Nathanial Hawthorne's *The Birthmark*: Aylmer's Scientific Obsession with Perfecting the Human Condition

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Abstract:

Nathaniel Hawthorne's The Birthmark (1843) illustrates the troubling consequence of the desire to eliminate all human imperfections. This article explores Aylmer's attempt to remove his wife Georgiana's birthmark, which ultimately leads him to a quest for human perfection. Aylmer's scientific ambition to perfect the human condition can be interpreted as a Faustian project. Furthermore, Aylmer's refusal to accept Georgina's birthmark highlights the philosophical concept of hubris, which underlines Aylmer's excessive ambition and pride in accepting the human limits. The story dissects how Aylmer's obsession with science and male desire distorts Georgina's sense of self. A comparison of Aylmer and Aminadab highlights the significant battle between idealism and human reality. Finally, Hawthorne does not condemn scientific knowledge, but he deeply critiques the intellectual hubris that wants to control and dominate nature.
Key words: *Nathaniel Hawthorne, scientific ambition, love, human perfection, mortality, hubris, Faustian will, gender.*

Résumé

La nouvelle La tache de naissance (1843) de Nathaniel Hawthorne illustre les conséquences inquiétantes du désir d'éliminer toutes les imperfections humaines. Cet article explore l'obsession scientifique d'Aylmer qui cherche à éliminer la tache de naissance de sa femme Georgiana et démontre comment une imperfection physique peut conduire progressivement à une quête de la perfection humaine. À travers les concepts tels que l'ambition faustienne, l'hubris et la perfectibilité que le récit souligne l'ambition démesurée et l'orgueil d'Aylmer face aux limites humaines. L'étude examine la volonté d'Aylmer de dépasser les limites de la nature par la science.

L'étude met également en lumière comment l'obsession scientifique d'Aylmer combinée à son désir masculin a réussi à changer l'image de Georgiana elle-même. Cette dimension genrée fait du corps de Georgiana un objet d'expérimentation et de contrôle. La relation entre Aylmer et Aminadab révèle une tension entre idéalisme scientifique et réalité humaine. Ainsi, Hawthorne ne condamne pas la connaissance scientifique, mais il critique vivement son instrumentalisation lorsqu'elle cherche à contrôler et dominer la nature.

***Mots-clés** : Nathaniel Hawthorne, ambition scientifique, amour, perfection humaine, mortalité, orgueil démesuré, faustien, genre.*

Introduction

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Birthmark* can be read as the most epic love story, which has a paramount influence in American literature. This story posits that what happens when the person you love cannot tolerate your flaws and imperfections? This devastating interrogation occupies the central plot of the book. This short story was published in March 1843 in *The Pioneer* then added to *Mosses from an Old Manse* in 1846. As a known American writer Hawthorne moved from writing short stories to writing novels with *The Scarlet Letter* being his most famous book. His short stories, including *The Birthmark* show the move from horror, to science fiction and represent Dark Romanticism proving how much he shaped literature in the nineteenth century.

The historical context of the book is essential to a more profound understanding of the story. The year 1840 marks a moment of profound intellectual and cultural tension in American history. On the one side stands the American Dark Romanticism, a literary movement that occupies a central place in Nathaniel Hawthorne's writings. This literary movement emerges as a result of the optimistic assumption of Romanticism. This latter is defined by Ann Woodlief as a "renaissance in the sense of a flowering excitement over human possibilities and a high regard for individual ego" (Woodlief).

Romanticist writers celebrate the beautiful aspects of nature and the power of imagination. In contrast, the literary movement of dark romanticism primarily focuses on the negative aspects of human experience, which is mostly concerned about the negative traits of human experience: obsession, guilt, alienation, sin and moral failure to name a few. Hawthorne's works are mostly associated with dark romanticism. This latter is an embodiment of a somber vision of human beings, which the author describes as morally complex. Nathaniel Hawthorne is a dark romanticist and a leading author of this literary movement.

At the time the story also speaks to a very specific cultural worry of its time: the rapid growth of scientific ambition. The 1840s also saw progress in chemistry, electricity and medicine. Galvanism, the use of current on living tissue, had already influenced Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). It addresses major concerns about where life ends and machines begin, about what is natural and what is made. Mesmerism, phrenology and early surgery experiments filled newspapers and public conversation. The laboratory started to seem like a place of power that felt almost supernatural. Hawthorne watched this change with unease.

In *The Birthmark* the plot can be explained simply. Aylmer, a brilliant scientist, marries Georgiana, a beautiful woman who has had a small birthmark on her cheek since she was born. Before their marriage, everyone, including Georgiana herself, considered the birthmark an oddity. She regards that mark as a magical endowment that makes her simply human. But in Aylmer's view, the mark becomes an obsession, a flaw that stops his wife from reaching the heavenly perfection he desires. Restless, Aylmer convinces Georgiana to agree to an experiment that will erase the mark. The experiment works. Georgiana dies. The simple feel of this story is its point. Hawthorne does not write a Gothic horror story for fun. He

demonstrates how the pursuit of perfection, driven by absolute purity for the sake of love or science, ends up destroying the life of his loved one, Georgiana, whom he claims to protect.

