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The Age of Revolution:

An Analysis of "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," by Nathaniel Hawthorne

Nathaniel Hawthorne was a man who was deeply influenced by the history of early America. In Hawthorne's own unique way, he was able to express his thoughts about history through his writings. Hawthorne, a descendant of strong Puritan roots, felt that it was important to analyze how the Puritan society had or had not influenced early America. Hawthorne believed that society was moving away from its early Puritanism, into a secular society and that it was evolving and embracing independence. Like an eagle ready to fly from the nest, America was now breaking away and moving towards revolution. In the story "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," written in 1832, Hawthorne reveals through his characters how America is moving from a theocentric and British-dependent society to a secular and independent society.

The character Robin is the embodiment of young America. Robin signifies America's youth: "He was a youth of barely eighteen years" (925). Robin has moved away from his homeland in order to go into the city. Hawthorne uses this to show how early Americans came over from Britain and left their homeland: "A homeless youth, Robin comes to his new world bearing a wallet on his back" (Fossum 175). The youth, Robin, has not renounced his family. In the same way, pre-revolutionary America had not renounced Great Britain. Hawthorne reveals through the character of Robin the choices that young America was facing: "what choices had faced his countrymen and what they had had to sacrifice in order to create that distinct organic whole" (Leavis 329).

In describing Robin's journey into the city at night, Hawthorne symbolizes how young America is in the night of pre-revolution, and with the dawning of day will come revolution and independence from Britain and Puritan ways.

The character Robin not only shows how America is young, but Robin also reveals how society is moving away from submission to God and Puritanism. Robin is leaving his Puritan home in order to go into the city. Robert Fossum makes strong comments about how this is symbolic of turning from God: "Hawthorne suggests a revolt against God Himself, a satanic assertion of the autonomous self" (203). While at home Robin participated in prayers and giving thanks to God. Robin recollects about his father: "he saw the good man in the midst, holding the Scriptures...and all rise up to pray. He heard the old thanksgiving for daily mercies" (933,934). Robin's family roots are strongly theocentric, but Robin has left that now to go the city of secular society.

Robin, as the embodiment of young America, is also questioning the Puritan faith. As Robin leaves the ferry, the ferryman takes inventory of Robin. The ferryman holds up his lantern of understanding to analyze Robin the Puritan. However, the ferryman's lantern is also aided by the newly risen moon: "the ferryman lifted a lantern, by the aid of which, and the newly risen moon, he took a very accurate survey of the stranger's figure" (925). Robin, symbolizing young Puritan America, is also beginning a journey into the city of New England, which causes him to take inventory of his Puritan faith: "In New England, where the dissolving affect of science, secular thought...it was only natural that religious ideas and above all Puritan obsessions should be subject to merciless analysis" (Pearce 3). This takes place under the newly risen moon, which symbolizes a shift from a

theocentric society towards a secular society. Colin Pearce writes: “In bidding farewell to his family home Robin is bidding farewell to the old New England Protestantism” (3).

Moreover, Hawthorne reveals how America is moving away from a theocentric society into that of a secular society in Robin’s encounter with the city people. Robin wanders through the streets at night, which shows the dark hour of his spirituality: “Robin encountered many gay and gallant figures. Embroidered garments of showy colors...half dancing to the fashionable tunes which they hummed, and making poor Robin ashamed of his quiet and natural gait” (929). Robin desires to shift away from his Puritan upbringing so that he may embrace secular society. The people in the city that Robin encounters, “were drifting steadily in the direction of discarding from their thought the God of the Old Testament” (Pearce 3). The people of the city have influenced Robin and caused him to feel embarrassed for his Puritan faith.

