

The best there ever was? Reappraising Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*.

The Natural, published in 1952, is Bernard Malamud's first novel and one that is sometimes considered to sit rather uneasily with his subsequent body of fiction. As a mid-twentieth-century Jewish-American novelist, Malamud is most often thought about alongside writers such as Saul Bellow and, later, Philip Roth, as a pioneer of an exuberant use of demotic language that marks their work with an excitable linguistic timbre that helped to produce an idea of what it might mean to be Jewish-American. The overflowing comedy routines of Jackie Mason and unrelenting dialogue in Woody Allen films continue the same lineage: to be Jewish-American is to be invested in, and psychically identify with, an edgy and highly-strung, neurotic, language. In his subsequent work, Malamud explored in great depth the social and psychic condition of "Jewishness" in the United States and how that, in turn, influenced what it might mean to be American, culturally, ethnically and linguistically. Yet, as Sidney Richman observes, in *The Natural* "nowhere is there a Jew or a mention of one" (28). Instead, Malamud offers up a baseball novel, constructed out of the "scraps of Homer's Troy, Malory's Britain, and Ring Lardner's New York" (28-29). This is not to say that the Jewish-American subject matter that he was later to develop does not make an appearance in *The Natural*. In fact, as Marcia Gealy has argued, the Hasidic theme of suffering for salvation is more than hinted at, but, nevertheless, it is very much underplayed in comparison to his subsequent work.

In this article, I assess the position of *The Natural* within its context of literary sport fiction, Malamud's own subsequent work, and the work of other significant novelists who followed him and explored the place of sport in American culture. I argue that Malamud's novel occupies a space of ambivalence, a fulcrum between the past and the future in both its linguistic style and its approach to sport as a literary concern. Occupying a position as a

Janus-type figure, looking back and to the future at the same time, Malamud's debut novel has attracted a significant critical commentary from scholars of Jewish-American fiction and those interested in sport fiction as a genre. A further significant strand of literary criticism has focused on Malamud's abundant use of mythic and historical references that offer a rich source of antecedents, literary and sporting, that burst out of the page in a rowdy explosion of allusive delights. After reviewing this already well-trodden ground, I turn my attention to a theme that has been under-developed in previous criticism – the structure and style that Malamud adopts that situates the novel as a liminal site between fantasy and reality, drawing on Freudian psychoanalytic interpretations and Macbethian allusions to unpack the “uncanny” narrative in order to consider how Malamud's exploration of the Freudian unconscious might offer clues to the novel's enduring capacity to speak through the ages to a twenty-first century reader. In a personal reading of the novel, I argue that the text resists an easy positioning within the literary canon but, in refusing easy categorization, welcomes new interpretations that reveal as much about the reader and our present time as it does about Malamud and the past.

Literary Context

The Natural needs to be located within a number of different literary traditions. Looking back, it can be placed in a long line of sports novels that commenced a hundred years earlier with the publication in Britain of Thomas Hughes' evocation of an idyllic, if robust, middle-class childhood, *Tom Brown's Schooldays* (1857), of which the influence on the development of team sports on both sides of the Atlantic should not be underestimated.ⁱ Not only did *Tom Brown* help to shape a sporting culture, it also initiated a literary tradition of some notable significance: the schoolboy sport fiction novel that proliferated toward the end of the nineteenth century. According to Michael Oriard, the “first known American novel devoted exclusively to sports was Noah Brook's *Our Baseball Club*, written in 1884” (27).

However, by far the most popular of these “dime novels” was the Frank Merriwell series, mostly penned by Gilbert Patten under the *nom-de-plume* of “Burt L. Standish,” and which ran for twenty years from 1896, producing well over 200 book-length editions, and in which the “athlete hero” became a staple pulp literary figure.

In his would-be athlete hero protagonist, Roy Hobbs, and his regular use of dime novel style, Malamud consciously draws upon this early sports fiction heritage in *The Natural*. But in Malamud’s more skilful hands, he adopts a more ironic stance toward his subject matter than his pulpy predecessors had ever allowed. It is for this reason, among others, that *The Natural* is viewed by scholars such as Oriard as marking a distinctive break with the established low literary tradition of sport fiction. Not only did Malamud cast a sardonic eye over the culture of baseball that he observed, but he was the “first writer to clearly see that the character of the hero, and the relationship of country and city, youth and age, masculinity and femininity in American sport are explicitly mythic concerns” (Oriard 211). Hence, in producing his baseball novel, Malamud mines both the ancient myths of Western culture and the more modern folklore of baseball history in one of the many ambivalent tensions that the novel creates.

