

Essay: Face by Cecile Pineda

Everyone has a face. Most of us look at our faces and see imperfections of one kind or another. And, we often don't like the way we look in photographs. We look at them and exclaim, "Boy, that doesn't look like me!" Human beings seem to have a fascination with the face—decorating them and masking them. Through these activities we somehow transcend or transform our own being, at least temporarily. But Helio Cara's concerns about his face wasn't a trivial matter. His face became the focus of his whole life, not just momentary musings.

Even by masking his face, Helio could not escape the horror of the real face behind the mask. His face, masked or unmasked, created an unconscious fear in others; thus, he was perceived as a threat. As a result, he was persecuted, ostracized, and forced to live the life of a night wanderer without a friend or any human companionship.

Most of the faces we see in a crowd are unremarkable. We pay no particular attention to them. There are many faces we recognize, but often when trying to describe someone's face, we are at a loss to remember anything but the most general details. Unremarkable or not, subliminally the face is very powerful. More than any other body part, the face is our identifying mark. The face is how we are recognized, it is our identity. In terms of human interactions, it is probably the most important part of our anatomy.

Communication actually begins with the face. We make instantaneous assessments based on body posture and the looks on a face. Of necessity, early humans developed these virtually instinctive assessments of others for survival purposes. Because there were no spoken languages at the dawn of civilization, humans needed to determine instantly if those who were approaching were a threat to their security. Were they friendly or enemies?

When depicting unfriendliness or fierceness, snarling looks about the mouth and teeth are used. The face is contorted in some way. The more grotesque, the more evil the being is thought to be. Most tribal communities throughout the world have used ritual masks of one kind or another. Grotesque looking masks were usually used to scare off evil spirits. Our own culture uses masks at Halloween. The origins of this holiday had roots rituals to scare off the devil or other evils. So, they symbol a masked or grotesque visage stimulated fear. This idea is deeply rooted in human perception.

Beauty on the other hand, the opposite of grotesque, is seen to be desirable. Practically from birth, we learn the value of beauty. In many cultures, a girl with beauty is more easily married off. In our own culture, females are inundated with messages—from advertisements to jokes—that beauty is almost essential. Everywhere we look, attractive people (mostly women) are trying to sell us something. Obsession with beauty dates back as far as the early Egyptians, and possibly even farther. So, the bottom line is, the face has "value."

The meanings of the word "face" are associated with mostly with aggressiveness, confidence, or something positive. The following are some definitions listed in the dictionary:

- 1 Visage, countenance, features, facial features.
- 2 Expression, aspect, look, air, grimace, pout, look of annoyance.
- 3 Appearance, look, external aspect.
- 4 Reputation, good name, dignity, repute, image, prestige, self-respect.
- 5 The surface of a thing, obverse side, principal side, finished side, facade, forepart.
- 6 Nerve, effrontery, boldness, audacity, daring, pluck, self-assurance, mettle, spunk, confidence, grit, hardihood.
- 7 Encounter, confront, meet face to face, turn toward, overlook.
- 8 Oppose with firmness.
- 9 To finish or protect with a thin external covering.

The antonyms of face are: back, underside, reverse side; shyness, timidity. So, the antonyms are basically associated with ideas which have negative connotations.

Many of our common, everyday expressions frequently include the word face. Many of these express their confidence or a positive nature. That there are so many expressions involving the word face shows the importance we put on it. Below are some examples of "face" expressions:

Saving face	Put on a happy face
On the face of it	Let's face it
They faced off	Face-to-face
Face the music	Two faced
A long face	To one's face
To fly in the face of	Make a face
To set a face against	Face value

The face, then, represents something more than a composite of characteristics (eyes, nose, mouth, cheeks, etc) unique to each person. The face represents something about us. It is the one part of us that is consistently left "naked," that is, without covering with some article of clothing. Although there are a few cultures which force women to cover all of the face except the eyes. This supposedly keeps them from being sexually attractive to men and, thus, "protects" them. However, other than these few societies, the face is often the only part of us others see fully exposed.

Unconsciously we make many judgments about one another based on what we interpret in the face. It is human nature, then, which causes humans to put so much value on the face. This value grew out of primitive roots—it was crucial for survival.

When Helio Cara "lost" his face, he essentially lost much of his ability to communicate. Because of the severe damage and the scar tissue, he probably had very limited facial expressions. Besides appearing grotesque, he would have engendered in others a subconscious fear because they couldn't "read" his face. The fear his face generated, whether masked or unmasked, was actually an instinctive fear.

For Helio there was no face-to-face contact. Glances were averted and people pretended to be preoccupied so they could focus on something else. There were numerous incidences that even when Helio talked to someone, he looked at them through a mirror. Or they made glances at him through mirrors. But never face-to-face.

Because Helio's face would never be the same again, his personality could never be the same again. Even after creating a new face, it would be drastically altered from the face he was born with and knew himself by. He would see a new person when he looked in the mirror and respond accordingly. Perhaps his personality wouldn't have been changed significantly, but it would have been changed nonetheless.

I once knew a woman who was considered homely. She had a lower receding jaw and virtually no chin. Her nose was also very large with a hook. When she was in her early 30's, she had plastic surgery to give her a normal size lower jaw and chin, and her nose was reconstructed to be proportionate to the rest of her face. After the surgery when the changes were healed, she was a strikingly beautiful woman. But what was more fascinating than the physical change, was that her personality changed significantly. She had much more poise and self-confidence. People, particularly men, noticed her and responded positively towards her. Her new face changed her life, it essentially gave her a new life.

Helio Cara's face, in one tragic instant, was buried in the rocks on the face of a cliff. In that tragic instant, Helio Cara's life was also changed. His existence was blotted out and replaced with that of an invisible, faceless man. The man inside Helio's body was the same, but it was forever trapped behind a face that wasn't his. By losing his face, he in a sense also lost his life. He began to live the life of a living dead man. It was Helio's life that was smashed upon the rocks that horribly tragic day.

From that day on, his existence as "Helio Cara" was virtually non-existent. He could no longer be "himself." He was robbed of his personality. "Now he no longer belonged, even to himself" (136). He was either a spectacle, where people pointed and whispered behind his back, or he was invisible, where people looked through him as if he wasn't there. When his shack was burning, no one helped or even acknowledged him; "they appear(ed) not to notice him at all" (106).

Helio Cara's crushed face propelled him into a living hell. The only way he could leave the dangerous, alien world he was so cruelly thrust into was to acquire another face. It didn't have to be a handsome face. He simply needed a face that could be seen without a mask to hide it. He needed a face devoid of any characteristic which would make him look grotesque. He needed a face which was safe; one which wouldn't create an instinctive fear in others. He needed a face which could communicate without speaking and allowed him to be face-to-face with others. He needed a face which wouldn't harm him.