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Hawthorne's Beautiful Women and Hideous Men: Ecofeminism in "The Birthmark" and "Rappaccini's Daughter"

Nature and women are in many of Hawthorne's works, but readers often do not pair the two together. Throughout history, and especially in literature, nature and women are compared to one another, as men and society are coupled. Nature and women both have their own separate criticisms within the literary realm. They have just recently been united as a single criticism called ecofeminism. In "The Birthmark" and "Rappaccini's Daughter" Hawthorne addresses ecofeminine ideas through the destruction of his female characters, Georgiana and Beatrice. The stories focus on the way men use science to overpower the women and their natural aspects in order to control them. The stories also show how the characters within portray the women with specific natural imagery.

Since ecofeminism is a new criticism, it is important to discuss the key ideas that ecofeminism represents. Jessica Schmonsky defines ecofeminism as, the connections women and nature have and their union to overcome the domination of men and societal issues to bring about change. Many scholars have focused on ecocriticism or feminism within literature, but few have identified the importance of combining their concepts to explore the same literature in a different light. It is important to note that nature and women in this criticism are two separate entities that are equal in importance and power, but it is their joining that creates this new way of examining literature. Ecofeminism focuses on two major ideas; one being the connections between humans and nature, the other being the connections between oppression, social dominance, and feminism

and nature (Schmonskey 13). Hawthorne incorporates these ideas through “The Birthmark” and “Rappaccini’s Daughter” by creating a man versus woman and a society versus nature dynamic. He examines how each interacts with the other and how this can affect the future or certain outcomes in the characters’ lives. Ecofeminism has many different aspects that it focuses on, it looks at nature and women’s relationship based on spirituality, ethics, female anatomy and reproduction, and science (Caro 78). Georgiana and Beatrice both represent and interact with these different positions within ecofeminism throughout each of their respective short stories.

First, it is important to examine the way in which the characters of “The Birthmark” and “Rappaccini’s Daughter” describe the females and how they create standards in order to control them and separate them from nature. Turner states in her thesis, “The actions of other characters are, in fact, direct reactions of what they ‘see’ inscribed in and on the bodies of Georgiana and Beatrice- the mark of the female- a mark that goes beyond physical difference,” to claim that Hawthorne is writing about the way society forces gender roles on women (Turner 23). The other characters in these two particular stories all happen to be men which is not a coincidence. Hawthorne wants the reader to be aware that the society is dominated by men and that any female who tries to break the mold of what is defined as appropriate will be corrected, even if it means the women are destroyed in the process. “Men often view women as objects- quiet, subservient, and dutiful- and see them in economic terms (Hallgren 18).” In the same way, the men in both short stories view these women as mere objects; a thing to be admired and obedient, and never to step out of the bounds of the “angel of the household” image. Beatrice and Georgiana, of course do not fit into the definition of such a woman in any way.

Throughout each story the women are often compared to some form of nature. Aylmer, from the beginning of “The Birthmark”, comments on Georgiana’s beauty and how she is

basically an image created by nature itself (Hawthorne 188). Aylmer is obsessed with the way his new wife looks, specifically focusing all his time to ridding his wife of her natural mark, her birthmark which rests upon her cheek. A few lines down after Aylmer talks about her natural beauty, Hawthorne describes Georgiana's birthmark and "a healthy though delicate bloom (Hawthorne 188)". These descriptions are just the introduction to the numerous times Georgiana is compared to nature and how the repetition parallel's to Aylmer's growing hatred for her blemish. This parallel's to ecofeminism in that women and nature are similar beings. It is this connection that women and nature have that men try to eliminate with science or societal values to rid them of any power nature and women have together (Schmonskey 14). Georgiana is a woman that fulfills the definition of nature's femininity and that is something he cannot have, or she may gain an independency that Aylmer does not wish her to obtain.

Similarly, it is this beauty and power that science has not given to Georgiana that Aylmer despises because it does not fit within the standards society has created. Georgiana's birthmark is later described as roses and it is Aylmer's intense staring at her that frightens her so much it makes the color of her cheek disappear. Aylmer's disgust with his wife parallels to the idea that the patriarchal culture does not want women to step out of the role it has created, and it will do everything in its power to repress women's individuality (Hallénback 17). It is this idea that ecofeminism tries to fight against so that women and nature can be accepted for their beauty and unique abilities.

