

# The Depths of Allegory in Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown"

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## ABSTRACT

The following is a literary criticism centered on the historical, psychological and religious perspectives combined for a more comprehensive view of Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown". Sources are drawn upon to prove the historical and religious Calvinistic and Puritanical beliefs that become important to the work, as well as Hawthorne's own life as an exemplar of historical basis in fiction. Finally, the psychological aspect of "Young Goodman Brown" completes the picture of a journey in which Man's Fall is inevitable. The story is literally and metaphorically a journey of a newlywed man who is walking toward spiritual crisis, hand-in-hand with the Devil himself. Set in Salem about the time of the Salem witch trials, it provides the backdrop to an eerie journey into the dark forest and the darkness of man. Goodman Brown makes a decision, ambiguous to readers, and reveals his new insight into his fellow townspeople and his new wife. Hawthorne warns of the dangers of religion 'out-of-control', and uses his symbolic inferences to develop these ideas. The research seeks to prove that a comprehensive, multi-pronged critical approach to "Young Goodman Brown" is needed in order to fully comprehend the many layers of allegory Hawthorne communicated so masterfully.

Herman Melville once wrote of "Young Goodman Brown" that it over time, "like wine, was only improving in flavor and body" (Melville 833). The story continues to ripen with age, and leads modern thinkers into a world filled with plenty of meanings for them to pick from its images. As Joan Elizabeth Easterly pointed out, "Literary critics have interpreted the significance of Goodman Brown's experience in many fashions allegorical, moral, philosophical, and psychological" (Easterly 339). To frame the piece in one critical view would destroy the integrity of it. "Young Goodman Brown" needs to be viewed in a combined approach: that which recognizes the overlap and intertwining of its historical context and relationship to religious symbolism within that context, as well as the psychosexual<sup>1</sup> crisis of the protagonist. Keil notes that Hawthorne was "such a masterful critic of human nature, [he] deserves no less than a fully comprehensive view" (Keil 55). It is in this 'comprehensive view' that the fullest meaning of the story can be ascertained. Through the combined perspectives, Hawthorne seems to convey a more complete message about the human condition. Goodman Brown explores man's innate drive toward sin through his journey in which the Fall<sup>2</sup> is inevitable. The psychologically damaging aspects of the Calvinistic<sup>3</sup> persuasion of the seventeenth-century are not to be read as a rejection of faith, but as a warning to humankind of the dangers of religion and, to a degree, the group dynamics of religion.

ence through the setting. He recreates the time period most remembered of the Puritans: the Salem witch trials. Evidence of this is found through references to time period and historical and familial allusion. The time period is established with the description of Goodman Brown as the son of a man who fought in King Philip's War. This war was fought between 1675 and 1676, and a son would have been of marrying age by the early 1690's. The Salem witch trials were in the year 1692, and the story is likely set just before this date. Nancy Bunge argues that Hawthorne "uses history to examine issues of community and individualism explaining both the madness in Salem and much subsequent madness" (Bunge 11). This time period is important, as it illustrates the village of Salem in its heightened state of religious oppression and strict moral code, which helped snowball the effect of verbal allegations of witchcraft against innocent people. Thomas Johnson stated of the time, "Belief in witches was generally questioned by no one...[they] accepted certain phenomena as due to witchcraft" (Pilgrims 1). Cotton Mather, a prominent Massachusetts theologian wrote a manual which was used to prosecute the 'witches' (Salem 1), and "helped generate an unbalanced fascination with witchcraft" (Pilgrims 1). This indicates that the time was ripe for religious persecution. The Puritans' belief in witches was strong enough 'proof' for Hawthorne's ancestors and their contemporaries to condemn twenty innocent Salemites to death based on purely spectral evidence.<sup>4</sup>

Hawthorne prepares the reader for symbolic infer-

It could be said that Young Goodman Brown was

<sup>1</sup>psychosexual: state of mind centering on sexuality.

