

Extensive reading – Lecture 7 (Pr. Handour)

This brief essay represents a critical attempt to analyze Nathaniel I Hawthorn's "Young Goodman Brown" in light of a set of narrative codes put forward by a number of narrative theory scholars.

I. An account of the narrative in the light of Barthes' narrative codes:

Roland Barthes describes a text as:

“a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible. We gain access to it by several entrances; none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend as far as the eye can read, they are indeterminable ... The systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed...” (S/Z-1974 translation).

According to Barthes, the text is open to plural interpretations and the codes we can base our analysis on are indeterminable. However, we will content ourselves with the five codes he has suggested:

➤ **The hermeneutic code:** *(It embodies those elements of a text that create an enigma and suspense leading us to ask questions): At first sight, the title triggers off a set of questions: why does the author use one of his characters as a title? What makes him special in his eye? Does Goodman as a title that evokes feelings of courtesy and respect chime in with the actions of Mr. Brown? Also, the introductory moments of the story might lead the reader to raise such questions as: why does Young Goodman Brown insist that he should go on a journey to the forest? Why does he obstinately refuse to put off or cancel this nocturnal journey in spite of his wife's plea to spend the night by her side? Why does the journey take place at night and not in daytime?*

As the plot unfolds, further questions can be raised: Why is Brown intercepted by the Devil? What is the rationale behind this nocturnal journey? To what extent can one infer that it is an eyeopener for young Goodman Brown? This is but a sample of questions that an individual reader might ask as he reads the tale, and since we are different readers — or more pertinently cultural constructs — the questions that are likely to be raised will always remain governed by indeterminacy. The potentially infinite range of questions one might ask lends some credence to Roland Barthes claim "that the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author."

➤ **The semic:** (*connotative code*) (it has to do with the second order of signification using hints or flickers of meaning). It is evident that Young Goodman Brown occupies a special place in the story that uses his name as a title. He is the protagonist whose actions and movements attract the reader's attention. However, the position he is initially granted in the tale turns out to be ironic, especially when he finds it difficult to ward off the temptation of taking part in the suspicious celebrations away from the village. The forest, which is the destination of his journey, appeals to him though the puritans have always denigrated it as a place of the devil where the Indians practice their pagan rites. Also, his encounter with the devil undermines his status as a protagonist whose name brings to mind such qualities as religiosity and piety. Much to his chagrin, his ancestors, who have always set a good example for him, turn out to be the devil's disciples. Their past, of which he is implicitly proud, is a source of disgrace, ignominy and infamy. The last straw for Goodman Brown is his Faith taking part in the evil festivities. Though the scene of her participation is somehow ambiguous given that the reader is at a loss whether the journey is real or not — in fact it might be construed as a dream — the allegorical overtones of Faith as a character make the reader infer that the protagonist's faith hangs in the balance.

➤ **The proairetic code:** the ability to determine the result of an action within logico-temporal constraints). The nocturnal journey from the village to the forest is meant to lay bare the hidden face of Puritanism.

Young Goodman Brown, who may pride himself on his lineage, is placed in close proximity to some distinguished ancestors whose notorious crimes disappoint any positive image he may have of them. The journey, though frustrating, is an eye-opener that introduces Goodman Brown to the ugly face of the 17th century New England Puritans. When his wife entreats him to change his mind and spend that particular night with her, we begin, as readers, to suspect the perils of a journey whose ultimate destination and the circumstances surrounding it do not augur well for our protagonist. Moreover, the future of Faith, whose husband bids farewell to her, is thrust into uncertainty since the forest is a frightening place and home to the devil and his associates. The first dialogue between husband and wife heralds Goodman Brown's unsafe return from the forest, which has always been associated with evil in the Puritans' imaginary.

➤ **The Symbolic code:** Generates a structure of symbolic meanings (sometimes in the form of paired opposites) that evolve into a larger structure in which the meanings of the story are conveyed.

From the outset of the story, the writerly reader comes across a set of symbols that serve to convey layers of meaning. The parting kiss can be interpreted as Faith's sense of foreboding that her husband is about to embark upon a perilous journey from the village where he is safe to the woods where he will be in danger of being devoured by evil forces. Placing the village in immediate juxtaposition with the forest also betokens the duality of religiosity and paganism. While the village is home to the « pious », the forest is the dwelling place of « the devil ». This asymmetric duality unveils further secrets about Puritanism. It is in the forest, which is the object of suspicion, where Young Goodman Brown is revealed the harsh reality of his pedigree's disgraceful mode of life. The forest therefore discloses the religious cant of the Puritans, who fail to live up to their religious teachings.

➤ **The Cultural Code:** *this code produces a structure in which the text points out common bodies of knowledge. This shared knowledge may take on the form of axiomatic truths. It is commonly believed that a journey into the forest is a hazardous adventure, especially because Young Goodman Brown sets Off in the dark alone. Also, hypocrisy and sin are symptomatic of human frailty and fallibility across cultures and religions.*