

## The Tar-and-Feathering in “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”

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# The Tar-and-Feathering in “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”

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## 1. From the Ending

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” describes the young protagonist Robin’s one night stay in a town— “the little metropolis of a New England” (CE XI 210), perhaps, Boston—a town absolutely unfamiliar to him. Robin is an “evidently country-bred” (CE XI 209) youth and intends to “rise in the world” (CE XI 231) with the help of his kinsman, a prominent figure in the town, Major Molineux; with great expectations, he leaves his pleasant country home and arrives at the new town. The story begins when he crosses the river and arrived at the port of the town. From the beginning, his ultimate wish is to find his kinsman. In the strange town, however, he is jeered whenever he asks townspeople the whereabouts of his kinsman, and Robin cannot understand why. The townspeople are actually intending to carry out a confidential plan of attack on his kinsman that same night, and Robin does not realize this until the climax of the tale. After wandering through the unfamiliar streets, he finally witnesses the tar-and-feathering attack of Major Molineux by the town’s people. Having lost his supporter in the town at the end of the story, Robin is depressed and asks a gentleman the way to the port in order to return to his country home. The gentleman, who Robin happened to meet in front of the church while wandering the town, persuades Robin not to leave:

“No, my friend Robin, not to-night at least … Some few days hence, if you wish it, I will speed you on your journey. Or, 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.” (CE XI 231)

The story ends with this gentleman’s proposal. Although the gentleman has optimistic hopes for Robin’s future here, the narrator does not adduce any reasons in support of the gentleman’s suggestion. Here the gentleman calls Robin, “shrewd youth,” and the character Robin too refers to himself as “shrewd” throughout the story, as does the narrator, but the word sounds rather ironic because Robin does not actually realize the situation he is in. It is immediately before the scene of the tar-and-feathering that Robin meets the gentleman, and therefore the only scene in the story that the gentleman witnesses is the climax: the tar-and-feathering of Major Molineux and Robin’s reaction to it. In other words, the gentleman must obviously recognize some kind of potential in Robin during the scene of the tar-and-feathering; thus, he comes to make a forecast for Robin’s future at the end: “you may rise in the world without the help of your kinsman, Major Molineux.”

One source which can provide clues to help us understand what the gentleman perceives at the scene of the tar-and-feathering is that he offers to help Robin in a kindly way but with a definite condition: “if you prefer to remain with *us*” (*Italics mine*). Despite being a solitary outsider, Robin meets unfamiliar townspeople who make a laughingstock of him, but he finally and suddenly is accepted as a member of the town by the gentleman after the incident involving Major Molineux. From these facts, we can suppose that this short story depicts a delicate relationship between an individual and a community. Although many critics have interpreted Robin’s one night journey as his initiation or a “rite of passage,” almost all critics have focused on the growth of his inner-self. This theme seems central given the American Revolutionary context and the comparison between a young protagonist and colonial America. Perhaps, the significance of the American

Revolution, the suggestion of the Freudian father, and the mythical or anthropological Archetypes, have prevented critics from considering this short story with respect to the social relationship between Robin and the multitude.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Hawthorne often describes the serious tension that exists between an individual and a community as in *The Scarlet Letter*, and “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” is no exception.

This paper, from the gentleman’s statement at the end, focuses on the scene of the tar-and-feathering as a significant moment which brings about a definite change in the relationship between Robin and the townspeople. My purpose is first to make clear the American Revolutionary context in “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” to help identify not only the historical meaning of the tar-and-feathering but also the gentleman’s “us” in the later section. I will go on to consider the theme of Robin’s initiation at the scene of the tar-and-feathering from a historical and cultural approach focusing on the relationship between Robin and the townspeople.

