Historical Context:

The Salem Witch Trials - the villagers of Salem killed twenty-five innocent people who were accused of being witches.

The Salem Witch trials admitted “spectral evidence” – the devil could be seen in the form of innocent people.

Judge John Hathorne (Hawthorne) condemned Goody Cloyse, Goody Cory, and Martha Carrie to death during the trials.

Puritans began forbidding Quakers from settling in their towns and made it illegal to be a Quaker; their intolerance soon led to imprisonments and hangings – Brown’s grandfather whipped a Quaker.
Young Goodman Brown

- Puritan doctrine of **innate depravity**: humankind was born tarred by original sin and the ritual of baptism could not remove this smudge.

- Only an elect few could be saved

- **Allegory**: two levels of meaning: a literal level/ surface story and a symbolic level that tells an abstract story

- In 1854 Hawthorne wrote: “I am not sure if I entirely comprehend my own meaning in some of these blasted allegories.”
Young Goodman Brown

- Interpretations & ambiguity:
  - Hawthorne criticizes the Puritans for the folly of looking for evil where it isn’t (Brown’s outlook has been tainted by this dark illusion – it is the devil who says evil is the nature of human kind)
  - Brown learns the truth about those hypocritical sinners in the village – human kind indeed is evil
  - Some say since this story could ambiguously be a dream or reality that either interpretation is fine
  - Hawthorne’s disdain for the Puritan’s overly strict outlook lends more credence to the first one – satirizing the Puritans
Young Goodman Brown

- **Characters:**
  - **Goodman Brown:**
    - Shows both innocence and corruptibility
    - At the beginning of the story, Goodman Brown believes in the goodness of his father, grandfather, Goody Cloyse, etc. until the devil, tells him that he knew them both.
    - He believes that Faith is pure and good, until the devil reveals at the ceremony that Faith, too, is corruptible.
    - This indecisiveness reveals Goodman Brown’s lack of true religion—his belief is easy to shake
Hawthorne suggests, however, that behind the public face of godliness, the Puritans’ actions were not always Christian.

The devil in the story says that he was present when Brown’s father and grandfather whipped Quakers and set fire to Indian villages, making it clear that the story of the founding of New England has a dark side that religion fails to explain.
Young Goodman Brown

- **Faith**
- Benevolence of God and goodness of human nature
- Puns:
  - I’ll cling to her skirts and follow her to heaven
  - Faith kept me back awhile
  - Is there any reason I should quit me dear Faith?
  - My Faith is gone!

Brown’s loss of natural faith aligns him with the Salem witch-hangers – suspecting the innocent of being in line with the devil – he satirizes their views
The Old Man/Devil

The devil appears to be an ordinary man, which suggests that every person, including Goodman Brown, has the capacity for evil.

By saying that the devil looks as though he could be Goodman Brown’s father, Hawthorne creates a link between them, raising the questions of whether the devil and Goodman Brown might be related or the devil might be an embodiment of Goodman Brown’s dark side (alter ego).
Symbols

- **The Staff**
  - The devil’s staff, which is encircled by a carved serpent, draws from the biblical symbol of the serpent as Satan. In the Book of Genesis, the serpent tempts Eve to taste the fruit from the forbidden tree of knowledge, defying God’s will and bringing His wrath upon humanity.

- **The Forest:**
  - Entering it is like being led by temptation
  - The deeper into it Brown goes, the more his faith is shaken (i.e., the baptism in blood and fire deep in the forest ends his belief in humanity).
Symbols

- **Faith’s Pink Ribbons**
  - The pink ribbons that Faith puts in her cap represent her **purity and innocence**.
  - When the pink ribbon flutters down from the sky, Goodman Brown perceives it as a sign that Faith has definitely fallen into the realm of the devil (the ribbon has fallen while Faith was riding her broomstick – the dark cloud that passed by- to the midnight Sabbath)
  - **Ironic sign** of monstrous evil and duplicity (deceit)
Ambiguity

- The mixed meaning or possible interpretations come down to dream or reality.
- Is it all a grand illusion or a dream that the devil uses to claim Brown’s soul?
- It’s unclear whether the encounter in the forest was a dream, but for the rest of his life, Goodman Brown is changed.
- He doesn’t trust anyone in his village, can’t believe the words of the minister, and doesn’t fully love his wife.
- He lives the remainder of his life in gloom and fear.