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Literature Teaching Unit

Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



The Natural

by Bernard Malamud

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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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 1)

VOCABULARY

brogue – accent
colossal – huge
conk – slang term for head
shenanigan – trick
third sacker – third baseman

1. What images of decay and dryness open the reader’s introduction to the New York Knights? Find some descriptions that amplify these images.

2. In Roy’s initial description, what signs does the reader get that show Roy to be still tormented by his past?

3. Given the fact that Roy has been waiting for years to play big league baseball, why do you think he is “down in the dumps” sitting in front of his first big league locker?

4. How is Roy’s first night as a Knight an eerie reflection of his tragic experience right before he had been supposed to try out for the Cubs?

5. Describe how the Judge came to own the Knights.

Batter Up! (Section 5)

VOCABULARY

goose-egged – permitted no runs
panhandling – begging
vile – poisonous, almost evilly so

- 1. How does the reader know that Roy’s appetites have extended beyond the bounds of convention?

- 2. Explain Roy’s decision not to switch bats during his slump?

- 3. What is ominous about Roy’s visit to Lola, the fortuneteller?
