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2018

# Media Criticism and Morality Policing on Twitter: Fan Responses to 'How to Get Away with Murder'

Melissa R. Ames



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# ADVENTURES IN SHONDALAND

Identity Politics and the  
Power of Representation

EDITED BY

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RUTGERS UNIVERSITY PRESS  
New Brunswick, Camden, and Newark, New Jersey, and London

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Griffin, Rachel Alicia, editor. | Meyer, Michaela D.E., editor.  
Title: Adventures in Shondaland : identity politics and the power of representation /  
edited by Rachel Alicia Griffin, Michaela D.E. Meyer.  
Description: New Brunswick : Rutgers University Press, 2018.  
Identifiers: LCCN 2018004645 | ISBN 9780813596327 (hardback) |  
ISBN 9780813596310 (paperback)  
Subjects: LCSH: Rhimes, Shonda—Criticism and interpretation. | ShondaLand  
(Firm)—History. | Women television producers and directors—United States. |  
African American television producers and directors. | African American women  
screenwriters. | Television broadcasting—Social aspects—United States. |  
BISAC: PERFORMING ARTS / Television / History & Criticism.  
Classification: LCC PN1992.4.R515 A38 2018 | DDC 791.4502/32—dc23  
LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018004645>

A British Cataloging-in-Publication record for this book is available  
from the British Library.

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National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed  
Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

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Manufactured in the United States of America

## 11 • MEDIA CRITICISM AND MORALITY POLICING ON TWITTER

### Fan Responses to *How to Get Away with Murder*

MELISSA AMES

In an alarmist age when tirades about society's eroding ethics are abundant, the media is often a scapegoat for those who fear that cultural values are disintegrating. For decades, from reality television's debauchery to celebrity programming's narcissism to fictional drama's excessive violence, television has been blamed for contributing to society's so-called moral decline.<sup>1</sup> Recently, concern has expanded from content to include twenty-first century television viewing practices. Studies argue that binge watching television leads to antisocial dispositions, depression, and immorality.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, social media is credited for creating a generation of narcissists and prompting increased levels of depression, jealousy, and apathy.<sup>3</sup> Television viewing today often entails double screening—wherein viewers are not only engaging with the content on television but are also commenting on that content through social media. Forty-three percent of tablet and smart phone owners report using their devices while watching television every day, and 95 percent of the conversation occurring on social media concerning television is taking place on Twitter, making it an ideal site to examine what viewers are doing with their double screens.<sup>4</sup> Reading dual-media use data alongside alarmist rhetoric about the negative impact technology has on cultural ethics, one might conclude that this tag team of Twitter and television is bound to destroy humanity as we know it. Or not. Unsurprisingly, online television fandom studies indicate that audience engagement—even with programs packed full of scandalous storylines—is much more complicated than fear-mongering implies.

When Nielson reported which television programs had the most active social media fans in 2015, it was not shocking that two of Shondaland's shows—*Scandal* (ABC 2012–2018) and *How to Get Away with Murder* (ABC 2014–present; also referred to as *HTGAWM*)—made the top ten list.<sup>5</sup> Media critics have analyzed how Rhimes's social media practices, as well as those of her fans, have transformed network television production and consumption.<sup>6</sup> While the postnetwork era has resulted in fragmented and noncollective viewing experiences, Rhimes's three-hour programming block on ABC prompted a return to live television watching—and, more importantly, live television commentary. Capitalizing on the must-see nature of her “fan-obsessed TV dramas” and the Twitter activism they inspire, Rhimes has evolved into a “savvy media mogul” who has cultivated prime-time viewing practices wherein viewers, actors, and producers engage in synchronous online dialogue on a weekly basis.<sup>7</sup> Eager to replicate Shondaland's success, now virtually every television program has a hashtag, and networks eagerly promote them. Given Rhimes's revolutionary impact, her shows are ideal for studying the consequences and benefits of active viewing practices. Moreover, considering Rhimes's use of fictional texts to address social justice, studying these viewing practices reveals how they interplay with Shondaland's politicized public pedagogy.

### HOW TO GET AWAY WITH MURDER'S BRAND OF MORALITY

*How to Get Away with Murder* forefronts tenuous societal debates concerning the morality and immorality of the U.S. justice system. Mirroring recent headlines of peer-pressure incentivized murder and child abduction, the show merges real-world criminality into its fictional narratives and exposes how the legal system fails to achieve justice. This melodrama's complicated, interlocking plots showcase a slew of sudsy storylines—backstabbing, betrayal, blackmail, and adultery—that tackle morality in terms of romantic relationships, family power dynamics, educational competition, and professional aspirations. Weekly, fans storm Twitter to interact with the show by live-tweeting their viewing experiences, engaging with the fictional morality tales, and debating the real-world ethical implications of *HTGAWM*. Interrogating morality is a constant thread running throughout Shondaland—medical ethics are questioned on *Grey's Anatomy* (ABC 2005–present; also referred to as *Grey's*) and *Private Practice* (ABC 2007–2013); political ethics are challenged on *Scandal*; and testing legal morality is the heartbeat of *HTGAWM*. Collectively, Shondaland shows function as public pedagogy designed to challenge normativity and prompt social activism.<sup>8</sup> Contrary to alarmist rhetoric concerning the detrimental effects of screen-centric lifestyles, social media platforms and interactions are functioning pedagogically. Therefore, studying audience engagement reveals how viewers react to Shondaland's weekly morality “lessons.”

