

# *A Study of Puritanism in the Birthmark from the Perspective of Transitivity System*

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**Abstract:** The Birthmark is a short story written by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) who is one of the most influential writers in American literature in the 19th century. It tells a story of a scientist called Aylmer who cannot accept the birthmark on his wife's cheek, because he considers the birthmark as an imperfection of his beautiful wife. Therefore, he conducts scientific experiments to remove it, which unfortunately results in his wife's death. Influenced by his puritan ancestors and the contemporary Transcendental Movement, Hawthorne expresses his ambivalent attitude towards puritanism through the portrayal of the destiny of the main characters in the novel. Through examining the flexible choice of transitivity system and the subtle distribution of the six processes in the discourse, this thesis, thus, holds that Hawthorne's interpretation of puritanism lies in the characterization of the two main characters in the Birthmark. Hawthorne's mixed feelings about Puritanism are mainly reflected in two aspects, namely, his acknowledgment of original sin and criticism of the rigidity and extremism of puritanism.

## 1. Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne was born into a family that was of puritan belief and brought up religiously, which had a great impact on his thoughts and works. But different from his ancestors, he, to some extent, reflects on the drawbacks of Puritanism for its intolerance and cruelty. Under the influence of puritanism, he had such strong feelings of evil and sin that he composed novels to further reflect on good and evil, predestination, the original sin and salvation. He, thus, was noted for his masterful exploration of the psychology of guilt and sin as well as his reflection on puritanism. His conflicting attitudes towards puritanism are implicitly embodied in his works, The Birthmark included.

The Birthmark, an allegorical tale published in Mosses from an Old Manse (1846), is singled out to be one of Hawthorne's most characteristic and most successful works. Aylmer, the protagonist, a man of science, married a beautiful woman with a birthmark on her cheek. Very soon after their marriage, Aylmer, considering the birthmark on his wife's cheek as "the visible mark of earthly imperfection", was determined to remove it at all costs with the help of his scientific research. Eventually, here comes the moment when he finally succeeded in removing the birthmark, he also lost his wife forever. In this novel, Hawthorne focuses on characterizing the two main characters, Georgiana and Aylmer, to express his feelings towards Puritanism. The Birthmark, deeply influenced by its social background, is endowed with a strong puritan ideology. But due to Hawthorne's psychological paradox, both identification with and doubt of puritan ethics and

morality can be interpreted from this novel. Therefore, this thesis is intended to examine the characterization of Georgiana and Aylmer from the perspective of transitivity system to explore Hawthorne's ambivalent attitudes towards puritanism.

This thesis is divided into five parts. The first part is concerned with the literature review with an aim to examine the previous studies on *The Birthmark* from the perspective of puritanism. The second part introduces Puritanism, including its origin and basic doctrines. Before conducting a detailed analysis, the third part aims to introduce Halliday's transitivity system. Taking the transitivity system as the theoretical framework, the fourth part analyzes the characterization of Georgiana and Aylmer by focusing on the lexico-grammatical choices in the transitivity system. This part is intended to investigate Hawthorne's attitude towards the conflict between theology and science through analyzing the original sin caused by the birthmark and Aylmer's fanatic pursuit of science. The final part concludes Hawthorne's attitudes towards Puritanism in *The Birthmark*. It is hoped that the present study can provide a different perspective to enrich readers' understanding and appreciation of Hawthorne's short stories as well as the merits and demerits of Puritanism. Besides, it is also of instructive significance in the analysis of other writers' works which are deeply rooted in Puritanism.

