The Natural Study Guide

The Natural by Bernard Malamud

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

In his *Dictionary of Literary Biography* article on Bernard Malamud, Joel Salzberg notes that the author "holds a preeminence among Jewish-American writers that has consistently been reaffirmed by recent critical assessments." Malamud, however, began his career with his popular first novel, *The Natural*, influenced by his love of baseball and his fascination with stories of the mythological quest for the Holy Grail. The novel's allegorical framework blends realism and fantasy in its exploration of the theme of moral responsibility. Malamud employs forces of good and evil to complicate the choices and consequences that face his protagonist.

The novel introduces Roy Hobbs, an initially innocent young man, who strives to be "the best there ever was in the game" of baseball. As he attempts to reach that goal, his moral courage will be tested. Ultimately, this flawed hero will learn too late of the consequences of blind ambition. The novel received mixed reviews when it first appeared, due to its complex narrative structure. However, critical response grew to the point where many now consider it among Malamud's best works.

Author Biography

Malamud set *The Natural* in New York City, where he was born in 1914 and raised by his Russian Jewish immigrant parents. Growing up near Ebbets Field in Brooklyn, Malamud became an avid fan of the Brooklyn Dodgers and of baseball as an American pastime. In 1936 he earned a B.A. from the City College of New York, where he became interested in the Grail legend, and in 1942 a M.A. in literature from Columbia University. Other than serving as a clerk at the Census Bureau in Washington, D.C. in 1940, he devoted his life to teaching and writing. He began his teaching career in New York City high schools and from 1949 to 1961 taught literature at Oregon State University. In 1962 he accepted a position at Bennington College in Vermont where he continued to teach until his death in 1986.

Malamud published stories for his high school literary magazine, but his literary career did not begin until years later. Greatly affected by World War II and the horrors of the Holocaust, Malamud engaged in an exploration of his Jewish heritage. His first novel, *The Natural*, written while he was at Oregon State, would be one of the few works that would not center on a Jewish protagonist. The novel does, however, explore the themes of suffering and redemption that Malamud would return to in his later writings. While at Oregon State, he produced his most notable works including *The Assistant*, *The Magic Barrel* (1958), and *A New Life* (1961), His work gained him several awards, including the National Book Award in fiction in 1959 for *The Magic Barrel* and in 1967 for *The Fixer*, and the Pulitzer Prize in fiction in 1967 for *The Fixer*.

Plot Summary

Part I: "Pre-game"

Bernard Malamud's novel, *The Natural*, follows the career of baseball player Roy Hobbs from his first false start to his final failure. The story is divided into two parts, the first recounting an event during Roy's nineteenth year, and the second picking up the story some fifteen years later. Although the first part is considerably shorter than the second, it is nonetheless just as important to the novel as a whole.

The Natural opens on a train hurtling eastward toward Chicago. We learn that Roy is travelling with his manager Sam for a tryout with the Chicago Cubs. Other passengers on the train include Harriet Bird, a beautiful woman who catches Roy's eye; Max Mercy, a curious sports writer; and Walt "The Whammer" Whambold, the leading hitter in the American League.

When the train makes an unexpected stop, the passengers leave the train and move toward a carnival at the edge of a town. Roy comes to the attention of the Whammer when he consistently wins at a baseball contest. Angered at remarks that the Whammer makes toward Roy, Sam bets the Whammer that Roy can strike him out.

In the contest that follows, Roy does strike out the Whammer; however, his last pitch hits Sam in the chest so hard that the old man dies later that night on the train. The contest also focuses Harriet Bird's attention on Roy.

Sam's death leaves Roy alone in Chicago. To his surprise, he receives a telephone call from Harriet Bird, inviting him to her hotel room. Roy is overjoyed, thinking that Harriet must intend a sexual tryst. Instead, when Roy arrives at her room, she shoots him in the gut with a silver bullet.

Part II: "Batter Up"

The second section jumps ahead fifteen years. Roy is now thirty-four, and has been signed to play with the Knights, a losing major league team managed by Pop Fisher. Now a batter rather than a pitcher, Roy still carries his handmade bat, Wonderboy, with him. Roy arrives as a man without a past; neither the reader "nor the other characters know where he has been or what he has done for the past fifteen years. Consequently, Roy's arrival piques the interest of Max Mercy, who does not remember their earlier encounter on the train. Max is determined to uncover the truth behind the mystery of Roy Hobbes

The team's best player, Bump Baily, subjects Roy to innumerable practical jokes. However, the rivalry between Roy and Bump seems to motivate the other players. Meanwhile, Roy falls in love with Pop's niece, Memo Paris, who is also Bump Baily's girlfriend.

The rivalry between Roy and Bump escalates until Bump accidentally kills himself by smashing into the outfield wall in pursuit of a fly ball. Roy then becomes the Knight's top player. He continues to pursue Memo, who rejects him.

Roy longs for Memo and begins an extended hitting streak in an attempt to win her. Finally, he decides that he needs more money in order to court her properly. Therefore, he approaches Judge Goodwill Banner, the team owner, for a raise. Rather than convincing the Judge to give him a raise, Roy finds himself responsible for the uniforms that Bump Baily destroyed.

After his unsuccessful visit with the Judge, Roy is accosted by Max Mercy. Roy accompanies Max to a nightclub where he meets bookie Gus Sands, who is there with Memo. After betting unsuccessfully with Gus, Roy performs a series of astounding magic tricks. For the first time since Bump's death, Memo laughs.

Later, Memo and Roy go for a drive. When Roy kisses Memo and touches her breast, she rejects him. Pop Fisher warns Roy that Memo is no good for him. Roy enters a hitting slump. Memo continues to refuse to see Roy. Finally, during a game, a woman in a red dress stands up in the crowd. When Roy sees her, he smells a wonderful fragrance and knocks a pitch out of the ball park.

The woman is Iris Lemon and she and Roy meet after the game. They walk along the lakeshore, and eventually make love. But when Iris tells Roy that she is a grandmother, Roy rejects her, and returns to his longing for Memo.

Unbeknownst to Roy, Memo and Gus Sands plot to destroy Roy. Memo agrees to date Roy, but refuses his requests for sex. Somehow Roy's sexual hunger is transformed into physical hunger. Memo urges Roy to eat and he gorges himself. When he returns to Memo's room and drops his pants in preparation for sex, he has a sharp pain in his stomach and he passes out. Roy's gluttony nearly costs him his life.

Now in the hospital, Roy is approached first by Memo and then by the Judge, who want him to throw the pennant game. At first Roy refuses. When the Judge suggests that Roy will lose Memo to someone richer, Roy agrees to throw the game for money. Memo is thrilled. When he is once again alone in his room, Roy reads a letter from Iris in which she explains her life. However, when, she once again talks about herself as a grandmother, Roy crumples up the letter and throws it away.

At the pennant game, Roy begins to keep his bargain and strikes out. Otto Zipp, a dwarf, taunts Roy, and Roy starts aiming foul hits at him. Just as he hits another foul ball, Iris Lemon stands in the crowd. The ball hits her square in the face and she collapses. Roy rushes to her side, and she begs him to win the game for her and for their son. In this way, Roy learns that Iris is pregnant with their child. Roy resolves to win the game and has renewed hope for his future. However, on his next hit, he not only fouls the ball, he also breaks his bat, Wonderboy. In spite of his renewed effort, Roy again strikes out, using another bat, and thus the Knights lose the game.

Later that night, Roy goes to the Judge's office where he finds the Judge, Memo, and Gus. Roy throws the money at the Judge and knocks out Gus. Memo goes after him with a gun, in a scene reminiscent of the earlier Harriet Bird incident. Memo screams at him, "You filthy scum, I hate your guts and always have since the day you murdered Bump." Roy takes away the gun and leaves the office, filled with self-loathing:

Going down the tower stairs he fought his overwhelming self-hatred. In each stinking wave of it he remembered some disgusting happening of his life. He thought, I never did learn anything out of my past life, now I have to suffer again.

When Roy hits the street, he finds that Max Mercy has published an article uncovering both his past and his sellout of the Knights. In the closing lines of the novel, Roy weeps for his own failures.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Author Bernard Malamud introduces his book with a chapter entitled *Pre Game*. Young Roy Hobbs, a nineteen-year-old baseball phenomenon, is on a train for Chicago, joined by his friend and professional scout, Sam Simpson. Hobbs plans to try out for a pitching spot on the Chicago Cubs professional baseball team. Along the ride, Roy is captivated with a woman named Harriet Bird, who carries a black hatbox that never leaves her sight. Nearby, nationally recognized sports writer Max Mercy reads the headlines of the day's newspaper, which announce double murders of star athletes by an unknown woman armed with silver bullets. Sam notices Max and introduces himself and Roy Hobbs to the writer and the baseball star he is traveling with, Walter (*The Whammer*) Wambold. Both men condescend to speak with Sam and Roy. Max alludes to Sam's alcoholism and Whammer is disinterested in Roy because he views him as inexperienced and out of Whammer's league.

The train stops at a carnival where they begin a baseball game in which Roy handily strikes out The Whammer, humiliating him. Roy impresses Harriet Bird. She gets better acquainted with Roy and talks philosophically about his life and his goals. However, Roy is on a different plane altogether. He prefers a more practical approach to life as experienced through winning and losing the game of baseball. He tells her his one desire is to become the greatest ever to play the game. Later that evening, Harriet phones Roy, inviting him to her room in the same hotel. Soon after he appears in her doorway, she shoots and seriously wounds him with a silver bullet.

Chapter 1 Analysis

Trains play a notable part in the story of *The Natural.* In one sense, a journey by train reflects Roy's lifelong journey to find meaning and security, especially in light of the many unfortunate circumstances he faces throughout *The Natural.* In another more literal sense, Roy travels by train hoping to keep up with his dreams, as he travels from his home of farmlands and fields to the big city, to another baseball team, or yet one more game. Whatever the train might signify at any given time, nonetheless, it keeps going. So do Roy's hopes and dreams, and so do his travels in search of fulfillment.

Pre-Game, the opening chapter of this book could well have been named *Roy Hobbs at 19*, as it introduces the reader to the young man with a truly *natural* talent for the game of baseball. Roy experiences the thrill of independence as the train leaves the western hills of the United States bound for Chicago, where he plans to try out as a pitcher for the Chicago Cubs. Author Bernard Malamud's effective imagery is witnessed early on, as Roy imagines in his mind "a white-faced, long-boned boy [who whips] with train-whistle yowl a glowing ball to someone under a dark oak." This memory of his boyhood days happily throwing a ball with his father recurs throughout the story. The reader may

intuit from this elaborate and image-laden description of a baseball, that for Roy, the game is a symbol of life's ups and downs, and perhaps the burden imposed on him as he gains notoriety in the sport. The idea that a mere baseball becomes too heavy to handle foreshadows future struggles for the nineteen-year old boy.

Roy Hobbs experiences hunger, at times ravenous, throughout the story, and this desire to be satiated appears as early in the novel as the train trip away from home. The young athlete is innocent, pure and natural. He has not seen much of the world, as he tells the train's porter, Eddie. He has seen Boise, Idaho and Portland, Oregon. He carries with him a bassoon case to protect his beloved baseball bat named Wonderboy.

Roy is going to Chicago with his friend and baseball scout, Sam Simpson, a man with such a soft heart for his young prodigy that he insists that Roy sleep in the bed, while Sam spends the night less comfortably. Sam's life never really amounted to what he hoped it would, and the theme of despair over the way life turns out will continue to be felt through the author's vivid representation of broken individuals. Sam struggles with alcoholism along with the rejection and taunting it brings him by people like the sportswriter Max Mercy, who is anything but a man of mercy. To the contrary, he hounds Roy and exploits the human condition unmercifully all for the sake of money, recognition and fame.

Sam is a loyal companion and trusted friend to Roy, and likewise, Roy enables Sam to retain his dream of finding a hero - Sam, a person who cannot afford a decent seat on the train or a decent shower. Roy is lonely and more than slightly afraid of what lies ahead, but Sam remains by his side.

Before long, an attractive young woman named Harriet Bird boards the train, and Roy is immediately captivated by her beauty and apparent mystery. She carries a black hatbox, which is not allowed to leave her side, and Roy considers her somehow superior. Combined with Roy's misgivings over leaving home, his longing for a beautiful woman is only the beginning of a downward trend. It is not the first time, nor will it be the last, that Roy's better judgment takes a back seat and he chases outward appearances without regard to inward integrity. Harriet carries a white, crumpled rose. White generally signifies purity, but in this case, the fact that it is crumpled betrays Harriet's character, especially when contrasted to her favorite black box.

The headlines of a newspaper announcing the murders of two star athletes by a crazed woman with a gun portends future calamity. Nationally recognized sportswriter Max Mercy warns his friend, and baseball great *Whammer*, that a baseball player might be the woman's next victim. The newspaper headline immediately follows the introduction to the mysterious woman carrying a black hatbox.

Neither Max Mercy nor The Whammer gives Sam the time of day, and in fact both men display a condescending attitude and toss insults alluding to Sam's trouble with booze and Roy's youthful presence amidst seasoned baseball veterans. Roy does not warm up to either one, so the initial impression is mutual. Roy feels very sad and homesick,

not so much from his literal home (which he had left behind) but for a feeling that he was secure and loved.

