

# Hawthorne & the Duality of Human Nature in “Young Goodman Brown” & “My Kinsman, Major Molineux”

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**ABSTRACT:** This article is intended as a portrayal of the exception to the rule. Specifically, it debunks the traditional plot of an initiation story wherein a character travels during the day in an effort to advance and improve. This concept is overturned in two of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short stories: “Young Goodman Brown” and “My Kinsman, Major Molineux.” In actuality, the main characters and male protagonists, Brown and Robin, respectively, set about their journeys of initiation under the guise of night. Along the way, they are met with several trials and tribulations and Brown and Robin, it can be argued, are ill-prepared to confront these challenges. As a result, both emerge all the wiser after their journeys of initiation, but, unfortunately, not for the better. Once initiated, their naïveté is destroyed as the worlds they assumed they knew so well are turned upside down, effectively casting Brown and Robin as outsiders from their communities. Nothing will ever be the same for these characters.



## HAWTHORNE AND THE DUALITY OF HUMAN NATURE IN “YOUNG GOODMAN BROWN” AND “MY KINSMAN, MAJOR MOLINEUX”

A predominant theme that emerges throughout Nathaniel Hawthorne's works is the notion of sin in conjunction with the idea of man's tainted soul. These concepts, which are inherently founded in the ideology of Puritanism, became quite an obsession for Hawthorne. This obsession is discernable, specifically, in two of his short stories: "Young Goodman Brown" and "My Kinsman, Major Molineux." On the surface, these short stories share a common bond according to Hawthorne's employment of the idea of initiation as a component of both of their plots. Superficially, "Young Goodman Brown" and "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" can be characterized as initiation stories. After all, each short story features a young male protagonist, Goodman Brown and Robin, respectively, who partakes in a physical journey that ultimately changes his way of thinking and alters his preconceived notions. Yet, by juxtaposing the many parallels between the trying journeys of Brown and Robin as they participate in the process of initiation, it becomes evident that Hawthorne strategically uses these similarities in tandem with the many dichotomies he employs: the city versus the country, preconceived notions versus unrealistic expectations, outsiders versus insiders (or "us" versus "them"), and the individual versus society, among others. In doing so, Hawthorne highlights the duality of human nature: a good exterior, which masks a sinful interior. Nevertheless, "Young Goodman Brown" and "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" are nontraditional initiation stories because they fail to portray a male protagonist's successful passage into manhood. Instead, Brown forsakes a corrupt society to adopt a reclusive lifestyle while Robin becomes a misfit, caught between his old way of life and a society that upsets his concept of a pre-established livelihood.

Although Brown leaves the town to go into the wilderness and Robin leaves the country to go to Boston, both are presented

as naïve, young men who are unprepared to begin their respective journeys of initiation; especially, since both are willing to begin their journeys despite the dangers of traveling at night. The fact that these journeys of initiation take place at night suggests the possibility that Brown and Robin will not improve as a result of their experiences, which serves as a clear distinction from other initiation stories that occur during the daytime and, in all likelihood, produce positive changes in their protagonists. On the one hand, Faith, Brown's wife, recognizes the impending doom that awaits her husband if he obstinately refuses to delay his journey until morning. As a result, she begs her husband to postpone his journey until the light of day, but Brown fails to heed Faith's warning, which is made clear when he explains to Faith: "My love and my Faith, of all nights in the year, this one night must I tarry away from thee. My journey, as thou callest it, forth and back again, must needs be done 'twixt now and sunrise" ("Young Goodman Brown" 65). He must abandon his wife, Faith, literally and physically as well as turn his back on his spiritual faith if his journey of initiation is to begin. Again, this scene signals to readers that Brown's travels will be full of challenges and temptations, to say the least. In spite of Brown's apparent eagerness to go about his journey, Hawthorne displays instances in which Brown's resolve wavers momentarily. For example, before setting off into the forest, "Young Goodman Brown came forth at sunset into the street of Salem village; but put his head back, after crossing the threshold, to exchange a parting kiss with his young wife" ("Brown" 65). Brown, who is new to married life, hesitates in leaving "[His] love and [his] Faith" behind for the sake of his journey ("Brown" 65). After parting, Brown turns around and spies Faith, which gives him reassurance and comfort, for the last time before his world is turned upside down ("Brown" 65). Lastly, in receiving encouragement from his final glimpse of Faith, Brown:

[F]elt himself justified in making more haste on his present evil purpose...It was all as lonely as could be; and there is this peculiarity in such a solitude, that the

traveller knows not who may be concealed  
by the innumerable trunks and the thick  
boughs overhead; so that with lonely  
footsteps he may yet be passing through an  
unseen multitude. ("Brown" 66)

