

## THE MULTIPLE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE VEIL IN HAWTHORNE'S "THE MINISTER'S BLACK VEIL".

Élida de Oliveira Barros Pessoa

Centro Federal de Educação Tecnológica da Paraíba – CEFET-PB

Michael Harold Smith

Universidade Federal da Paraíba

### Abstract

*The aim of this paper is an attempt to portray the multiple significance of the veil in Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil". As the idea conveyed by the veil is related to some elements in Puritanism, summarized accounts on Hawthorne's Puritan antecedents, on himself and on Puritanism as well will be pointed out in order to make it easier for the reader to understand the proposal of this work. Finally, some examples will be given from Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil" to illustrate what is being commented upon throughout the paper.*

Key-words: Hawthorne. Veil. The Minister's Black Veil.

### 1. A BRIEF ACCOUNT ON HAWTHORNE'S PURITAN ANTECEDENTS

It is known that the first Hathorne arrived in Naumkeag (Later Salem) between 1630 and 1633. He, William Hathorne (1607-81), Nathaniel's great-great-grandfather, was brought up as an Anglican. He was converted to Puritanism at the age of 21. By the Spring of 1634, he was seen as a colonist of exceptional worth in Dorchester. At the end of 1636, he moved to Salem. Day by day he exercised an increasing authority over the inhabitants of the colony, and those who did not follow the Puritan rules were doomed to suffer strict punishments commanded by him. All those people who committed any kind of irregularity according to a Puritan vision of life were put on trial.

William Hathorne's fourth son, John Hathorne (1641-1717), was also a magistrate and was as fanatical as his father was, but he did not persecute the Quakers. As he specialized in witches, he was chosen to serve as one of the advisors of the new governor of Massachusetts, Sir William Phipps, and his main duty was concerning the charge of witchcraft. This was Hawthorne's great-great-grandfather.

### 2. HAWTHORNE'S VIEW OF PURITANISM

Puritanism was a religious movement which started in the 1500's in England and sought to purify the established Anglican Church. The Puritans were essentially Calvinists in their doctrine. Some doctrines, such as Original Sin, Innate Depravity, Predestination, and Election, were unquestionable for the Puritans. They found all the answers they needed for their religious life and practice in the Bible, so the study of it was given emphasis, and the moment to learn God's word was during the occasion of the sermon.

Puritans suffered mutilation and imprisonment because they did not have faith in relation to the Official Church of England, and they disagreed with the way of worshipping.

Under such circumstances, America appeared, for Puritans, as the promised land, where they could practice and preach their religion with full liberty.

For the Puritans, man since the fall of Adam was, by nature, corrupt and depraved because sin was present in every man from birth, that is, the idea of evil was seen as something innate from which only through God's mercy and goodness could man be free. Then, we can state that the Puritan system of morality was very strict.

Hawthorne was a writer of the nineteenth century, and at that time there was a new reality that did not fit him because his reality was moral, based upon the Calvinistic sense of Original Sin and Innate Depravity, perhaps because he was still linked to his ancestors. As a moralist, Hawthorne was interested in what happened in the minds and hearts of men and women when they knew they had done wrong.

This is to some extent what he presents in "The Minister's Black Veil" with the story presented through the parishioners' different reactions when Mr. Hooper appears as a transgressor of the code of society, that is, wearing a black veil.

### 3. THE PLOT OF "THE MINISTER'S BLACK VEIL"

The story tells us about a New England clergyman called Mr. Hooper, who startles his congregation one Sunday morning by appearing at the meeting-house with a black crepe veil covering his face:

... There was but one thing remarkable in his appearance. Swathed about his forehead, and hanging down over his face, so low as to be shaken by his breath, Mr. Hooper had on a black veil. On a nearer view it seemed to consist of two folds of crape, which entirely concealed his features, except the mouth and chin, but probably did not intercept his sight, further than to give a darkened aspect to all living and inanimate things. (Hawthorne, 1976, p. 300)

He wears it throughout his lifetime, despite many pleas to cast it off.

### 4. THE SYMBOLISM OF THE VEIL

Cirlot, in his Dictionary of symbols, mentions that Guénon draws attention to the double meaning of the verb "to reveal" ("re-veil") which may mean either to pull back the veil or to cover again with a veil and adds that "the veil signifies the concealment of certain aspects of truth or of the deity".

Talking about the colors of a veil, the white one is very much known as the one brides wear during the wedding ceremony, and it symbolizes purity, happiness, peace, that is, it symbolizes everything that is good. When referring to the black one, it is known that in early times, women used it during funerals. The color black itself symbolizes death, danger, that is, it is related to bad happenings. Perhaps this is the reason why the parishioners became so amazed when they saw the minister, Mr. Hooper, wearing a black veil:

*"I can't really feel as if good Mr. Hooper's face was behind that piece of crape," said the sexton.*

*"I don't like it", muttered an old woman, as she hobbled into the meeting-house. "He has changed himself into something awful, only by hiding his face".*



*"Our parson has gone mad!" cried Goodman Gray, following him across the threshold.*

*"A rumor of some unaccountable phenomenon had preceded Mr. Hooper into the meeting-house, and set all the congregation astir..." (Hawthorne, 1976, p. 300)*

