Ironic Unity in Hawthorne's "The Minister'i

Black Veil"

E. EARLE STIBITZ

Southern Illinois University

D ECAUSE HAWTHORNE iS always very much the same and yet also

JD surprisingly varied, one way of understanding "The Minister's

Black Veil," as with any Hawthorne tale, is to read it not only as

the unique work of art that it is, but as a tale comparable to others

by Hawthorne, viewing it in the context of his essentially consistent

thought and art as a whole. Such a reading of "The Minister's,

Black Veil" yields an unambiguous meaning. Hawthorne, with

his usual assumption of the reality of personal evil, presents on one

level his fundamental belief in man's proneness to hide or rationalize

his most private thoughts or guilt. This is the "parable" (of the

subtitle) that the Reverend Mr. Hooper seeks to preach with his

wearing of the veil. On another level, Hawthorne reaffirms his

equally constant belief that man is often guilty of pridefully and

harmfully exalting one idea, frequently a valid truth in itself, to the

status of an absolute. This is the sin Hooper commits by his self-

righteous and self-deceptive insistence upon wearing the veil.

The second level grows out of the first and remains dependent

upon it, a structural pattern repeated in varying ways in each major

division of the story. Furthermore, this organic relationship of the

two levels is ironic. Hooper in his stubborn use of the veil parable

of one sin is unconsciously guilty of a greater one-that of egotisti-

cally warping the total meaning of life. This irony is compounded

in that Hooper's sin is a hidden one-hidden not only from his

fellows but from himself. He thus unintentionally dramatizes the

very sin of secrecy that he intentionally sets out to symbolize. The

central symbol of the veil keeps pace with this added irony: in ad-

dition to standing for man's concealment or hypocrisy and for

Hooper's own sin of pride with its isolating effects, it stands also for

the hidden quality of the second sin. All told, "The Minister's

Black Veil" is less ambiguous and more unified because it is more

ironic than has usually been recognized.

Ironic Unity in Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil" I83

The interpretations various critics have made of "The Minister's

Black Veil," taken as a whole, offer three basic points of view.

First is the interpretation that the veil indicates some specific crime

by Mr. Hooper. This is Poe's view and is one concurred in by

Leland Schubert and in part by R. H. Fogle, who holds that a

crime by the minister remains an ambiguous possibility in the

story.' A second view, and the one most widely held, rejects the

idea of personal wrongdoing and sees the veil simply as a device

chosen by the minister to dramatize a common human failing:

man's refusal to show to anyone his inner heart with its likely load

of private guilt. Among the critics that have subscribed to this

view are Newton Arvin, Gilbert Voigt, Randall Stewart, and Mark

Van Doren.2 Some of the critics who hold generally to this view

concern themselves, in addition, with the effect of the veil upon

the minister.3 The third view holds that there is something funda-

mentally wrong in the minister's wearing of the veil. W. B. Stein

is a vigorous exponent of this view, arguing that the story is one

of a man of God turned antichrist, especially in Hooper's failure to

follow Paul's II Corinthians injunction to ministers to let love be

the principle of the relationship with their congregations.4 Mr.

Fogle, basically representative of this view, argues for two mean-

ings.5 There is the explicit meaning of the veil as a symbol of

man's secret sin, with Hooper as Everyman bearing his lonely fate

in order to demonstrate a tragic truth; and there is the implicit one

of human unbalance, with Hooper's action out of all proportion to

need or benefit. The story, says Mr. Fogle, remains ambiguous with

the discrepancies in meaning unresolved-albeit an effective lack of

resolution. A footnote to Mr. Fogle's argument is Mr. Walsh's

comment on the minister's dubious smile, a recurrent element in

1 Poe's review of Hawthorne's Twice-Told Tales, The Complete Works of Edgar

Allan Poe, ed. James A. Harrison (New York, I902), XI, iiI; Schubert, Hawthorne the

Artist: Fine Art Devices in Fiction (Chapel Hill, I944), p. I65; Fogle, Hawthorne's

Fiction: The Light and the Dark (Norman, Okla., I952), p. 36.

2 Arvin, Hawthorne (Boston, I929), p. 6o; Stewart, The American Notebooks by

Nathaniel Hawthorne (New Haven, I932), p. xlviii; Voigt, "The Meaning of 'The Minis-

ter's Black Veil,'" College English, XIII, 337-338 (March, I952); Van Doren, Nathaniel

Hawthorne (New York, I949), p. 87.

'For example, George Edward Woodberry, Nathaniel Hawthorne (New York, I902),

p. I45, and R. R. Male, Hawthorne's Tragic Vision (Austin, I957), p. I7, both of whom

note the effect of isolation coupled with that of a shared sense of sin.

'William Bysshe Stein, "The Parable of the Antichrist in 'The Minister's Black Veil,'"

American Literature, XXVII, 386-392 (Nov., 1955).

