

A story about Dwelling in the Word

This story is an adaptation of a short story called *The Great Stone Face* by Nathaniel Hawthorne, the American writer.

It is written in a shortened form here to make it easier for transmission to staff and /or pupils.

This story is chosen because it illustrates the transformative effect of abiding in the presence of holy words and sacred scripture and allowing them to shape one's identity, security and being. The great stone face here represents the expression of God as mediated through holy scriptures.

The Great Stone Face (an adaptation) – Nathaniel Hawthorne

There was a young boy called Ernest who, with his mother, grew up in a beautiful valley in the mountains of America. This valley was unusual because it had a wonderful feature – a rock face which, from the home of Ernest and the surrounding villages, in certain lights had a striking resemblance to a human face. The face was no ordinary face but offered a kind, peaceful and wise welcome to those who took time to meditate on its beauty.

From his youth, Ernest was transfixed by the beauty of the face. He wholeheartedly believed the prophecy which surrounded it, that one day someone, who had grown up in the valley, would return and embody, in their own being, and their own face, the grandeur of The Great Stone Face. Blessing upon blessing would then be bestowed upon the valley.

One day, rumours circulated of a man who had made a great fortune, a certain Mr Gathergold.

Mr Gathergold had himself grown up in the valley, but on making his way in the world had gathered great riches using his wit, wisdom, and no small measure of cunning. He had contracted a vast manor to be built in the valley and, on his arrival to take up residence in this palace, the whole village – including young Ernest – came out to see this local hero return, and to see whether the prophecy would be fulfilled: would Gathergold's face share the contours of The Great Stone Face?

As Mr Gathergold arrived in his stately carriage, a shout went up that he did indeed reflect the grandeur of The Great Stone Face, but young Ernest, who knew and loved the face so well, was not convinced.

Mr Gathergold's skin seemed yellow and tight, his nose seemed hooked and his eyes small and shrewd. This was not the man to fulfil the prophecy, Ernest said to himself. He returned to

the porch of his small cottage and gazed upon the beautiful grand old face, basking in its kind shadow, waiting, and hoping for another to arrive.

A few years later another rumour circulated of an old and successful General who wished to end his long and accomplished military career by living in the beautiful valley. He too was said to have grown up here and, having forgotten about Mr Gathergold whom, it was decided, did not after all reflect The Great Stone Face as much as previously thought, many began to wonder whether this General, Old Blood and Thunder as he was called, would fulfil the prophecy in his own face.

Once again, the crowds gathered when the General, Old Blood and Thunder, came to receive a welcome from the townsfolk. As he climbed the podium to address the crowds many agreed that he did indeed reflect the grandeur of The Great Stone Face.

But Ernest, who was growing in discernment and wisdom himself, was not so sure. He saw instead a face that was harsh and weather-beaten, war worn and expressing an iron-will. This face did not bestow the blessings or the mild and infectious warmth of The Great Stone Face. Once again, Ernest retired to his cottage, where he sat and read in the gentle shadow and presence of the rock that gave him comfort and hope.

More years passed and Ernest had almost forgotten the prophecy, though the face's transforming and rugged beauty only soaked deeper into his character, actions, and thoughts. His life of simple truths and profound insight was something that villagers would often seek out in times of difficulty or distress.

Nonetheless, the prophecy was soon revived when rumour spread of a visiting statesman, a man of law and a famous politician, a certain Mr Silvertongue as he was widely known. He was coming to visit his place of birth, the cradle from which his talents grew. Perhaps Silvertongue, renowned for his persuasive speech and sophisticated manner was the embodiment of the prophecy, the one who would capture the honour of The Great Stone Face in his own expression.

Once again, the crowds gathered, expectation rose, and Silvertongue appeared to speak outside the steps of the townhall, one of the valley's own returning home. The crowd were ecstatic as he began to speak in the most fluent and favourable prose about his hometown. At last, the prophecy had been fulfilled. But not for the aging Ernest who noted with sadness that

the man's face bore no resemblance at all to The Great Stone Face. Instead, his eyes seemed distracted, his face vague and empty, and his gaze shallow as though he sought only to speak the words that others wanted to hear, rather than words endowed with the weight of a greater purpose. Ernest once again sought refuge in The Great Stone Face, in its stillness, its sincerity and its truth. Others continued also to seek solace in Ernest. Even though Silvertongue impressed, somehow Ernest looked into one's soul and understood you and your problems carefully, thoughtfully, and profoundly.

The last visitor was a poet whose name we do not know. By now Ernest was white-haired and wise, his teacher none other than a simple way of life, the nobility of his spirit and the time he spent in contemplation of the grandeur and beauty of The Great Stone Face. The poet had heard of this renowned man of the valley and sought him out.

Now Ernest was a great admirer of the poet and was greatly honoured that such a fine sculptor of words should seek him out at his cottage. Indeed, when the poet arrived Ernest was reading a volume of his most moving poems, shifting his gaze from the book to the mountain's face in wonder at the beauty and possibility of human existence. Perhaps this poet could, after all, in his quiet way, fulfil the ancient prophecy.

As had become customary in that valley, that evening, after the poet had arrived, people from the village came to Ernest's cottage to hear Ernest speak on the meaning and purpose of life, for his wisdom was now without challenge in all the area.

As the late sun warmed his face, Ernest stood before the people and gazing on them with love and kindness welcomed the esteemed poet and addressed the crowd. He spoke with simplicity but depth, with love but challenge, with hope but truth, springing from the honest life of integrity which he had always sought. As he spoke, the setting sun cast a shadow on the mountain behind him and The Great Stone Face glowed as rarely seen. But as Ernest spoke it soon became apparent to all who were present that there was an uncanny and uncommon resemblance between the face of their mentor and the face of The Great Stone Face. So, striking was the resemblance that the poet, overwhelmed by the similarity and by the shared beauty and grandeur that was emanating from both appearances, was pushed to his feet by an involuntary force: "Behold! Behold! Today the ancient prophecy is fulfilled: Ernest is himself is the very likeness of the Great Stone Face!"

The people looked and saw and knew that what the deep-sighted poet said was indeed true. The prophecy was fulfilled. But Ernest finishing what he had to say, took the poet's arm, and walked home slowly to his cottage, still hoping that some wiser and better man than himself would one day appear, bearing a resemblance to The Great Stone Face.