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On the Basis of Sex: Examining John Grisham's Legal Fiction Through Feminist Theory

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ON THE BASIS OF SEX: EXAMINING JOHN GRISHAM’S LEGAL FICTION THROUGH FEMINIST THEORY

*Viviana I. Vasii**

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INTRODUCTION

John Grisham’s legal fiction takes readers to a thrilling land where attorneys are the new heroes, fighting against the dark forces of injustice, corruption, and greed. Alas, in these masterfully crafted thrillers lies a force darker than all: Grisham’s writing has negatively molded our perception of women in the law and beyond. “[F]ictional portrayals can have a powerful impact on perceptions of real-life professionals.”¹ Applying feminist theory to a text can unearth such portrayals and the ideology that “Western culture is fundamentally patriarchal” in literature in order to effectuate change.² Analyzing text through the lens of feminist theory requires asking a panoply of questions in an effort to unveil, amongst other things, female stereotypes, their roles, how male characters talk about and treat female characters, representations of authority and power imbalances, attitudes suggested towards women, and which characters work behind the

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1. Chad Painter & Patrick Ferrucci, *Gender Games: The Portrayal of Female Journalists on ‘House of Cards,’* COMM. FAC. PUBLICATIONS 2 (2016).

2. ANN B. DOBIE, THEORY INTO PRACTICE: AN INTRODUCTION TO LITERARY CRITICISM 97 (1st ed. 2002) (noting that most feminist critics view literature as a tool towards understanding and reforming society) (emphasis omitted).

scenes as opposed to calling the shots.³ As such, this Article will use feminist theory as a tool to code the following themes to unveil Grisham's depiction of female characters as attorneys and beyond: the scarcity or lack thereof of heroines; impeding the character's chances of success at a legal career throughout the character's journey or at the novel's resolution; male gaze and objectification; stereotyping; sacrificing behind the scenes for the benefit of the hero through, among other things, mutilation and disguise; and the use of passive language/behavior and predominantly male viewpoint which subtly reinforces the negative view of women in the law and beyond. These themes, found throughout Grisham's writing career from his very first novel, *A Time to Kill*, to one of his most recent, *Gray Mountain*, attest to Grisham's failure to create a female character who is treated equally and rises to the level of one of his revered heroes.

Grisham either fails to include heroines in his novels or depicts female characters as less competent than their male counterparts based on their gender. Despite an upward trend of a more positive depiction of women in the legal fiction genre, "as for literary heroines who are lawyers, they are still few and far between."⁴ Even when heroines seldomly appear in legal fiction, the authors are customarily males who have practiced law, such as Grisham, or continue to be in the legal field.⁵ Women were prohibited from entering the legal field until the latter part of the 20th century—as such, it "took men to begin writing about women as lawyers."⁶ Alas, the male viewpoint in the legal fiction genre led to an unfavorable display of women: "the picture they have presented of the female lawyer is largely demeaning of women in general and women lawyers in particular."⁷ The emphasis was placed on outwardly attractiveness and sex appeal meant for the male gaze: "even the best product needed attractive packaging."⁸ This theme is ubiquitous in Grisham's novels except in *Gray Mountain*, where the male gaze and objectification dissipates in favor of a dominant female viewpoint. As Grisham is internationally recognized as "America's favorite storyteller" and most recognized in this sub-genre of fiction, his

3. *Id.* In the literary arena, feminists have "decried the unjust depictions of women by male writers" and looked "at the depiction of women in male texts in an effort to reveal the misogyny . . . lurking there." *Id.*

4. Marion Dixon, *In Portia's Footsteps: Women Lawyers in Literature*, 24 U.W. AUST. L. REV. 68, 68 (1994).

5. *See id.* at 69.

6. *Id.* at 70.

7. *Id.*

8. *Id.* at 70-71.

novels are a ripe arena for the use of feminist theory and ultimately effectuating positive change.⁹

Part II of this Article lays out an outline of the key themes that Grisham repeatedly introduces to represent women negatively in his novels. Part III then uses feminist theory to textually analyze five novels chronologically, from his very first novel to one of the most recent, to unveil those themes and language in Grisham's writing. Part IV proceeds to demonstrate how Grisham's writing can and does influence how women are perceived in the legal field and beyond. The final section offers concluding thoughts and future insights.

I. UNVEILED: JOHN GRISHAM'S WRITING TOOLKIT

Grisham's novels present two key themes: "first, women lawyers' outward struggle with the patriarchy; and secondly, their inner struggle to hold onto or express their true nature *as women* while working in a discipline which emphasizes the 'masculine' characteristics of logic, order and hierarchical authority."¹⁰ Even though women are typically portrayed in Grisham's novels as blessed with both intelligence and physical beauty, they are cast as having weak personalities and "neurotic" character traits which impede them from being happy as *both* women and attorneys: "simulating masculine values in a power-play alien to . . . feminine identity."¹¹ "Grisham creates strong, competent female attorneys, yet builds defects into their character which mitigate against their effectiveness not only as attorneys, but also as women."¹² Ultimately, Grisham reinforces the stereotypical belief that women's nature and genes are "the force which prevents them from becoming fully integrated individuals and attorneys."¹³ In fact, Grisham uses two tests in challenging characters, which female characters are unable to successfully overcome (first, competent/ethical attorneys, and second, gender), while male characters only have to pass *one* test, that is, being competent and professional attorneys.¹⁴

9. JOHN GRISHAM, <https://www.jgrisham.com> (last visited May 20, 2019); see also Nicholas Wroe, *A Life in Writing: John Grisham*, GUARDIAN, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/nov/25/john-grisham-life-in-writing> (noting that Grisham has sold close to 300 million copies of his legal thrillers, which have been translated into forty languages).

10. Dixon, *supra* note 4, at 74.

11. See *id.* at 76.

12. Carrie S. Coffman, *Gingerbread Women: Stereotypical Female Attorneys in the Novels of John Grisham*, 8 S. CAL. REV. L. & WOMEN'S STUD. 73, 77 (1998).

13. *Id.* at 78.

14. See Coffman, *supra* note 12, at 80.

Further, Grisham goes so far as to not only assign character flaws, but also leads female characters to disguise their personality and physical appearance. Similar to Portia, Shakespeare's famous character that disguised herself as a man to succeed, women have resigned themselves to this tactic as well in both real life and Grisham's novels.¹⁵ Though the necessity of full physical disguise does not often occur to this extent, disguising ones personality to appear more masculine in order to succeed in the law is certainly a reality for Grisham's female characters. Indeed, "to be taken seriously as professionals, women lawyers have had to be prepared to adopt the manners, the lifestyle and, to some extent, even the dress of male lawyers."¹⁶ Grisham's novels portray images of women that "risk perpetuating the myth that women cannot be professionally successful without losing or sacrificing some trait or quality essential to their womanhood."¹⁷ In fact, women that are both intelligent and attractive seem to be perceived as greater threats by male characters in Grisham's novels to the extent that women "are in constant danger of drastic haircuts."¹⁸ This occurs in several of Grisham's novels, such as *A Time to Kill*, *The Firm*, and *The Pelican Brief*, as can be seen later. This is a motif in Grisham's novels, which can represent how men perceive women and the lengths to which women must go to survive or be somewhat successful.¹⁹

Grisham's stereotyping is so consistent that a formal categorization of his stereotyping is already in place. Some dozens apply to his novels, but here are the main categories: "[i]n the workplace, women remain constricted by men's images of them: the 'good mother,' the 'superwoman,' the 'frivolous uncommitted professional,' or the 'tempt-

15. See Dixon, *supra* note 4, at 69-70.

16. *Id.* at 70; see also Connie Lee, *Gender Bias in the Courtroom: Combating Implicit Bias Against Women Trial Attorneys and Litigators*, 22 CARDOZO J. L. & GENDER 229, 238-39 (2016) (arguing that female trial attorneys "must tread lightly between societal stereotypes regarding feminine and masculine traits in order to be perceived favorably in the courtroom. If she is soft-spoken and compassionate ("feminine" traits), she risks being perceived as too weak. On the other hand, if a female attorney is aggressive or forceful ("masculine" traits), she risks being perceived as too abrasive.").