*How to Get Away with Murder* features Annalise Keating, a middle-aged African American legal professor, and her five ambitious law students, but it is Annalise who draws increased audience attention for her peculiar scruples. Critics often note her “ambiguous” morals and “Machiavellian moral compass,” which suggests that she acts in duplicitous and self-serving ways.<sup>9</sup> The pilot encourages such readings by underscoring the moral grey area the characters operate within. During Annalise’s opening lecture to her students, she says, “The question I’m asked most often as a defense attorney is whether I can tell if my clients are innocent or guilty. And my answer is always the same: I don’t care.”<sup>10</sup>

Viola Davis plays Annalise and is often asked to comment on her character’s ethics; she says, “I think we’re all morally questionable . . . I think that we . . . act on nature and not on morals. I [find] her to be a realistic protagonist. I find her to be very human, as we all are, in that we have grey areas.”<sup>11</sup> Peter Nowalk, the show’s creator, argues that Annalise’s personalized form of justice is a response to an unjust system: “It’s not so black and white to her. . . . Justice is very complicated, and the justice system is much more corrupt than you would think it would be. . . . I think Annalise feels like she’s being moral. She’s standing up for people who don’t get stood up for a lot.”<sup>12</sup> These ethical critiques of the criminal justice system are unsurprising; they align with the social commentary woven throughout *Shondaland* that debunks the myth that we are living in a postidentity society wherein equality has been achieved.

While Rhimes is certainly not alone in combating insinuations that the United States is postidentity and, particularly, postracial, she has been garnering increased media attention amid diversity debates in Hollywood.<sup>13</sup> Two events that reignited this conversation were Davis’s becoming the first African American to win Best Actress in 2015 for her *HTGAWM* role and the massive outcry that followed the 2016 announcement—for the second year in a row—of an all-white slate of Oscar nominees.<sup>14</sup> During her 2016 Producers Guild’s Norman Lear Award for Achievement in Television acceptance speech, Rhimes told the audience, tongue-in-cheek, “I completely deserve this . . . I have against the odds, courageously pioneered the art of writing for people of color as if they were human beings.”<sup>15</sup> She then more seriously explained that her practices should not be revolutionary in the twenty-first century: “I created the content that I wanted to see and I created what I know is normal . . . The respect of this award does mean the world. It just makes me a little bit sad. First of all, strong women and three-dimensional people of color is something Norman [Lear] was doing 40-something years ago. So how come it has to be done all over again?”<sup>16</sup> This speech underscores Rhimes’s commitment to equality and her belief that representation can pedagogically function in service to greater equity.

To study how Rhimes’s “lessons” are received by massive audiences, this chapter analyzes the live-tweeting practices of *HTGAWM* fans. Hosting over five hundred million users generating approximately 340 million tweets a day,

Twitter is steadily attracting academic analysis.<sup>17</sup> Building upon previous scholarship, this study examines how fictional programming viewers use Twitter as a medium to engage with important societal critiques and situates live-tweeting as a form of digital activism. By focusing, in part, on tweets responding to Annalise’s morality, this essay also investigates to what extent live-tweets reflect larger cultural sentiments concerning gender, sexuality, and identity politics.

## (S)HE DID A BAD, BAD THING: THE RISE OF THE ANTIHERO ON TELEVISION

Television scholars have long suggested that television programming reflects societal values.<sup>18</sup> If television acts as a cultural mirror, the rapid rise of the antihero on the small screen—a classification that Annalise belongs to—might be seen as disconcerting. Alarmists would posit that the increasing number of shows featuring dark and twisty, morally compromised antiheroes points toward a weakening ethical landscape within U.S. American culture; but this is not likely the case.

The antihero has existed as a character archetype since the early Greek comedies and tragedies, and its popularity often resurfaces at distinct points in history.<sup>19</sup> Hypothesizing the causes behind the recent resurgence, Michael notes, “If we consider the 21st century so far—9/11 terrorist attacks, the Iraq War, Enron, Hurricane Katrina, the economic recession, Hurricane Sandy, the Newtown shootings, the Boston Marathon attacks—there’s been a steady stream of terrible events to shake our faith in humanity.”<sup>20</sup> Counterintuitively, in dark times, audiences immerse themselves in even darker narratives. Thus, the early twenty-first century is an era of television drama filled with antiheroes like Tony Soprano (*The Sopranos*, HBO 1999–2007), Walter White (*Breaking Bad*, AMC 2008–2013), Dexter Morgan (*Dexter*, CBS 2006–2013), Jack Bauer (*24*, Fox 2001–2010), Don Draper (*Mad Men*, AMC 2007–2015), and Gregory House (*House M.D.*, Fox 2004–2012) who relieve us from real-world evils by transporting us into ethically compromised fictional worlds.<sup>21</sup> As this list of prominent antiheroes reveals, they often share a defining feature that fosters popularity: masculinity.<sup>22</sup> However, the televisual tides have been turning with female antiheroes like *UnREAL*’s (Lifetime 2015–present) Rachel Goldberg, *Nurse Jackie*’s (Showtime 2009–2015) Jackie Peyton, *Weeds*’s (Showtime 2005–2012) Nancy Botwin, *The Americans*’s (FX 2013–present) Elizabeth Jennings, and *Homeland*’s (Showtime 2011–present) Carrie Mathison who suggest that women, like men, can be “morally bereft and relatable at the same time.”<sup>23</sup>

Part of the appeal of watching characters who transgress morality is seeing ourselves (or our potential selves) in such characters and glimpsing a “relatable version of a good self that has gone bad.”<sup>24</sup> The typical antihero formula includes a backstory that allows us to forgive, or at least explain, the character’s transgressions, which in turn, make these characters palatable. Annalise’s backstory aligns

with this expectation; her past is scripted with childhood trauma and spousal abuse. Viewers also gain pleasure from the cognitive dissonance created by conflicted characters who are not purely good or evil. Steward notes this phenomenon in his analysis of *Nurse Jackie*'s antihero: "Jackie is an adulterous, drug-sniffing, domineering, devious super nurse, who at times, also displays the unwavering moral compass of a burning Catholic saint . . . [W]e see her juggle such contradictions as giving free medical care to cash strapped patients while also robbing an epileptic of their Oxy-Contin stash during a seizure."<sup>25</sup> Alongside internal conflicts, the antihero's sinful side also lures us in. These storylines tap into our scariest fantasies—the ones lurking, often unacknowledged, within the human psyche and "provide a sense of catharsis."<sup>26</sup>

