

**NOR SHALL DIAMOND DIE:
AMERICAN STUDIES
IN HONOUR OF JAVIER COY**

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AND
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(EDS.)**



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Departament de Filologia Anglesa i Alemanya
Universitat de València

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Table of Contents

Foreword	9
<i>Paul Scott Derrick, “In Our End is Our Beginning”</i>	11
<i>Mary E. Farrell, A Coy* Portrait</i>	13
<i>Nieves Alberola Crespo, Human Attitudes and Their Terra Incognita in Tennessee Williams’s Plays</i>	15
<i>Esther Álvarez López, Man’s Fantasy, Woman’s Death: The Subtle Operations of Idealism in Hawthorne’s “The Birth-mark”</i>	21
<i>José Manuel Barrio Marco, The Image of La Folle in Kate Chopin’s “Beyond the Bayou”</i>	33
<i>Fernando Beltrán Llavador, Thomas Merton’s Critique of Globalization</i>	43
<i>Jesús Benito Sánchez, Aesthetic Pursuit of Rational Escape? James Baldwin’s and Julio Cortázar’s Recreation of the Jazzman as Rebel Artist</i>	53
<i>Manuel Brito, Ron Silliman’s Remarks on Post-Referential Poetry</i>	61
<i>Francisco Collado Rodríguez, Tracking the Female Energy of V.: Glimpses of the Pynchonian Project</i>	71
<i>Juan José Cruz, Edward Rivera and American Mythology: A Reading of Family Installments</i>	79
<i>Russell Di Napoli, An Ongoing Missive to the Spirit of Bartolomeo Vanzetti</i>	85
<i>Isabel Durán, Latino Autobiography, the Aesthetic, and Political Criticism: The Case of Hunger of Memory</i>	91

<i>Emory Elliott, Race and Money in Pudd'nhead Wilson</i>	105
<i>Mary E. Farrell, Intimations on Four Poems by Wallace Stevens</i>	119
<i>Ana María Fraile Marcos, Afro-Caribbean Women Writers and US Literary Studies: Maryse Condé, Edwidge Danticat, and Elizabeth Nunez</i>	123
<i>María Frías, African-American Women Artists in Paris: Sex and Politics in Josephine Baker's La Revue Nègre (1925), and Maya Angelou's Porgy and Bess (1954)</i>	139
<i>Mar Gallego, Revisiting the Harlem Renaissance: Double Consciousness, Talented Tenth, and the New Negro</i>	153
<i>Pere Gifra Androher, "Into the Land of Dream": A Pyrenean Excursion in Lee Meriwether's Seeing Europe by Automobile (1911)</i>	167
<i>Montserrat Ginés, Intellectual Affinities: The Southern Fugitive-Agrarians and the Spanish Generation of '98</i>	179
<i>Manuel González de la Aleja Barberán, Norman Mailer: The Last Tough Guy</i>	189
<i>Constante González Groba, Eudora Welty's The Optimist's Daughter: The Regenerative Return to the Houses and Rooms of the Past</i>	201
<i>Juani Guerra, Metatext as Cognitive Metonymy: An Experientialist Approach to Metafiction</i>	211
<i>Juan Ignacio Guijarro González, Hysteria and Communism in Arthur Miller's Rewriting of Ibsen's An Enemy of the People</i>	217
<i>David Hamilton, Pierre Menard in New England</i>	227
<i>Aitor Ibarrola Armendariz, Not So Original, Mr. Shyalaman: A. Bierce's Elongated Shadow over The Sixth Sense</i>	235
<i>Santiago Juan Navarro, Conspiracy Theory: Chronic Psychoses in Contemporary Metafiction</i>	247
<i>Juan José Lanero, Spiritual Beauties and Beautiful Colours in Edwards and Emerson</i>	253

<i>Douglas Edward LaPrade, Sources of Hemingway's For Whom the Bell Tolls</i>	261
<i>Antonio Lastra, Literary Ethics and Pragmatist Aesthetics</i>	273
<i>José Liste Noya, William Carlos Williams's Travelling Culture</i>	277
<i>Juan López Gavilán, "The Shadow of the Wound-Mark": Poetic Witnessing in Darkness</i>	291
<i>Felisa López Liqueste, Beyond Borders: The Native-American C(h)ase</i>	303
<i>Townsend Ludington, "I am so fascinated by Spain": John Dos Passos, January 1917</i>	313
<i>Ana M^a Manzananas Calvo, Magic Realism in Contemporary American Fiction</i>	321
<i>Félix Martín, Whitman and America: The Biographical Commitment</i>	331
<i>Catalina Montes, The Complex Fable of William Faulkner in Search of an Interpretation</i>	339
<i>Marita Nadal Blasco, Poe's American Gothic, or the Gap between Reference and Signification</i>	355
<i>María Ruth Noriega Sánchez, "The New Buffalo": Reservation Gambling in Louise Erdrich's <i>The Bingo Palace</i></i>	365
<i>Joaquim Oltra, Jefferson on the Constitution of Cádiz</i>	375
<i>Elena Ortells, The Rhetorical Dimension of Character in Katherine Anne Porter's <i>Old Mortality</i></i>	381
<i>Barbara Oziebło, The Devils and Dilemmas of Feminist Biography: Writing the Life of Susan Glaspell</i>	391
<i>Daniel Pastor García, "Caught up in the tragedy of modern history": Tradition and Modernity in John Cheever's <i>The Wapshot Chronicle</i> and <i>The Wapshot Scandal</i></i>	403
<i>Viorica Patea, T. S. Eliot's Poetics of History and Tradition</i>	411
<i>Mercedes Peñalba, Ontology and Epistemology of the Short Story</i>	427

<i>Kevin Power</i> , Robert Creeley with Charles Olson, <i>The Island</i> and the Painters	439
<i>David Rio Raigadas</i> , Nevada as the Sin State: Twentieth-Century Fictional Portraits	453
<i>Michael Aaron Rockland</i> , New Jersey and <i>The Sopranos</i>	463
<i>Elaine B. Safer</i> , William Gass, the Short Story, and Metafiction	471
<i>Agustín Safón Supervía</i> , The American Historical Novel: Gore Vidal	481
<i>Pilar Sánchez Calle</i> , No City of God: Urban Images in the Fiction of Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset.....	489
<i>Isabel Soto</i> , Everyone Knows (?): Philip Roth’s <i>The Human Stain</i>	499
<i>Ruth Stoner</i> , Pocahontas, Mother of the New Woman in Charlotte Barnes’s <i>The Forest Princess</i>	507
<i>Juan Antonio Suárez</i> , Joseph Cornell, Collector and Historian.....	517
<i>Martín Urdiales Shaw</i> , From the “Rude Stream” to the Mainstream and Beyond: A Twentieth-Century Journey through Jewish American Prose	527

Foreword

ΟΨ ΤΙΣ

a man on whom the sun has gone down
nor shall diamond die in the avalanche
 be it torn from its setting
first must destroy himself ere others destroy him.

Ezra Pound, Canto LXXIV, II. 88-92.

Always, there is the journey. Always, there are the battles of the journey, and all of the hidden dangers and entrapments along the way. And then there is the long-deferred return to the island home, and the final expulsion of the false pretenders, before you can sleep at last, in peace, where you belong.

