



Published in Nairobi, Kenya by  
Royallite Global

Volume 4, Issue 4, 2023

#### Article Information

Submitted: 10th October 2022

Accepted: 20th June 2023

Published: 25th October 2023

ISSN: 2708-5945 (Print)

ISSN: 2708-5953 (Online)

Additional information is available  
at the end of the article <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

To read the paper online, please scan  
this QR code



#### How to Cite:

Too, G. K., Mwihiya, M. N., & Mwangi, P. M. (2023). Literary Strategies that Enhance Legal Representation: An Analysis of John Grisham's *The Firm* (1991), *A Time to Kill* (1989) and *The Chamber* (1994). *Research Journal in Advanced Humanities*, 4(4). <https://doi.org/10.58256/e2r76h69>

## Literary strategies and the legal representation in John Grisham's *The Firm* (1991), *A Time to Kill* (1989) and *The Chamber* (1994)

Gideon Kiplangat Too, Margaret Njoki Mwihiya & Peter Muhoro Mwangi

Department of Literature and Languages, Mount Kenya University, Kenya

Correspondence: [gidysnoop@gmail.com](mailto:gidysnoop@gmail.com)

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5688-0858>

#### Abstract

This article analyzes various literary strategies that John Grisham has used to develop his legal issues in *A Time to Kill*, *The Firm* and *The Chamber*. The study aims to investigate how Grisham's use of literary devices has helped him convey the relationship between society and the law. This is accomplished by an examination of the author's literary choices, the tactics that highlight the relationship between the law and society, and the motivations behind the language used by the characters and, if any, the omniscient narrator. We can determine the communication levels of a text by examining both the overt and covert meanings of the language used. To effectively carry out this study, Structuralism was used as a theory for analysis. From the study, it is established that Grisham has utilized the structure of a legal thriller, a hard-boiled protagonist, legal jargon, double narration, and an omniscient narrator.

**Keywords:** John Grisham, justice systems, law, legal representation, literary strategies



### Public Interest Statement

This article examines John Grisham's literary strategies in *A Time to Kill*, *The Firm*, and *The Chamber*, focusing on how he conveys the relationship between society and the law. It examines the author's literary choices, tactics, and motivations behind language used by characters and the omniscient narrator. Structuralism is used to analyze the text, revealing Grisham's use of legal thriller structure, hard-boiled protagonist, legal jargon, double narration, and an omniscient narrator.

### Introduction

This section analyzes various literary strategies that John Grisham has used to develop his legal issues in *A Time to Kill*, *The Firm* and *The Chamber*. This analysis is in an effort to examine how the literary strategies Grisham has used, has enabled him to communicate the interaction between law and the society. This analysis achieves this by looking at the literary choices the writer uses together with what the strategies foreground about the interaction between law and the society as well as the intention behind the language utilized by both the characters as well as the omniscient narrator if any. By analyzing the nuances as well as the direct intentions of the language employed, we understand the levels at which the text communicates.

John Grisham novels belong to a genre of novels called Legal Thriller. Legal thriller is a genre with fictional stories whose characters are mainly lawyers, judges, attorneys and those who work in their offices (Patterson, 2006). The motif in legal thrillers is mainly law and justice. The plot usually revolves around lawyers involved in cases trying to prove that their clients who have been accused of various crimes are innocent. In some cases, lawyers are hired to fight for their clients to get justice (Patterson, 2006).

The growth of legal thriller started in 1987 when Scott Turow's *Presumed Innocent* has been published (The New Republic 1994). Legal thriller depicts uneasiness about the law practices and about the lawyers who oppose the overall system, "who stand outside the world of expensive suits and expensive cars and expensive politicians, and who try, often pathetically, to revel in renunciation" (The New Republic 1994). The law in these novels is both, an apparatus and a pretext, "it's a rigid narrative frame, the exoskeleton of a plot" (The New Republic 1994). *National Library Board* describes a legal thriller as a story "in which ordinary lawyers are forced to do extraordinary tasks to combat enemies within and without the legal parameters" (National Library Board 2008). In other words the law is the essence of legal thrillers. The law is a cause of the conflict as well as a tool to extricate it.

