

Stop and smell the  
sicksweet scent of old  
roses: flower  
symbolism and  
tragedy in ...



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In *The God of Small Things*, Roy's main characters Estha and Rahel Eapen face many tragedies during their youth. The non-linear plot of Roy's novel causes readers to piece together the story once you get to the end. Many times throughout the novel, Roy provides recurring sights and smells that foreshadow tragedy to come. More specifically she mentions the "sicksweet smell of old roses on a breeze" (Pg. 145). At the climax of the book when the twins watch Velutha, their mother's forbidden lover, and dear friend, get beaten to death they ironically smell the old roses for the first time. This is Roy laying out the association between old roses, and pain and loss. She explains that this is "History's smell," the sicksweet, or bittersweet, smell that history gives off. This may be the first time that the twins encounter this smell, but it is definitely not the last as it follows them as a reminder of History's affect on their lives. Roses, known as being a well known symbol of love, is turned upside down into a nasty after smell of the pain and loss the twins face starting with Velutha but definitely not ending there. Estha and Rahel are constantly feeling the affects of History and Roy uses the "sicksweet smell of old roses on a breeze," as a way of presenting the long-lasting effects of pain and loss that come with History.

While Roy mostly develops the smell of old roses as a metaphorical symbol, literal roses appear early on, and are significant in setting up the terror to come. The cousin of the twins, Sophie Mol, is one of the most admired characters in the novel by the Eapen family. They call her arrival the, "What will Sophie Mol Think," week (pg. 65). As all the characters are rehearsed and ready to act on their best behavior they go with Chacko, Sophie Mol's father, to the airport to greet her. Ironically, to give to Sophie Mol as gift, "

From the Sea Queen florist Chacko had bought two red roses" (pg. 66). This makes readers flashback to the Terror when the twins smell the old roses following the loss of someone that we later find out is Velutha, and now linking that moment to Sophie Mol. As a pivotal character, and the whole reason the twins are on the other side of the river when Velutha gets beaten, it is fair to assume that Roy lays out this connection as a way to foreshadow Sophie Mol's role in the tragedy that haunts the twins way past their youth. The second rose that Chacko has he gives to Margaret Kochamma. This is another way of Roy foreshadowing because what is soon to come is the loss of her only child directly following the loss of her husband. Two roses, both given to people who are soon to cause pain and suffer great loss. There are the roses that go old and cause the sick-sweet smell. This is the start of how History shows its truly evil effect on this family, and sadly they do not even know it yet.

Roy also begins to develop the roses symbolically to represent the pain inside Ammu caused by her forbidden love with Velutha. While the twins ran off to see Velutha, Ammu was at home taking a nap. During this nap Ammu describes her dream in which she sees Velutha and desperately longs for him to be with her. She dreams of them together " skin to skin," and hopelessly wishes that she could be with him. Towards the end of her dream Ammu, "... pressed roses from the blue cross-stitch counterpane on her cheek" (pg. 104). The dream that she has makes her extremely happy but the roses are a way to underscore that happiness and bring her back to the sad reality of her situation. The roses pressing against her skin right before she senses her children near represents how while she may be able to dream of being with

Velutha, because of how History has created the love laws she will never be able to fulfill her fantasies, causing her to suffer through great pain. The roses pressing against her skin are not real, real roses wilt and rot eventually further representing how the love in this novel does not last. When she wakes up her children are in distress scared that their mother has just had an "afternoon-mare," and she looks a mess. Estha proclaims that his mother, "looked so sad," but Ammu tries to assure him that she was happy. While Velutha brings much pain to stay away from he also brings Ammu a great amount of joy making it even harder for her to separate herself. By the end of this moment with Ammu and the kids she ends up with, "the blue cross-stitch darkness laced with edges of light, with cross-stitch roses on her sleepy cheek," while they all sing to the tangerine radio. Ammu feeling some level of contentedness just having seen her lover in a dream but also carrying with her the long-lasting pain that History has caused.

Following the funeral for Sophie Mol, the separation of the twins is extremely traumatizing for them both, and warrants the reappearance of Roy's symbol for pain and loss. Ammu decides, with pressure from Baby Kochamma, that it is best for Estha to be Returned to spend time with his father, separating the twins from each other for the first time since birth. When describing Estha on his way to his father Roy describes that there was, "Rain. Rushing, inky water. And a smell. Sicksweet. Like old roses on a breeze" (pg. 16). This familiar smell of old roses while Estha is feeling the pain and loss of leaving his sister behind while he goes to live with people he has never met. He is smelling History in this moment because he begins to reminisce about the Terror, Roy describing that Estha now has, "...the memory of a young man

with an old man's mouth" (pg. 16) Estha may be young but he understands that the moment he caves into lying for Baby Kochamma, he had a part in hurting Velutha. No young man should have to make that decision, but the fact that he did gives him the perspective of an "old man" that he should not have had to experience.

During his Return Estha faces yet again another tragedy. He visits his old school friend, Khubchand, who falls extremely ill, and he decides to nurse him through the final weeks of his life. In some of Khubchand's last moments Estha feels the pain of his dear friend about to slip away and begins to smell the, "...smell of old roses, blooded on memories of a broken man" (pg. 7). Khubchand being the broken man but also Estha being broken by the many losses he has faced in this short amount of time. Estha is left to cope with the loss of these people that he cared so deeply about and in return falls into silence that he still grapples with as an adult, further showing how History follows them through their lives.

Roy lays out the roses throughout the book but waits until the very end to reveal the initial tragedy that alters the way roses smell to the twins for the rest of their lives. The Terror that forever changes the path of their lives, causing the ultimate pain and loss. Starting with the beloved Sophie Mol drowning in the river, and ending with the death of their dear friend Velutha. They witness both horrible events not knowing the lasting impact it would end up having on them. Following the beating of Velutha, Estha says that he learns two lessons. The first that, "Blood barely shows on a Black Man," and the second that the smell of pain and loss is distinctly, "Sicklysweet, Like old roses on a breeze" (pg. 145). These roses become a recurring reminder of <https://assignbuster.com/stop-and-smell-the-sicksweet-scent-of-old-roses-flower-symbolism-and-tragedy-in-the-god-of-small-things/>

the distress that he once had to face as a child. They also remind Estha and Rahel that History is constantly tormenting them with its harsh effects. Sicksweet old roses are a smell that lingers around the twins reminding them of the heartbreak they have faced.

Roy's display of tragedies are a direct result of what History has set forth for the society they live in. When Estha and Rahel suffer through the loss of Sophie Mol and Velutha their world is thrown off the hinges and changed forever. The smell that Roy reiterates during every hardship is the memorable smell of sicksweet old roses and she lays that out to represent the resilient effects of history. Even within a civilization with a rich or proud heritage, that fact is that humans will constantly have to deal with the decisions made long ago, similar to how Rahel and Estha will continue to face the sicksweet smell of old roses on a breeze.