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[Home](#) > [Vol 3, No 3 \(2013\)](#) > [Hodge](#)

Perfume: The Tragedy of Humanity

Abby Hodge

Abstract: This article examines two adaptations -- film and novel - of the story *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*. Through comparing these mediums this article explains themes within each, and how they vary based on the limitations of the mediums in describing a story that revolves primarily around scent and smell. The themes are consistent when the most prominent lessons of evil and broken societies come forth, though both are expressed in their respective ways.

Keywords: Perfume, film adaptation Grenouille, Tom Tyker, Patrick Süskind

Perfume: The Story of a Murderer tells the twisted tale of a broken boy living in a broken society. This boy, Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, is a phenomenally complex character in his background, his motivation, and the way he is presented to the audience. However, in two versions of the story, the original novel by Patrick Süskind and the film directed by Tom Tykwer, the character is taken in subtly different directions. Both authors adapt to their medium: Süskind uses graphic and descriptive diction while Tykwer utilizes the camera's eye and the lead actor's performance to present Grenouille as a wholeheartedly evil murderer and a pitiable, misguided outcast, respectively. Naturally, such a change in character significantly changes the theme of each work. Though both deal with identity, humanity's flaws, and death, Süskind's Grenouille shows the absolute evil that exists in an absolutely evil world, while Tykwer's interpretation shows how a world of absolute evil can pervert the naïve people who inhabit it. And though the actions of each character are almost identical, the author of each work shows them in such a way that the audience is able to discern the complexities and motivations in each Grenouille.

The first of everything is notable in some way. The first car was important because it led to the development of more and better cars. The first impression a young job applicant made on her interviewer was important because it was why she wasn't hired. The first scene in a book or movie is important because it sets the tone for the rest of our experience in that story. And the first scene of *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*, the novel by Patrick Süskind is vastly different from the first scene of *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*, the film, directed by Tom Tykwer. Because of this difference, the audience's perception of a despicable central character is significantly altered between the two mediums, though the character's despicability remains entirely the same. Grenouille is a singular character in that he understands very little of humanity except what he can perceive through his olfactory senses. His inability to function as a "normal" person, due to his ability to smell things with superhuman clarity, makes him an outcast no matter where he goes. This is not changed from novel to film. His obsession with scents leads him to commit a series of heinous murders in order to preserve the ephemeral and exquisite odor of virginal young girls. He commits these atrocities in both versions of the tales. However, while Süskind leads us to revile Grenouille, Tykwer presents him as almost pitiable, and this difference comes all from the first scene.

The first sentence of the novel introduces the murderer as a "gifted and abominable" person. He is given no name, but he is already an abomination in the eyes of the reader. The first page goes on to dub him "arrogan[t]" and "misanthrop[ic]," even going so far as to compare him to the father of all sadists, the Marquis de Sade himself. Immediately after establishing the "wickedness" of Grenouille, Süskind launches into an ecphrasis detailing the

A. Hodge

"barely conceivable stench" of the market in France where the central character was birthed. This diction he uses in this opening portion of the book is heavily connoted and serves to help disgust the reader and alienate them from Grenouille, making him an unlovable, if not fascinating, character. Making his hero so unlikeable was a risk on Süskind's part, since sympathy is the most common way to make people invest in a story. However, by establishing him as so absolutely despicable through his word choice and excess of detail, Süskind draws the reader in by making the main character fascinating rather than identifiable. Part of this fascination also comes from how Süskind chooses to start Grenouille's story. Stories often begin with some kind of inciting incident, such as Dorian Gray having his infamous portrait painted. The inciting incident that begins *Perfume*, however, is simply Grenouille's birth, showing that his transition into existence was an inciting incident unto itself. And it is a birth unlike any other literary birth, as it takes place in a "putrid" fish-market and leaves the child orphaned moments after his first breath, when his mother is hanged for attempted infanticide (the beginning of many deaths that follow him). It's an unprecedented and extraordinary birth, much like Grenouille himself will turn out to be.