This book is an offering of respect and gratitude for a colleague, and a friend, who has done so much to open the way for those of us who pursue American studies in Spain. It needs no preface of dates and names that we are all already familiar with. Making it is simply the right thing to do, and we do it gladly.

Javier Coy has been there, quiet, self-effacing and unpretentious, but also effective, constant and irrevocable, for as long as most of us can remember. His particular journey has been a full one and his battles, too, have been many. And though he has retired from an active academic role, that journey will still go on before he reaches home again.

We have garnered very much from his wisdom and restraint. All of us involved in the teaching of American literature at this university during the last twelve years have learnt, and learnt well, “from the slant angle of a tobacco pipe.” We owe Javier a lot. This book is one more installment, although limited to the field of American studies—from some of his oldest friends, many of his companions along the way, and many more of his students—in the repayment of our debt.

The diamond shall not die in the avalanche of time.

“In Our End Is Our Beginning”

It seems like hardly anybody
here

 knows how to make
a valuable poem any more. Like—
none of us has a clue
 to figure
out the problem: how to
construct

 a durable thing
 with words. How to
construct a solid, dependable, usable, durable thing.
None of us even knows what is worthy
to be spoken any more, now that
the deepest of our needs are practically extinct,
the deepest streams have
 gone still,
and only the glittering surfaces continue
to move beneath the light (Or
do they simply
seem to
move?)
at the behest of a mistaken purpose.

This is us. This is our illness.

We are become as minors,
 stuttering
out a mouthful of half-remembered
syllables, too impoverished by now
to realize that we
no longer hear what they really say.

How do we make the world cohere
into meaningful sound?

The words fall out like broken egg-
shells on the page
 and lie here
shattered, messy, inert.

Maybe somebody else can come along and put the pieces together again.

A Coy Portrait*

Long, lanky.

First time, upon seeing him:

“This guy’s socks couldn’t possibly match.”

Ah, but they did.

And so was he matched to his subject.

Right on.

Then we joked afterwards

About Pound and ounces.

*coy>quietus (Lat.)

Mary E. Farrell

Human Attitudes and Their *Terra Incognita* in Tennessee Williams's Plays

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I would say that there is something much bigger in life and death than we have become aware of (or adequately recorded) in our living and dying. And further to compound this shameless romanticism, I would say that our serious theatre is a search for that something that is not yet successful but is still going on.

Tennessee Williams

None of us perceives the world the same nor uses the same linguistic codes to describe it. Tennessee Williams had his own peculiar vision of the real world, one of light and shadow. He conceived the human being as a compound of body and soul (or spirit) but any disunion or split between them led to a deep fragmentation of his fictional beings that, in a certain way, remained rootless, unsettled. Some of the characters that populate his plays reject their bodies; others seem to be unaware of the existence of the *terra incognita* of their souls.

The material pose of the human being, his passionate, almost violent, emotional side, is clearly obvious in Williams's plays and has been widely scrutinized by the majority of critical essays published up to date. However, I think it is important to talk about the theme of spirituality, a spirituality that in my opinion does exist and presents itself in an underhanded way, somehow relegated to the background of his plays. In spite of the fact that this aspect has not much attracted the attention of the reviewers or scholars, a perusal of the multiple meanings and varied use of spirituality is advisable to see how this invisible, almost imperceptible body "without organs" undergoes an eternal process of metamorphosis in Williams's writing.

It goes without saying that the word "spirituality" has certain religious echoes. Traditionally the "spirit" has been defined as an immaterial, non-physical entity provided with reason, a rational soul. But "spirit" would also be the invisible partner and, considered as the purest one, equivalent to beatitude or blessedness; and it should be added that in certain contexts "spirit" is a synonym of liveliness, courage and determination. On the other hand, we should take into account that the word spirituality reminds us of the existence of a "God," written with capital letters when it refers to monotheism, the sacred name of the Supreme Being, the Creator of the Universe; or of a "god" written with small letters to allude to any of the deities of the polytheistic religions, or what we could call "minor gods."

Many doubts arise whenever we try to outline the different meanings of spirit and spirituality in Williams's work, and immediately the first questions emerge: Did Tennessee Williams have religious beliefs? Did he believe in God?¹ Did he believe in an everlasting life after death? Perhaps we can look at his memoirs to find some convincing answers.

In his autobiography, Williams relates his first experience of spirituality to a specific time when he had to face certain fears or phobias. At that time he was seventeen years old and on his first trip to Europe with his grandfather, Reverend Walter Dakin. When they were in Paris he had symptoms that he could still control, but when visiting Cologne he underwent for the first time an episode of psychotic nature. His fears, the anguish, the terror he felt, were the result of a psychotic crisis that he himself defined as "phobia about the processes of thought" (1977: 20). To subdue his panic, he took refuge in a Gothic cathedral whose interior was flooded with coloured sunrays reaching through the great stained-glass windows. Those colourful lights provided him with the peace and calmness he needed to overcome his crisis:

Let me say that I am not predisposed to believe in miracles or in superstitions. But what happened was a miracle and one of a religious nature and I assure you that I am not bucking for sainthood when I tell you about it. It was as if an impalpable hand were placed upon my head [...]. At seventeen I had no doubt at all that the hand of our Lord Jesus had touched my head with mercy and had exorcized from it the phobia that was driving me into madness. (1977: 21)

Let me give you this sworn truth. I have never doubted the existence of God nor have I ever neglected to kneel in prayer when a situation in which I found myself (and there have been many) seemed critical enough in my opinion to merit the Lord's attention and, I trust, intervention. (1977: 23)

We cannot take seriously his pronouncement on the subject; in other words, this quotation should not mislead us because the tone of his writing is somewhat ironic and humorous and he would later on state all his doubts, his incredulity, his scepticism on the possible existence of God. He flatly declared that he did not believe in an afterlife; and questioning the existence of angels, he argued that the only ones he had ever met are alive here on earth.

I said a lot of stuff about my faith in God and in prayer [...] about my paradoxical disbelief in an after-existence. I also said that I believed in angels more than I did in God and the reason was that I had never known God—true or false?—but that I had known several angels in my life. (1977: 33)

The angels portrayed in Williams's plays are ethereal creatures endowed with a great sensibility. They are immortal beings, pure and beautiful, of androgynous aspect like Hannah, whom Williams himself defined as what he thought was spiritually beautiful in a person and still believable.

Hannah is remarkable-looking—ethereal, almost ghostly. She suggests a Gothic cathedral image of a medieval saint, but animated. She could be thirty, she could be forty: she is totally feminine and yet androgynous-looking—almost timeless. (1979: 238)

Williams respected the different religious beliefs in their most varied manifestations. During his trips not only in the United States but also through Mexico, France, Japan, etc., he had the opportunity to meet and share some experiences with Methodists, Anabaptists, Buddhists, Christians, Jews, etc.; he even got interested in the ancestral rituals of native

¹ Although in his youth he was attached to the Episcopal Church, in his later years he rarely went into a church, even after his conversion to Catholicism in 1969.

Americans and Mexican Indians. His profound tolerance towards what is different, what is unlike anything else, made him question his own spiritual creed.

