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Sinners in the pulpit: The ministers of Faulkner and Hawthorne

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

“Well oghte a preest ensample for to yiv,
By his clenness, how that his sheep sholde
Lyve” (Chaucer, “General Prologue,” 505-506).

The significance of the minister in society has always been acknowledged. He has always played an important social role and, because of his particular authority, is expected to be a model for his parishioners. The situation of a religious leader is markedly different from that of any other figure of authority. Venial sins may be forgiven more easily in a leader whose duties are secular because, after all, the public duties of such a leader need not involve the attempt to better men's souls. The duties of a priest or a parson, on the other hand, make him responsible for the betterment of men's souls – and the assumption is that the minister himself is a role-model. In other words, he is expected to be “better” than those around him: more devout,

less prone to sin, and most importantly, above suspicion of any kind. One indication of the importance of the priest, minister, or preacher in society is that he has appeared in English literature through the ages. As early as the fourteenth century in Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, we have the "povre parsoun" who is "riche of hooly thoght and werk." From that point on the minister makes his presence felt quite regularly in poems, plays and novels. Because convention teaches us that men who are in a position of religious authority ought to be the worthiest in the community, our preconceptions of religious leaders continue when we encounter priests or ministers in literature. We judge them by the same high standards that we do ministers in real life. But ironically, of the many examples of this character, very few stand out as being truly good or as living up to the ideals of their profession. Chaucer's friar who is a "wantowne and a merye" and monk "that lovde venerie" stand out as being particularly wicked, greedy, and lustful. The trend of the fallen minister continues in English Literature with Hugh Evans, the deceitful parson in Shakespeare's The Merry Wives of Windsor. Similarly venial are Webster's Cardinal in The Duchess of Malfi, and Pocher, the parson in Ben Jonson's Bartholomew Fair. In the literature of the nineteenth century, we find Anthony Anderson, the corrupt divine in Bernard Shaw's The Devil's Disciple, and the cruel Mr. Bumble in Charles Dickens' Oliver Twist.

In the works of some American novelists who were writing between the mid-nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, we also find the figure of the minister. Two such writers are Nathaniel Hawthorne and William Faulkner. According to Darrel Abel, the reason a minister is a protagonist in The Scarlet Letter is that "in

the historical setting of seventeenth-century Boston, a popular minister like Arthur Dimmesdale was the logical figure to illustrate the theme...that in every heart, even the holiest, there is a germ of evil.... [His] was the profession, at that era, in which intellectual ability displayed itself more [than it did in a secular profession]" (226). Like Hawthorne, Faulkner, who writes about the twentieth-century South, uses the failed minister to dramatize some of his most characteristic themes.

Not one of Faulkner's and Hawthorne's ministers and preachers is totally admirable. Far from being ideal creatures, Arthur Dimmesdale in The Scarlet Letter and Gail Hightower in Light in August are guilty of the faults of ordinary men. When to these two are added Hooper (in Hawthorne's "The Minister's Black Veil") and Whitfield (in Faulkner's As I Lay Dying) – we have four ministers who are allied in their pride, guilt, hypocrisy and isolation. Although conventionally the minister is supposed to represent the best of the congregation, the ones in the works of these two authors are failures.

In their representation of the corrupt minister, both authors follow a well-established literary precedent, and in neither of their works do we find a truly ideal minister. Chaucer's Canterbury Tales has the corrupt friar and monk, but we do not see these two as the only representatives of the church, because Chaucer also presents the virtuous parson as a contrast to them. No minister in Hawthorne or Faulkner is "balanced off" by a contrasting virtuous one.

CHAPTER 2. THE WELL-LOVED MINISTER

“Rich was he of hooly thocht and werk” (“General Prologue,” 495)

The very fact that we miss an ideal minister in the works of the two authors indicates that the tradition of such a figure still exists. Our trust in ministers is shared by the other characters in the novels. The view of Dimmesdale as the perfect preacher is sustained by the townspeople of Salem almost to the end of the novel. Until his final confession, he remains a leader of society – one who can do no wrong. Before Dimmesdale even appears for the first time, the reader is inclined to regard him favorably because of the way the townspeople extol his virtues. The first reference to him is as “the godly pastor” – and there seems to be no reason to question this judgment. When Dimmesdale enters the story, the clergyman John Wilson refers to him as the “godly youth” (71). Hawthorne takes great care to emphasize this impression. The first detailed description of Dimmesdale is calculated to arouse admiration for

his obvious goodness and sensibility. He is described as having a lofty white brow (a sign of his intellectual ability); large, brown, melancholy eyes; a tremulous mouth; an apprehensive air as well as “eloquence and religious fervor” (72). Abel points out that the qualities Hawthorne emphasizes in Dimmesdale are his learning, his inexperience and ignorance of worldly things, his sensibility, and his apprehensiveness and discomposed manner (231). Hawthorne works up a formidable audience-sympathy for Dimmesdale by presenting him as a model of a sympathetic, sensitive preacher. The response of the reader is similar to that of the parishioners in Salem.

At the beginning of the story, Dimmesdale is new in the community and creates a good impression. But significantly, this impression is sustained by his parishioners until the very end. They continue to adore and admire him as a “heavenly-ordained apostle.” They cannot see him as less than perfect. So well-loved is he that his final sermon arouses admiration for his fervor as well as desolation over what he says:

this idea of his transitory stay on earth gave the last emphasis to the effect which the preacher had produced; it was as if an angel, in his passage to the skies, had shaken his bright wings over the people for an instant - at once a shadow and a splendor - and had shed down a shower of golden truths upon them (232).

