

Body, perception and identity in 'the birthmark' and 'hands'

[Sociology](#), [Identity](#)



Social sciences have often dealt with the relationship between a person's body figure and his or her self-image. In this respect, the sociologist Carolina Gonzalez Laurino (2008: 23) claims that " la construccion social de la identidad se encuentra en estrecha relacion con la auto-percepcion del cuerpo. " However, the image an individual has of his or her own figure may be affected by other people's perception. In the case of " The Birthmark," by Nathaniel Hawthorne and " Hands," by Sherwood Anderson, the body plays a central role because it determines the characters' identities and the way they interact with others.

It is the purpose of this essay to explore the ways in which the characters of Georgiana and Wing construct and alter their identity and self-image by the way in which their anatomies are described and treated by others. In " The Birthmark," Georgiana's self-image undergoes two major changes under the influence of male perception. At first, some of her lovers admire the birthmark: " Many a desperate swain would have risked his life for the privilege of pressing his lips to the mysterious hand. (Hawthorne 284) For this reason, Georgiana believes that the mark on her left cheek is a feature of which she should be proud. Later, however, this view of her mark changes due to the influence of her husband's words and actions: after asking Aylmer about the words he uttered in his sleep and seeing his reaction -" Aylmer sat in his wife's presence with a guilty feeling" (Hawthorne 286) - Georgiana urges Aylmer to remove the birthmark no matter the consequences: " let the attempt be made at whatever cost" (Hawthorne 286).

Gradually, she starts to feel her husband's hatred herself, and this repulsion is intensified to the point in which she would rather die than carry on living with the mark: " for life, while this hateful mark makes me the object of your horror and disgust, - life is a burden which I would fling down with joy" (Hawthorne 286). In Sherwood Anderson's story, the main character's life is dramatically changed by the community's perception of his hands.

As a young man, he has a positive view of his hands because they are the means through which he expresses himself: " By the caress that was in his fingers he expressed himself. " (Anderson 31-32) However, when the community in Pennsylvania turns against him, the way in which they talk about the hands changes his perception of that part of his body: " Although he did not understand what had happened he felt that the hands must be to blame.

Again and again the fathers of the boys had talked about the hands. " (Anderson 33). As a result, Wing constantly tries to conceal his hands, and every time he speaks to George, he tries to occupy them in some insignificant activity so as to prevent them from expressing something undesirable. However, one afternoon, when Wing is talking to the young reporter, he loses control of his hands for a moment and they move freely and caress the boy.

This situation deeply disturbs Biddlebaum: " With a convulsive movement of his body, Wing Biddlebaum sprung to his feet and thrust his hands deep into his trouser pockets- Tears came to his eyes" (Anderson 30). Furthermore, the

fear he feels because of what his hands may be capable of causing changes his personality from a confident, sociable member of the community to that of a timid man who chooses to isolate himself. This significant change is also reflected by the fact that he moves to a different city and changes his last name to Biddlebaum.

In this regard, the effect that the perception of the community of Winesburg has is shown by the part they take in the creation of his new identity: “[the hands’] restless activity (...) had given him his name” (Anderson 28). From the aspects analyzed above, it can be concluded that the image each of these characters has of him or herself is greatly influenced by other people’s perception. The way in which either their whole bodies or parts of them are viewed affects who they - believe - they are and the way they interact with those around them.