In appropriating for himself the stories of Arthur in particular, with Roy Hobbs as Perceval the errant knight, both restlessly wandering and falling into foolish traps, many of his own making, Malamud consciously exploits a hinterland of the highest of high literature, drawing explicitly on T.S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland*, and Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*, which itself was a critical pre-text for Eliot’s famous poem. In a breathtakingly original intertextual interpretation of *The Natural*, Deanne Westbrook traces the mythic parallels between Malamud’s novel and its illustrious predecessors. Contrary to some commentators who had viewed his “dime novel” as a “false start or an exercise in mythic madness” (Richman 28), Westbrook argues that, instead, it takes the fragments of the whole

of Western mythic tradition and shores them up, as Eliot would have it, against the folklore-history of America's favorite pastime to produce an innovative and deeply critical reinterpretation of the precarious place of the hero in modern America.

Weston and Eliot may have been Malamud's explicit literary sources, but he was clearly also influenced by the innovative literary techniques of James Joyce, making regular use of internal consciousness dream sequences, which also hint at Malamud's documented interest in Freudian psychoanalysis. *The Natural* is written in a basic fractal style. The second longer section, "Batter Up!", which tells of Roy Hobb's exploits for the Knights with his magical bat, Wonderboy, is a larger unfolding of the first part, "Pre-Game," where we meet Roy 15 years before the events of "Batter Up!". Roy's early encounter with the murderous Harriet Bird, who wounds Roy in the belly with a gunshot, acts as an ambiguous prophecy or warning for Roy, the young man who, like Macbeth, wants to be king. Characters from "Pre-Game" reappear in different form in the second part of the novel. Roy's mentor, Sam, whom Roy accidentally kills in a pitching contest, re-emerges as Pop Fisher, the coach of the Knights. Roy's would-be assassin Harriet Bird resurfaces as Memo, Pop's wayward daughter and object of sexual interest for Roy. A question Malamud poses is whether Roy has learned the lessons taught in "Pre-Game" when uncannily similar situations reoccur in "Batter Up!," for *The Natural* is a morality tale in which Malamud begins to sketch out the ethical universe that he would develop in his later works.

Looking forward from the critical juncture of 1952 when *The Natural* was first published, Malamud's reimagining of the sport novel inspired a generation of American writers to take up sport as a legitimate cultural concern through which they might offer their commentary on the state of their nation. Malamud's ironic tone, his vibrant use of language, the intertextuality, the overflowing allusiveness, and the fragmentation of narrative technique mark him out as a critical source for postmodern novelists who have taken up the challenge of

writing about sport, notably Robert Coover, Philip Roth, Richard Ford, and Don DeLillo, to name a few of the more illustrious authors. As Robert Detweiler observes, these novelists “use the various sports almost exclusively as metaphors for some other reality [...] Philip Roth’s *The Great American Novel* (1973) is a mythic-satiric epic that ridicules conservative politics, and Don DeLillo’s *End Zone* (1972) becomes a metaphor of the dangers of nuclear warfare, among other things, but these novels are also masterful portrayals of the sports themselves” (51-2).

The deployment of sport as metaphor has led to the phenomenon that much of the academic commentary of these novels has focused on their literary qualities and has largely overlooked their sporting content. Perhaps this is to be expected, as Malamud himself commented that “baseball when described realistically as a game is boring” (cited in Cheuse and Delbanco 41). Consequently, in *The Natural* baseball has sometimes been thought to be “only the background from which Malamud draws his real subject: the plight of the mythic hero in the modern world” (Hershnow 16). There is no doubt that Malamud’s debut text establishes some of the recurring themes that he would become renowned for exploring in his later, more explicitly “Jewish” novels. Most significantly, and a theme he returned to in his second novel, *The Assistant* (1957), and especially in *The Fixer* (1966), is the notion of the suffering hero, or what Helterman calls “the moral courage of fools and idiots” (2). If *The Fixer* took the idea of one man’s suffering to its zenith, perhaps to the point of absurdity on a par with the stoical Black Knight in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), Deanne Westbrook points out that the term “natural” also carries the double meaning of easy talent and foolhardiness, qualities that Roy Hobbs displays in abundance and for which he is destined to suffer.

The Natural, therefore, occupies an ambivalent place in literary history: from the past, the novel recalls the cheap dime sports fiction while simultaneously consciously drawing

upon high modernist literature. The novel is written in a plethora of contrasting styles, sometimes trashy while at other times hitting literary heights, or at least with pretensions to do so, with his conscious appropriation of Eliot's poem, Weston's folklore, and attempts at Joycean narrative techniques. Looking to the future, Malamud's text initiates a rich subsequent literary tradition of his own and is influential upon other significant novelists, especially in the Jewish-American literary tradition. Although it is now often regarded as something of an oddity, somewhat out of place in both Malamud's own work and of more celebrated subsequent sport fiction, *The Natural* is worth revisiting from the vantage point of the twenty-first century for its unique position within these disparate traditions.

