

# Interpreting *The Clockmaker* from the Perspective of Greenblatt's Cultural Poetics

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Thomas-C. Haliburton (1796-1865) establishes a literary fame as “the first Canadian writer to establish an international reputation” and a great humorist, with the publication of his masterpiece *The Clockmaker* (1836). Centering on Nova Scotia, the origin place of Canadian literature and the first British colony in Canada, the book conveys deep concerns on local reality under the British colonization in the 1830s. Haliburton as a Loyalist firmly opposes violent revolution against the British Empire whereas promotes gradual evolution in the colony. This is a typical demonstration of ideological contradictions in colonies. Greenblatt's Cultural Poetics generally explores political consciousness and ideology in literary texts. It surpasses the dichotomy mode of Western radical ideology and never views the relationship between domination and resistance as a simple confrontation. From the perspective of Greenblatt's Culture Poetics, this essay interprets the process of “improvisation of power”, “subversion” and “containment” in the colony reflected in *The Clockmaker* in order to explore Nova Scotians' awakening of independence awareness in the 1830s.

*Keywords:* *The Clockmaker*, Greenblatt's Cultural Poetics, independence awareness

## Introduction

Haliburton is a Nova Scotian judge and historian, whereas his great fame comes from his literary works. Characterized by application of dialects and oral proverbs, his humorous narrative style poses great influence in early Canadian literature and on other writers. He writes series of books, among which *The Clockmaker* introduces his most well-known literary character the clockmaker Sam Slick, an American merchants with paradoxical characteristics.

*The Clockmaker* is a collection of 33 stories about the experience of Slick peddling his clocks in British Nova Scotia and criticizing the colonial situation in depth. Taking Nova Scotia as a miniature of pre-Confederation Canada in the 19th century, the novel portrays a multidimensional picture of living conditions in Nova Scotia where people confronted with oligarchy from British government and oppression from the rich. As a Loyalist, Haliburton is anxious to witness the colony become a more powerful member in the British imperial system, and Nova Scotians be given equal rights as British citizens.

Greenblatt's Cultural Poetics pays great attention to the historical context on which culture depends. It generally carries out cultural criticism in the way of political interpretation and ideological representation. Focusing on Nova Scotians' political ideology in the 1830s, this essay holds that through anecdotes in each single story, *The Clockmaker* reflects the oppression in Nova Scotia colony under various "improvisation of power" and common people's rebellious spirit striving to subvert authorities. The novel also expounds British Empire's "containment" on the colonial subversive forces to consolidate the whole imperial system.

### **"Improvisation of Power" in *The Clockmaker***

In Greenblatt's essay entitled "Invisible Bullets", he declares that "we may add that the power of which we are speaking is in effect an allocation method—a way of distributing resources to some and denying them to others, critical resources that prolong life or, in their absence, extinguish it" (Stephen, 1980, p. 51). Improvisation is "the ability both to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one's own scenario" (Stephen, 1980, p. 227). Greenblatt's comment on Iago's improvisation of power in *Othello* showcases the motto of the improviser: "I am not what I am" ("Improvisation of Power", p. 5). Through role playing, improvisers insinuate themselves into preexisting political religious and psychic structures of natives and turn structures to their advantage.

In accordance with the *Constitutional Act of 1791*, powers in colonial government in Nova Scotia were held by the Governor and Executive Council and Legislative Council. The Governor, residing always in Britain, appeared rarely in British colonies in Canada and thus the two councils were actually responsible for colonial affairs. Positions in these two councils were usually taken and occupied by officials, clergies, businessmen, landlords who were intimate to the British Royalty, whereas ordinary people in Nova Scotia were not supposed to concern with politics. Under such circumstance, Nova Scotians could neither participate in election nor gain justice easily.

In *The Clockmaker*, British colonists consider themselves more civilized and advanced than Nova Scotians, and distort the image of the colonized people by demeaning them as uncultivated people that can't manage their internal affairs independently. On the excuse of civilizing the colony, British government manipulates the governmental institutions in Nova Scotia exclusively.

