

BLACK DRESSES AND WHITE ROSES:

A STUDY OF WOMEN CHARACTERS OF

THE NATURAL

Sachi Onchi

The Natural (1952), Bernard Malamud's first novel, contains almost all the remarkable elements of his fiction as far as the hero's relationship with the women characters is concerned. The shocking scene in which mad Harriet Bird shoots Roy Hobbs represents Malamud's tragic vision of sexuality. Malamud describes his first hero as a young man whose infantilism is his own destiny. Harriet is the extreme exemplar of women's destructive passion with which the hero is determined to be involved. Why does the hero have to be punished that way? We need to find out the function of this crazy woman who throws the hero into the abyss of despair right before he rises in the world.

In the beginning of the novel, young Roy awakens in the train on the way to Chicago for a tryout. Malamud succeeds in conveying the excitement and anxiety of the young hero, using "the

lulling train,"¹ a tunnel and the sight at dawn flying outside of the train window. In the train Roy is still allowed to be a child who is happy in a womb-like cradle. Yet in the dream he observes himself "standing at night in a strange field with a golden baseball in his palm that all the time grew heavier as he sweated to settle whether to hold on or fling it away" (pp. 3-4). As many critics suggest, *The Natural* is based upon a fertility myth which has been repeated in great classics from the Arthurian Grail legends to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. But Roy at the beginning of the novel is merely an American youth whose health and innocence are his talents.

A hero is born when Roy defeats the Whammer, a thirty-three year old famous player. Harriet witnesses their confrontation. "Her eyes shone at the sight of the two men facing one another" (p. 20). Roy resembles a knight who fights in order to win an honor from a lady. But this lady does not deserve men's gallant battle. We must note how Malamud tries to form her image, using color symbolism. She is "in a dressy black dress" (p. 8). She drops a white rose. She smokes, "crossing her heartbreaking legs" (p. 9). Roy immediately gets attracted to her sexually. To the reader's eye, she lacks wholeness as a character. She is obviously a temptress without mercy. Moreover she is more like a mischievous fairy than an earthly figure.

After the victory over the Whammer, Roy gets a chance to be alone with her. We notice that Harriet is curiously intelligent, comparing the fight with "David jawboning the Goliath-Whammer," or "Sir Percy lancing Sir Maldemer, or the first son (with

a rock in his paw) ranged against the primitive papa" (p. 25). While Harriet's insights deepen, Roy remains an infant whose interest is only practical and earthly. He does not recognize the fatal gap between her imagination and his. Their conversation is incoherent, lacking mutual understanding. While Harriet is referring to the destiny of a man who is not allowed to avoid undergoing the thorough decline of his power, Roy indulges in "the memory of how he had done it, the hero, who with three pitched balls had nailed the best American League had to offer" (p. 25).

Harriet points out that even an excellent player like the Whammer is obliged to be defeated by a boy like Roy. She suggests the cruelty of the whole scene that she has witnessed. But showing no sympathy for the defeated, Roy says "Myself, I've got my whole life ahead of me" (p. 26). He cannot answer her further question: "Isn't there something over and above earthly things—some more glorious meaning to one's life and activities?" (p. 27).

Roy is full of life in the midst of his youth. But he is unaware of what his power does to others. He is possessed by sheer faith in his physical power and future success as a baseball player. Roy actually kills the Whammer and takes over his position. But he does not know the defeated ex-hero is the future image of himself. Roy's power is so destructive that it kills Sam, his substitute father.

Shooting Roy, Harriet seems to function as the first dark angel that forces the hero to face the abyss of despair in life. As Earl R. Wasserman says, bird is one of "Jung's major symbols of the

mother.”² Harriet Bird is a terrible mother, who does not allow the hero to indulge in the comfort of a womb. There is a lesson to be learned in order to attain spiritual qualities as a hero. Though Harriet’s way of punishing Roy is too drastic, he needs it in order to emerge from childish infatuation with himself.

