

## On a Higher Level: Transcendence and Purity in the Literature of Sports

---

Mathew J. Bartkowiak

Every four years, Americans (like fans from other nations) place their hopes and self-esteem on the shoulders of their country's Olympic athletes. As US newspapers run tallies of medals won by Americans alongside those won by Olympians from China, Americans watch their athletes for signs of individual greatness that reflect the sense that the United States is exceptional among nations. In these and other ways, sports affirm people's identities and connections to ideologies that express those identities. However, despite this ideological freight, at the heart of the sporting experience is the game itself. By providing seemingly clear rules, athletic contests offer a sense of absolutism and purity—opportunities to transcend the messiness of everyday life. In every sport is a clear beginning and ending, good versus bad. Participants and spectators seem to crave this clarity, especially since the pure experience of sports is all too often challenged by ideological baggage brought to the field by fans and players alike.

In sports literature, corrupting influences that challenge this purity (from drugs to politics) are key narrative concerns. In Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* (1952) these forces cause a baseball player to get shot, and in Walter Tevis's *The Hustler* (1959) they lead to a pool player having his hands crushed by thugs. In both novels there is only one place of purity, peace, and transcendence for the player-protagonists: within the game itself. These two significant post-World War II works create safe spaces in the worlds crumbling around their protagonists. These novels suggest that the game itself can ultimately reject corrupting influences and provide a safe haven, even if just momentarily, for elevated experience and consciousness. This battle over what sports are supposed to mean and represent provides a poignant and constant reminder for the characters, as well as for readers, of the vices and excesses of humanity.

Though resistance to corruption links these two novels, the theme is explored differently in each. This difference is especially apparent in the frequency and length of transcendent moments and in the differing levels of catharsis felt by characters when they “transcend.” Before looking into these novels in detail, an operational definition of “transcendence” must be established. In “‘Distancing’: An Essay on Abstract Thinking in Sports Performances,” R. Scott Kretchmar employs the term “distancing” (6) to describe a process in which “being human is unavoidably to be immersed in the physical world and its curtailed temporo-spatial realities,” but “it is also to gain, in selective fashion, a distance from this milieu” (7). This space of elevated consciousness and experience can bring with it “safety, human affirmation, dignity, power, leisure, and rational observation” (7). Players can reach a level of synergy or “oneness” with the game, as Kretchmar postulates: “The athlete has to give himself to the contest, become committed to the game, fully live the activity, if he desires to understand some things about himself and his sport world” (17). Athletes who achieve “distance” transcend nationality, race, politics, capital, and any other ideology that can be connected to the action on the field. The opportunity to go beyond the limits of daily life is available for athletes engaged in sports, and the protagonists in *The Natural* and *The Hustler* have, to varying extents, the ability to seize this opportunity.

Sports can be a place in which absolute experience or purity rests in the heart of the game, devoid of all meaning outside the game itself. From a golfer who “gets into the swing” of a round, to a volleyball player who is “in the zone,” to a marathon runner who finds his or her “flow,” language expresses transcendent athletic experience. At such elevated moments, the athlete is, in essence, bathed in the pure light of the experience of sport itself, above fans’ collective notions of meaning and intent. For example, baseball is claimed by some to be an “American experience” in that it epitomizes the “American Dream” in which wealth, popularity, and “American” success are earned most

visibly through individual effort. However, nation, money, power, and fame are constraints to athletic transcendence.

The promise of transcendence and a pure experience within the game exists alongside the inevitable ideological associations like nationality, race, and politics that players and fans attach to sports. Both Malamud and Tevis respect and even revere a certain belief in “purity” through play. However, in each novel, human flaws challenge this purity and create distractions, compromising the protagonists’ abilities to lose themselves in the game and achieve transcendence—a transcendence that challenges both time and space and all human attachments, while bringing the player to a new state within the game.

These two sports-focused novels explore the binary of the transcendent experience within the game and the corrupting influence of ideology that attaches to sport. Both works test the reality of the American Dream and point at the dangers of adopting a winner-take-all, go-it-alone search for exceptionalism. *The Natural* has proven to be a cornerstone work of American sports literature with its focus on Roy Hobbs and his search for success, power, and redemption in baseball. *The Hustler* has created a lasting place in American literature with its take on the eternal struggle of the player who searches for identity and meaning both inside and outside of the game. Like Roy Hobbs in a more recognized sport, Fast Eddie Felson finds both moments of clarity and elevation as well as more than his fair share of corruption, greed, and other vices in the pool hall. The pursuit of their American Dream of wealth, power, fortune, and fame, however, bars each character from the freedom of the moment. This pursuit of what they think they want pushes aside what they have already gained through transcendence: purity of experience, peace of mind, and a sense of belonging.