In addition, the first scene in the novel *Perfume* sets the tone for the rest of the novel in both strangeness and style of description. In fact, much of the strangeness stems from the style of description, particularly in relation to scents. Odor is rarely described with such excess as it is in *Perfume*. No one remembers if Carton and Darnay smelled like one another, or whether the other boys were cruel to Piggy because he stank. But the first chapter of *Perfume* is rife with sickening descriptions of the "putrefying vapors" that infect the "foul" market where Grenouille was born. The olfactory image created by Süskind is disgustingly unique, a mirror for Grenouille's soul. The tone that this strange description creates is damp and oppressive--signaling the audience to be aware that this is not a story that will end well (in addition to creating a subliminal connection between Grenouille and the "rancid" place he is born). The first scene of the film creates a similar tone, though it is used to slant the viewer's perception of Grenouille in a much different direction.

Much like the novel, the opening scene of the film presents the tone, showing both the brutality and darkness that will take place over the next two hours. *Perfume* is a dark film. Throughout it, the audience is invited to watch Grenouille's miserable life unfold through death, abuse, and a general scorn of his existence that cumulates into his murdering of young women for their scent. Tykwer helps prepare the audience for such atrocities by opening the scene in darkness. The darkness of a prison cell, from which a nose emerges into a single shaft of light and sniffs. Like the novel, this simple image immediately signals to the audience that this film will not rely on human sense the way most films do. Though neither medium allows the creator to convey a scent literally, the lengthy descriptions of smells and opening image of this olfactive body part establish an immediate incorporation of smell into the story. This darkness also provides a similar, if not more literal, dark opening to the film that will be mirrored thematically as Grenouille goes on to commit his murders. In terms of preparing the audience for the violence, Tykwer uses many subtle beats to suggest the unforgiving brutality of the world of *Perfume*. The first moment occurs when the guard violently jerks the chains attached to Grenouille. The force used is excessive, and the close up on Grenouille's neck combined with his audibly pained reaction emphasizes it. In addition to showing the brutality of Grenouille's world, it also creates sympathy for him from the audience. However, this cruelty is minimal compared to the judge's reading of Grenouille's sentence. Keeping in mind that the audience is not yet aware of Grenouille's atrocities, the fact that the crowd ignites with vitriolic glee as it is announced that Grenouille will be "hanged on a cross until dead" and that he shall be "dealt twelve blows with a metal rod" is very disturbing. This barbaric punishment is made to seem even more horrific through the eye of the camera, which absorbs the crowd's reactions from behind Grenouille, placing the audience in Grenouille's shoes as he listens to the crowd cheer for his death. This entire sequence works to suggest that the audience should empathize with Grenouille, as it omits any mention of his individual crimes and makes him look unassuming and weak. In addition, by beginning

the film with the presence of death, Tykwer introduces the audience to the tone of the film and shows the violence and despair of Grenouille's world.

Despite the similarity to the novel's tonal effect, the content of the ensuing scene in the film creates an entirely different situation. Grenouille is shown in full for the first time as a young man who is brutally dragged out of a dank cell by abusive guards. Before the audience is told anything about his abilities or his crimes, the film shows him chained up, bony, and being presented before a murderous crowd who cheers as his brutal sentence is read. It is only after the judge cries out that he is to be denied "all customary acts of mercy," that a narrator begins to provide the background of Grenouille's life in a monologue that closely resembles the opening chapter of the novel. This scene that opens the film is not completely new, but the novel chooses to show it at the end, after the audience has accompanied Grenouille through his series of murders. Though small, Tykwer uses this change to heavily affect the way the audience will view Grenouille throughout the rest of the film. Sociologists have coined this element "the underdog effect." Essentially, it means that people have a natural sympathy for a fellow human being who is weak or being "ganged up on" by many people (or even just one person who happens to be much stronger). The opening scene of the film *Perfume* clearly sets up the antihero as an underdog, even going so far as to show him falling over and being dragged by the guards on his way to the crowd. This moment is shown through a slightly raised angle that looks down on Grenouille as he falls, causing him to appear even smaller and weaker. Tykwer's manipulation of the audience's perception helps create a character whose duality--being both an underdog and a murderer--gives him a complexity that works to illuminate the range and intricacies of human flaws, showing that nothing is entirely black and white.

