

Leading Students down Dark Paths: How Teachers Talk about Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown"

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How teachers actually talk about literary works with students in the classroom is a subject that deserves our attention as educators, but gathering and making sense of information from classrooms in which a wide range of literary works are discussed by an even wider range of teachers and students would be a daunting task. The extensive collection of written statements by teachers to students at popular internet sites may prove to be a good starting place for investigating how teachers actually talk with students about specific literary works or about literature in general.

An internet site is not the same as a live classroom, of course, and factors such as state and institutional mandates on what must or must not be brought into the classroom (e.g. generally favoring items likely to appear on state tests or generally avoiding the topics of sexuality and religion) may structure face-to-face discussions differently than relatively anonymous discussions taking part online. Nevertheless, an analysis of teachers' statements to students at a selected internet site may provide general insights that might later be compared to a similar analysis of live classroom discussions or, more immediately, that might be used by teachers themselves to reflect on and enrich their own reading and teaching practices.

This essay uses grounded theory, a method of qualitative research in the social sciences, to analyze the full set of 198 answers posted by 46 teachers in the "Question & Answer" forum at eNotes.com over a four-year period (from February 21, 2007 to April 14, 2011) in response to students' questions on Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown." The average teacher taking part in this "Question &

Answer" forum works at the 11th-grade, 12th-grade, or junior-college level (7 teachers worked at lower levels, and 6 teachers worked at higher levels or did not clearly identify the level of their students) and has posted four or more answers to the forum. The teachers' answers tend to be organized around a central idea, to have one or more developed paragraphs, and to be some 200 words in length.

Because the focus of this essay is on how teachers talk to students about Hawthorne's short story, the student-posted questions themselves are not examined here. However, it is worth noting that many of the questions read as if they, too, have been written by teachers. The questions sometimes consist of a number of closely-related items, moving from reading comprehension to open-ended interpretation, as seen, for example, in this question: "In the [story] 'Young Goodman Brown' how does Goodman Brown react to his wife and others upon his return to Salem? Why? Is he justified in acting this way?" Similarly, the questions occasionally end in tell-tale phrases such as "...with examples cited" or "Use evidence from the story to demonstrate." If the questions themselves have indeed been crafted by teachers for student use as study questions or as writing prompts and if other teachers are answering these same questions, then the "Question & Answer" forum may be seen as a particularly reliable source of information – as an echo chamber of sorts – on what teachers say when they talk with students about Hawthorne's story.

Rather than use the results of this grounded theory analysis to determine to what extent the answers by all 46 teachers are supported by Hawthorne's text and demonstrate a familiarity with various theoretical approaches to literature (see James Kelley's study of teachers' statements on *To Kill a Mockingbird* for a discussion along those lines), this essay seeks to identify the benefits to be gained by engaging the full range of answers presented by the teachers. Reviewing the full range of

statements by teachers to students, noting where they sometimes conflict and sometimes agree, may help illustrate for teachers and students alike the pleasure of discussion, the tolerance for diverse opinions and unresolved ambiguity, and the wide range of interpretations open to readers of the story.

Coding the data

Grounded theory is a method for analyzing a large number of text passages or other items of information. In a process called "coding," the researcher reads each passage closely, marking the key words, notable phrases, and small ideas – called "incidents" – that appear in the passage. The incidents identified in one passage are grouped alongside related incidents in other passages into general categories called "concepts." These concepts are then grouped or arranged into hierarchies to allow for the identification of one or more "themes" that can account for a wide range of concerns, approaches, and ideas that are present in the full set of passages under examination. The researcher sets out to uncover the answer to the general, open-ended research question – here, the question is what teachers say when talking to students about "Young Goodman Brown" – by building the answer from the ground up, basing the generalizations and conclusions on a wide range of specific incidents in concrete data.

Subjectivity plays a role in the grounded theory method, of course, and one strength of grounded theory is that it prompts the researcher to ask innovative questions and to develop unique approaches to the material with the goal of "creat[ing] new order out of the old" (Strauss and Corbin 27). The data should not be forced to fit a preconceived pattern: the researcher should consider everything encountered in the course of the study, reject nothing outright, reflect on preexisting biases, and remain

willing to reconsider the manner in which she or he has been organizing and interpreting the data.

