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The Malady of Exceptionalism: Authenticity, Field, and Habitus in Bernard Malamud's *The Natural* and Ronald Bronstein's and Josh Safdie's *Marty Supreme*

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Abstract

This research investigates the structural and cultural origins of moral compromise in Bernard Malamud's novel The Natural (1952) and Ronald Bronstein and Josh Safdie's screenplay Marty Supreme (2025). It focuses on Roy Hobbs and Marty Mauser, two exceptionally talented individuals who, despite their athletic gifts, resort to morally questionable acts as a calculated survival strategy under material constraints. While such downfalls are typically dismissed as personal weaknesses or tragic flaws, this study argues that the demand for exceptionalism drives poor individuals toward necessary gambles when gradual advancement is an unaffordable luxury. Through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of practice and Lionel Trilling's concept of authenticity, the analysis demonstrates that their ruin stems not from individual morality but from a cultural demand for exceptional status. The study utilizes qualitative close reading of both text and screenplay, exposing how a lack of capital turns questionable acts into pragmatic decisions to escape ordinary life. A comparative analysis of baseball (a commercially dominant and culturally respected field) and table tennis (a marginalized field) illustrates how both fields produce catastrophic failure, albeit in different forms. The study concludes that for the economically disadvantaged, moral compromise is not a failure of character but a rational response to an environment that mandates instant mobility.

Keywords: Authenticity, Pierre Bourdieu, Exceptionalism, Marty Supreme, The Natural, Moral compromise

Introduction

Post-World War II American ideology emphasized liberty, individualism, democracy, meritocracy, and a laissez-faire economy (Lipset, 1996). It promoted

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the belief that talent and hard work could secure success, making wealth and exceptional status measures of personal worth. Robert K. Merton identifies a structural contradiction in this ideal: society emphasizes culturally defined goals such as financial success while distributing legitimate means of achieving them unequally (Merton, 1938, p. 672). The meritocratic promise therefore obscures class-based barriers to education, money, and stable employment. McNamee and Miller similarly argue that the American Dream persists despite evidence that equality of opportunity is a myth. Failure is often attributed to insufficient effort or talent rather than structural obstacles, encouraging disadvantaged people to seek illegitimate routes toward culturally approved goals (Lipset, 1996; McNamee & Miller, 2004; Merton, 1938; Mijs et al., 2022).

The Natural (1952) follows Roy Hobbs, a gifted baseball player whose career is interrupted after he is shot in his youth. When he returns to the game years later, he achieves success but accepts a bribe to lose a championship game. His bat breaks, he strikes out, and the arrangement is exposed, ending his career. Marty Supreme (2025) follows Marty Mauser, a talented table-tennis player from a poor working-class background. His pursuit of a world championship leads him to damage relationships, steal money, and compromise his ethics. His eventual victory occurs in an unofficial match without the recognition he seeks.

This study asks how authenticity interacts with the ambitions of disadvantaged individuals and pushes them toward risky choices. Combining Bourdieu's theory of practice with Trilling's account of authenticity, it examines how structural constraints make transgression appear rational and how the search for distinction supplies an internal motivation. It compares The Natural and Marty Supreme through these theories to explain the cultural logic behind the protagonists' failures.

Significance of the Study

The study reframes moral compromise as an outcome of the interaction between individual aspiration and structural constraint. Neither Trilling's account of authenticity nor Bourdieu's account of material inequality alone fully explains the protagonists' choices. Together, they illuminate the "malady of exceptionalism": cultural pressure to become exceptional combined with a lack of resources to pursue that status through legitimate means (Foley, 2024; Mijs et al., 2022).

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Review of the Literature

Existing readings of The Natural emphasize mythology, ethics, and the American Dream. In "A Baseball (Anti-)Hero in the Waste Land," Gualberto examines Malamud's use of Arthurian mythology and baseball folklore, presenting Roy as both a Grail Knight and Fisher King while connecting the novel to Shoeless Joe Jackson and the 1919 Black Sox scandal. This "mythical uncertainty" makes Roy's failure reflect the hollowness of the American Dream as well as personal corruption. The present study extends this symbolic reading by examining the material conditions behind his choices. Madani's reading through Martin Buber's I-You philosophy presents Roy's movement from an egotistical I-It relationship toward moral responsibility, particularly after meeting Iris Lemon, but concludes that his development remains incomplete. The current analysis adds a structural and psychological explanation to this ethical interpretation (Gualberto, 2023; Madani, 2022).

