

Faith: Sweet Dream or Beautiful Nightmare?-- An Introduction to Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown"

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"Young Goodman Brown"

Author: Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864)

Genres: short story, prose, dark romantic, supernatural, historical fiction

Publication Date: first published in the *New England Magazine* in April 1835

Number of Words: approximately 8,000

"Young Goodman Brown" is all about the inner struggle that we all experience between good and evil, and about deciphering the true intent of ourselves and those around us.

Don't Read It Yet!

This story will be much less confusing if you know some background information before you begin reading. The story is set in Salem, Massachusetts, in the late 17th century--approximately 150 years before Hawthorne actually wrote the story--at the actual time and place of the historical witchcraft trials and executions. The Salem witch trials were a series of events that resulted in the torture and execution of dozens of innocent women, and is now considered to have been a case of mass hysteria resulting from religious extremism. (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salem_witch_trials).

There are three main characters in the short story: Young Goodman Brown, Faith (Young Goodman Brown's wife), and a man that is never named, but is a literal devil's advocate, if not the devil himself. Also, you should know that the story contains a great amount of allegory, so don't think too literally. Focus on the theme and broader picture and the points that support those elements more than the details of the story.

The Short(er) Version

"Young Goodman Brown" begins with Goodman Brown leaving his dear Faith to set off on his "journey," at dusk, leaving the village and going into the forest. It is never clear exactly what his journey is, but it is obviously significant. He feels bad for leaving his wife, and senses that she is troubled with his leaving, but he continues nonetheless.

Goodman Brown heads off into the forest where he meets his "fellow traveler". The man who seems to be the devil beckons him to continue on, but Goodman Brown argues, saying that he came from a long line of honest, Christian men and he could not defile them by doing such. The story never explicitly explains what the two are discussing, but it is apparently some sort of sinful witch meeting that is to take place in the forest, in the middle of the night. The devil then confronts Brown with a truth he's never known, that his family, grandfather and father, were evil men. Goodman Brown tries to ignore this fact, again by saying that he is of good people. And as if the knowledge of his family were not enough, the devil adds that the minister and other noble saints, both men and women, of the village are involved in sinful acts as well.

Still convinced he, himself, is a good man, Goodman Brown tries to find good in the huge burden that has just been laid on him. He says that if for nothing else he wants to remain good for his wife, Faith, because he does not want to hurt her. However, as time goes on and he gets further down the path, Goodman Brown sees and catches glimpses of other "saintly" people he has always looked up to. With each bit of new knowledge, he becomes more burdened and distracted, but all the while believes that as long as he still has Faith and her goodness, he can cope with the knowledge of others' sinfulness.

Once he reaches the end of the path and arrives at his destination, he sees men and women alike worshipping the devil and speaking of satanic things. All of a sudden, he hears a young woman's voice, and realizes it is his precious Faith. Young Goodman Brown is both outraged and terrified by this sight. He is deeply affected by the others who are involved in this dark, satanic ceremony, but he is hurt most of all by the hidden truth that his wife is certainly not as innocent as he thought. He begs Faith to resist the evil, but little does he know that she is already too far gone.

Goodman Brown, grief-stricken and emotionally exhausted, is finally overcome by the unsettling acts of that dark night and becomes just like the rest of his "good, Christian family".

When he wakes the next morning, he is not sure whether the events of the previous night were unfortunately true, or if they were simply a bad dream, a nightmare. Of this, he is never sure. All that Young Goodman Brown is certain of is that he will never look at those people the same again, his relationship with Faith will never be the same, and that his life will be forever changed.

If You Don't Understand, Don't Fret

First of all, you need to think of *Young Goodman Brown* as a big symbol or metaphor of the struggle between good and evil.

In the beginning of the story when talking of Goodman Brown leaving, it says, "...but [he] put his head back, after crossing the threshold, to exchange a parting kiss with his young wife. In my opinion, this is a sign of what is to come; that Goodman Brown will

never be the same again because once he knows the truth of the town, he is forever changed. Also, I think it alludes to the fact that this is the last time he will ever see his "good" Faith again. It's ironic that time and time again Goodman Brown clings to the faith that his Faith is good and will see him through, or give him the motivation to get through all he will encounter and learn. He said, "With heaven above, and Faith below, I will yet stand firm against the devil!" He quickly learns that having "Faith below", as his foundation so to speak, may not be so much help after all.

After seeing his dear Faith and what she had become, Goodman Brown says, "My Faith is gone!" I believe this statement to be both literal and symbolic. He is indeed sorrowed by the fact that he has essentially lost his wife, Faith. He is also, however, realizing that everyone is evil, or at least that they are not what he has always seen and thought them to be. In this case he has lost his faith in humanity.

Even though, it may seem as though Goodman Brown holds his own against evil for a while, I believe that he actually gave in when he stepped out from the woods and went towards all those that were gathered that night. The story says "...[the congregation] with whom he felt a loathful brotherhood, by the sympathy of all that was wicked in his heart." I don't think he wanted to give in, hence the word loathful, but he automatically felt a connection with these people; a connection he tried to disregard and fight, until the truth about Faith swallowed him in with it and released the truth of his heart.

Goodman Brown was never the same after those unsettling experiences involving such greatly conflicting emotions. "A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man, did he become, from the night of that fearful dream." Young Goodman Brown essentially fell and stayed down. He remained cynical for pretty much the rest of his life, and certainly never looked at his wife the same.

