

The symbolical transition of the veil in “The Minister’s Black Veil”

Takeo Togashi

1. Introduction

When one is asked about Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-64), who is one of the greatest 19th century novelists in America, one associates him with his masterpiece, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). In fact, as soon as he published it, not only did it greatly make his name but also created a big sensation in American society due to the fact that the theme ‘adultery’ was still rather taboo in an age of lingering Puritanism. He submitted the short story “Fanshawe” in 1828, but his debut as a writer began inauspiciously due to the withdrawal of the work. Since that setback, however, he produced a great number of short stories, one of them being “The Minister’s Black Veil: A Parable” (1836).

Whilst Nathaniel Hawthorne is well known as what is referred to as ‘a romance writer’, as represented in *The Scarlet Letter*, it seems that his short stories do not focus on the theme of ‘romance’ very much. Conversely, his works generally assume a kind of gloomy mood; this being particularly the case in “The Minister’s Black Veil”, for example.

From the beginning of the story to its conclusion one is haunted by something foreboding. This sense of foreboding can be attributed to the black veil which Mr. Hooper wears; it appears 'grotesque' to one's eyes, whilst the meaning and the function of it are vague. To overcome an ambiguous, dreadful uneasiness that one has, it is essential to focus on the veil and clarify the importance and the role of it, which also enables us to deepen our understanding of the story. My greatest concern here is, however, another thing: the symbolical transition of the veil. Therefore, by making a careful comparison between "The Minister's Black Veil" and Hawthorne's other works and, moreover, by revealing the substance of the veil in its entirety I would like to discuss how the veil as a symbol of secret sin evolves and changes itself as the story proceeds, whilst also striving to make clear the intent behind the story.

2. The influence of Hawthorne's ancestors in his works

An underlying aspect of Hawthorne's work is the sense of discomfort manifested towards the uncomfortable memory of two of his ancestors. One of his ancestors was William Hathorne, who arrived at Massachusetts with a party headed by John Winthrop from England. There he persecuted Quakers severely for their religion, popularizing Puritanism. The other ancestor was William's son John, who was among the judges of a witch trial in Salem, and passed the death sentence on more than one hundred women. Around two centuries later, Hawthorne discovered this rather disconcerting fact whilst studying American history in order to become a writer. This realization took place shortly after Hawthorne graduated from Bowdoin University in 1825.¹ The discovery of the transgressions of his ancestors casts a shadow over Hawthorne. However, at the same time, they had a remarkable effect on his writings insofar as they helped him to

establish and develop the subject of sin through his works. Taking a general view of the works of Hawthorne, one notices that they contain some key words, such as faith, sin, and community. By judging that it contains all these factors, it can be said that “The Minister’s Black Veil” is, indeed, typical of Hawthorne’s literary oeuvre.

“The Minister’s Black Veil” begins with the scene of Mr. Hooper’s appearance. One day in the morning, Mr. Hooper, who is a young and able clergyman in the community, appears in the meeting-house to preach a sermon for his parishioners. At this time, however, he suddenly appears transformed as another person altogether to their eyes. The remarkable passage is as follows;

Mr. Hooper, a gentlemanly person of about thirty, though still a bachelor, was dressed with due clerical neatness, as if a careful wife had starched his band, and brushed the weekly dust from his Sunday’s garb. 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, farther than to give a darkened aspect to all living and inanimate things. (38)²

When one starts to read the story, what one is both drawn to and repulsed by is the black veil. As the narrator describes, Mr. Hooper is, as it were, the model of a clergyman. Nevertheless, he appears in front of the parishioners without any advance warning, with the veil hanging down over his face. The veil apparently looks so bizarre, or grotesque that it stands to reason that they feel it unnatural for a clergyman like Mr.

Hooper to wear. This then causes one to question what could have happened to the minister to prompt the wearing of such a thing. In answering this question, one needs to analyze what Hawthorne really has in mind here. Before so doing, however, it is necessary to compare "The Minister's Black Veil" with some other works of Hawthorne to gain some deeper insight into this problem.

