

The Birthmark



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

A descendent of infamously harsh Puritans, and the only child of a sea captain who died when Hawthorne was four, Nathaniel Hawthorne grew up in Salem, Massachusetts. As a child, Hawthorne developed a love for reading when he injured his leg and was forced to spend a year in bed. He attended Bowdoin College, then worked as an editor and wrote short stories, many of which were published in his 1837 collection *Twice-Told Tales*. In 1841 he joined the transcendentalist Utopian community at Brook Farm, which he left in 1842 to marry Sophia Peabody. They lived for three years at the Old Manse in Concord, Massachusetts, but eventually had to move back to Salem, where Hawthorne worked in the customs house. Next, Hawthorne lived briefly in Lenox, Massachusetts, where he became friends with Herman Melville. In a remarkable streak that lasted from 1850 to 1860, he wrote [The Scarlet Letter](#), one of the first best-selling novels in the United States, [The House of the Seven Gables](#), often regarded as his greatest book, [The Blithedale Romance](#), his only work written in the first person, and [The Marble Faun](#), a romance set in a fantastical version of Italy. Hawthorne died in 1864, only a few months before the end of the Civil War. His reputation in America was so great that the most important writers of the era, including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., Louisa May Alcott, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, were pallbearers at his funeral.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The scientific revolution took place between the mid-sixteenth century and the end of the eighteenth century, putting the action of “The Birthmark” near the end of this period. This time was marked by an increase in scientific work and discoveries in Europe, and it overlapped with the European Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. The scientific revolution and the Enlightenment both placed particular importance on the values of rationality and empirical investigation, or discovery through hands-on experimentation. These scientific developments were sometimes seen as hostile to established religion, because scientists were known to propose views of the world that did not necessarily fit with the teachings of the Bible.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many of Hawthorne’s most famous works, including [The Scarlet Letter](#) and the story “Young Goodman Brown,” deal with issues surrounding New England Puritans and their beliefs, so his

general concern with religion makes it important to look for religious implications even in stories such as “The Birthmark,” which do not explicitly discuss it. Hawthorne’s short story “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” published along with “The Birthmark” in the collection *Mosses from an Old Manse*, tells the story of a scientist’s daughter who cares for his poisonous plants and becomes poisonous herself. When a man falls in love with her and tries to give her an antidote to the poison, she dies. [Frankenstein](#), published in 1818 by Mary Shelley, deals with a scientist who oversteps the boundaries of nature in a way similar to Aylmer, creating a monster in his attempt to create a living human.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Birthmark
- **Where Written:** Massachusetts
- **When Published:** 1843 and 1846
- **Literary Period:** Romanticism, the American Renaissance
- **Genre:** short story
- **Setting:** late eighteenth century, possibly in Europe
- **Climax:** the disappearance of the birthmark, coinciding with Georgiana’s death
- **Antagonist:** mortality, nature
- **Point of View:** third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Friendship through vegetables. When Hawthorne and his wife moved into their house, the Old Manse, in Concord, Massachusetts, transcendentalist writer Henry David Thoreau planted a vegetable garden for them.

Digging up bodies. Hawthorne’s wife and daughter were buried in London for 129 years, until 2006, when their bodies were dug up and moved to Massachusetts to rest beside Hawthorne’s own.



PLOT SUMMARY

Aylmer, an accomplished scientist, has taken a break from his laboratory to marry a beautiful woman named Georgiana, although it’s suggested that his love for her can probably never quite match his devotion to science. After their wedding, Aylmer becomes fixated on the small, hand-shaped **birthmark** on his wife’s left cheek, the only physical imperfection of an otherwise perfect woman. Georgiana’s former suitors have never minded the birthmark, and so she herself has not thought

much of it. But now, Aylmer's revulsion at the birthmark disturbs all of the couple's happy times together, and Georgiana begins to dread his gaze on her cheek.

One evening, Georgiana recalls to Aylmer that the night before, he had a dream that he tried to cut the birthmark out of her cheek, but it receded into her heart until he would have to cut it out of that vital organ. Distressed at her husband's hatred of her appearance, Georgiana suggests that he should, in fact, make an attempt to remove the birthmark. Aylmer agrees, eager to join his love of science to his love of Georgiana and to test his scientific abilities.

The next day, Aylmer brings Georgiana to his laboratory, where she immediately faints. Aylmer's assistant, Aminadab, emerges. He is a rough, strong man who does the physical work of the lab. He remarks that if it were up to him, he wouldn't remove the birthmark. Georgiana wakes and is dazzled by the ethereal beauty of the room that Aylmer has prepared for her. He demonstrates gorgeous scientific wonders for her, but some of them fail and only make their subjects ugly. He then boasts of great scientific feats, such as creating life and making an elixir that would make the drinker immortal, that he could accomplish if only he thought it moral to try, which he doesn't.

Finally, Georgiana looks through a number of books in Aylmer's library that detail the work of famous earlier scientists, as well as Aylmer's own experiments. She realizes that her husband has fallen short of many of the discoveries he hoped to accomplish. However, this only makes her admire him even more for aiming at such lofty goals. She enters the inner room of the laboratory and sees Aylmer and Aminadab working anxiously. She realizes that Aylmer is more worried about the treatment than he's let her see. He gets angry when he sees her in the lab, thinking that she doesn't trust him. She tells him that, to the contrary, she'll go through with the experiment no matter what, so he should tell her how dangerous it really is. He admits that he has already been subjecting her to treatments without her knowledge, and they haven't worked.

Back in the outer room, Aylmer pours a liquid onto a diseased **plant**, which immediately becomes healthy again. He then has Georgiana drink the liquid. She falls asleep, and Aylmer keeps watch over her, at one point kissing the birthmark. Soon the mark begins to disappear, and Aylmer is overjoyed. Georgiana wakes and, pitying Aylmer, tells him that she is dying. While Aminadab laughs, Georgiana dies, for with the disappearance of her only flaw and mark of mortality, she has become too perfect to remain on the earthly plane.

He becomes completely obsessed with Georgiana's **birthmark** and the possibility of its removal. As a result, he doesn't even consider that removing it might be a bad idea. Aylmer is often identified with godlike qualities, including his high intelligence and his ability to affect the natural world. He certainly sees himself in a position of utmost power over Georgiana, Aminadab, and nature. Aylmer exhibits a dangerous pride, or hubris, in that he cannot be content with Georgiana's near perfection and must instead attempt to change nature's creation to suit himself. This pride leads to Georgiana's death.

Georgiana – Georgiana is Aylmer's wife and the subject of his experimentation. Although she is very beautiful and much admired by men, she has a small, reddish, hand-shaped **birthmark** on her left cheek. Its visual prominence depends on the paleness or blush of the surrounding cheek at any given moment. Although she has never minded the birthmark before her marriage to Aylmer, she grows to hate it as he continually expresses his revulsion of it, and eventually begs him to remove it so that he can be happy with her. Georgiana's role in this story remains firmly within the bounds of a conventionally perfect woman and wife. She puts herself entirely under Aylmer's control, even saying that she would drink poison if he asked her to. Ultimately, she dies when the birthmark disappears because it was the only imperfect part of her, and thus her only link to the mortal world.

