

Image of Oppressed woman in Nathaniel Hawthorne's “ The Birthmark”

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ABSTRACT

The question of women is the dominating motive in Hawthorne's works, which offer rich images of women; their changing lives, frustrations and dreams. Hawthorne never viewed women as unimportant or as threatening Eves, but rather, as men's vital, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual partners, companions not threats. In his short stories and romances, Hawthorne creates a wide range of female characters. Some are independent-minded, self-confident; others embody the gender expectations of women in Hawthorne's day, weak and dependent on men.¹

He presents a number of female characters who are victims of men, destroyed by male power. Through these various characters and their experiences, Hawthorne explores the gender relations in his day. He also raises questions about the role of domesticity in shaping female characters and the role of emotion as well as reason in human experience.²

This study focuses on one of Hawthorne's female character who has been controlled by her selfish husband, Georgiana, the heroine of “the Birthmark”, and how this selfishness leads to her death. Consequently, woman cannot be defined by her relation to a man because she is an independent human being.

introduction

As demonstrated by his biographers, women often played crucial roles in Nathaniel Hawthorne's development. He grew up with two sisters and a widowed mother, married an intellectual and emotional peer, and was the father of two outspoken daughters.³

Those women inspired some of the female characters who appear in his fiction, he also had important relationships with women who affected his professional life, including Elizabeth Peabody and Margaret Fuller. Some critics see Fuller as another inspiration for some of Hawthorne's female characters, particularly his rebellious figures, who confront American men and society.⁴

Because his father had died when Hawthorne was four years old, he grew up living with a wide variety of womanhood: his aunt Mary Manning, a practical if unlettered woman, encouraged him to start writing by suggesting that all his aunts and uncles would pay for his college education at Bowdoin College. With that help he became the first college graduate in the family. Hawthorne never forgot the constant backing of these women, his aunt, his mother, and his two sisters.⁵

Forced by the geographical distance, between Salem, where he studied, and Raymond, Hawthorne learned early to communicate with paper and pen with his mother and literate sisters. He became even prouder of his narrative skills, later writing to his sister Louisa, thinking that his letter was only for her "...it is truly a pity that the public should lose it". Soon he went beyond epistolary creations to journalistic work. In 1825, he graduated from Bowdoin College and started his literary career. In 1841, he married Sophia Peabody, who had creative talents as an artist, a writer and a linguist in French, Italian, Greek, Hebrew and Latin. He continued to seek her help in writing and editing.⁶

As Hawthorne wrote for all these women as his first and most valued readers, he portrayed their lives first sympathetically, if two-dimensionally, approximately until the time of his marriage. One thinks of his early tales like, "Young Goodman Brown", "The Minister Black Veil" or "The Hollow of Three Hills", represent female characters that are seen from the outside, their inner lives are not the concern of the narrator. However, once Hawthorne had married Sophia, his portrayal of women became increasingly complex as he knew women better and became aware of their active role in society. This new knowledge about women culminated in his most powerful female characters, Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* and Zenobia in *The Blithedale Romance*, With his depictions of such powerful women, Hawthorne still has much to say to all his readers both female and male on this subject. In "The Birthmark",

Hawthorne presents an image of an oppressed woman, Georgiana, who was killed by her husband only because she has a birthmark in her cheek, thinking it is a sign of imperfection, metaphorically speaking. For Hawthorne's message is really about woman's identity represented by a birthmark on the cheek of the heroine.⁷

***Image of Oppressed woman in Nathaniel Hawthorne's
'The Birthmark'***

"The Birthmark" is a romantic short story, first published in March 1843 edition of *The Pioneer* and it later appeared in *Mosses from an Old Manse*, a collection of short stories by Hawthorne published in 1846. The story is about a husband, Aylmer, and a wife, Georgiana. Aylmer is a brilliant and recognized scientist and philosopher who marries the beautiful Georgiana, who is physically perfect except for a small red birthmark in the shape of a hand in her cheek.

... in the center of Georgiana's left cheek there was a singular mark, deeply interwoven, as it were, with the texture and substance of her face. In the usual state of her complexion- a healthy though delicate bloom- the mark wore a tint of deeper crimson, which perfectly defined its shape amid the surrounding rosiness. 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. But any shifting emotion 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. Its shape bore a little similarity to the Human hand, though of the smallest pigmy size. (B:p.1022)⁸

As the story progresses, Aylmer becomes unnaturally obsessed with the birthmark on Georgiana's cheek, he asks her if she 'ever considered that the mark upon[her] cheek might be removed?'. One night he dreams of cutting the birthmark out of his wife's cheek, removing it as scraping the apple skin from an apple, and then continuing all the way to her heart: He had fancied himself with his servant Aminadab,

Attempting an operation for the removal of the birthmark,
But the deeper went the knife, the deeper sank the hand,
Until at length its tiny grasp appeared to have caught hold
Of Georgiana's heart, whence, however, her husband was
Inexorably resolved to cut or wrench it away.(B:P. ibd.)

