

ANALYSIS

“Rappaccini's Daughter” (1844)

Nathaniel Hawthorne

(1804-1864)

“Rappaccini's Daughter” is an allegory of the modern world as a scientific experiment. For too many, science is replacing religion, as in “The Birthmark.” Religious terms such as “divine” and “worshipful” are applied to science, as people adopt a rationalist faith. The setting, the University of Padua, is identified with the rise of science. In the 16th century, the university established “one of those botanic gardens which were of earlier date in Padua than elsewhere in Italy or in the world.” The garden is still there. Also still there is a secret theater where anatomical studies of corpses were performed, defying the Catholic Church. To this day, the skulls of anatomy professors who donated their bodies are on display in a showcase.

A student with the common name Giovanni comes to the university to study science and takes lodgings in a mansion identified with an aristocrat condemned by Dante to his *Inferno*. Giovanni looks down from his window into an experimental garden cultivated by Professor Rappaccini, who uses the plants to make potent medicines--a scientist, but not unlike a witch. In the center of Rappaccini's garden is the “ruin of a marble fountain.” Fountains are an icon in Hawthorne, most obviously in his tale “The Vision of the Fountain.” Giovanni feels “as if the fountain were an immortal spirit.” The marble basin is a structure conducting the fountain of water, as the Church conducts the spirit of a believer. The basin is in ruins because Hawthorne is a Protestant who sees the Catholic Church as decadent, though he respects its ritual of confession, which might have saved Dimmesdale.

Rappaccini's decadent fountain nourishes his artificial plants, some with purple blossoms. Purple is a color motif throughout Hawthorne identifying what is aristocratic, in this case science, which is creating a polluted world. Some of the plants “crept serpentlike.” The garden is an icon of the heart in Hawthorne, here perverted by Rappaccini's science. The scholar himself is an old man in black like a Puritan, his face marked by intellect, but lacking “warmth of heart.” He is “emaciated, sallow, and sickly-looking,” physically and morally comparable to Chillingworth. One of his plants near the fountain is so poisonous he puts on a mask, then calls out for his daughter to help him, in a voice “affected with inward disease”: “He cares infinitely more for science than for mankind.” He is even exploiting his own daughter in an experiment that exposes her to poison, comparable to the experiment by the modern behaviorist B. F. Skinner, who locked his daughter in a sensory deprivation box. Rappaccini claims to be isolating his daughter to protect her and improve her life, masking his selfish motivation.

Giovanni sees the modern world created by science as more a wilderness than a true garden: “Was this garden, then, the Eden of the present world? And this man, with such a perception of harm in what his own hands caused to grow--was he the Adam?” The first question is rhetorical. The second teases the reader into analysis of what turns out to be an inverted analogue: Rappaccini is not analogous to Adam. He is the Creator of the garden, usurping the role of God. The one who falls into knowledge is Giovanni, who falls in love with the daughter Beatrice, named for the incarnation of ideals in Dante. Since this is an inverted analogue, Giovanni is not analogous to Adam but to Eve, as he is the one who accepts an “apple” of knowledge--the poisonous antidote concocted by the devil Baglioni. Beatrice is cast as an Adam created by a false God, adapted to his corrupted garden, innocently polluted and transcending this world. Because she represents the heart and the best in humanity, one of Hawthorne's angels, she is sacrificial and insists on taking the poisonous antidote first to protect her loved one. As in “The Birthmark,” there is no antidote to human imperfection in this life. Perfection is possible only after death.

The story is also an updated revision of *Paradise Lost*, with Rappaccini as a God of science who creates a poisonous Eden and Baglioni as a jealous Satan who prevails there. Both are killers posing as healers. The new Adam and Eve cannot leave. There is a professional “warfare of long continuance” between Baglioni and Rappaccini analogous to the warfare between Satan and God in Milton's epic. Giovanni has

already become so dissociated from his heart and intuition by empiricism he cannot trust Beatrice the angel. His doubts are “like so many demons. But he strove hard to quell them and to respond to Baglioni with a true lover's perfect faith.” As Eve, he is seduced by Satan. If he were capable of true love, Giovanni would be placing his faith in Beatrice.

The two lovers exemplify conventional Victorian gender types embodying head and heart. Repeatedly, Giovanni is “inclined to take a most rational view.” He “had not a deep heart.” He observes Beatrice in the garden with an expression on her face of “simplicity and sweetness,” but he is dismayed to see a flower she is holding kill a lizard. Then he is shocked when she kills an insect with her breath. After both events, she crosses herself, implicitly a good Catholic. When he confronts her, he feels “the delicate and *benign* power of her feminine nature, which had so often enveloped him in a *religious* calm.” He is blessed with “many a *holy* and passionate outgush of her heart, when the *pure fountain* had been unsealed from its depths and made visible in its transparency to his mental eye.” Yet the young rationalist questions whether she might be evil, based upon the evidence of his *senses*. (italics added)

As Brown did in *Wieland*, contributing to the Romantic Movement, Hawthorne rejects the mechanistic psychology of John Locke and dramatizes the limitations of reason, empiricism and the senses: “If true to the outward senses, still it may be false in its essence; but the words of Beatrice Rappaccini’s lips are true from the depths of the *heart* outward.” Hawthorne then says, as he will again in “The Old Manse,” “There is something truer and more real than what we can see with the eyes and touch with the finger.” The purely rational secular education of Giovanni has dissociated his head from his heart, rendering him incapable of intuition, of recognizing the truth or of trusting enough to truly love: “Whatever mist of evil might seem to have gathered over her, the real Beatrice was a heavenly angel.”

Giovanni “did but distrust.” He is startled by “suspicions that rose, monster-like out of the caverns of his heart.” He turns against the innocent girl with “fiendish scorn.” As in “Young Goodman Brown,” a man without faith cannot love. Giovanni decides to subject Beatrice to “some decisive test.” His heartless experiment kills her, casting him as an “unpardonable sinner” like Ethan Brand, Rappaccini, Baglioni, Chillingworth and Aylmer in “The Birthmark.”

The devil Baglioni calls his rival Rappaccini a “vile empiric.” Even as Beatrice is dying, Rappaccini is boasting, calling her “daughter of my pride and triumph.” Her last words emphasize the metaphor of poisonous distrust as she murmurs to Giovanni, “Oh, was there not, from the first, more poison in thy nature than in mine?” At the end, the devil Baglioni prevails and calls out in triumph, “Rappaccini! Rappaccini! and is *this* the upshot of your experiment!” Of course, Baglioni also is responsible for the death of Beatrice--and proud of it. The upshot of the story is a prophetic warning: in the “Eden” of our modern world, rationalistic skepticism (Giovanni), proud tyrannical science (Rappaccini) and competitive jealousy (Baglioni) may kill the best in human nature (Beatrice)--the capacity for faith and love. There is a fictional film adaptation of “Rappaccini’s Daughter” in the novel *Hollywood* (2004).

Michael Hollister (2014)