



Ain-Shams University  
Faculty of Al-Asun

**Facial Features  
in**

**Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, George Eliot's  
*Adam Bede*, D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and  
Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway***

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## Abstract

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This research aims at studying facial features in four novels, namely Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854), George Eliote's *Adam Bede* (1859), David Herbret Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925).

The task of this thesis is not merely a discussion of the treatment of the numerous descriptions of characters' facial features within these works. The paper also attempts to examine how the implied author dealt with facial descriptions – whether he or she presented them as transparent and 'readable', or treated facial descriptions as 'opaque', that is, not revealing anything about the character beneath the visual surface, or ignored this question altogether. As will be illustrated, the representation of characters' looks not only reflects the implied norms of the respective work (and thus the implied author's), but also makes it possible to draw conclusions about the implied author's (and even the epoch's) general approach to the world.



An investigation of the four novels to show the development from high realism through a more skeptical realism and a moderate modernism to a radical variation of the latter, will be analysed by taking a precise look at how the information on characters' facial features is dealt with within the respective work, and how much facial information is included. The intention is to take these instances of facial descriptions as a metonymy meant to show the general worldview underlying the respective novels. Thereby, an attempt will be made to paint a miniature overview of literary history from Gaskell's uncritical praising of the epoch's epistemological basis to the radical refusal of all these norms and values in Woolf's work. Moreover, the researcher will investigate as well the different aspects of the realism and early modernism as reflected in the narrative technique and subject matter.

The research falls into an introduction, four chapters and a conclusion. The four chapters attempt a profound study of facial features, themes and techniques in Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South*, George Eliot's *Adam Bede*, D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* and Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* respectively. Finally, the conclusion gives a summary of the main findings reached in the research.

### **Facial Features in English literature and their significance.**

It is a fascinating phenomenon, that whenever one meets another person for the first time, one unconsciously and immediately judges him or her by merely looking at the person's face. Although one may call oneself the most tolerant person free of prejudices, one cannot help thinking a person likeable or not right away by the first visual impression one gets, without ever having talked to him or her. Even though one knows that a correspondence of facial features and 'inner' traits has never been convincingly or scientifically proved, it is unquestionable that most of us are impressed and influenced by visual data one receives from our fellow human beings' faces.

In the course of history (and thus, of literature), people have repeatedly tried to come to terms with this phenomenon and to find explanations as well as definitions that may help to 'face', and deal with, facial features in everyday life. Apparently, it has always been, and still is, people's wish to 'read' in other faces so as to facilitate contact and to know how to judge characters. That this desire is not new can be seen by the fact that even Aristotle set up rules according to which one could 'categorise' faces and thus know what kind of character is hidden behind the surface.

Hence, notions of the relationship between an individual's outward appearance and inner character are as old as time. The first indications of a developed theory appear in the fourth century B.C., when Aristotle makes frequent

reference to such theories. Aristotle's own thought was receptive, as can be seen from a passage in his *Prior Analytics*:

It is possible to infer character from features, if it is granted that the body and the soul are changed together by the natural affections: I say 'natural', for though perhaps by learning music a man has made some change in his soul, this is not one of those affections which are natural to us; rather I refer to passions and desires when I speak of natural emotions. If then this were granted and also that for each change there is a corresponding sign, and we could state the affection and sign proper to each kind of animal, we shall be able to infer character from features. (2.27)

Today, nobody relies on Aristotle's theories anymore, which categorised people, among other factors, by establishing an analogy between animals and human beings. According to Aristotle, those who had certain traits that were seen as resembling certain animals were considered to have the respective animal's 'inner' traits as well. Again, he states how facial features may reveal inner characters of someone as follows:

The lips, when they are very big and blubbery, show a person to be credulous, foolish, dull, and stupid, and apt to be enticed to anything. Lips of a different size denote a person to be discreet, secret in all things, judicious and of a good wit, but somewhat hasty. To have lips well coloured and more thin than thick, shows a person to be good humoured in all things, and more easily to be persuaded to good than evil. To have one lip bigger than the other shows variety of fortunes, and denotes the party to be of a dull sluggish temper, and but of a

very different understanding, as being much addicted to folly.  
(2.85)

The principal promoter of facial features in modern times was the Swiss pastor Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741-1801). The two principal sources from which Lavater found 'confirmation' of his ideas were the writings of the Italian Giambattista della Porta (1535-1615) and the English physician and philosopher Sir Thomas Browne (1605-1682), whose *Religio Medici* Lavater read and praised. Browne discusses in this work the possibility of the discernment of inner qualities from the outer appearance of the face thus: "there are mystically in our faces certain Characters which carry in them the motto of our Souls, wherein he that cannot read A.B.C. may read our natures" (*R.M.* part 2:2). Late in his life Browne affirmed his facial beliefs stating in his *Christian Morals* (circa 1675):