To British colonists, ordinary local people have no power in the colony, no brains for politics, so naturally they are deprived of rights to vote and to be elected. Far from selecting prominent representatives in the colony, the colonial government's manipulation on the election power doesn't take any effect to the welfare for Nova Scotians. The election is a costly power competition game among different political parties. Competitions for Council-man are at the expense of weakening each party's opponents, causes abundant unnecessary loss. Furthermore, these candidates merely vote for large salaries, for being the great people in Halifax.

Judicial procedure in the colony also calls for immediate improvement, which can be reflected by the judges' abuse of lynchings and partiality. In the fifth story, "Justice Pettifog", Slick mentions lynch law and describes the punishment in detail that "they would make a carpenter's plumb bob of him, and hang him from the church steeple, to try if it were perpendicular" (Haliburton, 1836, p. 18). The application of lynch law in the court is a violation of sanctity of just law.

Under the oligarchy from British government, the Governor and two councils are given the supreme authority to manipulate election and judgment. "Their sweeping authority over local matters similar to their broad and discretionary powers in England" (Thomas, 2012, p. 95). The British colonists' absolute power in the colony excludes Nova Scotians from the opportunity to decide their own matters.

When Nova Scotians suffered the predicament caused by the manipulation from British government, they had to bear the bully from the rich simultaneously. In 1825, Halifax Banking Company was established as the first bank in Nova Scotia. Its founders aimed to build a single commercial group controlling money and credit for the entire colony. By issuing its own currency, the company gradually developed into a commercial monopolist. Joseph Howe, a young publisher in Nova Scotia claimed that the bank "create one currency for the rich and another for the poor" (Jade, 2013, p. 247). The rich were holders of hard money, gold, and silver specie, but the poor were paid very little paper money after heavy physical labor. In the context of depreciating paper currency, the rich became wealthier and powerful, whereas the poor became needy and powerless to stop the devaluation of paper currency in their hands.

In *The Clockmaker*, when a Nova Scotian is reduced to poverty, he is very likely to be bought and sold like black slaves. In the twenty-seventh story, "The White Nigger", Slick witnesses the "trade in white slaves" scene in which the auction festivity is fraught with brutality, sorrow and crying. Through the description of this scene, Haliburton depicts the plight of the poverty-stricken white. For the rich, their economic competence can be explained by intrinsic genes. They contend that poor Nova Scotians are ignorant of money value, and thus are even unworthy of owing their whiteness. To some extent, "trade in white slaves" reflects the truth that money determines one's value and race in the colony.

Apart from the cruel "trade in white slaves", the rich greedily occupy a large quantity of resources. In the twenty-first story, "Setting up for Governor", the scene old couples John and his wife and a half-naked child in a ramshackle house displays Nova Scotians' living condition in poverty. What the poor little boy eats is a small bin of poor, watery, yellow potatoes in the corner, because there isn't any utensil for cooking or eating. "Starvation is wrote plain on his cheek, skinny fingers, and sunk eyes—went right straight to the heart" (Haliburton, 1836, p. 99). On the contrary, judges, banks and lawyers swallow all there venues for building bridges, roads and schools in Nova Scotia colony. As Slick comments in the twenty-eighth story, "Fire in The Diary", "great folks" always take care to build a big house, because it shows him "pretty well to do in the world" (Haliburton, 1836, p. 135). Meanwhile, they hold a posture of arrogant superiority to persuade all creatures purify spirit, to work harder, to be responsible for improving situation. However, these "great folks" don't confess the fact that their wealth owes to their privileges of controlling resources occupation.

Greenblatt claims in his essay "The Improvisation of Power" that "a successful improvisational career depends upon role playing, which is in turn allied to the capacity" (Stephen, 1980, p. 2). Superficially, two forces of British government and the rich proclaim their respective superiority in civilization and intelligence from different angles, but actually, they play enlightening and civilizing roles to legalize their joint oppression to the wretched Nova Scotians.

