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Internalized Oppression in *The Birth-Mark*

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Birth-Mark* is a short story published in 1843 that engages with themes of beauty, perfection, and control. The story is centered around a man named Aylmer, a scientist in the 19th century, and his wife Georgiana, a woman who is described as beautiful in every way besides a prominent birthmark on her cheek. Aylmer becomes obsessed with her birthmark, becoming increasingly desperate to remove it. Eventually, after a series of experiments, he develops a potion that will remove the birthmark from her cheek, and Georgiana drinks it without any hesitation. She awakes and looks in the mirror, watching her birthmark slowly fade away. After her birthmark fades away completely, Georgiana dies. Interestingly, Georgiana feels honored to be the subject of Aylmer's perfectionist ideals rather than recognizing his fixation on her birthmark as harmful and controlling. Georgiana's character development reflects the concept of internalized oppression, which occurs when individuals from marginalized groups accept and enforce the negative beliefs and expectations imposed upon them by society. Initially, Georgiana has no strong feelings about her birthmark, but as Aylmer's disgust intensifies, she internalizes his revulsion and begins to see herself as flawed. Instead of resisting, she comes to believe that true love requires her complete submission to his impossible standard of beauty. Her willingness to undergo the procedure despite the clear risks demonstrates how deeply ingrained beauty standards compel women to conform, even at the cost of their own well-being. The fact that Georgiana does not even perceive herself as a victim makes *The Birth-Mark*

a striking critique of coercive beauty standards and the devastating effects of internalized oppression, and her submission to Aylmer mirrors the real-world beauty standards that push women towards harmful interventions in pursuit of unattainable ideals.

Before Aylmer's relentless fixation on her birthmark begins, Georgiana does not perceive it as a flaw. She has lived her life without questioning her beauty, and other men have even found the birthmark charming: "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" (Hawthorne 6). This suggests that her self-perception was not inherently negative but rather shaped by external influences. When Aylmer asks her if she had ever considered having the birthmark removed, Georgiana answers: "To tell you the truth it has been so often called a charm that I was simple enough to imagine it might be so," to which he responds by telling her that he is shocked by her only visible sign of imperfection (Hawthorne 5). This highlights the fact that before Aylmer's disgust, Georgiana did not see her birthmark as an imperfection. Her previous confidence demonstrates how beauty is subjective, and what is considered attractive is dictated by societal expectations rather than any sort of objective truth.

As Aylmer continuously expresses his horror towards the birthmark, Georgiana's perception of herself begins to shift. She internalizes his revulsion, allowing his judgement to override her previous confidence. His repeated comments erode her self-worth until she comes to view herself through his critical lens. As the story continues, "Georgiana soon learned to shudder at [Aylmer's] gaze," and she becomes increasingly ashamed of herself as she takes in the magnitude of Aylmer's disgust: "Pray do not look at it again. I can never forget that convulsive shudder" (Hawthorne 7-11). Much like Georgiana, women in the real world often begin with a

neutral or positive self-image, only to have it eroded by repeated exposure to unattainable beauty standards. Her transformation from confidence to self-loathing reflects the ways in which beauty standards exert control over women by making them feel inadequate and in need of correction.

Rather than recognizing Aylmer's fixation as dangerous and dehumanizing, Georgia misreads his relentless pursuit of perfection as a form of profound love. She does not resist his demand for change. Instead, she comes to believe that his unwillingness to accept her as she is proves the depth of his devotion:

> Her heart exulted, while it trembled, at his honorable love—so pure and lofty that it would accept nothing less than perfection nor miserably make itself contented with an earthlier nature than he had dreamed of. She felt how much more precious was such a sentiment than that meaner kind which would have borne with the imperfection for her sake, and have been guilty of treason to holy love by degrading its perfect idea to the level of the actual; and with her whole spirit she prayed that, for a single moment, she might satisfy his highest and deepest conception. (Hawthorne 16–17)

This passage reveals that Georgiana has fully absorbed Aylmer's ideals. She does not view his refusal to accept her as a flaw but instead believes that true love must demand perfection. The idea that love should be conditional upon flawlessness reinforces the oppressive nature of beauty standards. Her willingness to change for Aylmer reinforces the idea that a woman must mold herself into an idealized form to be worthy of affection. She does not question the logic of his obsession but instead prays for the opportunity to meet his standards, even if only briefly. This reflects real-world beauty standards, where women often undergo painful or extreme modifications (cosmetic surgery, extreme dieting, contaminated beauty products, etc.) under the belief that achieving perfection will bring love and validation. The story exposes how beauty

ideals not only place physical burdens on women but also warp their perceptions of love, making them believe that self-sacrifice is necessary for societal acceptance.

Despite recognizing the potential dangers of Aylmer's treatment, Georgiana willingly accepts the procedure, seeing it as her only path to being truly loved and accepted. When Aylmer confronts her about the procedure, she replies: "Let the attempt be made at whatever risk. Danger is nothing to me; for life, while this hateful mark makes me the object of your horror and disgust,—life is a burden which I would fling down with joy" (Hawthorne 8). This moment is pivotal because it shows how thoroughly Georgiana has internalized Aylmer's judgements about her beauty. No longer seeing the birthmark as insignificant or desirable, she fully adopts his disgust as her own. She would rather risk death than continue living with any imperfection in her appearance. Her willingness to undergo such an extremely risky transformation demonstrates the final aspect of internalized oppression, where a woman no longer needs external pressure to conform because they have come to strictly enforce those standards upon themselves. Much like Georgiana, countless women throughout history have endured physical suffering to meet societal beauty standards. Furthermore, there is an illusion of choice; many women see these procedures as personal decisions, but they are shaped by societal conditioning. Just as Georgiana believes she is freely choosing to remove her birthmark, modern beauty standards often make women believe they are making independent choices, when in reality they are responding to deeply ingrained societal pressures.

Overall, Hawthorne's *The Birth-Mark* serves as a critique of the internalization of oppressive beauty standards, illustrating how external ideals can become so deeply embedded in a woman's mind that she begins to enforce them upon herself. Georgiana's progression from indifference to self-loathing to self-sacrificing highlights the consequences of internalized

oppression. Georgiana's death is a perfect demonstration against the relentless pursuit of perfection. She is unable to resist the harmful expectations Aylmer forces on her, and she fully embraces them with fatal consequences. Tragically, she does not even see herself as Aylmer's victim due to the extent of her manipulation. Nearly 200 years after the story's publication, women continue to internalize and perpetuate beauty standards, policing both themselves and other women. Whether in the 19th century or today, society's demand for flawlessness leads to both physical and psychological self-destruction. Even if it was not initially intended to be a feminist novel, *The Birth-Mark* can be critically analyzed through a feminist lens to demonstrate the ways in which vulnerable individuals come to enforce and uphold harmful beauty ideals themselves.

Work Cited

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Birth-Mark*. The Pioneer, 1843.