

“Them Dodgers is My Gallant Knights”: Fiction as History in *The Natural* (1952)

Harley Henry
Department of English
Macalaster College

Leave us go root for the Dodgers, Rodgers,
They're playing ball under lights.
Leave us cut out all the juke jernts, Rodgers,
Where we've been wastin' our nights.
Dancin' the shag or the rumba is silly
When we can be rooting for Adolf Camilli,
So leave us go root for the Dodgers, Rodgers,
Them Dodgers is my gallant knights.¹

(Brooklyn Dodgers rooters' song)

Bernard Malamud's first novel, *The Natural* (1952), is about a briefly great, but fatefully incomplete baseball player: Roy Hobbs of the New York Knights. "Baseball players were the heroes' of my childhood," Malamud recalled in 1975,² adding that "as a kid" he sometimes found entertainment in "the adventures of the Brooklyn Dodgers at Ebbets Field."³

This essay describes the contemporaneous (1946-51) baseball events and written sources which influenced Malamud's creation of a Cold War "American Adam"-Roy Hobbs-as this hero transformed "Them Dodgers" of Malamud's youth into the somewhat-less-than-gallant New York Knights of his adult baseball fiction. Readers familiar with baseball have long recognized allusions to the game's history and legends in the novel, but my research has uncovered a number of previously unidentified contemporary sources and events which shed considerable light on the genesis and thus on the historical significance of the novel.

Malamud wrote about a *baseball* hero who sells out because recurring sports scandals of the forties and early fifties seemed both symptoms and apt symbols of wider-spread corruption in American life. In the early years of the Cold War-despite America's rapid recovery from World War II and exclusive

1. Brooklyn Dodgers rooters' song written by Dan Parker, sports editor of the *Daily Mirror*, and quoted in Frank Graham, *The Brooklyn Dodgers: An Informal History* (New York, 1945), 203, a work which was most probably a source for Malamud (see below).

2. Leslie A. Field and Joyce W. Field, "An Interview with Bernard Malamud," in *Bernard Malamud: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. L. A. and J. W. Field (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1975), 8.

3. Bernard Malamud, "The Art of Fiction LII," *Paris Review* 61 (1975): 43.

possession of the atomic bomb-corruption at home and Communist threats abroad raised grave doubts about the strength of the country's "natural" values and fitness for the exercise of global power.⁴ Malamud's patronymic American hero Roy Hobbs is *roi*- "He coulda been a king."⁵ But he is also the immature "American Adam," unprepared for the post-war world, as indicated by the allusion to the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who feared the ambitions of the natural man without discipline doomed him to a "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" life.

Malamud obviously overlaid his baseball story with allusions to classic western myths embodied in the "matter of Arthur" and the quest for the Holy Grail, and to their twentieth century interpretations by Jessie Weston, T. S. Eliot, C. G. Jung, and others.⁶ He did so in order to establish the contemporary power of American myths embodied in baseball. My concern here is with the historical sources of Malamud's mythopoeic novel, particularly its protagonist and plot. This study of its genesis shows that Malamud *made myth out of* current sport events of the cold-war era in order to strengthen the topical power of his novel. I also hope this essay will put to rest the notion that a reader of this novel must somehow compensate for Malamud's supposed indifference toward, or ignorance of, baseball.

I

Malamud's last and perhaps most definitive remark about the writing of his first novel was in a memoir delivered at Bennington College in 1984:

During my first year at Oregon State I wrote *The Natural*, begun before leaving New York City. Baseball had interested me, especially its comic aspects, but I wasn't able to write about the game until I transformed game into myth, via Jessie Weston's Percival [sic] legend with an assist by T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land" plus the lives of several ballplayers I had read, in particular Babe Ruth's and Bobby Feller's. The myth enriched the baseball lore as feats of magic transformed the game.

Although this account provides valuable clues about Malamud's need to transform "game into myth," it reveals little about the actual genesis of the novel.

Malamud apparently worked on *The Natural* from sometime in 1948 until mid to late 1951. No definitive biography of him exists, and he remained very guarded about the relations between his life and his fiction; what follows is a

4. I am presently at work on an essay exploring more fully the contextual moral implications of Malamud's novel, particularly the analogy between Roy's baseball and America's atomic powers. This essay, "In and Out and Fair and Foul: Moral Judgment in *The Natural*," looks at the moral problem of *hamartia* (mistake) as it is displayed in Roy's sellout and subsequent failure in the playoff game at the end of the novel.

5. Bernard Malamud, *The Natural* (New York, 1973), 217. Further references to this novel will be by page references in the body of this essay.

6. This literary background is fully and convincingly presented by Earl R. Wasserman, "*The Natural*: Malamud's World Ceres," in Harold Bloom, ed., *Bernard Malamud: Modern Critical Views* (New York, 1986), 47-64. Wasserman's essay first appeared in *Centennial Review*, 4 (1965).

7. Malamud, "Long Work, Short Life," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 26 (1987): 606. Malamud's statement that he "wrote" his novel in his first year at Oregon State does not, I think, preclude the possibility that he spent the next year to eighteen months reworking it for publication. As my analysis indicates, at least some of his materials were not available to him until after his first academic year in Oregon.

provisional reconstruction of the composition process based on existing biographical evidence and inferences from the baseball materials and sources revealed by the text.

Malamud's writing career began with two short stories published in 1943.⁸ Meanwhile he taught high school in New York City until he moved his family, sometime during the summer of 1949, to Corvallis, Oregon, where he assumed a teaching position at Oregon State University. Before the move he had obviously begun a number of writing projects. Soon after he arrived in Oregon, he mentioned "the outline of novel he was writing (which turned out to be *The Natural*) at a party."⁹ We can assume that before leaving New York he had a baseball story in mind, though perhaps only a short story inspired by the shooting of the player Eddie Waitkus in June, 1949, an event around which the first short section of *The Natural* is composed. But he had other things in the works as well. Two new short stories were published in 1950, and three more in 1951. It therefore seems unlikely that he completed the final version of his first novel, as he remembered doing, during his "first year." Although Malamud's discipline as a writer-he claimed he taught three days and wrote four each week-became legendary at Oregon State, some of the baseball materials alluded to in the novel simply were not available to him until after June, 1950.¹⁰ The most important of these are the extraordinary 1950 comeback-far more noted by the sports media than that of Waitkus-of New York Giant pitcher Sal Maglie; the employment of a hypnotist by the St. Louis Browns (one of the prototypes for the "dead to the neck" Knights) in 1950; the basketball point-shaving scandals which rocked the country in January, 1951;¹¹ and the Kefauver Committee hearings into organized crime, including sports gambling, particularly the televised sessions in March, 1951. To this list one might add the New York Giants' 1951 playoff victory over the Dodgers, among the most dramatic moments in baseball history, although this event undoubtedly took place rather late in the Malamud's work on the novel. But even if the "Miracle of Coogan's Bluff" occurred after the novel was finished, it certainly added considerably to the context in which *The Natural* was originally read.

At the outset, and before the move to Corvallis, the baseball materials for the

8. Rita Nathalie Kosofsky, *Bernard Malamud, An Annotated Checklist* (Kent, Ohio, 1969), 3.

9. Suzanne Clark, "Bernard Malamud in Oregon," *The American Scholar* 59 (October, 1990): 68.

10. Since the outbreak of the Korean War was in June, 1950, some of the crucial political events, including Truman's firing of General Douglas MacArthur, as well as the sports events noted and reflected in the novel, occurred after this date.

