

How is patrick
süskind's
characterization of his
protagonist significant
in criti...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In the novel *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*, Patrick Süskind presents the audience with a central protagonist who is characterized as less than human. Grenouille's potential malevolence is initially indicated by his invariably negative characteristics, as Grenouille's actions as a child differentiate him from other humans within society. Eventually, Grenouille embraces his difference and embarks on a quest of self-discovery. His desire to be not just human, but more than human, through the creation of the ultimate scent becomes his pervading motive. Süskind's characterization of Grenouille throughout his journey provokes questions about human identity and morality. Moreover, the protagonist encourages condemnation of a society that not only allows a malicious being to survive, but thrive.

Süskind foreshadows Grenouille's malevolent nature by characterizing him as an unwelcome and distasteful baby. The accretion of negative adjectives, such as "ugly" [1] and "devilish" [2], to characterize Grenouille suggests that he is both physically and psychologically repulsive. Moreover, Süskind attributes volition to newborn Grenouille, suggesting that his "cry, emitted upon careful consideration... was the newborn's decision against love and nevertheless for life"[3]. By suggesting that newborn Grenouille made a mature decision that inevitably willed the death of his mother makes him seem monstrous. The setting where Grenouille is born establishes a gloomy atmosphere and miasmic olfactory imagery of animals and death. Süskind makes it apparent that these elements that emerge in the characterization of Grenouille later in the novel as in fact inherent from birth. In France there is a prevailing understanding that "an infant is... a prehuman being and does not yet possess a fully developed soul"[4]. Hence, Süskind indicts

<https://assignbuster.com/how-is-patrick-suskinds-characterization-of-his-protagonist-significant-in-criticizing-the-society-in-the-work-perfume-the-story-of-a-murderer/>

society, as it is ironic that there are laws to protect newborns from infanticide even though people consider babies to be subhuman. The undervaluing of young human life is characteristic of the flawed society. Süskind immediately depicts Grenouille malevolently, however the circumstances surrounding his intrauterine neglect and adverse birth prompt the reader to consider whether he is unjustly treated by society. From the outset, Grenouille's name and inability to sustain human relationships act to differentiate him from other humans. Süskind gives Grenouille the name Jean-Baptiste, which alludes to the beheading of Saint John the Baptist; Grenouille's mother was similarly beheaded for infanticide. Additionally, Süskind's choice of the surname Grenouille (French for 'frog') is metaphorical of Grenouille's animalistic traits and lack of human identity. Grenouille begins to express the animalistic qualities that his surname insinuates when he is subjected to the failed guidance of the wet nurses. With ravenous hunger Grenouille "pumped [his wet nurses] dry down to the bones" [5]. This description foreshadows Grenouille's eventual parasitic nature, under which he benefits at society's expense. Although Grenouille's development is partly guided by characters who disregard him early in life, he exploits even them for his personal gain. Hence, Süskind criticizes a society that is so dismissive of Grenouille yet allows him to thrive effortlessly.

As Grenouille's psychotic tendencies begin to manifest in his childhood, Süskind illustrates that Grenouille's human relationships are merely constructed to advance his passion for perfume. As Grenouille advances his perfumery skills, Süskind condemns the societal values of Pre-Revolutionary <https://assignbuster.com/how-is-patrick-suskinds-characterization-of-his-protagonist-significant-in-criticizing-the-society-in-the-work-perfume-the-story-of-a-murderer/>

France that deem Grenouille to be futile in the discipline. Grenouille is described as “ a nobody” [6] in the field of perfumery due to his lack of “ relatives of like standing” [7]. Pre-Revolutionary France was not yet a meritocracy and consequently, despite his perfumery brilliance, Grenouille’s adverse childhood prevented him from being promoted in the business. Moreover, Baldini acquires Grenouille by purchasing him from Grimal. This indicates that the serfdom of the lower class was still present in France. However, Grenouille is able to enhance his perfumery skills despite being exploited by Baldini. While Grenouille initially attains relatively good fortune working for others, he also becomes an inadvertent agent of death. This is indicated in the demise of Madame Gaillard, Grimal, Baldini, and Marquis. Perhaps their deaths are a way for Süskind to condemn their maltreatment of Grenouille. Hence, the society that does not respect Grenouille’s talent for perfumery eventually feels the consequences as his talent becomes an untempered aberration. Süskind explores the flaws in society through Grenouille’s superior olfactory ability. Grenouille is noted to “ bask... in his own existence” [8] in the cave in Massif Centrale in an attempt to abscond from the “ stench” [9] of humankind. It is ironic that society is repulsed by Grenouille because he does not have a scent, when their scent is epitomized by cat excrement, cheese, and vinegar. Hence, Süskind uses Grenouille’s superior sense to show that human essence is inherently rancid. Moreover, Süskind’s diction while Grenouille is in the cave is less descriptive than the diction used when Genouille is in Paris. This shift encapsulates the serenity that Grenouille feels when he is not disturbed by society. Essentially, Süskind

uses scent, the thing that makes Grenouille different to others in society, to show that the society which condemns Grenouille is equally flawed.