Since the Brow speaks often true, since Eyes and Noses have Tongues, and the countenance proclaims the heart and inclinations; let observation so far instruct thee ... . we often observe that Men do most act those Creatures, whose constitution, parts, and complexion do most predominate in their mixtures. This is a corner-stone in Facial expressions ...there are therefore Provincial Faces, National Lips and Noses, which testify not only the Natures of those Countries, but of those which have them elsewhere. (Part 2 section 9)

In English literature, the question of whether there is an indexical or arbitrary connection between inner and outer traits has been approached in many different ways which cannot be analysed in detail here. In a large number of older texts,

descriptive passages containing facial hints were not included, which points to a certain disinterest in this field of explanations (as well as in visual details in general). Some earlier works like Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (written around 1380), although dealing with facial descriptions only in passing, rely on 'speaking', that is, expressive faces, without explicitly thematising facial reading as such. Other authors seemed to be undecided between belief in 'speaking' facial descriptions and a sceptical approach, as the following two quotations from the great dramatist's plays illustrate. In *Troilus and Cressida* (IV, v, 55), William Shakespeare unmistakably proclaims the 'readability' of physical traits: "There's language in her eye, her cheek, her lip, / Nay, her foot speaks; her wanton spirits look out / At every joint and motive of her body." In *Macbeth*, however, a remarkable quotation includes a message contradicting the previous one: "There's no art/ To find the mind's construction in the face" (I, iv, 11), the king of Scotland cries out.

Although these two passages point to different approaches to the field of facial descriptions, they at least reveal that the author has given some thought to the topic. In the course of the following centuries, due to a general rather careless treatment of outer details in English fiction, facial descriptions did not play an important part. This does not necessarily mean that people in earlier times did not rely on the belief that faces are 'readable', but that the way of writing simply did not yet attempt to 'visualise' the (fictitious) world

(including faces). This can partly be explained by the fact that novel-writing as such developed late in English literature, and that we have to wait until the 18<sup>th</sup> century to find novels that intend to depict ‘the real world’, that is, that try to create the illusion of ‘reality’. Thus, it is only from this point in history that facial descriptions within a literary work can be treated as indices to the worldview underlying the respective work.

The interest in creating a plausible ‘real’ fictitious world, ‘inhabited’ by characters who have an ‘authentic’ life-like outer shape (which required descriptions of their looks) gradually increased, until it reached its heyday in 19th-century realist fiction.

Quite clearly, it would go beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss the various instances of facial descriptions in English literature in general. Therefore, the focus will be on prose only and restricted to two literary epochs, which will be contrasted by their different treatment of physical traits. The discussion will start with an analysis of mid-19th-century realist works, in particular Elizabeth Gaskell’s industrial novel *North and South* (1854/55) (chapter 1) and George Eliot’s famous *Adam Bede* (1859) (chapter 2).

The task of this thesis is not merely a discussion of the treatment of the numerous descriptions of characters’ facial features within these works. The thesis also attempts to examine how the implied author dealt with facial descriptions – whether he or she presented them as transparent and ‘readable’,

or treated facial descriptions as ‘opaque’, that is, not revealing anything about the character beneath the visual surface, or ignored this question altogether. As will be illustrated, the representation of characters’ looks not only reflects the implied norms of the respective work (and thus the implied author’s), but also makes it possible to draw conclusions about the implied author’s (and even the epoch’s) general approach to the world. This is the reflection this thesis is based on.

In the case of realist writers, as they mostly relied on the assumption that a face is indeed a ‘mirror’ of one’s soul, the suggestion that they generally had a positive, optimistic view of the world as a transparent and accessible one seems plausible and will be questioned and illustrated in the first part of this thesis.

The various reasons for the optimistic (in the semiotic sense) conviction of authors like Elizabeth Gaskell, Anthony Trollope or Charles Dickens will be included, too. What may have had a strong influence on at least some of these authors<sup>1</sup> is the famous treatise about facial descriptions by Johann Caspar Lavater called *Facial Fragments* in which he strongly affirms the readability of facial traits. While his theories were already strongly criticised during his lifetime, the fact that major thinkers and writers like Arthur Schopenhauer or Johann Wolfgang von Goethe favoured them contributed to their widespread popularity (Gray 33).