17. Tammy R. Pettinato, *An Annotated Bibliography of Law Review Articles Addressing Feminist Perspectives on Law in Literature*, 99 L. LIB. J. 55, 63 (2007).

18. Randolph Paul Runyon, *John Grisham Obsessive Imagery*, in SOUTHERN WRITERS AT CENTURY'S END 44, 52 (Jeffrey J. Folks & James A. Perkins eds., 2014).

19. See *id.* at 51-53 (describing the haircuts as a form of "self-mutilation"). Runyon draws a unique psychological correlation between Sigmund Freud's interpretation of Greek mythology, specifically the decapitation of Medusa, and the cutting of female character's hair in Grisham novels. Runyon draws on Freud's theories in concluding that female hair is symbolic of multiple penises, a threat to the male sexuality, and to mitigate or even remove this threat to the male characters in his novels, Grisham chops off the hair of female protagonists. See *id.* at 53.

ress.”²⁰ There are also other types that we can see in the novels *The Client*, *The Pelican Brief*, and *The Partner* such as the chameleon type (Eva Mendez),²¹ victim (Darby Shaw),²² and nurturer (Reggie Love).²³ Another type is found in *The Partner* through the hero’s wife, the ‘trophy wife’ type.²⁴ Scholars agree that Grisham impedes female characters from succeeding, even when he presents them as competent²⁵—however, his masterful use of *language* and *tone* contributes the most to reinforcing stereotypes and subtle conditioning. Grisham could have chosen to ignore the discrimination that women continue to suffer in the legal field and beyond in his novels. Instead, he opted to include those issues, all while presenting the status quo of women as something organic, that need not be challenged.

Consequently, Grisham does not limit his writing to casting women with character flaws due to gender or through the themes of mutilation/disguise: he pervasively represents women negatively through subtle, passive language and tone. Coffman points out several instances in his novels where Grisham *brushes* over some blatantly stereotypical statements on women’s appearance in the courtroom and more.²⁶ For example, in *A Time to Kill*, the hero remarks about Ellen that “she looked as much like a lawyer as a woman could.”²⁷ Indeed, while “[Grisham] champions the plight of African Americans . . . his

20. Coffman, *supra* note 12, at 80; see also Eli Wald, *Glass Ceilings and Dead Ends: Professional Ideologies, Gender Stereotypes, and the Future of Women Lawyers at Large Law Firms*, 78 *FORDHAM L. REV.* 2245, 2273-74 (2010) (arguing that, in large law firms, women are customarily stereotyped in the following three ways: that a woman’s place is at home, instead of at work—women “should support and focus on their husbands’ needs, should look pretty, and should care for their children”; that they are incompetent as lawyers, “or at least not as competent as men lawyers”; and that women’s commitment to taking care of their family is incompatible with the loyalty required at the workplace); DOBIE, *supra* note 2, at 97 (noting that American feminist critics have called “for recognition that male writers have too long stereotyped women as either ‘the angel in the house’ (the woman who lives to care for her husband) and ‘the madwoman in the attic,’ the woman, who chooses not to be the angel.”).

21. Coffman, *supra* note 12, at 96.

22. *Id.* at 86.

23. *Id.* at 91.

24. JOHN GRISHAM, *THE PARTNER* 51 (1997) [hereinafter *THE PARTNER*].

25. See, e.g., Dixon, *supra* note 4. Even Grisham’s own wife has noted that he is incapable of properly casting a female protagonist. Rebecca Lee, *The “Perfect Storm for Corruption” that Inspired John Grisham’s New Novel*, CBS NEWS (Oct. 25, 2016, 2:30 PM), <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/john-grisham-the-whistler-new-york-times-best-selling-author-indian-casinos/>.

26. See Coffman, *supra* note 12, at 85, 87, 90.

27. JOHN GRISHAM, *A TIME TO KILL* 91 (1989) [hereinafter *A TIME TO KILL*].

narrative voice and male characters seem insensitive to women.”²⁸ Grisham’s seamless writing about the discrimination of women leads to a flawed appearance of normalcy. If Grisham were *explicit* about how he makes female characters ultimately fail in the end, his novels would not be nearly as popular, particularly considering that a majority of his audience are women.²⁹

An effective way to recognize the extent of Grisham’s passive and subtle conditioning through language is by looking at how *female* legal fiction writers employ language.³⁰ While there is a need for more female legal fiction writers that cast strong heroines who can be whole in the profession of law without losing their identity and happiness³¹, there is an even greater need for awareness of female legal fiction already in place that portrays women strikingly different from Grisham. Male legal fiction writers, particularly Grisham, approach their books with a “female binary” system that portrays women “as both pretty scenery and femmes fatales,” while female legal fiction writers use a blatant approach to women’s issues in the legal field.³² Grisham’s novels *subtly* and passively influence readers’ opinion negatively regarding women in the law and beyond, whereas female legal fiction authors present similar issues in a *straightforward* manner.³³ Alas, numerous scholars fail to recognize and analyze the blatantly distinct writing style between female and male authors within the same sub-genre of fiction.³⁴ For example, there are no internal dialogues of women experiencing oppression in Grisham’s books, whereas legal fiction authored by women directly address these issues. Notice, for instance, O’Shaughnessy’s *Breach of Promise*:

Love was yin, traditionally the province of women, female, subjective. Law was yang, male, objective. She felt uncomfortable about Lindy’s position. Show me the hard evidence, the lawyer in her said. Promises of marriage, sex, talk of love, midlife crisis, affairs—the legal system had washed its hands of these. She didn’t want to be associated with such sloppy emotional matters herself. A woman lawyer had to take special care to be more objective than anybody else . . . [Yet] it wasn’t right. Her anger worked on her, as it always

28. MARY BETH PRINGLE, JOHN GRISHAM: A CRITICAL COMPANION 32 (Greenwood ed., 1997).

29. Coffman, *supra* note 12, at 99; *see also* PRINGLE, *supra* note 28, at 9.

30. DOBIE, *supra* note 2, at 104 (discussing that some critics “compare and contrast what men and women write and how they write it”).

