12-17-2016

Teaching Field of Dreams as Cosmogonic Myth

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol2/iss3/3
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Abstract
Trotting away from the camera toward the boundary between baseball diamond and surrounding corn, Shoeless Joe Jackson, himself part of American baseball myth, turns to ask: "Hey, is this heaven?" "No," replies Ray Kinsella, who has turned part of his farm into his field of dreams, "It's Iowa." Both the line and the movie from which it comes, Field of Dreams (1989), have become a staple in my "Religion and Modern Culture" course, providing a teachable occasion for linking popular culture, the religious category of myth, and the task of critical thinking in religious studies.

This article is available in Journal of Religion & Film: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol2/iss3/3
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Not only is *Field of Dreams* familiar to most of my students; it works well 
in class because it exhibits many of the characteristics of Mircea Eliade's discussion 
of sacred space in *The Sacred and the Profane* (1959). In contrast with the almost 
transparent meaning of the film, Eliade's text is opaque to the class from the start. 
Sentences like "the manifestation of the sacred ontologically founds the world" 
(21), as well as his use of foreign words and comparative examples, baffles and 
confuses students with little background in philosophy or religion. Their immediate 
response to Eliade runs from criticism to hostility to derisive dismissal. *Field of 
Dreams*, a familiar artifact of popular culture, makes Eliade's unfamiliar language 
and analysis more useful to the students. It helps them to understand Eliade, to think 
more critically about--not of--the religious category of 'myth', and about its 
applicability to the world around them.
I try to help students see the metaphorical relationship between the film and Eliade's analysis of sacred space. The scene that I show is divided into two sequences--the first is set in the profane space inside the house, and the second in the sacred space of the baseball field. The clip begins with a young girl, Karen, watching baseball on TV; her parents, Ray and Annie, sit talking about their impending bankruptcy. Their concern with mortgages and finances preoccupies them with what Eliade calls the 'desacralized world' (13)--cornfields and bank payments, the profane world.

Karen interrupts, saying, "There's a man out there on the lawn." Ray leaves the house and steps onto the liminal space of his porch. Because Ray has heeded a voice saying, "If you build it he will come," this otherwise sensible farmer has plowed up a large section of the family cornfield to construct a baseball diamond, complete with lights. As he flips on the diamond's lights to see who is there, they frame the entire baseball field on which stands a lone figure--an ordered cosmos "of light beyond which lies the chaos" of the boundless midwestern cornfield (30). Ray enters the field and starts to play ball with the figure, whom he discovers is the long-dead Shoeless Joe Jackson, banned for life from baseball as a member of the legendary "Black Sox" team of 1919, who allegedly "fixed" a World Series game. The appearance of Shoeless Joe, I suggest, can be seen as what Eliade calls a "hierophany." It is "an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory
from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different" (26)--
making the space sacred, "the only real, and real-ly existing space" (20).

Ray, who has been batting, now reverses positions with Jackson and takes
the pitcher's mound. The camera offers a low shot of Ray on the mound, showing
it to be the field's elevated center, around which Ray has constructed--or, in Eliade's
words, "provided an orientation for"--a sacred cosmos (29). Not really an axis
mundi (38), it nevertheless orients Ray and the viewer in this world, this imago
mundi (52f). The ritual of the game is a re-creation of the cosmogony. And the film
in its entirety, I suggest to the class, can thus be seen as a sort of cosmogonic myth,
showing "how a reality came into existence, whether it be the total reality, the
cosmos, or only a fragment" (97).

Shoeless Joe makes it clear how real this world was to him, what a sacred
thing it was to play this game, to do this creative, cosmogonic task. Statements such
as "Getting thrown out of baseball was like having part of me amputated," or "Man,
I did love the game," and "Shoot, I would have played for nothing," indicate that
for him, as for any religious person, the sacred is more than a place. It is a way of
being oriented in the world.

If the edge of the cornfield, serving as the outfield fence, demarcates the
"boundary of the sacred" (a boundary that Shoeless Joe can cross at will, indicating
the kinship between the sacred and the realm of chaos), on the home-plate side of the field lies the boundary between the sacred and the profane, desacralized world, a line that Shoeless Joe cannot cross. Thus, he must refuse the offer of a cup of coffee, prompting Karen in her innocence to ask, "Are you a ghost?", to which he responds with a question of his own: "What do you think?" "You look real to me," Karen responds. Shoeless Joe concludes, "Then I guess I'm real"—in fact, the most real, that is, most sacred figure on the screen at the time.

In a final long shot with the house out of focus and Shoeless Joe heading into the cornfield, he turns and asks the question with which I began above, "Is this Heaven?", to which Ray answers, "No, it's Iowa." The American heartland is thus redescribed as sacred center. The scene which began with the profane world and its financial worries ends with Ray and Annie reaffirming their commitment to keeping this field, at all costs. For it has been seen as it really is, a sacred space, indeed the very center of what matters most.

By using this film clip in class, I can work inductively to let the familiar and the unfamiliar reinterpret one another. Students' initial criticism of Eliade can be transformed into an appreciation for the kind of critical thinking that The Sacred and the Profane engenders. Having read Eliade, then watching this film clip, students now have both new intellectual tools and a concrete example of how and why they matter in making sense of the popular cultural world in which they spend
their time. When the exercise works, students suddenly see Eliade everywhere. With the enthusiasm of new religious converts they see the sacred and profane, the axis mundi, and liminal spaces in virtually everything they do--in the choices of their seats in the classroom, in other of their favorite sports. This provides the chance to talk, then, about the limits of using popular culture in the classroom as well. There are important differences between the movie director's view of sacred space and that of Eliade. And the class can think, too, about the difference between the medium of text and that of film. Yet, most of all, they have an opportunity to see that Eliade's analysis of sacred space is less strange than it first appeared. Indeed, they come to appropriate the analytical tools as a way of thinking critically about the film and about other examples of sacred space, and they develop a confidence and competency with a bit of the discourse of comparative religion as well.