

40 Short Stories
5th Edition

Reading Short Stories Closely

In front of you, on a page or a screen, is a short story that you intend to read. Maybe a friend has recommended it to you, or, more likely, you've been assigned to read it for a class. But you are distracted. Outside your window, passersby are enjoying a beautiful day. You hear some music or chatter coming from down the hall. Your phone buzzes with an update of some sort. You remember something else that is due tomorrow, or something you promised but forgot to do until just now.

With all these potential distractions, how will you gather your attention to focus on those little words streaming across your page or screen? Close the shades, cover your ears, turn off your phone, and accept that the effort of concentration will be worth it. Your challenge is to get into the reading deeply enough, closely enough, that a partnership is forged between you and the text, a partnership in which you collaborate to create something unique: your very own interpretation of the story. Consider the benefits. First, you, the attentive reader, will be entertained. Second, you may find yourself moved, deeply and unforgettably, by the events of the story. Finally, the characters and their situations will expand your sympathy and understanding of the human condition. For this is the magic of the short story: A dozen or so pages of print spring to life in your mind. Characters become real in your imagination, their conflicts become your conflicts, the distant times and alien environments inhabit places in your own mind and heart. These experiences and transformations are often why authors write and publish, and why readers often approach reading a story with anticipation and remember it with intense pleasure.

To become involved in this way, you need to read slowly and carefully and concentrate with an active mind on the language of the story. Close-reading is more involved than *reading*; it goes beyond understanding the meanings of the printed words. The method involves identifying and evaluating some of the following: a story's diction or vocabulary; its imagery, sentence structure, point of view, setting, characters, plot, and themes; and the vision of life it expresses.

(For help with these and other terms in this section, consult the Glossary of Literary Terms.) To analyze a story, a close-reader examines details to consider larger meanings. Close-reading is challenging because it involves exploration and discovery of patterns, but with practice it becomes easier and rewards the reader by building an active partnership with the text. Annotating a text, discussed below, and recording your thoughts in a reading journal are tools that strengthen your close-reading.

As you read this section, keep in mind three general points. First, close-reading is widely held to be the most effective first step in analyzing a story because the process requires you to “enter” the story, read it carefully, and locate important details about its shape and meaning. Second, close-reading can easily be applied to all reading and is useful in courses and fields beyond literature. Third, close-reading is a natural preparation for writing about short stories and other texts, as you will find in the following section, “Writing about Short Stories.”

ANNOTATING SHORT STORIES

While you are reading, you can annotate the text by underlining important phrases and writing brief marginal notes that help you remember your reactions and trace the patterns in a story. Annotation is a helpful tool for close-reading because it organizes your thoughts and makes them easily retrievable in later readings and reflections. Annotation also helps you familiarize yourself with the content and structure of a story and is a way to clarify important details, remember them, and use them in discussion and writing. Deciding how many and what kind of notes you will make is up to you. However, making consistent annotations will help you dig deeper into a story and will strengthen your close-reading practice. There are many ways to annotate. The following recommendations are particularly useful.

1. Underline, circle, or highlight key words, phrases, and sentences in the story. After you have read through the story once or twice, underline, circle, or highlight language that might refer to unusual features of character, plot, setting, themes, and recurring images of the story. For example, in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown,” you might mark language that alludes to the devilish nature

of Brown’s companion. Read through the story again to find and mark other key words. This step helps you identify the story’s elements and think about the patterns you have found.

2. Note main ideas in the margins. This procedure will draw attention to the patterns you have developed in thinking about the story. For example, in “Young Goodman Brown,” the underlined phrase “on his present evil purpose” might be labeled “evil motive.” If you find other places in the margin where you have marked “evil motive,” you have discovered a pattern in the story that you may want to explore further.

3. Label phrases that signal important changes in story structure or turns of events. Note phrases that describe the function of the sentence, paragraph, or section you are flagging. These comments will trace the action of the story, so look for and annotate places where important turns of events occur. One such place in “Young Goodman Brown” is when Brown refuses Faith’s fearful plea that he not go out on “this night . . . of all nights in the year.” Your comment might read: “Couple differs; husband will go” or “B. will go, though Faith begs otherwise.”

