



The Scent of Desire and Decay: Olfactory Manipulation in Émile Zola's *Nana*

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Abstract

Imagine walking into a room and instantly feeling at ease, or suddenly being drawn to someone without quite knowing why. Often, these invisible nudges come from the world of scents; subtle signals that shape our emotions, memories, and even social connections in ways we rarely notice. Smell is one of our most primal senses, tightly linked to the parts of our brain that govern emotion and memory, making it a powerful yet often overlooked force in human interaction. This paper explores the deep, unconscious connection between smell and emotions of human beings and how Emile Zola uses smell in his 1880 novel, *Nana*. Through the character and atmospheres, Zola expresses how odours from refined smell to the smell of decay; trigger intense feelings, raw emotions, drive desire and reflect the moral state of Parisian society during the Second Empire. By analysing some literary examples and Zola's approach, the paper provides information on how smell acts as a faint yet powerful force, controlling emotional responses. From intense lust and admiration to profound disgust and the foretelling of doom. This paper explores the raw and unconscious emotions and behaviours that are stimulated by sensory triggers, especially smell. It also explores the science behind the olfactory system that works behind these emotions.

Key words: Smell, emotions, scents, odour.

Did you ever smelled something and had a flood of memory that rushed back to your mind? This experience is very common, but this proves that smell, or olfaction, is directly tied to our feeling and memories. The part of brain that process smell is called olfactory bulb, it has a unique and direct connection to the limbic system. The limbic system is the area that is responsible emotions and memories, which means smell can avoid the

thinking part of the brain and go straight to the feeling part of the brain. This gives our brain no space to think and bring out the raw unfiltered emotions.

In literature, writers often use this to connection to shape atmosphere and characters, Emilie Zola is a writer from Naturalist movement. He is known for his detailed and scientific descriptions of people and their environment. His novel *Nana* is a story of courtesan, who destroys the wealthy men around her with her overwhelming sexual appeal. Zola uses the sense of smell to explore the strong emotions: especially corruption and desire. This paper explores how the scents described in *Nana* act as characters themselves and influence the emotions of the people in the novel.

This research paper explores the border theme of smell as a faint yet potent part in sketching social interactions and psychological responses. This demonstrate that smell is not merely a passive experience but a social language with real consequences. The paper also examines influence of scent in our social and psychological lives.

Using *Nana* as a lens, this paper illustrates the social and psychological power of scent as a form of manipulation and communication. Through Zola's strong sensory description, the paper explores the vehicle attraction, seduction and social control of smell that control the emotions and behaviour of the characters.

Sexual manipulation through scent is a more specific form where smell triggers attraction, desire, controlling how people respond to another person. In *Nana*, Nana's perfume and presence make men obsessive, infatuated, and irrational. These men are not acting logical, they are acting on their subconscious desire triggered by her scent and action. From the beginning Nana's power is linked to a mighty, powerful scent that drives men crazy. The Manager of the theatre states that:

Nana has other good points, by heaven!—something which is as good as all the other things put together. I've smelled it out, it's deuced pronounced with her, or else I've got the scent of an idiot. You'll see, you'll see! She's only got to come on, and all the house will be gaping at her. (19)

Nana's magnetism is not only her looks but also something more than that, and that something is overpowering her physical appearance. The use of "smell it out" and "scent" suggest an biological appeal, that is a powerful, subconscious trigger that triggers lust and infatuation in men. Their behaviour is not intellectual but a subconscious signal, a gut reaction driven by an animalistic attraction towards her.

As she becomes wealthy her atmosphere changed into a rich, expensive aroma which is designed to enhance the sense of luxury and desire. The scent of lavish materials creates an intoxicating environment that dulls the sense and encourages emotional recklessness. The expensive scents act like a drug, it feeds her lovers' overwhelming emotional need to possess her. The intensity of her seduction made men to lose their financial wealth and fuel their desire get her. The destructive power of emotions are triggered by her.

Initially Nana's character was associated with seductive perfume but the author often contrasts it with underlying smells of decay and filth. This contrast shows smell as an indicator of moral and emotional decay. The moral and emotional corruption of the characters are reflected through the foul smell of decay and filth. He knew all the shops, and in the gas-laden air he recognized their different scents, such, for instance, as the strong savour of Russia leather, the perfume of vanilla emanating from a chocolate dealer's basement, the savour of musk blown in whiffs from the open doors of the perfumers. . . . Big drops were dripping from a

broken waterspout, and a ray of gaslight slipped from Madame Brno's window and cast a yellow glare over a patch of moss-clad pavement, over the base of a wall which had been rotted by water from a sink, over a whole careful of nameless filth amid which old pails and broken crocks lay in a heap. (250)

This scene where the brief whiffs of pleasant perfume and vanilla are overwhelmed by the nameless filth and the faint decaying smell. The foul smells acts as a symbolism of the downfall. The pleasant smells are a thin cover for the emotional and social disease that Nana brings with her. This unpleasant atmosphere foreshadows the emotional and financial doom awaiting her admirers.

When Nana dies from smallpox, comes the powerful use of smell in the novel. Zola, the author strips all the glamorous illusions she once had. Replacing her intoxicating smell to a stinking order of disease and death. The final description of Nana's body is shocking and visceral, designed to evoke profound disgust and horror in the reader:

What lay on the pillow was a charnel house, a heap of pus and blood, a shovelful of putrid flesh. The pustules had invaded the whole face, so that one pock touched the next. . . . And from that mass of corruption, from that pile of slops and pus, a breath rose which was thick and nauseous. It was the smell of the charnel house. (488)

The overpowering smell of the charnel house replaces the strong female odour that once made men desire and desperate. The intense disgust and horror are the final emotional states left by the women whose life was defined by the sensory world.

Emilie Zola's *Nana* is a powerful demonstration to the influence of smell on human emotions and behaviour. Zola uses smell not only as a social background but also as a main plot that reflect social emotions and behaviour. The intoxicating smell of Nana that triggered men's raw desire and infatuation on her, later changed into a foul disgust smell. The smell of her whole surrounding changed from lavish, zest to reek and foul smell. There started the down fall of Nana. Finally the smell of her diseased body at the end of the novel forces the ultimate emotion, profound disgust and horror, which act as Zola's final, brutal critique of the decadent society. By carefully crafting the sensory details Zola's *Nana* provides a clear insight on how scent can affect human emotions and behaviour. The paper also explores the transient nature of scent and its association with decay and morality.

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