The Minister’s Black Veil

**Literary Focus: Symbol**
A *symbol* is something that has meaning in itself but also stands for something more than itself. You’ve seen the dove used as a symbol of peace. Uncle Sam symbolizes the United States, and the four-leaf clover is a symbol of luck. What other symbols can you think of?

**Reading Skill: Making Inferences**
When you make an *inference* about a character or event, you are making an educated guess. This guess is based on clues in the text and on your own knowledge and experience. You make inferences in everyday life too. For example, your neighbor gets a new puppy. How would you infer what your neighbor is feeling?

**My Experience**
I would love to have a puppy.

**Clue I Observe**
I see my neighbor playing with the puppy and laughing.

**Inference**
My neighbor is very happy.

**Into the Short Story**
This story is set in a New England town during Puritan times. It is about a young minister who shocks his congregation by wearing a black veil over his face when he preaches the Sunday sermon. The minister won’t say why he is wearing the veil, and he won’t take it off. The veil affects characters in the story in different ways. The story looks at how the veil affects the minister’s congregation, his social standing, his relationship with his fiancée, and his entire life.
Based on the Short Story by
Nathaniel Hawthorne

The Minister's Black Veil
A Parable
On a bright Sunday morning the good people of Milford were on their way to church. They paused outside and waited for their minister to appear. When they saw him walking slowly along the road, they were startled to see that he wore a black veil over his face.

On a nearer view the veil seemed to be two folds of crape, which entirely covered his features except for the mouth and chin. He must have been able to see through it, however, because he walked with a steady pace and nodded to some of the people.

“I can’t really feel our good Mr. Hooper’s face is behind that piece of cloth,” said one man.

“I don’t like it,” muttered an old woman. “He has changed himself into something awful by hiding his face.”

“Our parson has gone mad!” cried Goodman Gray, following the minister into the meetinghouse.

There was a general bustle when the minister entered, and everyone stared at him. He approached the pulpit and stood face to face with his congregation, except for the black veil. The veil shook with his breath as he gave out the psalm, read the Scriptures, and looked up to God in prayer. Was the minister trying to hide his face from God as he prayed?

A few people were so upset they had to leave. Perhaps the faces of the congregation were as fearful to the minister as his black veil was to them.

Mr. Hooper was a good preacher, though his method was mildly persuasive rather than thunderous. He spoke softly now of the secret sins that lie in the hearts of all people, those we hide from our nearest and dearest and even try to hide from ourselves. Every listener, even the most innocent, felt that the preacher had crept up on them and discovered their hidden sins.
After the service the people rushed from the church in confusion. They noticed that they felt better when they lost sight of the black veil. Some whispered together, but others went home in silent thought. Others talked and laughed loudly. Some believed they could figure out the mystery. Others said there was no mystery at all, but only that the minister’s eyes were weak and needed to be shaded from the light.

The minister treated everyone with his usual kindness and respect. No one competed for the honor of walking beside him, however, and old Squire Saunders forgot to invite him home for dinner as he usually did. As the minister returned to the parsonage, he noticed all the people staring at him, and a sad smile gleamed faintly from beneath the veil.

“How strange,” said a lady, “that a simple black veil should become such a terrible thing on Mr. Hooper’s face!”

“Something must be wrong with his mind,” said her husband, the town doctor. “That simple veil makes him seem like a ghost.”

“I would not be alone with him for the world,” said the lady. “I wonder he is not afraid to be alone with himself!”

“Men sometimes are so,” said her husband.

The minister presided that afternoon at the funeral of a young lady. Here his black veil seemed appropriate. As he bent over the dead young woman, it seemed that he held the veil so that even she could not see his face. Mr. Hooper gave a tender prayer, full of heartbreak and sorrow and yet filled with divine hope. The people trembled when he prayed that everyone might be ready, as he trusted this young maiden had been, for the dreadful hour that would snatch away the veil from their faces. After the funeral the mourners proceeded to the graveyard with Mr. Hooper following. It seemed to some, as they looked back, that the minister and the dead girl’s spirit were walking hand in hand behind the procession.

3. Squire: a gentleman; the main landowner of a village.
That evening, the handsomest couple in Milford village were to be married. The guests at the wedding awaited the minister's arrival with impatience. 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 mean nothing but evil to the wedding. Everyone felt as though a dark cloud had settled over the joyous occasion. As the minister raised a toast to the couple, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. He himself was now horrified at the sight of the black veil. He shuddered—his lips grew white—and spilled the wine upon the carpet. Then he rushed out into the night where the Earth, too, had on her Black Veil.

The next day, everyone in the village spoke of nothing but the black veil. One playful child put a black hanky over his face, frightening both his playmates and himself.

Nobody had the courage to ask the minister about the veil, although he had always welcomed people's concerns. Finally, a group was chosen to question him, but once they were in his presence, they were unable to speak. The black veil seemed to hang down over the minister's heart, the symbol of a fearful secret between him and them.

