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Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" as an Introduction to the Modern
Debate of Eugenics and their Societal Implications

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This paper will provide an original perspective on the multifaceted debate about eugenics in modern global society through an in-depth literary analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark." The various opinions and perspectives involved with the debate will be further explained in comparison to the short story's theme and character development. The central argument of this research can be found in the fixation of the short story's main character on the correction of disability in the seemingly isolated world in which he lives. The research in this paper will be additionally drawn from scholarly articles, including the work of Elizabeth R. Napier and Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, and disability literature, including Temple Grandin's autobiography. The ideas that this research will lay out and support can be read as a lens through which to view the arguments existing both in this paper and in society at large.

"The Birthmark" by Nathaniel Hawthorne raises intricate questions about disability and its implications. Aylmer, the main character, views the birthmark of his wife, Georgiana, as a disability and becomes obsessed with its scientific removal. Hawthorne's work is well ahead of its time, as the modern questions of viewing disability as imperfection and of ridding society of this purported burden come into play through his work of fiction. Although there was no name for the scientific wiping out of what society deems to be inadequate when the literary piece was first published, today it is known as "eugenics." In his short story, "The Birthmark," especially through theme and character development, Nathaniel Hawthorne introduces an early version of the modern debate of eugenics and their questionable contribution to society.

The modern debate about eugenics is at its core a controversial one. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines the adjective "eugenic" as: "pertaining or adapted to the production of fine offspring, *esp.* in the human race." Eugenics can be seen in various different forms (both positive and negative) throughout history and all over the world, from Adolf Hitler's interest in creating an Aryan race to the modern science that allows the removal of genes for certain diseases from embryos. This genetic engineering to remove or create a certain type of human in society is a largely debated question, and Hawthorne perhaps started the conversation without even realizing it. According to the OED, the word's earliest roots can be traced back to 1883, which is approximately 40 years after the publication of Hawthorne's short story. Although the study of eugenics came after Hawthorne's publication, there is room to explore how Aylmer's psychological fixation on the removal of a physical blemish speaks to the contemporary debate regarding the use of eugenics.

“The Birthmark” involves the dispute as to whether Georgiana’s birthmark helps or hurts her, as well as Aylmer’s scientific obsession with removing it from her face as a driving force. The character development of Aylmer as he shifts from acceptance of his wife’s differences to hatred for her physical imperfection highlights the general foundation of eugenics. Aylmer’s fixation is on his wife’s birthmark, which resembles a small, red hand placed on her left cheek. Some view it as beauty, while others view it as a flaw. Hawthorne’s story reads,

Georgiana's lovers were wont to say that 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.... Some fastidious persons – but they were exclusively of her own sex – affirmed that the bloody hand, as they chose to call it, quite destroyed the effect of Georgiana's beauty, and rendered her countenance even hideous. (Hawthorne 1022)

The people who surround Georgiana are torn on how to feel about her blemish. Some believe that it makes her who she is, but some believe she would be a better person without it. The hand holds a possibly equal version of both good and bad. The good is the uniqueness in which the birthmark instills in her; it is the way in which she stands out as beautiful to the people around her who view her as a positive kind of different. The bad is the physical branding that lives on her face; it is the red hand that slapped Georgiana across the cheek and marked her as imperfect, flawed, and possibly evil.

This theme of the short story directly portrays society’s views and questions on disability. Is disability something that makes a person who they are, or is it a burden that should be removed if possible? Aylmer believes the latter – that Georgiana’s birthmark brings her

down and renders her a damaged individual. His obsession with removing it speaks to the part of society that believes disability to be a burden, an inconvenience, and essentially: a fluke in the system. Aylmer's solution to erasing this "fluke" from their lives is to use his scientific research and resources. Though there is great danger involved in an experiment like this, he is convinced that the risk is worth the potential reward. As each day goes on and he delves further into his research, Aylmer's discontent with the small, red hand on his wife's cheek grows stronger and stronger. This dissatisfaction grows into loathing, and it comes to the point where he would rather see her die than see her live with what he views to be a disability. Aylmer speaks for a societal desire of seeking perfection as he attempts to wipe out his wife's undesirable characteristic, which he believes stands in the way of her being a complete human. Ultimately, his obsession with creating the perfect woman in his wife kills her, and the discovery that perfection is unattainable and perhaps even an emotional illusion is profound.

Elizabeth R. Napier's article, "Aylmer as 'Scheidekünstler': The Pattern of Union and Separation in Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark,'" highlights and analyzes Aylmer's fixation on the removal of his wife's birthmark. Napier argues that Aylmer's character serves as a "separation artist" in the story, as in a man who is interested in playing God and separating entities that should not necessarily be separated. Beginning as a man who loves his wife for everything she is and is not, he fully appreciates her personality, beauty, and the birthmark on her cheek as characteristics that make her unique and lovable. His gradual scientific and eugenic obsession – which is almost nonexistent in the beginning – forces him into the fixation on separating his wife from her physical flaw. Napier contends,

He is guilty not only of Georgiana's death but – like Miles Coverdale and the Puritan society that condemned Hester Prynne – of a more abstract, spiritual crime: the violation of psychological integrity. Aylmer's attempt to “separate out” the single, unknown part of Georgiana's psyche indicates an ominous and tragic inability to deal with the complexity of being human. (Napier 34)

