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Psychological Criticism of Aylmer from "The Birth-Mark" by Nathaniel Hawthorne.

# Introduction

Many people are taught about the imperfections in their growing ages. Nathaniel Hawthorne presents a different concept of imperfection in life. He has been through the struggles for making his life perfect. The only reason for his struggle towards perfection in life was an imperfect birthmark. Aylmer has used his ideas about science, and the fear of his wife's birthmark to remove the imperfection. Freudian concepts of Pleasure Principle helps one in critically analyzing the Birthmark. It also helps in getting the idea about underlying misconceptions about the birthmark and the alternate desires in the author's mind. In Hawthorne's "Birthmark", the pleasure principles are based on the reality principles. These reality principles can be used for critically analyzing Aylmer’s struggles for hiding his subconscious desires. Aylmer’s own desire is to achieve perfection by removing the blemish. He thinks that masculine perfection can be achieved by Freud’s psychoanalytical thoughts about mind, dreams, and struggle for achieving reality.

In the very start of the story, Hawthorne writes “it’s not unusual for the love of science to rival the love of women (“‘The Birthmark’ by Nathaniel Hawthorne”). The author is actually caught up in a situation, where it is becoming difficult for him to stop the doting which is continuously expanding on his wife’s body. He cannot help in removing these scars with his very definite knowledge of science. He has become obsessed with his wife’s imperfection. In his constant obsession with the removal of doting from Georgiana’s cheek (Aylmer’s wife), he has adopted the Freudian mind element of ego to do that. Ego is actually the balancing between pleasure gratification and moral conscience. In doing so the author demonstrates how he developed the mental disorder with his impractical need to make his wife perfect. He does not seem to encounter to what point his science experiments can harm.in developing the psychological criticism on the Birthmark, Freudian pleasure principle will be used as a strategy to develop criticism.

# Psychological Criticism

Shortly when Aylmer married Georgiana he discovered that the voting has started expanding over her cheeks. The removal of this flaw became Aylmer’s only conscious desire. Freudian concept relevant in this case is the ‘Id’. It is the very first stage which is associated with pleasure seeking. According to Freud, it is central to one's unconscious desires. If Aylmer consciously desires the perfection in his wife, he is subconsciously working to make his subconscious level more perfect. This perfection, according to Freud can be found through masculinity. As the story progress, it appears that Aylmer compares himself with his assistant, which he describes as “representing man’s physical nature”. Many recent psychological critics argue that Id is relevant in physical cases. It can compare non- physical things and is not viable in the case of humans (*The Birthmark Summary & Analysis from LitCharts | The Creators of SparkNotes*). Aylmer has in fact gone too far in comparing himself with his assistant.

Aylmer’s personality is more intellectually driven. He lacks the strong features of a healthy man. He thinks that these masculine features can bring him more attention from the people. This is where he brings his science to develop his masculine abilities. According to his scientific intelligence, he lacks the significant aspect of men’s personality which otherwise will make him perfect. His subconscious desire for perfection has actually taken over his other abilities. When his wife Georgiana discovers his journal of science, she thinks that “as much as he had accomplished, his successes appeared almost invariably failures (Parsons et al.) ”. This constant failure of Aylmer has ignited his conscious desire of removing the facial scares of Georgiana. The psychoanalysis, in this case, suggests that at this point in the story, the conscious and the subconscious desires of Aylmer are going hand in hand. The apparent perfection of his wife’s facial expression is actually his desire of achieving masculinity which can benefit him.

Pleasure principle suggests that it is only through accepting the reality that Aylmer can achieve perfection in his subconscious. He finds this reality in between his conscious desire and the rules and regulations of his surroundings, which define masculine properties. He writes that it is actually not about the perfection of one’s inner self, but the perfection in one’s thoughts about what society thinks of masculinity. Aylmer’s desire to reach masculinity is because of the lack of libido. Freud’s “psychical impotence” concept which is directly linked to the lack of libido guides about the exact nature of the problem with Aylmer. His obsession with science is for the reason that he wants to experience anyway to regenerate his feeling for sexual desire. In his subconscious, he thinks that his imperfection is what his wife has brought into him. The doting on the cheeks of his wife prevents him from going into physical contact and he is always done with her just in the few seconds.