<sup>2</sup>Refers to the fall of mankind, represented in the Bible with Adam and Eve. They are banished from the garden after eating the forbidden fruit.

<sup>3</sup>Following the doctrines of Protestant theologian John Calvin, who stressed that people are saved through God's grace, not through their own merits. Predestination was a major tenet of his church.

<sup>4</sup>Spectral evidence included unexplained dreams, fevers, and unfounded children's accusations.

a result of Hawthorne's guilt that he felt because of his ancestors' involvement in the Salem witch trials. Yet, this view by itself would drastically narrow the focus of Hawthorne's intent, prohibiting the greater, multiple meanings behind the story. It is widely known and historically accepted that Hawthorne's ancestors were involved in the witch trials, as well as in other atrocities against Native Americans and Quakers. By using the reference to family, however, it is not necessarily a condemnation of those ancestors. This story acts as a defense for all of mankind, if not specifically for his ancestors. For Goodman Brown, like his ancestors, "fails to distinguish between the specter or shape of a person and the person himself" (Martin 83). Hawthorne's tragic hero repeats the sins of his fathers, and it becomes clearer that Man's fate involves sin and struggles of faith. Another clue to Brown's realization of sin is that he creates the devil figure in his own image. This acts as a projection of himself as the embodiment of evil. This fuller understanding of the self as a sinner, rather than viewing the world around him as sinning, is a nineteenth-century phenomenon of Unitarianism<sup>5</sup>, which Hawthorne seems to struggle with as Narrator of the seventeenth-century story about Goodman Brown.

As we explore greater depths of the story, it becomes more apparent that the focus is on society and mankind as a whole, not the specific two or three 'bad apples' of his hereditary lines. After all, in "Young Goodman Brown", the Devil had given his staff to the 'Egyptian magi' among many others, implicating man through the ages as capable of evil. The timelessness of mankind's sin is revealed within the Puritans as well as in the Narrator's focus years later (through the eyes of Unitarianism). This idea of evil past, present and future is just another example of the allegorical nature the story has in relation to the Fall of Man. Brown is representative of the past, exemplifying the group dynamics of the religious society of the Puritans. McPherson calls him the "Puritanical representative young hero — a Calvinist Everyman" (McPherson 73), which he demonstrates through his repeated sin of judging others, rather than focusing on his own sins.

Also important to the allegory is the setting, which Hawthorne chose to be in Salem in the religious hysteria that shrouded the trials. At the time of the trials, books were being written on the nature of witches, spectral evidence was introduced as solid proof of guilt, and the disciples of Puritanism followed what was dictated by the elect. It is the elect which proves to be an important issue for "Young Goodman Brown." Calvinistic principles had five main points, abbreviated as TULIP. Four of the points defend and give power to the 'elect' (i.e., those who were chosen by God), the remaining point is for everyone else

(the 'Everyman', as Goodman Brown was). The idea of 'total depravity', whereby men are unable to exercise free will because of their 'hereditary corruption' through Adam and Eve, is the most known doctrine of Calvinism. Therefore, the Calvinists - as well as the Puritans - believed that there were a few chosen people who set the rules based on what they claim is their direction from God. Others, not part of the elect, or still unaware of their status with the elect, were left feeling doomed for hell. On one end, their lives feel wasted with repentance, as only the elect went to heaven, and a contradictory uneasiness grew from the other end, a discomfort with the barriers predetermined for them. This idea became symbolized through the church as a struggle between light and darkness. The light representing the freedom from sin that the elect enjoyed and the darkness representing man's personal sin, a darkness which all of Goodman Brown's fellow townspeople shared. This darkness is brought to life in the critical forest scene of "Young Goodman Brown". A basic tenet of the Puritans was that "after the Fall, all but an elect group [are] irrevocably bound for Hell" (Pilgrims 1). This gloomy doctrine of predestination presented by Calvin was turned into means for man to commit atrocities either out of known salvation as part of the elect, or out of hopelessness of never knowing God regardless of actions or will. The ideology of the church began to spin into "hypocritical moral will" (Shear 547) and was questioned by no one, as the elect were the decision-makers. The doctrine bewilders Goodman Brown: he's damned if he does, damned if he doesn't. It's a tough choice.

