

**Notion of Sin and Evil  
In Nathaniel Hawthorne's Short Stories  
" The Minister's Black Veil "**

**And**

**" Young Goodman Brown "**

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**الملخص :**

ان فكرة الاثم هي فكرة سائدة في قصص و روايات ناثانيال هورثون. و بالرغم من هذا التكرار، فإن هناك تفاوتاً في طريقة فهم شخصياته لمفهوم جانب الشر الموجود في داخل كل انسان.

وسواء تجسدت فكرة الاثم بشكل أنانية، عاطفة، او هوس فأنها غير ظاهرة للاخرين وتمنع، في نفس الوقت، الانسان من تحقيق الخير. الهدف من هذا البحث هو التركيز على فكرة الذنب والشر في اثنان من قصص هورثون القصيرة: " حجاب الكاهن الاسود"، " الشاب كودمان براون".

**Abstract**

Sin in the short stories and novels of Nathaniel Hawthorne is a recurring theme. Though sin present in most of his works, there is much variation on the ways in which his characters come to understand the inherent evil that lurks inside every human being.

Whether expressed in the form of selfishness, passion, or obsession, sin is somehow masked and concealed from others and prevents humans from achieving their goodness.

The purpose of this research is to focus on this theme in Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil" and "Young Goodman Brown".

### **Introduction**

One of the great American authors of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Nathaniel Hawthorne

(1804-1864) grew up in New England and published his first novel,

### **Fanshaw**

in 1828. Though he went on to help lay the foundations of American short stories, Hawthorne is more widely known for his novels **The Scarlet Letter**(1850) and **The House of Seven Gables** (1851). His rich family heritage and the leading role his ancestors played in American history shaped Hawthorne's philosophy and writing. Two aspects of his heritage were especially to affect his imagination. The Hathornes( Nathaniel added the "w" to the name) had been involved in religious persecution with their first American ancestors, John Hathorne was one of the three judges at the 17<sup>th</sup> century Salem witchcraft trials. Further, the family had over the generation gradually declined from its early prominence and prosperity into relative obscurity and indigence. Raised in New England, steeped in his Puritan heritage, and troubled by his ancestors' role in the persecution of others, Hawthorne focused on these themes through his life.<sup>1</sup>

The fiction of Hawthorne has frequently been defined in musical terms on account of the recurring themes it contains. These themes possess "a slight, delicate, and evanescent", yet they frequently carry " some definite moral purpose" <sup>2</sup> . Sin is one of them. His fiction

explores the weight of the Puritan conception of sin at a time when the transcendentalist idea of the goodness of man saw light.

A number of critics have agreed that Hawthorne's fiction shows signs of the disappearance of the doctrine of original sin which was to gradually become "backwater theology"<sup>3</sup> and which left room for something more positive and hopeful.

Indeed, there is a certain complexity in the concept of sin as we find it in Hawthorne's fiction. The reader is confronted with several categories of sin, some more obvious than others. Many of these are fused together into a larger whole, creating an atmosphere, or rather, a pervasive mood or gloom and guilt. In some of Hawthorne's short stories, the characters' unconscious awareness of the original sin is transferred to a visible, physical burden. Such is the case in The Minister's Black Veil and Young Goodman Brown.<sup>4</sup>

But what is the exact meaning to be applied to "sin" in Hawthorne's fiction? In his article "Hawthorne and sin", D. Donoghue proposed to explain the notion of sin as it is used by Hawthorne. He explains that when Hawthorne "referred to sin, he seemed to assume a force of evil so pervasive that it did not need to be embodied in anyone or in any particular action".

There is a lot of truth in this remark and it can be applied to the quasi- totality of Hawthorne's fiction. For example, Hester Prynne's sin is rarely talked of openly and except the frequent allusions to adulteration, the text of The Scarlet Letter is more concerned with "a kind of fetishistic fascination with the 'nameless' " which seems to have more universal value than the simple reference to a definable sin. Hawthorne is only slightly more explicit in The House of The

**Seven Gables** where the seven gables manifestly stand for the seven capitals sins and evoke the principle of their hereditary transmission.<sup>5</sup>

A variety of expressions and synonyms are used by Hawthorne to refer to the word "sin", (e.g 'evil', 'fall', 'disobedience'), instead of using the word directly and openly. To define something that is only implicitly referred to and rarely stated may prove a difficult task.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Minister's Black Veil**

The Minister's Black Veil is narrated by unnamed Puritan parishioner in Milford congregation. The narrator recounts with sympathy the story of how the minister Mr. Hooper, at thirty years of age first donned a veil and how his congregation reacted to this gesture. While the narrator ponders the events, he offers no explanation for why Mr. Hooper took such an extreme action nor what it means. The story opens with the first appearance of Mr. Hooper before his congregation on the Sunday morning on which he wears his veil. The congregation is alarmed and shocked by the veil. But the covering seems to lend the minister a new power over them especially when the topic is about the secret sin. The congregation senses that he has entered their hearts and viewed the secrets they hide there.