Aminadab – Aminadab is Aylmer's laboratory assistant. He is a grotesque character—physically strong, ugly, and “earthy.” He does not understand any of the science behind Aylmer's experiments, but ably executes whatever tasks Aylmer sets him. Aminadab represents the natural world in human form, contrasting with Aylmer's more spiritual and abstract presence. Although Aylmer disdains Aminadab's intelligence, Aminadab's strong connection to the mortal world allows him to understand the **birthmark** better than Aylmer does, and he expresses his opinion that it should not be removed. However, he submits to Aylmer's control as willingly as Georgiana does, and plays his part in the experiment without protest.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



CHARACTERS

Aylmer – Aylmer is an accomplished scientist, and Georgiana's husband. Although he has achieved many impressive scientific feats, he has also often failed to accomplish what he aimed to.



SCIENCE, NATURE, AND RELIGION

“The Birthmark” centers around the conflict between science and nature. Aylmer cannot accept Georgiana as nature made her, and instead feels driven to use his scientific knowledge to erase what he sees as

nature's imperfection. The **birthmark** on Georgiana's face is, by definition, a mark that formed in the womb. It is an entirely natural occurrence, and the narrator implies that the mark exists for a reason – to keep Georgiana imperfect enough to remain an earthly being.

However, Aylmer worships science and does not hesitate to use his skills to tamper with nature's creations. Even before becoming fixated on the birthmark, he changes the natural life cycle of **plants** and considers how to make an elixir of life, which would make the drinker immortal. Aylmer himself is aware of the tenuous relationship between science and nature – he tells Georgiana that even though he probably could create an elixir of life, he doesn't do so because it would go against nature. However, his vanity over his wife's appearance seems to blind him to this danger in his experimentation with the birthmark. Normally, Aylmer excludes all signs of nature from his laboratory, even replacing natural **sunshine** with chemical lamps. At the moment the birthmark disappears, however, he opens a curtain and sunlight falls on Georgiana. And it is then, in the true light of nature rather than through the limited vision of science, that it is revealed that she must die.

The word "God" does not appear in the story. However, due to Hawthorne's concern with religion in many of his works, it makes sense to look for religious implications in this story as well. "Nature" implies a sense of the divine, since in a traditional Christian view, God created the natural world. In working to change nature, then, Aylmer also attempts to change God's creation.

In this story's view of the world, science does not come out of natural processes, but instead works to overturn them. Aylmer's scientific intervention results in Georgiana's death, implying that scientists must not overstep their boundaries and go against what nature—and God—has willed to be a certain way.



PERFECTION

The narrator describes Georgiana as perfect in every way except for the **birthmark** on her cheek. Aylmer loves Georgiana, but he cannot stand this

one aspect of her that falls short of perfection. Aylmer becomes so obsessed with making Georgiana absolutely perfect that her one supposed imperfection comes to blind him to everything else good about her. While other men find ways to look fondly on the birthmark, Aylmer ruins his married life by dwelling constantly on the mark and the deeper flaw of the soul that he thinks it represents.

Ironically, Aylmer's quest for perfection fails just at the moment that it succeeds. In removing the birthmark, he does manage to make Georgiana perfect. However, it's suggested that Georgiana needs to be imperfect to survive on the mortal plane. The moment the birthmark disappears and she becomes

perfect, she can no longer exist as a human—humans being, by Biblical definition, imperfect—so she dies to ascend to a higher plane of existence.

Although Aylmer desires nothing more than for Georgiana to lose her birthmark and become perfect, he himself is quite imperfect. When Georgiana reads Aylmer's account of all of his previous experiments, she finds that he has failed to achieve most of what he aimed to do. Admittedly, even his failures resulted in scientific advancements, but he certainly has metaphorical blemishes of his own. He thus exhibits some hypocrisy for demanding nothing less than perfection from his wife when he himself is so far from perfect.

Aylmer's scientific ambition blinds him to the realities of life. Georgiana's death demonstrates that no earthly being can ever be perfect—only divine beings can attain that goal. Humans must accept their own shortfalls and those of others, because absolute perfection is impossible and striving for it will only make them miserable.



FATAL PRIDE

Aylmer exhibits the trait known as hubris, a pride that results in his own downfall. The idea of hubris originates with Greek stage tragedies such as

Oedipus Rex, but many characters since ancient times have similarly suffered from their own sense of superiority. Aylmer, for one, has complete confidence in his own scientific methods, despite the failures he has experienced in the past. Even though he has never made an elixir of life, for example, he tells Georgiana that he definitely could if he wanted to.

Furthermore, Aylmer has married one of the most beautiful and good women in the world, whom many other men would have liked to marry. But he isn't content to have the best woman; instead he must have a perfect woman. In his pride, Aylmer thinks he can correct what he sees as the mistakes of nature, and thus, Hawthorne implies, of God. Such an idea requires that Aylmer assume himself superior to these entities. He essentially tries to play God by means of his scientific skills. Characters invariably come to bad ends when they step on God's toes, and Aylmer is no exception.

Aylmer's hubris seems particularly extreme in contrast to the humble natures of the other two characters. Although Georgiana is admired by all men who see her, she never shows any vanity. Instead, she comes to hate her own appearance because of Aylmer's influence. Similarly, Aminadab accepts Aylmer's view of him as a dumb machine, and never tries to convince Aylmer that he understands the **birthmark** better than Aylmer does, even though his perspective on it turns out to be the correct one.

Aylmer is blind to his own mortal shortcomings, and so he believes that he can make right what nature has made, in his eyes, wrong. Instead his hubris ends, as hubris always does,

with tragedy.



SUBMISSION AND SACRIFICE

Throughout the story, Georgiana acts in complete, unquestioning obedience to Aylmer's wishes and submits to his will even before he asks her to.

Wives of Hawthorne's time were expected to obey their husbands, so Georgiana is, in a sense, the "perfect" wife, reflecting her physical perfection and the story's overall concern with perfection. She herself suggests that Aylmer remove the **birthmark** since it bothers him so much, and even as she comes to a fuller understanding of the potential dangers of the experiment, she continues to urge her husband to remove the mark at any cost. In fact, Georgiana tells Aylmer that if he offered her poison, she would drink it. This sort of submission shows the degree of power that husbands often expected to have over their wives—the power of life and death. Georgiana's inability to imagine anything beyond her husband's opinion of her leads to her death, which she welcomes.

When it comes down to it, Georgiana would rather die than have her husband shudder to look upon her face, and so she essentially offers up her happiness and her life as a sacrifice to her husband's egotistical need to have a physically perfect wife. Her decision to do so could even be seen as a Christlike sacrifice, in that she dies for her husband's arrogance in playing God. In fact, the Bible verse 1 Peter 1:19 says that the faithful are saved from their sins by the "blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot." In light of this verse, it could be argued that Aylmer's removal of the birthmark—the "blemish or spot"—makes Georgiana the perfect stand-in for Christ to save Aylmer from his sins by her sacrifice.

