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Young Goodman Brown's "Heart of Darkness"

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THE CRITICAL CONTROVERSY WHICH HAS CENTERED on Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" seems to have reached an impasse. Critics have usually seen the story as an allegory embodying Hawthorne's suspicions about man's depravity.[1] This interpretation implies that the Devil's words to Goodman Brown—"Evil is the nature of mankind. Evil must be your only happiness."—echo Hawthorne's own attitude. R. H. Fogle, for instance, writes, "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."[2] Hawthorne, Fogle says, "does not wish to propose flatly that man is primarily evil; rather he has a gnawing fear that this might be true."[3] And Harry Levin has unequivocally stated, "The pharisaical elders ... meeting in the benighted wilderness, are doing the devil's work while professing righteousness."[4]

On the other hand, F. O. Matthiessen and W. B. Stein have resisted the majority consensus and suggested that it is Goodman Brown who purposely seeks for evil.[5] Recently David Levin has attempted to void both points of view by insisting that Goodman Brown is misled by the Devil who conjures up apparitions to befuddle his innocent victim.[6] The idea is comforting but not convincing. To take guilt away from human beings in order to place it on infernal powers is not a satisfactory explanation of the

[1] Among them: Q. D. Leavis, in "Hawthorne as Poet," *Sewanee Review*, LIX, 179-205 (April-June, 1951); Harry Levin, in *The Power of Blackness* (New York, 1958); and Roy Male, in *Hawthorne's Tragic Vision* (Austin, Tex., 1957).

[2] *Hawthorne's Fiction: The Light and the Dark* (Norman, Okla., 1952), p. 79.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 16.

[4] *The Power of Blackness*, p. 54.

[5] Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York, 1941), p. 283; and Stein, *Hawthorne's Faust: A Study of the Devil Archetype* (Gainesville, Fla., 1953), pp. 6-7. Unfortunately, neither of these critics offered a sustained analysis of his reading.

[6] "Shadows of Doubt: Specter Evidence in Hawthorne's 'Young Goodman Brown,'" *American Literature*, XXXIV, 344-352 (Nov., 1962).

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story. To the modern mind (and I suspect that includes Hawthorne's) either Abigail Williams and her Salem playmates were irresponsible, hysterical little liars, or Martha Carrier and Goody Proctor really were witches.

If I am correct, David Levin's contention is misleading, and we must return to the original argument. He writes, "Asking whether these people were 'really' evil is impertinent, for it leads us beyond the limits of fiction."[7] Confessing diabolical inspiration, I shall take a chance on being impertinent because I am not convinced that questions dealing with man's nature and the human heart are "beyond the limits of fiction." I believe the reader has every right to wonder if the townspeople are actually cohorts of the Devil. After all, if Young Goodman Brown did not have a nightmare or experience hallucinations, Hawthorne has created a fearful indictment of humanity. But if Goodman Brown did "dream," then the evil he saw, like the witchcraft reported in Salem in 1692, was the product of his own fancy with no reality save that supplied by his depraved imagination.

My point here is that "Young Goodman Brown" is a subtle work of fiction concerned with revealing a distorted mind. I believe the pervasive sense of evil in the story is not separate from or outside its protagonist; it is in and of him. His "visions" are the product of his suspicion and distrust, not the Devil's wiles. Goodman Brown's dying hour is gloomy because the evil in his own heart overflows; he sees a world darkened by the dreariness of sin. Hawthorne has given us every reason to read the story as a revelation of individual perversion (the story, after all, *is* entitled "Young Goodman Brown"), and speculations about man's nature or the talents of the Devil are out of place.

The tale begins with an account of Goodman Brown's departure from his home in Salem village in order to keep a strange tryst in the forest. He prepares to leave "at sunset," an hour when the world is about to be plunged into darkness. Faith, "as the wife was aptly named," begs him to "put off [his] journey till sunrise"; but he replies, "My journey, as thou callest it, forth and back again, must needs be done 'twixt now and sunrise." Like Richard Digby, the intolerant religious fanatic of "The Man of Adamant" who

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 351.

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"plunged into the dreariest depths of the forest" and was disappointed that "the sunshine continued to fall peacefully on the cottages and fields...," Goodman Brown's alliance with evil is suggested by contrasting images of light and dark which intimate a symbolic opposition between good and evil. These images of shadow, dark, and gloom become more frequent and persuasive as the story continues.

Hawthorne makes clear at once that Goodman Brown's purpose on this night is an evil one. The fact that he is aware of the sinfulness of his trip destroys any belief we may have in Goodman Brown's "simple and pious nature."

