

The Story of my Body is on my Body.

Tattoos as Personalized Style in Late Modern Literature



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Abstract

Tattoos, intended modifications of the own body, display the bearer's identity on the body surface (although not always publicly visible), or more precisely: Under the skin. Thereby, they cannot be judged with conventional aesthetic codes or traditional stylistic principles — in terms of this year's PALA conference, "Testing the Boundaries of Contemporary Stylistics".

These symbols or texts, cut into the skin, represent a highly personal attitude towards life, politics, or religion, but also stand for individual experiences or traumas. In all cases, tattoos are very exclusive and can only be understood ('read') in connection to the personal biography of its bearer.

In late modern literature, sailors from Queequeg in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), the Captain in Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) to the Maori Apirana in Christian Kracht's *Imperium* (2012) 'wear' such visualized pictures or symbols on the body, both as a 'proof' and a reminder of their adventures. Furthermore, tattoos are also used to reveal (and display) a certain group affiliation (for example by prisoners or gang members), or to cope with traumatic experiences (similar to a 'self-intended scar').

With regard to the field of stylistics, tattoos described in literary texts can be analyzed both as the expression of an individual 'style' (displayed on the own body), but also on a meta-level within the fictional text: Tattoos 'narrate' a story, namely its own background and history of origin.

This paper explores tattoos in literary texts as a marker for group identity, as well as the personal identity (especially memory and trauma), and finally as a narrative device within the text.

Keywords

Tattoo, tattooing, style, identity, trauma, body memory, metaphor.

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1. Same same but different

Apart from the cutaneous pigmentation and the actual skin colour, there are hardly any major physical differences between human bodies. But this universal ‘sameness’ of the skin as a ‘blank canvas’ may just be the inspiration for a veritable urge for individualization and aestheticization of the own body. And while the body surface area of an average human being is approximately 1.7 meters² (c. 2 yards²), there actually is enough free space for various forms of ‘body improvement’. This “cult of the body beautiful” (Juvin, 2010: 94) results in a “new morality” (Ibid.: 95) and — as the French philosopher Hervé Juvin states in his essay *L’avènement du corps* (2005) — emphasises the ageless “ideal of the skin as identity” (Ibid.).

Besides sports and dieting, cosmetic surgery, body piercing or branding, as well as various forms of implantations, the aesthetic practice of tattooing represents a highly personal understanding of beauty and simultaneously a drastic and permanent form of style, traceable for centuries as a cultural rite (especially as a ritual in Australian or Polynesian tribes) and even practised during the Stone Age, as the example of Ötzi shows. But apart from regional variations or the used colour, the actual procedure remained constant since the Neolithic:

“The techniques of tattooing do not vary much: Colouring is pricked into the skin with a needle or sharp instrument.” (Brain, 1979: 55)

Violating major religious rules and the ‘sacredness’ of the body — “Ye shall not make any cuttings in your flesh for the dead, nor print any markes vpon you: I am the LORD.” (Leviticus 19, 28) —, tattoos and body marking in general are forbidden both by the Koran and the Bible, although, ironically, “pilgrims to Mecca and Jerusalem have always sought to tattoo their bodies as a sign of their journey” (Brain, 1979: 14).

Pilgrims and especially sailors spread this ‘barbaric’ and ‘naïve’ practice across Early Modern Europe, and today tattooed people are no longer limited to fairs and circus shows, but are present in everyday life as well as popular culture.

During the last years, several psychoanalytic studies and sociological approaches to body modification and tattooing (Cf. e.g. Atkinson, 2003; Pitts, 2003; Lemma, 2010), as well as numerous anthropological and ethnological analyses (Cf. e.g. Sanders and Vail, 2008) have been published. And while various major exhibitions in European museums (Cf. e.g. Ermacora and Riese, 1996; Benthien and Zeuch, 2003; Bagot et al., 2014) and historical surveys (Cf. e.g. Caplan, 2000; Gilbert, 2000) explore this cultural phenomenon, there are hardly any studies connecting tattoos and literary history.

But tracing back the cultural practice of tattooing in literary works (including graphic novels, films and television series) both mirrors the current social understanding of the concepts of beauty and style, as well as an individual staging of the body itself. Furthermore, the tattoo as a ‘text’ on the body described within the literary

text takes up an intertextual function.

Three major categories will be analyzed in this paper — the tattoo as a marker for group affiliation (or exclusion, in reverse), as a symbol for identity (especially memory and compensation), and finally as a narrative device within the literary text.