- **Psychological Readings of Marty Supreme**

Because the screenplay was published in 2025, criticism discussed here is journalistic rather than peer-reviewed scholarship. Reviews commonly focus on Marty's narcissism and ambition. Brody describes his "megawatt personality"; Menon argues that he "mythologizes his own life"; Bradshaw characterizes his journey as a "nightmare of sweaty desperation." Schwartz situates the story within American self-deception, while Wood sees the late matches as returning the film to a parable-like structure. These accounts foreground individual psychology but give less attention to structural limits on Marty's options. This study instead examines the screenplay as a written text and considers how economic deprivation shapes his transgressions (Bradshaw, 2025; Brody, 2025; Menon, 2025; Schwartz, 2026; Wood, 2026).

- **Bourdieu-Inspired Readings of Literary Protagonists**

Taha et al. apply Bourdieu's habitus and field theory to Hamid's The Reluctant Fundamentalist, showing how a change in the social field after 9/11 makes the protagonist's habitus incompatible with his surroundings. Zhang and Liu use capital theory to explain Gatsby's failure to convert economic capital into cultural capital and gain acceptance in East Egg. These studies demonstrate how social exclusion shapes literary protagonists. Unlike readings in which characters leave or fail to enter a field, the present study examines characters who remain committed to their fields and transgress to retain access to them (Taha et al., 2023; Zhang & Liu, 2026).

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❖ Sociology of Sports and Bourdieu's Theory

Januário explains that Bourdieu's theories have informed the social history of sport, including the development of organized competition and class distinctions. Athletes' bodily practices can communicate social background, while distinctions between amateur and professional activity determine which uses of the body are legitimate. This perspective helps explain how Roy's and Marty's physical talents place them within fields whose structures they cannot control (Hextrum et al., 2025; Januário, 2025).

❖ Knowledge Gap and Conceptual Framework

Existing approaches do not fully explain how the demand for exceptional achievement interacts with economic deprivation to produce desperate decisions. This study combines Bourdieu's field, capital, and habitus with Trilling's concept of authenticity. Bourdieu explains how structural constraints shape available choices; Trilling helps explain why the protagonists feel compelled to distinguish themselves. Together, the theories connect the social conditions that make transgression practical with the internal pressure to escape an ordinary life (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Trilling, 1972; Januário, 2025).

Methodology

This qualitative, interpretive, and comparative study conducts close readings of two written texts: Bernard Malamud's The Natural (Farrar, Straus and Giroux edition, 1952/2003) and Ronald Bronstein and Josh Safdie's Marty Supreme screenplay (2025). In the novel, the analysis considers narration, style, symbolism, character reflections, and dialogue; in the screenplay, it examines dialogue, action lines, scene descriptions, and character behavior. The comparison considers temporality, field, and genre.

❖ Data Analysis and Theoretical Application

The analysis proceeds in four steps. First, it maps each field: 1940s Major League Baseball, a prestigious and commercially powerful institution, and 1950s American table tennis, a marginalized activity with few domestic career opportunities. Second, it identifies moments when Roy and Marty express exceptionalist ambition or reject ordinary life. Third, it examines their positions in the field, available capital, and habitus to understand why risky choices appear reasonable. Finally, it compares

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Roy's public humiliation with Marty's hollow victory to assess how similar pressures produce different outcomes in different fields (Januário, 2025; Hextrum et al., 2025).

Theoretical Framework

- **Bourdieu's Theory of Practice**

In Outline of a Theory of Practice (1977), Bourdieu argues that action is neither entirely free nor fully determined; it emerges through the interaction of field, capital, and habitus. A field is a social space with its own rules and stakes (Bourdieu, "Some Properties of Fields" 72). Capital includes cultural capital (education and specialized skills), economic capital (money and property), symbolic capital (honor and prestige), and social capital (relationships and networks). Because capital is unequally distributed, individuals occupy unequal positions within a field. Habitus, described as "embodied history" and a "second nature" (Bourdieu, The Logic of Practice 56), consists of dispositions shaped by past experience. It influences what people perceive as possible, acceptable, or impossible (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990).

