

**A Victim of "Love":  
A Study of Beatrice's Character  
in "Rappaccini's Daughter"  
By Nathaniel Hawthorne**

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**Abstract:**

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864) has been widely known for his special interest in the female characters. In many of his novels, he narrates the conditions, values, and the institutions that surround and control the life of women, leading them to be victims.

In "Rappaccini's Daughter" (1844), the heroine, Beatrice is created to be victimized by her loved ones (her father and lover). This paper focuses on the term "victim," it shows its aspects through the development of Beatrice's character. The paper also studies a female character in the male-dominated society, to show the cruelty done to her, and how she is considered to be a second rate person, who is unable to live normally, or at least to save herself from death.

**Key words:** Nathaniel Hawthorne, "Rappaccini's Daughter", Beatrice, victim, Giovanni.

**Introduction :**

In *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, a victim is defined as "someone or something which has been hurt, damaged, or killed, or has suffered, either because of the actions of someone or something else, or because of illness or chance."<sup>1</sup> This meaning can be applied to Beatrice Rappaccini, the heroine of Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "Rappaccini's Daughter" which first appeared in the December 1844 issue of the *Democratic Review*.<sup>2</sup> In 1846, it appeared in a Hawthorne collection of stories and sketches, *Mosses From an Old Manse*. In this story, Hawthorne argues that Beatrice is the victim of the male characters in the story; her father Dr. Giacomo Rappaccini, and her lover Giovanni Guasconti. Beatrice, according to the definition of victim, has suffered, been hurt, and died because of the selfishness of her father and lover, who use her for their own purposes. The name *Beatrice* is derived from the Latin word *beatrix*, meaning *she who makes people happy*. Beatrice was the name of the young woman to whom Dante Alighieri dedicated many poems. That woman, Beatrice Portinari, died in 1290, when she was only twenty-four. Dante glorified her in *The Divine Comedy*.<sup>3</sup> Beatrice is Dante's perfect, innocent woman, for she has the ability to save a man, by guiding him through part of purgatory and all of heaven. So, Hawthorne deliberately chose this name to make it for his female

protagonist. In "Rappaccini's Daughter" Beatrice Rappaccini is presented as:

[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.<sup>4</sup>

She is the daughter of the scientist Signor Giacomo Rappaccini in 16<sup>th</sup> Century Padua, Italy. She is a beautiful, kind, and innocent young woman. She has been isolated from all society and friendship by her father's diabolical knowledge of botanical poisons and his experiment upon her. Signor Rappaccini raised rare poisonous plants in pursuit of medical knowledge and infected his daughter with their poisons so that her very touch or breath can be fatal to another. Beatrice has an interlude of happiness when she falls passionately but chastely in love with a science student, Giovanni Guasconti, who is renting a room next door to Rappaccini's marvelous but deadly garden. Although aware that Beatrice's touch or breath is deadly to flowers raised elsewhere, insects, and lizards, Giovanni becomes enamored of Beatrice's sweetness, gaiety, and extraordinary beauty. Soon he realizes that he, too, has become infected with the poisons. If he stays with Beatrice in the garden, he, too, will be deadly to all other humans, animals, insects, or plant life. Cruelly, Giovanni accuses Beatrice of infecting him. His heartlessness, plus her father's evil plan to make his daughter deadly to all other living creatures, destroys Beatrice. She dies after taking a supposed antidote developed by Rappaccini's rival, Signor Pietro Baglioni, who has attempted to use Giovanni to get the upper hand in the rivalry with Rappaccini.<sup>5</sup>

