

# Support for calvinistic faith in "young goodman brown"

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



“ My Faith is gone!” (Hawthorne 394) cries Young Goodman Brown after seeing his wife’s pink ribbon fall from the sky and then realizing that humanity is depraved. Although Faith is the name of Brown’s wife, it is also a metaphor for his interior faith in God. In “ Young Goodman Brown,” Puritan attitudes towards faith and evil are carefully considered by Hawthorne and described at various levels of depth in the story. Many critics have difficulty deciding on the overall theme of this story, though, and there is a mixed response towards the motives for Hawthorne’s writing of this piece. When examining Puritan theology and the historical context of the short story, “ Young Goodman Brown” is transformed into several moral lessons based on the importance of faith which, in turn, supports Calvinistic beliefs. The story of Goodman Brown includes many references to biblical stories and Puritanical beliefs. Although Brown believes he is an upstanding person of a respectable family line, he allows his curiosity to betray his faith. Brown arrives late to his meeting with the evil figure and explains that, “ Faith kept me back a while” (Hawthorne 388). Brown hesitates because he realizes that his journey with this devilish being is sinful. This story parallels the biblical story of Adam and Eve and the fall of man. Although the pair knew it was against the orders of God to eat the fruit from the tree of wisdom, Satan tempted them into committing sinful acts. This single act decides the fate for the future of mankind as sinful beings, but this was not the only outcome in the eyes of the Puritans: “ the Puritan version [of the fall of man] goes farther still. Not only human nature but all nature suffered the consequent disaster . . . What surrounds us, what we look upon and commune with, its not nature as it issued from the hand of God. It is nature red in tooth and

claw, perverted from its original, the domain of the Prince of Evil and of his subject, natural man" (Jones 277). Hawthorne incorporates both of these Puritanical beliefs into his story: he creates a paranoid monster from the once innocent Goodman Brown and the natural setting regresses into an unsafe, unknown forest of evil. Brown describes the fearful nature of the wilderness after proclaiming his faith is gone: "The whole forest was peopled with frightful sounds - the creaking of the trees, the howling of the wild beasts, and the yell of Indians" (Hawthorne 395). Although Goodman Brown was confident when entering into the forest with the devilish being, his temptations cause him to lose faith and become unsure of humanity and nature. Although this need for exploration could be viewed as a critique of the overbearing nature of the Puritans, Hawthorne includes a similar moral lesson as the biblical story, in which curiosity is punished and faith is the escape from evil. Furthermore, Hawthorne's usage of language in describing Goodman Brown's journey into the forest reflects Puritanical speeches. Although his trip into the forest is an act of curiosity and exploration, Brown describes it as an "errand" on several accounts. For example, when Brown discusses leaving Faith, he says, "'What a wretch am I to leave her on such an errand!'" (Hawthorne 388). By utilizing wordplay, Brown attempts to create a martyr out of himself, in attempts to overcome the evil presented by the devil. He acts as if he must leave his religious faith and experience evil before being able to become completely loyal to God. The word "errand" has historical background in the Puritanical setting: "Suffice it to say that Young Goodman Brown's 'errand' into the wilderness recalls the Puritans' 'Errand into the Wilderness,' a metaphor first enunciated in Samuel

Danforth's election sermon of Matt 11, 1670 . . . [Hawthorne] also incorporates the root of the Puritans' identity and enterprise: their self-remarked likeness to the children of Israel in the wilderness" (Christophersen 203). This also reflects a certain mocking of the contradictory nature of Puritan ideals, because Hawthorne exploits the hypocrisy of his main character; on the other hand, Hawthorne is supporting the necessity of faith when entering into an unknown territory. As would be the concerns of Puritans who intend to settle in several new areas, Hawthorne discusses the importance of maintaining a religious stability in order to overcome evil. Unfortunately in the case of Goodman Brown, he abandons his faith before entering into the wilderness, leaving him susceptible to the Devil and his evil followers. Therefore, after experiencing the evils of nature and the unknown, Brown returns to civilization as a lost man who is unable to maintain a firm religious stance. Hawthorne discusses this lost nature of man in relation to Calvinistic belief as well. As Goodman Brown enters the unknown forest, he believes that his mental abilities to overcome evil will protect him. When he abandons his faith, he is attempting to overcome the Devil through his own mental stability and strength. His belief in himself represents a very different Puritanical belief: "For all insistence on man's unworthiness, his corrupt nature, man still bears the image of God in some measure engraven on him. He is therefore, says Calvin, however lacking in intrinsic merit, a creature of no small dignity and excellence" (Jones 277). Brown's dignity is illustrated clearly by Hawthorne through his attempt to overcome evil without the aid of his faith. Unfortunately, as the reader observes, Brown's will power and respectability is not sufficient enough to defeat the Devil's temptations;

