

BEAUTY AND THE ARTIST ·

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(1) Throughout his four stories, Hawthorne supports his idea that the artist or artist-figure is separate from society. Hawthorne depicts artists as gifted people who are alienated from society because of their obsession with perfection as it is represented by a beautiful object. Though all try to achieve perfection by bringing beauty into reality through some form of creation, all experience alienation from society. The alienation comes from various sources--some of the men alienate themselves and others are shunned by society. Regardless of the source of this alienation, all the men still dedicate themselves to the pursuit of beauty, which is a dream none of them can achieve.

(2) In the stories "Rappaccini's Daughter" and "The Birthmark," Hawthorne demonstrates how artist-figures are often alienated by their own actions. Rappaccini surrounds himself with his beautiful but poisonous garden. The garden, however, is his secondary concern. His foremost concern is his daughter, Beatrice, his most successful experiment. She is described as being as "poisonous as she is beautiful" because of the numerous poisons her father has infused into her body. The poisons make her as beautiful as the deadly plants in the garden he created and continues to sustain. Rappaccini is isolated from society through his constant experimentation with his daughter and his garden. He ignores the remainder of society and devotes himself solely to the pursuit of perfection in beauty that he can create and control.

(3) Similarly, Aylmer in "The Birthmark" is also

alienated by his constant search for perfection. Aylmer is constantly engrossed in his experiments of alchemy, and he alienates himself through his obsession with the removal of a crimson birthmark from his wife's otherwise perfect visage. Aylmer has no concern for his wife or anyone else around him; he is tormented and controlled by his desire to remove the birthmark, which to him is the symbol of imperfection impairing his vision of reality. Unlike Rappaccini, Aylmer does not really create anything, but rather strives to perfect a creation that already exists. He allows the pursuit of perfection to control his entire life and does nothing else but dwell on the birthmark, which he perceives to be the mark of imperfection on his beautiful wife.

(4) Although Hawthorne shows how artists can alienate themselves through their actions and mannerisms, he uses the stories "The Prophetic Pictures" and "Artist of the Beautiful" to demonstrate how society can alienate artists. "The Prophetic Pictures" is a subtle demonstration of an artist who has been alienated by members of society unable to understand him or his talent. The painter views reality as his portraits while society often cannot comprehend his talent and reverts to superstitious gossip. The artist is highly respected because of his talent, but "even in superior circles his character was invested with a vague awe" The artist is alienated and spends most of his time among his creations, generally coming into contact with humans only for business purposes.

(5) Likewise, Owen Warland of "The Artist of the Beautiful" is also alienated by society. In this case, however, Owen is shunned by society because it cannot and will not try to understand his feelings or motivations. Owen is inspired and uplifted by beauty and believes that the ideal artist must "stand up against mankind and be his own sole

disciple." Owen, however, is also the only artist or artist-figure who expresses a desire to be accepted by at least one member of society. When he realizes that his only true love has been stolen by the mundane Robert Danforth, he laments by saying, "I yearned for sympathy, and dreamed that you might give it to me." Owen's only goal in life then becomes the pursuit of perfection which possesses all the qualities of a real insect with the added benefit of being immortal. Owen dedicates all his efforts to the achievement of this goal and is finally able to construct a near perfect butterfly.

(6) Although all the artists or artist-figures are searching for perfection, none of them is able to realize and to retain the perfect beauty they consider to be reality. Rappaccini's daughter dies after realizing how miserable she is because of the alienation her father imposed on her through isolation. Aylmer loses his beautiful wife because she can no longer live among the imperfect when she becomes perfect. The painter in "The Prophetic Pictures" is able to achieve perfection because he can embody the future in his prophetic portraits, but he manages to cause pain because of the negative aspects of knowing the future. Similarly, once Owen has achieved perfection with the butterfly he has created, he can only enjoy the benefits for a short time because his creation is destroyed by a small child soon after it is created. When describing this predicament, Hawthorne asserts that "when the artist rose high enough to achieve the Beautiful, the symbol by which he made it perceptible to mortal senses became of little value." Hawthorne shows that the artists in all the stories lose touch with society because they perceive reality in a very different way than most humans do. According to Hawthorne, perfection is not truly possible because of the many inhibiting factors in society and the

world, and the artist's dedicated pursual of his dream is a fantasy that cannot be achieved.