

**Romantic Love and Self-Creation:
Stefano and Lila in *My Brilliant Friend***

My Brilliant Friend showcases a spectrum of the effect of romantic love on the self. Milena loses her mind over love, Marcello becomes tamer and more vulnerable over love, Lila loses herself over love, and love hardly affects Elena at all. Focusing on Lila's course of romantic love with Stefano, I argue that romantic love is potentially one of the most damaging obstacles to self-creation. This is because being in love can deprive one of one's free-will, due to love's ability to disrupt and entrap. Here, by disruptive strength, I refer to love's ability to change one's core values and beliefs. By entrapment, I mean the feeling of being unable to end a relationship due to a fear of wasting or upsetting what has already been invested into it. This feeling of entrapment proportionally increases with more investment, whether it be emotional, material, or time. To make this argument, I first summarize Ullman-Margalit's argument and examine under what circumstances we might consider romantic/sexual love to be 'opting' and transformative. Then I apply this to *My Brilliant Friend*, examining how choices to enter a relationship are related to opting. Finally, I discuss implications and counterarguments.

First, let us re-outline Ullman-Margalit's definition of opting. Ullman-Margalit separates choices into the small, medium, and big. Opting includes the big decisions of life: the ones that are personal and transformative in significant ways. We can consider opting to be the driver of self-creation. After all, small decisions (defined as "cases where we are strictly indifferent with regard to the alternatives before us" (157), such as which specific bottle of coke to choose) are hardly ever important to our sense of self. Meanwhile, medium day-to-day decisions, such as which class to take, or whether to go to a party to stay home and do some work on a Friday night, are largely determined by the results of opting. For example, if you have opted to become a doctor and you must take the MCAT, you would likely choose to study more.

Ullman-Margalit's four characteristics/ criteria of opting are 1) "transformative or 'core affecting'", 2) "irrevocable", 3) "taken in full awareness" and 4) "the choice not made casts a lingering shadow"(158). Transformative means that opting changes the way one views the world, specifically through fundamentally shifting one's core beliefs and value system. For example, before entering college, I might've thought that academics and maintaining a high GPA is the most important thing. After attending college for two years, I now place relationships with important people above academics. Thus, I now see a perfect GPA in a different way. Next, irrevocability means that after making this choice, "restoration" is not possible; regardless of how much we attempt to compensate. Conversely, as long as restoration is possible, no matter how much money, time or emotional investment it takes, a decision cannot be considered irrevocable. This means that even relatively important or core affecting issues, such as choosing to break contact with a best friend, cannot be considered opting if it is possible to repair the relationship through sincere apologies and good deeds. This is perhaps counterintuitive. An alternative reading is that after the choice has been made, even if you *can* go back, you would not *want to* go back. For example, we might think that entering an important friendship is not irrevocable, because we can easily break things off. However, even if breaking things off is possible, this friendship has now changed you so that you would not. Furthermore, even if you *did* break things off, you cannot reverse the effects the friendship has had on you. Third, "taken in full awareness" means 1) the person must believe she was free to make this choice and 2) the person sees this choice as a transformative instance. If the person felt that she was forced (e.g being enlisted in the army) or did not feel that there was a single decisive moment of choice (e.g slowly being pushed onto the path of a doctor by your parents), then it becomes respectively *converting* and *drifting*. Finally, the fourth characteristic means that there will always be some lingering curiosity or perhaps slight regret about what would have happened had one not opted this way.

Now, I address the question of under what scenarios can we consider engaging in romantic love be opting. But before that, since romantic love is a rather vague notion, I'll clarify what I refer to and break it down into several parts. The word 'love' points to many different things. Typically, it refers to both a feeling ('loving someone') and a state ('being in love'). The feeling is most commonly seen as a mix of very strong attraction, affection, care and desire for someone. The state is one of closeness and understanding, where one entrusts one's whole self to another, and the two selves are connected in fundamental ways. In this state of love, lovers often share deep components of the self with each other, including values and belief systems, in addition to sharing more temporary feelings such as happiness or grief—what is good or bad for one becomes good or bad for the other. Thus, the state of love also involves an extension of the self, where the boundaries of the self and the lover's self become blurred. But the feeling and state of love also change throughout the course of love. To broadly trace the 'check points' of conventional, monogamous romantic love as featured in *My Brilliant Friend*, there is 1) the initial meeting, 2) moment when attraction beings (which can be years from the meeting), 3) proposal or more colloquially, 'asking someone out', 4) the state of reciprocity and confirmation of love in a relationship, and 5) marriage. Now, we can ask: within this process of love, is there any decisive moment of choice that can be considered opting?

