

Feminine Outcast in Hawthorne's Rappaccini's Daughter and the Birthmark

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Abstract

Literature being any collection of written work records, preserves and transmits knowledge having social, psychological, political and spiritual roles. Comparative literature is an interdisciplinary field which is considered to be the "literature without borders". This paper compares the feminine outcasts in Nathaniel Hawthorne's works, "Rappaccini's Daughter" and "The Birthmark". Despite the similarities between Beatrice and Georgiana, there are also differences in their direction of development. This paper will focus on the situations both the characters undergo due to the conditions men have created for them. Psychological and physical influences lead both the characters even to their death.

Keywords: Psychology, feminism, Physical influences, perception, concoction, obsession.

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature is any collection of written work, but it is also used more narrowly for writings specifically considered to be an art form, especially prose fiction, drama, prose and poetry. In recent centuries, the definition has expanded to include oral literature, much of which has been transcribed. Literature is a method of recording, preserving, and transmitting knowledge and entertainment, and can also have a social, psychological, spiritual, or political role.

Literature, as an art form, can also include works in various non-fiction genres, such as biography, diaries, memoir, letters, and essays. Within its broad definition, literature includes non-fictional books, articles or other printed information on a particular subject. Literature is classified according to whether it is

poetry, prose or drama, and such works are often further categorised according to historical period, adherence to certain aesthetic features or genre.

Comparative literature is an academic field dealing with the study of literature and cultural expression across linguistic, national, geographic, and disciplinary boundaries. Comparative literature performs a role similar to that of the study of international relations but works with languages and artistic traditions, so as to understand cultures from the inside. While most frequently practised with works of different languages, comparative literature may also be performed on works of the same language if the works originate from different nations or cultures in which that language is spoken.

Comparative literature is an interdisciplinary field whose practitioners study literature across national borders, time periods, languages, genres, boundaries between literature and the other arts (music, painting, dance, film, etc.), and across disciplines (literature and psychology, philosophy, science, history, architecture, sociology, politics, etc.). Defined most broadly, comparative literature is the study of “literature without borders”.

American literature refers to the body of written or literary works shaped in the history of the United States and its former colonies. Nathaniel Hawthorne (July 4, 1804 – May 19, 1864) was an American novelist and short story writer. His works often focus on history, morality, and religion. He was born in 1804 in Salem, Massachusetts, from a family long associated with that town. He published several short stories in periodicals, which he collected in 1837 as *Twice-Told Tales*. The following year, he became engaged to Sophia Peabody. He worked at the Boston Custom House and joined Brook Farm, a transcendentalist community, before marrying Peabody in 1842. The couple moved to The Old Manse in Concord, Massachusetts, later moving to Salem, then to The Wayside in Concord. *The Scarlet Letter* was published in 1850, followed by a succession of other novels. Hawthorne died on May 19, 1864.

Much of Hawthorne’s writing centres on New England, many works featuring moral metaphors with an anti-Puritan inspiration. His fiction works are considered part of the Romantic Movement and, more specifically, dark romanticism. His themes often centre on the inherent evil and sin of humanity, and his works often have moral messages and deep psychological complexity. His published works include novels, short stories, and a biography of his college friend Franklin Pierce, written for his 1852 campaign for President of the United States, which Pierce won, becoming the 14th president. He is recognized, with his close contemporaries Herman and Walt Whitman, as a key figure in the development of a distinctly American literature. “*Rappaccini’s Daughter*” is a Gothic short story by Nathaniel Hawthorne first published in the December 1844 issue of the US

Magazine in New York, and later in the 1846 collection *Mosses from an Old Manse*. It is about Giacomo Rappaccini, a medical researcher in Padua who grows a garden of poisonous plants. He brings up his daughter to tend the plants, and she becomes resistant to the poisons, but in the process she herself becomes poisonous to others. The traditional story of a poisonous maiden has been traced back to India, and Hawthorne's version has been adopted in contemporary works.