Malamud implies that his heroes cannot remain ignorant, detached from the vice of the world. They are in one way or another the victims of the capricious power of the world. Malamud puts the sexual image of a woman together with this capricious force. The image of a forbidden woman full of sexual charm underlines the tragic fates of his heroes.

Placed upon Harriet’s black feathered hat, a white rose loses its pure, innocent image of femininity. Its whiteness carries the icy touch of death. The forest (another symbol of motherhood) “flew upward, and [Harriet] making muted noises of triumph and despair, danced on her toes around the stricken hero” (p. 34).

After fifteen years thirty-four year old Roy appears in a major league team, The New York Knights. Pop Fisher (an allusion to the Fisher King), the team’s manager, suffers from the terrible records of the team. The team members are morally deteriorated, lacking a will to cooperate with fellow team-mates. The picture of the team is drawn in dry, futile images. Bump, the team’s leading hitter, is the source of their negligent attitude toward the games. He does not fight for the team but for his own pleasure. Roy grows to be a savior of the team. After so many years of suffering, he seems to have accomplished the task of becoming a true hero, that is, of giving a new life to society which has long suf-

ferred futility. A natural sustains a capacity to make the rebirth of spiritual virility possible among people. But Roy encounters Memo Paris, another Harriet Bird. His sexual starvation for her throws a shadow over his inborn strength.

To the reader it is clear that from the beginning Memo is a wrong woman for the hero. It is hard to understand why Roy overlooks the resemblance between Harriet and Memo. Harriet was wearing black and Memo in black panties and brassiere strikes Roy so hard that he feels "a splitting headache" (p, 51). They are both forbidden women. They have strong erotic appeal to Roy all the more because they are dangerous. The urgent hunger they evoke in Roy has much to do with his infantile experience with his mother, who abandoned the son. Remember that he calls his mother, "that bird," or "a whore."

Although he is a grown man, he cannot help exposing his weakness as a man who still has a psychological scar of motherless childhood. When can he overcome his weakness and be a fully mature human being? Roy avoids clarifying his inner self and plunges into the fruitless relationship with Memo. How can he expect love from her? How can she love a man with whom she slept, believing that the man was her lover? In his subconsciousness, Roy always tries to compensate for the lack of affection from his mother. A hunger for love is the most serious weakness of the hero.

Memo hates Roy because she believes that he is the ultimate cause of Bump's death. She mourns for Bump, her past lover, wearing a black dress and a black ribbon. She is too fragile to

give what Roy really needs. Roy himself chases after her without knowing what he really lacks. This time again, he seems to be punished. He never knows how his hunger blurs his own capacity to love. He is too much controlled by such a loveless woman like Memo.

After Bump's death Roy accomplishes a great record. Only a natural like him can arouse vigorous sensation among players and fans. But his resemblance to Bump, which excites fans greatly, implies the dark side of a player's glory. Death and life juxtapose in the world of games. Bump's fate may become Roy's any time because like Bump, Roy also has not attained a moral capability to control his natural virility.

Bump finally loses his life because he never learned to use his inborn power efficiently. He remains an egoistic rascal despite his talent. Through their resemblance it seems that Malamud tries to exhibit their common moral deficiency. They are both naturals. But they both betray nature which has given them power, unable to use it positively. We can witness Roy's flaws through some descriptions.

Pop Fisher deploras: "I mistrust a bad ball hitter" (p. 74); though he is the one who appreciates Roy most. Another episode is more suggestive:

It happened that a woman who lived on the sixth floor of an apartment house overlooking the stadium was cleaning out her bird cage, near the end of the game, which the Knights took handily, when her canary flew out of the window and darted down across the field, Roy, who was waiting for the

last out, saw something coming at him in the low rays of the sun, and leaping high, bagged it in his glove.

He got rid of the bloody mess in the clubhouse can. (p. 75)

This episode suggests Roy's potency which may become destructive when it loses its right direction. While he smashes a little canary (another feminine image), he indulges in his hungry desire for Memo.

