

---

---

# *A Lucid Portrayal of Ambiguity: Locating Meaning in Hawthorne's 'My Kinsman, Major Molineux'*

**Rod Jenks**

*Broward College*

*It was the very spot to utter the extremest nonsense or the profoundest wisdom, or that ethereal product of the mind which partakes of both, and may become one or the other, in correspondence with the faith and insight of the auditor.*

—Hawthorne, "The Old Manse"

In this article, I intend to make several remarks in the direction of an interpretation of Hawthorne's "My Kinsman, Major Molineux."<sup>1</sup> I will not, however, be trolling the text for its hidden metaphors or its class prejudices or its socioeconomic or racial undertones, and I will definitely not be engaging in hermeneutic imperialism or textual colonialism. I will be doing, in short, what I think critics used to do, before they got the idea that they were all formidable philosophers and redoubtable social critics. I will be striving to construct a preliminary interpretation of what I take to be a fine work of literature.

## I

In attempting to construct an adequate, or even a satisfying, interpretation of a work of fiction, the critic must assume that

---

ROD JENKS is Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at Broward College.

<sup>1</sup> All citations of text are from William Carvat et al., eds., *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne, XI, The Snow-Image and Uncollected Tales*, Columbus, OH: (The Ohio State University Press, 1974), 208-31.

---

---

the work of art under scrutiny is perfect. The hypothesis that any element in a work of fiction is idiosyncratic and thereby, meaning-less, is absolutely the critic's last resort. Such a judgment of any adequate work of literature represents a failure of interpretation. In the interpretation of *Moby Dick*, we are intrigued if a critic observes that white is typically associated with purity and innocence, yet that nature, on Melville's showing, is anything but pure and innocent, and so white, as the color of the whale, is presumably ironic. On the other hand, if all that a critic can produce in answer to the question, "Why is the whale white?" is "Perhaps white was Melville's favorite color," that critic has failed. We assume that each identifiable element is present and in its place for a reason, and interpretation, broadly speaking, seeks to discover and to articulate the reason or the reasons for the inclusion and the positioning of the elements in a work of literature. Interpretation is a delicate adjustment between what we seek to understand and what the work under scrutiny is prepared to declare to us.

As a writer, Hawthorne is keenly aware of his reader's hunger for meaning, the very hunger that manifests itself in this hermeneutic assumption. In "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," Hawthorne deliberately and self-consciously suggests several avenues of interpretation that he is well aware are dead ends. Other avenues of interpretation are left open, but not nearly enough material is presented by the narrator or by Hawthorne<sup>2</sup> to complete any of them or to lend the reader any confidence that they are intended by the author. It is as though there were a *halo* of significance surrounding the story, but the narrative refuses to settle into any single, settled line of interpretation. I will argue that Hawthorne presents a tale that is so tantalizingly unsettled in order to expose his reader to a critical angst analogous to the practical angst experienced by his uncertain protagonist, Robin.

*A tantalizingly  
unsettled tale.*

## II

We are introduced to Hawthorne's protagonist by means of this curious phrase: ". . . one of whose names was Robin" (209). The reader is immediately taken aback by this teasing piece of half-information. The character's *other* name might

---

<sup>2</sup> I am uncertain as to whether these are the same.

---

---

An allusion  
to Puck?

perhaps be "Goodfellow."<sup>3</sup> If so, this would be an allusion to Puck, the mischievous spirit of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* ("Lord, what fools these mortals be!" III, ii). And we are never told what Robin's *other* name is. He thus seems unconnected, a wheel that does not turn. It is curious that a character who seems to be unconnected is striving to use his connections to get ahead in the world. That his name is incomplete makes him seem to have no permanent pedigree. And what little representation of his family is presented is darkened by what appears to have been a death. When Robin envisions his family, he notes that his father's voice falters when he speaks of "the Absent One" (223). But no more is related about this; it is a thread Hawthorne does not later pick up.

Hawthorne's protagonist, though evidently good-natured (and, to this extent, not unlike Puck), is, by way of contrast, *not* noteworthy for his subtlety and his savvy. He seems, indeed, ingenuous and surprisingly ignorant. Robin is hungry for knowledge (as is the reader), and so Robin is easy prey for the mendacious townspeople. He is, in many ways, the mirror-image of the impish, worldly-wise Shakespearean character. What Puck is, Robin appears not to be. Perhaps, then, the allusion is intended ironically.