31. Dixon, *supra* note 4, at 74-76.

32. Priscilla L. Walton, *Interrogating Judicial Bodies: Women and the Legal Thriller*, 18 S. CTR. REV. 21, 23 (2001).

33. *See generally id.*

34. *Id.*

did, seeking a productive outlet. But what could she do all by herself in a fight against these big boys?³⁵

Rarely will a reader encounter a moment in Grisham's novels where women voice their struggles in a patriarchal world, whether internally or externally. As women remain silent and passive on these pressing issues, they give an appearance of ignorance and contributing to these stereotypes. "[M]ost *female* legal thrillers include some discussion of the difficulties of being taken seriously in a traditionally male-dominated venue," including being subject to constant objectification and balancing "the demands of home and family."³⁶ Note the following excerpt:

Your Honor, why are we discussing my clothing and makeup in court? Do you make comments of this sort to male attorneys who appear before you? . . . With all due respect, Your Honor, I find your comments inappropriate. I object to them and to the tenor of this entire sidebar as an unfortunate example of gender bias.³⁷

Grisham depicts women's issues in his novels as well, such as coping with their husband's workaholic nature, objectification, and balancing their career with home life. However, the lack of female characters speaking out on these issues, particularly their perceived inferiority, contributes to the negative display of female characters in his novels.

II. A WALK THROUGH THE DECADES: GRISHAM'S NOVELS UNDER THE LITERARY MICROSCOPE

To unearth the key themes surrounding Grisham's female characters, feminist theory will be applied textually on the following novels: *The Firm*, *A Time to Kill*, *The Pelican Brief*, *The Partner*, and *Gray Mountain*. These novels were chosen to illustrate a chronological development in how Grisham has represented women spanning over two decades, from his very first novel, to one of the most recent. These five novels are also illustrative of a theme that occurs once (such as a female character's power stemming from betraying the hero), to themes used repetitively (such as objectification and the male gaze).

35. PERRI O' SHAUGNESSY, *BREACH OF PROMISE* 52 (1998).

36. Walton, *supra* note 32, at 29-32 (emphasis added).

37. *Id.* at 30.

A. The Firm and A Time to Kill

Grisham begins his legal fiction career with the novels *A Time to Kill* and *The Firm*. In these initial novels, Grisham portrays women through the most blatant discrimination and objectification in his entire career. In these two novels, Grisham segregates female characters in the legal field and beyond, subjects them to the manipulation of men or solely allows them to serve as aides and sacrifice themselves for the benefit of the heroes, causes them to go through mutilation and disguise, and subjects them to severe objectification. In fact, the novel *The Firm* begins with the depiction of the segregation of women in the law firm:

McDeere was a male, and there were no women in the firm. That mistake had been made in the mid-seventies when they recruited the number one grad from Harvard, who *happened to be a she* and a wizard at taxation. She lasted four turbulent years and was killed in a car wreck.³⁸

Notice how Grisham shifts the focus from the female character's brilliance and Ivy League background through emphasized expressions such as being a "mistake" and "happened to be a she."³⁹ Grisham goes as far as turning women against women in *The Firm*, as can be observed in one of the interactions between Kay, the wife of one of the attorneys in the law firm, and Abby, Mitch's wife (the hero):

Abby: 'Why no female lawyers?'

Kay: 'They tried it once. She was a real bitch and kept the place in an uproar. Most women lawyers walk around with chips on their shoulders looking for fights. They're hard to deal with. Lamar says they're afraid to hire one because they couldn't fire her if she didn't work out, with affirmative action and all.'⁴⁰

As such, Kay reveals and spreads deeply-rooted negative attitudes about female attorneys, which male characters from the firm helped shape. In fact, the novel's mention of Knauss dying under suspicious circumstances could be taken to suggest that she intelligently discovered who ran the firm and was ultimately taken out by the Mob.⁴¹ Regardless, Kay failed to question these stereotypical beliefs and what she learned about Knauss from the male characters. Abby herself does not question these beliefs and accusations towards Knauss

38. JOHN GRISHAM, *THE FIRM* 1 (1991) [hereinafter *THE FIRM*].

39. *Id.*

40. *Id.* at 27.

41. *Id.* at 176.

as she fails to reply and instead proceeds to focus on her meal. Abby's silence demonstrates that she either shares the same stereotypical beliefs originating from male characters or that Grisham subtly uses this moment to stereotypically depict her as passive. In fact, Kay's use of language resembles the language used by the partner in the law firm when explaining to the hero why no female attorneys practice there:

"Typical female lawyer. Came here from Harvard, number one in her class and carrying a chip because she was a female. Thought every man alive was sexist and it was her mission in life to eliminate discrimination. Super-bitch. After six months we all hated her but couldn't get rid of her. She forced two partners into early retirement."

'Was she a good lawyer?'

'Very good, but it was impossible to appreciate her talents. She was so contentious about everything.'

'Was she the first woman?'

'Yes, and the last, unless we get sued.'⁴²

Kay's use of language and this interaction shows how Kay was conditioned to think about female attorneys and communicate her thoughts on the matter—that even though female attorneys may be highly competent, they are nevertheless dangerous in the legal environment based on their gender. Grisham again uses an expression that shows how easily he negatively frames women in the law: "typical female lawyer."⁴³ In fact, similar to Abby, Mitch drops the subject, suggesting that he accepts these allegations and stereotypical beliefs as true, or not worth scrutinizing.

Further, when female characters are involved more actively in the novels, they are represented as easy to manipulate, and the ones who, in order to effectively serve as the heroes' aids, must go through numerous sacrifices, such as mutilation and disguise. For instance, Grisham portrays Mitch's repeated cheating on Abby as a natural occurrence and easy to conceal from her:

No one will ever know . . . Everybody does it. It had happened once before when he was in college, before he was married but after he was engaged. He had blamed it on too much beer, and had survived with no major scars. Time took care of it. Abby would never know. . . . He did it. . . . She suspected nothing. She was touched and even moved.⁴⁴

42. *Id.* at 92.

43. *THE FIRM*, *supra* note 38, at 92.

44. *Id.* at 134, 149.

Grisham's use of language suggests that cheating on women is acceptable and normalized behavior due to its ubiquitous nature and, most importantly for the male characters, being able to get away with it. Indeed, one of the partners in the firm openly reveals that "[t]here's an unwritten rule in the firm—what we do away from Memphis stays away from Memphis . . . Mitch was glad to hear the unwritten rule, although he was awakened with the security that he had committed the perfect crime."⁴⁵ The male lawyers' attitude and behavior in *The Firm* thus show little to no respect towards the female characters, as their only concern resides in being caught, rather than the fact that their actions are wrong towards their life partner. Further, Mitch's statements emphasize the ease with which he believes he can charm and distract his wife, suggesting his attitude that women are gullible.

The two female characters of importance to the hero in *The Firm*, Abby and Tammy, sacrifice and aid him tremendously behind the scenes by printing thousands of compromising documents or charming the law partners.⁴⁶ In fact, Abby changes her physical appearance drastically to help Mitch:

Mitch: 'After dark, try to sneak into a drugstore and buy some hair dye. Cut your hair extremely short and dye it blond.'

Abby: 'Blond!'

Mitch: 'Or red. I don't give a damn. But change it.'⁴⁷

Mitch's demanding tone gives no choice to Abby except to change her long hair to a "boyish cut" and dye it to complete her disguise to aid him.⁴⁸ This theme of self-mutilation and disguise is quintessential in Grisham's novels, as will be noticed through other novels. Alas, this is not the biggest sacrifice that Abby must make for the hero. In the end, Abby has to leave her career and family behind to live with Mitch on an island:

Abby stayed in the cabin, saying little and smiling only when necessary. Life on a boat was not something she dreamed about. She missed her house and wondered what would happen to it. Maybe Mr. Rice would cut the grass and pull the weeds She missed the shady streets and neat lawns and the small gangs of children riding bicycles. She thought of her dog and prayed that Mr. Rice would adopt it. She worried about her parents-their safety and their fear.

