

## Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown": A Postcolonial Reading

*Puritanism—the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.*

—H. L. Mencken

“An errand into the wilderness” is a standard metaphor for the Puritan undertaking in colonizing New England, the first of several chapters in the grand narrative of American history. In the words of John Winthrop, the colonists were to “be as a city upon a hill” with “the eyes of all people” upon them; their success in building a fruitful society was to be an example for the rest of Christendom. In New England, however, the success of the Puritan undertaking was also its failure. The political and financial success of the colonies in New England came at the expense of Puritan unity and idealism. Having fled Europe in pursuit of tolerance, the Puritans extended none to the native inhabitants of the New World or even to other religious groups, such as the Antinomians and Quakers. The errand Young Goodman Brown takes into the wilderness in Hawthorne’s story is more than a single man’s struggle with temptation. It is also representative of the Puritan undertaking generally. Both young Goodman Brown’s errand (mission) and the Puritan undertaking result in error (Lat. *errare* “to wander”) and failure.

The allegorical dimension of Hawthorne’s story casts Goodman Brown as a Puritan Everyman and his wife, Faith, as representative of one of the three qualities mentioned in I Corinthians 13:13, namely “faith, hope, charity [or ‘love’].” While journeying through the forest with the devil, Goodman Brown demonstrates that the piety of his community and his wife are foundations of his faith: “We are a people of prayer, and good works to boot, and abide no such wickedness.” This foundation crumbles away as the devil and Goodman Brown meet Goody Cloyse, the minister, and Deacon Gookin, and these supposedly pious people reveal their wickedness. When Goodman Brown finds his wife’s pink ribbon, he is convinced that she too has succumbed to temptation. Slowly but surely Goodman Brown, the Puritan Everyman, loses his religious ideals and any sense of religious unity with the members of his community.

At the end of Hawthorne's story, Goodman Brown seems to prevail and resist evil, but his success is also his failure. At the climax of his errand, Goodman Brown directs his wife, "Faith! Faith! Look up to heaven, and resist the wicked one" and "[h]ardly had he spoken when he found himself amid calm night and solitude." Goodman Brown's removal from the scene of the devil's communion suggests that he has successfully resisted temptation. However, his behavior after this fateful evening proves the emptiness of his victory. After Goodman Brown directs his Faith to look to heaven, the narrator of the story explains that "[w]hether Faith obeyed" Goodman Brown "knew not." Yet Goodman Brown "looked sternly and sadly into her face, and passed on without a greeting." He becomes a "stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man," apparently believing that, unlike himself, his wife did give into temptation and is in league with the devil. As a result, his success in resisting the temptation, his resistance to "the Wicked One," is at the same time his wife's (imagined) failure to resist. In assuming that he has resisted temptation but his wife has not, Goodman Brown commits the sin of pride (originally committed by Lucifer, who was the source of all sin according to Christian dogma/belief). In a sense, only by becoming like the devil can Brown overcome him, and by the end of Goodman Brown's journey, he has lost his Faith (and all hope and charity).

Similarly, the Puritans colonizing New England were able to defeat the native inhabitants during King Philip's War (any recovery was made impossible because of the losses to war and disease) only by becoming as barbaric—if not more so—as they claimed the natives to be. "I helped your grandfather, the constable, when he lashed the Quaker woman so smartly through the streets of Salem. And it was I that brought your father a pitch-pine-knot, kindled at my own hearth, to set fire to an Indian village, in King Philip's war," the devil tells Goodman Brown. Quite conceivably, the incident Hawthorne had in mind was the so-called "Great Swamp Fight" of December 19, 1675. The "fight" consisted of lighting the fortified village of the Narragansetts on fire, with the inhabitants—men, women, and children—still inside. The forces from the United Colonies lost seventy men and one hundred fifty were wounded in their attempts to breach the walls before resorting to the torch. The Narragansetts lost close to one hundred

warriors and an undetermined number of women and children (estimates run between three hundred and one thousand). As such, the English gave the natives another lesson in so-called civilized warfare. The lashing given to the Quaker woman and the burning of the Indian village in Hawthorne's story show the extent of tolerance among those seeking religious freedom.

A pamphlet published in the same year the "Great Swamp Fight" took place (dated September 7) clearly reveals the colonists' stance against the natives. In "A Brief and True Narration of the Late Wars Risen in New-England: Occasioned by the Quarrelsome disposition, and Perfidious Carriage of the *Barbarous, Savage, and Heathenish Natives* There," the author casts blame for the war on the natives. He points out that "the value of Lands" has "considerably advanced" since the colonists had begun turning the "howling Wilderness" into "Corn fields, Orchards, enclosed Pastures," and towns ("A Brief and True Narration" 3). He also writes, however, that "some *Indians* repent the sale of them and particularly Sachem *Philip*" ("A Brief and True Narration" 3). It was not so much the missed opportunity to make money that rankled Philip (the name given the Indian leader by the colonial forces) but rather the pressure put on him and his people as a result of the ever-expanding colonies. On one level, the dispute was about land. However, had the colonists allowed the natives to continue hunting and gathering on the remaining uncultivated land (a common complaint at the time), tensions between the colonists and the Indians would not have mounted so quickly. It also is worthwhile to note that Philip's father, Massasoit, had helped the Plymouth Pilgrims to survive their first winter in the New World. Extending a similar kindness would have necessitated that the colonists rethink their demonization of Native Americans and the foundation of their own culture—an act unsuited to the established theocracy.

Plurality was not possible for either the Puritans or for Brown. Using free indirect discourse, the narrator in Hawthorne's story describes that "[i]t was strange to see that the good shrank not from the wicked, nor were the sinners abashed by the saints. Scattered also among their pale-faced enemies were the Indian priests, or powwows." Goodman Brown rejects the only moment of equality and unity among all the inhabitants of Salem and its environs, as would have

any member of his denomination. Granted, he does so for religious reasons, but his subsequent behavior is, according to his own culture, sinful. This sin of pride is ultimately mirrored in the society for which Goodman Brown stands as representative. The loss of Goodman Brown's hope, charity, and faith and the gloom of his end foreshadow the same in Puritan society. The Puritans made financial success the product of divine grace and a sign of future salvation. But their success came at the expense of their Christian values and the ideals on which their society was based via the wholesale destruction of native civilizations on the continent.

### **Bibliography**

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