Though  
presented  
throughout  
as "shrewd,"  
Hawthorne's  
protagonist  
seems easily  
deceived.

Although both the narrator and Robin himself describe Robin throughout as "shrewd" (211, 215, 216, 220, 225 and 231), he does seem to be rather easily deceived. He struggles to achieve an understanding of the hostility of the townspeople in response to his evidently innocent inquiries after the dwelling place of his kinsman, Major Molineux. Major Molineux is Robin's father's cousin. The farm where Robin was raised has been inherited by Robin's older brother. Major Molineux had, in earlier times, shown a certain affection for Robin, and Robin now hopes that the Major will help him to get established. His inability to receive an informative response to his continuing inquiries about his kinsman elicits little curiosity from this "shrewd" young man. Instead, he seems satisfied with quick hypotheses: This man is unschooled and does not know how

---

<sup>3</sup> When Robin imagines (or hallucinates) the scene of his family gathering, he is said to picture "the goodman [an archaic term for *head of household*] in the midst," clutching a Bible which is illuminated by sunlight (223). The attentive reader, who is already thinking about Robin Goodfellow, is struck by the reference to the *Goodman*. This is quite possibly a play on "Goodfellow."

---

---

to respond properly; that man has detected Robin's resemblance to his kinsman and so is treating him with deference, etc. Moreover, "shrewd" Robin at first has no suspicion that the landlady is a prostitute. The landlady, decked out in a red petticoat, whom he unwittingly addresses as "Mistress" (216), tells him Major Molineux is in a drunken slumber (217). Robin accepts this lie and acts on it. He finds the innkeeper to be "courteous" and "honest" (213, 214); we discover anon that he is neither. When Robin drops the name of his kinsman at the inn, he misunderstands the "general movement in the room" to signify that everyone there wishes to be his guide (214). In these instances, Robin reveals himself to be easily snared or deceived. This, of course, is what one would expect of a country lad on his first visit to the city, but it is inconsistent with his characterization of himself as a "shrewd" youth.

And yet, in spite of his self-characterization, he seems at one point aware of his naiveté. He criticizes himself for his innocence in interviewing the sepulchral man: "You will be wiser in time, friend Robin," he tells himself (211). Consonant with Robin's current lack of wisdom, it might be observed that a truly shrewd man lives by his wits, and not by his cudgel. Perhaps, however, in this brave new world of delirious and murderous multitudes, arming oneself with a cudgel is the shrewd thing to do. One of the first things Robin notices in the town is the smell of tar (211), but he discovers, and Hawthorne's readers also discover, the import of this detail only in the denouement.

"Robin," however, is also a Puritanical name for Satan. If this is intended, the fact that Robin's "other name" is left out would be particularly jarring, indeed, ominous. And Robin's eventual connection with the devil figure (out of whose head horns are just about to pop, 213) reinforces this dark reading. But not enough is provided to give us any confidence that Robin represents the devil. His name is associated with a diabolical name, and the name with which he is provided in the narrative is incomplete. That is all the text is prepared to declare to us.

The reader, at any rate, is made aware that all is not well in this town. The innkeeper reads, "or seems to read," a wanted poster on the wall, which he pretends refers to Robin. "Better

---

---

Whether Robin is shrewd or mistakenly believes himself so is left deliberately unresolved.

trudge, boy, better trudge!" the innkeeper growls (214). The general hostility he has encountered in the inn dissuades Robin from attacking the man with his cudgel (214). At the inn, when Robin announces the purpose of his visit, "there was a sudden and general movement in the room which Robin interpreted as expressing the eagerness of each individual to become his guide" (214). Identifying the action and Robin's interpretation of the action separately suggests that the action has a far different import from what Robin believes it to possess. In short, whether Robin is shrewd or whether he is a simple lad who conceives of himself as shrewd is one of the issues Hawthorne deliberately leaves unresolved.