11. The Browns' employment of a hypnotist received considerable attention, mostly for its comic possibilities, early in the 1950 season. See John Lardner, "The Man Who Hypnotized the Browns," *Sport* (July, 1950): 70-72, 93. Lardner reported, "Dr. Tracy has eyes that can pierce concrete, which is not meant as a reflection on the skulls of the Browns" (72). See also Ellis J. Veech, "Hypnosis in Baseball," *Baseball Magazine* (May, 1950): 345-46. Articles also appeared in such magazines as *Colliers* (March 11) and *American Magazine* (April). One can speculate that the Waitkus incident was the crucial, as well as the initial, stimulus. Certainly the shooting, the Feller materials, and the 1948 "Monty Stratton Story" (see below) were sufficient for the creation of "PreGame," which has the finished quality of a short story. The Browns' hypnotist appears early in "Play Ball" as do some of the Maglie materials. Singularly and most notably missing from the baseball allusions in the novel is any recognition at all of the dramatic and highly symbolic appearance of black players in the major leagues, beginning in 1947.

novel included, by Malamud's own testimony, the published "lives" of players Bob Feller and Babe Ruth-as well as his memories (probably refreshed by reading) of the "Brooklyn Dodgers at Ebbets Field," both before and after World War II. Malamud, perhaps moving from short story to novel, then began to shape an "exile and return" plot imitating current events, for which he fleshed out his conception of Roy-based on Feller and Ruth-with allusions to three other players, two of them active at the time: Joe Jackson, Ted Williams, and Sal Maglie. These contemporary materials-readily available in newspapers and magazines of the times-linked his subject matter (sports) to a much broader problem which, in 1975, Malamud called "an ethical dilemma of American life." "Roy Hobbs is as American," he added, "as the White House lawyers involved in Watergate."¹²

As a serious writer, Malamud took a genuine yet carefully calculated risk at the beginning of his career by writing about baseball. The tradition of adult sports fiction was thin in 1952, and play-by-play descriptions might easily degenerate into clichés and irrelevant detail. Yet Malamud not only organized the main "Play Ball" section around the time-honored baseball plot of the fortunes of a team through the course of a season, he also devoted the climax and much of the last fifth of the novel to the details of a single playoff game. He knew what he was doing. Although it has been argued otherwise,¹³ Malamud was neither ignorant of, nor indifferent to, baseball and its socio-political implications. That is to say, he knew baseball while writing about it. As it turned out, his choice of subject was especially felicitous.

It also seems reasonable that, in 1950, Malamud "wasn't able to write about the game" until he saw in myths preserved in literature the ingredients to make baseball the means to "symbolize and explicate an ethical dilemma in American life."¹⁴ Having little in the way of direct literary precedent, however, he may have seen unadorned baseball with what Philip Roth later called the American writer's "old bugaboo . . . of seriousness, or profundity" so that a "certain snobbishness about [baseball] held [his] imagination in check."¹⁵ The high art sources-Weston, Eliot, and Jung-he tapped to "transform" baseball into something more literary have been well documented and they help to explain his willingness to use "the matter of baseball" as a modern American artistic equivalent for the British "matter of Arthur."

But we must also take seriously the references in his Bennington memoir to the "feats of magic" of Bob Feller and Babe Ruth, which transformed baseball-in their way-as much as he was trying to transform it in another. They are important clues to the deeper influence of the "matter of baseball" in the composition of the novel.

12. Field, "An Interview," 9.

13. For example, by Gerry O'Connor, "Bernard Malamud's *The Natural*: The Worst There Ever Was in the Game," *Arete* 3 (1986): 37-42.

14. Field, "An Interview," 9.

15. Phillip Roth, "On *The Great American Novel*," in *Reading Myself and Others* (New York, 1985), 86. Roth's essay was first published in the *Partisan Review* 3 (1973): 467-71.

II

Feller's ghost-written autobiography, *Strikeout Story* (1947), is an important and previously unexamined baseball source that Malamud took with him to Oregon. Three incidents in the early career of Feller—the Iowa farm boy who became a premier major league pitcher—are, and presumably were for the budding writer, especially suggestive.

Feller's account, which Malamud heavily modified for the opening of *The Natural*, recalls his journey to join the Cleveland Indians for the first time for a regular season game in 1936:

I had never slept on a train and this represented as much of a problem, or more, as tipping, dress, taxis and the rest of the cified picture. The porter showed me to my seat and I sat there for hours as the train rolled on. Finally, the porter came back.

"Young man, you going to bed, sir?" he asked wearily.

I gave up and nodded, remembering that I had been told pullman berths wouldn't be long enough for me. I was nearly six feet tall by now and I was sure I wouldn't fit.

After squirming out of my clothes and trying to keep my bare feet out of the aisle, I finally got settled to discover there was ample room. I turned out the light and raised the window shade. I lay there, looking out at black trees silhouetted against a moonlit sky, occasionally broken by the flashing panorama of a town. The rhythmic click of the wheels on the rail joints set up a chain reaction in my mind.

"You're on your way, you're on your way, you're on your way," it sang. It was very early morning when I fell into a shallow sleep.

Daylight flooding into my berth awakened me as we rolled into Philadelphia.¹⁶

Comparison of this passage with the opening pages of *The Natural*, in which Roy Hobbs rides the train east toward his tryout, indicates that Malamud obviously found considerable inspiration in non-fictional sources and events, as well as in literary scholarship on myth. Indeed, it is difficult, with *Strikeout Story* in hand, to conceive of the opening section of *The Natural* independent of Feller's account. Beside the suggestive character of Feller's description, one notes the role of the porter, Feller's unfamiliarity with Pullman berths, his squirming out of his clothes (Roy squirms into his), and the "black trees silhouetted against a moonlit sky." Malamud obviously transformed this already poeticized incident into a mythopoeic rite of passage, one which Earl Wasserman¹⁷ saw as a depiction of Roy's chronic infantilism.

Strikeout Story also provided the precedent for Roy's strikeout of the Whammer in the "Pre-game." As Eric Solomon pointed out some time ago, "Roy's speed as he strikes out the Whammer resembles the feats of the young Bob Feller."¹⁸ In 1936, without any minor-league experience, Feller struck out eight

16. Bob Feller, *Strikeout Story* (New York, 1947), 28-29.

17. Wasserman, "Malamud's World Ceres," 51-52.

18. Eric Solomon, "Jews, Baseball and the American Novel," *Arete* 1 (Spring 1984): 58. Solomon, who assisted Wasserman in identifying the baseball lore in *The Natural*, has perhaps the fullest catalog of the baseball references in the novel. Because I have been concerned to identify more precise sources for these allusions, I differ from Solomon in my view of the novel.