Significantly, Brown's reluctance to part from Faith is reflected in his need to continually convince himself of the mission and journey that ultimately "justified" the urgency in which he sets out from home. His reservations follow him into the woods, though, as is noted in his loneliness and uncertainty concerning the "unseen." Taken as a whole, these fleeting hesitations are telltale signs that Brown does not know what to expect along his journey. Hence, Brown's naïveté and youth are manifested in the fact he, rather than ardently initiating his journey and mission, is detained by his misgivings, as is evident when he unwillingly separates himself from Faith, his wife and moral guide.

In contrast, though Robin is eager to venture into the "world," or, more specifically, Boston, to make a living and a name for himself, his naïveté and youth are reflected outwardly in his lack of financial means and food rations to last the entirety of his journey as well as in his style of dress and manners, all of which do not escape the notice of the city's inhabitants. In much the same way that Brown recognizes the necessity of traveling under the darkness of night, Robin agrees to pay the ferryman an additional fare so that he can reach Boston that very same night as opposed to postponing his journey another day ("My Kinsman, Major Molineux" 3). While both Brown and Robin do not know what to expect along their journeys, Robin takes a more enthusiastic approach because he, unlike Brown, has yet to realize that his journey will be laden with temptations and glimpses of evil. Whereas Brown is uneasy about departing from his wife, Robin is not properly primed for his journey of initiation as Hawthorne mentions that Robin prematurely consumes the last of his provisions in conjunction with the scene in which Robin is unable to pay the extra fare he falsely promises the ferryman ("My Kinsman" 3, 5). Another indication that Robin is ill-prepared for city-life is the fact that

both the ferryman and innkeeper infer from Robin's style of dress that he is new to the city, having recently come from the country ("My Kinsman" 3, 6). Hawthorne is once again hinting at the lack of preparation on the part of his male protagonists. For Robin, his style of dress identifies him as a visitor; he fails to assimilate by altering his dress. Moreover, Robin's confrontation with "the citizen" is pivotal because Robin's manners get the best of him as he clings to the garb of an elderly man who is already burdened by the weight of his own steps ("My Kinsman" 3). The fact that Robin seeks this man's advice and guidance illuminates how much he still has to learn, for even the barber's sons, societal members of low socioeconomic status, are aware of Robin's poor judgment: "Ah, Robin, Robin! Even the barber's boys laugh at you, for choosing such a guide! You will be wiser in time" ("My Kinsman" 3). Finally, another major clue that Robin naively and childishly believes that what works in his former way of life is applicable and effective in his new surroundings is represented in his attempt to use his cudgel, a symbol of his previous way of life in the woods. It is a gesture that would have been interpreted as threatening in the woods and is the means by which Robin mistakenly supposes he can successfully get others to do as he commands, which in this case is to provide Robin with food as well as the whereabouts of his kinsman, Major Molineux. Collectively, these overly simplified approaches to change, and his journey in general, reinforce the standpoint that Robin, a lad of only "eighteen years," is naively unaware of what lies ahead of him on his journey of initiation ("My Kinsman" 3).

Hawthorne goes a step further in fortifying his portrayal of Brown and Robin as naïve youths by creating several instances in which their preconceived notions are proven to be unrealistic expectations. They are shown to possess premature assumptions that not only set them up for failure, but inevitably make fools of them as well. Utilizing the dichotomy of preconceived notions versus unrealistic expectations is the means by which Hawthorne emphasizes the idea that Brown's and Robin's journeys of initiation will prove to be much more difficult than either one of them initially suspects. For Brown, Faith is not only the wife that he has come to know and love, but, as noted above, she serves as his moral guide,

or so Brown thinks. Bruce R. Magee, an Associate Professor in the Department of English at Louisiana Tech University, in "Faith and Fantasy in 'Young Goodman Brown,'" issues a caveat in response to maintaining such an assumption when he asserts:

Brown's counting on an easy path to heaven by clinging to Faith's skirts is also self-delusory and destined to fail. In one sense, the sooner that he is disappointed the better. If he is to gain salvation at all, he must work it out himself...not delude himself that his wife's purity will save him. Even if she were completely pure, her goodness still could not save him. But she is not that pure, nor can she be. (20)

