A Critical Analysis of The Good Wife

The following was written in November of 2012. The Good Wife is currently in its fourth season. This paper is based on the character and events that take place from the when series began in 2009 until November 7, 2012.

“Now, given that you are a woman lawyer, are you feeling a little schizoid?”

-Catharine MacKinnon

I. Introduction and Purpose

Every Sunday evening at 9 p.m., an estimated 9.54 million viewers tune into CBS’s legal drama The Good Wife. The show portrays Chicago politics, a humiliating sex scandal, and a powerful law firm handling dramatic and compelling cases each week. The series also regularly confronts issues like sexism, racial discrimination

1 Catharine MacKinnon, On Exceptionality: Women as Women in Law, in Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law 75 (1987)

and sexual orientation each week.\textsuperscript{3} Television and law has always had a lively relationship; legal dramas have been a fixture on each network since the 1950s\textsuperscript{4}. The influence of television on the public's perception of lawyers cannot be precisely measured, but the pervasiveness of television in American culture is undeniable.\textsuperscript{5} 99\% of all American households possess at least one television, and\textsuperscript{6} Americans watch around 250 billion hours of television per year.\textsuperscript{7} Television is a powerful socializing agent; media analyst George Gerbner has called television “the new religion.”\textsuperscript{8} Television can form public opinion, and it can also validate pre-existing

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{3} See \textit{The Good Wife} (CBS broadcast, 2009-Present) For example, one of the main characters is bisexual and semi-closeted, the title character's son dates an African-American girl and makes his grandmother uncomfortable and critical, one of the female lawyers is told by a judge that she is not allowed to wear pants in his courtroom etc...
\item \textsuperscript{5} \url{http://www.csun.edu/science/health/docs/tv&health.html}
\item \textsuperscript{6} \textit{Id.}
\item \textsuperscript{7} \textit{Id.}
\item \textsuperscript{8} George Gerbner, The Dynamics of Cultural Resistance, in \textit{Hearth Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media, 47.}
\end{itemize}
public attitudes and perceptions. This paper seeks to critically examine the portrayal of female lawyers on the show *The Good Wife* through the lens of third-wave feminism, and in particular, the concept of intersectionality. The goal of this paper is to examine what *The Good Wife* portrays to the public, and if *The Good Wife* accurately reflects the general perception of female lawyers in the American public. This paper also seeks and suggests ways to incorporate more intersectionality and awareness to *The Good Wife* and television shows like *The Good Wife*.

II. Third-Wave Feminism and Intersectionality

It is difficult to label exactly what third wave feminism is, since it is still an emerging outlook. Third wave feminism is, in many ways, a backlash against perceived limitations and failures of second wave feminism. The third-wave avoids essentialist definitions of what women are, and what is good for all women. The third wave also embraces having conflicting identities and inclusiveness for all types of sexual orientation, economic class and race. This paper will focus on the “inclusiveness” aspect of third-wave feminism, termed “intersectionality.” Intersectionality began as a criticism of second-wave feminism, which third-wave

---

9 Cling, On Camera Sex Discrimination: A Disparate Impact Suit against the TV Networks and Major Studios, 4 Law & Inequality 509, 511 (1986)

feminists perceived as based solely on the experiences of upper-class white women, and ignored marginalized women like the poor or women of color. Since media has been identified by many third-wave texts as one of the primary methods that the third-wave movement raises cultural consciousness and how the third-wave examines and measures popular culture, it seems appropriate to survey television shows that feature feminist dialogue through the criticisms of the third-wave ideals.

III. Underrepresentation of Race

*The Good Wife* exhibits a major gap of representation of race. According to The Association for Legal Career Professionals (NALP), in 2010, 17.6% of all associates in law firms in Chicago were of a minority background, and 9.8% of all associates were minority women. 5.97% of all minority lawyers were firm


13 A Closer Look at NALP Findings on Women and Minorities in Law Firms by Race and Ethnicity, [http://www.nalp.org/jan2011wom_min#table1](http://www.nalp.org/jan2011wom_min#table1) (last accessed November 7th 2012)
partners, and 1.96% of female minority lawyers were firm partners.\textsuperscript{14} However, in four seasons and 77 episodes, the show has featured only two black lawyers employed at the law firm, and neither of them appears regularly.\textsuperscript{15} None of the lawyers who work at the fictitious law firm that the series is centered around are minority women.\textsuperscript{16} Very few minor characters of color appear irregularly in the series, but there are no main characters that are lawyers at the firm.\textsuperscript{17} There is a main character that plays an investigator at the firm who is a female minority, but she is not a lawyer.\textsuperscript{18}

The lack of racial diversity shown in The Good Wife is misleading; Chicago is an ethnically diverse city, and while the number of minority women who are attorneys in Chicago is not high, it is not realistic that a large firm would have no minority men or women lawyers employed.\textsuperscript{19} It also does The Good Wife’s

\textsuperscript{14} Id.

