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## Sports in The Fiction of Don DeLillo



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“One player practicing sportsmanship is far better than fifty preaching it.”— Ernest Hemingway

Sports literature is a genre worthy of critical study. A key function of literature is to explore human problems and experiences and sports has been fertile material for writers. Sports is a complex phenomenon that acts as an agent for both social change and social control. It works on an individual level, because so many young people search for a personal identity through it. Carefully structured, games and sports in particular satisfy our need for order and, paradoxically, for security. In games everything is a matter of limits, boundary lines, and non-negotiable codes. As Don DeLillo tells us, games provide a frame within which excellence might be attained: “We can look for perfect moments or perfect structures...”.<sup>1</sup> Although sports has served as subject matter for American fiction almost from its beginnings, it is twentieth century American writing that has used sport most extensively and seriously. A close look reveals a long list of competent writers and works.

Many great authors who have written about sports but there are only a few authors whose works represent the depiction and maturation of the sports narrative like Roger Angel, Pat Conroy,

Robert Coover, Frank DeFord, Don DeLillo, John Updike. As sports has assumed more cultural and economic significance, it has also become more pervasive in our literature. Since the early 1950s sports has been a staple in some of the best fiction by some of the North America’s best-known authors. This process started in the late nineteenth century with sports books for younger readers and is successfully continuing till date. At 5’7” and 140 pounds, F. Scott Fitzgerald was too small to become the sports hero he fantasized about, but that hero worship found its way into his novels. Fitzgerald probably based Amory Blaine, protagonist of *This Side of Paradise* (1920), his first novel, on Hobart Amory Hare Baker, an All-American halfback at Princeton during Fitzgerald’s freshman year. Hemingway wrote two fine boxing stories (“The Battler” and “Fifty Grand”) and, with Santiago’s veneration of Joe DiMaggio, provides a memorable exemplification of “grace under pressure” in *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). More recently, Norman Mailer and Joyce Carol Oates have written non-fictional accounts of boxing. In literature sport is a “game” that is more motivated than others. It distinguishes itself- through the rigor of its rules -from absolute arbitrariness.

Among the above mentioned authors Don

Delillo is the most esteemed novelists in American Literature. DeLillo is known for taut, bone-clean postmodern prose about helpless, well-meaning adults facing the fear and anxiety of modern life. He sometimes brings in real-life characters like Lee Harvey Oswald or Chairman Mao, and he sometimes tilts the story towards the surreal, a la Harold Pinter just to keep us guessing. His stories always maintain a hard, cold surface, never fully allowing the reader inside, and rarely delivering climactic moments. Much of the mob action in Delillo's fiction is set in stadia or sports arenas. The novels often have games as their central motion: Sports (football) in the ambiguous *End Zone*, whose title signifies the end of the world as well as the playing surface is about nuclear war and a college football team. It has treated football as absurdist farce. *Ratner's Star* is about baseball. At all times, rules are rules "strict rules add dignity to a game," (RS 1). Don DeLillo used the *nom de plume* "Cleo Birdwell" to conceal his authorship of

*Amazons* (1980), a fictional memoir of the first woman to play in the National Hockey League, despite the fact that he was six books into his career at the time and that his second novel, *End Zone* (1972), had explored the relationship between language and football. *Mao II* opened with a mass wedding of Moonies at Shea Stadium in which the couples seemed to descend from the mothership. In *Running Dog*, Selvy takes part in a kind of game, trying to escape his murderers. Sports figure prominently in several of DeLillo's books, including

*Underworld*, which opens, famously, with a panoramic scene at the 1951 World Series. [t begins in a ballpark-the old Polo Grounds, which DeLillo [eaves as wreathed with noble vapors as a Confederate-battlefield (*Underworld* 827). The 'meaning of the game', including "the way people live life as a game," has "always been valuable"

to Kennedy, who plays poker, billiards, and horse racing with the existential stakes of Billy Phelan (RS 3). Don DeLillo says about games:

'People stress the violence. That's the smallest part of it, Football is brutal only from a distance. In the middle of it there's a calm, a tranquility. The players accept pain. There's a sense of order even at the end of a running play with bodies stewn everywhere. When the systems interlock, there's a satisfaction to the game that can't be duplicated. There's a harmony.' Delillo is interested in sports, and some of his novels can be categorized as sports literature. Don DeLillo told Tom LeClaire in an interview that his interest in play centers on sports and games, grounded in or ordered by rules. Football may seem to some to be just a silly game, but DeLillo treats it no differently than the silly-yet-serious game of nuclear war.

