"My Kinsman, Major Molineux" has attracted many critics for its abundance in imagination. Especially since 1950s, it has been discussed in various ways and the number of critical studies has been increasing. There are three main types of reading: historical, psychological, and moral. Although their points of views differ, they have a point in common in that all read it as Robin's initiation story. The historical reading sheds a light on the historical background of the tale. Q. D. Leavis draws a parallel between American Independence and Robin's growth into an adult, interpreting Robin as the symbol of "the young America" and Major Molineux as the "representative in New England of the British civil and military rule." In her interpretation, Robin's recognition of the Major changes from a relative to be depended upon to a conqueror to be excluded, and he (the young America) develops into independence.\(^1\) Roy Harvey Pearce asserts "only through the discovery of historical responsibility ... could a man gain whatever of human freedom he might aspire to" and that Robin has achieved the "knowledge of how he is related to his past ... by identifying with the community through which his sense of the past comes to him."\(^2\) Michael J. Colacurcio brings a new point of view into the historical reading of the tale. Considering that Hawthorne revised the myth of the American Revolution, Colacurcio reads the tale from the view point that "the Revolution is not a
major event in Holy History." It makes the view meaningless that the
American Revolution was just like growing up. Colacurcio asserts that there
are two unreconciled stories in the tale: Robin's initiation and a rebellion in
the town, and that Robin experiences the "passage from single-mindedness of
childhood to fallen wisdom of adult duplicity" and learns there is "their
story" but "his moral adventure is quite different from their historical plot."³

In the psychological reading, Freudian Oedipal theory is applied to
Robin's personal conflict. Simon O. Lesser and Frederick Crews interpret
that Robin has escaped from the repression of paternal authority and
obtained emotional freedom. Lesser reads another story on the unconscious
level of the tale: a story of the conflict between Robin's desire for "economic
as well as sexual independence" and repressive power of authority as a
paternal figure. He maintains that "[Robin] destroys an image of paternal
authority so that, freed from its restraining influence, he can begin life as an
adult."⁴ In Crews's interpretation, the tale presents filial ambivalence:
Robin's search for an idealized father and a healthy independence from the
paternal image. He asserts that Robin "has cathartically rid himself of both
filial dependence and filial resentment" through the laughter at the climax
and now is free to rise in the world.⁵

In the moral reading, the quest for Molineux in the town is considered as
an initiation ritual and the critics' standpoints are divided into three
according to the interpretation of what Robin obtains, moral good, moral
evil, or uncertainty. In the first group, Seymour L. Gross analyzes the story
as follows; in the night town, a moral labyrinth, Robin recognizes the power
beyond human control and acquires "new moral shapes," and the ending of
the story is not an end of his life but a beginning.⁶ Arthur T. Broes, one of the
critics who considers that Robin's acquisition is moral evil, asserts that
Robin discovers "the adult world of evil and corruption" and "has not
escaped this corruption, but only identified himself with it."⁷
All the readings so far mentioned have been unanimous in that Robin attains something through the one-night experience in the town and, making it a stepping stone, develops into the next stage, be it growth or degradation. On the other hand, several critics offer an interpretation that Robin learns nothing or what he obtains is uncertain. Daniel G. Hoffman compares Robin and Major Molineux to a Yankee bumpkin and a scapegoat king. Although he admits that the ritual of the deposition of the Scapegoat-king provides a ceremony of initiation, he is doubtful of its result and asserts that Robin has “learned nothing from anything that . . . touched him.” Another critic that takes what Robin obtains as uncertain is Terence Martin, who observes that although Robin’s laughter indicates his self-recognition of loss of his identity, he does not recognize the necessity of finding a new identity.

All these critics read the tale as an initiation story and most of them see Robin’s development in the end of the tale; Robin has developed to a new stage, whether it is better or worse, according to what he obtains through the one-night experience. On the other hand, there is a view that Robin has learned nothing. Is it a story of Robin’s, development or not? My aim in this paper is to give an interpretation of the end of the tale by focusing on what Robin obtains in the end.