Although his wife is very beautiful, Aylmer describes her "otherwise so perfect, that he found this one defect". He writes that this only perfection has drawn them distanced from their united lives. Georgian’s beauty is so perfect that his masculine imperfection has prevented him from being in such relations with her. He has developed his subconscious level so thorough, that he always finds himself on the gaining edge. He thinks that the reason for their short uniting times in private is not his inability, but the dots on her face. Freud describes this as imperfection over perfection. Aylmer’s takes the help of society in pleasing his subconscious thoughts as well. For him, it has become easy to argue with Georgiana about expanding doting over her face openly. Freud writes that in such cases males have an edge which serves their many causes. As Aylmer has generated in him a fight between his conscious and subconscious level, therefore this is not much discussed among these both.

Another factor which keeps on pushing Aylmer for getting perfection in himself is his failure in science. Science is the area where he feels more comfortable. He thinks that there is a solution, hidden in many diverse aspects of sciences. The most talked about psychoanalytical perspective in this regard is the perception of success. This perspective of Freud suggests that with time humans develop such abilities which make them believe in things not available in the world (Beaty). For example, Aylmer’s believe that his findings of science are true, appears false after the discovery of science journal by Georgiana. His obsession with his ideas about science is for the reason that his subconscious abilities have taken over his entire understanding of science. In order to dissuade this failure, he started pushing his wife, as the only reason for these imperfections with him. These constant failures actually added fuel to his desire of making himself perfect.

According to the pleasure principle, the final stage in delinking many different and confusing aspect in life is the superego. In between the struggle of satisfying one's conscious thoughts and working on limiting the subconscious abilities, there exist superego. The superego is, in fact, the moral consciousness which is guided by the reality principle. The societal norms establish such ideations in society. During his fight with the subconscious ablates, Aylmer cannot limit his ludicrous desire. By the application of the reality principle, he is forced to transfer his desire of perfection to his wife. As a man, it is impossible for Aylmer to discuss his imperfections openly. Different to his conscious thoughts, the society in which he is living, suggests that he should learn to live in the way he is. His scientific discoveries (as mentioned above) has not helped in bringing fascination in his own life.

A thorough analysis of The Birthmark suggests that Aylmer is different from many in his society. Unlike many people in the world, he remained unable to learn how to live with his disability. Although he remained successful in hiding his disability with many persons of the society (excluding his wife), the scientific journal made it opened to her as well. The Birthmark story is actually about how people are not able to judge between their conscious and subconscious mindsets. For them, each mindset presents a safe corner for thinking and creating new means to look toward life. Aylmer has led a life, different from many married men. Instead of trying to create a mutual way, the couple explored each other’s weaknesses. These inherent weaknesses and their continued obsession with them suggest that they have not tried to live the way society tells. Freud’s main perception about things in the material world is that human existence in the world is subject to accepting the weaknesses one is granted.

Freud’s pleasure principle suggests that pleasure is not always the ultimate objective of anyone life. Some people cannot enjoy the beauty around them. Similarly, some people are not so blessed. With time such kind of people starts developing themselves tailored with the requirement of their body. In doing so, they remain successful in bringing their subconscious and conscious abilities on the same page. The characters in the Birthmark are different. They are struggling to find happiness anywhere. In doing this they have become mean, both Aylmer and Georgiana are finding ways to soothe their feelings, which otherwise is impossible.

# Conclusion

The psychological criticism over this story provides information about how a birthmark can change the perception of life. There are different opinion of people about birthmarks. With time, they have developed into beliefs. These beliefs are what normally imposed over to people. Gradually then it becomes a norm to live with the inherent defects one get from nature. It directly impacts one's idea about life. The birthmark suggests that these are the reason why one-stop searching about the truth and stop relying upon the scientific discoveries. For one’s personal life, it might not be destructive but for people, in general, it stops the discoveries of new things. Aylmer, in the Birthmark, wants to play a role, similar to any natural being, but he remains to fail in doing so. This failure tends him to think that doting over her wife’s face is actually a disability. He tries his best to cure her of that sickness, but all his efforts remain useless.

The other side of this story opens the mentally distorted nature of Aylmer. Not any single activity of his talks about his mentally stable nature. Throughout the story, he remains in between his subconscious and conscious self. He often uses his subconscious feelings to console his inner wants. This is how Aylmer has developed a mental disorder. This competes for discussion proves the thesis that his mental disorder is actually because of his failure of learning to live with his inabilities.

# Works Cited

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