

Chapter 8

Flesh, Scars, and Clay

The Role of Pain and Bodies in the Creation of Identity and Meaning

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The mask's role is central to the superhero narrative.¹ The mask is a non-human identity, which replaces the civilian, human one; sometimes forever.² It is what happens to the majority of Gotham's villains. While Batman can take off his mask and at least pretend to be Bruce Wayne, many of his enemies do not have the same privilege. For characters like Two-Face, Joker, Zsasz, and Clayface, the mask is carved directly into their bodies. Like masks, scars can replace one's identity, but deeply and sometimes irreversibly.

Bodies and masks play a central role in ancient primitive cultures, especially during initiation rituals. The two elements are distinct, but closely linked. Wearing a mask always implies a modification of the body, or at least of the way it is perceived. Furthermore, marks left on the body, whether temporary like a face paint or definitive like a tattoo, perform a similar function to that of the mask: they replace the individual's identity and communicate a message.

The initiation ceremonies destroy a previous identity to create a new one. While an individuum is a Leib, a living body that is becoming and escapes an ultimate meaning,³ by inflicting pain and scars, the initiation rituals aim to reduce the body to a stable dimension. First an ecstasy, induced by drugs and fasting, and through the infliction of physical pain, shatters the previous identity. The Leib is reduced to the passivity of flesh. Then a new identity is literally written on the body through scars or tattoos, thus receiving an "ultimate" sense and giving him/her a role and a place within society. The scar is a new identity, like a mask carved directly on the body.