

Structuralism and literature: A critical approach to Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown"

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Abstract

This article discusses how literary texts can be analyzed primarily on the model of linguistic theory, and how language can be used as a structural model to look for meaning in a literary work. The main focus is on the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure in his *Course of General Linguistics*. Structuralism, is not concerned with the content of a literary work, rather, it analyzes and explores the structures underlying the text, how meaning is possible and how it is transmitted. Because literature functions as a system of meaning, any literary text could be considered the individual articulation of a culture, that is the way we talk and think about the things that affect our lives. By using the techniques, methodologies, and vocabulary of linguistics, offered by structuralists, this article's ultimate objective is to make explicit the system of rules and codes that govern the form and meaning of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Young Goodman Brown".

Key words: structuralism, linguistics, structural model, signified, signifier, sign, meaning, arbitrary

Introduction

Structuralism and Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of language

Structuralism is concerned with the use of language as a structural model and the explanation of how meaning is possible. It is mostly related to the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, who tried to study the structure of the language system. He held that language is some kind of order; its parts are integrated and have to follow certain conventions. He came up with a theory of signs, and invented the terms *signifier* and *signified* . In his theory of linguistics, Saussure states that language is comprised of signs. The sign is composed of two elements, the *signifier* (the sound of a word), and the *signified* (the idea or concept), which the *signifier* expresses. The relationship between the *signifier* and the *signified* is referred to as *signification* (Saussure, 1959). Saussure insists that Language is a process of naming, but this does not mean that “ready-made ideas exist before words” (Saussure,1959, p.65), but rather: “The linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image” (Saussure,1959, p.66). According to this theory, language is a complex of signs that functions in certain ways to create meaning. "Words are not symbols which correspond to referents, but rather

are signs which are made up of two parts: a mark either written or spoken, called the signifier and a concept called signified" (Sanders, 2004, p.53). Eagleton (1996), in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, goes on to clarify this notion even further by stating that...

The signifier does not yield us up a signified directly, as a mirror yields up an image: there is no harmonious one-to-one set of correspondences between the level of the signifiers and the level of signifieds in language....there is no fixed distinction between signifiers & signifieds either(pp. 110-11).

Additionally, the relationship between *signifier* and *signified* is *arbitrary*, thus each sign, if it stood alone, would be meaningless. This is so because language is a self-contained relational structure, and its elements derive their existence and their value from their differences. These differences, Saussure, calls *binary oppositions*, because they come in pairs. We can only understand the significance of a word/sound, which is a linguistic sign, when we perceive its difference from other signs. A sign gets its meaning "by virtue of its difference from the others" (Eagleton,1996, p.97). In language, therefore, what makes any single item meaningful is not its particular individual quality but the difference between its quality and that of other sounds/words. "Each linguistic term derives its value from its opposition to all the

other terms” (Saussure,1959, p.88). Indeed, Saussure, in his *Course of General Linguistics*, understood language to be

A system of signs that express ideas, a network of elements that signify only in relation to each other. Indeed, the sign itself is a relational entity, a composite of two parts that signify not only through those features that make them slightly different from any other two parts, but through their association with each other (Sanders, 2004, p.66).

We can, therefore, understand language as a system, or structure, which defines itself in terms of itself. There is no language behind language with which we understand it, no statements to explain what language means. Instead it is a self-referential system. Words clarify words, give explanation of words, and meaning is present, within the words themselves, as a set of structures. This is so because "Language is a system of interdependent terms in which the value of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others" (Saussure, 1959, p.114).

Structuralism in the field of literature

In the field of literature, Structuralism seeks to explain the structures underlying literary texts, either in terms of a grammar modeled on that of language or in terms of Ferdinand de Saussure's principles; that the meaning of each word depends on its place in the total system of language; that our perception of

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reality, and hence the way we respond to it are dictated or constructed by the structure of the language we speak; that all elements of human culture, including literature, may be understood as part of a system of signs; that all literature is subject to a set of codes and conventions and is not a product of an author's distinctive mind, but the product of a linguistic system (Saussure, 1959).

