



Aylmer's Motivation in Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark"

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Framing Question

Why does Aylmer, the protagonist of Nathaniel Hawthorne's story "The Birthmark," undertake his fatal experiment?

Understanding

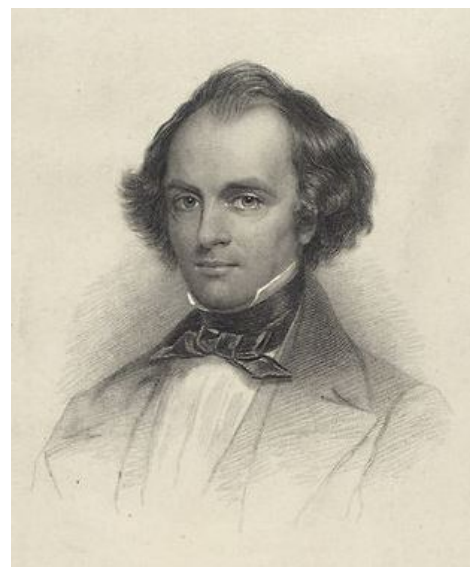
Aylmer, the protagonist of Hawthorne's "The Birthmark," undertakes to remove the blemish from his wife's cheek to satisfy his own spiritual strivings and to redeem what he sees as a failed career.

Text

[Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Birthmark", 1843.](#)

Background

At first glance "The Birthmark," published in 1843, seems like a simple story with, as the narrator tells us, a "deeply impressive," and presumably easily understood, moral. Yet, as with all of Hawthorne's mature stories, when we look closely, we discover that "The Birthmark" is not as simple as it seems. The narrator — cool and detached, like many of Hawthorne's narrators — leaves us with questions. How, for example, can Aylmer be "proficient in all branches of" science when his journal is a record of failure? Why does Georgiana drink the potion when she has come to doubt Aylmer's skill? And then there is perhaps the most intriguing question of all: why does Aylmer undertake to eradicate the birthmark? The analysis we offer here explores that last question and in so doing reveals the complexity of this "simple" tale.



Portrait of Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1851

Text Analysis

Setting the Stage: Paragraph 1

[1] In the latter part of the last century there lived a man of science, an eminent proficient [skilled] in every branch of natural philosophy, who not long before our story opens had made experience of a spiritual affinity [relationship or connection] more attractive than any chemical one. [2] He had left his laboratory to the care of an assistant, cleared his fine countenance from the furnace smoke, washed the stain of acids from his fingers, and persuaded a beautiful woman to become his wife.

The opening lines of a work of fiction bear close study because often in them an author will reveal important elements like setting or theme. In sentence 1 the narrator establishes part of the story's setting. What does he include, and what does he leave out? Why might he make this omission?

When is the story set?

Why does the narrator refer to the protagonist simply as a nameless "man of science"?

What opposition does the narrator establish in sentence 1?

Contextualizing Questions

1. When was the story published?
2. When was it set?
3. What kind of scientist is Aylmer?
4. What is the focus of the reading of the story?

Activity: Vocabulary

Learn definitions by exploring how words are used in context.



What does the word “chemical” refer to here?

Sentences 1 and 2 tell us that the story is set at a key moment of change in Aylmer’s life: he has just gotten married. Whenever a story focuses on newlyweds, what thematic questions immediately arise?

What do sentences 1 and 2 suggest about the way Aylmer’s life will change now that he is married?

Paragraph 1 cont’d

[3] In those days when the comparatively recent discovery of electricity and other kindred mysteries of Nature seemed to open paths into the region of miracle, it was not unusual for the love of science to rival the love of woman in its depth and absorbing energy. [4] The higher intellect, the imagination, the spirit, and even the heart might all find their congenial [well-suited] aliment [nourishment] in pursuits which, as some of their ardent votaries believed, would ascend from one step of powerful intelligence to another, until the philosopher should lay his hand on the secret of creative force and perhaps make new worlds for himself. [5] We know not whether Aylmer possessed this degree of faith in man’s ultimate control over Nature. [6] He had devoted himself, however, too unreservedly [too completely] to scientific studies ever to be weaned [separated] from them by any second passion. [7] His love for his young wife might prove the stronger of the two; but it could only be by intertwining itself with his love of science, and uniting the strength of the latter to his own.

What opposition does Hawthorne establish in sentence 3?

In sentence 4 Hawthorne explains why the love of science might rival the love of woman. State the reasons in your own words.

Why is sentence 5 an odd statement for the narrator to make?

In sentences 6 and 7 the narrator adds the final details to the stage setting before flipping the switch on the action. Although this is a time of change for Aylmer, what will not change for him?

What question does the narrator raise in sentence 7?

What themes has the narrator introduced in this opening paragraph?

Paragraph 3

[1] “Georgiana,” said he, “has it never occurred to you that the mark upon your cheek might be removed?”

