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Nathaniel Hawthorne- Liminality as Enlightenment: “Am I Here, or There?”

“Liminality refers to something very simple and universal: the experience of finding oneself at a boundary of in an in-between position, either spatially or temporally”

—Bjorn Thomassen

Nathaniel Hawthorne uses liminality, a state of between-ness often used to express a transition in someone’s life, in his short stories to emphasize the magnitude of a transition in a characters life. Abigail Crain posits that the liminal states of Robin in “My Kinsman Major Molineux” and Brown in “Young Goodman Brown” occur at the end of their tales, meaning that everything that happened to them throughout their respective stories has led them to this end state of being between something. I disagree. Hawthorne creates certain spaces within the story to be seen as grounds for transitions in the character’s lives. Hawthorne creates his characters to be broken, leaving room for a sizable transition to a better life, which a reader can see upon comparison of the two works.

Creation of Characters-Beginning of Liminal Journey

Scholars have debated on the intention behind the naming of the main character in “My Kinsman Major Molineux.” The most widely accepted belief is that Hawthorne “linked him to Robin Goodfellow from Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*” (Crain 32). “In addition, his story shares with Shakespeare’s play the themes of disguise, fruitless search, and lost ways, all presented in an atmosphere of phantasmagoria and dream, all related with the usurpation of

authority” (Shaw 565). Some have connected him to the rebellious Robin Hood. Regardless of how the comparison is made, Hawthorne creates a clear connection to past works to initially define his Robin as a rebellious, naïve young man that’s in over his head.

Beyond relation to other characters, Robin’s actions define him as young and naïve. He’s created to be an unaware blank slate for Hawthorne to manipulate. “Robin begins his journey as a very one dimensional, archetypal symbol of innocent, ignorant, rural young America” (Crain 36). This innocence is clear to the reader when Hawthorne originally introduces Robin through the eyes of the ferryman. Hawthorne describes Robin as “a youth of barely eighteen years, evidently country-bred, and now, as it should seem, upon his first visit to town” (374). The fact that he buys a ticket, goes to a town that he’s never been to, all for the purpose of finding a man that he knows very little about leaves the impression that Robin is in way over his head with little understanding of the adult world.

Hawthorne created Young Goodman Brown in a similar light as Robin. Scholars agree that Hawthorne is using the term “goodman” ironically. “After defining ‘goodman’ as ‘the master or male head of a household,’ the O.E.D. cites its former application to ‘a husband himself or a ‘householder in relation to his wife’” (Robinson 219). Crain states that “attaching the term ‘Goodman’ to a name was not only a sign of respect for a person, but was also indicative of the righteousness and worthiness of that person” (55). In doing this, Brown is created to be someone whose actions define him to be anything but a good man. Young Goodman Brown is not seen to be the ideal faithful (pun intended) husband, thus Hawthorne puns on the name.

Young Goodman Brown’s actions reveal him to be young and naïve and arguably innocent. He was married “but three months” to his wife, Faith, yet, he leaves her at home alone

to go to a mysterious meeting with a stranger in the woods (Hawthorne 387). Not only does this create a shaky trust dynamic between the two of them, it also shows that Young Goodman Brown doesn't think very much about his wife. This is not to say that he doesn't love her, but he's too naïve to understand the dangers of leaving his wife alone in such a perilous time in Salem.¹ At this time in Salem, families were joining together, praying, and locking their doors, not abandoning their wives to meet strangers in the woods. He's also very easily influenced. He follows a mysterious figure into the woods with no understanding of what's to happen there or if he'll even return. He's acting purely on impulse. Levy states that "Initially, he is a naïve and immature young man who fails to understand the gravity of the step he has taken," making him fruit ripe for change as he enters the forest (376).

Liminal Spaces

It's at this point in Hawthorne's texts where Crain and I disagree. She finds the liminal space presented in Hawthorne's short stories at the end of the character's tales, whereas I see certain spaces in the text to be a grounds for the transitions in the lives of the characters. Crain states that "Robin's final liminal state, removed from his country-home society but also not part of the provincial town, is ambiguous. But, it is precisely this ambiguity, this lack of a structural sense of place, that thrusts Robin from his static symbolism in to the unknown yet now explorable depths of his newly realized identity" (50).² I am not questioning the validity of Crain's statement. There is truth there, but my argument is that there are aspects of liminality throughout the work rather than saying that the entire tale is a slow shift to the liminal state.

