

A Study on the Contradictory Narrative of S üskind's "Perfume"

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S üskind's "Perfume" constructs the story frame of the text through three sets of contradictory narratives, exploring the process of Grenouille, who is regarded as an alien by others, trying to find and construct true meaning of being a human being from three aspects: human smell, emotion, and discourse. This process constantly encounters deconstruction from its own smelllessness, senselessness and aphasia, thereby implying the lack of human subjectivity and value through Grenouille's failure to find identity. It also uses the image of perfume to express the author's deep concerns about the loss of subjectivity, the disillusionment of classical morality, and the violence of industrial civilization in France and even Europe in the eighteenth century.

Keywords: "Perfume", Grenouille, contradictory narratives

Introduction

In a step-by-step time chain, using language rich in "seduce tones", S üskind's fantastic imagination makes "Perfume" present a strange and real beauty (S üskind, 2003, p. 5). In the eighteenth-century Paris, where the smell of perfume mixed with the rancid and dirty vegetable markets, Grenouille announced the birth of a kingdom of smells, the "Almighty God", with his earth-shattering cry. He has a super vitality that is different from ordinary people, the super strength to identify and obtain various smells, and the super power to confuse and control the entire world through perfume. After the foundation of French religious theology was shaken by industrial civilization in the eighteenth century, Grenouille became a god-like supreme being. He is contradictory, weird, naive and dark.

Eighteenth-century French Enlightenment thinkers and materialists represented by La Mettrie, Helvetius, Diderot and Holbach used materialism to oppose idealism, atheism to oppose religious theology, and fundamentally denied the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. This is the destruction of the theoretical basis of religious theology. Without "God", how will all the morals, beliefs, and values in real society be revalued? It became the fog in the minds of Europeans in the eighteenth century. "If God did not exist, He would have been created" (Voltaire, 2005, p. 632). Grenouille embodies this confusion and the necessity of creating a God. He became another kind of absolute power that was in urgent need of reconstruction after the collapse of religious and theological beliefs in European society. However, he was destroyed by the only desire to survive which was "to let others love himself". S üskind ironically gathered various contradictory elements in Grenouille—He has no human smell, but can smell all the fragrance in the world. He is indifferent to the pain and insults inflicted on him by the outside world, but he inexplicably hates all human beings. He dominates

everything in the kingdom of peerless perfume, but has almost lost the power of discourse (subjectivity). With various contradictions being intertwined, and through a calm analysis of the complex contradiction of Grenouille, Süskind expresses his deep concerns about the loss of human subjectivity, the disillusionment of classical morality, and the violence of industrial civilization.

Smelless and Extraordinary Sense of Smell

The contradiction between Grenouille's natural lack of human smell and his extraordinary sense of smell is a contradictory description based on the transcendent level. It is a metaphor for the futility and impossibility of Grenouille's pursuit of constructing a complete "human" subjectivity.

On the hottest day in 1738, Grenouille was born under a fish slaughtering table next to a smelly fish stall in downtown Paris. His mother left him in a garbage pile of rotten fish intestines but he did not die. Süskind uses delicate and humorous language to describe this birth that is full of supernatural and rotten odors, sins and rumors—"The streets reeked of feces, the backyards reeked of urine, the stairwells reeked of rotten wood and rats, and the kitchens reeked of rotten vegetables and suet" (Süskind, 2003, pp. 1-2). "The newborn was left between the fish intestines and the severed fish head, with a bunch of flies perching on it" (Süskind, 2003, p. 4). But Grenouille has tenacious vitality and a keen sense of smell. He has been able to identify everything in the world through smell since he was six years old. He can distinguish subtle fragrance or rancid smell, but he is regarded as an alien because he has no human smell. This contradiction gave rise to Grenouille's inner awareness of incompleteness. For him, obtaining "human smell" is the last condition for him to become a real human being in a biological sense, so he constantly searches for, seizes and copies various human smells. After he calmly killed twenty-five girls and obtained their scent to create a peerless perfume, he still could not get his own scent. If the pursuit of "human smell" means Grenouille's conscious awareness of becoming a complete human being, then the ultimate inability to obtain his own smell mocks the false biological construction of a complete human being from a transcendental perspective. Therefore, Grenouille began to shift from the pursuit of "human smell" in biology to the construction of human subjectivity in the sociological sense.

Since then, Grenouille has used his innate sense of smell to open and control the world. He worked hard to create perfume to make up for the lack of body odor, allowing everyone to see him as a human being, and to find his subjective identity as a human being from others. In this sense, Grenouille's process of making perfume is his pursuit of human subject status and value attribution. But the results of his pursuit were delayed throughout his life. Even when he confused and ridiculed an era and realized his dream of perfume, he still did not feel the joy or satisfaction of being a perfect person. "Under this mask he has no face and no smell at all" (Süskind, 2003, p. 316). The "human smell" that proves his existence is still absent. Grenouille, who does not have the "human smell", is not a person in the strict sense. "He never knows who he is, so he doesn't care about the world, himself, or his perfume" (Süskind, 2003, p. 316).