Obviously, there is a correlation between Beatrice Rappaccini's name and her namesake Beatrice Cenci, a woman who was raped by her father and in turn killed him. Beatrice also has a Cenci-like father, who has raped her freedom by destroying her chances at having a good, and normal life.<sup>6</sup> In his essay "Sexual Exploitation and the Fall from the Natural Virtue in 'Rappaccini's Daughter'" Kent Bales thinks that Beatrice Rappaccini has been the victim of her father's sin, because Doctor Rappaccini has poisoned her.<sup>7</sup> Thus, it is just like the sin of Beatrice Cenci's father, who has killed her innocence, and turned her to be a victim of his selfishness. Hawthorne has also made a correspondence between "Rappaccini's Daughter" and the biblical story of Genesis and Adam and Eve in choosing the setting as a garden. The garden is the place where Nature is subdued, ordered, selected and enclosed. Hence, it is the symbol of consciousness.<sup>8</sup>

Gardens are places of pleasures, and this is what links them to the image of Paradise. Thus, the garden of Rappaccini is an "Eden of the present world"<sup>9</sup> for its beauty that suggests calmness and happiness, yet making this garden as a laboratory recall the fall and perhaps foreshadow another fall. One point that makes difference between the tale of Genesis and Hawthorne's story; that is, the role of the lovers is reversed. In the original tale, Eve is the one who brings the forbidden fruit to Adam and causes their downfall. In "Rappaccini's Daughter" the opposite is true, because Giovanni brings the cause of death to Beatrice. Like the plant of her father's garden, Beatrice is so beautiful that "all the young men in Padua are wild about, though not half a dozen have ever had the good hap to see her face." (80) Beside her beauty, she also has an education and intellect that qualifies her "to fill a professor's chair." So with these qualities she may represent the perfect woman, but with them, she may also represent a threat to the male-dominant world, they fear her physical and intellectual power. However, Hawthorne never intended to view women as unimportant or as threatening Eves, but, rather, as men's vital, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual partners, he wanted to say that women are companions not threats.<sup>10</sup>

Dr. Rappaccini is a knowledgeable scientist; however, he cares "more for science than mankind". In the pursuit of knowledge and power, Rappaccini poisoned his daughter whom he is supposed to really love, but blinded by his ambition to succeed in science and by the pride he felt for his created daughter, Rappaccini forgets his fatherly feeling towards his daughter and he is unable to see how lonely and unhappy he has made her. This father lacks all senses of humanity and sees humans as experimental subjects, his motivations are selfish because he wants his daughter to be a tool to achieve scientific greatness, he has this desire of interfering with nature, and to perfect the already perfect.<sup>11</sup> The father is unable to see that his daughter is a human being, not an object of experiment. This way of treatment, produces her suffering and death at the end. Thus, he represents evil, and he is a blight that generates corruption. He first corrupts his soul, committing the father of all sins, pride, by defying God and nature in order to aggrandize his reputation through experiments that turn his garden into an evil Eden. His experimentation also corrupts his body, which becomes feeble and sickly, and transforms his innocent daughter into a poisonous agent whose very breath can kill.<sup>12</sup>

Though Rappaccini made his daughter poisonous just because of his scientific interest, he says with a confident manner that he has made her stand apart from ordinary women and be dreadful to others,

"Miserable!" exclaimed Rappaccini. "What mean you, foolish girl? Dost thou deem it misery to be endowed with marvellous gifts, against which no power nor strength could avail an enemy? Misery, to be able to quell the mightiest with a breath? Misery, to be as terrible as thou art beautiful? Wouldst thou, then, have preferred the condition of a weak woman, exposed to all evil, and capable of none?" (101)

Probably he would like to say that it is an evil world outside, and his garden is the only haven where his daughter can be safe; because he believes that all the women are weak and they cannot survive in this world, for in it only the mightiest exists.

The father- daughter relationship between Rappaccini and Beatrice shows a complete loss of understanding and an inequality in love. Rappaccini believes that he is protecting Beatrice by making her poisonous to all mankind. He is shocked and astonished when she calls her plight a "miserable doom" he has thought that he is endowing her with powers that will protect her from all other. Rappaccini misjudges the needs of his daughter, who wants to be "loved not feared." Likewise, his love for Beatrice is second to that of his science. Whereas Beatrice's love is pure and unencumbered. She lives without qualifications, without ulterior motives.<sup>13</sup>

