
A Phantom Fly and Frightening Fish: The Unconscious Speaks in *Sports Night*

Douglas Keeseey

Sports Night anchor Casey McCall is ducking his head and swiping at the air with his hands. He insists he's being pestered by a fly in the studio, but no one else can see it. The show's producer, Dana Whitaker, calls it a "phantom fly" (episode 4). At the same time, Dana is about to go on a date with a man named Gordon with whom she hopes to have a "good time," and as she is leaving, Casey mutters under his breath, "I'll bet you will." Casey's comment could be taken as a sign of jealousy, but Dana argues that he's not really harboring any love for her, that it's just in his head — like the fly. Casey counters that it is Dana who has serious feelings for him, even though she has said that she's "not the one being hunted by an imaginary insect." At the end of this episode, Dana is hit by a fly.¹

The fly is one of many examples in *Sports Night* of words and images through which the unconscious speaks. Casey and Dana are both pestered by a nagging feeling which they can't deny but which they can't quite admit to themselves: they love each other. Since this internal feeling is disavowed (not "owned" as theirs), it seems to come at them from the outside — as a dive-bombing fly. Their shared sense of being "hunted by an imaginary insect" is a return of their repressed love, a feeling that won't let them alone until they admit it's real. The "phantom fly" is thus an image that Casey and Dana use to communicate their unconscious feelings for one another and to help bring those feelings to light.

As we shall see, many of the couples in *Sports Night* receive promptings

from their unconscious which call upon them to recognize and declare their desire for each other. Often these promptings are confused at first — clouded by ignorance (lack of self-knowledge) and fear (of rejection by the other). Sometimes these coded messages from the unconscious, as in the case of the fly, seem to be as much about hiding from the truth as about facing it, as if to say, “The feeling that we may love each other is just a minor annoyance.” However, these coded messages are also the mind’s way of figuring out how it really feels, of working through confusion toward clarity and insight. These surreptitious signals — words and images affected by the unconscious — allow the self to comprehend and dispel the fears that have clouded the free expression of desire.²

In a later episode (15) after the one with the phantom fly, Dana tells Casey that Gordon has invited her to go on a snorkeling trip with him and several other couples. Casey responds with words specific enough to convey his jealousy, but vague enough to hide the fact that it is Dana and Gordon he is jealous of: “Sounds like a lot of people are going to be having sex with a lot of other people who aren’t me.” It’s important to note the implied connection here between snorkeling and sex in order to understand the anxiety Dana feels about this trip: “Fish frighten me in a very real way.... They live where it’s murky — poisonous, tentacle-bearing, prehistoric sea creatures.... We don’t know what the hell’s down there.” Dana’s fish phobia is her unconscious confession to a fear of sex, particularly the male sex, which she views as a dark threat — stinging, entrapping, primitive, and unknown. At first we may think that Gordon is the fish she fears, and in part this may be true, but it turns out that Dana’s greatest dread is Casey. While she may be anxious about going snorkeling with Gordon, this trip is really an avoidance of a date with Casey. As a man, Gordon is bland and unthreatening, and Dana’s feelings for him do not run deep, whereas Casey is unknown and unpredictable, and her sense that he may be what she really wants makes her vulnerable to deep disappointment. As Casey realizes, Dana isn’t afraid of fish, but of “holding out for what she deserves” — a man who will really love her and whom she can love (a man like Casey). As an image, the frightening fish alert Dana to a fear of sex and of love which she must overcome, and they are telling her not to go with Gordon, who is the wrong man for her.

Casey’s fly and Dana’s fish are thus indirect expressions of their longing for each other, circumlocutions used in place of straightforward declarations of love. Casey and Dana can’t bring themselves to talk plainly and just say how they feel. Consider Dana’s verbal contortions in discussing Casey with associate producer Natalie Hurley (episode 14):

NATALIE: He’s secretly in love with you.

DANA: He’s not.

NATALIE: He's only pretending he's not...

DANA: He's pretending he's pretending he's not so I think he is, but he's not, but he thinks he is, which doesn't matter because I'm in love with Gordon.

NATALIE: I know.

DANA: Good.

NATALIE: But you're secretly in love with Casey.

