

# An Analysis of the Protagonist in *Young Goodman Brown*: The Disintegration of the “Old Self”

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Nathaniel Hawthorne is one of the great American romantic novelists of the 19th century, and his *Young Goodman Brown* is a classic short story about human nature. With the theme of “human nature is evil”, it presents the main character’s psychological contradiction and struggle when facing the “dark” truth. The purpose of this paper is to do a close reading, to interpret the dilemma of human nature and the protagonist’s disintegration of the “old self”, so as to bring out philosophical reflections on human nature and human predicament.

*Keywords:* *Young Goodman Brown*, old self, human nature

## Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Young Goodman Brown* was created in 1835. The story is set in Puritan New England in the late 17th century. At that time, Puritans established settlements in the New England region and became the dominant Christian sect. Their doctrines were very strict.

The story takes place in Salem, Massachusetts. This was a time when witchcraft was prevalent and later saw the famous Salem witch trials. John Hathorne, one of the judges in the trials and Hawthorne’s ancestor, likely influenced Hawthorne’s exploration of Puritanism in his works.

The protagonist, *Young Goodman Brown*, experiences inner conflicts. He wavers between morality and temptation, faith and doubt, and undergoes the deconstruction of his “old self”. This paper analyzes this process and its significance, exploring how Brown changes in the face of challenges and what it reveals about human nature and the social context.

## Literature Review

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Young Goodman Brown* has drawn extensive scholarly attention. Critics have delved into multiple aspects of this work.

Regarding the Puritan setting, which is crucial as the story unfolds in late 17th century Puritan New England. The strict Puritan doctrines here offer a profound context for comprehending the moral and spiritual battles of the protagonist. The historical events like the Salem witch trials and Hawthorne’s family connection through his ancestor John Hathorne being a judge in these trials have been thoroughly examined for their impact on the narrative.

The character of *Young Goodman Brown* is a focal point. His journey of self-discovery and the deconstruction of his “old self” have been widely analyzed. His internal struggles between morality and

temptation, faith and doubt, are regarded as representative of the human condition. There is ongoing debate among scholars about whether his experiences are a critique of Puritanism or a more general exploration of good and evil.

Some scholars have also explored the narrative structure and literary techniques. The use of symbols like the forest and the pink ribbon has been studied for its contribution to the story's meaning. The ambiguity and uncertainty in the story are recognized as effective literary devices that prompt readers to consider various interpretations.

In summary, the existing literature on *Young Goodman Brown* presents diverse viewpoints. This story remains engaging for both readers and scholars due to its complex themes, historical background, and literary artistry.

### **Dilemma of Human Nature**

#### **Devil vs. Angel**

"Devil" and "angel" are a set of fundamental oppositions in the novel, which centers on Brown's fantasy of perfection for his wife, Faith, and the proven unreliability of "beauty". The name of his wife, Faith, means "strong religious belief", and after introducing her name, the author adds "was aptly named". In Brown's eyes, Faith is "a blessed angel on earth" (Jin, 2013, p. 97), and she appears in the novel as a beautiful, gentle woman who begs her husband to stay with her, so that Brown always thinks of his beautiful wife with a sense of guilt as he goes deeper into the forest. However, such a pure and kind wife breaks down Brown's last psychological defense. When Brown hesitates on his winding journey because he discovers the hypocrisy of his community and family, his young wife gives him the courage to resist the devil, yet in the end, Brown's faith is completely shattered when he finds her pink ribbon in the forest.

In fact, "devil" and "angel" are not completely opposed to each other. The word "devil" originated from the Indo-European word "divi", which belongs to the same root as the word "divinity". Christianity claims that demons are angels who have fallen to earth and dominate the forces of darkness. Faith, the "angel" in the story, can also be seen as the devil under the mask of an angel. The pink ribbon hints at her impurity and the evil in her heart, and the evil she reveals is the "last straw" that breaks Brown's heart. Stripped of his innocent "faith" in his wife, Goodman Brown becomes almost inhuman, more terrifying than his worst fears of nature and the supernatural. "My Faith is gone!", he loses his faith and accepts that all humans are sinners.

