

Ron Robinson

Prof. Chiang-Schultheiss

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An Exposition of the Stereotypes of Women in “The Birthmark”

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark” is a short story that was written in 1844. The setting of the story takes place in the last part of the 18th century (Hawthorne 10). The focus of the story is upon two main characters. One of those characters is introduced immediately. This character is a man by the name of Aylmer; he is a man of science and “natural philosophy” (10). Aylmer has an interest that reaches beyond his laboratory. It is an interest that is deeper than the “chemical ones.” It is an interest that lies in and upon the second main character, Georgina, Aylmer’s “beautiful” wife (10). There is a third character. This character is Aylmer’s assistant who is mentioned in the beginning of the story. This assistant’s appearance in the story is abrupt and occurs in the first quarter of the story. The name of the assistant is Aminadab.

In addition to Aylmer’s interest in science, philosophy, and his wife, Aylmer has one other interest. This other interest is the culmination of Aylmer’s vocation in science and his deep interest in his wife. The narrator will reveal through a sequence of events the seriousness and depth of Aylmer’s interest. It is in fact an obsession, as the story will eventually prove. Aylmer is obsessed with a birthmark that is found and impressed upon his wife’s face: specifically, on the left cheek. In Aylmer’s scientific mind and in his philosophical estimation, Georgina’s physical beauty is all but perfect (Hawthorne 11). Aylmer blames the birthmark for her imperfection (11). Accordingly, Aylmer boldly and confidently resorts to his scientific experience and skill with an aim toward its removal. He sets out to create a chemical drink that possess the strength and

power to remove the embedded birthmark. This venture is what “The Birthmark” is all about. And it is through this that *“The Birthmark” perpetuates a number of stereotypes placed upon women.*

The narrator, as noted above, starts the story by introducing a man that is supposedly well educated, if not at least intelligent and full of intellect. This man is skilled in the sciences (intelligence) and philosophy/intellect (Hawthorne 10). On the other hand, in that same introduction, the narrator introduces a woman. She is said to be beautiful, but a mark rests on her left cheek (10). Through this highly contrasted description of characters-Aylmer’s intelligence and Georgina’s beauty, “The Birthmark” perpetuates the stereotypical view that women are somehow unworthy or are somehow unqualified to be thought of as intelligent. The absence of intelligence or intellect in Georgina is on par with many people’s view of women in the century in which Georgina lived. In other words, the narrator creates a typical 18th century woman. In that century, societies throughout the world had withheld education from women. In his writing “The Education of Women” Daniel Defoe passionately articulates the plight of women of that era. He writes:

“I have often thought of it as one of the most barbarous customs in the world, considering us as a civilized and a Christian country, that we deny the advantages of learning to women. We reproach the sex every day with folly and impertinence . . .

One would wonder, indeed, how it should happen that women are conversable [sic] at all; since they are only beholden to natural parts, for all their knowledge. Their youth is spent to teach them to stitch and sew or make baubles. They are taught to read, indeed, and perhaps to write their names, or so; and that is the height of a woman's education. And I would but ask any who slight the sex for their

understanding, what is a man (a gentleman, I mean) good for, that is taught no more? Their parts and judgments being improved, they may be as profitable in their conversation as they are pleasant.” (pars.1-2).

But Hawthorne wrote “The Birthmark” in the 19th century in 1844, a solid 125 years after Daniel Defoe wrote “Education of Women” in 1719. Accordingly, there is the possibility that Hawthorne understood or was keen to that which Defoe expound upon. That possibility holds true even though Defoe was European and wrote in Europe. It holds true because Defoe was elaborating on what was a universal problem. Regardless, in this particular instance with Georgina with her lack of education “The Birthmark” does indeed perpetuate the stereotypical view of women in the 18th century. Hawthorne could have chosen to be a “non-conformist” (borrowed from Prof. Chiang). He could have decided to give Georgina an education. He could have decided to attribute to her intelligence. He could have decided to cast a woman of the likes of Lucy Aikin (1781 - 1864). Lucy wrote the Epistles on Women. In that work, Lucy skillfully “argues for greater opportunities for women in terms of improved education, claiming women’s intellectual equality with men” (Para. 9).