> "Poor little Faith!" thought he, for his heart smote him. "What a wretch am I to leave her on such an errand! She talks of dreams, too. Methought as she spoke there was trouble in her face, as if a dream had warned her what work is to be done to-night. But no, no; 'twould kill her to think it. Well, she's a blessed angel on earth; and after this one night I'll cling to her skirts and follow her to heaven."

Aside from the interesting emphasis on dreams, the passage is noteworthy for several reasons. Goodman Brown's conscience is troubled by his departure from Faith. He realizes that it would "kill her" if she were to know the purpose of his trip, but he assumes that his absence (his departure from faith) will be only temporary. Goodman Brown's first mistake is to imagine that faith (which, most readers are agreed, must be interpreted as faith in one's fellow men as well as religious faith) can be adopted and discarded at will. The irony of the passage resides primarily in the implication that Goodman Brown intends to get to heaven by clinging to the "skirts" of faith rather than by virtue of his own character or actions. The ironic implications become almost playful in the following sentence: "With this excellent resolve for the future, Goodman Brown felt himself justified in making more haste on his present evil purpose." Despite Fogle's concentration on the ambiguities of the story, it seems clear that Hawthorne means us to be in no doubt that Goodman Brown has already had some contact with the forces of evil and does not hesitate to renew that contact, because he feels that he will prove superior to the temptations which may assail him.

The suggestions that we are primarily concerned with the char-

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acter of Goodman Brown, with some secret concerning his mind and heart, become stronger as he journeys into the forest, which functions as a symbol of withdrawal into oneself. Goodman Brown's isolation, his retreat from normal human intercourse into the strange dream world of the subconscious, is intimated by the imagery which describes his journey. He takes "a dreary road, darkened by all the gloomiest trees of the forest." Goodman Brown there encounters the man whom he has journeyed into the forest to find. The man appears to be the Devil himself, and he expects Goodman Brown.

The forest, symbol of Brown's retreat into himself, is associated with images suggestive of evil. "It was deep dark in the forest, and deepest in that part of it where these two were journeying." Hawthorne also insists on the similarity between Brown and the Devil—"the second traveller was about fifty years old, apparently in the same rank of life as Goodman Brown, and bearing a considerable resemblance to him...." And we are informed that "they might have been taken for father and son." Despite David Levin's reminders of the Devil's wiles and powers, this personage is so curiously described that he is indisputably Goodman Brown's own personal devil.

Goodman Brown's faith may be "little," but it is not nonexistent. His "devil" knows, just as Goodman Brown or any contemporary criminal subconsciously knows, that belief in the morality of society must be destroyed, rationalized away, before total commitment to evil is possible. When the young man is chided by his companion for his tardiness in keeping their appointment, he replies, "Faith kept me back awhile"; but faith was not, of course, strong enough to prevent his journey. Goodman Brown's "lonely night of the soul," his pathetic struggle between good and evil, is dramatized in his dialogue with the Devil. At first he protests that he intends to return at once to the village. "'Sayest thou so?' replied he of the serpent, smiling apart." The Devil, it seems, knows his victim well. He urges the young man to walk on, insisting that they are "but a little way in the forest yet"; and Goodman Brown goes with him, not realizing how far into the forest of his own evil he has already traveled.

The Devil then begins a sly temptation of Goodman Brown, but

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it is a puzzling temptation because the only rewards Goodman Brown is offered are the aspersions cast on his family, his neighbors, and his church. Strangely enough, he accepts without question the words of the Father of Lies. The temptation is actually a kind of interior monologue, a debate which Goodman Brown holds with himself. He asks the Devil several questions whose purpose seems to be to keep him from evil. The questions, it is interesting to note, suggest the three institutions to which man is morally obligated: the family, society, the church. Goodman Brown asks, in effect, "What would my family think? What would the neighbors say? How would the church react?" But the Devil (or psychic rationalization) assures him that his family, his neighbors, and the leaders of his church are far more stained by the blackness of sin than he.

These questions are projected into vivid, concrete form in the visions which follow. As they walk on into the forest, Goodman Brown and the Devil come upon a woman whom Brown recognizes as the venerable and pious Goody Cloyse. Fearing (or pretending to fear) that she will question his being out so late in such strange company, Goodman hides himself. The Devil, however, advances on her; she recognizes him and they hold a short conversation in which the old woman reveals that she has long been on familiar terms with Satan. The young man never pauses to consider the reality of Goody's appearance, even though such consideration might be expected of any well-trained Puritan cognizant of the Devil's powers. Hawthorne's use of Goody Cloyse and her reference to Martha Carrier remind us that they were actual historical personages unjustly accused by twisted "youngsters." That Goody Cloyse's appearance is part of Goodman Brown's psychological self-justification seems clear from Hawthorne's statement in the following paragraph: "They continued to walk onward, while the elder traveller exhorted his companion to make good speed and persevere in the path, discoursing so aptly that *his arguments seemed rather to spring up in the bosom of his auditor than to be suggested by himself*."[8] The biblical echo of the Devil's exhortation to Brown "to make good speed and persevere in the path" appears to be Hawthorne's ironic parodying of the situation since it is the path of *self*-righteousness to which Goodman Brown adheres.

