


Chapter 7

#BlackGirlMagic: *How to Get Away With Murder* Is Not Evil

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ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores the relevance of Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative to critique the unintended, subliminal evil representations in Shonda Rhimes's work. Kant's moral theory is used to re-think evil in the way that Rhimes portrays Annalise Keating (Viola Davis) in *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014-) as an influential defense attorney and law professor who goes to extreme lengths to get what she wants, even if her behavior is considered bad or evil. This chapter argues that Rhimes's work challenges the systemic racism and stereotypical portrayals of Black women in television, as she not only focuses on the bad or evil doings of her Black characters but also on what makes them powerful, good and emblematic of #BlackGirlMagic.*

INTRODUCTION

From a western perspective, Evil has always been a concept associated with Black people (see Zimbardo, 2004; Williams, 2018). Over decades, Black women especially have been represented on television as evil. In African-American culture and in television, those evils including “black magic” have been written on in several texts (see Wanderer & Rivera, 1986; Chireau, 2003; Summers, 2012; Jenkins, 2017; Williams, 2018). Recently, there has been a change in the way in which Black women are portrayed on screen; they are now depicted as more powerful, educated, professional and determined to succeed. Shonda Rhimes's work has gained much popularity in mainstream media with her first Black female lead character, Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington), in *Scandal* (2012-2018) which was followed by Annalise Keating (Viola Davis) in *How to Get Away with Murder* (2014-). Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy as a philosophical concept on evil is used to interpret some of the misrepresentations about Black women and how they are connected to evil through a critique of Rhimes's television shows. The paper briefly

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discusses Olivia Pope in *Scandal* but focuses more heavily on the representation of Annalise Keating, who draws one's attention to her 'blackness' in her career and love life and how this affects her, as evil. While the portrayal of Olivia Pope centers on her work as a crisis manager (a 'fixer') and the impact that the men in her life have on her, Annalise Keating channels broader issues related to race, infidelity, sexual orientation, sexual abuse, alcoholism. Her characterization is not confined by these issues as she is represented as a strong-willed woman who rejects falling victim to others around her by doing what she needs to do in order to be respected in both her work and personal life. Annalise Keating represents particular aspects of Kant's view of evil which is meshed into his categorical imperative as it relates to respect for women and humankind. Some authors have discussed Kant's work in light of the respect one gives women (see Kofman & Fisher, 1982; Schulzke, 2012). They determine that to respect women is to obey the categorical imperative which requires reverence with regard to the other as moral personage. Choices to do what is evil can be attractive, while preserving Kant's claims that we do not choose to do evil simply for its own sake (Kant, 1948). These perspectives echo with this paper's exploration of Rhimes's shift in the representation of Black women lead characters in television as highly educated, professional and overcomers. Especially since endurance and resilience has been part and parcel of Black women's representation through the ages, in one thinks of *The Color Purple* for example. Thus, #BlackGirlMagic becomes an integral concept in Rhimes's attempt to address the ascendant nature of modern-day Black women, and the rejection of their association with "evil", degradation and humiliation by reasserting the powerful, strong, opinionated view points and controversial actions of her lead Black woman subject.

BACKGROUND

According to Zimbardo (2004, p. 3), evil is intentionally behaving – or causing others to act – in ways that demean, dehumanize, harm, destroy, or kill innocent people. The titles of the television shows *Scandal* and *How to Get Away with Murder* imply and carry evil undertones; thus, one would expect the lead characters, Olivia Pope and Annalise Keating, to be evil women. The so-called "evil" that these characters exude are somehow "normalized" in other television shows, however, Black powerful women have never been represented in the way that Olivia Pope and Annalise Keating have. Since Black women have for centuries been associated with violence, rape and racial segregation, and thus their reactions to their present circumstances can only be explained by the social ills they have experienced.

Zimbardo (2004, p. 3) asks the philosophical question "Who is responsible for evil in the world, given that there is an all-powerful, omniscient God who is also all-Good?" That conundrum began the intellectual scaffolding of the Inquisition in the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe. Kant's work is influenced by philosophers from this era. According to Acton (1970, p. 1), Immanuel Kant, born in 1724, lived and taught in East Prussia during the intellectual movement known as the Enlightenment. From 1755 he taught various branches of philosophy and died in his hometown, Königsberg (in East Prussia) in 1804. Kant's work was influenced by Wolff and Pietism, a movement that emerged from the Lutheran church in Germany in the previous century. According to Anton (1970, p. 2), this sect encouraged studying the Bible, participating in church affairs as well as personal involvement in spontaneous devotion and good works. Anton (1970, p. 2) explains that Wolff's account of the natural world seemed to leave no room for miracles or for free choice, which created some separations between him and Pietism. As revealed in *Malleus Maleficarum*, the handbook of the German Inquisitors from the Roman Catholic Church, the inquiry concluded that the Devil was the source of all evil (Zimbardo, 2004, p. 3). However, these theo-

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