## 2. The American Revolution

Generally, Hawthorne is known as one of the “historical romancers” (Bell 6) who utilizes history in his narratives, and he employs historical facts, too, at the beginning of “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”:

After the kings of Great Britain had assumed the right of appointing the colonial governors, the measures of the latter seldom met with the ready and general approbation, which had been paid to those of their predecessors, under the original charters. The people looked with most jealous scrutiny to the exercise of power, which did not emanate from themselves, and they usually rewarded the rulers with slender gratitude, for the compliances, by which, in softening their instructions from beyond the sea, they had incurred the reprehension of those who gave them. (CE XI 208)

Previous to the appearance of the protagonist Robin, the narrator initially recounts the historical backdrop: a political conflict between Great Britain and colonial

America concerning “the right of appointing the colonial governors,” that is to say, the right of self-rule. After this passage, the narrator mentions that two colonial governors “were prisoned by a popular insurrection” (CE XI 208) and a third “was driven from the province by the whizzing of a musket ball” (CE XI 208). Hawthorne includes historical materials into the beginning of the story “as preface to the following adventure” (CE XI 209), and he emphasizes the aversion to tyrannical authority and longing for self-rule in the opening section. At the close of the first section the narrator expressly asks permission for his omission of any more historical materials: “The reader, in order to avoid a long and dry detail of colonial affairs, is requested to dispense with an account of the train of circumstances, that had caused, much temporary inflammation of the popular mind” (CE XI 209). From this “preface,” we can surmise that Robin’s adventure is probably set in 1730s Boston, and thereafter, the narrator does not touch upon any historical subject directly; however, we do actually find more references to Revolutionary contexts in his story.<sup>2</sup>

Robin pays “a sexangular piece of parchment valued at three pence” (CE XI 209) as an extra charge to the ferryman when he crosses the river at night, and he again mentions “three pence” in the tavern: “‘Oh that a parchment three-penny might give me a right to sit down at yonder table,’ said Robin, with a sigh” (CE XI 210). Regarding the “three pence” which Robin paid and left him penniless, Kathleen P. Colgan points out that it was the same amount as the stamp tax of three pence which was levied on American colonies by the Stamp Act of 1765 (194). Moreover, concerning the 1773 Boston Tea Party, Roy Harvey Pearce suggests that the name “Major Molineux” comes from William Molineux, who was “a well-to-do radical Boston trader, an organizer and leader of anti-Loyalist mobs … one of those who are said to have been at the Boston Tea Party” (327). Robert C. Grayson also indicates the allusion to the Boston Tea Party in the tale from the fact that the narrator mentions “the Indian dress” (CE XI 227) among the mob that lynches Major Molineux (555). In addition to the reference to political conflict between Britain and America in the “preface,” it is well known that the Stamp Act and the Boston Tea Party were historical turning points in the course of events

leading to the American Revolution. In particular, recent historical studies show that American colonial mob activities suddenly assumed political significance as anti-tyrannical mobs immediately after the Stamp Act.<sup>3</sup> At the end of his adventure in the unfamiliar town, Robin witnesses a disturbance caused by a mob, and the tar-and-feathering of Major Molineux also strengthens the Revolutionary image:

A mighty stream of people now emptied into the street, and came rolling slowly towards the church. ... The rattling of wheels over the stones sometimes found its way to his [Robin's] ear, and confused traces of a human form appeared at intervals, and command to halt: ... Right before Robin's eyes was an uncovered cart. There the torches blazed the brightest, there the moon shone out like day, and there, in tar-and-feathery dignity, sat his kinsman, Major Molineux! (*CE* XI 227)

Having gone through the adventure in the strange town, here Robin witnesses the tarred and feathered Major Molineux: a sight symbolic of Revolutionary patriotism. Although the tar-and-feathering often appears in American history as punishment of an individual by members of the community, it is not an American invention. According to Benjamin H. Irvin, "tar-and-feathers dates back at least as far as medieval times" (199) in Europe, and it, through Atlantic sailors, "became a popular method of intimidating customs officials and castigating informants" (201) in late eighteenth-century America. Above all it was often employed as a form of punishment of Royalists or Tories by patriots in colonial America, as the expression "the feathered Tories" (Waldstreicher 44) clearly shows.<sup>4</sup> Hawthorne prefaces his story with Anglo-American historical and political issues and indirectly incorporates the Revolutionary context into Robin's story. As a result, the tar-and-feathering of Major Molineux also inevitably assumes historical and political significances at the Revolutionary moment in which the American people were beginning to oppose British power.<sup>5</sup>

