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Exploring he theme of Isolation in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short stories; “ The Minister’s Black Veil”, “ Young Goodman Brown” and “ The Birthmark”   
Nathaniel Hawthorne is the author of many short stories in which he portrays his characters with some dilemma where they must make up their minds about what is wrong from what is right. His stories end with morals that can be learned through his characters’ actions. Most of the stories he wrote are filled with themes of guilt and there are many themes of loneliness and sadness. His main characters are reclusive and lived sheltered lives. In most of his works, Hawthorne portrays his characters as religious. This religion can sometimes cause separation from family and from society. In three of his short stories, Young Goodman Brown, The Minister’s Black Veil and The Birthmark, Hawthorne’s characters are faced with difficult decisions and the life altering decisions that they all must make. The characters in the three short stories must come to grips with the decisions that they have made, they must hang on to the strength of their faith and must deal with their obsessions and ultimately the final outcome, good or bad.   
A common theme in all three stories is isolation. Julia Burns in the article “ Analysis of Three of Hawthorne’s Works: Solitude and Isolation, the themes are brought out in most of his works. She writes that solitude and isolation are immense, powerful, and overcoming feelings. These can destroy a person’s life by overwhelming it with gloom. By closely studying his life and works in “ The Heath Anthology of American Literature” the three short works by Hawthorne can best be understood; The Minister’s black Veil, The Birth Mark and Young Goodman Brown. All three stories hold some aspect of Hawthorne’s life. He wrote about moral and social issues which he says “ is the worst evil that can befall a man.” Interestingly Hawthorne’s three male characters in the stories were men whose avocation were related to science, ministry and law; three areas that he mistrusted.   
In “ Young Goodman Brown” he leaves his young wife one evening and ventured out into the forest to meet the devil. He planned to spend the night with the forces of evil and next day he would return to his wife and continue to live a Christian life. Young Goodman Brown must embark on a journey that will either make him lose his faith and remain in the dark world or return to his community and his brethren and continue to live a God fearing life. In “ The Minister’s Black Veil” the minister appeared one day at church with a black veil covering his face. He is struggling with his own sins and in his attempt to hide his sins he wears a veil that covers his face. The members of his congregation were alarmed at his behavior and soon they were all speculating about his actions. His fiance Elizabeth tries to find out the reason for his actions. The Reverend had no plausible explanation for the black veil. He was shrouded in mystery and the black veil was the symbol of a fearful secret between himself and the people. His fiancé told him to “ first lay aside your black veil: then tell me why you put it on.” (Hawthorne, p. 1257). His only answer to her was that the hour will come when all persons will have to cast aside their veil. He told her that he had taken a vow to wear this as a symbol even in solitude and not even Elizabeth whom he loves can come behind the veil.   
Elizabeth suspected that the minister was harboring some grievous sin behind the veil and begs him to remove the veil, “ for the sake of your holy office” (Hawthorne, p. 1257). He only remarked that if he was using it for some deadly dark sin then every mortal could do the same. He sensed that she was about to leave him and he implored her not to leave him in his loneliness. Although gravely hurt by the isolation and misery, he refused to lift the veil even to talk to her for a little while. This stubbornness resulted in Elizabeth walking out of his life.   
In “ The Birth Mark” Aylmer is obsessed with a mark on his wife’s face. He attempts to remove it and she allows him to knowing that he will fail. She dies leaving him to suffer the misery of loneliness. In the story, Hawthorne writes about morality and isolation. Hawthorne deliberate splitting of the word birthmark creates a segregation thus symbolizing isolation. The mark becomes a symbol of unworthiness in society. She eventually feels as if she is not worthy because the persons around her made her feel that it is an imperfection. Not all around her view the birth-mark as an imperfection. Aminadab, the assistant who works in the lab says that he would never make her get rid of it. “ If she were my wife, I’d never part with the birth-mark” (Hawthorne, p. 28 ). Aylmer believes that the birth-mark is “ the fatal flaw of humanity” Aylmer sets himself up as a God he could rid his wife of her birth-mark. Aylmer is a scientist and believes that the birthmark in his wife’s face is some evil that he must get rid of. In her quest to please him she finally agrees to let him concoct a potion that will remove the evil from her face.   
