

Research paper on the ministers black veil a parable by nathaniel hawthorne

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“ Our parson has gone mad!” cried Goodman Gray (Hawthorne, 2001, 26).

The young minister, Mr. Hooper, shocked his parishioners one Sunday morning by wearing a black veil while he gave the sermon. Then to make the shock even worse the minister did not remove the veil even for his daily activities. He wore it all the time even though his fiancé broke their engagement and others cringed to see him coming.

The minister’s new look made a visible impression on those around but he would not explain to anyone the reason he started wearing a black crape veil over his eyes. This essay explores the reasons he may have decided to wear the veil. It is possible that he was testing the people around him in some way. He may have only been planning to wear the veil for a short period, but after experiencing the effect the veil had on others, he decided to keep wearing it. Because Mr. Hooper never clearly explains, we can only guess.

The Minister’s Veil written in 1836 was the first time Hawthorne had written a story using one main symbol (Wright, 2006, para. 2). All the characters’ reactions in the story were based on the symbol unless they became familiar with the seeing the minister wearing the veil. After they started expecting him to wear the veil, they would have been surprised if Mr. Hooper had removed the veil; although they may not have been so likely to shun the minister.

Elisabeth, Mr. Hooper’s plighted wife (fiancé) stayed calm and directly asked him “ 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” (32). Yet even to Elisabeth he speaks in mysterious terms and tells her that “ This dismal shade must

separate me from the world: even you, Elisabeth, can never come behind it!" (32). Elisabeth does not agree to this arrangement and breaks off the engagement. But she remains constant to her dear friend, Mr. Hooper, and at his death bed she is there beside him as his nurse.

Realizing that if Mr. Hooper will not even tell Elisabeth the reason he is wearing the veil leads to all kinds of guessing as to his purpose. Wright (2006) noted that Edgar Allen Poe suggested that he may have been motivated to start wearing the veil because of something to do with the young woman's funeral which took place on the same day. One of the mourners thought that she had seen the young girl's corpse shudder when the veiled minister bent over the body. Another woman looked back while in the procession leaving the funeral. Her partner asked why and she answered " I had a fancy that the minister and the maiden's spirit were walking hand in hand" (Hawthorne, 1836, 29). This may be an indication that some reason had upset Mr. Hooper about the girl's death that motivated him to start wearing the black crape. His prayer at the funeral was very sensitive and kind. Maybe the death of an innocent who was faithful to God and had no sins upset Mr. Hooper. He could have become shaken in his faith and he did not want anyone to see a change in his eyes. Maybe he simply could not bear to see how unfair the world was when even the best people suffered.

White (2006) also notes that Hawthorne says the veil has made the minister efficient and has given him some kind of power; some kind of " awful power" (8). Other than those two new characteristics the veil seems to have no positive impact on the minister or on his congregation. Yet people are drawn

to him, his fame and congregation grow; and at some point the people start calling him “ Father Hooper” (Hawthorne, 1836, 35).

Bloom (2001) reminds us that when that when the minister raised his glass of wine to toast the newlywed couple, he sees himself in the mirror wearing the veil. He is frightened by his reflection, spills his wine and runs from the church.

Sterling (2001) leads a reader to think about the idea that it is not the outside world he does not want to face; maybe it is something about himself that he does not want to see. But that seems even harder to determine because so little is known about the minister. The reader does not know anything about what the minister was like before he wore the veil. The narrator of the story asks a very curious question “ Did he seek to hide it from the dread being whom he was addressing?” (Hawthorne, 1836, 27). This was at the time Mr. Hooper was reading the Scriptures and praying. So was Mr. Hooper protecting himself from the sight of the devil? There still seems to be a never ending list of possibilities both of hiding from his faults or sins and shading his eyes from the bad things in the world.

Werlock (2009) makes a very telling comment about a clue Mr. Hooper may have been giving us from his deathbed. She suggests that he wore the veil as a warning to other people; that somehow he had seen so much of the faults and sins of other people it was like they were hiding their eyes under an invisible veil. That way they would not have to see their own faults and therefore not have to confess to them or take responsibility for them. He

says that when “ man does not shrink from the eye of his Creator, loathsomely treasuring up the secret of his sin” then people can say to the minister that he is a monster (37). So was Hawthorne trying to encourage his readers to see how silly it was to fear God or to fear their own neighbors? Living in fear would be a terrible way to live so maybe that was the message.

Mellow (2012) brings up the psychological side of hiding behind a mask or veil. Hawthorne had in the notes a mention of a real incident of a minister wearing a veil for the rest of his life after he had accidentally killed a good friend. Also he made a note about the burden of always wearing a mask. The note about the minister who accidentally killed a friend may or may not be true, after all. Maybe that was put into the story as a part of the fiction to help us understand the reason for the parable. If that is the case then the veil may refer to carrying a burden your whole life but never accepting it or letting it go. Finally your life isn't about anything but the burden. That seems to be what happened to Mr. Hooper. Although he seemed so disturbed because children ran away from him, people either avoided him or tried to bully him, although these types of events clearly upset him, he did not remove the veil. Coale (2007) has made a disturbing observation “ Hooper's choice reflects his vision of himself as a minister in Milford, transfiguring himself into the dreaded icon of his congregation's faith, complete with all its aspects of fear, terror, horror, and fright” (para. 1). This is an interesting observation. During Hawthorne's time perhaps that is how ministers gained power over their congregation and helped them to be moral individuals, by scaring them.

Although many questions arise from the story one thing is very clear.

Hawthorne's use of the symbol (the veil) to tell his parable makes a reader engaged right away with the story. At first the story is interesting because of the people's reaction to the minister. He seems to have been a quiet, non-threatening regular kind of fellow before the morning he came to give the sermon wearing the veil. The people are very astonished and some so upset they can't look at him or even stay until the end of the service. Strangely the congregation felt that by wearing the veil the plain Mr. Hooper could suddenly read each of their most inner thoughts. The funeral of the young girl may be a clue, perhaps something happened or he had feelings for her that made him feel ashamed? Then after the wedding ceremony Mr. Hooper scares himself when he sees his reflection in the mirror. That would have been a reasonable place for him to tear off the veil and just say that his 'experiment' has ended. But he does not even remove the veil after that; instead he goes to Elisabeth's house. This seems to be the perfect person to find out for the reader what is going on with Mr. Hooper. Shockingly he allows their engagement to be ended. Finally the reader realizes that the veil has become a part of the way people view Mr. Hooper and part of his character. Still at the end the reader is in suspense to hear the reason Mr. Hooper is wearing the veil. Elisabeth is there nursing him on his death bed. It would be reasonable for Mr. Hooper to remove the veil so he can look into Elisabeth's eyes one last time before he dies. But instead he patiently holds the veil smashed against his eyes so that the veil won't be removed while he is still alive. The words he spoke to Elisabeth so many years ago have proved

to be made with absolute sincerity; he would not see her eye to eye again until the afterlife.

Certainly Mr. Hooper seems to be a very sincere and serious minister. He does smile at the strangest times though. For some reason he will never share his reasons for wearing the veil; the questions will continue to be asked forever.

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