In short, Robin comes to the town just at the night plotted for the tar-and-feathering of a British representative by the patriots. He searches for his

kinsman who just so happen to be the target of the said plot, and finally witnesses the tarred and feathered Major Molineux. Although this story has often been interpreted as a "rite of passage" of the young hero—this will be discussed at next section—the Revolutionary context itself closely relates to Robin's story. Michael J. Colacurcio points out a unique relationship between the Revolution and Robin's initiation in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux":

What better backdrop for a rite of personal passage than a nation's own problematic and, yes, ultimately violent transition? ... the process of personal maturation and the dynamics of political independence go round and round in our mind forever, in the aftermath of Hawthorne's tale, like equilibrists; ... or ... Robin and Revolution now exist in that sort of indissoluble union which only literature can create. (133)

Colacurcio indicates that Hawthorne deals with both the Revolutionary context and the theme of Robin's initiation equally in the tale, and emphasizes that the Revolution is an apt backdrop for a "rite of passage" and that the two themes "exist in that sort of indissoluble union." Colacurcio's opinion has become more comprehensible by acknowledging Hawthorne's contemporary historical view of the American Revolution. The American Revolution was, as Jonathan Arac points out, defined not as "the violent innovation" but "a development from the previous two centuries of American life" (137) by nineteenth-century historians.<sup>6</sup> In this historical view which regards the Revolution as a "development," colonial America in the tale and Robin's initiation tightly unite each other. Sacvan Bercovitch calls the American Revolution a "rite of passage into nationhood" (132), and Colin D. Pearce defines Robin's story as a "rite of passage from rural boyhood to urban maturity" (29). It was Q. D. Leavis' "Hawthorne as Poet" which made "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" a well-known short story in American fiction and she defines Robin as "the young America" (46). Both colonial America and Robin are actually described as equivalents in the phase approaching independence.<sup>7</sup>

In addition, this story reveals Hawthorne's attitude toward the Revolution and mob violence. Michael

David Bell, in his *Hawthorne and the Historical Romance of New England*, first studies nineteenth-century New Englander's sense of the past and seeks to clarify Hawthorne's own ideas about the history of the United States. Although his study mainly deals with the historical consciousness of the Puritan past—thus, he excludes “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” from his study—he emphasizes the Revolutionary rhetoric of nineteenth-century American historians:

…American historians in the earlier nineteenth century were seeking types … of the triumph of “liberty.” Each instance of the struggle between liberty and tyranny, each emergence of embryonic democracy, could be regarded as a type of the great culminating example of the victory of liberty over tyranny—the American Revolution. (8)

Hawthorne's “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” was written just in this current, and also obviously shows Hawthorne's interest in the Revolution, yet he does not make it clear that the tale focuses on the Revolution even though it deals with mob activity. Mass violence, as Arthur Lee Schlesinger says, “played a dominant role at every significant turning point of the events leading up to the War for Independence” (244) in colonial America, while mob activities, for Hawthorne, mean not only Revolutionary action for independence from tyranny but are also, as he says in “Liberty Tree,” “a most unjustifiable act” (CE VI 159) which reflect human savagery. By not including any historical references about British tyrannical oppression after the prefatory section, Hawthorne deprives the mob of their significance as Revolutionary heroes protecting their liberties and putting democracy into practice. Instead, the narrator calls the multitude around the tarred and feathered Major Molineux “fiends” (CE XI 230). This does not necessarily indicate that Hawthorne denied the American Revolution or American democracy. For Hawthorne, the American Revolution was a rightful act, “a *conservative* defense of American liberty” (Colgan 146) as the narrator describes in the “preface;” on the other hand, he regarded mob activities as misguided because “an excited mob was guilty of outrageous violence” (CE VI 159). We can detect his negative feelings about the mobs even in

his publication of the tale. Hawthorne wrote “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” in 1831. Although this short story appeared in *The Token and Atlantic Souvenir* the following year, it was not included in *Twice-told Tales* in 1837 but in *The Snow-Image and Uncollected Tales* in 1852 that Hawthorne published in book form. Arac suggests that increasing number of mobs in the 1830s possibly caused Hawthorne to postpone publishing “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” in his book because of his wish to be detached from contemporary politics.<sup>8</sup> At least, avoiding describing the details of pre-Revolutionary events directly, Hawthorne seems to balance between glories of the American Revolution and the savagery of the violent mob activity in the tale.<sup>9</sup> History is actually Hawthorne's favorite subject; however, whenever he uses historical materials, he intends not to criticize or narrate history itself but to create an imaginary “neutral territory” for his fiction.<sup>10</sup> In “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” Hawthorne describes the fictional adventure of a boy in the American Revolutionary context, and that is the focus of the next section.

