

"young goodman brown" by nathaniel hawthorne essay sample

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"Young Goodman Brown" is a short story by the American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne. The story made its first appearance in the New England Magazine for April 1835 and was collected in Mosses from an Old Manse in 1846. The story is set in the Puritan New England, a common setting for Hawthorne's works, and like most of the stories in Mosses, "Young Goodman Brown" examines Hawthorne's favorite themes: the loss of religious faith, presence of temptation, and social ills of Puritan communities. These themes, along with the story's dark, surreal ending, make "Young Goodman Brown" one of the Hawthorne's most popular short stories. In order to understand "Young Goodman Brown" we must, like the author himself go back some four hundred years into the past, to the 17th century, in the time of the Puritans. In this story Hawthorne references three dark events from the Puritans' history: the Salem Witch Trials of 1692, the Puritan intolerance of the Quakers, and King Philip's War. It is necessary to point out the main characteristics and beliefs of the Puritan teachings for the better understanding of the society to which the protagonist belongs to.

Puritan culture emphasized the need for introspection and the strict accounting for one's feelings as well as one's deeds. They believed in the conversion experience, an epiphany, which signified that a person was chosen to be among God's elect, and this belief was the center of evangelical experience. The Puritan theology rested primarily upon the doctrine of predestination and the inefficaciousness of good works; it separated men sharply and certainly into two groups, the saved and the damned, and, technically, at least, was not concerned with any subtler shadings. The words of the Bible, as they interpreted them, were the origin

of many Puritan cultural ideals, especially regarding the roles of men and women in the community. According to this teaching both sexes were sinful for they carried the stain of primeval sin, the sins of Adam and Eve, which in Puritan eyes, extended to whole humanity. The Puritan church insisted that its congregants lead godly lives and exhibit a clear understanding of the main principles of their Christian faith, and they also had to demonstrate that they had experienced true evidence of the workings of God's grace in their souls. Only those who gave a convincing account of such an epiphany could be admitted to full church membership, and could have been called God's elect.

Order in the family fundamentally structured Puritan belief. Authority and obedience were the main characteristics which constituted the relationship between Puritan parents and their children. The historical events in the story are not central, but they inform the action. Hawthorne was very much interested in them, and while researching the local history of New England he made a very important discovery. His 17th century ancestors from his father's side were important political and religious leaders of Salem. "Young Goodman Brown" was influenced by this Puritan heritage. Hawthorne looked on his ancestors both with a sense of pride as well as guilt. They were the source of his pride because they belonged to a prominent and accomplished generation, but he also felt ashamed because they took part in witch trials and were very intolerant towards the Quakers.

In "Young Goodman Brown" the devil tells Brown that "I helped your grandfather, the constable, when he lashed the Quaker woman so smartly"

(Hawthorne 17). With this story the author is criticizing the monstrous witch trials and inflexible Puritan doctrine of the 17th century. Apart from its historical context in "Young Goodman Brown", some critics consider that it was also influenced by his personality which in the time this story was written had already acquired a somewhat skeptical look on life, full of dualities; and these mental and moral beliefs are revealed in the story (Johnson 35). Like his protagonist, Hawthorne is also struggling with his moral convictions (Donaldson 2133). Analysis of the Major Characters

The characters in this story are generic, they belong to the category of "flat characters", for they do not change in the course of the narrative, nor are they elaborated and characterized in an extensive way, but are built around a single idea which represents the core of the story. They are also allegorical, combined together to make an all extending metaphor of the narrative and their function is implied in their names, which are highly symbolical. The entire narrative is a representation of the human soul's struggling with temptation and doubt, and with the loss of faith and its consequences. "Young Goodman Brown" is an allegory about the discovery of evil, and the fall of man, from which Hawthorne illustrates his view of the doomed fallibility and hypocrisy in the Puritan religion.

