

EMOTIONS AND OLFACTORY MEMORIES.

THE ROLE OF SCENT IN ITALIAN LITERATURE

Tamara Gotowicka, Italian Philology, Warsaw University

We are moving in a localized cloud of smells which contains information about the emotions that we are currently experiencing. Our sense of smell is one of the most powerful senses we possess. It was often overlooked as we mainly rely on what we see and what we hear. Meanwhile our capacities for both smell and emotion are rooted in the same network of brain structures, and no other sense has the same kind of deep access to the brain part where emotions are born and memories stored. Everything starts with just one breath. The association of fragrance, memories and emotion is not only an invention of writers, poets or perfume-makers. Our olfactory receptors are directly connected to the limbic system, the most ancient and primitive part of the brain, which is thought to be the seat of emotion. Smell sensations are relayed to the cortex, where 'cognitive' recognition occurs, only after the deepest parts of our brains have been stimulated. The scent has already activated the limbic system, triggering more deep-seated emotional and memories responses. Therefore scent evokes vivid memories that stay with us long after the visual images fade. In fact scent as a time machine can immediately bring us back to the most cherished childhood days, remembering the most important chapters of our life, the youth, love affairs, our family. Because scent has the power to trigger some long-gone feelings. As the writers notice, certain smell of a certain person who is no longer around can make us feel nostalgic. The same is with the scent of a certain place. It connects us back to memories, the energy that drove us then, and it reincarnates the yearning we felt at a time. The scent in literature is vivid and powerful. I would like to explore how scent influences the emotions, behaviours and decisions of protagonists in Italian literature. As studies show that smell perception is modulated by experience and physiological state. Smell can arouse emotion, and can lead to the recall of emotional memories. I will try to show how the sense of smell is so powerful and how authors used it to re-live the past.

KEY WORDS: SCENT, MEMORY, TIME, PAST, EMOTION, BEINGY IN LOVE, BEHAVIOUR, DECISION