Abstract: Hawthorne’s short story “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”, though written in 1828, did not receive much scholarly attention until the second half of the twentieth century. A multitude of different interpretations evolved, drawing either on historical facts or focused the vast literary context that the tale touches upon. Despite the disregard that Hawthorne’s ‘Molineux’ had to endure during the lapse of a full century, scholars eventually judged it to be one of his major and most powerful works.

This article provides a first overview regarding the different interpretations of the short story. It sheds light on the established historical facts and compares the quest motif with Hawthorne’s Young Goodman Brown. After introducing several possibilities to interpret the tale, it expands on the idea of a Saturnalian rite by applying Victor Turner’s concept of liminality.
Essentials for Reading Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux"

Janko Pedal

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1 Overview

Hawthorne’s short story ‘My Kinsman, Major Molineux’, though written in 1828, did not receive much scholarly attention until the second half of the twentieth century. A multitude of different interpretations evolved, drawing either on historical facts or focused the vast literary context that the tale touches upon. Despite the disregard that Hawthorne’s ‘Molineux’ had to endure during the lapse of a full century, scholars eventually judged it to be one of his major and most powerful works (cf. Gross 1957, pg. 98 and Broes 1964, pg. 172).

The historical readings draw either on the overall political situation in the resisting New England colonies in the years following the renunciation of the colonial charter by King Kames II, seeing it as an artful interpretation of historical events (cf. Grayson 1982) or interpret it as a historical allegory of Young America shaking off the imposed bonds of English monarchical rule. This act of emancipation is closely linked to the main protagonist of the tale. Robin, a young country lad travels to the town in search of his uncle, Major Molineux. In light of the historical argumentation, which was first brought forward by Q. D. Leavis, Robin and his quest are symbolic for the coming of age of America, assigning Robin the role of the colonies and the Major the role of British authorities (Newman 1979, pg. 225). A special intertextual historic reading of Smith in 1965 points out the many similarities in structure and events between Benjamin Franklin’s arrival in Philadelphia and Robins experiences in Boston, arguing that these similarities are far from being a coincidence.

Robin and especially his enigmatic laughter at the end of the story are the object of other allegorical, though morally inspired interpretations. Robin’s quest is understood as one of moral maturing, seeing him as an innocent and somewhat naive young country boy. With the protagonist having spent his youth in the rural areas of New England, remembering and yearning in the course of his adventures the salvation and calm granted by the woods, the contrast between the familiar nature and the strange city is emphasized. Robin’s journey is finally a painful way to understand the moral reality of the city and thus a quest of enlightenment (cf. Gross 1957). Broes expands on this moral interpretation, reading Robin’s quest as a descent into moral darkness, which manifests itself in the city and its corrupt and sinful citizens (cf. Broes 1964).

Especially in the light of such supposed moral implications, “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” bears strong resemblance in theme and structure to another story of Hawthorne, namely “Young Goodman Brown”, written in 1835. Here the protagonist undertakes a
journey through a dark and threatening environment as well, meeting various persons of a doubtful morality which are symbolic for the society he is living in. Similar to Robin’s experiences, the journey assumes a dreamlike quality in which the protagonist cannot be sure if he is still in full possession of his senses or rational thought.

Regardless whether it is a dream or a dreamlike course of events, which only assumes a surreal quality to a political and morally inexperienced boy, the narrative holds several implications for the late colonial or respectively, young American society. Although it draws on the earlier historically imbued interpretations mentioned above, Hoffman’s idea of seeing the Major as a scapegoat king reveals a reoccurring ritualistic action. By paying closer attention to the elaborate description of the tarred and feathered Molineux he assigns him a central role as the tool of change and constant renewal of society; a theme that achieved a myth-like quality in the today’s political system of the United States of America (cf. Hoffman 1961).
2 Structure, Historical Inspiration and Literary Correlation