[8] Italics here as elsewhere are mine.

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When Brown finally refuses to go any further, the Devil seems entirely undisturbed by the news: " 'You will think better of this by and by,' said his acquaintance, composedly." Sitting by himself, Goodman Brown experiences his second "vision." He imagines that he hears the voices of the minister and Deacon Gookin, as they ride by, talking about the devilish communion which they plan to attend. Goodman's reason for believing what little evidence his senses afford him is even less good in this instance than it had been in the previous one:

owing doubtless to the depth of the gloom at that particular spot, neither the travellers nor their steeds were visible. Though their figures brushed the small boughs by the wayside, *it could not be seen that they intercepted, even for a moment, the faint gleam from the strip of bright sky athwart which they must have passed.* Goodman Brown alternately crouched and stood on tiptoe, pulling aside the branches and thrusting forth his head as far as he durst *without discerning so much as a shadow.*

Fogle has alluded to this passage too as evidence of Hawthorne's ambiguity, but there is no ambiguity in the fact that Goodman Brown actually *saw* nothing at all. Nevertheless, he stands "doubting whether there really was a heaven above him." Goodman Brown makes one last desperate avowal of his resistance to evil: " 'With heaven above and Faith below, I will yet stand firm. . . .' " But he has already departed from Faith. Goodman Brown then thinks that he hears the sound of voices: "The next moment, *so indistinct were the sounds*, he doubted whether he had heard aught but the murmur of the old forest, whispering without a wind." Hearing "one voice of a young woman," he immediately assumes it is his wife, and he cries her name. Suddenly he catches sight of an object fluttering down through the air; he clutches it and discovers it is a pink ribbon. Associating it at once with the ribbons his wife had worn that evening, he shouts: " 'My *Faith* is gone!' . . . 'There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name. Come, devil; for to thee is this world given.' " Goodman Brown accepts his wife's guilt without ever having seen her.

Faith's ribbons have proved bothersome to several critics. F. O. Matthiessen objected to them because they seemed too literal and concrete; they appeared to him out of keeping with other sugges-

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tions that Brown is having an hallucination.[9] Fogle has noted that they are mentioned three times in the opening paragraphs of the story, and he feels that "if Goodman Brown is dreaming the ribbon may be taken as part and parcel of his dream."[10] At any rate, "Its impact is merely temporary"[11] (a peculiar statement in view of the fact that these ribbons appear, at last, to convince Goodman Brown of man's depravity and so "color" the rest of his life). Hawthorne concentrates so insistently on Faith's ribbons, and their effect on Goodman Brown is so devastating, that one may assume they were intended as an important symbol. If we remember that Faith is primarily an allegorical figure, an answer suggests itself. Goodman Brown, we recall, intends to get to heaven by clinging to Faith's skirts; in other words, he feels that the mere observation of ritual will insure salvation—good works have no place in his (as they had no place in Calvinistic) theology. Faith's skirts and her ribbons fulfil somewhat the same function. The ribbons, with their suggestions of the frivolous and ornamental, represent the ritualistic trappings of religious observance. Goodman Brown, it seems, has placed his faith and his hopes of salvation in the formal observances of religious worship rather than in the purity of his own heart and soul. This interpretation is supported by the fact that what he has seen and heard of Goody Cloyse, the minister, and Deacon Gookin, even though it may condemn them as individuals, can hardly be used as a condemnation of religious faith. Goodman Brown accepts the metonymic ribbon, Faith's adornment, as reality—just as he has accepted the "skirts" of religion as a means of salvation.

Has Goodman Brown really been subjected to visions which imply the universal prevalence of evil? Has the faith of a good man been destroyed by a revelation of the world's sinfulness? It would seem not. If one accepts the fact that Hawthorne gives us no valid grounds to believe in the reality of Goodman Brown's visions and voices, he must either believe, as Fogle does, that Hawthorne feared his own knowledge of the world's evil; or he must treat those events as emanations from Brown's subconscious which intimate the corruption of Brown's own mind. Why do the young man's visions of evil concern only Goody Cloyse, the minister,

[9] *American Renaissance*, p. 284.
[10] *Hawthorne's Fiction*, p. 18.
[11] *Ibid.*, p. 19.

