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Serious Issues: A Psychological Evaluation of Aylmer in "The Birthmark"

Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Birthmark" is set in an age when mankind was making bounds and leaps in the areas of science and philosophy. Scientists were pioneers in dark territory where religion and supernatural powers had been the only explanation for many natural phenomena. This story is centered on a middle-aged scientist, Aylmer, who has recently set aside his scientific pursuits to get married. Aylmer soon starts obsessing over a small birthmark on his lovely wife Georgiana's cheek, and fancies that Georgiana would be the essence of perfection were it not for the blemish (said to resemble a small handprint.) Aylmer returns to his laboratory to manufacture a potion that will remove the blemish from Georgiana's cheek, but after consuming this concoction and attaining perfection she passes away. Aylmer is a deeply troubled man dealing very poorly with his midlife transition, and his wife Georgiana may be ultimately committing suicide because of the influence of his psychosis.

The time between ages seventeen and forty-five years of age is nutshellled in developmental psychology as a struggle of intimacy vs. isolation (Lahey 347). If one spends their young adulthood in isolation, as we can assume Aylmer did in his laboratory, they will become "less capable of full emotional development" (347). This leads to his rocky mid-life transition, during which the story takes place. During this transitional stage, people become very focused on their families and the endeavors that will last after they have passed away. Aylmer finds himself at this time with no family or children, which may be why he has abruptly put aside his research

to woo and marry Georgiana. Though children are never mentioned in the story, there is a recurring theme of women as creators and holders of knowledge beyond what is available to Aylmer. These anthropomorphic beings are Mother, Envy, Sleep, and most especially Nature. In the passage “our great creative Mother... is severely careful to keep her own secrets...” (Hawthorne 14) and again when it is mentioned that Aylmer had, earlier in his career, “attempted to fathom the very process by which Nature assimilates her precious influences... to create and foster man” (14) show us how Aylmer has some resentment against women for being able to create human life when he, with all his scientific knowledge, cannot. This may be indicative of his desire to procreate and his inability to do so with his lovely wife. We are also made aware when Georgiana is reading his book that Aylmer felt as though “his brightest diamonds were mere pebbles ” (19) and the experiments that went wrong in the laboratory with Georgiana are said to be “mortifying failures” (16). These passages further support the so-called “midlife crisis” idea, in that Aylmer may be feeling inadequate in what he is passing on to the world.

A delusional disorder, which is “characterized by delusions of grandeur and persecution” (Lahey 561) in which the “delusions are subtle and more believable (than in paranoid schizophrenia)” (561) seems to surface in Aylmer soon after he begins to obsess over Georgiana’s birthmark. This rare disorder is dangerous because of the believability of the delusions, which led to serious tragedies in the cases of Rev. Jim Jones and David Koresh (who are both believed to have had it to some degree.) Aylmer makes very lofty claims in convincing Georgiana of his power, such as when he tells her he has concocted a perfume “capable of impregnating all the breezes that blow across a kingdom” (Hawthorne 17) and in the line “No king on his guarded throne could keep his life if I... should deem that the welfare of millions justified me in depriving him of it” (17). At one point he tells Georgiana that after his expected

success in the removal of her blemish “worship me if you will. I shall hardly deem myself unworthy of it” (19). In the course of the story we are witness to many of Aylmer’s failures, and it seems highly unlikely that any of these claims could be true.

The birthmark, or in Aylmer’s words, “the visible mark of earthly imperfection” (11), can quite obviously be seen as the object of displacement for Aylmer’s fears of failure and mortality. In his dream, the tiny hand “appeared to have caught hold of Georgiana’s heart” (13). This can be interpreted to mean that Aylmer was disturbed by the knowledge that Nature had more control over life than he did, but that he was projecting that fear onto his wife. He notes that “the stain may go as deep as life itself” (13), yet is still convinced that he can remove it. In his delusional state, he may be thinking on some level that if he can have a hand in the creation of a perfect being, he will have a power over Nature. It is even mentioned that in the tomes of his library there were volumes by past philosophers that in their time “were believed, and perhaps imagined themselves, to have acquired from the investigation of nature a power above nature, and from physics a sway over the spiritual world” (18). These high ideas of his predecessors may have influenced him to believe that he too might be capable of possessing such powers, which is a belief his failures had not dissuaded him from holding firm. His own tome tells of his “strong and eager aspiration towards the infinite” (19), something which goes against the very essence of mortality. This is also noticeable when he calls his assistant, Aminadab, “thou human machine, ... thou man of clay” (20) as if Aylmer himself were not of the same species. This fits in with his delusional disorder, as he may be thinking that he is above mortality and needs only to unlock the secret that will show him how to break free of “the despair that assails the higher nature at finding itself so miserably thwarted by the earthly part” (19). His constant shuddering at his wife’s small blemish shows us that he is threatened by the power of nature (or Nature) as greater

than his own to the point that he would rather risk his wife's life to be rid of that reminder than to accept what is a basic fact.

Georgiana falls victim to Aylmer's harmful behaviors in several ways. She is told every day, perhaps several times (in words and disgusted looks) that the small blemish on her cheek is a "frightful object" (12), to the point where she herself starts calling it a "dreadful hand" (13) amongst other things. She asks Aylmer if he can remove it "to save your poor wife from madness" (13). This is an example of conditioning, in which Aylmer has conditioned Georgiana to feel that she is not perfect as if perfection is truly a possibility. On the same note, she is made to believe that she should be perfect, and that is the only way to preserve her marriage.

Georgiana falls under the influence of Aylmer's delusions, and finds herself at a point where she is willing to lose her life in order for Aylmer to be satisfied. She tells him before they go into the laboratory "spare me not, though you should find the birthmark take refuge in my heart at last" (14). Georgiana has found herself in a situation where her husband no longer wants her as she is and is constantly telling her she should not have this mark that is a part of her flesh and her being. This daily abasement could have put her into a state of depression. During her stay in the laboratory, she is shown several experiments by Aylmer, all of which produce unexpected and unsuccessful results. While reading his book, she is said to have "loved him more profoundly than ever, but with a less entire dependence on his judgment than heretofore" (19). At this moment we see that she no longer believes that Aylmer's plan will have the results he intends, yet she will go along with it out of love and admiration. In essence, when Georgiana is telling Aylmer on her deathbed "he has rejected the best that earth could offer" (23), she is not only ending her grievous existence, but trying to bring Aylmer to terms with his own mortality.

Works Cited

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