

In Denial of Young Good-bad-man Brown  
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The Proairetic Code

“Young Goodman Brown” is the story of a young man’s secretive overnight journey into the forest of his own evil nature and his return at sunrise, a changed man. Along the way he encounters multiple opportunities to make choices. Each of the decision points outlined in the Proairetic Code (and listed below) illustrate the impact of others’ choices and behaviors on him as well as the cumulative impact of his own choices. Something is so seductive that he chooses to leave Faith alone. He refuses the staff offered him by the devil, but he does so with self-righteous affirmation of his “scruples” (294). He struggles to reconcile how is it that so many people he has revered, have in some manner communed with the devil (his father, grandfather, Goody Cloyse, Deacon Gookin, the minister, Faith). Each time he attempts to turn back, he lapses into a self-righteous pride wherein he congratulates himself for the clear conscience he will have. One by one his role models are dethroned in his estimation. He not only doubts them now but he begins to doubt God. With the loss of Faith (faith), he no longer resists the devil and proceeds in haste to commune with him. At the point that he realizes his “loathful brotherhood by the sympathy of all that was wicked in his heart,” he loses his ability to resist and steps forward as a convert (300). He is not completely sure that he is not leaving Faith behind. So many of his decisions are self-aggrandizing, rather than, self-sacrificing. At the very last moment, he resists the devil and encourages Faith to do so as well. Finally he demonstrates his caring for her, and relying on a power greater than himself, he is saved. (See Appendix A for a more in depth discussion of each decision point.)

The Hermeneutic Code (Code Of Puzzles)

The initial mystery or gap in the narrative is the purpose of Young Goodman Brown's journey. We wonder what is so urgent that he must travel at night and on this particular night. What specifically enticed him to keep an appointment with the devil? A second mystery is Faith's plea that he delay his leaving until sunrise. These gaps are resolved when we learn that Goodman Brown is on a journey to commune with the devil, but we do not learn that Faith is on the same journey until they meet at the altar. We never learn what specific enticement lured him into the forest. One gap that is not fully resolved is whether or not Faith escapes the baptism by the devil. When she runs to meet him upon his return, she is wearing her cap with the pink ribbons, signifying her innocence. However she, like Young Goodman Brown, also came close enough to the fire to be forever changed by her newfound awareness of evil. It seems unlikely that she escaped with her innocence. Perhaps the pink ribbons are the author's ironic stab at the hypocrisy of the Puritans. We don't know and perhaps that is the point. We often don't know the deepest recesses of another's heart. Another significant gap not fully resolved is whether Goodman Brown actually undertook the journey or dreamed it. We do know, whether an actual experience with the supernatural or a dream, he was forever changed. Finally, the most significant gap that is not resolved is whether he made the "right" choice by refusing to be baptized by the devil. On the face of it, he did as he was immediately transported to calm and solitude. But why does he go on to live an isolated, embittered life? Did he not escape? What damage has been done? Is something left unfinished? These questions highlight the major gap of the text. (See Symbolic Code and Overview for further discussion.)

The third person narrator initially appears to be neutral, recounting the actions and dialogue of Faith, Young Goodman Brown, and the devil. Midway through the journey, however, he begins to narrate at times from the point of view of Goodman Brown, describing his unspoken thoughts and feelings. However, he remains objective so as to clearly differentiate between Goodman Brown's perceptions and alternate realities – "Had Goodman Brown . . . only dreamed a wild

dream of a witch-meeting?” (302). There is a hint of irony in his tone in the two paragraphs when he describes Young Goodman Brown - so “distrustful,” judgmental, “stern,” “sad,” fearful, and distant. Yet he is the one who saved himself from baptism by the devil. Or did he? The ironic tone at the end enhances the allegory by revealing the damage wreaked by the sin of self-righteousness.

