

“Young Goodman Brown” by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Langston Hughes’s Essay “Salvation”

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Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “[Young Goodman Brown](#)” and Langston Hughes’s “Salvation” both portray a crisis of faith shaped by a community’s religious expectations. Hawthorne’s fictional Puritan travels into a forest and believes he sees respected neighbors, ministers, family members, and his wife participating in a satanic ceremony. Hughes’s autobiographical narrator remembers a childhood revival at which adults expect him to experience Jesus visibly and immediately. In both works, the protagonist confronts a gap between public religious language and private reality. (Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown”; Hughes, “Salvation”)

The similarities are important, but the two works should not be collapsed into the same moral. Goodman Brown responds to uncertainty by condemning everyone and living in permanent distrust. Hughes recognizes that he lied under social pressure and describes the pain of a child whose literal expectation was not fulfilled. Hawthorne’s story is an ambiguous allegory about sin, suspicion, and interpretation; Hughes’s essay is a precise critique of coercive testimony and the way adults misunderstand a child. This comparison examines innocence, ritual, community pressure, symbolism, narrative form, race, and the different consequences of lost certainty. (Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown”; Hughes, “Salvation”)

Different Genres

“Young Goodman Brown,” first published in 1835, is a short story with allegorical names, dreamlike events, and deliberate uncertainty. Readers cannot know conclusively whether the forest ceremony occurred, whether Brown dreamed it, or whether the experience externalized his own fear and desire. (Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown”)

“Salvation,” published in Hughes’s memoir *The Big Sea*, is a personal essay. Hughes reconstructs a childhood event with irony and adult understanding. The essay’s power depends on the reader recognizing what the twelve-year-old narrator could not yet explain: the adults use “seeing Jesus” metaphorically, while he waits for a literal appearance. (Hughes, “Salvation”)

Innocence and the Word “Young”

Hawthorne’s title emphasizes youth, but Goodman Brown is married and makes an intentional decision to leave Faith and enter the forest. His “youth” suggests moral inexperience rather than childhood innocence. He believes goodness requires purity and has not learned to live with human imperfection. (Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown”)

Hughes is literally a child. His vulnerability comes from trust in adults and language. The revival’s expectations are not merely abstract ideas; they are imposed by relatives, church members, song, prayer, and public waiting. The comparison should preserve this difference in power. (Hughes, “Salvation”)

Faith as Person and Belief

Hawthorne names Brown’s wife Faith, making her both a character and a symbol. Brown leaves “Faith” behind when he begins the journey. Later, a pink ribbon falls from the sky, and he cries, “My Faith is gone!” The sentence refers simultaneously to his wife and his religious trust. (Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown”)

The symbolism is effective because Brown treats one apparent sign as proof that all goodness has disappeared. He moves from idealization to total despair. His faith was fragile because it depended on believing that certain people were without sin. (Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown”)

The Forest

The forest represents uncertainty, temptation, the unconscious, and a space outside public order. Puritan New England historically associated wilderness with danger while also depending on land taken from Indigenous peoples. Hawthorne uses the setting to expose fear beneath the community’s righteous surface. (Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown”)

Brown meets figures who resemble his father, grandfather, catechism teacher, minister, and deacon. The path suggests that evil is not an invasion from outside the community; it is connected to its history and authority. (Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown”)

The Revival in “Salvation”

Hughes’s revival is not a secret forest but a public sanctuary. The congregation sings, prays, and watches children who are expected to come forward. The social pressure is visible and collective. (Hughes, “Salvation”)

Auntie Reed has told Hughes that salvation brings a light and the presence of Jesus. She likely speaks from sincere religious understanding, not an intention to deceive. The problem is that the metaphor is not translated for the child, and the ritual allows little space for uncertainty. (Hughes, "Salvation")

Westley and Social Learning

Hughes watches another boy, Westley, become tired of waiting. Westley uses profanity and then goes forward despite not reporting the expected experience. Nothing terrible happens to him. This teaches Hughes that the public act, rather than an inner transformation, will satisfy the adults. (Hughes, "Salvation")

Westley's choice is not presented as theological argument. It is practical resistance to boredom and pressure. Hughes then faces a painful dilemma: continue waiting and embarrass the congregation or imitate an action he believes is false. (Hughes, "Salvation")

Public Ritual and Private Experience

Both works ask whether communal ritual can guarantee inner faith. The forest ceremony in Hawthorne's story appears to reveal a hidden truth about everyone. The revival in Hughes's essay asks children to display a truth the community already expects. (Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown"; Hughes, "Salvation")

Ritual is not portrayed as meaningless in itself. It can create belonging and shared interpretation. The danger arises when a community treats outward performance as transparent proof of inner condition. Brown believes the ceremony proves universal corruption; the revival congregation believes standing proves salvation.

Hypocrisy

Hawthorne's story is often read as an exposure of religious hypocrisy. Respected people may participate in evil while maintaining public reputations. Yet Brown's conclusion is itself morally flawed. Even if the vision is true, learning that people sin does not justify refusing love, worship, or community forever. (Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown")

In "Salvation," the clearest hypocrisy is the child's forced public performance, but Hughes does not portray the congregation as knowingly fraudulent. The adults are joyful because they misunderstand his action. The essay criticizes pressure and language more than it accuses every believer of secret evil. (Hughes, "Salvation")

Literal and Metaphorical Interpretation

Hughes waits to see Jesus because adults have described salvation as an event he can perceive. His literal reading reveals the responsibility adults have when speaking to children. Religious metaphors about light, presence, and rebirth can be powerful, but they can also confuse when presented as immediate sensory promises. (Hughes, “Salvation”)

Brown makes the opposite interpretive error. He treats an ambiguous dreamlike vision as literal and complete evidence. Both characters suffer because they cannot hold symbol and uncertainty together. (Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown”; Hughes, “Salvation”)

Shame

Hughes’s decision is driven by shame. He sees the congregation waiting, hears prayer focused on him, and does not want to disappoint his aunt. After pretending to be saved, he cries at home because he believes he has deceived everyone. (Hughes, “Salvation”)

The adults misinterpret his tears as spiritual joy. This final misunderstanding is central. Hughes is surrounded by people yet emotionally alone because the ritual provides no language for what actually happened.

