In the following essay, Diane Henningfeld aligns the failure of main character Roy Hobbs with that of Gawain in Gawain and the Green Knight.

Bernard Malamud, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, published short stories in a variety of magazines during the 1940s and 1950s. He published his first novel, The Natural, in 1952. That Malamud chose to focus his first novel on baseball surprised and mystified his readers; even in his early short stories, Malamud had generally used Jewish characters, settings, and themes. The early reviews of The Natural illustrate the hesitation with which critics approached the novel. Many found the subject matter strange, the allegory strained, and the symbolism difficult.

Consequently, apart from reviews, the novel received little critical attention in the first years after its publication. However, after the publication of The Assistant and The Magic Barrel, literary scholars returned their attention to Malamud's first novel, looking for patterns that would emerge in his later work.

In spite of renewed interest in the novel, however, critics generally agree that The Natural is Bernard Malamud's most uncharacteristic and difficult novel. In his book, Bernard Malamud, for example, critic Sidney Richmond calls The Natural "one of the most baffling novels of the 1950's."

A number of notable critics have attempted to render the novel less baffling by identifying Malamud's sources. Earl Wasserman, for example, identifies important allusions to the real world of baseball, including events from Babe Ruth's life, the White Sox scandal of 1919, and the shooting of Eddie Waitkus by an insane woman. He also discusses Malamud's use of the Arthurian Grail story, noting that the Grail story serves as "the archetypal fertility myth." In addition, Wasserman applies psychologist Carl Jung's notion of mythic archetypes to help explain Roy's relationship with the female characters in the novel.

Indeed, connecting The Natural to Arthurian legend provides one of the most compelling ways to read the novel. Nevertheless, critics who make this connection generally look to Malory as Malamud's source. Certainly, the inclusion of Pop Fisher as the Fisher King and the motif of the Wasteland spring largely from Malory; however, there is another medieval Arthurian romance that seems more closely aligned with The Natural. "Honi soit qui mal y pense," says the Judge to Roy: Shame be to the man who has evil in his mind. This is, not coincidentally, also the closing line of Gawain and the Green Knight, a long poem written by an anonymous writer around 1400. A closer examination of Gawain may offer yet another way to read Malamud's novel.

Gawain and the Green Knight opens in the Christmas court of King Arthur. A huge Green Knight enters and challenges the knights to a game. He offers any knight the chance to strike him with his ax. In exchange, the Green Knight will strike the same knight with the ax in one year and a day. Gawain rushes to accept the challenge and knocks the head off the Green Knight.

To everyone's surprise, the blow does not kill the Green Knight. Rather, he merely picks up his head and tells Gawain to meet him in a year and a day at the Green Chapel. Keeping his bargain, Gawain sets out a year later. On the way, he visits the castle of Bercilak with whom he enters into another challenge: Bercilak will exchange anything he captures hunting with anything Gawain receives while staying in the castle.

While Bercilak hunts, Lady Bercilak attempts to seduce Gawain. She finally succeeds in persuading Gawain to take her green girdle as protection against the blow he will receive from the Green Knight. Gawain does not turn over the girdle to Bercilak, thus breaking his bargain. When Gawain meets the Green Knight, he discovers that he is actually Bercilak, and that Bercilak knows of his deception. Although Bercilak laughs and sends him on his way with his life, Gawain is mortified by his own moral failure and vows ever to wear the green girdle as a reminder of his own shame.

Just as The Natural is only apparently about baseball, Gawain and the Green Knight is only apparently an Arthurian romance. That is, while both Malamud and the Gawain poet use the baseball story and Arthurian romance respectively to structure their stories, they each have larger issues at stake. These writers use their genres to allegorically explore the sin of pride, the nature of testing, and the inevitability of human failure.

In order to fulfill their larger purposes, these writers appropriate cultural icons to serve in their tales of human imperfection. The Gawain poet chooses as his main character Gawain, a native English hero known to medieval audiences for his appearance in countless Arthurian romances. Gawain's reputation is complicated, however; although considered the best and most loyal of Arthur's knights, he is also known as a violent, rash, womanizer.

Likewise, Malamud appropriates incidents from the life of the greatest popular icon of baseball, Babe Ruth, and associates them with Roy Hobbs. Like Gawain, Ruth's reputation is complicated. His prowess on the field is uncontested; yet he is also known as a rash, sometimes violent womanizer, and a man of huge sensory appetite. By associating Ruth with Roy, Malamud offers a problematic hero, a man of great prowess, great appetites, and great potential for moral failure.

Further, both Roy Hobbs and Gawain strive to be the best in their respective games. However, it is not always clear what has more value to the characters: being the best, or seeming the best. When Harriet Bird asks the young Roy what he hopes to accomplish, he replies, "Sometimes when I walk down the street I bet people will say there goes Roy Hobbs, the best there ever was in the game." Clearly, it is the reputation that motivates Roy. Likewise, Gawain is reputed to be the greatest of all knights. When the temptress Lady Bercilak attempts to seduce Gawain, her tactic is to remind him of his reputation. The appeal to his pride leads him ever closer to his fall.

