

## Treatment of Myth and Imagery in Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*

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### Abstract

*In The Natural, Bernard Malamud comments on the role of the hero in the modern world. He digs deep into American myth to portray a natural man adored and corrupted by an unnatural society – the baseball world. Roy Hobbs, the baseball natural protagonist, has been paralleled with Percival the Arthurian knight. In this novel Bernard Malamud infuses his story of successful Roy Hobbs with allusions drawn from a variety of mythic sources – Arthurian legend, fertility myth, vegetative myth, bird imagery.*

### Keywords:

Vegetative myth, Fisher king, Arthurian legend, baseball, bird imagery, Wasteland, American dream

Bernard Malamud is the only Jewish-American author in the twentieth century, including Saul Bellow, who has brought the Eastern European shtetl to the streets of America. His novels are so carefully crafted that they appear as a certain current of "Jewish" writing, or as period pieces. His novels and stories are concerned with Jewish characters and issues but after many readings of his works, the exact opposite feeling is generated. The aching reality, the underlying myths, the seeming simplicity - all point to the immeasurable depth of a master artisan and artist whose literary legacy remains one of the Jewish community's most priceless possessions. This is one of the most profound literati of our age as his works surpass the earthly time in which they were written. Malamud uses myth, legend, and magic to convey the most intimate details of existence, and consequently, life's pathos and sadness as much as life's joy and fulfillment.

*The Natural* is somewhat of an unusual novel in Malamud's body of work. There are virtually no Jewish characters and it certainly does not deal with Jewish issues. Instead, *The Natural* is a complex blend of myth, legend, and the American obsession with professional sports and celebrity. Roy Hobbs, the talented but tragic baseball player, becomes tied up with the hopes and dreams of New York as he brings the New York Knights up from last-place oblivion into a winning race. Malamud modeled Hobbs's brief career on the myth of the Fisher King, focusing on the core idea that the health of the king—or coach, in the case of Pop Fisher—is related to the health of the land, or, in this case, the city. Hobbs

is Perceval to Pop's Fisher King; however, Hobbs himself is also a Fisher King of sorts, unable to achieve the Holy Grail because he refuses to abandon his dreams of glory.

*The Natural* depicts the rise and fall of a heroic baseball player in post-WWII America -- a mythic persona with majestic gifts and massive appetites and abilities whose fictional feats come from the annals of baseball history. It is an exciting yet tragic tale of achievement and ambition, victory and loss, fame and anonymity, desire and deception, love and hate, strength and weakness, and other such grand themes -- all of them set amid the familiar fields of the national pastime. Malamud has used the Arthurian legend and Jungian mythic psychology to interpret "*man's psychological and moral situation*." (Earl R. Wasserman, 47)

*The Natural* is often identified-even today, some fifty years after it originally appeared-as the finest baseball novel ever published. Malamud tells the story of Roy Hobbs, the "natural" of the title, who is both our hero and anti-hero. We marvel at this sportsman's physical and athletic accomplishments even as his egotistical or violent deeds off the field or, sometimes, on it make him difficult if not impossible to sympathize with. But right or wrong, Hobbs himself is the story here-the one player without whom there would be no game. So the narrative arc of the book closely follows his career in professional baseball; rarely, if at all, do we read a scene from which Hobbs is absent.

In an introductory chance encounter of modern violence, the young phenomenal Hobbs is shot -- during an indiscreet rendezvous en route to his major-league audition -- by a lunatic mistress. He is nearly killed; his life is put on hold for over fifteen years. Next we find Hobbs, age 35, signing on with the last-place-and-going-nowhere New York Knights. Suddenly he's a rookie in the major leagues, although at an age when most ballplayers retire. Many people just don't know what to make of Hobbs, but he hits anything the opposition can throw at him, and at one point knocks the cover off the ball -- literally. He turns the team around; for the first time in ages, the Knights have a shot at the pennant. Hobbs becomes a hero -- instantly and universally -- a living legend, a hero, a baseball icon. But with his reign at the top Hobbs also finds a king's ransom in difficulties -- crooked gamblers, a corrupt owner, jealous teammates, nosy journalists, a miserable slump, fierce fans, and a spellbinding woman of dangerous beauty and seductive command. Can Hobbs actually become "the best who ever played the game"? Will he exhibit the skill and the luck that it takes? Does he even have a chance?