Dimmesdale is idolized by his adoring congregation about as much as it is possible for any human being to be. By this time, however, the reader has information that Dimmesdale’s congregation does not and no longer can regard him as a perfect preacher. But his congregation is ignorant about his secret until the very end, so that just before his public confession he stands

on the very proudest eminence of superiority to which the gifts of intellect, rich love, prevailing eloquence, and a reputation of whitest sanctity, could exalt a clergyman in New England's earliest days (232).

Another minister who occupies a position of prominence is Reverend Hooper, the protagonist of "The Minister's Black Veil." He is respected by his congregation before he chooses to isolate himself. Of course, he enjoys none of the tremendous popularity that Dimmesdale enjoys (Hooper's sermons are mild and persuasive rather than full of fire) but he is a significant figure in Milford. Hawthorne tells us that old Squire Saunders used to invite him to sit at his table every Sunday and that members of his congregation used to consider it an honor to walk by his side. Hooper falls from favor later and his parishioners "regard him with dread [and shudder] at the veiled face so near their own." He spends his life "shrouded in dreadful suspicions...unloved and dimly feared; a man apart from men, shunned in their health and joy" (111). But before his inexplicable act of covering his face, he was considered a "blameless example, holy in deed and thought, so far as mortal judgment may pronounce" (113).

The ministers in Faulkner, on the other hand, do not enjoy the social position Dimmesdale or Hooper does. Reverend Gail Hightower in Light in August is different from them in that he disgraces himself before his congregation fairly early in the novel. He is "the fifty-year old outcast" who has been denied by his church. He has fallen from grace in the eyes of the townspeople because of his conduct toward his wife and his obsession with the past, which lead him to ignore the wishes of his congregation, and they punish him by turning against him. They stop visiting him at the house,

and then, after his wife dies, they humiliate him at church and make him “resign from his church, but he wouldn’t leave Jefferson...[although] they tried to get him to” (46). Finally, as if this were not enough, they turn aggressive in their attempts to drive him away from Jefferson, by actually tying him to a tree and beating him unconscious.

On the surface, then, the positions of Dimmesdale and Hightower seem to be in total contrast. Dimmesdale is favored by his congregation; Hightower is disliked and shunned by his. The two men seem to have nothing in common. But significantly, Dimmesdale and Hightower are equally isolated. In spite of having an adoring congregation that refuses to see any fault in him, Dimmesdale leads a double life, separated from the townspeople by his guilt. Well-loved only because he maintains the facade of the guiltless preacher, Dimmesdale is as isolated from his congregation as Hightower is from his.

CHAPTER 3. THE MINISTER IN ISOLATION

“A monk in his cloystre” (“General Prologue,” 181)

Both Faulkner and Hawthorne deal with the theme of the isolation of a man from society. Many of the figures in their novels are characterized by the fact that they are incapable of integration into the community. This characteristic is seen more clearly in Faulkner's novels. Joe Christmas of Light in August, Darl and Jewel of As I Lay Dying, Temple Drake and Popeye of Sanctuary live in emotional isolation, unable to communicate with others around them. Although the situation of Hawthorne's characters seems to be less bleak because they appear to have a relationship with others around them, Chillingworth in The Scarlet Letter or Coverdale and Zenobia in The Blithedale Romance are really cut off from other people either through their actions or because of their very natures.

Conventionally, the minister is supposed to be a source of moral support and encouragement – the ideal presented by Chaucer’s “povre parsoun” is still viable. But with both Hawthorne and Faulkner, who are describing a phenomenon in modern society identified by Cleanth Brooks as “the plight of the isolated individual cut off from any community of values,” the theme of isolation gains an added dimension. Their ministers, who should at least be accessible to their parishioners, are “religious isolationists” who deliberately cut themselves off from the community they are supposed to serve. And what further complicates matters is the very nature of their isolation. Isolation can be imposed by a society that chooses to shun an individual. Or a person could will his own isolation. Dimmesdale and Hooper are examples of this second type of “outsider” because theirs is a willing isolation.

The situation of Hightower is a little more complex. On the one hand, the people in his church in Jefferson deliberately punish him after the death of his wife. But on the other hand, Hightower himself wants to remain in the shadow of “his house, his sanctuary.” Thus his isolation is not so much imposed by society as self-willed, and this idea of his self-willed isolation is reinforced by the very description of his bungalow and study. The house is almost completely obscured by the crepe myrtle and syringa except for the study window from which he watches the street. He uses his house as a hiding-place where he will not be disturbed, and from where he will be able to peep out at the world while remaining unseen. This way he can retain a superficial contact with the world, while ensuring that he does not get too close to it. His willing isolation is carried to a point where it becomes almost a negation of life.

(In fact, Hugh Holman goes so far as to call him a “flaccid, fat, breathing corpse” who insists upon living in Jefferson in spite of everything.) He lives among dead ghosts – among people “who no longer live in life,” and his house becomes almost a “precursor of the tomb” (239). This physical aloofness mirrors his emotional state. He does not want any involvement with people because “he did not care about the people, the living people, about whether they wanted him here or not” (47). All he desires is to be left alone, without having to experience (even vicariously) the pains and pleasures of life. “I just wanted peace,” he says at one point, “I have bought immunity” (232-233).

Faulkner portrays Hightower’s remoteness from everyday living by saying that his attitude is that of an “eastern idol” who is a passive audience for Byron Bunch, the mill-worker who visits Hightower two or three times every week. Hightower is willing to be Byron’s sounding-board and listen to him passively, but he does not want to be affected by anything the latter says. Byron talks to him about helping Lena Grove, the young woman who comes from Alabama in search of Lucas Birch (who made her pregnant). But Hightower keeps reminding himself of his role of noninvolvement. “I am not in life anymore,” he says to himself, “that’s why there is no use in even trying to meddle, interfere” (226). He wants to distance himself from the world, so that

life cannot reach him to hurt him again.... He has tried to isolate himself from an impure world.... A part of him knows that he is really waiting for death (Waggoner 130).

