

The Birthmark Study Guide



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Summary

The protagonist of this tale, Aylmer, is a scientist “proficient in every branch of natural philosophy.” The plot is set in motion when he marries a beautiful young woman, Georgiana, who bears a curious birthmark on her cheek in the shape of a tiny crimson hand. Envious women sometimes say it spoils her beauty, but most men find it enchanting. Aylmer, however, becomes obsessed with the birthmark as the one flaw in an otherwise perfect beauty. When Aylmer involuntarily shudders at the appearance of the birthmark, which waxes and wanes with the flushing or paling of the lady’s cheek, Georgiana also develops a horror of her supposed blemish. Aylmer has a prophetic dream in which he seeks surgically to remove the mark, but it recedes as he probes till it clutches at her heart. In despair, Georgiana encourages Aylmer to try to remove the mark, even if it endangers her life to do so.

He secludes her in a lovely boudoir and entertains her with enchanting illusions and captivating fragrances. He and his gross, shaggy-haired assistant, Aminadab, labor mightily in Aylmer’s laboratory to produce an elixir that will irradiate the imperfection of his nearly perfect bride. The laboratory’s fiery furnace, its soot-blackened walls, its gaseous odors, and its test tubes and crucibles contrast grimly against the ethereal boudoir where his wife waits.

Meanwhile, Georgiana finds and reads Aylmer’s journal, which records his scientific experiments. Her admiration and understanding for her husband’s aspirations and intellect increase, even as she recognizes that most of his experiments are magnificent failures. Though she no longer expects to outlive the experience, she gladly and lovingly accepts the draft from her husband’s hand. The birthmark does indeed fade, leaving her a vision of perfect beauty, a spirit unblemished in the flesh, but Georgiana is dead. The birthmark is mortality itself.

Summary

Published in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s collection *Mosses From an Old Manse*, “The Birthmark,” using the third-person-omniscient point of view, tells the story of a beautiful woman, Georgiana, whose face is imprinted with a pale red birthmark in the shape of a small hand, and her husband, Aylmer, a scientist, who possesses a high degree “of faith in man’s ultimate control over Nature.” Georgiana had thought her mark to be a sort of “charm,” and men in the past had found it enchanting, suggesting a sexual symbolism. Aylmer, however, considers it an imperfection and, confident in his power over nature, wants to remove it from her face. He persuades her to allow him to remove it, even after he reveals his frightening dream that he must carve down to her heart to do so, because she feels they cannot be happy together unless the birthmark is gone. While they both admire perfection, she understands it in spiritual terms while Aylmer reduces it to the physical, not comprehending the utter goodness of his wife and taking full advantage of his ability to dominate her. Guiding her to his laboratory, which includes beautiful rooms designed to relax and perhaps

mesmerize her, Aylmer ultimately succeeds in removing the birthmark, but Georgiana, as the dream foretold, dies. “The Birthmark” ultimately valorizes “natural” beauty, which might contain imperfections, over the “ideal” beauty created by art or science; explores the hubris of art and science in attempting to perfect what nature provides; and also reveals a fascination and discomfort with the power of women’s sexuality, which might cause a man do anything, including jeopardizing a woman’s life, to diminish it.

Summary: Extended Summary

Aylmer, a man who has devoted his life to science, leaves “the laboratory [and] wash[es] the stain of acids from his fingers” to marry the beautiful Georgiana. His love of science is so strong, however, he cannot completely wean himself from it: his love for his wife “intertwine[s] itself with his love of science.” Soon after their marriage, Aylmer asks Georgiana whether she has ever considered removing from her cheek a birthmark, very tiny but bearing in shape a likeness to the human hand. Pale red, it would fade when she blushed but become more distinct when she paled. “Seeing her otherwise so perfect, he found this one defect grow more and more intolerable with every moment of their married lives,” until finally Georgiana begins to shudder under his critical gaze. He recounts to her a disturbing dream that when he, with his servant Aminadab, operated on her cheek, the deeper he went with his knife to remove the mark, the deeper the mark sank into her skin so that eventually the tiny hand of the birthmark “caught hold of Georgiana’s heart.” Even then, however, Aylmer was resolved to remove it. In spite of the dream, he is convinced that he can perform the operation successfully, and she admires her husband’s devotion to an ideal that motivates him to perfect her in this way.

