

I

“A Frightful Object”

Romance, Obsession, and Death in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Birth-Mark”

Domestic violence manifests itself peculiarly in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Birth-Mark,” a story that first appeared in *Pioneer Magazine* in 1843. Published earlier than many of the texts under discussion in this book, “The Birth-Mark” is a narrative that obscures its subject matter from itself. Representing itself as a tale of brilliant scientific investigation and research, “The Birth-Mark” turns out to be the story of a marked body and a murder. Aylmer, an illustrious scientist, becomes obsessed with a mark on his wife’s cheek, determines to eradicate it, and in doing so kills her. The story thus concerns itself with the marking and representation of the woman’s body—a body that appears at first to be noted for its stunning beauty, but turns out instead to be a body marked merely for destruction.

“The Birth-Mark” is distinct from the other texts discussed in this book; not only was it published earlier, it is the only American text and is also a romance. There is a laconic, guarded quality in the narration of events; the narrative style is arguably not only brief and succinct but cursory. The generic features of romance—the lack of a detailed social context, the stylized, allegorized quality of the characters, and the strange, pervasive air of distance—release both the reader and the characters into a world unconstrained by the realist expectations of social actuality. In this story, unlike most of the other texts

explored in this book, little explanation or context is offered for the violence and destruction that occur and Aylmer's destructive desires are not narratively placed in a psychological or social or cultural context. "The Birth-Mark" may therefore appear to be a strange starting point for a book that principally considers mid-nineteenth-century realist texts.

Paradoxically, however, it is precisely the absence of context that works to illuminate the perversity and distortion of the violence that is portrayed in the story.

For Henry James, the lack of context, of detail, of explanation, or of actuality is the defining quality of the romance and functions to free the imagination from constraint:

The only *general* attribute of projected romance that I can see . . . is the fact of the kind of experience with which it deals—experience liberated, so to speak; experience disengaged, disembroiled, disencumbered, exempt from the conditions that we usually know to attach to it. (Preface, *The American* xvii)

For James, then, the lack of realist constraints in the romance has the paradoxical effect of enhancing and intensifying its capacities for human investigation. This notion is elaborated upon by a number of theorists of the genre, all of whom perceive the denuded, simplified world of the romance as exposing that which is partially excluded by the realist text—the world of the unconscious, of dreams, fantasies, nightmares, and of the private, the hidden, the dark. Gillian Beer states that "the romance gives repetitive form to . . . those desires which cannot find controlled expression within a society" (13); Northrop Frye discusses the "subjective intensity" of romance and the way in which something "nihilistic and untameable is likely to keep breaking out of [its] pages" (304–05); and Richard Chase argues that the romance embodies the "aesthetic possibilities of radical forms of alienation, contradiction, and disorder" (2).

For Hawthorne himself, romance, both because of and in spite of this instability, is fully committed to "the truth of the human heart" (Preface, *House* 1). "Nihilism," lack of control, outbreak, "contradiction," and "disorder" all seethe beneath the stylized veneer of "The Birth-Mark" allowing it to reveal aspects of the psyche and "human heart" that might be less accessible in the detailed, contextualized world of the realist text.

The principal “context” of the story is markedly unreal: when Aylmer takes his wife into the artificially created space that he has constructed for her and in which he will kill her, he feels as though “he could draw a magic circle round her, within which no evil might intrude” (44). While, on the one hand, the figuration of this “magic circle” highlights the essential liminality of the domestic sphere (an important aspect of all the domestic spaces this book examines), on the other hand, its magical unreality foregrounds the fact that the evil from which Aylmer ostensibly wishes to protect his wife comes from within rather than without, from *inside* the “magic circle,” inside the domestic sphere. Thus, the tale’s lack of context and of realist detail functions not only to isolate the violence (thereby intensifying it) but to point directly to its source.