The failure to mention or attribute even a miniscule amount of education or any notable degree of intelligence to Georgina impacts the story. With this absence, there remains only one other attribute to describe. That attribute is none other than Georgina’s physical characteristics. So the “Birthmark” perpetuates another typical view of woman; they are merely physical creatures created for man’s pleasure. Nearly everything mentioned about Georgina is based on her physical characteristics. It is Georgina, not Aylmer, who is the one with the beauty. Georgina, not Aylmer, is the one with the marring birthmark. Georgina, not Aylmer, is the one whose physical qualities are evaluated by men and women (Hawthorne 11). According to Roy

Males, “Women know that they are measured by both sexes largely on their looks. Even if men fear women, at least most appear to want one that passes the aesthetic values of the male concept of beauty. Women must be without flaw (slim, beautiful, and forever age 18-22) to have worth” (Ellis Para 43). These are the very the sentiments of Aylmer. Women must be flawless. Yes, Aylmer confirms that the flaw upon Georgina’s cheek is for other women. Aylmer won’t tolerate it on his wife, however. This somewhat seemingly virtuous statement has little redeeming value, for the woman who is before him is the woman with whom he has to do with. The issue is not other women: the issue is Georgina. Aylmer says to Georgina, “Ah, but upon another face perhaps it might but never on yours. No, dearest Georgina, you came so nearly perfect from the hand of Nature as being the visible mark of imperfection” (Hawthorne 11). Aylmer’s estimation of Georgina is all based on her physical looks. Dr. Kris Blair discusses the obvious connection of the 19th century story “The Birthmark” with the 21st century practice of cosmetic surgery. She writes, “To me, cosmetic surgery and the like (I’m talking purely cosmetic here--not surgery that is reconstructive or benefits the physical well-being of the person) open up society to a myriad of problems--foreshadowed in the themes of "The Birthmark." Who's to say what true beauty is? To what lengths should we go to achieve it? Do we pay a high price when technology triumphs over nature--at least in the area of aesthetics? The pressure to have a certain look seems so overwhelming--especially to the population of women much younger than myself. I want to warn them, shake them, tell them not ‘to become complicit in the male gaze’”(The Body Beautiful).

The only obvious notable virtue of Georgina lies on the outside. Absolutely nothing is allotted to the internal mind or heart of Georgina that would elevate her far above this stereotype of women. Talents, skills, education, intelligence, are not associated with Georgina. This leads to another role that has been associated with women. It is that women are believed not to be

qualified to work beyond that which their domestic duties demand. In fact, Mary Ellmann categorizes the household duties of women as a “confinement” (Ellman 87). In the 19 century women and men had their territories. The woman’s territory was the household. In the household women possessed some authority. On the other hand, the man’s territory was “the public world.” Georgina’s world was nothing more than her household; it cannot be otherwise because she lacks the prerequisites that would permit her to venture intelligently and intellectually into “the public world.” In fact, Aylmer leads Georgina into his world. Specifically the narrator says, “As he [Aylmer] led her [Georgina] over the threshold of the laboratory Georgina was cold and tremulous” (Hawthorne 14). It is at this time that Aylmer has a “convulsive shudder” when he sees “the intensive glow of the birthmark upon the whiteness of her [Georgina] cheek” (14). Georgina then faints when she sees Aylmer’s shuddering. So Georgina cannot enter the laboratory. She cannot enter into “the public world” without great difficulty. Yes, she fainted when Aylmer “shuddered” but for the “resistant” reader this shuddering and fainting represent the stereotypical view that women do not belong or are not capable of functioning outside their domestic boundaries. The idea of the threshold representing a place of transition came from Cindy Weinstein. She argues that Hawthorne is using the threshold has an allegory (Weinstein 57). Specifically, the threshold “represents a transition” that women take when they leave their domestic world. The transition is either impossible-the fainting-or very difficult. If and when, however, a woman does make that transition she has only entered a man’s world (57).

