# The Gravity of Lightness: Embodied Metaphor, Finitude, and Ethical Reorientation in Stephen King's Elevation

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| Abstract | Original Research Article |
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This article offers a cognitively oriented literary analysis of Stephen King's novella *Elevation* through the framework of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). Focusing on the protagonist's anomalous loss of weight without corresponding bodily change, the study argues that the narrative literalises a system of embodied metaphors grounded in everyday conceptual mappings such as WEIGHT IS BURDEN, LIGHTNESS IS RELEASE, and VERTICALITY IS MORAL ORIENTATION. Central to this system is the paradoxical *gravity of lightness*, through which physical weightlessness becomes a means of reconfiguring ethical orientation rather than escaping embodied finitude. Rather than functioning merely as a fantastical or allegorical device, the phenomenon of "elevation" reorganises the protagonist's affective disposition, social relations, and sense of embodied selfhood. Drawing on work by Lakoff and Johnson, Kövecses, and related cognitive-linguistic scholarship, the article demonstrates how King's text exploits entrenched metaphorical structures rooted in bodily experience to generate narrative meaning. The analysis situates *Elevation* within broader discussions of embodiment, metaphorical cognition, and literary meaning-making, arguing that the novella offers a concise yet conceptually sophisticated exploration of how ethical orientation emerges from embodied constraint rather than transcendence of it.

**Keywords**: cognitive literary studies, Conceptual Metaphor Theory, embodiment, metaphor in literature, Stephen King, weight and lightness.

## 1. Introduction

Stephen King's *Elevation* occupies an unusual position within his extensive body of work. Neither conventionally horrific nor fully realist, the novella presents a restrained narrative built around a single, implausible physiological anomaly: the protagonist, Scott Carey, loses weight steadily while his physical appearance remains unchanged. This paradox—measurable lightness without visible transformation—constitutes the narrative's central organising

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principle. While the phenomenon initially invites medical, supernatural, or allegorical interpretation, the text persistently withholds causal explanation, redirecting attention away from ontological resolution and towards experiential, ethical, and relational consequences. In doing so, *Elevation* foregrounds not the mechanics of the impossible, but the meanings that emerge when embodied expectations are systematically violated.

This article approaches *Elevation* from the perspective of Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), arguing that the novella can be read as an extended exploration of how deeply entrenched metaphorical structures, grounded in bodily experience, organise abstract reasoning, moral evaluation, and narrative coherence. Rather than treating metaphor as a decorative or rhetorical feature of King's prose, the analysis proceeds from the cognitive-linguistic premise that metaphor is constitutive of thought itself. From this viewpoint, Scott Carey's weight loss functions not simply as a plot device, but as a literalisation of conceptual metaphors that structure everyday understanding of responsibility, emotional burden, social gravity, and ethical orientation.

Within everyday cognition, *weight* is not a neutral physical property but a privileged source domain for the conceptualisation of abstract states. Expressions such as *carrying a burden*, *being weighed down*, or *lightening one's load* reflect systematic metaphorical mappings in which physical heaviness corresponds to psychological strain, moral obligation, or existential difficulty. Conversely, lightness is associated with freedom, relief, transcendence, and, in some contexts, detachment from worldly concerns. These mappings are neither arbitrary nor purely linguistic; they are grounded in recurrent correlations between bodily experience and affective states. It is precisely this embodied metaphorical logic that *Elevation* renders narratively explicit by severing weight from appearance and allowing the protagonist's body to become increasingly subject to the logic of abstraction.

The relevance of CMT to literary analysis has been widely acknowledged in cognitive poetics and cognitive literary studies, yet its application to contemporary popular fiction—particularly to works that resist overt stylistic experimentation—remains comparatively underdeveloped. King's writing, often characterised as transparent and accessible, is rarely examined as a site of complex conceptual organisation. *Elevation*, however, offers an unusually concentrated case study in metaphorical cognition. By stripping away subplots, antagonistic forces, and explanatory frameworks, the novella isolates a single embodied anomaly and explores its conceptual reverberations across social interaction, ethical judgement, and self-perception.

Crucially, the narrative does not treat Scott's decreasing weight as a problem to be solved but as a condition to be lived through and, ultimately, accepted. Medical discourse proves inadequate; scientific rationalisation is suspended; and the body becomes a site of metaphorical rather than diagnostic significance. This shift aligns closely with cognitive accounts of metaphor as a mechanism for understanding domains that resist direct empirical access. In *Elevation*, the body itself becomes a medium through which abstract values—kindness, responsibility, reconciliation, and moral alignment—are recalibrated. The progressive loss of weight corresponds not to physical deterioration in any conventional sense, but to a reconfiguration of the protagonist's relational stance toward others and toward his own mortality.

Although the novella includes social tensions and interpersonal conflict—most notably involving Scott's neighbours, a couple who operate a local restaurant—this article does not foreground identity politics or sociopolitical controversy. Instead, such elements are treated descriptively and functionally, insofar as they contribute to the narrative's metaphorical economy. The focus remains on how interpersonal friction is reframed through the protagonist's changing embodied condition, and how metaphorical lightness facilitates a shift from antagonism to ethical openness. This approach allows the analysis to remain anchored in cognitive theory while acknowledging the text's social dimensions without reducing them to polemic.

The central claim advanced here is that *Elevation* exemplifies a form of metaphor-driven narrative in which embodied conceptual structures do not merely underpin figurative language but actively organise plot progression, character development, and ethical resolution. By literalising conceptual metaphors associated with weight and verticality, King constructs a narrative in which physical laws are subordinated to cognitive ones. The novella thus provides a compelling illustration of how literary texts can externalise and dramatise the metaphorical foundations of human thought.

The article proceeds as follows. The next section reviews key developments in metaphor theory, tracing the shift from classical rhetorical accounts to contemporary cognitive approaches. This is followed by a theoretical framework outlining the principles of Conceptual Metaphor Theory most relevant to the analysis, including embodiment, image schemas, and metaphor systems. The central analytical section then examines *Elevation* in detail, focusing on the metaphorical structures activated by weight loss, vertical movement, and bodily instability. The conclusion reflects on the implications of this reading for cognitive literary studies and for the interpretation of metaphor in contemporary fiction.