45. *Id.* at 137.

46. *Id.* at 254-56, 288-94.

47. *Id.* at 376.

48. *Id.* at 378.

When would she see them again? It would be years, she decided, and she could live with that if she knew they were safe.⁴⁹

Abby tacitly expresses that this is not the ending she wanted for herself. On the other hand, the hero gets precisely the ending he dreamed of as he says, “[t]he truth is, I never wanted to be a lawyer anyway . . . I’ve always wanted to be a sailor.”⁵⁰ As such, Abby was forced to leave everything behind, whereas the hero did not lose anything—on the contrary. Mitch’s only living family member was his brother, whom he took on the island as well. All that Abby has left is the stereotypical role of a female, that of procreating, as Mitch tells her at the very end of the novel, “Let’s get drunk and make a baby.”⁵¹ While it is true that Abby wanted a family too and Grisham subtly makes it appear as if though she has a good ending as well with the hero, she is not in the proper place, emotionally, financially, or geographically, to finally have a child.

Throughout the novel, Grisham also reduced Abby’s worth to constant objectification through the male gaze. For instance, notice how Mitch objectifies his wife:

He stared at her long, brown legs. . . . ‘With legs like that, you could get us into any restaurant in New York.’ . . . There were stares along the way. . . . Whistles and catcalls were a way of life. And her husband was used to it. He took great pride in his beautiful wife. . . . He grabbed her leg again and rubbed the knee. She allowed it. She smiled seductively at him, dimples forming perfectly, teeth shining in the dim light, soft pale brown eyes glowing.⁵²

. . .

Mitch: “Great. One a day. Why don’t you put one on?”

Abby: “What?”

Mitch: “You heard me. Go put on that little blue one with high legs and a couple of strings around front, the one that weighs half a gram and cost sixty bucks and your buns hang out when you walk. I wanna see it.”⁵³

While it may initially seem that Mitch simply appreciates his wife, Grisham’s use of language displays objectification by seeing Abby’s beauty as a tool to achieve the hero’s goals and show her off as a trophy. In the beach scene, Mitch has a more demanding tone when he asks her to be eye candy for him, even though it is cold outside.

49. THE FIRM, *supra* note 38, at 418.

50. *Id.* at 421.

51. *Id.*

52. *Id.* at 44-45.

53. *Id.* at 262.

Grisham is shaping Mitch's language and personality to display nuances of dominance and objectification. Tammy also does not escape the male gaze:

A shapely platinum blonde with a constricting leather skirt and matching black boots asked for his name. . . . the black leather well above her knees. . . . He admired her legs, which for the moment were positioned just so and demanded to be admired. . . . He slowly worked his way up the seams, past the leather, pausing to admire the roundness of her rear, then upward to the red cashmere sweater . . .⁵⁴

The words and expressions that Grisham selects, such as "asked for his name," and "demanded to be admired" demonstrates the underlying stereotypical belief that women's bodies are organically designed for the benefit of the male gaze—their value residing in being objects or moving art.⁵⁵ It is almost as though Grisham uses these expressions to excuse men from their objectification: if it is natural and a demand stemming from women, then why would men be held accountable for the way they view women?

In *A Time to Kill*, similar themes and language are present, but, due to the setting in the South, each representation and theme is exacerbated. The two main female characters in the novel, Carla and Ellen, will be used as examples to show how women are represented in Grisham's novel in a Southern setting in both an informal (Carla) and a formal legal setting (Ellen). Carla's life, the hero's wife, centers around the housewife stereotype: taking care of the household and their daughter, having sex, and waiting at home alone: "[s]he was accustomed to the hours and the warmed-over dinners, and she did not complain."⁵⁶ In fact, Grisham does not hide the hero's stereotypical reasons for marrying Carla:

Then came Carla. . . . She was beautiful, and that's what got his attention. . . . This appealed to Jake—the family money and the absence of a career ambition. He wanted a wife who would stay home and stay beautiful and have babies and not try to wear the pants. It was love at first sight.⁵⁷

Notice how Jake's feelings for Carla are primarily based on selfish, stereotypical desires, such as Carla's outward beauty and lack

54. THE FIRM, *supra* note 38, at 117-18, 228.

55. *Id.*

56. A TIME TO KILL, *supra* note 27, at 197.

57. *Id.* at 285-86.

of interest towards being empowered or independent.⁵⁸ She provides Jake with the safety of knowing that he will be the head of the house and she will mostly serve as a pretty live figurine, satisfying all his needs and desires that could not be accomplished by himself or his legal practice. This objectification is even more severe than in *The Firm* as, even though Mitch repeatedly objectifies his wife, unlike Jake, he does not explicitly state that those are the reasons he married his wife. Further, Jake objectifies and describes Carla mostly in terms of her physique throughout the book:

He held them and admired her dark, tanned, thin, almost perfect legs. The bulky nightshirt covered nothing below the waist, and a hundred lewd thoughts danced before him. . . . She slid an almost perfect bronze leg up . . . unsnapped the band of silk between the two almost perfect breasts.⁵⁹

The repetition regarding each part of Carla's body as being close to perfection raises the objectification level even higher, while showing the meticulous attention that *is* given to women regarding their physique and body movement, all while neglecting all other qualities. This makes women appear like objects, rather than humans with feelings and potential for much more than physical beauty.

Jake ensures that Ellen Roark aligns with his patriarchal expectations too. Even though Ellen is brilliant (as being ranked second in her class), wealthy, talented, hard-working, and more than qualified to work for his law firm, Jake is unmovable regarding his stereotypical beliefs on women's status quo.⁶⁰ Here are two separate interactions that portray his stance on women:

Jake: 'I was afraid you'd want to be a law partner.'

Ellen: 'No. I'm a woman, and I'm in the South. I know my place.'⁶¹

. . .

Jake: 'Judge Noose hates women lawyers.'

Ellen: 'So does every male lawyer in the South.'⁶²

Notice how Jake displays internal fear that the stability of the status quo regarding genders in the South could be broken or altered. What is most striking about these dialogues is how Grisham's use of language portray Ellen's blatant verbal acceptance and awareness of

58. It is worth noting that, in characterizing Carla through Jake's eyes, Grisham ensures that he draws attention to Carla's lack of self-confidence. *Id.* at 285.

59. *Id.* at 19, 118.

60. *Id.* at 296-301.

61. *A TIME TO KILL*, *supra* note 27, at 297.

62. *Id.*

women's status quo in the South and passivity towards it. By comparison, in *The Firm*, while Knauss is used as a negative example regarding women in the legal profession, the complete prohibition of women from working as associates or partners in a law firm does not occur to the extent displayed in *A Time to Kill*. Ellen's passivity can also be observed in the courtroom before a trial, mixed with the usual dose of objectification:

Ellen had arrived, and Harry Rex was talking loudly. She's wearing a see-through blouse with a miniskirt, thought Jake as he walked downstairs. She was not. Harry Rex was congratulating her on dressing like a Southern woman with all the accessories. . . . In the words of Harry Rex, she looked as much like a lawyer as a woman could look.

Harry Rex: 'We apologize for admiring you and we know how much this infuriates your little liberated heart. Yes, we're sexist pigs, but you chose to come to the South. And in the South we, as a rule, drool over well-dressed females, liberated or not'.