I suggest that in cases of true love, there is no choice at all. Love presents itself as a 'choice' or opting: choosing the 'right' person to marry tends to be an important consideration in many lives, and wedding vows enforce that love is a choice. But if we consider the above process of love with Ullman-Margalit's theory of opting, we can find that love almost never happens in a way that satisfies all four criteria. First, the initial meeting cannot be a choice—we cannot control who we meet and when we meet them. Second, the moments of attraction, talking and getting to know someone is indeed a choice, but it is not

opting. Choosing to get to know someone due to initial interest may satisfy criteria three and four, but getting to know someone in this light-hearted, easy manner, where both parties present their best sides, is rarely personally transformative/ irrevocable. Depending on how this second period goes, one either loses interest or realizes that one has fallen in love. While this realization is transformative and irrevocable, it is not exactly a choice—we hardly weigh all the pros and cons of falling in love with someone and then fall. Next is the moment of asking someone out. However, if two people already have feelings of love for each other, the person who declares love does not feel like he has a choice in doing so, and the person who accepts never really considers no as an option. If there is mutual love, then entering a relationship is no longer a choice. Then, within the relationship, there again is again no opportunity to opt, as one already has committed to loving another person, believes that one is in love and remains in this inertia. Finally, during a wedding, when the bride and the groom say, “I do”, this decision appears to have been made a long time ago—no one says “I don’t”. But looking back, we can find there was no moment when the monumental “I do” was decided. The only choice made was to get to know another person, and there is no way to know in advance whether that choice would lead to love. The only way to know if one would fall in love with someone is to test it out, and if the answer is yes, then it is too late to say no.

Lila and Stefano’s relationship in *My Brilliant Friend* showcases how the beginning of love does not allow one to opt. Stefano and Lila’s initial meeting was coincidental, during *Childhood*. After Lila defeated and humiliated Alfonso, Stefano’s brother, in a mathematics competition at school, Stefano came to Lila to seek revenge. He came to school and “said very nasty things to Lila [...] pushed her against a wall and tried to grab her tongue, shouting that he would prick it with a pin.”(53). Then, during *Adolescence*, we see Stefano take an interest in Lila, inviting her to the Carracci house for the New Year. The next time we see Stefano and Lila interact is when Elena returns from Ischia and Stefano drives the girls

around. During this drive, something is evidently happening between Lila and Stefano: “that allusive tone was evidence that they were close, that they had talked other times and not in jest but seriously. What had I missed in the period of Ischia?”(235). It was clear that there was now attraction between them, but at this stage they still lack knowledge of each other, and their future together is uncertain. Lila looked like “she had to do a difficult calculation in her head...but without her usual impudent expression; she was visibly preoccupied, as if she were attempting an experiment with an uncertain result” and Stefano admits that “The intention is there, but I don’t know how it will end up.”(237-238). This analogy of a difficult calculation that even Lila could not solve captures the uncertainty of the choice that they are making at this moment—a choice of getting closer to someone that could lead to love, or to nothing at all. It is impossible for either of them to understand all that is at stake in this moment. Then, we suddenly find that Lila is now in a relationship with Stefano: “Everything happened in a little more month and Lila seemed to me happy.” and the rest of the book details a linear progression and deepening of their relationship, as they become closer and Lila grows into the role of a wife. It appears that at some point between the drive and the relationship, the uncertainty turned into inevitability, but neither Lila nor Stefano had any agency in this transition.

