

The human hero:
arthurian parallels
and a personal quest
in 'the natural'



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Being involved in a story or a moment of mythic proportions is one thing - being aware of it is another. In sport, significant moments often write themselves through the narrative of a game, where the victors are heroes, and the losers are forgotten. Bernard Malamud took it upon himself to weave a mythic narrative that revolves around baseball, and the ill-fated athlete Roy Hobbs, revealing this significance in sport. In his novel, *The Natural*, a heightened sense of historical importance is placed upon baseball, and these instances of heightened importance have lasting consequences for Hobbs.

Great importance is placed upon Roy Hobbs's handcrafted bat, Wonderboy.

In the story, the offensive tool that Hobbs is extremely faithful to is a reference to King Arthur's sword from Arthurian legend, Excalibur. The bat is a parallel of it - a second coming of the sword through a literary novel about baseball. When the bat is introduced early in the novel, we immediately see it referred to as something mythic. Observing the bat's storage device (a bassoon case), Eddie the porter asks Roy what the tune is today, to which Roy explains, "It ain't a musical instrument". Poking away at Roy, Eddie asks "A pogo stick... (a) Foolproof lance?" and Roy sharply answers "No" (5). The foolproof lance that Eddie is jokingly referring to would be none other than King Arthur's Excalibur. Not only is Roy ignorant to this, he immediately denies the idea. He does not place any historical or mythical significance upon Wonderboy, and doesn't believe that it is a tool or weapon of Excalibur's nature. In his article "The Once and Future Sword: Excalibur and the Poetics of Imperial Heroism in Idylls of the King", Jeffrey Jackson explains the significance of Excalibur in Arthurian legend. He writes that "Excalibur, of course, was foundational for Arthur's rule and reign", that the taking of

Excalibur for King Arthur was "...a taking that marked his right to rule" (208). And as we see throughout Malamud's novel, Wonderboy is just as foundational for Roy Hobbs. The protagonist is constantly taking care of the bat, slowly polishing it and keeping it nearby as often as possible. The bat seems to be as important to Hobbs's hitting as his own natural talents and technique.

The origin of the bat, too, is something of mythic historical proportions that Roy never truly seems to grasp. Wonderboy is something of a miracle of nature, a work of art, much like Excalibur, which Jeffrey Jackson explores further in his article. "As for Excalibur itself," he writes, "in many of its appearances in Tennyson's work, it functions more as an ornate objet d'art than as a martial weapon" (208). Reading into Wonderboy's origins, we can see that the miracle bat is just as much a work of art with a legendary history. After Roy knocks the first three batting practice pitches that he sees in the pros over the fence, Pop, the team's manager, questions him about his bat. "I made it long ago," he says, "when I was a kid... this tree near the river where I live was split by lightning. I liked the wood inside of it so I cut me out a bat" (63). He goes on to explain that the white of the bat is the true colour of the wood, implying its natural beauty and importance. His casual attitude and understating of the bat's origins speak toward Roy's ignorance to any instance of heightened importance in his life. In the final game of the novel, right when Hobbs needs it most, Wonderboy goes down, and the ballplayer goes down with it. It is hard to imagine Roy Hobbs at the plate without Wonderboy, and in the concluding appearances where this is just the case, Roy is out of place and unable to connect. When he shatters the bat on

a foul ball, thunder crashes as the gods attempt to alert the world of the significance of the moment. Malamud writes, " Wonderboy lay on the ground split lengthwise, one half pointing to first, the other to third... Vogelman delivered his next pitch. It floated in, perfect for pickling, but Roy failed to lift the bat" (220). After striking out to end the game as well as the season in his next at-bat, Roy buries Wonderboy under the outfield grass, " He poured back the earth, carefully pressing it down, and replaced the grass... and after a last long look around, walked off the field (228). It is clear that heightened historical importance is placed upon Wonderboy, and we mourn alongside Roy as he lays his bat, as well as his career, down to rest.

In the novel's opening chapter, Pre-Game, heightened importance is placed upon Roy's trackside battle with the Whammer. Furthermore, Hobbs's ignorance to this mythical importance and his role in it ultimately dooms him. After Roy blows three pitches past the three-time MVP, the Whammer, in a surreal and picturesque showdown, Malamud speaks toward the grandness of the scene, as told by Harriet Bird. He writes that she was "... reviewing the inspiring site (she said it was) of David jawboning the Goliath-Whammer, or was it Sir Percy lancing Sir Maldemer, or the first son (with a rock in his paw) ranged against the primitive papa?" (25-26). All references mentioned here are of grand and important historical nature, and this is what Harriet and the others are apt to allude to when describing the young Roy Hobbs defeating the powerful but fading Whammer. It seems that everybody around Roy sees the magnificence in what just played out except for the young ballplayer himself. He innocently replies to Harriet that, " the only thing I had on my mind... was that Sam had bet this ten spot we couldn't

afford to lose out on, so I had to make him whiff" (26). Here, Roy's young and ignorant nature is on display, as not even he understands or is able to see the importance of what he has just done. His trackside strikeout signifies the end of the Whammer's dominance, and the undeniable promise of his own career.

However, Roy's ignorance of the importance shown here and later in the conversation is what dooms him to his fate at the hands of Harriet. In his article, "The Natural: Malamud's Metamyth of a Moral Will Through the Moral Hero", Oscar Salinas explains the character traits that bring Roy toward the punishing shooting. He writes, "However, his baser, sensual self makes him the easy target of the evil Morgan Le Fay temptress figure, Harriet Bird, who invites him to her hotel room only to shoot him with a silver bullet" (107). As is told here, young Roy's "baser" self is revealed and the elusive Harriet Bird doesn't think twice about carrying out her mission. Tragic as this is, the Roy Hobbs that we know and celebrate in literature would not exist without this ill-fated run in. Tim Parrish explains this in his article: "Women in the Fiction of Bernard Malamud: Springboards for Male Self-Transformation?". Of the women in Malamud's novels, and specifically Harriet Bird here, he writes "... their reality is inevitably absorbed by the male hero's self-examination; yet, without the female characters' antagonistic force, the male hero's self-examination would have no meaning" (107). How we see Roy in the rest of *The Natural*, and how Roy sees himself, comes as a result of his ignorance to the heightened importance of sport and his role in it, which is well-displayed in the trackside battle and in *Pre-Game* as a whole.

Roy Hobbs's multiple downfalls in Malamud's novel, as unfair as they seem, may both be linked to the heightened importance of baseball in the story, which often reaches mythic proportions. Though his time in the game was short, Roy's career and his decisions while in the midst of it leave us speculating into modern times. The heightened importance and responsibility that was placed upon the simple ballplayer may have beaten him down, even in success; after all, it was " Roy alone who had saved the boy's life" (142). Malamud's telling of Hobbs brilliantly calls into question what it means to be a natural.

Works Cited

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