

The geography of enlightenment and equality in perfume: the story of a murder



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Enlightenment and Equality in Perfume: The Story of a Murderer The

Enlightenment emerged in the late 17th- and early 18th-century as an intellectual movement emphasizing reason, individualism, and equality. The Enlightenment presented a challenge to traditional French societal values, and many Enlightenment thinkers were considered the progressives of their day. In the novel, *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*, by Patrick Süskind, the geographical landmarks of Paris and Grasse symbolize 18th century societal values, particularly the emphasis on equality and meritocracy. These values are expressed through the scent motif as it changes according to setting.

During the Age of Enlightenment, Paris was the center for enlightened change. Ironically Paris was the smelliest place in all France. According to *Perfume's* narrator, "the rivers stank, the marketplace stank, the churches stank;" (Süskind 4). The narrator's list is an ironic statement on equality; the city's stench crosses all the socioeconomic boundaries that traditional French society had erected before the Enlightenment's emphasis on equality. Despite the Enlightenment's equalizing effect underscored by the narrator's opening assertion, class is suggested through neighborhoods, and while everything in Paris stank, different neighborhoods had differing scents: "Through the wrought-iron gates at their portal came the smell of coach leather and of the powder in the pages' wigs," (35). The distinct scents arising from the quarter between Saint-Estache and the Hôtel de Ville, "coach leather" and the "powder" convey class and are more pleasant than the smells described in the marketplace, which is depicted as smelling like "a blend of rotting melon and the fetid odor of burnt animal horn," (4). This provides a clear division in the social structure of Paris, which Süskind subtly

incorporates in order to emphasize that even with the enlightened ideals, not everyone in society is truly equal.

This pre-Enlightenment hierarchy is evident in Baldini's characterization, and when he teaches Grenouille about the art of making perfume. Baldini creates his perfume in a way "which consisted of knowing the formula," (79) and this form of creation is in line with the enlightened ideas because it is scientific and exact, which is ironic because Baldini initially opposes the new enlightened ideas. Geographically, Baldini lives in one of the newly enlightened cities, and he teaches with the new enlightened scientific methods, but he still clinging on to Paris' old identity. Baldini's location also aligns with his true values - money. Baldini and Grenouille's relationship is based on what Grenouille can do for Baldini in the aspects of launching a successful perfume. His "house" is on the "Pont-au-Change" (45) which historically owes its name to the goldsmiths and money changers who installed their shops there centuries before on an older version of the bridge. Thus the narrator reveals geographically what principles actually govern Baldini's behavior. In the novel, Grenouille ironically embodies the older ideas, before the Age of Enlightenment because he randomly adds different ingredients into his perfumes; he claims "I don't need a formula. I have the recipe in my nose" (75). He uses his sense of smell only to create perfume, not exact measurements. However, at the same time, Grenouille is also the perfect embodiment of the Enlightenment because his innate skills move him up Paris's rigid social hierarchy. Born in a fish market to a single mother, he is brought under the church's protection. Later he enters the bourgeois, getting his journeyman's papers the help of Baldini (107), and his abilities to

create the perfume, thus almost eliminating all preconceived notions of class limitation further emphasizing that everyone when it comes down to the details is the same.

The final geographic location within Paris that signifies equality is the Cimetière des Innocents, located between rue aux Fers and the rue de la Ferronnerie and “ before him lay the cemetery grounds,” (253); the narrator claims that it is the “ garbage dump of death” (253), making it the smelliest place in Paris. Grenouille’s last breath is taken on the grounds of the cemetery; in only a half an hour, “ Jean-Baptise Grenouille had disappeared from utterly from the earth” (255). Ironically Grenouille dies in the place surrounded Paris’ worst smells. This geographic location creates circularity; he has returned to the smells that surrounded him at birth and which convey metaphorically equality. Grenouille continues his journey through France, arriving at a cavern inside a volcano. Grenouille stays here for seven long years, locking himself away from society, and the changing world around him: “ He had no use for sensual gratification, unless that gratification consisted of pure, incorporeal odors” (122). The mountain provides Grenouille with an escape from the changes happening in Paris as well as Grasse where he later ventures. In Grenouille’s mind up in the mountain “ there were no real things at all..., only the odors of things,” Thus the mountain not only emphasizes the absence of class structure, it also highlights the power of individuality. “...he basked in his own existence” (123). In the mountain there are only natural scents, no “ human” odors; thus, there are no distinctions to be made between different classes. The scents Grenouille experience in the mountain also allow him to create his

own world, where he is at the center of the universe, directly making himself seem like a god, when there are really no other “human” scents to compete with. After seven years in seclusion, “his mountain” vomit[s] him back out into the world” (133). He travels to Grasse, the 18th century perfume capital. Grasse is a town with a “little stump of a church steeple,” (166), implying that the church’s influence is minimal, and the Enlightenment has infiltrated their society. Instead Grenouille encounters “Odors of wealth that the wall exuded like a fine golden sweat,” (169), symbolizing the newly created middle class, which the Enlightenment engendered.

Madame Arnulfi particularly embodies these new values, as she “was a woman of solid prosperity,” (173). As a working woman she exemplifies the enlightenment’s ideas and how they have spread through Grasse. Madame Arnulfi lives in a town of enlightenment which allows her to become a woman of respect for the time. Her smelling like prosperity, shows how Grenouille identifies her abilities to be good for Grenouille. Grasse who in the town with “the Rome of scents, the promise land of perfumers,” (166), smelled like prosperity, which directly contrasts with the disgusting smells of Paris. However, at the heart of Grasse there is an established tanner, very similar to the tanner established in Paris. This establishes no matter how “enlightened” a town may appear the stench of old values will remain. No matter what covers the stench that is symbolically human nature; it is still there. Enlightenment ideals are just a mask for human instinct. Grasse and Paris both express the different ideas of the enlightenment, but each in their own way. Paris has not easily accepted the liberal ideas of equality with such open arms as the town of Grasse has, because of the way Grenouille is still

able to smell between the lines in a way, and smell the different distinctions between class neighborhoods. Grasse, on the other hand, has created a new way of life, where people can easily live in the middle, experiencing benefits from the upper class, while also understanding limitations of the lower class.

In Grenouille's journey, he is able to move through the classes, and understand that the Age of Enlightenment is about establishing equality for all forms of people, and when he dies in the Cimetière des Innocents, in death, everyone smells the same, and no one is better than someone else. The stench of "humanness" embodies the human instinct and it is the same throughout all classes of people, in each stage of the journey. Through the expression of the scent motif, throughout the changes of setting in the novel, *Perfume*, by Patrick Süskind, the geographical landmarks of Paris and Grasse to represent 18th century societal values, particularly the emphasis on the shift on equality and meritocracy.

Works Cited: Süskind, Patrick. *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*. New York: A. A. Knopf, 1986. Print.