## 2. Literature Review

*The Birthmark* has attracted many scholars to conduct various studies from various perspectives since "the birthmark" in this novel is endowed with rich symbolic meanings. F. O. Matthiessen[6] points out that *The Birthmark* tells a story of an idealistic scientist who "is resolved to remove the birthmark from his wife's cheek" which dramatically symbolizes the theme of pursuing perfection. Other scholars attribute Georgiana's tragedy to Aylmer's irrational pursuit of the supernatural world. Domestic scholars mainly interpreted *The Birthmark* from the perspective of feminism, ecology, etc. For example, Peng Zhenzhu[7] and Zhang Jie[10] interpreted *The Birthmark* from the perspective of ecofeminism and the theory of Foucault, mainly analyzing the sufferings caused to women's physical bodies under the control of patriarchal power. What's more, Zhu Litan[12] examined the relationship between humans and nature with regard to the environmental ethnics and severely criticized the blind pursuit of knowledge and science. Other scholars[1] [9] are concerned with how women blindly accept their fate of objectification without any complaint and internalize the patriarchal norms. Jiang Jiangting[5] explored the theme in *The Birthmark* in terms of stigmatization. In her view, the image of the birthmark is imposed by Aylmer.

Taking it by and large, academic research on *The Birthmark* is primarily about ecofeminism, the relation between humans and nature, the power theory and so on. It can be seen that a few studies focus on the analysis of Hawthorne's attitudes towards puritanism in *The Birthmark* from a linguistic perspective. However, as a descendant of Puritan settlers in Salem, Hawthorne is fascinated by the history of the period of Puritan America. He, thus, often chooses Puritan New England as the setting of his stories and puritans as the main characters. Therefore, it is of great significance to explore how his conflicting attitudes towards puritanism are reflected in this novel.

## 3. An Introduction to Puritanism

In the early time of American culture, it was inevitable that Puritanism became a symbol of American genes and identity, and it was also the foundation of American spirit and culture. As the mainstream of the colonial culture, Puritanism has a far-reaching impact on American capitalist society. Along with the development of society, the meaning of the Puritanism has been constantly changing, but its essence has been inherited and expanded. Puritanism, which has given a strong impulse to the imagination of American writers, proves to be one of the essential roots of American

literature. This part is going to introduce the origin and basic doctrines of puritanism.

### 3.1 Origin of Puritanism

Puritanism was a movement in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that was initiated by the Puritans who grew discontent within the Church of England and launched reforms in the religious, moral and social fields. The Puritans were a group of radical Protestants who sought to “purify” the Church of England in their own ways. The severe persecution of the Puritans who opposed the Catholicism was one of the reasons for the Great Migration of Puritans to the New World. To avoid religious persecution and find new habitats, the British Puritans traveled far away across the sea to the North America. These newcomers settled in the so-called “a poor, cold, and useless”[2] place where they created a body of ideas and aspirations. It has to be mentioned that puritans varied from the humblest to the loftiest ranks of English society, the educated to the uneducated and the poor to the rich. But they all identify with the fact that they were a group of people whose lives were extremely disciplined with highly religious and moral principles.

### 3.2 Basic Doctrines of Puritanism

The practices and beliefs of the Puritans made Puritanism come into being. Individualism, rational principles, and autonomy contained in Puritanism provided factors of the spirit for the liberal democracy of the United States. They have shaped the American character of getting rich through hard work.

Puritanism accepted the interpretations of John Calvin on the nature of men, free will and predestination, and other basic concepts. The reason why puritans wanted to “purify the church” was that they thought the church was corrupted. Thus, Puritans demanded great purity and they accepted the doctrine of predestination, original sin and “total depravity, and limited atonement through a special infusion of grace from God”[11]. The Puritans saw God as the awesome Father-God and emphasized his majesty, righteousness, and control of the universe. In contrast, all human beings were born to be depraved sinners. They believed that God had predestined some of these fallen creatures for the gift of salvation. They believed that God had already chosen who would be in heaven or hell, and each believer had no way of knowing which group they were in. Although the puritans believed in predestination, they still spent their whole life trying to find out their destiny, whether it might be heaven or hell. Doing good and working hard, even if it did not guarantee salvation, was their way to express their faith and to show their hope for heaven.

