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# Gender in Black and White: Examining Interracial Relationships in ShondaLand

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Gender in Black and White:  
Examining Interracial Relationships in ShondaLand

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## Gender in Black and White: Examining Interracial Relationships in ShondaLand

**ABSTRACT:** *Shonda Rhimes has been credited for crafting progressive television dramas that attract millions of viewers. Scholars have found that through the use of tactics like colorblind casting, Rhimes unintentionally creates problematic relationships between characters. Focusing on production techniques and dialogue, this paper examines episodes from two of her most popular shows, How To Get Away With Murder and Scandal. This paper argues that while the shows pursue progressive material, the shows present African-American female characters that require partners. Further, both white male characters negatively influence the women's independence. Through media representations, Shonda Rhimes' shows reinforce inequality of race and gender through media.*

### Introduction

*Scandal* and *How To Get Away With Murder* are incredibly popular television dramas. In its second season on ABC, *Scandal* averaged eight million viewers a week, making it the number one drama at 10pm on any week night (Paskin). Also in 2014, in its debut season, *How to Get Away With Murder* became the biggest overall gainer of viewers, adding 6.0 million viewers (Moraes). Many say that both shows' popularity stems from writer and producer Shonda Rhimes' ability to break diversity barriers and her efforts create what critics call progressive television (Nussbaum). It is impossible to deny the popularity of these shows, but important to also consider both plots, and what each suggest for gender and race relations.

*Scandal's* main character and African-American female lead, Olivia Pope, works as CEO of a crisis management firm, where she seeks justice for innocent men and women involved in complicated crimes. Pope's passion and aggression motivates her team, and she works at an incredibly fast pace without ever appearing visibly tired or distressed. Pope's on-again-off-again white boyfriend, Fitzgerald Grant, is the President of the United States. Impatient, pompous, and hypersexual, Grant is also married. In the pilot episode, Pope discovers Grant is sleeping with another woman, and an act of revenge. The couple's affair is addicting yet problematic—the

white man holds control over the black woman, influencing her personal emotions and also her professional life.

Similarly, in *How To Get Away With Murder*, defense attorney and criminal law teacher Annalise Keating is strong, smart, and intimidating. The drama's plot follows Keating, the African-American female lead, and her team of five students solving cases and defending criminals. In each instance, Keating is unwavering and never wrong. Keating's white husband, Sam, is a psychology professor at the same university, and the plot thickens when Keating discovers Sam was having an affair with a recently murdered student. The only instance in which Keating acts erratically is when Sam admits he had an ongoing affair—then Keating screams, cries, and throws things at her husband. Ultimately, she takes on her husband's case in the hopes of avenging him.

Both dramas portray African-American women in high-ranking positions fighting for justice. Each woman is strong, professional, and admirable, and each woman is married to a white man who is impatient, hypersexual, and well-liked by the public. Almost every aspect of the two dramas speaks to what critics deemed “the most iconic feminist moments” on “progressive television” (Myers). But problems are evident: both Fitzgerald Grant and Sam Keating affect the women emotionally and professionally, even to the point of preventing functionality. When Pope swallows bottle after bottle of wine on her couch and Keating is bedridden after facing disappointment, heartbreak, and betrayal, the viewer must question what stereotypes the producers are incorporating, and how stereotypes influence the audience. In this thesis, I want to examine the relationships between the main characters in both *Scandal* and *How To Get Away With Murder*. Shonda Rhimes' construction of both of these relationships, in a time where society is progressing forward in women's rights, is fascinating. Additionally, the study is

relevant as the shows are exceptionally popular. No scholar has yet analyzed the relationships and what they suggest about race and gender, and the audience should be made aware of what is taking place within the context of these relationships.

### **Literature Review**

Scholars have studied progressive television dramas and how they frame race and gender. In Amanda Lotz's analysis, she studies specific 1990s television networks that she explains are feminist or progressive in their incorporation of characters and plots. These network television stations all targeted women's niches. Although *Scandal* and *How To Get Away With Murder* are not on Lifetime, it is useful to look at Lifetime because it exemplifies television driven by female viewers. Firstly, in discussing Lifetime, Lotz says that the slogan "Television for Women" provided enough distinction. Lifetime, Lotz explains, was successful because it incorporated dramatic progressive television shows with central female characters (40). Producing original series is more costly than syndicated off-network shows, but networks like Lifetime recognize that producing original series attracts viewers. Oftentimes, Lotz notes, not just in Lifetime but also in other seemingly feminist television networks, women are depicted as victims or are striving to overcome obstacles in various television shows (42). I argue that historically, television networks have abandoned depictions of women as victims; now, networks create female characters as women that audience members can aspire to, rather than relate to. Lotz also points out that in considering demographics, networks compete for the same advertisers and seek out the 18 to 34-year-old college educated woman with a yearly household income of above fifty thousand dollars. Most interestingly though, in this book, Lotz writes about workplace dramas; she explains, "Television depictions of career women have drawn attention as apparently feminist by definition because of characters' access to spaces outside of the home" (145). And

Lotz proves workplace dramas can be feminist in certain instances. She analyzes medical television shows, where women's careers become paramount. Lotz also analyzes law shows. She writes, "Law drama reappears with unfailing consistency because of the sorts of stories their settings allow them to explore" (147). However, Lotz disproves the theory that workplace dramas are always feminist by analyzing *West Wing*. Female characters throughout the television series are treated differently than men in the workplace, with consistent mentions of nudity and lack of clothing in certain scenes. Lotz explains, "I use these examples from the *West Wing* to indicate how a series that professes liberal politics and offers female characters narrative spaces still undercuts and minimizes their professionalism" (162). I feel Lotz's analysis of feminist and progressive television, especially on the basis of unsuccessful workplace dramas, offers helpful research for my analysis of *Scandal* and *How To Get Away With Murder*—two law dramas which undercut women's professionalism and success by way of incorporating problematic relationships with white men.

