



## THE NARRATIVE VOICE IN RICHARD FORD'S THE SPORTS WRITER

S. Manikandan\* Dr.V.Malarkodi\*\*

\*Ph.D., Research Scholar, Department of English, Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar.

\*\*Assistant Professor, Department of English (D.D.E), Annamalai University, Annamalai Nagar.

Richard Ford is one of the most gifted novelists in the contemporary America. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for creative writing for his novel *Independence Day*. This novel is the first one in the history to win together the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction in 1995. His works are being associated by the literary critics to the movement of “foul realism.” Ford is widely respected for the work with the language he applies in his texts. He was born in 1944. Ford has written eight novels and a collection of short stories in American literature. Ford’s *The Sports Writer* is an extremely acclaimed pattern of contemporary realistic fiction. It revolves around the thoughts and observations of one central character, the protagonist Frank Bascome. This paper encapsulates the protagonist, life, affairs, happiness, love, feelings and pain, as well as the dramatic change in his style. Obviously the soundless plight of men in contemporary society was skillfully depicted by American author Richard Ford in his award winning novel *The Sportswriter* (1986).

Ford’s novels efficiently dramatize the poverty of human relationships in contemporary culture. Frank, the protagonist, and the men with whom he interacts suffer from problems that are quite common to many North American men. Thirty year-old Frank faces the tragedies and disappointments in his life without self-pity. He faces difficulties similar to those the earlier athlete faces.

All of the men in Ford’s novels express some or all of the characteristics which are sponsored by the male mystique. A man’s studies reading of both Frank Bascombe novels reveals that the characters who introduce conflict are being controlled by sex codes and social forces to which they are oblivious. The central protagonists of both Frank Bascombe novels are the masculine mystique. Society teaches men to strive for this personal and teaches women to admire it. Frank is no longer husband and barely a father. He is a writer for an American Sports Magazine who is struggling to understand himself and the world around him. The opening paragraph, “My name is Frank Bascombe. I am a sportswriter” (3) provides us with a complete list of things that are clear to Frank as the novel begins. Often he is in the realm of confusion, of disappointments, and failures in his life, he has earned enough money but is neither happy nor stable, as he thought he would be. Mid-life crisis has cast the protagonist into a state of dreaminess and depression.

He remains, yet, a unfailing narrator as he assures: “ I have a voice that is really mine, a frank argues in rural voice more or less like a used car salesman: a no-frills voice that hopes to uncover simple truth by a straight –on application of the facts” (11). The *Sportswriter* chronicles a weekend of Frank’s life and the lives of three men he encounters, and reveals the problems that the male mystique causes them. Frank responds to his feelings of alienation by amalgamation.

The Divorced Men’s Club, a group of five single men who meet occasionally to relax and engage in traditionally masculine activities such as watching baseball games and fishing. These activities are alluring to Frank and other men because they appear to promote social interaction, unfortunately, the activities also distance the men from interaction with women and true progress in their lives. The men are unable or unwilling to express their feelings about their individual lives, and the club exists simply as an excuse for the men to drink and display bravado, rather than engage in any manner of therapeutic conversation.

This unfortunate arrangement is attributable to the masculine mystique and the manner in which it encourages men to conceal their emotional problems so that do not appear weak or feminine. Even Frank does not reveal his problems to his fellow club member, Water Luckett.



The novel begins with a serious conversation between Frank and his ex-wife (Anne Dykstra, but referred to in this novel only as X) who stand near by the cemetery of his own sharing a moment of reflection on the anniversary of their first son's death. In the cemetery, Frank has made mention of three poems. "The Hollow Men" by T.S. Eliot, "To An Athlete Dying Young" by A.E. Housman, and "First Meditation" by Theodore Roethke-each of which is thematically relevant to The Sportswriter, Like the men described in the poem, lead empty, meaningless, life-in-death existences in a dying and meaningless world. Likewise the American men also lead empty lives and committed to accumulating wealth and power instead of friendships and cheerfulness.

With the social codes that govern men's lives, the codes create an absurd world and ruin the lives of its inhabitants. Frank and X Ford's ignore for gender conventions, at the same time as each retains feelings for the other, they each transmit those feelings in unconventional ways. Frank still cares deeply for his wife and openly displays his emotions when they are together. X still cares about Frank but she erects a transparent façade of stoicism. He is often depicted as fragile, dreamy, and sympathetic. He notes that "I have always liked hearing women talk more than men" (11). And believes that "men feel things women don't" (329).

