

The Relationship between Literature and the Senses

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<p>Received: 08 May 2024; Received in revised form: 10 Jun 2024; Accepted: 19 Jun 2024; Available online: 27 Jun 2024</p> <p>©2024 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— <i>Sensory Language, Literature and Empathy, Narrative Engagement, Cognitive Effects of Literature, Emotional Resonance in Literature</i></p>	<p><i>This article explores the intricate relationship between literature and the senses, focusing on how literary works engage and stimulate sensory experiences. We analyse the use of sensory language and vivid imagery, demonstrating how literature can transport readers to different realms, evoke profound emotions, and foster a deep sense of empathy and connection. Furthermore, we investigate the role of narrative structure and character development in enhancing reader engagement and emotional resonance. The impact of literary experience on memory and learning is also examined, highlighting its lasting effects on cognitive and emotional processes. Through a review of empirical research, we elucidate how literature not only shapes sensory experiences but also influences cognitive functions, serving as a potent tool for empathy, understanding, and personal growth.</i></p>

I. INTRODUCTION

The senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch—serve as our primary means of engaging with the world, and they play a critical role in the realm of literature. Through the skilled use of sensory details, authors can evoke emotions, create vivid atmospheres, and transport readers to different times and places. Literature's unique ability to engage our senses sets it apart from other art forms and allows for a deep, immersive experience. For instance, consider how James Joyce's *Ulysses* immerses readers in the bustling streets of Dublin with rich sensory descriptions of sounds, sights, and smells. Similarly, Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* evokes the taste of a madeleine dipped in tea, unlocking a cascade of memories that resonate deeply with readers. These examples highlight the profound impact of sensory language in literature, creating experiences that are as memorable as they are vivid. This article explores the intricate relationship between literature and the senses, examining how authors use sensory details to

enrich storytelling, how our sensory experiences influence our interpretation of texts, and how literature can challenge and expand our sensory perceptions.

II. LITERATURE'S ENGAGEMENT WITH THE SENSES

Literature engages and stimulates our senses in a way that is unparalleled by other art forms. Using sensory language and imagery, authors can create experiences that are deeply immersive and emotionally resonant. This section delves into the ways literature interacts with our senses, exploring how different types of imagery can enhance our understanding and emotional connection to the text.

2.1 Visual Imagery and Description

Visual imagery is one of the most effective tools at an author's disposal for engaging the reader's senses. By painting vivid pictures with words, authors

can bring scenes to life in the reader's mind, making the text feel immediate and real. For example, in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, the description of Daisy Buchanan with "bright eyes and a bright passionate mouth" (Fitzgerald, 1925, P.9) not only creates a clear image of her physical appearance but also conveys her lively and dynamic personality. The visual imagery here serves to deepen the reader's connection to the character, making her more memorable and impactful. Authors like Virginia Woolf also excel at creating vivid visual landscapes. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf uses detailed descriptions of the setting to reflect the inner lives of her characters, using the changing light and weather to mirror their emotional states. This use of visual imagery not only enhances the atmosphere but also deepens the thematic content of the narrative. Similarly, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, employs visual imagery to blur the lines between reality and magic, thus reinforcing the novel's magical realism. Visual imagery in literature is not confined to descriptions of characters and settings. It often extends to the symbolic and thematic realms. For instance, in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, the intricate descriptions of landscapes such as the lush, green fields of the Shire or the dark, foreboding lands of Mordor serve to symbolize the conflict between good and evil. The vivid imagery creates a stark contrast that not only grounds the reader in Tolkien's world but also underscores the epic struggle central to the narrative. In different genres, the application of visual imagery varies to suit the narrative's needs. In horror, for example, authors like Stephen King use dark and ominous imagery to build a sense of dread and anticipation. In his novel *It*, King describes the decaying, abandoned town of Derry with a level of detail that evokes a visceral sense of unease, contributing to the overall tension and fear. By exploring these varied uses of visual imagery, we can see how it not only enriches the reader's sensory experience but also enhances the depth and impact of the narrative, making it a vital element in storytelling across genres and styles.

