

Literary Analysis of "Young Goodman Brown"

American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne is the author of "Young Goodman Brown". This is a short story that describes Puritan New England of the 17th century. The events described by the author begin during the twilight time in Salem, when Goodman Brown abandons his wife. They have been living together for three months before the man decided to go to the forest and conduct an errand there. His wife, Faith, does not want him to leave, but Goodman insists on undertaking a journey. He encounters an old man in the forest; it seems like the man reminds Goodman of himself. Then, they together meet Goody Cloyse, who says that she needs to go further. Thus, after exchanging pleasantries, they flee together in her direction. During this night, other people from the town, who hold on for the same place as Goodman, settle in the woods. Goodman hears his wife's voice and calls out for her; however, he gets no response. Then, he flies around the forest with the help of the maple staff made for him by a stranger. He arrives at a gathering that took place at midnight. There he sees all people from the town, who gathered together at a ceremony intended to convert both Goodman and his wife. They were not initiated in the forest ceremony. The ceremony resembles witches' Sabbath as there is a flaming altar made from rock. Faith and Goodman Brown are brought forth as the new converts. Then, Goodman appeals to heaven, and the scene disappears at the same moment.

Themes and Symbols

According to the literary scholar Walter Shear, the story consists of three parts. The first one focuses on Goodman Brown's life at his native village that is integrated in the society. The next part of the short story is a lengthy dreamlike sequence of Goodman Brown's life in the forest. The third part is devoted to Goodman Brown's loss of trust and rejection of Puritan world.

When Goodman returns home the next morning, he rejects his wife's greetings. Hawthorne writes:

By the sympathy of your human hearts for sin Ye shall sent 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 (Hawthorne n.pag.).

Fear of the Forest

As soon as Goodman Brown appears in the forest, he voices his reverence for the wilderness, viewing it as an evil place. Like other Puritans, Goodman Brown associates wilderness with the savage Indians. Moreover, it seems to him that someone is hiding behind the trees. Goodman is so assured that the devil inhabits such places that he finally sees him, just as it was expected. He considers it as a matter of family honor; his forefathers were unable to walk freely in the forest for pleasure, so he gets upset when the devil tells him that this is not the case. He is ashamed of being seen walking in the forest, so he hides himself when he encounters Goody Cloyse, the minister, and the Deacon Gookin. After giving in to the devil, Goodman feels comfortable in the forest, which is characterized as devilish, frightening, and dark. This is proved by the author's words:

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 (Hawthorne n.pag.).

Weakness of Public Morality

Goodman seems more concerned in his faith in other people than in the fact that he meets with the devil in the wood. Goodman's religious convictions are rooted in the position or belief in the people that surround him. When he discovers that his father, grandfather and wife Faith are connected with the devil, he briefly contemplates a possibility of doing the same. Hawthorne

suggests that the danger results from a society based on the religious beliefs and ethical principles. He tries to prove the fact that community members do not have their own moral deacons and when they tend to copy the beliefs of other people around them, the faith becomes rootless and weak. Hawthorne writes in his story that “their conversation is awkward, especially when she mentions Wickham, a subject Darcy clearly wishes to avoid” (Hawthorne n.pag.).

Symbols

The serpent portrayed by Hawthorne symbolizes a demon, which is used as a resistance to God. Just like Eve, Goodman is tempted when he chooses to pick the staff and make a travel faster. It means that he loses his innocence towards curiosity and temptation. The serpent represents Eve’s curiosity, which in turn leads her to that temptation. Goodman’s decision to enter into the forest is inspired by his curiosity. The staff shows that the old man is more of a demon than human. Thus, when Goodman chooses to use the staff for himself, he appears on the path to evil:

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 (Hawthorne n.pag.).

From the very beginning of the story, Hawthorne mentions Faith’s pink ribbon a couple of times. In fact, it represents Faith’s righteousness, and the color itself is associated with gaiety and innocence. When this pink ribbon falls down to Goodman from the sky, this is a sign that Faith has fallen to the devil’s realm; it also means that she shed off her innocence and purity: “It was funny to see that the good shrank not from the wicked, nor were the sinners abashed by the saints” (Hawthorne n.pag.). As the story ends, Faith salutes Goodman as he comes back from the forest. She is wearing her pink ribbons that signify regeneration of her innocence portrayed at the

beginning of the story and cast doubts on the faithfulness of Goodman Brown's experiences in the wood.

Conclusion

When Goodman comes back home the following morning, he is not sure of the events of the previous night. Moreover, he is trembling and his belief that he lived in a Christian community is broken. Goodman loses faith in his wife as well as in the whole humanity. Hawthorne finishes the story mentioning, "And when he had lived long, and was borne to his grave...They carved no hopeful verse upon his tombstone, for his dying hour was dark" (Hawthorne n.pag.). Goodman lives the rest of his life anticipating everything that will happen next; such an attitude resulted from losing faith in his wife and people around him.