HAWTHORNE'S PREOCCUPATION WITH THE DEMONIC AND THE MYSTERY OF EVIL

Smaranda ŞTEFANOVICI, Associate Professor Ph.D.,
"Petru Maior" University of Tîrgu Mureş

Abstract: By the 1850s, imaginative literature became intense, personal and symbolic. A preoccupation with the demonic and the mystery of evil marked the works of Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, etc. American writers of Gothic terror novels, they focused on the very period when the superstitious lore of witchcraft was being formed, being a good way of dealing with the newly founded society which lacked history, tradition or manners whatsoever. Hawthorne's use of the Gothic in his tale entitled "The Minister's Black Veil" is a particularly good illustration of his way of adapting conventional materials to allegorical and psychological uses.

Keywords: liminal being, demonic double, moral allegory, Black Veil, mystery of sin

Motto:
"In Hawthorne's hands the Gothic is performed: it is not allowed to direct the form of the narrative but is instead manipulated and distorted for purposes that include a recognition of its origins in destabilized personal and political situations. His tales are full of magic or fetish objects: speaking objects, fatal shawls, broken fountains, ghostly prophecies, artificial flowers, and cryptic veils; but these are characteristically unpacked to show their range of historical and personal meanings" (Lloyd-Smith 33).

British vs. American Gothic Romance

Romantic writers placed increasing value on the free expression of emotion and displayed increasing attention to the psychic states of their characters. Heroes and heroines exhibited extremes of sensitivity and excitement. The novel of terror became the profitable literary 'indispensable' that it remains today as well. Writers of Gothic terror novels sought to arouse in their readers a tempestuous sense of the remote, the supernatural, and the terrifying by describing castles and landscapes illuminated by moonlight and haunted by ghosts and spirits. A special Gothic preoccupation with the demonic and the mystery of evil marked the works of Poe, Hawthorne, Melville, and a host of lesser writers.

The traditions immediately antecedent to the American romance, most of them coming from England, were allegorical, Gothic and transcendental. Allegory was transformed into symbolism, from the Gothic, temperance and sternness were taken, while the metaphor, as a structural device used by the transcendentalists, penetrated more and more into what was to become later the romance tradition in American fiction; built upon the almost forgotten species of romance used in European literature, the American type of romance mingled the severity of New England Puritanism, the rational and skeptical spirit of the Enlightenment and the imaginative liberty of Transcendentalism. Nathaniel Hawthorne, by excellence, used the

BDD-A23402 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:52:13 UTC)

three American traditions (Puritan, Enlightenment and Transcendental) to create a unique form of Gothic romance.

The Gothic novel, a form of the novel in which magic, mystery and horrors abound, was practiced for the first time by Charles Brockden Brown in England. Later on, great American novelists such as H. Melville, N. Hawthorne, H. James, W. Faulkner, M. Twain, used it as a perfect substitute for that part of the national history which the Americans did not have. At the same time, in its fascination with the past and with supernatural forces, Gothicism focused on the very period when the superstitious lore of witchcraft was being formed, being a good way of dealing with the newly founded society which lacked history, tradition or manners whatsoever. Early colonists (Lloyd-Smith 37) were well aware of the new territory they settled in, of its wildness, of its land that promised a lot while being a source of threat and fear as well due to slavery, to gender issues, to race issues and to ambiguity of relationships in general. "In essence a reactionary form, the Gothic uses negativism chaos and wrongdoing in an attempt to return to a safe and moralizing pattern of traumas and guilt, anxieties concerning class and gender, fear of resolution, worries about the developing powers of science … a fear of colonial otherness" (6-7). Hence the Gothic characters are terrorized unreasonably of what might happen, are in a continuous mental interchange between reason and emotion, reality and imagination, both opposed and related to one another (8). "They are often showed as struggling in a web of repetitions caused by their unawareness of their own unconscious drives and motives" (2).

