

A PANOPTIC REINTERPRETATION OF MALAMUD'S *THE NATURAL*

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Abstract

The Natural is Malamud novel without any Jewish characters and although the novel is more closely tied to Malamud's later works than some reviewers have claimed, Wasserman and others have remarked that the concept of redemption is unquestionably part of pagan-Christian mythology. Roy's search for himself can also be understood within the less obvious context of a Jewish tradition, particularly Hasidism or Jewish Mysticism, where the search for God or the Father is equated with the search for oneself and where the surest way to God is to travel into the depths of the self. Jewish mystic's insistence, from the first to the twentieth century that the quest for God or virtue begins and ends with a journey into one's depths. It is never too late to make the proper choice, to realize and take responsibility for one, as long as many lives. Roy Hobbs returns home safely when we see *The Natural* from its suggested Hasidic perspective.

Keywords: Hasidism, Jewish Mysticism, the Natural.

INTRODUCTION

"We can be saved to the degree that we accept who we are, I have always been impressed by the Jews' concern for ethics," says the Lelov Rabbi. According to Bernard Malamud, the fundamental conflict is with oneself. When Roy Hobbs defeated the powerful Whammer Wambold, Harriet Bird, the destructive temptress of *The Natural*, marveled at the feat and compared it to "David jawboning the Goliath-Whammer, or was it Sir Percy lancing Sir Mademer, or the first son (with a rock in his paw) ranged against the primitive papa?" Many reviewers have pointed out that Roy is a representation of at least the latter two characters, but none more so than Earl R. Wasserman, whose outstanding analysis of Malamud's usage of the Arthurian tale and Jungian psychology has become a standard for its field. But to my knowledge, it hasn't sparked any serious discussion that Roy may in any way be compared to a Jewish hero, not even a David.

After all, *The Natural* is the only Malamud book without any Jewish characters. And although the novel is more closely tied to Malamud's later works than some reviewers have claimed, Wasserman and others have remarked that the concept of redemption is unquestionably part of pagan-Christian mythology. Roy is associated with Sir Percival and the search for the Holy Grail due to his mysterious background, his clumsy ignorance as a youngster, his membership in the "Knights," and the way a rival player describes him: "in full armor, mounted on a black charger, coming at him with a long lance as thick as a young tree" (231). "Roy at bat" is, in Wasserman's words, "every quilter who has had to shape his character to fulfill his goal,

whether it is the grail or the league pennant.” Roy’s search for himself can also be understood within the less obvious context of a Jewish tradition, particularly Hasidism or Jewish Mysticism, where the search for God or the Father is equated with the search for oneself and where the “surest way to God” is to travel “into the depths of the self.” Roy must develop humility and come to grips with his mortality, the existence of evil, and the dreadful duties of freedom and parenthood, no less than King David did. The point is that Roy finally achieves salvation in a profoundly Hasidic sense of the word: he confesses, repents, and “his heart accepts the understanding and is converted to it.” If we recognize the Hasidic undertones of *The Natural*, a new reading of the book is possible. The fact that Roy lost the game, in the end, is irrelevant since his decision to side with Iris and his acceptance of pain demonstrate that he has discovered his soul.

Roy Hobbs is on a train when we first see him, staring at his reflection in a window. He experiences “a splurge of freedom” as the mirror fades, but the sensation is fleeting since Roy won’t embrace the obligations that bring actual freedom until the end of the book. Because one must know oneself to be free, Malamud’s fictional heroes who stare in the mirror quickly become recognizable figures. The metaphor of the voyage will also be employed again, and it makes little difference whether the hero is traveling from West to East like Roy or vice versa (as Levin in *A New Life*), as the journey is ultimately one that takes place within.