#### **Sin vs. Crime**

Christianity believes that all people are sinful, and everyone in the story is branded as "original sin". There is a big difference between sin and crime. The Puritans referred to "original sin" as being born with moral defects, such as greed, lust, laziness, gluttony, envy, etc. In the story, the devil first uses "sin" as an example—a lecherous clergyman speaking indecently to the maid of his house, and then gives various kinds of "crime"—mariticide, patricide, infanticide, etc. By leading from moral defects to the breaking of earthly laws, the devil is actually leading people from sin to crime. A person who has made a mistake and strives for redemption is good; a person who has made a mistake, is self-abandonment, and commits crimes is evil. In the novel, although Brown is called "goodman", he does not stick to the way of goodness. He acts like a saint, but he is not. He knows that his journey is sinful, but he is still mesmerized by the devil and goes deeper and deeper into the forest. In contrast, Prine, the heroine of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, cleanses her shame with love and good

deeds. Eventually, her Scarlet Letter A becomes the symbol of her transformation from adulterer to angel. Brown, on the other hand, goes from being a good man to a lost man who has lost his faith simply because he discovers the evil deeds of others.

### **Analysis of the Complete Disintegration of the “Old Self”**

#### **Brown’s Social Class**

The title of the short story, “Goodman Brown”, in addition to the literal meaning, also has the following dictionary meanings, “the male head of a household”. Goodman used formerly as a courtesy title before the surname of a man not of noble birth. In the text, Brown also briefly introduces himself, “I have nothing to do with the governor and council; they have their own ways, and are no rule for a simple husbandman, like me” (Jin, 2013, p. 99), showing that Brown is a man of ordinary social status. Brown is neither poor nor rich, and Hawthorne’s choice of such an extremely ordinary man as the main character is very representative and persuasive. Brown did not aspire to social status or wealth, and always prided himself on the fact that his family had been faithful and devout Christians for generations. The forest for Puritans marked both a place of fear and a place of possibility. It contained threat—“heathen” Indians and a world out of the control of Puritan society, but also an escape from the pressures of that society. For Brown, who is walking into the forest expressly out of a sinful curiosity, the forest might also be seen as reflecting his own mind, full of confusions and terrors.

#### **Brown’s Inner Sense of Evil**

Brown’s behavior is always shown to be contrary to his personal perceptions, giving a sense of hypocrisy. At the beginning of the story, his wife Faith begs Brown to stay at home with her, but he insists on going to the devil’s appointment. While he was worried about Faith, “It would break her dear little heart; and I’d rather break my own” (Jin, 2013, pp. 99-100), he moved on and acted contrary to what he had said. He actually knows that the journey is evil and feels deeply guilty about it, but he continues to think of himself as one of the Elect, and comforts himself, so as to feel justified in picking up his pace toward his “evil purpose”. In addition to this, the story hints at Brown’s inner evil at various points. When Brown arrives in the woods, he fears that he will see an “devilish Indian”, but instead, the devil appears in the form of a man who resembles Brown so much that the two men are so similar in appearance that they could be mistaken for father and son. Sometimes it is hard to tell good from evil, and the devil may be the manifestation of the evil within Brown. When Brown sees the old woman, Goody Cloyse, he hides in the woods to avoid being seen and questioned about his journey with the devil. Here it can be seen that Brown is just as hypocritical as his father and grandfather; he hides in the forest to avoid being seen by the woman because he wants to be thought of as a good person.

#### **Brown’s Submission to the Devil**

Brown gradually reveals his hypocrisy and eventually succumbs to the devil, accepting the dark truth and reaching the disintegration of his “old self”. An important turning point in the story is when Brown discovers his wife’s pink ribbon. “The young man seized it, and beheld a pink ribbon. ‘My Faith is gone!’ cried he, after one stupefied moment. ‘There is no good on earth and sin is but a name. Come, devil for to thee is this world given’” (Jin, 2013, p. 104). Brown cries out his wife’s name three times and these three outcries can be read as pleas to his wife or as appeals to both his and her religious belief. The doubt and despair eclipse Goodman Brown’s faith in his wife and Brown himself also loses faith and innocence. More ironically, the devil’s altar resembles a church place, mocking the hypocrisy of the Puritans—who have been revealed to look saintly on the outside but be

sinner within. In the face of the priests, the saints and his wife, his “faith” is completely subverted, and his “old self” is completely extinguished.

### Conclusion

Although Brown is devoutly Christian, he is ignorant of his own faith. On his way to the devil’s appointment, he hesitates several times, but his inner evil still overpowers the good, which is all due to the human nature. The disintegration of Brown’s “old self” demonstrates the hypocrisy of religion and people in the social context at that time. It reveals the hypocritical nature of people who seem to be good, and deepens the thinking on the topic of “human nature is evil”.

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