2.1 Structure and time of the tale

The tale’s plot is at the first glance quite simple. It informs the reader of a journey which is undertaken by a young man named Robin. He wants to find his uncle who is a person of high standing in one of colonial New England’s major towns. According to tradition of these times, Robin cannot inherit the farm, because he is the youngest son of a supposedly quite poor country family. With the oldest son being the heir, Robin hopes to find his own way of life and thus seeks the help of his supposedly rich kinsman, Major Molineux, who “had visited his cousin, in great pomp, a year or two before” (pg. 13). During this visit, as Robin recalls during a conversation with a stranger, the Major showed interest in the future of the two boys. But the hopes of the overconfident Robin slowly trickle away. Failing to find his uncle in the unknown town he has to face the problem that its citizens refuse to show him the Major’s house. At the end of the story, Robin has to witness a rioting mob tarring and feathering his uncle to eventually cart him out of town in a ridiculous procession. Shocked and bereft of his hopes Robin wishes to leave. But before he can depart he receives counsel from a friendly stranger, who suggests him to stay and find his place amongst the citizens of the town.

An account of the expulsion of officials by the local townsfolk makes up the first part of the short story and is detached from the narration of Robin’s adventures. In its disguise as a quasi-historical description of the troubles following the revocation of the colonial charter by James II, Hawthorne sets a relatively vague narration time, by citing the annals of Massachusetts Bay and Hutchinson’s “History of Massachusetts”. Due to the reference to the revocation of the royal charter by James II in the year 1684 and the forty-year timespan which the annals cover, the narration is probably meant to be set around the year 1729, in which William Burnet was the appointed governor (Newman 1979, pg. 218). A further hint informs the reader that the narrated events are “not far from a hundred years ago” (pg. 3). Grayson points out, that Hawthorne allowed Samuel G. Goodrich to publish his tales in “The Token” in 1831 when he did not find a publisher for them. The date of publication is insofar of importance, as the year 1730 marked the centennial of Winthrop’s arrival with the original charter in New England (Grayson 1982, pg. 546). Nevertheless, it remains doubtful whether Hawthorne had

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specifically this era in mind, as these riots were more likely to be the events occurring during the pre-revolutionary period of 1765, in which the Stamp Act was put into effect (Newman 1979, pg. 218 and Pearce 1954, pg. 6).

Although the place of the narration is never stated, Hawthorne’s description of the town as a “little metropolis of a New England colony” (pg. 4) and his introduction to the history of Massachusetts Bay strongly suggest the town of Boston, which is still famous for its patriotic acts. Especially the “Boston tea party” in 1773 features a prominent place in today’s memory of the American revolution. Boston as the place of events can be traced back to Dr. Caleb H. Snow’s “History of Boston”, which Hawthorne most probably used to build an authentic historical background for his fictional events (Grayson 1982, pg. 545). Subtitled “the Metropolis of Massachusetts”, Snow’s history contains even more similarities to Hawthorne’s description. The people of Boston are described in this early historical work to be the most rebellious of the colony, eager to regain their former liberties (Grayson 1982, pg. 551). Also many of the sites and buildings Robin visits during his stay seem to be modeled after places that were connected with rebellious activities and are mentioned in Snow’s book. On top of Robin entering of the town via a ferry; the ships, the tavern, the steepled building and the mansion can be traced back to buildings that existed during the revolutionary period. Grayson points out that the place from which the ships are visible could be Dock square, which was a well known assembly point for anti-royal orations. The tavern with the “broad countenance of a British hero” (pg. 5) reminds of the Admiral Vernon tavern, which was situated close to the place of the Boston Massacre in 1770. A very striking house must be the steepled building Robin sees, as it stands even out of all the other “lofty houses” (pg. 7). This edifice was possibly the Old State House in which the elected House of Representatives met. Situated closely to each other, the mansion and the church make a deep impression on Robin. As he does not find the house of his uncle during his search, regardless how hard he tries, it seems highly ironic that the building he notices shortly before falling asleep has been the so called Province House. Situated in the historic part of Boston it used to house the royal governor (Grayson 1982, pg. 353-355). Still dazed, Robin even wonders if he might have spotted the face of his uncle in one of the windows, which could be understood as another ironic wink of the author.

