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Sneakily Feminist: A *Gilmore Girls* Analysis

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for Departmental Honors in Communication Studies

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## Abstract

According to Symphony Advance Media, the 2016 reboot, *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life*, pulled in an average of five million viewers among the 18-49-year-old age demographic in its first three days on Netflix ('*Gilmore Girls*' Early Ratings). The original series, broadcast on the WB Network (2000-2007) was nested into the everyday life of women in American society. It included a mother/daughter duo that problematized what it meant to be a feminist during its initial run. This project considers: How *Gilmore Girls* might be understood as a feminist intervention in 21st century US television? Prior research into the show is limited and fails to explore feminism and the show in general. Research has been done on television shows and feminism specifically on shows like *Friends* and *Frasier* (Brinkema, Eugenie). Research has also been done on how gender is represented and portrayed in television but nothing has ever been specifically researched or applied to *Gilmore Girls*. My project investigates the show from three different perspectives: text, industry, and audience. By looking at the show in this way, I am able to assemble a more complete picture of what was going on when this show was filmed, how it was written, and what it meant to the audience in feminist terms. This will lead us to be able to see how the show really was a feminist reflection of society in the United States.

## Introduction

The show is sneakily feminist in that it's always been great for them to have love, but they're also okay when they don't. That self-sufficiency is the first strength and that allows them to have these relationships. It's why we sometimes bristle at: What team are you on?! It's like: It doesn't matter. Rory's going to be great no matter what. And I think that's an underlying message of the show, too (Bradley, Laura).

*Gilmore Girls* aired on the Warner Bother's (WB) Network for seven years from 2000 to

2007 and was later revived on Netflix as a four-part series in late 2016. The show was created by Amy Sherman-Palladino and her husband Daniel Palladino (*Gilmore Girls* (TV Series 2000-2007)). In the pilot episode viewers meet the three women that the show will be at centerfold for the next 156 episodes: Loreali Gilmore (Lauren Graham), Rory Gilmore (Alexis Bledel), and Emily Gilmore (Kelly Bishop). From the minute we meet these ladies we are introduced to the generational conversation that is going to continue throughout the show's run. The research question for this thesis is: how might *Gilmore Girls* be understood as a feminist intervention in 21st century US television? To answer my research question I will be using a three-pronged approach from a textual, industrial, and audience perspective. Before the next section of this thesis I will introduce you to the Gilmore women and give you a brief history of the show, network/ creators, and the fandom.

*Gilmore Girls*, was a first of its kind of show, a show that had mothers, daughters, and a grandmother at the centerfold. This made it easy to create a platform for women's issues and feminism. The show was not always a positive representation of women but with the amount of women who graced the screen there was an overall representation of women and they tended to lean to the positive side. The show is a cis-normative and heteronormative show but what they did represent they did it well. The Bechdel Test can be used in order to critique and assess the representation of women on screen. The Bechdel Test was designed by Alison Bechdel, and is used has a way to analyze the representation of women in film or in this case television. The test asks whether the media on screen features two women who speak with each other about something other than a man ("Bechdel Test Movie List"). As simple as this test seems, most films in America tend to fail this test. *Gilmore Girls*, on the other hand repeatedly passes this test

within the first few minutes of most episodes. The test does not show if women's issues or feminist characteristics are being talked about.

The fictional town where it all happens is Stars Hollow, Connecticut. It is a different kind of place: it is a small town where the coffee is always on, everybody knows everybody, and where the *Gilmore Girls* call home. In the pilot episode, the viewer is quickly sucked into an image of Lorelai Gilmore, walking across a street in the town to enter a coffee shop (Luke's a place that becomes a staple during the show's seven year run). Lorelai is quirky, witty, coffee loving, strong, and independent single mother. While in the coffee shop we meet the second Gilmore girl, Rory. Rory is Lorelai's sixteen-year-old daughter. She is bright and intelligent beyond her years and is aspiring to go to an Ivy League college. Finally, we meet the matriarch of the Gilmore women, Emily Gilmore, about twenty minutes into the pilot when Lorelai goes to see her parents to ask for a loan so she can send Rory to a private school. Emily is the true definition of a high-class woman. She does not have a job and sits on the boards of many charities and has a revolving door of different hired help for her house. Yet, she is also troubled in her own ways, she does not have a good relationship with her daughter.

Lorelai always wanted an out to the life she grew up in. She hated the fancy dresses, balls, and having to live with Richard and Emily Gilmore. Lorelai got that out at the early age of sixteen when she got pregnant with Rory out of wedlock. This event happening between Lorelai and Emily put a wedge in their relationship. Lorelai never really states if she minds it, but at numerous points throughout the show Emily seems to long for the mother/daughter relationship that Lorelai and Rory have, despite her often-icy interactions with her only child. The show doesn't spend a lot of time with Emily's want for this type of relationship nor does the show spend a lot of time on focusing on the struggles that Lorelai had as a single mother. Instead the

show creates a positive environment that celebrates strong female role models, independent women, and the uniqueness that lies within these women.

In an interview in 2002 with *Variety*, Sherman-Palladino said, “ My constant battle with the WB is that they love the show so much, ...They feel like it’s doing so well ...” (Schneider, Michael). When first coming onto the air *Gilmore Girls* had to go up against Thursday night shows that were airing on networks big like CBS and NBC, and the WB had little money to be thrown around. Two of the most notable network shows were *Friends* and *Survivor*. After surviving the first season despite having to go up against big name network shows, *Gilmore Girls* was moved to the Tuesday night slot. The Nielsen report that came out that year with the *Gilmore Girls* being in the Tuesday night slot had them coming out on top, going up against shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (Schneider, Michael).

The *Gilmore Girls* had a smooth ride from season two until the end of season six. At the end of season six the show’s creators, Sherman-Palladino and Palladino, left over contract disputes. All while this was happening the WB was also set to join United Paramount Network (UPN) in the creation of a new television network, The CW network. In the timeframe between the end of season six and the beginning of season seven the *Gilmore Girls* found itself without the show’s creators and with a new home on a new network. When asked in interview with the EW Dan Palladino said “We’ve been working for the last two years with one-year contracts, working seven days a week for the past six years, we wanted not a two-year pick-up for the show, but a two-year contract for us, ...when we saw none of that was coming together, we made of decision [to leave].” (Tucker, Ken). The Palladinos due to contract disputes, left the show at the end of season six after dealing with year to year contracts when their show was getting picked up for seasons at a time.

After leaving *Gilmore Girls* Sherman-Palladino gave interviews to varying media companies and made her own predictions that the show would not end after Season Seven and that the two creators would get to come back and finish the show. The transitions that happened at the end of Season Six were the beginning of the end for *Gilmore Girls*. On May 3, 2007, a joint statement was released by the CW and WBTV: “This series helped define a network and created a fantastic, storybook world featuring some of television’s most memorable, lovable characters, and we promise to give this series the sendoff it deserves” (Adalian, Josef). This release came only twelve days before the series would go off the air for good. Palladinos, cast, and crew thought they would never return to Stars Hollow again. They would but it would be ten years later.

Despite no longer making new episodes the show still was on televisions across the country. In 2004, the WB had given rights to ABC Family to be able to play *Gilmore Girls* reruns. This was another way for the WB to make money but when the show went off the air, it became a way for fans to still stay connected to their favorite show (Grego, Melissa). During the time between coming off the air and the ATX Festival in 2015, fans watched the show either by reruns or from buying DVDs of the series. Also in the fall of 2014, *Gilmore Girls* was put onto Netflix for streaming, which made the show more accessible to the younger generation (Locker, Melissa). During this break fans flocked to fan sites on Facebook, Twitter, and blogged about the show. The ones who really wanted to have a perfect ending for the show took to writing their own variations of fanfiction. I happen to be one of the fans that spent the years that the show was off the air flocking to fan sites to talk about my favorite show. Myself and all of the fans that have spent years keeping our favorite show alive are referred to as, “Gillys”.

In 2015, fans were treated to a fifteen-year reunion of the *Gilmore Girls* at the ATX Festival in Austin, Texas. It was the first time in eight years all of the cast and creators had been in the same room. It was the beginning of something special. During the panel, Sherman-Palladino was asked if she would ever consider doing a reboot. Sherman-Palladino said, “It would have to be the right everything, like the right format, the right timing, the right way. ... It would have to be honored in a certain way. And I think that if it ever came around, I think we would all jump in and do it” (Corrison Michele). The WB and Netflix struck a deal and the *Gilmore Girls* finally had the green light to do four 90-minute episodes that would be put on to Netflix at the end of 2016. It seemed like the *Gilmore Girls* was finally going to get the ending it deserved.