Lotz's analysis of television dramas framing race and gender lacks any mention of stereotypes. Stereotypes are essential to discuss in the mention of non-progressive television dramas. Scholars Ella Shohat and Robert Stam analyze stereotyping through encoding and decoding. Shohat and Stam argue that good and bad representations of groups are too simplistic. Through detailed historical research and convincing "realism," everything can appear "right" (Shohat and Stam 179). Instead, the authors examine representations of frequently and infrequently represented groups of people, and how the representations are constructed, displayed, and received. Specifically, the authors ask to what extent Hollywood uses stereotypes to depict "reality" in creating texts. After detailing both political and religious stereotyping in texts, Shohat and Stam ultimately explain the burden of representation by stating, "What all these

instances share is the semiotic principle that something is ‘standing for’ something else, or that some person or group is speaking on behalf of some other persons or groups” (183). The semiotic representation depends upon a number of factors—the people represented, for example, because stereotyping a white man is less harmful than stereotyping a black man, as the black man is underrepresented to start. The audience also plays a part in the stereotype, because the stereotype often reflects the societal view. Further, the stereotype and the audience directly correlate—Shohat and Stam analyze that if a text stereotypes an underrepresented minority, society’s view of the minority group will adapt to the stereotype. Shohat and Stam write, “While all negative stereotypes are hurtful, they do not all exercise the same power in the world” (183). The authors explain that using certain stereotypes to depict African-Americans, as producers do in *How to Get Away With Murder* and *Scandal*, can have “a searing impact on the actual lives of Black people” (Shohat and Stam 184).

Many argue that Shonda Rhimes’ dramas are not problematic. In incorporating diverse casts and in essentially ignoring race throughout dialogue, Rhimes in theory can avoid Shohat and Stam’s concerns regarding society adapting to problematic material. Rhimes uses colorblind casting when she searches for actors and actresses to fit characters she creates in all her dramas. Colorblind casting is a process where the director writes no physical description of a character. This way, the directors can encourage a person of any race and ethnicity to try out for the role. Kristen Warner, along with many other scholars, finds holes in this tactic, though. On the surface, Warner admits that it is a seemingly flawless tactic—one is able to increase diversity in television without intentionally reaching out to or people of one race or excluding people of another race. The practice also results in transgressive television shows, which allow viewers to imagine themselves as successful and without discriminatory restrictions. In a recent interview

about *Scandal*, ABC Chief Channing Dungey admitted, “Shonda felt strongly that Olivia be black” (Hollywood Reporter). Rhimes echoed Dungey, stating, “I got a phone call from somebody who said, ‘This would be the perfect show for Connie Britton.’ I said, ‘It would be, except Olivia Pope is Black’” (Hollywood Reporter). This conversation only further suggests complexity in the shows. Further, the concrete issues arise when Rhimes insists not only on casting without considering race, but also maintaining such silence on the shows themselves. Rhimes creates interracial relationships and places African-American women in leadership career roles, but after Warner analyzed Rhimes’ dramas, she noted that Rhimes never spends time discussing race in her script. Rhimes defends the lack of racial dialogue, explaining in an interview, “I just felt like there’s something interesting about having a show in which your characters could just be your characters” (Warner 637). It is understandable that Rhimes wants her characters to simply be her characters, but Warner argues that in ignoring race so blatantly, Rhimes ultimately creates racial tension. Warner states, “One of the problems that arises from Rhimes’ mode of disavowal is that the actors of color inadvertently step into racial tropes...the text becomes a breeding ground for unintentional stereotypes” (640). Warner predominantly analyzes and writes on *Grey’s Anatomy* in her article, but touches upon *Scandal*, and specifically upon the relationship between Pope and Grant. Warner’s discussion of the “network’s implicit demands for a white lead” is particularly significant (641). The assumption here, of course, is that the country is not so progressive that viewers would react to a black male lead in the same way they would a white male lead (consider the handsome and beloved ‘McDreamy’ Patrick Dempsey on *Grey’s*). Such societal preferences force Rhimes to pair Pope with the white Grant in *Scandal*. Again, Warner asserts, this pairing, along with a refusal to speak about race, forces



Pope into a series of racial tropes. Perhaps Rhimes is too progressive in a society that has not yet caught up, but regardless, colorblind casting causes more problems than it ought to.

Amy Long discusses very similar issues of colorblind casting throughout seasons of Shonda Rhimes' *Grey's Anatomy*. Long, too, criticizes Rhimes for her colorblind casting, and it is important to mention when noting the number of scholars who have written about racial issues in Rhimes' television shows. However, Long and Warner differ when Long analyzes gender. Long asserts that because the producer chooses to ignore the role of race, the producer tends to shift the television series to a different focus, like gender. The author analyzes the interracial friendship between Christina Yang and Meredith Grey, and how the bond between the two is stronger than that of either of their husbands. Most interestingly, though, Long analyzes how the constructed relationships imply certain stereotypes. Long examines colorblind casting not only with positions of employment but also through interracial romantic relationships. Ultimately, she draws a conclusion that while *Grey's Anatomy* very explicitly includes a number of races, the show masks racism itself. Long explains that this "band-aid for a political bullet hole" degrades any diversity, ignoring "intersectional specificities among groups of men and women," ultimately elevating white Americans and constructing issues of racism (1079). Long's and Warner's arguments are inherently different in that Long believes Rhimes' shows are ultimately progressive, where Warner stated Rhimes' shows are ultimately problematic. Long explains that while the relationships in *Grey's Anatomy* are not perfect, "they represent a valid, if not entirely successful attempt...to promote ideals of community, care, egalitarianism, and interconnection across, racial boundaries and gender categories" (1079). I disagree with Long's claims: Long feels Rhimes' dramas allow us to reimagine the world on the basis of race and gender, but I believe there is no room to reimagine with the construction of such problematic relationships.

Shohat and Stam point out that when producers create television riddled with stereotypes, viewers will adapt to the stereotypes—here, there is no such thing as reimagining. Perhaps, too, history is at fault: as Warner suggested, “As much as Rhimes may desire all of her characters to be the same, historical representations prevent this from becoming a reality” (639).