## 2. Literature Review: From Rhetorical Metaphor to Conceptual Cognition

### 2.1 Early Philosophical Accounts of Metaphor

The systematic reflection on metaphor in Western thought originates in classical philosophy, where metaphor was predominantly framed as a rhetorical and linguistic device. Aristotle's discussion of metaphor in *Poetics* and *The Art of Rhetoric* defines it as the transfer (*epiphora*) of a name from one thing to another on the basis of perceived similarity or analogy. Although Aristotle acknowledges the intellectual value of metaphor—arguing that the ability to perceive similarity within difference is a mark of intelligence—metaphor remains, in his account, subordinate to literal language and primarily serves stylistic, didactic, and persuasive functions (Aristotle, trans. 1997; Aristotle, trans. 1992).

Subsequent rhetorical traditions largely preserved this orientation. Roman rhetoricians such as Quintilian incorporated metaphor into systematic classifications of tropes, reinforcing its status as an ornament of discourse rather than a foundational mechanism of cognition. Medieval scholastic thought, while recognising the indispensability of metaphor in theological language, continued to treat it as analogical rather than embodied. As Hart (2022) observes, metaphor in pre-modern thought was often valued for its expressive and illustrative power but rarely conceptualised as constitutive of knowledge itself.

The Enlightenment further marginalised metaphor within philosophical discourse. Thinkers such as Locke and Hobbes expressed explicit suspicion toward figurative language, warning that metaphor could obscure meaning and undermine rational clarity. Within this epistemological framework, metaphor was relegated to poetry and rhetoric, while scientific and philosophical inquiry increasingly privileged literal, unambiguous language (Martinengo, 2024). This relegation established a long-standing dichotomy between figurative expression and rational thought that would only be seriously challenged in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

### 2.2 Metaphor as Meaning and Knowledge

A decisive conceptual shift occurs when metaphor begins to be understood not merely as a linguistic deviation but as a mechanism of meaning production. Nietzsche's critique of truth as a "mobile army of metaphors" represents a radical departure from earlier views, dissolving the distinction between literal and figurative language altogether (Nietzsche, 1873/1999). Although Nietzsche does not offer a systematic theory of metaphor, his insistence that conceptual systems are built upon forgotten metaphors anticipates later cognitive and constructivist approaches.

In the twentieth century, this reorientation is developed more rigorously in semantic and hermeneutic theories of metaphor. Ricoeur's *The Rule of Metaphor* conceptualises metaphor as a form of semantic innovation that emerges at the level of the proposition rather than

the word. For Ricoeur (1975/1978), metaphor creates meaning through a productive tension between literal incompatibility and emergent sense, enabling a "redescription of reality." Importantly, Ricoeur assigns metaphor an ontological dimension: metaphor does not merely embellish language but restructures how reality is understood.

This view is echoed and elaborated in philosophical accounts that emphasise metaphor's epistemic function. As Hart (2022) notes, modern metaphor theory increasingly recognises metaphor as a bridge between perception, imagination, and conceptual thought. Rather than obscuring truth, metaphor becomes a means of accessing domains that resist direct conceptualisation. This reconceptualisation lays the groundwork for the cognitive turn in metaphor studies.

## 2.3 Conceptual Metaphor Theory and the Cognitive Turn

The most influential contemporary framework for understanding metaphor emerges with Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), most prominently associated with Lakoff and Johnson. Their central claim—that metaphor is fundamentally conceptual rather than linguistic—marks a paradigmatic shift in metaphor studies. According to CMT, abstract domains of experience are systematically structured in terms of more concrete, experientially grounded domains, resulting in stable patterns of metaphorical mapping (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Kövecses (2002) further systematises this approach by demonstrating that conceptual metaphors operate as coherent cognitive structures that organise thought, language, and action. Within this framework, metaphors such as HAPPY IS UP and LIFE IS A JOURNEY are not poetic inventions but entrenched conceptual schemas grounded in bodily experience. These mappings are typically unconscious and culturally shared, shaping not only figurative expressions but patterns of reasoning and evaluation.

A crucial aspect of CMT is its emphasis on embodiment. Conceptual metaphors are motivated by recurrent correlations between sensorimotor experience and subjective states. Primary metaphors emerge from these correlations and form the building blocks of more complex metaphor systems (Huszka et al., 2025b; Kövecses, 2002). For example, the association between physical heaviness and effort gives rise to metaphors linking weight with emotional or moral burden, while experiences of vertical orientation underpin metaphors that associate upward movement with positivity and downward movement with negativity.

Image schemas play a central role in this process. As preconceptual patterns derived from bodily interaction with the environment—such as CONTAINER, PATH, BALANCE, and UP-DOWN—image schemas provide the structural basis for metaphorical mapping. The invariance principle further constrains these mappings by ensuring that the image-schematic structure of the source domain is preserved in the target domain, maintaining conceptual coherence (Kövecses, 2002).

## 2.4 Metaphor, Culture, and Conceptual Dynamics

Although early formulations of CMT emphasised universality, later research has highlighted the role of cultural and contextual variation in metaphorical conceptualisation. Kövecses (2005) demonstrates that while many metaphors are grounded in shared bodily experience, their elaboration and evaluative orientation are shaped by cultural models and historical conditions. This balance between embodiment and variation is particularly relevant for literary texts, which often exploit, intensify, or reconfigure conventional metaphors for aesthetic and thematic purposes (Huszka et al., 2025a; Huszka et al., 2025c; Huszka et al., 2025d).

From a discourse-historical perspective, Musolff (2004) introduces the notion of "conceptual evolution," arguing that metaphors develop dynamic "discourse careers" through adaptation and recontextualisation. Although his analysis focuses primarily on political discourse, the underlying insight—that metaphors are flexible cognitive tools rather than static correspondences—extends naturally to narrative fiction, where metaphorical structures may shift

in response to character development or ethical transformation.

## 2.5 Metaphor and Literary Interpretation

Within literary studies, cognitive approaches to metaphor have challenged the view that literary metaphors are exceptional or purely ornamental. Instead, literature is increasingly understood as a domain in which everyday conceptual metaphors are foregrounded and rendered experientially salient. Literary narratives often literalise metaphorical structures, embedding them not only in language but in characterisation and narrative logic as well.

