JOHN GRISHAM'S "THE STREET LAWYER"- THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE POOR AND THE RICH

Section A-Research paper



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"Compelling ... if there is any justice, 'The Street Lawyer' will be the biggest hit wet"

yet."

(Entertainment Weekly)

"An entertaining read with an important theme."

(Chicago Sun-Times)

"The plot surges forward, pulling us along as we turn those pages a mile a minute."

(San Francisco Chronicle)

In the contemporary world the importance of solution of political and social problems is becoming a more attractive theme. The reason is the great amount of them and the people who are suffering and one more time John Grisham in his novel "Street Lawyer" made attempts to show social and political issues of the society. The United States is the world's richest third world nation. Imperial America's decay has one simple cause: the unsustainable tension between extreme greed and extreme poverty. While intellectuals wring their hands, it takes the thriller writer to mention this unmentionable fact. The author disturbs some problematic matters of high developed America such as homelessness, young motherhood, divorce, salary, money's reflection to husband and wife's relationship, lack of charitable works, discrimination, corruption, selfless advocates for the poor and strong lawyer for the rich, and many others.

Analyzing John Grisham's novel "The Street Lawyer", the genre of which is a legal thriller, we see the main focus on the problems of his concern. The main character Michael Brock is a wealthy and successful lawyer who works for Drake and Sweeney, an important company in Washington. From the beginning his dream is to become a partner of the firm, but an unexpected event will change his priorities. Then he wants to be a street lawyer, a defender of homeless and people who live in the streets. One day he finds out some illegal facts and knows that his company is guilty of having evicted some squatters despite them having paid their rent for their houses. Suddenly Michael changes his lifestyle. After this episode he loses his big house, his luxury car and his high standard of life. Moreover his marriage is broken. A lot of book reviewers consider that he decides to be a homeless lawyer after being taken hostage along with other eight attorneys by an armed street person who identifies himself as "Mister". His name is Devon Hardy, 45, a veteran of Vietnam; he has been evicted from his squatter's apartment because of Michael's firm Drake & Sweeney. He demands only to tell how much money his prisoners earned last year and how much they gave away to charity. Critics Tom De Haven, Michiko Kakutani, Katherine Dagger, Linda L. Richards,

Vicente Hidalgo, Gale Ann A. Sayson and Mat Coward are convinced that one deadly shot to "Mister" by a police sniper ends the six-hour standoff, however it changes Michael's life, whose 90-hour workweeks suddenly seem pointless. Another contradicting idea is that the decision being a street lawyer came to Michael's mind after his meeting with a 4 year-old black kid Ontario and his young mother with three more children. That day he works as a volunteer in the Church, his task is spreading peanut butter on bread in the soup kitchen. He helped Mordecai Green, a black street lawyer, the leader of the movement. Michael likes Ontario very much and the child can give answer to his questions fluently. It is too cold and he gives his denim jacket to his little friend. Unfortunately that was the end of their relations, because once he watched the news on TV: "D.C. police found a small car near Fort Totten Park, in Northeast, in a war zone. It was parked on the street, its bald tires stuck in the frozen slush. Inside were a young mother and her four children, all dead from asphyxiation. The police suspected the family lived in the car, and was trying to stay warm. The automobile's tailpipe was buried in a pile of snow plowed from the street. A few details, but no names."¹ This is all about Ontario and his family. Michael claims: "I cursed Mister for derailing my life; I cursed Mordecai for making me feel guilty and Ontario for breaking my heart."² There could be a case for saying that it is the black kid who destroys the mind of the protagonist in "The Street Lawyer".

Unfortunately, Grisham's this book has received generally negative reviews by most scholars and as usual positive ones by the author's fans. The main topics for consideration are shallow character development, usage of atrocious dialogues, frenetic plot, absence of subtlety and hardly gritty realism of storytelling and so on.

