



Unit
9

**‘THE MINISTER’S BLACK VEIL’ BY
NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE**

: UNIT STRUCTURE :

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9.0 OBJECTIVES

- To know about Nathaniel Hawthorne’s contribution in English literature
- To understand the short story by ‘*The Minister’s Black Veil*’ by Hawthorne
- To know the themes, characters, and symbols present in the short story
- To understand the whole story by taking into consideration various aspects about it and analyse it critically

9.1 INTRODUCTION

Nathaniel Hawthorne, born on July 4, 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts was an American short story writer and romance novelist who experimented with a broad range of styles and genres. He is best known for his short stories and two widely read novels: *The Scarlet Letter* (mid-March 1850) and *The House of Seven Gables* (1851). Along with Herman Melville and Edgar Allan Poe much of Hawthorne’s work belongs to the sub-genre of Dark Romanticism, distinguished by an emphasis on human fallibility that gives rise to lapses in judgement that allow even good men and women to drift toward sin and self-destruction. Dark Romantics tend to draw attention to the unintended consequences and complications that arise from well-intended efforts at social reform. Melville dedicated his epic novel, *Moby-Dick* to Hawthorne: “*In token of my admiration for his genius.*” Hawthorne’s lesser-known poems exemplify Dark Romanticism; some of his darkest works, including his ghost stories and tales involving the supernatural, fall within the genre of Gothic Literature.

Young Hawthorne was a contemporary of fellow Transcendentalists: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Louisa May Alcott, Hawthorne was part of this prominent circle of Massachusetts writers and philosophers. The Transcendentalists believed in the “inherent goodness of both people and nature.” You may think of them as intellectual hippies of the early 19th century (the movement sprang

forth in the 1820s and 1830s). Hawthorne was a founding member of Brook Farm, a utopian experiment in communal living — though he is not portrayed as a deep believer in its ideals. As Hawthorne matured, he drifted further and further from some of the transcendental principles. In fact, his later writing, produced after greater experience in the world, demonstrated an increasing disdain for the Transcendental Movement. He notably fictionalized the experiences of Brook Farm in his satirical novel *The Blithedale Romance* (1852).

9.2 THE STORY- '*THE MINISTER'S BLACK VEIL*'

The sexton stood in the porch of Milford meeting-house pulling at the bell-rope. The old people of the village came stooping along the street. Children with bright faces tripped merrily beside their parents or pretended to be as serious as adults in their Sunday clothes. Young men looked at the pretty maidens, and fancied that the Sabbath sunshine made them prettier than on weekdays. When the crowd had mostly streamed into the porch, the sexton began to toll the bell, keeping his eye on the Reverend Mr. Hooper's door. The first glimpse of the minister's figure was the signal for the bell to cease. "But what has good Parson Hooper got upon his face?" cried the sexton, in astonishment. All within hearing immediately turned about and beheld Mr. Hooper slowly pacing his way toward the meeting-house. As one, they gave a start, expressing more wonder than if some strange minister were coming. "Are you sure it is our parson?" inquired Goodman Gray. "Certainly," replied the sexton. The cause of so much amazement may appear slight. Mr. Hooper, a gentleman of about thirty, though still a bachelor, was dressed as neatly as if a careful wife had starched his collar 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. It consisted of two folds of thin black cloth, which entirely hid his features except the mouth and chin, but probably did not block his sight except to give a darkened shade to all living and non-living things. With this gloomy shade before him, good Mr. Hooper walked onward at a slow and quiet pace, stooping somewhat and looking on the ground, yet nodding kindly to those who still waited on the meeting-house steps. But so wonder-struck were they that his greeting hardly met with a reply. "I can't really feel as if good Mr. Hooper's face was behind that veil," 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 rumour of some unexplainable phenomenon had preceded Mr. Hooper into the meeting-house and set all the congregation astir. Few could keep from twisting their heads toward the door. Many stood upright and turned directly about. Several little boys climbed upon the seats, and came down again with a terrible racket. There was a general bustle, a rustling of the women's gowns and shuffling of the men's feet. But Mr. Hooper appeared not to notice. He entered with an almost noiseless step, bent his head mildly, and bowed as he passed the oldest member of the church, a white-haired great-grandfather. Mr. Hooper ascended the stairs and showed himself in the pulpit, face to face with his congregation except for the black veil. The myste-

