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GAME-PLAY IN FICTION:
A CRITICAL PARADIGM*

Toward the end of *Light in August*, in the climactic scene in Chapter 1 where the authorities of justice pursue the elusive Joe Christmas through the streets of Jefferson, William Faulkner introduces a new character, Percy Grimm, a twenty-five-year-old captain in the State National Guard who has relentlessly acquired the rank of a special deputy for the search. As the town closes for the weekend, Grimm keeps vigil at a downtown store where other townsfolk have begun a poker game to stay awake through the night as the search goes on. In their zeal to uphold law and justice, his men revel in their fantastic make-believe that they are doing the work of "a hidden and unsleeping and omnipotent eye watching the doings of men."[1] The poker game goes on through Saturday night until Christmas is spotted and given chase. As Grimm runs through the streets after the fleeing man, Faulkner

[1] William Faulkner, *Light in August*, New York, Modern Library, 1968, p. 432. Subsequent page references are to this edition.

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presents to us the deputy's stream of thought from an omniscient point of view: "There was nothing vengeful about him either, no fury, no outrage. He was moving again almost before he had stopped, with that lean, swift, blind obedience to whatever Player moved him on the Board" (437). Through the rest of the chapter, Grimm, who has not participated in the poker game at all, thinks and acts as if he is engaged in a chess game, not as a player but as the stake or the pawn in a board game in which Jefferson is the board on which he and Christmas are being moved from place to place by two larger forces, he by the benevolent Providence and Christmas by the powers opposed to God. Finally, when Christmas is cornered and fatally shot in Reverend Hightower's kitchen, this fantasized game seems to end.

What is the rhetorical effect of this apparently intrusive episode of play? How does it affect our response to the story, the characters, and the plot? What aspects of play need to be addressed when we establish a critical paradigm for the ludic texture of fiction which uses game-play as a rhetorical ploy to manipulate characters' actions and readers' responses? These are the questions I wish to discuss here as a starting point in proposing a paradigm for the analysis of ludic texts.

By the standards of conventional narrative, *Light in August* is logically complete when Christmas is captured. We have the essence of an Aristotelian plot: a background to the characters and a "beginning" which leads to a conflict; an evolving action through which we experience the "rising" complication: and a catastrophe signifying the termination of progressing action. A crime has been committed; the force of good, the authorities of justice, have sought out the alleged criminal who apparently represents the evil forces in the world of Jefferson; justice has been done and social balance restored through the defeat and capture of the sought-for disrupting agent. But that is the design of a narrative involving action in a realistic novel, and for those of us who have overlooked or forgotten Percy Grimm's world of fantasy, the "make-believe" world where antagonistic forces are perpetually locked in contest of strength and skill, Faulkner has a reminder: "But the Player was not done yet" (439). For the game that Grimm thinks he is playing or being played on against Joe Christmas to come to its close, there has to be a "kill", so that one player is thrown off the

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board as the other proclaims victory.[2] In *Light in August* this ritual of kill manifests itself in Grimm's grotesque, gruesome emasculation of Christmas behind the table. The poker game early on provides a psychological frame for our evaluation of Grimm's action: if we lose sight of the rhetorical demands that this chasing game creates, Grimm appears to be a "flat" diabolical villain, and Faulkner's irony in characterization escapes us; if we participate in his game, Grimm emerges a winner and a hero, and we miss the symbolic meaning of the peripeteia at the moment of reversal.[3]

Because of the common notion associating play with freedom and openness, narratives using game-play often raise doubts as to whether their authors have any regard for traditional methods of narrative development, particularly in respect to unit of character and action. Yet authors who use game-play as a rhetorical device to manipulate reader response commit themselves to a narrative structure demanded by the nature of the game. For, though each game-play situation involves some universal concepts of play—contest (test of physical/mental strength), entertainment and exercise, rules, boundaries of time and space, for instance—we anticipate that the narrative conform to the rules and conventions of its "kosmos", and offer us a "system of notations" to grasp the way in which it is related to life. To present this total vision, a writer must illuminate at least three relations between the story and the metaphor: it must develop the specific game as a fictive donnee, that is, the game as inseparable from, and intrinsic to, the main assumption, or as source of assumptions on which the story proceeds; it must define the role of the game as a moral touchstone; and it must sustain the use of the game as the vehicle for defining the metaphorical "world of the work". The paradigm I wish to present in the following pages is based on these premises.