Stefano and Lila’s relationship further reveals how love, with its disruptive strength and entrapment, disguised as a choice, can quietly, unnoticeably limit self-creation. During that first drive, Elena speculates that although Lila was uncertain: “...yet it might be that she wasn’t aiming at anything precise. She was like that, she threw things off balance just to see if she could put them back.”(238) This shows that Lila half played along with Stefano just out of curiosity towards the way things would unfold. But this light-hearted choice would eventually redefine Lila. Before dating Stefano, although Lila was becoming physically beautiful, she seemed careless and almost not self-aware of her beauty. Her goals were

writing books and starting a shoe business to bring in wealth—in other words, to become wealthy independently by having the value of her work be recognized, through a combination of strategy, creativity, and cunning. But after initiating her relationship with Stefano, she plays the role of a beautiful fiancée and slowly becomes more and more defined by her appearance. Indeed, Elena writes that beauty and wealth seemed to be the “the terms of their agreement as a couple”. For Stefano, Lila was “the most palpable symbol of the future of wealth and power that he intended”, while for Lila, Stefano’s endless gifts serve as amplifiers for her beauty (264). Elena, while appraising this new Lila, says that “The tense, aggressive Cerullo was as if immolated.” The girl who had written *The Blue Fairy*, the sincere letter to Elena while Elena was at Ischia, and even the girl who designed shoes with great ambition disappeared. In her place stands a girl who shows minimal interest in conversation about things other than boys, love and luxury.

What aspect of their relationship caused such disruption in Lila, such that she became almost entirely discontinuous from her previous self? Lila’s current state is perhaps a poor simulacrum of her original dream of independently acquiring wealth and raising her family out of the neighbourhood. Instead of being recognized for her work (writing, shoes, etc.), she herself *becomes* the work that is valued; instead of pursuing writing or shoemaking, she carefully makes up her face. Now, we might ask, why doesn't Lila use her new wealth to pursue education? Stefano can easily afford a tutor and buy all the books that Lila wants while she looks beautiful. After all, beauty and education are not exclusive. I argue that one answer is how romantic relationships change our valuing. One aspect of romantic love is seeking to be valued by someone whom we value. This explains why Marcello’s attempt to sway Lila with lavish gifts failed, but Stefano’s succeeded. The difference is not in their wealth, but that the Solaras were widely despised, while Stefano was an honest, charismatic and well-liked individual. Then, as discussed previously, the intimacy of the state of love

means that lovers influence each other's values. But while in equal relationships there might be an equal influence, there is a strong power imbalance with Stefano deciding where to spend the money. Thus, Lila begins to value herself as Stephen values her: not for her cunning intellect, but for her beauty. Thus, we see in cases where 1) one's lover's way of valuing the world and oneself differs from one's own value system and 2) one's lover has greater power in this relationship, love becomes disruptive, endangering self-creation.

Next, I'll discuss how the entrapment in love further makes self-creation difficult to achieve. As the date of the wedding draws closer, we see Lila beginning to have doubts about the wedding. After the particularly violent argument involving Silvio Solara's role as speech master at the wedding, Lila shuts herself off from wedding preparations entirely. But Elena is able to convince her with Lila's own narrative: "I spoke of the before and the after, of the old generation and of ours[...], of how she and Stefano were different." (311). By retelling the tale that Lila deeply believes in and reinforcing this shared fundamental ideal of Lila and Stefano, Elena convinces Lila to re-join wedding preparations. Importantly, at this moment, Lila voices about Stefano's love for the first time, saying that he doesn't love her as much as he loves his money—she is denied even the ability to decide who attends her own wedding for the sake of money. Yet, she does not know this yet, as Stefano's betrayal comes at the very end, with Marcello appearing wearing the shoes that Lila made.

Another telling moment comes on the day of the wedding, while Elena helps Lila wash and prepare. Lila asks "Do you think I'm making a mistake? [...] By getting married." and tells Elena to go on studying, no matter what (312). At this moment, Lila shows her vulnerability, fear of the future, and regret. By telling her best friend to go on studying, Lila affirms the importance of education and hence acknowledges that she has devoted her time to the wrong priorities. Lila then mentions that these thoughts are caused by her encounter with Maestra Oliverio, who refused Lila's wedding invitation, refused to let Lila in the door, and

