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„The Minister's Black Veil" in a Contemporary Context

Summary

The aim of this paper is to subject to critical assessment Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil" in the current pandemic context, when wearing a mask or covering one's face can take on a series of new symbolic and metaphorical interpretations. It seems apposite to accentuate that being masked or veiled, in Hawthorne, is more than an attempt to camouflage one's identity, as it also seeks to stand for the viral spread of sin, avarice and jealousy. Hawthorne's rigid moral climate – engendered by Puritanism, the weight of its history, and the virulent urban environment he came to observe – has contaminated the individual and urban society and, in the same breath, began to imperil nature as well. In this specific relation, the paper will touch upon the themes of concealment and the importance of how an invisible contagion (the sinful nature of human beings, that is) endangers the "edifice of society" in Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil"* (1837), where the atmosphere of decay both in the human body and the soul are a clearly detectable quality of the tale.

Key words: veils, authority, obsessiveness, burden of the past, sin.

In his book on Nathaniel Hawthorne, Henry James stated that the American writer was "the most valuable example of the American genius" he knew, providing "the most vivid reflection of New England life that has found its way into literature" (James 1988: 12, 13). In addition to a

* "The Minister's Black Veil" will be hereinafter abbreviated as *MBV* in all parenthetical citations.

volume of tales, various sketches, and children's books, Hawthorne only produced a handful of novels, which alone earned him the status of being extensively read and taught in the canon of American literature. One of the reasons for the endurance and the topicality of Hawthorne's writing is owing to the fact the author committed himself to exploring the universal experience of human nature and society as a whole by often beginning with what appear to be tales with a bucolic scene, gradually widening in breadth only to address at last the overarching themes of presumed guilt, unrelenting preoccupation with sin, crimes against the human heart, authority, and obsessiveness.

Hawthorne's place in American literature is difficult to define. He is generally grouped among transcendentalist writers, even if he represents a particular kind of transcendentalism. In stark contrast with Emerson's optimism, Hawthorne depicted human nature with dark tonalities, acrimony, and pessimism, portraying lonely, isolated, and often sinful individuals. Modern literary criticism – F. R. Lewis, F. O. Matthiessen, and Charles Feidelson, in particular – views Hawthorne and Melville as skeptically distanced writers who evinced their aloofness from American culture that primarily lay stress on conformity and material wealth. Today's reader will find in Hawthorne that the moral injustice and the religious intolerance that his protagonists experience at the hands of fundamentalist zealots are akin to the widespread sentiments of guilt and ethical concerns permeating the social fabric of our globalized times. In a similar vein, Aladár Sarbu (1989) argues that Hawthorne's best major romance, *The Scarlet Letter* "had little immediate relevance in mid-nineteenth-century America" as the work might "strike the uninitiated reader as an imaginative yet credible recreation of the world of the first Puritans" (35). It can also be argued that the thematic patterns Hawthorne recurringly employs in his short and long fiction can be safely transported into our present times as a disquieting commentary on what it means to conceal our identities in public, where the act of hiding behind a mask implies an elusive set of meanings about stigma, personhood, and self. The aim of this essay is to demonstrate how the pervasive use of the veil in "The Minister's Black Veil" signals societal preoccupations of topical relevance for today's reader when wearing a mask connotes more than "a disguise of some sort to conceal something

more actual underneath" (Jessee 2014: 61). It will be shown, among other things, that the short story under critical scrutiny provide a fertile ground for literary investigation with respect to the uncomplicated significations of veils for Hawthorne's contemporary readership and their problematic and multifarious associations for today's reader.

Hawthorne often wrote notes in his journal of story ideas he might develop, one of which is clearly suggestive of "The Minister's Black Veil." In this regard, Hawthorne says that his fiction aims "[t]o allegorize life with a masquerade, and represent mankind generally as masquers" (1994:122). Critics have pinpointed that veils abound in the author's works and are always charged with meaning, which connect them to Hawthorne's major themes in other, more fundamental ways.* Written in 1836, this story has been labelled the first of Hawthorne's fictional works revolving around a single central symbol.** Joel Pfister (2004) is right in remarking that "no tale illustrates Hawthorne's wariness of ideological single-vision as visually and in some instances as compassionately as "The Minister's Black Veil" (55).