Delillo's book *End Zone* has been described by him as a "complex sport novel" (EZ 241) and as the "most provocative and intelligent of all football fiction" (EZ 302). It is a story that revolves around a college football team in West Texas. There is an absence of a recognizable sport narrative in the novel, because, in DeLillo's own words, "*End Zone* wasn't about football." It's a fairly elusive novel. Kneeling in the *End Zone* takes the often overlapping worlds of sports and religion and turns them upside down. Athletes; coaches, fans and broadcasters often bring faith into the world of sports~ whether through on-field prayers, post-game interviews, biblical bleacher signs or using faith language or scriptural metaphors to describe. an incredible play or performance. Kneeling in the *End Zone* aims to do the exact opposite, using sports as a lens through which to look at the Christian faith. It uses sports as a metaphor, drawing parallels between scriptural stories and memorable tales from the field or court, and looks at those

transcendent moments in sports history that reveal larger truths about life. DeLillo offers new insights into the curious mix of sport, violence, and the precariousness of human existence. Here DeLillo imagines football as something primal- the key, perhaps, to larger manifestations of the violence to which the human instinct for aggression drives its victims. DeLillo goes to considerable trouble to develop the parallels between the violence of war and the violence of football. DeLillo is writing in a time when the nation's obsession with sport, notably the violent sport of football, coexists with a growing anxiety about the ultimate disposition of nuclear arsenals here and around the world.

“It seems to be about extreme places and extreme states of mind, more than anything else (DeCurtis 65). But he has acknowledged that *End Zone* is also about games, of which football is the most obvious—but certainly not the only—example. “The games I’ve written about have more to do with rules and boundaries than with the freewheeling street games I played when I was growing up,” DeLillo said in an interview with LeClair. He added:

People leading lives of almost total freedom and possibility may secretly crave rules and boundaries, some kind of control in their lives. Most games are carefully structured. They satisfy a sense of order and they even have an element of dignity about them Games provide a frame in which we can try to be perfect. Within sixty-minute limits or one-hundred-yard limits or the limits of a game board, we can look for perfect moments or perfect structures. (LeClair 5-6)

DeLillo presents the assistant coaches as mechanically spouting vague jargon regardless of who is hearing it. One coach approaches the running backs and addresses them: Guards and tackles, I want you to come off that ball real quick and pop, pop, hit those people, move those people out, pop them, put some hurt on them, drive them

back till they look like sick little puppy dogs squatting down to crap. (EZ 28)

When the players inform him that he is addressing the wrong group, he seems undeterred and tells them to “Hit somebody. Hit somebody. Hit somebody.” And that is exactly what the players do. We are told many times that the action on the field is clear and simple. Players run, hit and execute, and the “daily punishment” on the field reduces complexity (EZ 31). Gary insists early on, “football players are simple folk, whatever complexities, whatever dark politics of the human mind, the heart—these are noted only within the chalked borders of the playing field” (EZ 4).

It is important how DeLillo uses the system of language to show readers a new way of looking at sports, and at sports literature in general. Words for DeLillo have a physical presence, like carvings in stone. Added to this is DeLillo's remarkable facility for capturing jargon and feeding it back in a stylized form, making it funny and portentous at the same time. This quality of DeLillo helps him a lot in presenting a theme like sports in a quite realistic manner. For example DeLillo, ‘does’ a sports broadcaster; meaningless air-filling commentary with a twist:

Toby, what do you think of this Birdwell, an all-white woman like this? If we gave you a running start, it would still take you two weeks to lick her white body from head to toe. She's that tasty, right? You'd linger. You'd spread a second and third coat (Birdwell, *Amazons*, 90). In *Underworld*, the Ball is a sub-text to the main story, an object that anchors and, through its passage, marks the passage of time. It is the object-pivot to a story that leaps, between the decades of 1950s, 60s, 70s. As a stabilizing signifier, the reader holds onto it as desperately as Nick does. It links macro-historical political events, such as the rise and the proliferation of

nuclear weaponry as the martyr-myth of the Cold war period to the life of a particular country, to the life of particular persons who squeeze memory out of the Ball. In *Underworld*, McFarlane, the buyer of McGwire's seventieth, reveals something akin to Nick in his statement, "Sports make you forget death, taxes, and politics, and all the other garbage that goes on in the life." In this regard, Oriand's cartography of sports themes is particularly useful: [B]aseball in literature produces most often either a nostalgic remembrance of the past or a representation of the American innocent confronting complex reality; football becomes a ready metaphor for violence in all its forms or for the stifling of individuality by corporate America; boxing becomes the naturalists' representation of urban

dehumanization; and basketball exemplifies the life of the individual ill-suited to regimentation and control. Finally, given the fecundity of sports literature over the past several decades, it should not be surprising that the topic has attracted the attention of scholars and anthologizers.

Thus looking back over DeLillo's fiction since *End Zone* till recently published *Underworld*. it has been found that DeLillo believes in rules whether they are applied to sports or to human lives. According to him different games give impressions of different themes depicting various aspects of life. Now that sports has been accepted as proper and fitting subject matter for fiction, it is likely that we may have an even greater variety of works to choose from in the future for research purpose.

#### Abbreviations:

EZ: *End Zone* RS: *Ratner's Star* RD: *Running Dog*

## REFERENCE

(I) In LeClair and McCaffery, *Anything Can Happen*, 81.

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