The Hilltop Review

Volume 9
Issue 1 *Fall*

Article 5

December 2016

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Article 3

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Emerging onto the literary scene in the late 1820s and early 1830s, Nathaniel Hawthorne sought to distinguish his style as unique from that of his predecessors. In so doing, he developed a style of writing that emerged as something completely different from the norms of the time, but also became a new standard against which American authors could be measured and through which they could be deemed of equal value to their European counterparts. His mode of writing embraced such conventions as are evident in the British Gothic, but it also contained a truly original dynamic that expressed Gothic imagery in ways that had not yet been observed on the international scene. Reflecting upon the source of this imagery directs one's attention to some of Hawthorne's earlier works, particularly his often variably-defined story "My Kinsman, Major Molineux."

The Emergence of the Theme

Prior to Hawthorne, there were very few Gothic stories or novels published by American authors.[1] The genre was largely a European one, with the strongest influence residing with the British. The thoughts and opinions of those particular authors were inextricably woven into the plotlines of their stories, setting the dominant tone of the genre as culturally their own. Dominant themes included settings in "antiquated or seemingly antiquated" spaces, instances of extreme isolation, struggles between power and submission, anti-foreign/anti-Catholic/anti-"other" sentiments, and scenarios set in periods that combine the modern with the ancient (Hogle 1; Gamer 86).

Homegrown American authors, such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, brought a unique perspective to the genre, lending the new "American Gothic" a flavor

all its own. Playing upon the last theme mentioned above, Hawthorne was very fond of casting a critical eye on the past to make observations regarding America's colonial forefathers, particularly those of Puritan ancestry, and the way they went about structuring their new country. "Modern" perspectives often clashed with the "ancient" ones possessed by those who had come before Hawthorne's writing.[2] Of particular interest is the allegorical short story "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," which was published in 1832, but set in a period well beforehand, when what is now known as the United States was facing imminent rebellion against royal rule, followed by the declaration of, and subsequent war for, American independence. Although critics are divided as to whether the story is set in the 1730s or 1760s, there is no doubt that rebellion was set firmly in the minds of the many colonists Hawthorne depicted.

In this tale, a youth, "one of whose names was Robin," has taken a journey of some distance from his rural origins to "the little metropolis of a New England colony," home to a relative who has offered to give the boy some assistance in beginning to make his way in the world (Hawthorne 69). After a series of bewildering encounters with the townspeople and eventually the Major himself, Robin declares his intent to return home but is gently delayed in doing so by a kind stranger who suggests he look into making his own way in the world (87).

While this story certainly seems like a straightforward example of the proverbial country boy vs. city boy or "new world" politics vs. "old world" politics motifs and all that they symbolize, there is a much richer dynamic waiting to be extracted. When one considers the multifaceted approach taken in this story, "Major Molineux" could really signify the emergence of the American Gothic as a distinct and separate experience apart from the style of the earlier generation of British and European Gothic writers.

Keeping this idea in mind, a rich tapestry emerges of carefully constructed threads, which together weave a tale not just of American independence, but also of an evolved and separate American identity. Severing ties with the established norms and allegiances of yesterday, Hawthorne takes old conventions and turns them into something new, a genre that is rooted distinctly in the unique American culture.

What the American Gothic does for the Story

One element of the Gothic that is recognized as an American invention is the use of comic effect to relay a message. Consider the first description of Robin. The ferryman who brings the youth into town notes that he was "clad in a coarse grey coat…his under garments were durably constructed of leather…his stockings of blue yarn, were the incontrovertible handiwork of a mother or sister; and on his head was a three-cornered hat" likely originating secondhand from his father (69). The people of the village, however, are much more elaborately adorned, including one eminent figure "with a full periwig of grey hair, a wide-skirted coat of dark cloth, and silk stockings rolled about his knees," who carries a "long and well-polished cane" (70). When compared to the people he meets in town, with their elaborate dress, Robin is clearly viewed as a bit of a rube and worthy of their ridicule.

Hawthorne then uses his narrator to "expose and mock Robin's personal weaknesses, idiosyncrasies, simplistic rationalizations, and bad judgments" for the benefit of the reader (Piacentino 85). Initially it seems as though Robin is not one to be taken seriously. However, that perspective does shift over time. In fact, "Robin's disillusionment seems to suggest a hopeful future," which is a definite contrast when compared to many of Hawthorne's other characters (White 217). Perhaps this suggests the gradual coming of age of the American Gothic as something first considered a novelty, a lark, but later recognized for its more meaningful contributions.

