

The Birthmark – Nathaniel Hawthorne - Short story

[Nathaniel Hawthorne](#) was a famous and well known American author of short stories. He was a prolific short story writer and novelist in the early 18th century in the Americas. [The Birthmark](#) which he wrote and published in the year 1843 is considered one of his best short stories.

The story talks about a brilliant and recognized scientist (Aylmer) who is a man absolutely in love with science. He drops the focus from his career and experiments to marry the beautiful Georgiana. His wife is physically perfect except for a small red birthmark in the shape of a hand on her cheek. The story describes the unnatural obsession that Aylmer has with the birthmark and his descent into madness as he tries to remove it in the name of pursuing perfection.

You can download a free PDF copy of the birthmark story right below and also download a worksheet with many questions and answers.

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About the author – Nathaniel Hawthorne

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Hawthorne was born in 1804 in Salem, a town in Massachusetts. He published his first work in 1828, the novel called Fanshawe. He also published several short stories in periodicals, which he collected in 1837 as Twice-Told Tales.

This story is included into the high school curriculum of the USA and is read by hundreds of thousands of children across the world. You can download a free PDF copy of the birthmark story right below.

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The man of science

A long time ago, there lived a skilful scientist who is a man who lived his life in the pursuit of understanding and perfection. He was a man of science, a brilliant and recognized scientist and philosopher. He is one who would conduct many a great experiment in his strives to understand science.

But it is a surprise to many that such a man of science would do what he did next. He decided to drop his focus from his career and leave all his experiments. He had left his laboratory in the care of his assistant, something he would never dream of. He washed the chemicals from his hands one last time and asked a beautiful woman to become his wife. And so came the beautiful Georgiana into his life.

In those days new scientific discoveries such as electricity seemed to open paths into the area of miracles. It was not unusual for the love of science to compete with the love of a woman.

The scientist's name was Aylmer. He had so totally given himself to scientific studies that he could not be weakened by a second love. His love for his young wife could only be the stronger of the two if it could link itself with his love of science.

Such a union did take place with truly remarkable results. But one day, very soon after their marriage, Aylmer looked at his wife with a troubled expression.

The birthmark

"Georgiana," he said, "have you ever considered that the mark upon your cheek might be removed"?

"No," she said smiling. But seeing the seriousness of his question, she said, "The mark has so often been called a charm that I was simple enough to imagine it might be so."

"On another face it might," answered her husband, "but not on yours. No dear, Nature made you so perfectly that this small defect shocks me as being a sign of earthly imperfection."

"Shocks you!" cried Georgiana, deeply hurt. Her face reddened and she burst into tears.

"Then why did you marry me? You cannot love what shocks you!"

We must explain that in the center of Georgiana's left cheek there was a mark, deep in her skin. The mark was usually a deep red color. When Georgiana blushed, the mark became less visible. But when she turned pale, there was the mark, like a red stain upon snow. The birthmark would come and go with the emotions in her heart.

The mark was shaped like a very small human hand. Georgiana's past lovers used to say that the hand of a magical fairy had touched her face when she was born. Many a gentleman would have risked his life for the honour of kissing that mysterious hand.

But other people had different opinions. Some women said the red hand quite destroyed the effect of Georgiana's beauty.

Male observers who did not praise the mark simply wished it away so that they did not see it. After his marriage, Aylmer discovered that this was the case with himself.

The dream of the birthmark

Had Georgiana been less beautiful, he might have felt his love increased by the prettiness of that little hand. But because she was otherwise so perfect, he found the mark had become unbearable.

Aylmer saw the mark as a sign of his wife's eventual sadness, sickness and death. Soon, the birthmark caused him more pain than Georgiana's beauty had ever given him pleasure.

During a period that should have been their happiest, Aylmer could only think of this disastrous subject. With the morning light, Aylmer opened his eyes upon his wife's face and recognized the sign of imperfection. When they sat together in the evening near the fire, he would look at the mark.

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.

"Do you remember, dear Aylmer, about the dream you had last night about this hateful mark?" she asked with a weak smile.

"None! None whatever!" answered Aylmer, surprised.

The mind is in a sad state when sleep cannot control its ghosts and allows them to break free with their secrets. Aylmer now remembered his dream. He had imagined himself with his assistant Aminadab trying to remove the birthmark with an operation.

But the deeper his knife went, the deeper the small hand sank until it had caught hold of Georgiana's heart. Aylmer felt guilty remembering the dream.

"Aylmer," said Georgiana, "I do not know what the cost would be to both of us to remove this birthmark. Removing it could deform my face or damage my health."

"Dearest Georgiana, I have spent much thought on the subject," said Aylmer. "I am sure it can be removed."

Foreshadowing

"Then let the attempt be made at any risk," said Georgiana. "Life is not worth living while this hateful mark makes me the object of your horror. You have deep science and have made great discoveries. Remove this little mark for the sake of your peace and my own."