instead, Brown victimizes himself by abandoning his faith and entering into unknown territory. After his experiences in the forest, Hawthorne describes Brown as, " A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man . . ." (Hawthorne 399). Goodman Brown becomes lost due to his self-assurance and dignity and due to his abandonment of faith. The nature of man continues to be questioned when Goodman Brown experiences total depravity in the forest. He is witness to powerful and religious figures from his society participating in various forms of devil worship and witchcraft. Brown's shock and horror of seeing those he respects as active members of this evil cause him to question his own purity: " Goodman Brown stepped forth from the shadow of the trees and approached the congregation, with whom he felt a loathful brotherhood by the sympathy of all that was wicked in his heart" (Hawthorne 397). Although he believed he had the mental ability to overcome the Devil, Brown joins the crowd due to the innately evil nature of humans. Corresponding to the fall of man parallel in the beginning of the story, Brown completes the final stages of his temptation into evil by destroying his faith: " What [Brown] perceives is in fact the nature of man: he is not mistaken. But because he looks upon it without the intervening medium of faith, his merely human eyes can see no reality beyond it" (Jones 279-280). This is similar to the Puritanical idea of predestination. Although humanity may appear to be faithful beings or upstanding citizens, their fate may be one of evil and destruction. As Brown experiences depravity without the aid of his faith, his fate is decided for him because he completely loses his grasp of God: " His implication is that the doctrine of the elect and damned is not a faith which carries man

heavenward on its skirts, as Brown once believed, but, instead, condemns him to hell - bad and good alike indiscriminately - and for all intents and purposes so few escape as to make on man's chance of salvation almost disappear" (Connolly 375). Brown's prearranged experiences with evil has caused him to lose his sense of reality and faith and eventually leads him to damnation. By witnessing the true nature of man without the aid of his faith, Brown's own nature turns to one of evil. This balance of evil and faith has been questioned by several critics that attempt to find a thematic unity within the text. For example, Connolly believes that, " not only did [Brown] retain his faith but during his horrible experience he actually discovered the full and frightening significance of his faith" (371). Although Hawthorne describes the importance of faith in detail, Brown's journey is a regression from the confident, religious being he once was into a distrustful, weak man. While he did learn the truth of predestination and man from a religious stance, his abandonment of faith causes him to become a victim to the evil he experiences. Connolly fails to address the issues of Brown's faith before entering into the forest and its slow decline throughout his journey. From the Puritanical perspective, Brown's mistake is abandoning his faith in order to overcome the evils of his society and of the world. His journey represents the biblical fall of man, which the Puritans believed was the source of all man's sin. Although critics have disagreed on the motives of Hawthorne's writing of " Young Goodman Brown," from a historical perspective, the story represents the Calvinistic beliefs common during that time. While Hawthorne may have intended on attacking the overbearing and contradictory nature of the Puritans, Goodman Brown is a character that exemplifies the moral

corruption caused by a loss of faith. Through several biblical parallels and Puritanical beliefs, Hawthorne illustrates that faith is the only protection from the evils of the world and that by exploring the world without religious faith, humanity is susceptible to depravity. Works Cited Christophersen, Bill. "'Young Goodman Brown' as Historical Allegory: A Lexical Link." *Studies in Short Fiction* 23. 2 (1986): 202-204. Connolly, Thomas E. "Hawthorne's 'Young Goodman Brown': An Attack on Puritanic Calvinism." *American Literature* 28. 3 (1956): 370-375. Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "Young Goodman Brown." *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. Ed. Wilfred L. Guerin, et al. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2005. 387-400. Jones, Madison. "Variations on a Hawthorne Theme." *Studies in Short Fiction* 15. 3 (1978): 277-283.