Hawthorne’s Three Rungs: Diving into *The Birth-Mark*

*The Birth-Mark* by Nathaniel Hawthorne is a story that can be interpreted in numerous ways. These different interpretations affect what the reader takes away from reading the story. The poem *Diving into the Wreck* by Adrienne Rich says, “There is a ladder. The ladder is always there hanging innocently close to the side of the schooner” (Rich 1973). These lines are ironic because like a ladder having multiple rungs, *The Birth-Mark* can be interpreted in multiple, diverse ways. Likewise, all of these interpretations are never far from the reader’s grasp, in the same way the ladder is close to the side of the schooner. The three interpretations are like three rungs of the ladder, those rungs being the interpretations of Jeffery Howard, Liz Rosenberg, and myself. The rungs fade from sight as the water grows murky and deep, as perhaps do our possible interpretations.

A thought-provoking interpretation suggests that the reason Aylmer was so consumed with removing Georgiana’s birthmark was because it was disrupting their marriage and making him feel like less of a man. Jeffery Howard states, “Rather than focusing on the connections between nomenclature and the behavior of the characters in *The Birth-Mark*, I illustrate by means of a triad of symbols (head, heart, and hand) that Aylmer’s unification with and destruction of the birthmark—which parallels his marital unity and eventual destruction of Georgiana—exists as a reaction to the birthmark which he perceives as a threat to his masculine dominance” (Howard 133). Howard describes how Aylmer feels as though the mark on her face
is disrupting the union of their marriage. Aylmer believes by removing the mark, he will be improving Georgiana’s condition to help her looks, as well as to help his self-esteem. This interpretation also states, “Perhaps in his need to play the role of the protective male, Aylmer feels the mark may render him unnecessary to Georgiana” (Howard 135). Howard is suggesting that her mark resembles cave drawings of red hands that were believed to keep harmful forces away many years ago, and it is this resemblance that makes Aylmer feel that as long as Georgiana has this mark, a supernatural force will be protecting her rather than him. It is for these reasons that Aylmer feels that the mark is causing issues in their relationship.

Another interpretation suggests that the main theme of the story focuses more on the contrast between Aylmer and his assistant, Aminadab, rather than on Georgiana’s mark. Liz Rosenberg writes, ‘“To make matters perfectly clear, Hawthorne tells us in an authorial aside the Aminadab “seemed to represent man’s physical nature; while Aylmer’s slender figure and pale, intellectual face, were no less apt a type of the spiritual element” ’(Rosenberg 147). Rosenberg discusses the opposite personalities of the two men, and she explains that it is those opposing qualities that make them counterparts, ultimately leading to the demise of Georgiana. Rosenberg’s interpretation also talks about Georgiana and the significance of her name in relation to the personality of the two men. Her article explains, “Her name, as Burns points out, is a feminized masculine, suggesting the “Two-thing” of the alchemical process, and perhaps also geo, “earth,” poised between the “highest cloud-region” of Aylmer and the underworld “furnace” of Aminadab” (Rosenberg 147). Essentially, the writer is saying that Georgiana was doomed from the start simply by the symbolism that is present in her name. Rosenberg poses an interesting point by further examining the personalities of the men to produce an in depth interpretation of a seemingly simple story.
My interpretation of *The Birth-Mark* is much different than the two previous analyses. I believe Aylmer’s obsession with his wife’s mark was one that was sparked by discontent and boredom. In the story, Hawthorne writes, “One day, very soon after their marriage, Aylmer sat gazing at his wife with a trouble in his countenance that grew stronger until he spoke” (Hawthorne 366). To me, this suggests that Aylmer soon grew bored with his marriage. He was used to being in the lab constantly tinkering, and his marriage became boring to him due to its lack of excitement or challenge. Hawthorne also writes, “After his marriage—for he thought little or nothing of the matter before—Aylmer discovered that this was the case with himself” (Hawthorne 367). Aylmer was looking for something that would pose a challenge for him in his marriage, so he used the birth-mark as a way of expressing his discontent with their marriage. Ultimately, Aylmer was able to combine his wife’s mark with a task he could complete which he felt would create some type of excitement in their marriage, which was dull for him after a while.

