Gardens and Edens: Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Rappaccini’s Daughter” and Bernard Malamud’s “The Lady of the Lake”

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In a 1974 interview, Bernard Malamud observed, “I’ve been ‘influenced’ by Hawthorne. . .” (Leviant 49), later adding, “I believe that the link with Hawthorne exists. . .” (Leviant 52). Indeed, as a result of his use of a dark, often somber morality and leanings toward allegory, he has been referred to as the “Jewish Hawthorne” (Shechner 69). In this essay I will explore the parameters of this link in two stories, both of which use garden settings to illustrate their concern with the complexities of morality, here enmeshed in biblical and mythological contexts. The tales contain Adam and Eve motifs, Edenic parallels, themes of the Fall and redemption and, in “The Lady of the Lake” (1958), issues involving Jewish identity and the Holocaust. Both authors are passionate about morality and whether Eden is achievable in their respective mid-nineteenth-and twentieth-century worlds. The conclusions they reach are surprisingly similar given their different periods and backgrounds.

The garden in each tale is isolated from the real world and humanity. Both provide implications for the heroes’ perceptions of the heroines, with the beauty of the poisonous plants in Rappaccini’s garden—in particular a shrub “that bore a profusion of
purple blossoms, each of which had the luster and richness of a gem. . ." (Hawthorne, *Stories* 258) luring Giovanni—while Isola del Dongo is “lush, wilder, exotic birds flying around” (Malamud 108) and has “luxuriant vegetation . . . daring, voluptuous. . ., all bathed in intoxicating floral fragrance” (110–11). Isola del Dongo rises in terraces, supporting Levin/Freeman’s desire to rise, as earlier he fears “sinking to the bottom, striving fruitlessly to reach the top” (109) of the lake. His first meeting with Isabella is on the top terrace. The gardens slow the male protagonists’ progress toward their desired women, as Giovanni must approach Beatrice “forcing himself through the entanglement of a shrub that wreathed its tendrils over the hidden entrance. . .” (266), and Levin/Freeman finds Isabella “after wandering through profusions of flowers . . .” (120). Both gardens have marble fountains at their centers, gushing life-giving water, yet neither proves life-giving to the male protagonists.

Each garden is Edenic in its appeal and serves as a testing place controlled by a morally dubious ruler: Dr. Rappaccini raises his daughter in accordance with a scientific experiment, and in “The Lady of the Lake” the del Dongo family has a “perfidious history and was known for its deceit and trickery” (117). Both authors deliver their male protagonists into worlds for which they are ill-prepared emotionally and intellectually, bringing to bear the weight of religion and history. The female protagonists have been exploited by individuals and social forces, and have developed greater sensitivity to human needs.

In “Rappaccini’s Daughter” (1844), Giovanni Guasconti arrives in the northern city of Padua from Naples, and it is through his viewpoint that we initially see the garden and its people. He is displaced, has little money, and his choice of lodging is typical of Hawthorne’s foreshadowing of moral issues. As with the del Dongo family, the former occupants of Giovanni’s dwelling are morally questionable, a noble family, one of whose members had been “pictured by Dante as a partaker of the
immortal agonies of his inferno” (257). In “The Lady of the Lake,” Isabella gives Levin/Freeman a tour of the palazzo, showing him the del Dongo tapestries, and hurrying past one on which a “tiger killed the unicorn,” shades of her experience as a Jew with the Nazis. There is also an entire room devoted to “tapestrines of somber scenes from the Inferno” (123). Both families’ associations with Dante’s nether world overlay the settings with a gloom that foreshadows the outcome of each tale.

“Guasconti had not a deep heart. . .” (263) and does not grasp Beatrice Rappaccini’s complexity, which combines beauty and poisonousness, which he sees as good and evil inextricably intertwined. He wonders “whether there were those dreadful peculiarities in her physical nature which could not be supposed to exist without some corresponding monstrosity of soul” (272). Despite his familiarity with Dante and his great work, he does not consider that “Beatrice is Dante’s ideal woman who leads him through the gates of paradise. It is Giovanni who links her with the Inferno rather than with Paradiso. . .” (Fryer 41). Her soul, however, is morally unpolluted and resists the poison, her nature remaining pure. This could be perceived by a more sensitive individual, but as Hyatt H. Waggoner observes, “Giovanni’s ‘mistake’ was like that of young Goodman Brown: he had not the wit to see her as other than simply good or simply bad” (109).