Aylmer then takes Georgiana into his laboratory, where his assistant Aminadab, a man of little intellect and “grimed with the vapors of the furnace,” is ready to assist him in removing his wife’s birthmark. After she faints in fear, Aminadab comments, “If she were my wife, I’d never part with that birthmark.” When Georgiana awakes she finds herself in beautiful apartments where Aylmer shows her some of his magic to ease her spirits. She is delighted by the play of light he performs for her but is dismayed when a magical plant dies upon her touch. He tries to make a daguerreotype of her, but this fails. However, he continues to tell his wife of his accomplishments, and when she expresses fear that a mere human should possess such powers, he assures her that he would never use them, and to remove the “little hand” on her face would be but a “trifling” matter. As time goes by in the beautiful room, Georgiana begins to suspect that Aylmer has already begun his experiments on her because she feels peculiar sensations, and this awareness is accompanied by her increased loathing of the mark on her face, which she now feels exceeds even that of her husband’s.

When Aylmer leaves the room, Georgiana peruses the folios containing his notes on his experiments, and although she is shocked by his many failures, her admiration for him increases because of his devotion to his work. “It has made me worship you more than ever,” she tells him. When he leaves her to go into his laboratory, she follows, finding there the furnace and various accoutrements of science including “an electrical machine...ready for immediate use.” Aylmer is working over the machine, as is Aminadab, whom he imperiously calls a “human machine” and “man of clay.” Annoyed that Georgiana has wandered into his work space, Aylmer accuses her of not trusting him, but she in turn protests that he does not sufficiently trust her if he will not share with her all of what he knows. When he cautions her “there is danger” in removing the mark, she protests that the only danger is that “this horrible stigma shall be left upon [her] cheek.” The narrator tells us “her heart exulted, while it trembled at his honorable love—so pure and lofty that it would accept nothing less than perfection.”

Accordingly, when he gives her a potion in a goblet, she drinks it eagerly. After she falls asleep, Aylmer watches her carefully, marking down in his notebook all of his observations, including the fact that the birthmark begins to lose some of its distinctness. However, Georgiana becomes pale, causing Aminadab to emit “a gross, hoarse chuckle...of delight.” When Georgiana vaguely awakes, she looks into a mirror that

Aylmer has provided. She first smiles because the birthmark is now “barely perceptible” but then murmurs, “My poor Aylmer,” for she knows she is dying, and indeed she does. “As the last crimson tint of the birthmark—that sole token of human imperfection—faded from her cheek, the parting breath for the now perfect woman passed into the atmosphere, and her soul...took its heavenward flight.” Aylmer again hears the hoarse chuckling laugh of Aminadab as the narrator tells us that “had Aylmer reached a profounder wisdom, he need not thus have flung away the happiness which would have woven his mortal life of the selfsame texture with the celestial.” Ironically, from the beginning of the story, the coarse Aminadab understands the goodness and beauty of Georgiana more than the brilliant scientist Aylmer, who was her husband.

Themes: Themes and Meanings

Allegories seldom produce well-rounded characters because their purpose is primarily philosophical and didactic. Aylmer is undoubtedly the Faustian man who is never satisfied with his own limitations. Ordinary nature is never good enough to fulfill his idealistic aspirations, and like both Christopher Marlowe’s and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s Faust, he is entranced with the Greek ideal of perfect beauty. In terms of visible beauty, Georgiana cannot compete with Helen of Troy, the supernatural succubus provided by Mephistopheles for Faustus. On the other hand, she can appeal to Aylmer’s attraction to spiritual beauty and thus perhaps save his soul, like Gertrude, instead of assuring his damnation as the spurious Helen did for Faustus in Marlowe’s version. Aylmer’s ultimate fate is not resolved in the story. Presumably, he, like Ethan Brand, another of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s protagonists, has found the one unforgivable sin in himself: intellectual pride.

