

**HAWTHORNE’S HUMANIST PROMETHEUS  
IN *YOUNG GOODMAN BROWN*  
AND *THE MINISTER’S BLACK VEIL***

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***Abstract:** In this essay, I examine Nathaniel Hawthorne’s humanism in *Young Goodman Brown* and *The Minister’s Black Veil*. I argue that Hawthorne promotes a humanist world that prizes the intrinsic value of man above religious zeal or political ideology. In each of the two stories, the humanist world was inaugurated by its protagonist, whom I will analyse through invoking Prometheus, who was known for giving fire to humanity and being punished for it.*

***Keywords:** Hawthorne, humanism, Prometheus, puritan, *The Minister’s Black Veil*, *Young Goodman Brown**

**1. Introduction: Hawthorne, humanism, and Prometheus**

It is no secret that Nathaniel Hawthorne is critical of his Puritan ancestors – notably William Hawthorne and his son John. The former was the original Puritan immigrant from England in Hawthorne’s lineage. According to Hawthorne’s autobiographical account in “The Custom-House” (1892a), the introductory chapter of *The Scarlet Letter* (1892), William was culpable for the mistreatment of a Quaker woman; John, inheriting his father’s “persecuting spirit”, presided over the prosecution of the alleged witches of Salem (1892a: 14). The anecdote that Nathaniel changed his family name from “Hathorne” to “Hawthorne” to cut ties with such cold-hearted – if not also cold-blooded – figures is convincing proof of his critical attitude towards them. In many of his other stories about the Puritan life in early New England, such as “The May-Pole of Merry Mount” and “The Gentle Boy”, this attitude is also manifest. The Puritans are portrayed as a bigoted and intolerant group of villains that were sadistically obsessed with imposing their own will on others, and, in doing so, had no issues with using violence.

Yet, is that all to Hawthorne’s view of the Puritans? A more meticulous read of Hawthorne’s Puritan fiction suggests otherwise. A more nuanced attitude is revealed in Hawthorne’s depiction of William Hathorne in “The Custom-House”, who is said to have come to New England “with his Bible and his sword, and made so large a figure, as a man of war and peace” (1892a: 14). His character was typical of a Puritan in Hawthorne’s eyes, because he had “all the Puritanic traits, both good and evil” (ibid.).

The Puritan character, therefore, was more complex than it is popularly believed. After all, according to Hawthorne himself, the popular mind is apt to

forget their “better deeds, although these were many” (ibid.). In *Grandfather’s Chair* (1841: 20), Hawthorne even claims that they were “the best men and women of their day”, and that it was “a blessing and honour [...] for New England to have such settlers”. Their characteristic intolerance, along with the frequency of the persecutions they inflicted, does not suggest a state of moral failure worse than Hawthorne’s own time: “Let not the reader argue from any of these evidences of iniquity that the times of the Puritans were more vicious than our own” (Hawthorne 2009a: 223). The Puritans were morally flawed, but nonetheless a highly illustrious group who would easily stand out from their contemporaries. Why the resolute renouncement of his ancestral heritage, then?

In my view, what Hawthorne considers fundamentally problematic in his ancestors is less the fact that they were flawed than the powerful influence they wield on their progeny, primarily Hawthorne himself, who feared that he, as a writer, would be harshly judged by his demanding ancestors. He imagines their harshness in appraising him as follows: “A writer of story-books! What kind of business in life, – what mode of glorifying God, or being serviceable to mankind is his day and generation, – may that be? Why, the degenerate fellow might as well have been a fiddler!” (1892a: 16).

Hawthorne is no doubt resistant to such judgment. In fact, underlying his entire Puritan fiction, from *The Scarlet Letter* to *The House of Seven Gables*, is the same message of resistance against their fanatic pursuit of moral perfection and their intolerance of those not on board with them in such a pursuit, be it their depraved contemporaries or their degenerate offspring. This is also noted by Alfred S. Reid (1966: 343), who, in his essay on the humanism reflected in “The Birthmark”, writes that “Hawthorne is less concerned with developing the philosophical idealism of Platonism than he is with sounding the tragic depth of human fallibility”.