Giovanni Guasconti, a young student recently arrived from Naples, Southern Italy, to study at the University of Padua, is renting a room in an ancient building that still exhibits the Coat of Arms of the once-great, long since extinct Scrovegni family. Giovanni has studied Dante's *Divine Comedy* and remembers that an ancestor of the Scrovegni, Reginaldo degli Scrovegni, appears in Dante's Hell, as a usurer and a sinner against Nature and Art. From his quarters, Giovanni looks at Beatrice, the beautiful daughter of Dr. Giacomo Rappaccini, a botanist who works in isolation. Beatrice is confined to the lush and locked gardens, which are filled with exotic poisonous plants grown by her father. Having fallen in love, Giovanni enters the garden and secretly meets with Beatrice a number of times, while ignoring his mentor, Professor Pietro Baglioni, who is a rival of Dr. Rappaccini and warns Giovanni that Rappaccini is devious and that he and his work should be avoided. Giovanni notices Beatrice's strangely intimate relationship with the plants as well as the withering of fresh regular flowers and the death of an insect when exposed to her skin or breath. On one occasion, Beatrice embraces a plant in a way that she seems part of the plant itself; then she talks to the plant, "Give me thy breath, my sister, for I am faint with common air." Giovanni eventually realises that Beatrice, having been raised in the presence of poison, has developed immunity and has become poisonous herself. A gentle touch of her hand leaves a purple print on his wrist. Beatrice urges Giovanni to look past her poisonous exterior and see her pure and innocent essence, creating great feelings of doubt and confusion in Giovanni.

In the end, Giovanni becomes poisonous himself: insects die when they come into contact with his breath. Giovanni is troubled by this, which he sees as a curse, and he blames Beatrice. Professor Baglioni gives him an antidote to cure Beatrice and free her from her father's cruel experiment. However, when Beatrice drinks the antidote, she becomes sick and dies. Before realising that Beatrice is dying, Dr. Rappaccini excitedly welcomes the love between his two creatures, his daughter and her suitor, Giovanni, who has been transformed so that he can now be a true and worthy companion to Beatrice. While Beatrice is dying, Professor Baglioni looks down from a window into the garden and triumphantly shouts "Rappaccini! Rappaccini! and is THIS the upshot of your experiment!"

The Birth-Mark is a short story by American author Nathaniel Hawthorne. The tale examines obsession with human perfection. It was first published in the March 1843 edition of *The Pioneer* and later appeared in *Mosses from an Old Manse*, a collection of Hawthorne's short stories published in 1846. Aylmer is a brilliant and recognized scientist and philosopher who drop his focus from his career and experiments to marry Georgiana. As the story progresses, Aylmer becomes unnaturally obsessed with the birthmark on Georgiana's cheek. One night, he dreams of cutting the birthmark out of his wife's cheek (removing it like scraping the skin from an apple) and then, realizing that the birthmark is deeper, continuing all the way to her heart. He does not remember this dream until Georgiana asks about what his sleep-talking meant. When Aylmer remembers the details of his dream, Georgiana declares that she would rather risk her life having the birthmark removed from her cheek than to continue to endure Aylmer's horror and distress that comes upon him when he sees her.

The following day, Aylmer deliberates and then decides to take Georgiana to the apartment where he keeps a laboratory. He glances at Georgiana with the intent to console her but can't help but shudder violently at seeing her imperfection; Aylmer's reaction causes her to faint. When she awakens, he treats her warmly and comforts her with some of his scientific concoctions but when he attempts to take a portrait of her, the image is blurred save for her birthmark revealing the disgust he has of it.

He experiments describes some of the successes to her but as he questions how she is feeling, Georgiana begins to suspect that Aylmer has been experimenting on her the entire time without her knowledge and consent. One day, she follows him into his laboratory, and on seeing her there, Aylmer accuses her of not trusting him and says that having her birthmark in the room will foil his efforts. She professes complete trust in him but demands that he inform her of his experiments. He agrees and reveals that his current experiment is his last attempt to remove the birthmark, and Georgiana vows to take the potion, regardless of any danger it poses to her.

Once, Aylmer brings her the potion, which he demonstrates as effective by rejuvenating a diseased plant with a few drops. Protesting that she doesn't need proof to trust her husband, Georgiana drinks the concoction and promptly falls asleep. Aylmer watches and rejoices as the birthmark fades little by little. Once it is nearly gone, Georgiana wakes up to see her image in a mirror, the birthmark almost completely faded. She smiles but then informs Aylmer that she is dying. Once the birthmark fades completely, Georgiana dies.

A Feminist Outcast in *The Birthplace* and *Rappacini's Daughter*

Hawthorne's "Rappacini's Daughter" and "The Birthmark" have many similar elements, such as the central theme, the main characters, and the story's ending. Despite the significant similarities between the female characters of Beatrice and Georgiana, the Dynamics and direction of their development differ. This paper will look at the features of the stories and characters of Beatrice and Georgiana to demonstrate their main differences with the same ending of their stories.

