Sports Archetypes in The Novel *Black Brother, Black Brother*

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Abstract

This article analyzes the use of sports archetypes in Jewell Parker Rhodes' novel "Black Brother, Black Brother." It explores how the author incorporates established tropes from sports fiction, such as the underdog storyline, training sequences, mentorship, and pivotal game moments, to elevate the narrative beyond a typical coming-of-age tale. The analysis focuses on how these archetypes are applied to the protagonist Donte Ellison's journey in fencing, which becomes a vehicle for his personal development and exploration of identity. The document examines specific archetypes including the underdog, the mentor/coach, the training montage, the washed-up veteran, the loyal sidekick, the ultimate challenge, team spirit, and personal transformation through sports participation. It concludes that Rhodes skillfully intertwines these familiar tropes to create a powerful exploration of self-discovery, perseverance, and empowerment that resonates universally.

Keywords: Sports Archetypes, Black Brother, Sports Participation and Coach.

Introduction

Sports, a significant aspect of society, are often seen as influencers of physical and mental well-being and social interactions (Alasinrin and Ajeigbe). In the novel *Black Brother, Black Brother*, authored by Jewell Parker Rhodes, sports elements are not just present, but they play a pivotal role in shaping the characters and driving the narrative of the story. The

novel goes beyond a typical coming-of-age tale by incorporating established tropes from the sports fiction genre in a unique way. This piece will delve into the novel's distinctive use of sports fiction archetypes such as the underdog storyline, training sequences, the importance of mentorship, and pivotal game moments as tests of resilience and personal growth through sporting involvement. While fencing is the central activity, it becomes a vehicle for protagonist Donte Ellison's personal development and exploration of identity. This essay will analyse how Rhodes' unique approach to these sports fiction tropes elevate the narrative.

Archetypes in Literature

Archetypes are universal patterns, symbols, or events that recur throughout literature, mythology, and the collective consciousness of humanity. These fundamental character types, narrative structures, and symbolic motifs serve as the building blocks of storytelling, providing a common language that resonates across cultures and periods. As identified by prominent thinkers like C. G. Jung and Northrop Frye, these archetypal elements serve as the building blocks of storytelling, allowing authors to create narratives that tap into the shared experiences and symbolism of the human condition. The notion of the "monomyth," described by Joseph Campbell, highlights the pervasive nature of these archetypes, suggesting that diverse mythological and literary narratives are merely variations on a single, universal story. (Gijo and George 2021) One of the most widely recognized archetypes is the protagonist or hero, the central character through whose perspective a story is told and who takes on overcoming barriers and rescuing their community. Some other common archetypes are rags to rich, the quest, killing the monster and voyage and return.

Archetypes in Sports Fiction

The literature of sport is a vast and underexplored territory, deeply intertwined with society's broader cultural and social fabric (Umphlett). As such, the archetypes that emerge within sports fiction reflect the values, aspirations, and struggles that are inherent to the

human condition, transcending the boundaries of the athletic arena. These archetypes reflect the deep-seated cultural values and societal norms that permeate the world of sports, making them a rich source of literary exploration.

The Underdog: This archetype presents a person or team as improbable to win. They frequently encounter significant challenges or may not have the resources and backing of their rivals. Their story is one of perseverance against adversity, as illustrated by novels like *The Blind Side* by Michael Lewis and *Ruckus* by Jill Leslie.

The Mentor / Coach: The hero or squad is led by an experienced and knowledgeable person, the mentor or coach. This character frequently offers vital guidance, emotional support, and instruction. Two examples are mysterious coaches named Pop Meter from The Natural by Bernard Malamud and Frankie Dunn from Million Dollar Baby by F.X. Toole.

The Training Montage: In the training montage, a character gradually strengthens himself to get ready for a fight or sporting event. It involves intense physical effort, mental focus, identifying strengths and shortcomings, and emotional equilibrium. *You Will Know Me* by Megan Abbott and *Beartown* by Fredrik Backman have memorable training montages, showcasing the characters' dedication and growth as they prepare for their big moments.

The Washed-Up Veteran: A former standout player who had been a great player and might have achieved a pinnacle or missed it due to circumstance and is looking for atonement or a return and frequently faces their physical limitations or is haunted by prior foible. The character of Bruce Pearson from *Bang the Drum Slowly* depicts this.