However, religious dissent was absolutely not tolerated by puritans. The puritan doctrine essentially stated that one could reasonably enjoy life as long as that person affirmed belief in God and did not question their theocracy. Puritans’ intolerance proves that, to some degree, Puritanism can be both world-maintaining and world-destroying. Puritans’ faith in God helps them to live with the chastisement and hardships in the wilderness; however, Puritans’ strong will also go so far that it often turns to bigotry, especially in their religious beliefs. Any antinomian element or coexistence of a separate minor religious belief within but apart from the dominant Puritanism cannot be tolerated. All beliefs other than their own are errors. It is exactly what Hawthorn strongly criticized in his works.

## 4. An Overview of Transitivity System

Language is a means of social interaction based on the position that language system and the forms that make it up are inescapably determined by the uses and functions they serve, so it is said that social demand on language has helped shape its structure. Therefore, linguists of Systematic

Functional Grammar theorize about language function as three meta-functions, namely, ideational function, interpersonal function and textual function. This part mainly introduces one of the sub-systems of ideational function, transitivity system.

According to Hu Zhuanglin[4] and Halliday[3], Ideational function is to convey new information, to communicate a content that is unknown to hearer. This function is realized by transitivity system which construes the world of experience into a manageable set of process types including Material Process, Mental Process, Relational Process, Verbal Process, Behavioral Process and Existential Process. Material, mental and relational processes are the main types of process in the English transitivity system[3]. Material processes are clauses of happening and doing. There are often two participants in this process, actor and the goal of action. Halliday[3] groups together clauses of feeling, thinking and perceiving under the general heading of mental Process. They are processes of sensing, involving two participants, sensor and phenomenon. Moreover, relational processes reflect the relationship set up between two separate entities. Since the other three processes are not so obvious in the novel, the present study will not go into detail.

## 5. Puritanism Reflected in the Birthmark

Language users' options of processes in transitivity system imply their perspectives and reveal their ways of viewing the world [8]. In literary works, writers also need to make continuous choices of processes to express their experiences in the external world and in the inner world. As a result, their options are normally closely related to the theme of the novel. This part mainly takes the sub-system of ideational function, transitivity system, as analytical tool to analyze the characterization of Aylmer and Georgiana with an aim to explore Hawthorne's attitude towards Puritanism, such as original sin and the relationship between theology and science and technology. His attitudes can be demonstrated by analyzing the types of transitivity processes that the two main characters are involved in and their distribution in the discourse, as illustrated in the following Table 1:

Table 1: Analysis of Processes in the Birthmark

Types of Process	Quantity	Percentage
Material Process	49	43%
Mental Process	24	22%
Relational Process	19	17%
Behavioral Process	17	15%
Verbal Process	4	3%
Total	113	100%

### 5.1 Original Sin of Georgiana Realized by Transitivity System

Puritans demand great purity and believe in the doctrine of predestination, original sin. In other words, they hold that humans are born to be depraved sinners. As for Hawthorne, he acknowledges the idea of "original sin" which is exactly reflected in the birthmark on Georgiana's cheek and the attitude of Georgiana and Aylmer towards it. In the beginning, Georgiana regards the birthmark as "a charm" and never minds how others interpret it. But influenced by Aylmer, she begins to consider it "an odious hand", "a fatal birthmark" and even "a horrible stigma". Besides, the birthmark on Georgiana's cheek itself is a mark of nothing, but Aylmer calls it "the slightest possible defect", "the visible mark of earthly imperfection", "the fatal flaw of humanity", "the spectral hand", etc. In this manner, the birthmark is selected as the emblem of Georgiana's liability to "sin, sorrow, decay and death". Additionally, as Aylmer is resolved to remove it, it also becomes a

birthmark in the heart of Aylmer, the evil aspect of his human nature. This claim can be illustrated in the following examples from the perspective of transitivity system.