1. Young Goodman Brown

Much of this story's extensive body of criticism centers on its title's character, whose name is highly symbolical. The first part of the name, Young, signifies inexperience, innocence and ignorance of certain knowledge – knowledge of sin and of evil in the world and the people that surround

him. The journey he takes into the forest could be interpreted as an act of maturing, growing up. The second part of the name, Goodman was a title used in the 17th century, and it was applied to a husband or the master of the household. And finally, Brown, which is his family name and a very common one, purposes in the sense that he can be compared to Everyman, the representative of the whole humanity; also, brown, as a color, is a mixture of white and black – the two colors as symbols represent two sides of humanity, two oppositions, good and evil; it can also stand for innocence which is tainted by experience and evil. Young Goodman Brown could also be compared to the first man, Adam, who was tempted by the devil to eat the forbidden fruit from the tree of knowledge, and in this story we have Brown going into the whole forest, facing the whole forest. Like Adam in the book of Genesis, Goodman cannot help himself from wanting to know what lies behind the mystery of the forest.

And like Eve, he is rewarded for his curiosity with the truth that changes his life for the worse. In the course of the ceremony, the Devil tells Brown and Faith that their eyes will now be opened to the wickedness of themselves and those around them. Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden of Eden, and forced to undergo all the trials of being mortal, human, and Goodman Brown returns from the forest to find that the joy of life has been taken away from him. He has become suspicious of those around him, even the person closest to him, his wife Faith. From this we can see that "Young Goodman Brown" also functions as an allegory of the fall of a man, which is also one of the themes of this story. At the very beginning of the narrative, before

setting out on his journey, Goodman Brown appears to be a very confident young man for he is innocent and inexperienced. Upon his return we are given the picture of a very changed man. To show how this change occurs, maybe it would be well to give a brief recording of what actually happened in the story, and through it explore our hero.

In the opening of the story it has to be noted that every word is of great importance " Young Goodman Brown came forth at sunset into the street of Salem Village; but put his head back after crossing the threshold, to exchange a parting kiss with his young wife" (Hawthorne 1) She pleads to " put off his journey until sunrise," (Hawthorne 2) but he responds that he cannot " My journey, as thou callest it, forth and back again, must needs be done ' twix now and sunrise.'" (Hawthorne 3). This nocturnal journey he takes is done under the influence of strong cravings. It is a journey each must take alone, in fear, away from home and the community, from conscious, everyday life, to the wilderness where the hidden self, the subconscious resides. It should not escape us that he did struggle for a while with the temptation that was devouring him, but finally succumbed to it. At the point of his leave he is unaware of the gravity of the step he has taken. In the woods he meets the fellow-traveler, in appearance a man who bears a great resemblance to him and who carries a staff " which bore the likeness of a great snake, so curiously wrought that it might almost be seen to twist and wriggle itself like a living serpent" (Hawthorne 12).

That this figure is a supernatural creature is made very obvious when he reprimands Goodman for being late, by remarking that " the clock of the Old

South was striking as I came through Boston, and that is full fifteen minutes ago" (Hawthorne 10). To this Brown replies " Faith kept me back a while" (Hawthorne 11). This utterance meant that he was not sure of the action he was taking; he was still struggling with the temptation, trying to overcome it. Nevertheless, they proceed, but Goodman Brown is still reluctant and at one point refuses to continue the journey, especially bearing in mind his ancestors, who were the pride of his community. To this the traveler confronts him with the truth, saying that his forebears were nothing godly in the least, telling him that he knew them, and that he helped his grandfather, the constable, " when he lashed the Quaker woman so smartly" (Hawthorne 17).

