



## The Birthmark

*Nathaniel Hawthorne*

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# The Birthmark

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## **The Birthmark** Nathaniel Hawthorne

The main character is a great scientist and lover of nature with a beautiful wife whom he loves dearly. However, despite the love Aylmer has for his wife, he wonders whether the birthmark she has on her cheek can be removed.

## **The Birthmark Details**

Date : Published (first published 1843)

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Author : Nathaniel Hawthorne

Format : Paperback 50 pages

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## From Reader Review The Birthmark for online ebook

## Dhanaraj Rajan says

Another gift from Aldiko.

A short story by Nathaniel Hawthorne whose The Scarlet Letter is one of my all time favourites. This short story once again proved my belief in Hawthorne.

## About the Story:

Mr. Alymer is both a philosopher and a Scientist who specializes in Nature and Chemistry. He gets married to the beautiful Georgiana. The life is good until the day he finds that a slight mark on one of the cheeks of Georgiana is a blight to the perfect beauty she is. A small spot renders takes hold of his entire being and he is tormented. In fact, that small spot was seen by many as a lucky charm that enhanced the beauty. But Alymer sought perfection. And because life was a torment for him, his wife comes forward for any experiment that would result in the removal of the birthmark. And who could be the best one for the job than Mr. Alymer himself? She submits to his experiments. And did Alymer achieve what he wanted? If so, at what cost? Read the story. It is just 22 pages long

## **The Moral/Theme of the Story:**

To be perfect is the aim. But it is always impossible to be both human and to be perfect. Humanness is defined by imperfections. Accept the little imperfections in others. That is the best the Nature can offer to you. To strive for perfect human being in this world is to look for 'the perfect future in the present.' Perfection is of the Other World (the Perfect Future). Aim for it and be aware that it is not that easily attainable in this world.

????????? says

## Lemar says

A poetic idea goes a long way for me and Hawthorne has a good one here in *The Birthmark*. The short story seems inspired by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* with the emphasis here on the scientific quest for purity within imperfect mortals.

Reading a story that's almost 200 years old helps answer questions about what constitutes modern ideas such as, have there always been those among us who prize and appreciate imperfections as well as those that are bothered by blemishes? Hawthorne helps pave the path to appreciation of the whole person. This is

accomplished through plot and character, especially that of the scientist Aylmer's earthy assistant with the Jumble name of Aminadab who says, "if she were my wife, I've never part with that birthmark".

I have always been attracted to painters like van Gogh who painted subjects like people scrubbing a floor, as well as Platonic flawless statues of Ancient Greece. The statues may please the gods, but a kind gentle human girl with a birthmark seems the greater treasure! The story reads almost like a fairytale but this promising idea is not fully developed and multi-faceted the way Shelley's Frankenstein is.

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### **Bobby Jandrew says**

Nathaniel Hawthorne illustrates a theme of the foolishness in striving for perfection in his short story "The Birthmark." Hawthorne's main protagonist, Alymer, is an alchemist completely devoted to his passion for science, but as many men do, finds himself in love with an otherwise beautiful woman named Georgiana; otherwise beautiful because Georgiana possesses a birth defect upon her cheek in the small shape of a crimson hand. "Alymer'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 of soul or sense, had given him delight." Alymer can no longer accept that his "perfect" wife has but one flaw, and begins to contemplate its removal.

Alymer, as we learn, is a man of science. "He had devoted himself, however, too unreservedly to scientific studies ever to be weaned from them by any second passion. His love for his young wife might prove the stronger of the two; but if could only be by intertwining itself with his love of science, and uniting the strength of the latter to his own." His passion for science is to become the "savior" to his own personal distaste with his wife's birthmark, or so he believes. Georgiana, who is beginning to feel self-conscious about her birthmark after seeing Alymer's "convulsive shudder" after glancing at the mark, eventually gives in to his distaste for her "flaw." "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." Georgiana's devotion to her husband becomes the only reason she needs in allowing him to create an elixir for removing this crimson mark, and cannot bear him looking at her with disgust.

Hawthorne uses foreshadowing to illustrate his theme of the foolishness in striving for perfection. Alymer has a very vivid dream about Georgiana's birthmark. "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." Hawthorne illustrates that to attempt to play God, to tamper with nature, can take a turn for the worst.

Although written for readers in 1846, this central theme illustrated by Hawthorne in "The Birthmark" resonates with today's society. The extremes in which people will go to be perfect has unfortunately created a standard of beauty that cannot be obtained without intervention from science. Hawthorne attempts, even in 1846, to illustrate that nature has already created a central flaw in man-we will all die. Nobody will live forever. Accepting "ourselves" is crucial to defeating "death," although inevitably this will ultimately happen to all of us.

