

## The Symbol of Hair in ABC's *How to Get Away with Murder*

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“I’m an African American woman and there is not enough time on the show to discuss hair issues” (“Viola”). This is what Viola Davis answered on *Anderson Live* when being asked whether she found it odd that people notice and comment on the hairstyle of black women so much recently. Beauty standards and hairstyle trends have shifted over time, but there is a profound difference recognisable between the prestige associated with hair of white people versus the hair of people with African heritage.

The protagonist in ABC’s TV series *How to Get Away with Murder*, Annalise Keating, played by Viola Davis, is a successful defence attorney and lecturer. She lives in a big house and is married to a white man. She is also black and wears various hairstyles throughout the series. Whenever she is depicted as strong and professional, she wears a wig. On the other hand, her natural hair is only shown in a few scenes, particularly at times when she is undergoing a crisis. By discussing three scenes from *How to Get Away with Murder* in which her natural hair is shown, this article aims to reveal how hair is used as a symbol in the show *How to Get Away with Murder*.

Styling hair has always formed a crucial part of the African identity. Through the various hairstyles, different aspects such as gender, age, tribal affiliation or status were reflected (White and White 49). Due to its relevance within the African society, hair has also shaped a crucial part of African American pride.

During the time of American slavery, slaveholders let their slaves style their hair as they wanted. Hair was, right after skin colour, the feature

that distinguished between the black and white people most strikingly. Even though their lives as slaves impeded the ritual of styling their hair, the advertisements for runaway slaves in the eighteenth century portrayed numerous different hair styles. The advertisements showed that “some slaves wore their hair long and bushy on top and that others cut it short, or combed and parted it neatly, or shaved it at the back or at the front, or trimmed it to a roll” (49). The efforts of slaves to care for their hair underlines the importance of hair within their cultural identity. However, slaves were taught by the slaveholders and their mistresses to dislike their hair and not to be proud of it. The texture, for example, which differed from “the supposedly superior white variety” (56) was described with negatively connoted words such as “wool” (56). African Americans’ hair was often cut as a punishment for offences (49). In the 1780s, African American women in Louisiana were forbidden to wear jewellery in their hair and, henceforth, were forced to cover their hair with a tignon (Dawkins). Even after the abolishment of slavery, African American women have often felt the need to imitate the appearance and hairstyles of white women, seen as the hegemonic standard, since their natural hair may be considered unattractive and unprofessional. Up until today, the unequal prestige of hair is still evident. In 2017, to give one example, African American girls were excluded from extracurricular activities and prom at Mystic Valley Regional Charter School in Boston because their braids and afros were seen as a “distraction” (Schoenherr). Since the hairstyles of black women have been controlled, determined and influenced by the white hegemonic culture throughout history in

the U.S., the hairstyle an African American woman wears today can be seen as a deliberate choice, one which forms a crucial part of her identity.

The problem, however, lies within the prestige that is associated with white people's hair and the fact that their hair is seen as the hegemonic standard. This thinking is increased by the problematic representation of black women in film and fiction. In her TedTalk, Chika Okoro, an African American graduate from Stanford Business School, argued that she would need to scroll down to the bottom of the film *Straight Outta Compton* cast list to find the section she belongs to, "[t]he D girls: African American, poor, not in good shape, must have darker skin tone." (1:55–2:06). Moreover, black women in the media are frequently represented stereotypically "as the oversexed Jezebel, the tragic mulatto, and the mammy figure" (Owens Patton 26). According to Michelle Wallace:

[t]he black woman had not failed to be aware of America's standard of beauty nor the fact that she was not included in it; television and motion pictures had made this information very available to her. She watched as America expanded its ideal to include Irish, Italian, Jewish, even Oriental [sic] and Indian women. America had room among its beauty contestants for buxom Mae West, the bug eyes of Bette Davis, the masculinity of Joan Crawford, but the black woman was only allowed entry if her hair was straight, her skin light, and her features European; in other words, if she was as nearly indistinguishable from a white woman as possible. (157–158)

These intermingling issues of hair and race can be seen in *How to Get Away with Murder*. Annalise Keating is portrayed by the African American actress Viola Davis, who does not have European features or light skin. Nevertheless, her hair is styled according to the white hegemonic norm. Whenever

Annalise is in the public sphere, she wears a wig, with hairstyles varying from short and straight, straight shoulder-length, or lightly curled. Wearing the wig, she is portrayed as confident, powerful, proud and professional. Without a wig, she is portrayed differently. The following text focuses on how differently Annalise as a character is depicted when not wearing a wig, and how these depictions use hair as a symbol.