6Fogle, Hawthorne's Fiction, Chapter 3.

i84 American Literature

the story.0 The smile, always linked wit

faint, stands in opposition to the veil, a

and produces, says Mr. Walsh, a fundamental ambiguity. Both

Mr. Stewart and Mr. Van Doren, in general discussions of Haw-

thorne's tales, imply that Hooper is perhaps guilty of some spirit-

ually wrong attitude.7

That Hooper is in some way in the wrong seems an inescapable

conclusion from any careful reading of the story, but some qualifica-

tion is called for in each of the criticisms presenting this third view.

Mr. Stein's low estimate of Hooper must in general be accepted,

but because of Hawthorne's humanistic emphasis in this story as

well as elsewhere it is very difficult to see Hooper as an antichrist;

Mr. Stein makes Hawthorne too orthodox. And the argument for

the II Corinthians analogue remains speculative. What Mr. Fogle

says about the minister's unbalance is valid, but perhaps less so his

judgment about the meaning of the tale as a whole. Against his

claim of "discrepancies," of a basic ambiguity, must be asserted the

essential unity of the tale. The irony is strongly unifying, not only

in tone but also in meaning. Hawthorne here is his usually de-

tached self, but this artistic distance is not noncommittalism. In

general too much has been made of Hawthorne's ambiguity in

theme. Often he employs ambiguity in details and is ambiguous in

total philosophy revealed, but only very rarely does ambiguity quali-

fy a specific theme. Finally, Mr. Walsh's assumption, in his point of

ambiguity in the smile-light and veil-dark imagery, that Hawthorne

uses light to suggest something spiritually positive, is acceptable. But

most readers will not find the smile a true smile or the light clearly

light, as the faintness of the whole image makes evident; there is

a peculiarly mixed quality about the smile itself-indeed something

ironic.

The ironic meaning of "The Minister's Black Veil" is incorpo-

rated in and, in part, is created by its vertical or logical structure.

Out of the first level of meaning, the calling of attention to the

truth of man's proneness to the sin of concealment, rises the second

level, the minister's sin in making his veil demonstration all-im-

6 Thomas Walsh, "Hawthorne: Mr. Hooper's 'Affable Weakness,' " Modern Language

Notes, LXXIV, 404-406 (May, 1959).

'Stewart, Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Biography (New Haven, 1958), pp. 256-258; Van

Doren, The Best of Hawthorne (New York, I95), p. II. The present view of each of

these critics represents an alteration of that in an earlier analysis.

Ironic Unity in Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil" I85

portant; and this second level, with its irony, absorbs the first,

creating a dominant theme.8 An analysis that seeks to offer evi-

dence of this unity of form and meaning can best be presented by

following the horizontal or chronological structure of the tale-the

successive divisions of its narrative development. Narrative sequence

and timing are very important here and have usually been neglected

in the religious and philosophical discussions of the story. There

are five divisions: (i) the first appearance of Hooper wearing the

veil at the Sunday morning service; (2) Hooper's appearances at

the funeral and at the wedding on the same Sunday; (3) the un-

successful effort of a deputation from the congregation, and of

Elizabeth, his financee, to reason with him about the veil; (4) a

summary picture of Hooper's life from the time of these efforts to

his death; (5) the deathbed scene. In each of these divisions the

two levels of meaning are ironically united to produce a singleness

of theme.

At the beginning of the first division the minister is revealed as

experiencing a twofold alienation-from man and from God. Be-

cause of the strange veil the members of the congregation sense the

minister's distance, and he, in turn, sees them darkly. Also the

veil comes between him and God as he reads the Scripture and as

he prays. That Hooper's estrangement is the first point established

in the story suggests the central importance of the minister's second-

level sin. In Hawthorne, isolation of one kind or another is con-

sistently presented as the result of sin, and at times as being some-

thing very close to sin itself, a sin frequently linked with intellectual

or spiritual pride. Here Hooper's alienation argues that the wearing

of the veil is in some way profoundly wrong. And under this

second level of meaning lies the more briefly developed first level,

the veil as the symbol of hidden guilt, which is introduced by the

sermon with its condemnation of secret sin.

Not only are the two levels thus established but so also is their

ironic relationship. While the one sin is consciously preached

(through veil parable and sermon), the second sin is unconsciously

8Robert Stanton points out that Hawthorne in his four major romances used irony

almost exclusively to carry a share of the theme ("Dramatic Irony in Hawthorne's

Romances," Modern Language Notes, LXXI, 420, June, I956). See also Robert Allen

Durr, "Hawthorne's Ironic Mode," New England Quarterly, XXX, 486-495 (Dec., 1957);

Durr shows, though not in "The Minister's Black Veil," that Hawthorne is most ef-

fectively serious when most deliberately ironic.

i86 American Literature

embodied (through the minister's egotis

Emphasis is upon the minister's pride that leads him to make the

truth of man's hypocrisy the only Truth and brings him to force

his idea upon the consciousness and conscience of his congregation.

