

“Young Goodman Brown” Revisited

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Hawthorne's short story entitled “Young Goodman Brown” is one of his early works, published in *The New England Magazine* in 1835 and in *Mosses from an Old Manse* in 1846. Much anthologized, this story has been characterized in various ways: as an allegory; a romance; a story with moral; a story of meaningful ambiguity; and more.

The story-line is simple. One evening, Young Goodman Brown goes out to the forest for a meeting, leaving Faith, his wife of “but three months,” alone at home, despite her plea that he not go. When he returns home the next day, he is a gloomy man. (The night's journey into the forest and back occupies ninety per cent of the story.) At story's end, he dies at an old age, leaving behind his wife, children, and grandchildren.

But, is it just a simple story of a night's journey? Not at all. Though the story is relatively short and its structure lucid, it nonetheless deals with profound and serious themes involving religious faith, in particular, Puritanism. Most significantly, Hawthorne's approach to and treatment of these themes contribute to the enigmatic nature of this story — to its complexity. Melville, one of its early admirers,

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says of this work that "it is deep as Dante."

What makes this story "complex"? There are many factors. For one, it is a story filled with ambiguities. To begin with, let us look at the story title and the names of the main characters. They are not as straightforward as they first appear to be. Moreover, as critics agree,⁽¹⁾ the name "Goodman Brown" has ironic overtones. "Goodman," of course, is an archaic form of address for a man of humble birth, a farmer or yeoman, who was the head of a household. That is to say, any man not necessarily a "good" man could have been and *was* called "Goodman." As in Hawthorne's other works, in this story, too, the color symbolism is important. The title character's name "Brown" obviously suggests the color itself, the color of the dust of the ground out of which God gave form to Adam. His wife, who (as the narrator informs us) is "aptly named" Faith, is described in the opening paragraph of the story as wearing a cap adorned with "the pink ribbons." Pink ribbons are usually associated with female frivolity and weakness, but in this story, I would suggest that they are *also* symbolic of Faith's natural, one might say earthy, feminine qualities, qualities that make her so attractive to Brown. (Brown's relationship with Faith will be discussed further in this study.) In brief, "Goodman Brown," the title character of this story, is presented as a figure who could have been truly "good" and in search of purity because of his upbringing as a Puritan, but cannot be completely "pure" because he is an *earthy* fellow of humble birth, wedded to his wife, who is presented with the pink — and *not* white, the color of purity — ribbons.

Brown's journey into the forest in the night, the main plot of the story, is veiled with ambiguities, too. For example, why is it that, as Brown himself tells his wife, his "journey. . . must needs be done"? And, why does it have to be done on "this night. . . of all nights in the

year"? There is no explanation in the story. However, we (the readers) are led to believe that Brown has made some prior agreement with someone to take this journey on this particular night. Why else does the first person whom Brown meets on the way (who is initially described as "a man, in grave and decent attire") greet him in these words: "You are late, Goodman Brown"? This remark suggests that the time for their meeting was pre-arranged, and that Brown was late for the appointment. Also, not long after, Brown speaks to the same man about "having kept *covenant* by meeting thee here" (emphasis added), suggesting even more clearly that he has made such "covenant" at an earlier time. (The choice of the word "covenant" here may be an ironic twist on the expression "covenant theology," an important tenet in the Puritan faith, with Brown perhaps making the "covenant," not with God but with the devil. More on this point later.) As for the choice of the night of this journey, it is generally agreed to be October 31, All Saints' Eve, the traditional time for a Witches' Sabbath.⁽²⁾

Next, what is the purpose of the journey, to which Brown apparently has agreed? Does he know? On this point, we find the following statement in the story: "Goodman Brown felt himself justified in making more haste on his present evil *purpose*" (emphasis added). Moreover, Brown adds, "What if the devil himself should be at my very elbow!" Apparently he is conscious that his journey is of "evil purpose," and that he might be accompanied possibly by "the devil himself." At least, we are led to believe that Brown has this much of "foreknowledge" or awareness with respect to the nature of his journey. Viewed in this light, Brown's response to the first man he met, "Faith kept me back a while," becomes quite clearly symbolic, even allegorical. On one hand, as we have noted, Faith is the name of