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Deacon Gookin, and his wife? One answer, of course, is that they represent an exceptional piety which makes their participation in evil dramatically more effective. But if Hawthorne's theme concerns the universality of human sinfulness, should we not see a wider manifestation of that evil? The only scene in which such a manifestation occurs is the Devil's communion, but that takes place *after* Goodman Brown has declared his loss of faith; and the scene of that vision, Hawthorne tells us, was "in the heart of the dark wilderness," a setting whose significance is so inescapable that Joseph Conrad would later echo Hawthorne's words (unknowingly?) in the title of one of his novels.

A more significant reason for Hawthorne's choice of those four characters occurs to us if we return to a consideration of their relationship to Goodman Brown. They are the four people in Salem village to whom he is morally responsible. Goody Cloyse "had taught him his catechism in youth, and was still his moral and spiritual advisor, jointly with the minister and Deacon Gookin." His wife is an even more important representative of the forces of morality and virtue. It seems obvious that they are the four people whose respectability must be destroyed before Goodman Brown can fully commit himself to a belief in the wickedness of the world.

The remainder of the story continues to emphasize Goodman Brown's surrender to evil. Rushing through the forest "with the instinct that guides mortal man to evil," Goodman Brown, the man who has lost faith in his fellow men, "*was himself the chief horror of the scene.*" "The fiend in his own shape," Hawthorne tells us, reminding us of the similarities between Goodman Brown and the Devil, "is less hideous than when he rages in the breast of man." The communion scene in the forest, which Roy Male finds "essentially sexual," seems to me to be entirely the product of a dream fantasy, a blasphemous parody of a religious service. In this "grave and dark-clad company" Goodman Brown, his faith totally destroyed, fancies that he sees every person he has ever known. When a call is made to bring forth the converts, "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.*" When the converts look upon each other, Goodman Brown at last sees his wife. They are told

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that "Evil is the nature of mankind. Evil must be your only happiness. Welcome again, my children, to the communion of your race." But as if in denial of the Devil's assertion, just as they are about to be baptized into "the mystery of sin," Goodman Brown cries out: "'Faith! Faith!'...'look up to heaven, and resist the wicked one.' Whether Faith obeyed he knew not." Goodman's cry breaks the spell of his hallucination: "He staggered against the rock, and felt it chill and damp; while a hanging twig, that had been all on fire, besprinkled his cheek with the coldest dew." That Goodman Brown has been experiencing hallucinations or dreaming seems unquestionable. The details concerning the rock and the twig are surely intended to signal Goodman Brown's return to a "rational" state of mind.

The most striking quality of the paragraph which describes Goodman Brown's return to the village of Salem is its tone. No longer are there any suggestions of the weird and incredible. The dreamlike quality of Brown's adventure in the forest is replaced by purposefully direct and forthright narration. Life proceeds in the village as it always has. Only Goodman Brown has changed. If the events of the night before had been real, or even symbolic of reality, would not Hawthorne have indicated in some way a shared knowledge between Goodman Brown and the townsfolk whom he sees? Hawthorne has told us that Brown did not know whether his wife obeyed his cry to look up to heaven. Nonetheless, he passes her without a greeting when she runs to meet him. His own distrust and suspicion have assured him that she is sinful, even though, as Hawthorne is careful to note, she is wearing the pink ribbons which Goodman Brown thought he had grasped from the air. Nor is there any change in anyone else. The minister seeks to bless Goodman Brown, but the young man shrinks from him; Deacon Gookin is praying and even though Goodman Brown can hear "the holy words of his prayer," he still thinks him a wizard. Goody Cloyse is catechizing a young girl, and Goodman Brown snatches the child from the old woman's arms. The corruption of his mind and heart is complete; Goodman Brown sees evil wherever he looks. He sees it because he wants to see it.

If Hawthorne had wished to intimate that the events of the night were real, it would hardly do to confuse us with suggestions

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about dreams (unless, as Fogle thinks, this was Hawthorne's method of escaping the implications of his own insight into man's depravity). A more acceptable interpretation of the ambiguity of the story is to see in it Hawthorne's suggestion that the incredible incidents in the forest were the product of an ego-induced fantasy, the self-justification of a diseased mind. It seems clear that these incidents were not experienced; they were willed. The important point, however, is that Goodman Brown has accepted them as truth; and the acceptance of evil as the final truth about man has turned him into "a stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful" human being. Goodman Brown does not become aware of his own kinship with evil; he does not see sinfulness in himself but only in others. That, perhaps, is his most awful sin. He has lost not only faith in his fellow men but his compassion for them. And so it is that "On the Sabbath day, when the congregation were singing a holy psalm, he could not listen because an anthem of sin rushed loudly upon his ear and drowned all the blessed strain." Hawthorne never tells us that the anthem, loud and fearful as it must have been, ever reached the ears of any but young Goodman Brown.

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