

The birthmark by nathaniel hawthorne

Literature



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Formal Reflective Essay on ' The Birthmark' by Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1843

“ Don't it always seem to go, that you don't know what you've got till it's gone?” (Joni Mitchell, 1970). When I read this story, the words of that song ' Big Yellow Taxi' kept running through my mind. Nathaniel Hawthorne's Aylmer, in the short story, ' The Birthmark' (1843), was a man who made the meaning of those words come alive. He had a great intellect, much scientific knowledge, and may have believed in the power of “ man's ultimate control over Nature” (Hawthorne, 1843). His philosophy, science, experimentation, all seemed to link science with sorcery, combining Nature, magic and spiritualism into a powerful, dangerous mixture. He could not stop his pursuit of the “ secret of creative force”, driving him to search for perfection. Motivated by his belief in his own powers, he became so arrogant that he destroyed the best thing in his life, his wife Georgiana.

The reason for this destruction stemmed from Aylmer's inability to accept or tolerate the one imperfection she bore, “ the visible mark of earthly imperfection” (Hawthorne, 1843), a little hand-shaped birthmark on her left cheek. Aylmer's obsession with the flaw, that he believed to be a “ symbol of his wife's liability to sin, sorrow, decay and death,” (Hawthorne, 1843) eventually drove Georgiana to agree with his perception, and towards insanity. Before they married, she had been content with her beauty, both physical and spiritual, and accepted the mark light-heartedly as possibly having been put on her face at birth, by a fairy. There was a happy, lightness and goodness in Georgiana, but she loved, respected and admired her husband so much that she became as obsessed with removing the mark as he was. The hand on her face, the hand of God, Aylmer's hand in the events, <https://assignbuster.com/the-birthmark-by-nathaniel-hawthorne/>

all take on a symbolic meaning with regard to power and control.

The story's progress demonstrated for the reader, how one person's self esteem can be eroded and submerged by believing that the one they love is superior in knowledge and intelligence, and by the desire to be exactly what the beloved wants. Georgiana allowed herself to be closeted in the laboratory, where the man who loved her was capable of lying and drugging her, as he prepared to demonstrate his 'magic'. Interpretation of his actions suggests that he was prepared to prove his power over Nature, setting himself up as God, almost, by using her as an experiment, despite the fact that most of his experiments had failed.

Aylmer controlled Georgiana through love, and his assistant Aminadab, through some mysterious power that made him stay to serve his master. There seemed to be something un-human about the assistant, and his name, if transposed, reads 'Badanima', or 'bad soul'. The differences between the two men was made evident by phrases like " he (Aminadab) 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."

(Hawthorne, 1843). The 'lesser' man had a better understanding of how wrong Aylmer's actions were, when he " muttered to himself, " If she were my wife, I'd never part with that birthmark." (Hawthorne, 1843). The reader is made aware of the tensions and impending tragedy with the interactions between these men.

Nevertheless, Aylmer's conceit made him think he could improve on Nature, by removing the flaw that he detested and that threatened Georgiana's sanity and happiness. Even after she read his notes, and the failures they exposed, his wife remained convinced of his powers and moral goodness in <https://assignbuster.com/the-birthmark-by-nathaniel-hawthorne/>

his motives. But the scene she encountered in the laboratory, after reading the folios, seemed like something from Hell. The imagery of “ the furnace, the hot and feverish worker,” and the sorcerer, Aylmer, who “ hung over the furnace as if it depended upon his utmost watchfulness whether the liquid which it was distilling should be the draught of immortal happiness or misery.” (Hawthorne, 1843)

There is a sinister, secretive unnatural feel to everything at this point, borne out as the story reaches its climax. There was something more evil than good happening.

What was finally exposed was how one man’s arrogance, and the desire to transcend and control Nature, led to the destruction of the best thing in his life. Pride and obsession turned the little birthmark into “ the fatal hand that grappled with the mystery of life” (Hawthorne, 1843). The mark faded, but so did Georgiana; his power was flawed and corrupt. The sadness of this story lies in how a beautiful person could be destroyed by the pride and arrogance of the man she loved and trusted. The lesson must be to be true to oneself, for as the song said “ You don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone” and Aylmer

“ failed to look beyond the shadowy scope of time, and living once for all in eternity, to find the perfect future in the present.” (Hawthorne, 1843).

That was Aylmer’s fatal flaw in the end.