Critical reception

Unsurprisingly, given its heavy mythical overtones, many scholars have unraveled the numerous references from the Western tradition. Notable among these commentators is Deanne Westbrook, who offers an intertextual interpretation, interspersed with Freudian psychoanalytic insights, from the myth-criticism school. Locating the novel within the literary landscape crafted by Eliot and Weston, Westbrook uncovers a plethora of mythic allusions, including from Tarot, fertility rituals, Arthurian and Homeric legends, with Roy as a wandering Odysseus and Perceval with his Excalibur, his bat Wonderboy, his external soul, according to Westbrook, ready at his hand. Malamud's allusions to the mythic literary past have been well documented by numerous previous commentators.ⁱⁱ However, with Roy as would-be king, temptation in the form of Memo, prophecies of greatness, and a style that oscillates between the natural and the supernatural, a previously overlooked allusion to *Macbeth* reveals additional insights into Malamud's enduring themes of the individual caught in a corrupt and all too carnally and financially enticing world.

As if all this were not enough, *The Natural* is also a modern myth, a baseball story, and Malamud's tale borrows freely from the sport's history which he interweaves with the

ancient legends. In an account of non-fictional events and sources that informed the novel, Henry Harley identifies the critical incidents from baseball's own folklore. These celebrated tales that helped to install the game as a mythic enterprise in the American imaginary, include the shooting of Eddie Waitkus in a hotel in June, 1949, and the sporting trajectory of Babe Ruth, who converted from pitcher to batter, allegedly hit a home run for a child sick in a hospital, and suffered from a giant bellyache. Also featuring as a critical aspect of the novel in its concluding chapters is the tragic story of "Shoeless" Joe Jackson, implicated in the so-called "Black Sox" corruption scandal of 1919 and to which I will return in some detail.ⁱⁱⁱ

However, despite these and many other references to baseball's own history, Malamud maintained that *The Natural* was not a baseball novel, or so he wrote in 1950 to Paul Brooks when he was just 5000 words into his first piece of long fiction. This might explain why, in a spectacular polemic, Gerry O'Connor found the novel to be wholly unsatisfactory, claiming that Malamud had made elementary errors in his depiction of the game, and that his "omniscient voice, hopelessly unnatural, travesties the rich, colorful language of baseball" (38-39). From the foregoing discussion, however, it should be clear that contrary to the implication that Malamud did not understand baseball, O'Connor's problem is that he is reading the text too literally as a baseball novel in the tradition of the Frank Merriwell stories, rather than the caustic satires of Lardner from which Malamud also drew inspiration. Far from showing "total ignorance of the game, its rules and strategies, its players and its records, its language and its culture," (37), Malamud's "errors" or "slips" are clearly quite deliberate in intent and are central to an understanding of the novel as one that oscillates dialectically between reality and fantasy, always deferring to decide exactly which it is.

Not only did Malamud draw upon the myths of Western culture, high literature pretexts, and baseball's own history, but he was also inspired by the work of the founders of

psychoanalysis, Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud. The Jungian psychological references have been well described, most notably by Earl Wasserman, whose thematic analysis of the myths and archetypes that Malamud incorporated into his text is regarded by Marcia Gealy as a “classic of its type” (24). For Wasserman, Roy is a universal questor seeking his own fulfilment. From Joyce, also influenced, though not persuaded, by Jung, Roy is an Everyman in the tradition of Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, fallen hero of *Finnegans Wake*, as he carries Excalibur to his fateful destiny. Other early commentators on the novel have explored the explicit Freudian content, most significantly Leslie Fiedler, who was not only an early admirer of Malamud but also contributed, from the position of critic, to the construction of Jewish-American identity in the mid-twentieth century.^{iv}

In a collection of interviews edited by Alan Cheuse and Nicholas Delbanco, Malamud acknowledged his explicit use of Freudian symbolism such as imagining the magical bat Wonderboy as an obvious phallic symbol. However, as Mark Schorer maintains in the same volume, to think of Malamud’s symbolism as simply a form of translation or disguise would be to underestimate its powers of revelation. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Malamud’s explicit exploration of the Freudian unconscious and its ferociously manifested motivations, such as Roy’s overeating as a symptom of his guilt over Iris (Cheuse and Delbanco 42-44). It is now well established that analysis of thematic content as practiced by Wasserman and others through a Freudian and Jungian lens has been superseded by a shift of focus, inspired by the teachings of Jacques Lacan, on to the text itself, language or, more accurately, to the absences and gaps within language. However, notwithstanding the outpouring of critical literary interpretations centered round a ubiquitous “lack” – much ado, it might be thought, about nothing – it is to Freud, and particularly the Freudian unconscious that fascinated Malamud, that I propose to return in a light psychoanalytic reading of the text that respects and mirrors the playful exuberance of the novel itself.

