

QUEST FOR MORAL STRENGTH IN NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE’S *MY KINSMAN, MAJOR MOLINEUX*

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My Kinsman, Major Molineux reveals the protagonist Robin’s need to go on an empirical search in order to attain adulthood and emerge independent. Robin leaves home “near nine o’clock of a moonlight evening when a boat crossed the ferry” (Hawthorne 30). Robin left his hometown in search of his kinsman, Molineux, who he believes is now a major, rich and powerful. Since his brother is to inherit their father’s farm, Robin has to pursue Molineux’s offer. But as he goes in search of his uncle Molineux, he discovers a world of darkness filled with chaos and immorality. Thus by the end of the search Robin gains further knowledge of the complicated world, which in turn quickens his maturity into adulthood and manhood.

Robin remains a stranger to the city until he crosses the river. However, he gradually gains familiarity with it through the varied experiences he has had during his search for Major Molineux. On his journey Robin “becomes entangled in a succession of crooked and narrow streets, which crossed each other” (Hawthorne 32). Later on the streets become darker, more solitary and mean, especially after his unexpected encounter with a seductive pretty mistress; the streets now “lay before him, strange and desolate, and the lights were extinguished in almost every house” (Hawthorne 39).

Robin is a village boy going up to the city for the first time and hence is taken aback by the oddly behavior of the city folk. He is also frightened and confused, for he a stranger in town and this is clear from the ferryman’s description of him:

He was a youth of barely eighteen years, evidently country bred, and now, as it should seem, upon his first visit to town. He was clad in a coarse grey coat, well worn, but in excellent repair; his under garments were durably constructed of leather, and sat tight to a pair of serviceable and well-shaped limbs; his stockings of blue yam, were the inconvertible handiwork of a mother or a sister; and on his head was a three-cornered hat, which in

its better days had perhaps sheltered the graver brow of the lad's father.
(Hawthorne 30)

The historical background of the story, which is brought into vague conjunction with the particular history of the young man and his prominent relative. The Major is a man of high rank, appointed by the king, and he partakes, therefore, of the nature of kingship. His appearance is majestic. The exact cause of his unpopularity and downfall is not explained. The reader, like Robin, the young country cousin, is led by one incident after another to an eventual understanding of the tragedy of the Major. Robin undergoes an initiation into the life of the world, coining as he does from the innocence of his country home, and he learns in a terrifying public demonstration. His search because he journeys through the city in search of the kinsman, and he is young, energetic, naive, and innocent. Robin begins his journey in moonlight, and details of his appearance are given through the ferryman's observation with the help of a lantern. His journey ends unclimactically after he has seen his kinsman, Major Molineux, amidst "multitude of torches" (Hawthorne 47). Again Robin's search culminates in darkness which indicates that he has to function alone, without outside help.

Robin's meeting with an old man of whom he inquires the whereabouts of the Major clearly reflects his intention to search for an authoritative figure, whom he can model after in his life. Hawthorne writes that Robin shall learn about the world and hence grow up to be independent henceforth. Robin journeys through the crooked and narrow streets before he reaches a tavern, which he enters boldly to inquire about Major Molineux. Everyone in the tavern watches him while the innkeeper examines the handbill posted on the wall. Robin does not realize that the person described in the handbill matches his uncle's appearance. The notice reads: "One pound currency reward to whosoever shall lodge him in any jail of the providence" (Hawthorne 35). He describes his uncle, the major, is actually wanted for crimes committed. Robin is asked to leave immediately by the innkeeper, "Better trudge, boy; better trudge!" (Hawthorne 35) When the innkeeper implies that Robin is looking for a dangerous person, he is ready to lift his oak cudgel, but a strange hostility in the eyes of all the men in the tavern discourages him from using it. All the men laugh scornfully behind him as he leaves the tavern. Contemplating on the event, Robin decides that although his Kinsman is important to him, the Major is not loved by the local people. Although the innkeeper ridicules him, Robin is unable to understand it because he does not know his uncle yet, instead Robin runs away from the tavern. Robin's naivete is brought out clearly in this scene.

Although tired, hungry, and still unsuccessful in his effort Robin resumes his search. His next meeting, with a pretty mistress, is intriguing because she claims that she is his uncle Molineux's housekeeper and invites him to come in. She disappears at the sight of the watchman, leaving Robin pondering about her. Robin inquires the watchman about his kinsman, in spite of the latter's warning for him to leave the place, as Robin is dealing with a prostitute who is seducing him. The maid tempts him again, "but Robin being of the household of a New England clergyman, was a good youth, as well as a shrewd one; so he resisted temptation, and fled away" (Hawthorne 39). The protagonist wants firsthand knowledge of life, in spite of the enmity and seclusion that Robin experiences as he comes into contact with of moral depravity which pervades that world.