Ellen: 'What's in the sack?' she said.

Harry Rex: 'Breakfast.'⁶³

Coffman cites the line "she looked as much like a lawyer as a woman could look" to portray how the look of an attorney is expected to be male-like.⁶⁴ Harry Rex's blatant admission of their sexism is compounded by his usage of the expressions "little liberated heart" and "liberated or not," which mock women's desire for empowerment.⁶⁵ Yet again, Grisham artfully writes out this interaction to frame Ellen as passive towards their objectification and instead merely inquiring about the contents of the sack, without complaining, challenging, or even displaying irritation with these stereotypical comments.

Grisham uses the female characters in his novels to introduce and develop an even more disturbing motif, particularly in a *Time to Kill*—the mutilation of women. There are two types of mutilation that occur in *A Time to Kill*: the rape and torture committed against a little girl, and the Ku Klux Klan scalping Ellen and tying her to a tree. *A Time to Kill* begins with the rape and domination of a ten-year old girl.⁶⁶ Towards the end of the novel, we learn that the girl will never be

63. *Id.* at 372-73.

64. Carrie S. Coffman, *Gingerbread Women: Stereotypical Female Attorneys in the Novels of John Grisham*, 8 S. CAL. REV. L. & WOMEN'S STUD. 73, 77 (1998) (quoting JOHN GRISHAM, *A TIME TO KILL* 91 (1989)).

65. *Id.* at 308.

66. *A TIME TO KILL*, *supra* note 27, at 2.

able to procreate.⁶⁷ Grisham thus symbolically curtails both a physical function that is uniquely feminine and mutilates one of Ellen's feminine traits, both through male violence and force.

Towards the end of the novel, the KKK punishes Ellen for her involvement in the criminal case. She is the *only* one on the defense team subject to this form of symbolic mutilation: "[w]ith his knife, he cut her hair. He grabbed handfuls and hacked away until her scalp was gapped and ugly."⁶⁸ Though Abby's hair was also severely cut in *The Firm*, it did not occur in similarly violent circumstances. Ellen is then hospitalized for the rest of the novel and is unable to attend the trial and celebrate its success, despite her significant contribution.⁶⁹ The hero and the other male characters are able to celebrate and enjoy perfect health.⁷⁰ Once again, the female characters thus far in Grisham's novels, who greatly contributed towards the hero's success, ultimately suffer far more consequences in the end than the hero. And, while Carla does not endure the same consequences as Abby, she is not cast as holding the same importance as Ellen, and thus Grisham seems to assign the direst consequences to the female characters who contribute to the legal field *or* prove essential towards the development of the hero throughout his journey.

B. *The Pelican Brief*

Interestingly, a few years later, Grisham features his *first* female heroine in *The Pelican Brief*. Darby Shaw possesses a panoply of qualities that heroines are expected to have, such as a strong personality, assertiveness, adaptability, determination, and brilliance. However, Grisham still fails to feature a strong female character and true heroine by undermining and trivializing her through his familiar strategies: a blatant volume of objectification, questionable sexual morality, and a negative resolution.

Grisham indeed endows the heroine with strong heroine traits, such as survival skills, an analytical mind, intelligence, leadership, and perseverance. For example, at numerous points in the novel, Darby focuses on what she can do to survive and thrive, rather than let

67. *Id.* at 482.

68. *Id.* at 433. It should be noted that prior to the Klan almost scalping Ellen, a member tied her to a large pole, cut most of her clothing from her body with a knife, and contemplated whipping her. *Id.* at 433-34.

69. *See id.* at 460.

70. *See id.* at 510-15 (mentioning the multiple occasions that the male characters shared celebratory drinks and addressed the press).

her fear and emotions conquer her: "I'm not worried with fairness or feelings. I'm more concerned with staying alive until noon . . . She would survive . . . She had slept two hours, and spent the rest of the time with a legal pad diagramming and charting. If she died, it would not be from a lack of preparation."⁷¹ Darby not only displays strength on her own, but also shows the same by taking control of male characters in positions of power, such as Gavin, an FBI attorney. For example, she tells him, "I'm the boss okay,"⁷² and Gavin abides by her plans and strategies: "She was dead serious. He felt like a first-grader who'd received his first spanking."⁷³ Strikingly, two stereotypes are broken here, which is a rarity in Grisham's books: a woman leading a man, *and* a law student leading an FBI attorney. In fact, Darby is the only character with insight into the U.S. Supreme Court murders: "[s]he knew the identity of the man behind the murders of Rosenberg and Jensen and Callahan, and this knowledge made her rather unique."⁷⁴ As such, Darby impresses the very director of the FBI towards the resolution of the novel: "You're a helluva lady, Ms. Shaw. Your brains and guts are bringing down one of the sickest men in this country. I admire you."⁷⁵

Despite all her strong qualities and incredible insight into the murders, Grisham yet again ensures that her character is framed mainly by objectification, a secret intimate relationship with her law professor Callahan, and an ending negatively clouded by her numerous sacrifices. The moment the heroine is *introduced*, the emphasis is on her physical appearance:

An attractive young female in tight washed jeans and a cotton sweater slid elegantly through it and sort of glided along the wall. . . The guys on the fourth row watched in admiration. The guys on the fifth row strained for a peek. For two brutal years now, one of the few pleasures in law school has been to watch as she graced the halls and rooms with her long legs and baggy sweaters. There was a fabulous body in there somewhere, they could tell . . . What they wouldn't give for a black leather miniskirt. . . She was that perfect little cheerleader with the perfect teeth and perfect hair that everybody fell in love with at least twice in high school . . . But Callahan was not in a screaming mood, and Darby Shaw was not

71. JOHN GRISHAM, *THE PELICAN BRIEF* 157-226 (1992) [hereinafter *THE PELICAN BRIEF*].

72. *Id.* at 214.

73. *Id.* at 320.

74. *Id.* at 190-91.

75. *Id.* at 417.

afraid of him, and for a split second he wondered if anyone knew he was sleeping with her.⁷⁶

Even though Darby displays strong qualities in the novel, Grisham focuses so extensively on her cheerleader-type of sex appeal, immoral romance, and men's constant gazing of her that the readers' perception of her becomes immediately compromised. Grisham seems to be making her intelligence and hard work compete with the fact that her sexual appeal will be what holds importance in the end, as she is constantly surrounded by men. Grisham then attests to her intelligence:

Number two in their class and within striking distance of number one, she could recite the facts and holdings and concurrences and dissents and majority opinions to virtually every case Callahan could spit at them. She missed nothing. The perfect little cheerleader had graduated magna cum laude with a degree in biology, and planned to graduate magna cum laude with a degree in law, and then make a nice living suing chemical companies for trashing the environment.⁷⁷

Though Darby has consistently displayed a high level of intelligence, Grisham *insists* on using language and a mocking tone that trivializes her identity and accomplishments, such as referring to Darby as "the perfect little cheerleader," instead of just saying 'Darby' or 'she.'⁷⁸ In fact, even though most characters in the novel respect and compliment her intelligence. they often refer to her as a "very attractive female," and wondering if Darby would "run around in a little string job on the beach" for their delight.⁷⁹ As such, the male characters in *The Pelican Brief* trivialize and distract from the fact that Darby is intelligent enough to solve a high-profile case.