At the first sight of the black veil, one of the parishioners instinctively murmurs that 'Our parson has gone mad' (38). Apart from whether this fact is true or not, a reader of Hawthorne has witnessed a similar scene in "Young Goodman Brown" (1835). The basis of the motif of the story is the belief in the existence of witches in Salem. The main character Goodman Brown, although newly married, is seduced and seized with a strong lust, so that he enters into the forest at sunset to take part in the Witches' Sabbath, leaving his wife Faith alone. On the way, the pious man repeatedly wonders if he must go farther into the forest or turn back. But then, a pink ribbon, with which his wife always ties up her hair, suddenly flutters down to him. We cannot immediately judge whether or not the ribbon is just the same as Faith's, but he cries at the sight of it "My Faith has gone!" (83)³ Saying so, he falls into a state of madness, or 'a devilment'. Frederick Crews points out the parallelism between Mr. Hooper and Goodman Brown⁴, but one must not jump to conclusions without much thought. Attempting to answer whether Mr. Hooper has really gone mad is the biggest problem. To answer this question, I would like to focus on the veil and to thus get to the core of the problem in the next chapter.

3. Beneath the surface of the veil

"The Minister's Black Veil" is set in Milford, Massachusetts around

the middle of the seventeenth century. In those days, the influence of Puritanism remained deeply-rooted as compared with the present. Hawthorne often criticized the Puritan humanity, as Puritans were, on the whole, selfish, exclusive, and idealistic, and moreover ‘narrow-minded’ in the extreme. One has a glimpse of those aspects everywhere in the story, but they badly affect one’s point of view regarding the veil, which leads to an indifferent attitude for Mr. Hooper.

“The Minister’s Black Veil” has a lot in common with *The Scarlet Letter* with regard to its structure and plot, and it has often been said that Mr. Hooper’s counterpart is Arthur Dimmesdale, as they show some strong similarities. For example, both are clergymen, unmarried (although Mr. Hooper has a fiancée, unlike Dimmesdale), and, above all, commit secret sin that cannot be expressly revealed (although Dimmesdale, just before his passing, finally confessed it to the parishioners in front of them, unlike Mr. Hooper). One therefore cannot put aside these significant common points. After putting on the veil, Mr. Hooper changes into a man of awful power and, more importantly, comes to have the ability to sympathize with all ‘dark affections’.⁵ This is described in detail in the following passage.

Among all its bad influences, the black veil had the one desirable effect, of making its wearer a very efficient clergyman. By the aid of his mysterious emblem—for there was no other apparent cause—He became a man of awful power, over souls that were in agony for sin. His converts always regarded him with a dread peculiar to themselves, affirming, though but figuratively, that, before he brought them to celestial light, they had been with him behind the black veil. Its gloom, indeed, enabled him to sympathize with all dark affections. (49)

The underlying truth behind the veil is the matter of 'secret sin' which is illustrated by Mr. Hooper in the wearing of it. However, whilst the symbolism of the veil is connected to the notion of 'secret sin', the specific nature of the sin is not expressly revealed in the text by Hawthorne. In addition, just as the details of the sin are not described at all in *The Scarlet Letter*⁶, it is not clear throughout the story that he is guilty of any particular secret sin. However, the nature of sin is subtly intimated in one passage of the text. After Mr. Hooper finished the first sermon, an afternoon funeral service was held for a young lady. According to a 'superstitious' woman who attended the service, and was the only witness of the incident, Mr. Hooper and the maiden's spirit were seen walking hand in hand at that time. This testimony hints at the grave possibility that they had a sexual relationship with each other. As a minister, it is forbidden for Mr. Hooper to have such improper relations with his parishioners, and he pays a consequential price for this: he is forced to wear the black veil and to face up to the world through it. Thus, he is mentally and physically isolated from the world. However, this also bestows him with additional abilities and sympathies, and enables him to sympathize with all dark affections. Moreover, this allows him to grasp a fundamental truth of the human condition: all mortal men wear the veil without exception. Whilst these ideas are diametrically opposed, this is symptomatic of Hawthorne's style. It may be true that Mr. Hooper had an unpardonable sin, but it is also the truth that if he had not committed it, he would not have attained that state of mind. As Frederick Crews notes, "The Minister's Black Veil" distinguishes between the conscious and unconscious thoughts within each individual⁷, and this necessitates considering the matter of consciousness further. Therefore, I would like to probe more deeply into the matter, and, moreover, to consider the

symbolical transition of the veil in the next chapter.