In the 1800s, Europe was still viewed by Europeans and European Americans as the artistic mecca of the world, featuring more expression of the arts than virtually anywhere else, including painting, sculpture, literature, theater, and fashion. Indeed, no European of the day would be caught dead adorned in such simplistic array as the endearing Robin, due to the belief that clothing literally "made the man" according to European social custom. By depicting his hero as a rather stereotypical, basic young man of the time, Hawthorne draws attention to the richness of the townsmen's fancier garb, which followed the models of European fashion even in these new environs. Although technically more spectacular to the eye, their clothing makes little sense in the setting of early America, reminding one of a peacock in the midst of the humble turkey's domain. This was the perception of many Americans at that time who favored freedom of choice and simplicity over royal rule and even the dictates of fashion. Hawthorne subtly draws attention to this separation of identity by making simple comparisons between clothing.

Major Molineux, the subject of young Robin's search, is not revealed until very near the end of the story. Prior to this, the young man recounts to a stranger on the street the story of the Major, his cousin's, visit to his father's home. The Major, having "manifested much interest in Robin…was therefore determined that Robin should profit by his kinsman's generous intentions, especially as he had seemed to be rather the favorite, and was thought to possess other necessary endowments" (82). It was with this goal of inheriting success in mind that Robin journeyed to town to meet the Major. However, their introduction takes a disturbing turn when the elderly Major is at last paraded through town, victim to a perilous mob, a scapegoat for the despised elitist status quo that would no longer be tolerated. Although outwardly the Major seemed possessed of "a steady soul…steady as it was, his enemies had found the means to shake it" (85).

Just as the character of Major Molineux is representative of Europe and outdated ways of thinking, his type is also a useful metaphor for the established status quo in the Gothic genre at the time Hawthorne began publishing. The Gothic novel "exploded in the 1790s," both in Europe and in the British Isles, but its chills and thrills were at first only enjoyed by the readers of the new United States rather than being authored by them (Hogle 1). While highly acclaimed Gothic works proliferated in Britain, the same fervor was not evinced by volume of publication in the U.S. Rather, American authors made their attempts individually before determining their course.

In order to appreciate the literary environments in Britain and America, it is useful to note that around the same time that Hawthorne was releasing

his first novel, *Fanshawe,* in 1828, Percy Bysshe Shelley had already published his *Zastrozzi* (1810), Mary Shelley was enjoying significant acclaim from *Frankenstein* (1818), and J. W. Polidori's *Vampyre* (1819) had also been very well-received. As Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales* came out in 1837, he had to contend with the publication of Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* that same year. The competition Hawthorne faced was tremendous. While authors are often examined in relation to their peers, it is nearly impossible to do so here. Hawthorne embodied a completely different breed of writer than what was present in Europe. When he could have shied away from the Gothic genre and looked to the success of his "sunnier" works, Hawthorne did the opposite. British authors were expected by their readership to publish remarkable and distinguished Gothic works due to their already established literary tradition. Very little was anticipated from the Americans, especially in the way of artistic expression, as they were viewed as a rather rustic and uncultivated population. However, rather than wilt in this atmosphere, Hawthorne blossomed by establishing a new identity for the American Gothic and treating the existing British conventions as antiquated when compared to the new experiences to be had in America.

Early American author Charles Brockden Brown explains, "new springs of action, and new motives to curiosity should operate; that the field of investigation, opened to us by our own country, should differ essentially from those which exist in Europe." His directive may indicate that the later creative publications in the U.S. were attributable to the continued exploration of that dark and mysterious place, that new world, which surrounded them (Brown iii). He also points to the American shift away from "peurile superstition and exploded manners; Gothic castles and chimeras," favoring more geographically relevant "incidents of Indian hostility, and the perils of the western wilderness" as far more suitable, stating his belief that "for a native of America to overlook these, would admit of no apology" (Brown iv).

