

# The Social Significance of

# Hair

By Ralph Keyes



*One man's hair history—from above the ear to below the collar and back again—has led to this conclusion: Who you are is as plain as the hairs on your head*

I started high school as a would-be greaser. This called for following a recipe. Soften two tablespoons of pure Vaseline between palms of hands, then rub briskly through hair. Dab on enough scalding water to melt Vaseline. Comb quickly: up on the sides, forward on the top and together at the back. Complete with a part from pate to neck. Pat lightly. When Vaseline rejells, you're set for the day.

Besides wanting to look hoody, I wanted to write for the school newspaper. When I volunteered in the fall, the clean-cut editor coolly eyed my Sal Mineo hairdo. They'd be in touch, he said. They weren't. Over Christmas vacation, I tried a new tack: short hair and Vitalis. I looked like the Kingston Trio. When school resumed, that same editor put me right to work. "Why didn't you come sooner?" he asked. "We've been looking for someone like you."

Hair matters. Its style and length tell the world how we see ourselves. University of Alaska zoologist R. Dale Guthrie calls it a "social garment," the easiest part of the body to alter for reasons of vanity, identity or values.

According to anthropologist E. R. Leach, long hair is associated with erotic freedom, short hair with sexual restraint. His colleague Margaret Holmes Williamson thinks that the Powhatan Indian men who wore their hair long on one side and short on the other were sexually ambivalent. Perhaps the same case could be made for today's urban Powhatan look-alikes.

Because it's such a powerful symbol, authorities throughout history have tried to regulate hair length. Just a century and a half ago, an Englishman in Derby refused to let his son study with a clergyman who defied acceptable hair standards. "Egad, sir," was the older man's explanation, "the man wears his hair short! Why, he must be a dangerous revolutionist!" More recently a Texas coach defended mandatory haircuts for high-school football players as "not just an American tradition [but] a matter of biblical principles. . . ."

This is the way it goes, an endless cycle of short to long to short hair again as succeeding groups of men seek to distance themselves from other groups of men. Hair length itself matters less than what that length stands for at any given time.

According to Philadelphia haircutter Joseph Cirello, 72, the average hairstyle now lasts about ten years. He should

know. More than forty years ago, Cirello invented the DA for kids in South Philadelphia.

But it was only after Elvis adopted the look that young men went to the mirror in droves with comb and Vaseline. Pioneers always break new style ground well before a more prominent figure popularizes a look and gets credit for its invention. Don Johnson, for example, was supposedly the first to let his stubble grow. But long before *Miami Vice*, a story in *The New York Times* had reported the trend. Before the Beatles popularized long hair, Jerry Lee Lewis had shocked the crew-cut generation with his pomaded curls.

Like so many in the late Sixties, I gradually let my hair grow long. I can't remember exactly why. It probably had something to do with wanting to look "natural," even though this took lots of care and cream rinse. My long hair also gave people the wrong impression. I was always at the conservative end of the counterculture and was constantly reminded of this fact by genuine radicals, who were furious that someone who looked like them didn't also believe in the rising revolutionary consciousness of the working masses. Of course, at the time those masses wanted to resemble George Gobel, not George Harrison. Once the proletariat let its hair down, short styles suddenly appealed to the trendsetting vanguard. When ponytails began to peek out from beneath motorcycle helmets and softball hats, they disappeared in certain circles faster than you could say "Perrier with a twist." But this is how it goes and always has. As fashion historian Richard Corson points out, new hairstyles are initiated by the upper classes, but "eventually the less privileged classes imitate. . . style changes, destroying their value to those who promulgated them, and necessitating new styles."

Today, like most of my peers' hair, mine is closer in length to Jim McMahon's than Jim Morrison's. It's still a bit startling to hear myself tell someone who's meeting me for the first time, at an airport, say, to look for a guy with short hair. If you asked why my hair's so trim these days, I'd point out how much easier short hair is to care for. I might grudgingly admit to considerations of fashion as well. But there's also something about growing up involved in cutting hair short. Even my younger brother—the last of the hippies—recently traded in two feet of hair on a new identity as a family man pushing 40.

At least he had hair to trade. (continued on page 162)

# The Whys and Wherefores Of Whiskers

**B**eards speak a language all their own. This was something I discovered when I grew one during the beatnik phase that followed my greaser period, in 1962. My high-school classmates weren't amused. The longer my beard grew, the more anxious they became that I would come to graduation and "spoil it for everybody." I didn't. Later, during a temporary job before college, my co-workers made me resolve not to shave by insisting that I had to. As one secretary pleaded, "People will walk in here and see you and think we're all a bunch of *dialects*."

