



LAW, LITERATURE AND A DREAM: HOW MEDIA INFLUENCED MY JOURNEY TO LAW

*Sonia Gardi**

Introduction

Television has long been a powerful medium for influencing public perceptions, values and career choices. This influence extends to the legal profession, where popular legal dramas such as 'Suits,' 'Law and Order,' and 'How to Get Away with Murder' have captivated audiences and, in some cases, influenced individuals' decisions to pursue careers in law.

Roles associated with law, including lawyers, have consistently maintained a position of prominence and 'overrepresentation' on prime-time television. The depiction of the legal system has been widely broadcast through various popular culture formats, such as movies, best-selling books, soap operas, television news, advertising and pop music. Its often glamourised depiction has influenced many to pursue law as a career choice, including myself.

This report will first discuss my early life, providing context as to how my decision to pursue law was somewhat radical. It will then move on to how that decision was made, the part that literature, film and TV had in the choice, and finally the differences between how law is portrayed in the media, compared to the study and practice of it.

Early Life

Though I would label myself as a born and raised Plymothian, that's not entirely accurate. Before my arrival, my family would travel around the globe. Starting from their birthplace in Kurdistan (a region in Northern Iraq), they went from Turkey to Morocco, travelled across East Asia, visited the coastlines of Tenerife and Thailand, and ventured through Europe. However, this journey came to a sudden stop in the Netherlands, as my mother was six months pregnant and was advised to stop travelling and rest, much to her disdain. It was

* Sonia is currently in the third year of her law degree

here in Amsterdam that I was born and spent the first eight months of my life there. After this, my parents decided to move to Plymouth, UK and ceased their travels. My elder brother and sister never hesitate to tell me I “ruined the fun” and I can’t say I blame them.

My childhood stayed fairly consistent. I moved house a few times, but never so far that I couldn’t recognise the new area. I went to Eggbuckland Vale Primary School (EVPS) and swiftly transitioned to its sister school, Eggbuckland Community College (ECC). However, I still had many cultural differences as even though I grew up here, I was raised closer to how a child living in Kurdistan would be. One of many examples I can think of is that my parents were very strict, which I realise is a trait many parents share. However, mine just seemed to go above and beyond. I was seldom allowed to go out with my friends, and sleepovers frankly didn’t exist in my household. In fairness, they did grow up in a small village in Kurdistan, where every three paces you’d find some form of a deadly snake, dog, or person. So perhaps they were just projecting onto their children what they had been told their whole lives. This difference in upbringing was evident throughout school, but even so, I never felt marginalised, which I completely credit to my closest friends. They not only understood these differences and accepted them, but have attempted many times to participate in practices I would otherwise do alone, a noteworthy one being Ramadan. This will be the 12th year my friend Christina swears that she will fast at least a single day and will likely give up in the third hour!

The comfort and stability I found in Plymouth was uprooted in 2015 when my parents decided to move back to Kurdistan, due to complications in my elder siblings’ education. Well, ‘back’ for them, as it was my first time living there. Although I only lived there for two years, it’s still one of the most memorable parts of my life, perhaps because of how different the lifestyle was. Nothing was familiar to me. From weather to education, everything shifted. Summers in Plymouth were never unbearably hot, and the rain persisted, whereas in Kurdistan they were scorching, with temperatures exceeding 45 degrees Celsius, accompanied by occasional red rain.¹ At ECC in Plymouth, I was asked to critically analyse why Lady Macbeth scrubbed her hands in her sleep, whereas in Kurdistan I was brought back to basics and asked to identify which of ‘womb’, ‘tomb’, and ‘bomb’ didn’t rhyme (English is a third/fourth language there). Despite this, I still loved every second of life there and was slightly devastated when I had to pack my bags and move back to Plymouth once again. However, this barely constituted another life-altering adjustment, as settling back into England took me about a day. I continued studying at ECC and was placed in Year 10 (the year all my old

¹ Red rain (sometimes called muddy rain, coloured rain, or blood rain) is a variety of rain (or any other form of precipitation) which contains enough mineral dust, from soils (particularly from deserts), for the dust to be visible and give it a maroon pigment.

classmates were in), so everyone around me was a familiar face. The major difference was that conversations about my career became far more prevalent.

The Law and Literature

I wish I could say that my reason for pursuing law was that I've always had a calling to it, that I witnessed the law being used for manipulation and injustice, and swore to make a change. Unfortunately, my reasoning was not quite as profound or conventional. My journey to law began with a tub of Pringles and an ancient box television in my bedroom.