Another key difference between the book and the movie that alters the ethical presentation of Grenouille in the situation surrounding his first murder. The actions in each scene are broadly the same: Grenouille smells a girl, likes her smell, and then kills her. However, the specific manner in which the events transpire differ in the details, and separate the character in the book from the character in the movie. It begins similarly enough, with Grenouille sneaking away from his oppressive life at the tanner and exploring the city. During this exploration, he comes upon a scent of "pure beauty" that belongs to a girl selling plums. Desperate to "emboss" this smell on his "black, muddled soul," he follows her. In the novel, he approaches her, and when she turns around, he immediately strangles her as she is too "frozen with terror" to react. In this situation, Grenouille never hesitates to kill her--only the possession of her scent matters to him. Süskind goes so far as to say that this character's life "would have no meaning" if he did not obtain it, which furthers his inhumanity, showing how he defines himself entirely by this one aspect of the myriad of human experiences. This selection of detail furthers the idea that Grenouille is corrupt from the start and thus that he is an entirely morally despicable character. To make his crime even more ghastly, Süskind emphasizes the innocence of the "delicate" girl while Grenouille murders her. Since her killer "refuses" to look at her, only the reader sees her "red lips" and "sparkling eyes"-- traits that do not matter to a man who only sees with his nose. Grenouille's first murder is depicted in a way that emphasizes his lack of humanity by showing his willingness to kill and contrasting his own evil to the humanity of his victim. Süskind uses this murder to eliminate almost any pity that could have been garnered for his leading character, and in doing so, reveals the darkness within the humanity he exists among, showing the evil created in an evil world.

In Tykwer's film, however, several elements work together to make Grenouille's first kill morally gray, and thus complicating the character in a different way than the novel. The most notable difference is that the murder is accidental. After catching her scent, Grenouille follows the girl until she reaches her home, where she works outside, halving plums. While her back is turned, Grenouille approaches and begins smelling her, until she turns around and screams. To silence her, he puts his hand over her mouth and nose and holds her like that until the two passerbys who might hear her leave. Of course, by this time, the girl has already suffocated. Though the events

A. Hodge

themselves already make the murder seem less purposeful and malicious, a great deal of the change in Grenouille's character comes down to how he is portrayed by the actor, Ben Whishaw. Since the narrator in the film rarely comments on the character's inner feelings in the way the novel does, a great deal of his internal characteristics must be made physical in the film, and Whishaw's physical performance as Grenouille makes the character seem animalistic and unaware of himself. As the soon-to-be murderer follows the girl, he walks in a strange, hunched over, and almost non-human manner. In addition, when Grenouille nears the girl whose scent he follows, the camera lingers on his closed eyes and the sound of his deep inhaling of her smell is made louder, suggesting that his purpose is less voyeuristic and more instinctual, like a dog who blindly follows his nose. These elements work together to make him seem less than human, but more in a naïve than a malicious way, as his actions are more creepy than violent. Even when he places his hand over the girl's mouth, accidentally suffocating her, he never looks at her while he holds her or realizes she can't breathe. Instead, he focuses on the passerbys, waiting for them to leave (the moment shares many parallels with Lennie's accidental murder of Curley's wife in John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*). The selfish and instinctual motivation behind his repulsive actions are emphasized throughout the scene, through both Whishaw's performance and the Tykwer's decision to bring out the animalistic nature of Grenouille with his shot choice. This emphasis in turn creates a character who, although despicable, is more pitiable than Süskind's inhuman Grenouille. Because he behaves in such an animalistic way, his evil actions seem to become the responsibility of a broken society who showed him no other way to live.