When the train stops near a carnival, Sam exacts retribution on the insensitive Max Mercy and his cohort, Wambold, with a bet that Roy Hobbs can strike out the Whammer. The competition is particularly exciting following the way in which Whammer has been strutting around, flirting with Harriet Bird on the train as he flashed a gaudy diamond on his finger, and viewing Sam contemptuously. At the carnival, as in varied scenes throughout the story, Malamud exposes the seamy side of society as young girls trade kisses for prizes won and gobble junk food in order to satisfy their gluttony.

It is not until Roy heroically strikes out Whammer that Harriet Bird's true colors show. She takes a shine to Roy once she realizes he might actually displace Whammer. Her regard for people seems to depend largely upon their performance rather than their depth of character. Eventually, Roy avenges Whammer for insulting Sam by handily striking him out, winning the bet for Sam, and bringing the haughty athlete to his knees. Suddenly, Harriet casts her gaze upon Roy. He becomes her new infatuation. That evening after dinner, however, Roy is "aware of the tormented trees fronting the snaky lake . . . trees bent and clawing, plucked white by icy blasts from the black water, their bony branches twisting in many a broken direction." Malamud's images - tormented, snaky, bent, clawing, icy blasts, black water, bony branches and broken direction - cannot be ignored when placed side by side with Harriet's advances to Roy. It is not difficult to discern that her true intentions are at best, highly questionable. Of course, later we learn that they are, at worst, murderous.

After seeing what Roy can do from the pitcher's mound, Harriet Bird probes him for answers to life's philosophical issues. She questions his desire to be regarded by fans as the best baseball player ever to have lived. However, to Harriet's disappointment, life for Roy does not go much deeper than the game of baseball, the acquisition of fame and notoriety, and eventually of beautiful things, including women. Roy talks to Harriet in baseball terminology and does not concern himself with larger questions. Roy desperately wants to give Harriet an answer that will make her feel tender toward him, but his efforts are in vain. Soon after, when he makes romantic advances toward her, and she responds coldly.

Malamud takes Sam into a fitful dream state in which Max Mercy, always hungry for an angle or salacious story, betrays Sam to a train conductor who throws him off the train. Eventually Sam meets up with a white watchman on an embankment who tries to save his life, but Sam dreams of being stabbed. Shortly after, Sam in fact dies, presumably from the hard pitch Roy had thrown earlier, which had impacted his chest from his catcher's spot. Had Sam lasted much longer the reader would not be drawn into the next phase of Roy's life, which sees him alone in the big city. Sam saw Roy off to a great start, believed in him enough to convince him to take the leap into the unknown and proved that true friends really do exist.

Sam gets an unexpected phone call from his Chicago hotel. It is Harriet, inviting him to come to her room, which he does. However, when he greets her he feels a shiver in his

spine. Finally the mystery of the silver bullets that killed the two star athletes is revealed, as Harriet points her shining pistol at Roy and asks him sweetly whether he will truly be the best baseball player ever. He answers affirmatively and Harriet shoots him in his mid-section, effectively snuffing out the next fifteen years of his professional career. Had Roy satisfied Harriet's hunger for meaning and lasting solace, perhaps he would have spared her twisted wrath. The world is not what Harriet wishes it to be, and Roy is all too human despite his natural ability.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Roy Hobb is reunited with baseball fifteen years after he is shot. Pop Fisher is the coach of The Brooklyn (New York City) Knights, Red Blow is the team trainer, and both men are dejected with the status of the team, which has been on a losing streak for as far back as they can remember. Pop does not have high hopes for his team, or for his future as their manager.

Enter Roy Hobbs, who carries with him a contract signed by a man known as *The Judge*. He announces to Pop that he is the new left fielder, and dodges questions about his past, preferring to convince Pop that he is a talented baseball player and should begin to help the team. Bump Bailey, right fielder for the Knights, is always up to practical locker room jokes but does little to help the team win or bolster morale. In fact, he is in a major slump himself. He does not get along with his coach, either, and Roy soon dislikes him. Before long, Pop takes Roy under his wing, as does coach Red Blow. Roy learns from Red about Pop's painful past, including an account of baseball mistake that Pop never forgot. He tells Roy that The Judge, a majority stockholder of The Knights, wants to push Pop out of his job, which causes Roy to want success for the team even more. Still, Roy spends many nights with the nightmare that cost him fifteen years of his career and a lifetime as a professional pitcher.

Chapter 2 Analysis

Fisher laments his life to the team trainer, Red Blow. In light of his team's dismal performance, it is an understandable sentiment for the aging coach to have. So far one cannot help but wonder about Malamud's relationship with professional baseball, and perhaps even more so, his awareness of the capricious nature of life. Up to this point, we have met Sam, the sad alcoholic coach who never saw his big break. Merciless Max Mercy, obnoxious Whammer, lonely Roy, disturbed Harriet and Eddie the gambling train porter. One sees a conspicuous absence of protected souls in the author's world of *The Natural*. Instead, they are vulnerable, some hanging by a thread of hope. Pop Fisher's heart is heavy, because for all the time he has been in the sport of baseball, he has yet to experience success.

This chapter takes up fifteen years after Roy Hobbs has been critically wounded at the hands of his fanatical admirer, Harriet Bird. Pop disdains his outfielder "Bump" Bailey, who has a penchant for pitiless locker room jokes and Pop's breathtakingly beautiful niece, Memo Paris. Furthermore, his best pitcher, Fowler, yields to pressure when the game is close. However, his losing streak will make a turn for the better when 34-year old Roy Hobbs shows up at batting practice to announce he has a contract to play left field for Pop's Knights.

Roy promises Pop that he will be good for the team for at least ten years. He tells Pop that a scout named Scotty found him, and that his deal was approved by The Judge. Soon we learn that The Judge is one more among the many shady characters in this story. The issue of age repeatedly rears its head in the story, often unfavorably, coupled with being of no use to the world any more. Roy has come to a bad luck team - with one man recently paralyzed by a fly ball and another with a broken spine as a result of a fall. This creates a useful backdrop against which Roy Hobbs can turn things around for a dying team of sullen players.

No sooner does Roy get fitted for a baseball cap than he sheds a tear, presumably over the many years he lost from his beloved passion for the game. Time might eventually heal Roy's wounds, but right now he has the impulse to run away for good. The players do not respect Pop Fisher and ridicule him with unkind jokes behind his back, which Roy overhears. However, for Pop the feeling is mutual. Bump is a leading hitter, and as such, he gets away with unending torment of the coach and anyone else to cross his path. Roy looks on with disgust and wonder at how this behavior can be tolerated.

It is up to Roy to come to terms with his inner doubts about joining to the team. He is alone, in the midst of a demoralized and disrespectful team of ineffective athletes, and tells Pop that hotels are not his favorite places. After all, fifteen years ago he almost died in one. In due course, after winning the respect of Pop, Roy also gains a new friend. Later, after dining with the team's trainer Red Blow, he adds another to his roster of faithful, trustworthy comrades. Up to this point, companions have been in short supply and the death of Sam only heightened Roy's need for comfort. When Roy learns more about Bump's sexual escapades and his laziness, his determination to help The Knights grows deeper. He hears from Red the story of "Fisher's Flop" years ago, when Pop was caught between bases, precipitating a heartbreaking loss for his team. Roy is speechless, and grows more disturbed when Red tells him that Pop's life was forever changed as a result of his mistake. Pop has never been able to surmount the constant goading.

Clearly, Roy can relate to his coach considering his own hard luck, the media's penchant for beating a broken man, and the team's desperate standing, which he hopes to improve. Perhaps this will be Roy's big break. Roy promises Red that if Pop will play him, he will give it his best. Once again, the reader is reminded of the age issue as Red warns Roy not to waste whatever earnings he makes, to be careful, to protect his old age. If Roy heard the warning, he did not take it in, because he responds that he will be around for a long time, and will leave a lasting impression.

As Roy goes to sleep that night thinking about the flop that changed Pop's whole life, he dreams of loud trains, and relives the shooting by Harriet Bird. Dreams are useful tools for Malamud. They serve to warn the reader of what the protagonist himself could not know. Roy's suffering might not ease if he does not undergo a fundamental change, but the question remains, is he able and willing to do that? Until that time, he may continually find himself on racing trains with shrieking sounds, unfriendly colors and sordid characters.

Roy's rest is interrupted by the entrance of an unclothed redheaded woman, real or imagined, who has icy hands and feet and slashes his body. Yet, we are told that he enjoyed the tryst, suggesting that their passion was consummated. Roy had seen a redheaded woman earlier, and she clearly belonged to Bump. Whether this incident is real or symbolic is unclear, but it undoubtedly points to Roy's imminent infatuation with a lovely woman and a sexual encounter that will still leave him hungry for something that will last.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The Knights are glum because of their losing streak. Fights break out in the locker room, and Roy is subjected to endless practical jokes, such as someone absconding with his beloved bat, which, as a child, he carved from a tree struck by lightning. Before long Roy gets his chance at bat and proves to Pop, Red and the team that he is truly a *natural* at the game of baseball. Fascinated and impressed by the hand-carved bat, they even suspect the almost magical way in which it works for Roy, so they decide to weigh and measure it. Pop becomes increasingly optimistic over the potential of the Knights, and practices are more energetic. However, Doc Knobb, whom Roy refers to as a *shyster quack*, regularly visits the team in order to calm them and ostensibly make them winners. Roy dismisses himself from one of Knobb's sessions, and he is benched by Pop for dissenting. Roy explains to Pop that he came to play baseball, and he refuses to let anyone mess with his mind. The team heads into a terrible slump. Fans show up with odd garments and banging gongs to cheer them on, but Roy sticks to his guns and refuses to be hypnotized by Doc Knobb, so he remains on the bench. Memo Paris is the beautiful niece of Pop Fisher, and also Bump's girlfriend, but that does not keep Roy from coveting her. He is awed by her presence, and he seeks her out every chance he gets, with dreams of one day winning her love. Doc Knobb eventually blames the team's failure on Pop, which gets him fired.

The Knights gain renewed energy and play great baseball. Upset with Bump's playing as well as his attitude, Pop asks Roy to the plate, telling him to knock the cover off the ball, and Roy does so, literally, for a home run. Pop appoints Roy a pinch hitter and substitute fielder. During a subsequent game, Bump decides to hustle based on warnings from Pop; he is also wary that Roy might take his place. Overzealous, Bump heads into the back wall and later dies from his injuries. Roy inherits Bump's right field spot and starts breaking major league baseball records.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Roy is the subject of crude practical jokes by several team members, including Bump Bailey, as he finds himself in the clubhouse missing his bassoon case (which houses his precious bat, *Wonderboy*) and the victim of numerous annoying pranks. Roy proceeds to hit balls with precision and power to the amazement of the entire team. Pop is dying to know where he got his magical bat, so Roy tells him the story of how he hand-carved it. Pop remarks on the whiteness of Roy's bat. Again, there is a reference to white, and Roy replies that white is the bat's *true* color. This calls to mind the association of white with purity, and something natural.

To Roy's dismay, Pop pays a hypnotist, referred to by Roy as a shyster, to calm the players in the locker room. The display of contentment among the team disturbs Roy,

however. The men go into a collective trance, and Roy almost partakes of it before he catches himself, when "everything gradually got so black he lost all sight of where he was. When he tried to rise up into the light he couldn't find it." The black, or darkness, is an unknown or dangerous place for Roy to be. The light, representing truth, is what he seeks, yet cannot seem to find. Roy wants to play baseball. He repeatedly utters throughout the story that he wants to be the best to ever play in the game. Hypnotherapy is not for him, and he will not allow anyone to manipulate his mind. While it could certainly be said that Roy does not see beyond the baseball field or intuit danger and destruction before they undo him, he is a man of conviction. Despite Pop's threat to bench him, Roy frees himself from the clenches of the "medicine man," whom he views as dishonest and a threat to the team. Meanwhile the team plays terribly, "afflicted with more than the usual number of hexes and whammies and practiced all sorts of magic to undo them."

The term *fair weather fan* could have been invented from Malamud's novel. When the team experiences a winning streak, they turn out in droves to support the players, but when a slump hits they throw vegetables at the team and holler insults. Malamud does not spare words as he recounts the unfaithfulness of the fickle fans. In the midst of a tough season, Roy once again reaches out for love - to a woman who is already claimed by Roy's teammate, Bump. Memo Paris ignores his every advance and saunters past him in scorn, but he still waits for her.

Eventually when Pop dismisses Doc Knobb, the hypnotist, The Knights play better than ever. When Pop drops his stubborn stance toward Roy, allowing him to hit, he hits in Bump's place and literally takes the cover off the ball. Human pride rears its hideous head when Bump, angry over being shown up by Roy, tries to become a hero by catching near the wall and breaks his skull. The abominable Max Mercy prints suspicions about Roy's bat for all to read, but it is tested and deemed legal for play. Roy continues to awe his team, coach and the crowds, breaking records and building self-confidence. Red Blow tells Pop that Roy is *a natural,* which should predict great things to come, but somehow by this point in the story the reader is aware that Roy lacks wisdom. His desire to be the very best, overcoming the suffering of his past through sheer will, might ultimately become his downfall.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Memo Paris, the object of Roy's infatuation, is grief stricken over Bump's death, and finally reappears from her hotel room dressed in black, with lighter hair. He remains determined to attract her and become the hero to her that he perceives Bump once was. Roy becomes a leading league hitter, gaining news notoriety and filling sports columns. In spite of his success, Roy still feels like he has barely lived yet, and wants to conquer the world. He still wants Memo for himself, and Pop regrets having kept Roy out of the lineup for so long, believing the team would be even further ahead had he not stubbornly punished his player due to his faulty judgment regarding Doc Knobb.