From this perspective, metaphor functions as an organising principle of narrative meaning rather than as a stylistic embellishment. As Turbayne (1991) argues, philosophical and literary models of mind and reality are deeply indebted to metaphorical frameworks inherited from earlier conceptual traditions. Literary texts thus become privileged sites for examining how metaphor structures cognition, especially when narratives centre on bodily anomaly or transformation.

## 2.6 Positioning the Present Study

The present study situates Stephen King's *Elevation* within this cognitive tradition by treating the novella as a sustained exploration of embodied metaphor. Rather than engaging in author-centred or genre-based criticism, the analysis builds on Conceptual Metaphor Theory to examine how metaphorical systems grounded in weight, balance, and verticality organise narrative meaning. The literature reviewed here establishes metaphor as a cognitively grounded mechanism capable of structuring ethical perception and experiential understanding, thereby providing the theoretical foundation for the analysis that follows.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

### 3.1 Conceptual Metaphor Theory as an Analytical Framework

The present study adopts Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) as its primary analytical framework, proceeding from the assumption that metaphor is a constitutive mechanism of human cognition rather than a secondary rhetorical device. As formulated in *Metaphors We Live By*, CMT posits that abstract domains of experience are systematically structured through mappings from more concrete, experientially grounded domains. These mappings operate at the conceptual level and give rise to both linguistic expressions and non-linguistic patterns of reasoning.

In applying CMT to a literary text, the analytical task is not limited to identifying metaphorical expressions in language, but extends to reconstructing the underlying conceptual structures that organise narrative logic. Literary narratives may foreground, literalise, or problematise conceptual metaphors that ordinarily remain implicit in everyday cognition. From this perspective, metaphor becomes a generative principle that shapes character development, plot progression, and ethical orientation. *Elevation* is particularly amenable to such analysis because its central narrative premise externalises a metaphorical structure—weight as burden, lightness as release—by transforming it into a physically enacted condition.

CMT thus provides a framework for analysing *Elevation* not as an allegory with a fixed symbolic key, but as a narrative system in which embodied metaphors are explored dynamically. The novella does not merely refer to metaphorical weight; it reorganises the reader's understanding of weight by severing it from visible mass and allowing it to function as a conceptual variable. This move aligns closely with the cognitive-linguistic insight that metaphors structure understanding by selectively highlighting certain aspects of experience while backgrounding others.

### 3.2 Embodiment and the Cognitive Grounding of Metaphor

A central premise of CMT is that conceptual metaphors are grounded in embodied experience. Human cognition is shaped by recurrent patterns of sensorimotor interaction with the physical and social environment, and these patterns provide the experiential basis for

metaphorical mapping. Abstract concepts such as responsibility, emotion, morality, or mortality are understood in terms of bodily experiences such as effort, balance, movement, containment, and force.

In the context of *Elevation*, embodiment is not merely a theoretical background assumption but a narrative focus. Scott Carey's anomalous weight loss foregrounds the body as the primary site of meaning production. Importantly, the body in *Elevation* is neither disembodied nor idealised; it remains visibly unchanged even as its relation to gravity shifts. This narrative decision intensifies the metaphorical effect by preserving perceptual familiarity while altering experiential expectation. The reader is invited to reflect on the body not as a static object, but as a dynamic interface between physical law and conceptual interpretation.

Embodiment in CMT also implies that metaphorical meaning is affectively charged. Because metaphors are grounded in lived experience, they carry evaluative and emotional weight. The sensation of heaviness is commonly associated with effort, fatigue, and constraint, whereas lightness is associated with ease, freedom, and relief. These associations are not arbitrary cultural conventions but arise from bodily interaction with gravity and resistance. *Elevation* exploits this embodied logic by aligning Scott's increasing lightness with emotional buoyancy, ethical openness, and a reconfigured relation to others.

## 3.3 Image Schemas and Structural Coherence

To account for the structural coherence of conceptual metaphors, CMT draws on the notion of image schemas. Image schemas are recurring, preconceptual patterns derived from bodily interaction with the environment, such as CONTAINER, PATH, BALANCE, FORCE, and VERTICALITY. They are not detailed images but abstract relational structures that organise experience and enable metaphorical projection.

Among these, the VERTICALITY schema is particularly salient for the analysis of *Elevation*. Human experience is deeply structured by the opposition between up and down: standing upright versus lying prone,

climbing versus falling, lifting versus dropping. These bodily experiences generate a range of metaphorical associations in which upward movement is aligned with positive states and downward movement with negative ones. CMT does not claim that such associations are logically necessary, but rather that they are experientially motivated and culturally stabilised.

In *Elevation*, the VERTICALITY schema is activated at multiple levels of narrative organisation. Scott's decreasing weight alters his physical orientation toward the ground, transforming gravity from an invisible constant into a perceptible force whose weakening produces both practical and conceptual consequences. As Scott becomes lighter, the narrative increasingly frames upward movement as desirable and meaningful, culminating in a final ascent that is presented not as catastrophe but as release. The image-schematic structure of UP-DOWN thus provides a backbone for the novella's ethical and existential trajectory.

In addition to verticality, the FORCE schema plays a crucial role. Gravity functions as an omnipresent but normally unnoticed force that constrains movement and anchors bodies to the earth. By narratively diminishing gravity's effect on Scott, *Elevation* invites a reconceptualisation of force as a metaphor for constraint more broadly. The weakening of gravitational force parallels the loosening of social, emotional, and existential constraints, reinforcing the coherence of the metaphorical system.

## 3.4 Primary Metaphors and Experiential Correlation

CMT distinguishes between complex conceptual metaphors and more basic structures known as primary metaphors. Primary metaphors arise from early and recurrent correlations between sensorimotor experience and subjective states. For example, the frequent co-occurrence of physical effort and difficulty gives rise to the metaphor DIFFICULTIES ARE BURDENS, while the correlation between upright posture and positive affect underlies HAPPY IS UP.

Primary metaphors are particularly relevant for literary analysis because they operate below the level of conscious awareness and thus have strong intuitive force. Readers do not need to be explicitly instructed to associate lightness with relief or upward movement with positivity; these associations are already entrenched in their conceptual systems. Literary texts can therefore activate powerful responses by staging scenarios that align with or disrupt these primary metaphors.

