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Coral Serrano

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I Know You Are, but What Am I?

Hawthorne’s Projection through Mr. Hooper

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s short story “The Minister’s Black Veil” has been analyzed from various perspectives, but thus far in the published literature, very few have examined this work using the psychoanalytic criticism. It is even more rare to find research over “The Minister’s Black Veil” addressing the use of psychological projection. Psychological projection is a defense mechanism defined by the American Psychological Association as when an individual “attributes [one’s] own unacceptable feelings, impulses, or thoughts to another individual or object” (qtd. in Barlow and Durand 18). Through the character of Mr. Hooper in “The Minister’s Black Veil,” Hawthorne projects his difficulties publicly expressing his criticism and opinion of religion because of the overshadowing actions of his forefathers. Evidence of this is laced within the short story: references to mental illness, the connotations of adjectives and other words used in descriptions, and career and life similarities between Hawthorne and Mr. Hooper. Critics and reviews of “The Minister’s Black Veil” additionally supports these ideas by citing personal accounts in Hawthorne’s life.

More specifically, William Freedman, has also questioned the “autobiographical import” (354) Hawthorne may have utilized in writing “The Minister’s Black Veil.” Freedman goes so far as to draw comparisons between Hawthorne and Hooper since “both deliver texts whose subject is the veil “asserting that this causes them to become a “removed and judging observer
who felt he could penetrate the mystery of other souls while remaining invisible” (359). This sense of detachment is effective in conveying a resonating message to a wide audience. However, Freedman believes that this comes with the consequence of his artistic decline (360). This leads one to question why Hawthorne would feel the need to remain detached as an author, despite knowing that publicity is vital to his career.

By taking this into consideration, one must also consider if this is a necessary ploy in writing about a stable factor in many of Hawthorne’s works: religion. The “rigorous enforcement of Puritan standards” by his ancestors William and John Hathorne has been cited to be a heavy influence on his works in addition to acting as “a burden, … weighing heavily on him” (Idol 91). Throughout his life, Hawthorne had difficulty identifying with specific denominations and explicitly expressing his beliefs with others, including his immediate family (Reynolds 2-3). It seems particularly ironic that Hawthorne would write about religion so frequently.

It strongly indicates that one - arguably the primary - motivation for Hawthorne’s religious writings was to express himself freely. It is not farfetched to undoubtedly conclude that there was judgment and preconceived notions imposed upon him because of his ancestral background. The idea of Hawthorne practicing this form of self-care would not be particularly unusual since he created his work during “an increasingly secular culture” (Goldman 27). Striking similarities between “descriptions of mental illness and Hawthorne’s descriptions of his conscience-stricken characters …” (Goldman 28) strongly suggests that Hawthorne was interested in mental processes. The narrator in “The Minister’s Black Veil” provides many examples of this.
The first example derives from Elizabeth as she questions Mr. Hooper’s sanity while he is wearing the black veil and wonders if it is “perhaps a symptom of mental disease” (Hawthorne 196). It is additionally mentioned by the narrator in detailing Mr. Hooper’s avoidance of his reflection that results in the community assuming that his “conscience tortured him” (Hawthorne 196). A mark of insanity is additionally suggested when Mr. Hooper is depicted as smiling as he thinks about the veil tearing him apart from his chance of experiencing joy (Hawthorne 195).

From the “The Minister’s Black Veil,” the opening scene is additionally laced with descriptions that supplement the overarching theory of Hawthorne’s projected religious attitudes. Introductions to the members of Mr. Hooper’s congregation all provide positive descriptions or references to their attire. The children, while moving along joyfully, are described as also being in “conscious dignity of their Sunday clothes,” and the single church going men are described as “spruce bachelors” (Hawthorne 189). Hawthorne is revealing that children, who are associated with untainted innocence determined by how they are seen with “bright faces,” are made to be keenly aware of the finery attached to the church. The unmarried men of the congregation are more concerned with attracting the eyes of the attending young, single ladies.

