"YOUNG GOODMAN BROWN": A FAILURE IN STRIKING THE BALANCE BETWEEN INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE

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Abstract
This article aims at presenting a reading of Nathanael Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown" based on William Blake's concept of the human soul's inherent dualism. It consists of a brief analysis of how ambiguity appears in Hawthorne's short story and creates a play of binary oppositions that matches the theme of innocence and experience, discussed by Blake in *The Songs of Innocence & The Songs of Experience*. Through a concise review of Blake's concept, the conclusion arrived at is that Hawthorne's protagonist failed in finding happiness because he was unable to achieve the balance between the opposing forces within himself that Blake implies in his idea of man's soul.
Keywords: Nathanael Hawthorne, William Blake, ambiguity, Innocence/Experience.

Resumo
Este artigo apresenta uma leitura do conto de Nathanael Hawthorne intitulado "Young Goodman Brown" baseada no conceito de William Blake do dualismo inerente à alma humana. Trata-se de uma breve análise de como a ambigüidade aparece no conto de Hawthorne e cria um jogo de oposições binárias análogas ao tema da inocência e da experiência, discutido por Blake em *The Songs of Innocence & The Songs of Experience*. Através de uma revisão concisa do conceito de Blake, quer se chegar à conclusão de que o protagonista de Hawthorne falhou em encontrar a felicidade por ser incapaz de alcançar o balanço entre as forças opostas dentro dele que Blake expressa pelo seu conceito da alma humana.
Palavras-chave: Nathanael Hawthorne, William Blake, ambigüidade, Inocência/Experiência.

One of Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" 's central features is ambiguity. The short story is full of recurrent images and symbols that suggest so and even the main characters are ambiguous. A brief analysis of some such elements will be made here in order to introduce the topic of this paper.

To start with, let us consider that the short story is about Goodman Brown, a puritan, newly married youngster who, as a puritan, should live according to certain religious rules and have a characteristic stern behaviour, directing his life to salvation and aiming at moral rectitude. His affliction starts when he is tempted to do otherwise, when he decides to undertake a journey through the forest – an archetypal image in literature that usually means a psychological journey into one's unconsciousness, which causes the journeyer to discover things about his deepest wishes and thoughts; in a word, a journey that brings *wisdom*. But, being a puritan, Goodman Brown must have been aware that the fruit of wisdom was forbidden to man by God and one who tries to catch and eat it may have to bear the burden. We do not mean to regard the fact of his being a puritan (and not of any other religion) as of particular interest; our mentioning it is intended to emphasize his ambiguous behaviour.

Having considered this, we must now focus on ambiguity or, instead, on how it is expressed and/or implied in the text. To do so, we can start by noticing the effect produced in the text by the contrast between light and darkness. For this purpose, Hawthorne's story may be roughly divided into three parts: the very beginning, in which Brown parts from his wife, Faith; his journey through the forest and his returning home.

The first paragraph works very well as an introduction that gives the reader all necessary information to present the story and, at the same time, causes instantaneous doubt. We are told the names of the main characters, that they are married and we are told the husband is going away. On the other hand we are not told why he is going to be absent. Also, the narrator presents the setting (Salem village) and – what concerns us here – the time, the moment of day: *sunset.* Wishing to analyse the contrast between light

and dark, one must not neglect the meaning of sunset for it marks the passage from day to night and, consequently, from light gradually to complete darkness. These, being a very common binary opposition, are always associated with several other contrasting ideas such as good/evil, life/death, joy/melancholy or purity/corruption. Thus, the first line of the story telling us it begins exactly at sunset may suggest the later change Goodman Brown (and all his life) will undertake.

In what we called the second part, the emphasis lies on darkness and on its associations. To enter the forest "he had taken a *dreary* road, *darkened* by all the *gloomiest* trees" (our italics). If the darkness and gloom of the place reflect Brown's state of mind and to what extent is hard to ascertain, but the forest seems to be an ambiguous place both for the reader and for him, in a way that "with *lonely* steps he must yet be passing through an unseen *multitude*" (our italics). The antithesis in italics intensify the story's ambiguity and the passage makes clear that both character and reader are affected by it. As Goodman Brown goes deeper on his way into the forest, the image of darkness is intensified and when he meets the devil – a decisive moment – it is "deep dusk in the forest, and deepest in that part of it where these two were journeying". The fact of it being darker where they are may also suggest, as we have already noted, the change that has, at this moment, already happened within Goodman Brown and that perhaps now is irrevocable because, as he himself says, he has gone "Too far! Too far!". It seems as if Goodman Brown has now arrived in the heart of darkness, from which one cannot come back unaltered. Now in the last part of the story, Goodman Brown returns home and it is now *morning*, the time of light again. To a certain extent, it could be said that the alternation of light and dark is circular: the short story starts with some light, proceeds gradually to darkness and returns to light. However, the light we have at the end is not the same and the reason for that is simple – Brown has gone through the forest and, whatever that means, he is a changed man and the experiences he has had have made everything different.