In contrast to the detailed descriptions of Robin’s surroundings, the time that elapses in the course of the plot remains vague. When Robin leaves the ferry, it is near to nine o’clock in the evening and the moon is shining. The correlation between his time of arrival and the situation of the light is quite clearly emphasized, as Hawthorne puts it
together right in the first sentence following the quasi-historical part of the tale. Light and time are linked once more, when Robin pays the ferryman. Not only the moon is “newly risen” (pg. 3) and hints at a dim light, but the ferryman is depicted as lifting a lantern, so that he can see Robin’s appearance. Robin’s departure to the streets of the town leaves him soon puzzled as he is unable to find the right direction to his uncles house. The absence of light is in correlation with Robin being lost in time and space. After being scared away by the old man the first time, he becomes disoriented in a “succession of crooked and narrow streets” (pg. 5) and is reminded by his hunger, that a considerable amount of time has passed since his last meal. But after leaving the tavern and eventually the narrow lane, he is in a spacious and lively street, which is not only lit by many lamps but by the moon as well. In addition, the clock of the steepled building, which is according to the big street and the still lit shops most probably a social center of the town, rings its bell, ending Robin’s disorientation. Afterwards Robin continues to walk even further into the city, thus descending further into darkness to face even more unpleasant encounters. With the inclusion of a dreamlike sequence, Hawthorne dislodges Robin from time, as the protagonist himself is unable to tell if he is fully awake or still dreaming with his mind “vibrating between fancy and reality” (pg. 12). Therefore he is neither prepared for the confrontation with the riotous mob, nor the with the cruel punishment he has to witness when the mob prances down the street towards him. At the end of the plot, when Robin has to decide whether he wants to return home or to stay in the town, the time of the day is still not revealed. Surrounded by darkness, it adds to his confusion about what to learn from the things he had to experience.

The tale can be quite clearly subdivided into five major parts, with the historic background being the first one. After Robin has crossed the river via the ferry he becomes introduced through a very detailed description of his appearance. The second part is a transition. By crossing the river, he is also crossing of the border between the countryside where he grew up and the town in which he has to prove himself. Part three details Robin’s search for his kinsman. It consists of a series of encounters which seem to be obstructive rather than helpful for Robin’s search. Although he rationalizes the unfriendly reactions of the citizens away, his zest for action is slowly eroded by hunger and continuous failure, leading to the fourth part of the tale. Falling asleep during his rest on the stairs of the church, memories mingle with dream-imagines of his home, gaining a prophetic and somewhat surreal quality. The setting of the dream sequence is displaced in time and space. The dreams setting contrasts the dark street with the description of a golden light and clearly distinguishes it from all the other events of the
story. The last part of the short story reveals the tragic fate of the Major and tells of Robin’s reaction upon finally meeting his kinsman. It is introduced and concluded by the friendly stranger whom Robin had met before. At the first encounter, the stranger offers the lonely Robin company, alleviating the boy’s loneliness and growing desperation. But more importantly he is the one to counsel the confused Robin once he had to witness the dreadful fate of his kinsman.

2.2 The historic background of the three major characters

While the structure of the plot is rather easy to discern, the possible sources which inspired Hawthorne for depicting the three main persons of his story are up to discussion. The Major, the mob leader with the two-colored face and Robin can be traced back to either real historical persons or literary and cultural roots. The theme and structure of Hawthorne’s story bears certain similarity to the autobiographical account of Benjamin Franklin’s arrival in Philadelphia, as Smith (1965) observes:

”Each leaves his father’s house to go to a strange city in advancement; each arrives in this strange city by boat; each is embarrassed about his lack of money; each is in danger of being arrested for having run away from his master. Both encounter and resist strippers, and both fall asleep or ”dream in or near places of worship” (Smith 1965, pg. 551).

Another possible influence for the name Robin can be found in William Shakespeare’s “A Midsummer Nights Dream”, in which the main character wears the name Robin Goodfellow. Hawthorne seems to have included more references to this play by citing two other characters of it, by his description of the watchman carrying a lantern ”like the Moonshine of Pyramus and Thisbe” (pg. 9 and Freese in Lubbers 1990 , pg. 14). But not only the names bear a certain resemblance, also such themes like resisting authorities, getting lost, dream imagery (Newman 1979, pg. 220) and the ”atmosphere [...] of an insane performance” (Pearce 1954, pg. 331) contribute to the similarity of both works. This would also have consequences for a closer definition of the date in which the plot unfolds, being supposedly the mid-summer eve of 1730, the 23rd of June (Grayson 1982, pg. 547). Another explanation for choosing the name Robin is proposed by Duban, who links the historic person of Robert Walpole to Robin’s intentions. Hawthorne’s allusion to the streets of London bring Duban to the conclusion, that the author might have been inspired by various pamphlets which dealt with the corruption of King George’s II Prime Minister, who was nicknamed ”Robin”. Robin’s
hopes of receiving help from his rich and influential kinsman, his constant believe in an almost magical effect that the mere mentioning of the name must have, is seen as an allegory of undemocratic structures and nepotism, which was called "Robinocracy" during Walpole’s rule (Duban 1983, pg 274-275).

