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Perfume by Patrick Süskind:

A Freudian Reading of the Story of a Murderer

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The novel *Perfume*, by the German writer Patrick Süskind, portrays the fictional story of a murderer, from his birth in a putrid slum in eighteenth century Paris, to his final glory and shocking death. Although he has no scent of his own, Jean-Baptiste Grenouille was born with a remarkable sense of smell. After a miserable and extremely sad childhood, he eventually apprentices himself to a perfumer and learns this ancient art with passion and fervor. Determined to create the best perfume in the world and have humankind at his feet, the arrogant Grenouille is ready to do anything so as to execute his plans. His obsession leads him to kill: only the smell of some virgin young girls can help produce the "heavenly" scent. As the story goes on, the reader witnesses some dreadful murders which Grenouille, deeply disturbed and trouble minded, is responsible for. The reader is submerged into an evil, dark environment, where sexuality and death, crime and passion are allied, and where sin leads to personal triumph. Freudian psychoanalysis can shed some light on the ambiguous character Grenouille, and help us understand the different states of mind that leads him to murder.

Jean-Baptiste Grenouille was born on July 17, 1738 in Paris, "on the most putrid spot in the whole kingdom." This dark, gloomy and smelly spot seems to foreshadow a sad, depressing future for the innocent baby. Grenouille's birthday is connected with a strong, fetid smell of death and decomposition: "The heat lay leaden upon the graveyard, squeezing

its putrefying vapor, a blend of rotting melon, and the fetid odor of burnt animal horn, out into the nearby alleys." From the very beginning, it seems that Grenouille and odors are deeply connected. The author insists on the importance of this smelly environment that surrounds Grenouille as a baby. This early description is meaningful. Indeed, smells, odors, "perfumes" are central elements of the story, and are playing a major part in the murders that follow. Also, his mother does not welcome Grenouille's birth. She is herself a murderer and got rid of her past four babies. Grenouille is the fifth and she wished "it were already over". From the start, not only was Grenouille born in a putrid slum that portrays him more as an animal than a human baby, but also he is not meant to "be" at all. His mother has long before planned to kill "the newborn thing". However, she is quickly arrested and decapitated, and Grenouille survives. From a psychoanalytic point of view, the reader can predict that Grenouille might become a murder himself, since most of the kids reproduce their parents' crimes or weaknesses. In addition, according to Freud's theory on psychoanalysis, we can link the sinister, trouble minded murderer Grenouille with the fact he had an extremely sad, difficult childhood. After his mother's decapitation, Grenouille is given to a series of wet nurses. Unfortunately, his bad luck seems to follow him, for "he had already changed wet nurses three times." Anyway, no matter what the problem really is at this point, he does not receive any love, any affection whatsoever. It seems that this is something else than "bad luck", and this looks more like a curse; something might be wrong with Grenouille himself: "No one wanted to keep it for more than a couple of days." Grenouille "sucks as much as two babies", which foreshadows his greediness and selfishness as an adult, later in the story. Then, his last wet nurse gives him to Father Terrier. Unfortunately, he is afraid of him, too. Grenouille's dog-like sense of smell scares Father Terrier away, for he has the impression the baby is staring at him through his nose. Father Terrier eventually understands the bizarre, mysterious

words pronounced by the nurse: "He doesn't smell at all. He's possessed by the devil." The baby is then given to Madame Gaillard, who does not care so much about Grenouille's bizarre condition. The other kids try to suffocate the baby several times, for they are scared of him. They fail each time: Grenouille might have some kind of supernatural powers. The fact that he is an exceptional being or that he might not be human at all, presents him as a separate entity and increases his isolation and solitude. In other words, Grenouille's having no scent of his own makes him "a monster". Although he has an incomparable, almost supernatural sense of smell, nobody ever cares for Grenouille. He remains an outcast his whole childhood. He does not know what love means since he never received any. Therefore, he might understand "hate" better, and confines himself in dark, sinister thoughts. If we apply Freud's theory of repressed desires into Grenouille's story, it becomes clear that he might have repressed his feelings and most personal desires during his childhood. His numerous and atrocious murders might be "responses to trauma", the results of an "inside" crisis during which his hidden feelings come out: his anger, his profound sense of isolation, his hate for people and humankind in general. He is clearly facing a battle between his "ego" (conscious self) and his "id" (unconscious self), which results in the coming out of his "id", in other words, of the expression of his secret thoughts. Those strong feelings, which have been kept secret for so long, "explode" in all of their horrifying consequences.