### 3. Robin's Initiation

As mentioned in the previous section, Robin's story and the American Revolution are described as near equivalents. The revolutionary aspect comes to a climax in the scene of the tar-and-feathering and Robin's initiation too seems to reach a climax at this moment. This section focuses on the tar-and-feathering as the site of Robin's initiation and investigates what happens to Robin at the climax in relation to the American Revolutionary context.

Despite his assertions, “I have the name of being a shrewd youth” (CE XI 225), but not actually realizing the situation he is in, Robin wanders about the unfamiliar town, searching for his kinsman. At one point he meets a strange man “who holding whispered conversation with a group of ill dressed associates” (CE XI 213) at a tavern, and sees “little parties of men … in outlandish attire” (CE XI 219) who speak “in some language of which Robin knew nothing” (CE XI 219) in a desolate street, and again encounters the stranger whose “one side of the face blazed of an intense red, while the other was black as mid-night” (CE XI 220)

in front of a church. This grotesque stranger tells him "watch here an hour, and Major Molineux will pass by" (*CE* XI 220). Following his advice, Robin determines to wait, and there meets the gentleman who forecasts Robin's future at the end of the story. Then a large crowd suddenly rushes into the street in front of the church, and Robin witnesses the tar-and-feathering of Major Molineux. First, the tarred and feathered figure of his kinsman causes shock and consternation to Robin, but laughter suddenly takes the place of his shock:

They [Robin and Major Molineux] stared each other in silence, and Robin's knees shook, and his hair bristled, with a mixture of pity and terror. Soon, however, a bewildering excitement began to seize upon his mind: ... Then Robin seemed to hear the voices of the barbers, of the guests of the inn, and of all who had made sport of him that night. The contagion was spreading among the multitude, when all at once, it seized upon Robin, and he sent forth a shout of laughter that echoed through the street; everyman shook his sides, everyman emptied his lungs, but Robin's shout was the loudest there. (*CE* XI 229)

Although it is yet unclear what the gentleman recognizes in Robin here, at least, we know what he witnesses at the scene of the tar-and-feathering. Here the gentleman observes nothing but the encounter between Robin and Major Molineux and Robin's laughter. Robin's laughter here especially seems to have great significance in view of the fact that he mingles among the townspeople for the first time in his echoes of their laughter.

Concerning Robin's transformation, many critics agree that Robin's journey is an initiation. For instance, Malcolm Cowley defines Robin's journey as "the legend of a youth who achieves manhood through searching for a spiritual father and finding that the object of his search is an impostor" (28). Roy R. Male also emphasizes Robin's maturity in the tale in terms of Freudian father images (52). On the other hand, Seymour L. Gross and Arthur T. Broes emphasize Robin's initiation as one from innocence into "satanic knowledge" (Gross 107) or "a knowledge of evil"

(Broes 180). Whether his journey means initiation from childhood to manhood or innocence to knowledge, many critics have argued that the tale deals with Robin's moral growth. In contrast, Peter Shaw expresses suspicion concerning Robin's growth:

Robin's experience is described as eventuating in a growth of awareness, maturity, and moral stature, but little evidence can be found for such development. Robin displays aggressive tendencies throughout, and after acting brutally toward his kinsman, shows no more than a hint of mild remorse. ... The confident ascription of moral growth to Robin, therefore, speaks well for his critics but not necessarily for Robin himself. (561)

Shaw points out that Robin's growth or development is not explicitly described in the text. Indubitably, as Shaw indicates, Robin's development is clearly suggested neither to readers nor to the gentleman who presents Robin with an ultimatum at the close. It is a fact that the gentleman witnesses some potential in Robin; however, his growth or development is something ambiguous which is barely indicated by Robin's situation and the gentleman's forecast.