Brown's wife, to whom he has been married for only three months. On the symbolic, or allegorical, level, "Faith" is Brown's "faith" in the Christian religion. He says of his family, "we have been a race of honest men and good Christians since the days of the martyrs." Needless to say, in the Christian tradition, one's faith in the religion is metaphorically described as a marriage—one is wedded to one's faith. Now, is there any significance to the fact that Brown is "but three months married" to Faith? Does the period of "three months" have any relationship to the duration of Brown's "faith" in Christianity? Again, there is no clear answer. However, in the story, we are told that Brown as a child was taught his catechism by Goody Cloyse. That is to say, we can assume that Brown has been brought up in the Christian tradition, and that, he has essentially accepted that religion for much longer than three months. But the depth or the quality (if such a term may be used) of his "faith" in Christianity remains uncertain.

Despite his awareness of the "evilness" of his journey, when he sets out, he apparently is confident that "after this one night I'll cling to her [Faith's] skirts and follow her to heaven." We are forced to ask ourselves: does Brown really believe that he will return to his wife completely unscathed? If Brown does, then, we have here an example of the irony, which abounds in this short story. For, as we shall see later, "after this one night," Brown becomes gloomy and stern, and would often "turn away" from his wife. Also, in the passage quoted above, Brown's wording, "I'll cling to her skirts and follow her to heaven," is worthy of note. That he will cling to her skirts seems to suggest his attraction or attachment to her is more physical than spiritual, with obvious sexual overtones. In other words, early in the story, we find Brown thinking of "following his wife to heaven," guid-

ed primarily by her physical and sexual attributes, rather than by her spiritual being. This notion is further reinforced as Brown later calls her "a blessed angel *on earth*" (emphasis added). If Brown thinks that the angel who will guide him to heaven is earth-bound, wearing skirts and pink ribbons — with all the implications discussed earlier —, what sort of "faith" did Brown have before his journey into the forest? Here is another enigma.

The man whom Brown meets is described as follows:

As nearly as could be discerned, the second traveller was about fifty years old, apparently in the same rank of life as Goodman Brown, and bearing a considerable resemblance to him, though perhaps more in expression than features. Still they might have been taken for father and son. And yet, though the elder person was as simply clad as the younger, and as simple in manner too, he had an indescribable air of one who knew the world, and who would not have felt abashed at the governor's dinner table or in King William's court, were it possible that his affairs should call him thither. But the only thing about him that could be fixed upon as remarkable was his staff, which bore the likeness of a great black snake, so curiously wrought that it might almost be seen to twist and wriggle itself like a living serpent. This, of course, must have been an ocular deception, assisted by the uncertain light.

From this description, Brown's companion is clearly associated with the devil, even though he is never identified as such. The association or identification with the devil becomes more plausible, as the figure is shown to possess the power of "reasoning," persuasion, "discoursing so aptly that his arguments seemed rather to spring up in the

bosom of his auditor than to be suggested by himself," and the ability to change his form or appearance at will. (For example, on the way into the forest, the female figure recognized by Brown as Goody Cloyse describes Brown's companion as follows: "in the very image of my old gossip, Goodman Brown, the grandfather of the silly fellow that now is.")

That Brown leaves Faith behind and follows the lead of a companion who resembles the devil, or who can be identified as the devil (as critics generally agree), can be interpreted allegorically. And in the early part of the story, that is to say, in the early stage of Brown's night journey, he "resolves" to turn back three times, but each time, his resolve is broken, as he allows himself to reverse his decision under the influence of his companion — or, by the devil's manipulation, though Brown seems unaware of the fact. In this sequence of three attempts to turn away from the journey, we are again presented with ambiguities.