Ironically then, the absence of explanation or narrative detail allows for a strangely direct intervention into the traumatic moment. Dori Laub’s statement that trauma has “no beginning, no ending, no before, no during and no after” (Felman and Laub 69) aptly sums up the compelling atmosphere of timelessness that is so prevalent in “The Birth-Mark.” The story exhibits or embodies what Laub describes as quintessential to the traumatic moment, namely an “absence of categories that define it [which] lends it a quality of ‘otherness,’ a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity that puts it outside the range of associatively linked experiences, outside the range of comprehension, of recounting and of mastery” (Felman and Laub 69). As the narrator and Aylmer collude to create the impression that the story is merely one of a scientific experiment unfortunately gone awry, the story’s hints about and oblique references to the experience of Georgiana suggest that everything that happens to her in her marriage is infected by an “‘otherness,’ a salience, a timelessness and a ubiquity” quite beyond the realm of mastery. In fact, it is by relying on the comprehension, recounting, and mastery of Aylmer, and by abandoning her own, that Georgiana is left open to his scientific depredations.

The one context the story does provide in detail is the story of Aylmer, “a man of science—an eminent proficient in every branch of natural philosophy” (36); yet in spite of his amazing proficiency his “most splendid successes were almost invariably failures” (49). “Mastery” in the narrative appears to belong to a failed scientist; when science fails again at the end of the story, the events are subject merely to the banal moralizing of the narrator rather than to any sense of

effective “comprehension . . . [or] mastery.” The experiences of Georgiana are left unnarrated, and assumed to be unnarratable. Thus this short story about a mark and an extraordinary act of violence inside the domestic sphere encapsulates and highlights the major concerns of the investigations that follow.

SIGNIFICATION AND THE FEMALE BODY

The progression of the narrative in “The Birth-Mark” might be said to be the inverse of the other narratives under consideration in this book. In all the other texts, the plot develops around the violent marking of the female body; in this text the identifying mark is present at the beginning of the story and the tale is about the protagonist’s attempts to eradicate the mark. The act of violence perpetrated against the female subject consists of the unmarking of her body; the removal of the mark becomes the apparent key to power, triumph, and happiness. The “meaning” of this mark, the way in which it is read, is thus central to the unfolding of “The Birth-Mark.”

The mark on Georgiana’s face, as the subject around which the entire narrative revolves, is quite obviously of central thematic and structural concern in the story but, from the outset, what is regarded as most interesting about it is its signifying quality. Its capacity for different readings by different readers is presented to us as one of its first and major characteristics:

It must not be concealed, however, that the impression wrought by this fairy sign-manual varied exceedingly, according to the difference of temperament in the beholders. Some fastidious persons—but they were exclusively of her own sex—affirmed that the Bloody Hand, as they chose to call it, quite destroyed the effect of Georgiana’s beauty, and rendered her countenance even hideous. But it would be as reasonable to say, that one of those small blue stains, which sometimes occur in the purest statuary marble, would convert the Eve of Powers to a monster. Masculine observers, if the birth-mark did not heighten their admiration, contented themselves with wishing it away, that the world might possess one living specimen of ideal loveliness, without the semblance of a flaw. After his marriage—for he thought little or nothing of the matter before—Aylmer discovered that this was the case with himself. (38)

In calling the mark a “manual,” the narrator suggests its readability and openness to interpretation, again foregrounding the notion of its textuality.¹ His focus on conflicting ways of reading the mark reveals various social and cultural responses to it. He reveals Aylmer’s attitude to the mark—the one “flaw” in “ideal loveliness”—an attitude that is in strong contrast to Georgiana’s, which, up until this opening point in the story, has been to regard it as a “charm” (37). Most significantly, and seemingly inadvertently, the narrator, under the guise of offering us ordered, reasonable, normative comments, reveals his own attitudes to the mark. Although he argues that “reason” should correct the vision of “some fastidious persons,” it is clear that the narrator is not as objective or as reasonable as he considers himself to be. His response manifests ambiguities and biases of which he is completely unaware, for while he disagrees with the unreasonable assumptions of those of Georgiana’s “own sex,” he avoids deconstructing the assumptions of “masculine observers” in general, and of Aylmer in particular. From the story’s commencement then, the ambiguities of reading are built into the narrative itself, which, as Steven Youra points out, “thematizes the act of reading” (43).²