Aminadab also submits to Aylmer's orders. He doesn't think Aylmer should remove the birthmark, but he makes no real effort to convince Aylmer not to, and instead provides the physical energy necessary to complete the experiment. Georgiana and Aminadab's acquiescence to Aylmer's will reinforces the impression that Aylmer has of himself—he is the husband, the master, the scientist, and is beyond fault. In the nineteenth-century Christian household, the male head of the family was in fact regarded as being the closest to God, and the rest of the family was supposed to accept his religious teachings when an actual clergyman was not present. Aylmer takes this a step further by attempting to *act* as a god, and through their submission to his will, Georgiana and Aminadab uphold Aylmer's idea of himself as such. That the story ends disastrously, of course, calls into question both unquestioning submission and the arrogance that expects it.



MORTALITY

On one level, the **birthmark** stands for mortality, and Aylmer's obsession with the mark reflects his

obsession with and fear of mortality itself. The birthmark, in this view, is like nature's brand on its product – Georgiana – to mark it as flawed. But while flaws are often thought of in moral terms, the flaw represented by the birthmark can also be seen as a purely mechanical one, a symbol of the fact that humans are flawed in that they are not immortal, in that they are destined to die.

In Aylmer's view, it doesn't seem to matter how perfect Georgiana is—she still has that birthmark, that constant reminder that she'll die and in death will be degraded to the exact same level as all of nature's other creations. Aylmer and Georgiana discuss the elixir of life, a drink that would make its drinker immortal, multiple times. Even though Aylmer claims to believe it would be immoral to create an elixir of life because it would unbalance nature, it seems a distinct possibility that his desire to render his wife immortal is an almost unconscious one. He sees the birthmark as a mark of mortality, and wants to remove it, which would logically result in immortality. This achievement would put him at the pinnacle of science and on a level with God, a position which he does pursue even in his less ambitious attempts at changing nature.

Furthermore, one exchange between Georgiana and Aylmer suggests that a poison is in fact an elixir of life, or, as Aylmer says, an "elixir of immortality." He seems to imply that death brings about some sort of immortality in itself, which corresponds to the Christian view of heaven as a place where souls will forever reside. And if a person has already died, then they are in a sense no longer mortal—at least, they can't die again.

In this sense, perhaps Aylmer does achieve his goal. On a basic level, he succeeds in removing the birthmark. On a more complicated level, he does render Georgiana immortal, since he removes the only thing that makes her mortal and her soul ascends to heaven, where it will live on through eternity. Ironically, he removes the flaw of death, but the results – Georgiana's death – are essentially the same as if he hadn't.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE BIRTHMARK

The story revolves around the small, pink, hand-shaped birthmark on Georgiana's cheek. This symbol can be interpreted in a few different ways, which can all work simultaneously.

In one sense, Aylmer sees the birthmark as a symbol of sin and moral degeneracy, and he imagines it ingrained not only on his wife's skin but on her heart, indicating a significance beyond

that of her physical appearance. However, Aylmer does not realize that *because* it's a flaw, the birthmark connects Georgiana to the physical, natural world. As her "sole token of human imperfection," the mark allows her to continue living on the earthly plane. Its removal kills her because she becomes too perfect for the world of flawed humans.

The hand-shaped mark also represents the grip of mortality, a reminder that Georgiana, a human created by nature, will one day die. Aylmer's anxiety around the birthmark shows his general anxiety at the idea of mortality, largely because death makes everyone equal. Even Georgiana, his almost-perfect wife, will be no better than everyone else when she's dead and buried. This interpretation implies that the eventual death of humans is in fact the major flaw which nature forces on all her creations, and Aylmer's quest to remove the birthmark may also be a quest – an impossible quest – to make Georgiana immortal.

Alternately, the birthmark can be read as an allusion to 1 Peter 1:19 in the Bible, which says the faithful are saved from their sins by the "blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot." Georgiana is entirely willing to die for Aylmer's desire for perfection, essentially sacrificing herself for his happiness. According to this Bible verse, she becomes Christlike when Aylmer renders her "without blemish" by removing the birthmark, and she thus becomes the perfect sacrifice, like Jesus, to atone for Aylmer's own sins in attempting to control God's creations.



PLANTS

Aylmer twice uses plants to demonstrate scientific points, and in both instances they represent

Georgiana herself and foreshadow the effect of the experiment on her. Aylmer shows Georgiana a plant that grows and flowers before her eyes. He tells her to pick the flower while it lives, for it will soon die. However, when she tries to pick it, the entire plant dies. Like Georgiana, the flower is perfect, and like Georgiana, it dies before its time due to Aylmer's influence. The plants not only foreshadow Georgiana's death, but also emphasize the role of nature in the story. Later, Aylmer pours liquid over a diseased plant before having Georgiana drink the liquid. The liquid removes the plant's discolorations, just as it removes Georgiana's **birthmark**. Aylmer's faulty control over the plants, products of the natural world, mirrors his disastrous attempt to alter the way nature has made his wife.



SUNLIGHT

In this story, sunlight represents nature and its influence. Aylmer lights his laboratory with chemical lamps and does not allow sunlight in, which demonstrates his worship of science and scorn of nature's

power. At the end of the story, he finally parts the curtain and allows "the light of natural day" to fall on Georgiana's face. Acting also as a symbol of clear insight, the sunlight illuminates Georgiana's death, showing the triumph of nature as Aylmer faces the grave consequences of his desire to use science to alter the natural world.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Hawthorne's Short Stories* published in 2011.

The Birthmark Quotes

☝ It was the fatal flaw of humanity which Nature, in one shape or another, stamps ineffaceably on all her productions, either to imply that they are temporary and finite, or that their perfection must be wrought by toil and pain. 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, causing him more trouble and horror than ever Georgiana's beauty, whether of soul or sense, had given him delight.

Related Characters: Aylmer, Georgiana

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 179

Explanation and Analysis

This passage explains Aylmer's revulsion to the birthmark on Georgiana's cheek, which drives the entire plot of the story. The birthmark is fundamentally a mark of nature, and it acts as a reminder that nature's creations, particularly humans, can never attain perfection and will eventually perish. The narrator implies that the hand shape of the birthmark represents the hand of mortality grasping Georgiana. Despite Georgiana's perfection in every other way, her mortality makes her ultimately no better or more important than all the far more flawed people who exist.

Aylmer takes the birthmark not only as a reminder of Georgiana's eventual death, but also as a symbol that she has the potential to lack morality. As a result of all this,

Aylmer becomes so disgusted with the birthmark that it wipes out all the happiness he could have drawn from all the perfect aspects of his wife.

“ I have already given this matter the deepest thought—thought which might almost have enlightened me to create a being less perfect than yourself. Georgiana, you have led me deeper than ever into the heart of science. I feel myself fully competent to render this dear cheek as faultless as its fellow; and then, most beloved, what will be my triumph 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.