Aylmer is never covetous of evil pleasures. He aspires upward, always, toward the ideal. In this sense, he is less believable as a human specimen than the Renaissance Faustus, who craved sensual experience as well as knowledge and power. Aylmer seems to have been corrupted by the idealist’s tendency toward abstraction and discontent with reality. In fact, he hardly seems sufficiently empirical in orientation to make a good scientist. However, the reader is assured that “he handled physical details as if there were nothing beyond them; yet spiritualized them all, and redeemed himself from materialism by his strong and eager aspirations towards the infinite.” Science is obviously closer to alchemy and magic at this time than to modern chemistry and physics. Alchemy always had a spiritual element.

Georgiana is a one-dimensional heroine, as good as she is beautiful. In fact, the story seems to support the Platonic assumption that perfect beauty is equivalent to perfect goodness. Georgiana does gain some intellectual insight in the course of the story, loving her husband more but trusting his judgment less. She has more common sense than he but also more selfless devotion. Modern readers may complain that the perfect goodness she attains, even before she is purified of her physical flaw, is simply the absurd exaggeration of conventional female virtue: absolute self-sacrifice and submission to the will of the beloved. Hawthorne casts all blame for the tragic outcome on the misguided husband, who is not satisfied with the blessings of nature.

The conflict is not really between good and evil; it lies, rather, in a fundamental incompatibility between the physical and the spiritual aspects of human beings. Georgiana recognizes that Aylmer’s journal was “the sad confession and continual exemplification of the shortcomings of the composite man, the spirit burdened with clay, and working in matter, and of the despair that assails the higher nature at finding itself so miserably thwarted by the earthly part.”

Themes

Romanticism and the Ideal

“The Birthmark” argues that the artistry of nature, even when imperfect, surpasses any art created by humankind. As a result, idealistic endeavors that aspire to an art more beautiful than what nature offers are

morally flawed. Because Georgiana “comes so nearly perfect from the hand of nature,” Aylmer’s idealism as well as his arrogant confidence in his skills motivates his desire to remove the mark “so that the world might possess one specimen of ideal loveliness without the semblance of a flaw.” At moments, the narrator as well as Georgiana admires this pursuit of perfect beauty, yet Aylmer’s final failure communicates to the danger of this position. To worship with humility divine beauty is one thing, but to believe one can create pure beauty is another. In this way, Hawthorne questions whether the major inspiration for creativity is pure vision or whether artistic creativity in pursuit of the ideal is unavoidably lessened by selfish, proud motives.

Science Versus Nature

In the nineteenth century, many understood science as the ultimate cure for the problems of the world. The positivism of the day suggested that science offered the cure to the difficulties of nature, including sickness and death. In this way, science offered the possibility of dominating nature and, for this reason, was associated with masculine thought. Nature, on the other hand, has historically been associated with the feminine, as something beautiful but also something that could be “penetrated” and ultimately dominated—understood—by means of scientific experiments and knowledge. “The Birthmark” embodies this dichotomy between science and nature, masculinity and femininity. Aylmer, representing science, seeks to perfect nature, represented by Georgiana. His dream of cutting into her birthmark, which connects to her heart, provides a metaphor of science penetrating nature to seek and ultimately control its mysteries. That Georgiana dies at the end of the story, her soul flying to heaven, indicates the danger and failure of science, while it also allows its success, in that the woman indeed is dominated and penetrated even though destroyed in the process.

Gender and Sexuality

The theme of gender presents itself not only by way of the conflict between science and nature but also through the symbolism of the birthmark. Before she married, Georgiana considered it a “charm,” connoting something both magical and fortunate, and former suitors thought “some fairy” placed it there, giving Georgiana “sway over all hearts,” indicating its sexual power. Significantly, Aylmer does not notice the birthmark until after he marries Georgiana, when, we infer, they have shared sexual intimacy. Then he suddenly finds it a “mark of earthly imperfection.” In other words, it reminds him that she has a body and is not the “pure spirit” of beauty he would prefer. From Leviticus until at least the twentieth century, myths about women’s menstruation have carried suggestions of uncleanness and poison to which Hawthorne implicitly alludes through Aylmer’s abhorrence of the birthmark and his means of protecting himself from it. For example, when Georgiana touches the magical flower it dies, and when Aylmer prepares her for his experiment he isolates her in a “magical circle” cut off by curtains until he cures the “imperfection.” Some critics interpret the tiny hand on Georgiana’s cheek as a mark of God, while others understand it as a mark of the devil. Such ambiguity further indicates the ambivalent attitude toward female sexuality that the birthmark embodies.