The novel takes the prosperous handicraft civilization of France in the 18th century as the background, and uses extremely complicated language to carefully present the materials, processes, machines, tastings and transactions of perfume manufacturing, leaving us amazed at the prosperity of the industrial economy produced in that era. "But when we take away all the material outer layers and only cast our inquiring gaze on the spiritual level of the entire society, we will strongly feel that the author's Grenouille may be a microcosm of the entire

world, and its shortcomings are precisely the flaws of the world" (Wang, 2010, p. 33). In France and even the whole of Europe in the 18th century when scientific and technological rationality was highly developed and the human spirit had nowhere to rest, people urgently needed to get rid of the fog of chaotic and crazy reality, and longed for a superior almighty god to guide the direction of the human spirit and soul. Grenouille seemed to be such a "superman" existence. On the one hand, he is the "god" that European society has been waiting for for a long time in the eighteenth century. Like a god, he has the superpower to lead and reconstruct the entire world. On the other hand, he is unable to obtain even the most basic human body odor, and has inherent physical and ability defects, dooming Grenouille to become the false "Almighty God" of the era. In this contradictory relationship, Süskind hints at Grenouille's lack of subjectivity as a "human being". Smelllessness flaws and imperfections deprive Grenouille of the possibility of becoming a "god". He has become a kind of existence that is neither a "god" nor a "thing" about a "human being". From "God" to "human" and then to "thing", it is not only Grenouille's true path to pursue the failure of human subjectivity, but also reflects the author's worries and reflections on the loss of human subject values caused by the violence of industrial civilization.

Indifference and Hatred

Grenouille is indifferent to people and things in the external world, loses the ability to feel, ignores physical pain, and is insensitive to spiritual insults, but only retains a "hate" for the world. Grenouille attempts to rely on this power of hatred to find the subjective values of human beings in hatred and desire to obtain the rewards of hatred. This set of contradictory relationships embodies Grenouille's desire to capture the feeling of existence as a real human being in the emotional realm following his debacle in the world of perfume.

Grenouille contracted anthrax from Grima and syphilitic scar variant from Baldini, complicated by advanced purulent measles. He was dying both times, but his insensibility to the pain allowed him to miraculously survive, defeating the threat of death with indifference. At the same time, Grenouille is lonely and indifferent, losing the ability to make complex psychological feelings and moral judgments about the world. Even for the twenty-five girls he brutally murdered, he still did not feel any moral judgment or spiritual uneasiness. It reflects his lack of perception in both body and soul, leaving only "hate" for the ugly people in the world, and hoping to get people's "hate" for him in equal measure, even if he only gets this real feeling from one person's response. However, "his hopes were dashed" (Süskind, 2003, p. 250). On the one hand, Grenouille refuses to accept and participate in this world with indifference. He seems to be outside of real life, and even his own physical suffering and feelings of survival are abandoned. In this sense, Grenouille still does not exist as a "person" in the complete sense. On the other hand, he uses the remaining "hate" to prove his own values and uses it as a bond, hoping to establish an emotional connection of "hate" with others. To this end, the novel provides sufficient reasonable proof for Grenouille's "hate": Various ugliness in the capitalist society in Paris, France in the 18th century—Paris is a city of stench and filth, which makes people sick and tired; The world stinks, people cover up and tell lies; Business owners are greedy, shameless and stupid. Grenouille uses his unique perfume to create a mask to blend his hatred of the world. With the help of this bottle of perfume, Grenouille became the "Almighty God of Fragrance" and longed for the world's "hate", but ironically collected the world's crazy love for him. Therefore, the dislocation and inequality between love and hate in giving and receiving once again delayed Grenouille's desire to construct the meaning of human subject.