Nathaniel Hawthorne's writing has long been interpreted as strongly concerned with the conflict between human aspiration and the restrictions of reality. Richard H. Fogle's Hawthorne's Fiction: *The Light and the Dark* is particularly relevant to this argument, as he addresses Hawthorne through the duality of idealism and realism. This theory provides a solid foundation for understanding Aylmer's discontent with Georgiana's birthmark as the result of an inability to reconcile his ideal of perfection with the realities of embodied human existence. Such perspective also resonates in Hyatt H. Waggoner in *Hawthorne: A Critical Study* (1963). This book offers an insightful view of how Hawthorne looks at idealism, moral choices and how people are limited. Waggoners take is beneficial because it does not make Aylmer just a bad guy. Aylmer's reasons are not inherently bad; rather, his desire to perfect Georgiana stems from a hopeful idea that becomes harmful when he fails to recognize his limits. In his article "A Surgeon's Obsession with Perfection in Nathaniel Hawthorne's '*The Birthmark*"', Louis Mendy closely examines Aylmer's monomania and his warped perception of Georgiana's birthmark. Mendy's reading reveals that the obsession in Aylmer's mind is about removing what Aylmer calls an imperfection. Building on this view, the present study asks how this obsession turns into a denial of human imperfection, of death and of the limits that nature sets.

Despite the publication of *The Birthmark* in 1843, there is no doubt that the scientific transformation of the human body resonates with contemporary debates about perfecting it. In fact, this short story invites comparison with the current debates about cosmetic surgery, genetic selection, human enhancement

and the algorithmic mediation of self-image. In the twenty-first century, the strong will to correct, improve and even erase all imperfections from human beings is quite visible in today's aesthetic surgery practices. In her article, "From Aylmer's Experiment to Aesthetic Surgery", Balestrini demonstrates the such relevance of Aylmer's project of bodily perfection. Such a perspective can also be seen through social media filters. When the filter smooths a face or brightens skin, it improves the way one looks with the user's consent. The same principle applies when Aylmer operates on his wife, Georgina. By removing his wife's marks, which symbolize his human existence, to perfect her, Aylmer engages in an inhuman act. Therefore, it would be convenient to note that the discussions about biotechnology address ethical questions about how far human beings are willing to go to achieve perfection and eliminate nature's restrictions. *The Birthmark* is not a condemnation of scientific progress, rather, it invites readers to reconsider science as an instrument of control to perfect human life by overcoming human limitations.

This article methodically brings in a view that shows Aylmer's hidden desires and his inner psychological battles. It is also worth significant attention to point out Aylmer's male gaze and how his wife, Georgina, obeys him, which shows the link between gender, control and the female body. Moreover, this writing also looks at the post-humanist view by looking at the differences between humans, nature, technology and improvement. It would also be essential to incorporate the philosophical ideas of hubris and Faustian ambition.

This article is a literary study of a feminist approach combined with a psychological reading of scientific obsession. It addresses topics such as hubris, Faustian ambition and a belief in perfectibility. These concepts are developed through Aylmer's quest to overcome nature's limitations. The feminist part of the

analysis resides in Judith Fetterley and Kary Meyers Skredsvig who show how Aylmer's wish to manipulate and change Georgiana's body is connected to gender roles and power. The psychological approach deals with obsession and repressed desires and helps to understand why Aylmer's scientific work goes beyond reason and becomes a compulsive drive for perfection. Together these perspectives suggest that Hawthorne depicts the quest for perfection as a scientific and moral issue. The urge to remove all flaws ultimately endangers the life it was meant to improve.

In that same line, it is important addressing the major question of this article: how does Hawthorne represent Aylmer's scientific obsession with perfecting the human condition and how does he ultimately fail to reach such objective in *The Birthmark*? This main question also raises several significant questions, namely: in what ways perfection leads to destruction? How can Aylmer's character be interpreted as a Faustian figure? In what ways does Georgina's submission to her husband offer a feminist reading of the birthmark? How does Hawthorne expose the meaning behind Georgina's death as moral and philosophical consequences of trying to perfect human nature through science?

Although there are substantial works on *The Birthmark*, my contribution lies in the concept of perfecting the human condition. I will argue that Aylmer's science, his Faustian ambition, the concept of hubris, Georgiana's submission and Aminadab, when considered as separate issues, are interconnected manifestations of a single project: Aylmer's ambition to overcome the fundamental limitations of embodied human existence.

In this article, I propose to read *The Birthmark* through three interlocking lenses. In the first chapter, I examine Aylmer's obsession with science, pride and the Faustian will. The second

chapter mainly focuses on perfecting the human condition. This chapter aims to present Georgina as the object of scientific experimentation. The third and last chapter demonstrates the limitations of human perfectibility. It highlights Hawthorne's moral and philosophical critique of the ideal of perfection and human limits.

