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Critical Approaches to John Grisham's Works by Contemporary Scholars

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**Annotation**

The following article deals with the critical literary analyses of the works by John Grisham. Moreover, the general introductory details concerning the author and his career in literature have been provided in order to make the reader familiar with John Grisham as well as his detective works. The viewpoints of the critics have been mentioned including the dissertations by the well-known scholars and the scientific articles. The gathered data collections have been analyzed chronologically as well as empirically, and the results have been supplied in the article. Mostly, the critical analyses presented in the article have been done based on the works by June Harris, Dave Mote, Jenifer Rubin and Randolph Paul Runyon. The reason why we have chosen their works primary is that the scholars paid much more attention to the author's style to write detective novels and did great attempt to study the fictional works by John Grisham in the comparative way. In fact, our investigations have proved that most of the critics including the above-mentioned scholars rejected and criticized the legal detective novels by the author. Later on, they consequently changed their viewpoints regarding his works and all the negative ideas turned into the opposite manner. That means, the hard work to increase the quality of the novels have been done by the author respectively.

Key words: John Grisham, critical analyses, reputation, creative fictions, justice, detective, "legal text", legal detective.

Аннотация

Куйида келтирилган мақола Джон Гришам асарларининг адабий танқидий таҳлилига бағишланган. Бундан ташқари, кириш қисмидаги адиб Джон Гришамнинг ҳаёти ва ижоди ва унинг детектив асарлари ҳақидаги маълумотлар билан китобхонларни таништириш имкониятини беради. Мақолада олимларнинг танқидий фикр ва мулоҳазалари, диссертация ва илмий мақолалардан иқтибослар келтирилган. Тупланган маълумотлар хронологик ва эмпирик жихатдан таҳлил қилиниб натижалари мақолада келтирилган.

Калит сўзлар: Жон Гришам, танқидий таҳлил, мақом, бадиий туқима, адолат, детектив, «юридический матн» юридик детектив.

John Ray Grisham, Jr. is an American lawyer and author, best

known for his popular legal thrillers. Because of his creative fictions on the legal issues he is considered as “Lord of legal thrillers” or “Master of legal thrillers”, long before his name became synonymous with this genre. He was born on February 8, 1955 in Jonesboro, Arkansas, to parents who were never formally educated, his father was a construction worker and a cotton farmer and his mother was a homemaker, but the young Grisham was encouraged by his mother and became an avid reader. While self-study he admired John Steinbeck’s works and was influenced by his clarity. He got acquainted with different towns throughout the South till his parents finally settled in Southaven, Mississippi. Unlike the protagonist of his novel “Bleachers” in 2003, he wasn’t an All-American football player.

Young John drifted through three different colleges before finally obtaining a degree and he couldn’t have imagined of becoming a writer since he hadn’t increased any interest in writing till beginning a professional career in

law. He attended the Mississippi State University in 1971 and received a BS degree in accounting and in 1981 graduated from the University of Mississippi School of Law to become a tax lawyer. Yet, he changed his mind and shifted interest in general civil litigation. After earning a Jurist Doctor degree, he specialized in Criminal defense and personal injury litigation. As a young attorney he spent much of his time in court proceedings. In 1983 he was elected to the state House of Representatives and served until 1990. He was later promoted to the position of Vice Chairman Apportionment and Elections Committee.

As a writer of compelling mysteries he has achieved remarkable success. Since 1991, at least one new best-selling novel appeared each year – “The Firm”, “The Pelican Brief”, “The Client”, “The Chamber”, “The Rainmaker”, “The Runaway Jury”, “The Street Lawyer”... and the latest publication “Sycamore Row” which was released in October, 2013.

John Grisham made his first step into literature via the novel “A Time to Kill” in 1989, and since that time the author has established himself as one of the blockbuster novelists of the late 20th century. He got inspiration for his prelude novel after hearing the testimony of a 12-year-old rape victim and the question “what would have happened if the girl’s father had murdered her assailants?” disturbed the author. So he decided to write a novel. For three years he arrived at his office at five o’clock in the morning, six days a week because of the purpose to write his first book “A Time to Kill”. Grisham’s first manuscript was rejected by 28 publishers. But one unknown publisher agreed to publish it and the first book was sold a disappointing 5000 copies. That might cause an unfortunate end to Grisham’s hobby; however he had already begun to write his next novel.