Although exposed to British models as well, the unique cultural conditions in America led to a different way of expression. The American Gothic is devoid of elements alluding to a civilized history (castles, etc.) such as the British one is. It relates to slavery, miscegenation, Native Americans, wilderness, fear due to an unknown and unexplored territory. The American Gothic novel unlike the British/European Gothic novel substituted "the wildness and the city for the subterranean room and corridors of the monastery, or the remote house for the castle, dark and dangerous woods for the bandit infested mountains of Italy" (Lloyd-Smith 4). The cave came to replace the European dungeon, the haunted forest was used instead of the haunted castle, nature becoming the incarnation of evil. Among these unique conditions the author mentions "the frontier experience, with its inherent solitude and potential violence; the Puritan inheritance; fear of European subversion and anxieties about popular democracy which was then a new experiment; the relative absence of developed 'society'; and very significantly, racial issues concerning both slavery and the Native Americans" (4). Exploring extremes, "the Gothic tends to reinforce […] culturally prescribed doctrines of morality and propriety […] with punishment and retribution in the eventual return to psychic normality (5).

Early American Gothicism approached themes connected to real horrors such as trauma and guilt of race and slavery, or fear of miscegenation, the settlers' terror of the Indians and the wilderness, and suppressed recognition of Native American genocide. Other social, political and class fears, such as the fear of immigrant groups, are also themes traced (Cf. Lloyd-Smith 9).

Burke's *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756) shows how "even the emotion of fear might be pleasurable in the right context" (qtd. in Lloyd-Smith 27). Even descriptions of pain might produce powerful

BDD-A23402 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:52:13 UTC)

emotional reactions in the reader. There was a growing interest in inward contemplation, in intuition and subjective knowledge that could result in deeper knowledge than rationality.

Hawthorne, too, was a disciple of the English Gothic school, but not in what it had grotesque and absurd; he followed the track of Ann Radcliffe, who explained apparently supernatural elements as having natural causes. He, like Poe, theorized the darker side of the Romantic ideal according to which inspiration is found within the self, and it is best realized at night and in solitude. Hawthorne's wide use of Gothic elements in his short romance "The Minister's Black Veil" is going to be illustrated shortly.

Hawthorne's Use of the American Gothic Romance

Hawthorne's critics "have generally considered [his] literary methods as manifestations of his temperament and, in particular, his use of the Gothic convention as evidence of limited imaginative resources of morbidity […] but the interpreters of Hawthorne have often lost sight of important contemporary influences upon his literary practice and important motive for it. Hawthorne's use of the Gothic is a particularly good illustration of his way of adapting conventional materials to allegorical and psychological uses" (Doubleday 250). Indeed, as Doubleday states, Hawthorne's use of the Gothic elements is not used primarily to arouse terror and horror but to embody a moral or to symbolize a condition of mind or soul.

Romance suits the Gothic convention and adds to the moral Hawthorne wants to convey. The Gothic is associated with the past while similarly rejecting it. In the preface to *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851), Hawthorne emphasizes the role of romance as a "tale" that attempts "to connect a by-gone time with the very Present that is flitting away from us" (2). He speaks about our limited capacity to understand the present because of its rapid transformation. That is why in Hawthorne's Gothic story, characters are connected to the past, but also to the present and future through the burden of the ancestral sin.

N.Hawthorne. Conventionalism and Modernism

The religious and cultural background of N.Hawthorne reveals his ambivalent and ambiguous attitude towards life, which makes him both a conventional Puritan writer as well as a modern writer. He was born and lived in New England, Salem, Massachusetts, in a most Puritan community, who strictly believed in man's original sin, predestination and eternal damnation. Besides the Puritan faith, he adhered to Deism, a rational form of religion in which man is regarded as improvable morally speaking, he can gain redemption on the Earth through his own acts and contribution. Enlightenment also preached man's possibility to be redeemed through education. Living during a time (19^{th} c) when many intellectuals were disappointed by the American life, Hawthorne also adhered to a new philosophy, transcendentalism that encouraged personal choices and the resulting consequences. He longed for 'the magnetic chain of humanity', in which love and 'sympathy' connect the living and the dead, the material and the spiritual, the rational and the irrational, the head and the heart, the past and the future, the good and the evil, thus acknowledging the dual nature of human being. His organic view of life dwells upon this duality of life, good and evil. According to him, the outside reality lacks meaning while the truth of the human heart (psychological, social, or historical, we do not know which) is the only valid truth. His views

