



# A Baseball (Anti-)Hero in the Waste Land: Exploring Mythical Uncertainties in Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*

REBECA GUALBERTO 

RESEARCH

 ubiquity press

## ABSTRACT

Most critics of Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* (1952) have focused their analysis of the novel on probing the obvious mythical allusions in the text that combine Arthurian mythology and baseball folklore. More recent discussions, however, have raised the issue of the novel's symbolic ambiguity which for so long has vexed Malamud scholars. As a response to this debate, the aim of this study is to address such indeterminacy by revisiting and bringing up to date a myth-critical interpretation on the novel, exploring how the mythical artifacts in Malamud's text construe mechanisms of uncertainty and ambivalence that express an unsettling vision of post-war American society, which in turn deserves renewed critical attention.

## CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

**Rebeca Gualberto**

Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

[rgualberto@uclm.es](mailto:rgualberto@uclm.es)

---

## KEYWORDS:

Bernard Malamud; *The Natural*; myth-criticism; Arthurian mythology; baseball; sports literature; Grail myth

## TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Gualberto, Rebeca. "A Baseball (Anti-)Hero in the Waste Land: Exploring Mythical Uncertainties in Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*". *Anglo Saxonica*, No. 21, issue 1, art. 9, 2023, pp. 1–10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/as.85>

In a very well-known myth-critical essay on Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* (1952)—for Lupack and Lupack, “perhaps the most perceptive essay of all on *The Natural*” (219)—Wasserman defines the novel as a “syncretism of baseball and the Arthurian legend” (48) in which a baseball champion stands as “the American hero” (48). He argues, however, that, after the influence of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which Wasserman extends to Eliot's myth-ritualist sources, Arthurian mythology is necessarily invested by anthropological and psychological interpretations that determine that the purpose of the baseball champion as an archetype of the American hero is no other than “to gain access to the ‘sources of Life’” (48). Wasserman is perhaps only the most well known in a long list of Malamud critics who have explored the mythical dimension of the novel, as noted by Turner (135) or Pifer (138). Of course, as Turner critically pointed out, asserting the presence of myth in a literary text “is not necessarily to explain why it is there” (135). He complained that early Malamud criticism had consisted in “finding buried traces of myth” as if the task were “a refinement of the symbol archaeology” carried out in the times of New Criticism (135). As a response, he advanced a myth-critical study of the novel that addressed a conflict “between myths and the outer world” (134) that offered however a rather general approach to the mythical artifacts in Malamud's novel, not probing the specificities of Arthurian myth as revised in the novel to explore instead the story of Roy as a manifestation of “the ur-myth of the hero,” appealing to classical sources in the study of hero mysticism such as Rank, Raglan or Campbell (136). This approach to myth in the novel is oddly vague when, as Pifer observed, most discussions on the function of myth in *The Natural* have indeed focused on how the text alludes specifically to Arthurian romance, and, in particular, to the myths of the Grail Knight and the Fisher King (138). More recently, Salinas has retaken a myth-critical approach to the novel, but insightfully noting that, while traditional criticism of the novel has commented on its obvious mythic elements—“especially the motif of the questing hero” (Salinas 106)—a revision of the literature reveals that “Malamud's scaffolding of the novel with the idealizations of myth vexes many critics, for it seems inordinately difficult to discern what Malamud is building” (107). The aim of this study is precisely to respond to that confusion by revising and updating a myth-critical approach to the novel. Probing that vexing mythical scaffolding of the text, the present paper seeks to examine the mythic elements that construe the mechanisms of ambiguity and indeterminacy in the text, with the purpose of interpreting such ambivalence of meaning as a symbolic response to the historical and ideological context depicted in the novel, in which the mythologization of baseball narratives depicts a particularly disquieting vision of American society in the nineteen-fifties.

## 2. THE MYTHICAL AMBIVALENCE OF THE BASEBALL CHAMPION

As mentioned, the most obvious mythic elements in *The Natural* allude to a specific myth in the Arthurian canon: the Waste Land myth, or Grail myth, which tells the story of a wounded king—often known as the Fisher King or Maimed King—cursed to rule over a wasted kingdom.<sup>1</sup> The centrality of this myth in the American twentieth-century literary canon is, at least partly, a consequence of the impact of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* upon the poet's contemporaries. But the fact is that such revision of this myth is so emblematic of American modernism that it resulted in the coinage of critical labels such as wasteland modernism (Chavkin 326), wasteland writers (French 170), or wastelandism (Kermode 113).<sup>2</sup> In this context, as Wasserman notes, for a complete understanding of the symbolic representation of the myth one must consider the influence of myth-ritualism, for not only Eliot, but also two of his sources—James Frazer and Jessie Weston—“transformed the significance of the Arthurian myth for the modern mind” (47). This is one interpretative key to expand the myth-critical reading of Malamud's novel, for it invests medieval legend with a set of mystical meanings that are unavoidable in *The Natural*.

1 The earliest extant version of the myth appears in de Chrétien de Troyes's *Conte del Graal*, a twelfth-century unfinished courtly romance (Loomis 28). The Fisher King has been wounded between the thighs and, due to the sympathetic connection between the king and his kingdom, his sterility has infected the land. For the land to be restored, the young Grail Knight must relieve the king by finding the Grail, or, in later versions of the tale, by replacing the old sick king with a younger and stronger successor (Frye 121).

