

# Embodiment and Cognitive Alienation in *A Rose for Emily* from the Perspective of Embodied Cognition

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**Abstract**—This paper employs the theoretical framework of embodied cognition to conduct an in-depth analysis of the interactive relationship among bodily experiences, sensory perceptions, and cognitive construction in William Faulkner's short story *A Rose for Emily*. Through a meticulous interpretation of embodied elements such as olfaction, vision, space, and bodily behaviors in the text, it reveals how the protagonist, Emily, maintains a distorted cognitive world through bodily practices. The paper explores the profound implications of the novel's themes from the perspective of embodied cognition, offering a new academic dimension for the interpretation of the work. It finds that the theory of embodied cognition can effectively reveal the deep interaction between the body and cognition in literary texts, offering an interdisciplinary perspective integrating sensory experience, bodily practices, and cognitive science for the interpretation of classic works.

**Keywords**—embodied cognition, *A Rose for Emily*, sensory perception, bodily practice

## I. INTRODUCTION

Embodied cognition theory challenges the traditional view in cognitive science that the mind is an “abstract symbol operation system”. Davis and Markman introduced embodied cognition as a practical research paradigm, outlining its existing framework and exploring future directions for advancing the theory [1]. It emphasizes that human cognition originates from the interaction between the body and the environment. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson proposed in *Metaphors We Live By*, the human conceptual system is essentially metaphorical, and these metaphors are rooted in bodily experiences [2]. The bulk of our everyday conventional language are structured and understood primarily in metaphorical terms, has gone either unnoticed or undiscussed. Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish—a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language [3]. For example, the metaphor “Time is money” stems from humans' embodied perception of time and resource consumption. In literary analysis, embodied cognition theory provides a unique approach. It focuses on the implicit bodily experiences in language, revealing how authors transform abstract thoughts, emotions, and themes into perceivable embodied experiences through sensory descriptions, action narratives, and other means, thus achieving deep cognitive resonance.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Embodied cognition, as an emerging paradigm in cognitive science research, has posed challenges to traditional cognitive

science. Traditional cognitive science holds that the essence of cognitive activities is computation, mainly relying on information processing in the human brain while barely considering the influence of the body and the environment. Friston proposed an embodied inference framework that integrates Bayesian inference with the free energy principle, explaining how bodily perception and action shape the neurocomputational foundations of spatial cognition through active inference mechanisms [4]. In contrast, the theory of embodied cognition emphasizes the importance of bodily movements and experiences in cognitive activities, highlighting the core status of perceptual-motor experiences formed by the body, the environment and their interactions. Tang and other scholars contributed to embodied cognition and metaphor research by examining the temporal neural mechanisms underlying the comprehension of scientific and poetic metaphors, revealing dynamic differences in their processing and providing evidence for embodied cognition theory, which showed that the activation timing of brain regions related to bodily experience was closely associated with the cognitive characteristics of metaphor types [5]. David McNeill explored the intricate relationship between gesture and language, arguing that gesturing was a dialectical component of language, not just an accessory to speech [6], which revolutionized the relation between language and mind. Slepian and Ambady showed that novel sensorimotor metaphors influenced sensory judgments by activating corresponding physical experience systems, supporting embodied cognition [7]. Spaulding argued that embodied cognition theories could enhance our understanding of mindreading by linking it to physical experience and sensory-motor processes [8]. Furthermore, high-level cognitive processing and offline cognitive processes involved the reproduction and embodied simulation of past bodily perceptual-motor experiences. Embodied cognition provided a new framework for language comprehension, arguing that language understanding did not merely depend on abstract rules or representations, as semantic and syntactic features were insufficient to explain deep meanings. Aizawa examined the nature of “embodied cognition” by critiquing its definitions and boundaries, arguing for clearer distinctions between cognitive processes and bodily and environmental factors in Philosophical Psychology [9]. The meaning of linguistic symbols should be a systematic internal construction rather than a relationship between different meanings. Jones proposed “embodied cognitive ecosophy”, positing that mind, body, meaning, and ecology constitute an