Beatrice is a beautiful, lively, and vigorous girl, yet at the same time she is fatal. In his discussion of "Rappaccini's Daughter" in *Hawthorne's Fiction: The Light and Dark*, Richard Fogle claims that Beatrice should symbolically represent a contrast between outward beauty and inner ugliness and evil. He notes that she is essentially simple and good, her evil power merely a superficial disguise.<sup>14</sup> It seems that this inner ugliness is the creation of her father. It is his sin not her, that is trying to rival God and subordinate human values to scientific knowledge. He is a false creator of an unnatural heaven.<sup>15</sup> Hyatt H. Waggoner describes Beatrice as "the victim of an original sin", in his book *Hawthorne: A Critical Study*, and he notes that she has not committed any actual sin, nor is she guilty of any capital vices. The plant with which she is so intimately associated is the vehicle for evil in the story.<sup>16</sup> Beatrice lives in a secluded place, her father's garden. She remains isolated and ignorant of the world around her, and her lack of contact with its inhabitants has rendered her into a child, as the following passage attests:

[Beatrice] became gay, and appeared to derive a pure delight from her communion with [Giovanni]... conversing with a voyager from the civilized world. Evidently her experience of life had been confined within the limits of that garden. She talked now about matters as simple as the day-light or summer-clouds, and now asked questions in reference to the city, or Giovanni's distant home,

his friends, his mother, and his sisters; questions indicating such seclusion, and such lack of familiarity with modes and forms, that Giovanni responded as if to an infant. (pp. 89-99)

Her innocence is kept by seclusion, but when she knows love, her extraordinary character which is unnaturally forced into her, obstructs the fulfillment of love. Her innocent heart is accompanied by her physical poison. As she says herself, she is created by God, and is not responsible for her poison. Her poison can be regarded as a symbol of human fault, that is Beatrice is an ordinary human being who has both good and bad qualities.<sup>17</sup> When young Giovanni Guasconti sees her, he asks himself: "What is this being?--beautiful, shall I call her?--or inexpressibly terrible?" He is taken by her outside look, forgetting that appearances are deceptive.

Indeed, Beatrice's condition is the father responsibility. It is he who wishes to find a suitable match for his daughter because he wants to expand his experiments, to reach other human beings other than Beatrice. He is a scientist who wants to study Giovanni as a case. He looks at Giovanni as a bird or a mouse which in pursuance of some experiment. In this way, Rappaccini's evildoing extends also to old Lisabetta, the maid, whom he apparently uses as his cat's paw to ensnare Giovanni—via Beatrice's charms—for his experiments. Lisabetta informs Giovanni of a secret door to the garden. Giovanni enters the garden to come face to face with the lovely Beatrice. Giovanni wants to covet Rappaccini's beautiful daughter, he wants to win the dream of all Padua's young men to prove himself as superior. On the other hand, Beatrice wants to find love yet, again she turns out to be the victim of a selfish lover and a cruel experiment her father created.<sup>18</sup> She falls in Giovanni's love quickly and is willing to sacrifice her life for his, just because she is eager to have a natural life, and to be with people for she has suffered living alone in her father's garden.

At the beginning, Beatrice is noticeably a caring but guarded individual, she wanders through the garden like some beautiful idol, tending to the different flowers as if they were her children, and she also bides her time by caring for her father. After she meets Giovanni, something changes within her. She falls in love with him and she realizes that there is another world outside her father's garden that is why she welcomes him to enter into her secluded but private life, while her father closely monitors her progression into love, and does not mind it. Giovanni, of course, has always had an interest in Beatrice ever since he saw her from the balcony one morning tending to one of Rappaccini's poisonous plants.<sup>19</sup> It seems that Giovanni actually sees Beatrice's beauty, he looks at her on a physical level not a soulful level, though he witnesses some strange elements in her hinting to her dangerous side like the death of the insect and the

