The Decadent Scent: Patrick Süskind's *Perfume* as a Critique of Enlightenment Science

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April 8, 2024

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Introduction

In the 1985 historical fantasy novel, *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*, Patrick Süskind engages with concepts of identity, innocence, and love amid the murderous crimes of its protagonist, Jean-Baptiste Grenouille. As a product of postmodernism, *Perfume* unites the styles of earlier literary movements to form a unique story centering around explorations in the ephemeral sense of smell. Paralleling the narrative, stylistic, and thematic fundamentals of the late nineteenth-century Decadent movement, *Perfume* demonstrates the enduring relevance of Decadence in a novel published a century later; furthermore, Süskind applies the Decadent feature of unrestrained sensorial imagery to *Perfume* with abundance, engaging the reader in a nuanced and effective illustration of the olfactory imagination. This combination of Decadent influence and olfactory detail in *Perfume* reveal the novel's critical perspective regarding unethical scientific practices and principles from the Enlightenment.

The dominant ideas of the Enlightenment inform the ethics of scientific exploration and reasoning during the eighteenth century and in *Perfume*. Kant coined the motto of the Enlightenment as '*Sapere aude,'* a Latin phrase meaning 'dare to know, to taste, to have sense.' This defining phrase of the Enlightenment is translated today as 'Have the courage to use your own understanding,' uniting the several meanings of *sapere* under the collective sense of introspective reason. The concept of daring oneself to pursue an intellectual understanding of the world and diverging from religion is rooted in the scientific exploration of the Enlightenment. But when does daring go too far? The courage in investigating the infinite unknowns in science evolves into the justification of pursuing science for the sake of science, which introduces ethical concerns regarding the driving purpose behind scientific experimentation and exploration. When the purpose of scientific inquiry blurs into a pure objective investigation of nature's boundaries,

the results of a given investigation overshadow ethical concerns. The Enlightenment's fundamental basis of ceaseless campaigns for scientific excellence and understanding evolved in later years, breaching ethical codes of humanity—namely, in the Nazi regime.

With more than 20 million copies sold worldwide, translated into fifty languages, and adapted in film, television, and music, *Perfume* has enraptured audiences since its publication in 1985.[1] Originally published in Switzerland in German by Diogenes Verlag, Patrick Süskind's *Das Parfum: Die Geschichte eines Mörders* quickly gained popularity as its unique story, character, and style gripped European audiences and beyond. Süskind declined to accept any literary awards for this novel, though many were awarded to him, and he has only given four interviews in his lifetime. In an interview with *The New York Times* in 1986 after the publication of the English translation, Süskind reveals his intention in writing *Perfume* and the way he immersed himself in the writing process. Even forty years after the end of World War II, Germany was still entrenched in the enduring effects of its history, which influenced Süskind's writing. In the interview, Süskind states,"'The Third Reich was for my generation always in the back of our minds;" thus, he created a story about a "monomaniacal murderer who manages to exercise a mesmeric sway over the victims of his terror" that "for post-Hitler Germans, its allegorical message should be clear enough" (Markham 25). The Third Reich committed countless atrocities, including the administration of barbaric scientific experiments for the sake of scientific and ideological advancement. The "clear enough" allusion to Hitler and his regime preceding *Perfume* by more than forty years demonstrates the lasting impact of that time on German authors for years to come and reveals the inspiration for the novel's violence and condemnation of unethical scientific experimentation.

[1] Nirvana's Kurt Cobain was known to carry the novel, *Perfume*, in his back pocket. As one of the only songs written by all members of Nirvana, "Scentless Apprentice," featured as the second track on the group's third studio album, *In Utero,* is based on *Perfume*.

The “monomaniacal murder” of *Perfume* refers to the novel’s fictional protagonist, Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, who terrorizes France for a short time in the eighteenth century. Born to an unloving mother and with no odor of his own, Grenouille possesses an exceptional sense of smell, and uses these olfactory abilities to identify, catalog, and understand the world around him. While exploring the odors of Paris as a youth, Grenouille smells a scent so intoxicating, beautiful, and perfect that he tracks its trail, discovering a young virgin woman as its origin. Desperate to fill his very being with the scent, Grenouille kills the girl by accident. Uncaring of his murderous actions, Grenouille files away the scent in his mind for future use, and pursues the art that will allow him to preserve scents: the art of perfumery. In his apprenticeship to perfumer Giuseppe Baldini, Grenouille applies his crude smelling techniques to the technical art, creating captivating perfumes of renown. Growing tired and overwhelmed by the constant smells assaulting his senses, Grenouille flees to a remote cave where he resides for seven years, reveling in his favorite scents forever cataloged in his mind. Grenouille at last emerges with the intention of creating a perfume to mask his own odorlessness and travels to the town of Grasse. What better smell to give oneself as an unloved, friendless predator than the one that inspires the love and devotion Grenouille experienced in the presence of the girl in Paris? To create this perfume, Grenouille must experiment in preserving the scent of a human, murdering twenty-four young women with this exquisite scent in this endeavor. Having perfected his technique and process, Grenouille kills the final girl, Laure Richis, extracting her scent and formulating the perfect perfume for himself. Grenouille is finally apprehended for his murderous crimes and sentenced to death; however, at his execution, he dons the perfume, and madness erupts. The townspeople, overcome with the smell of innocence, absolve Grenouille of his crimes and descend into a massive orgy in the town square. Although Grenouille achieves his purpose in creating the

perfect perfume, he still feels adrift with no personal odor and no identity. He douses himself in the perfume and approaches a group of people who, consumed with love for the man standing before them, cannibalize him, thus ending Grenouille's life, reign of terror, and the novel.

Pulling from Decadence, Süskind formulates *Perfume* with countless similarities to the earlier movement. Reaching its peak at the end of the nineteenth century, Decadence responds to the period's general sense of decay as the century comes to an end. Prominent Decadent writers, including Charles Baudelaire, Joris-Karl Huysmans, and Oscar Wilde wrote about egotistical protagonists, who are isolated from society and engage in a single-minded pursuit and appreciation of artistic perfection. Decadence emphasizes artifice over nature and amorality over moral instruction. Indulging in imagery centered around the senses, Decadence also pays special attention to sensorial experiences. While Süskind incorporates several literary movements' characteristics in a postmodern pastiche of styles, he includes Decadence in particular because its narrative structure and protagonists share similarities with the scientists of the Enlightenment. Art is to Decadence as science is to the Enlightenment; both movements encourage the pursuit of excellence, whether the subject is beauty or knowledge. Decadents and Enlightenment scientists employ unethical means to achieve a chosen goal, experimenting to the point of violence. Using formulaic methodology and also necessitating creativity, perfumery unites art and science, and thus, Decadence and the Enlightenment. In *Perfume,* olfactory imagery born out of Grenouille's exceptional sense of smell dominates the novel, intensifying its Decadent style and challenging the reader to immerse themselves in these rich descriptions, whether the olfactory details are enticing or repellent.

The sense of smell is the central focus of *Perfume* with vivid olfactory descriptions guiding the reader through Grenouille's life. Süskind isolates the sense of smell in *Perfume*,

ascribing memories and abstract feelings to the scents in the novel to illustrate every detail. In his 1986 interview, Süskind reveals how he brought such a narrow focus of olfactory imagery into this novel. While conducting research for *Perfume*, he drove a motor scooter through the "perfume-producing country of southern France, just sniffing" because as he recounts in his own words, "'smelling was practically the only sense I had functioning on the Vespa…with goggles I could hardly see and with the helmet on I couldn't hear anything" (Markham 25). Süskind's own sensory experiences while writing *Perfume* inform the reader about his approach to writing a novel that features such rich sensorial imagery, especially the often indescribable sense of smell. Not only is smell difficult to describe in literature, but it is also difficult to physically capture. Scent is ephemeral with no physical body to hold it in place, requiring the precise science and art of perfumery to contain its essence forever. Perfumery distills natural objects, like flowers and fruits, to create these elaborate scents; however, in *Perfume*, Grenouille attempts to create a perfume out of the human body in order to capture the scent of innocence and allure that exudes from young virgin women. Scientists in the Enlightenment conducted experiments to explore new frontiers triggered by the era's endorsement of reason as a guiding principle instead of religious faith. This ideological displacement echoes in *Perfume* as Grenouille's natural olfactory exceptionalism and ability to capture the abstract scent of humanity causes him to believe himself to have God-like capabilities and characteristics. The extensive focus on olfaction in the novel emphasizes the arrogance of Enlightenment scientists—and Decadent protagonists—in their pursuit of scientific and artistic achievement.