2 For French, the “wasteland writers” of the nineteen-twenties were “the fictional chroniclers of the Lost Generation” (51)—Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Faulkner, Dos Passos—who expressed in their writings a “widely prevalent world-weariness” (French 1975: 51). Kermode coined the term “wastelandism” to designate the apocalyptic temperament of the literature written between the two wars (113). For Chavkin, “pessimistic wasteland modernism” was at the time an “unchallenged literary convention” (329).

The myth and ritual school of thought, founded at Cambridge University at the beginning of the twentieth century, applied Frazer's theory of myth and ritual—the belief that “literature harks back to myths that were originally the scripts of the key primitive ritual of regularly killing and replacing the king in order to ensure crops for the community” (Segal 44)—to classical myth and early forms of classical drama (49). A few years later, Jessie Weston—a contemporary of the Cambridge ritualists—applied that same theory to the Grail legend, advancing the hypothesis that the myth of the Fisher King was the narrative evolution of the primeval rite of royal sacrifice described by Frazer, in which the tribal king was sacrificed when he grew old or sick, before his strength could diminish, to guarantee the fertility of the crops in springtime (Frazer 308–329). From this perspective, the centrality of the Grail myth was not, then, the magic of the talisman, the valour of the knight, or even the health of the king; it was the need to restore the Waste Land (Weston 63–64), which illustrates with eloquence the influence of Weston's hypothesis upon Eliot's revision of the Grail myth and the subsequent prominence of the “various waste lands” in the modernist canon (Friedman 97).

In American literature after the Second World War, the pervasiveness of wasteland imagery persists. The mythical and symbolic reverberations of wasteland modernism infused the work of later American authors who understood that, after the horrific experience of World War II, “life offered further socioeconomic and political corroboration of the reality of the wasteland—a wasteland more extreme than Eliot could ever have conceived” (Lupack and Lupack 210). A rigorous myth-critical examination of Malamud's *The Natural* corroborates such a statement, for it reveals a “sense of uneasiness” (Turner 135) in the reshaping of myth that dismantles the certainties of hope, transcendence and communal prosperity that lie beneath the traditional myth and also at the core of the “religious magnetism” of baseball (Cartwright and McElroy 47).

In *The Natural*, protagonist Roy Hobbs is “like Parzival, who must heal the fisher king of the Wasteland;” he must restore dignity to team manager Pop Fisher by ending his pennant drought (Salinas 107). In Wasserman's traditional argument, the baseball champion embodies the mythical figure of the Grail Knight not by chance, but because he incarnates “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” (46). For Cartwright and McElroy, the baseball champion is the direct inheritor of Frazer's mythic hero, “a god or king figure,” whose ritual resurrection corresponds with the coming of spring (50). For them, baseball itself—and its set of “pastoral rituals”—reproduces the mythic pattern of divine sacrifice that myth-ritualism establishes as the magical substratum of the Grail story. In this view, Roy is not simply a literary representation of Perceval or Galahad, but an embodiment of the mysticism that imbues such mythical characters, not despite his status as a baseball hero, but precisely because of it. Different layers of mythical representation thus coalesce to represent the mysticism of baseball in the character of a hero upon whose shoulders lies the responsibility of ensuring the welfare of the community.

Roy is the best hitter in the New York Knights baseball team. As a typical chivalric prototype, he owns a magical weapon that is both source and vehicle of the character's prowess: his bat, Wonderboy, the origins of which resonate mythically. Roy carved it himself from the white wood of a tree near a river where he lived when he was a child, after the tree was split by lightning (57). But the mythologization of plot and character, despite being quite evident, is far from straightforward. The pattern of chivalry dissolves into the myths of baseball that shape the architecture of the novel. Baseball provides “a ritualistic system” (Wasserman 65) that, as it assimilates Arthurian myth, transforms a historical perspective over the world of baseball in the fifties into a deeply symbolic reflection about contemporary America that turns out surprisingly pessimistic and unsettling. Avoiding the usual contrivances of allegory, Malamud's novel draws from memorable real events to construe, through a reality-bound narrative, an ancient myth of heroism and longed-for regeneration in which intricate references and structures overlap to a point of inexorable uncertainty.

At the beginning of the novel, Roy's promising career is side-tracked when, at the age of nineteen, he is shot by a mysterious woman named Harriet Bird. The event is based on a true story: the strange shooting accident and later comeback of a real player, Eddie Waitkus (Theodore 20), who was shot in his hotel room by an obsessed fan on 14 June 1949. Waitkus's ordeal shocked fans across the country and “even became part of baseball folklore” (Theodore 20). Malamud's fictionalization of Waitkus's story seems straightforward enough, but it becomes more

complicated when probing the connections between Roy's story and baseball 'folklore' from a broader perspective. As [Torrijos](#) explains, baseball exists in American culture in two interconnected realms, one "physical—recorded in statistics, newsreels, and old photographs," and the other "mythical," made up of "the legends passed down as folklore, the memories enhanced by nostalgic imagination, and the dramatic struggles of humans as played out by heroes in baseball novels" (196). In this argument, one may usefully distinguish between the stories of well-known baseball players—become folklore when fictionalized—and the underlying credo behind those stories, that is, the fact that those baseball stories in fact express, with eloquence, America's "quintessential national quest: the pursuit of the American dream" ([Elias 3](#)). If a myth is a story that symbolizes a communal credo, and the credo behind baseball is the belief in the American Dream, then such would be the faith behind Waitkus's story: "the belief that all men, in accordance with certain rules, but exclusively by their own efforts, can make of their lives what they will" ([Weiss 3](#)). This would be the "shared dream of a culture," that collectively held ideal that is "fundamentally important to the way people think and live" ([Oriard 9](#)).