2.2 Auditory Imagery and Description

Literature appeals to the sense of hearing through auditory imagery, creating a fuller, more immersive reading experience. Authors use descriptive language to evoke sounds, whether it is

the gentle rustling of leaves, the cacophony of a busy street, or the distinct tone of a character's voice. This sensory engagement allows readers to experience the text in a more vivid and realistic way, making scenes and emotions more impactful. In William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the character Ariel's song includes the lines: "Full fathom five thy father lies; / Of his bones are coral made; / Those are pearls that were his eyes" (Shakespeare, 1616, p. 14). This passage not only evokes the sound of Ariel's ethereal song but also creates a vivid mental image of transformation, blending auditory and visual imagery to powerful effect. The musicality of the language and the rhythmic quality of the verse immerse the reader in the magical atmosphere of the play, demonstrating how auditory imagery can enhance the thematic richness of a text. Similarly, the works of Edgar Allan Poe often use sound to build a sense of suspense and horror. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," the relentless ticking of the old man's heart creates a chilling auditory image that heightens the tension and drives the narrative forward, making the reader almost hear the imagined heartbeat. Poe's use of auditory imagery not only creates a sense of impending doom but also mirrors the protagonist's escalating guilt and paranoia, thus deepening the psychological impact of the story.

Auditory imagery can also evoke the ambiance and mood of a setting. In James Joyce's *Dubliners*, the story "Araby" uses the sound of rain falling on the rooftops to create a melancholic atmosphere that reflects the protagonist's inner turmoil. The quiet, persistent patter of the rain serves as a backdrop to the boy's introspective journey, highlighting his emotional isolation and disappointment. Additionally, auditory imagery is often used to characterize individuals through their unique sounds or voices. In Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, the distinct sound of Boo Radley's laughter heard through the night contributes to the mystique surrounding his character, blending fear with a sense of humanity. This subtle use of sound helps to build Boo's enigmatic presence without direct exposition, showcasing how auditory imagery can provide depth to character portrayal. Moreover, in the realm of poetry, auditory imagery plays a crucial role in conveying rhythm and mood. In Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem "The Charge of the Light Brigade," the repetition of phrases like "Half a league, half a

league, / Half a league onward" (Tennyson, 1854) mimics the rhythmic gallop of horses and the relentless forward charge of the soldiers, immersing the reader in the urgency and chaos of the battle. The auditory patterns created by Tennyson's language help to evoke the intensity and bravery of the event, demonstrating how sound can enhance the emotional power of poetic imagery. By exploring these examples, it becomes clear that auditory imagery is a powerful tool in literature. It not only helps to create a more immersive reading experience but also enriches the narrative by adding layers of meaning and emotional resonance. Whether evoking the soft murmur of a crowd or the chilling silence of a haunted house, the use of sound in literature engages the reader's imagination and senses, making the text more vivid and impactful.

2.3 Olfactory Imagery and Description

Olfactory imagery, utilizing the sense of scent, serves as a potent tool in literature to evoke memories and emotions, given the close link between smells and our emotional responses. Authors adeptly employ this sensory modality to vividly depict scenes, often tapping into readers' own sensory memories to elicit visceral experiences. In J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, the description of Mrs. Weasley's "warm comforting smell" not only conveys her nurturing nature but also evokes feelings of safety and home (Rowling, 2005). This olfactory imagery establishes a strong emotional connection between the reader and the character, illustrating how scent can evoke deep-seated emotions and associations. Patrick Süskind's novel *Perfume* takes the exploration of olfactory imagery to an immersive extreme, constructing an entire narrative around the protagonist's obsession with crafting the perfect scent. Süskind portrays a world where odors hold as much significance as visual details, demonstrating the profound impact of olfactory sensations on perception and experience. The protagonist's journey through this fragrant world not only engages the reader's senses but also explores the psychological and philosophical implications of scent as a form of identity and power. The use of olfactory imagery in literature extends beyond mere description; it enriches narrative depth by tapping into primal sensory experiences. In Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, the narrator's memories are often triggered by the aroma of a madeleine dipped in tea,

