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Price of Purity: A Psychological Interpretation of Hawthorne's "The Birthmark."

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark," Aylmer is a man of science who asks Georgiana, his newlywed wife, to participate in his experiment to remove a small birthmark from her cheek. When Aylmer sees that Georgiana is hurt by his request to remove the birthmark, he explains: "you came so nearly perfect from the hand of Nature, that this slightest possible defect, which we hesitate whether to term a defect or a beauty, shocks me, as being the visible mark of earthly imperfection" (Hawthorne 11). Aylmer explains that he simply wants to remove the birthmark because Georgiana's physical beauty would be perfect without it. Aylmer's intention seems to be honest and direct at first, but it does not take long before his obsession for perfection takes over for the worse and reveals its true intention. Aylmer views the birthmark as a representation of sin. By removing the birthmark, Aylmer is hoping to make his wife pure and perfect once more. Aylmer is motivated by intellectualization because he is "analyzing and rationalizing rather than feeling and reacting" (Lynn 195). "Intellectualization is isolation for intellectuals" (Lynn 192) and Aylmer clearly isolates himself into his experiment.

Aylmer's perception of the birthmark as a representation of sin is evident throughout the story. The first sign is the very timing of Aylmer's mention of the birthmark, which takes place "one day, very soon after their marriage" (Hawthorne 10). Before they got married, Georgiana is referred simply as a beautiful woman without any mention of a flaw. Aylmer viewed Georgiana as being a pure and perfect woman, untouched by man. But after she married him, the birthmark

is referred to as “a crimson stain upon the snow” (Hawthorne 11), “the bloody hand” (Hawthorne 11) and “the fatal flaw of humanity” (Hawthorne 12). The color red is associated with sin and Aylmer clearly associates the birthmark as a symbol of sin of humanity. The thought of sin disturbs Aylmer to a point of suffering and obsessing. He is found “rendering the birthmark a frightful object, causing him more trouble and horror” (Hawthorne 12).

Aylmer feels guilty for marking his wife with sin, but because he is an intellectual in isolation, he never mentions his true feelings to her. Even when Georgiana asks him if he had any dreams about the birthmark, his first reaction is to deny it, using “a dry, cold tone, affected for the sake of concealing the real depth of his emotion” (Hawthorne 12). But Aylmer cannot escape from his dreams, where his unconscious makes aware of his repressed fears and obsessions with sin. He admits that the “the mind is in a sad state when Sleep, the all-involving, cannot confine her specters within the dim region of her sway, but suffers them to break forth, affrighting this actual life with secrets that perchance belong to a deeper one” (Hawthorne 13). Aylmer also admits that “truth often finds its way to the mind close muffled in robes of sleep, and then speaks with uncompromising directness of matters in regard to which we practice an unconscious self-deception during our waking moments” (Hawthorne 13). The two statements clearly show that Aylmer represses his fears and obsessions in his conscious awareness. Aylmer hides from his fears and obsessions by repressing them, but the repression undeniably motivates him and his behavior. Aylmer’s behavior also follows the concept of intellectualization by turning his obsession with sin into an obsession with his experiment where he is “convinced of the perfect practicability of [the birthmark’s] removal” (Hawthorne 13). Aylmer is safe in his scientific world of analysis and ration because he does not have to confront his real fears and emotions. He never has to mention that the birthmark represents sin. He convinces Georgiana

that he wants to remove the birthmark because it is a physical distraction. He simply treats the removal of the birthmark as a scientific experiment.

Georgiana is the victim of Aylmer's intellectualization. She is no longer viewed as a human being with real emotions and feelings. Instead, she becomes his specimen, the subject of Aylmer's experiment. This is first seen when Aylmer refers to Georgiana as the "purest statuary marble" (Hawthorne 11) and as a "living specimen of ideal loveliness without the semblance of a flaw" (Hawthorne 11). Because of the birthmark, Aylmer cannot even look at his wife without shuddering or being troubled by it. He is completely obsessed with the birthmark and cannot look beyond it. Even after Aylmer informs Georgiana that his experiment might fail and that there is danger in trying his concoction, he continues with his experiment and casually declares that "in a little while all will be tested" (Hawthorne 21). The cruelest result of Aylmer's intellectualization is that Georgiana has simply become a test specimen to Aylmer.

In his attempt to remove the birthmark, Aylmer allows himself to feel power through science. He tells Georgiana that he is "fully competent to render this dear cheek as faultless as its fellow; and then, most beloved, what will be my triumph when I shall have corrected what Nature left imperfect in her fairest work" (Hawthorne 14). Aylmer finds relief that he can try to remove sin and make his wife pure again by using his scientific knowledge and laboratory. He is now influenced by the concept of displacement, where "a threatening, powerful target is exchanged for a safer one" (Lynn 196). Aylmer is clearly threatened by the power of sin and obsesses over how he can triumph over it by associating the sin with the birthmark. Aylmer believes that by simply removing a physical birthmark on Georgiana's cheek, he is able to overcome and conquer his fear of sin. An example of this is when Georgiana is in his laboratory, Aylmer feels that "he could draw a magic circle round her within which no evil might intrude"

(Hawthorne 15). Science is giving him a sense of power and magic that he can use to fight sin and evil. Through displacement, the birthmark becomes a small and non-threatening target for sin, which Aylmer is confident he can remove through his power of science.

In the end, Aylmer's obsession proves to be fatal. His concoction succeeds in making the birthmark fade, but the life of Georgiana fades with it. Aylmer's repressed desire to cleanse sin and find purity controlled his behavior to the end and overcame any sense of caution and care. Even as he presented his concoction to his wife, Aylmer was in a "highly wrought state of mind and tension of spirit than of fear or doubt" (Hawthorne 21). Aylmer hides from his fears and obsessions by repressing them, but the repression undeniably motivates him and his behavior, which leads to the ultimate price for purity: Georgiana's death.

Works Cited

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