This is an autobiographical element, already mentioned in the introductory part. But, still Goodman Brown refuses to believe him, for the seed of skepticism has not yet strongly penetrated his heart. They soon overtake Goody Cloyse, " a very pious and exemplary dame" (Hawthorne 25), who had taught Goodman his catechism. That she was in the woods with the same purpose as Brown is made very clear when she starts conversing with the Devil, and telling him how she is looking forward to their nocturnal meeting, for she knows that there is a youngman to be taken into communion, and also mentioning her broomstick, saying it was stolen by " that unhanged witch, Goody Corey" (Hawthorne 31). Even though he is disillusioned with his old teacher, and in a way mentor, Brown is still reluctant in giving himself over to temptation, and refuses to proceed any farther. Unalarmed by his resistance the Devil gives him his staff to help him

on his way when he decides to proceed, and leaves him to rest for a while. The staff that Brown was given could be interpreted as the seed of doubt, planted by the Devil, leaving him to struggle with it. While waiting, Deacon Gookin and the minister of the community ride by and also obviously on their way to the coven. Brown is bewildered and is trying to pray, he cries " With heaven above and Faith below, I will yet stand firm against the devil!" (Hawthorne 45).

The moment when the protagonist gives way to desperation is when he sees one of Faith's pink ribbons fluttering down through the air. He cries " My Faith is gone!" (Hawthorne 49). This utterance, of course, has a double meaning; it means that the one person Brown cherished more than anything in the world, his bellowed wife, angelic-like Faith, has betrayed him, deceived him by making him believe so blindly in her purity. And since she is both an allegorical character, standing for Brown's faith in general, it means that he has none anymore. Feeling that he has no longer anything sacred in this world, Goodman Brown pushes on to the coven to join the damned. There he will behold everyone from the Salem Village, the good and the bad, the godly and the wicked all mixed together, joined in " one stain of guilt, one mighty blood spot" (Hawthorne 62). Brown evokes his faith one more time, trying to prevent himself and his wife from receiving the diabolical baptism, and the entire vanishes, and Brown finds himself all alone in the forest.

When Young Goodman Brown returns to Salem Village with the morning light, " staring around him like a bewildered man," (Hawthorne 69) he finds everything in perfect order, everyone going about the Lord's work. Faith

greet him at the door giving no sign of any kind of change. Goodman Brown is not sure whether the night's event was a reality or not, but this does not even matter. The doubt exists, and like a cancer growing and spreading doubt on everyone around him, poisoning everything human in him. Since his eyes have finally been open to the true, evil nature of his fellowmen he inescapably knows that what he suspected of himself is true of all men. From now on he must live with that painful knowledge, and it makes him a disillusioned, an unhappy, and a gloomy man; a man that is skeptical of everyone that surrounds him. He had no true faith, for the experience, although painful, should have made him stronger, but he succumbed to his grief and gave in to desperation, imprisoning himself in the hell of his own creation, doomed to isolation forever.

Young Goodman Brown's going into the forest could be also interpreted, as he stands for all of humanity, as an outcry against the hypocritical norms of the Puritan society; but, as he lacks the most important quality – strength of faith – he ends up as empty as a shell, bereft of any kind of emotion, without any kind of meaning in life; Goodman Brown becomes the very thing he is fighting against – a stereotypical gloomy Puritan. The revelation that he had in the end – that no one is completely good or evil, but that everyone is a mixture of both – is represented in the forest, which can be seen as the symbol of the Puritan world, by both the representatives of good nature embodied in the spiritual leaders, pious people, elders of the church, chaste dames and virgins, and of evil nature, which are portrayed by the men of dissolute lives and women of spotted fame, wretches given over to all mean

and filthy vice (Hawthorne 55). " It was strange to see that the good shrank not from the wicked, nor were the sinners abashed by the saints" (Hawthorne 55). This shows to illustrate that there are two sides to everyone, good and bad. The people in the community were not saints as Goodman Brown idolized them.

2. Faith

Faith is the wife of Young Goodman Brown, to whom he has been married only for three months. She is purely an allegorical character, to be more precise " she is at once an allegorical idea and the means by which the idea is inverted" (Levy 116). " Not the least terrifying aspect of the story is the insinuation that Faith has made her own independent covenant with the Devil. There is a faint suggestion that her complicity may be prior to and deeper than Brown's" (Levy 120). In addition to this " If he [Brown] believed in the certainty of depravity and only the possibility of salvation, as the [Puritan] catechism teaches, he would know that even so righteous a person as Faith is corrupt and not necessarily of the elect, appearances notwithstanding" (Franklin 73). Faith's name already tells us her significance in the story, for she stands for Goodman Brown's faith in God, faith in saintly nature of the people in his community, and faith in the spiritual leaders, the elects of God. If we are to view Goodman Brown as the first man, then Faith can be seen as Eve, the first woman. She is also under a similar compulsion as Brown, and she tries to persuade him to stay at home, for both hers as well as his sake, but her attempts prove to be unsuccessful. This could be

seen as the lake of faith on Brown's part. One prominent feature about Faith are her pink ribbons.