Another ambiguity lies within Major Molineux himself. Ironically, the historic person of William Molineux was not a royalist, but a notorious mob organizer who came to fame in the pre-revolutionary Boston. Pearce cites a royalist source that describes him as a "Pest to society [...] who retired to his House and finished his Life by Suicide" (Pearce 1954, pg. 327-328). The thematic dilemma, that such contradictory relation between the literary figure and the historic person opens, is explained by assigning Molineux a double role. As Robin and the Major are kinsmen, the two figures become a complex one, that helps to destroy itself (Pearce 1954, pg. 329).

The "double-faced fellow" leading the mob has his historic counterpart in a person called Joyce Jr., who was described as wearing a colored face during several Boston riots he led (Pearce 1954, pg. 332).
2.3 Similarities with "Young Goodman Brown"

"My kinsman, Major Molineux" bears several similarities to a tale which Hawthorne published only three years later. In both stories, a young man has to leave his home in order to undertake a journey for very mundane reasons. They embark on a quest that both drastically alters their character and perception of society. While Robin hopes for the financial aid of his kinsman, Young Goodman Brown’s motivation for leaving his home at night is left unknown. But the unusual time, the urgent necessity to do it now and not another time, as well as the description of this errand as an “evil purpose” (pg. 65) leave no doubt that his intentions are far from being pure. The journey takes both through an unknown and threatening environment. Robin as a country lad feels confused and threatened by the labyrinthine streets and unfriendly people, while Young Goodman Brown must make his way through the dark forest, aided and threatened by the voices surrounding him (Carpenter 1969, pg. 48). Due to the crooked streets of the town and the dense forest - both coupled with a darkness that is omnipresent in both stories - both protagonists soon feel dislocated in time and space. Underlined by the eminent uncertainty, whether the events they experience are dream or fact, the characters are forced to deal with the confusion inflicted on them. It is eminent that both characters are eventually ill-prepared for their journey. While Robin foolishly relies on his country-shrewdness and the useless oaken cudgel to counter potential threats and in the strange city, Young Goodman Brown has to realize that he lost the only thing that could guide and save him on his evil journey. His cry "My faith is gone!" (pg. 71) refers to the symbolic meaning of his wife’s name and marks his capitulation in face of the devils seductive and corruptive powers (pg. 71). Another detail that adds to the close resemblance of the stories is the wooden stick Brown carries. But in contrast to Robin’s cudgel it is not perceived as a useless burden, but as a "magic instrument to help him on his way toward evil" (Carpenter 1969, pg. 51).

Structurally, both stories let their protagonist experience a series of threatening or even seductive encounters with representatives of society, making them finally witness a ritual conducted by the people they have met. A key element is the helping figure that accompanies Young Goodman through the woods and that cheers the desperate Robin up.

Although both stories share the quest motif, the underlying themes and style differ in