But Hightower’s innate nature does not allow him to be merely a passive listener because he advises Byron to leave Lena Grove and go away from Jefferson. And

toward the end of the novel, when he sees that Byron is determined to leave with Lena anyway, Hightower tries to persuade her to send Byron away. His motive is questionable because it seems to be rooted not in genuine concern for Byron but in his own misogyny. He tries to include Byron in a strange brotherhood of isolation. He wills it for himself, and is convinced that isolation will be right for Byron, too, as Byron

deserves at the least that the nothing with which he has lived for thirty - five years be violated, if violated it must be, without two witnesses (309).

Hightower's isolation is an integral part of his psyche and is considered by him to be a most admirable state. When we finally leave him at the end of the novel, Hightower, whose "protection of the self has taken precedence over all,...[is left] as an object, in a present dominated by a past" (Reed 76).

Thus although Hightower wills his isolation, he is also partially a victim of the society's collective dislike and his alienation is caused partly through the actions of the society. But since his alienation is acknowledged by society, he does not need to bother with appearances any more. Dimmesdale, however, is adored by a community from which he feels totally isolated by his guilt. His burden must, therefore, be even more difficult than Hightower's.

Dimmesdale is put on a pedestal by the townspeople and finds that he is in the public eye a great deal. To add to his agony, whatever he says or does is totally misinterpreted by his dotting congregation. The more they try to make him a hero the

more his guilt and isolation increase. Frederick Crews points out that Dimmesdale's guilt and sexual impulse have him caught in a double bind because he can never fully overcome either emotion. Even though the minister is eaten up with remorse, he fails to subdue his desire for Hester. The conflict between sexual desire and guilt continues until the end, with his guilt intensifying as he continues to be unable to confess. Unwilling to disclose his terrible secret, he becomes over-zealous in his duties. Hawthorne calls this zeal his "too unreserved self-sacrifice to the labors and duties of his pastoral relation" (109). To his admiring congregation, Dimmesdale's fervor and zeal are only admirable, and their love for their near - perfect minister increases. And with their love Dimmesdale's anguish multiplies. He is so eaten up with remorse that, as Crews observes, guilt threatens to "conquer [his] soul once more" (139).

A tremendous battle is going on in his psyche, but since he is unable to give an honest expression to his inner conflict by confessing publicly, it manifests itself in other ways, in his attempted release through fasts and vigils. The parishioners, however, misinterpret his demeanor and his actions. For them "the paleness of the young minister's cheek was accounted for by his too earnest devotion to study" (118). This misinterpretation has the effect of merely increasing Dimmesdale's private agony because he knows himself to be so idolized by his parishioners that he has become the prisoner of their expectations and believes that he can under no circumstances confess to them. He is forced to live a perpetual lie in public, and is totally distanced from his parishioners. All of his words are fated to be misinterpreted by them. His refusal to marry, for example, is seen by his congregation as an example of his strict discipline. Hawthorne suggests that there are "many blooming damsels, spiritually

devoted to him," who would willingly become his wife. Dimmesdale rejects all suggestions of marriage, "as if priestly celibacy were one of the articles of his church discipline" (124). This explanation is what his congregation believes to be true. But the explanation seems ironical to the reader who knows that Dimmesdale's refusal has its roots not in self-denial but in the tremendous guilt he has to live with daily. He can retain some self-respect (although at the expense of his peace of mind), as long as he remains "faithful" to Hester in a way that is secretly acknowledged by both: that is, through his celibacy. If he marries anyone else, it will be the ultimate act of betrayal against her. But his congregation does not know this, and he is isolated from them because he has to bear his awful secret alone. They will not only be ignorant of the truth but will constantly misinterpret his motives. To them he will remain the ideal minister whose restraint is admirable, while he alone is aware that he will always be forced "to eat his unsavory morsel always at another's board and endure the lifelong chill which must be his lot who seeks to warm himself only at another's fireplace. [He is thus] doomed by his own choice" (124).

Reverend Hooper of "The Minister's Black Veil" is in a similar situation. He isolates himself when he chooses to become an incomprehensible figure of dread and suspicion. At the start of the story he is referred to as the "good Mr. Hooper," and it is suggested that although he may not be a brilliant preacher, he is respected in his congregation. But he is one of Hawthorne's religious isolationists, someone "who violates the bond with man...essential to living a normal life" (Kesterson 197). He alienates himself from people by covering his face with the veil. He arouses fear and suspicion in the hearts of the people of Milford. His parishioners become unwilling

to confide in him, Old Squire Saunders neglects to invite him to his table, and “none aspire to walk by their pastor’s side” (Berkove 153). He isolates himself not only from the other townsfolk but also from Elizabeth, his plighted wife. But Hooper is fully conscious of what he is doing and knows that “this dismal shade must separate [him]...from the world: even...Elizabeth can never come behind it”(108).

He takes an almost masochistic pride in his alienation. Why else would he suddenly don this extremely noticeable garb and refuse to give an explanation for it, even to Elizabeth? When questioned by her, all he offers is an ambiguous response: “I, perhaps like most other mortals”, he says, “have sorrow dark enough to be typified by a black veil”(34). He not only rejects her, but “shuns love and human sympathy. The only human contacts he maintains are those which pertain to his duties as a pastor”(Kesterson 202). Like Hightower, Hooper first initiates his alienation and then refuses to leave a society that looks at him with fear, suspicion or dislike.