Following the afternoon service, Hooper officiates at the funeral of a young woman. A mourner states that he saw the corpse shudder with fear. Members of the church attempt to ask the minister to remove it, however they are unable to speak of it. Only his fiancée is able to do that but he gives no answer. The narrator describes

Hooper's life from then on ; "revered and possessing a special power over those in moral anguish but cut off from the fellowship of the community and forever alone". The story concludes with the death of Hooper. A young minister asks him to remove the veil, but Hooper rebukes him, declaring that everyone around him is wearing a veil. The minister is buried with his veil.

In this short story Hawthorne calls the reader attention to the veil as an obvious symbol, as Hooper himself refers to that when his fiancée, Elizabeth, asks him to remove it, he replies:

So far as my vow may suffer me. Know  
Then this veil is a type and a symbol, and  
I am bound to wear it ever, both in light  
And in darkness, in solitude and before  
The gaze of multitudes, and as strangers,  
So with my familiar 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.<sup>7</sup>

Criticism of Hawthorne's story has proceeded on the assumption that the veil hides something and is donned by Hooper to send a message to the congregation.

Interpretations of the black veil as a representation of some fault in Hooper follow three trends; the veil as a marker of some specific crime Hooper has committed; the veil as the embodiment of original sin, humanity's tendency to transgress against the law of God; and the veil as a signal of Hooper's excessive pride.

As an example of the first trend, Edgar Allan Poe announced that he had figured out the mystery of the black veil. Hooper's veil is a badge of shame for the illicit relationship he had with the young lady whose funeral is described in the story;<sup>8</sup>

A person who watched the interview between  
the dead and living, scrupled not to affirm,  
that, at the instant when the  
Clergyman's features were disclosed, the  
Corpse had slightly shuddered, rustling  
The shroud and muslin cap, though the  
Countenance retained the composure of  
Death.<sup>9</sup>

The second trend of interpretations takes its cue from Hooper's deathbed statement and the subject matter of the first sermon he delivers while wearing the veil;

The subject had reference to secret sin, and  
those sad mysteries which we hide from our  
nearest and dearest, and would fain conceal  
from our own consciousness, even forgetting  
that the omniscient can detect them .<sup>10</sup>

both address the secret sin that men harbor in their hearts. The suggestion is that Hooper wears the black veil in order to inform his parishioners of the guilt that stains everyone and the weakness that makes them hide their sins from themselves, other men , and even God.

But if Hooper's intention really is to communicate some message to his congregation, he could have done it much more effectively than he does if, in fact, he does at all. He waits until he is

on his deathbed to say anything about the veil, and even then he speaks rather ambiguously. He might have worn the veil for a short time, explaining its significance simply and directly.

The fact that he does not do so affirms that his intention is not to inform his congregation about his original sin, but only to acknowledge its presence in himself.

The third trend of interpretations is closely linked to the second. It assumes that the black veil is initially meant to communicate a message to Hooper's parishioners. The black veil becomes a symbol of Hooper's sin of excessive pride. When he continues to wear it and gets caught up in thinking that he is morally superior because he is the conveyor of such an important message;<sup>11</sup>

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 of 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.<sup>12</sup>

After all these interpretations still there is one fact about this veil that is the veil separates him from his society;

By persons who claimed a superiority  
To popular prejudice, it was reckoned

Merely an eccentric whim, such as  
Often mingles with the sober actions  
Of men otherwise rational, and tinges  
Them all with its own semblance of  
Insanity. But with the multitude,  
Good Mr. Hooper was irreparably a  
Bugbear. He could not walk the  
Street with any peace mind, so  
Conscious was he that the gentle  
And timid would turn aside to avoid  
Him, and that others would make it  
A point of hardihood to throw  
Themselves in his way.<sup>13</sup>

### **Young Goodman Brown**

The story begins with the young Goodman Brown leaving, for three months, his home and his wife, Faith, to meet a mysterious figure deep in the forest. As he and this mysterious figure meet and proceed further into the dark forest, it is broadly hinted that Goodman Brown's companion is in fact, the devil;

...the young man turned aside, but  
Take care to watch his companion  
Who advanced softly along the  
Road until he had come within a  
Staff's length of the old dame. She  
Meanwhile, was making the best of  
Her way, with singular speed for so  
Aged a woman, and mumbling  
Some indistinct words... a prayer,  
Doubtless.. as she went. The traveler  
Put forth his staff and touched her  
Withered neck with what seemed