(1) "...upon another face perhaps it might." replied by her husband; "but never on yours. 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 visible mark of earthly imperfection." [13]

(2) ...but seeing her otherwise so perfect, he found this one defect grow more and more intolerable with the every moment of their united lives. [13]

The above excerpts are talking about Aylmer's feelings towards the birthmark either from his own words or from the author's narration. The first sentence involves two mental processes ("hesitate", "shock") and three relational processes. Relational processes involved in (1) are identifying ones that deal with the relations between the two entities. What a ridiculous idea Aylmer has that if this birthmark is on someone else's cheek who is not as beautiful as Georgiana, it is acceptable. Yet it is not a charm on beautiful Georgiana's cheek but the fatal flaw of humanity and her inborn liability to be a sinner. Besides, according to Halliday, mental processes are used to reflect the on-going in the internal world of the mind. "Hesitate" and "shock" construct the mental process to show Aylmer's disgust with that birthmark.

What's more, the next excerpt is also about a mental process and relational processes. Although Georgiana is almost perfect except for the birthmark on her cheek, Aylmer still finds it so intolerable that he has to purify it by all means. It is identified with the beliefs of puritans that they want to "purify" everything different from them. To maintain the purity of their region, they even persecute heathens. In this way, Hawthorne not only implies the evil aspect of Aylmer's human nature, but also criticizes the rigidity and ruthlessness of puritanism. Then in this way, "the birthmark" becomes the token of "human sin". Hawthorne holds that everyone has the evil or "the birthmark", only with different shapes and sizes. Moreover, he also critiqued deformed idealism and its potentially harmful consequences.

## 5.2 Aylmer as a Scientist Realized by Transitivity System

In puritanical Calvinism, God is infinite, omnipresent and omnipotent, while humankind, created by God, is prone to be sinners. Then, from theological dimension, orthodox Puritans consistently hold the view that man cannot comprehend the pure and ineffable reality of God, any claim to absolute knowledge must be symptomatic of hermeneutic delusion. It is absurd that man could take the trouble or make any efforts to know God or to explore the original and ultimate truth of the universe, the existential secret of mankind. What God needs is human absolute faith in him rather than understanding or interpretation. However, with time going by, Puritans have led the way away from their own insistent practices. The tenets of the original sin and predestination are gradually abandoned, and the traditional Puritan theology loses its dominance, and the puritan extremists even want to replace the original theology with modern science, which has led to the modern division and conflict of faith and knowledge, theology and science. Puritan extremists believe that they are selected by God and therefore have the right to interpose, control and influence the life of "non-selected folk" and achieve their idealism.

Hawthorne admitted the material prosperity brought by modern science in the 19th century, while he also anticipated the appalling dominance of expanding science and technology and pointed out the disaster of rational knowledge deprived of its theological foundation and of science replacing religion. He criticized puritans' extreme utopian trust in science and technology and fanatic pursuit of knowledge, which is conservatively believed as a violation of the sovereignty of God. He, therefore, holds that all the human secular knowledge should finally return to theology.

All in all, the misleading and malpractice of Puritan extremists and Hawthorne's sharp criticism on the conflict of theology and technology are both fully and vividly represented in *The Birthmark*. Then this part is going to discuss Hawthorne's attitude towards the conflict between theology and science by examining the characterization of Aylmer as a scientist.

### 5.2.1 Aylmer as a Scientist with Great Achievements

Despite criticism of the puritans' extreme utopian belief in science, Hawthorne also acknowledged the great influence of science on American social development. At the beginning of *The Birthmark*, Aylmer is described as a man of science, "an eminent proficient in every branch of natural philosophy". It is no doubt that he is an excellent scientist in terms of the great achievement he made in science. There are many expressions, most of which fall in the range of material process in transitivity system, devoted to his success in scientific study. For example,

(3)...he had made experience of a spiritual affinity...had left his laboratory to the care of an assistant, cleaned his fine countenance from the furnace smoke, washed the stain of acids from his fingers, and persuaded a beautiful woman to become his wife. [13]

(4)...he had made discovers in the elemental powers of nature. Seated calmly in this laboratory, the pale philosopher had investigated the secret...he had satisfied himself of the causes...and had explained the mystery of fountains. He had studied the wonders of human frame, and attempted to fathom the very process.[13]