Even when using a simplified grounded theory approach, one more in line with Barney Glaser's open approach than with Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin's highly structured approach, the researcher will find the coding process to be labor-intensive and recursive. The researcher usually reads and codes the entire sample of data more than once, as recommended by Robert C. Bogdan and Sari K. Biklen, and, following what is called the constant comparative method, continuously reconsiders the significance of individual pieces of data as the researcher moves back and forth through the full set of passages. The following four sample answers help illustrate the coding process and the constant comparative method.

At 220 words, the first sample answer was posted by a 12th-grade teacher and is just slightly longer than the average post. The answer reads:

I think Brown has been forced to accept the dual nature of humans. Prior to his little venture into the woods with Satan himself, Brown believes, as a devout Puritan, he is predestined for heaven. He states that once he returns to faith he will cling to her skirts and follow her to heaven. However, as soon as he enters the woods he begins to see that the people around him, who Brown thinks are virtuous, may not be so great. For example, he learns that the devil knew his father and grandfather. He also learns that three of the people he respects most, Goody Cloyse, Deacon Gookin, and the minister are also well acquainted with the devil. He never is able to reconcile this and that is why he dies a bitter man. It is interesting to note that Brown never accepts the duality of sin in himself. He is able to see the sinful nature in others, but does he see it in himself? Just look how easily he gets lured deeper into the forest, despite

his declarations to turn back. Eventually, he is even driven to rage and tear through the woods so that he is the most frightening thing in it. Maybe if Brown had been able to recognize his own sins, he might have been able to accept the sins of others and lived a happier life. (teacherscribe, Oct. 31, 2007)

As with many of the answers, this answer contains a range of incidents, not all of which may be apparent until a number of answers by other teachers have been read and compared to this one. The answer opens with "I think," a qualifier that may indicate openness to other views or interpretations. The word "learn" appears twice, and the answer has much to say about the ability or inability of a person to integrate ("to reconcile") new information into one's preexisting world view. The answer ends with speculation ("Maybe if Brown had been able to recognize...") that points to an alternate ending to the story, one of integration or reconciliation (recognizing "the dual nature of humans" and "the duality") rather than one of religious despair or existential angst. The phrase "Brown believes, as a devout Puritan..." references a particular Christian belief system. Finally, the word "little" in the phrase "Prior to Brown's little venture into the woods with Satan himself" is ironic given the content of the full answer; that "little venture," so this answer argues, is transformative for the title character in Hawthorne's short story. Thus, this answer may be coded as including incidents that can be tentatively grouped under the concepts *Personal interpretation*, *Alternate outcomes*, *Education (of YGB, failed)*, *Human nature (duality)*, *Puritan beliefs*, and *Irony*.

The second sample answer, at 121 words, is below average length and was posted by a community college teacher:

To me, Hawthorne is trying to tell us something that he thinks is important about human nature and about how we deal with it. In the story, he is trying to show that human nature has an evil side to it. I

think this is what is happening with Brown -- it is why he has to go with the Devil at least once. But once you realize that humans have an evil side, how do you react? Brown reacts by becoming completely alienated from people. He loses all trust and faith in humanity. I believe Hawthorne is saying that we need to realize people are partly evil, but we can't let that ruin our lives or our view of humanity. (pohnpei397, Feb. 23, 2010)

This answer includes a number of incidents that can be grouped under the previously established concepts: *Personal interpretation* ("To me..." and "I think..."); *Education (of YGB, failed)* and *Education (of the reader)* ("But once you realize ..., how do you react? Brown reacts by..."); *Human nature (duality)* ("humans have an evil side"); and *Alternate outcomes* (Brown could have experienced a different outcome, as must we: "we can't let that ruin our lives or our view of humanity"). Incidents of *Irony* are not clearly present. Instead, this answer may present two new concepts: *Author's purpose* and *Moral* (both expressed in the phrases "Hawthorne is trying to tell us something" and "Hawthorne is saying that...").