Characters: Character List

Aminadab—the bulky, coarse laboratory assistant to Aylmer. He has great mechanical ability, the brawn, so to speak, to the brains of his master, Aylmer.

Aylmer—a superb scholar and scientist. He marries Georgiana, whom he loves, but his devotion to ideal beauty and scientific studies rivals his devotion to his wife. As a result, he seeks to perfect her loveliness by removing from her face a birthmark that he thinks is a “defect.”

Georgiana—the beautiful, newly wedded wife of Aylmer. Born with a birthmark that looks like a small hand on her left cheek, Georgiana wants her husband to love her and admires his pursuit of beauty. She painfully regrets that he finds her beauty marred by the birthmark; as a result, she submits to his experiments to remove

the “imperfection.”

Narrator—the distinctive voice, most likely male, that recounts “The Birthmark.” He assumes the formal role of a storyteller, giving the reader warnings and implying correct moral choices.

Characters: Character Analysis

Critics variously view **Aylmer** as a “failed humanitarian,” a “callous scientist,” or a misogynist who fears the sexuality of Georgiana. No doubt he is all of these, which contributes to his power over his wife and his arrogant confidence in himself, in spite of repeated failures in his experiments. Indeed, there is something compulsive about the man in that although he considers his wife “otherwise so perfect, he [finds] her [birthmark] grow more and more intolerable every moment of their united lives.” Although some men might have found it charming, for him the birthmark is “the fatal flaw of humanity,” reminding him of the mortality that “clutches the highest and purest of earthly mould, degrading them into kindred with the lowest, and even with the very brutes”; in short, for Aylmer the birthmark is “a symbol of his wife’s liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death.” This perception of the birthmark indicates Aylmer’s fears of his own humanity as well as that of his wife, the fact that he is liable to decay just as she. This he cannot tolerate, and throughout the story he insists upon his own difference from common humanity, which is why he calls his assistant a “brute” and “man of clay.” For him, the birthmark makes his wife a “brute” like his assistant. However, some readers might consider Aylmer the brute, despite his pretensions to intellect and perfection and even though he, like a gentleman, cleanses himself of “furnace smoke” when he persuades Georgiana to become his wife. His belief that her birthmark is a “frightful object” bullies Georgiana into agreeing to his experiments on her. Indeed, he is so persuasive that she ultimately believes what he says, and his need to eliminate what makes her human causes her to “worship [him] more than ever.” Although her death indicates her mortality, her soul ascends to heaven at the end of the story, while he, along with his assistant, remains attached to the earth, lacking the wisdom that would have enabled him to love his wife rather than focus on her “imperfection.”

Aminadab, representing the earthly side of human nature, functions as the foil for the intellectual and scientific Aylmer. However, as W. R. Thompson points out, the name “Aminadab” alludes to Amminadab of the Old Testament, who was a high priest entrusted with administering rites to Yahweh. Therefore, he can also be understood as a symbol of earthly religious authority, here subordinated to (and humiliated by) the scientific authority of Aylmer. A priest without rites and “grimed with the vapors of the furnace,” he answers to Aylmer, the modern man disregarding religion. In his capacity as a religious authority, Aminadab understands Aylmer’s error in wanting to remove Georgiana’s birthmark, telling his master he should not. His “hoarse chuckling laugh” at the end of the story contains the irony that he, the brutish “man of clay,” treated as only a machine, understands more than the intellectual Aylmer that Georgiana’s beauty is perfect in its imperfect condition. His laugh mocks Aylmer’s arrogance even while it shows his callous lack of sympathy for Georgiana.