Structuralism may be classified as the system of giving literary criticism the theoretical strictness of a science of language, and to view "literature as a second-order system that uses the first-order structural system of language as its medium, and is itself to be analyzed primarily on the model of linguistic theory" (Abrams, 1993, p.280). Structuralism is mainly concerned with the study of the grammar of literature, that is, the rules that govern the production of meaning of literary texts. Literature and language are similarly structured: the first is a self-enclosed system of rules that is composed of language, while the second needs no outside help to construct meaning, except its own rule-governed and socially constrained system, which allows the critic "to rethink everything through once again in terms of linguistics" (Jameson, 1972, p.4). Literature, therefore, "must be understood as 'structure'...as a text which possesses its own harmony of relations, but which at the same time can only come into being

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within a network of other texts, or within literary history, and beyond this within the human life-world" ( Bruns, 1974, p.262).

Consequently, the structuralists have developed analytical, systematic approaches to literary texts. They are inclined to deny the text any inherent privilege, meaning, or authority; they believe that the literary text is only a system that puts forward the question of "how", such a construct of language can contain meaning, instead of "what" the text means. Their main concern is how the form and structure of the literary text, that is, its symbols and other literary devices, fit together and function. Their "ambition is to discover the codes, the rules, the systems which underlie all human and cultural practices" ( Sanders, 2004, p.66). This can be achieved by looking for specific patterns, repetitions, and contrasts in characters, locations, objects, language used, which they believe give meaning to all our social and cultural customs and behavior. They argue that the structure of language produces truth, and meaning is no longer determined by the individual, but by the system which guides the individual. They seek to explain how a text's underlying structural codes combine to produce the text's meaning rather than a reader's personal interpretation.

Contrary to some other critical theories, structuralism assumes that there is a constant movement away from the interpretation of the individual literary work towards an understanding of the larger

structures which contain them. For the structuralists, the word "interpretation", does not mean "looking for meaning", as much as it means "looking for the underlying principles of structure". The literary text, therefore, is no longer a unique and autonomous object with the author's intention as its final meaning, because meaning, the structuralists believe, is determined by the system that governs the author.

### **Language as a structural model in Nathaniel Hawthorn's "Young Goodman Brown".**

In "Young Goodman Brown", Nathaniel Hawthorne's real preoccupation as a novelist, is not telling a story, but showing. He is more interested in the how of story-telling, that is the chosen diction, setting, the character's actions, the story narrative, which as seen by the structuralists are all signs, codes, rules and a system which lie behind the human and cultural practices of the residents of the village of Salem. Because most of these features are present in "Young Goodman Brown", it can be meaningful to approach it structurally. Analyzing the symbols and signs found in plots such as in Hawthorne's short story, is how structuralists determine the function of the text.

### **Sings and symbols**

The story of "Young Goodman Brown" is a dark and eerie tale of one man's fear and obsession of evil within the world. It shows so shockingly that awareness of reality may sometimes cause

destructive consequences. At the beginning of the story Goodman Brown is presented to us as a good man, a person of honesty and firmness, a person with too high a set of expectations. He is confident in his awareness that all the people in his village, are as he believes them to be: kind, sincere honest and dependable. He, above all, treasures the knowledge that his wife, Faith, is decent and truthful. Deeming that his place in heaven is guaranteed by his wife's graciousness, integrity, and respect, Brown pays no heed to the outcomes of keeping an appointment with the Devil. Faith begs him not to go, but Brown says that he has a duty that must be completed before sunrise. As he leaves, his wife Faith foreshadows coming events with her reference to dreams .

"Dearest heart," whispered she, softly and rather sadly, when her lips were close to his ear, "pr'ythee, put off your journey until sunrise, and sleep in your own bed tonight . A lone woman is troubled with such dreams and such thoughts, that she's afeard of herself, sometimes. Pray, tarry with me this night, dear husband..." ( Hawthorne).

Faith's use of dreams as an excuse for her husband to stay home on this exact evening foresees Goodman's confrontation in the woods. Regardless of his wife's plea, Goodman Brown, walks down the main street of the village. The surrounding wilderness is unknown, a place where one can easily wander from the straight and narrow path into the forest at night. As he proceeds

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deeper, into the dark forest, Brown discovers a figure of darkness who appears with his serpent cane; an old man who is actually the Devil in concealing outfit. The devil assumes a disguise of a gentleman, very similar to Brown, implying that evil is in everybody, even Brown himself. He invites Brown to walk on with him and to take the stick to make his journey effortless. The forest itself is looked upon as devilish, horrifying and dark. The imagery gives off a sense of no hope for any kind of joyful ending. A wretched and menacing sensation throughout the entire story. Goodman Brown is unconscious of the outcome of his trip, but he persists on going on. The path that he takes is ..

a dreary road, darkened by all the gloomiest trees of the forest, which barely stood aside to let the narrow path creep through, and closed immediately behind. It was all as lonely as could be; and there is this peculiarity in such a solitude, that the traveler knows not who may be concealed by the innumerable trunks and the thick boughs overhead; so that with lonely footsteps he may yet be passing through an unseen multitude. (Hawthorne).