Far from believing in an everlasting life, Williams is a clear supporter of *carpe diem*: it is the moment that counts, the here and now. There is a poignant interrogative when he asks what he would do with a small piece of eternity if he held it in his hands. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* we can read: “human beings dream of life everlasting [...] but most of them want it on earth and not in heaven” (1979: 38). In the film adaptation of this play, directed by Elia Kazan, this idea is stressed visually in the scene where Big Daddy and Brick have a discussion in a basement chockful of knick-knacks. Big Daddy tells Brick that his mother bought lots of things during their trip to Europe; all those objects, material possessions, will remain behind when a man dies. In this case, Big Daddy knows he is going to die and he resembles a pharaoh, a king of ancient Egypt, surrounded by his treasures, precious objects that glitter but with a perishable light not destitute of the playwright’s personal touch.

Big Daddy: [...] the reason he buys everything he can buy is that in the back of his mind he has the crazy hope that one of his purchases will be life everlasting! (1979: 61-62)

Is it possible that human beings are endowed with *some unearthly feature*? How can men know that there is *something* more important than their own physical needs? But that *something*, how could it be defined?

As the pharaohs in ancient times considered themselves deities, Williams places himself in the centre of his world. He becomes a visionary, a prophet aware of all the social changes of his own time. American society of the 50s and 60s was marked by consumerism, body worship, violence, dehumanization, loss of values, hypocrisy, mendacity. In Williams’s contemporary society, honor, dignity, elegance, delicacy, tenderness and the spiritual side of human nature had little value, or none at all. As a result the vindication of art as the expression of the human soul in its multiple manifestations was a romantic quest, more a dream than a reality.

The first and second generations of English romantic writers rejected the idea of “God” as the Supreme Being and searched for new alternatives. Let us mention the case of Wordsworth and Coleridge, who bet on Nature as their spiritual guide. Nature would help them in their intellectual growth; or for example, Keats, Byron or Shelley, who rejected their predecessors’ pantheism and decided to place man in the centre of the universe. Williams’s creed is not religious but artistic: firstly, he underlines the primacy of the artist, not of God, as the modernist writers had been doing. His voice proclaims in *The Night of the Iguana*:

Shannon: We’ll play God tonight like kids play house with old broken crates and boxes [...] so it can run back to its bushes because God won’t do it and we are going to play God here. (1979: 324)

And secondly, he transforms reality into a work of art that can oftentimes be rude, outrageous and violent. His plays follow the tradition initiated by Eugene O’Neill; they are not just pure entertainment but introduce the audience to the oddest and most unexpected situations.²

² When his plays were adapted to the big screen a new type of Hollywood films was created, films mainly destined for an adult audience.

Consciously or unconsciously he deconstructs spirituality in his writing because that is the only possible way to present it. Meditation on the meaning of life or eternity,³ remnants of ancient rituals, magic, religious beliefs, form a complex pattern where the different voices share a state of equilibrium. Let us take, for example, Serafina, the protagonist of the play *The Rose Tattoo*; in her persona magic rituals and religion coexist in difficult harmony.

Assunta: Serafina, for you everything has got to be different. A sign, a miracle, a wonder of some kind. You speak to Our Lady. You say that She answers your questions. She nods or shakes Her head at you. Look, Serafina, underneath Our Lady you have a candle. The wind through the shutters makes the candle flicker. The shadows move. Our Lady seems to be nodding!

Serafina: She gives me signs. (1976b: 22)

Miracles, mysterious unknown powers and irrationality may collide with reality, but in the world of imagination, of fantasy, in the fictional arena these three elements may not always be incompatible.⁴

In his work some characters believe that something immaterial and invisible that cannot be represented subsists within the frame of human anatomy. The characters become aware of their dual nature. They feel the fragmentation of their existence and express it in terms of a struggle between body and spirit. However, this fight should not be understood as an epic battle between Good and Evil, but as an inner fight or critical debate between what they really are, what they appear to be and how they would like to be. We witness an identity crisis. And we should try to understand that sometimes those feeble signs of spirituality are palmed off so as to hide or deny any sexual contact beyond the commonly accepted. Examples of this would be Brick, Blanche and Alma. They loath their physical side because they do not want to admit their “truth,” they do not want to question their sexual identity. Brick, for example, is not interested in questioning his possible homosexuality; Blanche, her possible sexual addiction to youngsters; and Alma represses her natural sexual instincts (she is a parson’s daughter), denies her body and, translated into anorexia, her trial is to somehow escape and transcend it—if at all to get herself disembodied.⁵

Williams shares with his characters a dislike for the destructive, treacherous, cruel quirks of human nature, “evil spirits that haunt the human heart and take possession of it, and spread from one human heart to another human heart [...] [until] everything green and beautiful is destroyed” (1976a: 52). He knows that they are just human characteristics, humanity is neither good nor bad, and evil and destructiveness interact with goodness and creativity in the process of life. Although Williams’s characters may seem engrossed by evil through violence and deceit, they soon become victims of their own limited human perceptions. Skipping over linguistic, cultural and time barriers, we are reminded of Proust’s words sounding the depths of human feelings:

It was a terrible *terra incognita* this on which I had just landed, a fresh phase of undreamed-of sufferings that was opening before me. And yet this deluge of reality that engulfs us, if it is enormous compared with our timid and microscopic suppositions [...]. (367)

³ Alma in *Summer and Smoke* defines “eternity” as “something that goes on and on when life and death and time and everything else is all through with” (1982: 103).

⁴ Detailed realism was never a primary concern for Williams. He was an impressionist, a symbolist, a realist, whatever was necessary.

⁵ We should bear in mind that at the end of the play Alma goes through a radical change; she rejects her old way of thinking (the spirit) and accepts John’s way (the flesh). On the other hand John admits that he now believes that “something else is in there, an immaterial something [...]” (1982: 168).

Tennessee Williams landed in a terrible *terra incognita*, a timeless imaginary world where the fictional characters are not tragic/dramatic heroes; theirs is a different kind of heroism. They never do triumph, their battles are already lost before started: a search for lost purity, a refuge from the execrable world, or simply a zest for human relations. The result does not count, only “the everlasting struggle and aspiration for more than our human limits have placed in our reach” (Williams 1982: 141). The ambiguous portrayal of the characters, their duplicity, makes it difficult to judge or condemn their behaviour. Sometimes they even feel free and detached from the author whilst in the process of composition of the play. Chance rules their fates and they are vulnerable to the linguistic potential threats against both their physical and psychological integrity. At the end there are no solutions, only a future marked by uncertainty. The only thing that seems to bring any hope, any light, is Art.

In order to include spiritual nuances, Williams stressed in his plays the importance of stagecraft,⁶ specially the use of lights and music. He introduced music, sound effects, movement and lighting to express abstract themes. All these elements would often be the echo of the characters’ inner life, the mark of their spirituality.

Worthwhile to ponder on is the intensity of stage lights. It is interesting to notice how some characters find themselves at ease in the darkness (Chance, Shannon, Blanche—they prefer to linger in dusk); other characters, following the author’s strain, have to be intensely illuminated (Maggie, Amanda or Catherine, for example) because that way Williams provided them with a peculiar vitality, an energy that differentiates them from the rest.