The above examples are the narration of the author with an aim to present all kinds of scientific achievements Aylmer has made, including seven material processes, two verbal processes ("explained" and "persuaded") and a mental process (satisfied). When describing Aylmer's scientific achievements, Hawthorn used a large number of material processes to show what Aylmer did to explore the secret of nature. Moreover, all these processes take Aylmer as the same actor and the achievements as the goal of the process. Such action verbs as "investigated", "made", "cleaned", "washed" "studied" and "attempted" are all positive words in order to construct a positive and active image of Aylmer as a professional scientist. In this sense, Aylmer seems to be a scientist like any others who have devoted themselves to science and to unveiling the secrets in nature, to make a contribution to human beings. The skillful arrangement of material processes displays the outstanding achievements of Aylmer and the continuing use of powerful words reinforces the persuasion. However, such a kind of positive image of Aylmer presents a sharp contrast to what he did to his wife and to his fanatic pursuit of science and technology.

### 5.2.2 Aylmer as a Scientist with Extreme Views on Science

It is Aylmer's over-quest for perfection that brings the tragedy to his wife. Aylmer regards his scientific career as the noble pursuit of idealism and tries every effort to prove its reasonability, which has some certain rightness. However, when this idealism reaches the extreme of ignoring Nature's Providence, Christ's doctrine and human virtue of tolerance, it will inevitably result in horrible disasters. As for Aylmer, the birthmark on his wife's cheek is the personification of the omnipresent evil, and it becomes "the sole token of human imperfection" and "the symbol of his wife's liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death". Then with the purpose of creating perfect beauty, the young "scientist" did a scientific experiment on his wife to remove "the fatal flaw of humanity", regardless of the law of nature. There is a lot of evidence in the novel to claim Aylmer's extreme views on science through the analysis of transitivity system, part of them listed as follows:

(5) I feel myself fully competent to render this cheek as faultless of as it fellow; ...what will be my triumph when I shall have corrected what nature left imperfect in her fairest work! [13]

(6) It was his option to concoct a liquid that should prolong life for years, perhaps interminably;

but it would produce a discord in Nature. [13]

(7)...I could apportion the lifetime of any mortal..... the strength of the dose would determine whether he were to linger out years, or drop dead in the midst of a breath. [13]

In the above examples, a mental process (“feel”), two relational processes and four material processes (“prolong”, “produce”, “apportion” and “determine”) are involved. Example (5) includes a mental process to illustrate Aylmer’s thoughts about his capability to challenge nature successfully. According to Halliday, mental processes are those of thinking in the inner world. In other words, Aylmer’s confidence in his ability to “correct” nature’s mistake is just a delusion. He regards the birthmark as a mistake nature makes that can be improved by science, thus it will give him a great sense of achievement if he removes it triumphantly. In example (6), the author conducts a relational process to emphasize the terrible effect of the elixir vitae created by Aylmer both on human beings and on the natural progress of nature. Example (7) contains two material processes with Aylmer as the actor and the drug as the actor respectively. The fact that Aylmer tries to keep and use such kind of drug to control the lifetime of human beings also shows Aylmer’s desire to conquer and control nature, thus exerting a great but terrible impact on the natural order of nature.

All in all, there is no doubt that Aylmer has a talent for scientific study but he lacks the ability to care for others as well as sympathy for humans. It is his extreme passion for science that gives him perfect composure and calmness even facing his wife’s death. It is the fact that Aylmer considers everything as his experimental objects, including his wife, results in Georgiana’s tragedy. As the Puritans hold the illusion of a single identity and ultimate truth, Aylmer also failed to be aware that the divine cannot be known fully. Therefore, in this way, Hawthorne wants to unveil that puritan extremists’ conduct actually goes against their religious beliefs - love and tolerance. Besides, it is ridiculous that they tend to legalize their torture, harsh persecution, bigotry and extremism in the name of truth. On the contrary, Hawthorne calls for a humane religion that can convert fanatics into a rational faith and rational religious practice. He also emphasizes God’s mercy and his divine grace on humans and the imperfection of mankind as well.