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rious veil was never once withdrawn. It shook with his breath and there was darkness between him and the holy page as he read the Bible. While he prayed the veil lay heavily on his uplifted face. Did he seek to hide it from the dread Being whom he was addressing? Such was the effect of this simple piece of crape that more than one woman of delicate nerves was forced to leave the meeting-house. Yet perhaps the pale-faced congregation was almost as fearful a sight to the minister as his black veil to them. Mr. Hooper had the reputation of a good preacher, but not an energetic one: he strove to save his people by mild persuasion rather than by the thunders of the word. The sermon which he now delivered was marked by the same style and manner as usual, but there was something either in the sermon itself or in the imagination of the listeners which made it the most powerful speech that they had ever heard from their pastor’s lips. It was tinged more darkly than usual with the gentle gloom of Mr. Hooper’s personality. The subject was secret sin—those sad mysteries which we hide from our nearest and dearest, and would hide from our own consciousness, even forgetting that God can see them. A subtle power was breathed into his words. Each member of the congregation, the most innocent girl and the man of hardened heart, felt as if the preacher had crept upon them behind his awful veil and discovered their stored-up wickedness of deed or thought. Many spread their clasped hands on their chests. There was nothing terrible in what Mr. Hooper said—at least, no violence. Yet the hearers quaked. They longed for a breath of wind to blow aside the veil, almost believing that a stranger’s face would be discovered, though the form, gesture and voice were those of Mr. Hooper.

At the close of the services, the people hurried out with confusion, eager to communicate their amazement, and feeling light-hearted the moment they lost sight of the black veil. Some gathered in little circles, huddled closely together, with their mouths all whispering in the centre. Some went homeward alone, wrapped in silent thought. Some talked loudly and polluted the Sabbath-day with loud laughter. A few shook their heads, hinting that they could interpret the mystery, while one or two claimed that there was no mystery at all, but only that Mr. Hooper’s eyes were so weakened by the midnight lamp as to require a shade. After a brief time good Mr. Hooper came forth, in the rear of his flock. Turning his veiled face from one group to another, he paid due respect to the elderly, saluted the middle-aged with kind dignity as their friend and spiritual guide, greeted the young with authority and love, and laid his hands on the little children’s heads to bless them. Such was always his custom on the Sabbath-day. Strange and bewildered looks repaid him for his courtesy. None, as on former occasions, walked by their pastor’s side. Old Squire Saunders neglected to invite Mr. Hooper to his table, where the good minister used to bless the food almost every Sunday. The minister returned home, therefore, and at the moment of closing the door, looked back upon the people, all of whom had their eyes fixed upon him. A sad smile gleamed faintly from beneath the black veil and flickered about his mouth. “How strange,” said a lady, “that a simple black veil, such as any woman might wear on her bonnet, should become such a terrible thing on Mr. Hooper’s face!”

