

Young Goodman Brown

by

Nathaniel Hawthorne

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**First
Published**

1835

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ANALYSIS

“Young Goodman Brown” (1835)

Nathaniel Hawthorne

(1804-1864)

This is a dream allegory, a young Puritan’s nightmare, in which he leaves his new wife Faith to keep a covenant with the Devil in the “heathen wilderness.” Melville called the story “as deep as Dante” and implicitly alludes to it in the “Try-Works” chapter of *Moby-Dick*. Hawthorne based the tale on historical records of the Salem witchcraft trials. Young Goodman Brown is duped by “spectre evidence” such as was admitted at the witch trials in 1692, until the practice was stopped by Cotton Mather and others. The ironic appellation Goodman meant Mister.

The story is the “inward history” of a Calvinist like “Roger Malvin’s Burial” (1832), but not as elusive in meaning, because of the clear contrast between dream and reality at the end. Brown has only recently achieved Faith. He is “but three months married” and she is “little.” He calls his wife “a blessed angel on earth” and promises that “after this one night I’ll cling to her skirts and follow her to heaven.” Faith is one of Hawthorne’s many redemptive angels in the house, Victorian rather than Calvinist, as indicated by her sweet face and pink ribbons. A reader familiar with Hawthorne would recognize her as an icon of salvation and see Brown as risking damnation when he leaves her behind, going to the Devil. She is true, while he is false. She is the corrective to Calvinism, the indoctrination her husband is receiving from Goody Cloyse, the name of a real person executed as a witch in 1692.

The nightmare occurs on Halloween, All Hallows Eve, originally a holy day with customs dating from the Middle Ages, subsequently a holiday that emancipates witches and Satan--today in fun, once in deadly seriousness. Cloyed (filled to excess) with Calvinist doctrine by Goody Cloyse, a young man ventures out into the wilderness to raise the Devil in a spirit of “speculation.” He falls asleep while waiting. Wilderness is the archetypal unconscious. In what Hawthorne calls “the wilderness of sleep,” Goodman dreams he is Badman. He dreams that the Calvinist doctrine of innate total depravity is true. Puritans lived with that doctrine by hoping they were saints, among those elected by God to salvation (it’s our neighbors who are going to Hell). Goody *Cloyse* is cloying Brown’s head with orthodoxy.

The young man leaves home on Halloween night “head” first, then puts his head back to kiss his wife, calling her “Dearest heart.” According to Victorian gender roles, she is heart and he is head. She is of the hearth and he is misled in his head. The doctrine of total depravity encouraged total depravity: Everybody is doing it and we’re damned anyway. Faith begs Goodman not to leave her: “Sleep in your own bed to night,” but he insists on his night out. The sexual implication is extended in their exchange: “My journey...forth and back again, must needs be done ‘twixt now and sunrise. What, my sweet, pretty wife, dost doubt me already, and we but three months married?’ ‘Then God bless you!’ said Faith, with the pink ribbons; ‘and may you find all well when you come back’.”

She is an angel, not a doormat.

Badman Brown feels justified “on his present evil purpose” by his intention to be Goodman hereafter. In the forest, unable to find the orgy he falls asleep and conjures up Satan himself: “What if the devil himself should be at my very elbow!” Evil takes the conventional form of a stranger whose staff resembles a snake—“he of the serpent.” Satan leads him on into the wilderness and tries to convince him by “reasoning” and then by spectre evidence that the doctrine of total depravity is true and that evil rules the world. His arguments “seemed rather to spring up in the bosom of his auditor than to be suggested by himself.” Goody Cloyse appears and identifies Satan, but Brown continues on with his “guilty purpose.” When an apparent witch flies overhead and a pink ribbon flutters down, Brown cries out “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.”

Satan is said to be “the instinct that guides mortal man to evil,” making the story universal, transcending any particular religion. “The fiend in his own shape is less hideous than when he rages in the breast of man.” In accord with the doctrine of total depravity, everybody in the village, his own parents and maybe even the wife of the Governor is there at Satan’s communion in the wilderness. When Satan declares that “evil is the nature of mankind,” he is preaching Calvinism. He dupes Brown by further convincing him that whatever is evil by nature cannot in any wise be good, and that the apparent virtue of men is only another form of evil--hypocrisy. Hawthorne sees the doctrine of total depravity as what led to the witchcraft mania in New England. Brown finally cries out from his heart to his true Faith, “look up to heaven, and resist the wicked one.” It is too late: “Whether Faith obeyed he know not.”