In the first chapter of this analysis, I present the contextual elements of postmodernism and Decadence, and I present the fundamental features of Decadence and their application in the most notable works of Decadent literature, Joris-Karl Huysmans' *Against Nature (À Rebours)*

and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray.* From this demonstration, I identify the narrative, stylistic, and thematic elements of Decadence in *Perfume*, revealing the unethical principles of Enlightenment experimentation. Then, I reveal the lasting effects of the Enlightenment's harmful principles in World War II, which Süskind reflects upon in the novel's publishment year of 1985. In the second chapter, I discuss the complexities in portraying olfactory imagery through literary mediums before analyzing the risk and success with which Süskind employs this Decadent sensorial focus in *Perfume*. Süskind highlights the hubris of Enlightenment scientists as he pursues the descriptive challenge of olfactory imagery in *Perfume*. I then examine Grenouille's animalistic characterization as both predator and prey, which emphasizes Süskind's rumination on the Enlightenment's presence in the Third Reich. At the end of the second chapter, I analyze the transformative deification of Grenouille as his violent experiment comes to a successful, yet unfulfilling conclusion. In *Perfume,* Patrick Süskind implements a Decadent structure and protagonist, who seeks dominion over the ephemeral sense of smell by obsessive and murderous means, to ultimately criticize the unethical and hubristic principles of Enlightenment science.

I. *Perfume* and Decadence

Süskind's primary use of Decadence in *Perfume* is to apply the Enlightenment's scientific zeal to artistic pursuits in exploration, experimentation, and achievement, hence Grenouille's narrative arc devolving into obsession and murder through his natural olfactory abilities and his acquired knowledge of perfumery. Decadent protagonists embody the Enlightenment's scientific fervor in artistic forms; therefore, in applying Decadent styles to *Perfume*'s postmodern structure, Süskind unites art and science with perfumery. Excessive and obsessive experimentation with an indiscriminate objectivity creates the possibility for unethical practices and purposes for scientific pursuits. The lasting influence of these Enlightenment ideals emerges hundreds of years later in World War II, where the Third Reich conducted inhumane experiments and prompted the creation of the atomic bomb. With Enlightenment scientists and Decadent protagonists sharing countless similarities in their respective realms of science and art, Süskind utilizes Decadence in a postmodern style as a parallel structure with which he critiques the Enlightenment's obsessive scientific goals and enduring influence in the current era.

Postmodernism

Written in 1985, *Perfume* is a prime example of postmodern literature, emulating earlier literary periods and appealing to a wide audience. Postmodernism, as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, is the "state, condition, or period subsequent to that which is modern… characterized by features such as references to, or the use of, earlier styles and conventions" ("Postmodernism, N."). Modernism rejects traditional narrative methods, utilizing stylized techniques to reveal intimate stories concerned with uncovering universal truths about the human condition. Emerging in the 1960s, postmodernism adopts modernism's experimentation, but dismisses the search for truth; instead, this period questions the solemnity of preceding literature

and encourages a playful exploration of diverse experiences and literary eras. However, the lack of truth and reality in postmodern literature does not equate to a lack of meaning. As a fantastical story about a man with an extraordinary sense of smell, *Perfume* does not create meaning from reality; rather, Süskind uses this unusual olfactory focus to emphasize its thematic investigation of identity, innocence, and love from the perspective of a psychopathic murderer.

Taking place in Paris during the mid-eighteenth century, *Perfume* occurs amidst the French Enlightenment, the Age of Reason. Since postmodernism discounts reason as a guiding principle, the setting of the Enlightenment conflicts with the novel's literary style of postmodernism. As an example of a postmodernist playful experimentation, Süskind uses the olfactory sense—typically, an unreliable way to interpret the world—to oppose Enlightenment ideals that revolve around rational thought and the scientific method. The latter concepts are still present in the narrative as Grenouille learns the art of perfumery in his apprenticeship to Baldini, formulating perfumes based on scientific formulas and principles, but Grenouille ultimately relies on his gifted senses to become the greatest perfumer in the world. This complex relationship between conflicting ideologies in *Perfume* demonstrates how "the postmodern psyche in all arenas seems compelled to rewrite the Enlightenment past as Other in order to construct, and perhaps vindicate itself and to confront the promise of Enlightenment epistemology" (Elias 535). Postmodernism must isolate the Enlightenment as a movement of the past, rejecting its presence in the current era, because postmodernism alludes to several earlier movements and eras as its primary principle. The Enlightenment's influence does not end in the late eighteenth century as pursuits in reason and science continue to form the base of understanding in the present day, complicating the defining characteristic of postmodernism. Süskind acknowledges significant elements of the Enlightenment, yet he also uses an unrealistic,

fantastical, and postmodern alternative to undermine its efficacy, supporting his critique of the period's obsessive fixation upon scientific achievement and exploration which led to unethical experimentation.

A primary feature of postmodernism is its borrowing and imitation of other literary periods and movements. With the support of these periods, including Romanticism, Symbolism, and by my own account, Decadence, Süskind equips *Perfume* to engage in a fusion of diverse styles and characteristics. *Perfume* exemplifies a novel situated between pastiche and parody as its postmodern qualities lend itself to substantial intertextuality, according to critic Judith Ryan. Ryan uses Grenouille to describe these literary allusions as "he passes through a phase of Romantic dualism, then a phase of aestheticist dissolution, and finally he emerges as a postmodern cannibalized self" (Ryan 401). As the novel progresses, so too does the addition of literary allusions. Ryan asserts that the majority of the novel never crosses the line into parodic imitation of these periods, but that Süskind's style relates closer to pastiche, a work of neutral imitative art or literature. Discussing another feature of postmodernism, Ryan outlines "double coding" which describes the dual appeal of postmodern novels to literary critics and casual readers alike (Ryan 396). For Ryan, the postmodern "double coding" of *Perfume* both allows for critical discussion among academics and introduces a range of literary styles to general audiences, though they may not recognize them. In appealing to a wide range of audiences through its literary allusiveness, accessible language, and complex protagonist, *Perfume* traverses the barriers between critical and popular classifications of novels.

While postmodern intertextuality offers diversity, it drives some critics to question the creativity and originality of the novel. Described as "the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past [and] the play of random stylistic allusion" by Fredric Jameson, a foremost scholar

and theorist of postmodernism across all domains, an overuse or aimless utilization of intertextuality causes critics to question the intrinsic originality of a novel (Jameson 65). Süskind's imitation and echoing of several earlier literary periods in *Perfume* calls the novel's originality into question, including the writing style, the language, the characterization of Grenouillle, and the plot itself. In regard to *Perfume*, Ryan queries, "Is this an extraordinary allusive richness or a shocking literary dependency?" (Ryan 398). Answering this question, Ryan concludes that *Perfume*'s allusiveness is a "deliberate strategy"; Gray argues that it "strategically appropriates these techniques of popular and postmodern literature to relate in fictive-parabolic form a critical *histoire des mentalités* of Enlightenment culture"; it "expands constructively on past poetry"; and despite the extensive amount of intertextuality in *Perfume,* "Süskind [is an] original and deserves our most sensitive attention" (Ryan 402; Gray 490; Herzog 222; Fowler 85). *Perfume* exhibits the Enlightenment's primary principles in fictional form, using a postmodern structure to do so. In response to Jameson's claim of postmodern novels' "random" allusiveness, the latter statements concerning *Perfume* defend the novel's originality and propose that its intertextuality is a deliberate strategy to impart various meanings and to encourage diverse interpretations. In another positive perspective of postmodernism's allusiveness, Linda Hutcheon argues that "even the most self-conscious and parodic of contemporary works do not try to escape, but indeed foreground, the historical, social, ideological context in which they have existed and continue to exist" (Hutcheon 183). Thus, with *Perfume* as one of these contemporary works of literature, this novel does not use these allusions to escape from the time in which it was published; instead, Süskind uses postmodernism's inclusion of earlier literary periods, such as Decadence, to reflect his own critique of the Enlightenment.

Decadence

The Victorian era stretched the length of Queen Victoria's reign from 1837 to 1901, dominating the social and cultural landscape of the later nineteenth century. The Decadent movement emerged in France as a small, yet prevalent philosophical and literary doctrine during this era, reaching its peak in the 1890s. Representing the dominant *fin de siècle*, or end of the century, ideology in French thought, Decadence counters the decline of intellectual innovation towards the end of the Victorian era. The decadents' endorsement of this new principle initially arose from "the romantics' melancholy, which they inherited, [and to which] they added their own disillusionment over the political and social events of 1848; this combination left them frightened, weary of life, and most prominently, bitter against man and all his works" (Hansen xii). In 1848, France underwent its fourth revolution since the founding French revolution in 1789. Termed the February Revolution, this period in French history saw a resurgence of civil unrest and governmental discontent, though the majority of the French public grew weary of such tumult, prompting the rise of Decadence. In the decades following the February Revolution, the weariness evolved further into "sheer hatred of modernity, which gave [the decadents'] philosophy its momentum" (Hansen xii). The ideals of modernity in question that the decadents' found unacceptable included "democracy, which glorified ignorance; the bourgeoisie, which embodied mediocrity; and utilitarianism, which killed true art" (Hansen xii). In response, the Decadent movement opposed these beliefs, encouraging intellectualism, excellence, and an intense appreciation for art. With these principles forming the basis of Decadence, the movement developed other defining features, including the preference for amorality and artifice, that characterized much of the French and British literature of the late nineteenth century.