The cathartic relationship between antiheroes and viewers contextualizes the large fan following of *HTGAWM*'s Frank Delfino, Annalise's assistant and ethically unbound fixer. Charlie Weber, the actor who plays Frank, calls him "a hit man with a heart of gold" but clarifies that he does not consider him an antihero, rather he's a cold-blooded killer who "enjoys it."<sup>27</sup> Despite drowning a student, stuffing a corpse into a suitcase, and sending someone innocent to jail, fans do not react as harshly to his immorality as they do to Annalise's. The differing reactions these two characters draw arguably stems from the double standards that exist for male versus female characters and are further complicated by the black/white racial dynamic in the Annalise/Frank pairing.<sup>28</sup> One might ask: would Frank be beloved as a "hit man with a heart of gold" if he was of color? The latter half of *HTGAWM*'s second season features flashbacks to explain how both characters arrived at their respective compromised ethics. Interestingly, the scenes devoted to Frank's downfall cast Annalise as the catalyst for his initial moral lapse. This narrative conjures up the female temptress trope and problematically presents a black woman as the force that corrupted a white man.<sup>29</sup> Although individual storylines depict Frank's immorality trumping Annalise's, their backstories highlight how moral superiority is often granted by default to white men.

While devious male characters are easily labeled as antiheroes and are often popular, similar female characters are typically described as "'off-putting' and 'obnoxious'" or, more commonly, they get tagged with the all-too-popular "unlikable."<sup>30</sup> Countless critics have addressed the gendered "double-standard of likability" that results in "infinitely more obstacles faced by leading ladies making morally questionable choices."<sup>31</sup> For example, antiheroes like *Girls*'s (HBO 2012–2017) Hannah Horvath, *Orange Is the New Black*'s (Netflix 2013–present) Piper Chapman, and *Nashville*'s (ABC 2012–2018) Juliette Barnes have been criticized for being "annoying, selfish and entitled."<sup>32</sup> It seems that when we are faced with "women who act in a way we're used to seeing only male characters act," it's "alienating" and we unfairly brand them as "unlikable rather than well-crafted and complex."<sup>33</sup> Female characters—like their real-world counterparts—are punished for projecting masculine-coded traits like ambition, aggression, or strength.<sup>34</sup>

These gendered power dynamics are evident with female characters in leadership roles, often "portrayed as icy, heartless, manipulative, and vindictive."<sup>35</sup> The question is: are audiences reading these female characters as critiquing this double standard or reinforcing it? In response, I argue that Shondaland's female characters critique gendered double standards. Additionally, *Scandal*'s Olivia and *HTGAWM*'s Annalise importantly complicate the double standard as black female antiheroes; they are not deemed unlikable solely for failing to fit the traditional mold of white femininity but also because of their moral transgressions. Interestingly, media criticism suggests that Annalise is more commonly deemed unlikable and receives harsher criticisms, while Olivia is often forgiven because her determination to do good—to wear "the white hat"—usually prompts her transgressions.<sup>36</sup> Critics assert that the absence of the white hat trope on *HTGAWM* might account for the harsher criticism directed at Annalise.<sup>37</sup> Nowalk confirms that Annalise was meant to stand in contradistinction to Olivia: "Olivia believes in the White Hat, and there's no hat for Annalise; there's reality and justice. I don't think she thinks there is justice; it's kind of whoever plays the game the best."<sup>38</sup> Annalise "does not offer a compelling justification for her behavior . . . her job is to get her client off—not get her client off *because* she is innocent or *because* the legal system requires perfection from the defense and prosecution in order to promote the best sense of justice."<sup>39</sup> Due to her contentious antihero status, Annalise makes for a fascinating case study of fans' Twitter reactions to complex fictional characters embroiled in ethical dilemmas.

## TWITTER AS MORALITY POLICE? AN ANALYSIS OF LIVE-TWEETING PRACTICES

To study live *HTGAWM* tweets through the lens of morality, I focus on tweets that "critiqued" the show to answer these research questions:

1. Do the majority of live-tweets focus on portrayals of the justice system or melodramatic subplots?
2. Do live-tweets reflect the research on gendered ethics, especially in terms of female antiheroes or "unlikable" characters?
3. How do live-tweets engage with Rhimes's public pedagogy and demonstrate that live-tweeting fictional television programs is a form of digital activism?

Twitter data was collected from September 24 through November 19, 2015, spanning nine weeks from the season 2 premiere of *HTGAWM* until its mid-season hiatus. Live-tweets associated with #HowToGetAwayWithMurder were scraped (i.e., collected) weekly using NodeXL—a program that gathers all tweets associated with a specific hashtag and transfers them to Excel.<sup>40</sup> To narrow the data pool, I focused on tweets posted from 8:00 P.M. EST to 9:01 P.M. EST during the one-hour

original broadcast of the program, which aired simultaneously in the Eastern and Central time zones. The data pool was further reduced to 18,439 tweets by limiting analysis to English content and original posts (i.e., retweets and replies were not included).

