

Penetrating the mind of young goodman brown

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Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown," is an allegory rich in sexual repression. By psychoanalyzing the main character, one can discover that "Goodman Brown" is not simply a battle between good and evil, but also one of a more sexual nature. The short story begins with an image of Brown's wife Faith, and "the pink ribbons of her cap" (Hawthorne 67). Throughout the story, the image of the pink ribbons is brought up numerous times, suggesting that they are more than just a pretty thing to tie one's hair with. Clearly there is more to the ribbons than that. The fact that they are pink shows the femininity of the woman. The fact that they bind, or secure, Faith's hair symbolizes Brown's inability to escape his predetermined role of a Puritan husband. The ribbons constantly remind him of his 'faith.' Consciously, or subconsciously, it is the ribbons of the woman that refuse to release him. Goodman Brown's "pretty young wife" Faith, whose "hair is bound with pink ribbons," practically begs him to stay at home, threatening that "disturbing thoughts" would trouble her if he were to leave (67). Brown, instead, asks Faith to be a "good little girl and say her prayers and go to bed" (68). By saying this he is able to keep his 'appointment' in the forest, thus allowing him to avoid the conflict and in return keep a handle on his emotions. This is an attempt to put her back into a position that his male ego can accept, without consciously acknowledging her sexual advances. This behavior could also signify his unwillingness to engage in normal sexual encounters because he believed them to be sinful, thus causing an emotional conflict that he could not cope with. Goodman Brown's experience in the forest reveals to him the sexual nature of people. Brown's observance of this is curiously devoid of revulsion. This would suggest that he is

rationalizing his own repressed sexuality and thus pacifying his feelings of guilt by projecting his own deeply repressed id onto the most respected townspeople. Brown's own insecurities lead him to see that even Goody Cloys, his catechism teacher, seems to vanish with the aid of Satan's staff. The use of a witch image to describe Goody also signifies the evil side of women that his superego refuses to see under normal circumstances. The man that Brown meets in the forest is inarguably Satan, who almost universally represents the opportunity to fulfill repressed desires and unlock the id. Further discussion with the Satan-like figure reveals that he has had a relationship with all of Browns' ancestors, claiming " they were my good friends...we had many a pleasant walk along this path" (69). The man is attempting to reassure Goodman Brown that his feelings are completely normal. The figure of darkness even goes so far as to recall some of the Brown's ancestors' more unsavory behaviors, such as the whipping of a Quaker woman through the streets of town. The information that Satan is in contact with everyone that Brown has ever respected, up through the governor, suggests that Brown has no moral idol to emulate. This condition precludes him from continuing to repress his dark side through hero worship. The staff of Satan's " which bore the likeness of a great black snake" is another sexual symbol (68). Goodman Brown dismisses the idea that he can't take his eyes off of the man's " remarkable staff" by telling himself that " it may have been an ocular deception assisted by uncertain light" (69). The shadowy figure encourages Brown's thoughts of uncertainty by saying " you will think better of this by and by. . . . take my staff to help you along." When Goodman Brown does eventually use the staff it is " wet with evening

dew”(71). This is yet another sexual image. The staff that is described as being “twisted” and much like “a living serpent” is similar to that of the image of the snake that encourages Adam and Eve to give into temptation in the Garden of Eden (68). The staff of the devil is thus tempting Brown to see his own sexuality in a new light, one which he cannot completely comprehend. After Goodman Brown approaches the “black mass” which can be seen as a secret which he has yet to shed light on, he confronts an image that he perceives as his mother, who urges him to turn away from the temptation (72). This externalization of his mother as the voice of good, or his conscience, displays evidence of his unresolved Oedipus complex. The mere fact that he sees his mother while engaging in a sexual encounter shows his subconscious desire for her. The revelation of his wife Faith’s membership in this dark community comes as the greatest shock. Brown exclaims, “I have lost my Faith” (73). He has lost his religious faith, he has lost his wife to the forces of evil, and he is now forced to reevaluate his personal ideal of women in general. The fact that Hawthorne yet again mentions the pink ribbons suggests that the third interpretation has the most validity. The ribbons are now gone and are no longer seen as binding him to Faith. The story concludes by showing the inscription on his tombstone “for his dying hour was gloom,” suggesting that he was not a happy man during his life (77). This was because he was never fully able to attain a grasp on his own sexuality, or on sexuality period. The observation could be made that guilt from giving in to his desire and from being forced to confront unresolved Oedipal and other sexual issues had made him unhappy his entire life.