The term, decadence, bears many meanings depending on the context in which it is used; from the Decadent movement of the 1890s to the informal use of the word today, the differences in meaning parallel the long history of the word. The etymological origins of decadence stem from a Latin compound of *de-* (down, away from) and *cadere* (to fall), resulting in the literal meaning: 'to fall down or away from.' Over time, this rough meaning evolved to "the process of falling away or declining (from a prior state of excellence, vitality, prosperity, etc.); decay" ("Decadence, N., Sense a."). The Decadent movement is a response to the *fin de siècle* social, cultural, and political decline from the preceding rich Romantic period. Representing the public frustration and weariness of France's recent political upheavals, Decadence instead emphasizes the antithesis of decline: extravagance, luxury, and artifice. The modern meaning associated with decadence developed from these key features of the Decadent movement. Often used in culinary descriptions, today's understanding of decadence lies in "the quality or fact of being sumptuous or self-indulgent; luxuriousness, richness" ("Decadence, N., Additional sense."). Decadent desserts and its use in "wielding it moralistically" rule the modern use of decadence; critics recognize this substantial shift in the word's gravity, describing the current use as "something of a joke, a cuteness about moral being and behavioral risks; it's a bit of camp about what was surely a troubled spiritual condition that some of our predecessors took pains to try to identify" (Gilman 17). Although the modern understanding of decadence no longer includes the formality and consequence of the movement's use of the word, modern decadence traces its roots to the core elements of the Decadent movement.

The key features of Decadence vary according to each scholar's investigation, resulting in complex and mixed definitions. Contending with the aforementioned weariness of the French majority and resulting in an antithetical response to the standards of the Victorian era, Decadence

embraces several core features. In an albeit lengthy summarization and expansion on these defining characteristics of Decadence, literary critic, Russell M. Goldfarb, outlines them as such:

> Decadent literature is animated by the exploration of immoral and evil experiences; never does it preach morality, nor does it strongly insist upon ethical responsibilities. Decadent literature is characterized by artistic concern for the morbid, the perverse, the sordid, the artificial, the beauty to be found in the unnatural, and the representation of the cleanliness in unclean things; it is characterized by a self-conscious and weary contempt for social conventions such as truth and marriage, by an acceptance of Beauty as a basis for life. (Goldfarb 373)

This summary of Decadence highlights the complexity of this movement and the difficulty in defining it in succinct terms. Decadence encompasses a short, yet passionate time period in which authors and artists explored a variety of ways to express the atmosphere of the era. To boil down the essential elements that constitute the movement, critic, Holbrook Jackson, asserts they are "(1) Perversity, (2) Artificiality, (3) Egoism, and (4) Curiosity"; for Hansen, the decadents "glorified success…stressed exoticism…embraced solitude…turned to pure beauty…sought and worked for nothing less than perfection" (Jackson 76; Hansen 252). These definitions will guide this discussion in understanding Decadence in its original form and in its return in *Perfume.*

For the following analyses of critical texts of Decadence and *Perfume* thereafter, a concise definition of Decadence's primary features is paramount to our understanding of the movement and its significance. By my own comprehension, Decadent literature follows a specific narrative path, uses a distinct style, and embraces themes characteristic of this movement. Narratively, Decadence follows an isolated and egotistic protagonist who pursues

perfection in one or many given art forms, uses perverted means to achieve the desired result, and culminates in their ultimate demise. Stylistically, Decadence wields descriptive excess, welcoming lengthy sensorial descriptions, and listing affiliated impressions and ideas. Thematically, Decadence emphasizes the pursuit for perfection and an appreciation of art, prioritizes artifice over nature, and endorses amorality as a fundamental principle. These narrative, stylistic, and thematic details ultimately represent Decadence as a literary movement and period.

Important works of Decadent literature include Joris-Karl Huysmans's *Against Nature (À Rebours),* Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* and Charles Baudelaire's collection of poetry, *The Flowers of Evil (Les Fleurs du Mal).* From the collection's first publication in 1857, Baudelaire laid the foundation for Decadence, inspiring future renderings of the movement decades later. Hailed as the "Bible of the Decadence," *Against Nature,* published in 1884, tells the story of Duc Jean Des Esseintes, an aesthete who retreats to a secluded village and indulges in life's material luxuries (Gilman 105). Its descendent, *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* published in 1891, actually references *Against Nature* in the novel itself, with Dorian describing it as a "poisonous book" that was written in "that curious jewelled style, vivid and obscure at once, full of argot and of archaisms, of technical expressions and of elaborate paraphrases, that characterizes the work of some of the finest artists of the French school of Decadents" (Wilde 89). Acknowledging the influence of Decadence upon the writing of *Dorian Gray*, Wilde expresses the popular view of Decadence's style and central values. *Against Nature* was "poisonous" to Dorian because it exposed him to the extensive lengths to which one will go in order to attain and preserve artistic perfection. While the novel influences Dorian's actions towards violence, its warning about the consequences unfortunately did not resonate with Dorian

before his demise. Therefore, given the novel's reputation, even among other literature, as the primary example of Decadent literature, an examination of *Against Nature* reveals the fundamentals of Decadence in application.

Against Nature's Des Esseintes flees to the outskirts of Paris to escape from the vacuity of Parisian aristocrats and to amuse himself with a quest for exquisite and tasteful art, embodying the most essential aspect of Decadent protagonists. Believing his sensibilities to be far superior to anyone he encounters, Des Esseintes maintains a dismally low opinion of humanity. He concludes that "the world, for the most part, was composed of scoundrels and imbeciles" and that he could not "expect companionship with an intelligence exulting in a studious decrepitude, nor anticipate meeting a mind as keen as his among the writers and scholars" (Huysmans 3). These "scoundrels and imbeciles" apparently refer to the various social circles he approached in search for companionship: the nobility, the wealthy, the highly educated, the religious, and even the literary men. Des Esseintes found each group rather boring, arrogant, and unrefined—enough so that he sees fit to assign them the lowly, ignoble identities of "scoundrels and imbeciles." Des Esseintes thus embraces the arrogance he condemns in the other men and exists as a prime example of the humanity he detests. His ignorance of this contradiction and insistence upon his mental superiority lead him to willingly isolate himself.

The Decadent protagonist is not only isolated, but also dedicated to the pursuit of artistic perfection, favoring artifice over nature. Des Esseintes desires and procures rare and distinct art and literature to suit his refined style, believing that "it is only the impossible, the unachievable that arouses desire" (Huysmans 4). Decadence does not emphasize excess, but relishes the singularity and uniqueness of an object or idea. In decorating his home, Des Esseintes declines to use "oriental stuffs and rugs which have become cheapened and ordinary, now that rich

merchants can easily pick them up at auctions and shops" (Huysmans 7). He equates "ordinary" with being "cheapened" on account of the ease with which they may be procured. And yet, since the most desirable objects and experiences are also the rarest, Des Esseintes decides he must settle for imitations that emulate the original model for "artifice [seems] the final distinctive mark of man's genius" (Huysmans 11). While rarity distinguishes great taste, artifice makes refined style accessible without necessitating an object's original form. In Decadence, artifice represents the avenue by which one attains the desired perfection and beauty of all art forms.

The passion for art drives Des Esseintes into the perverse means by which Decadents will attempt to achieve perfection. After purchasing a live tortoise from a shop window, Des Esseintes realizes that the tortoise's dull shell contrasts too greatly with the color scheme of his house, so he decides to attach sparkling stones and gems to the tortoise's shell to remedy the problem. However, the tortoise collapses and dies, "unable to support the dazzling luxury imposed on it, the rutilant cope with which it had been covered, the jewels with which its back had been paved, like a pyx" (Huysmans 24). The tortoise is never mentioned again. Des Esseintes' indulgence of his extravagant desires results in the destruction and death of the animal on which he poured his fascination, exemplifying an essential component of Decadent narratives: the inevitable corruption of character. And yet, while the protagonist descends into debauchery, the author does not intend to impart moral counsel upon their audience; instead, they emphasize amorality. Readers recognize the clear immorality of the characters' actions and do not need to be convinced of the moral implications of violence and murder. Decadent literature focuses less on the morality of characters and more on the consequences of their actions upon their identities.

The final, most relevant and relatable characteristic of Decadent literature to this greater analysis of *Perfume* lies in its affinity for extensive sensorial descriptions, spanning several

pages at a time in order to detail just one object. Des Esseintes, an amateur perfumer—certainly in comparison to the fantastical abilities of *Perfume*'s Grenouille—pursues perfection in the art of perfumery just as much as he does with any other form of art. Huysmans, in the Decadent style, spares no detail in describing Des Esseintes' particular appreciation for the finer points of the delicate art:

> Into this *décor,* arranged with a few broad lines, receding as far as the eye could reach, under his closed lids, he introduced a light rain of human and half feline essences, possessing the aroma of petticoats, breathing of the powdered, painted wine, to which he added a dash of syringa, in order to give to the artificial life of paints which they exhaled, a suggestion of natural dewy laughter and pleasures enjoyed in the open air. (Huysmans 51)

The section above exemplifies a small excerpt of a far lengthier and more detailed account of Des Esseintes' perfumery skills and dedication to creating perfect, intoxicating scents that encapsulate and give form to abstractions, such as "dewy laughter and pleasures." Huysmans explores every sense throughout *Against Nature*, but its olfactory vividness reawakens in *Perfume,* a novel published a century later. A deeper investigation into this occurrence continues in the second chapter of this analysis.

