The Minister's Black Veil: A Paradigm Study Guide

The Minister's Black Veil: A Paradigm by Nathaniel Hawthorne

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Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil" first appeared in 1836 in the journal the *Token*. It was published anonymously, along with several other tales that Hawthorne had submitted. These tales met with critical acclaim, and their anonymous author, writing of unique American experiences, was praised as a genius. In 1837 "The Minister's Black Veil" was included in *Twice Told Tales,* a collection of short stories published under Hawthorne's own name.

Author Biography

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born on July 4, 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts, the second of three children born to Nathaniel and Elizabeth Hathorne. (Their son added the "w" to the family name when he began his writing career.) In 1808, his father, a ship's captain, died of yellow fever in the distant port of Surinam. Shortly thereafter, four-year-old Nathaniel moved with his mother and two sisters, Elizabeth and Maria Louisa, from their home on Union Street to the house next door belonging to the Mannings, his mother's family. In the Manning household, Hawthorne's keen intelligence was noted and nurtured; in fact, his maternal relatives hoped that he would eventually attend college. At the age of sixteen, Hawthorne demonstrated a flair for journalism when he wrote and printed the *Spectator* - an intra-family newsletter he wrote with his sister that functioned as a kind of correspondence between the Mannings in Salem and an uncle who was overseeing the family lands in Raymond, Maine.

In 1821, Hawthorne entered Bowdoin College in Maine, and he proved to be a competent, but not always industrious, scholar. While there, he became acquainted with Franklin Pierce, who would later become the fourteenth president of the United States. Another classmate of Hawthorne's was Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, soon to be one of America's most acclaimed poets. As his time at Bowdoin drew to a close, Hawthorne wrote a letter to his mother expressing his lack of enthusiasm for the professions of law and medicine. He proposed that he should become a writer, asking his mother to imagine the pride she would experience at seeing his name in print and at hearing his works generally praised.

After graduating from Bowdoin in 1825, Hawthorne returned to the Manning residence and lived a life of relative isolation that lasted for some eleven years. During this period he wrote *Fanshawe,* a novel that took as its subject matter his days at Bowdoin, and published it at his own expense in 1828. However, fearing that the novel was inadequate, he stopped its publication and burned all the copies of it that he could find. "Young Goodman Brown" was written circa 1836 and "The Minister's Black Veil," was published in 1837 in the collection *Twice Told Tales*. It was also during this time that Hawthorne studied New England history and discovered that one of his Puritan ancestors had ordered the whipping of a Quaker woman, and another had served as a judge in the Salem witch trials of 1692. Many critics believe that the guilt Hawthorne felt over his family history prompted him to explore the evil of man and original sin in works such as "Young Goodman Brown" and "The Minister's Black Veil."

After 1830, several of Hawthorne's short stories appeared in various literary journals. Hawthorne, though, was frustrated with his literary career, not only because it paid so little but also because he had always desired recognition as the writer of a collection of tales, hoping to imitate the successful literary career of Washington Irving. Hawthorne finally achieved this critical recognition with the publication of *Twice Told Tales* in 1837, but the financial rewards were still not enough to support him. Hawthorne married Sophia Peabody in 1842. The couple moved to Concord, Massachusetts, where they stayed for three years before returning to Salem.

Even before the publication of *Twice Told Tales,* Hawthorne had tried his hand at other jobs in order to make a living. He had served as the editor for a short-lived magazine, written a series of children's stories, and worked as a measurer in the United States Customs House in Boston. He joined the ill-fated farming commune at Brook Farm, an enterprise that combined intellectual and physical labor, only to leave in disappointment after six months. With the help of Franklin Pierce, Hawthorne procured the position of Surveyor for the Customs House in Salem, a position he held from 1846 to 1848.

The publication of *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850 occurred during the same time of Hawthorne's controversial discharge from his customs position. Hawthorne had been granted that position by a Democratic administration, and when the Whigs won the national election, local party members demanded that those appointed by the Democrats be removed from their jobs. Hawthorne was disappointed that some of his neighbors and friends turned against him during this time. This controversy - added to the publicity over the book's content - boosted sales, and the Hawthornes were able to move back to Concord. After publishing several more successful novels, serving as the American consul to Liverpool from 1853 to 1857 under Franklin Pierce, and touring Europe for several years, Hawthorne returned to Concord, Massachusetts in 1860. He died on May 19, 1864 while vacationing with his old college friend, Pierce.

In 1837 Hawthorne had written to Longfellow "that there is no fate in this world so horrible as to have no share in either its joys or sorrows." He went on to say, "For the last ten years, I have not lived, but only dreamed of living." It seems that not even the years of his ultimate success could eradicate the experience of his early days as a writer. Always somewhat reclusive, Hawthorne projects his private world in his narratives, portraying many of his characters as dispassionate observers of the dark recesses of the soul, unable to participate in life's "joys and sorrows."

Plot Summary

Part I: Hooper Dons the Veil

As the story opens, the congregation of a small church in Milford, Connecticut is arriving in their best clothes to attend Sunday service. The sexton, a person responsible for maintaining the church, is ringing the bell that announces the service will soon begin. His ringing stops abruptly when he is startled by the Reverend Mr. Hooper emerging from his quarters with a veil of black crepe that covers his whole face and leaves only his mouth and chin exposed.

In the minds of the parishioners, Mr. Hooper is a young and self—disciplined parson who has never acted irrationally before. They are bewildered by his present behavior, believing that either he has lost his wits or he has committed some terrible sin. An excited hush greets Mr. Hooper as he walks to the pulpit. He has never been a terribly effective orator, but, on this day, he delivers a sermon concerning "secret sins" that every man harbors and would hide from his fellow man and even God Himself. The congregation is dramatically moved by the combination of the sermon and the inexplicable black veil, each parishioner feeling as if Mr. Hooper has penetrated to his or her very soul. They cannot wait to flee the oppressive atmosphere of the church and feel the bright sunshine outside. No one wants to walk with Mr. Hooper, and one of the parishioners who always invites Mr. Hooper to dinner fails to do so on this occasion. As the Reverend Mr. Hooper enters his quarters he turns and casts a "sad smile" on the curious congregation.

Part II: The Funeral and the Wedding

At the later service, the black veil has the same impact on the parishioners. After the service is over, Mr. Hooper officiates at the funeral of a young lady. When Hooper leans forward to utter some final words into the face of the deceased, the veil falls away, and he clutches it back into place as if afraid the corpse might see his features. One superstitious old lady swears that when he did this, she saw the corpse shudder. As the mourners leave the church, one of them looks back furtively, convinced that Hooper and the deceased were walking hand in hand, this eerie conviction seconded by others present.

Later that evening, one of the most popular couples in town is to celebrate their wedding. The parishioners anticipate the arrival of Parson Hooper, convinced that the earlier wearing of the veil was just a passing fancy, expecting that he would be his old mildly amusing and comfortable self. When he arrives with the veil still covering his face, he casts a funeral-like atmosphere over what should be a joyous occasion, prompting some there to imagine that he had brought the spirit of the dead girl from the funeral for the purpose of some unholy or otherworldly marriage. As he raises his glass of wine to toast the newly married couple, Hooper glimpses his own veiled face in the

mirror and is struck by the same sense of evil he has evoked in his parishioners. Horrified, he runs out into the darkness of the night.

Part III: Requests for an Explanation

In the ensuing days, the black veil is all the congregation can talk about. The fascination with Hooper's eccentricity extends even to the young schoolchildren. This young boy wears a black veil and frightens his playmates so badly that the boy scares even himself. Since the Reverend Mr. Hooper has always been ready to listen to the advice and concerns of his congregation, a group is selected to approach the parson and inquire as to the meaning and purpose of the veil. When this select group comes into Hooper's presence they are tongue-tied and cannot ask him. If the veil were only removed, they say, they could have advanced to the point. Since it was not, they leave in ignorance, deciding that the issue of the veil is better left to the consideration of a church counsel, or even the consideration of a group of churches uniting in a general synod.

Elizabeth, the woman to whom Hooper is engaged to be married, is not frightened or put off by the veil, and she asks Hooper, directly, the question the others could not. She asks him to remove the veil and then explain why he put it on in the first place. When he replies that he cannot, she asks him at least to remove the mystery from his words. As he explains that he has vowed to wear the veil forever, as a "type and symbol," she is suddenly unnerved by his willingness to give up the most meaningful of human relationships for the sake of that veil, and is finally struck by its symbolic horror. She asks him one last time to remove it, and he again refuses. When she leaves in dismay, he displays, again, that sad smile, both amazed and amused that a simple piece of cloth could intrude so heavily upon human happiness.

Part IV: A Summary of Hooper's Persistence

It soon becomes evident that Mr. Hooper intends to keep wearing the veil, despite his discomfort with the reactions of his parishioners, many of whom cross the street to avoid him while certain others make it a point of honor to confront him, in order that they might brag about their courage later. It upsets him that small children run from him. Also, he is disappointed that he has to give up his customary walks to the cemetery because of those who always hide behind the gravestones trying to see behind the veil as he leans over the gate.

Rumors continue to circulate that he has committed some terrible and unpardonable sin. Yet, in a way, he has become a more effective minister. Many of those he had converted to his own religious faith insist upon his presence at the moment of their deaths, as if they believe the veil has given him an intimate understanding of life's mysteries.

Part V: The Deathbed Scene

The Reverend Mr. Hooper lives this lonely life for many years. On his own deathbed, the Reverend Mr. Clark, a young and energetic parson who has come from the nearby town of Westbury to comfort Hooper, asks if he might remove the veil before Hooper dies. Perhaps misunderstanding Hooper's ambiguous answer, the Reverend Mr. Clark reaches toward the veil, but Hooper clutches it to his face and prevents it from being removed. Hooper, at last, offers to those assembled around him an explanation for his wearing of the veil:

"'Why do you tremble at me alone?' cried he, turning his veiled face round the circle of pale spectators. 'Tremble also at each other! Have men avoided me, and women shown no pity, and children screamed and fled, only for my black veil? What, but the mystery which it obscurely typifies, has made this piece of crepe so awful? When the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend; the lover to his best-beloved; when a man does not vainly shrink from the eye of his Creator, loathsomely treasuring up the secret of his sin; then deem me a monster, for the symbol beneath which I have lived, and die! I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a Black Veil!'" (Excerpt from "The Minister's Black Veil: A Parable")

The Reverend Mr. Hooper accuses everyone of veiling their innermost secrets and desires. The black veil symbolizes this masking. His explanation, though, is somewhat dissatisfying, since readers might wonder why Hooper insists upon wearing that worldly symbol in the afterlife. As the story ends, Hawthorne leaves readers with the grim image of Hooper lying in his coffin with the black veil still firmly fixed to his face.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

Minister Hooper is known to the people of Milford as "a gentlemanly person," renowned for his neat and orderly appearance and mild manner. It is for this reason that he is received with such undisguised amazement when he appears one Sunday morning for services with his face covered by an eerie black crape veil. Some people think it is merely a passing fancy, some suppose that he has gone mad, and some cannot even believe that it is the same person who gave services the previous week.

That Sunday in the church there is more than the usual anxious rustling among the pews. Minister Hooper appears not to notice anything out of the ordinary as he makes his entrance and proceeds toward the pulpit. His appearance is so frightening to the townspeople that some of the women begin to feel faint and have to be escorted out of the church before the end of the services. Those that stay, however, feel that there is something different in Minister Hooper's service that day. He had always had "the reputation of a good preacher, but not an energetic one: he strove to win his people heavenward by mild, persuasive influences, rather than to drive them thither by the thunders of the Word." The sermon that he gives on the day that he begins to wear his veil is delivered in much the same style, but is "tinged, rather more darkly than usual, with the gentle gloom of Mr. Hooper's temperament."

The subject of his sermon is secret sin. He condemns those who try to conceal their sinful thoughts and actions from their loved ones, forgetting that there is an omnipotent, omniscient being from which they cannot hide. Although there is nothing remarkable in his words, the aura of gloom that surrounds his swathed head makes everyone feel as though their deepest, most well kept secrets have suddenly been exposed for the entire congregation to see. They all long for a gust of wind to blow the veil from Mr. Hooper's head so that they can be assured that it is in fact their beloved pastor, and not an evil spirit.

At the end of the services, there is almost a stampede to exit the church. Everyone is expressing their confusion in different ways, but it is clear that they are all bewildered and frightened by the sudden change in Mr. Hooper. It is not clear to the people whether it is merely the veil that is causing them such anxiety, or if there has been something more than a physical change in their pastor.

Mr. Hooper follows them out of the church as is customary, greeting many of the townspeople individually. Normally it is a privilege to walk by his side on the way out of the church, but on this day, he walks alone. He is normally asked by Old Squire Saunders to bless the food at his table, but he receives no such requests now. He returns to the parsonage unaccompanied, and as he reaches it, he turns to look back at the people on their way home. He sees every pair of eyes in the congregation staring

after him incredulously. He offers up a sad but knowing smile behind the black veil that is to become his trademark.