Although the gentleman actually witnesses Robin's laughter, the real motive or meaning behind this laughter is unclear. "Laughter," Hawthorne mentions in "Ethan Brand," "when out of place, mistimed, or bursting forth from a disordered state of feeling, may be the most terrible modulation of the human voice" (*CE* XI 87). Robin is indeed in "a disordered state of feeling" during the scene of the tar-and-feathering. He becomes somewhat depressed seeing the tarred and feathered Major Molineux who should have helped him to rise in the world, and his laughter in shock or desperation reminds us of Young Goodman Brown's laughter when he finds his wife Faith at the devil's Sabbath. As Gross also points out, "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" has identical structures to "Young Goodman Brown" with a young protagonist's one night journey to an unknown place and disclosure of the truth.<sup>11</sup> Probably—though the narrator does not mention—Robin's deep and complete despair can be supposed as a motive for his laughter like Young Goodman Brown. After the encounter with the tarred and feathered



Major Molineux, Robin's "cheek was somewhat pale, and his eyes not quite so lively as in the earlier part of evening" (CE XI 230). Finally, he begins "to grow weary of a town life" (CE XI 231) and asks the gentleman "the way to the ferry" (CE XI 230). His action here does not indicate to the reader that he himself believes that he "may rise in the world" (CE XI 231).

A clue to the interpretation of the meaning of Robin's laughter remains not in Robin himself but only in the person who comments on his future, the gentleman "in his prime, of open, intelligent, cheerful, and altogether prepossessing countenance" (CE XI 224). He meets Robin when Robin is waiting in front of the church following a stranger's advice, and soon realizes that Robin is "a country youth, apparently homeless, and without friend" (CE XI 224). Perceiving his kindness, Robin briefly outlines his purpose and situation in the town to the gentleman, while the gentleman seems determined to remain with Robin "with a singular curiosity" (CE XI 225). It is suggestive that the gentleman seems to be, as Colacurcio points out, "an *arch*-conspirator" (144) in the mob violence against Major Molineux. In the scene of the tar-and-feathering, the double-faced stranger appears again, now as a leader of the mob, and the men in the street who speak "in some language of which Robin knew nothing" (CE XI 219) are supposed as his accomplices. Robin cannot understand their language, because they are talking to each other not in a foreign language but in code. Using a code, they secretly plot the tar-and-feather attack on Major Molineux that night. On the other hand, when the gentleman is asked about the double-faced fellow by Robin, he says that "I chanced to meet him a little time previous to your stopping me" (CE XI 225), and he asserts that, "I believe you may trust his word, and that the Major will very shortly pass through this street" (CE XI 225) when Robin questions the reliability of the stranger's advice about his kinsman. It is rather strange that he knows which way the procession of the tar-and-feathering will head in advance of the appearance of the mob. His knowing clearly shows that he is a conspirator of the tar-and-feather violence, that is to say, he is one of patriots.<sup>12</sup>

Prior to the appearance of the gentleman, in front of the church, Robin's thought goes to the family which

he had left in his pleasant country home. He reminisces about his pastoral life with his family; however, in his vision, his family "go in at the door; and when Robin would have entered also, the latch tinkled into its place, and he was excluded from his home" (CE XI 223). Although Robin tries to return home at the close, here his vision already suggests that he cannot. Robin is, as the gentleman observes, a lonely outsider now. He has left his home behind, does not have any acquaintances in the unknown town, nor belongs to any human community. Since he can no longer return home, all Robin can do is adjust himself to the new town, new people, and new community.