Unlike Long, Cassandra Chaney is far less positive in her analysis of Rhimes’ problematic dramas—Chaney’s research will provide the basis of my analysis. She discusses in great depth the black stereotypes Olivia Pope personifies, how Pope’s ongoing affair with Fitzgerald Grant portrays a power differential between a black woman and a white man, and the troubling history of the black woman as it relates to the construction of Pope’s character. Chaney points out that analysis of Pope is significant because the black woman is the largest group of single women in the United States (128). Further, historically, the black woman was sexualized in a different way than the white woman—the black woman was subhuman, where the white woman was revered. Historical race issues, Chaney argues, are the reason for white supremacy today, and *Scandal* upholds the portrayal of white supremacy. Chaney believes *Scandal* depicts Olivia Pope as an aggressively sexual black woman, who treats her clients as if they are her children (by nurturing and advising as a stereotypical Mammy), and who is tied down by her male counterpart, Fitzgerald Grant. Here, Chaney believes that any trope is a negative one. However, Tara-Lynne Pixley’s “Trope and Associates” counters Chaney’s claims. Pixley argues against critiques of Shonda Rhimes by analyzing Olivia Pope in *Scandal*, both through race and gender. Pixley argues that Rhimes does not omit race from her television shows, but rather utilizes stereotypes in a positive way via the show’s script. While previous scholars argue that Rhimes’ construction of Pope’s character falls under a number of black female stereotypes, Pixley accuses scholars of limiting black actresses to specific categories. She argues that Pope

falls under one “super trope,” embodying the Jezebel, Mammy, and the Sapphire—and contends that this super trope is a new way of constructing the black female actress, and that Rhimes’ production and writing is groundbreaking (Pixley 30). This article will be useful because I disagree with Pixley’s points. While Pixley believes that Rhimes’ construction of Judy Smith, former White House deputy press secretary under George H. W. Bush and woman Pope’s character is based on, is constructed factually and realistically, I believe it is far too obscured. And while Pixley believes that the show excels in casting people of all orientations and races, I believe the way in which the show deals with these characters does not reflect positively on the producers and writers. Ultimately, while Pixley believes a super trope is a progressive and groundbreaking depiction of the black actress, I tend to agree with Shohat and Stam, in that society will adapt to the minority stereotype. This, in turn, leaves no room for racial empowerment, as Pixley suggests.

Rachel Alicia Griffin brings the terms from Chaney and Pixley’s articles into her discussion of tropes as they relate to *Scandal*. Griffin criticizes *Scandal*, analyzing the show on the basis of Pope’s characteristics, interactions, and relationships (36). Griffin makes a number of fascinating points, and considers herself a black feminist spectator in observations and analysis (38). Griffin argues against Pixley and disproves Pixley’s point completely in discussing tropes—while the mammy once was a stereotype that portrayed African-American women as caged by slavery, it “has been modernized to mirror societal changes” (36). Griffin explains that Black female characters are still serving and obeying White people on television, but simply in different (and often unrecognizable) ways. Further, Griffin claims Rhimes is “mammifying” Pope through her career in the way that her employees come to her for salvation—Griffin says Pope comes to the “compassionate rescue” of “each gladiator under dire circumstances,”

ultimately constructing Pope as a black “surrogate mother” (39). Additionally, Griffin explains that Pope is troped as superwoman through her ability to independently succeed in her personal life. Another interesting point Griffin noted is the way in which Pope assists White upper class Americans, and how this degrades Pope as a servant (a point which Warner previously notes). What is interesting about this article is that Griffin “de-mammifies” her own projections of Pope by then discussing the respect that her coworkers have for her, and how the nurturing relationship is reciprocated—and in this way no longer problematic. I disagree with Griffin’s arguments here, and feel there are major holes in this article: there is no mention of Pope’s relationship with Grant, which is arguably the most problematic construction of racial tension in this show. Furthermore, Griffin implies that Pope is neither lusted after nor fantasized about (45). I will refer back to this claim later in my thesis, as I observed and argue Pope is both lusted after and fantasized about, especially by her white male counterpart. This article is also helpful, as it provides an outline for *How To Get Away With Murder* in its discussion of both race and gender. Ultimately, I will argue against Griffin’s projections.

Despite Rhimes’ attempts at progressive television through colorblind casting and lack of attention to racism in dialogue, Pope and Keating are fit as characters to resemble certain tropes, degrading them due to their gender and their race. Some scholars argue that certain tropes can reinforce race; the hypersexualized, mammified, sapphire becomes the “super trope,” synonymous with the superwoman. However, other scholars argue that historically racist tropes cannot be depicted as ideal—they are still problematic, but appear differently simply due to their adaptation with current societal racism. In other words, the argument that viewers might have the freedom to reimagine diverse casts is lost, because ultimately, audiences always adapt to the stereotypes encoded for them in the television shows.

## Research Question

Such points have allowed me to construct and narrow my own research question. In this paper, I ask in what ways are the African-American female leads disempowered by their white male counterparts, and what does this suggest about race and gender? Specifically, how do men use language to sexualize and degrade their lovers, and in which ways do women blatantly and negatively address their race in conversation with their lovers? How do white men hinder the black women's professional careers, and how do production decisions exemplify such hindrances? Finally, in which ways do the men physically abuse their lovers, and how do the women react to the abuse?

## Method

I approached my research by gathering my primary sources, *Scandal* and *How To Get Away With Murder*, through Netflix. I selected three episodes of *Scandal* and three episodes of *HTGAWM* partially through purposive sampling and partially through random sampling. Because I am studying the problematic relationship between Annalise Keating, the Black female lead, and Sam Keating, her White husband, I had to limit my search to Season 1 of *HTGAWM*, as Sam Keating dies in the season finale. (Fitzgerald Grant, Olivia Pope's White lover, remains on the show throughout its five seasons, so I chose *Scandal* at random). Through random sampling, I entered in specific numbers of seasons and episodes online, ultimately viewing *Scandal* Season 2 Episode 8, Season 3 Episode 1, and Season 5 Episode 9, and *How To Get Away With Murder* Season 1 Episode 5, Season 1 Episode 8, and Season 1 Episode 13. While viewing each episode, I worked inductively: therefore, I took detailed and random notes, reviewed the notes, and after deciding which themes arose most often, I created categories. Specifically, *Scandal* is categorized through production (i.e. juxtaposition, camera angles), dialogue, and Pope's physical

