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Short Story Unit

## Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil": Group Activities and Interpretations

### **Abstract:**

Although the better-known *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) still draws more attention from many high school English teachers, Nathaniel Hawthorne's darkly enigmatic short story "The Minister's Black Veil" (1836) touches on similar themes and provides readers with diverse avenues for exploration, discussion, and analysis. Containing dramatic, psychological, and moral elements, in addition to its literary ones, it is a complex text that can confound teachers and students alike with its range of interpretations and ambiguity. This lesson allows students in small groups to choose and focus on one interpretive element. It also accommodates different learning styles, offering both creative and analytical options.

This lesson should take about two class periods.

### **Common Core State Standards:**

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.9-10.1 Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.7 Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RL.11-12.9 Demonstrate knowledge of eighteenth-, nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

### **Procedure:**

1. After the students have completed the reading, lead a general discussion of the text, allowing students to react to the plot and characters before moving on to the symbols (such as the veil itself) and general themes (guilt, sin, morality).
2. Allow the students to select a group from the following categories: Performers, Artists, Psychologists, Poe and the Critics, and Moralists. You may want to establish a per-group minimum to ensure that the work is divided evenly.
3. After they have selected their groups based on their area of interest, introduce them to the questions [Appendix A]. Give them the remainder of the period to work with their groups, and have them present their findings during the next class.

**Materials:**

Copies of the text.

Two poster-sized sheets of paper (for the Artists group – see Appendix A).

## APPENDIX A

### GROUP QUESTIONS

#### **Performers**

This story, like many of Hawthorne's works, contains some very dramatic moments. Your job is to perform the final scene from Hawthorne's "Minister's Black Veil." You will need at least three characters (Reverend Mr. Hooper, Reverend Mr. Clark, Narrator). Remember, this is to be a *performance*, not just a reading, which means you'll have to block out movement and make choices with the dialogue (volume, tempo, pauses, etc.). Write down at least three *choices* that you make with the text – things that are the result of your group's interpretation, and not necessarily visible in the text. Be prepared to explain these choices after your performance. You may leave the classroom to rehearse your performance.

#### **Artists**

A marketing firm has hired your group to conceptualize and create two posters for an upcoming movie version of "The Minister's Black Veil." The first poster is to appeal to very traditional "literary" audiences, while the second is intended to appeal to younger, mainstream audiences. Carefully consider the power of Hawthorne's symbols, and how you might utilize them, particularly the veil – is it symbolic of a specific sin of Hooper? Or of a more general sin of mankind? How do the themes of the story appeal to both types of audiences? How can you portray these themes visually in a way that will appeal to both types?

#### **Psychologists**

Professional psychologists often refer to the five stages of grief (also called the "Kübler-Ross model"): Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. Briefly explain what these stages are, then find and cite an example of each of these stages as people in the story try to understand the behavior of Mr. Hooper. What, exactly, are the townspeople grieving? List the stages, page numbers of examples, and your conclusion.

#### **Poe and the Literary Critics**

Edgar Allan Poe said that meaning of Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil" is that Mr. Hooper has committed a "crime of dark dye" against the woman whose funeral he conducts. Other critics contend that the story exhibits one of Hawthorne's favorite themes, that of the "fortunate fall" ("felix culpa" in Latin), which is the idea that a series of miserable events will lead to a better or happier outcome for others. Find and cite evidence for both points of view, then take a stance (as a group) in this debate, clearly supporting one side. Explain why you think the evidence better supports your point of view.

#### **Moralists**

At the beginning, Hawthorne labels the story "A Parable." What is a parable? Write and provide a source for the definition. Compile and cite evidence from the text that both supports and opposes the idea that this story is a parable - including Hawthorne's assertion that the story is taken from a true incident with a Joseph Moody. As a group, come to a conclusion about whether Hawthorne's story is in fact a parable, and if so, what lesson (or lessons) is it teaching?