\textsuperscript{15} See The Good wife, generally (Michael Ealy, playing Derrick Bond, appeared in 12 episodes and is no longer part of the series, and Michael Boatman who plays Julius Cain has appeared in 15 episodes.)

\textsuperscript{16} See The Good Wife, generally

\textsuperscript{17} Id.

\textsuperscript{18} Kalinda Sharma, played by Archie Panjabi, is a key character, however, she is not an attorney, and this paper is focused on the portrayal of the legal professionals on the show.

\textsuperscript{19} NALP numbers
feminist discourse a disservice by eliminating non-white women’s viewpoints and narratives on their experiences in the legal profession. A diversity of viewpoints based on women’s race is an important precept in third-wave feminism, and is one of the ways the third-wave movement tries to distinguish itself from second wave feminism.20

This lack of diversity lends itself to the criticism that while The Good Wife does confront issues like sexism and racism in its plot, its narrative is always based on how a white, upper class woman’s experiences gender and race. This lack of intersectionality is one of the central criticisms of second-wave feminism that the third-wave points out. Complete lack of representation is problematic not only because it is simply not realistic and erroneously portrays to the public that minorities are not usually lawyers, but because it diminishes the value of any feminist or gender discourse the show tackles. The third-wave resists the exclusion of diverse ethnic backgrounds because the voices of all women do not sound the same. The Good Wife sets up its feminist dialogue from an exclusively white standpoint- creating one voice for women on the show that is culturally homogenous.

IV. Alicia’s Pathway to a Legal Career

Alicia Florrick, the titular “Good Wife,” graduated from Georgetown Law School, along with her husband Peter Florrick. She chooses to “opt out” of the work force\(^{21}\) and stay at home with her and Peter’s two children, Zack and Grace. In the first season of *The Good Wife*, Alicia must work to support her family because her husband, the State’s Attorney of Cook County, has been imprisoned on corruption charges\(^{22}\). He is accused of using county money to pay a prostitute, and for declining to prosecute cases based on his association with this prostitute. Alicia starts at the law firm of Stern, Lockhart & Gardner as a first-year associate in the litigation department.\(^{23}\) Alicia starts at the bottom rung of the work ladder as a new hire, surrounded by much younger peers, like Cary Agos, a young man who is fresh from law school.\(^{24}\)

Alicia’s professional life fulfills her and excites her right away. The show portrays her re-found passion for the law as Alicia’s chief liberation from her role as “The Good Wife.” As Peter’s “good wife” Alicia stoically endures the

\(^{21}\) Mainiero, LA and SE Sullivan. “Kaleidoscope Careers: An Alternate Explanation for the ‘Opt- Out’ Revolution” Academy of Management Executive 19.1: 106-123 Social Sciences Citation Index, Web (last accessed November 7\(^{th}\), 2012)

\(^{22}\) See Season 1 of Good wife, generally

\(^{23}\) *Id.*

\(^{24}\) *Id.*
humiliation of her husband’s sex scandal, and the hardship his incarceration works against her family. The opening shots of the series include her silently standing by Peter’s side as he holds a press conference explaining how his “indiscretions” have caused his family pain and his personal regrets about his mistakes.²⁵

The image is familiar. The Good Wife is loosely based on the prostitution scandal surrounding Eliot Spitzer;²⁶ and sex scandals like these are familiar features of the American political landscape.²⁷ One persistent image commonly created by these scandals is that of the silent wife, who remains at the side of the disgraced husband. Alicia literally has no voice in the opening scenes of the series, as Peter speaks to a rapt audience at a press conference, and Alicia

²⁵ See The Good Wife, Season 1, Episode 1 (Peter: Good morning. An hour ago, I resigned as States Attorney of Cook County. I did this with a heavy heart and a deep commitment to fight these scurrilous charges. At the same time, I need time to atone for my private failings with my wife, Alicia, and our two children. I have never traded lighter sentences for either financial or sexual favors. But I do admit to a failure of judgment in my private dealings with these women. The money used in these transactions was mine, and mine alone. No public funds were ever utilized.)

