

# Twice-tilled tracts: revisions of the garden of eden in hawthorne's short stories...

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



Hawthorne marks his characters as potential usurpers of God who are undermined by an inability to negotiate with human chaos. Confronted with examples of imperfection or fragmentation, the scientific minds of “The Birthmark,” “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” and “Ethan Brand” attempt to efface or fuse flaws as they seek an impossible ideal of total encapsulation and order. Unsatisfied with writing a Psalm, they try to script the entire Bible. This analogy is not incidental; the three stories are all, to some extent, revisions of the Garden of Eden tale. The trio attempts to reconfigure Original Sin, either by blotting it out or by internalizing and conquering sin to the point of self-deification. The latter is particularly key for Hawthorne, a writer who crafts his prose with immaculate precision and detail, ostensibly the marks of the omniscient narrator. Yet Hawthorne concedes the impossibility of full comprehension of a character, or at least his unwillingness to seek such a conclusive appraisal, and consequently refrains from directing the reader to a similar resolution. Fragmentation runs through “Ethan Brand,” so much that the story is subtitled “A Chapter From an Abortive Romance.” The fragments come to resemble irreconcilable pieces of nature. Framed by images of Bartram’s son playing with the “scattered fragments of marble” and of Bartram shattering Brand’s “relics (into fragments,” Hawthorne employs the occupation of lime-burner as a central metaphor of Brand’s search for the Unpardonable Sin (271, 287). Brand’s “Idea first developed” as a reaction to the processes of his profession, in which “blocks and fragments of marble” are converted to lime (272). The kiln performs the act of fusion and assumes the state of permanence that Brand’s mind craves and mimics: The kiln, however, on the mountainside,

stood unimpaired, and was in nothing changed since he had thrown his dark thoughts into the intense glow of its furnace, and melted them, as it were, into the one thought that took possession of his life. (272) While Brand moves from monoliths to monomania, other characters in “Ethan Brand” compensate for their fragmentation by adding a spiritual or invisible quality. Lawyer Giles, who has become a soap-boiler (the opposite of a lime-burner; Giles works with expansive liquid, not dislocated solids) by virtue of losing a foot and a hand to an ax and the “devilish grip of a steam engine” (note the similarities to the hellish fires of a furnace), is now deemed “but the fragment of a human being” (278). However, we learn that in place of the physical, “a spiritual member remained”: “Giles steadfastly averred that he felt an invisible thumb and fingers with as vivid a sensation as before the real ones were amputated” (278). Likewise, the village doctor, who has degenerated into a chaotic, “half-gentlemanly figure, with something wild, ruined, and desperate in his talk,” has spiritual resources that raise him beyond his fragmented state: “but there was supposed to be in him such wonderful skill, such native gifts of healing, beyond which any medical science could impart” (279). This mystical essence assumes the consistency of his chaotic mind and passes on the effects: “he [sometimes] raised a dying man, as it were, by miracle, or quite as often, no doubt, sent his patient to a grave that was dug many a year too soon” (279). Just as the doctor spreads his chaos, for better or worse, so does the pernicious flower in “Rappaccinni’s Daughter” take on the role of a fluid poison. The fragment motif here roots itself in the garden: “(there was the ruin of a marble fountain in the center, sculptured with rare art, but so woefully shattered that it was

impossible to trace the original design from the chaos of remaining fragments" (224). Rappiccini, to trick Beatrice into touching the plant, even calls himself "shattered" (226). It comes as no surprise, then, that the "magnificent shrub" lies next to the "shattered fountain"; in the garden of ordered chaos, where "the strange plants were now and then nodding gently to one another, as if in acknowledgment of sympathy and kindred," the shrub inherits the disorder of the fountain. Hawthorne describes the garden, and especially its artificial life, as a sum of its parts, analogizing the notion of a communicable germ that disseminates as disease: "They were probably the result of experiment, which in one or two cases had succeeded in mingling plants individually lovely into a compound possessing the questionable and ominous character that distinguished the whole growth of the garden" (237). The contagion diffuses via touch or breath, and the human occupants of the garden turn into hosts; when Beatrice prevents Giovanni from plucking one of the shrubs, his body is noted as plant-like: "Giovanni felt her touch thrilling through his fibers" (240; italics mine). The poison takes hold in the form of a fragment-like (in the sense of a diminished reproduction) fingerprint: "On the back of that hand there was now a purple print like that of four small fingers, and the likeness of a slender thumb upon his wrist" (241). In "The Birthmark," Georgiana's blemish also functions as infection, at least in Aylmer's eyes; the birthmark becomes a subjective notation of beauty that exaggerates her beauty in one direction: "Masculine observers, if the birthmark did not heighten their admiration, contended themselves with wishing it away, that the world might possess one specimen of ideal loveliness without the semblance of a flaw" (205). Aylmer falls into

this camp, calling it “<sup>1</sup>the visible mark of earthly imperfection<sup>1</sup>” (204). But Aylmer overextends himself in his desire to remove the stain and, as Beatrice does, leaves the mark of his own poison (a poison of perfection, rather than one of sin) on his wife<sup>1</sup>s body: “ He rushed towards her and seized her arm with a grip that left the print of her fingers upon it” (215). The wording is too precise in the story for the reader not to perceive the birthmark as Original Sin; described as “ the fatal flaw of humanity which Nature, in one shape or another, stamps ineffaceably on all her productions(to imply that they are temporary and finite,” Aylmer tries to counteract the temporality of sin, aiming “ by his strong and eager aspiration towards the infinite” (205, 214). This develops into an obsession with developing God-like powers which he claims “<sup>1</sup>might almost have enlightened me to create a being less perfect than yourself<sup>1</sup>” (207). To complement the creative process, he concocts a poison through which he boasts “<sup>1</sup>I could apportion the lifetime of any mortal at whom you might point your finger<sup>1</sup>” (212). His use of the first-person is part of his apotheosis through apotropaic apothecary. Despite Aylmer<sup>1</sup>s fervent attempts, neither he nor any of Hawthorne<sup>1</sup>s characters is able to assume the role of God without mishap. Rappicini has the most obvious example of an Edenic garden gone awry)Hawthorne begs us to ask “ 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?” (225) While the first question may seem obvious, the second is misleading. He is not content to be the simple Adam, but must grow into an ever-evolving God, watching over his garden to add to his knowledge hoard: “<sup>1</sup>His patients are interesting