His playing with lights depended on the effect he wanted to achieve. In the production notes that precede the printed text of *The Glass Menagerie* (1962: 231), we can read:

The lighting in the play is not realistic. In keeping with the atmosphere of memory, the stage is dim. Shafts of light are focused on selected areas or actors, sometimes in contradistinction to what is the apparent centre. For instance, in the quarrel scene between Tom and Amanda, in which Laura has no active part, the clearest pool of light is on her figure. This is also true of the supper scene, when her silent figure on the sofa should remain the visual centre. The light upon Laura should be distinct from the others, having a peculiar pristine clarity such as light used in early religious portraits of female saints or madonnas. A certain correspondence to light in religious paintings, such as El Greco’s, where the figures are radiant in atmosphere that is relatively dusky.

Laura becomes a transparent, ethereal, quasi-mystic creature. In this play the music becomes an additional component that underlines the fragile beauty of the female protagonist.

Williams now and then insisted on maintaining the poetic element in his dialogues, not only in the theatrical texts but also in the scripts for film adaptations. Seemingly the struggle with the real world should leave a residue of poetry in the broken lives of the characters. Poetry would be a manifestation of spirituality in terms of beauty. Sometimes he would even include a few verses or pieces of short poems, for example in *The Night of the Iguana*:

And still the ripe fruit and the branch
Observe the sky to blanch
Without a cry, without a prayer,
With no betrayal of despair.

⁶ For Tennessee Williams the visual part was as important as the dialogues and monologues. He used to write long production notes and he loved to experiment with different stage techniques such as translucent interior walls, the perfect metaphor for the exploration of the inner man confined within the walls of a room.

O Courage, could you not as well
Select a second place to dwell,
Not only in that golden tree,
But in the frightened heart of me? (1979: 325)

Spirituality has to be understood as what makes us different from the rest of creation. Perhaps it can only be defined in terms of what it is not. It is neither the primitive nor irrational side of a human being; it is not the basic instincts; and we can only detect it through its various manifestations: art, music or poetry, the skills of the mind that Blanche DuBois appeals to:

Blanche DuBois: [...] Maybe we are a long way from being made in God's image, but Stella—my sister—here there has been *some* progress since then! Such things as art—as poetry and music—such kinds of new light have come into the world since then! In some kinds of people some tenderer feelings have had little beginning! That we have got to make *grow*! And *cling* to, and hold as our flag! In this dark march toward whatever it is we are approaching [...]. *Don't—don't hang back with the brutes!* (1964: 163-164)

Spirituality understood in terms of an artistic expression—poetry—cannot be materialized without a referential, and as such the body cannot be ignored nor denied. Fully aware of this Williams created his new language, an utterance of ethereal and transparent spirituality concocted with the most violent and passionate instincts.

In the inexhaustible search or everlasting struggle to grasp whatever lies beyond our human limits, perhaps only a spiritual prop may lend sense to the eternal venture. What is left if the bodily substance vanishes? Does the holder of art, poetry, music, spirituality, remain as an ever-living witness? As Marcel Proust wrote: “The most terrible reality brings us, with our suffering, the joy of a great discovery, because it merely gives a new and clear form to what we have long been ruminating without suspecting it” (367).

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Man's Fantasy, Woman's Death: The Subtle Operations of Idealism in Hawthorne's "The Birth-mark"

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Nathaniel Hawthorne's fiction is categorised as part of the so-called canon of American literature that includes some of his *masterpieces* in traditional literary studies. I employ the term "master-piece" deliberately here, though not in its common usage, since I would like to understand it in this context as the work of a man who "naturally" writes as such and shows, even if unconsciously, the basic tenets of the patriarchal culture he was born in and grew up with, a culture that positions men and women in very different and unequal categories. Hawthorne ultimately helps to perpetuate in his work a male-authored representation of women, the norm of what he and most, if not all, of his contemporaries considered to be the governing principles in the relationships between men and women, even if more often than not he does so in a rather disguised, ambiguous way.

In spite of his alleged feminism,¹ Hawthorne usually deviates from any initial intention in that path and proselytises through an idealistic and untrustworthy narrator concerning the roles of men and women and their differences in a paradigmatic patriarchal cultural world not even he can escape from. In "The Birth-mark," one of his *master-pieces*, the writer exercises his dominion as "master"² of his work through the opinions poured therein, just as his main male character does. Aylmer, a "master" for his servant-assistant Aminadab is also, as we shall presently see, a true master for his wife Georgiana, whom he imprisons and subordinates into the text he has framed for her.

Michael J. Colacurcio, in his "Introduction" to a collection of Hawthorne's tales mentions, though in passing and therefore without going into much depth, what to me is one of the essential and often overlooked readings of the story: the feminist one. Colacurcio is very much aware of the more than obvious gender issues that the tale provides. He addresses feminist critics who, he considers, "may fairly notice that it is a hapless but worshipful wife who is elected to reveal the mark of fleshly imperfection and on whom,

¹ I disagree on this point with Judith Fetterley, who asserts in her study of "The Birth-mark" that "the implicit feminism [in this story] is considerable" (31) and Hawthorne's attitude toward men and their fantasies critical (30), though on the same page she says that the story is "by no means explicitly feminist." Whereas it is true that there seems to be an implicit critique of the method the scientist uses to achieve his goal, it is also true that the author sanctions Aylmer's aspirations toward the infinite and the Ideal, which, as usual, takes the form of a woman.

² Malcolm Cowley subtitles his *Portable Hawthorne as A Comprehensive Cross Section of the Writings of a Great American Master*.

accordingly, the maddened Aylmer must perform his insane experiment” (xxxii).³ He makes it sound as if that in itself was only something that “feminist critics”—who we all know are always out problematizing what otherwise are “innocent” beliefs and/or opinions—, and nobody else, could really “fairly notice” even on a first and superficial reading. In spite of the attempts on his part to account for Hawthorne’s gesture, explaining that “it too is part of Hawthorne’s historical *donnée*” and its parallelism with Poe’s “Ligeia,” whose Platonism is epitomised in “‘the most poetic’ theme of the ‘death of a beautiful woman,’” he himself cannot fail to acknowledge the author’s evident wish to “observe that certain Western, even Christian attitudes toward ‘Woman’ are embedded in the language often used to express ‘Man’s’ more than Faustian desire for symbolic transcendence” (xxxii). All in all, Colacurcio seems to be very sure of Hawthorne’s awareness of the sexual implications of idealism that his tale tackles in, as is usual in this writer, a rather ambiguous way. Taking what I think is a hidden, sexist meaning behind this tale of alleged idealism and noble aspirations, I would like to analyse “The Birth-mark” in the light of some of the ideas that have characterised feminist criticism in the past decades, important issues concerning the ideological construction of subjectivity and the inscription of femininity through and by masculine representation. There is no possible “innocent” reading of Hawthorne’s tale from this contemporary perspective, just as there are no transcendental aims or motives on the main character’s part.