The color pink bears a significance, as in the case of her name, for they have a symbolic role; the color pink represents a mixture of red and white – red standing for Faith's passion and sexuality, while the color white symbolizes a women's purity and innocence. Her ribbons can therefore, represent tainted innocence, or tainted morality of the whole human race. " Brown calls out three times for Faith to come to his aid, and not until he [Brown] sees a pink ribbon from Faith's cap that has fluttered down from the sky and caught on the branch of a tree does he abandon hope [It is] the tangible evidence of Faith's desertion" (Levy 117). Also, " The pink ribbon seen in the forest may be merely a lustful projection of the Goodman's depraved fancy, which wills wickedness . . . even as it reluctantly departs from its forfeited innocence" (Abel 136). Since Faith's allegorical function has already been explained, maybe we could observe her from a different perspective. Before embarking on his journey, Brown considers his wife to be an angel, a perfect creature.

She is his safe haven, for he says so himself " after this one night I'll cling to her skirts and follow her to heaven" (Hawthorne 7). He is bewildered when he sees her in the coven, ready to be baptized by the Devil. So, this may also serve to demonstrate that we should never idolize someone the way Brown has. He creates an angelic image of his wife, projecting something unreal onto her, something out of this world, and that prevented him from seeing her as a real person, made of flesh and blood, just as sinful as everyone else

in the world. No wonder then that he became disillusioned with her. He believes Faith is an "angel" and one of the Puritans elects who is destined for heaven. Unfortunately, Brown's experience in the forest makes him reject his previous conviction of the prevailing power of good. He instead embraces the Devil's claim—" Evil is the nature of mankind" (Hawthorne 64). This has devastating consequences on their marital life; his grief causes suffering not just to him, but to her and their children.

3. The Devil

The Devil in this story is never referred to as being one, but the reader, of course, realizes this almost immediately after his first moment's encounter with Young Goodman Brown; this is conformed when the Devil tells him " You are late, Goodman Brown, said he. The clock of the Old South was striking as I came through Boston, and that was full fifteen minutes ago" (Hawthorne 10). The remarkable thing about the fellow-traveler was his staff, which looked an awfully lot like a great black snake, wriggling itself as it was alive. " When the diabolical companion throws his twisted staff down at the feet of Goody Cloyse," the act reminds of the biblical story of " Aaron[who] had thrown down his rod before Pharaoh, and so had the magicians of Egypt done with theirs, and so all became serpents..." (Hale 18). Hence, within this allegorical framework, the staff of the Devil could be associated with the opponents of Moses and of the God of Israel, which exemplifies evil that Goodman Brown finds so fascinating. The author is suggesting, in the symbolism of the twisted staff, " a universal struggle for possession of the mind" (Hale 18).

The Devil can take any shape he so chooses to, but appears in human form, and in that bears a striking resemblance to Young Goodman Brown, only older and more experienced, and as Hawthorne says they might have been taken for father and son. This action could be interpreted in two ways, as well as the whole story: first is that this was an attempt of the Devil to gain Brown's trust, to make him an easy prey for his hideous scheme; or, the Devil is in fact Goodman Brown, his dark, subconscious side, in the form of the Devil, and that is why he is referred to as the fellow-traveler, constantly following him, representing the always present temptation in Young Goodman Brown himself. The Devil could be seen, if we interpret the whole story as an allegory, as the dark side of Goodman Brown.