Another unexplained feature of the narrative is the proneness of the characters to *violence*. Robin's inquiry about the dwelling place of his kinsman is met at one point by a gratuitous threat, to the effect that Robin will be "set in stocks by peep of day" (218-19). When Robin begins to feel frustrated, he responds by threatening the townspeople. With a raised cudgel, he demands to be told where his kinsman is living (216). He refrains at the last instant from beating the innkeeper (214). He is tempted to beat the sepulchral man (211). Again, when the patrons at the inn laugh at him, Robin is tempted to beat them all with his cudgel (215). Trying still to locate his kinsman, he accosts a man in the street in this way: "Halt! Tell me this instant . . ." (219, 220). The person to whom Robin issues this strong demand turns out to be the devil figure, the (as it were) *horned* man with the black and red face. When Robin blocks his way, the devil-man orders him to stand aside, "or I'll strike you to the earth" (220). This threat is ominous indeed, if it is issued by the devil. *But is it?*

Contrast between festive atmosphere and dark intent

And yet, this proneness to violence is set against the almost celebratory mood of the townspeople. As the mob gathers, a persistent humming is heard (215). The people are said to be "half dancing" (221), and they are all decked out in gaudy clothing (219). The reader witnesses a deliriously happy mob set on murder. The contrast between the festive atmosphere of their gathering and their dark intent suggests a lack of seriousness on the part of the townspeople. Dispatching the Major will be *fun* for them.

The gentleman with the "altogether prepossessing counte-

---

---

nance" (224) shows Robin where to stand to see his kinsman pass by, but the man's pleasant face does not tell Robin that his kinsman is about to be tarred and feathered. Just so, Hawthorne casts his tale initially with some quasi-historical material concerning the reception of colonial governors generally. Having set the tale against a rather elaborate quasi-historical background, Hawthorne writes, "These remarks may serve as a preface to the following adventures, which chanced upon a summer night [perhaps a Midsummer Night!] not far from a hundred years ago. 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" (218). The reader is thus encouraged to take the narrator's word for the veracity of the narrative. This would hardly be apt unless the author of the tale wanted to suggest that the reader might well be suspicious. The narrator cannot protest too much his own ingenuousness without arousing the reader's suspicions. The narrator does not tell the reader what bearing the information about the reception afforded colonial governors has on his tale. Like Robin, the reader has to wait and see what the import will be. We are asked to accept that there was considerable hostility to colonial governors, but no explanation is forthcoming. We are asked, indeed, to accept that hostility as a brute fact. As Iago says, "I hate the Moor" (*Othello*, I, ii, 380), so the town hates its colonial governor. Perhaps the world contains implacable, inexplicable hatred and violence.

But the hostility Robin encounters might also be political, a reflection of growing anti-British sentiment among the colonists, and, if so, it is not surprising that it is directed against the *colonial* governor. Robin's crossing of the river might be symbolic of America's turning away from her British ancestry, recognizing that that "pedigree" is really not so splendid after all. As Robin becomes more of his own man, not relying on his connections any longer, so, too, America is about to sever its connection to its colonial past. But again, the narrative voice refuses to go into any detail about the enmity towards the governor (218); the political dimension of the story is sketchy, at best.

*Political  
dimension of  
story sketchy  
at best.*

Robin's self-identification as being "shrewd," then, is

---

---

perhaps a piece of dramatic irony. Robin may think himself shrewd; indeed, compared to the average rustic, he may even *be* shrewd. But he is obviously not shrewd *tout court*. Yet at the end of the story, when Robin joins in with the rabble, howling with laughter at the spectacle of his tortured kinsman, he exhibits, not what passes among fellow rubes for shrewdness, but genuine shrewdness, as he melts into that delirious throng. Why defy this legion of louts? Why take arms against this sea of troubles? The shrewd thing to do under the circumstances seems to be to enroll in the general brou-ha-ha.

Part of the political force of the story is that here in the New World, one's pedigree counts for nothing. America is effectively saying to Robin, "Here is what we think of your family connections!" On the other hand, perhaps Robin is all along aware that the American ethos castes pedigree as a humbug. After all, a man who thinks his pedigree is sufficient to open doors for him does not feel compelled to carry about a cudgel. Perhaps he wears his country clothes, announces his country origins and characterizes himself as shrewd—this strikes townspeople and readers alike as boyishly, charmingly unpolished—in an effort to project an image. Perhaps the lack of polish is the very image he seeks to cultivate. In that case, he is genuinely shrewd throughout.

