

AUTHORITY, SEXUAL MATURITY, HOMOSEXUALITY, ‘CANES’, ‘CUDGELS’, ‘SWORDS’ AND ‘STAFFS’ IN NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE’S “MY KINSMAN, MAJOR MOLINEUX”

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I endeavour to revise the psychological approach employed by many literary critics to analyse Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”. I pay special attention to the relevance of the symbolism of the names of the tools and weapons which the different characters of the story brandish to emphasise their sense of authority, sexual maturity and adulthood in public. The images of these weapons and tools appear to represent Freudian phallic symbols, a fact that contributes to reaffirming the validity of the psychological approach for this story. This present study concentrates on the relationship between the theme of authority and the theme of adulthood, as well as on the analysis of the psychological evolution that the protagonist, Robin, goes through in order to achieve what both Hawthorne and the very protagonist believe sexual maturity and adulthood consist of. I also speculate on the possibility that, consciously or unconsciously, Hawthorne could have had the idea of ridiculing the image of the uncle figure in “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”. Some biographers and critics have said that Hawthorne went through the humiliation of being sexually abused by his uncle Robert Manning when he was a young boy. Hawthorne could have used this short story to take his personal revenge.

Keywords: American literature, Nathaniel Hawthorne, “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”, homosexuality, sexual maturity, father figure, phallic symbols, masculinity.

RESUMEN

En este artículo se pretende hacer una revisión del enfoque psicológico utilizado por muchos críticos para analizar el cuento “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” de Nathaniel Hawthorne. Se presta especial atención a la importancia del simbolismo de los nombres de las herramientas y armas que empuñan los distintos personajes del cuento para reafirmar públicamente su sentido de autori-

dad, su madurez sexual y su condición de adulto. Las imágenes que parecen transmitir tales armas y herramientas representan símbolos fálicos, un hecho que contribuye a confirmar la validez del enfoque psicológico para este cuento. El presente estudio se centra en las relaciones existentes entre el tema de la autoridad y el tema de la madurez, así como en el análisis de la evolución que su protagonista, Robin, sufre hasta alcanzar lo que tanto para Hawthorne como para el mismo protagonista constituye la madurez sexual y cronológica. Asimismo se contempla la posibilidad de que a nivel consciente o inconsciente Hawthorne pudiera haber tenido la intención de ridiculizar la figura del tío en “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”. Algún biógrafo y crítico ha afirmado que el joven Hawthorne llegó a sufrir la humillación de sufrir abusos sexuales por parte de su tío carnal Robert Manning y que podría haber hecho uso de este cuento para vengarse de la afrenta.

Palabras clave: Literatura norteamericana, Nathaniel Hawthorne, “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”, homosexualidad, madurez sexual, figura paterna, símbolos fálicos, masculinidad.

One of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s best-known short stories, “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” (1832),¹ has lately received a number of relevant critical studies. Even though most literary critics have concentrated mainly on famous stories such as “Young Goodman Brown”, “The Minister’s Black Veil”, “Rappaccini’s Daughter”, “Roger Malvin’s Burial” or “The Birthmark”, “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” is considered to be one of the key short stories of Hawthorne’s early work.

As far as the analysis of this short story is concerned, three different approaches have usually been employed. The so-called historical point of view has endeavoured to study the allegorical parallelism existing between Robin’s relationship with his kinsman Major Molineux and America’s relationship with Britain. This approach has concentrated on presenting the character of Major Molineux as a representative of British authority in America, an authority which was humiliated at the hands of the people of the colony during the American war of Independence. Robin would consequently represent the symbol of young America’s victory in her war against the metropolis. Historical criticism of this short story has also paid attention to ascertaining the degree of historicity of the city alluded to in Hawthorne’s story. Indeed, Grayson has established that the city described in Hawthorne’s tale was no doubt Boston, or that the date in which the action was presumably taking place was the midsummer of 1730 (1982:546-47). Similarly, the identity of the historical figure that inspired Hawthorne to create the character of “Major Molineux” has already been established as the Lieutenant Governor of Massachusetts Major-General William Dummer (Grayson, 555), and according to Pearce (1954:332), the name of the

¹“My Kinsman, Major Molineux”, originally titled “My Uncle, Major Molineux”, was probably written between 1828 and 1829 (Chandler, 2001:55). It was published for the first time in *The Token* (May 1832) and was later included in his collection of short stories *Snow Image and Other Twice-Told Tales* (1852).