Hawthorne uses the magnitude of the journey through the forest as a representation of all the sin and evil which surrounds us in this world. The setting provides structure for the overall mood and theme of "Young Goodman Brown", and by his choice of setting

and descriptions, Hawthorne has given us an insight into the process Goodman Brown is going through.

As he journeys deeper into the woods, Goodman Brown hears Faith's voice and a scream, followed by the appearance of one of her pink ribbons. The lost ribbon symbolizes the innocence that Goodman Brown is losing by traveling the path of sin. Grasping the ribbon, Brown cries, "My Faith is gone! There is no good on earth...come, devil, for to thee is this world given" (Hawthorne ). Goodman Brown gives up on his own beliefs. He is the kind of person who allows himself to be harmed by his own sensitivity. Expecting perfection from his wife and all the others, he turns bitter when he learns about their human faults.

And maddened with despair, so that he laughed loud and long, did Goodman Brown grasp his staff and set forth again, at such a rate, that he seemed to fly along the forest-path, rather than to walk or run. The road grew wilder and drearier, and more faintly traced, and vanished at length, leaving him in the heart of the dark wilderness, still rushing onward, with the instinct that guides mortal man to evil. The whole forest was peopled with frightful sounds; the creaking of the trees, the howling of wild beasts, and the yell of Indians; while, sometimes the wind tolled like a distant church-bell, and sometimes gave a broad roar around the traveler, as if all Nature were laughing him to scorn. But he

was himself the chief horror of the scene, and shrank not from its other horror. ( Hawthorne)

The chosen diction, words or signs, "maddened", "frightful sounds", "dark wilderness", "howling of wild beasts", show Brown's dread and hesitancy towards the mix of emotions he's experiencing. This scene explicitly shows the connection between Goodman Brown's feelings and the setting, and how the shocking images began to negatively affect him...

In truth, all through the haunted forest, there could be nothing more frightful than the figure of Goodman Brown. On he flew, among the black pines, brandishing his staff with frenzied gestures, now giving vent to an inspiration of horrid blasphemy, and now shouting forth such laughter, as set all the echoes of the forest laughing like demons around him. The fiend in his own shape is less hideous, than when he rages in the breast of man. (Hawthorne)

The images and words used by the author, "frenzied gestures", "laughing like demons", "the fiend in his own shape is less hideous", "rages in the breast of man", all appeal imaginatively to the reader's senses. They create a mental picture, imagined sensations, stimulating some kind of sensory response in the reader. We can imaginatively use our senses to experience what the words represent and we can even imagine what Goodman Brown is experiencing : his recognition of the alarming nature of

the people he knows and respects. Brown is anguished to learn of their hypocrisy, but as his faith is destroyed a worse awareness takes over: his own life has been a lie. He questions his own honesty and faithfulness and finds himself deficient. His self-recrimination at his own double standards shuts out his remaining faith. To Brown's mind the smallest bit of evil wipes out all kindness and goodness in the world. Hence, Young Goodman Brown's innocence and beliefs are lost forever; there is no way to recover them ; he is thus filled with distrust and skepticism toward the rest of the world.

What Hawthorne tries to show through Brown's torment and misery in the forest and his first encounter with evil, is the vulnerability of humans, their rapid willingness to deny their belief in the prevailing power of goodness from the first brush with a disappointing incident .The author structures this section to show how setting directly affects the epiphany of Goodman brown.