Despite their constant moral failures, the Puritans were not unworthy of the reverence they enjoyed, but in Hawthorne’s eyes, they should not rule the lives of others by their own godly, religious principles and deprive them of their human agency. By advancing such an idea in his fiction, Hawthorne proves himself a humanist. To elaborate on his humanism, I now proceed to analyse two of his short stories – “Young Goodman Brown” and “The Minister’s Black Veil”. The analysis will be approached within a theoretical framework that covers all three aspects of Edward Quinn’s (2006: 201-202) definition of the word “humanism”: the emphasis on the value of the individual, the prioritisation of secular life, and the interest in the cultural heritage of ancient Greece and Rome.

The two short stories were originally published one year apart from each other, in 1835 and 1836, and were later collected in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1876) and *Twice Told Tales* (2009), respectively. In both stories, Hawthorne’s rejection of the Puritan rule by religious decree and his advocacy of humanism are conspicuous. In line with the Renaissance humanist tradition of invoking ancient Greece and Rome, I argue that the protagonists in these stories, Young Goodman Brown and Reverend Mr Hooper, are modelled after Prometheus, the titan in Greek mythology. Known for stealing fire in the service of humankind, and therefore being punished by Zeus, Prometheus, whose stories are recounted by Hesiod and Aeschylus, may aptly be called the original humanist. Similarly, the two of Hawthorne’s stories also contain a shared plot that sees the protagonist steal “the fire” (standing for human interests), which has previously been hidden from man by “Zeus” (standing for rule by godly principles), and receive punishment for such a deed.

There is no evidence suggesting Hawthorne's conscious use of Prometheus as the prototype for his Goodman Brown and Mr Hooper. It is only in his later writings that Hawthorne reveals his fascination with Prometheus. In the prose piece "Fire Worship", also collected in *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1876a), for example, Hawthorne vividly depicts the fire as "that brilliant guest, that quick and subtle spirit, whom Prometheus lured from heaven to civilise mankind and cheer them in their wintry desolation" (161). In "P.'s Correspondence", another piece of prose in the same collection (1876b), he shows himself to be well-versed in Percy Shelley's lyrical drama *Prometheus Unbound*, which, along with other "productions of his maturity", he considers "warmer with human love" (152).

Therefore, while it is impossible to ascertain that Hawthorne had Prometheus in mind when writing "Young Goodman Brown" and "The Minister's Black Veil", he would not consider the association of Prometheus and the fire with humanist ideas unfounded. In fact, the mythological nature of Prometheus' stories makes him an archetype, which is defined by Carl Gustav Jung (1971: 81) as "a figure – be it a daemon, a human being, or a process – that constantly recurs in the course of history and appears wherever creative fantasy is freely expressed" (). "Essentially, therefore, it is a mythological figure" (ibid.), Jung adds. As a writer of fiction and therefore a creative artist, Hawthorne did not need to have Prometheus in mind when creating his own renderings of Prometheus. Jung (1974: 86) also has a fascination with Prometheus, and contends that the mythological figure, whose name means "fore-thought", represents a social transition, since fore-thought denotes a severance of "all connection with the present in order to create [...] a distant future". The notion of a transition from a godly world to a human one, through the effort of a Prometheus, is the very idea I seek to elaborate in this article.

Depicting Hawthorne as a champion of humanism is not a new practice in Hawthorne studies. Existing studies, notably the aforementioned one by Alfred S. Reid, have explored this motif. However, this article uniquely makes Hawthorne interact with humanism in the multiple senses of the concept that are interlinked with one another. In doing so, it seeks to give a full account of Hawthorne's humanism. While Reid's study focuses on "The Birthmark", this article analyses two of his Puritan stories, which are more typical of Hawthorne's fictional corpus. Such a selection can presumably make my exposition of Hawthorne's humanism more compelling. The invocation of Jung's theory of archetypes in characterizing Hawthorne's protagonists as Prometheus not only helps with the understanding of the writer's humanism, but, given the recurrent nature of archetypes, lends perpetual relevance to Hawthorne's fiction by letting it transcend its Puritan and historical character and become reflective of the humanity's wide and constant struggles to assert itself.