The Rival: An antagonist who tests the protagonist's resolve and frequently embodies the weaknesses the protagonist must conquer in themselves. Stories, like You Will Know Me by Megan Abbott and The Contender by Robert Lipsyte, feature this dynamic heavily.

The Loyal Sidekick / Teammate: A helpful figure who offers humorous relief, emotional support, or necessary abilities to aid the protagonist on his path. Consider figures like Owen

Dunne from *The Art of Fielding* by Chad Harbach and Drew Knox from *You Will Know Me* by Megan Abbott.

Ultimate Challenge / Big Game: The "Ultimate Challenge" or "Big Game" archetype is a common and compelling theme in sports fiction. The climax centers around a pivotal game or competition that tests the protagonist's skills, resolve, and growth. In Chad Harbach's The Art of Fielding, the "Big Game" comes during the College World Series, where Henry and his teammates face their ultimate challenge on the field.

Team Spirit: The portrayal of "Team Spirit" in sports literature showcases the bond, solidarity, and collaborative endeavor of a group striving towards a shared objective. The narratives of the novels *Summerland* by Michael Chabon and *The Mighty Ducks* by Jordan Horowitz emphasize the development of team unity and the significance of trust in attaining triumph.

Personal Transformation Through Sports Participation: In sports fiction, "Personal Transformation Through Sports Participation" is a potent and recurring theme examining how sports participation can result in notable personal growth and development. This trope usually depicts characters involved in a sport who can undergo significant personal transformations as a result. *Friday Night Lights* by H.G. Bissinger explores the lives of high school football players in Texas, focusing on how the sport impacts their personal and community identities.

These templates serve as a foundation for sports fiction storytelling, crafting relatable tales that connect with audiences through themes and character arcs. Some of these archetypes which are used in the novel taken for study have been discussed below:

1. The Story of the Underdog

Within sports fiction, the underdog tale strikes a chord with readers due to its impact. *Black Brother, Black Brother* embodies this archetype through Donte's character. From the outset, Donte is established as an underdog. He accedes to it by saying, "In my old school,

basketball ruled. Trey was “top dog.” At Middlefield Prep, fencing is the be-all. Nobody fences better than Alan.” (Rhodes 28) It reveals that Alan is the “top dog’’ at fencing here in Middlefield Prep. As a Black student in a predominantly white school, Donte encounters prejudice and feels like an outsider. His lack of prior fencing experience also positions him as a novice in a competitive environment. Hence, he begins his journey at a disadvantage both socially and in fencing, a sport dominated by his white peers. His transformation from being underestimated and marginalized to discovering his strengths and proving himself forms the core of this narrative. This storyline creates a character whose resilience and grit inspire readers.

"Sometimes in life, it is not the best who wins. It is the one who wants it the most." This quote encapsulates the underdog theme in this fiction, where characters overcome the odds to succeed. Alan, the enemy of Donte, is the best fencer who might have won the match, but Donte needs the victory most to prove his identity and avenge his bully. Typically, he wins the bout and proves his identity, “Me. Everyone in the arena sees me. Fencing champion. I raise my foil with unshakable, unmistakable confidence.” (Rhodes 228) This setup aligns with the classic underdog narrative often found in sports fiction.

2. The Importance of Mentorship / Coach

Mentorship plays a role in sports-themed stories, often portrayed through a supportive coach who aids the main character in unlocking their potential. In *Black Brother, Black Brother,* coach Arden Jones fulfills this role for Donte. Alan identifies Donte’s talents as a fencer coach and becomes his mentor. He teaches Donte not only the aspects of fencing but also imparts valuable life lessons about persistence, honesty, and self-confidence. The following conversation between Jones and Donte underlines how he emphasizes personal development beyond competition.

“Winning is fine. Fencing honorably is the main thing. Do you remember what I told you about the salute?”

“Yes,” I say. “Our opponent, the ref, and the audience.” “Yes,” coach echoes. “Be respectful,” he adds. (Rhodes 159-160)

“Sorry I lost,” I say, eyes cast down.

“I’m not worried about you, Donte. I’m proud of you… I’m especially proud of how you rallied your team…Donte it’s not just about the bout. It’s about leadership, giving respect. Patience and control.” (Rhodes 171-172)

This mentorship greatly influences Donte’s growth by offering him guidance and encouragement for success. He emerges as a pivotal figure in Donte's journey. He fulfills the mentor role, a well-established sports fiction trope.

