

## Lenny H. on Dickens' "The Black Veil" (Sketches by Boz)

From the comments on Week 8 of the #Dickens Club: <https://wreninkpaper.com/2022/02/21/dickens-club-week-8-final-week-of-sketches-by-boz-and-a-week-7-wrap-up/>



Illustration by Harry Furniss for "The Black Veil"

### Part I

The entire pastiche of materials that surround this tale would be interesting to string together as a kind of novelette in several parts. But I'm wondering what would be the outcome and would it be structurally and aesthetically possible? You and others might have an answer for that....

As it IS, now, I find the tale so intriguing and complex that it would take many pages of writing and exploration to do it justice. I'm just going to make a few suggestions how I might go about making a fairly long explication of "The Black Veil" without following up very much on them.

One could certainly come at the tale with some analysis of its antecedents and followers and how they could, with their themes, characters, structures, descriptive details give meaning

and purpose to this Dickens' tale. I'm thinking particularly of the young American writers who were working more or less contemporaneously with Dickens. As I was reading the "Veil" I thought immediately of Hawthorne, Irving, and secondarily, of Poe—all of whom were writing in something we could call the "Gothic" tradition. The Stories I'm thinking of are Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Browne" and "The Minister's Black Veil"—and with Irving, "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle. With Poe, writing later, there is "The Fall of the House of Usher," which really made a huge impression on me as an undergraduate. All of these "tales" are dark, strange, symbolic, introduce dream/nightmare states and suggest allegory—Christian or otherwise. At one time or another, Dickens was probably familiar with them all but to what extent he made use of them I don't know. Nevertheless, they contain elements which could be read back into the "Veil" productively, seeing it as a kind of gothic allegory.

Two other approaches to this tale really excite me—they are similar and might be used in parallel fashion—Joseph Campbell's "Monomyth" (coming from his great and provocative work **THE HERO WITH A THOUSAND FACES**), and the German heroic structure—the "**BILDUNGSROMAN**." In many ways, an analysis involving these two "traditional" approaches would or could intermingle and heighten the meaning of both and each other and thus the the Dickens' tale. In other words their ideas could be integrated usefully in an analysis by looking at the tale from these perspectives. This is not to say that the Hawthorne, Irving, Poe inferences would be left out in this complex of ideas. Bringing in meaning and details from these sources would just enrich our understanding of the multifaceted meanings of this complex work by our dear Charles.

The Key structure in the monomyth is in three parts: Beginning with the main character's **SEPARATION**- leading to an **INITIATION** and ending with the hero/heroine/protagonist's **RETURN**. This fits the structure of "The Black Veil" to a "T." The young doctor, sitting more or less complacently in his warm cottage, protected from the wild storm raging outside, falls asleep and dreams positively of his future with his bride to be. This dream positions him in a fairly "safe" place and heightens his more or less complacent present situation. But he is awakened by his young assistant and faced with the spectre of the veiled woman who, in all her austerity, is terribly frightening. She makes her verbal appeal to him as doctor to meet with her the next morning so that he might be able to take care of someone who, as it turns out would be his first patient! In the monomyth, this veiled woman would, in taking the

young doctor out of his “safe” environment, act as his GUIDE into the “Initiation” part of the Campbell structure. And this segment of the structure, makes up the bulk of the tale, where the doctor moves out of his home into kind of unknown and strange environment where he begins to see and experience a part of life he’s new to. The grotesque, chaotic, ramshackle, impoverished landscape will imprint itself upon him for ever, and give him an awareness he perhaps has never before experienced.

## Part II

As Chris mentions, “the Walworth neighborhood is quite chilling.” Yes, it’s definitely a “wasteland”—but there is more. It serves as a hiding place and training ground for thieves and murderers. Perhaps the birthplace of the son of the veiled woman! And this fact is definitely a crucial segment of the monomyth, especially as it is combined with the mysterious and “dark” “residence” of the dead man. For in the monomyth, there is usually a DESCENT during the initiation phase, into some kind of shadowy underworld and the horrors that might go with it. The “guide”—here the mother—is responsible for drawing the protagonist into this dark place where the protagonist’s “education” continues. Campbell states that this “place” could be a forbidden psychological space, a spiritual environment, or simply a realistically awful landscape. Whatever, the descent is usually terrifying, a kind of Gethsemane, perhaps. In “The Black Veil” The gothic description of the dead man’s home and resting place is dark and austere, and reminds me of the horrible spaces in a Kafka novel or something from a surreal painting of Dali. In fact, in this regard, I’m tempted to classify the entire tale as a surreal short story—with its early dream sequence and the very nightmare-like details near the story’s conclusion. In raw terms, also, one might say that the mother has beckoned the young doctor into an “appointment with death”! And, naturally, this is one of the great ironies of the story. The doctor’s FIRST patient is a dead man! Now we’re getting, I believe, into the realm of Poe!