In *Elevation*, several primary metaphors intersect. The progressive loss of weight activates the metaphor of burden release, while Scott's increasing buoyancy activates metaphors of emotional uplift and freedom. At the same time, the narrative complicates these associations by linking lightness to mortality: Scott's eventual departure from the earth is both liberating and terminal. This tension does not negate the underlying metaphors but deepens them, demonstrating how literary narratives can explore the limits and implications of metaphorical structures rather than merely reproducing them.

## 3.5 Metaphor Systems and Narrative Organisation

Conceptual metaphors rarely operate in isolation. Instead, they form interconnected systems in which multiple metaphors converge on a shared target domain or reinforce one another across different aspects of experience. CMT emphasises that such systems can structure extended discourse, including narrative texts.

*Elevation* can be understood as organised around a coherent metaphor system centred on weight, balance, and vertical movement. Physical lightness, emotional openness, ethical generosity, and social reconciliation are not presented as separate themes but as mutually reinforcing dimensions of a single conceptual configuration. The narrative does not alternate between literal and metaphorical registers; rather, it collapses that distinction by allowing metaphorical structures to govern physical events.

This systemic quality is crucial for distinguishing a cognitive-metaphorical reading from allegorical interpretation. In an allegory, narrative elements correspond to fixed meanings that can be decoded independently. In *Elevation*, by contrast, meaning emerges from the interaction of metaphorical structures over time. Scott's condition evolves, his relationships change, and the ethical implications of lightness are renegotiated across different contexts. The metaphor system remains stable enough to be recognisable, yet flexible enough to accommodate narrative development.

## 3.6 Methodological Implications for the Present Analysis

The theoretical framework outlined above informs the methodological approach of the analysis that follows. Rather than cataloguing metaphorical expressions, the analysis reconstructs the conceptual metaphors and image schemas that organise *Elevation* as a narrative whole. Particular attention is paid to how embodied experience is narrativised, how metaphorical entailments are realised through plot events, and how conceptual structures guide ethical interpretation.

This approach allows the analysis to remain grounded in cognitive theory while remaining sensitive to literary form. By treating *Elevation* as a site where embodied metaphors are explored narratively, the study demonstrates how Conceptual Metaphor Theory can illuminate the cognitive foundations of literary meaning without reducing the text to a set of abstract propositions. The following section applies this framework to a close analysis of *Elevation*, focusing on the metaphorical organisation of weight, lightness, and elevation as key drivers of narrative meaning.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1 Weight as Burden: Embodied Heaviness and Conceptual Constraint in *Elevation*

The narrative logic of *Elevation* is initiated not by ascent but by weight. Before Scott Carey floats, rises, or detaches himself from the earth, he becomes inexplicably lighter. This initial condition establishes weight as the primary experiential and conceptual axis of the novella. Within a cognitive-metaphorical framework, this emphasis aligns with the deeply

entrenched primary metaphor BURDENS ARE WEIGHT, which structures everyday reasoning about difficulty, responsibility, and emotional strain (Kövecses, 2002; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). King's narrative literalises this metaphor by transforming weight from an abstract descriptor of effort into a measurable, destabilised bodily property.

Crucially, Scott's weight loss is not accompanied by visible bodily transformation. His body retains its shape, volume, and appearance, even as the scale registers dramatic numerical change. This dissociation between visual perception and experiential reality intensifies the metaphorical function of weight. If Scott were visibly wasting away, weight loss could be interpreted medically or symbolically as decay. Instead, King preserves bodily familiarity while altering gravitational relation, thereby isolating weight as an experiential variable. From a CMT perspective, this move foregrounds weight as a *conceptual* rather than *anatomical* phenomenon: what changes is not Scott's body as object, but his body as bearer of force, resistance, and effort.

In embodied cognition, weight is not experienced abstractly but through muscular exertion, balance, and resistance to gravity. Carrying a heavy object demands effort; moving under load slows the body and constrains movement. These correlations underpin the metaphorical extension of weight to psychological and ethical domains. Expressions such as *being weighed down*, *carrying a burden*, or *the gravity of a situation* reflect the systematic projection of physical effort onto abstract difficulty. *Elevation* does not merely draw on these expressions linguistically; it reorganises them narratively. Scott's diminishing weight reduces the effort required for movement, and this reduction coincides with a loosening of affective and social constraint.

Importantly, Scott is not initially depicted as a man suffering from overt psychological distress. He is financially secure, socially functional, and outwardly calm. The burden that weight metaphorically encodes in *Elevation* is therefore not pathological but existential and relational. This subtlety is significant. The novella suggests that burden does not require

overt suffering to be operative; weight can be present as a latent condition of being embodied, socially situated, and morally implicated. In this sense, Scott's weight represents not trauma but *embeddedness*: the ordinary condition of being subject to gravity, routine, and unexamined social norms.

This reading is reinforced by the narrative context in which Scott's condition emerges. His weight loss begins around the time he becomes entangled—albeit reluctantly—in a conflict involving his neighbours, who experience social exclusion and hostility within the community. Scott's initial interactions are marked by discomfort and misalignment rather than overt animosity. He is not an aggressor, but neither is he fully disengaged from the ambient social gravity that structures the town's attitudes. Within a metaphorical framework, this positioning is crucial: Scott is not morally "heavy" in the sense of being malicious, but he is nonetheless situated within a gravitational field of social tension that exerts force on his conduct.

From the perspective of CMT, weight here functions as a structural metaphor organising Scott's relation to responsibility. As his physical weight decreases, his capacity for movement increases, both literally and figuratively. He runs more easily, moves more freely, and occupies space with less resistance. These bodily changes precede and enable ethical ones. Scott's growing involvement in others' lives, his willingness to intervene, and his openness to relational risk are facilitated by an embodied condition of lightness that counteracts inertia. The metaphorical entailment is clear: reduced burden enables agency.

At the same time, the narrative resists a simplistic equation of weight with negativity. Weight, after all, is a condition of groundedness. To have weight is to belong to the earth, to be subject to physical law, and to share a common corporeal condition with others. In this sense, weight also encodes mortality and finitude. The novella repeatedly hints that gravity is the force that anchors bodies not only to the ground but ultimately to the grave. From this perspective, weight is not merely a burden to be escaped but

a condition that situates human life within time and limitation.