#### HAIR AS A MASK

Until the fourth episode of the first season, "Let's Get to Scooping" the audience has seen Annalise as strong, respectable and well put-together. She has only ever been depicted in the public sphere, always wearing a wig. At the end of episode four, however, Annalise reveals her other self.

During the first few seconds of the scene, the camera focuses on Annalise removing her jewellery and looking directly at herself in the mirror. The close-ups and sudden movements of the camera allow the audience to be part of this fast, ritualised and daily routine. When she suddenly puts her hands on the back of her head revealing that she is, in fact, wearing a wig, the camera starts filming from exactly that position. After she removes the wig, the camera zooms out again and, for the first time, the audience sees Annalise's natural hair. Once again, the camera depicts her reflection in the mirror where she is seen stroking her natural hair. The shifting camera puts the audience in the position of the mirror she is looking into while removing her false eyelashes and make-up. The camera's fast movement allows the audience to become part of the scene, and when it takes the position of the mirror, it allows the audience to see Annalise the way she sees herself.

At this point, it is important to notice the difference between a white woman straightening her hair and a black woman putting on her wig in the morning because of the prestige associated with the white European beauty standard. Taking off her wig, eyelashes and make-up is portrayed as a daily ritu-

al in Annalise's life, one that is powerful and full of dignity, particularly shown by the way in which she strokes her natural hair. For the audience, it is the first time they encounter another side of Annalise, one that differs significantly from her professional self, revealing that she is authentic, vulnerable, and human. It portrays many women's reality: living in a society where "good" hair is still connected to the white hegemonic standard to which many African American women adhere to in order to climb the ladder of success, set their racialised identity aside and compete (Owens Patton 27). This scene has since gone viral and many people celebrated Viola Davis for creating this honest picture of African American women on television.

Transferring the concept of gender as performative to the beauty standards of African American women, Butler notes that gender is not just performative, but it is also "produced as a ritualized repetition of convention" (Owens Patton 36). Regarding African American women, Owens Patton says that "hair is performed as a way for the marginalised to attempt to become centred in a world of beauty that tends not to value African American forms of beauty" (36). Since Annalise needs to be respected in the public sphere, she attempts to style herself as close to the white hegemonic beauty standard as possible because "[she] is conditioned or socialized to believe [she] must look a certain way" (Banks 82). Depicting Annalise with her natural hair is thus not just important for the authentic representation of African American women in media but also for Annalise as a character who knows that when she works as a defence attorney, she must put on a mask every morning because otherwise she would not be as successful and respected.

#### HAIR AS PROTECTION

In season one, episode thirteen, "Mama's Here Now", a broken Annalise is shown. In the previously discussed scene, Annalise's wig symbolises the mask she wears every day. Here, hair takes on a new symbolic meaning. In this episode, the conflict between

Annalise and her mother is illuminated. As a child, Annalise was sexually abused by her uncle who lived in their house. Annalise has always questioned her mother's role in it, which has strained their relationship. In this scene, her mother is shown combing Annalise's natural kinky hair while Annalise is sitting on the floor, letting her mother console her with this affectionate ritual. The camera shifts from a long shot portraying mother and daughter to close-ups focusing on the feelings and facial movements. The long shot produces a very intimate and private atmosphere, and the depiction of Annalise sitting on the floor letting her mother comb her hair illustrates her brokenness. For the first time she is not just depicted as vulnerable or human, but actually as a broken person who is suffering and needs comfort. In this scene, Annalise's mother tells her that she has let the house she loved burn to the ground knowing that the abusive uncle was there. Hearing this story, Annalise realises that her mother did protect her, she just never knew. The close-ups (starting at 36:25) emphasise the determination in her mother's eyes and Annalise's tears showing her relief. This is the moment when Annalise herself realises her mother's active role in protecting her, which means that she can rely on and trust her mother.