Much critical attention has been focused on the mark; clearly, the way in which the mark is “read” is fundamental to any interpretation of the story.³ One of the most crucial readers of the mark is Aylmer himself; the story’s plot revolves around the way in which he chooses to interpret the mark. But Aylmer cannot see his own response of disgust as an interpretation; it is precisely the mark’s capacity for polysemous signification, highlighted by the narrator, that Aylmer is incapable of apprehending. Trapped in an obsessional, fixed world view he reduces the mark of many significations to a single signification; his relationship to the mark is a commitment always and only to its literal removal. Thus, although Aylmer may be said to *see* the mark, he really cannot read it at all.⁴

But the ambiguities surrounding the mark’s capacity for figuration extend beyond the limitations created by Aylmer’s (murderous) illiteracy. Not only are Aylmer’s distortions perfectly mirrored by Georgiana’s—the two of them collude in her destruction—but the “deeply impressive moral” (37) which the narrator promises at the beginning of the story and delivers at its conclusion—that Aylmer “failed to look beyond the shadowy scope of Time, and living once for all in Eternity, to find the perfect Future in the present” (56)—is filled

with enough bizarre ambiguities and incongruities to throw the narrator's own capacity to read severely into question.

The explanation for the increasing unreadability of the readable mark lies in the nature of the body to which it is attached. The comparison of the mark to a stain of blood serves to associate or designate the mark with the aura of femininity:

But if any shifting motion caused her to turn pale there was the mark again, a crimson stain upon the snow, in which Aylmer sometimes deemed an almost fearful distinctness. Its shape bore not a little similarity to the human hand, though of the smallest pygmy size. (37–38)

That the mark is in the shape of a hand is, in itself, significant since as Peter Brooks comments, any special sign marked on a body looks “suspiciously like a linguistic signifier” (*Body* 3). In this story, the shape of the mark invites a particular association with the world of writing, foregrounding its signifying quality. This in conjunction with the notion that it is a “bloody hand,” a “crimson stain” (38) announces it as a kind of women's writing. It is the femininity of the mark that Aylmer cannot tolerate; the female signed body creates such havoc that Aylmer feels compelled to erase it. Its signification—its very capacity to signify—is so disruptive that only annihilation would appear to restore the prevailing order.

The mark's utter determination to exist offends Aylmer; the story describes repeatedly how it refuses to subject itself to his vision. Its autonomy emerges most clearly in the description of the mark's relationship to its background:

[I]n the centre of Georgiana's left cheek, there was a singular mark, deeply interwoven, as it were, with the texture and substance of her face. In the usual state of her complexion,—a healthy, though delicate bloom,—the mark wore a tint of deeper crimson, which imperfectly defined its shape amid the surrounding rosiness. When she blushed, it gradually became more indistinct, and finally vanished amid the triumphant rush of blood, that bathed the whole cheek with its brilliant glow. But, if any shifting motion caused her to turn pale, there was the mark again, a crimson stain upon the snow. (37–38)

Barbara Johnson, commenting upon the mark's relation to its background in the story, sees it as the “mark of intersubjectivity; it is interpreted differently by different beholders, and it interprets *them* in response. . . . [W]hat Aylmer wishes to do in erasing the mark is to

erase the difference—to erase sexual difference—by reducing woman to ‘all,’ to ground, to blankness” (259). Since Aylmer cannot read (a female body entered into writing), he cannot see the mark is “one of Georgiana’s givens, in fact equivalent to her” (Fetterley 25). It is a metaphor for her identity, her sexuality, her being. As he cannot read the mark in its metaphoric and metonymic capacity as associated with (and representative of) the whole, Aylmer (at least consciously) refuses the realization that in removing the mark, he removes all there is of her. The story reminds us repeatedly, and through each of its characters, of the indissoluble connection between Georgiana and her mark. The narrator tells us that the mark is “deeply interwoven . . . with the texture and substance of her face” (37); Aminadab comments: “If she were my wife, I’d never part with that birth-mark” (43); Georgiana, herself, tells us that “the stain goes as deep as life itself” (41). Aylmer, in his turn, provides Georgiana with his “scientific findings”:

“Know, then, that this Crimson Hand, superficial as it seems, has clutched its grasp into your being, with a strength of which I had no previous conception. I have already administered agents powerful enough to do aught except to change your entire physical system.” (51–52)