reactions contrasted with Grant's physical interactions. I considered flashbacks where Pope is intentionally placed with seemingly sexist and racist dialogue of previous scenes. Further, I considered camera angles which appear to minimize Pope's stature. I analyzed sexist and or racist dialogue, and physical reactions where Pope is gesticulating, sighing, or crying, contrasted with Grant placing his hands on Pope aggressively, and or pulling her toward him. Similarly, in analyzing *How To Get Away With Murder*, I chose two broad categories: the characterization of Annalise and Sam as individuals and as a couple, and Annalise's career contrasted with her relationship. In order to analyze problematic relationships, I note background information (dialogue where Annalise and Sam negatively reference their past together). Further, I analyze Sam as sometimes physical (in grabbing Annalise, or placing his hands on her aggressively), but usually even-tempered (a neutral facial expression and calm tone of voice in reaction to Annalise's emotion). I then analyze Annalise as overly emotional, based on a combination of crying, shouting, placing her hands on her face or body, and throwing objects. Then, in analyzing her professional versus personal lives, I contrast Annalise's flawless and unwavering ability to both educate and practice law (a kempt appearance, controlled voice, sharp wit) juxtaposed beside her home life (physically at home, with a combination of hands on face, crying, and alcohol and or drugs in her vicinity). In each instance, both Keating and Pope are constructed as dependent on their white male counterparts.

### **Analysis**

This analysis examines Olivia Pope's problematic relationship with Fitzgerald Grant in *Scandal*, and continues on to analyze Annalise Keating's problematic relationship with Sam Keating in *How To Get Away With Murder*. To begin, throughout Season 2 Episode 8, "Happy Birthday, Mr. President," certain production (i.e. juxtaposition, camera angles), dialogues, and

Pope's physical reactions compared with Grant's physical interactions exemplify inequalities of race and gender. This particular episode is unique in its structure, and uncommon compared to other *Scandal* episodes: in Season 2 Episode 8, Fitzgerald Grant is shot while entering his birthday event. Additionally, I analyze *Scandal* Season 2 Episode 1, "It's Handled," where the show flashes back to a previous episode where Mellie Grant, Fitz's wife, announces that her husband cheated on her in an interview. The show then opens with media announcing that Olivia Pope is the alleged "mistress." The plot of the episode follows Pope's team investigating who leaked her name to the media, while also following The White House as they deal in protecting the President.

### **Problematic Juxtaposition in *Scandal***

In "Happy Birthday, Mr. President," the plot follows the White House scrambling as Grant's health declines in the hospital, but also specifically follows Pope's reactions to her lover's injuries. Juxtaposed with the present day are flashbacks to Grant's public presidential inauguration, paralleled with Grant and Pope's secret love affair. The episode documents the trials and tribulations of government instability as Grant recovers, while also presenting Pope's instability. A clear and intentional contrast between Pope's poise as an employee in the face of uncertainty and her complete devastation in the face of Grant's wavering health lays the groundwork for a problematic relationship and negative depiction of race.

Certain production decisions evident in "Happy Birthday, Mr. President" imply Pope is at the mercy of her emotions and love for Grant, unable to function properly at a job she loves due to her white male boss and lover. In one of the earliest scenes in the episode, Pope steps in as press secretary when the previous press secretary was killed in the shooting. Pope's coworkers are watching Pope, controlled and matter-of-fact on television speaking with media. One

coworker remarks, “If I’m ever shot, I want her running the press conference,” and another coworker responds, “Makes you wonder why she ever left the White House.” Here, the producers juxtapose a flashback where Pope is avoiding Grant in the early days of his presidency—Grant whispers that he misses her, and Pope angrily responds, “I don’t know what you expect. I don’t want to be in this. I am not this person.” The implication here, due to the juxtaposition, is that Pope left the White House because of Grant. Pope’s eventual resignation motivated by her relationship with Grant suggests that despite her talent, strength, and intelligence, she is overcome by her White male counterpart and cannot possibly continue in her career because of him.

### **Racist and Sexist Dialogue in *Scandal***

It is not often that Rhimes writes racial issues into her script, as she practices colorblind casting and feels it an unnecessary topic of conversation; when dialogue does address race, then, it is particularly shocking and extremely problematic. In “Happy Birthday, Mr. President,” during one of the earliest flashback scenes in the episode, Pope and Grant both state relatively problematic dialogue regarding race. Pope and Grant are arguing in a hallway of the White House. The argument takes place just minutes after Mellie has confronted Pope, explaining subtly that she is aware of the affair taking place between her husband and Pope. In the argument, Grant says, “I know this is difficult,” and Pope responds, “I’m feeling, I don’t know, a little Sally Hemmings Thomas Jefferson about all of this.” This obvious mention of race in character dialogue causes even more racial tension. Grant responds to Pope’s accusation, exclaiming, “You’re playing the race card on the fact that I’m in love with you?” and Pope’s next words are, “I wait for you, I watch for you; my whole life is you. You own me. You control me.” If the intentional paralleling of Grant and Pope’s relationship to the controversial sexual



relationship of a former President and his black slave is not problematic enough, Pope's further dialogue discussing Grant as her owner is especially concerning.

In another episode of *Scandal*, "It's Handled," an interaction between Olivia and her father at the beginning of the episode yet again blatantly depicts race. Specifically, Mr. Pope's long-term advice to his daughter implies a clear and blatant statement of race, and race inequality. Mr. Pope, having heard his daughter is the President's mistress, is driving her to an airplane. He encourages her to escape the current dilemma, and has set her up with a Swiss bank account and a promise to erase her current image in the States. In a heated conversation before Pope enters the plane, Mr. Pope says, "You've gotten yourself into a little bit of trouble, Olivia. You raised your skirt and opened your knees, and gave it away to a man with too much power. That's the Presidency versus you. Whose victory do you think they will fight for? Whose body do you think they will bury?" Here, the implication is that Fitz, as the most powerful man in the world, will destroy his lover to save his own image. Olivia vehemently denies her father's claims, exclaiming, "He would never!" But her father responds, "He told you you'd be first lady, and you believed him. I raised you for better. How many times have I told you, you have to be...what?" Olivia struggles, "Twice as good," and her father echoes, "Twice as good as them to get half of what they have." The beginning of Mr. Pope's quote is concerning here because his implication is that Olivia placed her trust in someone who wasn't simply untrustworthy, but untrustworthy because he is white. It is important to note this, as Shonda Rhimes' implementation of colorblindness in her television shows makes for a very rare discussion of race. Mr. Pope mutters after this exchange, "Sleeping with that..." and sighs. Once more, the audience can clearly predict Pope's final phrase would be "white man," which again is problematic not only in the show, but also in constructing a separation between the two partners.