BDD-A23402 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:52:13 UTC)

make him both a conventional Puritan writer (his assumption of original sin – "In Adam's fall we have sinned all") and a modern Anti-Puritan writer who believes in man's redemption on the Earth through the educational function of sin.

Hawthorne's Gothic space is filled with morality, sin, guilt, doubt, shadow and dark imagination, which allow for deep allegorical meaning and symbolic terms. Hawthorne himself was a liminal human being with an unearthly aspect, placed between the real world and the fairy land, where the Actual and the Imaginary may meet through the medium of romance. However, according to Lloyd-Smith, rather than to develop fully Gothic narratives, he uses mirrors, magical portraits, and the effects of indirect, blurred light to produce a mood of Gothic strangeness (33).

Hawthorne's Demonic Doubles

Melville, considers Lloyd-Smith (34), recognized a hell-fired darkness in Hawthorne's writing. The demonic double he found in the Puritan experience deformed the human 'heart', hence his blackness of vision, his 'negative Romanticism' that made him concern with the dark side of society and the role of evil that lied within the self. His demonic figures help further his individual literary and moralistic projects (Derek 77). Ambivalence and ambiguity characterize his writing in the sense that, Puritanically, he uses writing as a means to repent and to overcome sin and evil, while in his short story "The Devil in Manuscript" (1835), for instance, he speaks about the devilish character of writing.

Hawthorne's tales are rich in atmosphere and suspense, with plots centering on subjects as diverse as witchcraft, revenge, the power of guilt, and a passion of the beautiful. His moral allegories read like sermons about the presence of sin in the human heart and he allegorizes the moral conflict "within his soul, and, by extension, those of all people" (Derek 83). He revisits the same themes and embodies them in the same demonic characters. "Hawthorne's fiends and devils, rarely presented in corporeal form, generally prove to be a force that corrupts mankind in the realm of the psyche" (77). The Puritan imagery, particularly that of hell, has its roots in dark and nightmarish visions, bonds to the past, the Puritan culture of condemnation, predestination, and original sin. One of the most frequent images is that of a devil within a character or the use of a devil as a psychological symbol; these images are supported by Gothic language as well. He frequently uses words like 'devilish', 'demonic', 'fiendish', 'hellish', 'awful', 'horrible', 'dreadful', 'sorrowful'. Outsiders (Indians, witches, Catholics, etc.) are associated with the Devil due to the Puritan doctrine according to which God elects those few who will be atoned on the Earth. The supernatural is added a natural explanation, thus eliminating the distinction between reality and imagination. To that end, the dream trope, Derek says, is used to allow for a rational explanation of events. All these dualistic, apparently clashing forces make him come to a conclusion about his place within life (a synthesis of love and fear) and the nature of the existence of evil (a complementary force to the existence of good).

Hawthorne's Gothic Short Romance "The Minister's Black Veil"

In "The Minister's Black Veil" (Twice-Told Tales, 1837, first published in The Token, 1835), Hawthorne studies the effects of secret sin on the individual and his relations with the Puritan community. Mr. Hooper, the parson of the town of Milford, Massachusetts, has

BDD-A23402 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:52:13 UTC)

decided to cover his face permanently with a black veil/piece of crepe hanging down from his forehead to his mouth in repentance for an unknown wrong. This stirred the villagers' curiosity who started imagining all kind of stories regarding the minister's strange decision to hide his face. His action isolates him from his parishioners, but, at the same time, it empowers him to speak vehemently to them about the need to redeem themselves.