The fans become more exuberant as the Knights gain recognition and Roy becomes famous. Meanwhile, the sports writer Max Mercy is hungry for details of Roy's past, and rumors abound that his father was an itinerant worker and his mother an actress, but Roy remains mum on his history because his passion is playing baseball and winning the love of Memo Paris, who continues to mourn over her loss of Bump.

Roy is convinced he deserves higher pay, and visits The Judge, who insists on meeting him in his dark, unlit office, and lectures him about the love of money being the root of all evil. He warns Roy that placing value on money will distort the athlete's values. Roy continues to try to negotiate downward to a salary he believes is fair and reasonable, but Judge repeatedly turns him down. Roy angrily leaves the office to meet up with Max Mercy, the writer, waiting outside. Max once again grills Roy for details of his past, promising him five thousand dollars in cash for his story, but Roy refuses, telling Max that all the public is entitled to is his best game of baseball. Max introduces Roy to Gus Sands, a suspicious bookie, and discovers Memo sitting close to the bald, middle-aged, one-eyed man with an eerie glass eye. Gus and Roy proceed to make bets over the table, and Gus wins them all. Finally Roy performs magic tricks on Gus, Memo and Mercy, drawing Memo's laughter, and winning back all of the money he had lost.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Memo's grief over the death of Bump underscores her lack of discernment concerning her choice of men. That Bump should gain such an extreme reaction from Memo does not bode well for Roy's future. Bump would not commit to her and never proved himself trustworthy, yet she mourns him as if he had been a devoted husband for years. Yet she stayed with him, talks incessantly to Roy of her memories with Bump, and seems to lack the tools to create stability in her life.

The world of baseball is sufficiently corrupt to convict Roy Hobbs of a crime he could not possibly have committed - being somehow responsible for Bump's fate. According to Pop, people intimate that had Roy not joined the team, Bump would not have gone for

the ball. Sadly, Roy still believes that he must meet or surpass Bump's reputation. Fans make it difficult for Roy to relax and be himself. He cannot even be successful and guilt-free. He is left to inherit the dubious memory of a man he loathed. Nevertheless, he is unable to rise above the superficial world of hits, runs and strikeouts. He continues to desire Memo Paris, who from all accounts so far, will never bring him contentment. It is a fatal desire. The fair weather fans soon forget about Bump, and cheer for Roy as long as he does not fail. Failure is not an opportunity to learn and improve in *The Natural*. Instead, it seems to bring unrelenting heartache, leading to further failure.

Through it all, Roy continues to delude himself. Memo tells Roy that she still belongs to Bump. Once Roy reads enough press clippings gushing over his talent, he realizes that more money might win over Memo. He is justifiably concerned with his measly salary compared to the league standard, so he approaches The Judge, requesting more pay. The Judge covets ownership of The Knights and wants to get rid of Pop by any means necessary - an item of which Roy is aware because Red told him - yet Roy seems to lack the necessary insight to put The Judge's motives in perspective and approach him with great care. Roy is hungry to be the best, and that means making plenty of money and catching Memo as if she were an object to be acquired.

We are informed the Judge is wearing a black fedora, reminiscent of the many other references to black in the face of danger. His formal name is Goodwill Banner. Malamud brings irony to many names, and in this case, The Judge Goodwill Banner does not bear good will, just as Max Mercy is not merciful. The Judge embodies greed. He exploits people. In his office sits a stuffed shark. He enjoys sitting in the dark, and he is in that state when Roy meets him. Roy had been warned to watch out for himself around The Judge. No one knows where he gets his money, but it is undoubtedly through dishonest means.

It is within this arena of suspicion and commentary that Roy finds himself asking The Judge for a pay raise. The Judge refuses, reminding Roy that he in fact owes money for a uniform that Bump (not Roy) destroyed, and spouting biblical references. He is a hypocrite who takes advantage of the crowds at the stadium to line his pockets, inevitably leading to future betting with his bookie friend, Gus Sands. Ironically, Gus warns Roy that loving money will lead to evil, and Roy tells him that he has never been close enough to money to love it. Meanwhile, Roy lowers his asking salary bit by bit. The irony of a corrupted judge telling Roy about values is apparent. The Judge thinks everything can be purchased at the price of his choosing, including Roy's career, and The Judge knows Roy is inexperienced at negotiating, so he takes full advantage of his innocence.

Max Mercy gets wind of Roy's disappointment and bribes Roy into a five thousand dollar gift in exchange for Roy's life story, to which Roy responds that all he owes the public is his best in the game of baseball. Again, the young man sticks to his natural, innate sense of what is appropriate and fair. In this story, such simplicity of mind could bring Roy's demise at the hands of greedy, publicity-seeking sportswriters and gamblers. While dining with Max, Roy meets the infamous bookie, Gus Sands, a fifty-plus year old, balding crook who has designs on Memo and one eerie glass eye. Roy distrusts him

almost immediately. "There was something wormy about him. He belonged in the dark with The Judge. Let them haunt themselves there," Roy thinks to himself. He has the audacity to inform Roy that he had bet against him and lost. Gus gloats - and goes further to talk to Roy about how he destroys people. He belongs with the Judge. Both men use people and take advantage of the American tendency to fall for schemes that will bring quick money. It does not seem to matter to this kind of character what method, however shady, is used to extract money.

After a series of small tableside bets, which Gus wins, Roy excuses himself and returns with a white tablecloth that he uses to perform magic tricks. Again, the author painstakingly describes not just any linen, but is sure to say it is white. In Roy's hands, it works for the good as he manages to recover all the money he lost. Max Mercy and Gus become irritated and flushed as Roy wins Memo's laughter and applause from the audience. As the magic tricks come to a close, Max frantically notes in his black book the curious happenings. Roy has succeeded in making fools of those who would seek to harm him. However, he has yet to develop mature insight and learn from past mistakes, so his payback is short-lived. He has outsmarted Gus only for the time being. Roy must learn to develop and draw upon his intuitive powers if he is to survive in an entertainment world characterized largely by deceit.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

When Max Mercy prints a column about The Judge's refusal to increase Roy's salary, local fans come together to urge a pay raise for Roy. *Roy Hobbs Day* is commemorated at the ballpark with a huge party and gifts for the hero of The Knights. Memo becomes friendlier with Roy and the two go for a drive together. Memo reminisces about Bump and her days as a Beauty Queen that she says never added up to anything meaningful. Roy tries to make love to Memo and she comes up with an excuse to stop. Later, Memo drives Roy along a dirt road without the headlights turned on. Roy thinks he sees a young boy coming out of the woods followed by a dog. Roy is sure the speeding car hits somebody; he returns to the scene, but finds nothing. With Roy now driving, the car runs into a tree, and Roy suffers a black eye. Pop sees Roy and Memo return to the hotel the next day and he fines Roy one hundred dollars for not being in his room the night before. Pop warns Roy about Memo's ability to carry bad luck to other people and Roy dismisses the advice, telling Pop that he is in love with her. Max Mercy comes upon the scene and notices Roy's black eye, then chases him through the hotel to snap a photograph for the newspaper, but Roy eludes him.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Once Max Mercy gets hold of the story about Roy being denied a raise and prints it for the masses, fans declare a *Roy Hobbs Day*, and shower the athlete with lavish material gifts, including a white Mercedes-Benz. Roy speaks to the crowd, once again promising to do his best and become the greatest baseball player ever. The author omnisciently informs the reader that such a daring pronouncement might bring misfortune, but crowd pretends to love him nonetheless. Roy hopes he has not brought bad luck upon himself. Along with Malamud's mention of the wrath of ghosts, combines to foreshadow possible heartache for Roy Hobbs.

When Memo sees Roy in the impressive looking Mercedes, she agrees to ride with him despite Roy's dismay over his lack of progress in the past two weeks with regard to Memo's affections toward him. Sex and fame keep leading to hunger for Roy, the lesson (of which he is still unaware) being the more he seeks Memo (and women like her) the hungrier he will become. His fundamental spiritual needs are unfulfilled. This is the essence of loneliness. While the reader might feel compelled to Roy, nonetheless, he lacks the desire to look within himself and others for something more lasting than outward appearance - whether in the form of a beautiful woman or being the best there ever was in the game of baseball.

As Roy spends a moonlit night by the water with Memo, he aches desperately for some sign that she might love him. However, she brings up Bump's name again, and later claims that Gus is like a father to her. In reality, Gus provides little more than material

goods to Memo in exchange for her sexual favors. Memo shares her past with Roy, and tells him that she was abandoned by her father, and failed to make it in Hollywood. Like Roy, happiness for Memo seems to depend upon people and things rather than a firm foundation. To Memo, the idea of using her sexuality to obtain wealth is fine. It hurts Roy to no end, yet he continues to pursue her. Each of these hungry souls yearns for security but does not know it will never be found through a temporary obsession or possession. Like Harriet Bird before her, Memo repels Roy's sexual advances. Like The Judge, she likes the darkness. Despite all the warning signs, Roy will sell his soul for an outwardly beautiful woman. In his mind, this is part of what goes with being a champ.

As Memo drives into the night without headlights (because she likes the dark and does not want to see the light, symbolizing truth and clarity) Roy is convinced he sees a young boy in the shadows, and fears that once they pass him, something - either the boy or his dog - has been struck by the vehicle. Roy tells Memo he heard a groan, and she tells him it must have come from him. Perhaps Roy was figuratively groaning over his bygone youth - even at the hands of Memo.

Pop later warns Roy about Memo, saying she has always been unlucky, and her bad luck carries to other people. He does not want Roy to get involved with her, but Roy dismisses Pop's sage advice and declares to Pop that he loves her. When Pop asks Roy if she feels the same way, he replies that he does not know, but thinks she will one day.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Roy enters a slump and feels dejected and frustrated, unable to pinpoint the source of his trouble. Red Blow counsels him to consider matters that might be weighing on his mind, advises him to get rid of whatever nervousness he might have, and tries to lighten his mood. Pop gives him practical advice about which balls to hit and let go, and tells him to consider another bat besides Wonderboy. Memo is scarce, and Roy frets that she might not like him anymore because he is not playing well. In his desperation, Roy visits a fortuneteller. She tells him he will fall in love with a brunette and says goodbye. The fans become disgusted with the team, and Pop orders Roy to the bench because he refuses to relinquish his trusty bat. The Knights drop to second in the division. A desperate fan meets up with Roy while the team is traveling and begs him to hit a home run for his sick child. Roy tells the man he wishes he had not done that, but promises to do his best in the game. When the team gets into trouble Pop gets Roy in to hit. A woman whom Roy has never met keeps rising from her seat to look at him from the stands. He notices her, catches her smiling at him and hits a home run to win the game. As he circles the bases he lifts his cap to her, but she has already left.

Chapter 6 Analysis

The memory of Memo continues to depress Roy. He is restless, and even considers that he might be better off without her, but that thought makes him resentful. Roy Hobbs enters a baseball slump that will last weeks and many games. The player fans regarded as a miracle worker proves he is only human after all. Once again, the fair-weather followers show their true colors.

Even his trusty trainer, Red Blow, attempts to assuage his pain with the suggestion that perhaps something is worrying his mind. Roy does not consider his mire of ambition and ends up visiting a fortuneteller named Lola. This visit follows a suggestion by Memo. After all, she tells him that Bump consulted with one. Memo has been scarce lately, since Roy is not doing well. Lola foretells that Roy will soon fall in love with a dark-haired lady, and Roy informs her that he is already in love with a swell-looking redhead. He departs from her office, hoping that maybe if he puts on his socks inside out and eats less meat, luck will turn his way. Pop becomes furious with Roy's insistence on using the only baseball bat he has ever used and ejects him to the bench indefinitely. Absent during this slump is any sense of compassion or act of mercy. The players and coaches alike slap band-aids on whatever troubles them and show utter inability to probe the underlying cause.

Roy's night sweats and bad dreams continue and he wishes he had a friend, father, and home to return to. Finally, while in Chicago for a game, Roy sees a woman in a red dress, nodding to him in support as she rises from her seat in the stands. For the first

time in a long time, Roy senses that she truly cares. Roy is touched that a human being would stand up for him. In a symbolic move that signals the end of his slump, Roy hits a home run and the game is won.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Iris Lemon is the name of the woman who seemed to break Roy's slump with her encouraging support from the stands. He gets her phone number after seeing her at another game and sending her a note. He meets Iris one evening and she tells him she has been watching him awhile and urges him to continue being a positive influence for youth. She tells him that she stood up so that he would know someone believed in him, and that he would regain his power. Soon Roy and Iris connect on a more personal level and share their stories. Roy, about how life did not turn out the way he had hoped it would, that he was abused by women, but that Iris seemed different. They go swimming, Iris turns away from Roy's romantic advances and he disappears into the water, quite a distance away from her. Iris becomes frightened and cries but Roy later surfaces. The couple gets out of the water and later become intimate. Iris informs Roy that she is a grandmother and he is stunned by that news.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Roy is amazed and touched by Iris Lemon's confidence in him, being that she does not know him. This could be a defining moment for Roy, a turning point in his life from which will spring hope and security. Instead, when Roy meets Iris he is disappointed that she is not thin like Memo. He continues to desire Memo, but she cannot offer him anything of lasting value. She is too absorbed in her own wants to understand a meaningful relationship.

Iris tells Roy that she can't stand to see a hero fail, and that there are so few of them. In a manner that harkens back to his conversation with Harriet Bird, as she coaxed him onto a higher plane than baseball, Roy responds with a baseball example. However, unlike the deranged Harriet, Iris is very patient as she works to maintain his trust in her: She tells Roy that an athlete's job is to be the best, and everyone else should understand what it takes for an athlete to have those high standards.