## 2. The godly, yet dehumanising world

As mentioned above, Hawthorne's fictional Puritan world, despite its many moral failures, is not an unsalvageable one. What defines it is a predominant godly facade that shows no regard for what is characteristically human. The Puritan world's godly facade resulted from the Puritan immigrants' zealous goal to build a community based purely on Biblical principles in the New World. In Hawthorne's (1892a: 79) own words, his ancestors sought to build a "Utopia of human virtue and happiness". The godly facade did not only define the collective character of the

Puritan community, but also the individual character of its figures of authority. The companion of Goodman Brown in his nightly journey, as the spirit of his forefathers, had such a godly facade. He is depicted as belonging to “the governor’s dinner table or in King William’s court” (1876c: 89), because of his air of authority. Such an air could only be fortified through the staff, a symbol of authority, which he carried.

However, the staff was unusual, because of its resemblance to “a living serpent” (ibid.). The serpent, as a cunning animal, obviously complicates the moral composition of Goodman Brown’s forefathers. On the one hand, Goodman Brown professed that his family lineage was “a race of honest men and good Christians” (idem: 90). Yet, on the other hand, as revealed by his companion, they also “lashed the Quaker woman” and “set fire to an Indian village, in King Philip’s war” (ibid.). The complicated moral composition makes Goodman Brown’s forefathers resemble Zeus in Greek mythology, who was both the king of gods and an erratic perpetrator of injustice. The snake, while popularly known as the force of evil, also suggests the fuller human experience, or, according to Jung (2009: 247), “the earthly essence of man of which he is not conscious”. Therefore, the outward look of the spirit of Goodman Brown’s forefathers, comprehensively considered, betrays the concealment of humanity under a godly facade.

Hawthorne’s description of Goodman Brown’s wife can also attest to such a concealment. She was “aptly” called “Faith” (Hawthorne 1876c: 87), as though she was a singular, allegorical figure, instead of a full human. Her confession of being “afear’d [afraid] of herself” (ibid.) reflects an internalised denial of the full human experience. Her state of innocence, indicated by her “pink ribbons” and her likeness to a “blessed angel” (idem: 88), evokes that of Eve in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. Yet, her fear of herself recalls Adam and Eve’s realisation of their nakedness after eating the forbidden fruit, which prompted them to clothe themselves with fig leaves (Gn 3: 6-7 NIV). The Puritan world was, therefore, essentially a fallen, human world, disguised with a godly facade, but both Goodman Brown and Faith had been made ignorant of the fact. Therefore, the mission of the former, as Hawthorne’s Prometheus, was to help the human world ditch its godly facade and come to terms with its true state of existence.

In the other story, Mr Hooper was tasked with the same mission. Inexplicably to his parishioners, he put on a black veil over his face. According to Hawthorne (2009b: 22), this change took place when Hooper was “of about thirty”, evoking Jesus, who was also “about thirty years old” when beginning his ministry (Luke 3: 23), thus having a missionary nature. When Hooper prayed to God and read the Scriptures, the perplexity of the black veil to his parishioners was particularly heightened. Hawthorne (2009b: 23) hints that he could be hiding his face “from the dread Being whom he was addressing”. This is plausible because, supposedly having realised the human nature of his world, Mr Hooper believed that only a black veil, as a filter that could darken everything in sight, could help him see it for what it really was. All its outward look of divinity, epitomised by the Scriptures, the meeting house, the devout parishioners, and “the conscious dignity of their Sunday clothes” (idem: 21), was but a suffocating constraint on the full human experience.

What was the outcome of the outwardly godly world that could not reconcile itself to its human essence? To Hawthorne, it was the fact that, blindly preoccupied with their worship of God and following godly principles, the humans could not form spontaneous communities. They were informed by their mutual empathy and

shared human experience, but were divided into the godly and the ungodly, in accordance with their external image, thus making what Hawthorne (1892a: 66) calls “the united effort of mankind” impossible. The godly was often justifiably entitled to oppress and harm the latter, hence the bloody oppression of the Quakers and the Indians suffered at the hands of Goodman Brown’s family lineage, who ironically was known as “a people of prayer” (Hawthorne 1876c: 91). Moreover, the Puritan world shows to be one where human authenticity was discouraged, if not forbidden. Therefore, Reverend Mr Hooper insisted that his black veil would no longer be necessary when “the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend, the lover to his best-beloved; [...and] man does not vainly shrink from the eye of his Creator, loathsomely treasuring up the secret of his sin” (2009b: 33).