A major motif throughout the story is the attempt to separate opposites that live together, and the ultimate attempt of separation on Aylmer's part is to remove Georgiana from her disability. This “complexity of being human” that Napier describes is the situation that every person on Earth is dealt a certain hand, and to be human is to take life as it comes. Aylmer's refusal to accept Georgiana's circumstances is crucially depicted as unnatural and as disturbing the way her life and body are meant to be. In attempting to fix her – despite what God or the universe or whatever dictating force wants – Aylmer destroys his wife's psyche, and he kills her too.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's article “Eugenics” explains the historical and widespread existence of eugenics around the world. Eugenics can describe a wide range of societal practices, and Garland-Thomson breaks it up into two major categories: tribal and modern. The tribal category encompasses any methods of controlling the population through barbaric methods, such as rape and murder. Nazi Germany's attempt to extinguish an entire race of people, for example, falls under the tribal grouping. The modern category, however, describes the methods of scientifically controlling reproduction by choice. For example, the choice of pregnant mothers to have their unborn children tested for disease or to have their children's embryos handled to contain

certain genes fall under the modern grouping. Garland-Thomson explains the contemporary presence of eugenics in terms of reproduction manipulation, stating:

Understood as voluntary rather than imposed, the use of reproductive technology to sculpt individuals, families, and larger groups responds to cultural attitudes and ideologies about what kinds of people are valuable and desirable and what kinds are not (Parens and Asch 2007). (Garland-Thomson 77)

This idea of humans having the power to dictate what kinds of genes and characteristics should and should not exist among their species is a growing debate as science becomes more powerful. The concept of humans "playing God" now frequently comes into question, as the line for where to stop with genetic engineering is quite blurred. The discussion of eugenics – whether intended or not – involves the act of deciding what kinds of people and what kinds of traits are worthy of survival. The blurring of boundaries regarding manipulation of the human species then raises a multitude of questions involving the use of science to "correct" society.

The debate of eugenics concerns the questions of whether or not humans should be able to control the genetic makeup of their species, what genes are worthy of survival, and to what extent this manipulation should be able to take place. Aylmer as a character in "The Birthmark" plays the role of God by making the decision that his wife should be separated from her disability. He deems her birthmark to be a burden to her beauty, and he believes that it should be removed despite the risk. The reason he is so willing to put his wife in danger is because he believes that if it is impossible to remove such a blemish from her body, then her life is not worth living. Aylmer views Georgiana's imperfection as something that he can and should control. Furthermore, he will stop at nothing to

make sure her birthmark is removed for the sake of both her beauty and the comfort of those around her.

Aylmer's decision to remove the birthmark portrays certain opinions in the debate of eugenics that will argue for working to create a more perfect world of people. Individuals in a position of "perfection" who do not have disabilities themselves – such as Aylmer – may be more inclined than those who do have disabilities to argue that certain human characteristics must go. However, in the perspective of those with disabilities, certain characteristics could be argued as worth keeping among the human population. Temple Grandin, for example, argues in her autobiography, *Thinking in Pictures*, for the protection of autism in society with the belief that individuals with autism can contribute in certain ways to society that those without autism cannot. She states:

There are numerous interest groups run by people on the autism/Asperger spectrum and many of them are upset about attempts to eliminate autism... In an ideal world the scientist should find a method to prevent the most severe forms of autism but allow the milder forms to survive. (Grandin 122)

As an individual with autism herself, she explains in her book the unique mental processes of people with autism and offers insight as to how these processes are successful in providing society with ingenuity. She believes that if autism were to be wiped out entirely, a multitude of potential creative ideas could disappear with it. Grandin's opinions on the preservation of the milder forms of her disability in society with the argument that they contribute positively through unique and individual points of view adds a key perspective to the debate of modern eugenics. Grandin's argument

serves as an example for disabled individuals who wish to defend their circumstances, and it goes against Aylmer's desire to make the executive decision for his wife to remove her disability.

The modern debate of eugenics is rooted in various opinions, perspectives, and views of how society should and should not be. As opposed to more historic, barbaric forms of human species manipulation, eugenics today seek to control the population through science and by a certain degree of choice. It is now easier than ever for parents to decide what genes their children's DNA will and will not hold. On one hand, gene selection can be helpful in allowing a child to be healthy and to avoid being born with debilitating diseases. On the other hand, however, playing God can be a dangerous thing. Although the genetic engineering of today is mostly limited to avoiding disease, who is to say that parents one day will not opt out of choosing their babies' physical traits, such as eye and hair color, height, and intelligence levels? And even when it comes to favoring certain genetic characteristics over others, is it right to "play God?" Is the human population speeding up evolution by deciding to do what it believes to be right? What if creating the perfect population could have grave repercussions?

It is inevitable to discuss the controversial topic of eugenics without raising more questions than there were to begin with. The opinions and arguments involved in the debate of this controversial topic are varied and multifaceted. The ultimate consensus – if there is any – is that science can be helpful in prolonging the human life and promoting wellness throughout the world. However, there needs to be an agreement on where to draw the line. This is the part where governments and lawmakers should step in and take action. As the members that make up a global society, humans – disabled and not

disabled alike – need to come together to protect what is right for all parties involved.

The ultimate question that the debates on eugenics need to answer in order to come to a potential conclusion – and that Hawthorne successfully raised before the debate even began – is: what constitutes a genetic characteristic that should be kept (if scientifically possible) from existing in the human species? And who gets the right to decide?

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