

The Politics of Hair

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The Politics of Hair

Throughout the history of humankind, women's hair has been fashioned to exhibit beauty, removed to cause humiliation, and interpreted as a sign of strength, power (often destructive), or powerlessness. Because hair continually replenishes itself, it has been imbued with magical, symbolic power and defined by myth and tradition. Stories of Samson and Delilah, Medusa, and Rapunzel are only three of many biblical, mythological, and fairy tales associated with hair. They help to shape our psyche, embedded as they are in our memories from childhood.

Hair also has social implications. It helps us determine age, economic, intellectual, and marital status, as well as religious affiliations. Hairstyles can signify conformity, for example, to army regulations, monastic celibacy, or any group-determined aesthetic. Hairstyles can also signify rebellion.

Today many women choose to shave their heads as a sign of female bonding and sometimes as a form of protest against the beauty myth. Whether they go bald for personal or political reasons, bald-headed women are often perceived as threatening, perhaps because of the negative connotations associated with baldness as a sign of age, punishment, illness, or rebellion. Prisoners of war were often shorn of their hair, and, after World War II, shearing was used as a form of punishment for French women suspected of collaborating with the enemy. Sometimes hair was also removed from the heads of slaves as a sign of servitude, a tradition that dates back at least to ancient Egypt. In the Old and New Kingdom, children's heads were shaved, except for one remaining lock of hair. When they reached maturity, women's hair was closely cropped and covered with a wig.

Some orthodox religions mandate the covering of a woman's hair after marriage. Jewish women at one time were required to cut their hair off and wear a wig. Orthodox women today need not crop their hair but must cover it, usually with a wig, when in public. A sense of modesty also requires an orthodox

Muslim woman to cover her hair in public from at least the age of maturity. This signifies the renunciation of personal vanity and discourages sexual attraction from males other than her own husband. Amish and Old Order Mennonites also require women to cover their hair as a sign of modesty. Some Pentecostal sects require that a woman never cut her hair; however, when she reaches maturity, she must bind it tightly on top of her head. In such instances, it is hair's sexual attraction that is controlled by society—or we should say patriarchy—as it has been for thousands of years. According to many polls, hair remains one of the six most sensuous parts of the body.

Both good and evil have been attributed to hair, especially after its removal from the head. Superstition and sentiment led to the making of hair fetishes, objects with magical powers, such as a lock of a loved one's hair carried into battle as a form of protection or the burial of one's enemies' hair so it would not perpetrate evil. A far more sentimental custom was particularly popular during the 1880s when hair was designed into intricate jewelry for loved ones, or made from the hair of a deceased person as a memento of mourning. Besides taking the form of jewelry, shadowbox wall ornaments and glass-domed flower arrangements were made from the hair of family or friends. In its day a hair memento was comparable to having a photograph of a loved one.

The modern obsession with youth and thinness can lead to the use of substances that affect the health of women. In spite of warnings of the possibility of carcinogens in hair dye, many women refuse to heed warnings of danger. Perhaps it is the fear of getting old, or just looking old, that drives such decisions. In our culture, shades of blond are perceived as most sensually appealing, although any color is preferable to the aging signs of gray. Some women have also bought the media's message that they can look more youthful and have so called "natural" looking hair when it is dyed, curled, or permanent waved. In recent decades, an industry has evolved to satisfy the need of black women whose hair texture often requires different shampoos, lotions, curling irons, and styling techniques. Today many black women wear hairstyles of braids, dreadlocks, and cornrows. Some styles last for weeks, are very expensive, and take hours to create. Sometimes these styles have met with hostility by employers and others threatened by African-inspired expressions of blackness. As we grow more comfortable with ourselves, what is on our heads should stop controlling what is inside, making us more tolerant of what others have done with their hair.