

Perfume Study Guide

Perfume by Patrick Süskind

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Plot Summary

Perfume is the story of Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, a man born into eighteenth-century France with a superhuman sense of smell, but with no personal odor of his own. He is orphaned at birth, and grows up without love to become a cold and calculating murderer. He is motivated in his crime by a desire to possess the scent of a young woman named Laure Richis, which he intends to steal using the extraction methods he has learned as a journeyman perfumer. From this girl's scent, he creates the most powerful perfume in the world, which has the effect of making anyone who smells it fall in love with the wearer. Grenouille uses the perfume to escape punishment for the murders he has committed, even gaining forgiveness from Laure Richis' father. He is not satisfied, however, for he still has no genuine scent of his own. In a bizarre suicidal ending to the novel, Grenouille wanders into a camp of vagrants and douses himself with his powerful scent. In a fit of passion, the vagrants attack and eat him.

Grenouille is born in a fish stall and left among the guts on the ground to die by his mother. She is eventually executed for letting four previous children die, and Grenouille is taken in by the church. The monk in charge of him has trouble finding a wet nurse to feed him, however, because he is a ravenous eater and because he has no smell. He is sent to live with a woman who takes in orphans, Madame Gaillard.

As Grenouille grows up under the harsh but fair hand of Gaillard, he realizes he has an ability that nobody else has, which is a superhuman sense of smell. He is able to detect the slightest odor from across the city, and can use scent the way others use vision to perceive objects. Yet he has no individual scent of his own, something that makes him practically invisible to others, who do not realize that they use their sense of smell to detect the presence of other people.

Madame Gaillard sends Grenouille to work for a tanner named Grimal. He slaves away for years for Grimal, doing the worst of chores, biding his time until an opportunity comes along. He is gradually given more and more freedom by Grimal, which he uses to explore the scents of the city. One night during a fireworks display, he smells a scent so lovely that he is compelled to follow it. It comes from a young woman who is sitting alone in a courtyard. Grenouille comes from behind her and strangles her, taking in her scent as she dies. He creeps away and is not caught.

Opportunity turns up when he is asked to deliver a load of skins to Giuseppe Baldini, a master perfumer. Grenouille maneuvers his way inside Baldini's workshop and talks him into letting him create a perfume for him from the ingredients in his shop. Grenouille has by this time memorized thousands of scents, and has a desire to create new ones by learning the perfumer's art. Baldini is skeptical, but indulges Grenouille.

Grenouille astounds Baldini by creating a perfume that is overwhelmingly beautiful. He takes Grenouille on as an assistant, and exploits his amazing ability to become a rich and famous perfumer. He teaches Grenouille what he can about extracting the scent from natural materials, but Grenouille wants to learn more. Baldini eventually grants



Grenouille his journeyman perfumer papers and lets him go, provided he never tell that he was the secret of Baldini's success.

Grenouille sets out for Grasse, the center of the scent-making trade, to learn more about the craft. Once outside the city, however, he begins to avoid the smell of humans, and eventually finds himself on a desolate mountaintop with no trace of human scent. Here he becomes a hermit, living in a dark cave for seven years, during which time he lives in his imagination populated by all the smells he has ever encountered. The most wonderful of these is the scent of the young girl he murdered. Then suddenly he has the realization for the first time that he himself has no smell. He panics and leaves the cave. He decides he must create a scent for himself and makes off toward Grasse. On his way, he is taken in by a nobleman, Taillade-Espinasse, who rehabilitates Grenouille and gives him some money. He steals away from Taillade-Espinasse and makes his way to Grasse.

Arriving in Grasse, Grenouille once again encounters a smell like the one of the girl he murdered in Paris. He follows the scent to the mansion of a scent wholesaler named Richis. It is Richis's daughter that Grenouille can smell, and he begins to devise a plan to possess her scent for himself. He takes a job in a perfumer's workshop and begins to learn more about the methods of extracting scent from things. He begins to experiment with robbing the scent of living beings such as small animals. After some success, he begins to carry out his plan.

The town becomes terrified as several young girls turn up murdered, naked, and with their hair cut off. The killer cannot be found. It is Grenouille killing the girls. He wraps them in oil-soaked linen as they die and extracts their scent. This scent he concentrates into an intense oil he keeps hidden in small bottles in his cabin. The town of Grasse is desperate to stop the killings. One day the killings just stop. After six months, they have largely forgotten about them.

There is one person who has not forgotten the murders, however, and that is Richis. He has decided that he has some insight to the motive of the killer and believes, correctly, that his own daughter is the ultimate target. He packs up his household and pretends to leave for the town of Grenoble. On the way, he and his daughter break away and head toward the sea. He intends to have her married to the son of a baron right away. Once she has lost her virginity, he reasons, the killer will no longer desire her.