### The Cultural (Referential) Code

The narrative is set in a village called Salem. Although it is not specifically referenced as Salem, Massachusetts, the devil references Young Goodman Brown’s Puritan heritage with his grandfather who “lashed a Quaker woman so smartly through the streets of Salem,” an allusion to the witch hunts, and his father who torched an Indian Village (295). The Puritan religious movement began as an effort toward increased purity and devotion to God. However, more fanatical adherents focused on a strict sense of morality and a willingness to prosecute and persecute any possible sin or variation from expected behaviors. The language of Young Goodman Brown illustrates the cultural code of the Puritans in the mid-1800s – “I have scruples, touching the matter thou wot’st of”(294). The context heightens the sense of incredulity and betrayal that Young Goodman Brown feels as he learns that so many of those he has admired are capable of such evil.

### The Connotative Code (Semic Code)

Those readers grappling with their own moral choices are most likely to respond to the text. Light and dark figure as prominent symbols. The journey begins at sunset and lasts into the night; darkness here signifies a confrontation with evil. Faith intuitively feels that there is something significant about this particular night “of all nights in the year” (293). Young Goodman Brown repeats the phrase, “. . . of all nights in the year . . . my journey . . . must needs be done’twixt now and sunrise” (293). He has an appointment on this night and whatever must be encountered must be done in the dark, before the light. Light as an image is corrupted by the devil at the altar in the forest. This light is the rising and falling “lurid light” given off by the burning pine trees and blazing foliage (301). The natural light of the sky and stars signify the presence of God. After he overhears the deacon and

minister on their way to the meeting in the forest, he doubts the existence of heaven. But when he sees “the blue arch, and the stars brightening in it” he is fortified to “stand firm against the devil” (298).

The forest is used with darkness to signify the evil in nature, in this case, man’s human nature – “a dreary road, darkened by all the gloomiest tress of the forest” (294). The further Young Goodman Brown travels into the forest, the darker it becomes. By the time he overhears the conversation between his esteemed deacon and minister, “the depth of gloom at that particular spot” prevents him from seeing either the “travelers nor their steeds” and he is unable to “discern so much as a shadow” (295). As they pass on, the forest is described as a place “where no church had ever been gathered, or solitary Christian prayed. . . a heathen wilderness” (296). Believing that he has lost Faith (faith), Young Goodman Brown continues his journey to commune with the devil and finds “the road . . . wilder and drearier and more faintly traced, and vanished at length, leaving him in the heart of the dark wilderness . . . The whole forest was peopled with frightful sounds- the creaking of the trees, the howling of wild beasts, and the yell of Indians . . .”(299).

The names of the characters are symbolic of their functions in the allegory. Goodman (good man) Brown (common or everyman) is married to Faith. She represents his own faith to which he has made a commitment and which he counts on to deliver him from evil – “I’ll cling to her skirts and follow her to Heaven” (294).

The pink ribbons of Faith’s cap signify faith’s innocence. They appear at three points in story – when she is first introduced (here they are mentioned three times), when they flutter to the ground in the forest after he hears her voice and scream, and when she runs to him after he returns to the village at sunset. When he sees the ribbon in the forest, it serves as confirmation that indeed she has been lured or captured by the devil’s followers. When we see them at the end of the story, the meaning is unclear. (See previous discussion of The Hermeneutic Code.)

The devil’s walking stick signifies the serpent and is the only thing about his appearance in the wood that is unusual. It provides a clue to his true identity.

Music is used to signify yet another corruption, that of a tool of worship, the hymn. When Goodman Brown approaches the altar to the devil, he hears a familiar hymn that has been appropriated by the demons so that all the “sounds of the . . . wilderness [are] pealing in awful harmony together” and are joined by his own cry in unison with them (299). A second verse of the hymn is sung when all have arrived, “Joined to words which expressed all that our nature can conceive of sin, and darkly hinted at far more” (300). The hymn here signifies the corruption of the saints by the devil as they sing, “according with the voice of guilt man in homage to the prince of all” (300).

