

## **“Young Goodman Brown”: An Analysis of a Name: Immaturity of Faith and the Puritan Sense of Superiority**

Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown" has puzzled and excited readers and scholars alike for over a century ever since its publication in 1835. It has been interpreted in many different ways, such as being "an allegorical revelation of human depravity, as a symbolic study of sexual initiation, as an inquiry into general conflict, as a demonstration of Puritan hypocrisy, as evidence for Hawthorne's sympathy for Puritan values and as an artfully designed short story making no essential reference beyond itself" (Eberwein 23). This essay, however, will be exploring another possible interpretation of this elusive tale through centering the analysis around the titular character's name. In the short story Young Goodman Brown's name exemplifies the characteristic of the Puritans to morally separate themselves from others, be that through the names with which they referred to each other, or the way in which they treated "sinners". Furthermore Young Goodman Brown's name also, through the events of the story, shows readers how instead of building one's faith on people, it should be built on God, and that one should rather develop an inner conviction of one's faith.

What catches the attention and puzzles the reader first, is perhaps the odd choice of names and way of referring to people that appears throughout the text. These in themselves send clear messages to the reader as to how Hawthorne wants to present the Puritans of the village of Salem. Although it was commonplace for Puritans to refer to one another in this way, if the reader just chooses to take these names at face value, without looking at the historical background, these names are very telling. By the men being referred to as "goodman" and the women as "goody", this indicates to the reader that somehow the person bearing this name has earned the honour to be referred to in this manner; and secondly, that those who do not have this name, are in some way inferior. It sets up a clear line of divide. Goodman Brown, the protagonist of the short story, as the reader discovers in the story, would be considered to be of good Puritan blood. His father and grandfather are known as worthy men who "set fire to an Indian village, in King Philip's war," and "lashed the Quaker woman so smartly through the streets of Salem" (Hawthorne). These people (the Quaker woman and the Indians) were not "goodmen" and "goodies", and so these were deemed godly acts. The prejudices towards the Indians are clearly visible in Goodman Brown's behaviour as well, as when he is in the forest alone he says that "there may be a devilish

Indian behind every tree” (Hawthorne). This distinction based upon those referred to as goodman and goody and those who were not is clearly seen in an account of how “two ministers maintained that it was unlawful to call any non-church member by that very title (of goodman). For them, therefore, Goodman implied moral-rather than civic-worth” (Pablé 240).

What will also puzzle the reader is why the protagonist’s youth is stressed in his name. Why is he called Young Goodman Brown as opposed to Goodman Brown? This suggests an idea of immaturity in the character, which later on proves to be the case and becomes a central theme of the short story. Although, as mentioned, he has what is considered in the village to be an impressive Puritan heritage, the immaturity suggested by his name is clearly seen in his own faith and religious convictions. He outwardly follows what is expected of a good Puritan, through having Goody Cloyse as “his moral and spiritual adviser, jointly with the minister and Deacon Gookin” (Hawthorne), going to church each Sabbath, as indicated in his comment of seeing people at the forest gathering who “Sabbath after Sabbath, looked devoutly heavenward, and benignantly over the crowded pews” (Hawthorne), and in how he considers himself and his village “a people of prayer, and good works to boot” (Hawthorne). As Jane Donahue Eberwein argues, “he is evidently a dutiful member of the Salem village community and seems to have obeyed all its rules and regulations. Hawthorne presents him here as he encounters the first real test of his conversion,<sup>1</sup> the experience that will indicate whether he has really achieved faith” (25). The short story, however, presents him as yet unripe in his faith, in that he has not made the faith his own and is going with the crowd instead of acting based upon his own convictions. There are several instances of this kind in the story.

The first occasion on which Goodman Brown acts in such a way, is when he is going over in his mind how after his return he will return to Faith and lead a good life, and that “with this excellent resolve for the future, Goodman Brown felt himself justified in making more haste on his present evil purpose” (Hawthorne). Goodman Brown does not see that if someone believes in something so much as to build their whole life around it, their faith should be based on personal conviction that the faith is the truth. According to Leo B. Levy, “initially, he is a naïve and immature young man who fails to understand the gravity of the step he has taken” (376).

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<sup>1</sup> Conversion was a stage in the Puritan faith, after “visible” signs of the person’s “sanctity” had been noted, which then granted them church membership (Eberwein 24).

