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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the modern cultural fascination with the game of football and with football players as this concern is reflected in the modern (post-1960) novel. The analysis is based on 31 novels, or portions of novels, which treat the topic of football as a cultural metaphor at the high school, college, and professional levels. Inspecting these novels for literary images, the study finds that the football hero is represented as both the sensitive idealist and the ego-centered pragmatist. The majority of these popular heroes fall into the ego-centered category, thus debunking the myth that the football star is a hero. The use of football as a cultural metaphor allows these novels to deal seriously with the problems of contemporary life--racism, sexism, gambling, homosexuality, and drugs--by reflecting these difficulties in the small world of the team. (Author/RB)

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ABSTRACT

The Helmeted Hero: The Football Player in Recent American Fiction

This study examines the modern cultural fascination with the game of football and with football players, as this concern is reflected in the modern (post-1960) novel. At the moment, the bibliography includes thirty-one novels or portions of novels which present professional, semi-professional, and amateur players.

Inspecting these novels for the literary images of the "helmeted hero," the study finds that the football hero is represented as both the Sensitive Idealist and the Ego-Centered Pragmatist. The majority of these popular heroes, in fact, seem to fall into the latter category, thus suggesting that the modern novelists not only debunk the great American myth of the Frank Merriwellian athlete, but also replace the myth with the construct of the money-grabbing, pill-popping, sexually-rapacious stud.

Similarly, the findings also suggest that the "game" of football--with its shattering violence--is used as a metaphor for that vast, impersonal, mechanically-sophisticated, commercially-oriented system which we call modern life. In this scheme, the "team" thus becomes a social microcosm for the larger world of American society. Thus these novels are able to

deal seriously with the problems of contemporary life--the racism, the sexism, the gambling, the homosexuality, the drugs--by reflecting these difficulties in the "small world" of the team.

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In The Unembarrassed Muse: The Popular Arts in America, Russel Nye discusses the vast popularity of Gilbert M. Patten's 208 Frank and Dick Merriwell books which sold 125 million copies in the early 1900's. Nye relates Patten's "frantically athletic" plots to the contemporary fascination with spectator sports: "Patten caught the spirit of this emergent cult of mass sport in his books, tailoring them to the pattern of the new sets of heroes whom boys held in respect, and the new interests of a frenetically physical time." Thus Frank and Dick Merriwell, who were strong, handsome, athletic, intelligent, and pure and who neither smoked nor drank nor swore, so "tied morality and athletics together in highly satisfactory fashion" that they implied what Patten terms a "fair play" rule for living, expressed by the analogy of the playing field."

Times have indeed changed in the 60-70 years since Frank and Dick scored those last-second touchdowns for Fairdale Academy and for Yale. Yet, like Gilbert M. Patten, recent American novelists have examined the relationship of the game of football with its "Helmeted Heroes" to contemporary culture. In fact, after the American media helped establish the popularity of football in the late 1950's, scores of biographies, autobiographies, season's di[redacted]es, "inside looks," and novels began to capitalize on the

mass fascination with this game as the dominate sport of our times. This paper will present an overview of the trends in American fiction since 1960 with respect to the role and stature of football and football players in contemporary society. The study will be limited to novels and portions of novels which present professional, semi-professional, and amateur (both college and high school) players. (On the attached Bibliography, the number of these novels stands at 31, but continues to grow weekly.) Thus I omit autobiographical and historical accounts, as well as juvenile literature, with the exception of #15, Zanballer, a novel which presents seriously a feminist questioning of the game's inherent sexism and of the "masculine" role of football players.

My discussion today will contain two major divisions: I) The Helmeted Hero--an analysis of the literary image of the football player; and II) The Game--a breakdown of the imagistic and metaphoric patterns used to describe the sport.

I) THE HERO:

Quite literally, these novels present the modern football player as "hero"--a larger-than-life figure whose gridiron exploits win him local, state, or national adulation. This mass adulation is more than a simple "football fever," writes Babs Deal in The Grail, suggesting an underlying archetypal need: "It is the ancient yearning for a hero, the basic human urge to deify that buries itself snugly through periods of casual time only to rise up again, more ruthless, unrestrained, and rarefied for its sojourn in the underworld of the mind."

In the 31 novels examined, this cultural "yearning" for a contemporary folk hero leads to the presentation of at least two categories of helmeted protagonists--what I term the Sensitive Idealists and the Ego-Centered Pragmatists. In 20 of the 31 novels, the reader finds sensitive, idealistic, even intellectual athletes (or former athletes) who attempt to define themselves in relationship to the football contest. This process of self-definition is a difficult one, however, and in terms of the novels' artistic structures, the sensitive hero is most often faced with or exposed to the "hard realities" of the game (and, hence, by extension, of life).

