

Critical Analysis of Nathaniel Hawthorne's Rappaccini's Daughter

One of Nathaniel Hawthorne's most famous works is the short story, "Rappaccini's Daughter" written in 1844 and published in the *Mosses from an Old Manse*. Many who knew the author comments that this short story is one the most complex, he has written especially being known as a poet during his time. The short story is similar to his other works wherein the author clearly refers to Dante's *Divine Comedy* and the Garden of Eden. Hawthorne makes use of science and spirituality as a subject in this story and uses many symbolisms to make his point to readers. Most notably, a central theme is voyeurism with scientists and a couple go beyond typical measures to pursue love. The brilliance of Hawthorne is that the story has a mysterious ending that leaves its readers to make their own interpretation of the events. Significantly, this illustrates how this story has become an instant classic in literature wherein it evokes an emotional response from its audience (Elliot, 5).

Hawthorne who has been described as a loner and an observer channeled his own personal problems of isolation into the creation of his works. As such, like *Rappaccini's Daughter* the author likes to use evil as a subject matter and juxtaposes this with humanism that is having a passion for life with the use of one's intellectual freedom. In his short story, Hawthorne uses symbols to represent the material versus the fantasy world. The use of imagination is rife in the story especially with the thought of limitless possibilities science could attain. It has been said that *Rappaccini's Daughter* is actually a reference to the experiences of the author's wife when she lived a sheltered childhood as a young girl. But the short story had a tragic ending compared to Hawthorne's real life. Many of the symbols and symbolic allusions are found in the setting of the story such as being set in Padua, with no specific time period.

Most of the scenes take place in a garden which the author dubbed as a place of adultery. Significantly, the garden itself is a contradiction being filled on one hand with lush and beautiful plants but also filled with poisonous flowers. The garden also has a broken fountain found in the center of the green vegetation (Swann 76).

The story is written in the Giovanni's perspective where he falls in love with Rappaccini's daughter, Beatrice who is trapped in the garden because she developed poisonous venom in her physical body. Giovanni first sees Beatrice through the garden's windows where she feels a sense of attraction for the young man. Beatrice is described as a God fearing person and would most likely be heart broken by loneliness being forced by her father to stay in the garden. Giovanni also falls in love with Beatrice but eventually finds out her delicate albeit awkward condition. The dark and twisted agendas of Rappaccini are revealed as he purposely made her daughter poisonous to others in order for her to be protected from the world's evil nature. The fact she is a prisoner in the garden indicates how she was led to believe that darkness does exist in the outside world. As such, Rappaccini also makes Giovanni poisonous in order for her daughter to have a companion in her garden world. Notably, the scientist took extreme measures for her daughter by building her a fake world where Hawthorne makes a clear reference to how science can become evil because of man's experimentation. More importantly, the purpose of the plants are altered which was not the original intention of God, the Creator making a reference to how scientists can develop a god-complex mentality (Paperstarter.com).

Upon analysis, Rappaccini himself can be quickly categorized as the antagonist who is evil in the story. His ways are immoral since he places science above humanity. He also uses his patients as a means for an experiment to build his own agenda. As such, Rappaccini clearly fits

the description of a mad scientist who has isolated himself from the outside world. However, it is important to note that the scientist is also a tragic hero whose intentions started off as being good. However, as they say the end does not justify the means which can be clearly seen in Rappaccini's case where he began to develop a god-complex which gave him a sense of power of manipulation and control. The character evolved from being a normal loving father into a terrible and unnatural scientist using all means to protect his daughter. More importantly, Rappaccini becomes misguided and uses his own daughter as a sense of pride. He forgets his role as a father as Hawthorne illustrates how misguided idealism can corrupt a man. It is important to note that as a father, Rappaccini should not have made her daughter a poisonous individual if she loved her at all. It also symbolizes perhaps the scientist's view on original sin and sexuality seeing his daughter as a product of a forbidden act instead of love. Rappaccini's overconsumption led him to become jealous, spiteful with a hidden passion for vengeance. It is in this way that the author is able to depict how Rappaccini is truly the poison in the story and not his beautiful daughter (Bookstove.com).