Related Characters: Aylmer (speaker), Georgiana

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Aylmer attempts to reassure Georgiana that he can definitely remove the birthmark as she has suggested he do. At the beginning of the story, the narrator remarked that Aylmer's love of Georgiana could only match his love of science if the two loves were somehow joined together. Here, Aylmer expresses his delight that the two will, in fact, be joined as he uses his scientific wisdom to make his wife into a creature he can admire without reserve.

Aylmer also exhibits the first suggestions of his dangerous pride here. He suggests that he's come close to achieving the knowledge necessary to creating a human being by means of science, the ultimate goal for a scientist seeking to understand and recreate everything that nature—and thus God—can do. Furthermore, Aylmer has no doubt that he can correct what he sees as nature's mistake, and he's already imagining how triumphant he'll feel once he's done so.

Aylmer compares himself to Pygmalion, a Greek mythological figure who sculpted a statue of a woman so beautiful that he fell in love with her. To Pygmalion's joy, the goddess Aphrodite brought the statue to life. Aylmer sees himself as similar to Pygmalion because he hopes to, if not create a woman from scratch, create a more perfect Georgiana. Pygmalion can also be seen as a prideful figure, however, since he scorned all other women and only fell in

love with his own art, so the comparison adds to the sense of Aylmer's arrogance.

“ Here, too, at an earlier period, he had studied the wonders of the human frame, and attempted 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. The latter pursuit, however, Aylmer had long laid aside in unwilling recognition of the truth—against which all seekers sooner or later stumble—that 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.

Related Characters: Aylmer (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the narrator relates one of Aylmer's past endeavors in his laboratory—to create a human being. This attempt is reminiscent of Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*, published about thirty years before “The Birthmark,” in which Dr. Frankenstein creates a destructive monster in his attempt to create a human. The failures of both scientists to complete their experiments—and the fatal pride involved in attempting such experiments—link them together.

Trying to create life is the ultimate mark of a pride that puts Aylmer dangerously close to trying to imitate God. Aylmer has eventually had to admit failure in this area and bow to nature's greater ability. However, he says at multiple points that he is using the knowledge he gained from his attempt in the process of removing the birthmark, which perhaps should be cause for alarm. The narrator heightens the sense of foreboding by remarking that it's easy to ruin nature's creations, but it's very difficult to fix them. Again and again, the birthmark is labeled a sign of nature, so it's very risky to try fixing it.

●● Aylmer bade her cast her eyes upon a vessel containing a quantity of earth. She did so, with little interest at first; but was soon startled to perceive the germ of a plant shooting upward from the soil. Then came the slender stalk; the leaves gradually unfolded themselves; and amid them was a perfect and lovely flower.

"It is magical!" cried Georgiana. "I dare not touch it."

"Nay, pluck it," answered Aylmer,—“pluck it, and inhale its brief perfume while you may. The flower will wither in a few moments and leave nothing save its brown seed vessels; but thence may be perpetuated a race as ephemeral as itself.” But Georgiana had no sooner touched the flower than the whole plant suffered a blight, its leaves turning coal-black as if by the agency of fire.

●● He gave a history of the long dynasty of the alchemists, who spent so many ages in quest of the universal solvent by which the golden principle might be elicited from all things vile and base. Aylmer appeared to believe that, by the plainest scientific logic, it was altogether within the limits of possibility to discover this long-sought medium; “but,” he added, “a philosopher who should go deep enough to acquire the power would attain too lofty a wisdom to stoop to the exercise of it.” Not less singular were his opinions in regard to the elixir vitae. He more than intimated that it was at his option to concoct a liquid that should prolong life for years, perhaps interminably; but that it would produce a discord in Nature which all the world, and chiefly the quaffer of the immortal nostrum, would find cause to curse.

Related Characters: Aylmer, Georgiana (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

While Aylmer is preparing to remove the birthmark, he shows Georgiana wonders that he produces by his scientific abilities. He means to impress her with this demonstration of his scientific power over a plant, one of nature’s creations, but it fails. The miracle of the plant exists in its condensed life cycle—it sprouts, flowers, and dies in a matter of moments. This process draws attention to the mortality of nature’s creations, a fact that irritates Aylmer when it’s represented by Georgiana’s birthmark. The plant dies even sooner than it should when Georgiana touches it, further emphasizing the association between Georgiana and the inevitability of death.

One of Aylmer’s ambitions, even if he says he won’t act on it, is to create life. Aylmer tells Georgiana that the plant’s seeds will continue the existence of its species, reminding the reader that Aylmer, too, could create life through natural means—after all, he’s married to a beautiful woman, so he could just try to have a baby with her. But perhaps Aylmer is bothered by the fact that the plant’s descendants will be “ephemeral,” or short-lived. His natural descendants, too, would be only normal humans with mortal lifespans, and he grasps at something more than this, at escaping nature’s cycle of life and death.

Related Characters: Aylmer (speaker), Georgiana

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 185

Explanation and Analysis

During one of his breaks from preparing the materials necessary to remove the birthmark, Aylmer gives this account of scientific history to Georgiana. He seems to have firm opinions on the morality of certain long-sought scientific goals, specifically the ability to make gold out of other materials and the creation of a drink that would cause immortality. Aylmer believes that both of these goals are possible to attain, but that the use of either alchemy or an elixir of life would degrade the user and disturb the balance of nature, so scientists should not pursue them.

Aylmer again exhibits his pride here, particularly when he implies that he *could* mix an elixir of life if he wanted to. Additionally, he seems blind to how his current experiment with the birthmark might relate to either of these pursuits that he sees as immoral and prideful. He’s concerned about “discord in Nature,” but he never thinks that his own attempt to alter nature’s creation might have similarly negative consequences.

“And what is this?” asked Georgiana, pointing to a small crystal globe containing a gold-colored liquid. “It is so beautiful to the eye that I could imagine it the elixir of life.” “In one sense it is,” replied Aylmer; “or, rather, the elixir of immortality. It is the most precious poison that ever was concocted in this world. By its aid I could apportion the lifetime of any mortal at whom you might point your finger. The strength of the dose would determine whether he were to linger out years, or drop dead in the midst of a breath. No king on his guarded throne could keep his life if I, in my private station, should deem that the welfare of millions justified me in depriving him of it.”

Related Characters: Aylmer, Georgiana (speaker)

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 185-86

Explanation and Analysis

Aylmer is showing Georgiana his collection of scientific wonders when she asks about the golden liquid. This exchange shows the potentially dangerous power of science, since Aylmer claims for himself the ability to kill a king, an action that would upend old ideas of the supposedly natural order of the world, in which subjects must act in deference to their king. Furthermore, many people believed that kings were granted their power by God, so Aylmer's ability to take this power away again suggests his attempt to act in God's place.