The first time occurs shortly after Brown meets the man with the serpent staff. Brown, "exchanging his slow pace for a full stop," says to his companion, "having kept covenant by meeting thee here, it is my purpose now to return whence I came." But this resolve is immediately broken, and he resumes his walk "unconsciously" while still talking to his companion and claiming, "my father never went into the woods on such an errand, nor his father before him. . ." In response, Brown's companion says of Brown's father and grandfather, "they were my good friends, both: and many a pleasant walk have we had along this path, and returned merrily after midnight. I would fain be friends with you for their sake." Brown at first is surprised to hear this, but is able to dismiss his companion's words by saying, "We are a people of prayer, and good works to boot, and abide no such wicked-

ness." At this point, his companion intimates to Brown as follows:

I have a very general acquaintance here in New England. The deacons of many a church have drunk the communion wine with me; the selectmen of divers town make me their chairman; and a majority of the Great and General Court are firm supporters of my interest. The governor and I, too — But these are state secrets.

This intimation initially amazes Brown. (It is to be noted here that Brown does not question if his companion is telling the truth, but seems to accept what the other man tells him; nor does Brown question how the other man should know all that.) He manages, however, to regain his calm, and makes another attempt at turning back, saying: "But, were I to go on with thee, how should I meet the eye of that good old man, our minister, at Salem village? Oh, his voice would make me tremble both Sabbath day and lecture day." He adds, "... there is my wife, Faith. I would break her dear little heart; and I'd rather break my own." Yet, this attempt to stop his journey and turn back is unsuccessful, too. Brown and his companion continue to walk "at good free speed." Then, suddenly Brown decides, for the third time, not "to go any farther." Brown says: "my mind is made up. Not another step will I budge on this errand. What if a wretched old woman do choose to go to the devil when I thought she was going to heaven: is that any reason why I should quit my dear Faith and go after her?" But just as his "companion" predicts, "You will think better of this by and by," Brown's third resolve is eventually defeated, when he believes he hears the "voices" of "towns-people of his own," including "the voices of the minister and Deacon Gookin" and "a stronger swell of those familiar tones, heard daily in the sunshine at Salem village." Among the voices Brown seems to recognize is that of

Faith.

"Faith!" shouted Goodman Brown, in a voice of agony and desperation; and the echoes of the forest mocked him, crying, 'Faith! Faith!' as if bewildered wretches were seeking her all through the wilderness." The final blow to Goodman comes when he sees "a pink ribbon," "caught on the branch of a tree." Then, he cries, "My Faith is gone! . . . There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name. Come, devil; for to thee is this world given." Earlier in the story, Faith is portrayed three times with the pink ribbons of her cap. But there is no proof that this pink ribbon that Brown sees in the forest belonged to Faith. However, Brown assumes without hesitation that it is hers.

After this, we are told that Brown, "maddened with despair," "set forth again, at such a rate that he seemed to fly along the forest path rather than to walk or run." He has, we may conclude, given up completely his earlier efforts to turn back. From this point on, he becomes a most fervent traveler on this midnight journey. He hurries forward, "giving vent to an inspiration of horrid blasphemy." He sees "a numerous congregation [that] alternately shone forth, then disappeared in shadow. . .," among them "faces that would be seen next day at the council board of the province, and others which, Sabbath after Sabbath, looked devoutly heavenward, and benignantly over the crowded pews, from the holiest pulpits in the land." What is it that Brown sees in this scene? In this instance, the narrator of this story gives the following ambivalent statement, suggesting that what Brown saw might be a hallucination:

Either the sudden gleams of light flashing over the obscure field bedazzled Goodman Brown, or he recognized a score of the church members of Salem village famous for their especial sanctity.

Further, we are told that Brown sees "Good old Deacon Gookin" and "his revered pastor," "these grave, reputable, and pious people, these elders of the church, these chaste dames and dewy virgins," in the company of "men of dissolute lives and women of spotted fame, wretches given over to all mean and filthy vice, and suspected even of horrid crimes." In the midst of this scene unfolding before Brown's eyes, he thinks of Faith: "But where is Faith?" thought Goodman Brown; and, as hope came into his heart, he trembled."