The emotional implications of these scientific findings surface in his nightmare when he dreams that “the deeper went the knife, the deeper sank the Hand, until at length its tiny grasp appeared to have caught hold of Georgiana’s heart” (40). But in no matter what form knowledge occurs—social, scientific, or emotional—he represses it. All of the characters in the story—Aylmer, Georgiana, Aminadab, and the narrator—know (and evade the fact) that the mark cannot be removed because it cannot be separated from Georgiana, or she from it. The mark is Aylmer’s object and since, as the sign of her subjectivity, it represents Georgiana, it becomes she who is his object. The corollary is also true; since Georgiana (together with her mark) is already an object (of his scientific and sexual attention and scrutiny), her subjectivity is unbearable to him and must be destroyed.

THE OBJECT, THE NARRATOR, AND THE GAZE

The notion of scrutiny, the act of looking, is crucial in this tale; Aylmer cannot take his eyes from Georgiana’s mark. The gaze is, as always in Western culture, the privilege of the male subject with the

woman constituted as the object “of representation, of discourse, of desire” (Irigaray 133). In “The Birth-Mark,” Aylmer’s stare is not only indicative of his social and sexual power over Georgiana, but also of his scientific power. In the second sentence of the story, we are told that Aylmer “persuaded a beautiful woman to become his wife” (36) and the use of the indefinite article emphasises visual beauty as the crucial element in his choice. That Georgiana’s physical beauty is stressed as a vital aspect of Aylmer’s attraction toward her turns out to be as important for his scientific concerns as for his sexual ones. The motif of looking is reiterated again and again throughout the tale. We are told that “very soon after their marriage, Aylmer sat gazing at his wife, with a trouble in his countenance” (37) and that his obsession with the mark comes to dominate their whole relationship:

[I]t became the central point of all. With the morning twilight, Aylmer opened his eyes upon his wife’s face, and recognized the symbol of imperfection; and when they sat together at the evening hearth, his eyes wandered stealthily to her cheek, and beheld, flickering with the blaze of the wood fire, the spectral Hand that wrote mortality, where he would fain have worshipped. (39)

Even when Aylmer is working to remove the mark, he cannot refrain from either his staring or his revulsion. “While thus employed, he failed not to gaze often at the fatal Hand, and not without a shudder,” the narrator remarks (54).

But as Aylmer’s growing obsession turns Georgiana into a hateful object destined for destruction, she, in equal measure, turns her own self into that object and colludes entirely with her own destruction. Thus, while we are told early on in the story that “Georgiana soon learned to shudder at his gaze” and that it “needed but a glance, with the peculiar expression that his face often wore” to prompt her response (39), toward the end, we learn that “she place[s] her hand over her cheek, to hide the terrible mark from her husband’s eyes” (44) with no prompting from him at all.

Her progressive deterioration is carefully plotted. Her response to his comments at the beginning of the story demonstrates an insight and power that vanishes as the tale develops. Thus at the beginning of the story, she is able to confront Aylmer with “momentary anger”:

“Shocks you, my husband!” cried Georgiana, deeply hurt; at first reddening with momentary anger, but then bursting into tears.

"Then why did you take me from my mother's side? You cannot love what shocks you!" (37)

By the end of the narrative, this insight (as well as her capacity for rage) has been entirely lost and she wants to die: "life—while this hateful mark makes me the object of your horror and disgust—life is a burthen which I would fling down with joy," she states (41).

The significant symptom of her deterioration is her loss of capacity to read the mark. The sense of play present in her initial response to the mark where she regards it as a "charm" with all the overtones of attractiveness, luck, and delight gives way to a fixed sense of herself (as obsessional as Aylmer's) as an object of horror and disgust. After her first angry response at the beginning of the story, Georgiana never really questions Aylmer's judgments about her body. If anything, once she begins to perceive the mark upon her cheek in his terms, she desires to make her body and self a gift to him, to enslave herself absolutely, to become his object. The bizarre distortions that this entails are encapsulated in her desperate plea to her husband: "Cannot you remove this little, little mark, which I cover with the tips of two small fingers?" (41). The repetition—"little, little . . . small"—foregrounds her urgency and intensity at the same time that it emphasizes the thorough absurdity of her desire.