Even though Iris helped Roy get out of his slump, he resists the urge to talk about his past, complete with heartache and loss. It digs up too much hurt and pain, as he explains to Iris. Roy sums it up by saying that nothing turned out the way he expected it would. Chapter 7 exposes the danger of obsession. Iris wants to talk about the game of life, and impart some of her hard-won lessons to Roy, but he can only discuss baseball. She asks him why he cannot be satisfied with breaking a few records, and assures him that no one's life really turns out according to plan.

However, Roy hears another train in his mind as his ambition races. He does not answer her question of whether he is afraid of death. Instead, he moves on to all the women that looked great, but hurt him. Iris tells him comfortingly that she will not ever

hurt him. "Experience makes good people better. We have two lives, Roy, the life we learn with and the life we live with after that. Suffering brings us toward happiness," she tells Roy. However, Roy responds that he is tired of suffering and wants to keep far away from it. The two make love, and Iris confesses to Roy that she is both a mother and grandmother. He is repelled by her statement and by the fear it conjures in his mind. Age does not equate with wisdom in this story. It signifies lack of beauty and the sense that one is no longer viable, successful or worthy. Still, Roy goes on to engage in sex with Iris.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The Knights are blissful now that they appear to have surmounted their losing streak. Roy devours enormous quantities of food on the train ride back from St. Louis. He reflects on Iris Lemon and his desire for her wanes as he considers the fact that she is a grandmother. He has no interest in being a grandfather, and tells himself he is still as young and frisky as a colt. Roy's obsession with Memo returns once again, and she comes to his hotel. He soon forgets his disappointment over her behavior while he was not playing well. She explains to Roy that she does not tolerate being around people who are in a blue mood. She turns down Roy's advances toward lovemaking.

The Knights win seventeen games in a row and their fans turn out in great numbers now that they are more successful. Roy does not forget the way they and the press treated him while he was in trouble. Max Mercy continues to fixate on Roy's history, and Roy misses Memo, so he goes to visit her. He sees Gus, the bookie, in her apartment, smoking a cigar, and is very uneasy that Memo continues to mingle with him, wondering what she sees in him. Roy, Memo and Gus play cards, and Roy wins a sizable amount from Gus, who is apprehensive over Roy's relationship with Memo. Momentum among the Knights continues to build as Roy helps carry the team to within the top three spots in the league. Roy has intense daydreams about marrying Memo and starting a family, but the reality hits him that she is not the domestic type. Memo gloats over Roy's success, though he warns her that the pennant is not yet in the bag, with one more game to go. She invites him to a party that night and Roy agrees to come even though he knows Pop would be angry. Roy consumes large amounts of food, becomes very faint and ill and wakes up in a hospital bed.

Chapter 8 Analysis

The theme of insatiable hunger prevails as Roy consumes more than his body would naturally warrant on the train ride home from a win in St. Louis. Still, Roy falls asleep on the speeding train dreaming of the white grass of his youth, and he awakens to the thought of Memo.

Yet Memo tells him shortly after he returns from the road that she hates being with people who are down and out. Many men would have felt abandoned - even angry - at such a pronouncement, but Roy cannot see his way out of the passion he still feels for her. She spurns his sexual advance, telling him that she is not feeling well. Naively, he thinks she has shared something intimate with him.

The Knights continue a winning streak and their fans resurface. But Roy has not forgotten the way those same fans treated him when he was in trouble. The obvious question becomes why, then, Roy does not see the trouble being dished out to him by

Memo, his fantasy woman. He is blind to her intentions. Even in his lowest moments, Roy yearns for Memo, yet he takes time to reflect that perhaps she is not as wonderful as he wishes she was, and that she would probably not be happy in a domestic setting. This is Roy's fatal flaw: he is caught up in a false dream of peace and happiness that he thinks will arrive when he becomes the best baseball player ever, and Memo belongs to him.

Memo invites Roy to a party on the evening before a game that will decide whether the Knights will win the pennant. He foolishly accepts, thinking only of making love to her when the party is over. In another moment of voracious hunger, Roy gobbles everything in sight. He questions whether he is hungry for food or something else, and is anguished over the inability to be satiated. Roy eventually gets physically and dreams about eating dead birds. Overwhelmed with desire for Memo, he comes to her room to find her lying in bed with no clothes on, chewing a turkey drumstick. In a state of half dream and half reality he sees a roaring train feels a "shattered gut;" imagine a "green-eyed siren" (Memo) and a "one-eyed rat" (Gus Sands, the bookie, and Memo's lover). During a time when Roy should have been preparing for the big game ahead, he chooses to feed his lust and ends up in the hospital.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Roy Hobbs wakes up in the hospital where Bump died with a raging fever and bad dreams. Memo visits him and the doctor tells him he can play in the final game which is one week away, but tells him that his baseball days are nearly over if he expects to live long. He thinks about making enough money to appease Memo. She tells him that she is dissatisfied with her life and she is fed up. When Roy promises to take care of her and asks her to marry him, she tells him she is afraid of being poor. She reminds Roy that his baseball days are almost over, and wonders how he will provide for her needs. He realizes that Gus must have sent her to Roy's room to talk about money. She tells Roy that The Judge sent her. The Judge will pay Roy twenty five thousand dollars and give him a substantial raise the following season if he agrees to lose the game for The Knights. Memo leaves, and The Judge enters with the hope of cutting a deal with Roy, but Roy threatens to contact the FBI. Then he weighs the benefit of earning enough money to take care of Memo and starts to negotiate with The Judge. The Judge warns him that he might lose Memo to someone else, and Roy agrees not to hit the ball safely for the sum of thirty five thousand dollars. Memo returns to Roy and showers him with affection. Roy tries to fall asleep. Unable to do so, he reads a letter that Iris Lemon had given to him. She talks about how lonely it was raising her baby alone. Her daughter married and became a mother before the age of seventeen, just as Iris did. Roy reads the word *grandmother* on the written page and discards the letter.

Chapter 9 Analysis

At the hospital, Roy's stomach is pumped of his gluttonous frenzy. He groans in anguish as he reflects on his condition, and wrestles with the words of his doctor: Though he can be present at the game, the doctor warns him that for his own good, he should stay away from baseball if he hopes to live. Yet, had Roy lived clean and abstained from his earthly cravings, his dream of being the best in the game might have come true. Nonetheless, he continues to grasp at even the remotest chance to win over Memo. He wonders if he could satisfy her if he would win twenty-five thousand dollars, and imagines her lying naked in bed. Memo visits him in the hospital, telling him her fear of being poor. She needs a house of her own with a maid to help her, and a fur coat in cold weather. Within moments, he figures out that Gus sent her to bribe Roy into losing the big game for a price. At first, he tells Memo that he will not throw the game.

In a dream of ominous foreshadowing, Roy dreams about a rat-eyed vulture, black against the ceiling, dripping fat onto Roy's face. He awakens to the sight of The Judge, wearing dark glasses, a black fedora and a thick, black wig. The reader knows that Roy should have stuck to his guns, and sent the FBI after The Judge, as he had threatened to do. Gradually, Roy succumbs to the lure of money and the possibility of securing Memo as his wife. He knows the difference between right and wrong and tells The

Judge that he should be selling snake oil. In the end, however, he chooses evil, even as The Judge murmurs that any moral condition can become its opposite.

Unable to fall asleep that night, Roy reads a letter given to him by Iris when they last met. In her account of her life, Iris talks about the sacrifices she gladly made for her dedication to her daughter, her loneliness and suffering, and the years rolling on. When Roy reaches the final page in which Iris discusses being a grandmother, he crumples the letter and throws it to the wall. Earlier in the story, The Judge had quoted a Bible passage about the dog that returns to its vomit. Roy repeatedly visits that state - his own vomit, his mistakes and vast emptiness of heart. When he might have found a lasting companion in Iris, because she understands his needs and desires his spiritual fulfillment, he hurls to the wall her heartfelt letter. It is the ultimate display of self-importance.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Roy shows up at the game feeling as if he cannot hit the ball even without the money promised to him by The Judge. He hopes he will sit on the bench the entire game. Pop apologizes to Roy for benching him so long earlier in the season, telling him that if he had not done that, The Knights would be further ahead, and Roy tells him he feels weak and might not hit well. Pop tells Roy that he never hoped to win the World Series, but he does expect to win the pennant. He believes he is entitled to it, and then he will quit the game forever. Roy promises Pop he will do his best.

From home plate, Roy sees Memo and The Judge looking out a tower window that overlooks the baseball field. The first time at bat, Roy strikes out. So many Knights players are doing poorly that Roy wonders if The Judge bribed them as well. Roy returns to the plate and hits the ball into the stands, injuring a woman whom he learns is Iris. She is bruised, but she manages to urge him to win the game. She tells him she is pregnant with their child, and an ambulance takes her to the hospital. Roy steps up to hit again, and splits Wonderboy lengthwise from top to bottom. He also realizes that Fowler, pitcher for The Knights, is not trying to win the game. As Pop becomes more desperate about losing, Roy asks to enter the game, promising to "murder" the ball. When the starting pitcher for The Pirates faints, a young man named Herman Youngberry comes in to pitch to Roy Hobbs. Roy strikes out and the game is over.

Chapter 10 Analysis

As fans and human vultures speculate about what caused Roy to become so sick while the rest of the team, present at Memo's party, remained healthy, Roy polishes his adored baseball bat and prepares to play in the momentous game. Secretly, Roy hopes he will stay on the bench so that he does not have to face the prospect of helping to throw the game. However, he is painfully silent when Pop confides to him how much winning the pennant means to the coach. "Roy, I've been lately thinking that a whole lot of people are like [a baseball player he once knew], and for one reason or the other their lives will go the same way all the time, without them getting what they want, no matter what, I for one ...[the world series flag] ain't in the cards for me - that's all. I am wise to admit it to myself. But that don't hold true for our league pennant, Roy. That's the next best thing and I feel I am entitled to it. I feel if I win it just this once - I will be satisfied - and win or lose in the Series, I will quit baseball forever. You see what it means to me, son?" Roy replies that he does, and tells him that he will go in the game. If Roy regrets his deal with The Judge, it certainly does not show in this dialogue with his coach.

Soon after the game begins, Roy suspects that Fowler, the pitcher for The Knights, has also accepted The Judge's bribe. While he vacillates over quitting his deal with The

Judge, Roy keeps returning to the thought of living without Memo. He cannot bear thinking about how alone he would be. Moments later, he suffers over what he promised The Judge. Once again, he notices Iris in the stands. The author points out her white dress, while repeatedly referencing Memo's black dress, and Memo stands in the tower window viewing the baseball game alongside The Judge. A hard shot by Roy hits Iris in the face, sending her to the hospital, but Roy rushes to her side. A moment earlier, he asked himself what he had done and why he had done it. He wishes he could reverse all the mistakes he had ever made. Iris had already warned Roy to learn from his suffering, but he does not let go of erratic Memo. From the ambulance stretcher Iris confesses to Roy that she is pregnant with their child, and begs him to win the game for their unborn son. For a little while it looks like Roy experiences genuine love for the first time as he bends over the wounded Iris, kisses her, and feels unbridled emotion and joy.

When Wonderboy is split lengthwise, forcing Roy to use another bat, the story takes another formidable turn. Pop becomes increasing hopeless and the game spins further away from The Knights, inning by inning. The star pitcher for the opposing team faints and a young pitcher is brought into the game, known to have a formidable fastball and curveball according to a scout who had reported on him. Ironically, this pitcher has always dreamed of being a farmer. That was his life's mission, and he played baseball in order to save enough money to retire to a farm. He shares this passion for the simple life with the man to whom he will pitch. Roy feels disdain for The Judge and Memo but when he looks up to the window, they have already left. For the first time he experiences loathing for Memo as he places her on the same plane as The Judge.

Redemption would be sweet had Roy Hobbs hit the ball over the fence, and the reader would have the satisfaction of knowing the young man had turned his back on those who seek to trade his integrity for their own riches - namely, The Judge, Gus Sands and Memo. However, that does not happen. Instead, Roy strikes out on a bad pitch. Roy did show a valiant effort through his decision to hit some pitches with earnest. It was not enough to win the pennant for The Knights.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

In the dark of night, Roy Hobbs retrieves the broken halves of Wonderboy, ties them together with shoelaces and buries them in the ground. He walks out to the street and recovers an envelope containing 35 one-thousand-dollar bills. Roy ascends the tower where he had last observed The Judge and Memo watching the game. As he enters a dark office, the men are counting their earnings. Roy punches Gus, pushes Memo to the side, hits The Judge with the envelope of money and beats on the Judge. Memo sobs, and Roy exits the room, descends the steps of the Tower and expresses regret over his entire life. Once on the street and in the light of day, he notices a newspaper headline declaring the end of baseball for Roy Hobbs, on suspicion of having sold out on The Knights. The boy who gave him the newspaper asks Roy to tell him it is not true, but Roy lifts his hands to his face and weeps.