Rappaccini's Daughter is in fact a heartbreaking story where none of the characters triumphs in the end. It is important to note another theme of the story which is betrayal that is seen in the characters Giovanni and Beatrice. As they fall in love, Giovanni creates a plan to save her but Beatrice neglects to mention her poisonous body. Giovanni who was poisoned in the process took this as an act of betrayal. Many would describe the plot of Rappaccini's Daughter as radical but this is only a reflection of the author's real disposition being a transcendentalist. This was a new way of thinking in the 18th century taking on modern day ideas such women's rights. More importantly, transcendentalism is about using God's gift of intelligence and insight to man and use it to inspire others for human development. It does not dispute spirituality but rather

emphasizes on how human achievement can further progress with the right manner of thinking. Transcendentalism aims to answer how man can balance his beliefs and intelligence and can be seen in how Giovanni tried to come to grips with Beatrice's condition. He was advised by other people not save the young girl but in his heart he knew this the right thing to do. The story highlights common predicaments men face when making life changing decisions. Giovanni was advised by older men to stay away from Beatrice since she is a temptress another label degrading women by connoting their evilness. However, Lisabetta an older woman encourages Giovanni and even helps him enter the garden. In this respect, Hawthorne makes a parallelism of Beatrice's garden to the Garden of Eden where she like Eve is the temptress that led to Adam's fall from God's grace. This is the classic definition of Genesis story blaming the woman for man's downfall which in this story, Giovanni's failure as he struggles with temptation. It is important to note the deeper analysis of Giovanni's feelings is not simply just doing what is right but also emphasizes his fear of losing his love. The temptation to save her and quench his own desires was just too hard for the protagonist to ignore (Helium.com).

The ideas of transcendentalism also questioned the authority of the Church and their ideas. This is seen in the character Dr. Baglioni who is also a priest in Rappaccini's Daughter. More importantly, he is Rappaccini's rival and he gives redemption advice for Giovanni's sins of sexual desires but he obviously had an underlying agenda. The corrupt priest gives the wrong advice to an otherwise romantic ending changing the plot into a tragic end. This is a reflection of the times where many questioned the motives of the Church, where Hawthorne presents how priests also abuse their power especially hiding evil motives under priestly robes. Rappaccini's Daughter also aims to show how theology and science have begun to contradict each other in their use and form but also highlighting their commonality. The similarity lies in the way people

use these institutions to pursue progress, human development and personal ambition. It is a manifestation of how man developed a god complex attitude and utilizes this to control and manipulate society. Both also illustrate that by trying to change God's plan unforeseen and unpredictable consequences occur. Transcendentalism also supported women's rights and at that time in the 18th century many women's basic civil liberties were denied. Rappaccini's Daughter is able to illustrate how women are also capable of intelligence seen in the character of Beatrice. Baglioni in fact was bothered by the rumors of Beatrice's skill to be equal to that of her father which depicts how society and the Church viewed the role of women during that period. Baglioni becomes jealous of Beatrice being able to care for the garden and her father's experiments. He even comes to believe that Rappaccini intends her daughter Beatrice to replace him (Helium.com).

Rappaccini's Daughter theme also centers on the concept of free will and predetermination. It begs to question if God, the Creator of all things allowed tragedy to befall the characters of the story. God was part of the story being Beatrice main motivation however, the unfolding of events questions the free will of man in the character of Giovanni. The story asks how and even why God allowed Giovanni to be tempted by Beatrice. It asks whether everything in life is actually predetermined and man is simply a product of fate. As such, free will does not exist at all nor does the meaning of choice. It is in this way Hawthorne is able to relate the dilemmas of Giovanni to Adam's predicament in the Garden of Eden. Significantly, it is also important to note how the author is able to highlight human folly seen in the eyes of the protagonist. Giovanni becomes consumed with lust and love that he forsakes common sense. Afterwards, he seeks and takes the advice of Baglioni without disconcerting the priest's motivations. He is also quick to scorn Beatrice after her betrayal. Hawthorne is able to show by

end of the tragic tale how the ideas of transcendentalism fails as the characters are not able to use their intelligence in navigating their romance to a happy ending (Helium.com).

Hawthorne's characters are stereotypical but upon critical analysis they each serve to embody a hidden allegorical meaning and more importantly, each represents a moral significance bringing to light different aspects of humanity. Many would say the story is gothic and advance for its time when it was written and certainly, the plot was filled with ambiguity that is prevalent in modern day science fiction novels. The element of fantasy is also not to be missed as the characters show an idealistic and idiotic protagonist while the woman, Beatrice is represented as being wise with angel like characteristics. The story has many Faustian characteristics as well as showing the quandary of temptation indicating how this can lead to sin and immorality. The plot evolves with the concept of misplaced faith in other people—from Beatrice's loyalty to her father, to Giovanni's easily succumbing to his desire for Beatrice (Idol and Buford, 46).

