

The Light in “Young Goodman Brown”

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Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote “Young Goodman Brown” as an allegory to describe the danger of abandoning one’s Christian faith, even for one night. This story overflows with symbolism which Hawthorne uses as a means to reach the reader’s subconscious thought. In “Young Goodman Brown,” Hawthorne’s use of the light in the forest symbolizes how there is always a brighter place to be.

Goodman Brown is setting out on a trip. The reader is not told exactly what this trip is for, but when Goodman Brown begins his trip, “he came forth at sunset” to start a journey that needed to be completed “‘twixt now and sunrise” (Hawthorne 540). His wife, Faith, whose name is also a symbol of his Christian faith, encourages him to “prithee put off your journey until sunrise” (Hawthorne 540). In these early paragraphs, Hawthorne is emphasizing that Goodman Brown is journeying toward, and in, darkness. This darkness represents evil and is the realm of the devil, whom he travels to meet this night. His faith urges him not to travel in the dark but wait until sunrise in order to avoid the devil and remain in God’s light, keeping him safe.

Goodman Brown “had taken a dreary road, darkened by all the gloomiest trees of the forest” and, after meeting the devil on the road, continued his journey with the devil as a traveling companion (Hawthorne 540). It soon became “deep dusk in the forest, and deepest in that part of it where these two were journeying” (Hawthorne 541). Hawthorne uses Goodman Brown’s journey to signify a test of his faith and the gloom of the forest as the evil from sin that begins to



darken the path he is taking. He continues on his chosen path, now accompanied by the devil, and the evil is greatest where he and the devil walk.

After a period of time keeping to the path, talking and walking with the devil, Goodman Brown finds the strength to break away from the devil and try to return to his Faith. At one point “he looked up to the sky, doubting whether there really was a heaven above him. Yet there was the blue arch, and the stars brightening in it” (Hawthorne 544). Goodman Brown found the strength to start to pray, but while looking up at the sky, “a cloud, though no wind was stirring, hurried across the zenith and hid the brightening stars.” (Hawthorne 545). Hawthorne shows how man can find strength to resist evil. The light of heaven, represented by the blue sky and starlight, illustrate that goodness is within reach even when deep in the dark of sin but, if man is weak in faith, evil sin masks his ability to see the God’s light.

Once he lost sight of heaven’s light, Goodman Brown became “maddened with despair” (Hawthorne 545). He ran through the forest until “he saw a red light before him” (Hawthorne 545) and came to a clearing filled with a “grave and dark-clad company” (Hawthorne 546) being addressed by the devil. Many of these people he believed he recognized from Salem village. He approached the company at the same time as a veiled young woman did. The company “turned; and flashing forth, as it were, in a sheet of flame, the fiend-worshippers were seen; the smile of welcome gleamed darkly on every visage.” (Hawthorne 547). The devil told Goodman Brown to look at the woman who accompanied him “and by the blaze of the hell-kindled torches, the wretched man beheld his Faith, and the wife her husband, trembling before that unhallowed

altar." (Hawthorne 548). Hawthorne amply uses the red light to depict the flames of hell that light the evil of his worshipers.

Goodman Brown tried to save his Faith and again was able to resist the devil by looking up to Heaven. The ceremony and worshippers were gone as if he woke from a dream, and he went back to Salem village the next morning. When he entered the village, he saw one of the women he believed was at the witch meeting the night before. "Goody Cloyse, that excellent old Christian, stood in the early sunshine, at her own lattice, catechizing a little girl" (Hawthorne 548). Goodman Brown snatched the little girl "as from the grasp of the fiend himself" (Hawthorne 548). Hawthorne describes the distrust that Goodman Brown has developed as a result of his experience. Goody Cloyse is catechizing the young girl while standing in the sunshine – the light of day, the good light. Goodman Brown does not recognize this and sees in her the evil the devil led him to see.

Goodman Brown grows old, dies, and is buried with "no hopeful verse upon his tombstone, for his dying hour was gloom" (Hawthorne 549). Hawthorne shows how the sin Goodman Brown followed for just one night followed him to his grave. Hawthorne wrote this story to show how Young Goodman Brown lost sight of his faith and became, in the end, a bitter untrusting person. He fell to the evil and darkness of sin and, even though he saw the light of heaven and tried to reach it, in the end became a person who did not trust his faith and died, tainted by sin.



Work Cited

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "Young Goodman Brown." *Literature: Reading, Reacting, Writing*. Ed. Laurie G. Kirszner and Stephen R. Mandell. 7th ed. Boston: Wadsworth, 2011. 540-49. Print.