While Natalie states simply and clearly that both Dana and Casey are secretly in love with each other, Dana spins a complex verbal web of defense in which she herself is trapped. She is so intent on protecting herself against the possibility that Casey's love is only a pretense that she gives it no chance to be true.

Both Dana and Casey find it safer to express their interest in one another through coded communications like the fly and the fish. A declaration of love that is never (clearly) made is one that can never be (bluntly) rejected. Veiled expressions of jealousy help to hide the pain of unrequited love. In one episode (13), Dana and Casey are set to go on a double date — she with Gordon, and Casey with another woman. Dana believes that Casey thinks there's a certain point in the evening when Casey will say something wonderful to her that will make her melt and be sorry to have gone out with Gordon. Casey counters that he'll settle for Dana's spilling something on herself. With this aggressive remark, Casey attempts to deny his jealous desire for Dana, but at the same time the "spill" is an equivocal expression of that desire. Is Casey angry because Dana thinks he's jealous, or because he *is* jealous over her going out with Gordon? Is the wish for her to spill something on herself a matter of pure aggression, or does Casey want to ruin Dana's date with Gordon, to make her "melt" for Casey himself, to spill his own love for her? There is a parallel episode (16) in which Jeremy Goodwin, a research analyst, spills eggnog out of his mouth and onto his shirt to show how much he loves Natalie. Jeremy hates eggnog, but he has been making it in order to please Natalie's parents (he thinks they drink eggnog at Easter).

In the same episode (16) as the spilled eggnog, we find out that Casey spilled some wine on one of his shirts when he was spending the night with Sally, another producer at the network and a professional rival of Dana's. Here is another spill with sexual connotations, and it is clear that sleeping with Sally is the closest thing for Casey to sleeping with Dana — his true desire. Casey leaves his shirt at Sally's to be laundered, but a few days later he notices that Gordon, Dana's current beau, is wearing that same shirt.³ Casey could take the direct route and simply tell Dana that Gordon has been unfaithful to her with Sally, but this would not only have Dana suspecting Casey's jealous interest in ruining her current relationship with Gordon, it

would also involve Casey's own admission that he too has been "unfaithful" to Dana by sleeping with Sally. Casey cannot easily tell Dana that Gordon is the wrong man for her without making himself look self-interested and similarly wrong for her.⁴

It is indirect communication that allows Casey a way out of this difficult situation (episode 22). He tells Dan Rydell, his co-anchor on the show, and swears him to secrecy. But Dan tells Natalie, who then tells Dana. Dan and Natalie thus act as agents of Casey's unconscious, conveying to Dana what he cannot bring himself to do directly.⁵ By consciously keeping the truth from Dana, Casey can be thought of as having tried to protect her from pain. At the same time, the indirect communication to her of the truth reveals Gordon's infidelity and leads to her breakup with him, thus clearing the way for Casey. Casey has gotten what he secretly wanted without having to pay a price for his self-interest. Earlier, Casey had said that his only plan to separate Dana from Gordon was Napoleon's battle plan: "First we show up, then we see what happens." To Dan, this had sounded like no plan at all, but by the end of the episode Dan seems to see that it was indeed a brilliant (unconscious) strategy: Casey took the "high road" of keeping Dana safe from the secret of Gordon's infidelity, while others took the "low road" and revealed it to her, causing a breakup with Gordon that benefits Casey.

The plan almost backfires, though, when Dana becomes furious with Casey for his having slept with Sally: "You are a sleazy, slimy, adolescent, oversexed, overpaid blowhole!" However, even Dana's anger proves to be Casey's secret success, for it turns out that she was more upset about Casey's affair with Sally than about Gordon's, and the very words she uses to condemn Casey reveal the depth of her feeling (the jealous rage of a woman betrayed) and the desire behind her ire (that "sleazy, slimy ... oversexed ... blowhole" is reminiscent of those "tentacle-bearing, prehistoric sea creatures" in their sensual particularity).⁶ When Casey ends up anchoring the show without pants and Dana tells him he should feel right at home that way, her interest in seeing him exposed is prurient as well as punitive.

