

# Vanity – devil's favourite sin

Literature



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In both of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short stories "The Birthmark", and "Rappaccini's Daughter" a beautiful young woman becomes the victim of a misguided perfectionist/idealist who loves her. In order to demonstrate the satire and tragedy involved in trying to create perfection, Nathaniel Hawthorne presents scientist who becomes ignorant of the necessity of imperfection in the world, and try to use science to "play God" and create excellence. The scientists Aylmer and Rappaccini are both very proud of their great knowledge; however, this pride drives them to change nature as a test and demonstration of their ability.

The stories illustrate the satiric nature of an idealist's need to alter and perfect, when, in the end, nothing is learnt. The story "Rappaccini's Daughter" is set in a fanciful garden with a broken fountain in the middle. Created by Rappaccini, the garden consists mostly of beautiful but toxic flowers. His daughter, Beatrice, is confined to this garden because she thrives on the very poisons produced by the plants in the garden. Due to his role as the creator Rappaccini is compared to God.

"Was this garden, then, the Eden of the present world? (182) In the Bible, Adam and Eve are given life, love, and sustenance, but God forbids them to partake of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. The situation in "Rappaccini's Daughter" is almost identical. Rappaccini offers Giovanni a young suitor of Beatrice, her love, and the chance of leading a life with her. But in return Giovanni must ignore the fact while Beatrice is pure and innocent at heart, "Then, with all the tenderness in her manner that was so strikingly expressed in her words, she busied herself with such attentions as

the plants seemed to require"(182), she is trapped in a dangerous and poisonous body.

Therefore the knowledge of Beatrice's separate physical and spiritual characteristics is comparable to the knowledge of Good and Evil. When Giovanni starts to question Beatrice's nature, the way to clarify his accusation comes to him via Signor Baglioni, the intellectual rival of Rappaccini, in the form of a small vial of chemical antidote that tests the poisonous of Beatrice. " Bestow the vast, and the precious liquid within it, on your Beatrice, and hopefully await the result" (203). This vial is the forbidden fruit, and in accordance with the Bible, Beatrice is the first to partake of the fruit.

Rappaccini has created the poisonous garden and made his daughter poisonous so that she can live in it. The garden is not a product of God but rather the creation of a vain idealist. Rappaccini sees his garden as his perfect world, " This garden, then, the Eden of the present world? "(182), though its poison would be fatal to him too. Rappaccini wants perfection that is unachievable, he does not realize God has already created an ideal world, and imperfections are a part of that world.

His lust for perfection drives him to question God's creation and therefore cause the death of his beloved daughter. Hawthorne uses many religious terminologies in describing Aylmer the scientist in " The Birthmark". Words like " faith"(148), " miracle"(149), " holy"(152), " to pray"(154), " immortality"(162), and " heavenly"(163), are found throughout the story to show clearly that science has become a religion for Aylmer. Furthermore he

also imposes his belief on his wife Georgiana. "[Georgiana] prayed that, for a single moment, she might satisfy his highest and deepest conception" (162).

Aylmer believes in the supremacy of science and science's ability, and mistakes science for religion. "The Birthmark" also deals with human's vanity and pride, and how intolerance of small imperfection can cause disaster. In the story, Aylmer is very skeptical towards nature; he sees the natural birthmark on Georgiana's face as a subject under human control, and can to be improved upon. In a pursuit to reach perfection by removing the birthmark, Aylmer believes in his ability to overcome nature, and makes himself an earthly god.

Aylmer tries to create the ultimate ideal wife, but the birthmark on Georgiana stands as a "symbol of imperfection"(150), "the visible mark of earthly imperfection" (148), and "fatal flaw of humanity"(149). Aylmer's desire to remove the birthmark reveals his perfectionism. The consequence is tragedy and pain. Aylmer doesn't accept that he doesn't need to improve his wife, "If she were my wife, I'd never part with that birthmark"(154), and that God has created a perfect world that involves faults. Even though he is able to use his scientific knowledge to remove the birthmark from Georgiana's right cheek, the price is deadly.

Overly confident in his science, Aylmer feels that "He felt he could draw a magic circle round her, within which no evil might intrude"(154). Aylmer tries to perfect, but instead he kills his wife and ruins everything; perfection is something never achieved on earth. Aylmer's behaviour shows his attempt at being God; his overconfidence in his abilities causes science to turn

against him. By refusing to accept that Georgiana's birthmark is a mere physical imperfection, Aylmer is unable to see past his own selfish desires and pride in his quest for perfection.

As a result, his science does, indeed, triumph over the birthmark, but at the cost of his heart, his soul, and the true source of his happiness: his wife.

Aylmer lets vanity blind him, and his obsession with perfection makes him Georgiana's murderer. In both tales "The Birthmark" and "Rappaccini's Daughter", the finales show, that idealism and narrow-mindedness is the cause of devastation. The intolerance and the need to perfect, illustrated by the scientists towards the necessary flaws that God has produced in the world, lead them to destroy their beloved ones.