Nathanial Hawthorn’s *Young Goodman Brown*

In Nathanial Hawthorn’s *Young Goodman Brown* the struggle of the main character can be understood through the Freudian ideas of the id, the ego, and the superego. The main character Goodman Brown is representative of the ego because he tries to follow the social structure of the puritan town that has been a central part of his life and rejects his urges to join in the unholy congregation. His belief that being righteous in his current life will lead to greater rewards keeps him from joining the congregation. The townspeople led by the character referred to as, “old Goodman Brown” (6) represent the id because they ignore social rules and join together, sinners and saints alike, to celebrate the initiation of a new member. Their only concern is with fulfilling their own needs and they ignore any societal structures that would get in the way of their pleasure. The Superego is represented by the social structure that guides the normal lives the townspeople live during the day. By ignoring their normal tendencies they mask their wickedness behind a presentation of culturally accepted behaviors. Thinking of the story in these terms can be helpful in understanding the ending. When Young Goodman Brown, the ego, tries to unify the opposing realities of the towns real nature, the id, with the presentation of a normal puritan town, the superego, he suffers from feelings of repression and becomes, “A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful” (13) man. In this way Freud’s theories of psychoanalysis can be helpful in understanding that the story is about the damaging psychological effects of repression. Brown repression is caused by the split between the ways he feels he should act, represented in
the story through piety, and the way that he feels people really want to act, represented in the story by the hedonistic congregation of the townspeople. His inability to merge these two ideas is what leads him to becoming repressed and detached from society.

Young Goodman Brown’s role as the moderator between desires and social obligations becomes evident early on in the story. As he steps out of his house he is thinking, “Well, she’s a blessed angel on earth, and after this one night I’ll cling to her skits and follow her to heaven” (3). Readers can see that he is already struggling with the split between his desires and his obligations. Even though he does not really want to leave he is able to, “With this excellent resolve for the future” (3). Brown is able to delay his immediate gratification because of the knowledge that he will be able to satisfy it in the future. Brown’s need to hide his inner desires is seen again when he hears horses riding by in the forest. Readers find Brown ducking into the woods as he is, “conscious of the guilty purpose that had brought him thither” (7). Readers can see that Brown is motivated by the social stigma against people traveling in the woods. He is willing to exchange his current discomfort for the pleasures he will receive from remaining an upstanding member of the community. Both these actions show that Brown acts in the role of the Ego because he attempts to mediate between his desires and his social obligations.

In contrast to this, the strange man he meets, sometimes referred to as old Goodman Brown, represents the id of the story because he is completely motivated by immediate gratification. Old Goodman Brown’s basic nature is revealed in the description, “And yet, thought the older person was as simply clad as the younger, and as simple in manner too, he had an indescribable air of one who knew the world, and who not would have felt abashed at the governor’s supper table or in King William’s court, were it possible that his affairs should call him thither” (4). Unlike the young Goodman Brown the old man has no hang-ups about social
settings. Whether walking through the woods or dining at the King’s table old Goodman Brown is equally comfortable. This shows that he is not concerned with his presentation in society but only in following his own desires. The difference between the old and young Goodman Browns can be seen again when they meet Goody Cloyse in the woods. Young Goodman Brown immediately feels the need to hide his presence because, “she might ask whom I was consorting with and whither I was going” (6). Instead of acting in a similar manner, in order to guard his reputation, the old Goodman Brown strolls up to her and even jokes with her about making potions, “Mingled with fine wheat and the fat of a new-born babe” (6). Once again this passage highlights the difference between Young Goodman Brown who is constantly striving to hide his inner desires to blend in with society and old Goodman Brown who acts however he wishes to, whenever he wants to.

Readers get a sense of Brown’s struggle between his desires to join the wickedness of the town and his need to remain true to his social structure when he watches the climax of the heathen gathering. When old Goodman Brown puts forth the command for the new imitates to step forward Brown feels, “a loathful brotherhood by the sympathy of all that was wicked in his heart” (11). Readers get the sense that part of Brown’s psych is pulling him towards joining in the unholy brotherhood. This struggle is highlighted even more when Brown approaches the inner circle of the meeting. Old Goodman brown declares that, “Depending upon one another’s hearts, ye had still hoped that virtue were not all a dream. Now ye are undeceived. Evil is the nature of mankind. Evil must be your only happiness” (12). Here readers encounter the main conundrum of the story. The question of whether all happiness stems from behavior that stands in opposition to the churches beliefs. Young Goodman Brown’s attempt to unify the desires he feels with the expectations of the society he lives in leads to him feeling repression.
Even though Brown does not know whether the congregation in the forest was a dream or reality it still affects his psyche just the same. Upon waking the next morning his entire worldview is changed by the events of the previous night. Whether or not the events were real does not matter because Brown’s eyes have been opened to the inner desires of the townspeople. He begins to view the townspeople’s actions as a mask that covers their evil natures. Upon the old minister coming up to him and blessing him Brown, “shrank away from the venerable saint as if to avoid an anathema” (12). Even when his wife approaches him he, “looked sternly and sadly into her face, and passed on without a greeting” (13). Brown finds himself unable to unite the inner desires of the townspeople with the social standards he is accustomed to. He is left feeling his nature repressed and, “A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man did he become from the night of that fearful dream.” (13). His repression leads to him becoming detached from the world around him. He no longer even enjoys the company of his family and finds himself, “Often, awakening suddenly at midnight, he shrank from the bosom of Faith; and at morning or eventide, when the family knelt down at prayer; he scowled and muttered to himself, and gazed sternly at his wife, and turned away” (13).

In the end Young Goodman Brown is left a hollow, empty man. His inability to merge the base desires he sees in himself and the townspeople with his social understanding of the world leads him to psychosis. Instead of confronting what he believes he saw or joining in the wickedness he represses his vision and removes himself from society. By looking at these events through the lens of Freudian psychology readers can see that there is a psychological explanation for his detachment at the end of the story. The disjoint between the inner desires of him, and possibly the townspeople, and the social expectations of his puritan town cause him to become repressed.