Even though she initiates and solves the case, Darby is the one, as is often the case with female characters in Grisham's novels, who has to make sacrifices regarding her appearance and future. She cuts her hair for "two painful hours with dull scissors" in order to survive and becomes aware of how all her efforts would in the end be in vain because the male characters would indulge in all the glory: "We used my brains and looks and legs, and you get all the glory."⁸⁰ Even though

76. THE PELICAN BRIEF, *supra* note 71, at 14-15.

77. *Id.* at 18. *See, e.g.,* DOBIE, *supra* note 2, at 97 (quoting Maryanne Ellison Simmons) ("If a woman has her Ph.D. in physics, has mastered quantum theory, plays flawless Chopin, was once a cheerleader, and is now married to a man who plays baseball, she will forever be 'former cheerleader married to star athlete.'").

78. THE PELICAN BRIEF, *supra* note 71, at 17.

79. *See id.* at 106-95.

80. *Id.* at 392.

she began as an incredibly promising future attorney, her insight and unwavering work ethic cost her career: “Not long ago, she’d thought of being a judge after a few years in practice. Forget it. It was much too dangerous.”⁸¹ Similar to Ellen in *A Time to Kill* and Abby in *The Firm*, even though Darby was instrumental in helping the main male character, she ended up dissatisfied and without receiving due credit. In the end, Darby has to leave her legal career behind and live on an island with an insecure future.

C. *The Partner*

Alas, Grisham’s feature of a heroine in his novels was fleeting. His next novel, *The Partner*, reverts to featuring a hero, Patrick, and maintaining a high level of male gaze and objectification towards female characters. Nevertheless, Grisham introduces two novel ways of negatively representing female characters: both the female characters are deceitful people who betray the hero and one of them, the hero’s romantic and business partner, enjoys a better resolution in comparison. Grisham casts female characters in this novel as having a high capacity for being deceitful and betraying the hero: the novel suggests that Eva betrayed Patrick and disappeared with his money, and Trudy, his wife, cheated on him and took advantage of his life insurance. Grisham casts Trudy as the trophy wife, someone who solely concerns herself with money and maintaining her physical beauty. When her husband allegedly dies, Trudy does not react like the average widow:

Trudy was quite thrilled about her good fortune. With her pain eased considerably, she somehow managed to suffer through the funeral service and burial without a serious breakdown . . . Trudy loaded her small daughter and her boyfriend, Lance, a holdover from high school, into the red Rolls.⁸²

Notice Grisham’s mocking tone, such as “managed to suffer through the funeral service,” “quite thrilled,” and “holdover” to ridicule the situation and emphasize that Patrick’s death was a blessing for her.⁸³ When Trudy learns that Patrick is alive, “[t]here was nothing but fear; the horror of losing the money. The life insurance would sue immediately.”⁸⁴ The novel suggests her belief that Patrick’s death is the only solution that would save her. Grisham points out that Trudy

81. *Id.* at 334.

82. *THE PARTNER*, *supra* note 24, at 51-52 (1997).

83. *Id.* at 51.

84. *Id.* at 54.

would not be the type to kill, but instead, due to her “amazing capacity for deceit,” might use her boyfriend to carry on this dirty job: “You take the fall and she forgets your name. You’re a dumbass, Lance, and you know that.”⁸⁵ Overall, Trudy is shown as the type of woman who, once she gets the money and lifestyle she wants, could care less about who she used to get there.

Patrick is in love with the other woman in his life, Eva, and entrusts her with his dozens of millions of dollars. Further, he trains Eva in numerous ways, particularly how to disguise herself physically and hide her identity, to keep Patrick and the money safe. Thus, Eva successfully fulfills the chameleon stereotype categorized by Coffman: “She was registered under the name of Leah Pires, and now had a gold credit card issued to her in that name . . . Now she was a stranger, another nameless beauty in a small bikini baking in the sun.”⁸⁶ Patrick intended to spend his life with her once Eva wired the money to a safe place.

However, Grisham extends the meaning of chameleon to a length that not even Patrick is cognizant of: the novel seems to suggest that she disappeared with his money. Patrick is sadly aware that if they would meet again, “she would find him” and not him as “her face would not be seen, because he’d taught her how to hide it.”⁸⁷ Grisham creates a pattern of betrayal for both women against the hero, pointing out a stereotypical message of what could happen if a man *does* let women call the shots and are trusted. Even though Grisham’s strategy of switching the negative ending from the female character to the hero might seem positive, both female characters are compromised in the eyes of readers by achieving their ending in this manner. Thus, the female characters still do not escape being negatively portrayed and stereotyped.

Grisham not only places an aura of betrayal around both women, but also makes them seem preoccupied mainly with beauty and trivial matters, thus seeming to create an excuse for the male gaze and objectification that is ubiquitous in this novel as well:

Other than that one brief episode, she had shouldered the weight of widowhood with remarkable resiliency. She shopped in New Orleans, ordered health foods from California, sweated two hours a day in designer spandex, and treated herself to expensive facials and treatments⁸⁸

85. *Id.* at 96.

86. *Id.* at 88.

87. *THE PARTNER*, *supra* note 24, at 366.

88. *Id.* at 78.

Grisham's tone ridicules Trudy through this language because he contrasts her widowhood with her 'coping' skills that consists of living the high life. No sensible person would focus so much on physical appearance and life's pleasures under these horrible circumstances. Grisham thus frames Trudy as an unpleasant character in reader's minds. Male characters are, of course, ready to notice Trudy's sex appeal: "looked damn good doing it. Tight yellow spandex. Tight blond ponytail. Not an ounce of fat anywhere. Cutter could've watched for hours. Even her sweat was cute . . . She did this two hours a day. At thirty-five, Trudy still looked like everybody's high school sweetheart."⁸⁹ Just as in *A Time to Kill*, *The Firm*, and *The Pelican Brief*, the male characters never cease to describe the female characters in predominantly sexual terms. Grisham could attempt to wrongly justify and conceal the stereotypical beliefs in his novels by arguing that, if a woman is to invest so much time towards looking good, would it not be a waste for men not to gaze?

Eva does not escape Grisham's emphasis of the male gaze either. Her irrational financial and beauty preoccupations are highlighted, diminishing her value and credibility as a brilliant Georgetown Law graduate:

The Concorde was an extravagance, but she now considered herself to be a wealthy woman . . . No luggage. Not a stitch of extra clothing. Patrick would pay dearly for this. Let her get to London; give her a day along Bond and Oxford. She'd have more clothes than this little jet could carry . . . She began shopping on Bond Street, first for the necessities-undergarments and perfume-but before long it was Armani and Versace and Chanel, with little regard to price. She was a very wealthy woman at the moment.⁹⁰

Eva has already taken over Patrick's money to dispose of as she wishes. Common sense dictates that "undergarments and perfume" are not necessities, so Grisham makes efforts to represent his female character, who seemed strong, brilliant and trustworthy, into someone who cannot be taken seriously.⁹¹ Of course, similar to Trudy, men do not fail to notice Eva's efforts at looking like a model with Patrick's money: from the vice president of a large bank to a security guard to Sandy (an attorney and Patrick's friend) they all gaze at Eva and notice her legs.⁹²

89. *Id.* at 52.

90. *Id.* at 114, 393, 414-15.