Grenouille is able to track them with his nose, however. While they are stopped at an inn, he climbs into Laure's window and kills her, taking her scent as he has done with the other girls. He gets away and returns to Grasse.

He is soon caught, as he had been seen at the inn. He confesses to the murders and is sentenced to be executed. On the day of the executions, however, he steps out of the carriage that is carrying him to the scaffold, wearing the ultimate perfume that he has created from the scents of his murder victims. At once the crowd is convinced that he must be innocent. The scent makes them feel they are in love with him, and that he



must be set free. Even Richis falls into tears, begging Grenouille to forgive him. Meanwhile, the amassed crowd descend into a gigantic sexual orgy.

Grenouille passes out. He is overcome once again by the panic that he has no scent of his own. He wakes up in Richis's mansion, in Laure's very bed. Richis asks him to be his adopted son, he loves him so much. Grenouille agrees, but as soon as possible he leaves the mansion and sets off out of Grasse toward Paris, with a bottle of his ultimate perfume.

He is going to Paris to die. He can make people love him with his perfume, but it will only ever be a hollow love because he has no scent of his own. He enters Paris and goes back to the neighborhood where he was born, near a foul-smelling cemetery. There, a group of vagrants have built a small fire and are gathered around it. Grenouille steps into the circle of vagrants and douses himself with the ultimate perfume. The vagrants are overcome with love and desire for Grenouille, to the point that they attack and eat him.



Characters

Jean-Baptiste Grenouille

The main character of the novel. Grenouille is orphaned as an infant and raised in strict conditions by a woman named Madame Gaillard, who takes in orphans. He is a small man, ugly, and with a crippled foot. He possesses a superhuman sense of smell, which he can use as other people use sight to perceive objects and other people. He does not give off any scent himself, however, which makes him nearly invisible to others. He grows up without any sense of right and wrong, it seems, and he does not hesitate to kill a young girl when it suits him in order to experience her scent. Later he will kill twenty-five other girls in the same fashion, and for much the same reason.

Grenouille is cold and ruthless in his cunning, and is able to maneuver and manipulate others into helping him, largely by letting others think they are exploiting him. He uses subtle flattery to ingratiate himself to people, taking from them what knowledge he needs to complete his own schemes. In this way he enters into the service of Baldini, who helps him become a journeyman perfumer.

Grenouille does not realize that he lacks a scent until he has spent seven years as a young man living in a dark cave, away from all human contact. When he does realize it, he panics at first, then sets out to create a scent for himself that will fool others into smelling him as another person. He achieves this goal, but ultimately is not satisfied because he will never be able to have a scent of his own. Grenouille ultimately commits suicide.

Antoine Richis

Antoine Richis is the only person in the novel who comes close to understanding Grenouille and his motivations, although the two characters meet only briefly near the end of the story. He is a very wealthy widower living in Grasse, with aspirations to ally his fortunes with the French nobility. To do this, he plans first to use his wealth to arrange a marriage of his daughter, Laure, with the son of a Baron, and then to perhaps marry a noblewoman himself.

Richis's daughter, Laure, is his most treasured love. Without ever having seen him, he comprehends that the person who is murdering young women in Grasse is ultimately after his daughter. He is correct in this, for Laure is Grenouille's final target. Richis is also correct in guessing that the killer is somehow collecting his victims for some larger purpose.

He is a successful businessman and his competitive drive leads him to devise a plan to outwit the unseen killer. He plans to make his daughter an undesirable target by marrying her as soon as possible to the Baron's son. This, he guesses correctly, will ruin the killer's plans.



Richis cannot know the extent of Grenouille's abilities, however, and his plan fails. He is shocked, but subdued in his response. He wants only for justice to be done and for Grenouille to be executed. Following the miraculous transformation at the execution, however, Richis forgives Grenouille and even asks him to be his adopted son. He does not know why, but Grenouille reminds him of his own daughter.

Giuseppe Baldini

A master perfumer of Paris. Baldini was once very successful, but he is aging along with his traditional clientèle, and his business is waning when he meets Grenouille. He changes his plan to retire to Italy in order to take in this genius of scent, who makes him very rich.

Baldini is a vain man, and is very conscious of his place in society compared to Grenouille's. He gives Grenouille almost complete freedom, but Grenouille is careful to earn it by degrees from Baldini, lest his sensibilities be offended. Baldini is a religious man, but his plans to show his piety are interrupted by other events.

Baldini eventually dies when his home and entire perfumery fall into the Seine River shortly after Grenouille leaves Paris.

Marquis de La Taillade-Espinasse

A comical figure of a French nobleman, given to developing offbeat scientific theories. Taillade-Espinasse believes that the earth gives off a fatal gas and that the farther one is from the ground, the healthier one will be. When he learns that Grenouille has been living in a cave for seven years, he seizes the chance to test his theory. He "rehabilitates" Grenouille with fresh air and diet, or so he imagines. He does not know that Grenouille has created an illusion through scent. Grenouille uses Taillade-Espinasse to gain access to a perfumer's workshop, where he concocts his first mixture of human-smelling perfume.