In lieu of an ominous manor house or castle, Robin is "entangled in a succession of crooked and narrow streets, which crossed each other," causing him to become slightly disoriented and ill at ease in his search for his kinsman's home (70). Fumbling through the darkness, Robin perceives that "the streets were empty, the shops were closed, and lights were visible only in the second stories of a few dwelling-houses" (71). He is utterly alone and without resources in a strange and unfriendly place, similar to the experience of many early Americans who attempted to forge their way through remote terrain. Indeed, as Robin continues in his frustrating search, even the otherwise desirable attentions of a lady become bizarre and frightening. He is tempted by a "slender waisted woman, in [a] scarlet petticoat," ostensibly the Major's housekeeper, who "proved stronger than the athletic country youth" and had "drawn his half-willing footsteps nearly to the threshold" of a house of questionable repute, endangering the boy's virtue at the very least (76). Hawthorne need not rely upon established European conventions to reach his American readers, who would have recognized in his simple environmental darkness a signal that danger might be lurking.

In a similar way, near the close of the story, the rising stir of the townspeople — with their cries emerging first as a murmur, then as a din, then as a deafening roar with the approach of the riotous crowd— carries with it an

ominous tone that indicates trouble is fast approaching. Despite the commonplace neighborhood, the unremarkable evolves into a twisted version of itself, and a bystander tells the nervous Robin, "you must not expect all the stillness of your native woods here in our streets" (82-83). In the wake of the approaching crowd, "a single horseman wheeled the corner in the midst of them, and close behind him came a band of fearful wind-instruments, sending forth a fresher discord, now that no intervening buildings kept it from the ear...The single horseman, clad in military dress, and bearing a drawn sword, rode onward as the leader, and, by his fierce and variegated countenance, appeared like war personified; the red of one cheek was an emblem of fire and sword; the blackness of the other betokened the mourning which attends them" (84). Robin is at first overwhelmed by what he sees, but he comes to see that he, too, might find a place for himself in this unusual new home.

Robin, serving symbolically as the American Gothic, embodies the change in perceptions that accompanied this paradigm shift in style. When he initially arrives into town, Robin possesses a firm belief in his own importance and elevated position in society due to his old-school beliefs and relation to Major Molineux, a man who has "*inherited* riches, and *acquired* civil and military rank" (81, emphasis mine). However, as the reader comes to find out, the townsfolk view Robin's kinsman as someone who deserves far less than reverence, as he's paraded in "tar-and-feathery dignity" through the city streets (85). At the very beginning of the story, Hawthorne indicates that "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" (68). The inheritance or bestowal of privilege did not function in America the same way it did in Britain, as Americans were far more impressed with intrinsic values such as hard work, innovation, and independent thought than mere rights of appointment or inheritance.

Hawthorne adopts uniquely American elements to construct this tale of evolving separation. In early America, "the ideal of manly self-reliance and self-sovereignty gained pre-eminent authority…dislodging the…traditions of deferential hierarchy" (Herbert 21). Here is evidence that Hawthorne refuses to defer to tradition, instead contrasting it with the unusual setting and circumstances found in the colonial atmosphere. Whereas European authors utilized dark and foreboding castles for dramatic effect, in "Major Molineux," Hawthorne favors a deserted cityscape at nightfall. In place of incarnate hobgoblins or monsters, we see the distorted features of a man's painted face or the ominous forms of natives dancing by torchlight. Through the idea of "separateness" from the status quo, Hawthorne unlocks the door to an unlimited supply of original plotlines, twists, and turns rooted firmly in American design.

In further defining what exactly distances the American from the British Gothic style, it is useful to contemplate who is considered an "insider" and who is considered an "outsider" in the context of these works. When speaking to the experience of young Robin, it appears that he has been cast (at least temporarily) in the role of "outsider" when compared to the people he meets in his exploration of the new city. Remember his style of dress,

and then consider the dress of the other young men, or perceived "insiders," that he meets. "Embroidered garments, of showy colors, enormous periwigs, gold-laced hats, and silver hilted swords" are worn by "imitators of the European fine gentlemen of the period," which initially intimidates Robin, causing him to look upon his own plain dress with a sense of shame (74). However, just as the showy and highly acclaimed British authors garnered favorable attention initially by readers, the later efforts by relatively unknown American writers soon rose in popularity despite their lack of European flair. In fact, American Gothic writers would come to position themselves on the international writing scene precisely by distancing themselves from the British grandiose. And thus, positions reverse, and Robin the outsider is welcomed in.