Since each protagonist faces ordinary trials and tribulations, the moments of transcendence within and through sport are not proffered as absolute answers for peace and order in their lives. Rather, each has a distinct ability to transcend the messiness of life in the game. Purity reigns despite the corrupting influence of human

beings and the beliefs they bring to these sports. Thus, “games are both lovely and dangerous” in both the world of these two protagonists and the real world (Kretchmar, “Why” 198). The “innocence” of play coupled with the “vagaries of culture” that combine in formalized games reflects the spectrum of uses that sports can possess for their participants and audiences (“Why” 190–91). This ability of sport to represent both transcendence and everyday banality is not lost on Malamud or Tevis.

In order to understand the moments of transcendence, it is necessary to understand what the protagonists are trying to transcend. Each protagonist finds himself in a world that is remarkably harsh. While trying to achieve through sport a distinctive identity and direction, or even momentary escape, Hobbs and Felson are surrounded by people, places, and things that speak of the vices of humanity. Greed, jealousy, ego, and many other realities vex both characters off the field and even sometimes on it.

In Malamud’s *The Natural*, Roy Hobbs is on the cusp of what many may consider the American Dream. Success, wealth, power, and popularity seem certain as Roy makes a long train trip to Chicago for a new life in the majors. This hope is squelched, however, when a female “admirer” shoots Roy shortly after he arrives. Scrapping his way back to the big leagues, Roy defies the odds but still finds the dream elusive. Hell-bent on getting the prettiest girl, the most attention, and the most praise, Roy becomes a tragic figure chasing the wrong goals, and soiling the purity of baseball with shallow desires.

Roy becomes the personification of the 1919 Black Sox scandal, Babe Ruth’s reported gluttony, and many other excesses, all rolled into one. He sets aside the potential beauty and purity of the game and refuses the distancing that would allow him to transcend the shady world he inhabits. Like the Black Sox, he represents the original sin of humanity by falling prey to earthly temptations and ultimately the rejection of anything beyond the material. The mythic proportions of

baseball are compromised when the sacred is corrupted by the all-too-pronounced weaknesses of the sport's "heroes."

Roy exemplifies the kind of sports protagonist that follows the path of the unrighteous, trading his ability to achieve transcendence in the game for the pursuit of human desires. The sports protagonist is, as Kent Cartwright and Mary McElroy argue, "a kind of Americanized *tabula rasa* upon which the novelist can essay an enormous range of controlled encounters" (47). These encounters can range from the potentially redemptive to the damning. A desire for definitive experience and redemption through the player and the game beckons readers of sports fiction, and just as easily the athlete and the arena of sport can smash a fan's hope for something better than the sober realities of the everyday. Roy Hobbs, the innocent farm boy wanting to make it in the big leagues, disappoints readers by forgoing his focus on the game in favor of a growing focus on himself.

Amid a dark and dreamlike world, Roy experiences only a few moments of clarity, redemption, and hope. On the train ride to Chicago to join the big leagues, Roy's inner anxiety is exposed. In a liminal position, Roy is beset by the people surrounding him, including the seductress Harriet, who take away any possible comfort. Roy seems, at best, overwhelmed: "Yesterday he had come from somewhere, a place he knew was there, but today it had thinned away in space—how vast he could not have guessed" (Malamud 16). Away from his roots, no longer what he once was, he now has no idea of what is to come. It is an uncomfortable spot to be in, and the sordid characters surrounding him only make it worse.

On the trip, Roy experiences a moment of transcendence when he faces the great "Whammer" in an impromptu duel between fastballer and slugger. The discomfort of the trip and its sordid characters are momentarily forgotten in a showdown that serves as a stand-in for the entire game, where the game takes over in a stand-in for the entire sport: pitcher versus batter, with winner taking it all. Cartwright and McElroy describe the showdown between Roy and the Babe Ruth-like