Madame Gaillard

Madame Gaillard is the woman who raises Grenouille after he is brought to her by Father Terrier. She has no sense of smell herself, and so is not bothered by the fact that Grenouille gives off no odor. She is a harsh but fair mother to Grenouille. When the church stops paying her for keeping him, however, she immediately sells him to Grimal the tanner as a worker.

Druot

The journeyman perfumer who works for Madame Arnulfi in her former husband's perfume workshop in Grasse. He is a large man, and is the lover of Madame Arnulfi. He



marries her after her period of mourning is over and becomes a master perfumer. After Grenouille is acquitted of the string of murders in Grasse, Druot is tortured into confessing and is hanged.

Madame Arnulfi

A widow whose husband had been a master perfumer, and the owner of the perfume workshop where Grenouille finds employment in Grasse. She is a careful businessperson and is quite well-to-do.

Chenier

Chenier is an assistant to Baldini, watching over the perfume shop when he is working. He has worked for many years for Baldini and hopes one day to inherit the business. He has a nervous breakdown when Baldini dies and his shop and all his papers are lost in the river.

Grimal

Grimal is the rude tanner who employs the young Grenouille. He gives the boy the worst chores, not expecting him to survive for long. Grenouille is tough, however, and Grimal begins to hold him in higher regard. He eventually sells Grenouille to Baldini.

Jeanne Bussie

Jeanne Bussie is the wet nurse who refuses to care for the infant Grenouille because he has no scent. She returns him to Father Terrier.

Father Terrier

Father Terrier is a monk charged with taking care of the infant Grenouille when his mother is executed. He imagines himself the father of the baby boy for a short time, until he gets the impression that Grenouille is smelling him intently. He becomes terrified of the infant and carries it away at once to Madame Gaillard.

Papon

Papon is the executioner at Grasse, in charge of killing Grenouille as sentence for murder. He finds he cannot perform his duty when Grenouille emerges wearing his ultimate perfume.



Laure Richis

Laure Richis is the daughter of Antoine Richis and is the most beautiful young girl in Grasse. It is her scent that Grenouille prizes above all others. She is killed by Grenouille.

Grenouille's Mother

Grenouille's mother is never named. She is a fish merchant in Paris. She has had several children before Grenouille, all of whom she left to die. Grenouille is saved from a similar fate when his mother faints and he begins to scream. She is eventually executed for her crimes.

The Redheaded Girl

The unnamed girl who is Grenouille's first murder victim in Paris. He follows her scent from across the city and finds her peeling plums in a courtyard. He kills her for her scent.

Pelissier

Baldini's rival perfumer in Paris and the creator of the perfume "Amor and Psyche", which Baldini tries to imitate but cannot.

The Cannibals

The group of vagrants in the Cimetiere des Innocents that attack and devour Grenouille out of pure love when he douses himself with his amazing perfume.



Objects/Places

Paris

The largest city in France, where Grenouille grows up. At the time the story takes place, Paris is a crowded, bad-smelling city, and Grenouille lives in one of the foulest-smelling parts of it.

Grasse

A town near the Mediterranean coast that is the center of the French perfume trade. It is located in a valley isolated from the sea, surrounded by flower fields.

The Cimetiere des Innocents

The "Cemetery of the Innocents". A large, open cemetery in Paris near where Grenouille is born. Bodies are often placed in shallow or open pits, and the stench of decay is strong.

The Cave

A long, lightless cave where Grenouille isolates himself from all human scent for seven years. No living thing has ever lived in it prior to Grenouille.

Pont-du-Change

A bridge over the River Seine that has fashionable shops along each side. It is the location of Baldini's perfumery where Grenouille first finds work in the perfume trade.

Notre-Dame Cathedral

A large Catholic cathedral in Paris. Baldini tells himself he will light a candle at the cathedral to give thanks to God several times, but he never does.

River Seine

A major river that runs through the city of Paris.



Rue des Marais

The narrow street where Grenouille tracks down the redheaded girl, his first murder victim, by her scent.

Amor and Psyche

A fashionable perfume created by the perfumer Pelissier. Baldini tries to discover the formula, but cannot. He is amazed to learn that Grenouille can recreate it.

Nuit Napolitaine

The name Baldini gives to the first perfume that Grenouille creates for him, and which starts his rise to fortune and fame.

Grenouille's Perfume

The perfume that Grenouille creates from the personal scents of Laure Richis and twenty-four other young women, and which causes anyone who smells it to become uncontrollably in love with the wearer.

La Napoule

A castle on the Mediterranean Sea. It is in the village near the castle that Grenouille tracks down and murders Laure Richis

Massif Central

A mountain range in France where Grenouille finds isolation in his dark cave.

