

Beauty, horror and morality in Hawthorne's "the birth-mark"

[Experience](#), [Human Nature](#)



In Nathaniel Hawthorne's gothic work, "The Birth-mark", the central character, Aylmer, expresses his disgust with the mark's ability to diminish his wife's aesthetic beauty, as well as betray her mortal tendency to sin. The hand on Georgiana's cheek proves to represent the "fatal flaw of humanity ... to imply that they are temporary and finite" (2205). This obsession reveals his deep fear of death and mortality. He mistakenly believes that if he is able to rid his wife of the blemish, he will sever the tie between his wife and her mortality, creating the perfect woman. Hawthorne utilizes allusions, diction and imagery to explore the divisions of beauty and horror in an attempt to highlight Aylmer's aspiration to reform Georgiana into a beautiful work of art that transcends her own mortality.

The diction exercised in the Eve of Powers reference reveals Aylmer's compulsion to transform Georgiana into a flawless sculpture while simultaneously purifying her of her mortality. Furthermore, Hawthorne's reference to the Eve of Powers reveals Aylmer's obsession with the purity and whiteness of marble. The language of Hawthorne's allusion defines Aylmer's irrational view of perfect beauty. By equating Georgiana's birthmark with a "stain" on the "purest statuary marble", he is drawing attention to the impurity the mark suggests (Hawthorne 2205). While some would consider this irregularity as beautiful, Aylmer perceives it as horrific. The presence of these blue veins would humanize the statue of Eve to the point where it appeared as a monstrosity. This reflects Aylmer's view of how the birthmark reveals Georgiana's mortality and, in turn, diminishes her beauty. The language of the work establishes the mark as a problem that Aylmer yearns to solve. By continuously referring to the mark as "singular",

he is reaffirming that this single imperfection is so “ deeply interwoven” that it ruins “ the texture and substance of her face” (Hawthorne 2204). This symbolizes that flaws and mortality are so deeply connected to humanity that it is impossible to separate the two. While Aylmer should have been alerted to this and abandoned his work, his mania causes him to overlook the obstacle, ultimately extinguishing Georgiana’s existence.

The marble metaphor established in the quotation about the Eve of Powers is repeated in the allusion to Pygmalion, where Hawthorne employs a mirrored structure in order to juxtapose the motives and results of Pygmalion and Aylmer’s endeavors. Pygmalion’s love inspires a god to grant life to his beautiful marble statue of the ideally beautiful woman. Inversely, Aylmer’s disdain for the birthmark leads him to transform his wife from a beautiful woman into a piece of art with statue-like perfection, extinguishing her life. While the sculptor chisels marble to produce the perfect woman, Aylmer hopes to employ science in order to overcome his wife’s defects. In his quest to make Georgiana immortal, he unwittingly confirms her transience. The disgust Aylmer feels causes Georgiana to fade “ into a deathlike paleness” that makes “ the Crimson Hand” stand out “ like a bas-relief of ruby on the whitest marble” (Hawthorne 2206). The repeated fixation with a blemish on pure, white marble solidifies the idea that Aylmer believes that Georgiana’s otherwise untainted complexion and morality are marred by the birthmark. By comparing himself to Pygmalion, he is expressing confidence that he shares the sculptor’s ability to create the perfect woman. He rivals that his joy will be greater than “ Even Pygmalion, when his sculpted woman

assumed life" (Hawthorne 2207). Here, Aylmer is explicitly expressing his desire to transform Georgiana into a statue-like representation of perfection. What he does not consider is that she is not an empty shell like the marble used by Pygmalion. Where Pygmalion created life, Aylmer only succeeds in destroying it. While Aylmer succeeds in removing the mark that ties his wife to her mortality, his mistake also proves that such a flaw is necessary for life.

The reoccurring use of color imagery, specifically red and white, illuminates the horror Aylmer feels regarding the imperfection on Georgiana's appearance and purity. Hawthorne uncovers this revulsion by constantly comparing Georgiana and the mark to a beautiful white object marred by a red defect. The redness of the birthmark, as well as the imagery used to describe it, symbolizes Georgiana's energy and passion. The white object spoiled by the defect literally points to the imperfect complexion; however, it symbolically points to Aylmer's need to control his wife and strip her of this power. The idea of the mark as a stain upon Georgiana's virtuousness is repeated while forming the gruesome imagery of a " crimson stain upon the snow" (Hawthorne 2205). The image of red blood spreading on white snow indicates a loss of vitality and life. Snow is often used to stand for innocence and purity; therefore, the mark on Georgiana's cheek is selected by Aylmer to signify his wife's " liability to sin" (Hawthorne 2205). Sinning is part of mortality; therefore, if the mark represents Georgiana's mortality then it must also embody her tendency to sin. Aylmer's open abhorrence to the mark forces Georgiana to alter her self-perception. She begins seeing herself as " pale as a white rose" spoiled by the " crimson birth-mark" (Hawthorne

2210). This reflects Aylmer's mindset that the mark disrupts the delicacy of her complexion, just as a red stamp would serve as a blight on a colorless rose. The language utilized to create this imagery" juxtaposes the allure felt by the narrator with the horror felt by Aylmer, demonstrated through the transition of " the rosiest beauty" into " a pale ghost" (Hawthorne 2210). Additionally, white is often employed to highlight the properties of transfiguration. This, of course, relates to Aylmer's need to transform his wife into his vision of the perfect woman. Furthermore, When Georgiana blushes, the two colors are blended and her complexion causes the mark to become less defined. The act of blushing implies blood rushing to her face, which betrays her mortality. This serves as the narrator's reminder that the boundary between her beauty and her flaw is undefined.

Hawthorne utilizes literary devices to reveal Aylmer's obsession with transforming Georgiana into a statue in order to restore her beauty and absolve her of her mortality. Aylmer's own mortality is likely responsible for his fascination with the subject. While he believes Georgiana's physical flaw is an example of her mortality, his failures serve as a reminder of his.