The beauty of the story is its highlight of human problems set in a science fiction manner and illustrates the different gravities of sin. Sin in the end corrupts man and his motives making everyone in the story lose in the tragedy of Rappaccini's Daughter. More importantly, the story evokes different interpretations from readers since its publishing in the 18th century. The disparities in the characters ask its readers to delve more deeply rather than taking the simple short story at face value. It is interesting to note that Giovanni has been widely cast as the Puritan. Beatrice on the other hand was the consummate woman—both good and evil at the same time. Finally, Rappaccini acts like he is both God and the Devil especially with his scientific endeavors and role as being the father. Baglioni has been interpreted to be a deliverer of cryptic messages much like the parables Christ told to his disciples when giving advice (Normand, 105).

Rappaccini's Daughter although being a short story has been compared to many literary greats such as *The House of Seven Gables*, *Fanshawe*, *The Devil in Manuscript*, *The Intelligence Office* and *The Scarlett Letter*. It has even been likened to *The Divine Comedy* and *Purgatorio* especially with the religious contexts. More importantly, it has been compared to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*; and *Hamlet*; Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* and Holmes' *Elsie Venner*. The comparisons indicate Rappaccini's Daughter's literary triumph as it has made a mark in literary history. The character Beatrice is also seen in many modern day literary works such as *the Awakening* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Stallman).

A Christian critical analysis of Rappaccini's Daughter emphasizes on the morality aspect where dualism exists in all of the characters. The garden where Beatrice lives is a representation of how evil can hide in a thing of beauty. This illustrates how temptation in life is often presented to man. Of course, if the temptation does not seem good or evoke one's desire then it would not be classified as a temptation. Significantly, Beatrice is viewed as having the potential to attain spiritual perfection if she chooses to remain in the garden and not disobey her father's wishes. Her fall from grace shows the dualism of human nature where man in effect can succumb to their own desires. Some people classify this as free will, while others view it as man breaking their covenant with God since the story is very much likened to story of Adam and Eve. Covenants represents a person's bond and in this case a relationship and bond with God, the Creator. Like the Genesis story, the garden is not filled with all good such as the serpent who tempted Eve; Rappaccini's Daughter also has its cast of evil characters. More importantly, the story emphasizes the sins each character commits such as Rappaccini's intellectual pride. Beatrice is innocent and yet corrupt as well. Giovanni on the other hand is being tested much similar to what many Christians go through in life but his sin is his lack of faith. He relies on his

bodily senses to interpret his reality without using his intuition to navigate his course of decisions. More importantly, he cannot accept that Beatrice can also be his way of redemption but instead chose to see her as a sin or an evil seductress (Stallman).

Other analysis of the story has cast Baglioni as the ineffectual Christ. But the relevance is in the setting wherein the story is actually a symbol of an already corrupt world here on Earth. It shows how in many aspects of society, Satan has become present and alarmingly winning the hearts of man through temptation. It is a dismal portrait of the world where everything in effect is corrupt in some form but more importantly, evil. The story suggests how evil is present everywhere and like poison society is unaware how it is bringing man towards a slow death. Many works are dedicated to analyzing the characters of Rappaccini's Daughter, most especially Beatrice. Some say she is Eve who is both the temptress and beautiful while others say she is actually Adam who was given stewardship over the garden by her father. Regardless of which point of view, it simply illustrates the double sidedness of the character. She is both a body of guilt and source of redemption. Giovanni who listens to material advice is unable to reconcile the idea that Beatrice is both his sin and redemption. He is unable to accept her duality making him unable to achieve salvation or even maximize his human potential (Stallman).

Beatrice has also been described as a representation of the other characters evilness such as her father and Giovanni's. She is a representation of their fears, desires and obsessions all of which constitute unhealthy relationships. As Beatrice is the central character of the short story, it is in her femaleness that all the other male characters falls into different types of sin. This is the classical role women have become known to play and the stigma of women being the cause of man's downfall is captured in Rappaccini's Daughter. However, many are quick to blame Eve in

the same way they easily place the blame on Beatrice. Every individual has their own sense of intellect and concept of free will and as depicted in the story Beatrice simply becomes an easy excuse for man's failures. Hawthorne is able to illustrate an important idea which is accountability for one's own mistakes. In the case of Giovanni, this is seen in his ignorance and lack of trust and Rappaccini himself is delusional of his own diabolical behavior. The story also depicts how women can be used as a source of evil by the Devil even unknowingly to the woman herself. She in fact becomes the hapless victim as the plot unfolds (Stallman).

