Evil in Submission: A psychoanalytic analysis of Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman”

“Young Goodman Brown” is a powerful criticism of 16th and 17th century Puritans and the generational effect they had on their future families. Nathaniel Hawthorne, the author of the story, explores the psychological impact of the Puritan lifestyle using symbolism, allegory, and human superstition to illustrate a picture of the pressures and proclivities of the Puritan religious ideals of his era. His critique on Puritan society is serious in its implications, and it certainly merits thought that given Hawthorne’s generational ties to Puritan society, many of the traits and character descriptions that he used for the character Goodman Brown and the setting of the story are reminiscent of Puritanical values and customs.

In looking at literature from a psychoanalytic perspective, a critic hopes to examine the unconscious desires and motives that drive humans to exhibit outward behavior. Psychologically, the Puritan religion played a great part in the shaping of the lives of those involved with it; through the use of fear, suspicion, and deceit, the Puritans, in Hawthorne’s view, manipulated their future generations regarding the way in which humans should behave. Although individual study of the Bible and a personal relationship with God were emphasized in Puritan life, it is not difficult to see why these qualities became lost amidst the severity of Puritan morality and punishment.

Puritan life in Salem village was very difficult, as the church had most of the economic, social, and political control in the community. Clergymen wielded almost unlimited power and authority without question, which one could argue as a strong correlation to the unchecked violence and chaos that plagued the Puritan society during the 16th and 17th centuries. In the churches, there was constant reference to the Devil being “among the community,” (Puritan Life in Salem Village). This statement was most likely meant in a metaphoric context, although to a
child, it would be extremely difficult to discern the idea in a figurative manner. More likely, the fear of the Devil, of witches, and of wickedness of spirit was instilled into children in an effort to strike fear into their hearts should they stray from the path that the Puritans had set out for them.

By setting the events of his tale in Salem village, Hawthorne uses the village’s non-fictional history to remind the audience of the violence, deviltry, and paranoia that are an integral part of the town’s heritage. Salem Village is notorious for the witch trials that took place during the late 17th century—Hawthorne is even said to have added a ‘w’ to his family name of Hathorne to distance himself from one of his ancestors, an unrepentant judge in the Salem Witch Trials (Nathaniel Hawthorne). In “Young Goodman Brown” Hawthorne takes moralistic ideas and injects them into a haunting and intriguing tale of the dualism of mankind that takes place in a setting that is itself an important character in the story.

The protagonist, Goodman Brown, is introduced as a naïve and inexperienced young man, freshly married to young and innocent wife, Faith. Goodman has not yet found his place as an adult member of the community of Salem, and is still in a state of blissful ignorance to the goings on around him. Relating Brown’s relationship with his wife to the manner in which parents shape their offspring through a set of moral, or in unfortunate circumstances, immoral principles will yield some interesting psychological examinations of Puritan society.

Children imitate the world around them in an attempt to make sense of the governing rules and structure that supports it. This becomes one of the criterion ways in which children begin to grow cognitively; it demonstrates societal norms and exposes the complexities of human interaction. As a parent forges his or her path in the world, their child is watching, eagerly and earnestly, in order to cognize the acceptable social behaviors that will be required of them in later years. In the story, the young married couple is shaped by the principles and values of the
community, passed on to them in the hopes that they would grow to be submissive, unquestioning Puritans who would conform to the social, religious, and family values of the community. Although it is a noble goal for parents to help shape their children’s belief system, Hawthorne suggests that the manner in which many Puritans of the time did so was cruel and manipulative. This notion of generational values will come into consideration later in the story as Goodman Brown confronts his own lineage and the sins that they desperately tried to cover over.

Upon first impression, one may admire the seemingly benevolent and earnest way in which Goodman Brown carries himself; yet an undercurrent of insecurity and an unresolved sense of self seem to afflict the young protagonist in deeper ways. Given the suffocating and suspicious manner in which many Puritans of the time fashioned their lives, it stands to reason that the individual self was difficult to define. Individualism was only encouraged through the individual relationship with God; applying an outside perspective to morality would have been viewed as rebellion, or worse, devil worshipping. The article “Parenting and its Effects on Children: On Reading and Misreading Behavior Genetics” describes the basic societal nature of moral principles and rules, “All societies prescribe certain characteristics that their members are expected to possess and certain things people must not do, if they are to function adequately as members of their society,” (Maccoby, n.p.). This relates universally to any organized community; in the Puritan way of life, instilling fear and suspicion into their children manipulated the way in which the children saw themselves. More importantly, the adult Puritan members were able to shield their own sins and shortcomings from their children.