Grenouille's bizarre attitude towards sexuality can also be interpreted using a psychoanalysis approach. It is important to notice that he does not have a sexuality. In fact, the text never mentions any specific moments when he actually has some kind of sexual activity. The reader assumes that Grenouille is a virgin, and might remain one his whole life. However, if we look closer to the text, and if we use Freud's theory on sexuality, Grenouille seems to experience sexual feelings, even though he does not actually have a "genital"

sexuality: "Freud insisted that sexuality was evident throughout life, from childhood on. "The energy of sexuality is far from exclusively genital; it can also be anal or oral," Freud noted, and "it can also be displaced onto fetish objects or substitutes that replace early desired objects."¹ Grenouille, who is an outcast and remains very much apart from people, might be scared from genital sexuality. People have always despised him his whole childhood, and therefore he has always hated them in return. In addition, Grenouille's sexual activities might be seen as "perverse". When Grenouille commits his first murder and expresses his "sexual appetite", he is still a young boy. Therefore, his sexual activities do not have a reproductive function, as Freud argues:

"Nor do I complain if you find the kinship between infantile sexual activity and sexual perversions something very striking. But it is in fact self-evident: if a child has a sexual life at all it is bound to be of a perverse kind: for except for a few obscure hints children are without what makes sexuality into the reproductive function. On the other hand, the abandonment of the reproductive function is the common feature of all perversions. We actually describe a sexual activity as perverse if it has given up the aim of reproduction and pursues the attainment of pleasure as an aim independent of it."²

During his sinister journey when he "chases" the virgins' body odors, Grenouille's only aim is the pursuit of his personal pleasure and satisfaction. According to Freud, his sexuality is a crime, and the result of a perverse mind. There are no actual dialogues from his childhood that are mentioned in the text, and we assume that he barely talked, living in his own bubble and spending his time exploiting his incomparable sense of smell. Living in such a mental and physical isolation from people, causes him to become asexual. Nevertheless, his first murder

¹ Rivkin, Julie, and Michael Ryan, eds. *Literary Theory: An Anthology*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1998.

² Freud. *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. Norton, 1966. 317.

seems to imply he has some kind of sexuality. As a matter of fact, the way he describes his first victim—a virgin young girl—is very sexual: “He smelled that this was a human being, smelled the sweat of her armpits, the oil in her hair, the fishy odor of her genitals, and smelled it all with the greatest pleasure.” When he smells the young virgin, it is like he was looking at her, like if he was “looking” under her clothes, closer to her skin. The fact he can smell her so precisely, and even her private parts, has a very strong sexual suggestion. Grenouille cannot see her, he cannot touch her, but he can smell her. There is a kind of parallel between the sight and the smell. Smelling is a way of “seeing” for Grenouille. Before he murders the innocent virgin, he smells her even closer. The smelling act refers to the sexual act, and it is almost like he was “raping” her: “He thrust his face to her skin and swept his flared nostrils across her, from belly to breast, to neck, over her face and hair, and back to her belly, down to her genitals, to her thighs and white legs.” The word “genitals” is again used. It is clear that Grenouille is not attracted to a perfume the girl could be wearing, but clearly to her personal smell—the one her own body produces. This passage could be referring to some kind of animal instincts and drives. Grenouille behaves like a beast that is attracted to the animal/the girl’s genitals odor, during the period of reproduction. So, according to Freud, the smell of young virgins, which Grenouille wants to possess, could be a fetish or substitute to genital sexuality. Grenouille does not “need” any genital sexuality and finds gratification in other sexual activities. Furthermore, the fact he does not have a smell of his own means that nobody could be sexually attracted to him. Grenouille’s powerful sense of smell isolates him sexually, and makes him very frustrated. He “represses” his sexual frustration during his childhood. This repressed sexuality comes out when he “smells” this young girl: the temptation is too strong. He has to possess her; in other words he has to capture her smell. Besides, Freud’s theory of “inversion” might explain why Grenouille does not feel the need for genital