### **Literature Review**

In this literature review I will examine feminism and the *Gilmore Girls*, as well as other topics that relate to my research question: How might *Gilmore Girls* be understood as a feminist intervention in 21<sup>st</sup> Century US television? This section will look at two big ideas and break them down into the smaller subjects that fall within them. The two big ideas that we will be looking at are feminism and feminist media theory. For the feminism section, the smaller subject that will be talked about will be the different waves of feminism, constructions of gender, and hegemonic gender norms. In the second section, feminist media theory, the smaller subjects are: representation in television, characteristics of feminist film and television theory, and fandom as a feminist practice. These scholarly subjects are important in considering *Gilmore Girls* as a feminist intervention of 21<sup>st</sup> century television and society.

#### ***Waves of Feminist Movement***

Feminist theory and practice has many roots, beginnings, and phases. It is something that has existed in ancient times all while being a part of modern times and will be something to survive and live through future times. It is a common misconception that feminism is just a western idea but actually it is a global social and political movement (Milojević 329). The feminist movement that we have come to understand in America started in the mid-nineteenth century and has continued today in the twenty-first century. There have been three smaller waves that happened in the overall larger movement. The first wave was born from the ideas of giving more opportunities to women with a specific focus on suffrage (Rampton 1). The second wave came to be around the 1960s and took on the ideas of sexuality and reproductive rights. The third wave of the feminist movement began in the 1990s and was the ideas that women could be pretty and smart (Rampton 2). Beyond the idea of feminist movements is the idea of feminism as a concept/ theory (Ferguson 538). This is important because the Gilmore women are pretty and smart in their own ways.

The Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 was the birthplace of the movement. Hundreds of men and women gathered to fight for equality for women. This event is where American Suffragist Elizabeth Cady Stanton created a document outlining the movement's ideology and political strategy called the Seneca Falls Declaration. The first movement butted up against social norms of the mid-nineteenth century which resulted in Victorian Americans to view women in negative ways. This resulted in discussions about the difference between men and women and the ideas of giving women the right to vote (Rampton 1).

Feminist movements are born from the ideas of wanting social changes and with the thought of being able to offer an alternate vision for future generations of women to not have to go through the same oppressions that current generations are going through. If it wasn't for the

women of these past movements, the basic rights that we have today may not exist. The issues that we fight for in the present may not seem like a big deal for the women of the future (for example the ability for women to vote) but they are huge part of the life we live (Milojević 330). Bell Hooks, a feminist and social activist, defines feminism as, “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (1).

The second wave of the feminist movement was born in the 1960s and continued into the mid-90s. In this part of the movement sexuality and reproductive rights were at the forefront. The movement also focused on passing an Equal Rights Amendment that would guarantee true social equality regardless of sex. The Miss America Pageant of 1968 was the birthplace of this wave. Feminist protestors argued that women were being degraded to sex objects that were supposed to stay home or take on the low paying jobs in America that started it. During this part of the movement the differences between sex and gender were defined. Sex being biological and gender being social constructed, able to change over time (Rampton 2). Judith Butler, underscores the idea of gender and sex and how they are different. She established the ideas of sex being biological and our body parts will conform to our sex. Gender, on the other hand, is more of a free forming idea and that we learn our gender from what is going on around us and this can lead to us rejecting our sex (10). Second wave feminism is important to this study because Emily because an embodiment of this in the reboot of the series.

Around the time of the second wave of the feminist movement, feminism starts to embody the theories we have come to understand. Ferguson talks about feminism as a concept/theory that exists in two forms: the interpretive and the genealogical. The interpretive concept is the one that most women have come to understand and embody. It is the idea that there is a center also known as the patriarchy and that women are trying to penetrate the center and

create a reversal. Genealogy is the opposite. It tries to throw away the idea that a center even exists. It brings up the idea that we all co-exist and there is no real order we create the order in our own minds. Because we have been historically stereotyped to have submission to “the man” aka the patriarchy, we live in we cannot break out of the interpretive. Yet, we ultimately live in the genealogical concept of feminism. There is no true center it is one that we have created in our minds. We are all intertwined amongst one another and are created to be baseless but we have given order based on gender by our own experiences (538-539).

Third-wave feminism began in the mid-1990s and was developed by post-colonial and post-modern thinkers. In this phase of feminism many women took back the ideas of femininity that early adopters of feminism had thrown out the door. As Rampton (2015) states, “...the re-adoption by young feminists of the very lipstick, high-heels, and cleavage proudly exposed by low-cut necklines that the first two phases of the movement identified with male oppression. Pinkfloor expressed these new positions when she said that it’s possible to have a push-up bra and a brain at the same time” (2). The third wave of feminism also focused on the support of single mothers who were often looked down upon in the previous stages of feminism. It also worked to further support mothers who wanted to work full time all while they also had a family. The overall idea of third-wave feminism was to give a woman the chance to define femininity on a personal level (Rockler 250). Rockler meant that it is up to the woman to define how she sees femininity in her own personal life. She also meant that from woman to woman, what it meant to be feminist could and would be different for individuals. This is also important to the study because *Gilmore Girls* has women of several generations in conversations with another, and it is possible to think of the show as embodying and intergeneration feminist dialogue.

The third-wave of feminism also introduced some other new revolutionary thinking, particularly in relation to women of color. One feminist activist to really look at this was bell hooks. Hooks brings up the ideas that feminism is looked at most from a white perspective. She points out that the black female experience is vast and is not the same as that of white women (Shockley 552). *Feminism is for Everybody* written by bell hooks has a chapter talking about and gender together in terms of intersectionality. Hooks talks about the ideas that white women only have to participate in one civil movement, the feminist movement. Black women on the other had have to be involved in both the feminist movement and the civil rights movement (55). Hooks says, "Foregrounding gender meant that white women could take center stage, claim the movement as theirs, even as they called on all women to join. The utopian vision of sisterhood evoked in a feminist movement that initially did not take racial difference or anti-racist struggle seriously did not take racial difference of most black women/ women of color" (56). Despite this, women of color still joined their white sisters in the journey for equality knowing that their equality would be different. This continued into the 1980s when a younger generation of black women stopped following behind and wanted to spearhead the movement and introduce their own struggles as women of color (57).

When women of color started to introduce the idea of race to be side-by-side of that of gender, their white sisters accused them of being traitors of the movement. Hooks wrote, "We knew that there could be no real sisterhood between white women and women of color if white women were not able to divest of white supremacy, if feminist movement were not fundamentally anti-racist. Critical interventions around race did not destroy the women's movement; it became stronger" (57). By turning the conversation from just about gender but to also involve race it no longer just gave power to white women but it involved all women making

their movement stronger than ever before (58). This would lead to a movement that could accompany everything that all women needed and no longer suppressed the need of women of color (58). "... understanding our triumphs and using them as models, means that they can become the sound foundation for the building of mass-based anti-racist feminist movement" (60).

It is important to note that today we have moved away from the third wave of feminism and have entered what will become the fourth wave of the feminist movement (Rampton 4). Yet, it is important to understand that we are still writing this part of history, so it is hard to tell has of right now what is really going on completely. One element that has been brought up and that could be considered a part of the conversation for propelling us into the 4<sup>th</sup> wave of feminism is: the internet and social media. According to the article "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?", the internet has established a shift and has given women another stage to project women's issues onto. It makes easier for us to 'call-out' and challenge issues like misogyny and sexism (Munro 3). Also, according to Milojević (2008), the issues that tend to come to the center of a feminist movement are: violence, equal opportunity, equal pay, sexual objectification and oppression, and street harassment (330). These two parts of the feminist movements are important to *Gilmore Girls* because these are the two parts of the movements that Lorelai and Rory seem to conform to the most.

### ***Constructions of Gender & Hegemonic Gender Roles***

Sex and gender have been widely debated for years. People use to believe in "biology is destiny" but that is not actually the case or the way we live anymore. As discussed previously, sex is something that we are born with and gender is social constructed. Butler (1990) stated, "... gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex" (9). Butler is saying here

that gender is fluid and is not as permanent as sex. According to Lisa Anderman (2010), the idea of gender is something that is internally interpreted. It is something that we learn and how we identify within ourselves. We learn gender based on our environments. It something that is created socially. As said above, sex is something that is assigned at birth and is based on the body parts that we are born with (506).