4. Refine your own method of annotation. You should develop a system for keeping track of which types of annotation you are using, so that you can quickly understand the function of each annotation. For example, if you always note main ideas in the right-hand margin, you will know at a glance which comments represent main ideas. You may find that color-coding or labeling different types of annotation with a symbol, such as a star or an asterisk, is particularly helpful, especially if you use the same colors or symbols when you expand your annotations in your reading journal.

5. Reflect on your annotations to help you develop your own perspective on the story. Your own words may clarify particular patterns in the story. For example, you may comment here and there about the narrator’s annoying tone without knowing why. When reflecting on the content and consistency of your notes, you will often find that the author has established a pattern essential to your understanding of the story. You may also compare and contrast the story with another story or with external ideas and contemporary issues; this practice can generate good writing topics.

6. Keep a reading journal. Because most books do not have large margins for extensive notes, you will have to keep your marginal notes brief. But you can expand on your notes in a reading journal. Your instructor may have assigned one, but, if not, you can start one yourself for keeping longer comments that flesh out your marginal notes. Such a practice can help you further develop your ideas and deepen your reading. In the margins of the book, your annotations might be a few words or a short phrase. In your journal, you can expand these annotations into full sentences or paragraphs. This will help you fully record your thoughts, better preparing you to discuss the work in class or write a paper.

ANNOTATED EXCERPT FROM "YOUNG GOODMAN BROWN"

Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" is a masterpiece in the short-story genre. The first two pages, which provide the foundation for our understanding of the entire story, make an ideal sample for close-reading and annotation. In the following example, we use underlining because it is quick and produces a neater page to work from. These underlines and the comments that accompany them are only some of many interpretations of the story.

Young Goodman Brown *Meaning? Setting: time, place, history?*

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

[1804–1864]

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."

Mysterious image

Setting—place

Double meaning?

"My love and my (Faith)," replied young Goodman Brown, *Theme, setting,* "of all (nights) in the year, this one (night) must I tarry away *plot* 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." *Double standard, trouble ahead*

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 to-night. 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 *Husband's evil motive* 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!" *Devil image?*

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." *Setting, time, history*

"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. *Double meaning, blame*

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. *Setting, time, history*
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. *Satanic imagery*
 This, of course, must have been an ocular deception, assisted by the uncertain light.

As a tool of close-reading, annotating the first two pages of Hawthorne's story has yielded important material for developing an analysis. We were introduced to two major characters and their differing views of the husband's intention to leave his wife and go out into the woods all night. We learned that his motive is evil. We met a devil-like third character who accompanies Brown on his journey. Our next step would be to expand our annotations in a journal.

"Young Goodman Brown" Reading Journal

Title: "Young": youthful and relatively inexperienced; "Goodman": a type of address used by 17th-century colonial Puritans for men below the rank of gentleman.

Paragraph 1, Salem village: Setting, time and place, history — a small village (now Danvers) north of present-day Salem, MA. Accusations in the original Salem led to the infamous witch trials (1692), presided over by Hawthorne's paternal great-great-grandfather, Justice John Hathorne (1641-1717).

Paragraph 1, Faith: He's leaving his wife (Faith). He and she (Faith) "exchange a parting kiss." Double meaning: He is leaving his faith too.

In the example journal, the note about the setting would have required some research, while the note about the name "Faith" would have come solely from your interpretation of the story's patterns. Your annotations and notes are the perfect place to get ideas for writing papers. A bit of research at this stage will not only deepen your understanding of the story but also help you provide evidence for your thesis. Consult "Writing about Short Stories" to develop and support a thesis.

CHECKLIST FOR READING CLOSELY

- ☐ Have you underlined, circled, or highlighted key words, phrases, and sentences in the story?
- ☐ Have you labeled main ideas in the margins of the story?
- ☐ Have you labeled phrases that signal important changes in structure and events in the story?
- ☐ Have you developed an appropriate, flexible system of annotations that will help you keep track of your thinking?
- ☐ Have you reflected on your annotations to develop a perspective on the story, with ideas for discussion or writing?
- ☐ Have you started a reading journal where you can expand on your annotations to start writing a paper about the story?