In *Scandal* Season 5 Episode 8, “Baby It’s Cold Outside,” Pope and Grant get into an argument regarding Pope’s experiences having moved into the White House. Pope, after skipping cabinet dinner to get an abortion, arrives back at the White House and begins fighting with Grant. Grant, aware that Pope is upset, exclaims, “I knew this would happen when I moved you in here.” Pope fires back, in an unusually feminist dialogue, “When you locked me in here? Treated me like a hostage? Do I get to talk to wives at cocktail parties for you? Plan dinners for you? Live in this cage for you, and not breathe for you? What must I do to be forever indebted to you? Be your housewife, your girlfriend, your property?” What’s especially problematic is Grant’s response: he exclaims, “You’re worse than Mellie. With Mellie, I knew what she was. I mean, I knew where you came from, but...” The suggestion here is that while Mellie exemplifies a willingness to be submissive to Grant because she is a naïve daughter of a southern plantation owner, Pope exemplifies a willingness to be submissive to Grant because she is Black.

Dialogue in *Scandal* is not only problematic in terms of race, but also problematic on the basis of gender. Sexist language is often used throughout the show. Specifically, the use of “whore” throughout *Scandal*, and the lack of defense or argument after its use, is problematic. In “It’s Handled,” Fitz, his vice president, and his chief of staff are sitting in the Oval Office discussing plans to reform the President’s image. Fitz’ vice president, speaking offhandedly with his chief of staff, accuses Fitz of “sleeping with whores.” Instead of defending his lover, Fitz remains silent, except to request his chief of staff leave so he has the room alone with his vice president. Interestingly, this same situation takes place twice more in “It’s Handled”: Olivia, Mellie, and Fitz are speaking in an emergency security isolation room in the basement of the White House when Mellie, defending the fact that she outed her unfaithful husband in an interview, says, “I wouldn’t have had to smile at Oprah if you didn’t screw your whore every

chance you got!” Again, Fitz remains silent—it is Olivia who speaks out, requesting that Mellie “refrain” from calling her such names. Fitz simply raises his eyebrows to echo Pope’s request.

The final instance in which Mellie calls Pope a whore is when she confronts her husband: in the last five minutes of “It’s Handled,” Mellie explains how Fitz leaked Liv’s name in the hopes of saving his own image. Mellie problematically states, “Being First Lady is profoundly boring. What did you call me? Ornamental? Not functional?” It is not just evident here that Mellie’s role as first lady is dry and lacks intellect; it is also clear that Fitz has insulted her in the past, as he has insulted Pope, clearly proving gender inequality. Furthermore, Mellie shouts, “If you leaked her name it would neutralize your affair. You still think the country would somehow embrace you bringing your *whore* into the White House as First Lady?” Yet again, Fitz does not react to Mellie’s word choice—this is important, as cursing is very rarely implemented in the *Scandal* script. But Mellie’s line is important for another reason: it suggests that Fitz wants to implement Pope as his first lady, hereby revoking Pope’s gladiator CEO status and reducing her to what Mellie later describes as “a rose dying on a vine.”

### **Problematic Production Decisions in *Scandal***

Pope and Grant’s physical reactions (i.e. hand gestures, sighs, etc.) are prevalent throughout “Happy Birthday, Mr. President,” during which problematic racial and gender issues take place. The show again presents an interesting contrast where Pope is overly professional and almost flawless in her career dealings: she speaks at an unbelievable pace, delivering facts and sass at press conferences, shutting down reporters, and delegating confidently. The viewer is constantly reminded of how professional Pope is, to the point where, when Pope announces she is back working at the White House while the President is sick, employees actually breathe collective sighs of grateful relief. Again, Pope’s professionalism is contrasted with tears, lip

quivers, and animated gesticulation in her one-on-one dealings with Grant. For example, at the beginning of the episode, Pope stares into Grant's hospital room, exhaling deeply when she sees him wounded. The scene precedes a flashback, where a young Pope is watching Grant's inauguration speech on television. Again, Pope visibly reacts, with a dramatic lip quiver. The viewer recognizes over-the-top, dramatic physical reactions as the episode continues: at one point, Pope admits she loves Grant, gulping and sighing and gasping; at another, the doctors explain Grant's prognosis, and Pope quivers and sobs. The physical reactions here are more than just Kerry Washington's attempts at sincerity as an actress: the reactions only worsen the gender and racial problems.

Where Pope is heartbroken and emotional in her physical reactions, Grant is forceful and controlling. This dynamic, too, suggests relationship stereotyping, where Pope is sensitive and Grant is domineering. For example, in a flashback scene, Pope and Grant meet in the Oval Office after the Inaugural Ball (which Pope did not attend). Grant attempts to persuade Pope to have sex with him, but Pope is hesitant, as she feels guilty about the affair. Grant repeatedly grabs at Pope, pulling her toward him forcefully. Pope asks Grant to stop, and Grant moans, "No, no," lifting Pope onto his desk. Here, the use of iconography of rape suggests gender imbalance. In another scene, when Grant and Pope are arguing in a White House hallway, Pope tries to walk away, frustrated by the conversation—Grant grabs her arm, forcefully pulling her towards him once again. Every time Grant aggressively touches her, Pope looks at Grant's hands grasping her and inhales sharply. Here, it is as if Pope wants to say something—*but she remains silent*. Pope's physical reactions and Grant's physical interactions represent yet another problematic aspect of the couple's relationship, and create more underlying issues of racism and sexism throughout the show.