Perhaps Dimmesdale, Hooper and Hightower are trying to achieve a kind of martyrdom through their isolation, but they go too far with their near-masochistic acceptance of their situation. Hooper’s suffering is so self-conscious that his sad smile “occasionally glimmering” from beneath his veil loses its pathos. The prolonged mystery about why he wears the veil and his public agony could be simply manifestations of the desire that others recognize his intense suffering. His words all along fail to explain the significance of the veil, and even when he is about to die he admits that his soul “hath a patient weariness until that veil be lifted” (113). But he struggles to keep the veil on nevertheless, and dies “with a faint smile lingering on his lips”

while his “auditors [shrink] from one another, in mutual affright” (114). In his desire for isolation Hooper is like Dimmesdale whose constant self-flagellation is rooted in his inability to speak, but this inability reflects Dimmesdale’s concern for his public image, rather than remorse.

Of course, Dimmesdale is not blatantly hypocritical like Whitfield, who pretends he is ready to confess because he has “woken to the enormity of his sin” and seen “the true light at last” (164). Whitfield’s hypocrisy is obvious because the moment he hears that his sexual partner – Addie Bundren – is dead, he forgets his professed intention to confess. Although Dimmesdale is greatly concerned about his status in Salem, he accepts his guilt and finding himself unable to communicate it, reacts by isolating himself from the community. In his isolation Dimmesdale becomes incapable of performing his duties as a minister. Like Hooper and Hightower, he voluntarily withdraws from his congregation and his withdrawal is reprehensible, given the specific nature of his duties. As Faulkner and Hawthorne see it, isolation or alienation could make anyone a victim and therefore to be pitied, but the isolation of their ministers is voluntary and deliberately sustained. Hawthorne and Faulkner present their parsons as failures who are incapable of meeting their ministerial responsibilities. What David Kesterson says of Hightower becomes true for each of these men who, “because of their own sense of self- righteousness or obsession with man’s sinful nature, refuse to accept life the way it is and thus withdraw from humanity” (199).

Dimmesdale, Hightower and Hooper are especially reprehensible because they have a highly public role in which their professional duty requires them to reach out

to people in sympathy and love. By deliberately choosing to ignore their responsibility, the ministers fail to perform their most basic duty to their congregation.

CHAPTER 4. SEXUAL GUILT AND THE MAN OF GOD

“A preest foul, on whom we trust” (“General Prologue,” 501)

Self-imposed isolation is not the only way in which these ministers fail to live up to the ideal of their profession. Hightower, Dimmesdale, Hooper and Whitfield are actually guilty of an offense against women, and whether their offense is specifically sexual or whether it is rejection of womanhood, all four are guilty in some way. Interestingly, even here it is easy to find patterns: Hooper and Hightower commit the “crime” of denial or rejection while Dimmesdale and Whitfield are guilty of illicit sexual involvement.

Hightower’s problem is that his desire for noninvolvement with people of his own time and place extends even to his relationship with his wife, so that ultimately he

is greatly responsible for her death. He lives in the glorious past of the Civil War era and is incapable of coming to terms with the present. This desire for noninvolvement turns his marriage into a farce. His withdrawal from his wife is so complete that when the neighbors hear her weeping in the parsonage they know "that the husband would not know what to do about it because he did not know what was wrong" (66-67). He is unaware of her needs because of his preoccupation with the "glorious manhood of the past," and he "couldn't or wouldn't" satisfy her sexually. Her subsequent adultery is a result of his neglect. Whether he is actually impotent or not, is in the final analysis, irrelevant because his total self-absorption and futile obsession with the past cause him to neglect her. In fact, his attitude is not even active rejection but a total indifference to her. As far as his parishioners can see, it is as if he "forgot that he even had a wife, up there in his pulpit with his hands flying around him." Even when she started going to the hotel in Memphis he was "still acting like there was nothing wrong" (68). When she had to be sent to the sanatorium, "Hightower took her there and came back and preached the next Sunday, as usual.... Every two weeks he would go and visit his wife...but he always returned after a day or so, and on Sunday on the pulpit again, and it was as though the whole thing had never happened" (70).

Perhaps Hightower is irresponsible toward her because he "see[s] womanhood as [being] fundamentally destructive to the male" (Kesterson 203). If this is true, it explains his attitude to Lena Grove as well, because his rejection of women includes her, too. When he advises Byron to leave Lena, his pessimistic, misogynistic attitude is obvious. He tells Byron that marriage is not

men and women in sanctified and living physical intimacy, but

a dead state carried over into and existing still among the living
like two shadows chained together with the shadow of a chain (529).

His rejection of women is like that of Hooper, who withdraws from Elizabeth. Suddenly deciding to cover his face, Hooper alienates himself from her along with the rest of the world. He refuses to give her any explanation for wearing the veil, only saying that it is "a type and a symbol", and that he is "bound to wear it ever, both in light and darkness, in solitude and before the gaze of multitudes" (34). But Elizabeth reaches out to Hooper in genuine love and solicitude. She is practically the only person in Milford who is not appalled at the sight of the veil. To her questions, Hooper responds only with quasi-explanations and ambiguous utterances which contrast with what Hawthorne calls her "direct simplicity." "If it be a sign of mourning," he says, "I, perhaps like most other mortals, have sorrow dark enough to be typified by a black veil.... If I hide my face in sorrow, there is cause enough" (109). He is downright arrogant in his assumption that his cause is justified and that his word should be good enough for Elizabeth, not acknowledging that this ambiguous explanation is little satisfaction for his betrothed. To Elizabeth, Hooper's action cannot be anything but arbitrary, and finally, unacceptable. And her position becomes similar to that of Hightower's wife because both are denied marital rights they are entitled to. Hooper and Hightower reject their partners because of their obsessive self-involvement and become directly responsible for the women's suffering.