Hair plays a significant role in this scene. In her book *Hair Matters: Beauty, Power, and Black Women's Consciousness*, Ingrid Banks examines interviews with more than 50 black women, and many of them recalled the times when their mothers pressed their and their sisters' hair (21). In this scene, Annalise is taken back to her childhood through the ritual of hair care, but here the disentangling of Annalise's hair works a symbol for the disentangling of her and her mother's complex, complicated and somewhat broken relationship. At the end of that scene when mother and daughter hug each other tightly, their extensive conflict is overcome, and Annalise is finally able to make peace with the incidents that have always haunted her. In the previous scene, Annalise's wig symbolised a mask that hides her racial identity and

thereby gives her a professional appearance in the public sphere. In this scene, however, her wig works as a protective shield. Once she has taken it off, her feelings, especially the ones connected to the sexual abuse, are illuminated so that she must face and defeat them. Fortunately, she is able to defeat her feelings concerning the rape but even more importantly, the symbolic disentangling of her hair can be transferred to her broken relationship with her mother, which is then resolved. At the end of that scene, Annalise has let her hair down and, with it, her protection, enabling her to make peace with her past and her mother.

#### HAIR AS BURDEN

In “Not Everything’s About Annalise”, the eleventh episode of season three, Annalise is in custody while prosecutors try to blame her for the death of her student Wes Gibbons. Right before the relevant scene, Annalise has a conversation with the prosecutor who wants to trigger a confession by showing her photos of Wes’ burned corpse. Although Annalise has not committed the crime of murdering Wes, she still feels responsible and guilty for his death, which is why the prosecutor can trigger the emotional outburst that follows. When the prosecutor blames her for ruining Wes’ life, Annalise lashes out in anger and is taken back to her cell, where she asks her inmates for a blade. In the ensuing scene, for approximately 30 seconds, Annalise cuts her hair, filmed entirely as a close-up of Annalise. Either her face or her hands cutting her hair are constantly visible on screen. The fast movement of her hands and the way in which she tears out her hair, as well as the anger and determination in her eyes when cutting off her hair, emphasise the burden she feels she must lose.

In this scene, hair symbolises a burden. In the show, Annalise cuts her hair for two reasons. First, considering the guilt and responsibility she feels towards Wes’ death, she punishes herself by cutting her hair. In doing so, Annalise does not just blame herself secretly but demonstrates her guilt to the world openly. Second, she experiences her hair

as a burden. Wearing the mask daily, the one that also protected her from her traumatic experiences in her childhood, she now feels the need to lose her hair. Her caring attitude towards Wes has a profound significance for the burden she feels. Unlike in the scene with her mother, Annalise is not trying to hide from her feelings. She does not need or want her wig, or even her natural hair, to symbolically protect her in that scene. The profound difference lies within her wish to deliberately feel the pain connected to Wes’ death, and to do so she needs to lose the burden of her hair that until now has worked as a protective shield for her.

#### HOW HAIR MATTERS

The profound significance of hair in the African American cultural identity is evident up to the current day. The situation during the time of slavery has shaped and influenced the acceptance and prestige of African American women’s hair significantly and, even today, African American hairstyles are still not seen as being as prestigious as the ones worn by the white women. While the continuous under-representation of African American women in media increases this problem, Annalise Keating presents a counter-image: she is a complex character who sheds light on the nature of African American identity.

On the whole, the great importance and symbolic use of hair in *How to Get Away With Murder* is unmistakable. It is not just a mere symbol but a tool that is used to introduce different stages of Annalise’s character. Within this whole development her hair symbolises a mask, protection and burden. By wearing her wig, the different identities she feels the need to perform, are symbolised. However, when she takes it off, she is confronted with her true self and inner feelings that make her vulnerable, human, and ultimately strong.

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