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## ?Misericordia? ~ The Serendipity Aegis ~ ?????? ✨✿♥✿ says

Q: It is dangerous to read in a sorcerer's books (c) And marrying an alchemyst is also ill-advisable.

Morale #1: first think then act.

Morale #2: don't get married to crazy guys.

Morale #3: quest for perfection may destruct the happiness of today.

Q:

... some fairy at her birth hour had laid her tiny hand upon the infant's cheek, and left this impress there in token of the magic endowments that were to give her such sway over all hearts (c)

Q:

The higher intellect, the imagination, the spirit, and even the heart might all find their congenial aliment in pursuits which, as some of their ardent votaries believed, would ascend from one step of powerful intelligence to another, until the philosopher should lay his hand on the secret of creative force and perhaps make new worlds for himself. (c)

Q:

Truth often finds its way to the mind close muffled in robes of sleep, and then speaks with uncompromising directness of matters in regard to which we practise an unconscious self-deception during our waking moments.

Q:

had Aylmer reached a profounder wisdom, he need not thus have flung away the happiness which would have woven his mortal life of the selfsame texture with the celestial (c)

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## J.M. Brister says

The Birth Mark is a short story by 19th century American author, Nathaniel Hawthorne. This is an excellent, fast read with an enjoyable twist.

Aylmer is a scientist who decided to leave his career to marry his wife, Georgiana. After marrying, Aylmer notices a prominent birth-mark on his wife's face and begins to obsess about it.

Aylmer has a lot of selfish and superficial qualities to his character. To me, he is not a likable character. Georgiana goes along with his ideas because she loves her husband even though the birth mark has never bothered her before. Combined, both Aylmer and Georgiana demonstrate Hawthorne's view toward marriage.

I really enjoy Hawthorne's romantic style. He is one of my favorite 19th century authors. The Birth Mark in particular is an easier read (at least for me) than some of his other works.

The big question is: what does the birth-mark represent? To some, it might be the impossible pursuit of perfect. To others, it might be the husband/wife relationship. It could also have a Judeo-Christian undertone of the birth mark being sin.

Regardless, it is a great short story. I highly recommend it to American lit fans, but it is also pretty accessible to the casual reader as well.

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## Serena says

Published in 1843, *The Birthmark* was written by Nathaniel Hawthorne, who explored various themes like science versus nature, mortality and marriage through the story of a scientist who was so obsessed with removing a birthmark on his wife's beautiful face that he ended up killing her with his fixation on absolute perfection. Hawthorne stressed that no man could be without flaws and the plot itself contained several anti-science sentiments, thus categorizing *The Birthmark* into the Dark Romanticism genre.

In many ways, the genre of the story was influenced by the time when it was written. *The Birthmark* was written in the mid-1800s - a period when man's increasing faith in science suppressed the faith in God, leading to the Age of Enlightenment and the movement of Positivism (i.e.: the belief that all authentic knowledge comes from science).

However, as shown by the storyline, it was evident that Hawthorne strongly questioned the movement of Positivism. Like many other of Hawthorne's works, the whole story was an allegory, which he achieved through the use of symbolism. The death of the scientist's wife, Georgiana, after the scientific treatments administered by her husband, Aylmer, mirrored the author's view towards science and nature, which was a major theme in the book.

Symbolism played an integral part in substantiating the theme of science and nature in the story. A feverish scientist, Aylmer symbolized science and intellect. A man with great scientific knowledge, he could achieve marvelous things like doing some "optical phenomena", which was "almost perfect enough" that Georgiana believed that her husband "possessed sway over the spiritual world". This showed the disappearance of boundaries between science and nature, highlighting the spirituality of scientific Aylmer, which was a paradox in itself.

Furthermore, there were other symbols like the laboratory and the boudoir where Georgiana resided in, which represented earthly and heavenly realms respectively. There was great contrast in the imagery of the two symbols. The boudoir had "an atmosphere of penetrating fragrance", and according to Georgiana, the place looked like "enchantment" and seemed to be "a pavilion among the clouds". This revealed a spiritual realm, freed from all the humanly, earthly imperfections. It was like heaven – a place of perfection and creation.

