

COMPREHENDING THE RIDDLE: A CRITICAL EXCAVATION OF MYSTERY AND CHAOS IN 'PERFUME: THE STORY OF A MURDERER'

Lakshmi Rajasekhar¹, Dr Krishnaja²

^{1,2} Department of English, Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham, Amritapuri, India

Abstract

This paper examines the story of Jean Baptiste Grenouille through the movie *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* and it addresses how societal pressure affect an individual. Grenouille's experiences of social alienation, abandonment, and trauma, as viewed through the lens of General Strain Theory (GST) and Trauma Theory. The movie portrays Grenouille, as man ostracized from birth and devoid of a personal scent. The analysis explores the concept of General strain theory posits that this chronic ostracism cultivates anomie, a normlessness that erodes his moral compass and fuels his deviant behaviour. By examining these psychological underpinnings, the paper offers a nuanced understanding of Grenouille's motivations and the path towards violence that defines his story. The study explores how Grenouille's traumatic experiences – abandonment, isolation, and a world devoid of his own personal fragrance – shape his perception of the world and ultimately propel him down a dark path. Trauma theory illuminates how Grenouille's formative experiences create a sense of alienation and disconnection, impacting his ability to form healthy attachments and navigate social interactions. General strain theory complements this analysis by demonstrating how the unrelenting strain of existing outside societal norms and being denied basic social connection cultivates a pervasive sense of anomie. This anomie, in turn, weakens Grenouille's moral compass and contributes to his increasingly deviant behaviour.

Keyword: Perfume, strain theory, trauma theory, criminology.

INTRODUCTION

Perfume: The story of a murderer(2006) is a psychological thriller film directed by Tom Tykwer, based on the novel of the same name by Patrick Suskind. The film stars Ben Whishaw, Alan Rickman, Rachel Hurd-Wood, and Dustin Hoffman. His quest for the perfect perfume takes a dark turn as he becomes fixated on capturing the essence of a young woman's scent. This obsession leads him down a dangerous path, culminating in a series of murders.

The movie revolves around Jean Baptiste Grenouille, a man born with an extra ordinary sense of smell. It depicts Baptiste quest for the perfect scent and murders he commits in the process. The main character has a complex behaviour and society plays a major role in making the situation more complicated. The film explores themes of alienation, obsession, and the power of smell. It's a visually stunning and disturbing film that has been praised for its performances and direction. Grenouille's fixation with inventing the greatest scent, which gives him complete control over others, is fundamentally anarchic. It symbolises an extreme rejection of cultural conventions, as well as a strong personal quest that crosses moral and ethical limits. His skills are motivated not by traditional objectives like vengeance or greed, but by an obsessive desire to capture and own the essence of beauty and purity found in the scent of young women. His fascination turns him into a cold-blooded killer who uses his victims as raw materials for his olfactory experiments rather than as living beings. Grenouille's acts cause havoc and anxiety in the towns he visits by upsetting the social order. The senselessness of the murders has left the authorities perplexed and unable to understand the anarchistic motivation behind them. Grenouille

represents anarchy in this sense, opposing the status quo with his extreme individualism and disdain for social conventions. Grenouille's greatest achievement symbolises the height of his anarchic ambitions: a scent so potent that it makes anyone who smell it fall in love with the wearer. With the help of this perfume, he is able to exert extraordinary power over others, turning them into mindless puppets controlled by aroma. Süskind utilises this to examine how easily society institutions can be overturned and how brittle human emotions are.

GENERAL STRAIN THEORY

General strain theory (GST) is a theory in criminology developed by sociologist Robert Agnew. It offers a fresh perspective on why people commit crimes or become delinquent. Unlike other theories that focus on control or learning, GST highlights how negative experiences from others can lead to crime. It's the only major theory that emphasizes the role of bad emotions, like anger and sadness, in causing criminal behaviour. GST was created to address weaknesses in older strain theories. These earlier theories were criticized for only considering a few types of stress, not explaining why some stressed people turn to crime, and lacking strong evidence. GST has improved on these points. Since its development, GST has gained a lot of interest from researchers and shown promise in explaining criminal behaviour. However, the theory is still being refined and needs more testing to reach its full potential.

