



The Dualism of Good and Evil in “Young Goodman Brown” and “Rappaccini’s Daughter”

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The difficulty of retaining one’s faith in a world notable for its ambiguous mixture of good and evil is the common theme that relates two of Hawthorne’s famous short stories, “Young Goodman Brown” and “Rappaccini’s Daughter.” Hawthorne believes that in order to find a hope of heaven—in order, that is, to develop one’s full human potential—man must accept the tragic involvement with sin, but also the consequent possibility of redemption (Male, 2005, p. 54). In both “Young Goodman Brown” and “Rappaccini’s Daughter”, this perplexing amalgamation of vice and virtue is clearly illustrated in the settings and the characterization of the women.

In “Rappaccini’s Daughter”, the complexity of the mixture of good and evil manifests itself in the objects of the garden, the “Eden of the present world.”** The plants – not just to Giovanni but to any “wanderer” (p. 218) – possess a “questionable and ominous character” (p. 218). They are unnatural, artificial hybrids resulting from a “commixture and, as it were, adultery, of various vegetable species” (p. 220). They are, in short, human

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** Arvin, Newton, ed. 1996. *Hawthorne’s Short Stories*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, p. 209. All following parenthetical page numbers refer to this edition.



productions, but worse because they mimic God's creation in "an evil mockery of beauty" (p. 220). Their symbolic function is clear. They creep "serpentlike" (p. 208) along the ground; some of them "shock and offend" (p. 209) Beatrice and Rappaccini avoids their apparently poisonous odors, treating them as though they were deadly snakes (Levin, 2008, p. 97).

The same observations would seem to hold for the plant Rappaccini considers the most dangerous of all, the magnificent purple shrub with gemlike blossoms. Yet it is "one shrub in particular" (p. 208) and differs from the other vegetation in several important respects. It is nourished by water from the shattered marble fountain; its brilliance seems "enough to illuminate the garden, even had there been no sunshine" (p. 208); and it is treated with the utmost affection by Beatrice. The complex symbolic functions of the purple shrub are clarified somewhat by its relation to the water that gushes from the "rain" (p. 207) of the marble fountain. The water symbolizes the spirit, immortal and unaffected by the vicissitudes that have shattered its temporal, earthy vessel. As a unit, the fountain combines the material and the spiritual, but the two are easily distinguishable. Not so with the shrub. It is an ambiguous mixture of matter and spirit, magnificent but poisonous. Fed and reflected by the fountain of the spirit, it nevertheless seems chiefly sensuous in its gorgeous beauty and perfume. The resplendent shrub, together with its reflection, bathes the garden in a "purple atmosphere" (p. 220) like that of the "Hall of Fantasy" (p. 222), confirming our impression that Rappaccini's garden is a mystic region in which lies the dualism of good and evil (Male, 2005, p. 63).



In the same manner, Hawthorne uses the settings in “Young Goodman Brown” to suggest the mixture of vice and virtue. Here, the settings are the village and the forest. Brown leaves Salem Village and his worried wife Faith to undertake a journey of unnamed mysterious purpose which must be made “ ’twixt now and sunrise on this of all nights in the year” (p. 194). Promising himself that he will never forsake Faith again, he heads for the forest:

...He had taken a dreary road, darkened by all the gloomiest trees of the forest, which barely stood aside to let the narrow path creep through, and closed immediately behind. It was all as lonely as could be; and there is this peculiarity in such a solitude, that the traveler knows not who may be concealed by the innumerable trunks and the thick boughs overhead; so that with lonely footsteps he may yet be passing through an unseen multitude (p.194).

The descriptive details in the forest scene are highly selective. Most of these details create an atmosphere not only of the darkness of dusk but also of a moral darkness or gloom: dreary, darkened, gloomiest, creep, closed, lonely, solitude, concealed, thick, unseen are the most obvious examples of Hawthorne’s simple but effective diction. Whereas the darkness of the forest symbolizes Brown’s utter isolation within the depths of his mind and his discovery of the pervasiveness of evil, the daylight world of the village connotes the virtue of his conventional conscious life with Faith in the community. The fact that there are night and day, village and forest, the world is a mixture of good and evil (Levin, 2008, p. 98).



In addition to the settings, the characterization of the women in both stories supports this theme. Faith, in “Young Goodman Brown”, is described as a “blessed angel on earth” (p. 194), and yet she is sinful in joining the activity in the forest:

There was one voice, of a young woman, uttering lamentations, yet with an uncertain sorrow, and entreating for some favor, which perhaps, it would grieve her to obtain; and all the unseen multitude, both saints and sinners, seemed to encourage her onward (p. 200).

Similarly, Beatrice, in “Rappaccini’s Daughter”, is described as beautiful, exotic, ambiguous in her “poisonous” (p. 220) combination of sexual attractiveness and angelic purity:

Soon there emerged from under a sculptured portal the figure of a young girl, arrayed with as much richness of taste as the most splendid of the flowers, beautiful as the day, and with a bloom so deep and vivid that one shade more would have been too much. She looked redundant with life, health, and energy; all of which attributes were bound down and compressed, as it were, and girdled tensely, in their luxuriance, by her virgin zone. Yet Giovanni’s fancy must have grown morbid while he looked down into the garden; for the



impression which the fair stranger made upon him was as if here were another flower, the human sister of those vegetable ones, as beautiful as they, more beautiful than the richest of them, but still to be touched only with a glove, nor to be approached without a mask (p. 209).

However, Brown and Giovanni cannot accept the dual nature of humanity that their women represent. Both would like to possess their women physically, or both would be content with them as pure ideals; but both cannot grasp the fact that women offer both sin and eventual redemption (Male, 2005, p. 85).

In conclusion, we can say that “Young Goodman Brown” and “Rappaccini’s Daughter” share the same theme – the dualism of good and evil. By means of skillful and careful female characterization and settings, Hawthorne is successful in presenting this theme to his readers.

**Bibliography**

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