1. Aylmer's Obsession: Science, Pride and the Faustian Will

I see Aylmer as a scientist whose wish to control nature slowly turns into an obsession with perfection. Aylmer fixes attention on the hand-shaped birthmark on Georgiana's cheek, calling it a "defect" on an otherwise beautiful face. What is just a physical trait becoming, in Aylmer's eyes, a problem that must be fixed by science? Aylmer's actions are not about healing Georgiana. Aylmer's desire to change Georgiana's body reflects his idea of perfection. Aylmer's perception of Georgiana changes as he becomes more and more obsessed with the one flaw, he considers to destroy her beauty. This chapter will explore how, for Hawthorne, Aylmer's quest for perfection is a means of control, not simply a way of knowing or helping nature, but a way of laying down an ideal for nature. This pursuit is comparable to that of a Faustian figure.

1.1 Aylmer's Definition of Perfection

One of the questions in the story is the meaning of perfection. For Aylmer perfection is flawlessness. Aylmer cannot accept any defect no matter how small. Although Georgiana is very beautiful, her beauty is not enough because she has one imperfection. What makes Aylmer's attitude troubling is how unimportant Georgiana's birthmark is. The birthmark does not threaten Georgiana's health, intelligence, character or happiness. Nevertheless, Aylmer starts being so obsessed with it. Aylmer asks, "Has it never occurred to you that the mark upon your

cheek might be removed?" (Hawthorne 2). This question shows the start of Aylmer's desire to fix what he sees as a defect. The birthmark, which others see as an even charming feature becomes in Aylmer's eyes an intolerable imperfection. Aylmer's reaction shows how perfection can distort perception. By focusing on one flaw, Aylmer loses sight of the beauty and complexity of the whole person. Georgiana is slowly turned, in Aylmer's view from a wife, into an object to be perfected.

Aylmer's reaction shows how perfection can distort from reality and perception. Perfectionists often focus hard on flaws that they lose sight of the larger picture. Aylmer no longer sees Georgiana as a person. Instead, Aylmer reduces Georgiana's identity to a single imperfection. In that same vein, Steward Randall in "Hawthorne's Fiction: The Light & The Dark by Richard Harter Fogle" captures the essence of Hawthorne's method. Randall pinpoints that:

> For Hawthorne's meaning (Mr. Fogle makes this clearer than any previous writer on the subject has done) cannot be reduced to a few simple propositions. His fictions are embodiments of a rich complexity. Ambiguity is at the center of his vision of life. Is Beatrice Rappaccini demon or angel? Is Aylmer villain or hero? ... These, and scores of other questions raised by his fictions, require double answers. Of such ambiguities is the substance of his art composed. (Randall 247)

This quotation is very relevant when we consider how unclear Aylmer's search for perfection is and what the birthmark really means. It keeps readers asking tough questions about Hawthorne's story. Aylmer's desire for perfection is based on his inability to accept the tension between human ideal and human

reality. He wants Georgiana to embody an ideal of perfection rather than remain a naturally imperfect human being. Consequently, Aylmer's desire led to his faith in science. Convinced that his scientific knowledge can correct Georgina's birthmark, the pursuit of perfection becomes a pursuit of scientific control.

1.2 Aylmer's Obsession with Science

Hawthorne's portrait of Aylmer is one of the most psychologically nuanced in American short fiction. He is not a villain in the conventional sense. He is tender, devoted and genuinely brilliant and his love for Georgiana is real. What corrupts it is not malice but the particular pathology of the perfectionist: an inability to love anything that falls short of his ideal. From the opening pages, Hawthorne establishes the central conflict with quiet irony. The author openly affirms that:

> We know not whether Aylmer possessed this degree of faith in man's ultimate control over Nature. He had devoted himself, however, too unreservedly to scientific studies ever to be weaned from them by any second passion. His love for his young wife might prove the stronger of the two; but it could only be by intertwining itself with his love of science, and uniting the strength of the latter to his own. (Hawthorne 2)

Love in words is a "second passion" that comes after science. It is always in competition with science. It is always ready to be given up for the sake of science. The marriage is not a break from Aylmer's obsession. It is a continuation of that obsession in another form. Hawthorne makes this clear at the start of the book. He writes: "In the part of the last century there lived a man of science an eminent proficient in every branch of natural

philosophy, who not long before our story opens had made experience of a spiritual affinity more attractive than any chemical one." (Hawthorne, 2)

The birthmark does not just bother Aylmer because it makes Georgiana less beautiful. It stirs something inside him. It becomes the center of an anxiety that was always there hidden in his nature. This is the anxiety of the scientist who cannot stand to face something he cannot explain, cannot control and cannot fix. Georgiana's birthmark is nature's mark. It is a sign that the living body will always go beyond the scientist's understanding and demonstrates that there is always something that cannot be measured. Indeed, there is always a part of life that cannot be contained in a formula. The birthmark stands as a reminder that nature will always resist the experiment. This is quite understandable when Hawthorne stipulates that:

> The crimson hand expressed the ineludible gripe in which mortality clutches the highest and purest of earthly mould, degrading them into kindred with the lowest and even with the very brutes, like whom their visible frames return to dust. In this manner, selecting it as the symbol of his wife's liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death, Aylmer's sombre imagination was not long in rendering the birthmark a frightful object (Hawthorne 3)

In this passage, the birthmark begins as a physical mark and ends as "a frightful object", but the transformation happens entirely inside Aylmer's "sombre imagination." According to Aylmer, the horror is not in the mark itself but in the perceiver's refusal to accept what it truly represents. As for Aylmer, he cannot bear the reminder of mortality. He dreams, repeatedly, of cutting deeper and deeper into Georgina's chest to reach the mark,

finding each time that its roots are entwined with her heart. Here, the dream acts as a premonition. It suggests that removing the mark means removing her life. Despite this warning, he proceeds nonetheless.