The tale is characteristic of Hawthorne's theological and psychological questioning and the subsequent transformation process his characters experience. It is a representative example of his use of ambiguous allegory, encouraging multiple readings. The story begins one Sunday in the 1740s when Reverend Hooper dons a black veil much to the bewilderment of his congregation. He is henceforth received and viewed with mixed emotions, which ranges from fear, surprise, and morbid fascination. Refusing

* Special attention has been paid to the discussion of the Veiled Lady in *The Blithedale Romance*. See Richard H. Fogle's *Hawthorne's Fiction: The Light and the Dark*, Frank Davidson's "Toward a Revaluation of *The Blithedale Romance,* Bill Christopherson's "Behind the White Veil: Self-Awareness in Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*," and E. Shaskan Bumas's "'The Forgotten Art of Gayety': Masquerade, Utopia, and the complexion of Empire." Margaret Jay Jessee's "Veiling Ladies and Narrative Masquerade in The Blithedale Romance" is the most recent study mapping the relationship between gender and masking.

** A possible biographical parallel should not be neglected. One footnote by Hawthorne reveals that the tale was inspired by a real story and based on the figure of another clergyman, Joseph Moody of York, Maine. Moody started using a handkerchief rather than a veil, but it was characteristic of the profound guilt he suffered over inadvertently murdering a friend of his when he was young.

to answer to the question of why he decided to wear the veil, Hooper's emotional life becomes restrained as he detaches himself from others on the basis of his unspecified, hence eccentric, religious conviction. Speculations abound that his "conscience tortured him for some great crime, too horrible to be entirely concealed" (*MBV* 10). The veil hangs "between him and the world," separating him from "cheerful brotherhood and woman's love" and keeping him "in that saddest of all prisons, his own heart" (*MBV* 11). The only benefit of the veil is that it makes Mr. Hooper a "very efficient clergyman" (*MBV* 10). He becomes a man of "awful power," living an "irreproachable" life yet one "shrouded in dismal suspicions" (*MBV* 10, 11, 12). Several years elapse, and Reverend Hooper becomes mortally ill and is nursed by his fiancée, Elizabeth. On his deathbed, he confesses that it is the "mystery" of the crepe ("crape" as Hawthorne refers to it) that made him too fearsome to be approached by women and children through a lifetime; when he dies and placed into the coffin, the veil is left covering his face:

> 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! (*MBV* 13)

The reason behind Hooper's motive to don the veil carries less of an import that how its wearing – literally unto death and beyond the grave თოლო impacts the course of his life. It functions as an emblem that severs his ties with humanity and epitomizes his individualistic way of sacrificing himself to spiritual truth. One remarkable feature of Hooper's visual emblem is that it bears no intrinsic significance unlike the emblems associated with other fictional characters of his, including Roderick and his serpent in "Egotism; or, the Bosom-Serpent," Georgiana and her birthmark in "The Birth-Mark," and Warland and his butterfly in "The Artist of the Beautiful," has no intrinsic significance. Reverend Hooper's veil continuously reminds his flock that they deny their sinfulness and mortality as they live their daily lives. On the one hand, parishioners, more than ever, become converted when viewing themselves and their Puritanized souls in Hooper's inky mirror. On the other hand, they become nervous

about mingling with their religious leader, who perceives everyone only in one light or lack of light.

In the tale, members of the small community of Milford struggle to look at Reverend Hooper's veil as it was believed to hide his awareness of a multitude of sins. Even the subject of his sermon "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" (*MBV* 7). It is "under the consciousness of secret sin" (*MBV* 8) that Reverend Hooper's own existence becomes increasingly contingent upon the accumulation of knowledge about sin, which prevents him from removing his veil. One might find it difficult to leave the plausible analogy unnoticed between Reverend Hooper's desire to keep himself veiled – a form of preserving knowledge – even on his deathbed and the current social climate, in which removing our masks – a symbol of comprehending the frightful nature of the contagion – would implicate human ignorance.

Implications of knowledge on the spiritual life of the individual allow Hawthorne "to penetrate the mystery of the black veil" (Pearson 1999: 679). It seems to me that the author's conception of sin in several of his long and short fiction (particularly in the guilt-ridden romance of *The Scarlet Letter*) lends the word a near-synonymous meaning of secret. Knowledge for Reverend Hooper is merely of secondary concern to him. The community in which he preaches yearns for the unravelling of the secret and associates the wearing of the veil with sin regardless of its depth. It is worth citing Hawthorne's word from the preface of *The House of the Seven Gables*, where he explains that every piece of fiction must "rigidly subject itself to laws, and while it sins unpardonably, so far as it may swerve aside from the truth of the human heart" (2009: 1). This secrecy engenders a string of quandaries where Hawthorne's characters cannot but opt for the lesser evil: they can either acquiesce with the secret, whereby the sin is expiated, or recoil from being in the know of the secret sin, which will, in turn, haunt them for a lifetime.

Secret sin in the tale is presented as something of an *idée fixe* with a multitude of connotations, enabling Reverend Hooper to become a social pariah in the community under his spiritual leadership. Much in the same

fashion, Hester Prynne of *The Scarlet Letter* is forced to live on the margins of society, while Ethan Brand of the titular short story ventures on a quest for the Unpardonable Sin, the knowledge of which turns out to be an unattainable enterprise.