Then, later on in the episode, the producers reinforce Pope's present-day emotional instability sparked by her love for Grant. Here, Grant influences Pope's career, and gender issues take away Pope's agency. Pope, in an attempt to prepare Grant's wife Mellie for a speech, visits the couple's closet. Pope, unaccompanied, briefly examines Mellie's clothing, but is quickly distracted by Grant's clothing on the opposite side of the room. Pope longingly touches pieces of Grant's clothing before settling on a gray Navy sweatshirt. Pope picks up the sweatshirt, falls to the floor, and cries. Surely, the intention of the scene is to draw empathy for a woman mourning—and if the scene simply ended, it would not be problematic. However, after juxtaposing another flashback scene, the producers flash-forward yet again to Pope crying on the floor, holding Grant's sweatshirt—and Pope remains in the heap, audibly sobbing, for twenty-seven seconds. This length of time is particularly significant, as *Scandal* is such a fast-paced television series, with quick banter and even faster scenes. Once again, the show suggests that Pope is not simply saddened, but *overcome* by her love for Grant. This idea that only her male lover can stop a successful businesswoman is problematic.

Throughout the episode, Pope is depicted as an outsider, exemplifying her role as Grant's mistress. Scenes frequently portray Grant and Mellie together, with Pope standing to one side. However, in the final scenes of the episode, the camera literally displays Pope as an outsider. Pope is shot as a dark, blurred silhouette in the far corners of the screen in a number of scenes, where Mellie and Grant are close to one another in the center of the frame. For example, when Mellie makes a speech on the White House lawn, Pope is standing in back and to the left of Mellie (despite preparing Mellie's speech, choosing Mellie's outfit, and arranging for Mellie's hair, makeup, and transportation prior to the speech). Again, when Mellie sits beside Grant's hospital bed, holding her husband's hand, Pope stands in the far left of the shot, blurred. Finally,

when the doctors brief Mellie on her husband's condition, Pope is in the upper right-hand corner of the screen, blurred and only depicted by her dark silhouette. What is important here is that Mellie and Grant are both White, where Pope is Black. The scenes ultimately film the two White characters in the center of the screen, with a Black woman blurred and dark, staring longingly on, in the corner. This camera technique creates a problematic racial structure, where the Black woman is ignored and unnoticed, and the attention is on the White characters.

In *Scandal* Season 5 Episode 9, "Baby, It's Cold Outside," juxtaposition again creates a problematic suggestion for relationships and gender inequality. Pope has moved into the White House, and has taken on traditional roles as a First Lady (without ever having married Fitz): she makes conversation with guests at parties, and plans the china for the cabinet dinner. As the episode follows Pope as First Lady, it juxtaposes Pope watching Mellie filibuster a Planned Parenthood bill in the senate chambers. Pope clearly envies Mellie—she desires a life outside of the one she has settled into due to her love for Grant. The suggestion that the woman must give up her career goals in order to maintain a relationship with the man she loves creates a problematic depiction of relationships for ShondaLand.

**Analysis: *How To Get Away With Murder***

Season 1 Episode 5 of *How To Get Away With Murder*, titled "We're Not Friends," constructs yet another problematic relationship between the Black female lead, Annalise Keating, and Sam Keating, her White husband. The first season of *How To Get Away With Murder* follows five law school students assisting their professor in a number of murder cases. In addition to the public murder cases, Annalise privately investigates Sam for the possible murder of Lila Stangard, an undergraduate female student with whom Sam was having an affair. Additionally, the sub plot of Season 1 follows the five students attempting to get away with the

murder of Sam Keating (various flash-forward scenes finally reveal the full murder at the season finale). Throughout Season 1, Annalise and Sam have dramatic and emotional arguments, where Annalise attempts to seek the truth about Lila. The relationship, though, is problematic. After extensive analysis, I found that broadly, race and gender inequalities result in the characterization of both Annalise and Sam as individuals and as a couple, in addition to Annalise's career contrasted with her relationship.

### **Problematic Dialogue in *How To Get Away With Murder***

Rhimes' colorblind casting and lack of attention to race and gender issues in dialogue result in race and gender inequality. To understand present-day tensions within the show, one must first analyze the history of Annalise and Sam's relationship. Such dialogue constructs Annalise as a needy, desperate, emotionally unstable African American woman reliant on her White, intellectual and steady counterpart. For example, towards the beginning of "We're Not Friends," Annalise examines Lila Stangard's cell phone, and discovers a photo of her husband's penis in Lila's messages from him. During an argument between Annalise and Sam, where Annalise asks Sam about his affair with Lila, Sam justifies Lila was "just lost." Annalise shouts back, "Just like you found me," and continues, "That's how you like your mistresses, huh? Weak, broken messes that you just clean up?" Towards the end of the argument, Sam comforts, "You were never just some affair," and Annalise fires back, "Tell that to your first wife." The dialogue reveals background into Annalise and Sam's relationship: one can assume that when Sam and Annalise fell in love, Sam was previously married. Additionally, though, the characterization compares Annalise to a student—and an immature and dependent young woman. The implication that Annalise identifies as a "weak, broken mess," that Sam "cleaned up" suggests Annalise is not only emotionally damaged, but also highly dependent upon her

White husband. This dialogue is important, as it continues throughout other episodes. In Season 1 Episode 8, “Kill Me, Kill Me, Kill Me,” Annalise and her husband Sam are arguing in the first scene. Annalise is frantically packing Sam’s things—she’s just discovered he lied again about his affair with student Lila Stangard, and this time, it turns out Lila was pregnant—and Annalise requests Sam leave their house. During the argument, the couple debates the man Sam is now, versus who he once was. Annalise says, “You’re not that man anymore. And I don’t think you ever were. Which is why you chose me, right? I’ve been the window dressing for you; the black woman on your arm so you can hide, so that people only saw the good guy. You killed her because you didn’t want people to see you for the pathetic man you are.” To make this argument even more problematic, Sam fires back, “You’re some scared little girl who pretends to be strong but is really just weak. You’ve done nothing but make my life miserable.” Annalise, in retaliation, confesses her affair to Sam in quite explicit detail, concluding, “This is how I could sleep with you all these months, because I would think about him and I’d be able to stand you on top of me.” Sam finally exclaims, “You’re a monster. You want the truth? You’re nothing but a piece of ass. That’s what I saw when I first talked to you in the office that day. Cause I knew you’d put out. That’s all you’re really good for: dirty, rough sex, and too ashamed to tell anyone about it. That’s how foul you are, you disgusting slut.” Obviously, this shocking interaction, using predominantly sexist language, and in accusing Annalise of only being worthy of sex, is inherently sexist.