Fortunately his second novel “The Firm” brought a great reputation to John Grisham and it became one of the bestselling novels of 1991. “*The Firm*”

(1991) launched his rise to stardom. In “*The Firm*”, a brilliant Harvard Law School graduate named Mitch McDeere accepts a job with a Memphis-based law firm, where he discovers mystery, deceit, and murder. The novel is truly worthy of the oft-used critical phrases “gripping” and “compelling”, as evidenced by its long-time status as a New York Times bestseller. Grisham keenly keeps the reader one jump ahead of the main character, but a few steps behind the generally unpredictable plot that gradually engulfs him. “*The Firm*” showcases Grisham’s talent for quickly developing intriguing, though uncomplicated, characters both heroes and villains – to which the reader can relate, and for spinning a fast-unfolding, exciting tale (2).

Hitherto as a writer John Grisham has published 33 books: 26 novels, 1 story collection, 2 non-fictions and Theodore Boone series. “The Firm”, “The Pelican Brief”, “The Client”, “The Chamber”, “The Runaway Jury” and “The Last Juror” are very significant



works for demonstrating law processes, verdicts, juror's duty, tort law, client's rights, appeals and so on. As a realist author Grisham could raise contemporary problems around us and without a doubt he claims that law can be strong, however sometimes it is too weak to protect human rights.

After publication of "The Firm", he has produced at least one work a year, most of them widely popular bestsellers. He is the only person to author a number one bestselling novel of the year for seven consecutive years which includes from 1994 till 2000. Publishers Weekly announced Grisham "the bestselling novelist of the 90s", selling a total of 60,742,289 copies. The writer is one of the few authors to sell two million copies on a first printing. In 1992 his novel "The Pelican Brief" was sold 11,232,480 copies only within the United States.

If we analyze the themes of his works, in 1999 he managed to write "The Testament" with a strong religious theme and he showed his manner as a

"moderate Baptist". Beginning with "A Painted House" in 2001 John Grisham broadened the themes of his fictions from the formal legal thriller to other subjects, especially baseball and life in the rural South. The story of Luke, a young boy in 1950s Arkansas who witnesses a murder in the ranks of two rival groups of migrant workers given in "A Painted House" was followed by "Skipping Christmas", "Bleachers", "The King of Torts" and "Playing for Pizza". The author's "The Litigators" is considered as a comic novel, which was published in 2011. "Bleachers" published in 2003 tells of a former high-school football star, Neely Crenshaw, who returns to his hometown after being aware that his old coach, Eddie Rake is dying. The second book of this year "The King of Torts" states a return to familiar narrative ground. Clay Carter, a public defender in Washington, D.C., establishes his own practice for the purpose of representing a drug company whose product played a number of murders. Though he becomes wealthy

and respected, Carter begins to doubt his own morality.

Despite the huge popularity with readers, Grisham's works have garnered a mixed response from critics. For example, "The Last Juror" has been found the author's finest accomplishments by some reviewers, while others have dismissed the book, deeming it poorly structured and deaf to the plot's sociologically relevant undertones. Yet at the same time, some reviewers have heralded the author's handling of social issues, claiming as did commentator Timothy Rutten, that "... no other writer of his popularity is quite so keen-eyed or as fierce a social critic. He's an idealist but not an optimist; a moralist but not a moralizer (1). While some critics have concurred with Mark Hemingway's perception, that "(Grisham's) novels are at best glorified screenplays, rife with odious liberal populist messages"(1).

Scholars who have made critical consumptions more deeply into John Grisham's works have identified his

fiction as outgrowths of the legal thriller genre of the seventeenth century and they have viewed the problematic familiar relationships in many of his works in light of Plato's notion of the "orphan text". For instance, one of the well-known critics of the modern literature Randolph Paul Runyon claimed "In "The Pelican Brief" that foreknowledge takes the form of something that bears a remarkable resemblance to writing itself as Socrates defined it in the Phaedrus: the orphan text, set loose by its father or mother, in Darby's case (she is the protagonist of "The Pelican Brief") – into a world where it can only get into trouble" (7). In literature there is no anything new, authors give only different shadows; themes and problems are the similar with their even ancient prototypes. Plato's following statement can prove these ideas: "Once a thing is put in writing, the composition, whatever it may be, drifts all over the place, rolling here and there, getting into the hands not only of those who understand it, but

equally of those who have no business with it; it doesn't know how to address the right people, and not address the wrong" (Plato 521, translation modified) (7). It is as Jacques Derrida points out in his analysis of Plato's terminology in the dialogue, *a pharmakon*, a dangerous drug that can easily turn into a poison; "a supplement" too (in this terminology): an addition, be it ever so slight, that can upset the whole system. Certainly in John Grisham's "The Pelican Brief" the White House is in turmoil, likewise the antagonist of this novel Victor Mattiece's industrial-criminal organization. We will tell about the close relationship of Grisham's works with Plato's orphan text in more details in the Chapter III of our research when we analyze the stylistic peculiarities of the writer's works.