A legal thriller can be considered as an American genre not only because it originated in the United States of America but also because it portrays the character of American society (The New Republic 1994). Thus, a legal thriller accentuates the legal system of the United States of America. A legal thriller raises an issue of a legal system as a whole even though the story is usually about criminal law (The New Republic 1994). American legal system comes into question, while the story of an individual is equally important. A legal thriller is referred to as a study in individualism where the system is never justified (The New Republic 1994). In other words, individualism of the protagonist always prevails over the corrupt system of government.

A legal thriller depicts topicalities of the American society. The United States of America is often said to be the most litigious nation on earth with a great leap in the number of lawyers and distribution of law firms between 1965 and 1990 (The New Republic 1994). Thus, the society and the characters portrayed in a legal thriller are purely American. The protagonist of a legal thriller, a lawyer, and depiction of the legal system, which constitutes the core of the novel, remind the readers of the prevailing culture and the relevant issues their society faces. The protagonist of a legal thriller is called a lawyer-opportunist rather than a

lawyer-statesman (The New Republic 1994). Accordingly, the lawyer of a legal thriller accommodates to the circumstances and takes advantages of the opportunities available at that time. In addition to this, the protagonist is usually a young idealist who succumbs to material gain. The protagonist is slowly involved into the conspiracy by the practice of law and by the hollow, material culture which is a reflection of the prevailing culture outside the law (The New Republic 1994). A legal thriller focuses not only on legal issues. A system represented in a legal thriller is only partly legal, it is also partly political, partly cultural and partly racial (The New Republic 1994). Accordingly, a legal thriller, same as the hard-boiled detective, embraces a variety of aspects of the contemporary American society, namely legal, political, cultural and racial. It can be stated that the society represented in a legal thriller is not homogeneous. However, the stress is put on “all-white, all male, ‘gentlemanly’ undercut by success” (The New Republic 1994). Hence, in a legal thriller, an ethnic group as well as gender become indicators of those who can be considered privileged.

It is important to note that a legal thriller has its origins in spy or detective novel. The debt that a legal thriller owns to the detective genre is stressed in the article “Law’s labors lost - The Firm by John Grisham / Pleading Guilty”. The article provides a number of similarities between a legal thriller and the detective novel, namely “the same relentless insistence on the process of discovery, the same murky subterfuge, the same sense of divided loyalties, of fundamental allegiances gone awry, of being caught in a world where black and white have given way to shades of gray” (The New Republic 1994).

### Literature Review

According to Freund (1987), theory is a speculative instrument, an abstract level of discourse which attempts to formulate, conceptualize and generalize the underlying principles of certain phenomena. Alternatively, a theory is trying to understand a concept or a phenomenon using a given framework. Theories are formulated to explain, predict and understand phenomena, and in many cases, to challenge and extend existing knowledge within the limits of critical bounding assumptions. The theoretical framework is the structure that can hold or support a theory of a research study. The theoretical framework introduces and describes the theory that explains why the research problem under study exists (Abend, 2008).

Literary theories usually approach a text by asking questions from one of the following angles: questions regarding the author, the text, or the reader (Selden, 2005). Recent literary theories are less interested in the author. Even if a real author is known, his or her personal feelings, motivation, imagination, psychological make-up and so on are matters that are discussed outside the realms of literature. This is the case even in autobiographies that are normally perceived to be factual and regarded as true accounts of real events that took place. Literary theories instead focus on the other two aspects; the text and the reader.

The theory used in this study is structuralism. According to *shmoop.com*, structuralism is the analysis of structures that underlie all phenomena; of literary texts, of football games, of families, of political systems, of fashion, of chemistry classes, of theory study guides and so on. When structuralism is applied to the study of literary texts, it then means there are structures or rules that shape the meaning of a text that need identification and analysis. When a text is subjected to analysis, such elements such as the plot, character, narrative strategies, conflict, setting, point of view are considered. Selden (2005), states that in structuralism, there must be a structure in every text, which explains why it is easier for experienced readers than for non-experienced readers to interpret a text. Hence, every text that is written seems to be governed by specific rules.