3. The Training Montage - Dedication and Development

A feature in sports narratives is the training montage, which showcases the protagonist’s commitment and growth. In the novel, Donte’s journey begins when he takes up fencing to confront his adversary on his turf. The narrative delves into the demanding nature of Donte's fencing training. With the guidance of Coach Alan Donte, he embarks on training, pushing himself both physically and mentally. Donte witnesses struggles initially as he grapples with the unfamiliar techniques and rigorous physical demands, "Give me ten push-ups. …Down. I don’t think I can push back up. My arms quiver. Up… My whole body trembles. I grit my teeth. I collapse… I complain, rocking back on my heels. I really can’t… Legs wobbly, arms dangling. Sweat drains on my face and chest." (Rhodes 70-72), illustrating the physical challenges Donte faces. This commitment, practice, and gradual improvement sequence enhances Donte’s fencing skills. Through fencing, Donte acquires qualities such as discipline, focus, and resilience that assist him in overcoming challenges both on and off the fencing strip. It represents his personal growth.

4. The Washed-Up Veteran

In this fiction, coach Arden Jones is the washed-up veteran who uses his fencing experience to train Donte. He is a former Olympian who lost one of his matches at the Olympics intentionally as a response to avenge his teammate Michael, who was bullying him racially, "All through training, Michael harassed me." (Rhodes 180) Later, he realized his foible of giving into Michael's bias and now sees training Donte as an opportunity for redemption, "Let the past stay past. But it's you who's given me a second chance… Meeting you taught me to forgive myself. I don't need to hate. Not anymore." (Rhodes 183-184) He advises Donte, based on his experience, "Be you. Stay confident, visible. Even if others can't see you." (Rhodes 183)

5. The Loyal Sidekick / Teammate

Trey, Donte's brother, is the loyal sidekick of the story. He is a beneficial character to Donte, providing comic relief and emotional support and helping him along his journey of triumphing over Alan. The below chat between Trey and Donte confirms the comic relief:

> "Trey high-fives me. "That's what I'm talking about. Glue in his jockstrap. Flood his locker. Dump his fencing gear in the pool. Can you imagine? See his face?" Trey grins, rubs his hands together. "King Alan embarrassed."
>
> Trey drops his bag, moving toward the kitchen. "I need something to eat." I can't help but smile… After practice, he drinks a half gallon of milk. Chews three ham sandwiches. But when he's worried, he ats even more.
>
> He belly-laughs. "Don't laugh," I shout. "You and sports? You don't like sports." I'll learn. "Coordination, speed, agility. You need them for sports. PlayStation doesn't count." I shove Trey. (Rhodes 38-41)
>
> "Just be gentle," says Trey. "In a bit, it'll feel good. Like your hamstrings sighing."
>
> "You're nuts." I laugh. But I do what Trey says. (Rhodes 76)

Throughout the story, Trey has been an emotional support to Donte whenever Donte is humiliated:

> "Ellison brothers stick together," he says, extending his hand. Like a lifeline, I clasp his hand. Then, we bump knuckles, clasp hands again… "Brothers" (Rhodes 47-48)
>
> "Ellison brothers are the greatest," Trey yells, heading off to school. (50)
>
> Not stand by him when he was humiliated? I had to stand by Trey. We had to stand together. (Rhodes 118)
>
> "Feel me," Trey says, confident. His words calm me like rippling water. "I feel you." "You're my best brother." "Your only brother." 220

Trey is the one who suggests fencing as a tool to avenge Alan, "Only thing Alan really cares about is fencing." (Rhodes 40) and helps Donte find the coach Arden Jones by providing him with an article titled 'Unknown Boston Greats' (Rhodes 47) in which Arden Jones is mentioned and convinces their mother when she asks Donte to give up the idea of training for fencing and retaliating Alan:

> "You should be avoiding folks like Alan… Bullies are everywhere. But facing off? Underneath the table, Trey smacks my thigh. We get it… Mom, we didn't hurt anybody. We'd never, murmurs Trey… Alan threatened us says Trey, defending me… You're the better fencer. I'm proud of you. Bet you could've taken him, Donte. Who knew? My little brother, the fencer? On guard! Trey pretends to swing a sword." (Rhodes 117-120)