American revolutionary on which Hawthorne based his portrayal of Robin was somebody called Joyce, Jr.

A more literary-centred analysis of "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" has focused on how far one can detect the importance of what Hawthorne had read and how this is perceived in the short story. Thus, Broes pinpoints the influence of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim Progress*, Dante's Third Canto of *Inferno*, Lucian's *Satires* and *Dialogue of the Death* and Spencer's *Fairie Queene* (1964:171-183). One of the most recent perspectives used to analyse this short story consists of interpreting it moral terms as an account of man's inhumanity to his fellow men (Dennis, 1971:250). According to the followers of this approach, "the city that Robin enters is a realm of moral blight, and Robin changes not by developing into a free-spirited adult but by corrupting his soul" (251).

However, the psychological approach employed in this paper depicts Robin as a young man struggling to be in contact with a protective father-figure. He does this whilst also trying to assert his position as an adult even if this means rejecting and mocking the same father-figure. This is not the first time that "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" has been analysed from this perspective.² Lesser (1955:372-390), for instance, stated his belief that this short story presents a Janus-faced protagonist. Indeed, according to him, Robin "says one thing to the conscious mind and whispers quite different to the unconscious" (376). Indeed, Lesser admits the possibility of analysing Hawthorne's tale by paying attention to the unconscious. Thus, for him, this tale "is a story of the youth's hostile and rebellious feelings to the relative –and for the father– and wish to be free from adult domination" (381). Another critic, Crews, concentrates on studying "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" in comparison to another short story, "The Gentle Boy". He sees the former story as the protagonist's literal search of an elder relation who will help him get on in the world. He adds that, whereas one must not deny the plausibility of other historical and mythic readings, "we would do well to ask whether Robin's own mind may not be the chief referent of Hawthorne's symbols" (1966:73).

Following this psychological perspective, this paper also attempts to explain some key issues to this short story, namely, the relationship existing between the theme of authority and the theme of adulthood, as well as the analysis of the literary evolution that Robin goes through in order to achieve what both Hawthorne and the very protagonist believe sexual maturity and adulthood consist of. Subsequently, I aim to highlight the relevant expressions used by Hawthorne, chosen maybe unconsciously, in order to take an immature and inexperienced character like Robin at the beginning of the story to a state which constitutes a self and social awareness of fairly complete sexual maturity and adulthood at the end. The phallic symbols employed are especially abundant: the canes, cudgels, swords and staffs depicted in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" are clear Freudian elements that allude to images of masculine adulthood and sexual maturity.

Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" is in essence a short story about a young man called Robin. He has taken a ferry from the country to the city to look for his relative, Major Molineux. This aristocratic character had apparently promised Robin help

² For more details on this approach in reference to "My Kinsman, Major Molineux", see Paul (1961), Lesser (1955) and Crews (1966).

to establish himself in life. If one gives a Freudian approach to the analysis of the story, we are presented with a youth in rebellion against a repressive father figure who stands in the way of his development towards becoming an adult. This rebellion is strengthened by the young man's Oedipus complex and the feelings of guilt and jealousy that his father incites him to feel as he looks on him as a mature man who is experienced sexually.³ Robin's idea of maturity involves the sexual threshold that he has to cross and which he cannot cross whilst this father-figure retains his power over him.

By "father-figure", more than the literal role of "father" is involved. Young Robin's search for maturity is at first frustrated by several figures of authority who assume a paternal role towards him. Major Molineux not only represents help and protection for his would-be protégé, but also authority, or this is what the protagonist seems to believe. The young man, though wanting help, also naturally desires freedom and unconsciously (or perhaps even consciously) postpones the finding of his kinsman as long as possible. Does he, by any chance, forget to ask the way to Molineux's house?

The old bad-tempered man with the "long and polished cane" states: "I have authority, I have, -hem, hem- authority" (619).⁴ The cane is the first element that appears to represent authority, an authoritarian tool that its owner is prepared to use as a disuasory weapon if the case arises. Apart from his old age and elegant clothes, the old man's authority seems also to be emphasised in the phallic symbolism of the cane, which somehow bears more weight than Robin's country-like cudgel, another phallic symbol with only partial effectiveness in a city. In the tavern that Robin enters, the innkeeper advises him to leave as a father would. The continual reference to Robin's cudgel and his desire to hit the innkeeper over the head with it shows the hostility he feels towards a paternal figure for reminding him of his youth and inexperience. Once again a tool or weapon is used to express a threat and as a way of reinforcing one's authority.