### The Symbolic Code

Numerous binaries exist in the text - the individual vs. the multitude, the natural man vs. the religious man, innocence vs. guilt, dark vs. light, good vs. evil. Young Goodman Brown, though alone in the forest, suspicions that “with lonely footsteps he may yet be passing through an unseen multitude” (294). He is not alone in his confrontation with the devil or with evil. The narrator does not privilege one over the other but values the tension between them – a realization of commonalities with others but the responsibility for individual choice within that context.

A second opposition is that between the natural man and the religious man. The narrative is peppered with references to religious terms and practices.<sup>1</sup> Despite this, however, Young Goodman Brown finds himself increasingly in unison with his natural self as he traverses deeper into the wild forest, eventually joining in the chorus of “sounds . . . pealing in awful harmony together. . . his cry . . . lost to his own ear, by its unison with the cry of the desert” (299). By the time he steps forth as a prospective convert before the congregation, he feels “a loathful brotherhood by the sympathy of all that was wicked in his heart” (300). The narrative appears to privilege the natural man. With the exception of Young Goodman Brown, all of his religious role models and mentors have joined the community of the devil.

<sup>1</sup> Christians, martyrs, Puritans, Quakers, prayer, deacons, churches, communion wine, minister, Sabbath-day, deacon, worship, Faith, ordination, ecclesiastical council, heaven, saints and sinners, hymns, choir, altar, pulpit, congregation, elders, guilt, evil, baptism, catechisms, minister, sermons, blessing, holy psalm, blasphemer

A third opposition in the text is innocence vs. guilt. Faith with her pink ribbons signifies innocence but it is not at all clear that her innocence survives. Young Goodman Brown's innocence does not survive, having now recognized the propensity toward evil in his own heart and in others. He rejected the devil's baptism, yet he is guilty and his faith is permanently damaged. In this way the text privileges guilt over innocence, an unexpected resolution since he makes the "right" choice.

A fourth opposition in the text is dark vs. light. Actually there are few references to light in the text – the stars in the blue sky, the "lurid light" at the devil's altar (301), the return to the village at sunrise. There are multiple references to darkness and with the exception of the last two paragraphs, the entire narrative takes place in the dark. The text devotes itself to an explication of the processes, arguments, rationalizations, and consequences of a seduction into "the dark side" of our human natures.

The primary opposition in the text is that of good vs. evil as the entire narrative revolves around whether Young Goodman Brown ultimately will choose his faith or communion with the devil. The narrator appears to value the choice of good over evil in his negative depiction of the natural, the darkness, and the guilty. However the unhappy outcome of Young Goodman Brown's choice for Heaven reveals that something is wrong. The narrator's careful description of the changes in his attitude and in his relationships with everyone he previously trusted accentuates the gap. One wonders then if he has made the wrong choice, if he has failed some important spiritual test, though ostensibly he made the "right" choice. The progression of events illustrates his increasing awareness of evil, the loss of his innocence, and the loss of his Faith (faith). Together, a good man and faith can generate enough hope to rescue them from communion with the devil. Separated, life becomes a series of idealizations and devaluations, resulting in a heightened recognition of evil, an inability to trust, a bitterness, and loss of joy.

### Overview

The Proairetic code emphasizes the theme of individual choice, vulnerability to evil, the

conflict regarding completing the journey or turning back, holding onto faith or losing it, and a mystery regarding “right” choices. The gaps in the Hermeneutic Code highlight the secrecy inherent in the seduction of both Goodman and Faith. We don’t know what so strongly enticed them to risk all that they had to meet the devil in the forest. The suspense drives the plot which centers around whether they will or will not join the community worshipping the devil. We never know what choice she made. And the choice he made did not result in any peace or resolution. The Proairetic Code and the Hermeneutic Code reinforce each other. The Cultural Code works with the Proairetic Code to heighten the Hermeneutic Code in two ways. First, the Puritan notion of good and evil are revealed by the plot to be more than theoretical concepts but also propensities contained within each of us. Second, the simple dichotomies outlined in the Cultural Code are no longer successful in the plot and reinforce the mystery that something more complex begs attention. The Semic Code reinforces the notion that the journey into wildness or nature, into the forest or dark, is necessary and must take place before one can see the light. The Symbolic Code enlarges the vision from a choice of *either* good *or* evil to a recognition of *both* good *and* evil. or the unity of the two within the same person. All of the binaries in the text, the individual vs. the multitude, the natural man vs. the religious man, innocence vs. guilt, dark vs. light, good vs. evil – are facets of a challenge to each of us to integrate these oppositions. The Symbolic Code introduces a more complex task of moral development, one which Young Goodman Brown has not yet attained - the acceptance of his own propensity for evil and the responsibility to manage those choices. This is the dominant message of the text.