- **Trilling's Concept of Authenticity**

In Sincerity and Authenticity, Trilling distinguishes sincerity, a "congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (Trilling, 1972, p. 2), from the more demanding modern ideal of being true to oneself (Trilling, 1972, p. 11). Authenticity encourages people to resist convention and become distinctive. It creates tension because individuals are expected to achieve exceptional things even when their circumstances limit their opportunities. In this study, Bourdieu explains how and why particular actions become practical within a field, while Trilling explains the internal pressure to become unique. Their combination connects structural constraint with the protagonists' pursuit of distinction (Trilling, 1972).

- **Methodological focus and comparison**

The analysis treats the novel and screenplay as written narratives rather than attempting to generalize from them to real athletes. The novel's narrator, symbols, character reflections, and dialogue are read alongside the screenplay's action lines, scene descriptions, and dialogue. This approach makes it possible to compare how each text presents the relationship between ambition and material constraint while retaining the differences between the genres. The comparison does not assume that the two fields are identical: baseball is established as a visible commercial institution, whereas table tennis has limited domestic legitimacy. Instead, it

examines whether the same relationship between ambition, capital, and transgression appears under these different conditions.

The distinction between sincerity and authenticity is central to the interpretation. Sincerity concerns agreement between what a person says and feels, while authenticity places a heavier demand on the individual to discover and display a distinctive self. Under this ideal, an ordinary occupation may seem like a denial of identity rather than a reasonable means of survival. Bourdieu's concepts help explain why that demand is especially difficult for people who lack economic and social capital. Habitus is not simply a conscious plan; past instability shapes what seems possible in the present. Thus, the protagonists' rejection of patience is interpreted not only as impatience but as a disposition formed by experiences in which security and support were unreliable.

The idea of illusio connects these theoretical perspectives. Roy and Marty continue to invest in their respective fields because they believe the stakes matter and that success will confirm their exceptional identities. That belief makes the field's rules and promises compelling even when the material conditions are unfavorable. Roy's faith in baseball persists despite the Judge's control and his own financial dependence. Marty's commitment to table tennis persists despite its low domestic status, inadequate accommodation, and administrative barriers. Their investment in the game helps explain why they continue to pursue it when safer alternatives are available: abandoning the field would also mean abandoning the identity through which they hope to escape ordinariness.

Analysis

- **Context and Field Mapping**

The Field of 1940s Baseball

Major League Baseball functions as a field with its own stakes, hierarchies, and access to power. Commercial value shapes the worth of players, whose talents become resources for earning money. Beneath the formal organization lies corruption. Judge Goodwill Banner uses the club to increase his wealth, and Pop Fisher remarks,

"He'd skin his dead father if he could get into the grave" (Malamud, 2003, pp. 39–40).

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The Judge's dog races and gambling connections expose an institution more concerned with extracting profit than protecting athletes. Roy enters this environment with physical talent but little economic capital. He arrives with

"the lone four-bit piece he had in his back pocket" (Malamud, 2003, p. 16),

borrows money to survive, and is subject to a restricted salary. His ability therefore does not immediately provide financial independence.

The Field of 1950s Table Tennis

Unlike baseball, table tennis has little professional standing in the United States. Marty says,

"Is that a joke!? There is no USTTA. It's two guys and a desk" (Bronstein & Safdie, 2025, p. 21).

Although international tournaments attract large audiences, domestic structures offer limited support. Marty works at his uncle's Norkin Shoes and rejects this role:

"But I'm just not a shoe salesman. It's not me, it's not my function" (Bronstein & Safdie, 2025, p. 5).

When his uncle withholds his salary, Marty insists,

"All I want is the 700 dollars that Murray owes me" (Bronstein & Safdie, 2025, p. 16).

The international association's limited accommodation further reveals the precarious conditions facing players. Marty's ambition is to become

"the face of the entire sport in the U.S." (Bronstein & Safdie, 2025, p. 13),

but poverty makes access to that recognition difficult.