In this same episode (22), Dana makes the curious comment that none of the bad things in her life would be happening if she had a camera, and after finding out about Gordon's infidelity and then again after berating Casey for being "oversexed," she declares her intent to buy a camera. Dana's camera-craze is a satire on materialism as a panacea, but it also suggests a desire for phallic fulfillment and loving commitment which Gordon (definitively) and Casey (so far) have failed to provide. In episode 23 where Dana is excited about taking the "maiden photograph" with her newly bought camera, everyone is available for the picture except Casey, and the flash takes too long to go off. When Dana calls this "a little timing problem," she

perhaps says more than she knows: the implication is that she and Casey are out of sync, and that if they could only get together for their virgin date they might both find fulfillment. At the end of this episode, Casey shows that he appreciates Dana's sense of humor in a way Gordon never could, and with Casey in the picture she can laugh when they are all looking the wrong way as the flash pops.

What they are looking at instead of the camera is a TV monitor showing a "ninth-inning rally." One trait that makes Dana and Casey compatible is their joint passion for sports, leading to the possibility that they may finally get it together in the end. This passion is not always shared by others. In an episode (13) before Dana and Gordon break up, they do go on that double date with Casey and another woman named Lisa. Lisa and Gordon both feel sidelined by Casey's and Dana's mutual love of sports broadcasting. During the foursome's dinner conversation, Casey uses words whose latent meaning is that Lisa is not the woman he wants. First of all, Casey notes that Lisa has the same name as his ex-wife (a person whom Dan had described as "an angry, unhappy, punishing woman"). When this Lisa (the dinner date) points out that her name is pronounced with a *z*, Casey marvels that it is nevertheless still spelled with an *s*. With this comment, Casey resists allowing this Lisa to differentiate herself from the Lisa he divorced, thus spelling doom for their relationship. Moreover, Casey then goes on to mock his date, inserting a *z* sound into other female names like hers, including "Lucy — Lose-y," which makes Lisa sound like a loser.

In a later episode (32), Casey sabotages a date with another woman by finding special significance in the fact that her name — Pixley — has no special significance. Having a relationship with her would thus be meaningless. To Casey, the names of all these other women mean too little (Pixley) or too much (Lisa), for the only name he wants to hear is Dana's. This is apparent in episode 12 where Dan tells Casey that Sally was acting seductive toward him, and Casey asks, "Do you really think that Dana was flirting with me?" A slip of the tongue — Dana for Sally — reveals Casey's true love interest. Given Casey's tendency to read latent meanings into names, it's not surprising that he should be especially jealous when Dana has dinner with a high school friend who may have been an old flame. The man's name is Cab Calloway, which sounds an awful lot like a substitute for Casey McCall.⁷ If that's not enough of a threat, Calloway's name in the school Spanish club was "Guillermo," which makes him sound like a Latin lover (episode 27).⁸ Interestingly, Dana tells one of her coworkers (Elliot), who has said that he is late for a date, to "sit your ass down, Valentino" (episode 32). Dana's words are not directed at Casey, but her unconscious is speaking to him, for she knows that Casey is supposed to romance Pixley that night.

Many of the coded words and images used to express desire or jealousy tend to touch on the body. In Episode 32, Casey makes a point of telling Dana that if Pixley goes home with him after their date, he plans on “making her this thing where I hollow out a grapefruit.” Although this first date with Pixley does not come to such a fruition, a subsequent meeting leads Casey to use a pen to write his phone number on Pixley’s hand, which leaves Dana feeling unfulfilled (episode 33). Dana’s jealousy can perhaps be read between the lines in the sports report about “a certain Bear” who “got his hand stuck in the cookie jar” (episode 36). On a tedious date with another man, Dana wriggles out of her underwear while sitting at a restaurant table. By the end of the evening, these panties have magically appeared in Casey’s desk (episode 27). Natalie helps to reveal the underlying significance of these events by reading aloud the dictionary definition of “estrus” (episode 33). Somewhat later (episode 36), Natalie is again helpful in pointing out that Dana is “a little sarcastic and short-tempered for a woman who hasn’t been having a lot of sex recently. Oh wait, I think I just put my finger on the trigger.” In the same episode (36), Dana finds that Sam Donovan, the ratings expert, has entered her office to “play with her gun” (a Revolutionary War musket she has inherited). “This gun hasn’t had a lot of use,” Sam says, running his fingers over the part of it called the “cartouche.” Sam’s denial — “I wasn’t hitting on you. I was just talking about the musket” — only triggers the thought that he might have been deploying sexual metaphors — a seductive subtext made all the more likely when we realize that William H. Macy (the actor playing Sam) is married in real life to Felicity Huffman (Dana).