But then to the third segment of the monomyth, the RETURN. The idea behind the Campbell structure is that the Hero/Heroine separates from an initial place/space, moves through some kind of initiation, and comes back into his original “environment” more or less in tact with the knowledge that the initiation has “taught” him or her. With this new information, he

ideally will integrate himself back into society and do good works with his new knowledge. And this, in brief, is what happens on a small scale in “The Black Veil”:

“For many years after this occurrence, and when profitable and arduous avocations would have led many men to forget that such a miserable being existed, the young surgeon was a daily visitor at the side of the harmless mad woman; not only soothing her by his presence and kindness, but alleviating the rigour of her condition by pecuniary donations for her comfort and support, bestowed with no sparing hand. In the transient gleam of recollection and consciousness which preceded her death, a prayer for his welfare and protection, as fervent as mortal ever breathed, rose from the lips of this poor friendless creature. That prayer flew to Heaven, and was heard. The blessings he was instrumental in conferring, have been repaid to him a thousand-fold; but, amid all the honours of rank and station which have since been heaped upon him, and which he has so well earned, he can have no reminiscence more gratifying to his heart than that connected with The Black Veil.”

A lesser man might ignore the learning that has taken place during the initiation and simply forget about the veiled woman. But the young doctor doesn’t and receives both material and spiritual rewards for his caring and love for the dead son’s mother. Perhaps then, we could also see this tale as a Christian Allegory similar to Bunyan’s PILGRIMS PROGRESS! We could then, extrapolate the ideas and methods from Bunyan’s popular narrative and use that as our “Monomyth Sounding Board.”

Oh Boy! The interpretation possibilities just pile up!

But now, very quickly, to the “Bildungsroman.” Again, as in the monomyth, the narrative involves a protagonist who goes through a segment of life involving trials and tribulations. This genre usually implies a journey or some kind of quest. And through this experience the protagonist receives an “education,” maybe we could call it “life lessons.” Dickens would be as familiar with this kind of structure as he would be with the novels and stories containing the monomyth. One of his favorite novels was, I presume, Fielding’s TOM JONES, and this novel contains the narrative structure I’ve just alluded to. I think that this Fielding novel was one of his favorites because Dicken named one of his sons after Fielding. So, in “The Black Veil” we could be seen to have a kind of truncated Bildungsroman. Here, we could discuss the novel in terms of the Fielding work, the various stages of Tom Jones’ journey, and apply them to gain meaning to the events and characters of Dicken’s story. Or we could simply

research the motifs and ideas inherent in, generically, the Bildungsroman, and see what depth they would reveal about the “Veil.” However, I tend to see the Bildungsroman as more of a secular story, whereas the monomyth moves, often, in the direction of religious narrative. But I’m splitting hairs, here, and getting onto dangerous ground. Perhaps they are more interchangeable than I think. But I’d put my money on the monomyth idea as I ventured to do an in-depth analysis of “The Black veil.

In the past, and this will sound a bit too erudite, my favorite Bildungsroman was Goethe’s *WILHELM MEISTER’S WANDERJAHR*. This is a lovely German narrative that Dickens may or may not have read. He was probably familiar with it in some capacity. But for the life of me, I remember practically nada about it—after 50+ years—and have promised myself to reread it these last ten years but haven’t gotten around to it!!! So sad....

I believe that *DAVID COPPERFIELD* and *GREAT EXPECTATIONS* are wonderful possibilities for the kind of analysis I’ve been talking about. But we’ll know that once we take on those novels. You Dickensians would know much more about how any of these ideas fit with the other novels and stories....