He can represent the subconscious of Brown, which has been suppressed by the Puritan mode of living, struggling to come out. We have already mentioned that Brown stands for Everyman, and his meeting the Devil may mean that we are all destined, at some point in our lives, to face the Devil, to lose innocence, and start experiencing evil things, or at least be aware of them. This is what it means to be human, for mankind is not a godly race, but an imperfect one. Every person in the world carries the birthmark of imperfection, but that does not mean that we should stop believing in the goodness as well. In this story Goodman Brown opens his eyes to the truth, but he chooses to close his heart, he chooses to be on the periphery of living, in order to avoid suffering, not realizing that suffering is part of life and that he is missing out the joy of living as well.

The Minister, Deacon Gookin and Goody Cloyse

The Minister, Deacon Gookin and Goody Cloyse are not the major characters of the narrative, but they do play a significant part in it. We will therefore not discuss them separately, but as one representative of the finest in the community. Before Goodman Brown's journey into the forest, these people are idealized in Brown's eyes. They are his moral and spiritual advisers. To him they are godly people, unstained by sin, predestined to be God's elect. When Brown sees all of them in the forest, in the communion with the Devil, his world crumbles into pieces. His conviction of the universal sinfulness vanishes. The first one who appears to be stained by evil is Goody Cloyse, a woman who has taught Brown his catechism when he was a boy. " Although the treatment of innate depravity in the catechism is relatively brief, this was only one source of information about human corruption and its implications available to Puritan youth. As part of the Puritan upbringing . . . Brown doubtless would have sat through many sermons that emphasized innate depravity, which his family of churchgoers presumably reinforced . . . " (Franklin 71). " Had Brown understood from childhood that humans, all of whom are depraved, cannot obey the Commandments, that fidelity to God's law is impossible, [as the Puritan catechism teaches] he would not be so surprised to see, or to think he sees, the several worthies preparing to act in a decidedly non-Christian manner in the woods" (Franklin 80).

Goody Cloyse was the name of an actual woman who was tried and convicted of witchcraft during the historical Salem Witch Trials of 1692; Hawthorne borrows her name for this character. Then we also have the Minister of Salem Village. The minister, a respectable pillar of the

community, appears to be a follower of the Devil. And finally, Deacon Gookin, who is the member of the clergy in Salem, a very important and highly esteemed in Brown's eyes. Their presence at the witch meeting serves the purpose of criticizing the elders, the hypocrisy of Puritans, leading double lives, meeting in the wilderness by night, and professing righteousness by day.

Conclusion

Young Goodman Brown's going into the forest was no dream, but serves as a metaphor for Brown's inner consciousness. The journey he takes is the one of self examination, introspection of his deepest fears, doubts and perversities. The evil that he encounters in the forest is his own evil, projected on to others, for he has no strength to confront the hideousness he finds in himself. It is always easier to blame someone else for one's own failures. The fact that Hawthorne chose to portray the story as a dream like vision is no coincidence. The dreams, according to many psychological studies, often bring on to the surface the most subconscious parts of our mind. It helps us to deal with our imperfections, our fears, in order to make our lives less painful. The fact that Brown remained unaware of the true human nature is because he simply refused to open his eyes. For him it was easier to believe in the godly nature of the people surrounding him, rather than facing the imperfection of humanity.

When the seed of doubt was left in him, he chose to ignore it, rather than trying to find inner strength in his faith; but the cancer of doubt growing

inside of him was too much for him to bear. The story shows us that however noble an idea may seem in our imagination, it is not in accordance with human nature, which is imperfect. One must accept imperfection, first in himself, and then in others, if one wants to remain human. Goodman Brown never realized this, and that is why his dying hour was gloom. The protagonist lacks strength, and is very judgmental towards everyone. After his epiphany, in which he is shown the truth, he chooses to do nothing. The final message of the story is to never lose faith, to never give in to temptation, for there is always hope. What is a man without his faith? We need something to believe in, whether that be God, destiny, some higher force, or even ourselves, because life has no meaning without faith, no purpose, and it leaves us desolate and condemned to a life-in-death.

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