### “Subversion”: Suspicion of Authorities

Greenblatt's Cultural Poetics has internalized Michel Foucault's fragmentary history discourse, concerning for “histories” instead of “History”. Rather than advocating for a radical overturn to authority, Greenblatt maintains that the purpose of “subversion” is to question the ideology raised by dominant power and to listen to voices from common people, and disapproves single narration of history, with potential to overshadow the roles of marginalized characters in the shaping of history. Greenblatt believes that “the insistence on contingency, the sense if not of a break then at least of a swerve in the ordinary and well-understood succession of events” (Stephen, 2007, p. 7), which might explain why most of his works begin with anecdotes.

A literary comment on Haliburton's writing proves the applicability of Greenblatt's concept that “subversion” is always embodied in anecdotes to interpret the novel. It observes that “Haliburton's characteristic mode was always satire, and his subject, as well as his intention, was to show Nova Scotians the truth about themselves, usually by juxtaposing the attitudes and behavior of two or more related groups of people” (George, 1985, p. 90). In *The Clockmaker*, Slick's recordings of voices from the common Nova Scotians are of great significance. Opposite to the authority, these people are on the other end of the balance scale of power. Through depicting daily life of these marginalized characters, the novel reveals their struggles to pursue the same equal rights as other British citizens in Great Britain. Nova Scotians' endeavors to resist oppression from the colonial government and hierarchy system obviously show the sprout of their suspicion of authorities.

In the 19th century, on account of the oligarchy of the British government, the Governor and two councils didn't take Nova Scotians' interests into consideration, which resulted in the lack of guarantee for people's rights in the colony. In order to urge Nova Scotians to deal with their own matters in the colony, Haliburton expressed his hope that “the colonial elite in Nova Scotia to be treated on an equal footing with their British counterparts” (Cynthia, 2014, p. 220), and weaved several anecdotes about Nova Scotians' skepticism towards British government's authority in *The Clockmaker*.

In the twenty-first story, “Setting up for Governor”, in order to become a governor, lawyer Crowningshield and his wife have to cut down their living cost. When Slick visits their family, they even don't have a candle or a decent tea set in the room, because they choose to sacrifice all comfort to be the “first rung in the ladder” (Haliburton, 1836, p. 96) and can't afford anything else. Crowningshield believes that being a governor means “a man to govern his own family” (p. 97), and his representative perception further implies that elites among Nova Scotians have realized the power manipulation of British government. By dedicating himself in the political arena, Crowningshield expresses his expectation to be the master on his native land.

In the fifth story, “Justice Pettifog”, teacher Dennis's pursuit for justice in court is a sign of his political consciousness to disclose injustice in judiciary department of British government. In the case of Dennis's and Hare's property dispute, the judge makes difference between them in accordance to who bribe him. The judge is a rascal in nature, so he would never make a fair judgment. Audiences in this court whisper to condemn his corruption but dare not to speak it loudly. Although the judge threatens Dennis before the trial: “make less noise or I'll commit you” (Haliburton, 1836, p. 19), Dennis sternly rejects the unfair sentence, formidably argues with the judge, bravely challenges the judge's authority in the court. He asks his neighbor to be a witness to prove that

he teaches Hare's children without any payment. Moreover, Dennis proves that tuition fees of Hare's children have already exceeded the cost of his accommodation.

The purpose of Nova Scotians' resistance against the British government's oligarchy through struggle in election and pursuit for justice is to question the government authority. In the above anecdotes, both Crowningshield and Dennis are spokesmen pursuing equal rights in the British colony.

In the 19th century, the economic crisis intensified the existing discontent of the poor to the rich in the unequal hierarchical system. In *The Clockmaker*, the poor's resistance to the rich as well as farmers' struggle for fair resources embody their increasingly strong sense of equality.