Huysmans' *Against Nature* reveals the central components of Decadent literature, which Patrick Süskind's 1985 novel, *Perfume,* resurrects. How does Süskind revive the tenets of Decadence in *Perfume*? If the "Bible of the Decadence" represents the movement with certain key elements, then these features would be present in other examples of Decadent literature and its contemporary descendants. The following analysis applies the defining characteristics of Decadence found in *Against Nature* to reveal *Perfume*'s close connection to this earlier literary

movement, exemplifying one aspect of the novel's postmodern elements and introducing the critical similarities between *Perfume*'s Decadent protagonist and Enlightenment scientists.

Perfume's Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, embodies the characteristics of a Decadent protagonist, an isolated, egotistical aesthete whose perverted means of pursuing artistic perfection and beauty leads to his demise; Grenouille's Decadent characterization begins with his isolation. As an orphan, Grenouille receives no tender care from his parents, but neither does he receive any love from other adult caretaking figures in his childhood on account of his invisible, yet unnerving lack of personal odor. During his childhood at the orphanage, the other children "stayed out of his way, ran off, or at least avoided touching him… [because] it simply disturbed them that he was there. They could not stand the nonsmell of him. They were afraid of him" (Süskind 23). Grenouille's lack of personal odor, along with his unnerving olfactory sense, completely isolate him from other people, prompting him to lead a solitary life with no family, no friends, and only the ever-present smells of the world as his companions; with no personal attachments and guidance, Grenouille's path towards obsession parallel to the Enlightenment's scientific exploration is left unobstructed.

Grenouille's appreciation for art through the artificial means of perfumery does not manifest immediately; instead, Grenouille pursues perfection in scent among the natural odors of Paris, leading him to The Scent, which drives him towards an expanded Decadent characterization, including his murderous perversion and cannibalizing death. According to Grenouille, "one could understand nothing about odors if one did not understand this one scent, and his whole life would be bungled, if he, Grenouille, did not succeed in possessing it" (Süskind 38). Thus begins his Decadent obsession redolent of the zealous scientific inquiry of the Enlightenment. For a man whose identity rests upon his exceptional sense of smell, it is

understandable that the most alluring scent to exist would give meaning to his life. This scent epitomizes the pinnacle of Grenouille's catalog of olfactory sensations. As most people use sight to make sense of the world, Grenouille understands life through the "lens" of his sense of smell. Therefore, as his life revolves around analyzing and cataloging smells, this intoxicating scent gives him purpose and desire. Grenouille intensifies the significance of this scent by predicating his success in life upon "possessing" the scent. And yet, how can one possess a scent, especially that of an abstract impression of a human? This seeming impossibility creates the premise for the novel and Grenouille's unwavering fixation from this point forward. His desperation continues as "he had to have it, not simply in order to possess it, but for his heart to be at peace" (Süskind 38). Grenouille faces significant inner turmoil, and the revelation of this pure goal allows the reader to empathize with Grenouille. While just moments later Grenouille's violence destroys his likeability, this connection to the reader leaves an impression of the pursuit of peace as a noble endeavor for every human being. However, science for the sake of science, especially in an obsessive pursuit of achievement, does not equate to a noble purpose; in this moment, Grenouille begins to experience the Enlightenment's scientific fervor for experimentation, which did not result in and influence exclusively noble uses of such discoveries.

Decadent style employs lengthy sensorial descriptions, which Süskind readily utilizes from the beginning of the novel. Grenouille describes the various smells of humanity in detached and less than kind words: "Children smelled insipid, men urinous, all sour sweat and cheese, women smelled of rancid fat and rotting fish. Totally uninteresting, repulsive—that was how humans smelled…" (Süskind 41). Grenouille lives in Paris in the mid-eighteenth century, and as described vividly in the first chapters of the novel, the city reeks of nauseating smells, mostly produced and perpetuated by Parisian inhabitants. His descriptive distinction of smells among

men, women, and children are one of countless examples of the novel's detailed olfactory imagery. These sensorial descriptions constitute another central feature of Decadence. Evocative word choices such as "urinous" and "rotting fish" are so simple yet powerful that the reader can faintly pull them from memory, creating a visceral experience that leaves a distinct impression. By describing the stench of humanity with such gripping and common terms and scents, Süskind connects the reader with Grenouille if only with just a fraction of his peculiar talent. People in this setting doubtless smelled along the lines of Grenouille's description. His opinion of humanity stems from their repulsive smell, and though his disdain for humanity evolves beyond their odor, he understands the world through his sense of smell and thus maintains a low opinion of humanity. His disdain for humanity—excluding young women of course—exists as a form of self-inflicted isolation, a principle of Decadent protagonists. The combination of the isolated protagonist and detailed sensorial descriptions form the initial comparative basis between *Perfume* and Decadence.

The first instance in which the Decadent protagonist's perversity surfaces within Grenouille occurs when the intoxication of The Scent blurs Grenouille's reality, and he accidentally kills the girl whose scent overwhelms him. Grenouille is born with neither a personal odor nor a conscience. The former inspires his longing for an identity; the latter causes his violence to unfold without end and reveals the reason for Grenouille's unaffected demeanor and calm composure in the aftermath of his murders. He does not truly see the girl he kills, "keeping his eyes closed tight as he strangled her, for he had only one concern—not to lose the least trace of her scent" (Süskind 42). For the first time, the exquisite scent is the driving force behind Grenouille's actions and will continue to be so just as he declared was his purpose in life. The Scent's potency blinds him so that he doesn't intend nor does he realize that he killed the girl

in his fervent concentration. In this new governing purpose, Grenouille now must endure the fear of The Scent's disappearance. As his sole concern lies in not losing even a trace of the scent, Grenouille reveals his desperation and psychosis.

Süskind concludes this chapter of Grenouille's defining moment of discovery and purpose by contextualizing the murder in relation to Grenouille's lack of empathy—and the novel's lack of moral instruction, revealing another aspect of the novel's Decadent comparison to Enlightenment objectivity. This represents a fundamental part of *Perfume*'s comparison and critique of the Enlightenment, as the Enlightenment's scientific pursuits endorsed objectivity, which often led to complete indifference and an amoral perspective. For Grenouille, "a murder had been the start of this splendor—if he was at all aware of the fact, it was a matter of total indifference to him" (Süskind 44). This "indifference" to his heinous and violent actions reveal the reason for Grenouille's ability to follow his destiny in possessing The Scent: if he finds no immorality in this murder, nothing restricts his future actions in pursuit of his purpose in life. Grenouille does not distinguish between moral and immoral. Since the reader understands his murderous actions as distinctly immoral, Süskind does not need to persuade, convince, or instruct his audience on the moral implications of Grenouille's crimes. Described as a "splendor," this chapter of discovery for Grenouille and of doom for the young women of eighteenth-century France reveals the significance of The Scent upon *Perfume*'s troubled protagonist and his journey to fulfill his destiny.

As Grenouille's fixation intensifies and his conscience crumbles, the olfactory imagery expands and the focus on fabricated smells from perfumes deepens, emphasizing the distinction between his natural abilities and Decadent artifice. The shift from smelling natural elements in the world to creating and interacting with artificial scents like perfumes further demonstrates the

Decadent influence on *Perfume.* Grenouille apprentices at a perfumery under the tutelage of Baldini, an experienced, yet uninspired perfumer. In this apprenticeship, Grenouille learns "the knowledge of the craft itself, the way in which scents were produced, isolated, concentrated, preserved, and thus first made available for higher ends," gaining the "ability to make those scents realities" (Süskind 93). At the beginning of the novel, Grenouille pursues perfection in natural scents, which he continues to prefer, but in order to preserve the perfection of these ephemeral scents, he must learn the art of perfumery. Despite his exceptional olfactory senses guiding his path, Grenouille appreciates the art of perfumery for its ability to capture natural scents in an artificial representation.

