The Desire for Perfection in Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark”

“Beauty is only skin deep,” or so people say. If so, then the presence of a birthmark should not affect how its owner is viewed, for nothing the person did warranted the mark: he or she just happened to be born with this natural blemish, symbolic of human’s original sin. However, in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s tale “The Birthmark,” a small mark on a woman’s face becomes the obsession of her husband, who insists upon removing it with his scientific expertise. Because of his passionate pleas, the woman gives in to his demands, thus dying. A psychoanalytic interpretation of the plot adds a new dimension to the literal level of the story. Freud’s division of the mind into three elements (the id, ego, and superego) plays an enormous role in a psychoanalytic interpretation of “The Birthmark.” The id contains all human passions and desires that lead to pleasure, conforming to Freud’s “pleasure principle.” The superego, the id’s opposite, follows the “reality principle,” for it is the moral conscience of the individual that is created by parents’ rule and society’s laws. The ego is a mediator between the two, as it directs the pleasure principle to the reality principle, telling the person how to act properly.

What happens when the ego fails to do its job? “The Birthmark” is a sobering example. When the scientist Aylmer lets his desire for perfection loose upon his wife (under the guise of his superego, science), he kills Georgiana (thus killing
the symbolic id of himself). The ego, represented by his servant Aminadab, fails to be the mediator necessary for balance. Hawthorne suggests that a competent ego is necessary to prevent the devastating consequences of Aylmer’s behavior. Without the ego’s balancing effects, either the id or the superego will take control of a person, shutting out the other half with horrible results.

In this dark tale, science acts as a pseudo-superego. Science strives to find through rigorous experimentation the answers to all of nature’s mysteries. Science represents the rational and permissible, and the scientist, hoping to help perfect life, is permitted to experiment to help benefit humanity. Science is exact—the scientist continues to strive for that exact, perfect answer that will satisfy him or her. Aylmer lives and breathes science: “He had devoted himself … too unreservedly to scientific studies ever to be weaned from them by any second passion” (Hawthorne 212). Aylmer is therefore an agent of the superego science, giving himself over to the search for perfection. Through this rational mode of thinking Aylmer strives for the flawlessness the superego symbolizes. He says to his wife, Georgiana, that she has led him even farther into science than his previous experiments. To this he adds: “I feel myself fully competent to render this dear cheek as faultless as its fellow; and then, most beloved, what will be my triumph when I shall have corrected what Nature left imperfect in her fairest work” (215).

What is it about this flaw that so repulses the superego side of Aylmer? The birthmark, as little as it is, could represent the “evil” or impulsive id-like side of a person. It is red and hand-shaped, similar to the mark that would remain if someone slapped another on the face. Maybe the presence of this mark calls forth the same sort of reprimand by the superego that slapping someone would; the evil in that person is pointed out. However, the blemish appears on the face of an otherwise beautiful woman, so perhaps Hawthorne’s symbolic meaning is that such a small blemish should not really matter, for we are all “blemished” in a small way. Furthermore, the mark is natural, and so it should not be condemned. If the blemish represents imperfection, then science as superego has permission to eliminate the blemish in the name of science. If the blemish, however, represents the impulses of the id, science as superego will be naturally opposed to it, trying to “kill” it, even though the ego needs the balance of the id and superego.

The fact that the mark is so tiny shows just how obsessed the superego can become with perfection. Aylmer feels driven to remove even this small reminder of the human his wife is: “But seeing her otherwise so perfect, he found this one defect grow more and more intolerable with every moment of their united lives” (213). As his wife is a part of him through the symbolic union of marriage, he sees the mark as a reflection of himself—imperfect. Consequently, he wants to repress or hide in his unconscious the reminder that his wife is not perfect, for if he cannot make her perfect, he would have to admit his own humanity and ultimate failure as a scientist. Thus he is tempted by his superego to achieve perfection: “No, dearest Georgiana, you came so nearly perfect from the hand of Nature that this slightest possible defect, which we hesitate whether to term a defect or a beauty, shocks me, as being the mark of earthly imperfection” (212).