An important element of the story is the relationship between male and females as Giovanni wants to change Beatrice by curing her. He sees himself as her savior and wants her to be healed from the poison in her body to conform to his fantasy of an ideal woman. At the same time, he is also fearful of being dominated by woman through sexual desires which makes him blinded to the innocence of their love in the first place. Beatrice was also envied by Baglioni being seen as his professional rival, to which he acted out of revenge in order to settle his own fears of being professionally dominated by a woman. It was perhaps the greatest insult for his career to be upstaged by an intelligent woman. Many also cite how Rappaccini uses his daughter as an experiment to attain power. He is actually self-serving by limiting her daughter's potential under the guise of protecting her from the outside world. Hawthorne's greatest disliking is obviously seen in Rappaccini as he lusts for personal ambition and greatness without concern for mankind and even his own flesh and blood (Normand, 38).

Beatrice has also been described as being the classic femme fatale who every man desires but inwardly they are actually fearful of her. She is deadly but not because of her own doing and is not purposely evil. She in fact is the only good character in the story but she symbolizes to the

men in her life a dual nature of good and evil. As such, the character of Beatrice has been analyzed to portray the crises of many women today either being typecast as a saint or seductress. All of the men in the story project their own impulses to Beatrice but they are in denial of their own feelings justifying themselves and cleansing their conscience in the process. An important lesson of the story is acceptance, which is actually part of the definition of love. In this case, many argue that Giovanni may have only been infatuated with Beatrice and not truly in love. Love means accepting a person for who they are, Giovanni wanted to change Beatrice and make her conform. His actions were fatal as all of them lost love by the end of the story. Beatrice has also been described as the victim of original sin, which extends to all humans for that matter making everyone have a dual nature to begin with. Significantly, this indicates the crises of man since the fall of Adam and Eve which is walking that fine line between being good and avoiding evil (Idol and Buford, 93).

One of the key elements of the story is the use of the color purple which is seen in the flowers of the garden and Beatrice's wardrobe. The use of purple is a symbol used by the authority to illustrate death and royalty. Beatrice bearing this color adds mystery to her true being for readers. Purple is also widely used in Christianity since it symbolizes the season of Advent that marks Jesus' birth as he is considered to be mankind's salvation. The allusion of Hawthorne suggests that by using this color one must wait for the time perfection in the form of Christ will come. Jesus being the Son of God is a perfect being as his arrival on Earth is being awaited upon since through him life everlasting is granted. In this case, *Rappaccini's Daughter* shows how the world remains to be imperfect without Christ's arrival. As such, man should learn to live with the duality of good and evil knowing in faith that good overcomes evil in the end that is dependent on the actions man takes (Stallman).

Another strong color used by Hawthorne in the story is black to represent Rappaccini. This is obviously a negative color that indicates the scientist's evil nature. It is important to note that Hawthorne did explicitly use Rappaccini to represent God or Satan, as many would argue he is simply a corrupted man. Some analysts liken the character to the serpent in Genesis, who had underlying motivations wanting to be like God himself. As such, the analysis of Rappaccini's Daughter is highly complex with many critics citing the excess of themes, symbolisms and values in the story. This has resulted in many varying interpretations but has ignited debate over crucial issues tackled by the simple short story. In fact, many would simply like to view it as another tragic Romeo and Juliet where two lovers failed to reach their fairy tale ending. However, there is no doubt that Hawthorne is able to utilize different aspects of human emotion to craft a literary masterpiece. The complexities and varying definitions only adds to historical significance of this piece of literature (Stallman).

It is suffice to say the greatest contribution of this story is the depiction of truth that can be different depending on whose perspective. In essence, truth is dependent on man's interpretation which may be a real or false reality. This blindness exists in all human beings to which the Hawthorne wants the audience to understand and perhaps even open their eyes to. Simply, the truth is man is living in an imperfect world and as long as one has a self centered attitude this blinds man's ability to transcend towards real progress. More importantly, by accepting the truth man has a better chance of achieving redemption and even winning love at the end. Sadly, man's demise is his blindness to reality and preference for flights of fancies (Elliot, 8).

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