In *The Sins of the Fathers: Hawthorne's Psychological Themes* (1966) Frederick Crews discovers a pertinent psychological element in Aylmer's behavior. Rather than representing Aylmer's deeds as a simple personification of scientific ambition, Crews's method emphasizes the profound psychological struggles that form the background of Hawthorne's characters. From this perspective Aylmer's response to Georgiana's birthmark is highlighted. Physically the mark is insignificant, but he invests it with a significance far beyond its real nature. His intolerance of such a minor blemish suggests that his concern is not only with Georgiana's looks but with his own need to transcend the limitations of human nature as he perceives them. Aylmer thus wants to do more than remove a birthmark, he wants to remove the mark of human imperfection itself. Thus, Crews's psychological reading thus helps illuminate the obsessive dimension of Aylmer's pursuit, which later develops into an excessive faith in science and his desire to control nature.

Similarly, Aylmers belief in science keeps growing. With that growth comes a desire to push beyond what nature allows. His scientific goals stop being about learning. They turn into a drive to control and dominate. This shift marks the start of the pattern in Aylmer. He becomes a man who lets his pride, in knowledge lead him to defy nature. He tries to take power that should not belong to humans. In the end his ambition goes far and exceeds what any person should be able to do.

1.3 Aylmer as a Faustian Character

Aylmer's drive to achieve perfection takes on a Faustian shape when his scientific goals shift from seeking knowledge to

wanting to control nature. Like the Faust figure he refuses to accept the limits that come with being human. His dislike for Georgiana's birthmark is not about appearance it reflects a much deeper desire to dominate the natural world. The author says that Aylmer had "devoted himself [...] to studies" and that nothing could match his love for science except his love for his wife (Hawthorne 2). More telling Hawthorne writes that Aylmer might one day "lay his hand on the secret of creative force and perhaps make new worlds for himself." (Hawthorne 2) This image points to something human beings stepping into a role normally reserved for the divine.

Aylmer's experiments show how far his ambition reaches. His fascination with the "the universal solvent by which the golden principle might be elicited" and the "Elixir Vitae" (Hawthorne 7) reveals that he is not only trying to understand nature, he wants to break its rules. He even claims he could create an "elixir of immortality" to decide how long someone will live. This makes Aylmer declares that "I could apportion the lifetime of any mortal at whom you might point your finger" (Hawthorne 8). Georgiana senses the danger in this power. She tells him "It is terrible to possess power or even to dream of possessing it" (Hawthorne7). Her words highlight what makes Aylmer truly Faustian: the hunger for knowledge has turned into a hunger for control.

Aylmer's scientific ambition takes on a Faustian dimension because his pursuit of knowledge becomes a desire to conquer nature. William Bysshe Stein identifies him as "the first of Hawthorne's Fausts", arguing that he is "thus the first of Hawthorne's Fausts, in a purely symbolic line of action sacrifices his soul to conquer nature, the universal force of which man is but a tool." (Stein 91–92). Such a perspective as Rucker's analysis of Aylmer's scientific idealism, intellectual pride and desire to conquer nature reinforces this perspective. In these following lines, Rucker describes Aylmer as "a proud and

obsessed scientist whose single goal is to conquer nature" (Rucker 447). Her characterization is particularly revealing because Aylmer's pursuit is not simply scientific; it is driven by an aspiration toward the infinite. He is, in Rucker's formulation, a "seeker of the infallible" (Rucker 453) whose intellectual pride ultimately prevents him from accepting the limitations of the natural world.

There is an irony in the end. He achieves the perfection he wanted but loses the woman he loved. Hawthorne does not blame knowledge itself. He blames the belief that human knowledge can become absolute. Aylmer's tragedy is that he will not accept that mortality and imperfection are part of being human. His Faustian ambition promised control. It led only to loss. In trying to perfect nature, he destroyed life. Besides, Aylmer's desire to push beyond the boundaries of nature turns from a dream into something real. He wants to make the impossible possible to fix what nature has made imperfect. This ambition leads him directly to Georgiana. She is no longer his wife; she becomes the experiment.

2. Perfecting the Human Condition: Georgiana as the Object of Scientific Experimentation

Aylmer's desire to perfect nature becomes most troubling when Aylmer turns his attention to Georgiana. What begins as a harmless birthmark gradually becomes, in Aylmer's eyes, a defect that must be removed. Aylmer's scientific ambition therefore enters the intimate part of Aylmer's life: Aylmer's marriage. As Georgiana becomes the object of Aylmer's experiment, Georgiana also begins to accept Aylmer's view of her imperfection. This chapter follows this progression from the meaning of the birthmark to Georgiana's acceptance of Aylmer's ideal and finally, to the failure of Aylmer's attempt to perfect Georgiana.

