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***Gender and Social Class in the TV Show 'Gilmore Girls'***

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## **Introduction**

*Gilmore Girls* (The WB, 2000-2007) was a show that premiered on The WB in the year 2000. It tells the story of a young mother and her 16-year-old daughter while they navigate through life. The series has already been the source of some studies due to its popularity both during the seven years that it was on air and more recently thanks to its arrival on the streaming platform Netflix. Such is the recent popularity that a sequel was made in the year 2016 under the title *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life*. From the many topics of interest that could be tackled within the show, in this BA Thesis I will be focusing on two main: gender and social class.

In my theoretical framework below there are four sections in which key concepts regarding the show are explained. These sections deal with information that explains why *Gilmore Girls* continues to be relevant and a source of studies twenty-three years after its premiere. In the first section, popular culture is explained. I will be focusing more on popular culture on television and how television has become a very important part of popular culture. This is important to the topic not only because the show has become part of popular culture, but also because of the constant popular culture references that the show makes. Sociologist Stuart Hall has written about the topic and the relevance of popular culture and writer Joanne Hollows explains how it became a source of study, as I will explain below. I will be also providing an insight into what culture really is in opposition to popular culture.

In the second section, a rather new concept will be explained: comfort shows. This is a term that has become popular, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Accessibility to shows has also contributed to the creation of this concept. A whole sociological theory exists behind this phenomenon which many experts like college professor Elisabeth Cohen have tried to explain. There are no strict features in a show that instantly turn them into a comfort show, it is more of a personal choice depending on the emotional period the spectator might be going through. I will delve into these questions on the following pages.

In the third section, I will be discussing the dramedy genre of fiction. *Gilmore Girls* is considered a dramedy, therefore, understanding this genre is crucial to understand the analysis later carried on. Not only the main features of dramedies will be explained, but also the features that make *Gilmore Girls* fit in this category and their importance for its success. This section also offers an insight into women's representation in media and how it has been evaluated with things such as the Bechdel Test.

For the last section of the theoretical framework, I will be reviewing the history of the family in television and how its representation and view have been evolving with time. In this section what is considered the “nuclear family” is explained and how it no longer is the only type of family. This section is relevant to the topic of this essay because *Gilmore Girls* is a show completely centred on family and whose family relations directly affect the topics dealt with in the analysis.

For the analysis, I will be focusing on two important topics that very often come together: gender and social class. *Gilmore Girls* is a show whose main characters are mainly women, so it has been considered by some as a feminist show, but it is proven in this part of the analysis that it is not as feminist as it first might seem especially when dealing with topics such as sex. In this part, I will be focusing on the character of the daughter and his image of the innocent girl, how that is often linked to virginity and the consequences it has.

Lastly, the topic of social class will be analysed. *Gilmore Girls* clearly portrays two different social classes: the upper class, and the middle class. I will explore the differences between these two classes using two of the main characters of the show. By comparing these two social classes many conclusions are discovered such as the patterns of behaviour in many of them, especially in the upper-class ones, and also how gender can also be affected by our social class.

## **1. Theoretical Framework**

In this essay, I will be discussing and analysing the TV show *Gilmore Girls* from different perspectives. But first, and in order to understand the analysis, we will be focusing on popular culture and how TV shows and fiction in general have become an important part of it. We will also discuss the rather new appearance of the concept “comfort shows” and how *Gilmore Girls* has become one for many viewers. I will explain the dramedy genre and the different characteristics a show needs to have to fit in the genre. Lastly, I will view how families have been a fundamental part of fiction since the beginning and how they have evolved.

### *1.1. “Reality has no place in our world”: Popular Culture and TV Shows*

Since its invention in 1926, television has changed how we see the world. It has transformed the way in which we consume entertainment and, therefore, society’s view of culture. As one of the significant forms of communication in today’s world, television

has become a source of popular culture. Because of the impact of both television and popular culture in modern society, television entertainment has become a topic of academic studies.

The study of television covers many areas, such as directing, production, or audiences, but one of the most important ones is representation. In 1990, identity and how others perceive us became a concern in Cultural Studies, so it is also interesting to see how these matters can be applied to television characters. How are they built? How do they become who they are and why do they act the way they do? Moreover, it is also interesting to analyse these questions not only thinking about characters, but also the impact they have in the audience watching the programs, with questions posed such as why someone identifies with a fictional character.

Thanks to the appearance of streaming services such as Netflix or Amazon Prime, access to media has become easier for everyone able to afford it, and it has helped TV shows and films spread around the world more quickly than before. Another crucial factor for a series to reach a wider audience is social media. Nowadays, we have the opportunity to comment on every aspect of what we are watching live and share it with the world. Social media has become the best medium for advertising. If we mix these two factors, the easy access to media and the fast-spreading of certain cultural products, it is easy to understand how some films and especially TV shows can become social phenomena. Many programmes have become an essential part of pop culture; people reference them in their daily lives. But not only TV series have this impact, but also films or reality shows. Today, everything can become viral, so anything can become part of pop culture.

In order to understand the concept of pop culture, we first need to understand what culture itself is. There are many definitions of culture available, but most of them tend to revolve around knowledge. American professor John Paul Lederach book *Preparing for Peace: Conflict Transformation Across Cultures* describes culture as “the shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them” (Lederach, 1995, p. 9). An article published in *Live Science* defines culture as “the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, encompassing language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music, and the arts” (Pappas, Stephanie, and Callum McKelvie, 2022, n.p.).