My own position on these value conflicts are similar to those intimated by Hawthorne. A person who does not realize his commonality with the multitudes or own his natural self is a dangerous person. Blinded by pride, he is comfortable in denial until he suffers some impulse breakthrough that reveals the depth of his depravity. The narrative reveals that a religion of rules and legalism are never enough to control the natural man. Hawthorne’s narrative unexpectedly

privileges the propensity toward evil in the natural man and in the multitudes, especially given the context of the Puritan tradition. Young Goodman Brown recognizes his guilt but the narrative suggests that something is not resolved. Because he has not been able to accept the propensity toward evil in himself, he is not able to accept it in others. He is unable to recognize that each of us is separated from evil only by a hairsbreadth of choice. Young Goodman Brown does not take the next step, an acceptance of his propensity toward evil and his need for God moment by moment. He reaches out to Heaven in terror and he is saved – this time. Rather than feel gratitude, however, and mercy toward his fellow sinners, his faith is permanently damaged because he remains stuck in fear, judgmentalism and self-righteousness. He is no longer innocent, but he cannot move beyond his guilt to do good. He will never be able to do this until he can accept that he is Young Good-bad-man Brown.

## In-depth Explication of the Proairetic Code

Each of the decision points outline in the Proairetic Code illustrate the impact of others' choices and behaviors on him as well as the cumulative impact of his own choices. Faith begs him to stay with her, revealing that she is troubled by her dreams and thoughts and "that she's afraid of herself sometimes" (293). But he leaves her to go on his journey. This is Decision #1 when he leaves her unprotected and begins the journey that will have him dialoguing with the devil.

The devil takes many forms in the story, beginning with his first appearance in the forest in the form of an older man, of the "same rank" as Goodman Brown and "bearing a considerable resemblance to him" (294). His actions indicate that he knows how to make himself look normal, not too off-putting, and yet attractive with "an indescribable air of one who knew the world" (294). He is very adept at know how to talk with Young Goodman Brown, promising him that he can turn back any time, all the while seducing him to stay on the path. "Let us walk on, nevertheless, reasoning as we go, and if I convince thee not, thou shalt turn back" (295). And Goodman Brown "unconsciously resum[es] his walk" (295). Another strategy that the Devil uses is to systematically destroy his role models. He tells Goodman Brown that he as been intimately acquainted with his father whom he helped to torch an Indian village and his grandfather whom he helped to lash a Quaker woman in Salem (295). He claims to have relationships with many important men in power and appears to have relationships with Goodman Brown's spiritual advisors. He is particularly adept at knowing what arguments are most likely to appeal to Goodman Brown – "discoursing so aptly that his arguments seemed rather to spring up in the bosom of his auditor, than to be suggested by himself" (294-294). How is it that the devil knew exactly which people or what images (blue sky and stars) to target to discourage Young Goodman Brown and what specific items in his internal dialogue to pinpoint in order to cajole or reason with him?