Here, at the "hard realities" level of competition, these novels offer some of their freshest insights into and keenest perceptions about the physical nature and the psychological makeup of the modern football player. Several novels, particularly Alphabet Jackson, North Dallas Forty, Only a Game, Two Hours on Sunday, and The Hundred Yard War, detail excruciatingly the various physical ailments and injuries which cause the protagonist to live a "season" or a "week" of pure, unremitting existential pain.

In addition to the constant physical suffering, these protagonists are continuously buffeted by the fear that each game will produce the final crippling injury which will terminate the career. This fear--and its resultant tension--provides much of the basic conflict in these more perceptive protagonists. As Pete Elliott, the narrator of North Dallas Forty notes,about his dehumanized role as player; "I am a man who has learned that survival is the reason of life and that fear and hatred are the emotions. What you cannot overcome

by hatred you must fear. And every day it is getting harder to hate and easier to fear."

This "testing" of the sensitivities of the protagonist leads him most frequently to a period of psychologically imposed alienation and isolation. Some few protagonists are able to confront their psychological situation and adjust maturely by integrating the self. Most frequently this adjustment is presented as the protagonists move out of and away from the game. The implication, of course, is that the more idealistic individual finds meager fulfillment as participant in this modern sport: there is little emotional, little psychological, and little intellectual growth afforded.

Even though about seven heroes make this transition, the novels are filled with scores of fictional "super-star" players who remain trapped in self--who are engulfed in arrogant, proud, and aggressive patterns of behavior. These--whom I call the Ego-Centered Pragmatists--represent a serious literary re-evaluation of the image of the contemporary athlete. Obviously far removed from the "morality and athletics" of the Merriwell brothers, these self-interested pragmatists debunk the Great American Myth of the Merriwellian athlete, replacing it with the construct of the money-grabbing, pill-popping, sexually rapacious stud. Interestingly, these survive in the game, mainly by subverting any value systems to what I see as a self-centered situational ethics and a neo-hedonistic pragmatism. These fictional characters represent closely a view of the game recently posited by modern theologian Eugene Bianchi who says that big time football promotes the "virtues of toughness and insensitivity. . . . the game also portrays the anxieties and contradictions of aggressive sexuality. Its calculated violence makes it hard for the player to

to become sensitively attuned to his own body."

(Time won't permit a catalogue of their activities--but thank God that the Merriwell bodys were not exposed to even one of the sexual orgies of Alphabet Jackson, North Dallas Forty, fe Swap; Semi-Tough, Super Ball, or The Hundred Yard War.)

II) THE GAME (Imagistic and Metaphoric Patterns)

Just as these novelists examine the complex aspects of the football player as cultural hero, so do they analyze the nature of the game itself, both as modern sport and as popular spectacle. In this overview, I would like to discuss two major patterns of images which define the game A) as intricate, stylized attempt at beauty and perfection, and B) as simple, brutal contest of violence.

With respect to the ideal qualities felt inherent in the game, figures like Doc Rivers (former coach, now University President who is running for governor--a Willie Stark populist) in The Long Gainer believe that "youth, sport, and beauty were absolute values. He had enshrined them in his trophy pavilion and consecrated them in his heart; to him they had been incorruptible emblems of the good and the true. The dream hadn't been Doc's private creation, of course. Really, it was an All-American vision." To some, like Duke Craig in Only a Game, football is a spectacle which "takes millions of people out of their own drab worlds. It enriches people's lives."

For some fictional participants, like Sonny Joiner, in Joiner,

the game is a momentary opportunity to bring bodily motion and rhythms into perfect stylized harmony:

> I felt I had on small tight springs instead
> of cleats, all on a Sunday afternoon. Rack!
> Rack! Rack! I'm a ballet dancer and
> Whirlaway on a high blue wire at the Fair,
> all alone and weightless in the light.
> For three quarters I experienced a perfect
> solitude of immaculate achievement
> superior to killing.

In several novels, the game is idealistically described as the modern event which allows the participant to experience pure, unalloyed pleasure--the "intoxicating joy" referred to in Only a Game; the pure Platonic "love" for teammates and the game in The Running Back; the sublime feeling that completing a touchdown pass is like "looking into heaven"; or, as one player in Alphabet Jackson puts it, "the quivery feeling when you go out there with your peers and tangle-ass." The notion that I've been getting at here in the novels has been recently stated by modern theologian Michael Novak who sees the recent play off games as "almost perfect enactments of comradship, team unity, split-second execution and most intense physical confrontation. . . . Football is a humble saving grace, a joy to millions."