The data was then coded to highlight “critiquing” tweets.<sup>41</sup> The critiquing tweets were sorted into two large categories based on the following criteria: (1) small scale critiques, which includes subcategories such as personal opinions and criticisms concerning characters, actors, show creators, writing, plot, and so on, and (2) large scale critiques, which includes subcategories engaging with law or justice related storylines and/or the social commentary embedded into such storylines. The tweets included in the analysis below were selected from this narrowed data set because they were representative of the posts or sentiments appearing most frequently on the feed.<sup>42</sup>

#### Do the Majority of Live-Tweets Focus on Portrayals of the Justice System or on the Melodramatic Subplots?

Since *HTGAWM* is a legal drama, I expected that many critiques would focus on its depiction of the justice system and the illegal actions of the central cast of lawyers. While this was present (see table 1), this focus was rather minimal.

I anticipated that Annalise, as the main character, would often be of interest, but expected a primary focus on her compromised professional ethics—especially since the cliffhanger between seasons 1 and 2 predicted that she would be involved in yet another murder cover-up. While Annalise was the character most often targeted, her personal rather than professional actions were commonly highlighted. Out of 18,439 tweets, Annalise was directly mentioned in 2,463 and indirectly referenced in many more, making mentions of her account for approximately 13.36 percent of #HowToGetAwayWithMurder.<sup>43</sup> Annalise’s personal actions were critiqued in numerous tweets that framed her as a skilled liar, bully, or two-timing romantic player. By comparison, her professional ethics were mentioned only occasionally. On September 25, 2015, @dawniebgood87 wrote, “Annalise plays dirty just like the justice system” and on October 15, 2015, a dispute between Connor and Annalise over how to handle evidence that incriminated a client sparked online debate. Rachel Romanczuk (@RachelER22) wrote, after Annalise sided with protecting the client while Connor actively worked toward the client’s conviction, “I’m with Connor. Annalise only cares about money and winning.”

Annalise was more often the topic of superficial critiques focused on various programming aspects ranging from costuming and acting to characterization and plot (see table 2). The tweets pertaining to Annalise’s appearance could be disregarded as just one-off opinions about trivial elements such as costuming. However, often these comments attended to her stylized racialization, indicating that viewers were picking up on the program’s attention to race. The most frequent comments, though, critiqued Annalise’s personality and actions. Many

TABLE 1 Sample Tweets Critiquing Portrayal of Justice System

Twitter User	Timestamp	Tweet
Trillmermaidxxx	9/24/2015 9:23	Crazy how they really be breaking the laws as lawyers though ☹☹☹ smh #HowToGetAwayWithMurder
rt1959	10/1/2015 9:01	Everybody is a criminal on this show. #howtogetawaywithmurder
pentylu	10/1/2015 9:38	If Nate is convicted just shows how fucked up the justice system is #HowToGetAwayWithMurder
Kendallkuban	10/15/2015 9:29	#HowToGetAwayWithMurder when the lawyers are worse criminals than the criminals they defend . . . OMG.

TABLE 2 Sample Media Criticism Tweets Focusing on Annalise’s Costuming

Twitter Handle	Timestamp	Tweet
azsahd_	10/8/2015 9:56	I’m sick of Analeese’s wigs. Just sick and tired. #HowToGetAwayWithMurder
trendingtopic_o	10/1/2015 9:59	The authenticity with the head tie lol #HowToGetAwayWithMurder
Wilgafney	11/12/2015 10:01	Shonda teaching folk how we twist our hair! Can’t we have any secrets? #HowToGetAwayWithMurder #HTGAWM #DatMurda

negative tweets focused on Annalise’s drinking. On October 8, 2015, Vale Váz (@valeria13201422) wrote, “she is pissy drunk.” Even more tweets focused on her adulterous relationship with Nate; on October 15, 2015, Maria Nkata (@CrackHeadJemi) posted, “What kind of woman sleeps with a man who’s wife is dying?” The Annalise kind who doesn’t give a F@&\$\$. Some even attended to Annalise’s position of privilege. On October 8, 2015, @\_therealmami wrote, “Annalise walks like she owns a cotton gin,” which associates Annalise with slavery but complicates her empowered, intersectional positionality by comparing her to a slave owner. Users also praised her for behavior they viewed as positive. When Annalise refused to commit euthanasia when asked to by Nate’s dying wife, on October 16, 2015, Hajarrah Mamman Nassi (@Hajmannas) posted, “Proud of you Annalise, really thought she was gonna help Nate’s wife, glad she didn’t.”

The fact that tweets more often engaged with superficial aspects rather than underlying storylines suggests that *HTGAWM*'s melodramatic stylistics and overarching plot often overshadow its episodic focus on legal cases. These findings support Rawden's critique of *HTGAWM*'s employment of legal motifs: "The actual courtroom drama is mostly . . . used as a device to show off the talents of the law school students."<sup>44</sup> She argues that other legal dramas, such as *The Good Wife* (CBS 2009–2016), more effectively use their legal storylines "to look at the complexities . . . politics, and moral ambiguities" involved in practicing law.<sup>45</sup> This suggests that *HGTAWM*'s scripting as a hybrid where legal drama meets prime-time soap opera undercuts its potential to spark reflection on legal injustice.

#### Do Live-Tweets Reflect the Research on Gendered Ethics, Especially in Terms of Female Antiheroes or "Unlikable" Characters?

