

# Conflict between the individual and society in "the minister's black veil" by nat...

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Similar to most of Hawthorne's works, *The Minister's Black Veil* not only exemplifies the issues of morality, repentance and sin within the setting of Puritan New England, but it also exhibits the familiar literary theme of conflict between the individual and society. Through this kind of social, psychological and moral conflict, Hawthorne criticizes the Puritan image of original sin, as well as the stereotypical views this particular society bears regarding Reverend Hooper.

In spite of Milford's religious community, the townspeople are quick to judge and resent Mr Hooper without ever directly enquiring him of the reason he wears the black veil to obscure his face. While "one or two" are considerate enough to assume that it is only because his "eyes were so weakened by the midnight lamp as to require a shade", a majority of the community prefer severe accusations of his morality and mental health over good-judgment and practical questioning. It is evident that the society's reaction towards Mr Hooper's harmless black veil reflects their unfavourable qualities of ignorance and hypocrisy. Their antagonism however, does ironically bring them closer together as a community against the minister; the veil "supplied a topic for discussion between acquaintances meeting in the street, and good women gossiping at their open windows".

Moreover, their reactions also prove the stereotypical views which they bear in regards to prominent – or more specifically – religious figures such as Reverend Hooper. As a minister, he is expected by the townspeople of Milford to be infallible; free of sin or of ultimately any wrongdoing. He is a kind of role model which the Puritan society rely on for guidance to purity

and piety. However, the “horrible black veil” acts as a mask of sin, an object that “could portend nothing but evil” in the eyes of society. It emphasizes whatever immorality the minister might have done rather than conceal it. It is intended to remind people of the original sin inherent in all of them; a motive which unfortunately has always been disagreeable to the surrounding community, as people are always eager to hide their sins rather than admit it to the public. Therefore, the misconceived notion that the veil is worn to cover up some embarrassing sin is unacceptable to society, as Mr Hooper is, in their point of view, supposed to maintain the countenance of sanctity and not to be like the ordinary, wrongdoing man.

Besides this, the people of Milford appear to resent the fact that there is something of the minister that they do not know. It is possible that as a religious, prominent figure, the community expects Mr Hooper to be open and sincere with them, rather than conceal some “secret sin” or a secret in general. Just as how people of the contemporary age are always demanding for more information on famous celebrities, to the point where secrecy is meaningless, the townspeople are unhappy with the knowledge which Mr Hooper appears to know that they do not.

Although Mr Hooper does nothing more than wear a black veil, and continues his everyday duties as minister without difference, the community reacts with hostility; “strange and bewildered looks repaid him for his courtesy”, and their faces are always “pale” with fear when acknowledging him. As a response to Mr Hooper’s unnatural decision, society tries to overpower him, in spite of his respected position as a minister. They are insistent on the

removal of the black veil, without considering its significance and submitting to the moral lesson it upholds. Even after listening to a prayer of the minister's which explains the veil's representation of a religious idea, the community continues to reject it. It is because the people fear the subject which the veil symbolically embodies: repentance, and their rejection of the veil signifies their refusal to repent. This proves that the society is misguided, as they overlook the fact that Mr Hooper is at a position of religious authority and tries to exercise their power over him.

On the other hand, it appears that the minister is not entirely the victim, as his adamant refusal to take off the veil, even when alone, highlights some stubbornness in his temperament. He is tangibly more spiritual than others, and is more devoted to the afterlife than his life on earth. However, with this profound resolution there is the obvious hint of arrogance in his quest for spiritual connection. Mr Hooper states that " this dismal shade must separate [him] from the world", as though the world is such a detrimental place to live in. It connotes the idea that he is far better than the world, or is deserving of a better setting.

Lastly, society uses the common argument of a sinking reputation and public judgments against the minister to coerce him into giving up the black veil. This is done through Elizabeth, Mr Hooper's wife, who declares, " Beloved and respected as you are, there may be whispers, that you hide your face under the consciousness of secret sin. For the sake of your holy office, do away this scandal!" This statement exemplifies the society's unwarranted excessive care and concern over reputation and the judgment of other

people, even if it were for the sake of religion. Mr Hooper contradicts this criticism with the modest excuse, “ If I cover it for secret sin, what mortal might not do the same?”

In this fashion, the conflict between Mr. Hooper and society ensues throughout the story, and his achievement at keeping the veil on even at death proves his victory against his adversaries. However, it is a bittersweet triumph, as the minister wins at the expense of rejection and alienation from everybody else, even the woman he loves.