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The Carnal Sins of Young Goodman Brown

In the very first sentence of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story *Young Goodman Brown*, Goodman Brown exchanges a "parting kiss with his young wife" (1). And this kiss, in all its seeming innocence, both introduces and betrays an undercurrent of eroticism in Hawthorne's text. Sex is an intriguing and often taboo topic, and must have been as dangerously compelling a subject in the fledgling Americas. For centuries, dominant religious factions in England glorified celibacy and virginity over the "necessary sin" of marital relations. Such heavy doctrines are slow to dissolve, even amongst dissenters. Whether Hawthorne intentionally imbued *Young Goodman Brown* with lustful resonances is unknown and really of no import. The fact remains that this story invokes with its words, images and narrative movement an illicit and depraved perversion of sexuality in marriage where participation in carnal sin consigns Goodman Brown and his young wife Faith to an existence in which "evil must be [their] only happiness" (8).

In spite of her virtues and introductory description as "aptly named," Faith's seductive nature is revealed early in the story as she entreats Goodman Brown not to leave her. Hawthorne writes: "when her lips were very close to his ear" she whispered softly "prithee put off your journey until sunrise and sleep in your own bed to-night." The mention of Faith's lips so close to her husband's ear is tantalizing and her coy plea for his company in their bed even more so. What newlywed husband would not abandon every enterprise to sleep at home with so sweet and coquettish an "angel on earth" as his young wife (1)? Goodman Brown, it seems, is a rare man to turn from these temptations and set off into the woods, but he is far from steadfast in his decision. While on the one hand it seems that Goodman Brown walks away from the sinful allure

of his own bed, his evasion of sin itself is only momentary and futile. As Hawthorne reveals, sinful inclinations will always win-out and can only be thwarted temporarily.

The sin Hawthorne names overtly in *Young Goodman Brown* is not actually sexual in nature. This text, taken at face value, is about a young man who leaves his wife at sunset to be initiated into a congregation of witches and devil-worshippers, only to find that she too is in attendance as an initiate. And yet, even the integrity of the narrative that Hawthorne himself provides is called into question by the images of dreams that bookend this text. At the outset of the story, Faith begs Goodman Brown to stay home because “a lone woman is troubled with such dreams,” and at the end of the text, the narrator raises a startling query: “Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch meeting?” (1, 9). With the potential invalidity of the story’s events both foreshadowed by Faith and questioned outright by the narrator of the tale at its end, *Young Goodman Brown* can be understood as a text porous enough to yield many interpretations; whether a dream or not, the language and imagery of Goodman Brown’s expedition through the woods and his experience at the gathering within hint at a sinful journey between the sheets every bit as much as one between the trunks of maple trees.

In the woods, Goodman Brown meets a strange old man “bearing a considerable resemblance to him.” Over the course of their walk this man leads and encourages Goodman Brown onward, even as Goodman Brown’s misgivings make him hesitant. An erotic reading of this old man reveals him to be mouthpiece of Goodman Brown’s urges and desires, not the least because he and Goodman Brown bear such a striking resemblance. In the presence of this elderly image of himself Goodman Brown has no control over the compulsions of his body and even as he exclaims “Too far! Too far!” he is all the while “unconsciously resuming his walk.” Thus

Goodman Brown's body aligns with his desires as voiced by the old man even while his thoughts tell him to turn back. Aside from his similarity to Goodman Brown, Hawthorne writes "the only thing about [the old man] that could be fixed upon as remarkable was his staff" (2). And emphasis on a staff that is "like a living serpent," "assume[s] life" and acts as Goodman Brown's "help" or more aptly, guide, brings up strong associations with the symbol of an erect phallus (2, 4). Thus poor Goodman Brown stumbles through a dark forest of lust with only his desires and his loins to guide him, futilely resisting the urges of his body as he is drawn ever onward toward ultimate sin.