Regarding Robin's adaptation to the unknown community, the tar-and-feather scene appears to be significant. Irvin discusses tar-and-feathering in the American Revolutionary period, and emphasizes the importance of tar-and-feathering not only from a political point of view but also in terms of its influence on the American people:

By attacking their "enemies," often brutally, the colonists bound themselves ever more tightly to that which they sought to defend: their "American liberties." ... Tar-and feathers violence thus became an important means by which the colonists relinquished their British identities and pledged their allegiance to one another and to the new United States. (229)

Here Irvin's view shows us that the tar-and-feathering functions as a means of shaping colonists' national identity as Americans in the Revolutionary period. Hilary J. Moss also mentions that "during the revolutionary period, colonists ... had seized upon the practice of tarring and feathering as a means of asserting their incipient identity as Americans" (234).<sup>13</sup> It has often been suggested that in the post Cold War era the United States has tended to define its political opponents as "enemies" or the "other" and identified American self by the existence of "others." As the considerable influence of William Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* on Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" and the European origin of the tar-and-feathering clearly reveal, the United States culturally still had close ties with Great Britain

and Europe as if they were *kin* even in the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> "[A]t the time of independence, Americans could not distinguish themselves culturally from Britain; hence they had to do so politically," thus, "Britain embodied tyranny, aristocracy, oppression" (Huntington 30) as the "otherness" of colonial America.

As Kazuko Fukuoka shows in her study on nineteenth-century American writers, "otherness" can be considered an indispensable element to the emergence of "self" as an American, both in American society, and American literature (ii). Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" also appears as a tale which deals with the hostile and interdependent relationship between America and the "otherness" of America when we pay attention to American Revolutionary contexts and the gentleman's "us." We can surely regard the tar-and-feathering of Major Molineux as a revolt against the tyrannical power of Britain following Hawthorne's historical "preface," even though Hawthorne does not state directly mention that Major Molineux is a royalist. Adapting James George Frazer's anthropological study on the sacrificed King to the tar-and-feather attack on Major Molineux, Daniel H. Hoffman defines Major Molineux as "the scapegoat king, the Royal scapegoat" (66)<sup>15</sup>. The tar-and-feathering of Major Molineux is a scene in which one who is regarded as an enemy of America is attacked and ostracized by members of the community.

The tar-and-feathering can also be observed as Robin's initiation within American historical and cultural contexts. As we observed in the first section, the gentleman makes a comment about Robin's future; however, he makes a definite condition concerning Robin's success: "if you prefer to remain with *us*..." (CE XI 231 *Italics mine*). The "us" which the gentleman mentions here apparently represents the people in the community who ostracized Major Molineux by the tar-and-feathering, and Robin laughs with the multitude, at the very moment that they attack Major Molineux. Peter L. Bellis regards the tar-and-feathering of Major Molineux as a pageant or "theater" and says that "Robin certainly responds to it as theater, with the 'pity and terror' that Aristotelian tragedy should produce" (23); however, he is no longer merely an audience when he laughs and mingles with the multitude around the tarred and feathered Major Molineux. Rather

he becomes an actor in the theater performing the American Revolutionary scene.

Having nothing to do with Robin's motive or meaning of his laughter, he involuntarily participates in the American revolutionary mob as a member of the "us." Regarding his participation in the multitude, Colgan too points out that "Robin contributes to the anarchical energies of the midnight rout by joining the multitude in an insane form of laughter" (179). This is his initiation, an initiation into the social inclusion of the new community: America. When "America comes of Age" (Leavis 46) and tries to establish itself as an independent country, a boy who is "high time to begin the world" (CE XI 225) shows that he too may become a member of the community. The gentleman's last statement shows that Robin would be accepted in the unknown town as a member of community if he became one of "us." In fact, he does not have any choice and has to become a member; otherwise, Robin will also be tarred and feathered or ostracized as the "other" of "us" like his kinsman. Although the gentleman is described as the one and only obliging person in the tale, his proposal at the end ultimately sounds like a threat.

#### 4. Robin's Future

As we have observed in the preceding sections, Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" describes Robin's initiation in the American Revolutionary context. The tar-and-feathering in the story occurs as the Revolutionary moment, and Robin, at the same time, achieves his initiation at that moment. What the gentleman who speaks the final words of the tale witnesses is Robin's initiation, but it doesn't suggest only a moral initiation that has always been spoken of by critics. When we consider the influence of the tar-and-feathering over people in the community, Robin's participation as indicated by his laughter means his inclusion in the new community: America. Thus, the gentleman who can be regarded as a patriot looks forward to Robin's future at the end. The tar-and-feathering in the tale does not merely signify a pre-Revolutionary mob. The people attack and ostracize a local figure of authority regarded as an enemy of America, while a lonely young outsider is, by



momentary participation in the violence, accepted as a member into a new community.