Are we to interpret this to mean that there was still some "hope" for faith in Brown at this moment? But Brown apparently goes no further. During the remainder of his stay in the forest, he becomes a willing participant in the ritual, which begins with a voice crying "Bring forth the converts!" "At the word, Goodman Brown stepped forth from the shadow of the trees and approached the congregation, with whom he felt a loathful brotherhood by the sympathy of all that was wicked in his heart." In the congregation Brown is made to see what looked like his own dead father and his mother. "But he had no power to retreat one step, nor to resist, even in thought." He was evidently under the spell of some supernatural force.

During the ensuing ritual (or, "witch-meeting") attended by "the fiend worshippers" (as they are called), Brown hears the sermon of evil: "Evil is the nature of mankind. Evil must be your only happiness." At the climax of the ritual scene, Brown is about to be confirmed into the group, paired with a young woman, who turns out to be Faith. "... The husband cast one look at his pale wife, and Faith at him. What polluted wretches would the next glance show them to each other, shuddering alike at what they disclosed and what they saw! 'Faith! Faith!' cried the husband, 'look up to heaven, and resist the wicked one.'" The narrator continues:

Whether Faith obeyed he knew not. Hardly had he spoken when he found himself amid calm night and solitude, listening to a roar of the wind which died heavily away through the forest. He staggered against the rock, and felt it chill and damp; while a hanging twig, that had been all on fire, besprinkled his cheek with the coldest dew.

The next morning young Goodman Brown came slowly into the street of Salem village, staring around him like a bewildered man.

When Faith, his wife, "bursting into such joy at sight of him," goes to greet and kiss Brown, he "[looks] sternly and sadly into her face, and [passes] on without a greeting." (This is a marked contrast to the opening of the story, where Brown did "exchange a parting kiss with his young wife.")

Did Brown fall asleep in the forest? Where did all the congregation that had appeared before him go? Or, was such a congregation really there? The story offers no answer to these questions, except for the following comment by the narrator:

Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting?

Be it so if you will; but alas! it was a dream of evil omen for young Goodman Brown. A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man did he become from the night of that fearful dream.

The concluding paragraph of this story covers the rest of Brown's life (that is, from the morning after his journey into the forest—which took place three months after he and Faith had married—till his death) and the story ends with this sentence: "And when he had

lived long, and was borne to his grave a hoary corpse, followed by Faith, an aged woman, and children and grandchildren, a goodly procession, besides neighbors not a few, they carved no hopeful verse upon his tombstone, for his dying hour was gloom."

To sum up: before he starts his journey, Brown knows, apparently, that his night's journey is of "evil purpose," and yet he chooses to go forth. The question to be asked is: Did Brown think he could just go to the forest that evening and come back, and that everything would be perfectly all right afterward? In the early stages of his journey, Brown chooses to turn back, no less than three times, but, each time, he allows himself to reverse his decision. When he is made to "see" the "holy" and "reputable" members of his town also heading for the meeting, he despairs and becomes a most eager participant, laughing like a demon.

On the journey and at the "witch-meeting," Brown does cry out "Faith!" On a literal level, this is a cry for his wife, but on an allegorical level, this cry represents his struggle to keep "faith" with himself. It seems plausible that in this story, Hawthorne presents a man, named Goodman Brown, an intellectual young man, who wishes to keep "faith" with his religion, but who is also aware of the "evil" or "wickedness" present in the world (or, in himself as well), which, as noted by Melville (and others after him), is "the Calvinistic sense of Original Sin and Total Depravity."⁽³⁾ But when he is made to see those people who are revered in the community participating in the wicked meeting (whether or not he actually saw these people, or, whether or not such a meeting really took place can never be ascertained), he comes to the extreme conclusion: "There is no good on earth," and declares "My Faith is gone."