He thinks that Georgiana's face is perfect and this mark is shocking;

”...Nature made you so perfectly that this small defect shocks me as being a sign of earthly imperfection”(B:P). Georgiana is angry at first;”Shocks you” cries Georgiana, deeply hurt. Her face reddened and she bursts into tears;” Then why did you marry me? You cannot live with what shocks you”(B:P). But later she declares that she would risk her life having the birthmark removed from her cheek rather than to continue to endure Aylmer's horror when he sees her;

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. You have deep science. All the world bears witness of it. You have achieved great wonders. Can not you remove this little mark, which I cover with the tips of two small fingers? Is this beyond your power, for the sake of your own peace, And to save your poor wife from madness.(B:P.Ibid)

Aylmer decides to take Georgiana to his laboratory, glancing at Georgiana casually but can't help shuddering violently at seeing her imperfection. Recognizing the meaning of his look, Georgiana faints. Aminadab, Aylmer's assistant, comes out to help, saying he would not remove the birthmark if Georgiana was his wife. When Georgiana recovers consciousness she finds herself;

breathing an atmosphere of penetrating fragrance, the gentle potency of which had recalled her from her deathlike faintness...Aylmer had converted those smoky, dingy, sombre rooms...into a series of beautiful apartments not unfit to the secluded abode for a lovely woman.(B:P.1023)

Aylmer treats her kindly and warmly and comforts her with some of his discoveries; he has already made marvelous discoveries about volcanoes, fountains, mines and other natural wonders. Then he gives her a fast-growing flower that dies as soon as she touches it. Next he tries to create a portrait of her with a metal plate, but when the plate shows a hand, he throws it into acid.

Georgiana begins to suspect that Aylmer has been experimenting on her the entire time without her knowledge and consent. When she tries to make more investigations about the experiments of her husband, she has been caught by him and accused of spying on him. Georgiana then agrees to drink the potion. Aylmer has prepared for her despite his warning that it might be dangerous to do so and may carry unexpected side effects.

Soon after, he brings her a potion that cannot fail as he said, putting a drop from it to a dead plant which has been cured promptly, “to test the liquid, he placed a drop in soil of a dying flower growing in a pot in the room. In a few moments, the plant became healthy and green once more.” She drinks the potion and sleeps;

She quaffed the liquid and returned the goblet
“it is grateful,” said she with a placid smile.”Methink
It is like water from a heavenly fountain; for it
Contains I know not what of unobtrusive fragrance
And deliciousness. It allays a feverish thirst that had
Parched me for many days. Now, dearest, let sleep.
My earthly senses are closing over my spirit like the
Leaves around the heart of a rose at sunset.”(B:P.Ibid)

Aylmer watches the birthmark fade little by little and once it is really gone, he cries”success! Success!”, Georgiana wakes up and becomes pleased, like her husband, to see the result but tragically and unexpectedly, as a result of a fatal side effect, she soon tells her husband that she is slowly dying because of the potion and once the birthmark fades completely, Georgiana dies with it;

“My poor Aylmer” she repeated, with a more than
Human tenderness, you have aimed loftily; you have
Done nobly. Do not repent that with so high and pure
A feeling, you rejected the best the earth could offer.
Aylmer, dearest Aylmer, I am dying!”(B:P.1024)

most criticism has accepted the rather forthright and explicit allegorical interpretation of Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" that regards the mark in Georgiana's cheek as the external sign of her humanity, her life as the writer indicates right from the beginning, for this mark connected with her heart and emotions. It is a symbol of women within the society, a symbol indicative of position, an object of scorn unworthy of consideration.⁹