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[2] Kenneth Burke discusses this concept of the "kill" and the scapegoat at length in *Philosophy of Literary Forms*, Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 1967, Ch. 1.

[3] I am aware that here, as in several other examples I can think of, the game is an extended metaphor or model for deterministic force. American naturalists in particular often used games to represent the way (they thought) real life works—the game structure's logic forces the players to make their decisions. The players have free will but they cannot will what they will, since the game supplies their logic. Though characters like Grimm may appear heroic, I believe that Grimm is the author's projected parody of the typical fanatic who fails to distinguish between a fantastic game and the reality of life.

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But, first, why a new paradigm? Historically, analysis and understanding of literature have relied heavily on a larger world picture which defines the cultural attitudes of an age toward life and art. When the creative minds and the critical minds of a period fail to synchronize their understanding of this picture, the situation leads to a revision of the old world picture and to a new paradigm of intellectual apprehension of the universe.[4] In *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode points to our need for such a new paradigm. The traditional English novel, he notes, is formally defined by a Christian paradigm, a rectilinear model which begins with Genesis and ends with Apocalypse: "The clock's *tick-tock* I take to be a model of what we call a plot, an organization that humanizes time by giving it form", Kermode explains; "and the interval between *tock* and *tick* represents purely successive, disorganized time of the sort that we need to humanize".[5] The new novel, he says, has departed from this norm. In contrast to the biblical narrative which apotheosized this theological paradigm, the fiction of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries embraced a form congruent with the secularized model of human life. The new paradigm was still historical and linear, but it began with the birth of a child and generally came to a close with either death or marriage, the first marking the end of the life-cycle and the second marking the beginning of a new generation. Just as the new rationalism of those centuries invalidated the theological dogma inherent in the world picture which formed part of their inherited critical/literary doctrine, similarly the new technology of our time has armed us to question the certainty of the phases of human life in the secular model of plot and characterization handed down to us. Thanks to medical science, death is no longer accepted with stoic helplessness as an integral part, a companion piece, of life; rather, life is prolonged and death postponed, sometimes for years, with the help of "life-saving" machines. The transition from life

[4] This shift in fundamental beliefs is as true even in the realms of science, where "truth" is thought to be empirically proven and, so, perennial. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1962.

[5] Frank Kermode, *Sense of an Ending*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 45. The new novel, Kermode says, has departed from the norm of the nineteenth-century novel: it "repeats itself, bisects itself, modifies itself, contradicts itself, without ever accumulating enough bulk to constitute a past—and thus a 'story', in the traditional sense of the word" (19).

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to whatever comes hereafter has become an ordeal, a batle ground of forces. Similarly, consequent upon social and economic forces of this century, marriage has changed its contractual meaning: no longer considered a social ritual uniting two people into one in holy matrimony for life, it also denies the certainty of the beginning of a new generation any more. The beginnings and endings of life in the secular model no longer operate in the beginnings and closings of fictional plots. Wolfgang Iser considers Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* as the half-way point in this shift from the eighteenth-century novel represented by Fielding to the twentieth-century novel represented by Joyce, and calls for a newer approach to fiction based on the changed relationship between the author and the reader—and human beings and the cosmos, on a larger scale—one that demands that "the reader find for himself the key to a many-sided puzzle".[6]

If much modern fiction is characterized by game-play,[7] our new paradigm for this fiction will have to derive from our fundamental beliefs about play. The essential features of play, I submit, are the following: the ethos of a game is separate from and independent of the common reality of everyday living; a game takes place within limited time and space, so it begins with the entry of the players and the spectators in a play arena and ends with their return from there; a game controls and is controlled by the players, its rules functioning as the determinants of interaction among players and spectators, just as the social, political, and economic constraints structure our life outside play; a game involves a frame of mind in which the paradoxical realities of play and non-play exist together, so the normal patter· ·f action and behavior are suspended while we are within th   e of play. We expect that all fictional

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[6] Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader*, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974, p. 103.

