

# Getting lost along the way

Literature, American Literature



## Getting Lost Along the Way

Various social movements have shaped society politically, economically, and religiously as centuries have passed. Religion especially has had a momentous impact. During the 16th and 17th centuries, a reform movement known as Puritanism spread voraciously. Puritans sought to take their passion for their religion (Protestant) and rewrite and equalize the faith of the entire nation. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica, “ Puritans believed that it was necessary to be in a covenant relationship with God in order to redeem one from one’s sinful condition, that God had chosen to reveal salvation through preaching, and that the Holy Spirit was the energizing instrument of salvation.” A covenant is a two-way promise between two beings. Since this word is more commonly associated with religion, it usually means a promise between a mortal and divine being, such as God. A reformation founded passionately about promises can be dangerous. There is a severe consequence for those who break or can’t keep them: “ condemnation to hell” (Gettysburg).

This movement made such a notable impression on society that it remained a topic of literary interest for authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne two hundred years later. Literature is familiar and accessible to a wide variety of readers, which acts as an efficient catalyst between a nation’s history and the nation itself. This goes to show that literature, especially fiction, acts as a metaphor for historical events. By definition, a metaphor acts as a figural representation for a literal object or concept.

In writing this story, Hawthorne tries to inform his readers that the issue of wavering faith is still troubling souls two hundred years after the height of an intense religious reformation. His short story, *Young Goodman Brown*, is shaped by metaphors and symbolism to address such an issue. In the case of the main character, his faith wavers against his newly-acquired beliefs of Puritanism. The physical journey Goodman Brown takes in his dream is representational of his spiritual journey.

When the story begins, we are introduced to Goodman Brown. His name is representative of all good men (or rather, those who try to be). We learn that he has been newly-married to his wife, Faith, for three months. Hawthorne's deciding to name Goodman's wife this makes it clear to the reader that this story isn't going to provide a simple, literal narrative, but a religiously symbolic one as well (see also: the 15th century British morality play, *Everyman*). Faith represents just that: Goodman's faith in God. He is a fresh convert to Puritanism, but is doubting his decision. This is why he decides to leave Faith and embark on an unknown errand. He isn't sure he will be able to make the lifelong commitment.

As Goodman journeys into the dark forest, he falls asleep and has a dream. In this dream, he continues his quest through the forest. Before long, he meets a mysterious man (the devil) who offers him his serpent staff (temptation). He treats Goodman like he would an old friend, despite the fact that the two have never met before. He claims to be an old family "friend." This is how the devil operates. According to most Christian religions, the

devil is charismatic and alluring in his attempts to lead the faithful into darkness and uncertainty.

Goodman and the man continue their expedition and come upon familiar people such as Goody Cloyse. This woman is known to be one of the most devout members of the church in town. To see her wandering through the dark forest causes Goodman to realize that not everyone is who they seem to be. Even the most faithful can be led astray—a key message that Hawthorne wants to convey. This frightens him and he starts to question his errand: ““ What if a wretched old woman do choose to go to the devil, when I thought she was going to heaven! Is that any reason why I should quit my dear Faith and go after her?”” (2425) His faith is wavering, but he hasn't given in to the darkness just yet.

The moment of climax arrives when he reaches the heart of the dark forest and witnesses a “ witch-meeting” (2430). He sees his beloved Faith there, too. This is a moment of truth as we realize that Goodman has lost his F/faith, something he thought he could never lose. He tries to call out to her, urging her to resist evil. While doing this, he is also urging himself to resist evil. “ Whether Faith obeyed, he knew not” (2430).

Goodman awakens disoriented and unsure of what to make of his dream. Unfortunately for him, “ it was a dream of evil omen” (2430). He experiences a change of heart that affects the rest of his life. No longer can he see his fellow townspeople the same way, not even his own wife. He lives the rest of his life in a stupor of bitterness and uncertainty. On his voyage, Goodman Brown failed to find peace. Instead, he lost himself and his religious dignity

along the way. No longer can he be considered a “ good” man, but instead, a “ lost” man.

## **Works Cited**

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