*The Birth-Mark* is a story that can only be interpreted by the reader. It is safe to say that only Hawthorne himself knows the true interpretation of the story. Once again, the poem written by Rich describes the way this story can be interpreted by saying, “I came to explore the wreck. The words are purposes. The words are maps” (Rich 1029). The reader can explore this story the way one could explore a ship wreck. By exploring the words in this story like a ship wreck, it can help the reader form their own opinions as to what Hawthorne is trying to communicate.

When reading this story, ironically, the words are like maps, maps that show you the underlying message of *The Birth-Mark*. No matter which interpretation the reader chooses to accept, *The Birth-Mark* has a great deal of lessons throughout and poses interesting questions that can only be answered by exploring the wreck that is Hawthorne’s story.
Works Cited


Nathaniel Hawthorne’s THE BIRTH-MARK.

Language: English

Authors: Jeffrey Howard


Document Type: Short Story Review

Publication Information: Taylor & Francis Ltd

Subject Terms: SHORT story (Literary form) -- History & criticism
BIRTHMARK, The (Short story)
HAWKERNE, Nathaniel, 1804-1864
MASCULINITY in literature
BIRTHMARKS in literature
SYMBOLISM in literature
LOVE in literature
DREAMS in literature

Author-Supplied “The Birth-Mark”

Keywords: hand
heart
masculinity
Nathaniel Hawthorne

Abstract: A literary critique is presented of the short story “The Birth-Mark” by Nathaniel Hawthorne. The author argues that the birth-mark and the male character’s need to destroy it allude to themes of masculinity, love, and physical perfection. The author discusses Hawthorne’s use of the symbolism of hands, hearts, and the influence of dreams.

Document Information: Essay last updated: 20120614

Author: 1 Utah State University

Affiliations:

ISSN: 00144940

DOI: 10.1080/00144940.2012.678414

Accession Number:

Database: Literary Reference Center
Nathaniel Hawthorne’s THE BIRTH-MARK

Keywords: hand, Nathaniel Hawthorne, heart, masculinity, “The Birth-Mark”

In a 2009 essay on Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Birth-Mark,” Conor Walsh, augmenting the analysis of the work performed by W. R. Thompson, explores the etymological significance of Aminadab’s name and the connection between that name and the process of removing the birthmark from Georgiana’s cheek (Walsh 258). Nathan Cervo, on the other hand, states that the story revolves around the names of all three characters. Further, he weaves a detailed and complex argument that “The Birth-Mark” stands as an alchemic allegory, explaining that the relationship between the characters exemplifies a somewhat explosive chemical reaction (21). However, Jules Zanger departs from the scholastic name game played by other critics, proposing that Georgiana’s unsightly mark and her submission to the desires of her husband “unifies Aylmer’s life and love; [and] she becomes central to his existence rather than ‘a thing apart’” (366). In other words, Georgiana’s blemish facilitates the newlyweds’ marital unity. While the story does support the development of a unity of sorts, the birthmark usurps Georgiana’s position as the object of Aylmer’s attention, leading to unity between Aylmer and the birthmark, which eventually becomes “central to his existence.”

Rather than focusing on the connections between nomenclature and the behavior of the characters in “The Birth-Mark,” I illustrate by means of a triad of symbols (head, heart, and hand) that Aylmer’s unification with and destruction of the birthmark—which parallels his marital unity and eventual destruction of Georgiana—exists as a reaction to the birthmark which he perceives as a threat to his masculine dominance.

Because of the placement of the mark on Georgiana’s cheek, the head becomes a vital symbol in ascertaining Aylmer’s motivation to remove his
some sort of “clairvoyant action” or divining power, a metaphysical force which perhaps escapes the alchemist Aylmer’s ability to control (Cirlot 194), because he deals primarily with the physical elements (Hawthorne 1292).