The erotically charged gun can be invested with manly as well as womanly significance. Dana says that the musket is “macho,” “redneck,” and “disgusting,” but when Sam points out that it was used by “ragged,” “dirty,” “crazy” farmers to defend their freedom during the Revolutionary War, she is moved and aroused. Earlier, she had said that Sam might not be so loathsome “if he shaved his moustache,” but now his raggedness seems to excite her.⁹ When she is with Casey, Dana tends to mock his manhood, but this derision is really desire: her tongue-lashings betray a lascivious interest in the very thing she obsessively mocks. In the episode (32) where she is jealous of Casey’s upcoming date with Pixley, Dana contemptuously dismisses doing a news story on a “coxswain” (pronounced “cock-s’n”) who fell out of a boat but didn’t save anyone from drowning. Her real scorn is directed at “oversexed” Casey and his foolishly evident desire, which Dana wishes would save her. An earlier episode (7) has a similarly risible “bulging dik” misprinted on the teleprompter (the word should be “disk”). This is the episode in which Dana mistranslates the name of the bar where she and Casey go —

El Perro Fumando — as “The Flaming Dog,” to which Casey retorts, “The dog’s not gay.”

Thus, Casey is both too much (“bulging dik”) and not enough (“Flaming Dog”) of a man, as Dana’s imagination obsesses over the excesses and shortcomings of his masculinity. Certainly, Casey can sympathize with Dan’s dictionary discovery that “‘boned’ and ‘de-boned’ mean the same thing” (episode 25). When Dana’s boss Isaac says, “I’m shrinking,” and she asks, “Where?” (episode 10), her reductive remark might as well be directed at Casey, who at one point finds his anchor’s chair sinking until his head barely overlooks the desk (episode 28). At another point (episode 37), Casey misreads the teleprompter as saying that “Houston goes bunting [not “hunting”] for a new power forward,” as if the most he could do is go a short distance. However, all of Dana’s taunts seem designed to get a rise out of Casey, as when she calls him “inferior” in relation to Gordon’s “obvious physical prowess” (episode 7).¹⁰ Her disparagements are encouragements, inciting his desire, and every time she shows him up she is also confessing that she can’t take her eyes off him: “Casey took gymnastics after school for seven years. How’s he looking to you now, girls?” (episode 24).

Of course, Dana and Casey are not the only couple whose longing shows through their language, and certain words and images seem to take on a libidinal life of their own, circulating among several characters, including Dan and his love interest, Rebecca. While giving a sports broadcast, Dan is distracted by thoughts of Rebecca, causing him to commit the erotic error of referring to a female player who used to go to “a neighborhood park all covered with cheese” (the word should be “trees”) (episode 15). Later, Casey complains about a lack of cheese on the craft table, when what he really means is that he is missing Dana, who at that point is dating Gordon (episode 17). When Casey first finds out about Dana and Gordon, he kicks a fire hydrant, injuring his ankle (episode 4). Casey then asks Dan to tell Dana about the hurt ankle and to make it sound dignified and heroic. The ankle thus becomes Casey’s indirect means of communicating to Dana his desire for her: not only does he want her love and sympathy, but he also wants her to sense that he has been wounded by jealousy. In a further episode (12), Sally (Dana’s rival) flirts with Casey by showing him her supposedly injured ankle. Finally, during another sports broadcast, Dan errs again, asking about “Rebecca’s ankle” instead of player “Rich O’Brien’s” (episode 19). Beyond Dan’s erotic interest in Rebecca’s ankle, there is his concern that she was “wounded” by her husband, Steve Sisco, who cheated on her.

Yes, verbal slips like the one Dan makes about Rebecca’s ankle reveal hidden concerns and desires. But more importantly, these communications from the unconscious are ways of working through confusion toward clar-

ity. They are symbols used by the characters to sort out who they are and how they feel. It's no mere accident that the person Dan asks about "Rebecca's ankle" is Bobbi Bernstein, his co-anchor for that show. Bobbi has been insisting that Dan slept with her in the past, never calling her again and just moving on to some other woman, while Dan maintains, "You've obviously mixed me up with someone else" (episode 13). However, Bobbi finally proves that Dan did seduce and abandon her, back when she looked different and was called Roberta (episode 19).¹¹ So, Dan had "cheated" on Roberta in much the same way that Steve Sisco cheated on Rebecca.