*The Natural* depicts baseball not only as a game but more than that. All sports involve a contest, an array of talents, a battle of some kind, but baseball -- as Malamud's novel makes plain from page one -- is richly symbolic of the American character. Indeed, the sport has long been seen by many as a kind of mirror of the national psyche. Baseball is the game about which most Americans tend to have the fondest memories; much of our collective national daydream, going back over a hundred years, is

about playing this sport or watching it being played. The game's rules, rituals, memories, and associations capture America's imagination in childhood just as they command America's attention in adulthood. So in Malamud's artful novel about baseball we find a well-told tale of the modern American experience.

Like T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land*, much of *The Natural* is informed by a book entitled *From Ritual to Romance*, by Jessie Weston. Weston examines the many myths and legends that have grown up around the Holy Grail, particularly Arthurian legends. These vegetative-fertility myths are so primeval that they have insinuated themselves in myth and literature ever since the creation of writing. The novel blends the great American pastime—baseball—with myth, particularly the Arthurian legends of Perceval and the Fisher King. *The Natural* is packed with mythological themes and imagery, which begin piling up almost immediately. Roy, riding on a train within a dark, womb like tunnel, is in the midst of his primordial birth as a hero—a person with amazing natural abilities and a chance to do great things for the world. Sam is Roy's guide, his father figure; perhaps more important, the Whammer is Roy's predecessor. In the novel, the star baseball players—the Whammer, Bump Bailly, and Roy—are not simply good ballplayers; they are mythological heroes. More specifically, they are symbols of ancient vegetative myths involving fertility gods. These vegetative myths, which are prominent in the mythologies of many early cultures, describe a cycle of birth and death based on the seasons. Birth occurs in spring, when plants come back to life and animals return from hibernation; summer is the height of this life, and then fall begins the process of dying. Winter, when the land is cold and dark and lifeless, represents death. Early cultures paid close attention to this cycle, and their myths were often based on the seasons. Thus, the gods or more often goddesses, such as the earth-mother were born in spring, then became old and perished by late fall, only to be reborn or replaced in the following spring. Malamud was familiar with these myths and their relationship to Arthurian legends, particularly the story of Perceval and the Fisher King. Several literary critics, such as Jessie Weston in *From Ritual to Romance*, have argued that vegetative myths serve as a basis for many mythological tales, even Arthurian ones. Malamud read Weston's book prior to writing *The Natural*. The Whammer is portrayed as the "dying" hero. It is spring, and a new god must replace the Whammer. This hero- god is Roy, who not only strikes out the Whammer and renders him into an "old man," but also symbolically cuts himself free from his "father" by accidentally causing Sam's death.

Many other significant metaphors and themes arise in the first section of the novel. This section recapitulates "the mythic formula of Initiation, separation, and return." (Sidney Richman, 30). Harriet Bird's last name is significant; indeed, the entire novel is filled with bird imagery, which is common in all of Malamud's novels. For Roy, the word "bird" is

synonymous with "woman" and perhaps even "where," though he does not make this connection in the case of Harriet. Nonetheless, birds are often a foreshadowing of danger to Roy, but he never heeds this. He quickly falls for Harriet, the girl who seems interested in him only for his prowess and skill. Roy sees a pair of legs and breasts, a face that is "a little drawn and pale," and knows only that he wants her. He is completely out of his element when she tries to engage him in conversation, and it is here that Roy makes his greatest mistake. When Harriet asks him "Is that all?", Roy is undergoing the Hero's Test—the same test that Sir Percival fails when, in a slight reversal, he fails to ask the Fisher King the meaning of his Grail vision. Because Roy is unable to understand baseball and his role in the sport—beyond setting records and making money—he fails his test. Harriet tries to make Roy understand what she means, but she is unable; Roy, therefore, remains ignorant that his life could have any meaning beyond his own desires. He wants money, fame, and women, and to play baseball; but only this last one has any real relevance to his role as a "vegetative hero." If Roy simply played the game well and upheld the moral values required of a hero—and, more importantly, if he accepted suffering as a necessary aspect of life—then his success would be unmatched. However, mired as he is in his real-world dreams of ambition, wealth, and power, Roy has already set himself on a path to failure. Harriet is aware of this potential failure; by shooting Roy, she only hastens what she believes is inevitable. Some critics have said that Harriet and Memo are both examples of the "destructive seductress," but Harriet is not really so simple. Harriet displays aspects of both Memo and Iris Lemon; the implication is that, if Roy were able to answer Harriet's question properly, she would not shoot him. Even if Roy had simply answered "I don't know" when asked if he would be the best in the game, he might have had a chance. It is his arrogance and selfishness that causes his suffering—an idea that is common in Malamud's works.

