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Aylmer The Narcissist: A Psychological Analysis of Hawthorne's "The Birthmark"

Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, "The Birthmark," tells the tale of Aylmer, a highly rational, consummate man of science, his unfortunate young bride, Georgiana, and the fatal birthmark which proves to be their love's demise. No ordinary man, Aylmer suffers various psychological dysfunctions, the most troubling for Georgiana being his obsessive-compulsive disorder and his narcissistic personality disorder. Shortly after marriage, Aylmer becomes fixated with the idea of obliterating what most would call a charmingly innocuous discoloration of a tiny area of Georgiana's cheek but what Aylmer instead can see only as the mocking manifestation of his wife's "earthly imperfection." Placing too much stock in his own imagined omnipotence, he sets out to eradicate the hateful, hated mark. Disaster, of course, ensues. Hawthorne presents a character so flawed by psychological dysfunction, mired so deeply into his narcissism, that there could not possibly have been any brighter denouement.

Throughout the text, many indications are given of Aylmer's varying degrees of psychological quirks and dysfunctions. His overriding narcissistic personal disorder is abundantly evident when he tells Georgiana: "Ah, wait for this one success . . . then worship me if you will. I shall deem myself hardly unworthy of it" (Hawthorne 19). Truth is, Aylmer does not deem himself unworthy of worship even before his success, even, in fact, in spite of his abundant failure. However, this is not his only problem, and it appears that with his obsessive-compulsive disorder and tendency toward the liberal use of displacement, projection and

sublimation, Aylmer is a walking mass of psychological chaos, all directed by his vastly outsized, hubris-fueled ego.

As the archetypal mad scientist, isolated in his cavernous, poorly lit laboratory, Aylmer represents the epitome of man's misguided drive to emulate and eventually to usurp the secrets of nature. Time and again in folklore and fiction this conceit of man's character is demonstrated to have fatal consequences, as characters from Sisyphus to Dr. Frankenstein could attest. Yet, despite such historical warning and ample evidence to the contrary, Aylmer never doubts his own infallibility. This is because the true narcissist is not capable of self-doubt but can instead only shift blame away from him or herself, as when Aylmer says "there was too powerful a stimulus" to explain the failure of one experiment (16). Even as one experiment after the another falls short of its desired results, Aylmer continues to assert that he is in complete control and fully confident of eventual shining success. With so much at stake (the very life of his professed beloved wife), a normal man would stop before fatal damage was done. But a normal man would not be laboring under Aylmer's obsessive-compulsive disorder. Aylmer is incapable of noticing or heeding any warning to stop, just as he is incapable of controlling his constant thoughts of the birthmark and his compulsion to have it removed. Indeed, if it were not the birthmark, it would no doubt be some other perceived imperfection which would captivate his mind and sensibilities to the point of distraction. So, instead of ignoring the irritating blemish, as a normal person would (but as Aylmer is functionally incapable), he indulges in a bit of sublimation.

While simply fixating on Georgiana's imperfection would be considered socially unacceptable, to undertake (selflessly, tirelessly, and sparing no expense) to remove this blight from her face and, by extension, from the world at large, could be viewed as a purely

humanitarian act and yet more proof of the narcissistic Aylmer's superiority to common man. Aylmer's need to be viewed as superior continues to be evident in his actions throughout the story. In direct opposition to the facts as they exist, he constantly reminds Georgiana that his experiments "cannot fail" (16), that she should "not mistrust me, Dearest" (18) and that the results were "already certain" (19). He even convinces himself, again, in spite of several failed experiments and less than certain outcomes in the past, that "he could draw a magic circle round her within which no evil might intrude" (15). Poor Aylmer is so deep into narcissistic denial that he cannot consider the possibility of failure, even as one experiment after another is failing before his eyes. This extreme form of denial might even be seen as reaction formation, in that Aylmer is convinced that he is saving Georgiana even as he is killing her.

Strict control of one's emotions is one of the hallmarks of the narcissistic personality. At one point, Aylmer becomes upset with Georgiana for reading from his journal some information which shows him to be less than perfect. "It is dangerous to read in a sorcerer's books," said he with a smile, though his countenance was uneasy and displeased." (19). By smiling through his vast displeasure, Aylmer displaces his emotions. Anger indicates a loss of control, something expected of common people, not superior beings. Displacement is preferable, an indication of his supremacy. It is only later, when, while under immeasurable pressure, he is startled by Georgiana's unexpected presence in his laboratory, that he momentarily loses his equanimity and shouts at her, "impetuously" (20). This word is very important to the narrative, as it is doubtful that a character with Aylmer's personality disorders would often, if ever, act impetuously. Impetuosity is anathema to the narcissist, reeking as it does of base abandon. As if to prove this theory, Aylmer is very quick to compose himself and present once again the calm, controlled and controlling nut case we have come to know.

Not, however, before we get to see another of Alymer's psychological defense mechanisms in action—that of projection. When he screams at Georgiana, “have you no trust in your husband?” (20), Alymer is projecting his own lack of trust in his wife. He has not told her anything of substance regarding the experiments which he has already begun on her, he certainly has not informed her of the danger involved, nor does he appear inclined to do so prior to completing his experiments. While it is sometimes questionable whether or not the narcissistic personality is aware that his or her actions might be morally or ethically indefensible, the need to justify those actions so that they continue to be seen in the best possible light is so strong that projection is a common defense mechanism employed by those suffering this particular dysfunction. Alymer simply cannot acknowledge that he has done anything less than honorable; it is Georgiana who has instead breached *his* trust by innocently walking into his laboratory.

If we were to follow Freudian theory, the fault might be said to lie in Alymer's underdeveloped superego. A stronger, more functional superego would better control Alymer's overdeveloped ego. Unfortunately, Alymer is suffering from an ego which has taken control, resulting in a highly rational personality but one which, while efficient, is emotionally distant enough to have allowed the tragedy to occur. Alymer feels no guilt because his ego has overpowered his superego and because his narcissism refuses to permit the idea of guilt, with its implication of wrongdoing on his part, to enter into the equation.

Hawthorne's tale is cautionary, but perhaps not in the way it might be assumed at first glance. Yes, it is yet another account of man's misguided and ill-advised attempts to control nature and to appropriate her secrets. And yes, it ends badly for the would-be appropriator. (Well, worse for his wife, but you get the idea.) More deeply, however, Hawthorne offers a glimpse into the heart of a true narcissist, a heart which harbors unspeakable evil.

Work Cited

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. "The Birthmark." *"Young Goodman Brown" and Other Short Stories*.

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