The only person in the village who had courage enough to ask him about the veil was Elizabeth, the young woman he had promised to marry. "There is nothing so terrible in this veil," she said, "except that it hides a face I am glad to look upon. Lay it aside, and tell me why you put it on."

"There is an hour to come," he said, "when all of us shall cast aside our veils. Beloved friend, I will wear this piece of cloth till then. I have vowed to wear it always," he continued. "No mortal eye will see it withdrawn, even you."

"What terrible thing has happened to you?" Elizabeth asked.

"It is a sign of mourning," replied Mr. Hooper.

"People will whisper that you hide a secret sin," said Elizabeth.
“If I hide my face for sorrow,” he said, “there is reason enough.
And if I cover it for secret sin, who might not do the same?”

After pleading with him for some time, Elizabeth finally fell silent.
The tears rolled down her cheeks. As she looked at him, the terrors of
the black veil soon took the place of sorrow. She stood before him,
trembling.

“And do you feel it then at last?” he said mournfully.

She did not reply but turned and started to leave the room. “Have
patience with me,” he cried. “It is but a mortal veil—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 desert me!”

“Lift the veil just once,” said she, “and look me in the face.”

“Never! It cannot be!” he replied.

“Then, farewell,” said Elizabeth, and she left.

From that time no more attempts were made to remove the
minister’s black veil or to discover the secret it was supposed to
hide. But the minister could not walk about with peace of mind. The
timid would avoid him, and others would throw themselves purposely
in his way. Children ran off when they saw him coming. He gave up
his usual walk at sunset to the burial ground, for there were always
faces behind the gravestones, peeping at his black veil. It was noticed
that he himself hated the sight of the veil and avoided mirrors. This
convinced some people that he had committed a terrible crime.
The minister seemed to walk in a cloud of sin or sorrow. Love or
sympathy could never reach him.

The black veil had one desirable effect. It made him a more
effective clergyman. Sinners converted to belief because they felt they
had been with him behind the veil, and the dying begged him to
come to them. Strangers came from far away to attend his church. He
was even asked to preach the election sermon for the governor’s
administration.4

4. “election sermon for the governor’s administration”: Hawthorne is referring to Governor
Jonathan Belcher, who governed Massachusetts from 1730–1741.
And thus Mr. Hooper spent a long life, lonely and shrouded in suspicions. He was kind and loving, though unloved. People ignored him when they were healthy and joyous, but they summoned him when they were dying.

Finally, Mr. Hooper lay dying. Elizabeth came to take care of him, and church members surrounded him. He still wore the black veil that had kept him in that saddest of all prisons, his own heart.

His mind was confused now and wavered between the past and the present. But still he would not let the veil be removed. At last, the attending minister announced that death was near. “Are you ready,” he asked Mr. Hooper, “to lift the veil that shuts in time from eternity?”

“Never,” the veiled man cried. With a mighty effort he sat up and spoke. “Why do you tremble at me alone?” he said. “Tremble also at each other! Have men avoided me, and women shown no pity, and children screamed and fled, only for my black veil? What has made this piece of cloth so awful? When all are open and honest and pure with each other, showing their inmost selves, then call me a monster. I look around me and, lo, on every face I see a Black Veil!”

And so he died. They laid him, still veiled, in his coffin and bore him to his grave. Grass has grown for many years on that grave, and the burial stone is grown over with moss. The minister’s face is dust; but awful still is the thought that it rotted beneath the Black Veil!
Symbol

A symbol is something that has meaning itself but also stands for something more than itself. In Hawthorne’s story you have read about the black veil. It is a symbol that separates its wearer from the world. As the story unfolds, the veil takes on different meanings, including sin and sorrow.

You see many symbols every day. Red traffic lights mean “stop.” Two fingers forming a V means “victory.” In the left-hand column below are descriptions of common symbols you probably have seen before. Match them with their meanings in the right-hand column. Draw a line from each symbol to its meaning. One symbol has already been done for you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. an American flag</td>
<td>a. surrender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. scales held up by blindfolded woman</td>
<td>b. freedom; welcome to all</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Statue of Liberty</td>
<td>c. patriotism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. a white flag</td>
<td>d. international cooperation; athletic achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. the five Olympic rings</td>
<td>e. fairness; justice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Theme
Underline at least “Earth . . . shall claim/Thy growth, to be . . . earth again . . . To mix forever with the elements,/To be a brother to the . . . rock/And to the . . . clod.”

Page 48
Vocabulary
Vales means “valleys.” The context clue is that the vales stretch between the hills.

Theme
Some students may find it comforting to be in such great company. Others may find no comfort in the thought, preferring a happier vision of an afterlife.

Page 49
Theme
Possible response: Live your life well, so you will die happily and without fear.

Page 51
Graphic Organizer: Theme Chart
Lines 1–17. Answer provided.
Lines 17–30. When you die, you become one with nature.
Lines 31–57. When you die, you join everyone who ever lived in a great tomb, which is all of nature.
Lines 58–72. Answer provided.
Lines 73–81. Live your life so you will welcome death unafraid.
Overall theme: Death is not frightening because it is a natural part of all life.