This ambivalence is central to the metaphorical economy of *Elevation*. Scott's loss of weight is experienced as liberating, but it is also recognised as terminal. The narrative therefore avoids framing burden purely as something to be eliminated. Instead, it suggests that weight becomes problematic when it hardens into constraint—when gravity ceases to be a shared condition and becomes an oppressive force that immobilises ethical action. What Scott sheds, metaphorically speaking, is not embodiment itself but *excessive constraint*: the unexamined heaviness of habit, prejudice, and disengagement.

Within this framework, weight operates as a mediating concept between body and ethics. It is through the destabilisation of weight that the narrative opens space for transformation. Before ascent is possible, burden must first be rendered perceptible. By making weight strange—measurable yet inexplicable, constant yet vanishing—*Elevation* forces both protagonist and reader to confront the normally invisible forces that structure experience. In doing so, the novella enacts a central insight of Conceptual Metaphor Theory: that abstract values are not merely expressed through embodied experience, but are *constituted* by it.

This foundational role of weight prepares the ground for the subsequent metaphorical shift toward lightness. Only once burden is conceptually foregrounded can its release acquire narrative and ethical significance. The following section therefore turns to lightness not as a simple inverse of weight, but as a reconfiguration of embodied possibility that emerges from the loosening of conceptual constraint.

## 4.2 Lightness as Release: Affective Openness and Ethical Reorientation

If weight in *Elevation* functions as the primary metaphorical register of burden and constraint, lightness emerges as its experiential and ethical reconfiguration rather than as a simple negation. Within Conceptual Metaphor Theory, lightness is not merely the absence of weight but a positively structured source domain associated with reduced effort and enhanced mobility. These experiential correlates underpin a cluster of metaphors in which lightness corresponds to relief, emotional openness, and freedom from constraint (Kövecses, 2002; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). King's narrative exploits this embodied logic by aligning Scott Carey's decreasing weight with a gradual transformation in affective orientation and social engagement.

Unlike many narratives of bodily anomaly, *Elevation* does not frame Scott's condition as a source of anxiety or alienation. Although medical explanation fails and the implications of his weight loss are potentially alarming, Scott's dominant affective response is not fear but a subdued, often playful acceptance. As his weight diminishes, he experiences a marked increase in physical ease: movement becomes effortless, running becomes pleasurable, and bodily exertion ceases to be taxing. From a cognitive perspective, this shift directly activates the metaphor EASE IS LIGHTNESS, grounded in the bodily contrast between carrying a heavy load and moving unencumbered. The narrative repeatedly reinforces this association by depicting Scott's growing cheerfulness and emotional buoyancy as parallel to his physical lightening.

This affective shift is not incidental. In CMT, metaphors structure not only description but evaluation. Lightness is associated with positive affect because reduced bodily effort is experientially correlated with comfort and freedom. In everyday language, emotional relief is routinely described as *feeling lighter*, while humour and sociability are associated with being *light-hearted*. *Elevation* literalises these expressions by making lightness a bodily fact that reshapes Scott's emotional disposition. He becomes more patient, more generous, and less defensive. Importantly, this transformation is not framed as moral self-improvement achieved through deliberation; rather, it emerges organically from a change in embodied condition.

This embodied origin of ethical reorientation is central to the novella's conceptual logic. Scott's lightness does not make him morally virtuous by decree; it alters the

conditions under which ethical engagement becomes possible. Reduced bodily constraint facilitates responsiveness. Scott moves more freely through space and, by extension, through social situations. He initiates contact, persists in interaction despite initial hostility, and accepts vulnerability without resentment. Within the metaphorical system of the text, lightness enables openness by counteracting inertia. Where weight anchors and stabilises, lightness permits adjustment and relational movement.

The ethical significance of this shift becomes particularly evident in Scott's interactions with others. As his physical condition evolves, he increasingly positions himself as a mediator rather than a detached observer. This role is not assumed aggressively or heroically; it is marked instead by persistence, patience, and a willingness to absorb discomfort. From a metaphorical perspective, Scott's lightness allows him to carry less defensive weight. He is not weighed down by the need to assert dominance, protect ego, or withdraw from tension. Lightness, in this sense, functions as a metaphor for ethical availability.

Crucially, the narrative avoids framing lightness as escapism. Scott does not detach himself from social reality or retreat into solipsistic transcendence. On the contrary, his increasing buoyancy coincides with deeper involvement in the lives of others. This alignment challenges a potential counter-metaphor in which lightness implies frivolity or irresponsibility. Instead, *Elevation* reconfigures lightness as a condition that enables ethical seriousness without heaviness. Scott's actions are deliberate and consequential, yet they are not performed under the sign of moral burden. The narrative thus destabilises the assumption that responsibility must be experienced as weight.

From the standpoint of CMT, this move is significant. Conceptual metaphors often carry evaluative entailments that remain unexamined. The association of seriousness with heaviness and levity with triviality is deeply entrenched in Western thought. By contrast, *Elevation* proposes an alternative mapping in which lightness supports ethical clarity rather than undermining it. Scott's capacity to act responsibly increases as his body becomes less

constrained. This inversion does not abolish the metaphor RESPONSIBILITY IS WEIGHT, but it complicates it by suggesting that excessive weight—whether bodily, emotional, or social—can inhibit ethical responsiveness.

Lightness in the novella is therefore best understood as a rebalancing rather than an erasure. Scott does not become insubstantial or indifferent; he becomes permeable. He absorbs social tension without becoming immobilised by it. This permeability is enacted bodily through his altered relation to gravity and conceptually through his altered relation to others. Within the metaphorical economy of the text, lightness mediates between constraint and transcendence, preparing the ground for the later emergence of verticality and elevation without yet invoking them explicitly.

At the same time, the narrative introduces an undercurrent of fragility. Lightness is pleasurable, but it is also precarious. As Scott's weight approaches zero, lightness begins to signal not only release but imminent departure. This ambiguity prevents the metaphor from collapsing into simple affirmation. Lightness is ethically productive precisely because it is temporary and contingent. It sharpens Scott's awareness of finitude rather than dissolving it. In this respect, lightness functions as a transitional metaphor, bridging the embodied experience of burden and the conceptual horizon of transcendence.