When we say that gender is something that is socially constructed we are talking about the idea that we learn from the environment and the interactions around us. For example, if you were born a girl your parents may dress you in pink and in dresses and you might play with dolls. Whereas if you were born a boy you may be dressed in blue and in suits and you might play with trucks (Brickell 90). Another way to look at gender is explored in the book, *Making a Difference: Psychology and the Construction Gender*, which says “Gender is an invention of human societies, a feat of the imagination and industry. The feat is multifaceted. One facet involves laborious efforts to transform male and female children into masculine and feminine adults. We call this rearing children or educating them” (Hare-Mustinm Rachel T, and Marecek, Jeanne 4). Gender is self-constructed - if we gave no meaning to boys being masculine and girls being feminine, there would be no gender identity. The book also talks about how we have come to define what a “male” and “female” is and it has an influence on who we see them and ourselves (5). We have also used the idea of defining gender has away to define important roles and acceptable practices based on a person’s gender (6).

Along the same lines Butler (2015) talks about how we have created what is the “binary gender system.” The binary gender system is where our gender should reflect our sex. We have created a system where gender is reliant on sex but actually gender is more of a free-floating idea. It is something we learn and that can change if what we feel in our heads doesn’t line up

with what our body is like. We assume that if someone is a girl they will behave in a certain way to conform to the “gendered” way of the sex, and the same applies to a boy (9-10).

Going off the idea that we use gender to define important roles. According to the article, “The Construction of Motherhood: Tasks, Relational Connection, and Gender Equality”, women are built to be the primary caretakers of their children. It builds on the gender stereotype that women are the caretaker in the family. The article does talk about how there has been shift in the fathers’ involvement in child care but women are still regarded as the primary caretakers and “professionals” in the child care department (Cowdery, Randi and Kundson-Martin, Carmen 336). The article also talks about the idea that women are naturally more nurturing and have a stronger connection with their children so the family dynamic automatically takes the look of a mother being the primary care taker and the father being the stepping back and working and not arranging their schedule around their children (339). This is another important part of *Gilmore Girls* because a huge chunk of the show is based on mother and daughter interactions.

Another important aspect to understand is that of hegemonic gender norms / roles. Hegemonic gender norms come from the ideas of hegemony, which is idea that one group of people has dominance over others. It is also credited with being the notion of how one group of people should behave compared to another. An article written by Sarah Friedman (2015) talks about the different aspects created by hegemonic gender norms and roles. The article talks about how men are supposed to work and be the “bread winner” of a typical heteronormative household. In these types of households, the women are “supposed” to stay at home but women in these household can work, but it must be in a position where her family can always come first. Friedman also talks about how these women can adopt “masculine” qualities like joining the work force. Yet, this is where the double standard gets created though women can adopt and in

some ways, are expected to adopt “masculine” qualities while men are not expected to adopt “feminine” qualities. Friedman argues that this happens because men are already put on a high pedestal because they are already seen as successful providers so they aren’t expected to modify their work-to-family life ratio because it is good enough as it is. Friedman says that women are expected to always be modifying their work to family life balance to make sure that they are able to satisfy the needs of everyone in their life (147). Medved (2016), she says that the hegemonic gender roles that we live by say that the mother is to be nurturing one in a heteronormative relationship and the father is supposed to be working the crazy long hours to support the family (21).

But what happens to these hegemonic gender norms and roles when you put them into a home with a single mother? According to an article by Terry Arendell (2000), the dynamics of the home don’t really seem to change. For the single mother, they have to adapt and perform both sides of the equation. They have to both work the long hours in order to provide for their children and be able to be nurturing and caring for their children. Arendell does bring up that it can be hard to maintain this equation has a single parent because there is only one household income so usual in order to provide for their family they have to work long hours to make enough money (1197). This is also important to *Gilmore Girls* because Lorelai is a single mother in the show.

### ***Gender & Representation in Television***

While research into *Gilmore Girls* from a feminist perspective is limited, that doesn’t mean that research has not been done on other shows that have been on television. In “Television Women from Lucy to Friends: Fifty Years of Sitcoms and Feminism”, Margaret Tally talks about the ideas that Lynn Spangler brings up in her book, that there is indeed a

relationship between the way women are portrayed in television and what was going on around them on a larger sociopolitical scale. This is done in television because it gives a stage for these situations to play out and for viewers to see how women can deal with these struggles. This also helps women gain respect for women's changing roles. Tally brings up the question: Should we hate Lucy from *I Love Lucy* just because it portrays the role of a housewife and because there is the occasional domestic violence? She understands that she cannot answer that question for everyone, but what she does suggest is that if we are now looking at this show fifty plus years later, we are taking it out of context. What we are seeing on a show like *I Love Lucy* was okay and may be considered the "norm" during that period of time (254). The same can be applied for *Gilmore Girls*. Sherman-Palladino was writing the show at time were she had to be sneakily feminist in order to make the stories happen the way she wanted.

Kym Bradley (2013), argues that "Media may reflect, create, or inculcate the dominant values of society. It can also present an alternative way of thinking and is therefore a powerful mechanism in the socialization of process" (221). She brings up the idea that actions and the language used in a show (though it might be subtle) can be a way to cue people in on what is going around them in society and can be a way for a show to work though it on screen (225). According to Muriel G. Cantor (1988), radio and television have made many attempts to change with the times. This has been specifically true with the representation of women in the media (76), though at times it was challenging for women to find positive and accurate representations of women (79).

According to an article, "Audience Perceptions of Strong Female Characters on Television", women's roles on television have come a long way. They have come from being just a housewife to playing a wider range of characters that reflect changes in the roles that they

fulfill today (Oppenheimer, Bonnie 162). Women are no longer just cast in typically “feminine” roles (i.e. nurses and social workers). They are now able to play what were typically considered “masculine” roles (i.e. lawyers and cops). This has resulted in women now having a more assertive and powerful demeanor on screen, which is a reflection of women in society (162).

Cocker ran a study to try and see how we view strong women on television and if viewers considered these strong women as strong. According to the study, both men and women had no problem identifying representations of strong women on screen. It is also brought up that women have less of a problem identifying strong women whether they were attractive or not. Whereas men had more trouble identifying a strong woman on screen if she wasn't attractive. Even with that the men did eventually come to be able to identify a strong female presence (168).

### ***Characteristics of Feminist Film & Television Theory***

Feminist film theory is known for challenging the ideas of “traditional”, ideas of what a woman use to be in the world. It takes on the ideas of heteronormativity (which promotes heterosexuality as the normal and preferred sexual orientation) and the femininity that appears on television screens around us. It is meant to be a lens that can be applied to film to be able to look at the way films and television shows treat and deal with the way women are treated within their respective stories (Mayne 94).

Julie D'Acci writes about gender in media and discusses the early days of feminist television theory. She discusses the ideas of when network executives would include women in their shows, they wanted to include relevant depiction of the women they would put into their shows all while trying to preserve the conservative way women use to be viewed. This means that the women that were, “primarily young, white, middle class, stereotypically ‘attractive’, and domesticated. They specifically portrayed women as wives, mothers, heterosexual sex objects,

subsidiaries of men, and as “vulnerable” and “sympathetic” characters; in addition, women were traditionally cast as the protagonists of situation comedies rather than prime-time dramas” (11).

D’Acci in her book talks about it how it wasn’t about the way the show (*Cagney and Lacey*) was shot, it was about the stories they were telling. The storylines of the shows for them to fit into the characteristics of feminist television theory had to be feminist in nature. The storylines needed to bring women issues out the front of the show as well as feature women in the protagonist lead of the show (11). Annette Kuhn writes that one of the main ideas behind feminist television theory is that the stories should be written from a female point-of-view and also similar to feminist television theory will also most likely include psychoanalysis (225). A psychoanalytic approach in a feminist film analysis are the ideas of: scopophilia, voyeurism, fetishism, and narcissism. Scopophilia is a Freudian term that means someone gains pleasure from looking at someone. When talking about this in terms of feminist film analysis it would be the idea that someone is taking pleasure while looking at the woman on screen. Voyeurism is the idea of looking at an object that is not aware that the gaze is upon them. An example of this could a peeping tom. Fetishism is when the object being viewed becomes a fetish when it is the focus of sexual desire. For example, someone’s hair can become a sign of sexual desire. Lastly narcissism is the idea that you can gain sexual pleasure from looking at your own body. (Doughty & Etherington-Wright).