Upon further consideration of this idea of "otherness," it is useful to acknowledge that early Americans had formed an entire country of "others" and "outsiders" who did not fit neatly into the social strata that existed in their homelands. As a result, it only seems logical that they should take it upon themselves to shape and rend their art into something distinctive from what was embraced by their European forefathers, particularly if those forefathers elected to remain behind as continuing participants in the society they deemed prudent to vacate. This is especially true of those individuals who fled religious persecution, and potentially death, to establish a new civilization that embraced their unorthodox belief systems. Even people who did not have religious inclinations were attracted by the notions of free will, independence, and economic prosperity embodied by the new land they called home, values that were so in conflict with the hierarchical wealth and opportunity structure left behind in Europe. With an entire society following in the footsteps of that rebellious mentality, many in New England eventually sought to distinguish themselves as individuals, as "others," without meeting the same skepticism and criticism as they would have met on their native soil. Or perhaps they merely succeeded in "othering" the British as foreign, and thus inferior to themselves.

This counter-culture attitude became extremely complex and convoluted over time, but in "Major Molineux" it is most notably evident when Robin's very "otherness" becomes his most valuable asset, as the American colonists set out to wreak havoc on royal governors and other representatives of privilege in their quest for recognition as a self-sustaining entity. Emerging from the darkness came "a mighty stream of people," while a "redder light disturbed the moonbeams, and a dense multitude of torches shone along the street," and the young man stood by and watched (84). Although at first he had voluntarily offered up his connection to Major Molineux to anyone who asked, believing the Major's wealth and position in society to be of positive regard to the townspeople, he comes to realize that he need not rely upon his kinsman to determine his fate. "As you are a shrewd youth," says the gentlemen who befriends him (for the first time without irony), "you may rise in the world, without the help of your kinsman, Major Molineux" (87). On the same token, American authors, including Hawthorne, would eventually distinguish themselves as masters of the Gothic style without relying too heavily upon the established conventions that preceded them.

The Significance of "Major Molineux" as the American Gothic

Scholars have recognized "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" as an important and interesting piece of work that touches on many subtle themes churning beneath the placid surface of creative fiction. Critics have varied substantially in what they take away from the story, ranging from the modernization of New England to the establishment of the self-made man.[3] While most agree that a definite and gradual metamorphosis was taking place at the time, it is the nature of this transformation that often leads to debate over interpretation. This essay's argument differs in its elemental focus upon the emergence of the American Gothic style as a mode of writing (as well as drama and motion pictures later to come) that is distinctive from the traditional approach of the European Gothic style, and more particularly, Hawthorne's British contemporaries.[4] "Major Molineux" heralds a conscious and recognizable "beginning" for Hawthorne and for American writers to follow.

When Hawthorne first emerged as one of America's first internationally celebrated authors, he was publicly perceived as a rather happy-go-lucky sort who crafted tales of amusement and wonder, including children's stories. However, when his work was considered more deeply and extensively, themes of darkness emerged that fit much more closely with the Gothic style so prolific in Europe at that time. When viewing him as a catalyst for what American literature was to become, his value as a Gothic pioneer is immeasurable. It is difficult to imagine a world where the long-suffering Puritan, Hester Prynne, does not wield influence from between the pages of *The Scarlet Letter*, or where Young Goodman Brown does not challenge the devil in a walk through the woods. Offering useful insight into this often hidden side of Hawthorne's personality, Herman Melville observed, "For spite of all the Indian-summer sunlight on the hither side of Hawthorne's soul, the other side… is shrouded in a blackness, ten times black. But this darkness but gives more effect to the ever-moving dawn, that forever advances through it, and circumnavigates his world" (Melville 62).

This darkness, whether intended or not, has become an important asset in establishing the comparable facility of American authors on the international scene. When one recognizes the fact that the year 1800 was "the largest single year yet for number of Gothic novels published in England," Hawthorne's publication of his novels and collections of short stories some thirty years later puts him chronologically well after the initial pioneers of the genre (Hogle xix). However, once he begins to publish, especially upon release of *The Scarlet Letter*, he becomes a force with which to be reckoned, and an important forerunner in establishing the United States as a worthy adversary in the battle for literary eminence.