¹ "Young Goodman Brown" is set in Salem, Massachusetts during the Salem Witch Trials.

² Here, Crain refers to the end of "My Kinsman Major Molineux" when a gentleman tells Robin that he "may rise in the world, without the help of your kinsman," which is what he's been searching for throughout the story (Hawthorne 186). He is neither a member of the town nor a stranger to its ways, leaving him in an in-between state at the end.

Hawthorne creates both Robin and Young Goodman Brown as naïve blank slates, awaiting a major change.

In both “My Kinsman Major Molineux” and “Young Goodman Brown,” there are spaces where great change occurs within the main characters. “Both move from an opening that emphasizes historical reality, a setting in a specific time and place, into an increasingly surreal world in which the elements of setting seem to be projections of a terrifying landscape that is fundamentally psychological. . . Both characters fall asleep and wake to find their perceptions of the world radically transformed” (Achilles 139-140).

In “My Kinsman Major Molineux,” the reader has a small amount of background information on Robin, only that he leaving his past life in pursuits of something better. From here, he gallivants about town in search of the one person who he thinks can help him. Once he begins to give up hope, he is thrown into a surreal dream sequence. The young man closes his eyes and sees home, but it is a dark vision of home. “Then he saw [his family] go in at the door; and when Robin would have entered also, the latch tinkled into its place, and he was excluded from his home” (Hawthorne 382). Robin left his home in an attempt to become a man, but his dream indicates that he has yet to make the shift to manhood, that he is still clinging to the support of his family and regrets his decision to leave. But his family doesn’t permit his reentry. He awakes rapidly and cries ““Am I here, or there,”” meaning he questions if he is dependent on his family, or is he an independent man (Hawthorne 382). He’s between these two stages of life, childhood and manhood, and, Hawthorne presents the town as the catalyst to this transition. Crain argues: “The town that seemed so ordinary, albeit slightly confusing, to him just a few hours before is now revealing itself to be an uncanny portal to the unconscious, to a place that is at once beautiful and horrific, known and unknown” (42). The ambiguous town here is symbolic

for Robin's internal shift. Robin is between childhood and manhood, citizen and stranger, known and unknown.

"Young Goodman Brown" follows a similar pattern of little description, falling into a possible dream sequence, and ultimately having a completely different view at the end of the story. The reader is given little background of Young Goodman Brown before he leaves his home and town that he has known to enter a dark forest of the unknown. We are informed that he is a man of faith. As he says goodbye to his wife, the narrator informs us that it is "with this excellent resolve for the future, Goodman Brown felt himself justified in making more haste on his present evil purpose" (Hawthorne 387). Brown knew that leaving his home to meet an evil stranger in the woods made the trek itself sinful by nature. Brown hastens into the forest, his liminal battleground, and meets a mysterious stranger that Brown believes holds a strong resemblance to Brown himself, but he appears to have a walking stick in the form of a living black snake. "This, of course, must have been an ocular deception, assisted by the uncertain light," Hawthorne writes (388). We begin to see a shift in Brown from a world he has known to this knowing nothing of the gloomy forest. "Already, the line between what Brown actually sees and what he believes to have seen, is blurred" (Crain 64). As the pair continue traveling through the forest, his companion discloses that several high-class people of the town are involved in mischievous activities. Naïve Brown convinces himself that he will not be called to participate in those activities, that he was above that. Ironically, as he goes about boasting of his inactivity, they are moving physically closer to the place that he distances himself from. The pair meet Brown's former teacher of catechism, Goody Cloyse, who alludes to her involvement in witchcraft. Brown begins to question the very beliefs he's held for years as "he looked up to the sky, doubting whether there really was a Heaven above him" (Hawthorne 391). He refuses to

continue this journey with the devil, but ultimately gives in. We no longer see the holy man that Goodman Brown was presented as earlier in the story. He gloats of his faith at the beginning of the story, to now question whether God and Heaven are real. He's talking a walk with the devil down a path away from God. As the pair continue, they come to a meeting of witches, where the Deacon Gookin is in attendance. In this new community, a voice cries to "Bring forth the convert," and Brown "[approaches] the congregation, with whom he felt a loathsome brotherhood" (Hawthorne 393). Brown has now joined the community of hypocritical witches. Brown, a man that once thought himself above the sinful activities of his neighbors, has now emerged himself in their brotherhood. He leaves the forest as a man uncertain of his faith, uncertain of that one crucial relationship with God that he once relied on. Brown is not the same man he was when he entered the forest.