Robin’s encounter with the harlot also signifies America moving away from a theocentric society into that of a secular society. Upon meeting the harlot, Robin is naïve to her true identity: “Pretty mistress...since I know nothing to the contrary” (930). Also, as he continues talking with her, he allows himself to be tempted by “the girl with the scarlet petticoat and her sexual invitation. Robin is aware that she is not speaking, ‘Gospel truth’” (930). However, he still is willing to accept her advancement, and thus, America accepts secular society: “the fair and hospitable dame took our hero by the hand...and the force was gentleness, and though Robin read in her eyes what he did not hear in her words, yet the slender-waisted woman in the scarlet petticoat proved stronger” (931). Robin is no longer naïve, and he now willingly moves away from his theocentric roots into that of a secular society.

In addition to revealing how American society is moving away from its theocentric roots, Hawthorne uses Robin to reveal how society is moving away from dependence on Britain. Robert Fossum points out how Robin typifies independence: “More particularly, he is the prototypical American rebel, striking out by himself in a world he does not fully understand” (203). Robin is intently looking for his kinsman, Major Molineux who symbolizes Britain: “the parent country as a symbol or representative of it in the person of the Major” (Adams 165). Robin embarks upon a journey in the night hour looking for his Kinsman. The journey that Robin has taken is a journey of isolation and estrangement, thus, the journey of young America searching for independence and separation from Britain: “For just as seventeenth-century New England’s break with the fatherland was religious as well as political, so Robin’s break with his father is a denial of both the spiritual and domestic authority of the past” (Fossum 175). At the end of the story Major Molineux is finally brought to Robin. Robin must now choose whether he will continue to identify with the Major and Britain, or whether he will choose to break away and be independent from the fatherland: “but now he is seized with the excitement of the victors, his fellow-countrymen, and sees their triumph as his own” (Leavis 331). After looking Major Molineux in the eyes, Robin chooses to disown his Kinsman, symbolizing how America disowns Britain: “it seized upon Robin, and he sent forth a shout of laughter that echoed through the street” (938). Hawthorne reveals that the shout of revolution has taken place, and America has turned away from its fatherland, Britain.

Hawthorne also shows how the society of young America is moving away from Britain’s rule through the meaning of Robin’s name. Robin is the name of a migratory

bird found in Britain. When the colonists first arrived in America they named the American bird robin after that of the British bird due to their similarities: “the American robin, one of the best known birds in North America, was so named by the early colonists because...it reminded them of the English robin” (Wildlife). The migratory robin represents the young Americans who migrated from Britain. Also the robin through its migration habits signifies the coming of spring. Emily Dickens writes, “The robin is the one/That interrupts the morn/With hurried, few, express reports/When March is scarcely on” (3). The character Robin is a symbol of how young America has migrated from Britain, but is now in the springtime of revolution: “The experience of Hawthorne’s Robin then may fairly be taken to symbolize the springtime of a colonial America emerging into a new young nation” (Pearce 3). This again reveals how American society is moving away from a British dependence into independence.

In addition, the colors of the British robin are symbolic. The British robin is black and red. Hawthorne uses the color red to signify how America is embracing war and revolution by turning away from their fatherland: “By spring, the plumage is brighter: breast redder, head blacker, throat more clearly black” (Wildlife). Also, Hawthorne uses the color black to signify the mourning that comes with war: “the red of one cheek was an emblem of fire and sword; the blackness of the other betokened the mourning that attends them” (936). America disowns Britain, and black symbolizes the death of the relationship. Moreover, death is not without pain and mourning: “...and lastly there sailed over the heads of the multitude a great, broad laugh, broken in the midst by two sepulchral hems” (937). Robin represents through the colors of the British

robin that America is not only embracing revolution, but is also mourning its coming independence from Britain.

Hawthorne also reveals in the character of the devilish man how America is moving from a theocentric and British-dependent society to a secular and independent society. Hawthorne first reveals the devilish character in the city tavern: “a person who stood near the door holding whispered conversation...His features were separately striking almost too grotesque...the eyebrows were deep and shaggy, and the eyes glowed beneath them like fire in a cave” (928). American society is represented in the tavern through the mariners, the country people, the traders, and the craftsmen. In addition, the man with the evil countenance is whispering things amongst them. This is symbolic of how war and revolution are slowly taking hold of American society and spreading. As people listen to the evil man with the fiery eyes, American society is embracing revolution and moving away from independence on Britain.