Despite her overwhelming beauty, Aylmer feels an almost neurotic need to remove the mark from Georgiana’s face and, ironically, this need seems simultaneously a function of the id. Georgiana’s beauty, then, can be seen as desire, for Aylmer wants her as wife (a perfect desirous object) and as specimen (the perfect scientific object). The pressure his wife feels from his id-superego-induced shame is enormous. Bowing to his overwhelming desires, she allows Aylmer free rein to perform any experiment he wishes, as long as the hateful mark is erased. She falls so under his influence that she no longer has any regard for her physical safety: “Danger? There is but one danger—that this horrible stigma shall be left upon my cheek!… Remove it, remove it, whatever be the cost or we shall both go mad!” (221). Georgiana as the id, beautiful to the narrator but flawed to Aylmer, gives way to the demands of the superego. Tragedy results.
This tragedy results because the ego does not balance the id-superego of Georgiana and Aylmer, a responsibility of the servant, Aminadab, the story’s ego. Hawthorne describes Aminadab in earthy terms: "With his vast strength, his shaggy hair, his smoky aspect, and the indescribable earthiness that encrusted him, he seemed to represent man’s physical nature" (216). Aminadab seems a perfect mediator between the abstract scientific superego and the uncontrolled passions of the id. His appearance is founded on the earth, as should be his actions. However, his status as Aylmer’s servant indicates trouble. Hawthorne instantly defines the relationship between the two as one of master-servant (i.e., the superego as master, the ego as servant). Aminadab as ego should perform his duties, but he should balance the id with the superego. Yet he follows only Aylmer’s monomaniacal drive for Georgiana’s perfection: “[He] was admirably fitted for that office by his great mechanical readiness, and the skill with which, while incapable of comprehending a single principle, he executed all the details of his master’s experiments” (216).

At one point Aminadab does try to assert himself, but his actions are too little too late. Hearing of his master’s plan, Aminadab should object. Unfortunately he waits until ordered to “Throw open the door of the boudoir” (216). The door opening is symbolic of throwing open the door into the domain of the id (Georgiana), a place the superego should never directly see. The bedroom as symbol for the id’s desire is reinforced by the dream-like, beautiful description of the room as containing gorgeous curtains draped around the room to give it a heavenly effect: “For aught Georgiana knew, it might be a pavilion among the clouds” (216). This contrasts sharply with Aylmer’s domain of the scientific lab in which “the atmosphere felt oppressively close, and was tainted with gaseous odors which had been tormented forth by the processes of science” (220). The id and superego are represented by these separate rooms. However, Aminadab acquiesces to Aylmer’s request to open the door, offering only a mumbled, “If she were my wife, I’d never part with that birthmark” (216). While his last statement may reflect the ego-like voice (a woman’s life should not be put at risk for a small birthmark), the statement is spoken too softly to be heard by Aylmer, symbolic of Aylmer’s demented drive for scientific perfection. If the remark had been made earlier and more forcefully—as symbolic of the ego’s balance of the id and superego—the ensuing tragedy might have been avoided. Aminadab could have been the voice of reason, informing Aylmer that no matter the spiritual or physical depth of Georgiana’s birthmark, it did not detract from her beauty.

Ironically, Aylmer destroys what is truly beautiful just because there is no force telling him he is acting inappropriately. As his wife was part of him and a reflection of him through marriage, the loss of her is the same as losing an essential piece of himself. Georgiana is now perfect, and the scientific quest is completed but unsuccessful, “yet, had Aylmer reached a profounder wisdom, he need not thus have flung away the happiness which would have woven his mortal life of the selfsame texture with the celestial” (224). If Aylmer had realized that acceptance of the “fault” (of the birthmark, of the id) would be possible in this world, he could have been happy. Like the scientist Rappaccini, who poisons his daughter to make her beautiful, Aylmer commits the Hawthornian unpardonable sin: he allows his zealous desire for scientific perfect to overtake his humanity. From a Freudian perspective, Aylmer, operating with faulty ego, is unwilling to acknowledge his id (Georgiana, her beauty, and her blemish) by destroying it by his superego.

The part Aylmer lost in Georgiana should have been united with him in spirit if the symbolic ego, Aminadab, had performed properly. Perhaps Aminadab’s inaction is intentional as an attempt to teach Aylmer his tragic lesson. When Aylmer thinks that his last scientific treatment is working to remove the birthmark, he hears Aminadab laughing: "Ah, clod! ah, earthly mass!" cried Aylmer, laughing in a sort of frenzy, ‘you have served me well! Matter and spirit—earth and heaven—have both done their part in this!’” (223). Aylmer thinks the chuckle is a result of the servant’s happiness for his master’s success. Aminadab’s last laugh when Georgiana dies indicates differently. It comes right after Aylmer knows
his wife is dead: “The parting breath of the now perfect woman passed into the atmosphere, and her soul, lingering for a moment near her husband, took its heavenward flight. Then a hoarse, chuckling laugh was heard again!” (224). Aminadab seems to laugh at Aylmer’s expense, and at his loss. The scientist discovers what life that strives solely for perfection, or is controlled solely by the superego, will be like. Hawthorne in “The Birthmark” creates a cautionary tale about the limits of reason and passion.

As the story suggests, a life lived with only superego-like tendencies will lead to tragedy. One part cannot exist without its opposite, and both need to be accepted and mediated by the ego to realize the full potential of life. A balance needs to be struck between the drive for perfection and the drive to satisfy more “base” desires. If one element gains control, then it will destroy the other, thus destroying part of the person. A rational (superego-like) world would be dull and dangerous and an irrational (id-like) world would be chaotic and equally dangerous. Why kill a part that could complement and balance the other? Hawthorne’s answer seems that many people are unable to recognize the need for such a balance.

Work Cited