

# Young goodman brown: a self-portrait

[Literature](#), [Books](#)



Nathaniel Hawthorne was undeniably interested in the roles of his ancestors in the Salem Witch Trials. Much of his literature combines the elements of Puritan thought with the deeper, often evil desires of the human psyche. Young Goodman Brown's nighttime journey in the story of the same name is an allegorical re-visitation to the madness of the Salem witch trials. Through this story, Young Goodman Brown and his journey become universal symbols for all mankind.

Hawthorne juxtaposed 19th Century religious thought with 16th Century Puritan thought in several of his works, including "Young Goodman Brown", whose title character represents, as his name implies, every man. The religious thought of both the centuries in question operated on fear, which ultimately leads several individuals, under the guise of overcoming or even conquering their fears, into the world of evil.

To Hawthorne, Salem was "the center of the witchcraft delusion, in the witching times of 1692, and it shows the populace of Salem Village, those chief in authority as well as obscure young citizens like Brown, enticed by fiendish shapes into the frightful solitude of superstitious fear" (Abel 133).

Brown, like all others of his village, is conflicted between accepting this fear and conquering it. Unfortunately, for most, this battle has unhappy consequences. Brown, as a representative for all people, is generally naïve and accepting, and thus ill-equipped to handle the terrifying night in the forest (Fogle 15). After all, it is in the best interest of the Puritan religious leaders to keep people constrained under fear rather than behave after the realization that all people sin.

Several symbols equate Brown's journey to the journey of every individual who struggles with the conflict between religion and self. The first is the forest, as a symbol for the dark and evil place where people are tempted to go. Brown, himself, is drawn into the forest, an archetype for evil and the unknown, for the reason presented above, as an attempt to overcome the fear brought on by religious dogma. It is in the forest that he is exposed to his utmost fears and where he realizes the shortcoming of humanity.

This realization begins with the temptation of man by the devil. This devil "seeks to lure the still reluctant goodman to a witch-meeting. In the process he progressively undermines the young man's faith in the institutions and the men whom he has heretofore revered" (Fogle 17). In doing this, Brown loses his ability to operate in the society of man and lives as a sadly disillusioned, miserable creature. According to Levy, he "is Everyman. The bargain he has struck with Satan is the universal one . . . (117). Thus, most people can relate to this type of demonic bargaining which has become a universal theme in literature.

Another symbol which connects Brown to any human being is his stringent belief in another human being or institution – this time Faith, which represents both. She is described as wearing a cap with pink ribbons, which suggest girlishness and naiveté. In this way, she is just like every woman Abel calls these ribbons "a badge of feminine innocence" (Abel 130). However, when Brown finds the ribbon in the woods, separated from his Faith (and faith), the symbolic meaning of the ribbons changes. Here, they signify a loss of innocence. Fogle explains that the pink of the ribbons becomes deepened into the color of blood and fire which represents faith's

demonic baptism into sin (Fogle 24). The tie of temptation and women hails back to the book of Genesis, and the realization of Faith's supposed fall precipitates Brown's loss. Levy calls the ribbon "the tangible evidence of Faith's desertion" (117) which parallels some defining moment in which many people lose their faith. This personalizes the loss for Brown, as it is for all people.

As Brown traverses the forest, he encounters other individuals. One, who looks strikingly like Brown, accompanies him for a while. While the reader understands that this man must be one of Brown's ancestors, Brown himself is blind to the similarities. This man takes on the role of companion and implies to Brown that his own ancestors made a similar journey, which Brown also disregards. Their encounter with Goody Cloyse is symbolic for two reasons. First, the encounter has Biblical implications and second, it represents another moment of disillusionment for Brown. The staff is mentioned several times in the Bible. In one story Aaron throws his staff at the feet of the evil Pharaoh and it turned into a serpent. The serpent represents evil. When the companion throws his staff at the feet of Goody Cloyse, it also turns into a serpent, indicating her evil nature as well (Hale, 17).

This distresses Brown, who does not understand why his Sunday Schoolteacher would be in the midst of the evil forest. "That old woman taught me my catechism" (Hawthorne 303). The catechism was really the only source of literature about pious living other than the Bible. Brown probably learned all about the sins of the flesh from Goody Cloyse and ironically, she is here in the forest of evil. Brown continues to encounter

other religious officials in the forest which parallels the astonishment and sadness of any person who discovers a religious icon has behaved in a hypocritical manner.

Ultimately, Brown loses his internal battle. The realization that everyone he had revered was not what he had imagined them to be forces him to give in to the evil of the forest wholeheartedly. He screams out, “Come witch, come wizard, come Indian powwow, come devil himself! And here comes Goodman Brown. You may as well fear him as he fear you!” (Hawthorne 306). Of course, the story ends with ambiguity. Did Brown really witness a devilish marriage? Did Faith really submit to the altar of the devil? The reader and Brown never really know the answer to these questions.

Once Brown awakens, all evidence is gone. He returns to his Faith, his elders and his life. Faith is once again adorned in her pink ribbons, which “... suggest, rather than symbolize something light and playful, consistent with her anxious simplicity at the beginning and the joyful, almost childish eagerness with which she greets Brown at the end” (Levy 124). Brown’s journey has come full circle. Unfortunately, the reality does not matter as much as Brown’s interpretation of the events that may or may not have been a dream. He is unable to reconcile his original conceptions of the people in his life (or himself) with what he experienced on his journey. Though his life with Faith continues, “... his dying hour was gloom” (Hawthorne 310).

Clearly, this parallels with the experiences of mankind. Disillusionment is prevalent, and it can cause misery, sin and even death. Loss of faith in an individual or in an institution is devastating. Many times this loss marks the person for life, preventing them from enjoying what life has to offer.

Acceptance of sin and corruption is very hard to take, especially of a loved one or a firmly held belief.

Hawthorne clearly adopted the idea that “ unlovely demons were everywhere, in the sunshine as well as in the darkness, and that they were hidden in men’s hearts and stole into their most secret thoughts” (Abel 133). Young Goodman Brown is indicative of every good man’s battle with such demons. As the story implies, this battle is more often lost than won, but most people are able to continue living their lives in spite of this acquiescence to evil. Some, though, such as Goodman Brown, are not able to do so. According to Abel, “ such a battle often led to an inner despair. They were constantly tormented because of the possible convictions and judgments of their peers. This battle intrigued Hawthorne and he sought out its presence in Puritan literature” (133). “ Young Goodman Brown” is the story of all people’s inner battles. Some win; some lose.

#### Works Cited

Abel, Darrel. *The Moral Picturesque: Studies in Hawthorne’s Fiction*. Indiana: Purdue UP,

1988.

Fogle, Richard Harter. *Hawthorne’s Fiction: The Light and the Dark*. Norman: U of

Oklahoma P, 1952

Hale, John K. “ The Serpentine Staff in ‘ Young Goodman Brown.’”  
Nathaniel Hawthorne

Review 19 (Fall 1993): 17-18.

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "Young Goodman Brown." Perrine's Literature: Structure Sound and Sense. 9th Ed. Arp and Johnson Eds. Boston: Thomson, 2006

Levy, Leo B. "The Problem of Faith in 'Young Goodman Brown.'" Modern Critical Views:

Nathaniel Hawthorne. Ed. Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1986. 115-126.