Upon his departure, everyone begins to talk. One woman marvels how such a simple piece of cloth can make such a difference to the whole person. Her husband, the town doctor, believes that he must be suffering from a mental illness of some sort.

Mr. Hooper is received with a similar reaction during the afternoon service, although following the service there is a funeral, so the gloomy black veil becomes slightly more appropriate in this context. As he leans over the coffin to peer at the young girl, some say that even the corpse shudders at the sight of his face behind the awful veil.

Mr. Hooper has one final obligation before his workday is over. It is the night of the wedding of a handsome young couple from the town. Although he is normally thought of as a melancholy man, he is known on these happy occasions to bring a certain solemn gaiety to the processions. On this day however, he brings nothing but gloom to the wedding, and the ceremony is thought to be a disaster by all. The ceremony ends when Parson Hooper catches a glimpse of his own image in a mirror, and rushes from the room with a wail of fright.

The following day no one can talk about anything but Parson Hooper's veil. Despite everyone's curiosity however, no one is able to approach Parson Hooper and ask him directly what the veil symbolizes and why he is wearing it. They decide to send to the head church for a minister to come and deal with the situation. The minister does come, but is so confused and repulsed by the veil that he decides to return to the head church to ask the advice of the church elders as to how to handle the issue.

The only person in the entire town who is not too afraid to speak to Parson Hooper is his fiancée, Elizabeth. She broaches the subject frankly and honestly with him at the very first opportunity, asking him first to take off the veil, and then to tell her why he had put it on in the first place. "There is an hour to come," he says to her, "when all of us shall cast aside our veils. Take it not amiss, beloved friend, if I wear this piece of crape till then." She is perplexed by his words, and asks him at the very least to unveil the meaning of his words. He clarifies, telling her in no uncertain terms that until the day of his death no person, including Elizabeth, will see him without his veil. She asks him why he has made this vow, and he says that he, like most human beings, "have sorrows dark enough to be typified by a black veil." She understands then that he has nothing more to hide than anyone else, but as a man of God has chosen to take his mortal sins more seriously than most. She counters that, because of the suddenness and drastic nature of his vow, people may tend to think that his very natural sins are of more of a scandalous nature, and that he hides his face "under the consciousness of secret sin." He replies that he has nothing out of the ordinary to hide, and that every mortal harbors enough sin to wear a similar veil, so why should he not just because others do not.

In reply to his unfailing logic, Elizabeth begins to cry, then covers her eyes with her hand and runs to the door. He entreats her to be patient until the afterlife when all veils are revealed and they can live in peace together, and she hesitates. She asks him for one

glance at his face, but he cannot grant her even this small request. She bids him farewell and rushes out the door.

From that moment forward no one else tries to understand the mystery of Mr. Hooper's veil. Some think him merely eccentric, but the majority thinks he is nothing short of frightening. He is saddened by the fact that timid people and children turn away from him in the streets in fear, and he himself is so horrified by his eerie countenance that he refuses to look at himself in mirrors.

The benefit of the veil is that he becomes a more effective and persuasive clergyman. Although nobody can quite understand the meaning of the veil, the sheer darkness of it begins to wield an "awful power over souls that were in agony for sin." Dying sinners cry out for him, and people begin to visit the town to behold his ominous veil. As the lonely years pass, he acquires certain fame for his gloomy convictions, and he becomes "Father Hooper" to all who know him.

On his deathbed, he is surrounded by many awe-struck admirers, including fellow clergymen, members of the community, the physician, and of course, the woman who had forsaken him so many years ago, Elizabeth. Even on his deathbed, he is continually conscientious that his veil does not slip off his face.

As his breath becomes more shallow, and his time draws closer, a Minister from Westbury moves closer to his bed, and asks if he is ready to have the metaphorical veil lifted so that he may pass into the next world. Father Hooper affirms that he is. Reverend Clark then tries to convince him that, in an attempt to absolve himself of all the rumors of the town that have been circulating for so many years, he should give everyone a glimpse of his blameless face once before dying. Despite his fragile state, Father Hooper responds vehemently, holding his hands over his veil to protect it from being removed, with the cry, "On Earth, Never!"

The minister jumps back, exclaiming, "Dark old man…with what horrible crime upon your soul are you now passing to the judgment?"

With a supreme effort to try to hold death at bay a few minutes longer, Father Hooper hoists himself up in his bed. "Why do you tremble at me alone?" he cries out in anguish to the frightened onlookers. "Tremble also at each other! Have men avoided me, and women shown no pity, and children screamed and fled, only for my black veil? What other than the mystery that it obscurely typifies has made this piece of crape so awful? When the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend; the lover to his best beloved; when man does not vainly shrink from the eye of his Creator, loathsomely treasuring up the secret of his sin; then deem me a monster, for the symbol beneath which I have lived, and die! I look around me, and, lo! On every visage a Black Veil!"

With that said, he lies back in his bed, and exhales his last breath. In his journey from deathbed to coffin to burial, the utmost care is taken that the veil not move a hairsbreadth from where it was when he made his final speech and passed on to the afterlife, finally free of his burdensome black veil.

Analysis

It is difficult to know what the author, Nathaniel Hawthorne, was trying to say with this short but mysterious work of fiction. The mystery, obviously, and the question on everyone's mind throughout the entire story, is why Parson Hooper would choose to cover his head with a black veil. In the moment of death, and once again while speaking to his fiancé Elizabeth, Hooper reveals that perhaps he was not wearing his black veil for any particularly grave sin that he had committed, but simply feels that mortal man is so sinful in general, that everyone should follow his example and don their own black veils.

He makes no secret about the pain that this isolation causes him. Hooper's character seems to say on a number of occasions, it is not easy to completely cut oneself off from society as he has done. The first time we see his anguished solitude is at the gloomy wedding, when, catching a glimpse of himself in a mirror, he spits out the wine in his mouth and rushes out the door with a cry of horror. From that day forth, he does his best never to see himself in a mirror. He also tells Elizabeth of his horrific isolation, and begs her not to leave him. However, in the end he feels it to be a worthy sacrifice, apparently thinking that he will reap greater rewards for his piety in the afterlife.

Just what Hawthorne is trying to say with this is unclear. It is possible to draw the conclusion that Parson Hooper has committed some grievous sin for which he is trying to atone. This story is in fact similar to a true to life occurrence, where one Mr. Joseph Moody, a clergyman from York, Maine, accidentally killed his best friend, and from that day forth wore a black veil as penance for his crime. Perhaps Hawthorne sees Hooper as a martyr, willing to suffer for the sins of him and all mankind, the veil being a symbol of Original Sin. Another possibility is that Hawthorne is making an ironic critique of overly puritanical values. Perhaps he sees it as ironic, and even a sin of pride in and of itself, to go through life with a silly veil covering one's head. He may see a parson's work as being to build a connection and a relationship of trust with the very same people that Hooper alienates through the veil. Only Elizabeth who, through her simple, clear-cut morality and emotional frankness, can see the veil for what it really is. As she looks at him closely when he comes to call on her, she "could discern nothing of the dreadful gloom that had so overawed the multitude: it was but a double fold of crape, hanging down from his forehead to his mouth, and slightly stirring with his breath." "There is nothing terrible in this piece of crape," she comments, "except that it hides a face which I am always glad to look upon. Come, good sir, let the sun shine from behind the cloud. First lay aside your black veil: then tell me why you put it on."

Hawthorne may point to Elizabeth as the real martyr of the story, the true heroine, rather than the overly pious Hooper. Unlike Hooper, she sees the joy in life, the good rather than the evil and the melancholy, and strives to live a life free from sin and the need for dark, disfiguring veils. Unlike the townspeople however, she does not shrink away from Hooper in disgust and fear. She confronts him and sees the veil for what it is, nothing but a simple piece of cloth. She does not condemn him for it, and until the day he dies

respects him for his decision to wear it, standing by his deathbed to help him keep the veil in position over his face.

It is perhaps the accepting and kind nature of Elizabeth that Hawthorne is trying to call attention to, bringing it into sharp contrast against Hooper, who is overly pious to the point of distancing himself from his congregation, and the townspeople, whose first instinct is to condemn that which they do not understand, thus further alienating Hooper from the community.

Characters

Rev. Mr. Clark

The Reverend Mr. Clark is a young and enthusiastic minister from the nearby town of Westbury, who is summoned to Milford to attend the dying Reverend Mr. Hooper. Knowing that "the veil of eternity" is about to be lifted from his worldly existence, Clark asks Hooper if he can remove the veil that he has stubbornly worn for many years. When Hooper desperately clings to that veil, Clark cries, "Dark old man! ... with what horrible crime upon your soul are you now passing to the judgment?" Clark is then witness to Hooper's dying claim that everyone in life wears a veil of secret shame that isolates him from the rest of the world. Hooper's veil is different only in that his is visible.

Elizabeth

Elizabeth is engaged to the Reverend Mr. Hooper, the minister who has, for some unknown reason, taken to wearing a mysterious black veil over his face. At first, Elizabeth is not affected by the horror that the veil seems to evoke in others. She considers it to be only a piece of crepe cloth hiding the face for which she has acquired some affection. But she, too, finally feels the veil's unsettling power when Hooper refuses her request to remove it. He explains to her that the veil might serve equally well as either a symbol of mourning or a symbol of sorrow for the secret sin he is accused of harboring. Even though Elizabeth breaks off the engagement, she proves herself to be Hooper's steadfast friend by nursing and supporting him at the hour of his death.

Father Hooper

See Rev. Mr. Hooper

Mr. Hooper

See Rev. Mr. Hooper

Parson Hooper

See Rev. Mr. Hooper

Rev. Mr. Hooper

The Reverend Mr. Hooper is a minister in the small town of Milford, Connecticut, who shocks his congregation by appearing at Sunday services with a black veil covering nearly his entire face—only his mouth and chin are exposed. He wears this veil throughout the service to the dismay and bewilderment of his parishioners. Hooper is engaged to be married to Elizabeth, but abandons his marriage plans when she insists that he remove the veil or adequately explain its meaning. He can do neither. The mystery of the black veil isolates Hooper from his parish and his community, and this isolation is evident in his despairing cry to Elizabeth: "Oh! you know not how lonely I am, and how frightened, to be alone behind my black veil." Despite the loneliness the veil causes him to experience, he never removes it. As he is dying, he explains that he has worn the veil as an outward symbol of humankind's hoarding of secret sins. Hooper hides his face with the mysterious black veil even into death.

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

The moment that the Reverend Mr. Hooper, a parson in the small town of Milford, puts on the black veil that he is to wear for the rest of his life, the influence of the veil becomes evident. As he delivers his first sermon wearing the veil, his congregation gets the uncanny sensation that it is not really their beloved Parson Hooper. After the service, those who usually vie for the prestige of accompanying Hooper out of the church do not do so, and a parishioner who always invites Hooper to dinner fails to invite him on this occasion. The veil so isolates him from the companionship of others that it denies him even the happiness of a marriage with Elizabeth, to whom he admits the veil's unhappy effects: "Oh! you know not how lonely I am, and how frightened, to be alone behind my black veil. Do not leave me in this miserable obscurity forever!" That miserable obscurity only intensifies as he adamantly continues to wear the veil, despite the pain he experiences when, again and again, certain people cross the street to avoid him, and children quit playing and run away at his approach.

Doubt and Ambiguity

The black veil is a symbol fraught with doubt and ambiguity, but critics disagree what it symbolizes. Upon Hooper's first appearance in the black veil, one woman in his congregation declares that the veil symbolizes the Parson's madness. Other parishioners who consider themselves wise suggest that there is no mystery to the veil at all; the Reverend Mr. Hooper has only strained his eyes the night before in intense studies by lamplight. But as he continues to wear the black veil, the parishioners offer other explanations of its symbolism.

At its least mysterious, Hooper's veil is explained as a symbol of mourning for some lost soul. At its most mysterious, Hooper's veil is explained as a symbol of some great and unpardonable sin that Hooper himself has committed. Doubt and ambiguity exist not only for characters in the story who try to read the black veil's symbolism, but also for modern readers of Hawthorne's tale. In trying to penetrate the mystery of the black veil, modern readers are helped neither by the author's footnote to the subtitle nor by Hooper's dying accusation. The footnote to the subtitle suggests that the story be read as a parable wherein Hooper's veil is not unlike the veil worn by the clergyman Mr. Joseph Moody, as a symbol of sorrow for the accidental killing of a friend. But the footnote also says, "In his case, however, the symbol had a different import." As Hooper lies dying, he accuses all men of veiling themselves from God and other men. But if his own black veil has been worn as a symbol of that shared sin or weakness, the reader might still question why Hooper insists upon wearing the veil after he is dead and has gone to his eventual judgment before God.