4. The symbolical transition of the veil

Whilst Hawthorne employs the letter ‘A’ in *The Scarlet Letter* to symbolize adultery, the veil is also utilized as a significant symbol in ‘The Minister’s Black Veil’. This is in turn combined with another symbol, being the minister’s smile. Thus, before assessing the veil, I would firstly like to analyze the use of the minister’s smile. One can see a large variety of smiles described during the story, and it therefore appears to one as somewhat ambiguous.⁸ It is, for example, varyingly depicted as ‘a sad smile’ (41), ‘a sympathetic smile’ (43), and ‘a melancholy smile’ (45), but there is one which is completely different in nuance. It is a ‘simple’ smile which is not modified by any words, and one can see this in the parting scene between Mr. Hooper and his fiancée Elizabeth. Among all the people in the community, Elizabeth is one person who is not afraid of the veil. The following day after his putting on the veil, she asks him to unveil it from his face on behalf of the community. In spite of her urgent request, however, he does not change his mind and firmly refuses it. After a great deal of argument, she finally runs out of patience and bids farewell to him. Her words greatly disappoint him, but one can infer from the text that his grief is only temporary in that he ‘smiles to think that only material emblem separates him from happiness’ (47), and even from Elizabeth. In short, one finds the former smile to resemble a kind of ‘compassion’ by the adjectives employed such as ‘sad’, ‘sympathetic’, and ‘melancholy’. Conversely, one judges from the passage ‘And do you feel it then at last?’ that the latter smile denotes resignation, or acceptance. It seems that he has prepared himself for her decision, or, as Frederick Crews points out, he may actually feel relieved to hear her decision

because he is afraid of normal adult love.⁹ Anyway, through the multiple readings and interpretations of Mr. Hooper's smile one can see the Hawthornian 'ambiguity' here.

The ambiguity in Hawthorne's texts can be more deeply penetrated by examining the symbolism employed in the use of the veil. As the story progresses, the veil as depicted as a symbol of secret sin gradually but drastically changes from an object of terror to homage for Mr. Hooper. However, of more importance is how and why this transformation takes place. At the first sight of the black veil, all the people in the community feel a sense of sheer terror of it. The narrator describes their first impression of it with the word 'wonder-stuck' (38). The veil represented 'that mysterious emblem (39)', 'the symbol of a fearful secret' (45), and 'this dismal shade' (46), and it makes a gloomy impression on them. It is, however, a simple piece of crape at the same time: it is 'a type and a symbol' (46) which Mr. Hooper is bound to wear throughout the course the rest of his life.

The advent of the veil not only makes his parishioners feel fearful but also brings their narrow-mindedness to light. At first, they cannot face seeing the veil, and try to keep away from Mr. Hooper as much as possible. Although they should turn their eyes more to themselves, they completely shift all sense of blame to him without regard to themselves, and it represents the fatal flaw of humanity. It depends on one's mind whether one looks on the veil as a simple crape or a black veil. To wipe their uneasiness away, the townspeople try to unveil the veil from his face in one way or another. Whilst these attempts include a deputation of the church and the promptings of his fiancée Elizabeth, however, nobody succeed in convincing him to unveil his face. In the face of his stubborn refusal, his persuaders have no choice but to give up. However, as time

goes by, the veil has gradually changes as follows;

In this manner, Mr. Hooper spent a long life, irreproachable in outward act, yet shrouded in dismal suspicions; kind and loving, though unloved, and dimly feared; a man apart from men, shunned in their hearth and joy, but ever summoned to their aid in mortal anguish. As years wore on, shedding their snows above his sable veil, he acquired a name throughout the New-England churches, and they called him Father Hooper. Nearly all his parishioners, who were of mature age when he was settled, had been bore away by many a funeral: he had one congregation in the church, and a more crowded one in the church-yard; and having wrought so late into the evening, and done his work so well, it was now good Father Hooper's turn to rest. (49-50)

Just the same as the letter 'A' changes from adultery into 'Able', the veil symbolically changed itself.¹⁰ The symbolical transition, which is a good example of what one might call 'multiple choice', is another literary characteristic of Hawthorne's. When one considers the letter 'A' and the veil, one notices that there is a slight difference between them; that is, the former is clear about the meaning from the beginning, and on the contrary, the latter is obscure about it until the conclusion. In addition, by comparison with the letter 'A', the veil has a more didactic implication. The letter 'A' (and Pearl, who is the embodiment of her sin,) makes Hester strengthen a sense of guilt, makes her mature her character, and finally makes the people of her community change their understanding of the letter 'A' through her devotion to the community, and their resulting respect for her. Conversely, the veil strengthens one's awareness of the fact that we all put on the veil—whether it is visible or not, whether we are conscious of it or not, and whether we admit ourselves to wear it or

not. Thus, in spite of his parishioner's strong distrust of him, Mr. Hooper is consistent in his behavior towards them: honesty, sincerity, and self-sacrifice. It is through this association of the veil with these values that his parishioners change their point of view regarding the veil over the course of time.