Interestingly, Georgiana finds the poison very pleasing to the eye. On one level, this fact could prove that appearances, which are important in this story, do not always translate to some truth about moral worth. However, it could also imply that only death allows perfection; the perfect liquid causes death, and when Georgiana becomes perfect with the disappearance of the birthmark, she dies.

“Much as he had accomplished, she could not but observe that his most splendid successes were almost invariably failures, if compared with the ideal at which he aimed. His brightest diamonds were the merest pebbles, and felt to be so by himself, in comparison with the inestimable gems which lay hidden beyond his reach. The volume, rich with achievements that had won renown for its author, was yet as melancholy a record as ever mortal hand had penned. It was the sad confession and continual exemplification of the shortcomings of the composite man, the spirit burdened with clay and working in matter, and of the despair that assails the higher nature at finding itself so miserably thwarted by the earthly part.”

Related Characters: Georgiana, Aylmer

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 187

Explanation and Analysis

In perusing Aylmer's bookshelf, Georgiana comes across a journal of all his experiments, and she discovers that Aylmer himself is far from perfect. Although Georgiana feels only increased reverence for her husband because of this, the revelation also makes Aylmer seem quite hypocritical. He demands absolute perfection from his already almost-perfect wife, when he himself has hardly met any of the scientific goals he has set for himself. This passage also casts further doubt on Aylmer's ability to remove the birthmark safely; if he has rarely done exactly what he meant to do in his experiments, why will this one be any different?

Additionally, Aylmer's failures may give some insight into his dislike of everything mortal and earthly. The narrator interprets his failures as the result of Aylmer's faulty human abilities falling short of the divine ideals that populate his imagination. If he feels weighed down by the mortal shortcomings that nature has given him, it makes sense that he would do all he could to triumph over the mark of earthliness in his wife.

“Why do you come hither? Have you no trust in your husband?” cried he, impetuously....

“Nay, Aylmer,” said Georgiana with the firmness of which she possessed no stinted endowment, “it is not you that have a right to complain. You mistrust your wife; you have concealed the anxiety with which you watch the development of this experiment. Think not so unworthily of me, my husband. Tell me all the risk we run, and fear not that I shall shrink; for my share in it is far less than your own.... I submit... And, Aylmer, I shall quaff whatever draught you bring me; but it will be on the same principle that would induce me to take a dose of poison if offered by your hand.”

“My noble wife,” said Aylmer, deeply moved, “I knew not the height and depth of your nature until now.”

Related Characters: Georgiana, Aylmer (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 189

Explanation and Analysis

When Georgiana enters Aylmer’s inner laboratory without his invitation, she finds him far more anxious than he let on before, and he gets angry when he sees her watching. Nineteenth-century standards demanded that an ideal wife would submit entirely to her husband’s will and devote her life to his happiness, and Georgiana here again displays the characteristics of a flawless wife. She tells Aylmer that he has much more to lose from the experiment than she does, thus sacrificing her own self-interest and health to his pride. She then goes so far to prove her trust in him and her complete, willing submission to him that she says she would drink poison if he wanted her to.

Georgiana’s actions demonstrate her total perfection in everything but the birthmark, although Aylmer’s initial mistrust of his wife and his refusal to ever be entirely satisfied with her might lead the reader to question whether he deserves such wholehearted obedience.

After his departure Georgiana became rapt in musings. She considered the character of Aylmer, and did it completer justice than at any previous moment. Her heart exulted, while it trembled, at his honorable love—so pure and lofty that it would accept nothing less than perfection nor miserably make itself contented with an earthlier nature than he had dreamed of. She felt how much more precious was such a sentiment than that meaner kind which would have borne with the imperfection for her sake, and have been guilty of treason to holy love by degrading its perfect idea to the level of the actual; and with her whole spirit she prayed that, for a single moment, she might satisfy his highest and deepest conception. Longer than one moment she well knew it could not be; for his spirit was ever on the march, ever ascending, and each instant required something that was beyond the scope of the instant before.

Related Characters: Georgiana, Aylmer

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 190

Explanation and Analysis

After Aylmer admits to Georgiana that the removal of the birthmark is a dangerous task, she returns to the outer room of the laboratory and thinks about her husband’s character. Far from feeling irritated by the fact that Aylmer dwells so much on her single fault, Georgiana, in her role as the perfect wife, feels thankful that she has a husband who will not be satisfied with anything less than what he truly wants. She sees this characteristic as a mark of true love. Again living up to the nineteenth-century ideal of a woman, she strives for nothing more than to be able to please Aylmer entirely for just one moment, thus putting him before all considerations that might be deemed selfish.

However, Georgiana also realizes that Aylmer will never be satisfied with anything for more than a moment, because he constantly strives for improvement. This demonstrates his pride, since he can never be satisfied even with perfection, and will keep pushing himself and his wife into realms of impossibility.

●● The fatal hand had grappled with the mystery of life, and was the bond by which an angelic spirit kept itself in union with a mortal frame. As the last crimson tint of the birthmark—that sole token of human imperfection—faded from her cheek, the parting breath of the now perfect woman passed into the atmosphere, and her soul, lingering a moment near her husband, took its heavenward flight. Then a hoarse, chuckling laugh was heard again! Thus ever does the gross fatality of earth exult in its invariable triumph over the immortal essence which, in this dim sphere of half development, demands the completeness of a higher state.

Related Characters: Aminadab, Georgiana, Aylmer

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 193

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs at the very end of the story, as the birthmark disappears and Georgiana dies. It finally becomes clear that the birthmark existed for a reason that Aylmer could not perceive. He has ignored the importance of Georgiana's single flaw, which kept her living on the earthly plane, and now that the flaw no longer exists his wife cannot remain with him, a flawed man, but must ascend to the higher heavenly plane.

Aminadab, however, does not seem surprised, and he even laughs at the scene. In fact, he might have known all along that this would be the result. The narrator suggests that earth has triumphed over heaven, presumably by thwarting Aylmer's attempt to create a perfect being on the earthly plane. Essentially, Aylmer now pays the price for ignoring the fact that nature demands imperfection, and instead striving to do something that goes against the laws of nature. Ironically, Aylmer has achieved his ultimate goal of removing the birthmark; however, the results are not what he expected.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE BIRTHMARK

In the late eighteenth century, a great scientist named Aylmer takes a break from his experiments to marry a beautiful woman named Georgiana. It is a time of many great scientific discoveries, and scientists feel that they're uncovering all of nature's mysteries and might soon even be able to create life. Aylmer has devoted his life to his scientific work, and would never leave the world of science. It seems that his love for Georgiana could only ever hope to rival his love of science if these two passions can somehow become connected.

One day soon after Aylmer and Georgiana are married, Aylmer asks his wife if she has ever considered trying to remove the **birthmark** on her cheek. Georgiana replies that she has not, and admits that she always thought it a "charm" of her appearance. Aylmer, however, tells her that he can't stand the birthmark because it's the only imperfect aspect of an otherwise perfect being. Hurt and angry, Georgiana questions why Aylmer agreed to marry her if he felt this way.

