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Review Article

Rappaccini's Daughter: An Ecofeminist Approach

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Abstract

Targeting the discourse of domination that rests on the binary opposites of power relations, ecofeminism addresses the destructive patriarchal practices. This movement brings into light the striking analogy that exists between such practices against women and against nature. The discourse is often translated in terms of manipulation, abuse, mistreatment, and subjugation with all the suppression and oppression that these practices entail. Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter" pleads an ecofeminist approach in terms of three aspects. First, it represents the two parties addressed in ecofeminist movements: on one hand there is the patriarchal oppressor embodied in Rappaccini and the two other male figures in the story, and, on the other hand, there is the oppressed, namely Beatrice and the garden. Secondly, it strikes a characteristic affinity between the maltreated female and the abused garden. Thirdly, it delineates the power relations represented as dichotomous binary opposites that each of the afore mentioned parties respectively represents.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, discourse of domination, patriarchy, binary opposites, the other.

INTRODUCTION

Ecofeminism calls attention to the tight bond that holds together woman and nature. It places under spotlight the domination exerted over those two by the patriarchal representatives who, deeming themselves the subjects, reduce them into mere objects of maltreatment. Ecofeminists claim that in patriarchal societies, the female is regarded as an inferior and imperfect creature and, therefore, must be oppressed and controlled in order for the society to attain its utmost and ideal potential (Bressler). This abusive mistreatment, ecofeminists observe, produces a system of power relations translated in terms of binary opposites. Being a mirror of the human condition, literature abounds with works that reflect such subjugation and lend themselves to the ecofeminist approach. One of these works that plead for such reading is Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter". This short story presents the patriarchal discourse of domination and oppression over the female and nature simultaneously; it tightly links woman with nature; and it displays a system of binary opposites that betray the power relations that govern the conduct of the characters.

Analysis

"Rappaccini's Daughter" relates the story of a scientist who is renowned for his extreme devotion to science and who is ready to render every creature an object of experiment in order to feed his insatiable scientific pride. Beatrice, his daughter, together with his garden, is an epitomic delineation of his achievement. Giovanni, a student who comes to Padua to study gets interested in, yet insists to explore the nature of, the daughter. Baglioni, Rappaccini's rival in science, exploits Beatrice as a weapon against Rappaccini. As a victim of the exploitation of all three male figures, Beatrice drinks a potion given to her by Giovanni on Baglioni's behest and dies wishing that she has been loved rather than feared.

Starting with the representatives of the two targeted parties of the ecofeminist approach, the paper now will investigate the delineation of the first group – that of the patriarchal oppressor; and then it will highlight the exploited party that comprises Beatrice and the garden. Dr. Rappaccini is, first of all, a father and a scientist. Nonetheless, the "father" who archetypically is supposed to engulf his children in his warmth of heart, gives in to his scientific obsession and is rendered devoid of all human warmth. Not only is Rappaccini Beatrice's father, but is also presented as the garden's, for the flowers have been "fostered" [1] by his mind. The verb "foster" intimates a parental responsibility of Rappaccini for his garden. Besides, his relationship to the flowers is described in parental terms: his handling the plants and flowers is likened to "the joy and labor of the unfallen parents of the race"

[1]. Rappaccini's being their progenitor is directly stated by Beatrice when she tells Giovanni that it is her father that has "created" them. The flowers are therefore the offspring of his science. In fact, the narrator refers to the doctor as their father: when the doctor reached for them, "he spread out his hand over them, in the attitude of a father imploring a blessing upon his children". Being their father is also emphasized by Michael Hollister who affirms that Rappaccini "is the Creator of the garden, usurping the role of God" [2]. God is a fatherly figure who tends for his creatures. The fact that he is metaphorically the father of the garden is implied by Beatrice's calling one of the plants "my sister". Therefore, Dr. Rappaccini assumes a patriarchal position in the life of both, his daughter and his flowers.