Analyzing how Annalise figures into small scale critiques of *HTGAWM* reveals that some reactions to her characterization align with research on the reception of female antiheroes. Although not as regularly as anticipated, the dreaded buzzword of *unlikable* was associated with her character. On October 1, 2015, @laurentluvsfenty called Annalise "strangely unlikable" and, on October 17, 2015, T. J. Newton (@tnewton92) asked, "Has there ever been such an UNLIKABLE lead on television before? Annalise is a truly horrible person." Still others posted tweets critiquing Annalise alongside *Scandal*'s Olivia, labeling them both as unlikable black female characters.<sup>46</sup>

Consistent with aforementioned scholarship on the gendered double standard, Twitter data also revealed that viewers more willingly accept (and even embrace) Frank's unethical behavior rather than Annalise's (see table 3). Most interesting was viewers' willingness to forgive Frank's extreme transgressions simply because they found him physically attractive. This aligns with research documenting that characters with lighter skin are often perceived as being more attractive and friendly than characters with darker skin, suggesting that Frank's white male identity factors heavily into why his wrongdoings are so easily forgiven.<sup>47</sup> Skin tone differentials also illuminate underlying dynamics of why and how light-skinned Olivia is deemed more likable than dark-skinned Annalise.<sup>48</sup>

In comparison, Annalise faced a range of criticisms for her moral missteps—and not one of them was forgiven based on her personal appearance or sex appeal. Although, unlike Frank, she had never committed murder, Annalise was more often called "terrible" or "evil." On September 24, 2015, Nakia Morton (@NGMBeauty) called her "the devil." Meanwhile, users celebrated Frank's immorality. On November 19, 2015, Marco Montalván (@desperategossip) tweeted, "Frank, you are the MVP." Reactions to these two characters signal society's forgiveness of bad behavior enacted by men rather than women and white people rather than people of color. This data also suggests that a large subset of live-tweeting viewers are heterosexual women who find white masculinity more appealing than

TABLE 3 Sample Tweets Discussing Frank's Moral Transgressions and Sex Appeal

Twitter Handle	Timestamp	Tweet
purplehearts441	9/24/2015 9:07	He's a shady, shady man. But God, Frank is hot #HowToGetAwayWithMurder #HTGAWM
jesusgarcia_90	10/8/2015 9:35	Let's all be honest with ourselves. Frank is a bad person. He does bad things. But we still love him. #HowToGetawayWithMurder #HTGAWM
ang_belita	10/15/2015 9:05	Frank is so sketchy. But ugh, so fine . . . #HowToGetAwayWithMurder #HTGAWM

black femininity. It also indicates that the harsh critiques targeted at Annalise are presumably coming from female viewers.<sup>49</sup>

However, contrary to female antiheroes research, Annalise's character also received audience support. Many tweets focused on the disloyalty of her law students and their lack of appreciation for her extreme efforts to save them. On October 15, 2015, B. Addison tweeted, "Like Annalise is giving her all to everybody trying to protect them all the while being called a killer." More telling are the posts which praised her transgressions, specifically those that could be interpreted as caretaking attempts. That "motherly" acts motivate forgiving a black woman's moral lapses is problematic but not surprising. Thus far on *HTGAWM*, Annalise is not a biological mother. Season 2 provides a backstory wherein she was pregnant and miscarried, a narrative inclusion that will likely help justify impending transgressions. Presently Annalise's motherly acts include mentoring and protecting adult protégés, and tweets often comment on her pseudo-parental role. On October 29, 2015, Joan Bushur (@joanbushur) posted, "Asher's back in the fold. Let momma Annalise fix everything." The following week, on November 5, 2015, two others similarly noted her protective motherly role. @alisahelene referred to her as "Mama bear Annalise" and criticized the students for not respecting her while @musicmonetradio posted, "omg! They've all been talking back to Annalise this season. I never talk back to my mom."

The inclusion of this surrogate mother plot device aligns with scholarship concerning how the mammy caricature lingers in twenty-first-century popular culture.<sup>50</sup> It also begs the question: would Annalise's acts be read as generously if they were done on behalf of her own biological children, or are they only forgiven because they are done in *service* to nonfamily members? This underscores that notions of nurturing are particularly troubling at the intersections of gender and race. While



white women and women of color are received similarly as antiheroes, race plays a multiplicative role in how their moral slippage is framed and perceived. That viewers are more willing to accept illegality from female characters when they were viewed as “motherly” also aligns with research on gendered ethics. Gilligan theorized the social construction of gendered morality, claiming that men operate according to “an ethics of rights” whereas women operate according to “an ethics of responsibility.”<sup>51</sup> Gilligan’s concept of female morality “emphasizes attachment and the urge to care” as the driving force underlying right versus wrong decisions, while male morality aligns with traditional notions of justice including “commitment to rules, values, and principles.”<sup>52</sup> While few *HTGAWM* characters—male or female—operate according to Gilligan’s masculine definition of morality, that Annalise’s behavior conforms to this feminized definition is interesting. Since many of her illegal acts are committed to protect her protégés, this contributes to her positive reception among viewers who judge her actions as justified.

Ultimately, tweets suggest that reactions to Annalise are quite idiosyncratic and, even though she is harshly criticized, many embrace her actions regardless of whether they are protective, caring acts. A subset of viewers gain pleasure from her “bad” behavior. Her most quoted lines of dialogue were almost always harsh—even shocking—comments directed at her legal team, and users celebrated these moments where she performed the role of “the bitch.” At times, Annalise embraces the title for herself. In season 2’s “I Want You to Die,” Annalise told her adversary, prosecutor Emily Sinclair, “You’re messing with the wrong bitch.”<sup>53</sup> Twitter then erupted with a series of tweets quoting this dialogue, @pentylu quoted the phrase, adding the exclamatory approval of “yeeeeeeesss” afterward.

