Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark” Discussion Questions

Type a thoughtful, thorough paragraph in response to each of the following discussion questions. This means don’t write two or three sentences for each of the questions. I expect depth, and depth usually requires a substantial amount of writing. A lengthy paragraph is required for each response. Also, do not go online to find what others have written about this story. Think for yourselves. I will know if you stole your thoughts from others because you will be submitting your responses to turnitin.com. (I’ll give you the log in information the first few days of school.)

1. Hawthorne’s bizarre tale of an inept scientist in quest of a potion that will remove the birthmark on his wife’s cheek is an allegory for the often destructive nature of science on humanity. This was a favorite theme of Hawthorne’s and of other writers in his time. Find a news article online of how science today is destructive or harmful in some way. For this first discussion question, summarize the article in your own words and then tell me your thoughts and impressions of the article. Then attach a copy of the article to the back of your discussion questions responses.

2. Hawthorne is not very sly about the meaning behind his tales. He requires you to think a little bit, but he often tells you right in his stories what certain symbols mean. Analyze the following excerpt of what the birthmark symbolizes: “It was the fatal flaw of humanity which Nature, in one shape or another, stamps ineffaceably on all her productions, either to imply that they are temporary and finite, or that their perfection must be wrought by toil and pain” (149). So what does this mean in simpler language?

3. Find another excerpt or phrase in the story that suggests what the birthmark symbolizes. Cite it and explain it in your own words.

4. Other than being a vain jerk who wants a “perfect” wife, why is Aylmer trying to rid Georgiana of the birthmark? If he succeeds, what will it mean to him? Again, Hawthorne tells you right in his story. Find it. Cite it. Explain it.

5. On page 155, Aylmer creates a plant that quickly grows, blooms into a flower, and then dies in the hands of Georgiana. What does this plant and its quick demise symbolize?

6. Find three examples throughout the story that foreshadow Georgiana’s death. Cite them. Explain them.

7. Aylmer’s assistant, Aminadab, laughs twice at the end of the story. The first time he laughs, he seems to be laughing with triumph that Georgiana’s birthmark is fading. But after Georgiana dies, he laughs again. So why is he laughing that second time? (It might help if you can figure out what Aminadab symbolizes in the story.)

(Over)
8. Analyze the last few lines of the story:

Thus ever does the gross fatality of earth exult in its invariable triumph over the immortal essence which, in this dim sphere of half development, demands the completeness of a higher state. 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. The momentary circumstance was too strong for him; he failed to look beyond the shadowy scope of time, and, living once for all in eternity, to find the perfect future in the present. (165)

First, what is the narrator saying in simpler language? Second, what theme or commentary is the narrator making about Aylmer or about humankind in general?

9. I want to know how well you think without guidance, so for this discussion question, tell me your final thoughts on Hawthorne’s story. Don’t repeat what you’ve already written.

10. Lastly, would you rather always have to wear a sports referee uniform or a wizard’s robe and hat in your daily lives? Why? Explain in detail the advantages of your choice and the disadvantages of the other option.