
NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S THE BIRTHMARK: A STUDY ON SYMBOLISM

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Abstract

Nathaniel Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark' was published in 1843, is a story of a scientist who is so obsessed with his wife's beauty that he never wants to see a scar on her beautiful face. The beauty of his wife, Georgiana was, always praised and admired and in one way worshipped by other men whom she is acquainted with. The scientist, Aylmer the husband of Georgiana does not like the scar on her face which is like a small hand in crimson color. Aylmer always sees the birthmark as a symbol of sin and moral degeneracy and imagines the scar ingrained not only on his wife's skin but on her heart. This indicates the significance of the scar beyond her physical appearance. The birthmark is a sole token of human imperfection which in turn reflects her personality. As long as the mark was there on her face it allowed her to live in this world. The removal of the mark led her to her death bed. Her husband's obsession of removing the mark with his experiment was too much for her to withstand her perfection in this world of flawed humans and their disbelief of nature, highlighting the upliftment of science.

Keywords:

Crimson hand, Birthmark, imperfection, science vs nature, symbol

Introduction

Massachusetts was an American short story writer and romantic novelists who experimented with a broad range of styles and genres. He is best and widely known for his short stories and remarkable novels like 'The Scarlet letter' and 'The House of Seven Gables'. Hawthorne's writing centers on New England. There are many works featuring moral metaphors with an anti-puritan inspiration. His fiction works are considered part of Romantic movement and more specifically dark romanticism.

Eventually Hawthorne developed a style of romantic fiction representative of his own literary style as well as the genres of the romantic novels and beliefs. Hawthorne conveyed modern themes of psychology and human nature through his stylish use of allegory and symbolism. One of Hawthorne's recurring use of themes throughout his works was his own views on human nature. 'Hawthorne explored an interesting human psychology through his exploration of the dark side of human consciousness' (Magil:1 841). Hawthorne's symbolism was an essential tool in addressing topics which were too radical in the Nineteenth century. Nathaniel Hawthorne is a popular example

of Romantic author from the Nineteenth century, who always believed that people are more prone towards science and these writers like Hawthorne show more of romantic ideals in their short stories.

The short story 'The Birthmark' is a good example of romantic's short story from Nineteenth century. These romantic writers wanted to remind the society that there was nothing more powerful than human emotion and nothing more beautiful than nature. The story 'The Birthmark' focusses more on obsessive love of the husband towards his charming wife who wants her to be perfect in always. It also reflects the conflicts between nature and science.

Symbolism in the story 'The Birthmark'

The story opens on the note of newly married couple named Aylmer, the scientist who persuades Georgiana, a beautiful and charming lady to marry him. The love between these two would have been more blossomed and soothing if the wife Georgiana would not have a mark in shape of a small hand in crimson color on her cheek. At first these two were happily married but their happiness doesn't last long, and it turns out to be a nightmare especially for the wife. The birth mark on her cheek adds beauty to her personality. She seems to be perfect in her way of taking care of her marital life. She gains a lot of appreciation from her small social gathering and everyone admires her beauty.

But to her surprise, her husband who is a scientist, doesn't like the mark on her face which is quite natural birthmark

and wants to control the nature and attain supremacy over it through his scientific knowledge. - Georgiana's birthmark symbolizes mortality. The narrator indicates that her small, red, birthmark that resembles a human hand represents her, and humanity's, flaws; and that is what makes us human- the inability to achieve perfection. Aylmer, is disgusted by her one imperfection and eventually convinces his wife, to the point that she would rather die than live with the birthmark. This aversion to her birthmark could stem from his belief that it symbolizes death. He wrongly assumes that if he can get rid of the birthmark, it will mean that he has the power to prolong life indefinitely. The shape of the birthmark, a human hand, causes the reader to imagine that God (or in the short story, a fairy or Mother Nature), while creating Georgiana intentionally marked her face with a symbol of humanity and imperfection. This is supported by the description of the birthmark in which Hawthorne says is "deeply interwoven" with Georgiana's face; symbolizing again that flaw is a key part of humanity's character and cannot be separated.

As a scientist, Aylmer wants to have nature under his control and show the world that science can make things perfect what nature cannot. Georgiana an almost-perfect wife, will be no better than everyone else when she's dead and buried. Aylmer 's approach to love and beauty will more clearly determine what kind of person he is. His experiment of controlling the birthmark and removing it altogether makes him more imperfect as a person. He cannot bear the anguish in him whenever

he sees the mark on his wife's cheek which reminds him that he is still under the control of nature and he cannot change it though he is a scientist. The thought of his wife's birthmark makes him so restless that he dreams that he had done an experiment with her and that he goes deep into her heart to cut the mark from the face with a knife.

He is so obsessed with the mark which is in a form of a small hand as symbol of nature conveying a message that no humans can change nature. Moreover, they must be bonded with the terms of nature. This thought itself makes him more possessive for his profession and wants to prove that science can control and rule nature. His selfish desire of proving to be above nature costs the life of Georgiana who silently agrees to the experiments which her husband imposes on her and finally losing her life.

Conclusion

As for the writer, everything in the world flawed somewhere or the other. That's the reason nature reminds way that every living creature eventually dies. The symbol of death on her cheek clashes with her natural generosity and natural spirit for the way she cooperates with her husband's experiments though she knows inwardly that no man can go against nature or can rule nature if so it ends in human decay.

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