For example, though the sermon is supposedly praised as one of the

most powerful that the minister has preached, the minister himself

is described as creeping upon the members of the congregation be-

hind his awful veil and discovering the hoarded iniquity of each

one. In this, Hooper is close to Hawthorne's most damning sin-

"the human invasion of the sanctity of the human heart," to use

Dimmesdale's description of Chillingworth's sin. That Hooper is

acting professionally increases rather than lessens the sin, for as a

minister he should have been spiritually more sensitive. Indeed he

is like a number of other Hawthorne sinners who ". . . in their at-

tempt to assume the role of God ... naturally give their allegiance

to Satan, and subsequently find themselves contributing to that very

imperfection which they had originally wished to eliminate."9 The

irony here is heightened in that the spiritual wrongdoing pictured

by the minister in his sermon describes precisely what he is soon

guilty of-hiding his sin "from his nearest and dearest, and from

his own consciousness."

In the second division, two contrasting yet representative events

of life, a funeral and a wedding, dramatize the meaning of the

veil on both levels with their continuing ironic tension. At the fu-

neral, the veil for the only time in the story is a truly appropriate em-

blem. Apart from its somberness it is appropriate (if we accept the

idea of the minister's prayer) because the truth of human secretive-

ness is one that human beings most fully realize when they are con-

fronted with death. Yet even now the incidents that Poe believed

linked the minister with the dead girl in some specific crime-for

example, his fear that she will see his face-indicate that the wear-

ing of the veil is not entirely right. As often, Hawthorne uses such

ambiguous details to enrich the meaning and heighten the tone of

the narrative rather than to establish its main direction. These de-

tails underscore the meaning already revealed by emphasizing the

unnaturalness of Hooper's action, and they heighten the tone by

'James E. Miller, Jr., "Hawthorne and Melville: The Unpardonable Sin," PMLA, LXX,

93 (March, I955). Miller's catalogue of Hawthorne's unpardonable sinners does not

include Hooper.

Iro,nic Unity in Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil" x87

pointing up the ironic discrepancy between the supposedly helpful

intent of the minister and the actual spiritual result.

The unbalance of Hooper in his isolation from normal life and

love is strongly in evidence at the wedding, where his wearing of

the veil brings fear and doubt, a markedly different effect from the

feeling of quiet cheerfulness and sympathy he formerly evoked on

such occasions. Hooper's use of the veil to instruct his parishioners

religiously has resulted in their spiritual impoverishment in that

human love has been diminished. To Hawthorne this is a loss of

something holy, for throughout his writings the acceptance or re-

jection of human love usually marks the choice of salvation or

damnation. Mr. Hooper faces this choice and is damned by choos-

ing to live by an idea rather than by human love. His unrepentant

insistence upon his abstracted idea as central to life violates the

warm reality of human existence.

The irony of Hooper's action is humorously symbolized by the

prank of the village youngster who in imitation of the minister puts

a black handkerchief over his face and so frightens his playmates

that he creates a panic in his own mind. The presence of this

satiric element, comparable to the dog's chasing its tail in "Ethan

Brand," indicates that Hawthorne has a definite point of view and

does not intend the story to be ultimately ambiguous. The two levels

of meaning are not allowed to stand in uncommitted balance; ironic

tension unites them, the first being subsumed into the second.10

In the third division, the story comes to its climax with the two

futile attempts to break through the wall of isolation that the minis-

ter has erected, one attempt by members of the congregation, the

other by Elizabeth, his financee. Although the two-level irony is

present in each of these efforts, the first underscores more the va-

lidity of the veil symbol as intended by the minister, the second, the

fact of his sin in making the veil idea all important. Even though

Mr. Hooper, heretofore, has been almost too amenable to congre-

gational advice, a deputation of parishioners fails in its mission to

10 Cf. Chester E. Eisinger's comment: "To unroll a series of antithetical statements

and maintain them in balance by the very tension they themselves generate is typical

of Hawthorne's complex anid suggestive technique" ("Hawthorne as Champion of the

Middle Way," New England Quarterly, XXVII, 34-35, March, I954). It is appropriate

to mention here that in a brief comment on "The Minister's Black Veil" Mr. Eisinger

approaches the idea of the tale as ironic. He states that paradoxically the minister's

"idiosyncratic aberration reveals the universal truth" of the ambiguity and the irresistible

power of sin (ibid., pp. 28-29).

i88 American Literature

question him about the veil. Feeling its sy

sit speechless before him, aware that his

hearts. But as before with the sermon

for the minister's attitude and action are essentially unkind. It is

not the parishioners' guilt alone that alienates them, for we are

told that the minister's veil hung down over his heart. Hooper

has changed from exhibiting too great submissiveness to displaying

an opposite unbalance, the stubbornness of an essentially weak

person obsessed with an idea.

