

**To what extent is death portrayed as insignificant to the protagonists in Patrick Süskind's  
Perfume and Chuck Palahniuk's Survivor?**

In the novels *Survivor* and *Perfume*, Chuck Palahniuk and Patrick Süskind present the reader with many deaths, yet it is the protagonists' unconventional reaction that is the focus. Although one would anticipate a response of grief or even remorse, the characters Tender and Grenouille do not follow these expectations. In direct contrast they are continuously indifferent to the deaths of their victims and relations. Although there are instances whereby Tender is portrayed to find a death significant such as that of his fish, Grenouille never does: finding each death as irrelevant as the next. On the one hand these reactions may appal the reader, losing the protagonist's sympathy, but through the characters Palahniuk and Süskind are able to convey fundamental criticisms of society. For instance the protagonists allow the authors to highlight the domineering influence society has over the individual, giving reason for the character's warped attitudes towards death. Whilst Palahniuk emphasises the prominence of family and the distorted aspects of modern culture, Süskind focuses on the limitation of the individual. As a result in both texts the protagonists are presented to consider death insignificant, however it is this portrayal which allows the authors to make relevant criticisms of modern society.

Although one may consider society to be a major influence on the protagonists, it is also apparent that their natural ambitions are their fundamental motive. For instance the protagonist in *Survivor* tells people to 'kill [themselves]' as he '[Dishes] out guidance and punishment'. Palahniuk consequently implies that Tender considers '[killing]' people a menial task. This is due to the use of the colloquial 'dishing out' suggesting that the character is impartial to victim's death as it is routine. Tender then goes on to claim he's a 'Full-time drudge. Part-time god', demonstrating his ambition to become omnipotent, therefore highlighting that he just uses death to reach his goal. Likewise, in *Perfume*, Süskind presents the character of Grenouille to have a very specific aim. This is firstly evident as 'Grenouille knew for certain that unless he possessed this scent, his life would have no meaning'. Whilst the character of Tender gains at least some emotional reward from death, Grenouille's pure focus on the possession of scent makes death completely meaningless. This is endorsed by Steven Wu who claims that 'he cares nothing for people and very little about himself; instead, he single mindedly engages in the pursuit of all scents'<sup>1</sup>. As Wu sees Grenouille to be 'single [minded]' it suggests that this one ambition is driving him forward, causing him to do anything at any risk; death thus becomes irrelevant.

Furthermore, as death is merely used by the protagonists it results in their disregard for the deceased. This is particularly highlighted by Süskind by the manner in which Grenouille leaves his victims – they are 'found naked and shorn and lying in a flower field'. The protagonist is consequently dehumanising the girls as their individuality is stripped from them - their hair and clothes. This is also built upon by the animalistic nature of leaving the

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.scwu.com/bookreviews/h/SuskindPatrickPerfume.shtml>

bodies in 'a flower field', conveying Grenouille does not see the death as significant, only the reward of scent. This interpretation is again heightened by the use of the third person which not only distances the protagonist from the events but also allows for reported speech. As the girl's deaths are portrayed through this third person, reported speech we are presented with a blunt factual account. This results in disregarding any emotional connection – making the deaths insignificant to not just Grenouille but also the reader. However it is also apparent that the character has been brought up in such a manner that 'he has no understanding of what is right or wrong'<sup>2</sup>. This consequently implies that Süskind is leading the reader to judge not Grenouille but pre-revolutionary France. This is because the character was continuously neglected by society, leaving him to form his own ideals – therefore not learning what was 'right or wrong'. Although it may be argued that this is a comment on 18<sup>th</sup> century France, these criticisms also relate to Süskind's disapproval of the modern mainstream materialism which he believed to be neglecting the needs of the individual.<sup>3</sup>

Likewise Tender is also presented to lack respect for the dead but in contrast to Grenouille, the character purposefully disrespects the deceased. For example he is by 'one of the oldest crypts in... the Columbia Memorial Mausoleum. Then [he] steal[s] the rose'. Palahniuk is therefore demonstrating that the character has no regard for the dead because 'Mausoleum[s]' are associated with respect and the superlative of 'oldest' emphasises its sanctity. However as this is then contrasted by 'Then I steal the rose', the character's disrespect is portrayed due to the abruptness of his action; this is highlighted by the one sentence paragraph drawing attention to his insolence. On the one hand, this may reduce the reader's sympathy for the character but on the other Palahniuk is making 'a relevant and important social criticism'<sup>4</sup>. This is because through Tender, Palahniuk is expressing how modern society has become so corporate and material that the traditional values are being corroded, consequently losing significance.

