

Discuss the ambiguities, enigmas and moral conundrums
presented in Süskind's *Das Parfum*

Zoe Bedford

Süskind's novel certainly breaks with the established norms of crime fiction.

According to the nature of the genre, the reader expects answers. The novel should rationalise the mystery, explaining what appears inexplicable and the reader seeks the revelation of murderer, method and motive. Yet *Das Parfum* confounds us. We are immediately presented with the murderer, robbing us of the mystery here. The murder method is likewise unexceptional, revealed unceremoniously and without suspense.

The only mystery remaining concerns a motive for Grenouille's actions. A variety of options are hinted at, most notably concerning his ambiguous status as animal or human or supernatural being, the nature of artistic genius, the role of his treatment by society and Grenouille as the embodiment of evil. An investigation of these central themes reveals many of the principle ambiguities presented in the novel. The conundrums arising from these ambiguities regarding the modern understanding of morality should also be investigated as should the enigmas presented in the text in order to place the novel within its context of postmodernity.

Grenouille's motives for the murders themselves are clear. He kills as a way to obtain scent, as a means to his end, and he is able to kill because he is amoral. This too is unambiguous, reflected in his inability to grasp abstract concepts related to morality

such as such as "Recht, Gewissen, Gott, Freude, Verantwortung..."¹. He shows no recognition of the implications of his actions on others and murders not for enjoyment of inflicting pain, but rather to achieve his aim and extract the essence of the girls, his amorality allowing him to consider murder a legitimate method to realise his desires. Yet the reasons behind his amorality are unclear, as is the motive behind his desire to capture the essence of the girls.

One explanation concerns his ambiguous position "on the border of the human and the natural worlds"², his status as a human being constantly being called into question. His odourless state seems to strip him of his claim to humanity, with a link between the two established early in the novel, when the wet nurse considers him possessed because "er riecht nicht, wie Kinder riechen sollen"³, and when Grenouille smells Pater Terrier, "the infant's total lack of humanity is apparently what enables him to penetrate to the depth of the monk's soul"⁴. This could imply the presence of a supernatural element, an idea supported, for example, by the deformity of his foot and the inevitable link with the devil which results.

The idea of Grenouille as more animal than human is also addressed and the bestial allusions used in conjunction with his speech and movement are frequent. He "zischelte"⁵, for example, and "schnarrte"⁶. There are numerous allusions to Grenouille as "ein Zeck"⁷ and the analogy can be seen to continue when his behaviour

¹ Süsskind, Patrick, *Das Parfum: die Geschichte eines Mörders*, Zurich, Diogenes Verlag, (1985) p33

² Ryan, Judith, "The Problem of Pastiche: Patrick Süsskind's *Das Parfum*", *The German Quarterly*, (1990) p399

³ Süsskind, Patrick, *Das Parfum: die Geschichte eines Mörders*, Zurich, Diogenes Verlag, (1985) p16

⁴ Jacobson, Manfred R. "Patrick Süsskind's *Das Parfum*: A Postmodern Kunsterroman" *The German Quarterly* (1992) p203

⁵ Süsskind, Patrick, *Das Parfum: die Geschichte eines Mörders*, Zurich, Diogenes Verlag, (1985) p92

⁶ Süsskind, Patrick, *Das Parfum: die Geschichte eines Mörders*, Zurich, Diogenes Verlag, (1985) p96

⁷ Süsskind, Patrick, *Das Parfum: die Geschichte eines Mörders*, Zurich, Diogenes Verlag, (1985) p29

towards others is examined. He sucks them dry, "being sustained in some way"⁸, as is the case with Jean Bussie and Madame Guillard and Grimal, or furthering his olfactory aims, as with Baldini, Druot and the Marquis⁹. "However, while Grenouille learns, develops and moves on, each of these individuals meets with an unnatural death.... We realise that Grenouille the tick always comes away full of blood, leaving behind a dead host who has been sucked dry"¹⁰. His very reliance on his sense of smell immediately links him to animals, as this is the least developed of the senses amongst humans, and one on which animals often rely, whilst his cave dwelling exile is the epitome of animal existence, licking water from moss and eating insects and lizards to survive¹¹.