Furthermore, critics have analyzed Grisham's ambiguous rendering of the motif of revenge. For example, Terence Martin proclaimed in his comparison of "A Time to Kill" with

other contemporary revenge narratives: *"Repeatedly, these narratives enact dramas of revenge for the exuberant defiling of innocents. Repeatedly, they cast antagonists as vicious and predatory, deserving of harsh retribution. And repeatedly, they are ambivalent about what should be done with the avenger, the character who acts out our impulses"*(1). For instance, his "Runaway Jury" depicts a huge revenge of former school children, they are already grown up, but the value of their purpose doesn't give them peace and at the end of the work they achieve their goals. Opposing Timothy Ruten's views (what we have mentioned on the previous page) here John Grisham is an idealist and at the same time an optimist; a moralist and fortunately a moralizer.

When critics argue about John Grisham's famous status in modern literature, they come to different conclusion on this statement. But in any case, it is easy to define the common ground among them. There are probably two main reasons for Grisham's

popularity among modern readers, stated June Harris in “Contemporary Novelists”, *first, Grisham invites his reader into the often confusing and arcane world of legal practice. He cuts through the “heretofores” and “whereases” to simplify law for the reader. He shows how the law works, how lawyers work, why the law sometimes doesn’t work, and what is going on when we can’t see legal workings. Furthermore he does this with a page-turning style that is hard to resist for those curious about the legal system in this country (5).*

June Harris’s assertion sounds as a general confirmation on the popular state of John Grisham’s works, the reviewer completed his ideas as the following:

Second, Grisham suggests to his readers that the law can be made to work for all of us, even neophytes, even in the face of huge companies with high-priced representation, even against overwhelming odds, even against government oppression. Grisham’s

protagonists are always underdogs. They may be law students (The Pelican Brief), brand new lawyers (The Firm, The Chamber, The Rainmaker), or practicing lawyers fighting against great odds (A Time to Kill, The Client). Whatever the situation, the message is powerful and seductive. Americans hold strongly and dearly the belief that we are all equal under the law and that all of us have a chance to win if our cause is right, never mind the reality of expensive attorneys (5).

Another critic Dave Mote , in “Contemporary Popular Writers”, is sure that Grisham’s much success can be attributed to his ability to weave into his novels parts of his past that make his sensational plots seem more believable. Elements of legal profession and the southern lifestyle form the basic ideas and situations of his books’ plot.

Shallow character development and simplistic plots are usually central topics of the critical observation on John Grisham’s works. The writer interviewed to “Writer’s

Digest”(July,1993): “ *You have to start with an opening so gripping that the reader becomes involved. ... The end should be so compelling that people will stay up all night to finish the book. ... You take a sympathetic hero or heroine, an ordinary person, and tie them into a horrible situation or conspiracy where their lives are at stake. ... No flashbacks. ... When you are writing suspense, you can’t spend a lot time on persons, places, or settings.*”Grisham is not afraid of saying such commentary: “*I write to grab readers. This isn’t serious literature*” (7).

However each work written by the writer depicts the character descriptions in details: age, profession, interest, some specific features and appearance, it is true; it helps to improve the imaginative picture of any fiction. At legal process each minor items can play significant importance to find out expected results. Because of his professional skills Grisham’s fictions are always accepted as interesting practical lessons examples.

Additionally, reviewers have cited Grisham’s aesthetic as a revised updating of the hardboiled detective genre championed by Dashiell Hammett in the 1930s. John Grisham has spoken on several occasions of his great regard for John Steinbeck, but his real novelistic ancestor is Upton Sinclair, the author of “The Jungle” and “Oil”. John Steinbeck’s “The Grapes of Wrath” had the greatest impact on him. Grisham said about it in his interview in *The New York Times Book Review*: “*I read it when I was a senior in high school and was stuck by its clarity and power. I’m not sure if it inspired me to write, but I do recall thinking, I wish I could write as clearly as Steinbeck*” (8). As a writer and as a reader John Grisham admires William Faulkner and in his article “*The Faulkner Thing*” published in *The Oxford American* in 2013 he stated that William Faulkner *had been a literary artist of immense proportions, a genius, a writer thoroughly dedicated to his craft, the greatest American novelist of this century* (4). The books made John

Grisham laugh written by Mark Twain, one of his interviews he said that he loved humor and for this reason he had always enjoyed Mark Twain and Tom Sawyer was still his all – time favorite literary hero. When he was a kid, he wrote a letter to the author of “Huckleberry Finn”, but never heard back.