In several interviews Malamud has admitted that he clearly intended to depict the twentieth-century baseball star as a mythic hero—in the case of Roy Hobbs, as one who fails in his quest, disappointing the hopes of his culture and community. In 1983 he told a USA Today interviewer, "*I lived somewhere near Ebbetts Field. The old Brooklyn Dodgers were our heroes, our stars, like out of myth.*" He also noted in another interview that his studies of myth in college had given him the background he felt he needed to treat baseball: "*I transformed game into myth, via Jesse Weston's Percival legend with an assist from T. S. Eliot's The Wasteland plus the lives of several ballplayers I had read, in particular Babe Ruth's and Bobby Feller's.*" As a boy and young man, Malamud saw ballplayers in mythic terms, and his appropriation and reworking of actual events serve not only to support the external mythic allusions but to illustrate how the real events of the game, both those recorded faithfully and those embellished by time and memory, ascend to the status of myth in the imagination of the fans.

*In Malamud's fiction myth presents the symbolic ideals of goodness and badness between which the protagonist must conduct his life and against which he must measure himself.*  
(Sandy Cohen , 73 )

As one of the myths that form the foundation of *The Natural* is that of the vegetative cycle, it is no surprise that we see vegetation-related motifs in the story. Most of them relate to Roy's identification with the vegetative god whose powers are a force of life and healing. When Roy first arrives at the Knights' field, it is parched and dry. With his first hit, however, he unleashes a torrent of rain that lasts for three days. The field is soon green and bright. Even more obvious is Iris Lemon. Her very name evokes both a flower and a fruit; she is the very force of life and fertility, already a grandmother at the early age thirty-three. When she stands up for Roy, there is an "unbelievable fragrance" in the air. Even Wonderboy, Roy's bat, is made from a tree; there seems to be something special in the wood that gives Roy powers beyond even the best players.

It is difficult to appreciate *The Natural* without some knowledge of the mythological traditions behind it. The most important of these are the legends of the Waste Land and the Fisher King. Malamud loosely based his novel on the story of Sir Perceval and his quest for the Holy Grail, originally recorded in the eleventh century by the French writer Chrétien de Troyes. In Chrétien's story, The Fisher King is a character found in several mythological sources, mostly Celtic in origin. However, he is best known from Arthurian mythology, particularly in the story of Perceval. There are several versions even of that story, but the basic elements are consistent. According to the story, Sir Perceval is out questing for the Holy Grail, as are all of Arthur's knights. While traveling, Perceval comes across a strange, ruined land. In the midst of this land he discovers a castle, and inside there is an old man. The old man has a regal bearing, but is deathly ill. The old lord invites Perceval to stay the night. The old man even gives the knight a special sword. After dinner, Perceval witnesses a strange procession. A youth enters the hall, carrying a white lance that holds a single drop of blood on its tip. Next, two more youth enter bearing golden candelabra. Finally, a beautiful maiden enters bearing a dazzling golden cup. Perceval wants to ask about these items, but he holds his tongue for fear of offending the old man. The next morning, Perceval awakes to discover that everyone is gone. He leaves the castle, which then disappears. Later, he encounters a woman who informs him that the lance was the one that pierced Jesus' side, and that the cup was no less than the Holy Grail itself. If Perceval had simply asked about these things, he could have brought about the healing of the old man, who is the Fisher King. If the King were healed, then the land would be healed as well.