Laura Mulvey is a well-known feminist film theorist that look at the psychoanalytic approach on how popular cinema works and how it produces what she believes to be the “male gaze.” The “male gaze” is the way in a film the camera will look at woman. It is thought to empower men and objectify women. In Mulvey’s (1975) groundbreaking essay she says “Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: as erotic object for the

characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium, with a shifting tension between the looks on either side of the screen” (441). In simpler terms when women are in screen it is thought to be that they are filmed in a certain way in order to create a sexual desire on screen. On the other end of this Mary Ann Doane argued the points that there such a thing called the “female gaze”.

Doane (1981) explored the idea of a “female gaze” and the “masquerade” that can happen in film. Doane drew some of her ideas from the works of Joan Riviere. Riviere believed in the idea that when an intellectual woman is in a place of authority, she will put on a mask of womanliness in order to divert attention away from her. Doane took this idea and coined the term “masquerade” to talk about the idea that women will act in a certain way, like adapting to their hegemonic femininity to get what they want (Doughty & Etherington-Wright 156). Also in another article written by Doane (1981) she points out the idea of sexuality and femininity as a social construct (a concept or perception of something based on the collective views developed and maintained within a society or social group) (Doughty & Etherington-Wright 156) aspect, and the more in tune with that a woman is, the more of a weapon it can be to be used against others and specifically men. Doane goes on to explain that during these times it may look like the camera is taking on a “male gaze” but really it is a modified “male gaze” that could be considered a “female gaze” because the woman in the scene is fully aware of what she is doing with her body and hence they are clued in one the way they are being viewed (28). The idea of taking pleasure in one’s body or understanding and using your body to be able to get what you “want” is an idea that surfaces in *Gilmore Girls*. I will talking about this further in my textual anaylsis,

Another characteristic of feminist film and television theory was actually developed for film but can be applied to television. The Bechdel test was developed in 1985 by Alison Bechdel in her long-running comic *Dykes to Watch Out For*. The test gives films or in this case television show's a pass or fail rating based upon three pieces of criteria: "One, it has to have at least two women in it who, two, talk to each other about, three, something besides a man" (Selisker, Scott). This test is able to be used to see if there is a proper amount of female representation happening on the screens that viewers are taking in. While most shows and films fail this test *Gilmore Girls* passes with flying colors in every episode and usually within the first five minutes. The test can also be applied to a wide range of media and not just film from: plays, novels, films, videogames, and comics (Selisker, Scott).

### ***Fandom as a Feminist Practice***

According to *The Adoring Audience: Fan Culture and Popular Media*, "Fandom is seen as a psychological symptom of a presumed social dysfunction; the two fan types are based in an unacknowledged critique of modernity" (Lewis 9). Fandom is considered to be a social and cultural phenomenon. To understand fandom, we first must understand what a "fan" is. A fan is considered to be something or in this case someone that is a response to the star system. Mass media plays a huge role in putting stars out in front most of us fans (10). Fandom can occur in: sports, television, movies, and with people (Duffett, Mark 4). Fandom tends to result in something or even someone getting a following that can also be considered a cult (5). The people who tend to fall into the fandom category have a deep passion or even a borderline obsession for what they are following (7).

Kristina Busse, who wrote the article, "Fan Labor and Feminism: Capitalizing on the Fannish Labor of Love", says "The acceptance of fans, geeks, and nerds is theoretically and

personally satisfying, as is the increased popularity of geeky media, and consequently the more positive media portrayals” (110). There was a time when fans who were a part of a fandom culture used to be looked upon in a negative light. In today’s world, it is more common for almost everyone to be a part of some sort of fandom. These fandoms vary now from television shows, movies, celebrities, and even sport teams (111). With the increased number of people getting involved in fandom we have now seen an increased number of panels taking place regarding fan practice to try and figure out why we like to be a part of fandoms (112).

One reason why fandom has become such a big practice is the digital era. “The digital revolution has had a profound impact upon fandom, empowering and disempowering, blurring the lines between producers and consumers, creating symbiotic relationships between powerful corporations and individual fans, and giving rise to new forms of cultural production” (Pearson, Roberta 84). Another idea that has pushed fandom past any limits was the birth of fan-fiction. Kristina Busse, author of, *In Focus: Fandom and Feminism: Gender and the Politics of Fan Production*, talks about the idea that shows who are produced are being written by all-male teams. Women tend to get involved by writing their own fan fiction as a way to be involved in the story after it ends (105).

According to the book, *Screwball Television: Critical Perspectives on Gilmore Girls*, “Since its October 5, 2000, debut on the WB network, the quirky family-friendly *Gilmore Girls*, created by writer and producer Amy Sherman-Palladino, built up a strong cult following and became the object of intense devotion among fans who flocked to their TV sets weekly, seeking comfort in the fictional hamlet of Stars Hollow” (Lavery, David, and Diffrient, David-Scott 18). The cult that they are talking about is the *Gilmore Girls* fandom. The followers of fandom tune in and follow the show religiously because of its sophisticated wordplay, pop-cultural references

and more (20). Shows just like *Gilmore Girls* end up with fandoms because they are relatable and are able to create a place for the viewer to get lost in (21).

### **Methodology**

To reiterate my research question: How might *Gilmore Girls* be understood as a feminist intervention in 21<sup>st</sup> century television? In this thesis, I will attempt to answer this research question from a feminist perspective, using a three-pronged approach. This multifaceted approach that was used comes from the ideas of Jane Stokes and her book, *How to Do Media & Cultural Studies*, accounting for industry, text, and audience practices. By using this multifaceted approach I will answer my research question using the context from above in my literature review and the process that Stokes laid out in her book. These three different approaches resulted in using several different methodologies to address my research question.

In considering *Gilmore Girls* in terms of industry I looked at various documents released by the WB, interviews that have been done with the cast and crew, as well as advertisements that have been done regarding the show. I also looked at the production strategies of the network in order to see what was going on at the time when the WB picked up the show. I also looked at the ideas that Sherman-Palladino could be considered an auteur in terms of bringing her single vision to bear upon the show.

In terms of text I employ a narrative and semiotic analysis. This is helpful because to look at this project you have to look at in terms of different ideas such as: feminisms, constructions of gender, representations on television, etc. I also was able to look at certain episode of *Gilmore Girls* and examine the story arc and narrative through a feminist lens. I also looked at nine episodes of from the show for feminist characteristics. The episodes I choose were: season one 1, 14, 18, and 1, season two 4, 12, and 20, and season three 13 and 22.

The last part of the three-pronged approach was to look at *Gilmore Girls* through an audience lens. To do this I chose look at some of blog, and tweets that go out about the show. When looking at the blog post and tweets I was looking at the context that they were talking about. I searched using #GilmoreGirls and #Feminism. The goal in this section was an attempt to find others in the fan community who also were able to apply on feminist read to *Gilmore Girls*.

### **Networks & Producers: Gender & Industrial Practice, & the *Gilmore Girls***

To reiterate my research question: How *Gilmore Girls* might be understood as a feminist intervention in 21st century US television? In this industrial analysis I am going to look at one my approaches which is look at *Gilmore Girls* from an industrial perspective.

### **The WB: Becoming A Big Five?**

*Gilmore Girls*, started on the air on the Warner Brothers Network (WB) in 2000 and finished its run of being on broadcast television in 2007 on the CW. The WB was born out of the idea that they could be the fifth major player (NBC, ABC, CBS, FOX) in the broadcast television landscape (Daniels, Susanne, and Cynthia Littleton). The network started with one night a week of programming and would expand on this over several seasons. On Wednesdays, the network would have a two-hour sitcom line up from 8pm to 10pm. The first programming aired on the network were sitcoms that were mainly targeted towards ethnically black audience. The in 1995-1996 season the network expanded its programming to Sunday nights in hopes of picking up views but none of the new shows that they were producing seemed to drum up an audience (“Company History”). In the 1996-1997 season the network once again expanded its programming to start airing shows on Monday nights. In this expansion it gave birth to one of the networks first bigger shows *Seventh Heaven*. In the 1997 season the network experienced their first major breakthrough and success with the release of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The show

attracted the highest Monday night rating the network ever had up until that point. It attracted new teenage viewers and new advertisers. The network realized that there was money in the teenage viewers. One of the shows that got created out of this notion was *Gilmore Girls*.