Guilt and Innocence

With his dying words, Hooper asks that his behavior be judged until others have examined their own consciences and found themselves free of sin. Those sins prevent people from communicating fully and openly with others and with God. Hooper has worn the black veil of "secret sin" visibly on his face while others wear that black veil on their souls. As a symbol, Hooper implies, the black veil represents a shared human weakness in the inescapable tendency to commit and hide sin. This implication is reinforced by the topic of the sermon Hooper delivers when he first appears wearing the black veil. "The subject had reference to secret sin, and those sad mysteries which we hide from our nearest and dearest, and would fain conceal from our own consciousness, even forgetting that the Omniscient can detect them." In Christianity, this shared tendency to sin is called Original Sin, an imprint of guilt inherited from Adam and Eve, who sinned against God and then tried to hide from Him. No one is born innocent of Original Sin, and no one escapes the mark of guilt of which Hooper's black veil is representative.

Moral Corruption/Sin

Many critics believe that the Reverend Mr. Hooper wears the black veil, at first, to teach his congregation a lesson about acknowledging the presence of Original Sin in each and every parishioner. His continued wearing of the veil, however, is a morally corrupting influence on Hooper since it leads him to the sin of excessive human pride. Had Hooper immediately explained to the congregation the significance of the black veil, the lesson he meant to impart would have been clear. Instead, he wears the black veil for the rest of his life, never offering an explanation until he is on his deathbed. And even then, the explanation is not as clear and direct as it might have been.

Moreover, the black veil isolates him from the religious community to whom he should minister with affection and concern. He takes great pride both in having discovered the dark secrets of the soul and in parading that discovery in front of the congregation. His isolation and suffering are, perhaps, only tolerable in his sense of moral superiority, and he puts his own continued sense of moral superiority ahead of the concerns of his congregation. Ironically, the black veil, which was initially meant to represent secret sin, comes to represent Hooper's own sin of pride, and conceals the very thing it was meant to expose.

Style

Point of View

In "The Minister's Black Veil: A Parable," the Reverend Mr. Hooper shocks his congregation in Milford, Connecticut, by appearing at Sunday services wearing a black veil that shrouds his face. He wears this veil the rest of his life and insists upon wearing it into the grave. The story is told from the point of view of an unknown narrator who describes the events of the story in the third person. This narrator is omniscient, that is, the narrator seems to know more about the motivations of the characters than they might know about themselves. In addition to describing events and reporting dialogue between characters, the narrator supplies the reader with a sense of the characters' thoughts and feelings. For example, it is the narrator who reveals Hooper's sense of horror at observing his veiled semblance in a mirror while toasting the newlywed couple. It is also the narrator who describes the sense of revulsion and horror that Elizabeth finally experiences, realizing that the veil will never be removed from her beloved's face.

The narrator sometimes frames events by indicating how they should be interpreted. For example, even as it is described that the corpse of the recently deceased young lady shuddered at the approach of Hooper's veiled face, the narrator implies that this account not be taken too seriously, since "A superstitious old woman was the only witness of this prodigy."

Setting

The story is set in the small town of Milford, Connecticut. Aside from the observation that the church and the graveyard seem to mark the extent of Hooper's world, the story does not seem dependent on the setting for its significance. It is interesting to note, however, that Hawthorne may have actually visited Milford in his preparation for writing *Twice Told Tales,* the collection of sketches in which "The Minister's Black Veil" appears. These collections of sketches or short stories were popular in nineteenth-century America, perhaps because the diverse and unique settings they offered were representative of the geographic and social diversity of America itself.

Structure

The structure of "The Minister's Black Veil" is easily divisible into five parts. The first part describes the reaction of Hooper's congregation to his appearance in the black veil and to the sermon he delivers. The second part recounts the events and describes the atmosphere of the funeral and the wedding later that day. The third part presents two attempts to elicit an explanation of the veil from Hooper, first by an authorized and select group of parishioners, and then by Elizabeth. The fourth part summarizes Hooper's isolation and suffering as he lives out his life and approaches death. The fifth part is the deathbed scene, in which he finally touches on the significance of the black

veil as a symbol of "secret sin." The secret sin of the story's final part mirrors the secret sin upon which Hooper sermonizes in the first part. The structure of the story, then, reinforces the reading of the veil's meaning.

Symbols/Symbolism

A symbol, simply defined, is an object that is understood to represent some concrete and tangible object while, simultaneously, representing one or more abstract ideas. The black veil that the Reverend Mr. Hooper wears certainly fits this definition. Several of the characters in the story remark that the veil is simply a piece of black crepe cloth, yet, at the same time, this simple piece of crepe instills a sense of horror in those who observe it because it represents the more abstract ideas of death, mourning, and the hidden secrets of the soul. But as with many things, when the black veil is designated as a symbol, it accumulates more and more abstract ideas. For example, some critics read the black veil as symbolic of Original Sin and of Hooper's excessive pride. Since to study the black veil is to learn its many diverse symbolic values, its significance is not easily apparent. It becomes a symbol that, in one of its abstractions, recalls the idea of symbolism itself. It becomes a symbol of symbols.

Figurative Language

Figurative language uses common terms to metaphorically express an unfamiliar idea in familiar terms. This is different from literal language that uses precise, factual terms to express exactly what is meant. Two examples from "The Minister's Black Veil" help illustrate this difference. When Hooper runs terrified from the wedding reception after glimpsing himself in the mirror, Hawthorne writes, "For the earth, too, had on her Black Veil." Hooper wears a literal veil on his face. The earth, in the shades of night, wears a figurative one. When Hooper refuses Elizabeth's request that he remove the veil and explain its significance, she says, "Your words are a mystery too ... Take away the veil from them, at least." Since he will not remove the literal veil from his face, she asks him, metaphorically, to remove the metaphoric language that hides the literal meaning of his words.

Parable

A parable is a short and concise tale which usually expresses a moral or religious message in terms of something that is easily understood. Hawthorne subtitles "The Minister's Black Veil" as "A Parable." He footnotes this subtitle with a brief account of another minister named Mr. Moody, who lived in York, Maine, approximately eighty years before the events of Hawthorne's story take place. Mr. Moody wore a black veil to symbolize the sorrow he felt at being involved in the accidental killing of a friend, and Hawthorne tells us that, although the eccentric behaviors of Mr. Moody and Mr. Hooper might be the same, the import or significance of the veils is not. Hawthorne is perhaps suggesting to the reader that the black veil as a symbol of secret sin is better

understood when compared to the black veil as a symbol of the more easily understood loss of a loved one.

Historical Context

When "The Minister's Black Veil" was first published in the periodical the *Token* in 1836, America was still a relatively new country struggling to form a national identity distinct from that of England. Americans no longer needed to channel all of their energies into survival; they now had the freedom to engage in and develop a whole host of cultural activities.

Ralph Waldo Emerson had long been exhorting the American public to cultivate its own unique identity. For example, in "Self-Reliance," he says, "Insist on yourself; never imitate." Many Americans were upset that so many people in the fledgling United States still looked to England for examples of great literature and dismissed American literary efforts as inferior. Evert Augustus Duyckinck, editor of a journal that published some of Hawthorne's early work, laments this state of literary affairs. He writes in an 1841 issue of his journal *Arcturus,* "In his own peculiar walk of fiction and sentiment, there is perhaps no author who could supply to us the few natural beautiful sketches of Nathaniel Hawthorne. Of the American writers destined to live he is the most original, the one least indebted to foreign models or literary precedents of any kind, and as the reward of his genius he is the least known to the public." Duyckinck is stressing the point that the American public did not honor America's authors, and, like so many others, he is calling for this situation to be remedied.

In 1820, Washington Irving had become a celebrity in both England and America with the publication of his *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent*. This work offers a series of individual and diverse tales connected by the framing story of a traveler, and Irving was to write several more successful collections of this type. Hawthorne wanted very much to be known as the writer of a collection of short stories about his New England experience, hoping to imitate the successes of Irving. In 1837, *Twice Told Tales* was published with Hawthorne's name on the title page, and he finally realized the critical claim he had so desired.

Irving perhaps adopted the literary format he did as a matter of necessity. His elaborate and distancing framework—Irving pretends to have discovered a sketch book belonging to Geoffrey Crayon who, in turn, records tales told to him by others— is almost an apology for the seeming audacity of an American writer proclaiming to the world that American experiences were interesting and important. Hawthorne adopted the literary format of Irving because it was the one literary tradition that had been established in America, one that had brought its author prominence. Still, there is a correspondence between these collections of tales and the national identity forming in America. Just as the individual tales in the collection were connected in a loose unifying framework, the individual colonial experiences of Americans were loosely connected in the confederation of states which had become a unified nation.

Having discovered his own connections to the early Puritan intolerance of Quakers and the persecutions of the alleged witches in Salem, Hawthorne refocused the Puritan experience in colonial America through his own perspective. In an 1850 article entitled

"Hawthorne and his Mosses, by a Virginian Spending the Summer in Vermont" which appeared in *Literary World,* Herman Melville, a contemporary and eventual neighbor of Hawthorne's, wrote a review of *Mosses from an Old Manse,* a subsequent selection of tales written by Hawthorne in 1846. Referring to the Calvinist sense of Original Sin in Hawthorne, Melville writes that the gloom in Hawthorne's soul is "blackness, ten times black."

The darkness of the soul that Hawthorne connects with Calvinism is evident not only in "The Minister's Black Veil" but also in several of his other stories and novels, most notably "Young Goodman Brown" and *The Scarlet Letter*. It is not clear whether Hawthorne meant to justify the severity of his Puritan ancestors or condemn Puritan/ Calvinist theology entirely, but it is clear that he wove the threads of Puritanism into the fabric of America, many modern readers getting their only understanding of Puritanism through Hawthorne. "The Minister's Black Veil" has a specific geographic setting in Milford, Connecticut, but is set in no specific time, almost as if it is deliberately suspended somewhere between the earliest of colonial American times and the nineteenth-century America in which Hawthorne wrote.

Critical Overview

Criticism of "The Minister's Black Veil" has mainly explored the meaning of the veil worn by the Puritan minister, the Reverend Mr. Hooper. Some see the veil as a physical reminder of a specific sin committed by Hooper. Others view Hooper as a Christian martyr wearing the emblem of Original Sin. Still others believe that Hooper's donning of the veil is a sin of pride. More recent criticism has focused on the veil as a "symbol of symbols," a deliberate ambiguity that is not meant to be resolved, but only to call attention to itself.

In his portrayal of the isolated Puritan minister in this story, Hawthorne reveals his fascination with Puritanism in colonial America prompted by the discovery that his earliest ancestors were Puritan figures publicly involved with both the harassment of the Quakers and the persecution of the alleged Salem witches. In drawing on his own understanding of the "Puritan experience" in America, Hawthorne introduces the themes of alienation and loneliness, doubt and ambiguity, guilt and innocence, pride, and the moral corruption of sin. These themes receive their most extended treatment in "Young Goodman Brown" and *The Scarlet Letter*, but they are evident in nearly all of Hawthorne's works.

Hawthorne's work has been favorably received throughout the years. When his first short stories began appearing anonymously in literary journals, their author was praised as a man of genius, a uniquely American author who might rival the authors of England. In 1841 Evert Augustus Duyckinck, a man familiar with Hawthorne's previous work and the editor of a journal called *Arcturus,* praised "The Minister's Black Veil" because it demonstrated "an ingenious refinement of terror, wrought with none of the ordinary machinery of gloom." According to Duyckinck, Hawthorne's story represented "a metaphysical exposition of the dark places of the human soul."

In 1842 Edgar Allan Poe, a writer contemporary with Hawthorne, offered a mixed review of Hawthorne's *Twice Told Tales* in the May issue of Graham's, calling them the product of a "truly imaginative intellect, restrained and in some measure repressed, by fastidiousness of taste, by constitutional melancholy, and by indolence." In short, Poe believed that Hawthorne was a truly gifted writer, but a lazy one who relied too much on mystery for his stories' effects. Poe believed that he had figured out the mystery of "The Minister's Black Veil." He speculated that the veil was a symbol of the minister's own private sin, and contended that Hooper had had an illicit relationship with the young lady whose funeral he attends.

Following Poe's example, many critics see Hooper's black veil as a symbol of his private shame for some wicked deed or impure desire, and some fairly recent criticism has projected Hooper's private shame onto Hawthorne. For example, in his 1966 publication of The *Sins of the Father,* Frederick Crews suggests that Hooper, along with several of Hawthorne's other characters, represents Hawthorne's own fear of sexual intimacy. He writes, "It could be plausibly argued ... that Hooper has donned the veil in order to prevent his marriage." Still other critics, taking their cues from the story itself, suggest

that the black veil represents the Christian idea of Original Sin, the unavoidable inclination in all of humankind to sin and to hide that sin in the inner recesses of the soul.

In 1955 a new trend in the criticism of Hawthorne's story emerged with William Bysshe Stein's essay "The Parable of the Antichrist in 'The Minister's Black Veil.'" Stein argues that Hooper's veil prevents him from interacting with his parishioners in the loving way ministers were expected to act. As a minister, Hooper acts in a way that is exactly opposite to the example Christ had taught, and the veil becomes a symbol of Hooper's gross negligence in addressing the needs of the religious community he is supposed to serve. In isolating Hooper from his congregation and signaling Hooper's sense of moral superiority, the black veil can be seen as a symbol of excessive human pride.