withered flower and also her painful touch. These signs are so clear to Giovanni, to warn him against Beatrice's world. But still, blinded by love and desire, Giovanni shrugs off all the warning signs and continues his pursuit for Beatrice's love. Later on he finds out that she has poisoned him, not intentionally, but because she does not know of her poisonous effect on others. After a difficult confrontation with Giovanni, in which he accuses her of being evil, and: "Accursed one! And finding thy solitude wearisome, thou hast severed me, likewise, from all the warmth of life, and enticed me into thy region of unspeakable horror!"(p.99). Giovanni accuses Beatrice of being evil and cruel, forgetting that he has interrupted her secluded life and she actually makes no attempt to bind him to her; she professes to want "only to love thee, and be with thee a little time, and so to let thee pass away, leaving but thine image in mine heart." (100) She yearns to be loved and to have a normal life like all people, and when she finds love, she is ready to sacrifice her life for it. Whereas, Giovanni only thinks of possessing Beatrice, to change and control her. Giovanni proves himself superficial; he lacks depth and sympathy, because he responds to Beatrice only as a physical being and fails to understand her as a real person rather than just a symbol of evil.<sup>20</sup>

Giovanni forgets the warnings and forgets that Beatrice has tried to save him from a poisonous plant when he has tried to touch the flower in the garden; she cries "touch it not...not for thy life! It is fatal." So, she tells Giovanni, that her father has created fatal shrubs. It is emblematic of natural purity despoiled by human contrivance. Then Beatrice was honest to Giovanni, she also offers to be the first in taking the antidote (which he brings claiming that it will cure her from the poison) and spares Giovanni's life in case the potion did not work. The lover is taken by Beatrice's beauty, her physical look infatuates him, he does not think of her inner beauty. This is not a real love, because it soon fades as Giovanni realizes the poisonous condition of Beatrice. His selfishness leads him to trying to change this girl, by using the antidote. If only this love is true, Giovanni will accept her as she is, therefore she will be saved from death. Thus, Giovanni sacrifices Beatrice's life as her father does. Beatrice tells Giovanni he must believe only what he witnesses himself, and then she emphasizes the truths behind the visible things. Hawthorne agrees with Beatrice and adds: "there is something truer and more real than we can see with the eyes and touch with the finger." Beatrice urges Giovanni to follow his true senses that inform him how innocent she is and how true her love is. In Margaret Hallissy's essay, "Hawthorne's Venomous Beatrice" she states that Giovanni is physically attracted to Beatrice but cannot get past her outer beauty and move on to her inner spiritual beauty. To Hallissy, Beatrice is trying to save Giovanni by asking him to look at her in a spiritual and moral sense not in a physical sense.<sup>21</sup>

Giovanni cannot accept Beatrice as a human being, both beautiful and terrible, having good and bad sides. He can only love the beautiful Beatrice and intends obstinately to be blind to her horrible attributes. Giovanni who has "a weak and selfish and unworthy spirit" does not know how to estimate Beatrice.<sup>22</sup> He cannot understand that Beatrice's ugly mystery is not natural. Beatrice says "though my body is nourished with poison, my spirit is God's creature." (100) If there is evilness in her, it is only because she was forced to be that way. Her heart is pure. So in the end, the beautiful and innocent Beatrice is betrayed by the man she loved. Giovanni thought she was evil, yet, she is only a human, with a poisonous body and a loving soul.

After all, he curses her in the belief that she willingly contaminated him, a development revealing that he lacks faith in her. His outrage suggests that his is a "fair weather" passion. When things go right, he will love her. When things go wrong, he will withhold his love. Beatrice apparently senses that his love is insincere.<sup>23</sup> Beatrice begs Giovanni to have faith in her inner goodness despite what he has witnessed. But Giovanni fails the test of faith, as a lover Giovanni is shallow and lacks faith; he has after all "not a deep heart." His heart soon fills with fear and he starts "groveling among earthly doubts" resulting in his hatred towards Beatrice. Giovanni doubts Beatrice and his doubts lead to the consequence of her death. Having no faith makes Giovanni more poisonous than Beatrice.

