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The Devil And Tom Walker By Washington Irving

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The Enduring Allure of Washington Irving's "The Devil and Tom Walker"

Few short stories from early American literature have managed to captivate readers quite like Washington Irving's "The Devil and Tom Walker." First published in 1824 as part of Irving's collection *Tales of a Traveller*, this darkly comedic tale has become a cornerstone of American folklore. At its heart, "The Devil and Tom Walker" is a cautionary narrative about greed, moral compromise, and the perilous allure of a Faustian bargain. The story follows Tom Walker, a miserly man living in colonial New England, who makes a deal with the devil—referred to as Old Scratch—for buried treasure in exchange for his soul. Irving weaves a masterful blend of satire, supernatural intrigue, and sharp social commentary, creating a work that remains profoundly relevant centuries after its publication. This article explores the story's plot, its memorable characters, its rich thematic layers, its historical context, and the literary devices that make it an enduring masterpiece of American Romanticism.

The Historical and Literary Context of the Tale

To fully appreciate "The Devil and Tom Walker," it is essential to understand the world from which it emerged. Washington Irving was writing during the early nineteenth century, a period that saw the rise of American Romanticism. This literary movement emphasized emotion, individualism, and a deep appreciation for the natural world, often contrasting it with the corrupting influence of society. Irving, often hailed as the father of American literature, was instrumental in forging a distinct national literary identity. He drew upon European traditions, particularly the German folktales of Faust, but grounded his narrative in a distinctly American setting. The story is set in 1727, near Boston, Massachusetts, a location steeped in Puritan history and its own legacy of moral rigidity and hidden hypocrisies. By setting his tale a century in the past, Irving could critique contemporary nineteenth-century American society—its rampant materialism, its get-rich-quick mentality, and its moral laxity—from a safe, historical distance. The story thus functions as a kind of moral fable for a young nation navigating the temptations of wealth and expansion.

A Close Look at the Key Characters

The characters in "The Devil and Tom Walker" are not deeply psychological portraits but rather archetypes, each serving a specific symbolic purpose within the narrative.

- Tom Walker: Tom is the quintessential miser: greedy, avaricious, and profoundly selfish. He values money above all else, including his own wife and his eternal soul. Irving describes him as a "meager, miserly fellow" who is willing to cheat anyone to acquire wealth. Tom's journey from a poor, discontented man to a wealthy, ruthless usurer illustrates the corrosive nature of unchecked greed. His lack of imagination and his inability to see beyond material gain make him a perfect dupe for Old Scratch's temptations.
- Old Scratch (The Devil): The devil in this story is not a terrifying, fire-breathing monster but a cunning,

almost businesslike figure. Irving depicts him as a "great black man" with a "pair of great red eyes" and a forked tail, but he also has an air of dark civility. He is a dealmaker, a land speculator, and a collector of debts. Instead of being purely evil, he is presented as a force that preys upon the moral weaknesses of humans—their greed, their pride, and their desperation. Old Scratch is also tied to the land itself; the trees in the swamp bear the names of corrupt local officials, hinting that the devil has already claimed many souls from the community.

- Mrs. Walker: Tom's wife is as miserly and bad-tempered as her husband. She is described as a "termagant" and a "shrew," and the two constantly scheme against each other. Her role is crucial in the narrative because it highlights the complete moral bankruptcy of the Walker household. When she attempts to make her own deal with the devil, she meets a gruesome end. Irving uses her character to reinforce the idea that greed destroys all human bonds, even those of marriage. Her fate also serves as a grim warning to Tom.

The Intricate Plot of Moral Compromise

The narrative arc of "The Devil and Tom Walker" is deceptively simple but powerfully effective. The story begins by establishing Tom's miserable existence and his even more miserable marriage. He and his wife are constantly hiding things from each other and plotting to get the upper hand. One evening, Tom takes a shortcut through a treacherous swamp near Boston, a place infamous for being haunted and dark. It is here, under a massive old oak tree, that he encounters Old Scratch.

The devil makes Tom an offer: Captain Kidd's buried treasure, hidden in the swamp, in exchange for certain conditions. Tom, intrigued but cautious, refuses initially. When he returns home and tells his wife, she is furious and insists he accept the deal. When Tom refuses, she sets off to make a bargain herself but never returns. Tom later finds her heart and liver wrapped in her apron, hanging in a tree—a grim sign that her own greed has led to her destruction. Now free from his nagging wife, Tom reluctantly agrees to the devil's terms. The conditions are typical of a Faustian bargain: Tom must become a usurer, charging exorbitant interest to desperate borrowers, and he must dedicate his life to serving the devil's interests. In return, he obtains the immense wealth of Captain Kidd.

Tom builds a new house in Boston and opens a counting house, becoming a ruthless moneylender. He grows wealthy and prosperous but also feared and despised. As he ages, a flicker of conscience—or perhaps just fear of damnation—stirs within him. He begins to attend church, pray loudly, and carry a Bible. He hopes to cheat the devil by becoming outwardly pious while continuing his usurious business. This hypocrisy, however, is his undoing. One day, a desperate speculator comes to Tom for a loan. When the man mentions that his business prospects look promising if only he can get money, Tom famously retorts, "The devil take me if I have made a farthing!" At that very moment, a black horse appears at his door. Tom is forced into the saddle and is carried away into a thunderstorm, never to be seen again. His office burns to the ground, and all his bonds and securities turn to cinders. In the end, the devil takes his soul, leaving behind nothing but the wreckage of a life lived for material gain.