"The Birthmark" sheds light upon the theme of isolation, the condition of being isolated requires that one be detached from others because of some reasons out of one's control. Georgiana's isolation is inflicted upon her rather than willfully sought by her. Aylmer attempts to unit his love for science with his love for his wife. The challenge serves to isolate her because she is one of his pursuits. In this perspective, Aylmer is a hunter and Georgiana is his prey. He maintains superiority through his "glares" and "gazes" as if an animal is sizing- up his victim. In a sense, the society causes Aylmer's extreme actions because the society creates" ...a passive

affect,[whereby]man is driven[by the ideology of the society], the object of motivations of which he himself is not aware"¹⁰. As a result, Hawthorne's scientific man is able to accomplish his feat with very little difficulty because he is powerful and" more than a man... unwilling to grant the accessibility of other alternatives".¹¹

Aylmer is not willing to afford Georgiana alternatives because she symbolizes imperfection. Her birthmark symbolizes the mark placed upon women by the society when woman is left undefined. As a result, Georgiana's only choice is to "do or die". Her questioning remark: "Is this beyond your power?"(B:P.Ibid.) removes the blame from Aylmer and places the blame on society because society produces him. Moreover, society does not define her within its structure.¹²

Therefore, the title of the story symbolizes the principles of society that set the paths of the characters in the story by linking and defining man's choices to rid society of imperfection. Because the woman is his "love" he attempts to join her with "his love for science" to save her from "toil and pain"¹³. The structure image of society creates the image of man in the image of a God that flaunts his image downward towards woman and gives her no choice other than to surrender to his will. Just as Georgiana surrenders her being to win acceptance of her husband. She has no hope because society denies her "the magic ingredient of hope"¹⁴ and leaves her with no choice. The choice of "no choice" is the gauge the serves to place man as a God over her in man's pursuit of a Goddess, free from imperfection, that will measure up to his own God like image. Society is the pacifying agent that justifies the inconceivable quest for perfection. Therefore, perfection becomes inevitable because only in can Georgiana ever achieve it.¹⁵

Aylmer is not only introduced in the loftiest of terms, but is consistently associated throughout the story with the highest of intentions, standards, and worth¹⁶. The narrator initiates this deification by identifying Aylmer foremost, in the first sentence,as"a man of science, an eminent proficient in every branch of natural philosophy"(B:p.Ibid). According to the narrator, the incredible potential of science was just beginning to be perceived" In those days, when the comparatively recent discovery of electricity, and other kinderd mysteries of nature, seemed to open the paths into the region of miracles..."(B:p).The realm of science was so powerful that it appeared to have no limit.

Perhaps, because science as a field of inquiry was perceived as still so new,it was mixed with feelings and desires, for the narrator affirms that Aylmer's love for his new wife could only become strong by"intertwining

itself with his love of science, and uniting the strength of the latter to its own"¹⁷. More importantly, the narrator speculates whether or not Aylmer "possessed this degree of faith in man's ultimate control over nature", "Man" who is capable of achievements and aspirations, more than aspirations. It is man's "higher intellect" which permits him to control nature, an intelligence beyond the realm of possibility for women, once again dating back philosophically to Aristotle's conviction that only men "and in particular, masters" had the capacity for and access to truth, while women were unable to surpass "opinion". Georgiana herself describes her own level of comprehension as "simple".¹⁸

Aylmer's professional, psychological, and physical features are all construed as manifestations of his superior nature. In classic physiognymic fashion, insubstantial physical features are seen to represent illusive "higher" qualities of the human condition;"¹⁹ Aylmer's slender figure, and pale, intellectual face, were...ap[ly] a type of the spiritual element"(B:P.1026). He was not only confident, but arrogant about his professional abilities; he was "confident in his science" to the point where he felt sure "he could draw a magic circle round [Georgiana], within which no evil might intrude". He declares "I feel myself fully competent to render this dear cheek as faultless as its fellow; and then...what will be my triumph, when I shall have corrected what Nature left imperfect; in her fairest work!"(B:P.Ibid). In short Aylmer had had an "ardent, ambitious, imaginative, yet practical and laborious life" during which he had "redeemed himself from materialism, by his strong and eager aspiration towards the infinite"²⁰. Materiality is subordinated to intellect, and Aylmer is the exclusive representative of "mind and spirit" in the story.

Georgiana's attitude and feelings toward Aylmer's scientific abilities essentially reinforce his self-image and public-image²¹. On the basis of his reputation, she beseeches him to remove her birthmark;" you have deep science! All the world bear witness of it . You have achieved great wonders"(B:P.1028). However, when she reads his folio of experiments, she is forced to modify her perception of him somewhat;" Georgiana, as she read, revered Aylmer, and loved him more profoundly than ever, but with a less entire independence on his judgment than heretofore. 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. The male intellectual circle emphasizes what is written, the theory, while Georgiana is concerned about practical results. Nevertheless, she claims that her reading has made her "worship[Aylmer] more than ever,"(B:P.Ibid.) an attitude of which he

entirely approves;" wait for this one success...then worship me if you will. I shall deem myself hardly unworthy of it".(B:P.Ibid.)