2.1 Georgiana and the Birthmark

Aylmer can be considered as the driving force that pushes the story to its tragic end, while Georgiana remains its moral heart. Before she marries Aylmer, she does not see the birthmark as a flaw. In reality, those who admire her think it part of her beauty. They imagine "some fairy had laid her hand upon the infant's cheek" (Hawthorne 3). Hawthorne shows the mark at first as something even more magical, not something that needs to be fixed. Even people who wish it gone do so because they already think Georgiana is almost perfect. They believe removing it would make "one living specimen of loveliness without the semblance of a flaw" (Hawthorne 3). The irony is strong. The mark is so small that it seems pointless to remove it. Aylmer slowly turns it into the most important thing about Georgiana.

As Mary E. Rucker points out, Aylmer cannot decide at first whether the mark is "a charm or a defect" (451). His doubt shows the real issue is not in Georgiana's appearance but in how he perceives her. Once he fixes his attention on the mark, he cannot see her beauty as a whole. Rucker says Aylmer "erroneously" focuses Georgiana's "totality" on the birthmark (454). That means he changes a detail into a judgment about her entire being. His way of looking at her reduces her to one flaw he wants to eliminate.

According to Hawthorne, the birthmark is more than a physical mark. It signifies "the fatal flaw of humanity" that nature places on every person. It is a reminder that human beings are "temporary and finite" (Hawthorne 3). The mark belongs to Georgiana. It also represents something bigger: the truth that everybody will grow old, weaken and die. Aylmer's wish to remove it is not about making his wife look better. He is attempting to erase the sign of limits. As Rucker puts it, Aylmer "profanely circumscribes Georgiana's selfhood to her physicality—precisely to her marred cheek" (456). That is

where the tragedy begins. A woman once loved for her wholeness becomes, in the eyes of her husband, a thing that needs fixing.

The tragedy grows more complicated when Aylmer's judgment starts to shape Georgiana's own view of herself. The birthmark, once seen as a part of her beauty slowly turns into a source of shame because Georgiana begins to see it through Aylmer's eyes. She is not being pushed by Aylmer's wish to make her perfect; Georgiana also joins in. Georgiana's choice to go through the experiment makes us ask a question: how much of Georgiana's decision is really hers when the idea of perfection is already, inside her? This mix of love, consent and self-denial shows the tragedy of Georgiana.

2.2 Complicity, Consent and internalized perfection

The tragedy of Georgiana grows more painful when she starts to see herself through Aylmer's eyes. At first, she is clearly upset by his rejection of the birthmark. She asks, "Then why did you take me from my mother's side? You cannot love what shocks you!" (Hawthorne 3). This question shows that she sees the problem as belonging to Aylmer, not to her. Over time his constant disgust slowly changes how she views herself. The birthmark, which once seemed harmless, now feels like something that could ruin her husband's love and happiness.

Her choice should not be considered weakness or blind obedience. Georgiana knows the experiment might kill her. She has read Aylmer's journal and witnessed the failures of his attempts. Instead of pulling back, she chooses to go ahead. Her words, "Spare me not, though you should find the birthmark; take refuge in my heart at last", show both her bravery and how deeply she has committed herself to Aylmer's project (Hawthorne 5). She is ready to risk her life because she believes that the mark must disappear. Her consent is tragic. She takes

part in her destruction because the ideal imposed on her has become her own desire.

The feminist criticism of "The Birthmark" shifts attention from Aylmer's ambition to the woman whose body becomes the object of Aylmer's experiment. In her book *The Resisting Reader: A Feminist Approach to American Fiction* (1978), Judith Fetterley argues that Aylmer's idealism is inseparable from Aylmer's desire to control Georgiana revealing how scientific authority can become a form of power. Aylmer's judgment turns a feature of Georgiana's body into a defect that needs correction. In that same vein, Kary Meyers Skredsvig's thoughts about science and gender also help us understand this moment. In her article "Eve's Daughter, Mary's Child: Women's Representation in Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark", her ideas place the conflict between Aylmer and Georgiana within a fight over female control over one's own body. Georgiana's body becomes the site where Aylmer's scientific power and his idea of womanhood are carried out. What begins as Aylmer's dissatisfaction slowly turns into Georgiana's sense of failure. After reading his journal, her admiration for him grows. She says, "It has made me worship you more than ever" (Hawthorne 10). There is an irony here. The more she learns about Aylmer's failures, the more she trusts his judgement.

Georgiana's cooperation does not make her responsible for the tragedy. Instead, it shows how completely Aylmer's vision has taken hold inside her. She no longer just wants to please her husband. She wants to become the woman he imagines. Hawthorne shows that perfection is not an outside demand. It can be absorbed deeply that the person who suffers begins to enforce it on themselves. Georgiana's final agreement is the disturbing result of Aylmer's obsession. He does not only try to change her body. He changes how she sees her worth.