## 6. Hawthorn’s Attitudes towards Puritanism in the Birthmark

Firstly, Hawthorne disagrees with the transcendentalist’s assumption that the cosmos is good and perfect, and at the same time, with the Puritan belief that the world is totally evil and predestined. Hawthorne himself strives for a balance to seek a middle way between different polarities- invariable condemnation of human evil and perfection of self and human society. Adopting dialecticism to take a place of monism, Hawthorne in his works tries to prove that the human world is both good and evil, and sin or evil can be transformed into good. According to Hawthorne, “salvation” has no limits and is available for everybody, which is a big challenge for the important doctrine of Puritanical “predestination”.

Secondly, blind and impractical idealism is a manifestation of human evil. Hawthorne condemns the scientific quest for perfection and power that has obscured moral responsibilities and ethical values. The failure of Aylmer proves that scientists cannot mend or even change Nature’s work. To quest the ultimate truth of nature with modern science is the same as to challenge the privilege of God, which is only a dream even a nightmare. Aylmer’s monomania quest for self-knowledge all turns out to be a sense of egotism. Obsessed with scientific redemption, he plays the role of God and usurps the omnipresent power of the Creator by transforming his imperfect wife into the ideal divine. According to Hawthorne, blind idealism causes the loss of human sympathy and mercy. No matter what kind of ideal or dream, it should be based on the benefits of human beings and the welfare of social development. Once idealism or perfectionism poses a challenge to the law of nature, it is in essence another kind of evil.

More importantly, Hawthorne advocates that love, endurance, humanity and charity are the means of redemption. Led by science and technology, puritans long for absolute truth and perfection. But they fail to understand that human imperfection is more real and important and also forget the basic practices of religious theology on human forgiveness, tenderness and love. Out of pride in man and technology, many puritan extremists represented as Aylmer explore the physical world for human perfection and progress and attempt to exercise God-like power over life through their full conquest of knowledge. For them, knowledge has been allied with power. Misguided by the scientific utopia, they despise humanity and imperfection. Repudiating their humanity, they become an unsympathetic observer of human suffering. As for them, scientific research replaces religious redemption; spiritual faith gives way to technological utopia. Confronted with the crisis, love, the essence of Jesus Christ, is a means of redemption. Hawthorne criticizes Puritan extremists' conduct with the aim to stress the virtues of tolerance, forgiveness, mercy, confession, self-examination and penance. Hawthorne's Puritanism thoughts, therefore, was not a completely negative reminder of man's sin, but a constructive vision of man's place in the universe. Through his works, Hawthorne also tries to restore the alienated extremist's identity and guides the lost Puritans home.

## 7. Conclusion

The present study investigates Hawthorne's attitudes towards Puritanism through examining the characterization of Georgiana and Aylmer in the *Birthmark* within the theoretical framework of transitivity system. In detail, material processes, mental processes, and relational processes are chosen as analytical tools to analyze the target linguistic data. Through a descriptive study of the choice of such grammatical resources as processes types in the target narrative language and dialogues, Hawthorn's criticism of the ethical indifference of modern science, the danger of dehumanization inherent in the egoism of scientific research, and pride of man is unveiled by examining such a complicated protagonist Aylmer in *The Birthmark*.

The necessity of sin and the capacity of sympathy and forgiveness for evil are what Hawthorne tries to tell readers. Hawthorne revises the original sin held by puritans and also calls for more merciful treatment of evil. What's more, as for the conflict between theology and technology, both loss of faith brought by scientific rationalism and the torture of nature caused by pursuing scientific knowledge finally lead to the expansion of evil inside human nature. He also attaches great importance to humanity, holding that without a theological foundation on mercy, love, forgiveness and endurance, science is incapable of redemption. Faith and love are both the precondition and requisition for divine revelation. As Aylmer ignored the importance of humanity, his pursuit of perfection is definitely futile.

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