Goodman Brown’s Night Journey—Into the Mind

In *Convivio*, book two, Dante has elucidated the definition of an allegory. Dante thinks by means of four senses, one can understand and expound writings’ meaning. The first sense he mentions is literal, and this is the most common sense we practice when we first read a composition. The meaning we get through the literal sense is limited because we only see the surface of the letters. On the contrary to the literal sense, the allegorical sense seeks to explore meanings underneath letters. “The next is called the allegorical, and this is the one that is hidden beneath the cloak of these fables, and is a truth hidden beneath a beautiful fiction” (249). And Dante also uses an allusion to mythology of Orpheus to exemplify allegorical sense. In Roman poet Ovid’s poem, Orpheus uses lyre, a kind of instrument, to tame wild beasts and to move trees and rocks. However, if we look deeper into the meaning between lines, we can make such interpretation as what Dante has made: “The wise man with the instrument of his voice makes cruel hearts grow tender and humble and moves to his will those who do not devote their lives to knowledge and art; and those who have no rational life whatsoever are almost like stones” (249). In this way, allegory provides
another aspect of view to its readers or we can say allegory unfolds the truth concealed by the writers. Now, I want to use allegorical sense, which Dante has mentioned in *Convivio*, as my key to unlock Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown.”

When you read “Young Goodman Brown” at the first time, you may find out that the first half part of the story is very similar to “The Little Red Riding Hood”. Both of their main characters have to pass through the forest in order to accomplish their missions or a trial. But the trial which Goodman Brown has experienced is not a common adventure we read in other stories. It is a test for Goodman Brown’s volition whether he chooses to adhere to his faith or turn his back on it. The elder Goodman Brown meets in the forest plays the same role as the wolf in *The Little Red Riding Hood*. Their function is to examine the characters—like the hurdles on the track field.

Aside from the plot of this tale being a type of allegory, there are other elements which also comprise allegorical sense. In this tale, there are many allegorical names by which the readers could easily recognize and understand the meaning the characters represent. Goodman Brown is the main character of this tale and what makes it immediately catches the readers’ attention is his allegorical name. On seeing his name, the first message the readers get is probably that this man is a kind, benevolent fellow, and he must be an upright and honest person. However, after a
deep analysis of this story, we have the new interpretation of his name. Goodman Brown, in fact, can be anyone. He can be you, can be I or anybody else. Goodman is the best representative of people who have lost their beliefs in the true, the good and the beautiful things on earth; they would rather submit themselves to the evil sides. Many of us are simply a copy of Goodman Brown, swaying back and forth between truth and wrong. Sometimes we can make a righteous decision but other times we are like Goodman Brown destroyed by our own human nature. At the assembly, Devil, who disguised as an old man, says to Goodman Brown, “Evil is the nature of mankind. Evil must be your only happiness.” That is to say—evil dwells in everyone’s mind. Like Goodman Brown, people usually think the depravity of human must be caused by evil other than themselves. Here, the story allegorizes that it is our human nature that results in the fatal mistake. R.H. Fogle writes, “Goodman Brown, a simple and pious nature, is wrecked as a result of disappearance of the fixed poles of his belief. His orderly cosmos dissolves into chaos as church and state, the twin pillars of the society, are hinted to be rotten, with their foundations undermined.”(Hurley) When Goodman Brown suddenly realizes that all his fellow men, including his mentor of youth, the priest in the church…, have become converts of Devil, he is in an extremely desperate state, not knowing who to believe ever after. So he falls after attending the gathering in the forest at that night, losing all his faith.
And how about his wife Faith? Faith is an allegorical idea. Her name automatically draws a self-portrait image in front of the readers as well. In a religious sense, the word “Faith” denotes the strong belief in God but it could also be confidence or trust on someone. In “Young Goodman Brown,” Faith implies both the above meanings. At the beginning of Goodman Brown’s journey, he leaves his newlywed wife Faith with reluctance. In fact, Faith here is used to imply his invulnerable conviction to the God, who prevents Goodman Brown from deviation. So when Goodman Brown has to accomplish his errand by entering the forest, where devils may lies, he is unwilling to leave his God behind; that is his moral guide. However, at the moment he departs from his wife Faith, he is inevitably doomed to depravity. In fact, if we scrutinize Goodman Brown’s belief carefully, the drawbacks are quite clear. Goodman Brown thinks if he can retain his Faith, he can attain salvage. He thinks to himself, “Well, she's a blessed angel on earth; and after this one night, I'll cling to her skirts and follow her to Heaven.” His flaw is to rely on his own belief too much; he thinks that with his faith in God he could enter Heaven. But all his faith does not truly arise from his heart. His notion of morality is influenced by other people so he often uses others as a ruler to measure himself. To him, the worst thing is that all his models are indeed a bunch of fake. So Goodman Brown’s Faith is indeed his weakness which reveals his feeble human nature. Owing to his inherent defect, he
gradually looses what he believes before as he begins to doubt his own faith—whether there is goodness or not? When his voice “My Faith is gone!” penetrates through the darkness of the forest and soars above the gloom sky, we know that Goodman Brown finally enters into consciousness; however, he looses his confidence in believing that there is still goodness dwelling in mankind. Just like what Richard Harter Forgle has mentioned, “The Communion of Sin is, in fact, the faithful counterpart of a grave and pious ceremony at a Puritan meetinghouse…Satan resembles some grave divine, and the initiation into sin takes the form of baptism” (Paul J. Hurley).