[7] For a sample of critical views suggesting game-play as an appropriate metaphor for the new reality of our time, see the following: Gabriel Josipovichi, *The Lessons on Modernism and Other Essays*, London, Macmillan, 1977; Frank Kermode, *Sense of an Ending*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1967; Jose Ortega, *Meditations on Hunting*, New York, Scribner, 1972; Philip Stevick, ed. *Anti-Story*, New York, Free Press, 1971; and Tony Tanner, *City of Words*, New York, Harper & Row, 1971. In addition, John Barth, Lawrence Durrell, Vladmir Nabokov, and other "metafictionists" have found play a convenient vehicle to express their view of the world.

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representations of play in literature, therefore, share these common characteristics, although there may be a broad range of ways in which writers use play in their fiction.[8]

Play begins with a departure from ordinary reality and ends with a return to the routine of life. It marks its difference from our regular living by asking us, spectators and players, to leave our daily business or work and gather at a certain place for a certain length of time. Unless we accept such an invitation, we remain outside the game, and the game seems absurd.[9] Such a departure, on the other hand, is predicated by a need for recreation, when our control over the surroundings dwindles to such an extent that we feel threatened about our role in a system that provides us our identity as human beings, when we need to get away from "it" all. In *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga begins his study of the play elements of culture from this premise, that play is essentially the attribution of human significance to a mechanistic universe, that play allows us to exercise our innate potential to manipulate the course of our lives. From such a perspective, play is not merely a field of escape from reality; instead, it is a search for a more systematic world, where we have a chance to synchronize our acts and intentions.[10] A fictional narrative relying on ludic metaphors must therefore invoke a tighter structure, one characterized not by looseness of motives and directions but by the outlines and

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[8] The varying criteria readers have used to classify the ludic elements in literature presents a broad spectrum of the creative uses of play by authors. See, especially, Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barasch, Glencoe, Illinois, The Free Press, 1961; Robert Detweiler, "Games and Play in Modern American Fiction", in *Contemporary Literature* 17. 1 (1976): 44-62; and Ronald Foust, "The Rules of the Game: A Para-theory of Literary Theories" in the special issue of *South Central Review* on "Game, Play, and Literature", Winter 1986 (forthcoming).

[9] If we consider the real action in a game, such absurdity becomes evident. Think, for instance, in soccer, of twenty-two after a leather ball with the single goal of kicking it into a net at one end of the field or the other, and, in golf, of players religiously hitting a tiny ball into a small hole in the ground. A game may sometimes be so acutely alien to the inherited patterns of life of a people that it will never be culturally accepted, as in the case of soccer in America, or American football in many other countries.

[10] In *Words in Reflection*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984, Allen Thiher argues that Beckett's characters play games in order to assert their individualities. From such a perspective, play seems to be a mechanistic action, that is, players set certain goals and follow certain strategies to reach those goals. Even in games of chance, players calculate the probabilities and risks with some degree of certainty.

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guidelines established by the text and the author of the games.

All games are carried out within boundaries of space and time, and just as the beginning of the game is marked by the players' and the spectators' departure from their "work" world so the end of a game is marked by their return to the regular routines, though the spectacle within the play arena may have changed their perspectives toward themselves, their fellow beings, and the world. Although the bounded space appears limiting at first glance, its limits paradoxically produce the liberating sense characteristic of play. Erik Erikson calls this new space an "extension" of the player. In a recent study on Samuel Beckett's characters, Allen Thiher holds that one impulse at the heart of play is "to kick open the closed space and experience the exhilaration of the body's vertigo."[11] Huizinga compares the play arena to an altar, a place manifested with the magic of miracles and myths. It is an appropriate place for ritual, a "mythologic universe", which Roger Caillois calls a "pure space".[12] This bounded space maintains a charm over those within its limits; it permits, demands, or tolerates many radical variances from the normal standards of conduct, but follows its own established rules as strictly as the world outside the game follows the guidelines of the common law of the land.

Similarly, the time dimension of game defines its meaning and significance. A real-life conflict lasting decades may be represented in a sixty-minute game and resolved at the end of the hour. An interstellar battle may terminate on the basis of scores acquired by competing players on a video screen in thirty minutes. Such compression of time reduces the horizontal stretch of time, but allows endless possibilities for vertical/synchronic time. The play-time is unreal; relieved of historical continuity in normal time, the participants in play epitomize the symbolism of this unreality, and with this shift the players and the participants go beyond the causality and the logic of time "before and after", their course being subject only to the laws of its own making and incorporation.