“Whammer” as being a few pitches that are “surrealistic and symbolic, vastly longer in experience than the few seconds Roy takes to hurl them” (51). The reader is allowed access into the slowed vision and consciousness of the Whammer, and here Malamud foreshadows the fate of the older Roy. The ball approaches with otherworldly slowness, and Whammer is reminded of a “white pigeon he had kept as a boy that he would send into flight by flipping it into the air. The ball flew at him and he was conscious of its bird-form and white flapping wings” (Malamud 22). The second pitch then appears “to the batter to be a slow spinning planet looming toward the earth. For a long light-year he waited for this globe to whirl into the orbit of his swing so he could bust it to smithereens that would settle with dust and dead leaves into some distant cosmos” (Malamud 23). Even with his reputation on the line, Whammer cannot help but be caught up in the game. Roy is silenced by Malamud on the other side of these pitches, as well, to underscore the transcendent nature of this duel. Any anxiety or inner turmoil is muted in these brief moments of pure experience. This mythical time—these moments when the ego is silenced, when the game is the sole experience, beckoning the participants to let go of their earthly constraints—is broken as soon as the at bat is over. After striking out, Whammer realizes he has become a sad member of the old order, while Roy revels in the power and control that comes with taking out the best. This intrusion of ego breaks the purity of the moment, and the characters return to the confines of their own vain heads.

This moment is a rarity, and soon after, Roy actively fights off peace of mind. His life quickly becomes a mess after this stunning flash of transcendence. Roy’s desire to succeed leads him to getting shot, chasing after an unrequited lust, and seeking desperately success and power in the game and beyond. When he makes his way back to the big show, he is assigned to a team at the lowest rung of the ladder: the Knights. So much in disarray, the team brings in Doc Knobbs, a man hired to exorcize the evils of the men’s own minds. Roy finds himself “going off” with the “soft, lulling, peaceful” voice of Knobbs during an

envisioning activity (67). Roy rejects this proffered relief and refuses to participate further in Doc Knobbs's attempt to "rid the fears and personal inferiorities" of the players (66).

His only other shot for some kind of peace comes off the field, in a brand of transcendence promised by love. Iris Lemon, a woman who supported him during a batting slump, offers Roy a way to escape his own head and his own selfish goals and desires. The promise of Iris's love, then, is much like the momentary utopia provided in sports. However, Roy is unable to break the hold that his other love interest, Memo Paris—the beautiful bombshell he is supposed to pursue according to his American Dream of success and power—has upon him. What is more, his appreciation for Iris is continuously compromised by his obsessions with her appearance and the fact that she is a grandmother. Iris, a voice of reason and passion in a confused and cold world, does not fully engage Roy. Shallow and greedy, Roy wants to be with Memo, a beautiful trophy other men will envy. It is his "nagging impatience" to take on "so much more to do, so much of the world to win for himself" (85) that compromises his ability to fully enjoy his time with Iris, and he forsakes baseball in the same way. An even greater transgression occurs when he permits Memo to compromise his dedication to the game.

The game, much like the promises of redemption and success off of the field, offers to Roy temporary but thrilling escapes into something pure and true. When a moment of transcendence occurs, time is again slowed in the narrative, and Roy's mind clears, allowing him to enter a world free of superficial desires. For example, after a rough start with the Knights that resulted mostly in bickering and sitting on the bench, Roy finally gets (and makes the most of) his opportunity: His bat "flashed in the sun. It caught the sphere where it was biggest. A noise like a twenty-one gun salute cracked the sky. There was a straining, ripping sound and a few drops of rain spattered to the ground. The ball screamed toward the pitcher and seemed suddenly to dive down at his feet." Malamud continues, "Attempting to retrieve and throw, the

Philly fielder got tangled in thread. The second baseman rushed up, bit the cord and heaved the ball to the catcher but Roy had passed third and made home, standing” (74). In this rare moment, Roy’s thoughts are drowned out by the events transpiring in front of him, where the game takes over.

Along with mythical sources from Homer to the Bible to Arthurian legend, the book also owes a great deal to the idea of the elusive nature of the American Dream, the creation and questioning of heroes, and the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. Passages in which players are locked in the action of the game indicate order in an orderless world. The order comes in the purity of the game, the definitiveness of rules, and the athlete’s ability to simply be in the moment of experience. In this pure state, one’s worst impulses and behaviors are removed, and one is able to rise above the narrow confines of the self and to become part of the universe of the game. Unfortunately for Roy, these few moments pale in comparison to the number of messes he creates for himself: Lust, greed, gluttony, and ego gratification overwhelm him, and in the end he is disgraced for colluding with gamblers to lose the one-game playoff for the pennant.

Though difficult to gauge, based upon his general inability to transcend and to find momentary respite in the “purity” of baseball, Roy is more lost than Eddie Felson, who is also flawed and as burdened by his humanity. Prone to the same need for acceptance, success, power, and wealth, Eddie searches for transcendence in the smoke-filled pool halls of Chicago and elsewhere. Unlike Roy, Eddie has numerous instances of pure experience and transcendence from the everyday that take him above the harsh world he inhabits. It is also within the game that he finds soul-crushing failure, a necessary risk that players take by playing the game and accepting all that it entails. For Eddie, the game brings him back to himself after life outside the game lets him down; for Roy, the journey can no longer be interrupted by the game. In his long, slow descent, Roy is not capable of completely giving himself to the game, as the game has become secondary to his life off the field.