Robin's one night journey ends at the close, while his life is now just beginning. Likewise, America in the tale is also in a state of pre-independence. Although the gentleman's statement forecasts Robin's future, Robin disappears at the close without there being any statement about what happens subsequently. As a man who does not go back home, he probably disappears among the American multitude. Robin and Major Molineux are the only characters who are identified by name in the story, and the gentleman's "us" is represented as merely a group of nameless members who have no individual personality. If he had remained in the town, Robin would become part of the nameless multitude.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Generally "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" has been regarded as a story of a young protagonist's growth intertwined with other themes. Following Q. D. Leavis' "Hawthorne as Poet," many critics have interpreted the tale historically, especially the American Revolution. On the other hand, Hyatt H. Waggoner argues the tale emphasizing "the texture of dream" (57) and Roy R. Male detects the father figure which splits into "two or more images" (49) concerning to Robin's growth. Besides, Daniel G. Hoffman's "Yankee Bumpkin and Scapegoat King" adopts James George Frazer's "Scapegoat King" to the tale. This paper, as well as other recent studies on the tale, is indebted to such various studies. Although Janet Carey Eldred already defines the tale as the narrative of socialization, she is interested in the subject of language and her approach to the tale entirely differs from this paper's intention in points of emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> Robert C. Grayson points out that Hawthorne uses historical materials "to create an authentic background" (545) in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux." From the historical material in the story, Grayson correctly presumes that "since the 'preface' takes the reader into 1729, the story must follow that time and occur probably in 1730" (546).

<sup>3</sup> For example, George Rudé, in his *Ideology and*

*Popular Protest*, traces the historical development of American colonial mob activities and emphasizes the existence of a social conflict as a popular movement in the colonial time. According to Rudé, "the Stamp Act crisis of 1765 was the decisive turning point, as the popular movement now merged with that of the middle class 'patriots' with Britain becoming the major enemy of both" (101). Howard Zinn reconsiders American history focusing on people as well as nation. He also speaks of riots against the Stamp Act in Boston: "In Boston, the economic grievances of the lowest classes mingled with anger against British and exploded in mob violence" (65). Both scholars emphasize that the Stamp Act is the very moment which combined the social conflict and the patriotic movement into one patriotic movement.

<sup>4</sup> Waldstreicher mentions that "the feathered Tories were described as getting 'a new set of clothes,' 'in the new style'" in prints at pre-Revolutionary times, and "tarring and feathering drew on the conventions of the satirical prints in which political offenders appeared as geese and 'turned the prints into real life'" (44).

<sup>5</sup> James Duban also mentions that "the tarring-and-feathering of Major Molineux represents an emerging American desire for democratic self-rule in the face of paternalistic British oppression" (274).

<sup>6</sup> Arac indicates "the development character of the Revolution" (137) in Daniel Webster's political oratory and George Bancroft's historical writings.

<sup>7</sup> Robin's situation can be regarded as Oedipus Conflict between father and son, while the relationship between Britain and colonial America in the tale also can be regarded as "symbolic acts of revolt by children against their father" (Shaw 560). Michael David Bell, too, indicates that "the analogue for revolution, for toppling of authority, is the murder of the father" (38). We can possibly find an analogy of Robin and colonial America from psychoanalytic reading, but this paper omits such an approach to focus on the historical and cultural dimensions of the story.

<sup>8</sup> Theodore M. Hammett studies mob activities in Jacksonian Boston and states that "the 1830s were a decade of heightened concern with order and disorder in the United States. ... Mob violence of

various motivations—religious, ethnic, and ideological—was increasing" (845).

<sup>9</sup> This idea derives mainly from Bell's view about Hawthorne's "The Gentle Boy": "Hawthorne did not, of course, write 'The Gentle Boy' simply to express his opinion of Puritans or Quakers. Rather he used his knowledge of Puritans and Quakers to provide the context for the individual tragedies of Tobias and Ilbrahim" (112).

