

## Overview: "Young Goodman Brown"

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### Introduction

"Young Goodman Brown," written in 1835 by Nathaniel Hawthorne, is known for being one of literature's most gripping portrayals of seventeenth-century Puritan society. The tale first appeared in the April issue of *New England Magazine* and was later included in Hawthorne's popular short story collection, *Mosses from An Old Manse*, in 1846.

"Young Goodman Brown" tells the tale of a young Puritan man drawn into a covenant with the Devil. Brown's illusions about the goodness of his society are crushed when he discovers that many of his fellow townspeople, including religious leaders and his wife, are attending a Black Mass. At the end of the story, it is not clear whether Brown's experience was nightmare or reality, but the results are nonetheless the same. Brown is unable to forgive the possibility of evil in his loved ones and as a result spends the rest of his life in desperate loneliness and gloom.

Though a work of fiction, "Young Goodman Brown" is widely considered to be one of the most effective literary works to address the hysteria surrounding the Salem Witch Trials of 1690. Hawthorne is also remembered for helping to establish the short story as a respected form of literature and as a proponent of instilling morals and lessons into his writing.

### Plot

"Young Goodman Brown" opens with Young Goodman Brown about to embark on an evening's journey. His young wife, Faith, fearful for some unknown reason, beseeches him to delay his journey. Goodman Brown, however, stresses that he has a task that must be accomplished before sunrise, and so the newlyweds reluctantly part. As he walks down the street, Goodman Brown chides himself for leaving Faith while he goes on his journey and resolves that, after this night, he will stay by the side of his good and pious wife. Pleased with himself, Goodman Brown then hurries through the forest to accomplish some unknown task.

Deeper in the forest Goodman Brown spies an old man, who is actually the Devil in disguise, waiting for him. Goodman Brown blames Faith for making him late. The older man, who has a curious resemblance to Goodman Brown, carries a staff which resembles a black snake. When the older man urges Goodman Brown to take the staff to ease his walk, Goodman Brown expresses second thoughts and his intention to go home. The older man convinces Goodman Brown to walk with him, however, and listen to the reasons why he should continue. Goodman Brown agrees and murmurs that his forefathers, good honest Christians, would never go on such a walk.

To his surprise, Brown finds this is not true. His companion tells him that he is well acquainted with the Brown family and that he helped Brown's father and grandfather commit acts such as the punishment of religious dissenters and the massacre of Indians. While Goodman Brown expresses surprise, his companion continues to speak of the good Christians of New England with whom he is acquainted: deacons, town leaders, even the governor. Goodman Brown is amazed but tells his companion that were he to continue on this journey, he still would not be able to meet the eye of his minister. Hearing this, the older man breaks into a fit of laughter. The two men then see Goody Cloyse, the old woman who serves as Goodman Brown's moral adviser. Not wanting to explain who he is with and where he is going, Goodman Brown hides in the woods. Again, Goodman Brown is surprised; the woman knows his companion, who has now taken on the appearance of Goodman Brown's grandfather. The two older people talk of a witch's recipe and the meeting that will take place this evening. Goodman Brown realizes that Goody Cloyse is a witch.

The two men continue walking through the forest. At a hollow in the road, Goodman Brown refuses to go any further, declaring he would rather be on the side of Faith than Goody Cloyse. His companion leaves him to think over the matter. Goodman Brown realizes that his decision to stop will enable him to meet his minister and deacon with a clear conscience. As he continues these comforting meditations, a carriage passes by on the road. Two men, who reveal themselves to be the minister and the deacon, speak of the evening's meeting and the young woman who will be joining. After the carriage has passed, Goodman Brown feels faint as he realizes that these men, too, are in communion with the Devil. Now he questions whether or not heaven really exists. Yet his love for Faith gives him the willpower to resist going to the meeting.