Indeed, the duality and splitting that such a psychological stance entails is demonstrated in her newly learned illiteracy when she reads Aylmer's carefully maintained record of his work. She refuses to grasp the implications of her reading, unconsciously obscuring her own perceptions from herself. Thus, although she notes that the record is a record of failure, we are told that as she reads, she "reverenced Aylmer, and loved him more profoundly than ever, but with a less entire dependence on his judgement than heretofore" (49). As this text—the record of Aylmer's failures—is precisely the text in which her own story (his most devastating failure) is being written, it is her own story (her own mark) that becomes illegible and incomprehensible to her. This is inevitable since in giving up her own subjectivity, she gives up her own story.

What would happen, Luce Irigaray asks, "if the 'object' started to speak? Which also means beginning to 'see,' etc. What disaggregation of the subject would that entail?" (135). But Georgiana never speaks, never fractures Aylmer's vision of the world. She mirrors Aylmer's hatred of the mark with her own, eventually almost delighting in his

psychotic view. Significantly, the one time that we see Georgiana looking is when she sees herself in a mirror, that is, she sees herself seeing herself (and is the object of her own gaze):

Still, whenever she dared to look into the mirror, there she beheld herself, pale as a white rose, and with the crimson birth-mark stamped upon her cheek. Not even Aylmer now hated it as much as she. (48)

Irigaray comments:

Once imagine that woman imagines and the object loses its fixed, obsessional character. As a bench mark that is ultimately more crucial than the subject, for he can sustain himself only by bouncing back off against some objectiveness, some objective. If there is no more “earth” to press down/repress, to work, to represent . . . then what pedestal remains for the ex-sistence of the “subject”? (133)

Georgiana joins in creating herself as the object for Aylmer to “work.” Not wishing to interrupt the fixedness of his gaze, she never reconstitutes herself as subject. The removal of the mark that results in her death is therefore as much a product of Georgiana’s vision as Aylmer’s. For Georgiana as well as for Aylmer, the mark is all there is.

The perversity of the bond between Aylmer and Georgiana manifests itself in the bizarre language of sexual ecstasy that pervades all their conversations about the mark. The first words of love and tenderness that we hear Aylmer utter toward Georgiana are after she asks him to remove the mark: “Noblest—dearest—tenderest wife!” cried Aylmer, rapturously” (41). This ecstasy pervades all their discussions about the removal of the mark: “Do not shrink from me! Believe me, Georgiana, I even rejoice in this single imperfection, since it will be such rapture to remove it” (44). The sense for both of them of satisfaction obtained, of repleted desire, is clear in the drinking of the fatal potion: “It allays a feverish thirst, that had parched me for many days,” Georgiana says (53–54), while for Aylmer the operation is accompanied by “almost irrepressible ecstasy” (55). The eroticism of Georgiana’s death brings together the unacknowledged arousal, revulsion, and murderousness present in both of them. Death is the only possible end to Georgiana’s story. Her being and subjectivity simply disappear; they are incorporated into Aylmer’s vision, the dominant and only available version of the world. By the time the birth-mark disappears, there is simply nothing left of her.

It is not only Aylmer, however, who reduces Georgiana to “nothing.” The narrator of the story colludes entirely with Aylmer’s world view; beneath the tone of studied indifference lies a collusiveness and an involvement with the progression of events of which the narrator seems entirely unaware. Like Aylmer, the narrator is centrally concerned with looking and, like Aylmer, he turns Georgiana into an object of art. Having described the different ways in which the mark might be viewed according to the temperament of the observer, he goes on to provide us with his own point of view, significantly explained in the language of looking:

But it would be as reasonable to say, that one of those small blue stains, which sometimes occur in the purest statuary marble, would convert the Eve of Powers to a monster. (38)

The narrator announces himself to be in disagreement with Aylmer here, beginning argumentatively with “But it would be as reasonable to say.” But the fundamental analogy on which his argument depends—the comparison of Georgiana to a marble statue of Eve—is suggestive. Not only is Georgiana once again the object of the gaze, but the narrator’s imagery anticipates Aylmer’s later triumphant comparison of himself to Pygmalion and the implied transformation of Georgiana into a marble statue. His use of the word *monster* also possesses an intensity that belies his laconic tone. Like Aylmer, the narrator regards the mark as a blemish, shifting his perspective only slightly from Aylmer’s. The mark, for the narrator, is a sign of Georgiana’s earthliness and therefore implies her true perfection. In all essentials, he is just like Aylmer and Georgiana; he cannot ultimately grasp the mark’s symbolizing quality, its capacity for multiple significations or play. In this sense, the narrative is as obsessive as the tale it recounts.⁵ Georgiana and Aylmer see their actions as the actions of idealism; the narrator shifts this view only in that he tells a story of misguided idealism.