In sum, *Elevation* constructs lightness as an embodied condition that reorganises affective orientation and ethical engagement. Grounded in everyday experiential correlations, the metaphor of lightness operates as a mechanism of release that enables openness without detachment and responsibility without heaviness. This reconfiguration sets the stage for the novella's subsequent emphasis on vertical movement and elevation, where lightness is no longer merely a condition of ease but becomes a vector of existential transformation.

### 4.3 Verticality and Elevation: The UP-DOWN Schema and Moral Orientation

While weight and lightness structure the experiential conditions of Scott Carey's transformation, verticality provides its

directional logic. In cognitive terms, vertical orientation is among the most fundamental image schemas organising human experience. The UP-DOWN schema emerges from bodily posture, locomotion, and the constant negotiation of gravity. Humans stand upright, fall downward, climb upward, and are physically impaired when horizontal or prone. These recurrent sensorimotor patterns motivate a wide range of conceptual metaphors in which upward orientation is associated with positive states and downward orientation with negative ones (Kövecses, 2002; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). *Elevation* activates this schema not merely descriptively but structurally, allowing verticality to organise the novella's moral and existential trajectory.

It is crucial to note that verticality in *Elevation* does not precede weight loss but emerges as its consequence. Scott does not initially rise; he first becomes lighter. Only once gravity's hold weakens does vertical movement become possible. This sequence mirrors embodied experience: ascent requires a reduction of resistance before it can occur. Within a CMT framework, this ordering underscores the conceptual dependency of verticality on weight. UP-DOWN orientation gains narrative salience precisely because the gravitational conditions that normally stabilise it are destabilised.

As Scott's condition progresses, vertical movement becomes increasingly foregrounded. He jumps higher, runs with unusual buoyancy, and eventually struggles to remain in contact with the ground. These physical changes are accompanied by a corresponding reorientation of value. Verticality in the novella is not neutral spatial information; it is evaluatively charged. Upward movement is associated with openness, generosity, and ethical clarity, while downward anchoring is implicitly aligned with inertia, limitation, and social gravity. The text thus mobilises the orientational metaphor GOOD IS UP, a mapping that is both culturally entrenched and experientially motivated.

Importantly, *Elevation* avoids presenting verticality as a simple axis of escape. Scott's upward tendency does not remove him from the social world; rather, it intensifies his engagement with it. He must actively resist premature ascent in order to remain present, tethering himself to furniture, objects, and eventually to other people. These acts of anchoring are not framed as failures but as ethical choices. Verticality, in this sense, introduces a tension between ascent and responsibility. The UP-DOWN schema does not operate unidirectionally; it becomes a field of negotiation between staying grounded and letting go.

From a cognitive perspective, this tension reflects the dual entailments of vertical metaphors. While upward orientation is associated with improvement and transcendence, downward orientation is associated with stability and belonging. Gravity anchors bodies to shared space, enabling social interaction and physical continuity. By weakening gravity, *Elevation* forces a reconsideration of what it means to be oriented within a community. Scott's increasing elevation threatens to remove him from the shared plane of experience even as it enhances his moral perspective. The narrative thus complicates the metaphor UP IS GOOD by embedding it within a relational context that values presence as well as ascent.

This complexity becomes particularly evident in scenes where Scott's vertical instability is witnessed by others. His inability to remain fully grounded renders his condition visible and, eventually, shareable. Verticality here becomes a social phenomenon rather than a purely individual one. Those who observe or briefly experience his altered relation to gravity are invited to recalibrate their own orientations—both spatial and ethical. The UP-DOWN schema thus extends beyond Scott's body to structure interpersonal understanding.

At the same time, verticality in *Elevation* is inseparable from mortality. The narrative explicitly associates gravity with the inevitability of death: gravity pulls bodies downward, toward the earth, toward burial. In this context, elevation acquires an eschatological dimension. To rise is not merely to improve but to depart. The UP–DOWN schema therefore intersects with existential metaphors of life and death, in which upward movement signals release from finitude while downward movement signifies return to materiality. Crucially, the novella does not frame

this departure as tragic. Scott's eventual ascent is depicted as peaceful and even joyful, suggesting a moral revaluation of death itself.

Within CMT, such revaluation can be understood as a reconfiguration of metaphorical entailments. If DEATH IS DOWN and LIFE IS UP are common conceptual associations, *Elevation* subtly reverses or at least destabilises them. Scott's life becomes increasingly meaningful as he moves upward, and his death is not a fall but a rise. This inversion does not abolish the UP-DOWN schema; rather, it exploits its flexibility to generate new interpretive possibilities. Verticality remains the organising structure, but its evaluative poles are redistributed.

The title *Elevation* crystallises this metaphorical logic. Elevation denotes both physical height and moral improvement, spatial ascent and conceptual refinement. The novella allows these meanings to coexist without collapsing one into the other. Elevation is not presented as moral superiority over others, nor as detachment from human concerns. Instead, it functions as a metaphor for reorientation: a shift in perspective made possible by altered embodiment. Scott sees differently because he is no longer anchored in the same way; his moral vision expands as his physical relation to the ground loosens.

In this respect, verticality in *Elevation* functions less as a destination than as a vector. It directs movement, attention, and value without prescribing a fixed endpoint. Scott's ascent is not a triumph over others but a culmination of relational openness and ethical clarity. The UP-DOWN schema thus integrates bodily experience, moral evaluation, and narrative resolution into a single conceptual framework.

By situating elevation within the broader metaphorical system of weight and lightness, the novella demonstrates how orientational metaphors can organise narrative meaning at multiple levels simultaneously. Verticality does not replace burden or release; it builds upon them, transforming embodied change into moral orientation. The following section extends this analysis by examining how gravity, death, and transcendence intersect within this metaphorical

system, further complicating the relationship between ascent and finitude.

## 4.4 Gravity, Death, and Transcendence: Metaphorical Limits and Narrative Closure

As the metaphorical system of *Elevation* approaches its narrative terminus, gravity emerges as the decisive conceptual threshold against which weight, lightness, and verticality acquire final significance. Throughout the novella, gravity functions not merely as a physical force but as a metaphorical constant that structures embodied existence. It anchors bodies to the earth, regulates movement, and enforces finitude. Within Conceptual Metaphor Theory, gravity may be understood as an extension of the FORCE schema, providing the experiential basis for metaphors of constraint and inevitability. In *Elevation*, the progressive weakening of gravity's hold on Scott Carey transforms this normally invisible force into an explicit object of reflection, culminating in a metaphorical confrontation with death.