That drop of psychedelic perfume is like a magic mirror, revealing the ugly, obscene but sanctimonious world's prototype. Grenouille completely despaired of this deformed, disguised, and false society. The author carefully portrays the psychology of the protagonist. The unspeakable love from others for Grenouille deepened his pain, and he hated people even more for succumbing to the mask of perfume. He knew that he was deified not because of himself but because of the magical perfume he created. "He can never be satisfied in love, but only in hate, in hating, in being hated" (Süskind, 2003, p. 249). Unable to break out of the false love of others and the hatred in his own heart, the illusion and destruction of his subjective values and even his sense of survival made him finally choose to return to the place of his birth. He once again used the bottle of magic perfume to let a group of "hoodlums, thieves, murderers, knife brawlers, prostitutes, deserters, and desperate young people" (Süskind, 2003, p. 262) eat themselves completely in the name of love, choosing the path of self-dissolution. The cruel ending of the novel is made in the name of love, creating a huge irony. For Grenouille, the ambiguous identity of being both a person and an object prevented him from completing the self-proving of the meaning of human subject. The world is a container that he can never perceive. Therefore, since neither "perfume" nor "hate" can complete the construction of human subjective value, then death, to a certain extent, completes its self-proving in the most extreme way. It proves to the world that Grenouille can disappear and die just like any other human life. Through the artistic effect of irony, the author completed the mockery of the construction of subjectivity in the form of physical death.

Aphasia and Power

Grenouille used the "smell" of his magical perfume to create a "god" identity for himself. The "smell" here is a metaphor for Grenouille's absolute power over human manipulation. Grenouille, who has superpowers in the Kingdom of Smell, has been almost aphasic throughout his life. The loss of discourse ability, that is, the loss of the power behind discourse, is ultimately destined to lose the integrity of the subjective meaning of those with discourse power.

Grenouille's motivation for survival is to complete the construction of his own subjective values by controlling others. In the novel, the girls who symbolized purity, beauty and love were brutally deprived of their lives by Grenouille, just because he wanted to possess their fragrance, let their fragrance become his "template" for "arranging other fragrances", and let their fragrance become his own "human scent". Süskind uses "girls" as a metaphor in his novel to reveal Grenouille's crazy pursuit of the natural beauties in order to satisfy his own needs, that is, the violence of the subject's cold possession of the object. Here, violent possession becomes a manifestation of power. It overrides law and morality and becomes a symbol of evil. When Grenouille used his peerless perfume to become the "Almighty God of Fragrance", he created an apocalyptic scene full of confusion, madness, shamelessness and ugliness. The "heretic" Grenouille, who was originally rejected and suppressed, became a "god" worshiped by people during the carnival. Here, power not only commits violence in the name of love, kindness and compassion, but also creates a magic that shakes secular moral principles. In this paradoxical and bizarre situation, Grenouille's desire to construct his subjectivity was also ruthlessly ridiculed. The world worshiped the fantastic perfume, not him or his power.

Therefore, Süskind left Grenouille almost aphasic throughout his life. "Discourse is power" is one of the strongest metaphors that Foucault contributed to the world in his inaugural lecture "The Order of Discourse". He

believes that discourse can control the subjects in the discourse and their statement activities. This control includes three aspects: (1) Discourse gives the right to state, that is, "Who has the right to speak"; (2) Discourse limits the content of speech, that is, "What should we say"; and (3) Discourse constructs the subject into a speaking subject, subjectivity is constructed by discourse, and the question "Who am I?" must be answered by discourse (Foucault, 1971, pp. 1-80). From these three aspects, Grenouille's aphasia is his abandonment of the right to speak, his rejection of the content of his discourse, and his deconstruction of the subjectivity of his discourse, which delays and obscures the subjective question of "Who am I?" Grenouille's aphasia is essentially a failure to construct a speaking subject. In a state of aphasia, even if Grenouille has supreme power over all living beings in the field of smell, he will still fall into deeper identity anxiety. A "I" who doesn't know "who" I am, naturally cannot become the omnipotent God worshiped by everyone.

Through three pairs of contradictory narratives, the novel completes Grenouille's process of finding and constructing a real person from three aspects: human smell (perfume), human emotion (hate), and human speech (power). However, it encountered deconstruction from its own smelllessness, senselessness and aphasia, thus implying the lack of subjectivity and values of Grenouille and even the entire human race. This incompleteness is the author's reflection on the conflict between industrial civilization, enlightenment rationality and human nature through the image of perfume. People's extreme worship of material things leads to the loss of humanity and lack of faith. Enlightenment rationality killed God and overturned various moral norms in the classical period, but it did not establish its own beliefs and moral norms accordingly, resulting in the development of spiritual morality lagging far behind the development of instrumental rationality. "The self without God is morally corrupt, spiritually empty, and behaves ugly under the control of desire for power and primitive instinctive desires. Moreover, it is extremely ironic that the 'heretic' Grenouille, who was originally rejected and suppressed, became a 'god' worshiped by people during the carnival. This weirdness creates a magic that ironically shakes secular moral principles and intensifies the author's concerns about moral crises" (Nie, 2010, p. 113).

Conclusion

As Voltaire once said: The world is a huge temple dedicated to the god of discord. "Perfume" is exactly a magical world full of discordant and contradictory narratives. Amidst all the contradictions and dislocations, it lies the author's serious thinking about human beings, human nature and world order.

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