In direct contrast, although Tender sees human death as insignificant, when animals are concerned it becomes more prominent issue. For instance a desperate tone is conveyed through 'It's my fish, I say. It's going to die if nobody feeds it... that fish means the whole world to me'. This tone is demonstrated through the use of short sentences, creating a sense of panic due to the quickening pace. Coupled with this, Palahniuk's metaphorical hyperbole of the 'fish [meaning] the whole world' to him demonstrates how much Tender cares for this one small animal, thus creating irony as it is so significant. It may be argued that the irony of Tender's comment allows Palahniuk to convey how trivial society has become – caring more about animals than fellow humans. Yet as the protagonist is so attached to his 'fish' we feel sympathy for him; this is built by the use of the first person which emphasises his emotions. In direct contrast, the third person used by Süskind adds to

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.dooyoo.co.uk/printed-books/perfume-patrick-suskind/395545/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.gradesaver.com/author/patrick-suskind/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://danielbroberts.com/2010/12/02/seeing-palahniuks-survivor-through-lit-theory/>

the insignificance of 'Once a dead raven lay at the mouth of the cave. He ate it.'. Although Süskind, like Palahniuk, uses a short sentence it has a different affect. The monosyllabic three words jar the fluid rhythm therefore drawing attention to the blunt lexis of 'He ate it', subsequently contrasting to the desperateness conveyed by Tender. On the other hand the basic three word sentence may also symbolise that Grenouille sees the bird as a basic necessity – a source of food, therefore relating to the time setting of the novel. In 18<sup>th</sup> century France animals were seen as food, not loved pets, consequently the reader views Grenouille's actions with disgust, whilst empathising with Tender as he views the 'fish' with such significance.

On the contrary it is also the order of the deaths which suggests their significance, not just our level of empathy. For instance in both texts a majority of the murders are clumped together: in *Survivor* they occur in the second chapter where 'many people who call [him] already know what they want' and towards the end in *Perfume* 'not a single week went by when the body of a young girl was not discovered'. This therefore demonstrates the unimportance of these murders as they happen in such a short period and only take up a minute section of the text. However, in *Perfume* these insignificant deaths are used to build up to the most prominent murder achieving Grenouille his ultimate goal, whereas in *Survivor* the more noteworthy deaths draw the reader's focus as they are scattered throughout the second half of the text. This is demonstrated as Tender 'bring[s] the rock down' on Adam's face as he repeats 'Again!'. The continuous repetition of 'Again!' quickens the pace therefore building tension and combined with the exclamation mark creates a sense of urgency, building to a climax. However as Tender '[doesn't] feel a thing... only [feels] contempt' whilst '[burying] Adam' it conveys the death's lack of significance, therefore Palahniuk creates an anti-climax – unlike Süskind. As a result we judge the protagonist as we have been lead to feel emotion but the character feels none. However, through Tender's actions Palahniuk may be bringing to light his criticisms of modern religious cults, such as 'born again Christians'<sup>5</sup>. As Palahniuk witnessed the growth in such groups, but was disillusioned by their teachings his belief grew<sup>6</sup> that 'reality means you live until you die'<sup>7</sup>. Palahniuk's factual, blunt tone is also reflected in Tender's trivial attitude towards death consequently, through Tender, Palahniuk is able to criticise the acts of the growing cultist religious movements of the 1990s.

Yet, it is the ultimate irony portrayed by both authors that the protagonists have insignificant deaths. Firstly, in *Perfume* Süskind foreshadows the character's ultimate death as 'he wanted to go to Paris and die', the blunt candied tone therefore distancing the reader from any emotion. Additionally this also foreshadows the characters death, subsequently we are anticipating it, lessening the build of an emotional climax. Coupled with this, as the reaction of his murderers was that 'though the meal lay rather heavy on their stomachs,

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<sup>5</sup> *American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America*

<sup>6</sup> <http://chuckpalahniuk.net/>

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/c/chuck\\_palahniuk.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/c/chuck_palahniuk.html)

their hearts were delightfully light', it leads one to see his death as irrelevant. This is because the protagonist has just died in a frenzied act of cannibalism, yet all that can be said is the consumers' stomachs were 'heavy' and that they even felt content with their act. As a consequence this demonstrates a total disregard for the protagonist as the focus is no longer on him or his death. The reader, therefore, becomes detached from the death, even overlooking it. As this is how insignificant Grenouille has seen death throughout the novel, Süskind presents a fundamental sense of irony.

In a similar light Palahniuk also uses the method of foreshadowing to create an ironically insignificant death. However one could argue that Palahniuk's use is more effective because the protagonist's death is foreshadowed from the very beginning. This is due to the cyclical structure: Palahniuk begins and ends with many the same lines such as 'Testing, testing. One. Two. Three'. As a result, throughout the whole text we are anticipating his death therefore reducing a sense of climax when it occurs. In addition, Tender doesn't even know if his last words are actually being recorded and doesn't care to check; only considering 'Maybe this is working... If you can hear me, I don't know'. Palahniuk's use of the conditional 'if' emphasises the uncertainty of the protagonist, suggesting that even he doesn't see his last words as significant enough to ensure they are being heard. Finally, like Grenouille, it is Tender's acceptance of his death that ultimately demonstrates its insignificance. This is because he believes 'It's all done. It's all just a story now.', the short sentences and the belief that his 'story' cannot be rewritten implies that he's given up. Consequently we no longer feel any need to hope for his saviour because even the protagonist has accepted his fate. Palahniuk is subsequently presenting there is no point in becoming emotional about the inevitable. As a result we, like Tender, see his death as insignificant.

In conclusion, although both protagonists do ultimately consider death to be insignificant, this is used by Palahniuk and Süskind to illustrate fundamental criticisms of society. Whereas Grenouille was neglected by his society, leading him to form and solely concentrate on his ultimate goal, the character of Tender was distorted by rebelling against society's ideals. However, despite these differences, both characters ultimately form an insignificant view of death, both disregarding and disrespecting the deceased. It is through this portrayal that Palahniuk and Süskind are able to represent and criticise how influential society is on the individual, how it has the ability to warp one's outlook and change one's persona.

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