Giovanni does not understand the complexity of evil even when he discovers that he has been tainted and his breath is poisonous. He would then have to admit that evil lurked in his heart. Hawthorne implies that this relationship may exist, stating that “Again Giovanni sent forth a breath, deeper, longer, and imbued with a venomous feeling out of his heart: he knew not whether he were wicked or only desperate” (272). Unlike Beatrice’s “heart,” the implication is that Giovanni’s was already tainted with evil, the poison being merely an outer manifestation of it. Indeed, at the close of the tale, the dying Beatrice asks
him: "Oh, was there not, from the first, more poison in thy nature than in mine?" (275); unlike the biblical story, here an Eve blames an Adam for the Fall, and it is Giovanni who has tempted Beatrice with the deadly antidote. Thus, Hawthorne implies the intricacy involved in understanding the nature of evil in oneself and others. There is even the implication that the poison in the garden has made Beatrice and Giovanni more beautiful, illustrating further evil's ambiguity.

This use of ambiguity, a central device for Hawthorne, derives from his attitude toward the human condition, where

his imagination was stimulated by the Calvinist dogma that man sins necessarily and yet bears full responsibility for his sin. . . . With this Puritanism which Hawthorne could neither accept nor disavow, it is no wonder that he summoned up the most frightening dilemmas of human existence and then apparently withdrew into a rather conventional moral statement or an evasion, for he was unwilling to push his tragic vision of man's moral nature to its logical conclusion. . . .

(Donohue 1-2)

Giovanni, Rappaccini, and Baglioni each treat Beatrice with a moral carelessness that relates not merely to their human limitations, their desire for self aggrandizement, but also in their denial of Beatrice's humanity to evil. Rappaccini and Baglioni have committed Hawthorne's unpardonable sin, as elucidated in "Ethan Brand," of valuing the intellect over the heart. Only Beatrice acts purely, and that may show her as different from the human norm, certainly an "evasion": "The poison in Beatrice is unable to touch her spirit, but Giovanni is wholly destroyed. . . . But he is ordinary and breaks beneath an extraordinary ordeal; Beatrice is exceptional" (Fogle 98). While Giovanni's soul seems stained, Hawthorne may be commenting on the nature of the world: Beatrice's isolation has permitted her to retain her innocence, whereas Giovanni arrives in the garden with a stain "from the more southern region" (257), even more indelible than that imbued by Dr. Rappaccini's plants.
While still writing the tale, Hawthorne himself was not entirely sure of Beatrice's nature. Julian Hawthorne points out that the author read the still unfinished tale to his wife, who asked "But how is it to end? . . . [I]s Beatrice to be a demon or an angel? 'I have no idea!' was Hawthorne's reply, spoken with some emotion" (Evans 462). Eventually, Hawthorne opted for Christian dualism: purity of soul but physical contamination.

Like Giovanni, Henry Levin in "The Lady of the Lake" is also displaced, having left New York to travel in northern Italy, looking for romance and a new future. Henry James's unsophisticated American travelers come to mind, but, because he is Jewish, Henry Levin, who changes his name to Freeman, cannot achieve the innocence of a Christopher Newman, as there exist for him more deep-rooted moral and historical obligations. His wish to expunge his Jewish identity shows a lack of that nobility of character that Newman is able to exercise in his relations with the Bellegardes, an American new man compared to the corrupt European aristocracy. Levin/Freeman's attempts to exercise new world freedoms in Europe become duplicitous—untrue to himself and the memory of the Holocaust.

He would like to become an American Adam, starting afresh in the New World where humanity had been granted a second chance after its failures in Europe.