Tragically, the mythical scaffolding of Malamud's *The Natural* in the end causes the collapse of such a shared dream. Roy does not simply embody a baseball hero and a legendary character. Whereas the superimposition of these two mythical references characterizes the American Dream of baseball as a journey in search of the sources of physical and spiritual life, a deeper layer of mythical representation establishes a mechanism of ambiguity that denies the possibility of success. Roy's ambivalent mythologization challenges the celebratory ideology behind the Waitkus myth, as his story also recalls the Black Sox scandal. Roy is a fictionalization of Waitkus and Shoeless Joe Jackson, a White Sox player accused of accepting a bribe in exchange for throwing the World Series in 1919 ([Nathan 96](#)). The mythical configuration of the character is thus diffused.<sup>3</sup> Waitkus and the Grail Knight stand as parallel myths of heroism, but Roy's double mythologization through the anti-myth of Joe Jackson suggests that he will not be the hero of the legend. His name unsubtly means king, and he has been tragically wounded. He is both Grail Knight and Maimed King. Opposing mythical meanings are expressed then by one signifier, which dilutes the solidity of mythical meaning, destabilizes its underlying credo and, relatedly, makes the completion of the knight's task of regeneration a factual impossibility.

### 3. MYTHICAL AMBIGUITIES AND HISTORICAL PARADOXES

At the end of the novel, Roy attempts to lose a game on purpose, which transforms the shared dream contained in baseball mythology into a cautionary tale about corruption. Roy's ambivalent mythologization, as [Nathan](#) argues, "suggests that ambiguity, irony and indeterminacy ruled the day" (97), which is pertinent insofar as it challenges our more recent perspective of American society in the nineteen-fifties, representing instead a "complex postwar social world in which moral judgements were not absolute" (97). In this regard, the ambivalence expressed in Malamud's novel gives testimony to the duality of an era that for some was "a placid, complacent time of consumption and consensus," but that was for others "a time of political repression, racial segregation, and stultifying conformity" (97), a circumstance that contradicts idealized visions of the fifties as an "innocent" era in American history "when the country was lulled to sleep by prosperity" ([Nathan 97](#)).

The fifties were certainly a time of contradiction. After 1945, despite the extreme horror caused and witnessed during World War II, the reaction to the war's end in America was euphoric. A free and democratic society had triumphed over the evil forces of fascism, and America's homeland had remained intact while the labour market prospered, and the country's industrial capacity developed to reach unseen levels of production ([Schwartz 1](#)). Economic growth brought about an accelerated increase of consumption which, added to the sense of triumph after the war victory, seemed to extend civilians' optimism well into the nineteen-fifties. However, as [Caputi](#) has argued, it is only through the lens of neo-conservatism in the eighties that life in the fifties was transformed into an ideologically charged narrative in American culture and politics (3). It is a narrative that transcends chronology, and which has crystallized into an idealized and nostalgic self-definition of America, having come to signify "that robust, expansive decade

---

3 [Cartwright](#) and [McElroy](#) point out that Roy is also an echo of Babe Ruth, another famous baseball player whose career is similar to Roy's in several aspects. Ruth is himself an ambiguous mythical reference, combining success—hitting a home run to cheer a sick child who had lost his will to live—and failure, as he suffered a traumatic bellyache that endangered the championship (48).

announcing that good times had returned to America after wartime and deprivations” (3). The sixties and seventies vindicated hippie values, feminism, gay pride, and multiculturalism among other unsettling social discourses (2), which distorted the neat demarcations of a previously clearly defined American identity. As a result, narratives of the fifties were retrospectively transformed by the Reagan and Bush administrations into a kind, gentle, and innocent decade that was culturally portrayed as an Eden-like time of “prosperity, family, and fun” (3).<sup>4</sup>

In actual fact, the nineteen-fifties were a time of uncertainty, described by Nathan as “an era when wartime certainties dissipated and were transformed into cold war and atomic insecurities [...] at a cultural moment still coming to grips with the Holocaust and Hiroshima, a moment when Senator Joe McCarthy was a hunting for communists, [and] the Korean War loomed large” (97). At this time of anxiety, baseball became “a preeminent symbol of American values and virtues” (97). But in *The Natural*, Malamud took that symbol and reshaped its mythopoeia, unsettling the values and corrupting the virtues it allegedly stood for, giving form in turn to a symbolic expression of the social tensions boiling under the surface of society. Ironically, the novel represents the prosperous fifties as the mythical Waste Land that resulted from the carnage of the Second World War, and it does so by recreating a “radically intertextual fictional world characterized by historical and mythical allusion, tragicomedy, and irony” (Nathan 97). By mythologizing in rather ambivalent terms the Black Sox scandal, the event resists a simplistic moral; the novel presents instead a complex and opaque depiction that “calls from American collective memory a story traditionally framed in terms of deceit, betrayal, and disillusionment and retells it so that readers are left with a much less unified and coherent parable than many are comfortable with” (97).