Like, the minister’s black veil, the birthmark is like a veil. To Aylmer it disguises his wife’s true beauty and purity. It is a symbol of sin. For him, if she is to be pure, her skin could not be tarnished. He says " no, dearest Georgiana, you came so nearly perfect from the hand of nature, / this slightest possible defect / whether to term a defect or a beauty--shocks me, as being the visible mark of earthly imperfection." (Nathaniel Hawthorne, p. 1). Aylmer is so fixated with the mark that he fails to see the other aspects of Georgiana that made her perfect. Aylmer harbors the fear of isolation. He has to remove the mark that will make her perfect. Aylmer attempts to remove the mark and she allows him to knowing that he will fail. She dies leaving him to suffer the misery of loneliness. Aylmer was not the only man who knew what it feels like to lose a loved one.   
In “ Young Goodman Brown”, he must leave his wife although they are newly-wed and venture into the dark forest alone. He also leaves the security of the community and his congregation and although she begs him not to go he says “ of all nights in the year this one must I tarry away from thee.” (Hawthorne, p. 42). She bids him goodbye and he was on his way. He is frightened as he walks and soon met an old man with a staff that resembles a great black snake. Goodman Brown was a Puritan and perhaps went off into the world searching for the devil that they believed walked the earth. This man that he met is evil and Goodman believes he can resist the temptation of sinning. Brown is portrayed as pure and innocent and must not give in in to follow the devil although he bids him to follow him “ You are late, Goodman Brown, the clock of the Old South was striking as I came through Boston; and that is full fifteen minutes agone.” (Hawthorne, p. 43). Goodman resisted the devil at first but followed him when he saw someone familiar. Goodman Brown took this decision to be alone with his faith and his own convictions about his religion. He follows the devil and as he goes along he sees his town’s people, including his wife Faith, engaged in some sort of devil worship.   
In “ The Birth Mark” Georgiana truly needed love; firstly her husband’s love and secondly her friends. Then she begins to think that since her husband finds her birth mark repulsive she would rather not live. Georgiana wants to live, love and feel joy. She however, never receives any. She has to deal with the external conflict first of not having any friends and family and then the internal conflict of overcoming something that she did not inflict on herself in the first place.   
The most upright people of the town are associated with the devil. Young Goodman Brown sees them all, even his catechism teacher, at the gathering with the devil. He is ashamed to look at them and cannot bear to associate himself with these unworthy souls. Goodman Brown fails to see that humanity is just mere mortals who are prone to temptation he decides that he cannot be a part of humanity. Goodman Brown met the devil and proceeded to walk with him. On the way he realized that all the people in his life have not been who he thought they were. They too have allowed the devil to deceive them and now he must make up his mind whether he will join them or continue on his own a desolate and broken Christian. His trip into the forest reveals many traumatic events that he begins to disbelieve that any goodness at all exists. He cries out to his wife to resist the devil. He says “ look up to heaven and resist the wicked one,” (Hawthorne, p. 51). Goodman discovered that even the clergy is sinful and this makes him lose his faith. He realizes that no one is spared from the devil. . Goodman Brown must do what he has to after he sees his wife and other members of the church cavorting with the devil.   
Like Young Goodman Brown the Reverend Hooper in “ The Minister’s Black Veil”, he too is a young unmarried minister who must cover up the sins he thought he had, and not reveal them to his congregation. In Milford, a small Puritan town, where on a Sunday men, women and children enjoy the peacefulness of the day and a good sermon from the reverend. Here comes the reverend to deliver the Sunday sermon with a black veil over his face. The people of the town are shocked and exclaimed that something awful has happened, the reverend has “ changed himself into something awful, only by hiding his face” (Hawthorne, p. 1253). That Sunday the reverend delivered an interesting sermon. The congregation felt that the veil gave the reverend a holiness and ominous appearance that he did not possess otherwise. The Reverend was even afraid to look at his reflection in the mirror. He thought that he had sinned and no one could make him take the veil off, he has to make atonement for his sins. Prayer could not erase it, only a life of isolation.   