II

When he first enters the town with a dream, Robin is full of self-confidence. We see a country youth with the ambition to rise in the world. After the experience, Robin does not seem so desperate in spite of the collapse of his ambition, and “dryly” asks the way to the ferry to go home. How has he changed during the experience? Hereafter let us consider what Robin attains through the adventure in the town, following the passage of his journey.

Robin’s journey is the equivalent of a process bringing the collapse of his
self-confidence. It is impelled by the town people's rejection and by his own sense of disorientation. When Robin lands from the ferry to the town, he has three things which stipulate what he is. The three bases for his identity are his physical strength exemplified by an oak cudgel, the authority of his kinsman Major Molineux, and his "shrewdness." His life plan is to rise in the world with the backing of Major Molineux and depending on his own abilities. However, Robin, who enters the town in high spirits, has experiences that one after another shake his confidence. First of all, the magical phrase "my kinsman, Major Molineux" does not display its effect. His "shrewdness" and oak cudgel which are available in his country scarcely have an opportunity to show the power in the town.

Robin has expected that once he mentioned his kinsman's name, he would be welcomed by the community. Actually, however, the name of Major Molineux only incurs ridicule and rejection, far from welcome. In addition, although his destination is quite clear, he cannot reach it easily. He does not know in which direction he should go and wanders in a labyrinth of streets. Such a sense of disorientation increasingly deprives him of his self-confidence and fills him with a sense of isolation. Here we shall concentrate on how Robin's self-confidence collapses, and how he increasingly feels a sense of isolation from when he first enters into the town.

At first, he walks forward into the town with a light step and with an eager eye, but soon it occurs to him that he does not know where to direct his steps. He asks a passer-by, a coughing old man, for the Major's dwelling, and he is entirely rejected as follows:

'Let go my garment, fellow! I know not the man you speak of. What! I have authority, I have—hem, hem—authority; and if this be the respect you show your betters, your feet shall be brought acquainted with the stocks, by daylight, tomorrow morning!'\(^{10}\)
At first surprised by the result of his question, Robin, who believes in the Major's authority, explains this mystery with his "shrewdness":

'This is some country representative,' was his conclusion, 'who has never seen the inside of my kinsman's door, and lacks the breeding to answer a stranger civilly....' (211)

After meeting the first town's person, Robin becomes "entangled in a succession of crooked and narrow streets" as if rejected by the town itself. Next he inquires the way at an inn, and as soon as he mentions the name of his kinsman, he is refused again. Here, too, he does not attribute the town people's rejection to his kinsman's name but to his light purse.

At this stage, Robin firmly believes in the authority of Major Molineux, and explains that the people's rejection is due to other causes than one of the elements of his identity. He still maintains his self-confidence. On the other hand, he begins to have a sense of incompatibility with the town. Robin is now unwilling to inquire further owing to the failure of the previous inquiries, and is ashamed of his quiet and natural gait, overwhelmed by "travelled youths, imitators of the European fine gentlemen of the period" (215). Some anxiety has come into his mind.

It is when he is ignored by a watchman after meeting a prostitute with a scarlet petticoat that Robin definitely perceives that he is rejected by the town. The woman's voice is the sweetest that he has heard that night, but at the same time, it is the voice that does not tell the truth. After he realizes that the only person that accepts him in the town is a deceiver and a tempter, he inquires of a watchman the dwelling of Major Molineux but the watchman goes away without giving a word. Here Robin recognizes that he is never accepted by the town and despairs:

He now roamed desperately, and at random, through the town, almost ready to believe that a spell was on him, like that, by which a wizard of his
country, had once kept three pursuers wandering, a whole winter night, within twenty paces of the cottage which they sought. The streets lay before him, strange and desolate, and the lights were extinguished in almost every house. (219)

The intercourse with the group he meets next deepens Robin's sense of isolation. They talk to him "in some language of which Robin [knows] nothing, and perceiving his inability to answer, [bestow] a curse upon him in plain English" (219).