These descriptions consequently provide readers with a bright, materialistic opinion that the congregation possesses between fine clothing and church. This viewpoint, along with the description of Mr. Hooper’s “clerical neatness,” contrasts with the gloomy presence of the black veil as Mr. Hooper enters the scene. The veil disrupts the pomp and circumstance of the Sabbath that Hawthorne establishes prior. The first member to overtly state her disdain for the veil - after the sexton - is an old woman, which strengthens Hawthorne’s covert assertion that this sense of materialism and judgement has been indoctrinated from an early age - with an emphasize on the earlier description of the children - and later reaching its full potential during old age.
After Hawthorne presents his first religious critique in “The Minister’s Black Veil” and introduces the namesake in the tale, the language of the story begins to draw even more emphasis on faces. The word face, or faces, appears 28 times throughout the story, and only three of those instances do not reference a concealed face: the opening description of the children’s faces, Elizabeth saying that she wants Mr. Hooper to look her in her face, and the description of Mr. Hooper’s dying face (German 43). The face, like clothing, is an aspect of one’s outward appearance. As someone that kept “his religion intensely private” (Reynolds 3), Hawthorne incorporates his own need for concealing aspects of his public face into the story through Mr. Hooper’s perseverance against the concern of the congregation. The reverend’s persistence and opinions of the congregation respectively parallel Hawthorne’s unyielding privacy and the inquisitive questioning of literary critics and the public.

The veil is also stated to have “concealed his features, except the mouth and chin …” (Hawthorne 189) which Freedman points out is the “speaking organ” (359). Emphasizing the mouth indicates that there is more importance in what Mr. Hooper is expressing compared to how he publicly presents himself. This again also applies to Hawthorne’s writing career since Mr. Hooper’s mouth, or message, is comparable to Hawthorne’s messages in his tales. A similar notion has been prompted by Freedman who “suggest[s] that ‘The Minister’s Black Veil—A Parable’ is itself the fictive equivalent of the minister's sermon,” citing similar reactions of the congregation and his readers at the use of concealment in Hawthorne’s and Hooper’s messages (358).

Then the narrator continues, “There was nothing terrible in what Mr. Hooper said … yet, with every tremor of his melancholy voice, the hearers quaked,” and the narrator states that the
veil is bringing about an “unsought pathos” (Hawthorne 191). Pathos is defined as a “an
expression or utterance that evokes sadness or sympathy, [especially] in a work of literature; a
description, passage, or scene of this nature” (“Pathos”). Hawthorne has evoked similar effects in
his audience by withholding information and heavy implications.

However, as the story progresses, Hawthorne continues to emphasize the actions of the
congregation, and in turn simultaneously and unconsciously addresses the mixed reactions of his
audience and critics, by showcasing the various responses, or lack thereof, to the pathos
associated with the black veil. After Mr. Hooper ends his service, members of the community
naturally fall into inquiring among one another or thinking to themselves. Yet what stands out
among this passage is the diction used for those not concerned with the veil: they “profaned the
Sabbath day with ostentatious laughter” (Hawthorne 191). This sentence is saying that the
Sabbath is “defiled, or treated with contempt” (“Profaned”) due to laughter “performed, … in a
manner calculated to attract attention or admiration” (“Ostentatious”). Here Hawthorne is
making another critique by unconsciously attributing negative opinions to those who are ignoring
or blind to the message Mr. Hooper, and Hawthorne, is attempting to convey.

Though inconsistencies with the narrator’s discussion of the congregation arises as the
story progresses. There are “good women gossiping” and children acting out the earlier events
(Hawthorne 193). The distinction between the negative, materialistic first impressions provided
by the narrator and the evolving positive associations towards the community is the growth of
curiosity. At first, the congregation is struck by the stark contrast of the black veil, and many
jumped to negative conclusions. Mr. Hooper storming out after the wedding could have caused
further outrage. The language instead suggests after this scene that it is a good thing that the
people are fostering discussion, and the children are successfully deciphering the implications on their own.

The similarities between Hawthorne and Mr. Hooper and between the congregation and his audience does not end there. The most jarring parallel between Hawthorne and Mr. Hooper is traced to the women in each of their lives. Everyone in the community is too afraid and intimidated to discuss the black veil with Mr. Hooper (Hawthorne 193). Larry J. Reynolds divulges that Hawthorne was “worried about … his perceived inability to share the … religious passions animating his friends and neighbors” (2). In “The Minister’s Black Veil,” Mr. Hooper’s “plighted wife” is the only one willing to directly address the minister about the veil (Hawthorne 194) while in real life Hawthorne’s wife was the only one between the two uninhibited in discussing her faith (Reynolds 3). Reversing each of the scenarios makes them so closely identical that it would be ludicrous to deem this occurrence as coincidental.