However reprehensible Hooper and Hightower may be, they are less guilty than Whitfield and Dimmesdale are. Through their illicit, adulterous love-affairs, Whitfield and Dimmesdale compromise their responsibilities and their ministerial duties.

Their sin is aggravated by the position of the women. Addie Bundren is a member of Whitfield's congregation, as Hester is of Dimmesdale's. (Another interesting parallel between Addie and Hester is that their adulteries produce children. The two children, Pearl and Jewel are given remarkably similar names that testify to the intensity of their mothers' loves.) Whitfield's guilt is not diminished by the fact that Addie Bundren is not a victim, as Elizabeth, Lena, and Hightower's wife are. In fact, Addie obviously idolizes him to the point that she believes that Whitfield's sin is "a gallant garment" which is sanctified. But this does not detract from the fact that Whitfield is a self-deluding hypocrite. Although he is fully aware of the magnitude of his guilt, he is more afraid of discovery than concerned about his moral guilt. He does teeter on the brink of confession but only because he is afraid that Addie will tell someone about her relations with him. He pretends to have "wrestled with Satan and...emerged victorious," and awakened to the enormity of his sin, and is therefore ready to confess. But his hypocrisy is obvious to the reader because though he goes to the Bundren place, he is able to justify not confessing when he hears that Addie is dead. Then he steps into his public role as the town preacher and, ignoring his earlier intentions, walks into the house, invoking God's grace upon it.

The one minister who combines both aspects of offense against women (that is, illicit sexual involvement as well as denial of women's sexuality) is, of course, the "godly Master Dimmesdale." Perhaps admirers of Dimmesdale would claim that Hester is such a vibrant, positive personality that in all probability, she initiated the seduction. Hawthorne is ambiguous about the identity of the seducer and leaves readers to draw their own conclusions, but in spite of Dimmesdale's obvious timidity,

it is difficult to see him being seduced by Hester because both accept the consecration of their sexual liaison. “[Chillingworth] has violated...the sanctity of a human heart”, Dimmesdale says to Hester, “Thou and I, Hester, never did so!” And she replies, “Never, never! What we did had a consecration of its own. We felt it so! We said so to each other!”

Whether or not one of them seduced the other, Dimmesdale's fault is surely greater than Hester's because “he is a minister responsible for Hester's soul, and a preacher of the word which includes anathema against fornication and adultery” (Moers 56). And even if we condone Dimmesdale's act, we cannot forget his subsequent rejection of responsibility. His prolonged and excruciating doubts and guilt and near - confessions cannot cloud the fact that he turns his back upon her. Ellen Moers feels that “Hawthorne succeeds in arousing sympathy for Dimmesdale, in turning him into a sensitive, tortured, solitary romantic hero rather than the villain of a feminine seduction novel,” but Dimmesdale is utterly contemptible in his feeble attempts to “help” Hester. Even when he is ostensibly trying to help her, he is able to protect his own interests. His oratorical skills are such that he can use his authority as minister to plead publicly with Hester, while ensuring that she will obey his unspoken plea. Thus he

addresses Hester in words which are both a public communication that voices official demand, and a private communication that points out to her that Dimmesdale's demand is merely formal and compulsory...his private communication furthermore calls attention to a qualification that justifies her refusal to speak

out (Fogle 229).

At the Governor's house, when Dimmesdale is appealed to directly by a distraught Hester, his request on her behalf that she be allowed to keep Pearl shows how completely he is able to de-emphasize the father's role in the conception of the child. His speech is directed as much to Hester as to the Governor and others who wish to send Pearl away. To these men, his appeal would seem like one coming from any religious minister, but what Dimmesdale succeeds in doing is to concentrate on God as the father and the creator of Pearl so that the child is seen as a gift from God to the mother, with the father's role becoming marginal. By reminding Hester that God is the father of the child, he hopes to remove emphasis from his own involvement in the affair so he can stop feeling guilt, even though he pretends to Hester that he is willing to share her blame. Dimmesdale has perfected, at least verbally, the art of denying responsibility or complicity.

His long speech is a cunning example of this ability to deny responsibility. He starts by saying, "God gave her the child, and gave her an instinctive knowledge of its nature and requirements...which no other mortal being can possess". Thus the father is an unimportant factor. He adds, "Moreover, is there not a quality of awful sacredness in the relation between this mother and this child?" This argument is directed both at Hester and at the Governor, and though it is interpreted very differently by them, it has an equally powerful impact on both. The message to the governor is that he has no right to disturb the "awful sacredness" of the mother-child bond. For Hester, the message is that he understands her attachment to her child, but he cannot enter it because it is exclusively a mother-child bond. Dimmesdale's

words may not be deliberately chosen, but they could not have been more effective if they were. "Do we not...say," he continues, "that the Heavenly Father, the Creator of all flesh, hath lightly recognized a deed of sin and made of no account the distinction between hallowed lust and holy love?" (112). Dennis Foster believes that Dimmesdale "makes the child ambiguous as a signifier of sin" (149), because he is ambiguous about whether he sees Pearl as a product of lust or of love. The hint to Hester, though, is that he sees Pearl as a product of "holy love" and his implicit appeal to her is that she should see Pearl as such, too. Therefore he can absolve himself not only of guilt, but of all responsibility, in her eyes.