Television has always been a major influencer in my career decisions. My 5 year-old self witnessed Jenna Rink in '13 going on 30' and swore to one day be an editor for a world-renowned magazine. A short-lived vision, as soon thereafter I was introduced to the 'Hunger Games' franchise and pledged to be a winner of the games! Which didn't happen either, although an argument could be made that the cost-of-living crisis is close enough.

It wasn't until I was introduced to the character of Meredith Grey in 'Grey's Anatomy' that I decided on a career and stuck with it. The 'I'm going to be a doctor' refrain seemed to be steadfast and unwavering for a long time, as it ran through my late childhood and persisted throughout my teenage years. However, that ambition came to an abrupt halt when I came to the obvious-to-everyone-but-me realisation that I can't do maths, and you need a lot more knowledge than the phrase "push one of epi" to get through med school.

So where to go now that reality slapped me across the face? My immediate thought was to turn to my family and follow in one of their footsteps. However, the comments I heard from them, like "this job sucks" and "I should have bought more lottery tickets" prompted me to abort that mission. My next idea was to turn to my peers and was consistently greeted with one of three phrases: "I've always wanted to be (insert occupation) since I was a child," "I dunno" and "I'm dropping out". Everywhere I looked for answers seemed to be a dead end. This brings me to a dreaded time in everyone's life: COVID-19, as it was during this period that I decided to pursue a career in law.

For my particular year group at ECC (i.e. the students that had barely six months of studying for A levels, and then were thrown into an eight-month lockdown) it was difficult to figure out what career path to take. I vividly remember my tutor calling me throughout July and August, encouraging me to write a personal statement and to be prepared to apply for universities in October 2020. During this time my older sister was ordering Paint by Numbers and showing me her "masterpieces" (as she put it), my brother and younger sister were learning how to

crochet and (over)playing Mario Kart, while I was being told to choose a career for the rest of my life. That's not to say that I didn't partake in Mario Kart, as I definitely did. But I also had a looming question, which was, 'Isn't that what A levels are for?' How was I supposed to choose a career if I knew nothing about the subjects in practice, or to be frank, in general, considering we weren't really being taught?

I was struggling as I had no work experience. This got so pressing that I turned to BuzzFeed Career quizzes and began making tier lists and customised randomisers to help me decide. Though my passion towards the law had always been there, it mainly stemmed from my hyper-fixation on legal media. This seeped through in many forms, ranging from Elle Woods weighing the pros and cons of a cherry-scented resumé in 'Legally Blonde', to Rodion Raskolnikov weighing the pros and cons of murder in the classic novel, 'Crime and Punishment'. However, I never considered it as a career choice, mainly because my father and elder siblings all chose science, technology, engineering, and medicine (STEM) related careers (except my little sister whose current goal is to be a nail technician – I'll never doubt you, Hana). Law seemed too out of place.

Also, I didn't know anyone who studied law, nor would the degree be very useful to me in Kurdistan, as their views of law compared to the UK are on opposite ends of the spectrum, which can often be jarring. In Kurdistan (or maybe just my extended family) without a university degree, you are almost shunned and deemed a failure, which I've always seen as rather extreme. However, that never tends to pose a problem for students as, worst case scenario, they can always go and study the easiest subject available to them... law! Kurdistan views law as something to turn to when nothing else seems achievable. This opinion is the exact opposite of the UK, where students studying law are always in demand, thanks to its longstanding reputation for academic and professional excellence and judicial rigour. Furthermore, UK law graduates may not necessarily pursue a career in law, but the prestigious degree alone will distinguish them. I knew that if I picked a STEM subject like the rest of my family, I would at least have a support system, a degree that would assist me regardless of where I lived. However, an overwhelming number of signs pointed to 'NO', so my mind never fully went there.

The Dream

That never-ending summer eventually went by, and we were in that strange transition between lockdown and returning to ordinary life. As far as my career path went, I was still drawing a blank. I had gone from doctor, to musician, to flight attendant and circled back to

doctor in the span of weeks. By this point, I was exhausted having my ideas shot down by multiple authoritarian figures in my life, whether that was my parents or my tutor at ECC. I became so desperate that I kept pleading, “Why can’t I just become an artist?” whilst showcasing a slightly above average drawing of a stickman to my dad, who I imagine had enough of my shenanigans.

One night, I was discussing one of my favourite novels ‘Crime and Punishment’ by Fyodor Dostoevsky, with a close friend of mine over FaceTime. We were debating the all-time question, do the ends justify the means? If Raskolnikov hadn’t confessed, would the murder of Alyona Ivanovna be justified?

“Obviously, the morality of an act is never absolute. It depends on the foreseeable consequences.”

“Obviously not, because the means determine the end. Saying the ends justify the means is just choosing wilful ignorance because it’s convenient.”