Chapter 11 Analysis

After burying the two halves of his baseball bat, Roy makes his way out to the street and discovers an envelope of thirty-five one thousand dollar bills, along with a note from The Judge telling him that next year's contract is not guaranteed due to The Judge's concerns over whether Roy had cooperated sincerely to throw the game. There is nothing left for Roy except his recollections of all the bad decisions he made. However, in one final cathartic gesture, Roy pulls himself into the tower that houses Memo, Gus and The Judge. He discovers them counting their considerable winnings at the expense of The Knights' loss, and Roy loses all composure, slugging Gus, who loses his glass eye; telling Memo she acts like a prostitute. Roy twists The Judge's nose until he squeals. There, in the midst of his greed, embodied by the hoards of betting slips and bills, The Judge defecates on himself. This is undoubtedly the essence of what he is - waste and stench - what is left after all the goodness is removed. Roy undergoes enormous self-loathing as he leaves the tower and heads for the street. He concludes that his constant suffering is a result of having never learned from past mistakes.

The image of the train reappears in Roy's mind. He is sickened by the decisions he has made and can hardly bear the loneliness of being in a public place yet feeling like he is the only person left on earth. A passing pedestrian remarks to someone, "He coulda been a king." A young lad is handing out newspapers headlining Max Mercy's - and others' - suspicion that Roy Hobbs sold out on the Knights. The young boy hopes Roy will tell him it is not true, but Roy remains silent through his tears.

The Bible warns of gaining the whole world, yet losing your soul. Malamud did not set Roy up to be pitied or viewed as a hapless victim. Instead, through the character of Roy the author exposes the desert of American wealth and ambition. On more than one occasion, *The Natural* is similar to *The Great Gatsby*. Jay Gatsby truly believed life

would be complete when he won over the wealthy socialite, Daisy Buchanon. However, he ends up emptier than ever despite repeated warnings that her life was, for all accounts, a dry, dull and barren one. Malamud gives no indication of where Roy is headed next. One can only hope he rushes into the arms of Iris Lemon, knowing full well that she will love him as no one else has.

Characters

Bump Baily

Like the Whammer, an arrogant, loud-mouthed ball player and the leading hitter in the league. As he did with the Whammer, Roy challenges Bump's top standing in the team. Trying to maintain his reputation, Bump lunges for a ball, bangs into the outfield wall, and dies.

Goodwill Banner

Judge Banner, a "slick trader" and controlling owner of the Knights, offers Roy money to fix a game and thus lose the pennant for the team. The Judge took advantage of Pop's financial troubles and gained from him an extra 10% interest in the Knights. Since then he has tried to push Pop off the team. His forced trades have made him money but have hurt the Knights. When Roy appears in the Judge's office after he strikes out during the last pennant game, he throws the bribe money in the Judge's face. Humiliated and afraid for his safety, the Judge pulls a gun on Roy. After disarming him, Roy beats the Judge with his fists.

Harriet Bird

Harriet Bird is a mysterious, beautiful woman who appears on the train Roy takes to Chicago. Her "nyloned legs [make] Roy's pulses dance." Harriet, however, initially shows more interest in the Whammer, until Roy defeats him during a test of their athletic skills. When Roy tells her his ambition is to be the best in the game, Harriet replies, "Is that all? Isn't there something over and above earthly things□some more glorious meaning to one's life and activities?" When they arrive in Chicago, they meet in a hotel room where Harriet takes out a pistol and shoots Roy in the stomach. She then dances around his prone body, making "muted noises of triumph and despair." The narrator suggests she may be the same mysterious woman who has shot other athletes with silver bullets from a .22 caliber pistol.

Red Blow

Red is Pop's assistant and protector. Red admits, "I would give my right arm if I could get Pop the pennant."

Pop Fisher

Passionate about baseball, sixty-five-year-old Pop Fisher manages and is part owner of the Knights, a New York City baseball team. Depressed about the Knights' lackluster

performance before Roy joins the team, he insists he "shoulda bought a farm." He pines for the old days of baseball and for players who put their heart into the game. Marked as a failure after a missed chance at a run during the World Series, he withstood his shame and played ten more years, compiling a fine record. Now, however, he considers himself jinxed, and looks to Roy to help him break it. Pop becomes a father figure to Roy and tries to keep him out of trouble, especially with his neice, Memo Paris. He also serves as a role model to him. Pop admits he "would give his whole life to win the pennant," but is not ambitious or proud enough to expect to "be the best" and win the series.

Roy Hobbs

Roy Hobbs, the novel's protagonist, faces a test of his moral character. The novel opens with Roy as an innocent young man, whose ambition is to be "the best there ever was in the game." This ambition sometimes creates a callous determination in Roy, as when, during his contest with the Whammer, he "smelled the Whammer's blood and wanted it." His dream is shattered for a time, however, by Harriet Bird who shoots him in a hotel room in Chicago, before he gets a chance to play ball for the Chicago White Sox. He gets a second chance years later, when at the age of thirty-three, he signs with the New York Knights and helps propel them to the top of the league. Roy replaces Bump Baily as one of the leading hitters in the game, but is still "gnawed by a nagging impatience for more."

Red Blow, Pop Fisher's assistant, claims Roy is a "natural" at the game, but not perfect because "he sometimes hit at bad ones." Predicting Roy's eventual fall, Pop adds that he "mistrust[s] a bad hitter. They sometimes make harmful mistakes." Joel Salzberg in his *Dictionary of Literary Biography* article on Malamud, argues that Roy's failure "to transcend his own desires for merely personal gratification" causes him to agree to a bribe and fix the battle for the pennant. Salzberg continues that "despite Hobb's eventual change of heart, his inherent moral weakness and immaturity diminish his effectiveness as a baseball hero and culminate in the fracturing of Wonderboy, as Malamud's flawed hero literally and metaphorically strikes out."

The Judge

See Goodwill Banner.

Doc Knobb

Doc is the team doctor. He tries to help the players relax during their slump through mesmerism and autosuggestion. Roy refuses to participate in the sessions. When Doc tries to hypnotize Pop, he fires him.

Iris Lemon

Iris Lemon becomes a symbol of selfless love in the novel. Her belief in Roy's heroism helps him "regain his power" during his slump. She gives her heart to him, admitting, "I don't think you can do anything for anyone without giving up something of your own." She also tries to guide and advise Roy, explaining that he will learn from his suffering: "it brings us toward happiness. It teaches us to want the right things." Roy rejects her love and concern, however, in his pursuit of his dream to be the best and to gain Memo's love. The news that she is pregnant with his child helps Roy turn his back on Memo and the Judge's offer.

Max Mercy

Max Mercy is a cocky sportswriter, with a "greedy, penetrating, ass kissing voice." To the tenacious reporter, "a private life is a personal insult." He trails Roy doggedly in order to dredge up personal information about him for his readers. Roy tries to avoid him, hoping he will not remember their initial meeting on the train to Chicago or discover details about his past. After Roy strikes out in his final pennant game, Max exposes him in his article, "Suspicion of Hobb's Sellout" and includes a photograph of Roy prone on the floor of the Chicago hotel room, taken after he had been shot by Harriet.

Memo Paris

Memo, Pop's red-headed niece, is a "sad spurned lady, who sat without wifehood in the wive's box behind third base." When Bump dies, she goes "wild with grief" and tells Roy that she is "strictly a dead man's girl." Pop insists "she's unlucky and always has been" and is afraid her bad luck will rub off on Roy. He warns Roy that "she is always dissatisfied and will snarl you up in her trouble in a way that will weaken your strength." Roy does not heed Pop's prediction and starts a relationship with her, which throws him into a slump. Memo's greed and her vindictiveness prompt her to help ensnare Roy in the plot to fix the pennant game. When he confronts her and the Judge after losing, she, like Harriet Bird, shoots him.

Gus Sands

Gus Sands is a "shifty-eyed" gambler with a "magic" glass eye that "sees everything." Gus helps set up the fix for Roy and has a shadowy relationship with Memo that is never fully explained.

Sam Simpson

Sam Simpson, an alcoholic scout for the Chicago Cubs, discovers the young Roy Hobbs and puts a great deal of faith in his abilities and future. Sam becomes a father

figure to the innocent Roy, helping him plan out his every move in order to help insure his success. On the train to Chicago, his concern for Roy emerges. He escorts Roy to his first Major League chance, a position with the Chicago Cubs, but dies suddenly on the train after being injured by Roy's pitch to the Whammer.

Walter Wambold

At thirty-three, the Whammer is the leading hitter of the American League and three times winner of the Most Valuable Player award. Proud and arrogant, the Whammer meets Roy on the train to Chicago and challenges him to a test of their athletic skills during a stop at a carnival. This test gives readers their first glimpse of Roy's exceptional talent and reveals how fleeting fame can be. After Roy strikes him out, the Whammer becomes an "old man" before everyone's eyes and soon fades out of the game.

The Whammer

See Walter Wambold.

Otto Zipp

A fanatically loyal Bump fan, who calls encouragement through a bullhorn. When Bump dies, he stops attending the games for a while, but then returns to harass Roy and forecast his doom.

Themes

Choices and Consequences

The novel's focus on morality incorporates the theme of choices and consequences and the related issue of responsibility. Malamud presents Roy with moral choices in the novel that require attention to his responsibilities as a father, a team member, and a human being. He must choose whether or not to form a lasting relationship with Iris and their child, and ignore his concerns about her being a grandmother. He must choose whether or not he will try to win the pennant for himself or for his team members and Pop Fisher. He also must choose whether or not he will accept a bribe and disgrace the game he loves in order satisfy his materialism and insure his financial security.

Failure

Roy's failure to make moral decisions in the novel cause his downfall. His failure reveals his devotion to the American dream of success that blinds him to the needs of others. A monomaniacal focus on being "the best there ever was in the game" prevents him from becoming a team player and putting the success of the Knights before his own. This self-involvement leads to loneliness and alienation. Another important part of the dream is money. Roy's growing materialism links him with the corrupt and greedy Memo and prompts him to accept a bribe from the Judge, which ultimately leads to his disgrace.

Growth and Development

During the course of the novel Roy does show some moral growth. His desire to win the pennant for Pop emerges alongside his own more selfish need to be the best. By the end of the novel, Roy accomplishes a self-transcendence when he decides to forget about trying to fix the game and determines to take care of Iris and their child. However, this development comes too late to save him.

Good and Evil

Throughout the novel, Roy is caught between the forces of good and evil; these forces wage a battle for his soul. Pop Fisher and Iris Lemon represent the forces of good. Pop struggles to turn Roy into a team player and to focus on community rather than individual success. Iris teaches him that through suffering we learn the important things in life, like love and self-respect. Unfortunately, the symbolically evil characters outnumber the good. Memo, the Judge, Gus Sands, and Max Mercy all try to drag Roy down into the world of corruption. Swayed by the power and success they offer, Roy realizes too late the dangerous consequences of his association with them.

Style

Allegory

The allegorical framework of *The Natural* successfully links historical, mythical, and fictional elements. Malamud borrows historical elements from the "Black Sox" scandal in 1919, when eight members of the Chicago White Sox baseball team were charged with bribery during the World Series. He acquires mythological elements from the Holy Grail legend and the wasteland myth. New York City becomes a moral wasteland in the novel, and Roy Hobbs becomes Perceval the Knight as he searches, under the guidance of Pop Fisher (the Fisher King), for truth and redemption and to restore the team by leading it to a pennant win. In Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field's interview with Bernard Malamud in their *Bernard Malamud: A Collection of Critical Es*says, he explains, "I became interested in myth and tried to use it, among other things, to symbolize and explicate an ethical dilemma of American life."

Realism and Fantasy

The novel's dominant style mixes realism and fantasy. Malamud grounds Roy's experiences in the world of baseball, but at the same time, he also incorporates supernatural elements. On his first day as a Knight, Roy notices that the team seems to be hexed. After Pop tells Roy to knock the cover off the ball, he literally does just that. Gus Sands "knows" how much money Roy has in his pocket and later, Roy makes a rabbit pop out of Memo's dress. Setting details also become fantastic. The landscape Roy passes through on the train to Chicago becomes an "unreal forest" with "tormented trees." Chicago appears as a "shadow-infested, street lamped jungle."

Foreshadowing

Malamud employs foreshadowing as part of the symbolic structure of the novel. Roy's defeat of the Whammer foreshadows a similar end for Bump and highlights Roy' s ambition to be "the best there ever was" in the game. A street beggar, rebuffed by Roy, warns, "You'll get yours." When strip club dancers in devil costumes jab Roy, they forecast the evil "jabs" he will suffer in his dealings with the Judge and Memo.

Historical Context

The Presidential Campaign

Just as Roy Hobb's moral character undergoes a test in *The Natural*, so does the character of many other public figures in America during the 1950s. On September 23,1952, General Eisenhower's running mate, Senator Richard Nixon, appeared on television to defend himself against charges that he took a "slush fund" of $18,000 from California businessmen. Nixon began, "I come before you tonight as a candidate for the vice presidency and as a man whose honesty and integrity have been questioned." He then denied that any of $18,000 was spent for personal use and claimed that the only gift he accepted was a cocker spaniel, named "Checkers" by his daughter Tricia. He explained, "the kids, like all kids, love the dog. Regardless of what they say about it, we are going to keep it." More than one million approving letters and telegrams poured in after this speech. During the ensuing election, Eisenhower and Nixon won 55 percent of the popular vote and 442 electoral votes. Nixon's moral integrity, however, would be questioned continually throughout his political life.

Communist "Witchhunt"

While testifying in front of the Dies Committee on May 22, 1952, playwright Lillian Hellman insisted she was not presently a "Red," but refused to admit whether she had been associated with the Communist party in the past. Hellman claimed she would not answer further questions so as not to "hurt innocent people in order to save myself." She added, "I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions." Many Americans were forced to appear at government hearings and some, including movie stars and film producers, betrayed others or make unsubstantiated accusations about associations and/or involvement in the Communist party.