Finally, the seasonal and weekly gridiron struggles allow some participants to strive for "absolutes" of perfection. At the collegiate level, this quest is for the "perfect season"--an accomplishment described in The Grail (which is, by the way, an elaborate modern retelling of the Arthurian legend). In that novel, victories for Coach Arthur (Hill) involve more than the scores: "It was the ultimate right of pattern over chaos. . . . he felt that

his means, football, was an integral a part of man's plan in the universe as that belonging to artist, inventor, or discoverer. He held within him a dream of order."

At the professional level, the quest is symbolized by the Super Bowl--an event described in the novel Super Dude as "the pinacle of their isolated and special universe."

Yet these novels simultaneously affirm, as Doc Rivers sadly discovers, that,because of the "golden jocks" who play the modern game, "beauty is not truth," that the intoxicating delight in the game is fleeting, and that absolute perfection is just beyond most men's fingertips. Ultimately, these novels posit what the protagonist of North Dallas Forty terms "the hopelessness of it all. . . . ten thousand degrees of failure and only one champion."

The second major pattern of images and metaphors runs counter to the idealized and stylized patterns by portraying the game in realistic terms as a violent physical activity. Numerous naturalistic images of splintered fingers, shattered arms, broken legs, smashed noses, and torn knees exist, more frequently in the novels of the 70's. Paralleling these images of physical brutality are metaphors which suggest that the game is a place of combat, a battleground, with the participants bent on destroying each other. Because so many military terms are associated with football (blitz, bomb, game plans, field general, etc), one is tempted to accept the easy generalization that football is war. However, I personally tend to agree with the college professor in End Zone who exclaims, "I reject the notion of football as warfare. Warfare is warfare. We don't need substitutes

because we've got the real thing. Instead, where resemblances are suggested between warfare and football (as in Mash, End Zone, Good By, Bobby Thompson! Good By, John Wayne!, Alphabet Jackson, and Black Sunday) the game itself is actually used to reflect and to parallel the chaos or the destructiveness of modern life. In Good By, Bobby Thompson! the football-playing career of Peter Murray is interspersed with the Korean war, the Hungarian Revolution and the Kennedy assassination, in Mash the nadcap football constest is played against the violent background of the Korean war, and in Black Sunday the Super Bowl in New Orleans is the target of a P.L.O. bomb attack. In End Zone the college players find themselves spiritual exiles in a world whose main concern is nuclear overkill; and in this novel one heady player sees his role as a "psychomythical" one--the term referring to what he calls "ancient warriorship. . . cults devoted to pagan forms of technology. What we do out on the field harks back." And in Alphabet Jackson, the team's intellectual sees the game as a cultural symbol in terms of territorial imperatives and self-preservation:

> It's deep inside the genes. If we beat Dallas, then symbolically those big bastards from Dallas aren't gonna enslave our kids and rape our wives and kill our men. The spectators admire us because we've protected them from death and mutilation. The act is symbolic, but the feeling's real.

(I might add that this view is quickly countered by a teammate's more commercial opinion: "We go for the money, that's all. I don't even know how to play no fuckin' cymbals.")

Thus many novels present the game--with its shattering violence--as a microcosm for that vast, impersonal, mechanically-sophisticated, commercially-oriented macrocosm which we call modern life. These

novels, then, are able to deal seriously with the problems of contemporary life--the racism, the gambling, the homosexuality, the drugs--by reflecting these difficulties in the "small world" of the team. (See attached handout chart of the thematic patterns, page 2.)

Similarly various secondary aspects of the game--the computerized scouting and drafting systems, the slow-motion game films which "break down" each individual's every movement, and the front office authoritarian "businesslike" approach to the players--are often emphasized to reflect the technological sophistication of American life. One protagonist suddenly realizes that

> We're just the fucking equipment to be listed along with the shoulder pads and headgear and jockstraps. This is first and foremost a business, with antitrust exemptions, tax breaks, and depreciations. And all the first and tens, all the last-second touchdowns, and ninety-five-yard passes, are just items on a ledger to be weighed along with the cost of precooked steak and green eggs. People don't talk about football teams anymore, they talk about football systems, and the control long ago moved off the field.