To spare spoilers for the novel, I will fast forward to the moment where he eventually gave in, admitting that my knowledge of the novel is superior (well... his precise words were “You’re an obsessed freak” but that’s how I chose to interpret it). To which I answered, “Huh, I’d make a pretty good lawyer”. Usually, this would be another one of my glib, throwaway comments that even I’d barely pay attention to. This time it was different, however. Of course, law! Why did I never think of it before? Inevitably the reasons I listed above all came flooding through. Jumping out of my bed, I sprinted down the stairs, and swung the living room door open to tell my family.

“I’m going to be a lawyer!”

Now, I didn’t expect a round of applause and cheering or anything, although that would have been nice, but I *also* didn’t expect an emergence of cackling I can only liken to machine gun fire. Regardless of their rather dismaying reaction, I didn’t let it sway my choice and began making steps towards law school. I think my parents believed I was having another one of my random career hyper-fixations, but that was quickly quashed when I showed up the next week with multiple references from my teachers, and a personal statement ready to go.

This is when the protesting began: “You shouldn’t do this”, “you’re making a mistake”, but it was too late. Although I’d always believed I’d be more pragmatic about my choice, my mind was made up and I was confident in my decision. Later that month, I submitted my application through UCAS, and soon after received an offer from University of Plymouth.

My First Day of University

One year later and it's 26 September 2021, the first day of law school. Every ounce of my social skills had been drained after the confusing year(s) that were COVID-19 and I was desperately searching for a friend and some footing. The previous year my confidence had stayed and I barely doubted my decision. These strong walls came tumbling down approximately two minutes into my first day, when I struggled to find Sherwell Church. After that, a wave of nervousness and doubt engulfed me. Of all the anxieties, imposter syndrome hit the hardest. "Can I do this?", "Is university for me?" To soothe my nerves, I told myself it would be fine, that everything will be worth it and that once I'm done with university, I'll be a qualifying, hot-shot lawyer. It will be just like Sui-

"If you're here because you think this is anything like 'Suits, I have bad news for you,"

said Luke Fisher. A dream-shattering statement. But alas, he was correct.

When I began the first semester, I was not the biggest fan. The competitive classrooms and demanding coursework overwhelmed me, and I felt as though I was heading towards burnout. One thing that definitely wasn't reflected from legal media was how intricate and convoluted legal concepts can be.

A rather memorable event occurred two years later in October 2023, when there was a career-focused Open Evening, held by Brights Solicitors in collaboration with the University of Plymouth Law Society (UPLS). A welcoming team, a glass of cider and a group of friendly faces marked the start of the evening. After this, presentations were given by several professionals, who discussed topics like the route to becoming a solicitor or barrister, balancing work and life, what it's really like to work in a law firm or chambers, and how to write a killer resumé. Some moments stood out for me, particularly the speech given by the criminal barrister, who explained that early in their career the crimes they dealt with were minor, such as low-level shoplifting, speeding, and routine road traffic offences, but as they became more experienced, they were assigned major cases, "like theft". I was left slightly unsatisfied and thought is this what I deserve after watching so many episodes of 'Criminal Minds'? As Scheidegger comments, 'Although much of crime television is a work of fiction, it holds a real-world effect on people in society, mainly by setting unrealistic expectations of the criminal justice system as a whole.'²

² 'How Accurate Are Crime Shows?' (York College of Pennsylvania) <www.ycp.edu/about-us/offices-and-departments/communications/blog/how-accurate-are-crime-shows.php> accessed 18 December 2023

Eventually, I got used to the study workload and realised that maybe my decision was right, as there have also been instances where the glamour on the screen reflects reality. Prevalent examples include the Advocacy presentations in the 'Dispute Resolution Skills' module, and the UPLS mootings and debating competitions. Although the nerves right before you stand to deliver your argument can be almost unbearable, the adrenaline rush of being given a complex case, crafting an argument and delivering it is unequalled, when all your hard work is finally rewarded. Sometimes, I have to prevent myself from reciting, "and isn't it the first cardinal rule of perm maintenance that you're forbidden to wet your hair 24 hours after getting a perm at the risk of deactivating the ammonium thioglycolate?" Not that this applies to any advocacy scenario, I just enjoy quoting it.

Despite the fact that studying and practising law is not quite akin to its glamourised counterpart on the screen, I'd be lying if I said it's *nothing* like it. Advocacy especially can get the adrenaline pumping, making it easy to get caught up in the emotion. Although my father and elder siblings still think it was not the right choice, and my mother can't go five minutes without saying, "Of course Sonia is going to be a lawyer" (usually followed by a cackle), I'm still convinced that I chose wisely and will continue to persevere on my legal journey.