

An Exploration Of Human's Internalized Relationship With Perfection

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Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" is a short story about an alchemist, Aylmer, who pursues a chemical cure to remove the birthmark on his wife's face. The story centers around Aylmer's obsession with removing his wife Georgianna's singular flaw. But upon finding and applying the chemical solution to the birthmark, which Aylmer has relentlessly pursued, Georgianna passes away. Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" presents the complexity of the human condition by revealing the implications of imperfection on personal relationships and societal structures.

Aylmer's relentless pursuit of perfection is fueled by his aversion to Georgianna's birthmark, which stems from humans' natural aversion to flaws. These flaws, as dictated by social trends of our time, are subconsciously seen as a natural

yet concerning manifestation of faults in a person's character. Aesthetic defects, in particular, are wrongfully perceived as being a consequence of some failing on the part of whoever bears those physical "defects." As such, Aylmer is overcome by the revulsion that this mark arouses within him because he believes that Georgianna, an otherwise perfect human, would possess no flaws if the birthmark were removed. He says that "[Georgianna] 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" (Hawthorne 29). Aylmer is haunted by Georgianna because the presence of her birthmark is an incessant reminder that she is a flawed person. As such, Aylmer believes that the removal of Georgianna's

birthmark will be “[his] triumph when [he] shall have corrected what Nature left imperfect in her fairest world” (Hawthorne 32). And while this would be an impressive feat, he sees this cure as the culmination of his life’s work as an alchemist not only because it would resolve his reservations about his wife, but also because this cure would offer him some reprieve from the human condition that plagues him. This universal desire for perfection is not only demonstrated by Aylmer’s disgust of the birthmark but also through Georgiana’s changing relationship with herself. When her husband identifies her birthmark as a flaw, she begins to detest her birthmark and believes that “[not] even Aylmer now hated [the birthmark] so much as she” (Hawthorne 37). Thus, Georgiana’s previously impassive attitude towards the birthmark transforms into feelings of personal disgust as she reevaluates her birthmark. This demonstrates that Aylmer’s desire to achieve perfection is not singular but, rather, that discomfort with imperfection is a universal human experience.

While Hawthorne establishes early in the story that people are inher-

ently uncomfortable with flaws, he uses Aylmer’s pursuit of and the aftermath of finding the cure to demonstrate that obsession with an ideal standard can be disastrous. In the story, Aylmer and Georgiana pursue the cure via Aylmer’s extremist scientific investigations. Safety becomes a secondary consideration in their search for a cure, with Georgiana proclaiming that “[danger] is nothing for me, for life, while this hateful mark makes me the object of [Aylmer’s] horror and disgust— life is a burden which I would fling down with joy” (Hawthorne 32). Aylmer and Georgiana value the achievement of aesthetic perfection more than they value life, and both are willing to prioritize this pursuit and face possible uncertain side effects. Georgiana pleads for Aylmer to “remove it, whatever be the costs” (Hawthorne 40). But as Aylmer’s cure fades the birthmark, it also takes Georgiana’s life. Thus, in removing her birthmark and consequently losing her life, Georgiana has exchanged her flaw for something most would consider far more dreadful: death. As Aylmer grieves for his wife, he realizes that “[the] momentary circumstance was too strong for him; he

failed to look beyond the shadowy scope of time... to find the perfect future in the present” (Hawthorne 43). In the wake of his wife’s must confront the undeniable truth that his all-consuming desire to remove the birthmark had distracted him from properly assessing the death, Aylmer must confront the undeniable truth that his all-consuming desire to remove the birthmark had distracted him from properly assessing the potential dangers of his treatment. Only when faced with the consequences of his recklessness did Aylmer acknowledge that physical flaws are an innate part of the human condition. In this way, Hawthorne again shows how dangerous it can be for people to fixate on their perceived flaws- particularly regarding pursuits of aesthetic perfection.

While “The Birthmark” is a fictional story, it has real implications for people’s lives. Humans use social constructs of beauty, success, and health to define an ideal existence, and they possess the self-awareness to identify how their lives compare to those ideal standards. In a culture of social comparison, people learn to fixate on their perceived flaws and seek to eliminate them. Exacerbated

by the aforementioned human condition that pushes people to seek perfection, we ruminate on what we believe ourselves to be lacking. This can easily descend into feelings of loathing and self-deprecation that, with consistent behavioral and cognitive repetition that influence one’s perception of self, decreases the quality of a person’s life. If people are unaware of or are reluctant to admit their discomfort towards imperfection, they may blindly let their fears and insecurities lead them toward what is broadly considered the “ideal” way to live, rather than a fulfilling way to live. Given how pervasive the pressure is to achieve a more perfect existence, which stems from our aversion to flaws, people instead constrain themselves from living genuine, if imperfect, lives.

Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark” is a telling story that explores humanity’s perennial relationship with perfection and imperfection. Through Aylmer and Georgiana’s vision and pursuit of a cure for Georgiana’s birthmark, it can be seen that the human habit of comparison instills people with the universal desire to seek perfection. As Aylmer and Georgiana willingly risk Georgiana’s life

to make her appear perfect, and then as Aylmer laments her death and realizes his mistake in pursuing a cure, aesthetic perfection becomes more inconsequential than he initially believed. Our uncomfortable relationship with imperfection has important implications for our relationship with ourselves and, putting this realization in the context of Hawthorne's "The Birthmark," demonstrates how harmful the pursuit of unattainable perfection can be if carried out to an extreme.