I have chosen this tale due to its most autobiographical character. Reverend Hooper is a mirror of Hawthorne himself. Paradoxically, a pastor named Hooper held the funeral sermon on Hawthorne's death. Hawthorne also used to dress in black, often concealed his face from others by wearing a black cloak. Believing, if not doctrinally, in original sin, Hawthorne was also convinced that all people wear a mask/a veil on their faces. Appearances are deceiving, all people have a dark side, a tendency to sin. This Puritan doctrine is counterbalanced by the modern doctrine according to which looking into one's heart and not judging others can make us self-aware of the fact that there is both good and evil in all of us.

The black veil is the terror motif Hawthorne uses to preach a moral symbolically. For unexplained reasons and for more than 20 years till and even beyond grave, the "minister" of the tale's title has kept his face hidden from his congregation, his fiancée, and even from himself: "This veil is a type and a symbol, and I am bound to wear it ever, both in light and darkness, in solitude and before the gaze of multitudes, and as with 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!" (45).

The effect of the veil is so powerful that it creates a feeling of discomfort in the people the Reverend connects with. By denying access to his 'external eyes' he also denies access to his 'internal gaze'; nobody can infer his feelings, his desires, his attitudes. At first Reverend Hooper's mysterious veil astonished, amused and confused them: "What has good Parson Hooper got upon his face?, cried the sexton in astonishment" (37); "Are you sure it is our parson?" (37); "Our parson has gone mad" (38); "Something must surely be amiss with Mr. Hooper's intellect" (41). Gradually, his ghost-like figure triggered 'horror' and 'dread' from his parishioners. The veil started to be interpreted as "a fearful secret" (44), "an innocent sorrow" (46), isolation and fright (47), "guilty conscience" (48). Concealing his features, Hooper renders those around him less 'powerful', more vulnerable in their relationships with himself. His inner world is impenetrable by the congregation, by his fiancée and by himself. His own antipathy to the veil makes him avoid mirrors and still fountains "lest he should be affrighted by himself" (48). In the eyes of the congregation he changes from a "good" person into "something awful, only by hiding his face" (38), into a "bugbear"(47). People treat him as one unfamiliar to them: they "can't really feel as if Mr. Hooper's face was behind that piece of crepe" (38).

Whatever the motive, one appalling effect is his separation from all human contacts: "That piece of crepe, to their imagination, seemed to hang down from his heart, the symbol of a fearful secret between him and them" (44). The veil becomes a Gothic physical object; it is moralized and becomes a type, the universal garment of secrecy. The question arises: "Why is the evil worn?". At the moment of his death, the minister sees "on every visage a Black Veil!" (52). Another question arises: "Why should he see that?" The evil worn is the people's fakeness and hypocrisy that they display on their faces, while the black veil symbolizes the impenetrable moral darkness at the core of the human heart: "All through life that piece of

BDD-A23402 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:52:13 UTC)

crepe had hung between him and the world: it had separated him from cheerful brotherhood and woman's love" and kept him in his own heart, that "saddest of all prisons"…. that "darksome chamber" (50).

The decision to wear the veil belongs to him alone. He is aware of the effects of the veil that alienates him from his congregation and from his "plighted wife", making her cancel their wedding plans, although he begs her to have "patience": "There shall be no veil over my face, no darkness between our souls! It is but a mortal veil – it is not for eternity! Oh! You know how lonely I am, and how frightened, to be alone behind my black veil. Do not leave me in this miserable obscurity for ever!" (47).

By refusing Elizabeth, his future wife's smiling invitation "to lay aside [his] black veil" (45) and "look [her] in the face" (47), the reverend interrupts all possible verbal and mental communication with her, which "highlights her frustration" (47). He fails her, sacrifices their relationship, which makes her suffer all the more because she does not expect this outcome. Although she leaves him, the woman's Gothic role of a victim is confirmed at the end of the tale when the nurse, "whose calm affection had endured thus long in secrecy, in solitude, amid the chill of age, and would not perish, even at the dying hour" (49) was recognized as "Who but Elizabeth!" (49).