In addition to the niggers' song for liberty, poor Nova Scotians express their dissatisfaction to the rich by different actions. In the twentieth story, "Sister Sall's Courtship", the young man Jim's love for Sall is a direct disregard for class boundaries. Though his scheme to run off to Rhode Island with Sall has been discovered, what he does for his lover displays his attempt to overcome class contradictions; In the twenty-eighth story, "Fire in the Dairy", Beck's trick on madam Blake is in fact his silent resistance against slavery. By showing the ignorance and foolishness of the madam, Beck proves that poverty has nothing to do with genes, and all people regardless of being rich or poor are equal in nature.

Several farmers realize the class division and class distinction in the Nova Scotia colony largely depend on the amount of resources one occupying, hence they believe that through individual efforts and talents, their social status can be changed. In the twenty-second story, "Too Much in the Fire", Haliburton narrates the painstaking struggle of several farmers who strive to improve their living conditions through hardworking though Ami Cuttle and Thomas Rigby encounter natural disaster and man-made calamities.

Greenblatt believes in the potential of anecdotes: "anecdotes are seized in passing from the swirl of experiences and given some shape, a shape whose provisionality still marks them as contingent—otherwise we would give them the larger, grander name of history—but also makes them available for telling and retelling" (qtd. in Paul, 2011, pp. 104, 84). In *The Clockmaker*, unprivileged people play crucial role in exploring the spirit of Nova Scotians' subversive spirit in the hierarchical system. Through the description of laborious efforts of the poor and farmers, the novel praises the encouragement and intelligence of Nova Scotians and depicts their awakening to question the unequal hierarchical system in the colony.

### **"Containment": Limited Independence**

Greenblatt demonstrates how the power paradigm operates through his analysis of Shakespearean dramas. Based on his theory, "subversion" refers to questioning the social ideology of the ruling class, so that the dissatisfaction of the ordinary people can be expressed; and "containment" points to confine "subversion" within the scope of permission. Jointly, he indicates the "subversion-containment" paradigm in the essay "Invisible Bullets" that "Indeed the subversiveness is the very product of that power and furthers its ends" (Stephen, 1988, p. 48). Without jeopardizing the fundamental interests of the ruling class, "subversion" and "containment" can coexist together, and "subversion" will be contained to consolidate the authority of ruling class at length. This power paradigm convincingly expounds the relationship between Nova Scotia and Great Britain in *The Clockmaker*.

Nova Scotia, as a colony under the British Empire in the 19th century, grew gradually stronger with the military and economic support of Great Britain. To some extent, the British Empire assumed the role of the protector of Nova Scotia. Loyalists in Nova Scotia, steadfastly insisted that the colony should gain an equal and impartial status in the Empire system through reformation. In *The Clockmaker*, Haliburton reappears this standpoint as an “*evolution* rather than *revolution*” (Kenworthy, 2009, p. 234). It is just in such a process of “*evolution*”, Nova Scotia’s subversive forces are contained by Great Britain, consequently accelerating the formation of a more consolidated Empire.

In *The Clockmaker*, Loyalists believe that monarchy is the most suitable form for an integral government. In their views, America’s break from the Empire endangers the imperial integrity. Reverend Hopewell who in favor of monarchy, declares that “I’d rather live under an absolute monarch any day than in a democracy, for one tyrant is better nor a thousand; oppression is better no anarchy, and hard law better nor no law at all” (Haliburton, 1836, p. 18). By citing American Independence as a negative case, Hopewell affirms the advantage of monarchy in the aspect of the unity and cohesiveness of the colony. In short, he advocates the monarchy for its avoidance of endless squabbles over state rights.

Notably, hierarchical system based primarily on the gap between poor and rich in Nova Scotia breaks the boundary between black and white skins. In the novel, poor people struggle to gain freedom and possess resources reveals their tough endeavors to subvert the class division setting in commercial monopoly by a private bank. However, in Loyalists’ opinion, monetary monopoly policy is able to help stabilize the economy. In the thirty-second story, “Too Much Irons in the Fire”, Slick attributes Rigby’s failure in the struggle for more resources to the bad time and proves that bank isn’t responsible for this consequence. He maintains that “As for banks, they can’t hurt a country nor great, I guess, except by breaking, and I consait there is no fear of your breaking” (Haliburton, 1836, p. 159).