Goodman Brown also criticizes the Calvinistic doctrines by refusing to acknowledge his own sins at the Sabbath. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin regards original sin as "our nature" and that it cannot be "inactive" (Kazin 35). Man was to be free from sin, yet the leader and founder of the Calvinists stated himself that it was in man's nature to sin. This, as a doctrine, fails to be convincing to Brown and leads to hypocrisy within his village. According to William Stein, the other failure on the part of the Calvinists was the strict belief that the "Devil's sovereignty is comparable to God's" (Newman 342). Hawthorne makes a point of placing the Devil in the role of teacher, where he "persuade[s] the hero to take his religion seriously" (Crews 107). This irony reflects the anti-Puritan view of Hawthorne, who does not reject the church or God, but who recognizes the dangers of strict Calvinistic indoctrination that concentrates on the sins of the world, rather than personal sins. By placing such an emphasis on the power of the Devil, man's hopelessness is magnified, for "redemption for the majority is impossible" (Newman 342). The forest depicted in Goodman Brown's jour-

<sup>5</sup>Unitarianism is a religious denomination characterized by tolerance of religious beliefs and the absence of doctrine and dogma. Unitarians have their roots in Christianity, but reject the doctrine of the Trinity.

ney, then, is crucial in order to emphasize the separation of man's blindness to corruption and evil, and man's insight into personal sin. The blindness occurs in the town, where light is everywhere and churches abound. In the wilderness, where "no church had ever been gathered" (Hawthorne 335), Brown is confronted by the devil himself, and is faced with a test of his faith. A crowd celebrates the witches' Sabbath and his wife, Faith, and family and fellow townspeople are all there. This dreamlike depiction of the forest is intentional in its ambiguity, providing enough information to talk academically about, but leaving out enough details to make it eternally debatable. One critic said of Brown, he is a "prisoner of his own psychology" (Shear 545). Others have attributed Brown's state of mind in Freudian concepts, such as 'projection', 'paranoia' (Shear 545), 'patriarchal rejection', and 'neurosis' (Levy 115). Another interesting theory discussed by several critics centers on the oedipal complexity of the final forest scene. The father motions for Goodman Brown to join him, among the sinners, while the mother begs him to leave. More convincing, perhaps, is Newman's argument that Brown "subsumes the cultural psychology of the nation in [his] individual psychology" (Newman 338). Cultural psychology, as developed in this argument, is greatly overtone in sexual connotation. It can be combined with the oedipal<sup>6</sup> tendencies to understand the Puritanical stance on sexuality in marriage. The Puritan version was that a couple should only be engaged in sexual contact for procreational purposes, not recreational. One source states that "sexual repression in Puritan New England...[led to a] tendency for out of control behaviors to spread in crowds" (Salem 1). This would lend itself to speculation that the 'repressive' nature of seventeenth-century marital sexuality, indoctrinated by the Puritans, led to the hysteria and 'mob mentality' of the witch trials.

One Puritanical belief is that women "could not be truly touched by God...Any woman who dared to speak the word of God must surely be an instrument of the devil" (Puritan 1). Most ironic in this belief is that Goody Cloyse<sup>7</sup> had taught Brown his catechism. The Puritan doctrine that barred women from personal relationships with God, in a sense, barred them from confronting personal sin. Hawthorne states that there was a world of meaning in his reference to Goody Cloyse's use of the word catechism<sup>8</sup>, and it is with this ambiguous inference that one could connect this statement to sexuality. Cloyse boasts that she knows Brown's grandfather carnally, suggesting that

the 'catechism' she taught him involved sexual sin (i.e. adultery). She reminds Goodman Brown that his own family was motivated to sin, and seeing his father in the forest only proved her words true. His new marriage to Faith seems to catalyze this Faith allegory occurring in the forest. His test of Faith is also the faith his wife has in him, and that he has in her. Brown's father welcomes him to marital sex and procreation with an acceptance of his passion. His mother tries to turn him away, in order to protect him from the sin of sexual pleasure, which her son fears he will encounter with his new wife. The fear is not unfounded in this context.

