

Raluca Andreescu is assistant professor (lecturer) in the Modern Languages Department at the University of Bucharest, Romania. Her main research interests are in the area of American Cultural Studies, American law and literature, Gothic literature, Women's Studies. She is the author of a monograph about Female Gothic in the American Century, with a focus on works by Edith Wharton, Shirley Jackson and Joyce Carol Oates, co-editor of a volume dedicated to contemporary storytelling across new media and disciplines, as well as of chapters and articles in the abovementioned fields of research.

Raluca Andreescu, *Reverence for The Laws: Representations of Law in American Culture*

© 2025, Institutul European Iași

INSTITUTUL EUROPEAN  
Iași, str. Bălușescu nr. 2, OP 6, CP 1309  
euroedit@hotmail.com; www. euroinst.ro

**Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naționale a României**  
**ANDREESCU, RALUCA**

**Reverence for the laws : representations of law in American culture** / Raluca Andreescu. - Iași : Institutul European, 2025

Conține bibliografie

ISBN 978-606-24-0405-5

008

All rights reserved. No part of this work covered by the copyrights hereon may be reproduced or copied in any form or by any means – graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping – without written permission of publisher.

PRINTED IN ROMANIA

RALUCA ANDREESCU

**REVERENCE FOR THE LAWS:  
REPRESENTATIONS OF LAW  
IN AMERICAN CULTURE**

INSTITUTUL EUROPEAN  
2025

## Contents

**Introduction / 9**

**Not in My Backyard: The Road to Housing Desegregation in Yonkers, NY, from Lisa Belkin's *Show Me a Hero* to Its Adaptation for Television / 65**

**From Outcasts in the Streets to Movers on the Hill: Narrating the Dark Side of Washington, D.C. in *D.C. Noir* / 89**

**No Community Standards: The Rise and Fall and Rise of New York's Sex Economy in *The Deuce* / 113**

**"Nobody gets out alive. This place just a big coffin": On Death and Dying in American Prisons / 127**

**"That Which Is Unspeakable by the White Enemy Is Speakable by Us": Examining Racial Tensions and the Failures of Law Enforcement in Joyce Carol Oates's *The Sacrifice* / 153**

**"A Senseless Act of Children, Wandering Around in the Dark": Legal Culture and Social Science in a Semi-Fictional Rendition of the Leopold and Loeb Trial (1924)" / 171**

**"In the desert, we are all illegal aliens": Border Confluences and Border Wars in Luis Alberto Urrea's *The Devil's Highway* / 193**

**"A Religious Orgy in Tennessee": The Misrepresentation of the Scopes 'Monkey' Trial in Lawrence and Lee's *Inherit the Wind* and Its Cinematic Adaptations / 215**

**The War That Did Not Take Place: Blurring the Boundaries of Fiction and Reality in Larry Beinhart's *American Hero* and Barry Levinson's *Wag the Dog* / 233**

**"Like a Death without a Body": A Representation of Bicoastal Divorce in Noah Baumbach's *Marriage Story* / 251**

***Dark Waters*: Cause Lawyering against the Poisoning of American Life / 277**

**Conclusion / 295**

## Introduction

"Let reverence for the laws be breathed by every American mother to the lisping babe, that prattles on her lap; let it be taught in schools, in seminaries, and in colleges; let it be written in Primers, spelling books, and in Almanacs; let it be preached from the pulpit, proclaimed in legislative halls, and enforced in courts of justice. And, in short, let it become the political religion of the nation; and let the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the grave and the gay, of all sexes and tongues, and colors and conditions, sacrifice unceasingly upon its altars."  
(Abraham Lincoln)

"There is hardly a political question in the United States which does not sooner or later turn into a judicial one."  
(Alexis de Tocqueville)

"If the law permeates our lives before we are born, reaching even into the womb, so too do stories, guaranteeing that law and literature will remain intimate bedfellows in the years to come."  
(Deji Olukotun,  
PEN American Center's Freedom to Write Fellow)



## 1. Law and Literature: the (Natural) Birth of a Movement

The relationship between law and literature is longstanding and multifaceted. The literary imagination has long been preoccupied with questions of law and justice, retribution and punishment. The *Old Testament* tackles the sanctity of contracts (in the form of the covenant), the relationship between divine justice and the laws of the people, but also the ideas of revenge (which precedes any system of law) and social justice. Aeschylus's *Oresteia* (5<sup>th</sup> century BC) illustrates the emergence of an institutionalized justice system and covers the origins of litigation, as well as the move from private justice to public justice. Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus* (429 BC) examines an individual's passionate quest for justice which ultimately exposes his criminality. Shakespeare's tragedies are permeated by a crisis of justice which mirrors the crisis in the early modern English legal system. Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862) explores the failures of the criminal justice system in 19<sup>th</sup>-century France and reveals the frictions between law and justice. Franz Kafka's *Der Prozess* (1925) represents a dark parody of the Austro-Hungarian legal system which examines the relationship between law, justice, power and authority, but also that between guilt and punishment.