***The Natural* as dreamscape**

In uncovering how the novel works, I draw inspiration from another line of thought that has often been alluded to but not always fully developed, which is, as Jeffrey Saperstein notes, “Malamud has created a strange, dream-like world” (85). *The Natural* offers a dreamscape that takes baseball as its subject and turns it into a beguiling compound of myth, history, mock-heroic yarn, comic turn, social commentary, and sports psychology. In Jonathan Baumbach’s words, “Malamud’s baseball world is fluid and magical” (108) and is one that conjures up a thrillingly enchanted tale. The overall structure of the novel resembles that of a dream, with its Joycean *Wake* style of distorted repetitions and circular motions. As already noted, characters and events from the first segment of the book, “Pre-Game,” reappear in different forms in “Batter Up!” and, as in all dreams, there appears little chance for escape, simply the illusion of agency, the hero in our own fantasy, as cast and action reoccur endlessly. Time is compressed with the fifteen years between the two parts unaccounted for, a comically accentuated and attenuated Lacanian “absence” represented only as a blank page. With mythic and historic events entwined in an exaggerated present, the novel recreates the strange eternal temporal suggestiveness of a dream. This is quite deliberate on Malamud’s part, as he clearly states that “one effect of fantasy is to give a feeling of timelessness, another of universality” (cited in Cheuse and Delbanco 51): for the unconscious, empires rise and fall, events turn to myths, and legends pass out of history, all in the strike of a ball or the turning of a page.

If the overall structure of the novel resembles that of a dream, the individual parts also have an illusory quality. From the first pages of *The Natural* we are presented with Roy’s bat, Wonderboy, disguised physically as a bassoon (TN 4), but also, of course, as the most thinly veiled of all phalluses. The dice are “bewitched” (8) and the mirror is “cracked” (TN 12). In a recurring motif, the ball that Roy uses to strike out The Whammer takes the form of a bird

with “white flapping wings until it suddenly disappeared from view” (TN 22), which will not be the only tricks of magic that Roy will perform as he later deceives, at least in his own mind, the evil-eyed bookie, Gus Sands, in his hellish nightclub, the Pot of Fire. Within the dream and among the illusions are further dreams: the novel opens with a dream that Roy recalls of “him standing at night in a strange field with a golden baseball” which itself followed hard on the heels of Roy’s illusion of a “long-boned boy” hurling a ball, to which Roy “shut his eyes ... because it wasn’t real” (TN 3). Illusions recur fitfully throughout the book, constantly blurring the lines, as in *Macbeth*, between reality and fantasy, myth and history.

For Malamud, the dream is “only one aspect of reality. If a man dreams, then dreaming is real and thus gives, in the dreaming, a fuller picture of the person” (cited in Cheuse and Delbanco 45). In *The Natural*, dreams function as a metadiegetic narrative, offering stories within stories, maintaining a tension between realism and fable where insatiable desires, the materials of the unconscious, are constantly erupting into life. At one point Sam and Roy are both dreaming at the same time – Sam that “he had gone thirsty made for a drink” while “Roy was dreaming of an enormous mountain” (TN 30). Malamud’s book can be read dialectically as both a fantasy and simultaneously as a quasi-realist baseball novel, and thus a novel of America, of the whole of Western tradition, and of its/our illusions, misrecognitions and transformations, where nothing, and no one, especially our own self, is quite what it seems.

Roy Hobbs: would-be hero and everyday *schmuck*

Malamud constructs a dreamscape populated with outlandish characters that are larger than life yet all too human in their frailties and desires. Nowhere is the ambivalent tension between reaching for the stars while condemned to walk with feet of clay more clearly

illustrated than in the central character of Roy Hobbs, the man-child who would be king. In his reading of the novel, O'Connor believes that "the legendary, cultural, and mythic personalities of Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, and Shoeless Joe cannot be resolved in one character" (41). As we have already seen, he might have added, amongst others, Odysseus, Perceval, Macbeth and, as Gealy argues, the *schlemiel-schlemazel* character that Malamud would develop in his later novels. If, as Freud maintained, "the construction of collective and composite persona is one of the principal methods of dream-condensation" (152), then Roy occupies a textual place between fantasy and history that escapes O'Connor's literalism through the compaction of these celebrated and mythic characters into the one persona of his flawed hero. Roy's world, the borderland of hypnagogia between dream and reality, is one of pure sensory experience and, as Thomas R. Hersch writes, "every experience we have is packed full of meaning and feeling and thoughts and associations." Malamud unpacks those experiences to explore the "royal road to the unconscious" or, at the very least, an understanding of Freudian unconscious motivations that animate his characters and with which he was especially interested. It is now well established that there can be no psychoanalyzing of characters in a novel which exist only as text, or the mind of the novelist to which there is no access. However, given Malamud's explicit concern with the unconscious lives of his characters, there is an insistence that we should at least consider these matters even in the knowledge that it will only reveal something about ourselves as readers, who, as we read, become fully implicated in the text.