If Grenouille is indeed more animal than human, then his actions can be seen in this light. Animals kill for survival, and there is the subtle suggestion that Grenouille's survival is linked to scent. His illness when he believes he cannot obtain the odour of human beings demonstrates his physical necessity for odours. His need to possess the odour of first the girl in Paris and then of Laure Richis is inextricably linked to his very life's purpose, as "für Grenouille stand fest, daß ohne den besitz des Duftes sein Leben keinen Sinn mehr hatte"¹².

Yet this idea of Grenouille as an animal is in turn is called into question by his lack of fear of death, evidenced by his essential suicide and his lack of desire to reproduce, both essential to animals. Indeed whilst the scenes describing his exile in the cave are

⁸ Jacobson, Manfred R. "Patrick Süskind's *Das Parfum: A Postmodern Künstlerroman*" *The German Quarterly* (1992) p205

⁹ Jacobson, Manfred R. "Patrick Süskind's *Das Parfum: A Postmodern Künstlerroman*" *The German Quarterly* (1992) p205

¹⁰ Jacobson, Manfred R. "Patrick Süskind's *Das Parfum: A Postmodern Künstlerroman*" *The German Quarterly* (1992) p205

often sexual, the girls' bodies remain "unberührt"¹¹ being concerned only with their scent. The ambiguity is thus complete and the reader is offered no definitive answers regarding Grenouille's very existence.

Perhaps this reflects Grenouille's own crisis in his lack of identity, exemplified in his lack of personal odour, the only aspect which he values and the tool he himself uses to identify others. We also see other manifestations of his lack of identity in peripheral position in the edge of society, unnoticed when he leaves Paris, for example and unmissed during his exile, his lack of consistent parenting and the fact that he is never baptised. This identity crisis is too held up as an explanation of his desire to obtain a human scent, and his confusion is perhaps reflected by his creation of multiple human odours, but again the extent to which this dominates is ambiguous.

Grenouille's position on the edge of the animal, human and supernatural worlds establishes him as an enigma early on, and provokes conundrums regarding the reader's judgement of him. We are left to decide, unaided by Süskind, how far our concepts of morality can be applied to creature who cannot, perhaps, be considered entirely human, thus calling into question the concept of universal morality. However, his refusal to fall neatly into a single category invalidates any concrete conclusions, confirming the postmodernist tendencies of the novel.

One of the most prominent themes of the novel, that of art and genius, is also presented as a possible explanation of both Grenouille's amorality and his quest for the scent which necessitates the murders, and reveals further ambiguities to be

¹¹ Süskind, Patrick, *Das Parfum: die Geschichte eines Mörders*, Zurich, Diogenes Verlag, (1985) p156

¹² Süskind, Patrick, *Das Parfum: die Geschichte eines Mörders*, Zurich, Diogenes Verlag, (1985) p44

investigated. The idea that absolute genius necessitates the sub-development and suppression of other senses and faculties is explored in *Das Parfum*. Part of the reason for the acute development of Grenouille's olfactory sense is presumably his own lack of odour, allowing him to detect odours uncorrupted by his own scent. Yet whether Grenouille's olfactory genius hinders his moral, social and emotional development, or whether his sub-development in these areas itself promotes and enhances his genius in the world of scent remains ambiguous. The possibility of Süskind's novel supporting the theory that art and artistic genius indeed require separation from morality and ethics in order to pursue the ultimate expression of art unhindered by the moral constraints¹⁴ is raised, but again we receive no guidance as to the role played by this.

A number of further ambiguities are linked to the role of art and artist in *Das Parfum*. Artistic genius is presented simultaneously as a constructive and destructive influence. Baldini's father's genius and then the exploitation of Grenouille's art allow the charlatan the fame and fortune he craves and the Grenouille's artistic gift permits Druot and Madame Arnulfi's business to prosper, pointing to art's constructive potential. Yet his departure witnesses their downfall, albeit not as a direct consequence. Similarly there is something poetic about the role of art simultaneously preserving and destroying. Grenouille kills the beautiful young girls in order to preserve their essence, countering the modernist concept of art having positive healing powers. These incongruous views of the role of art remain unreconciled however, serving only to exacerbate the ambiguity.

