

Young Goodman Brown

Nathaniel Hawthorne

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Context

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born in 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts, and raised by a widowed mother. His ancestors were some of the earliest settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. John Hathorne (the original spelling of the family name), one of his great-grandfathers, had served as a judge at the Salem witch trials of 1692 and condemned twenty-five women to death. Hawthorne felt both fascination with and shame for his family's complicity in the witch trials and incorporated those feelings into his fiction, much of which explores the social history of New England and the Puritans.

Hawthorne attended Bowdoin College in Maine, where he met Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, who would go on to become a famous poet, and Franklin Pierce, who would become president of the United States. After college, he also met several other important New England writers of the early nineteenth century, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, and Henry David Thoreau. Melville dedicated his masterpiece *Moby-Dick* (1851) to Hawthorne in appreciation for the help Hawthorne gave him in writing it. Emerson and Thoreau were active in transcendentalism, a religious and philosophical movement of the early nineteenth century that was dedicated to the belief that divinity manifests itself everywhere, particularly in the natural world. It also advocated a personalized, direct relationship with the divine in place of formalized, structured religion. Hawthorne incorporated many elements of transcendentalism into his writing, including the belief in free will as opposed to divine intervention. In 1842, he married a fellow transcendentalist, Sophia Peabody.

Hawthorne held a variety of jobs after college, including editor and customs surveyor, while he began developing his writing. Hawthorne first published "Young Goodman Brown" anonymously in *New England* magazine in 1835 and again under his own name in his short-story collection *Mosses from an Old Manse* in 1846. Like most of the stories in *Mosses*, "Young Goodman Brown" examines Hawthorne's favorite themes: the loss of religious faith, presence of temptation, and social ills of Puritan communities. These themes, along with the story's dark, surreal ending, make "Young Goodman Brown" one of the Hawthorne's most popular short stories. The story is often seen as a precursor to the novels Hawthorne wrote later in his life, including *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), and *The Marble Faun* (1860).

In 1853, Pierce, Hawthorne's college friend, became president and appointed Hawthorne a United States consul. Hawthorne moved to Europe for six years and died in 1864, shortly after returning to America.

Plot Overview

Goodman Brown says goodbye to his wife, Faith, outside of his house in Salem Village. Faith, wearing pink ribbons in her cap, asks him to stay with her, saying that she feels scared when she is by herself and free to think troubling thoughts. Goodman Brown tells her that he must travel for one night only and reminds her to say her prayers and go to bed early. He reassures her that if she does this, she will come to no harm. Goodman Brown takes final leave of Faith, thinking to himself that she might have guessed the evil purpose of his trip and promising to be a better person after this one night.

Goodman Brown sets off on a road through a gloomy forest. He looks around, afraid of what might be behind each tree, thinking that there might be Indians or the devil himself lurking there. He soon comes upon a man in the road who greets Goodman Brown as though he had been expecting him. The man is dressed in regular clothing and looks normal except for a walking stick he carries. This walking stick features a carved serpent, which is so lifelike it seems to move.

The man offers Goodman Brown the staff, saying that it might help him walk faster, but Goodman Brown refuses. He says that he showed up for their meeting because he promised to do so but does not wish to touch the staff and wants to return to the village. Goodman Brown tells the man that his family members have been Christians and good people for generations and that he feels ashamed to associate with him. The man replies that he knew Goodman Brown's father and grandfather, as well as other members of churches in New England, and even the governor of the state.

The man's words confuse Goodman Brown, who says that even if this is so, he wants to return to the village for Faith's sake. At that moment, the two come upon an old woman hobbling through the woods, and Goodman Brown recognizes Goody Cloyse, who he knows to be a pious, respected woman from the village. He hides, embarrassed to be seen with the man, and the man taps Goody Cloyse on the shoulder. She identifies him as the devil and reveals herself to be a witch, on her way to the devil's evil forest ceremony.

Despite this revelation, Goodman Brown tells the man that he still intends to turn back, for Faith's sake. The man says that Goodman Brown should rest. Before disappearing, he gives Goodman Brown his staff, telling him that he can use it for transport to the ceremony if he changes his mind. As he sits and gathers himself, Goodman Brown hears horses traveling along the road and hides once again.

Soon he hears the voices of the minister of the church and Deacon Gookin, who are also apparently on their way to the ceremony. Shocked, Goodman Brown swears that even though everyone else in the world has gone to the devil, for Faith's sake he will stay true to God.