Magee alerts readers of Brown's all-consuming trust in his wife as his ultimate moral guide. To err in thinking this is harmful and dangerous, which is why Magee advocates for Brown to be confronted by the folly of his delusion sooner than later. The quicker he can dispel these assumptions regarding the potential absence of sin and evil in his wife, the sooner he can be directed on the right path. To place his faith in a human rather than a higher being is the lesson Brown must learn or be challenged to prove without a doubt. Not only does Brown erroneously reason that Faith is his means by which to obtain salvation, Brown also unrealistically believes that he is capable of preventing himself from consorting with the devil if he should so choose, notwithstanding the fact that he has already set about his journey. In keeping with this line of reasoning, Jim Wohlpart, Associate Dean and Professor of English at Florida Gulf University, in "The Second Great Awakening in Hawthorne's 'Young Goodman Brown'" echoes similar sentiments when he notes:

From the very first, Brown's belief that he can freely choose whether or not he will "go to the devil" marks his journey...Just as Brown

believes that he has the ability to choose whether or not he will continue down the forest path towards the sinful meeting, he also believes that he has the ability to behave innocently and free of sin. (37)

In other words, by relying on Faith as his token to Heaven, Brown greatly underestimates the power of his own actions and freedom to choose whether or not to align himself with the devil's cause. The insights afforded by Magee and Wohlpert testify to the negative repercussions of preconceived notions. If Brown is not exposed to the reality of such logic, he risks a failure to improve and better himself. Although these misconstrued notions speak to the inexperience of youth, possessing such preconceived notions comes at a price because Brown's world will inevitably be shaken when he realizes that his expectations and assumptions are unrealistic.

While Brown looks to Faith to assure him of his fate and salvation, Robin naively holds similarly misconceived notions in expecting Major Molineux, his kinsman, to pave the way in establishing Robin's future. As an aside, it should be noted that in accordance with the perceptiveness of "Hawthorne and Masculinity," written by Walter T. Herbert, Professor of English and University Scholarship at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas, Hawthorne likely bases the notion of Robin's intended reliance on his kinsman upon Hawthorne's personal experiences. Herbert contends that Hawthorne, unlike Robin, focused his efforts and life's ambitions upon achieving success through his own "self-reliant masculinity" and actually prevailed in "overcoming early hardship to achieve wealth and fame" (60, 64). Herbert also conveniently provides a historical backdrop in which he describes the growing trend among individuals to shy away from the ideals of Colonial America in order to embrace the changing times in America during the nineteenth century:

Colonial America had been composed of small-scale communities that were governed by face-to-face networks of



familial connection, through which young men were guided to maturity through apprenticeships managed by their fathers, or foster-fathers...This life-pattern was displaced during the early nineteenth century...Instead of depending on family connections, a young man was now compelled to “make a name for himself” through his own unaided efforts. (61)

Herbert's insights are beneficial because they enable readers to conceptualize the expectations that society had for adolescents trying to make their passage into adulthood during the time in which “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” was said to have taken place. By extension, readers also come to better understand Robin's flawed logic in expecting his kinsman to provide an establishment for him. Clearly, Robin's preconceived notions, as well as the imperfect logic behind them, reveal his naïveté and youthful approach to life, and it is not until he receives advice from the “kind stranger” that Robin is able to come to terms with the unrealistic nature of his expectations.

Moreover, as is stated in the introduction, Brown and Robin experience many trials and tribulations (mentally and emotionally, if not physically) along their journeys of initiation; yet, Hawthorne employs the dichotomy of the outsiders versus the insiders, or “us” versus “them,” to illustrate the point that progress alone is not enough to make Brown and Robin fellow members of the culture and community of those already initiated. For instance, Brown seems to be ignorant, especially when it comes to knowing which particular members of his community side with the devil. When he discovers the identities of those holding regular meetings in communion with the devil, Brown is simultaneously amazed and disappointed to find that community religious leaders, whom he considered to be holy, freely consort with sinners. Even though it may be difficult to imagine that the minister and Deacon Gookin, or even Goody Cloyse, who taught Brown the Catechism, for that matter, would

willingly associate with the devil, Magee defends these characters' behaviors by noting:

The minister and the deacon have achieved their exalted standing in the community by opening their lives to close scrutiny over the course of many years, not by keeping their piety a secret...A society like theirs that awards status based on visible sanctity could scarcely avoid encouraging hypocrisy among its most well-meaning members. (14)