interdependent system where cognition emerges from physical experience and ecological interactions [10]. The theory of embodied cognition posits that language comprehension is deeply rooted in the body's motor-perceptual system, and the meaning of vocabulary originates from bodily actions, perceptions, and related experiences. Clark examined Lakoff and Johnson's experientialist theory of conceptual understanding through the lens of "embodied imagination", illustrating how abstract concepts were rooted in physical experience and bodily interactions [11]. A large number of empirical studies based on embodied cognition have shown that actions and perceptions significantly influence the comprehension of vocabulary, sentences, and discourses. The construction and understanding of linguistic meaning depend not only on the individual's body but also on the external environment in which they are situated. Research in embodied cognitive linguistics has provided new perspectives and theoretical foundations for language and literary studies.

### III. OLFATORY EMBODIMENT: SMELL AS THE MATERIAL CARRIER OF COGNITION

#### A. The Embodied Metaphorical Mechanism of "Smell"

The novel *A Rose for Emily* sets the tone with a powerful olfactory description at the beginning: "When Miss Emily Grierson died, our whole town went to her funeral: the men through a sort of respectful affection for a fallen monument, the women mostly out of curiosity to see the inside of her house, which no one save an old man-servant—a combined gardener and cook—had seen in at least ten years. It was a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily light some style of the seventies, set on what had once been our most select street. But garages and cotton gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of that neighborhood; only Miss Emily's house was left, lifting its stubborn and coquettish decay above the cotton wagons and the gasoline pumps—an eyesore among eyesores. And now Miss Emily had gone to join the representatives of those august names where they lay in the cedar-bemused cemetery among the ranked and anonymous graves of Union and Confederate soldiers who fell at the battle of Jefferson". Here, the "stale, enclosed smell" is not merely an environmental description. Through the embodied metaphorical mechanism, it transforms Emily's mental state and the decline of the Southern tradition into a perceivable material form. Readers activate the cognition of "decay and stagnation" through their own life experiences of unpleasant odors in enclosed spaces, thereby understanding Emily's stubbornness and the rigidity of the Southern tradition at the bodily level.

In their daily lives, people often associate negative emotions with unpleasant smells, such as "the smell of anger" or "the stench of fear". The smell of Emily's house serves as an embodied symbol of her refusal to accept external changes and her adherence to old-fashioned cognition. She is like a specimen sealed in a time capsule, and the smell of the house is the material manifestation of this "cognitive capsule".

#### B. The Cognitive Suppression of Olfactory Experience

When the "fragrance of roses" and the "stench of the corpse" are juxtaposed in the text, a strong olfactory sensory

conflict, triggering readers' cognitive reconstruction. In Western culture, the rose is a typical conflict, triggering readers' cognitive symbol of love and beauty, and its fragrance usually activates people's embodied associations with romance and tenderness. However, in the novel, this conventional cognition is forcibly suppressed by the stench of the corpse. Emily keeps Homer's body at home and allows it to decay. The once-symbolic rose of love coexists with the decaying body in the same space, forcing readers to reexamine the concept of "love".

This sensory conflict confirms the mechanism in embodied cognition theory that "perceptual input directly affects conceptual integration". Readers' cognitive frameworks are adjusted under the impact of olfactory experiences, and the originally beautiful concept of love is given a distorted and alienated connotation, thus enabling readers to deeply understand the novel's theme of "the coexistence of beauty and evil". The human conceptual system consists of neural representations of perceptual experiences. Aymerich-Franch explored whether "mediated embodiment"—cognition shaped by technological or symbolic mediation—offered a valid response to the limitations of traditional embodied cognition theories [12]. When new perceptual input conflicts with existing concepts, the conceptual system undergoes dynamic reconstruction.