Robin walks the streets observing how "travelled youths, imitators of the European fine gentlemen of the period (...)" make him "ashamed of his quiet and natural gait" (624). A country boy like Robin feels inadequate and "young", too inexperienced beside these "travelled", experienced city youths. So far, his experience of "travel" has consisted of his journey to that maze-like city in search of a protector. Yearning for experience, Robin walks round the city. Indeed, this is his only way of "travelling" and thus of gaining experience of city-life. However, he no longer inquires about his kinsman: "his former inquires made him unwilling to hazard another" (624).

Robin becomes impatient to reach adulthood. Hawthorne describes the youth's "hunger" for maturity. Robin begins to "balance the propriety of demanding, violently and with lifted cudgel, the necessary guidance from the first solitary passenger whom he should meet" (625). It is, he believes, the best way to assert his adulthood and his capacity as a fully-fledged citizen, somebody who demands to be noticed and respected within the social network of the city. With his weapon of asserted authority and sexuality now ready for action and with his "lifted cudgel", is it by any chance a mere coincidence that Robin

³ According to Crews (1966: 262), Hawthorne's plots usually "depict with incredible fidelity the results of unresolved Oedipal conflict."

⁴ All quotes from "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" have been taken from vol. III of the *Complete Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne with Introductory Notes by George Parsons Lathrop* (Boston, 1883, 13 vols.).

enters a “street of mean appearance”, where his kinsman obviously does not live, to encounter the lady of the “scarlet petticoat”, quite blatantly a prostitute? Robin does not believe her when she tells him that his kinsman lives there, but “cunningly” states: “now, truly, I am in luck (...) and so indeed is my kinsman, the Major, in having so pretty a housekeeper” (626). Robin’s desire to stay is evident. The image of his kinsman’s house is even more inviting as the young woman represents the father’s mistress, the projection of the son’s secret Oedipal desires. The watchman that lazily threatens Robin with the stocks if he goes on vagabonding at that time of the night holds a significant “long staff, spiked at the end” (627), reminding the youth of his guilt for being where he is and of the fact that he should act as “a good youth, as well as a shrewd one” (628). The watchman’s piece of advice, which is more a threat, reminds Robin that he still has some way to go in his path towards adulthood. The watchman’s tool or weapon becomes evidently menacing if the protagonist does not show willingness to obey him.

The devilish image of the man with the bulging head painted black and red and imposing his authority over Robin causes the young lad to brandish his cudgel demanding to know something about his kinsman: “Robin planted himself full before him, holding the oak cudgel with both hands across his body as a bar to further passage” (628). Robin protests. He is starting to feel aware of his growing sense of adulthood. He begins to order the more authoritarian figures around him to see him as a man, to take him as an equal, not as “[the] fool [they] take [him] for” (629). Nevertheless, looking into the church, Robin realises how lonely and homesick he feels. He feels distressed at having lost his family’s protection and at having to grow up.

A kindly stranger, “a helper figure” in Broes’ words, (1964-65:181), a gentleman in his prime who listens to Robin’s story takes the role of an understanding father. After hearing “prodigious merrymaking” (636), Robin sees, to his amazement, that his kinsman Major Molineux, for whom he has been looking for so long, is being carried through the streets, tarred and feathered. The procession is led by a simple horseman “clad in military dress, and bearing a drawn sword” (637), an evident image of full authority and sexual power. The aristocrat’s disgrace and ruin now emphasise the lad’s secretly desired victory over the father-figure. Robin at first feels “pity and terror” (639) for the inevitable victim and for himself, as he imagines he will suffer the same fate in the future. But this soon gives way to his laughter, the loudest in all the crowd, a sign of release from his long struggle. The lady of the scarlet petticoat touches his arm, to confirm, as it were, his victory, and probably to remind him of her availability to him, now that he is socially accepted as an adult and as a citizen of the city.

