

THE Geneva Review

No. 12 © 1984, Geneva Ministries July/Aug., 1984

THE NATURAL, A MOVIE ABOUT MORE THAN THE NATURAL

A Review by Ray R. Sutton

The Natural, starring Robert Redford and Robert Duvall, is a classic. It's the kind of movie that can be viewed on two levels. Kids, young and old, can watch Roy Hobbs (Redford's character) smack baseballs out of the stadium into all of the mythology of baseball. Or, the more serious viewer can study the many interesting themes and symbols. This review is for the latter.

On the surface, *The Natural* is a movie about a small town farm boy who becomes a star in Major League Baseball. But the key female villain, Harriet Bird, points to a more sophisticated theme when she questions Hobbs about his goals in baseball. Hobbs says he plays baseball "to be the best." And she responds, "that's all?" Why does she question him so at this point? Because to say he wants to be the best means he wants to be God. Only God can be the best. Unlike Chuck Yeager of *The Right Stuff* who raced against nature, Roy wants to climb above mortality, and be the best.

Since he has the natural talent and desire to achieve immortality, the conversation takes a dramatic turn. Harriet begins to talk about *Lancelot*, the Arthurian hero, and *Homer*. She asks Hobbs if he has ever read Homer. Homer only means four bases to Roy, so she tells him, "Homer wrote about heroes and gods."

Heroes and Gods

For me, Harriet's conversation unlocks several themes in the movie. The major theme concerns *heroes and gods*. Heroes are not gods in Christianity, but heroes are definitely more than mortal men in paganism, particularly *Greek/pagan* thought. Nevertheless, the classic hero of Homer was Ulysses. Ulysses was not unlike so many of the heroic figures of Ancient Greece. This hero was usually sent on some kind of voyage to accomplish a significant feat. Then he would return to his family as a true god. Usually, he would arrive home and find the need to rescue them from some enslavement.

Hobbs is like a modern day Ulysses. He leaves his true love and unofficial wife to become a Major League baseball player. After going through many trials, facing set back, and accomplishing his goals by becoming King (Roy means King) of the Knights baseball team, he returns to his family. Like Ulysses, Roy has to rescue his wife and son from bondage. She has become a slave of the city, and his son is considered a bastard because he has no father. Roy saves them from all this. At the end of the movie, Roy returns his family to the farm, and in the last scene, on the farm and in nature, he plays baseball with his son while his wife watches.

The Ulysses theme is fairly straightforward, and if that were all, we could stop the review here. Yet, another ancient Greek heroic concept comes out in the *The Natural*. It concerns the Olympic Games of ancient Greece. They provided a *labyrinthine* arena to surface the hero, better, the gods. This *labyrinthine* experience provided many tests and setbacks. The ancient belief was that the victor of the games was deity. By doing great physical feats, and overcoming all the obstacles in front of him he showed that he had transcended mortality. Thus, he was more than man.

In *The Natural*, Roy Hobbs is just such a Greek heroic figure. He overcomes natural and unnatural setbacks. He faces death when he is shot by a silver bullet, but does not die. We are told that others had died, not Roy. He is sent into exile. After he is shot, he is out of baseball for sixteen years. When he comes back, he has to play for the Hebrew Oilers, the team farthest removed from gentile Major League Baseball. Later, he resists the temptation to become wealthy by selling out the team, and throwing the pennant game.

Roy even overcomes time to become a hero/god. One of his homers crashes through a giant clock, and his natural and unnatural talents enable him to transcend the temporal.

But he possesses more than the natural. At the beginning of the movie, Roy's dad says to him, "boy, you have a real gift, but it takes more than talent to be the best, you'll have to develop it." In essence, he says, "you're a real natural." But his dad goes on to inform Roy that to be the best he will have to train and discipline himself.