According to Sidney Richman, Malamud figures Roy as a selfish hero whose whole desire is simply to be "the best there ever was in the game" (TN 27), to which Harriet Bird responds, "is that all?" (TN 27). For Westbrook, Roy's failure is not to recognize that baseball is life and life is baseball and that he has something to give to both. Given Malamud's later themes of trials of love through suffering and that success "can only occur

when it is incomplete, sealed in irony and in a continuing, hallowing pain” (Richman 41), Hobbs is a hesitant hero with whom we identify and simultaneously disavow. Our roving Roy of the Knights embodies the contradictions we might feel about other people and ourselves. Hersh argues that “you can hate someone and love them, despise them and admire them, feel like obeying them and feel like resisting, look down on them and look up to them, envy them and feel superior to them, feel angry about them and sorry for them, want to yell at them and feel like crying about them – all at the same time.” The relationship we have with our sporting heroes is at once slavish and cruel. We want and believe them to be perfect but delight in their frailties. The pedestal is erected tall, so much the better to facilitate a fall from grace. As much *schadenfreude* as Freud, we revel in the misfortune of others blessed with more talent than ourselves. We celebrate their victories as our own while we are envious of their success, fame, and riches even as we say to ourselves “it ain’t so.”^v Roy lives up to and exceeds all these expectations, because, as Saperstein states, “when Roy succeeds, he succeeds mightily; when he fails, he fails abysmally. He is both a Superhuman and an Everyman, an uber-mensch and a schlemiel” (85). The same might be said for David Beckham, Magic Johnson, and countless other sporting “heroes.” The same can be said for us all as we navigate precariously through the triumphs and disasters of our lives.

Roy as a modern day sports star

Malamud paints Roy as a flawed, perhaps even an empty, hero as he pursues his sporting goals at the expense of relationships with others or taking responsibility for himself. With his later works in mind, it seems that Malamud created Roy as an object lesson in the pitfalls of infantile irresponsibility with an interest only in trivial pursuits. Such an interpretation has been advanced by Field and Field in a collection of essays on Malamud’s work where they identify his enduring themes as “a search for a new life in the manner of the

Bildungsroman, i.e. a focus on growth and development from boyhood to manhood; the prison motif; the necessity for moral involvement, or freedom vs. responsibility; the value of suffering; the ritualistic and mythic elements in life; the search for a father or a son's displacing of a "father", or the scapegoat or orphan motifs; and a consuming concern with Love, Mercy (Rachmones), Menschlichkeit”(1). In this sense, *The Natural* is a direct successor to *Tom Brown* for its moralistic themes of spiritual development as much as for the sport. As Frank LeBlanc suggests, *The Natural* is more parable than myth, the lesson being that, to be successful, discipline is needed alongside talent. No doubt that is true, but how many sporting heroes do we worship for their “discipline”?

Contrary to these readings, Roy might also be seen as the very epitome of the modern sports star. What other goal is a player meant to have but to want to be the very best there ever was? Arguably, it is the most glorious and honest goal there can possibly be in the sporting world. In attempting to load responsibilities outside of sport on to Roy, Malamud seems to validate one of modernity's more ludicrous inventions, the sporting “role model” who is meant to embody virtuous and noble qualities simply because he or she (mostly “he”) happens to be good with a bat and a ball. But Roy, going against the grain of popular wisdom that hero status can only ever be conferred from without, loudly announces it for himself. With pure childlike reasoning, and all the more admirable for it, he realizes that the sporting hero is only a temporary, fragile and precarious thing, as the crowd's affections swing violently one way and the other: one minute the hero, the next a zero. Roy wants to be a hero for himself and himself alone. But his honesty is disconcerting: top sports stars are supposed to declare that any hero status is “for other people to decide” or make similar protestations of false modesty. Yet, occasionally the mask slips and we see beyond the bland banality to a more profound truth. When Portuguese and Real Madrid *galactico* Cristiano Ronaldo boldly stated that he was the best footballer in the world, the world sat up and took notice, not

because it might well just be true but because he was not *meant* to say that.^{vi} He was supposed to say that he will leave such judgments to his peers or something similarly hackneyed and dishonest.

