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Test of One Man's Faith

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown," the author uses mystery and suspense to hold the attention of the reader. From the beginning to the end of the story, Hawthorne leads the reader into asking the question, "what does all of this witchcraft, mysticism, and the double-sided lifestyles of the characters actually mean?" The reader must not look at "Young Goodman Brown" as just a suspenseful story but also see the many forms of symbolism the author uses. Hawthorne shows that a strong faith is the greatest asset of a man or woman, and when that faith is compromised, the effects of this can cause one to be filled with doubt and cynicism toward the rest of the world.

Goodman Brown does show he has a strong faith before he enters the forest and sometimes during his journey to the black mass. Hawthorne uses the very name of Goodman Brown's wife, Faith, as a symbol of Goodman Brown's own faith throughout the story. Goodman Brown's strong faith can be seen through the initial description of Faith: "And Faith, as the wife was aptly named, thrust her own pretty head into the street, letting the wind play with the pink ribbons of her cap" (140). Hawthorne suggests she is pure and innocent, as is Goodman Brown's own faith. Also, the reassuring replies Goodman Brown gives to Faith suggest that his faith cannot be weakened: "'Amen!' Cried Goodman Brown. 'Say thy prayers, dear Faith, and go to bed at dusk, and no harm will come to thee'" (140). Goodman Brown sets off on his

journey with a strong will and an “excellent resolve for the future” (141), and he “felt himself justified in making more haste on his present evil purpose” (141). Although he knows he is about to partake in a sinful act, Goodman Brown’s belief in his faith will bring him home safely and untainted. Goodman Brown also shows he believes in his faith while he ventures through the forest when the dark figure urges Goodman Brown to go with him. Goodman Brown replies, ““having kept my covenant by meeting thee here, it is my purpose now to return whence I came. I have scruples, touching the matter thou wot’st of”” (141). Goodman Brown’s “purpose” and “scruples” refer to his good faith. After the dark figure tells Goodman Brown about all of the evil acts he has performed, Goodman Brown exclaims, ““there is my wife, Faith. It would break her dear little heart: and I’d rather break my own”” (142). Again Hawthorne uses the name Faith to symbolize Goodman Brown’s faith, and he lets the reader know Goodman Brown would rather die than give up his faith. Upon seeing the town minister and Deacon Gookin riding to the black mass, Goodman Brown once again shows his faith is strong when he cries, ““With Heaven above, and Faith below, I will yet stand firm against the devil”” (144).

The characters Goodman Brown sees on his journey through the forest and his experience at the black Sabbath are what cause his faith to wane. When Goodman Brown is initially approached by the dark figure in the forest and is told he is late, Goodman Brown replies, “Faith kept me back awhile” (141). Again the name of his wife symbolizes Goodman Brown’s own faith and shows he had to compromise it to even start into the forest. Goodman Brown sees many characters making their way toward the meeting place and is surprised to see that many of them are people of great stature, both in the religious and governmental society. Here, Hawthorne shows that all people are sinners no matter how they may appear outwardly or what position they hold in society. First, Goodman Brown sees Goody Cloyse. She is described by Hawthorne as “a

very pious and exemplary dame” (142). Goodman Brown cannot believe Goody Cloyse would be out in the dark forest because she had taught him his catechism. The catechism is the initial schooling of the Bible in the Christian religion. This suggests Goodman Brown’s faith is beginning to weaken because seeing Goody Cloyse shows the foundation of his faith is weak. Although Goodman Brown attempts to keep his good faith when he sees the town minister and Deacon Gookin, he shows his faith is weakened when he “caught hold of a tree, for support, being ready to sink down on the ground, faint and overburdened with the sickness of his heart” (144). When he finds the pink ribbon of his wife in the forest, Goodman Brown’s faith is weakened even further. Again Goodman Brown’s wife is used as a symbol of his own faith: “‘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’” (145). At the black mass, Goodman Brown is astonished at the number of people he sees. And even though they are people he once recognized as God-fearing church members and respected members of the town, he sees they are actually sinners, and he describes them as “‘A grave and dark-clad company’” (146). He asks himself, “‘But where is Faith’” (146). He now believes there is no good in the world but only evil, and his faith is almost completely destroyed.

After Goodman Brown returns from the forest, he has little faith left, and this causes him to see everything in his environment as evil, sinful, and hypocritical. The preacher at the pulpit, Goody Cloyse teaching the catechism, Faith’s expressions of love toward him, and everything else that Goodman Brown held with high esteem seem to have become worthless. Goodman Brown shows he has some faith by attending church, but he only feels the wretchedness of the congregation’s sinfulness and hypocrisy: “On the Sabbath day, when the congregation were singing a holy psalm, he could not listen, because an anthem of sin rushed loudly upon his ear,

and drowned all the blessed strain” (148). When Hawthorne writes, “Often, awaking suddenly at midnight, he shrank from the bosom of Faith” (148), again, the name of Goodman Brown’s wife is used as a reference to Goodman Brown’s faith. This passage suggests Goodman Brown still has some faith remaining but his knowledge of the darkness in the world causes him to once again withdraw from the rest of the world. Even though he lives a long life with Faith and has children and grand-children, it is apparent Goodman Brown never loses his spitefulness toward society and the evil in the world, “for his dying hour was gloom” (148).

Hawthorne only uses the magnitude of the journey through the forest and the black mass as a representation of all the sin and evil which surrounds us in this world. Goodman Brown still seems to have faith in his own moral beliefs, but he has lost his faith in the rest of the world to hold these beliefs. Goodman Brown’s own lack of faith in the world has made him unforgiving because he believes only evil can be begotten from evil and there is nothing that can be done to change it. Rather than seeing the good in people and their actions and forgiving their sins, Goodman Brown only frowns upon them and believes people to be hypocrites. In all reality, it is Goodman Brown who is the hypocrite because he believes he can pass judgment on those who sin, yet he does not take his own sins into consideration. ““You have heard though it was said, “you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy” ‘but I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust’” (Mat. 5. 43-45). The point Hawthorne is making in this story is all people are sinners, and we must not hate people for there sins but hate the sins and love the sinners. Goodman Brown’s loss of faith has blinded him from seeing this.