When he begins to worry about money, Roy immediately gets involved with the underworld of baseball. This world, symbolized by the Judge and a bookie, Gus Sands, becomes the most fearful enemy of Roy's. Some images of the Judge suggest the dry grotesqueness of the world he represents. The Judge cannot be seen clearly because of cigar smoke and his preference of darkness. There is a rumor that "he kept . . . two medicine cabinets loaded with laxatives and cathartics" (p. 86). The pamphlet he hands to Roy says: "The Curse of Venereal Disease" (p. 90). Through these descriptions the Judge's sexual sterility is also implied.

At the night club, the Pot of Fire, Roy sees "half-naked girls chased by masked devils with tin pitchforks." "He grabbed at the devil and missed, then he heard a giggle and realized it was a girl." The chorus girls are "wearing red spangled briefs and brassieres" (p. 94). The circumstance which surrounds Roy is full of lustful images. He finds Memo in a black dress there with Gus. It is obvious that she belongs to this kind of degenerate circle. She seems to be burnt out with "the dark circles around her eyes" (p. 95). And Gus, her partner, or patron,

emits the smell of death. His expression is melancholy and "his glass [eye] gleamed like a lamp in a graveyard" (p. 102).

Memo is a young woman. But her spirit belongs to old age. She is also sexually futile. She is not a suitable woman for Roy. In spite of Pop's warning, he does not realize that his potency will be weakened by his unproductive desire for the wrong woman.

After the date with Memo in white Mercedes-Benz, Roy falls into a deathly slump. Like Wasserman, the reader needs to interpret the condition of their date psychoanalytically, since Malamud's reference to Jung is quite apparent. Besides the polluted water by which they stop their car and Memo's sick breast, the following episode delineates Roy's psyche:

The white moonlight shot through a stretch of woods ahead. He found himself wishing he could go back somewhere, go home, whenever that was. As he was thinking this, he looked up and saw in the moonlight a boy coming out of the woods, followed by his dog. Squinting through the windshield, he was unable to tell if the kid was an illusion thrown forth by the trees or someone really alive. After fifteen seconds he was still there. Roy yelled to Memo to slow down in case he wanted to cross the road. Instead, the car shot forward so fast the woods blurred, the trees racing along like shadows in weak light, then skipping into black and white, finally all black and the moon was gone. (p. 110)

"A boy coming out of the woods" is Roy's infantile self. On the subconscious level, Roy is still a fragile creature whose ultimate desire is to be protected comfortably in a mother's womb.

Woods and the moon are maternal images. Killing a boy in Roy's subconsciousness, Memo proves to be a merciless woman who completely condemns the hero's weakness as a man instead of giving him warmth and affection. This incident shows that with her chaotic spiritual condition Memo is potent to hurt Roy fatally. Their date ends up with his white Mercedes becoming a wreck.

While Memo does not even show sympathy for Roy during the slump, "a young black-haired woman, wearing a red dress" (p. 130) appears suddenly in the stands. A miracle happens while she remains standing, watching him:

He caught the red dress and a white rose, turned away, then came quickly back for another take, drawn by the feeling that her smile was for him. Now why would she do that for? She seemed to be wanting to say something, and then it flashed on him the reason she was standing was to show her confidence in him. He felt surprised that anybody would want to do that for him. At the same time he became aware that the night spread out in all directions and was filled with an unbelievable fragrance. (p. 133)

Iris Lemon is rich in feminine allure. Even "the stranger sitting next to her felt a strong sexual urge" (p. 131). In her picture, Roy sees a woman quite different from Memo. "In her wide eyes he saw something which caused him to believe she knew what life was like" (p. 136). "Memo was remote, even unreal. . . . Iris, a stranger, had done for him what the other wouldn't, in public view what's more." "He felt for her a

gratitude it was hard to hold in" (p. 138). What she did was to make him regain his power by giving him a sure sense that someone believes in him.

Yet in their conversation curiously enough Roy answers in the same way to Iris as he did to Harriet:

The sweat oozed out of him. "I wanted everything." His voice boomed out in the silence.

She waited.

"I had a lot to give to this game."

"Life?"

"Baseball. If I had started out fifteen years ago like I tried to, I'da been the king of them all by now."

