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Body Language: Harry Crews' Metaphorical Use of Bodies in the Novels

“Body” and “Scar Lover”

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Abstract

This paper considers the various representations of the human body in two later novels by the great Florida gothic author, Harry Crews. Crews' novels are rife with metaphorical language, and most present the reader with musings on human nature and mortality via the surreal lives of their characters. In *Body* and *Scar Lover*, written respectively in 1990 and 1993, Crews delves not only into the experiential qualities of the human body – what it *feels like* to live and die inside a body – but also utilizes his characters' bodies to express broader themes including sacrifice, resilience, mortality, and redemption. I propose that the profane nature of Crews' writing juxtaposes the sacred themes which underlie his works and serves to represent a defining characteristic of the human experience; to this end, I explore the various bodies of Crews' characters in *Body* and *Scar Lover*, and how they are used to develop these themes.

Keywords: Harry Crews, Mortality, Body, Identity, Southern Gothic

Throughout his works, Harry Crews depicts in great detail the physical bodies of the various characters that he creates. Specifically, in the two novels which Crews wrote between 1990 and 1993, *Body* and *Scar Lover*, Crews explores not only the physical bodies of his characters but also the nature of bodies in general. Through this exploration of physicality, Crews focuses not just on the bodies themselves but also uses them to represent and explore concepts such as self-sacrifice and mortality. In this paper, I argue that in both *Body* and *Scar Lover*, Crews uses the physical bodies of his characters to serve as conduits for the aforementioned themes and others, which are represented not only in their physical bodies but in their personalities and interactions as well. In what follows I will briefly discuss the titles of the two works, then comment upon the ways in which Crews utilizes bodies to represent these broad themes in his novels. In example, I call upon the bodies of Earline (a large woman who comes to love herself by being loved) and her sister Shereel (a world-class body builder) from *Body* and explain how they are used to represent freedom and self-sacrifice, respectively. Following this, I move on to discuss the bodies of George, Sarah, Mrs. Leemer, and Jonathan, as well as the remains of Mr. Leemer, and how all of their bodies develop the themes of emotional and physical scarring, death anxiety, and coming to terms with one's own mortality in the novel. With this, I intend to show that Crews' works are much more nuanced than they appear on the surface, and what seems at first to be callous and biased writing is in fact a deeply contemplative view of the human condition that is communicated through the culture and language of the working-class.

Within both of the aforementioned works by Crews, it is apparent from the outset that the physical bodies of the novels' characters will be of great pertinence to the overall meaning

of the works based upon the titles of the books. *Body* is a novel which is concerned with the bodies of its characters but not solely in a physical sense, and it is not really a book about bodybuilding as it would appear to be on the surface. Instead, the title of *Body* places the focus of the novel on what Earline and Shereel's bodies represent: Earline's the joys of freedom and the blissfulness of reckless abandon, and Shereel's the throes of self-sacrifice and the formation of identity.

Similarly, the title of *Scar Lover* places the reader's focus upon the scars which reappear throughout the book, and draws attention to the main character Pete, who is the lover of such scars. These include the brands on George's back, the cyst in Sarah's breast, the wounds upon Mrs. Leemer's chest, the hammer-marks in Jonathan's forehead, and the skull of Henry Leemer. The scars are all more than physical, representing mental agony as well, such as the pain of loyalty, death anxiety, and acceptance.

While *Scar Lover* plays with the same theme of emotional scars in different forms using the bodies of the characters, *Body* uses the bodies of Earline and Shereel to act as physical representations of two concepts which directly contrast each other; the sacrificial lifestyle of Shereel and the carefree hedonism of Earline. Though different in some aspects, both novels are comparable in the way that they employ bodies as vessels for metaphors, and their titles evidence this.

In *Body*, Crews uses the body of the character Earline to represent the beauty of freedom which none of the book's bodybuilders are able to take part in. Billy Bat, the bodybuilder who becomes Earline's lover by the end of the novel, is absolutely obsessed with

Earline's body as soon as he meets her; however, this obsession is much more than simple infatuation. Billy yearns for Earline because her fat body and the "heft of her" (Crews, *Body* 162) represent a form of self-indulgence which Billy Bat has never been able to claim as his own as a body builder.

Billy's true feelings towards Earline, as well as what she represents in the novel, are summarized by the following quote: "The imminent prospect of the heft and smell and taste of this wonderful, beautiful, free-grazing beast of a girl made him go weak with pleasure. It was the very feeling he had when he came back to his apartment from the convenience store late at night with his car loaded with junk food, knowing that in a matter of minutes he would be safely hidden from the world and free to gorge on all that was ... forbidden and illegal and dangerous to world-class body builders" (Crews, *Body* 162-163). In his world of bodybuilding, Billy is forbidden from partaking in the pleasure of food which he so dearly covets, instead resigning himself to binge and then purge when alone in order to momentarily have a taste of that which cannot keep. His perfect body reflects this withholding of pleasure, while Earline's represents a surrender to the hedonism that Billy craves.