5. Conclusion

As this paper has argued, the veil plays a key role in the story. At first, it is only a simple crape, but it functions as a mirror which reflects a general state of mind. Therefore, at the first glimpse of the veil, his parishioners feel afraid of it. However, as times passes they gradually change their consciousness of the veil from an object of terror to that of a symbol of reverence for Mr. Hooper. We can see the effect of their change of their mind in the last scene.

At about time when his last hour will come, there is only one parishioner left there who can remember the first time Mr. Hooper wore the veil. Before his passing, another clergyman entreats him to unveil the veil from his face. In spite of his desperate persuasion, Mr. Hooper rejects the request and says to him and the parishioners, "Tremble also at each other....lo! on every visage a Black Veil!" (52). It is evident in the subsequent behavior of his parishioners that his wish is firmly respected. Whilst it is doubtful whether or not they exactly understand what he really means, the younger generation follows his will and bears his corpse to the grave without unveiling it from his face. Thus, the veil functions well as a symbol of sin and sublimates in a similar fashion to the letter 'A'. Through the development of the veil, Hawthorne raises to us an understanding of a universal proposition: all men put on a veil that transcends time and space. That is Hawthorne's central message, and the

primary function of the veil. In the face of this awareness, one should sincerely face it, and deeply keep it in mind. If so, like Mr. Hooper, one will be able to have the ability to sympathize with all dark affections.

Notes

- 1 . After he discovered this historical fact about his ancestors, Hawthorne was afraid of its possible implications for him. Therefore, he changed his surname from Hathorne to the present Hawthorne, adding a letter 'W' in order to sever ties with his ancestors, so that his family might not be attacked by the neighborhood.
- 2 . Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Twice-Told Tales*, 1974.
- 3 . The passage is one of the central points in "Young Goodman Brown". The word 'Faith' is a double entendre, and one means the name of Goodman Brown's wife, whilst the other means 'belief'.
- 4 . Frederick Crews, *The Sins of the Fathers*, 1966.
- 5 . Hawthorne describes this in *The Scarlet Letter* as follows; 'But this very burden it was, that gave him [Arthur Dimmesdale] sympathies so intimate with the sinful brotherhood of mankind; so that his heart vibrated in unison with theirs, and received their pain into itself, and sent its own throb of pain through a thousand other hearts, in gushes of sad, persuasive eloquence. Oftenest persuasive, but sometimes terrible!' (142)
- 6 . Both in "The Minister's Black Veil" and in *The Scarlet Letter*, the details of sin are not described at all. Taking it into consideration, Hawthorne's concern must lie not with sin itself but in how one expiates one's sin.
- 7 . Frederick Crews.

- 8 . I described the latter smile as resignation, or acceptance, but possibly it means a kind of relief. Frederick Crews described this in *The Sins of the Fathers* as follows; 'It is possible that Hooper, who like Goodman Brown is obliged to confront the sexual aspects of womanhood, shares Brown's fears, and has hit upon a means of forestalling their realization in marriage. His literal wearing of a veil, like Brown's figurative removal of it to leer at the horrid sexuality underneath, acts as a defense against normal adult love.' (109)
- 9 . Dan McCall, *Citizens of Somewhere Else*, 1999.
10. Hawthorne describes this in *The Scarlet Letter* as follows; Hester Prynne did not now occupy precisely the same position in which we beheld her during the earlier periods of her ignominy. Years had come, and gone. Pearl was now seven years old. Her mother, with the scarlet letter on her breast, glittering in its fantastic embroidery, had long been a familiar object to the townspeople Her breast, with its badge of shame, was but the softer pillow for the head that needed one. She was self-ordained a Sister of Mercy; or, we may rather say, the world's heavy hand had so ordained her, when neither the world nor she looked forward to this result. The letter was the symbol of her calling. Such helpfulness was found in her,—so much power to do, and power to sympathize,—that many people refused to interpret the scarlet letter A by its original signification. They said that it meant Able; So strong was Hester Prynne, with a woman's strength.' (160-161)

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