¹³ Süskind, Patrick, *Das Parfum: die Geschichte eines Mörders*, Zurich, Diogenes Verlag, (1985) p251

¹⁴ Jacobson, Manfred R. "Patrick Süskind's *Das Parfum*: A Postmodern Kunstferroman" *The German Quarterly* (1992) p206

Grenouille's role as artist and genius is made more confusing to the reader seeking universal truths regarding art due to his status as an enigma. The enigma that is Grenouille is both created by, and itself exacerbates, the ambiguities presented in the novel. As the only artist or genius present in the story, we are unsure as to whether he represents art and genius, or could be the exception. There is no positive figure to counterbalance it and yet such an enigmatic figure cannot be taken as proof of the rule.

The suggestion as to how far the artistic genius in him provokes his need for the ultimate scent also goes unresolved. The reader can identify the link between Grenouille's artistic aims and the development of his artistic genius, evidenced by their simultaneous development and progression. As he hones his talent, a profile of an artistic genius which seems entirely plausible is portrayed. He first identifies, then collects and stores the scents, then learning to combine them before mastering the scientific techniques involved. His aims turn to the replication of the human scent, before focussing on the production of the ultimate perfume, his artistic masterpiece. What remains ambiguous however is how far this in itself is Grenouille's primary objective, the ultimate aim of an artistic genius.

Or is his aim rather the effect that this perfume will produce? His desire for a scent perhaps reflects his craving for the love and acceptance which have been denied to him, an idea borne out by his fantasies of being adored in which he indulges whilst exiled in the cave¹⁵. The reader briefly glimpses Grenouille the victim. Is it his treatment by a society which saw him used by every character he comes across which has led him to desire love and adoration so strongly?

¹⁵ Süskind, Patrick, *Das Parfum: die Geschichte eines Mörders*, Zurich, Diogenes Verlag, (1985) p160-161

Yet this seems negated by a further possible explanation voiced by Süskind.

Grenouille's quest for the ultimate scent could be motivated by a deep rooted hatred for humanity and an almost megalomaniacal belief in his own superiority. Certainly this is supported by his own admission that "er nie in der Liebe, sondern immer nur in der Haß Befriedigung fände, im Haßen und Gehaßt werden."¹⁶ Predictably the issue is not reconciled.

Whichever is the case, the ambiguity surrounding Grenouille's relationship to society and humanity concerns a fundamental moral conundrum in *Das Parfum*, namely that of whether, and how far, Grenouille's amorality results of his treatment by society. Perhaps his scant regard for human life which allows him to commit murder so easily stems from the lack of regard shown to him. His mother admits "daß sie das Ding bestimmt würde haben verrecken lassen"¹⁷, the other children and all others are indifferent to his survival, except where it benefits them. The value of his life equates exactly to his commercial value, evidenced for example by Grimal improving Grenouille's conditions only when he becomes immune to anthrax and can thus perform duties other workers cannot. Baldini values him only when he understands that he can exploit his genius as a perfume manufacturer and the Marquis de la Taillade-Espinasse values his potential to prove his scientific theory. Separate from this, Grenouille's life holds no value to another character in the novel. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that he recognises the value of the girls only in terms of his own aims. Without their scent, they mean nothing, as reflected by Grenouille's attitude to Laure's body: "Sie war für ihn als Körper gar nicht mehr vorhanden, nur

¹⁶ Süskind, Patrick, *Das Parfum: die Geschichte eines Mörders*, Zurich, Diogenes Verlag, (1985) p307

¹⁷ Süskind, Patrick, *Das Parfum: die Geschichte eines Mörders*, Zurich, Diogenes Verlag, (1985) p9

noch als körperloser Duft."¹⁸ In this way society's treatment of Grenouille perhaps cultivates his amorality.

It is perhaps also significant, pointing again to the impact of social conditioning in personal development, that the human characteristics developed by Grenouille are exclusively negative and echo those of the other characters. His greedy need to possess odours parallels, for example, Baldini's greed and hoarding of scents. Is it coincidence that his desire to be adored which is revealed by his fantasies of himself as a Godlike figure is echoed the Marquis's desire to be considered a pioneering scientist with his discovery of Fluidium Lethale? His cold-heartedness could be the result of the emotional detachment of the "seelenarmen"¹⁹ Madame Gaillard. The connection between upbringing and subsequent personal and social development is concretized by the example of Madame Gaillard, who, following a beating by her father had lost her sense of smell and "jades Gefühl für menschliche Wärme und menschlich Kälte und überhaupt jede Leidenschaft"²⁰. However, it is left to the reader to decide how to attribute the impact of Grenouille's childhood and treatment in society and whether he can be pardoned as a "monstrous misfit whose terrors merely presage the upheavals and horrors of more modern times"²¹. The issue is unresolved by Süskind.