The narrator describes the **birthmark**, which is small, pink, hand-shaped, and located on Georgiana's left cheek. It becomes less visible when she blushes, but is more visible when she is pale. Georgiana has had many suitors, and they have reacted to the birthmark in different ways. Some of them have yearned to kiss it. Some have speculated that the mark came from a fairy touching Georgiana at the moment of her birth and giving her those most alluring qualities that allowed her to attract so many men. Others have simply wished the birthmark wasn't there, so a perfect being could exist in the world. Women were the only ones who ever tried to claim that the birthmark actually made Georgiana ugly.

If Georgiana weren't so perfect in every other way, Aylmer wouldn't be so bothered by the **birthmark**. But as time passes, he becomes more and more obsessed with it. He sees it as a manifestation of "the fatal flaw of humanity" that appears in all beings created by nature, marking them as destined for suffering and death. It constantly reminds him that death makes even the most perfect people, such as his wife, no better than the worst people. More personally, he thinks that it's a symbol of the sins and moral faults that Georgiana possesses simply by virtue of being human.

The opening introduces the central themes of the story, setting a scene in which scientists are already trying to control nature and claim dangerous power for themselves. Although it is not yet clear whether Aylmer is among them, it seems foreboding that he might seek to mix his married life with his scientific passion. He's clearly already obsessed with science.



The very first mention of the birthmark occurs when Aylmer asks about its possible removal, foreshadowing the rest of the plot. Aylmer exhibits a willingness to openly criticize his wife, and he makes it clear that he highly values perfection. Georgiana expresses an initially positive attitude towards the birthmark, and shows an inclination to stand up for herself against her husband's criticism—neither of which will last long.



The birthmark has obviously been a present influence throughout Georgiana's life, since everyone around her seems to have had their thoughts about it. Their generally positive attitudes explain why she isn't bothered by the mark and suggest that Aylmer's reaction to it is out of the ordinary, at least for men, and perhaps irrational. Any of Georgiana's other suitors would have been content to have her with her imperfection, but she's ended up with the one who can't stand it.



Ironically, instead of appreciating Georgiana's perfection, her relative flawlessness only makes Aylmer obsess more about the birthmark. He seems to take it as an almost personal offense that nature insists on reminding him that his wife will die, demonstrating Aylmer's dangerous pride. He essentially wants to be married to a divine being, one who is morally impeccable and will never die or be degraded to the level of other humans. This says a lot more about his faults than about Georgiana's.



Whenever the couple should be happy, Aylmer ends up talking about the **birthmark**, until it becomes the center of their marriage. Whether they're waking in the morning or sitting around the fire at night, Aylmer always sees the birthmark and remembers that Georgiana is human rather than divine. Georgiana learns to shrink from her husband's gaze, because he's always looking at the birthmark with dislike.

One night, Georgiana brings up the **birthmark** herself for the first time, asking Aylmer if he recalls having a dream about it the night before. At first he doesn't remember, although he admits that he was thinking about it when he went to sleep. Georgiana tells him that he spoke in his sleep of removing something from her heart. Aylmer finally remembers that he did, in fact, dream that he was trying to operate on the mark, but the further his knife went, the further the mark retreated, until he would have to carve it out of his wife's heart to remove it.

Aylmer feels bad about the dream, but sometimes sleep brings to the surface feelings that people don't want to acknowledge they're experiencing when they're awake. The dream makes him realize just how much he's consumed by thoughts of the **birthmark**. Georgiana asks if it might be possible to remove it, acknowledging that the attempt could be dangerous. Aylmer admits he's considered this possibility, and he thinks it could be done. Georgiana insists that he try, no matter how dangerous it might be, because the birthmark is ruining her life due to Aylmer's disgust with it. Aylmer is elated at her willingness and is very confident that he can fix nature's imperfection, partly because he's already gotten pretty close to being able to create life through science. He compares his joy at removing the birthmark to that of Pygmalion when the woman he sculpted and fell in love with came to life.

The next day, Aylmer tells Georgiana his plan to bring her to his laboratory, where he can closely monitor her while he treats the **birthmark**. Over the course of his life, Aylmer has used his laboratory to successfully investigate numerous aspects of nature, including the sky, mines, volcanoes, and springs. He has also tried to discover how nature creates human life, presumably with the goal of creating it himself. However, he gave up on this attempt because nature makes it easy to mess things up, only rarely makes it possible to fix things, and definitely does not allow the creation of life from nothing. Still, to figure out how to remove the birthmark, Aylmer returns to his old pursuits concerning the chemical origins of life.

Aylmer is already ruining his marriage through his obsession with his wife's failure to be perfect. While Georgiana originally didn't mind the birthmark, she now begins to reevaluate it, since her husband so clearly hates it.



This dream shows that Aylmer believes the birthmark to be deeper than a surface blemish, and reinforces the impression of it as a symbol connected to morality, life, and love, since Aylmer sees it even in Georgiana's heart. It also communicates a sense of mortal danger connected to the potential removal of the birthmark, since Aylmer is literally approaching his wife's heart with a knife to get it out.



Aylmer's repressed concerns are coming out in ways that he can't control, like talking in his sleep. He has also caused Georgiana to begin hating herself, even though she has never minded the birthmark before. In fitting with the times, Georgiana never even considers confronting Aylmer about his damaging attitude, but instead thinks only of how to change herself to meet his desires. Aylmer sees only that he can now unite his love of science with his love of Georgiana. By comparing himself to the mythological figure of Pygmalion, who fell in love with his own sculpture, Aylmer highlights his own arrogance, implying that Georgiana will be entirely his own creation once he's removed the birthmark. Besides, Pygmalion's statue only came to life with the help of the goddess Aphrodite, but Aylmer scorns the influence of God or nature in his experiment with the birthmark.



The laboratory is the realm of pure science, where Aylmer thinks he's in complete control. The attempt to create life through science demonstrates Aylmer's willingness to play God, although it seems that he also realizes (on some level) that this is a bad idea. The narrator's comments on what nature allows scientists to do don't bode well for Aylmer's experiment, if fixing nature's creations rarely works. It's also concerning that Aylmer is still using aspects of his research about the creation of life even after he decided that this was an unwise branch of science to pursue.



Aylmer brings Georgiana into his laboratory to begin the treatment. She feels nervous, and Aylmer tries to comfort her, but instead shudders involuntarily when he catches sight of the **birthmark**. Georgiana faints, and Aylmer calls for Aminadab, his assistant, to help him. Ignorant of all scientific principles, Aminadab is a physically strong, ugly but useful man. He has worked for Aylmer throughout his whole time as a scientist, but he doesn't understand any of Aylmer's work and just does what Aylmer tells him. He embodies the earthy, physical counterpart to Aylmer's spiritual intelligence. Aylmer has Aminadab burn some incense to wake Georgiana from her faint. Seeing her, Aminadab mutters that he wouldn't do anything to the birthmark if Georgiana were his wife.