Yet another facet of Robin's joining in with the rabble is the particular hazard of any mass society, as America was in Hawthorne's day and as it is nowadays, also. De Tocqueville warned America that she has always been in danger of becoming, rather than a genuine democracy, a tyranny of the majority.<sup>4</sup> What preserves us from this extremity is respect for civil liberties, minority opinions, freedom of expression, etc. Much of this, of course, is written into law in America, but law is not uniformly enforced. Moreover, absolute horrors can be committed at the behest of the majority or the howling mob, as the final result of the Mytilenian Debate<sup>5</sup> perhaps best illustrates. Democracy is no guarantor of tolerance. In this dark town, the majority becomes a murderous *mob*.

As Robin searches for his kinsman's house, early on, he is

*Democracy no  
guarantor of  
tolerance.*

---

<sup>4</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, v. I, Part I, Chapter 3.

<sup>5</sup> Thucydides, "The Mytilenian Debate," *History of the Peloponnesian War*, §36-50.

---

---

said to pass an “unbroken line of lofty houses,” among which is a “steeped building at the upper end, whence the ringing of a bell announced the hour of nine” (215). Is the steeped building a church? Is the bell a church bell? If so, why does it announce the hour? Or is the building merely a clock tower? If so, why describe it as “steeped?” Is Hawthorne impiously suggesting that a church is really just another building, that a church bell is really just another bell? Not long after he passes the steeped building, Robin, who is, let us mark, the son of a clergyman (219, 224), is said to pass by “the walls of a church” (219). That Robin experiences the church as just a building with walls shows, again, that family connections mean nothing.<sup>6</sup> “Walls,” too, implies barriers or barricades. It might be that the church closes off possibilities. And when the murderous mob sets out, it approaches the church, led there by the devil figure (227). These details suggest at least a naturalistic understanding of, if not a downright hostility toward, religion. Yet the negative attitude is only suggested, enough to make the reader uneasy, but not enough to imply a dismissal of religion. The narrator’s (and/or Hawthorne’s<sup>7</sup>) attitude toward religion is left unclear.

*Negative  
attitude  
toward  
religion  
only  
suggested.*

After he first encounters the devil figure, the man out of whose head *horns* are just about to pop (213), Robin is left to “a series of philosophical speculations on the species of the *genus homo* had just left him” (220). Is the devil, then, a *species of human being*? When Robin remarks on the curious double-aspect of the devil-man’s face, he is told “a man can have many faces and many voices” (226). The devil figure is said to have eyes that “glowed beneath the eyebrows like fires in a cave” (213). This detail seems to be a reference to Plato’s image of the cave from *Republic*.<sup>8</sup> The fire in *that* cave is the instrument of illusion,

---

<sup>6</sup> Or at least that they mean very little. Robin, as the son of a clergyman, resists the temptation presented by his prostitute-landlady (219), but still experiences the church as a building.

<sup>7</sup> Again, I am not certain that these two are the same.

<sup>8</sup> Plato, *Republic*, VII, 514-518. The opening of *Republic* features Socrates going to the Piraeus to witness a procession for Bendis, the Thracian moon goddess. This perhaps is connected to Plato’s later focus on the sun in *Republic* VII. The moon provides some light, to be sure, but not enough for us to see clearly. Hawthorne, too, refers many times to moonlight, the man in the moon, and the sunlight illuminating the Bible. The contrast between these references and the dark, threatening reference to what will happen by “peep of day”

---

---

causally responsible for casting shadows on the wall, which shadows the prisoners take to be real things. The prisoners in the cave cannot discover the truth until they break their chains, at which point they realize that what they have heretofore taken to be real is just a show. The former prisoners then escape from that subterranean prison into the sunlight, where they see for the first time *real* things. The allusion to Plato is reinforced in that the face of the devil-man, being half red and half black, is said to be the fusion of two devils, “a fiend of fire and a fiend of darkness” (220). (The fire is the only source of illumination in Plato’s otherwise dark cave.) In Plato, the fire in the cave is set in the larger context of the sunlit world above the cave. In Hawthorne’s story, as previously noted, what little illumination there *is* is artificial and incomplete.