Explanations of the black veil's significance seemed to culminate in Stein's suggestion that it was an anti-Christian symbol, but in 1969 W. B. Carnochan, in "'The Minister's Black Veil': Symbol, Meaning, and the Context of Hawthorne's Art," introduced the notion that Hooper's black veil functioned as a "symbol of symbols," since its meaning could never be ultimately determined. Carnochan writes, "As language gives a meaning to experience but also comes between the subject and any direct perception or recreation of that experience, so does the veil." The veil suggests some symbolic meaning but, at the same time, prevents the possibility of any final pronouncement about that meaning. Considerations of the black veil's significance can only refer the reader to a horizon of possible interpretations, one of which is unresolved ambiguity. According to Carnochan, the veil both reveals and conceals meaning, for if Hooper's veil were to be lifted from his face, its significance would disappear since the veil can only communicate meaning when it is hiding something. When it no longer hides meaning, it ceases to be a symbol, and the reader cannot get beyond the impasse that the veil has become a symbol for something that can never be revealed.

Like Stein's earlier work, Carnochan's interpretation of the black veil seemed to offer the last word in criticism of "The Minister's Black Veil." After all, what can be said about the black veil once its symbolic mystery has been pronounced insoluble? In 1992, William Freedman suggested a new and interesting interpretation of the veil in his "The Artist's Symbol and Hawthorne's Veil: 'The Minister's Black Veil' Resartus." He expounds on Carnochan's work by asserting that Hawthorne was intrigued by the unlimited possibilities of the artistic symbol.

According to Freedman, the veiled Hooper can be likened to the veiled Hawthorne, both producing a similar impact on their reading audience. Just as the townspeople of Milford try to penetrate the mystery of Hooper's veil, the readers of Hawthorne's tale try to penetrate the mystery of the artistic symbol. In seeing the veil as only a piece of cloth, the character Elizabeth represents the simple reader who cannot go beyond the literal. She understands the veil's allegorical dimensions only when Hooper finally forces her to do so. In his last-minute attempt to remove the veil and reveal its ultimate meaning at Hooper's impending death, the Reverend Mr. Clark represents the naive reader who expects that lifting the veil will reveal its simple allegorical meaning. Just as the veil

hides Hooper's face, the artistic symbol hides the author's self, and it is the effects that these symbols produce in their readers that are interesting to examine.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Montbriand teaches writing and literature at Oakland University and St. Mary's College in Michigan. In the following essay, he refutes popular interpretations of the veil in Hawthorne's story, suggesting that the meaning of the veil is not found by looking into it, but in looking out of it, as the character Hooper does.

In "The Minister's Black Veil," Hawthorne calls the reader's attention to the veil as an obvious symbol, and critics have dutifully responded to the call. Criticism of Hawthorne's story has proceeded on the assumption that the veil hides something and is donned by Hooper to send a message to the congregation. But critics have overlooked another effect of the veil, which not only hides the face of the wearer from view but also colors his view of the world. Hooper is a Puritan minister who has realized the full significance of the Calvinist theology he preaches, a theology which embraces the idea of *predestination*. God has arbitrarily destined an "elect" group of people to the glory of heaven and has destined a "reprobate" group of people to an eternity of damnation. Since this sorting is done by divine decree, there is nothing man can do to alter his ultimate fate. The most worrisome aspect of this theology, perhaps, is that a person never knows whether he or she is a member of the elect or the reprobate designation.

Hooper is struggling with doubts about his own salvation, and the beginning of that struggle is marked by the moment he first dons the veil. Forever after that, he must, necessarily, see the world in a different way, for his preoccupation with his eternal destiny cuts him off from fully participating in the joys of the world around him. The veil represents his isolation; it does not cause it. Critics have been, as it were, on the wrong side of the veil. They have been trying to penetrate its mystery rather than looking through it as Hooper does. The veil is meant neither to communicate a message to Hooper's congregation nor to represent some fault in Hooper, as so many critics have argued.

Interpretations of the black veil as a representation of some fault in Hooper follow three identifiable trends: the veil as a marker of some specific crime Hooper has committed; the veil as the embodiment of Original Sin, humanity's tendency to transgress against the laws of God; and the veil as a signal of Hooper's excessive pride. As an example of the first trend, Edgar Allan Poe announced, somewhat triumphantly, that he had figured out the mystery of "The Minister's Black Veil." Hooper's veil was a badge of shame for the illicit relationship he had had with the young lady whose funeral is described in the story. Poe bases this assertion on some rather flimsy evidence from the story itself - the superstitious old woman's report that the corpse of the deceased girl had shuddered when Hooper drew near her and the premonition of several mourners that Hooper and the dead girl were walking hand in hand.

The second trend of interpretation takes its cue from Hooper's deathbed statement and the subject matter of the first sermon he delivers while wearing the veil. Both address the secret sin that men harbor in their hearts. The suggestion is that Hooper wears the black veil in order to inform his parishioners about or to remind them of the guilt that

stains every one of their souls and the weakness that inclines them to hide their sins from themselves, other men, and even God. But if Hooper's intention really is to communicate some message to his congregation, he could have done it much more effectively than he does - if, in fact, he does at all. He waits until he is on his deathbed to say anything about the veil, and even then he speaks rather ambiguously. He might have worn the veil for a short time, explaining its significance simply and directly. The fact that he does not do so affirms that his intention is not to inform his congregation about Original Sin, but only to acknowledge its presence in himself. If he were accusing his followers of hoarding sin, it is logical to assume that he would exhort them to confess that sin. But he does not follow this logical course, because he realizes that, according to a strict interpretation of Calvinist theology, confessing one's sins does not affect one's predestined course.

The third trend in interpretation is closely linked to the second. It assumes that the black veil was initially meant to communicate a message to Hooper's parishioners. The black veil becomes a symbol of Hooper's sin of excessive pride when he continues to wear it and gets caught up in thinking that he is morally superior because he is the conveyor of such an important message. E. Earle Stibitz ingeniously connects the two levels of the veil's meaning: "Out of the first level of meaning, the calling of attention to the truth of man's proneness to the sin of concealment, rises the second level, the minister's sin in making his veil demonstration all-important; and this second level, with its irony, absorbs the first, creating a dominant theme." The "dominant theme" to which Stibitz refers is less the result of an ironic coexistence between the first and second levels of interpretation than the mistaken assumption upon which both rest - the assumption that the veil is intended to somehow enlighten the congregation.

The greatest condemnation of Hooper, leveled by those who see the veil as a symbol of pride, is that he is a bad shepherd to his flock because he neglects them as he becomes more and more preoccupied with his moral mission. These critics even include Hawthorne in their condemnation of Hooper's pride. Nicholas Canaday, Jr. argues that "the author's severe moral judgment of Mr. Hooper" is not as evident as it might have been because Hawthorne was constrained by "the subtlety of the portrait," "the brevity of the tale," and "the limited cast of characters." On the contrary, far from portraying Hooper as a creature of pride, Hawthorne portrays him as one of abject humility, the humility he experiences in his isolation and agony of doubt. More importantly, Hooper cannot be accused of neglecting his congregation. As a Puritan minister aware of the Calvinist notion of predestination, he knows that his parishioners are predestined to either heaven or hell; there is nothing he can do to help them.

Although the Calvinist interpretation of the veil seems somewhat bleak, there is evidence to suggest that Hawthorne may have been reflecting the hstorical and cultural context of the time in which "The Minister's Black Veil" was written. Hawthorne had become fascinated with Puritanism when he discovered that two of his earliest ancestors in America had been important figures in two very controversial and deplorable historical incidents - the expulsion of the Quakers from Massachusetts, and the Salem witchcraft trials.

Alluding to Hawthorne's Calvinist interests, Herman Melville wrote that Hawthorne's soul had a gloomy side that evidenced "blackness, ten times black." More importantly, Hawthorne was writing at a time when American authors were trying to forge an identity that was completely American, and this identity would have had to incorporate, somehow, the shaping influence of Puritan colonists and the Calvinist theology they embraced. It is not unlikely to suggest that Hawthorne was reflecting, in works like *The Scarlet Letter*, "Young Goodman Brown," "The Birthmark," and "The Minister's Black Veil," a cultural concern with the influence Calvinism's more severe tenets might have on America's future. After all, New England's first colonists had come to America to establish a religious community free from religious persecution. It does not seem odd to find a nineteenth-century writer like Hawthorne weaving early Puritan attitudes into the fabric of American life.

Certain evidence from the text supports the idea that the black veil represents a new or renewed doubt about his predestined soul. In the earliest description of Hooper's veil, the narrator says that it "probably did not intercept his sight, farther than to give a darkened aspect to all living and inanimate things." The veil tinges his view of not only worldly things but also spiritual things since "it threw its obscurity between him and the holy page, as he read the Scriptures; and while he prayed, the veil lay heavily on his uplifted countenance." Symbolically, the veil denies him meaningful and complete access to God's presence in both Scripture and prayer. Realizing that he can never be certain whether God has elected or damned him taints a clear and uncomplicated view of worldly and spiritual things.

On the first day that Hooper wears the veil, he turns to enter the parsonage after having delivered his sermon on secret sin. Before he enters, "A sad smile gleamed faintly from beneath the black veil, and flickered about his mouth, glimmering as he disappeared." Canaday suggests that Hooper's smile is diabolical in each of its seven additional appearances in the story: "once when he receives the delegation of parishioners, three times in the important central scene with Elizabeth, once as he contemplates the rumors that the veil has given him supernatural powers, once on his deathbed just before he pronounces his final moralizing statement about the veils of men in general, and finally as it lingers on his corpse lying in the coffin. The import of this smile, which is condescending and self-satisfied, is crucial as a symbol of his spiritual pride."

If all of these occasions are examined, however, it becomes clear that each specifies a time when Hooper realizes that others are trying desperately to penetrate the mystery of the veil. The smile is not a diabolical one; it is a smile of resignation to the reality that he is cut off from the joys of friendship and a smile of amused sadness at seeing others struggle to understand the meaning of an emblem that is not meant for them.

Hooper's veil is an intensely personal emblem, much like the one worn by Mr. Joseph Moody of York, Maine. Hawthorne subtitles his story "A Parable" and explains, in a footnote to this subtitle, that Mr. Moody was a cleric who had been involved in the accidental killing of a friend some eighty years earlier. Several critics have difficulty with the parable, feeling that it obscures rather than clarifies the meaning of Hooper's black veil. Edgar A. Dryden examines the use of parable in the Bible and concludes that

parables were used to inform the worthy and to amuse the ignorant while diverting them from the truth. Rather than having the specific purpose of clarifying meaning, parables are like "veils that serve the double purpose of revealing and concealing meaning."

No doubt, Dryden is influenced in his analysis by the earlier work of W. B. Carnochan, who writes that "the veil, creating meaning and simultaneously hiding it, invites speculation and resists it." However interconnected these remarks about parables and veils are to the larger question of the indeterminacy of symbolism and language, they do not help very much in explaining the meaning of Hooper's black veil. If read correctly, Hawthorne's footnote to the subtitle does help to clarify the meaning of Hooper's veil. The veils of both Mr. Moody and Mr. Hooper are to be looked out from and not looked into. It might be assumed that Mr. Moody does not wear his veil in order to call attention to it; he wears it because it provides him a darker view of the world befitting his changed attitude toward life. Similarly, Mr. Hooper does not wear his veil in order to gain the opportunity to preach a moral message; he wears it because intense and internal doubt about his salvation has changed his attitude to both social and spiritual life.

One last question remains to be answered: Why does Hooper wear the veil into his grave and to his final judgment? If the veil were meant to represent a specific crime, Original Sin, or excessive pride, these things could not be hidden from an all-knowing God. The veil represents not what Hooper would hide but what is hidden from him. He cannot lift the veil himself. Only God can do that at the final judgment when He reveals to Hooper where his soul will spend eternity.

Source: Timothy Montbriand, "Overview of 'The Minister's Black Veil,'" for *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Freedman is a professor of English at the University of Haifa, Israel. In the following excerpt, he offers his interpretation of the veil as a symbol of Hawthorne's own alienation as an artist and his ultimate failure of imagination.

