



Allegorical Domestic Violence in “The Birth-Mark”

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In this analysis of the classic short story “The Birth-Mark,” Baylee Bozarth explains how Nathaniel Hawthorne symbolically aligns science with patriarchal power to deliver a compelling allegory about spousal abuse. This essay was written for American Literature I with Dr. Brenda Brown.

NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE’S “THE BIRTH-MARK” tells the story of a young married couple, Aylmer and Georgiana. Aylmer is a male scientist; Georgiana is a woman, almost perfect in appearance, except for the birthmark termed a “bloody hand” on her left cheek (1321). In Aylmer’s determination to use science to remove the mark, he literally drains the life from his wife and leaves her unblemished but dead (1331). Hawthorne, who is known for his allegorical texts, is implying a deeper message about the treatment of women throughout this story (Weinstein 44). Through literary means, Hawthorne is able to tell a story about domestic violence and the treatment of women as objects.

Hawthorne uses many strategies of Romantic storytelling to his advantage in creating the chilling and hostile environment in “The Birth-Mark.” The story has many qualities often utilized in Roman-

tic literature, including “the lack of social context, the stylized, allegorized quality of the characters, and the strange, pervasive air of distance” (Lawson and Shakinovsky 23). These three qualities allow the story to unfold in a way that is slightly creepy, but mostly shows the true range of horrible actions possible by a man in complete control of his wife. Hawthorne is fond of Romanticism, because it allows deeper investigation into the “human-heart” than other types of writing (Lawson and Shakinovsky 24). In this story, he is leading the reader to consider two main ideas: the value of women beyond their outward beauty and the dangerous power dynamic between husband and wife. He depicts the unhealthy relationship between the characters by exposing readers to the same isolation felt by Georgiana.

The story depicts the isolation often inflicted on women by their abusers in a stylized but realistic way. Because “The Birth-Mark” remains unconnected from the world outside the one Aylmer and Georgiana have created for themselves, it allows for their alienation and careful consideration of them as characters. It also allows the audience to feel the same separation from reality that plagues Georgiana. Many trauma survivors, such as those of domestic violence, describe their abuse as having “no beginning, no end, no during, no before, and no after” (Lawson and Shakinovsky 25). Therefore, the timelessness applied in the story is similar to the trauma Georgiana is experiencing at the hands of her abusive husband. In the beginning, she is aware of other people’s opinions of her blemish and is inclined to also believe that it has a charm (Hawthorne 1321). However, by the end of the story, because of the isolation from others and constant exposure to the negative opinion of her husband, she instead refers to it as a “horrible stigma” and begs Aylmer to remove it (1329). She loses her ability to think for herself or recognize her own worth. To Aylmer and herself, her worth is measured by her physical perfection and beauty.

The beauty standards imposed upon Georgiana in this story are harsh and unfair. Throughout the story, Aylmer’s appearance is not

described once, yet the conflict revolves around a simple imperfection in his wife's face (Lawson and Shakinovsky 30). The importance placed on the way Georgiana looks is superficial and degrading. Her own husband struggles to look at her, because her face is less perfect than it could be (Hawthorne 1321). The pressure to be physically perfect is a major factor in her devotion to her Aylmer and her willingness to drink the potion that kills her. Aylmer uses "science" to create the substance, but his relationship to scientific craft is actually symbolic of his power over Georgiana.

Aylmer's role as a scientist allows him the ability to view Georgiana as a subject; Hawthorne makes a connection between women and experimental subjects. Often, when analyzing this text in class, college-level students point out that Hawthorne is writing about how "some hubristic men considered females as expendable pawns whom the scientists willingly destroy for the sake of knowledge" (Cobb and Sterling 151). It is clear that Hawthorne is making a point about the scientist/subject relationship, which is scarily similar to a husband/wife situation. Aylmer's actual science is not important to the story. In fact, he is "more consistently the aesthetic scientist than the scientific aesthete" (Rucker). The role of scientist is, instead, being used to symbolize the power, manifesting as superior knowledge, that Aylmer has over Georgiana, the power that ultimately leads her to feel unworthy in his presence.

Aylmer and Georgiana's relationship depicts the cycle that is often evident in domestic violence situations. Liz Rosenberg describes the story as "clearly a newlywed's story, fresh with the author's anxieties, hopes, and fears." This is accurate in that it shows the process of marriage moving from a state of new love and admiration to one of resentment and violence. Yet, Georgiana is never aware of the danger in this transition, which is often accurate in real domestic violence situations. Throughout the story, we see her opinions change but not in her own favor. She respects herself less and her husband more and more.

Georgiana's ultimate submission to Aylmer is a large part of the narrative. She is, at first, bold enough to lash out in anger at him when he speaks negatively about her birthmark. However, as she begins to see the mark the way he does, she also begins to see herself the way he does: as a slave (Lawson and Shakinovsky 31). She says troubling things, such as, "It has made me worship you more than ever," after reading his scientific journal (Hawthorne 1328). This devout worship of someone who hates and, in turn, has caused her to hate her appearance is unhealthy. She allows Aylmer to murder her, because she is desperate for him to no longer be disgusted by her face and to be able to love her without hesitation.

The scene where Georgiana dies is never explicitly described as murder, but it is such in every way possible. When Aylmer successfully rids her of the birthmark, readers know that Aylmer is ecstatic. He encourages his assistant to laugh and be joyful at their success (Hawthorne 1331). However, the narrator provides the reader with no information concerning his response to the death of his wife (Lawson and Shakinovsky 34). That is not important to the story, nor would the outcome be pleasant for the reader to experience. To Aylmer, the experiment was successful, because his only real intent was to remove the birthmark. The death of his wife is simply "collateral damage" (Cobb and Sterling 155), because he sees his wife not as a person but as simply an expression of beauty marred by a hideous mark.

"The Birth-Mark" is an allegory masquerading as a scientific experiment gone wrong. Yet, the truth of what happens is simple: a man uses his power to take advantage of his wife and degrade her to becoming less than herself. By the end of the story, Georgiana is no longer her own person but a slave to the desires of her husband. Aylmer, in his determination to "fix" her, takes his wife's life. Hawthorne intended for this to be an allegorical and complex story that teaches or causes the audience to question something about human existence. He wants readers to reconsider their view of women and realize the flaws in men's thinking during the time period. Women

are not disposable, and their appearance is not the most important aspect of their existence. ▶▶

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