The young Roy is a charming and humorous creature who resembles the schlemiel-schlimazel character that Malamud will later create in many ways. Of course, the schlemiel is that clumsy clown from Jewish tradition who also has a touch of sorrow. His first cousin, the schlimazel, “simply has no luck” and is frequently the target of the schlemiel’s incompetence. Schlimazel is a man who splashes a bowl of boiling soup on a schlemiel to emphasize the difference between the two. Funny enough, Roy Hobbs (King of Bunglers) combines both personality types when he accidentally splashes water on himself while thinking about Harriet Bird (16) early in the book. The schlemiel of Yiddish folk culture is frequently an orphan, a lonely traveler, a pious fool, and a bungling clown. Roy, who is also an orphan, really began playing baseball for an orphan asylum team in 1994. Being a nomad, he continues to travel even after reaching his objective since “he hadn’t stopped going where he was going because he hadn’t yet arrived” (47). In addition, Roy is a recluse: “Roy sat about, and despite it being proclaimed on his breast that he was one of the squads, he sat among them alone... He went with them and dressed as they did, but he never joined them, maybe for batting practice. Roy has even performed the role of the clown in its entirety.

Max Mercy describes Roy in a historical photograph as “the snub-nosed Bobo, who despite the painted laugh on his pan seemed sad-eyed and unhappy” (170). However, Roy lacks the sanctity of the schlemiel until the very end, when his decisions and self-awareness put him back in the role of the idiot and pariah. Of course, Roy’s greatest flaw and the character flaw that precedes his downfall is pride. Roy boasts to Harriet Bird after defeating the “Goliath-Whammer”: “You have to have the appropriate thing to play good ball, and I got it. I’m willing to wager that I’ll smash all throwing and hitting records one day.”

A little while later, he boldly responds to her query, “What will you hope to accomplish, Roy?” with, “Sometimes when I walk down the street, I bet people will say, there goes Roy Hobbs, the best there ever was in the game” (33). However, Roy’s pride goes beyond just wanting to be the best at baseball; it also entails a denial of his mortality, notably the constraints of time, pain, and death. He tries hard to keep his history hidden from the incisive journalist Max Mercy out of guilt, yet he still wishes “he could have lived longer in his boyhood... an old thought with him” (117). Red Blow, the player who attempts to warn him of the “short life in baseball,” hears him say this and responds, “To hell with my old age. I’ll be playing for a while” (64). However, Roy’s fear of pain and death is never more overtly shown in the book than during his lengthy chat with Iris Lemon at Lake Michigan. He has been emphasizing to Iris the value of becoming “the best in the game” because “if you leave all those records that no one else can beat, they’ll always remember you,” he has said. You’re the type of person who never dies” (156).

As Roy sees it, the tragedy of his life is that “his fate, somehow, had always been the same (on the train going nowhere) defeat in sight of his goal.” His pain, he believes, has been unwarranted, and when Iris attempts to explain what she has learned through suffering, he refuses to comprehend:

“What beats me,” he said with a trembling voice, “was why it always had to happen to me. What did I do to deserve it?”

“Being stopped before you started?”

He nodded.

“Perhaps it was because you were a good person?”

“How’s that?”

“Experience makes good people better.”

She was staring at the lake.

“How does it do that?”

“Through their suffering.”

“I have had enough of that,” he said in disgust.

“We have two lives, Roy, the life we learn with and the life we live with after that. Suffering is what brings us toward happiness.”

“I had it up to here.” He ran a finger across his windpipe.

“Had what?”

“What I suffered- and I don’t want anymore.”

“It teaches us to want the right things.”

“All it taught me is to stay away from it. I am sick of all I have suffered.”

She shrank away a little. (157-158)

Roy resembles Frankie Alpine in *The Assistant*, who at first finds Morris Bober’s and the Jews’ suffering repulsive and tries to distance him from them. And Iris’ remarks mirror key Hasidic teaching: “Suffering makes for proper insight and compassion.”

