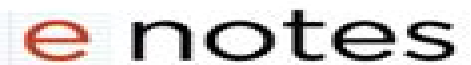


The Birthmark Study Guide



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Summary

The protagonist of this tale, Aylmer, is a scientist “proficient in every branch of natural philosophy.” The plot is set in motion when he marries a beautiful young woman, Georgiana, who bears a curious birthmark on her cheek in the shape of a tiny crimson hand. Envious women sometimes say it spoils her beauty, but most men find it enchanting. Aylmer, however, becomes obsessed with the birthmark as the one flaw in an otherwise perfect beauty. When Aylmer involuntarily shudders at the appearance of the birthmark, which waxes and wanes with the flushing or paling of the lady’s cheek, Georgiana also develops a horror of her supposed blemish. Aylmer has a prophetic dream in which he seeks surgically to remove the mark, but it recedes as he probes till it clutches at her heart. In despair, Georgiana encourages Aylmer to try to remove the mark, even if it endangers her life to do so.

He secludes her in a lovely boudoir and entertains her with enchanting illusions and captivating fragrances. He and his gross, shaggy-haired assistant, Aminadab, labor mightily in Aylmer’s laboratory to produce an elixir that will irradiate the imperfection of his nearly perfect bride. The laboratory’s fiery furnace, its soot-blackened walls, its gaseous odors, and its test tubes and crucibles contrast grimly against the ethereal boudoir where his wife waits.

Meanwhile, Georgiana finds and reads Aylmer’s journal, which records his scientific experiments. Her admiration and understanding for her husband’s aspirations and intellect increase, even as she recognizes that most of his experiments are magnificent failures. Though she no longer expects to outlive the experience, she gladly and lovingly accepts the draft from her husband’s hand. The birthmark does indeed fade, leaving her a vision of perfect beauty, a spirit unblemished in the flesh, but Georgiana is dead. The birthmark is mortality itself.

Summary

Published in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s collection *Mosses From an Old Manse*, “The Birthmark,” using the third-person-omniscient point of view, tells the story of a beautiful woman, Georgiana, whose face is imprinted with a pale red birthmark in the shape of a small hand, and her husband, Aylmer, a scientist, who possesses a high degree “of faith in man’s ultimate control over Nature.” Georgiana had thought her mark to be a sort of “charm,” and men in the past had found it enchanting, suggesting a sexual symbolism. Aylmer, however, considers it an imperfection and, confident in his power over nature, wants to remove it from her face. He persuades her to allow him to remove it, even after he reveals his frightening dream that he must carve down to her heart to do so, because she feels they cannot be happy together unless the birthmark is gone. While they both admire perfection, she understands it in spiritual terms while Aylmer reduces it to the physical, not comprehending the utter goodness of his wife and taking full advantage of his ability to dominate her. Guiding her to his laboratory, which includes beautiful rooms designed to relax and perhaps

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