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“Something must surely be amiss with Mr. Hooper’s mind,” observed her husband, the physician of the village. “But the strangest part of the affair is the effect even on a sober-minded man like myself. The black veil, though it covers only our pastor’s face, makes him ghost-like from head to foot. Do you not feel it so?” “Truly do I,” replied the lady; “and I would not be alone with him for the world. I wonder he is not afraid to be alone with himself.” “Men sometimes are so,” said her husband. The afternoon service was attended with similar circumstances. At its conclusion the bell tolled for the funeral of a young lady. The relatives and friends were assembled in the house and the more distant acquaintances stood about the door, speaking of the good qualities of the deceased, when their talk was interrupted by the appearance of Mr. Hooper, still covered with his black veil. It was now appropriate for the occasion. The minister stepped into the room where the corpse was laid, and bent over the coffin to take a last farewell of his deceased parishioner. As he stooped the veil hung straight down from his forehead, so that, if her eye-lids had not been closed for ever, the dead maiden might have seen his face. Could Mr. Hooper be fearful of her glance, that he so hastily caught back the black veil? Someone who watched the incident said that at the instant when the minister’s features were revealed, the corpse had slightly shuddered, rustling the burial garment, though the face retained the stillness of death. A superstitious old woman was the only witness of this wonder. From the coffin Mr. Hooper passed into the chamber of the mourners, and then to the head of the staircase, to make the funeral prayer. It was a tender and heart-dissolving prayer, full of sorrow, yet so filled with hopes of heaven that the music of a harp, plucked by the fingers of the dead, seemed faintly to be heard among the sad words of the minister. The people trembled, though they only dimly understood him, when he prayed that they and himself might be ready, as this young maiden had been, for the dreadful hour that should snatch the veil from their faces. The bearers went heavily forth and the mourners followed, saddening all the street, with the dead before them and Mr. Hooper in his black veil behind. “Why do you look back?” said one mourner to his partner. “I imagined,” replied she, “that the minister and the maiden’s spirit were walking hand in hand.” “And so did I at the same moment,” said the other. That night the handsomest couple in Milford village were to be joined in marriage. Though reckoned a melancholy man, Mr. Hooper had a quiet cheerfulness for such occasions, which often excited a smile. There was no quality of his personality, which made him more beloved than this. The company at the wedding awaited his arrival with impatience, trusting that the strange awe, which had gathered over him throughout the day, would now be gone. But such was not the result. When Mr. Hooper came, the first thing that their eyes rested on was the same horrible black veil which had added deeper gloom to the funeral and could foretell nothing but evil to the wedding. A cloud seemed to have rolled from beneath the black crape and dimmed the light of the candles. The bridal pair stood up before the minister, but the bride’s cold fingers quivered in the trembling hand of the bridegroom. Her death-like paleness caused a whisper that the maiden who had been buried a few hours before was come from her grave to be married. After performing the ceremony, Mr. Hooper raised a glass of wine to his lips, wishing happiness to the new-married couple in a strain of mild pleasantry. At that instant,

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catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror, he shuddered, his lips grew white, he spilt the untasted wine upon the carpet and rushed forth into the darkness, for the Earth too had on her black veil. The next day the whole village of Milford talked of little else than Parson Hooper’s black veil. That, and the mystery concealed behind it, supplied a topic for discussion between acquaintances meeting in the street and good women gossiping at their open windows. It was the first item of news that the tavern keeper told to his guests. The children babbled of it on their way to school. One little boy covered his face with an old black handkerchief, so frightening his playmates that the panic seized himself and he almost lost his wits by his own foolery. It was remarkable that, of all the busy bodies and rude people in the parish, not one ventured to ask Mr. Hooper why he did this thing. Before, whenever there appeared the slightest call for such interference, he had never lacked advisers nor hesitated to be guided by their judgment. Yet, no individual among his parishioners chose to make the black veil a subject of friendly questioning. There was a feeling of dread which caused each to shift the responsibility upon another. At length it was decided to send a small group of the church members, in order to deal with Mr. Hooper about the mystery before it should grow into a scandal. Never did a group of ambassadors perform their duties so ineffectively. The minister received them with friendly courtesy, but became silent after they were seated, leaving to his visitors the whole burden of introducing the obvious topic. There was the black veil wrapped round Mr. Hooper’s forehead and concealing every feature above his mouth, on which, at times, they could perceive a melancholy smile. But that piece of crape, to their imagination, seemed to hang down before his heart, the symbol of a fearful secret between him and them. If only the veil were cast aside, they might speak freely of it, but not till then. Thus they sat a long time, speechless, confused, and shrinking uneasily from Mr. Hooper’s eye, which they felt to be fixed upon them with an invisible glance. Finally, they returned embarrassed to their neighbours, declaring the matter to be too weighty to be handled without a council of the churches. But there was one person in the village unaffected by awe. With the calm energy of her character, she was determined to chase away the strange cloud that appeared to be settling round Mr. Hooper every moment more darkly than before. As his wife it should be her privilege to know what the black veil concealed. At the minister’s first visit, therefore, she entered upon the subject with a direct simplicity, which made the task easier both for him and her. After he took his seat, she fixed her eyes steadily upon the veil, but could see nothing of the dreadful gloom that had so awed the community. It was only a double fold of crape hanging down from his forehead to his mouth and slightly stirring with his breath. “No,” said she aloud, and smiling, “there is nothing terrible in this piece of crape, except that it hides a face which I am always glad to look upon. Come, good sir. Let the sun shine from behind the cloud. First lay aside your black veil, and then tell me why you put it on.” Mr. Hooper’s smile glimmered faintly. “There is an hour to come,” said he, “when all of us shall cast aside our veils. Take it not amiss, beloved friend, if I wear this piece of crape till then.” “Your words are a mystery too,” returned the young lady. “Take away the veil from them, at least.” “Elizabeth, I will,” said he, “so far as my vow may let me. Know, then, this veil is a symbol, and I am bound to wear it forever, both in light