Finally, the narrator’s own peculiar biases are particularly evident in the bizarrely evasive moral that he draws at the end of the story, a moral that replaces and represses its true end, the death of Georgiana:

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 self-same texture with the celestial. . . . [H]e failed to look beyond the shadowy scope of Time, and living once for all in Eternity, to find the perfect Future in the present. (56)

Like Georgiana and Aylmer, he reads the story as a story of failure rather than, in Judith Fetterley’s words, “the success story it really is—

the demonstration of how to murder your wife and get away with it" (22). We never learn of Aylmer's response to Georgiana's final comment to him that she is dying—almost the only time since the very beginning of the story that she feels free to correct his perception. His silence, which mirrors here a textual silence or gap, is replaced by the narrator's "interpretation" of events, an interpretation that in fact appears thoroughly contradicted by the events of the story itself. Alan Lloyd Smith comments on the ending: "The story pretends to the conclusion: She is perfect, but alas, she is dead! It secretly concludes: She is dead but [therefore] she is perfect!" (100).⁶ In this sense, the narrator is as cruel as the protagonist whose tale he tells. The point of view of the narrator (a concept expressed significantly in terms of the language of looking) is closer to Aylmer's than he cares to reveal.

The narrator's collusion with Aylmer profoundly furthers the sense that is so prevalent in the story as a whole—that there is no space in which Georgiana could independently function. In his discussion of "trauma as the Real" (*Plague* 215), Slavoj Žižek addresses the question of the (redeeming) space that might be provided by "the Other." Since the traumatic event constitutes itself as "a stain which blurs our clear perception of it,"

a trauma is always redoubled into the traumatic event "in itself," and into the trauma of its symbolic inscription. That is to say: when one is caught in a trauma (a concentration camp, a torture chamber . . .), what keeps one alive is the notion of bearing witness—"I must survive in order to tell the others (the Other) what really went on here. . . ." The second trauma takes place when this recognition of the first trauma through its symbolic integration necessarily fails (my pain can never be fully shared by the other): it then appears to the victim that he or she has survived in vain, that their survival was meaningless. . . . (*Plague* 215–16; ellipses in original)

In "The Birth-Mark" this double aspect of trauma is collapsed for Georgiana into a single experience. There is no "Other" in the enclosed world Aylmer has created and the possible alternative (to Aylmer's vision) that might have been provided by the narrative framework does not exist. The absence of this alternative other (narrative) space accounts for the overwhelming sense of claustrophobia that dominates the story. Since no world is represented as being outside the metaphoric "torture chamber" Aylmer has created, the possibility of "bear-

ing witness" is foreclosed. The "symbolic integration" of trauma does not succeed in this narrative because it is never attempted; rather, it becomes evident from the start that, for Georgiana, "survival was meaningless." In this sense, Georgiana can only join with Aylmer (and the narrator) and comply with her own destruction; she can only surrender to the traumatic "Real." What looks like Georgiana's collusion in her own death is thus in reality "the denial of [the] symbolic recognition" of trauma (*Plague* 216), a denial that functions throughout the tale as a symptom of the unspeakable narrative of Georgiana's short and tragic married life.

Thus, the unexpressed bond between the narrator and Aylmer powerfully exacerbates the silence that surrounds the trauma of Georgiana's marriage and death. Since the narrative framework allows no space for the expression of her trauma, it is figured in the narrative only by its lack, existing only through suggestion and by conjecture. The tone of laconic indifference that so characterizes the narrative voice also intensifies the atmosphere of timelessness that Laub describes as being fundamental to the experience of trauma and that prevails over the story in so peculiar a fashion. There is no "other" space in which Georgiana can exist and function.

