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Essay 3

A post-racial television series would be one that seems to function beyond or outside of the presence of racism. The use of many races is necessary and at no point does the race of a character disqualify or make them inferior to another race. This does not mean that the series does not acknowledge the differences in ethnicity, but that it does not use these differences in a judgmental way. Shonda Rhimes' *Scandal* does not claim to represent a post-racism society and none of the characters try to present it that way. Viewers may assume that because there is an African American female in a place of high power that the series is post-racial in scope or outlook, but this is not the case. There are many aspects in *Scandal* that reveal that the society in this series still practices racism. I intend to explore how the events that take place in the series illuminate the racist aspects it indeed possesses.

Scandal is a fictional television series that shows how the leading character, Olivia Pope (Kerry Washington), solves the many problems of the White House and surrounding Washington D.C. area. She is one of the few African American characters in the series. The other two include her father, Rowan (Joe Morton), and her employee, Harrison (Columbus Short) who is eventually killed off. Olivia is presented as a strong and nearly emotionless African American woman who is paradoxically engaged in a passionate affair with the President of the United States. In spite of the significance of the series having a Black female protagonist, Olivia's

race is not something that is mentioned at all within the episodes by anyone other than her father. On the surface, viewers may think that the series is post-racial due to the fact that Olivia obtains so much power and does not receive verbal discrimination based off of her skin color and racial background. However, after a close screening of the series, Olivia's purpose and people's true motives for having her around become questionable. Four seasons later and upon researching for this paper, I have realized that *Scandal's* society is nowhere near post-racial.

Olivia Pope is a very intelligent woman who has the ability to think quickly and on her feet to come up with solutions to problems that can cause the American people to believe absolutely anything she says. In season three of the series, Mellie Grant (Bellamy Young), the president's wife, is in distress because her husband is in deep depression and is not motivated to make what they consider an important decision. While standing in the Oval Office with Olivia, she begs her to come back and be the Director of Communications again because she knows how much her husband needs Olivia. Initially, Olivia refused and Mellie explained to her "this was her job". It was her duty to fix their problems for two reasons: she was the best at it, and it was a consequence of her engaging in a physical relationship with the President. This interaction brought up the question about whether Olivia was a close friend and loved one to the people of the White House or if they kept her around as "the Help".

The President, Fitzgerald Grant (Tony Goldwyn), feels very passionately about Olivia and cares very deeply about her. He even tells her on many occasions that he would give up his spot in the White House and move to Vermont with her so

that they could start their own family. Later in the series, Olivia also falls in love with Jake, a government agent that the President sent to spy on her and make sure she was safe. Jake promised her that they could “stand in the light together”. Both of Olivia’s love interest, Fitz and Jake, are White males. Her father uses this information to describe “the light” that Olivia is standing in in her relationships as a bright white light that will soon fade with her in it.

The one person who brings up race to Olivia is her father. Rowan tells Olivia as a child and while growing up that she has to work ten times harder to get half of what “they” have. In this context “they” is referring to people of the Caucasian race. Now that Olivia is in high places and has a large amount of influence and power in the White House, he tells her that she has to be careful not to do something stupid to lose it. Although the two white men that Olivia is dating claim to love her, her father explains to her in the most recent series that they just want to fight over her and ultimately have her as their trophy. She is a beautiful, strong, and smart African American and this is seen as rare due to the lack of powerful African American women and men presented in the series. There are many politicians who obtain the same qualities that she has, but few are black and even fewer are women. This makes her a huge prize in the eyes of the powerful men in her life.

There are glimpses of Olivia questioning her role in the lives of the people she loves. During conversation with Fitz, she tells him that she is not his Sally Hemings but yet she continues to run to his rescue and be his savior. Olivia claiming not to play this role in Fitz life is a very significant historical reference. Sally Hemings was Thomas Jefferson’s enslaved Black mistress before and during his

presidency. He was married the entire time that he engaged in affairs with Hemings and of course, she knew. Sally Hemings was “of mixed race” because her mother was a mulatto and her father was their slave master. This goes to show that a slave woman having an affair with her White master was common. Similar to this, Olivia is having an affair with the President who is indeed married and Olivia is clearly aware of it. This reference is significant because although the viewers see Olivia is in love with Fitz, we also see her try to get from under his spell often. There are multiple passionate scenes where Olivia tells Fitz “no” but yet he still pushes himself on her. She is enslaved to Fitz because she does all of his dirty work. Her mother describes her as his maid who goes running to Fitz every time he calls her to come clean up the White House. The rough and dominating treatment of African American females goes back to “the master and his Black mistress” relationships that were extremely popular during slavery and the pre- Emancipation period of American History. Although it is easy to categorize Rowan as evil, it is clear that wants the best for his daughter. He tells Olivia that she could never be one of “them” and not to let her desire to stand in “the bright white light” blind her from the truth.

Although it has become clear to me that the series has many racist aspects, it is hard to really pinpoint who the racist people truly are in the series. Is it the white people in the series who are racist because they abuse the relationship they have with Olivia so that she can constantly solve their issues and provide for their needs, or is it the African Americans who are racist because they still choose to accept a defeated mindset and question the motives of people although they seem pure? On the season finale of the most recent series, Olivia had just finished convincing the

President's right hand man, Cyrus, to keep his job and not allow what the press says make him forget who he is and the power he holds. He agreed and she walked up to the door of the Oval Office to see Fitz, Cyrus, and the press secretary who is also her friend from law school celebrating without her. I'm sure that if she would have walked in they would have welcomed her as family as they normally do but she choose to victimize herself and to feel left out.

Although *Scandal* does not verbally come out and say that it is a post-racial society, it is easy to assume that because of the African American woman in high places. However, once one takes a close look at the television series it becomes extremely clear that the society shown in *Scandal* has deep roots of racism and some take part in it without even knowing it. Because the characters close to Olivia are so loving and reverence her so highly, the viewer sees that they do don't treat her as a maid out of hatred for her or her race but because once something is in your culture for so long it begins to become instinctive and of strong influence. Oftentimes Olivia and her father practice internalized racism but it is hard to blame them when everyone who surrounds them are unknowingly treating them as though they are still slaves. Although it is normally extremely hard to sympathize with Rowan Pope, it is harder to deny the fact that he is treated as a slave who does all the private dirty work that mostly involves killing and setting up people who are a threat to the White House and their secrets. His job was once temporally given to Jake but because Jake was not portrayed as a vicious and nasty person in comparison to Rowan, he eventually got his position back. The series definitely can teach the lesson that moral characteristics are solely individual and have nothing to do with race or

skin color. Society would be taking a step in the right direction when it is realized that Olivia can be strong, beautiful, intelligent, and Black with out alluding to the fact that their must be some sexual or conniving way that she got there.