The objective of this paper was to analyze literary strategies used in selected texts of John Grisham. In pursuit of this, the researcher investigated legal and social structures in the selected texts and interrogates their interaction. Structuralism was suitable in carrying out this analysis since the theory is based on analysis of underlying structures to obtain meaning in a text.

### Methodology

The researcher applied textual analysis to collect and analyze data. According to Hodder (1994), textual analysis entails intensive reading of texts which are assigned labels to indicate presence of meaningful pieces of content. Textual analysis falls under qualitative research design. The researcher first read the novels extensively and as many times as possible to get a comprehensive understanding of the novel; both content and elements. The researcher then decided on what aspects are to be analyzed from the selected novels. In line with the objectives of the study, the researcher analyzed legal structures present in the selected texts after which an investigation on how they relate with social structures in the texts was done. The researcher finally examined literary strategies utilized by John Grisham to represent law and justice in his novels.

The data collected was subjected to content analysis together with the techniques of descriptive qualitative research as per objectives indicated in this study. *writing.colostate.edu* defines content analysis as a research tool used to determine the presence of certain words or concepts within texts. In content analysis, the presence, meanings and relationship of words and concepts are quantified and analyzed. In this study, the selected data in form of statements from the texts studied; was analyzed, evaluated and compared within and between texts in relation to place, language and space in order to determine character perception on legal matters.

### Analysis of the Findings

*The Firm* includes a number of legal terms because the action of the novel develops around legal institutions and the protagonist is a lawyer. Therefore, legal language gains considerable importance in the novel and is worth to be discussed. Language is one of the most important features of the law since the legal system functions not only through written codes but also through verbal communication. Same as most of professional groups of specialists, law system also has developed its own language which creates boundaries and, in this way, distinguishes lawyers from other professional groups. As a result, the knowledge in legal field includes learning the vocabulary of legal system as well as learning to use this vocabulary correctly.

Legal language empowers lawyers to exercise law effectively. According to Cotterrell, legal language is a ‘professional jargon’ which “enables lawyers to communicate in an effective and efficient way” (Cotterrell 2006). It can be stated that legal language is one of the basic elements of legal system since it embodies power and control of those who do not know legal language. However, legal communication has negative characteristics as well. As Cotterrell suggests, “the disadvantage is that lay people are often unable to understand it” (Cotterrell 2006: 15). Thus, legal language has advantages and disadvantages. It enables lawyers to practice and apply laws efficiently but, at the same time, it draws a sharp line between lawyers and ordinary people.

According to Cotterrell (2006), legal language can be divided into two categories: terms of art and terms of argot. Terms of art refer to the words which have a precise legal definition, for instance the word tort (Cotterrell 2006). Even though a layperson may recognize the word as a legal term, it is hardly plausible that he/she would be able to define it. The terms of art can be further subdivided into the terms which apply to the whole body of the law, for instance claimant, defendant, appeal; whereas other terms are used in a particular area of law, for instance consideration in contract law, murder in criminal law, trustee in the law of trusts (Cotterrell 2006). Another group of legal terms, even though frequently used by lawyers, lacks precision and therefore cannot be classified as the terms of art. These terms are not defined in dictionaries of law and are referred to as argot or “a language of jargon that members of a particular group use to communicate with each other” (Cotterrell 2006). Thus, these words are not officially accepted as legal terminology, nevertheless, they are recognizable as being specific to the legal community. The words *Blackacre* and *Whiteacre* could serve as an illustration of legal jargon. These terms refer to fictitious pieces

of land (Cotterrell 2006). It would be difficult for an ordinary person to explain the meaning of these terms same as the terms of art. The advantage of a language of jargon is that it can be used to avoid lengthy explanations since every lawyer knows what a particular jargon term means.

As stated before, the terms of art and the terms of argot are not used in everyday language by laypersons. However, some words are used both by ordinary people and by lawyers. The difference lies in the meaning with which a term is used in legal context and in common language. For instance, a party is not a celebration but “a person who has entered into a contract or is involved in a law suit”; meanwhile law suit is the legal meaning of the word action (Cotterrell 2006). Accordingly, certain words are common for both everyday and legal discourse. Nevertheless, these words carry different meanings and are used for different purposes in legal context.