Evasion is Dimmesdale's forte. It is necessary to retain his position in society, and he uses it to his advantage. In Puritan New England, Dimmesdale would be greatly condemned for his involvement with Hester, but until the last moment he is able to hide his offense because he avoids confessing. Hester shares his secret, but since she is capable of bearing the shame alone, Dimmesdale continues to depend on her silence. His offense against her does not bring him public retribution. His fear of public retribution becomes crucial if one agrees with Nina Baym that

the chief key to Dimmesdale's character is not his religious piety but his dependence upon the good opinion of society.... He needs public support.... [He] is not a person who can easily hold a view contrary to society's.... To confess his act and receive the punishment that would satisfy his sense of guilt would be to lose his position in society, which he cannot live without (68-69).

Thus Dimmesdale suffers for seven years and avoids confession for seven years. Since sexual weakness is one thing Dimmesdale's congregation would be unable to forgive in their pastor, he needs to go to great lengths to conceal his guilt. He is guilty of sexual complicity; in contrast to him are Hightower and Hooper, who deny their women the privileges they should be granted. The one thing common to all four ministers is that they abuse the sexuality of women, either by denying or by exploiting it.

CHAPTER 5. THE HYPOCRITICAL SOUL

“His wepyng and preyeres” (“General Prologue,” 231)

Dimmesdale's evasion of responsibility to Hester indicates hypocrisy, the most serious fault he has and one he shares with the other ministers of Hawthorne and Faulkner. Again, this weakness becomes more significant when one remembers that the men have a special office in life: they are all representatives of the church and mediate between the other townspeople and God. Undoubtedly, their office does not guarantee that they will be better individuals than those around them, but society makes such an assumption. Furthermore, the ministers are themselves aware that their congregations have expectations of them. Why else would they bother to deceive them otherwise? And the hypocrisy of characters like Dimmesdale and Whitfield does not end here. What makes them such consummate hypocrites is that

they are really trying to deceive themselves.

Whitfield is the ultimate self-deluding hypocrite. When he hears that his sexual partner (Addie Bundren) is dying, he claims to wake up to the enormity of his sin and is ready to confess his guilt. He pretends that he needs to confess to Anse, Addie's husband, and proceeds to the Bundren household. His hypocrisy is obvious because although he claims that he needs to confess in order to make amends to the people "whom [he has] outraged," his motive is really rooted in fear. He really wants to confess to Anse because he is afraid that the tale of his and Addie's "transgression [will] come from her lips [although] she had sworn that she would never tell it" (164). Whitfield goes to the Bundrens' house in this mood of remorse, but performs a *volte face* the minute he hears that Addie is dead. Whitfield then claims that God, who knows both the extent of his remorse and his willingness to confess, will forgive him. He also pretends that merely by desiring to tell Anse the truth he has completed the act of confession and need not bother with public confession. Whitfield's relief at not having to admit his guilt is obvious when he says that God in his infinite wisdom "restrained the tale from [Addie's] dying lips" (166).

But of the four ministers, Dimmesdale's actions and words are the worst. An exquisitely sensitive soul, he should be unable to sustain the facade of the perfect minister till the end. Perhaps his sensitivity and trepidation keep him from taking the final step to confession, but when we see how he totters on the brink of confession in all his speeches and how he uses rhetoric to keep evading guilt, we stop believing in him. An excellent example of his habitual evasion is when he "asks" Hester to re-

veal the name of the child's father. Dimmesdale has perfected the art of hypocritical evasion and his ambiguous appeal has exactly the desired effect on the two audiences, Hester and the townspeople. Just how cleverly he manipulates the situation can be seen from a close examination of the speech.

To begin with, he says that he knows that she can see "the accountability under which" he labors. When this is combined with Hawthorne's description of Dimmesdale "leaning over the bench and looking down steadfastly into her eyes," we see how Dimmesdale is working up sympathy for himself in her heart before he even begins his argument. His next line is a masterpiece in evasion. "If thou feelest it to be for thy soul's peace, and that thy earthly punishment will thereby be made more effectual to salvation, I charge thee to speak," he says. For the townspeople, this is a simple appeal which conventionally would be made by any pastor. But Dimmesdale is laying the onus of responsibility totally on Hester. He is slyly implying that if she reveals the name of the father, it will be because she wants salvation and because she is selfish enough to desire peace of mind at the cost of naming him. He knows very well that under these circumstances, Hester will never reveal his name.

He adds, "...speak out the name of thy fellow-sinner and fellow-sufferer" – thus secretly acknowledging to her that he is suffering as much as she is, even if he does not have to go through public humiliation. The unexpressed appeal is that she must not increase his suffering even more as he has been punished enough. He goes on to say that it would be a kindness on Hester's part to reveal the father's name because "though he were to step down from a high place" it would be better for him this

way than to hide a guilty heart through life. He knows that Hester is aware of the consequences of adultery for a minister and is ensuring that she will do nothing to jeopardize his position. Dimmesdale ends by saying to her that she is denying him the “bitter, but wholesome, cup” that is now presented to her, that is, public confession. But if that is what he really desires, who can stop him from confessing immediately?

In the light of this, what the clergyman John Wilson says about Dimmesdale’s response to the public questioning of Hester becomes significant. “[Dimmesdale] opposes me (with a young man’s over-softness, albeit wise beyond his years) that it were wronging the very nature of woman to force her to lay open her heart’s secrets in such broad daylight, and in presence of so great a multitude,” he says (71). This sentiment may seem admirable to Wilson but is suspect in light of Dimmesdale’s other responses. He is motivated not so much by altruism as by the fear of public exposure or ignominy. It is ironical that Dimmesdale always manages to sound perfectly sympathetic to Hester when his advice to her always works for his self-preservation.