### IV. VISUAL EMBODIMENT: BODILY GAZE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF COGNITIVE POWER

#### A. The Embodied Cognitive Framework of "Peeping"

The townspeople's "peeping" behavior towards Emily is a profound visual embodiment phenomenon in the novel. The text repeatedly describes the townspeople "peering through the cracks in the curtains" at Emily's life. This "peeping" is not just a simple visual act but forms an embodied logic of "visual gaze or cognitive control". As an important human sensory organ for obtaining information, vision is often associated with concepts such as "understanding" and "control" in daily life, as seen in expressions like "seeing is believing" or "seeing the essence clearly". In the novel, the peepers construct their cognition of Emily through the act of "looking" (bodily practice), defining her as a "eccentric old spinster" and "a stubborn guardian of the Southern tradition". Semino and Steen explored metaphor in literature, analyzed its manifestations in texts, functions, and impacted on reader comprehension [13]. Emily's act of "cutting her hair short, like a boy" is an important symbol of her bodily symbolic transformation, directly related to the reconstruction of her cognitive identity. In the Southern society of the 19th century, long hair was closely associated with women's qualities of tenderness and meekness, forming an embodied stereotype of "women features long hair". By cutting her hair short, Emily breaks this traditional cognitive connection. Through the change in her bodily appearance (physical feature alteration), she attempts to construct a cognitive self that is "independent of traditional gender norms".

This interaction between the body and cognition is of great significance in gender studies. Judith Butler proposed the "gender performativity" theory, which argues that gender is not a natural attribute but is constructed. Emily's act of cutting her hair is a rebellion against traditional gender

performativity. She challenges society's definition of women through embodied practices, demonstrating the initiative of self-cognition. Although this rebellion ultimately fails to change her tragic fate, it highlights the active role of the body in cognitive construction.

This cognitive construction conforms to the view in embodied cognition that "the mode of perception determines the mode of cognition". The townspeople metaphorically establish cognitive hegemony over the "other" through the physical "angle of view" (the cracks in the curtains). The narrow cracks limit their vision, allowing them to obtain only one-sided and distorted information, yet they believe they have grasped the truth. This process vividly demonstrates how cognitive biases are formed through embodied visual experiences. At the same time, Emily's resistance of "never opening the curtains" confronts external cognitive intrusion with the closure of bodily space (visual obstruction), embodying the embodied correlation of "bodily boundaries represents as the cognitive boundaries". She refuses to be defined by the outside world by closing the visual channel and adheres to the independence of her self-cognition.

### *B. The Cognitive Subversion of "Visual Representation of the Corpse"*

The description of Homer's corpse at the end of the novel is a classic scene of visual embodiment: "They opened the door and entered. A faint, sweetish odor of decay hung in the air. The room was furnished with heavy, old-fashioned pieces, and on a high, narrow bed lay a man in a nightshirt, his body wasted and shrunken, the flesh fallen away from the bones. His face, once handsome, was now a mask of decay, the skin stretched tight over the skull, the eyes sunken and empty. The bedclothes were yellowed and stained, and there was a smell of urine and excrement. On a table beside the bed was a bottle of arsenic, half-empty". This visual scene completely subverts readers' conventional cognition through embodied impact.

The decaying state of the corpse breaks the conceptual mapping of "love is equal to the eternal beauty". In traditional cognition, love is often associated with beautiful images and eternal promises. However, the decay and deterioration of Homer's body here embody the "distorted love desire" into a perceivable bodily form. Readers directly feel the alienated nature of Emily's love through visual experience. This "unconventional visual input" forcibly adjusts readers' cognitive frameworks, transforming "death" from an abstract concept into a shocking bodily decay. The body is our anchor in the world. Visual experience, as an important part of bodily perception, directly affects our understanding and cognition of the world.

## V. SPATIAL EMBODIMENT: THE ISOMORPHISM BETWEEN ARCHITECTURAL ENVIRONMENT AND COGNITIVE SCHEMA

### *A. The Embodied Metaphor of "Enclosed Space"*

Emily's house, as the core spatial image in the novel, forms a profound isomorphism with Emily's cognitive mode. "The house stands like a monument, with the shutters closed all year round". The enclosure of the building (windowless, high walls) is transformed into a bodily experience of "cognitive resistance" through embodied metaphor. According to the "spatial schema" theory in embodied cognition, human

perception of space in daily life forms specific cognitive schemas. For example, "enclosed spaces" often activate the bodily memory of "protection-isolation". When facing danger or needing solitude, people instinctively seek enclosed spaces.