Fear and Suspicion

Brown’s dominant emotion after the forest is suspicion. He recoils from the minister, hears hymns as sinful, rejects Faith, and dies without hope. Hawthorne does not celebrate this as mature insight. Brown becomes incapable of distinguishing evidence from projection. (Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown”)

His tragedy is not merely that others may be sinful. It is that he cannot accept complexity. A faith that requires perfect human representatives becomes hatred when those representatives fail.

Narrative Voice

Hawthorne’s third-person narrator stays close to Brown while maintaining irony. The narrator reports extraordinary events but preserves uncertainty. Symbolic names and gothic imagery prevent the story from becoming a realistic record. (Hawthorne, “Young Goodman Brown”)

Hughes uses first-person retrospective narration. The adult writer allows the child’s logic to unfold without mocking him. Simple details—the hot church, the waiting children, Westley’s impatience, the aunt’s expectation—make the institutional pressure visible. (Hughes, “Salvation”)

Ambiguity in Hawthorne

The narrator asks whether Brown merely dreamed. No answer is provided. The uncertainty is not a flaw to be solved. It tests the reader: does moral life depend on certainty about other people's hidden souls? (Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown")

If the ceremony was a dream, Brown destroys his life through interpretation. If it was real, he still chooses a response of pride and despair rather than mercy. Either way, his reaction remains the story's ethical center.

Clarity in Hughes

Hughes's essay is clearer about what happened: he expected a literal vision, waited, copied Westley, and later cried. The ambiguity concerns what the experience ultimately meant. His statement that he no longer believed in Jesus captures the child's immediate conclusion, but the adult memoirist's artistic return to the scene shows continuing engagement with religion, memory, and truth. (Hughes, "Salvation")

The essay should not be reduced to a permanent theological confession. It is an account of how forced certainty can produce doubt.

Community

Both protagonists are formed by community. Brown defines goodness through the reputations of his neighbors. Hughes understands salvation through his aunt and church. Neither crisis happens in private isolation. (Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown"; Hughes, "Salvation")

Community can support faith, but it can also make doubt dangerous. A healthier community would allow confession of uncertainty. Brown needs a way to acknowledge human sin without abandoning love. Hughes needs permission to say that he did not experience what others described.

Race and Historical Context

Hawthorne writes about Puritan ancestry and inherited guilt within nineteenth-century New England. The story refers to persecution, violence against Indigenous people, and religious authority, though it filters these through allegory. (Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown")

Hughes writes from a Black church context in which worship, testimony, music, and revival had deep communal importance. The church historically provided spiritual, social, and political support under racism. Critiquing one coercive experience should not erase that role. The essay's tension is powerful

precisely because the community's care and pressure coexist. (Hughes, "Salvation"; Miller, Langston Hughes)

Gender and Symbolic Burden

Faith is given limited interior life in Hawthorne's story. Brown uses her as a symbol of his own belief, then punishes the actual woman for what he thinks he saw. His inability to ask or listen reveals how idealization can deny another person's humanity.

Auntie Reed also carries symbolic weight, but Hughes portrays her affection. Blaming her alone, as the original analysis does, is too simple. The problem belongs to a wider ritual system and to communication across adult and child perspectives.

Different Endings

Brown's crisis becomes permanent. He lives many years as a "stern, a sad, a darkly meditative" man and receives a gloomy burial. Time does not produce reflection or reconciliation. (Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown")

Hughes's childhood night is painful, but the adult writer transforms it into literature. By narrating the event, he recovers agency and makes private shame understandable to readers. Writing becomes a form of interpretation unavailable to the child. (Hughes, "Salvation")

What Each Work Says About Faith

Hawthorne warns against a faith built on denial of human complexity. Brown wants saints and finds possible sinners, so he concludes goodness is impossible. His moral absolutism resembles the evil he believes he has discovered because it destroys compassion. (Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown")

Hughes warns against demanding testimony before experience. The revival values a visible result so strongly that a child learns to lie. Faith cannot be produced on schedule through collective pressure. (Hughes, "Salvation")

Conclusion

"Young Goodman Brown" and "Salvation" both depict a crisis of faith created through the interaction of individual expectation and religious community. Each protagonist discovers a gap between public performance and private reality. Symbols of light, darkness, forest, Faith, salvation, and testimony make that gap visible. (Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown"; Hughes, "Salvation")

Their outcomes are different. Brown interprets ambiguity as proof of universal evil and chooses lifelong isolation. Hughes submits to pressure, feels shame, and later writes with clarity about the adults' misunderstanding. Hawthorne's story asks whether suspicion is more destructive than the sin it seeks to expose. Hughes's essay asks what happens when a community cannot hear a child say, "Nothing happened." Together, the works suggest that mature faith—religious or interpersonal—requires room for doubt, honest language, human imperfection, and interpretations that do not turn uncertainty into despair or performance into truth. (Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown"; Hughes, "Salvation")

Works Cited

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