The impression that Dimmesdale is trying to avoid making a decision is strengthened when we see him standing on the scaffold with Hester and Pearl one night a few years later. When Pearl asks him if he will stand there with them the next day, his reply is in his usual hypocritical mode. “Nay, not so, my little Pearl”, he says, “...I shall, indeed, stand with thy mother and thee one other day, but not tomorrow.... [I will stand] at the great judgement day” (149). This way he is able to avoid confession until the last possible day. Darrel Abel, commenting on the futility of Dimmesdale’s midnight vigils on the scaffold, claims that

remorse makes him ascend the scaffold; cowardice makes his ascension an empty and ghastly irony. He ascends it, not at midday, but at midnight. No multitude is present to view him (234).

He attempts to unburden his soul at night, but his fear of detection makes his attempts seem hypocritical in the extreme.

Dimmesdale has perfected another method of avoiding responsibility for his transgression. Dennis Foster terms it "confessional evasion." Foster says that Dimmesdale gives full expression to his feelings of sin and shame in his sermons, but ironically, Dimmesdale's words have exactly the opposite effect on his listeners. Though he speaks the truth, his ardor on the pulpit is so excessive that the truth loses its significance. Dimmesdale's listeners assume that his passion results from his virtue, and since they fail to understand the true meaning of his words, they remain uncomprehending but sympathetic to him. Dimmesdale becomes only more successful at endearing himself to his parishioners by his ardor in the pulpit and humility in his actions. His knowledge of his guilt makes him overtly humble, and though his parishioners cannot understand "the power that [moves] them thus" when he preaches, they consider him "a miracle of holiness" (139).

But Dimmesdale loses credibility in the eyes of the reader when he claims that what he really wants to say to his parishioners is "I, who ascend the sacred desk and turn my face heavenward...I, in whose daily life you discern the sanctity of Enoch...I, your pastor, whom you reverence and trust, am utterly a pollution and a lie!" (140). We cannot believe what he says any more because immediately after telling himself

this, Dimmesdale does something quite different in the pulpit. He pretends that he has told his congregation the plain truth when he announced that he was “the worst of sinners, a thing of unimaginable iniquity.” The truth is, he knows the effect of his near-confessions on the congregation. They feel that if their godly pastor can imagine in his humility such guilt in himself, he would be appalled at the guilt in theirs. Dennis Foster points out that they “believe themselves innately depraved,...and in their desire to find their minister the embodiment of divine authority, they represent in themselves the very sins Dimmesdale felt himself guilty of” (142-45). When Dimmesdale calls himself a sinner, they believe that he is taking on their sins as a good pastor should.

The response of the townspeople would be accurate only if Dimmesdale were innocent, but since he is really guilty and knows it, his confession has exactly the effect he desires. “They heard it all, and did but reverence him the more. They little guessed what deadly purport lurked in those self-condemning words” (140). Finally, our notion that Dimmesdale is really helpless in the face of this determined idolization is dismissed because Hawthorne tells us that “the minister well knew – subtile, but remorseful hypocrite that he was! – the light in which his vague confession would be viewed.” He speaks the truth, but through his rhetorical self-flagellation he changes it into a lie because his parishioners refuse to see Dimmesdale as less than perfect. They continue to regard what he says as excessive humility and therefore something to be admired.

Perhaps Dimmesdale’s one saving grace is that when he and Hester are alone, he

does not use his habitual pretence any more. "Of penitence, there has been none!" he tells her, "else, I should long ago have thrown off these garments of mock holiness and have shown myself to mankind.... I have laughed, in agony and bitterness of heart, at the contrast between what I seem and what I am! And Satan laughs at it!" (182) As Nina Baym points out, Dimmesdale is an object of compassion because he is not merely a clever charlatan. The reader remains somewhat sympathetic to him because Dimmesdale at least admits his guilt, unlike the self-deluding hypocrite Whitfield. Whitfield lacks self-knowledge and is incapable of honesty, but Dimmesdale is at least honest with himself. But in spite of his agony, Dimmesdale continues to hide behind a lie, and we regard him as being not admirably sensitive but merely weak.

CHAPTER 6. THE MINISTER'S ORATORICAL GIFTS

"His parrishens devoutly wolde he teche" ("General Prologue," 481)

The ministers' awareness of their own weaknesses is expressed in their speeches. Dimmesdale, Hightower, Hooper and Whitfield are gifted with oratorical powers that are misused by them for selfish, entirely nonreligious purposes. Dimmesdale's sermons are an example of this abuse of power. He achieves a "brilliant popularity in his sacred office" by his power of speech: his words seem to come "in tongues of flame, symbolizing...not the power of his speech in foreign and unknown languages, but that of addressing the whole human brotherhood in the heart's native language" (139). The effect of Dimmesdale's sermons on his congregation is predictable. They fancy him "the mouthpiece of Heaven's messages of wisdom and rebuke of love" (138-139). He is so gifted that "an irrepressible outburst of enthusiasm kindled in the audi-

tors at that high strain of eloquence.... Within the church, it had hardly been kept down; beneath the sky, it pealed upward to the zenith.... Never, on New England soil, had stood the man so honored by his mortal brethren as the preacher” (233). For Dimmesdale, these rhetorical powers are a mixed blessing because his eloquence defeats his purpose even as it thrills his audience. He is continually misunderstood, so that during his final sermon he “remains nearly untainted, while all are thrilled by his rhetoric” (Foster 151). And he is fated to be continually frustrated in his efforts to admit his guilt publicly until the end of the story.