While he is lifting his hands to pray, however, he hears Faith's voice. He calls out for her, and she answers with a scream. He realizes that Faith is going to the meeting, and he decides to attend the meeting too because all good is now gone. Soon he reaches a clearing with a crude altar surrounded by the "saints" and "sinners" of Salem.

While the Devil's congregation sings an evil hymn rejoicing in sin, Brown waits, hoping that he can find Faith. At a call for the new members he steps forward, and Faith is led forward by two women. A dark figure speaks of sin. He commands the newlyweds to look at each other and then declares that they now know virtue is but a dream and evil is the nature of mankind. Goodman Brown cries out to Faith to resist this evil.

He never finds out, however, if Faith does resist. As soon as the words are out of his mouth, Goodman Brown finds himself alone in the forest. The next morning he returns to Salem. Everywhere he goes he sees people who attended the meeting, but he turns away from them. He even turns from Faith.

Though Goodman Brown never finds out whether or not he dreamed the meeting in the forest, the experience still has a profound effect on him. After that night, he becomes a stern, sad, and distrustful man. He rejects the faith he once had in his religion and even rejects his own wife. At his death, no hopeful words are carved upon his tombstone. He has lived a life of gloom, seeing sinners and blasphemers everywhere he looked.

## Characters

**Young Goodman Brown** : Much of this story's extensive body of criticism centers on its title character, whose name suggests he represents the average man. Brown makes his journey into the dark forest because he is curious and even tempted by the darker side of life. His brush with evil, however, leaves a permanently negative mark. Critics agree that whether the Black Mass really occurred or was dreamed, its impression on Brown is very real indeed.

At the beginning of the story, Brown appears confident in his ability to choose between good and evil, but once he stands before the Devil's altar, he can no longer believe that good always prevails. He becomes a profoundly disillusioned man, who sees wickedness everywhere, even in those closest to him. Some critics have interpreted Brown's resulting distrust and isolation as the result of a guilty conscience; he cannot forgive himself or others for hidden sinfulness. In the end, Brown is unable to accept the duality of human nature—that a person can possess both good and evil qualities—and for this he suffers.

**Faith Brown** : Faith Brown serves an allegorical purpose in this story. It is Faith that Brown leaves behind, presumably for one night, in order to keep his appointment with the Devil. Explaining to the old man why he is late Brown says, "Faith kept me back a while." She represents the force of good in the world. Thus, when Brown perceives that she too has been corrupted, he shouts "My Faith is gone!" and rushes madly toward the witches' gathering.

The pink ribbons that decorate Faith's cap have drawn more critical attention than any other symbol in the story. On one hand they have been said to represent female sexuality, while on the other, innocence. Or, they may merely signify the ornament of a sweet and cheerful wife. Whatever their purpose, Faith's pink ribbons are integral to the story's structure. They are mentioned three times: at the beginning when Brown is leaving Faith behind, near the climax when Brown sees a pink ribbon floating down from the heavens, and at the end when Brown is greeted by his wife upon his return.

**The Devil** : The figure of the Devil in "Young Goodman Brown" appears as an older—though not ancient—man who carries a twisted, snake-like staff. He seems to resemble Brown somewhat, and it has been suggested that he is a reflection of the darker side of Brown's nature. The devil claims to know both Brown's grandfather, who participated in the persecution of Quakers, and Brown's father, who took part in an attack on an Indian village. Similar evil deeds were perpetrated in real life by Hawthorne's ancestors, and the author's alignment of his forefathers with the Devil suggests his feelings of guilt concerning his family history.

**Goody Cloyse, the Minister, and Deacon Gookin** : All three of these characters serve as dramatic examples of the wickedness and hypocrisy that may hide in the souls of those who appear most virtuous. These three are distinguished from among the crowd of townfolk at the gathering because they represent a standard of piety and godliness that is destroyed for Brown by his experience. Both Goody Cloyse and Deacon Gookin were real people who were involved in the Salem Witch Trials of 1692.

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