However, he soon hears voices coming from the ceremony and thinks he recognizes Faith's voice. He screams her name, and a pink ribbon from her cap flutters down from the sky.

Certain that there is no good in the world because Faith has turned to evil, Goodman Brown grabs the staff, which pulls him quickly through the forest toward the ceremony. When he reaches the clearing where the ceremony is taking place, the trees around it are on fire, and he can see in the firelight the faces of various respected members of the community, along with more disreputable men and women and Indian priests. But he doesn't see Faith, and he starts to hope once again that she might not be there.

A figure appears on a rock and tells the congregation to present the converts. Goodman Brown thinks he sees his father beckoning him forward and his mother trying to hold him back. Before he can rethink his decision, the minister and Deacon Gookin drag him forward. Goody Cloyse and Martha Carrier bring forth another person, robed and covered so that her identity is unknown. After telling the two that they have made a decision that will reveal all the wickedness of the world to them, the figure tells them to show themselves to each other. Goodman Brown sees that the other convert is Faith. Goodman Brown tells Faith to look up to heaven and resist the devil, then suddenly finds himself alone in the forest.

The next morning Goodman Brown returns to Salem Village, and every person he passes seems evil to him. He sees the minister, who blesses him, and hears Deacon Gookin praying, but he refuses to accept the blessing and calls Deacon Gookin a wizard. He sees Goody Cloyse quizzing a young girl on Bible verses and snatches the girl away. Finally, he sees Faith at his own house and refuses to greet her. It's unclear whether the encounter in the forest was a dream, but for the rest of his life, Goodman Brown is changed. He doesn't trust anyone in his village, can't believe the words of the minister, and doesn't fully love his wife. He lives the remainder of his life in gloom and fear.

Character List

Goodman Brown - A young resident of Salem and the story's protagonist. Goodman Brown is a good Christian who has recently married Faith. He takes pride in his family's history of piety and their reputation in the community as godly men. His curiosity, however, leads him to accept an invitation from a mysterious traveler to observe an evil ceremony in middle of the forest, one that shocks and disillusioned him.

Goodman Brown shows both innocence and corruptibility as he vacillates between believing in the inherent goodness of the people around him and believing that the devil has taken over the minds of all the people he loves. At the beginning of the story, Goodman Brown believes in the goodness of his father and grandfather, until the old man, likely the devil, tells him that he knew them both. Goodman Brown believes in the Christian nature of Goody Cloyse, the minister, and Deacon Gookin, until the devil

shows him that Goody Cloyse is a witch and the other two are his followers. Finally, he believes that Faith is pure and good, until the devil reveals at the ceremony that Faith, too, is corruptible. This vacillation reveals Goodman Brown's lack of true religion—his belief is easy to shake—as well as of the good and evil sides of human nature.

Through Goodman Brown's awakening to the evil nature of those around him, Hawthorne comments on what he sees as the hidden corruption of Puritan society. Goodman Brown believes in the public professions of faith made by his father and the elders of his church and in the societal structures that are built upon that faith. Hawthorne suggests, however, that behind the public face of godliness, the Puritans' actions were not always Christian. The devil in the story says that he was present when Brown's father and grandfather whipped Quakers and set fire to Indian villages, making it clear that the story of the founding of New England has a dark side that religion fails to explain. The very fact that Goodman Brown is willing to visit the forest when he has an idea of what will happen there is an indication of the corruptibility and evil at the heart of even the most faithful Puritan.

Faith - Goodman Brown's wife. Faith is young, beautiful, and trusting, and Goodman Brown sees her as the embodiment of virtue. Although Goodman Brown initially ignores Faith's claims to have had disturbing nightmares, seeing her at the evil ceremony in the forest prompts him to question his wife's righteousness.

Faith represents the stability of the home and the domestic sphere in the Puritan worldview. Faith, as her name suggests, appears to be the most pure-hearted person in the story and serves as a stand-in of sorts for all religious feeling. Goodman Brown clings to her when he questions the goodness of the people around him, assuring himself that if Faith remains godly, then his own faith is worth fighting temptation to maintain. When he sees that Faith has been corrupted, he believes in the absolute evil at the heart of man. His estrangement from Faith at the end of the story is the worst consequence of his change of heart. If he is able to be suspicious of Faith, Hawthorne suggests, then he has truly become estranged from the goodness of God.

The Old Man/Devil - The man, possibly the devil, who tempts Goodman Brown into attending the ceremony in the forest. The man intercepts Goodman Brown in the middle of the dark road, then presides over the ceremony. He sees through the Salem villagers' charade of Christian piety and prides himself on the godly men he has been able to turn to evil.

