

“The Minister’s Black Veil” Response

This is a short story about both honesty and secrecy—about what we choose to communicate with others and what we choose to keep hidden from others. Moreover, like both “Young Goodman Brown” and “The Birthmark,” this story portrays a protagonist who possesses fixed ideas that shape his view of himself and others, his actions, his relationships, and his entire life. Through this story, author Nathaniel Hawthorne raises some interesting questions about what separates or divides us from others.

When he published this story in 1846, Hawthorne labeled it “A Parable” and included the following note:

Another clergyman in New England, Mr. Joseph Moody, of York, Maine, who died about eighty years since, made himself remarkable by the same eccentricity that is here related of the Reverend Mr. Hooper. In his case, however, the symbol had a different import. In early life he had accidentally killed a beloved friend, and from that day till the hour of his own death, he hid his face from men.

Instructions for Your Response: Choose one topic from items 1-3, and choose one more topic from items 4-6. Then discuss each chosen topic in a well-developed paragraph, supporting your ideas with clearly-explained reasoning and at least two significant quotations from the story (i.e., use four supporting quotations total—two in each paragraph).

Note: For your supporting quotations, do not use the quotations that are embedded in the questions below. Instead, use additional quotations found within the story.

1. Why is the minister's first sermon while wearing the black veil so disturbing to his congregation, even though there is "nothing terrible in what Mr. Hooper [has] said"? What "unwonted attribute" in the minister do the people in the congregation sense? Moreover, when Mr. Hooper later glimpses his own reflected image at the wedding, why is he affected by the same horror of the black veil that overwhelms everyone else?
2. Why don't the people of the parish ask Mr. Hooper why he is wearing the veil? What do the members of the delegation sent to inquire mean when they report back to their constituents that the "matter [is] too weighty to be handled, except by a council of the churches, if, indeed, it might not require a general synod"?
3. Why does Elizabeth think that “it should be her privilege to know what the black veil conceal[s],” and why does Elizabeth’s “calm energy” change to terror when she tries to persuade Mr. Hooper to remove the veil? Moreover, why does Hooper deny Elizabeth’s request and choose to remain behind his black veil, when he could remove the veil and marry Elizabeth instead?

4. Does the veil symbolize the same thing to Mr. Hooper as it does to others? Since Mr. Hooper says, "I, perhaps, like most other mortals, have sorrows dark enough to be typified by a black veil," why does he alone put on this material emblem, and why doesn't anyone else in the community follow Hooper’s example? Moreover, how does the veil affect Hooper’s vision of the world and people around him, and why might these effects on his visual perceptions be significant?
5. How does the black veil make Mr. Hooper "a very efficient clergyman"? Is this the same as being a very good clergyman? Moreover, why does he become known as "Father Hooper"? Does the veil make Hooper a more effective community leader, or does it make Hooper a less effective community leader? Why?
6. Ultimately, what is Hawthorne’s attitude toward Mr. Hooper? Is the author’s attitude simple and clear, or complex and ambiguous? To what degree does Hawthorne want us to view Hooper as a wise man, as a fool, or as something in between? Moreover, how does Hooper’s story function as a parable—as a work that communicates meaning on a symbolic level, in addition to its literal level of meaning? Through the story’s characterization, conflicts, and symbolism, what lessons or principles does Hawthorne aim to illustrate for readers?