Dan's error in asking Roberta about Rebecca's injured ankle hints at a hidden truth that Dan must face: Roberta and Rebecca are both wounded women, and Dan is like Steve in having done the wounding. Once Dan's repression of the truth about himself and Bobbi is lifted, he can recognize this similarity between Roberta and Rebecca (note how their names sound alike), and he can admit that Steve's bad behavior is also his own.¹² Dan has had other self-revelatory hints from his unconscious, as when he suddenly starts to sing the Three Dog Night song "Eli's Coming" (episode 19). Dan wants to think of Eli as a vague "something bad" coming from outside, but Casey reminds him that "Eli's an inveterate womanizer." These promptings from his unconscious and from Casey lead to character growth in Dan, who acknowledges his womanizing and apologizes to Roberta.

Because Dan is now conscious of his tendency to cheat, he can fight this inclination — in himself and in others. Thus Dan can speak with true self-understanding when he warns about Steve's cheating ways: "He's such a bad guy, Rebecca. I'm sorry if that hurts you, but I know these things. I'm not so good myself" (episode 19). As Casey says in a comment about sports which has hidden meaning for Dan, "There are days that separate the men from the Men." Although they are similar, Steve is a man, while Dan is a Man who owns up to his failings. A comic but meaningful moment in a later episode (22) has Dan and Casey standing side by side while Dana berates Casey for being a "sleazy," "slimy," "oversexed" cheater. "Which one of us are you talking to?" Dan asks, now well aware of his own such propensities.

Dan's womanizing tendencies seem to be rooted in a fear of rejection: with one-night stands, he can abandon a date before she leaves him. Dan's fear of rejection finds its cause in the feeling that he is fundamentally unlikable. Dan's unconscious speaks to him about this cause, but at first he tries to silence it, as when he finds a quick cure for writer's block by casually dating a woman who dotes on his writing. Eventually, though, Dan's craving for all women to like him, combined with his fear that not one of them does, drives him to make a date with an attractive woman he also knows is a therapist (episode 28). Inner promptings are leading Dan to seek the help

he needs. Dan acts out with his therapist, Abby, exhibiting a desperate desire for her to like him, but she resists his transference, refusing to fall into the role of casual date. Instead, she asks about Dan's parents and his past, coaxing his unconscious to make a telling slip: "My father likes me, Abby. She likes me just fine." Dan's dread of women's dislike is grounded in a fear that his father hates him, blaming him for the death of his brother in a car accident. He is "hit-and-run Danny" not only because he seduces and abandons women before they can reject him, but also because his neurotic behavior can be traced back to that long-ago car accident on account of which he first felt rejected by his father (episode 29). (Dan's fear of paternal disapproval is probably the explanation for why he keeps slipping up when he tries to pronounce "Yevgeny" in Yevgeny Kafelnikov.)

By finally listening to his unconscious, Dan is able to make some progress toward articulating and understanding his fears and desires. Earlier, Dan could only use mixed metaphors to describe his confused relationships — "Can I spread it out for you in a nutshell?" — and Casey couldn't tell how many of which people Dan was talking about (episode 14). In tracing his troubles with women back to a problem with his father, Dan clarifies both issues in a way that allows him to work on resolving them. By understanding how they are connected, Dan may be able to overcome both his fears of fatherly and of female disapproval. Dan has already acknowledged his similarity to the womanizing Steve Sisco, and now he recognizes the paternal source of his own womanizing tendencies. Dan's story arc, over the course of the series, moves him from unconscious promptings toward enlightened action. Instead of jilting Rebecca or being jealous when she considers getting back together with Steve, Dan remains steadfastly supportive, trying to win her over by being wonderful (episode 20). In the end, Dan's generous love is recompensed, as Rebecca returns to him in the series' last episode (45).