A third sample answer, more than twice the length of the average and posted by a teacher working at the first-year college level, has much to say about the story's description of Brown's allegedly righteous ancestors and ends with the statement:

Hawthorne, in his castigation of the precepts of Puritanism, implies the Biblical allusion of faith not being enough to save a person... Here the Calvinist precept of "Once saved, always saved" is questioned by Hawthorne who was chagrined by the hypocrisy of the Puritans who punished others, but hid their own "secret sins." (mwestwood, Oct. 19, 2009)

The full answer does not contain markers of *Personal interpretation*, but this excerpt contains incidents that may fall under the concepts *Puritan beliefs (criticized)*, *Hypocrisy*, and *Author's purpose*, among others.

A fourth and final sample answer (141 words) comes from a high school teacher and administrator:

I don't think the story is about Puritanism; it's a coming of age story for a young man who, despite being supported and sheltered by his "faith/Faith" for years, must journey into the world of imperfection/sin. After all, we are never sure that anything in the story happened, other than the fact that he entered the forest one evening and woke up there in the morning. The story is about how he reacts to what he thinks he knows about the people of his village. He finds out that they are not as perfect as he always thought they were (or so it seems IF it weren't all a dream) and is destroyed by their failure to live up to his ideal of them. I think Brown would have been destroyed by this "knowledge" in a Puritan society or any society. (timbrady, Nov. 28, 2008)

As with two of the previous answers, this post begins with a qualifier ("I don't think") and presents incidents that fit under the previously established concept of *Education* ("a coming of age story"). However, this answer also counters an idea in the previous answer – grouped under *Puritan beliefs (criticized)* – with a new idea of *Universal beliefs* ("in a Puritan society or any society"). Finally, this sample answer presents two incidents that will need to be grouped under new concepts.

The first new concept is *Allegory*, which is reflected in the teacher's summary of Hawthorne's story on a wholly allegorical rather than literal level: "a young man who, despite being supported and sheltered by his 'faith/Faith' for years, must journey into the world of imperfection/sin." By contrast, a literal summary that ignores the language of ambiguity in the

story might read: "Brown leaves behind his wife Faith to keep a nocturnal appointment with an older man in the forest. Led down the forest path by the man, he witnesses Goody Cloyse, who taught him his catechism, and two other respected members of his village on their way to a black mass. Even Faith is present at the service. He calls out to his wife to 'resist the wicked one' and wakes up the next morning unsure if what he witnessed the night before has truly transpired. The rest of his life is full of suspicion and gloom." The second new concept introduced in this final sample answer is *Ambiguity*, reflected in the statement "we are never sure that anything in the story happened, other than the fact that..." *Ambiguity* is the expression of multiple, often conflicting meanings at once. Once the entire set of teachers' answers has been read and reread, these newly identified concepts of *Allegory* and *Ambiguity* are found to be strongly represented across the full range of teachers' answers and thus are elevated to the status of themes.

Discussing the three themes

Coding the full set of answers has revealed three themes that can be discussed meaningfully together and that help explain how teachers at this selected internet site talk to students about Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown." In answering the student questions, the 46 teachers tend again and again (but not always in identical ways) to talk about how "Young Goodman Brown" is allegorical in meaning yet marked by an ambiguity that, on the whole, the teachers view as irrelevant to the story's overall didactic message. A third item treated here as a theme is the attention given to (and the wide range of disagreement over) the symbolism of Faith's pink ribbons. Taken together, these three themes may illustrate the teachers' various and often contradictory attempts to arrive at a single, clear interpretation of the short story "Young Goodman Brown," to provide students with a sort of catechism of what the story

really means. At the same time, however, many of the teachers' answers include qualifiers such as "I think," highlighting an awareness that what they present is personal interpretation, not an authoritative reading. Taken as a full set, the teachers' 198 answers may perhaps most productively be viewed as demonstrating a joy in the free exchange of ideas, an appreciation of uncertainty, and a rejection of the need to arrive at a definitive reading of the story.