As argued, indeterminacy is mythically expressed in the novel. Malamud fictionalizes in Roy the contradictory stories of Waitkus and Jackson, but he also embodies a Grail Knight that, at times, becomes indistinguishable from the Maimed King he should restore to health to bring about communal regeneration. For Schwartz, Roy “fails to fulfil his promise of becoming the grail knight who will lead his team from their wasteland of losing seasons, because he allows himself to be seduced by sex and corrupted by material distractions” (154). For Cartwright and McElroy, Roy is “blind and shallow [...] a ‘natural’ in the Elizabethan sense of a fool” who “cannot deal with life, with the real world, on the terms that life presents to him” (53). Regardless, Roy is a hero who sells the purpose of his quest, which thwarts the mythical expectations of recovery set up at the beginning of the story.

*The Natural* begins with a mock “tourney” (Malamud 23) in the middle of an enchanted forest of “trees bent and clawing, plucked white by icy blasts from the black water, their bony branches twisting in many a broken direction” (23). At a carnival where their train stops, Walter ‘the Whammer’ Whambold, the leading hitter of the league, challenges Roy to strike him out. Roy defeats the acclaimed Whammer and obtains Harriet Bird’s favour. She interprets the encounter between Roy and Whammer in myth-ritualist terms, as “Sir Percy lancing Sir Maldemer, or the first son (with a rock in his paw) ranged against the primitive papa” (23), which raises expectations of a communal restoration achieved by Roy’s replacement of Whammer. But right after their “contest of skill” (18), those expectations are frustrated by violence. Harriet asks Roy about the “glorious meaning” behind baseball (25), but he fails to answer appropriately. Immediately after, Roy watches his scout and manager, Sam, die of internal bleeding—a consequence of being struck by the last ball Roy pitched during the “tourney.” Not much later, when they all arrive at Chicago for his first try-out, Roy is shot by Harriet, who is revealed to be a serial killer who targets professional athletes. Her intended victim had probably been Whammer, but Roy’s triumph most likely made her change her mind, which forcefully reverses the ritual pattern of regeneration initially construed through Roy’s victory. This early upending of the expected mythical pattern gives a tragic form to the novel (Mellard 69), since what Mellard defines as “the novel’s central narrative” (69) in fact mirrors the mythical meanings and structures of this introduction but exacerbating the disturbances of the traditional mythical pattern that deny the possibility of regeneration.

When Roy joins the New York Knights, he is significantly older and, “barring the near-fatal wound inflicted by Harriet Bird, he should now be giving way to the younger hero” (Mellard 69). However, he replaces the young star of the New York Knights, Bump Baily, who, after being

---

4 In this regard, it is quite illustrative that a very influential movie in the Reagan era is precisely Barry Levinson’s optimistic film adaptation of *The Natural* (1984), which ends with Roy Hobb’s Pennant-winning homerun and, thus, with the completion of the Knight’s heroic task of restoration. The ambiguity expressed through ambivalent mythologization in the novel is lost in the film, which contributes to the fabrication of the kind and gentle narrative of the fifties as both definition and realization of a fixed and immutable American identity.

humiliated by Roy's skills, loses control, and runs into the outfield wall during a game, dying from the impact. Despite the tragic circumstances that lead to Roy joining the team, once again the mythical pattern of the narrative raises expectations of redemption. Pop Fisher, the team manager, asks Roy to play in Bump's place and, when Roy "trot[s] out" into the field and the rain turns the grass green (Malamud 69), the replacement looks like a wise decision: "the pitchers tried something different every time he came up, sliders, sinkers, knucklers, but he swung and connected, spraying them to all fields" (70). Yet, the promising game takes a dark turn towards the end, which forebodes the tragic fate of Roy as hero and redeemer of the Knights:

It happened that a woman who lived on the sixth floor of an apartment house overlooking the stadium was cleaning out her bird cage, near the end of the game, which the Knights took handily, when her canary flew out of the window and darted down across the field. Roy, who was waiting for the last out, saw something coming at him in the low rays of the sun, and leaping high, bagged it in his glove.

