

The Devil as a Symbol in “The Devil and Tom Walker”

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The story of a character selling his or her soul to the Devil is nothing new; this cultural motif exists in works ranging from classics like *Faust* to pop culture icons like *SpongeBob SquarePants*. Washington Irving draws on this idea in his short story “The Devil and Tom Walker,” in which the protagonist Tom Walker sells his soul to the Devil in return for the buried treasure of Kidd the Pirate. Throughout the story, Irving associates characters and the setting with Hell and the Devil in order to criticize Tom’s greedy and corrupt money-lending practices. Once Tom has agreed to give up his soul for wealth, there is no saving himself from the Devil no matter how hard he tries. Irving uses Hell and the Devil as symbols to express that greed can have terrible consequences.

The very idea of selling one’s soul to the Devil is a metaphor for disregarding what is right in order to gain what is desired, and Irving’s first step in developing that idea is to make the Devil himself a character. Irving introduces the Devil as a “great black man” (Irving, 1824, p. 3) who Tom Walker meets during an ill-fated shortcut through the woods. The man is “swarthy and dingy and begrimed with soot, as if he had been accustomed to toil among fires and forges” (Irving, 1824, p. 3). These subtle references to Hell help to characterize the black man as the Devil, who has obviously been spending his days surrounded by fire and brimstone. Moreover, the man eventually outright admits that he is the Devil, when he notes that “I amuse myself by presiding at the persecutions of quakers and anabaptists; I am the great patron and prompter of slave dealers, and the grand master of the Salem witches” (Irving, 1824, p. 4). The man even marks Tom Walker with a burned imprint of his fingerprint before he “seemed” to “go down, down, down, into the earth, until nothing but his head and shoulders could be seen” (Irving, 1824, p. 4). The literal descent down a hill is symbolic of the Devil’s descent into Hell. Irving

makes it clear that this man is the Devil early in the story to suspend disbelief later, when a deal with Devil has in fact taken place.

Because Irving has established the Devil as a character to whom Tom has sold his soul, he is able to shift the focus on to Tom's behavior later in the story. Once Tom agrees to give up his soul in exchange for Kidd the Pirate's treasure, he becomes a usurer in Boston. Although he acts like a friend to those who come to him, the "hardness of his terms" increases "in proportion to the distress of the applicant" (Irving, 1824, p. 8). As time goes on, Tom becomes wealthy as he "accumulated bonds and mortgages; gradually squeezed his customers closer and closer; and sent them at length dry as a sponge from his door" (Irving, 1824, p. 8). The more money Tom has, the more he desires, and he never has enough to satisfy his unending avarice. Even when he realizes that the time for him to repay his debt is approaching, he is unwilling to give up all that he has gained. Rather, he becomes "all of a sudden, a violent church goer" (Irving, 1824, p. 8) and tries to pray away his sin. Unfortunately for him, though, nothing he does can get him out of his deal, thus emphasizing the point that greed will be punished no matter what.

Irving's references to Hell continue throughout the remainder of the short story, particularly with the symbolism of fire. Irving uses these references to develop the idea that Tom will be punished for all eternity because of his greed. For instance, when the Devil arrives to finally collect Tom's debt, Irving writes that "a thunderbolt fell in that direction which seemed to set the whole forest in a blaze" (Irving, 1824, p. 10). Additionally, "the very next day his great house took fire and was burnt to the ground" (Irving, 1824, p. 10). Despite the wealth that Tom has built up during his time as a moneylender, his life and home end in ruins. By portraying such

a terrible fate for Tom Walker, Irving expresses that nothing good can come from the desire to accumulate mass amounts of wealth.

Washington Irving says it best when he writes, “Such was the end of Tom Walker and his ill gotten wealth. Let all griping money brokers lay this story to heart” (Irving, 1824, p. 10).

Through his depiction of the Devil as a man who would buy Tom’s soul for some treasure, Irving criticizes those who exploit others in order to obtain wealth for themselves. Tom is not able to escape the consequences of his actions and is rumored to spend frequent story nights haunting the forest where he first met Old Scratch. His punishment serves as a metaphor for the consequences that will come to all who let their avarice rule them.

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References

Irving, W. (1824). The Devil and Tom Walker. Retrieved from

[http://classiclit.about.com/od/devilandtomwalker/a/aa\\_deviltomwalker.htm](http://classiclit.about.com/od/devilandtomwalker/a/aa_deviltomwalker.htm)