1. Allegory in "Young Goodman Brown": What does the story mean on a non-literal level? What does Hawthorne want us to learn from it?

In answering student questions about "Young Goodman Brown," the teachers frequently comment on the allegorical nature of the story and explain how specific elements in the story – including the characters' names and the protagonist's nocturnal trip into the forest – represent abstract concepts. The character Faith is regularly said to represent religious faith, and teachers frequently comment on what the reader can learn from the story. For example, gbeatty writes: "the path Brown walks through the woods is like the path we all walk through life. It is dark, twisted, and filled with threats and temptations" (April 17, 2008). Similarly, the strange necessity that drives Brown to leave both wife and home behind to journey alone into the forest at night is often read as the human need to "journey into the world of imperfection/sin" (timbrady, Nov. 28, 2008) or, as other teachers put it, to "make the visit to the woods at least once" (accessteacher, Dec. 10, 2010) or to "go with the Devil at least once" (pohnpei, Feb. 23, 2010).

The teachers' discussions of allegory in "Young Goodman Brown" often rely on the idea of clear, decipherable meaning of the story. An allegory only succeeds in arriving at its goal – to educate its audience through a palatable, if not entertaining tale – if its symbolism is easily deciphered and the non-literal meaning of the story as a whole is clear to

the audience. Thus, on the whole, the individual teachers do not share the opinion of critic Thomas R Moore, who has characterized Hawthorne's works as "purposefully multivalent" and his writing style as "a rhetoric of subversion" (Moore 313). Rather, the teachers seek individually to present clear answers to students' questions about what the story means. The view that clarity can be found in "Young Goodman Brown" is demonstrated in a post that begins with that very word, "clearly," and that discusses the "allegorical significance" in the story at length:

Clearly, the theme of good and evil and the rather porous border that lies between these two states is a key theme of this tale,... *it is clear* that the characters and actions stand for abstract qualities. As Goodman Brown sets off on his journey into the woods, a "fellow-traveller" journeys with him, who *it is clear* is the Devil. The journey into the forest itself has allegorical significance, as *is made clear* when Goodman Brown responds to the invitation of the Devil to go deeper into the woods: "'Too far, too far!' exclaimed the goodman, unconsciously resuming his walk. 'My father never went into the woods on such an errand, nor his father before him. We have been a race of honest men and good Christians since the days of the martyrs; and shall I be the first of the name of Brown that ever took this path and kept-'" *It is clear* then that Goodman Brown is proud and convinced of his own "goodness," as represented by his name, for he, in his own imaginings, at least, is a "good man." *The journey into the woods, therefore, is representative of engaging with evil.* (accessteacher, Oct. 12, 2010; my emphasis)

From the opening word "clearly" and the four uses of the phrase "it is clear" or "is made clear" to the summary of the story's meaning, this answer emphasizes the clarity or transparency of the allegorical meaning in the story. No fewer than 16 of the 46 teachers use the term "allegory" or

"allegorical," and in similar discussions of what various elements in the story represent and of what should be learned from reading the story, many other teachers present allegorical readings even if they do not label them as such. In discussing the particulars of the lesson being taught, however, the teachers frequently disagree. Their answers do not present clear agreement on what the story means.

A number of the teachers view the story, much like *accessteacher*, as a religious allegory that shows, variously, a spiritual journey or failed spiritual quest, a loss of faith, a meditation on the sin of despair, or the story of human engagement with evil. Even when agreeing that the story presents a religious theme, these answers include very different points of emphasis. For example, *bmadnick* writes: "The dark woods come to represent Goodman's own hell because he's torn between his faith and giving in to evil, the struggle which every man must confront" (Feb. 24, 2008). For *rshaffer*, the title character's "spiritual journey into the forest has changed him forever in that he realizes that all mankind possesses evil" (Feb. 8, 2009). Finally, for *herappleness*, the story "teach[es] the reader a lesson on conscience and morals" (Feb. 16, 2010) or "a lesson on the emptiness and loneliness that surges after one has abandoned the ways of God" (Oct. 4, 2010). As a further illustration of the different religious readings, *teacherscribe* and *cldbentley* likewise interpret the story as a religious allegory but argue that Brown holds onto rather than abandons his faith at the story's end. For example, *teacherscribe* writes:

