ANTI-TRANSCENDENTALISM:
NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

The transcendentalists were kind of like the tree-hugging hippies of pre-Civil War Massachusetts. And just as there are those today who have contempt for the whole “peace-love-and nature thing,” there were people in Antebellum America who took issue with the transcendentalists. These anti-transcendentalists were somewhat akin to those of the all-black clothes, trenchcoat variety of today.

Anti-transcendentalism (as you might guess from the name) sprung up as a direct reaction to the philosophy of transcendentalism. The anti-transcendentalists felt that the transcendentalist denial of evil was naive. To Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne, the idea of a humanity without evil complexities lurking within their soul and in the world all around them, was just too boring. They thought that Emerson and Thoreau’s optimistic interpretation of humanity was simplistic and basically wrong. And while transcendentalism does make for a nice life philosophy, it doesn't exactly provide a writer with the best material for a novel: Who ever heard of a story without a bad guy, right?? [Or at least, this is how the anti-transcendentalists felt.]

Now, all this isn't meant to imply that Hawthorne and Melville were eternal pessimists. They did believe in the human capacity for good, but they also believed in the capacity for evil.
And they didn’t really put too much water in the phrase “Nothing is impossible, if you try.” Rather, Hawthorne and Melville found a mixture of will and desire in humanity. They wanted to probe reality, not some optimistic portrayal of reality. Melville summed up his approach to interpreting the lives of humans as the idea of “usable truth.” Melville described his phrase “usable truth” as “the absolute condition of present things as they strike the eye of the man who fears them not.”

Some other serious writers during this time and place were Emily Dickinson, James Russell Lowell, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Oliver Wendell Holmes. Lowell, Longfellow, and Holmes were called the Boston Brahmins.

**NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE**

1804 - 1864

Hawthorne was born in Salem, Massachusetts. The name “Salem” is still associated with evil in the minds of many Americans even today. This small Massachusetts town was the site of the infamous Salem witch trials, which occurred in a Puritan community during the 1600s. Many innocent women were murdered because certain townspeople thought they were witches. Hawthorne’s Puritan ancestors were involved in the witchcraft trials. The disturbing legacy of Hawthorne’s hometown had a serious impact on him: he knew that most humans strongly feared evil in others, yet many of these same people had this very capacity for evil within themselves. Hawthorne viewed evil as a force that leaves its mark on generation after generation. Hawthorne’s acceptance of evil was most like Puritanism; specifically the Puritan concept of original sin (all humans are depraved).
Both Hawthorne’s life and work were characterized by isolation. His concern with isolation may have resulted from his twelve years of seclusion. During the twelve years immediately following his graduation from college, Hawthorne secluded himself in his mother’s house to concentrate on developing his writing. He was concerned with the truth of the heart. The mysteries of the heart and the question of evil are the true subjects of Hawthorne’s art.

Hawthorne’s greatest work is generally considered to be *The Scarlet Letter*. The publication of *The Scarlet Letter* confirmed Hawthorne in his profession as a writer. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne probes the darker side of human nature more deeply than any American before him.

**“THE MINISTER’S BLACK VEIL”**

“*The Minister’s Black Veil*” is a parable. A parable is best defined as a narrative that draws a moral lesson or illustrates a religious truth. A parable is similar to an allegory, except that the message of a parable is not laid out quite as explicitly as the message of an allegory. An allegory is best defined as a tale in which characters or objects stand for abstract qualities. In an allegory, for example, if the author wants a character to symbolize laziness, then the character will be given the name “Lazy” (like in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*). In a parable, however, the writer is asking a little bit more of the reader.

So, what is the lesson of this parable??? Part of the lesson taught by Mr. Hooper’s experience is the merits of confessing sin. The black veil Reverend Hooper wore stood for secret sin. Parson Hooper’s black veil initially made his congregation
and the people of the town very frightened and uneasy. Then, as time goes on, certain members of the congregation begin to seek him out: “the dying sinners” of the town request that he visit with them during their last hours.

This short story also focuses on the theme of isolation, which Hawthorne dealt with in much of his work. The Minister’s decision to wear the veil puts a great distance between himself and the other townspeople — even his girlfriend Elizabeth, who leaves him. Perhaps the Minister’s aim was to get people to focus on the idea of “secret sin” and ultimately confront it within themselves. Some do — “the dying sinners” in their last hours — but many do not. The Minister is thus left alone, not only physically, but metaphysically (in the nonphysical world of abstract thought) as well. That is, most of the people in the town just couldn’t figure out why he was wearing that darn veil. No one really gets it until he is on his deathbed. It is at this point that he exclaims: “Why do you tremble at me alone? Tremble also at each other! . . . I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a Black Veil!”

“DR. HEIDEGGER’S EXPERIMENT”

“Dr. Heidegger’s Experiment” could be classified as an allegory. While the characters do not have names that clearly describe what they are supposed to represent (like Greedy, Bashful, Sleepy, Lazy, Sneezy, etc.), the abstract qualities that they represent are somewhat obvious. Mr. Medbourne, for example, is supposed to be representative of greed.

“Dr. Heidegger’s Experiment” also makes heavy use of symbolism. A symbol is best defined as something that stands
for something else. In this story the Doctor's mirror stands as a symbol of his past failures to help people live.

Dr. Heidegger's four guests can best be characterized as corrupt and decaying old people. Dr. Heidegger's true experiment was to see if people, given the illusion of youth once more, would behave in an improved or altered manner. And the result of the experiment?? Nope, people continue to be greedy, selfish, and vain. (You might be able to make a case here that Hawthorne is in fact an eternal pessimist.)