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Scorned For Life: A Feminist Interpretation of Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown"

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown," a young man named Goodman Brown leaves his home and wife to journey into the woods for an undisclosed errand. There, in a dreamlike state, he encounters representations of sin, including the devil himself in person, as well as a communion of his congregation celebrating their consumption of sin. Goodman Brown returns to his village in the morning, believing that he alone has rejected sin, while his wife and the rest of his congregation have succumbed to it. This turns him into a man filled with inconsolable grief and distrust, and he dies an old man of gloom. "Young Goodman Brown" strikes the readers as a short story about a young man's struggle with good and evil, but the more striking theme is the stereotype and punishment of Faith, Goodman Brown's wife of three months. Even though the journey is made by Goodman Brown, Faith affects Goodman Brown's reactions throughout the journey, as well as his outcome at the end. Faith is the victim of the stereotype of women set forth by Goodman Brown: women must assume the traditional role as being a proper and homebound wife or they will be consumed by evil.

The traditional roles expected from the husband and wife are clearly set from the beginning when Goodman Brown enters the street of Salem at sunset to set off on his journey. As the husband, Goodman Brown is expected to be the head of his household. He is expected to be seen in public and to oversee all aspects of his business. James C. Keil states in his article: "men should be the 'sole' economic providers of the household, working, increasingly, outside

of it, in the public realm” (Keil 35). Goodman Brown’s presence is important as indicated by the fact that he must go on this journey, even though his wife asks him to delay it. He replies that his “journey, as thou callest it, forth and back again, must needs be done” (Hawthorne 24). His reply shows that the journey is something important that he must do and Faith cannot change his decision. He does not even feel the need to disclose the purpose of the journey to his worrying wife. By choosing to go on the journey and leave his wife behind, Goodman Brown clearly assumes the traditional role of the husband who is in control of his life as well as that of his wife.

As the wife, Faith is expected to be homebound and private. This is most evident in the way she “thrust her own pretty head into the street,” (Hawthorne 24) as if her entire body should not be seen in the street of Salem at sunset. Even in Goodman’s Brown’s last glimpse of her, he sees “the head of Faith still peeping after him” (Hawthorne 24). James C. Keil states in his article: “Women should provide all the other needs of the family, laboring only within the house—a structure that [...] became known as the ‘home’ and became identified primarily with women and their children” (Keil 35). Faith is also expected to be proper and sexually passive. She is not the one to initiate the parting kiss with her husband; Goodman Brown does so by putting “his head back, after crossing the threshold” (Hawthorne 24). James C. Keil states in his article: “[men are portrayed] as sexually predatory and [...] women as virtually passionless” (Keil 37). Even her very name, Faith, shows that she is expected to be nothing but pure and devoted to her husband. The narrator reveals that “the wife was aptly named” Faith (Hawthorne 24), as if nothing else would do. Another expectation is that she is physically appealing. The description of her having a “pretty head” as well as being addressed as “my sweet, pretty wife” (Hawthorne 24) by Goodman Brown indicates this expectation. She is valued for her physical beauty, as opposed to her intellect or anything else. A final expectation is that she should be innocent and child-like

in her ways. This can be seen when Faith lets “the wind play with the pink ribbons of her cap,” as well as when Goodman Brown refers to her as “poor little Faith” (Hawthorne 24) when he leaves her. James C. Keil confirms this in his article when he reveals the “tendency to infantilize women, to view them as creatures of childlike disposition” (Keil 38). It is assumed that Faith cannot manage on her own in her husband’s absence. This is a convenient complement to the husband’s traditional role as the one in control. An innocent and child-like wife will not question her husband’s authority.

Goodman Brown’s expectation of Faith is shattered when he realizes that she is breaking the stereotype. The main example is when Faith tries to convince him to “put off [his] journey until sunrise and sleep in [his] own bed to-night” (Hawthorne 24). She whispers these words softly into his ears, which seems like she is trying to tempt him away from his journey with the promise of sex. For Faith, this gesture is simply a plea for his company and intimacy, which a wife needs naturally, but given the traditional role of the wife being innocent and proper, her plea is seen as being sinful and lustful. In the traditional role, the husband is expected to initiate sex, not the wife. E. Arthur Robinson states in his article: “the moral is old and complex: woman [...] possesses physical attributes that lure man to evil, although the evil may not be within her power or will” (Robinson 225). By expressing her desire for intimacy, Faith no longer fits the stereotype and is branded as an agent of sin, trying to lure her husband into evil by offering him lust and carnal pleasures.

When Faith breaks the stereotype with her soft words, she makes Goodman Brown doubt her faith. Faith whispers, “a lone woman is troubled with such dreams and such thoughts that she’s feared of herself sometimes” (Hawthorne 24). Goodman Brown replies, “dost thou doubt me already, and we but three months married” (Hawthorne 24), which shows that he assumes

Faith is troubled by her lack of faith in him as well as herself. Edward J. Gallagher states in his article: “In the introduction Brown asks, rhetorically, if Faith doubts him; and in the conclusion, in response, we see that it is Brown who doubts her” (Gallagher 30). He simply instructs her to “say thy prayers, dear Faith, and go to bed as dusk, and no harm will come to thee” (Hawthorne 24). This shows how Goodman Brown believes that Faith will be safe as long as she maintains the traditional role expected of her: be innocent, private and homebound. Faith, being a sensual and intimate wife, brings doubt into Goodman Brown’s heart because he fears that she will want to satisfy her appetite for intimacy with another man in his absence.