The Economy

Americans enjoyed a higher standard of living during the 1950s as a direct result of the United States's participation in World War II, which enabled the country to become the most prosperous economic power in the world. This new affluent age prompted an avid materialism in many Americans, as it did in Roy Hobbs. Goods like automobiles and suburban homes became powerful status symbols. Spending money became a popular American pastime for the rich as well as the burgeoning middle class.

The Media

The growing demand for information about famous Americans encouraged reporters, like the fictional Max Mercy, to ferret out personal details for newspapers and tabloids. In 1952, Generoso Pope, Jr. took over the *The National Enquirer* and promised to

expand its emphasis on sensationalism by reporting lurid crimes, gossip about public figures, and sexual escapades. By 1975, Pope had increased his paper's circulation to over four-million copies per week.

The 1952 World Series

The New York Yankees beat the Brooklyn Dodgers four games to two and won the World Series.

The "Black Sox" scandal

In 1919 eight members of the Chicago White Sox baseball team were charged with bribery during the World Series.

Critical Overview

The initial mixed response to *The Natural* focused on the novel's interplay of realism and fantasy. Harry Sylvester in his review in the *New York Times* insists the work is "an unusually fine novel ... What [Malamud] has done is to contrive a sustained and elaborate allegory in which the 'natural' player... is equated with the natural man who, left alone by, say politicians and advertising agencies, might achieve his real fulfillment." He closes his review claiming that *The Natural* is "a brilliant and unusual book."

Not all reviewers, however, found the narrative successful. J. J. Maloney's review in the *New York Herald Tribune Book Review* argues that the novel is a "troubled mixture of fantasy and realism in which the fantasy is fantastic enough, but the realism is not very real." While he appreciates the subject matter, he finds that "it is unfortunate that *The Natural*, which is a serious novel about baseball, should have been written by a man who seems to be completely a captive of the present fashionable cult of the obscure." E, J. Fitzgerald in the *Saturday Review*, offers the following review: "Bernard Malamud has taken some potentially exciting material and gone all mystical and cosmic on it with somewhat unhappy results ... Despite some sharp observation, nice sardonic touches, and an ability to write individually biting scenes, he doesn't quite bring it off." Other reviewers complained that Malamud overused symbolism in the novel.

Many critics, however, appreciated the complex nature of the narrative. While most consider *The Fixer* to be Malamud's best work, critical response to *The Natural* remains positive. Earl Wasserman's essay "The Natural: Malamud's World Ceres" cemented the novel's critical reputation. Wasserman argues that *The Natural* contains all the main themes that can be found in his subsequent fiction. In an exploration of the moral questions the novel raises, Wasserman points out the allegorical and historical connections between Roy Hobbs and Sir Perceval and Shoeless Joe Jackson. Pirjo Ahodas in *Forging a New Self: The Adamic Protagonist and the Emergence of a Jewish-American Author as Revealed through the Novels of Bernard Malamud* digs further beneath the allegorical structure of the novel where she explores Malamud's astute philosophy of composition. Her examination of the novel presents a new interpretation of Malamud's work.

Criticism

- In the following essay, Henningfeld aligns the failure of main character Roy Hobbs with that of Gawain in *Gawain and the Green Knight*.
- Wasserman's essay, hailed as an outstanding example of Malamud's scholarship, provides a thorough analysis of myth as an integral element of *The Natural*.
- In the following excerpt, Turner points out how Malamud's recurrent theme of the conflict between myths and the outer world appears in *The Natural*.

Critical Essay #1

In the following essay, Henningfeld aligns the failure of main character Roy Hobbs with that of Gawain in Gawain and the Green Knight.

Bernard Malamud, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, published short stories in a variety of magazines during the 1940s and 1950s. He published his first novel, *The Natural*, in 1952. That Malamud chose to focus his first novel on baseball surprised and mystified his readers; even in his early short stories, Malamud had generally used Jewish characters, settings, and themes. The early reviews of *The Natural* illustrate the hesitation with which critics approached the novel. Many found the subject matter strange, the allegory strained, and the symbolism difficult.

Consequently, apart from reviews, the novel received little critical attention in the first years after its publication. However, after the publication of *The Assistant* and *The Magic Barrel*, literary scholars returned their attention to Malamud's first novel, looking for patterns that would emerge in his later work.

In spite of renewed interest in the novel, however, critics generally agree that *The Natural* is Bernard Malamud's most uncharacteristic and difficult novel. In his book, *Bernard Malamud*, for example, critic Sidney Richmond calls *The Natural* "one of the most baffling novels of the 1950's."

A number of notable critics have attempted to render the novel less baffling by identifying Malamud's sources. Earl Wasserman, for example, identifies important allusions to the real world of baseball, including events from Babe Ruth's life, the White Sox scandal of 1919, and the shooting of Eddie Waitkus by an insane woman. He also discusses Malamud's use of the Arthurian Grail story, noting that the Grail story serves as "the archetypal fertility myth." In addition, Wasserman applies psychologist Carl Jung's notion of mythic archetypes to help explain Roy's relationship with the female characters in the novel.

Indeed, connecting *The Natural* to Arthurian legend provides one of the most compelling ways to read the novel. Nevertheless, critics who make this connection generally look to Malory as Malamud's source. Certainly, the inclusion of Pop Fisher as the Fisher King and the motif of the Wasteland spring largely from Malory; however, there is another medieval Arthurian romance that seems more closely aligned with *The Natural*. "Honi soit qui mal y pense," says the Judge to Roy: Shame be to the man who has evil in his mind. This is, not coincidentally, also the closing line of *Gawain and the Green Knight*, a long poem written by an anonymous writer around 1400. A closer examination of *Gawain* may offer yet another way to read Malamud's novel.

Gawain and the Green Knight opens in the Christmas court of King Arthur. A huge Green Knight enters and challenges the knights to a game. He offers any knight the chance to strike him with his ax. In exchange, the Green Knight will strike the same

knight with the ax in one year and a day. Gawain rushes to accept the challenge and knocks the head off the Green Knight.

To everyone's surprise, the blow does not kill the Green Knight. Rather, he merely picks up his head and tells Gawain to meet him in a year and a day at the Green Chapel. Keeping his bargain, Gawain sets out a year later. On the way, he visits the castle of Bercilak with whom he enters into another challenge: Bercilak will exchange anything he captures hunting with anything Gawain receives while staying in the castle.

While Bercilak hunts, Lady Bercilak attempts to seduce Gawain. She finally succeeds in persuading Gawain to take her green girdle as protection against the blow he will receive from the Green Knight. Gawain does not turn over the girdle to Bercilak, thus breaking his bargain. When Gawain meets the Green Knight, he discovers that he is actually Bercilak, and that Bercilak knows of his deception. Although Bercilak laughs and sends him on his way with his life, Gawain is mortified by his own moral failure and vows ever to wear the green girdle as a reminder of his own shame.

Just as *The Natural* is only apparently about baseball, *Gawain and the Green Knight* is only apparently an Arthurian romance. That is, while both Malamud and the *Gawain* poet use the baseball story and Arthurian romance respectively to structure their stories, they each have larger issues at stake. These writers use their genres to allegorically explore the sin of pride, the nature of testing, and the inevitability of human failure.

In order to fulfill their larger purposes, these writers appropriate cultural icons to serve in their tales of human imperfection. The *Gawain* poet chooses as his main character Gawain, a native English hero known to medieval audiences for his appearance in countless Arthurian romances. Gawain's reputation is complicated, however; although considered the best and most loyal of Arthur's knights, he is also known as a violent, rash, womanizer.

Likewise, Malamud appropriates incidents from the life of the greatest popular icon of baseball, Babe Ruth, and associates them with Roy Hobbs. Like Gawain, Ruth's reputation is complicated. His prowess on the field is uncontested; yet he is also known as a rash, sometimes violent womanizer, and a man of huge sensory appetite. By associating Ruth with Roy, Malamud offers a problematic hero, a man of great prowess, great appetites, and great potential for moral failure.

Further, both Roy Hobbs and Gawain strive to be the best in their respective games. However, it is not always clear what has more value to the characters: being the best, or seeming the best. When Harriet Bird asks the young Roy what he hopes to accomplish, he replies, "Sometimes when I walk down the street I bet people will say there goes Roy Hobbs, the best there ever was in the game." Clearly, it is the reputation that motivates Roy. Likewise, Gawain is reputed to be the greatest of all knights. When the temptress Lady Bercilak attempts to seduce Gawain, her tactic is to remind him of his reputation. The appeal to his pride leads him ever closer to his fall.

Because of their preoccupation with their reputations, neither Gawain nor Roy correctly assesses the tests to which each is put. Gawain assumes that the Green Knight tests his courage and Lady Bercilak tests his lovemaking. Roy assumes that his test is to prove himself on the field with the Knights and in bed with Memo. Neither understands that what is truly at stake is honor and truth.

Perhaps not surprisingly, each story has female characters who act falsely. As *Gawain and the Green Knight* opens, we discover that Gawain is Guinevere's champion. Just as Gawain has cultural currency outside the immediate tale, so does Guinevere. Any reader of Arthurian romance knows that she will betray Arthur by committing adultery with Lancelot and consequently will bring down the court of Camelot. Further, at Bercilak's castle, Gawain encounters both an old hag (whom we later discover is none other than Morgan la Fay, the architect of the entire Green Knight scheme) and Lady Bercilak. Although it appears to Gawain that Lady Bercilak is betraying her husband, she is rather working in concert with her husband to test Gawain.

In *The Natural*, Harriet Bird also hides her motivation for taking an interest in Roy. Many critics have identified Harriet with the testing women of Arthurian romance, or with Morgan la Fay. Certainly, Roy's infatuation with this false woman nearly costs him his life. Further, Memo's collusion with Gus Sands is reminiscent of Lady Bercilak's collusion with Lord Bercilak. Memo tempts Roy with sex and food, and finally with money. She offers him life, a life with her, if he will accept the Judge's money to throw the game. Roy accepts the money only to discover that Memo's motivation is far different from what he assumed. Her desire is to ruin him, not wed him.

In each story, the protagonist attaches himself to the false women and turns away from the true women. As Gawain prepares to leave Camelot in search of the Green Knight, he has the image of the Virgin Mary, "the high Queen of heaven," placed on the inner part of his shield. He loses sight of his true patroness, however, in the arms of Lady Bercilak. Roy finds a true woman in Iris Lemon, who miraculously rises from the crowd and seems to be the reason Roy breaks free from his batting slump. However, although Roy finds Iris to be a full and fertile woman, someone who would be true to him, he turns away from her when she speaks of her joy in mothering and grandmothering. Rather than remaining true to Iris, Roy rejects her, and renews his attachment to the false Memo.

The failures of these protagonists stem from their inability to learn from their past mistakes. Gawain's rash acceptance of the Green Knight's challenge is repeated in his rash acceptance of Lord Bercilak's game, and although he features himself a "true" knight, he finds himself a false one. Likewise, Roy nearly loses his life at the hands of a false woman early in his life, and then repeats the mistake some fifteen years later. As Malamud writes, "He thought, I never did learn anything out of my past life, now I have to suffer again."

Both Gawain and Roy suffer public humiliation at the close of their stories. Gawain confesses his cowardice and falsehood to the court, and vows to wear the green girdle

as an emblem of his own failure. Roy, on the other hand, discovers that his story has been published in the newspaper for the entire community to read:

A boy thrust a newspaper at him. He wanted to say no but had no voice. The headlines screamed, "Suspicion of Hobbs' Sellout□Max Mercy" ... And there was also a statement by the baseball commissioner. "If this alleged report is true, that is the last of Roy Hobbs in organized baseball. He will be excluded from the game and all his records forever destroyed." Roy handed the paper back to the kid. "Say it ain't true, Roy." When Roy looked into the boy's eyes he wanted to say it wasn't, but couldn't, and he lifted his hands to his face and wept many bitter tears.

By the time the Gawain poet wrote *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, Gawain, as a major hero of Arthurian romance, had already been supplanted by the French import, Sir Lancelot. Yet readers of Arthurian romance know that Lancelot, too, proved false. Although he was granted a glimpse of the Grail, Lancelot died a failure, supplanted by yet another, younger hero, Galahad. Within the *Gawain* poet's choice to use Gawain as his main character inheres a final message: heroes striving for perfection will inevitably fail, and be replaced by yet other heroes.

Likewise, Roy Hobbs' beginning is also his end. His saga begins as he replaces Walt "the Whammer" Whambold and ends with his own replacement by Herman Youngberry, the rising pitcher who strikes him out. As Richman argues, "*The Natural* concludes, therefore, on a note of total loss." The failure of Roy Hobbs (and of Gawain) is not a failure of courage, but a failure of morals. Roy becomes a kind of Everyman, who fails the tests set before him, and who ends, inevitably, flawed.

Source: Diane Andrews Henningfeld, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 1998. Henningfeld is a professor at Adrian College and has written for a variety of academic journals and educational publishers.

Critical Essay #2

Wasserman's essay, hailed as an outstanding example of Malamud's scholarship, provides a thorough analysis of myth as an integral element of The Natural.

