

# Irving's devil and tom walker

Literature, American Literature



Two of the most famous works of short fiction offer a compelling study in contrast. Washington Irving's *The Devil and Tom Walker* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown* both concern ordinary men making a covenant with the Devil, but there are some notable differences worth exploring.

From the beginning, both stories share similarities in themes when it comes to nature or the wilderness. In *Young Goodman Brown*, the moment Brown steps foot in the forest he voices his fears of the wilderness, seeing the forest as a place where nothing righteous is possible. He echoes the dominant point of view of 17th century Puritans, who believed that the wild new world was something to fear and then dominate. Goodman Brown, like other Puritans, associates the forest with the Native Indians and believes the Devil could easily present himself. He considers it a matter of family honor that his forefathers would never have walked in the forest for pleasure and he is upset when the devil tells him that this was not the case. Hawthorne characterized the forest as Devilish, frightening and dark. Brown only shows signs of comfort after thinking this wife, Faith, has turned evil and takes the Devil's staff. On the other hand, in *The Devil and Tom Walker*, Tom's shortcut home through the forest one night has him come across an old Indian burial ground, and he is not fearful of the forest. Although he too associates the Indians killing their prisoners to be a sacrifice for the Devil, he does not fear the Forest the same way Goodman Brown does:

Anyone but he would have felt unwilling to linger in this lonely, melancholy place, for the common people had a bad opinion of it, from the stories handed down from the times of the Indian wars, when it was asserted that

<https://assignbuster.com/irvings-devil-and-tom-walker/>

the savages held incantations here and made sacrifices to the Evil Spirit. Tom Walker, however, was not a man to be troubled with any fears of the kind (Irving).

In fact, the first difference that can be seen in the two stories is in the main characters and each one's position before and after the covenant is made. Before meeting the Devil, Tom is not a pleasant man. He only loves one thing-money-and is only afraid of one person, his wife. At first, Tom is hesitant and does not accept the Devil's offer to conduct his primary business: " Tom resolutely refused; he was bad enough in all conscience, but the devil himself could not tempt him to turn slave-trader"(Hawthorne). He is not Devilish enough to take the protected pirate treasure and buy a ship to bring slaves to America. Tom's miserable relationship is further highlighted by the fact he went searching for the devil after his wife's lengthy absence.

Tom consoled himself for the loss of his property, with the loss of his wife, for he was a man of fortitude. He even felt something like gratitude toward the black woodsman, who, he considered, had done him a kindness. He sought, therefore, to cultivate a further acquaintance with him(Irving).

After that second encounter, Tom agrees to be money launder that charges high interest, a deal that eventually made him the wealthiest man in Boston. Tom begins to worry about death as he ages and becomes paranoid. In a desperate attempt to break his deal with the Devil, he starts going to Church. Unfortunately, his disingenuous attempts at redemption were futile and the Devil came to collect at the end of the story. In contrast, Goodman Brown is a religious and pious man. The devil offers Goodman Brown the

staff claiming it will help him walk faster, but Brown refuses. The Devil tells him, he has close relations with family members, ancestors, and members of the church, all the way up to the State Governor. Brown adamantly refuses to believe the Devil, but after thinking he hears his wife, Faith's voice in the forest he grabs the staff which propels him quickly through the forest towards the ceremony. At the ceremony, he clearly sees faces of respected members of the community along with disreputable men, women and Indian Priests. He does not see Faith until he is dragged forward with her. In that moment of terror, he tells her to look up to the heavens to resist the Devil. He then suddenly finds himself alone in the forest. At the end of the stories, Brown is miserable. He begins to look at everyone in the town differently with more cynicism and bitterness, and he eventually dies a spiritually dead man. The moral of the story being; people are not always who they seem to be.

In each story, the Devil is described in their own distinct fashion. In *Young Goodman Brown*, the unnamed companion with a staff bearing the head of a snake appears to be an ordinary man of Salem Village, insinuating that every person including Goodman Brown, has the capacity for evil. By emphasizing the Devil's chameleon nature, Hawthorne suggests that the Devil is merely an embodiment of all the worst parts of oneself. By saying that the devil looks as though he could be Goodman Brown's father Hawthorne creates a link between them raising the question of whether or not the Devil and Brown might be related, or if the Devil might be an embodiment of Brown's dark side. Although it is never entirely clear whether the experience in the forest was a dream or reality. The consequences of the interaction stay with

him for the rest of his life. Perhaps the consequence of taking the staff was opening his eyes to the evil in everyone. Washington Irving's description of the Devil in "The Devil and Tom Walker" was neither black nor white. He was described as having a sooty face. He is a giant like man who guards the old Indian Fort. He is exceptionally manipulative and cunning. He could be described as the very embodiment of sin, which surprises Tom even though he has been living a life a sin himself. The Devil surprises Tom again at the end of the story when he knocks on his door at his house and takes Tom to his doom. In this story, the Devil is imagined to be a Woodsman who cuts down living sinners like trees to burn in the forge and the fire of hell. The Devil burns the trees with the victim's names carved in them. This is ironic because of Tom's house mysterious burns at the end of the story. Almost like burning in the fiery pits of hell.

Historical aspects of these two stories also provide key differences. Young Goodman Brown has many historical aspects: Salem- famous witchcraft trials of 1692, Puritans settling: the woods, Black Mass, etc. Hawthorne makes a point of naming Brdemonizedown's wife as Faith because he is struggling with his faith (the spiritual side of life). The idea of separation of civilization and nature comes with the association of the wild being demonized and associated with the Native Americans. Hawthorne himself was the beneficiary of a wealthy Puritans family, so it makes sense that he viewed the natives' unorthodox approach to spirituality and praise of Nature demonic. Essentially the new settlers didn't understand life, they didn't understand the natives (possible due to the language barrier), and

ignorance. Much of Hawthorne's works deal with him having shame over his connection to the Puritans.

The Devil and Tom Walker, utilizes the same concept as the famous German Legend of Faust and plays off of the real-life Pirate King, Captain Kidd.

Washington Irving is known to be one of the originators of humor and horror in literature. He is most famous for his biography of Christopher Columbus and Prophet Muhammad. The reason that people think Columbus was sailing the new world and that the world was flat was that Irving tapped into the small cult of people that believe the world was flat and use that to make the story of Columbus sailing the ocean seem more exciting. Irving used literature to paint Columbus as a heroic figure thereby furthering and cultivating the American culture of individualism and separatism. Similar to the way people at that time were making movements to the new world in search of financial riches, the same greed is what Tom and his wife display in the story.

As can be seen The Devil and Tom Walker, and Young Goodman Brown is Devil covenant stories. Young Goodman Brown is primarily a story about a moral character. Tom Walker has his life repossessed by the Devil after living a life poor character and sin. Both authors do an excellent job of encoding messages without spoon-feeding the reader. Its meanings can be inferred, and as such, their stories have passed the test of time due to their revolutionary style of literature, which helped shape short stories become a respected form of literature in America.