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and darkness, in solitude and before the gaze of a crowd, and as with strangers, so with my friends. No mortal eye will see it withdrawn. This dismal shade must separate me from the world; even you, Elizabeth, can never come behind it.” “What grievous harm has befallen you,” she earnestly asked, “that you should thus darken your eyes for ever?” “If it be a sign of mourning,” replied Mr. Hooper, “I, perhaps, like most other mortals, have sorrows dark enough to be expressed by a black veil.” “But what if the world will not believe that it is the sign of an innocent sorrow?” urged Elizabeth. “Beloved and respected as you are, there may be whispers that you hide your face under the knowledge of secret sin. For the sake of your holy office do away this scandal.” The colour rose into her cheeks as she hinted at the rumours that were already spreading in the village. But Mr. Hooper’s mildness did not desert him. He even smiled again—that same sad smile which always appeared like a faint glimmering of light emerging from the darkness beneath 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?” And gently but stubbornly he resisted all her pleas. At length Elizabeth sat silent. For a few moments she appeared lost in thought, considering, probably, what new methods might be tried to coax her lover from so dark a fantasy, which, was perhaps a symptom of mental disease. Though of a firmer character than his own, the tears rolled down her cheeks. But in an instant, a new feeling took the place of sorrow. Her eyes were fixed on the black veil, when like a sudden twilight in the air its terrors fell around her. She arose and stood trembling before him. “And do you feel it, then, at last?” said he, mournfully. She made no reply, but covered her eyes with her hand and turned to leave the room. 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 in heaven there shall be no veil over my face, no darkness between our souls. It is only a veil during this mortal life; 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 misery for ever.” “Lift the veil but once and look me in the face,” said she. “Never! It cannot be!” replied Mr. Hooper. “Then farewell!” said Elizabeth. She withdrew her arm from his grasp and slowly departed, pausing at the door to give one long, shuddering gaze that seemed almost to penetrate the mystery of the black veil. But even amid his grief, Mr. Hooper smiled to think that only a bit of material had separated him from happiness, though the horrors which it hinted at must be placed darkly between the fondest of lovers. From that time no attempts were made to remove Mr. Hooper’s black veil or to ask him about the secret which it was supposed to hide. For most people good Mr. Hooper was forever a source of dread. He could not walk the street with any peace of mind, so aware was he that the gentle and timid would turn aside to avoid him, and that others would make it a point of toughness to put themselves in his way. Their rudeness forced him to give up his customary walk. It grieved him to the very depth of his kind heart to observe how the children fled from his approach, breaking up their merriest sports while his melancholy figure was still far off. Their dread caused him to feel more strongly than anything else that an unearthly horror was interwoven with the threads of the black crape. In truth, his own dislike of the veil was known to be so great