In addition to spreading ideas of war in the tavern, the man with the evil countenance later undergoes a change in his complexion: “but the man’s complexion had undergone a singular, or, more properly, a twofold change. One side of the face blazed an intense red, while the other was black as midnight” (932). Society has now accepted war and revolution and this is shown in how the man’s face has changed color. As Robin encounters the strange man in the night, so does America encounter revolution and its pain: “Robin is exposed not to the singular evil of the human soul so much as to the multiple evils of a social cosmos” (Carpenter 114). The man’s face on one side is red for war and revolution. The other half of his face is black for the mourning and pain that

comes with war and revolution. The man is also moving in the night, just as revolution and American independence was in the night hour, waiting for dawn.

Not only does the character of the evil-countenanced man show by the change in his complexion that America is moving away from dependence on Britain, but he also shows through his leadership of the tarring and feathering of Major Molineux, how America is embracing independence. Major Molineux is the embodiment of Britain, thus, as the townspeople rebel against the Major, they are rebelling against Britain. The man with the changed complexion is leading the people as a military man: “The single horseman, clad in military dress, and bearing a drawn sword, rode onward as the leader, and by his fierce and variegated countenance, appeared like war personified” (936). War and revolution do not come without violence and mourning, thus, the violent overthrow of Major Molineux: “The new America that empowers the mob and throws out the gentlemanly class, in America” (Pearce 3). For Robin to embrace the cruel actions against his Kinsman is for America to embrace independence from Britain.

Hawthorne also shows through the character of the watchman how America and its government is moving away from being a British dependent society. The watchman is walking the streets at night, which is, “a moment of attested time between past and future, a pivotal point between Colonial submission and self-assertion” (Fossum 176). Hawthorne shows the watchman roaming the streets as though he were asleep: “As he walked sleepily up the street...home, vagabond, home! Said the watchman, in accents that seemed to fall asleep as soon as they were uttered” (931). This reveals how the government of America is still asleep and has not yet awakened. However, the night will soon end and awaken the government of America: “wherein an old colonial awakens to

find that he must adapt himself to life in the new democratic republic” (Pearce 3). At the end of the story, Hawthorne shows how the watchman, though still asleep, has joined in the violence against Major Molineux. Moreover, American government is about to be awakened and British dependence overthrown.

Not only does Hawthorne reveal through the characters of Robin, the evil countenanced man, and the watchman how society is moving from a theocentric and British-dependent society to a secular and independent society, but also through the character of the gentleman who entertains Robin. Robin encounters this man while he is waiting for his Kinsman: “a gentleman in his prime, of open, intelligent, cheerful, and altogether prepossessing countenance. Perceiving a country youth...he accosted him in a tone of real kindness” (934). This man characterizes the reasonable and progressive side of revolution. The man does know the military man, but not intimately: “his face was of two different colors. Do you happen to know such a man, sir? Not intimately, answered the stranger” (935). The stranger influences Robin not to return home, but rather, to stay and progress in society without his Kinsman: “he may wish to remain in town and try to rise in the world without the Major’s help” (Fossum 176). After Robin rejects his Kinsman, just like America rejects Britain and the old Puritan faith, he decides to become independent: “but thanks to kindly Providence, he finds he may rise, after his fall” (Wagner 201). The kind man of reason is the nonviolent side of the shift from a theocentric and British dependent society to that of a secular one. As he encourages Robin to “rise in the world without his Kinsman,” reason and providence encourage America to arise out of the revolution in order to make it in the world without the help of Britain.

The youth, Robin, reveals that like an eagle ready to embark on a flight of independence, young America is ready to embark on the flight of revolution. The devilish man of revolution has come to lead society, and the yawning watchmen of government will soon awaken out of his slumber. Nathaniel Hawthorne shows how America has embraced its age of revolution. America has lost its innocence and gained its independence. Revolution is not without its price.

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