

the devil and tom walker by washington irving

the devil and tom walker by washington irving is a classic American short story that explores themes of greed, morality, and the supernatural. Written by Washington Irving, the tale is set in colonial New England and revolves around Tom Walker, a miserly man who makes a Faustian bargain with the devil. This story is renowned for its vivid portrayal of early American folklore and its moral lessons about the consequences of human avarice and corruption. In this article, we will analyze the plot, characters, themes, and symbolism found in the devil and tom walker by washington irving. Additionally, we will examine the historical context and literary significance of the story. The detailed exploration will provide a comprehensive understanding of why this narrative remains an important piece in American literature. The following sections will guide the discussion systematically for clarity and depth.

- Plot Summary of the Devil and Tom Walker
- Main Characters and Their Roles
- Themes and Moral Lessons
- Symbolism and Literary Devices
- Historical Context and Influence

Plot Summary of the Devil and Tom Walker

The devil and tom walker by washington irving tells the story of a greedy man named Tom Walker who encounters the devil in a swamp near Boston. The narrative begins with a description of a dark, foreboding swamp where Tom meets a mysterious figure known as Old Scratch, a representation of the devil. Old Scratch offers Tom a deal: in exchange for his soul, Tom can gain immense wealth by exploiting the riches hidden in the swamp. Initially, Tom's wife attempts to make the deal herself but mysteriously disappears after confronting the devil, leaving Tom to accept the bargain alone. As Tom becomes increasingly wealthy through unscrupulous moneylending and exploitation, he grows fearful of the consequences. Despite his attempts to repent and seek salvation, the devil ultimately claims his soul. The story concludes with Tom's sudden disappearance and the destruction of his ill-gotten wealth.

Key Events in the Story

The narrative is structured around several pivotal moments that highlight Tom's moral decline and the

supernatural elements at play:

- Tom's initial encounter with the devil in the swamp.
- His wife's attempt to strike her own bargain and her subsequent disappearance.
- Tom's rise to wealth through usury and greed.
- Tom's late attempts at religious repentance.
- The devil's eventual claim of Tom's soul and the destruction of his possessions.

Main Characters and Their Roles

The devil and Tom Walker by Washington Irving features a small but significant cast of characters whose interactions drive the plot and underscore the story's themes.

Tom Walker

Tom Walker is the protagonist, characterized by his greed, selfishness, and moral weakness. His willingness to sell his soul for wealth reflects the story's critique of avarice and corruption. Tom's hypocritical religiosity later in the tale underscores his superficial repentance and lack of genuine moral reform.

Old Scratch (The Devil)

Old Scratch personifies the devil and serves as the antagonist. He offers Tom the temptation of wealth at a grave cost. The devil's role is to expose human sinfulness and the consequences of moral compromise. His presence also introduces the supernatural element essential to the story's Gothic atmosphere.

Tom's Wife

Tom's wife is depicted as equally greedy and quarrelsome. Her attempt to negotiate with the devil herself and her abrupt disappearance signify the peril that comes with moral corruption. She acts as a catalyst for Tom's eventual acceptance of the devil's offer.

Themes and Moral Lessons

The devil and tom walker by washington irving is rich in themes that reflect the moral and social concerns of its time. The story's enduring relevance is largely due to its exploration of universal human flaws.

Greed and Materialism

Central to the story is the theme of greed. Tom's insatiable desire for wealth leads him to make a pact with the devil, illustrating how materialism can corrupt the soul. The narrative warns against the destructive power of avarice and the emptiness of ill-gotten riches.

Morality and Repentance

The story examines the possibility and limits of repentance. Tom's late and superficial attempts to reform highlight the consequences of delayed morality. The tale suggests that true repentance requires genuine change, not mere fear of punishment.

Supernatural Justice

Through the devil's intervention, the story advocates a form of supernatural justice. Those who engage in immoral behavior and exploit others ultimately face retribution. This reflects early American beliefs about divine judgment and the moral order.

Symbolism and Literary Devices

Washington Irving employs various symbols and literary techniques in the devil and tom walker by washington irving to enhance the story's meaning and impact.

The Swamp

The swamp where Tom meets the devil symbolizes moral decay and the unknown dangers lurking beneath the surface of society. Its dark, treacherous nature reflects the corrupt path Tom chooses.

Old Scratch as a Symbol

The figure of Old Scratch symbolizes temptation, evil, and the manifestation of human sin. His role as the devil is a direct allusion to the Faust legend, linking the story to a broader literary tradition.

Use of Irony

Irony permeates the story, especially in Tom's hypocritical behavior. For example, his sudden religious fervor contrasts sharply with his previous greed and cruelty, highlighting the story's critique of insincere morality.

Allegory

The entire narrative functions as an allegory about the dangers of greed and moral compromise. Each character and event represents broader ethical concepts, making the story a timeless moral tale.

Historical Context and Influence

The devil and tom walker by washington irving was published in the early 19th century, a period when American literature was beginning to establish its distinct identity. The story reflects social and cultural concerns of the time, particularly those related to capitalism, religion, and folklore.

