

The Exploration of Human Nature in *Young Goodman Brown*

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Taking Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown* as an example, this paper analyzes the Puritan thought of "inherently evil human nature" embodied by the main characters in the work. Through the analysis of characters, such as Brown, Faith, and the mysterious old man, it shows the evil under Brown's loyal and kind appearance, the devilish nature under Faith's angelic appearance, and the evil of human nature revealed by everyone's participation in the devil's appointment. At the same time, it is pointed out that the novel not only reveals the life of Puritans, but also prompts readers to think about how to redeem themselves in the case of inherently evil human nature and explore the dark side of human nature and the deep themes of the novel against the dark and mysterious background.

Keywords: *Young Goodman Brown*, human nature, Puritan thought, character analysis

Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) was one of the most influential romantic novelists in the 19th century America. Apart from his well-known novel *The Scarlet Letter*, his widely circulated short stories, such as *Young Goodman Brown*, *The Minister's Black Veil*, *The Birthmark*, *Ethan Brand*, and so on, also represent his ideological and artistic characteristics. These short stories focus on exploring the evil of human nature and the depth of "original sin", with intense inner conflicts and delicate psychological descriptions, revealing profound ethical and moral meanings, often with a strong mysterious color and atmosphere. They embody a permanent theme in Hawthorne's works—"original sin", which means that everyone's nature is evil. Evil comes from human life, and everyone has a sinful nature. Under the profound influence of Puritanism, Hawthorne wrote the masterpiece *Young Goodman Brown*. An in-depth analysis of "original sin" in this work will bring inspiration and enlightenment to the interpretation of the theme, the author's creative source, and the imprint of the times.

Young Goodman Brown tells a story about a young and kind-hearted man who separated from his pretty and lovely wife Faith, who they had just been married for three months, to attend a devil's appointment at sunset. He believed that no one would know about this meeting, nor would he encounter anyone. He thought that after tonight, he could live a happy and fulfilling life with Faith, so he felt that it was justified to hasten the fulfillment of his evil intentions. However, the result was beyond everyone's expectation. When he arrived in the dark and boundless forest, he surprisingly discovered and saw that many people he respected and admired the most in daily life were also secretly going to the devil's appointment, including the respectable clergymen, devout elders, chaste young girls, and even his beautiful and lovely wife. Hawthorne uses his skilled techniques and vivid psychological descriptions to portray the supernatural, grotesque, and terrifying phenomena in the novel,

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gradually revealing the “evil” nature of human beings. According to Puritanism, human nature is inherently evil, and everyone is born with sin. This article analyzes the main characters, including Brown, Faith, the old man, and others to demonstrate the Puritan idea of “inherent evil of human nature”.

Brown: Evil Under the Guise of Loyalty and Kindness

The word “Goodman” in English has the meaning of “good man”, and many people believe that Brown is a kind young man, but is he really a good person or a bad one? If he is a good person, how could he have agreed to the devil’s appointment and ignored his wife’s pleading pleas for him to stay?

Initially, Brown, newlywed, knew that this trip had an evil purpose, but he still insisted on attending the devil’s appointment despite his wife’s pleading pleas, already indicating that the seeds of evil had been planted in Brown’s heart. Secondly, Brown harbored prejudice and resentment against Native Americans. When Brown entered the deep forest, he muttered to himself, “There may be a devilish Indian behind every tree” (Hawthorne, 2005, p. 6). He did not refer to the evil ghost as anyone else, showing that he had a deep-seated grudge against Native Americans. Where did this grudge originate? Perhaps it started when his father set fire to the Native American village! When he learned that his Faith had also attended the gathering, he laughed and said, “... Come witch, come wizard, come Indian powwow, come devil himself...” (Hawthorne, 2005, p. 12). He equated Native Americans with devils, showing that he was not a completely fair and impartial person, harboring prejudice.

Again, when Brown encountered the old man in the forest, he had many opportunities to escape, but his hesitant nature and curiosity for evil drew him deeper into the old man’s trap. Was it his indecisive character that pushed him closer to the abyss, or was it his inner curiosity for evil? Perhaps, the latter outweighed the former. When the old man told Brown that he had helped Brown’s grandfather, a policeman, whip a Quaker woman, and helped Brown’s father set fire to an Indian village, Brown strongly defended, saying, “We are a people of prayer, and good works to boot, and abide no such wickedness” (Hawthorne, 2005, p. 7). If they had done good deeds and accumulated virtues, they would not have burned down the Indian houses, and Brown would not have attended such a gathering.

Finally, when Brown learned that his Faith had left, he stood still for a moment and shouted, “There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name. Come, devil; for to thee is world given” (Hawthorne, 2005, p. 11). At that moment, there was nothing more terrifying in the haunted forest than the figure of Goodman Brown. This embodiment of his own demon was not as terrifying as his enraged self. Brown had completely lost his mind and turned into a demon, with all the evil and dissatisfaction in his heart exploding. After everything was over, the next morning, Brown walked on the streets of Salem Village as usual, but unlike before, he saw everyone as a devil, including his wife Faith. He began to curse the priests he respected most in his daily life, wondering what gods they were praying to. However, he did not realize that he was one of them. In the following days, he lost his faith, felt depressed, and eventually died.