Grenouille eventually kills twenty-five more young virgin women to complete his creation of the perfect perfume, deviating from Decadence's typical level of violence. *Perfume*'s excessive violence does not stem from Decadence as this movement merely highlights the protagonist's perverse means by which he attains artistic perfection. In *Against Nature,* Des Esseintes' character corruption remains harmless with the exception of his killing a turtle by mistake and his common disdainful remarks on humanity. The descent into perversity and debauchery manifests in different ways with Des Esseintes condemning humanity's poor approach to art and literature and seeking ways to assert his intellectual prowess upon the world. Grenouille inherits these traits from Des Esseintes, believing himself to be the greatest perfumer to ever exist and maintaining an equally low opinion of humanity as Des Esseintes. However, Grenouille sinks further into depravity as he must murder the women whose bodies contain the intoxicating scent, thereby fulfilling his purpose in life and achieving scientific (and artistic) excellence worthy of the Enlightenment. Grenouille, with a true lack of conscience, employs violence as a means to an end, enabling his obsession and distinguishing him from Des

Esseintes. While *Perfume*'s violence deviates from Decadent principles, Grenouille's violence does not bar the novel from embodying Decadence and its key characteristics: the violence simply represents an intensified rendering of artistic obsession and its consequences parallel to scientific pursuits of the Enlightenment.

The demise of the Decadent protagonist does not follow a singular narrative method or result, but Grenouille's death differs from those of the movement's primary examples. Des Esseintes's obsession prompts his swift decline in health, forcing him to abandon his solitary existence and rejoin society in Paris at his doctor's instruction. The city represents everything Des Esseintes scorns; therefore, his forced relocation back to Paris is a fate worse than death and signifies the ultimate punishment for his character. In a similar way, Dorian Gray accidentally kills himself, intending to simply destroy his soul's reflective portrait, not realizing the portrait is intrinsically linked to his life force as well. Dorian's obsession with maintaining his youth results in the death of him and his eternal youth. In contrast, Grenouille faces a demise consciously chosen by himself. Upon realizing the futility of creating a meaningful personal odor from The Scent as he will never attain a permanent identity from this perfume, Grenouille chooses to die. After relishing his manufactured identity and the extreme effects of the perfume on others, Grenouille approaches a group of "thieves, murderers, cutthroats, whores, deserters, young desperadoes," who cannibalize him in their entranced state (Süskind 253). After dousing himself in the perfume of The Scent, he is cannibalized, but not against his will; if anything, it was against the mental will of the cannibals themselves, who did not understand their actions until later. While Des Esseintes clings to life, enduring his punishment in Paris, Grenouille chooses his death as the ultimate finale of his life, escaping mortal penalty and enjoying the agency he retains in death. Grenouille's action do lead him to his demise, emblematic of Decadence, yet in

choosing suicide, Grenouille's death sets him apart from other Decadent protagonists. The deviations from Decadence in *Perfume* represent the influence of the other literary movements that make up the novel's postmodern allusiveness, perhaps endorsing the individualism of Romanticism in Grenouille's death.

Before Grenouille endeavors to create the perfect perfume by violent experimental means, he apprentices with Baldini, who disapproves of the Enlightenment's influence. As both a practiced perfumer and a devout Christian, Baldini appreciates science's role in the formulaic practice of perfumery, but he disapproves of science's widespread influence on other aspects of his life. His scorn for the Enlightenment period in which he lives reveals the rampant change in intellectual thought overtaking France:

> In every field, people question and bore and scrutinize and pry and dabble with experiments. It's no longer enough for a man to say that something is so or how it is so—everything now has to be proven besides, preferable with witnesses and numbers and one or another of these ridiculous experiments. [...] They've finally managed to infect the whole society with their perfidious fidgets, with their sheer delight in discontent and their unwillingness to be satisfied with anything in this world, in short, with the boundless chaos that reigns inside their own heads! (Süskind 57).

Baldini disparages the excessive experimentation and the scientific method that forms the basis of the period's new standards for making a claim. Baldini's own discontent with the scientific fervor of the Enlightenment appears well-founded because Grenouille's subscription to these ideals wreaks terror on the town of Grasse several years later. The "unwillingness to be satisfied" manifests in Grenouille as his experiments with distilling human scent continue until he achieves methodological and olfactory perfection, despite the violent means with which he succeeds

(Süskind 57). Grenouille's Decadent appreciation for the art of perfumery and his Enlightenment precision in the science of perfumery unite to oppose Baldini's—and other unyielding traditionalists'—reproachful view of the period. Traditionalists or anti-*philosophes* rejected the Enlightenment's opposition to the religious reasoning that dominated the general understanding of the natural world at the time. The anti-*philosophes* viewed the Enlightenment through "the genuine strain of revulsion in their rhetoric, the seething bitterness, and the apocalyptic note of terror. Seemingly at odds with their century, these [anti-*philosophes*] looked at the society around them as one gone mad" (McMahon 26). Baldini embodies the Counter-Enlightenment movement in *Perfume*. Thus, the Enlightenment as the setting for *Perfume* engages the reader in the contention between the usefulness of science and its obsessive and "chaotic" possibilities.

Süskind drew inspiration for the psychopathic and murderous protagonist of *Perfume* from Hitler, as the lasting impact of Nazi Germany influenced this 1985 novel. Despite being born in 1949, four years after the end of the war, Süskind reveals in a rare interview that "'The Third Reich was for my generation always in the back of our minds" (Markham 25). This is clearly demonstrated in *Perfume* through the obsessive and violent characterization of Grenouille, who remains disaffected by the murders he commits, viewing them as necessary for the success of his olfactory experimentation. Hitler authorized countless unethical, inhumane, and utterly barbaric experiments on Jewish people and others to further Nazi ideology and to gain advantages in the war, operating under the concept of 'science for science's sake.' In the concentration camps, physicians "carried out so-called freezing experiments on prisoners to find an effective treatment for hypothermia, [and] prisoners were also used to test various methods of making seawater drinkable" (U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum). Treatment for hypothermia and effective methods of desalination exemplify attempts by the Third Reich to aid their forces in

the war at the expense of people's lives. Experiments such as these represent the horrible extent to which the Enlightenment's scientific obsession manifests centuries later.

Nazi Germany obliterated the preconceived boundaries of ethical scientific exploration, violating the personal agency of its experimental subjects, who were racially and religiously targeted, abused, and murdered in the name of science. In a parallel way, Grenouille targets young women for their unique scent, sacrificing twenty-four women to olfactory experimentation before he perfects his method and commits murder once again to create the final result. In his quest for aesthetic perfection, Des Esseintes kills a turtle by overloading its shell with colorful gems. The scope between the atrocities committed by the Nazis, Grenouille, and Des Esseintes vastly differs, but the lethal experimentation on living beings for selfish, ideological, and unnecessary purposes by cruel, violent, and remorseless means reveals their connection influenced by the Enlightenment's concept of experimenting simply because one can.

Süskind wrote Perfume in 1984 and published it a year later with Germany ideologically and physically divided by the Berlin Wall. Constructed in 1961 to prevent migration between East and West Germany, the Berlin Wall separated the capitalist democratic state of West Germany from the Soviet communist state of East Germany. West Germany's endorsement of progress and a free market economy in contrast to East Germany's rejection of progress and struggling economy emphasizes the uncertainty of the period. The countless desperate attempts at crossing the wall and the political divisiveness reveal the instability in Germany in the 80s before the country's reunification in 1989. Times of uncertainty and instability prompt longings for opposing eras of certainty and stability, such as the Enlightenment. While the Enlightenment inspired the French Revolution and occurred during the European Seven Years War, the Enlightenment's fundamental belief in reason, rationality, and intellectualism rooted the period in

concepts of certainty like the scientific method. Writing in France and Munich in West Germany, Süskind was immersed in this divisive setting, reflecting this sentiment as the Enlightenment features in *Perfume*. In his interview with the *New York Times,* Süskind reveals that he "originally thought of fixing the action in the present but was attracted to 18th-century France because 'this was when this type of modern man appeared, this dark side of the Enlightenment'" (Markham 25). Referencing Grenouille's perverse experimentation in perfumery, Süskind indicates his reasoning for placing the setting of the novel in the Enlightenment rather than in 1985: to explore the more despicable elements of humanity, beginning with the obsessed scientist of the Enlightenment. Therefore, the tumultuous state of Germany in 1985 drove Süskind to set the novel in the Enlightenment as a representation of the nation's longing for certainty, and the Enlightenment ideals of zealous scientific exploration prompted Süskind's clear allusion to the Decadent pursuit for artistic perfection.

II. *Perfume*'s Olfactory Imagination

As a form of both art and science, perfumery unites the respective subjects of Decadence and the Enlightenment and exists as the primary object of inquiry in *Perfume*. Grenouille's confidence in his olfactory abilities to guide his understanding of his surroundings elevates when he applies his sensorial skills to perfumery; his desire to create a perfume from the distilled scent of innocence and allure in young women reveals his hubristic play-acting as God. Süskind examines the characteristic shift in a person—even someone with an exceptional sense of smell—who is able to bottle the scent of an abstraction, which gives immense power to its keeper. With the downturn of religious faith in the Enlightenment, an opening for religious devotion unfurls. Grenouille fills this gap, becoming a god-like personage in the moment in which he wears the perfume of innocence and absolute devotion. The following analysis investigates the novel's substantial and successful olfactory imagination that demonstrates Süskind's critique of the hubris and obsession of Enlightenment scientists in their zealous exploration of nature's limits reflected in Grenouille's exceptionalism, animal qualities, and character progression.