Hawthorne distinguishes between his heroes, whose outcast status is at least as much the fault of the community as their own, and those who voluntarily renounce all human bonds. Reverend Hooper's sermon is dedicated to the question of the Original Sin: when he hides his face behind the veil, he makes his parishioners confront with their own sins in a similar vein to the artist of "The Prophetic Pictures" (1837), who paints the picture of a couple which he believes to harbour some deep secret. The veil is often thought of a symbol, which critics equip with meanings.* One recurring interpretation is to see how the veil operates as a literary device chosen by Reverend Hooper to dramatize a common human failing, that is to say, hypocrisy. As the story draws to a closure, the minister provides his own interpretation of the ambiguity behind the veil by acknowledging his sin and simultaneously drawing parallel to the self-defeating, hypocritical nature of his own community, which, by extension, takes on universal dimensions:

"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 crape so awful? When the friend shows his

* The veil has been used as a symbol in works by other authors, including *Mysteries of Udolpho,* by Ann Radcliffe, and in stories by Charles Dickens, such as "The Black Veil" (1836). Seminal works pertaining have been dedicated to the plausible meanings of the veil are numerous: G. A. Santagelo's "The Absurdity of 'The Minister's Black Veil'" (1970), Victor Strandberg's "The Artist's Black Veil" (1962), and W. B. Carnochan's " 'The Minister's Black Veil': Symbol, Meaning, and the Context of Hawthorne's Art" (1969), and Frederick Newberry's "The Biblical Veil: Sources and Typology in Hawthorne's 'The Minister's Black Veil'" are important readings of the veil extending beyond its usual conceptualization as either a study in human pride or a negation of transcendent truth. Samuel Chase Coale (1998) suggests that "the veil is a symbol of mortal ignorance, a false *signum diaboli*, a demonic object to be overcome, a symbol of the failure to communicate" (45).

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!" (*MBV* 13).

In a seminal article, J. Hillis Miller (1988) writes that the tale is composed of short, vignette-like episodes, all of which are connected to the community's daily activities and follow one another in a quick success of steps; these include a funeral, a wedding, a customary evening stroll in the graveyard; however, none of these activities are executed with the same ease as before once Reverend Hooper dons his black veil. Miller consider this act to be an important watershed in the story, after which

there is no more open discussion, no more courtship, no more marrying or giving in marriage; rather, marriages become indistinguishable from funerals, and funerals cease to be an institutionalized acceptance of the fact that the dead are really dead. Hooper's deathbed scene becomes not the expression of a farewell openness to his parishioners but the occasion of a final speech denouncing the people of Milford. […] Even Hooper's death is not the occasion of an unveiling, as the last sentence of the story affirms" (Miller 1988: 17-18).

Since Reverend Hooper never openly discloses the mystery of the black veil, critics and students have been coerced into putting forward their own theories in reading the tale. In an early commentary of it, Edgar Allan Poe implies that the minister wears the veil to show contrition for a "specific sin," which might as well be in conjunction with the young woman whose funeral he conducts (Carnochan 1969:182). Some other hypotheses about the signification of the veil identify the piece with as a symbol of the sins of within his congregation, or rather, a shared quality of humanity. It might also stand to reason to see Reverend Hooper as a religious zealot analogous in his spiritual extremism to the heroine portrayed in "The Gentle Boy" (1837), where Catherine, the mother of a Quaker boy Ibrahim relinquishes motherhood and "breaks the bonds of natural affection" (Wright 2007: 185) so that she can devote herself to preaching the Quaker faith.

In a different context, it has been suggested that Reverend Hooper, much like Young Goodman Brown of the titular short story, Aylmer of "The Birthmark," and Giovanni of "Rappaccini's Daughter," is a "sexual escapist" (Crews 1966: 158). His bonds are severed from his community and continues living in a state of pessimism. While the parishioners in the village respond to the veil, often by drawing similarities with their own sins, they also avoid encountering the minister. They cease inviting him to weddings or Sunday dinner. In an insightful analysis of the tale, Nancy Bunge writes that the villagers regard him as a "living parable of evil" (1993: 19), who gradually develops into an emblem of depravity and "a bitter corrosive unhappiness" (1993: 22). It is interesting to note that his fiancée, Elizabeth does not abandon him against all odds; she continues to recognize the veil as an object for which he has a personal and emotional attachment to such a degree that he is even recalcitrant to have it removed on his deathbed. She loves him also: "There was the nurse, no hired handmaiden of death, but one whose calm affection had endured thus long […] in solitude, amid the chill of age, and would not perish, even at the dying hour." Compared to other scholars, who see the minister either as a "mild-mannered bachelor in clerical garb" or an "Antichrist in his pride and despair," Crews considers him to be a "self-deluded idealist" (Crews 1993: 58). Another conflict in the story is the disparity between unconscious and conscious thoughts within individuals. However, even at its closure, Reverend Hooper continues to repress his thoughts; he cannot admit their "hold upon his own imagination" (Crews 1993: 107–111). The veil not only intensifies the minister's influence, but also becomes an emblem of the passion for concealment that torments all human beings to a greater or lesser degree.