Thus, in his legal thriller *The Firm* John Grisham depicts corruption and incompetence of American legal institutions and discusses the problems of the contemporary American society. Legal terminology and words related to the legal system constitute a big part of the novel's language. On the basis of its relationship to crime fiction and a number of common characteristics, a legal thriller can be considered as a branch or a subgenre of the hard-boiled detective.

There exist several literary strategies that John Grisham has utilized which enhance the realization of the plot. According to *literarydevices.net*, plot refers to the events that make up a story. There are various strategies at each writer's disposal in connection to effective communication in relation to plot. A story can take the linear plot form where events follow each other in a chronological order or the climatic plot where the story begins in the middle. Whichever form writers select allows them to realize aestheticism and foreground various thematic issues. John Grisham utilizes the frame story technique. The frame story technique is where there is an overall unifying story within which one or more other stories exist (Kermode, 1979).

This concept of double narration can be seen in *The Chamber* and *A Time to Kill*. In *The Chamber*, the main story revolves around a fictional racist character, Sam Cayhall, sentenced to death via the gas chamber. His charges include setting up a bomb with an accomplice that destroyed a Jewish lawyer's office and killing the lawyer's two twin boys. With some days before he is taken to the gas chamber for execution, Sam's grandson, Adam Cayhall, a young attorney who has just been admitted to practice law is brought in to try and save his grandfather from the gas chamber. Micro narratives include the flashbacks of racial murders and lynchings that Sam Cayhall carried out. Another sub-plot is that of narrations about the family members of Sam Cayhall. In *A Time to Kill* the main story revolves around a white attorney named Jake Brigance who has been contracted to defend an African American named Carl Lee Hailey, who faces prosecution for murdering two white supremacists responsible for rape and assault of his ten-year-old daughter, Tonya Hailey. The micro-narratives include separate chapters that deal with the activities of the Ku Klux Klan members.

Grisham seams the micro-stories with the main stories in both texts in a manner that allows them to seem like one story. Grisham's use of one narrative voice, the omniscient narrator, enables the two stories to achieve unity as well as avoid appearing fragmented. The usage of double narrative enhances Grisham's interrogation of the interaction of aspects of law and social issues in the American society. Grisham is making a statement that inasmuch as the interaction between law and society is structured into different levels, these levels are connected through a seamless labyrinth of other factors that influence the administration of justice. Although the two narratives are independent, they converge at one point. The convergence of the narratives illuminates this idea that though the characters belong to different social groups, their vices draw them in unity of destruction or success. The convergence also illustrates how social aspects meet at some point with judicial system for the interaction to take place.

**Conclusion**

John Grisham has utilized legal jargon as a linguistic style in his texts. He has also used aspects of narration such as sub stories and omniscient narrator to ensure his narrations are whole round and simultaneous.

**Funding:** This research neither received internal nor external funding. **Conflict of interests:** The authors declared no conflict of interest.

**Authorship and Level of Contribution:** All the contributors equally took part in the research, writing and preparation of the work for consideration for publishing.

References

- Abend, G. (2008) "The Meaning of Theory." *Sociological Theory*. San Francisco CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Cotterrell, R. (2006). *Law, Culture and Society: Legal Ideas in the Mirror of Social Theory*. Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company.
- Grisham, J.(1991) *The Firm*. Pearson Educational Limited.
- Grisham, J.(1989) *A Time to Kill*. Pearson Educational Limited.
- Grisham, J.(1994) *The Chamber*. Doubleday.
- <http://writing.colostate.edu/reference> Retrieved on September 20, 2019.
- Hodder, I. (1994). *The Interpretation of Documents and Material Culture*. Thousand Oaks: Sage
- The New Republic (1994). *The Thriller*. New York: Kerrie Gillis.
- Patterson, J.(2006) *Thriller*. Ontario, Canada: MIRA Books.