... In Carnochan's view, "The Minister's Black Veil," is less a parable of hidden guilt than an exercise in the complex employment of the artistic symbol, and, ultimately, a tale about the nature of such symbols. The principal effect of the veil is "to avert explicit statements of what it stands for." Creating meaning and simultaneously hiding it, inviting speculation and resisting it, the veil not only "conceal[s] what is behind it, but is a sign of that concealment." It is, in short, a "symbol of symbols":

Because the meaning of the veil consists only in what is hidden, meaning is lost in the very act of revelation. It is in this that the veil serves as 'type' and 'symbol' of types and symbols in their general nature. As language gives a meaning to experience but also comes between the subject and any direct perception or recreation of that experience, so does the veil. (Carnochan)

These are Carnochan's points about the veil and they are, in my view, extremely well taken. But they are also brief and partial, leaving much to be said, because Carnochan is more interested in the veil as a clue to Hawthorne's ultimate disintegration as a symbolist, hence as a writer, than in the veil as artistic symbol in the tale. His observations must be extended and many others added if we are to grasp not only the full richness of this symbol of symbols, but also its implications for the artist who wears it. My view of the parable is that it carries autobiographical import more for the artist's dubious present than for his declining future, that it speaks of Hawthorne's adoption of the symbolic method (the donning of the veil), of the power of that alteration of his literary "face," and of its price. Appearing first in *The Token* for 1836, "The Minister's Black Veil - A Parable" is one of Hawthorne's earliest symbolic tales. It speaks, I think, of the nature of the symbol he had begun to explore after his earlier failure with *Fanshawe* (1828) and other relatively or baldly realistic fictions, and of its effects not only on his real and imagined readers, but on the artist as well.

The veil, like the artistic symbol it represents, invites a round of tentative interpretations, all based inevitably on surmise. But its chief significance lies not in these "readings," surely not in its "ultimate meaning," which may or may not be revealed, but in its power to stimulate such efforts and in the still more potent emotional effects it produces in those who behold it. Some of the townspeople are amazed, others awed; some are fearful or intimidated, others perplexed or defensively wise, while yet others are inspired or made hopeful. For all the emphasis on interpretive hypotheses - and there is much - there is as much or more on the accompanying emotional impact. And both, of course, are characteristic of the symbol, the latter more profoundly than the former. Symbols, as D. H. Lawrence remarks [in his introduction to *The Dragon of the Apocalypse,* by Frederick Carter, 1920], "don't 'mean something.' They stand for units of human *feeling,* human experience. A complex of emotional experience is a symbol. And the power of

the symbol," like the power of the minister's veil, "is to arouse the deep emotional self, and the dynamic self, beyond comprehension" (Lawrence). The "strangest part of the affair," remarks a physician, "is the effect of this vagary, even on a sober-minded man like myself" (Hawthorne).

The emphasis on this effect, I believe, reflects Hawthorne's larger concern with the literary symbol as he had begun to employ it in this and other short works. He is preoccupied here with the question of interpretation and effect, tantalized, it seems, by the radiant power of his new instrument. Like ideal readers or critics in relation to a story, the townspeople are obsessed with the veil, intrigued by its possible meanings, overwhelmed by its spiritual and emotive power. Like readers cut off from the author or intimidated by him, "not one ventured to put the plain question to Mr. Hooper, wherefore he did this thing". But eventually, like naive readers unable to control their curiosity and simplistically trustful that the author is the final arbiter of his own meanings (a trust, by the way, that, if we share it, finally reduces the rich tale to the shallowness of the minister's own death-bed fulmination), a few approach him. Futilely, of course, for the creator will not reveal his intentions.

The ultimate naive reader, however, is the minister's fiancee. A simple literalist who perceives none of the symbolic import that perplexes and mortifies the others, Elizabeth "could discern nothing of the dreadful gloom that had so overawed the multitude": to her "it was but a double fold of crape .... " Such a reader would have the author renounce his symbol and return to the realist's simpler perception of the world (which she has never transcended), undarkened and uncomplicated by the veil. Rejecting her entreaty, the minister echoes the sentiment of Carlyle's Professor Teufelsdroeckh in [Thomas Carlyle's] *Sartor Resartus,* a work written but two years earlier than "The Minister's Black Veil," and one whose views on symbolism, so close to that of the parable, may suggest an influence. "Small is this which thou tellest me," declares the Professor,

that the Royal Sceptre is but a piece of gilt-wood; that the Pyx has become a most foolish box, and truly, as Ancient Pistol thought, 'of little price.' A right Conjuror might I name thee, couldst thou conjure back into these wooden tools the divine virtue they once held. (Carlyle)

Hawthorne is such a conjurer, of course, as is Hooper. Both conjure back into the simple materials of literature and earth a power beyond. They do so, as Teufelsdroeckh recommends, by planting "into the deep infinite faculties of man, his Fantasy and Heart" (Carlyle) - Hooper by means of the veil, the artist by means of the symbol the veil represents. And it is here that Elizabeth, experiencing what both the minister and the artist hope for, feels its effects at last, as its terrors fall around her. Only now does she sense what the physician's wife had remarked earlier: the power with which person and context can invest the otherwise barren tools of art's ministry. "How strange," the wife had mused, "that a simple black veil such as any woman might wear on her bonnet, should become such a terrible thing on Mr. Hooper's face!" The observation is crucial, for it suggests that, like the symbol - indeed like all language - the veil has no detachable or intrinsic significance. The meanings it carries and the impact it generates, finally to Elizabeth as well, are dependent on the user, on the context, and on the

inferred intentions of its use. It is when the minister rejects the invitation to removal and literal rendering and, offering evocative symbolic hypotheses for her to ponder, returns the burden of feeling and reflection to this "reader," that she becomes aware of these forces and feels the shuddering impact of the symbol.

"In a symbol," remarks Carlyle, "there is concealment and yet revelation." And the veil, both as symbol and as symbol of ..., is a concealment that is a revelation of concealment. To the minister and the sinners who become his disciples, it is a concealment revelatory of the universal masking of secret sin ("lo! on every Visage a Black veil!"). For the reader it is a concealment that reveals concealment as the only viable meaning. In this tale, in all of Hawthorne's best symbolic work, perhaps in all fiction and language, the veil as veiling or veiledness is itself the message. The ambiguity and mystery of the concealing veil become themselves the meaning, suggesting the inaccessibility of determinate meaning or truth.

The meaning of a (Hawthorne) story is found not behind its signs or symbols, but in the fact and experience of impenetrability, the realization that no interpretation will suffice. The veil again is a symbol of symbols, more broadly a symbol of the symbolistic resonance of signs. "Speech," as Teufelsdroeckh affirms, "is great, but not the greatest." For "Speech is of Time, Silence [like the symbol and the veil] is of Eternity" (Carlyle ...). The Professor's point about the silent power of the symbol - that "Thought will not work except in Silence" - is the parable's point about the veil: namely, that speech, the minister's earlier sermons unaccompanied by the veil, is relatively effete as a stimulant of profoundest thought and recognition. In the symbol, on the other hand, "in many a painted Device or simple Seal-emblem, the commonest Truth stands out to us proclaimed with quite new emphasis" (Carlyle). As it does for Hooper, whose sermons assume unprecedented power.

What we see in Hawthorne's tale, of course, is that the moral message of the veil, if indeed there is one, is not disclosed until the minister's death, if even then. The power and consequently the point of the veil lies not in its meaning, its "common Truth," for were it so, Hooper would surely have proclaimed it sooner. Rather, by refusing revelation and provoking an endless battery of possible interpretations and responses, the minister carries Hawthorne's message that the only truth that stands affirmed in the veil is the truth of the artistic symbol's boundless resonance and evocative force. The important truth of the veil is not the universality of concealed sin, for that revelation is too long postponed to be of consequence to most of its observers. The veil speaks far more eloquently of what Carlyle calls "The incalculable influences of Concealment" that account for "the wondrous agency of Symbols".

That the meaning of the veil is in the veil itself and not in any hidden referent seems confirmed by the pointlessness of the Reverend Mr. Clark's last-minute effort to raise the veil in search of its meaning. "'Before the veil of eternity be lifted,'" urges Clark at Hooper's bedside, "'let me cast aside this black veil from your face!' ... And thus speaking ... bent forward to reveal the mystery of many years." If Elizabeth is the naive literalist who believes at first that the veil is a mere object rather than a sign or symbol, the Reverend Clark is the simple allegorizer who looks for single meanings directly

behind the given sign. The effort is futile, of course, not because Hooper resists it, but because the raising of the veil would reveal only a face and nothing of the veil's meaning. The minister clasps the veil to his face not because its removal would reveal the hidden meaning behind it, but because such an act would remove veil and all meaning together.

Hawthorne emphasizes the point in a fine ambiguity that introduces and casts doubt on the minister's deathbed revelation, which has too often been accepted as the "true meaning" of the veil. "What, but the mystery which it obscurely typifies has made this piece of crepe so awful?" asks the minister. Readers have assumed - and been led to assume - that the mystery he speaks of is revealed in the ensuing tirade on the loathsome treasuring up of secret sin.

But there is another way to read the minister's question, one that seals the concealed meaning of the veil as artist's symbol, hence as essential mystery, as tightly as Hooper's disclosure seems to shut the door on further queries into what this sign signifies. For what has made this piece of crape so aw[e]ful is precisely "the mystery" it obscurely typifies. The veil, in other words, typifies not a mystery to be disclosed, but mystery itself, and it does so by typifying obscurely, in a way that perpetually tempts and frustrates the assignation of all meaning beyond itself.

Such a reading of "The Minister's Black Veil" raises again the familiar question of Hawthorne's view of the role and power of the artist and, through that, the nearly threadbare controversy over his attitude toward the minister's donning and wearing the veil. For if the veil is the artist's symbol, then Hooper is a kind of symbolizing artist, the author himself perhaps. Like Hawthorne before he discovered the awesome power of the literary symbol, Hooper was a good but "not an energetic" preacher who "strove to win his people ... by mild persuasive influences, rather than to drive them thither [to heaven], by the thunders of the Word." When he adopts the symbolic method by donning the veil, however, a telling change is felt in his oratory. The sermon he now delivers is marked by "the same characteristics of style and manner," the same unthundering quietness.

But there was something, either in the sentiment of the discourse itself, or in the imagination of the auditors, which made it greatly the most powerful effort that they had ever heard from their pastor's lips .... A subtle power was breathed into his words.

As it was into Hawthorne's own written words, and it is not too much, I think, to suggest that "The Minister's Black Veil - A Parable" is itself the fictive equivalent of the minister's sermon. Its subject too "had reference to secret sin"; it too is "tinged rather more darkly than usual with the gentle gloom" of its author's temperament; and it too, Hawthorne may well have felt, was his most powerful effort to that time.

That "The Minister's Black Veil" is, as the full title indicates, "A Parable," places it in the same category with Hooper's sermon on secret sin - a veiled reference to the veil - and with the veil itself as a bearer of veiled messages. Hawthorne and the minister, in other words, are identified as preacher/artists. Both deliver texts whose subject is the veil and

whose parabolic meaning is concealed until the deathbed "revelation," which at once retroactively casts at least putative meaning on both the minister's sermon and the tale that contains it. It is only here that we encounter the allegorical message of the veil and recognize the veil as the hidden referent of Hooper's dark sermon. Hawthorne as artist offers the symbol in search of single meaning. Hooper, the double craftsman, presents a similar challenge in his veil while offering in his sermon-as-veiled-parable meaning in search of attachment to the floating symbol of the veil.

By donning the veil, Hooper becomes what Hawthorne would come to feel himself, more and more strongly as he developed and perfected his symbolic art: a removed and judging observer who felt he could penetrate the mystery of other souls while remaining invisible. The veil conceals the minister's face as effectively as a tale, particularly a veiled symbolic tale, conceals its author and his intent. It hangs before his face, covering everything but the mouth and chin, leaving free, in other words, the speaking organ only. It enables him to preach far more effectively than before, and it causes the members of his magnetized congregation to shrink uneasily from his eye, "which they felt to be fixed upon them with an invisible glance." Passing from the uninspired realism of his earlier work to the eerily suggestive power of the symbolic tales, we feel, with Elizabeth and his congregation, the effects of the veil that is a symbol of symbols.

For Hawthorne, we know, there is a price to be paid for the artist's mission and his remotely scrutinizing insight: the price of personal isolation, the punishment as well as the privilege of the seer who sees and remains himself unseen. The minister, of course, pays the artist's price for his power. He has "changed himself into something awful ... by hiding his face" and peering, like Hawthorne, through his obscure and somber tales, through a veil that gave "a darkened aspect to all living and inanimate things."

Like the poet Coverdale in *The Blithedale Romance* where the veil is again a focal symbol; like the scientific researchers of the soul that darken his fiction; and like Hawthorne's guilty conception of the writer that these figures typify, Hooper is "a man apart from men," separated from the world by his "dismal shade." He is separated too, and as a result, from happiness, lonely and frightened behind his black veil, where he gropes "darkly within his own soul [and gazes] ... through a medium that saddened the whole world". Like Hawthorne's image of the minister "gazing darkly within his own soul," the Hawthorne given us by critics and biographers experienced "the perpetual turning in of the mind upon itself, the long introspective brooding over human motives" that probed the soul's secret impulses and laid bare its dark workings. "I have made a captive of myself and put me into a dungeon," he wrote to Longfellow in 1837,

and now I cannot find the key to let myself out - and if the door were open, I should be almost afraid to come out.... [There] is no fate in this world so horrible as to have no share in either its joys or sorrows. For the last ten years, I have not lived, but only dreamed about living. ("To Henry Wadsworth Longfellow")

"[Without] thy aid," he wrote to his wife Sophia in 1840,

my best knowledge of myself would have been merely to know my own shadow - to watch it flickering on the wall, and mistake its fantasies for my own real actions. Indeed, we are but shadows - we are not endowed with real life, and all that seems most real about us is but the thinnest substance of a dream - till the heart is touched. ("To Sophia Peabody Hawthorne")

This closing phrase, if it is more climax than afterthought, seems to support Malcolm Cowley's hypothesis that Hawthorne's work declined in the final years of his life not, as many have argued, because of his claustrophobic preoccupation with the shadows of his imagination, but because the affections of his heart and his emergence into the too bright world blocked his access to the source of his hermetic inspiration. It was, after all, after his heart was touched by Sophia, his time by the demands of wife and family, his insulated privacy by the demands upon a public figure, that his imagination and his art began to fail.

