

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

The Natural

by Bernard Malamud

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Notes

The Natural has been described as the best novel about baseball in American letters. It is a tale of unlimited possibility tempered only by human susceptibility to the lusts and desires that often clutter and block the path to greatness. It is also a story about the ways in which expectations can weigh down and destroy the dreams of the great, and it is a cautionary fable about the deadening effects of appetite. Many critics believe that this story is loosely based on Sir Perceval's search for the Holy Grail – however, where Perceval reached the necessary depths of humility to find that which he sought, no such transformation occurs in the life of Roy Hobbs. Because the actual plot is simple, many of our questions focus on interpretation, analyses of events and characters, and literary terms rather than simply on “what happens next.”

The Natural is not particularly lengthy, and it is not particularly difficult to read. The events of the plot make this a book for all secondary grades nine through twelve. The style Malamud employs, however, is difficult for weaker readers; his sentences may be long and convolute at times, and the older baseball jargon he uses may be difficult for some students. There are a few sexual encounters that are graphic at times, so some caution must be used as to the maturity level of the class.

All references come from the Perennial Classics edition of *The Natural*, published in 2000.

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss the blessings and curses of an amazing talent and ability, including the following ideas:
 - the differences between the expectations placed on ordinary people and those placed on people with special gifts
 - the perils of seemingly unlimited opportunity.
2. discuss the motif of water in this story as an image representing the duality of opportunity, which is, at times, a giver of life and at other times a source of ruin.
3. illustrate and explain the use of characterization to foreshadow impending tragedy, with regard to the following characters:
 - Judge Goodwill Banner
 - Sam Simpson
 - The mysterious doctor
 - Harriet Bird
 - Eddie (the train porter).
4. discuss the operation and significance of appetites in the story, with particular attention to the ways a desire for sex, for food, and for success merge and all seem to be different sides of Roy's low self-esteem.
5. discuss the ways that learning from one's past is a major theme in the story, with particular attention to the similarities and differences between the pasts, present circumstances, and apparent futures available to Roy, Memo, and Iris.
6. discuss the use of Wonderboy to represent differing stages of Roy's confidence, in terms of his ability to hit, as well as his ability to find satisfaction in the arms of Memo and Iris.
7. illustrate and explain the use of events in the lives of others to foreshadow the possible future for Roy, including the following:
 - Sam Simpson's general failure in life, as a ballplayer and as a scout
 - The Whammer's fall from grace, resulting from his overconfidence
 - Pop Fisher's infamous "flop"
 - Bump Bailey's waiting until it was, literally, too late to become the type of ballplayer his abilities permitted.
8. discuss the interplay of metaphor, simile, and personification to create wealth of images that reflect the story's themes and ideas.
9. discuss the difference between perceived and actual predestination; the difference between free will and a superstitious attention to "jinxes."

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. How is imagery, including metaphor, symbol, and simile, used to foreshadow Roy's downfall in the Pre-Game section of the novel?
2. How is the title of the novel both accurate and ironic at the same time?
3. Explain the increase in Roy's appetite for food as the season goes on. What sources of dissatisfaction cause Roy to turn increasingly to food to find solace?
4. The water motif in *The Natural* seems to have two purposes: at times, it seems to show the abundant promise of Roy's gift, but at other times, it seems to show how Roy's life has fallen into decay. Give examples of both times, and discuss how water is an appropriate metaphor for such a duality.
5. What attitude does Roy seem to have toward women, based on his feelings toward Harriet, Memo, and Iris? What is the source of these feelings?
6. During his first train ride to Chicago, Roy's train passes through a large forest; this forest returns several times in Roy's physical and imaginative experiences. What does the forest symbolize? Why can Roy not seem to escape this forest?
7. Why are the names Max Mercy and Judge Goodwill Banner examples of irony?
8. Olson and Cal Baker have two different opinions about Roy Hobbs—a difference that continues in discussions of modern athletes. Is Roy a team player, or is he only seeking to pursue his own accomplishments? Give an example of a modern-day athlete who has similar questions asked about him.
9. Often, a white rose is taken as a symbol of purity. Based on its use in the descriptions of Harriet Bird and Iris Lemon, what do you think the white rose symbolizes in *The Natural*?
10. In what ways is Bump Bailey's attitude similar to that of many modern athletes? Give specific examples.
11. Many times, critics of modern athletes say that, in older times, athletes played more for the love of the game, and certainly not for financial gain. Based on this novel, where do you think *The Natural* would fall on this argument?

The Natural

Pre-Game

VOCABULARY

amiable – friendly; likely to join in a conversation
chamois – soft leather from the hide of an animal, such as a deer
contorted – twisted
droll – silly or comical
ducks – casual trousers
gabardine – worsted cotton, wool, or rayon
greenhorn – slur directed at someone new to a situation or uninitiated
hayseed – slur directed at someone from a rural area
intone – call or say aloud
marvelously – beyond the realm of human belief
rednose – slur directed at someone with a drinking problem
splurge – a sudden explosion
stereopticon – a projector that produces two opposite views
suppressed – held back or within
valise – suitcase
wrested – pulled, using a twisting motion

1. From the beginning, Roy Hobbs' gift is presented as both a supernatural blessing as well as an inescapable burden. What rhetorical devices in the first two paragraphs of the story combine to reflect this difference?

2. Why does Eddie (the porter) bother Roy so much with idle talking?

Batter-Up! (Section 3)

VOCABULARY

cathartics – medicine
contemplated – gazed at while deep in thought
indigent – poor, unable to support oneself financially
limelight – area of public notice
per diem – per day (88)
roundhouse – a garage for locomotives
scurvy – up to no good
shade – spirit
strident – loud or urgent

1. What figures or literary terms express the ongoing pain of the grieving Memo?

2. Until now, the presence of water has only meant good for Roy and for the Knights. How is the significance of water now uncertain?

3. What makes Memo's grief deeper than it might have been in a different relationship?

4. As time passes after Bump's death, Roy finds that he retains only the positive memories of Bump—the wrath he had felt after Bump pulled pranks on him has dissipated? How do you explain this?

Batter-Up! (Section 7)

VOCABULARY

baleful – accusing
bludgeon – blunt, brutal instrument
brittle – fragile
dredge – dig up, especially from a great depth or from under water
hordes – uncontrolled crowds
ravenously – without inhibition, fiercely
snuff – order to stop
stupendous – marvelous or wonderful

1. What does Roy dislike about Iris?

2. How does Roy get revenge on Max Marcy for printing the picture of Hobbs in a clown suit?

3. Find a literary device employed in the long passage about playing dice.
