

# Writing about Literature: The Basics

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## CONCEPT

## 1

# Writing about Literature: The Basics

## Learning Objectives

- Ask subjective and objective questions about what they have read.
- Learn the meanings of “tone,” “diction,” and “syntax.”
- Identify the major elements of a plot.
- Identify character, setting, and theme.
- Differentiate between internal and external conflict.

## Why Should I Write About Literature?

You might be asking yourself why you should bother writing about something you’ve read. After all, isn’t creative writing more fun, journalistic writing more interesting, and technical writing more useful? Maybe, but consider this: writing about literature will let you exercise your critical thinking skills like no other style of writing will. Even if you don’t want to pursue a career involving literature, you can use critical thinking and analysis in any field from philosophy to business to physics. More than being able to think critically, you need to be able to express those thoughts in a coherent fashion. Writing about literature will allow you to practice this invaluable communication skill.

“Okay,” you say, “that’s all good and well. But hasn’t anything I have to say about a story already been said? So what’s the point, then?” When you write your paper, you might end up saying something that has been discussed, argued over, or proposed by literary critics and students alike. However, when you write something, you present a point of view through your unique voice. Even if something has been said about a book many times, you can add something new to that discussion. Perhaps you can state an idea in simpler terms, or you want to disagree with a popular viewpoint. Even if you’re writing to an instructor’s prompt, your voice will make the paper unique.

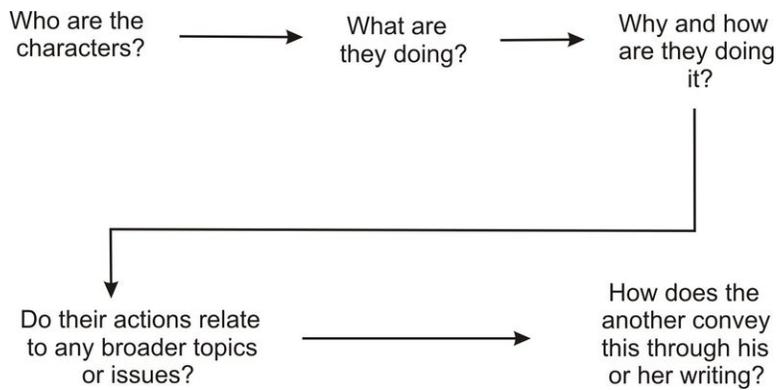
## So How Do I Start?

To many of us, writing a response to something we’ve had to read sounds more than a little daunting. There are so many things to examine and analyze in a book, play, or poem. But before you decide that writing about writing just isn’t for you, think about this—you already have many of the skills you need to write a good response to literature.

How many times have you heard about someone who watched a horror movie and yelled, “Don’t go into the basement!” at the potential victim. Or maybe you’ve listened to a song and thought about how the lyrics described your life almost perfectly. Perhaps you like to jump up and cheer for your favorite team even if you’re watching the game from home. Each time you do one of these things, you are responding to something you’ve seen or heard. And when you read a book, you likely do the same thing. Have you ever read anything and sympathized with or hated a character? If so, you’ve already taken your first step in responding to literature.

However, the next steps are a little harder. You need to be able to put your response into writing so other people can understand why you believe one thing or another about a book, play, or poem. In addition, writing an essay based on how a story makes you think or feel is only one of many ways to respond to what you read. In order to write a strong paper, you will need to examine a text both **subjectively** and **objectively**. If you only write about your personal reaction to a book, there won’t be much to support your argument except your word alone. Thus, you will need to use some facts from the text to support your argument. Rather than trying to evaluate every nuance of a text all at once, you should start with the basics: character and plot. From there, you can examine the theme of the work and then move on to the finer points such as the writing itself. For instance, when determining how you want to analyze a piece of literature, you might want to ask yourself the following series of questions.

Of course, answering these questions will only start you in your analysis. However, if you can answer them, you will have a strong grasp of the basic elements of the story. From there, you can go on to more specific questions such

**FIGURE 1.1**

Questions to consider when writing about literature.

as “How does symbolism help illustrate the theme?” or “What does the author say about the relationships between characters through the dialogue he gives them?” However, before you can start answering detailed questions like these, you should look at the basic elements of what you’re reading.

### The Basics of Literature

Before you dive straight into your analysis of symbolism, diction, imagery, or any other rhetorical device, you need to have a grasp of the basic elements of what you’re reading. When we read critically or analytically, we might disregard character, plot, setting, and theme as surface elements of a text. Aside from noting what they are and how they drive a story, we sometimes don’t pay much attention to these elements. However, characters and their interactions can reveal a great deal about human nature. Plot can act as a stand-in for real-world events just as setting can represent our world or an allegorical one. Theme is the heart of literature, exploring everything from love and war to childhood and aging.

With this in mind, you can begin your examination of literature with a “Who, What, When, Where, How?” approach. Ask yourself “Who are the characters?” “What is happening?” “When and where is it happening?” and “How does it happen?” The answers will give you character (who), plot (what and how), and setting (when and where). When you put these answers together, you can begin to figure out theme, and you will have a solid foundation on which to base your analysis.

You will also want to keep an author’s **tone** in mind as you read. Tone is the attitude writing can take towards its subject or audience. For instance, writing can be informal, formal, sarcastic, or playful. These are just a few examples of tone. When trying to figure out a story’s tone, ask yourself how the writing is actually put together. Does the author use **diction**, or the overall word choice, to convey a specific tone? For instance, is there any reason to say “joyful” instead of “happy” or “seething” instead of “angry”?



The following table provides examples of the same scene written in different tones. Pay special attention to the italicized words.

**TABLE 1.1:**

#### Joyful

The sound of their *revelry rang* throughout the town. The sun *gleamed brightly* on the parade, and colorful streamers *floated* through the air like *dazzling rainbows*.