But whatever the cause of his artistic decline, there is a poignant connection between the suspected vacuity of the symbol and Hawthorne's anxiety about the vaporous insubstantiality of the isolated self. In a private world where fantasies are mistaken for human actions and where all that seems most real is but the faint immateriality of a dream, symbol and reality merge in their common lack of substance. The self that wants reality is reflected in the symbol devoid of meaning or reference. Both exist in solitude, draped in the shadow that is all the reality they possess.

While I do not wish to venture into the controversy over the tale's implicit judgment of the minister and his art, whether Hooper is a devoted martyr, an inhuman anti-Christ, or some hybrid form between, I will offer an addendum that touches on the question. The veil, as we have traditionally read the minister's deathbed translation, is the symbol not of human sinfulness, but of the refusal of its revelation, the "loathsome ... treasuring up" that conceals what should be made manifest. "When the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend; the lover to his best-beloved; when man does not vainly shrink from the eye of his Creator ...," declaims the minister, "then deem me a monster.... "

There is more to this denunciatory confession than at first appears; implicit self-accusation stirs beneath the seeming self-exoneration and projection. On one level, *"then* deem me a monster" invites merely nominal condemnation. The minister alone will continue to wear the veil symbolic of sin's furtive concealment when others have opened their sinfulness to divine and human view. Only at this barely imaginable time will he be monstrous, and then but metaphorically, for his veil is but an emblem of the crime it represents. Indeed, by wearing the veil, the minister exalts himself, becomes, it seems, a kind of Just Man by publicizing on his own face the secretiveness others practice but deny. The minister is as yet no monster, not only because others share his defect but, equally paradoxically, because he achieves in his exposure at least partial absolution from the sin he exposes to view.

And yet, as the minister/artist takes on the character of the symbol he employs, in the very act of exposing the souls and hidden sinfulness of others, Hooper, like the artist, also partakes of the infection he perceives. As the artist falls into isolation in the

demanding task of its description, becoming the distanced judge of those whose judgmental detachment he condemns, so Hooper, in the obfuscation of his message, becomes tangled in what he would merely emblemize. Like the power of the purloined letter, hidden by a different sort of minister, the power of the symbol, as of the veil, lies not in its use but its concealment.

"With the employment [of the letter]," Poe's narrator observes, "the power departs." And similarly, the conclusive ascription of any given meaning to the veil or symbol drains the potency bonded to its mystery. By withholding until the moment of his death the presumed meaning of his symbol, Hooper maintains his lifelong grip upon his "readers," but at another price. For in concealing from them the secret of his veil, he turns the symbol into the moral reality it allegedly signifies. The minister's act implicates him in the crime of concealment that the veil symbolizes and condemns. The symbol has become its meaning, the artistic or symbolizing act a patch of the moral as well as existential darkness it illumines.

It is in this sense among others that "a preternatural horror was interwoven with the threads of the black crape." And it is for this reason that "the black veil involved [the minister's] ... own spirit in the horror with which it overwhelmed all others." The minister's frame, which is also that of the artist and the narrative, shudders when he glimpses his veiled figure in the looking-glass, not merely for its emblematic potency, but because of the enmeshing tangle of doing and being that twines Ahab to the whale. The "Veil" as fiction, which, like the veil, is a parable finally only of its mystery, weaves the artist into the incriminating veil of his own separating mystification.

Source: William Freedman, "The Artist's Symbol and Hawthorne's Veil: 'The Minister's Black Veil' Resartus," in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 29, No. 3, Summer, 1992, pp. 353-62.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Carnochan presents his interpretation of the veil as symbol, emphasizing that Hawthorne uses it in the story to explore the nature of all such symbols.

"The Minister's Black Veil," one of Hawthorne's early tales (1836), has a reputation as one of his best. It has had less attention than, say, "Rappaccini's Daughter" or "My Kinsman, Major Molineux," no doubt because it is in some ways less problematic and is a less bravura piece than are they. Still the story presents its own kind of difficulties, and there is no critical unanimity among its readers. On one view the Reverend Mr. Hooper is a saintly figure, calling his people to repentance in the manner of an old testament prophet; on another view he is a victim of monomaniac obsession, one of Hawthorne's unpardonable sinners or, even, a type of antichrist. Between these extremes, opinion shades off to a less monochromatic center. But interpretation of the story generally rests on some moral assessment or explanation of the minister's symbolic self-veiling. The mystery is conceived as one to be *solved,* just as Poe conceived it when he argued that the minister had committed a "crime of dark dye" against the "young lady" whose burial is described. What Poe calls a defect - "that to the rabble its exquisite skill will be *caviare*" - he surely thinks a virtue: he is happy in the discovery of concealed evidence, from which he infers a romantic solution more congenial to his taste than the merely generalized didacticism of the "moral" that the minister pronounces at his death. I shall argue, to the contrary, that neither solutions, like Poe's, nor moral estimates, like many a critic's and even the minister's own, are essential. The story, I believe, is concerned above all with the veil as a symbolic object, pointing toward questions that cluster about the notion of a symbol itself. Beside these questions, the moral character of the minister who wears the veil is relatively a minor matter.

If so, this early story has a more important place than it is usually given in Hawthorne's canon: like *The Scarlet Letter* - which is *about* the letter of its title, just as this story is about the veil - "The Minister's Black Veil" has to do with the materials of Hawthorne's own art in proportion as it has to do with the nature of symbolic meaning. Thinking about this story, we need to remember all the while the abortive history of Hawthorne's last romances and the altogether desolate end of his literary life - where we get, as Hyatt H. Waggoner has said [in *Hawthorne: A Critical Study,* 1963], "no merely technical failure, and no turning to new subjects that he did not know how to handle, but a failure at the very center, a failure of meaning." This failure of meaning is a failure of the symbolic process: the relationship, always for Hawthorne a difficult matter, between symbol and reference breaks down entirely, and the course of his artistic life can be roughly plotted in terms of this disintegration. "The Minister's Black Veil" stakes out the ground on which Hawthorne was to struggle with the angel of destruction.

Even to ask the bald question, "What does the veil stand for?" implies the difficulty of giving any answer. Perhaps it is just as well, however, to frame the question in a way that makes the difficulties apparent. In any case, the Hawthornian business of false leads and doubtful clarifications is under way from the very start of the tale. In an

introductory note, we hear about "another clergyman in New England, Mr. Joseph Moody, of York, Maine, who died about eighty years since" and who "made himself remarkable by the same eccentricity that is here related of the Reverend Mr. Hooper." Then, still with an air of being helpful and direct, Hawthorne offers what seem to be distinctions: "In his case [Moody's], however, the symbol had a different import. In early life he had accidentally killed a beloved friend; and from that day till the hour of his death, he hid his face from men." But what sort of distinctions are these? And how precisely are Moody and Hooper different cases? The explanation, on a closer look, turns out not to be an explanation at all. Of what is Mr. Moody's veil a "symbol"? Grief, surely; but we do not know the "accidental" means by which he killed his friend, nor do we know except in a general way why he hid his face from men. We are faced with an "ambiguity of sin or sorrow," as much as in Hooper's case. Hawthorne's note - like the veil itself - obscures as much as it reveals. Still, despite the falseness of its reassurance, there is something of the genuine in it, too; it is in keeping, as I want to show, with the whole point of the tale that Hooper's mysterious veil has a counterpart in reality. Here again it is like the scarlet letter with its counterpart that Hawthorne finds in the custom house and is at such pains to be precise about ("By an accurate measurement, each limb proved to be precisely three inches and a quarter in length"). Each fictional symbol is attached to a fact in the real world.

We can try another question, a little less blatant: what does Hooper's veil stand for in its own context? Because the minister's dying speech sounds a dominant note, or seems to, it is easy to go there first of all:

"When the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend; the lover to his best beloved; when man does not vainly shrink from the eye of his Creator, loathsomely treasuring up the secret of his sin; then deem me a monster, for the symbol beneath which I have lived, and die! I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a Black Veil!"

Coming as it does at the end, this looks like summary and conclusion. But that is as deceptive as the authoritative air of the opening footnote. If we throw caution aside and take this last pronouncement as conclusive, the story is that parable of hidden guilt which it is usually supposed to be - and also, I think, a less interesting story than it really is. Hooper's final piety, his deathbed utterance with its implied confession, all this needs to be taken dramatically - as a formal setpiece - and with the reservations appropriate to so pat a gesture. It is the end, or almost the end, of the story - but not the whole of it. We need not, in fact cannot, let it go as a drama of clandestine sin. Granted that Hawthorne was concerned, deeply so, with that theme; but here it is concealment and mystery, not guilt, that concerns him most, and that makes the difference.

The very nature of the veil itself is to avert explicit statements of what it stands for, or at least to throw them immediately in doubt. It is not just that "the meaning of the symbol is ambiguous"; that would tell us little we did not always know. Rather the strange quality of the veil is that not only does it conceal what is behind it, it is a sign of that concealment; it both symbolizes and generates what is symbolized, is its own symbol - and, in its self-containment, is in one sense beyond interpretation, i.e., beyond any rendering in referential terms. But to "mean" is a function of the human, to "be" a

function of the divine; a symbol, humanly speaking, implies something symbolized that is not only itself. So the veil, creating meaning and simultaneously hiding it, invites speculation and resists it. No one ever dares ask Hooper why he wears the veil. The deputation from the church, sent to "deal with Mr. Hooper about the mystery" - how obviously inappropriate is the commercial dealing with mystery - never comes to the point: "Were the veil but cast aside, they might speak freely of it, but not till then." Because the meaning of the veil consists only in what is hidden, meaning is lost in the very act of revelation. It is in this that the veil serves as "type" and "symbol" of types and symbols in their general nature. As language gives a meaning to experience but also comes between the subject and any direct perception or re-creation of that experience, so does the veil. "In a Symbol," says Carlyle (as Professor Teufelsdroeckh) [in *Sartor Resartus*], "there is concealment and yet revelation." Hooper's veil embodies the paradox.

In this setting the common Hawthornian tactic that F. O. Matthiessen calls [in *American Renaissance,* 1941] "the device of multiple choice" and Yvor Winters [in *Maule's Curse,* 1938] "the formula of alternative possibilities" works to special advantage. The tactic is uncomplicated: merely that of offering several explanations of events or symbolic circumstances and apparently leaving the reader, according to his own lights, to accept the one that suits him best. "The reader may choose," says Hawthorne, among the several theories proposed to explain the mark (if there was one) "imprinted" in the Reverend Mr. Dimmesdale's flesh. But the formula is really designed to prevent, not to encourage, speculation. We are intended not to choose; it is difficult to suppose that Donatello has furry ears, but it is damaging to suppose that he doesn't. And, by the same token, it is damaging to limit the extensions of the veil to this one or to that. It is not one veil but every veil. It is the glass through which we see darkly; Hooper appears in the pulpit " *face to face* [my emphasis] with his congregation, except for" - a grim irony - "the black veil." Elsewhere it is associated with the darkness of night that obscures the visible world, or with "the veil that shuts in time from eternity." Sometimes it turns Hooper away from the mirrors of self-knowledge: "In truth, his own antipathy to the veil was known to be so great, that he never willingly passed before a mirror, nor stooped to drink at a still fountain, lest, in its peaceful bosom, he should be affrighted by himself." He resists the last knowledge that he is hidden even from himself. But, still elsewhere, the veil itself becomes a magic mirror, reversing the world of normal experience in its transfiguring presence: the funeral of the young woman is transformed to a marriage ("I had a fancy," says one observer - giving Poe the lead he was looking for - "that the minister and the maiden's spirit were walking hand in hand"), and the "cold fingers" and "deathlike paleness" of a bride at her wedding change the ceremony into a dance of death. For the veil all things are possible; its extensions come naturally from its primary character as a symbol of symbols, hence capable of all their protean changes. If we cannot eliminate the human fact of reference, still we need not commit ourselves to other versions of the absolute and insist on singleness of reference; since a single correspondence cannot be finally established, that way lies either delusion or skepticism and despair.