After a night of making deals with the Devil, having all of his fellow countrymen show their Satanic tendencies and himself becoming associated with evil and wickedness, Goodman Brown begins to act coldly and completely changes his conduct . Despite all his preceding rewarding experiences with all the good people in his village, he sees evil in everyone, and even denounces his own cherished friends; he takes a broad view of all the people

around him too hastily. Goodman Brown's weakness of character, his helplessness and his vulnerability allow his realization of the misconduct of his fellow villagers to aggravate and he refuses what he considers to be a community of sinners, when in fact, he himself is a sinner as he is incapable of coming to terms with reality, and instead turns away from the rest of humanity and gives up on his own faith so easily. What Nathaniel Hawthorne wants to show, through the depiction of Brown's character, is that wrongdoing, unlawful activity, crime, offence, that is, sin in all its aspects, is an unavoidable part of human nature. Brown's experience is actually a spiritual journey from innocence to knowledge that is a part of emotional maturity. Yet, because Brown cannot acknowledge what he has discovered in his agonizing experience in the forest, both his emotional and physical development are arrested and he fades away spiritually until he dies. However, the narrator begins to question whether what Goodman Brown has witnessed was, in fact, a dream, or reality.

Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest, and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting? Be it so, if you will. But, alas! it was a dream of evil omen for young Goodman Brown. A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man, did he become, from the night of that fearful dream. (Hawthorne)

Nathaniel Hawthorne provides some distinctions between the irrational, illogical world with the realistic world by providing malicious components. These elements, which the structuralists view as *binary oppositions*, are established all through the story in a malevolent ceremony. At the end of the story, when Goodman Brown finds himself next to a fire, this discloses the repulsive possibility of the irrational, illogical world actually being the real world. By joining together these two worlds the reader constantly has a feeling of obscurity which adds ambiguity to the story. Here the reader does not know if what just happened was a figment of the imagination, an illusion or certainty.

### **Binary oppositions**

The narrative of a dream can also be seen as a signifier through which Brown experiences the reality of his past, so that it becomes a means for him to define and understand his present. So , here again, we can see *binary oppositions* at work: dream/reality, present/past, Knowledge/ignorance. The dream expands Browns awareness to include some of the reality which surrounds him, yet of which he has no knowledge. "Dreaming involves a certain type of knowledge, one linked to the ordinarily invisible world. As such dreams are sources of knowledge and channels of communication between multiple worlds that feed back dynamic information." (Riches, 1995, p.49) Thus, the dream and Brown's acceptance of what happened in it, becomes crucial

in the development of his personality, as the dream could be indicative of " a quest for knowledge of self consciousness on the part of the protagonist" ( Wright, 1992, pp. 216-217). The dream presented is extremely beneficial to the development of the story as it gives the reader a new view of the plot itself. At the same time, however, it becomes difficult to determine how much of the dream has been affected by the character, and how much is pure fantasy. Young Goodman Brown himself, cannot determine whether the events actually occurred, or if they simply were created in his troubled mind while he slept.

Yet, it is precisely this dream which haunts Brown for the rest of his life, as he can no longer accept the people in his life for what they appear to be, and cannot forget that he saw them all at the witch-meeting. He lets this single disillusioning experience govern his entire outlook on others, and thus fails his test and turns his entire life into one of darkness and wretchedness. Because of the ambiguity of the situation, where one cannot be sure of the validity of the dream, it becomes difficult of analyze and decode Brown's character. It is therefore impossible to come to any absolute conclusions regarding the nature of Young Goodman Brown as one cannot accurately assess what has happened to him, and the consequences of those events.

However, beyond any doubt, in this story, we see a struggle between good and evil. This clash between the two sides, and the

dishonesty that causes bewilderment for Goodman Brown, is the source of worry all through. In “Young Goodman Brown,” every character’s mannerisms , the setting, the diction, the images, and even the colors referred to, have double meanings and are symbolic to the main *binary oppositions* of either good or evil, reality or fantasy, as the structuralists would declare.

In conclusion, I think that upon a more comprehensive examination, it becomes obvious that Hawthorne is assessing both parts of the binary, declaring that absolute goodness, or absolute evil, do not exist. To a certain extent, the dilemma of Young Goodman Brown appears to suggest that both good and evil are within society , a kind of created principles or standards proposed to regulate humanity. Goodman Brown praises goodness, placing it side by side with evil all throughout the narrative; yet, what is ironic is the fact that Hawthorne presents all the village people as deeply affected by evil in the eyes of Goodman Brown .In attacking the honesty and integrity of the sacred characters in particular, Hawthorne is making a broad evaluation of decency, honesty and honorable principles as a whole. The author makes use of the fictional character, Goodman Brown, to assess critically the degree by which morality is measured.

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