

Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown": A Psychoanalytic Reading

Nathaniel Hawthorne's story "Young Goodman Brown" describes the maturation of its protagonist, Goodman Brown. Through a dream vision, Brown confronts his forefathers, his wife, and authoritative members of his town, and by the end of the story he has established his place in the community as an adult. The events of the dream vision are Brown's "errand" to a witches' Sabbath in "the heart of the dark wilderness" and his refusal to take communion from the devil. The psychological significance of the dream vision is less obvious: Through his journey, Brown becomes an adult in his community; though uninitiated at the Sabbath, he is fully initiated socially. This initiation results in a frozen emotional state as the "young" Goodman Brown becomes, overnight, an old and gloomy Goodman Brown, without hope through the end of his days. Ultimately "Young Goodman Brown" can be seen as Hawthorne reaching his own critical understanding of his Puritan ancestors.

The conflict that Brown suffers during his journey in the woods is shown to be internal through the number of details that are projections of his unconscious. The devil's arguments "seemed rather to spring from up in the bosom of his auditor"—that is, Brown himself. When "the echoes of the forest mocked him," Brown is projecting his emotional state onto the forest. The further Brown sinks into despair, the clearer it becomes that what he sees and hears is to a large extent the product of his fancy. "Once [Brown] fancied that he could distinguish the accents of townspeople of his own," but "the next moment, so indistinct were the sounds, he doubted whether he had heard aught" until "then came a stronger swell of those familiar tones." Ultimately Brown himself is the "chief horror of the scene" created by his own mind in conflict.

In Brown's dream vision, his forefathers are condensed into one figure, that of the devil, and the other authority figures in his life are also strongly associated with the devil. Not only does the devil have "a considerable resemblance to" Brown, but he also boasts of being involved with Brown's grandfather and father. Eventually Brown and the devil "might have been taken for father and son." Before reaching the goal of his "errand," Brown encounters figures of "parental" authority who, it turns out, are in league with the devil. Goody Cloyse, "a very pious and exemplary dame" ("she had taught him his catechism"), is the first. She recognizes her "old gossip, Goodman Brown" in the devil and borrows his staff to get to the Sabbath. Afterwards, Brown hears the minister and Deacon Gookin on their journey to the Sabbath. Through these meetings, Brown loses faith in and distances himself emotionally from his forefathers and the authority figures of his community. Thus the sources of social control are undermined in Brown's psyche.

At the climax of his journey, Brown refuses to be initiated into the "grave and dark-clad company," and his dream vision shatters (he finds himself "amid calm night and solitude"). Psychologically he has rejected social authority: "the shape of his own dead father"; a woman whom Brown suggests is his mother; and, as the devil says, "all whom yea have revered from youth," who are in the assembled crowd. Brown perceives that all of his "good Christian" forefathers and all authority figures are devil worshipers and therefore hypocrites. He must decide whether to conform and join or to rebel. His choice to rebel has significant implications for his emotional maturation. Although the independence he achieves through his rebellion allows him to establish his own identity (as distinct from what he considers to be hypocritical), it also results in a premature hardening of his emotional life. He becomes that against which he rebelled: a stereotypical gloomy Puritan—a stereotype partly constructed by Hawthorne himself.

Hawthorne's demonization of the Puritan patriarch in "Young Goodman Brown" is just one instance in which he levies severe criticism of New England's infamous colonizers. In "The Custom-House," the introduction to *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne clarifies his stance toward the first of his ancestors to set foot in the New World, William Hathorne, coming with "his Bible and his sword" (26). According to Hawthorne, the son of that man also "inherited the persecuting spirit" (27): That man was John Hathorne, noted for his refusal to repent his condemnation of the accused after the "martyrdom of the witches" at Salem (27). The crimes of Hawthorne's forefathers are much the same as those committed by Goodman Brown's forefathers. Hawthorne describes how the Quakers remember William Hathorne's "hard severity towards a woman of their sect" (27), just as Brown's grandfather "lashed the Quaker woman so smartly through the streets of Salem." Like Brown, Hawthorne must confront his forefathers.

In "The Custom-House," following his criticism of his two ancestors, Hawthorne offers repentance with the following words: "I know not whether these ancestors of mine bethought themselves to repent, and ask pardon of Heaven for their cruelties; or whether they are now groaning under the heavy consequences of them, in another state of being. At all events, I, the present writer, as their representative, hereby take shame upon myself for their sakes" (27). Thus Hawthorne accepts the biblical injunction that the sins of the father shall be visited upon the son. Like Brown, he confronts his forefathers and rebels. As such, Hawthorne grapples with his own demons through writing "Young Goodman Brown."

Work Cited

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. Edited by Ross C Murfin. Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1991.