St. Louis Cardinals in an exhibition game. Roy, who (as scout Sam Simpson tells sportswriter Max Mercy) “has not exactly been in organized [professional] baseball” (14) yet, comes from the high school diamond to vanquish the Whammer in an exhibition of sorts when the train carrying him to Chicago for a tryout is halted. The high-school-star-vanquishes-most-valuable-player motif of “Pre-Game” was clearly indebted to Feller’s story.¹⁹

Perhaps the most suggestive incident in Feller’s autobiography is captured in a photo of Feller bending over his mother’s bed in a Chicago hospital in 1939. (See accompanying photo.) Mrs. Feller’s head is visible from under the bed-covers; her left eye is black and the right is bandaged. In the accompanying text Feller reports one of those strange-but-true stories that baseball lore preserves in abundance. Feller was pitching against the Chicago White Sox, on-believe it or not-Mother’s Day, with the Feller family seated in grandstand seats between home and first. White Sox third baseman Marvin Owen,

fouled several harmless balls into the seats between first and home. Then there was one that wasn’t harmless. My follow through turned me that way and I saw the ball hit my mother in the face. I felt sick. . . I saw them leading her out and I had to put down the impulse to run to the stands.²⁰

In fashioning the climax of his novel, Malamud fused the dramatic image of the bruised woman and mother, and Feller’s account, with a notorious “foul ball” incident in which Ted Williams purposely hit balls at a heckler (examined below).

Other aspects of Feller’s early career in *Strikeout Story* which found a place in the novel are his youth, rural origins, and relationship with his father. Feller first pitched in the majors at 17, returning after the season to Iowa to finish high school. Roy’s response to Harriet’s “test” in the opening section of *The Natural*—“Had he ever read Homer?” she asks. “Try as he would he could only think of four bases and not a book”(25)—may have been suggested by Feller’s remark that in response to the exam question, “What caused the Hayes-Tilden tie?” he was “tempted to ask what league they played in.”²¹ In the novel, from the train Roy sees “within the woodland the only place . . . [he has] been truly intimate with . . . a green world” (3). Feller makes a good deal of his growing up on a farm where his father built a baseball diamond (“Oakview Park”) for Bob and his friends; one of his teachers warns him, “You’ll never grow baseballs on your farm, Bobby. . . . They’re not good to eat you know”; and when asked how he developed his fast ball, he is tempted to answer, “Carrying water for cattle from the Raccoon River.” Just as Sam tells Max Mercy that “[Roy’s] daddy taught him [to pitch] years ago,” Feller remembers a conversation in which his father persuaded him to concentrate on being a pitcher: “Looking back, I must have sensed that this was a big moment as we sat there in

19. Robert Smith, *Baseball* (New York, 1947), 339, claims that Feller was working as a vendor in the Cleveland ballpark on the day he was called upon to pitch against the Cardinals. In *The Natural* Roy has a variety of odd jobs between his injury at the hands of Harriet Bird and his “comeback” with the Knights.

20. Feller, “Strikeout,” 5-6.

21. *Ibid.*, 85.



It happens once in a million, Mrs. Feller lies in a Chicago hospital after being struck by a foul tip from son Bob Strikeout Story (1947). Published with permission from Child Products, Incorporated, Stamford, Connecticut, for A. S. Barnes & Co., Inc.

the dark on the porch, listening to the cattle in the barn and the crickets in the field.”²² As “Long Work, Short Life” suggests, Malamud’s imagination com-

22. *Ibid.*, 8-9.

bined the young, pastoral and “natural” figure of Bob Feller with the legendary Babe Ruth and the present-day Sal Maglie.

Babe Ruth’s “feats of magic” were already enshrined in American legend, but his long illness and death in August 1948, brought America’s premier baseball hero back to the front pages, and led to a disappointing film, *The Babe Ruth Story*,²³ several biographies and a ghost-written autobiography, one of which Malamud said he read. Except for the fable that he once knocked the cover off the ball,²⁴ all of Ruth’s exploits and colorful characteristics employed in *The Natural* were ready at hand in contemporary accounts of the “big fellow’s” career: his early life in an orphanage and mysterious origins, his natural talent and change from pitcher to the hitter who saved baseball from the 1919 scandal, the “big bellyache,” the home run which saved Johnny Sylvester’s life, the “called shot” home run, the detectives hired to keep him out of trouble, numerous crashes in expensive automobiles, practical jokes such as sawing bats in two or ripping clothes and hats off players on trains to celebrate a pennant or a world series,²⁵ and Ruth’s huge appetite for food and women.²⁶

The life of the Bambino, the best known American baseball hero, pressed on Malamud a precedent for both the “natural” flaws in the American hero depicted in Roy’s infantilism and insatiable appetite, as well as the heroic pattern of his magical and powerful feats at bat. Ruth’s legend, and its retellings after his death in 1948, were matters Malamud could not possibly ignore when he began conceiving a baseball hero that very same year. It is difficult, in 1992, to estimate the resonance in 1952 of the materials Malamud appropriated from the “lives” of Feller and Ruth. Were these baseball tales unfamiliar to novel readers in the late 1940s and thus as studied as Malamud’s allusions to ‘The Wasteland’ or the Grail legends? Or were they part of the “matter of baseball” Malamud could assume his readers would easily recognize. As he blended the literary with the topical, Malamud was trying to combine current perceptions of the figure of the American baseball hero, as he was depicted by the sports media, with the larger western cultural context for the hero’s actions as it was implied by the literary references. He seems to have assumed that his readers would have more than a casual knowledge of *both* the popular and literary frames of reference of his novel. The “mythic” materials from his literary

23. A good deal of the notoriety of the film was caused by Mrs. Ruth’s unhappiness at the choice of William Bendix rather than Paul Douglas for the part of the Babe.

24. I have only encountered this Ruth legend in an audio biography of Ruth produced for juveniles.

25. The day after Roy joins the Knights, Bump instigates a series of practical jokes on him, including trying to “attack Wonderboy with a hacksaw” (57). On the train from Chicago after Roy has come out of his slump, “A wild bunch led by Roy stripped the pajamas off players already sound asleep in their berths, peeled Red Blow out of his long underwear, and totally demolished the pants of a new summer suit of Pop’s” (148). Ruth was also fond of destroying straw hats worn, against custom, after Labor Day.

26. See Tom Meaney, *Babe Ruth. The Big Moments of the Big Fellow* (New York, 1947), 8,13,47-48,50, 58, 78, 92-3, 100, 126, and 170. Meaney, 93, quotes Paul Gallico’s famous account of the Johnny Sylvester incident which in turn suggests Ruth’s contribution to the mythology Malamud exploited: “It was God himself who walked into the room, straight from His glittering throne, God dressed in a camel’s hair polo coat and flat camel’s hair cap, God with a big flat nose and little piggy eyes and a big grin, with a fat, black cigar sticking out of the side of it.”

sources would intensify the reader's appreciation of the cultural domain in which he had positioned his hero: the game of baseball as American myth. But like Melville, who wrote the story of another great American occupation, whaling, Malamud needed more occupational "ballast" from the more readily accessible contemporary matters to strengthen the context of his tale of natural American goodness corrupted. He had to avoid the artistic weakness of a contrived allegory; the additional current materials he turned up, along with the lives of Feller and Ruth, provided rich possibilities for myth-making. As a result *The Natural* became mythopoeic, rather than merely a baseball story dressed up in literary allusions. Yet behind this rich tapestry can be seen some of the many threads of contemporary life in America during the early post-war years.

III

Malamud began taking on his baseball ballast by creating the less-than-noble "Knights" from his memories and current knowledge of the exploits of Brooklyn's "beloved Bums." No other major league team could have provided a better image of an ordinary America rising from the despair of the Depression to world power. After years of ineptitude, the Dodgers, under Larry MacPhail, won the National League pennant in 1941 and dominated the league in the years following World War II. Moreover, "dem Bums"-more so than the aristocratic Yankees and the long-successful Giants-came equipped with both endearing "comic aspects" and a familiarity with heart-breaking defeat that made them a perfect metonymy for the common American and his postwar hopes and fears.