Indeed it is possible that Grenouille, from his peripheral position in society, considers nature to have nurtured and raised him as much as people, as he survives in the cave

¹⁸ Süskind, Patrick, *Das Parfum: die Geschichte eines Mörders*, Zurich, Diogenes Verlag, (1985) p280

¹⁹ Süskind, Patrick, *Das Parfum: die Geschichte eines Mörders*, Zurich, Diogenes Verlag, (1985) p27

²⁰ Süskind, Patrick, *Das Parfum: die Geschichte eines Mörders*, Zurich, Diogenes Verlag, (1985) P25

²¹ Whiting, R.G., Herzog, M. "Hoffmann's *Das Fräulein von Scuderi* and Süskind's *Das Parfum*: Elements of Homage in a Postmodernist Parody of a Romantic Artist Story", *The German Quarterly*, (1994), p233

due purely to nature, and his survival in the face of freezing to death is no less due to nature's generosity than his survival at the tannery and Baldini's is due to human intervention. As a being who places no value on humanity, it is not surprising that he equates the use of flowers to create traditional perfumes directly to the use of people in the creation of his perfumes. The reader finds it difficult to consider him a monster with this consideration, and it is this very ambiguity as to how to view Grenouille which provokes the central moral conundrums regarding morality: Is it then impossible to class someone amoral as evil or are the concepts mutually exclusive?

Certainly both evil and amorality are present in *Das Parfum*. It is hard to see the carefully planned murder of twenty five young girls as anything but purely evil. Grenouille himself declares that this is what motivates his desires and the narrator confirms this from the outset by describing Grenouille as "ein Mann, der zu den genialsten und abscheulichsten Gestalten...dieser... Epoche gehörte". Throughout the novel he is described as monstrous and the children's fear and distrust of him points to this conclusion, as children are often associated with intuition and uncorrupted judgement. However, we are told that the other orphans "konnten ihn nicht riechen"²², where the ambiguity surrounding the word "riechen" deliberately establishes a link between Grenouille's smell and his treatment by society, as the phrase can be taken to mean they could not smell him, or that they could not stand him. This echoes the other hints as to the role of society, causing the reader to reject this concept of evil as the only explanation. He must decide alone how evil and amorality are connected, as it remains ambiguous.

²² Süskind, Patrick, *Das Parfum: die Geschichte eines Mörders*, Zurich, Diogenes Verlag, (1985) p30

Grenouille's unique position within and relationship to society consolidate his role as an enigma. His unusual upward mobility in progressing from bastard orphan to respectable journeyman to godlike figure would seem to mock the class divisions of society, and his peripheral position, skipping between being a part of society, albeit an insignificant one as in Paris and Grasse, for example, and social exile in the mountain make concrete judgements as to the role of society impossible.

A closer examination of the social context for Grenouille's actions reveals further moral conundrums for the reader regarding their identification with the murderer. As the murder victims are never developed as characters in themselves, with only Laure named and her own emotions and personality left unexplored, the reader feels no sense of loss at the deaths, no real sadness, only shock. The reader's struggle to find a single redeeming character with whom to identify leave him in the uncomfortable position of identifying most closely with a sociopathic mass murderer. We are instinctively repulsed by all that he does and is, and yet our sympathy is perversely elicited by his portrayal as a victim of society and through our repulsion towards all other characters. This provokes questions regarding our concept of morality. Do we object to the murders because of an innate sense of morality or due to social programming? This factor provokes contemplation as to whether morality is an innate recognition of right and wrong, or the cynical result of an acquired social code of conduct, thus challenging our perceptions of the murderer. Grenouille, who has developed with no social or moral guidance, cannot perhaps be blamed if morality is learned rather than innate.