As a "father figure", however, Rappaccini drastically manipulates and abuses both his daughter and the garden for the sake of his scientific aggrandizement. The daughter's and the garden's natural state is deliberately distorted in his process of experimentation and scientific discovery. This distortion is severe, and the product is "no longer of God's making, but the monstrous offspring of man's depraved fancy, glowing with only an evil mockery of beauty . . . a compound possessing the questionable and ominous character" [1]. The plants are so maliciously potent that even their creator cannot approach them. He treats them with detachment and with a negative attitude as if they are the dangerous Other: "there was no approach to intimacy between himself and these vegetable existences. On the contrary, he avoided their actual touch . . . for the man's demeanor was that of one walking among malignant influences, such as savage beasts, or deadly snakes, or evil spirits" [1]. A garden is supposed to be haven for man; yet this garden and its flowers are transformed by Rappaccini into bestially poisonous fatal creatures. Before touching or approaching them, the doctor protected defended "his hands with a pair of thick gloves. Nor were these his only armor . . . [and] placed a kind of mask over his mouth and nostrils" [1]. The term "armor" implies shielding and protection from jeopardy. He has concocted "new varieties of poison, more horribly deleterious than Nature", with which he has "plagued the world" [1]. Though metaphorically their father, his treatment of them is far from how a father approaches his children.

The second patriarchal figure is Giovanni. Despite his attraction to Beatrice and his admiration of the purity of her soul, he yields to his scientific disposition and insists upon testing her essence. In other words, when he senses her poisonous effect, Giovanni does not sympathize or attempt to understand Beatrice's predicament. Michael Hollister affirms that "If he were capable of true love, Giovanni would be placing his faith in Beatrice" [2]. His motivations are deeply rooted in his inclination as a scientist to subject everything to empiricism. Eager to do so, he acquiesces to Baglioni's invitation to administer a potion to Beatrice, thinking that it will clear all the imperfections in her essence. Besides, before offering her the potion, Giovani unleashes a torrent of verbal assaults, cursing her, accusing her of poisoning his nature, and disregarding that she herself is the victim of her father's experiments. While lashing at her and to prove his poisonous nature, he spots a score of insects and blows at them; instantly these insects drop lifeless. His verbal abuse of Beatrice, his attempt at giving her a potion to alter her nature, and his unjustified assail against the natural creatures deem him an abusive patriarchal figure. Shocked by this heartless aggression, Beatrice, now two in one as she speaks for herself and for nature, does not forgive him and is suffocated by this oppression and verbal aggression. Giovanni becomes a representative of what Ruether describes as "a society whose fundamental model of relation-ships continues to be one of domination" [3]. Failing to uphold gender equality and wanting to alter Beatrice's nature, Giovanni assumes the role of the oppressor male and makes of Beatrice and the insects objects of his extremely rational and scientific temperament that neglects the goodness of spirit.

The third male figure is Baglioni, who harbors jealousy and animosity towards Rappaccini. Deciding to avenge his shortcomings when compared to Rappaccini's prominence in the world of science, he chooses to strike him in his weakest point, Beatrice, by abusing nature, Rappaccini's same tool. Addressing the absent Rappaccini, Baglioni declares that he "will thwart Rappaccini yet! . . . Perchance, most learned Rappaccini, I may foil you where you little dream of it!" [1]. He, therefore, seizes the opportunity of Giovanni being interested in Beatrice's nature, concocts a poisonous potion by exploiting nature, and passes it to her via Giovanni, claiming that it will render her nonpoisonous. He hands him the concoction telling him that they "may even succeed in bringing back this miserable child within the limits of ordinary nature, from which her father's madness has estranged her" [1]. Alluding that he will help Giovanni restore Beatrice's nature, Baglioni succeeds in securing his revenge. Victimizing Beatrice for the sake of revenge and exploiting nature as a tool by distilling poison out of it, Baglioni acquires the status of the exploitative patriarch.

Those three characters represent the first group – the patriarchal mindset and the male oppressor – that exploits women and nature and maltreats them. Their attempts to change and/or exploit the nature of Beatrice and the garden imply that the male is not satisfied with their original nature, deeming them wanting and themselves superior and, therefore, entitled to considering them objects of experiment and tools for revenge.

This oppressing group is juxtaposed in the story with the oppressed Other, comprising Beatrice and the garden. Both Beatrice and the garden are subjected to abuse in order to satisfy the males' targets. Rappaccini is obsessed with scientific progression; Baglioni is concerned with avenging his scientific defeat on the hand of the rival scientist Rappaccini; and Giovani aims at attaining certainty of and altering Beatrice's poisonous essence disregarding the purity of her soul.

Beatrice and the garden exemplify the patriarchal maltreatment of the Other. First, Dr. Rappaccini turns their nature into a poisonous one. Doing so, Rappaccini has erected a giant wall around the two creatures and has isolated them from all humanity. Beatrice declares that her father has "estranged me from all society of my kind" [1]. The narrator states that Beatrice's life experience has been limited to her life in the garden, as, being poisonous herself, she is incapable of approaching people. This confinement has strengthened the bond between the girl and the garden.