Social Sensitivity

The novel's sales figures strongly suggest that *Perfume* spoke, and continues to speak, to the sensibility of the general reader — to expectations, needs, and moods, both conscious and subconscious. The central figure JeanBaptiste Grenouille inspires respect for his abilities and workmanship, his perseverance, and his success in surmounting his social origins. Further, the creativity of Grenouille evokes a mass appeal which is less rational in its origins; his art generates a sensuous intoxication that envelops the figures about him and finds its vicarious effect in the imagination of the reader. He shares the qualities of a child, narcissistic, egocentric, and irresponsibly self-indulgent. Savoring the headiness of unlimited self-gratification, he is absolutely autonomous and beholden to no one for his power; unfettered by moral constraints, he works his will upon society.



Techniques

Perfume shares several traditions of the novel genre. The work at the outset presents itself as historical in nature, purporting to deal with a French figure of the eighteenth century no less brilliant than the Marquis de Sade, Louis Antoine Saint-Just, Joseph Fouche, and Bonaparte — and no less arrogant, misanthropic, immoral, and wicked.

And while the focus is upon Grenouille as the central figure, Perfume is divided into four parts which treat his development in the fashion of the educational novel (bildungsroman). Part I concludes with the end of his apprenticeship to Baldini and departure from Paris: II deals with his years of isolation and his introduction to the Enlightenment society of Montpellier by the marquis: III represents residence in Grasse while developing techniques for the manufacture of perfumes; and the final Part IV details flight from the site of his scheduled execution to die as on the day of his birth among the odors of Paris. The skills of Grenouille suggest an additional tradition in the genre of the novel where an artist serves as the central figure (künstlerroman).

That richness and variety manifested by drawing upon several traditions in the genre of the novel are reflected in the use of the techniques and styles of various literary-historical periods. An omniscient narrative voice that is somewhat aloof predominates in text containing almost no dialog. The eighteenth-century narrative practice which destroys the illusion of objective distance is employed when the author includes the reader in the first person plural, "Since we are to leave Madame Galliard behind us at this point in our story . . ."

In his relationship to Baldini, an allusion to sixteenth-century historical circumstances is made in Grenouille's perceived need for journeyman's papers that will allow him to travel and take work; for this reason he readily agrees to Baldini's conditions, recalling romanticism in his desire "to empty himself of his innermost being, of nothing less than his innermost being, which he considered more wonderful than anything else the world had to offer."

That same literary-historical vein is preserved in the scene of the solitary Grenouille wandering over the landscape beneath the moon and avoiding all human beings in order to be at one with nature; in a solitary, uninhabited region he retreats to a cave atop a mountain in the Auvergne to seek proximity to himself.

The style and technique of nineteenth-century realism are reflected in the detailed catalogues as, for example, that of all the foul smells generated by eighteenth-century Paris and its dwellers at the time of Grenouille's birth. At Baldini's we are provided with an elaborate list of all the materials used in the preparation of perfumes and a marvelous description thereof.



Themes

The Nature of Love

Süskind examines the nature of love throughout the novel, both what love is and what love means. By connecting the emotion of love directly with the fleeting world of scent, Süskind is perhaps suggesting that, like scent, love is something difficult to grasp or to express in language.

Grenouille grows up without love. Süskind writes that given the circumstances of his younger life, Grenouille has a choice of demanding to be fed or to be loved, but not both. This is largely because of his lack of scent. The first person to try to care for him, the wet nurse Jeanne Bussie, rejects him because he does not smell like a child should. He has no scent at all, and she believes him to be evil because of it. Father Terrier, who takes Grenouille back from the wet nurse, at first shows tenderness toward the child, even imagining that he is the father of the infant Grenouille. Once he also finds the child to have no scent his tender feelings evaporate and he does everything possible to be rid of the child.

As Grenouille discovers himself as a young man, love is closely tied to scent. His rapture at the scent of the redheaded girl is a kind of love, and it is the evocation of love that Grenouille sees as the highest achievement of his art as a perfumer and of his life.

Yet Grenouille does not really seem to be wishing for love for its own sake, but only for the experience of evoking it in others. He is the only person alive who realizes the powerful connection between scent and love, and so is also the only person who knows that he himself could never be truly loved, for he has no scent. Süskind is perhaps suggesting that the practice of analyzing love as Grenouille has carefully analyzed the scent that causes it also destroys it, as he destroys the young women whose scent he steals.

The Power of Scent

The primary theme throughout the novel is the subject of scent and the sense of smell and how they relate to our social interactions. Süskind suggests that we rely on scent far more than we are aware, even using it to tell other humans apart from other living things. The well-established connection between scent and memory is referred to. The raw power of scent is also examined.