#### Unhappy

The noise of the *cacophony shrilled* throughout the town. The sun *glared harshly* on the parade, and colorful streamers *rained* through the air like *falling debris*.

In addition, ask yourself if the author use unusual **syntax**– the order in which the sentence is put together grammatically? (Look at “money is the root of all evil” versus “the root of all evil is money.” Does each sentence imply something different to you?) Keeping tone, diction, and syntax in mind will help in your analysis of literature.

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## Character

You are probably already adept at identifying the characters of a story, but there are some terms that will be helpful in your literary analysis. Keep in mind that characters aren't necessarily people. They can be animals, divine beings, personifications, etc.

One of the most important terms you will use is **conflict**. Conflict occurs between two opposing sides in a story, usually centering on characters' values, needs, or interests. A conflict can be internal or external. **Internal conflict** takes place within an individual, such as when a character is torn between duty to his family and duty to the state. **External conflict** occurs when two individuals or groups of individuals clash. A struggle between a character and his best friend is an example of an external conflict.

By examining the conflict, we can determine the **protagonist** and **antagonist**. The protagonist is the focal point of the conflict, meaning that he or she is the main character of the story. All the action in a story will revolve around its protagonist. In addition, a story that contains a series of conflicts can contain several protagonists—no story is limited to just one. The antagonist is the character who stands in opposition of the protagonist. The antagonist is the other half of the conflict. Remember that an antagonist doesn't have to be a person—it can be a nation, a group, or even a set of ideas.

Sometimes, the protagonist can take the form of the **antihero**. The antihero is a protagonist who does not embody traditional “heroic” values. However, the reader will still sympathize with an antihero. For instance, a protagonist who is a scoundrel is an antihero, as a traditional hero would embody virtue.

In addition to the protagonist and antagonist, most stories have **secondary** or **minor characters**. These are the other characters in the story. They sometimes support the protagonist or antagonist in their struggles, and they sometimes never come into contact with the main characters.

Authors use minor characters for a variety of reasons. For instance, they can illustrate a different side of the main conflict, or they can highlight the traits of the main characters. One important type of minor character is called a **foil**. This character emphasizes the traits of a main character (usually the protagonist) through contrast. Thus, a foil will often be the polar opposite of the main character he or she highlights. Sometimes, the foil can take the form of a sidekick or friend. Other times, he or she might be someone who contends against the protagonist. For example, an author might use a decisive and determined foil to draw attention to a protagonist's lack of resolve and motivation.

Finally, any character in a story can be an **archetype**. We can define archetype as an original model for a type of character, but that doesn't fully explain the term. One way to think of an archetype is to think of how a bronze statue is made. First, the sculptor creates his design out of wax or clay. Next, he creates a fireproof mold around the original. After this is done, the sculptor can make as many of the same sculpture as he pleases. The original model is the equivalent to the archetype. Some popular archetypes are the trickster figure, such as Coyote in Native American myth or Brer Rabbit in African American folklore, and the femme fatale, like Pandora in Greek myth. Keep in mind that archetype simply means original pattern and does not always apply to characters. It can come in the form of an object, a narrative, etc. For instance, the apple in the Garden of Eden provides the object-based forbidden fruit archetype, and Odysseus's voyage gives us the narrative-based journey home archetype.

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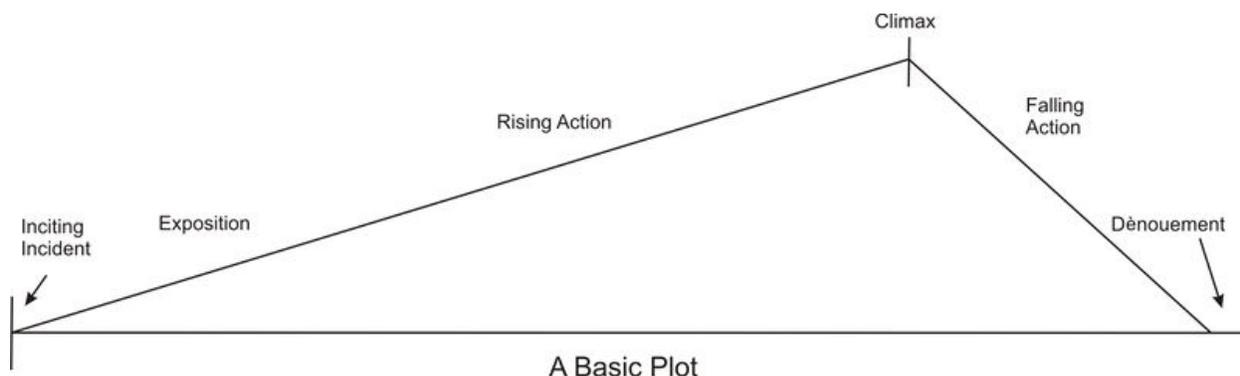
## Plot

Before you can write an in-depth explanation of the themes, motives, or diction of a book, you need to be able to discuss one of its most basic elements: the story. If you can't identify what has happened in a story, your writing will lack context. Writing your paper will be like trying to put together a complex puzzle without looking at the picture you're supposed to create. Each piece is important, but without the bigger picture for reference, you and anyone watching will have a hard time understanding what is being assembled. Thus, you should look for “the

bigger picture” in a book, poem, or play by reading for plot.

A plot is a storyline. We can define plot as the main events of a book, short story, play, poem, etc. and the way those events connect to one another. Conflicts act as the driving forces behind a plot.

A plot has several main elements: **inciting incident**, **exposition**, **rising action**, **climax**, **falling action**, and **dénouement**. These elements often appear in the order listed here, but you should be aware that some works deviate from this form.