He got rid of the bloody mess in the clubhouse can. (71)

The "bloody mess" that Roy discards is a very eloquent omen of the destiny that awaits both him and his team-mates. Roy, as a Grail knight, seems to be completing his heroic task, but the ambivalence of mythical roles and meanings determines that the actions that should bring redemption to the Waste Land become destructive. Initially, Roy's replacement of Bump, who was "carefree and full of life" (101), seems to bring about regeneration for the Knights: "Even the weather was better, more temperate after the insulting early heat, with just enough rain to keep the grass a bright green" (78). This mystical connection between baseball mastery and natural renewal concurs with Cartwright and McElroy's hypothesis about baseball being a "modern day pastoral art form" that reproduces "pastoral rituals" (47, 50). The mythical interplay between baseball, pastoral regeneration, and the Arthurian substratum of the story appears to be seamless. The novel's clearest Fisher-King figure, the team manager Pop Fisher, seems to heal miraculously with Roy's arrival at the Knights: "His hands healed and so did his heart, for even during the tensest struggle he looked a picture of contentment" (79). But the inherent perversion in the replacement of Bump cannot be disregarded. Roy suffers himself the illness that afflicts Fisher, and they seem to be infecting the rest of the team, who are described by Lupack and Lupack as the "denizens of a modern wasteland" (214):

It was like some kind of sickness. They threw to the wrong bases, bumped heads together in the outfield, passed each other on the baselines, sometimes batted out of order, throwing both Pop and the ump into fits, and cursed everybody else for their mistakes. It was not uncommon to see them pile three men on a bag, or behold a catcher on the opposing team, in a single skip and jump, lay the tag on two of them as they came thundering together into home plate. (Malamud 62)

A myth-critical interpretation of the novel establishes that the King's sickness has infected his kingdom, which has become a waste land. Fisher suffers from athlete's foot, which he has in both hands and makes him itchy, forcing him to be bandaged in the hot weather. He is uncomfortable to the point of wondering if life is "worth the living of it" (36). He suffers from "hysterical behaviour" (65), but his downfall as a baseball hero seems to have been a case of bad luck: he fell on his stomach during a game. Since then, Fisher believes he was jinxed, and has spent twenty-five years trying to break the curse, something he believes will happen when the Knights become "world champs" (51). Now Fisher, whose dream was to be a farmer—which seems to denote a kind of mystical connection with the land<sup>5</sup>—is about to lose his job as manager. Roy's mission is to redeem him before he is deposed, which would put an end to the "blasted dry season" (35). The myth-ritualist dimension of the story is once again emphasized. Roy, however, fails. And, tragically, he does so on purpose.

---

5 If, as previously discussed, the credo that underlies baseball is the belief in the American Dream, Fisher's aspiration to be a farmer is significant for how it resonates with historical manifestations of the American Dream, a term first coined by James Truslow Adams to define "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement" (374). In these words, one may hear the echoes of Benjamin Franklin's original argument that the reason for the uncommon growth of population in America was to be found in "the salubrity of air, the healthiness of the climate, the plenty of good provisions, and the encouragement to early marriage by the certainty of subsistence in cultivating the earth" (530).

One of the ways in which Roy is characterized as counterpart to the mythical Fisher King, and not only to the Grail Knight, is through his identification with Fisher.<sup>6</sup> Roy believes he is jinxed too, and towards the end of the novel, his “athlete heart” (Malamud 168) distortedly mirrors Fisher’s athlete foot. He suffers a case of high blood pressure so severe that he risks dying if he continues to play baseball. It is the final and most serious condition Roy has suffered since Harriet Bird shot him, but he was sick ever since, when he “could feel the strength draining from his bones, weakening him so he could hardly lift Wonderboy” (62). Roy’s incapacity to lift Wonderboy, which stands as a symbol of his vigour and reproductive capacity, also stresses the character’s mythical identification with the Fisher King, but the mythical dimension of Roy’s story complicates further when he meets Memo, Bump’s lover, who Lupack and Lupack identify with a “false Grail” (216) that distracts Roy from his mission. Their argument is that Roy’s success is dependent on his love for another woman, Iris, who they describe as “earth-motherly” (212) and who appears to break Roy’s jinx (Malamud 137). Iris is a grandmother at thirty-three and, despite Roy’s mythical identification with the Fisher King at this point in the novel, she becomes pregnant with Roy’s child after only one encounter. This circumstance corroborates the character’s ‘motherly’ nature, but the clear exaggeration suggests a farcical tone that challenges a face-value interpretation of the character. In a narrative where Grail Knight and Fisher King are at times indistinguishable, the Grail as a mythical signified should not have a stable meaning, either. In fact, an interpretation of Iris as a sort of Grail-like source of redemption for Roy strengthens his mythical characterization as a Fisher King figure, and not as the Knight that pursues the Grail. This evidences how all mythical references in the story are multivalent and fluid, thus dismantling the traditional mythical pattern of regeneration to be expected. In this remade mythic framework, Iris does not offer a better chance at regeneration than Memo does.

Memo, like Roy and Fisher, is sick, but this is no deterrent for Roy, who feels sexually enticed by her illness. He dreams that her sick breast “had turned green yet he was anxious to have a feel of it” (112). The image somehow recalls, quite perversely, the mythical landscape of that “green breast of the new world” imagined at the end of *The Great Gatsby* (Fitzgerald 148),<sup>7</sup> but again the reference is two-fold. Memo’s sick breast appeals to an Eden-like mythologization of America as a land of plenty but, at the same time, it recalls Myrtle Wilson’s torn breast, lying flat on the road after the tragic car accident in Fitzgerald’s novel. As Tanner argued, in *The Great Gatsby*, this terrible transmutation of images, from green breast to torn breast, represented America as a place “desecrated, mutilated, violated” (196). As he wrote, “what might’ve been a Wonderland” had become “a wasteland” (196). Malamud, by inhering this dichotomy but fusing it together in the image of Memo’s sick body, combines in one single signifier those mythical landscapes of Wonderland and Waste Land. The traditional movement of romance, from order to chaos and darkness, and back again to a new order (Saunders 3), is replaced in *The Natural* by a paralysis that does not differentiate Wonderland from Wasteland, plentiful from inhospitable.