"Dearest wife," cried Aylmer. "Do not doubt my power. I am ready to make this cheek as perfect as its pair."

Her husband gently kissed her right cheek, the one without the red hand. The next day the couple went to Aylmer's laboratory where he had made all his famous discoveries. Georgiana would live in a beautiful room he had prepared nearby, while he worked tirelessly in his lab. One by one, Aylmer tried a series of powerful experiments on his wife. But the mark remained.

Georgiana waited in her room. She read through his notebooks of scientific observations. She could not help see that many of his experiments had ended in failure. She decided to see for herself the scientist at work.

The first thing that struck Georgiana when entering the laboratory was the hot furnace. From the amount of soot above it, it seemed to have been burning for ages. She saw machines, tubes, cylinders and other containers for chemical experiments. What most drew her attention was Aylmer himself. He was nervous and pale as death as he worked on preparing a liquid. Georgiana realized that her husband had been hiding his tension and fear.

"Think not so little of me that you cannot be honest about the risks we are taking," she said. "I will drink whatever you make for me, even if it is a poison."

Success?

"My dear, nothing shall be hidden," Aylmer said. "I have already given you chemicals powerful enough to change your entire physical system. Only one thing remains to be tried and if that fails, we are ruined!"

He led her back to her room where she waited once more, alone with her thoughts. She hoped that for just one moment she could satisfy her husband's highest ideals. But she realized then that his mind would forever be on the march, always requiring something newer, better and more perfect.

Hours later, Aylmer returned carrying a crystal glass with a colourless liquid.

"The chemical process went perfectly," he said. "Unless all my science has tricked me, it cannot fail."

To test the liquid, he placed a drop in the soil of a dying flower growing in a pot in the room. In a few moments, the plant became healthy and green once more.

"I do not need proof," Georgiana said quietly. "Give me the glass. I am happy to put my life in your hands." She drank the liquid and immediately fell asleep.

Aylmer sat next to his wife, observing her and taking notes. He noted everything – her breathing, the movement of an eyelid. He stared at the birthmark. And slowly, with every breath that came and went, it lost some of its brightness.

"By Heaven! It is nearly gone," said Aylmer. "Success! Success!"

Irony

He opened the window coverings to see her face in daylight. She was so pale. Georgiana opened her eyes and looked into the mirror her husband held. She tried to smile as she saw the barely visible mark.

"My poor Aylmer," she said gently. "You have aimed so high. With so high and pure a feeling, you have rejected the best the Earth could offer. I am dying, dearest."

It was true. The hand on her face had been her link to life. As the last trace of colour disappeared from her cheek, she gave her last breath.

Blinded by a meaningless imperfection and an impossible goal, Aylmer had thrown away her life and with it his chance for happiness. In trying to improve his lovely wife, he had failed to realize she had been perfect all along.

Summary and Analysis – The birthmark

Aylmer is a brilliant and recognized scientist and philosopher who gives up his focus from his career and experiments to marry the beautiful Georgiana. His wife is perfect and is an embodiment of beauty. However she has small red birthmark on her cheek.

As the story progresses, Aylmer becomes unnaturally obsessed with the birthmark. One night, he has a terrible dream of his wife lying down and him with a sharp knife. He dreams of cutting the birthmark out of his wife's cheek. As he digs deeper and deeper, he realizes that the birthmark is too deep. But he is so mad he digs all the way to her heart.

In the next morning, Georgiana asks about his dream. Aylmer recounts the terrible dream as he remembered the details of his dream. Georgiana is so sad that she declared that she would rather risk her life to remove the birthmark than to live with Aylmer's distress and regret.

Aylmer is so happy that he takes Georgiana to his laboratory. He shows her some of his scientific concoctions. He attempts to draw a portrait of her but his image is blurred save for her birthmark revealing the disgust he has of it.

He experiments some more and describes some of the successes to her but as he questions how she is feeling, Georgiana begins to suspect that Aylmer has been experimenting on her the entire time without her knowledge and consent.

One day, she follows him into his laboratory, and on seeing her there, Aylmer accuses her of not trusting him and says that having her birthmark in the room will foil his efforts. She professes complete trust in him but demands that he inform her of his experiments. He agrees and reveals that his current experiment is his last attempt to remove the birthmark, and Georgiana vows to take the potion, regardless of any danger it poses to her.

Soon after, Aylmer brings her the potion, which he demonstrates as effective by rejuvenating a diseased plant with a few drops. Georgiana drinks the solution and falls asleep. Aylmer rejoices as the birthmark fades little by little. Georgiana wakes up to see the birthmark almost completely faded. She smiles but then informs Aylmer that she is dying. Once the birthmark fades completely, Georgiana dies

Moral of The birthmark:

The moral of the short story, the birthmark is that it teaches us the peril of trying to achieve perfection of one's body with chemicals. It is human to be flawed. One can never be perfect and imperfections do exist and in those imperfections is one's beauty. One must not strive for perfection of the body as it begins to deny one's own mortality.