2. Stigma

After Cain killed his brother Abel, he is stigmatised with a mark — the (probably) earliest body modification in Christian history: “And the LORD set a marke vpon Cain, lest any finding him, should kill him.” (Genesis 4, 15)

Not only in the example of Cain, tattoos function as a marker to exclude or include persons from or in a group: The ancient Greeks and Romans branded slaves and captives with a burned or pierced mark; similar customs by the Samians are recorded by Plutarch (Cf. Ruhnke, 1974: 45f.). During the Age of Discovery, 18th century Europe ‘rediscovered’ the practice of tattooing “when Cook and other explorers noted its almost universal existence outside their civilized world” (Brain, 1979: 51). Charles Darwin, for instance, recorded in his travel reports about a visit to Tahiti:

“Most of the men are tatoood [sic]; the ornaments so gracefully follow the curvature of the body that they really have a very elegant & pleasing effect. One common figure varying only in its detail, branches somewhat like palm leaves (the similarity is not closer than between the capital of a Corinthian column & a tuft of Acanthus) from the line of the back bone & embraces each side.” (Darwin, 2011: 315)

Tattooed persons simply stood out in Early Modern Western thinking, and when James Cook, William Dampier and other discoverers brought tattooed natives from Polynesia or Australia to England to (literally) ‘exhibit’ them at fairs, they looked unfamiliar and sometimes even scary. And even after David Purdy set up the first professional tattoo shop near Holloway Prison, London, in 1870 (Cf. Brain, 1979: 52), and despite the entry of the Samoan word “tatau” in English dictionaries as “tattoo” (Cf. OED, 2014), these body decorations remained primarily subject to lower classes well into the 20th century.

Even more, a general and superficial connection between tattooing and crime was established in scientific works — for example in Adolf Loos’ art historical *Ornament und Verbrechen* (1908) or Cesare Lambroso’s influential *L’uomo delinquente* (1876):

“One of the most singular characteristics of primitive men and those who still live in a state of nature is the frequency with which they undergo tattooing. [...] It occurs only among the lower classes — peasants, sailors, workers, shepherds, soldiers, and even more frequently among criminals.” (Lambroso, 2006: 58)

Although tattoos are no longer ‘infamous’ or ‘disreputable’ today, they still work as a

distinctive mark and a symbol of identification for groups and gangs in a prison or on the streets, as well as for various ‘associations’ from the Hell’s Angels to Coptic Christians. Here, the unifying symbol and, of course, permanently visible sign literally brands the individual’s body during the membership — as soon as the person leaves or is expelled from the group, the sign is deleted from the body memory.

Thereby, not all tattoos are intentional, especially when the body is stigmatised to assign a person to a certain group (and, in reverse, also separate it from the rest). One example is the drastic case of the so called “Lagertätowierung”: In Nazi Germany, prisoners of concentration camps were literally marked with their de-individualizing ID-number — a recurring theme in the works of Primo Levi, for instance in his famous novel *Se questo è un uomo* (1947):

“I have learnt that I am *Häftling* [German, ‘prisoner’]. My number is 174 517; we have been baptized, we will carry the tattoo on our left arm until we die. The operation was slightly painful and extraordinarily rapid: they placed us all in a row, and one by one, according to the alphabetical order of our names, we filed past a skilful official, armed with a sort of pointed tool with a very short needle. It seems that this is the real, true initiation: only by ‘showing one’s number’ can one get bread and soup.” (Levi, 2004: 33f.)

In the original Italian version, the word ‘tattoo’ in the second line of this quote reads as ‘il marchio’ (Levi, 2012: 37) — ‘the mark’ —, and is thereby again etymologically related to the mark of Cain. Other examples of the “Lagertätowierung” or similar concentration camp experiences can not only be found throughout the work of Primo Levi (for example in his later novel *Il sistema periodico* (1975)), but also in other Holocaust novels like Edgar Hilsenrath’s *Der Nazi & der Friseur* (1971/77) or autobiographical memories such as Szymon Laks’ *Mélodies d’Auschwitz* (1948/78).

In Imre Kertész’s novel *Sorstalanság* (1975), for instance, “the numbers, likewise imprinted in the skin of the older prisoners in the kitchens” are called “‘*Himmlische Telephonnummer*’ — ‘a celestial telephone number’” (Kertész, 2004: 107), and thereby cynically refer to the cruelty of such practices in Nazi extermination camps.

