

English 280, Third Place; Professor, Dr. Timothy Helwig

**Scandalous TV: How Scandal and Olivia Pope are Redefining Black Women on Prime Time**

Christine Jordan

10.48 million viewers cannot be wrong about a television show that has been in ABC's prime time lineup since 2012. *Scandal* stars Kerry Washington as Olivia Pope, a black woman who operates her own crisis management firm while simultaneously having an affair. Critics and viewers alike have been torn about how to evaluate Olivia Pope. Some critics praise the show for having characters that are not defined by their race alone. Others critics believe that Olivia falls into black female media stereotypes. Olivia's class accomplishments are undermined by her race so much so that her achieved status is not highlighted. The media's stereotypes about race and class affect how real African American women are viewed in everyday life. Popular media, whether pe

her staff of “gladiators” aim to handle any crisis as long as clients follow the golden rule: do not lie. The goal of Olivia’s firm is to deliver justice (when it is due)

two consenting adults who love each other and counters the critics' inaccurate arguments. Fitz says, "I exist for you. If I could escape all of this and run away with you...there's no Sally or Thomas here. You're nobody's victim, Liv. I belong to you" ("Happy Birthday, Mr. President"). Fitz understands that their interracial relationship can be compared to slavery: Olivia can be labeled as victim (slave) and Fitz as an abuser (master) (Mask 4). But because Olivia chose to have an affair with Fitz, she cannot fit into the slave-master love affair stereotype because she is acting out of her own free will. F

President of the United States, he commands the relationship. Stacia L. Brown, adjunct professor and freelance writer, strongly argues that Olivia “pursue[s] a dominant-submissive relationship with someone who is, as the script keeps forcing him to remind us, the Leader of the Free World... it’s **hard not to connect her to the earliest, collective history**” (Brown, “Is Olivia Pope the New Sally Hemings?”). Brown makes it seem as if Olivia is submissive to Fitz and gives in to all of his requests (professional and sexual). However, Brown has failed to realize that Olivia Pope is portrayed as a woman who is in control of the whole romantic relationship. Olivia and Fitz have broken up a few times over the past five seasons; Fitz actually longs for them to be back together every single time. Olivia’s life continues to go on without Fitz. Ironically, Fitz admits that Olivia is actually in control of the affair in Season 2, Episode 8:

You own me! You control me. I belong to you. You think I don’t want to be a better man?... You don’t think I want to be honorable?... My every feeling is controlled by the look on your face. I can’t breathe without you. I can’t sleep without you. (“Happy Birthday, Mr. President”)

Fitz is one of the most powerful men in the world and yet, he cannot live without Olivia. Olivia is able to break up with him and keep moving forward. Fitz is willing to do whatever it takes in

board school, attended Princeton University, and went on to Georgetown Law School. From there, she worked on President Fitz's campaign

example, Quinn was interviewed on a news program and called out the media for describing her as 'sassy, lucky, over-confident, etc.': "Olivia Pope doesn't fit with the slutty-mistress stereotype.



Olivia Pope treats her clients and staff members with the upmost respect. She cares about their wellbeing and understands the challenges that life can bring. One of her staff members, Huck, wanted to visit his family while a lot of work had to be done. Olivia allowed Huck to leave work and did not force him to choose between work and family. As mentioned earlier, Olivia helped each of her staff members in their time of need and never asked for anything in



## Works Cited

- Brown, Stacia L. "Is Olivia Pope the New Sally Hemings?" *Clutch Magazine*. Sutton New Media, 1 May 2012. Web. 13 Dec. 2015. <<http://www.clutchmagonline.com/2012/05/is-olivia-pope-is-the-new-sally-heming/>>.
- Evans, Lydia. "Representations of African American Political Women in Scandal." *Pepperdine*

Khanna, Nikki, and Cherise A. Harris. "Discovering Race in a 'Post-Racial' World: Teaching Race through Primetime Television." *Teaching Sociology* 43 (2014): 39-45. Print.

Khanna, Nikki, and Cherise A. Harris. "A Rebuttal to Jack Niemonen's 'Whither the White Working Class?'" *Teaching Sociology* (2015): 242-45. Print.