Young Goodman Brown: Positive Side Of The Main Character

Nathaniel Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown is a short story published in two separate occasions. In 1835, it was published anonymously in The New-England Magazine. In 1846, it was published under his own name in Mosses from an Old Manse. A push and pull of good and evil is prevalent in this literary piece. The author wanted to stressed out what would happen if a person doubts in the existence of good. Is it possible that the mere thought of this could eat out the life of the heart? The point of this literary analysis is to try to decipher the meaning of Hawthorne's Young Goodman Brown. In order to do that, I will use some literary theories and examine the story's symbolism, themes and motifs.

The book is mainly about morality. It shows how a person can lose his faith if some situations or details are altered in his life. SparkNotes Editors states that, "Young Goodman Brown examines Hawthorne's favorite themes: loss of religious faith, presence of temptation, and social ills of Puritan communities. The story is often seen as a precursor to the novels Hawthorne wrote later in his life" (1). This literary piece also talked about witches and demonic rituals. Hawthorne had an ancestor named John Hathorne who was one of the three judges in the Salem Witch Trials. Using the biographical approach, maybe this story had something to do with that. His ancestor could have been his inspiration in writing this book. Perhaps this book is form of apology for what his ancestor did to those alleged witches. It is common knowledge that they hanged witches in the 1800's. To support my argument, I have this line from the book which says, "I helped your grandfather, the constable, when he lashed the Quaker woman so smartly through the streets of Salem."

Next, I am going to interpret the themes present in the story. The first theme that I observed is hypocrisy. At first, his resolve was strong when he came into the forest and meet with the devil. But then, when he saw Deacon Gookin and minister he immediately hid. To me, it was like he was concerned of how others may see him. The weakness of morality is the second theme I have observed. "At the word, Goodman Brown stepped forth from the shadow of the trees and approached the congregation, with whom he felt a loathful of brotherhood by the sympathy of all that was wicked in his heart." That statement proved that he had a weak conscience. When he saw the villagers including his wife, Deacon Gookin and the minister are all in league with the devil, swiftly he decided to join. The mind's ability to elicit paranoia is the last theme I noticed in this book. When he entered the forest, the surroundings are dark and gloomy. During this time, he was more focused on the problems that may arise instead of seeing the reality of things. "There may be a devilish Indian behind every tree. What if the devil himself should be at my very elbow!" His mind was haunted by these images and he suffers perplexity and fear because of it.

Some symbolisms were present in the book. The first thing I noticed was the staff. It aroused my curiosity. Whenever he feels like giving up or tired or restless, his companion immediately offers it to him. "Take my staff, if you are so soon weary." At first, I thought this was a sign of help but after reading it for a couple of times I soon realized that it was not. The moment he took that staff was also the moment he completely submitted himself to evil. Faith's pink ribbons is another symbol I wanted to point out. Fogle states that the color pink is associated with

innocence and gaiety, and ribbons are themselves are a modest, innocent decoration (52). Hawthorne's idea of attaching ribbons to Faith symbolizes her purity and innocence. When it fell from the sky, Goodman saw this as a sign that his wife has completely lost her innocence and entered into the realm of the devil.

Examining the piece using New Criticism, the author has an interesting choice of words. He used "dreamy" and "lonely" twice. "Black" was used thrice. There are six instances when he used the word "gloom/gloomy". Eleven occurrences when he mentioned the words "dark/darkened/darkness". All of these created a dark atmosphere for the book. Aside from that, it also suggests that this piece is about morality, good vs. evil, and religion. I like the author's choice of words particularly in naming the characters. He used the word "Good" to name some of them but then he portrayed them as sinners. Like for example Goodman Brown and Goody Cloyse started out as characters who seemed innocent; then they succumbed to their darkest desires near the end of the story.

Seeing this literary piece using the lens of Psychoanalytic Criticism, when Goodman gave in to temptation, the Id part of his personality took control. All of his anger, hidden desires, and ambitions suddenly manifested. There is a possibility that the events of the story were only a dream. If it were, then Goodman had an unconscious desire for evil. Freud believed that the influences of the unconscious reveal themselves in a variety of ways, including dreams, and in slips of the tongue, now popularly known as 'Freudian slips' (3).

I think this literary piece has a certain similarity to the story of Adam and Eve. Goodman Brown is Eve. The old man he met is the serpent. Faith is Adam. Goodman Brown is tempted by the old man and submits because of his curiosity and the weakness of his faith. He can't help himself from wanting to know what lies behind the mystery of the forest. Adam and Eve's punishment was exiled from the Garden of Eden. Goodman's punishment occurred when he returned from the forest to find that the joy in life has been taken away from him. He became paranoid of those around him, including Faith who he once loved.

My final thought for this piece is that it has multiple meanings and can be interpreted using different literary theories. This story highlights our vulnerability to evil. All of us can be tempted. Even Jesus was tempted in the Bible. Unlike Goodman Brown, Jesus didn't fail. He remained steadfast and kept the faith. Another thing I want to point out is Goodman's journey through the dark forest. It is similar to our journey in life. Inevitably, some of us may lose our innocence. We may not know what tests or temptations lie ahead but we must always keep our faith strong. Never accept "the staff" that Satan offers whenever we feel weary. Instead, we must always remember to look up and pray to Him. Faith 'till we make it.

Works Cited

1. Fogle, Robert Hyland. Hawthorne's fiction: the light and the dark. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952.
2. Freud, Sigmund. The Unconscious. New York, New York: Penguin Adult, 2005.
3. SparkNotes. Sparknote on Young Goodman Brown. 10 August 2019.