Embracing Annalise for being a self-described bitch is quite interesting. In some ways Annalise does not actually fulfill the typical role that the bitch plays in fictional narratives. This role serves as “the embodiment of female evil: the foil for literature’s icons of morality and the scourge of the male hero.”<sup>54</sup> First, Annalise really is not a foil for anyone. Second, to varying degrees, almost all of the female characters could be classified as bitches. Further, *HTGAWM* lacks any traditional heroes, male or female, to thwart. Quite simply, Annalise is not completely evil or virtuous, moral or immoral. This suggests that Shondaland has created a more complicated, nuanced portrayal of women who are forced to (or choose to) embody the paradoxical elements of constructed caricatures like the bitch.<sup>55</sup>

There was, however, one particular storyline that prompted mixed reactions concerning Annalise’s so-called bad behavior, specifically her use of sexuality as a means of power. In *HTGAWM*’s pilot, Annalise sleeps with Nate, a police officer, in order to win a case which sets the precedent that she is willing to use sex as a means to an end. Throughout season 2, the pilot prompted tweets about her potential motivations whenever she has sex with someone. This prior history also influenced how some viewers reacted to her mentoring Michaela Pratt to use her sex appeal to control clients. In the episode “Skanks Get Shanked,” Annalise orders

Michaela to keep their murder defendant, Caleb Hapstall, in line.<sup>56</sup> When Michaela is at a loss, Annalise asks, “What’s the matter? Don’t know how to use your boobs?”<sup>57</sup> Like most of her hard-hitting punchlines, this line echoed across Twitter when users quoted it. On October 15, 2015, Derek St. John (@Dieter117) called it the “best line of the night.” When Michaela befriends Caleb rather than seducing him, Annalise barks: “I told you to use your boobs, not your heart.”<sup>58</sup> Again, viewers appreciated the line. On October 8, 2015, Mary Bushur (@joanbushur) quoted the line adding, “Love Mikaela and Annalise together.” While multiple viewers compared Annalise to a pimp, not all did so critically as evidenced by Paris Hodges’s tweet (@brownxsuga) on October 15, 2015, “Imao annalise pimping Makayla.”

Weeks after this episode, some were still expressing their corrective outrage; on November 12, 2015, @msmjfan14 posted, “Michaela is MORE than her boobs Annalise.” This tweet aligns with criticisms concerning sexual or romantic storylines undermining female characters, particularly strong female characters like Annalise.<sup>59</sup> Keating notes that storylines that involve female protagonists using their femininity and sex appeal ultimately undermine the character’s intellect, ability, and success.<sup>60</sup> Shondaland’s other black female powerhouse, Olivia, has received critiques of this nature. Many claim that the romantic story arc focused on Olivia’s on-again-off-again romantic relationship with President Fitzgerald Grant undercuts her strength and respectability. Rising to her defense, Gallagher writes:

While Olivia is by no means a role model for young women, she is much more nuanced, complex, and three dimensional than most black female characters that have risen to her level of popularity. *Scandal*’s success is a testament to the fact that female characters can be imperfect and still be popular. In fact, imperfect characters are much better vessels for representation. Audiences are ready for female characters that evoke contradictory emotions and encourage critical reflection.<sup>61</sup>

This same argument easily applies to Annalise. The ways viewers embrace her suggest that audiences desire more complicated portrayals of women who do not fit easily into outdated, unrealistic gendered archetypes.

#### How Do Live-Tweets Engage with Rhimes’s Public Pedagogy and Demonstrate That Live-Tweeting Fictional Television Programs Is a Form of Digital Activism?

As evident so far, of the two classifications of critiques—small scale criticisms focused on the show versus large scale criticisms engaging with societal issues—the majority of the critiquing posts focused on rather trivial content. However, when particular moments pointedly drew attention to a societal issue, large scale criticisms predominantly surfaced. This commonly occurred when Rhimes’s pedagogical social commentary manifested as character dialogue. In this instance,

the most frequent tweeting practice was quoting, wherein the poster would tweet the line of dialogue containing the social critique. While this practice can logically be read as embracing or promoting the critique, quoting dialogue is ambiguous. While some tweets provided additional commentary along with the quote that revealed their opinion on the dialogue or their purpose for citing it, the majority simply tweeted the actual dialogue as a standalone post free of explanation. While this lack of context could stem from the character limits imposed by the medium, it could also reveal our tendency to allow quotes to stand in place of making bold, potentially controversial statements. This practice is particularly prevalent on social media where it is more acceptable to circulate a meme or quote from someone else concerning a controversial topic rather than to make a direct statement of one's own stance. Paradoxically, this allows posters to showcase their opinion from a distance.

In terms of quoting practices, the comedic undertone of many circulated quotes further complicates their reading. Since some of the quotes were delivered as punchlines, the tweets could be read as celebrating their humor or their cultural critique. The inability to determine authorial intent is another limitation of analyzing Twitter data, as is the difficulty in determining tone. On September 25, 2015, Dianne Carusell (@diannecarusell) wrote, "Another Black lawyer and a Black judge—I feel so empowered." This post could be read as a straightforward statement of, perhaps, an African American viewer celebrating the racially diverse cast. However, this post could also be read as a sarcastic critique of diverse representation, perhaps indicating that the user feels it is cliché or ineffective. Although my interpretation may be incorrect, Carusell's profile picture visually indicates that she is a white woman, which raises speculation concerning the intent of her tweet. This example demonstrates the difficulty of interpreting meaning from uncontextualized comments written within the constraining 140-character limit. This makes proclaiming the purpose of an *individual* tweet difficult; yet, analyzing trends within Twitter posts *collectively* provides more reliable insight into the crossroads of Shondaland's fictional morality lessons and real-world cultural values.

Quoting practices suggest that Rhimes's public pedagogy is not completely overshadowed by *HTGAWM*'s melodramatic soap opera nature. Highly quoted moments of dialogue involved season 2's critiques of white privilege. One of the most quoted lines stemmed from "It's Time to Move On": "White folks always bring up race when it suits them, never when it matters."<sup>62</sup> Another popularly tweeted line circulated weeks later during "Meet Bonnie": "Add your whiteness on top of that, the police are trained to believe you."<sup>63</sup> Both prompted supportive comments on Twitter. On October 22, 2015, @refinedsmarts tweeted, "preaching about white male privilege, yasss!" and @EDubb\_41yfe tweeted, "White privilege is real y'all. I'm telling you."