Book reviewers Tom De Haven, Michiko Kakutani and Gale Ann A. Sayson state out that John Grisham has overused awful and atrocious dialogues which decrease the quality of the fiction. For instance in Entertainment Weekly Tom De

¹John Grisham. The Street Lawyer. – United States: Befry Holding Inc, 1998.-p.47

²John Grisham. The Street Lawyer. – United States: Befry Holding Inc, 1998.-p.50

Haven founds: "In 'The Street Lawyer', that finger-pointing advocacy can often turn scenes into civics lessons and make an awful lot of dialogue read like op-ed screeds."³ And another critic Michiko Kakutani who usually criticizes Grisham's works with a bit negative reviews asserts: "Matters are not by Grisham's atrocious dialogue. Michael speaks almost entirely in clichés: he talks about being "back at full throttle" and being his "usual hard-charging self." To a friend, he says he's "found a calling"; to his brother, he says: "I've lost my love for money. It's the curse of the devil." The rest of the people in this book speak in equally leaden terms. One says, "The law is a higher calling." Another: "There are more valleys than mountains."⁴ Moreover the reviewer Gale Ann A. Sayson points out that the book has many dialogues which require searching their meaning from the dictionary. Yet the vocabulary used by John Grisham is understandable to ESL learners. He has consumed mostly common set phrases and idiomatic expressions in English.

As we claimed before "The Street Lawyer" is not John Grisham's complicated work, character development and storytelling are main subtleties of the novel. According to the reviewer Tom De Haven mentioned: "... *Grisham's strong suit has never been character development. That weakness presents here, since Michael's transformation from careerist attorney to a zealous champion of the poor happens, improbably, with the thunderclap swiftness of Saint Paul's conversion.* "⁵Really, changing profession and life style, turning from one environment into another one requires prominent period of time. For the protagonist it takes only few days. Having come to think of the length of time, everything happens with astonishing speed, just 32 days cover the whole novel and within a month Michael Brock changes careers, ends his soured marriage, swipes a file of sensitive documents, nearly gets killed in a car crash, is arrested and beaten up tracks down a reluctant witness, and even finds a girlfriend.

³Tom De Haven. The Street Lawyer. –Entertainment Weekly, 1998.

⁴Michiko Kakutani. The Street Lawyer: From Avarice to Virtue. –New York Times, 1998. ⁵Tom De Haven. The Street Lawyer. –Entertainment Weekly, 1998

The author of the article "The Street Lawyer: From Avarice to Virtue" Michiko Kakutani believes that *Grisham is too busy charging ahead to bother fleshing out any of these developments with the sort of emotional or physical detail that might make them feel plausible or real. The result is a perfunctory brand*-*name novel with an unlikable hero, a slapdash plot and some truly awful prose.*⁶

While analyzing this novel, we have the right to say that if a fiction's task refers to social impacts of the society and it contains a lot of moral and psychological issues, and of course it is natural phenomenon to the author to avoid some literary rules. We are sure it is not true about all social works.

It seems to a reader that the genre of the book is even a mixture of didactic and thriller. It is the author's evaluation to fix two genres' elements in a book. Proofing this statement the critic, Mat Coward, states out that *"The Street Lawyer" is a plainly didactic book. It is a curious novel, fluent and fascinating, but not suspenseful...* "And didactic books are good for improving the condition of the society by its members. One special trend for John Grisham's works is to show the exact line between good and bad, and at the end of the book the author says to his readers in the world honest and hard-working people achieve their wishes, yet mean and lazy ones share is unfortunate destiny. Fairy tale ending is used by the author in this book; the sequence of events is beyond of reality. If John Grisham had used more reliable actions, "The Street Lawyer" would have received more positive views by both critics and readers.

Analyzing the author's work's impact on social conditions, generally it takes much more positive approaches by scholars who consider that Grisham's literature is very poor using fictional elements in his thrillers. As a social writer he is always praised, it might be the reason why common people read and adore his each bestselling novel.

Firstly the work tries to demonstrate the social issue the homelessness and its easy proposal by the street lawyer Michael Brock. But the deep layer of the

⁶Michiko Kakutani. The Street Lawyer: From Avarice to Virtue. –New York Times, 1998

novel depicts several issues of the society and the government; young motherhood, divorce, salary, money's reflection to husband and wife's relationship, lack of charitable works, discrimination, corruption, selfless advocates for the poor and strong lawyer for the rich, and many others.