Trying to break the deadlock of the situation, Robin decides to appeal to his physical force and succeeds in eliciting information about the Major by using the oak cudgel from a bulky stranger muffled in a cloak. Although Robin is surprised by his grotesque appearance, he settles it too by explaining "shrewdly, rationally, and satisfactorily" that "Strange things we travellers see!" (220)

Here, in spite of the gradual decline of his self-confidence, Robin still firmly maintains his past identity and keeps the determination to solve the problem depending upon what he believes his abilities to be. On the other hand, seized with strong loneliness, he dreams of his country with nostalgia. Robin, however, is shut out by the country community to which he has been thinking he belongs. In his fancy, when he tries to enter into the house following the other members of his family, "the latch [tinkles] into its place, and he [is] excluded from his home" (223). His cry, "Am I here, or there?" significantly indicates his dangling state.

Although, unable to enter the town community and excluded from the country home, he entirely loses his place, Robin does not seem to have a sense of his present situation as a crisis. While explaining the relation between Major Molineux and himself to the kindly gentleman he meets after the man of two-colored complexion, he still emphasizes his "shrewdness" and believes that he can solve the problem at once only if he meets the Major. He
regards his condition of marginal existence as only a temporal one, and wishes to find a community to which he can belong. Hearing a laughter which fills up the intervals of the sounds of a trumpet in some neighboring street, Robin says to the kind gentleman:

'I have laughed very little since I left home, Sir, and should be sorry to lose an opportunity. Shall we just step round the corner by that darkish house, and take our share of the fun?' (226)

He wishes to be assimilated into the community by sharing the laughter with the crowd.

At last the moment comes to meet Major Molineux. Observing the scene of the Major's humiliation, Robin realizes that the root of his identity has collapsed. The laughter of the town people rushes at Robin who perceives tremendous ridicule and experiences "a sort of mental inebriety." They laugh at Robin for his having called his kinsman's name with pride, showing the climax scene of the drama to him, the only audience. Robin's self-confidence and pride, which have depended upon his kinsman's authority, completely collapse at this moment. His laughter that follows is to ridicule himself because he has been proud of his kinsman without knowing he has not already been authority. At the same time his laughter is the only means to join the festival. He tries to be accepted in the community by sharing their laughter together. It is also a means to escape his marginality and attain new identity. Nevertheless Robin is not able to assimilate himself into the community completely. He instinctively clings to the stone post and does not follow the procession. Watching the humiliation of Major Molineux, Robin realizes the meaning of the rejection by the town people and the collapse of the crucial element of his identity. After the procession passes, he recognizes that he cannot stay in the town, and asks the way to the ferry.

Robin, however, does not seem to despair in spite of the loss of his
ambition. He shows his cool analysis that "[Major Molineux] will scarce desire to see [his] face again" (231), and asks "rather dryly" the way to the ferry. He seems to recover his self-confidence when he returns to himself after the procession passes. Although he has lost an element of his identity, the Major's authority, he still relies on the other two elements, especially on "shrewdness." He considers that with what he believes his abilities to be, he will be able to rise in the world somewhere even if he cannot in the town. His misconception of his own identity brings an optimistic view and protects him from despair. Accordingly what Robin obtains in the end is nothing but the recognition that he is isolated in the town and cannot stay here. Still having the same misconception of his identity as before, he is ready to go on a journey looking for another "Major Molineux."

III

Although Hoffman asserts that Robin has learned nothing except that his self-reliance is shaken, Robin has certainly learned that he is marginal in the town and has no place there. But it is to this extent that he has learned, and he has not yet reached the correct recognition of his situation. After the procession leaves, Robin asks the kindly gentleman the way to the ferry. Namely he considers that he can find his place only if he goes somewhere else. The kindly gentleman's words would lead Robin in the correct recognition:

'You have then adopted a new subject of inquiry?' observed his companion, with a smile.

'Why, yes, Sir,' replied Robin, rather dryly.

'Thanks to you, and to my other friends, I have at last met my kinsman, and he will scarce desire to see my face again. I begin to grow weary of a town life, Sir. Will you show me the way to the ferry?'

