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Hawthorne's "The Birthmark" as an Introduction to the Modern Debate of Eugenics

Eve Papa¹

Abstract: This article will contribute to the current debate about eugenics through an analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birthmark." This will concern the story's theme and character development, as well the period in which it was written. Of particular interest will be main character's fixation on the correction of disability in the seemingly isolated world in which he lives. Also relevant is the research of Napier and Garland-Thomson and the literature on disabilities.

"The Birthmark" by Nathaniel Hawthorne raises intricate questions about disability and its implications, ranging from how society defines disabilities to if and how it believes they should be corrected. Aylmer, the main character, views the birthmark of his wife, Georgiana, as a disability and becomes obsessed with its scientific removal in the name of reason.

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." The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines the adjective "eugenic" as: "pertaining or adapted to the production of fine offspring, esp. in the human race." 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.

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, without even realizing it, started the conversation. 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 the publication, there is certainly room to explore how Aylmer's psychological fixation on the removal of a physical blemish speaks to the contemporary debate.

It is worth noting that Hawthorne scholars tend to focus on the study of the story as either a general literary work or an analysis of feminism and women's domestic rights—few, if any, examine disability. There has not yet been a focus on

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Aylmer's character as more than just a mad scientist; he is a mad scientist attempting to play God. And in taking it upon himself to decide what features of his wife can stay and what must go, Aylmer takes a stance that argues for disability as being something negative and poisonous that must be wiped out of society. In writing such a character, Hawthorne has provided both the disability and eugenics debates with an important piece of literature. In examining the relationship between a couple and their views of a physical blemish, Hawthorne speaks to the big-picture question: should science view disability as a defect and be working towards removing it entirely? Or does disability contribute to society and provide diverse personalities and ideas?

"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 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 writes:

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 that 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. He will stop at

nothing to make sure her birthmark is removed for the sake of her beauty, the comfort of those around her, and his personal convictions.

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. 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 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 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 fundamental 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 kills her, but not before destroying her psyche.

To further the lens through which this conflict of disability can be viewed: the theme of separation does not stop with Aylmer's desire to separate the birthmark from his wife. His hope, at a larger and more metaphoric scale, is to separate the previous societal views of enlightenment to the more recent (at the time of publication) views of romanticism. "The Birthmark", which was written during the romantic period, certainly displays the period's emphasis on individuality, emotions, and self-expression. Hawthorne's story focuses on the relationship between Aylmer and Georgiana, the debate as to what makes Georgiana a validated individual, and how Aylmer feels about all of this.

But Aylmer, who is in a certain sense a more traditional man, holds fast to the previous views of science and reason, in his attempt to remove the main characteristic that makes Georgiana *Georgiana*. He believes, in an older fashion, in his capacity to differentiate right from wrong through the use of science and logic, which aligns with the goals of the enlightenment.

Aylmer's dependence on logic, however, only gets him so far; science is not telling him nearly as much as he believes it is. It ultimately only gets him as far as this: the birthmark (which represents romanticism) needs to be removed because it makes Georgiana different; science (which represents reason) will solve this problem for his wife. As Aylmer drags Georgiana through his reasoned battle against an entire school of thought, he works tirelessly and endlessly towards a eugenic answer that will never come—all at the expense of individual expression.

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 means, such as rape and murder. Nazi Germany's attempt to extinguish an entire race of people, for example, falls under the tribal grouping. However, the modern category 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:

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. (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 raises a multitude of questions involving the use of science to "correct" society. Moreover, the debate of eugenics concerns the questions of whether 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 permitted.

Aylmer's decision to remove the birthmark illustrates certain opinions in the debate of eugenics that 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. For example, in her autobiography, *Thinking in Pictures*, Temple Grandin, argues for the protection of autism in society with the belief that individuals with autism can contribute to society in certain ways that those without autism cannot. As she contends:

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. There are two sides to every story, and it is equally important to pay attention to how people with disabilities feel on this topic.

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 seeks 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 the 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, playing God can be a dangerous thing. Is it morally correct to be deciding which disabilities can survive and which cannot?

And 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 impossible to discuss eugenics without delving into more and more questions. 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, and at what point the Aylmers of the world need to stop mixing their potions. This is the part where governments and lawmakers should step in and take action. As the members who make up a global society, humans of all abilities, 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? Although the Aylmers of the world strive for utopian living and want every human to be perfect, what would a world without Georgianas be?

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