In "Young Goodman Brown," the devil appears to be an ordinary man, which suggests that every person, including Goodman Brown, has the capacity for evil. When the devil appears to Goodman Brown in the forest, he wears decent clothes and appears to be like any other man in Salem Village, but Goodman Brown learns that the devil can appear in any context and not appear out of place. By emphasizing the devil's

chameleon nature, Hawthorne suggests that the devil is simply an embodiment of all of the worst parts of man. By saying that the devil looks as though he could be Goodman Brown's father, Hawthorne creates a link between them, raising the questions of whether the devil and Goodman Brown might be related or the devil might be an embodiment of Goodman Brown's dark side. Later in the story, Goodman Brown, flying along with the devil's staff on his way to the ceremony, appears to be a much more frightening apparition than any devil could be by himself. Although it is never fully clear whether the old man and Goodman Brown's experiences in the forest were a dream or reality, the consequences of Goodman Brown's interaction with the old man stay with him for the rest of his life.

Goody Cloyse - A citizen of Salem Village who reveals herself to be a witch. Goody Cloyse is a Christian woman who helps young people learn the Bible, but in secret she performs magic ceremonies and attends witch meetings in the forest. Goody Cloyse was the name of an actual woman who was tried and convicted of witchcraft during the historical Salem Witch Trials of 1692; Hawthorne borrows her name for this character.

The Minister - The minister of Salem. The minister, a respectable pillar of the community, appears to be a follower of the devil.

Deacon Gookin - A member of the clergy in Salem who appears to be a follower of the devil. The deacon is an important man in the church of Salem, and Goodman Brown thinks of him as very religious.

Themes, Motifs, and Symbols

Themes

The Weakness of Public Morality

In "Young Goodman Brown," Hawthorne reveals what he sees as the corruptibility that results from Puritan society's emphasis on public morality, which often weakens private religious faith. Although Goodman Brown has decided to come into the forest and meet with the devil, he still hides when he sees Goody Cloyse and hears the minister and Deacon Gookin. He seems more concerned with how his faith appears to other people than with the fact that he has decided to meet with the devil. Goodman Brown's religious convictions are rooted in his belief that those around him are also religious. This kind of faith, which depends so much on other people's views, is easily weakened. When Goodman Brown discovers that his father, grandfather, Goody Cloyse, the minister, Deacon Gookin, and Faith are all in league with the devil, Goodman Brown quickly decides that he might as well do the same. Hawthorne seems to suggest that the danger of basing a society on moral principles and religious faith lies in the fact that members of the

society do not arrive at their own moral decisions. When they copy the beliefs of the people around them, their faith becomes weak and rootless.

The Inevitable Loss of Innocence

Goodman Brown loses his innocence because of his inherent corruptibility, which suggests that whether the events in the forest were a dream or reality, the loss of his innocence was inevitable. Instead of being corrupted by some outside force, Goodman Brown makes a personal choice to go into the forest and meet with the devil; the choice was the true danger, and the devil only facilitates Goodman Brown's fall. Goodman Brown is never certain whether the evil events of the night are real, but it does not matter. If they are a dream, then they come completely from Goodman Brown's head—a clear indication of his inherent dark side. If they are real, then Goodman Brown has truly seen that everyone around him is corrupt, and he brought this realization upon himself through his excessive curiosity. Goodman Brown's loss of innocence was inevitable, whether the events of the night were real or a dream.

The Fear of the Wilderness

From the moment he steps into the forest, Goodman Brown voices his fear of the wilderness, seeing the forest as a place where no good is possible. In this he echoes the dominant point of view of seventeenth-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 wild "Indians" and sees one hiding behind every tree. He believes that the devil could easily be present in such a place—and he eventually sees the devil himself, just as he had expected. 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. He himself is ashamed to be seen walking in the forest and hides when Goody Cloyse, the minister, and Deacon Gookin pass. The forest is characterized as devilish, frightening, and dark, and Goodman Brown is comfortable in it only after he has given in to evil.