91. *Id.*

92. THE PARTNER, *supra* note 24, at 83-342.

Unlike previous novels, the focus is indeed on how the female character's beauty is *acquired* and *why* men look so that Grisham can emphasize how they managed to have the money and resources to look this way: all by betraying the hero. Grisham stereotypes the female character as if that is why a woman cannot be trusted with important matters, whether legal or not: she will fail in the end to complete her mission and deceive through the very methods she learned from the hero. Even though the hero stole the money in the first place, he is portrayed as the innocent hero who had his life ruined by loving and trusting the two women in his life.

D. *Gray Mountain*

Finally, after failing to fully represent and develop a strong female character, Grisham publishes *Gray Mountain*, a novel that features his only heroine since *The Pelican Brief*, after a hiatus of approximately *two decades*. Grisham's novel demonstrates meaningful strides towards improving his representation of female characters in his novels. In attempting to cast a strong heroine, Grisham included nearly no objectification towards women. However, his familiar negative representations of casting a passive female character, lacking numerous of the positive traits that defined Darby Shaw in *The Pelican Brief*, and *still* being mostly used as an aid greatly undermines Samantha Kofers's status as a strong heroine and, yet again, confirms Grisham's failure in creating a strong heroine from beginning to end.

Grisham's *Gray Mountain* departs from his prior works by rarely subjecting female characters to objectification. Indeed, Grisham successfully greatly lessened the male gaze for the first time in his career thus far. In fact, whereas objectification occurred at least every few pages towards the female characters, the first mention of objectification does not occur until page sixty-six:

A shapely brunette sauntered by in a short skirt and Marshall instinctively gawked and stopped chewing for a second. . .

Samantha: 'You're sixty years old and she's about my age. When will you ever stop looking?'

Marshall: 'You just don't understand men, Samantha. Looking is automatic and harmless. We all look. Come on.'

Samantha: 'So you can't help it?'

Marshall: 'No.'⁹³

93. JOHN GRISHAM, *GRAY MOUNTAIN* 66-67 (2014) [hereinafter *GRAY MOUNTAIN*].

Even though this constitutes objectification, even in this instance the representations are tamer than what readers are used to seeing in Grisham's novels. However, Grisham again tries to justify this behavior through the male character's reply that men cannot help but look. Grisham continues the trend of taming down the objectification levels through merely including statements such "a slender brunette" and "glanced at her legs as he settled in behind his desk."⁹⁴ In fact, the only time that Samantha is directly objectified is in the following scene:

Samantha: 'I'll look spectacular in an orange jumpsuit with chains around my ankles.'

Jeff: 'You would, yes. You'd look great in anything, or nothing.'⁹⁵

This is most of the objectification that occurs towards female characters in this novel. As can be seen, it is substantially tamer and sparingly used. However, the concern with this extreme shift in representing women changes the quality of Grisham's writing as he shies away from the most basic descriptions. For instance, the reader never learns if Samantha is tall or short, her hair color, or her race. There are zero details that could remotely paint a basic picture of her in the readers minds, or of any of the other female characters. This is a pitfall that Grisham fell into: from severely objectifying women, to avoiding any fair descriptions.

Nevertheless, another rarity regarding objectification in Grisham's novel occurs in *Gray Mountain*: male characters are objectified and physically described more than ever. Two main reasons could be that Grisham is attempting to balance out the objectification that his female characters have thus suffered for decades, or that the dominating viewpoint comes from a female character now. Men are objectified in a tame way as well, using expressions such as "cute" and "pretty boys."⁹⁶ This assures that Grisham is safe from criticism because he equally balances the amount and degree of objectification towards both genders, and thus a feeling of fairness and equality is reached.

Unfortunately, Grisham reverts to his negative representation of women as passive. Unlike Darby Shaw who is assertive and determined, Samantha tends to make excuses and shy away from taking initiative in any case she is part of. Samantha also falters on where she wants to live and continue her career until the very last page of the

94. *Id.* at 174-243.

95. *Id.* at 248.

96. *Id.* at 303-304.

novel.⁹⁷ The heroine can be described in one word that is rarely, if ever, associated with a strong heroine throughout their journey: passive. For instance, she is highly passive during a passionate conversation on trial work between her father and Jeff, the brother of a deceased trial attorney. Grisham represents her passivity exclusively by internalizing her thoughts, which ironically, seldomly occurs for his female characters: “Samantha almost said, ‘Please, come on,’”⁹⁸ and “She wanted to ask, Great, Dad, and was that the fee you kept offshore and tried to bury until Mom got wind of it?”⁹⁹ and “Is everything lucrative, Dad? Samantha wanted to ask.”¹⁰⁰ Samantha had the urge to ask several questions—yet, she never took the initiative to externalize her thoughts, making her seem weak and passive.

Another instance where the heroine is represented as being passive is when she realizes that Jeff used her as cover to obtain all the documents he needed to finish his brother’s trial work¹⁰¹:

Samantha: “I know Jeff, I know. I’m not stupid. You need me for cover, a chick who’ll put you out by the fire during long romantic weekends on the property. A girl, any girl will do, so that the bad guys will figure we’re just kayaking and grilling on the porch, a couple of lovebirds screwing away the long winter nights while you sneak through the woods with the files.”

Jeff: “Pretty close, but not just any girl will do, you know? You were carefully chosen.”

...

Jeff: “Just be the girl.”¹⁰²

This exchange suggests that Jeff is using Samantha to further his own hero work for his brother. The heroine should be the character taking initiative and using aides along the way to further her heroine journey to be believable in her role. Unlike Grisham’s heroes or Darby Shaw, Samantha is not memorable. At the very end of the novel, she finally shows commitment to what her next steps will be.¹⁰³ Nonetheless, she rejects a big law firm job with an attractive bundle of benefits, despite her desire to change the male/female ratio in law firms.¹⁰⁴ As

97. *See id.* at 368.

98. GRAY MOUNTAIN, *supra* note 93, at 201.

99. *Id.* at 202.

100. *Id.* at 204.

101. *Id.* at 328.

102. *Id.* at 345-46.

103. GRAY MOUNTAIN, *supra* note 93, at 368.

104. *See, e.g.,* Wald, *supra* note 20, at 2252 (noting that there is “extensive literature” that describes the experiences of female lawyers at large law firms “running into a glass ceiling”).

such, her passiveness and avoidance of challenges, leadership, and initiative can hardly make the case for a strong heroine.

Despite a failed attempt at creating a strong heroine yet again, Grisham's representation of female characters improved in another way: his female characters express their desire to improve their status quo in the legal profession. This representation occurs through Grisham's two main female characters: Mattie and Samantha. For example, Samantha announces at the very end of the novel: "When I walk into a courtroom, I want all the boys to sit up straight and notice, and not just my ass."¹⁰⁵ She also demands a lot of information and things from Andy regarding how she wants to be treated and the male/female ratio when he offers her a the big firm job: "What's the male/female breakdown? No all-boys club."¹⁰⁶ In fact, Samantha is driven by her awareness and desire for more females to join law firms: "Her goal had been to make partner by the age of thirty-five, one of few women at the top, and nail down a corner office from which she would play hardball with the boys."¹⁰⁷ However, the heroine rejects the very opportunity to make that happen by rejecting the law firm offer and working for the legal aid clinic. Mattie, though not the heroine, shows her desires more through action in that she is not afraid to actually boss men around and succeed:

Snowden: "Okay, what do you gals have in mind?"