The scene in the street in Hawthorne’s story features the mob carrying torches (227), and the shops, which are all closed, nevertheless curiously still exhibit burning lamps (211-12). But the houses are almost all dark (219). In short, there is *some* illumination in the context, but it is *artificial*, and set against an enveloping darkness. “Peep of day” has not yet crept into that dark street in that dark, dark town. The devil roams the streets, and watching over the whole scene is not God but the Man in the Moon, who seems to be enjoying the spectacle. “‘Oho,’ quoth he, ‘the old earth is frolicsome tonight!’” (230). As he gazes on the face of his tormented kinsman, Robin feels “a mixture of pity and terror,” (229) an obvious allusion to Aristotle’s definition of tragedy.<sup>9</sup> But to what aesthetic end is that allusion directed? The scene is not particularly tragic. Robin, after all, eventually joins in the rabble-rousing. The reader is left by the tale not saddened, not feeling “pity and terror,” as Aristotle assures us we will feel upon witnessing a genuine tragedy;<sup>10</sup> rather, the reader is left feeling mysti-

---

cannot but strike the reader as significant. Again, there is light here, but not enough by which to see things clearly, and when “peep of day” brings light sufficient to illumine, horrid things are revealed.

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1450<sup>a</sup> ff.

<sup>10</sup> I don’t think Aristotle’s understanding of tragedy works very well even for Athenian tragedy. It is often *not* a “tragic flaw” that is at issue. More often than not, the protagonist in a Greek tragedy has to make a choice, usually between two competing principles (e.g., the state and the family), sometimes between two exclusive alternatives (Orestes in Aeschalus’ *Orestia* must either kill his mother or not refrain from killing his mother). Whichever choice the

---

---

fied. Again, when Robin is pictured wandering among the gathering throng, he is said to entertain “stronger hopes than the philosopher seeking an honest man, but with no better fortune” (215-16). Diogenes the Cynic, a.k.a. Diogenes of Sinope, who was also distinct in *his* mode of dress,<sup>11</sup> wandered ancient Athens, carrying a lantern at midday and vainly searching for one honest man.<sup>12</sup> The mob carries torches (227), but not Robin. He carries a cudgel. Unilluminated, he *seeks* illumination. But Robin’s quest is genuine, while Diogenes’ was clearly sarcastic. To what aesthetic end, then, is the allusion presented? Again, the narrator lets the reader know that something is amiss when he says the sepulchral man releases two loud “hems” when he speaks, “like a thought of the cold grave obtruding among wrathful passions” (211). Again, the elderly man denies knowing Major Molineux with these words: “I know not the man you speak of” (211). These are the very words of Peter’s denial of Christ (Matthew 26, 32, Mark 15, 71; Luke 23, 57). But what is the function of this Biblical allusion?

When he finally confronts the prepossessing gentleman, demanding a gloss to the text of his baffling experiences, Robin mentions the devil figure. The gentleman replies, “Oh yes, I know him. But not intimately.” This casual admission is particularly striking. The devil is well known around the town—but not intimately. And yet the devil-man, who is not well known, leads the procession that murders Major Molineux (227).

The presence of the elderly gentleman who threatens to have Robin set in stocks “by peep of day” is indicated throughout by “two sepulchral hems” (211). “Sepulchral,” of course, does have the sense of “deep and melancholy,” as a characterization of sound, but it is also connected to “sepulcher,” “grave,” or “tomb.” This connection is apt in a tale of a murder. At first, the reader takes the “two sepulchral hems” to indicate asthma or emphysema or bronchitis, and referring to the character in this way may seem to be little more than a

---

protagonist makes, he will suffer from it.

<sup>11</sup> I. G. Kidd, “Diogenes of Sinope,” in Paul Edwards, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York and London: MacMillan and Collier MacMillan, 1967), v. II, 409, notes that Diogenes went about clad in a barrel.

<sup>12</sup> Wallace Matson, *A New History of Philosophy, v. I: From Thales to Ockham*, 2nd ed. (Orlando: Harcourt, 2000), 188. Matson remarks that the point of this gesture remains obscure.