Everything Brown knew is now a blur. He cannot view the people of the town in the same way. Was it all a dream, he asks himself. "Be it so, if you will. But, alas! It was a dream of evil omen for young Goodman Brown. A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man, did he become, from the night of that fearful dream" (Hawthorn 395). He's no longer a man of the faith as he cannot listen to the hypocritical preacher on Sabbath or hear the congregation singing without being reminded of the severity of their sins. He no longer has faith. "Brown's grand symbolic plunge into the moral chaos of the Witches' Sabbath may or may not be just a dream, but it is clear that he has become a monster"³ (Achilles 140). Liminality, though possibly all a dream in Brown's case, is a separation from the former self. Brown sees himself as a monster. He's become an ungodly beast, a nightmare to his former self.

³ Witches Sabbath is a gathering of witches

The vast change in the characters before and after their dream sequence and the dream-y voyage into the forest is what makes those spaces liminal. Before falling asleep and dreaming of his family, Robin was content in believing that his journey to the small town was his journey to manhood. His sole purpose was to find his kinsman so that he may begin an adult life. The dream served as a wake up call. Upon awaking, he realized that his life thusfar was far from independent. This was his real transition into manhood. He no longer needs a kinsman to create a life for himself. He is no longer reliant upon someone to guide him into adulthood.

Young Goodman Brown was not a monster when he entered the woods. Before kissing his Faith goodbye, he was a goodman by the definition of the word. He obeyed God's word, but he was blind to the reality happening around him. As he enters the dark and dreary forest, he can now ironically see everything that he couldn't before. Brown's witnessing his deacon and former teacher of catechism practicing witchcraft flipped his worldview upside down. His faith flew out the window just as his Faith's ribbon flapped in the wind.

Readers are reminded that "liminality guarantees nothing. It merely occasions the freedom to imagine alternatives" (Ashley 76). Saying that there are liminal areas in writing does not mean that there will be a happy ending. There is no guarantee that the character will change for the better, only that they will change. Young Goodman Brown is an example of this. To lose one's faith is not considered to be a typical climax of a story, but here, it's used to emphasize the liminal state of Brown in the forest.

Why Does It Matter?

As previously mentioned, Crain and I disagree on the placement of liminality in both "My Kinsman Major Molineux" and "Young Goodman Brown." By changing the time frame in which liminality occurs in Hawthorne's short stories, the reader's perspective of the entire work

is altered. By stating that the end state of both Young Goodman Brown and Robin is their liminal state, as Crain does, it implies that everything leading to that liminal state was only gearing them for this transition. It implies that everything happening throughout the story was in no way changing them. Rather, I say that all the events that occur in the stories after introducing characters and before the resolution are the liminal state. When Robin awakes from the dream sequence, he is a changed man. When Brown leaves the forest, he is a changed man. There is no ambiguity in the ending of these stories. True, the reader doesn't know what happens to Robin after he abandons hope on having a kinsman, but we can infer that he is pursuing independence. As for Brown, readers know his end state. After years of suffering through the pain of coming face to face with hypocrisy daily, he goes to a verse-less tomb. Yet, as Achilles says, "The crucial difference, of course, is that Brown goes on a journey and then returns as a bitter angry man...while Robin enters a whole new world, discovers he is not welcomed on the terms he assumes, but is ultimately invited to stay" (141).

We've seen in these two short stories that Hawthorne uses liminality as a means to grow his characters. He highlights the transition of Robin's outsiderdom to civilian and Brown's from civilian to outsider. In two of Hawthorne's other short stories "The Minister's Black Veil" and "Rappucini's Daughter," the reader is again greeted with this familiar sense of liminality as the characters grow and develop throughout their tales. In "The Minister's Black Veil," the minister, formerly popular in his community, becomes an idolized outsider when he dons a black veil. "Rappucini's Daughter," readers are watching Giovanni's shift from being an outsider to the monstrous.⁴

⁴ Crain doesn't mention these two works, therefore, we cannot observe them for further inquiries.

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