According to one of Hawthorne’s biographers, Mellow, the American writer had to live and even share the same room (and bed) as his uncle Robert Manning ever since he had become an orphan due to his father’s premature death at sea. Mellow suggests (1998: 610) that Hawthorne’s uncle could have obliged his nephew to partake of homosexual acts with him. This may have been the very unnamed “unpardonable sin” that is ever present in Hawthorne’s personal and literary cosmology (611).⁵ It is understandable that the American

⁵ However, Erlich (1986) sees this hypothesis unlikely: “The relationship [between uncle and nephew] was almost certainly tinged with enough eros to encourage a passively feminine identification in Nathaniel, but one need not posit an actual “homosexual assault” as does biographer James R. Mellow”

writer never had a high opinion of his relative, towards whom he may have very probably nestled a secret or not so secret wish of vengeance. According to Mellow, “there is a distinct, though low-keyed animus toward his Uncle Robert [Manning] revealed throughout Hawthorne’s life” (610). As far as Hawthorne’s correspondence is concerned, especially in his letters to his mother, I have found several instances of his poor opinion and dislike of Uncle Robert. On July 11, 1820, young Hawthorne wrote: “I am 16 years old. In five years I shall belong to myself” (*The Letters*, XV: 124), words that bear witness to the firm control that Hawthorne’s uncle exercised on the writer’s family. Robert Manning is alluded to further down in the same letter. Another letter to his mother shows Hawthorne’s aggressive attitude towards his uncle. On March 13, 1821, he wrote: “(...) I dreamed the other night, that I was walking by the Sebago [lake], and when I woke was so angry at finding it all a delusion, that I gave Uncle Robert (who sleeps with me) a most horrible kick (...)” (XV: 138). The uncle figure seems to have been of unwelcome memory to Hawthorne. In a letter to his friend James T. Fields (November 18, 1863), the writer wrote that “An Uncle (...) is a very dangerous member of the family (...)” (XVIII: 603). Taking into account that “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” was written in Hawthorne’s early stages of his literary career, I believe it is more than likely that his stormy relationship with his uncle could have shown its influence in the narration of the story.⁶ This longed-for aspiration for vengeance on Robin’s part—Hawthorne’s possible alter-ego—could explain the protagonist’s eagerness to show familiarity with the lady of the scarlet petticoat in an unconscious way to counteract both Robin’s and Hawthorne’s hurt prides at having been abused by authoritarian figures and thus affirm their masculinity.

Robin’s physical likeness to his kinsman the Major is twice alluded to in the story, thus implying that his genetic relationship with his “uncle Molineux” is not that of an uncle-in-law, but of a carnal uncle, like that of Hawthorne’s with Uncle Robert Manning. When the innkeeper gives Robin a courteous welcome, the youth attributes it to the fact that he has been recognised as a relative to his influential uncle Molineux. He thinks: “The man sees a family likeness! The rogue has guessed that I am related to the Major!” (622). On another occasion, on meeting Robin, the Major’s lover exclaims: “You are the good old gentleman’s very picture, and I could swear that was his rainy-weather hat” (626). Besides, the original title given to the short story was “My Uncle, Major Molineux”, later changed to the title as we know it today. However, Hawthorne, who was so zealous of giving away autobiographical elements in his works, may have wished to dodge the easy association of Robin and his kinsman with his own relationship with his real-life uncle Robert, of unhappy memory. When Robin is given the opportunity of relating his relationship with his kinsman, the reader is informed that the protagonist’s father and Major Molineux are cousins, and therefore Robin is merely a distant nephew to him.

(1986:118). He adds that “the notion of an overt homosexual assault seems unlikely and unnecessary” (118).

⁶ Mellow (1998:610) attributes the inspiration of characters such as Rappaccini in “Rappaccini’s Daughter”, Roger Chillingworth in *The Scarlet Letter* and Judge Pyncheon in *The House of the Seven Gables* to Hawthorne’s hostility towards Uncle Robert. However, he does not mention this possibility, which I find most likely, about the uncle of “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”.

After the passage of the public humiliation of Robin's "uncle" in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux", the young protagonist is shown to be willing to leave and return to the safety of his home, but the kindly stranger, no longer acting as a paternal figure, offers him the option of remaining in the city and facing the responsibility of his own life. Robin must choose. This is his final test for adulthood in the stranger's eyes. He advises a culmination of the learning process for adulthood by staying in the city for a few more days: "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" (641), a quote that constitutes the ending words of the tale.

Hawthorne depicts the process of rejecting the father-figure, of growing up, as necessary to achieve maturity. He presents the natural life process as tragic. Pain is inevitably involved and in the victim there is tragic dignity, like that of "a dead potentate, mighty no more but majestic still in his agony" (638). Robin has been initiated into adulthood, but has still to confront city life as the definitive test. His life in the city serves as a period of training into fully-fledged adulthood. His development from inexperienced youth to manliness and predisposition to active sexuality is seen through Hawthorne's use of the different tools and weapons present in the story employed by the protagonist or the other characters as a means to assert their masculinity, sexuality and maturity.

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