Georgiana's agreement marks the step in Aylmer's search for perfection. When the birthmark finally vanishes, his

so-called victory comes at the cost of her life. What seems like a triumph of science turns out to be the failure of perfection.

2.3 The Perfectibility Project's Failure

With the disappearance of the birthmark, Aylmer's experiment seems finally to be a success. But Hawthorne makes this moment of triumph richly ironic: the closer Aylmer gets to physical perfection, the closer Georgiana gets to death. Which is already foreshadowed by his earlier unsuccessful experiments. Georgiana's touch causes "the whole plant [to] suffer a blight, its leaves turning coal-black" (Hawthorne 7). The withered flower foreshadows what Aylmer cannot see: his desire to correct nature will eventually destroy what he loves.

And the paradox is complete when at last the birthmark vanishes. Hawthorne writes, "the last crimson tint of the birthmark—that sole token of human imperfection—faded from her cheek," and "the parting breath of the now perfect woman passed into the atmosphere" (Hawthorne 13). Georgiana is only "perfect" at the moment of her death. Aylmer has attained his scientific goal, but only by destroying the human being he wanted to perfect. His failure is, therefore, not only scientific. It is his failure to understand that human imperfection is part and parcel of human life. In his article "Speaking of the Unspeakable: Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark'" Jules Zanger takes this contradiction even further by suggesting that:

> Aylmer, in turn, may be said to have transformed himself into a perfect, uxorious husband by elevating his wife into a scientific problem to be solved. The result is, if not marital happiness, at least a feverish compatibility, a temporary symbiosis that finally degenerates into vampirism. (Zanger 366)

Zanger observes that Aylmer turns Georgiana into "a problem to

be solved" and that their relationship ultimately degenerates into "vampirism". The metaphor captures the logic of the experiment: Aylmer's pursuit of perfection feeds upon Georgiana's life. This image is arresting because Aylmer's desire to change Georgiana gradually consumes her. Her love does not accept her as she is; it is conditioned by changing her. The final outcome shows the cost of this obsession: in removing the mark, Aylmer does not perfect Georgiana but destroys the very life he claims to love.

Hawthorne's final judgment leaves no doubt of the failure. Aylmer "did not look beyond the shadowy scope of time" and "find the perfect future in the present" (Hawthorne 13). He searches for perfection outside of the normal human condition and when he does so he destroys the imperfect happiness that is within his grasp. His project only operates on the surface. The birthmark is gone. Georgiana is gone. Destruction is the only way to perfection and Aylmer's greatest scientific triumph is the clearest evidence of his failure.

Aylmer's failure is more than a failure of science; it is a failure of perfection itself. By destroying Georgiana in his attempt to perfect her, Hawthorne calls into question the human desire to overcome the limits of nature.

3. The Limitations of Human Perfectibility: Hawthorne's Moral and Philosophical Critique

Aylmer's experiment going wrong signalizes something deeper. His pursuit of perfecting Georgina highlights his rejection of accepting limits. Throughout the short story, Hawthorne exposes ambition against natural order. He goes further and reveals what happens when the urge to control nature turns into obsession. This last chapter examines this conflict in three ways: nature versus science, which discusses Aylmer's attempt to fix what nature created; hubris and the rejection of human imperfection,

which explores Aylmer's inability to accept human imperfection and Aminadab and the judgement of nature, where Aminadab reminds us that we cannot triumph over the natural order.

3.1. Nature vs. Science

Aylmer's scientific experiment raises a significant question that tackles the heart of Hawthorne's short story: can human beings really improve what nature has made? The author does not reject systematically scientific knowledge, nevertheless, he is not adhering to the desire to master what nature has made. Indeed, Aylmer, the main protagonist recognizes that nature does not surrender her deepest secrets easily:

> our great creative Mother, while she amuses us with apparently working in the broadest sunshine, is yet severely careful to keep her own secrets, and, in spite of her pretended openness, shows us nothing but results. She permits us, indeed, to mar, but seldom to mend, and, like a jealous patentee, on no account to make. (Hawthorne 5)

The distinction is significant. Science can change or improve nature, but it cannot take the power to remake life to suit human wishes. Aylmer fails to recognize this boundary when he sees Georgiana's birthmark as something that can, and should, be rectified. This tension also mirrors current anxieties about the proper role of science. In a similar vein, Balestrini points out in her article "From Aylmer's Experiment to Aesthetic Surgery" that Warner declares that:

> too much scientific interest by an American physician could be seen as an outward flaw that pointed to an inward lack of grace. Even the appearance of excessive devotion to science

> threatened to taint his character, and thereby to corrupt his integrity and identity as a healer. (Warner 62, qtd in Balestrini)

In this passage, Balestrini reveals that nineteenth-century medical thought was wary of excessive scientific ambition as a threat to the physician's moral character, especially when scientific interest was pursued at the expense of empathy. Jacob Bigelow's formulation provides a telling contrast to Aylmer's attitude: "The physician is but the minister and servant of nature" (qtd. Balestrini 63). Aylmer does the reverse. He is not a servant to nature but tries to be her master. His experiment turns a natural imperfection of man into a challenge that he must conquer.