Süskind structures *Perfume* around the most evanescent and ungraspable sense: the sense of smell. Olfactory sensations do not translate from words to the reader's imagination with ease. Descriptions of the senses of sight, sound, and even touch are far more common in literature than those of taste and smell due to the reader's ability to experience and feel sights, sounds, and textures without their physical presence. Even if these imaginations of the senses are indistinct and imprecise, their forms are more suited to literature; taste and smell are far more elusive and ephemeral. Therefore, for the focus of a novel to revolve around the sense of smell and further for this endeavor to be successful, Süskind faces a daunting task—a task he thoroughly conquers,

according to international reviews and sales. Since the heart of the novel lies in its vast olfactory detail, an analysis of the novel must also examine the significance of such language, seeking to understand the following inquiries: why does Süskind choose to explore the elusive sense of smell and how does he convey such powerful and authentic imitations of scent to the reader? Süskind applies his critique of the hubristic Enlightenment philosophy of pursuing grand scientific achievement to his own writing style in *Perfume* by using the sense of smell as the focal point, despite its descriptive challenges. Thus, Süskind himself embodies the hubris of Enlightenment science in his olfactory endeavor to model the Enlightenment's obsessive fixation in the pursuit of excellence, distinction, and achievement.

Scents, smells, and odors struggle to maintain a lasting physical presence in history on account of its natural ephemerality. As a result, the range of scents from earlier time periods is often lost to history with only literature to revive them. In an analysis of the olfactory imagery in James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Perfume*, Bernard Benstock asserts that "historical restoration fails to take the olfactory into consideration—no time capsules buried for later recuperation contain a retrievable whiff of the odor of the times—yet each work of fiction is posterity-proof" (Benstock 141). Thus, even though history cannot preserve the physical forms of smells from long ago, literature retains the ability to give distinct impressions and imitations of these smells through the olfactory imagination. Generations for years to come can experience these smells rooted in history if the literature renders them with authenticity and success. When Süskind first introduces Grenouille in the novel, he compares Grenouille to infamous historical figures, notorious for their "arrogance, misanthropy, immorality, [and] wickedness"; he claims that the loss of Grenouille's name and infamous deeds in history is not due to his lack of these traits, but "because his gifts and his sole ambition were restricted to a domain that leaves no traces in

history: to the fleeting realm of scent" (Süskind 3). Süskind acknowledges the difficulty in scent's ability to traverse generations. *Perfume* is by no means a true historical account, but Süskind uses the opening created by the ephemerality of scent to root Grenouille's story in history and to convince the reader of its plausibility.

Literature does not often feature the sense of smell as explicitly as *Perfume* due to its ephemeral nature and difficulty in bridging the gap between literary narrative and reader imagination. Olfactory imagery began to feature in literature more commonly after the scientific discovery of pheromones in 1959 because "once the olfactory had been identified as a driving force of human behavior, the literary and critical worlds became more willing to give it a try" (Rindisbacher 86). Thus, if the sense of smell maintains this power over human behavior, it can certainly serve as the basis of inquiry for a novel; *Perfume* exemplifies this intensive focus on the olfactory sense. Sensorial imaginations are well suited to *Perfume*'s positioning in literary context as they "represent the postmodern urge to 'return-to-nature' or at least to the 'natural' in a neo-romantic vein of self-discovery and self-improvement with the senses and subjective experience acting as the main interface" (Rindisbacher 75). Every smell traces its roots back to nature. Whether the smell comes directly from a flower or it is a convoluted mixture emulating a synthetic smell, nature lies at the heart of the olfactory imagination. As a postmodern novel that pulls from earlier literary periods, including Romanticism, and one that embarks on a lengthy quest for its protagonist's identity, *Perfume* fulfills every requirement for a sensory-focused novel.

When such olfactory focuses emerge, critics emphasize their rarity and analyze the success with which the author conveys the authenticity of smell to the reader. Süskind creates an olfactory experience for the reader to immerse themselves in without restriction. In an

investigation of the effect of olfactory detail in Victorian literature on sanitary reform, Ursula Kluwick finds that despite the abundance of olfactory detailing, authors would not directly reference the "process of smelling," and thus, "the boundary between the observer's body and the contagious environment is kept intact and the intrusiveness of smell is curtailed" (Kluwick 243). This boundary not only separates the character from their environment, but also restricts the readers from experiencing the smells permeating that scene. Kluwick discovers the absence of the "process of smelling" in olfactory descriptions through the authors' restriction of olfactory imagery to nouns and adjectives or in a "complicated passive structure that studiously avoids any direct allusion to the actual process" (Kluwick 242). In this way, the author reveals the presence of certain odors, yet the characters themselves are not actively smelling their environment. This disconnect further isolates the reader from the olfactory sensations detailed in such instances.

In sharp contrast, Süskind explicitly details Grenouille's "process of smelling," creating a direct connection between the character and the reader and thus yielding a far more immersive experience. When Grenouille first interacts with the smell of wood, Süskind's description of his "process of smelling" is anything but restricted:

> He saw nothing, he heard nothing, he felt nothing. He only smelled the aroma of the wood rising up around him to be captured under the bonnet of the eaves. He drank in the aroma, he drowned in it, impregnating himself through his innermost pores, until he became wood himself. (Süskind 24)

Süskind emphasizes Grenouille's sole sensory focus on the smell of the wood, demonstrating the intense and personal "process of smelling" that both Grenouille and the reader experience together. By eliminating the other senses, one can direct all of their focus onto their sense of smell. In comparison to the Victorian avoidance of direct interaction with smell, there is no

passivity in Grenouille's act of smelling as he "drank," "drowned," and "[impregnated] himself" with the smell, nor is there any boundary between Grenouille and his environment (except perhaps the lack of feeling any other sense, but that of smell). While Grenouille does not physically shift into a block of wood, the scent envelops him with such totality that he cannot separate his own identity from the wood. Süskind characterizes Grenouille with only two unique traits: his superhuman sense of smell and his lack of any personal odor. Thus, throughout the novel, Grenouille uses his extraordinary olfactory abilities to find and create his own personal scent, granting him a purpose and an identity. In this instance and in each following one, Grenouille delves into the scents around him with Süskind sparing no immersive detail about these sensorial episodes.

While Victorian authors shy away from this "intrusiveness of smell," Süskind welcomes it into his novel, exploring its entirety from the most exquisite smells to the foulest odors. In structuring the novel around a character whose understanding of the world hinges on his sense of smell, Süskind forces the reader to surrender themselves to this olfactory experience. In turn, the reader feels a visceral connection to the smells in *Perfume*, as if they themselves are characters in the story, smelling the plethora of scents described by Süskind. This intimacy between the novel and its readers reveal the significance of Süskind's decision to center the novel around the sense of smell, as Süskind acutely describes within the novel: "Odors have a power of persuasion stronger than that of words, appearances, emotions, or will. The persuasive power of an odor cannot be fended off, it enters into us like a breath into our lungs, it fills us up, imbues us totally. There is no remedy for it" (Süskind 82). Why would Süskind rely on sights and sounds to chronicle this story when the sense of smell invades the body and "imbues us totally" with a "power of persuasion" stronger than that of any other sense? If Süskind wishes to highlight the

hubris of Enlightenment science, then an intimate subject will engage the reader with the most success. It is not often that the olfactory sense is explored in such descriptive depth and focus, and thus, an effective rendering of this challenge distinguishes this novel in all literary realms; furthermore, this success demonstrates Süskind's achievement mirroring the scientific challenges and inventive results of the Enlightenment.

Describing smells in literature proves difficult on account of the inability for a reader to easily imagine smells and the lexical complexity of the olfactory imagination. For example, if one describes a perfume as smelling of "cinnamon," the reader knows what cinnamon smells like, but is more likely to picture cinnamon than to physically smell it. To overcome this, an author might attempt to describe the smell of cinnamon by expressing its warm spiciness; and yet, from this deviation to abstraction, what does "warm spiciness" smell like? Herein lies the lexical complexity of describing smells. Descriptions of smell often fail to convey the true essence of the scent because they struggle to translate to the physical world through literature and thus cannot be easily understood and experienced. In *Perfume*, a novel entirely centered around the sense of smell, Süskind must find a way to convey these smells to the reader.