The Puritan religion in many ways condemned humans’ natural instincts, often by using scare-tactics and driving fear into the hearts of those who held a different perspective than the accepted values. Hawthorne recognized this, resulting in his inspiration for writing the story. In
modern times, many churches dis-fellowship their members if said members do not act in accordance with the laws and principles decided upon by the leaders of the church. In Puritan times, excommunication was much more severe in its implications. In “The Light and the Glory” the authors discuss the typical way in which a person was forced to leave the church in the 16th and 17th century, in contrast to modern days:

Today, if anyone were threatened with dismissal from church membership, in all probability he would simply laugh, take up his coat and leave. But it was different three centuries ago … under most circumstances, excommunication was a matter of the utmost gravity. It meant the local body of Christ, after repeatedly trying to bring a sinner to repentance so he or she could receive God’s forgiveness, would finally have no choice but to break fellowship with the individual … this meant that a person would be under Satan’s influence … a fearsome turn of events indeed (Marshall, Manuel p. 173).

Given the severity of excommunication from the Puritan way of life, one can reason that fear overrode individuality and self-expression, denying children the chance to be free and comfortable with their selves. In his book “The English Puritans” John Brown mentioned various ways in which a person was treated if they became excommunicated from the Puritan religion, including: denial of a Christian burial, imprisonment, and constant negative criticism and persecution (p. 114). Using the fear of excommunication and abandonment, the Puritans scared many of its members into obedience, although individual faith and belief were no doubt lost in the process.

A clashing of the id and the superego is represented in many of Brown’s actions; the id representing a basic drive for instinctual pleasures and gratifications conflicting with the idealistic superego, which seeks an attainment of perfect balance and control over a life. The
superego is comprised of hopes and aspirations of an individual, although humans characteristically fall short of these goals on a consistent basis. Brown, suppressing his base desires all of his life, takes precaution in his going into the forest to make his appointment with the Devil; yet, he still goes forth, almost unconsciously, as though his same suppressed desires propel him to the source of “evil” in the woods.

The use of fear is consistently present in the story. Using the common human fear of darkness, shadows, and wooded areas, Hawthorne plays with these ideas as pertaining to the metaphysical elements of the story. The human imagination is quite capable of an extraordinary amount of fantastic and nonsensical ideas; however, this should not suggest that these fears and superstitions have no merit or value in interpreting why people become frightened. Stephen T. Asma discusses this concept in his book “On Monsters” in which he posits that: The monster … is a product … of the imagination, but the imagination is the driving force behind our entire perception of the world. If we find monsters in our world, it is sometimes because they are really there and sometimes because we have brought them with us. (p. 14) Applying this to “Brown” many of the supernatural characters and elements of the story are defined by the protagonist’s own beliefs. As Brown believes so strongly in the Devil and witchcraft, his fears are brought to life in the form of the Devil and the Devil’s influence in Salem village. The concepts of Heaven and Hell are the strongest elements of any religion, and the symbolism, archetypes, and motifs associated with these concepts provided a vivid picture in the minds of the followers of the Puritan religion, often in a fear-inducing manner.

Fear is a primitive, yet psychologically challenging way of reacting to dangerous and threatening situations. In modern times, fear may be reduced to little more than internal chemical reactions by some; furthermore, given this scientific approach, fear can be considered in many
ways irrational. This approach, however, prevents the mystery and paranoia that comes with fear to be fully understood. In the book “Critical Theory Today” Lois Tyson submits that, “Until we find a way to know and acknowledge to ourselves the true cause(s) of our repressed wounds, fears, and guilty desires, and unresolved conflicts, we hang onto them in disguised, distorted, and self-defeating ways”, (13).

A mixing of the elements of nature as well as the elements of sin and despair set a grim tone for the story henceforth, leading young Goodman Brown down a most dangerous and deceitful path.