that he never willingly passed before a mirror nor stooped to drink at a fountain lest he be frightened by himself. This was what some believe that Mr. Hooper's conscience tortured him for some great crime too horrible to be entirely concealed or openly confessed. Thus from beneath the black veil there rolled a cloud into the sunshine, a mystery of sin or sorrow, which enveloped the poor minister, so that love or sympathy could never reach him. It was said that ghosts and fiends accompanied him. With shuddering and outward terrors, he walked continually in its shadow, groping darkly within his own soul, gazing through a thin curtain that saddened the whole world. Even the wind, it was believed, respected his dreadful secret and never blew aside the veil. But still good Mr. Hooper sadly smiled at the pale faces of his neighbours as he passed by. Among all its bad influences, the black veil had the one desirable effect of making its wearer a very effective preacher. 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 stated, figuratively, that before he brought them into heavenly light they had been with him behind the black veil. Its gloom, indeed, enabled him to sympathize with all dark emotions. Dying sinners cried aloud for Mr. Hooper and would not give up their breath till he appeared, though always, as he stooped to whisper comfortingly, they shuddered at the veiled face so near their own. Such were the terrors of the black veil even when Death had shown its face. Strangers came long distances to attend service at his church with the mere idle purpose of gazing at his figure because it was forbidden them to behold his face. But many were made to quake before they departed. Once, Mr. Hooper was appointed to preach the sermon for the governor's election. Covered with his black veil, he stood before the chief judge, the council, and the representatives, and made so deep an impression that the laws passed during that year were characterized by all the gloom and piety of our ancestors. In this manner Mr. Hooper spent a long life, blameless in outward action, yet cloaked in dismal suspicions; kind and loving, though unloved and dimly feared; a man apart from men, shunned in their health and joy, but summoned to their aid in their death cries. As years wore on, he acquired a name throughout the New England churches, and they called him Father Hooper. Nearly all in the community who had been of middle age when he had first settled there had been carried away by funerals: he had one congregation in the church and a more crowded one in the graveyard. Now, having worked so late into the evening and done his work so well, it was now good Father Hooper's turn to rest. Several persons were visible by the shaded candlelight in the death-chamber of the old clergyman. He had no relatives. But there was the politely grave physician, seeking only to ease the last pain of the patient whom he could not save. There were the pious members of his church. There was the nurse—no hired employee, but one whose calm affection had endured for years in secrecy, in solitude, amid the chill of age, and would not perish even at the dying-hour. Who but Elizabeth! And there lay the white-haired head of good Father Hooper upon the death-pillow with the black veil still swathed about his brow and reaching down over his face, so that each more difficult gasp of his faint breath caused it to stir. All through life that piece of crape had hung between him and the world. It had separated him from cheerful brotherhood and woman's love and kept him in that saddest of all

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prisons, his own heart. And still it lay upon his face, as if to deepen the gloom of his chamber and shade him from the sunshine of eternity. For sometime his mind had been confused, wavering between the past and the present, and hovering forward into the world to come. There had been feverish turns, which tossed him from side to side and wore away what little strength he had. But in his most agonized struggles, when no other thought could influence him, he still showed an awful care lest the black veil should slip aside. Even if his bewildered soul could have forgotten, there was a faithful woman at his pillow who with averted eyes would have covered that aged face which she had last beheld in youthful manhood. At length the death-stricken old man lay quietly in mental and bodily exhaustion, with a feeble pulse and breath that grew fainter and fainter except when a long, deep breath seemed to foretell the flight of his spirit. The minister of nearby Westbury approached the bedside. "Father Hooper," said he, "the moment of your release is at hand. Are you ready for the lifting of the veil that shuts in time from eternity?" "Yea," said he, faintly, "my soul is weary until that veil is lifted." "And is it fitting," resumed the Reverend Mr. Clark, "that a man so given to prayer, of such a blameless example, holy in deed and thought, so far as anyone knows—is it fitting that a father in the Church should leave a shadow on his memory that may seem to blacken a life so pure? I pray you, my old, respected brother, let not this thing be! Allow us to be gladdened by your appearance as you go to your reward. Before the veil of eternity is lifted, let me cast aside this black veil from your face." Thus speaking, the Reverend Mr. Clark bent forward to reveal the mystery of so many years. But, exerting a sudden energy that made all the beholders stand aghast, Father Hooper snatched both his hands from beneath the bedclothes and pressed them strongly on the black veil, resolved to struggle if the minister of Westbury would fight with a dying man. "Never!" cried the veiled clergyman. "On earth, never!" "Dark old man," exclaimed the affrighted minister, "with what horrible crime upon your soul are you now passing to the judgment?"