Reflection of Early American Society

The story captures the Puritanical influence on early American culture, especially its emphasis on morality, sin, and redemption. The setting and characters also mirror the economic changes occurring in America, such as the rise of capitalism and the tensions it created.

Connection to the Faust Legend

Irving's tale is heavily inspired by the Faust legend, a European folklore about a man who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for knowledge and power. The devil and tom walker adapts this theme to an American context, emphasizing greed and material wealth instead of intellectual ambition.

Influence on American Literature

The story contributed to the development of the American Gothic genre and influenced later writers who explored themes of morality and the supernatural. It remains a significant work for its blend of folklore, social critique, and narrative style.

Key Historical Factors

- Puritan religious values and their impact on American morality.
- The emergence of capitalist economy and individualism.
- The use of folklore to address societal anxieties.
- The influence of European literary traditions on American storytelling.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the main theme of 'The Devil and Tom Walker' by Washington Irving?

'The Devil and Tom Walker' explores themes of greed, moral corruption, and the consequences of making deals with the devil. It serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of valuing wealth over integrity.

Who is the devil in 'The Devil and Tom Walker,' and what role does he play?

The devil, often referred to as Old Scratch in the story, is a mysterious figure who offers Tom Walker a Faustian bargain. He represents temptation and evil, leading Tom to make morally questionable decisions in exchange for wealth.

How does Tom Walker's character change throughout the story?

Initially portrayed as a greedy and miserly man, Tom Walker becomes increasingly obsessed with wealth after making a deal with the devil. Despite attempts to avoid his fate by becoming a hypocritical religious man, he ultimately faces the consequences of his choices.

What is the significance of the setting in 'The Devil and Tom Walker'?

The story is set in a dark, swampy forest near Boston, which symbolizes the murky moral landscape and the ominous presence of evil. The setting enhances the gothic atmosphere and reflects the themes of temptation and danger.

How does Washington Irving use symbolism in 'The Devil and Tom Walker'?

Irving uses symbolism such as the devil himself representing temptation and evil, the swamp symbolizing moral decay, and the hidden treasure symbolizing ill-gotten wealth. These symbols deepen the story's moral message about the perils of greed.

Additional Resources

1. *The Devil and Tom Walker* by Washington Irving

This classic short story follows Tom Walker, a miserly man who makes a Faustian bargain with the devil in exchange for wealth. Set in the early 18th century New England, it explores themes of greed, moral corruption, and the consequences of one's choices. Irving's tale is a dark, cautionary story steeped in folklore and supernatural elements.

2. *Faust* by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

A seminal work in German literature, "Faust" tells the story of Dr. Faust, a scholar who makes a pact with Mephistopheles (the devil) to gain unlimited knowledge and worldly pleasures. The play delves deeply into themes of ambition, temptation, redemption, and the human condition. It has inspired countless adaptations and remains a cornerstone in discussions about deals with the devil.

3. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde

Though not directly about the devil, this novel explores a Faustian bargain where Dorian Gray sells his soul for eternal youth and beauty. The story examines the consequences of vanity, moral decay, and the supernatural influence of corrupt desires. Wilde's gothic tale is a profound reflection on the price of hedonism and the loss of innocence.

4. *Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe

This Elizabethan tragedy dramatizes the story of Dr. Faustus, a scholar who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for magical powers and knowledge. The play is a powerful exploration of ambition, sin, and damnation, highlighting the dangers of overreaching human desires. Marlowe's work is a foundational piece in the tradition of devil-related literature.

5. *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov

In this surreal and satirical novel, the devil arrives in Soviet Moscow, causing chaos and challenging the complacency of society. The story intertwines themes of good versus evil, the nature of power, and the role of the supernatural in everyday life. Bulgakov's work is both a critique of totalitarianism and a profound metaphysical exploration.

6. *Young Goodman Brown* by Nathaniel Hawthorne

This short story follows Goodman Brown who ventures into the forest and encounters the devil, witnessing the hypocrisy and hidden evil within his community. It is a dark exploration of faith, doubt,

and the nature of evil lurking beneath the surface of society. Hawthorne's tale is a psychological and moral study of temptation and disillusionment.

7. *Paradise Lost* by John Milton

An epic poem that tells the biblical story of the Fall of Man, focusing heavily on Satan's rebellion and his role as a tragic anti-hero. Milton's depiction of the devil is complex, portraying him as both a tempter and a figure of pride and defiance. The work explores themes of free will, obedience, and the cosmic struggle between good and evil.

8. *The Damnation Game* by Clive Barker

This horror novel centers on a man who becomes entangled in a deadly pact with a demonic figure. Barker mixes elements of the supernatural, dark fantasy, and psychological horror to explore themes of fate, damnation, and the limits of human endurance. The story is a modern take on the classic devil's bargain trope with intense, vivid imagery.

9. *Something Wicked This Way Comes* by Ray Bradbury

A dark fantasy novel about two boys who confront a mysterious carnival led by a sinister figure resembling the devil. The story explores themes of temptation, fear, and the loss of innocence against a backdrop of magical realism. Bradbury's novel is a haunting meditation on the battle between good and evil in a small town.

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