

ANALYSIS

“The Minister's Black Veil” (1836)

Nathaniel Hawthorne

(1804-1864)

Hawthorne subtitles the story “A Parable” and introduces it with a footnote about another clergyman in New England who made himself remarkable by the same “eccentricity.” In his case, “the symbol had a different import.” That clergyman had killed a friend by accident. Hawthorne’s tone here is empirical, his view objective like that of Parson Hooper’s fiancée Elizabeth, one of his iconic angels who transcends the projections by the multitude onto the veil: “It was but a double fold of crepe, hanging down from his forehead to his mouth.”

Elizabeth asks Hooper why he put on the veil: “‘If I hide my face for sorrow, there is cause enough,’ he merely replied; ‘and if I cover it for secret sin, what mortal might not do the same?’” Hawthorne implies here that, unlike the clergyman in the footnote, Hooper is not guilty of anything: “If he erred at all, it was by so painful a degree of self-distrust, that even the mildest censure would lead him to consider an indifferent action as a crime.” This “self-distrust” is a legacy of the Calvinist doctrine of total depravity, which likewise afflicts Reuben Bourne in “Roger Malvin’s Burial.” Bourne saves himself, whereas Hooper and Young Goodman Brown and “The Man of Adamant” are all isolated by their belief in the doctrine and damned to a hell of alienation.

Parson Hooper chooses his fate, contradicting the Calvinist doctrine of predestination: “This dismal shade must separate me from the world.” Any reader familiar with the iconic art of Hawthorne recognizes the theme of damnation by isolation. Hooper alienates himself from the innocent heart of a good woman, the Victorian angel who represents happiness and salvation. Elizabeth is embarrassed by the veil, knowing it will cause a scandal and ruin their reputations (in a review, Poe misread the story, inferring the two had committed “a crime of dark dye”). Hooper merely smiles at Elizabeth with “unconquerable obstinacy.” He lacks the heart even to sympathize with her. Out of pride he rejects happiness for them both and damns himself in order to dramatize a point of doctrine.

Hooper makes himself a minister appropriate mainly to funerals. To a wedding, that holy sacrament, his veil “could portend nothing but evil.” He is “irreparably a bugbear” and “children fled from his approach.” Christ said, “Suffer the little children to come unto me.” Victorians venerated children above all and would recognize the evil of the veil. At the same time, like the guilty Dimmesdale, Hooper becomes a more effective minister to sinners who feel totally depraved. More than a symbol of one doctrine, the veil now represents the entire vision of Calvinism: it gave a “darkened aspect to all living and inanimate things”; “he walked continually in its shadow, groping darkly within his own soul, or gazing through a medium that saddened the whole world.”

The first time the minister appears in public wearing the veil, a man cries out, “Our parson has gone mad!” Later, the village physician says, “Something must surely be amiss with Mr. Hooper’s intellects.” An impish child imitates him by covering his face with a black handkerchief, “thereby so affrighting his playmates that the panic seized himself, and he well-nigh lost his wits by his own waggery.” Like the impish child, when Hooper looks in a mirror he scares himself: the veil “involved his own spirit in the horror” and he runs outside “into the darkness. For the Earth, too, had on her Black Veil.” Ultimate truth is beyond our seeing, but we should feel it in our hearts. The objective Elizabeth wonders if the veil is not “a symptom of mental disease.”

Hooper’s smiles are a motif expressing spiritual pride, comparable to that of Cotton Mather in his diaries, feeling superior while debasing himself because he, the minister, is groveling lower than any. He feels holier than thou, yet he is the opposite of Christ. In “The Gentle Boy,” Hawthorne saw a sadistic

aspect to Calvinism. In this story, he suggests a masochistic aspect: “Mr. Hooper smiled to think that only a material emblem had separated him from happiness.”

Just as “the scarlet letter had not done its office,” Hooper’s veil does not accomplish any good purpose. When he is dying, a fellow minister in attendance thinks the veil is intended to symbolize some “horrible crime.” Ironically, while innocent of any illegality, Hooper has committed a horrible crime against himself, and against Elizabeth of course. By now his black veil shows forth “his inmost heart.” Once a decent man, by living a Calvinist life he has conformed to the doctrine of total depravity: “I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a Black Veil!” That is because he is wearing one. He sees even the angel Elizabeth, his nurse, still loyal and devoted after all these gloomy years, as depraved. “Then deem me a monster,” he says, before dying with a smile on his lips--and we do. We do.

The black veil metaphor applies to ideologies besides Calvinism. For example, Elizabeth is like a literary New Critic. Objective literary analysis, called “New Criticism,” was originated by Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot in the early 20th century. After the 1960s objective analysis was scorned by academic radicals who have “blackened” works of literature to promote their leftwing politics and their own “identities.” They squint at literature through veils called Marxism, Feminism, Queer Studies, Black Studies, and so on. Like Parson Hooper, they are proud, self-righteous, believe in total depravity and play the role of martyrs. But whereas Hooper believed everyone is depraved, the radicals depict anyone who disagrees with them as depraved and themselves as saints.

Michael Hollister (2015)