Although Grisham’s detractors have pointed out the formulaic repetitiveness of his works as a sign of his authorial weakness, some scholars, as Peter Swirski and Faye Wong, have suggested: “Each of Grisham’s best sellers introduces new themes and characters, even if developed within the familiar genre. In fact, it is his seemingly inexhaustible innovation that brings readers back to bookstores year in and year out, full of anticipation of a novel twist to the tried-and-true formula” (1).

Besides these critical approaches, there are some research works on John Grisham’s novels, concerning the dissertations by M.V.

Lutseva and Y.A. Savochkina. They wrote their candidate works in Russian based on the Russian translations of Grisham’s works.

M.V.Lutseva’s research paper was devoted to the legal terms used by John Grisham considering his 18 novels from “The Firm” in 1991 to “The Innocent man” in 2007. She used the method of comparative analysis, well-known in world lexicographical practice as dictionary criticism. The title of her dissertation is “Лексикографическое описание юридической терминологии в неспециальной сфере использования (лингвостатическое исследование на материале произведений Дж. Гришема)” (*Lexicographic description of legal terminology in a non-specialized field of use (linguistic research based on the works of J. Grisham)* – translated by the author) (6). In American literature using juridical terms can be rooted with Theodore Dreiser’s “An American Tragedy” and this work could show political and social conditions of America at that time,

moreover John Grisham flourished this field as a social novelist and one of the founders of the legal thriller genre. As Lutseva claimed in her work John Grisham has consumed 1501 terms 44848 times in his 18 novels. Concerning jurisprudence the vocabulary of the author is very prolific and we'll analyze the language of the writer in the next paragraphs of the dissertation.

Another researcher Y.A. Savochkina stressed on John Grisham's "The Runaway Jury" and its translation in Russian. The importance of her dissertation is defining the genre of legal thriller and its functions in fictional works. The theme of Savochkina's research is *"Лингвоэвокационное исследование литературно-художественного жанра юридического триллера: на материале романа J. Grisham "The Runaway Jury" и его перевода на русский язык* ("Linguo-evocation study of the literary and artistic genre of the legal thriller: based on J. Grisham's

novel "The Runaway Jury" and its translation into Russian." –translated by the author)" (10). The new genre of literature serves to demonstrate the nations of American and their court cases, and again the social attitude to the government and its system in John Grisham's fictions. The Russian translator of "The Runaway Jury" is I.Y. Doronina and she managed to interpret this novel to Grisham's Russian readers. The translator chose the title "Вердикт" ("Verdict") instead of "Сбежавшее Жюри", however his attempt can be estimated well, for his title could open the deep meaning of the novel much more than the writer's one.

Creating John Grisham's works' political, social and economic influence on his readers, one of the most successful critical articles is Jennifer Rubin's *"John Grisham's Law: the Social and Economic Impact of a Pop Novelist"*. First of all the author tries to clarify what is Grisham's law, *it is a dark and devious world in which corporations are filled with expert*

conspirators, not banal paper-pushers. They blackmail, cover up, rig settlements, manipulate juries, and demonstrate stealth to a degree that would put the CIA to shame. It is a world in which the regulatory apparatus of the federal government is virtually nonexistent (3, 56). In Grisham Law “causation” is the basic link between the wrongful act and the injury in tort law. At the root of the tort system is the notion that the law is a great equalizer between the strong and the weak, and at the same time ultimate source of justice. Moreover this justice depends on an unbiased eye to the facts and a denial to be blinded by emotion.

Hence, John Grisham is a blockbuster novelist of contemporary literature and there are some shadows of mass culture in his works. As a literary critic Timothy Rutten claims, the writer *sometimes seems less a literary personality than a force of nature – his books a showy kind of regularly reoccurring natural phenomenon* (9). John Grisham also proclaims: “*I’m not a*

Southern writer ...I’m a commercial writer who lives in the South. I try to write commercial fiction of a high quality – no attempt at literature here – just good book that people enjoy reading. The libraries are already filled with great literature. There’s no room for me” (4).

Despite of this fact Grisham is a leader in the tendency of political and social issues of modern world literature. His readers are common people, he writes in common language, might be one of the reasons of his popularity is simplicity. Even in political and governing system of the country the culture has played a remarkable role. While romanticizing and glamorizing the depiction of law in the popular culture, it acts as a strong protection against changes and helps jurors and judges to create legal theories. When popular culture and the law are intermingled, there is no more influential figure than John Grisham.

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