"The king of what?"

"The best in the game," he said impatiently. (p. 141, cf. p. 26)

While the women talk about LIFE, Roy is only capable of answering them, calling himself, "the best in the game." It is doubtful if Roy understands the meaning of Iris's words: "suffering is what brings us toward happiness" (p. 143). Roy has experienced tremendous suffering. But it is doubtful how much he has learned from the pain of the experience. As far as he avoids observing his own flaws, he cannot grasp the reality of his barren condition.

Iris is an Aphrodite provided with golden images. The time Roy shares with her at the lake is the most pleasant one he ever experiences. But this Aphrodite is not flawless. In her teens she was raped

and got pregnant. She is now a grandmother at the age of thirty-three because her daughter also got a baby very young. But unlike Roy, Iris has learned a lot about living from her suffering. She brought up her illegitimate daughter by herself. She is a responsible human being. The white rose she was wearing symbolizes femininity and fertile motherhood in her case. She once was the victim of her sexuality but she has not condemned the inherent sexual energy in herself. To the contrary, her energy regenerates the hero's not only physical but also spiritual potency.

Malamud does not delineate women as flawless. All his women are described with some kind of sexual images. We feel his sympathy toward a woman who has suffered because of her own sexuality but never given up her life, preserving moral solidity.³ Iris is another archetypal woman of Malamud's fiction, the reverse of Harriet or Memo. Iris knows what it is like to suffer and she seems to have recovered from the scar that the harsh experience inflicted on her.

While Iris sees Roy with conviction as "a man whose life she wanted to share. . . a man who had suffered," (p. 145) Roy only sees her as a sexual target:

To do her justice he concentrated on her good looks and the pleasures of her body but when her kid's kid came to mind, despite grandma's age of thirty-three, that was asking too much and spoiled the appetizing part of her. It was simple enough to him: if he got serious with her it could only lead to one thing—him being a grandfather. (p. 149)

Avoiding human responsibility, Roy again begins to chase Memo, "a truly beautiful doll with a form like Miss America" (p. 150). Boy's miraculous hitting arouses a pennant fever among the fans. "He was a hunter stalking a bear, a whale, or maybe the sight of a single fleeing star the way he went after that ball" (p. 152). Yet Roy is cool about the fans. "The more they cheered the colder he got to them" (p. 153). It is hard to expect Roy to be a man of self-restraint with spiritual insight as Iris expects. Roy accomplishes a glorious record. But it is hard to see a spiritual growth in him after such a terrible slump.

He dreams of a family with Memo. He convinces himself that to have her always "would end the dissatisfactions that ate him, no matter how great were his triumphs, and made his life still wanting and not having" (p. 164). If the desire to have Memo always is the only thing he got from all the misfortunes and regrets in his past, it reveals the fact that he has not learned much from his life.

It is Memo who initiates the hero's fall right before the Knights reach the pennant. The night before the crucial game, Memo holds a party for the Knights, using Gus's money. Wasserman explains Roy's abnormal gluttony, referring to Jung:

Meanwhile, Roy's regression has moved his sexual libido back to the related but even more infantile "hunger libido," and Babe Ruth's bellyache has begun. In Jung's terms, the libido has regressed to the "presexual stage." Unlike his incestuous desire for Memo, which was a regressive wanting of what he had had, hunger is the ultimate regression, food, like breast-

feeding, giving him "a feeling of both having something and wanting it the same minute he was having it."⁴

As Malamud suggests in many ways, Memo is dead both spiritually and sexually. She is a fragile woman unable to face reality. She protects herself allying herself with Gus and the Judge. Roy's stupidity is stressed when we find Memo seeing the scrapbook of Bump in her bed where she promised Roy to fulfill his long-lasting desire.

He accepts bribery on behalf of Memo, who says: "I got to have a house of my own, a maid to help me with the hard work, a decent car to shop with and a fur coat for winter time when it's cold" (p. 182). Roy gives in to the Judge, an incarnation of degenerate value. Because of his desire for Memo, he hands his potency to the enemy.