The main purpose of the book cycles around the homelessness. Grisham's depiction of the homeless is tight enough to indicate a fair amount of close research. Nor does the author fall into the trap of overworking the heart-rending aspects of the work, which would have been a fair temptation. Instead of it the writer's work is filled with pathos and an impressive understanding especially for one who was once a nasty lawyer himself. Following lines from the book can prove the statement above. "The homeless are close to the streets, to the pavement, the curbs and gutters, the concrete, the litter, the sewer lids and fire hydrants and wastebaskets and bus stops and storefronts. They move slowly over familiar terrain, day after day, stopping to talk to each other because time means little, stopping to watch a stalled car in traffic, a new drug dealer on a corner, a strange face on their turf. They sit on their sidewalks hidden under hats and caps and behind drugstore sunshades, and like sentries they observe every movement. They hear the sounds of the street; they absorb the odors of diesel fumes from city buses and friend grease from cheap diners. The same cab passes twice in an hour and they know where it came from. A fine auto with Virginia and Maryland plates is parked at the curb; they'll watch it until it leaves. A cop with no uniform waits in a car with no markings, and they see it."

Grisham is keen on making detailed descriptions of the character, places and events, because of his professional influence; he is success using poetic details. He can be observed not as a writer mostly as a lawyer in his works.

The problems of marriage and the consequences of divorce are one of the significant subthemes of the novel. A young couple without children (maybe they don't want to have children) plays as key characters for transcendent chilly truth

⁷John Grisham. The Street Lawyer. – United States: Befry Holding Inc, 1998.-p.126

about fake marriage. They are protagonists of the book – Michael Brock and his brain surgeon wife Claire. It is usual with John Grisham, he never blames any character for his or her fault openly, and of course intelligent readers can receive the author's hidden message through the work. On the surface of the book there is no any negative attitude to Claire or Michael, even readers come to such a conclusion maybe it is good not living together when two people can't understand each other. In modern world even in Asia and in Muslim countries where traditions have much more power than personal desire, divorce is ubiquity and people try to accept easily.

However Grisham wants to declare the main and strong means are believe, kindness and true love in husband and wife relationship. If there are no such notions between them, the marriage can be broken as Michael and Claire do. Besides this there are much bigger reasons -job, money and career. Both of them count and compare their salaries for a year, both of them want to have promotion and both of them are very happy that they live in the centre of the city. They depend on more material issues than real humanistic duties. About their six years of marriage the author depicts a few countable things, and surprisingly all of them are about money, job and accommodation, nothing about romantics and. About their flat: "It was very nice apartment; at twenty-four hundred a month it should've been ever nicer. The furnishings were adequate. We were proud of where we lived –right address, beautiful rowhouse, and swanky neighborhood –but we spent so little time there. And we seldom entertained. Moving would be an adjustment, but we could endure it."8 They come home just for sleeping, from morning till night they are busy with learning about their profession and living in the rich part of the town make them much happier than their partner. Magnificence plays significant role in their perception of family.

One good thing – they are always open about their finances, nothing is hidden. Michael says: "She knew we had around fifty-one thousand dollars in

⁸John Grisham. The Street Lawyer. – United States: Befry Holding Inc, 1998.-p.60

mutual sounds, and twelve thousand in the checking account. I was amazed at how little we'd saved in six years of marriage. When you're on the fast track at a big firm, the money seems endless. "⁹ Leaving prominent law firm Drake & Sweeney and starting a job in Mordecai Green's clinic for the poor, cause, to tell the truth about, divorce by Claire. American picture of marriage appears when she suddenly asks his salary. Thirty thousand dollars a year is less one thousand than hers. Michael accepts that "You don't do public interest law for the money"¹⁰. Before choosing a profession money is usually not the attraction, the same with Claire and Michael. Like every med student she has begun her studies vowing that money is not her interest. She wants to help humanity, same for law students. Yet everything has changed.

When Michael is held hostage with his eight colleagues for six hours by Mister (Devon Hardy), eight families come because they are somewhat concerned. But only he has to catch a ride home with his secretary and his wife also knows about the hostage situation not because of her husband, it is standard procedure in that position, companies notify the hospitals, and everyone is placed on standby. Unfortunately when she tries to call, the phone lines are jammed. The writer makes such evidence and there is no way to blame Claire for not being so attentive to her husband. Claire explains: "We lost a litfie boy in surgery; he was hit by car."¹¹ Usually responsibility for work can outweigh all duties for rest of matters.