Hawthorne's Beatrice in "Rappaccini's Daughter" has a very similar story to Georgiana's. The theme of beauty is prominent throughout it as well. Beatrice is described with natural imagery by the narrator and the male characters. She even lives in a garden, to show that her connection with nature is a strong one. When the narrator first introduces Beatrice, she is

described as plant like. Giovanni says it's as though she were sisters with the other plants in the garden (Hawthorne 39). The scene before this we see Beatrice's father caring for the plants so we know that it is his garden and the description of Beatrice alludes to the fact that Beatrice is just another experiment of her father's. Beatrice being without blemish except for her poison, and her being forced to remain in the garden reflects that of a standard being forced on her to live in the ways of patriarchal society (Turner 45). This strengthens the argument that Hawthorne is examining the way women are forced to look and act a certain way by the men in their life. Just like Georgiana, Beatrice's connection to nature is seen by every man as a singular being instead of two. Their fascination with the appearances of women also plays on the aspect of control and the need to overpower the women so they do not want to do participate in normal gender stereotypical roles. Later, the narrator says that women and nature are different, but similar and that it was confusing for the character Giovanni (Hawthorne 39). This is a direct idea of ecofeminism of women and nature being two separate things with common issues that they can relate to one another. Hawthorne is arguing that women are more than just a singular being they have more unique qualities that should not be repressed by patriarchal society.

Hawthorne focuses on another key element for ecofeminism in his discussion of science versus nature within both of these texts. Aylmer and Rappaccini are both prolific scientists that are heavily concerned with the manipulation of nature. Ecofeminism examines the way in which men in societies are obsessed with the eradication of nature in order to enlighten women of who has the ultimate power. Likewise, Aylmer and Rappaccini use their knowledge of science to show the women in their lives who holds the power in their respective relationships. The one thing to focus on in these stories though is the failures of each man's experiments and how they disguise their failures by making them out to seem as grand successes.

Aylmer wants Georgiana to understand he is trying to make her into the best possible version of herself for him. He only allows Georgiana to look at things within his lab that he can make out to be wonderful creations of science and the mind of man. However, the reader can tell that Georgiana is well aware that Aylmer is not as successful and he claims to be. The reader can tell that Aylmer wants nothing to do with nature by the description of his lab as well. He blocks out the sun and the smells of the room are only that of chemicals (Hawthorne 192). This is where he begins to convince Georgiana that getting rid of the mark upon her face will be just as simple and the outcome will be magical. Aylmer makes Georgiana look upon a plant that he has manipulated to put off a sweet smell knowing that the effects will not last. She refuses but Aylmer insists and as she does “suffered a blight, its leaves turning coal-black as if by the agency of fire (Hawthorne 193).” Here Aylmer is showing what he thinks to be some great experiment because he does not worry about the effects his scientific power has on nature. Georgiana knows that nature is not something to be messed with because the outcome can be detrimental. Ecofeminism focuses on the way that science should be used to aid in the prolonging of natural things and not the elimination of it from society. Hawthorne here in this story is expressing why the superficial power of science as greater than nature can be deadly to not only nature, but women as well.

Rappaccini, the father of Beatrice, like Aylmer is more interested in science than in the well-being of the woman in his life. Rappaccini has modified his daughter in the same way he has altered the plants in his garden. Early on we see the intentions of Rappaccini to destroy nature’s effect on Beatrice. She is the only person in the garden who can be close to the plants, but it is of her father’s want (Hawthorne 38-9). They all have a poisonous perfume about them that is toxic to everyone but themselves. Rappaccini wants to create a “super-race through