We consider Roy to be far too full of himself, but he is simply giving voice to the beliefs we all have about ourselves, but have learnt to suppress out of fear of ridicule. Don't we all, deep down somewhere in our psyche, see ourselves as the dashing hero in our own life story? That part of our psychic constitution is not called the ideal ego for nothing as we attempt to recuperate a sense of infantile omniscience through our dreams and fantasies. For Freud, a dream was not so much one of wish fulfilment but of the fantasy of a fulfilled desire. However, unlike most of us, but similar to Freud's Bismarck or Cristiano Ronaldo, for that matter, Roy tries to make his wish materialize. In his celebrated essay, "Two Ways to Avoid the Real of Desire," Slavoj Žižek provocatively argues that the *femme fatale* in hard-boiled detective fiction "embodies a radical *ethical* attitude, that of 'not ceding one's desire'" (Žižek, "Two Ways" 122). To the extent that he always wants more and tries to make his dream come true, Roy acts not as the irresponsible infant Malamud would have us believe but as the ethical man in the drama, true to his desire to be "the best there ever was." Roy fails, not due to his "selfish" desire or because he allows it to overwhelm him, but because ultimately he gives up on his desire and does not see it through to the bitter end. And it is to the end that I now turn.

The Natural, corruption and Macbeth

In a novel that has revealed a multitude of fictional and historical allusions, it may seem redundant to infer more than those already well documented in the critical literature. However, with its tale of a would-be king who commits regicide and also kills a rival to achieve his obsession to be regarded as the best player ever, thoughts turn "naturally" to

Macbeth, another story of temptation, corruption, visions, and hallucinations that conspire to end in the tragic fall of its aspiring protagonist.

To ground the suggestion that Malamud has drawn upon Shakespeare's drama of doomed ambition, we might recall that *Macbeth* is a work that unsettles both epistemological and ontological understandings of the world, constantly disrupting, in the words of Catherine Stevens, the "distinctions between reality and illusion, or the inner world of the subject and the objects that he perceives" (3). Like *Macbeth* the play, *The Natural* teeters perilously at all times on the ridge between the real and the unreal, the familiar and the alien, with the uncanny return of characters and events and the ambiguous distinctions between myth and history. Like Macbeth, Roy believes he is destined to be "king of the hill." When Harriet Bird asks witheringly, "is that all?" to Roy's ambition to be the best at baseball, is she not replicating Lady Macbeth's scorn of her husband's faltering determination to seize the crown? When Memo reveals that one of her breasts is in some way malformed, this reminds us of Lady Macbeth's refusal of the role of nurturer of her child in favor of rearing demons to satiate her ambitions when she says "come to my woman's breasts, / and take my milk for gall" (47-48). In *Macbeth*, as in *The Natural*, "corruption of the flesh," Jared Johnson notes, "takes the form of lust, blood – and otherwise" (103). And, like Macbeth, Roy, having fallen in lust with Memo, is fatally tempted by a woman with greater ambition than his own.

If Malamud's novel is only one thing, which it is not, but if it were, then it would be a novel about corruption – of the flesh, of the spirit, and, of course, of the game of baseball, standing in for the American dream itself. The myth that America likes to tell itself, or at least which some Americans like to present to the outside world, is that, in the "land of the free," anyone can succeed, that anyone, however low their birth, can rise to the top. It is not a myth unique to America; it pervades the whole of Western culture. Roy is that man who, from a familial background that would make humble look luxurious, claims his right to

embody the dream that he might, with talent and endeavor, become the best there ever was. As the novel draws to a climax, Malamud's themes of personal ambition, corruption, sex, money, and gambling are bound together in the concluding chapters that have their historical counterpart with the notorious "Black Sox" World Series-fixing scandal of 1919 where a number of professional players were charged with, though never convicted of, corrupting the sport.

First, however, it is worth recalling how the game-fixing scenario plays out in *The Natural*. Roy, suffering from a terrible bellyache after encouragement by the object of his sexual desire, Memo, to gorge himself the night before the big game, is informed by doctors that the pennant-deciding match must be his last due to a damaged heart. Now financially more vulnerable than ever, Roy is approached first by Memo and later by corrupt club owner The Judge, who, working with Gus Sands, the Supreme Bookie, wants Roy to fix the upcoming pennant-deciding game. He agrees to help fix the game as he believes the money he is promised will help set him up in business so he can then marry Memo, who has, in fact, been grooming him all along at the behest of the corrupt partnership. Roy, taken in by her deception, and feeling weak from his illness, succumbs to the temptation to play badly in order to ensure that his team, the Knights, lose the game so The Judge and Gus can make corrupt money on the betting markets.