Georgiana is awakened by the powerful fragrance in the beautiful room that her husband has prepared for her in his laboratory. Surrounded by curtains, it's entirely cut off from the rest of the world, and Georgiana almost feels like she might be in an enchanted room in the sky. Aylmer does not allow **sunlight** into his laboratory because it would ruin his experiments, so he instead uses chemical lamps to light the room. He feels confident that he can keep Georgiana perfectly safe in his lab. When she wakes, it takes Georgiana a moment to remember where she is, and she automatically covers the **birthmark** with her hand. Aylmer reassures her that he now loves the birthmark because it will be so wonderful to get rid of it.

Georgiana pleads with Aylmer not to look at the **birthmark**. To cheer her up, he gives her a demonstration of his more elegant scientific abilities. First, Aylmer causes a number of optical illusions, making it look like he is summoning spirits. When Georgiana thinks she might want to see the outside world, he conjures up very realistic images of it within the room. Georgiana is enchanted.

Next, Aylmer presents Georgiana with a pot of dirt. As she watches, a **plant** sprouts and flowers. Aylmer tells her to pick it and smell its scent, because it will soon die and leave only its seeds to continue its existence on earth. Georgiana tries to pick the flower, but as soon as she touches it, the whole plant turns black and dies. Aylmer says this was the result of overstimulation.

Georgiana's sudden lifelessness when she enters the laboratory foreshadows her eventual death in this place. Aylmer and Aminadab are quite clearly positioned as opposites, with Aylmer the intellectual man connected to the divine and Aminadab the simple, physical man connected to nature. Conventionally, the reader might be inclined to trust Aylmer's judgment over Aminadab's, particularly in matters of science, but Aminadab's warning adds to the sense of foreboding around the birthmark's removal. It also criticizes Aylmer for his unnecessary obsession with the mark.



In the laboratory, Aylmer has created an environment entirely of his own making, excluding nature. He doesn't even allow natural light in, replacing it with a light created by science, which acts as a metaphor for his general approach to life. He thinks the laboratory is a space where he's entirely in control. The fact that Georgiana feels she might be in the sky adds to the sense of Aylmer acting as God, with this as his heavenly lair. Additionally, Aylmer's sudden supposed love of the birthmark demonstrates that uniting his love of science and his love of his wife is already strengthening his love of both.



These performances make Aylmer seem as though he has some divine power to control the spirit world, along with the power to create an imitation of the natural world. However, both of these are only illusions, just as Aylmer's control over nature turns out to be just an illusion.



Aylmer tries to display his power over nature and the life cycle. However, the plant's death casts doubt on science's ability to control life and reminds the reader of the inevitability of mortality that Aylmer so fears. The mention of the plant's seeds acts as a reminder that the natural way of overcoming mortality is to reproduce, so that one's children can live on, but Aylmer never even considers this option.



To make up for the plant's death, Aylmer creates a portrait of Georgiana by a scientific process similar to early photography. However, the image comes out blurry except for the shape of the **birthmark**, which dominates her cheek. Aylmer hastily destroys the image. He's embarrassed by these failures.

The birthmark's clarity against the rest of the blurry picture suggests that perhaps the birthmark has some supernatural power that disregards the rules of science. Furthermore, the image acts as a representation of Aylmer's obsession, as it only allows him to see the birthmark, to the exclusion of all other aspects of his wife.



In between his hours working on the treatment, Aylmer tells Georgiana about alchemy, the early branch of science that sought to turn various materials into gold. He believes this feat is possible, but also that anyone wise enough to achieve it would have too much moral sense to make use of it. Similarly, he thinks that he could create an elixir vitae (also known as an elixir of life—a liquid that would make the drinker immortal), but that to do so would violate nature and result in the drinker's misery. Georgiana is shocked that he would even consider pursuing this kind of power, but Aylmer reassures her that he would never actually go after these discoveries. In fact, he's only telling her about them to show that their current experiment with the **birthmark** is nothing in comparison.

Aylmer seems to lack self-awareness. He has obviously thought about the morality of science and its interaction with nature, and passes judgment on those who pursue alchemy or the elixir of life without a thought for the moral implications. However, his pride blinds him to the fact that his own experiments with the birthmark might have moral implications, as well. The elixir of life also brings up the issue of mortality. Ironically, Aylmer thinks the elixir would be harmful to the drinker, yet he can't accept the mortality of his wife and in effect attempts to make her immortal by removing her one mark of mortality, the birthmark.



Georgiana hears Aylmer talking to Aminadab in the inner room of the laboratory. When Aylmer emerges again, he directs Georgiana's attention to his cabinet of scientific wonders, showing her a perfume powerful enough to spread over an entire country. She asks about a vial of beautiful golden liquid that she imagines could be the elixir of life. Aylmer tells her that it's actually the most powerful poison in the world. He says he could use it to kill a king if he thought it the best course of action for the general populace. Georgiana is horrified, but Aylmer tells her that applied carefully, the poison can also work to remove skin blemishes. However, he won't use it on his wife because her **birthmark** requires a solution that will go deeper than the skin.

With these two liquids Aylmer exhibits his willingness to use science to have a large-scale effect on the world, along with his pride in thinking he might be worthy to decide whether a king's death would benefit an entire population. Also, it's ironic that Georgiana thinks a poison looks like it could be the elixir of life, but it also suggests that immortality of the soul, if not the body, can only be found in death. This is essentially what will happen to Georgiana at the end of the story. Finally, Aylmer once again interprets the birthmark as something that goes to the very heart of Georgiana's being, rather than as a simple skin blemish.



Throughout their discussions, Aylmer has been asking Georgiana about her physical well-being, and she's starting to think that he may have already begun treating her through the air or her food. She even thinks she might be feeling some sort of influence on her body that's making her blood and heart feel odd. But the **birthmark** doesn't look any different, and by now she hates it even more than Aylmer does.

Georgiana isn't worried by the fact that Aylmer has already started the treatment without notifying her or telling her anything about what it involves. He might be changing her very physical composition, but she seems fine with it, submitting entirely to his every whim. However, Aylmer seems to be failing so far.



While Aylmer works, Georgiana reads the books in his laboratory, which recount the achievements of famous scientists throughout history. These men were far ahead of their times and believed themselves to have gained power over nature and the spiritual world through their studies. They didn't know where nature would set limits around the power of science. Georgiana is even more interested in Aylmer's journal of his own experiments. It shows that he sees the physical aspects of science as always having spiritual implications. However, Georgiana discovers that he has failed to achieve most of what he aimed for, defeated by his own earthly imperfections, and the journal is in fact a sad record of human inadequacy. Even so, it makes Georgiana love and respect her husband more than ever.