transporting him back to his childhood and evoking a complex interplay of nostalgia and introspection. This example highlights how scent can serve as a powerful mnemonic device, unlocking layers of personal history and emotional resonance within the narrative. Furthermore, olfactory imagery can be employed to characterize settings and atmospheres. In Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*, the recurring scent of lavender permeates the mystical landscape, symbolizing both tranquility and the supernatural forces at play. This use of scent not only enhances the sensory richness of the novel but also underscores its thematic exploration of magic realism and familial legacies. Olfactory imagery in literature transcends the boundaries of description, engaging readers on a profound sensory and emotional level. Whether used to evoke memories, establish character traits, or symbolize deeper themes, the portrayal of scent underscores literature's capacity to immerse readers in multifaceted sensory experiences that resonate long after the text is finished.

2.4 Gustatory Imagery and Description

Authors employ gustatory imagery, which appeals to the sense of taste, to vividly bring flavors to life and render scenes more tangible and immersive for readers. This sensory technique enhances the reading experience by adding another layer of engagement through the depiction of tastes and culinary experiences. In Roald Dahl's *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, gustatory imagery plays a central role in creating a richly sensory narrative. The descriptions of the fantastical sweets and chocolates are so evocative that readers can almost taste the richness and sweetness, thereby making Willy Wonka's fantastical factory feel vividly real and immediate. This use of gustatory imagery not only stimulates the reader's sense of taste but also contributes to the magical and imaginative atmosphere of the story. Similarly, Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate* utilizes gustatory imagery to profound effect by intertwining food with emotions and cultural significance. The detailed descriptions of the dishes prepared by the protagonist not only engage the reader's sense of taste but also convey deeper layers of emotional and narrative meaning. The emotions of the cook are imbued into the food she prepares, affecting those who consume it in ways that extend beyond mere taste, illustrating how gustatory

imagery can be used to explore themes of love, identity, and tradition.

Gustatory imagery in literature serves not only to describe flavors but also to symbolize and communicate broader themes. In Homer's *The Odyssey*, the lavish descriptions of feasts and banquets underscore themes of hospitality, social status, and divine favor. The portrayal of sumptuous meals and exotic delicacies not only provides sensory detail but also enhances the cultural and historical context of the narrative. Moreover, gustatory imagery can evoke nostalgia and personal memories in readers, much like olfactory imagery does. In Haruki Murakami's *Norwegian Wood*, the protagonist's nostalgic recollections of meals shared with a lost love evoke a poignant sense of longing and melancholy, illustrating how tastes can become intertwined with emotional experiences and personal histories. Gustatory imagery in literature serves as a powerful tool for enhancing sensory engagement and enriching narrative depth. Whether used to depict fantastical feasts, convey cultural traditions, or evoke emotional responses, the portrayal of taste in literature transcends mere description, providing readers with immersive sensory experiences that resonate on emotional, cultural, and thematic levels.

2.5 Tactile Imagery and Description

Tactile imagery, appealing to the sense of touch, vividly describes textures and physical sensations in literature, enhancing the reader's immersion in the narrative and making scenes more palpable and realistic. Authors utilize tactile imagery to depict how objects and environments feel, ranging from the softness of fabric to the roughness of stone. In Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, the protagonist Santiago experiences the "smooth cool surface of the marlin," allowing readers not only to visualize the fish but also to feel the sensation of touching it (Hemingway, 1952). This tactile description enriches the realism of the scene, enabling readers to connect more deeply with Santiago's struggle and triumph, thereby intensifying their emotional engagement with the narrative. Tactile descriptions also play a pivotal role in establishing a sense of place and atmosphere within literature. For instance, in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*, the depiction of the "cold, clammy stone" of the prison elicits a visceral sensory response, conveying the