Feminist criticism exposes how subjectivity has been denied to women, who are constituted as objects “of representation, of discourse, of desire” (Braidotti 133) by a masculine cultural system. Women have always been “read,” and their femininity interpreted and inscribed, in literary works that have fixed meaning and sexual identity in their ideological literary representations. Women have been “spoken subjects,” muted or silenced by speaking male subjects, reincarnated “Adams” with the capacity to name and define. This “universal” He has used his authority to interpret others and thus master them, i.e., impose his subjectivity, through his “*master*” pieces. In *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar contend that in patriarchal Western culture “the texts’ author is a father, a progenitor, a procreator, an aesthetic patriarch whose pen is an instrument of generative power like his penis” (6), an idea that emphatically underlines the (feminist) conception of that culture as phallogocentric. Subjectivity is thus fashioned through the rhetoric of a dominant monologic discourse that ostensibly presents the *authorised* versions of reality, of truth. Moreover, scientific discourse—the one Aylmer, the protagonist of Hawthorne’s story, personifies—has been used “to quantify and qualify, to prove [...] the *essentially* different nature of the other” (Case 78), as has artistic discourse itself, which discriminates who is to be represented and who represents, and which ends up designating alterity by denoting essential and characteristic distinctions such as gender. As Sue-Ellen Case concludes, “Tautologically, art confirms superior racial beauty and a higher degree of civilization; science, superior intelligence, and the transcending of superstition; religion and law, superior soul and body” (79).

Classic writers such as Hawthorne employ knowledge along with various kinds of dominant discourses (“the master’s tools” in Lorde’s terms) in stories of colonisation of (female) Others. These Others are denied discursive presence, rendered inferior, and at length silent and invisible. Woman is seen as this “Other,” relegated beyond the borders of the (subjective) self, whose otherness is expressed and reinforced “by means of representational systems, symbols, imaginary constructions, behaviour models” (Badinter

³ All references to “The Birth-mark” are taken from *Selected Tales and Sketches*, ed. Michael Colacurcio (New York: Penguin, 1987) and will be cited using the initial (B) followed by the page number.

95). Among the most significant of these are the hierarchical binary oppositions that divide the male and the female and assign each certain characteristics depending on their gender. Thus, culture, mind, the intellect are referentially placed versus nature, body, matter, the first term of the pair corresponding to man and culturally marked as positive whereas the second is associated to woman and has clear negative connotations.

Aylmer, the male protagonist of Hawthorne's "The Birth-mark," is a composite character who embodies the Culture-Science dualism in his activities and pursuits. He is presented as a "man of science—an eminent proficient in every branch of natural philosophy" who seeks to "lay his hand on the secret of creative force" and "to make new worlds for himself" (B 259). In his role as culture-bearer he will attempt to create new forms to control Nature, represented by his wife's bloody stain on her left cheek, her birthmark. Sherry Ortner maintains that Culture-Science "has at some point asserted itself to be not only distinct from but superior to nature, and that sense of distinctiveness and superiority rests precisely on the ability to transform—to 'socialize' and 'culturalize'—nature" (253-54). This is the idea that runs through "The Birth-mark," as through "Rappaccini's Daughter" as well, two of Hawthorne's tales where, not surprisingly nor coincidentally, the male characters are physicians. Both Aylmer and Rappaccini are devoted to a Neoplatonic idea of Science, which they experiment with constantly and which is tested in the two cases on a woman: a devoted wife and daughter, respectively. Also in both stories the women are closer to nature than either one of the scientists: Beatrice because her life runs parallel to that of the flowers in her father's garden; Georgiana because her birthmark stands for all that is natural and inherent in individuals, and that Aylmer tellingly turns not into a generic symbol of all human beings, as could be expected, but into a gendered one standing for "*his wife's* liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death" (B 261-62, emphasis added). The implications in "The Birth-mark" are fairly clear, as the sentence implicitly suggests: Georgiana's mark represents in Aylmer's eyes the emblem of woman's active participation in the primeval sin. She is Eve reincarnated, tacitly blamed by her husband for embodying what to him is a perpetual reminder of humankind's most inescapable condition: mortality. His wife's birthmark, therefore, signifies to him the "fatal flaw of humanity"; it is a "frightful object," "a symbol of imperfection" (B 262), that "Nature stamps on all her productions, either to imply that they are temporary and finite, or that their perfection must be wrought by toil and pain" (B 261). In his endeavour to surpass Nature's perishable work and to achieve the status of immortality that will give him complete power over life, the man-scientist finds it "natural" to subordinate and control it/her. He will try to correct Georgiana's imperfection by erasing her earthly nature and thus making her what he believes will be a perfect specimen of absolute beauty and immortality.

Georgiana is clearly identified with Nature and, as such, she is contemplated as an active participant in its special processes. As a woman she is culturally believed to possess both a creative and a destructive force, the former associated with birth, the latter with death, "the two events which haunt the human imagination, and which the unconscious and a great many myths associate with woman. She thus reappears as a threat to man where he feels the most defenceless, the most dependent" (Badinter 93). Elizabeth Badinter follows here Simone de Beauvoir's thesis that man projects onto woman the horror of his carnal contingency, of his inability to control his physical existence, his birth or his death. It is Georgiana's body and what it represents that obsesses her husband, her (female) nature that appeals to his scientific, (ir)rational mind. It is quite obvious for an attentive reader of this story that in "The Birth-mark" Aylmer is obsessed with his wife's (im)perfection, in spite of her beauty, not with Aminadab's, the ugly underworker, whom he could have chosen as a more suitable object of his experiments. The scientist despises his assistant for his lack of

knowledge and his brutishness, but in no way attempts to change either his psyche or his physicality. There is, I believe, nothing accidental in the selection of the object whose idealisation will be pursued, nor in the form this (misguided) idealism takes in the story. In my view, it is Georgiana's femaleness, her sexual difference, that prompts the scientist to act on his wife, an atavistic dread of the female—what she signifies in Western cosmology—that Aylmer must also confront if he wants to exorcise and overcome it. In order to do so, he must first and foremost remodel her subjectivity through his disruptive perspective, inscribe her femininity in his own text (i.e., representational cultural system) and, finally, render her absent as an agent both of discourse and of meaning.

Jane Gallop asserts that “Sexual difference takes its decisive significance from a sighting” (qtd. in Hutcheon 165), as Hawthorne, in a very particular way, corroborates through his male protagonist, for it is the beholding of Georgiana's birthmark that causes Aylmer's anxiety, his revulsion, and his conflict in the first place. I argue that the mark becomes then the site/sight where Aylmer's maleness confronts Georgiana's femaleness, a battlefield where gender identity is fought over with the aim of restoring the psychological peace that has been threatened by the disorder and chaos that the profound implications of her mark have brought to bear on his male (disguised as scientific) identity. “Misogyny is not a disease,” Serge Dunis claims, “but a policy that systematically discredits women, the better to establish the creative powers of men” (qtd. in Badinter 109). Dunis' assertion rings very true when applied to the specific context of Hawthorne's story and his protagonist, as it is precisely a persistent debasement of his wife that will enable him to establish his powers, creative or otherwise.