[T]he hero of the new adventure: an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling. . . . Adam was the first, the archetypal, man. His moral position was prior to experience, and in his very newness he was fundamentally innocent. (Lewis 5)

In the Old World Levin/Freeman cannot achieve this emancipation from his identity, despite his thinking that "a man's past was, it could safely be said, expendable" (126). His attempt at freedom with Isabella illustrates that ancestry, family, and race cannot be erased, and he cannot stand alone and retain his morality. He is not an Adam; he has a past.
Of course, numerous Jews fled Europe for America, and Levin/Freeman’s return to Europe is “an ironic reversal, somewhat comic and unreal, of their escape from the dark oppression of European history” (Goldman 158). Staying in Stresa, he must battle in a rowboat a threatening lake that seems to resist his presence, in order to explore Isola del Dongo where he meets a woman “whose dark, sharp Italian face had that quality of beauty which holds the mark of history, the beauty of people and civilization” (113). Ironically he never associates these attributes with the Jewish roots he wishes to discard. When she asks him, “Si e perduto?” [“Are you lost?”] (113) or if he is Jewish, he does not grasp that an admission of both is essential if he is to be made whole, redeemed. His denial of both tells of his lack of self-knowledge. A character’s forswearing his identity or past is a sign of moral lassitude for which he pays heavily, as Malamud believes, ironically, that “to be truly free is to be imprisoned in obligation and accountability” (Alter 173). Levin/Freeman, a Malamudian anti-hero, wishes to escape from these burdens.

The gracious woman identifies herself as Isabella del Dongo, an “exotic Jewess . . . obviously out of Shakespeare by way of Scott” (Siegel 131). The complexity involves duplicity by both characters, as Isabella lies about who she is, her name actually being della Seta, a caretaker not a countess. She tells Levin/Freeman what “I thought you wanted to hear” (129), desiring to find out more about him and thinking that he would not be interested in her if he knew her lowly position. However, she retains her honor, desiring to remain true to her Jewish heritage. Malamud does not share Hawthorne’s belief in innate sinfulness, and Isabella is judged solely on her responses to experience. As with Beatrice, her soul is pure; however her purity is a result of her immersion in the brutality of worldly existence—Buchenwald. This has strengthened her morally, and she “accepts her Jewishness despite—indeed, because of—her own suffering” (Abramson 132), which highlights the thinness of Levin/
Freeman’s morality. Thus both women’s souls remain pure, but as a result of very different experiences. However, neither Giovanni nor Levin/Freeman has been isolated from the world or experienced suffering sufficient to create what is the women’s moral centers.

The complexities of plot, theme, and character are developed in relation to the garden settings. Beatrice and Isabella are isolated from humanity by their gardens: the former on account of its poisonous nature, which precludes any outsiders entering, the latter by its island setting. This apartness mirrors their physical isolation: Beatrice because of her infectious poisonousness; Isabella due to her concentration camp experiences, the outer sign being the numbers on her breast. Each woman’s outlook on life has been greatly affected by her physical deformity, her being outside society and a survivor with her character intact.

At first it appears that both women are in need of rescue and redemption, as they are leading lives that are limited and controlled. However, it is Giovanni and Levin/Freeman who require redemption, with each being able to attain it through his respective woman if he was more insightful, sensitive, and possessed greater morality. The allusion in Malamud’s title to Arthurian legends points toward the conclusion that Isabella is offering Levin/Freeman an Excalibur that could reestablish his identity, thus granting him redemption; and Giovanni’s soul could be transformed by Beatrice’s love and inner purity. However, both men lose their opportunities, as they are incapable of enlightenment, of seeing beyond their established ideas.

The minor male characters also lack sensitivity and morality. Rappaccini uses his daughter in a misplaced experiment that eventually destroys her. Also, he acts to lure Giovanni to provide her with a mate and further his experiment. Crews correctly sees Rappaccini as parodying God. He has “created’ the central shrub in his new Eden, and he presides over everything that happens between its Adam and Eve. . . . He is a parody of divinity . . . the God of a godless world” (133–34). Baglioni,
having appeared to be Giovanni’s friend and to have compassion for Beatrice, is unable to suppress his pleasure at his rival’s defeat when Beatrice dies. However, neither man is simply evil, and each may be viewed as fearful and unable to cope with his limitations, leading to the destruction of Beatrice and Giovanni:

If Baglioni is unduly afraid of scientific advances, Rappaccini is too afraid of the world. Both fears stem from a conservative attitude; Baglioni fears the far-ranging activities of the mind, and Rappaccini is equally suspicious of the wanderings of the heart. However, Rappaccini does not discount the needs of the heart. He has made his daughter poisonous to protect her. . . . (Uroff 68)