Furthermore, what Balestrini has exposed is quite true of Aylmer. According to Hawthorne, too much commitment to science could pose a threat to the moral character of a physician, especially when scientific curiosity replaces human sympathy. This is testified to by Balestrini, who writes that "the contention that scientific interest may destroy individual integrity recurs in Hawthorne's stories about scientists who lose their sense of empathy with their patients" (Balestrini p. 62). Aylmer is the embodiment of that tension. As he becomes more absorbed in perfecting Georgiana's body, he starts seeing less of her as a person.

The tragedy, then, is not merely that Aylmer's science fails. It is that he will not acknowledge the line between what can be changed and what must be borne. In his pursuit of improving nature, he ends up destroying it. In this, Hawthorne emphasizes on a significant message: human knowledge is priceless and worthy, but one might be careful to perfect life because no one can exercise control over nature and it requires humbleness to be able to understand it.

3.2. Hubris and the Rejection of Human Limits

Aylmer's tragedy does not lie in Aylmer's lack of love for Georgiana but in Aylmer's inability to accept Georgiana's imperfection. Aylmer's love gradually becomes inseparable from Aylmer's desire to perfect Georgiana. What begins as affection therefore turns into control. Aylmer truly loves Georgiana but he cannot accept the limits that make Georgiana human. It turns out that Aylmer's ambition is both noble and dangerous. That attitude is rooted in pride. Such perspective resonates in Brooks and Warren when they describe Aylmer as possessing "the questing spirit which will not resign itself to the limitations and imperfections of nature" a pride that enters into "many of man's nobler purposes". Brooks and Warren go further and testify that "the author is sympathetic to him, and obviously sees in his ruinous experiment a certain nobility "(Brooks and Warren, qtd. in Weston 2). This makes Aylmer more than a mad scientist. Aylmer's ambition comes from a desire to go beyond human limitations but that ambition becomes destructive when Aylmer refuses to recognize the authority of nature. As Rucker puts it Aylmer is "an obsessed scientist whose single goal is to conquer nature" (Rucker 447).

And in Aylmer's own words, we realize how proud he is. He looks forward to the time when he will have "corrected what Nature left imperfect in her fairest work" (Hawthorne 5). The word "corrected" is revealing in that it implies Aylmer considers nature to have made an error for which his science can find a cure. Thus, his ambition is not only to discover nature's secrets, he wants to improve upon nature's work. In this respect, his scientific confidence becomes divine, for he assumes the power to decide what should or should not exist in a perfect human being. This pride is ultimately a premonition of the tragedy to come.

The birthmark however represents something Aylmer cannot eliminate without destroying Georgiana. What Aylmer regards as a defect is therefore also a sign of the condition. Aylmer's desire to erase the mark becomes a desire to escape imperfection, vulnerability and ultimately mortality. When the mark finally disappears, Hawthorne states that "the parting breath of the perfect woman passed into the atmosphere" (Hawthorne 13). Georgiana becomes "perfect" at the moment of death. Aylmer achieves what he wanted only by destroying the life he sought to perfect.

This pattern is also mirrored in a revealing way in Eudora Welty's "A Still Moment," in which John James Audubon kills his subject in a bid for a scientifically perfect representation. As Weston notes in his article "Character, Theme, and Thematic Structure in Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark' and Welty's Fiction", Audubon knows that if the living object is broken up, the result is "a dead thing and not a live thing, never the essence, only a sum of parts" (Weston 4). Such a perspective reveals Aylmer's strongest desire. It is the master of science knowledge in order to overcome all limits and consequences. Accordingly, Aylmer's hubris does not lie only in the excessive pride of his intelligence and in the mastery of science but in his core denial of what makes us human: mortality as a fundamental condition of life.

Hawthorne's final judgment makes the paradox clear. Aylmer's failure is ultimately a failure of humility. By refusing to accept the conditions of human life, Aylmer sacrifices the very life he sought to perfect. Thus, Aylmer wants to perfect human life, but his own inability to accept its limits ultimately deprives him of the ability to preserve it and this sounds like a warning against arrogance.

3.3. Aminadab and the Judgment of Nature

Hawthorne's contrast between Aylmer and Aminadab is one of the story's clearest illustrations of the struggle between the ideal

and the physical. Aylmer is pale, thin, intellectual and occupied with the world of ideas, whereas Aminadab is described as "shaggy," "bulky" and covered with the soot and vapors of the furnace (Hawthorne 6). The narrator clearly states that Aminadab "seems to represent man's physical nature." On the other hand, Aylmer stands for "the spiritual element". (Hawthorne 6) Thus, the two men show two different approaches to understanding what it means to be human. Aylmer is attracted to the ideal while Aminadab stays firmly committed to the body and the material world.

The fact about Georgiana's birthmark becomes significant. Aminadab does not share Aylmer's horror of the mark. When Aylmer tells him that the experiment has been a success, Aminadab merely laughs and says that if Georgiana were his wife, he would never have worried about the birthmark. Although his reply is crude, it also shows a certain practical sense. He does not regard Georgiana's body as something that needs to be corrected. To Aylmer the mark is an intolerable defect, but to Aminadab it is simply part of the woman.