Field Constraints and Material Deprivation

Baseball is a prominent and profitable national institution, whereas table tennis is marginalized domestically. Despite this difference, both fields impose economic obstacles on outsiders while holding out the promise of success. Bourdieu's concept of illusio—the belief that what a field offers is worth pursuing—captures the protagonists' commitment (Januário, 2025; Mutz, 2026). Roy believes,

"I bet some day I'll break every record in the book for throwing and hitting" (Malamud, 2003, p. 29).

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Marty likewise sees his talent as an obligation:

"I have a purpose. You don't. And if you think that's some kind of blessing it's not…It means I have an obligation to see a very specific thing through…and with that obligation comes sacrifice" (Bronstein & Safdie, 2025, p. 122).

Their faith in their fields leaves little room for safe, gradual advancement.

- **The Burden of Authenticity**

The Rejection of the Ordinary

For Trilling, authenticity demands more than sincerity: individuals are expected to reject convention and establish a distinctive self. Ordinary life becomes a sign of failure. Roy wants public recognition, imagining that people will say,

"there goes Roy Hobbs, the best there ever was in the game" (Malamud, 2003, p. 29).

His encounter with the Whammer similarly makes athletic dominance a means of becoming visible:

"Dropping the bat, he trotted off to the train, an old man" (Malamud, 2003, p. 27).

Marty also rejects ordinary employment and declares,

"Just look at me. I'm here. I'm on top. I'm the ultimate product of Hitler's defeat" (Bronstein & Safdie, 2025, p. 23).

For both men, achievement must confirm their exceptional identity, not merely provide a livelihood.

The Pursuit of Distinction and Early Instability

Their fear of ordinariness is connected to unstable childhoods. Roy explains,

"After my grandma died, the old man dumped me in one orphan home after the other, wherever he happened to be working…" (Malamud, 2003, p. 28).

Marty similarly reports,

"…my mother died in childbirth, my father was a compulsive loser who abandoned me when I was 2. I got stuck in the city orphanage system til I was 16…" (Bronstein & Safdie, 2025, p. 24).

Both treat sport as a route away from invisibility. Roy's bat, Wonderboy, is made from a lightning-split tree and carefully maintained (Malamud, 2003, p. 55), making it an extension of his physical identity. Marty insists that his success must rest on his own ability:

"I have do it entirely on my own, purely on the basis of my talent, or else it's like, the success won't count" (Bronstein & Safdie, 2025, p. 102).

Their self-worth becomes inseparable from performance.

- **The Mechanics of Rational Transgression**

The Calculus of Corruption in The Natural

Merton's account of innovation explains how people may pursue culturally approved goals through illegitimate means when legitimate routes are blocked (Merton, 1938; Foley, 2024). Roy's commitment to baseball and his desire for distinction meet financial pressures that talent alone cannot resolve. Memo Paris makes her material expectations explicit:

"That is that I am afraid to be poor… 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" (Malamud, 2003, p. 153).

Roy calculates the Judge's offer against his possible earnings:

"Thirty-five," Roy got out. "Don't forget I stand to lose a couple of thousand on the pay I could get in the Series" (Malamud, 2003, p. 160).

His decision is also shaped by his deteriorating health. A doctor warns that his condition could cause sudden death if he plays the next season (Malamud, 2003, p. 149).

With his body—the main capital he possesses—failing, Roy sees the bribe as a last opportunity to secure money. His history of abandonment and instability makes waiting for a safer future feel impossible. The act is therefore presented as a calculated risk shaped by both material pressure and habitus, rather than as an isolated moral lapse.

The Illicit Acquisition Strategy in Marty Supreme

Marty's transgressions are repeated rather than confined to a single crisis. When his uncle withholds money owed to him, Marty robs Norkin Shoes and insists,

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"Look, I just want what I was promised to me. Not a penny more" (Bronstein & Safdie, 2025, p. 17).

He rationalizes the act: "It's a legit robbery, like any other" (Bronstein & Safdie, 2025, p. 18). The international association later blocks his championship application until he pays a $1,480 fine, prompting him to exclaim,

"That's my money for Japan!" (Bronstein & Safdie, 2025, p. 56).

With no savings or institutional support, he hustles strangers at table tennis for money. He also joins Rachel in an extortion attempt against Ezra Mishkin, who is killed, while Rachel is shot. Their desperation escalates as each effort to acquire money fails or becomes more dangerous.