Grenouille possesses a superhuman ability to smell and discern the individual odors that make up more complex scents. He is able to commit these scent to memory and create entirely new ones in his mind. He notices that humans are greatly affected by scent, although they are not aware of it. Grenouille is very self-aware of how scent affects his own feelings, although his range of emotion is limited, perhaps because his highly analytical sense of smell does not let him "feel" scents as others do.



There is one scent that Grenouille does "feel" more than others, however—the scent of young, innocent women. When he smells the redheaded girl from across the river and follows her scent to her, enraptured, he is so greatly affected that he kills the girl to possess her scent. This is of course how Grenouille himself meets his end. He douses himself with the concentrated scent of twenty-five virgins and a small crowd kills him to possess him, although they are unaware that they do so out of love for his scent. Süskind hints that those sensitive enough, like Grenouille, or those faced with a powerful enough odor, like the cannibal vagrants, will even kill.

But to those unaware of the power of scent, this passion is indiscernible from the scents themselves. Grenouille has the ability to tell the difference, an ability that becomes a curse as he comes to realize that scent is a kind of mask, and that beneath this mask, he does not even exist to the world.

The Ambiguity of Morality

There is no question that Grenouille is evil. He arrives at this conclusion himself, and it is his own motivation for the acts he commits to create his ultimate perfume. Yet Süskind does not condemn the character in his narrative, he simply states his evilness as a matter of fact and leaves the interpretation to the reader.

Grenouille is evil but not in a conventional sense. It is not that he is immoral, but that he seems to have no morals at all. He is driven only by the practical requirements of completing his plan to create the most beautiful scent in the world. Stated in this way, his goal seems almost heroic, but of course his method of achieving it requires the murder of twenty-five innocent young women.

Indeed, there is an ambiguity to the whole arc of the narrative, which follows the path of a more conventional rags to riches story, where a hero born into poverty and deplorable conditions improves his condition through hard work and a little luck until he emerges at the end of the novel a successful, wealthy man. This is the path that Grenouille follows, even to the point where he is to be adopted by a very wealthy perfume merchant and become rich himself.

But riches do not tempt Grenouille, and this is one way in which he is more like a character from a heroic epic. He serves a higher purpose. He is striving toward beauty, an ideal that is often associated with morality, and there is no doubt that he achieves the realization of this beauty. He does this by means that the rest of the world finds unacceptable, except when they themselves experience this beauty first-hand. On the one hand, this causes them to drop their morals temporarily and have unabashed sexual relations with one another. On the other hand, however, they also offer a kind of forgiveness to Grenouille, which is recognized as a virtue by most in society. This ever-changing definition of morality raises questions about traditional definitions of morality.



Significant Topics

Two themes, or motifs, develop the qualities of Grenouille that evoke admiration and fascination. A metaphorical comparison suggests his resemblance to an insect, namely the tick, which perches alone in the tree until the appropriate moment to fall upon its victim beneath. Qualities shared by Grenouille and the tick are unobtrusiveness, persistence, toughness, and resistance. Encapsulated within himself, Grenouille, like the insect, gives nothing to the world and endures hard days awaiting a change for the better.

The motif is particularly prominent and appropriate during the period of the young man's brutal apprenticeship to the tanner; the stupor of the work renders him numb and yet enables him to preserve himself inviolate; in the first hours gained free for himself he reawakens to the odors of Paris. Ultimately gaining insight into the metaphor as it applies to him, Grenouille realizes why he has clung so tenaciously and savagely to life: fate has picked him to be the greatest perfumer of all time. Contributing less to the admiration of the reader for Grenouille is an additional aspect of the tick metaphor in the parasitic nature of the man's relationship to other characters, whom he uses as hosts to be sucked dry.

The sensual appeal of this character and his unbridled egocentricity evoke a fascination with evil associated with the devil. Described as an abomination from the day of birth, the infant is identified with the devil by his wet nurse, not because he stinks of sulphur but because he has no odor; moreover, he walks with a limp. Since Grenouille needs nothing for his soul — not security, attention, tenderness, or love — the suggestion is that he may have none. He is predisposed towards darkness and night, at which time he becomes active. His extraordinary olfactory powers gain him the reputation of possessing second sight, a power which in the popular mind is associated with misfortune and death. The unexplained murders of twenty-five women are recognized as the work of the devil.



Style

Point of View

The author's point of view is as an omniscient outside voice, observing the actions of all the characters and witnessing their inner thoughts. Using this point of view allows Süskind to quickly demonstrate the characters' motivations, and to describe events that are not directly witnessed by the main characters, such as the birth of Grenouille and the death of Grimal.

The novel is written from the point of view of a later period in time, suggesting that the events being described are perhaps better understood now than they were when they took place. The author occasionally moves forward in the story to events that take place after the end of the novel, such as the gradual death of Madame Gaillard and the mass denial of the murders by the people of Grasse many years after they took place.