What made Goodman Brown and Minister Hooper the designated Prometheus, expected to bring people the knowledge of their earthly nature, was their intermediary existence. They each occupied a social position that allowed them to realise the falsity of the godly facade. Goodman Brown, like Hawthorne himself, came from a prominent family of Puritans. Mr Hooper was a priest. Therefore, both were involved in sustaining the godly facade of their communities.

However, Goodman Brown was also characterised by an aptitude for forethought, as denoted in the name Prometheus. This is revealed early in the story, when Goodman Brown struggled to decide whether to go on the nightly journey and leave his wife behind, before coming up with a future arrangement:

“Poor little Faith!” thought he, for his heart smote him. “What a wretch am I to leave her on such an errand! She talks of dreams, too. Methought as she spoke there was trouble in her face, as if a dream had warned her what work is to be done tonight. But no, no; ‘t would kill her to think it. Well, she’s a blessed angel on earth; and after this one night I’ll cling to her skirts and follow her to heaven.” (1876c: 88)

Carl Jung (1974: 166) describes Prometheus as “a man introverted to his inner world, true to his ‘soul’”. My view is that it is through this introspective and inquisitive tendency that Goodman Brown was able to go on such a journey and explore a world hidden from the view of the ordinary man.

Hooper’s intermediary existence is more obvious. He was “a good preacher”, who “strove to win his people heavenward by mild, persuasive influences” (Hawthorne 2009b: 23). By hiding his own face behind the black veil, he symbolically removed the godly facade of the community from the view of his parishioners. This impelled his parishioners to examine their own souls. The effect of the sermon that he preached, as a result, was enhanced, as if it was “the most powerful effort that they had ever heard from their pastor’s lips” (*ibid.*), making Mr Hooper “a very efficient clergyman” (*idem*: 31). However, this does not mean that the godly facade was thus dissolved. The people’s conscious attitude about Hooper’s message was that of resistance. Complaints of and even protests against his perplexing new look became commonplace, making the congregation “pale-faced” and “fearful” in his presence (*idem*: 23). Prometheus was in for a long battle against the godly power of Zeus.

### 3. The humanist fire

Underlying the prose piece “Fire Worship” is Hawthorne’s belief in the civilising power of the fire, which was true not only during the primordial stage of human evolution, but also in a perpetual sense. Therefore, he considers “the

fireside” the touchstone of a civilised man: “While a man was true to the fireside, so long would he be true to country and law, to the God whom his fathers worshipped, to the wife of his youth, and to all things else which instinct or religion has taught us to consider sacred” (Hawthorne 1876a: 163).

Truthfulness in the face of the human condition is also a central element in Hawthorne’s humanism. The main moral message of “Young Goodman Brown” is to accept the universal sinfulness of humanity, which is a presupposition of Hawthorne’s humanism: “Evil is the nature of mankind” (1876c: 103). It suggests the fallibility of all men and rejects such sanctity as accorded to Goodman Brown’s forefathers and “the church members of Salem village” (100), all of whom were present in the devil-worshipping assembly that Goodman Brown was led to. Their inauthentic existence was made known at the assembly: “Ye deemed them holier than yourselves, and shrank from your own sin, contrasting it with their lives of righteousness and prayerful aspirations heavenward. Yet here are they all in my [the devil’s] worshipping assembly” (102).

However, the universal sinfulness of man was no reason for despair to Hawthorne. Unlike his Puritan forefathers, he was not a whole-hearted Calvinist believing in God’s sole sovereignty in the dispensation of Saving Grace, which would predestine some “to salvation, others to destruction (Calvin 2006: 921). Rather, he trusts man’s capacity for good. Thus, the last moment of Goodman Brown’s nightly journey saw him urging his wife, whom he unexpectedly met at the ceremony, to “look up to heaven, and resist the wicked one” (Hawthorne 1876c: 103). This call is akin to Prometheus’ charitable act of gifting man with fire, which the latter could use to free himself from subsisting passively on nature and proactively improve his conditions.