THE HOME AS DOMESTIC LABORATORY

The absence of narrative space (for Georgiana) is uncannily matched by the domestic physical space of the story as the couple move from their first marital home to their second in Aylmer's laboratory. The home in which Aylmer and Georgiana first live is almost undescribed in the narrative; its only remarkable feature is the light it is able to throw onto the birth-mark: "[W]hen they sat together at the evening hearth, his eyes wandered stealthily to her cheek, and beheld, flickering with the blaze of the wood fire, the spectral Hand that wrote mortality, where he would fain have worshipped" (39); and again, "the lights were growing dim, so as hardly to betray the stain on the poor wife's cheek" (39). The insistent visibility of the mark in this first home demands its excision, leading Aylmer and Georgiana to leave this space and instead take up residence in his laboratory, since the experiment that is to effect its excision demands "constant watchfulness" (42).

When Aylmer takes Georgiana to their new home, the narrator states that "he led her over the threshold of the laboratory" (43). The

home as laboratory, as the experimental space in which the marriage of Aylmer and Georgiana is to be played out, has at least two important implications. First, the image brings together the two spheres of mid-nineteenth-century life—the public and the private. The public world of male activity and power, rather than being separate from the central concerns of domestic fiction, is brought not merely into intimate connection with the private realm, but is, indeed, inseparable from it. Although the “boudoir”—the “beautiful apartments, not unfit to be the secluded abode of a lovely woman” (44)—is separated from the laboratory by rich hangings, Georgiana need only follow Aylmer from her rooms to enter into the laboratory with its “furnace,” “retorts, tubes, cylinders, crucibles,” and “electrical machine” (50). If, as Elizabeth Langland argues, the angel in the house performs “a more significant and extensive economic and political function than is usually perceived” (8), it seems in Hawthorne’s story that the reverse is equally true: the public man plays the essential role in constructing a domestic economy. The public realm as engulfing private space leads to the second point, that is, that Aylmer’s marriage with Georgiana is nothing other than an experiment undertaken by Aylmer, and the domestic sphere is nothing other than the laboratory in which this murderous experiment will be played out. The scientific questing after power not merely invades the domestic sphere, it completely absorbs it into its own project.

Science is conceived of in the story as a “faith in man’s ultimate control over nature” (36). Thus, Aylmer’s project throughout his scientific career has been the obsessional attempt to master “the secret of creative force” (36), such a force being figured in the narrative as a female body. All of his experiments are attempts to “fathom the very process by which Nature assimilates all her precious influences from earth and air, and from the spiritual world, to create and foster Man, her masterpiece”; up to the point of his marriage to Georgiana, however, these ventures have all failed, since “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” (42). Having failed to “fathom” the “secrets” of the “Mother,” having indeed nothing but a series of “mortifying failures” (46) to show as the result of his scientific career, he turns instead to a domestic experiment—to marriage, to the home, and to the woman—as the place where his preeminence will be established.

His marriage to Georgiana is explicitly a part of his scientific quest for mastery since, the narrator states, Aylmer "has devoted himself . . . too unreservedly to scientific studies, ever to be weaned from them by any second passion" (36). Thus, his love for Georgiana can only flourish "by intertwining itself with his love of science, and uniting the strength of the latter to its own" (37). When the narrator concludes, "Such a union accordingly took place" (37), he is referring as much to the unequal union of science and love as the union of Aylmer with Georgiana. Once married to Georgiana, Aylmer is again obsessed by the ineluctable manifestation of the "Mother" apparent on her body, for although she "came so nearly perfect from the hand of Nature," she bears "the visible mark of earthly imperfection" (37). "Mother" Nature has again left its unreadable mark.

Georgiana is, however, fatally open to Aylmer's depredations in a manner in which Nature is not. The "Mother" can "keep her own secrets" from science but the individual body of Georgiana can be fatally injured in the attempt to plumb them. Georgiana's plaintive cry—"why did you take me from my mother's side?"—can be read allegorically as her belated knowledge of the safety that resided on the "side" of the Mother. In the laboratory/home, the preserving mother is nowhere to be found.