**FIGURE 1.2**

A diagram of the components of a basic plot

**Inciting Incident:** This is the event that sets the main conflict into motion. Without it, we could have no plot, as all the characters would already be living “happily ever after,” so to speak. Most stories contain many conflicts, so you will have to identify the main conflict before you can identify the inciting incident. Remember, the inciting incident and conflict are two separate things—the inciting incident is a moment in a story that starts the main conflict. For instance, a person throwing the first punch can be considered the inciting incident to the conflict of a long fistfight. In addition, the inciting incident can happen before a story takes place, in which case it is related to the reader as a past event.

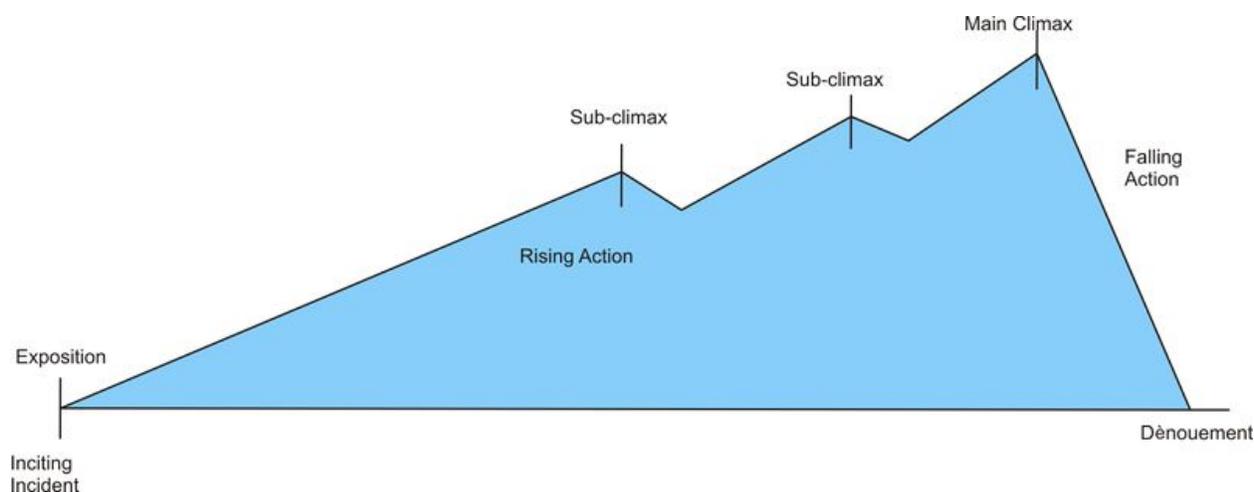
**Exposition:** This is the part of the story that tells us the setting. We find out who the main characters are and where the story takes place. The exposition also hints at the themes and conflicts that will develop later in the story. Exposition can take place throughout a story as characters reveal more about themselves.

**Rising Action:** The rising action is comprised of a series of events that build up to the climax of the story. It introduces us to secondary conflicts and creates tension in the story. You can think of the rising action as the series of events that make the climax of the story possible.

**Climax:** The climax has often been described as the “turning point” of a story. A good way to think of it is the incident that allows the main conflict of a story to resolve. The climax allows characters to solve a problem. It takes many forms, such as an epiphany the protagonist has about himself, a battle between the protagonist and antagonist, or the culmination of an internal struggle.

Many stories actually have smaller climaxes before the main one. Like the main climax, these are turning points in the story. These sub-climaxes can be minor turning points in the main conflict that help build and release suspense during the rising action. They can also be the main turning points for secondary conflicts within a story. You might diagram a plot containing sub-climaxes and a main climax like this:

**Falling Action:** The events that take place after the climax are called the falling action. These events show the results of the climax, and they act as a bridge between the climax and the dénouement.




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**FIGURE 1.3**

A diagram of a complex plot, or a plot that contains sub-climaxes.

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**Dénouement:** The word dénouement comes from the French “to untie” and the Latin “knot,” which gives us an indication of its purpose. It serves as the unraveling of a plot—a resolution to a story. In the dénouement, the central conflict is resolved. However, conflicts aren’t always resolved. Some stories leave secondary conflicts unsettled, and a rare few even leave doubt about the resolution of the main conflict. The dénouement can also leave the story and characters in the same state they were in before the story began. This often occurs when an epilogue tells the reader that all the conflicts in the story have been resolved. Thus, we can see the dénouement as a kind of mirror to the exposition, showing us the same situation at both the beginning and end of a story.

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## Setting

If a story has characters and a plot, these elements must exist within some context. The frame of reference in which the story occurs is known as **setting**. The most basic definition of setting is one of place and time. You want to ask yourself “Where and when does the story take place?” *Gone With the Wind*, for example, takes place in Georgia during the American Civil War. Setting can be very important in discovering and highlighting the **mood**, or the general feeling we get from a story. (Note: Be careful not to mix up mood and tone, as they are not the same thing. Mood is the feeling we get from a story; tone is a way of getting that feeling across.) For instance, Edgar Allan Poe portrays a very dark, oppressive setting in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” which makes the reader share the narrator’s feelings of confinement and depression. In addition, the house in Poe’s story can be seen as a kind of **internalized setting**. In this kind of setting, an aspect of the story external to a character represents the character’s internal development. For instance, the cracked face of the house can be said to represent the cracked minds of the Usher siblings.

Setting doesn’t have to just include the physical elements of time and place. Setting can also refer to a story’s social and cultural context. There are two questions to consider when dealing with this kind of setting: “What is the cultural and social setting of the story?” and “What was the author’s cultural and social setting when the story was written?” The first question will help you analyze why characters make certain choices and act in certain manners. The second question will allow you to analyze why the author chose to have the characters act in this way.

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## Theme

Finally, you must examine theme in your basic analysis of literature. **Theme** is the unifying idea behind a story. It connects the plot points, conflicts, and characters to a major idea. It usually provides a broad statement about humanity, life, or our universe. We can think of theme, in its most basic definition, as the message the author tries to send his or her readers.