Conflict centers around whether he will choose to complete the journey or turn back, whether he will hold onto his faith or lose it. Decision #2 comes at the point the Devil invites him to take his staff. He refuses, stating that he will now turn back – “having kept covenant by meeting thee here, it is my purpose now to return whence I came (294). But he continues the dialogue. Decision #3 is the decision to believe the stories he is told about his father and his grandfather. He has previously idealized them – “We have been a race of honest men and good Christians” and “We are a people of prayer, and good works to boot, and abide no such wickedness” (295). While the stories may be true, they may not be. This does not seem to occur to Goodman Brown. Goodman Brown next eavesdrops on a conversation between Goody Cloyse who is his spiritual mentor and the Devil. She appears to be a witch (296). He does not question whether this is real or an illusion but he reaches another point at which he tries to set a limit, to stop the progression. He sits down on a stump and refuses to go further. “What if a wretched old woman do choose to go to the devil, when I thought she was going to heaven; is that any reason why I should quit my dear Faith (faith) and go after her?” (297). He feels so confident in his ability to stick to this decision (Decision #4) that he begins to applaud himself for the clear conscience he will have when he next encounters the deacon, his pastor, and Faith. No sooner does he begin to revel in this self-righteousness than the Devil has him overhear a conversation between the esteemed Deacon and the minister who are on their way to the convocation in the forest with the devil! Young Goodman Brown nearly faints, “over-burthened with the heavy sickness of his heart” (298). At this point nearly everyone he has idealized and trusted has been devalued. He “looked up to the sky, doubting whether there really was a heaven above him” (298) but seeing the sky and stars, he affirms again his decision (#5) .“With Heaven above and Faith below, I will yet stand firm against the devil!” (298). Realizing that he is fortified by the sky and stars, the devil then sends a “black mass of cloud” to block his view and in the cloud he hears familiar voices that he recognizes from Salem village, both “pious and ungodly” and among them the voice and scream of his own dear Faith (298). Yet again the devil has

gone directly to the very spot that anchors him to his faith – the view of the sky and Faith.

Overtaken by grief, Young Goodman Brown now makes an emotional and fateful decision (#6).

“My Faith is gone! . . . There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name. Come, devil; for to thee is this world given” (298). He is “maddened with despair” and becomes “himself the chief horror of the scene,” inviting the evil spirits to fear him, “brandishing his staff with frenzied gestures,” blaspheming, laughing demonically (299). Once he arrives at the meeting place, he is astonished to find present fellow church members “famous for their especial sanctity” along with the deacon and his pastor. But with the “grave, respectable, and pious people” are the wicked “given over to all mean and filthy vice” along with Indian priests (300). All are members of the devil’s congregation, signifying the propensity toward evil in all humans. Initially he does not see Faith, but when asked to come forth as a convert, he responds. This is Decision#7 and he makes it, not knowing for certain whether he is leaving Faith behind. At this point, he feels “a loathful brotherhood by the sympathy of all that was wicked in his heart” and he loses his ability to resist. The devil invites him along with the veiled female figure beside him to “the communion of your race, . . . your nature and your destiny” (300). The two of them are reminded that all the people they have idealized and whose models caused them to “[shrink] from [their] own sin” are guilty themselves (300). They are promised the ability to “penetrate . . . the deep mystery of sin” (300). The devil then takes away from each of them their last hope, their faith in each other as they recognize each other standing before him as a potential convert.

The crisis is at the moment he and Faith are asked to submit to baptism. Goodman Brown realizes it is his last opportunity to save them and cries out, “Faith! Faith! . . . Look up to Heaven, and resist the Wicked One!” This is his final major decision (#8). The denouement is that he is immediately transported to a “calm night and solitude” (302). We do not know the outcome for Faith, whether she chose God or the devil. We do know that his marriage to her was affected by the events in the forest as he was never able to fully trust Faith or his faith again. On one level it seems a good thing

that he does not allow himself to be baptized into the community by the devil. He appears to have made a choice/decision for God and good. However, his life thereafter does not result in any spiritual development or peace. “A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate, man did he become . . .” (302). He remains throughout his life distrustful, distant, judgmental and bitter. Though Goodman Brown made the “right” choice, it is clear that at some level, he has made the wrong choice. (See Hermeneutic Code for further discussion.)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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