to him only as subjects for some new experiment<sup>1</sup>” (228). The puppeteer<sup>1</sup>s apple is the flower which allows him to entrap the animals in his garden, but it is used not as a test of faith. Rather, Rappaccini is a vengeful God bent on administering poison as a means to acquire knowledge, moving towards omniscience, and as an indirect weapon, advancing towards omnipotence. First described by Baglioni as a scientist who “ would sacrifice human life for the sake of adding so much as a grain of mustard seed to the great heap of his accumulated knowledge,” by the story<sup>1</sup>s conclusion Rappaccini exclaims that he has given his daughter “ marvelous gifts against which no power nor strength could avail an enemy” (228, 251). Brand, too, has “ lost his hold on the magnetic chain of humanity” in other words, his distance from humanity is part of the fragmentation between the two (285). He has become an explicit puppeteer, “ looking on mankind as the subject of his experiment, and, at length, converting man and woman to be his puppets” (285). The religious vocabulary employed by Hawthorne to portray the pre-Idea Brand<sup>1</sup> with what reverence he had then looked into the heart of man, viewing it as a temple originally divine, and, however desecrated, still to be held sacred by a brother” (284). Now, Brand is “ no longer a brother man,” and the connections between Rappaccini<sup>1</sup>s flowers and their mutual accumulation of knowledge becomes clear: “ And now, as his highest effort and inevitable development<sup>1</sup>as the bright and gorgeous flower, and rich, delicious fruit of his life<sup>1</sup>s labor<sup>1</sup>he had produced the Unpardonable Sin!” (285) The “ fruit,” the apple of knowledge, is an elevation beyond the Original Sin and into the Unpardonable Sin. “ Rappaccini<sup>1</sup>s Daughter” concerns itself with the Original Sin that is present in all of us) Beatrice<sup>1</sup>s dying words to Giovanni are “ Oh,

was there not, from the first, more poison in thy nature than in mine?" but "Ethan Brand" critiques man's attempted deification in progressing from biting the apple, an allowable act, to eating the entire orchard. How does Hawthorne reconcile the boiled-down "moral" with his own prose? He repeatedly stresses the inaccuracy of perception, especially in "Rappaccini's Daughter," where characters move in and out of "shadowy intervals" (also a continuation of spatial fragmentation) and Giovanni's eyes are constantly in doubt or evasion, such as when he turns them "downward to avoid those of the professor" (230, 243). When the evidence of Beatrice's fatal touch is dubious, Hawthorne draws out his thoughts that "there could be no possibility of distinguishing a faded flower from a fresh one at so great a distance" (232). Indeed, later on Hawthorne more directly asserts that "There is something truer and more real than what we can see with the eyes or touch with the finger" (245). Hawthorne never makes the presumption of the author as God. In "Ethan Brand," the German Jew exhibits his pictures, "full of cracks and wrinkles," and displays them as a series; in short, he creates a pictorial narrative (281). But Hawthorne is quick to point out that he is only that, a narrator: "(in the midst of these would be seen a gigantic, brown, hairy hand) which might have been mistaken for the Hand of Destiny, though, in truth, it was only the showman's) pointing its forefinger to various scenes" (281). "The Birthmark" presents narrative interference even more covertly. Georgiana's mark is illustrated as "a singular mark, deeply interwoven, as it were, with the texture and substance of her face" (204). That the imprint is of a human hand is key; Georgiana, like "Wakefield," is a written document. If this seems dubious, consider that her husband's

scientific journal is called “ as melancholy a record as ever mortal hand had penned” (the second time Hawthorne uses “ hand” to account for their being written) and then, to remind us of the visual connection to her face, Hawthorne writes “ Perhaps every man of genius in whatever sphere might recognize the image of his own experience in Aylmer’s journal” (214). Recall, too, that Aylmer leaves his finger-marks on her arm, and the initial texture/interwoven symbols reach literary fruition in the final paragraph: “(he need not have flung away the happiness which would have woven his mortal life of the selfsame texture with the celestial” (220). Aylmer-as-author is too determined to weave his texture as he desires it, but Hawthorne permits an ambiguity in his characters beyond his control, as with Brand: “ It made him doubt)and, strange to say, it was a painful doubt)whether he had indeed found the Unpardonable Sin” (279). If Brand is unsure, perhaps Hawthorne is as well. This may explain the subtitles of inclusion, as in “ Ethan Brand,” or “[From the Writings of Aubépine]” from “ Rappaccini’s Daughter.” By acknowledging their status as small parts of (fictitious) greater works, Hawthorne denies any possibility that each story is the final word. Instead, he embraces the fragments as individual perspectives which may or may not reveal reality. Since each perspective is faulty, the only way to assure is an impossibly “ objective” view is through such a perspectival collage. This may help explain why Hawthorne wrote as many short stories collections in his lifetime as novels)better for a dozen or so chaotic pairs of eyes to assess truth than an authorial Cyclops, lacking depth perception.