'No, my good friend Robin, not to-night, at least,' said the gentleman.
'Some few days hence, if you continue to wish it, I will speed you on your journey. Or, if you prefer to remain with us, perhaps, as you are a shrewd youth, you may rise in the world, without the help of your kinsman, Major Molineux.' (231)

Various interpretations are placed on the kindly gentleman's comments here. Terence Martin and Roger P. Wallins take it as kind and legitimate advice. Gross and Carpenter go one step further and read it as a view of bright future. The critics who read Robin's degradation in the end of the tale interpret the comment as inviting Robin to spiritual ruin. In order to interpret the kindly gentleman's comment correctly, we must first examine "the kindly gentleman" himself.

"The kindly gentleman" is an idiosyncratic existence among the characters in the tale. He alone enters the stage in the last of the tale, while all the other characters appear in the first half. He alone does not participate in the night's festivities, although he seems to be familiar with the circumstances of the town. When the characters' laughter is introduced one after another under Robin's eyes, there is no laughter from the gentleman. He is the only character that sympathizes with Robin and that is affirmatively estimated by the narrator as "a gentleman in his prime, of open, intelligent, cheerful, and altogether pre-possessing countenance" (224). The idiosyncrasy of this character is due to peculiarity of creation of the character. Unlike the other characters, he is an embodiment of the narrator.

In addition to his observer's role, which G. R. Thompson emphasizes after inspecting the words and actions of the kindly gentleman, his attitude toward both the crowd and Robin has points in common with the narrator. The unsympathetic attitude of the narrator toward the colonial people appears in the introductory paragraph of the tale:

The people looked most jealous scrutiny to the exercise of power, which
did not emanate from themselves, and they usually rewarded the rulers with slender gratitude, for the compliances, by which, in softening their instructions from beyond the sea, they had incurred the reprehension of those who gave them. (208)

Furthermore the description of the crowd who take Major Molineux away after Robin’s encounter with him obviously indicates the narrator’s antipathy to them:

On they went, like fiends that throng in mockery round some dead potentate, mighty no more, but majestic still in his agony. On they went, in counterfeit pomp, in senseless uproar, in frenzied merriment, trampling all on an old man’s heart. On swept the tumult, and left a silent street behind. (230)

Although the kindly gentleman’s words do not go so far as to allude to his antipathy toward the crowd, he is the only person among all the characters except Robin that is not involved in lynching Major Molineux. Though conversant with the circumstances of the town, he neither participates in the procession nor in the circle of laughter. He draws a clear line of demarcation between himself and the crowd, which corresponds to the attitude of the narrator.

As for the attitude toward Robin, the narrator is both close to him and at the same time detached to some extent. He steps into Robin’s mind and describes the night adventure from Robin’s point of view, but he also narrates what Robin can never say.17 When Robin is addressed by the innkeeper at the tavern, he thinks “the man sees a family likeness! the rogue has guessed that I am related to the Major!” (213) And the following comment that “[Robin] had hitherto experienced little superfluous civility” (213) can never be made by Robin. It is the narrator’s own comment. What clarifies the distance between the narrator and Robin is the narrator’s
use of the term “shrewdness.” The narrator repeats this term seven times including its synonym, and every time he uses it ironically. Although “shrewdness” is a part of Robin’s identity and an important quality for him, it is obvious that he is not actually shrewd. He wrongly interprets almost every mystery he meets. Nevertheless, the narrator reiterates the term so often that a dramatic irony increasingly deepens. In other words, the narrator calls Robin “a shrewd youth” though he knows Robin’s stupidity; therefore there is a psychological distance between Robin and the narrator.

On the other hand, the kindly gentleman, though sympathizing with Robin, also keeps some distance from Robin. While he asks Robin various questions, he never answers directly Robin’s questions. When Robin asks him if he knows the double-faced man, he answers, “Not intimately,” but continue, “I believe you may trust his word” (225). When he first hears the name of Major Molineux from Robin, he only says “Major Molineux! The name is not altogether strange to me” (224), but later he says “there is reason to believe that [Major Molineux] will pass by, in the course of a very few moments” (226-27). The gentleman does not give the entire picture of the night to Robin, although he knows all the circumstances.