Human communication is artificial, seems to be Hawthorne's message here. Hooper explains to his parishioners that all human beings wear a Black Veil, that is a social, historical or psychological mask that alienates us from the world. Hawthorne uses the sermon as a Gothic strategy to convey a moral message that people refuse to acknowledge. In Hawthorne's transcendentalist view, appearances are misleading, and hypocrisy is the worst 'sin' of the Puritan society. Puritans must assume responsibility for their own choices in life and reveal 'the truth of the moral heart', that is, they should not hide from their own consciousness. Moreover, as Hooper emphasizes, "hidden motives and unacknowledged feelings inevitably color all human relationships, including the most cherished of bonds. His own 'antipathy to the veil' he persists in wearing is one indicator of the sometimes painful inner solitude, which we all, as agents of deception, must experience. In the end we find ourselves alone behind our self-serving social 'faces'" (Saunders 430).

Hawthorne's concern with morality provides the framework for this symbolic tale of secret sin. Constantly afflicted with man's hypocritical masking of sinful activity, Hawthorne here is interested not so much in the nature of the hidden wrong as in the results of a penance which isolates man from the world in which he lives. The tale is a parable which illustrates a moral attitude: "There is an hour to come when all of us shall cast aside our veils" (45), Reverend Hooper says. On his deathbed, the minister cries, "I look around me and, lo! On every visage a Black Veil!" (52). The real devil is the one lurking within each individual. Hawthorne's moral, which is placed into Hooper's mouth, is that there is a black veil on every face, so why tremble at him alone?

Hawthorne uses the Gothic lengthily in this short romance and in the following, guided by Thomson's *Glossary of Literary Gothic Terms,* I am going to give some examples from the text:

- *Gothic settings:* the parish, the graveyard, "Mr. Hooper's eyes were so weakened by the midnight light" (40);

BDD-A23402 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:52:13 UTC)

- *Gothic context:* the funeral of a young lady, souls in torment: people trembled at the funeral of a young maiden, a wedding where "the bride has the death-like paleness of the maiden who had been buried a few hours before" (43);

- *thematic and/or Gothic elements*: the funeral of a young lady, corpses, coffins, mourners, funeral prayer;

- *Gothic counterfeit:* the text is presented as a recovery of an ancient text. Another clergyman in New England, Mr. Joseph Moody, of York, Maine also wore a veil on his face, due to another reason: as a young man he accidentally killed a beloved friend;

- *the grotesque* and *the demonic double/ the doppelgänger*, which is often the ghostly counterpart of a living person: "a little imp covers his face with an old black handkerchief" (43); "the black veil makes him ghost-like from head to foot" (41); "ghost and fiend" (48); "an ambiguity of sin and sorrow" (48); convulsive struggles… bewildered soul (50); "dark old man" (51);

- *an atmosphere of suspense/mystery/oppressiveness/fear/darkness*: "the mystery concealed behind it"; "people trembled at the funeral prayer (42); "there was a feeling of dread, neither plainly confessed nor carefully concealed, which caused each to shift the responsibility upon another" (44); "were the veil but cast aside, they might speak freely of it, but not till then"(44); the wearing of the veil was reckoned as "a type of innocent sorrow" (46), "the consciousness of a secret sin" (46), "a symptom of mental disease" (46), "an eccentric whim" (47);

- *Gothic vocabulary*: "the old people of the village" (37); "darkened aspect to all living and inanimate things" (38); pale-faced congregation… fearful a sight, the sermon he preaches is about secret sin, sad mysteries (39); Mr. Hooper's stranger's visage and melancholy voice, dreadful hour (42); Mr. Hooper's melancholy smile (44)