The Olympic hero needs more than natural ability. That was the presumption at least. For the Greek/pagan, discipline was everything. His view of discipline involved morality to the extent that it enabled him to transcend mortality. Discipline and virtue were simply means to becoming deity. In other words, the Greek hero, in this case Roy Hobbs, had to remove all impurity from his life while moving through the game(s).

Trains are used to represent movement, or as the name *locomotive* implies, *locomotion* to the game(s). At the beginning of the movie, a middle-aged Hobbs climbs on the train to enter the game of baseball after sixteen years of being sidetracked. Significantly, his detour had begun on another locomotive when he climbed aboard the train of transcendence the first time.

There, he met a lady, Harriet Bird, dressed in black-always in black. Initially, she climbed on the train to join the *Whammer*, the reigning best. During the trip, however, the *Whammer* was challenged by Roy's manager to a joust, that is a contest, with Roy. The bet was that the *Whammer* could not hit three strikes pitched by Roy.

Roy's first contest is one of those scenes one never forgets. Much at this point is done in slow motion to capture all of the dynamics of what happens. Yet, the most important exchange does not occur between Roy and the *Whammer*. When the *Whammer* is struck out by Roy, the camera focuses on Harriet's face, for as the *Whammer* strikes out, she turns her face toward Roy. He is the new hero/Lancelot to be brought down.

Images of Purity and Impurity

1 say brought down because she represents impurity, mortality (death), and fate. For Roy to become more than a man, he has to overcome all three. After the train arrives in Chicago, Roy descends on the elevator in the hotel to enter Harriet's room. As a matter of fact, each time Roy sins, he is pictured as descending in elevators. This first time, however, is nearly fatal. Arriving at her room, she greets him dressed in a black negligee with black hood. Then, to the viewer's surprise, the seductress shoots Roy in the Stomach (side) with a silver bullet, and jumps out of the hotel window to her own death.

The silver bullet stands for purity. This is an interesting twist used by the sinister *underworld* gods who sent Harriet to prevent another from transcending into deity. The silver bullet will only kill the one who is impure. In a conversation between the *Whammer* and Max Mercy, a reporter/cartoonist, we are told the news of a football player and *Olympic* star who had been killed by silver bullets.

In Roy's case, he is severely wounded in the side. But he does not die. He rises above the fatal wound. Like Lancelot, the hero of the Arthurian legend, he is always plagued by this wound in the side. The results of which involve his fall into impurity. The wound is later activated by a second seductress, Memo. When she touches the scar, Roy has a flashback of himself descending the elevator and meeting Harriet. He awakens to find Memo next to him who then informs Roy that she has only touched the scar.

Memo is also sent by the *underworld* figures Judge and Gus. Judge is part owner of the Knights baseball team, and Gus is a mysterious partner/millionaire with an occultic eye. Both are desirous of participating in the game. In this sense, they are competing with Hobbs. If Roy is successful, they will fail to gain control of one of the Knights. They have to succeed by stopping Hobbs.

Nevertheless, Roy is a true hero who overcomes in a positive light with a special weapon, *Wonderboy*. *Wonderboy* is Roy's bat. Hand made from the center part of a tree cauterized by lighting, *Wonderboy* is another symbol of purity. The only time the bat fails is when Roy becomes impure through illicit relationships with Harriet and Memo. At all other times, *Wonderboy* enables Roy to transcend to be the best.

There is an exception. In the last and biggest game of Roy's career - the game for the pennant - Roy faces a would be pursuant of immortality. In the bottom of the 9th, and the winning run at the plate, John Roads, a country farm boy from Nebraska, an unknown (like Roy had been), steps to the mound. Roy is up, and on the third pitch, *Wonderboy* breaks.

At that point, Roy turns to the batboy, Bobby, and says, "pick me

out a bat.- Bobby is the complete antithesis of the natural. He is fat and lacking all the godlike qualities of Roy Hobbs, Bobby hastens to the dugout, and brings back his own hand-made bat, the Savoy Special.

