"You cannot love what shocks you!" is a simple yet powerful message present in "The Birthmark" by Nathaniel Hawthorne (Hawthorne 6). The same message is also present in "Birthmark" by Miranda July; however, it is stated much more subtly when the narrator states "They wordlessly excused each other for not loving each other as much as they had planned" (July 47). This is one of the many examples of the themes that Hawthorne used in his story that Miranda July also used. Both authors, in their respective works, revealed social norms through characters that lie on the fringes of society because of physical abnormalities. By examining the work of Hawthorne, in its historical context, the reader can better examine and understand how July borrows and adapts thematic points from the former - including human imperfection, contemporary feminine roles, and morality.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, who wrote during the mid 1800's, addresses the concept of human imperfection and the desire for perfection in "The Birthmark." Hawthorne criticizes social practices "from popular superstitions, to the social dislocations... of the time" (Zanger 365). In Miranda July's "Birthmark," the narrator describes the main character as a special type of person who is "very beautiful except for" - which indicates a social stigmatism as a result of her birthmark (July 16). Georgiana's birthmark made her a different kind of exception to societal rules. The description of Georgiana's hand-shaped birthmark as a "charm" shows how Georgiana embraced the idea that all of her previous suitors had viewed the mark as such (Hawthorne 4).
Aylmer, the man whom she married, was an exception to this; he was one of the few men that would have rather "wished it away" (6). This is different from the way July presents her character in that the birthmark of the character has been removed for so long her own husband had never known her when she had it (July 32, 62). Miranda July points out in her piece that "most people don't" become romantically involved with those who have a physical abnormality - that the narrator's husband is "none the worse for it" (32). Unlike Georgiana, who is actively sought after, in spite of - or arguably because of - her birthmark, July's main character is seen as foreign and undesirable, at least prior to the birthmark’s removal (Hawthorne 7, July 17).

According to Zanger, Georgiana's birthmark is symbolic of human imperfection, and Aylmer's desire to remove it represents the desire for perfection (Zanger 364). The same can be said of July's main character removing her birthmark and it's return - which is symbolic of the inability to remove the natural imperfection of mankind. Zanger further describes the attempted removal of the birthmark from Georgiana's cheek as "scientific, rational, reformist presumption, or of too aspiring an idealism" (Zanger 364). July describes the fulfillment of this idealism: "Nineteen ninety-eight was the year lasers came to the people as good bread... be finally perfect" (July 16)

Further historical analysis leads the reader to examine the early feminist undertones present in the work of Hawthorne. According to Eckstein, "Romance prepared Georgiana only for submission, even martyrdom, in marriage" (Eckstein 514). This brings forth the need to examine Georgiana, as a symbol for gender roles in "The Birthmark." The character Georgiana, is the near perfect wife of Aylmer. Her one imperfection is her small birthmark, which is described as "... in the centre of Georgiana's left cheek there was a singular mark, deeply interwoven, as it were, with the texture and substance of her face" (Hawthorne 6). Upon deeper investigation, Georgiana can be seen as more of a symbol of a woman's role in a traditional
relationship than just a symbol of imperfection. According to Zanger, Georgiana's quick acceptance, and eventual provocation, of Aylmer's proposition to remove her birthmark is indicative of her being a mental, spiritual, and social example of the ideal role model "of women in the nineteenth century..." exemplifying "the mentality of submission" (Zanger 366). Her submission to Aylmer, which was in line with contemporary social standards, became a tool for his pursuit of science.

The concept of submission is in noticeable contrast to the way Miranda July presents her characters. July's main character is a symbol of the modern female; this is indicated by the couple's home, which has "...empty rooms in the house where they meant to keep their love, and they worked together to fill these rooms with high-end, consumer-grade equipment" (July 62). Hence, there is a shared responsibility for the household, which was traditionally a feminine duty. According to Eckstein, this is comparably opposite of Aylmer's control of every aspect of his marriage (Eckstein 517). Later in the work, July reveals another point that contrasts the work of Hawthorne. The husband in July's "Birthmark" is seen at the end of the piece accepting the blemish which has returned to his wife, leading the reader to believe the characters will continue their married life, more happily than before (July 79). In Hawthorne's work, Aylmer is shown at the end, continuing his first love by cataloguing the death of his wife (Hawthorne 77). Eckstein describes this ending as signifying the destruction of the natural, by the manmade (Eckstein 514). While the social importance of the feminine role is important within the works, other themes must also be examined in order to fully grasp the importance of shared themes between the two pieces.

Morality is another thematic concept present in "The Birthmark" by Hawthorne. It is considered to be one of the main themes of many of his works (Zanger 364). Keeping this in
mind, the reader can deduce that the death of Georgiana is more than just a symbol for the human condition. According to Eckstein, "The destructive effects of overreaching science and romance are evident..." in the characters of Aylmer and Georgiana, respectively (Eckstein 511). The moral issue in question is not whether science and romance need to be kept in check by other societal entities, but rather if individuals are capable of placing too much value on science and relationships.

This is evidenced by the final scenes of "The Birthmark." With Georgiana willingly sacrificing her own life for the sake of her husband's potential success, she shows her undying love and submission to Aylmer. "Not the minutest symptom escaped him... such were the details... he wrote down in his folio volume," describes the way Aylmer devotes himself to his work, more than he devotes himself to his now perfect, but dying wife (Hawthorne 77). July, while incorporating an element morality, provides a more positive moral than that of Hawthorne. The finishing touch of "Birthmark" is the period of patience, acceptance, and – most importantly – unconditional love. The husband of the main character remains waiting, neglecting to clean up the broken jar of jam - he waits for the return of his wife (July 79). The most exemplary part of this scene, "He was worried she would not let him love her with the stain... He would stay on his knees, just like this, she would see him this way and understand," shows the most evident moral of "Birthmark" - unconditional love (79). While the moral of Hawthorne's piece is a warning to not place all of one's eggs in a single basket, whether it be romance, science, or even religion, July's piece provides hope for those who place too much emphasis on their appearances.

"The Birthmark" by Nathaniel Hawthorne provides an excellent foundation from which an analysis of "Birthmark" by Miranda July can be made. The comparison can be made on more than just the surface level of both pieces being related to love and physical abnormalities. By
examining the elements of Hawthorne's piece, and relating them to July's piece, the reader will discover that human imperfection, feminine roles during the time written, and subsurface moral themes are present within both works. However one decides to interpret these pieces, the basic points are self-evident within both - love, science, and self-image can be destructive if unchecked, but proper control, acceptance, and balance can result in beauty.
Works Cited