In the succeeding scene, Hooper's response to Elizabeth's ques-

tions about the veil and his resistance to her pleas to lay it aside

constitute a rejection of her love. Her patient efforts to draw him

from his vow to wear the veil as a "type and symbol" meet his

gentle but insurmountable obstinacy. In Hawthorne, as suggested

earlier, the way to salvation is most frequently the acceptance of

human love. Hooper fails to take this way. And his reaction to

Elizabeth's tears reveals the sharp irony of his attitude, for it is not

the hidden-sin meaning of the veil that causes her grief and terror,

as he egocentrically thinks, but the rejection of her love and the

irredeemable alienation demonstrated by his refusal, even for a

moment, to lift the veil.

Hawthorne's description of the minister as gentle, melancholy,

and sad and the quiet style of the story throughout tend to hide the

fact that we are face to face with an unbalanced and unredeemed

sinner. Although Hawthorne does not dwell upon the antecedent

cause of Hooper's "fall," some elements of causation are evident

and help to illuminate his character and clarify the irony of the tale.

The minister is shown as an essentially weak man, poorly prepared

by his unmarried solitude, his somewhat morbid temperament, and

his professional position to deal in a stable way with an absorbing

religious idea that harmonizes with his personal and vocational

prejudices. He finds false strength in a kind of fanaticism, which

strength destroys him as a balanced human being.

The fourth and penultimate division of the story offers chiefly

the results of the events and attitudes already presented, with the

ironic pattern of the previous divisions repeated. Here on the

dominant second level is the minister's continued isolation, with

the veil as a sign of his peculiar sin; on the first level is the account

Ironic Unity in Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil" I89

of his work as a minister, with the veil as a valid symbol of the

general sin of human duplicity.

Hooper continues to stand abnormally alone in the community.

The veil so envelops him with a cloud of sin or sorrow that neither

love nor sympathy can reach him, and he fumbles obscurely within

his own heart. But the veil also has the supposedly good result of

making him an effective minister by enabling him to enter into

the dark emotions of agonized sinners. Still this ability is a dubious

good, and the terms "efficient" and "awful power," used to describe

the minister's spiritual work, are not entirely flattering. Nor is it

praise when the author speaks of the terror rather than consolation

that Hooper brings to sinners who come to him for help. His

awareness of the truth of hidden sin and sorrow ought to enable

him not just to enter the lives of his parishioners but to enter

comfortingly; however, when with evident irony he egocentrically

insists upon the mechanics of the veil, he largely destroys this good

potentiality.

The final division of the story, the account of Hooper's death,

,continues the ironic and unifying relationship of the two levels of

meaning. Quantitatively the emphasis is again upon the second

level, for of about a thousand words all except a hundred or so are

used to picture the minister's intractability in wearing the veil on

into death. Organically, this is the emphasis, too, for the irony of

his action while depending upon the hidden-sin aspect so absorbs

it that the story as it comes to a close is unambiguously one.

Although various persons, including Elizabeth, attend Hooper's

dying moments, he is spiritually alone. Hawthorne leaves little

doubt that this loneliness is the result of the minister's unbalanced

action; an idea has supplanted life and love: "All through life

that piece of crape has hung between him and the world; it has

separated him from cheerful brotherhood and woman's love, and

kept him in that saddest of all prisons, his own heart; and still it lay

upon his face, as to deepen the gloom of the darksome Chamber,

and shade him from the sunshine of eternity." In these closing

moments of his life, his monomania is so powerful that even amid

his convulsive struggles and amid the wanderings of his mind he is

desperately careful to keep the veil over his face. And it is still

upon his face when he is buried, a token of his final lack of

repentance.

9go American Literature

Particularly demonstrative of the ironic uni

of meaning is Hooper's delayed defense of his wearing the veil by

saying that everyone around him has on his own black veil. The

veil is no longer merely a symbol of the fact of hidden sin or sorrow,

but it is also, more dominantly, a symbol of Mr. Hooper's prideful

adherence to a destructive idea-the sin of a spiritual egotism that

enables him to see the mote in another's eye and blinds him to the

beam in his own. The irony has become even more complex than

this, for things have gone full circle, and added to the double

symbolism is the fact that the veil now stands for a new hidden sin.

Actually, by focusing attention, including the minister's own con-

cern, on the general sin of human concealment the veil has made

effective the hiding of the more important personal sin. For the

reader of Hawthorne's story, of course, the veil is now the means of

communicating the total irony of the minister's action and of estab-

lishing the single meaning that the author wishes to conv