So great is her respect for and awe of Aylmer, however, that Georgiana affirms-even as she is dying-that he has "aimed loftily" and "done nobely" and " should not repent" of " so high and pure feeling". Georgiana not only recognizes but supports Aylmer's desire to surpass human limits,she is unwilling to diminish Aylmer's reputation and her eagerness to maintain his monumental ego.²²

Aylmer, as a living human being, cannot escape the limitations of his physical nature, no matter how longingly he aspires to the " completeness of a higher state"²³. The narrator is quite sympathetic in blaming human nature rather than individuals, observing that the books of the philosophers of the middle ages(all men naturally)" stood in advance of their centuries, yet were imbued with some of their credulity, and therefore were believed, and perhaps imagined themselves, to have acquired from their investigation of nature a power above nature, and from physics a sway over the spiritual world"(B:P). The choice of the verbs "believe" and " imagine" suggests that these masculine aspirations are doomed to failure, no more than wishes.²⁴

Aminadab serves as a sort of alter ego for Aylmer, embodying that "gross fatality of earth" which is the counterpart to Aylmer's intellectual and spiritual nature. Aminadab is described as " a man of low stature, but bulky frame, with shaggy hair hanging about his visage," a creature of " vast strength...and indescribably earthiness" who "seemd to represent man's physical nature". His "harsh, uncouth, misshapen tones" were" more like the grunt or growl of a brute than human speech". He had been Aylmer's assistant for his entire professional life. As a represntative of matter, can aquire manual skills but not intellectual ones. Like the traditional representation of women as nature, he can reproduce but not create on his own, he is totally dependent upon Aylmer's higher nature to provide the ideas, the essence, while his contribution is purely physical. The way that Aylmer addresses Aminadab emphasizes the fact that Aminadab is only body;"thou human machine", "thou man of clay", "cold", "earthly mass", "thing of senses". Although Georgiana and Aminadab both represent physicality, Aminadab has privileges that Georgiana will never have. He is allowed to participate actively in Aylmer's science, while Georgiana's participation can only be passive.²⁵

Aylmer perceives Georgiana birthmark as the" symbol of his wife liability to sin, sorrow,decay, and death"(B:P). It bothers him because

Georgiana is his wife, she belongs to him. Aylmer despises this reminder of his own mortality, at the same time he aspires to have "perfect wife", as befits his status as eminent scientist.²⁶

Georgiana sees her birthmark as a symbol for her self, and it is a flawed self which she perceives. She bemoans her inability to achieve not only physical, but also moral perfection; "Life is but a sad possession to those who have attained precisely the degree of moral advancement at which I stand. Were I weaker and blinder, it might be happiness. Were I stronger, it might be endured hopefully". What is important in her perception of weakness and imperfection is the way in which she assimilates Aylmer's attitudes of blame. Aylmer, as a man, is ascribed the authority of knowledge, while Georgiana sees herself only as a receptacle for his wisdom. In spite of clear indication that she is able to reason, and more importantly, understand and question her husband's her acceptance of his perception and judgment of her as inferior determines her behavior accordingly. Because she has been ascribed the place and status of a lesser "other", which explains, but does not justify, her almost casual attitude towards her own survival.²⁷

NOTES

1- Judith Fetterley, The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction, (Bloomington; Indiana UP, 1999), p.59

²- Ibid. p.66

³- Ibid. p.68

⁴- Ibid. p.72

⁵- Ibid. p.72

⁶- Cindy Weinstein, The Literature of Labors and The Labors of Literature: Allegory In Nineteenth Century American Literature, (New York: Cambridge UP, 1995), p.53.

⁷ Ibid. p.55

⁸ Nathaniel Hawthorne, 2004, the birthmark, Electronic Text Center, University of Virginia Library. p.1020-1033.

⁹- Cindy Weinstein, p.55

¹⁰- Ibid. p.57

¹¹- Arlin Turner, Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Biography, (New York: Oxford UP),

¹² Ibid. p.83.

¹³- Nathaniel Hawthorne, Yong Goodman Brown and Other Short Stories, (New York: Dover Publication, Inc. 1992), p.90.

