

GETTING READY TO INTRODUCE THE KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Many months had passed since we had last seen one another.

Just before I formally introduced the keynote speaker to the roomful of delegates, he turned to me and said, "It's good to see you again. We really need to touch base."

It was only after I had placed my hand, lightly, against his cheek that I heard what he actually said.

BEARDS

I have always enjoyed a good beard, particularly a writer's beard, and more particularly an American writer's beard, and even more particularly a 19th century American writer's beard, and even even more particularly those 19th century American writers with big, dedicated, unkempt beards. Claude Monet had an impressive beard and he looked great in a smock flanked by his house and gardens in Giverny, but he was a painter and French too so he's off my list, and, anyway, the ends of his beard were just a little too neat for my taste.

The beard that has always impressed me the most belonged to Walt Whitman, especially as worn in the photograph taken in 1877 in the studio of Philadelphia photographers, Broadbent and Taylor. Whitman wears a thick cardigan over a white shirt, the cuffs open and turned back. He's leaning back in a wooden chair, a crumpled and life-worn hat on his head. His left hand is in the pocket of his cardigan, his right forearm is bent upwards, a moth perched on his right index finger, picking up on the image of Whitman used in the 1860, 1861, and, later, 1881 editions of his magnum opus, *Leaves of Grass*, in which he is shown lounging in a smoking-jacket and broad felt hat, a butterfly delicately perched on his finger. "Yes — that was an actual moth," Whitman later told his friend and literary heir, Horace Traubel. "The picture," Whitman went on, "is substantially literal: we were good friends: I had quite the in-and-out of taming, or fraternizing with, some of the insects and animals."

Although I have had several butterflies land on me in the butterfly house at Chester zoo and know first-hand the joy of these insects, it has always been Whitman's beard in this photograph that really holds my attention: all white and thick and long and straggly. It's the sort of beard finery that makes you distrust anyone who wouldn't attempt to grow such a thing or, worse, can't grow one. "Washes and razors for foofoos," Whitman wrote in *Leaves of Grass*, "for me freckles and a bristling beard." Whitman's beard also has its own facebook page.

Other 19th century American writers to have worn a good beard include: Henry David Thoreau, Frederick Douglass, James Russell Lowell,

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Herman Melville. Mark Twain didn't have a beard but his moustache was of a noteworthy thickness.

A more recent study into beards, conducted by an internationally recognised university, announced that, owing to an increasingly impressionable youth and the growing reach of various online platforms dedicated to cascading the anthropological conditions of a few select streets in Brooklyn and Hoxton, in the second decade of the 21st century, themselves consciously or unconsciously in thrall, I am sure, to the beard-legacies of the 19th century, the rather ominous sounding 'peak beard' has been reached. While conceding that it was hard to tell how the experiment related to the real world, one of the researchers claimed the attractiveness of beards depended on their rarity. "The more beards a person had already seen," stated the lead researcher, "the less attractive subsequent beards were to them."

I am not quite certain what this means for 19th century American studies, and this, I think, is part of the reason why a grant-funded follow-up study is now underway, exploring the links between beards and masculinity. In the words of the head of research, "We still don't really know the primary function of the beard."

BECAUSE I AM A MAN

Because I am a man I don't go to the dentist or the doctor or know what's happening tomorrow or make much of an effort to plan what's happening the day after or take an interest in my skin or keep a mental note of how many units of alcohol I drink or follow instructions or know when to stop or carry an umbrella or really need more than one ok friend or contact family members on a regular basis or answer the phone or enjoy going out or know the ages or birthdays of my nieces and nephews or start more than one thing at a time or say out loud when I would prefer not to do something or set out my stall on either side of the fence or buy things in actual shops.

CYCLE TO WORK

After much procrastination and not a little disbelief, on an uncommonly warm morning in December I took the potentially foolhardy decision to cycle to work wearing nothing but a t-shirt.

I was as surprised as anyone to make it so far before being waved over by two police constables and arrested for indecent exposure.

Neither constable, it seemed, was swayed by my passionate discourse on climate change, unseasonal weather, and its far-reaching impacts on the daily commute.

As it turned out, later, neither was the judiciary.