However, the lab was the exact opposite of the "beautiful" boudoir. It was literally littered with "soot" and was "tainted with gaseous odors" with an "oppressively close" atmosphere. With its "naked walls and brick pavement", it was obvious that the laboratory was an image of the earthly realm. The blatant contrast between the boudoir and the laboratory held heavy meaning: The dwelling place of all Aylmer's "lofty", spiritual ambitions, the boudoir symbolized everything he wanted to accomplish as a scientist. But the laboratory reeked of his failures, not as a scientist, but as a moralistic scientist who learns to respect the boundaries between nature and science. The lab also held reminders of his own mortality and inability to compete with nature and discover her "secrets". The stark contrast between the lab and the boudoir mirrored the "spiritual" Aylmer and earthly Aminadab – Aylmer's assistant, a man of "low stature, but bulky frame, with shaggy hair". As clearly stated by the narrator, Aminadab seemed to represent "man's physical nature" with his "vast strength... and the indescribable earthiness that incrusted him". It was apparent that the two men could not be any more different, just like the lab and the boudoir. However, they were forced to co-exist together in close proximity with an unbreakable link, just like science and nature.

Moreover, it should be brought into attention that physically, the lab and the boudoir were separated by a single wall only. This emphasized the boundary between nature and science that no man could cross and hinted at the theme of the iron boundary that Nature set for science.

Apart from the above symbols, the most significant symbol of all was certainly the birthmark. In fact, it was so important that it was made into the title of the story, which made sense as the whole story revolved around the birthmark on Georgiana's otherwise perfect face. The birthmark itself symbolized mortality and humanity. It was the "sole token of human imperfection" and showed the inextricable link between one's character and imperfections. In some way, it was the birthmark that made Georgiana mortal and by taking away the birthmark, Aylmer was taking away Georgiana's mortality, thereby leading to her death. This echoed the theme of mortality in the story, which was linked to the theme of science and nature. Aylmer challenged Nature by trying to become a creator himself – to "repair" a "flaw", to "correct" what Nature left imperfect in her fairest work". By doing this, Aylmer crossed the boundary and like a "jealous patentee", the Nature fiercely guarded her secrets by taking away Georgiana's mortality, thus proving to be more powerful than science.

Although in truth, the birthmark symbolized Georgiana's mortality, Aylmer saw it as a "symbol of his wife's liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death". He was so disgusted by imperfections that he "rejected the best the earth could offer", as proclaimed by Georgiana upon her death. It was ironic that Aylmer searched so hard for perfection when the perfect wife was before him. His obsession with perfection made him "flung away the happiness which would have woven his mortal life of the selfsame texture with the celestial". In other words, Georgiana could help him experience heavenly joy, yet Aylmer threw it away with his scientific pursuits and spiritual aspirations. This brought out the theme of marriage in the story.

The marriage between Aylmer and Georgiana was not an ideal one. Although Aylmer's love for his young wife might prove to be the "stronger of the two" but it could only be by "intertwining itself with his love of science, and uniting the strength of the latter to his own". It was clear from the start that science replaced the romance in Aylmer's marriage. Aylmer's foremost duty was to science, instead of his wife. On the other hand, Georgiana was totally dedicated to Aylmer. Her whole existence depended solely on the opinions of her husband. Before, Georgiana believed that her birthmark as part of her "charm". But after Aylmer's negative reactions towards it (i.e.: the shudders of revulsion and the declaration that it "shocks" him), Georgiana gradually became disgusted of her birthmark that she would even "fling down" her life "with joy" if the "hateful mark" remained on her face still.

In the end, Georgiana got her wish but she died after achieving perfection, which was one of the morals in the story. The first message was that science was not omniscient – it had its limitations. As presented in the beginning, The Birthmark was set in a time when men believed that science could prove everything's existence and make anything possible. However, Hawthorne was obviously against this notion. A top scientist of his time, Aylmer failed to discover nature's "secrets" and failed in his past experiments. As Georgiana had discovered after reading his journals – "his most splendid successes were almost invariably failures, if compared with the ideal at which he aimed". He had failed in the past and he had failed yet again, when the birthmark finally faded away but Georgiana died in the process. This showed that nature was so omnipotent that it even defeated science.

The ambiguous ending of the story proved the moral of the story. In the last few lines of The Birthmark after the death of Georgiana, there was a "hoarse, chuckling laugh", which was Aminadab's distinctive laugh. In fact, the name 'Aminadab' was rooted deeply in the Bible – the Genesis to be exact. This led to a paradoxical result – Aminadab was shown as an "earthly" man, yet he represented religion at the same time; Aylmer was the manifestation of the "spiritual element", yet he was a symbol of science. The conclusion was that

although Aylmer was a man of science, he had the ambition to be the creator, to be God Himself, thus intruding upon the spiritual realm. On the other hand, although Aminadab was a man of “physical nature”, he did not dare to interfere with Nature nor replace the heavenly powers. In the story, Aminadab declared that if Georgiana were his wife, he would “never part with that birthmark”. This showed that he was, in certain aspects, wiser than Aylmer. Although Aminadab was of lower status than Aylmer (i.e.: earthly power was submissive to science), his compliance with Nature enabled him to have the last laugh – both figuratively and literally.

