

Essay on conflict and reality in Hawthorne's young Goodman Brown and badwings

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Literature often deals with various conflicts involving people; wars, families, cultures, nations, and many other factors pit one or more people against each other. However, pivotal moments in literature often occur within the characters themselves. A character may struggle within himself, and this internal struggle can reveal much about the character and therefore the aim of the literature. Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" and James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" are short stories that deal intimately with the internal conflict of their protagonists, which reveals much about the characters.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, "Young Goodman Brown," written in 1835, describes an episode in the life of the character Young Goodman Brown, who leaves his home one evening to go on a journey in the forest. This allegorical story opens with Goodman Brown leaving his home at the end of the day, though his wife Faith asks him not to go and to stay home with her. In the story, Goodman Brown enters the forest at night to attend what is evidently a witches' Sabbath and also an initiation, in which he and his wife are to become one of the congregation of the damned. Many readings of the story focus upon the metaphors, allegory, and other literary devices that Hawthorne uses to illustrate the themes in his story. For instance, "Faith" is not an uncommon first name for a female, but in the story it serves a double-purpose of representing Goodman Brown's religious and spiritual nature as well as a concrete presence in his life that he hangs on to in moments of doubt and despair.

However, it is also important to consider what Goodman Brown's struggle with himself means in terms of the story. Though the beginning and end of

the story take place in apparent reality, the major and middle part of the story, when Goodman Brown travels in the forest, could be a fantasy or dream. Hawthorne never directly answers the question of whether the episode in the night forest is dream or reality, and it is likely that his intention is that readers should consider it as both. Literary critic Reginald Cook describes this episode in the forest as when Goodman Brown “ passes from a conscious world to a subconscious one” (474). In other words, it does not matter if the incident is a dream or real, to the character it becomes a reality. As Cook adds, “ Hawthorne’s make-believe is more evocative of the heart’s truths than many realist’s spitting image of reality” (474).

What Hawthorne’s story reveals is that a person’s subconscious, internal reality can easily direct the life of an individual. In Goodman Brown’s case, his internal struggle is with issues such as faith, personified by his wife, but reflected in the entire community. Even though his struggles seem to be with external things, such as his wife, the Devil who walks with a serpentine staff in the forest, and the leadership of renowned citizens in his life, it must always be remembered that the forest journey is internal and subconscious. When he sees Goody Cloyse, an old woman who taught him many Christian tenants, walking in the forest, Goodman Brown says to his Devil-companion, “ I shall take a cut through the woods until we have left this Christian woman behind. Being a stranger to you, she might ask whom I was consorting with and whither I was going” (Hawthorne 3). Yet, the reader soon realizes that Goody Cloyse is pleased to be well acquainted with the devil and his ways. Even though the story seems to be revealing about the secret, dark lives of other characters, all that happens is really in Goodman Brown’s head.

Therefore, all that happens in the story is really a revelation of what happens in the mind of one character in a crisis of faith and doubt. At the end of the story, Hawthorne writes of Goodman Brown's death many years later but that his many loved ones "carved no hopeful verse upon his tombstone, for his dying hour was gloom" (9). This story shows that the internal struggles of a character, though they may be illusions, equate to reality for that character. In the case of Goodman Brown, they led him from being a hopeful idealist to being a somber, gloomy person weighted with doubt about the world. Hawthorne's use of the name "Goodman" is interesting because the struggle that his character goes through is meant to be an example of the struggle that any "good" man can experience. The internal conflict of this character and the unfortunate results represents something anyone can experience, yet the unfortunate results are individual to Goodman Brown. Hawthorne allows readers to be in a superior position to Goodman Brown, because the story reveals that Goodman Brown is unable to recover from the experience, something that Hawthorne allows the reader can do. Goodman Brown's internal struggle illustrates a lesson for the reader to learn, James Baldwin's story "Sonny's Blues" tells the story of two black brothers, one a schoolteacher in Harlem and the other one a musician who is released from prison after being arrested for heroin possession. The story is told from the first-person viewpoint of the teacher-brother, who recounts several memories from his own and Sonny's pasts as well as events in his present in his struggle to understand his brother, who has lived such a different life from his own. It is clear to see that Sonny, the musician and drug-using brother, endures many struggles both internal and external in his life, but

the conflict within the narrator brother is what truly illuminates the internal wars and realizations in this story.

Unlike Hawthorne's story, in which the real struggles the main character deals with are on the subconscious level, the conflicts that the characters in Baldwin's story endure are much more concrete. Poverty, drug addiction, violence, and racism are constants in the characters' lives. Yet, the idea of what is real and what is not still pervades in Baldwin's story. When it came to his brother's arrest for heroin possession, at first the narrator says, " I read about it in the paper . . . and I couldn't believe it," but at the same time he knew it was true and says that his brother " became real to me again" (Baldwin 17). Although the narrator lives solidly in a reality that is full of the poverty, addiction, violence, and many other things that cause conflict, what he reveals is that he has been able to effectively ignore the problems until they are made real for him by an article about his brother in the newspaper. By describing how he distanced himself from and ignored reality, the narrator sets the stage for the conflicts he will experience in the rest of the story.

It is not until his own daughter dies that the narrator writes to his incarcerated brother, who immediately writes back and makes his brother feel like a terrible person because he has ignored a member of his family. The irony of this situation is that until then, and perhaps beyond that point, the narrator has thought of himself as a man who is on the straight-and-narrow, a good and law-abiding citizen. Upon his brother's release from prison, the narrator deals with some of the less palatable aspects of reality that he has distanced himself from, and finds that there is more than simply

a black and white, good or bad dichotomy to the situation. As he greets Sonny, he realizes “ The seven years’ difference in our ages law between us like a chasm” just as he imagines their very different experiences separate them (Baldwin 23). However, he simultaneously realizes that he was there the day Sonny was born, he heard Sonny’s first words, and caught him before he fell the first time he walked, which establishes a deep connection between them that he cannot deny (Baldwin 23).

Baldwin’s selection of the brother and not Sonny as the narrator makes it clear that the story is as much if not more about the changes in the narrator as it is about Sonny. The narrator had many other choices he could have made when it came to Sonny. He could have chosen not to write to him in prison, he could have chosen not to be there for him once he got out of prison, he could have ignored Sonny’s words in the past or present, and he could have decided not to go to the club and watch Sonny perform as a musician. Literature professor Arlene Wilner writes, “ Baldwin both endorsed and critiqued the boundaries of tradition and conventional morality,” and the narrator’s struggle within and his actions illustrate Baldwin’s understanding of the complexity this lends to human nature. The narrator feels as if there is a lot he wishes he could say and promise to his brother but “ it would have all sounded—empty words and lies,” so, he says, “ I made the promise to myself” (Baldwin 42). This internal struggle and promise of the narrator show that he understands that conflict is a constant, but that there are ways to rise above conflict and have community no matter what kind of person one is.

In Hawthorne’s and Baldwin’s story, both characters appear to find conflict

on the surface with external things, but the real struggle each character endures is within himself. After all, in either story, there were many choices that the characters in conflict could have made that they did not; Goodman Brown could have stayed home as his wife Faith wanted him to, Sonny's brother could have rejected him once he heard about his incarceration. Reading about the inner thoughts and reactions to events in these characters' lives illuminates important points about human nature that the authors want readers to relate to and gain new perspectives about even though the characters are very different from the readers themselves. The struggles that the characters go through is what makes both stories so compelling, thought-provoking, and worth sharing with many generations of readers.

Works Cited

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