The Doges of Venice dropped a ring into the Adriatic to renew annually its marriage to their city and to assure that the sea be propitious. The British monarch ceremonially opens the annual session of Parliament that it may undertake its care of the kingdom. In the United States, the President annually sanctifies baseball by throwing the first ball of the season into the field; and, having received its presidential commission, baseball proceeds to its yearly task of working the welfare of the national spirit. The wonder is that we do not have a whole library of significant baseball fiction, since so much of the American spirit has been seriously poured into the game and its codes until it has a life of its own that affects the national temperament. Just as a personal indiscretion can topple an English government, the White Sox scandal strained the collective American conscience, and Babe Ruth's bellyache was a crisis that depressed the national spirit nearly as much as the bombing of Pearl Harbor infuriated it. Like any national engagement, baseball, especially in that form that Ring Lardner called the "World Serious," has had not only its heroic victories and tragedies, but also its eccentricities that express aspects of the American character and have become part of our folklore: Vance, Fewster, and Herman, all piled up on third base; Hilda (the Bell) Chester, the Dodger fan; Rabbit Maranville's penchant for crawling on window ledges, especially in the rain; Wilbert Robinson's attempt to catch a grapefruit dropped from a plane; Chuck Hosteller's historic fall between third and home when he could have won the sixth game of the '45 Series.

These are not merely like the materials of Malamud's *The Natural*; the items mentioned are among its actual stuff. For what Malamud has written is a novel that coherently organizes the rites of baseball and many of its memorable historic episodes into the epic inherent in baseball as a measure of man, as it once was inherent in Homeric battles or chivalric tournaments or the Arthurian quest for the Grail. Coming, like Babe Ruth, from an orphanage, Roy Hobbs, unknown pitcher of nineteen on his way to a try-out with the Cubs, strikes out the aging winner of the Most Valuable Player award and then, like Eddie Waitkus in 1949, is shot without apparent motive by a mad girl in her Chicago hotel room. The try-out never takes place, and the years that follow are degrading failures at everything. But at thirty-four, having switched□as Ruth did□from pitcher to fielder and prodigious batter, Roy joins a New York team and, with his miraculous bat, lifts it from the cellar into contention for the league championship. Like Ruth, too, his homerun cheers a sick boy into recovery, and a monumental bellyache sends him to a hospital, as it did Ruth in 1925, and endangers the battle for the pennant. Like the White Sox of 1919, Roy and another player sell out to Gus, an Arnold Rothstein gambler, to throw the crucial game for the pennant, and the novel ends with a heartbroken boy pleading, as legend claims one did to Shoeless Joe Jackson of the traitorous White Sox, "Say it ain't true, Roy." In fact, nearly all the baseball story derives from real events, and to this extent the novel is a distillation of baseball history as itself the distillation of American life: its opportunities for heroism, the elevating or dispiriting

influence of the hero on his community, the moral obligations thrust on him by this fact, and the corruption available to him. By drawing on memorable real events, Malamud has avoided the risk of connived allegory that lurks in inventing a fiction in order to carry a meaning. Instead, he has rendered the lived events of the American game so as to compel it to reveal what it essentially is, the ritual whereby we express the psychological nature of American life and its moral predicament. Pageant history is alchemized into revelatory myth.

But the clean surface of this baseball story, as a number of critics have noticed, repeatedly shows beneath its translucency another myth of another culture's heroic ritual by which man once measured the moral power of his humanness□another and yet the same, so that Roy's baseball career may slip the bonds of time and place and unfold as the everlastingly crucial story of man. Harriet, mad maimer of champions, conceives of Roy's strike-out of the Whammer as a "tourney"; Roy's obscure, remote origin and clumsy ignorance have their archetypal form in the youth of Sir Perceval; the New York team he ultimately joins is the "Knights"; and one opponent, sick at the thought of pitching to him, sees him "in full armor, mounted on a black charger ... coming at him with a long lance." Of the mountain of gifts Roy receives on his Day at the ballpark, one is a white Mercedes-Benz, which he drives triumphantly around the field and stops before the box of Memo, coldly disdainful lady of courtly love, to ask for a date. By subsuming the chivalric tourney and the Arthurian quest, baseball expands beyond time, and Roy's baseball career becomes, not merely representative, but symbolic of man's psychological and moral situation. Because of the trompe-l'oeil, Roy at bat is every quester who has had to shape his own character to fulfill his goal, whether it be the Grail or the league pennant. By drawing his material from actual baseball and yet fusing it with the Arthurian legend, Malamud sets and sustains his novel in a region that is both real and mythic, particular and universal, ludicrous melodrama and spiritual probing□Ring Lardner and Jung.

Malamud's syncretism of baseball and the Arthurian legend ... invites a further consideration of the novel in these terms: the psychological, moral, and communal needs of the baseball champion□the American hero□to gain access to the "sources of Life." Roy long since had made his own bat out of a tree, a sort of Ygdresel, and named it "Wonderboy," and a miraculous bat it is, with an energy of its own. Derived from nature's life and shaped by Roy for the game in which he is determined to be the hero, it flashes in the sun, blinds his opponents with its golden splendor, and crashes the ball with thunder and lightning. It is, in other words, the modern Excalibur and Arthurian lance. The phallic instrument is the raw vitality and fertility he has drawn from the universal "sources of Life." After Roy's fruitful night with Memo, Bump says to him, "I hear you had a swell time, wonderboy," and during Roy's slump Wonderboy sags like a baloney.

With Wonderboy, Roy joins the dispirited last-place Knights in a remarkably dry season, and the manager, Pop Fisher, who laments, "I shoulda been a farmer" and whose heart "feels as dry as dirt," suffers, as his form of the Fisher King's affliction, athlete's foot on his hands. Even the water fountain is broken, yielding only rusty water. But when Wonderboy crashes the ball, its thunder cracks the sky, the rains leave the players

ankle-deep, the brown field turns green, and Pop Fisher's affliction vanishes. When Roy first appeared and merely entered the batting cage, the flagging Knights suddenly "came to life." The Quester has brought his virility to the Waste Land, and, like Jung's mana-personality, he restores the dying father-king. Roy, the questing Knight, by access to the sources of life, has restored virility to his community and the vegetative process to nature. In the radical sense of the word, he is the "natural."

The Grail vegetation myth has been precisely translated into its modern American mode and is carefully sustained in this baseball story. The "Pre-Game" section, in which young Roy is shot, takes places in early spring, prior to the baseball season. When the story is resumed years later, Roy joins the Knights in summer, a third of the baseball season having passed; and with Roy's failure in the last crucial game the novel ends in a wintry autumn to complete the fertility cycle inherent in both the Grail Quest and the schedule of the baseball season. The traditional Arthurian dwarf who taunts the hero and beats him with a scourge takes his place in the bleachers as the dwarf Otto Zipp, who reviles Roy, honks a Harpo Marx horn at him, contributes razor blades on Roy's Day with the advice, "Here, cut your throat." This stunted growth, who also embodies a good deal of Homer's Thersites, is that portion of the community envious of and antagonistic to the hero's regenerative potency that spreads to the entire team, although Zipp had worshipped Roy's predecessor Bump, whose sterile triumphs were wholly his own while the team slumped; and Zipp exults over Roy's downfall with the empty gesture of hitting a phantom ball for a visionary homerun. Merlin the Magician and Morgan le Fay have evolved into the league of Gus the "Supreme Bookie," who plays the percentages, and, Memo, Morganatic in every sense, the temptress for whom Roy sells out. Because of the complementary parts played in King Arthur's life by Morgan, who works for evil and slays knights, and the Lady of the Lake, who works for good and beneficently aids them, Arthurian scholars have claimed they were originally one. Correspondingly, of Roy's two women, red-haired Memo is customarily clad in black, and black-haired Iris, complementarily, in red; and it is Iris who knows Lake Michigan intimately and whose presence restores the power of Wonderboy, his Excalibur. Like the Grail fertility hero, Roy displaces the current hero whose power has waned. In the "Pre-Game" section, like Perceval slaying the Red Knight, he succeeds to the hero's office by striking out the thirty-three-year-old Whammer, thrice chosen the Most Valuable Player, who now knows he is, "in the truest sense of it, out" and trots off, an "old man." In the main narrative Roy gains his life-giving position with the Knights by including the death of Bump, who, although the leading league hitter, has transmitted no potency to his team (Le Roi est mort, vive le Roy.) And at the novel's end thirty-four-year-old Roy's spiritual death is his being struck out by the young pitcher whose yearning, like Pop Fisher's, is to be a farmer, just as years before Roy had struck out the aging Whammer. Yet at one point Roy confuses the Whammer with Bump, at another sees Bump when he looks in his own mirror, and later dresses exactly like the Whammer; and when Roy succeeds the dead Bump the newspapers marvel at the identity of the two in body and manners. For in fact they are all the same fertility hero, displacing each other with each new seasonal resurgence and decline of potency. In nature, quite independently of moral failures, life and strength are forever renewed.

Besides the hero's charismatic power to restore the maimed Fisher King and bring the fertile waters to the Waste Land, Arthurians have added that the characteristics of the seasonal Grail hero are possession of a talisman, like Excalibur or Wonderboy, representing "the lightning and fecundity of the earth," and "marriage to the vegetation goddess." In every respect, then, Roy seems to fulfill his role as fecundity hero, except for the marriage, despite his yearning for Memo and his passing affair with Iris. His tragic failure therefore is linked with this omission; and the search for the reason takes us to the core of the novel, where we must seek the psychic and moral flaw within the fertility theme□which is embodied in the Arthurian Grail myth□which has been assimilated to the baseball story□which is purified out of actual events.

In the night of defeat Roy performs the ritual of psychic mourning. In the now parched earth he digs a grave for his split bat, his shattered vital power, and, wishing it could take root and become a living tree again, he hesitates over the thought of wetting the earth with water from the fountain. But he knows the futility□it would only leak through his fingers. Because Roy's failure to be the hero is his failure to accept the mature father role, it is properly a boy who ends the novel, begging hopefully in disillusionment, "Say it ain't true, Roy." More was lost by Shoeless Joe Jackson than merely the honor of the White Sox or even the honor of the national game. For in the boy is each new American generation hopefully pleading that those on whom it depends will grow mature through the difficult love that renders the life of the human community the self-sacrificing and yet self-gaining purpose of their vital resources; that they not, selfishly seeking the womb-like security of disengagement, evade the slime that human existence must deposit within, but willingly and heroically plunge into it, with all its horror, to release for others its life-giving power.

Baseball has given Malamud a ritualistic system that cuts across all our regional and social differences. The assimilation of the Arthurian myth defines the historical perspective, translating baseball into the ritual man has always been compelled to perform in one shape or another; and the Jungian psychology with which Malamud interprets the ritual locates the central human problem precisely where it must always be, in one's human use of one's human spirit.

Source: Earl R. Wasserman, "The Natural: *World Ceres* " in *Bernard Malamud and the Critics*, edited by Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field, New York University Press, 1970, pp. 45-65.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Turner points out how Malamud's recurrent theme of the conflict between myths and the outer world appears in The Natural.

The Natural is a curiosity on two counts: first because it is one of the very few "non-Jewish" works of the author; and second because it makes use of a supposedly unadaptable subject for serious fiction□baseball. It is perhaps this latter factor which has contributed most substantially to the novel's wary critical reception. Baseball has resisted the best efforts of American writers to elevate it to a sufficient height to sustain a serious work, though several writers, notably Ring Lardner, Charles Einstein, and Mark Harris, have correctly seen it as a microcosm of American life. The uniqueness of Malamud's treatment derives from the fact that he has been able to invest this boy's game with tragi-comic qualities as opposed, say, to Lardner or Harris, who treat it in largely comic fashion.

Malamud's successful use of baseball in this novel has been commonly attributed to his use of myth, particularly the myth of the hero, and almost every critic who has troubled himself with *The Natural* has dutifully and sometimes painstakingly pointed out the various mythic parallels. Malamud, they observe, has equated the baseball hero of his novel with mythic heroes of the past so that the actions of Roy Hobbs, left fielder for the New York Knights, take on a significance far larger than that guaranteed even the most glorious of sweaty demigods.

Despite the ease with which critics have exposed the mythic underpinnings of *The Natural* (or perhaps because of it), there has persisted a sense of uneasiness about the book, as if Malamud were somehow cheating by using myths in such a fashion. So Norman Podhoretz [in *Commentary*, March, 1953]:

All this amounts to a commendable effort to say that baseball is much more important than it seems to be. Using Homer, however, is not only too easy a way to do it, but also a misconception of what intelligence and senousness of purpose demand from a writer

.

Then too, the mythic parallels themselves seem to lead nowhere, and it has seemed almost as if the use of myth was an end in itself as indeed the critics themselves have made it: to assert the presence of myth in a literary work is not necessarily to explain why it is there, and this has unhappily been too often the case with recent criticism; it is as though finding buried traces of myths were but a refinement of the symbol archeology earned on in the journals for the past thirty-five years. Podhoretz and Marcus Klein can tell us what myths are being used where, but they fail to tell us to what effect. Podhoretz can even suggest that baseball has its own mythology:

Mr. Malamud is truer to the inherent purpose of his book when he finds the elements of myth, not in ancient Greece, but in the real history of baseball

.

Yet he fails to follow up this potentially valuable suggestion as have all other critics who have dealt with *The Natural*. To heed it is to be taken straight to the heart of this novel, and perhaps in some measure to the heart of Malamud's fiction as a whole.