Such a call also constitutes a rewriting of Eve’s succumbing to the devil’s seduction in Genesis 3. Its aim, however, is not to retain the original innocence, which to Hawthorne was out of the question in a human world, but to be the authentic maker of one’s moral decisions. Perhaps to Hawthorne’s liking, it was such a call that took Goodman Brown away from both the assembly and the nightly journey into the “calm night and solitude”, with “the roar of the wind” dying “heavily away through the forest” (Hawthorne 1876c: 103-104). In his new life following such a night, the defining characteristic of his conduct was also resistance. We learned that he “shrank” from the local minister, “snatched away” a little girl from false catechism, and “turned away” from his wife (1876c: 104-105). He exemplified how a man who had benefited from the fire of authenticity resolutely rejects the false godly facade of his community.

The fire of humanism brought by Mr Hooper manifested itself in his enhanced emotionality, which ironically came through covering the face. The covering can be likened to the Puritans’ historical effort to abolish idolatrous practices in the English Church, including “liturgies and ceremonies from their churches”, and replace “images, inevitably seen as idols, with scripture and prayer” (Coale 1993: 81), both with the aim of purifying society. Through covering his face, Hooper, now a preacher of humanism, directed people’s reverential attention away from his saintly persona to his sermon and his conduct. We learn that the increased efficiency of his sermon was because it was infused with “the gentle gloom of Mr Hooper’s temperament” (Hawthorne 2009b: 23). “An unsought pathos came hand in hand with awe” (ibid.). When Elizabeth, his fiancée, left him after a failed attempt to make him unveil his face, Hooper’s response shows how the veil had amplified his emotionality: “Oh, you know not how lonely I am, and

how frightened to be alone behind my black veil. Do not leave me in this miserable obscurity for ever” (29).

No other emotions could so fully express Hooper’s inner world as his persistent smile. It was seen immediately after he put on the veil until his death, when he turned into “a veiled corpse, with a faint smile lingering on the lips” (34). Exposing only his mouth and chin to the outside world, he let his smile become his defining expression. It is “that same sad smile which always appeared like a faint glimmering” (29), an unmistakably human smile, blending sorrow and hope. Along with the rich emotions Hooper displayed, the smile also marks the defiance against the stern and rigid looks that were typical of Hawthorne’s Puritans.

Like his smile, Hooper’s love is deliberately described as a mixture of sadness and bliss. Despite his refusal to unveil his face to Elizabeth, she did not abandon him. Instead, her “calm affection had endured thus long in secrecy, in solitude, amid the chill of age, and would not perish even at the dying-hour” (32). Elizabeth’s enduring affection for Hooper is also a manifestation of Hawthorne’s humanism. The female character is presented as both a spiritual follower and an emotional supporter of Hooper, in the same way that the Biblical Mary Magdalene “followed Jesus and financially supported him during his itinerant ministry of preaching and healing” (Ehrman 2008: 195).

Elizabeth is identified as a “nurse” when attending the dying Hooper (Hawthorne 2009b: 32), a profession that would enable the flourishing of the humanist vision that Hooper preached in his lifetime. Elizabeth once again is reminiscent of Mary Magdalene, who witnessed both the crucifixion of Jesus (John 19: 25) and his resurrection (John 20: 1). While Hooper could not see his humanist teaching widely accepted while alive, he prophesied the continuation of his cause, which is why he called the veil a “type” (Hawthorne 2009b: 28), meaning “a person or thing (as in the Old Testament) believed to foreshadow another (as in the New Testament)” (“Type” 2022).

#### **4. The continued struggle amid punishment**

Despite accounts of resolute action and of hope of success that mark the last episodes of the two stories, they do not have unambiguously happy endings. They are rather defined by a poignant sense of continuous suffering. After his nightly journey, Young Goodman Brown became a “stern, a sad, a darkly meditative, a distrustful, if not a desperate man” (Hawthorne 1876c: 104-105). With his consistently introverted self, his suffering was distinctively internal. As a messenger of humanism, he refused to join his family in talking to God through prayers (105). In essence, his inner suffering – characterised by an unspeakable boundness – is not so different from that of Prometheus, who was chained by Zeus on Mount Caucasus for stealing the fire: “With painful fetters he bound shifty-planning Prometheus, with distressful bonds, driving them through the middle of a pillar; and he set upon him a long-winged eagle which ate his immortal liver” (Hesiod 2006: 45).