How does Aylmer refer to the birthmark in this exchange?

Paragraph 4

[1] “No, indeed,” said she, smiling; but perceiving the seriousness of his manner, she blushed deeply. [2] “To tell you the truth it has been so often called a charm that I was simple enough to imagine it might be so.”

How does Georgiana interpret the birthmark in paragraph 4? Does she see it in a positive or negative light?

Paragraph 5

[1] “Ah, upon another face perhaps it might,” replied her husband; “but never on yours. [2] No, dearest Georgiana, 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.”

How does Aylmer refer to the birthmark in paragraph 5? How does his attitude toward it change as he addresses Georgiana?

Paragraph 7

[1] To explain this conversation it must be mentioned that in the centre of Georgiana’s left cheek there was a singular mark, deeply interwoven, as it were, with the texture and substance of her face. [2] In the usual state of her complexion — a healthy though delicate bloom — the mark wore a tint of deeper crimson, which imperfectly defined its shape amid the surrounding rosiness. [3] When she blushed it gradually became more indistinct, and finally vanished amid the triumphant rush of blood that bathed the whole cheek with its brilliant glow. [4] But if any shifting motion caused her to turn pale there was the mark again, a crimson stain upon the snow, in what Aylmer sometimes deemed an almost fearful distinctness. [5] Its shape bore not a little similarity to the human hand, though of the smallest pygmy size. [6] Georgiana’s lovers were wont to say that some fairy at her birth hour had laid her tiny hand upon the infant’s cheek, and left this impress there in token of the magic endowments that were to give her such sway over all hearts. [7] Many a desperate swain would have risked life for the privilege of pressing his lips to the mysterious hand. [8] It must not be concealed, however, that the impression wrought by this fairy sign manual varied exceedingly, according to the difference of temperament in the beholders. [9] Some fastidious persons — but they were exclusively of her own sex — affirmed that the bloody hand, as they chose to call it, quite destroyed the effect of Georgiana’s beauty, and rendered her countenance even hideous. [10] But it would be as reasonable to say that one of those small blue stains which sometimes occur in the purest statuary marble would convert the Eve of Powers to a monster. [11] Masculine observers, if the birthmark did not heighten their admiration, contented themselves with wishing it away, that the world might possess one living specimen of ideal loveliness without the semblance of a flaw. [12] After his marriage, — for he thought little or nothing of the matter before, — Aylmer discovered that this was the case with himself.

Why might it be said that sentences 6 and 7 make the birthmark a symbol of Georgiana’s sexuality?

How do women interpret the birthmark and why?

What does the birthmark's resemblance to a hand suggest?

In what sentence does the narrator state his view of the birthmark? How does he interpret it?

In sentence 11 the narrator tells us how some men interpreted the birthmark and suggests that Aylmer saw it the same way for a while. How would you characterize their interpretation? What language separates this view from Aylmer's later response to the birthmark?

What, according to the narrator, determines how people will interpret the birthmark?

What does this suggest about Aylmer's interpretation of the birthmark?

Paragraph 8

[1] Had she been less beautiful, — if Envy's self could have found aught else to sneer at, — he might have felt his affection heightened by the prettiness of this mimic hand, now vaguely portrayed, now lost, now stealing forth again and glimmering to and fro with every pulse of emotion that throbb'd within her heart; but seeing her otherwise so perfect, he found this one defect grow more and more intolerable with every moment of their united lives. [2] It was the fatal flaw of humanity which Nature, in one shape or another, stamps ineffaceably on all her productions, either to imply that they are temporary and finite, or that their perfection must be wrought by toil and pain. [3] The crimson hand expressed the ineludible gripe in which mortality clutches the highest and purest of earthly mould, degrading them into kindred with the lowest, and even with the very brutes, like whom their visible frames return to dust. [4] In this manner, selecting it as the symbol of his wife's liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death, Aylmer's sombre imagination was not long in rendering the birthmark a frightful object, causing him more trouble and horror than ever Georgiana's beauty, whether of soul or sense, had given him delight.

Throughout the story thus far the narrator has noted different meanings for the birthmark. It is at once a symbol of Georgiana's beauty, a minor defect in her complexion, and a symbol of her sexuality. What does he associate it with in sentence 1?

In what way can this last meaning be said to be a foreshadowing?

What meaning does Aylmer finally assign to the birthmark?

What does the narrator's use of the verb "select" suggest?

According to the narrator, what is the origin of this meaning?

Thus far we have reached three important interpretative conclusions. We established that Aylmer is a spiritual striver; he seeks greater refinement and spirituality in his life. We established that he sees Georgiana as his link to this more spiritual existence. We have established that he sees the birthmark as a defect that stands between her and the higher spirituality of perfection. How do these interpretative conclusions help explain Aylmer's obsession to remove the birthmark?