What Iris does not say, but the story reveals, is that suffering is an inevitable side effect of love. You will suffer if you love anyone. As a result, Roy's rejection of Iris is more than a rejection of a mother-grandmother type; it is a denial of his greatest desire to both give and receive love, a need that reveals itself in the very next chapter as an unhealthy craving for food. The connection between food and love is presumably universal, but it is heightened in Malamud's East European Jewish heritage. Indeed, one of the primary ways a *shtetl* mother demonstrated her love was "by constant and solicitous overfeeding." The Jewish mother sees food as a sign of her love, and "How could there be too much of that?" In this view, Memo's urge that Roy to eat is ironic, because the food she serves cannot satisfy Roy, whose desire is for the love that the food represents. Roy's massive bellyache is similar to the agony in the buttocks experienced by another Malamud hero, S. Levin from *A New Life*, shortly after attempting to hide his feelings for Pauline Gilly. When Roy chooses Memo over Iris, he chooses the path of crippling ambition (or desire) over the path of love, which would sustain and feed him. Furthermore, Roy must learn that there is no way to avoid pain; at best, we must acknowledge it since, as Iris puts it, "It teaches us to want the right things insight and passion. If, after the story, Roy has been taught "to want the right things," it is not just because of his suffering but also because he has had apt instructors.

Roy had enjoyed the care and commitment of two dedicated dads (Sam and Pop) long before he encountered the selfless love of a mother figure (Iris). Roy is conflicted about his father, who "dumped him in one orphan home after another, wherever he happened to be working when he did." Nonetheless, his father took him out of the house during the summers and taught him how to play baseball (32). Sam is Roy's surrogate father, and he enjoys drinking and throwing the ball. Even though Sam stands to gain if Roy becomes a major leaguer, his care for Roy extends beyond that of a scout for a player. He insists on Roy sleeping on the Pullman bed at the start of their voyage and presses his pocketbook on Roy towards the end of the journey when he knows he is dying.

When we consider that in Malamud, like in Hasidism, desire for the father is associated with longing for the self, Sam's reappearance in one of Roy's nightmares after the story makes perfect sense. Roy is suffering from a stomachache in a maternity hospital (where his disguise as a parent is a foreshadowing of what is to come) when he dreams of himself as adrift in a storm. The dream is unclear, though, because it turns out that Sam is missing and Roy is looking for him. When Sam is apprehended, he advises Roy, "Don't do it," a clear warning to avoid the temptation to toss the game that Memo would soon bring to him. Roy is aware in some way that Memo, who is connected to Gus, the Bookie, will serve as his agent to persuade Roy to toss the game. When Roy first opposes Memo, he is listening to a better part of himself that identifies with both Sam, the caring parent, and Pop Fisher.

Pop first dismisses Roy, saying, "Who needs a fielder old enough to be my son?" Nonetheless, he quickly repents his comments and gives Roy a spot on the squad (49). His love for Roy rises to the point where he urges him to avoid Memo, his niece, since "she is always dissatisfied and will snarl you up in her trouble in a way that will weaken your strength if you don't watch out" (126). Pop also provides Roy with a personal check for \$2,000 to make up for the shortfall in

income that Roy had been promised but was not legally entitled to. Roy affirmatively responds to pop's devotion, as he did to Sam's, but his final choice to give up his reliance on the magic of his bat, Wonder Boy, is his feelings for Mike Barney, the book's last father figure. Mike, the dying boy's father, begs Roy to hit a home run to save his son's life. More than seeing Iris, the image of Mike Barney "doing exercises of grief" hits Roy's sensitive character, allowing him to give up Wonder Boy and agree to return to the game. "How could he explain to Barney that he had sacrificed his child's life for the sake of a hunk of wood?" (146). Of course, Roy's willingness to make a sacrifice convinces Pop to let him retain Wonder Boy, saving the game, the boy, and Roy's sense of morality.

If caring dads teach Roy compassion and responsibility, it is the criticizing mother figure who teaches the hero to suffer and make sensible decisions. Roy's biological mother died when he was seven years old, and he remembers her as a "whore" who ruined "his old man's life" and "didn't love anybody" (185–186). Harriet Bird is the first lady in the novel with whom Roy connects as his mother and for whom he feels a "strange fondness... She looks a little like his mother (that bird)" (34). Harriet's refusal to allow Roy to touch her breast, a symbol of parental love, ties her with Memo Paris, who either has or pretends to have a wounded breast, and with other Malamud bird ladies (for example, Avis Fliss in *A New Life*), who are generally unforgiving and destructive influences in the hero's life. Interestingly, Harriet is associated with Iris Lemon, the beneficent earth mother figure, since both women wear a white rose pinned to their dresses. Harriet, dressed in black, drops the white rose when Roy first sees her (15), and Iris, dressed in red, is differentiated by the white rose when she first stands to demonstrate her trust in him (146). Harriet, Memo, and Iris may be viewed as distinct manifestations of the terrible-beneficent mother figure, each a vital component of the hero's maturation process. Malamud would sometimes mix these opposing traits in one lady, as with Helen in *The Assistant*.