Brown appears to ultimately pass the very test he set out to in the beginning. He does not seem to abandon his faith, for at the very moment when he and Faith are about to take communion into the black mass, he tells her not to give in and to look heavenward. It is at this moment that he passes the test; he proves his faith, though it has been severely shaken. (Nov. 14, 2007)

In three separate answers, cldbentley similarly writes that the title character "maintains his sense of right and wrong, his ethics, and his 'innocence,' each of which is indicative of a true hero. Turning away from wrong and persevering as a moral man who is true to himself is heroic" (Sept. 25, 2009); he "becomes aware of the evil of those around him and the power of its pull, but he refuses to give in to it and returns from his journey wiser and stronger in character" (Oct. 8, 2009); and he "is tempted but does not succumb" (Oct. 29, 2009).

Even in answers that do not use the term "allegory" or "allegorical," many teachers discuss how the story presents a lesson to the reader because it illustrates Brown's failure to "learn" an important lesson, to "grow" into a more mature understanding of the world, or to "understand" an important truth (whether that truth is about himself, his religion, his community, or the human race as a whole). A number of teachers (including gbeatty, lnorton, lynneb, mwestwood, and renelane) focus less explicitly on religious themes. They read the story as, among other things, an allegory illustrating the need to accept the dual nature of humanity, to be humble and avoid overconfidence, or to recognize hypocrisy and intolerance wherever it is found, whether in the Puritan era or our own.

2. Ambiguity in "Young Goodman Brown": Did the events in the story truly happen or did Young Goodman Brown merely dream of the events in the forest? Does it matter?

Perhaps because many of the teachers seek to identify and discuss what they see as the clear allegorical lesson in "Young Goodman Brown," whatever that lesson might be, their answers generally do not include extended examinations of ambiguity in the story. The answers by a few teachers (including ecofan74, lynneb, and mwestwood) demonstrate attentiveness to the language in the story that creates a sense of ambiguity, such as the appearance of the old man's serpent-like staff in

the "uncertain light" of the forest at night or the indistinct voices that Brown thinks that he hears overhead. However, many of the teachers' individual answers seem less tolerant of or less interested in ambiguity. When the teachers reflect on what they see as the main point of ambiguity in "Young Goodman Brown" – whether or not the events in the story actually took place or were dreamed entirely by the title character – they generally conclude that this central ambiguity does not affect the meaning of the story.

Toward the end of Hawthorne's tale, Imetcalf explains, "the narrator asks the most important question of the story: 'Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting?' (or had it all really happened). That is THE question of the story!" However, Imetcalf continues, the answer to this most important question is irrelevant: "what is important to realize is that it doesn't really matter whether it happened or not because that night, real or not, changed Brown into a bitter and haunted man who can now only see and assume the worst in people after thinking he saw them all partaking in an evil scene" (Jan. 5, 2011). A second teacher similarly writes: "What seems most important about the story is the effect that the events – whether dream or actual – have on the protagonist" (sagetrieb, Oct. 1, 2007). A third teacher agrees: "When I teach 'Young Goodman Brown,' ... it really doesn't make much difference to me whether it was a dream or not. The importance is the change that occurs in Brown" (teacherscribe, Oct. 1, 2007). No fewer than 9 other teachers make highly similar assertions. For them, to get at the meaning of the story, it simply "does not matter" whether the events were real or imagined. What matters to them is the change experienced by the main character at the end of the story:

we are unsure whether it is a dream or not. However, what is clear is the way in which Goodman Brown is transformed by his

experiences in the woods for the rest of his life. (accessteacher, Feb. 21, 2011)

Even Goodman Brown was left wondering if it was a dream or not. In the end it doesn't matter. Whether it was a dream or a real experience, Brown could not accept the thought of such evil. (amarang9, Jan. 21, 2011)