Iris's letter, which reminds him of her being a grandmother, disgusts Roy. He has no sympathy for the suffering which Iris has accepted as a mother without any help, nor moral insights into human responsibility. He does not sense his culpability until he is told by Iris that he will be a father. But it has taken him much time and many mistakes to realize how much he has sacrificed because of his attachment to the wrong woman. He realizes that he could not overcome his desire because he has been ignorant of the way to use his human spirit. His inborn power has been misdirected because of the lack of moral solidity. While he has prospered as a baseball player, he has regressed to infantile torpor spiritually. With Wonderboy split into two, Roy's defeat becomes definitive.

The Natural is a story about a man who has failed to grasp the meaning of what is given to him. Malamud uses the world of baseball whose intense competition is similar to that of American life. The glory and decline of the star players are part of American culture. Roy is not only a baseball player but also an American hero.

Roy was defeated because he never learned how to deal with the assailing forces which tried to ruin him for selfish motives. But more than that, what ruined him completely was his inner corruption. Through his life he neglected growing morally. In other words, Roy was punished because he avoided being a responsible human being, rejecting a serious commitment to his own life.

The three women reflect his spiritual condition in different stages of his life. Harriet tested young Roy. She was dissatisfied with Roy's inability to take an insight into the tragic side of life. She, at the same time, embodied the world's destructructive power of which Roy was ignorant.

Memo, allying with Roy's true enemies, tempts him into vice. The hero shamelessly reveals his moral flaws and psychic trauma through the relationship with Memo.

Iris is the only woman who tries to accept Roy and love him as a whole human being. However, in spite of her sexual vividness, she cannot help reminding Roy of human responsibility. Marrying her means Roy's becoming a grandfather. He cannot bear its moral burden while Iris has attained a strength to face reality. Abandoning Iris, seeking a dream to get a beauty like Miss America, Roy

falls into the abyss of despair again.

"I never did learn anything out of my past life, now I have to suffer again" (p. 217).

NOTES

- 1 Bernard Malamud, *The Natural* (New York: Avon Books, 1980; New York: Harcourt Brace, c1952.), p. 3. All subsequent page references are to this edition.
- 2 Earl R. Wasserman, "The Natural: World Ceres," *Bernard Malamud and the Critics* ed. by Leslie and Joyce Field (New York: New York University Press, 1970), p. 57.
- 3 For example, Olga in "The Girl of My Dream," and Mary Lou in "A Choice of Profession" have the same kind of characteristic as Iris. Disguising herself using her daughter's name, Olga gets to correspond with Mitka, a disappointed young writer. Mitka assumes that his pen friend is a pretty young woman and desires to meet her actually. When he finds a middle-aged woman in the library, he first realizes that he has been trapped in his own illusion. The reader cannot help feeling sympathy for Olga who sought human warmth, though her device was petty. She says, "I had verve and a quality of wholeness. I loved life. In many ways I was too rich for my husband. He couldn't understand my nature and this caused him to leave me—mind you, with two children." Like Iris Olga has a great capacity to accept a man, though she once was abused by a man and thrown into the chasm of suffering. Mitka has no understanding for her loneliness and pain as a woman. Mitka's attitude is cowardly. It seems that Malamud reveals Olga's moral superiority. Mary Lou attracts Cronin, a college teacher, with her sexual quality. Though he wishes to sleep with her, he falters at her past. She once was a whore and did not quit until she was arrested. Moreover, when she was a little girl, she was raped by her real brother. Cronin cannot face the ugliness of the experience she was forced to accept. Unable to suppress his sexual hunger for her, he ruins her joy from company with his fellow professor. Malamud seems to ask which one is morally degenerate, a woman who is trying to overcome her past mistakes or a man who rejects her and blinks the harsh reality of life. We are told at the end of the story that "she was still at the college, majoring in

education, and hoped someday to teach." She is the victim of her sexuality. But Malamud suggests that she is to be admired when she learns with her life and sustains her goodness. Real degeneracy is spiritual sterility which rejects to behold the pain of human experience.

4 Earl R. Wasserman, p. 58.