Harriet's eyes are "sad" when Roy's self-centered answer demonstrates, in Wasserman's words, that he is "completely infantile." And when Harriet pulls the trigger that sends the silver bullet to fall on the hero, the noises she makes are not only of "triumph" but also of "despair" (41); no less than Memo Paris, who follows her, she suggests ambivalence. The memo, like Harriett, wears largely black, and while she does not visually look like Roy's mother, her selfish and unloving character is the push that causes Roy to recall his mother's brutality. Roy stands on base during the last game, wondering why Memo hasn't visited him since he left the hospital, and shortly after, he recalls his mother drowning a black tomcat in the tub (220). Nonetheless, Memo, like Harriet Bird, is a "loathly lady," one who tries the hero and "seems bent on luring him to his destruction," but whose deeds are attempts to prepare him for "his manhood."

If Memo is *The Natural's* terrible mother, Morgan le Fay's image, Iris Lemon is the Earth mother, the benevolent Lady of the Lake. Iris' leap into Lake Michigan in an attempt to save Roy's life is less amazing to him than the way she has sacrificed her privacy by standing in the packed ballpark to demonstrate her faith in him. Roy first doesn't understand why she did this for him, but then she explains, "Because I hate to see a hero fail." "There are so few of them"

(154), Roy believes she is referring to his role as a baseball star. “I mean as a man as well,” she clarifies, adding quickly, “I hoped you might become yourself again” (155). Iris recognizes the necessity of giving one all to the game of life, but Roy recognizes simply the importance of becoming the best at baseball. With these words in mind, Iris’ final chat with Roy, in which she tells him he “must win,” implies that he must finally become himself.

The fact that Harriet, Memo, and Iris are all complementary can be seen not only in the white flower that connects the first and last woman but also in Roy’s dream in the maternity hospital, where he sees “Iris’ sad head topped Memo’s dancing body, with Memo’s vice versa upon the shimmying rest of Iris, a confused fusion that dizzied him” (193). The Morgan le Fay (awful mother) and Lady of the Lake (earth mother) figures that other critics have observed may be regarded as more than the Morgan le Fay (terrible mother) and Lady of the Lake (earth mother) figures. A fascinating component of Jewish mysticism is the feminine as destroyer and preserver, as a demon and divine presence.

The demonic is viewed as the spawn of the feminine sphere in Kabbalah symbolism, and the woman represents the quality of severe judgment. Nonetheless, as Gershom Scholem points out, this is not a denial of womanhood due to the paradoxical Kabbalistic idea of the Shekhinah, God’s feminine essence. The Shekhinah, or Divine Presence of God, is seen as the queen or mother of the world of holiness, in the same way, that Lilith, the “harlot, the wicked, or the black,” is regarded as the queen or mother of the world of evil. Here, we must remember the Hasidic insistence on the unity of all things, particularly on the acceptance of evil, because “if there were no evil, there would be no good, for good is the counterpart of evil.” Furthermore, “the fact that evil confronts good gives man the possibility of victory: of rejecting evil and choosing good, and only then does the good exist truly and permanently.” In one Hasidic story, the Shekhinah is shown as a long-suffering woman with bleeding feet, accompanied by two “winged beings,” and she talks of the importance of love and man’s responsibility for his fellow man. Admonishing a young Jew for failing to love, she says, “One cannot love me and abandon the created being,” and her final message is, “Approach me, and my redemption will approach.” Like Iris Lemon, who says, “I don’t think you can do anything for anyone without giving up something of your own,” (155), the Shekhinah preaches a bittersweet message of love, sacrifice, and salvation.