Aylmer finds Georgiana reading his books and scolds her for it, saying that reading his journal almost makes him go crazy, but Georgiana assures Aylmer that it has only increased her admiration of him. He tells her to suspend judgment until after he has removed the **birthmark**, when he'll actually deserve her praise. Aylmer then asks Georgiana to sing for him, which she does, and her singing makes him happy. When he returns to the inner room of his laboratory, Georgiana realizes she forgot to tell him about a strange feeling in the birthmark which has made her restless, so she follows him. She is fascinated by the sight of all the machines and instruments that her husband uses for his experiments, although they make the room far less pleasant than the one where she's been staying. While he is cheerful enough when in Georgiana's presence, she notices that here Aylmer is intense and worried as he keeps watch over Aminadab's work.

When Aylmer catches sight of Georgiana, he gets angry and accuses her of not trusting him. He even suggests that the presence of the **birthmark** in the room will ruin his work. Georgiana replies that he has deceived her by pretending to be so confident in the treatment when he was actually very worried about it. She tells him that he must be honest with her, for she would do anything he asked of her, even drink poison. Aylmer is impressed, and reveals that he has already been treating the birthmark, but to no avail. There's only one option left to try, and it could be dangerous. Georgiana retorts that the only danger lies in the continued presence of the birthmark, which would make both of them go mad.

These books show that science has a long history of potential conflict with nature, and Aylmer is following in the footsteps of countless other men who thought they could control nature through science. However, the narrator makes it clear that nature does create boundaries for science, even if it's unclear precisely what they are. Furthermore, Aylmer's journal proves that he himself is far from perfect, despite demanding perfection from his wife. He's far more human than he would like to believe. Georgiana's intensified adoration of him, even if misguided, speaks to her complete submission to him and adds to her "perfection" as a wife. She loves Aylmer more for his imperfections, even though he loves her less for hers.



Contrary to being oblivious to his failures, Aylmer seems to be very bothered by them, perhaps explaining why he cares so much about succeeding in this experiment so that he can have a perfect wife and come a little closer to perfection himself. When Georgiana enters the inner laboratory, science is revealed to be far less elegant and perfect than Aylmer has made it seem through his demonstrations for Georgiana. In fact, it is far more dependent on Aminadab's physical, earthy abilities than Aylmer would have it seem. Furthermore, Aylmer is obviously not as confident as he wants Georgiana to think he is.



Aylmer seems not to deserve Georgiana's devotion, since he doesn't fully trust in her devotion to him. Georgiana, on the other hand, reaffirms her complete submission to her husband when she says she would drink poison for him. This moment also foreshadows the fact that Aylmer's medicine will in fact act as a poison. Finally, Georgiana's attitude towards the birthmark has completely reversed since the beginning—she would now rather die than go on living with it on her face.



Left alone again, Georgiana thinks about how amazing Aylmer is. She's overwhelmed at his love and glad that he strives for perfection rather than being happy with something less than what he truly desires, because she thinks this makes his love pure and honest. All she wants is to be able to satisfy him for a single moment, since she knows that as soon as he's satisfied, he'll want something even better.

Aylmer enters carrying a glass of colorless liquid, anxious but claiming that the medicine is perfect. Georgiana says if she didn't have him to think about, she'd probably rather die than live. She feels this way because she has enough moral sense to see her own faults, but not enough strength to fix them, so she simply goes on being unhappy with herself. Aylmer insists she will not die, and to demonstrate the effect of the liquid, he pours it into a **plant** with blemishes on its leaves, and the leaves become entirely green.

Georgiana says she didn't need Aylmer to prove the liquid's effect, because she trusts him completely. She drinks the liquid, pronouncing it delicious and saying that it satisfies a thirst she has felt for days. Then she falls asleep. Aylmer watches her anxiously, observing every little change in his wife and writing them all down in his journal. His entire self-worth is invested in the result of this experiment. Though he doesn't know why, he kisses the **birthmark**, but still feels disgusted by it. Georgiana herself seems disturbed in her sleep by his kiss. The birthmark slowly begins to fade, but its disappearance is like "the stain of the rainbow fading out of the sky." Aylmer is joyous with his success.

Aylmer pulls back a curtain, and **sunlight** falls on Georgiana's cheek. He hears Aminadab laughing and congratulates him on their mutual success, saying that earth and heaven worked together to make it happen. Georgiana wakes and sees her reflection in a mirror. She seems glad that the birthmark is fading, but then she starts to look worried. She expresses her pity for Aylmer, and he doesn't understand why, saying instead that she's perfect now.

It almost seems that the more Aylmer's flaws become apparent, the more completely Georgiana submits herself to his will. She also perceives that Aylmer's never-ending desire for something more than what he has is impossible to fulfill, but she'll still do whatever she can to try. This is perhaps the height of "female virtue" in this historical period, and another display of her perfection.



This is the first indication that Georgiana feels unsatisfied with her own morality, rather than just wanting to be rid of the birthmark because Aylmer hates it. Aylmer's successful demonstration with the plant here echoes the failed demonstration with a different plant earlier. Though this plant with its blemishes is meant to be like Georgiana, the one that died might also be like her, casting doubt on the medicine's success.



Georgiana again displays her submission to Aylmer and her willingness to sacrifice herself to his egotistical experiments. Aylmer seems to suddenly feel a connection to the birthmark, now that he thinks he has control over it. When it starts fading, he feels he has for once met his goal, but the narrator implies that the mark's disappearance also takes something beautiful away from Georgiana's face. It is now clear of blemishes, but not special as it was before. Aylmer seems oblivious to any such loss.



Nature begins to make its power felt here, as natural light enters the room for the first time and Aminadab, the man of the earth, is heard laughing with apparent triumph. Aylmer experiences a brief moment of oblivious happiness, thinking he has created perfection, but Georgiana senses that not all is as it should be.



Georgiana tells Aylmer that he has done well to aim so high in his ambitions, even if in doing so he has “rejected the best the earth could offer.” She reveals that she is dying. The **birthmark** was the only thing keeping her divine spirit connected to a human body, and as the birthmark disappears entirely, her soul goes up to heaven. Aminadab laughs again—earth celebrating its victory over the spiritual. The narrator laments that mortality always triumphs on earth, and if Aylmer could only have taken a broader view of life and time, he wouldn’t have lost his chance at happiness. In fact, his union with Georgiana would even have joined him to a divine being. But he couldn’t appreciate what he had, and so he threw away his best chance at perfection.

Even as she knows she’s dying, Georgiana comforts and praises Aylmer rather than criticizing him for essentially killing her. Ironically, mortality triumphs precisely because the only sign of it on Georgiana has gone, and so she becomes too perfect to remain human. Aylmer has essentially succeeded in his plan to make his wife perfect, but he didn’t take into account the fact that perfection can’t exist on earth. He could have appreciated being married to a woman who was as close to perfect as she could be, but in seeking complete perfection, he has wasted his only chance at being close to a divine creature. In effect, nature has triumphed over science even though science has completed what it meant to do.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Greider, Julia. "The Birthmark." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 14 Dec 2016. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Greider, Julia. "The Birthmark." LitCharts LLC, December 14, 2016. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-birthmark>.

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MLA

Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Birthmark*. Vintage. 2011.

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Hawthorne, Nathaniel. *The Birthmark*. New York: Vintage. 2011.