Goodman Brown’s doubts and fears consume him when he encounters his congregation celebrating their consumption of sin in some sort of evil ceremony. Goodman Brown merely hears “one voice, of a young woman, uttering lamentations” (Hawthorne 30) and he immediately assumes it is the voice of his Faith. He becomes madly desperate and panicked and when he finds a pink ribbon fluttering down from the sky, he cries out, “my Faith is gone!” (Hawthorne 30). He has not seen Faith nor spoken to her, but he instantaneously assumes the pink ribbons fell from Faith when she succumbed to sin. In response, he cries out, “there is no good on earth; and sin is but a name. Come, Devil; for to thee is this world given” (Hawthorne 30). The pink ribbon symbolizes the mixture of two colors: white which symbolizes purity and red which symbolizes sin. According to an article by Patrick Shaw, “Faith and her ribbons might look innocent in the brightness of day, but at night they are diabolical” (Shaw 321-322). Shaw further states: “pink conveys the paradox of Faith’s innocence (white) and the violence of her passions (red) [...] Faith’s pink ribbons epitomizes innocence masking passion (Shaw 322). The fact that Faith was wearing pink ribbons that fluttered carelessly from her cap shows how Goodman Brown has all along suspected her innocence and purity. When he finally cries out to her: “look

up to Heaven, and resist the wicked one” (Hawthorne 33), he assumes the traditional role of the husband who can control his wife, by telling her what she should do, instead of having faith that she will choose to do the right thing on her own.

Goodman Brown has no evidence that Faith has succumbed to evil. He admits: “whether Faith obeyed, he knew not” (Hawthorne 34). He simply assumes that she was not able to resist the “wicked one” (Hawthorne 33). Goodman Brown believes this without a doubt because Faith did not assume the traditional role expected of her as a wife. If she had stayed home as Goodman Brown had instructed, she would not be in the woods before the congregation of sinners. If she had remained truly innocent and pure, she would not have exposed herself to the temptation of sin in the forest. If she had only done as he had instructed, like an obedient child, she would be safe at home, awaiting her husband’s return. When Goodman Brown does return home, Faith greets him with pure joy. Goodman Brown sees “the head of Faith, with the pink ribbons, gazing anxiously forth, and bursting into such joy at sight of him that she skipped along the street and almost kissed her husband before the whole village” (Hawthorne 34). This does not seem the reaction of a woman who has lost her innocence and succumbed to evil. She is simply overfilled with joy to see his safe return, as she has missed him. An impression favorable to Faith is made in Paul W. Miller’s article where he states: “the narrator’s description of Faith the next morning [...] would certainly suggest that she had summoned the strength to heed her husband’s plea. Joy such as Faith showed that morning would seem to be a more natural consequence of resisting temptation than yielding to it, especially with the stakes so high” (Miller 258). But Goodman Brown does not even greet her because he doubts her faith and innocence. Goodman Brown does not even question the fact that Faith appears once again with the pink ribbons on her head- the very ribbons he found in the woods and assumed fell from Faith. Paul J. Hurley states in his

article: “his own distrust and suspicion have assured him that she is sinful, even though, as Hawthorne is careful to note, she is wearing the pink ribbons which Goodman Brown thought he had grasped from the air” (Hurley 415). He does not even ask her about the incident; he is too absorbed in his own assumptions to give any credit to his wife.

Faith is punished by Goodman Brown because she failed to assume the traditional role as being a proper and homebound wife. The first reaction of Goodman Brown toward his wife is evident of this: “Goodman Brown looked sternly and sadly into her face, and passed on without a greeting” (Hawthorne 34). The narrator at this point reminds the readers that perhaps Goodman Brown fell asleep in the forest and dreamed of the whole incident, but whether it was a dream or not, Faith is scorned and punished. Goodman Brown becomes a “stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate, man did he become from the night of that fearful dream” (Hawthorne 34). He no longer trusts Faith; she is looked upon with stern and sad eyes. Goodman Brown rejects her like a worthless object, instead of considering her as a human being with emotions and needs. He remains married to her to maintain his role as a husband, but denies her emotional intimacy and trust. The narrator reveals that “often, awaking suddenly at midnight, he shrank from the bosom of Faith; and at morning or eventide, when the family knelt down at prayer, he scowled, and muttered to himself, and gazed sternly at his wife, and turned away” (Hawthorne 34). When Goodman Brown dies, he is “followed by Faith, an aged woman, and children and grandchildren” (Hawthorne 34). It is interesting how Faith remains with Goodman Brown to the end, even following him into his grave, after having been a wife who remained at his side and even gave birth to his children. Goodman Brown is completely engrossed in his mistrust and scorn for Faith that he fails to give her any credit and dies a gloomy old man who

had “no hopeful verse upon his tombstone, for his dying hour was gloom” (Hawthorne 34). Even to the end, Faith is the one blamed for Goodman Brown’s misery and disappointment.

Faith is the ultimate victim in “Young Goodman Brown.” Throughout the short story, she is expected to be homebound, private, passionless and submissive. Faith could not help but fail to meet these expectations because they are unrealistic and unreasonable. She is treated with scrutiny from the beginning: the pink ribbons in her hair are seen as representing her innocence and sin; her soft whispers to her husband are seen as having erotic overtones- meaning to lure him into lust. No matter what Faith does or say, she has already been condemned by her husband in his mind. Faith is not even confronted by Goodman Brown; he simply draws his own conclusions based on his own assumptions. Faith is the victim of the stereotype of women set forth by her husband: women must assume the traditional role as being a proper and homebound wife or they will be consumed by evil. Sadly, Faith is scorned and denied emotional intimacy from her husband for life.

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