

Argumentative essay on Hawthorne's *The Birthmark*

[Experience](#), [Belief](#)



Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" explores a variety of themes. The tone of this short story is dark yet subtle, and the writer's choice of language is intelligent in emphasizing this subtlety. The two main characters, a newly married couple, are introduced, and immediately Hawthorne establishes a sense of their relationship. In his story, "The Birthmark," Hawthorne explores a troubling narrative and a theme which is largely rooted in feminism.

There have been many stories exploring themes involving men who wish to leave their mark on women, either physically, mentally, or sexually. However, "The Birthmark," is concerned with a man who wants to remove a part of a female, rather than adding to it. Hawthorne's story illustrates how a male who is determined to erase a mark from the female could be equally as damaging as a male who is determined to place his mark upon her (Mascia-Lees, p 155).

The story of "The Birthmark" is set near the end of the eighteenth century. It introduces readers to a male scientist, Aylmer, who grows obsessed with a birthmark on his wife's face, and develops a desire to remove it. Before his marriage to Georgiana, Aylmer had not noticed the birthmark which "bore not a little similarity to the human hand, though of the smallest pigmy size" (Hawthorne, pr 7). Interestingly, however, Hawthorne emphasises that the mark was one attribute that other men found attractive in her: "Georgiana's lovers were wont to say that some fairy at her birth hour had laid her tiny hand upon the infant's cheek, and left his impress there in token of the magic endowments that were to give her such sway over all hearts" (Hawthorne, pr 7). Conversely, women are described as thinking the mark

hideous, calling it "the bloody hand" (Hawthorne, p 7). Therefore, both men and women view the birthmark as feminine. Women relate it to menstruation and men relate it to beauty (Mascia-Lees, p 156).

Perhaps the most important symptom of Georgiana's deterioration is that she changes her view of the birthmark, and loses any sense of perspective regarding it. When Aylmer first brings up discussion of the mark in a negative way, she cheerfully refers to it as a "charm" (Hawthorne, p 4). However, as Aylmer's true feelings towards the mark emerge, Georgiana, too, fixes her attitudes towards it as being of hatred and disgust. Similarly, near the beginning of the story, Georgiana displays anger at Aylmer for marrying her when he felt so repelled by her birthmark. However, from that point onwards she never again questions Aylmer's opinion or judgement of the situation. Instead, she appears to become completely subordinate to him, through dealing with the birthmark. She allows him to control her mind and body more and more until, eventually, she allows him to kill her.

When Georgiana relinquishes her own subjectivity, she also relinquishes having her own story. Interestingly, the only occasion on which she sees the truth is when she looks at herself as she perceives herself. She looks in the mirror, and views herself, objectively, as she is looking: "Still, whenever she dared look into the mirror, there she beheld herself pale as a white rose and with the crimson birthmark stamped upon her cheek. Not even Aylmer now hated it as much as she" (Hawthorne, p 52). This is perhaps the more subtle climax of the story, as Georgiana gets a glimpse of what has happened to her. Even with this new insight, however, she feels powerless to change it.

Georgiana's physicality is symbolised by her birthmark. As " a singular mark, deeply interwoven ... with the texture and substance of her face"

(Hawthorne, pr 7). At its worst, Georgiana's birthmark is what changes her from being a perfect depiction of a woman into a representation of " the fatal flaw of humanity" (Hawthorne, pr 8). To Aylmer, his wife's birthmark is observable validation of human mortality. More importantly, however, it is a symbol of human inferiority. In this story, the whole concept of the female figure is representing such inferiority.

Of course, most pieces of text can be analysed in different ways, depending on the reader's attitudes, experiences and perspectives. In her paper, " Levinson and the Resisting Reader: Feminist Strategies of Interpretation," Ismay Marwell explores the use of feminist perspectives when reading and analysing literature. Barwell discusses how a feminist critic would approach a piece of text in order to interpret it. She discusses the concept of a ' hypothetical audience,' which needs to be taken into account in discovering the true meaning of literature. Barwell suggests that " the actual reader aiming at understanding must recognise what beliefs and attitudes constitute the hypothetical audience position and what emotional responses should follow" (Barwell).

Sociologists have long studied the influence of economic and social changes on American gender ideology between the years of 1825 and 1850. Social historian Leverenz points out, " The emerging ideology of individualism erected an ideal of free, forceful and resourceful white men on the presumption of depersonalized servitude from several subordinated groups"

(Mascia-Lees, p 156). Parallel to this, a trend of spirituality and domestic keenness was developing among white women. Their role was of "fulfilment through tender self-sacrifice" (Mascia-Lees, p 156). The indication of sensuality and physicality that Georgiana's birthmark suggested is insufferable in a wife. For this reason, it becomes Aylmer's mission to increase her spirituality. He focuses all of his attention on ridding them both of the birthmark: "what will be my triumph when I have corrected what nature left imperfect in her fairest work!" (Hawthorne, p 19).

In his private life, Hawthorne also appeared to want to impose a feminine ideal onto his daughter, Una. His view of his child emphasises his gender category confusion: "the child appears to him an anomaly, neither male nor female and yet both. She strikes him as not human, in uncanny movements, because she does not conform to the definitions that organise his perceptions of the human" (Mascia-Lees, p 156).

As Joel Pfister said, "Hawthorne's fiction intermittently launches a critique of the sentimental construction of 'masculine' and 'feminine' roles upon which the economic and cultural ascendancy of his class relied" (Idol & Ponder, p 10). He then went on to claim that "The Birth-mark,' then, is about the urge to control, not just a female body, but a female role, and this discursive management of the way women envisioned their womanhood was crucial to the ideological production of middle-class identity in uncertain times" (Idol & Ponder, p 10).

In his story, Hawthorne embellishes the idea that a woman's identity is a direct product of men's responses to her: "It must not be concealed,

however, that the impression wrought by this fairy sign manual varied exceedingly, according to the difference of temperament in the beholders" (Hawthorne, pr 7). To people who have affection for Georgiana, her birthmark is a piece of her beauty. However, to people who are jealous of her or who dislike her, the mark is disgusting. It is evident that the birthmark morphs, depending on the feelings of whomever is viewing it. Similarly, Georgiana's feelings toward her birthmark seems to change depending on other people's responses to it. She creates her image of herself as a result of internalizing the man's attitudes toward her. Since Aylmer is obsessed with hating her birthmark, therefore, it is unsurprising that Georgiana soon matches him in hating it, and in begging him to remove it, despite the risk of death. In this way, "The Birthmark" illustrates the impact on a woman who stuck in an oppressive relationship with a man.

Hawthorn's "The Birthmark" is an intelligent short story, exploring complex themes. It is clear that feminist concepts are littered throughout the story as well as running through the overall narrative. By examining Hawthorne's private attitudes towards women, and by looking at the culture surrounding him at the time, it is easy to interpret this example of his wonderful writings.

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