The absence of morality amongst the other characters would furthermore seem to mitigate Grenouille's crimes and cast doubt over the very existence of morality. From Chenier, who schemes to take over Baldini's empire, to Madame Gaillard, who cares for orphans only in order to earn the money necessary for her retirement and death, every character can be seen as motivated primarily by self interest. Richis, whose cynical, sordid and self seeking desire to use his daughter in order to fulfil his own vain ends echoes Grenouille's own megalomania, resulting in the reader finding him arguably as repulsive as the murderer with whom he identifies himself so proudly.

The vanity and greed which govern the actions of every character mean that immorality is rife, yet disguised by a pretence of social acceptability. This is perhaps best demonstrated in the peculiar orgy scene, where a mass murderer appears to strip off the veneer of respectability and provoke an unrestrained orgy. The subsequent cover up reveals the role of society to disguise, yet not face the roots of, immorality.

That *Das Parfum* has been considered a detective novel seems almost ironic. Our appetite for explanations is explored in the interesting juxtaposition of the scientist Baldini with his hypocritical religious belief and rejection of rationalisation and Pater Terrier's admittance of the incongruencies of Christianity and his interest in science, although his love of comfort, material and spiritual precludes more in-depth analysis or consideration! But the role of religion and science remains unclear. In a genre where explanations are essential, no solutions are offered regarding Grenouille's motivations for creating his perfume, nor is his amorality explained.

It is no coincidence that the structure and compilation of Süskind's novel echoes the process by which perfumes are manufactured. It is a novel filled with literary allusions, from Goethe to Hoffmann²³, containing numerous puns, double meanings and more minor ambiguities which it was not possible to examine within the scope of this essay. These are briefly wafted before the reader, almost as Grenouille catches whiffs of scents before the thread leaves him, serving to make text deliberately ambiguous. The playfulness which permeates, demonstrated in red herrings such as the exact dates for Grenouille's life, the historical context full of real events such as accounts of the war²⁴ and his name meaning frog in French, neither of which have any relevance and yet which trick the reader into seeing them as clues, further complicates this²⁵.

In a deliberately post-modern twist, most of the questions raised remain unanswered and ambiguous, making it difficult for the reader to draw the concrete conclusions and representation of universal moral truths. Instead we are left with a series of moral conundrums regarding the message and meaning of the novel as a whole, echoing postmodernity's rejection many of the certainties and absolute truths expounded by modernity. Neither the motive behind Grenouille's creation of the scent nor the reasons for his amorality are provided. The idea of Grenouille's animal or supernatural existence, society's responsibility and the nature of his artistic genius are raised, but the roles of these are never defined. Perhaps the reader is being placed in the role of detective and left to answer his own questions in order to answer his own questions. Perhaps the novel is more a playful refusal to produce the explanations and

²³ Ryan, Judith, "The Problem of Pastiche: Patrick Süskind's *Das Parfum*", *The German Quarterly*, (1990) p396-398

²⁴ Süskind, Patrick, *Das Parfum: die Geschichte eines Mörders*, Zurich, Diogenes Verlag, (1985)p169

messages we expect and seek from such a complex story, teasing the reader by provoking questions with no answers. Certainly no clarification of this is offered by Süskind.

Word count: 3,291

Bibliography

Jacobson, Manfred R. "Patrick Süskind's *Das Parfum: A Postmodern Künstlerroman*"

The German Quarterly (1992) p201-211

Ryan, Judith, "The Problem of Pastiche: Patrick Süskind's *Das Parfum*", *The German*

Quarterly,(1990) p396-403

Süskind, Patrick, *Das Parfum: die Geschichte eines Mörders*, Zurich, Diogenes

Verlag, (1985)

Whitinger, R.G., Herzog, M. "Hoffmann's *Das Fräulein von Scuderi* and Süskind's

Das Parfum: Elements of Homage in a Postmodernist Parody of a Romantic Artist

Story", *The German Quarterly*,(1994) p222-234

[http://readers.penguin.co.uk/inf/Document/DocumentDisplay/0,,P100000010_RPT,00.](http://readers.penguin.co.uk/inf/Document/DocumentDisplay/0,,P100000010_RPT,00.html)

html

²³ Jacobson, Manfred R. "Patrick Süskind's *Das Parfum: A Postmodern Künstlerroman*" *The German Quarterly* (1992)) p204