Earline's body, however, is not merely a stand-in for the pleasure that Billy denies himself, but evolves and changes as her and Billy's love manifests. Billy's love for Earline makes her find herself beautiful ("...her belly now was beautiful because of the gentle, crooning sounds coming from Billy Bat" (Crews, *Body* 169)), and Earline helps Billy stop participating in the self-destructive practice of bodybuilding, as he thinks "she could have all of his worldbeating back, because she did, in fact, truly have all of him" (Crews, *Body* 172). Billy is

willing to sacrifice the body that he already sacrificed so much for in order to be with Earline, which is indicative of the redemptive power of love, a recurrent theme within both novels.

Contrasting the body of Earline is the perfectly toned, muscular body of Shereel, which represents the sacrifice of her own self for her sport. Shereel remodeled herself from Dorothy Turnipseed into Shereel Dupont when she started bodybuilding, and this transformation annihilated the woman that she once was, replacing it with the body of "...the best in the world." (Crews, *Body* 180). Through this metamorphosis Crews explores how incongruencies between Shereel's self-image and reality lead to her inevitable suicide. Shereel Dupont is the best bodybuilder in the world, and so in order to exist as Shereel Dupont, she must actually be the best in the world. Since she has eliminated the body of who she used to be, Dorothy Turnipseed, by working out and transforming herself, she has to win the Cosmos (the world's largest bodybuilding contest in the book) to be Shereel. If she loses, then she is effectively nothing, her hard work and sacrifice meaningless as is her body, because a body that lost the Cosmos cannot be the body of "Shereel Dupont".

Nail, Shereel's boyfriend, understands this well from his time in the military, as he once watched an army major who "had lost every man in his command, had lost everything that made him an officer, had lost it all, and the last option was his only option" commit suicide (Crews, *Body* 238). Crews provides the story of the army major committing suicide after losing his entire command in order to parallel the suicide of Shereel after losing the Cosmos, as both of them committed suicide because they were no longer themselves; the major had to kill himself because he was no longer a major without anybody in his command, and Shereel had to kill herself because after losing the Cosmos she was no longer Shereel Dupont. With this, Crews

muses on the interplay of how our self-perceptions of our identities interact with our actual identities, professing that the bodies of Shereel and the Major could not continue to exist due to the destruction of their internalized identities.

In his next novel, *Scar Lover*, Crews continues to utilize bodies as vehicles for various themes, however much more cohesively than in *Body*, as the scars of the characters all contribute to the central theme of emotional scars and healing in subtly different ways. Crews introduces the overarching theme of scarring bodies and minds through the brands upon George's back which his wife Linga gives him to show his loyalty to her. These are shown to Pete in the boxcar they both work in, and Pete's fetishization of scars is revealed in this scene as well, for when Pete sees the brands Crews writes "[italicized in original text] *Pete loved the scars, and he knew he did. He wanted to touch them. It was the knowledge that if they had been on a woman, he could have – would have – licked them that made him want to puke.*" (Crews, *Scar Lover* 27).

This quote from Crews describes Pete's current disgust at his own admiration and pseudo-sexual attraction towards scars, which originates from his death anxiety. Pete's confused emotional and physical relationship with scars is the crux of this novel, and his interactions with the many scarred people in the book demonstrate his ever-changing attitudes towards death. This disgust is used to shield himself from his petrifying fear of death, sickness, or injury, which is evidenced by his aversion to Sarah during their initial conversation at the beginning of the book. As Pete must confront death throughout this novel, both threatened and real, he slowly accepts it as a part of life, culminating in the scene where he sleeps with Mr. Leemer's remains which I discuss at length later.

With George's branded body, Crews is able to provide a physical representation of coming to terms with suffering and pain, which is also manifested in the personality of George as he is willing to accept the way Linga treats him, branding him every year that they have been together. As Pete goes from hating George in the beginning of the novel to asking Sarah to "... tell him I love him" (Crews, *Scar Lover*, 283) and treating him as a brother at the end, the reader can observe how Crews uses Pete's feelings towards George as a reflection of Pete's attitude towards suffering and death. Although Jonathan's forehead scars allow Pete to come to terms with suffering and eventually learn forgiveness, Pete's relationship with George, a character deeply scarred yet resilient in the face of hurt, is the indicator of Pete's internal growth across the novel.