Overall, often the highest volume of tweets within an episode's airing aligned with narrative moments that mirrored Rhimes's pedagogical social commentary.

Her storylines on sexuality garnered significant commentary, although analysis does not indicate that these lessons were always well received. The October 8, 2015, episode, "It's Called the Octopus," involved the legal team representing the owner of an elite sex club.<sup>64</sup> Many tweets posted on this date celebrated Shondaland addressing sex shaming and queer sexual practices. @kpringer tweeted, "hella sex shame-y episode tonight," Candace Nicole Werts (@candacenwerts) posted, "Sex fetish, yes!" and Monet Sutton (@MusicMonetRadio) wrote, "People shouldn't be ashamed of their sexuality. They shouldn't be ashamed of liking sex." However, others resisted the episode's message. Micah Ouroboros (@micahouroboros) tweeted, "That's not sex positive. That's f-ing trashy and dirty. There's a difference," and Inda Lauryn (@indascorner) wrote, "Sex parties tho? That's nasty." Viewers also tweeted appreciation for the attention given to topics such as sexual violence and transgender identity. On October 22, 2015, @AverageCockram tweeted, "Viola Davis dropping some real talk on America's rape culture," and on October 1, 2015, after "She's Dying" @PretentiousUSA wrote, "Wow! What a great PSA/promo at the end of episode for sexual assault." Similarly, on October 29, 2015, @EDubb\_41yfe wrote, "Glad and surprised that Shonda inserted a transgender centered mini-storyline into the season."

Connor and Oliver's (i.e., Coliver's) same-sex relationship also generated numerous tweets. Their romantic relationship was well received, with most mentions of Coliver being positive, such as Ashley Graham (@Shleekins)'s September 24, 2015, post: "I <3 Conner and Oliver so much!!!" However, the storyline related to Oliver's HIV diagnosis, and Connor's decision to take PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis, a drug for people at high risk for being exposed to HIV) to continue their sexual relationship sparked diverse reactions (see table 4). Looking critically at the lovefest that Coliver sparks online also reveals troubling cultural values. The many tweets praising Connor for staying with Oliver after his diagnosis conjure up white savior ideology amid their interracial relationship and a man of color being scripted as the partner who contracts HIV.<sup>65</sup>

Although Coliver's storyline prompted much Twitter activity, it paled in comparison to the season 2 reveal that Annalise had a former female lover.<sup>66</sup> The scene that revealed her layered identities as a bisexual dark-skinned black woman prompted the most tweets of the entire data pool (see table 5). The six-minute scene recounting Annalise's history with fellow attorney Eve Rothlow includes a kiss that helped skyrocket #HowToGetAwayWithMurder to 1,206 tweets (accounting for 20.78 percent of the episode's tweets). These posts represent a range of reactions from explicitly homophobic to implicitly homophobic to sex positive to LGBTQIA (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, asexual) inclusive. The tweets indicate that many embraced Annalise's backstory and applauded *HTGAWM*'s inclusivity, but others reacted negatively, revealing that Shondaland's pedagogy on sexual diversity is not always well received.

TABLE 4 Sample Tweets Focused on HIV/PrEP Storyline

Twitter Handle	Timestamp	Tweet
itslouismcduff	9/24/2015 9:16	Wait HIV isn't a big deal? #HowToGetAwayWithMurder... Someone explain
chelsea_rana3	9/24/2015 9:16	Conner Awesome For Staying With Him Knowing He Has HIV. #BreakTheStigma #HTGAWM #HowToGetAwayWithMurder #TGIT 🍷🍷
mandamari3	9/24/2015 9:16	Yes PrEP!!! #Awareness #HowToGetAwayWithMurder
itsjaniez	9/24/2015 9:17	I love the way how Connor is dealing with this whole HIV situation... #HTGAWM #HowToGetAwayWithMurder #TGIT
sweetcorn4	9/24/2015 9:17	I'm sorry bae got AIDS ummm relationship over #HowToGetAwayWithMurder

TABLE 5 Sample Reactions to Annalise's Bisexual Storyline

Twitter Handle	Timestamp	Tweet
callingshots_	9/24/2015 9:48	HELL YEAH BI REPRESENTATION #HTGAWM #HowToGetAwayWithMurder
Shirlzrene	9/24/2015 9:50	Lesbian kiss!!! #HowToGetAwayWithMurder
jeremy_chino13	9/24/2015 9:50	Oh ok so Annalise is bi?? Cool #HowToGetAwayWithMurder
jamie132xo	9/24/2015 9:50	This is really awkward 🙄🙄 Imfao #HowToGetAwayWithMurder
Glamazonianash	9/24/2015 9:50	Why is everybody gay on all these shows? #HowToGetAwayWithMurder
britt_brat62	9/24/2015 9:50	Omg please don't let Annalise sleep with that woman! #HowToGetAwayWithMurder
_popdhattunechi	9/24/2015 9:51	Yes!!! Fluid sexuality! #HowToGetAwayWithMurder

Twitter enables producers and actors to interact directly with viewers, which allows for straightforward pedagogical statements. The morning after the queer reveal, Peter Nowalk, *HTGAWM*'s creator, tweeted, "Thanks all for watching last night! And just a tip: *It's not a lesbian kiss, it's just a kiss*. Love you all" (emphasis added). Although Nowalk's tweet appears positive, it actually undermines the significance of Annalise's bisexuality by minimizing their kiss, and the storyline it crystalizes, with it is "just" a kiss. Additionally, "It's not a *lesbian kiss*" is also

troubling because Annalise is portrayed as bisexual, different from Eve who is portrayed as a lesbian. Ultimately, Nowalk's "supportive" tweet functions akin to colorblind rhetoric that erases racial differences in our supposed postidentity era. As an articulation of Shondaland's production outlook that mistakes minimization and erasure of difference for inclusion, alongside casting Eve as a white woman and scripting Coliver's narrative with white savior ideology, critically considering identity politics exposes how *HTGAWM*'s creators utilize normative characterizations and pairings.