The narrative explicitly associates gravity with mortality. Gravity pulls bodies downward, toward the ground, and ultimately toward burial. This association is neither subtle nor incidental; it reflects a deeply entrenched metaphorical alignment in which DOWN IS DEATH and DOWNWARD MOVEMENT IS DECLINE. What distinguishes *Elevation* is not the presence of this metaphor, but the way it is reworked. Scott's increasing detachment from gravity does not signify decay or disintegration. On the contrary, his bodily integrity remains intact even as his relation to the earth loosens. The body does not fail; the force that governs it does.

This distinction is crucial. In many narratives of bodily anomaly, the weakening of physical constraint signals pathology or loss of control. In *Elevation*, however, the loss of gravity's hold is framed as a form of release rather than collapse. Scott's body becomes less bound, not less viable. From a cognitive-metaphorical perspective, this framing disrupts the usual entailments of gravity-related metaphors. Gravity is typically associated with seriousness, responsibility, and realism—the

"gravity" of a situation demands sober attention. By contrast, *Elevation* proposes that excessive gravity may inhibit ethical clarity rather than enable it.

As Scott approaches the point at which gravity no longer binds him to the earth at all, the narrative enters a liminal zone in which metaphorical extension reaches its conceptual limit. Lightness can no longer be understood merely as relief, and verticality can no longer be treated as orientation. At this stage, ascent becomes departure. Importantly, the novella resists filling this departure with metaphysical content. There is no explicit afterlife, no divine intervention, and no promise of transcendental reward. Instead, transcendence is presented as a conceptual horizon: a movement beyond the conditions that make ordinary experience intelligible.

Within CMT, such horizons mark the limits of metaphorical mapping. Metaphors structure understanding by projecting familiar experiential patterns onto abstract domains, but they cannot fully articulate what lies beyond embodied experience. Death, as the ultimate cessation of embodied interaction, occupies precisely this limit. *Elevation* acknowledges this limit by staging Scott's final ascent as an event that is witnessed but not explained. Those who remain grounded can observe the departure, but they cannot follow it conceptually.

This restraint is methodologically significant. Rather than resolving its metaphorical system by translating elevation into spiritual salvation or symbolic immortality, the novella allows transcendence to remain indeterminate. Scott's laughter at the moment of departure is not interpreted; it is simply registered. From a metaphor-theoretical standpoint, this indeterminacy preserves the integrity of the embodied framework. The narrative does not claim that lightness conquers death; it suggests instead that a reconfiguration of embodied orientation can alter how death is encountered.

Narrative closure in *Elevation* is therefore achieved not through explanation but through saturation. The metaphors of weight, lightness, and verticality have been fully activated, their entailments explored, and their tensions exposed. Gravity, as the final constraint, marks the point at which metaphorical extension can proceed no further. Scott's ascent resolves the narrative by exhausting its conceptual resources rather than by transcending them symbolically.

At the same time, the narrative frames this exhaustion as peaceful rather than catastrophic. Scott's departure is communal rather than solitary, witnessed by those with whom he has formed meaningful relational ties. This communal framing is important: it prevents transcendence from becoming solipsistic. Scott does not escape the world unnoticed; his departure is embedded in shared recognition. In metaphorical terms, the release from gravity does not negate relationality; it completes it.

This framing also reinforces the novella's ethical logic. The ethical reorientation enabled by lightness and verticality culminates not in domination, superiority, or withdrawal, but in acceptance. Scott does not seek to resist death indefinitely, nor does he frame his ascent as victory. Instead, he approaches the limit of embodiment with curiosity and equanimity. The metaphorical system thus supports an ethics of finitude rather than transcendental ambition.

In this respect, *Elevation* offers a distinctive configuration of transcendence within a secular narrative. Transcendence is not defined by escape from embodiment but by a transformed relation to its limits. Gravity, once the force that anchored Scott to routine and unexamined social weight, becomes the boundary that gives meaning to release. Without gravity, lightness would be meaningless; without finitude, elevation would lack direction. The novella's final gesture therefore preserves the dialectical relationship between constraint and freedom, grounding transcendence in the very forces it appears to overcome.

This conceptual closure prepares the ground for a final synthesis of the metaphorical system. The concluding section will draw together the analyses of burden, release, orientation, and limit to demonstrate how *Elevation* functions as a coherent exploration of embodied metaphor, offering insight into the cognitive foundations of ethical meaning in narrative fiction.

## 4.5 Metaphor Systems and Narrative Integration

The preceding analyses have examined weight, lightness, verticality, and gravity as distinct yet interrelated metaphorical structures. Taken together, these elements form a coherent metaphor system that organises the narrative logic of *Elevation* at multiple levels simultaneously. Within Conceptual Metaphor Theory, such systems arise when several metaphors converge on shared target domains, reinforcing one another through consistent entailments. In *Elevation*, this convergence produces a tightly integrated narrative in which bodily experience, ethical orientation, and existential meaning are governed by the same conceptual architecture.

At the core of this system lies the experiential continuum from burden to release. Weight functions as the primary metaphor for constraint, embeddedness, and unexamined gravity—both physical and social. Lightness emerges not as a negation of embodiment but as its recalibration, enabling affective openness and ethical responsiveness. Verticality then provides directional coherence, transforming release into orientation and lightness into movement. Finally, gravity marks the system's limit, anchoring meaning in finitude and preventing metaphorical expansion from dissolving into abstraction.

What is striking about this configuration is its narrative economy. The novella does not introduce separate metaphorical registers for different thematic concerns. Social relations, ethical decisions, and existential reflection are all processed through the same embodied framework. This integration avoids allegorical compartmentalisation. Scott Carey is not a symbol who stands for a pre-assigned moral concept; he is a body whose changing relation to force generates meaning dynamically. The narrative's metaphors are therefore not detachable from its plot but constitutive of it.

From a cognitive perspective, this integration mirrors how conceptual metaphors function in everyday reasoning. Humans do not apply metaphors piecemeal; rather, metaphorical mappings form networks that stabilise interpretation across contexts. *Elevation* exploits this cognitive tendency by allowing a single experiential alteration—loss of weight—to propagate through multiple domains of meaning. As Scott becomes lighter, the reader is invited to reinterpret responsibility, kindness, community, and mortality through a shared conceptual lens. The result is a narrative in which ethical insight is not argued for but *enacted* through embodied transformation.

