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Good and Good Enough:

The Fluidity of Human Nature in Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown"

Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" is an intricately psychological tale that easily lends itself to multiple interpretations. For this reason, numerous literary critics have examined it. Generally, they seem to be in general consensus in the notion that Brown's trip into the forest is a trek into the subconscious filled with archetypal and subconscious imagery. Brown's dream is full of manifestations that reflect his own fears about being a man. He is at odds with natural human inclination and his understanding of morality, most likely as defined by Puritan society. The angle from which the motifs are applied to Brown's dream change the meaning little, and the variance is actually useful in understanding the universality of the theme: Goodman Brown fails to grasp or reconcile some aspects of human nature, both within and without, and ultimately alienates himself from society as a defense mechanism.

One of the most in-depth examinations of "Young Goodman Brown" is that by Richard Predmore, who asserts that Brown's journey is similar to the mythological motif of a hero descending into the depths of darkness in order to acquire some treasure. However, Predmore ultimately dismisses the notion that the forest is a symbol of the Freudian subconscious and replaces that idea with one focusing on the Jungian unconscious, specifically the collective unconscious (250). He notes that the forest itself is a symbol of the

unconscious and the psyche in Jungian psychology and goes on to point out that there are multiple clues in Hawthorne's tale that illustrate the fact that it is taking place outside the real world. Specifically, the clouds are moving in the absence of wind, voices come from these clouds, the forest itself begins to murmur, and a pink ribbon mysteriously appears (251).

Since Predmore is drawing on Jungian psychology, he elaborates on three specific archetypes that Brown confronts within the unconscious: the terrible mother, the anima, and the shadow. He deals with the concept of the terrible mother fairly directly, summarizing it as the devouring force of the unconscious that the hero must overcome in his quest and citing Carl Jung directly in this explanation (252). Predmore attributes such force to the essence of witchcraft and the initiation itself, which is a fairly obvious explanation.

He then goes on to define Faith as the anima archetype, quite obviously since she is the wife and female counterpart to Brown. He claims that Faith manifests in the coven as an indication of Brown's unwillingness to accept her own earthly, human side, noting that Brown was uncomfortable when Faith whispered for him to sleep in his own bed, clearly a sexual reference (252). However, Brown is too uncomfortable with Faith as human and is therefore unable to deal with the anime of his dream. He fails to embrace Faith as his partner and ultimately undermines their marriage (254).

Predmore also claims that a key part of Brown's dream was his need to confront his own dark side, the aptly named shadow archetype. He cites the moment that Brown discovers Faith in the coven and begins waving a devil's staff and laughing as the moment he ultimately merges with his shadow (255). However, Brown awakens before he can properly master this aspect of himself; "his nightmare is so painful that he wakes up and goes home to spend the rest of his life obsessed with the idea that everybody around him is evil" (255).

Interestingly enough, Predmore maintains a certain level of sympathy for Brown, nothing that the things he is unable to deal with in his dream are the sorts of things that would have been linked to depravity and evil according to his Puritan upbringing. Specifically, his Puritan upbringing failed to properly prepare him for reality, leaving him vulnerable so that the unconscious ultimately devoured him (255).

This staunch Puritan upbringing may well account for Frederick Crew's assertion that Brown is a self-imagined idealist who separates himself from others based on the idea that he is better than they (96-7). However, the ideal is generally deluded; his own morality is no better than that of those around him. His attempts at separation ultimately amount to escapism. The sin that Goodman Brown sees his fellows is representative of the sin that exists within him. Thus, Crew asserts that the individuals Brown finds in the forest are manifestations of himself (99-100).

Crew applies a distinctly sexual interpretation to Brown's experience, going so far as to claim that the gathering in the woods is a pseudo-sexual experience. This experience is ultimately horrific and traumatic for Brown because of his unwillingness or inability to accept his sexuality and adulthood (102). From here, the Freudian influence on Crew's interpretation comes to the forefront. He claims that Brown's rejection of sexuality stems from unresolved sexual fixation with parental figures, noting that the meeting is comprised of many people with whom Brown was close during childhood, and furthermore, the manifestation of the devil looks like Brown's father and claims to have had a sort of patron relationship with his father and grandfather (103). He also applies the notion of the Oedipus complex to Brown, claiming that he views Faith as more of a maternal figure than a wife, citing a "filial desire to 'cling to her skirts and follow her to heaven'" (105-6).

Unlike other critics, Michael Tritt is less concerned with the symbolic backdrop of the forest ceremony than he is with Brown's own reaction to it. Without invoking any particular psychoanalytic theory, Tritt agrees that the forest is a psychological manifestation and that the figures present are aspects of Brown's self. Thus, he claims that Brown's understanding of himself is the crux of the story and goes on to claim that Brown's experience in the forest hinges upon the "duality of human nature," which Brown is ultimately unable to reconcile (115).

Tritt places heavy emphasis on the fact that Brown is confused after the evening's events. He maintains that Brown accepts the evil of the community, which he shuns for the rest of his life, and thus does not seem particularly confused; however Tritt explains that it is Brown's own inner evil that he is unable to come to terms with, it is his own nature which confuses him (115). In revisiting the final paragraphs of the tale, Tritt notes that Brown's attention moves perpetually outwards and claims that this is a psychological phenomenon known as projection, where an individual focuses anxiety, self-loathing, guilt, or, as in Brown's case, a combination thereof, outwards onto others, maintaining the illusion that he is somehow different, that he did not succumb. After all, Tritt asserts, it makes little sense for Brown to seize the child from Goody Cloyse if he is as wicked as she is (114). However, the real tragedy of Brown's affliction is that it renders him permanently trapped by the unconscious of his own mind (117).