Beatrice deeply loves her father and lover, and she thinks that they have the same feeling in return. She never thinks of dying as a victim of the loving ones. Definitely, she has been shocked by their selfishness, yet her last words suggest that she has had a strong character, as she says:

"I would fain have been loved, not feared," murmured Beatrice, sinking down upon the ground.--"But now it matters not; I am going, father, where the evil, which thou hast striven to mingle with my being, will pass away like a dream--like the fragrance of these poisonous flowers, which will no longer taint my breath among the flowers of Eden. Farewell, Giovanni! Thy words of hatred are like lead within my heart--but they, too, will fall away as I ascend. Oh, was there not, from the first, more poison in thy nature than in mine?"(p. 102)

In these lines, Beatrice tells her father that he made a mistake by not letting her have a chance at real life. In a sense, she is sort of punishing him with her death to show him that his struggle to make her unnatural was in vain, she also tells Giovanni that he made a mistake of loving her for her physical beauty instead of her inner beauty. This paragraph shows that Beatrice is teaching both men that she is sacrificing herself for a better good.<sup>24</sup> Beatrice wanted to make a point to her father and to Giovanni.

To her father, Beatrice wanted to show him that she was ready to move on and ahead in life. She was tired of being alone, enclosed, and secluded from everyone else, and most of all she was tired of her father and his world. As for Giovanni, she wanted to show him that beauty is skin deep and that she was more than just a beautiful woman. Beatrice wanted Giovanni to know her inner beauty, her strengths and weaknesses, she wanted him to understand the knowledge she possesses but unfortunately, he was too blind to see. Instead, he blames her for his misfortunes; he can be considered a coward for such a deed. Giovanni assumes that he has become poisonous on account of Beatrice: "thou [Beatrice] hast made me as hateful, as ugly, as loathsome and deadly a creature as thyself." Hawthorne gives the readers many clues of Giovanni's selfish nature. But, in turn, it puts Beatrice in a different light. She sacrificed her life to be free of her father and she tried to teach Giovanni a lesson. In essence, Beatrice had a meaningful death if her father and Giovanni understood; it is that Beatrice has died in order to bring them to a higher plane of existence.<sup>25</sup>

"Rappaccini's Daughter" seems to suggest that there is no perfect man, everyone has both good and evil sides. Giovanni was unable to separate the physical from the spiritual. He develops a strong bond with Beatrice; however, it is not true love (from his side). Because for him, being dominated by a woman, means being robbed of his independence and having his manly character swallowed up.

In his commentary about "Rappaccini's Daughter," Richard Brenzo views Beatrice as an Eve still trapped and controlled by the male character in her life.

Each man represents a typical male role might find a woman threatening, and might therefore try to destroy her. Giovanni, her lover ... desires her sexuality, yet fears its power to dominate and destroy him... Her father wants her beautiful enough to win a husband, dependent enough to remain in his home, obedient enough to do his bidding, and compliant enough to be molded to his standards. None of these men could have been portrayed as feeling these same fears, with the same intensity, about a man.<sup>26</sup>

Brenzo concludes that it is not Beatrice, who is poisonous, but it is Rappaccini and Giovanni, their ambitions and desires represent their poison. Thus, both men share the blame for Beatrice's death.

Beatrice finds that her father is trying to change God's nature, by attempting to recreate her. And Giovanni is governed by lust; he fails to be a true lover. Both were unable to see Beatrice as an earthly angel. She is a creature of God, pure of soul and heart. Her spirit is natural, but hidden inside her poisonous body. The father and the lover used her like an inanimate object rather than a woman with a

good heart and soul. Their pride and fear worked together to turn Beatrice into a helpless victim of their misuse and to end her life.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Definition of “Victim” as in *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*. See <http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british/victim?q=victim>

Accessed: July 23th 2011

<sup>2</sup> Duane Vorhees, "The Neglected Preface to 'Rappaccini's Daughter'," *English Language and Literature*, vol. 37 No. 4(1991), P.921.