This conclusion is supported by the uncertainty that Georgina displays when she is in the laboratory. There in the laboratory Georgina is as young child who has been taken to a place she has never been before. First, Georgina asks: “Where am I?” (15). When she remembers where she is she covers the mark to hide it from her husband. She is out of her territory. And though she

was led to the laboratory by her husband she feels ashamed to be there. There is no legitimate reason for a woman to enter the territory of men. Furthermore, there are “illusions, an optical phenomena, a procession of external existence that flitted across a screen, a picture, an image, a shadow, a plant that dies when Georgina touches it. Undoubtedly, Georgina has entered a territory that is unfamiliar to her, a women. It is a world that she does not comprehend. It is a world that she can ruin with a simple touch. Accordingly, “The Birthmark” perpetuates the view that women are to be “confined” to their domestic world.

By the end of the story Georgina meets the end of her life. The stereotypes of women have been so prevalent and domineering in literature that it has prompted Mary Ellmann to take special note of the demise of women in many stories. In her concluding remarks about the “confinement” of women, Ellmann writes, “Wives who crush even abject fantasies are severely punished in novels” (Ellmann 92). This one sentence summarizes the biases, the prejudices, the stereotypes that woman has had to face in literature. Not by accident or by mere imagination, but by the reality that woman is seen as defenseless, weak, and lacks intelligent. Therefore it is fitting that she become a *targetable* subject in literature, one whose real life role would not permit much of anything else to transpire in a story. Right?

There was “at the start of 19th century” a man named Sir Walter Scott, “the best-selling author of the historical potboiler (114,000 books sold in France alone during his lifetime¹) may have changed the role of women characters forever in this country when he created Jeanie Deans. This heroine of his vastly successful ‘The Heart of Midlothian’ (1818) played none of the stereotypic roles assigned women: Magdalene/Eve, madonna, wife of Bath, drudge, vampire. She was an Innocent who did murder.” This is in stark contrast to the roles assigned women in Scott’s day. It is in stark contrast to those women who are “severely punished.”

Georgina is severely punished. She loses her life. In keeping with the observation of Mary Ellman that wives who crush abject fantasies are severely punished in novels are severely punished. Hawthorne's Georgina is no exception. What did Georgina do to deserve a severe punishment? When Georgina saw her husband's seriousness of the matter concerning her birthmark's removal, "She blushed deeply" (Hawthorne 10). It is what follows that blushing that sets Georgina up as a candidate for the punishment. Georgina is not necessarily crushing Aylmer's abject fantasy, but she is not at that point in full cooperation or submissiveness to Aylmer. In fact, as this conversation progresses Georgina's comments and words become heavy, challenging, intense, expressive. She takes a risk and attempts to buttress herself as something more than a woman with physical qualities. Her actions, however, fit right in with Ellman's observation of the very thing that writers use to set the ground work to "severely punish" such women. Now, hear Georgina, "Shocks you, my husband! . . . reddening with anger" (Hawthorne 10-11). Perhaps this small rebuttal was all that was needed to appease accepting readers that Georgina was now fit for the perpetual gallows set and established for daring, rebellious women in literature.

In the 19th century "The Birthmark" was written. Unfortunately the story didn't challenge or attempt to change the stereotypes that societies had hurled upon women. Comfortably, the story conforms to the conventional wisdom. It conformed to the norm. In the end, dear Georgina, the woman of flawed beauty, the typical senseless woman, of no redeeming internal qualities, dies. What is the value in such a story? The value is this, it compels the Walter Scott's of literature to create stories that challenge the status quo. It compels writers to include in their stories and novels women of intelligence, strength, and other qualities that submerge beyond the skin's glowing beauty. Furthermore, Such a story as "The Birthmark" a short story or novel to

abandon the idea that deep within the inner recesses of a woman's heart there is a lack of fortitude, self-respect, self determination to an extent that such qualities would cause a woman to reject fully the sorrowful words of dear Georgina, "[B]eing what I find myself, me thinks I am of all mortals, the most fit to die" (Hawthorne 21).

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