

# Hawthorne's *The Birthmark* | An Analysis

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Born in 1804, American writer Nathaniel Hawthorne would spend his life writing short stories and novels that would later become American classics. While one of his most famous works is *The Scarlet Letter*, a novel, Hawthorne's short stories are not to be missed. As a master of symbolism and allegories, Hawthorne wrote stories that made readers question life's many truths. For example, it is often said that love is blind, but in his short story *The Birthmark*, Nathaniel Hawthorne alludes to a more sinister truth about love. Hawthorne argues that love is not blind, love is blinding. In this short story, readers witness the life altering effects of love as a scientist accidentally murders his overly trusting wife. Both characters are blind to sense by their love for the other.

In *The Birthmark*, readers are introduced to a scientist named Aylmer and his bride, Georgiana. The story opens with an emphasis on Aylmer's professional accomplishments and his brilliance. This introduction is followed by a notification that Aylmer has left all of this behind in favor of marrying a beautiful woman, Georgiana. Hawthorne notes that Aylmer's scientific mind would never be fully left behind, only combined with his deep love for his wife. The first page of the story contains the following quote:

"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 it could only be by intertwining itself with his love of science and uniting the strength of the latter to his own."

Later in the story, readers find that Aylmer's love for his wife is tainted by his obsession with a birthmark on her face. While other men have ignored it, or loved it, Aylmer finds it to be a flaw that he is not able to ignore. As a man of science, he believes that he can find a way to fix Georgiana, despite her apprehension. In his quest to fix his bride, Aylmer continues to cite love as his reason for removing Georgiana's blemish. In his reasoning, Aylmer believes that his love

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for his bride is so strong and so pure that he would do anything for her. He begins to obsess over the blemish, telling Georgiana that he may be able to remove her birthmark based on dreams he has been having at night. Despite his fanciful words, Aylmer must admit to himself that his dreams contain nightmarish depictions of Georgiana's death. In his dream, he sees the following:

“...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.”

Aylmer's premonition about Georgiana's death, unfortunately, is for naught. He boasts to his wife that he has found a way to make her perfect, to return her to the image of beauty that he once saw. After Aylmer's dream, Hawthorne wrote: “... he had not been aware of the tyrannizing influence acquired by one idea over his mind.”

Aylmer's increasing disdain for Georgiana's facial feature highlights Hawthorne's point that love is in fact, not blind. Instead, Aylmer's ideation of love for his near-perfect wife is blinding. By the end of the story, Aylmer is blind to risk, and he is completely determined to edit Georgiana's look. This, unfortunately, leads to disaster. In his blind quest for the perfect bride, Aylmer throws away that which is most important to him: Georgiana. Hawthorne foreshadows the loss of Georgiana long before her death. As she sits with Aylmer before the operation, and he attempts to ease her worries, yet again blinded by his love for a perfect wife, Aylmer procures a flower. At first, Georgiana dares not touch it, afraid to ruin the bloom. Aylmer, on the other hand, encourages her to pluck the flower, saying:

“...pluck it and inhale its brief perfume while you may. The flower will wither in a few moments and leave nothing save its brown seed vessels; but thence may be perpetuated a race as ephemeral as itself.”

In this moment, Hawthorne equates Georgiana to the flower. Aylmer finds the flower beautiful, desirable even, and in his love for it he advertises its downfall. He instructs his wife to pluck it, effectively marking the end of its life. Aylmer, a man of science, sees no harm in such a thing.

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His love for beauty, perfection, and discovery fully blinds his sense of remorse for the loss of life.

Over the course of the story, Aylmer begins to take more and more from Georgiana. During his research, he summons her solely to provide entertainment as he plots a drastic change to her countenance. Georgiana answers her husband's every call, including his requests for petty entertainment. To quote Hawthorne, "So she poured out the liquid music of her voice to quench the thirst of his spirit." In the end, Georgiana must give all of herself to quench Aylmer's 'thirst'. His attempt to remove her birthmark fails, leading to Georgiana's death. After her death, Aylmer is finally, for a moment, completely quelled. He cannot look for perfection, and despite the immensely painful circumstances, he regains his metaphorical sight and is no longer blinded by love.

In Nathaniel Hawthorne's masterful exploration of love and obsession, we are drawn into the tragic tale of Aylmer and Georgiana. Through Aylmer's relentless pursuit of perfection and his misguided belief that love justifies any action, Hawthorne unveils the chilling truth that love, far from being blind, can be blinding. As Aylmer's obsession with Georgiana's birthmark consumes him, we witness the gradual erosion of their bond and the tragic consequences that follow. Hawthorne's poignant narrative serves as a cautionary tale, reminding us of the dangers of allowing love to cloud our judgment and of the importance of seeing beyond superficial flaws to cherish what truly matters.

