

Young Goodman  
Brown by Nathaniel  
Hawthorne



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Young Goodman Brown, the famous short story and allegory by Nathaniel Hawthorne, is a classic that has definitely stood the test of time. Since it is an allegory, practically everything in the story is symbolic. The story is also ironic. Nathaniel Hawthorne came from a long line of prominent Puritans and even though the family was no longer of the religion, he felt a sense of inherited guilt of his forefathers. His great-great grandfather was the judge during some of the Salem witchcraft trials and this bothered Hawthorne greatly.

However, the theme of reality vs. illusion plays a huge role in the story since the reader is not told directly whether the whole incident that took place in the forest actually happened or was merely a dream of Goodman Brown. Hawthorne leaves the question open as to whether Goodman Brown's experience is real or imagined, as in a dream. Normal people sometimes accept visions, dreams, or lies as real events and they sometimes see wickedness in a person who has done nothing wicked.

A compulsive liar will sometimes get so caught up in the lie that he/she actually believe that it has happened. Other times dreams are so real that when one wakes, it takes seconds and even minutes to realize that the events took place only in the mind and that it was only a dream. Those dreams can be so real that the dream follows the person all throughout the day. The mind is very powerful and can definitely play tricks on a person. The theory of ergot could also be a possibility of the reality and illusion of the story.

Since Hawthorne had such a focus on his Puritan past, he surely would have heard of this theory and could have incorporated it into the story. The theory of ergot is one where a bacteria or fungus can thrive in whole grain flour if it is not kept in a proper temperature. This bacteria can cause hallucinations. Many have presented the theory of ergot as a possible explanation of the visions of those involved in the witchcraft trials of the 1690's. Some even believe that those who lied at the hearings actually believed what they were saying since the illusion they had was so real.

Hawthorne could have used the theory to his benefit in the story. The readers do not know whether Goodman Brown's experience was real or imagined. That is the beauty of the story. If it were plainly spelled out, or if it was obvious, then something would be taken away from the story.

Hawthorne meant for everyone to wonder about the outcome. Whether it was real or not was not the point. Goodman Brown believed that it was real, and it caused him to lose his faith.