Another element that helps construct ambiguity in the text is Faith's pink ribbons. They are perhaps the most ambiguous symbol in the story. To start with, Faith is a puritan and puritans would only wear black or, at least, dark and dull colours, but the said ribbons seem to belong to her personally for they are referred to three times in the beginning of the story and function almost as an epithet for the young wife. What can the pink ribbons suggest then?

> Clearly Hawthorne meant them to be suggestive, to be an index to one or more themes in the tale. But suggestive of what? Are they emblematic of love, of innocence, of good? Conversely, do they suggest evil, or hypocrisy, or the ambiguous and puzzling blend of good and evil? Are they symbolic of sex, of femininity, or of Christian faith?[1]

We do not intend to find an answer to these questions; it is enough for our purpose to show the ambiguity inherent to the ribbons. And the fact that they are specifically pink interests us here. They could be red, but that would make them much less ambiguous for they would be immediately associated

with passion or sin. Now pink is the mixture of white and red, and what more ambiguous than that? White symbolizes purity and peace; red symbolizes sexuality and anguish. Thus, as Wilfred L. Guerin et al have noted, "they are ambiguity objectified"[2].

The way Hawthorne placed the pink ribbons in the story is, in some ways, analogous to the way he placed light and darkness: they make a circular movement. They are first mentioned in the opening paragraph, then in the middle of the story when Brown is in the forest, and, finally, at the end when he returns home. In the beginning, they appear insistently connected to the name of Faith, being thus characteristic of her and possibly suggesting things about her personality. In the forest, Goodman Brown sees a pink ribbon falling from the sky and this appears to be suggestive of two things specially: on the one hand they can represent the loss of Faith – and here it is necessary to note the ambiguity of the name of Brown's wife. "Faith" in this short story can either be read as the wife or as religious faith. It is interesting to note that Faith, whatever it be, appears as opposed to the Devil and thus leaves Goodman Brown between two forces – good and evil, white and red. But being Faith the owner of pink ribbons, which side does she tend to? Or else, does she tend to any? Thus, the fall of the ribbons may mark the moment Brown lost his faith, the moment he has really gone "too far". On the other hand, they can represent a fall like Adam's. In this sense, we must assume that Goodman Brown has sinned and that the Devil has been the stronger force between the two we mentioned before. The last time the ribbons appear, instead of clarifying things, they do not confirm any of the possibilities we proposed for their fall in the forest. When Brown returns home, he finds Faith there waiting for him still with the pink ribbons. Unlikely the light that is different in the beginning and in the end, the ribbons appear to be the same and this can leave us without knowing what to do with their fall in the forest: if they are the same in the end, than we are led to think Faith, be it the wife or the belief in God, has not being lost and Brown has not really fallen.

The fact that Faith remained with Brown up to the end does not seem to us to be strong enough an element in the text to support the argument that he kept his faith in religion. We suggest here that, perhaps, at the end of the story, Faith means only the wife and not religious belief anymore for this would help us understand why the pink ribbons are the same after the journey through the forest: the change would have happened just in him and Faith would be just the same as she was when he left her by the door of their house. But assuming this would imply that we support that Goodman Brown really lost his religious faith and this might be too risky in such an ambivalent context.

In looking at the names of the two puritans, we may note that the name of Faith can easily be read as ambiguous, and if we agree that her ribbons are ambiguity objectified, we could say that Faith is ambiguity personified. This doesn't seem to be the case with the name Brown, which

appears to go well for a puritan for it refers to a dark and usually dull colour, contrasting with the brightness and joy of pink. His name seems to us to be in accordance with the sadness involving his death.

Another device through which Hawthorne created ambiguity in his short story was the discourse of the narrator. "Young Goodman Brown" has a third person omniscient narrator and that usually grants objectivity to a story. However Hawthorne's narrator pierces the text now and then with adjectives, comments or suggestions that intensify the story's ambiguity, sometimes ironically. This can be said, for example, of the adjectives the narrator uses to describe Goody Cloyse and Deacon Gookin. When Brown and his companion first meet the former in the forest, it is said that Brown "recognized a very pious and exemplary dame" and that the Devil wished to leave "this Christian woman behind". When Goodman Brown returns to Salem, the narrator refers to Deacon Gookin as "the good old minister" and "venerable saint". Having being acquainted with their dual behaviour, the reader might read all these adjectives as ironical or as contributing to cast doubts about their personalities.