In *The Natural*, the most obvious representative of the Fisher King is Pop Fisher. His hands are wounded, afflicted with "athlete's foot." As the team continues to lose, Pop is ill; the playing field is dry and dead, and the fans

are absent. However, it is difficult to equate Pop Fisher entirely with the Fisher King. Malamud admitted to using Eliot's *The Waste Land* as an inspiration for his novel; one of the implications in Eliot's poem is that the waste land of modern civilization has no Fisher King to be healed. In the legend of the Fisher King, the Waste Land is the king's domain. Based on a belief that surfaces in a number of ancient cultures, the idea behind the Waste Land is that the King is so tied to the land that when he falls ill, the land itself falls ill as well. This parallel has a very literal meaning in the story of the Fisher King; when Perceval heals the King, the land, which is barren and cracked, suddenly bursts into new life, covered with plants and animals. In *The Natural*, the Waste Land is represented by the Knights' baseball field. When Roy first arrives, the field is dry and barren; there has been a drought, in both the team's long losing streak and the weeks without rain. Roy ends both of these droughts: when he makes his first hit, it not only results in a tie game (though not a win, at least not a loss), but it also heralds the arrival of a great storm that drenches the playing field for three days, making it green once again when the grass springs back to life.

Eventually, Perceval succeeds in his quest; this success is a marked difference from the story of Roy, who obviously fails to "heal" the Waste Land. The source of Roy's failure is his own greed and childish impulses, but more superficially, it is Memo, who distracts him from his duties. In the Perceval legend, the knight is distracted by his infatuation with a girl named Blancheflor in a way somewhat similar to that of Roy with Memo. However, Blancheflor is a good deal nicer than Memo, and appears to love Perceval; in some versions of the story Perceval actually marries Blancheflor and lives happily. Obviously, this romantic happiness is not the case in *The Natural*. There is an undercurrent of realistic pessimism in Malamud's novel, and by the end Roy has failed in his quest to heal the Fisher King and, by extension, heal the Waste Land.

The correlation between this story of the Fisher King and *The Natural* is a complicated one. It is fairly easy, however, to match a few characters. Pop "Fisher" obviously corresponds to Fisher King; like the Fisher King, his hands are wounded (in Pop's case, he has "athlete's foot of the hands," an impossible, almost supernatural condition). Pop has a Holy Grail of his own: to win a pennant. The team he manages is the New York Knights, calling up the image of the Round Table. Roy Hobbs is a clear image of Perceval, the country bumpkin who becomes enamored of the idea of being a ballplayer (or a knight) without really thinking about what it means or entails. Both Perceval and Roy get carried away with the conventions of their chosen profession: Perceval wants to rack up defeats against other knights, whereas Roy wants to break as many records as he can. Both enjoy the life, so to speak: Perceval and Roy each have very clear ideas of how knights and ballplayers, respectively, are supposed to live, and what they have coming to them. Furthermore, both Perceval and Roy must overcome their selfishness in order to achieve

their goal. Roy, unfortunately, reaches this realization a little too late.

*The Natural* is not simply a modern version of old myths. Malamud is careful to consider the nature of such romantic characters in the modern world; as the novel progresses, the struggle between the mythic and the real becomes more and more evident. Roy's life is complicated not only by Memo, but by his sudden obsession with food and his difficulty dealing with modern-day Satan such as the Judge and Gus Sands. Most modern of all is Max Mercy, the journalist who loves nothing more than ripping away the veil of heroism to show the dirty, seamy, *normal* man underneath. Max's job is a new one in romance: exposing the hero as being human. His personal mission is to undermine everything a hero is or is supposed to stand for. Max embodies what Malamud sees as modern society's schizophrenic desire to both raise up heroes and then watch them fail. In this novel Malamud has successfully blended the mythic quest and the mundane career of a baseball player to depict the modern man's moral and psychological predicament in a corrupt and debased social environment. He has dealt with the mythical theme of redemption in a degenerated society suggesting how he can save his humanity and true identity under hard conditions. It is a story of human struggle and redemption through suffering.

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