Rappaccini’s astonishment at his daughter’s rejection of his gift of power and strength seems oddly genuine, Hawthorne showing how evil may emanate from a lack of perceptiveness, as with Giovanni, as much as from wicked motives. There is more ambiguity in Baglioni’s reaction to Beatrice’s death, caused by his antidote. His envy of Rappaccini, who is described as “thunderstricken,” is clear, expressed in a “tone of triumph”—a victory won over a rival. However, even Baglioni’s response is “mixed with horror” (276). This ambiguity of character is mirrored in the tale, where “this duality is entirely appropriate to the human condition: man is both good and evil” (Evans 461). (However, at least one critic has seen Rappaccini as God and Baglioni as Satan.)

Hawthorne creates characters who are unnatural in that they seem to possess God-like qualities: Rappaccini has created flora that do not exist in and may be inimical to nature; Baglioni is able to overcome natural poisons. However, both lack morality

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1Here the apple is the “fatal antidote supplied by the jealous, envious Satan-Baglioni, who wishes to avenge himself upon the Rappaccini-God, who far surpassed him in creating scientific wonders” (Donohue 173).
in placing their own obsessions above Beatrice’s humanity, making her an unnatural creation:

> Like her emblem, the hybrid flowers, she is a living violation of the static order of nature. However much we may pity her as a person, nature imperatively demands that she be purged from the system of created things. (Boewe 49)

Their parodies of God transform them into the serpent, with some of Rappaccini’s creations in the garden described as having “crept serpent-like along the ground or climbed on high, using whatever means of ascent was offered them” (258). Indeed, both men attempt to “ascend,” burnish their scientific reputations, using the innocent Beatrice, and both are responsible for the tale’s catastrophic ending, which recalls the finale of humanity’s sojourn in Eden—the Fall.

In “The Lady of the Lake,” Ernesto, Isabella’s father, like Rappaccini, wishes to arrange a match for his daughter, conniving to get her to America, “but under the right circumstances” (129). These “circumstances” are purely materialistic, as he questions Levin/Freeman closely concerning his income, not expressing interest in his Jewishness or what kind of man he is. Poor and shabby, he uses his role as a guide to the del Dongo estate to exercise a pathetic control over his charges, actually striking Levin/Freeman with his cane for straying from the group. Like Rappaccini and Baglioni, Ernesto operates through ulterior motives. Each of the minor characters supports the structure of deceit underlying each tale. Moreover, all three men share the lack of perceptiveness and understanding from the “heart” possessed by the female protagonists.

The nature of the Eden presented in both stories is ambiguous, as neither Rappaccini’s garden nor Isola del Dongo share the Edenic ideal since none of the main characters wish to remain within them: “For Hawthorne the conception of an earthly Paradise was repugnant; thus the loss of Paradise was really a piece of good luck” (McPherson 113), a “fortunate fall.”
Rappaccini’s garden is poisonous, and Beatrice and Giovanni would like to live outside it. Isabella, encouraged by her father, is willing to leave Isola del Dongo for a life outside its confines, and Levin/Freeman sees San Francisco as his Eden. Thus, whereas Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden and condemned to live in the world, Beatrice and Giovanni are “expelled” from the world and condemned to live in the poisoned garden. Levin/Freeman hopes to convince Isabella, whom he still believes to be a countess, to forsake her island paradise for the new world, symbolically a modern Eden. In these tales it is the world that is presented as paradisical and the garden that is “fallen.” Referring to Seymour Levin in Malamud’s A New Life, concerned with an Eden in the American West, Iska Alter observes that “to live in Eden is to cripple one’s humanity. . . .” (Alter 47).

For Hawthorne, Eden is only attainable on earth through love. He wrote in his notebook, in 1836, “New Adam and Eve,” a story that is critical of nineteenth-century society, presented as a corrupted, fallen world far from nature, where humanity has been destroyed but its cities and creations remain. Adam and Eve, innocent and unfallen, view this world with curiosity and alarm. The new Eve expresses Hawthorne’s view: “And what a strange place too! Let me come closer to thy side and behold thee only; for all other sights trouble and perplex my spirit” (328). Adam has the “stronger tendency toward the material world” (328), wishing to explore it. However, Hawthorne presents Eve’s instinct for love as more important than the ephemeral creations of humanity. In 1839 Hawthorne became engaged to Sophia Peabody, and the following year wrote to her: “How happy were Adam and Eve! . . . We love one another as well as they; but there is no silent and lovely garden of Eden for us” (Letters 449). Their love had to be sufficient.