Three passages seem to us to be significant in analysing how the narrator's discourse contributes to produce ambiguity. The first refers to the staff the Devil carried with him. First the narrator states that when the fiend laughed, his staff seemed to laugh too, and then, as if to turn the reader's attention from something he should not have said, from a clue he should not have given, he states that "this, of course, must have been an ocular deception, assisted by the uncertain light". Also when Brown recognizes Goody Cloyse and, astonished, states that she has taught him his catechism, the narrator tells us "there was a world of meaning in this simple comment", but it is given the reader only to interpret what meaning it is. Towards the end of the story is perhaps the trickiest comment: "Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting?". By thus addressing the reader, the narrator seems to be hinting exactly at the range of possible interpretations the story unfolds.

There are other aspects in the text that help intensify ambiguity, but having focused on the ones we considered more important, we intend now to approach what is real, factual in the story. Although it is not easy to place the events in the level of reality or in the level of fantasy, one thing, at least, is certain: Goodman Brown, in spite of having denied communion with the Devil, in spite of having done what he considered correct, was poignantly unhappy for the rest of his life. It could be said that it was so because he lost his faith in God and in religion but, as we have noticed, this argument is weak and hard to support with evidences from the text. What went wrong then with young Goodman Brown? Why was he so miserable?

It is the aim of this article to suggest that a possible answer to this question may be procured in William Blake's concept of the human soul. We are not going to consider all of Blake's work here; instead we are going to focus mainly on the *Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience*, espe-

cially the matched poems "The Lamb" and "The Tyger" and on *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

The *Songs of Innocence* was first published in 1789. Five years later, William Blake added to this work the *Songs of Experience*, in which each poem matched one poem in the previous publication. If we consider the title of this next edition – *Songs of Innocence and Experience Shewing the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul* – we can suppose that probably the poet did not mean the poems to be read individually. If he meant them to be read together and considered them as "Shewing the Two Contrary Stated of the Human Soul", we can infer that this early work already reveals Blake's concept of man as a dually composed being. Such a representation of man is not present only in the *Songs*; instead it is implicit in much of Blake's poetry. In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* is one of Blake's clearest expressions of his conception of man's ambiguity and the necessity of this ambiguity. In "The Argument" of the poem, Blake states that "without contraries is no progression"[3] and then defines the faculties of Reason and Energy as opposed but inherent to man. The *Songs*, however, demonstrate and exemplify these concepts more evidently as we can observe by noting the title and heeding to the speaker's point of view in the poems.

In order to understand what Blake considered innocence and experience were like, we are going to concentrate on the images and symbols in "The Lamb" and "The Tyger". The lamb appears as a fragile animal, usually associated with the bucolic scenery of a farm or countryside, that children could well admire for its soft and delicate clothing of wool and for its tender voice. It is also important to note that the lamb is in the Bible – the holy Lamb of God. On the other hand, the tiger represents the state opposed to the lamb. It is ferocious and associated to wild sceneries and, rather than enchanting children, it causes even adults to be afraid. Its body is not covered with a delicate woollen skin but with the bright colour of fire, whose red contrasts with the white of the lamb. When we look at this contrast, the effect produced by the pink ribbons becomes the more evident.

These images commonly linked to a lamb and to a tiger are all portrayed in the illustrations made by William Blake for the poems. The lamb appears among very green trees, with a child and a cottage: life, innocence and fragility. The tiger appears in a dark forest, with a dry tree: fear, anguish and hopelessness. In the poem, the lamb is described as having a "clothing of delight" and a "tender voice" that "makes all the vales rejoice" whereas the tiger burns bright "in the forests of the night" and has a "fearful symmetry" with "dread hand" and "dread feet"; the sinews of its heart show how strong it is, unlike the lamb.

Being these two creatures so utterly different, it is pertinent to ask what unites them, what makes them representative of the "Two Contrary States of the Human Soul". To attempt an answer to this question, we must note one more difference, this one in the structure of the poems: "The Lamb"

has a closed and, to some degree, circular structure for the lyric voice starts by addressing the lamb in a childish language and proposes a question about its creation. The second part answers the puzzle thus closing the discussion and ends in childish language again and with a blessing. Like "The Lamb", "The Tyger" presents a circular structure too, the first and last stanzas being essentially the same. Unlike the first poem, the second is filled with questions to which no answer is provided. One of these is of particular interest here – "Did he who made the Lamb make thee?". It is known that none of the questions proposed in the poem have a definite solution, but we intend to argue that this one can be answered with an affirmative. If we agree that the same creature – God – made both lamb and tiger, we can start assimilating the dual, and therefore ambivalent, nature of the human being, which, according to Blake "has no Body distinct from his Soul"[4], meaning that man is ambivalent in his very nature.