The main character's name, Young Goodman Brown, is a very ironic and somewhat obvious symbol of the story because he turned out to be not so good of a man. On the other hand, the title seems to be very obvious as well, but is a bit more complex. It describes not only the main character, but the other characters as well. With the exception of the devil, all of the characters were good in the beginning in the mind of Goodman Brown and were found to be evil. The most obvious example to the reader, though, is Faith. At first, we, along with her husband, see her as innocent a blameless; but we soon find that she is evil in a very appealing disguise. In my opinion, this makes the title the theme of the story because it is applicable to our lives. It is something we have all dealt with or will deal with at some point: wrestling with sin, temptation, and of course our faith.

How I Really Feel About It

Even though this story is very dark with its strong emotions, subjective experiences, and questionable motives, I love it! You can call me crazy if you want, but you can't deny that the story leaves you with questions. *Young Goodman Brown* not only left me questioning the motives of Goodman Brown and the kind of person he truly is, but also

questioning who others truly are, and even what may subliminally motivate me from time to time.

I might feel like I always have the best intentions, but we all know that anything can happen when you get really pissed off or really anytime a strong emotion is involved. The story reminds me of the struggle we all have with sin from time to time. Likewise, we tend to easily have faith in things and/or people based on what we see, but usually there is something to them deep down that no one knows, whether it's good or bad.

Also, I love me some Faith! In my opinion, she is the perfect symbol of us all in one way or another. She seems to be the perfect little lady (a sweet dream), so innocent and good, yet we find out that she isn't any better than the rest of the people. She has done some bad, and made her mistakes, but if we're all completely honest, we would probably admit that we have a little darkness down in us somewhere. A side that we may not know a lot about and definitely can't explain, but we know it's there all the same.

For some, including myself from time to time, it can be a daily struggle or question of who we are versus who we want to be. Am I saying that there is no good in the world and we should just all be hopeless? No, not at all. More often than not, clinging to those good things get us through the hard times. Nevertheless, everything is not always going to be perfect all the time. That is why I love this story so much. The example it encompasses may be a bit extreme, but it is honest. Things are not happy go lucky all the time. There is evil in the world and there is strife, and there is pain.

Sometimes the people who seem to have it all together and are the most morally sound are the very people who do wrong or can break bad in the blink of an eye. I love people, and I am very passionate about being optimistic and trying to make the best out of every circumstance. However, I will be the first to admit that I have temptations and struggles and sins daily. It's simply a part of who are and our human nature. It's life.

Interesting Facts After the Fact: About The Author

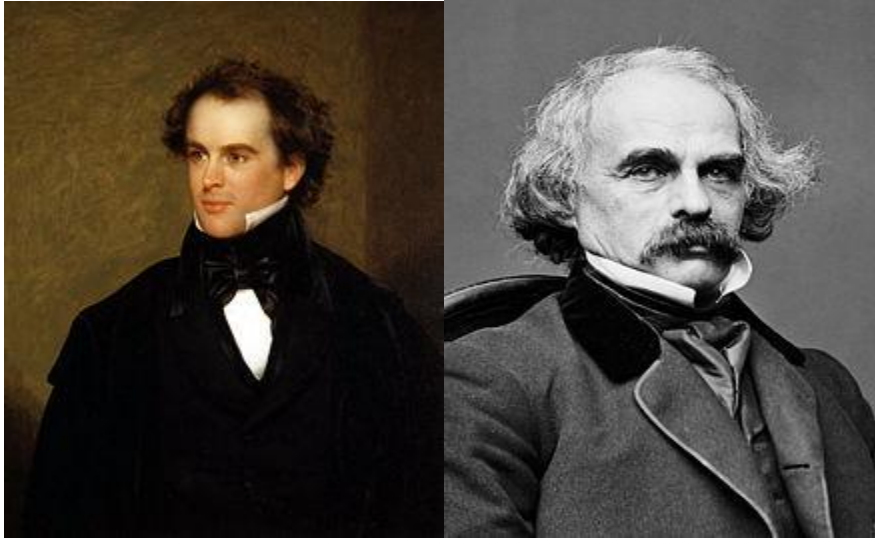
Nathaniel Hawthorne is a well-known classic American author. Most people regardless of their level of knowledge on American Literature have at least heard of him and/or his more famous works such as, *The Scarlet Letter*, and *The House of Seven Gables*. Henry James, also an author, once called Hawthorne "the most valuable example of American genius". He is known for his prose style, vivid characteristics, uncanny ability to recreate the past, and being tantalizingly elusive and withholding interpretation.

A fact that some may not know, however, is that Nathaniel Hawthorne's paternal great-great grandfather, Justice John Hathorne(1641-1717) was the chief interrogator of the accused witches during the Salem witch trials and hysteria in 1692, the time in which "Young Goodman Brown" is set. Some think that Hawthorne was plagued with guilt of his ancestor's role, which drove him to write about similar circumstances in an attempt to expose the hypocrisy of Puritanism and to make good the reputation of his ancestor.

Even though there is no evidence to support it, it has been said that this guilt is what inspired him to change his name from Hathorne to Hawthore.*

*All facts in this paragraph found at the website of an organization that studies all things Hawthorne based in Salem, MA, called "Hawthorne in Salem." The site is a project developed by the North Shore Community College, in collaboration with three Salem, MA museums, and in consultation with various Boston-area high school and college students and faculty. Accessed October 2012. <http://www.hawthorneinsalem.org/Literature/Quakers&Witches/YoungGoodmanBrown/MMD1164.html>. That site in turn cites a book by Margaret B. Moore entitled, *The Salem World of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, U of Missouri Press, 2001.

Pictures of Nathaniel Hawthorne as a young adult(left) and in his later years(right)



http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathaniel_Hawthorne

About the author: "MaKinzie Reavley is a freshman undergraduate majoring in nursing at East Tennessee State University. She has recently become interested in classic American literature since beginning an American literature class this semester, and has come to love Nathaniel Hawthorne after reading "Young Goodman Brown."