---

---

whimsical means of identification. However, at the epiphany of Major Molineux, “there sailed over the heads of the multitude a great, broad laugh, broken in the midst by two sepulchral hems; thus, ‘Haw, haw, haw–hem, hem–haw, haw, haw, haw!’” (229). The connection between laughter and paroxysm, as though the fellow were literally *choking* with laughter, suggests that the town’s sickness is funny or that the town’s laughter is sick, or both. As he stops in at the church, he notices a graveyard in back and worries that his kinsman is already dead (222). He is almost right. During the procession, the mob throbs and hums with delight (215, 219, 221). One cannot help but recall that Robin himself wishes to linger on in the street, explaining that “I have laughed very little since I left home . . . , and should be sorry to lose an opportunity” (226). He suspects early on that he has a “part to play in the pageantry” (228). Eventually, he joins in the sick laughter, and his shout of hilarity is the loudest of them all (230). He has become, as earlier he had promised himself to be, “wiser in time” (211). He takes full advantage of the opportunity for uncontrolled laughter afforded him by this dark town of steepled buildings where the devil is well known.

### III

Hamlet compares the way Rosencrantz and Guildenstern treat him to the way people use recorders or flutes. He says to them, “You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery.”<sup>13</sup> Shakespeare, as I read him, is peering over these words, directly addressing his reader. The line represents a challenge. *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* is a mystery, and we have been struggling to pluck out its heart ever since Shakespeare defied us to do so. In a similar vein, at the conclusion of “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” the prepossessing gentleman jostles Robin. “Well, Robin, are you dreaming?” he asks (230). The immediate point of this detail is to raise the issue of just how much of the narrative the reader can trust.<sup>14</sup> Is Hawthorne’s

---

<sup>13</sup> *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, III, ii, 350-52.

<sup>14</sup> Swift too, perhaps, wishes to call the trustworthiness of the narrative in *Gulliver’s Travels* into question, insofar as it is reasonably clear at the close of the narrative that Gulliver, the narrator, is utterly mad. Swift is peering over

---

---

tale a dream-narrative? At the very least, Hawthorne is jostling the reader at this point in “My Kinsman, Major Molineux,” saying, in effect, “If you think you understand this, you *are* dreaming!” Robin demands of the man who shows him where to sit to see his kinsman, “I’ve been searching half the night for one Major Molineux; now, Sir, is there really such a person in these parts, or am I dreaming?” (224). The monotonous humming he hears as the procession draws near has a soporific effect on him (221). We are told that “his mind kept vibrating between fancy and reality . . .” (223). The darkness of the town, the lanterns burning, the plea “Am I dreaming?,” and the monotonous humming all suggest dreamscape.

Hawthorne’s tale defies a coherent reading. It is a finely crafted, perspicuous representation of *aporia*, that befuddlement or confusion, that “product of the mind that partakes of both extremest nonsense and profoundest wisdom.” Hawthorne is saying to his reader: *This is the kind of world we live in, and these are the kinds of creatures we are. We cannot help trying to make meaning in a world in which absolutely nothing is grounded.* Unlike the moonbeams that illuminate the Bible (or “the book”—223) that Robin glimpses through the windows of the church (or “the building”—215), any light shed on the text of the world as it is represented in “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” is unnatural and is finally, perhaps, only an artifact of our hunger for meaning in this ambiguous, uncertain, *dark* world.<sup>15</sup>

*Hawthorne’s  
tale defies  
a coherent  
reading.*

Note, too, that the scene with the illuminated Bible makes Robin feel a profound sense of *loneliness* (525). Perhaps what we have been taking all along for text is really just words, words, words, signifying nothing.<sup>16</sup> Mark also the fact that the

---

the text, saying, “Figure this out, you yahoos!” *Gulliver’s Travels* is, in effect, a tale that cannot be told.

<sup>15</sup> This is the effect Pynchon’s earlier fictions (*V*, *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*) have on many readers. The world may be a text, but equally, it may well be a jumbled, haphazard, meaningless collection of mere things. “V,” after all, is the Boolean symbol for “or,” and Pynchon studied logic at Cornell. “V” might represent this woman, or that city, or this bodily organ, or it might simply represent “or” itself. We cannot help trying to decipher or to crack the putative code of this dark, uncertain world, but the haunting sense that there is no code, that nothing is grounded and so nothing can be finally understood or adequately explained, causes us to feel isolated and lonely.

<sup>16</sup> *Hamlet*, II, ii; *MacBeth*, V, v.