In nine novels there is an event which encompasses both the idealistic and the monetary aspects of the game: The Super Bowl--an appropriate cultural symbol for the pinnacle of athletic achievement and for the gross commercialism of modern pastimes. This spectacle is likened in one novel to D-Day--an undertaking so big that it can't be called off. Finally, in a folksong to the hero of Semi-Tough (in "The Ballad of Billy Clyde") the

Super Bowl (the event which best symbolizes the mass popularity of and the cultural fascination with the game) is used emblematically to ask the ultimate metaphysical question:

Will they play a Super Bowl in Heaven?
Will the fans be drinkin' beer?
Will any long-haired, lovely girls
Be there to cheer?

"The Helmeted Hero:
The Football Player in Recent American Fiction"

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BIBLIOGRAPHY OF PRIMARY WORKS:

1961	1)	The Long Gainer	William Manchester	(College)
1963	2)	The Grail	Babs Deal	(College)
1966	3)	The Last Picture Show	Larry McMurtry	(High School)
1967	4)	Only a Game	Robert Daley	(Professional - College - High School)
1968	5)	Mash	Richard Hooker	(Military)
	6)	The Hundred Yard War	Gary Cartwright	(Professional)
1970	7)	Going All The Way	Dan Wakefield	(High School)
1971	8)	A Fan's Notes	Frederick Exley	(Professional)
	9)	Joiner	James Whitehead	(Professional - College - High School)
	10)	Two Hours on Sunday	Joseph Pillitteri	(Professional)
1972	11)	Cut 'N' Run	Frank Deford	(Professional - College)
	12)	End Zone	Don DeLillo	(College)
	13)	Semi-Tough	Dan Jenkins	(Professional)
	14)	The Sunday Heroes	Noel B. Gerson	(Professional)
	15)	Zanballer	R. R. Knudson	(Grade School)
1973	16)	The Cheerleader	Ruth Doan MacDougall	(High School)
	17)	Cock-A-Doodle-Dew	Joe Brandon	(Professional - College)
	18)	Footsteps	Hamilton (Tex) Maule	(Professional - College)
	19)	Four Quarters Make A Season	Eliot Berry	(Professional)
	20)	Goodby, Bobby Thomson! Goodby, John Wayne!	Alan S. Foster	(Professional - College - High School)
	21)	Life Swap	Curtis Richards	(Professional)
	22)	North Dallas Forty	Peter Gent	(Professional)
	23)	The Score	Collis Barker	(Professional - Semi-Pro)
1974	24)	Down Among The Jocks	Ralph Dennis	(Professional)
	25)	No More Reunions	John Bowers	(High School)
	26)	Sunday Fix	Joseph Nazel	(Professional)
	27)	Super Ball	Nicole Warfield	(Professional)
	28)	Super-Dude	John Craig	(Professional)
	29)	The Running Back	William Cox	(College - Semi-Pro)
	30)	Alphabet Jackson	Jack Olsen	(Professional)
1975	31)	Black Sunday	Thomas Harris	(Professional)

THE NOVELS:	THE THEMATIC PATTERNS:	INTELLECTUALIS	IDEALISM	EGO-CENTRIC PRAGMATISM	ISOLATIONISM	SEXUALITY:	Adultry	Groupies	Homosexualit	Orgy	DRUG DEPENDENC	RACISM	COMMERCIALISM	COMPUTERISM	GAMBLING
1961:															
1) LG		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X			X		
1963:															
2) G			X	X	X	X	X								
1966:															
3) LPS					X	X	X								X
1967:															
4) OG			X	X	X	X	X						X		
1968:															
5) M				X		X					X				X
6) HYW					X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	
1970:															
7) GAW		X	X		X	X					X				
1971:															
8) FN		X	X							X	X		X		
9) J		X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X		X			
10) THS					X	X			X				X	X	
1972:															
11) CNR			X			X	X	X					X		X
12) EZ		X	X	X	X	X									
13) ST			X	X	X	X		X		X	X	X	X		X
14) SH			X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
15) Z			X												
1973:															
16) C			X	X		X									
17) CDD			X			X	X						X		
18) F				X	X	X	X	X		X			X		X
19) FQMS		X	X	X	X	X	X	X				X			
20) GBT!			X		X	X							X		
21) LS				X		X	X			X	X	X	X		
22) NDF			X	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
23) S				X	X	X	X	X		X	X				X
1974:															
24) DAJ				X		X	X								
25) NMR			X	X	X	X						X			
26) SF				X		X						X	X	X	X
27) SB				X		X	X	X		X			X		
28) SD			X	X	X	X	X					X	X		
29) RB			X	X	X	X						X			X
30) AJ		X		X	X	X	X	X		X	X		X		X