The death of his first son has dispelled the notion of continuity for Frank. Trapped in what he refers to as the Existence Period, Frank inhabits a world that is seemingly unknowable and retreats within himself to escape. Frank, like many men, lacks the vocabulary to describe the psychological turmoil from which he suffers, so Existence Period is his label for this turmoil.

The turmoil includes his divorce, the death of his only son, and his inability to fall in love again, and regrets from his past. The sports Writing is unambiguous and Frank depends on the simplicity of his profession to keep himself sane, but the therapeutic qualities of his vocation are a life. Rather than confronting his mid-life problems, Frank has allowed himself to slip in and out of a dream-like state (10).

His dreaminess provides a temporary escape, but it provides no true solace because, in his dreamy state, he sees that he is himself, as complex, chaotic, and mysterious as the world around him. Frank does not fit into the world because the world insists on obedience to the doctrines of the masculine mystique-doctrines against which Frank is unconsciously rebelling as he suffers his mid-life crisis. Frank's divorce, for example, tags him as socially dysfunctional. As he notes:

It is not, I have come to understand, easy to have  
a divorced men as your neighbour Chaos lurks in  
him-the viable social contract called into  
question by the smoky aspect of sex. Most people  
feel they have to make a choice and it is always  
easier to choose the wife, which is what my  
neighbours and friends have mostly done(5).

Frank responds to his feelings of alienation by joining. The Divorced Men's Club, a group of five single men who meet infrequently to relax and engage in traditionally male activities such as watching baseball games and fishing. These manners are alluring to Frank and other men because they appear to promote social contract; unfortunately, the activities also distance the men from interface among women and true progress in their lives. The men are unable or unwilling to express their feelings about their individual lives, and the club exists simply as an excuse for the men to drink and display bravado, rather than engage in any manner of therapeutic conversation. When Frank is not ready to address his personal problems. Even though, Frank listens with discomfort and annoyance, Water explains that his life is in shambles. He is undergoing a crisis, a mid-life crisis, which he does not fully understand and which recently has led him to have sexual intercourse with a man he met in a bar. After his shocking revelation, Walter reflects on his inability to bond with Frank during his confession. Even though his future is uncertain, he is able to take consolation in the knowledge that his own problems with the men mystique and the male midlife crisis are shared by others. "We have all felt that way, I am confident, since there's no way that I could feel what hundreds of millions of other citizens have not(375). What separates Frank from the crowd



is that he redeems himself from his lifelong participation in the men mystique, which tens of millions of other American men are unable to do. Because Frank plays the role of “the saved” in *The Sportswriter*, it is not he who is most illustrative of the negative effects of the male mystique because he ménages to survive his mid-life crisis and refocus his life. While Franks’ fate preserves optimism and saves the novel from a morbid conclusion, it is the men who interact with Frank, “the damned.” Who are more interesting subjects of study. Unlike Fran Bascombe, Water Lockett, Herb Wallaggher, and wade Arecault do not contend well with the masculine mystique and the male midlife crisis.

At the end of the novel Frank is dumped by Vicki because of his argument at the supper table. It is an interesting separation because it marks a physical separation from those whom he is ideologically distancing himself-those who, like the Aercnaults, are –content to live under the thumb of the masculine mystique. The separation is a violent one-Vicki punches him in the face, making his mouth bleed when he protests-which marks the abrupt termination of his association with mental and. Ideological apathy and the birth of a new Frank, who is more clearly able to understand his own life and world just about him.

#### **REFERENCE**

1. Clemons, Walter. “The Divorced Men’s Club.” Rev. of *The Sports Writer*, by Richard Ford. Newsweek 7 Apr. 1986.
2. Doyle, James A. *The Male Experience*. Dubuque, Lo: 1983.
3. Eliot, T.S. “The Hollow Men.” *Twelve Poets*. Ed. Glenn Leggett. Toronto: Holt, 1958.
4. Ford, Richard. *The Sports Writer* New York: Random House, 1986.
5. Haddad, Tony, ed. *Men and Masculinities A critical Anthology*. Toronto: Canadian Scholar’s 1993.
6. Housman, A.E. “To and Athlete Dying Young” *Twelve Poets* Ed. Glenn Leggett. Toronto: Holt, 1958.
7. Roethke, Theodore. *Words for the Wind: The Collected Verse of Theodore Roethke* Garden City. N.Y. Doubleday, 1958.