A number of characteristics of the Brooklyn club are most evident in *The Natural*. First, Malamud gave some well-known and colorful characteristics of Dodger general manager Branch Rickey to Judge Goodwill Banner, the unscrupulous and tight-fisted owner of the Knights who does not practice the moral "triple talk" he preaches.²⁷ Rickey smoked large cigars, wore rumpled clothing, and lived frugally; he was also the Bible-thumping critic of gambling's dangers to organized baseball, moving to the Dodgers from the Cardinal organization with a charge to clean up player gambling. Rickey was christened "El Cheapo" for his reluctance to pay high salaries to his players, and Dodger fans chanted the sobriquet at games; he was widely referred to as "The Mahatma" after Mahatma Gandhi who "preached in parables as Rickey did." Reporters called him a "bullshit artist" and proclaimed, "The more he talks, the more we count the spoons."²⁸ After the Dodgers lost a playoff to the St. Louis

27. Banner's first two names recall two other baseball czars, Albert Goodwill Spalding and Judge Kennesaw Mountain Landis. Like Landis and Judge Banner, Branch Rickey was a trained lawyer. Banner's moral casuistry is amply revealed in Roy's first interview with him and in the sell out agreement in the hospital. Solomon also suggests Boston owner Judge Emil Fuchs as a possible model.

28. Peter Golenbock, *Bums. An Oral History of the Brooklyn Dodgers* (New York, 1984), 86, 105, 97, 249. Golenbock, 205, also quotes Leo Duroucher's account of his conference with Rickey about the former's moving to the Giants which certainly resembles Roy's confrontation with the Judge early in the second part of the novel: ". . . he just looked at me and said, 'Well' And then he swiveled around and looked out the window into the pitch blackness. He chewed on his cigar. He said nothing. I don't know what the hell you expect to see out there!" I said, jumping up."

Cardinals in 1946, Rickey was widely criticized for being content with the second place finish which kept fan interest, but avoided the higher player salaries winning a pennant would require.

Second, Malamud's Dodgers *qua* Knights may also owe something to a contemporary printed source, Frank Graham's popular *The Dodgers, An Informal History*, published in 1945.²⁹ Graham chronicles the "Daffy Dodgers" of Wilbert Robinson, the grapefruit dropped from an airplane and Uncle Robbie's struggles with the Dodger owner; Vance, Fewster and Herman piled up on third base; Rabbit Maranville's crawling on window ledges; the brutal treatment of fans by the "specials," the ushers in Ebbets Field; Branch Rickey's avoidance of alcohol and stern opposition to gambling, and Hilda "the Bell" Chester and other Dodger fanatics.³⁰ Malamud, in other words, certainly did not have to depend on his youthful memories in creating the blighted Knights.

Third, more recent baseball events, including the high adventures of "Them Dodgers," were also at hand, events as extraordinary as any baseball fiction could be. The baseball seasons following World War II, especially for the Dodgers and the New York teams, were extraordinary. No other era, other than the 1920s, offered richer materials for a baseball novel. Moreover, baseball still reigned supreme as the National Pastime, unchallenged as a symbol of what was best and most distinctive about America, and the dramatic comeback of baseball itself after the war increased the game's popularity and cultural significance. In 1946, the Dodgers lost the pennant in a playoff with the St. Louis Cardinals, who then defeated Boston in a dramatic seven-game world series in which Red Sox star Ted Williams performed poorly because of an injury. In 1947, Brooklyn won the pennant with patient, fatherly, 62-year-old Burt Shotton (the model for *The Natural's* Pop Fisher) as manager, Leo Durocher having been suspended for conduct detrimental to baseball. In 1948, the darkhorse Boston Braves (like the miracle Braves of 1914 and the novel's miraculous Knights) fought off the Dodgers in September to win the pennant, while Lou Boudreau's sensational play, in contrast to Williams' indifferent performance, led Cleveland past the Red Sox in a one-game playoff. In mid-season the devious Rickey manipulated Durocher into defecting to the hated Giants, replacing him again with Shotton. In 1949, Brooklyn won the pennant on the last day of the season from the arch-rival Cardinals though, as in 1947, losing the World Series to the Yankees. In 1950, the Dodgers lost the pennant on the last day of the season to the Phillies' "Whiz Kids" when Cal Abrams, who would have been the winning run, was thrown out at the plate. And, of course,

29. Graham, *Brooklyn Dodgers*, 137, also recalls Casey Stengel's remark to a barber in Chicago after losing a doubleheader, "A shave, please. But don't cut my throat. I may want to do it later myself." (On Roy's "day," Otto Zipp gives him rusty razor blades with the message, "Cut your throat.") Other contemporary sources available were Arthur Daley, *Times at Bat* (New York, 1950), 100-110, an eclectic history of baseball, largely reworkings of Daley's regular columns in *The New York Times*. Daley also wrote a brief piece on "Baseball's Showmen-The Dodgers" in 1947 for the *New York Times Magazine* (8 June 1947): 18, 32, 34. A reworking of Graham's history, with much less colorful detail, is Dan Parker's "The Brooklyn Dodgers," *Sport* (October, 1950): 25-29, 71-80. Malamud's creation of Otto Zipp may also owe something to Jack Pierce, the "balloon man," who was a devoted fan of Dodger third baseman Cookie Lavagetto; see Golenbock, *Bums*, 59.

30. Graham, *Brooklyn Dodgers*, 106-10, 202-03, 233-40.

the 1951 Giants defeated the Dodgers in baseball's most famous playoff game on a three-run home run by Bobby Thomson.³¹

In addition to these histrionics, current baseball events provided Malamud and his readers with a deep-seated belief in the "comeback." The meteoric rise of the Roy Hobbs-led Knights, with fatherly Pop Fisher as manager, at least equals and thus plays upon the real end-of-season dramatics of the time, encouraging the contemporary reader of the novel to anticipate a glorious completion of the seasonal quest in victory. This expectation of team conquest was enriched by the individual "comeback" performances of the seminal figures (for the novel) of Sal Maglie and Eddie Waitkus. Sal Maglie's return from exile, and his extraordinary pitching performance for the New York Giants during the second-half of the 1950 season (see below), as well as the miraculous late-season triumph of the 1951 Giants, do in fact *surpass* Roy's (and the Knights') exploits in the second half of Malamud's fictional season. But in early 1950, the figure who most signified the comeback from fateful adversity was Eddie Waitkus.

IV

The most important single event which shaped *The Natural* was the bizarre shooting of Philadelphia Phillies first baseman Eddie Waitkus by a "deranged bobby-soxer" on June 15, 1949 in the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago. Since the shooting of Roy Hobbs by Harriet Bird is the climax of the first short section of the novel, "Pre-Game," one can assume the Waitkus shooting provided the beginnings of a plot and perhaps the chief inspiration for Malamud's novel before he left for Oregon. Waitkus was not permanently injured and details about his assailant, Ruth Ann Steinhagen, were relatively few; follow-ups revolved around Waitkus' chances to "come back" in 1950 (he did), and the effect of women fans on the game, particularly players' problems with "bobby-soxers" or "Baseball Annies."³² Roy's own comeback, delayed by fifteen years, is destroyed by another Baseball Annie of sorts, Memo Paris, and Malamud's novel, with assistance from Jung, explores the influence, good and bad, of women on the baseball hero.³³ The following spring, stories on Waitkus'

31. Roy Hobbs' long blast which goes foul in the crucial seventh inning of the Knights' play would have been a game-winning homer if fair. Abrams' baserunning error, as well as Chuck Hostetler's fall in the 1945 World Series, may have contributed to Malamud's conception of "Fisher's Flop."