<sup>3</sup> Dante Alighieri: (c. 1265–1321), was a major Italian poet of the middle ages. His *Divine Comedy* is widely considered the greatest literary work composed in the Italian language and a masterpiece of world literature. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dante\\_Alighieri](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dante_Alighieri) accessed January 7th 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *Mosses from an Old Manse* Vol.1, (New York: John B. Alden 1888, p.77. (The second reference to the novel and subsequent references with the text).

<sup>5</sup> Anda Stefanovici, (2005) “Nathaniel Hawthorne's Women: Tradition and Modernity,” *Diacronia*, Issue 1, pp. 431-432.

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Ellis, (1993), “Some Observations about Hawthorne's Women” *WILLA*, Volume2, pp.13-18.

<sup>7</sup> Laura Stallman, (1995) “Survey of Criticism of "Rappaccini's Daughttr" by Nathaneil Hawthorne,” retrieved from [archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/eng372/rappcrit.htm](http://archive.vcu.edu/english/engweb/eng372/rappcrit.htm) Accessed July 23th 2011.

<sup>8</sup> J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, Trans. by Jack Sage (New York: Dover Publications, INC. 2002), P.115.

<sup>9</sup> Gwendolyn Connelley Stafford, “Unity and Duality in ‘Rappaccini's Daughter’ and ‘The Birthmark,’” Unpublished Thesis, Texas Tech University, 1970, P.13

<sup>10</sup> Anda, p. 428

<sup>11</sup> Nicole Smith, (2010), “Comparison Of “the Birthmark” And “Rappaccini's Daughter” Researchomatic. <http://www.researchomatic.com/Comparison-Of-the-Birthmark-And-rappaccinis-Daughter-52102.html> Retrieved 12, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Michael J. Cummings, 2009 “Rappaccini’s Daughter by Nathaniel Hawthorne: Study Guide,” retrieved 18/5/2011

<http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides6/Rappaccini.html>

<sup>13</sup> Gwendolyn p, 16

<sup>14</sup> Laura Stallman.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Masaru Ohba, (1972) *Lurid Intermixture in Hawthornian Romance*, Seijo University: Tokyo, p. 25-26.

<sup>18</sup> Clifford J. Kurkowski, “Beatrice’s Inner Strength: A Feminist Approach to Rappaccini's Daughter,”

<http://home.mindspring.com/~blkgrnt/footlights/foot65.html>

Accessed 3/6/2011.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Stallman.

<sup>21</sup> Clifford J. Kurkowski.

<sup>22</sup> Masaru Ohba, p.34.

<sup>23</sup> Michael J Cummings.

<sup>24</sup> Clifford J. Kurkowski

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Barbara Ellis quoted from Richard Brenzo.

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### ضحية "الحب"

دراسة لشخصية بياتريس بطلة قصة "ابنة راباتشيني" للكاتب ناثانيل هوثورن

م.م زينب سمير شاكر  
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كلية المأمون الجامعة

### المستخلص:

يشتهر ناثانيل هوثورن (١٨٠٤-١٨٦٤) باهتمامه بالكتابة عن شخصية المرأة. حيث يروي في العديد من رواياته عن الظروف والقيم والمؤسسات التي تحيط وتسيطر على حياة المرأة وتقودها الى ان تكون ضحية. يسلط البحث الحالي الضوء على قصة "ابنة راباتشيني" (١٨٤٤) وصور هوثورن شخصية بياتريس (بطلة القصة) على انها ضحية لوالدها ولحبيبها اقرب الناس اليها، بالتركيز على مصطلح "ضحية" من خلال التطور الحاصل في شخصية بياتريس. كما ويركز هذا البحث على دراسة شخصية المرأة في المجتمع الذكوري ليبين القسوة التي تعانيها المرأة في مجتمع يعتبرها انسان من الدرجة الثانية لا يمكنها ان تعيش حياة طبيعية، ولا يمكنها حتى ان تنفذ نفسها من الموت. مفاتيح الكلمات: ناثانيل هوثورن، ابنة راباتشيني، بياتريس، ضحية، جيوفاني