Annalise is further depicted as a needy and helpless African American when she argues with her mother in Season 1 Episode 13, “Mama’s Here Now.” The plot follows Annalise and her mother discussing Annalise’s sexual abuse by her uncle at a young age. Annalise exclaims, in an effort to prove her mother neglected the abuse, “My sorry ass husband might’ve been a



cheater and a lowlife, but he saw me for why I am this way. Sam knew exactly what happened to me the minute I stepped into his office. He said, “This thing that happened to me, this thing that you ignore, is why I am the way I am.” Here, Sam, the white psychologist offers Annalise comfort and understanding—she relies on him and needs his steadiness in her desperation. He fills a void for her, creating both racist and sexist implications of the relationship.

### **Problematic Production Decisions in *How To Get Away With Murder***

In both scenes from both episodes, Sam becomes particularly passionate. The physical altercations where Sam often uses his force against Annalise prove problematic as well. In “We’re Not Friends,” he exclaims, “This was just sex. I love *you!*” and proceeds to grab Annalise’s arms and pull her towards him. Annalise screams “Don’t touch me,” and Sam puts his hand tightly over her mouth, forcing her down onto their bed and laying on top of her. Here, more iconography of rape is evident. Following this scene, producers juxtapose Annalise and her students listening to a domestic abuse murder case. Surely, if Annalise sought help for the physical incident between her and her husband, or discussed during the interview her personal experiences with domestic abuse, the relationship between Annalise and Sam would be far less problematic. However, the resulting silence regarding the incident suggests a certain implied acceptance, and therefore becomes a question of race and gender inequality. Similarly, in “Kill Me, Kill Me, Kill Me,” Sam grabs Annalise as a result of their argument, pushes her against the wall with both hands around her neck, and says “And I think of Lila every time I try to get off with you!” As he strangles her, Annalise struggles, “Kill me, kill me, kill me!” And finally, the argument ends after Annalise persuades Sam to be honest.

*How To Get Away With Murder*, through Annalise and Sam’s individual characterizations, constructs a White, surface-level even-tempered man versus the overly

emotional and inconsolable Black woman. What is most interesting about the characterization of the individuals is that, as a practicing psychologist and psychology professor, Sam Keating is notably calm and even-tempered. When Annalise instructs Sam to give Lila's best friend a psych evaluation, he calmly tells her he feels it is not a good idea. Annalise, in this scene, appears to be dominating and controlling, while Sam (despite acting as an accessory to a murder) appears rationale. Sam asks Annalise if she has anything else to say, hoping she will forgive him, but Annalise instructs Sam to sleep on the couch. Unlike Annalise, Sam is not fazed—his eyes do not water, his head does not fall, and he does not raise his voice. Sam maintains composure throughout a majority of the episode; it is Annalise whose emotions spark fits of sobbing hysteria. After Annalise and Sam's argument, Annalise throws pillows at her husband until he leaves the room. Then, she puts her hands to her head, sobbing and breathing erratically. Normally, Annalise's appearance is unflawed: she wears a sleek and kempt wig, precise makeup, and form fitting clothes. But during her argument with Sam, her real hair is braided loosely on her head, her makeup is smeared under her eyes, and a robe cinched loosely around her body. Annalise's messy appearance further exemplifies the ways in which Sam negatively affects Annalise. After Annalise's argument with Sam, she visits Nate, an attractive African-American detective with whom Annalise is having an off-and-on affair. Annalise's affair is something very different from Sam's: Sam secretly had sex with Lila, his student, on many occasions—Annalise has sex with Nate only after her fight with Sam. In this way, Sam's affair is based on desire, while Annalise's affair is based on revenge. This implication suggests Sam has the freedom to commit adultery as the lust-filled husband unsatisfied with his wife, but Annalise's affair must come riddled with insecurity and motivated by revenge.

**Problematic Juxtaposition in *How To Get Away With Murder***

The second theme supporting the problematic relationship between Annalise and Sam is evident in the contrast the show creates between Annalise's professional and personal lives. All too often, Annalise is subject to her emotions, and her husband negatively affects her career. At the start of the episode, Annalise is a professional and witty professor, quipping to brilliant and attentive students in a lecture. When Wes Gibbons, a member of Annalise's team of student lawyers, suggests after class to offer Lila's phone as evidence, Annalise angrily and tersely denies the suggestion. Juxtaposed with this scene is Annalise questioning Sam about his affair with the dead student, and the implication is that Annalise (as a successful defense lawyer) is withholding evidence in order to protect her husband. In this way, Annalise is serving her husband—both a race and gender inequality. Surely, this can be interpreted as Annalise defending a client, something she is used to doing. However, it takes place again in “Kill Me, Kill Me, Kill Me,” after Annalise and Sam's physical altercation and argument about Lila. The scene shows Annalise sitting in her car across the street from the police station. She is clearly contemplating reporting her husband, but is sobbing: surely, the love she has for her husband is strong, but after the knowledge she (as a successful lawyer) has about the college student's death, and after the argument she had with her husband, she should not still be so broken about reporting him. Following this instance, she visits Nate, the man with whom she is having an affair. Annalise, crying, confesses, “I should have left him. Instead, I'm trying to protect him.” Ultimately, this dialogue confirms the previous suspicion. Again, this scene suggests that Annalise relies and finds a great deal of her worth in her husband—something exceptionally problematic. Again, when Annalise is fighting the domestic abuse case in court, she is sharp and intelligent. Even when the abuse evidence is ruled out as evidence in the case, Annalise is