It was really strange to see a man wearing a veil and a black one like that. Perhaps because this color expresses obscurity and impurity, the parishioners associated the wearing of the veil with a supposed sin or with something wrong that the Minister had done and for which he was punishing himself. This veil can be compared to curtains which at the same time hide and reveal something and can be understood as referring to his sinfulness and consequently his common humanity: "But that piece of crape, to their (the parishioners') imagination, seemed to hang down before his heart, the symbol of a fearful secret between him and them." (Hawthorne, 1976, p. 306)

There are some hints which seem to show that Mr. Hooper was punishing himself because after wearing a black veil he became feared by the people, separated from the world, a melancholic and a gloomy man:

*... At that instant, catching a glimpse of his figure in the looking glass, the black veil involved his own spirit in the horror with which it overwhelmed all others. His frame shuddered- his lips grew white-he spilt the untasted wine upon the carpet- and rushed forth into the darkness... (Hawthorne, 1976. P. 305)*

He could not even look at himself in the mirror: "... In truth, his own antipathy to the veil was known to be so great that he never willingly passed before a mirror, nor stooped to drink at a still fountain, lest, in its peaceful bosom, he should be affrighted by himself." (Hawthorne, 1976, p. 309)

He even alludes to the possibility of a secret sin: "If I hide my face of sorrow, there is cause enough" he merely replied. "and if I cover it for secret sin, What mortal might not do the same?" (Hawthorne, 1976, p. 307-308) He put on a veil also to represent the spiritual fact that all men wear veils in their lifetime, and he tried to show how individuals may achieve salvation through Christ.

## 5. Sin in "The Minister's Black Veil"

For Puritans, this question of sin began from the history of the Bible, when Eve, the female figure, invited Adam to taste the apple. So, for being responsible for Adam's fall, she became a symbol of sin, of temptation and thus responsible for Original Sin. When expelled from Paradise, Adam and Eve were dressed in black which symbolized the color of condemnation and resignation to the vanity of this world.

In "The Minister's Black Veil", we have the figure of Elizabeth who is engaged to Mr. Hooper and who asks him to cast aside the veil, which he refuses to do: "... even you, Elizabeth, can never come behind it" (Hawthorne, 1976, p. 307) When she seems to be lost in thought, the author says: "... what new methods might be tried to withdraw her lover

from so dark a fantasy..." (Hawthorne, 1976, p.308) Finally, when she turns to leave the room, he begs for her companionship:

*...He rushed forward and caught her arm.*

*"Have patience with me, Elizabeth!" cried he passionately. "Do not desert me, though this veil must be between us here on earth. Be mine, and hereafter there shall be no veil over my face, no darkness between our souls! It is but a mortal veil - it is not for eternity! Oh! You know not how lonely I am, and how frightened to be alone behind my black veil. Do not leave me in this miserable obscurity for ever!" (Hawthorne, 1976. P. 308)*

Having in mind the Original Sin as a black spot that all humanity inherited from Adam's fall and from which no man could ever be free by his own powers, but only through God's mercy and goodness, man was thought to be sinful in all aspects of his being. So, this may be the reason why Mr. Hooper was seen as a sinful man since he appeared wearing a black veil. But he was not the only one. Even the planet Earth was said to wear a veil: "...For the Earth, too, had on her Black Veil. (Hawthorne, 1976, p. 305)

Earth here symbolizes the world, society, the people. It also symbolizes women because it is called her. This her reminds us of Eve from the Bible who committed the Original Sin. So the Earth has got "her" sins too because sin is present everywhere and principally in everybody's mind.

## 6. Conclusion

It is essential to know that although Hawthorne wrote about the Puritans' morality, he criticized the Puritan society that interfered too much in a person's way of living. As he was interested in what happened in the minds and hearts of people when they knew they had done something wrong, he expressed this feeling through the different reactions of the parishioners towards Mr. Hooper's black veil which has different meanings. The duality between black and white can be compared to day and night, knowledge and ignorance, yin and yang, but the color black is frequently related to negative aspects principally in an oppressive way. It indicates melancholy, pessimism, affliction or unhappiness. All of these feelings are expressed throughout the short story.

Veils hide mysteries. The crape hiding Mr. Hooper's eyes from the world shocked people. It also presented a world through a darkened aspect of his eyes. As the Original Sin happened when a man decided not to accept the divine order, Mr. Hooper was thought to have done something wrong when he appeared wearing a black veil, which was uncommon for a man and principally for the one who gave sermons to sinners. The community did not understand that decision. Consequently, they complained a lot.

Mr. Hooper died full of sorrows, griefs and presentiments. He felt himself completely misunderstood by his parishioners, but did not reveal the real reason why he decided to wear that veil: whether to call the people's attention not to judge anyone by his or her appearance or to show that he was a sinner like any human being on earth.



## 7. Bibliography

- [01] CHEVALIER, Jean; GHEERBRANT, Alain. **Dicionário de símbolos.** (mitos, sonhos, costumes, gestos, formas, figuras, cores, números). 2. ed., Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1989.
- [02] CIRLOT, J. E. **A dictionary of symbols.** 2 nd ed. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.
- [03] CROWLEY, J. Donald. **Profiles in literature: Nathaniel Hawthorne.** London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971.
- [04] HAWTHORNE, Nathaniel. **The scarlet letter and selected tales.** England: Penguin Books, 1976.
- [05] MARTIN, Terence. **Nathaniel Hawthorne.** New Haven: College & University Press, 1965.
- [06] SPILLER, Robert E. **The cycle of American Literature.** New York: The Free Press, 1967.