Exploring the Major Themes

"The Devil and Tom Walker" is rich with thematic substance. Irving uses the story to explore several enduring ideas that remain relevant in contemporary society.

The most obvious theme is the destructive power of greed. Tom Walker's entire life is consumed by the pursuit of wealth. He sacrifices his marriage, his reputation, and ultimately his soul for money. Irving satirizes the American obsession with getting rich quick, a mentality that was already flourishing in the 1820s. The story serves as a stark warning that the pursuit of material wealth, when divorced from moral principles, leads to ruin. The treasure itself is worthless in the end; it buys Tom nothing but a few decades of hollow prosperity and an eternity of damnation.

Irving is also deeply critical of religious hypocrisy. Tom's sudden turn to piety in his old age is a sham. He attends church, prays loudly, and carries a Bible, but he continues to cheat his neighbors and charge usurious

interest. His religion is a performance, a desperate attempt to bargain with God just as he bargained with the devil. Irving exposes the gap between outward religious display and inner moral corruption. This critique extends to the larger society of Boston, which is shown to be full of corrupt politicians and clergymen whose names are carved on the trees in the swamp, waiting to be claimed by the devil.

The story is a classic example of the Faustian bargain, a theme that has resonated throughout Western literature. It explores the idea of trading one's soul for worldly power and wealth. Tom willingly makes the deal, believing he can somehow outsmart the devil. He represents the universal human tendency to seek shortcuts to success and happiness, often at a terrible cost. The story asks a profound question: what is the true price of success? For Tom, the answer is everything.

Irving's depiction of the natural world is significant. The swamp is a dark, foreboding place, filled with "dark cypresses" and "funereal pines." It is a place of moral ambiguity, far from the ordered world of the town. The devil is deeply connected to this landscape; he owns the trees that bear the names of the corrupt. This suggests a powerful link between the land and the moral state of the people who inhabit it. The wilderness is not a place of pastoral innocence but rather a repository of secrets and a witness to human corruption. This reflects a Romantic-era tension between the idealization of nature and the recognition of its darker, more mysterious aspects.

Literary Devices and Irving's Craftsmanship

Washington Irving was a master stylist, and this story showcases his literary skill. One of the most prominent devices he uses is **satire**. He ridicules not only Tom Walker but the entire society of Puritan New England, exposing its greed, its hypocrisy, and its moral decay. The story is also rich in **symbolism**. The swamp symbolizes moral darkness and temptation. The oak tree with the carved names represents the hidden corruption of the community. The black horse is an obvious symbol of death and the devil's agency. Tom's burning house and the ashes of his bonds symbolize the complete and utter destruction of a life built on immoral foundations.

Irving also employs a **frame narrative**, telling the story through the voice of a fictional historian named Diedrich Knickerbocker. This device adds a layer of authenticity and distance, allowing Irving to present his tale as a piece of local folklore. The tone of the story is a unique blend of the **gothic** and the **comic**. There are genuinely eerie moments, such as the discovery of Mrs. Walker's heart and liver, but there is also a dry, ironic humor in the way Irving describes Tom's miserliness and his hypocritical piety. This balance prevents the story from becoming simply a moral sermon; it remains an engaging and entertaining tale.

Lasting Influence and Modern Relevance

"The Devil and Tom Walker" has had a significant influence on American literature and culture. It is one of the earliest American stories to use the Faustian bargain theme effectively, and it paved the way for later explorations of greed and moral compromise, such as Stephen Vincent Benét's "The Devil and Daniel Webster." The story has been adapted into plays, films, and operas, and its core image of a man selling his soul for wealth has become a cultural shorthand for moral bankruptcy in the pursuit of success.

In the modern era, the story's themes are perhaps more relevant than ever. In a culture that often equates success with material wealth, that celebrates financial speculation, and that struggles with systemic inequality, "The Devil and Tom Walker" offers a timeless warning. It asks us to consider the cost of our ambitions. Are we, like Tom, willing to compromise our principles and our relationships for the sake of money? Are we building our lives on foundations that will ultimately turn to ashes? Irving's story does not offer easy answers, but it forces us to confront these uncomfortable questions. It remains a powerful, darkly humorous, and deeply insightful work that continues to speak to the human condition.

Conclusion: A Timeless Tale of a Soul's True Worth

Washington Irving's "The Devil and Tom Walker" is far more than a simple ghost story or a moral fable. It is a sophisticated work of satire, a sharp critique of American materialism, and a profound exploration of the human soul's struggle with greed and hypocrisy. Through its memorable characters, its richly symbolic setting, and its darkly comic tone, the story has secured its place as a classic of American literature. The tale of Tom Walker's rise and fall serves as a stark reminder that some bargains are too costly to ever be worth making. In the end, Tom gets exactly what he asked for—wealth and power—but he loses everything that truly matters. Irving leaves readers with a haunting question that lingers long after the final sentence: in the relentless pursuit of more, what are we willing to sacrifice, and is it ever enough?

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