If Roy is unwilling to embrace Iris’ benevolence until the end, he first rejects the evil he sees in Judge Goodwill Banner and Gus, the Supreme Bookie. Roy must realize that the Judge and Gus are manipulators of chance and nature and that they are mirrors of his drive to deny the repercussions of his death. The scene in “Pot of Fire,” an obvious parody of the hero’s visit to the Underworld, depicts Roy with only a fleeting victory over the Bookie because Roy matches his magician’s tricks with the magic of Gus’eye. “Roy must go beyond appearance and recognize the evil within himself; he must learn to trust in love and endurance; and, in Iris’ words, freedom comes as “more a reward for standing it so long than any sudden magic” (210).

Roy had been dreaming about grappling with a black, rat-eyed vulture and waking up to find the Judge in dark glasses standing at the foot of his bed. If he finally succumbs to the Judge’s bribery offer, it is because he is still enslaved to himself. Roy’s passion for Memo and fear of

losing her make him a willing accomplice to the Judge's schemes, and it's no surprise that he begins parroting the Judge's usage of scripture after succumbing to his temptation (209). Roy's nearly utter selfishness may also be observed in his failure to connect with any of his teammates on a deep level. He can't recognize his attraction to Bump, the self-centered jerk he attempts to replace in Memo's affections and on the field. Malamud's usage of the double figure is most prominent in this book, in Roy and Bump.

Memo misidentifies Roy in bed early in the tale; following Bump's death, Roy takes his position on the club and, like his predecessor, becomes one of the league's best hitters. The doubling of Roy with Bump is undoubtedly seen as the displacement of one fertility hero by another (as Herman Youngberry will do at the end), but it also demonstrates, using a Hasidic framework, that "all souls are one" and that "what happens to one man, in a sense, reveals what happens to all men." Malamud returns to the theme of the double again, perhaps most dramatically in his current work, *The Tenants*, which tells the narrative of a Jew and a black guy. When Roy ultimately decides to select Iris and win the game, he is essentially choosing triumph over the part of himself that binds him to Memo, or desire and greed. Roy has struggled to accept his independence since the beginning.

When Iris questions him about why he chooses the sort of woman that brings him defeat, he responds, "They chose me." It's because of the breaks" (157). Roy's salvation begins when he becomes "suddenly anguished over what he had promised the Judge" and seizes his freedom of choice (223). Roy's salvation is complete when he takes the path of duty, love, and suffering. In this light, the fact that Roy has lost the game, even if he does not recognize that he has learned from his mistakes, cannot negate the fact that he has made sensible decisions. So I can't agree with Sidney Richman when he claims *The Natural* ends "on a note of total loss." As many critics have noted, it appears in this regard as a contrast to the more affirmative conclusions of the later novels. "Roy's fate may indeed be that of a "wanderer and a fugitive," but as two Hasidim promise, "The most effective penance is to become a wanderer and a fugitive" and "He who is first a wanderer and a fugitive becomes cheerful afterward." Roy may have lost the world, but he has reclaimed himself. If we remember an important Hasidic principle, "It is more important to possess oneself than to possess; it is more important to be than to appear," Roy has won his ultimate loss.

Roy Hobbs fails as a realistic baseball hero or as an Arthurian knight in search of the grail, but when viewed through the lens of Hasidism, he becomes a true schlemiel or holy fool, an inept blunderer destined to suffer but whose suffering gains dignity because of his moral stance. The obvious symbolism of *The Natural Baseball* as a distillation of American life, the grail legend, and Jungian psychology to suggest the psychic journey should not blind us to the subtle truth that Roy Hobbs, in the end, is not all that different from the penitent, suffering beggar-type fools of either Hasidic legend or later Malamud stories. And if, as Mark Goldman points out, the "quest motif" is "a classic mode in serious or tragic literature from Oedipus to Heart of Darkness where the spiritual or physical journey begins in innocence and ends in experience or tragic self-knowledge," we must also remember the Jewish mystic's insistence, from the first to the twentieth century, that the quest for God or virtue begins and ends with a journey

into one's depths. It is never too late to make the proper choice, to realize and take responsibility for one, as long as many lives. Roy Hobbs returns home safely when we see *The Natural* from its suggested Hasidic perspective.

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