All modern heroic myths are but redactions of the ur-myth of the hero as this has been dissected and outlined by Otto Rank, Lord Raglan, and Joseph Campbell. That myth is too well known to require reproduction here, but anyone can see, for example, that the Horatio Alger story is a form of the heroic myth and that, existing as it does in a democratic and predominantly Protestant society, the story has taken on the characteristics of that society while dropping those features of the old heroic myths which are culturally uncongenial: its aristocratic and sexual overtones. Similarly, it can be seen that the myth of the baseball hero is an amalgam of the heroic myth and its democratic offspring, the Horatio Alger story:

1) the hero is from undistinguished parentage and has a rural background;

2) the hero's father teaches him to play baseball, perhaps thereby fulfilling his own unrealized boyhood
ambitions,

3) the hero is discovered in his rural haunts by a hard working scout;

4) the hero is transported to the city where he finds life frightening and bewildering; he encounters difficulty in convincing the team "brass" that he has the necessary talent,

5) the hero finally gets his chance and displays prodigious talents (fastest fastball, longest home run);

6) the hero rises to stardom, has a "day" at the stadium and inarticulately expresses his humble thanks;

7) everything after the hero's day savors somewhat of anti-climax, his talents gradually decay, and he eventually retires.

Roy Hobbs, Malamud's hero, is one who lives and finds his meaning only within this mythology and this is his tragic weakness. He is obsessed with a sense of mission which is nothing less than to fill out the heroic proportions which the pattern casts for those who would follow it. Roy's lack of any values outside the mythology is one of the major sources of the tragicomic quality which Malamud has been able to impart to the novel: Roy's refusal to think in any terms other than those of baseball is, to begin with, comic, and he becomes the prototypical goon athlete immortalized in our literature by

Lardner and James Thurber. So this passage in which Harriet Bird sizes Roy up as a future victim of her sexually-tinged desire to murder famous athletes:

Had he ever read Homer?

Try as he would he could only think of four bases and not a book. His head spun at her allusions. He found her lingo strange with all the college stuff and hoped she would stop it because he wanted to talk about baseball

.

And:

"What will you hope to accomplish, Roy?"

He had already told her but after a minute remarked, "Sometimes when I walk down the street I bet people will say there goes Roy Hobbs, the best there ever was in the game."

She gazed at him with touched and troubled eyes "Is that all?"

He tried to penetrate her question. Twice he had answered it and still she was unsatisfied. He couldn't be sure what she expected him to say. "Is that all," he repeated. "What more is there?"

"Don't you know?"

"Isn't there something over and above earthly things□some more glorious meaning to one's life and activities?"

"In baseball."

Fifteen years and worlds of agonies later Roy is still held in the grip of the mythology, still refusing to think or act outside of it. Now, however, Roy's refusal to see outside the myth is not comic, but rather tragic. It is so because we are here witness to the spectacle of a man who has given his Me for that myth, and because myth cannot be defended entirely from within; it must be defended by a hero who sees both inside and outside it. Still, there is another chance for Roy to save the myth through an acceptance of the love of Iris Lemon. Such an acceptance would prepare him to confront the world of objective reality while at the same time remaining true to baseball's mythology: Iris is in the real world but she still believes in heroes. Here Roy's refusal of Iris' love guarantees his inevitable (Natural) failure. This time when Roy reveals in conversation with a woman (Iris) his tragic limitation it is no longer a laughing matter, his vision has taken on a kind of Oedipal blindness:

"I wanted everything." His voice boomed out of the silence.

She waited.

"I had a lot to give to this game."

"Life?"

"Baseball. If I had started out fifteen years ago like I tried to, I'da been king of them all by now."

"The king of what?"

"The best in the game," he said impatiently.

She sighed deeply. "You're so good now."

"I'da been better. I'da broke most every record there was."

"Does that mean so much to you?" "Sure," he answered.

"But I don't understand why you should make so much of that. Are your values so□."

Roy's values are "so□" for this is what distinguishes the hero from ordinary people like Iris. A hero is someone who acts within and for a mythology□national, regional, occupational□even when to do so is to jeopardize his very existence. Malamud's ironic vision is that such an insulated hero cannot possibly win out.

What continually threatens the existence of the hero and of the mythology which he serves is what Wallace Stevens called the "pressure of reality." It is always clear that mythologies are in some ways divorced from the real world, though what they contain may be directives for solving the world's problems. Here the fading, sagging ball park where the Knights play their home games functions as metaphor for the other-worldly quality of mythology ... Inside the park gates one is transported to another world filled with grotesque devotees, magic bats, and super-sized demigods. The drama of the hero's story comes out of the conflict between the mythology within, which the hero acts, and the pressures of reality, which work always to force the hero into a betrayal of his mythology.

In *The Natural* the pressure of reality is represented by the unholy alliance of Judge Goodwill Banner, the Knights' owner; Gus Sands, the Supreme Bookie; and Memo Paris, Roy's love The sportswriter, Max Mercy (whose name, like that of the Judge, has its obvious irony), is their press agent. The Judge has a completely cynical, ruthless attitude toward the game. He is in it to make money, and Malamud skillfully contrasts him with his co-owner, Pop Fisher, who manages the team and subscribes wholly to the mythology of the game. Similarly, Gus Sands has no reverence for the game itself. To him it is simply "action" on which to bet. Because of the death of her hero, Bump Baily, Memo Paris has disavowed her belief in the mythology and she now works with the Judge and Gus to destroy the hero

The hero must meet the challenge to his mythology head-on, and it is one of the central ironies of the novel that Roy Hobbs meets this challenge as he lies bewildered and enfeebled in a hospital bed. The doctor has told Roy that he must quit baseball or risk a heart attack, and Memo, whom Roy covets, has made it clear that she is to be had only for the kind of money which comes to a famous athlete. Thus when Judge Banner appears at the bedside to bribe Roy into throwing the play-off game, the hero is at his lowest ebb. Faced with his physical predicament and an uncertain financial future, the hero succumbs. He has at last seen outside the mythology, but in so doing he loses his grip on the mythology itself.

When in the midst of the play-off game Roy attempts to reattach himself to the mythology he cannot do so. Wonderboy, the magic bat, breaks in two, for once this hero has seen and acted outside the mythology□acted, that is, against it□he can never again act with it; his limited vision will not permit him to. Thus, the gates of Roy's Eden are closed forever, and there remains for him nothing to do but drag himself up the stairs to the Judge's darkened tower to collect his reward.

This final scene is the novel's best, for in it Malamud makes the reader fully aware of the tragedy of Roy's lost herohood. Divorced forever from the mythology which gave his life meaning, Roy can only beat up Gus Sands and the Judge, tear open the envelope containing the bribe money, and shower it over the Judge's head. The end for this failed hero is to enter the real world and to find it a sordid and bitter place:

When he hit the street he was exhausted. He had not shaved, and a black beard gripped his face He felt old and grimy. He stared into the faces of people he passed along the street but nobody recognized him.

"He coulda been a king," a woman remarked to a man.

So with modern man: divorced forever from the mythologies of his past, he finds himself alone, on the street, adrift in a new and mythless world.

And yet, of course, this is not the end for the Malamud hero; it is merely the first installment. Roy Hobbs is the hero of a mythology, but ultimately he fails that mythology by his inability to see and act beyond it without destroying it for himself. The mythology of baseball is what keeps the game alive in the hearts of its fans. Without that mythology the game would disintegrate into a jumble of meaningless statistics and facts. Yet conditions change, and the mythology of baseball must be continually defended on new grounds. What this latest baseball hero should have done is to accept Iris Lemon's love, and, sustained by this new and vitalizing outside force, resist temptation and expose the Judge and Gus who represent the greed and corruption which now threaten baseball's mythology. In this way the hero would have remained true to his mythology while at the same time defending it against hostile forces. But Roy Hobbs, as we have seen, is too limited a hero to assume this difficult stance; for him it is impossible to act within a mythology and at the same time see beyond it so as to defend it. For him it must be one thing or the other.

Source: Frederick W. Turner in, "Myth Inside and Out *The Natural* in *Bernard Malamud and the Critics*, New York University Press, edited by Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field, 1970, pp. 109-119.

Adaptations

The Natural was adapted as a film by Barry Levinson, starring Robert Redford as Roy Hobbs, Robert Duvall as Max Mercy, Glenn Close as Iris Games, and Kim Basinger as Memo Paris, Tri-Star Pictures, 1984.

Topics for Further Study

Research the "Black Sox" scandal that involved eight Chicago White Sox players charged with bribery in the 1919 World Series. Compare the events surrounding the scandal with Roy's experiences in the novel.

Research the mythological quest for the Holy Grail. What symbolic elements of this quest appear in the novel? What purpose do they serve?

How is the American love of baseball illustrated in the novel?

Focus on Malamud's development of Roy Hobbs as a character. Is he a static or a dynamic character? Does he gain any knowledge about himself and/or of his world by the end of the novel?

Compare and Contrast

1950s: Money poured into defense spending during the 1940s helped to create a successful military-industrial complex that bolstered the economy in the 1950s. Companies produced goods that enabled them to become prosperous and hire more workers who would in turn buy more goods.

Today: A healthy economic forecast causes the stock market to soar and pays huge dividends to investors.

1950s: Critics attack Senator Richard Nixon's moral character when rumors of illegal funds surface during the 1952 presidential campaign.

Today: Critics attack President Clinton's moral character when rumors of illegal funds, shady business dealings, and sexual improprieties surface.

1950s: Baseball is America's favorite pastime. Salaries for top athletes soar into the thousands.

Today: Frustrated by rising ticket prices, the 1994 strike, and players' salaries soaring into the millions, many fans become disillusioned with the game.

1950s: The public clamors for news about the personal lives of actors and athletes.

Today: The public clamors for news about the personal lives of actors, athletes, politicians, and royalty. Public figures hounded by the press lash out over their lack of privacy. "Average" Americans appear on nationally televised talk shows reporting sordid details of their lives.

What Do I Read Next?

Acts of King Arthur and His Noble Nights, John Steinbeck's 1962 nonfiction work. Steinbeck re-tells the Arthurian legends and Grail romances.

Jim Bouton's nonfiction best seller, *Ball Four*, published in 1990, is a funny and revealing diary of one of his seasons playing Major League ball.

Eight Men Out: The Black Sox and the 1919 World Series, a nonfiction book by Eliot Asinof and Stephen Jay Gould, analyzes the events surrounding the famous baseball scandal.

In *Shoeless Joe*, W. P. Kinsella (1996) presents the game of baseball as a metaphor for life. The novel was adapted into the film, *Field of Dreams*.

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Earl Wasserman, "'The Natural': Malamud's World Ceres," in *Centennial Review*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 1965, pp. 438-60.

For Further Study

Jonathon Baumbach, "The Economy of Love: The Novels of Bernard Malamud," in *The Kenyon Review*, Vol. 25, No. 3, summer, 1963, pp. 438-57
In a classic essay on Malamud's novels, Baumbach provides an excellent overview of the use of myth in *The Natural*.

Ronald V. Evans, "Malamud's *The Natural*," in *Exphcator*, Vol 48., No. 3, spring, 1990, pp. 224-26.
Provides a Jungian reading of the novel.

Sheldon J. Hershinow, *Bernard Malamud*, Frederick Ungar Publishing Co, 1980.
Reinforces the identification of *The Natural* with the Arthurian Legend, adding that the theme of the novel is the inevitable suffering of human bemgs.

Patric Keats, "Hall of Famer Ed Delahanty: A Source for Malamud's *The Natural*," in *American Literature*, Vol.62, No 1, March, 1990, pp 102-04.
Focuses on Malamud's treatment of Roy Hobbs and finds an historical parallel in the life of Edward "Big Ed" James.

Robert C. Lidston, "Malamud's *The Natural*: An Arthurian Quest in the Big Leagues" in *West Virginia University Philological Papers*, Vol 27, 1981, pp. 75-81.
Compares the novel to the Arthurian romance, especially in its linking of baseball and the quest theme.

James M. Mellard, "Malamud's Novels: Four Versions of Pastoral," in *Critique*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 1967, pp. 5-19.
Contends that *The Natural* embodies "the pastoral fertility myths of dying and reviving gods, of youthful heroes replacing the aged, of the son replacing the father." These archetypes provide the structure of the novel, according to this critic.

Ellen Pifer, "Malamud's Unnatural *The Natural*," in *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, Vol. 7, No. 2, fall, 1988, pp. 138-52.
Explores the moral character of Roy Hobbs.

Norman Podhoretz, "Achilles in Left Field," in *Commentary*, Vol. 15, No 3, March, 1953, pp 321-26.
Makes connections between Roy Hobbs and the Young Unknown from medieval romance, as well as Achilles from the *Illiad*, but concludes that Malamud's novel ultimately fails due to Roy's shallowness.

Sidney Richman, *Bernard Malamud*, Twayne Publishers, 1966.
Provides an excellent introductory study of Malamud and his major works. In his chapter on *The Natural* he undertakes a systematic explication of the allegory, the themes, and the characters.

Joel Salzberg, *Bernard Malamud: A Reference Guide*, G. K Hall Co, 1985.
An extremely useful annotated bibliography of scholarship on Bernard Malamud.

Darnel Walden, "Bernard Malamud, an American Jewish Writer and His Universal Heroes," in *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, Vol. 7, No 2, fall, 1988, pp 153-61.
Examines Malamud's treatment of the hero in *The Assistant*, *The Fixer*, and *The Natural* and shows how each is related to the Jewish experience.

Earl R. Wasserman, "*The Natural* World Ceres," in *Bernard Malamud and the Critics*, edited by Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field, New York University Press, 1970, pp. 45-66.
Wasserman connects *The Natural* with the tradition of the baseball story, the Arthurian Grail quest, and Jungian psychology, arguing that the novel "is the broad formulation of Malamud's world of meaning." Consequently, *The Natural* is a necessary starting point for any student of Malamud's fiction.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book
The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's "For Students" Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other

characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria
The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years.
Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas.

From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

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- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name.
- Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch"
would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
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- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.

- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).
- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

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