

ANALYSIS

“The Birthmark” (1843)

Nathaniel Hawthorne

(1804-1864)

Aylmer is a “man of science” in the 18th century, during the Enlightenment when among the intellectual elites, religious faith was replaced by faith in reason, science, progress and human perfectibility. By 1843 New England culture was dominated by liberal reform movements and Transcendental philosophy, led by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller. “The Birthmark” is one of Hawthorne’s responses to Emerson, in particular to his doctrine of the Godlike perfectibility of humankind.

Aylmer is intellectual yet spiritual: He “redeemed himself from materialism by his strong and eager aspiration towards the infinite. In his grasp the veriest clod of earth assumed a soul.” Aylmer sounds like Emerson in *Nature* (1836), which concludes with idealism that Hawthorne compares to the soap bubbles blown by Clifford Pyncheon the childish aristocrat in *The House of the Seven Gables*. Clifford babbles Emersonian speculations while out of his mind. Aylmer applies Emerson’s idealism to his wife, literally, and his superficial perfectionism kills her. More concerned about her looks than about her welfare, he feels challenged to remove the birthmark from her cheek, as if she is a model for cosmetics ads in magazines, but science is more ambitious than the beauty industry. Aylmer also is patriarchal and wants his wife to remain forever young, beautiful and compliant. His intolerance of her imperfection lowers her self-esteem until she is willing to sacrifice herself to his deadly experiment.

Georgiana represents the best qualities of the imperfect human race--our humanity. Her birthmark is “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.” Toil and pain, how inconvenient. Aylmer the scientist wants a quick fix, much as the Unitarians in “The Celestial Railroad” want a comfortable ride to Heaven and the blithe Blithedalers an easy reformation of the world according to their specifications. Seeing the birthmark “as the symbol of his wife’s liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death,” Aylmer tries to improve upon divinely created Nature by making her both perfect and immortal--becoming his own God.

Aylmer dreams he operates on Georgiana and finds that the deeper he cuts, the deeper the birthmark--until his knife reaches her heart. “It may be the stain goes as deep as life itself.” Yet he is “inexorably resolved to cut or wrench it away.” To succeed, he would cut out her heart, like the doctors who experimented on human subjects in Nazi concentration camps in their war to cleanse humanity. What is symbolized by the little red hand is in her blood and Aylmer kills her by his meddling with Nature, putting his hand in. His vertical consciousness is dissociated from his heart and he commits the “Unpardonable Sin” defined in “Ethan Brand”: “The sin of an intellect that triumphed over the sense of brotherhood with man and reverence for God, and sacrificed everything to its own mighty claims! The only sin that deserves a recompense of immortal agony.”

Aylmer is the master of his hairy servant Aminadab--bad anima spelled backward--the gross body according to the Victorians: “He seemed to represent man’s physical nature.” In the vertical mode of consciousness, Aylmer is the dominant head, Georgiana the compliant heart and Aminadab the body, stoking the furnace in the basement, serving the mad scientist who thinks he has “acquired from the investigation of Nature a power above Nature, and from physics a sway over the spiritual world.” Like the scientist Rappaccini, Aylmer subjects the one he “loves” to poison, both spiritual and literal. He excludes natural light and replaces it with an “impurpled radiance.” Traditionally associated with royalty, purple is a motif of aristocratic tyranny in Hawthorne. Like Rappaccini, Aylmer rationalizes and projects his evil: he “felt that he could draw a magic circle round her within which no evil might intrude.”

Georgiana, as humanity, is undismayed by his deadly effects. She loves him nonetheless. She reads his history of experiments, full of achievements yet “as melancholy a record as ever mortal hand had penned,” then tells him, “It has made me worship you more than ever.” Worshipping science is self-destructive. Even as she is dying, she forgives him: “You have aimed loftily; you have done nobly.” His “fatal hand had grappled with the mystery of life, and was the bond by which an angelic spirit kept itself in union with a mortal frame.” The birthmark fades away only as she dies, with Aminadab laughing in the background. He supposes physical Nature has prevailed, but her soul “took its heavenward flight.”

Aylmer “failed to look beyond the shadowy scope of time, and, living once for all in eternity, to find the perfect future in the present.” He lacks holistic consciousness. Though he is “spiritual,” he is focused only on the material, the superficial. Seeing evidence of a perfect future in the present makes it possible to forgive imperfection in this life and to live a more ideal life in anticipation of the next. See “The Old Manse” and “The Artist of the Beautiful” for more on this theme.

Though science is improving our physical well being, is it not also threatening us as never before with total destruction? And though science helps us live longer and better physically, has it helped us live better in a moral sense? Has it made us wiser? According to Hawthorne we must avoid the dissociation of sensibility and Unpardonable Sins caused by science worship, represented by scientists and experimenters such as Aylmer, Rappaccini, Ethan Brand, Chillingworth and Westervelt. Upon seeing documentary footage of Hiroshima after the atomic bomb fell upon it, Robert Oppenheimer the scientist most responsible for developing the bomb declared, “We have known sin.”

Michael Hollister (2015)