You learn a lot about hair and identity by wearing a beard in clean-shaven times. Mistaken identity, actually. A wizened barber in Toledo once leaned over my head mid-haircut and whispered in a thick Yiddish accent, "You Or-to-dox?" More often, I was taken to be a Fidelista. But, except for his own, beards have always been rare in Castro's Cuba. Communist leaders fear facial hair even more than American football coaches do. Perhaps revolutionaries understand better than anyone the power of hair and want to make sure it isn't directed against them.

The CIA once cooked up a scheme to sprinkle depilatory powder in Fidel Castro's shoes. Like Samson, they figured, the Cuban leader would probably be deprived of his prowess along with his hair. They might have had a point. Some societies have taboos against cutting the locks of their leaders. The Amboinese of Indonesia so believed hair to be the source of power that their Dutch colonizers quickly discovered that scissors were their most effective tool for keeping the natives in line. A similar theory underlies the head shaving of Marine recruits and convicts. Certainly Charles Manson looked a lot less threatening once sheared of his hair and beard.

While researching his book *Sex Signals: The Biology of Love*, biologist Tim Perper found that long hair, beards and mustaches were a turn-on to some women, a turnoff to others. But most women's reactions had more to do with the type of man they were looking for than any aesthetic considerations. Those who preferred "jock-types" said clean-shaven guys with short hair caught their eye. A beard and longer hair attracted some women looking for intelligence, creativity and nonconformity.

Social scientist Dwight Robinson has studied the fickle nature of facial-hair fashions. His survey of trends in England from 1842 to 1972 reveals that particular styles took fifty years to crest in popularity, then gradually fell from favor over the following half century. Beards started to become popular after 1840, peaked around 1892 and had disappeared by 1957. A decade later, they began to reappear. Robinson's conclusion: So long as there are people alive sporting a dated style, "the young may tend to avoid such a mode as old hat. These distasteful associations seem to be safely overcome only after the passage of a century or more." —R.K.

# Significance of Hair

(continued from page 157) One reason balding so traumatizes men is that it involves the loss of both real and symbolic hair. If your hairstyle tells the world how you see yourself, then going bald means losing not just part of your body but much of your identity. More precisely, you take on a new, unwelcome identity: a bald guy. Like Dad.

Harvard zoologist Stephen Jay Gould has noticed for years how anxious the onset of hair loss can make his younger colleagues. Gould sees this reflected in "the extent to which young men, at the very beginning of balding (i.e., when it's not very noticeable, but when you can no longer deny the fact to yourself), attempt to hide, joke, deny and, especially, obsess. I'm beginning to think that no other single physical fact so markedly jolts a person into fear and perception of age (and, indeed, mortality)."

This is a pretty fair description of my own reaction during college to the ever-increasing amount of hair that began to catch in my comb. I've always liked my hair, perhaps more than any other part of my body. Losing it felt like losing an old friend. There are issues of disfigurement in the balding process, mutilation. Hair, for most men, is the first body part to go. Later, of course, there will be others. But as a harbinger, hair loss can be a terrible shock.

At one time, a receding hairline was equated with sagacity. Men in some cultures have even plucked their foreheads to achieve this look. But to Americans, a bare scalp symbolizes physical decline. This is why balding politicians run for office from so far behind the starting block. John Glenn and Alan Cranston were penalized severely for their lack of hair during the Democratic primaries in 1984. With the exception of Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware, every serious presidential candidate for 1988 so far has a full head of hair. (Maybe one reason Biden is running now is because he knows his window of hairlessness will only grow with time.)

We have not had a serious bald presidential aspirant (Gerald Ford was appointed) since the Eisenhower-Taft-Stevenson era. This is largely because television is so cruel to hairless scalps. To justify his own hair transplants, Senator William Proxmire of Wisconsin pointed out that TV cameras make bald heads appear "three feet high." Major countries with bald-headed leaders—France, South Africa, the Soviet Union—are also ones in which television is strictly regulated by the government.

Washington political consultant Bob Squier thinks televised sessions will literally change the way senators seat themselves. As Squier points out, the harshest, least forgiving camera shots are focused in the front of the chamber, on the shiny skulls of older, more senior senators. "In the past," Squier says, "you'd move to the front due to seniority. Television will eventually reverse that process, as more balding senior senators move to the back."

With the clout of their generation, perhaps aging baby boomers will develop an aesthetics of thin hair, a "Jack Nicholson look" as it were. All we need is a breakthrough rebel initiating this look—Wallace Shawn, say—and a balding Bruce Willis to carry it through. Biden might do well to bide his time. ■

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