To accomplish this seemingly impossible task, Süskind chooses words that will elicit strong emotions and reactions from the reader. These visceral emotions and reactions give life to the smells in the novel and aid in drawing the reader into the story. The first introduction to *Perfume*'s olfactory imagination walks a fine line between intriguing the reader and driving them away—a risky move for Süskind to make at the very beginning of the novel. He illustrates the cities of the eighteenth century as such:

> The streets stank of manure, the courtyards of urine, the stairwells stank of moldering wood and rat droppings, the kitchens of spoiled cabbage and mutton fat; the unaired

> parlors stank of stale dust, the bedrooms of greasy sheets, damp featherbeds, and the pungently sweet aroma of chamber pots [...] People stank of sweat and unwashed clothes; from their mouths came the stench of rotting teeth, from their bellies that of onions, and from their bodies, if they were no longer very young, came the stench of rancid cheese and sour milk and tumorous disease. (Süskind 3)

This illustration is positively foul. Süskind intends to evoke absolute disgust and revulsion and does so with immediate success. The words, "stank" and "stench," bear negative connotations, giving the impression that the smell being described is distinctly unpleasant and unwanted, even without knowing the other descriptive words. In the repetition of these words in place of "smelled" or "scent," which have more neutral or positive associations, Süskind emphasizes the filth and decay of the cities and their inhabitants. The actual smells in this description reveal the true scope of foulness in this setting.[2] Manure, urine, chamber pots, grease, sweat, rotting teeth, onions, rancid cheese, sour milk, and tumorous disease evoke powerful reactions because they create such overpowering physical smells. Powerful smells are most likely to penetrate the boundary between words and physicality as they leave lasting memories and are thus easier to recall in one's mind. These "stenches" are undeniably disgusting, but they accomplish Süskind's task in immersing the reader into the novel and breaching the olfactory barrier in literature. The smells' undeniably disgusting descriptions are powerful enough to assault the reader's senses, facilitating a unique olfactory experience and forgiving Süskind for detailing such putridity.

Following this evocative illustration and introduction to the novel's olfactory prowess, Süskind details the equally appalling birth of Grenouille, appealing to the reader's fresh feelings of disgust. Grenouille's life begins among the stenches that define most of his life. Born in a food

[2] Although the Enlightenment resulted in countless inventions and broadened our understanding of science, modern germ theory was not discovered until 1861 by Louis Pasteur, about a century after the end of the Enlightenment.

market built atop an old graveyard, the "most putrid spot in the whole kingdom," to an unloving and uncaring mother, Grenouille endured a difficult beginning to life (Süskind 4). At the time when his mother was about to give birth in the middle of the market, she was gutting a fish that "stank so vilely that the smell masked the odor of corpses" (Süskind 4). Süskind's evocative olfactory language seeks to not only reveal the disgusting conditions in which Grenouille was born, but also to establish empathy for Grenouille's situation in life, starting from his very birth. As the reader imagines the foulest smell of fish possible, Süskind reminds the reader that a baby is being born, innocent and undeserving of such an entry. After Grenouille's mother cuts the umbilical cord with a butcher's knife and dumps him under the fish stall, she collapses in exhaustion.[3] People then discover baby Grenouille "beneath a swarm of flies and amid the offal and fish heads," exemplifying the combination of this putrid setting with an innocent baby's first moments on earth (Süskind 6). Süskind preemptively rouses empathy for Grenouille before the reader knows the scope of Grenouille's obsessive depravity. In doing so, Süskind complicates the reader's emotions and perspective on Grenouille to create a complex relationship between the reader and this corrupt character.

In the chronicle of Grenouille's early years, Süskind reveals the various ways smells will be presented throughout the novel and how Grenouille interacts with scent. When Süskind first introduces the reader to Grenouille's 'process of smelling,' he demonstrates how deeply and intimately the smell of wood affected Grenouille. However, once Grenouille becomes accustomed to his own superb olfactory abilities, his process and descriptions of smell often shift to either pure abstractions or a piece-by-piece dissection of each scent. The abstractions represent concepts that do not have a physical form and do not have a pure smell. Therefore, when only an

[3] Grenouille's mother had previously birthed four other babies in the same manner. When Grenouille is discovered, she confesses to her previous actions and she is convicted of multiple infanticide. A few weeks later, she is decapitated in true French fashion.

abstract concept describes a smell, it becomes a subjective matter because everyone will associate it with different smells. When Grenouille finally obtains the ability to freely roam the streets of Paris, he "[catches] the scent of morning" (Süskind 33). Süskind does not clarify what morning smells like to Grenouille, leaving it to the imagination of the reader and forming a crucial aspect of the olfactory imagery in the novel. Depending on one's routine and setting, the smell of morning will change from person to person; for some in the modern age, morning smells like coffee, and for others, tea. Without the help of further descriptions from Süskind, it is difficult to know what smells Grenouille associates with morning. Abstractions such as this example allow and encourage the reader to take an active role in the novel, creating a subjective perspective that supplements the olfactory imagery in a unique way.

In contrast to abstract descriptions, Süskind reveals another significant way in which Grenouille interacts and catalogs the smells around him: the dissection method. Grenouille's sense of smell is so sophisticated that he is able to dissect any complex smell into "single strands of unitary odors that [can] not be unthreaded further" (Süskind 34). Every smell is either in its own pure form or is made up of many smells. By "unraveling" these "strands" of smell, Grenouille gains a wealth of knowledge about the world, which aids him in his employment at the perfumery. These dissections are less subjective and interactive than the abstractions and also are particular to Grenouille's process. In describing the sea, Süskind first uses a simple simile: "The sea smelled like a sail whose billows had caught up water, salt, and cold sun" (Süskind 35). This description is straightforward and one that readers could possibly discern on their own. However, Süskind distinguishes Grenouille from the average person by revealing his ability to "dissect the odors into fishy, salty, watery, seaweedy, fresh-airy, and so on" (Süskind 35). While one might describe the sea using these words, they would not likely be able to actually divide the

smells of the sea in their mind with such ease. And yet, Grenouille "preferred to leave the smell of the sea blended together, preserving it as a unit in his memory, relishing it whole," acknowledging the beauty of the sea's natural mixture of smells (Süskind 35). Grenouille's abilities set him apart from humanity, demonstrating Süskind's delicate balance between maintaining an interactive experience for the reader and preserving the singularity of the novel's protagonist.

Süskind and by extension, Grenouille, find the most difficulty in describing The Scent as it belongs solely to the literary realm and does not exist in the physical world. Süskind initially describes it by which smells it is not: "This scent had a freshness, but not the freshness of limes or pomegranates, not the freshness of myrrh or cinnamon bark or …" and "it had warmth, but not as bergamot, cypress, or musk…" (Süskind 39). He spends a significant amount of time and words listing the fragrant items that The Scent does not imitate, revealing The Scent's resistance to definition and explication more than any other smell in the world—mostly on account of it not truly existing in the physical world. This is the one scent that exclusively exists in the literary realm, hence the difficulty in conveying its smell. Grenouille shifts from the comparative descriptions to more abstract impressions, ending with an acknowledgement that The Scent defies all attempts at definition. He admits that "this scent was inconceivable, indescribable, could not be categorized in any way—it really ought not to exist at all" (Süskind 40). The Scent maintains an intrinsic connection to Grenouille as a character in this way because Grenouille's extraordinary olfactory abilities should not exist either; as both The Scent and his gift do not exist in the real world, Grenouille and The Scent mirror each other at this point and further throughout the novel.

Grenouille's extraordinary ability to identify, parse, and understand the world through his sense of smell sets him apart from other people; his natural exceptionalism drives him to exhibit animal behavior, the first step of his inhuman transformation to a man capable of divine feats. Süskind's depiction of Grenouille as an animal characterizes the objectivity of Grenouille's pursuit of fresh smells as the prey and predator instinct for survival. This emphasizes his detachment from humanity just as the Enlightenment parted from religious dependency, embarking on obsessive and hubristic pursuits. As a solitary youth, Grenouille avoids human interaction; instead, he allows for the world's smells to approach him. From the beginning of the novel, Süskind describes Grenouille as "the lonely tick, which, wrapped up in itself, huddles in its tree, blind, deaf, and dumb, and simply sniffs, sniffs all year long, for miles around, for the blood of some passing animal that it could never reach on its own power" (Süskind 21). While Grenouille maintains full use of his other senses, his sense of smell exceeds human ability and places him on equal footing with the animal kingdom, including an unassuming tick. Even before his discovery and obsession with The Scent, Grenouille pursues every scent he comes across or "blood of some passing animal," seeking its origin, dissecting its elements, and cataloging its essence in his mind for future use (Süskind 21). Foreshadowing his eventual bloodlust, Süskind extends this representative description of Grenouille as a tick and "waits, for the most improbable of chances that will bring blood, in animal form, directly beneath its tree. And only then does it abandon caution and drop, and scratch and bore and bite into the alien flesh…" (Süskind 22). In using the preceding graphic images and animalistic verbs, Süskind emphasizes the predatory nature of Grenouille and introduces the violent turn of character of which he is clearly capable.