But not only prisoners were involuntarily ‘marked’ with a lifelong tattoo by the Nazi regime. In his novel *Am Beispiel meines Bruders* (2003), Uwe Timm remarks the interesting fact that Nazi soldiers were tattooed, too:

“SS members had their blood group tattooed on their upper arms. [...] It was the counterpart to the numbers tattooed on the forearms of concentration camp inmates to mark their rejection from the human community. Victims and oppressors alike were defined by numbers.” (Timm, 2006: 52)

3. „My Body Is My Whole Inheritance“ⁱ

Tattooing as a cultural import was mainly pushed by sailors, adopting the practice as seen on their travels in the South Seas. So, this form of body style is strongly (and stereotypically) associated with seamen — for example in the case of Captain Saltmarsh in Mark Twain's *The American Claimant* (1892), a former Yankee sailor:

“Captain Saltmarsh was sixty, tall, erect, powerfully built, with coal-black hair and whiskers, and [...] [h]is horny hands and wrists were covered with tattoo-marks [...]” (Twain, 1899: 136)

But far not all seamen were actually tattooed by natives in Polynesia or Papua New Guinea — and especially after the Age of Discovery, many sailors imitated the apparently adventurous custom (cf. Lobstädt, 2005: 173). So, the rather exaggerated description of the Captain's forearm in Robert Louis Stevenson's novel *Treasure Island* (1883) actually seems to be a rather satirical account, making the skin look like an advertising pillar:

“It was tattooed in several places. ‘Here's luck,’ ‘A fair wind,’ and ‘Billy Bones his fancy,’ were very neatly and clearly executed on the forearm; and up near the shoulder there was a sketch of a gallows and a man hanging from it — done, as I thought, with great spirit.” (Stevenson, 2010: 13f.)

For the juvenile narrator, Jim Hawkins, these tattoos represent the Captain's adventures on the high seas and his experiences on distant islands, while for the sailor, on the other hand, every tattoo stands for a memory: The body becomes a postcard, a diary, a logbook. Thereby, every picture, symbol and text tattooed on the body can only be ‘read’ with regard to the personal biography. The reasons for this drastic and painful procedure are as individual as the actual signs are — they are hand-made and mainly serve not only as an expression of individual feelings, but as a memory and/or a symbolic compensation of traumatic events.

3.1 Memories and experiences

Probably one of the most famous examples of a tattooed sailor in literary history can be found in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick, or: The Whale* (1851). Here, the description of Queequeg's skilfully decorated body is conveyed through the novel's autodiegetic narrator, Ishmael, and his ‘Western’ view:

“As I live, these covered parts of him were checkered with the same squares as his face; his back, too, was all over the same dark squares; he seemed to have been in a Thirty Years' War, and just escaped from it with a sticking-plaster shirt. Still more, his very legs were marked, as if a parcel of dark green frogs were running up the trunks of young palms.” (Melville, 2008: 24)

Ishmael is shocked by this first glance at the Polynesian harpooner Queequeg; for him,

tattoos immediately evoke a clear (and stereotypic) image:

“I remembered a story of a white man — a whaler too — who, falling among the cannibals, had been tattooed by them. I concluded that this harpooner, in the course of his distant voyages, must have met with a similar adventure. And what is it, thought I, after all! It’s only his outside; a man can be honest in any sort of skin. [...] It was now quite plain that he must be some abominable savage or other shipped aboard of a whaler in the South Seas, and so landed in this Christian country.” (Ibid.: 23f.)

According to social and aesthetic norms at that time, Ishmael’s Western socialisation is opposed to Queequeg’s tattoos; he is fearful and tries to persuade himself that he only saw the (barbaric) surface, “his outside”, so far.

This clash of divergent stylistic and beauty-related concepts can also be found in Christian Kracht’s novel *Imperium* (2012). Here, it is the Maori sailor Apirana who — tattooed himself — offers to tattoo a young girl after a heavy storm at sea:

“Während sie zusammen essen, bietet Apirana an, das Mädchen [Pandora] zu tätowieren, eine Stelle ihrer Haut für immer mit der Geschichte des durchfahrenen Sturms zu überziehen, aber Slütter will nichts davon wissen und untersagt es, er kann es nicht ertragen, daß ihre äußere Hülle, ihre weiße Epidermis von Nadeln durchstoßen wird. Der Maori zuckt mit den Achseln, es bedeutet ihm nichts, außer dem Wissen, daß dieser Teil der Chronik des Verlaufs der Welt, die jedem Menschen zustehe, nun nicht auf dem jungen Mädchen nachzulesen sei.“ (Kracht, 2013: 196)ⁱⁱ

Again, the ‘civilized’ code of ethics (and aesthetics) clashes with the ‘naïve’ tradition of ‘recording’ important and existential events on the own body. The German captain Slütter rejects this apparently ‘barbaric’ practice in accordance with his highly conservative (and colonial) Western view.