32. See James Cruisenberry, "Women Fans and Their Effect on the Game," *Baseball Magazine* (May 1950): 405-06, 430, and Ross Morrow, "Baseball Players Vs. Bobbysoxers," *Sport* (September 1950): 14-16, 97-99. Waitkus himself seems to have gone to Steinhagen's room on the assumption that she was a willing baseball groupie. At first, Roy suspects that Iris Lemon, who helped him break out of his slump in Chicago, "might be batty or a grownup bobby soxer gone nuts over him for having his name and picture in the papers" (136).

33. See James Barbour and Robert Sattelmeyer, "The Natural and the Shooting of Eddie Waitkus," *Midwestern Miscellany* 9 (1981): 61-67. By examining contemporary news coverage of the event, the authors conclude: "Malamud relied heavily on contemporary events in baseball in the years between 1949 and 1951 to supply much of the material for *The Natural*. But it was the Waitkus shooting and the ideas and philosophical questions posed by it that seem to have fixed themselves in Malamud's imagination: the idea of a ballplayer senselessly and inopportunistly struck down as he was about to achieve stardom, the extent to which he himself was responsible for his own demise, and the meaning that such an insane accident might hold for someone so victimized. . . . But Roy is a simple man and no philosopher. The possibility that the shooting and the suffering that results might teach him something is beyond his comprehension." The authors also contend that Ruth Ann Steinhagen's "split personality" influenced Malamud's creation of Harriet Bird.

comeback noted that the “tragedy” had not made him withdrawn, “anti-social,” or afraid of women, “even subconsciously.”³⁴ Similarly, Roy Hobbs avoids talking about his shooting and never does come to understand the lesson of the suffering it brought him. The Waitkus story may also have contributed to Roy’s fateful pride after his strikeout of the “Whammer.”³⁵

The larger significance of the Waitkus incident in the genesis of *The Natural* is its provision of the mythopoesis of the stricken player who returns to the game, a figure which perhaps first suggested Malamud’s baseball metonymy of post-war America. Indeed Eddie Waitkus was only one of several players celebrated during the late 1940s for overcoming crippling shooting injuries to play baseball again. Here again, real events made credible and compelling the idea of an aging athlete-like the country itself and its individual political figures- seeking a new, post-war life in baseball or other realms.³⁶ Lou Brissie received severe leg wounds in battle in 1944, but went on to pitch in the major leagues from 1947 through 1953.³⁷ A second maimed player was portrayed in a sentimental movie popular in the spring and summer of 1949, *The Stratton Story*. Here, White Sox pitcher Monty Stratton in real life and film a simple Texas farm boy-loses his leg in a hunting accident and makes a courageous and heart-rending minor-league comeback. The film also supplied materials for Malamud’s creation of Roy’s first father-figure, Sam Simpson.³⁸ Thus, if the Waitkus shooting was the germ for *The Natural*, the plot of Malamud’s developing fiction concerned a stricken player returning to baseball after an exile which, though merely hinted at in the novel, implies the wartime absence from professional baseball of many established and potential stars. While using the “comeback” motif to stress his protagonist’s and America’s return to health and vitality in the new situation after the War, Malamud reversed the putatively happy endings of the real stories so as to intensify the pointed irony and political commentary of Roy’s failure to learn from the suffering inflicted on him.

To the composite of Waitkus, Brissie and Stratton, Malamud (as well as knowledgeable readers) could add other players, “old” by baseball standards, who made baseball history at the time after being out of the game. Of the players who came back from military service and raised major league baseball back to

34. Bob Brumby, “Can Eddie Waitkus Come back?” *Sport* (April 1950): 23, 82.

35. An additional detail developed in the *Newsweek* story on the shooting bears on Harriet’s motives for shooting Roy in the novel. As she points the pistol at him, Harriet “sweetly” asks Roy about his boastful claim that he will “be the best there ever was in the game.” When he replies, “That’s right,” she shoots him (33). Ruth Ann Steinhamen told reporters that while waiting for Waitkus to come to her hotel room she considered allowing him to call the police. “I think if he had walked into the room a little decently,” she said, “I would have told him to call the police. But he was too confident. He swaggered.” “Neurotic With a Rifle,” *Newsweek* 33 (27 June 1949): 27-28.

36. As has been frequently noticed, Roy’s “comeback” resembles the search for a new life by Frankie Alpine in *The Assistant* and Seymour Levin in *A New Life*, Malamud’s two subsequent novels.

37. Daley, “Times at Bat,” 235-36. Brissie’s dream of pitching for the Philadelphia Athletics was realized by his striking out Ted Williams in the ninth on opening day, 1948, after Williams had early drilled a hard line drive off his patched up leg.

38. Sam Simpson is the baseball scout who discovers Roy and takes him to the Chicago Cubs on the condition that “I am to go back as a regular scout, like I was in 1925” (14). Barney Weil, the itinerant scout who discovers Monty Stratton in the film, is a down-on-his-hick alcoholic excatcher, like Sam, who spends the winter with the Strattons, gives up drinking, and gets back into baseball as a pitching coach by virtue of taking Stratton for a tryout with the Chicago White Sox.

its pre-war level, the first and most prominent was Hank Greenberg, widely celebrated as the most important Jewish major leaguer, who rejoined the Detroit Tigers at 34-Roy is 34 when he joins the Knights-and led them to a World Series victory in 1945 and continued to star in 1946.

Additionally, there were several players who experienced banishment and exile, as Roy does, one of whom (Maglie) returned to triumph in organized baseball in 1950. Thus additional evidence of the topicality of the novel is the similarity between Roy Hobbs and a number of players, barred from organized baseball for five years for "jumping" to the Mexican League in 1946, reinstated in 1949 as a result of legal pressure.³⁹ In the interim they performed in Mexico, on barnstorming teams and in obscure semi-pro leagues.

The best known "jumper," because of his subsequent success, was pitcher Sal "the Barber" Maglie, who bears a striking resemblance to Roy Hobbs. Maglie had had very little major league experience when banned and, playing in an "outlaw league" in Quebec in 1949, declined to join the New York Giants until the beginning of the 1950 season, when he was 33, an "old man" in baseball terms. (Under the terms of his original suspension he, like Roy, would have been 34 when he returned.) As Pop Fisher keeps Roy on the bench after he joins the Knights, Giant manager Leo Duroucher did not give Maglie a starting assignment until late June. Maglie's second opportunity did not come until late July, whereupon he astounded the baseball world by then winning eleven straight games, including four (nearly five) shutouts in a row, finishing the season with a record of 18 wins and four losses, surely as incredible a half-season as any thirty-three-year old rookie (fictional or otherwise) has ever had. With Maglie winning, the Giants moved from sixth place at mid-season to five games out of first by the end, and Duroucher's critics were quick to point out that if he had used Maglie earlier the Giants might have won the pennant.⁴⁰ Pop Fisher, the Knights' manager, admits his mistake in keeping Roy "on the bench for three solid weeks in June" (195).

