

## The Ethics of Rappaccini

By Jacob Roshanmanesh

*Rappaccini's Daughter* is a short story of moral conflict. Rappaccini's actions are neither cold-blooded nor self-centered. His actions are typical of a very protective and loving father. Rappaccini's decisions provide insight into an ethical belief. His beliefs are very utilitarian in character; he sacrifices himself for the good of others. His actions are ethical and ultimately selfless. Rappaccini is not the antagonist of the plot, but rather the noble protagonist who sacrifices his life for his daughter's future.

Throughout the plot, several characters try to portray Dr. Rappaccini's actions as cruel or inhumane. He is a very intelligent scientist who is engaged in a series of experiments. These experiments, one of which is his daughter, are often propagated as unconventional. Professor Baglioni continuously maintains the position that Dr. Rappaccini is an evil man: "(He) is said even to have produced new varieties of poison, more horribly deleterious than Nature, without the assistance of this learned person, would ever have plagued the world withal" (p. 6). He goes on to slander him and his work by saying "but to tell you my private mind, Signor Giovanni . . . (Rappaccini) should be held strictly accountable for his failures, which may justly be considered his own work" (p. 6). He is merely jealous of Rappaccini's successes and seeks to destroy him. He wishes to see Rappaccini ostracized from the community. If anyone is cruel or inhumane, it is Professor Baglioni. Rappaccini's decisions are not deserving of his treatment. Professor Baglioni concerns himself with Giovanni's interest in Beatrice, Rappaccini's daughter, resulting in her death. Rappaccini unintentionally poisoned his daughter. The poison did not kill her, however. It was the antidote that Professor Baglioni gave to her that resulted in her tragic death. Hawthorne

however, leads the reader to the conclusion that Rappaccini is to blame for Beatrice's unhappiness and death by only presenting Baglioni's side of the story. The reader mustn't side with Professor Baglioni by viewing Rappaccini as a madman who has been consumed with scientific research. This interpretation is erroneous and causes the reader to fall into Hawthorne's trap. By siding with Professor Baglioni, the reader acquires Hawthorne's hatred for Rappaccini and his actions. Dr. Rappaccini does not fall into the stereotypical category of mad scientist that Professor Baglioni would like to see him placed into.

Dr. Rappaccini's actions must be interpreted to be selfless and altruistic. He did not sacrifice his daughter's normalcy for a scientific experiment. He is undoubtedly responsible for his daughter's condition, yet he did not alter her as a person to make a name for himself in the scientific community. Dr. Rappaccini sacrificed his time and lent his wealth of knowledge to the task of making Beatrice phenotypically superior to other girls and men her age. Rappaccini did not intend to harm his daughter. His decisions were more than acceptable; they were extraordinary.

Dr. Rappaccini's thought process is one of a utilitarian. He acts in favor of the greatest number of people. His experiments may affect his daughter and her boyfriend; however, his experiments can produce cures that could save thousands. Dr. Rappaccini is not willing to sacrifice his closest friend in life, his daughter, to better society. However, he may bring about many new discoveries with her cooperation. He is a selfless, noble man who is an enormous contributor to the welfare of society. Rappaccini might have selfish intentions, which may include the desire for fame and fortune. Neither of these possibilities find any support in the text. Because the narration is given in a third-person point of view, the reader can never know what is

going on in Rappaccini's head, but by solely looking at his actions, his ideas and principles are easily uncovered.

As the story comes to a close, the reader realizes that it is highly probable that Rappaccini contaminated his daughter intentionally to make her stronger and more fit to survive in the world. He thought that he was making the right decisions for Beatrice, but she indicates that she feels otherwise. The reader must not forget that Rappaccini is her father, who is responsible for her decision-making until she is old enough and strong enough to go out into the world on her own.

Dr. Rappaccini is responsible for his daughter's mutation, regardless of the ethical principles that he holds dear. Professor Baglioni also has a negative impact on Beatrice's life; by giving Giovanni the antidote he indirectly provides the means by which Beatrice unintentionally kills herself. As she grows, she seeks to enter adulthood and make all of her decisions for herself. In this coming of age, she seeks to change the past with Professor Baglioni and Giovanni's help. Making what appears to be her first important decision, she kills herself. Professor Baglioni's actions do more harm than good, yet he achieves his goal; he ruins Dr. Rappaccini. This is not inconceivable because he and the other professors at the university have a reason to dislike Dr. Rappaccini as he "ruins" their "reputations" by giving science a "bad" name.

This short story tries to convey to the reader the loss of compassion that seems to accompany scientific inquiry. Rappaccini sees the world through scientific eyes. His tunnel vision is a major factor that contributes to the conflict of the story. If Rappaccini could see the big picture, he would realize his mistakes and attempt to fix them. Instead of trying to help him fit in with society, the other professors turn their backs on him and try to destroy him. Beatrice eventually confronts Rappaccini by asking, "My father, wherefore didst thou inflict this

miserable doom upon thy child?" (p. 21). Rappaccini, acting out his role as a scientist who is dealing with a problematic result of a successful experiment, proclaims "Miserable! What mean you foolish girl? Dost thou deem it misery to be endowed with marvelous 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 though art beautiful?" (p. 21). His daughter has confronted him directly, yet he continues to see what he has done through a purely scientific point of view. In his quest for scientific knowledge and perfection, he has lost the one thing that should matter to him above all: his daughter.

In Rappaccini's eyes, his daughter is too weak to make decisions for herself. He questions her ability to come to intelligible conclusions by asking, "Wouldst thou, then, have preferred the condition of a weak woman, exposed to all evil and capable of none?" (p. 21). This could very well be a reasonable explanation for his actions. Beatrice would have had little say in this society, particularly against her father and the decisions he would make for her. This part of the text may also explain why Rappaccini did what he did to her. Perhaps by contaminating her and making her poisonous, he thought that he had made her more powerful and stronger than the average woman of the time. Perhaps he felt that he had to utilize all of the knowledge that he had gained to give his daughter a better life, in his opinion, than perhaps her mother had.

Had she followed the path her father had made for her, she could have lived happily ever after. Rappaccini had made his daughter poisonous, yes, but in the process he had also made her stronger, more powerful and coercive, and had found her a mate who truly loved her for what she was, as he knew the true extent of her condition. Perhaps Rappaccini knew what he was doing and was giving his daughter the best life that he could. Regardless, he was wrong in assuming that the life that he had chosen for her was the one that she would want to live. At the end of the

story, she takes the antidote and falls to the ground dead; the antidote was death to her just as the poison was life.

Dr. Rappaccini should only be viewed as a loving father; the reader should not fall into Hawthorne's trap by judging his actions. Without knowledge of his intentions it is inconceivable to try to judge his actions. Throughout the plot there does not exist a single instance in which it is evident that he is an evil man or a horrible father. The reader should think twice before judging a book by its cover.