

Dogmatic paranoia in “Young Goodman Brown”

In his short story “Young Goodman Brown”, Nathaniel Hawthorne intentionally leaves the implications of the story open to debate. The possibility that Goodman Brown’s experiences are just figments of his imagination is not only hinted at but clearly acknowledged. Assuming that this is the case, it can be argued that the reason why Goodman Brown is having such a vision in the first place is due to his belief in the doctrine of unconditional grace, according to which salvation is limited to a select few that God has predestined to be saved.

In the conclusion of the story, the question is asked: “Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest, and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting?” (Hawthorne, 71), to which the answer is: “Be it so, if you will” (Hawthorne, 72). As Richard H. Fogle points out regarding the deliberate use of equivocation: “Primarily it offers opportunity for freedom and richness in suggestion” (Fogle, 452). This open acknowledgement of ambiguity may lighten the horrific impression of the events in retrospect but it makes the outcome even more uncanny considering Goodman Brown’s transition from friendly, light-hearted, innocent young man to resentful paranoid. Conceding that his experience may have been a dream renders his fate even more depressing. The rest of his life is presented in a fairly disconcerting manner: “A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man, did he become, from the night of that fearful dream” (Hawthorne, 72). If he was just dreaming and the people he saw at the devil-worshipping ritual in the forest are not guilty of such partaking in such an act, then not only is his contempt and disdain for everyone around him unwarranted but his life is wasted on pointless despondency. His perception of his community changes his outlook on life in general. He believes the devil when he says that evil is the core of human nature. This is what leads him to treating everyone with suspicion. He guards himself against their evil influence which he now perceives as an integral part of their whole being.

What he probably sees as a justification of his paranoia is that it is ideologically confirmed by the Puritan concept of unconditional election. The principle is explained by Kirk MacGregor in his review on the formative history of the doctrine of predestination: “In the Reformation era, John Calvin (1509-1564) taught an unconditional double predestination of the elect to eternal glory without reference to foreknown good, along with predestination of the non-elect, or reprobate, to eternal destruction without reference to foreknown evil” (MacGregor, 1). As a branch of Calvinism, Puritans shared most of the teachings of John Calvin, including his view on predestination. In the context of this idea, it would seem

reasonable that no matter how pious and devout someone may appear on the surface, their true self may still be wicked and sinful. Those who are not elect – that is, predestined for salvation – are unworthy of divine grace, no matter what they do. Even if they seem righteous, their behaviour is just an artificial charade intended to create a false image of virtue. This conception is in line with the common belief that the devil is deceptive. Assuming that Goodman Brown is familiar with Puritan dogma, it makes sense that he would take what he witnessed – even if he believed it to be a dream – as a confirmation of the principle of predestination. Hope in the virtue of mankind is even mocked by the devil: “Depending upon one another's hearts, ye had still hoped that virtue were not all a dream!”, followed by a telling exclamation: “Now are ye undeceived!” (Hawthorne, 65). This revelation resonates with Goodman Brown as shown by his change of character after the ritual. It makes him believe that now he has seen people for what they truly are. What is maybe even worse is the uncomfortable reality that he – no matter how reluctantly – participated in the ritual as well.

Given that Goodman Brown's contempt for the other members of his community is based on their supposedly shared indulgence in devil-worship, he has no excuse for thinking that he is any better considering that he is also guilty of submitting to the infernal forces. He lets go of all of his remaining resistance to the devil's power when he discovers his wife Faith's pink ribbons in the forest and suspects that she is one of the followers of the devil as well upon which he exclaims: “My Faith is gone!” (Hawthorne, 50) which, of course, has a double meaning, hence the suggestive name of the character – as well as most others in the story. The word 'Faith' primarily refers to his wife but in this highly dramatic context, it also alludes to the loss of his faith in a religious sense. He recognizes that the devil has a major influence over everything and everyone, even those who appear to be the most righteous, including his beloved wife Faith. That leads him to resignedly accept the devil's call out of hopelessness, as demonstrated by the following sentence: “And maddened with despair, so that he laughed loud and long” (Hawthorne, 51). From then on, Goodman Brown becomes an eager participant to the point of surpassing the other horrors of the forest: “all through the haunted forest, there could be nothing more frightful than the figure of Goodman Brown” (Hawthorne, 53). During the ritual, his affiliation with the crowd is explicitly acknowledged: “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” (Hawthorne, 60). Even before the explicit recognition of the reason behind his journey, it is implied throughout the story that Goodman Brown is undertaking the initiation ceremony willingly, given that there is no sign of force exerted upon him and the arrangement with his uncanny

guide is hinted at when the latter's appearance is described as "not wholly unexpected" (Hawthorne, 12).

If Goodman Brown embarks on his journey and the subsequent ritual on his own volition – as it has been shown to be the case – and the gathering he experiences is interpreted as a dream rather than an actual event, the question why he has such a bizarre vision in the first place is rightfully asked. It is arguable that dreams often reflect one's mental state. A dream may be a manifestation of memories, desires, fears and inner conflict. If Goodman Brown's spooky dream is an expression of his mental state, it reveals a great deal of insecurity and a deep-seated doubt in his own rectitude. He is drawn to the gathering for a reason that is clearly disclosed: "the sympathy of all that was wicked in his heart" (Hawthorne, 60). That is what he thinks he has in common with all of his community. The most striking indication that the dream might be rooted in Goodman Brown's fear of his natural proclivity for sin is the appearance of his guide who is described as "bearing a considerable resemblance to him, though perhaps more in expression than features. Still, they might have been taken for father and son" (Hawthorne, 13). Edward M. Cifelli explains the situation adequately: "The conclusion to be drawn from the combined images seem to be that Satan has taken the form of the elder Brown" which he then clarifies as "an unmistakable sign of guilt according to the principle of "spectral" evidence during the Salem witch trials" (Cifelli, 16). It means that the devil takes Goodman Brown's physical form because the remorseful Puritan man feels an unwanted association with him. He later verifies this association by accepting the devil's staff which is carved in the likeness of a serpent – a symbol of evil in Christianity – and then he consents to the initiation. The entire scenario is a reflection of Goodman Brown's fear that anyone can be inherently evil, including himself.

The doctrine of predestination might be blamed for instilling the fear in Goodman Brown that most people are naturally predisposed to the influence of the devil regardless of how they conduct themselves in public or how they suppress it. Goodman Brown's dream confirms to him not only that no one can be trusted because he cannot tell whose righteousness is genuine but also that his righteousness is not genuine, either. He gave in to the call of evil and joined the coven in wickedness. Although the paranoid bitterness that he exhibits for the rest of his life is manifested mainly through his interaction with his community, it is fair to say that he resents himself just as much as his fellow Puritans. Nothing suggests in the conclusion of the story that he holds himself in a higher regard. In fact, the whole point of his venture has to do with his own insecurity, his own guilt and self-doubt. He failed to "stand firm against the devil" (Hawthorne, 46) so he has no reason to believe himself to be elect. If anything, that

fateful night taught him that the power of the devil is so far-reaching that no one can be trusted, not even his own faith.

Works Cited

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