Yet play is open-ended or loosely structured in the sense that it

[11] Thiher, p. 157.
[12] Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barasch, Glencoe, Illinois, Free Press, 1959, p. 7.

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has immeasurable potential for surprises, that is, the outcome of a game can take any number of turns in the course of the designated time. As Caillois observes, "an outcome in advance, with no possibility of error or surprise, clearly leading to an inescapable result, is incompatible with the nature of play".[13] The unpredictability of the outcome of a game is, indeed, the source of our enjoyment. We have a bias for surprise; most spectators often have a secret desire to see the underdog come off the winner, though they know well that the superior team or individual has the advantage to win. In our experience of reading, Iser has suggested, a similar longing for surprises, betrayals of our logical expectations, also characterizes our aesthetic enjoyment of literary texts.[14] In a game-play narrative, such surprises are integral to the theme, not just authorially manipulated tools. We demand punishment for people who "fix" a game, a bid, or the price of shares on the stock exchange, for the very idea of play presupposes equal chances for the contenders to win; we expect that the author/narrator will not interfere in the logical progression and closure of the narrative which builds on the momentum of a game.

The rules of a game, like its time and space boundaries, are constricting, but they contribute to its feeling of liberation because the participants either set those rules or accept them before they enter the play world. When the rules, institutionalized and rigid after a period of usage and adherence, seem incompatible to the dynamics of the game, representatives of players and spectators have the option of revising or replacing them, yet once the new rules go into effect the competitors are bound by them.

Even with the players, the spectators, the play area, and the rules established, however, a game cannot exist without the ludic frame of mind which must inseminate the play sphere and sustain the

[13] Caillois, p. 7.

[14] "In the oscillation between consistency and 'alien associations', between involvement in and observation of the illusion, the reader is bound to conduct his own balancing operation", says Iser, "and it is this that forms the aesthetic experience offered by the literary text" (p. 286). This "shifting of perspectives", he holds, brings to the text realism, its proximity to the experience of life. The audience's secret desire for surprise was evident in the pre-game TV projections about the 1985 NCAA basketball championship game between Georgetown, the incumbent team, and Villanova, the challenger. Spectators, even supporters of the Georgetown team, admitted a secret sympathy for the underdog.

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spell of the game. Huizinga calls it the "charm" produced in the
of playing, and compares it to the incantatory sound which
pervades the place of worship and produces the magic of
obedience. Participation in play is self-hypnosis, a deliberate
self-deception, involving "an oscillation between the bent to
sustain the illusion and the opposite tendency aiming at
disillusionment".[15] A ludic frame of mind, thus, is burdened with
two levels of reality. As players or spectators, we simultaneously
experience the natural, though momentarily suspended, reality of
ordinary life and the created, but predominant, reality of the game.
We swing with the dialectic of these two consciousnesses, so that
we cheer our team on its victory or despair over its defeat though
we know that we are watching *only* a game, and the players, though
they know that they are *only* playing, burst into violent fights over
some trifle during the game. The same oscillation characterizes our
reading a fictional text. But the illusion is transitory, and at
intervals we realize the temporality of the experience. This ethos
of play, the ludic frame of mind, disappears when the
disinterestedness of the players is replaced by real-life calculations.
When an originally conceived game acquires proportions of
utilitarian seriousness incompatible with the spirit of play, the
game becomes reality and a new game is devised to symbolize the
play aspects of it; similarly, when a normal human pastime is
conceived in terms of play, a new game evolves to make light of
its threatening outcomes.[16]

These four I consider to be the characteristic elements of play,
and I submit that when play is used as a rhetorical vehicle in a
fictional narrative they define and control the narrative structure
by virtue of the sets of expectations they arouse and appease in us.
How does such a definition of game-play help formulate the
fictional narrative? Jacques Ehrmann provides a starting point for

[15] The umpire's role in a game symbolizes the paradox of play in a unique way.
The official is within the game, but he always protects the rules which control the
game. When abuse of the game's rules is of external origin and is out of control of
the umpire, the public acts against the team or the players. Tulane University's
basketball program in 1985 is a case in point: under charges of bribery and
point-shaving, the sixty-five-year program was disbanded.

