The Natural & The Gospel

After heart of Redford's passing, my mind wandered back to my sophomore year at Louisiana College, when I stepped into a darkened theater at the Alexandria Mall to watch "The Natural." With just a couple of teenage months to spare I was captivated by what seemed like a simple story about baseball and second chances. Now, in the seventh inning stretch of my life, I approach the film with different eyes and accumulated experience. Perhaps the greatest revelation I've discovered is the Christ figure that emerges in fleeting glimpses throughout the movie through the character of Roy Hobbs.

Baseball has always been fertile ground for mythic tales and mind-bending consequences—from the ball slipping through Bill Buckner's legs, to the limping gait of Kurt Gibson as he rounded the bases in the Dodger's World Series, to the Babe pointing to the stands before his legendary home run. This week, I streamed the movie again, drawn perhaps by nostalgia and the timeless pull of great storytelling. As with any great movie, I discovered new layers I had never noticed before, or perhaps had never spent time truly contemplating. Mythological and biblical imagery abound in ways that are both subtle and profound. I'm sure I'm not nearly the first to notice them and I made a point not to Google it. I will after writing this.

I was particularly struck by the scene between The Judge and Hobbs, where Roy is tempted to throw games for money. The parallel to Jesus's forty days in the wilderness became unmistakable. "Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me'" (Matthew 4:8-9). The Judge's seductive offer mirrors Satan's temptation precisely. His promises of money and comfort strikingly reflect this biblical encounter.

https://www.youtube.com/embed/D69ShXtN__s?si=FPjkg86hB5iGKj7a
The lightning bolt serves as perhaps the film's most potent symbol of supernatural power. Born from a tree struck by lightning, Roy's bat—Wonderboy—carries mythic significance. The wooden bat itself echoes the cross, an instrument of both destruction and redemption. When his teammates become captivated by Roy's miraculous performances and choose to stitch lightning bolts on their jerseys, it mirrors the Great Commission: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19), each carrying forward the symbol of transformation.

Roy's rejection of pure materialism echoes Jesus's response: "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Matthew 4:4). His choice to pursue his calling rather than wealth reminds us of Philippians 2:7, where Christ "made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant," choosing mission over personal gain.

The silver bullet piercing Roy's side from the mysterious Harriet Bird echoes the fate of a more perfect One: "Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water" (John 19:34). After years of silence and exile, Roy emerges—much like Jesus striding out of the wilderness to begin his ministry. This resurrection motif transforms Roy from a fallen hero into something approaching the sacred.

Roy's teammates become his disciples of sorts, transforming from a ragtag squad of nobodies into followers of a champion. There's something profound about his mysterious, late arrival to the scene—Roy Hobbs seems to be on a divine mission, just as "Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach" (Mark 3:13-14).

https://www.youtube.com/embed/Y1pgp1BOqqM?si=TbRHpo6Ld2B9vmPY
The film’s ending offers perhaps its most heavenly imagery: Roy playing catch with his son in golden, almost ethereal light. This scene suggests paradise regained—all relationships restored, all purposes fulfilled. It evokes the promise found in Revelation 21:4: “He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” I couldn’t help but think of my own father and all those who have passed before us, and the promise that we will all gather together again in that perfect light.

The Imperfect Savior: Certainly, there are profound differences between Roy Hobbs and the figure of Christ, even in metaphorical terms. Roy was full of pride, experienced a devastating fall, and struggled with very human weaknesses. Yet perhaps this is where the metaphor becomes most powerful—it places us in Roy’s shoes. Like the apostle Paul, we can say: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do” (Romans 7:15). We are often attacked, frequently tempted, and sometimes betray those we love most.



The story of redemption echoes through the longings of our own hearts and lives, reminding us that “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Roy Hobbs is not Christ, but he points us toward Christ. His story reminds us that even the fallen can rise, even the wounded can heal others, and even those who have lost everything can find their way back to grace. In the end, “The Natural” offers us more than entertainment—it provides a glimpse of the gospel played out on America’s most mythic stage.

The metaphors may be imperfect, but they are undeniably present, woven throughout the film like threads of gold catching light in unexpected moments. Sometimes the most profound truths come to us not through sermons or scripture alone, but through the stories that capture our imagination and refuse to let go.

Mr. Redford, I don’t know if I’ll see you in the life to come.

But I want to thank you—for bringing Bernard Malamud's story to life with such care, dignity, and beauty. Through your performance, you gave me another glimpse of the gospel. Another reminder that even in a game, even in a story, we can catch sight of something eternal.