Goodman Brown isn't sure that his night in the forest really happened or if he dreamed it. He allows that night, whether real or a nightmare, to change his life forever. (bmadnick, Sept. 15, 2007)

In the end, Brown cannot tell if what he saw was real or a dream, but he loses his faith in mankind, even his wife, and is a changed man from that day forward. (booboosmoosh, Nov. 20, 2010)

[Y]oung Goodman Brown's adventure in the woods (regardless of whether or not it was real or imagined) shakes his faith in himself, his wife, humanity as a whole, and even in his religion. (copelmat, April 14, 2010)

After Goodman Brown awakens in the forest alone he can not tell if what he experienced in the woods with his wife, Faith, and the devil was real or a dream. No matter which it was, he becomes suspicious of everyone. (ladyvols1, Feb. 3, 2009)

We don't know whether what he saw in the forest really happened, but it doesn't matter. He acts as if it does and it ruins his life. (pohnpei397, April 14, 2010)

In the end, it is not clear whether it was a dream or real. It really wouldn't matter, what was once a young, happy man is now bitter and lacking trust or joy. (renelane, October 25, 2007)

I can only suggest that it [reality or dream] is irrelevant; the effect on Brown of what happened is all that matters. (timbrady, Feb. 9, 2008)

Very few teachers suggest that it may indeed matter whether Brown's experiences in the forest were real or imagined. The title character has responded properly if the events truly took place, mwestwood argues, but has reacted poorly if he had only imagined them:

The main ambiguity of "Young Goodman Brown" arises from the question posed by Hawthorne as narrator: "Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting?" If the experience of witnessing the black mass is real, Brown loses faith in the Puritan community because they are hypocrites. However, if he has merely dreamed "a wild dream of a witch-meeting," then his loss of faith is of his own doing; it is because of the depravity of his own soul, his own hypocrisy, and not because of the actions of others. (June 29, 2010)

A second teacher, sullymonster, similarly argues that Brown is himself at fault if he has allowed imagined events to influence his real life: "the scene is too contrived to be real," sullymonster reasons, and because it was likely a dream, "one could fault the protagonist for having such serious doubts about his neighbors. You could also fault him for placing people too high on a pedestal, expecting them to always be pious and true" (Nov. 16, 2007).

In asserting that it does not matter, in the end, whether Brown literally experiences these events or dreams them, the teachers may be

affirming the power of the imagination – and, by extension, the power of creative literature – to affect real-world changes, for better or worse. The two teachers asserting that *does* matter, by contrast, focus on determining who is to blame – the main character himself or the community – for the story's hopeless ending. Both approaches may be seen as attempts to sidestep or resolve the ambiguity in the story in order to present a clear statement about how the story can or should be read.

3. Symbolism in "Young Goodman Brown": What do Faith's pink ribbons symbolize? What is the meaning of the color pink? How do the ribbons function as a plot device in the story?

Teachers' discussions of "Young Goodman Brown" frequently identify literary elements such as foreshadowing, plot, setting, character, and theme. Given the teachers' emphasis on allegorical readings of the story, it is not surprising that symbolism is a recurring point of discussion, and Faith's pink ribbons are one of the most frequently discussed items, both as symbol and as plot device. However, exactly what the ribbons symbolize and what purpose they serve in the story emerge as points of disagreement among the teachers.

Teachers often comment at least briefly on the meaning of the pink color of the ribbons. A popular position is that the color pink represents innocence. In three representative posts, srodgers1029 describes Faith at the beginning of the story as "the picture of innocence as she bids him goodbye, with her pink ribbons blowing in the breeze" (Dec. 7, 2009); booboosmoosh defines pink as representing "goodness and innocence" (Nov. 20, 2010); and teacherscribe writes that "her pink ribbons ... represent innocence" (Oct. 28, 2007).