unwavering. But following Annalise's fiery, quick, and brilliant skills in the courtroom, she is seen sitting at home beside an empty bottle of vodka, crying. Sam calls her, and she ignores the phone call, drinks more alcohol, and the scene flashes back to Sam's false promises. Here, despite Annalise's remarkable talent, she is overcome with sorrow for her husband's actions. More so, Sam's affair and possible crime cause Annalise to near alcoholism. The idea that Annalise is constantly tied down by Sam's words and actions is not only racially suggestive, but also indicative of patriarchy. Finally, after a challenging trial, Annalise comes forward with an inconceivable and underhanded win. Her students and clients are tearfully celebrating, but Annalise sits on her staircase, head down, awaiting Sam's arrival home. In another similar scene in "Kill Me, Kill Me, Kill Me," Annalise arrives home after contemplating turning in her husband and leaves Sam a voicemail, professing both apologies and love for her husband (at one point in the voicemail, she states, "Whatever you did, wherever, the truth is, I'll stay by your side no matter what"). She's both begging and needing her husband at this point in the episode. Similarly, in *HTGAWM* Season 1 Episode 13, "Mama's Here Now," Annalise finally leaves her bed after mourning the loss of her husband. Annalise's mother is visiting the house, and asks where Annalise's coworkers and law students are. Annalise explains they are at the trial, and her mother asks, "Without you?" Annalise responds, "Does it look like I can be at trial? Does it look like I can help anybody?" Annalise, as a professional and infamous defense lawyer, should not be extensively mourning, never mind bedridden, by the loss of her abusive and adulterous husband. The suggestion that Annalise cannot function outside of the home or at work because of her husband's death is problematic. Such conservative and traditional plot lines question the commonly referred to post-feminist television show.

## Conclusion

This paper examined *Scandal* and *HTGAWM* on the basis of racism and sexism. Specifically, I studied the way in which men use language to sexualize and degrade their lovers, and the way in which women blatantly and negatively address their race in conversation with their lovers. Secondly, I analyzed the way in which both White men hinder the Black women's professional careers, and the way in which production decisions exemplify such hindrances. Finally, I analyzed the way in which men physically abuse their lovers, and the way women remain silent in their reactions to the abuse.

Many scholars speak to Shonda Rhimes' dramas. Some analyze Rhimes' colorblind casting technique, and suggest that the tactic opens holes and room for gender inequality. Other scholars, including Amy Long, argue that while colorblind casting is problematic, it does represent a utopia which society can strive to construct. After analyzing both *Scandal* and *How To Get Away With Murder*, I hope to have proven that the television series allow no room for admiration. Colorblind casting, along with a number of other tactics, seem ideal on the surface level. But once analyzed, it is clear that in an effort to place a Black Olivia Pope with a White Fitzgerald Grant, dialogue, production decisions, and physical interactions, whether intentional or unintentional, become deeply problematic, racist, and sexist.

I have addressed scholars' arguments not only regarding Rhimes' dramas, but also discussing the importance of feminist television series and how they influence society. It is important to conduct research that outlines problems within feminist shows because it allows audiences to broaden their own perspectives and critique shows. Rather than believing based on popularity that Rhimes' shows are progressive and without flaws, I hope that audiences now take the time to review the shows skeptically for their construction of race and gender.

Surely, there are counter arguments to my claims. While I argue that Sam Keating disempowers and distracts Annalise in her professional career, many others might argue that Annalise simply loves her husband, and her various phone calls and alcohol addiction are a reflection of that. Similarly, Annalise's inability to turn in her husband's phone as evidence in her case, and her eventual inability to turn her husband into the police after she determines he was at fault for the murder of Lila Stangard, might be construed as yet another strategy in her career as defense lawyer. Similarly, problematic dialogue between Olivia Pope and Fitzgerald Grant regarding ownership and possession might be interpreted as dialogue depicting deep love in a complicated romance drama. Surely, the producers must offer drama in order to entertain the audience; however, producing *Scandal* and *How To Get Away With Murder* in a way that constructs an imbalanced racial structure is problematic for mindless entertainment.

Because I watched both series with preconceived notions regarding the construction of relationships, my interpretation might seem shaped on my own experiences. Additionally, because I am a passionate women's rights activist, feminist scholar, and promoter of civil rights, my personal beliefs could have shaped my research. What I want to suggest is that when this dialogue or plot line is presented alone, it does not seem problematic. The shows become problematic when Pope and Keating are juxtaposed as winning a case or succeeding in a tricky court battle, and then simultaneously shown wallowing for extensive periods about their White male counterparts. The show does not accidentally produce these cuts: the production, juxtaposition, and dialogue is intentional, and the blurring out of a Black woman in the back of the screen while the White couple remains prominent is something seriously concerning about these 21<sup>st</sup> century seemingly progressive and feminist series.

In considering future research, I recommend analyzing on a wider scale. Again, my study analyzed only three episodes from each series. It would be interesting to see, on a wider scale, whether my findings remain true. Next, my analyses of both series only analyzed Pope and Keating with their White male lovers. I did not include other partners, including love interests of different races and sexes. Perhaps, in pursuing those relationships as well, a study might find further evidence. Finally, my findings specifically for *HTGAWM* consider only the first season, when Sam Keating is alive. It would be interesting to analyze further seasons of *HTGAWM* and see if any White partners act similarly or differently than Sam for Annalise.

Olivia Pope of *Scandal* and Annalise Keating of *HTGAWM*, two career-oriented, brilliant, and feminist Black female leads, exemplify problematic, and sometimes racist and sexist relationships with their White male counterparts. I analyzed each relationship based on specific reactions in physical interactions, certain words present in dialogue, and various juxtaposition and production decisions. Ultimately, I concluded that while many argue Shonda Rhimes' television series are progressive, groundbreaking, and feminist, the series actually reinforces problems in race and gender. There is no better time to be addressing such racist and sexist issues in television. As young men and women flock to their televisions every Thursday evening to watch ShondaLand, it becomes exceptionally important to expose flaws in such seemingly flawless television—we must work to analyze popular television and other forms of media indicative of society in order to positively shape developing minds.

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