Other issues raised by John Grisham in "The Street Lawyer" are young motherhood and birth controlling. Again these problems are also observed by homelessness. The exact example is Lontae Burton. As we said before, Lontae, a mother of four children and only 22 years old and the father of her last three children is Kito Spires who is just 19 years old. They are poor, they don't have pocket money for themselves, and moreover they have four children. They are too young to protect their life and how they can take care for kids. The novel's

⁹John Grisham. The Street Lawyer. – United States: Befry Holding Inc, 1998.-p.60

¹⁰John Grisham. The Street Lawyer. – United States: Befry Holding Inc, 1998.-p.60

¹¹John Grisham. The Street Lawyer. – United States: Befry Holding Inc, 1998.-p.16

concerning problem is not only young motherhood, but young fatherhood as well. After Lontae and her four children die of carbon monoxide poisoning when snow blocks the exhaust pipe of their car, a typical inner-city product, an unemployed high school dropout with a criminal record Kito comes to meet the street lawyer, Michael Brock, and says that he doesn't know about the eviction though he feels it is wrong. He lives with Lontae and her children in the warehouse and he helps her to pay the rent when he can. After Christmas they fight and he leaves not only her, but his 3 children. And then he begins to live with a woman whose husband is in prison. As a father, a 19-year old boy doesn't feel responsibility in all countries, they are still immature and they need other's help and supporting.

John Grisham depicts such awful scenes of modern high developed America, and it seems that the novel is the resemblance of Theodore Dreiser's "An American Tragedy". Each page is full of problems of the society, yet the weak point of the book is that there are no strong solutions to the obstacles raised by the author.

It is very surprising that John Grisham always use allusions in his works and it helps to improve the author's conceptual world. In "The Street Lawyer" he consumes this stylistic devise and it increases the informativity of the novel, for instance about Mitch Snyder and CCNV. Mitch Snyder was one of the early advocates for the rights of the homeless; he dedicated his life to this noble cause. And CCNV – community for creative non-violence, its mission is to ensure that the rights of the homeless and the poor are not infringed upon, and that every person has an access to life's basic essential-food, shelter, clothing and medical care. "The CCNV was founded in the early seventies by a group of war protestors who had assembled in Washington to torment the government. They lived together in a house in Northwest. During their protests around the Capitol, they met homeless veterans of Vietnam, and began taking them in. They moved to larger quarters, various places around the city, and their number grew. After the war, they turned their attention to the plight of the D.C. homeless. In the early eighties, an activist named Mitch Snyder appeared on the scene, and quickly became a passionate and noisy voice for street people. ... In 1984, Snyder endured a fifty-one-day hunger strike to call attention to the neglect of the homeless.¹² ... In 1989, the city built a shelter in Southeast, far away from downtown and began planning the removal of the homeless from the CCNV. ... The CCNV grew to thirteen hundred beds. Mitch Snyder committed suicide in 1990, and the city named a street after him.¹³

The valuable part of the book is the author's ability to explain the cultural concept of the words "street lawyer" and "public interest law". As Michael emphasized: "I was rapidly learning that one of the challenges of being a street lawyer was to be able to listen. Many of my clients just wanted to talk to someone".¹⁴

The author of the book turns the story into an astonishing and surprising end. Michael and Mordecai Green win in the court case. And they found a way of defending the poor and the homeless. They blame Drake & Sweeney for the death of Devon Hardy (Mister) and Lontae with her four children. The plot is about crime, violence and injustice and there are also some important human values like honor, faithfulness or friendship. In the first row responsibility for work is the best appreciated character in the novel. Michael Brock's words in "The Street Lawyer": – "*I'm thinking about Public Interest Law… It's when you work for the good of society without making a lot of money*"¹⁵ make us think whether we are in the right way in choosing our profession or continuing it in an acceptable form. Everybody should realize that if a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich.

Grisham could raise social and political problems in his writing. He describes that everybody has equal rights and duties and it doesn't depend on

¹²John Grisham. The Street Lawyer. – United States: Befry Holding Inc, 1998.-p.99

¹³ John Grisham. The Street Lawyer. – United States: Befry Holding Inc, 1998.-p.100

¹⁴John Grisham. The Street Lawyer. – United States: Befry Holding Inc, 1998.-p.246

¹⁵John Grisham. The Street Lawyer. – United States: Befry Holding Inc, 1998.- p.30

relatives or friends' high rank in the society. His works cover the theme of social issues and often deal directly with the legal and moral questions around such matters as the death penalty, homelessness, health insurance and prison conditions. In Grisham's works there is no separation of countries, nations and readers... He could write for everybody from old people to children. It is a very rare phenomenon to manage it. It is known that it is a rather difficult task to understand and to describe all ages of people at the same time to be appreciated by them.

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