*Gilmore Girls*, premiered in October of 2000. The show struggled to survive its first season being in the Thursday night timeslot due to having to go up against NBC's powerhouse lineup most notably *Friends*. But the show turned out to be one of the networks more successful shows after being moved to the Tuesday night timeslot in 2001. The show would remain in that timeslot until 2006. Other shows that become bright spots for the company were *Smallville* and *Reba* ("Company History").

The network created shows that were essentially patriarchal with the exception of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Gilmore Girls*. The network did not realize when they greenlighted *Gilmore Girls*, they were getting show that was more about the matriarch side of a family that was different than any others that had been on television up to this point. The WB was trying to stay afloat and needed to cash in on the family demographic and the generational audience that *Gilmore Girls* was able to provide for them.

For the initial run, *Gilmore Girls* reached five million viewers weekly. This number indeed does lack in comparison to a show like *Friends* that was attracting 25 million views but there was a big difference between the two networks the shows were airing on. *Friends* was airing on one of the big networks and *Gilmore Girls* was airing on a "mini" network (Adalian, Josef). Despite the good ratings for a show that was airing on a small network the show was very popular amongst its fans but was never a breakout hit. It was never featured in many of the major award ceremonies. What kept it alive and also high on the list of shows that would survive despite a failing network? Emily Yahr, a writer for the *Washington Post* wrote, "Something

about the whip-smart writing, obscure pop culture references and dynamic characters — with the ability to expertly mix both outlandish and quiet scenes together — made it feel like you were watching something special, something that doesn't come along too often on TV,” (Kozłowska, Hanna). Although in most overall demographics that show was not a breakout hit. The *Washington Post*, also mentioned that *Gilmore Girls* was rated has one of the high watched shows in the 18-25 year-old demographic (Kozłowska, Hanna).

Despite being on a failing network *Gilmore Girls*, survived as the quote about says the show had an angle that many at the time did not. What was different it was what helped keep the WB going when all along the network should have probably shut down before the show went on the air. But to return to the initial quote at the beginning of this thesis, the “sneakily feminist” aspect of the show and the different story line helped keep the show and the network alive.

### **Sherman-Palladino: Writer/Producer**

One half of the equation is having a network and the other half is having a cast and crew to create a network's content. *Gilmore Girls* was one of the shows that made up the WB's content and the creator of the show was Amy Sherman-Palladino. Amy Sherman-Palladino was singular in her position as a television auteur: women who were creators, directors, and writers were far and few between during the time that *Gilmore Girls* was being created. Sherman-Palladino had a lot that she was trying to prove. At the time, she was trying to distance herself from her writing days at *Rosanne*. *Gilmore Girls* was getting picked up seasons at a time yet her contract was year to year with little to no reassurance if she would be brought back for the next season. Sherman-Palladino was dealing with the issues of unequal pay and was having to fight for herself like many women who were involved in the third wave of feminism who were also

trying to fight for equal pay. She had producers and higher ups from the WB breathing down her neck to make sure she was doing everything right.

We also can't forget the fact that she was creating a television show that was primarily made up of unique women during a television age that was primarily made up of difficult men. This is a hard concept to understand but a Huffington Post article (2015), said we didn't enter the "golden age" for feminist television until about 2015. It is now hard to image television without the strong representations of women in them but it was the truth. We are used to seeing shows like *Grey's Anatomy*, *How to Get Away With Murder*, and *New Girl* (Blay, Zeba). *Gilmore Girls* was on the air during a time that most television was made up of male characters. *Gilmore Girls* came on the air fifteen years before the "golden age." Similar *Sex & the City* the girls had a lot to prove--and they did. They are credited with being one of the shows that was a starting point and launching pad for feminist television (Blay Zeba).

The writing crew for *Gilmore Girls* was also unique to this period of television production. The Palladinos (Amy and Dan) wrote most of the episodes in seasons 1-6. The other writers that were also brought in at one point or another to be on the writing crew were: Jenji Kohan, Bill Prady, Jane Espenson, Rebecca Rand Kirshner, and Janet Leahy (*Gilmore Girls* (TV Series (2000-2007))). The writing crew for the show was predominately female, with only two males ever really writing for the show Every script that was written also went through Sherman-Palladino before filming. She has also gone on record saying, "every draft either I write, or it passes through my hands ... so that there is a consistency of tone. It's very important that it feels like the same show every week, because it is so verbal" (Tobias, Scott). Sherman-Palladino also didn't really let anything through the first six season go without her final approval. She also was the music supervisor for the show and all of the music was produced by a female singer-

songwriter, Sam Phillips. The show's directing crew was a revolving door for all sorts of talented directors. Some of the most notable were: Jamie Babbit, Lee Shallat Chemel, and Chris Long. Sherman-Palladino and Palladino were always apart of directing crew because it was very important to them that the show always maintained the same feel from day one (*Gilmore Girls* (TV Series (2000-2007))).

Given the production history of the show, I would argue that Sherman-Palladino should be considered a television auteur. In terms of film practice an auteurist is "a filmmaker whose personal influence and artistic control over a movie are so great that the filmmaker is regarded as the author of the movie" ("Auteur"). Though when saying someone is an auteur we are usually referring to a film, we could talk about how Sherman-Palladino could be an auteur for television. She was involved in many of the processes for *Gilmore Girls*, she created the show, wrote for the show, was a director, and helped pick out the music. Indeed she had a hand in everything that appeared on screen.. We could also relate this back to women pushing for power in the third wave of the feminist movement. Even though Sherman-Palladino did have to answer to the network executives she had way more people answering to her to make sure everything was the way that she wanted it to be. With arguing that Sherman-Palladino should be considered a female auteur this also gives her an advantage to understand certain aspects of film and television theory like Doane's ideas of the female gaze, which I will be highlighting in my textual analysis.

Another idea that we can talk about is the ideas that D'Acci says the show must be feminist in nature to be considered a feminist show. The writing team for *Gilmore Girls*, is very good at making sure that there is typically some form of a feminist or women's issue being talked about at some point in the almost every episode. Though most of the time it is so subtlety

done that if you are not paying attention the viewer has the potential to miss it entirely.. The show also writes on the idea of empowering young women to do whatever they want to be in life

### **Reading Gilmore Girls Through Text**

To reiterate my research question: How *Gilmore Girls* might be understood as a feminist intervention in 21st century US television? Now that we have determined that Sherman-Palladino is a female television auteur this can help us understand how the show itself might be understood as feminist. We can link the production end of the conversation with Doane's idea of the "female gaze" in the literature section. *Gilmore Girls* has brought forth in a sneaky way some major ideas of third wave feminism (appearance, individualism), a generational conversation, hegemonic gender norms, intersectionality, and the characteristics in which the show was made.

#### ***Female Gaze:***

The "female gaze" is the idea that if a woman is in tune with her body sexually she can use it in order to get what she wants when she wants it. Between the writing of the show and how it was filmed, that happens at several different points throughout the show. One could argue that the Gilmore woman who was most in tune with her body was Lorelai. If Lorelai wanted to be served coffee faster than everyone else when she was at a coffee shop she would lean a little further over the counter in order to catch Luke's (owner of the coffee shop) attention faster than other customers. Lorelai also was able to use even her voice at times in order to get what she wanted. Obviously this was a writing choice down by Sherman-Palladino but also had something to do with casting Lauren Graham to play Lorelai. In season two Lorelai is having a problem with one of the pipes at the Inn that was supposed to have been fixed by a plumber that she had hired. When the problem is still occurring Lorelai offers to sleep with the plumber if he will come and take care of it for free. Obviously joking the writing team understood that the more in

tuned with Lorelai's body they were the more they could use to create the female gaze. Another time that the writers play with the female gaze by using writing is when Lorelai is on a phone call with Max. She asks Max to do something in exchange she will tell him what color underwear she is wearing. Once again is another time that the writers know how powerful a woman can be when she is in tune with her sexuality.

Another production consideration is that the show was never really shot to have the male gaze. It was never meant to be perceived in a sexual way like some other shows turned out to be. The show was mainly shot from long range shots with lots of background exposed or with midrange shots. The only time we really got any close-ups of the characters was when they were trying to bring emotion to the scene. An example of this could be the last episode of season three. In this episode Rory is graduating from high school and she is the valedictorian. When giving her speech the camera did a series of close up shots on Rory and Lorelai getting emotional because Rory is saying how much of a role model and hero her mother has been for her over the last eighteen years of her life.