3.2 Compensation of traumatic events

Besides these memories tattooed under the skin, the example of compensating traumatic events by indelible inscriptions in the body memory more drastically shows the connection between the body and the individual identity.

In his concept *Le Moi-Peau* (1974/85), Didier Anzieu, in the tradition of a Freudian thinking, defines three major functions of the human skin: Anatomically and biologically, being a border and an envelope, and interpersonally, being a ‘primary tool of communication with others’. In psychoanalytic terms, the skin mirrors the “inner state which it is supposed to protect” (Anzieu, 1989: 17) to the outside world, including pimples, moles or scars, which are all a (more or less) permanent part of the body memory, leaving its marks on the skin. Thereby, it can be argued that tattoos are (in

contrast to scars, for example) intentional modifications of the own body — ‘self-intended scars’; they are the expression of a highly personal style (including an individual perception of beauty) on one side, as well as a more general expression of a certain lifestyle on the other side.

In compensating traumatic events by tattoos, the body becomes a “walking memorial” (Jeffords, 1991: 208); significantly, it is the procedure of violating the body to compensate dramatic memories and/or physical injuries. For instance, in Stieg Larsson’s *Män som hatar kvinnor* (2005), the first part of his Millennium Trilogy, Lisbeth Salander copes with her traumatic rape. After she was sexually assaulted by her legal guardian, Nils Bjurman, several times, she tries to compensate (and simultaneously visualize) the physical and mental injuries:

“On Friday, a week after the second rape, [Lisbeth Salander] walked from her apartment to a tattoo parlour in the Hornstull district. She had made an appointment, and there were no other costumers in the shop. The owner nodded, recognising her. She chose a simple little tattoo depicting a narrow band and asked to have it put on her ankle. She pointed, ‘The skin is very thin there. It’s going to hurt a lot,’ said the tattoo artist. ‘That’s O.K.,’ Salander said, taking off her jeans and putting her leg up. [...] ‘It’s a reminder.’” (Larsson, 2008: 237)

And while tattoos help her — the English title of this novel introduces Lisbeth as *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* — to compensate traumas and (literally) inscribe such events in her own body memory, leaving ‘intended’ marks on her skin, it is significantly a tattoo, too, to take revenge on Bjurman:

“Salander has crushed him. He was never going to forget it. She had taken command and humiliated him. She had abused him in a way that had left indelible marks on his body. On an area the size of a book below his navel. She had handcuffed him to his bed, abused him, and tattooed him with I AM A SADISTIC PIG, A PERVERT, AND A RAPIST.” (Larsson, 2009: 30)

Her drastic revenge (cf. Larsson, 2008: 30, 260 and 409 before) as a violent and painful ‘penetration’ of the skin mirrors the earlier rape, combining two main functions of the tattoo — memory and compensation: Both the perpetrator and the victim are connected with each other by marks on their bodies.

4. Tattoos as a narrative device and metaphor

As already seen, tattoos are more than a simple body modification, more than the masochistic urge to leave marks on the own body, under the skin. Tattoos are marks and markers simultaneously, they create identity, express feelings and messages, visible to the outside.

Additionally, tattoos have an intertextual function within the fictional work; they narrate an 'additional' story on a secondary level — just as the tattoo itself, while the inscriptions on the body turn the skin into a palimpsest. Tattoos can be overwritten or deleted from the skin (and thereby from the body memory), but the removing of, for instance, the name of the former spouse or a misspelling, is still a long and usually painful process.

After tattoos experienced a comeback in the early 2000s — due to the so called 'tramp-stamp', a lower-back-tattoo —, an urban myth originated, claiming that a New York City tattoo parlour was mistranslating and misspelling Chinese symbols. This contemporary legend is, for example, picked up in the *Big Bang Theory* episode "The Adhesive Duck Deficiency" (S3.08) when Sheldon asks Penny: "Why do you have the Chinese character for 'soup' tattooed on your right buttock?"