Motifs

Female Purity

Female purity, a favorite concept of Americans in the nineteenth century, is the steadying force for Goodman Brown as he wonders whether to renounce his religion and join the devil. When he takes leave of Faith at the beginning of the story, he swears that after this one night of evildoing, he will hold onto her skirts and ascend to heaven. This idea, that a man's wife or mother will redeem him and do the work of true religious belief for the whole family, was popular during Hawthorne's time. Goodman Brown clings to the idea of Faith's purity throughout his trials in the forest, swearing that as long as Faith remains holy, he can find it in himself to resist the devil. When Goodman Brown finds that Faith is present at the ceremony, it

changes all his ideas about what is good or bad in the world, taking away his strength and ability to resist. Female purity was such a powerful idea in Puritan New England that men relied on women's faith to shore up their own. When even Faith's purity dissolves, Goodman Brown loses any chance to resist the devil and redeem his faith.

Symbols

The Staff

The devil's staff, which is encircled by a carved serpent, draws from the biblical symbol of the serpent as an evil demon. In the Book of Genesis, the serpent tempts Eve to taste the fruit from the forbidden tree, defying God's will and bringing his wrath upon humanity. When the devil tells Goodman Brown to use the staff to travel faster, Goodman Brown takes him up on the offer and, like Eve, is ultimately condemned for his weakness by losing his innocence. Besides representing Eve's temptation, the serpent represents her curiosity, which leads her into that temptation. Goodman Brown's decision to come into the forest is motivated by curiosity, as was Eve's decision to eat the forbidden fruit. The staff makes clear that the old man is more demon than human and that Goodman Brown, when he takes the staff for himself, is on the path toward evil as well.

Faith's Pink Ribbons

The pink ribbons that Faith puts in her cap represent her purity. The color pink is associated with innocence and gaiety, and ribbons themselves are a modest, innocent decoration. Hawthorne mentions Faith's pink ribbons several times at the beginning of the story, imbuing her character with youthfulness and happiness. He reintroduces the ribbons when Goodman Brown is in the forest, struggling with his doubts about the goodness of the people he knows. When the pink ribbon flutters down from the sky, Goodman Brown perceives it as a sign that Faith has definitely fallen into the realm of the devil—she has shed this sign of her purity and innocence. At the end of the story, when Faith greets Goodman Brown as he returns from the forest, she is wearing her pink ribbons again, suggesting her return to the figure of innocence she presented at the beginning of the story and casting doubts on the veracity of Goodman Brown's experiences.

Historical Context

In "Young Goodman Brown," Hawthorne references three dark events from the Puritans' history: the Salem Witch Trials of 1692, the Puritan intolerance of the Quakers, and King Philip's War. During the Salem Witch Trials, one of the most nightmarish episodes in Puritan history, the villagers of Salem killed twenty-five innocent people who were accused of being witches. The witch hunts often involved accusations based on revenge, jealousy, botched child delivery, and other reasons that had little to do with perceived witchcraft. The Puritan intolerance of

Quakers occurred during the second half of the seventeenth century. Puritans and Quakers both settled in America, hoping to find religious freedom and start their own colonies where they could believe what they wanted to. However, Puritans began forbidding Quakers from settling in their towns and made it illegal to be a Quaker; their intolerance soon led to imprisonments and hangings. King Philip's War, the final event referenced in Hawthorne's story, took place from 1675 to 1676 and was actually a series of small skirmishes between Indians and colonists. Indians attacked colonists at frontier towns in western Massachusetts, and colonists retaliated by raiding Indian villages. When the colonists won the war, the balance of power in the colonies finally tipped completely toward the Puritans.

These historical events are not at the center of "Young Goodman Brown," which takes place after they occur, but they do inform the action. For example, Hawthorne appropriates the names of Goody Cloyse and Martha Carrier, two of the "witches" killed at Salem, for townspeople in his story. The devil refers to seeing Goodman Brown's grandfather whipping a Quaker in the streets and handing Goodman Brown's father a flaming torch so that he could set fire to an Indian village during King Philip's War. By including these references, Hawthorne reminds the reader of the dubious history of Salem Village and the legacy of the Puritans and emphasizes the historical roots of Goodman Brown's fascination with the devil and the dark side.

The Dark Romantics

In the nineteenth century, American writers, including Nathaniel Hawthorne, were influenced by the European Romantic movement but added their own nationalistic twist. The most famous European Romantics included William Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and William Blake. The characteristics of the movement, which began in Germany at the beginning of the eighteenth century, included an interest in the power of the individual; an obsession with extreme experiences, including fear, love, and horror; an interest in nature and natural landscapes; and an emphasis on the importance of everyday events. Some writers in America who drew from the Romantic tradition were James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving, and the transcendentalists Henry David Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. American Romantics in the early nineteenth century tended to celebrate the American landscape and emphasize the idea of the sublime, which glorified their beautiful home country. They also created the concept of an American Romantic hero, who often lived alone in the wilderness, close to the land, such as Cooper's Leatherstocking or Thoreau himself at Walden Pond.