From this perspective, interpreting Memo as a false Grail is thus somehow reductionist. She is the object pursued by the Knight, but the multiple references to her green breast—including the Waste Land itself—complicates her characterization. Roy betrays his “pledge” of heroism in exchange for a bribe that he believes will make him rich enough to be worthy of Memo’s affections, thus abandoning his mission to help the Knights win the Pennant; but Memo’s mythical significance is greater than her status as a temptress that corrupts the hero’s moral compass. The fact that Memo stands as counterpart to the Grail and to the Waste Land simultaneously connotes the ambiguity of the mythical signified itself, which denies the possibility of finding transcendence beyond symbolic representation. Of course, this is extensive to other characters in the novel: both Memo and Iris are two symbolic depictions of one mutable mythical signified the meaning of which no longer antecedes representation. Both are unreliable signifiers, but Roy’s refusal to accept such ambivalence and his determination to choose between one or the other determine his heroic failure. As Turner argues, “Roy exists inside the myth, he fulfils its conditions, but it is those same conditions that make his corruption and fall inevitable” (53).

6 The names Roy and Fisher combine to form an Anglo-French term equivalent to *le Roi Pêcheur* (the Fisher King in the original French sources).

7 The intertextual relationship that conjoins *The Natural* and *The Great Gatsby* has been long established by critics such as Ducharme, who draws parallels between Daisy and Memo to corroborate an identification between Gatsby and Roy (11), or Pifer, who observes similarities between how both Roy and Gatsby “pay the price” for pursuing an American dream that is “as compelling as it is impossible to attain” in so far as it offers riches and success as the key to entering “a magical realm of existence” (145).

He chooses Iris when he learns that she is pregnant, choosing the possibility of rebirth, but by then it is too late. During the last game, Roy accidentally hits Iris with a ball; she goes “soundlessly down” (194) and is carried to the hospital in an ambulance. Iris’s recovery is uncertain, but the potentially tragic demise of the character has been repeatedly foreshadowed in a story that constantly raises expectations of redemption only to thwart them time and time again. Iris pursues Roy believing that he is a true hero, confident that “without heroes we’re all plain people and don’t know how far we can go [...] [because] it’s their function to be the best and for the rest of us to understand what they represent and guide ourselves accordingly” (133). Roy believes that, when she stands up in the middle of a game and he sees her among the audience, thinking that she is with him and nobody else, she breaks “the whammy” (133) that is the cause to his bad luck. But their assumptions are both wrong. Iris soon recognizes the emptiness behind Roy’s purpose to break every record only to be the best in the game. When they go swimming in the freezing waters of Lake Michigan—what seems initially an obvious contrast to the stagnant pond that Roy visits with Memo—Iris feels “repelled” (138) and tries to escape Roy’s insistent advances, which leads him to attempt suicide by swimming for the bottom of the lake. When Iris finally surrenders, their lovemaking is not interrupted as in the case of Roy’s encounter with Memo, but it denotes a sense of repressed violence that hinders the sought-for regeneration to be expected from that moment. Roy “smiles, never so relaxed in sex,” but he stops suddenly when Iris tells him she is a grandmother (140). Then, “in fright,” she tries to raise herself as she “remembered something else;” but Roy “shoved her back and went on from where he had left off” (140). Her getting pregnant after the encounter—probably what Iris intended to avoid when she “remembered something” and tried to pull away—can hardly be interpreted as a sign of regeneration in this context, which is tragically confirmed when, during the final game, Roy hits her in the face when aiming to hit an unhappy fan who criticises him from the audience.

Such is the fatal ending repeatedly foreshadowed through the mythical and symbolical parameters of the novel. The night before the last game, Roy attends a party hosted by Memo during which he compulsively eats large amounts of food, trying to satiate an inexplicable hunger. He collapses and wakes up later at the hospital. For Petty, this is a sign of what leads Roy to his ruin: “his chronic dissatisfaction, his tendency to want something even as he is having it, which applies to his voracious appetite, his burning desire to rewrite the Major League record books, and [...] his unfulfilling choices regarding sex” (36). Roy’s gluttonous appetite is thus correlative to his frustrated sexuality and to the vanity behind his purpose to break records, which in mythical terms contrasts with the traditional Grail Knight’s fasting (Lupack and Lupack 212). He devours down six hamburgers that “looked like six dead birds” (Malamud 164). He pours ketchup “on three of the birds” and shuffles all of them together “so as so as not to know which three had the ketchup and which two hadn’t” (164). He eats them but is dissatisfied, because “they all tasted like dead birds” (164).

