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Aylmer: A Man of Science and Power

Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birth-mark" is a short story that explores the issues between male and female gender roles. At this time, men were associated with power and dominance while women were associated with beauty and obedience. Hawthorne also examines the consequences of such gender roles through his presentation of Aylmer and Georgiana. In "The Birth-mark," Aylmer portrays a traditional man through his intelligence and career, the way he dominates Georgiana, and his need to prove himself.

In the beginning of the story, Hawthorne immediately presents Aylmer and discusses his career. For example, Hawthorne writes "In the latter part of the last century there lived a man of science, an eminent proficient in every branch of natural philosophy" (1). Aylmer is very passionate about the field of science and dedicates his entire life to it. On the other hand, Georgiana is presented as Aylmer's wife and is not given a specific profession. This shows that having a profession during this time period, especially one involving science, is associated with men. According to the book *Psychology Applied to Modern Life*, one of the five important characteristics of a traditional man is autonomy, which refers to being independent (Weiten, Dunn, and Hammer 354). Aylmer shows his autonomy by having a career and being able to take care of his family versus being dependent on Georgiana for life's necessities.

In addition, *Psychology Applied to Modern Life*, states, "Most men are socialized to be highly competitive and are taught that a man's masculinity is measured by the size of his paycheck and job status" (Weiten, Dunn, and Hammer 354). This statement suggests that being intelligent and having job success is an important part of the typical male role. Aylmer demonstrates this male role as he conducts research and performs experiments in his career. Hawthorne describes Aylmer as, "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” (5). This shows that Aylmer is an accomplished scientist and displays his intelligence through his career success.

After Aylmer marries Georgiana, he becomes fixated on the birthmark that is on her cheek. Hawthorne illustrates “Aylmer’s somber imagination was not long in rendering the birthmark a frightful object, causing him more trouble and horror than ever Georgiana’s beauty, whether soul or sense, had given him delight” (3). Once Aylmer becomes aware of the birthmark, his hateful opinion begins to grow and dominate Georgiana. In addition, Jeffrey Howard states, “. . . Aylmer’s unification with and destruction of the birthmark-which parallels his marital unity and eventual destruction of Georgiana-exists as a reaction to the birthmark which he perceives as a threat to his masculine dominance” (133). This describes how Aylmer feels about the lack of control he has over Georgiana’s birthmark. In order to regain his traditional male role, Aylmer tries to dominate Georgiana and control her physical appearance.

Georgiana’s opinion of her birthmark drastically changes throughout the story. When Aylmer asks Georgiana about her birthmark and its possible removal, she replies, “To tell you the truth it has been so often called a charm that I was simple enough to imagine it might be so” (Hawthorne 1). This shows that Georgiana is not bothered by her birthmark and has never considered removing it. After this, Aylmer shows his hatred of the birthmark through his dreams, facial expressions, and body language. This behavior in Aylmer changes Georgiana’s opinion of her own birthmark. For instance, Georgiana responds to Aylmer’s final request of removing the birthmark with, “let the attempt be made at whatever risk. Danger is nothing to me; for life, while this hateful mark makes me the object of your horror and disgust, - life is a burden which I would fling down with joy. Either remove this dreadful hand, or take my wretched life!” (Hawthorne 5). This clearly shows that Aylmer’s opinion of the birthmark dominates Georgiana to the point of submission.

Once Georgiana agrees to have the birthmark removed, Aylmer isolates her in the apartments he uses for lab space. For his experiment, Aylmer controls Georgiana’s

surroundings in the boudoir and is unhappy when she explores the area. Hawthorne describes Aylmer as “uneasy and displeased” when he finds Georgiana reading his scientific journals (11). Likewise, when Aylmer finds Georgiana wandering through his actual lab area, “He rushed towards her and seized her arm with a gripe that left the print of his fingers upon it. ‘Why do you come hither? Have you no trust in your husband?’” (Hawthorne 12). This demonstrates Aylmer’s displeasure at being disobeyed by his wife. These instances of Aylmer’s anger and aggression are displays of his male dominance over Georgiana.

Another one of the five important characteristics of a traditional man is achievement and this “requires social proof and validation” (Weiten, Dunn, and Hammer 353-354). Aylmer shows many verbal and physical examples of his need to prove his manhood. When Georgiana agrees to have the birthmark removed, Aylmer says, “I feel myself fully competent to render this dear cheek as faultless as its fellow; and then, most beloved, what will be my triumph when I shall have corrected what Nature left imperfect in her fairest work!” (Hawthorne 5). Aylmer is trying to verbally reassure Georgiana that he is a skilled scientist and even implies that he has the ability to control nature. This need to reassure Georgiana shows that Aylmer is not completely sure of himself and needs Georgiana’s approval.

Another example of Aylmer trying to prove himself is seen when he shows Georgiana his magical elixir. After explaining the elixir’s dangerous power to Georgiana, Aylmer says, “No king on his guarded throne could keep his life if I, in my private station, should deem that the welfare of million justified me in depriving him of it” (Hawthorne 9). Aylmer is trying to impress Georgiana with this elixir and comes off as very boastful. This arrogant statement shows that Aylmer needs verbal proof of his abilities as a scientist. Also, Aylmer is giving himself god-like qualities by implying that he knows what is best for the entire population.

Lastly, Aylmer attempts to prove his intelligence and power through a series of experiments. While Georgiana is waiting in her boudoir, Aylmer performs an experiment where Georgiana sees, “. . . the germ of a plant shooting upward from the soil. Then came the slender stalk; the leaves gradually unfolded themselves; and amid them was a perfect and

lovely flower” (Hawthorne 8). When the plant quickly dies, Aylmer ignores his failure and moves on to a new experiment. Next, Aylmer attempts an experiment that shows Georgiana’s image on polished metal. Hawthorne writes, “Georgiana assented; but, on looking at the result, was affrighted to find the features of the portrait blurred and indefinable; while the minute figure of a hand appeared where the cheek should have been” (8). Once the second experiment fails, Aylmer destroys the metal plate in acid. These examples show how desperately Aylmer is trying to impress Georgiana and prove his scientific abilities.

In conclusion, “The Birth-mark” shows many examples of a powerful male figure through the character Aylmer. Aylmer’s intellect, career, dominance, and need to validate himself are all characteristics that make him a traditional man. Aylmer’s constant strive for power and control end up becoming his downfall. His traditional male role leads to the death of his beloved wife Georgiana, and destroys his happiness.

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