Georgiana carries the chief symbol in the story, her birthmark, which resembles a tiny human hand. Up until Aylmer shows his disgust for it, Georgiana considered it “a charm” and was not self-conscious about it at all. Because people other than her husband considered it the mark of a fairy, many critics have understood it as resembling a kiss from God; however, because it is on her left cheek, others understand it as a mark of evil in general and sexuality in particular. Its redness lends it this connotation, but whether a mark of God or the devil, when Aylmer, only after their marriage, defines her by it, she cannot escape the identity he constructs for her—imperfect, marred, flawed. Although the narrator says Georgiana possesses “firmness,” she nevertheless is unable to tell her husband that she refuses to submit to his scientific experiments—and this in spite of the fact that, when reading his folios, she observed “that his most splendid successes were almost invariably failures.” Thus, we can only infer that the narrator characterizes her as such ironically, for having internalized her husband’s disgust for the birthmark, she is willing to put aside her rightful fears: he has

convinced her that if his experiment to remove the mark does not succeed they “are ruined.” That she is “firm” in character becomes even more doubtful when she tells Aylmer, “I am of all mortals the most fit to die” because she lacks “moral advancement,” which by now she, like her husband, equates with the perfect beauty that he demands. In short, most critics see her submitting to her husband to the point of dying for him, suggesting that Georgiana’s subservience to her husband and his distaste for that mark on her face indicates the author’s personal misogyny and fear of female sexuality.

The Narrator is a distinct character in the story, one who ironically comments on Aylmer’s arrogant ambition and Georgiana’s acquiescence to it and also didactically pronounces moralisms, such as in the final sentence, when he says Aylmer “failed to look beyond the shadowy scope of time...to find the perfect future in the present.” Georgiana thinks her husband’s desire to perfect her signifies the honor and depth of his love for her, but the narrator’s voice is ironic when he comments on her view that her husband would be “guilty of treason to holy love” if he did not want to perfect her. As a storyteller, the narrator at times indicates the limits of his knowledge, as when he tells the reader at the beginning, “We know not whether Aylmer possessed this degree of faith in man’s ultimate control over nature.” His succeeding statement, however, then makes clear that he knows Aylmer will ultimately be unable to compromise his love of science over that for his wife: “He had devoted himself, however, too unreservedly to scientific studies ever to be weaned from them by any second passion.”

Analysis: Style and Technique

Hawthorne inherited from his Puritan ancestors a brooding preoccupation with the idea of Original Sin. He created several haunting symbols to suggest that human flaw: the minister’s black veil, the poisonous breath of Rappaccinni’s daughter, the scarlet letter that Hester Prynne wore on her breast. The birthmark is one of these symbols. Although the tiny hand is expressly associated only with the “fatal flaw” of mortality, Aylmer’s peculiarly Calvinistic frame of mind expands its symbolic value to “his wife’s liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death.”

Hawthorne’s symbolic mode sometimes explains too much for modern tastes, yet there are ambiguities lurking even in this most allegorical of tales. The fact that Aylmer connects the physical flaw to moral sin seems to be the reason for this abhorrence of the birthmark and thus his justification for, in essence, murdering his wife. This presents a moral ambiguity akin to the situation in “Young Goodman Brown,” where the author carefully suggests that Brown may indeed have met his neighbors and his wife at the devil’s sabbat but that he may have dreamed the whole episode. If the evil vision was a dream issuing from the tortured sense of his own guilt, then Brown casts a terrible blight on his wife and neighbors with the poisonous vapors of his Calvinistic imagination. Even more obviously does Aylmer blight his wife as though her physical imperfection were equivalent to sin.

However, Aylmer is explicitly aligned with the spiritual side of humanity. The shadow side of humanity, or the entirely physical element that presumably serves the spirit, is represented by the grotesque Aminadab. Lest the reader miss the point, Hawthorne pushes the contrast between the servant and his master. “With his vast strength, his shaggy hair, his smoky aspect, and the indescribable earthiness that encrusted him, he seemed to represent man’s physical nature, while Aylmer’s slender figure, and pale, intellectual face, were no less apt a type of the spiritual element.”

In spite of the didactic instruction in the symbolic significance of such figures, one must remember that the villain of the piece is not the beastly shadow figure but the spiritual, intellectual Aylmer. This is true even though Aminadab chuckles ominously at the death of Georgiana, as though at the victory of earth over spirit. He contributes to the menacing gothic atmosphere of the alchemist’s laboratory but is a relatively innocent collaborator in an intellectual crime. Who needs Mephistopheles when men can destroy in the name of

perfection?