"My Kinsman, Major Molineux" was originally published in 1832 in *The Token and Atlantic Souvenir*, which encompassed works written in 1831 ("Tales and Sketches" 1472). Interestingly enough, documentation of Hawthorne's own research suggests that he obtained much of his background information for "Major Molineux" from the 1819 publication of "Rees' Encyclopedia," or *The Cyclopedia*, which he checked out from the Salem Athenaeum repeatedly in 1829 and 1830 (Bier 28). Jesse Bier posits that

in the "M" section, "the liberal 16th Century religious sect" of "Molinists" gave Hawthorne his "philosophic cue for the story" and that the Molinists provided Hawthorne "with an historical example and symbolic means of opposing hard doctrine thinking" (28-29).

The Molinists, followers of the Jesuit Lewis Molina, believed that "the operations of divine grace were entirely consistent with the freedom of human will," and in new ways of removing "the difficulties attending the doctrines of predestination and liberty." These beliefs were well aligned with the evolution of the American concepts of self-reliance and novel interpretations of the timeworn concepts of yesteryear (29). This also speaks to Hawthorne's continued efforts to divorce the morality in his written works from that espoused by his Puritan forefathers, in addition to distancing himself from established European literary traditions. The inclusion of this volume among the works Hawthorne read at the time of writing "Major Molineux" suggests that he ruminated on the emergence of independent thought at a period when he was also surrounded by the prolific influence of British Gothic authors, perhaps influencing his pen.[5]

It is especially thought provoking to connect the Molinists with the colonists who lived beside Major Molineux in their "little metropolis of a New England colony" (69). These colonists hold to a diverse set of religions and belief systems, heralding from many nations but also from many generations; some regard the "tried and true" as the best means toward prosperity and others wish to forge a new understanding of the same. Clearly those who espouse new ideas emerge triumphant, through the vilification or "othering" of those adhering to principles of the past, and also by taking a rebellious course of action both novel and defiant. Just as the colonists left their appointed leaders "few and brief intervals of peaceful sway," the emerging ingenuity of American authors began a persistent encroachment onto the Gothic literary scene once dominated by the pens of Europe (68).

Regardless of the specific inspiration for "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," the story has been recognized as an example of Hawthorne's early success as a writer; only the story within the story remains up for debate. The dark and often humorous encounters of young Robin as he attempts to navigate a strange new place evoke the image of a young writer struggling to make his mark in a world of literary achievement that was not quite envisioned for someone like him. Hawthorne rose to the occasion, achieving not only personal success, but also blazing a trail for future writers to follow in his distinctive American Gothic style. His mingling of old and new approaches to thinking and writing, as well as his introduction of authentic colonial American ingredients, allowed for new introspection on what it meant to be distinguished as an American author.

Notes

1. Hawthorne's works were preceded by those of American authors Charles Brockden Brown, with his Wieland (1798) and Edgar Huntly (1799), as well as S. S. B. K. Wood's Julia and the Illuminated Baron (1800).
2. "The May-Pole of Merry Mount," The House of the Seven Gables, and "The Gentle Boy" all come readily to mind, among others.
3. Andrew Loman offers an interesting economic and monetary theory in his 2011 article, "'More Than a Parchment Three-Pence': Crises of Value in Hawthorne's 'My Kinsman, Major Molineux.'" Also, Michael Cody's 2012 article, "'As Kinsman, Met a Night': Charles Brockden Brown and Nathaniel Hawthorne as American Gothic Romancers" makes very useful connections between these two influential pioneers in American Literature. Lastly, Colin D. Pearce's 2001 article, "Hawthorne's 'My Kinsman, Major Molineux'" gives valid insight into the "rites of passage" interpretation of this story.
4. Additional information on Hawthorne's Gothic style is found in Maurice Charney's 1961 article, "Hawthorne and the Gothic Style"; Neal Frank Doubleday's 1946 treatise on "Hawthorne's Use of Three Gothic Patterns"; Ronald T. Curran's 1976 piece on the "'Yankee Gothic': Hawthorne's 'Castle of Pyncheon'"; and Monika M. Elbert's observations in "Afterword: is Rome's Moonlight Different From Salem's: Hawthorne's Reconceptualization of the Gothic" of 2012, none of which were appropriate for inclusion here.
5. Interestingly, there is an entry in The Cyclopedia just above that of the "Molinists" for a place called "Molineux's Harbor" in New Zealand, which may have provided, whether consciously or unconsciously, the surname for which the story is so well known (Bier 29).

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