In the novel, Emily reinforces her cognition of "resisting the passage of time" by maintaining the enclosed state of the house (bodily practice). For her, "enclosed space is equal to the unchanging past", and the house becomes a fortress for her to escape reality and adhere to the Southern tradition. This isomorphism between space and cognition is also reflected in real life. For instance, when people reminisce about the past, they often recall specific spatial scenes, and space becomes a container for memories and emotions. Emily's house is not only a physical residence but also the embodied presentation of her spiritual world.

### *B. The Cognitive Trajectory of "Bodily Movement"*

Emily's movement paths within the house also contain profound embodied cognitive logic. Her physical limitations of "never going out on the street" and "only moving downstairs" mirror her cognitive limitations. Embodied cognition theory emphasizes that the scope and mode of bodily movement directly affect the boundaries and depth of cognition. When Emily refuses to leave the house, she actually equates the "physical territory" with the "cognitive territory". Through self-imprisonment of the body, she maintains the illusion of "the undying Southern tradition". Emily's acts of poisoning Homer and preserving his body are extreme manifestations of embodied cognition, materializing her inner emotions and desires into perceivable bodily practices. The act of "poisoning" seems simple, but in fact it contains complex cognitive and emotional logic. In Emily's cognition, Homer's departure threatens her illusions about love and tradition. Therefore, she negates Homer's subjectivity through the bodily act of poisoning (a specific action), transforming him into a "controllable object", thus achieving the cognitive construction of "eternal love" at the bodily level. This process conforms to the cognitive pattern of "abstract emotions are equal to specific actions". In real life, people also often express inexpressible emotions through actions, such as smashing objects when angry or caressing old things when missing someone.

The act of "preserving the corpse" further pushes embodied cognition to the extreme. Emily dresses and arranges the corpse year after year. Through continuous bodily interaction, she maintains the cognitive illusion of "Homer not being dead". Embodied cognition theory points out that repeated bodily actions strengthen related concepts. By constantly touching and arranging the corpse, Emily strips "death" from her own cognition, making the corpse the material carrier of her love fantasy. Although this behavior is extreme in reality, it also reflects the universal psychological mechanism by which humans maintain cognitive stability through bodily practices, such as using ritualistic behaviors to relieve anxiety and strengthen beliefs.

## VI. READERS' EMBODIED RESONANCE: SENSORY LANGUAGE ACTIVATING COGNITIVE PROJECTION

The novel's intricate web of sensory descriptions serves as a conduit for readers to engage in a profound process of

cognitive projection, intertwining their own embodied experiences with the textual world of *A Rose for Emily*. This interaction not only deepens the reading experience but also reveals the underlying mechanisms through which literature shapes and is shaped by human perception.

#### A. Olfactory Projection: The Evocative Power of Scent

When readers encounter the description of “the smell of opium and dust”, it triggers a multi-layered process of olfactory projection. This sensory cue activates neural representations associated with past experiences of enclosed, stagnant spaces. The olfactory projection is not a mere passive recall but an active simulation in which the reader’s brain reconstructs the qualitative aspects of the smell—its mustiness, its heaviness, and its sense of decay.

This process is further influenced by cultural and personal associations. Soliman, Johnson, and Song argued that religious beliefs and practices were rooted in embodied cognition, shaped by physical sensations and actions rather than being purely mental constructs [14]. In Western cultural contexts, the smell of opium often carries connotations of decadence, escapism, and hidden secrets, while dust evokes images of abandonment and the passage of time. For readers, these associations merge with the textual context, allowing them to grasp the isolation and psychological confinement within Emily’s world at a visceral level. From a phenomenological perspective, as Merleau-Ponty emphasized, the body is the medium through which the world is experienced. Thus, the olfactory projection in *A Rose for Emily* enables readers to “inhabit” the textual space, sharing, albeit vicariously, the sensory and emotional states of the characters.

#### B. Visual Projection: The Disruptive Impact of Gory Imagery

The visual description of “the corpse’s hair sticking to the bed sheets” is a masterstroke in Faulkner’s use of embodied language. It disrupts readers’ cognitive schemas by presenting a grotesque and disturbing image that defies the romanticized notions of love and death. According to the “Embodied Simulation Theory,” when readers process such visual information, the brain regions involved in visual perception and emotional response are simultaneously activated. This activation leads to a physical and emotional reaction, such as discomfort or revulsion, which in turn serves as a powerful catalyst for critical thinking.