Mattie: "Don't call me a gal!" Mattie barked at him. Snowden recoiled fearfully, as if he might get hit with one of those sexual harassment claims. . ."

"They wheeled about and marched away, leaving Snowden weak-kneed and shell-shocked and already having glimpses of the nightmares."¹⁰⁸

In this interaction, Mattie is the one who does all the talking and scares Snowden away as Samantha is observing. Grisham also represents Mattie as a leader, as she runs a legal aid clinic. Alas, placing female characters in the legal aid/counseling arena, while placing male characters in the trial work/big firm can perpetuate the stereotype that aggression, assertiveness, power, money, and resilience are reserved for men, while emotional counseling and unpaid or poorly paid work is reserved for women. In fact, Samantha makes that association regarding trial attorneys when she wins her first small lawsuit

105. GRAY MOUNTAIN, *supra* note 93, at 368.

106. *Id.* at 310.

107. *Id.* at 16.

108. *Id.* at 107.

by stating, “This was the overdose of testosterone that inspired men like her father to dash around the world chasing cases.”¹⁰⁹

III. BLURRING THE LINES: WHEN FICTION IMPACTS REALITY

While “women have made significant strides in the legal profession,” stereotypes based on sex “continue to pervade the courtroom and the legal profession, creating obstacles for women who wish to advance in their legal careers.”¹¹⁰ To level the playing field for women, particularly in the legal field, we must first become aware of what conditions our beliefs in those stereotypes.¹¹¹ The value of feminist theory is not merely in its ability to unveil the negative stereotyping against women in literature—instead, it is found in its power to increase awareness and provide a platform for positive change in the real world for women. Fiction writing is not limited to its entertainment value: “[w]riting, even in its lightest forms . . . influences the reader’s perceptions of societal mores. It is in literature that the concrete outlook of humanity receives its expression.”¹¹² In fact, shows and other sources, such as novels, “constantly inundate young girls with ideas about cultural norms, and this *conditioning reinforces cultural norms of femininity*.”¹¹³ For instance, two law movements, the law and literature and law and popular culture movements, emphasize the influence that Grisham’s novels have towards molding our perception of women in the law and beyond: “[r]ealistic or not, these are the images which may color the way the reading public views women in law.”¹¹⁴

If prosecutors, defense counsel, and judges are quoting Grisham in court filings, then it is safe to say that the public, including young lawyers, must take away something about practicing law from Grisham’s books . . . the descriptions of lawyers and the legal world in Grisham’s books resonate very strongly with the American public, including young lawyers. Much the same way that fairy tales teach children lessons even though the children know that a tortoise did not really race a hare, Grisham’s legal tales deliver strong

109. GRAY MOUNTAIN, *supra* note 85, at 197.

110. Lee, *supra* note 16, at 230.

111. *Id.* at 251.

112. Shaeda Isani, *From Idealisation to Demonisation and In-between: Representations of American Lawyers in Legal FASP*, 47 ASP 1, 4 (2010).

113. Painter & Ferrucci, *supra* note 1, at 2.

114. Valeria Frances Diamond, *Women in Law*, 16 LEG. REF. SERV. QUARTERLY 9, 11 (1997).

messages to young lawyers about our legal system and those who operate it.¹¹⁵

“Grisham’s portrayal of women attorneys reinforces stereotypes and perpetuates the perception that women cannot achieve full development as both women and attorneys.”¹¹⁶ Because fiction influences popular opinion, “like all creators of fiction, from Shakespeare to Stone, Grisham is responsible for his product which perpetuates a negative stereotype” and cannot simply ignore his novels’ effects.¹¹⁷ Indeed, the American Bar Association itself stands behind the principle that Grisham’s novels and other similar popular culture sources have a high degree of influence towards molding such negative perceptions.¹¹⁸ It is perilous when people assume that these “distorted depictions” are accurate representations of women.¹¹⁹ In fact, the consequences are far-reaching as the future of women in the law will not solely depend on their ability and determination, “but on how receptive others may be to these characteristics. It will depend on the disappearance of the stereotypes that define women as unlikely professional partners for men.”¹²⁰ Indeed, the law and popular culture movement treats popular culture works, such as novels, “as legal texts, as important in their own way as statutes, administrative rules, or judicial precedents” considering that repeated exposure to these “negative representations, albeit fictional, which tend to coincide with readers own limited experience and pre-existing fragmentary and erroneous perceptions, erode the reader’s critical approach to fictional representations of professionals.”¹²¹ Even more so, most people tend to be more exposed to popular culture sources, such as TV shows and novels, rather than intricate legal documents, caselaw, and statutes. As such, Grisham’s negative representations of female characters are far from limited to the glossy covers of his best-selling novels: they have perpetuated the already pervasive stereotypes that women have been subject to in the legal profession and beyond for far too long . . .

115. John B. Owens, *Grisham’s Legal Tales: A Moral Compass for the Young Lawyer*, 48 UCLA L. REV. 1431, 1434 (2001). See, e.g., Nicholas Mignanelli, *The Runaway Judge: John Grisham’s Appearance in Judicial Opinions*, 48 U. MEM. L. REV. 731, 732-51 (2018) (arguing that “there can be no doubt that Grisham has broad appeal in the legal profession” when he was discussed or alluded to in over two dozen court opinions at both the state and federal level.)

116. Coffman, *supra* note 12, at 75.

117. *Id.* at 100.

118. *Id.* at 76.

119. *Id.* at 76.

120. *Id.* at 100.

121. Isani, *supra* note 112, at 4.

CONCLUSION

Grisham is considered ‘America’s favorite storyteller.’ His novels and memorable heroes fighting against the dark forces in the legal field kept millions of readers on the edge of their seat in the United States and beyond. Alas, Grisham has yet to write a novel with a strong, memorable, positively represented heroine from beginning to end. Though Grisham has made positive strides towards better representing women in his novels in the last years, it is far from what he could accomplish. Indeed, Coffman set a challenge worthy of a feminist critic long ago for Grisham:

The charge to Grisham is to write a novel as compelling as his first nine, but which portrays a capable woman who demonstrates that women can simultaneously be essentially female and competent attorneys. An author of Grisham’s intelligence and skill owes it to his public to write such a novel.¹²²

Coffman articulated this direct challenge to Grisham over two decades ago . . . only time will tell if he will someday live up to it. Though Grisham’s writing career spans over a quarter of a century, female heroines are few and far in between, and alas, one of his most recent attempts at casting a strong heroine fell short, despite some improvements. In fact, Coffman’s challenge could be taken further: as America’s favorite storyteller, Grisham has a social and professional responsibility to continue improving his representation of women in his novels and finally create an uncompromised heroine.¹²³ Women have faced far too many obstacles in the legal profession and beyond historically for fiction writers to further contribute to this. Precisely because fiction writing can mold readers’ perceptions, Grisham can now use this powerful tool to mold such perceptions through positive, fair representations of women in the law and beyond. Then, and only then, will female characters truly stand side by side with male characters in the fight against the dark forces in the law . . . and obstacles on the basis of sex may slowly wither away.

122. Coffman, *supra* note 12, at 100.

123. See, e.g., Painter & Ferrucci, *supra* note 1, at 12 (noting that researchers studying the show *House of Cards* concluded that the negative representations of female journalists “are not socially responsible because such portrayals could have a negative impact on *real-world* journalists.”).