Nature itself can be treacherous, as in walled garden or island the initial attraction to its beauties, seen in aspects of description that are tinged with pathetic fallacy, illustrates the danger of an
appeal to an Edenic ideal. Hawthorne asks an ironic question within “Rappaccini’s Daughter”: “Was this garden, then, the Eden of the present world?” (259); no, but poison prevents moving beyond its walls. Levin/Freeman cannot stay on beautiful Isola del Dongo but encounters difficulties on leaving and transferring his ideal of paradise to the real world. Not only is the water rough, but he also finds that “Rowing back to Stresa, he was stopped by the lake patrol and compelled to show his passport” (116)—that is, assume his real identity, putting into question the viability of his new life. Finding paradise in the world or in a garden is problematic for both Hawthorne and Malamud.

Both male protagonists intrude into the worlds created by Rappaccini and Ernesto for their daughters. Giovanni and Levin/Freeman believe it possible to move beyond human reality: Giovanni through Baglioni’s antidote, which he believes will render Beatrice “purified from evil” (275); Levin/Freeman, through denying his Jewish heritage, which will transform Isabella into a New World Eve, one without a past, either of aristocracy initially or, finally, of a suffering Jewess. In these tales both men’s hopes are shown to be false, with Eden being unrealizable.

It is important to realize that “Eve set in train a new phase of history, where humanity exchanged the simplicity and ease of unthinking obedience for the complexity and challenge of the freedom to choose” (Norris 28). Beatrice and Isabella act the part of Eve in their gardens. Beatrice is more innocent than Eve, with Giovanni describing her expression as one of “simplicity and sweetness” (262), and her voice as “half childish and half woman-like” (263). She does not sin with Giovanni, nor does she appear even to be aware of its possibility, her feelings being those for someone she could love briefly and virtuously until he left, she being trapped in the garden. Whether his motives are based on discovering new scientific knowledge or egotism, Rappaccini has eliminated any normal sexual and emotional
existence for his daughter, so has brought a “bridegroom” into the garden. Rappaccini’s garden has become the place for his Adam and Eve to fulfill their destiny, whereas the biblical Adam and Eve had to make their way through the trials of the world, closed to Beatrice. Giovanni’s having eaten of the poisoned “apple” reverses the biblical story as he is doomed to remain within the garden. For Beatrice, sexual knowledge would have come, not as to Eve through eating the apple (drinking the antidote), but through leaving the garden. Whatever Fall might have occurred would have been due to this modern Eve’s ingenuousness rather than her duplicity.

Hawthorne was familiar with *Paradise Lost*, but did not share Milton’s attitude toward Eve being responsible for the Fall.  Rappaccini is more culpable morally than is Beatrice, having tempted God with his impious garden and injected unnatural poisons into the world. Moreover, he has corrupted his pure daughter and connived at Giovanni’s poisoning. Through Baglioni, Giovanni has gained access to an antidote that, like Eve to Adam, he convinces Beatrice to imbibe, thus destroying her. Hawthorne has assigned to characters other than Beatrice most of the negative traits attributed to Eve by the Puritan Milton. Indeed, Gilbert and Gubar observe that

> though Milton goes to great lengths to associate Adam, God, Christ, and the angels with visionary prophetic powers, that visionary night-world of poetry and imagination, insofar as it is a *demonic* world, is more often subtly associated in *Paradise Lost* with Eve, Satan, and femaleness than with any of the ‘good’ characters except the epic speaker himself. (203)