Because of their preoccupation with their reputations, neither Gawain nor Roy correctly assesses the tests to which each is put. Gawain assumes that the Green Knight tests his courage and Lady Bercilak tests his lovemaking. Roy assumes that his test is to prove himself on the field with the Knights and in bed with Memo. Neither understands that what is truly at stake is honor and truth.

Perhaps not surprisingly, each story has female characters who act falsely. As Gawain and the Green Knight opens, we discover that Gawain is Guinevere's champion. Just as Gawain has cultural currency outside the immediate tale, so does Guinevere. Any reader of Arthurian romance knows that she will betray Arthur by committing adultery with Lancelot and consequently will bring down the court of Camelot. Further, at Bercilak's castle, Gawain encounters both an old hag (whom we later discover is none other than Morgan la Fay, the architect of the entire Green Knight scheme) and Lady Bercilak. Although it appears to Gawain that Lady Bercilak is betraying her husband, she is rather working in concert with her husband to test Gawain.

In The Natural, Harriet Bird also hides her motivation for taking an interest in Roy. Many critics have identified Harriet with the testing women of Arthurian romance, or with Morgan la Fay. Certainly, Roy's infatuation with this false woman nearly costs him his life. Further, Memo's collusion with Gus Sands is reminiscent of Lady Bercilak's collusion with Lord Bercilak. Memo tempts Roy with sex and food, and finally with money. She offers him life, a life with her, if he will accept the Judge's money to throw the game. Roy accepts the money only to discover that Memo's motivation is far different from what he assumed. Her desire is to ruin him, not wed him.

In each story, the protagonist attaches himself to the false women and turns away from the true women. As Gawain prepares to leave Camelot in search of the Green Knight, he has the image of the Virgin Mary, "the high Queen of heaven," placed on the inner part of his shield. He loses sight of his true patroness, however, in the arms of Lady Bercilak. Roy finds a true woman in Iris Lemon, who miraculously rises from

the crowd and seems to be the reason Roy breaks free from his batting slump. However, although Roy finds Iris to be a full and fertile woman, someone who would be true to him, he turns away from her when she speaks of her joy in mothering and grandmothering. Rather than remaining true to Iris, Roy rejects her, and renews his attachment to the false Memo.

The failures of these protagonists stem from their inability to learn from their past mistakes. Gawain's rash acceptance of the Green Knight's challenge is repeated in his rash acceptance of Lord Bercilak's game, and although he features himself a "true" knight, he finds himself a false one. Likewise, Roy nearly loses his life at the hands of a false woman early in his life, and then repeats the mistake some fifteen years later. As Malamud writes, "He thought, I never did learn anything out of my past life, now I have to suffer again."

Both Gawain and Roy suffer public humiliation at the close of their stories. Gawain confesses his cowardice and falsehood to the court, and vows to wear the green girdle as an emblem of his own failure. Roy, on the other hand, discovers that his story has been published in the newspaper for the entire community to read:

A boy thrust a newspaper at him. He wanted to say no but had no voice. The headlines screamed, "Suspicion of Hobbs' Sellout Max Mercy" ... And there was also a statement by the baseball commissioner. "If this alleged report is true, that is the last of Roy Hobbs in organized baseball. He will be excluded from the game and all his records forever destroyed." Roy handed the paper back to the kid. "Say it ain't true, Roy." When Roy looked into the boy's eyes he wanted to say it wasn't, but couldn't, and he lifted his hands to his face and wept many bitter tears.

By the time the Gawain poet wrote Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, Gawain, as a major hero of Arthurian romance, had already been supplanted by the French import, Sir Lancelot. Yet readers of Arthurian romance know that Lancelot, too, proved false. Although he was granted a glimpse of the Grail, Lancelot died a failure, supplanted by yet another, younger hero, Galahad. Within the Gawain poet's choice to use Gawain as his main character inheres a final message: heroes striving for perfection will inevitably fail, and be replaced by yet other heroes.

Likewise, Roy Hobbs' beginning is also his end. His saga begins as he replaces Walt "the Whammer" Whambold and ends with his own replacement by Herman Youngberry, the rising pitcher who strikes him out. As Richman argues, "The Natural concludes, therefore, on a note of total loss." The failure of Roy Hobbs (and of Gawain) is not a failure of courage, but a failure of morals. Roy becomes a kind of Everyman, who fails the tests set before him, and who ends, inevitably, flawed.

Source: Diane Andrews Henningfeld, in an essay for Novels for Students, Gale, 1998. Henningfeld is a professor at Adrian College and has written for a variety of academic journals and educational publishers.