sexuality. "Inversion" occurs when unconscious desires are displaced onto expressive activities or compulsive thoughts; more specifically when a hidden feeling is converted into its opposite. Grenouille, who feels great animosity towards his distant and selfish mother (she tried to assassinate him when he was born, and she was decapitated because of her crime), may convert that feeling into its opposite, a fantasy that all women are themselves mean and unworthy of his love.

Psychoanalysis can also help interpret some passages when Grenouille dreams. Freud believed that the unconscious expresses itself in the form of dreams. At night, the ego does not have much power over the id; therefore the repressed desires can be expressed. After Grenouille has finished his apprentice at Giuseppe Baldini's and when he masters the ancient art of making a perfume, he decides to leave. His journey leads him to Les Cévennes, at the volcano Plomb du Cantal. There, he ends up living like a hermit, in the deepest isolation and solitude. Once, he dreams that his putrid cave turns into a rich castle: "It lay in a rock-strewn desert, concealed by dunes, surrounded by a marshy oasis, and set behind stone walls. It could be reached only from the air." Grenouille's castle, being away from civilization and from humankind, reflects his sense of isolation. He has been a solitary being all his life. He has learned to live and to survive on his own, without anybody's help. For the young man, life means hard work, survival, and starvation. There is no love in Grenouille's world. How could he know what love is, when he never received any? How could he be willing to live among humans, when none of them ever showed him some kind of sympathy? After he learns how to master the art of making perfumes at Baldini's, Grenouille might enter a stage of transition. He is not ready yet to create the perfume that would make people love him and worship him. After all, he has learned how to live without them, why would he need any love now? So, Grenouille's dream-castle reflects his antipathy towards civilization: "it could be reached only

from the air." Some servants are living in this castle but they are "invisible, intangible, inaudible, and above all inodorous.", which again expresses Grenouille's hate and disgust for humankind. Also, his dream proves that he suffers from an identity crisis: "Grenouille, no longer Grenouille the Great, but only the quite private Grenouille, or simply dear little Jean-Baptiste." In his dream, he is not "Grenouille the Great", the fictional character he created to persuade himself that he could achieve "great" things in life, but he is Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, the real Grenouille, the one who was born in poverty and struggles to survive his miserable life. In his dream, Grenouille becomes a rich man; he lives in a huge castle: "it had a thousand private rooms and a thousand underground chambers and a thousand elegant salons." The repetition of "thousand" conveys Grenouille's ambition to make it in this life, and it also creates a clear gap between his actual life (he lives in a humid, dirty spot in a narrow tunnel down a mountain) and the life he dreams to have (being a wealthy gentleman, living in a rich and luxurious mansion). Who he wants to become is clearly the opposite of who he is now. In addition, this dream also reflects Grenouille's repressed sexual desires. The whole dream could be seen as a metaphor for "repression", which is a Freudian term. Grenouille tries to get rid of his sexual urges, which are totally unacceptable in social life. Living in the mountains, in the middle of nowhere, away from people, could not be a better way for him to "repress" his sexual desires. However, when he dreams, his id and his ego come into conflict, and all his repressed feelings come out. While living in this imaginary castle, Grenouille dreams that he possesses "thousands" of scents: the scents from his childhood, odors of his schooldays, odors of the streets, and, last but not least, "the most splendid of all: the scent of the girl from the rue des Marais." The "girl from the rue des Marais" is the one Grenouille murdered, in order to "capture" her divine and exquisite scent. We have said previously that, according to Freud's essay "On sexuality", Grenouille's