Aylmer as Scientist: Paragraph 22

[1] The next day Aylmer apprised his wife of a plan that he had formed whereby he might have opportunity for the intense thought and constant watchfulness which the proposed operation would require; while Georgiana, likewise, would enjoy the perfect repose essential to its success. [2] They were to seclude themselves in the extensive apartments occupied by Aylmer as a laboratory, and where, during his toilsome youth, he had made discoveries in the elemental powers of Nature that had roused the admiration of all the learned societies in Europe. [3] Seated calmly in this laboratory, the pale philosopher had investigated the secrets of the highest cloud region and of the profoundest mines; he had satisfied himself of the causes that kindled and kept alive the fires of the volcano; and had explained the mystery of fountains [geysers], and how it is that they gush forth, some so bright and pure, and others with such rich medicinal virtues, from the dark bosom of the earth. [4] Here, too, at an earlier period, he had studied the wonders of the human frame, and attempted to fathom the very process by which Nature assimilates all her precious influences from earth and air, and from the spiritual world, to create and foster man, her masterpiece. [5] The latter pursuit, however, Aylmer had long laid aside in unwilling recognition of the truth — against which all seekers sooner or later stumble — that our great creative Mother, while she amuses us with apparently working in the broadest sunshine, is yet severely careful to keep her own secrets, and, in spite of her pretended openness, shows us nothing but results. [6] She permits us, indeed, to mar, but seldom to mend, and, like a jealous patentee, on no account to make. [7] Now, however, Aylmer resumed these half-forgotten investigations; not, of course, with such hopes or wishes as first suggested them; but because they involved much physiological truth and lay in the path of his proposed scheme for the treatment of Georgiana.

When did Aylmer make his greatest discoveries?

What effect did those discoveries have on his career?

How does the work we see Aylmer doing as an old man in the story reflect the work he did when young?

Why might it be said that fathoming the “process by which Nature... create[s] man, her masterpiece” represents the ultimate in scientific discovery?

What field of study confronts Aylmer with his greatest professional setback?

Paragraph 51

[1] But to Georgiana the most engrossing volume was a large folio from her husband's own hand, in which he had recorded every experiment of his scientific career, its original aim, the methods adopted for its development, and its final success or failure, with the circumstances to which either event was attributable. [2] The book, in truth, was both the history and emblem [symbol] of his ardent [passionate], ambitious, imaginative, yet practical and laborious life. [3] He handled physical details as if there were nothing beyond them; yet spiritualized them all, and redeemed himself from materialism by his strong and eager aspiration towards the infinite. [4] In his grasp the veriest [truest] clod of earth assumed a soul. Georgiana, as she read, revered Aylmer and loved him more profoundly than ever, but with a less entire dependence on his judgment than heretofore. [5] Much as he had accomplished, she could not but observe that his most splendid successes were almost invariably failures, if compared with the ideal at which he aimed. [6] His brightest diamonds were the merest pebbles, and felt to be so by himself, in comparison with the inestimable gems which lay hidden beyond his reach. [7] The volume, rich with achievements that had won renown for its author, was yet as melancholy a record as ever mortal hand had penned. [8] It was the sad confession and continual exemplification of the shortcomings of the composite man, the spirit burdened with clay and working in matter, and of the despair that assails the higher nature at finding itself so miserably thwarted by the earthly part. [9] Perhaps every man of genius in whatever sphere might recognize the image of his own experience in Aylmer's journal.

How does the narrator's description of Aylmer's work in sentence 3 reinforce the theme of his spiritual striving?

How does Georgiana come to judge Aylmer's career?

What language indicates that Aylmer shared this judgment?

What is the difference between the way other scientists see Aylmer and the way he sees himself?

What does the term "composite man" mean?

How does sentence 8 describe Aylmer's situation?

Paragraph 55

[1] “Ah, wait for this one success,” rejoined he, “then worship me if you will. [2] I shall deem myself hardly unworthy of it. [3] But come, I have sought you for the luxury of your voice. [4] Sing to me, dearest.”

In sentences 1 and 2 Aylmer tells us what this experiment means to him. What does it represent?

With your analysis of Aylmer’s achievements as a scientist in mind, speculate on why the narrator in paragraph 1, sentence 5 asserts that he does not know if Aylmer believed science can control nature.

Activity: Writing about Aylmer as a Scientist

Outline a brief paper. Practice structuring an argument, identifying textual evidence, and articulating connections between elements of an argument.



Glossary

eminent: distinguished, high rank

countenance: face

ardent: enthusiastic

votaries: dedicated follower

swain: a lover or suitor

fastidious: attentive to detail, meticulous

ineffaceably: can't be erased

somber: gloomy and dark

apprised: informed, told

repose: rest

melancholy: depressed and gloomy state of mind

Portrait of Nathaniel Hawthorne, steel engraving by Thomas Phillibrown, 1851, after the 1850 oil portrait by Cephas G. Thompson.
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