Grenouille interprets the world through scent, using his nose to hunt for fresh scents in his youth and his next human prey once he begins his search for The Scent; tracking scent trails from miles away and apprehending their sources, Grenouille is a wild predator in human form. Süskind supports this animalistic representation of Grenouille by describing the character's search for scent as a "hunt"; emblematic of a hound with its nose to the ground, tracking the scent of a fox, Grenouille "[catches] the scent of morning. He [is] seized with an urge to hunt. The greatest preserve for odors in all the world [stands] open before him: the city of Paris" (Süskind 33). As Grenouille did not simply decide to hunt, "he [is] seized," revealing his unconscious and natural need to hunt as a predator would hunt prey: for survival. In using this passive construction, Süskind emphasizes the way Grenouille's predatory actions are truly innate. Later, when he seeks out young women to practice his embalming and scent preservation procedure, Grenouille approaches as a predator, "[stalking] them from a safe distance with a wide-meshed net, for he was less concerned with bagging large game than with testing his hunting methods" (Süskind 187). In this instance, Süskind relates Grenouille to more of a human hunter than a wild predator by referring to his victims as "game," a term with connotations rooted in the hunting of animals. Süskind also describes him using a "net," but he does so figuratively, not literally; Grenouille casts his nose and superior sense of smell out as one would a net. And yet, whether Grenouille's actions are human or animal, Süskind illustrates a clear picture of him as a dangerous predator, stalking and hunting his victims as prey.

Despite his predatory actions and descriptions dominating much of his characterization, Grenouille simultaneously embodies a prey animal himself. During his seven-year-long hibernation in a remote cave, isolating himself from the constant onslaught of smells invading his nose, Grenouille lives a reptilian existence:

> He went to his watering spot, licked the moisture from the wall, for an hour, for two; it was pure torture… as if he were a hunted creature, a little soft-fleshed animal, and the hawks were already circling in the sky overhead, he ran back to his cave, to the end of the tunnel where his horse blanket was spread. There he was safe at last. (Süskind 131)

During this period of time, Grenouille's reliable way of understanding the world betrays him as his sense of smell is so finely tuned that it overwhelms him. The constant bombardment of smells sifting past his nose from miles away blurs his reality, feeling like more of an attack upon his senses than a supportive tool. Unable to escape from his own olfactory skill, Grenouille behaves even more animalistically than before, scurrying about the cave in search of water and shelter. Süskind reinforces his resemblance to prey by not only describing him as a "hunted creature," but also that he must seek refuge from the predatory hawks circling above. The promise of safety drives his actions, not the bloodlust of a hunt, revealing the shift from predator to prey, yet still sustaining his portrayal as an animal.

The portrayal of Grenouille as an animal surfaces well before his stay in the cave, taking form in his name. The name, Jean-Paul Grenouille, characterizes the protagonist in ways unseen at first glance. Jean-Baptiste is the French translation of John the Baptist, portraying Grenouille as a righteous minister that will baptize Christ himself, thus ushering in a new age of blessings and holiness; eventually, Grenouille sees himself as a God among men, introducing simpler beings to the majesty of scent, forming his own spin on John the Baptist's teachings. However, in terms of prey, *Grenouille* means "frog" in French. Frogs are cold-blooded amphibians that breathe through their skin, absorbing oxygen from the water in which they must stay covered. Described as "his old cold-blooded self," Grenouille resembles a frog in more ways than just in name (Süskind 135). Biologist Michael Dorcas provides a comprehensive report on frogs,

stating, “Frogs and toads are sit-and-wait predators. That is, they pick a good spot and wait for something to come by that they can eat,” echoing Süskind’s description of Grenouille as tick (Dorcas 78). Just as Grenouille avoids people due to their unbearable stench and their simple minds, “most frogs would rather avoid people” (Dorcas 83). Grenouille applies his perfumery skills to formulate several human scents that camouflage his strange lack of personal odor and influence people to behave in particular ways, including odors for inconspicuousness and arousing sympathy. Thus, just as Grenouille creates perfumes that permit him to “move undisturbed in the world of men and to keep his true nature from them,” frogs “defend themselves by remaining undetected either through camouflage or simply by hiding out of sight beneath various objects or underground” (Süskind 184, Dorcas 45). Even though these are different forms of camouflage, they serve the same purpose of hiding one from the scrutiny of those around them. Some frogs even “rely heavily on odor to locate food,” analogous to Grenouille’s reliance on scent to guide him to his unfortunate victims (Dorcas 79). Grenouille’s name reveals hidden clues that illustrate his character as both predator and prey, demonstrating the beginning of his divergence from humanity and leading to his egotistic personal realization.

Just as the Decadents’ appreciation and preservation of art turned into detached violence, Grenouille’s adoption of the Enlightenment’s divine playacting turns violent as a result of his obsessive focus on the experiment’s success. Süskind portrays the devolvement of Grenouille’s characterization from exhibiting animal behavior to a hubristic divine goal, filling the religious gap left by the Enlightenment’s advancement:

> Yes, that was what he wanted—they would love him as they stood under the spell of his scent, not just accept him as one of them, but love him to the point of insanity, of self-abandonment, they would quiver with delight, scream, weep for bliss, they would

> sink to their knees just as if under God's cold incense, merely to be able to smell *him,* Grenouille! He would be the omnipotent god of scent, just as he had been in his fantasies, but this time in the real world and over real people. And he knew that all this was within his power. (Süskind 155)

In this moment of revelation, Süskind engages the reader (as he does with his method of describing abstract smells through a written medium) with intentional language to emphasize Grenouille's shift towards divine realization. The reader follows Grenouille's crazed thought process as he settles on his mission to bottle The Scent. The repetitive structure of "they would" reveals his desperate wish and belief in the possibility for the experiment's success, resulting in absolute devotion to him. Süskind directly mentions Grenouille's imagination of himself as both "God" and an "omnipotent god," ensuring the reader's understanding of the protagonist's obsession and foreshadowing the extent to which Grenouille will go to achieve his goal (Süskind 155). Following the Enlightenment principle of pursuing science for the sake of science, Grenouille "[knows] that all this [is] within his power," hence his decision to go through with the experiment (Süskind 155). He knows he can achieve it, so he will because of his desire for an identity that inspires absolute adoration and devotion. In this way, Grenouille embodies the possibility for a scientific pursuit to regress from noble and enthusiastic explorations to a hubristic obsession with the discovery of limits of science.

Süskind emphasizes Grenouille's Enlightenment hubris through his deified characterization. When Grenouille douses himself in his perfect creation of The Scent's perfume and the town devolves into madness, Grenouille himself not only believes he is a powerful deity, but all who come in range of his perfumed body also become enraptured by his presence as if he

were God. In this way, he more than achieves his goal and his experiment is complete and entirely successful:

> He was in very truth his own God, and a more splendid God than the God that stank of incense and was quartered in churches. A flesh-and-blood bishop was on his knees before him, whimpering with pleasure. [...] A nod of his head and they would all renounce their God and worship him, Grenouille the Great. (Süskind 240)

Grenouille degrades the Christian God that dominated the period's religious faith, filling the opening left by the Enlightenment's departure from religion. According to scholars, "humanity itself replaces God at the center of humanity's consciousness in the Enlightenment," but Süskind alters this idea by inputting Grenouille as the unlikely replacement (Bristow 14). Grenouille clearly views his own existence as divine, believing that the people would "renounce their God" for him and titling himself, "Grenouille the Great" (Süskind 240). This devotion is his payment and commendation for the success of his experiment. In the way that the successful results of Newton, Kant, and Voltaire's achievements in science and philosophy earned them international recognition and historical acclaim, Grenouille's feat raises him to a divine level. The effect of The Scent's perfume on the townspeople is so extreme that Grenouille becomes an "angel" in the eyes of those who cannibalize him when the "miracle is over" (Süskind 253, 245). Thus, once the experiment is finished and successful and Grenouille realizes that he will never have a personal odor, he commits suicide by cannibalism because he has already reached his greatest form. There are no avenues left for him to pursue because he achieved his seemingly impossible quest to bottle an abstract scent of humanity. Grenouille's experiment represents the pinnacle of Enlightenment excellence, despite the violence he employs to achieve this greatness.

The lasting impact of the Enlightenment's scientific progress is undoubtable; from batteries and fire extinguishers to thermometers and the smallpox vaccination, the Enlightenment produced countless advancements in science. As the Age of Reason, the Enlightenment prompted a departure from absolute religious faith and sought to explain the world's mysteries through scientific investigation. However, while the advancement in thought and technology made a positive impact on the modern world, the fervor and obsessive pursuit of scientific achievement gave rise to unethical and hubristic experimentation. These lasting effects materialized in the atrocious experiments of the Third Reich in World War II, which also prompted the creation of the atomic bomb. The Enlightenment explored the limits of the natural world through scientific experimentation, but its manifestation in World War II reveals the dark side of the Enlightenment. With the enduring influence of World War II on German literature in 1985, Süskind reflects on the harmful principles of the past that led to such horrors, including the effects of obsessive and hubristic experimentation. In *Perfume,* Süskind criticizes the violent extents to which one will go to pursue excellence, whether in science or in art or in both, as Grenouille unites Decadent and Enlightenment principles to create the perfect perfume. Uniting the hubris of Grenouille in his quest to bottle an abstract scent of humanity and the hubris of Enlightenment scientists in their extreme explorations of nature, Süskind applies this hubris to his writing in *Perfume*, focusing the novel around the most ephemeral sense of smell. Successfully working through the challenges of describing the olfactory sense in literature, Süskind critiques the unethical and hubristic principles of the Enlightenment.

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