Father Hooper's breath heaved. It rattled in his throat. But with a mighty effort grasping forward with his hands, he caught hold of life and held it back till he should speak. He even raised himself in bed, and there he sat shivering with the arms of Death around him, while the black veil hung down, awful at that last moment in the gathered terrors of a lifetime. And yet the faint, sad smile so often there now seemed to glimmer from its darkness and linger on Father Hooper's lips. "Why do you tremble at me alone?" cried he, turning his veiled face round the circle of pale spectators. "Tremble also at each other. Have men avoided me and women shown no pity and children screamed and fled only for my black veil? Only the mystery it symbolizes has made this piece of crape so awful! When the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend, the lover to his best-beloved; when man does not shrink from the eye of his Creator, treasuring up the secret of his sin,—then call me a monster for the symbol beneath which I have lived and die. I look around me, and, lo! on every face I see a black veil!" While his listeners shrank from one another in mutual fright, Father Hooper fell back upon his pillow, a veiled corpse with a faint smile lingering on the lips. Still veiled, they laid him in his coffin, and a veiled corpse they bore him to the grave. The grass of many years has sprung up and withered on that grave, the burial-stone is moss-grown, and

good Mr. Hooper's face is dust; but awful is still the thought that it moldered beneath the black veil.

9.3 ANALYSIS

All humans do not know another person's life inclusively. Therefore, one is concealing numerous aspects and conducted actions, which defines his/her individuality, from the environment and the people around him/her. Despite shaking hands, greeting, and initiating a conversation, no one will justly comprehend the true character hiding underneath the bare face of an individual. Nathaniel Hawthorne portrays this concept in his short story, '*The Minister's Black Veil*', to convey that all humans harbour some sort of "secret sin" within them. This secret sin, which he explains throughout the piece, could be both exorbitant and onerous, forming an isolated and lonely life that one must endure.

With the introduction of the black veil, which hung over his face, there begins to shift in the piece of work from an accepting tone to a rejecting one. As Mr. Hooper stood facing his congregation with the veil, a woman states, "He has changed himself into something awful, only by hiding his face." The aghast and feared tone of the woman illustrates the shock and trepidation seen in the eyes of the Puritans. From the new implanted impression of the minister, Mr. Hooper begins his downfall into a lonely and segregated lifestyle, aloof from society.

At one point, the annoyance of the black veil, or secret sin, engendered the discontinuity of a once stable and secure relationship. Mr. Hooper's fiancée, Elizabeth, after engulfing the rumours spread about her fiancé, developed a desire for the minister to reveal his face to her at least once. Mr. Hooper responds, "No mortal eye will see it withdrawn even you, Elizabeth" Through the use of explicit diction, Mr. Hooper's rejection portrays how much effort one (involuntarily) puts in for the security and safety of the secret sin. With the minister's rejection of Elizabeth's access to his face, Elizabeth rejects him entirely and abandons him, even after he pleaded for her not to desert him. Furthermore, Elizabeth's rejection exemplifies the amount of sacrifices one puts in for the concealment of the secret sin.

The black veil, overall, possesses a symbolic significance, which Hawthorne tries to reveal to his audience. Even though the congregation leaves at a state of "indecorous confusion", Mr. Hooper hints at the veil's meaning as he references to "secret sin" in his sermon. Nonetheless, the author represents the idea of a mask hiding what one hides within him/her, such as his/her innermost feelings and thoughts with the use of this physical material, the veil. At the denouement of the short story, in his deathbed, Mr. Hooper inquires, "Why do you tremble at me alone?... for my black veil?" and dies exclaiming, "I look around me, and lo! On every visage a Black Veil!" This combination of rhetorical questions and profound syntax illustrates how everyone in this Puritan society possesses an indivisible mask hiding their "secret sin" from the public. In others words, Reverend Hooper is a living symbol, representing all the people and the secret sin that they hid within them. Ironically, the Puritans had "felt as if the preacher (Hooper) had crept upon them and discovered their hoarded iniquity of deed or thought" during this sermon but no one effectively grasp his preaching, even after Hooper clari-

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fied. This obscurity and confusion demonstrates how secret sin is concealed deep inside people's mind that even their own consciousness is oblivious to it.