In this relation, the full title of Hawthorne's story – that it is a parable – hides a complex double meaning: both the tale and the black veil itself act as parables in their own rights. The black veil worn by Reverend Hooper is to remind his parishioners of their own sins as well as the Original Sin, which constitutes the core of the minister's sermon. It can be surmised that the function of the veil resembles that of a mirror, reflecting the parishioners' own sinful nature back at them by tempting them to contemplate its symbolism:

A subtle power was breathed into his words. Each member of the congregation, the most innocent girl, and the man of hardened breast, felt as if the preacher had crept upon them, behind his awful veil, and discovered their hoarded iniquity of deed or thought (*MBV* 3).

Reverend Hooper's purported act of mysterious "creeping upon" the parishioners through their veils can be likened to the metaphorical lifting of their (metaphorical) veils to unravel and confront them with the dark secrets of their past.

Hawthorne describes that the minister's relationship with his congregation is unblemished until he begins to wear his veil. Even if the tale is centred around the plausible meanings of the veil, Coale emphasises that "[m]ost criticism has focused more on Hooper than on the veil" (1998: 45). The minister's demonic, inhumane, proud, and misguidedly religious act of wearing the veil only submerges when he is in such a wrought-up state of the mind that he even disguises his face from his loved one, sacrificing not only his own contentment but also shattering her life. Hawthorne believes that one must be able to live with one's sins, otherwise one's life will forever bear resemblance of the minister's plight. He perceives sin as a barrier to all human relationships by thinking that a black veil is hanging over each face. He is convinced that the veil separates people from each other, husband from wife, and mother from child. In his parochialism, he does not realize that it is only between the minister and the congregation that there lies an ever-widening, unbridgeable gap. Reverend Hooper's recognition of humankind's sinful nature before God irretrievably separates him from his parishioners instead of helping him better understand their actions and ways of thinking. He continues living his life as an outcast and dies as a lonely, disillusioned man. Hawthorne concludes in his tale that "[a]ll through life that piece of crape had hung between him and the world: it had separated him from cheerful brotherhood and woman's love, and kept him in that saddest of all prisons, his own heart" (*MBV* 11).

Writing in 1836, he recognizes the power of the veil as a literary image by stating that the "essay on the misery of being always under a mask. A veil may be needful, but never a mask" (cited in Coale, 1998:45). Hawthorne's comment allows the critic to pose the question whether the min-

ister's black veil functions merely as a veil, or it is rather a mask. Samuel Chase Coale (1998) claims that "although a veil conceals something (the face), on a semantic level its meaning is usually *not* concealed but made plain" (46). When Elisabeth confronts Reverend Hooper about his veil, she raises the question:

"But what if the world will not believe that it is the type of an innocent sorrow? […] 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" (*MBV* 8).

Reverend Hooper's position throughout the tale unmistakably applies to the flaws commonly shared by humankind in our own century. While the tale ends on an indeterminate note by withholding from the reader the diabolic sins Reverend Hooper may have (or may not have) committed, Hawthorne's comment that the minister looks around and sees on a "every visage a Black Veil" clearly resonates with our current times in identifying a close analogy between wearing a veil and donning a mask at all levels of society regardless of place, time, religion, ethnicity, and other circumstantial factors.

It is evident that the tale, with its nearly apocalyptic ambiance the author creates, allows the reader to discover in Hawthorne something of a global thinker forging ideas pertinent to our contemporary times rather than merely a writer burdened by the dark secrets of the Puritan legacy bearing upon his fictional world. The shadowy world of the "The Minister's Black Veil" aptly echoes our present-day preoccupation with our pandemic-ridden world by enabling the reader to ponder on a round of tentative interpretations of the questions of death and the impending doom. Hawthorne offers a sinister imagery of a world — reduced to the microcosm of a small community, as it were – that seems to be aptly directed at the injustices and depravations of modern societies in our post-millennial era. To the reader of today, Hawthorne's tale might be a striking and astute evocation of the thoughts of the apocalypse and fearing God's wrath as humankind's unending concerns about the pandemic and its aftermaths occupy a central place in our daily lives.

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