The visual projection in this case forces readers to confront the dark underbelly of Emily’s love. It challenges the cultural ideals of love as a pure and beautiful emotion, revealing instead its potential for possessiveness, obsession, and decay. Moreover, this visual disruption aligns with the postmodern concept of the “uncanny”, as described by Freud. The familiar image of a loved one transformed into a decaying corpse creates a sense of estrangement, prompting readers to question their own assumptions about identity, mortality, and the nature of human relationships.

### VII. CONCLUSION

In *A Rose for Emily*, Faulkner’s employment of embodied language strategies is a testament to the power of literature to capture the complexities of human existence. By materializing Emily’s cognitive alienation into perceivable

bodily experiences, Faulkner creates a narrative that resonates on multiple levels—from the individual psyche to the collective cultural consciousness. Emily’s olfactory resistance, visual closure, spatial fixation, and bodily manipulation are not just idiosyncratic behaviors; they are symbolic acts that reflect the broader tensions between the body and the mind, tradition and modernity, and the self and society. From a philosophical standpoint, the novel serves as a meditation on the nature of cognition and perception. Embodied cognition theory, when applied to this text, reveals that Emily’s tragic fate is not solely the result of external circumstances but is deeply intertwined with her embodied experiences. Her attempts to preserve the past through physical actions, such as preserving Homer’s corpse, are ultimately futile, highlighting the limitations of the body in the face of the inexorable passage of time.

In the realm of literary criticism, this study of *A Rose for Emily* within the framework of embodied cognition opens up new avenues for analyzing works of fiction. It emphasizes the importance of considering the sensory and physical dimensions of reading, challenging the traditional focus on abstract themes and narrative structures. Leschziner and Brett argue that creativity involves integrated cognitive, embodied, and evaluative processes, challenging the dichotomous view that creative thinking is purely a mental activity. This study confirms that cognition, especially embodied cognition, provides a new approach. Consistent with prior studies applying embodied cognition theory to literary analysis (e.g., Lakoff & Johnson’s practice of metaphor theory in text interpretation), this research also endorses the core hypothesis that “bodily experience serves as the foundation of cognition”, continuing the interdisciplinary paradigm of combining cognitive science with literary criticism. For example, while some scholars have interpreted character psychology through metaphors of bodily movements in Dickens’ novels, this study further focuses on the interaction between sensory perceptions (olfaction, vision) and cognitive construction based on such precedents, reflecting inheritance in theoretical application.

Looking ahead, the integration of embodied cognition theory with other disciplines, such as neuroscience, sociology, and anthropology, holds great promise for literary research. For example, neuro-literary studies could explore the neural correlates of embodied resonance in readers, while sociological approaches could analyze how cultural norms and social structures influence the interpretation of embodied metaphors in literature. Such interdisciplinary efforts will not only enrich our understanding of individual literary works but also contribute to a more comprehensive theory of literature as a medium that engages the whole person—body, mind, and spirit. This study, rooted in the theory of embodied cognition, analyzes the relationship among bodily experiences, sensory perceptions, and cognitive construction in *A Rose for Emily*. Sensory stimuli (olfaction, vision) and enclosed spatial experiences drive Emily’s cognitive distortion, while her bodily practices (e.g., refusal to go out) further solidify this bias. Her cognitive dilemma symbolizes the resistance of the old Southern aristocratic culture to modernity, with the mansion and corpse scenes symbolizing the collapse of the old order. Breaking through traditional literary criticism frameworks, the research validates the explanatory power of

embodied cognition theory for texts through an interdisciplinary approach, offering new interpretive dimensions for Faulkner's works and Southern Gothic literature.

#### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

#### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Zihan Liu took the initiative to integrate the theory of embodied cognition with the textual analysis of Faulkner's novel *A Rose for Emily*. Xue supported the research depth through textual empirical analysis and interdisciplinary argumentation, collecting. Chen assisted the overall research with technical tools, data integration, and detail refinement. All authors had approved the final version.

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