Marty's theft of Kay Stone's necklace further demonstrates his poor conversion of symbolic resources into money. The necklace proves to be costume jewelry, and Marty eventually admits,

"I stole this from you, ok, and I want to return it…My plan was to sell it and never see you again" (Bronstein & Safdie, 2025, p. 130).

Kay suspects that he has returned only because it is worthless (Bronstein & Safdie, 2025, p. 131). His final compromise comes when he agrees to Milton Rockwell's demand for humiliation in exchange for transport and payment to Japan. Marty confirms the terms—

"So to be clear, you're going to bring me to Japan and then compensate me" (Bronstein & Safdie, 2025, p. 143)

But Milton responds,

"You don't. You have no power here" (Bronstein & Safdie, 2025, p. 143).

Marty submits, sacrificing bodily autonomy to retain access to the field. His childhood in the orphanage system and repeated experience of institutional neglect have taught him to rely on himself. Unlike Roy's one-off bribe, Marty's sequence of robbery, hustling, extortion, theft, and humiliation reveals a continuous scramble for capital under structural constraint.

- **Mutual Implosion and Contrastive Synthesis**

Public Humiliation versus Hollow Triumph

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Roy's attempt to resist the Judge's control fails when Wonderboy breaks and he strikes out:

"Wonderboy lay on the ground split lengthwise, one half pointing to first, the other to third" (Malamud, 2003, p. 173).

His corrupt agreement is exposed, and a young newsboy confronts him:

"Say it ain't true, Roy." Roy cannot deny it and weeps (Malamud, 2003, p. 237).

His public disgrace destroys the exceptional status he sought. Marty's climax differs. He forces an unofficial match with Koto Endo, asking,

"Who wants to see us play a real game!?! (slowly) A... REAL... GAME..." (Bronstein & Safdie, 2025, p. 159).

He wins, but the match is outside the official competition and serves as an advertisement; it earns him no lasting symbolic capital, and Milton withdraws financial support for his return. Roy loses his reputation, while Marty's apparent victory is hollow. Both arrive at an existential void: Roy's failure is publicly visible, whereas Marty returns to an unrewarding life and sobs while looking at Rachel's baby in the hospital.

Theoretical Synthesis

The protagonists' exceptionalism is better understood as an institutional problem than as an innate defect. Both accept the cultural demand for extraordinary achievement but lack the capital required to pursue it through legitimate channels. This study calls their response rational transgression: they retain the goal while abandoning acceptable means because those means appear unavailable. Roy's transgression is a single act revealed through his physical collapse; Marty's is recurrent and increasingly visible. The more marginal field offers fewer resources to outsiders attempting legitimate advancement. Both narratives therefore challenge the promise that talent and perseverance alone guarantee success. Roy and Marty are talented enough to enter their fields but lack the money and connections needed to succeed legitimately.

Further evidence of the unequal conditions within the fields

The economic contrast between the two sports does not mean that baseball offers Roy security. The Judge's control over the club and his gambling interests make the field commercially powerful but ethically unstable. Roy's limited resources are

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visible not only in his small amount of cash but also in his dependence on others for immediate survival. The loan of twenty-five dollars and the question, "Where in blazes did he get the figure of three thousand dollars?" (Malamud, 2003, p. 39), show that his physical ability does not place him in control of the economic terms of his career. In Marty's case, the domestic absence of a professional structure contrasts with the international popularity he believes could change his position. The association's response— "We offer complimentary housing to all of our players, Mr. Mauser. And as far as I know, you are the only one to complain" (Bronstein & Safdie, 2025, p. 21)—frames his hardship as an individual complaint rather than a structural issue. The screenplay's image of a rat taking food from a sleeping player's plate (Marty Supreme 19) makes the poor conditions tangible. These details reinforce the difference between the promise of a field and the resources available to its less privileged participants.

