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Advanced Comp Revision

Murder 101:

A Review of *How to Get Away with Murder*

ABC's *How to Get Away wijth Murder* began as the underdog of the Fall 2014 American broadcast network pilot season, but as it now launches its second season, the legal drama is rolling in great ratings. Producer Shonda Rimes (of Scandal and Grey's Anatomy fame) lead the current season to eight million viewers in September, 2015. After ending the previous season in February with the shocking revelation of who killed Lila Stangard, along with yet another dead body, *How to Get Away with Murder* continues to captivate its viewers.

How to Get Away with Murder centers on Annalise Keating, played by Viola Davis, as she teaches criminal law at the fictional college of Middleton University in Philadelphia, and takes a special interest in five of her students. The pilot episode begins *in medias res*, as these six characters become entangled in the plots of not one, but two separate murders. While Annalise continues to teach and represent clients at her own law firm, she and her students work through the homicides, more personally involved than ever.

Davis' character of Annalise Keating, a defense attorney and law professor, is the driving force behind the show. From the first episode, Annalise is the head bitch in charge, intimidating, cold, and utterly fascinating. Even her opening monologue is ominous:

> "Good morning. I don't know what terrible things you've done in your life up to this point, but clearly your karma's out of balance to get assigned to my class. I'm Professor Annalise Keating, and this is Criminal Law 100, or as I prefer to call it, how to get away with murder."



Viola Davis as Professor Annalise Keating

She cuts an imposing figure, one who leads her class and law firm with strength and regality, but behind the scenes, Annalise cheats on her husband and ruthlessly manipulates her students. In addition, she is always willing to do whatever it will take to win a case, whether it be entirely legal or not, and her scheming always puts her one step ahead of everyone else.

From the pilot episode on, Annalise remains an intriguing protagonist, one whom viewers both root for and despise at the same time. But Annalise is only one of the truly outstanding ensemble. In the first episode, Keating selects five outstanding students from her class to work at her law firm, a prestigious position that can guarantee them a successful career in the future. These students make up the Keating Five: Wes Gibbins, the aspiring underdog; Connor Walsh, a gay narcissist; Michaela Pratt, an ambitious perfectionist; Asher Millstone; the privileged know-it-all; and Laurel Castillo, an idealistic feminist. The lives of these characters will become hopelessly intertwined as they become involved in the murder cases on their campus.

The first season was filled with steamy love affairs, legal drama, and more than enough intrigue. The body count starts in the pilot, as the up and coming law students Wes, Michaela, Laurel, and Connor set fire to a body, whom we later learn was that of Keating's husband. Lila Stangard, a student who has been missing for months, is also found dead, floating in the water tank of her sorority house. The connections between all the characters are fraught with tension. Just who committed these murders remains unclear, as well as how or why. The audience can only begin to guess how our main characters are involved, whether they have committed the acts themselves, worked as accomplices, or simply witnessed as unfortunate bystanders. As

the season continues, pieces of the murder are slowly revealed to the shock and awe of viewers.

What starts as a legal thriller, a murder mystery, quickly becomes a character study. How does one act under high stress? What causes a person to kill? Just how far can you push someone before they break? These characters, so three dimensional and relatable, can't help but draw viewers in for more. For every good trait they exhibit, there is the darker hidden counterpart; for each criminal act, the means, motive, and opportunity.

However, the backbone of the show is not the whodunnit mystery, but the relationships that build and change throughout the season. Rebecca, one of the suspects in Lila's murder, and Wes, her lawyer, may be the star crossed lovers of the new generation: a drug dealer charged with murder and her defense attorney's ambitious protégé. Both of Annalise's associates begin questionable if endearing relationships with two of the Keating Five, Asher Millstone and Laurel Castillo. Even Annalise and Wes border on creepy, in a twisted relationship that is partly familial and still somehow fraught with sexual tension. These relationships are built only to be twisted and put to the test, as characters manipulate and use each other for their own purposes, looking out for themselves only, or perhaps worse, become so devoted that they will ultimately commit murder to protect each other.

Lead actress Viola Davis is entering the second season on an Emmy-winning high (the first African American woman to receive such an award for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama series), but it is not just her superb acting skills that take the show to the next level. The entire cast performs equally as well. Alfred Enoch, previously known for being in the *Harry Potter* series for all of two seconds, is finally getting his chance to shine as Wes Gibbins, the underdog of the law class, and the only one who is capable of holding it together while literally burying a body. Aja Naomi King and Karla Souza play ambitious law students, who often put their male counterparts to shame. Both Jack Falahee and Matt McGorry embody their obnoxious and smug characters so effortlessly that one can't help but somehow fall in love with

them. Katie Findlay as Rebecca Sutter, our murder suspect through much of the first season, is at once irresistible and untrustworthy. An award winning cast combined with a famous showrunner and producer, as well as excellent writers and directors, create an utterly dynamic television series that simply cannot be missed.



The entire cast. Left to right: Jack Falahee (Connor Walsh), Aja Naomi King (Michaela Pratt), Matt McGorry (Asher Millstone), Alfred Enoch (Wes Gibbins), Karla Souza (Laurel Castillo), Viola Davis (Annalise Keating)

How to Get Away with Murder has already been named Television Program of the Year by the American Film Institute and won the Outstanding Drama Series award by both the Image and GLAAD awards. With a talented cast, well rounded characters, and a plot that just doesn't quit, *How to Get Away with Murder* continues to be one of the best shows on television today.