In figuring the home as an experimental space, Hawthorne's story is able to describe Georgiana's everyday life as, unbeknownst to her, the experiment itself. It is only as Aylmer "made minute inquiries as to her sensations" (47) that Georgiana is made aware that the experiment is already in progress: "Georgiana began to conjecture that she was already subjected to certain physical influences, either breathed in with the fragrant air, or taken with her food" (48). Thus, for Georgiana, life itself, with its mere acts of breathing and eating, constitutes an experimental procedure undertaken by the man in the domain of his power. These "minute inquiries" are also the only moments of intimacy that readers ever witness between the couple. Otherwise they seem never to converse—except, of course, about the mark.

Aylmer's conception of himself as the scientist is matched by Aylmer's vision of himself as the artist. He compares himself to Pygmalion: "[W]hat will be my triumph," he exclaims, "when I shall have corrected what Nature left imperfect, in her fairest work! Even Pygmalion, when his sculptured woman assumed life, felt not greater ecstasy than mine will be" (41).⁷ Aylmer, in his comparison of his work

to Pygmalion's, ignores some crucial differences, the most significant being that his efforts result, not in the creation of a being, but in its destruction. Indeed, the notion of the metamorphosis of a human being into marble constantly recurs in the imagery of the story:

It needed but a glance, with the peculiar expression that his face often wore, to change the roses of her cheek into a deathlike paleness, amid which the Crimson Hand was brought strongly out, like a bas-relief of ruby on the whitest marble. (39)

Similarly, we hear of Georgiana's "marble paleness" (54) after she has drunk the draught given her by her husband. The metaphoric comparison in the first quotation (indicated by the use of a simile) is replaced by a description in the second, which eventually becomes entirely literal. Aylmer takes a living human being and converts her into dead marble. By contrast, Ovid's description of Orpheus's narration of the story of Pygmalion and Galatea in Book 10 of the *Metamorphoses* conveys most movingly the transformation of dead marble into living flesh:

The lover stood, amazed, afraid of being mistaken, his joy tempered with doubt, and again and again stroked the object of his prayers. It was indeed a human body! The veins throbbed as he pressed them with his thumb. (232)

In Ovid's story the play of hands, the repetitive, loving human touch, registers the moment of Galatea's coming alive, of her veins beginning to throb. In "The Birth-Mark," the imprint of Aylmer's thumb on Georgiana's arm carries precisely the opposite implications: "He rushed towards her, and seized her arm with a gripe that left the print of his fingers upon it" (51). The marking of her body here (which in itself echoes the hand-shaped mark) is indicative of Aylmer's violent determination to do away with Georgiana. Significantly, in an echo of his transformation of her into marble, he is "pale as death" through this encounter (50).⁸

Aylmer's perverted artistic endeavor functions as a metaphor for his failed scientific experiment as he produces his final, perfect, dead object. The domestic space in which Georgiana's marriage takes place is Aylmer's laboratory. From the unspoken point of view that might have been Georgiana's, this space is no space; it exists only to announce a lack of context or possibility in which a life or a narrative might have taken shape. The lack of defining detail or context so

endemic to the genre of romance here speaks to the absent story that is the life and death of Georgiana.

Thus, Hawthorne precipitates the reader into a world of psychic darkness, of hidden obsessions and private desires; he creates a space in which the radical impulses in human experience might be acted out. Although the conventions of the genre might account, at least in part, for the lack of explanation, or cause, or context, these absences possess a further psychological function. Hawthorne's tale does reveal "the truth of the human heart." Both Aylmer's destructiveness and Georgiana's compliance with it appear peculiarly motiveless; man's murderous desires, Hawthorne appears to be saying, defy explanation.

In the chapters that follow, the question of destructiveness or motive for evil is confronted again and again. The specific social and psychological opacity of Hawthorne's tale differentiates it generically from some of the texts that follow, but the blank or incomprehensibility that surrounds the marked female body emerges as a pattern of cultural and representational recurrence. Aylmer's attempts to unwrite Georgiana, to reduce her to blankness, functions as a useful figuration for the "blank" that we find at the heart of all of the texts that we investigate. The complexities that accrue around the marked female body are exquisitely illuminated in Hawthorne's tale of bizarre love and distorted desires.