With the Savoy Special, Roy knocks the ball out of the park, threw the lights into eternity (literally), and wins the game. Roy no longer needs the weapon of purity because he has become pure. He finally possesses what his father had said he needed.

When the final hit of the last game crashes through all of the lights, Roy steps into pure light. Light plays an important role in Roy's transcendence. Many shots are taken of light hitting Roy's golden hair. And the lightning that forges Roy's bat flashes when he makes big plays.

The most memorable scene of light recurs when Roy is in a slump. He has been living with Memo. Iris, Roy's boyhood girlfriend, teenage lover, and mother of his son, reads about Roy's coming to Chicago where she lives. She attends the game and finds that Roy cannot get a hit. When he comes to the final bat, she stands up so that Roy can see her. Roy looks up and sees the light streaming down off her head. Roy, literally, sees the fight.

Iris, as the name implies, has always been Roy's eyes. She helps him see that he will make the first team that recruits him. She helps him see his impurity by her pure love for him, and thereby lure him away from Memo, the evil woman. When Roy is in the hospital, suffering from his wound, Iris reminds Roy of all the little boys who need him, actually worship him (notice all the scenes where little boys are looking up at Roy). By this, she helps him to play in the final game. Thus, Iris transmits the light to Roy, and enables him to see.

In contrast to Iris are the Judge, Gus, and Max Mercy. The Judge keeps the lights turned way down in his office because he hates the light. The Judge's office overlooks the field, and the Judge and Gus watch the game from this vantage point. When Roy hits his homer through the lights in the last game, the sparks fall down all over the Judge's office.

Gus has an eye which has occultic power that can see into people's pockets. He uses this power to gamble. Gus's favorite trick, or bet, is to get a person to bet against his ability to see how much money is in the person's pocket. When he tries this on Roy, Hobbs uses a bit of his own magic to trap Gus. Like a magician, he pulls two silver dollars from the hair of Memo who is sitting between them. Roy has more light and purity than Gus.

Max Mercy, played by Robert Duvall (another star performance), is a light-bearer. In his own words, "I protect the game." What does he mean? He protects the game in a negative way by exposing the players through cartoons and pictures.

When Roy is recovering from a flare-up of his wound, he tries to sneak out and practice for the last game. Mercy hides in the stadium with his camera to take a few pictures. Roy hits some homers at Mercy, and hollers out, "Don't look back, Max, don't look back." Roy is referring to his past. He knows that Mercy will try to dig it up, cause a scandal, and keep him from playing.

But Mercy is not a truly negative figure as is indicated in his last speech with Hobbs. Roy asks Mercy if he has ever played the game. Mercy says "no" which means that he, perhaps more than anyone else, truly loves the game. Moreover, he tells Roy that "Whether Roy is a goat or a hero, he (Mercy) will write about him the next day." So, why is Mercy so busy exposing the players? As a light-bearer who tracks the potential stars, and exposes them, he protects the game from being dominated by anyone except the gods. And Max is a true lover of the true gods.

Concluding Thoughts

First, *The Natural* is not a movie about baseball. Robert Redford said in an interview on TV, "This is not a movie about baseball, it's an allegory I'm not sure what the movie is about, and I get very frustrated when asked to explain what the movie is saying. I know it is talking about a second chance in life and a few other things." So, what is the movie all about? Answer: *pagan transcendence*. Christianity is a religion of transcendence, but not the same as pagan transcendence. What is the difference? Christians believe that God is Transcendent, not man. The pagan mind believes that man can somehow rise above mortality, as is consistently portrayed in the *The Natural*. Yet, man can never become god. Cornelius Van Til has told us time and again that the most basic distinction in Scripture is the Creator/creature distinction.

Why, therefore, is the movie called *The Natural*? In a way, it seems to be about anything but the natural endowments of man. We should remember that the Greek/pagan mind believed nature and god were one. Thus, god was the purest form of nature, and to transcend nature really meant becoming a pure being. The purely natural, according to the Greek/pagan mind, was one who had progressed from one form of nature to a purer form of nature no longer bound by time or space. He/she became true nature/god. In a pagan sense. From a Christian point of view, the viewpoint we come to this movie with, nature is distinct from God. Man becomes one with God through a covenant, and not any direct connection of being.