certain aspects. Robin's journey into the town confronts him with persons who can't be dismissed as figments of his imagination, while Young Goodman Brown is always in doubt about the things he experiences. The "voices he hears may be nothing but the product of his fevered imagination" (Carpenter 1969, pg. 51). Carpenter argues further, that the quest of Goodman Brown is, due to this dreamlike nature, a reflection own his own tortured doubt and lost faith, with the encounters as symbolic realization of it. Robin in contrast witnesses a corrupt society (Carpenter, 1969, pg. 51). While Brown is at least slightly aware of the negative implications and fateful consequences his journey might have, Robin prances into the city with high hopes and an arrogant behavior. The implication of doubt adds to the sinister shroud that seems to surround Goodman Brown right from the beginning of the story, while the ignorance gives the figure of Robin at least a comic undertone. Carpenter even attributes the journey of Brown a similar predestined tragic ending like that of Oedipus, who could not escape the prophesied fate, as everything he did, was determined by his own free will and moral judgment (Carpenter 1969, pg. 53). In contrast to such grim resemblance Robin is often seen in the tradition of the naive and ignorant country bumpkin, who boasts none of the qualities, that other heroes from Greek mythology had. He neither possesses Ulysses' wit or Aeneas' steadiness of soul (Allison 1968, pg. 306). While Brown at least tries to resist the evil that he encounters, Robin is completely ignorant of the approaching disaster and fails to decipher the manifold hints that the townspeople give him either through their laughter or by their ironic answers. The laughter appears in both tales, but with a totally different connotation. Every time Robin is repelled again he hears the laughter of the people behind him, mocking his naivety and lack of cunning. The nature of laughter Brown witnesses in the forest is not of such comic quality, but of demonic nature, enhancing his feeling of horror. At the point of their highest confusion and despair - in Robin's case the sight of his ill-fated uncle, in Brown's case the descending pink ribbon - they start to laugh themselves. Both undergo a transformation at this point of the story: Robin finally understands the reactions of the people. Joining in their frolic behavior means to complete the transition from the naive country boy to a member of urban society, just as the friendly stranger suggests. Goodman Brown on the other hand does not only lose faith and sanity, but is described by Hawthorne as having assumed a demonic quality himself:

"The fiend in his own shape is less hideous than when he rages in the breast of man. Thus sped the demoniac on his course, until, quivering among the trees, he saw a red light before him [...]" (pg. 71).
Carpenter concludes that Hawthorne basically used the same plot to depict two different results of such a quest. Brown’s witnessing of the satanic ritual, in which many of the most respected people of the Puritan society participated, leaves him in moral isolation and distrust of the world. Although Robin must live through a similar ordeal, he has the possibility to shake off his self-imposed isolation by joining the people around him (Carpenter 1969, pg. 54).

What nevertheless unites both stories, is the insight the protagonists gain in the society they move within. The moral implications are clearly negative in the case of “Young Goodman Brown”, but the more or less conciliatory ending of “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” does is not necessarily a positive one. Robin’s motivation to join the laughter and his decision about his further life are an important reason for quite contradictory interpretations.
3 Interpretations and Intertextuality

The interpretations of "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" attribute to Robin adventures and the revelation of his uncle’s demise different connotations. Besides historical interpretations, that see the tale in the light of the foundation of the American nation, many readings focus on the moral implications. By putting the tale in context with other literary works or linking it to Christian religion, the interpretations either attribute Robin’s quest a positive outcome in terms of becoming a self-dependent adult or even see him being lost in a corrupt and cruel society.

3.1 The quest as process of maturation

Casting the historical interpretation of Q.D. Leavis aside, Gross argues 1957 for a moral statement that the tale carries, as the first would simply ignore a large part of the tale or at least would reduce it to “sheer Gothic mystification” (Gross 1957, pg. 106). He also points out, that Hawthorne criticized other writers like William Gilmore Simms for missing the opportunity to create new moral shapes in the reader’s mind (Gross 1957, pg. 99). In order to do this, Robin has to undergo a change from moral innocence to painful enlightenment. As a symbol of his innocence serves his biographical background of a young country lad who was raised under simple but therefore uncomplicated and sheltered circumstances. This is revealed by as his dreamy memories of the bright forest and his recollection of a deeply religious father. This rustic life of a farmer family in the 18th century most probably bore more physical challenges than giving opportunity to enhance the knowledge about the political and societal intricacies of city life. Consequently, Gross puts the city in contrast to the woods, by interpreting it as a "moral labyrinth, through whose tortuous passageways stalk hatred, revenge, sin and retribution” (Gross 1957, pg. 100). Robin’s defense against such threats is, unknown to the self-confident youth himself, quite meager. The oaken cudgel he carries with him is not only a useless burden, but also the wooden symbol of his inadequate preparation for the social reality of the city. The clumsiness of this archaic weapon is a stark contrast to the overly emphasized shrewdness of Robin, which Gross does not necessarily see as a means of mocking. Although the story clarifies through the almost endless repetition of the term “shrewd” that it cannot be taken as an attribute like the wit Ulysses possessed. It rather serves as an “carapace of innocence (or ignorance)” (Gross 1957, pg. 102), enabling him to rationalize the hostile acts of the people, i.e. by discarding the old man’s hostility as the irks of “some country representative” (pg. 5).
But this armor of ignorance (and arrogance) must be penetrated in order to release him from his immaturity. Robin’s self-confident and bumptious behavior changes after he had to experience the inefficiency of his weapon in his encounter with the double-faced man, who puzzles the enraged club wielder with his cryptic answer and uncanny visage. The feeling of loneliness that the empty church evokes, opens his mind for a first sensation of shock and the longing for company. Upon visiting the graves he realizes that the power of man is limited by its mortality. In light of these thoughts, Gross perceives Robin’s dream as an action of escapist, which not only fails, but instead initiates the change of Robin’s personality.