The question now is how did fear become such a powerful and important element in in the Puritan’s lives? It is reasonable to believe that fear is an inherent trait; that we are naturally inclined to fear by exposure to aggression, anger, or concepts and ideas that we do not fully understand. In the introductory statement regarding “Supernatural Horror in Literature” H.P. Lovecraft gives a simple, yet intriguing suggestion regarding fear: “The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown,” (1). This statement presents the notion that an individual, when faced with unseen or confusing instances of danger or threat, may regress to a state of panic or fear, merely due to said person never experiencing their present circumstance before. While this statement is true, it can also be built upon by suggesting that fear becomes much more than simple instinct when manipulated by outside factors such as home life, religious views, education, addictions, among others. Given the influence that the clergymen and authority figures in the Salem village community had over the followers, it is very strongly supported that many of the members of the community feared the Devil and witchcraft. Along with that, many perhaps also feared the church, as it was rather spiteful and mean-spirited towards its dis-fellowshipped members, and even its members.
Lastly, deceit plays a pivotal role in “Young Goodman Brown.” The Puritan elders of the community taught strict self-discipline and restraint, and, in their children’s eyes, were the models of these principles. Yet when Brown meets his companion in the woods, this notion is thrown into question. Up to this point in the story, Goodman Brown’s perception of his lineage is one of praise and unquestioning denial. His misplaced admiration for his paternal family’s virtue and unfettered righteousness is shattered as his travelling companion mentions the sins of Goodman’s father and grandfather. Although he begins to question the traveler’s claims, Brown continues to insist that, “We are a people of prayer, and good works to boot, and abide no such wickedness,” (Hawthorne, 1218). Out of context, one might admire this statement, or at least appreciate the idea that Brown chooses to remain steadfast in his values; however, it is clear that Brown said this with some misgivings, a cloud of doubt growing in his mind as to the honesty and integrity of those who had raised him in the community.

One of the most dangerous aspects of human psychology is the inability or unwillingness to recognize shortcomings and weaknesses that detract from an overall state of psychological health and well-being. Lois Tyson said this on the unconscious, “Our unconscious desires not to recognize or change our destructive behaviors—because we have formed our identities around them and because we are afraid of what we will find if we examine them too closely—are served by our defenses,” (15). By resorting to defenses, humans become deceitful, even unreliable in the way in which they interact with one another. Hawthorne commentaries on this concept most strongly in the story by writing about the Puritan’s outwardly pious and devout lifestyle being contradicted by their private shortcomings and failures, although they attempted to hide these weaknesses from their children. Like the use of fear and superstition, deceit was used upon the younger generation in the Puritan community in attempts to display a false sense of outward
perfection and tranquility with oneself. This was psychologically damaging to the children, as it displayed a contradictory portrait of what they would one day grow up to be.

This concept is present in the character Goodman Brown in that he is a contradictory individual, despite his efforts to be pure. He is steadfast in his faith, yet ignorant to the goings on around him; he stands up against the adversities around him, although he is unconsciously drawn towards them. Contradictions, impulsiveness, irrationality, and the questionable values that humans carry with them are all psychological aspects of a conflicting individual. The Puritans tried so very hard to ignore this dualism of the self; although it is not entirely possible for a person to do so, at least not all of the time.

A driving factor in the Puritans’ attempts to deceive others of their sins came from the knowledge that others would cast them out of good favor. Embarrassment and humiliation in the face of others’ disapproval was a powerful motivator in the attempts to hide their deficiencies from one another.

It would be unfair to completely belay the entire psychological burden placed on the Puritan children to the majority of the Puritan adults of the community, at least in that the elder generation was also raised in a very strict and suppressive manner. Many of them only knew how to live by the ways in which they had been taught in their youth. Rather than criticize individual members of the Puritan community in Salem, Hawthorne molds his critique to the shape of the entire community; through their oppressive and stifling enforcement of religious values onto their followers, they crushed much of the independent faith and spirituality that might have existed and flourished otherwise. Although there are many interpretations of the story, the tragic ending serves as a reminder to the audience to understand their beliefs and what they represent—in other words, to question everything in your life. Without doing this, humans can become
intolerant, exercising the ability to instill fear, suspicion, and deceit into their future generations and those around them.

In closing, a psychoanalytic interpretation of “Young Goodman Brown” can be a daunting task; many of the interpretations and truths made about the story can be equally applicable to modern times. The examination of religious deception and persecution for personal shortcomings is not to suggest that the practice of religion is inherently evil or ill-intentioned; it only serves to exemplify the ways in which man imposes his own views into his religious values, often finding a way to warp the teachings of the religion to conform to his desires or needs. Alternatively, humans can alter their opinions and beliefs based on their fear of how others will perceive them. It is the hope of the author that the audience might reflect upon their own religious beliefs, as well as the importance of seeking personal truth. This will serve in a person gaining knowledge of themselves and their beliefs, which can in turn become wisdom to be applied to everyday life.
Works Cited