Another character besides Dan who eventually heeds the heart's promptings is Jeremy in his relationship with Natalie. "Do you want to go get a doughnut?" she asks him, before making her metaphor even more explicit: "Want to go someplace and make out?" (episode 17). Natalie also wants Jeremy to whisper computer talk in her ear, which she compares to phone sex (episode 12), and she invites him to go clubbing with her, but he is embarrassed and resistant. Eventually, they break up over his inability to be more "adventuresome in [their] sex life" (episode 36).¹³

It's at this point (episode 38) that Jeremy goes to a bar and meets a woman named Jenny, a porn star who helps him to overcome his inhibitions. In a single conversation, Jenny moves from telling him, "You really shouldn't watch those kinds of movies, Jeremy," to saying that "It's OK to enjoy the movies, Jeremy." It's as if Jenny were a part of Jeremy (note the

similarity in their names), his unconscious whispering what he needs to hear for his sexual development. Interestingly, in talking to Casey about this relationship with a porn star, Jeremy says, "Any minute now my mother's going to wake me and tell me it's time to go to school" — as if Jenny were indeed a boy's wet dream (Episode 40). In a coded conversation, Jenny accuses Jeremy of being unable to "stand in the rain without an umbrella," adding that "I learned when I was young that the things that frighten me might not be so frightening after all." Eventually, Jeremy proves his symbolic readiness for sexual adventure by allowing himself to get drenched in a downpour (Episode 39).

When Jeremy lies to Natalie about Jenny, saying that she is a choreo-animator (a designer of dance steps for cartoons), Natalie assumes that Jeremy's choice of date is just another sign of his arrested development: "a choreo-animator! Could anything be more symbolic? We broke up, fundamentally, because I wanted to experience more of the world, and he was happy with what he had. Now he can spend the rest of his life with the cartoon characters that graced the walls of his boyhood bedroom" (episode 41). However, when Jeremy tells Natalie the truth about his date — "Jenny was a porn star, for the boy *and* the man in me" — his erotic evolution becomes apparent to her (episode 42). Earlier, Jeremy had reported that a very big sports story was happening but that he just didn't understand what it was: the words and acts in this sport were unfamiliar to him, but they involved a player who "took all ten wickets in an inning" and who could "pick up a low snatch" (episode 21).¹⁴ By the last episode (45) of *Sports Night*, Jeremy has achieved a greater understanding of the words whispered to him by his unconscious, Jenny, and Natalie. He now accepts Natalie's invitation to adventure as the two of them make love on a desk in one of the offices of their workplace.

And what about Casey and Dana? Do they heed the fly, the fish, the spill, the camera, the grapefruit, and the other subliminal messages urging them to declare their love for each other and to come together in the end? For much of the series, a happy ending is in doubt. Dana is the only one who doesn't know that she likes Casey, Natalie insists, while also telling Dana that Casey is "reaching out to you," but "you're missing the signs" (episode 2). In the meantime, Casey, who is gun-shy due to a recent divorce, ignores his inner promptings — such as the song in his head, "Crimson and Clover": "I think I could love her" — and fails to ask Dana on a date in time to prevent her from getting involved with Gordon (episode 16). Even after Dana and Gordon have broken up and Dan insists to Casey that "the time is right," Casey hesitates, claiming he's not a risk-taker: "I can't become this thing that I'm not." But Dan promotes growth rather than stasis in his friend,

arguing that both Dana and Dan think that Casey *is* this thing that he's not — a coded way of saying that Casey does have it in him to be a risk-taker (episode 24).¹⁵

However, when Casey does get up enough courage to ask Dana out, she insists on postponing their first date for six months so that he can see other women and determine if his interest in her is really serious (episode 25). Now it is Dana who is gun-shy after the failure of her relationship with Gordon, who cheated on her. It's also possible that she is punishing Casey for having "cheated" on her by sleeping with Sally, as if Dana were saying, "you wanted to sleep with other women besides me, and now you have to." Thus, Dana's delay in dating Casey seems to be less about giving his love time to mature than about punishing him and protecting herself. When Dana does finally take the risk of asking him out, it is too late: having grown tired of waiting for her to grow up, Casey has moved on to someone else and says "no" to a date with Dana (episode 34). Casey's reaction is understandable given Dana's immature behavior, but his refusal of a date with her is really as childish as her postponement of a date with him. Now it is he who is punishing her (for delaying their date) and protecting himself (from feeling rejected), and it's his turn for regret when Dana starts to show interest in someone else (Sam).