With his pleading voice, “his lamentable cry” (pg. 13), the change is made audible when he addresses the stranger who refrains from repelling the young boy, but instead decides to listen to his story. This act of compassion can only be possible as Robin drops his “childish façade of physical self-reliance with which he had previously faced the moral universe” (Gross 1957, pg. 104). At this point, Gross does not only assume that the stranger does already know what fate the Major has suffered, but he also attributes him the wisdom of a man that “has come to term with the inexorable nature of a menacing reality” (ibid., pg. 104). But if the stranger knows that the kinsman, who is sought so desperately by the young boy, is already on the cart, then the exhibited friendliness can only be superficial. The motivation for waiting together with Robin for the arrival of the mob could be of a different quality than Gross assumes. Even if the stranger has only the best intentions for Robin in Gross’ sense, namely giving him the chance to learn of the nature of man, the tone and selection of words “[...] but i chanced to see him a little time previous [...]” (pg. 14) or ”I have a singular curiosity to witness your meeting [...]” (pg. 14) imply at least mockery. Still taken as granted that he knows the Major’s feathery condition, the mockery of asking Robin if he would recognize his kinsman in case he passes by is perfidious.

Nevertheless he gives Robin the possibility to understand and cope with the scene he has to witness by telling him of the two complexions that man’s soul can have. The humiliation of the man with whom he had connected hopes for his own future is in Gross reading a “curative power of an apprehension of the nature of moral morality” (Gross 1957 pg. 104). Robin’s innocence, his ignorance of the moral reality of man, is the darkness that had been shed light upon by the townsfolk which eventually laughs at his expense in the final part of the story. The constant change of light and darkness in the streets of the city is therefore the journey towards the liberation from his immaturity. The advice of the stranger implies, that the ordeal Robin had to experience is the
beginning of life (Gross 1957, pg. 108).

3.2 The quest as a journey into darkness

In contrast to Gross’ positive outcome, other interpretations see the ambiguous rhetorical question of the stranger, regarding the two voices of man, in a more sinister way. The two complexions are closely linked to a statement of either a hypocrite society or even a worldly hell. Connor identifies this question as the overall theme of the story, which connects all the events narrated (Connor 1959, pg. 299). His argumentation towards the revelation of a hypocrite society assigns Robin not the role of a naive country bumpkin, but accepts the overemphasis of Robin’s shrewdness at face value. His shrewdness manifests itself in his “intelligent perception” (Connor 1959, pg 301), which enables him to quickly adapt to the situation, by adopting a voice that emulates the social standing of the persons he encounters. But his conversational partners have different voices as well, responding to his questions with threats, deceit and irony. This hypocrisy of the townsfolk is shown by the thematic appearance of the double-faced fellow, who functions as a natural leader of the citizens, while Robin is a natural follower (Connor 1959, pg 300). This special follower is just not aware of his own two complexions. He only uncovers them when he is used by the townspeople as the “crowning implement in the humiliation of his kinsman” (Connor 1959, pg 301). Laughing in face of the tragic fate his uncle has to endure, he allies himself with the mob and thus is invited to stay and rise in the city. In Connor’s view, this acceptance and adaptation of hypocrite morals and behaviors is the condition for succeeding in the world that Hawthorne depicts (Ibid., pg. 302).

