Veiled Sin: Unraveling Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil"

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The uncanny and the sublime are, in a way, the conjoined twins of Gothic literature; they permeate throughout the literary canon of the genre and, though they exist as distinct concepts, share much in common. This remains true when tackling Nathaniel Hawthorne's work, "The Minister's Black Veil", wherein Reverend Hooper, the minister of a Puritan congregation in nineteenth century Connecticut, dons a mysterious veil that sends his parishioners into a frenzy. The veil seems innocuous, yet holds undeniable power, imbuing within Hooper an almost supernatural ability that not only transforms his sermons, but startles his congregation with its uncanniness, and the sublime nature that accompanies it. In that sense, this paper will explore the veil as a conduit through which the sublime, uncanny, and the supernatural manifest, and how these elements work due to the potency of the Puritan conceptualization of sin.

To properly place the veil within the context of the uncanny and the sublime, we first have to establish what these concepts are. Accordingly, we have to turn our attention to the eccentric and infamous psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, who popularized the concept of the uncanny in his eponymous 1919 essay. Here, Freud defined the uncanny as "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar." (Freud, 1-2). Boiled down, the uncanny, in the Freudian sense, is something familiar yet warped, leading to an uncomfortable, gut-churning sensation of discomfort. In the context of the gothic, the uncanny can also include not just the strange and familiar but also the interplay between revealed and concealed, that which we know, and that which we do not yet understand: "one's home becomes threatening; the person one is talking to is not who/what they seemed." (Bacon, 2). This strangeness, particularly in the context of a culture as rigidly structured as that of Puritan society, helps fuel this uncanniness; additionally, however, it can almost cause a more extreme reaction, one that not only inspires terror, but as we shall see with the sublime, a feeling on unwitting awe.

Closely linked to the uncanny is the concept of the sublime: something extraordinary, straddling the edge between natural and supernatural, something that inspires awe. However, especially in terms of the gothic, it is crucial to note that the sublime does not equate to beauty; in his 1757 treatise, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Edmund Burke made the distinction: terror is a crucial element of the sublime, as "it is

productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling." (111). Though other philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant, disagreed on how Burke separated the sublime from the beautiful, one concept held: the sublime is a mingled feeling of awe and terror. When we understand how both the uncanny and the sublime deal with terror, heightened emotional reactions, dread, and the natural versus the supernatural, we can see how these concepts can gel together and both be in existence simultaneously. It is also essential for us to understand these two concepts, for as we will see in the following paragraphs, understanding the uncanny and the sublime becomes integral to untangling the complexities of "The Minister's Black Veil."

If, as noted above, the uncanny itself evokes feelings of unease, dread, and terror, we can see these emotions aptly displayed in the reactions of Hooper's congregation. "Our parson has gone mad!" cries one parishioner upon seeing Hooper donning the veil; another woman "of delicate nerves was forced to leave the meeting-house." (3). It is clear that much of the knee-jerk reactions towards the veil arise from its peculiarity and the sense that it has somehow changed Reverend Hooper: he has "changed himself into something awful." (Carnochan, 186). Furthermore, Hooper himself is struck by the uncanniness of the veil upon himself, as he sees himself in a reflection, involving "his own spirit in the horror with which it overwhelmed others." (6). All of these moments seem to suggest a sudden aversion to the veil and a signal that something has changed about Reverend Hooper; he is startling, though familiar to his congregation, horrifying to himself and others around him. However, a simple piece of black fabric on its own cannot possibly cause such furor; upon closer inspection, perhaps a more otherworldly element of the uncanny is at play within the dark fabric of the veil.