The serpent's tail.<sup>14</sup>

and that the purpose of their journey is to join in an unspecified but obviously unholy ritual. Goodman expresses reluctance. As their journey continues Brown discovers others are also going to the meeting, many of them his townsfolk whom he had considered exemplary Christian, including his minister and deacon and the woman who taught him his catechism. He is astonished and disheartened and determines, once again, to turn back. But then he hears his wife voice and realizes that she is one of them. Recognizing that he has lost his Faith (in both senses), he now resolves to carry out his original intention and enthusiastically joins the procession; "My Faith is gone... There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name. Come, devil; for to thee is this world given."<sup>15</sup>

At the ceremony, which is carried at a rocky altar deep in the forest, the new converts are called to come forth. He and Faith approach the altar and, as they are about to be anointed in blood to seal their alliance with wickedness;

And there they stood, the only pair, as it  
Seemed, who were yet hesitating on the  
Verge of wickedness in this dark world.  
A basin was hollowed, naturally, in the  
Rock. Did it contain water, reddened by  
The lurid light? Or was it blood? Or,  
Perchance, a liquid flame? Herein did  
The shape of evil dip his hand and  
Prepare to lay the mark of baptism  
Upon their foreheads, that they might  
Be partakers of the mystery of sin,  
More conscious of the secret guilt of

Others, both in deed and thought,  
than they could now be of their own.<sup>16</sup>

the husband looks at his wife and cries," look up to heaven and resist the wicked one whether Faith obeys he has no idea.

Arriving back his home the next morning, Goodman Brown is uncertain whether his experience was real or only a dream, but he is never –theless deeply shaken. His view of his neighbors is distorted by his memories of that night. He becomes a suspicious and cynical man, wary of everyone around him, including his wife Faith. The story concludes with this dismal statement; " And when he had lived long, and was borne to his grave...they carved no hopeful verse upon his tombstone, for his dying hour was gloom".

Hawthorne's tale eloquently depicts how inaccurate perception can be and how often ambiguity attends reality or illusion covers it and, therefore, how recognition of these complications should discourage simplistic judgment. In the forest with his companion, for instance, Brown is shaken by the revelation that Puritan community and his own family are not as perfectly virtuous as the seem, and he strongly leaps to the extravagant conclusion that they are totally wicked.<sup>17</sup>

The protagonist seems to be a good young man , readers are therefore to sympathize with him and to overlook the considerable amount of evidence introduced throughout the tale that indicates that most of what he experiences on his night journey into the forest is a dream, because he never suspects that, his impressions are not to be accepted as prima facie truths but are to be interpreted.

When Hawthorne wrote the story, he was already a master of symbolism, allegory, ambiguity, and irony, four of the story's outstanding features. As with John Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress , each character in Hawthorne's tale has symbolic value. The central personage of young Goodman Brown, who symbolizes youth( although he is no longer young at the end) and goodness ( although that value is qualified), focuses the story into an allegory of the plight of every human being who seeks to achieve and maintain mature integrity in a murky world.<sup>18</sup>

Hawthorne handles the details of the meeting with exquisite irony. Brown we are told, "passed a crook of the road" and looking forward "the figure of a man, in a grave and decent attire". The subtle pun " crook of the road" can refer both to a bend in the road and to the devil, who is believed to bend minds and steal souls.

It is important to note that the narrator never refers to the devil by that name; he is always a "figure," or "elder person," "traveller" "the other' or some such term. The narrator never says the devil is present; Brown convinces himself that he literally meets the devil incarnate. If Brown expected to find the devil in red, with horns, and tail, he is surprised to find only the "figure" of a man, possibly ominous only in that his attire is "grave". The figure not only looks like a Puritan, he even resembles Brown. By such clever touches, Hawthorne suggests that evil is not "out there" but inside of us.<sup>19</sup>

The end of the story is the more tragic because the persisting consequences on Brown of his dreams are baseless and unnecessary. He is unable to cope with humans who though not saints are yet more good than bad. He continues to live with his wife, Faith,

despising her, and yet begets children with her. It is a horrifying picture of how delusion can poison even the most beautiful gifts that life has to offer and pervert legitimate and innocent happiness into gloom;

...when the congregation were singing a  
a holy psalm, he could not listen because  
an anthem of sin rushed loudly upon his  
ear and drowned all the blessed strain. When  
the minister spoke from the pulpit with  
power and fervid eloquence, and, with his  
hand on the open Bible, of the sacred truths  
of our religion, and of saint-like lives and  
triumphant deaths, and of future bliss or  
misery unutterable, then did Goodman  
Brown turn pale, dreading lest the roof  
Should thunder down upon the blasphemer  
And his hearers.<sup>20</sup>