[16] For example, as professional athletics loses its status of pure play, new play
models of the teams with exact statistics are created. These models idealize and
ritualize the players and the teams.

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a critical paradigm to approach such narrative structures. He divides play into its two broad categories—play in action (*ludus*) and in words (*jocus*)—and, drawing on the works of Huizinga, Caillois, and Emile Benveniste, suggests that the different kinds of reality and order of existence in play are represented through the time and space dimensions of literature:

> ... the question of play is situated both in the prolongation of the structure (a logical system which encloses Space in a certain formal area) and in the prolongation of the question of History (a dialectic reason whose dynamism engenders Time as lived through by the individual or the group).[17]

Such an approach encompasses games and play in both realistic literature and fantasy, the *Bildungsroman* and the fiction of Utopia, without claiming for the subject any unrealistic position in the theory of literature and criticism. Ehrmann forges a fruitful connection between the fiction of game-play and the archetypal patterns dating from Homer and the Golden-Age Greeks and codified by Aristotle in *Poetics*. His analysis links game-play novels to the literary traditions of quest and discovery, which is historically ingrained as much in the fables of journey—with alienation, physical separation, and reconciliation at their core—in time and space, real or imagined, as in the works generally termed *Bildungsroman*.

Using this model as my point of departure and relating it to the two principles of narrative suggested by Tzvetan Todorov, I will propose a ludic paradigm to show that game-play fiction follows a structural design which conforms to the classical rhetoric of form. In "The Two Principles of Narrative", Tzvetan Todorov argues that a narrative "requires the development of an action . . . change, difference", and that the "passage from A to non-A is the paradigm of all change". According to him, the two categories of narrative are based on principles of *succession* of events and *transformation* of characters and scenes between the narrative units. For the first of these, the simple narratives based on chronological succession of events or documented information, he proposes the term

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[17] Jacques Ehrmann, "Homo Ludens Revisited", *Yale French Studies*, 41 (1968), 5.

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mythological. For the second, "the type of narrative in which the principle of succession is assisted by the second type of transformation [qualitative], narratives in which the importance of the event is less than that of our perception of the event, of the degree of knowledge that we have about it", he proposes the term *gnoseological.* To map out the nature of succession and transformation in narratives, he identifies "five indispensable elements" in his example, Boccaccio's "Swan-Geese Story": (1) the situation of equilibrium at the beginning; (2) the breakdown of this situation; (3) recognition of the loss of equilibrium; (4) successful search for the lost person/object; and (5) re-establishment of the initial equilibrium. The story, he holds, is based on ignorance followed by discovery, a paradigm also central to the quest for the Grail. The principal narrative in each case is the story of a quest, and the quest produces a narrative of knowledge.[18]

Play is characterized by a similar quest whether the quest is for pure hedonistic pleasure or for a meaning of life in the world, especially when the equilibrium of normal life has been upset by events or situations which we can neither explain nor control. The paradigm for the ludic narrative relies, therefore, on transformation rather than succession. Play may be interpreted, but not analyzed, because when we analyze a game we subject it to a logic external and irrelevant to it. Analysis of games, by nature, has to be *post facto.* If we extend Todorov's "five indispensable elements" to a game-play situation where the narrator presents play as the metaphorical vehicle for dramatic action, we may take the following to be paradigmatic of all game-play narratives:

Seclusion: The protagonist, beset with unresolved questions of life, withdraws temporarily from the real world of work by choice or necessity and seeks a congenial world. The new world may belong to a haunting past, in which he finds nostalgic charm and sportive independence, or to an imminent future, where he creates an idealized world for a life without burdens and pressures. In a narrative, this fantasy land may be implied or externally presented; located in the abstract sphere of pure imagination, or ritualized in

[18] *Diacritics*, 1.1 (1971), 38-40.

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metaphors of concrete reality; entered intentionally or accidentally.