Likewise, previously, at a wedding ceremony, Reverend Hooper, himself, gets a little petrified after he catches a glimpse of him in a wine glass. This scene juxtaposes Hooper's character role in the piece, but it reveals the immense negative impact it will have if a secret sin is exposed overtly. The confusion he possesses over the whereabouts and harm of his sin prompts him to develop a fear towards it, akin to the phrase "fear of the unknown". When one is afraid of his/her own sin, it emphasizes the hazards and dangers it will have when it is divulged to the public.

9.4 CHARACTERS AND THEMES

The main theme of *'The Minister's Black Veil'* is secret sin. The story begins with Mr. Hooper presiding over the congregation of a Puritan town. The church-goers are horrified to see, however, that Mr. Hooper wears a veil that covers the top half of his face. This veil comes to represent the minister's sin, which remains a secret for the whole story.

Mr. Hooper initially gives a sermon about sin, and he later attends the funeral of a woman. Before the coffin is removed, however, Mr. Hooper leans over the body. The veil moves forward so that, if the corpse was still alive, she would have seen Hooper's face: "As he stooped, the veil hung straight down from his forehead, so that, if her eyelids had not been closed forever, the dead maiden might have seen his face."

Townspersons become consumed with the meaning of the veil and gossip about the secret sin that Mr. Hooper is concealing. In another scene, Mr. Hooper performs a wedding ceremony, and his black veil casts darkness over the union.

The secret sin begins to affect Mr. Hooper's personal life. His fiancée, Elizabeth, urges him to remove the veil. He refuses, and she ends the engagement. Mr. Hooper continues a life of successful preaching and eventually falls ill. Elizabeth visits him on his deathbed, where he says that everyone is wearing black veils. He dies and is buried with his veil still intact. The theme of secret sin comes out most forcefully at the end. It isn't that only Mr. Hooper has a secret sin, but rather that we all do, hidden behind non-material masks.

Like in almost all short stories, there are very few characters here. There are only two major characters: Mr. Hooper and Elizabeth. The entire story revolves around Mr. Hooper and his black veil that he never uncovers. Elizabeth is his fiancée who tries to convince him to remove the veil but he doesn't do so. Elizabeth's role in his life is for a very short time. She fails to know the reason behind his veil and to unveil his real face.

9.5 THE BLACK VEIL AS A SYMBOL

The veil can be a symbol of the ways and practices of the Puritans, as well as people today, misleading others of the sins they have committed while completely and truly facing themselves. The veil is used as a daily reminder of people's sins, undeniable truths, guilt, and secrets that they are just unwilling to admit. In his lesson, Hooper uses a parable to influence his congrega-

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tion, and possibly even further on to Puritan society. However, he pays a high price for this parable: The community’s admiration for him turns to confusion and fear, and he is forced to live a lonely, isolated life. Many people in the congregation assume that Hooper is keeping a secret sin from them and since black veils are a sign of mourning, they thus assume death.

The black veil is a symbol of secret sin and how terrible human nature can be. This could represent the secret sin that all people carry in their hearts, or it could be a representation of Mr. Hooper’s specific sin, which some readers think to be adultery. Hooper as Everyman bearing his lonely fate in order to portray a tragic truth; and there is the implicit one of human imbalance, with Hooper’s actions out of all proportion to need or benefit.¹ Edgar Allan Poe speculated that Minister Hooper may have committed adultery with the lady who died at the beginning of the story, because this is the first day he begins to wear the veil, and a crime of dark dye (having reference to the young lady) has been committed, which only minds congenial with that of the author will perceive. Minister Hooper also seems to be unable to tell his fiancée why he wears the veil due to a promise he has made, and is not willing to show his face to the lady even in death. Finally, two funeral attendees see a vision of him walking hand in hand with the girl’s spirit.