Second, *The Natural*, like all pagan imagery, is more dangerous to the person who understands the message, and is not faithful to Christ. This is the way of all falsehood. The more one understands, the worse off he becomes. If one is armed with the Scriptures, however, he can do more than enjoy the simple theme of a man who gets a second chance in midlife and succeeds.

Moreover, he can study the movie and work his way back from perverted truth to appreciate and understand True Truth, to use one of Schaeffer's more notable phrases. This demands a mature grasp of orthodox doctrine and a solid comprehension of Christian worldview. What do I mean by working back from perverted truth? We must understand that everything in the world was made in the image of God. Even though the world has fallen into sin, creation is still a reflection of God. Although men twist and distort the truth, they cannot create ideas ex nihilo (out of nothing). They are the created and only the Creator can create from nothing. If orthodox Christians really took the doctrine of ex nihilo seriously, then they would understand that all of the falsehoods of man are nothing but perversions of what God has already created. This means there can be redemptive value in analyzing pagan ideas to see how they illustrate, re-enforce, and pervert True Truth.

The old Humanism (to be distinguished from the pagan modern Humanism) which Christianized classical Greek literature understood this. Christians of the Middle Ages saw, for example, the heroic concept among the Greeks as a distortion of the Christian concept of hero. Therefore, they tried to re-interpret Greek heroes with a Christian construction on them. This was the fatal mistake, and certainly not what I am suggesting. The old Humanists of the Middle Ages, however, were not completely wrong. They were operating from the presupposition that all of man's ideas, including pagan ones, are not something new under the sun. These concepts in their true form originated in God. Thus, there is value in studying non-Christian literature and art.

The old Humanists failed in that they applied this presupposition wrong. They tried to re-interpret instead of remake this literature into the image of God. In other words, one cannot undo the pagan message of Plato's *Republic* by attempting to make Socrates into a Christian. This is a worse deception than Plato's original pagan message, and was one of the great failures of the Church of the Middle Ages. The instructors kept telling the pupils that Plato had a Christian message, but the pupils kept drifting back into Greek thought. They knew what Plato was really saying. The better method would have been to point out the perversion of True Truth. Value could then have been derived from reading him without undermining the Word of God. Of course, Plato would be for the more advanced Christian student. *The Natural*, although filled with Greek/pagan themes, is different.

The Natural is like a fairy tale. Fairy tales are less damaging because they can be read at two levels. This is why I think *The Natural* is fine for children to see. Most Christians, and certainly not children, will not understand this movie. So, they will just see a movie about baseball. But the one cognizant of the transcendent theme should beware. The transcendent theme could be tempting if this movie is viewed in unfaithfulness. The temptation of transcendence was the very temptation that the Serpent brought to Eve. The Serpent wanted to transcend his being to become God. And his very words were to Eve, "do this and you shall become like God."

At the Incarnation, Truly God became Truly Man. Christ redeemed man, and enabled him to become truly man through covenant with Christ. Although man can never become Incarnated like Christ, that is become one with the Deity of Christ, he is joined to Christ's True Humanity by faith in the risen Savior. *The Natural* should be viewed in terms of this faithfulness. Remember Eric Liddell of *Chariots of Fire* who ran, unlike Roy Hobbs played baseball, for the glory of God.

The Geneva Review is published eight times a year by Geneva Ministries, and is mailed with The Geneva Papers. Those wishing to receive these mailings should address requests to Geneva Ministries, P.O. Box 6376, Tyler, TX 75711. A donation, tax deductible, is requested. Checks should be made out to The Geneva Papers. Permission to reproduce these reviews, in whole or in part, is granted, provided the name and address of The Geneva Review is included.