Into the forest, Goodman Brown experiences another different kind of baptism, which brings him to the dark side of his soul where also lies the original sin. Or we could also consider the forest as a part of Goodman Brown’s subconscious mental condition. The farther the forest he enters, the darker his mind becomes. Forest, in fact, is not a real object; it is a mental condition emerging when one sinks into a complicated dilemma therefore his consciousness is becoming weaker and weaker. So the journey Goodman Brown has undergone may just be a dream or we can say that it is a course one must take during his life to seek truth from self.

Forest has always been a place full of challenges and variation. In this allegory, Goodman Brown tries to pass through this forest with his faith remaining intact.
However, he fails to keep his promise which he gives to his wife when he leaves. But what results in Goodman Brown’s doom—whose "dying hour was gloom"? Is it because his determination is not strong enough for him to pass the examination or is it all related to his inherent flaw? I think both are the reasons for Goodman Brown’s failure. When he is about to head for his journey, Faith once tries to stop him but her persuasion is in vain. That apparently shows that Goodman Brown’s faith is not firm. But the fatal cause is his inherent flaw in his character. He is a man who is self-assured for having strong faith in God and who places himself at a moralist status. Therefore he denies evil which is also a part of mankind. As he finds out this fact, the perfection of world dwelling in his mind breaks into pieces and he becomes helpless without hope. “Can this be so!” Goodman Brown cries in his mind repeatedly. If we analyze Goodman Brown from a different perspective, he is not a pure saint among sinners. On the contrary, he is a feeble and ignorant man among every man. His morality actually is a shield to protect him from seeing the real world—where good and evil both exist. And his extreme intolerance of others’ wrongdoing has already backfired on himself. He eventually becomes an outsider of the society. We can only conclude that his entire destiny is destroyed by his own personality, not by what he calls “Evil.”
This allegorical short story has its implicated educational meaning. Sometimes we rely on our inherent prejudice and therefore we could not see a thing of all its dimensions. Goodman Brown refuses to acknowledge that except goodness, there is a forest dwelling in every one’s mind. The forest is the dark side of human soul and every one during his or her lifetime definitely will enter into their forests to struggle between evil and good. During many times of mental struggle we, therefore, can form our personality and our mind will become more mature so that we can fit in the society. Hawthorne artfully allegorizes Goodman Brown’s night journey as an innate struggle of self. And he further points out that the doom of oneself is not always arising from external factors. Sometimes, it is a person’s ignorance and narrow capacity for tolerance that makes him perish.

Work Cited