Yet his appeal is successful, proving that the real Faith is true. She has proven Satan to be false. Brown is doomed to doubt the proof because he has been cloyed with Calvinism by Goody Cloyse, dissociating his head from his heart, a division of the soul that “is never, in this mortal state, repaired.” He “staggered” like a man waking up confused. The next morning he returns to Salem village a “bewildered man.” He has no evidence whatever for his dread that his loving wife and neighbors are not what they seem in the early sunshine. Yet he doubts them all. At the end, Hawthorne’s style changes from the equivocal Expressionism of the gothic dream in the wilderness, the realm of Satan. The change is triggered by the disappearance of the villagers and Satan, by the blazing forest being abruptly replaced by chilly solitude; by the sudden transition from midnight to morning, and by the shift from wilderness to village. The tone becomes authoritative, the images iconic, conventional and Victorian--church, minister, family, sunshine and the Bible representing “the sacred truths of our religion.”

Badman Brown is so alienated by Calvinist doctrine and by his own sin that he suspects everybody in his village of depravity, including his minister and Faith, who rushes joyfully to greet and kiss him only to be passed by with a stern look and not even a greeting. In his dream her pink ribbon falls down from the sky and he “seizes it,” yet in the morning she is wearing it. His paranoia makes it impossible for him to differentiate between reality and his nightmare. Because he was Bad, he suspects that everybody Good is Bad, even his true Faith. The doctrine of total depravity becomes a defense mechanism. If everybody is really not Bad, if everybody including Faith remained faithful, then he is the only one Bad. To justify himself he has got to believe that all the Goodys are Baddies. His alienation makes his last name apt, as Brownists were a Puritan sect of *separatists* in early New England.

“Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting? Be it so if you will...” Hawthorne accepts his own suggestion: “It was a dream of evil omen...” The rhetorical question culminates a dream motif that begins as Brown is setting out from his home: “A lone woman is troubled with such dreams... She talks of dreams, too...as if a dream had warned her... A desperate man did he become from the night of that fearful dream.” If you fail to recognize the question as rhetorical, you are just as confused as Brown. If you think the witch meeting was real, like many critics, you agree with Satan and would have testified against defendants in the witch trials of 1692.

When Brown cries out to his Faith to resist Satan, the blazing forest vision disappears and a twig that had been on fire now “besprinkled his cheek with the coldest dew.” This touch in a criticism of Calvinism (1835)--the head dissociated from the heart by doctrine--is parallel to Hawthorne’s satire of Unitarianism (1843)--the heart dissociated from the head by vanity--in “The Celestial Railroad”: After calling the Unitarian minister Mr. Smooth-it-away an “impudent fiend” for beguiling him all the way to Hell, the narrator is dashed by spray from the river Styx: “so cold, so deadly cold...that with a shiver and a heartquake I awoke. Thank Heaven it was a dream!” In both tales the desperate final effort of a character to escape the Devil terminates his dream with a cold shock, signifying the reality of his moral freedom. Hawthorne intended both dreams to awaken the reader to the dangers of straying from a true Faith.

The only one present in the forest, the dreaming unconscious of Brown, is Brown. Through his erring head, he dupes himself. He is comparable to Parson Hooper when he puts on the black veil, gets a look at himself in the mirror and is terrified, but does not take it off. Brown cannot take it off because ideology damaged his brain as surely as a kid who has a bad trip on drugs and never recovers. He is also like the Calvinist in “The Man of Adamant,” whose heart turns to stone.

The psychological dynamics of “Young Goodman Brown” occur most often when one group is polarized against another and demonizes it as depraved, as in a war or an ethnic cleansing. Surveys indicate that about 30% of Americans in both major political parties detest members of the opposing party so much they consider them depraved, with an intensity evident on the Internet.

Michael Hollister (2015)