While the story undercutting belief in the literal existence of the devil and witches, it proposes that the mere knowledge of evil can be sufficiently destructive by itself if indulged and acted upon. Furthermore, the attendant belief that one is the only virtuous and infallible person is itself a form of evil because it bases action on a fallacy and blinds one to see goodness in the world. Young Goodman is most vulnerable when he rejects the wholesome influences of other human beings- especially those who earned and deserved his trust, his wife and his friends.<sup>21</sup>

**Notes**

- 1-Pearson Norman Holmes(ed.), *The Hawthorne Treasury: The Complete Novels and Selected Tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, New York: The Modern Library, 1999, p.234.
- 2- Ibid., p.235.
- 3- Barna Mark Richard, " *Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Unpardonable -a-parable*" [www.answer.com/topic/the-minister-black sin](http://www.answer.com/topic/the-minister-black-sin/)" (http:// 2-2-2010, p.4.
- 4- Pearson, p.236.
- 5- Gorman Herbert, *Hawthorne: A Study in Solitude*, New York: George H. Doran Company, 1927, p.19.
- 6-Egan Kane, " *The Adulteress in the Market-Place: Hawthorne and The Scarlet Letter*", *Studies in the Novel*, Vol.27, 1995, p.26.
- 7- Nathaniel Hawthorne, ( Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library [http:// etext Virginia edu/etcbin/ =images/ ... 4-2-2010.p.3](http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/=/images/...4-2-2010.p.3).
- 8-Timothy Montbriand, ([http:// www. Answer.com/ topic/the-minister- s- black- veil – a- parable](http://www.answer.com/topic/the-minister-s-black-veil-a-parable)) 5-3-2010, p.5.
- 9- Nathaniel Hawthorne, p.4.
- 10- Ibid., p. 5.
- 11-Edward Jonathan, " *Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended*", *Basic Writings*, New York: Penguin Books, 1966.
- 12- Hawthorne, p.6.
- 13- Ibid., p.8.
- 14- Nathaniel Hawthorne, ( Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library [http:// etext Virginia edu/etcbin/ =images/ ... 4-2-2010.p.1](http://etext.virginia.edu/etcbin/=/images/...4-2-2010.p.1)

15- *ibid.*, p.4.

16-*Ibid.*, p.5.

17- Herman Melville, " *Hawthorne and His Mosses*", *Tales, Poems, and other writings*, New York: Modren Library, 2002, p.65.

18- *Ibid.*, p.68.

19- Daniel Hoffman, *Form and Fable in American Fiction*, New York : Oxford University Press, 1961.

20-Hawthorne, p.8.

21- Summery of *Yong Goodman Brown* (<http://www.articlemyriad.com> Summery- Goodman – hawthorne-htm)

### **Conclusion**

Nathaniel Hawthorne is known in his writing for his criticism of the teachings of Puritan. " *Yong Goodman Brown*", and " *The Minister's Blake Veil*" are no different as they seek to expose his perceived hypocrisy in Puritan doctrine. Their doctrine teaches that all men are inherently evil and they strive to make each person realize his sinful nature. However, Puritans present themselves as pure, holy, righteous, moral people, when according to their very own teachings, they are fueled by sin and evil.

Hawthorne's stories are, apparently, more concerned about the discovery of evil, and the true nature of humans, rather than believing in the pervasiveness of sin.

In both of the two stories, the heroes are obsessed with the idea evil. They seem to be sinners, but without identifiable sins. *Young Goodman* has a dream in which he discovers the dark side of human nature, and the falseness of his supposedly virtuous

townsfolk, including his wife. While Hooper, in "The Minister Black Veil", covers his face with a black veil. The veil is transformed from an object into a symbol, significant in its black color and in its ability to hide and to shroud.

The veil may refer to the original sin which becomes part of human nature, according to the Puritanical teachings. Hooper wears that veil to remind everyone of his unpardonable sin. Or it could mean a certain sin that is committed by Hooper, and he just tries to hide his face out of fear and shame.

But what ends does Hawthorne choose for his heroes? Both of them are ruined as sinners. Their deaths are a matter of gloom.

They seclude themselves from their societies. Goodman is unable to understand the nature of human beings, who are not angels and yet more good than bad. Hooper, on the other side, is a desperate person who refuses to admit his sin. It was better for him to reveal the truth in an attempt to expiate the sin. They become withdrawn persons and the fact that they preserve their secret sin damages their body and soul.

Accordingly, many of Hawthorne's secret sinners appear as socially ostracized individuals or as solitary wanderers. Hawthorne remarked that " never was seen such headlong eagerness in pursuit of an object that could not possibly be attained". then the only sin, in Hawthorne's belief , is the secret obsession with sin. It is a major error that man lives within the boundaries of his sin rather than jumping out of these boundaries and trying to diagnose and fix it.

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