Beatrice” to prove that he is a great scientist (Turner 26). This is the way that Rappaccini tries to prove that he has more power than nature with his scientific studies. Nature is not able to create a “perfect woman” only science is through the power of man. Ecofeminism argues that science should not try and overpower nature, but rather work with it. If science tries to destroy nature it will only bring about negative effects. Even as Beatrice is dying Rappaccini does not care for his daughter’s passing he is angry with the way she speaks. He does not understand why Beatrice is not grateful to him for giving her power and a man to love who can live with her poisonous state (Hawthorne 58-9). This shows that Rappaccini is only worried about carrying out a great science experiment and not with the life of his daughter. He has created a monstrous being that has totally derived from nature (Turner 45). He thinks that his experiment has been successful, and not once does he show a sign of grief or remorse for poisoning her because he knows he can do the same thing with another woman. This is how Hawthorne portrays the ecofeminism ideals of men using science to manipulate nature and women so they lose their power.

Finally, one must look at the way the women give in to the desires of their male peers in order to have a place within patriarchal society. Both Beatrice and Georgianna choose to turn their backs on their individuality and nature to appease their admirers. It is this decision that Hawthorne focuses on with most importance in the short stories. He wants the audience to realize that patriarchal culture is the reason why the women die at the end (Hallenback 18). This is how he reflects the ideals of ecofeminism. When the women release their power to the men, they are strengthening the patriarchal society that is figuratively and literally killing every part of what makes them feminine. Beatrice and Georgiana turn their back on nature and in turn lose their lives. It is crucial to observe, as a reader, just how severe this decision is for these characters because they know they are choosing death.

Georgiana realizes that the only thing in the way of her husband's happiness and her identity is her birthmark. She is no longer concerned about her individuality like in the beginning of the story. Georgiana has a desire to fit in to the world her husband lives in even if it means she must die. This is where Hawthorne begins to show what issues can come when women are given standards that they cannot possibly meet and the problem with men trying to rid women of their power. Aylmer's different science experiments, where he tries to manipulate nature, are described as nothing but mere failures, with an outcome that is successful in a different way than was originally planned. He is obsessed with studying the human body and how nature works to create such beings (Hawthorne 191). As Aylmer begins to show Georgiana what magic science can do to alter nature one can see she begins to worry. She even tells him that "It is terrible to possess such power, or even dream of possessing it," to warn Aylmer that his need to dominate nature will only bring about destruction (Hawthorne 194). This is representative of the ways in which ecofeminism tries to protect women and nature from the detriments of patriarchal society. Ecofeminism aims to examine the ways in which male and societal domination can alter the existence and thinking of not only the present, but the future and how this can be changed. Georgiana chooses to conform, and this enlightens others that this is not the way society should treat women or nature, as beings to be destroyed.

Beatrice is also destroyed by the societal roles forced upon her by Giovanni and her father. She never once uses her "power" for evil, but the men only believe she has or should. Beatrice's fate is the exact same as Georgiana because she wants to fit in to the patriarchal society in the only way she knows how. Beatrice drinks the poison that Giovanni gives her, because she knows it is either removing the poisonous effects from her body or death to live in a world with Giovanni (Hawthorne 58). The men in the story have forced Beatrice to completely

turn her back to the natural world she has been surrounded by and that destroys the person nature created. Ecofeminism argues that it is societies fault for forcing unrealistic stereotypes that ruin the uniqueness of women and nature. Their ideas cannot flourish unless men alter the way they respond and treat both beings. Beatrice “falls victim” to the issue of submitting to culture’s standards or die (Turner 25). Unfortunately, Beatrice goes to any length possible just to be accepted that she loses her life just as Georgiana does.

Hawthorne’s language and description about the women reflect that of a person who respect women and identifies their uniqueness and connection with nature. These stories aim to inform society that the treatment of women and nature as objects and something to be molded is the wrong thing to do. Hawthorne expresses ideas of ecofeminism in the way he describes the women’s physical features in relation to nature, explores the suppression of each by men, and addresses the horrible effects of continuing to treat them the same way. Men must be willing to change the way they view women and nature and try to understand their importance is equal to that of society. Ecofeminism is important in this way because it allows scholars to compare the issues women and nature face within patriarchal society. It opens new discussion to older concepts through a unique lens and brings new power through the connection of both criticisms. The uniqueness of women and nature should never be covered up, but rather allowed to flourish in their own way or the results could be detrimental.



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