

The birthmark– wicked good essay



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Earthly Imperfections

Too often in this world does man attempt to perfect nature. Tampering with this sort of element most commonly leads to a disaster to come extent.

Because man is never satisfied, he is constantly vying for perfection, regardless of the outcome. Such is the case in Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, "The Birthmark." Aylmer's persistent attempt to perfect nature is the cause of Georgiana's demise and the affirmation that when man tampers with such a powerful component terrible things may occur.

In this short story, Hawthorne uses symbolism to emphasize the strange shape of the "earthly imperfection" (204) and his desperate need to change it. The shape of the birthmark "bore a little similarity to the human hand" (204). Here, Hawthorne's use of symbolism clearly illustrates a distinct connection between the shape of the birthmark as a human hand and the need to remove it by the same means. In Aylmer's quest for perfection, he simply ignores the fact that he is tampering with an incredible force: Nature. The "crimson hand" (206) symbolizes man always trying to change something natural: something that need not be changed. Aylmer's subconscious obsession with science quickly becomes apparent when he realizes that he has the knowledge to potentially change something that nature has brought. At one point in the story Aylmer becomes so infatuated with removing this birthmark he dreams about how he will do so. He goes as far as to "catch hold of Georgiana's heart" (206) and dispose of her precious life. This dream is incredibly symbolic of Georgiana's ultimate fate, though Aylmer pays no attention to its importance. He simply continues on his way to perfect nature's imperfections.

Aside from Hawthorne's use of symbolism, his extensive use of imagery also

contributes to the notion that man cannot perfect nature. Aylmer's true goal in this story is to force Georgiana to believe that her birthmark is " a symbol of her liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death" (204) and she must rid herself of it. He creates this image in order to brainwash her into believing that it is a " dreadful hand" (207), and she, too, should wish it away. Finally, after gazing at, and studying the birthmark, this horrible image in which Aylmer had implanted in the mind of his lovely wife has become all too unbearable. Georgiana, feeling unworthy of her husband, freely surrenders herself to Aylmer and his science. " Either remove this dreadful hand, or take my wretched life," (207) she tells him, while rationalizing the validity of science on such a thing. Another image Hawthorne makes use of, in order to potentially change the mind of Georgiana, is that of the geranium, once diseased with yellow spots of death, is now full of life. The diseased flower symbolizes, in the eyes of Aylmer, a diseased Georgiana.

Another tool that Hawthorne brings into use in " The Birthmark" in order to show difference between the two characters is conflict. Throughout this short story, both Georgiana and Aylmer are at constant war with themselves and each other. Conflict between the two characters ultimately results in the decision to remove the birthmark. Internal conflict invades the psyche of Georgiana and forces her to make a decision. After being constantly criticized by Aylmer, she explains, " you cannot love what shocks you" (204). Georgiana is physically incapable of enduring the pain that her husband emotionally inflicts upon her. In order to rid herself from this pain she is willing to risk her life for the satisfaction of Aylmer. Aylmer too, is at constant conflict with himself from the beginning of the story. He promises to " lay down his books"

(203) and marry Georgiana, leaving behind his love for science. But in the end Aylmer only proved one thing; " It was not unusual for the love of science to rival that love of a women" (203). Together, surrendering themselves to their own conflicts, resulted in pain and the loss of a beautiful woman.

Another not so obvious component Hawthorne uses to add to the events in " The Birthmark" are the names of two of the characters. The names Aylmer and Aminadab, to the reader, would appear to be somewhat normal names; however this is not true. Hawthorne purposely gives the name Aylmer to foreshadow the eventual demise of Georgiana. The word Aylmer can most clearly represent the word " ailment," meaning an illness. Hawthorne does this in order to assign a certain role to the character before the reader knows anything about them. This is also true with the name, Aminadab. If one were to take this name and read it backwards it would spell " bad anima," meaning bad spirit. Laughing at the death of Georgiana, as if to say, " I told you so," Aminadab, indeed, proves to be a bad spirit.

Indeed, Aylmer has nothing but good intentions in removing the " crimson hand" of " earthly imperfection" from Georgiana's beautiful face. Her once-touched-by-an-angel-face is a part of nature that should never be tampered with. Aylmer's perpetuating attempt to perfect nature has failed miserably. In the end, however, Aylmer proves only one thing to be vitally true; " Mother Nature permits us, indeed, to mar, but seldom to mend" (208).