Goodman Brown's ungrounded faith is a theme present throughout this story, in which the dangers of relying on others are presented. He is unable to make a decision for himself, as shown in when he says "my father never went into the woods on such an errand, nor his father before him. We have been a race of honest men and good Christians since the days of the martyrs. And shall I be the first of the name of Brown that ever took this path?" (Hawthorne) This clearly shows that he does not have his own set beliefs, but instead bases them on those around him, like his forefathers, the minister etc. Why doesn't Goodman Brown just turn back because he personally thinks it is wrong? This weakness of his is later played to by the devil, who cites how his father and grandfather were helped by him to do evil deeds. Goodman Brown has a similar relationship with the minister, who is also a model for him, which can be seen in when he says: "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" (Hawthorne). Goodman Brown's faith is built on people (his forefathers, Faith, Goody Cloyse, the minister and Deacon Gookin), not his own convictions. The devil, as exemplified above, "progressively undermines the young man's faith in the institutions and the men whom he has heretofore revered" (Fogle 450). As R.H. Fogle says,

Goodman Brown, a simple and pious nature, is wrecked as a result of the disappearance of the fixed poles of his belief. His orderly cosmos dissolves into chaos as church and state, the twin pillars of his society, are hinted to be rotten, with their foundations undermined. (qtd. in Hurley)

Faith, Goodman Brown's wife, plays a key role in highlighting this and at the same time showing how Goodman Brown should have responded to temptation. His dependence on Faith can be clearly seen in the scene after he discovers that Goody Cloyse practices witchcraft and says: "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?" (Hawthorne) It shows how he is incapable of standing on his own and needs his wife to keep him on the right track. This is also physically played out after he discovers that the deacon and the minister have also come down the path of temptation, and he is "ready to sink down on the ground, faint and overburdened with the heavy sickness of heart. He looked to the sky, doubting whether there really was a heaven above him" (Hawthorne). With the loss of the people on whom his faith is built, his faith also begins to crumble.

Faith's name also points to his lack of faith, as whenever he mentions her name on his journey into the woods, he should be turning to and gathering strength from his faith in God. As Eberwein interestingly puts it, "whether the journey Brown undertakes be viewed as actual encounter or as nightmare, Hawthorne clearly intends it as a real spiritual trial, having definitive consequences for his remaining life and a probable bearing on his eschatological condition" (26). Brown's lack of faith is seen when he says that "with heaven above and Faith below, I will yet stand firm against the devil" (Hawthorne). This is how it should be in the sense of remaining firm due to his personal faith in God, but he needs Faith his wife to remain firm for him to remain on the good road. It is important to note that though Goodman Brown is a believer, not once in the whole narrative does he turn to God for strength or guidance. He comes close to it once before the strange cloud appears. This only further underlines his lack of faith. Goodman Brown remains alone in his despair as he feels he has lost all those he trusted and respected, and only after he tells Faith to "look up to heaven and resist" (Hawthorne) does his nightmare in the wood come to an end. This implies to the readers that this is how he should have responded in the first place to solve his problems.

Therefore

this ambiguity (as to whether Goodman Brown's forest experience is a dream or not) adds depth and tone to Hawthorne's thin and delicate fabric. It covers the bareness of allegory, imparting to its one-to-one equivalence of object and idea a wider range of allusiveness, a hint of rich meaning still untapped. (Fogle 453)

Through Goodman Brown it is shown that putting faith in people instead of God leads to despair, as the devil says: "depending upon one another's hearts, ye had still hoped that virtue were not all a dream" (Hawthorne). But as the dream showed Goodman Brown, no one is perfect. There are two further instances in the short story that are worth mentioning that reflect Goodman Brown's dependence on others. The first is when Goodman Brown is at the ceremony in the forest and notices that Faith is not present and exclaims "but where is Faith?" and at this "hope came into his heart" (Hawthorne). This clearly shows the reader that his wife Faith is what gives him faith, and pinpoints how Goodman Brown places his faith in people instead of getting strength from his religious beliefs. The second instance is when at the devil's ceremony the new members are called forward and "he had no power to retreat one step, nor to resist, even in thought, when the minister and good old Deacon Gookin seized his arms and led him to the blazing rock" (Hawthorne). This showcases how Goodman

Brown has been led his whole life, instead of being the one directing and taking charge of his own life based upon his own convictions.

In conclusion, the protagonist's name, Young Goodman Brown, can be viewed as a summary of some of the chief aspects of Goodman Brown's problems and why he ends up "a stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not desperate man," resulting in "no hopeful verse upon his tombstone, for his dying hour was gloom" (Hawthorne). His feeling of superiority in judging his townsmen for the rest of his life, and his immaturity of faith that resulted in his inability to gain strength and guidance from it in his hour of need, lead him to this gloomy existence.

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