The answers of a few teachers implicitly extend this idea of innocence to Faith's sexuality. A relevant answer by lynneb begins, "The ribbons are symbols of Faith's purity and youth. They are decorations that

a young, pure, faithful wife can reasonably wear, even in Puritan society, and not be considered vain." The answer goes on to use the word "purity" once more before concluding: "Later, [Brown] recognizes Faith in the forest at the witches' coven meeting, and she has her pink ribbons again, but this time they fall out of her hair, indicating that she has lost her innocence and purity" (Sept. 29, 2010). Although disagreeing on whether Faith indeed loses anything in the course of the story, mwestwood similarly uses suggestive language to write about Faith's behavior toward the end of the story: "Ironically, Faith remains constant. With her innocent pink ribbons still intact," she runs to greet her returning husband the next morning (July 23, 2009). These answers pair a discussion of Faith's ribbons with a series of words – including "innocent," "pure," "faithful," and "intact" – that hint the pink ribbons might serve as an outward sign of Faith's virginity.

If Faith's ribbons represent innocence, the loss of at least one ribbon in the forest would seem to represent a loss of innocence. For mwestwood, it is Faith whose innocence is lost ("when Faith's pink ribbons fly into the air, the symbolism of these ribbons suggests her loss of innocence" – Feb. 23, 2011), but for teacherscribe, it is Brown who experiences the loss ("Seeing that ribbon in the wilderness causes Brown to literally lose his faith and his innocence" – Oct. 28, 2007). The presence of Faith's ribbons in her cap at the story's end is a complication that is not often addressed by teachers who see the loss of the ribbons as symbolizing primarily the loss of innocence.

An opposing position depicts Faith as less than innocent and even as transgressing against Puritan ideals in both her dress and her behavior. In their posts, these teachers sometimes also make subtle references to Faith's sexuality. One teacher asserts that something other than innocence may be suggested by the color pink:

the wearing of pink ribbons by a Puritan woman (who dressed very conservatively and avoided bright color) may be seen as an expression of joyful innocence or the budding sexuality of a young wife (remember, she wants him to sleep beside her, and she can barely restrain herself from kissing him in the street), but it may also be seen as an indication that she is not a "good" Puritan and thus serve to foreshadow her later presence at the Black Mass. (Inorton, Feb. 20, 2008)

A second teacher largely agrees, adding that the color pink is a mix of the colors red and white and thus might symbolize something other than unadulterated innocence:

Puritans generally didn't not adorn themselves with pretty colorful ribbons, but Faith's ribbons suggest a youthfulness and a slight "bending of the rules." The color is also created by mixing white (purity) with red (sin). The color could then suggest that Faith is not wholly good or evil – just a mix that is typical in human nature. (Imetcalf, Oct. 18, 2010)

A third teacher similarly mentions Puritan culture and the duality of human nature as well as multiple possible meanings of the ribbons:

Pink hair ribbons would have been frowned upon if allowed at all in the austere [atmosphere] of Puritan New England. Most women, married or unmarried, would have covered their hair with a cap. ... Thus the pink ribbons rather than symbolizing purity (they would have been white if that were the case), symbolize the mixture of good and evil (with white for good and the red of Satan for evil) in all of us, including Faith. They, I think, also symbolized the uncertainty of Brown's faith so that when he found them on the ground they represented his loss of faith and Faith's apparent abandonment of the good half of her for the pure evil of Satan. The

fact that the ribbons are in Faith's hair upon his return would signify that she rejected Satan's total control and signify Brown's still mixed faith. (jilllessa, Sept. 20, 2007)

Other teachers similarly read the color pink as a mix of red and white and thus as representing the dual nature of humanity and sometimes suggest other possible meanings. For rshaffer, the color pink carries multiple symbolic meanings at once: it represents "the ambivalence that Goodman Brown is experiencing in continuing his journey further into the woods," "the fight within Goodman Brown between thoughts of good and evil," and the "good and evil [that] are mixed and inherent in every human being" (Feb. 5, 2009).

