

The impact of the natural landscape in perfume: the story of a murderer



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The main character in *Perfume*, Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, sets on a long journey through 18th century France, which starts and ends in Paris. The changes in the landscape during his travels reflect the inner changes in personality he undergoes himself. Patrick Süskind portrays Grenouille as very much animal-like because of his incredible sense of smell. Moreover, he is compared to a tick during his childhood and then later on is given animalistic instincts and behavior, such as hunting. However, Grenouille, who never had a normal relationship with another human being, reaches a point where he desires to be accepted by society. The inner conflict of animal vs. human is further developed through the changes in the landscape in the story. The character's journey, which is enclosed in a circle, since both its beginning and end are in Paris, emphasizes on Grenouille's inner wanders between being more human or more animal-like, culminating in his 'suicide'.

Patrick Süskind describes Paris as a place of horrible stench, crowded with people, which fills Grenouille with loathing for humankind, in order to highlight the idea that since others cannot accept him, he would always be 'an animal' on the inside when surrounded by society. "The streets stank of manure, the courtyards of urine, the stairwells stank of moldering wood and rat droppings, the kitchens of spoiled cabbage and mutton fat; the unaired parlors stank of stale dust, the bedrooms of greasy sheets, damp featherbeds, and the pungently sweet aroma of chamber-pots." (p. 3) The thorough imagery using only associations to scent makes the atmosphere in the city very dark and unpleasant, reflecting Grenouille's personality. For the character however, the stench is even more unbearable because of his incredible sense of smell.

Grenouille's time in Paris could be divided into his early childhood under Madame Gaillard's care and during his years as an apprentice for Grimal and into him working with the perfumer Baldini. While staying with Madame Gaillard, Grenouille develops his sense of smell and discovers his abilities. He wanders throughout Paris 'catching' different scents, slightly turning into rather an animal. "The other children, however, sensed at once what Grenouille was all about. From the first day, the new arrival was a sinister presence to them. They avoided the box in which he lay..." (p. 23). Süskind highlights the idea that Grenouille is not a normal human being since the other children feel that there is something about him that they cannot understand, which scares them. Moreover, the fact that he sleeps in a box resembles the way house animals sleep. This animal-like personality is further threaded in Grenouille's stay with Grimal: "After one year of an existence more animal than human, he contracted anthrax, a disease feared by tanners and usually fatal." (p. 33) Living in the poorer parts of Paris and sniffing various unpleasant scents, the character develops a hate towards humankind.

His feelings are slightly altered, or rather simply put at hold, when he starts working with Baldini. Grenouille is now able to enjoy some more privileges and is engulfed in his desire to learn more about perfumery. This change is reflected by the change in his surroundings: now he lives in a much better part of Paris and is more distant from all the unpleasant scents of the city. Despite that, he still hates his own town, which is used as a metaphor for human beings. "What did he need Paris for? He knew it down to its last stinking cranny, he took it with him wherever he went, he had owned Paris

for years now.” (p. 112) In fact, Paris represents all the people living there and thus what Grenouille cannot stand are the people, not the city itself.

After Grenouille leaves Paris and sets off on his journey to learn new ways to distill scents, he realizes that “ For the first time in his life he did not have to prepare himself to catch the scent of something new, unexpected, hostile – or to lose a pleasant smell – with every breath. For the first time he could almost breathe freely, did not constantly have to be on the olfactory lookout.” (p. 119) The change in the setting, from Paris to the countryside, brings out Grenouille’s true nature. He is no longer surrounded by humans, which allows him to “ breathe freely”. Moreover, the word “ hostile” implies that he feels threatened by other people and prefers being on his own.

The character’s loathing for humanity is further developed and eventually reaches a point when he finds the most distant place from any human being – a mountain located in the Massif Central. There, Grenouille embraces animal-like behavior, demonstrated in him hunting down animals for food: “ He also found nourishment in the form of small salamanders and ring snakes; he pinched off their heads, then devoured them whole.” (p. 126) However, at the same time, his inner state juxtaposes with his behavior. Grenouille appears to be an animal but manages to find inner peace, which drives him closer to being a human. His solitude resembles the ways in which people try to come close to spiritual forces or God, such as saints or prophets. The change in the setting from the countryside to the cave on the mountain and Grenouille’s stay there, reflects on his spiritual growth and him reaching the realization that he desires to be accepted by society. This

shows how among humans, Grenouille is rather animal-like and when alone, he needs the recognition of others, thus, his more human side is brought out.

The next change in the setting in the story occurs when Grenouille leaves the mountain and goes to different cities: Marseille, Montpellier and Grasse. His looks, “ He looked awful. His hair reached down to the hollows of his knees, his scraggly beard to his navel. His nails were like talons, and the skin on his arms and legs, where the rags no longer covered his body, was peeling off in shreds” (p. 143), are used to dehumanize him, emphasizing on his animalistic characteristics, despite his recent spiritual growth and new realizations. Later on, his abilities in perfumery allow him to create scents that influence people in particular ways, which leads to his acceptance in society and him having a relatively normal life. However, Grenouille’s aim of creating the ultimate perfume, one that would make people adore him, brings him back to his animalistic personality. “ At first he stalked them from a safe distance with wide-meshed net, for he was less concerned with bagging large game than with testing his hunting methods.” (p. 193) Grenouille turns into a serial murderer, killing maidens for their scent.

His actions once again highlight the inner conflict of animalistic vs. human in an ironic way, since his ultimate goal is to be loved by others, which would be achieved by going against anything human. Grenouille eventually realizes that despite his utmost efforts, he is not able to overcome his hatred and the desire to be human is prevailed by the animal ‘ inside’ of him. “ What he had always longed for – that others should love him – became at the moment of its achievement unbearable, because he did not love them himself, he hated them. And suddenly he knew that he had never found gratification in love, <https://assignbuster.com/the-impact-of-the-natural-landscape-in-perfume-the-story-of-a-murderer/>

but always only in hatred – in hating and in being hated.” (p. 249) Love and hatred could be seen as metaphors to describe Grenouille’s inner conflict and struggles. The recognition of his true self is stressed by his return to Paris, which closes the character’s life’s circular frame. He goes back to where his life started to end his own life, realizing there is no other place where he belongs, but the one he hates the most. The juxtaposition and dark irony are used by Süskind to reveal that in the end, we are who we are, and Grenouille is more an animal than human.

In *Perfume*, Patrick Süskind uses the importance of setting to either juxtapose or reflect on the spiritual journey that Grenouille undergoes. The idea of the inner conflict of the character between his animalistic and human selves is used by the author to suggest that everyone has another side to themselves and we have to find a way to deal with our inner struggles. Süskind criticizes humans for not being brave enough to accept their true nature, trying to hide it or change it, similarly to the way Grenouille believes he wants the love of others.