The obvious allegorical quality of “The Birthmark” makes it a less satisfactory treatment of the mad scientist theme than the more complex and polished “Rappaccinni’s Daughter.” They are both intermediate forms, however, between the religious allegories of the past and the science fiction of the present.

The traditional Satan or Mephistopheles has waned as literary symbol of evil, to be replaced by the machine or mutant monster that the mad scientist creates in his ambition to take over from God the control of natural forces. In “Rappaccinni’s Daughter,” the mutant form that in turn destroys the innocent maiden is the poisonous vegetation created by her father. In “The Birthmark,” however, the scientist is described in persistently spiritual terms and creates no intermediate form, except of course the fatal potion, but brings death directly to his beloved. Although the menacing Dr. Rappaccinni seems closer to the devil in conception, Aylmer seems closer to God. Perhaps Hawthorne suffered from a dark suspicion that, after all, God must be responsible for humankind’s imperfection and suffering. The tales of Hawthorne speak eloquently of a profoundly ambivalent mythic imagination.

Analysis: Setting

The narrator opens by placing the temporal setting in “the latter part of the last century,” which to his contemporary audience was the eighteenth. Various details, however, call attention to the nineteenth century’s fascination with the visual, indicated by the development of photography after 1839. For example, Aylmer creates the illusion of “optical phenomena” to distract Georgiana in her boudoir near his laboratory, and he also creates a daguerreotype of her, although unsuccessfully. In addition, the furnace, cabinet of chemical products, and the “electrical machine” all mark the setting as postindustrial. However, the story is also gothic in mood. References to magic and alchemy, vials of poison, and the flower that dies with Georgiana’s touch are all characteristics of the gothic literature written during the Romantic period in the nineteenth century. While Aylmer works in his laboratory, Georgiana peruses her husband’s scientific library, finding the books of “philosophers of the middle ages, such as Albertus Magnus, Cornelius Agrippa, [and] Paracelsus...antique naturalists [who] stood in advance of their centuries,” as well as books of the “Transactions of the Royal Society,” in which the members, “knowing little of the limits of natural possibility, were continually recording wonders or proposing methods whereby wonders might be wrought.” Just as Dr. Frankenstein seeks to create life, so Aylmer has created an elixir of immortality by which he can increase the lifetime of any “mortal”—or so he says.

In terms of place, the two dominant settings of the story are the laboratory and the boudoir. At first, they seem to signify the separate domains of male and female: the laboratory is the place for science, intellectual activity, and risk; the boudoir is the site of passivity, decoration, and safety. However, even though the boudoir offers an “atmosphere of penetrating fragrance” with “a series of beautiful apartments...hung with gorgeous curtains, which imparted the combination of grandeur and grace,” it is in fact an extension of the laboratory and completely dominated by Aylmer. It is a place, in short, where he attempts to put Georgiana at ease, mollify her, and in the process gain her acquiescence to his experiments, which he in fact does. Thus, this depiction of the setting suggests Georgiana has no real refuge in the marriage at all; her husband controls all aspects of it. Yet the laboratory, though decidedly masculine, is not what Georgiana (or the reader) expects it to be either. Up until Georgiana discovers Aylmer in the laboratory, she, along with the reader, imagines it is a place of intellectual study, for her husband (with the help of the narrator) describes his projects as “strong and eager aspiration toward the infinite.” Yet the laboratory turns out to be a filthy place of labor, more like a factory than anything else. When entering it, Georgiana first sees the “furnace, that hot and feverish worker, with the intense glow of its fire, which by the quantities of soot clustered above it seemed to have been burning for ages.” According to critic Jules Zanger, the image of the factory, which signifies a worker, under the guise of a “laboratory,” the site of an intellectual, shows the close relationship and dependency of these

two classes of people on each other as opposed to the distance between them imagined by Hawthorne's contemporaries. In this way, setting carries meaning in two ways: first, it shows the domination of the feminine by the masculine; and second, it erases (as Zanger puts it) "the physical and social distance that conventionally separates the genteel lady from the noxious factory and disguises their organic relationship and the dependence of one upon the other."

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