Interestingly, imprints of the red hand have also been found on cave walls as part of prehistoric drawings believed to keep away harmful influences (Denny 3770). Perhaps, in his need to play the role of the protective male, Aylmer feels that the mark may render him unnecessary to Georgiana. Those feelings of potential superfluity spur him toward its removal, instead to “draw a magic circle round her” (Hawthorne 1294), representative of the masculine principle by which he intends to protect Georgiana (Cirlot 103).

However, Aylmer’s actions also communicate his need to protect himself and his dominant scholarly position. The location of the hand on Georgiana’s heart contains a symbolic allusion to wisdom because “the hand placed on the breast indicates the attitude of the sage” (Cirlot 194). The idea of intelligent action in his wife might, in Aylmer’s mind, potentially represent an incursion on Aylmer’s role because he perceives himself as nearing omnipotence or godhood, an attitude conveyed in his remark to Georgiana concerning the final product of his experiment: “Ah, wait for this one success . . . then worship me if you will” (Hawthorne 1297). Aylmer might interpret any sign of intelligence or wisdom on Georgiana’s part as an infringement of his godly role relative to her existence. Therefore, fearing that the mark will burn away the topless towers of his intellectual Ilium, Aylmer seeks to remove it from Georgiana’s breast.

Further, the appearance of the mark on the left side of Georgiana’s face—a side which is often portrayed as being “inferior to the right” (Denny 3770)—threatens Aylmer’s intellectual prowess. The symbolism of the left hand opposes “the rational, the conscious, the logical and the virile” (Cirlot 195), all characteristics which Aylmer believes himself to possess. Therefore, Aylmer turns all of his attention to removing the mark, becoming one with it in order to unravel the fabric of the subversive antimasculine and antiauthoritarian implications of the birthmark, ultimately destroying the mark, his wife, and his own almighty self-perception in the process.

Works Cited
‘The best that earth could offer’: ‘The Birth-mark,’ a newlywed’s story.

**Authors:** Rosenberg, Liz


**Document Type:** Literary Criticism

**Subject Terms:** Criticism

**Reviews & Products:** Birthmark, The (Book)

**NAICS/Industry Codes:**
- 451211 Book Stores
- 414420 Book, Periodical, and Newspaper Merchant Wholesalers
- 424920 Book, Periodical, and Newspaper Merchant Wholesalers
- 451110 Book stores and news dealers

**People:** Hawthorne, Nathaniel, 1804-1864

**Abstract:** Analyzes the relations between men and women in the fictional work of writer Nathaniel Hawthorne entitled ‘The Birth-mark’. Alchemical references and imagery characteristics; Revelation of mind/body theories; Praising of imperfect and mortal quality of human nature.

**Full Text Word Count:** 2905

**ISSN:** 0039-3789

**Accession Number:** 9511241782

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'THE BEST THAT EARTH COULD OFFER': 'THE BIRTH-MARK', A NEWLYWED'S STORY

Listen [American Accent] *

"The Birth-mark" is a love story, like most of Hawthorne's greatest fiction, concerned with the relation between men and women. The "love" in Hawthorne's fiction seldom takes any other form--his women are not mothers but wives, not angels but household saints: even in one notable exception, Hester's relation to her daughter Pearl comes to seem peripheral to her union (or disunion) with Reverend Dimmesdale.

This question of marriage--and the larger issue of union and separation--has a special piquancy in 'The Birth-mark,' perhaps largely for biographical reasons. Written in 1843, it was Hawthorne's first work of fiction following his own marriage to Sophia. It remains clearly a newlywed's story, fresh with the author's anxieties, hopes, and fears. This very freshness helps make the story as peculiar in Hawthorne's oeuvre as it is characteristic. In "The Birth-mark" Hawthorne takes to task his own "eterealizing" protagonist; he reveals a deep suspicion of mind/body theories current in his time; and, strangest of all, he ends by praising the imperfect and mortal quality of human nature.

The story's problematic "hero," Aylmer, is a scientist, artist, aesthete--and newlywed. An idealist by nature and profession, he falls prey soon after his marriage to a haunting awareness of "his wife's liability to sin, sorrow, decay and death" (39), symbolized by the tiny
"The Best That Earth Could Offer":
"The Birth-mark," A Newlywed's Story

by Liz Rosenberg

The Birth-mark" is a love story, like most of Hawthorne's greatest fiction, concerned with the relation between men and women. The "love" in Hawthorne's fiction seldom takes any other form—his women are not mothers but wives, not angels but household saints: even in one notable exception, Hester's relation to her daughter Pearl comes to seem peripheral to her union (or disunion) with Reverend Dimmesdale.

