

The secret under the veil

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The legendary author Nathaniel Hawthorne's intriguing story, "The Minister's Black Veil", may be initially read as simply a town's aversion to a pastor's strange decision to wear a black veil, but a deeper examination will reveal more profound values—particularly one that echo those of the writer himself. Hawthorne was known to espouse beliefs on man's propensity toward evil, as well as the ensuing dangers brought on by isolation (OnPedia.com, par. 1), which are evident in many of his works.

The same thinking was used as the underlying theme in this story, which is a narrative of the choices made by Parson Hooper, the local minister who refused to remove the veil from his person—thus causing him to be avoided by townsfolk and associated with the idea of evil and secrecy, or both. Strangely, but perhaps intentionally, the word 'veil' may be turned around to spell 'evil', which in Hawthorne's typical period of seventeenth-century New England (Merriman, par. 2) could be logically equated with sin.

The question then to be asked is within Hooper's vow to wear the veil—was it to conceal a great sin? The answer may be revealed by a careful analysis of the story, identifying specific statements and moments that provide proof. II. Facades and Appearances: Symbolism of the Black Veil The story begins with the townsfolk's dismay at the veiled countenance of their new minister, Mr. Hooper, and is evident in a statement uttered by one of them: "'I don't like it,' muttered an old woman... 'He has changed himself into something awful, only by hiding his face.'" (Hawthorne, par. 8).

This reaction was most probably triggered by the common representation of the black veil—gloom, death, sadness—as it is usually seen during funerals. It does not directly refer to an admission of sin, but rather to mourn for

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something; but the people took its use to be for disguising one's real feelings, and therefore, must be a manifestation of guilt. Such is implied in their collective thought as Mr. Hooper proceeded with the church service, "did he seek to hide (his face) from the dread Being whom he was addressing?" (Hawthorne, par. 10).

Without actual knowledge of Mr. Hooper's intentions, the townspeople had already passed judgment and concluded that the minister must be concealing a secret, something so evil that he would not even face God without it. This assumption was further made correct in their minds as Mr. Hooper's sermon centered on the subject of secret sin, and how no matter it is relegated into the darkest corners, God is able to see it (Hawthorne, par. 12). Small-town societies, such as in the story, can be preoccupied with maintaining appearances and impressions; the main goal is to present a favorable image of themselves as members of a system.

Anything that goes against the accepted norms may be treated with curiosity at best, and ridicule at most. Clearly, the town's unspoken rules did not include having a pastor wearing a black veil, due to the perceived meanings of the object. The outcome is thus the connection and interpretation found within their own social narrative—in this case, secrecy, evil, and sin. III. Change and Acceptance: Not For the Religious People during this era had a great attachment to their faith, exemplified by their staunch obedience to all requisites of religion.

Because of this, they had little or no tolerance for anything that ran against the accepted notions of religious tradition (Smith, par. 2)—most especially the idea of a minister wearing a black veil. Gloom and darkness were

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instantly associated with Mr. Hooper, and produced images of supernatural events (Hawthorne, par. 18). Once more, the wealth of assumptions created by the townsfolk spoke greatly about their own values, and none truly giving value to Mr. Hooper's reasons. No one dared ask him—except his fiancée—regarding his use of the black veil; the people were content to talk among themselves and further elaborate on their perceptions.

The appropriation of funerals is notable in the story, which then gives the reader a chance to associate the concept with Mr. Hooper's veil, but this was certainly not the mindset of the people; they had already formed their own ideas regarding Mr. Hooper, his probable secret, and the darkness it evoked that consumed the whole town. IV. Truth and Consequence: Revealing the Veil's Purpose Curiously, the story includes as note that refers to another account of the wearing of the black veil: one that involved yet another clergyman who wore the veil to his death due to his accidental murder of a friend (Hawthorne, par. 2).

This information, as provided by the author, lends itself to much argument and debate. On the one hand, the reader could assume that this was a 'veiled' revelation of Mr. Hooper's real yet untold reason for donning the black veil; on the other, it could be simply a comparison of two similar manifestations albeit with different objectives. Another clue that positions itself toward the belief that Mr. Hooper may indeed have committed a grave sin is his exchange with his fiancée Elizabeth, during which he asked. "... if I cover (my face) for sin, what mortal might not do the same?

" (Hawthorne, par. 37). And no matter how much Elizabeth tried to convince Mr. Hooper to tell her his reasons for not removing the veil, the minister

remained firm in his resolve. In the end, he chose to live in isolation, far from the woman he loved, for the motivation for hiding behind the veil was greater. But this isolation and focus on the consequences of sin drew ‘ sinners’ closer to Mr. Hooper; it was perhaps his dark appearance and reputation that made them confess their sins easily, with the quest to ask for forgiveness, as is done in the presence of a priest.

In the end, while on his deathbed, Mr. Hooper dealt the blow that would eventually explain, however cryptic, his possible reasons for wearing the veil: “Tremble also at each other... I look around me,... on every visage a black veil! ” (Hawthorne, par. 60). While some will conclude that the minister finally admitted to his secret sin, another interpretation runs toward his use of the veil only to make the people realize their hypocrisy and bad judgment. By his referring to “ the mystery by which (the veil) obscurely typifies has made (it) so awful? ” (Hawthorne, par. 60), Mr. Hooper denounced the isolation he had been subjected to by the evil in the minds of men, including his own religious brothers. Just by the sole use of the black veil, a lifetime of assumptions and judgment had been passed on to him—obviously a sin created by malicious thinking.

Conclusion

If the reader were to assume that Mr. Hooper had committed a sin that he avowed to remain secret because of the bit of information about another priest’s use of a black veil, as well as the perceptions of society, then he or she would not be any different from the townsfolk. The presentation of various facts—Mr. Hooper’s wearing of the veil and his refusal to remove it; the earlier incident of another veil being used; and the affinity of the ‘

sinner's' with the minister—were probably made to evoke the kind of reaction in a person, coming from the degree of evil in his or her mind. Nowhere in the story had any concrete proof of Mr. Hooper's supposed sin been shown, and coming to this kind of conclusion is born out of the reader's own experience. The mention of the other priest who had worn a similar veil was only there to provide one reason; it was not exactly meant to assume that Mr. Hooper's was the same.

Also, the author specifically stated why the first priest had done so—because of a murder he had committed—which meant that it was revealed to the public at some point. In Mr. Hooper's case, no revelations of any kind were given, as he simply refused to remove it till his death. Mr. Hooper's character is a test of the townsfolk's—and the reader's—core. Seeing how the townsfolk reacted, which is most likely along the same lines as that of many readers of this story, Hawthorne's theory of evil residing in the minds of men is validated.

Works Cited

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