Hawthorne himself is also cognizant of the eagle as a metaphor of divine punishment on humanity. In “The Custom-House”, the American eagle is depicted as a dehumanising menace:

With the customary infirmity of temper that characterises this unhappy fowl, she appears, by the fierceness of her beak and eye and the general truculency of her

attitude, to threaten mischief to the inoffensive community; and especially to warn all citizens, careful of their safety, against intruding on the premises which she overshadows with her wings. (Hawthorne 1892a: 5-6)

The liver that Zeus' eagle devoured is not a random organ, but a metaphor for human conscience itself. It is also the mark of the human defiance against the rule of the gods. Despite the recurring setbacks, man's defiance against the gods continues, just as the liver of Prometheus "grew again on all sides at night just as much as the long-winged bird would eat during the whole day" (Hesiod: 2006: 45).

The notion of regeneration also marks Goodman Brown's late life. Despite his continuous suffering, his struggle could not be annihilated. According to Hawthorne (1876c: 105), not only did Goodman Brown himself put on a long struggle, he also gained many followers, including a large posterity, who embodied his 'regeneration': "And when he had lived long, and was borne to his grave a hoary corpse, followed by Faith, an aged woman, and children and grandchildren, a goodly procession, besides neighbours not a few".

Like Goodman Brown, Mr Hooper also "spent a long life" (Hawthorne 2009b: 31). His struggle to free the community of its godly facade was also a lonesome one, evoking the bound state of Prometheus. His messages of emotionality would constantly fall on deaf ears, just as he himself was often denied love: "kind and loving, though unloved and dimly feared; a man apart from men, shunned in their health and joy" (2009b: 31). Yet, when bad things happened to his parishioners, as they would do in a human world, he would be "ever summoned to their aid" (ibid.). In his final moment, he put on a final battle against the false godliness by rejecting the request of Reverend Mr Clark, "a young and zealous divine" who threatened to undo Hooper's effort, by asking him to take off his black veil (32-33). This incident highlights the perpetual nature of the humanist cause.

Resolutely rejecting such a request in his last moment, Mr Hooper wore his black veil into his tomb: "Still veiled, they laid him in his coffin, and a veiled corpse they bore him to the grave. The grass of many years has sprung up and withered on that grave, the burial-stone is moss-grown, and good Mr Hooper's face is dust; but awful is still the thought that it mouldered beneath the black veil" (2009b: 34). Gloomy as it sounds, such a scenario is not hopeless. While the black veil did not immediately usher in a new epoch, its continued existence wielded an enduring persuasive power, making it similar to Hester Prynne's scarlet letter, which she opted to wear permanently in her later life: "the scarlet letter ceased to be a stigma which attracted the world's scorn and bitterness, and became a type of something to be sorrowed over, and looked upon with awe, yet with reverence too" (Hawthorne 1892: 466). Thus, Hawthorne's humanism precludes utopianism, whereby virtue could be universally practised and happiness could be attained once and for all.

## 5. Conclusion

The article discusses Hawthorne's humanism embedded in his two short stories, *Young Goodman Brown* and *The Minister's Black Veil*, by drawing a comparison between their plots and the archetypal story of Prometheus. Each of Hawthorne's protagonists in these stories essentially enacted a heroic, continuous struggle against the Puritan morals, which demanded a moral perfection that was not only impossible, but also uncondusive to the formation of a good community.



However, as evidenced in Hawthorne's critique of the American eagle in the autobiographical account of "The Custom-House", Hawthorne's humanism is not simply anti-Puritan, but an ethic that opposes all lofty social principles and values that do not give due consideration to human reality or put the human being's interests and needs first. Therefore, the humanist cause, as suggested in Prometheus' archetypal story and in Hawthorne's short stories, is a never-ending battle.

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