Brown relied solely on faith to resist evil, even keeping his distance from his wife, and finally ended up dying of depression. Therefore, relying solely on faith to fight against the evil in one’s heart is not feasible, especially when the faith is shattered. (Wu, 2021, p. 133)

Faith: Devil Under the Guise of an Angel

Faith, Goodman Brown’s wife, was beautiful and lovely, having been married to Brown for only three months. The word “Faith” in English contains the meanings of “loyalty” and “belief”. “Loyalty” refers to Faith’s

loyalty to Brown and her religious piety, while “belief” represents Faith as Brown’s spiritual support. The descriptions of Faith in the novel are all positive, portraying her as having a pretty face and wearing pink silk. In Brown’s heart, she is young, beautiful, kind, and resembles an angel on earth. However, the text also subtly hints at the evil within Faith’s heart, revealing that she is actually a devil beneath an angelic facade.

As Brown prepared to leave, she whispered sadly into his ear,

Prithee put off your journey until sunrise and sleep in your own bed to-night. A lone woman is troubled with such dreams and such thoughts that she’s afraid of herself sometimes. Pray tarry with me this night, dear husband, of all nights in the year. (Hawthorne, 2005, p. 5)

Faith did not know what her husband was planning for tonight, but she desperately tried to persuade him to stay at home, as if something dreadful was about to happen. She wanted to prevent the evil from occurring within her heart by staying with her husband. At the beginning of the novel, a close-up shot was taken of Faith’s “pink silk ribbon”, which was mentioned twice later in the story. Pink is a color between white and red, where white represents purity in Western culture, and red represents passion and blood. The ribbon is neither entirely red nor purely white, but a color between the two, suggesting that Faith is neither completely corrupted nor innocent, but rather a psychological state between the two extremes. It represents humanity’s imperfect purity and flawed spiritual world, and Faith’s ribbon also signifies her impurity and the evil within her heart. After Brown left home, the novel did not describe Faith again until she reappeared astonishingly, in the forest, having sneaked out to attend the devil’s gathering behind Brown’s back. Like Brown, her curiosity about evil drove her to step into the realm of demons. Finally, we do not know if Faith looked up at the sky to resist evil, but we only know that she was overjoyed to see Brown and ran towards him happily, as if nothing had happened. However, what remains for the reader is the ugly side beneath her angelic facade.

The Old Man and Others: The Appearance of Evil Beings

The old man, an important character in the novel, remained anonymous from the beginning to the end. We only knew that he was about 50 years old, sharing the same identity and resemblance with Brown, resembling a father and son, but with a well-traveled demeanor. He carried a cane resembling a black snake, intricately carved and vividly twisting and turning. The snake-shaped cane reminded people of the snake symbolizing evil and depravity in the Bible. Satan, the devil who fell into evil, was expelled from heaven and transformed into a snake in anger, tempting Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to eat the forbidden fruit, thus depriving humans of heaven and leaving future generations carrying the original sin committed by human ancestors. Similarly, this snake-shaped cane also led the protagonist Brown into the land of sin, making him completely depraved. The old man did not take coercive measures against Brown, but through wisdom, he lured Brown into the forest step by step unconsciously. When Brown told the old man that his family had been honest and upright for generations, all being good Christians, the old man told him in the first-person plural that he had helped his grandfather whip the Quaker women, participated in the “King Philip’s War”, helped his father burn down Indian villages, and walked this road happily with his father many times, returning happily after midnight. His words instantly drew Brown closer, and Brown also realized that his ancestors had committed evil deeds, which alleviated his sense of guilt for participating in the devil’s appointment. Unlike other demons, the old man did not threaten or physically attack Brown, but his flowery words were like a potion that deceived people’s hearts, directly seducing Brown from the depths of his soul.

As the story progressed, more and more people revealed their evil nature. Brown's deceased father, a vague woman (resembling a mother), the pastor and the deacon of Salem Town, Goody Cloyse who taught Brown catechism, and the villagers all participated in the devil's appointment. Moreover, the pastor and the deacon played pivotal roles in the meeting, and nothing could be done without their presence. The presence of these people deepened the idea of "human nature is inherently evil".

Conclusion

At this point, every character in the novel is branded with the label of "original sin", and Hawthorne's Puritanism is fully expressed in the novel. This made the writer first consider some basic concepts of Puritanism. According to Hawthorne, evil behaviors in social life are caused by the hidden evil in people's hearts. Although the Industrial Revolution has brought economic progress, the various changes and conflicts it has brought have made Hawthorne confused. He attributed this inexplicable phenomenon to human's sinful nature. Therefore, the idea of "original sin" and "human nature is inherently evil" has become the creative theme of Hawthorne's novels, including *Young Goodman Brown*.

The novel does not merely describe the miserable life of Puritans under rigid and stubborn doctrines. Instead, it reveals the evil psychology and hypocritical nature of seemingly kind people through the character of Brown, deepening the theme of the novel and prompting readers to consider how we can redeem ourselves if human nature is inherently evil. The novel is filled with dark and gloomy images, and behind these images, the author strives to explore the dark side of human nature. It is against this dark and mysterious background that the work creates a secluded yet charming atmosphere and unexpected results, attracting readers to explore the inner thoughts of the characters and the deeper themes of the novel.

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