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2In Book IX, Milton’s attitude toward Eve is clear: “O much deceived, much failing, hapless Eve. . .” (ll. 404); “. . . into fraud / Led Eve our credulous mother, to the tree / Of prohibition, root of all our woe. . .” (ll. 643–45); “. . . his words replete with guile / Into her heart too easy entrance won. . .” (ll. 733–34).
Both women attract their respective Adams. Beatrice’s innocent calls to Giovanni prove a powerful draw. Isabella is much more forthcoming, inviting Levin/Freeman to meet her, swimming naked in his presence, kissing him, and offering him food which, unlike the apple, is permitted, but, like it, would enrich his world were he able to appreciate the implications that lay behind it. Both eschew simplicity, with Beatrice, after Giovanni’s arrival, desiring the world outside the garden her father has created, while Isabella rejects an easy life in America with Levin/Freeman in choosing her Jewish heritage. Both women attempt to teach their men: Beatrice about love and purity of soul, Isabella about the importance of one’s heritage. Unfortunately neither man is capable of appreciating what is being offered. Of course Adam chooses to eat of the apple knowing it was forbidden, whereas Giovanni is poisoned unbeknownst to him or Beatrice. She is presented as innocent, unlike Eve, who knowingly ensnared Adam in sin. However, Eve’s offer to Adam of the forbidden fruit began human history, as we had to leave the Garden in order for it to begin.

Although Beatrice does not intend to infect Giovanni with poison, she does view the gorgeous poisonous shrub hanging over the fountain as a sister, her clothes mirroring it in terms of colors and textures, flaunted as are Pearl’s and the scarlet letter. Isabella’s horrendous experiences mean that she chooses clothes that are more delicate and subdued in color, an expression of her nature that, while similar to Beatrice’s in morality, differs because of her experiences. Beatrice’s innocence implies a blank slate, but she is an ironic mixture of moral innocence and scientific knowledge, the latter of which Baglioni thinks qualify her “to fill a professor’s chair” (261). “Like Eve, she stands for knowledge; although she is innocent emotionally and socially, she is brilliant intellectually” (Fryer 44).

Beatrice is a strongly sexual creature, but, as with the exceptional nature of her soul’s purity, seems unaware of it. Hawthorne states that “Flower and maiden were different, and
yet the same, and fraught with some strange peril in either shape" (260). Beatrice is certainly unaware that, referring to more than the garden, "Many a young man in Padua would give gold to be admitted among those flowers" (265). Frederick Crews convinces when he states that "Her innocence consists in an almost willful ignorance of her sexual power, and this ignorance is the foundation of her claim to spiritual purity" (120). Hawthorne keeps her true to Christianity's equation of sexuality with sin; however no sin occurs and Beatrice remains a flawed Madonna. The sensuality of the flowers, which she mimics in her dress, combined with the heightened color of her cheeks due to the poisonous atmosphere, combine to lure Giovanni, but when he attempts any physical contact Beatrice subtly repels him, the eternal unworldly innocent.

The garden's plants and the centrally placed shrub are forbidden fruit to all save Beatrice. She slavishly follows her father's prescriptions until Giovanni's poisoning when, like Eve defying God and eating of the apple, she chooses courageously to drink Baglioni's antidote that will cleanse the poison from her body. However, unlike Eve, she is presciently fearful of the outcome, telling Giovanni, "with a peculiar emphasis, 'I will drink; but do thou await the result'" (275). She intuits that purification may be impossible and dangerous but wishes to be free from her father's influence and to live in the world beyond the garden. Like Eve's, Beatrice's attempt to achieve freedom and, in her case, love ends in disaster; she dies and destroys Giovanni's future. For Hawthorne, human perfectibility is unrealizable.

One critic sees her as a mythological type for Hawthorne who

Clearly admires this primal woman and takes elaborate pains to say that she is guiltless, or at least no more guilty than men; she simply follows the laws of her nature. . . . Still more clearly, Hawthorne's angelic "Beatrice" Rappaccini is only what her father made her. . . . In Christian terms, the Dark Lady is Eve, cursed by the Puritans but admired by Hawthorne. (McPherson 223–24)
Isabella also destroys her Adam's future, in her case through rejecting Levin/Freeman as a gentile. Although willing to leave Eden for the world beyond, she cannot relinquish her heritage, her hopes succumbing like those of Beatrice, to the shallowness of her Adam. Both Eves make use of unusual devices to destroy their own future and that offered by their men: Beatrice, Baglioni's antidote pressed upon her by Giovanni; Isabella, the Buchenwald number that Levin/Freeman's falsehood forces her to expose. Both authors illustrate the impossibility of achieving Eden as place in a postlapsarian world, finding in self-understanding and a genuine love relationship the only Eden of which we are capable.

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