The "Mexican jumpers" were in the baseball news in 1946, for most of 1949, and during Maglie's winning streak in 1950, and thus were obvious examples of *both* the "exile and return" and the "sell out" motifs. Malamud combined the Waitkus shooting with comebacks of older ballplayers, some of whom, like Maglie, had been ordered out of "organized baseball" by the Commissioner. Herein lay an important connection between contemporary events and the most famous sellout in baseball history: the banned "jumpers" were the major leaguers of the period who most resembled the 1919 "Black Sox" players banned for life in 1922, one of whom, Joe Jackson, influenced Malamud's creation of Roy Hobbs. Within the plot of the wounded or exiled young player who returns, only to fail, Malamud fleshed out his fatefully incomplete hero by combining characteristics of the untainted and/or acknowledged heroes Bob

39. The *New York Times* for June 6, 1949 headlined the lifting of the ban on the jumpers, "Welcome Assured on Exiles' Return."

40. See Stanley Frank. "How the Giants Found a Pitcher in the Dog House," *Saturday Evening Post* 223 (5 May 1951): 29, 151-54.

Feller and Babe Ruth, with features of two flawed heroes, Shoeless Joe Jackson and Ted Williams. Roy Hobbs is an amalgam of Feller's youthful innocence, Ruth's hungry prowess, Williams' hostility and pride, and Jackson's natural but corruptible talent. Thus, as it turned out, there was plenty of ballast with considerable creative promise. But what would be the moral of Malamud's baseball story about the stricken hero who returns from exile?

V

In 1975, Malamud told Daniel Stern, "As a kid, for entertainment I turned to the movies and dime novels. Maybe *The Natural* derives from Frank Merriwell as well as the adventures of the Brooklyn Dodgers in Ebbets Field."⁴¹ The Merriwell stories, the sports archetypes of the American "novel of success," sold in the hundreds of millions and recirculated in the 1930s and 1940s on radio and in comic strips, playing an important role in the development of the archetype of the American athlete-hero.⁴² Though he reversed the standard plot with the failure of the hero, Malamud's depiction of Roy Hobbs, in effect, tantalizes the reader for most of the novel with the possibility of the success plot common to both American sports fiction and the contemporary comeback stories. Despite Roy's "sell out" and deliberate foul balls—one of which injures mother-to-be Iris Lemon—the reader is encouraged to hope for something better than the strikeouts in the seventh and ninth innings of the playoff which end Roy's season and career. (Malamud's own ironic hint of the Merriwellian story certainly explains the ease with which the popular 1984 film of *The Natural* changed the ending from failure to triumph.) The motif of athletic success after overcoming obstacles was writ large in most of the contemporary materials (Waitkus, Brissie, etc.) Malamud selected. But the post World War II political situation—particularly doubts about America's fitness for world power coupled with fears of the "enemy within"—dictated an ironic ending in which the hero succumbs to temptation and agrees to fail, and then, though he finally renounces his sell out, is powerless to avoid defeat.

Malamud's earliest published remark about *The Natural* connects it with this larger political context and the moral dilemmas it posed. In 1961, Malamud's novel, *A New Life*, was reviewed on the front page of the *Times* book section, accompanied on a back page by "A Talk With B. Malamud." The brief four-paragraph interview appears to have taken place by telephone and contains only two direct quotes: his comment on his "switch from East to West" in *A New Life* and a remark about Bennington where he was now teaching. After some sketchy biographical details the interviewer takes up the "background" of Malamud's earlier books and reports,

"The Natural," just reprinted and about a baseball player, was suggested by a column written by Arthur Daley for this newspaper—why does a talented man sell out?⁴³

41. Malamud, "The Art of Fiction," 43.

42. Michael Oriard, *Dreaming of Heroes: American Sports Fiction* (Chicago, 1982), 27-29.

43. "A Talk With B. Malamud," *New York Times Book Review* (8 October 1961): 8.

Arthur Daley, one of the country's most influential sportswriters, wrote the regular "Sports of the Times" column from 1943 until the mid-1970s. Despite a rigorous search I have been unable to find a column by Daley on "why does a talented man sell out?" But, since Malamud is not quoted directly here, I suspect the interviewer fused (but not necessarily confused) something Malamud said about Daley with something he said about his own novel in which an athletically "talented man sell[s] out." In fact, Daley often devoted his regular columns to the numerous incidents of sports "sell outs" between 1943 and 1951,⁴⁴ most of them in college basketball, where gamblers paid players to "shave points." Sports corruption was unquestionably seen as one aspect of the moral malaise of the late forties and early fifties. President Truman, writing in 1951 to Wayne Morse, after the latter had declined his offer to become Attorney General, refers to this connection in a call for much-needed moral reform:

What is needed is a tough, unbiased approach to a situation which is rampant in the country. Football, basketball-there have been over six hundred bank robberies from the inside in the last year. . . . What is needed is an Isaiah [sic] or a Martin Luther to put us back into [sic] the straight and narrow path.⁴⁵

Included in the catalog of wider-spread corruption in America at the time were the various scandals within the Truman administration involving deep freezes, fur coats and rakeoffs to the so-called "five-percenters"; McCarthyism's search for the communist enemies within who sold out what were believed to be atomic and other military secrets; accusations that Chiang Kai-shek had been sold out to the "Red Chinese" by "State Department Reds," and vivid evidence of organized crime. In March, 1951, before an estimated audience of 30 million, the televised New York hearings of the Senate committee, headed by Senator Estes Kefauver, investigating organized crime, presented a frightening parade of gamblers, mobsters and communists before the public.⁴⁶

It was in this contemporary context of moral crisis that Malamud took up his baseball materials with the intention of comically and ironically reversing the novel of success by creating a typical American Adamic hero who fails to find redemption after selling out. The mythic inflations provided possibilities for a

44. Between 1943 and 1951, Arthur Daley wrote more than a dozen columns and a *Times* magazine piece on sports sell outs. Daley's usual line is to decry the fix, excoriate the gamblers, call for greater vigilance by officials, exhort athletes to report bribery offers, and reassure his readers that sports are honest since gamblers wouldn't bet on them otherwise. As one reads these pieces, Daley's (and presumably the sports establishment's) growing concern about corruption in American sport is evident despite his rather simplistic view of the problem. Each time a new "fix" or scandal occurs, the previous ones are noted anew, and even a casual reader would have been aware of the dangers of sports gambling and increased emphasis on winning at all costs. In 1951, Daley opposed an attempt to restore Jackson's batting records because of the basketball fixing scandals; and he consistently took a hard, moralistic line on sports sell-outs while adopting a live-and-let live attitude toward the antics of Leo Durocher or the fate of the Mexican "Jumpers." Daley's accounts of Joe Jackson and Ted Williams, which Malamud could have read either in *The New York Times* or in Daley's *Times* at Bar, connected the contemporary figure of Williams and the legend of the nearly-forgotten Jackson, the "natural" from the sticks who was tricked by the evil "city slickers" and barred from baseball for life.

45. Robert J. Donovan, *Tumultuous Years: The Presidency of Harry S. Truman. 1949-53* (New York, 1982), 377.

46. See Eric Goldman, *The Crucial Decade-And After, America 1945-60* (New York, 1960), 191-99, and Peter Biskind, *Seeing Is Believing* (New York, 1983), 168. Even President Truman complained during the 1948 campaign that "the record of the 80th Congress is a sellout of the people's interests."

literary romance which allowed stylistic extravagance and necessary critical distance between the “objective” narrator and the flawed protagonist. At the same time, the ballast of baseball fact and lore made the treatment of this symbolic figure all the more pointed by dramatically asking: If baseball, the national pastime, isn’t safe from corruption, what is? The mythopoesis of the novel evolved from the *donnée* of a sports sell out, which in turn was shaped by the “exile and return” plot Malamud found in current baseball events, and by his fleshing out of his hero-based on Feller and Ruth-with features from the lives of two more tragic and proud baseball heroes, Joe Jackson and Ted Williams.