²⁶ The Daily Princetonian http://www.dailyprincetonian.com/2011/05/06/28517/

²⁷ http://www.cbsnews.com/2300-504083_162-10006790-6.html?tag=page;next (detailing modern scandals from the 1980’s and on, such as the John Edwards/Rielle Hunter scandal and the Bill Clinton/Monica Lewinksy scandal)
silently stands next to him. Metaphorically, Alicia regains this voice as the show goes on. Her professional and personal life becomes the center of the series—despite the long shadow that being Peter’s wife casts. The majority of the storytelling comes from Alicia’s perspective, and the audience slowly learns how she feels about the scandal, her new job, and whether or not she ought to divorce Peter. Alicia becomes an individual in her own right at the office; all the attorneys and legal staff at Stern, Lockhart & Gardner know about Alicia’s skills and Alicia’s thoughts as an individual. Everyone outside of her office, like her old friends from her suburban neighborhood, and the general public see her solely as Mrs. Peter Florrick, the scorned wife. At work, she is just Alicia Florrick, an exceptional attorney.  

Her job provides the outlet she needs to feel in control- Alicia displays confidence and skill as she navigates her cases and the office politics. She is unafraid to ask for more difficult assignments. She excels professionally in the courtroom, winning a case nearly every episode. She is well-liked and respected by colleagues and clients. However, the audience sees Alicia display uncertainty and pain in her personal life—she breaks down in tears multiple times and experiences doubt and insecurity when thinking about or discussing her marriage and her role as Peter’s wife. Work liberates her from this role of

28 See The Good Wife

29 See The Good Wife episode _____

30 See The Good Wife, generally
the uncertain, long-suffering wife, whose life was centered on working in a home in support of a spouse who betrays her.

Her home life is completely uprooted, metaphorically and literally- the Florrick family must move from a suburban mansion to an apartment in Chicago because of Peter's displacement. Alicia is literally “freed” from the large suburban mansion where she toiled as a housewife, and delivered into a much smaller apartment, where the amount of housework is greatly diminished, and where Peter’s mother takes over the role of homemaker (for a time), doing chores and making meals for the family so she can work the long hours required for a new associate. She is also metaphorically liberated from her role as a housewife by embracing her new status and identity as a professional. 31

III. The “Work as Liberation” Idea

The feminist idea that work outside the home liberates women is not new, and is one of the key philosophies in the seminal and revolutionary feminist book The Feminine Mystique by Betty Friedan, first published in 1963. 32 The

31 Id.

32 bell hooks, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center, p.95
“work liberation” idea in feminism runs deep within many feminist theories, and in particular, theories and ideas stemming from “second-wave” feminism.

Alicia’s fulfillment with her job is highlighted when Peter gets out of prison and the need for Alicia to work ceases. Alicia chooses to continue working, despite the expectation that she would return to full-time home-making when Peter was released. However, the appearance of the common feminist idea of women liberated through work outside the home in The Good Wife reflects at least some level of “bourgeois class bias” to many philosophers who espouse the need for feminist awareness of other economic classes. For many upper and middle-class women, finding work outside of the home is not about necessity, but self-fulfillment and liberation, allowing them to stop being “just” housewives, and possibly freeing them from financial dependency on working men. However, this idea ignores the legions of women who work because they must

33 Need to plug in research here

34 Mann, SA and DJ Huffman “The decentering of second wave feminism and the rise of the third wave.” Science & Society 69 no. 1:56-91 (accessed October 30th, 2012)

35 See Good Wife Episode ___

36 See Good wife Episode ____ (in which Peter tells Alicia not to worry since she “won’t have to play breadwinner” much longer, since he believes he will be released from prison in the near future)

37 bell hooks, Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center, p.95

38 Id.
work to support themselves and possibly their families.\textsuperscript{39} It also assumes that work found outside the home will be meaningful or enjoyable for the woman and therefore fulfilling.\textsuperscript{40} However, this view completely ignores the experiences of the majority of women who \textit{must} work outside the home, and whose work does not grant them any economic freedom from men, or any self-reliance.\textsuperscript{41} As Benjamin Barber, a critic of this work liberation tenet, points out, most women will not have the fortune of pursuing a fulfilling profession like Alicia, since