In keeping with Magee's thinking, then, it would seem that Hawthorne employs these characters as a way of showcasing the duality of human nature: members of Brown's community live one identity by day and a different identity at night. In addition to these prestigious and high-ranking members of society who are in attendance with the devil, Catholic scholars Bird and Bird, in *From Witchery to Sanctity*, extend this membership to all members of Brown's community since the devil has claimed dominion over them, which explains why Brown "finds that many men and women, both young and old, reputed to be virtuous and with a good reputation, are there to wait upon the Devil himself" (65). It is for this reason that Brown ponders whether or not Faith, his wife and assumed moral guide, has converted to the dark side; having lost his "peace of mind [Brown] has no way of knowing whether Faith has entered into the communion of evil. Even if she has not, Brown's experience in the forest convinces him that Faith is human after all, and he suspects that she is in league with the devil, shattering his fantasy that Faith is 'a blessed angel on earth'" (Magee 6). This is the moment in which Brown is forced to question the rationality of his premature assumptions. Caught between his preconceived notions and the possibly harsh reality that Brown must face, he is torn. On the precipice of true discernment, Brown does not know who or what is real and sincere. Since he has yet to successfully complete the process of

initiation, Brown is not considered a full-fledged member of the devil's community; consequently, he does not know who to trust and is suspicious of everyone.

Hawthorne's use of the dichotomy of outsiders versus insiders in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" is much more obvious for readers, and even among the characters themselves, than it is in "Young Goodman Brown." As previously stated, for example, one of the initial indicators that Robin is ill-prepared for city-life is his style of dress, which immediately gains the attention of the ferryman and the innkeeper. Thus, this idea of "us" versus "them" is established from the moment that Robin sets foot on the shores of Boston. On a deeper level, though, when compared with the individuals who are dressed in "outlandish attire," it becomes evident that Robin has not been briefed about the secretly planned festivities that are scheduled to begin later that same night. For instance, having spent the night wandering about the strange streets of an unfamiliar city, Robin has made no breakthroughs; actually, he is less sure of himself at this point than when he first arrives in the city. Twice during his adventures, Robin comes into contact with "little parties of men, among whom Robin distinguished individuals in outlandish attire...They did but utter a few words in some language of which Robin knew nothing, and perceiving his inability to answer, bestowed a curse upon him in plain English and hastened away" ("My Kinsman" 10). The Distinguished Professor of English at UCLA who specializes in American literature and literacy history, Michael Colacurcio, in "The Matter of America: 'My Kinsman, Major Molineux,'" attributes the men's frustrated response in hastening away to their inaccurate two-fold assumption that Robin's failure to recognize the "local words and ways" suggests that he opposes their efforts to overthrow Major Molineux's authority and that Robin will expose their intentions (210). This scene reinforces the claim of Jason Charles Courtmanche, Director of the Connecticut Writing Project at the University of Connecticut, in *How Nathaniel Hawthorne's Narratives are Shaped by Sin*:

Hawthorne's male characters, aggressively  
monistic in their "take" on the world around

them, were always allegorists, dividing the world into “us and them” and stumbling into or upon realms that bristle with ambiguities, contradictions and paradoxes...In every instance the complexities of worlds beyond allegorical categories disturb, derail, and in several cases destroy them. (i)

As a result, Robin, similar to Brown, feels like an outsider because information regarding his inevitable initiation is withheld from him. In actuality, Colacurcio believes that nothing regarding Robin's journey is the outcome of coincidence; instead, Colacurcio maintains that apart from Robin, “everyone in the story knows everyone else, and all have been conferring about the progress of the plot; everyone knows very well the established route of the procession” (212). Hence, Robin assumes the role of a victim as the conspirators cunningly lure him deeper into the city so that they can dictate when and where they will make explicit their intentions for Robin so as to ensure that he completes the process of initiation.

While Brown and Robin are “kept in the dark” concerning their initiations, it should be specified that the religious background of both characters is a key detail highlighted by Hawthorne. He does this to dramatize the degradation of the characters once they complete their journeys of initiation and are invited to become members of their respective communities. According to Robert C. Grayson, Emeritus Professor at Southeast Missouri State University, in “Curled Milk for Babes: The Role of the Catechism in ‘Young Goodman Brown,’” Brown “is a third-generation Puritan who is “[i]ntroduced early to the catechism [and who has] the ‘counterfeit of religious ardor’” (3). As for Robin, Hawthorne notes that he, because Robin is not the eldest son and male heir of the family, is forced to seek his own means by which to make his way in the world. This fact alone provides motivation for Robin's journey in which he makes his way to Boston to inherit the childless Major Molineux's fortune. More importantly, though, Hawthorne stresses the fact that Robin is the son of a minister. Therefore, similar to

the shock value created when Brown learns of the minister's and Deacon Gookin's associations with the devil, readers recognize the height from which two characters with a religious upbringing, Brown and Robin, can fall. Admittedly, Brown rejects the devil's invitation to join in the circles of evil; yet, he does accept the devil's belief that there is an inherent propensity to sin within every human being. Robin does not immediately accept nor decline the devil's invitation but, rather, is given the opportunity to reflect upon the public degradation of his kinsman in the hope that Robin will learn from his relative's mistakes and therefore wish to succeed through unaided efforts.