¹⁴ Ibid. p.91

¹⁵- Randl Stewart, 'Hawthorne's Female characters' in Nathaniel Hawthorne: A Biography, (Yale University Press, 1984), p.23.

¹⁶ Ibid. p.25.

¹⁷ Ibid. p.32.

- ¹⁸ - Ibid.p.33.
- ¹⁹ Cindy Weinstein,p.
- ²⁰ Ibid.p.72.
- ²¹ Ibid.p.74.
- ²² Ibid.p.77.
- ²³ - Ibid.p.80.
- ²⁴ Barbara Ellis, *Some Observations about Hawthorne*,(Cambridge UP,1993),p.13.
- ²⁵ Ibid.p.14.
- ²⁶ Ibid.p.16.
- ²⁷ Alexander Clark, Spark Notes Website, "the birthmark".
<http://www.sparknotes.com/lit/the-birthmark>.
- ²⁸ Ibid.p.2.
- ²⁹ Ibid.p.3.
- ³⁰ Ibid.p.3.
- ³¹ Joel Pfister, *The Production of Personal Life: Class, Gender, and the Psychological In Hawthorne's Fiction*, (California: Stanford UP, 1991),
- ³² Louise DeSalvo, *Nathaniel Hawthorne: Feminist Reading Series*, Atlantic Highlands,(N.J.Humanities Press International 1987),
- ³³ Nina Baym, *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career*,Ithaca,(N.Y. Cornell UP, 1976),

CONCLUSION

The story of "The Birthmark" is symbolic. It deals with the place of woman in her society. The writer succeeds in depicting his human message in his symbolic short story, to say a lot in few words.

After reading "The Birthmark", the reader cannot help asking; Why Aylmer is obsessed with his wife's birthmark or imperfect nature? Actually the theme of the story lies in the answer of this question.

Most of critics believe that the birthmark in Georgiana's cheek could represent her identity as a human being and her social role. Joel Pfister came up with a conclusion about woman's body, as the birthmark is a part of Georgiana's body, "to control woman's body was related to the desire of controlling her social role"³¹. Louise Desalvo shows how Hawthorne felt that "any deviation from these prescribed gender roles would result in the total collapse of the order of society"³². Nina Bayn believes that Hawthorne realized that "women are imprisoned, but she feels that Hawthorne is sympathetic to women and tried to reveal the folly of male myths that distorted women's psyches"³³.

Another question could be asked by the reader; why does Georgiana submit to her husband's will? Apparently, the husband has a strong dominance over his wife, this can be felt from the ease with which he convinces Georgiana. After her momentary futile resistance, for she regarded it as a charming sign in her cheek, she accepts her husband's valuation of her.

Georgiana accepts her degraded role attributed by society, and this acceptance leads to her death. She is robbed of her womanhood which is

essential to keep her a woman. To conclude, woman must perform her natural role as an independent and constructive human being, having her own real identity, challenging the conventional views of men and her society.

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ملخص

تعتبر قضية المرأة في أعمال هوثورون فكره اساسيه. حيث تقدم هذه الاعمال الصور الغنية عن المرأة من تغيرات في حياتها ، احباطات او احلام . لم ينظر هوثورن للمرأة بأنها حواء ذات الدور الثانوي الذي يشكل تهديدا، لكنه صورها على انها شريكة الرجل التي تمتاز بالاهمية، العاطفة، الفكر، الروحية، وهي رفيقة وليست تهديد للرجل.

وفي قصصه القصيرة والعاطفية اختلق هوثورن الكثير من الشخصيات الانثوية البعض منهن يتميزن بالاستقلالية والثقة والبعض الاخر يجسدن ما يتوقع منهن ان يكن عليه في عصر هوثورن، كائن ضعيف ويعتمد على الرجل .

لقد قدم هوثورن مجموعة من النساء اللواتي كن ضحية الرجل ومن خلال هذه الشخصيات و تجاربهن المختلفه استطاع هوثورون ان يستكشف العلاقات بين الجنسين و اثار الحياة العائلية و تأثيرها على الشخصية الانثوية وكذلك دور العاطفة والفكر على التجربة الانسانية.

هذه الدراسة تركز على واحده من الشخصيات التي تعيش تحت سيطرة الزوج ، جورجينا بطلة قصة "الوحمة"، وكيف ادت انانية زوجها الى موتها. بالتالي فأن النساء لهن شخصيتهن المستقلة باعتبارهن كائن حي مستقل ولا يمكن ان يأخذن قيمتهن من خلال علاقتهن بالرجل فقط.