

# Literature review on young goodman brown

[Art & Culture](#), [Symbolism](#)



## " Young Goodman Brown" - Symbolism

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story " Young Goodman Brown," the titular character is a pious, faithful man in Salem, Massachusetts who leaves his wife to run a mysterious errand out in the forest.. Along the way, he encounters many different people and situations along the way, eventually resulting in a horrific dream that shows the fallibility of humankind and the ineffectiveness of Christianity. Hawthorne tells the tale of a naive, faithful young man who begins his fall from grace and acknowledging the presence of evil in the world, especially in other people. The story is rife with symbolism, and takes Goodman from a place of innocence to cynicism. The various symbols of the short story will be detailed, and examined in terms of what they indicate to the reader. The use of symbolism by Hawthorne throughout the short story in order to detail Goodman's fall from innocence is meant to instill a dreamlike, fantastical mood to the tale.

One of the clearest signals in Hawthorne's story is the name of the wife - Faith. In the short story, Goodman is leaving his wife Faith to embark on a journey that is necessary, but risky. " My journey, as thou callest it, forth and back again, must needs be done 'twixt now and sunrise" (Hawthorne, 1835). He actively abandons his faith, or at least puts it aside for the night; he feels that, come morning, he will return to it. She is symbolic of Goodman's faith in himself, in humanity and in God, which he believes is good and ineffable. He adores his faith - " Well, she's a blessed angel on earth; and after this one night I'll cling to her skirts and follow her to heaven" (Hawthorne, 1835). However, by leaving Faith, he puts himself in danger of corruption. The use of the literal name 'Faith' is part of Hawthorne's plan to make this a clear, <https://assignbuster.com/literature-review-on-young-goodman-brown/>

allegorical parable to the reader - he wishes to make it clear exactly what he is walking away from.

Along the way, Goodman meets a mysterious traveller who goes with him through the forest. He carries a staff, which looks like a snake, that he uses to walk. Throughout, Goodman is tempted by the man to take the staff, which he refuses. It turns out that this man is the devil; his staff is symbolic of accepting the evil within man, and the temptation to sell one's soul and innocence to get ahead. Eventually, he accepts the offer to take the staff in order to walk faster. This makes him lose his innocence, due to the curiosity he displays at the staff and the mysterious man who walks with him. That the staff is a serpent is a hint at its true dark nature, as it symbolizes the snake that tempted Eve to bite the apple in the Garden of Eden. The taking of the staff is indicative of the beginning of his march towards the path of evil. Instead of invoking the Christian association of the rod and staff comforting a traveler, the staff is more serpentine, the very symbol of evil. By Goodman taking ownership of the serpent, he is symbolically accepting evil and its potential into his journey.

The road down the forest, which he travels on, is a symbol for the journey he makes through life, and the path he takes towards darkness. At the beginning of the path is Faith; the goodness and virtue that all men learn at the beginning of their lives. However, as the road is travelled, temptation begins to rear its ugly head, in the form of the devil and his promises of practical shortcuts at the expense of ethics and innocence. The further one walks down the road, the closer one gets to darkness - " The road grew

wilder and drearier and more faintly traced, and vanished at length, leaving him in the heart of the dark wilderness, still rushing onward with the instinct that guides mortal man to evil" (Hawthorne, 1835). By making the road such an overt symbol of the life experience, the other symbols Goodman meets along the way are more clearly illustrated as aspects of life that he picks up on his way.

Faith places pink ribbons in her hair; these pink ribbons are a large part of her character and appearance; she is frequently called " Faith, with the pink ribbons" (Hawthorne, 1835). These pink ribbons are indicative of her purity and innocence, as well as the gaiety of her existence. She does not adorn herself ornately, but with the simple ribbons as a single embellishment to her existing wardrobe; this indicates a lack of narcissism and a youthful, exuberant energy indicative of her youth. However, the ribbons come back into play when Goodman is at his darkest hour, during the terrible dream state he enters, where he sees the people around him doing terrible things; he wonders whether or not the people he knows are truly good. He calls for Faith, but it does not answer; another indicator that his faith has eluded him. Instead, one of the pink ribbons falls from the sky and flutters down to him. This is the last straw, Goodman believing that all the world is evil, and that he should join them; " My Faith is gone!" cried he, after one stupefied moment. " There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name. Come, devil; for to thee is this world given"(Hawthorne, 1835). Though he wakes from his dream, the things he sees in it do not truly shake from him; " Often, waking suddenly at midnight, he shrank from the bosom of Faith," carrying his loss of innocence with him to the end of his days.

The symbolism present in "Young Goodman Brown" showcases a metaphorical fall from grace and innocence. Goodman starts the story with Faith and goodness, falls into temptation, grows paranoid and frightened at the evil he sees, and loses faith in himself and others in the process. This process is outlined by several symbols, including the staff and the pink ribbons, that highlight these themes and issues for the reader. In this way, the subtext becomes text, and Hawthorne accomplishes his mission to make this story clearly a tale of an unambiguous fall from grace. By providing symbols of the outside world, and literally thrusting a 'good man' into it, away from his 'faith', it shows how the outside world itself is what corrupts, especially when one is away from their emotional center and place of comfort.

## **References**

Hawthorne, N. (1996). *Young Goodman Brown*. Charlottesville, Va.: University of Virginia Library.