One thing you should remember about theme is that it must be expressed in a complete sentence. For instance, “discrimination” is not a theme; however, “genetic modification in humans is dangerous because it can result in discrimination” is a complete theme.

A story can have more than one theme, and it is often useful to question and analyze how the themes interact. For instance, does the story have conflicting themes? Or do a number of slightly different themes point the reader toward one conclusion? Sometimes the themes don’t have to connect— many stories use multiple themes in order to bring multiple ideas to the readers’ attention.

So how do we find theme in a work? One way is to examine **motifs**, or recurring elements in a story. If something appears a number of times within a story, it is likely of significance. A motif can be a statement, a place, an object, or even a sound. Motifs often lead us to discern a theme by drawing attention to it through repetition. In addition, motifs are often symbolic. They can represent any number of things, from a character’s childhood to the loss of a loved one. By examining what a motif symbolizes, you can extrapolate a story’s possible themes. For instance, a story might use a park to represent a character’s childhood. If the author makes constant references to the park, but we later see it replaced by a housing complex, we might draw conclusions about what the story is saying about childhood and the transition to adulthood.

### Reading Exercise



Now that you’ve learned the basics of reading literature, read the following short story. Keep an eye out for plot, character, setting, tone, mood, and theme.

#### ***YOUNG GOODMAN BROWN***

**by Nathaniel Hawthorne**

Young Goodman Brown came forth at sunset into the street at Salem village; but put his head back, after crossing the threshold, to exchange a parting kiss with his young wife. And Faith, as the wife was aptly named, thrust her own pretty head into the street, letting the wind play with the pink ribbons of her cap while she called to Goodman Brown.

“Dearest heart,” whispered she, softly and rather sadly, when her lips were close to his ear, “prithee put off your journey until sunrise and sleep in your own bed to-night. A lone woman is troubled with such dreams and such thoughts that she’s afraid of herself sometimes. Pray tarry with me this night, dear husband, of all nights in the year.”

“My love and my Faith,” replied young Goodman Brown, “of all nights in the year, this one night must I tarry away from thee. My journey, as thou callest it, forth and back again, must needs be done ’twixt now and sunrise. What, my sweet, pretty wife, dost thou doubt me already, and we but three months married?”

“Then God bless you!” said Faith, with the pink ribbons; “and may you find all well when you come back.”

“Amen!” cried Goodman Brown. “Say thy prayers, dear Faith, and go to bed at dusk, and no harm will come to thee.”

So they parted; and the young man pursued his way until, being about to turn the corner by the meeting-house, he looked back and saw the head of Faith still peeping after him with a melancholy air, in spite of her pink ribbons.

“Poor little Faith!” thought he, for his heart smote him. “What a wretch am I to leave her on such an errand! She talks of dreams, too. Methought as she spoke there was trouble in her face, as if a dream had warned her what work is to be done tonight. But no, no; ’t would kill her to think it. Well, she’s a blessed angel on earth; and after this one night I’ll cling to her skirts and follow her to heaven.”

With this excellent resolve for the future, Goodman Brown felt himself justified in making more haste on his present evil purpose. He had taken a dreary road, darkened by all the gloomiest trees of the forest, which barely stood aside to let the narrow path creep through, and closed immediately behind. It was all as lonely as could be; and there is this peculiarity in such a solitude, that the traveller knows not who may be concealed by the innumerable trunks and the thick boughs overhead; so that with lonely footsteps he may yet be passing through an unseen multitude.

“There may be a devilish Indian behind every tree,” said Goodman Brown to himself; and he glanced fearfully behind him as he added, “What if the devil himself should be at my very elbow!”

His head being turned back, he passed a crook of the road, and, looking forward again, beheld the figure of a man, in grave and decent attire, seated at the foot of an old tree. He arose at Goodman Brown’s approach and walked onward side by side with him.

“You are late, Goodman Brown,” said he. “The clock of the Old South was striking as I came through Boston, and that is full fifteen minutes ago.”

“Faith kept me back a while,” replied the young man, with a tremor in his voice, caused by the sudden appearance of his companion, though not wholly unexpected.

It was now deep dusk in the forest, and deepest in that part of it where these two were journeying. As nearly as could be discerned, the second traveller was about fifty years old, apparently in the same rank of life as Goodman Brown, and bearing a considerable resemblance to him, though perhaps more in expression than features. Still they might have been taken for father and son. And yet, though the elder person was as simply clad as the younger, and as simple in manner too, he had an indescribable air of one who knew the world, and who would not have felt abashed at the governor’s dinner table or in King William’s court, were it possible that his affairs should call him thither. But the only thing about him that could be fixed upon as remarkable was his staff, which bore the likeness of a great black snake, so curiously wrought that it might almost be seen to twist and wriggle itself like a living serpent. This, of course, must have been an ocular deception, assisted by the uncertain light.

“Come, Goodman Brown,” cried his fellow-traveller, “this is a dull pace for the beginning of a journey. Take my staff, if you are so soon weary.”

“Friend,” said the other, exchanging his slow pace for a full stop, “having kept covenant by meeting thee here, it is my purpose now to return whence I came. I have scruples touching the matter thou wot’st of.”

“Sayest thou so?” replied he of the serpent, smiling apart. “Let us walk on, nevertheless, reasoning as we go; and if I convince thee not thou shalt turn back. We are but a little way in the forest yet.”

“Too far! too far!” exclaimed the goodman, unconsciously resuming his walk. “My father never went into the woods on such an errand, nor his father before him. We have been a race of honest men and good Christians since the days of the martyrs; and shall I be the first of the name of Brown that ever took this path and kept—”

“Such company, thou wouldst say,” observed the elder person, interpreting his pause. “Well said, Goodman Brown! I have been as well acquainted with your family as with ever a one among the Puritans; and that’s no trifle to say. I helped your grandfather, the constable, when he lashed the Quaker woman so smartly through the streets of Salem; and it was I that brought your father a pitch-pine knot, kindled at my own hearth, to set fire to an Indian village, in King Philip’s war. They were my good friends, both; and many a pleasant walk have we had along this path, and returned merrily after midnight. I would fain be friends with you for their sake.”