Questions and Answers - The birthmark – Set 1

1. Who are the main characters in The birthmark?
 1. The main characters in the story are a brilliant scientist Aylmer and his wife Georgina.
2. In the story, the Birthmark, what perceived deformity did the scientist think that his wife had?
 1. In the centre of Georgiana's left cheek there was a mark, deep in her skin. The mark was usually a deep red colour. When Georgiana blushed, the mark became less visible. But when she turned pale, there was the mark, like a red stain upon snow. The birthmark would come and go with the emotions in her heart.
3. Who is the author of the story the birthmark?
 1. [Nathaniel Hawthorne](#) was a famous and well known American author of short stories. The birthmark is one of his most famous stories.
4. Who is the protagonist and antagonist in The birthmark?
 1. There is no true protagonist or antagonist in the story. The scientist can be considered as the anti hero of the story as his obsession ends the life of his wife.
5. What type of story is the birthmark?

1. The story can be described as a mix between dark romance and Gothic fiction. It is of the romantic genre as the scientist does everything to make his wife the perfect embodiment of beauty. The story is dark as he takes it too far.

Questions and Answers - The birthmark – Set 2

6. What is the irony in the birthmark?
 1. The irony in the birthmark is that the scientist strives to remove his wife's birthmark and when he succeeds in removing it, his wife dies.
7. What is the story the birthmark about?
 1. The story the birthmark is about the darkness of a man's obsession in trying to achieve perfection no matter the price. The obsession results in his wife's death
8. What does the birthmark symbolize to Aylmer?
 1. To Aylmer, the birthmark signifies imperfection which he could never accept. The birthmark stands for imperfection in an otherwise perfect person. Aylmer is obsessed with the birthmark since he is afraid of imperfection since he considers himself a true lover of man of science.
9. What is Aylmer's true motive for removing the birthmark?
 1. Aylmer is obsessed with the removal of the birthmark because he considers it would be his greatest scientific achievement. He considers himself a failure as a scientist and that this would rescue his career.
10. How does Aylmer feel when Georgiana asks him to remove her birthmark?
 1. Aylmer is very happy as he believes it would be the greatest of achievements to correct Nature's flaw.

Questions and Answers - The birthmark – Set 3

11. What does the plant symbolize in the birthmark?
 1. The plant symbolizes death when perfection is attained without regard of the price.
12. Did Aylmer truly love Georgiana?
 1. Aylmer did truly love Georgiana but his madness resulted in the path he took which killed her.
13. Why did Georgiana drink the potion?

1. She is fed up with the madness of her husband and wants to be loved again. So she says she is ready to drink even poison to remove the birthmark. Ironically that is what she drinks in the end.

14. Why does Georgiana love Aylmer?

1. Georgiana loves Aylmer as it is her duty as a wife. She hates that her imperfection is the reason for husbands' misery.

15. What happens to Georgiana's birthmark?

1. Georgiana drinks the elixir and falls asleep and the birthmark starts to fade away. However as it fades away in the end, she dies with it.

Questions and Answers - The birthmark – Set 4

16. What foreshadows Georgiana's death in the birthmark?

1. In his dream, Aylmer comes to fully understand the birthmark and its connection to Georgiana's mortality. However he is still willing to remove it forcibly as he desires perfection in everything. The dream foreshadows Georgiana's death.

17. Which action did Aylmer perform while Georgiana slept?

1. He kisses her birthmark as if he were saying goodbye to it. Ironically, he was saying goodbye to his wife for she was about to die.

18. What is Aylmer most afraid of?

1. Aylmer is most afraid of becoming a failed scientist and becoming irrelevant in the world of science. The birthmark stands for imperfection. Aylmer is obsessed with the birthmark since he is afraid of imperfection as he considers himself a true lover of man of science.

19. What is the conclusion of the birthmark?

1. One should not strive to cure all bodily imperfections as the human body although created in god's image is flawed for in its flaws is its beauty.

20. What happens at the end of the birthmark?

1. His wife Georgiana died because of the chemicals that removed her mole. The mole had been an indicator of her health and his chemical was harsh enough to remove it thus killing her.

21. What is the moral of the story the birthmark?

1. The moral of the short story, the birthmark is that it is human to be flawed. One can never be perfect and imperfections do exist. One must not strive for bodily

perfection as it begins is to deny one's own mortality. Also it teaches us the peril of trying to achieve perfection of one's body with chemicals.

22. What does the birthmark symbolize?

1. The birthmark symbolizes the existence of imperfection in everything. It is told throughout the story that his wife is perfect aside from the birthmark which infuriates and depresses the scientist.