Needless to say, Brown and Robin remain on the outskirts of their communities during the majority of their respective journeys of initiation; however, Hawthorne makes use of laughter along with the dichotomy of the individual versus society in order to draw readers' attention to the fact that Brown and Robin are finally granted membership into the circles of evil. Even though one may reasonably argue that the laughter in "Young Goodman Brown" is demonic while the laughter in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" is derisive, A. E. B. Coldiron, an English Professor at the University of Virginia specializing in late-medieval and Renaissance literature, in "Laughter as Thematic Marker in 'Young Goodman Brown,'" argues that the commonality of laughter in both short stories "accompanies [the] naïve [protagonists'] loss of innocence and darkened view of [their] community" (19). He goes on to argue: "In 'Young Goodman Brown,' as in 'My Kinsman, Major Molineux,' a Satan-figure...initiates the dreadful laughter which rings through the night air [mocking Brown and Robin's] naïve belief in the innocence of the townspeople" (Coldiron 19). Clearly, once the Satan-figure ("the elder traveler" and "the double-faced fellow," respectively) laughs, it is as if the devil is using its authority in marking its seal of approval over the completion of Brown's and Robin's respective journeys of initiation, and extending its welcome to Brown and Robin as members of the communities of evil. In actuality, the devil's laughter terminates Brown's and Robin's journeys of initiation, destroying the barriers between the male protagonists and the rest of society. Although Brown is

accepted into communion with the devil and other sinners, Brown exiles himself from his community members as he deals with his own conflicted notions and fallen nature. Even more, Robin's ability to join in the crowd's laughter at the expense of his kinsman, and himself, along with his willingness to heed the kind stranger's advice, is Hawthorne's way of suggesting that Robin can potentially become a member of the community by joining in the devilish brotherhood of the riotous crowd.

In the beginning it was noted that Brown appeared as if he was not fully committed to the process of initiation, while Robin seemingly lost no time in gaining ground on his journey of initiation; but, the devastating effects of such a course of action are unmistakably similar for both of them: they are coerced into seeing a new way of life. Magee, in citing the findings of Kai Erikson, notes, in reference to Brown: "He loses the ability either to trust the evidence of his senses or to dismiss it completely, for he is unable to decide between the evidence of sanctity he sees in the village by day and evidence of depravity that he sees in the forest at night" (8). In simpler terms, he has come to accept the fact that individuals are not necessarily who they present themselves to be since they often portray a superficial view of themselves to others by concealing what lies hidden in the depths of their hearts (Colacurcio 213). As for Robin, Colacurcio argues that his experiences "mark [his] passage from the single-mindedness of childhood to the fallen wisdom of adult duplicity" (213). This means that, as a result of his journey, Robin is no longer suffering from childish delusions concerning the way society functions. Overall, the consequences of Brown's and Robin's journeys of initiation mirror Courtmanche's belief that the process of initiation undertaken by many of Hawthorne's characters "[o]ften...fails and leaves his male characters in particular scarred, suicidal, solitary, and/or doomed" (iii).

In conclusion, by comparing the many similarities between the initiation stories of Brown and Robin, an encapsulating dichotomy of good versus evil manifests itself in which both male protagonists are forced to recognize the duality of human nature: innocent and holy by day but guilty and evil by night. In turn,

Brown and Robin will never be able to return to their old ways of life; thus, they must relearn how to live, or adapt, amidst a world Brown and Robin previously thought they knew so well. In essence, Brown sees human nature as flawed and therefore, the world is a place of pretenders. This revelation shatters his world, causing him to question those he can really trust at face value. While Brown discovers the hypocrisy of human nature, Robin perceives the uncertainty of his future when he contemplates whether or not his self-reliance will bring him success in the future. Hence, Brown's initiation concludes on a more pessimistic note while Robin's transition into adulthood is far from black and white, leaving him ambiguously in the gray. Regardless of their initiation into the world of imperfection and tainted souls, Brown and Robin feel inescapably alone but, ultimately, as a result of their psychological journeys into the moral labyrinth of the human heart, Brown loses his will to interact positively with his fellow community members and Robin emerges, regrettably, all the wiser for having learned the ill-effects of childish delusions.

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