The unappealing description of Roy’s gluttony recalls with clarity the ominous symbols in Roy’s first game with the Knights, when he accidentally crushed a bird in his hand. The insistence on the use of Ketchup to try to hide the taste of dead birds—America’s national condiment so much as baseball is America’s national pastime<sup>8</sup>—expressively recalls the “bloody mess” (71) in Roy’s first game, which symbolically connects Roy’s seemingly heroic and restorative first game to his definitive failure. At this time, the character is explicitly identified with the mythical Maimed King: trying to understand his dissatisfaction, Roy tries to remember “how it felt when he was hungry after a day of fishing and was sizzling lake bass over an open fire and boiling coffee in a tin can” (163). Yet he remains, simultaneously, the Knight. After his indigestion, he dreams of rousing himself “to do battle” (164), yet can barely move due to a pain “he could not believe existed” (165). His bellyful of “dead birds” and subsequent visit to the hospital reveal a severe blood pressure condition that could kill him if he continues playing baseball. Like Pop Fisher, he must quit, but, unlike Fisher, he selfishly decides to renounce his mission altogether, accepting a bribe from the team’s owner to throw the game, believing that, if he abandons his promise to redeem the Knights and instead obtains financial security, he will be able to finally earn Memo’s affection.

For Cartwright and McElroy, Roy falls prey to corruption because of the vanity of his purpose; as they argue, once he cannot set any more records, “he has no large, more encompassing set of values to fall back on now, to guide him through the temptation to corruption” (52). This means that, by the time he changes his mind, he has given up mythical heroism; consequently,

---

8 See Smith, Andrew F. *Pure Ketchup. A History of America’s National Condiment. With Recipes*, 1996.



he is too sick to play, having embodied completely the figure of the Fisher King. Feeling as if he is dying (Malamud 199), he hits a foul ball and Wonderboy splits lengthwise, which is a sign of Roy's symbolic castration, now irreparable.

After the game, Roy buries Wonderboy "wishing it would take root and become a tree" (204). Once again, the text alludes to the mysticism behind Roy's mythical characterization, but now he knows the futility of his wish. He decides not to water the earth where he has 'planted' his bat, knowing that the water "would only leak through his fingers before he got there" and doubting "he could find the exact spot in the dark" (204). Later, a woman says of Roy that "he could have been a king" (206). A myth-critical approach to the novel decodes the irony in such a statement: Roy is a king, but the mythical mechanisms of his enthronement are disturbed. Joseph Campbell argued that the task of the Grail hero was "to ask the question relieving the Maimed King in such a way as to inherit his role without the wound" (424). Roy certainly inherits the wound, which signals the failure of his heroic mission.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The juxtaposition of baseball and Arthurian legend throughout the novel sustains the hypothesis that the Knights' plight, "their wasteland of losing seasons" (Schwartz 154), is a testament for American society in the nineteen-fifties. As Carino notes, "baseball history works to inscribe the novel with a realistic strain that locates it in the modern world, where money and human weakness tend to triumph over heroism" (75). The characterization of that modern world is shaped through its mythologization, that is, through its modelling around characters, symbols, and themes of Arthurian mythology. But far from operating as two separate systems of references, traditional Arthurian legend and contemporary baseball mythology are inextricable in the text. Roy Fisher embodies Eddie Waitkus insofar as he is the Grail Knight counterpart, and he stands in for the Fisher King so far as he also incarnates Shoeless Joe Jackson. This simultaneity of references recalls Levenson's definition of the "anthropological temper" that Eliot used in *The Waste Land* and which "understands by comparing, [...] sets systems of belief in relation to one another, and [...] disallows the special claims of any single system" (202). In *The Natural*, baseball as an inherently American cultural manifestation is compared and set in relationship to Arthurian myth through a remarkably complex process of mythical reinterpretation that, firstly, recaptures the mythical parameters of America's modernist tradition of *wastelandism*, and, secondly, connects that outlook with the most popular mythical corpus of its time: the stories of baseball folklore that were so well-known in the collective imagination during the fifties. The process, as Levenson argues, disallows any claims of truth and transcendence in both mythologies (202). The result is a "reshaped" legend (Lupack and Lupack 211) that examines contemporary life and denounces the emptiness of consumer capitalism values in a commodified society that used materialism and the shining superficiality of economic prosperity to masquerade the underlying horror that hid beneath such buoyancy: the unimaginable violence of World War II, and the political repression, racial segregation, mindless conformity, and social inequalities that tenuously supported the complacency and docility of the consumption era. Critics such as Schwartz have claimed that, "read as a metaphor for the nation as large, [*The Natural*] further suggests that the United States might easily possess the resources and talent to lead the world out of its post-war waste land but is instead squandering that potential on superficial attractions" (154). Yet, the mythical ambivalence of the novel seems to suggest that Roy's failure is not simply a consequence of his squandered potential, but of an inherent corruption of such potential that denies him any chance of heroism. His materialism and greed are symptoms of the collective affliction he cannot relieve, and which lay at the root of the credo that sustains baseball mythology, that is, the American dream: a myth that cannot endure, without dissolving, the collision with a violent and corrupt reality it cannot transcend.