As may be clear from the preceding discussion, one major theme of this story is that of appearance versus reality. In this work, what appears to have happened may not be what actually took place. That Brown went to the forest, spent the night there, and returned the next day seems certain, since that is the "realistic" framework of the story. Beyond that, however, nothing is absolutely certain. As we have seen, Hawthorne's narrator on several occasions comments on the ambiguity of the scene or situation at hand. Young Goodman Brown's companion—the devil—appears in the likeness of his grandfather and speaks to Brown and others. But did the devil in his disguised form really appear to Brown? Or, were the people Brown saw in the forest really there? (It seems highly suggestive that Hawthorne emphasizes Brown's "hearing," rather than "seeing," in the dark forest scene.) Or, what the devil said at the "witch-meeting"—did he really say it? And, as we have noted, Hawthorne even suggests that the whole scene in the forest in which Brown supposedly participated could be a dream, "a dream of evil omen."

To pursue this line of thought, then, Brown willingly believes in the "appearance," not knowing what is real. Brown accepts what he sees, or, what he thinks he sees, without ever questioning the authenticity of what he sees or hears. And, what he sees—so he is convinced—is sin and evil in all other people.

Before Brown sets out on his journey, he kisses his Faith, who is shown with the pink ribbons of her cap, calling her "a blessed angel on earth." We might say that at this point, Brown has both love for his wife, a human woman with all her natural endowment, and faith in his religious teaching, or "goodness" in the world. As mentioned earlier in this study, the pink ribbons seem to Brown to suggest his wife's natural feminine qualities, or, her human-ness, as it were. Of

the many critical comments given to the pink ribbons, J. M. Ferguson, Jr.'s interpretation with its religious or theological implication would complement my reading:

. . . if we look to the color of the ribbons to yield their meaning we find an obvious interpretation for this detail which contributes to the meaning of the story perhaps more than any other single image within it. Neither scarlet nor white, but of a hue somewhere between, the ribbons suggest neither total depravity nor innocence, but a psychological state somewhere between. Tied like a label to the head of Faith, they represent the tainted innocence, the spiritual imperfection of all mankind.⁽⁴⁾

That he has chosen to take one night journey despite its (potential) evil nature may signify that faith and doubt co-exist in Brown and that, as if dictated to by his intellect, he wants to find out if he can retain his faith intact (or, perhaps driven by his pride, he wants to test himself and come out unscathed). In the forest, when he renounces Faith completely, it seems that Hawthorne is presenting the one-sidedness of a man named Brown. That is, he (Brown) seems to refuse to acknowledge that good and evil co-exist in all human beings. He seems to forget that "faith" is a matter within and not external to himself. He lacks true understanding of what human beings are, and becomes a bitter man, suspicious and critical and intolerant of humankind in general.

In the traditional devotional literature, the faithful follower of the Christian religion is shown to demonstrate his or her *complete, unconditional, total* belief, faith and devotion to God. Is Brown's act (his total surrender to the devil, to sin and to evil) a parody of such tradi-

tional forms of faith and devotion to God?

Brown's "inner struggle" and the way he deals with that struggle seem quite different from those shown by the speaker in one of John Donne's holy sonnets:

Batter my hear, three-personed God; for, You
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.
I, like an usurped town, to another due,
Labour to admit You, but oh, to no end;
Reason your viceroy in me, me should defend,
But is captived, and proves weak or untrue,
Yet dearly I love You, and would be loved fain,
But am betrothed unto Your enemy.
Divorce me, untie, or break that knot again;
Take me to You, imprison me, for I,
Except You enthrall me, never shall be free,
Nor ever chaste, except You ravish me. (1633)

Here, the speaker confesses openly his struggle to attain genuine faith in God, acknowledging freely his weaknesses, hoping ultimately to attain such faith, to be wedded to his God.