When Eddie Felson first takes on “Minnesota Fats,” the premier player of the game, he feels a sense of peace and transcendence, even in the midst of a marathon pool session: “There was a strange, exhilarating feeling that he was really somewhere else in the room, above the table—floating, possibly, with the heavy, bodiless mass of cigarette smoke that hung below the light—watching his own body, down below” (Tevis 49). Like the ability of Roy Hobbs to silence his own thoughts while his bat flashes in the sun, Eddie eliminates all distractions to silence everything but the game and experience a sensation of momentarily floating.

Searching out the best in the hopes of defeating the best, Eddie finds his game and holds his own against Fats. He eventually is in a spot that might make the average person quite happy: eighteen thousand dollars ahead in the game. Cash and alcohol may help Eddie to obtain this feeling of floating, but Tevis indicates that the game itself is at the heart of this transcendence later in the book. Crushed after losing to Minnesota Fats, and after having his hand broken by some folks who do not appreciate the fact that he is a pool shark, Eddie finds himself back in the game: “Eddie slowly became aware of something he had not been aware of about himself for a long time: of how much he enjoyed playing pool. Things of that kind, things that simple, can be forgotten easily—especially in all of the questions of money and gambling, talent and character, born winner and born loser—and they can come as a shock” (130). At this point Eddie is coming back to playing pool after having his hand broken, and he is severely mentally and physically damaged thanks to the game (or at least the pride and gambling associated with it). However, Eddie achieves a sense of purity and experience in the pool hall that night. Such moments speak to Kretchmar’s notion of “distancing” in sports. These moments are “associated with these diverse senses of distancing—safety, human affirmation, dignity, power, leisure, and rational observation, to name but a few” (“Distancing” 7). Eddie is affirmed and alive in the game.

Unlike Roy, for Eddie these moments are numerous and continue to maintain and propel him through the world of smoke, greed, and pride. He is as prone to temptation but is able to more completely give himself to the game. The game becomes a base of operations, and he is able to find his center as well as his folly through playing it. When not cloaked in corruption and vice, the game reminds Eddie of what can be, versus the harsh realities of what his life really is. He reflects that the “hard, absorbing, almost religious practicing were a reminder to him of what he was, of what he had been and was going to be. And it kept him from thinking, kept him from being irritated” (Tevis 134). What baseball *could* provide for Roy Hobbs, pool *does* give to Fast Eddie Felson, who is immersed repeatedly in transcendent moments through distancing. Kretchmar describes how this comes about in sports:

Just as it is difficult to be “moved” or “carried away” by paintings, poetry, prose literature, or music by dealing with them skeptically or half-heartedly, so too sport does not normally render up its full charm and meaning to the occasional or distracted participant. The athlete has to *give* himself to the contest, become committed to the game, fully live the activity, if he desires to understand some things about himself and his sport world which are most difficult to grasp. (Kretchmar, “Distancing” 17)

Eddie appears to have a better talent for finding these moments, even as his dreams and visions of finding redemption and the American Dream prove to be meaningless illusions. The game still holds some sway and reverence for him, whereas Roy’s pleasure in the game appears to have been left behind as soon as he boards his first train to Chicago.

Although Eddie finds momentary transcendence in the game, he is shoved back to the ground by the seedy character, Bert, a sort of pool pimp looking to cash in on Eddie’s talents. A bit more mature after dealing with his loss to Fats and somewhat refocused after recovering from his injury, Eddie sees the forest through the trees this last time in his rematch with Minnesota Fats, in which he “was in a place now

where he could not be affected, where he felt that nothing Fats could do could touch him. Not Eddie Felson, fast and loose—and, now smart, critical” (Tevis 217). Significantly, Tevis concludes this list of identifiers with the words “and rich.” Though he feels the last sensation at that moment, the pursuit of wealth will also reveal itself as an illusion. Fast Eddie illuminates the themes of isolation and vice, but his humanity would not be so apparent without the purity and transcendence that he achieves. As it was for Roy, aside from his single fleeting chance to harness the love of good woman, the game is the only road for Eddie to find some truth and to transcend.