---

---

Bible offers an elaborate gloss on the text of human experience. Thus, the scene of the illuminated Bible making Robin feel lonely is yet another *suggestion* that Hawthorne has an ambivalent attitude toward religion. That the protagonist feels lonely in a church suggests that he (and we, too) really *are* alone. Continuing with the tale, the narrator says, "He beheld [the goodman] close the book" (223). The Bible, then, is a book. Attempting to make meaning when one is haunted by the sense that what one is striving to explain or to clarify may in fact be complete nonsense naturally inspires a feeling of isolation and loneliness.

I have dwelt on many of the classical, Biblical and thanatopic allusions in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," and I will now explain my interest in them. Writing in the heyday of Transcendentalism, Hawthorne suggests, without directly implying, that his story exhibits profound echoes of mythology,<sup>17</sup> but he stops short of connecting the elements of his story with their mythical antecedents.<sup>18</sup> The references throughout "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" are unmistakable, but their import is dark. Suggesting connections without arguing for them or even fully articulating them is the trademark of Transcendentalism. Thoreau, by contrast, spins a lovely narrative in *Walden*, and the meaning really does shine forth from the prose. But Hawthorne, I think, suggests that, though our experience is apparently peppered with echoes of our cultural heritage, the

---

<sup>17</sup> *Mythos*, in Attic Greek, comes to "story" or "tale." It does not imply that the story in question is false. "Mythology," as I use the term, is intended in this original sense.

<sup>18</sup> His hesitancy is evocative of Joyce's as well: *Ulysses* seems to be simultaneously a celebration *and* a parody of *The Odyssey*. Penelope resists the advances of the evil suitors, but Molly Bloom resists nothing at all. And while Odysseus returns home to slay the suitors, Leopold Bloom actually departs his residence to facilitate Molly's meeting with Blazes Boylan. When Odysseus returns to the palace in the *Odyssey*, he comes in disguise, and it is crucial that his disguise be effective. Telemachus, however, sees through his father's disguise, and so Telemachus must exercise enormous discipline to resist his temptation to embrace his father. By the time Daedalus encounters Bloom in *Ulysses*, he is so drunk that he hardly recognizes himself, and Bloom slings the embattled poet over his shoulder and carries him home. It is lack of discipline that leads to Daedalus' failure to recognize his spiritual father. There are, then, points of comparison and points of stark contrast between Joyce and Homer, and Joyce's attitude towards the mythical antecedents of his tale remains unclear—to me, at least.

---

---

meaning we think we decipher in our experience may well be an artifact of our cabalistic longing for sense.<sup>19</sup>

The meaning of the narrative, the moral of the story, I believe, is our need to locate meaning. It is thus the perfect text to scrutinize as a challenge to those who feel they must superimpose their social and political agendas onto their interest in literature. “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” is a fascinating story, a finely crafted piece of work, one which both *demand*s and *resists* our attempts to pluck out the heart of its mystery. It is entirely worthy of our aesthetic attention as thoughtful, careful readers for its own sake, and on its own merits.<sup>20</sup>

*A challenge to those who must superimpose their own agendas onto literature.*

---

<sup>19</sup> It would take me a bit far afield to argue for this view, but it seems to me that *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* suggests this same kind of uncertainty. At the outset, Bernardo (and, a moment later, Horatio) and Francisco are exchanging the watch, but it is too dark for them to see one another. “Who’s there?” “Nay, answer me” (I, I, 1-2). “Is Horatio there?” “A piece of him.” “Horatio, by your voice.” *It is too dark to see you. Who are you?* This scene introduces a dark play, a play of questions, rather than answers—Is the ghost’s story true? Is the ghost from heaven or hell? Is Hamlet really mad or is he pretending to be mad? Is Gertrude guilty? Who are Hamlet’s friends? Are some of those he counts as friends actually spies? Whom can he trust? Can he even trust his girlfriend? And the central speech of the play surrounds a *question*—not an *answer*.

For all of our obsession here in the West with understanding everything, many of our classic texts express uneasiness about the connotative dimension of the world. Perhaps we simply project meanings onto what is not so much a *world* as it is merely a *planet*.

<sup>20</sup> Gordon Maddison read and commented on an earlier version of this article. I want to acknowledge his help and to thank him.