In his article "Aminadab in Hawthorne's 'The Birthmark", Thompson provides a rather interesting explanation of this situation. Rather than viewing Aminadab's reply as simply the statement of "a crude man who is easily satisfied", he maintains that it is "based on compassion" (Thompson 415). In Thompson's view, Aminadab stands for a respect for human personality, which Aylmer's science has lost. This interpretation complicates the typical contrast between the sophisticated scientist and his supposed crude assistant. Although Aminadab has no education comparable to Aylmer's, he has something that Aylmer is increasingly losing, tolerance for human imperfection. The difference between the two men also has a more general importance. Thompson claims that Aminadab stands for "an early authority which is now discredited", whereas Aylmer symbolizes the emergence of a new scientific authority

(Thompson 414). Aminadab's position is thus paradoxical in that although he seems powerful because of his physical strength, he is still subordinate to Aylmer and works at his direction. The intellectual authority of Aylmer has replaced the older and more earthly type of knowledge represented by Aminadab. Hawthorne does not merely praise one and condemn the other. It is through their relationship that we see what might be lost when intellectual control becomes detached from the physical and human realities it aims to control.

The conclusion presents this conflict in its full extent. Once Georgiana has died, Aminadab is heard again chuckling with a hoarse laugh, after which the narrator states that "the gross fatality of earth exults in its invariable triumph over the immortal essence" (Hawthorne 13). The laugh is particularly disturbing since it is ambiguous. It may be interpreted as cruelty, but it could also be seen as the final acknowledgment that Aylmer's effort to overcome nature has failed. Although he had tried to defeat the limitations of the body, the body has in the end been the last to speak. Aminadab, therefore, does not merely mean "nature" in a literal sense; he stands for the physical aspect of human existence, which Aylmer is always trying to go beyond. His coarseness, his love of the material world and his admission of Georgiana's imperfections brought him into direct conflict with Aylmer's pursuit of an impossible perfection. Aylmer's tragedy is his inability to reconcile the spiritual and the physical, for he is attempting perfection by denying the very conditions that make human life possible. Aminadab's final laugh leaves Aylmer's failure hanging in the air: the ideal may strive for immortality, but the earth has the last word.

The analysis of Hawthorne's short story expounds a fundamental paradox in Aylmer's project. His desire to perfect human life ultimately turns into a danger to human existence itself. The birthmark first looks like a detail and Georgina even calls it a charm but in Aylmer's eyes, the birthmark equals a fatal

flaw. His scientific perspective transforms differences into defects, ultimately reducing Georgina to an object of experimentation. The experiment reveals how limited Aylmer's confidence in science is, while Georgiana's death clearly exposes how destructive it is to ignore human limitation. A reading through the concepts of hubris and Faustian ambition, we realize that Aylmer's failure is not a failed experiment, but it is the result of a larger wish to go beyond human limits. In the end, the story tells us that imperfection is not a mistake that science can fix but a part of what it means to be human.

Conclusion

Hawthorne's *The Birthmark* offers a powerful warning about how the quest for perfection can ultimately threaten life itself. The analysis makes it clear that Aylmer's point of contention with Georgiana's birthmark begins as a dislike of imperfection and turns into something larger, his willingness to exercise his scientific knowledge over nature's mark and human condition. His ambition transcends science; he ultimately becomes a Faustian character. He looks for knowledge and power that can overcome the limits of the body, death, and imperfection. At the same time, Georgiana's role in the analysis demonstrates the gendered aspect of this project, as her body becomes the object of Aylmer's impositions of his ideal of perfection. His scientific authority works with the desire to define and control the female body. The failure of the experiment, the presence of Aminadab and the death of Georgiana show that a worldview that tries to change the nature of understanding has its limits. Hawthorne does not simply put science against nature. He examines the consequences of scientific ambition when the quest for perfection ignores the basic limits of human life.

However, it is necessary to appreciate science's benefits in healing illness, repairing injuries, setting broken bones and

restoring sight, which are not nature-made or divine imperfections but defects nonetheless. Aylmer's clinical error is considering the birthmark as an earthly imperfection. Moreover, *The Birthmark* continues to speak to contemporary debates about esthetic intervention, biotechnology, and human enhancement, where the desire to correct or improve human life still raises questions about the limits of scientific power and the meaning of human dignity.

This study also contributes to society by engaging with contemporary questions about the body, scientific power and the desire to perfect the human being. This paper focuses on the social implications of the designation of some physical features as flaws to be remedied by analyzing Aylmer's effort to remove Georgiana's supposed imperfection. It also prompts us to reflect on the gendered pressures of body image and the ethical responsibilities of scientific and technological innovation. Hawthorne's story remains relevant in the present era of increasing importance of esthetic medicine, biotechnology and human enhancement technologies since it invites the reader to critically reflect on the boundary between improving human life and seeking to control or redefine it. Thus, the study contributes to Hawthorne scholarship and to broader discussions of body politics, scientific ethics, human dignity and the limits of technological intervention.

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