Roy is torn between the need for money, his lust for Memo, and his loyalty to Pop Fisher. He initially deliberately misses with Wonderboy but, as the game proceeds, Roy's cognitive and emotional crises become more pronounced and are brought into sharp relief by "a stream of jeers, oaths, and horn hoots that burned Roy to the bones" (TN 217) emanating from the stands in the shape of Otto Zipp, who has always been (more than) sceptical about Roy's heroic deeds. As only Macbeth can see Banquo's ghost, haunting him with reminders of his murderous past, so only Roy can hear with crystal clarity Zipp's damning judgment,

because, according to Jacques Derrida, “the spectre first of all sees *us*” (cited in Johnson 8). Suffering from such an intense epistemological and ontological predicament, Roy aims foul balls at Zipp’s head. “Carrion, offal, turd – flush the bowl” (TN 217), cries Zipp as a foul ball ricochets off his head and accidentally hits Roy’s former lover and bearer of his child, Iris Lemon. Shocked by what he has done, Roy vows to win the game, but he finds his Excalibur, his Wonderboy, split, as he has been, in two. Forced to use a normal bat, he tries to win the game but, without his magic weapon, he flails and misses, striking out to the new pretender, Youngberry. The Knights and Pop lose and the Judge and Gus win their crooked bet. Full of remorse for yielding to corruption, Roy angrily rejects the bribe. As in *Macbeth*, the moment of anagnorisis is a moment of tragic horror, arriving as ever a fraction too late because rumor of Roy’s fraud has made the newspapers via a Max Mercy column and his reputation and records lie in tatters. The novel ends with Roy replaced by new “hero” Youngberry on the field, but off it he has the chance to take up the rest of his life with Iris and their unborn child.

Daniel Walden comments that “Malamud believed that if a writer is lucky ‘serious things seem funny,’ and in his best work, including *The Natural* ... ‘life to him [is] always on the edge of both tragedy and comedy, of reality and fantasy’” (172). The novel contributes to an understanding of corruption through a technique that melds comedy and tragedy with fantasy and reality. It is here that Malamud’s off-centered descriptions of the game become important. What O’Connor thought of as *naïf faux-pas* turn out to be symbolic of how a fixed game, that seems to be legitimate to the visual gaze, is, in fact, like the ghosts seen by Macbeth, or the dreams we all experience, purely spectral. Or, to be more accurate, a fixed game occupies a position of epistemological uncertainty between the real and the fake. Corruption never reveals itself directly, but only as a phantom sense of suspicion and unease that something is not quite right – an unexpectedly poor pitch or miss here, a dropped catch there.

The problem with detecting game-fixing in sport, recognizing ghosts, remembering dreams, or grasping the fullness of language is that spectral refractions are the *sine qua non* of each. Match-fixing is often only glimpsed through the oblique means of gossip, hearsay, and rumors; ghosts are only caught in the corner of an eye; dreams escape the waking mind just before they can be remembered; and language slips away at the moment of definition. Malamud conveys the sense that we are looking at a game that is slightly off kilter, but does so by distorting the language of the game. The reason that he has adopted this technique from the beginning of the novel now comes into sharper relief – *The Natural* is both/neither baseball novel and/nor masquerade, but an exercise in destabilization of the text itself, revealed as always already real/fake. Using the technique of an omniscient narrator, alongside an ironic stance to the narration itself, Malamud allows the reader to see the corrupt core of sport while showing how it is covered up and presented to the public as the real thing. From the perspective of the fan, the corruption is disguised as they place their bets and cheer on their team, accepting the anguish of defeat as the inevitable result of sport in which there must be a loser as well as a winner. What we see is the darkest of nightmares, in which reality is indistinguishable from the faked – surely a parable for our times if ever there was one. Roy, as Everyman, is caught up in this web of deceit and, suddenly, his protestations to be the hero to anyone except himself seem all the more preposterous. The very concept of the hero, or an American dreamer, or a dreamer anywhere of any kind, is shown to be a fantasy created to maintain the fiction of the game of sport and of life as an honest endeavor in which we can all be winners.

According to the cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek, the French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze, once remarked, “‘si vous êtes pris dans le rêve de l'autre; vous êtes foutus’, (if you’re trapped in the dream of the other, you’re fucked!)” (Žižek, *Violence* 48). As the novel progresses, we see how Roy, like Macbeth before him, has been trapped in the dreams of

others throughout, but which masquerade, as so much of our world does, is of his own making. In the short “Pre-Game” part of the novel, he is severely wounded by Harriet Bird, who has created her own nightmarish world in which she shoots and kills top sports stars. When he resurfaces (from where?) in “Batter Up!” to claim his place as wannabe hero and record breaker, he fails to see that these are fictions created from elsewhere, drawing him in as they have countless others before and will continue to do so after he has left the scene. But at the corrupt core, records and heroism are treated with contempt by the powerful, useful only in maintaining the veneer of sports’ legitimacy to further their own dishonest ends. As Roy is groomed by Memo, a temptress as old as Lady Macbeth, he is lured inevitably into the dark dream of The Judge and Supreme Bookie. In truth, he has been trapped in their dream from the outset.