Their being both regarded as the inferior "Other" is mostly manifested in the striking affinity between the girl and the flowers – an affinity best evident in the narrator's referring to them as two sisters. They both have the same poisonous nature; they are both the product of one creator – Rappaccini. Rappaccini addresses his daughter as "daughter of my pride and triumph" [1]; and they are treated as objects of scientific experiment. The narrator states that "flower and maiden were different and yet the same, and fraught with some strange peril in either shape" [1], emphasizing the existence of a certain "analogy" between them. Their affinity is so strong that Beatrice treats the flowers as family: "approaching the shrub, she [Beatrice] threw open her arms, as with a passionate ardor, and drew its branches into an intimate embrace; so intimate" [1]. The flowers cannot be nourished but by the poisonous daughter as she is the only one that can approach and attend to them. Similarly, Beatrice cannot live without the flowers as they are her only source of the poisonous "breath of life". She seeks the warmth of nature after being a victim of the cold nature of man. She addresses the flowers, entreating them to "give me thy breath, my sister . . . for I am faint with common air!". She also informs Giovanni that she has "grown up among these flowers" [1], intimating that they are her siblings. Her identification with the flowers is also noticed by Giovanni, who, inspecting the flower, detected a fragrance "which [he]recognized as identical with that which he had attributed to Beatrice's breath [1] Besides, Giovanni, watching Beatrice among the flowers, "doubted whether it were a girl tending her favorite flower, or one sister performing the duties of affection to another"[[1]. Additionally, Beatrice affirms this strong bond when she tells Giovanni that she and the garden are "the offspring of his science . . . I, dearest Giovanni--I grew up and blossomed with the plant, and was nourished with its breath. It was my sister, and I loved it with a human affection". Another example of identification between Beatrice and the flowers is the narrator's description of Beatrice "as if here were another flower, the human sister of those vegetable ones" [1]. Beatrice repeatedly the shrub as her sister that the reader cannot miss their affinity: "Yes, my sister, my splendor, it shall be Beatrice's task to nurse and serve thee; and thou shalt reward her with thy kisses and perfume breath" [1]. Being two sisters and exploited by the patriarchs, Beatrice and the garden are rendered the inferior Other. Not only is their affinity emphasized, but also the garden is endowed with a humanistic aspect, as though it is no longer a garden but a certain human being with all the human attributes and feelings: "The strange plants were basking in the sunshine, and now and then nodding gently to one another, as if in acknowledgment of sympathy and kindred" [1]. Just as Beatrice is confined and isolated, so is the garden "a solitude"; and just as the garden's essence was distorted by Rappaccini, so was his daughter "the victim of his insane zeal for science" [1]. The affinity between Beatrice and the garden is manifestation of the ecofeminist belief that is explained by Ensslin, who argues that ecofeminism "essentially parallels natural disorder and destruction with the yielding female" [4]. Both their natures destructively abused, Beatrice and the garden are an illustration of the parallel that Ensslin observes in the ecofeminist approach when he explains that "the degenerating female is paralleled with decomposing nature and the dead elements" [4]. Beatrice's and the garden's degeneration can be seen in the description of the narrator of Beatrice, who, not unlike the garden, is "to be touched only with a glove, nor to be approached without a mask".

Besides Beatrice's and the garden's affinity that brings them together as the "Other", the binary dichotomies also establish the association of one group – the representatives of the oppressive patriarch – with coldness, indifference, detachment, malignancy, and the Other – the oppressed female and nature – with warmth, purity innocence, and benignancy. In other words, the first party is linked with the mind, the other with the heart. Hobgood-Oster [4] argues that ecofeminists detect a firm link between all kinds of oppression and domination – particularly the oppression of nature and women on the hands of the dominating and tyrannizing patriarchy. Patriarchal representatives justify their practices by dual hierarchies or binary opposites or dichotomous constructs [5].