The congregation talked but no one could approach him, they were fearful, only his dear fiancée, Elizabeth. She asked him to remove it “ there is nothing terrible in this piece of crape, except that it hides a face. always glad to look upon / come good sir, let the sun shine from .. / first lay aside your black veil: then tell me why you put it on.” (Hawthorne, p. 1257). The reverend refused. He said he had made a vow never to reveal his face to anyone, not even Elizabeth whom he loves. He must remain in solitude and no mortal must ever the veil withdrawn. This shade is what separates him from the world. As a result he is left along in his loneliness because he cannot remove the veil for the rest of his mortal life. The reverend is left completely alone and spends a long irreproachable life.   
In both “ The Minister’s Black Veil” and “ Young Goodman Brown” the characters suffer from solitude and isolation because they cannot bear to see members of their religious community indulging in sin. The Minister wishes to cover his face because he does not want to see members of the religious community holding meeting with the devil. As a result he is isolated. “ and I would not be alone with him for the world . I wonder he is not afraid to be alone with himself.” (Hawthorne, p. 1255). In “ The Minister’s Black Veil” the Reverend Hooper could not control his worries. He worried that he had sins and that his congregation and the community would see them. He had to decide how to control his worries and to keep them from been seen so he decides to isolate himself from even his wife to be. Arthur Dimmesdale in “ The Scarlet Letter” is also ‘ a man of the cloth’ who has a secret to hide. He must suffer in silence as he cannot reveal his sins. He suffers emotionally and socially. He has no family and could not interact with Hester and Pearl. Emotionally he had to suppress the loneliness and the hurt.   
The veil could not hide the minister’s sins. Instead it made people shun him, and he became a melancholy figure in the community, “ to observe how the children fled from his approach, breaking up their merriest sports, while his melancholy figure was yet afar off. Their instinctive dread caused him to feel more strongly than aught else, that a preternatural horror was interwoven with the threads of the black crape. (Hawthorne, p. 1258). Hooper who is a preacher could not pray away his own sins. The people thought that behind the veil was a man with an evil personality and so they all shun him. He allows pride to cover his guilt; the guilt of pride. The pride did not let him confess or admit to his own sins. He lived a miserable life.   
Young Goodman, after returning from the forest could not bear to look at the religious leaders of the church because he had seen them in the forest indulging in immorality. Even his wife, he treats her with scorn because she allowed herself to be used by the devil, “ Then turning the corner by the meeting house, he spied the head of Faith,./ bursting into such joy at the sight of him that she skipped.. almost kissed her husband / But Goodman Brown looked sternly and sadly into her face, / and passed on without a greeting.” (Hawthorne, p. 52). This action caused his fellowmen to spurn him.   
Goodman Brown could not decide if what he had seen was reality or it was just a dream. His faith was destroyed and now he could trust no one, therefore his life from now on would be a life of loneliness and misery. He would often wake suddenly in the middle of the night and try to separate himself from his wife’s bosom. He could no longer kneel and pray with his wife and would often mutter to himself and turn away. He now had no faith in the people around him and went into hiding and alienation. He soon died a miserable and lonely old man. “ And when he had lived long, / borne to his grave a hoary corpse / they carved no hopeful verse upon his tombstone, for his dying hour was gloom.” (Hawthorne, p. 52). Hawthorne alluded to the fact that when individuals take on to themselves a self-righteous attitude that lacks good faith this will destroy wholesome communication among individuals that will eventually lead to isolation.   
In “ The Birth Mark”, Aylmer failed to see that his wife had other spiritual traits and not just physical beauty. Aylmer failed to see that the birthmark meant something else. It symbolizes a death both spiritual and physical. He was eager to remove something that he thought would make them both happy but instead he created isolation. Georgiana was the one who was isolated because of this birth mark. Her husband did not like it, so were he friends. This therefore led her into a mental state of isolation until she began to see it too as something ugly upon her face. The picture that her husband took made her see herself as everyone else saw her. Only Aminadab saw her as something natural and beautiful. Georgiana soon begged for this potion too as she begins to feel isolated from the rest of society. She did not like to see her husband’s reaction when he looks at her face. She knew this poison would kill her but she now wanted to end the isolation. She said “ If there is the remotest possibility of it, let the attempt be made.. risk / Danger is nothing to me / for life, . this hateful mark makes me the object of your horror and disgust ./ either remove this dreadful hand, or take my . life.” (Hawthorne, p. 18). She begged him to remove it because the isolation was too much. The “ elixir of Immortality”, as her husband calls it, killed her. He killed his wife in his quest for something perfect and beautiful.   