Another message was that no man was perfect and flaws was what made men mortal. Therefore, it could be concluded that if someone was without flaws, they were no longer humans, which was the case with Georgiana, when “the parting breath of the now perfect woman passed into the atmosphere”. This gave substance to the theme of mortality – to the fact that mortality means imperfections, and that absolute perfection can never exist on the mortal plane.

The morals of the story were narrated in a moralistic, subjective tone. The narrator was omniscient and strangely though, seemed to have a character of its own. It had a strong voice and rushed to give details of every symbol. For example, it clearly stated that Aminadab “represent man's physical nature” while Aylmer was “no less apt a type of the spiritual element”.

Apart from the narration, Hawthorne adopted the technique of foreshadowing to bring out the major themes of the story. The “fatal birthmark” itself foreshadowed the tragic end of Georgiana and the phrase “the stain goes as deep as life itself” hinted that if Aylmer removed Georgiana’s “sole” imperfection, he was removing her mortality as well. This approached the theme of mortality, especially with the “the lifeless form of Georgiana”, which Aminadab saw after she fainted upon entering the boudoir. Also, Aylmer’s dream was a major hint to the ending of the story. In the dream, Aylmer was operating on Georgiana to cut the birthmark away. But Aylmer cut so deep that he reached Georgiana’s heart and in the end, he was “inexorably resolved” to cut it away too. Other examples of foreshadowing included the “perfect and lovely flower” that withered the second Georgiana touched it. The metal plate showing Georgiana’s birthmark was later thrown into “corrosive acid” by Aylmer, thus foreshadowing Georgiana’s death. Personally, I found the foreshadowing too excessive and it gave away the ending too much. I was a little disappointed when the ending proved to be the same as it had been foreshadowed.

Hawthorne’s writing style was very distinctive with its moralistic tone and blatant foreshadowing. In this story, he gave very minute details of Georgiana’s birthmark but added in very little of the characters’ background – too little in my opinion. For instance, Hawthorne dedicated a large paragraph describing the “singular mark”, which was “deeply interwoven... with the texture and substance” of Georgiana’s face. He even painstakingly described the exact shade of the birthmark when Georgiana’s face changed colour with her emotions – the “tint of deeper crimson” and the “brilliant glow”. On the other hand, apart from the fact that Aylmer was a brilliant scientist who was “too unreservedly” dedicated to science, readers knew almost nothing of him and the other supporting characters. Hawthorne even missed out the climax of the story when Georgiana died and no one knew anything of Aylmer’s reaction towards his wife’s death. This further enhanced Hawthorne’s moralizing throughout the story. To him, the messages and morals of the story were far more important than the story itself.

All in all, I found The Birthmark with delightful, philosophical depths and the text was well connected to the modern world. The conflict between science and nature still exist at the present. Technology and science had advanced so much that men could even take the role of God, like determining the sex of babies and cloning people. The Birthmark was an excellent book that explored the permanent struggle between science and nature.

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### **Bill Kerwin says**

First published in *The Pioneer* (March 1843), “The Birth-Mark” is first-class Hawthorne, a product of the “Old Manse” years of his marriage. It is an allegory—like many of his earlier efforts—but an allegory fleshed out with new maturity, new humanity, aware of both the sensual possibilities and the tragic ironies of life.

Aylmer, both scientist and philosopher (and a bit of an alchemist too) marries the lovely Beatrice whose only physical flaw is a small birth-mark, on her left cheek, shaped like a little hand, faintly visible when her face glows with excitement but more prominent when great emotion makes her pale. Aylmer becomes obsessed with removing this birth-mark, which “shocks” him, for he considers it the “visible mark of earthly imperfection.” Because Beatrice loves him she agrees, and Aylmer goes to work, employing tools both chemical and occult to eliminate this blot on his wife’s otherwise perfect beauty. “The Birth-mark” is the account of Aylmer’s quest, and its consequences.

Perhaps the most wonderful thing about this story is the way its language yokes sensuality and mortality, beauty and death together. By doing so, Hawthorne foreshadows Beatrice’s fate, but he does more: he presents the reader with a fully realized tragic vision of life.