Dana's and Casey's conscious speech — saying "wait" and "no" to a date — is thus in contradiction to their unconscious desire. Despite the sensual stirrings of their innermost selves, combined with the erotic encouragement of friends Dan and Natalie, Casey and Dana keep missing, ignoring, and repressing the signs of their love for each other until it seems that time has run out. Yet, against all deliberate denial, these irrepressible signs keep coming, as if to say that it is never too late. "Tabby's tempter?" Dana asks, reading the clue to a crossword puzzle, and Casey supplies (himself as) the answer: "Catnip." "Give the slip?" she asks, and the response to her need does not "elude" Casey (episode 28). Later, Dana is excited to discover that "'momentarily' does not mean 'in a moment,' it means 'for a moment,'" as if she could thereby turn a postponement (like her date with Casey) into something happening right now (episode 33). In episode 37, Casey notes a misspelling in "irreversible," as if to say that (the end of his and Dana's relationship) isn't.

While the future of Casey's relationship with Dana may seem to be threatened by her interest in Sam, it is Sam who basically encourages her to flirt with Casey by speaking from her microphone in the control room to his earpiece in the studio: "Men like the sound of women whispering in their ear. It makes them playful" (episode 26). By the last episode (45) of the series, Sam is gone, and Dana is whispering "Quo Vadimus" in Casey's

ear. “Quo Vadimus” is the name of the company that has bought *Sports Night* and agreed to allow the show to continue, thus ensuring that Dana and Casey will still be working together. “Quo Vadimus” (“Where are we going?”) are the words used by the owner of the company — and by Dana — to give coworkers a sense of hope and direction.

But most importantly, “Quo Vadimus” is the last coded message of unconscious desire in the series. When Dana whispers the meaning of “Quo Vadimus” (“Where are we going?”) in Casey’s ear, she is also asking about their relationship, encouraging him with the sense that it too may have a future. Could it be that all their secret longings are finally being brought to consciousness, much as the Latin “Quo Vadimus” is translated into its clear English sense? Will all the subliminal promptings of past episodes finally lead Casey and Dana to declare their desire? Aaron Sorkin, creator and head writer of the series, has said that “someone accused me of writing as if I’m perpetually on a first date with a girl I really want to have a second date with” (qtd. in Levesque). The words Sorkin uses to end the series — “Quo Vadimus” — keep the date between Casey and Dana alive as a perpetual possibility, as something just about to ring true.

Notes

1. It’s not clear whether this fly is ever objectively present, or whether, since Casey and Dana are the only ones who see it, its only existence is as their subjective intuition of love for each other.

2. My essay on *Sports Night* is informed by the writings of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and the many literary and film critics in their wake who have used psychoanalysis in the interpretation of words and images. Those interested in further exploration of this area will find that Freud himself is quite readable: see his *The Interpretation of Dreams* or the handy collection of some of his most important writings in *The Freud Reader*. For a psychoanalytic approach to a popular television show, see Glen O. Gabbard’s *The Psychology of The Sopranos*. Regarding film, Robin Wood has written strong and accessible interpretations of movies from the 1970s, ’80s, and ’90s in *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan ... and Beyond*. Finally, those interested in the psychoanalysis of literature will find that some of the most influential and accessible readings are Bruno Bettelheim on fairytales, Barbara Johnson on *Billy Budd*, and Shoshana Felman on *The Turn of the Screw*. (For full information on all of the psychoanalytic texts mentioned here, see the Works Cited.)

3. In *Sports Night*, shirts are often connected with sexuality, as in Natalie’s several references to wearing Jeremy’s shirts in order to get him excited (episodes 10 and 24). Compare also the flirtatious compliment that the women of *The View* give to Casey about his ties (episode 11).

4. This is not the first time that covert connections have linked Casey with other men of dubious character. In the series’ first episode, Casey has grown disillusioned with the

bad behavior of sports figures (that “double homicide in Brentwood”), while he himself is involved in a painful divorce. Later, Casey denounces the bad plays called by head coach Rostenkowski (Casey may really be railing against his rival, Gordon) before finally admitting (to Gordon) that Casey himself doesn’t know any better about which plays to call (episode 6).