Conclusion

As many of the answers demonstrate, it is possible for teachers to say that Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown" is full of ambiguity and then proceed to present what sometimes sound like definitive readings. They may read the story as illustrating a moral truth, presenting a harsh critique of Puritanism, or giving a lesson in character development. Further, the story's meaning is sometimes reduced to an adage that borders on cliché, such as "things aren't always what they seem" or "too much concern for others' faults leaves one out in the cold and loveless" (chelsea85. Nov. 10, 2009). However it is read, Hawthorne's short story is regularly treated as an allegory, a tale interpreted by the teacher for the edification of the young reader, and the ambiguity in the story perhaps must be eliminated or sidestepped so that the allegory can succeed.

For other teachers, however, the story is not a simple allegory depicting the loss of innocence and the triumph of evil. These teachers treat the loss of innocence as something challenging but necessary. For example, amarang9 writes: "Meeting with the devil is not necessarily bad"

and "Brown's own walk with the devil is not really what corrupts him" (Jan. 21, 2011). This view is likely related to their own roles as educators and mentors, working with young adults who must eventually come to engage more fully with the complexities of the adult world. Teachers frequently agree that the story is one of education, but they often disagree on what exactly is being taught. For some, it is a lesson in hypocrisy or humility; for others, it is about the duality of human nature or the prevalence of temptation.

For such teachers, the story "Young Goodman Brown" may represent a failed lesson taught by a necessarily imperfect teacher: "Brown can not (or chooses not to) deal with what he learns" (timbrady, Feb. 9, 2008) or "Instead of recognizing that humans have a capacity for evil and then doing something about it, Brown refuses to accept it and dies miserable" (teacherscribe, October 1, 2007). Elsewhere, timbrady also writes that Brown seems most affected by having seen Goody Cloyse, who taught him his catechism, in the forest that night: it "was something he never expected ... and something he could never deal with ... even if it didn't happen" (June 25, 2009; ellipses in the original). For Brown, the hardest lesson to accept may be that the person who taught him the foundations of his faith is herself less than perfect.

A grounded theory analysis of the full set of responses allows one to make sense of the teachers' interpretations of Hawthorne's short story through a systematic approach to the recurring small ideas in their multitude of statements. A number of the teachers' posts emphasize the individual nature of the reading (their personal interpretations), but other answers are written as if to present themselves as the one correct reading. Viewing the multiple interpretations side-by-side calls into question the possibility of ever arriving at a sense of certainty about what the story truly means. The story does read like an allegory, rich in symbolism, and yet remains full of unresolved ambiguity. The complication

with allegorical readings of the story is that the symbolism and the underlying lesson are not wholly clear. Faith's pink ribbons represent at once both purity and sexuality, both innocence and imperfection, for example, and the blame for Brown's soured life perhaps rests both with him and with the community as a whole. An answer by sagetrieb proposes that the story can teach the reader something precisely because it is so full of ambiguity:

"Young Goodman Brown" is an excellent story to read to understand the concept of ambiguity, which in this case refers to a richness in meaning resulting from *multiple understandings interacting with each other all at once*. An important critic, I. A. Richards, says this about ambiguity in reference to poetry, but it can be applied to fiction as well: "A word ... can equally and simultaneously represent vastly different things. It can effect extraordinary combinations of feelings. A word is a point at which many different influences may cross or unite..." Think about this multiplicity in meaning and effect as you reread "Young Goodman Brown" or any good poem. That story can take place in Brown's head all as a dream, it could have happened in a fantasy sort of way (as a result of guilt) in his subconscious, and then each of the things he sees represents different emotions [or] situations (all at once) as well. The story doesn't mean either this or that but both and many ideas. (Sept. 11, 2007, emphasis in the original)

Whether taking place face-to-face or online, the act of repeatedly reading and discussing "Young Goodman Brown" can lead the readers (both teachers or students) to question their previously unquestioned beliefs about the story – to leave for a time their safe, comfortable, well lit spaces of moral and human truths for the dark paths of uncertainty and doubt. If all of the teachers surveyed here could be one teacher embodying the full

range of these conflicting interpretations of the story, they might be at once both Goody Cloyse at her best, guiding fresh young minds along the path of righteousness, and the man leading them into the "uncertain light" of a dark and wooded path, the devil in disguise.

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