The juxtaposition of Coliver and Annalise/Eve tweets indicate that a variety of factors influence why the former was better received. Both feature interracial couples, yet the former features a white man/light-skinned man of color versus the latter's white woman/dark-skinned black woman. Further, that the relationship featuring two gay men was more popular highlights the patriarchal prevalence of gay male relationships when LGBTQIA identities are represented in popular culture.<sup>67</sup> Equally significant is that the white male character's (Connor's) relationship is embraced more so than the black female character's (Annalise's). Illuminating the dynamics at play, Meyer argues that bisexual women of color are a common plot device, manipulated so their intersectional "'Otherness' is layered to produce a commodifiable image that is both economically profitable and exploitative through its erasure of difference, and by implication, identity."<sup>68</sup> Compounding multiple "discourses of 'Otherness' in one character makes it easier to 'check all the boxes' of identity politics and appease the most number of identity constituents in a given audience."<sup>69</sup> Meyer's analysis focuses primarily on secondary characters; therefore, Annalise's positionality as the protagonist is notable, especially when the cast contains other queer characters. Queering Annalise's character directs attention to the racial politics of representing a dark-skinned black woman and the queer politics of bisexuality. Audience responses to Shondaland's pedagogy illustrate a pervasive investment in whiteness and patriarchy.

## AND THE PEDAGOGICAL MORALITY OF SHONDALAND IS . . . ?

Obviously, Rhimes and her Shondaland team aim to "teach" audiences various lessons about diversity through casting, scripting, and consciousness-raising narratives. Rhimes is completely transparent about doing so; when she received the 2015 Ally for Equality award at the Human Rights Campaign Gala, she said, "I really hate the word 'diversity,' it suggests . . . something unusual about telling stories involving women and people of color and LGBTQ characters on TV. I have a different word: *NORMALIZING* . . . I am making the world of television look *NORMAL*."<sup>70</sup> Rhimes's quest to normalize television and address social inequalities is complicated by using melodramatic narratives to do so, because her lessons are often delivered through plots featuring scandal, crime, and secrecy and saturated

with malfeasance. When viewers are prompted to learn moral lessons from immoral characters this creates dissonance that masks the didactic roles these storylines serve. Further, this data indicates that viewers are not live-tweeting fictional programs—or at least this fictional program—to primarily engage with social commentary. That *HTGAWM*'s live-tweets did not always align with Shondaland's pedagogical aims mirrors other research on how audiences often diverge from media texts through Twitter.<sup>71</sup> For *HTGAWM*, this means that live-tweeting could distract from Shondaland's social commentary. While I cannot necessarily claim this occurred, the number of tweets devoted to melodramatic commentary versus social commentary suggests that Twitter users were more preoccupied by the fictional bad behavior than the real-world bad behavior they were scripted to highlight. Consequently, this suggests that live-tweeting fictional television may not constitute an easily recognizable form of digital activism.

At a glance, *HTGAWM* presents a postidentity wonderland of equality for all; the cast reflects a diverse multicultural ensemble led by a powerful bisexual black female protagonist involved in interracial relationships. Shondaland both crafts and shatters this idealization by spinning storylines in ways palatable to normativity. Utilizing Coliver as an example, the storyline inclusively depicts a gay interracial couple productively coping with an HIV diagnosis amid real-world ignorance and bigotry (e.g., Asher's comment that *Philadelphia* is his favorite movie). Moreover, Shondaland punctuates Rhimes's pedagogical intentions with hard-hitting commentary on identity politics, power dynamics, social justice and injustice through characters that parrot Rhimes's social critiques conveyed through Twitter and public speaking appearances. The diverse reactions in response to Rhimes's and Shondaland's public pedagogy indicate that some viewers are particularly receptive and use Twitter to further reinforce or comment on these lessons (e.g., by quoting dialogue). However, other viewers resist these lessons (e.g., by ridiculing or challenging dialogue). Therefore, conflicting tweets ultimately express the warring sentiments (and different ideological camps) that still surround discussions of identity politics, including portrayals of women of color in lead roles, same-sex relationships, and interracial relationships.

Overall, this chapter suggests that Twitter discourse cannot provide declarative insight into larger cultural sentiment. Like all media, if it acts as a social mirror, it is a distorted one at best. The performative nature of Twitter posts, along with character limitations and the inability to determine authorial identity, intent, and tone make this medium an unreliable predictor of cultural values. Even if user sentiment could be determined by analyzing tweets, the population that live-tweets a television show may not accurately represent viewer sentiments more broadly. Therefore, future studies to determine how fans receive Rhimes's pedagogical lessons should partner Twitter analysis with other research methods such as interviewing to more fully gauge viewer sentiment. This project also suggests that further study is needed to identify the live-tweeting practices common among

viewers of fictional television. Previous scholars claim that live-tweeting purposes are consistent across televisual genres, yet this study suggests this may not be the case.<sup>72</sup> Studying live-tweeting practices across televisual genres will reveal rich possibilities for the tag team of Twitter and TV to spark societal reflexivity and, perhaps someday, a consistent form of digital activism.<sup>73</sup>

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73. I want to thank my research assistant T. J. Martin, who helped collect research on contemporary Twitter practices, and Sara Amato, whose work on female antiheroes influenced this project.