### ***Third-Wave Feminism***

Defining feminism on your own level is one of the key ideas for third-wave feminism and that is exactly what the show explores. Emily, Rory, and Lorelai all had their own sense of style when it came down to fashion. Emily for example would never be caught dead in jeans. You would typically see her in some sort of skirt and blouse, with the occasional treat of seeing her in pants but never jeans. Lorelai on the other hand was a whirlwind of different outfits from dresses and high-heels to jeans and a t-shirt. You never knew what you would see her dressed in but you always knew she would look fabulous. An idea from Rampton discussed in the literature is low-

cut dresses and women dressing to enhance their bodies is similar to the way Lorelai dressed. Lorelai was famous for her low-cut dresses and midriff exposed. Rory didn't necessarily care about what she wore. She was excited to go to private school so she could wear a uniform and not have to care about what to wear. The theme continued throughout the course of the show though, Rory did have similar fashion sense to her mother's but it was not as pronounced (Rampton, Martha).

Along the same lines of how the women dressed comes the idea of the power that a women's body can hold. Lorelai uses her body to her advantage and also being a feminine woman to get what she wants from people just like Doane says (Doane, Mary Anne). In one scene Lorelai is on the phone with the plumber that fixes things at the Inn because one of the rooms has leak that he was supposed to have fixed. Lorelai changes her voice and starts to flirt over the phone to get him to come out and take care of it free of charge. This is a perfect example because it shows that Lorelai is in tune with her femininity and understands that it can get her things in the world. This also can tie back to the fact that she understands the power that her body has over people. A lot of the 3rd wave of the feminist movement was all about taking back a women's ability to look sexy and being able to make her way in the world for herself. Another example is one that happened in more of joking way in the pilot episode when Lorelai offers to have sex with the headmaster of Chilton to be able to pay for Rory's school. In the episodes that I looked at Rory is still coming into herself and really hasn't learned the power of her body.

Another key idea of third wave feminism is the idea of individualism. Third wave moved away from the door pounding and legislative push that the other waves of feminism had focused on. Lorelai and Rory focused on being individuals and developing their lives for the better. Lorelai and Rory take on the idea of needing a man in their lives romantically. In the pilot

episode of the show Rory was accepted into a private school and she was debating about not going because she had met the new boy at school and she really liked him. When she told Lorelai, her reaction wasn't the best: "Don't get me wrong. Guys are great. I am a huge fan of guys. You don't get knocked up at 16 being indifferent to guys. But, babe, guys are always going to be there. This school isn't. It's more important. It has to be more important" (*Gilmore Girls*). The idea is that guys will always be there to resurface throughout the show. It is important to Lorelai that Rory gets an education and is able to accomplish everything that she was unable to. Lorelai wants to make sure that Rory does not repeat what she sees as her own mistakes. Another example of this is in another episode in season one. Rory stays all night with her boyfriend Dean and when Lorelai wakes up, she isn't home. Lorelai defends Rory to Emily but when Rory finally comes home Lorelai lectures her. Lorelai tells her this can never happen again and that she will not get pregnant (Rampton, Martha).

It is important to understand that these women understood their femininity and embraced it. They proved that women could be beautiful and dress to show off or enhance their features but could indeed have brains and hang around with the boys in a business world. Lorelai proved this idea. She started from the bottom as maid and made her way to be in charge and run an inn. This also goes on to play into the representation of women on television from the career path perspective. In terms of representation, women are being put into positions of power. Lorelai is in the position of power. She is the boss, something that would typically be played by a male. The same thing with Rory. Rory is told she will never succeed at her private school and that she will fail. She proves her headmaster wrong by succeeding and going on to be the valedictorian and goes on to attend an Ivy League school. The girls prove that they are as good, if not better than, everyone around them and that they can hang around with the "big boys" (Rockler 250).

Even though Rory and Lorelai fight against not having men in their lives at times there were moments that both Rory and Lorelai fall apart when it comes to the men that become a part of their lives. When Rory and her boyfriend Dean break up, Lorelai tells her she has to be sad and grieve about the breakup. The same thing happens with Lorelai when she breaks up with her boyfriend from season one, Max, though Lorelai and Max eventually get back together and get engaged to get married. But, Lorelai leaves Max at the alter and does not marry him. The opposite of Lorelai and Rory when it comes to men is Emily. Emily doesn't know how to lead her life without her husband Richard. She fits into the hegemonic gender norms. Richard was the bread winner. He worked in order to support his family so that way Emily could stay home and take care of their daughter and be a home maker in a lavish upper-class lifestyle.

Another feminist aspect of the show that is hidden within the center fold is how Rory received her name. The name Rory is just the nickname for Lorelai's daughter. Lorelai did something with her daughter's name the typically only happens with men. This is a quote from the pilot from Rory that explains how she received her name, "She named me after herself. She was lying in the hospital thinking about how men name boys after themselves all the time, you know, so why couldn't women? She says her feminism just kind of took over" (*Gilmore Girls*). Rory's real name is Lorelai and her mother took it upon herself to name her daughter after herself the way many men do with their sons (Rockler 251).

### ***Generational Representation***

Another important aspect is that each of these women represent a different movement of feminism. Emily is example of someone who is a misfit in terms of a feminist movement. She was younger during the second-wave of feminism but doesn't necessarily fit the mold. Emily has a strong hold on what it means to be a woman but for her that means staying home and running

the household while her husband earns the money. Lorelai is a representation of third-wave feminism. She takes back the ideas of being able to dress femininely. She doesn't need a man in her life. She is more focused on making her life work as it is and being the best mother she can be to her daughter. Lastly, we have Rory. She is still coming into herself and is highly influenced by the role models she has around her. She is her own person and gets the idea of being independent but she hasn't completely found herself yet. If we had to place her I would say she would fall into fourth-wave feminism which is not defined yet (Rampton, Martha).

Emily as a character doesn't start to embrace a feminist movement until the show's revival in 2016. During the show's original run Emily didn't have the chance to fit into a feminist movement. This is due to the fact Emily makes it her responsibility to take care of her husband and be a housewife. She was in charge of hiring all the help for their house and making sure that everything Richard needs her to do is done. In the revival for the show Emily has to learn how to become an independent and strong woman because her husband has passed away. Emily's journey is her growth in finding her own femininity. For example, Emily is going through the process of cleaning out her house and when Lorelai asks her what she is doing she responds that, she needs to figure out her life and how to have a life without her husband. This was her first step to become that strong, independent woman able to move on. She eventually ends up selling her house and moving and gets a job for the first time in her life. Emily takes a long time to have to embrace feminism but she learns quickly (Rampton, Martha).

### ***Hegemonic Gender Roles***

Another thing that we could look at in *Gilmore Girls* is its interrogation of hegemonic gender roles. The Gilmore women at times reject some of the hegemonic gender conventions. This idea can also be related back to the third wave of the feminist movement and women

empowerment. They make it known that no one has dominance over them. Lorelai makes it known when she is engaged to Max that he will not dominate or control her. She also makes it known to him that his role with her daughter is insignificant and that her and Rory had made it this far in life without the help of most. As she puts it, he is there for her. Granted, this could really lead to a deeper issue for Lorelai but she is a very dominate person and does not do well with others wanting or needing to have authority over her. Emily is also similar in that way. She has an overall dominate personality and doesn't do well if things don't go her way. Yes, she leans on her husband but Richard also leans on her to get things around the house done. These dominant personalities reflect on Rory who is still learning about herself in the first three seasons of the show. Through the first two seasons Rory is quiet and reserved but in season three we see a change. Rory stops being quiet and strives to be the dominate personality that her mother and grandmother have displayed for her (Butler, Judith).

### ***Intersectionality***

On the other side of the conversation *Gilmore Girls* in some aspects can be viewed as not a perfect example of a feminist intervention in 21<sup>st</sup> century television. One of the big ideas that was introduced in the second and third wave of the feminist movement was the idea of intersectionality. Bell hooks was one of the first major feminist activist to bring it into the conversation. Before this point when activists were looking at feminism it was in the conversation of white women in America and many failed to consider the views of what women of color go through on a daily bases. *Gilmore Girls* has a show unfortunately, does not have a strong representation of women color. In the whole series there are only two women of color and they are Korean. Though having these two Korean women in the show does mean that some of the episodes did have an influx of Korean but at the centerfold of the show representation for

women of color does not happen. This means for an activist like hooks, *Gilmore Girls* is not an ideal show for intersectionality representation that hooks was looking for in the third-wave (hooks, bell).