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

## AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

Rebeca Gualberto  [orcid.org/0000-0002-1474-1577](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1474-1577)  
Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Spain

- Adams, James T. *The Epic of America*. Little, Brown and Co., 1954.
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Masks of God: Creative Mythologies*. Penguin Books, 1968.
- Caputi, Mary. *A Kinder, Gentler America. Melancholia and the Mythical 1950s*. U of Minnesota P, 2005.
- Carino, Peter. "History as Myth in Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*." *NINE: A Journal of Baseball History and Culture* vol. 14, no.3, 2005, pp. 67–77. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nin.2005.0038>
- Cartwright, Kent, and Mary A. McElroy. "Malamud's "the Natural" and the Appeal of Baseball in American Culture." *The Journal of American Culture* vol. 8, 1985, pp. 47–56. DOI: [https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-734X.1985.0802\\_47.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1542-734X.1985.0802_47.x)
- Chavkin, Allan. "Bellow's Alternative to the Wasteland: Romantic Theme and Form in *Herzog*." *Studies in the Novel*, 1 vol. 1, no. 3, 1979, pp. 326–337.
- Ducharme, Robert. 1974. *Art and Idea in the Novels of Bernard Malamud*. Mouton, 1974. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110904963>
- Elias, Robert, editor. *Baseball and the American Dream. Race, Class, Gender and the National Pastime*. M. E. Sharpe, 2001.
- Fitzgerald, Francis S. *The Great Gatsby*. Longman Group Limited, 1991.
- Franklin, Benjamin. "Information to Those Who Would Remove to America." *The Norton Anthology of American Literature. Volume A, Literature to 1820*, edited by Nina Baym, Norton, 2003, pp. 528–533.
- Frazer, James G. *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion. I Volume, Abridge Edition*. Macmillan Publishing Company, 1963.
- French, Warren. *John Steinbeck*. Twayne Publishers, 1975.
- Friedman, Susan S. *Psyche Reborn: The Emergence of H.D.* Indiana UP, 1991.
- Frye, Northrop. *The Secular Scripture. A Study of the Structure of Romance*. Harvard UP, 1976.
- Kermode, Frank. *The Sense of an Ending. Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. OUP, 1967.
- Levenson, Michael. *A Genealogy of Modernism. A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908–1922*. CUP 1984.
- Loomis, Roger S. *The Grail. From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol*. Constable, 1992. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691187198>
- Lupack, Alan and Barbara Tapa Lupack. *King Arthur in America*. D. S. Brewer, 1999.
- Malamud, Bernard. *The Natural*. London: Vintage, 2002.
- Mellard, James M. 1970. "Four Versions of Pastoral." *Bernard Malamud and the Critics*, edited by Leslie Field A. and Joyce W. Field, New York UP, pp. 67–83.
- Nathan, Daniel A. *Saying It's So: A Cultural History of the Black Sox Scandal*. U of Illinois P, 2003.
- Oriard, Michael. *Dreaming of Heroes: American Sports Fiction, 1868–1980*. Nelson-Hall, 1982.
- Petty, John W. "It's Only Natural: Sex and Baseball in Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*." *Baseball/Literature/Culture: Essays, 2004–2005*, edited by Peter Carino, McFarland & Company, 2006, pp. 35–45.
- Pifer, Ellen. "Malamud's Unnatural 'The Natural'." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* vol. 7, no. 2, 1988, pp. 138–152.
- Salinas, Oscar. "The Natural: Malamud's Metamyth of a Moral Will Through the Moral Hero." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, vol. 97, no. 1, 2014, pp. 100–125. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5325/soundings.97.1.0100>
- Saunders, Corinne. *A Companion to Romance. From Classical to Contemporary*. Blackwell Publishing, 2004. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/b.9780631232711.2004.00002.x>
- Schwartz, Richard A. *The 1950s*. Facts on File, 2003.
- Segal, Robert A. *Theorizing About Myth*. U of Massachusetts P, 1999.
- Smith, Andrew F. *Pure Ketchup: A History of America's National Condiment with Recipes*. U of South Carolina P, 1996.
- Tanner, Tony. *The American mystery*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Theodore, John. *Baseball's Natural: The Story of Eddie Waitkus*. U of Illinois P, 2002.
- Torrijos, Randy M. "America's Two Reams." *Baseball and the American Dream. Race, Class, Gender and the National Pastime*, edited by Robert Elias, M. E. Sharpe, 2001, pp. 193–199.
- Turner, Frederick W., III. "Myth inside and out: Malamud's 'The Natural.' *Novel: A Forum of Fiction* vol. 1, no. 2, 1968, pp. 133–139. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1345263>
- Wasserman, Earl R. "The Natural: World Ceres." *Bernard Malamud and the Critics*, edited by Leslie Field A. and Joyce W. Field, New York UP, 1970, pp. 45–65.
- Weiss, Richard. *The American Myth of Success. From Horatio Alger to Norman Vincent Peale*. Illini Book, 1969.
- Weston, Jessie L. *From Ritual to Romance*. Princeton UP, 1993. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780691217741>

**TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:**

Gualberto, Rebeca. "A Baseball (Anti-)Hero in the Waste Land: Exploring Mythical Uncertainties in Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*". *Anglo Saxonica*, No. 21, issue 1, art. 9, 2023, pp. 1–10. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/as.85>

**Submitted:** 05 April 2022

**Accepted:** 05 November 2023

**Published:** 27 November 2023

**COPYRIGHT:**

© 2023 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

*Anglo Saxonica* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.