Despite being coming from different angles and psychoanalytic theories, these varying interpretations contain many of the same elements. They generally agree that the rendezvous in the forest is a manifestation of Brown's fears regarding adult human nature. The experience is some sort of attempt for Brown to confront what he believes to be the more

unsavory aspects of himself. His black and white understanding of human nature renders him unable to reconcile the entirety of himself. He separates himself from the rest of his village and is fated to a life withdrawn from the others in his village. However, by the story's conclusion, Brown has never spoken about his night in the woods, and he continues to act his role in society. His journey into the forest and failure to reconcile what he finds there result in his emotional withdrawal; he continues to participate in life much as he did before but finds no joy in it.

Both Predmore and Crew assert that Faith is an integral figure in the story; however, neither critic makes particular note of how often Faith is contextualized by sorrow. For instance, her first words are spoken "rather sadly," and she watches him with a "melancholy air." Even more importantly, when Brown begins his journey his focus is not on the morality of his actions but their potential to break Faith's heart. Furthermore, if Faith is indeed a symbol of sexuality, as she truly seems to be, then her alignment with sorrow is of particular interest. Predmore and Crew cite the fact that Brown "shrank from the bosom of Faith" after his endeavor, but this passage cannot be taken precisely literally. The final lines of the text reveal that Brown has fathered children, so the reader must conclude that he and Faith maintained a sexual relationship. However, as Brown has shunned the carnality of human nature, he derives no joy from this aspect of his and his wife's relationship. Thus, sexuality, like Faith, is characterized by sadness.

Reading Faith in this light makes Brown's obsessive need to protect her a bit curious. Predmore paints her as a sort of damsel in distress whom Brown is supposed to rescue while Crew considers her a maternal figure. Despite the finer points of distinction among these two, they share a common idea: Faith represents that which is pure, unblemished, yet she is in

constant danger. In continuing to read Faith as a sexual motif, the one who poses a threat to her is Brown himself. Shortly before Faith's appearance in the forest, Brown sits down to rest and ends up thinking about abandoning his errand, returning home, and going to bed with Faith. Considering how often critics interpret Faith's earlier plea for Brown to spend the night with her as a sexual invitation, it follows to interpret Brown's imagining of being in bed with her as a sexual fantasy. Furthermore, while Puritan society was extremely strict, one cannot imagine that sex between a husband and wife would be taboo. Marital sex would have been a procreative necessity, and it is difficult to imagine that two young newlyweds would have abstained from such for three months. Thus, it is sex which acts as a corrupting force but sexual fantasy, lust.

Brown's fears regarding the duality and reality of his own nature are most resonant at this moment, during which he fantasizes about Faith. In doing so, he ultimately pulls her into the wicked ceremony and threatens her with corruption and damnation. Furthermore, as Brown's ideal role is to protect Faith, as a classical hero like Predmore suggests or otherwise, then the moment he mentally defiles her is the moment he fails in this task. Brown's role inverts from that of the hero to that of the villain. However, Brown never sees Faith partake in the ceremony. Whether or not she succumbs to the devil remains unknown, so Brown's withdrawal from her seems to make little sense. Thus, Brown's rejection of Faith can only be understood in light of her being a symbolism of him. He believes Faith will partake in the offered sin because he wishes to do so himself.

Furthermore, as Faith is the catalyst through which Brown most clearly realizes his own duality, she is the reason for his fall. In keeping with Tritt's assertions regarding projection, which are not so different from Crew's about escapism, Faith would change from the

ultimate symbol of purity to one of corruption. Since he subconsciously perceives her as the reason for his own fall, he projects villainy onto her. Ultimately, Brown falls into the trap of 'either or' categorization. Faith is either virginal, or she is a whore. Brown is either the hero, or he is the villain. There is good, and there is evil-no middle ground.

The notion of human nature as fluid, and Brown's failure to grasp that notion, helps to reconcile the various interpretations of the text. Faith can represent either the virginal bride or the virtuous mother; the important part is that the man cannot or will not accept her humanity. The devil's appearance could be a manifestation of Brown's unresolved paternal issues, or it could be a terrible reflection of his own identity. Either way, he cannot reconcile that men of virtue could have a little bit of the devil in them without viewing them as wholly evil or giving completely into temptation himself. For Goodman Brown, any sin, such as that displayed by his fellow villagers, equates to all sin.

The idea of a grey area between good and evil in "Young Goodman Brown" has not been adequately discussed by scholars, perhaps because it seems so simple. Puritan values were notoriously strict; they were supposed to work and worship to the glory of God, little else. However, do we truly imagine that these people felt no lust for their lovers? That they gleaned no pleasure from a fine meal? That they did not sing, dance, or revel on occasion? Of course they did, and few would consider them evil for such. Human nature is not so dualistic that perfection is required to be morally upstanding. This is that which Goodman Brown failed to understand. The problem is not that he subconsciously sees himself as a villain, but as Tritt asserts, he honestly believes himself to be the hero. His adherence to Puritan values leads him to reject all the joy and pleasures of life.

While this is certainly a commentary on Puritan values, the fact that the rest of Brown's village remain able to lead happy healthy lives illustrates that Puritan values are not a universally destructive force. However, Brown's psyche is damaged by his preoccupation with Puritan morality. Thus, it is most apt to say that his Puritan values made him vulnerable to becoming a self-destructive idealist. The key word here is idealist. Goodman Brown is not simply a man of Puritan virtue; he is a man of Puritan idealism, a sort of extremist. He is the absolute pinnacle of Puritanism, and he's miserable for it.



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