“If it be as thou sayest,” replied Goodman Brown, “I marvel they never spoke of these matters; or, verily, I marvel not, seeing that the least rumor of the sort would have driven them from New England. We are a people of prayer,

and good works to boot, and abide no such wickedness.”

“Wickedness or not,” said the traveller with the twisted staff, “I have a very general acquaintance here in New England. The deacons of many a church have drunk the communion wine with me; the selectmen of divers towns make me their chairman; and a majority of the Great and General Court are firm supporters of my interest. The governor and I, too—But these are state secrets.”

“Can this be so?” cried Goodman Brown, with a stare of amazement at his undisturbed companion. “Howbeit, I have nothing to do with the governor and council; they have their own ways, and are no rule for a simple husbandman like me. But, were I to go on with thee, how should I meet the eye of that good old man, our minister, at Salem village? Oh, his voice would make me tremble both Sabbath day and lecture day.”

Thus far the elder traveller had listened with due gravity; but now burst into a fit of irrepressible mirth, shaking himself so violently that his snake-like staff actually seemed to wriggle in sympathy.

“Ha! ha! ha!” shouted he again and again; then composing himself, “Well, go on, Goodman Brown, go on; but, prithee, don’t kill me with laughing.”

“Well, then, to end the matter at once,” said Goodman Brown, considerably nettled, “there is my wife, Faith. It would break her dear little heart; and I’d rather break my own.”

“Nay, if that be the case,” answered the other, “e’en go thy ways, Goodman Brown. I would not for twenty old women like the one hobbling before us that Faith should come to any harm.”

As he spoke he pointed his staff at a female figure on the path, in whom Goodman Brown recognized a very pious and exemplary dame, who had taught him his catechism in youth, and was still his moral and spiritual adviser, jointly with the minister and Deacon Gookin.

“A marvel, truly, that Goody Cloyse should be so far in the wilderness at nightfall,” said he. “But with your leave, friend, I shall take a cut through the woods until we have left this Christian woman behind. Being a stranger to you, she might ask whom I was consorting with and whither I was going.”

“Be it so,” said his fellow-traveller. “Betake you to the woods, and let me keep the path.”

Accordingly the young man turned aside, but took care to watch his companion, who advanced softly along the road until he had come within a staff’s length of the old dame. She, meanwhile, was making the best of her way, with singular speed for so aged a woman, and mumbling some indistinct words—a prayer, doubtless—as she went. The traveller put forth his staff and touched her withered neck with what seemed the serpent’s tail.

“The devil!” screamed the pious old lady.

“Then Goody Cloyse knows her old friend?” observed the traveller, confronting her and leaning on his writhing stick.

“Ah, forsooth, and is it your worship indeed?” cried the good dame. “Yea, truly is it, and in the very image of my old gossip, Goodman Brown, the grandfather of the silly fellow that now is. But—would your worship believe it?—my broomstick hath strangely disappeared, stolen, as I suspect, by that unchanged witch, Goody Cory, and that, too, when I was all anointed with the juice of smallage, and cinquefoil, and wolf’s bane.”

“Mingled with fine wheat and the fat of a new-born babe,” said the shape of old Goodman Brown.

“Ah, your worship knows the recipe,” cried the old lady, cackling aloud. “So, as I was saying, being all ready for the meeting, and no horse to ride on, I made up my mind to foot it; for they tell me there is a nice young man to be taken into communion to-night. But now your good worship will lend me your arm, and we shall be there in a twinkling.”

“That can hardly be,” answered her friend. “I may not spare you my arm, Goody Cloyse; but here is my staff, if you will.”

So saying, he threw it down at her feet, where, perhaps, it assumed life, being one of the rods which its owner had formerly lent to the Egyptian magi. Of this fact, however, Goodman Brown could not take cognizance. He had cast up his eyes in astonishment, and, looking down again, beheld neither Goody Cloyse nor the serpentine staff, but his

fellow-traveller alone, who waited for him as calmly as if nothing had happened.

“That old woman taught me my catechism,” said the young man; and there was a world of meaning in this simple comment.

They continued to walk onward, while the elder traveller exhorted his companion to make good speed and persevere in the path, discoursing so aptly that his arguments seemed rather to spring up in the bosom of his auditor than to be suggested by himself. As they went, he plucked a branch of maple to serve for a walking stick, and began to strip it of the twigs and little boughs, which were wet with evening dew. The moment his fingers touched them they became strangely withered and dried up as with a week’s sunshine. Thus the pair proceeded, at a good free pace, until suddenly, in a gloomy hollow of the road, Goodman Brown sat himself down on the stump of a tree and refused to go any farther.

“Friend,” said he, stubbornly, “my mind is made up. Not another step will I budge on this 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?”

“You will think better of this by and by,” said his acquaintance, composedly. “Sit here and rest yourself a while; and when you feel like moving again, there is my staff to help you along.” Without more words, he threw his companion the maple stick, and was as speedily out of sight as if he had vanished into the deepening gloom. The young man sat a few moments by the roadside, applauding himself greatly, and thinking with how clear a conscience he should meet the minister in his morning walk, nor shrink from the eye of good old Deacon Gookin. And what calm sleep would be his that very night, which was to have been spent so wickedly, but so purely and sweetly now, in the arms of Faith! Amidst these pleasant and praiseworthy meditations, Goodman Brown heard the tramp of horses along the road, and deemed it advisable to conceal himself within the verge of the forest, conscious of the guilty purpose that had brought him thither, though now so happily turned from it.