said “I know Cerullo. I don’t know who this girl is.” (308). At this moment, we see the old Lila return as she realizes all the parts of the past self that she has lost. But this is also a moment of helplessness. Elena does not answer the original question, and Lila lets it go as if they are both afraid of what the answer is. Yet, they continue on with the bathing and preparing—at this moment, everything has already been set into motion. Invites have been sent out, the cake has been made, photographers and bands are ready...It is too late to simply call it off, even for someone as bold as Lila. The wedding exemplifies the concept of entrapment. The wedding is a huge investment of capital, time, and emotions not only that of the newlywed’s family, but for all the attendees. As Elena notes, the whole neighbourhood has been waiting for this moment in anticipation, and many likely had to spend a considerable proportion of their savings—or even borrow money—to purchase suits, dresses and gifts. Thus, the wedding becomes a community effort and investment, entangling everyone and entrenching the bride through capital, not allowing any escape without significantly upsetting everyone involved. Indeed, we can see Lila’s wedding dress as the symbol of this entrapment: her dress, lying beside her, looked like “the body of a dead woman” (312). By putting it on, Lila entraps herself more deeply, symbolizing the death of her former self. Thus, we see how love, by demanding capital, time and emotional investment from the couple, the couple’s family, and then the whole community, suppresses the couple’s ability to opt out of the relationship.

Here, I want to address a criticism: *how do we know that Lila’s new self is not a continuation of her old self, but necessarily disjointed or in the wrong direction?* Or, in other words, what makes Elena’s growth as a high school student continuous, but Lila’s growth as a wife discontinuous? One possible answer is to look at the reflections of the characters themselves, and those closest to them. While Elena finds studying boring and sometimes embarrassing compared to Lila’s glamorous life, she never seriously doubts her choice. On

the other hand, Lila does. Similarly, Maestro Oliverio views the past Lila as having disappeared but sees Elena as mature continuation of her past self. Another possible answer is to examine the character's tendencies as a child. Elena's bookish, nerdy 'good' kid image is entirely continuous with her identity as a high school student, and she still aims for the same goal of leaving the neighbourhood through education and increasing her ability. On the other hand, Lila's near-genius intellect, and rogue nature seems to be very much restricted by her current environment.

Now, I move on to discussing some implications of my argument, for love in real-life. I have shown that romantic love can be destructive to self-creation due to its disruptiveness, entrapment, and disguise as opting when there is no choice beyond a certain point. The conclusion of this is obviously not to avoid making any contact that might result in one falling in love at all. Romantic love can be destructive, but it can also be extremely formative in a beneficial way.

For example, the hints of the beginning of romantic attraction between Nino and Elena could result in a positively transformative love. Elena sees in Nino the possibility of actualizing her dream since she was small—becoming good enough to escape this neighbourhood, to not end up like her mom and her limp that symbolizes defeat. While hearing Nino eloquently express his thoughts on topics ranging from magazines to politics and literature, Elena realizes that Nino could help her quickly improve on all the knowledge about life that she was missing from only reading literature. She writes: "I was dazzled instead by the way Nino talked to me: the basis of which he would build it. To listen to him lighted up my mind almost the way Lila once had. His devotion to me made me grow." (325). Here, the lover and one's own values align, and the love can become one's companion and guide in things that are important to oneself. Thus, rather than disruption and discontinuity, Nino and Elena's love has the potential to help Elena self-create. Hence, one implication of

romantic love is that we should be aware of how the potential lover's values can shift our self-creation, and how interacts with our image of who we want to become. If the potential lover's values conflict with this image, perhaps it is better to close off the possibility of a romantic relationship and avoid risking self-creation as Lila did.

The implication of entrapment means that we should hesitate to involve more people in our relationships. But perhaps deeper than that, we should view romantic relationships as other one-time experiences, such as going on an amusement ride or skydiving—the goal is not in some endpoint but simply the experience. This way, we can reduce the fear of wasting invested capital when we end an experience.

The implication of the fact that we do not get to opt into romantic love is more difficult to discern. Perhaps one possible method of turning the decision of entering a romantic relationship into opting would be to lengthen the time from the realization that one has fallen in love to committing to a relationship. As discussed previously, the choice of entering a relationship could be considered more converting than opting: when someone you've secretly loved for weeks or months finally asks you out, it might seem like the only possible choice is yes, and saying yes will most likely not leave a lingering shadow. Perhaps letting this infatuation fade and then making the decision will lead to a more rational consideration of the effects of entering this relationship. However, in practice, this may not be possible.

In this essay, I argued, based on *My Brilliant Friend* and Ulmann-Margalit's theory of opting, that being in love can deprive one of one's free-will, due to love's ability to disrupt and entrap. However, while this essay focuses on romantic love as potentially one of the most damaging things to self-creation, we should also seek to understand the mechanisms in which it is beneficial as well.