Rappaccini, the "scientific gardener", has "a look as deep as Nature itself, but without Nature's warmth of love" [1]; he is portrayed as "true as a man of science as ever distilled his own heart in an alembic". The term "distilled" implies the diminishing, if not the evaporation, of the heart. He is, thus, divested of the

warmth of heart. He is a "vile empiric". His scientific bent is emphasized throughout the whole story and his "scientific mind" has a full command on his actions. Dr. Rappaccini's face is described as "singularly marked with intellect and cultivation, but which could never, even in his more youthful days, have expressed much warmth of heart" – a description that underscores Rappaccini's mind fully assuming control over his humane side. This scientific lack of human warmth is emphasized and recurs more than once: "His patients are interesting to him only as subjects for some new experiment. He 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" [1]. He does not mind, therefore, whatever befalls the others as a result of his scientific experiments. His aspect is "cold and purely intellectual" [1]; and he is a "scientific gardener" and a "sickly and thought-worn Doctor" [1]. This emphasis on his scientific inclination indicates that the doctor's humane side is overcome by his cold mind, rendering him incapable of showing any warmth or regard to the others.

Unlike Rappaccini, Beatrice is associated with the heart as her words "are true from the heart outward". The first felt reaction when she meets Giovanni is in her heart, as the reader sees her "press her hand to her bosom, as if her heart". Besides, Beatrice's "mirthful expression [that is] half childish and half woman-like" establishes her innocence and benign nature. Her benignant nature is implied in her effect on Giovanni, who "seemed to gaze through the beautiful girl's eyes into her transparent soul, and felt no more doubt or fear". As a result he feels "imbued with a tender warmth of girlish womanhood. . . her nature was endowed with all gentle and feminine qualities . . . she was capable, surely, on her part, of the height and heroism of love" [1]. Through his eyes, Beatrice is seen as a "natural, most affectionate and guileless creature". This emphasizes her association with the heart. Giovanni, however, is associated with the mind, being inclined to follow the senses and not intuition. Michael Hollister (2014) affirms that "the two lovers exemplify conventional Victorian gender types embodying head and heart" [2]. Similarly, the garden is a source of warmth, for it is Beatrice's haven from the coldness of humanity. Hollister [2] states that "Giovanni has already become so dissociated from his heart and intuition by empiricism he cannot trust Beatrice the angel" [2]. This pits the two on opposite poles that are impossible to reconcile. The head, manifested in science, becomes a victor over the warmth of the heart incarnated by Beatrice and nature.

Besides coldness and warmth, there is another pair of binary opposites – darkness/blackness and light/whiteness. Beatrice and the garden are both strikingly luminous. The shrubs "illuminated the whole garden"; and Beatrice "illuminated the more shadowy intervals of the garden path", and her aspect "glowed". On the other hand, the male figures are associated with darkness. "Giovanni frowned so darkly upon her that Beatrice paused and trembled"; and his "rage broke forth from his sullen gloom like a lightning-flash out of a dark cloud". Rappaccini is shrouded in black: he is "dressed in a scholar's garb of black"; and Beatrice is purely white: Giovanni's doubts defiled "the pure whiteness of Beatrice's image". In addition to all this, Giovanni's residence is referred to as an inferno, while the garden as "Eden", and Beatrice as an "angel" [1]. Nonetheless, the warm and luminous "creatures" are undermined by the prominent dichotomy of poisonous/non-poisonous, and the soft, warm, and tender creatures are rendered lethal.

Most importantly is the creator/creature binary opposition, which raises man, being a creator, to the level of perfection, while dragging nature and the girl into the inferior level of imperfection. First, the author refers to both Beatrice and the flowers as creatures. Second, Beatrice's poisonous nature is Rappaccini's work: "her earthly part been wrought upon by Rappaccini's"; and, third, the flowers are "created" by him. Rappaccini is, therefore, deemed their creator, fulfilling the binary opposition of creator/creature.

Another significant binary is the savior male and the rescued helpless female. Beatrice's innocence and benign inner nature drives her to perceive Giovanni as a savior and a faithful lover. Meeting Giovanni, she turned happy as though she "a pure delight from her communion with the youth, not unlike what the maiden of a lonely island might have felt, conversing with a voyager from the civilized world". Giovanni is, accordingly, elevated to the position of the savior figure, while Beatrice is deemed the helpless will-less damsel.

CONCLUSION

To wrap it up, Beatrice, as a result of the male figures' victimization drops dead: "the poor victim of man's ingenuity and of thwarted nature . . . perished there, at the feet of her father and Giovanni" [1]. This description is telling: not only is Beatrice destroyed, but so is nature "thwarted". Rappaccini has transformed them into poisonous creatures, destroying their life by the process. Therefore, this short story invites an ecofeminist approach through its representation of the two parties that stand for the oppressor and the oppressed; through the acute identification that is drawn between Beatrice and the garden; and through the dichotomous binaries that pit each party on an opposite pole.

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