6. The Ultimate Challenge - the Big Game

In sports stories, the big game represents a moment when the characters' determination and abilities are put to the test. For Donte, this pivotal moment comes during a fencing match against his rival, Alan, who symbolizes the racial challenges he has

encountered: “The last semifinal match – Country Day School v. Middlefield Prep. George Hansen v. Alan Davies. The opponents salute. I breathe heavily, nervously. I’m supposed to fence whoever wins… Of course I’m destined to meet Alan. Some battles can’t be postponed, delayed. Avoided. In the finals, Alan will be my opponent. One of us will be first; the other, second.” (Rhodes 219-221) The narrative hinges on this crucial fencing competition, functioning as the story's climax, “Alan, furious, beats my blade ferociously… “Unsportsmanlike behavior.” The referee hands Alan a red card.” (Rhodes 226) Beyond being a competition, this match is a battlefield for dignity and fairness. It becomes a chance for Donte to avenge Alan's misconduct: “With each attack, images flash: police, handcuffs, jail, courthouse, and judge.” (Rhodes 226) With pressure and stakes involved, Donte’s performance in this match showcases his development and unwavering resolve. Through this experience, Donte demonstrates his talent and reveals his inner strength and bravery. “Alan can’t break through. Thirty seconds left. Big finish. I grunt, the dam bursts, all my hurt and anger rushes through my body then narrows into a fluid, focused hit. Score. Five to one, I win!” (Rhodes 226) This narration captures the heightened emotions leading up to the competition.

7. Team spirit

The idea of 'team spirit' has always been a theme in sports stories capturing the interest of readers and viewers. The commitment and cooperation that people exhibit in a team to strive toward a common goal is what is supposed to be understood as team spirit. The concepts of unity and shared purpose are the foundation of team spirit, “Coach grins and pints his sword high. “All for one, one for all.” Each of us lifts steel swords, touching, crossing each other, pointing skyward. “All for one, one for all.” (Rhodes 207) Donte “Boys and Girls Club. That’s my fencing home. My team. (Rhodes 198) as well as coach: “Coach raised a plastic cup of Coke. Let’s salute our Boys and Girls Club family.” (Rhodes 231). Consider

their team as a family. As per convention, only Donte, Zion, and Zarra are the Greater Boston Boys and Girls Club (Rhodes 211) fencing team members in the story. However, Trey, brother of Donte too is considered as team member as he accompanies them and aspires for the success of the team, “We look smart, slick. Zion, Zarra, Trey, and me… We’re a team. Months of training. Practice bouts.” (Rhodes 159) Team spirit is vital to lead individuals and teams to success.

8. Personal Transformation Through Sports Participation

A significant theme in sports narratives is the personal growth characters experience through their participation in activities. Donte’s journey in the story exemplifies this transformation vividly. Initially struggling as a marginalized and disheartened student, Donte evolves into a self-assured and empowered individual. Through dedication and competition, Donte cultivates patience and confidence, overcomes obstacles, and discovers a newfound sense of belonging: “Coach laughs, hands me a water bottle. I’m teaching patience. What I need that for? Swiftness, intelligence can win a match. But patience is the real necessary skill.” (Rhodes 90) Fencing serves as a vehicle for his self-exploration and development. Through the sport, he learns to channel his emotions, gains self-esteem, and discovers a sense of community and purpose. The transformation plays a role in the story, illustrating how sports can profoundly impact someone’s life. The following inner thoughts of Donte after having won the final game demonstrate how fencing becomes a defining aspect of Donte's identity: “I know who I am – Donte Ellison, son of William and Denise Ellison, brother of Trey Ellison. Arden Jones’s student, Zion, and Zarra’s teammate. Me. Everyone in the arena sees me. Fencing champion. I raise my foil with unshakable, unmistakable confidence.” (Rhodes 228)

Conclusion

In *Black Brother, Black Brother* by Jewell Parker Rhodes, the use of sports fiction tropes like the underdog narrative, training montage, mentorship importance, pivotal game moments, and personal growth through sports participation is skilfully intertwined in Donte's journey. Rhodes elevates the story beyond a simple sports story by employing these familiar tropes from sports fiction. These components not only deepen the resonance of the narrative but also underscore themes of perseverance, development, and empowerment that resonate universally. The narrative becomes a powerful exploration of self-discovery and resilience, using fencing as a tool for Donte's journey.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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