On came the hoof tramps and the voices of the riders, two grave old voices, conversing soberly as they drew near. These mingled sounds appeared to pass along the road, within a few yards of the young man’s hiding-place; but, owing doubtless to the depth of the gloom at that particular spot, neither the travellers nor their steeds were visible. Though their figures brushed the small boughs by the wayside, it could not be seen that they intercepted, even for a moment, the faint gleam from the strip of bright sky athwart which they must have passed. Goodman Brown alternately crouched and stood on tiptoe, pulling aside the branches and thrusting forth his head as far as he durst without discerning so much as a shadow. It vexed him the more, because he could have sworn, were such a thing possible, that he recognized the voices of the minister and Deacon Gookin, jogging along quietly, as they were wont to do, when bound to some ordination or ecclesiastical council. While yet within hearing, one of the riders stopped to pluck a switch.

“Of the two, reverend sir,” said the voice like the deacon’s, “I had rather miss an ordination dinner than to-night’s meeting. They tell me that some of our community are to be here from Falmouth and beyond, and others from Connecticut and Rhode Island, besides several of the Indian powwows, who, after their fashion, know almost as much deviltry as the best of us. Moreover, there is a goodly young woman to be taken into communion.”

“Mighty well, Deacon Gookin!” replied the solemn old tones of the minister. “Spur up, or we shall be late. Nothing can be done, you know, until I get on the ground.”

The hoofs clattered again; and the voices, talking so strangely in the empty air, passed on through the forest, where no church had ever been gathered or solitary Christian prayed. Whither, then, could these holy men be journeying so deep into the heathen wilderness? Young Goodman Brown caught hold of a tree for support, being ready to sink down on the ground, faint and overburdened with the heavy sickness of his heart. He looked up to the sky, doubting whether there really was a heaven above him. Yet there was the blue arch, and the stars brightening in it.

“With heaven above and Faith below, I will yet stand firm against the devil!” cried Goodman Brown.

While he still gazed upward into the deep arch of the firmament and had lifted his hands to pray, a cloud, though no wind was stirring, hurried across the zenith and hid the brightening stars. The blue sky was still visible, except directly overhead, where this black mass of cloud was sweeping swiftly northward. Aloft in the air, as if from

the depths of the cloud, came a confused and doubtful sound of voices. Once the listener fancied that he could distinguish the accents of towns-people of his own, men and women, both pious and ungodly, many of whom he had met at the communion table, and had seen others rioting at the tavern. The next moment, so indistinct were the sounds, he doubted whether he had heard aught but the murmur of the old forest, whispering without a wind. Then came a stronger swell of those familiar tones, heard daily in the sunshine at Salem village, but never until now from a cloud of night. There was one voice of a young woman, uttering lamentations, yet with an uncertain sorrow, and entreating for some favor, which, perhaps, it would grieve her to obtain; and all the unseen multitude, both saints and sinners, seemed to encourage her onward.

“Faith!” shouted Goodman Brown, in a voice of agony and desperation; and the echoes of the forest mocked him, crying, “Faith! Faith!” as if bewildered wretches were seeking her all through the wilderness.

The cry of grief, rage, and terror was yet piercing the night, when the unhappy husband held his breath for a response. There was a scream, drowned immediately in a louder murmur of voices, fading into far-off laughter, as the dark cloud swept away, leaving the clear and silent sky above Goodman Brown. But something fluttered lightly down through the air and caught on the branch of a tree. The young man seized it, and beheld a pink ribbon.

“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.”

And, maddened with despair, so that he laughed loud and long, did Goodman Brown grasp his staff and set forth again, at such a rate that he seemed to fly along the forest path rather than to walk or run. 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. The whole forest was peopled with frightful sounds—the creaking of the trees, the howling of wild beasts, and the yell of Indians; while sometimes the wind tolled like a distant church bell, and sometimes gave a broad roar around the traveller, as if all Nature were laughing him to scorn. But he was himself the chief horror of the scene, and shrank not from its other horrors.

“Ha! ha! ha!” roared Goodman Brown when the wind laughed at him.

“Let us hear which will laugh loudest. Think not to frighten me with your devilry. Come witch, come wizard, come Indian powwow, come devil himself, and here comes Goodman Brown. You may as well fear him as he fear you.”

In truth, all through the haunted forest there could be nothing more frightful than the figure of Goodman Brown. On he flew among the black pines, brandishing his staff with frenzied gestures, now giving vent to an inspiration of horrid blasphemy, and now shouting forth such laughter as set all the echoes of the forest laughing like demons around him. The fiend in his own shape is less hideous than when he rages in the breast of man. Thus sped the demoniac on his course, until, quivering among the trees, he saw a red light before him, as when the felled trunks and branches of a clearing have been set on fire, and throw up their lurid blaze against the sky, at the hour of midnight. He paused, in a lull of the tempest that had driven him onward, and heard the swell of what seemed a hymn, rolling solemnly from a distance with the weight of many voices. He knew the tune; it was a familiar one in the choir of the village meeting-house. The verse died heavily away, and was lengthened by a chorus, not of human voices, but of all the sounds of the benighted wilderness pealing in awful harmony together. Goodman Brown cried out, and his cry was lost to his own ear by its unison with the cry of the desert.

In the interval of silence he stole forward until the light glared full upon his eyes. At one extremity of an open space, hemmed in by the dark wall of the forest, arose a rock, bearing some rude, natural resemblance either to an altar or a pulpit, and surrounded by four blazing pines, their tops aflame, their stems untouched, like candles at an evening meeting. The mass of foliage that had overgrown the summit of the rock was all on fire, blazing high into the night and fitfully illuminating the whole field. Each pendent twig and leafy festoon was in a blaze. As the red light arose and fell, a numerous congregation alternately shone forth, then disappeared in shadow, and again grew, as it were, out of the darkness, peopling the heart of the solitary woods at once.

“A grave and dark-clad company,” quoth Goodman Brown.

