

There are two types of people: those that watch and those that are watched by others. One group is the observer, while the other group becomes the target of the observer's attention. What separates the two groups, and what determines in which group a person is placed? One possibility is social phenomena, which affects many aspects of spectatorship. Some of the social aspects behind spectatorship can be found in "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," by Nathaniel Hawthorne.

The entire town puts Major Molineux on public display and humiliates this once "majestic person" (p. 31). The town, perhaps, has good reasons for wanting to ridicule him. "The people looked with most jealous scrutiny to the exercise of power which did not emanate from themselves" (p. 13), remarks the narrator, and so the townsmen may have reasons to be jealous of the Major's wealth or power. But why does Robin, who begins his journey proudly searching for his kinsman, Major Molineux, join in with the rest of the town in making a mockery of his kinsman?

A very realistic view might be that Robin realizes that his kinsman's wealth and power would not be much use to Robin anymore. From the time Robin leaves the ferry to his participation in the disgrace of his kinsman, he changes significantly, learning about a new, unfamiliar type of society. In his naïve state, Robin thinks of himself as a "shrewd youth" (p. 28), when in fact, he does not understand many things including why the townspeople laugh at him. When he does come to a full understanding, Robin realizes that Major Molineux, "will scarce desire to see my face again" (p. 33) and so will no longer be any use to Robin. But this does not justify his laughter, for Robin's statement comes after his laughter and could not have been the cause of it. Before Robin's outburst of laughter, he might not have been able to make the claim, as a tarred and feathered Major Molineux is still Robin's kinsman. However, even if Robin had

thoughts that he would never see his kinsman again, this alone cannot have been the primary motivating force behind his laughter.

Can Robin's participation be attributed to curiosity? Many actions seem to stem from curiosity. For example, the kind gentlemen with Robin says he has a "singular curiosity to witness [the] meeting" (p. 28) between Robin and Major Molineux. Is this why Robin participated in the mockery also? But why do spectators continue watching when their curiosity has been satisfied? Understandably, "Robin's curiosity [is] strongly excited" (p. 29), at the approaching festivities and he wants to join in the fun. However, even after he sees what the festivities are really about, and after his curiosity is quelled, he joins in with the rest of the town in laughter against his kinsman. Robin cannot have the same reasons as the townspeople might have to wish a mockery of his kinsman. Some of the townspeople might have been angry, some might have been jealous, and others might have joined in just for enjoyment purposes. But for Robin and some of the townspeople in the story, the explanation of having genuine interest in watching Major Molineux paraded around is not sufficient. Although some of the townsmen may want to see the Major disgraced, there is also a "mass of people, inactive, except as applauding spectators" (p. 30). The merriment may come as much from the Major's disgrace as from the thrill of the entire town coming together as one. It may also be exciting and attracting participants because it is not a very common occurrence.

So what is Robin's motivation behind his participation? A spectator should have a reason to watch, and participation in an event needs even better reasons. One partial explanation is that spectatorship is contagious, creating an unstoppable domino-like effect. "It seized upon Robin, and he sent forth a shout of laughter...every man shook his sides, every man emptied his lungs, but Robin's shout was the loudest there" (p. 32). What is it that seizes Robin and compels every

other person to laugh? The “contagion...spreading among the multitude” (p. 32) infects each person mercilessly not sparing even Robin, who is affected “with a sort of mental inebriety” (p. 32). Why is it so contagious and so powerful? When the parade passes by, everyone comes out from their houses and continues to watch and participate in the “congregated mirth” (p. 32). Is this collective enjoyment the source of the unstoppable contagion? There is a sense of community, of togetherness, when the crowd roars in one voice. It would feel out of place, perhaps not socially acceptable, for one not to join in the group merriment. Robin has to pick one direction or another. He has to join in with the rest of the town, or be ridiculed and isolated along with his kinsman. This sense of not being alone is extremely important and powerful. When Robin is alone looking into the church and watching the moonbeams, he feels lonely, saying, “Oh that any breathing thing were here with me!” (p. 25). So he grabs the first opportunity he can to join the community and to rid himself of his sense of loneliness.

Thus, social forces motivate Robin’s laughter. Throughout the story, the townspeople watch Robin, laughing at his quest to find his kinsman. Being laughed at by everyone he meets, Robin must have felt an unpleasant sensation similar to when he has the “uncomfortable idea that he [is] to bear a part in the pageantry” (p. 31). Robin, like many people, has no wish to be under the spotlight or the one being watched. Although Major Molineux certainly is not proud of his situation, he has no control over what happens to him, while Robin does have some measure of control to divert the attention away. One way of throwing the attention away from oneself is to find someone else to put in the spotlight. Major Molineux is already in the spotlight, making it easier for Robin to draw attention away from himself. When Robin sees Major Molineux, “his hair [bristles] with a mixture of pity and terror” (p. 31). With his terror outweighing his pity, Robin joins the crowd rather than showing pity for his kinsman.

This joining of the crowd, Robin's laughter, symbolizes a change in his status. In the beginning, Robin is associated with his kinsman Major Molineux, and Major Molineux, as it is implied, is in quite a different social class as the rest of the town. Major Molineux seems to be in a higher or more favored class, while the majority of the town is in a lower class. When there are classes like this, the spotlight almost invariably falls on the higher classes, with the lower classes taking the role of the spectators. When Robin associates himself with his kinsman, Major Molineux, Robin becomes associated with the higher class that the Major represents. That partially explains the spotlight being on him and the townspeople laughing at him, in the same way they laugh at Major Molineux. Robin's laughter symbolizes his letting go of his previous association, and perhaps joining the other social class containing the rest of the town. When he joins a lower class, the spotlight moves away from him, leaving Major Molineux as the object of attention. This passing on of the spotlight and the attention is represented in the story by the passing of the procession, once his laughter is complete. Once Robin is able to disassociate himself from Major Molineux, the procession seems to lose its interest in Robin, and moves on, leaving only "a silent street behind" (p. 33).

As has been shown, social forces are a powerful influence on behavior. Although spectatorship can come about from many reasons, such as curiosity and interest, these alone cannot explain Robin's actions in Hawthorne's short story. Robin's conversion from being watched to becoming the watcher is a very significant change, which would be difficult to explain without the presence of social phenomena. The different roles inherent in different social classes, allows Robin to shift unwanted attention away by changing his role. The feeling of belonging to a social class or community and the feeling of unity are strong enough to cause Robin to join in the disgrace of a fellow kinsman. When a group watches an individual, as in the public display of

Major Molineux, it is much easier to join the group over the individual. Under these circumstances, the “temporary inflammation of the public mind” (p. 5) swells and grabs hold of all. Social influences are just too difficult to resist.