When Goodman Brown finds Faith's trademark pink ribbon in the woods, he suspects that she too has succumbed to the temptations of sin and he resists his impulses no more. Beyond simply signifying Faith's presence in the woods, from an erotic angle, Faith's pink ribbon is the only item of her clothing detailed thoroughly in this story and its removal eradicates any lingering barriers between herself and her new husband, signaling her wanton willingness to sin alongside him. With this wonderful and terrible invitation delivered by Faith's pink ribbon, Goodman Brown rushes "onward with the instinct that guides mortal man to evil," brandishing the old man's staff with "frenzied gestures" (6). And it is in this undeniably lustful and impassioned manner that Goodman Brown advances toward the demeritorious witches gathering in the woods.

The vocabulary and themes Hawthorne employs in this climactic forest gathering scene are highly suggestive to the point of producing a reading of this passage not as an instance of organized devil-worship, but as a sinful coupling between man and wife. Among the "quivering" congregants are "wives of honored husbands, and widows...and fair young girls, who tremble lest their mothers should espy them" along with "church members of Salem village famous for

their especial sanctity” and “men of dissolute lives and women of spotted fame.” In short, everyone—no matter their spiritual devotion or position in life—has been drawn to this physical place of sin and, metaphorically, the carnal place of sin where Goodman Brown and his wife Faith find themselves on this dark and dreadful evening. Even the hymn sung at the meeting is like “pious love, but joined to words which expressed all that [human] nature can conceive of sin” in the same way that, for the purposes of an erotic interpretation, sexual relations might be confused with “pious love” but are in fact inextricably linked to sin (7). Goodman Brown has “no power to retreat one step, nor resist, even in thought” as he is drawn toward a stone altar at the center of the gathering where again his bodily impulses overpower his better judgment (8). At this crude stone altar a dark figure tells of the secret and lascivious deeds of the congregants in a speech littered with the language of erotic sin. Vocabulary such as “wanton words,” “bosom,” “infant’s funeral,” “bedchamber,” “blood spot,” “penetrate,” “the deep mystery of sin,” and “deed,” used in regard to the witches and devil-worshippers in attendance, keep the erotic undercurrents of this gathering strong with their sexual connotations, even as these words also further the narrative at its most basic level. And, in a sentence that could just as easily be torn from the amorous pages of a sin-themed romance novel, Hawthorne writes: “by the blaze of the hell-kindled torches, the wretched man beheld his Faith, and the wife her husband, trembling before that unhallowed altar” (8). This sentence reads almost as the precarious and lustful moment before lovemaking, as a dark figure welcomes husband and wife to the “communion of [their] race” (8). In this instant of sin, Goodman Brown and his wife Faith “[shudder] alike at what they disclosed and what they saw,” presumably the other’s sin, or in context of this extended sexual metaphor, the other naked, wanton and sinning; a partaker of sensual pleasure, a subscriber to the congregational doctrine “evil must be your only happiness” (9, 8).

The consequences of Goodman Brown's sin are made very clear in the closing paragraphs of the story. In the wake of his sinful escapades Goodman Brown becomes a "stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man." If his journey through the forest, his hesitation, his compulsion and his ultimate communion with Faith is taken as a metaphor for a psychological journey through his own bedroom, the conclusion that must be drawn is that a young married couple's fornication is so strong a sin as to irrevocably change Goodman Brown for the worse. Hawthorne adds of this poor husband that "on the Sabbath day, when the congregation were singing a holy psalm, he could not listen because an anthem of sin rushed loudly upon his ear and drowned all the blessed strain" (9). This suggests that once one has knowledge of sin, perhaps particularly the carnal knowledge of sexuality, desire for this sort of pleasure obscures any and all holiness. In fact, just as *Young Goodman Brown* opened with a kiss, it closes with a perversion of marital relations in which "often waking suddenly at midnight," Goodman Brown "shrank from the bosom of Faith" being so afraid of his own carnal sins as to recoil from the wife he once addressed fondly and significantly as "my love and my Faith" (9, 1).