"Young Goodman Brown" fits into a subgenre of American Romanticism: the gothic or dark romance. Novels and stories of this type feature vivid descriptions of morbid or gloomy events, coupled with emotional or psychological torment. The dark Romantics joined the Romantic movement's emphasis on emotion and extremity with a gothic sensibility, hoping to create stories that would move readers to fear and question their surroundings. Edgar Allen Poe, who wrote "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) and "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843), was probably

the most famous of the writers to work in the American dark Romantic genre. Goodman Brown's encounter with the devil and battle with the evil within himself are both classic elements of a dark Romance.

The Fall of Man

"Young Goodman Brown" functions as an allegory of the fall of man, from which Hawthorne draws to illustrate what he sees as the inherent fallibility and hypocrisy in American religion. Hawthorne sets up a story of a man who is tempted by the devil and succumbs because of his curiosity and the weakness of his faith. Like Eve in the book of Genesis, Goodman Brown cannot help himself from wanting to know what lies behind the mystery of the forest. And like Eve, Goodman Brown is rewarded for his curiosity with information that changes his life for the worse. In the course of the ceremony in the forest, the devil tells Goodman Brown and Faith that their eyes will now be opened to the wickedness of themselves and those around them. Adam and Eve were exiled from the Garden of Eden and forced to undergo all the trials and tribulations of being human, and Goodman Brown returns from the forest to find that the joy in life has been taken away from him. He has become suspicious of those around him, even the woman he once loved.

Important Quotations Explained

1. On he flew among the black pines, brandishing his staff with frenzied gestures, now giving vent to an inspiration of horrid blasphemy, and now shouting forth such laughter as set all the echoes of the forest laughing like demons around him. The fiend in his own shape is less hideous than when he rages in the breast of man.

This passage, in which Goodman Brown gives up on trying to resist the devil's temptations, takes up the devil's staff, and makes his way toward the ceremony, appears about a third of the way into the story. It suggests that some of the shame and horror Goodman Brown feels when he returns to Salem Village may come from his feeling of weakness at having succumbed to evil. Goodman Brown resists the devil while he still believes that various members of his family and community are godly, but when he is shown, one by one, that they are all servants of the devil, he gives in to his dark side completely and grabs the devil's staff. The change that comes over him after either waking up from his dream or returning from the ceremony can be explained partially by his shame at having fallen so quickly and dramatically into evil.

2. But, irreverently consorting with these grave, reputable, and pious people, these elders of the church, these chaste dames and dewy virgins, there were men of dissolute lives and women of spotted fame, wretches given over to all mean and filthy vice, and suspected even of horrid crimes. It was strange to see that the good shrank not from the wicked, nor were the sinners abashed by the saints.

In this passage, which appears halfway through the story, Goodman Brown sees the ceremony and the dark side of Salem Village. The transgression of social boundaries is one of the most confusing and upsetting aspects of the ceremony. The Puritans had made a society that was very much based on morality and religion, in which status came from having a high standing in the church and a high moral reputation among other townspeople. When Goodman Brown tells the devil at the beginning of the story that he is proud of his father and grandfather's high morals and religious convictions, he is describing how the society in which he lives values these traits above all others. When Goodman Brown sees the mingling of these two different types of people at the ceremony, he is horrified: the ceremony reveals the breakdown of the social order, which he believed was ironclad. Hawthorne is pointing out the hypocrisy of a society that prides itself on its moral standing and makes outcasts of people who do not live up to its standards.

3. "By the sympathy of your human hearts for sin ye shall scent out all the places—whether in church, bedchamber, street, field, or forest—where crime has been committed, and shall exult to behold the whole earth one stain of guilt, one mighty blood spot."

Near the end of the story, the devil promises Goodman Brown and Faith that they'll have a new outlook on life, one that emphasizes the sinning nature of all humanity, and condemns Goodman Brown to a life of fear and outrage at the doings of his fellow man. This dark view of life is a complete turnaround from the ideas that Goodman Brown had held at the beginning of the story. Then, he thought of his family as godly; Faith as perfectly pure; and the Reverend, Deacon, and Goody Cloyse as models of morality. The devil ultimately shows him that his views are naïve and gives him the ability to see the dark side in any human context. When Goodman Brown returns to the village, he trusts no one. As the devil's speech suggests, Goodman Brown has seen the evil in every human, and once he has started seeing it, he cannot stop.