Despite having being brought up by a Christian family and educated within a Christian doctrine, William Blake had a very critical and original view of religion and of biblical exegesis. He consistently denied lethargic and oppressive dogmas and developed his own interpretation of the scriptures and his own, let us say, philosophy of religion. God, the Creator, is not seen stereotypically and the suggestion of his creating both the Lamb and the Tiger implies the same ambivalence is present in God's finest and ultimate creation: man. Blake's philosophy of religion allows Eros and Thanatos to co-exist in man.

Through association, innocence and experience, as characteristic of man, are soon linked with good and evil and with several other opposing ideas: light and dark, life ad death, id and superego and Heaven and Hell. This is not incorrect in the case of Blake's poetry; however one cannot have in mind the traditional concept of good as something correct and desirable and of bad as incorrect and deadening. The Romantic tradition, of which Blake is an important precursor, believes that the pair good/evil is also associated to passivity/activity, being good obedient to Reason and evil originating from Energy. It is understood that these forces, or aspects, oppose each other; however they are better comprehended if seen as a binary combination rather than as an opposition. In William Blake's concept, innocence and experience co-exist and are just like the two sides of the same coin, they do not exclude nor complement one another; instead they live in constant tension, and thus is man's vital energy produced. We usually tend to think of such oppositions as forming a kind of Hegelian synthesis, in which one element interferes with the other and both may lose some their features to produce the synthetic union. But this is not the case with Blake. The fact that they exist in tension help us comprehend how they never fuse and yet have a balanced co-existence. If it were otherwise, man's living would be destabilized: none of the poles should be seen as predominating.

We intend to propose here that this was what happened to young Goodman Brown: he failed in striking the balance between innocence and

experience. When, in the middle of the forest, he denied communion with the Devil, he denied the second pole of all the oppositions we mentioned here to live within his soul, which became lopsided. June Singer (2004) has noted that the Devil, in Blake's poetry as well as in Milton's (one of Blake's strongest influences), represents creative Energy and is generator of life. Thus in denying him, Brown denied a very important aspect of himself and a very important part of his life. We have mentioned that Brown seemed to be oppressed by two antagonising forces – Faith, representing innocence/good (despite all the ambiguity inherent to her) and the Devil, representing experience/evil. Hawthorne's protagonist failed in assuming a derridean deconstructive position, in which both poles of binary oppositions have the same value; instead he attributed more weight to the first and thus destabilized his own soul.

What seems to make it impossible for Brown to establish a balance between innocence and experience is that he conceives of religion in a way opposed to Blake. While Brown struggles to suppress the Energy that pulses in his breast, because, in his religiosity, he considers this Energy as Evil and Evil as the manifestation of a destructive desire, Blake claims that "Energy is eternal Delight"[5]. Brown relies on what Blake calls an error put forth by sacred codes: "That God will torment Man in Eternity for following his energies"[6].

June Singer (2004) demonstrates that Blake's dual concept shifted to a fourfold image of man in his later work but even then man's inherent dualism is not definitely at an end as implied in these lines by Blake:

> Now I a fourfold vision see
> And a fourfold vision is given to me
> Tis fourfold in my supreme delight
> And three fold in soft Beulahs night
> *And twofold Always*. May God us keep
> From Single vision & Newtons sleep[7] [our italics]

As Blake himself stated, his vision is "twofold Always" and Singer (2004) explains that Newton's sleep is symbolic of the belief only in what can be demonstrated and measured – only in reason and not in imagination. These blakean verses can also help understand the solution we proposed to Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown". Brown adopted what Blake called "Single vision" rather than a two fold one and thus fell in Newton's sleep, being led by reason only to deny the experience and the evil belonging to him. Perhaps he acted in that way for he knew "the fiend in his own shape is less hideous than when he rages in the breast of man". That portrays the predicament of an ego having to decide between id and superego and the tragic aspect of such choices. We do not suggest that Goodman Brown should have accepted communion with the Devil firstly because that would also be a negligence of one aspect of the human soul and secondly because that would be too shallow an answer. Our main argument is that in trying to suppress the fiend in his breast, Brown destabilised the equilibrium of his existence, cutting off half his soul and, consequently, "they carved no hopeful verse upon his tombstone for his dying hour was gloom".

Notes

1 Guerin, Wilfred L. et al. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. p. 98.

2 Ibiden. p. 98.

3 The Marriage of Heaven and Hell. In: Erdman, David V. (editor) *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1965, p. 34.

4 Ibidem, p. 34.

5 Ibidem, p. 34.

6 Ibidem, p. 34.

7 To Thomas Butts, 22 November, 1802 In: Erdman, David V. (editor) *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1965.

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