In a different view, the black veil could represent the Puritan obsession with sin and sinfulness. Puritans held beliefs of predestination and that only “God’s elect” will be saved when the day of judgement comes, and this weeding out process of finding the saved versus not saved was a large part of Puritan life. The reaction to the minister’s veil is one of annoyance and fear, “‘I don’t like it,’ muttered an old woman, as she hobbled into the meetinghouse. ‘He has changed himself into something awful, only by hiding his face. We are given no clues in the story up to this point as to how, why, or when the minister came to have the black veil over his face, it is just there, and as far as we are told the minister is doing nothing different from his normal routine. The one and only difference is a simple veil covering his face and the way his congregation thinks about him now. This is Hawthorne criticizing the overly judgmental nature of the Puritans belief on sin, for them sin was an undeniable mistake, “Hooper need not have committed any specific sin; for the hardened Puritan, his humanity was sinful enough, and he wore it the way the medieval penitent would his shirt. Anything less than absolute perfection was absolute corruption” The inclusion of an old woman used to introduce us to the Puritan’s rough ways was no mistake, Hawthorne wanted to show the most “hardened” Puritan elder and their reaction to the minister as evidence of how judgmental even the most seasoned Puritan can be.

9.6 LET US SUM UP

‘*The Minister’s Black Veils*’ centres around the black veil of Mr. Hooper. Till the end of the story it is not revealed why he wore it and didn’t ever remove it even when he was to die. Black veil as a symbol creates a lot of confusion in the minds of people of Milford as well as the readers. Black veil remains a symbol of secret sin. In Hooper’s view, there is such a black veil on everyone’s face, but it is not visible like his own. Thus, secret sin is the predominant theme.

STUDY OF SHORT
STORY

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:1

FILL IN THE BLANKS.

1. This story is set in the village named _____.
2. _____ is Mr.Hooper's fiancée.
3. Black veil symbolizes _____.
4. Does Hooper remove his black veil before he dies? Yes or No? _____
5. Hooper believes that he will attain _____ after death because he has suffered in his life like Christ did.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS:2

ANSWER THE QUESTIONS IN BRIEF.

- Q.1. Why has Mr.Hooper worn a black veil ?
- Q.2. What do the people of Milford think about Mr.Hooper's black veil ?
- Q.3. Why does Elizabeth break her engagement with Hooper ?
- Q.4. How does the story end ?

9.7 KEY WORDS

Isolation : Loneliness

Reluctance : Unwillingness to do something

Veil : Cover, Something hung up or spread out to hide the face or object from view

Sermon : Religious Discourse

Recognition : Awareness, acceptance as valid or true

9.8 BOOKS SUGGESTED

1. *The Hawthorne Collection* -Nathaniel Hawthorne
2. *The Minister's Black Veil* -Nathaniel Hawthorne
3. *Selected Stories by Nathaniel Hawthorne* -Terry O'Brien

ANSWERS

Check Your Progress 1

Fill in the blanks:

Ans.1 Milford Ans.2 Elizabeth Ans.3 secret sin Ans.4 No Ans.5 Heaven

Check Your Progress 2

Descriptive Questions:

Ans.1 The reason behind Hooper's wearing the black veil is not clear neither is it revealed by Hooper. One interpretation is that he killed a young woman and that's why he wants to hide his face as he is a secret sinner. Hooper himself gives two reasons: one is, everyone has sinned and thus there are invisible veils on everyone's face, he has a visible one, second is, he wants to suffer from loneliness and go to Heaven as he believes that if he endures suffering during his earthly life, he will

attain Heaven. Thus, he believes himself to be Christ-like. Craving for Heaven is thus another reason for his veil.

Ans.2 The people of Milford feel a distance when they see their parson with black veil. They don't understand why he put it on. Earlier they were friendly to him but they no longer feel that closeness. Their minds have so many thoughts and interpretations of Hooper's unclear appearance. Even when Hooper becomes a better preacher, he is unable to appeal the townspeople as much as he could before. People fear him and take religion more seriously than before.

Que.3 Elizabeth is a loyal, honest woman. She believes in appearances and gossips and doesn't understand the abstract beliefs. She is afraid of Hooper's veil and she decides to depart from his life fearing what the veil symbolizes-sin in all human beings.

Que.4 The story ends with Hooper's death. When he is on deathbed, people want to remove his black veil. But he utters his last words thus: "lo! I see a black veil on everyone's face." And he lies as a veiled corpse. People bury him along with his veil.

'THE MINISTER'S
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NATHANIEL
HAWTHORNE