The sobering realities of Roy’s and Eddie’s lives are ultimately the same: The game provides a momentary release, but fails to free them in the long run. In the worlds that they inhabit, the protagonists do not find ultimate redemption through a lasting sense of transcendence or even generally a lasting sense of hope. It is these worlds that corrupt the game. The game itself is presented as a dangling carrot of transcendence and pure energy/experience. The corrupt world and their base desires pale in comparison to the beauty of the game. Neither of these novels presents a damnation of sport. Instead, they reveal that what people bring to the sport on the fields and in the stands, the ideological meaning put into this space of experience, is what compromises the ability to transcend through the experience. In each novel, the dramatization of brief moments of “distancing” prove that each of us are capable of such transcendence in our everyday lives.

Sport represents, in both works, a pure ground of experience. It is a place of ultimate freedom, but its promise is wasted by most when ideology is allowed to frame the experience. In an interview in the *Paris Review*, Malamud was asked why he combined baseball and mythology. He responded: “Baseball flat is baseball flat. I had to do something else to enrich the subject.” He continues: “The mythological analogy is a system of metaphor. It enriches the vision without resorting to montage. This guy gets up with his baseball bat and all at once he is, through the ages, a knight—somewhat battered—with a lance; not to

mention a guy with a blackjack, or someone attempting murder with a flower” (qtd. in Stern). Baseball essentially becomes the ideas and the identities that are actively connected to it. The realm of pure experience becomes a realm of imported meaning and significance in which perhaps the greatest challenge is for the characters to actively avoid such baggage, something people are not prone to do.

Malamud uses what the interviewer identifies as a “prison motif” in his works: a force that challenges freedom, physically and mentally: “Perhaps I use it as a metaphor for the dilemma of all men.” According to Malamud: “The personal prison of entrapment in past experiences, guilt, obsession—the somewhat blind or blinded self, in other words.” Roy Hobbs is trapped in a prison of his own making with success and power as his primary jailers. Baseball and his love for Iris are keys to the shackles entrapping Roy’s mind, but he cannot grasp them. He cannot “construct, invent, his freedom” (qtd. in Stern). Roy has moments when time is slowed, and he is able to be outside of his own head in pure experience. The game and his momentary happiness with Iris both gleam in the sun, but Roy’s eyes are too busy playing tower guard.

Fast Eddie Felson is much more capable of finding these gleaming moments of transcendence, but as is the case for Roy Hobbs, they are short-lived. Eddie is pulled back repeatedly into the mundane world from these instances of distancing because of the vices and follies people bring to the table and to the game itself. As depicted in the novel, the game is a much more acute and significant means of escaping Eddie’s (as Malamud says it) “personal prison of entrapment,” because of his love for the game itself.

Although the protagonists in *The Natural* and *The Hustler* play different sports, each seeks something real and tangible in a messy, short-sighted world. Sport can be that something, the pure experience that will wake people from futile pursuits and show them what life has the capability of being: free and in tune with one’s self. In play and sport the mind can be freed, the senses acutely honed, and shortcomings momentarily left on the sidelines. Humankind’s penchant for folly ensures

these moments are fleeting, and people do everything to confine the game to the mind and the ego. The American Dream, redemption, political concerns, and other ideologies all make it difficult (if not impossible) for an athlete to achieve “distancing.” Malamud and Tevis painted the sobering reality of American life in the 1950s and each story continues to resonate with readers also looking for the ability to transcend and yearning for something pure. Perhaps, in addition to all of the meanings and intentions people bring to sport, games are also part of the inherent fabric of everyday life thanks to their promise to allow people to transcend and to experience something on or off the field that is acute, distanced, and free of foolhardy humanity.

## Works Cited

- Carino, Peter. “History as Myth in Bernard Malamud’s *The Natural*.” *Nine* 14.1 (2005): 67–76. Print.
- Cartwright, Kent, and Mary McElroy. “Malamud’s ‘The Natural’ and the Appeal of Baseball in American Culture.” *Journal of American Culture* 8.2 (Summer 1985): 47–55. Print.
- Kretchmar, R. Scott. “‘Distancing:’ An Essay on Abstract Thinking in Sport Performances.” *Journal of the Philosophy of Sport* 9.1 (1982): 6–18. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “Why Dichotomies Make It Difficult to See Games as Gifts of God.” *Theology, Ethics and Transcendence in Sports*. Ed. Jim Parry, Mark Nesti, and Nick Watson. New York: Routledge, 2011. 185–200. Print.
- Malamud, Bernard. *The Natural*. 1952. New York: Farrar, 2003. Print.
- Stern, Daniel. “Bernard Malamud, The Art of Fiction. No. 52.” *Paris Review*. Paris Review, 1975. Web. 9 May 2012.
- Tevis, Walter. *The Hustler*. 1959. New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 2002. Print.