- *transformation/ metamorphosis*: Mr. Hooper becomes a stranger to his congregation greeted with strange and bewildered looks (40-41); the people's feelings: wonder-struck, they believe he has gone mad (38); he has changed himself into something awful, only by hiding his face (38); a fearful sight (39); "indecorous confusion"; "pent-up amazement"; strange and bewildered looks (40-41), afraid to be alone with him or neglect to invite him to bless the food (41); "good Mr. Hooper was irreparably a bugbear" (47); in the end he becomes Father Hooper;

- *superstitions, supernatural explained, rational vs. irrational*: "the interview between the dead and the living" (42); "I had a fancy… that the minister and the maiden's spirit were walking hand in hand" (42); "a cloud seemed to have rolled duskily from beneath the black crape and dimmed the light of the candles" (43); the corpse of a young girl slightly shuddered when the veil hung straight down from the minister's face when he bent over the body (42);

- *necromancy* – the dark art of communicating with the dead: "the minister and the maiden's spirit were walking hand in hand" (42); "the tremulous hand of the bridegroom, and 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" (43);

Elements of *romance* include "dark" atmosphere, the psychological plot, the imprisonment motive, the theme of guilt, strangeness within the familiar (Mr. Hooper's face compared to 'a stranger's visage'), *foreshadowing* ("a material emblem had separated him from happiness through the horrors which it shadowed forth"/ 47), and most importantly the

BDD-A23402 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:52:13 UTC)

allegory of the *demonic double* ("his whole person makes him ghost-like from head to foot"/ 41) and *the symbol* of the veil: "a type and a symbol" (45), "mysterious emblem" (39), "a terrible thing" (41), "horrible black veil which had added deeper gloom to the funeral, and could portend nothing but evil to the wedding" (43), "dismal shade" (45).

Conclusion

Gothic romance formed an important bedrock of Hawthorne's work, ever present and often employed for definite artistic purposes. He combined elements of the Gothic romance with elements of the historical and psychological tale. His achievement is unique. This is partly because he had a real sense of the past. America was already an old country to him, with a genuine darkness overhanging its former days, a pure and palpable terror that he could feel. Witchcraft for him was not fiction, it was fact; he still experienced its mystery and its guilt, just as he was peculiarly able to penetrate whatever was most cruel and gloomy in Puritan thought. A 'psychological', 'historical' and 'ambivalent' romancer, Hawthorne was deeply preoccupied with the modern themes of the demonic and the mystery of sin, which are potent forces that shape characters' lives. In this case, it is the reader's task to resolve "the ambiguity of sin or sorrow" raised by Hooper's rhetoric question: "If I hide my face for sorrow, … there is cause enough… and if I cover it for secret sin, what mortal might not do the same?" (46). It is about the impenetrability of every heart, the sinfulness, probably, of every heart; emblematically, the veil on every face.

Works cited

[1] Derek, Maus. "The Devils in Details: The Role of Evil in the Short Fiction of Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol and Nathaniel Hawthorne". *Papers on Language and Literature*, Jan 1, 2002.
[2] Doubleday, Neal Frank. "Hawthorne's Use of Three Gothic Patterns". *College English* 7: 5 (Feb. 1946), 250-262.
[3] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The House of the Seven Gables*. USA: Dover Publications, Inc., 1851.
[4] Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "The Minister's Black Veil. A Parable". *Twice-Told Tales*. London: Frederick Warne & Co., 1893, 37-52.
[5] Lloyd-Smith, Allan. *American Gothic Fiction. An Introduction*. NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 2005.
[6] Saunders, P. Judith. "Hawthorne's Theory of Mind: An Evolutionary Psychological Approach to 'The Minister's Black Veil", *Style* 3/4 (2012): 430. Elibrary. Web.21 Aug. 2013.
[7] Thomson, H. Douglass. *A Glossary of Literary Gothic Terms*. http://www.saylor.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/engl403-1.3.1-A-Glossary-of-Literary-Gothic-Terms.pdf. Web. 22 Aug.2013.

BDD-A23402 © 2013 Editura Universităţii „Petru Maior"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 01:52:13 UTC)