VI

The title of the novel, the sportswriters’ view that Roy was “a throwback to a time of true heroes . . . a natural not seen in a dog’s age,” Roy’s rural origins and the newsboy’s plaintive “Say it ain’t true, Roy” at the novel’s end (153, 217), pointedly and abundantly recall Shoeless Joe Jackson-barred from baseball for life for his alleged participation in the fixing of the 1919 World Series. A phenomenal batsman, Jackson is regarded as the greatest “natural hitter” to play baseball; but his fate was to be the most famous “sell out” in baseball history as well. However, it is likely that Jackson was relatively unknown-perhaps even initially to Malamud himself-in the post-war years. In 1948, Arthur Daley wrote a “Sports of the Times” column on Jackson in response to a reader’s request for more information about a player, “who is a stranger to me.” Judging from Daley’s account, the common view was that Jackson was the “innocent dupe of the city slickers,”⁴⁷ certainly one way of seeing Roy in the hands of Judge Banner and Gus Sands. But baseball fans in the late forties were most likely to remember Jackson because he was frequently compared to the contemporary star, Ted Williams. Daley’s reader wanted to know more about Jackson because an earlier column contended, ‘the experts agree that [Williams] is the greatest natural hitter since Shoeless Joe Jackson.’ ”

Roy Hobbs resembles Ted Williams in a number of ways. Unquestionably one of the most dominant and well-known players of the post-war era, Williams openly admitted he wanted to “have people say, There goes Ted Williams, the greatest hitter who ever lived,”⁴⁸ a boastful remark that followed him through his career and made him a perfect example of American post-war pride. Malamud’s Roy Hobbs possesses Williams’ egotism, disdain for the fans, vengefulness on hecklers, and inability to lead his team to the final victory. After striking out the Whammer in the first section of the novel, Roy tells Harriet Bird, “I bet some day I break every record in the book for throwing and hitting,” and, when Harriet asks him what he hopes to accomplish, replies, “Sometimes when I walk down the street I bet people will say there goes Roy

47. Daley, “Times At Bat.” 24. In 1951 the legislature of Jackson’s native state, South Carolina, passed a resolution calling for the reinstatement of his records, though organized baseball declined to do so. See Daley, “Reinstatement for Jackson?” *New York Times*, 15 March 1951.

48. Ted Williams, *My Turn At Bat* (New York, 1969), 7.

Hobbs, the best there ever was in the game” (26). Roy’s failure in the playoff game recalls Williams’ disappointing performances in the 1946 world series and the 1948 American League playoff. Although no one ever accused “Teddy Ballgame” of even thinking about throwing a ball game, there was nevertheless the connection between Williams and Jackson as “naturals.”

Moreover, Williams linked with Feller gave Malamud the volatile ingredients for the most important baseball incident in *The Natural*—Roy’s retaliatory attack on the heckling dwarf, Otto Zipp, by deliberately hitting foul balls into the stands. This incident is complex in both baseball and moral terms. It is sufficient here to point out that Malamud’s interest in, and knowledge of, baseball is no more strongly revealed than in his making a tricky baseball incident the moral climax of his novel.

Roy’s “foul” acts injure the pregnant Iris Lemon and lead to the destruction of his magic bat, “Wonderboy.” His homemade Excalibur splits in half when, after the deliberate fouling incident, Roy tries to win the game but only hits a long blast which is “clearly foul.”⁴⁹ During a game in 1942, Williams purposely hit foul balls into the stands at a heckler. The incident, frequently offered as an example of Williams’ hubristic hostility toward fans, was later authenticated by Williams himself.⁵⁰ An inflated account was available to Malamud in Daley’s eclectic history of baseball, *Times at Bat* (1950), based on his columns. The following is in Daley’s section on Williams, drawn from the original column in which he compared Williams and Jackson:

I find this one hard to believe myself, but [Red Sox manager] Joe Cronin told it to me and he vouches for its accuracy. “Ted jogged in from left field this day,” he recounted, “and he was fit to be tied. There’s a blabber-mouthed guy behind third, he howled, who’s been riding the pants off me. The next time at bat I’m gonna smack that big-mouth right between the eyes with a foul ball.’ He fouled one that sent the leather-lunged citizen ducking. So I kept count. Ted fouled seventeen balls at that guy and he never was more than six feet away from the target.”⁵¹

Regardless of which “foul” incident Malamud discovered first, Williams’ retaliation on the heckler and the injury to Bob Feller’s mother coalesced in Roy’s injuring Iris Lemon in *The Natural*.⁵² Unlike the real-life Feller, Roy

49. Malamud emphasizes the connection between Roy’s foul-hitting and the destruction of Wonderboy by having the two pieces of the split bat point toward first and third base, a clear indication of where the foul lines are in baseball.

50. In *My Turn at Bat*, 144, Williams says, “I remember when I first started in Boston there was a guy behind third base who gave me a hard time. I tried to hit *him* with a foul ball. Jack Wilson, who I could handle pretty well, was pitching for the Athletics then, so I aimed three or four fouls in this spot behind third, but never got close enough. . . [Boston manager Joe] Cronin fined me \$250.” If Williams is correct that the pitcher was Jack Wilson, the incident must have occurred in 1942. Wilson pitched for the Athletics in 1934 before Williams came to the majors, and from 1935 to 1941 he pitched for Williams’ own team, the Red Sox. According to *The Baseball Encyclopedia*, in 1942 Wilson pitched nine games for the Detroit Tigers and twelve for the Washington Senators.

51. Daley, “Times At Bat,” 186. Daley (189) also notes that Cronin “upbraided Williams for some lethargic, slipshod fielding and Ted began to sulk. Then he began to plot ways and means to get even.” Solomon (“Jews, Baseball, and the American Novel”) suggests Malamud used this aspect of Williams in the creation of the lazy and sulking Bump Baily. Smith, *Baseball*, 334, 338, notes Williams’ reputation for immaturity and reluctance to bunt.

52. Given Wasserman’s account of the influence of C. G. Jung, particularly his concept of the good and bad mothers, on the novel, the picture of Feller’s injured mother in *Strikeout Story* must have had considerable impact on Malamud’s imagination.

doesn't resist the "impulse," rushes into the stands, groans at what he has done ("The left side of her face was hurt, bruised and rainbow-colored. Her eye was black and the lid thick"), and carries Iris into the clubhouse, where she pleads, "Win for us, you were meant to" (204-05). But the "comeback" ending with which Malamud teases the reader-and which would be expected by readers recognizing the Waitkus, Brissie, Stratton, and Ruth allusions-does not occur. The talented man, prepared by his exile and return to serve as a hero for his team, betrays it and then, though he sincerely wants to, cannot overcome his sell out.

Although some readers have tried to ignore Roy's "foul" failures in order to locate some positive, perhaps tragic implications in his downfall, here the novel is uncompromising. The reason is that Malamud saw the sellouts as symptoms of a corruption which contradicted America's supposed natural virtuous innocence. He was determined to point this moral and the need for the national moral maturity by banishing Hobbs, like Jackson, from baseball. Hence Roy, like the fallen Whammer in "Pre-Game," is, at the novel's end, "in the truest sense of it, out" (23) of the game by selling out and "fouling" out.