At times, the narrative voice moves away from describing the events of the story and addresses the reader directly. These passages are used to elucidate some of the details of the story, or sometimes to make reference to modern events that are somehow connected to the ones related in the book.

While this point of view allows the author to efficiently describe the motivations of the characters, it is also detached from those characters and makes it more difficult for the reader to identify with any single character by sharing their point of view.

Setting

The setting of *Perfume* is France in the eighteenth century, before the French Revolution, while France was still ruled by a monarch. The first part of the novel takes place in Paris, which at this time is a crowded city, one of the largest in Europe. Within Paris, Grenouille begins his life in a neighborhood near a large, foul-smelling cemetery. He then gains employment in an area of fashionable shops on a bridge over the River Seine. Grenouille returns to Paris at the end of the novel, where he commits suicide near the place he was born.

Once Grenouille leaves Paris, the setting changes to the rural French countryside as he wanders, trying to avoid humans as much as possible. He eventually ends up in the Massif Central mountain range in the province of Auvergne, where he lives in a lightless cave for seven years.

After leaving the cave, Grenouille makes his way to the town of Grasse, located in an inland valley near the Mediterranean Coast of France. This town is a center for the production of perfume, both in the novel and in actuality. Its climate is well suited to growing the flowers from which many scents are extracted. Grasse is the setting for



most of the murders that Grenouille commits, and where he is sentenced to be executed.

The final murder Grenouille commits takes place in a small village near a seaside castle on the Mediterranean Sea called La Napoule. This is where he climbs into the room of the inn where Laure Richis is sleeping and steals her scent.

Language and Meaning

Perfume was originally written in German and then translated into English. As with all translated works, some of the language and meaning is changed during the translation to fit the language.

Translated differences aside, Süskind's choice of subject matter presents a challenge as the written word is a very visually-oriented medium not easily tailored to describe the sense of smell. Süskind refers to this difficulty in a few passages in the novel, such as when Grenouille is learning to speak and finds language inadequate for describing the thousands of scents he can discern. Süskind relies on poetic descriptions to convey smells in writing, such as when he describes an infant's scalp as smelling like caramel, or the scent of the redheaded girl as a pastry soaked in milk.

Süskind's prose is otherwise straightforward, often strikingly so. He sums up seven years of Grenouille's isolation in the cave with one sentence. His description of the murders that Grenouille commits in a plain, direct style, which both accentuates the coldness of the character and makes his actions that much more chilling. The novel begins with an announcement that the story will be told of an abominable man, and the book frequently reads like a biographical news story in precisely descriptive terms. This style creates ambiguity around the moral questions in the novel, leaving the reader to make the determination.

Structure

The book is divided into fifty-one relatively short numbered chapters over four parts. Part One describes the birth and youth of Grenouille up through the point where he leaves the service of Baldini to strike out on his own. Within Part One, the first eight chapters cover Grenouille's upbringing and apprenticeship with Grimal the tanner. The larger portion of Part One concerns Grenouille's apprenticeship with Baldini, the perfumer. It is during this period that he first begins to apply his amazing power of scent toward creative endeavors.

Part Two of the novel describes Grenouille's entrance into the cave and his eventual return to society. As he leaves Paris at the beginning of Part Two, he meanders in the path that is the least likely to bring him into contact with humans and ends up on a desolate mountaintop, where he remains for seven years living inside his own mind in a dark cave. Chapters twenty-three through twenty-nine describe his isolation. Chapters thirty through thirty-four concern the events after he leaves the cave to find a way to



create a scent for himself and describe his rehabilitation and reintroduction into society with the help of Taillade-Espinasse.

Part Three contains some of the most dramatic scenes in the novel, as Grenouille moves to Grasse to perfect the art of extracting scents and develop his ultimate perfume. Chapters thirty-five through forty describe how he obtains a job in a workshop and learns to extract the scent from living things. At the end of this section, Grenouille begins killing young women systematically to make his ultimate perfume. He terrorizes the town, and then stops the killings to lull them into feeling secure that the killer has gone. Chapters forty-one through fifty describe the efforts of Antoine Richis to protect his daughter from the unseen killer, without success. The climax of the novel appears at the end of Part Three, when Grenouille is caught and sentenced to be executed for the murders, but at the execution he reveals his ultimate perfume, which causes the entire town to fall in love with him and believe that he could not be the killer. Part Three ends as Grenouille steals away from the mansion of Richis, who has not only come to believe Grenouille is innocent, but has begged him to become his adopted son.

The final part of the book, Part Four, consists of only one chapter in which Grenouille makes his way to Paris to commit his bizarre suicide, where he causes a band of vagrants to eat him by subjecting them to his ultimate perfume.