From Self-Reliance  Page 52
Page 54
Understanding Metaphors
Possible answer: When plucked, iron strings vibrate powerfully. Emerson compares that vibration to how people feel about the idea “Trust yourself.” It is very powerful.

Understanding Metaphors
Circle “blindly.” Emerson is comparing people who accept society’s beliefs and customs without thinking about them and deciding for themselves whether or not they are right to people who cannot see.

Page 56
Graphic Organizer: Metaphor
1. Imitation destroys a person’s individuality.
2. People have a powerful positive response to the idea of trusting themselves.
3. Answer provided.
4. Unthinking people are scared into always behaving the same way.

Page 57
Vocabulary Development: Developing Vocabulary
Students’ sentences will vary. Sample sentences:
1. I show self-reliance when I do my chores without being reminded.
2. Juliana shows her individuality in the way she dresses.
3. Getting along with others in school requires some conformity of behavior.
4. Class rules are constraints on individual behavior.
5. Answer provided.

From Resistance to Civil Government  Page 58
Page 60
Paradox
Thoreau sees a contradiction in his neighbors’ stated opposition to slavery and the war in Mexico while they support these causes with their tax dollars.

Page 61
Asking Questions
Sample questions: How can just one person change a big country like the United States? How will it change society if I don’t pay my taxes and get in trouble with the IRS?

Page 62
Paradox
Possible answers: Yes, when you are away in nature, you are free from governmental authority. No, the government is in control everywhere, with laws about behavior, land use, and so on.

Asking Questions
Sample questions: How do you think our government needs to change to become the government you imagine? Is such an ideal government really possible?

Graphic Organizer: Paradox
1. Thoreau felt more free than his townsman because he was standing up for his beliefs.
2. The purpose of a government is to govern.
3. Thoreau paid his debt to society by going to jail.

The Minister’s Black Veil  Page 64
Page 66
Making Inferences
Students could answer “yes” or “no.” If yes, underline “good preacher” (line 24). If no, underline “his method was mildly persuasive” (lines 24–25) and “He spoke softly” (line 25).

Page 67
Vocabulary
Presided means “was in the position of authority at an event.”
Symbol
Possible response: I think Mr. Hooper is referring to
death—when God sees and judges all your secret sins.

Page 68
Vocabulary
Toast means here a “drink in honor of someone or
something.”

Page 69
Symbol
Circle “gave up his usual walk” and “avoided mirrors.”

Making Inferences
The veil convinced people that Mr. Hooper understood
sin and death and could help them overcome sin and
face death.

Page 70
Making Inferences
Possible response: The heart can be a prison if a person
is alone or feels guilty.

Symbol
Possible answer: Mr. Hooper means that everyone is
hiding their sins and not being open and honest.

Page 71
Graphic Organizer: Symbol
1. c  
2. e  
3. b  
4. a  
5. Answer provided.

The Pit and the Pendulum Page 72

Page 74
Symbolic Meaning
The dark place deep below the earth may symbolize a
grave, death, Hell, or despair.

Page 75
Retelling
The narrator is strapped to a wooden rack with only his
head and an arm free so he can eat spicy food without
anything to drink. Overhead there is a huge pendulum
with a sharp blade that is swinging faster and faster and
getting closer and closer to slicing the narrator in half.

Symbolic Meaning
At first, the rats symbolize horror, decay, and death, but
after they gnaw through the narrator’s straps, they may
symbolize freedom or escape.

Page 76
Retelling
After the pendulum went away, the figures on the walls
start to glow. The walls get fiery hot. Fearing he will
burn up, the narrator rushes to the pit in the center of
the room. He shrieks when he sees that the pit is full of
rats gnawing bones. He weeps.

Symbolic Meaning
The arrival of the French army may symbolize freedom
or God’s pardoning of the damned.

Page 77
Graphic Organizer: Symbolic Meaning
1. Hell, death, a grave, despair
2. Death, punishment
3. Prison, torture
4. Answer provided.
5. Death, hellfires, torture

Symbolic meaning of the story: Poe is describing the
inhumanity of the Spanish Inquisition and of any
government that uses torture.

The Raven Page 78

Page 81
Sound Effects
Circle “whispered” and “murmured.”

Page 82
Sound Effects
Circle “ebony,” “bird,” “beguiling” and “sad,” “fancy,”
“smiling.”

Page 83
Sound Effects
Circle “muttered.”

Interpreting a Poem
The speaker means that the Raven will leave in the
morning, just as his other friends and all his hopes have
already left him.

Page 84
Sound Effects
Draw arrows connecting “fowl” with “fiery” and
“burned” with “bosom’s.”

Vocabulary
Methought sound like the words me and thought.
Methought means “I thought.”

Page 85
Interpreting a Poem
The speaker gets angry because the Raven said he will
not be reunited in heaven with his beloved Lenore.

Vocabulary
Quoth reminds me of the word quote. Quoth means
“quoted, or said.”

Page 86
Interpreting a Poem
The raven never leaves and the speaker’s spirits will
never be lifted. This may symbolize the speaker’s
despair at the death of the woman he loves.