<sup>10</sup> Hawthorne, in "The Custom-House: Introductory to *The Scarlet Letter*," illustrates that moonlight "is a medium the most suitable for a romance-writer to get acquainted with his illusive guest (*CE* I 36)." Moonlight bestows "a quality of strangeness and remoteness" for objects, and "the floor of our familiar room has become a neutral territory, somewhere between the real world and fairy-land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet, and each imbue itself with the nature of the other" (*CE* I 36). We can find the same statement in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux": "... he [Robin] threw his eyes along the street; it was of more respectable appearance than most of those into which he had wandered, and the moon, 'creating, like the imaginative power, a beautiful strangeness in familiar objects,' gave something of romance to a scene, that might not have possessed it in the light of day" (*CE* XI 221).

<sup>11</sup> Seymour L. Gross states that "the city, like the forest in "Young Goodman Brown," is a dark and terrifying moral labyrinth, through whose tortuous passageways stalk hatred, revenge, sin, and retribution" (100). Perceiving the similarity between "Young Goodman Brown" and "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," Richard C. Carpenter compares both tales in his study.

<sup>12</sup> We cannot define all the townspeople as patriots in the story. Grayson indicates the existence of Tories in the tale: "the people whom Robin sees walking along the broad street with the steeped building at the upper end are "prerogative" men, tories. Their stylish dress reveals English influence. None of them appear in the scene in which the Major is being ridden out of town" (552). Besides, it is not a rare case that there are prominent patriot leaders among the Revolutionary mob. R. S. Longley studies the Massachusetts mob in the Revolutionary

period and mentions that "In general, all mobs are interested chiefly in excitement and destruction, and the Massachusetts mob was no exception. But the organization behind it gave it a political color and led to its members being called patriots" (99).

<sup>13</sup> Moss mainly considers nineteenth-century black citizenship in relation to the tar-and-feathering in her study. Although this paper omits her discussion about racial problems to emphasize the tar-and-feathering as the place of shaping national identity, her paper actually contains significant indications about the tar-and-feathering and race.

<sup>14</sup> Many critics deal with "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" in relation to William Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night Dream*. Actually, the name "Robin" reminds us of "Robin Goodfellow" and the narrator refers to "the Moonshine of Pyramus and Thisbe" (*CE* XI 209) in the story. "In addition," Shaw suggests, "his story [ "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" ] shared with Shakespeare's play the themes of disguise, fruitless search, and lost ways, all presented in an atmosphere of phantasmagoria and dream, and all connected with the usurpation of authority" (565). On the other hand, Alexander W. Allison indicates influences of European classical literature and myth in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" in his "The Literary Context of 'My Kinsman, Major Molineux.'"

<sup>15</sup> One could also take the tar-and feathering of Major Molineux as violence enacted upon an innocent man in view of the fact that he a representative of British power: merely an appointed agent of the king and not an actual member of the Royal Family. Shaw points out that "Americans in the eighteenth century attacked their governors instead of 'the kings' who, Hawthorne writes in his opening sentence" (561). He calls Major Molineux "an innocent victim" (562).

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## The Tar-and-Feathering in “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”

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Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” describes the young protagonist Robin’s one night stay in a town which is absolutely unfamiliar to him. Although many critics have interpreted Robin’s one night journey as his initiation to adulthood or a “rite of passage,” almost all critics have focused on the growth of his inner-self. This theme seems central given the American Revolutionary context and the comparison between a young protagonist and colonial America. Perhaps, the significance of the American Revolution, the suggestion of the Freudian father, and the mythical or anthropological Archetypes, have prevented critics from considering this short story with respect to the social relationship between Robin and the multitude.

This paper, from the gentleman’s statement at the ending, focuses on the scene of the tar-and-feathering as a significant moment which brings about a definite change in the relationship between Robin and the townspeople. My purpose is first to make clear the American Revolutionary context in “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” to help identify not only the historical meaning of the tar-and-feathering but also the gentleman’s “us” at the later section. I will go on to consider the theme of Robin’s initiation at the scene of the tar-and-feathering from a historical and cultural approach, focusing on the relationship between Robin and the townspeople.