In truth they were such. Among them, quivering to and fro between gloom and splendor, appeared faces that would be seen next day at the council board of the province, and others which, Sabbath after Sabbath, looked devoutly

heavenward, and benignantly over the crowded pews, from the holiest pulpits in the land. Some affirm that the lady of the governor was there. At least there were high dames well known to her, and wives of honored husbands, and widows, a great multitude, and ancient maidens, all of excellent repute, and fair young girls, who trembled lest their mothers should espy them. Either the sudden gleams of light flashing over the obscure field bedazzled Goodman Brown, or he recognized a score of the church members of Salem village famous for their especial sanctity. Good old Deacon Gookin had arrived, and waited at the skirts of that venerable saint, his revered pastor. But, irreverently consorting with these grave, reputable, and pious people, these elders of the church, these chaste dames and dewy virgins, there were men of dissolute lives and women of spotted fame, wretches given over to all mean and filthy vice, and suspected even of horrid crimes. It was strange to see that the good shrank not from the wicked, nor were the sinners abashed by the saints. Scattered also among their pale-faced enemies were the Indian priests, or powwows, who had often scared their native forest with more hideous incantations than any known to English witchcraft.

“But where is Faith?” thought Goodman Brown; and, as hope came into his heart, he trembled. Another verse of the hymn arose, a slow and mournful strain, such as the pious love, but joined to words which expressed all that our nature can conceive of sin, and darkly hinted at far more. Unfathomable to mere mortals is the lore of fiends. Verse after verse was sung; and still the chorus of the desert swelled between like the deepest tone of a mighty organ; and with the final peal of that dreadful anthem there came a sound, as if the roaring wind, the rushing streams, the howling beasts, and every other voice of the unconcerted wilderness were mingling and according with the voice of guilty man in homage to the prince of all. The four blazing pines threw up a loftier flame, and obscurely discovered shapes and visages of horror on the smoke wreaths above the impious assembly. At the same moment the fire on the rock shot redly forth and formed a glowing arch above its base, where now appeared a figure. With reverence be it spoken, the figure bore no slight similitude, both in garb and manner, to some grave divine of the New England churches.

“Bring forth the converts!” cried a voice that echoed through the field and rolled into the forest.

At the word, Goodman Brown stepped forth from the shadow of the trees and approached the congregation, with whom he felt a loathful brotherhood by the sympathy of all that was wicked in his heart. He could have well-nigh sworn that the shape of his own dead father beckoned him to advance, looking downward from a smoke wreath, while a woman, with dim features of despair, threw out her hand to warn him back. Was it his mother? But he had no power to retreat one step, nor to resist, even in thought, when the minister and good old Deacon Gookin seized his arms and led him to the blazing rock. Thither came also the slender form of a veiled female, led between Goody Cloyse, that pious teacher of the catechism, and Martha Carrier, who had received the devil’s promise to be queen of hell. A rampant hag was she. And there stood the proselytes beneath the canopy of fire.

“Welcome, my children,” said the dark figure, “to the communion of your race. Ye have found thus young your nature and your destiny. My children, look behind you!”

They turned; and flashing forth, as it were, in a sheet of flame, the fiend worshippers were seen; the smile of welcome gleamed darkly on every visage.

“There,” resumed the sable form, “are all whom ye have revered from youth. Ye deemed them holier than yourselves, and shrank from your own sin, contrasting it with their lives of righteousness and prayerful aspirations heavenward. Yet here are they all in my worshipping assembly. This night it shall be granted you to know their secret deeds: how hoary-bearded elders of the church have whispered wanton words to the young maids of their households; how many a woman, eager for widows’ weeds, has given her husband a drink at bedtime and let him sleep his last sleep in her bosom; how beardless youths have made haste to inherit their fathers’ wealth; and how fair damsels—blush not, sweet ones—have dug little graves in the garden, and bidden me, the sole guest to an infant’s funeral. By the sympathy of your human hearts for sin ye shall scent out all the places—whether in church, bedchamber, street, field, or forest—where crime has been committed, and shall exult to behold the whole earth one stain of guilt, one mighty blood spot. Far more than this. It shall be yours to penetrate, in every bosom, the deep mystery of sin, the fountain of all wicked arts, and which inexhaustibly supplies more evil impulses than human power—than my power at its utmost—can make manifest in deeds. And now, my children, look upon each other.”

They did so; and, by the blaze of the hell-kindled torches, the wretched man beheld his Faith, and the wife her

husband, trembling before that unhallowed altar.

“Lo, there ye stand, my children,” said the figure, in a deep and solemn tone, almost sad with its despairing awfulness, as if his once angelic nature could yet mourn for our miserable race.

“Depending upon one another’s hearts, ye had still hoped that virtue were not all a dream. Now are ye undeceived. Evil is the nature of mankind. Evil must be your only happiness. Welcome again, my children, to the communion of your race.”

“Welcome,” repeated the fiend worshippers, in one cry of despair and triumph.

And there they stood, the only pair, as it seemed, who were yet hesitating on the verge of wickedness in this dark world. A basin was hollowed, naturally, in the rock. Did it contain water, reddened by the lurid light? or was it blood? or, perchance, a liquid flame? Herein did the shape of evil dip his hand and prepare to lay the mark of baptism upon their foreheads, that they might be partakers of the mystery of sin, more conscious of the secret guilt of others, both in deed and thought, than they could now be of their own. The husband cast one look at his pale wife, and Faith at him. What polluted wretches would the next glance show them to each other, shuddering alike at what they disclosed and what they saw!

“Faith! Faith!” cried the husband, “look up to heaven, and resist the wicked one.”

Whether Faith obeyed he knew not. Hardly had he spoken when he found himself amid calm night and solitude, listening to a roar of the wind which died heavily away through the forest. He staggered against the rock, and felt it chill and damp; while a hanging twig, that had been all on fire, besprinkled his cheek with the coldest dew.