*Had she been less beautiful--if Envy's self could have found aught else to sneer at--he might have felt his affection heightened by the prettiness of this mimic hand, now vaguely portrayed, now lost, now stealing forth again, and glimmering to-and-fro with every pulse of emotion that throbbed within her heart. But, seeing her otherwise so perfect, he found this one defect grow more and more intolerable, with every moment of their united lives. It was 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. The Crimson Hand expressed the ineludible gripe, in which mortality clutches the highest and purest of earthly mould, degrading them into kindred with the lowest, and even with the very brutes, like whom their visible frames return to dust. In this manner, selecting it as the symbol of his wife's liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death, Aylmer's sombre imagination was not long in rendering the birth-mark a frightful object, causing him more trouble and horror than ever Georgiana's beauty, whether of soul or sense, had given him delight.*

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### **Hamza says**

This short story is just about accepting life with its imperfection. To live a perfect life, is not to live at all!

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### **Althea Ann says**

(1843) A young woman has always thought that the small birthmark on her cheek was rather a charming feature. Certainly none of her many beaus ever thought it detracted from her beauty. But the man she finally married not only sees it as a flaw, but becomes obsessed with this imperfection, and insists on trying medical and alchemical methods to remove it.

This obsession leads to the destruction of the couple's happiness, some ethically suspect actions, and, of course, eventual tragedy.

The whole piece is heavily allegorical and works as a metaphor for the potential that all of have to let small things bother us more than they should. I actually thought the piece would've been stronger if the message was a little less heavy-handed, and a little less religious.

(Previously read... many years ago.)

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### Siv30 says

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**James says**

## *Book Review*

Nathaniel Hawthorne is one of my favorite authors but I disliked The Birthmark. It was not a very interesting piece. It reminded me of other war literature, which I have never been able to get into. I would have much preferred that this piece was trashed and we could have read The Minister's Black Veil. I absolutely love that piece, but we need a diverse experience of literature with Hawthorne, so... The Birthmark and Rappaccini's Daughter were very similar when it came to the endings. By removing the one part of the beautiful woman that was hideous, their male lovers destroyed and killed them.

In *The Birthmark*, I sympathized with both the husband and the wife. I am a pessimist and tend to focus on the negative aspects of something, and I wonder how I would have looked at my wife's face if she had a birthmark like that. It didn't seem that bad, but it makes me think of how I would feel about my wife, if God forbid, she got into a car accident and had a horrible scar on her body somewhere visible everyday. I would be very cowardly if I only focused on that, and I know that's what Hawthorne is getting at. It is definitely a piece to make you think about how you view perfection and whether you are an optimist or pessimist.

## *About Me*

For those new to me or my reviews... here's the scoop: I read A LOT. I write A LOT. And now I blog A LOT. First the book review goes on Goodreads, and then I send it on over to my WordPress blog at <https://thisismytruthnow.com>, where you'll also find TV & Film reviews, the revealing and introspective 365 Daily Challenge and lots of blogging about places I've visited all over the world. And you can find all my social media profiles to get the details on the who/what/when/where and my pictures. Leave a comment and let me know what you think. Vote in the poll and ratings. Thanks for stopping by.

**Kaylin (The Re-Read Queen) says**

From his most famous 'Scarlet Letter' to his short stories, most of Nathaniel Hawthorne's writings seem to **focus on man's sin and the struggle for perfection.**

This short-for-school-read is no exception. In this story, Aylmer is married to the young and beautiful

Georgiana, and while he loves her, he can't seem to stand the hand-shaped birthmark on her face. Being slightly obsessed with science and 'overcoming nature' he sets out to remove it.

Of course, this birthmark is merely a symbol—**which the narrative explicitly tells us:**

"In this manner, selecting it as the symbol of his wife's liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death, Aylmer's sombre imagination was not long in rendering the birthmark a frightful object, causing him more trouble and horror than ever Georgiana's beauty, whether of soul or sense, had given him delight."

From this, we can easily infer that Georgiana's birthmark is not just a physical mark, but **a symbol of her humanity-- and therefore imperfection.**

While this raises some interesting questions, **it all feels very cut-n-dry.** The symbolism is flat-out explained to us, the characters nothing more than tools for the discussion and the old-1800s-English doesn't help any.

But maybe I'm just a cynic, as I said-- this *does* present typical Hawthorne-esque questions about perfection, sin and morality. If you read his other works and enjoyed them, you may certainly enjoy this more than I did.

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### **The Converted Bookworm says**

This short story made me cry. It tells of a man and his hate for a birthmark that his wife was born with. I highly recommend it if you can stand the use of old English, but nevertheless it was good and taught a very powerful lesson.

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### **Mya says**

I enjoyed this story. I can tell why it is still a classic.

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