This systemic quality also explains the novella's tonal consistency. Despite addressing potentially destabilising themes—social exclusion, bodily anomaly, and death—*Elevation* maintains an affective register that is calm, reflective, and ultimately affirmative. The metaphor system does not oscillate between competing evaluative frameworks; it steadily reorients perception toward release without denial. Because the same metaphors govern both difficulty and resolution, the narrative avoids abrupt shifts in moral logic. The ending feels earned rather than imposed.

Importantly, the metaphor system remains open rather than prescriptive. While the novella strongly associates lightness with ethical clarity, it does not dictate specific moral doctrines. The metaphors organise *how* meaning is experienced rather than *what* conclusions must be drawn. This openness is consistent with the cognitive view of metaphor as a tool for structuring understanding rather than enforcing interpretation. Readers are not instructed to adopt Scott's perspective; they are invited to experience its implications.

Narrative integration is further reinforced by the relational dimension of the metaphor system. Scott's embodied changes are not private phenomena; they are witnessed, shared, and partially experienced by others. The metaphorical system therefore extends beyond the individual body to encompass social interaction. Lightness becomes communicable, gravity becomes negotiable, and elevation becomes collectively intelligible. This relational extension prevents the narrative from collapsing into solipsistic transcendence and anchors metaphorical meaning in intersubjective recognition.

In synthesising these elements, *Elevation* demonstrates how a literary narrative can

function as a site of metaphorical exploration rather than metaphorical illustration. The novella does not simply employ metaphors that readers already know; it tests their limits, reorders their entailments, and stages their interaction over time. By literalising embodied metaphors and allowing them to govern narrative development, King constructs a story in which cognition, affect, and ethics are inseparable.

This integrated metaphor system provides the basis for the article's concluding argument. *Elevation* exemplifies how Conceptual Metaphor Theory can illuminate the cognitive foundations of narrative meaning without reducing literature to conceptual schemata. The novella shows that embodied metaphors are not merely tools for understanding texts; they are engines of narrative transformation. The Conclusion will draw out the implications of this finding for cognitive literary studies and for the analysis of metaphor in contemporary fiction.

## 5. Conclusion

This article has approached Stephen King's *Elevation* as a narrative organised not by allegory or genre convention, but by a coherent system of embodied metaphors. Drawing on Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the analysis has demonstrated that the novella's central conceit— the protagonist's anomalous loss of weight— functions as a literalisation of entrenched conceptual mappings grounded in bodily experience. Weight, lightness, verticality, and gravity are not isolated motifs but interdependent components of a metaphorical system that structures affective orientation, ethical engagement, and narrative closure.

By beginning with weight as the primary experiential anchor, the analysis has shown how *Elevation* foregrounds burden as a condition of embodied existence rather than as a pathological deviation. Scott Carey's initial heaviness does not signify moral failure; it reflects the ordinary constraints of being socially situated, gravitationally bound, and ethically implicated. The destabilisation of weight renders these constraints visible, allowing the narrative to explore how changes in embodied condition can reorganise perception and agency. In this sense, the novella aligns with a central insight of Conceptual Metaphor Theory: that abstract values are not merely expressed through bodily experience but are constituted by it.

The transition from weight to lightness reveals how embodied change enables affective and ethical reorientation. Lightness in *Elevation* is not framed as frivolity or detachment, but as a condition of openness that counteracts inertia. Scott's increasing buoyancy corresponds to an expanded capacity for relational engagement and ethical responsiveness. This configuration complicates conventional metaphorical associations that equate seriousness with heaviness and responsibility with burden. Instead, the novella suggests that excessive weight—whether bodily, emotional, or social— can inhibit ethical action, while lightness can support attentiveness and care.

Verticality further integrates these transformations by providing directional coherence. The UP-DOWN schema organises not only spatial movement but moral orientation, linking ascent with ethical clarity and downward anchoring with limitation. Crucially, *Elevation* does not treat verticality as a simple axis of escape. Scott's upward tendency intensifies rather than diminishes his involvement with others, introducing a productive tension between ascent and presence. Elevation becomes a matter of perspective rather than superiority, enabling a reorientation of values without negating relational grounding.

The narrative's engagement with gravity and death marks the metaphorical system's conceptual limit. Gravity, as the force that anchors bodies to the earth and ultimately to mortality, provides the boundary against which lightness and elevation acquire significance. Scott's final ascent does not resolve this boundary through metaphysical explanation or spiritual assertion. Instead, transcendence is presented as a transformed relation to finitude rather than an escape from it. By allowing death to remain conceptually indeterminate, the novella preserves the integrity of its embodied framework and avoids converting metaphor into doctrine.

Taken together, these elements reveal *Elevation* as a tightly integrated exploration of embodied metaphor in narrative form. The novella does not deploy metaphors decoratively or symbolically; it allows them to govern plot development, character transformation, and ethical meaning. In doing so, it exemplifies how literary texts can operate as sites of cognitive exploration, testing the limits and implications of everyday conceptual structures by rendering them experientially salient.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to cognitive literary studies by demonstrating how Conceptual Metaphor Theory can be applied to contemporary fiction without reducing narrative complexity. The analysis does not claim that *Elevation* exhausts the possibilities of embodied metaphor, nor that its metaphorical system is universal or normative. Rather, it offers a case-based illustration of how metaphorical cognition can organise narrative meaning in a compact literary form. The novella's restraint—its refusal to explain, moralise, or allegorise overtly—proves to be one of its strengths, allowing embodied metaphors to operate with minimal interference.

Finally, this article does not claim to provide an exhaustive interpretation of *Elevation*. Other critical perspectives—genre analysis, cultural studies, or narrative ethics—could illuminate additional dimensions of the text. The aim here has been more modest and more precise: to show how a cognitively informed approach to metaphor can reveal the structural role of embodiment in literary meaning-making. In this respect, *Elevation* serves not as an exception within Stephen King's oeuvre, but as a particularly lucid example of how narrative fiction can think through the body, using metaphor not only to describe experience but to reorganise it.

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