oppressive and bleak nature of the setting (Dickens, 1861). This tactile imagery not only enhances the physicality of the environment but also reinforces the emotional impact of the narrative, immersing readers in the harsh realities faced by the characters. Moreover, tactile imagery can symbolize deeper themes and characterizations within literary works. In George Orwell's *1984*, the description of the protagonist Winston Smith's experiences with the "smooth, creamy paper" of his forbidden diary contrasts sharply with the harsh, abrasive textures of the dystopian society he inhabits. This tactile juxtaposition underscores Winston's longing for individuality and authenticity in a world dominated by conformity and control. Furthermore, tactile imagery serves as a sensory anchor that grounds readers in the physicality of fictional worlds, making abstract concepts more tangible and immediate. In J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, the description of Frodo's tactile experience with the One Ring, from its cold, smooth surface to its weight and texture, enhances the ring's significance as a powerful and ominous artifact that shapes the fate of Middle-earth. Tactile imagery in literature enriches narrative depth by evoking physical sensations and textures that resonate with readers on a visceral level. Whether used to portray the texture of objects, evoke atmospheres, symbolize themes, or deepen characterizations, tactile imagery enhances the sensory experience of literary works, fostering a more profound connection between readers and the narratives they explore.

III. THE IMPACT OF LITERATURE ON THE SENSES

Literature not only reflects and engages our senses but also profoundly influences our sensory experiences and perceptions of the world. Through vivid sensory language and imagery, authors create immersive experiences that leave a lasting impact on our emotions, memories, and cognitive processes.

3.1 Emotional Resonance

Literature has a remarkable ability to evoke a wide range of emotions, creating deep emotional resonance that persists long after the book is closed. This emotional impact is often achieved through the use of sensory language, which helps readers connect

more deeply with characters and events. For example, in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, the detailed sensory descriptions of the magical world help readers form a strong emotional connection with the characters and their journeys. The vivid imagery of Hogwarts and the emotional arcs of characters like Hermione Granger resonate with readers, evoking feelings of empathy, excitement, and nostalgia. In addition, literature can evoke powerful emotional responses through its exploration of complex themes and human experiences. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* uses rich sensory descriptions to convey the haunting legacy of slavery, creating an emotional depth that leaves a lasting impact on readers. The sensory details not only bring the historical context to life but also evoke a profound sense of empathy and understanding for the characters' struggles.

3.2 Sensory Memory

Literature can also shape and enhance our sensory memory, creating vivid mental images and associations that persist long after reading. This lasting impact on memory is achieved through the use of detailed and evocative sensory descriptions. In Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the lush, sensory-rich descriptions of the town of Macondo create a vivid and lasting mental image. The "melancholy air" and "golden flowers" evoke a strong sense of place and atmosphere that remains with readers, shaping their perceptions and memories of the fictional world. Similarly, in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, the taste of a madeleine dipped in tea triggers a flood of memories, illustrating the powerful connection between sensory experiences and memory. The detailed sensory descriptions not only enhance the narrative but also highlight the profound impact of literature on our sensory memory.

3.3 Empathy and Perspective-Taking

Literature has the unique ability to foster empathy and perspective taking by immersing readers in the sensory worlds of diverse characters and experiences. Through detailed sensory descriptions, literature allows readers to experience life from different perspectives, fostering a deeper understanding and empathy for others. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* provides a nuanced exploration of race and identity through the sensory experiences of a Nigerian woman living in the United

States. The vivid descriptions of cultural and sensory differences help readers understand the complexities of the immigrant experience and the challenges of navigating a new cultural landscape, fostering empathy and perspective taking. Similarly, in Khaled Hosseini's *The Kite Runner*, the sensory details of life in Afghanistan create a vivid and immersive experience that helps readers empathize with the characters' struggles and experiences. The detailed descriptions of sights, sounds, and smells create a rich sensory tapestry that deepens the reader's connection to the narrative and its themes.