It is here and now that Robin begins to grow out of naivete and show perspicacity. He now roams "desperately, and at random," until he meets a bulky stranger, whose appearance repulses him:

Robin gazed with dismay and astonishment, on the unprecedented physiognomy of the speaker. The forehead with its double prominence, the broad-hooked nose, the shaggy eyebrows, and fiery eyes, were those which he had noticed at the inn, but the man's complexion had undergone a singular, or, more properly, a two-fold change. One side of the face blazed of an intense red, while the other was black as midnight, the division line being in the broad bridge of the nose; and a mouth, which seemed to extend from ear to ear, was black or red, in contrast to the color of the cheek. (Hawthorne 40)

Robin's meeting with the bulky stranger may be viewed as a representation of a split, a demonic split in the person of Robin. The bulky stranger is made to represent two devils, "a fiend of fire and a fiend of darkness," in his face (Hawthorne 41). This passage seems to encompass the intricacies in Robin's search for his kinsman.

Robin continues his search and finally meets a kind gentleman, who helps relieve his loneliness. He relates his purpose in searching for the Major and seeks the man's advice. This meeting can be viewed as a vision Robin has. Robin is exploring the unconscious while waiting for Molineux. He asks the gentleman: "I've been searching half the night for one Major Molineux; now, sir, is there really such a person in these parts, or am I dreaming?" (Hawthorne 44). The bulky stranger had earlier told him about Molineux and the gentleman only reconfirms it. Later Robin watches Molineux being taken in a procession amidst "instruments of discord, and a wild and confused laughter, and unknown commotion, and shrill voices of mirth or terror" (Hawthorne 47). In the procession the headman sits at a higher level than the kinsman because the latter is a fallen man and is being taken a prisoner. Hawthorne describes the kinsman as sitting "in tar and feathery dignity." The Major and Robin gaze at each other in a silent, painful, and mutual recognition that makes Robin's "knees shake and his hair bristles, with a mixture of pity and terror" (Hawthorne 48). While watching the Major, Robin reminisces about the spectrum of characters who have reprimanded and humiliated him in the course of his journey: the innkeeper, the barbers, the watchman, the prostitute, and the bulky stranger. The scene culminates as the crowd gathers to watch the procession break out into clamorous "laughter that echoed through the street" (Hawthorne 49).

Hawthorne writes that Robin's shout is the loudest. Wallins argues that "Robin has been cleansed of his innocence by both purgatives, Aristotelian catharsis, and laughter" (178). Robin has attained mental maturity. He awakens and realizes the disappointment in his search and decides to return. Finally, we see Robin's "cheek somewhat pale, and his eye not quiet so lively as in the earlier part of the evening" (Hawthorne 50). However Robin has come to grips with an inclusive empirical presupposition of his life:

"You have then adopted a new subject of inquiry?" Observed his companion, with a smile. "Why, yes Sir," replied Robin, rather dryly. "Thanks to you, and to my other friends, I have at last met my kinsman, and he will scarce desire to see my face again. I begin to grow weary of the town life, Sir. Will you show me the way to the ferry? (Hawthorne 50)

Every incident along his journey is shocking to him. However, the climactic scene is the most shocking because he did not expect to see his uncle as a criminal. He wants to go back to where he began, because his purpose is shattered and thinks that he cannot live alone, and requests the gentleman to show him the way to the ferry. The man however persuades him to wait for some more days "if you prefer to remain with us, perhaps, as you are a shrewd youth,

you may rise in the world, without the help of your kinsman, Major Molineux.”(Hawthorne 50). Hawthorne scholars generally agree that Robin attains mental maturity by the end of his journey, both internal and external maturity. Internal maturity is personal and psychological, and external maturity understands of universal reality. Internal awakening shows Robin’s loss of naivete and subsequent maturity as he decides to think independently by the end of his journey. Robin has also overcome false self-confidence, an allusive self-image of his shrewdness.

Maturity is Robin’s realization of darkness and chaos in his kinsman, Major Molineux’s world, and for Robin the quest is educational. This self-discovery enables him to function independently because he is left with no role model, and has to live alone. Important images that enhance the journey motif, such as light and dark, pitch into the apprehensions Robin has, as he grows out of naivete and develops into maturity. Robin’s whole journey, apart from being a quest, is symbolically a trip into the unconscious, where he attempts to learn about good and evil and in the end he awakens both morally and psychologically as a result of it. *My Kinsman, Major Molineux* Robin’s journey leads to self-discovery through self-education, but Brown’s is to understand something that is within him, but he goes on a search looking for it outside him. Although Robin is disappointed in his quest, he emerges independent but Brown, although successful in his search, does not emerge a morally strengthened man. Robin’s which awakens him ultimately.

Workcited

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