

The Symbolism In “The Birthmark”

Posted on October 25, 2019

Summary

Nathaniel’s story “The Birthmark” is an emotional story of a married couple. A scientist named Aylmer marries a beautiful woman Georgiana. The whole story revolves around the birthmark that Georgiana has on her cheek. This birthmark is the shape of a human hand, giving Georgiana’s beauty a unique form. Aylmer, the scientist and Georgiana’s husband, once expresses his wish to remove the birthmark from his wife’s cheek. She expresses her anger, but after Aylmer’s request, she agrees, and in that experiment of removing the birthmark, Georgiana dies. Reading closely to the story, one can come up with different ideas about how the title of the story symbolizes a lot of things.

The Symbolism Of The Birthmark

The imperfection of the human nature and Man’s attitude

The birthmark in the story symbolizes the imperfection of human nature and human mortality. This birthmark was disturbing for Aylmer since, for him, Georgiana came “nearly perfect from the hand of Nature” (thebirthmark.weebly.com). He searches for the absolute perfection in his wife, which this birthmark does not let him imagine as it reminds him of his wife’s imperfect beauty and mortality. Aylmer was so in love with science that he wanted to link this love with the love of his wife. However, the birthmark indicated and symbolized that only one love could last. Scientists are infatuated with perfecting nature even while guessing the inevitable consequences (writework.com).

Thus, this man of science started viewing things with the perspective of perfection and imperfection, and therefore he says, “This small defect shocks me as being a sign of earthly imperfection” (Hawthorne, pp.1). The term “shocks” surprises his wife as “You cannot love what shocks you!” (Hawthorne, pp. 1). Here, we can also say that the birthmark serves as a mirror of a man’s nature or personality that he runs after or gets interested in what he thinks is perfect before him. One small defect can change a man’s mind. The birthmark refers to a sign or a mark that has been present since the birth of a child, and the one Georgiana had on her cheek depicted her simplicity and delicacy. Her simplicity was in believing all that people used to remark on her regarding her birthmark. She believed that it was her lucky charm and that some fairy put her hand on her cheek when she was born as a blessing.

However, some people also commented the opposite, that this mark is destroying the absolute beauty Georgiana had. But she was perfectly fine with it. And this showed her humbleness towards life as she

didn't get conscious about her appearance. Where Georgiana was at ease with her birthmark, for Aylmer the birthmark was becoming a sign of despair, sickness, sadness, and death of her wife. And this indication was urging him to remove the mark from their life. He forgot that nothing is perfect and immortal. Everything has to end someday. This wish to remove the mark showed Aylmer's inclination towards immortality and the perfection of human nature. The birthmark also served as a source of the message for Aylmer that what he thought and believed was wrong and how scientific he may become can never compete with nature and its laws. "Do not doubt my power," he says (Hawthorne, pp. 2). Nature showed him that though science helps us make our lives easier, it can't destroy or compete with the laws of nature and come in between its decisions and rules. The birthmark thus revealed the true faces of both Aylmer and Georgiana.

The birthmark and Georgiana's love for Aylmer

Georgiana's love and sincerity were also proved by the birthmark. In other words, the birthmark also became the sign of Georgiana's affectionate sentiments and faithfulness towards her husband, Aylmer. Through this mark, she could prove her true feelings for her husband. She noticed her husband's growing tension due to her mark, and when she couldn't bear this, she asked him to remove the mark, "Remove this little mark for the sake of your peace and my own" (Hawthorne, pp.2). But poor Aylmer couldn't see his wife's fear and her sincerity towards him. In fact, only one thought was there in his mind, and that was removing Georgiana's birthmark. Thus, we can also say that the birthmark revealed the opposing sentiments of the husband and wife towards one another, and what did they prioritize the most. The wife prioritized her husband's thoughts, while Aylmer prioritized his views regarding the birthmark. He imposed his thoughts on his wife emotionally, so she gave herself up and accepted his decision (shmoop.com). "I am happy to put my life in your hands" (Hawthorne, pp.3). This birthmark showed that Georgiana could do anything for the love of her husband. She says to her husband, "I will drink whatever you make for me, even if it is poison" (Hawthorne, pp.3). Even when Georgiana is about to die, she doesn't blame her husband. In fact, she feels sad about how the experiments failed and did not do any good to the couple. She is distressed that Aylmer's hard work did not prove successful. While dying, she says, "You have aimed so high. With so high and pure a feeling, you have rejected the best the Earth could offer" (Hawthorne, pp.3).

The birthmark and the changing emotions of Georgiana

The birthmark also served the purpose of expressing Georgiana's feelings and emotions. When she blushed, it became less visible, and it used to appear like a red stain on the snow whenever she turned pale. "The birthmark would come and go with the emotions in her heart" (Hawthorne, pp.1). This depicts a woman's changing moods and emotions. Women express their feelings either through their facial expressions or their words. In the story, Georgiana's way of expressing her sentiments is through her birthmark. Though she showed her fear, love, and distress through words, in some instances, her birthmark served the purpose. "Georgiana soon began to fear his look. His expression

would make her face go pale. And the birthmark would stand out like a red jewel on white stone” (Hawthorne, pp.2). All kinds of emotions that were felt by Georgiana throughout the story are revealed by her birthmark, and the interesting and notable thing is that when that birthmark faded and diminished from her cheek, so did her feelings and emotions, making her completely lifeless.

Conclusion

Hence, we observed three different aspects of emotions associated with the birthmark: how it symbolized imperfection and the man’s attitude towards it, how it helped in proving Georgiana’s love for her husband, and how it symbolized all kinds of emotions and feelings Georgiana sensed throughout the story. Thus, the whole story revolved around Georgiana’s birthmark which played a significant part in conveying different and helpful messages to the readers. Everything about the couple is somehow linked to the birthmark, and its significance can be seen throughout the story when it is present on Georgiana’s cheek; it evokes sentiments of curiosity and search for perfection in the heart of Aylmer, and when it disappears, it took all the happiness of Aylmer (genius.com), his faith in science, and life of Georgiana with it, and then she becomes too perfect for the world of flawed humans (litcharts.com).

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