Even as early as 1883, Irving Browne observed that "the Law and the Lawyer have oftener been the subject of animadversion and ridicule on the stage than any other class or profession" and that the "rascally attorney has always been a favorite character in the drama" (v-vi). His lengthy *Law and Lawyers in Literature* includes examples of different genres from over 150 authors – there are works by dramatists, novelists, poets, essayists, historians, satirists, but also epigrams, songs,

odes, burlesques. Or take, for instance, John Marshall Gest's *The Lawyer in Literature* (1913), which dedicates ample analyses to the law and lawyers of Charles Dickens, Sir Walter Scott, Honoré de Balzac, Sir Edward Coke. The number of literary works with legal subjects has increased manifold since the beginning of the twentieth century, and so has the number of studies dedicated to them.

In a similar manner, law and justice have made for compelling themes beyond literary canons. They flood popular culture as well, featuring prominently in graphic novels, children's literature and young adult fiction, they are hot topics in movies and television series, subject of 'blawgs' by law students, video games, and so on. Representations of legal actors (judges, lawyers, paralegals, clerks) abound in popular culture, especially in film and television. I will return to the interesting relationship between law and popular culture later in this introductory chapter.

Finally, another aspect of the connection between law and literature is that of laws which regulate literature, against copyright infringement or plagiarism, for instance, or laws governing the use of obscenity and defamation (Posner xii). While such rules directly and indirectly shape cultural output – perhaps the most obvious examples are the struggles against censorship that affected classics such as D.H. Lawrence or James Joyce, cult movies such as Louis Malle's *Les Amants*, and a myriad other more extreme products –, the topic will be marginal to this volume.

One of the most interesting approaches to the intersection of law and culture is what came to be labeled the 'law and literature movement' which originated in law departments in the United States as an attempt at 'humanizing' legal studies in the 1970s. The primary reasons for the renewed interest in the




humanities in American law schools were, on the one hand, the changing job market in the United States, especially in higher education, and, on the other hand, the dominion of economics and its perceived conservatism over the field of law. The budget cuts in the humanities in the 1970s led to the contraction of employment opportunities for graduates in the field. American legal scholar Martha Minow noted that, at the time, people who would have normally joined humanities departments went instead to law school and joined law faculties, bringing with them “questions and methods of inquiry common in nonlegal disciplines, and subjected law to scrutiny” (qtd. in Stierstorfer 11).

This intense exchange between humanities and the law was also encouraged as a reaction against “reducing social and cultural developments to market forces”, as seen in the work of proponents of the so-called ‘law and economics’ movement (Stierstorfer 11) and in direct response to the latter’s social and judicial conservatism, arguably heightened in the era by the appointment of William Rehnquist as Chief Justice of the US Supreme Court. Klaus Stierstorfer observes that “the discipline that was brought in as a counterweight to economics was literary studies” and that the law and literature movement “clearly set out to give weight to the humanities in legal scholarship, in opposition to a more science-based approach as brought in by the economists” (Stierstorfer 13). Julie Stone Peters similarly maintains that the key feature of this emerging cross-disciplinary movement was “its commitment to the human as an ethical corrective to the scientific and technocratic visions of law that had prevailed in most of the twentieth century” (73). Once again, this speaks to the envisaged rehumanizing project of the law and literature movement and its focus on literature as counterweight to the supposed degrading forces of the market and the “conservative bias in law and economics” (Stierstorfer 17). After all, it was

observed, “novels provide a moral philosophy that cannot be found in deontological and utilitarian ethical systems” (Olson 7). From this perspective, the law and literature proponents operated with a nineteenth-century view of literature as a “platform of moral instruction and orientation, gradually even replacing religion”, as a “social and political corrective”, as a “moral institution” (Stierstorfer 15) aiming to restore the ethical core of law. Moreover, the project of the law and literature movement represents “not a narrow subfield of legal or literary studies”, but rather a union between “two of the most powerful currents of belief in the West, the belief in law and the belief in literature, both of which need to be read against the backdrop of the rise of secularism” (Sarat et al. “Introduction” *Teaching Law and Literature* 9).

Another important factor in the rise of the law and literature movement was the “theory wars” of the 1970s and 1980s, namely, the expansion of literary theory and criticism, which “had begun to inundate many literature departments across Western academia, providing scholars in law and literature with a bewildering wealth of new material and inspiration” (Stierstorfer 17). The ensuing efflorescence of partly overlapping, partly antagonistic perspectives engendered a plethora of approaches to literature in relation to society which proved auspicious to the law and literature movement.

The publication in 1973 of James Boyd White’s *The Legal Imagination* is credited with sparking the movement and calling for a rise against the law and economics side. Considered one of the founding fathers in the field, White is a Harvard graduate in both English literature and legal studies who regards the law as “an art essentially literary and rhetorical in nature, a way of establishing meaning and constituting community in language” (*When Words Lose Their Meaning* xi). From his perspective, the law is rather akin to poetry “in its