In spite of Georgiana's obvious physical and spiritual accomplishments, Aylmer finds her wanting. In a typical pygmalion pattern, he dreams of an ideal woman who will serve as an intercessor between him and the divine, the eternal; a creature, his own creation, that—he deems—would be unfinished, lacking, without the superior intervention of his almighty hand. In “The Birth-mark” it becomes imperative for Georgiana to surrender her body and her spirit to her husband's science and to his power. She is required to be absolutely selfless (or rather, she is de-self-ed) to appease his obsessive mania in what turns out to be a subtle but pervasive form of control. For much of what Aylmer reveals in the process of improving his wife's body is his own need to exert his mastery, to be certain and confident, while at the same time he unwittingly exposes his deep anxieties about male creativity. What “The Birth-mark” ultimately presents is this man's obsession, his horror and envy of the feminine aspects of generation, his fear of female sexuality. A question arises soon after the first pages: Why does Aylmer take up the issue of his wife's birthmark so soon after he gets married? The narrator reminds us that the eminent man of science had not thought about it until those first moments of their united lives. There must have been something then that made him more disturbingly aware of the inescapable presence of the birthmark once he got to know Georgiana more intimately. The opening lines of the story suggest that Aylmer had left his laboratory only when he felt it was due time for him to find a mate and comply—as it were—with Nature's call. It is also quite plain that he had never had any kind of sexual contact with a woman before, “too unreservedly” devoted as he had always been to his science. Now he is confronted with his and Georgiana's sexuality for the first time, face to face with the female of the species and her biological capacity to procreate.

In his study on the history of sexuality, Michel Foucault notes that medical and philosophical thought have typically associated sexual activity with death and connected both to the very principle of reproduction, as its ultimate end is to palliate the extinction of living beings and to give to the species as a whole a form of eternity that could not otherwise be granted to any single individual (125). For Aristotle and Plato, Foucault

observes, the sexual act is a kind of crossroads of an individual life in the sense that it heads for death while it is simultaneously immortalised in the survival of the species (125). Aylmer cannot withdraw himself from this yearning that every perishable nature has of perpetuating itself, of being immortal. Sex is thus linked to both death and immortality, the two facts the scientist has always struggled to elude and achieve respectively. Furthermore, it is in the irrepressible force of desire and in the sexual act that the philosopher Saint Augustine sees one of the first stigmas of the Fall, as the involuntary movement reproduces in the human body the revolt of man against God (130), a revolt Aylmer will carry out through his manipulation of his wife's body. Not surprisingly, he has soon given up on her "soul or sense," which could have brought her closer to the Absolute, the ideal of perfection he aspires to, and has instead circumscribed her only to her physicality. Georgiana becomes in his mind the embodiment of the seemingly contrary but intimately linked principles of Eros and Thanatos, whereby man's sexual desire indirectly involves a surrender to death.

"The Birth-mark" has been analysed as the first of a series of fictions that explore "the social, aesthetic, and moral assets and liabilities of the Neoplatonic artist" (Rucker 448). We can better understand the implications that the tale explores if we place it in the context of two antebellum American social developments that deeply affected long-standing cultural paradigms: on the one hand, profound changes in the nature of women's work, and thus of both male and female identity; on the other hand, the emergence of authorship as a profession. This context reveals the new uncertainties that arose about the differences between masculine and feminine modes of creativity. According to Nicholas K. Bromell,

[a] generalized Neoplatonic tension between mind and body, or matter and spirit, is specified as a relation between a man's mind and a woman's body. Moreover because the body of a woman is capable of creating by generation (Georgiana's flaw, it should be recalled, is a "birthmark"), it poses an alternative, and a threat, to the only creating of which a man is capable—invention and fabrication. (545)

The tale is one of Hawthorne's most explicit fictional meditations on the nature of art and artistic activity, complicated with the mutual interweaving of a whole set of binary oppositions (man/woman, mind/body, intellect/matter, mental/manual work) that further underscore the author's (as an artist and writer himself) and the character's preoccupation with woman's material essence, her sexual potential, and the natural processes of (pro)creation that, as a female, characterise her.

In spite of his acquired knowledge, the scientist does not seem to know what to make of his wife's nature, baffled perhaps by the secrets her femaleness hides from (his) view, the mystery of mysteries, the original place of creation of human beings. If the function of all myths of origin is to express "men's fear and to provide it with an antidote" (Badinter 99), then Aylmer will soon produce his own myth to protect his vulnerability and inferiority in the creative potential he obviously and "naturally" lacks. In the unconscious and in myths, the vagina is represented as a devouring, devastating, insatiable force, "a 'toothed' cavern, 'nightmarish', and finally, mortal," a *vagina dentata* that produces an almost universal fear linked to that of menstrual blood, "which is disturbing and unhealthy, since it is the object of an enormous amount of taboos, but also of the blood of defloration, which is said to bring bad luck" (101). Aylmer—the narrator reminds us—starts his monomaniac fixation only after getting married (B 260, B 261), "for he thought little or nothing of the matter before" (B 261), possibly after his own first sexual contact with his wife, an important episode in which the virgin woman leaves her bloody mark of purity in the act. This blood can however be regarded as a sign of bad luck, something unhealthy and unclean, as is codified in the biblical passage Lev. 15, 19: "And if a woman have an issue, and her issue in her flesh be blood, she shall be put apart seven days; and whoever toucheth her shall be

unclean until the even.” Aylmer tries to “spiritualise” Georgiana in order to counteract the earthiness that her femaleness, represented in her impure blood/self, imposes on their conjugal lives, staining the otherwise perfect bliss of holy matrimony.

Much in the same line as Badinter, Julius Zanger provides in his article about “The Birth-mark” textual proof of Hawthorne’s own concern with women’s menstruation (perhaps because he was, like Aylmer, himself a newlywed at the time he wrote his story), and the relation of it with the birthmark itself. He alludes to the Judeo-Christian attitude toward menstruation and to *Pliny’s Natural History* that describes the effects of women’s blood:

Contact with it turns new wine sour, crops touched by it become barren, grafts die, seeds in gardens are dried up, the fruit of trees falls off, the edge of steel and the gleam of ivory are dulled, hives of bees die, even bronze and iron are at once seized by rust, and a horrible smell fills the air; to taste it drives dogs mad and infects their bites with an incurable poison [...]. Even that very tiny creature the ant is said to be sensitive to it and throws away grains of corn that taste of it and does not touch it again. (369)

Zanger sees evidence of these attitudes in Hawthorne’s story, for Aylmer isolates Georgiana in a “magic circle” within which no evil might intrude,⁴ cut off from everything and everyone in her boudoir. He then offers her a magically created flower, “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” (B 268). When she intrudes in his laboratory without his prior consent, he gets mad at her for the possible pernicious effects that her presence there might have on his experiments: “Would you throw the blight of that fatal birth-mark over my labors?” (B 273), he cries. Zanger concludes that these three incidents appear to corroborate his theory that Georgiana’s “imperfection,” in the image of the crimson stain, “is linked to Hawthorne’s response to the menstrual aspect of a woman’s biological life” (369).