Thus the narrator and the kindly gentleman have some points in common in terms of the attitude toward both the town’s people and Robin, and they both play an observer’s role. Accordingly it is not unnatural to consider the kindly gentleman is an embodiment of the narrator.

The merit of this device is to make it possible for the narrator to talk to the protagonist directly. The kindly gentleman’s direct narration to Robin causes errors in Robin’s recognition to emerge from obscurity. Therefore, the last words of the gentleman have vast significance and they should be carefully examined. Let me quote his last words again:

‘No, my good friend Robin, not to-night, at least,’ said the gentleman.
"Some few days hence, if you continue to wish it, I will speed you on your journey. Or, if you prefer to remain with us, perhaps, as you are a shrewd youth, you may rise in the world, without the help of your kinsman, Major Molineux." (231) (Italics mine)

Although several critics base their arguments of Robin's step up and a view of his bright future on this last clause, we should not overlook the adverbal clause just before the final clause. Namely the gentleman says that Robin may rise in the world because he is a shrewd youth. The term "shrewd," however, has been repeatedly used by the narrator ironically, and since the gentleman is an embodiment of the narrator, "a shrewd youth" here is also ironically used. The kindly gentleman suggests that Robin may not rise in the world even if he stays in the town.

Robin has come to the town because his kinsman Major Molineux dwells there, and now that Major Molineux is exiled, if Robin stays in the town, he has to live with the people who have exiled his kinsman. However, he cannot identify himself with the mob, which is indicated by the fact that he instinctively clings to the stone post and does not go with the procession. He has no place to live and is isolated in the town. Robin himself recognizes the reality so well that in order to leave the town he asks the way to the ferry after the procession goes away. The destination in Robin's mind must be his home country, for it is the only place that has ever accepted him. In spite of his expectation, his home already has no place for him, which is suggested by the scene in his reverie that he alone is shut out of his home. Robin does not notice it or completely forgets it. Then what if he goes any place that is neither the town nor his home? In the dialogue with the kindly gentleman, Robin remarks: "I have laughed very little since I left home, Sir, ..." (226). Namely he has not discovered a community which he has laughter in common with. Wherever he goes, he is marginal and an isolated being.

Robin is not accepted by any community and isolated from society. At the
same time, he is alienated in an existential sense. As for the three bases of his past identity, his kinsman's authority has disappeared, and "shrewdness" and physical strength still remain. Of the two, the "shrewdness" which he is especially proud of and greatly relies on is his illusion. No one thinks that he is shrewd except Robin himself. In other words, what he considers his identity is false and he does not recognize its falseness. Actually he has nothing to depend upon in his life. He is in a state of self-alienation and has to seek for what he himself is before seeking for his place to live. It should be "a new subject of inquiry" that the kindly gentleman mentions. Robin, however, does not understand the necessity of the inquiry. When he is asked by the gentleman if he has adopted a new subject of inquiry, he only answers that he begins to grow weary of town life and wants to go home. He does not notice his serious situation of self-alienation. He has lost his identity and is hollow to himself. He does not find a community he should belong to, wherever he may go. There is no way of getting out of his present fix.

Although he is in such a serious situation, Robin is not conscious of his reality. The kindly gentleman's role is to make Robin face the real situation and recognize it. After the procession leaves, Robin's first remark is a question about the way to the ferry. To his question, the gentleman does not answer directly and responds with another question: "You have, then, adopted a new subject of inquiry?" "A new subject of inquiry" here means a new basis of identity instead of the whereabouts of Major Molineux. By posing the question, the kindly gentleman gives Robin a hint about the necessity of seeking his identity. Robin again asks the way to the ferry, but the gentleman will not tell it to him: "No, my good friend Robin, not to-night, at least." Here the gentleman suggests to Robin, who has found he cannot stay in the town and tries to go home, that it is no use going home since there is no place for Robin even in his home. His remarking that: "some few days hence, if you continue to wish it, I will speed you on your journey" is a
suggestion that Robin study his state for a while and go on a journey seeking his identity after recognizing his real situation. The gentleman does not say he will help Robin if he prefers to remain in the town. Since the remark “as you are a shrewd youth, you may rise in the world” is an ironical expression as stated above, the gentleman’s real intention is to insinuate that Robin is not shrewd and that it is no use staying in the town. In the end, what the kindly gentleman truly wants to say is that Robin should watch his own state closely and consider how seriously he is alienated.