Whitfield, like Dimmesdale, is considered by his congregation to be exemplary. Addie’s friend Cora, who reflects community opinion in As I Lay Dying, says that Whitfield “singled [Addie] out and strove with the vanity in her mortal heart” (152). Faulkner also hints at Whitfield’s success as an orator when Cora says that “Brother Whitfield, a godly man if ever one breathed God’s breath, prayed for [Addie] and strove as never a man could except him” (153). And in this case, Cora’s opinion of Whitfield contrasts with our knowledge of his true nature.

Hawthorne talks about Hooper’s eloquence in the pulpit as well. Before Hooper alienated himself from his congregation he had the “reputation of being a good preacher, but not an energetic one: he strove to win his people heavenward by mild, persuasive influences” (103). But the nature of his sermons changes after he dons the veil. Then his sermon seems like “the most powerful effort [the congregation] had ever heard from their pastor’s lips.... A subtle power was breathed into his words, There was nothing terrible in what Mr. Hooper said...and yet, with every tremor of his

melancholy voice, the hearers quaked. An unsought pathos came hand in hand with awe." The audience is now aware of "some unwonted attribute in their minister" (103-4). As with that of Dimmesdale, Hooper's new-found eloquence corresponds with his sense of alienation from the townspeople.

Similarly, Faulkner describes Hightower's gift for oratory. Just as the passion of Dimmesdale's eloquence in the pulpit springs from his guilt regarding illicit sexual relations with Hester, Hightower's increased fervor in the pulpit is connected with his failing relationship with his wife. The irresponsibility of both men toward women results in their sermons gaining additional fire. After Hightower puts his wife in the sanatorium, he preaches

in the pulpit, with his wild hands and his wild rapt eager voice
in which like phantoms God and salvation and the galloping horses
and his dead grandfather thundered.

It is as if he forgets

that he ever had a wife, up there in the pulpit with his hands
flying around him and the dogma that he [is] supposed to preach
all full of galloping cavalry and defeat and glory" (67).

This wild oratory also has its roots in his romanticizing of the past and his total inability to live in the present –

so he preached to them, as he had always preached: with that
rapt fury which they had considered sacrilege and which those
from the other churches believed to be out and out insanity (68).

The rhetoric of the ministers have very different effects on their respective congregations. The histrionics of Dimmesdale and Whitfield arouse admiration in the hearts of the members of their congregations, while Hightower and Hooper offend or confuse people with their bizarre oratory. The ministers misuse their authority by bringing their personal demons into the pulpit. Dimmesdale uses his privileged position to exorcise his guilt while Hightower indulges his obsession with the unattainable past.

CHAPTER 7. CONCLUSION

Hyatt Waggoner believes that Hightower, in the end, learns to love and is a “redeemed and potentially redemptive character” (131). Waggoner thinks so because Hightower renews contact with humanity at the birth of Lena Grove’s child. Where earlier Hightower claims that marriage is bondage and desires immunity from reality, at this point he “moves like a man with a purpose.... There goes through him a glow, a wave, a surge of something almost triumphant” (446). The ultimate gesture of Hightower’s acceptance of life seems to come when he hopes that Lena will name her child after him.

But Hightower’s acceptance of life lasts only momentarily. When he sees Lena again, he has already become a prey to his old doubts and fears, and he advises her to leave Byron. His reasons, which are rooted in his habitual misogyny, are that Byron deserves “that the nothing with which he has lived for thirty-five years be violated...without two witnesses” (454). When Lena tells Hightower that Byron has gone away, his reaction is one of relief. “Thank God, thank God, God help me.” When we finally leave Hightower at the end of the novel, he is again “the shadowy figure among shadows” who lives surrounded by the past with its “wild bugles and the clashing sabres and the dying thunder of hooves” (544). He recognizes that he is

a failure in his own world. "I was the one who failed, who infringed," he tells himself, "perhaps that is the greatest social sin of all, ay, perhaps moral sin" (537).

Some might think that Dimmesdale is redeemed by his death, but we cannot be entirely certain because when the moment of truth finally arrives, it is too late. He confesses in the name of God, who gives him courage to admit his guilt after seven years. But his motive for finally confessing is less noble than it appears because Dimmesdale knows that he is dying and that if he does not confess before his death, his soul will be in agony. Even at this moment his motives are purely selfish. By confessing just before his death, he can escape the censure of the people in Salem and die peacefully, having cleared his conscience.

However, because the moment of death comes so soon after the confession, his death is simply the final point in his isolation. The same is the case with Hooper. At his deathbed he is surrounded with "pale spectators" to whom he addresses his ravings, and their only reaction is one of fear and incomprehension. His melodramatic and almost hysterical explanation still fails to clarify his reason for wearing the veil, and thus his vision of a black veil on every visage is rooted in paranoia. Neither Dimmesdale nor Hooper is able to communicate honestly with his respective congregation, and their deaths signify the end of men who are incapable of being integrated into the community.

In their novels, Faulkner and Hawthorne present ministers who are weak at best and positively sinful at worst. Although Chaucer is highly critical of the medieval

clergy in his portrayal of the lustful friar and the greedy monk, he does acknowledge the existence of good men like the devout parson. In the novels of William Faulkner or Nathaniel Hawthorne, however, we cannot find a single minister who is not seriously flawed. Dimmesdale, Hightower, Hooper and Whitfield are all we have, and they are highly unsatisfactory representatives of their class.

The six hundred year old literary tradition of the corrupt minister is very much alive in the twentieth century. Perhaps writers see an added appeal in presenting themes of guilt, avarice, sexual weakness or hypocrisy through a character who is as idealized by the community during modern times as he was during medieval. And because of the still-prevailing idealistic attitude toward religious leaders, we find it hard to forgive ministers like Arthur Dimmesdale or Gail Hightower who represent failed priesthood.

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