

## How does Patrick Süskind use perspective to explore different themes in his literary best-seller, *Perfume*

by

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*Perfume*, the work in translation originally by Patrick Süskind, deals with the story of a murderer, Jean Baptist Grenouille. Born in 1738 in France, the protagonist possesses no body odour whatsoever and has an incredible sense of smell. In the book Süskind expertly gives the reader an insight into the mind of Grenouille who experiences the world through smell. He does so not by utilizing a first person perspective, instead, Süskind challenges himself to use a third person perspective. Despite the choice of perspective Süskind is able to expertly show the world through Grenouille's eyes. Süskind then uses this perspective to explore different themes through the eyes of Grenouille. In this essay we will discuss how Patrick Süskind uses perspective to explore the themes of control, state of mind, and societal judgement in his literary best-seller, *Perfume*.

Our protagonist is constantly searching for control, both over his own life and situation, and that of others. Control and the search thereof is deeply ingrained in *perfume*, both in an overarching sense, and on a stylistic level. The author -Patrick Süskind- uses stylistic devices to explore the theme of control through the eyes of Grenouille. Süskind opted for a third person perspective despite a first person perspective seeming more logical since everything is described through Grenouille. While the book's publication date undoubtedly played a role in this choice it also serves as a challenge for the author, who has to effectively communicate Grenouille's perspective from the narrator's standpoint. This seemingly illogical choice allows the author to contrast objective reality with the protagonist's interpretation. Since the world of the protagonist consists of smells and odours, the novel uses perfume to express Grenouille's control over them. Throughout the book we see Grenouille's control over perfume bleed over into control of the people around him: employed by Baldini he holds the power to make or break his business, and during the book's climax he is able to escape execution through the use of perfume. In addition to this Grenouille frequently dreams of power, he even thinks of himself in a very godlike manner. In chapter 26 a great example can be found of the narrator richly describing Grenouille's power fantasies which depict him as an all-powerful emperor. Grenouille here describes himself with an extreme amount of status and power. Süskind also chose deliberately to have Grenouille compare himself to an emperor instead of a god. This is because the power of an emperor is more concrete and tangible, people look up to an emperor not in need of aid or guidance, but in fear and respect. First the author shows us Grenouille's perspective, before starkly contrasting this against reality where Grenouille is completely alone and without audience. These fantasies slowly turn more and more into reality through the aid of perfume: Grenouille learns more and more to control and manipulate people, starting with being able to make people view him as a normal person and culminating in him escaping execution.

At its core, *perfume* is about the psychology behind a serial killer. Serial killers are usually created either by childhood trauma, or they are born that way. It is immediately clear Grenouille is unequivocally the born type. No earlier than the first chapter is Grenouille described as disturbing and off-putting, Jeanne even claims he is possessed by the devil. Süskind primarily utilizes literary and stylistic devices to convey the mind of a murderer to his reader. This undoubtedly played a role in the choice of medium as the author's way of writing and his way of creating perspective are highly specific to the written form. On the flip side a skilled filmmaker could utilize techniques specific to film to create a similar insight into the protagonist's state of mind. Since that is what Süskind's writing does, it puts you into the protagonist's mind. Chapter 8, Grenouille's first murder for example shows how Grenouille does not care for fireworks because of their smell, likewise he does not participate in celebrating his king. The author highlights that Grenouille does not think of function the way a regular person would: exclusively the scent is important to him. The author chose fireworks here as metaphor for Grenouille's following experience. Our protagonist catches the scent of a girl, a scent that is described with much passion, showcasing Grenouille's excitement and sheer awe at

its beauty. Grenouille experiences the scent much like how a normal person would experience fireworks. The girl herself is described with extreme olfactory beauty because Grenouille's world is built around smells, he simply does not care for her physical beauty. To drive this point home the author uses phrases like 'consulting his eyes for a moment' which show how Grenouille utilizes his other senses. Grenouille even keeps his eyes closed during the murder, an action that is described in a distant manner, reflecting how Grenouille thinks of it, unimportant.

Grenouille is often described animal like. The narrator calls Grenouille 'gifted and abominable' in the first chapter. Jeanne wants to abandon Grenouille with Father Terrier because he is very greedy "he'll eat anything" she states, in addition to claiming he 'pumped her dry to the bone'. Jeanne refuses to refer to Grenouille by name and by her tone it is clear she views him as monstrous enough to refuse to take care of him, despite his innocent age. At one point she even claims he is possessed by the devil. Some of the children in Madame Gaillards home find him creepy and strange, some even fear him. In later passages Grenouille earns the description of 'goblin' and is treated as subhuman. Interestingly, the beginning of the book is one of the few passages we have that are not told from Grenouille's own perspective and as such it shows how society views him. Grenouille learns, over the course of the book, slowly to adapt and integrate into society, through mannerisms, showing his psychopathic tendencies, but mainly through the use of perfume, exercising the control he has over scent. For him it is a means to an end. At Tanner Grimal's he has a sharp disliking to the way he is treated, Grimal himself and the stench around him. He decides however to bottle up all his anger since he understands his life is only valuable to Grimal as long as he is useful to him. Later while Grenouille is employed at Baldini's perfumery he tries to act normal, and the divide between outside Grenouille and inside Grenouille starts to grow. In addition Grenouille starts to understand that certain small things like deliberately making mistakes make himself seem more human. It is little things Grenouille does and changes about himself to fit in better in society, to ensure he is viewed and valued as human, to this end Grenouille also utilizes his greatest strength: perfume. This concept reaches its peak during the climax of the book where Grenouille now has the power to manipulate people into not just viewing him as normal, but he is even able to make them think he is innocent and instil a primal lust into the audience.

Süskind shows in his literary best-seller *perfume* not the adventures or exploits of Grenouille, Süskind provides an insight into what it is like to be Grenouille. While this insight is used primarily in context with Grenouille's murderous state of mind -after all, the subtitle reads 'the story of a murderer'- additionally, the perspective provides a much more subtle and less pronounced insight into the judgement Grenouille faces. Especially in the modern day this book can provide a much less divisive look on societal outcasts since after all the reader sympathises with the murderer at the end of the book. This paradox perfectly showcases how prematurely dismissing someone could be viewed from the receiving perspective, Grenouille's perspective. As a matter of fact this concept goes two ways, in the book Grenouille is viewed as disgusting or repulsive, and while understanding that even acting differently towards such an individual can have an incredibly dehumanising impact, the book goes the other way, Grenouille and his actions were much more than repulsive. This seems to undermine the concept that one should not haste to judgement but looking slightly further we can see that this only goes to underscore said concept. Grenouille was judged to be repulsive but harmless when in fact he was not harmless, this goes to show that one should never set anyone aside for any reason unless they know the person they are judging and all of the facts before having an opinion, which for a book from 1985 is remarkable. In a sense Süskind plays the devil's advocate in this book but when the context is changed from escapist fiction to a very real environment we see that these people that are spat out by society for their general mannerisms are set aside unfairly as 'weird' or 'different'