Young Goodman Brown: Faith Allegories

After analysing the coming of age story “Young Goodman Brown” by Nathaniel Hawthorne, it is quite evident that Young Goodman Brown’s wife, Faith, symbolises much more than a simple representation of Goodman Brown’s own faith. She embodies the complexity of the contradicting forces that each person carries in them: the good and the bad. Despite her innocent and naive state of initial appearance, Faith holds a much more intricate meaning. She represents the temptation in all of us to stray from our own faith, demonstrating to readers that they cannot rely solely on their faith because it is only as strong as their will to maintain it. Therefore, while simply being equated to the maintenance and loss of faith in Goodman Brown, in reality, his wife really represents the temptation and curiosity in all of us that has the capability to crack everyone’s faith.

Understood as just an allegory for the strength of Goodman Brown’s religious faith, the character Faith would only stand as an object of Brown’s manipulation, something she is not. Faith is her own person, with her own thoughts and desires as shown in the opening passages when she declares, “A lone woman is troubled with such dreams and such thoughts, that she's afeard of herself, sometimes. Pray, tarry with me this night, dear husband, of all nights in the year!” (Hawthorne 2). With these words, Faith shows us that she is worried of the dark that may consume her if she is to be left alone on Devil’s Eve. When examining this quote, it is clear that Faith does not always trust herself and cannot rely purely on her good religious faith to get her through the night. Ignoring Faith’s worries and desires, Brown inaccurately sees Faith as the purest thing in his life, which readers often mistaken as a symbol for Brown’s own faith. Since Faith is afraid of her own temptations, she cannot be read as a simple allegory like many internet sites reduce her meaning to.

The temptation and curiosity found in all types of faith is further demonstrated in the next passage when Hawthorne mentions that Goodman Brown hears a woman’s voice in the dark cloud looming above. He writes, “There was one voice, of a young woman, uttering lamentations, yet with an uncertain sorrow, and entreating for some favor, which, perhaps, it would grieve her to obtain. And all the unseen multitude, both saints and sinners, seemed to encourage her onward” (Hawthorne 47). In this quote, Faith appears in the cloud, being encouraged forward by the good and the bad, the “saints and sinners” (Hawthorne 47), and continues with hesitation to the communion on Devil’s Eve. Hearing Faith engage in the practice of worshipping the Devil seems, initially, to mean that Goodman Brown has abandoned his own faith, but looking deeper, we can tell that doubt in one’s religion is not something specific to Brown. In fact, if we take the idea that Faith represents the good and bad in all of us, Faith is just going through a time when curiosity gets the best of her and she is enticed to make it to the Devil’s communion. To me, this quote is Hawthorne’s way of explaining to readers that faith is more complicated than either having it or losing it. He wants people to understand that faith is very complex and involves how humans react to natural temptation and unsteadiness in their own belief system.

In the last passage to be analysed, the common, simple representation of Faith to mean the loss of Goodman Brown’s faith is proven incorrect. The following quote explains how when Young Goodman Brown and Faith found each other in the forest at the Devil’s communion,

Brown's faith is not yet gone, "'Faith! Faith!' cried the husband. 'Look up to Heaven, and resist the Wicked One!'" (Hawthorne 68). If Faith is to symbolize Goodman Brown's loss of faith, Brown would not have warned Faith to resist the evil forces during the forest gathering. He would no longer care what happened to her religious faith if his was completely gone. We can tell from the sentence spoken by Brown that his faith is not completely lost. He wants Faith to look to the sky and see the goodness in Heaven above. In the sentence that follows, Hawthorne writes "Whether Faith obeyed, he knew not" (69), which makes it clear that he never finds out if Faith listens to him. Whether or not she does is not what is important; what really matters it is the fact that she is portrayed as innocence, goodness, and purity, and ends up going to a satanic worshipping ceremony, representing the instability of our own beliefs and appearances when we are faced with temptation and curiosity.

When examining the true meaning of Faith's character, we can see that although Goodman Brown's faith is assumed to represent a reflection of the purity of hers, Faith stands as more than a simple allegory for Brown's religious faith. She represents the good, the bad, and the temptation within ourselves that we must inevitably deal with when it comes to our beliefs. Toward the end of the story, when Brown wakes up back in his home, Faith still seems to trust in everyone and everything. Brown, on the other hand, cannot do the same. After seeing so many people in the forest with him, Brown can no longer trust what he thinks to be correct, forever damaging his faith in humanity. Hawthorne alludes to a larger meaning of faithfulness in humanity in his story by using Faith to show readers how humans are individualistic beings who, while each living by their own faith, are all united by the fact that the human race is constantly tempted by curiosity. Through his writing, Hawthorne explains that while we each create our own interpretations of faith, it is natural for humanity to give into our curious, impulsive sides.

Works Cited

1. Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "Young Goodman Brown." Mosses from an Old Manse, edited by Jack
2. Lynch, vol. 1, 1846, par. 1-69. andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Texts/younggoodmanbrown.html