Though, to defend how *Gilmore Girls*, despite this fact can still be viewed has a positive representation in 21<sup>st</sup> century television. *Gilmore Girls* was set in a fictional town of Stars Hollow, Connecticut. Despite being shot in a fictional town, the real town that show was based off was Washington Depot, Connecticut. When finding this out I conducted further research into the town's demographics. In real life the town is primarily white, coming in at 93.5% white and the non-white population of the town is only 6.5%. While Stars Hollow is a fictional place this gives you the idea of the demographic of the real town that Sherman-Palladino was basing her fictional town after ("Washington, Connecticut"). Also Connecticut itself, is also a primarily white state. According to the US Census Bureau 80.6% of Connecticut is white with only 19.4% making up the non-white population ("QuickFacts"). These statics alone can help show the picture of why Stars Hollow itself was not as diverse as we might like it to be.

I do believe on the other end of the conversation hooks does talk about the importance of gender representation in conversation with intersectionality. Which leads me to believe that for hooks this show would not be a completely and total loss for her. In *Gilmore Girls*, we have a cast that is made of male and female characters but at the centerfold of the show we have the three Gilmore women: Emily, Lorelai, and Rory. Along with them we have a variety of colorful women that are also in the show. There really are only two men who we could argue that could possibly be considered main characters in the show and even then they do not have appearances in every episode of the series.

The show was also able to do something that many other shows and films of the time could not do. They were able to pass the Bechdel Test. The Bechdel Test is used to test if a movie or television show has enough female representation on screen. For a piece of media to be able to pass the Bechdel test there must be two female character that talk must talk to each other about something other than man. Not only in *Gilmore Girls*, do we have two women who talk to each other a lot about something other than a man, they also are the two protagonists of the show. We could also argue that the show actually has three protagonists when looking at all three of the Gilmore women, but at times we could also argue that Emily plays Lorelai's antagonist.

Again to summarize this textual analysis *Gilmore Girls* can be viewed from several different viewpoints on an academic level. Like discussed the show can be analyzed from third wave feminism (appearance, individualism), a generational conversation, hegemonic gender norms, intersectionality, and the characteristics in which the show was made. Now that we have looked at *Gilmore Girls* from a textual point of view we can now look at the show from an audience point of view.

### **“Gillys”: Gilmore Girls Fandom as Feminist Practice**

*Gilmore Girls* also has a fandom that has helped this show live on past coming off the air in 2007. The endearing term that is used for this fans are “Gillys.” These “Gillys” flood public forums from Facebook to blogs, tweet with their 140 characters about the show, listen to podcasts, attend fan festivals, and go to meet-and-greets with the cast and crew of the show. There are members of the fandom who are “acafans”(Acafandom and Beyond), a term coined by Henry Jenkins in 1992. An “acafan” is someone who is both a fan and an academic. According to Jenkins, “The new ‘acafen’ (fen has been the plural of fan within the science fiction fan culture) sought to distinguish themselves from the previous generation by signaling their own

affiliations with and accountability to the communities they were studying” (Acafandom and Beyond). Being members of the fandom and also academics members of the fandom we are able to appreciate the show from a fan perspective while also applying our academic lens to get a further read on our favorite shows. I am one of the fans that is both a “Gilly” and an “acafan”. I flock to the fan sites and Facebook groups, tweet at my favorite actors from the show, and read the fanfiction. I am also interested in looking at the show from an academic sitting in some of terms I have laid out in this thesis.

One website that allows for fans to give the shows an audience rating is *Rotten Tomatoes*. When looking at ratings for *Gilmore Girls*, the only time the show was rated below an 80% was Season 7 (“*Gilmore Girls*”), which also happens to be the only season that the show was not written by Sherman-Palladino and Palladino. With the Palladinos writing for the show the average rating was at least 90% (Rotten Tomatoes). Despite rating well on a site like Rotten Tomatoes the show was very popular amongst its fans but was never a breakout hit. So why does the fandom live on? Why is *Gilmore Girls* still so popular? Sherman-Palladino created a world that we could see. It is place that we could image being a part of. We all want to walk the streets of Stars Hollow and stop in at Luke’s Diner for a cup of coffee, to go to Star Hollow Books, and to cap the day off with a conversation with one of Star Hollow’s colorful residents.

*Gilmore Girls* also bridges that generation gap. It encompasses a teenage daughter, a mother, and grandmother. It is something that we can sit in the living room and watch with our children, mother, and grandmother, with all generations feeling touched in some form or fashion by what is going on in the show. It was also a show that gave us positive representations of women. No one was mean or petty. No one is demeaned for who they are. They all were women just trying to make it in the world. Rory was a strong-willed girl that wanted to succeed in going

to an Ivy League college. Lorelai was in a position of power. She ran an inn and went on to own an inn and she did it all on her own with little help of anyone. Emily being the matriarch of the family was the anchor. She showed her daughter and granddaughter what it meant to be a woman, to embrace the femininity but to never let anyone tell you, you couldn't do something just because you were a woman. These are the example of women that most of us want to grow up to be. Why wouldn't these powerful and colorful women create a cult following that could stand the test of time?

Sherman-Palladino created a place for her viewers to get lost in and that was relatable. Most of us all have had similar conversations with our mothers that we can't throw our lives away for a significant other. Our mothers have all had the concern conversations about if they are raising us right with our grandmothers. To watch someone on TV have the same conversations you have had in your personal life makes it even more engaging and vital ~~eye~~ ~~catching~~. It reminds you we're all human. From the pilot episode, certain trajectories were clear. Sherman-Palladino was destined to make a cult following and fandom and successful show from the first episode. Granted the show in later seasons had some plot lines that stretched a little too thin and created things that turned out to not be relatable (i.e. discovering a kid you never knew existed and getting married on whim when you didn't want too) but the fans, despite these issues, still love the show. *Gilmore Girls* means so much more to their cult followers that those mistakes and plot holes seem to be minor details compared to the overall representation that the show creates. It creates a representation for women all over who may not have felt represented in a positive way on television before this show came along.

With this in mind I took to Twitter to see what fellow fans of the show were tweeting about. To do so I looked at different hashtags that can be associated with the show and was

surprised to find significant activity around International Women's Day (March 8). I was able to find lots of tweets thanking *Gilmore Girls* creators, cast, and crew for giving them positive examples of women. Some of the tweets didn't even thank the creators of the show but went far enough to thank Lorelai and Rory for being the examples of women that they wanted to be when they grew up. The tweets varied in range from, "Lorelai Gilmore is my spirit animal" to "Being a strong independent MOM- That's #feminism – Oh #Gilmoregirls sparked my feminist awakening" ("*Gilmore Girls* Twitter Search"). One of the tweets I looked at had a link that went to a personal blog. The blog post was titled "How the *Gilmore Girls* Taught Us To Be Feminist". The blog post shared the author's opinions about the feminist lessons of *Gilmore Girls*. She talked about how the show showed her positive examples of how to empower women, which we discussed in the textual analysis. The blog post author also brings up how the show celebrated and embraced single motherhood despite the fact that it could have chosen to look at in a negative light. She also discusses the ideas that there is no idea of a "weak" female, saying:

"Korean-American Lane rebels against her mother's wishes to become a rock drummer.

Lorelai proposes to Luke in the Season 5 finale. Paris Gellar unapologetically chases after every goal she sets for herself. Rory displays strength when she chases her goals to attend Yale, become a reporter, and rejects Logan's marriage proposal at the end of Season 7 to pursue her professional dreams" (Basco, Isabella).

In another blog post that I found through looking at tweets, "Sneaky Feminism On Screen" the author writes,

"There's no denying that the show's portrayal of the bond between mother and daughter was unique. Romantic dramas were often peripheral to their relationship with each other and their own successes and failures. In fact, perhaps the most tragic split in the series is

not Lorelai and Luke or Rory and Dean, but the rift between the *Gilmore Girls* themselves in Season Six. The show was far from perfect, but it did place a high degree of value on women's lives outside of romance" (Hunt Rosie).

The blog goes on to talk about how popular culture we are taking in like *Gilmore Girls* could be 'sneakily feminist' but we are just taking it in at eye level and not looking for the deeper meanings. "At face value, many films and popular programs can seem like just another rehashing of tired gender stereotypes, but when you look beyond noisy trailers and glossy promotion, pop culture can surprise us" (Hunt Rosie).

