

Perfume: The Story of a Murderer



by Patrick Suskind

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Characters

The central figure Jean–Baptiste Grenouille initially evokes respect and interest, which then turn to fascination and horror. He is not a three–dimensional literary creation but a grotesque antihero, who moves through society in an obsessive pursuit of aromas. Lacking an odor himself, he devises various scents which enable him to dominate other people and finally learns to steal the aromatic soul from a living creature, the scent of pure beauty from women who inspire love. After Grenouille is captured for the murder of dozens of young women, Suskind eliminates the bond of empathy, and he intends for readers to no longer want Grenouille to escape and survive. He steps from the bonds of his captors by overwhelming them with aroma provoking an orgy of love. At this instant he is Prometheus creating the divine spark, a self–made God, who is, however, filled with disgust and revulsion for mankind. Bearing no identity of his own, he seeks death at his birthplace among people crazed by the aroma who devour him.

The other characters exist as stick figures for Grenouille's purposes; they offer him a role or provide a context in which he learns a skill or otherwise demonstrates his abilities; there is no motivational interaction among them or with Grenouille. These figures include the orphanage mistress Madame Gaillard, Grimal the tanner, the perfumer Guiseppe Baldini, and the amateur Enlightenment philosopher marquis de La Taillade–Espinasse.

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Social Concerns

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 Jean-Baptiste 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.

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Themes

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.

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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 Fouché, 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 (*ktinstlerroman*).

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.

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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, middle-class 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 Siiskind 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 zvuundersame 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.

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Related Titles

The theme of the isolated individual or outsider runs throughout Siiskind'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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Ideas for Group Discussions

The richness and diversity of Siiskind'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 Siiskind'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 Siiskind suggests that all writers of his generation treat willy–nilly, 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 delta 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?

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