According to James C. Crews, Brown was "fleeing from the sexuality of married love...to a place where he can voyeuristically and vicariously enjoy that which he directly shuns" (Keil 33). This spiritual crisis that Brown encounters is what begins his journey, feeling as though he is the only man who feels sinful. What he discovers on his way is that all of those whom he regarded as religious teachers had taken part in the sin of sexual pleasure as well. What's more, Brown seems unwilling to sacrifice his 'sin' for redemption and rebirth, a blunt rejection of Puritan doctrine. Martin argues that Goodman Brown's insistence upon "this one night" represents "man's irrational drive to leave faith...and...adventure onto the wilder shores of experience" (Martin 85). It is man's destiny to want to use the gifts of God (i.e. sex), which in turn become their doom, for "evil is the nature of mankind" (Hawthorne 340).

The climactic moment of Brown refusing to give up his sinful ways might at first seem evil, but what it represents to him is a rejection of Puritanical ideas that sexuality is sinful. He has nothing to lose, according to the church. He is damned anyway, if he has discovered he is not one of the elect. What good would rebirth do for him if he is already dead in the eyes of Calvinistic predestination? The Fall of Man is masterfully recreated in "Young Goodman Brown", and is reminiscent of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the biblical Eden. One critic goes as far as to say, "the old story here is, of course, the story of the fall of Adam through the temptation of Eve. But Eve is renamed Faith" (Becker 16). Hawthorne manages to portray Faith convincingly, as both a physical and metaphorical element of the story. As Harris states that "It all comes down to a refusal [of Brown] to accept his own humanity or anyone else's" (Harris 44). Brown's inability to see the sins of humanity blinds him, and after the Sabbath<sup>9</sup>, his eyes were rudely awakened to the reality of evil of mankind, or the "wickedness in

<sup>6</sup>Oedipal refers to Oedipus Complex, which involves feelings of sexual desire of a boy for his mother and his jealousy toward his father. Freud made this mythological story famous in his psychology writings.

<sup>7</sup>Goody Cloyse is introduced as the woman who gave Goodman Brown spiritual guidance, but is later seen in his journey through the 'forest' as a witch.

<sup>8</sup>Catechism is a set of questions and answers that are used for teaching people about the beliefs of the Christian religion.

<sup>9</sup>Sabbath is the holy day of the week reserved for resting and worshipping God. For Jews, this is Saturday. For Christians, it is Sunday.

this dark world" (Hawthorne 340). The disturbing reality decimates his soul and leaves him embittered and angry for the rest of his days "for his dying hour was gloom" (Hawthorne 341). What is again ironic, is the doctrine of the church which seems hypocritical in its own teachings, that exercising one's gifts of God (i.e. sexuality) "yields 'miserable ruin'", but that this ruin and misery is necessary for one to come "to a knowledge of God" (Calvin 593).

Levin quotes Melville as saying that "Young Goodman Brown [is as] deep as Dante" (Levin 27). It seems so, from the depth of historical and biblical allusion that Hawthorne incorporates in order to more clearly illustrate the struggle of mankind with sin. The narrator's voice seems to be one of pity for Brown, perhaps Hawthorne's voice, as he came to the text with a clear awareness of "the conflict between Calvinism and Unitarianism at its height" (Verduin 183). This more open-minded approach to the historical sense of sin is what generates this new allegory for the Fall of Man. It is Hawthorne's intention to display the sin that we have all inherited through Adam and Eve, and to bring greater understanding as to the psychosexual, religiously symbolic and historical pretexts that made events like the Salem witch trials occur in our history. It is an understanding of the heart of man, however dark it may be.

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