In “ The Birth Mark” and the “ The Minister’s Black Veil” both wore something that was not easy to ignore. Hooper choose to wear a veil that could be removed if he wishes and Georgiana was born with a crimson hand on the side of her face that could not be removed without dangerous consequences. Both of these characters faced physical, mental and emotional isolation. Georgiana wanted to remove her mark but the Reverend did not. The reverend said that his veil would not be removed until his death. Georgiana called for the removal of the birth mark even if it kills her (Hawthorne, p. 16) They both took it on themselves to be troubled by something that could be easily dealt with. The reverend could choose to not wear the veil but pray away his sins if he wanted to. Georgiana could continue to look on her mark as something natural and beautiful but instead she allowed her husband and her friends to be overly concerned about it that it led her to do something drastic.   
Both Aylmer and Georgiana are extremely unhappy. Georgiana could not bear to see her husband’s reaction when he looks at her face. In Aylmer’s mind the birthmark was a sign of imperfection and this would cause people to alienate them from their friends. He was so obsessed with removing it that he had a dream. In the dream he tries to surgically remove the mark but the deeper he cuts, the deeper the birthmark went until he was close to her heart. He could not stop himself from cutting her heart to remove the mark. The dream upsets her and she tells him to do whatever it takes to remove it. Aylmer’s potion, true to its claim removed the mark and he was happy. However, Georgiana wakes up and tells her husband that she is dying. Aylmer throws away a happy life for something that was superficial. He did not know that there was no perfect human being or for that matter no perfect life. He chose to be unhappy and alone.   
The minister’s veil causes Elizabeth much grief and sorrow. She cried because of the rejection she felt from the man whom she was about to marry. He refused to tell her anything and to be with her because he must atone for his sins. He rejected her love and shuts her out of his life. She feels alienated and he is destroyed by his obsession with his Puritan faith. Reverend Hooper becomes isolated and alone behind his facial mask. He chose to remain all alone and died a miserable man. Young Goodman Brown chose a life of solitude when he refused to stay with his wife although she pleaded with him to stay with her for the night. Goodman Brown loses his Faith and so does Reverend Hooper, he loose Elizabeth. Both men allowed their deep conviction about the Puritan faith to stand in the way of their happiness. The disastrous mark on Georgiana’s cheek cause much terror and discomfort for Aylmer. It became an obsession like the black veil on Reverend Hooper’s face. Both men struggle to find perfection in the present world. All three women obey their men and paid the price of rejection. Georgiana loses her life because she could no longer take the rejection and isolation from her love. Faith warned her husband that if he goes she could not guarantee him that she would be around when he returns. Elizabeth stopped arguing with her fiancée about his obsession with the black veil upon his face. She refused to live with him not knowing the magnitude of the sins that he possess. The three men selfishly choose a life of sadness and isolation.   
Aylmer created isolation. He was locked away in his lab creating things of science. He was convinced that life around him was imperfect and so he had to create something that would make everything perfect. Hooper was very much like Aylmer he saw imperfection in everyone and sought to punish them self because of this. Hawthorne’s characters in the three stories are similar. They are faced with moral issues and isolation. The main characters are all religious people who seek to either impose their beliefs on others or use their religious conviction to harm themselves. Young Goodman Brown embarked on a journey that he hoped would lead him to live a pious life but instead he ends up losing his faith. He came back in despair and subsequently led a secluded life. He was not even sure the journey was real or imagined. He grappled with what was right from what was wrong until he did not know the truth. This led him to shut everybody out of his life. He trusted no one.   
The Reverend Hooper In “ The Minister’s Black Veil also hid himself from everyone. He is afraid to confront his fears and so he hid behind his veil. In “ The Birth Mark” Georgiana is isolated from her husband and from her friends because she had a slight imperfection. He feels that he cannot fully accept her until he gets rid of the flaw. Hawthorne places his characters among nature. Nature is one of man’s greatest teachers yet man allows spirituality and sin to get in the way. All of Hawthorne’s characters sought to have perfection in their lives but instead they destroy themselves and also the people they love. The Puritans were close minded people and Hawthorne’s writing in this period was perhaps to teach the rest of society that they should not be close minded like the puritans as this would lead to self-alienation and subsequent destruction.

## References

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