Elements of the supernatural are closely linked to the notion of the uncanny and the sublime and, in turn, to gothic literature as a whole; because of this, it is significant that the veil in "The Minister's Black Veil" also appears to wield certain supernatural overtones. Part of the uncanniness of the veil, indeed, arises from the supernatural allusions the congregation makes in its use; after a funeral, one woman remarks that "the minister and the maiden's spirit were walking hand in hand." (5). Though Hooper is not literally walking hand-in-hand with a spirit, it is interesting that the parishioners seem to view the veil as imbuing Hooper with a closer link to the afterlife, with black veils closely associated with mourning. Beyond potentially giving Hooper greater insight into the afterlife, it seems donning the veil does indeed bestow upon Hooper a sort of supernatural ability (Morsberger, 455). The beginning of the text notes that, while an effective preacher, he was

certainly not a powerful one until, upon donning the veil, his sermons became the most "powerful effort that they had ever heard from their pastor's lips." (3). Because of the veil, "a subtle power was breathed into his words. Each member of the congregation, the most innocent girl and the man of hardened breast, felt as if the preacher had crept upon them behind his awful veil and discovered their hoarded iniquity of deed and thought." (4). Herein the uncanny rears its head - Hooper is the same, though changed, in this case, into a more effective minister. But the sublime is not far behind, wherein the parishioners are in abject awe of Hooper's ability but also reduced to fear over the veil, where the "unsought pathos came hand in hand with awe," to fill the congregation with "pent up amazement." (4). Again, there is no doubt fear in the veil - partly, as we will explore shortly, due to the unknowns behind it - but also an impressive quality that shakes his congregation to its bones. Hooper becomes "a man of awful power over souls that were in agony or sin." (4). Author James Reece furthers this concept, arguing that Hooper's action is meant to "increase the effectiveness of his ministry." (93). According to Reece, Hooper "appears to have dedicated himself wholly to God by solemnly vowing that, in return for divine assistance in moving sinners to salvation, he would conceal his face from mortal sight throughout the remainder of his life." (95).

Of course, discussing the supernatural elements of the veil and the powerful reactions of the congregation that run the gamut of the uncanny and the sublime are incomplete without ascertaining a particular reason why the veil triggers these reactions. A significant driving force behind these emotions is the concept of sin. Sin and sinners run throughout the text; Hooper explains that the veil symbolizes sin yet refuses to answer whether it represents a specific act committed or a "general awareness of sinful humanity." (Morsberger, 455). Regardless of intention, the response from the parishioners is strong, evoking feelings of the uncanny and the sublime. Why this is the case, perhaps, lies in the Puritan conceptualization of sin. Puritan teachings are heavily preoccupied with sin, a "consequence of their doctrine of total depravity." (455). William James calls this excessive preoccupation a disease; "Repentance, according to… healthy-minded Christians, means getting away from the sin, not groaning and writhing over its commission." (126). Because Puritan theology believes in sin as not just an isolated act but a condition of humanity, fear and dread become an inevitable part of life. In donning the veil, Hooper only exacerbates this fear by not disclosing why the veil is being worn in the first place; the congregation is forced to confront their unease, inviting speculation and introspection. Here, the

veil not only appears to act as a shroud but, in a somewhat unnatural sense, a mirror, reflecting onto the congregation their own imperfections and sinful nature, thus triggering the reactions that lend themselves to the uncanny and the sublime.

The sublime, the uncanny, and the supernatural are critical components of the gothic literary genre; they evoke a particular mood, feelings of dread, fear, terror, and awe; perhaps most importantly, they can be molded to suit many circumstances. That appears to be what has happened in The Minister's Black Veil; by donning the veil, Reverend Hooper channels the forces of the uncanny and the sublime as ascertained through the reactions of his congregation, running the gamut of awe to abject fright; furthermore, the veil appears to imbue within Hooper a supernatural ability to not only become a better preacher but to confront his congregation with their sinfulness, rooted deep within Puritan theology. In this way, the veil operates as a powerful symbol that blurs the boundaries between the known and the unknown, the visible and the invisible, the mundane and the transcendent; it elicits powerful emotions, destabilizes the community, and all the while rooting its use of the uncanny and the sublime to the greatest of Puritan horrors: sin.

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