“for a few lucky men, for far fewer women, work has occasionally been a source for meaning and creativity. But for most of the race it remains even now forced drudgery in front of ploughs, machines, words or numbers—pushing product, pushing switches, pushing papers to eke out the wherewithal of material existence...”\textsuperscript{42}

Alicia’s success as a professional and her desire to continue working outside the home is an inspiring journey to watch, and the character of Alicia Florrick is a positive image of a female lawyer on primetime network television. However, while her liberation from the silent housewife to skilled attorney is aspirational, it is not necessarily relatable for a large majority of women, and it is an image of a feminist tenet that is based solely on the experiences and perspectives of women not facing the common realities of economic hardship or struggle. Lack of awareness of other

\textsuperscript{39} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{40} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{41} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{42} Benjamin Barber, \textit{Liberating Feminism}, p. 52
economic strata is one criticism that the third-wave levies against second-wave feminist ideas. Third-wave feminism has been deliberate to include voices of marginalized economic classes and has rejected ideas based solely mainstream feminist perspective. 43

V. Alicia’s Motherhood

On the show, Alicia is consistently the voice of compassion. Her job is often to “hand-hold” the clients, a role that she finds frustrating at times, but a role that she admits she naturally does well. 44 Alicia also exhibits more qualms and discomfort about representing guilty clients than do her co-workers.45 Alicia is a capable, confident attorney, just like her the other lawyers she works with, but she consistently shows more compassion and empathy for those around her, and clients regularly tell Alicia that they feel close to her and reliant on her to take care of them.

43 Stacey K. Sowards & Valerie R. Renegar, “The rhetorical functions of consciousness-raising in third wave feminism” page 540(last accessed on 11/7/12)
http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/10510970409388637

44 See The Good Wife, generally. For example, in Season 4, Episode 5, Alicia willingly waits at a client’s home for him to be arrested, so that she can look after the client’s son. The rest of the lawyers and investigators work on the case, while Alicia sits on a swing with the young boy and comforts him and explains about what is happening to his father.

45 See The Good Wife, Season 1 Episode 13
No other lawyer on the show is depicted as having the compassionate relationships with clients that Alicia has. Alicia’s nurturing abilities and capability for empathy often stems from her being a mother. For example, in Season 1, Episode 3, a client comments to Alicia that she did not need to drive a long way out of her way to see the client’s high school aged son, who is on trial. Alicia replies to her that she a boy “she saw grow up needed my help. So I came.” Alicia comments that her heart is softened to this defendant because he is around the same age as her son.

Alicia is the only lawyer who exhibits compassion of this kind to clients. Many feminist theorists embrace this idea that a woman’s maternal capabilities render her different from men, based on the bond she experiences with creating new life in a fetus. Robin West theorizes that the “experience of being human, for women... includes the counter-autonomous experience of a shared physical identity between woman and fetus, as well as the counter-autonomous experience of the emotional and psychological bond between mother and infant.”

However, third-wave feminism has resisted this idea as essentialist, as it overlooks differences among women as individuals. Not all women experience pregnancy and maternity identically, and Alicia’s nurturing nature should not be viewed as necessarily relatable for each woman watching her. She is the only

46 See The Good Wife, generally

47 See The Good Wife Season ___ Episode ___

48 Robin West, cite the textbook, p139

49 Cite Textbook/ Kimberle Crenshaw p 150
mother and attorney on the show, and her experience as a mother is the only one the show depicts.  

The third wave movement also embraces conflicting identities within one woman, and emphasizes individual experience, so if Alicia’s maternity does render her more nurturing, her identity as a lawyer need not be jeopardized by her identity of a caring woman. The show displays this well, despite Alicia’s habitual relegation to “hand-holding” and comforting clients, because Alicia still displays prowess in the courtroom, and while her clients often thank her for her extraordinary compassion and understanding, they more frequently turn to her say “you’re good.”

VI. Conclusion

a. The Good Wife as a whole: Positive or Negative? Using Third-Wave ideals as a guide

b. What does that say about America? What does that say about the relationship between law and television

c. Solutions for incorporating more diverse viewpoints

50 See The Good Wife, generally

51 See Season 4, Episode ___ (in which a surprised client comments on Alicia’s quick thinking.)