Another view connects the adventures of young Robin with the allegorical pilgrimage of John Bunyan’s Christian, seeing the city however as being inhabited by the damned. The argument is rooted in the demand of the ferryman for an extra fare, which Broes links to the crossing of the river Styx in Dante’s depiction of the “Inferno” where Charon’s is reluctant to allow a living man into the realm of the damned. Broes therefore argues similar to Gross, as he attributes Robin an innocence of the sinful reality that will soon entangle him, exemplified by the reluctance of the ferryman to take him to the town (Broes, 1964, pg 173-174). Robin’s innocence is again traced back to the dichotomy between country and city, whereas the farm stands for moral order while the crooked streets symbolize the “twisted moral fabric” (Broes 1964, pg. 177) of the city.

The encounters with the different people are however interpreted in a reversed role than
the one Gross has assigned them. They are not trying to enlighten the innocent boy or are playing a prank, they are “spiritually dead” (Broes 1964, g 174), having nothing as curses and threats for the protagonist. Their laughter is not an expression of feelings, but mirrors their lack of morals, serving ultimately as a tool to enhance the terror they spread. Broes understands the quick and sequential encounters Robin has as a parable to the seven vices of Christian religion, with each symbolizing one.

With his demand for more money than the usual fair, the ferryman expresses his greed, thus symbolizing the first vice. As soon as Robin enters the town, he crosses the way of the old man, whose repeated and somewhat stilted boasting of the authority he possesses, is the embodiment of pride. The intermittent coughs he utters are another underlining of the spiritual death he has already suffered (Broes 1964, pg. 176). Hawthorne’s description of the tavern with the victuals displayed to the hungry traveler seems to symbolize gluttony (Ibid., pg. 178). In light of this interpretation it is remarkable, that he does not comment on the more direct reference that the author makes to religious traditions here. After Hawthorne depicted the people’s eagerness to consume either punch or Whisky, he does not refrain from labeling this behavior as clearly negative and deeply rooted in colonial society:

“Nearly all, in short, evinced a predilection for the Good Creature in some of its various shapes, for this is a vice, to which, as the Fast-Day sermons of a hundred years ago will testify, we have a long hereditary claim”3 (pg. 6).

The next encounter presents him the personifications of lust and sloth between which he has to navigate like Odysseus did between Skylla and Charybdis. Being beautiful and gifted with a seductive tongue, a girl tries to lure Robin into her dwelling, which is prevented from another uncanny figure spit out by darkness. Broes identifies the heavy yawn of the watchman as a sign of lethargic character, qualifying him a representation of sloth (Broes 1964, pg. 178). After having escaped this threat, he runs into groups of strangers that speak a foreign tongue and curse him fiercely. With this expression of hatred these “lost souls” (Ibid., pg. 179) are the personification of wrath. Broes interpretation lacks consistency, though, as the seventh vice, envy, is left to speculate on.

Having his appearance close to the church, the double-faced man with his red and black colored parts is assumed according to Broes as being unmistakably the devil, that will later play his “satanic role” (Broes 1964, pg. 179) by leading the mob. His advice to wait for the Major leaves Robin waiting at the church which functions as a last bastion

3The Good Creature is a euphemism for Rum or Whisky and the Fast-day sermons was a day of public abstinence (McIntosh 1987, pg. 6).
against evil. The solitary ray shining on the bible is a “heavenly light” (ibid., pg. 180,) which nevertheless cannot help Robin to escape his feeling of being uprooted. With the door to the church remaining locked, the unattainability of the bible can be seen as underlining his argumentation.

The person of the stranger is not even slightly better than the rest of the people. His friendliness is a superficial disguise in which metaphorical ruin approaches the people. Consequently, Broes sees his invitation to stay in the city as an offer to join the ranks of the spiritually ruined (Broes 1964, pg. 181). An exception to this accumulation of sin and moral depravity poses the Major Molineux, whose description by Hawthorne is received by Broes as being far more favorable than that of the other citizens. In fact, he is expelled from the city being for innocent himself. He is a symbol of “moral good and order in a world from which these virtues seem to have largely disappeared” (Broes 1964, pg. 183). Robin’s laughter in face of this injustice is not only an acknowledgement of the victory that evil has achieved, but also his identification with his true kinship, which will help him advancing in this world (Broes 1964, pg. 183).