As the fixed game proceeds, the web gathers round Roy and it becomes clear to him that he is caught in the nightmare of The Judge and Gus, but also hooked into the noble dream of Pop Fisher, who desperately wants to win the pennant just the once in his lifetime. For Roy, the epistemological and ontological tension is unbearable. Torn between nightmare and dream, he literally does not know what to do. In his mental disarray, he hears a foul voice upon the wind, none other than Otto Zipp, who, as the clear-eyed specter that always sees us first, penetrates beyond the hero worship of the other fans and, as Roy’s demanding superego, brings the hero down to earth with scatological precision as Roy deliberately misses with Wonderboy. Zipp symbolizes the role of the always ambiguous internal/external superego that leads to the eventual construction of the ego ideal that takes its idealized form from the demands of the social upon the individual and marks the final abandonment of the infantile ideal ego that Roy has been pursuing to be the best there ever was. In rage at the recognition that his dream is finally broken, he tries to silence his externalized superego by smashing foul balls at him in a final act of futile resistance.

Poor Roy, sold on the impossible dream of the sporting hero, has been fucked for a very long time. And yet, there is a sense that Roy, while he remained childlike and infantile, dreaming only of being the best, had his chance to break the chains in which he became trapped. Channeling Žižek, Roy needed to make good on his desire, to not give up on it but to be the radical ethical man even as it would result in death in glory. At this, I am reminded of the story of the British amateur club cricketer, Ken Turk who, according to the obituary note, “on May 3, 1992, aged 67 ... went out to bat at No. 11 for the club Second XI against Shepherd's Bush, hit a six, then collapsed on the field and died.”^{vii} Unlike Turk, who is documented as going out in a blaze of brilliance, Roy's sporting life, by giving way on his desire, is deleted from the historical record, and he morphs instantly from Everyman to No-One, consigned, like gangster Henry Hill at the end of Martin Scorsese's film *Goodfellas* (1990), to the worst death of all: anonymity, marriage, and kids for the rest of his life.

Conclusion

The Natural is many things – a throwback to the dime sports novel and an anticipation of the postmodern sports literature of Coover, Roth and DeLillo; a footnote to Weston, Eliot, and Joyce and the inauguration of Malamud's own auspicious Jewish-American literary *oeuvre*; a mythic fantasy wrapped up in an historical moral fable; a mock-heroic tragic-comedy that addresses the enduring theme of the place of the hero in modern society; a reworking of the tragic drama of *Macbeth*, and a commentary on the state of America and Western culture in the mid twentieth-century with its themes of corruption and moral decline. *The Natural* is all these things and more. In this article I have attempted to add to the commentary on *The Natural* that focuses on the myths, symbols, allegories, and historical antecedents, and to reclaim it for its sporting context and as a novel that is, at its heart, about baseball, the place of sport in society, and a contemporary critique of our precarious times. Perhaps, above all, the novel can reveal something of ourselves as 21st century readers.

Critically, contrary to Malamud's intention that Roy can only be the hero once he puts aside his childish desires simply to be a sporting hero and to take his place in adult society, from the perspective of the twenty-first century, and a sign of our atomistic times, to want simply to be the best now seems a most noble of pursuits. What more are we expected to aspire to but to be the hero in our own life, to throw off the mantle of false modesty and to embrace our ideal ego, and reclaim for ourselves our dreams and fantasies? Trapped in the nightmare world of *The Judge and Gus*, a simple metaphor for American, and therefore, Western culture, Roy's only route of escape was to hold tight to his childish dreams and to be the hero that he wanted to be. The same goes for all of us: simply to be the best we can be.

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End notes

ⁱ For more on this phenomenon see, Andy Harvey, *Boys will be Boys? An Interdisciplinary Study of Sport, Masculinity and Sexuality*. Oxford: Fisher Imprints, 2015: Chapter 2.

ⁱⁱ For other scholarly examinations of the mythic and symbolic references in *The Natural*, see, *inter alia*, Jeffrey Helterman, *Understanding Bernard Malamud*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1985; Sheldon J. Hershinow, *Bernard Malamud*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1980; Marcus Klein, *After Alienation: American Novels in Mid-Century*. Cleveland: World Publishing, 1964, pp. 247-93; Earl R. Wasserman, "The Natural: Malamud's Word Ceres." *The Centennial Review* 9: 4 (1965): 438-460.

ⁱⁱⁱ For a detailed account of the "Black Sox" scandal, see Eliot Asinof, *Eight Men Out*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1963.

^{iv} See Leslie Fiedler, "In the Interest of Surprise and Delight. *Folio* 20: 3 1955: 17-20.

^v For greater elaboration of these themes of sports fans' ambivalent relationship with their heroes, see Andy Harvey and Agnieszka Piotrowska, "Intolerance and Joy, Violence and Love among Male Football Fans: Towards a Psychosocial Explanation of 'Excessive' Behaviours." *Sport in Society* 16: 10 (2013): 1404 – 1412.

^{vi} See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/football/34737914>

^{vii} See <http://www.espn.com/sports/story/228731.html>