

The role of women in perfume and the assault

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The Role of Women in Perfume and The Assault In most cases, women are portrayed either as mother, lovers or people that fulfill men's sexual needs. Both Perfume by Patrick Suskind and The Assault by Harry Mulisch is no exception. However, the reader might notice that in both novels women are portrayed in a flat, two-dimensional way and yet, paradoxically, have a significant symbolic value. The women of these novels seem to project the protagonists' needs for these kinds of love and without them the novel would not exist.

Therefore, they are not important for who they are, but rather for what they represent- the maternal and sexual love for men. In The Assault, Anton's mother barely appears in the novel and yet we can notice how her subtly strong character had left a mark on Anton's life. Her importance lays in what she represents in his childhood memory- a strong woman who is the core of the family. " ... She had a cavity in her tooth that could not be treated just then; to relieve the pain she had found a leftover clove in the kitchen to put on the sore spot, just as her mother and grandmother used to do.

She sat up straight, but her husband across the table was bent over, reading a book. " (Mulisch, 10) Though this is a little detail that Mulisch had added, it characterizes her by inferring that she was strong. A contributing factor could be the setting of the novel. They were in time of war and the circumstances force her to be strong. We can also see a contrast between the mother and the father, the father was bending while she was sitting straight up. This infers that she was the more dominant figure. Therefore, even though Anton had lost both parents.

The reader notices that Anton later on seeks Truus and Saskia to replace her, but does not search for anyone to replace his father. Truus who is also barely appears in the novel is a proof of how Anton never fully recovered of losing his mother. She was present in a time where he needed her affection.

However, she is like a bridge to Anton between maternal and sexual love. “ He touched her fingers; she took hold of his hand and pulled him close. On the cot she embraced him with one arm and with her other hand pressed his head against her breast.

She smelled of sweat but also of something sweetish that he couldn't identify. Perhaps it was perfume. ” (Mulish, 32). Though she represents security and love like his mother did to him. The word choice by Mulisch insinuates Anton's sexual awakening. The fact that they are on a ' cot' or a bed highlights the intimacy. She embraced him like a mother would embrace her child, however the focus on her ' breasts' arouses sexual feelings in Anton which he will realize later on in his life.

Moreover, in the absence of light and presence of complete darkness, Anton cannot use his sight that is where the tactile and olfactory sense becomes heightened. This causes the scene to be more intense in the reader's head. Saskia who is Anton's first wife is also a two dimensional character in the book that is only present as Anton's image of Truss. When Anton grows up he realizes that Truus was more than a mother figure to him. “ There was nothing wrong with Saskia's looking like the idea of Truus.

Truus had under these circumstances, aroused an image in his mind to which Saskia seemed to respond, and that was fine, for it was not Truus's image,

but his own, and where it came from was unimportant..." (Mulish, 131) The use of the word 'aroused' has a sexual connotation which came from the fact he felt intimacy in the dark and as a young boy, though unconsciously this intimacy aroused something inside him. Truus became like a fantasy of love that he perused. Saskia represents that love that he needed.

Moreover, the addition of 'under the circumstances' insinuates that at the previous moment Anton needed certain affection which was in a form of a mother. However, now he needs it in a non-platonic form. This is where it shows that Anton never wholly recovered from losing his mother. As Sigmund Freud's theory suggests, a man unconsciously marries a mother figure. Therefore, since Truus seemed to represent a mother figure and Saskia is his image of Truus, the mother figure in this novel is linked with romantic interest.

Due to all the events that had happened to Anton, the woman he encounters in the dark (Truus) embodies his need for courageous, maternal and erotic love. This makes the two dimensional character Saskia, a symbol for his erotic desire. Anton in this passage is trying to reassure himself that where Saskia's image came from is 'unimportant', however later on the readers realize that it actually does matter to him as they get divorced. Similarly to *The Assault*, the women in *Perfume* are portrayed very superficially and like Saskia, they represent erotic love. Although Grenouille seems uninterested in sex, there are many sexual parallels.

In passages where Grenouille smells the women, Suskind describes it very sexually. "... he (Grenouille) tore off her dress, and the stream of scent

became a flood that inundated him its fragrance. He thrust his face to her skin and wept his flared nostrils across her, from belly to breast, to neck, over her face and hair... .. down her genitals, to her thighs and white legs. ” (Suskind, 45). Suskind uses imagery to form an image the reader’s mind. Like Mulisch did in the scene where Anton meets Truus, Suskind highlights the olfactory sense rather than others.

This makes us smell the women and almost feel Grenouille’s sensation. He describes the power of the scent as a flood of water that moves towards Grenouille and floods him. He is completely taken over by it as if it were sexual feelings. However, he has no interest in the girl herself, but rather what she possesses. Here is where he parallels to Anton, who is not interested in whom Truus was but in what she represents to him. Stripping the females from their scent degrades them and reveals how Grenouille, like Anton, extracts what he needs of the woman and forgets about her as a whole.

The remains of the females, which are their individualities, are forgotten like dead flower petals. “ They lay on the surface for a moment, like eyes facing instant death, and lost all the color the moment the spatula pushed them down into the warm, oily embrace. ...And it was not that the dead blossoms continued to give off scent there in the oil - no, the oil itself had appropriated the scent of the blossoms. ” (Suskind, 181). This is the processes that Grenouille uses to steal scents from girls. Therefore, the blossoms here are a metaphor for the girls.

This insinuates that they are only important for their scent which pleases Grenouille. The rest of the girl, which is her personality and her individuality all lies insignificantly on the surface 'like eyes facing instant death'. Suskind continues to say how the blossoms had lost their color the moment Grenouille pushed the spatula. Since color is what makes them beautiful it is insinuated that when Grenouille steals their scents, they are no longer beautiful for their inner selves. This makes Grenouille selfish. Anton and him extract what they need from the women and forget about her a whole.

They do this to replace love that they were deprived of in their childhood. Like Anton Grenouille is deprived of his mother's love and losing her has had a crucial impact on him. Since there is a thin line between different kinds of love, Grenouille, who is missing maternal love projects his needs in a sexual way. HE steals the essence of women for his own personal pleasure. "They lay on the surface for a moment, like eyes facing instant death, and lost all the color the moment the spatula pushed them down into the warm, oily embrace. And it was not that the dead blossoms continued to give off scent there in the oil - no, the oil itself had appropriated the scent of the blossoms." (Suskind, 181) The use of specific time emphasizes the extent of Grenouille's love- with the scent. Smell is always a strong sense that people associate with people they care for. It is intimate. Therefore it seems like non-platonic love. Moreover, the fact that Suskind writes that Grenouille is not in love with the girl, but the scent emphasizes how Grenouille, like Anton uses women to project his needs.

In conclusion, both Mulisch and Suskind do not show any effort in making the reader know the female characters deeply. Some women even remain unnamed for the whole novel! However, their presence is extremely crucial for the protagonists. Women are a projection of men's needs. Some people may be offended when noticing such aspects of the portrayal of women in these two novels. There are two interpretations to why the authors portrayed the women that way. They could be either critiquing society for objectifying women or this portrayal reflects the authors' own opinions