VII

Happily, baseball, the greatest of post-war America's sports symbols, remained largely unspoiled by gamblers, communists and enemies within.⁵³ In the October, 1951 *Baseball Magazine* Senator Kefauver himself gave baseball a "clean bill of health" in an essay, "Baseball Escapes the Tempter's Snare." Although his committee had discovered "the infiltration of the gambling interest into various sports," Kefauver reported, "never for a moment . . . did we have cause to suspect crookedness in Organized Baseball." The Senator agreed that Judge Landis' swift reaction to the Black Sox in 1920 saved baseball and assured its present state of "purity," and he put his trust in the knowledgeable baseball fan who "recognizes when any familiar player does less than his very best on any occasion" and is "the ever alert sentinel protecting baseball from the evil of the fix: . . . I shudder to imagine what might happen to player, manager or umpire who had gone crooked if a crowded grand-stand were loosed in his direction." Everything must be done to save baseball, Kefauver warned. "There is much to be preserved. No stone should be left unturned to keep the game from

53. In the 1940s there were only three publicized incidents of corruption in baseball. In 1943, Commissioner Landis barred William Cox, the owner of the Philadelphia Phillies, from baseball for life for betting on his own team, an event dredged up when later scandals were reported and corresponding to Judge Banner's betting against the Knights. During the winter of 1946-47, coincident with fixing scandals in professional football, boxing and college basketball, the commissioner of the minor leagues suspended the manager and four players of a team in the Class D Evangeline League in Louisiana for involvement with gamblers. Despite the greater seriousness of the basketball scandals, baseball officials were clearly very nervous in the wake of this incident, which made headlines throughout the country. At their meetings shortly after, both major leagues took firm steps to keep gamblers away from their ballparks and required players to report any bribe offers, while reminding the public that major league baseball had been free from scandal involving players since 1919. To prove the point, prior to the beginning of the 1947 season, Commissioner Chandler suspended Dodger manager Leo Durocher from baseball for a year for conduct detrimental to baseball, including consorting with gamblers and mobsters.

falling into the wrong hands. There are those who would sacrifice the confidence of the American people in the sport for mere money."⁵⁴

Malamud's imaginative creation of Roy's corrupters taps these current fears of corruption-from-within which dooms the natural American hero. While players and gamblers were being indicted early in 1951 on charges of fixing basketball games, the televised hearings of the Kefauver committee, with twice the audience of the 1950 World Series, made the connection between corruption and sports sellouts very clear. Although Malamud's one-eyed "Supreme Bookie" Gus Sands can be compared to Arnold Rothstein, the Black Sox fixer, his contemporary origins are also quite obvious. Gus would have been a headliner at the Kefauver hearings-along with Mickey Cohen and Frank Costello. Though Judge Banner may resemble Charlie Comiskey, Branch Rickey and even Bill Veeck,⁵⁵ he also keeps company with William Cox, a baseball owner barred in 1943 for betting on his team; and with Kefauver witness, former New York Mayor William ODwyer, and those who "would sacrifice the confidence of the American people . . . for mere money," by selling either secrets or sacred symbols. The specter of the 1919 scandal is certainly present in *The Natural*. Indeed, Arthur Daley's column on the 1951 Manhattan College scandal is entitled "Say It Ain't So, Joe."⁵⁶ But the novel really addresses itself much more directly to a current and immediate dilemma.⁵⁷

In January 1951, in conjunction with the Manhattan scandal, Daley reported that the nation's most distinguished educators had issued a plea "for a moral reconstruction to develop intelligent and fervent loyalty to moral and spiritual values." "⁵⁸ "The fixer contaminates everything he touches," said Daley in an essay in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1951. "Boiling in oil is too good for him."

Gambling is an unhealthy parasite which fastens itself on the healthy body of sports. It gnaws away harmlessly until the fixers, the sure-thing operatives, give it the teeth to hit a vital spot and then it becomes a ravenous beast that would destroy the very thing on which it lives.⁵⁹

Thus it is quite likely that, as Malamud indicated in 1961, Arthur Daley did "suggest" some matters, moral and spiritual, more central to *The Natural* than the Williams-Jackson connection. *The Natural* is a cry of "foul," a warning that

54. Estes Kefauver, "Baseball Escapes the Tempter's Snare." *Baseball Magazine* (October 1951): 6-7, 32. Subsequently George Trautman, President of the National Association of Professional Baseball Players commented on Kefauver's article. Referring to the "treason mentioned in Senator Kefauver's article" (the Evangeline League scandal), Trautman proclaimed: "A professional player learns early in his career that when he dons his uniform, he has covered himself with something more than a piece of flannel: he wears, now, the badge of Honesty, Faith, and Courage; of Obligation, of Tradition, of Trust. The three or four violations of the code in more than a hundred years serve to glorify the tens of thousands who have kept the faith." George M. Trautman, "Integrity of Baseball. An Old Story," *Baseball Magazine* (November 1951): 5, 37.

55. Like Judge Banner, Veeck tried to use Cleveland Stadium for midget auto races. See "Veeck and Mayor of Cleveland Wrangler over Muddy Stadium," *The New York Times*, 22 May 1947, 35.

56. Daley, *New York Times*, 18 January 1951.

57. See n. 45 above.

58. Daley, "Two News Stories," *New York Times*, 20 February 1951.

59. Daley, "Sports Are Honest." *New York Times Magazine* (4 March 1951): 20.

“it can happen here,” and an indictment of both the vulnerability of immature American virtue as well as the corruptive tendencies of Cold War authority and power.⁶⁰ The drama of “Them Dodgers,” the magic performances of Feller and Ruth, and the “comebacks” of the wounded and exiled, provided ingredients for a hopeful story. But in the end, and in accordance with the temper of the times, Malamud merged the figures of the innocent but corrupted (but hopeful) Jackson, with the prideful “fouling” (and continually pessimistic) Williams to produce the fallen American baseball hero, Roy Hobbs. Ignorant of the wisdom implied in his past suffering, Roy’s athletic and simple moral virtues are corrupted by the dreaded fixers, and his failures raise anew the era’s fears of sellouts. In the end, true to his baseball destiny as it was defined in 1919, he is banished from the game forever because he has not learned to use his gifts and powers for others, rather than only for himself. Malamud’s novel is a cold war baseball story; yet its moral goes beyond both the “matter of baseball” he adopted, and the nation’s fears about the weaknesses of the “American Adam.” At the end of his failed quest Roy laments, “I never did learn anything out of my past life, now I have to suffer again” (217). For Malamud suffering might not be so much the sad fate of the American hero as it could be a maturing gift of both our life and the games we play. What we learn from suffering might make all the difference, he seems to say. Although it voices no hope for Roy or the infantile hero, the old baseball cry, “Wait until next year,” might nevertheless have offered some consolation to perceptive readers of Malamud’s corruption-centered novel in 1952.

It may be that Robert Redford’s triumphant Roy Hobbs was best suited to America in the 1980s. But the novel itself must be understood as the product and reflection of an earlier, perhaps more innocent, America, one with something left of its capacity to be genuinely troubled by corruption.

60. A recurrent theme of the era. See especially Reinhold Neibuhr’s *The Irony of American History* (New York, 1952).