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The story's problematic "hero," Aylmer, is a scientist, artist, aesthete—and newlywed. An idealist by nature and profession, he falls prey soon after his marriage to a haunting awareness of "his wife's liability to sin, sorrow, decay and death" (39), symbolized by the tiny birthmark on her cheek. This mark becomes to him "the spectral Hand that wrote mortality, where he would fain have worshipped" (39). Aylmer's personality resists this: his lifelong search, Hawthorne suggests, has been for "ultimate control over nature" (36).

"The Birth-mark" examines Aylmer's dilemma chiefly by way of three systems of thought: alchemy, animism, and Emersonian Transcendentalism. All three systems address the issue of union versus separation—all three also bear upon "birthmark," in its larger context of spirit and matter.

Alchemical references and imagery recur throughout "The Birth-mark," as has been amply documented by Shannon Burns, David Van Leer and others. Aylmer's scientific aims are at one with alchemy, to "ascend from one
creates "Airy figures, absolutely bodiless ideas, and forms of unsubstantial beauty . . ." (44). Only in his repeated failures as a scientist does Aylmer reveal "the short-comings of the composite man—the spirit burthened with clay and working in matter . . ." (49).

Aminadab and Aylmer are alter-egos, mirror images. Aylmer is introduced to us as "an eminent proficient in every branch of natural philosophy," while Aminadab enters as one "issued from an inner apartment, a man of low stature" (36, 43). Aylmer possesses "the higher nature," Aminadab "the grunt or growl of a brute" (49, 46). To make matters perfectly clear, Hawthorne tells us in an authorial aside that Aminadab "seemed to represent man's physical nature; while Aylmer's slender figure, and pale, intellectual face, were no less apt a type of the spiritual element" (43). What is "bad" in both is their lack of integration. Here, as elsewhere, Hawthorne reveals his distrust of polarizing extremes: "There is no surer method of arriving at the Hall of Fantasy, than to throw oneself into the current of a theory . . ." ("The Hall of Fantasy" 180). Fanaticism, Hawthorne suggests, kills the real.

Between Aylmer, the airy intellectual, and his "bad anima," the cloddish Aminadab, stands Aylmer's wife Georgiana—associated throughout the story with love, marriage, blood, and the heart. Her name, as Burns points out, is a feminized masculine, suggesting the "Two-thing" of the alchemical process, and perhaps also geo, "earth," poised between the "highest cloud-region" (42) of Aylmer and the underworld "furnace" of Aminadab. Georgiana's birthmark is controlled by her heart's blood, as is Georgiana herself: she feels the effects of Aylmer's remedy as a "tingling, half painfully, half pleasurably, at her heart" (48). In a story about the dangers of one-strandedness, Georgiana's failure of excessive heart—while to Hawthorne the most pardonable of sins—is ultimately deadly to her. As Barbara Eckstein has pointed out, "Romance is Georgiana's religion" (511) and she dies its martyr.

If the heart sees only the heart's truth, "The Birth-mark" indicates that it is nonetheless closer to reality than either abstraction or cloddishness. Georgiana differs from Aylmer and Aminadab not only in the nature of her failure but in her clear-sightedness. Aylmer never truly sees his wife; even when she is dying, he misperceives the true import of her symptoms. Aminadab, on the other hand, feels only the physical: he says, "If she were my wife, I'd never part with that birth-mark" and expresses "delight" in a "gross, hoarse chuckle" while Georgiana lies dying (43, 55). But Georgiana observes her husband's failures clearly, even while she admires him for his passionate convictions. She sees herself and her situation no less accurately: "Life is but a sad possession to those who have attained precisely the degree of moral advancement at which I stand. Were I weaker and blinder, it might be happiness. Were I stronger, it might be endured hopefully" (53). It is