The first of these incidents, the woman’s seclusion in the boudoir, prevented from contact with the external world by a magic circle, seems to suggest that merely because of her sex a woman permanently attracts the powers of evil, making of the female sex a danger for society, so much so that “man does not approach it without purifying rituals” (Badinter 102), which Aylmer conveniently and duly performs. He strives to distract Georgiana from the tragic fate he has doomed her to by showing her some of the “magical optical phenomena” his scientific lore has taught him, as if thereby he could convince her of his own superior creative powers. However, although he has devotedly “applied himself to his labors” (B 269), his experiments are said to be “abortive” (B 268),⁵ a term that points to their destructive nature, and to him, in spite of his efforts to the contrary, as a faulty creator who, incapable of making, can only unmake. It would not be too far-fetched to say that Aylmer is envious of Georgiana’s reproductive capacity, of her potential to give birth and to create in a natural way, something that he, no matter how intellectual or high he is in the human scale, can never do.

Science and medicine have traditionally made use of sexual metaphors which represent “Nature” as a woman that the man who seeks her secrets is to unveil (Showalter 145). Hawthorne must have been familiar with these metaphors, though he changes them slightly

⁴ Throughout the story there are countless references to magic and witchcraft, starting with Georgiana’s birthmark. Inquisitors and judges usually looked for birthmarks or any other mark or protuberance in a woman’s body that was used as evidence to prove her pact with the Devil; another one is this magic circle mentioned in Hawthorne’s text that witches supposedly used in some of their rituals.

⁵ Note the double meaning of the word “abort” in English (see also B 273): “work” or “effort” and “the act of giving birth.”

to make them fit into the larger pattern and issues of his work. In this case, Nature/woman is a sort of worker, “a jealous patentee,” that hides her lore from man’s ineffectual efforts at “unveiling” her secrets and thus at competing with her in her creative processes:

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. (B 265)

In order to compensate for his lack of (natural) generative power, for the innate impossibility to “lay his hands on the secret of creative force,” man fantasises about his own self-creation (as artist, as writer, as scientist), fantasies that are accompanied, as the case here demonstrates, by images of young women whose bodies are penetrated by the science of medicine. Elaine Showalter contends that men “open up a woman as a substitute for self-knowledge, both maintaining the illusion of their own invulnerability and destroying the terrifying female reminder of their impotence and uncertainty” (134). Aylmer will both literally and figuratively invade Georgiana’s body by exploring it, analysing it, unveiling it through the bold, penetrating gaze of his intellectual mastery. In Freudian fashion, Hawthorne resorts to a dream the scientist has had in order to show his deep anxiety about the birthmark, which brings to the fore from those far regions of the mind Aylmer’s unconscious, deeply unacknowledged truths. In that dream, he “had fancied himself [...] attempting an operation for the removal of the birth-mark. But 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; whence, however, her husband was inexorably resolved to cut or wrench it away” (B 263). This scene could very well be a practical case study for Freud’s psychoanalytical theories of the unconscious and of the interpretation of dreams, for Hawthorne uses here a recognisable phallic symbol—a knife—that Aylmer resolutely employs to open up and cut into Georgiana’s body, violating her self in an attempt to gain control over her femininity, generally seen as elusive and threatening, a reminder of man’s impotence, of his vulnerability and uncertainty. Freud himself, the “father” of psychoanalysis, used “familiar metaphors of opening up a woman [...] breaking and entering into her psyche against her will [...]. There’s more than a hint in this language of sexual assault, but also of rational penetration” (Showalter 137). Female subordination, as Freud well knew, is more effectively achieved through the control of her sexuality. Appropriately enough, it is after Aylmer’s dream-induced “violation” that Georgiana finally submits to his desire to remove the birth-mark from her otherwise immaculate face, “for the sake of your own peace, and to save your poor wife from madness”—she claims, to which the scientist rapturously replies: “Noblest—dearest—tenderest wife [...]. *Doubt not my power*” (B 264, emphasis mine). Indeed, in this sentence lies the quintessential nature of the issue at stake here. Although he refers to the scientific knowledge that is to aid him in the task of successfully removing the mark from Georgiana’s cheek, his real power (for we know that as a scientist he has mostly been a failure) is the one he holds over his wife as a man. The birthmark is a proof of this.

As has already been noted, Aylmer had not thought about the mark until “one day, very soon after their marriage,” when he sat “gazing at his wife, with a trouble in his countenance that grew stronger, until he spoke” to ask Georgiana if it had not occurred to her that it might be removed. She replies smiling that it had so often been called a charm

“that [she] was simple enough to imagine it might be so.” But Aylmer is not one to be put off by what his wife might think: “Ah, upon another face, perhaps it might [...] but never on yours! No, dearest Georgiana, you came so nearly perfect from the hand of Nature, that this slightest possible defect—which we hesitate whether to term a defect or a beauty—shocks me, as being the visible mark of earthly imperfection” (B 260). The angel-woman is not perfect, hence the haste to reform her. Not surprisingly, her body will be the appropriate site where that “transcendental” transformation will take place.

The body can no longer be regarded as just a physical phenomenon in the natural world; it is rather the locus on which cultural power mechanisms are more directly articulated; it is a bearer of meaning, and one of its richest sources derives from its gendered character. Aylmer no doubt knows this and thus he will objectify Georgiana’s body, aestheticizing it, turning it into a signifying icon, so—the narrator says, “the world might possess one living specimen of ideal loveliness, without the semblance of a flaw” (B 261). In order for Georgiana not to turn from an “Eve of Powers” into “a monster” (B 261), she must be physically and spiritually unblemished. Not less important than her body, and in manifest conformity with it, her “ideal loveliness,” that most appreciated mark of her femininity, must be enhanced, preserved at all costs if she is to be valued as a true, flawless woman. First Hawthorne and then Aylmer fashion Georgiana’s subjectivity in the image that male fantasies would have it be: she is presented as the prototypical nineteenth-century angel in the house, portrayed as the embodiment of the mystique of the eternal feminine that aids to elevate man to higher spheres: she must perforce be passive, pure, and selfless, a “memento of otherness” (Gilbert and Gubar 24). If man is allegedly the one who acts, creates, discovers, defends, and uses his intellect for speculation and invention, then woman’s talent—so it is generally claimed—is useful for serving others; her capacities are declared to be inadequate for creation or invention, but for being good, instinctive, self-sacrificing: “And, with her whole spirit, she prayed, that, for a single moment, she might satisfy his highest and deepest conception” (B 274-75). To top this dreamlike image of woman, this paragon of virtues must likewise be a mere prolongation of man, completely absorbed by him, since his success is inextricably bound to her abnegation and passive obedience.