Quotes

"In eighteenth-century France there lived a man who was one of the most gifted and abominable personages in an era that knew no lack of gifted and abominable personages. His story will be told here. His name was Jean-Baptiste Grenouille. . ." Part One, Chap. 1, p. 3

"You priests will have to decide whether all this has anything to do with the devil or not, Father Terrier. That's not for such as me to say. I only know one thing: this baby makes my flesh creep because it doesn't smell the way children ought to smell." Part One, Chap. 2, p. 11

"Looked at objectively, however, there was nothing at all about him to instill terror. As he grew older, he was not especially big, nor strong - ugly, true, but not extremely ugly that people would necessarily have taken fright at him. He was not aggressive, nor underhanded, nor furtive, he did not provoke people. He preferred to keep out of their way." Part One, Chap. 5, p. 23

"She was so frozen with terror at the sight of him that he had plenty of time to put his hands to her throat. She did not attempt to cry out, did not budge, did not make the least motion to defend herself. He, in turn, did not look at her, did not see her delicate, freckled face, her red lips, her large sparkling green eyes, keeping his eyes closed tight as he strangled her, for he had only one concern - not to lose the least trace of her scent." Part One, Chap. 8, p. 42

"Behind the counter of light boxwood, however, stood Baldini himself, old and stiff as a pillar, in a silver-powdered wig and a blue coat adorned with gold frogs. A cloud of the frangipani with which he sprayed himself every morning enveloped him almost visibly, removing him to a hazy distance." Part One, Chap. 9, pp. 45-46

"Grenouille stood there cowering and gazing at Baldini with a look of apparent timidity, but which in reality came from a cunning intensity. 'I want to work for you, Maitre Baldini. Work for you, here in your business.' It was not spoken as a request, but as a demand. . ." Part One, Chap. 14, p. 70

"Odors have a power of persuasion stronger than that of words, appearances, emotions or will. The persuasive power of an odor cannot be fended off, it enters into us like breath into our lungs, it fills us up, imbues us totally. There is no remedy for it." Part One, Chap. 14, p. 82

"If ever anything in his life had kindled his enthusiasm - granted, not a visible enthusiasm but a hidden one, an excitement burning with a cold flame - then it was this procedure for using fire, water, steam and a cunning apparatus to snatch the scented soul from matter." Part One, Chap. 18, pp. 95-96



"He would flee farther, increasingly sensitive to the increasingly infrequent smell of humankind. Thus his nose led him to ever more remote regions of the country, ever farther from human beings, driving him on ever more insistently toward the magnetic pole of the greatest possible solitude." Part Two, Chap. 23, p. 118

"He lived only within his mountain, only within the self-made empire of his soul. And he would have remained there until his death (since he lacked for nothing), if catastrophe had not struck, driving him from the mountain, vomiting him back out into the world." Part Two, Chap. 28, pp. 122-23

"As he came out onto the street, he was suddenly afraid, for he knew that for the first time in his life he was giving off a human odor. He found that he stank, stank quite disgustingly." Part Two, Chap. 32, p. 151

"The scents of the garden descended upon him, their contours as precise and clear as the colored bands of a rainbow. And that one, that precious one, that one that mattered above all else, was among them." Part Three, Chap. 35, p. 169

"In May of that same year, the naked body of a fifteen-year-old girl was found in a rose field, halfway between Grasse and the hamlet of Opio east of town. She had been killed by a heavy blow to the back of the head." Part Three, Chap. 40, p. 194

"The most precious thing that Richis possessed, however, was his daughter. She was his only child, just turned sixteen, with auburn hair and green eyes. She had a face so charming that visitors of all ages and both sexes would stand stock-still at the sight of her, unable to pull their eyes away, practically licking that face with their eyes, the way tongues work at ice cream, with that typically stupid, single-minded expression on their faces that goes with concentrated licking." Part Three, Chap. 41, p. 200

"He pushed up the casement, slipped into the room, and laid down his cloth. Then he turned to the bed. The dominant scent came from her hair, for she was lying on her stomach with her head pressed into the pillow and framed by the crook of her arm - presenting the back of her head in an almost ideal position for the blow by the club." Part Three, Chap. 45, p. 216

"The proceedings against Grenouille did indeed move at an extraordinarily rapid pace, not only because the evidence was overwhelming, but also because the accused himself freely confessed to all the murders charged against him." Part Three, Chap. 48, p. 228

"What happened was that from one moment to the next, the ten thousand people on the parade grounds and on the slopes surrounding it felt themselves infused with the unshakable belief that the man in the blue frock coat who had just climbed out of the carriage could not possibly be the murderer." Part Three, Chap. 49, p. 235

"For a moment they fell back in awe and pure amazement. but in the same instant they sensed their falling back was more like preparing for a running start, that their awe was



turning to desire, their amazement to rapture. They felt themselves drawn to this angel of a man. A frenzied, alluring force came from him, a riptide no human could have resisted, all the less because no human would have wanted to resist it, for what that tide was pulling under and dragging away was the human will itself: straight to him." Part Four, Chap. 51, p. 254

Key Questions

The richness and diversity of Suskind's writing enables it to speak to the reader upon several levels coincidentally. Complexity lends itself to a variety of interpretations which may be enhanced by analogy. Literary or historical personalities and events are suggested by Suskind's fictional figures and episodes. Moreover, the author's marked orientation toward literary traditions and his occasional borrowing from other authors contribute additional layers of meaning in instances which may be characterized as irony or parody.