Grenouille's predicament and consequent desire to be more than human derive from his inability to impact the olfactory world. Süskind writes that "odors have a power of persuasion stronger than that of words, appearances, emotions, or will" [10]. This premise suggests that scent is integral to humanity on an unconscious level. Without a scent, Grenouille is perceived as less than human, both in his own mind and in the mind of society. Hence, Grenouille deems that the perfect elixir of perfume will give him not only a human identity, but also an identity that is superior to all other humans. Grenouille's journey from less than human to more than human finishes during the orgy; however, it is dissatisfying because he discovers the true nature of society. Grenouille finally attains his dream of being "Grenouille the Great" [11] when he enamors the crowd at his execution. The crowd becomes a group of animal-like beings responding unconsciously to a chemical stimulus. Süskind reveals that human emotion is merely manipulated by artificial means like perfume. Grenouille's black out further symbolizes his disappointment in humanity and desire to disappear from the world that he has never been suited for. Such easy manipulation of society is epitomized by the changing perception of Grenouille from a "devil" [12] to an "angel" [13]. This is an opportunity to criticize society's assessment of Grenouille, as the reader may think that Grenouille does not deserve praise. The flawed society that once rebuked Grenouille had become animal-like and less than human, the people eating him "like hyenas" [14]. Süskind posits that the animalistic qualities present in Grenouille are inherent in all of <https://assignbuster.com/how-is-patrick-suskinds-characterization-of-his-protagonist-significant-in-criticizing-the-society-in-the-work-perfume-the-story-of-a-murderer/>

society. In fact, despite being scorned for most of his life, Grenouille is the one character who truly understands humanity.

Ultimately, the ending is indicative of Grenouille's changing identity from less than human to more than human, yet never able to find the human identity that he yearned for. Süskind employs animal metaphors to characterize Grenouille during his journey from being less than human to more than human. Indeed, Süskind first depicts Grenouille as a "bacterium" [15] and lastly as a "beast" [16]. The animal metaphors that spin off from these, such as "reptile" [17] and "hermit crab" [18], indicate that Grenouille is moving from a lower order organism to a higher order organism as he ages. This parallels his development from an unwanted child to a revered being. Also, by likening Grenouille to a "black spider" [19], Süskind may be positing that Grenouille's actions are involuntarily convulsive. This suggests that Grenouille is amoral rather than immoral and that his search for a human identity is a justifiable motive for his murderous deeds. Therefore, Süskind allows the reader to have an independent interpretation of Grenouille's character and of the characters of others within society. By likening Grenouille to various animals Süskind suggests that Grenouille is never truly human and therefore cannot assimilate into French society unless by artificial means.

Patrick Süskind's characterization of Jean-Baptiste Grenouille encourages the audience to be critical of French society on the whole. Grenouille is characterized as an animalistic subhuman who is allowed to thrive in the hands of society. His psychotic vulnerability manifests itself in his

<https://assignbuster.com/how-is-patrick-suskinds-characterization-of-his-protagonist-significant-in-criticizing-the-society-in-the-work-perfume-the-story-of-a-murderer/>

adolescence as a result of neglect from other characters. Yet Süskind contrasts Grenouille with members of society who are not admirable to show that all characters have inherent flaws. At the end of the novel, Süskind characterizes Grenouille as a superior being despite his evidently abominable nature. This climax typifies Süskind's critique of society; the people of France are so vain that they neither accept Grenouille in society nor appreciate his talents, but nevertheless allow him to manipulate their behavior through artificial scents. By revealing the flaws in the characters around Grenouille, Süskind encourages the reader to question whether this society is ultimately to blame for Grenouille's warped and perverted motives and how it could let such a malevolent creature prosper.

Word count: 1477 [1] P. Süskind, *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*, trans. A. Diogenes Verlag, London, Penguin Books, 2010, p. 22 [2] *ibid.*, p. 15 [3] *ibid.*, p. 22 [4] *ibid.*, p. 10 [5] *ibid.*, p. 8 [6] *ibid.*, p. 110 [7] *ibid.*, p. 110 [8] *ibid.*, p. 128 [9] *ibid.*, p. 3 [10] *ibid.*, p. 86 [11] *ibid.*, p. 249 [12] *ibid.*, p. 19 [13] *ibid.*, p. 263 [14] *ibid.*, p. 262 [15] *ibid.*, p. 21 [16] *ibid.*, p. 240 [17] *ibid.*, p. 74 [18] *ibid.*, p. 131 [19] *ibid.*, p. 79