Escape-Observation: The protagonist enters the world of play, alone or in company, where he confronts the real-life questions. As a player or a spectator, he now lives a dual consciousness, first of the world left behind and its restraints and limitations, and the second of the new world he has arrived in, where the old restraints have been replaced by totally new ones, though the new limitations symbolically represent the "old" world. The game stretches on the surface of time: his life outside game remains beneath, in the depths, where his past and present flash from moment to moment. He seeks to find connections and make sense of both worlds by comparing and contrasting them. His participation gradually becomes more intensely total.

Equation-Analysis-Discovery: The search for parallel truths in the two worlds reaches a level of trance or monomania where the physical act of playing moves toward a metaphysical state and the player makes the fatal choice of preparing to sacrifice himself, if need be, for the game. What is important in the game assumes identity with or superiority over what is important outside it, and by a sudden act of violence the protagonist rediscovers his world in a new light. The peak of this violent moment is marked by some climactic form of physical loss, maiming, death, or death-like experience, either suffered or witnessed, as a token of the new knowledge gained from the outside world. It is a sacrificial death of the self or of an other.

Connection-Return: The protagonist emerges from the play, acquiring a new calm as regards the real world. The new awareness seems mystical, irrational, and remains unexplained and untransmittable. It becomes integrated with the protagonist's consciousness. If the shock of the new knowledge is bearable, the protagonist becomes a martyr to a cause: if he assimilates it, he accepts the world in new terms and becomes a leader.
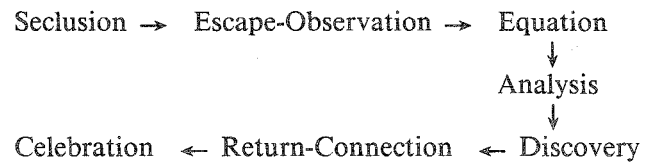
Celebration. The protagonist returns to the normal world, reconciled. He experiences a "waking up" from sleep or magic spell. When his individual success is simultaneous with a spectacular public success, the spectators celebrate this "waking up" by organizing parades or marches through the streets and displaying the players and by other paraphernalia of public

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participation. If the game is a loss, the player awakens as a person,
life or death. The return to the normal world, in such a case,
ounts to happy renewal.

he order of these narrative stages exhibits a progression from
ginning conflict to its final resolution, the moment of discovery
ming during a ritualized symbolic imitation of life, which is play,
rather than during the regular activities of the protagonist. The new
understanding thus remains less traumatic and more significant for
the changing consciousness.

This model also presents the narrative structure as a process of
inversion. The protagonist's journey from seclusion to return is
marked by nine stages, with the first four reversing qualitatively at
the point of *analysis*, which is marked by an intuitive
understanding and followed by the crucial stage of *discovery*. The
scheme may be presented graphically as follows:

$$\text{Seclusion} \rightarrow \text{Escape-Observation} \rightarrow \text{Equation}$$
$$\downarrow$$
$$\text{Analysis}$$
$$\downarrow$$
$$\text{Celebration} \leftarrow \text{Return-Connection} \leftarrow \text{Discovery}$$

Thus *seclusion*, which is signified by the protagonist's failure to
accommodate in a shared system of life and values and consequent
withdrawal from his community, not only ends with *celebration*,
but the end reverses the initial *status quo* as well. The protagonist's
loneliness—self-imposed, or inflicted by a rigid society, or brought
upon accidentally by external forces, or even engaged in as a
trick—beginning with *escape*, is handsomely rewarded upon his
return which is marked by communal acceptance of him as a hero
or a leader, as though the player has gone through a sacrifice for
the sake of his fellow men. Similarly, habitual observation of the
rituals of games changes into selective observation during the
connection stage, and formal *equation* leads to meaningful
discovery after the player-protagonist's *analysis* of his experiences
through the dialectic exchange of play and non-play selves of the
player.

The narrative is thus circular, though there is never a return to
the exact beginning. Play remains a means of transformation for

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the protagonist, a passage during which the "realism" of real life remains inoperative. Sometimes the game is concrete and physical, played on the natural level; sometimes it is abstract, played on the conceptual level; sometimes it is a resurrected mythic fable, depicted as a fantastic ritual; and sometimes it is limited only to words, created as verbal artifact. But the transformation of character, bounded by a withdrawal from and a return to the ordinary reality, follows the essential dialectic of play and games.

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