5. For Casey, DAN and NATALIE become verbal conduits to DANA. Natalie also acts as an agent of Dana’s unconscious flirtation with Casey, as in the episode (27) where Dana tells Natalie, and then Natalie tells Casey, that Dana is not wearing any panties. Natalie herself tends to be more direct in her courtship of Jeremy, as when she tells him straight out that she’s not wearing any socks (episode 44). Natalie is like the “maid” or “servant” character in a Shakespearean comedy whose straight talk about sex serves as a comic foil — and a needed antidote — to the main characters’ evasion and repression of the subject.

6. It’s interesting that when Dana tells her boss Isaac, “Gordon stood me up last night.... He had to work late,” Isaac says that “when I was eleven, I had a pet fish that died.” This is the same episode (16) in which we find out that both Gordon and Casey have been sleeping with Sally. Such bad behavior on the part of the “slimy” male sex certainly contributes to Dana’s fear of “fish.” Also, Dana’s disgust with men who behave like “oversexed” “blowhole[s]” may explain her mockery of Dan’s reference to “blown spume” (episode 3).

7. With Cab Calloway as a threat, Casey may have to rethink what he says to Dan about liking alliteration. Note, too, that Dan’s rival is named Steve Sisco.

8. In episode 34, when he asks Jeremy whether “‘hallucination’ is spelled with two *l*s,” Casey McCall might ponder the implications for his own wild jealousy over such men as Calloway (“Guillermo”).

9. When Dana says she wants to “smelt” the musket, she perhaps reveals a sensuous interest in it behind her disgust (episode 36). We might also recall what she says to Casey about his words making her “melt” (episode 13).

10. Like Casey, Jeremy seems to suffer from feelings of male inferiority. Sometimes these feelings are presented symbolically, as when his attempts to solve the Y2K problem (or “the KY problem,” as Natalie calls it, giving it a sexual connotation) result in a power failure rather than in proof that he can face the future “as the servant of no master.... Take back that ‘nerd’ thing.... Say, ‘Jeremy’s your daddy’” (episode 28). At other times, the symbolic (Jeremy’s fear of the needle during a blood drive — episode 22) becomes more literal, as when he balks at dating a porn star for fear that she will find him “anatomically” inadequate, and she has to reassure him that “no one is going to take their penis out and hit you in the head with it” (episode 38).

11. Dan gets a sense of what it was like for Roberta to wait anxiously for that call from him that never came when, in a later episode (25), Hillary Clinton never calls him back.

12. Dan and Steve are also alike in that both are sports anchors.

13. One reason that Jeremy is not sexually more adventurous may be that his father was too much so. In the episode (18) where Jeremy attempts to chart how a boat could have gone so far off course, he is really trying to figure out the wandering ways of his father, who is revealed to have been cheating on Jeremy’s mother since before Jeremy was born. This revelation (like that of Isaac’s stroke) has an undermining effect on Jeremy’s confidence in his father, in himself, and in male-female relationships, and it causes Jeremy to break off his relationship with Natalie for a time, probably because he does not want to end up hurting her in the way that his father hurt his mother. Interestingly, in an

earlier episode (3) Jeremy had witnessed a mother deer shot dead by a hunter's gun, leaving behind a bereft fawn with which Jeremy identifies. (Jeremy, who "got the call" to cover a hunting story, finds that what he sees is no "better than a poke in the eye.")

14. The patent sport is cricket; the latent one is sex.

15. Interestingly, Casey has a best friend named Dan and a love interest named Dana. It's as if the transition most boys make as they grow up — from a close male friend to a first interest in girls — were built into these names.

Works Cited

- Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*. New York: Knopf, 1976.
- Felman, Shoshana. "Henry James: Madness and the Risks of Practice (Turning the Screw of Interpretation)." *Writing and Madness: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis*. Palo Alto: Stanford U P, 2003. 141-247.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Freud Reader*. Ed. Peter Gay. New York: Norton, 1989.
- _____. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. New York: Avon Books, 1965.
- Gabbard, Glen O. *The Psychology of The Sopranos: Love, Death, Desire and Betrayal in America's Favorite Gangster Family*. New York: Basic Books, 2002.
- Johnson, Barbara. "Melville's Fist: The Execution of *Billy Budd*." *The Critical Difference*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1980. 79-109.
- Levesque, John. "Aaron Sorkin Is a Man of Many Words." *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* 7 March 2000.
- Wood, Robin. *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan ... and Beyond*. Columbia U P, 2003.