Around mid-century the promise of material progress and the functional marginalization of women had led men to believe that they could be successful in transforming the earthly woman, with her frailty and defects, into the unforgettable and ideal Eve of Paradise before the Fall. Owen Meredith would insist in *After Paradise* that “Adam bequeath’d a vision of this perfect primal Eve”

...to his posterity,
Who call’d it THE IDEAL. And Mankind
Still cherish it, and still it cheats them all.
For, with the Ideal Woman in his mind,
Fair as she was in Eden ere the Fall,
Still each doth discontentedly compare
The sad associate of his earthly lot;
And still the Earthly Woman seems less fair
Than her ideal image unforgot. (qtd. in Dijkstra 4-5)

Hawthorne may be unconsciously reflecting the familiar patriarchal cult of womanhood prevalent in nineteenth-century America, whereby woman was praised for her ladylike fragility and delicate beauty, qualities that had analogous psychological and emotional counterparts: she must be passive, contemplative, pure, virtuous, pious, gentle. Woman’s role and only aspiration should be to save the “omnipotent” soul of man, give him energy as he moves forward in science and history, while she remains secluded (like Georgiana

does in her boudoir), alienated from the outside (public) world, that “external existence” she is only allowed to perceive “flitting across a screen” (B 267). In the arrogant manner of a man-god, Aylmer attempts to elevate his wife to the category of the Ideal, testing the selflessness that should adorn the beautiful angel-woman with what might be regarded as the key act of her saintly submission: the surrendering of her self. And Georgiana gives in, thus sealing her sacrifice, “which dooms her both to death and to heaven” (Gilbert and Gubar 25).

Following the century’s cultural appeal for these weak, fragile and sickly women as symbols of purity and selflessness, Georgiana’s growing paleness, her “deathlike faintness” (B 266), is proof of her gradual conformation to that prototypical male-imagined vision, as the process of the removal of her birthmark (that distinct memento of difference and otherness) will prove. Aptly enough, her female nature is represented in the form of flowers whose intrinsic properties Aylmer has been manipulating for his scientific purposes. As the religious and lay paintings of the nineteenth century reveal, to the eyes of the artists woman was in her own essence, her fragility, her physical beauty and her lack of faculties for practical life, virtually a flower. In their purity, she and the flower were one and the same thing, a unity, so that the pure woman, who with her passive, submissive, uncreative and manageable qualities seemed to share the same characteristic features as the plant in a domestic garden, ended up being seen as a flower herself, cultivated in the same way in which a flower is cultivated to make it grow (Dijkstra 16). And so it is in Hawthorne’s story as well, where flowers frequently appear as objects of the scientist’s experiments, clearly foreshadowing Georgiana’s fate, who once looks at her image in a mirror only to behold herself “pale as a white rose, and with the crimson birth-mark upon her cheek” (B 270); or when she is about to die, her “earthly senses” closing over her spirit, “like the leaves round the heart of a rose, at sunset” (B 276). At this point, Georgiana has come to hate her birthmark more than even Aylmer could. Half-way along the process of reform, she has already become a weak, passive version of her former self, worlds away from the initial assertiveness she had exhibited when she had innocently considered her mark to be a charm, or when she had censured her husband for having taken her from her mother’s side if he did not truly love her,⁶ for—she had overtly declared, “You cannot love what shocks you” (B 260).

Such has been the degree of her husband’s pervasive phobia, however, and such her internalisation of the worthlessness his abhorrence entails that she is soon completely powerless and at the mercy of his will. His devaluation of her body and continual invasion of her self, her subjectivity, achieve the goal sought: her complete surrender, the culmination of the sacrificial impulse that, as a good specimen of the devoted angel-woman, she must dutifully perform. Georgiana readily complies and is now willing to “fling [life] down with joy” (B 264) rather than upset her husband’s peace of mind or his intellectual pride, yet aware that she is not the beloved wife she should be in their brief marriage but just the object of his horror and disgust. These feelings are best substantiated in the portrait Aylmer takes of her, again “by a scientific process of his own invention” (B 268). The daguerrotype unequivocally mirrors the way he sees her—a mere emblem of earthiness and imperfection. The result frightens Georgiana, who does not recognise herself, finding as she does her features in the portrait “blurred and indefinable” and with the minute figure of the hand still appearing where the cheek should have been. This

⁶ Curiously enough, Georgiana alludes here to a female genealogy when she refers to her “mother’s side,” and not, taking into consideration the social structure of families and society at the time, “my father’s house,” for example, that would be a more likely reply.

unexpected setback drives Aylmer to snatch the metallic plate furiously and throw it into a jar of corrosive acid. His reaction at what the narrator considers one more of the scientist's "mortifying failures" points, on the one hand, to his growing neurosis and, on the other, to his rather violent, unrestrained temperament. What will then happen to Georgiana, the reader wonders, if the experiment on her, as is openly and often hinted at, also fails? Will he destroy her as he has everything else he has laid his hand upon? Undaunted by his repeated reverses, however, and completely self-deceived about his (faulty) wisdom, Aylmer will go ahead, mystified by a more than elusive promise of sublime perfection and Absolute beauty.

Hawthorne must have been quite obsessed himself with woman's physical beauty, for during a period of seven years (from 1836 to 1843, when "The Birth-mark" was published for the first time), he had been turning the idea over in his mind repeatedly, as his notebook entries demonstrate. In 1836 he writes: "Those who are very difficult in choosing wives seem as if they would take none of Nature's ready-made works, but want a woman manufactured particularly to their order." One year later (1837), in another notebook entry he records: "A person to be in possession of something as perfect as mortal man has a right to demand; he tries to make it better, and ruins it entirely" (in Cowley 555). Finally, in 1839 he jots down: "A person to be the death of his beloved in trying to raise her to more than mortal perfection; yet this should be a comfort to him for having aimed so highly and holily" (560). These terms are almost literally reproduced in the final words Georgiana addresses to her husband in her agony: "You have aimed loftily!—you have done nobly! Do not repent, that, with so high and pure a feeling, you have rejected the best that earth could offer" (B 277). Georgiana's words leave no doubt as to the sympathies of the writer with Aylmer's quest, with the soul that yearns for the perfect eternal and does not accept the essential conditions of existence but aspires to the conditions of eternity. Hawthorne admires man's worthy passion for perfecting and transcending nature, even if in order to just get a mere intuition of the Absolute, the life of a woman has to be sacrificed.

At the core of the scientist's obsession (maybe of Hawthorne's as well?) with woman's earthly, imperfect nature may well lie what Caren Gordhor Lerner calls "defensive sexism," which she defines as "the close relationship between envy and devaluation. Devaluation of an envied object is a typical defensive maneuver, for as long as an object is devalued it need not be envied" (8), a dynamic that is not just confined to persons with serious psychopathology but should rather be regarded as pervasive and universal. She alludes to the work of O. Kernberg, "Barriers to falling and remaining in love" (1971), where he notes that in his work with borderline and narcissistic patients "that intense envy and hatred of women are conspicuous dynamics that impair the capacity to form love relationships." Kernberg also finds that "envy and hatred are defensively dealt with by depreciating and devaluing women" (in Gordhor Lerner 8). Likewise, in "On Narcissism," Freud notes how libido can be directed alternately toward the object (other people) or toward the self, called "object libido" and "ego libido" respectively, whose balance is necessary for the wholeness of the individual. In Freud's view, it is the exclusive investment in the self with no connection to the other that creates the narcissistic neuroses and psychoses, relatedness being the *sine qua non* of mental health.

The incapacity to form love relationships is highlighted early on in Hawthorne's story. The narrator of "The Birth-mark" presents Aylmer as a modern intellectual Narcissus who is nevertheless not so much in love with his own physical image as with a notion of himself as a man whose high intellectual abilities should make him deserve to be on a higher level than the rest of [mortal] human beings. Aylmer fits the pattern of the narcissus who is unable to love. He is said to have "devoted himself [...] too unreservedly to scientific