One of the most fascinating scenes in “The Minister’s Black Veil” that may not have such obvious parallels between Hawthorne’s life and Mr. Hooper is the funeral scene. What makes this event stand out even more is the wedding scene that is presented shortly after. It reads as if the Mr. Hooper and the deceased girl are experiencing their own union before he presides over the wedding. The funeral scene is rife with potential for varying interpretations, but continuing with the declarations central to this critique, this scene is also strongly suggestive towards Hawthorne’s relationship with his family history. The deceased girl represents the state of the forefathers. Mr. Hooper, and Hawthorne, can obviously not communicate with the deceased. However, the act of Mr. Hooper revealing his face to the girl signifies Hawthorne’s act of marrying his family history and unspoken beliefs through his fiction.
Because of the atmosphere of the period, along with his family history, this critique’s suggestion that Hawthorne is projecting himself onto Mr. Hooper is not unfounded according to the psychoanalytical theory of defense mechanisms. Defense mechanisms, like projection, were first theorized by Sigmund Freud as processes performed in the unconscious to keep unresolved feelings in check to ensure generally positive and productive mental functioning (Barlow and Durand 17). The evidence is largely based upon Hawthorne’s diction and the significant similarities between his role as an author with Hooper’s role as a minister. The likeness outlined and presented between the two are so remarkable that it is difficult to believe that it was an entirely conscious decision. This, of course, is not to doubt or discredit Hawthorne’s ability to purposefully utilize such devices in his fiction. Rather, the assertions that are exhibited in this critique is a testament to Hawthorne’s distinguished writing abilities. No matter what unconscious thoughts may plague an individual, the process of projection does not gift an author with the skills to craft their thoughts into being nearly undetectable for the average reader through fictitious speeches and scenarios.

Nonetheless, these suggestions may easily be refuted due to many of Freud’s unfounded theories, yet defense mechanisms and the unconscious have been respectively supported by his daughter Anna Freud and a multitude of other psychologists over time (Barlow and Durand 17). While projection is hailed as an unconscious process, it does not mean that an individual cannot be cognizant of the mechanism after the fact. Support for this is riddled throughout “The Minister’s Black Veil.”

The first hint of Hawthorne’s acknowledgement of man’s internal battles comes from a lady after the first time seeing the black veil on Mr. Hooper’s face. She says to her husband, “I
wonder he is not afraid to be alone with himself,” and he replies, “Men sometimes are so” (Hawthorne 191). To be alone with oneself is to be plagued only by one’s thoughts. This idea is carried over during the wedding after Hooper sees “a glimpse of his figure in the looking glass,” flees the scene, and the narrator concludes the passage with “For the Earth, too, had on her Black Veil” (Hawthorne 193). Personifying the earth nudges the reader into identifying the metaphor applied. The earth represents humanity, and upon finally seeing himself in the same fashion the community sees him, Mr. Hooper is aware that the sight of the veil upon his face makes it more apparent to his congregation that they, too, are undoubtedly concealing something. Hawthorne is revealing his personal conclusion that in some instances, the biggest sin of all is withholding the truth.

The ending death scene also explains this idea through Mr. Hooper’s last words. Mr. Hooper’s speech ends and begins with the two most telling statements. “Tremble also at each other! … I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a Black Veil” (Hawthorne 198)! Literally speaking, this is true. Mr. Hooper sees the black veil upon everything he gazes because the black veil remains physically in front of his eyes while on his deathbed. However, if one refers to Mr. Hooper’s earlier reaction upon seeing his reflection and the conversation he had with Elizabeth, it is evident that what Mr. Hooper is expressing is that the veil served the purpose of making everyone recognize that “like most other mortals, …” (Hawthorne 196) we are all inevitably concealing something.

Before Mr. Hooper approaches his end, the narrator lists many of the effects that it had on Mr. Hooper’s life in what Freedman would describe as the “price to be paid for the artist’s mission” (359). Mr. Hooper is revered as “a man apart from men …” that was “separated … from cheerful brotherhood and woman’s love” (Hawthorne 197). The veil set him apart from
other ministers, which is evident by his slight surge in popularity and his improved sermon effectiveness (Hawthorne 196). People are captivated by mystery, and Hawthorne, again, was no stranger in utilizing this technique.

Hawthorne’s metaphorical veil was the concealment of his religious beliefs, and it allowed him to similarly separate himself as an author. His own rise in popularity is evident by the consistent use of his literature in classrooms across the nation. It is arguable that literature like “Minister’s Black Veil” stands the test time of time because of its ability to relate to people on a fundamental level. Psychologically projecting his feelings onto a character breathes life into characters like Mr. Hooper. This is so successful because defense mechanisms are a part of a larger universal truth: all individuals are plagued by something. Hawthorne, as an author, recognizes his personal demons and releases them through his fiction that others will consume and possibility utilize for dealing with their own feelings and questions of the world.
Works Cited