To insist on a single meaning or explanation is in fact to be like the townspeople of the story, who speculate upon the reasons for Mr. Hooper's veil: "A few shook their

sagacious heads, intimating that they could penetrate the mystery; while one or two affirmed that there was no mystery at all, but only that Mr. Hooper's eyes were so weakened by the midnight lamp, as to require a shade." In this case we are specifically not asked to choose - the technique has not yet crystallized into a "formula" of alternative possibilities - and we do well to profit from the absence of advice. The alternatives available are each intended to be unacceptable: on one hand, to be identified with the "sagacious" few who think they can penetrate the mystery; on the other, to deny the mystery altogether. Either choice is self- defeating. But "sagacious" readers have not been wanting.

In truth, however, they have better reasons than any we have seen so far. Misguided prying into the mystery by "all the busybodies and impertinent people in the parish" is one thing; the case of Elizabeth, betrothed to Mr. Hooper, looks more doubtful. Her plea that Hooper take off the veil and reveal his secret to her is a sympathetic one; probably it is her presence that accounts for the view of Hooper as a malevolent spirit: "As his plighted wife, it should be her privilege to know what the black veil concealed." The scene that follows between Elizabeth and Hooper is a strange one, however. To her request that he "lift the veil but once," he answers that it cannot be. The feeling aimed at seems to be that the veil in literal fact *cannot* be removed; it is not, we are made to think, a volitional matter. But Elizabeth bids Hooper farewell, and the strangeness is especially in Hooper's response: "But, even amid his grief, Mr. Hooper smiled to think that only a material emblem had separated him from happiness, though the horrors, which it shadowed forth, must be drawn darkly between the fondest of lovers." On one hand it is "only a material emblem," on the other it seems to be everything; but symbol and thing symbolized, however (other than itself) that may be interpreted, are felt as concordant with one another. And there seems to lie the motive for Elizabeth's reappearance to nurse Hooper at his death - "no hired handmaiden of death, but one whose calm affection had endured thus long in secrecy, in solitude, amid the chill of age, and would not perish, even at the dying hour." The long endurance of a "calm affection" comes unexpectedly after Elizabeth's abrupt farewell in the earlier scene; the assertion of fidelity, in the presence of mystery is no easy one for Hawthorne to make, and the narrative lacks cohesion at the point of greatest strain. An assertion, nonetheless, there is: to keep faith is to accept the fact of human meaning behind the veil - even though that meaning, in the nature of things, is hidden to the eye.

But the phantom lure of knowing the unknowable is not so easily set aside. Mr. Hooper's veil and the efforts - Elizabeth's well-intentioned ones, the townspeople's vulgar and impertinent ones - to discover what lies behind it anticipate the veils and masks and efforts to "penetrate their mystery" that are so important in Hawthorne's later fiction. They make a large subject, beyond the reach of this paper. Also beyond the reach of this paper are the details of Hawthorne's decline. But this generalization may be risked: it is the possibility of faith - by that I mean a habit of mind more crucial than any specifically religious belief, the failure of which is sometimes supposed to account for Hawthorne's fate as an artist - that is for him ever more in doubt. The vain hope of lifting the veil and the fears of what might be found there (or, really, what might not be found there) become obsessive and, in the long run, paralyzing to the imagination....

Despite Elizabeth's fidelity and despite the wan hope in that "faint, sad smile, so often there, [that] seemed to glimmer from its obscurity, and linger on Father Hooper's lips" as he dies, no one is likely to mistake the mood of the tale. Elizabeth's affection, revealed so late, scarcely relieves the gloom, and the last word is still the veil: "The grass of many years has sprung up and withered on that grave, the burial stone is moss-grown, and good Mr. Hooper's face is dust; but awful is still the thought that it mouldered beneath the Black Veil!" The veil survives the changes of time after its meanings have turned to dust. Acceptance was not Hawthorne's lot, nor was the unreflective life, whose matter-of-factness he sometimes catches sight of with a touch of longing and reproduces here in the accents of the village, at the beginning of the tale:

"Are you sure it is our parson?" inquired Goodman Gray of the sexton."Of a certainty it is good Mr. Hooper," replied the sexton. "He was to have exchanged pulpits with Parson Shute, of Westbury; but Parson Shute sent to excuse himself yesterday, being to preach a funeral sermon."

"Certainty" is for the unthoughtful, acceptance for the faithful; for Hawthorne, there will be only the gathering pressure of questions not to be answered and meanings not to be found. In its fine rhetorical adjustment of means to ends, "The Minister's Black Veil" is among Hawthorne's best stories; in mood and substance it is grimly prophetic of what was to come.

Source: W. B. Carnochan, "'The Minister's Black Veil,'" in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction,* Vol. 24, No. 2, September, 1969, pp. 182-92.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, Stibitz presents his interpretation of Hawthorne's handling of irony in the story, focusing on the Reverend Mr. Hooper's alienation from the rest of humankind.

Because Hawthorne is always very much the same and yet also surprisingly varied, one way of understanding "The Minister's Black Veil," as with any Hawthorne tale, is to read it not only as the unique work of art that it is, but as a tale comparable to others by Hawthorne, viewing it in the context of his essentially consistent thought and art as a whole. Such a reading of "The Minister's Black Veil" yields an unambiguous meaning. Hawthorne, with his usual assumption of the reality of personal evil, presents on one level his fundamental belief in man's proneness to hide or rationalize his most private thoughts or guilt. This is the "parable" (of the subtitle) that the Reverend Mr. Hooper seeks to preach with his wearing of the veil. On another level, Hawthorne reaffirms his equally constant belief that man is often guilty of pridefully and harmfully exalting one idea, frequently a valid truth in itself, to the status of an absolute. This is the sin Hooper commits by his self-righteous and self-deceptive insistence upon wearing the veil.

The second level grows out of the first and remains dependent upon it, a structural pattern repeated in varying ways in each major division of the story. Furthermore, this organic relationship of the two levels is ironic. Hooper in his stubborn use of the veil parable of one sin is unconsciously guilty of a greater one - that of egotistically warping the total meaning of life. This irony is compounded in that Hooper's sin is a hidden one - hidden not only from his fellows but from himself. He thus unintentionally dramatizes the very sin of secrecy that he intentionally sets out to symbolize. The central symbol of the veil keeps pace with this added irony: in addition to standing for man's concealment or hypocrisy and for Hooper's own sin of pride with its isolating effects, it stands also for the hidden quality of the second sin. All told, "The Minister's Black Veil" is less ambiguous and more unified because it is more ironic than has usually been recognized.

The interpretations various critics have made of "The Minister's Black Veil," taken as a whole, offer three basic points of view. First is the interpretation that the veil indicates some specific crime by Mr. Hooper. This is Poe's view [in his review of *Twice-Told Tales*] and is one concurred in by Leland Schubert and in part by R. H. Fogle, who holds that a crime by the minister remains an ambiguous possibility in the story. A second view, and the one most widely held, rejects the idea of personal wrongdoing and sees the veil simply as a device chosen by the minister to dramatize a common human failing: man's refusal to show to anyone his inner heart with its likely load of private guilt. Among the critics that have subscribed to this view are Newton Arvin, Gilbert Voigt, Randall Stewart, and Mark Van Doren. Some of the critics who hold generally to this view concern themselves, in addition, with the effect of the veil upon the minister. The third view holds that there is something fundamentally wrong in the minister's wearing of the veil. W. B. Stein is a vigorous exponent of this view, arguing that the story is one of a man of God turned antichrist, especially in Hooper's failure to follow Paul's II Corinthians

injunction to ministers to let love be the principle of the relationship with their congregations. Mr. Fogle, basically representative of this view, argues for two meanings. There is the explicit meaning of the veil as a symbol of man's secret sin, with Hooper as Everyman bearing his lonely fate in order to demonstrate a tragic truth; and there is the implicit one of human unbalance, with Hooper's action out of all proportion to need or benefit. The story, says Mr. Fogle, remains ambiguous with the discrepancies in meaning unresolved - albeit an effective lack of resolution. A footnote to Mr. Fogle's argument is Mr. Walsh's comment on the minister's dubious smile, a recurrent element in the story. The smile, always linked with light, though consistently faint, stands in opposition to the veil, always linked with darkness, and produces, says Mr. Walsh, a fundamental ambiguity. Both Mr. Stewart and Mr. Van Doren, in general discussions of Hawthorne's tales, imply that Hooper is perhaps guilty of some spiritually wrong attitude.

That Hooper is in some way in the wrong seems an inescapable conclusion from any careful reading of the story, but some qualification is called for in each of the criticisms presenting this third view. Mr. Stein's low estimate of Hooper must in general be accepted, but because of Hawthorne's humanistic emphasis in this story as well as elsewhere it is very difficult to see Hooper as an antichrist; Mr. Stein makes Hawthorne too orthodox. And the argument for the II Corinthians analogue remains speculative. What Mr. Fogle says about the minister's unbalance is valid, but perhaps less so his judgment about the meaning of the tale as a whole. Against his claim of "discrepancies," of a basic ambiguity, must be asserted the essential unity of the tale. The irony is strongly unifying, not only in tone but also in meaning. Hawthorne here is his usually detached self, but this artistic distance is not non-committalism. In general too much has been made of Hawthorne's ambiguity in theme. Often he employs ambiguity in details and is ambiguous in total philosophy revealed, but only very rarely does ambiguity qualify a specific theme. Finally, Mr. Walsh's assumption, in his point of ambiguity in the smile-light and veil-dark imagery, that Hawthorne uses light to suggest something spiritually positive, is acceptable. But most readers will not find the smile a true smile or the light clearly light, as the faintness of the whole image makes evident; there is a peculiarly mixed quality about the smile itself - indeed something ironic.

The ironic meaning of "The Minister's Black Veil," is incorporated in and, in part, is created by its vertical or logical structure. Out of the first level of meaning, the calling of attention to the truth of man's proneness to the sin of concealment, rises the second level, the minister's sin in making his veil demonstration all-important; and this second level, with its irony, absorbs the first, creating a dominant theme. An analysis that seeks to offer evidence of this unity of form and meaning can best be presented by following the horizontal or chronological structure of the tale - the successive divisions of its narrative development. Narrative sequence and timing are very important here and have usually been neglected in the religious and philosophical discussions of the story. There are five divisions: (1) the first appearance of Hooper wearing the veil at the Sunday morning service; (2) Hooper's appearances at the funeral and at the wedding on the same Sunday; (3) the unsuccessful effort of a deputation from the congregation, and of Elizabeth, his fiancee, to reason with him about the veil; (4) a summary picture of Hooper's life from the time of these efforts to his death; (5) the deathbed scene. In each

of these divisions the two levels of meaning are ironically united to produce a singleness of theme.

At the beginning of the first division the minister is revealed as experiencing a twofold alienation - from man and from God. Because of the strange veil the members of the congregation sense the minister's distance, and he, in turn, sees them darkly. Also the veil comes between him and God as he reads the Scripture and as he prays. That Hooper's estrangement is the first point established in the story suggests the central importance of the minister's second-level sin. In Hawthorne, isolation of one kind or another is consistently presented as the result of sin, and at times as being something very close to sin itself, a sin frequently linked with intellectual or spiritual pride. Here Hooper's alienation argues that the wearing of the veil is in some way profoundly wrong. And under this second level of meaning lies the more briefly developed first level, the veil as the symbol of hidden guilt, which is introduced by the sermon with its condemnation of secret sin.

Not only are the two levels thus established but so also is their ironic relationship. While the one sin is consciously preached (through veil parable and sermon), the second sin is unconsciously embodied (through the minister's egotistic assumptions and actions). Emphasis is upon the minister's pride that leads him to make the truth of man's hypocrisy the only Truth and brings him to force his idea upon the consciousness and conscience of his congregation. For example, though the sermon is supposedly praised as one of the most powerful that the minister has preached, the minister himself is described as creeping upon the members of the congregation behind his awful veil and discovering the hoarded iniquity of each one. In this, Hooper is close to Hawthorne's most damning sin - "the human invasion of the sanctity of the human heart," to use Dimmesdale's description of Chillingworth's sin. That Hooper is acting professionally increases rather than lessens the sin, for as a minister he should have been spiritually more sensitive. Indeed he is like a number of other Hawthorne sinners who "... in their attempt to assume the role of God ... naturally give their allegiance to Satan, and subsequently find themselves contributing to that very imperfection which they had originally wished to eliminate." The irony here is heightened in that the spiritual wrongdoing pictured by the minister in his sermon describes precisely what he is soon guilty of - hiding his sin "from his nearest and dearest, and from his own consciousness."

In the second division, two contrasting yet representative events of life, a funeral and a wedding, dramatize the meaning of the veil on both levels with their continuing ironic tension. At the funeral, the veil for the only time in the story is a truly appropriate emblem. Apart from its somberness it is appropriate (if we accept the idea of the minister's prayer) because the truth of human secretiveness is one that human beings most fully realize when they are confronted with death. Yet even now the incidents that Poe believed linked the minister with the dead girl in some specific crime - for example, his fear that she will see his face - indicate that the wearing of the veil is not entirely right. As often, Hawthorne uses such ambiguous details to enrich the meaning and heighten the tone of the narrative rather than to establish its main direction. These details underscore the meaning already revealed by emphasizing the unnaturalness of

Hooper's action, and they heighten the tone by pointing up the ironic discrepancy between the supposedly helpful intent of the minister and the actual spiritual result.

