

The Psychology of Humiliation: Mann's "Mario and the Magician" and Hawthorne's "Major Molineux, My Kinsman"

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Curiously, the psychological impact of being thoroughly and devastatingly humiliated has not received much theoretical literary exposition and interpretation. Yet, no one has escaped that fate at some point in their lives. Moreover, it may involve whole nations and peoples. Some fiction writers, however, have recognized the power that may be achieved in the destructiveness of imposed degradation on either a personal or collective scale. Hawthorne and Mann both understood the vulnerabilities of people under the spell of more powerfully willed individuals who prey upon their victims' frangible identities. Hawthorne's story (1832) offers an intriguing aspect of the psychological phenomenon. Robin, a teenager from the country, seeks out his kinsman, a once powerful political figure in a colonial town resembling Boston. The townspeople, whom he encounters, mock his confused and vain efforts. Eventually, however, he witnesses a procession of revelers with drums and "rough," cacophonous music. Among them is Major Molineux, covered with tar and feathers. When the Major and the boy's eyes meet in mutual shame, the crowd laughs uproariously. Then Robin joins in the hilarity. It is as if his emergence from humiliation were announcing his welcoming into the community.

In the second example, Mario, an Italian resort hotel waiter on the Adriatic, becomes the final victim of Cipolla, a crippled, evil-minded mesmerist, who achieves theatrical success by shaming members of his audience. Like the Hawthorne celebrants, the spectators laugh and clap vigorously to see the puppet-like cavortings that Cipolla's hypnotized subjects perform at his command. But the fatal encounter with Mario reveals not just the magician's command of another's will but also the violent reaction of his victim when he awakens and realizes his humiliation and acts accordingly. The story, published in 1929, seems almost a harbinger of Hitler's seductive, spellbinding powers. The work of William Ian Miller, professor of law, Evelin Gerda Lindner, psychiatrist, and others outside the literary field will inform the paper with the hope of bridging the gap between literary criticism and these other social sciences.