When looking at tweets from fans about the show, most of the tweets regarding feminism and the *Gilmore Girls* had similar messages. Most felt as if the biggest message the show gave them was the ability to empower women. For example, there was a tweet referencing Rory and Dean's first fight, specifically about the comments Dean made during the "Damn That Donna Reed" episode in the first season. In that episode Dean said he would like to come home to a housewife that had dinner on the table for him every day. That was the opposite of what Rory wanted in life. Rory took that opportunity to teach Dean a lesson and mock the very idea of the type of women he would like to have in life. The tweet said, "YES, Rory destroying Dean in argument over Donna Reed! #GilmoreGirls #feminism" ("*Gilmore Girls* Twitter Search").

Another tweet that really seemed to hit a cord with others that were tweeting about the show came with a link to another article and was using the hashtags #feminism, #Gilmoregirls, #femalerolemodels, and #betruetoyourself ("*Gilmore Girls* Twitter Search). The article that the Twitter user wanted others to read was "In What Ways is '*Gilmore Girls*' a Feminist Show?". The article related to many points that we have seen throughout the textual analysis but also struck gold with what many other bloggers and tweeters were talking about,

“The storylines of *Gilmore Girls*, the show’s real success was its ability to seamlessly weave casual feminism into everyday life. The series made a constant effort to inject its episodes with subtle references. There’s the Planned Parenthood poster on the wall in Rory’s room; the Season One episode "That Damn Donna Reed," ... and Rory’s lengthy reading list, which includes works by Sylvia Plath, Toni Morrison and Judith Butler” (The Casual Feminism of *Gilmore Girls*).

The article even went as far to discuss why *Gilmore Girls* was a huge hit with generations of women,

“Furthermore, in showing the audience three generations of Gilmore women, viewers were able to see how ‘being a feminist’ has changed through the years... Compared to Rory’s progressive independence, Emily may appear old-fashioned. The contrast highlights to a young audience the progress in the feminist movement and what it means to be a woman in the modern world” (The Casual Feminism of *Gilmore Girls*).

The show was able to show viewers the progression of the feminist movements in the United States.

While the show isn’t perfect, and fans are among those who will point out the flaws the show has from not having enough racial representation to sometimes going against the very backbone of not needing a man. For example, “Interesting piece on privilege and the lack of intersectionality in #GilmoreGirls #feminism” (“*Gilmore Girls* Twitter Search”). They all seem to come back to the ideas that the show was made for a time that was about empowering women to do their very best in life. “Little Girl: so girl hobbits can go on adventures too, Lorelai: and they do it in heels #feminism #lorelaigilmore #Gilmoregirls” (“*Gilmore Girls* Twitter Search”). They also like the ideas of how Lorelai and Rory reject the notion of needing man. For example,

even though Lorelai finally does settle down to be with Luke it takes her 10 years, from the final episode of the series to the final minutes of *A Year in a Life*, to marry Luke. Even though Lorelai does end up marrying Luke in the end it doesn't change the positive representation of women she was throughout the show's run. She made sure that the success of herself and her daughters came first before she would even think about settling down.

Throughout this thesis we have talked about the lasting effects *Gilmore Girls* has had on fans. Some fans interact with the show via Twitter, fan sites, and Facebook. Others write blog post and attend fan festivals. Then there are "acafans" who want to interact with their favorite show in terms text, industry, and audience. Now that we have come full circle we can pull it all together.

### **Conclusion**

Television has been argued to be a venue for grappling with social issues. In 2018, *Gilmore Girls* is still very relevant. *Gilmore Girls* was something special and many knew it was different from the time it came it on the air in 2000 and is still something that many members of the fandom hold near and dear to their hearts. The lessons we learned and the feeling that we can escape into the magical world of Stars Hollow and sit down at the table for Friday night family dinners have been around for the last 18 years. We still have generations of women that are interacting and showing the progression of the feminist movement in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the same way the show has grandmothers, mothers, and daughters interacting in a similar fashion. Similar to seeing Emily we are able to see why our own grandmothers act in the similar ways to her and are still positive representation of feminist women. "Although Emily is an open-minded, educated woman who stands up for women's rights, she is a product of her time and adheres to

traditions such as cotillion and the belief in ‘marrying well.’ However, this does not diminish her role as a strong woman in the series” (The Casual Feminism of *Gilmore Girls*).

The same oppression that Sherman-Palladino was dealing with while trying to get equal pay and a good contract are the same pay inequality that women are still dealing with today. It is also refreshing to see a female producer who cares so much about the product that she is putting out for her viewers. Yes, *Gilmore Girls* is not a movie but in 100 years of cinema no American female director has ever really been recognized as an auteur (Giese, Maria). Though Sherman-Palladino has never been said to be an auteur, the amount of time and commitment she puts into her show suggests that she could be considered an auteur. Every aspect of the show passed through her. She read every script, was involved with how the show was shot and edited, and even had final say on what music was a part of the show.

In 2018, the show could even be related to the #MeToo movement that began in Hollywood, and then moved out into the wider culture. While the show is not really dealing with harassment, the purpose of the Me Too movement was the ability to empower women and especially young women. *Gilmore Girls* had a similar message and also wanted to empower women to be who and whatever they wanted to be.

“The majority of women on the show want a career, and they work hard to achieve their dream. Lorelai goes to school to get a degree so she can pursue her dream of opening an inn – and she succeeds. Rory works hard to get into a prestigious university so she can ultimately become a world-class news journalist in a field that is still primarily dominated by men. Sookie has no interest in marriage – at first – and would rather spend her days as a renowned chef in Lorelai’s inn. Lane wants to be a known rockstar. Paris can’t make up

her mind between becoming a doctor, lawyer or the first woman president. Miss Patty runs her own dance studio” (Wefler, April).

While the #MeToo movement and *Gilmore Girls* have different motivations they both focus on empowering women and giving them the ability to speak and be heard.

This also helps fans to connect in today’s world. Most “Gillys” who connect with the show and go to other places to talk about it do it for reasons other than just the love that they have for the show. The show has a deeper meaning. A common trend in the “Gillys” world is the strong representations of women and one of the big ideas of the third wave of feminism; empowering women. Being able to see these common trends on the television in front of fans and seeing the problems that can happen in the forum in front of them gave fans the ability to work through their own issues.

It is also important to note the *Gilmore Girls* reboot did not receive the best reception. Something that most fans and members of the fandom were excited to watch but instead were left disappointed. The reboot happened as if it was frozen in time for ten years. All of the characteristics that made the show worth watching and memorable all seemed to go away. The show was now playing into the old tired stereotypes. Rory had gone nowhere in life and was moving back home at 32 to live with her mom. Lorelai who had worked her whole life to make progress was frozen in time. She was working the same job, not married, and no sign of moving forward. The only character that was forced to develop was Emily and that was due to the actor who played her husband dying. Sherman-Palladino had no choice but to evolve Emily’s character.

My whole study is based off of my research question which is: How *Gilmore Girls* might be understood as a feminist intervention in 21st century US television? To find the answer to my research question I used a multifaceted approach that looked at *Gilmore Girls* through three different perspectives: industry, text, and audience perspectives. I used these approaches to be able to see what was going on behind the scenes in production. While I was looking at what was happening on screen and lastly looking at how fans were interacting with what was happening with the show.

This study only scratches the surface of *Gilmore Girls* from a textual, industry, and audience analysis viewpoint. This study calls for further research into all of these perspectives. With only viewing and analyzing nine episodes there are a total of 153 in the series. This leaves many episodes untouched for analysis. I also only looked at a handful of blogs and tweets about the show, which opens the door for someone to look further into the “Gillys” and how they interact further with their favorite show. I also looked at #GilmoreGirls and #Feminism so the tweets were kinda tailored in my favor someone could do a study on tweets that only used the #GilmoreGirls. There is also plenty of further research that can be done into the issues that Sherman-Palladino had with the WB and the oppressions she faced with being a woman and creating a matriarchal show in a world that was creating patriarchal shows.

Yes, the show is not perfect and has some issues with representation of race throughout its run. It is important to note that despite that issues, the show does an overall good job of being a positive example of feminist media. It shows the viewers positive examples of strong women who don't necessarily need a man in their lives. It shows how generations of women can put together conversations of different movements of feminism that work well together. It shows that they can help support each other through life all while being independent and strong. It gives us

examples of conversations that happen within our own household and makes these women relatable to our own lives in the real world. The show really is *sneakily feminist* and if you know what you are looking for you will find the answers right underneath your nose. Is the show a feminist intervention in 21<sup>st</sup> century US television? My answer is yes: *Gilmore Girls* an example of a feminist intervention in 21<sup>st</sup> century US television.

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