Authenticity also explains why neither protagonist treats a secure but ordinary life as an acceptable alternative. Roy imagines being recognized on the street as "the best there ever was in the game" (Malamud, 2003, p. 29), while Marty's claim that he is "uniquely positioned to be the face of the entire sport in the U.S." (Bronstein & Safdie, 2025, p. 13) ties personal identity to public distinction. Their ambitions exceed the practical desire for income: they want their talents to establish a singular identity. Yet the pursuit of distinction is not detached from material conditions. Roy's fear of poverty is intensified by Memo's expectations, while Marty's route to international competition requires money that his employment and the table-tennis institutions do not provide. The demand to be exceptional therefore operates alongside, rather than outside, economic necessity.

The two narratives also differ in the timing and repetition of transgression. Roy faces a concentrated crisis when his health threatens his future and the Judge offers money. His choice is shaped by the sense that his sporting body may soon cease to provide either income or recognition. Marty, by contrast, repeatedly confronts new financial barriers: the unpaid wages, the association fine, the loss of money from hustling, the failed extortion, and the worthless necklace. Each attempt to secure resources creates further exposure and risk. The episode involving the necklace shows the limits of his ability to convert access to wealthy people into economic capital; the object he assumes is valuable turns out to be costume jewelry. The later humiliation before Milton makes explicit the power imbalance that structures his access to the international field. These episodes show how repeated exclusion deepens his reliance on increasingly desperate strategies.

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The endings make the difference between public and hollow failure especially clear. Roy's broken bat becomes a visible sign of his collapse, and the newsboy's question forces him to face the public meaning of his actions. Marty's unofficial match allows him to demonstrate his ability but does not grant the formal standing or financial support he needs. His victory is therefore not a conversion of athletic skill into durable symbolic capital. The comparison does not erase the characters' responsibility for their actions; rather, it situates their decisions within fields that promise distinction while distributing the means to achieve it unequally. Their outcomes show that exceptional talent alone cannot overcome the unequal distribution of economic, social, and institutional resources.

Discussion and Conclusion

❖ Discussion

Across both narratives, a culture that demands exceptionalism without providing the resources to achieve it produces rational transgression. Roy and Marty possess athletic talent but lack economic resources, social capital, and institutional support. Their bribery, theft, and other compromises arise within settings where legitimate advancement appears blocked. The field shapes the form of failure: baseball's prominence makes Roy's disgrace public, while table tennis's marginality leaves Marty with an unofficial victory that brings little recognition. The comparison links the 1952 novel and 2025 screenplay through their representations of the postwar American Dream, while not establishing that the phenomenon is transhistorical. It also raises a question about moral judgment: treating the protagonists' actions only as personal failures obscures the structural conditions that shape their choices.

❖ Limitations

The study examines only two narratives and does not claim that its findings apply to all athletes or competitive fields. It analyzes the screenplay as a written text, not the film's visual design, performances, or cinematography. The two works' shared postwar settings also limit claims about the phenomenon across all historical periods. Because peer-reviewed scholarship on Marty Supreme was not available for the study, its contextual discussion draws on journalistic reviews, while the main analysis relies on close reading of the screenplay.

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❖ Future Implications

Future research could apply the comparison to other sports, disciplines, and national contexts to assess whether the "malady of exceptionalism" is specific to American sports culture. It could also examine how structural constraint affects judgments about poverty and morality, including whether transgression under extreme conditions is viewed differently when legitimate opportunities are unavailable. Research on real athletes could further explore the patterns identified here, including talent without capital, ambition without institutional support, and the consequences of blocked advancement.

❖ Conclusion

The "malady of exceptionalism" is not simply a psychological disorder of highly ambitious individuals; it is an institutional problem. Cultural expectations encourage people to leave a lasting mark, while unequal economic circumstances prevent some from gathering the resources needed to do so. Bourdieu explains how field, capital, and habitus make Roy's and Marty's actions appear practical within their circumstances; Trilling explains the internal pressure to reject ordinary life and become exceptional. Their combined framework shows how material deprivation and the pursuit of authenticity interact to produce rational transgression. The comparison does not claim that all ambition leads to corruption. It argues that when a culture promises opportunity but denies the means to pursue it, people who lack resources may come to see illegitimate actions as the only available route to distinction. Roy Hobbs and Marty Mauser thus illustrate how the reverence for exceptional achievement affects those denied the financial and institutional support needed to achieve it (Foley, 2024; Hextrum et al., 2025; Mijs et al., 2022).

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