In spite of various efforts from Nova Scotians to express their discontent to the governmental oligarchy and hierarchical system in the colony, it is arduous to pose threat to their power. In order to safeguard its colonial authority and interests, British government intentionally permits Nova Scotia’s subversive actions to consolidate its own authority by showing legitimacy and rationality of its imperial system.

Undeniably and inevitably, to a large extent, American entrepreneurial and industrial spirits infused energy into the formation and reformation of economy in the Nova Scotia colony. Just as Northrop Frey contends that “Nova Scotia had nothing to learn politically from the States but it had a lot to learn economically” (Northrop, 2003, p. 316).

In the novel, Slick boasts the “go ahead” spirit of their folks and attributes their economic success to the introduction of railroad:

The folks of Halifax have run down, and they’ll never go, to all eternity, till they are wound up into motion; the works are all good, and it is plaguy well cased and set; it only wants a key. Put this railroad into operation, and the activity it will inspire into business, the new life it will give the place, will surprise you (Haliburton, 1836, p. 26).

Slick compares the function of railroad in economic development as the role springs play in the operation of clocks. However, folks in Nova Scotia know little about building railroad. Slick’s comments in the novel

embodies Haliburton's a keen insight into the interrelationship between railways and the development of the world economy.

Simultaneously, Haliburton is sober to the fact that agriculture is a basic industry in Nova Scotia. He praises natural advantages in the colony, especially its abundant water resources, and maintains that even though attaching great importance to business and trade, agriculture should not be abandoned. The twenty-second story, "Too Much Iron in the Fire", narrates a story of farmer Ami Cuttle who neglects his farming land but mortgages farm to take up fur trade. Subsequently, he suffers failure in trade with nothing left to support his family, and pays a costly price to learn the significance of agriculture. In the twenty-sixth story, "The Minister Horn Mug", Reverend Hopewell further stresses the significance of agriculture: "A republic is only calculated for an enlightened and virtuous people, and folks chiefly in the farming line. That is an innocent and happy vocation. Agriculture was ordained by Him as made us, for our chief occupation" (Haliburton, 1836, p. 126). Through the two stories, Haliburton calls for a jointly development with the combination of agriculture, industry, and business and lead his native land to a well-organized and balanced condition.

The concept of Containment has dual dimension in *The Clockmaker*. In one aspect, Nova Scotians' subversive forces are oppressed by the British Empire in the process of colonization; but in other aspect, with the management in political and economic areas by the British colonists and under the military shelter of Great Britain, the Nova Scotia colony gain opportunities to develop quickly and safely. But unquestionably, from the angle of establishing a sovereign nation, Nova Scotians should eventually achieve independence from "containment".

### Conclusion

This essay centers on exploring the awakening of Canadian independence awareness in Nova Scotia colony in the 19th century under a variety of powers suppressed by the British colonial government and the rich in *The Clockmaker*. Haliburton as an insightful and foresighted writer and local official subtly observes the social reality and contradictions in Nova Scotia—a miniature of pre-Confederation Canada, through a deliberately literary weaving of 33 stories with a swarm of typical characters in typical settings. From the perspective of Greenblatt's Cultural Poetics, the interpretation of *The Clockmaker* in the paradigm of "improvisation of power", "subversion", and "containment" contribute to representing the novel's profound concerns about Canada's social reality and political appeal, along with the wishes for its developing direction and scheme before the Confederation. Remarkably, all the themes highlighted in the novel around two centuries ago, remain practical and significant in the current context of Canada in domestic and international affairs, and meanwhile, provide references for reflecting and constructing harmonious relations among different countries in the era of globalization.

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