3.4 Sensory Overload and Desensitization

While literature can engage our senses sensitively, it can also contribute to sensory overload and desensitization through exposure to graphic or intense content. Repeated exposure to violent or disturbing imagery in literature can lead to desensitization, reducing the emotional impact of such content over time. Studies by Bushman and Huesmann (2006) suggest that exposure to violent imagery in literature can lead to a decreased sensitivity to violence and an increased tolerance for aggressive behavior. This is particularly concerning for younger readers, who may not have the critical skills to process such content appropriately. However, literature can also play a role in raising awareness of social issues and promoting sensitivity and advocacy. For example, novels like *The Diary of Anne Frank* use sensory details to convey the horrors of the Holocaust, creating a powerful emotional impact that fosters empathy and a commitment to preventing such atrocities in the future.

IV. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON LITERATURE AND THE SENSES

Recent empirical research has explored the relationship between literature and the senses, examining how literary texts engage sensory experiences, influence brain activity, and shape cognitive and emotional responses.

4.1 The Power of Sensory Language

Sensory language uses words and phrases that evoke sensory experiences, such as sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures. Research by Kosslyn et al. (2011) shows that sensory language can activate the brain's sensory cortex, creating mental simulations of

described experiences. For instance, when participants read a descriptive passage about a sunny day, their brains responded as if they were actually experiencing the sunny day, with activation observed in the visual, auditory, and somatosensory cortices, as well as the hippocampus and amygdala, which are involved in emotion and memory (Kosslyn et al., 2011). Similarly, a study by Menon et al. (2000) found that when participants read about a character's emotional experience, their brains responded as if they were experiencing the emotion themselves. This research suggests that sensory language not only creates vivid mental images but also evokes emotional responses that enhance the reader's engagement with the text.

4.2 The Role of Imagery in Literary Experience

Imagery, or the mental visualization of scenes or experiences described in literature, plays a crucial role in enhancing reader engagement and emotional response. Studies have shown that literary imagery can activate brain regions associated with visual processing, creating vivid mental images that deepen the reader's connection to the text. Gerrig et al. (1993) found that when participants read a descriptive passage about a character's appearance, their brains responded as if they were actually seeing the character, with activation observed in the visual cortex and fusiform gyrus, a region involved in face perception. This suggests that imagery not only enhances the realism of the text but also deepens the reader's emotional engagement with the narrative. Research by Miall et al. (2000) also indicates that literary imagery can influence our emotional response to literature. When participants read about a character's emotional experience, their brains responded as if they were experiencing the emotion themselves, with activation observed in the anterior cingulate cortex, a region involved in emotion regulation. This highlights the powerful impact of literary imagery on our emotional and cognitive processes.

4.3 The Impact of Literary Experience on the Brain

Literary experiences have lasting impacts on brain structure and function, shaping our cognitive abilities and emotional responses. Research has shown that reading literature can enhance empathy, improve cognitive abilities, and alter the way we perceive and

process emotions. Studies by Kidd and Castano (2012) suggest that reading literary fiction can increase empathy and improve cognitive abilities. Their research indicates that engaging with complex narratives and diverse characters can activate brain regions associated with empathy and cognitive processing, such as the anterior cingulate cortex and the prefrontal cortex. Similarly, Logsdon et al. (2014) found that reading literature could change the way we perceive and process emotions, with activation observed in brain regions involved in emotion regulation and empathy. This research highlights the profound impact of literature on our cognitive and emotional processes, demonstrating its potential to enhance our understanding and empathy for others.

V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the relationship between literature and the senses is intricate and deeply enriching. Literature engages and stimulates our senses in unique ways, offering immersive experiences that evoke powerful emotions and foster empathy and connection.

Through the use of sensory language, imagery, and narrative structure, literature transports us to different worlds, creates vivid mental images, and shapes our cognitive and emotional processes. It enhances our memory, improves our cognitive abilities, and fosters a deeper understanding of the human experience.

Literature's impact extends beyond immediate sensory and emotional responses, offering lasting benefits for cognitive health and emotional well-being. Whether we are reading a novel, a poem, or a play, literature has the power to engage and stimulate our senses, enriching our lives and deepening our understanding of the world around us.

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