The next morning young Goodman Brown came slowly into the street of Salem village, staring around him like a bewildered man. The good old minister was taking a walk along the graveyard to get an appetite for breakfast and meditate his sermon, and bestowed a blessing, as he passed, on Goodman Brown. He shrank from the venerable saint as if to avoid an anathema. Old Deacon Gookin was at domestic worship, and the holy words of his prayer were heard through the open window. “What God doth the wizard pray to?” quoth Goodman Brown. Goody Cloyse, that excellent old Christian, stood in the early sunshine at her own lattice, catechizing a little girl who had brought her a pint of morning’s milk. Goodman Brown snatched away the child as from the grasp of the fiend himself. Turning the corner by the meeting-house, he spied the head of Faith, with the pink ribbons, gazing anxiously forth, and bursting into such joy at sight of him that she skipped along the street and almost kissed her husband before the whole village. But Goodman Brown looked sternly and sadly into her face, and passed on without a greeting.

Had Goodman Brown fallen asleep in the forest and only dreamed a wild dream of a witch-meeting?

Be it so if you will; but, alas! it was a dream of evil omen for young Goodman Brown. A stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man did he become from the night of that fearful dream. On the Sabbath day, when the congregation were singing a holy psalm, he could not listen because an anthem of sin rushed loudly upon his ear and drowned all the blessed strain. When the minister spoke from the pulpit with power and fervid eloquence, and, with his hand on the open Bible, of the sacred truths of our religion, and of saint-like lives and triumphant deaths, and of future bliss or misery unutterable, then did Goodman Brown turn pale, dreading lest the roof should thunder down upon the gray blasphemer and his hearers. Often, waking suddenly at midnight, he shrank from the bosom of Faith; and at morning or eventide, when the family knelt down at prayer, he scowled and muttered to himself, and gazed sternly at his wife, and turned away. And when he had lived long, and was borne to his grave a hoary corpse, followed by Faith, an aged woman, and children and grandchildren, a goodly procession, besides neighbors not a few, they carved no hopeful verse upon his tombstone, for his dying hour was gloom.

## Review Questions



1. Write a 10-minute freewrite about your subjective view of “Young Goodman Brown.” Some questions you might want to consider: Did the story hold you in suspense, or did you find the plot predictable? What did you

think of the ending? What did you think of Hawthorne's style of writing? What is Hawthorne saying about the society in which Goodman Brown lives? What is Hawthorne saying about Goodman Brown?

2. Sketch a diagram of the plot of "Young Goodman Brown," labeling the inciting incident, exposition, rising and falling action, climax, sub-climaxes, dénouement, and resolution. 2a. What point did you choose as the climax of "Young Goodman Brown" and why? 2b. Do you think "Young Goodman Brown" has several sub-climaxes, or are his encounters with the townspeople just part of the rising action? Explain your reasoning.
3. What conflicts does Goodman Brown encounter? Are they internal conflicts, external conflicts, or both? Explain your reasoning.
4. We know that Goodman Brown is the protagonist of the story. However, who is the antagonist? Is there more than one?
5. What is the setting of "Young Goodman Brown"? 5a. Does the story have an internalized setting? If so, what is it and who internalizes it? 5b. What is the mood of "Young Goodman Brown"?
6. List some possible themes in "Young Goodman Brown." Remember, a theme is expressed in a sentence, not in one or two words. 6a. Are there any motifs in "Young Goodman Brown" to reinforce the themes you listed? What are they?

## Vocabulary

### Introduction

**Subjective Reading** Paying attention to the feelings a story gives you when you read it. When you read subjectively, you follow your intuition about characters and plot points.

**Objective Reading** Paying attention to the character, plot, setting, theme, diction, and syntax when you read a story and using these elements to analyze that story.

**Tone** The attitude writing can take towards its subject or audience. Tone generally applies to specific sentences or paragraphs, not to the text as a whole.

**Diction** The word choice used throughout a text.

**Syntax** The order in which a sentence is put together grammatically.

### Character

**Character** A person participating in, or alluded to, in the action of a story. Characters can also be animals or inanimate objects.

**Conflict** The main problem in a story. It is tension in a story between two or more characters, groups, things, or events.

**Internal Conflict** Conflict that takes place within an individual, such as a conflict of morals or of emotions.

**External Conflict** Conflict that takes place outside an individual, such as a war or feud.

**Protagonist** The main character(s) of a story. The events of a story focus on the protagonist(s).

**Antagonist** The character(s), thing(s), event(s), or group(s) that stands in opposition to the protagonist(s).

**Antihero** A protagonist who does not embody traditional heroic values.

**Secondary/Minor Character** Characters in the story who are not the protagonist(s) or antagonist(s).

**Archetype** A character type that has been repeated in literature throughout history.

## Plot

**Plot** The set of events that make up a story.

**Inciting Incident** The event that sets off the main conflict in a plot.

**Exposition** Parts of the story that tell us about setting and main characters and hit at theme and possible conflicts.

**Rising Action** The series of events in a plot that build up to the climax.

**Climax** The turning point of the story; it is the incident that allows the story to resolve.

**Falling Action** The events in a story that take place between the climax and the dénouement.

**Dénouement** The point in the story at which the central conflict is resolved.

## Setting

**Setting** The frame of reference in which the story takes place. This includes place, time, and social/cultural context.

**Mood** The general feeling the reader gets from the story.

**Internalized Setting** When an aspect of the story external to a character represents the character's internal development.

## Theme

**Theme** The unifying idea or ideas behind a story. Theme usually provides a broad statement about humanity, life, or our universe and should be expressed in a complete sentence.

**Motif** Recurring elements in a story which points to a theme. Motifs can be objects, sounds, statements, etc.

## Sources

Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Young Goodman Brown." From "Mosses from an Old Manse and Other Stories," <http://www.gutenberg.org/>