1. The work has been widely hailed as a social history. What aspects of eighteenth century Paris and France are captured most vividly?
2. Can one justifiably interpret the work as political allegory dealing with Adolf Hitler and the Third Reich, a subject which Suskind suggests that all writers of his generation treat willynilly, if subconsciously?
3. What is the relationship between that absence of odor which characterizes Grenouille and his well-developed olfactory powers?
4. Does the author know how to finish off his central character? Is the conclusion aesthetically and psychologically satisfying?
5. Perfume is widely compared with *The Name of the Rose* (1983; *Nome della rosa*, 1980) by Umberto Eco. Although the Italian novel is not, strictly speaking, a literary antecedent of *Perfume*, some similarities exist. Do such bases for comparison suggest themselves to you?



Topics for Discussion

What challenges does the author face when writing about the sense of smell?

What role does the personal human smell play in the novel? How does the author relate it to morality? To innocence?

Is Grenouille immoral? What about those who exploit him, such as Baldini, Taillade-Espinasse, and Druot?

How does Süskind treat religion in the novel?

What connection does Süskind suggest between the sense of smell and emotions such as love and passion?

What purpose does the episode in the cave serve in the narrative of the novel? Is it necessary?

Süskind repeatedly refers to Grenouille as tick-like. In what ways is this the case? How does this attribute of his character affect the story?

Is Grenouille a hero?

Should Grenouille be excused or forgiven for his actions?



Literary Precedents

"In eighteenth-century France there lived a man who was one of the most gifted and abominable personages in an era ..." runs the first line of *Perfume* in the translation of John E. Woods. These words immediately remind the literate German reader of the opening of another well-known tale: "Toward the middle of the sixteenth century, there lived . . . the son of a schoolmaster, one of the most upright and at the same time one of the most terrible men of his day." This is the translation by Martin Greenberg of the first line of the novella *Michael Kohlhaas*, (1844; German, 1810) by Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811), a work purporting similarly to deal with an historical personality, a lone figure larger than life who confounds the social order of his time. Very reminiscent of Kohlhaas, the avenger who refashions the world, is the scene of the God Grenouille creating his realm on the mountain and directing the sun and the rains.

And further Kleistian touches abound. Amusingly characteristic of this author is Baldini's premonition and the catastrophic consequences thereof. Fearing that there will be a reckoning and he will have to pay the piper for having exploited Grenouille, the perfumer resolves to attend church but fails to do so. That night a section of the bridge beneath Baldini's house collapses into the Seine, and he and his wife disappear with their entire business including the formulae for six hundred secret perfumes, all of which are never to be seen again. Further, the formal style is sometimes reminiscent of Kleist, as is the description of crowd scenes, particularly that of people gathering for Grenouille's execution.

The novel of the artist has its precedents in *Cardillac, the Jeweler* (1855; *Das Fraulein von Scuderi*, 1819) by E. T. A. Hoffmann (1776-1822), the story of an artist unable to part from his creations and compelled to murder to recover them until, like Grenouille, he is finally discovered and apprehended. *Tonio Kroger* (1913-1915; German, 1903) by Thomas Mann (1875-1955) is a novella which details the growing self-awareness of a sensitive, young writer, who envies the normality of solid, middleclass people. The peculiar mixture of art and criminality found in *Perfume* and *Cardillac* is similarly present in Mann's *Felix Krull* (1955; German 1954), an amusing, picaresque novel of the adventures of a confidence man.

And Suskind borrows a number of familiar literary motifs. The return to civilization and readaptation thereto after seven years in the wilds recalls the nineteenth-century legends associated with Kaspar Hauser and other feral children. The man lacking an odor recalls a classic of German romantic fiction about a fellow without a shadow in Peter Schlemihl's *Remarkable Story* (1814; *Peter Schlemihls wundersame Geschichte*, 1813) by Adalbert von Chamisso (1781-1838). The absence of odor serves as a magic cape rendering its bearer invisible by depriving man and beast of their olfactory facilities; the magic cape or Tarnkappe is associated in German mythology with the dwarfs who inhabit the innermost regions of the earth.

Related Titles

The theme of the isolated individual or outsider runs throughout Suskind's works; and Grenouille in his use of perfume demonstrates much of the quality of the virtuoso associated in *The Double Bass* (see separate entry) with the lonely musician.

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