The unbalance of Hooper in his isolation from normal life and love is strongly in evidence at the wedding, where his wearing of the veil brings fear and doubt, a markedly different effect from the feeling of quiet cheerfulness and sympathy he formerly evoked on such occasions. Hooper's use of the veil to instruct his parishioners religiously has resulted in their spiritual impoverishment in that human love has been diminished. To Hawthorne this is a loss of something holy, for throughout his writings the acceptance or rejection of human love usually marks the choice of salvation or damnation. Mr. Hooper faces this choice and is damned by choosing to live by an idea rather than by human love. His unrepentant insistence upon his abstracted idea as central to life violates the warm reality of human existence.

The irony of Hooper's action is humorously symbolized by the prank of the village youngster who in imitation of the minister puts a black handkerchief over his face and so frightens his playmates that he creates a panic in his own mind. The presence of this satiric element, comparable to the dog's chasing its tail in "Ethan Brand," indicates that Hawthorne has a definite point of view and does not intend the story to be ultimately ambiguous. The two levels of meaning are not allowed to stand in uncommitted balance; ironic tension unites them, the first being subsumed into the second.

In the third division, the story comes to its climax with the two futile attempts to break through the wall of isolation that the minister has erected, one attempt by members of the congregation, the other by Elizabeth, his fiancee. Although the two-level irony is present in each of these efforts, the first underscores more the validity of the veil symbol as intended by the minister, the second, the fact of his sin in making the veil idea all important. Even though Mr. Hooper, heretofore, has been almost too amenable to congregational advice, a deputation of parishioners fails in its mission to question him about the veil. Feeling its symbolic truth, the visitors sit speechless before him, aware that his glance goes into their guilty hearts. But as before with the sermon the effect is less than good, for the minister's attitude and action are essentially unkind. It is not the parishioners' guilt alone that alienates them, for we are told that the minister's veil hung down over his heart. Hooper has changed from exhibiting too great submissiveness to displaying an opposite unbalance, the stubbornness of an essentially weak person obsessed with an idea.

In the succeeding scene, Hooper's response to Elizabeth's questions about the veil and his resistance to her pleas to lay it aside constitute a rejection of her love. Her patient efforts to draw him from his vow to wear the veil as a "type and symbol" meet his gentle but insurmountable obstinacy. In Hawthorne, as suggested earlier, the way to salvation is most frequently the acceptance of human love. Hooper fails to take this way. And his reaction to Elizabeth's tears reveals the sharp irony of his attitude, for it is not the hidden-sin meaning of the veil that causes her grief and terror, as he egocentrically thinks, but the rejection of her love and the irredeemable alienation demonstrated by his refusal, even for a moment, to lift the veil.

Hawthorne's description of the minister as gentle, melancholy, and sad and the quiet style of the story throughout tend to hide the fact that we are face to face with an unbalanced and unredeemed sinner. Although Hawthorne does not dwell upon the antecedent cause of Hooper's "fall," some elements of causation are evident and help to illuminate his character and clarify the irony of the tale. The minister is shown as an essentially weak man, poorly prepared by his unmarried solitude, his somewhat morbid temperament, and his professional position to deal in a stable way with an absorbing religious idea that harmonizes with his personal and vocational prejudices. He finds false strength in a kind of fanaticism, which strength destroys him as a balanced human being.

The fourth and penultimate division of the story offers chiefly the results of the events and attitudes already presented, with the ironic pattern of the previous divisions repeated. Here on the dominant second level is the minister's continued isolation, with the veil as a sign of his peculiar sin; on the first level is the account of his work as a minister, with the veil as a valid symbol of the general sin of human duplicity.

Hooper continues to stand abnormally alone in the community. The veil so envelops him with a cloud of sin or sorrow that neither love nor sympathy can reach him, and he fumbles obscurely within his own heart. But the veil also has the supposedly good result of making him an effective minister by enabling him to enter into the dark emotions of agonized sinners. Still this ability is a dubious good, and the terms "efficient" and "awful power," used to describe the minister's spiritual work, are not entirely flattering. Nor is it praise when the author speaks of the terror rather than consolation that Hooper brings to sinners who come to him for help. His awareness of the truth of hidden sin and sorrow ought to enable him not just to enter the lives of his parishioners but to enter comfortingly; however, when with evident irony he egocentrically insists upon the mechanics of the veil, he largely destroys this good potentiality.

The final division of the story, the account of Hooper's death, continues the ironic and unifying relationship of the two levels of meaning. Quantitatively the emphasis is again upon the second level, for of about a thousand words all except a hundred or so are used to picture the minister's intractability in wearing the veil on into death. Organically, this is the emphasis, too, for the irony of his action while depending upon the hidden-sin aspect so absorbs it that the story as it comes to a close is unambiguously one.

Although various persons, including Elizabeth, attend Hooper's dying moments, he is spiritually alone. Hawthorne leaves little doubt that this loneliness is the result of the minister's unbalanced action; an idea has supplanted life and love: "All through life that piece of crape has hung between him and the world; it has separated him from cheerful brotherhood and woman's love, and kept him in that saddest of all prisons, his own heart; and still it lay upon his face, as to deepen the gloom of the darksome Chamber, and shade him from the sunshine of eternity." In these closing moments of his life, his monomania is so powerful that even amid his convulsive struggles and amid the wanderings of his mind he is desperately careful to keep the veil over his face. And it is still upon his face when he is buried, a token of his final lack of repentance.

Particularly demonstrative of the ironic union of the two levels of meaning is Hooper's delayed defense of his wearing the veil by saying that everyone around him has on his own black veil. The veil is no longer merely a symbol of the fact of hidden sin or sorrow, but it is also, more dominantly, a symbol of Mr. Hooper's prideful adherence to a destructive idea - the sin of a spiritual egotism that enables him to see the mote in another's eye and blinds him to the beam in his own. The irony has become even more complex than this, for things have gone full circle, and added to the double symbolism is the fact that the veil now stands for a new *hidden* sin. Actually, by focusing attention, including the minister's own concern, on the general sin of human concealment the veil has made effective the hiding of the more important personal sin. For the reader of Hawthorne's story, of course, the veil is now the means of communicating the total irony of the minister's action and of establishing the single meaning that the author wishes to convey.

Source: E. Earle Stibitz, "Ironic Unity in Hawthorne's 'The Minister's Black Veil,'" in *American Literature,* Vol. XXXIV, No. 2, May, 1962, pp. 182-90.

Adaptations

A sound recording of "The Minister's Black Veil: A Parable" has been created by Robert H. Fossum as part of the Nineteenth Century American Writers Series, with Fossum as Lecturer. Deland, Florida, Everett/Edwards, 1971; available on cassette.

In another sound recording, "The Minister's Black Veil: A Parable" can be heard as read by Basil Rathbone, Caedmon TC 1120, 1197, (1960); available on vinyl.

Many of Nathaniel Hawthorne's stories and novels are set in seventeenth-century Puritan New England. Here, Lillian Gish and Lars Hanson portray the Puritan characters Hester Prynne and Arthur Dimmesdale in the 1926 film version of Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter*.

Topics for Further Study

The Reverend Mr. Hooper's preoccupation with secret sin suggests that truly embracing Calvinist theology as Puritans did would lead to a rather grim outlook on life. Research the communities of early American Puritan colonies. Did the members of these Puritan communities constantly remind one another of Original Sin and lead bleak lives of suffering and isolation like Hooper?

Hawthorne calls his short story a parable. In addition to the story of Mr. Moody provided by Hawthorne in the footnote, could Hawthorne have been alluding to biblical mentions of veils? Read Exodus 34:30-33, in which Moses wears a "vail" to shield his followers from the blinding glory of his face, which radiates as a result of his having been in God's presence for forty days and forty nights. Read also II Corinthians 3:7-18, in which St. Paul explains why Moses really wore the veil. Do these biblical accounts shed any light on Hooper's black veil?

Hawthorne's ancestors were involved in both the persecution of Quakers and the execution of people convicted of witchcraft in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1690. Research either of these events. You may want to read *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller; *The Salem Witch Trials* by Earle Rice, Jr.; or *Neighbors, Friends, or Madness: The Puritan Adjustment to Quakerism in Seventeenth- Century Massachusetts Bay* by Jonathan M. Chu. How did Puritans treat people who were different from them? What similarities are there between Mr. Hooper and others the Puritans disliked?

Compare and Contrast

1850s: Puritanism is still a strong influence in New England life.

1999: With the influence of the Moral Majority waning, many clergyman and cultural observers debate the role of religion in politics.

1850s: Americans continue to move west. The population of the northern states exceeds the population of the south by one million. Slave-holding states seek to expand their influence in the new territories, such as California and Utah. A compromise reached in 1850 holds the peace for a decade, but slavery becomes a major and confrontational domestic issue dividing North and South.

1999: Differences between northern and southern states remain, but not at constitutional levels. Slavery has long been abolished but many blacks suffer from racism. Foreign policy issues lead the political agenda as America seeks to maintain and extend its international influence.

1850s: As a rejection of Calvinistic sobriety, many middle-class people dabble in hydropathy, hypnotism, and phrenology, but these are still seen as alternatives to mainstream religious belief and medical therapies.

1999: Proponents of alternative medicines such as reflexology and aromatherapy present them as whole belief systems and substitutes for orthodox religion.

What Do I Read Next?

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), the title character witnesses what appears to be a witches' sabbath, at which he recognizes several notable people from his hometown. His experience is more illusory than real, but afterward, Young Goodman Brown shies away from the evil he perceives in the townspeople, an evil which may be his own sense of guilt projected onto others.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), a tale of Puritan hypocrisy and repression, relates the story of Hester Prynne, who is accused of adultery and is forced to wear the letter "A" on her breast as a sign of that indiscretion. Hester will not reveal the name of her lover, the preacher Arthur Dimmesdale, and Dimmesdale does not admit his involvement with her until just before he dies and is safely beyond the reach of social sanction.

Perry Miller's *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (1953) is an in-depth study of the Puritans in colonial and early American times. Miller dispels many of the myths about Puritan society, many of which were generated by the memory of the Salem witchcraft trials and perpetuated by authors like Hawthorne.

In *The Antinomian Controversy 1636-1638: A Documentary History* (1968), David D. Hall records the experiences of Anne Hutchison. Anne Hutchinson "went against the law" of her Boston congregation, accusing New England preachers of being too mechanical in their preaching. She argued that individuals should be allowed to interpret Scripture according to the inspiration they received from it. This kind of thinking was intolerable for New England ministers, and they banished her to Rhode Island. Hall provides the records of her courtroom examination.

Further Study

Canaday, Nicholas, Jr. "Hawthorne's Minister and the Veiling Deceptions of Self," *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 4, No. 1, Fall, 1966, pp. 135-42.

Canaday argues that Hooper's donning of the veil reveals his excessive pride, a sin which Hawthorne criticizes in his character more than critics have realized.

Crews, Frederick. *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne's Psychological Themes,* Oxford University Press, 1966, pp. 106-11.

Crews explores issues of sexual intimacy in Hawthorne's work. He maintains that Hooper wears the veil as a pretext for breaking off his marriage to Elizabeth.

Dryden, Edgar A. "Through a Glass Darkly: 'The Minister's Black Veil' as Parable," in *New Essays on Hawthorne's Major Tales,* edited by Millicent Bell, Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 133-50.

Dryden examines Hawthorne's footnote to the subtitle and finds that, instead of clarifying the meaning of Hooper's veil, the parable of Mr. Moody only makes that meaning more obscure.

German, Norman. "The Veil of Words in 'The Minister's Black Veil,'"*Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 25, No. 1, Winter 1988, pp. 41-7.

German traces the Greek and Latin origins of several words Hawthorne uses frequently in close proximity, arguing that Hawthorne was consciously punning for the appreciation of those who were as well versed in classic language as he was.

Stein, William Bysshe. "The Parable of the Antichrist in 'The Minister's Black Veil,'" *American Literature,* Vol. 27, November, 1955, pp. 386-92.

Stein condemns the Reverend Mr. Hooper as a preacher who has neglected the needs of his congregation in his pursuit of the singular message which only he is morally good enough to understand.

Turner, Arlin. *Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Biography,* Oxford University Press, 1980, 457 p.

Turner provides the reader with a comprehensive biography of Hawthorne's life, enlivened by his use of extensive quotations from Hawthorne and his family.

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Melville, Herman. Excerpted in Faust, Bertha. "Hawthorne's Contemporaneous Reputation: A Study of Literary Opinion in America and England 1828-1864," dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1939, p. 63.

Stein, William Bysshe. "The Parable of the Antichrist in 'The Minister's Black Veil,'" in *American Literature,* Vol. 27, November, 1955, pp. 386-392.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale'sFor Students Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on classic novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of classic novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board membersducational professionals helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

BOOKRAGS

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an at-a-glance comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature, a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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