The scars left on Mrs. Leemer's chest after her breast removal surgery, which she needed due to her cancer, act as a constant reminder to her of her own mortality. However, Mrs. Leemer's missing breasts also act as a reminder of death for all of the characters as well. Like a shadow hanging over the events within the book, Mrs. Leemer's missing breasts serve to remind the characters that death is inescapable, waiting for all. Additionally, when Crews has Mrs. Leemer state at dinner that "[Italicized in original text] *This just pisses the shit out of me!*" (Crews, *Scar Lover*, 123), she is expressing her outrage at the removal of her breasts; her anger is Crews' demonstration of how individuals can become warped into something completely different by the fear of death. This is shown by Sarah stating that "I've never seen Mama act like this before" (Crews, *Scar Lover*, 146), concerning how her mother has become violent and aggressive since undergoing surgery. Mrs. Leemer represents a potential future for Pete if he does not accept his mortality, as the reminder of death on her chest caused her to go mad out

of fear. If Pete fails to grow as a person, he is destined to do the same. By the novel's final scene, Crews shows that Pete avoided this fate, as Pete is joyous with Sarah and his reunited brother Jonathan, and he ignores the scorn of Mrs. Leemer and lives on happily, even though he will die someday.

With the body of Sarah, Crews delves into the concept of death anxiety and resilience in the face of dying. Sarah's fibroid cyst, which is a harmless scar that Pete is oddly fixated on sexually, terrifies her as she thinks it is malignant; she fears that she will suffer the same fate as her mother, Mrs. Leemer, and develop breast cancer. This scar, which turns out to be harmless, is a necessary step in Pete's redemption, for by loving Sarah despite assuming she has a fatal disease, Pete is able to begin his journey towards accepting pain and death as integral parts of life.

Sarah's love for Pete, in the form of sexuality, is used by Crews to portray the redemption of Pete from his pathetic state. As Pete becomes more involved with Sarah's body physically through increasingly sexual acts, he becomes more confident, self-assured, and gains a purpose in life other than survival, which is to love Sarah and start a family with her. Just as Billy Bat in *Body* was redeemed by his love of Earline and their sexual relationship, so too is Pete redeemed from misery by Sarah.

Perhaps the most important body within *Scar Lover* is the body of Jonathan, whose forehead scars left by Pete are the most important imagery in the novel. Crews uses Jonathan's broken and malformed body to act as a representation of Pete's guilt and shame, the "twin purple scars" (Crews, *Scar Lover*, 264) on Jonathan's forehead acting as Pete's stigmata, burned

into his brain, never allowing him to move on with life or forgive himself. However, by the end of the novel when Pete finally meets Jonathan face-to-face, he is able to find forgiveness from Sarah, Jonathan, and most importantly, himself, as when he kisses Jonathan's scars he finds that "...they were not like scars at all but tender and dimpled and he felt as if he could – would – disappear into them" (Crews, *Scar Lover*, 264). With this, Crews directly echoes his description of Pete's feelings towards George's scars at the beginning of the novel, even using the same words "... he could – would..." (Crews, *Scar Lover*, 27) showing that Pete has grown since he misjudged George's scars; Jonathan's scars show that Pete had not only been misperceiving how his brother felt towards him, but also that Pete had been wrong to dread the concept of death as he had been. When Pete reunites with Jonathan, Pete realizes that Jonathan never bore any hatred towards him, only love. By writing that the scars were now "tender and dimpled" (Crews, *Scar Lover*, 264), Crews shows that the painful part is done, and Pete finds absolution; the scars are proof that the pain has faded. In this scene, Crews shows that Linga's quote following the death of Mr. Leemer has finally been understood and internalized by Pete, this quote being: "There is something beautiful about all scars of whatever nature. A scar always means the hurt is over, the wound is closed and healed, done with. Did you ever think of that?" (Crews, *Scar Lover*, 142).

Mr. Leemer's skull is another example of this use of scars to represent the end of pain, as Mrs. Leemer states that Mr. Leemer's skull is "the final wound" (Crews, *Scar Lover*, 263). In other words, the skull of Mr. Leemer is the symbol of death acting as the end of all pain and hardship. Just as scars represent the healing of a wound, the skull shows that the individual which it belonged to has died, and therefore they can no longer suffer and the "wound" which

is living has healed over. At the end of the novel, Pete cradles the skull while falling asleep, demonstrating how he has finally come to terms with his mortality. Even though he is looking death straight in the face, in the form of Mr. Leemer's bodily remains, Pete "...could feel himself smiling, and could feel too his own skull grinning in death just behind his smile. With the warm palm of his hand on the crown of what had been Henry's head he felt himself falling back into a peaceful deep sleep" (Crews, *Scar Lover*, 274). Where Pete once could not discuss topics related to death, such as avoiding Sarah early in the novel to protect himself from hearing her talk about her dying mother, he is now able to hold a piece of a dead man's body in his hands and calmly fall asleep.

Through this exploration of Harry Crews' utilization of bodies in both *Body* and *Scar Lover*, it is evident that Crews intended for the bodies of his characters to play a paramount metaphorical role within each of these works. As the two novels were written consecutively in 1990 and 1993, respectively, it lends credence to the theory that this was a theme which Crews was especially concerned with at the time. Through the interplay of the characters' experiences, personalities, and physicality, Crews was able to construct metaphors that muse upon universal aspects of the human experience, including the formation and annihilation of identity and the fear and acceptance of death.

Works Cited

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