IV

Through the ritual of the humiliation of Major Molineux, Robin has recognized that he is isolated in the town, but he is not yet conscious of how seriously he is alienated. The kindly gentleman, an embodiment of the narrator of the tale, tries to make Robin and the reader recognize the hero’s real situation. With his identity upset and no community to belong to, Robin is in the state of self-alienation and social isolation. His present situation has no prospect for his future, neither toward a bright new life nor a dark degenerate one. It is an extremely closed and fixed situation. Robin’s inability to recognize it makes his situation more serious.

Hawthorne states in “Wakefield”:

> Amid the seeming confusion of our mysterious world, individuals are so nicely adjusted to a system, and systems to one another, and to a whole, that, by stepping aside for a moment, a man exposes himself to a fearful risk of losing his place forever. 18

Robin leaves his home and steps aside out of the community, and yet due to the downfall of Major Molineux, he has completely lost a community to belong to. After Wakefield in the caprice of the moment hides out and “[dissevers] himself from the world—[vanishes]—[gives] up his place and
privileges with living men, without being admitted among the dead” (138), he
still thinks of himself as follows: “Yet, changed as he was, he would seldom
be conscious of it, but deem himself the same man as ever…” (138). Like
Wakefield, Robin too is unconscious of such a great change of himself and
considers that he can solve the present predicament by moving somewhere
else. Actually, however, Robin is another Wakefield, another outcast of the
universe, who is to wander seeking his place.

NOTES

1 Q. D. Leavis, “Hawthorne as Poet,” Sewanee Review, LIX (Spring, 1951),
179-205.
2 Roy Harvey Pearce, “Hawthorne and the Sense of the Past, or the Immortality
of Major Molineux,” ELH, XXI (Dec., 1954), 327-49.
3 Michael J. Colacurcio, The Province of Piety: Moral History in Nathaniel
4 Simon O. Lesser, “The Image of the Father: A Reading of ‘My Kinsman, Major
Molineux’ and ‘I Want to Know Why,’” Partisan Review, XXII (Summer, 1955),
372-90.
5 Frederick Crews, The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne’s Psychological Themes,
6 Seymour L. Gross, “Hawthorne’s ‘My Kinsman, Major Molineux’: History as
Moral Adventure,” Nineteenth-Century Fiction, XII (Sept., 1957), 97-109. Among
the critics who take the same position as Gross are Richard C. Carpenter and
Goodman Brown’ and ‘My Kinsman, Major Molineux,’” Nineteenth-Century Fiction,
XXIV (1969), 45-56, and Fogle, Hawthorne’s Fiction: The Light and the Dark,
(University of Oklahoma Press, 1964), 104-16.
Frank Doubleday also considers what Robin obtains is moral evil. See
1972), 235-38.
11 Hoffman, 58.
15 G. R. Thompson points out that "it is as if the unnamed kindly stranger were an embodiment of the 'third-person' narrator of the tale,..." and asserts that "the stranger is, *not* Hawthorne, but a symbolic figuration of, a substitute agent for, a Hawthorne: that is, an *author figure*, symbolically present in the narrative." G. R. Thompson, *The Art of Authorial Presence*, (Durham: Duke UP, 1993), 155-56.
16 Thompson, 156-57.
17 Roger P. Wallins asserts that Robin and the narrator have the same point of view and the narrator's analysis of Robin is a self-reflective one by Robin, but Wallins ignores the distance between Robin and the narrator.
18 Nathaniel Hawthorne, 9: 140. All the references to "Wakefield" correspond to this edition.