Hawthorne's stories are very similar as they both tell about two ambitious scientists who made their beloved women victims of their experiments. The features of the female characters are also very similar. First, as Elbert notes, Beatrice and Georgiana are both under the supervision of men who restricts their territory and pronounce their judgments in excellent tones (28). Moreover, in both cases, women love and admire their guardians and their achievements in science. Secondly, both women are compared to nature and victims of the dominant men's influence, since they who objectify them by desire make them perfect (Shelton 9). The only difference is that Georgiana's husband wants to correct nature's Imperfection, and Beatrice's father wants to use its forces to make his daughter invulnerable. As a result, both women suffer and die at the hands of men who applied a mechanical view of nature and tried to manipulate its forces to their advantage (Petersheim 39). Thus, the main similarities between Beatrice and Georgiana are their dependent position as objects and their victimization.

Other less significant details, which, however, play a role in the stories, also bring Beatrice and Georgiana together. For example, Beatrice and Georgiana both do not get the love they deserve, which becomes fatal for them. Beatrice has not received enough paternal love since childhood because her father devotes all his time to science and practically does not speak to his daughter and perceives her as an object of experiments (Sugara 26-27). Simultaneously, although Georgiana has a meaning and influence on her husband, for example, he admires her singing and beauty, his obsession with science and aversion to the birthmark makes a woman feel unworthy. For this reason, Beatrice has such strong feelings for the only man who shows love for her, and Georgiana agrees to remove the birthmark to be better for her husband (Hawthorne "Rappacini's Daughter" 19-20; Hawthorne, "The Birthmark" 2). In addition, Beatrice and Georgiana were submissive, intelligent, and beautiful women and performed typically feminine roles, since, despite their constant involvement in science, men did not give them much knowledge. Consequently, these features characterise Beatrice and Georgiana and the position of women in society at that time in general.

However, such key features as the motives to take a treatment that killed Beatrice and Georgiana demonstrate significant differences in their characters' development. Even though both women died due to the men's ambitions, the factors that contributed to the ending and the behaviour of the heroines were different. Beatrice was born an ordinary beautiful girl and throughout her life became unacceptable to society due to her father's experiments. In other words, her character was shaped by her father; however, the desire to be part of society was not lost. Moreover, at a young age, after meeting Giovanni, Beatrice realized what love and social relationships meant, which made her oppose her father. The pressure of another man, Giovanni, played a decisive role in Beatrice's death, since she basically changed the dominance of one man to another. However, the desire to end her father's experiment was a challenge for the submissive Beatrice and a new step in the development of her character.

At the same time, Georgiana was brought up in an ordinary family and understood the importance of society, love, and feelings in a woman's life. Georgiana and Aylmer loved each other, and at the beginning of their marriage, Aylmer did not notice his wife's birthmark, and she did not worry about it. However, Georgiana's relationship with her husband and his obsession with the birthmark made the woman feel imperfect, ugly, and not good enough for her husband (Hawthorne, "The Birthmark" 2). Aylmer's influence led to the woman's self-worth, and belief in her own beauty was replaced by doubt. For this reason, Georgiana drank the medicine that killed her as she did not want to upset her husband with her flaw. Consequently, Georgiana's story demonstrates a degradation and complete submission to the will of her husband.

Consequently, despite the significant similarities between Beatrice and Georgiana and the same lethal finale of women's stories, their developmental lines have different progress. Although Beatrice remained a weak and objectified woman dominated by men, she discovered a new side of her personality and resisted her father's influence. At the same time, Georgiana completely submitted to her husband's will and died due to his obsession and ambition. Both heroines deserve scorn and sympathy as they have become victims of the dominant men's influence and obsession with their desires and interests. At the same time, if one considers the historical context of the stories, they will notice that such submission of women was typical at that time and that the behaviour of the heroines was not unique, unlike the conditions in which they found themselves.

II. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, comparing Beatrice and Georgiana's female characters demonstrates that the women in both stories share many similarities due to the conditions men have created for them. Psychological and physical influences led both heroines to decisions that brought them their death because of their men's ambitions. However, Beatrice's developmental progress was more significant due to her attempts to influence her destiny, while Georgiana completely submitted to her husband's wishes.

III. REFERENCES

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