

'perfume' by patrick suskind essay



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This extract of 'Perfume' by Patrick Suskind written in first-person narration explores and captures the author's portrayal of the olfactory sense in eighteenth century France, where rests the foulest city of stench, Paris. The diction, literary devices and on top of that, the use of revolting visual imagery to describe each particular unappealing smell encompassing not only human beings but also ordinary places in such explicit detail emphasizes the supremacy of each smell to the readers. The syntax of these descriptions is able to overwhelm readers with mixed feelings of appall and disgust but at the same time also awe and fascination.

One thing interesting about this extract is the ironic bond between the title of the novel and the content this extract. The title of the novel 'Perfume' contradicts clearly with the repetition of the words "stink" and "stench". This is interesting because the contrast between "perfume" and "stench" is quite obvious. It is as though comparing bitter with sweet or "pungently sweet aroma" to "chamber-pots". Through the use of oxymoron, I think that Suskind is trying to create and emphasize an emotional response or a feeling of disgust amongst readers through the use of this rhetorical device.

The repetition of the words emphasizes the unpleasantness of a mixture of smells and this in turn highlights how unhygienic people are. People are said to stink of "sweat" and "unwashed clothes" and old people are said to stink of "rancid cheese and sour milk and tumorous disease." This quote interestingly depicts the elderly in a very nauseating and unattractive way. The sentence seems to be structured in a sequence of increasing repulsiveness in terms of smell and visual image. The vivid imagery of "rancid" cheese and "sour" milk is enough to make the readers feel sick.

However, to imagine a person smelling like that makes the whole experience even more gut-wrenching. This description of the elderly highlights how Suskind thinks of human beings in general; that they all literally stink.

Because everyone is said to stink, it is no surprise that the places described within the extract is said to "stink" either. This idle attitude of the citizens living in Paris caused "millions of bones and skulls (to be) shoveled into the catacombs" and atop it, a food market is constructed. This is quite peculiar as markets should not be built upon a cemetery, especially when it involves food.

It is as though the food market is built atop to conceal the mess created under it; in the catacomb as remainders of bones and skulls are just "shoveled" without being organized properly. The stench of the people and places in Paris is reinforced by the juxtaposition of people and their place within the social hierarchy. A priest, who is usually seen as a respected public figure, "st(inks)" equally to a peasant, who is generally looked down upon based on their class in the social hierarchy. And later we also find out that the King himself stank, "like a rank lion" and the Queen of an "old goat".

This reference to animals; the king as a lion which is known as the king of the jungle and the queen as a goat which is seen as a milder, more tender animal highlights also the male supremacy amongst women in a gender hierarchy that exist within the patriarchal society. Also, a palace, which is a place of royalty is said to stink as much as beneath a bridge. This degrading comparison only reinforces the fact that Suskind compares the similarity between working class and aristocracy to his idea that all humans, despite

societal ranking stink. There are also references to suggest a theme of death.

The diction of the Cimetii?? re des Innocents as a "swollen graveyard" conveys an unusual but interesting image of a cemetery. The term "swollen", which normally refers to something that is becoming larger in size is placed in the context of the sentence. "Swollen" creates a vivid imagery of a graveyard so packed with corpses to the point where it is so noticeable, no one can ignore its presence. This in turn suggests the power of "stench" this place creates, especially when some of the graves "caved in", exposing the undeniable stench of eight hundred years' worth of "cart(ing)", "toss(ing)" and "stack(ing)" of corpses.

This motion of "cart(ing)", "toss(ing)" and "stack(ing)" of corpses is being depicted parallel to that of a war, a place of many deaths, where "bacteria" act busily at "decomposition" and most importantly, a place accompanied by the foulest stench of "decaying life". In addition to that, the motion also suggests a tedious routine giving off a terrible stench that everyone has become so familiar with it they just put up with it without insurrection. In this extract, a distinction between modern men and men from the past is made.

The "stench" in eighteenth century France is said to be "barely conceivable" to modern men. This and on top of that, the description of how people stink of "rotting teeth" from their mouths and "onions" from their bellies suggests to the readers that these people do not really take care of personal hygiene and do not maintain a proper eating diet. This shows a contrast to people nowadays as everyone tries to look presentable and has

access to modern healthcare facilities to ensure that they keep up their good image and remain healthy.

This extract takes the readers on a journey encompassing an olfactory world, revealing that there is so much more to ordinary human beings and common places than just what meets the eyes. This extract emphasizes the importance of smell surrounding us and conveys the message that no one can escape the power of stench as breathing is vital to each and every one of us to stay alive. This in turn tells us that the only way to survive is to repress the stench happening in our daily lives and just live with it because there is nothing we can do to destroy it.