capturing this young virgin's scent could be translated as a way of "possessing" the girl's genitals' odor. Therefore, Grenouille's dream reflects Grenouille's sexual appetite, and foreshadows his following murders, by showing that he's unable to get rid of his sexual frustration. Last but not least, Grenouille's final glory proves he was only seeking for sexual pleasure. At the end of the novel, when he manages to enslave his enemies who are under the charm of his new perfume, it becomes clear that Grenouille is a perverted man. His perfume has a terrible impact on them; they do not see Grenouille as a murderer any longer but as a kind of God. People's euphoria is so intense that they become as perverted as Grenouille is. Grenouille finds sexual satisfaction in assisting to this revolting orgy: "respectable women ripped open their blouses, bared their breasts, cried out hysterically, and threw themselves on the ground with skirts hitched high."

Besides, the fact that Grenouille dreams of living in a huge castle, with "invisible, inaudible" servants at his feet, reveals that he is very narcissist and self-centered. Narcissism is another major theory among Freud's works on psychoanalysis. Narcissism is a "Freudian term, drawn from the Greek myth of Narcissus, indicating an exclusive self-absorption."³ When he meets the perfumer Baldini for the first time, in Paris, Grenouille knows that Baldini is not a great perfumer any longer. The young boy thinks that his own genius could help Baldini become prosperous and successful again. Even before Baldini accepts him as his new apprentice, Grenouille, who is very self-confident, knows that he is going to get the job, and that this is only the beginning of his own immense success: "He was overcome by the idea that he belonged here and nowhere else, that he would stay here, that from here, he would shake the world from its foundations." So, at a very young age, Grenouille, who is aware of his own remarkable sense of smell, develops a narcissist personality. He knows that, once he

³ *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, 6th ed. Columbia University Press, 2005.

masters all the techniques, he will not remain in Baldini's shadow, and will become successful on his own. In addition, after he murders the first virgin, Grenouille has no regret at all. On the contrary, "never before in his life had he known what happiness was." He is ecstatic, in a state of pure bliss and delight. The sinister Grenouille is definitely living in his own world of sinful deeds and gruesome desires. Killing the innocent young girl from the ruelles des Marais makes him realize that he wants to create the "master scent"-the exquisite perfume that will enable him to enslave people. Grenouille's arrogant personality is revealed: "He felt as if he finally knew who he was: nothing less than a genius." He thinks that without a doubt he can be a better perfumer than anybody else: "He alone in all the world possessed the means to carry it off: namely, his exquisite nose, his phenomenal memory." Süskind puts forward Grenouille's narcissist behavior: "He alone in all the world"; "He must become a creator of scents"; "And not just an average one. But, rather, the greatest perfumer of all time." In his essay about narcissism, Freud notes that an individual with a narcissist personality disorder has an exaggerated sense of his own uniqueness and exceptionality, which is the case of Grenouille. Grenouille believes he can become the greatest perfumer of all times. He has lost sense of reality; his aspirations are far too big for a little, poor man like him. Also, this extreme confidence can be a result of his childhood, when nobody ever believed in him and when he was living in a profound isolation. Grenouille might have built a barrier between himself and the others, so as to protect himself. This is true that he has a unique sense of smell and an exceptional memory of all the scents, but Grenouille's aspirations prove he has a narcissist personality. Also, a narcissist individual tends to become antisocial, to show a lack of sympathy, and to take advantage of others in order to be successful. This is the case of the self-centered Grenouille who uses young virgins (he kills several dozens of them in the town of Grasse) in order to create the best perfume that is to be made of each girl's odor. Grenouille

chooses to live in the mountains of Les Cévennes, because nobody can disturb him there. His own sense of uniqueness becomes excessive, which proves he suffers from an antisocial personality disorder: "He was truly completely alone! He was the only human being in the world!" Besides, Grenouille tries to construct an ideal image of himself. He wants to be "Grenouille the Great": a kind of God people would have to worship: "They would love him as they stood under the spell of his scent, not just accept him as one of them, but love him to the point of insanity, of self-abandonment, they would quiver with delight, scream, weep for bliss, they would sink to their knees, just as if under God's cold incense." This narcissist personality confirms Grenouille's "super ego". In Freud's three-part model of the mind, the id and the ego have to interact with the "super ego". Grenouille develops a super-ego, maybe because of the painful process of repression, in order to have a better, ideal image of his self. He has suffered all his life from his bad image: an ugly, peculiar individual, with no smell of his own. Now, he is looking for some kind of revenge. He wants to be God: somebody people love and admire with passion.