The solution for the last vice, that remains unknown in Broe’s reading, can be found in context with the “Divine Comedy”. Allison argues, that Hawthorne arranged the vices according to a criterion of societal relevance (Allison 1968, pg. 307). In Dante’s vision of the “Inferno”, the most severe sin that can be committed by man is treason, trapping the lost souls in the frozen lake Cocytus. As treason to the rightful master is the worst form of betrayal, the expulsion of the Major marks the greatest in the series of spiritual crimes committed. Robin’s laughter therefore gains the worst connotation possible: It is a “surrender to the spirit of the crowd [that] violates fundamental obligations of youth to age, of kinsman to kinsman, and of man to man” (Allison 1968, pg. 309). Exactly this reaction, the laughter and the quick abandoning of his uncle is what destines Robin to share the frozen fate of Dante’s lost souls. It reveals his self-centered personality, which produced only a will of quick advancement, but not the determination of loyalty.
3.3 The quest as a scapegoat ritual

The ritualistic quality and the moral implications of the Major’s expulsion are brought together by Pearce, who urges that the American revolution is inevitably linked to “something like Original Sin” (Pearce 1954, pg. 330). Hoffman specifies the ritualistic character closer, as he links it back to the Roman Saturnalia festivities (Hoffman 1961, pg. 115), which reversed the role of rulers and ruled. Another part of the Saturnalia were the sacrifice of a scapegoat, which was understood as the symbolic renewal of the old ruler by replacing him with a younger successor (Hoffman 1961, pg. 118). The relation between Robin and his uncle is central to this view. While the Major is a complex father figure that represents authority and the past that must be overcome, Robin is at the same time a representative of the American people and as such a folk character. The country bumpkin has to undergo a transformation which will release him from his state of dependence (Hoffman 1961, pg 121).

This transformation is completed during a transitional situation that marks the overcoming of the authority figure Molineux who represents “Order, Tradition and Stability” (Hoffman 1961, pg 118). The transition of society is therefore a condition for Robin’s ritualistic initiation, which is completed and acknowledged by his laughter at the sight of the overcome authority. Expanding on Pearce’s interpretation of a Saturnalian rite, the transgression and ritual behavior are an important part of an ethnological concept described by Victor Turner’s liminality, which in turn is inspired by Arnold van Gennep’s rites de passage (Turner in Belliger / Krieger 2006, pg. 249) or rites of passage. These rites, which mark the transition from a certain state to another, are subdivided into three phases: First, an individual or a group of persons separates itself from a point in societal structure or a set of cultural conditions, by conducting a symbolic act. Second, the group or individual finds itself in a cultural domain that has no, or just a little resemblance to the future one. In the third phase, the group or individual will be integrated (or reintegrated) into a social structure, enjoying new liberties and feeling new obligations (Turner in Krieger / Belliger 2006, pg. 246).

Persons being in such a state of liminality, as Turner coined it, move between the positions of law, tradition and convention, so that the properties of it cannot be exactly described, but find their expression in different symbols. A few exemplifications of such symbols are darkness, death, lunar- or solar eclipses and the wilderness.

By looking at Hawthorne’s tale under this premises and incorporating the intertextual references discussed above, Robin’s journey and the rebellion of the townspeople
against the authority are both exhibiting expressions of liminality. When Robin leaves his father’s home, he abandons the life of a farmer in the rural landscape of New England, which marks the first phase of the rite of passage. It is symbolized by the crossing of the river, whose identification with the Styx is almost universally accepted and therefore reminds of death or mortality in general. The inappropriate clothing of the protagonist and his lack of worldly goods, especially money, is according to Turner another symbol for his state of transition. (Turner in Belliger / Krieger 2006, pg. 250). Similar to Young Goodman Brown, Robin finds himself quickly disoriented in time and space, so that it is easy to identify the town with its “crooked and narrow” (pg. 5) streets as the symbolic wilderness. But not only Robin is in such state of transition. The darkness that seems to fold around the town like a black cloak exemplifies the liminality of the townspeople, which are about to alter the social fabric of their community. The short interlude of the dream in which Robin is excluded from his father’s home makes him aware of the state he is currently in.

With the Saturnalian procession closing in, the rite of passage comes for both, the town and Robin, to a conclusion. Whatever the moral implication might be, Robin’s initiation and the transition of the townspeople to a new society is completed with the mutual laughter they utter. Robin is now part of a new cultural and social frame of reference that was constituted by the humiliation of his kinsman, with him being indeed the necessary “crowning implement” (v.s.).
References