In contrast to films or television series, the description of tattoos in prose texts appeals to the reader's creativity; due to the lack of visual material, it simultaneously establishes an additional text level. Furthermore — and now irrespective of the medium again —, the tattoo can have a narrative function for the text itself and thereby even become a literary or cinematic strategy.

The Illustrated Man, Ray Bradbury's 1955 collection of short stories, for instance, consists of the framing narrative of a fully tattooed vagrant; suddenly, his illustrations on the body curiously come 'alive', start to tell stories and thereby become tales within the main story.

A similar strategy can be found in filmic serial narration, using the example of *Prison Break*: In the first season (2005/06), Michael Scofield plans to escape from prison with a full body tattoo depicting the blueprint to Fox River State Penitentiary. The tattoo is as encrypted and labyrinthine as the plot (and the actual escape) itself, including dead ends and obstructions, and thereby both mirrors and typifies the narration of the first season.

The act of tattooing itself — the painful procedure of 'violating' the body, as well as the 'penetration' into the skin —, too, is symbolically charged and regularly used as a (sexual) metaphor in literary texts. In Dea Loher's play *Tätowierung* (1992), for instance, the incestuous sexual abuse of two young women by her father is described as an 'evil father-mark' (Cf. Loher, 2008: 113):

"Meine Nadel stech ich / dir ins Fleisch / wieder und wieder / eine Tätowierung / die du behältst / mein Zeichen / dein Leben lang / Vatermal / unauslöschlich."
(Ibid.: 96)ⁱⁱⁱ

Here, the abuse and its physical and mental injuries are symbolically compared to a permanent 'father-mark', similar to a personal signature. Additionally, the discontinued lines (as well as the 'hard' German language) are reminiscent of an actual tattoo

gun and thereby also mirror the procedure of tattooing itself.

In Tennessee Williams' play *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), too, the (sexual) 'penetration' of the body is highly symbolic and again described with the metaphor of a tattoo. In the night of her conception, the passionate Serafina delle Rose believes to feel her husband's tattoo being burned in her own body:

"That night I woke up with a burning pain on me, here, on my left breast! A pain like a needle, quick, quick, hot little stitches. I turned on the light, I uncovered my breast! — On it I saw the rose tattoo of my husband! [...] And when I saw it I knew that I had conceived..." (Williams, 2009: 21f.)

Here, the tattoo again functions as a metaphor relating to the individual's body memory. And, similarly to the play before, the enumeration "quick, quick, hot little stitches" is onomatopoeically reminiscent of the procedure of tattooing itself, too.

Tattoos — for centuries made by inserting ink under the skin, into the dermis, the second layer — are part of the own body and thereby of the identity. They are a visual memory, and, most of all, tattoos carry messages, visible to the outside, obviously depending on the part of the body.

Within literary texts, tattoos usually range between three major categories (Cf. Nesselhauf, 2014): 'Individuality' (the bearer's intentions and personal reasons), 'alterity' (the view from the outside world or other cultural backgrounds) and 'materiality' (the symbol itself, its genesis and meaning for the bearer). Furthermore, they can also function as a narrative device or a metaphor.

So, tattoos as an intentional and permanent body modification, are a lifelong 'companion' on the own body, and the voluntary decision for both an aesthetic decoration and a skilful 'stain' of the skin.



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Endnotes

- ⁱ Juvin, 2010: 103.
- ⁱⁱ So far, there is no official English translation of Christian Kracht's *Imperium*, although the American publishing company Farrar Straus & Giroux already announced the publication of *Imperium: A Fiction of the South Seas* (translated by Daniel Bowles) for summer 2015. — A possible (but rather simplified) translation of the excerpt quoted above could be: "During their shared dinner, Apirana proposes to tattoo the young Pandora, to permanently cover a spot of her skin with the story of the storm, but Slütter, the Captain, rejects the offer, because he can't bear it, piercing the girl's body, her white epidermis. The Maori sailor shrugs his shoulders; it doesn't mean anything to him personally, except to know that this part of history, this part of the individual biography, will not be found archived on the young girl's body."
- ⁱⁱⁱ The quoted excerpt is translated on the Griffin Theater website: "I stick / my needle into your flesh / again and again / a tattoo / which you'll keep / my signature / for life / a mark / indelible." Cf. <<http://www.griffintheatre.com.au/griffin-independent-season-2009/tattoo/>>. (Accessed 01 December 2014.)