In addition, the theme of the double is central to the novel, and can be interpreted through Freud's psychoanalysis. In order to seduce people, Grenouille decides to create a blissful perfume "that whoever smelled it would be enchanted and with his whole heart would have to love him." Grenouille could attract people, maybe the entire world, thanks to his own smell. Behind the heavenly smell he would have, there would still remain the sinister, evil Grenouille. In other words, Grenouille would be "God" from the outside and the Devil deep inside. Grenouille then becomes a "double" man. He wants to attract and fool people only to fulfill his personal aspirations. He is determined to get their love only to control them better: "He said to himself that he wanted to do it because he was evil, thoroughly evil." The creation of this smell involves the scents of several virgins and implies Grenouille has to kill dozens of

young girls. This idyllic perfume cannot be created without some evil crimes. Also, when Grenouille meets the marquis de La Taillade-Espinasse, who helps him recover from the seven years he spent in a cave, his “double” image is going to become more obvious. Indeed, Grenouille looks more like a wild beast than a human being after the seven years he spent living outside civilization. Thanks to the marquis’ help, Grenouille’s face is cleaner and he looks like a human being again, even like a real gentleman. When he looks at himself in the mirror for the first time, Grenouille becomes aware of his “self”, but at the same time, the “gentleman in the mirror” looks like a stranger to him. Süskind’s use of the mirror reinforces Grenouille’s double personality, and reveals that a devilish, sinful Grenouille is hiding behind this “odorless figure dressed and made up like a man”. Grenouille is putting on a mask. He wants to forget the old Grenouille. Now, he is Grenouille the Great, the one people are going to love. However, even though people love him when they are under the charm of his smell, Grenouille finds no satisfaction at all. He has been waiting all his life for people to love him, but their love becomes intolerable, for Grenouille does not love them in return. In fact, he hates them still, and does not want to receive any love from them. He realizes his mistake. He wanted to create a unique scent which people could fall in love him. Grenouille wants his revenge from humankind in general. He would like to be loved for the first time in his life, after having spent his childhood in great poverty and lack of any affection. But Grenouille is pure evil: he hates “love” in general. Since he is not able to “give” love, he cannot accept love. He wishes people could actually understand that the perfume he is wearing is just a subterfuge. He would like them to see him as the real evil. But it is too late. Even the father of one of the girls Grenouille killed is “deceived by his mask”. Also, the reason why Grenouille has a split personality could be his lack of scent. Grenouille lacks a scent; which means that he lacks an identity of his own. His chase of the ultimate scent will enable him to have a body

odor, and be accepted by others. In other words, having a body odor of his own will make him fully human. Besides, not only is Grenouille's pursuit of the perfect scent a way of satisfying his sexual urges, but it can also be viewed as an attempt to be fully human, to be one and complete person.

Therefore, Grenouille's complex personality and sinful drives can be better understood thanks to a Freudian psychoanalytic analysis. Grenouille's miserable and depressing childhood causes him to repress all his desires and feelings: sexual urges, dreams of a better, ideal life and the secret hope to be loved. Later on, Grenouille's sexual frustration and quest to create a unique perfume lead him to murder. After an unsuccessful attempt to live outside civilization in a cave where he cannot perform his atrocious crimes, Grenouille comes back to "reality" under the "mask" of a gentleman in order to 'seduce' people and enslave the human race. Besides, *Perfume's* main character cannot reject his sexual desires and he chooses to pursue self-satisfaction and pleasure. This Freudian interpretation explains why Grenouille is driven to madness, while revealing a stunning truth about human nature.

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