In the case of Goodman Brown, apparently his knowledge of evil and wickedness in human beings turned him stern and gloomy. It is curious that Brown never asks for the help of God in this crisis. In fact, God is never spoken of. Only once, it is said of Brown, "He looked up to the sky, doubting whether there really was a heaven above him." And, at the climax of the ritual scene in the forest, Brown cries to Faith, "look up to heaven, and resist the wicked one."

But, here again, he does not seek the help of God. As Ferguson suggests, "It is his pride which isolates him and prevents him from seeing that he too, figuratively speaking, wears pink ribbons. This *hubris*, to use the classical term, leads to his psychological destruction and accounts for the 'darkly meditative' and 'distrustful' man. . ."⁽⁵⁾ But Brown did not withdraw from society or become a recluse; instead, he continued his married life (although, we are told, "often, awaking suddenly at midnight, he shrank from the bosom of Faith"), and his associations with the members of the community, and when he died, he left behind "Faith, an aged woman, and children and grandchildren." However, "they carved no hopeful verse upon his tombstone, for his dying hour was gloom." But, was it only "his dying hour" that was "gloom"? It seems, rather, that from the time he returned from his journey into the forest, he lived a life of "gloom." Herein lies one central theme as summed up by F. O. Matthiessen: "the theme that mere doubt of the existence of good, the thought that all other men are evil, can become such a corrosive force as to eat out the life of the heart."⁽⁶⁾

Using the material richly associated with the Puritan past, the Puritan tradition, in "Young Goodman Brown" Hawthorne created a work of fiction which reflects his understanding of the working of the human mind. Whether we wish to call this work of short fiction a "moral allegory" or not, "Young Goodman Brown" does seem to tell us what it is like to be "human" and that to be truly human, we must not allow in ourselves a separation of the intellect from the heart. As is well known, this is an essential theme of Hawthorne's later work, his best known "romance," *The Scarlet Letter*. Hawthorne is a writer whose ultimate concern is with humankind, transcending the narrow confines of the Puritan mentality. This fundamental aspect of

Hawthorne's literature is discernible in his early work, "Young Goodman Brown."

[End]

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Notes

- (1) E. Arthur Robinson, for example, comments on the traditional connotations of the term, "goodman," particularly in the colonial period in which Hawthorne's story is set. (E. Arthur Robinson. "The Vision of Goodman Brown: A Source and Interpretation." *American Literature*, 35 [1963], 218-225.)
- (2) Daniel Hoffman writes: "Brown's destination is a Witches' Sabbath—'of all nights in the year' this must be October 31, All Saints' Eve, and he finds, at a rock altar flanked by blazing pines, all the worthies of Salem in the coven of the Prince of Darkness". (Daniel Hoffman. *Form and Fable in American Fiction*. New York: Oxford UP, 1965, p. 150) And Michael J. Colacurcio in his essay "Visible Sanctity and Specter Evidence: The Moral World of Hawthorne's 'Young Goodman Brown,'" reprinted in part in *Nathaniel Hawthorne's Tales* (New York: Norton, 1987), P. 390, agrees with and footnotes "the conjecture of Daniel Hoffman," quoted above. Another possibility is that Brown set out on "Midsummer Night," or the evening preceding Summer Solstice, believed to be a time when witches

and other supernatural beings were abroad, causing widespread mischief. As an additional note, E. Arthur Robinson comments: "Students of 'Young Goodman Brown' agree in general that its main materials are drawn from Cotton Mather's *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, published the year following the Salem witchcraft trials, in which Mather describes the devil's appearing as a "small black man" to lure people to forest rendezvous where church sacraments were imitated and mocked." (Robinson, p.218.)

- (3) Herman Melville, "Blackness in Hawthorne's 'Young Goodman Brown,'" *The Literary World*, August 1850.
- (4) J. M. Ferguson, Jr. "Hawthorne's 'Young Goodman Brown,'" *Explicator* 28 (1969), Item 32. np.
- (5) Ferguson, Item 32. np.
- (6) F. O. Matthiessen. *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman*. London, Oxford UP, 1941 (1966), p.283.

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