Grenouille's life is marked by significant strains. Abandoned at birth, he grows up in an orphanage devoid of affection and connection. This social alienation and lack of positive reinforcement can be viewed through the lens of GST's strain

generated by negative social interactions. The young woman, Grenouille murders can be seen as representing the source of positive stimuli (beautiful scent) that he desperately craves. Their murders become a violent response to the strain of being unable to obtain this desired stimulus through non-violent means.

GST proposes that individuals experience strain due to negative life events. This strain can lead to negative coping mechanisms like aggression or delinquency if not managed effectively. The passage portrays Grenouille's obsession with capturing a beautiful flower's scent. This intense desire can be viewed as a strain, a constant pressure that motivates him. The passage highlights Grenouille's anticipation and pleasure upon encountering the flower's scent again. This reinforces the idea of an intense, almost addictive strain driving him. The flower's symbolic representation of the perfect scent Grenouille seeks can be seen as the embodiment of the source of his strain.

TRAUMA STUDIES: EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF DEEPLY UPSETTING EVENTS

Trauma studies is a field that focuses on how people deal with extremely upsetting experiences and how these experiences affect them. It looks at how trauma is portrayed in writing, movies, and other media, and how these portrayals can influence our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Trauma studies uses ideas from psychoanalysis (like Freud's theories) along with other approaches to understand how trauma affects people's minds and memories. These approaches consider social and cultural factors too. The core idea is that trauma can be so disturbing that it's hard to even put it into words, and it can completely change how someone sees themselves and the world.

Trauma studies examines how people remember and talk about traumatic events, and how these experiences can influence a person's identity and how they see themselves. It also explores how writers and artists use language and storytelling to explore trauma.

Trauma studies started in the 1990s and initially relied heavily on Freudian theory. This theory suggested that trauma is so overwhelming it can't be fully expressed in words. However, the field has grown to recognize that this is just one way people respond to trauma, and not everyone experiences it the same way. While the idea of trauma shattering language is still influential, other perspectives are gaining traction.

Trauma theory offers a powerful lens through which to analyse Jean-Baptiste Grenouille's character and actions in "Perfume: Story of a murderer." From the very beginning, Grenouille experiences a series of traumatic events that profoundly shape him, being abandoned at birth is a significant trauma, severing the crucial bond between infant and caregiver. This can lead to feelings of isolation, insecurity, and a distorted sense of self. Growing up in a harsh orphanage likely meant emotional neglect and a lack of affection. This further reinforces his isolation and hinders his ability to develop healthy coping mechanisms.

THE EFFECTS OF TRAUMA ON GRENOUILLE

These traumatic experiences can explain several aspects of Grenouille's character, his extraordinary sense of smell could be a defence mechanism. By focusing on the external world of scents, he avoids confronting the internal pain of his trauma. His quest for the perfect scent can be seen as an attempt to capture a sense of connection and belonging, something he craved but never received. Grenouille struggles to connect with people on an emotional level. His trauma may have made him distrustful and emotionally unavailable.

The most disturbing aspect of the film, Grenouille's murders, can also be understood through a trauma lens, his trauma may have left him with limited healthy coping mechanisms. The murders become a twisted way to achieve a sense of connection with the women he finds beautiful. Trauma can damage a person's ability to empathize with others. Grenouille sees the women as vessels of scent, not human beings. The murders could also be a warped attempt to control something he feels powerless over – his own sense of self and connection.

By applying trauma theory to the movie, we gain a deeper understanding of Grenouille's motivations. His descent into violence is not simply the result of a single traumatic event, but rather the culmination of a lifetime of emotional neglect and isolation. However, it's important to consider other factors that may have contributed to his behaviour.