However, both the novel and film convict Grenouille entirely by the end. Tykwer puts a great deal of emphasis on the pain the protagonist experienced in his life, from nearly being suffocated by children at his orphanage to frequent beatings from his master, however he clearly illustrates Grenouille's descent into absolute--if perhaps unintentional--evil as he begins to show Grenouille's final murders. The novel takes an interesting approach to these final murders. Süskind details Grenouille's obsessive inner monologue the night before he decides to kill the first girl for his "masterpiece" perfume. The next chapter then skips to a few months down the road when a farmer finds the body of a young girl. The next twenty-two murders are revealed in the same way, the "outrage]" of the town being the most prominent thing. In fact, Süskind does not even mention Grenouille until three chapters later, forcing the audience to feel the fear that the town feels rather than sympathize with the murderer. It is not until his twenty-fourth and final murder, as he achieves "the goal of his desires," that the novel begins to follow only Grenouille's actions once again. Though he remains in third person the whole time, choosing to allow the audience to experience Grenouille's murder from the town's perspective shows the mayhem he causes. They begin to blame any and everyone. There are "mob scenes" and salesmen are nearly "massacred" simply for being strangers. As they search for a murderer who seems as "impalpable [and] incorporeal" as the scents he collects, people begin to "revile" at authorities and suspect even their neighbors. It shows that death not only follows Grenouille, but that he creates it, and thus forces the citizens to confront it. And by forcing this confrontation, Grenouille causes a fear that reveals the darkness of humankind: their willingness to turn on each other, their distrust of one another, and their ability to accept scapegoats and lies.

In much the same way, the film gradually stops following Grenouille as he begins his final series of murders. Although we do see him kill the first girl, by the end of the montage of deaths, Tykwer no longer shows Grenouille using the bodies, instead choosing to let the audience witness the horror of the citizens as they find the clothes and hair of his victims. (Two things he must remove in order to preserve their scent.) It is at this point in the film that the father of one of Grenouille's future victims, Antoine Richis, is introduced, giving someone for the audience to sympathize with other than the villain-protagonist they've been forced to follow. Introducing a morally upright character to sympathize with so late in the story helps the audience to see Grenouille from the same point of view as people who have no idea of his inner conflicts, thus creating a drastic break between the viewer and the main character. This break allows the audience to take a step back and see Grenouille as the world does, which then

begs the question of who is morally right in the situation. It is generally agreed that murder is wrong, but because Tykwer shows the cruelty of Grenouille's world, he shows how the world can turn someone into a murderer, which then questions whether or not society is to blame. For the most part, when the film does convict society, such as in the opening scene, it convicts only the dark parts of it-- the suffering, the cruelty, and the inhumanity. Richis, however, a character who is entirely motivated by love for his daughter, creates a foil for both Grenouille and the wretched parts of humanity Tykwer criticizes. Without this opposite, the ugliness of the world that Tykwer shows would not translate nearly as clearly, and introducing him as Grenouille begins his serial killings heightens the contrast even further.

The world is a place of moral grey areas, where simply looking at the actions of a person cannot tell you everything about the situation. Motivations, past events, mental stability or instability--essentially context--are necessary to understand the complexity of people's lives. Both renditions of *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* reveal the complexities of Jean-Baptiste Grenouille's life in ways that are similar, yet tell the story of two very different main characters. While the book shows a sociopathic, black-hearted Grenouille who commits evil for the sake of evil, the film presents a man who simply does not understand humanity and, without guidance, ends up succumbing to the society of evil around him. Though both suggest a certain amount of hopelessness with the human condition, their tragedy is different. Süskind's Grenouille never had a chance to rise above his own evilness, while Tykwer's perhaps could have, but never did. And though each story presents a slightly different morality, they both boil down to stories that portray the tragedy of human existence through the life of Jean-Baptiste Grenouille: the most gifted perfumer who ever lived.

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