"There was only one thing that perfume could not do" (1:2:13)
Grenouille's life is marked by trauma from the very beginning - being abandoned at birth, living in neglect, and lacking a sense of belonging. This constant negativity could be seen as a stain that hinders his ability to form healthy, emotional connections. Grenouille's lack of scent makes him feel invisible and incomplete. He can't connect with others on an emotional level because he feels like he doesn't have an "essence" of his own. This trauma disrupts his ability to understand and experience love in the way others do.

Trauma theory explores how traumatic experiences are often difficult to process or articulate. The line can be interpreted as highlighting the one thing the perfume can't achieve: address the root of Grenouille's murderous actions. The trauma of his isolation and lack of human connection festers within him, unspoken and unresolved. The film's exploration of Grenouille's inability to smell himself could also be seen as a metaphor for his inability to fully grasp his own emotional state, a consequence of his trauma. The fleeting nature of scent can be seen as a parallel to the way traumatic memories can resurface unexpectedly.

Grenouille's murders themselves can be seen as traumatic events. Driven by his cold obsession with capturing perfect scents, he targets young women. These brutal killings would leave undeniable psychological scars on his victims. Finally, the murderers' "love" for each other after consuming Grenouille's perfume is a further illustration of trauma's distorting effects. This warped affection is a chilling consequence of the horrific experience they endured.

"Who could love and be loved like everyone else" (2:13:48)

Being abandoned at birth is a significant trauma, severing the crucial mother-child bond and leaving a deep sense of insecurity and isolation. Living in orphanages devoid of affection and basic needs further disrupts Grenouille's emotional development. He lacks the nurturing environment necessary to form healthy attachments.

Grenouille's exceptional sense of smell makes him hyperaware of the world around him, yet he lacks the crucial sense of smell himself. This creates a profound sense of alienation and incompleteness. The various traumatic experiences leave Grenouille struggling to understand who he is. He feels invisible and incomplete, lacking the social and emotional cues most people take for granted. Grenouille has trouble forming genuine connections with others. He sees them primarily as sources of scent, not as individuals worthy of love or empathy. Grenouille's obsession with capturing perfect scents can be seen as a form of

dissociation. He detaches from his own emotions and focuses solely on the external world of smells.

Trauma theory suggests that trauma can make it challenging to experience love in the traditional sense. Here's how it applies to Grenouille:

Grenouille's traumatic experiences might make him afraid of getting close to others. Intimacy might feel unsafe or threatening. His lack of social interaction and emotional development may lead him to misunderstand or misinterpret love. He might seek connection through scent instead of emotional intimacy. The repeated betrayals and neglect he have experienced might make it difficult for Grenouille to trust anyone enough to open himself up emotionally.

Grenouille's pursuit of the perfect perfume can be seen as a desperate attempt to connect with the world and experience a sense of belonging. He believes that by capturing the perfect scent, he can finally feel complete and loved. However, the movie portrays this quest tragically. Instead of bringing him closer to others, it further isolates him. The ending leaves the audience questioning whether he ever achieved true love or connection.

CONCLUSION

Society plays a vital role in the deviant behaviour of a person. In 'Perfume: The Story of a Murderer,' Grenouille's relentless pursuit of the perfect scent becomes a powerful strain, as explained by General Strain Theory (GST). This all-consuming desire pushes him towards increasingly deviant behaviours. Lacking healthy coping mechanisms, he descends into violence. Meanwhile, trauma theory sheds light on the impact of Grenouille's actions. The women he murders and those affected by his perfume experience varying degrees of trauma. Their reactions, ranging from dissociation to a warped sense of love, illuminate the film's chilling portrayal of trauma's lingering psychological effects. By examining these psychological concepts, the movie transcends a mere murder story. It evolves into a haunting examination of human nature, the power of obsession, and the indelible scars left by trauma.

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