It is also important to understand what “popular” implies: it could be defined as widely favoured or well-liked (McKeon & Williams, 1976, p. 236). John Storey states that “popular culture is simply culture that is widely favoured or well liked by many

people” (2012, p. 5). Popular culture does not only evolve around the media, but is also about literature, music, art, or sports. Therefore, Storey suggests that to try and measure popular culture, we could examine things such as concert tickets, albums, or DVD sales to try and get an idea of the impact a product has on the audience. If we only use facts such as sales, we would need to establish a scale to determine when something can become part of popular culture and when it cannot, especially because sometimes product do not necessarily need to be economically successful to become part of popular culture.

Popular culture has, for a very long time, been considered to be outside of what is known as “high culture”. It has been seen as products for the lower levels of society, while the upper classes would be interested in other more important matters or types of culture. However, this concept could also be problematic because what is and is not considered high culture has been changing over the years. For example, “William Shakespeare is now seen as the epitome of high culture, yet as late as the nineteenth century his work was very much a part of popular theatre” (Storey, 2012, p. 6). In any case, the idea of popular culture dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and has always been associated with the lower classes. Sociologist Stuart Hall claimed that popular culture is somehow related to folk culture, i.e., something produced and consumed by the people (Hall in Duncombe, 2002, p. 189). However, as time has passed, the meaning has been evolving, and with the arrival of mass media and new forms of communication, it has somehow become the culture of the masses.

In an article called “Feminismo, estudios culturales y cultura popular” (2005) writers Joanne Hollows and Pau Pitarch explains how popular culture became the object of academic studies. Her study is primarily linked with feminist studies and how media affected and still affects women today. One example of these is how women were hardly represented outside of the house and in the wife role in the media. The author argues that cultural studies in general and feminist studies in particular have always been linked. This eradicates how cultural studies often revolve around power relationships and how power is often linked with gender and sexuality.

Although the meaning of popular culture in the twenty-first century is no longer associated with social class the way it used to be, it still echoes this idea of separating what could be called “elite culture” from the culture of what the general public tends to consume. Creating a culture for everyone where references and elements are available to all and are taken from more trivial sources. It is true that popular culture has been

criticised alluding to its lack of deepness or value. However, it gains more and more relevance every day thanks to academic studies paying attention to it.

### 1.2. “A little nervous breakdown can work wonders for a girl”: Comfort Shows

A new phenomenon has emerged within the TV series universe especially as a result of 2020’s Covid-19 lockdown, and that is comfort shows. Leyden Streed explains that comfort shows are programmes “you watch to ease anxiety or invoke nostalgia” (2022, n.p.). There are other concepts similar to this one, like comfort food, that is, the food you cook when you are trying to feel better. Comfort shows have grown in popularity over the last few years. According to *Time* magazine, “when people rewatch their favorite TV shows, they report feeling transported into another world. This can make them feel less lonely when viewing these programs” (Goldfarb, 2022, n.p.).

There have been two key factors that have been decisive for the rise of comfort shows. Firstly, streaming platforms have allowed users to access to their favourite series at any given time. Audiences can now watch as many episodes as they would like to on a row without the need to wait until it airs on television, this new type of show consumption is known as “binge-watching”. However, the emergence of the concept of comfort shows has also been closely linked to the COVID-19 lockdown. In those uncertain times, issues such as anxiety or depression were commonly experienced by many people across the world. The worry about the future and not being able to leave the house had many people turning to TV as a means of distraction to forget about the harsh reality that the world was experiencing.

Comfort shows have only one rule to be considered as such: you must have seen them before, at least once. Studies have found that when people are faced with a choice to try something new or continue a habit they have, they tend to choose to keep things the same. This is called *status quo bias*, and we do it because maintaining habits we already have lowers the risk of distress or disappointment (Goldfarb, 2022, n.p.). Moreover, although TV characters are fictional, audiences still connect with them, and after watching a show, some viewers even feel as if some of them are your friends. So, by rewatching shows, it may feel as if one was meeting an old friend.

The psychology of comfort shows resides in already knowing what is going to happen. According to West Virginia professor Elizabeth Cohen, “there’s a lot of comfort in knowing when something’s going to happen. You don’t have to exert a lot of cognitive energy, so it doesn’t feel taxing” (in Gilbert, 2020, n.p.). In stressful times, which is when

people tend to jump into their comfort shows, it is easier and more relaxing to watch something that knowing you like and that you trust is going to create good feelings rather than start a new show you are not sure how it is going to affect you.

Some people also turn to old shows when feeling low, which is also connected to predictability. Sophie Gilbert explains that she remembers “finding TV frustrating during the ’90s because of how formulaic it was, yet that sense of predictability is precisely what people might be seeking out now” (2020, n.p.). Nowadays, TV series try to be innovative, to create plots never seen before so they can gain an audience. But because of the state of society today, and the increasing social and political issues plus the deterioration of mental health, people find themselves turning back to predictable shows in order to find some stability and something that can calm their anxiety.

What can and cannot be considered a comfort show may vary from person to person. There are examples of comfort shows in any genre; it just depends on what the spectator considers comforting. One example is violent shows like *Peaky Blinders* (BBC, 2013-2022) or *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010-2022). For some people, watching violence and trouble in shows is comforting since it helps them put their life into perspective and realise it is not as bad as they thought. Although it is fiction, it could be comforting for some to see people going through hard times and feel better about their lives.

Another type of comfort show is police TV series. In this case, it is not the violence that attracts viewers, but its predictability. Police shows such as for example *Castle* (ABC, 2009-2016) or *Criminal Minds* (CBS, 2005-present), tend to follow a pattern in each episode: the police team interviews the suspects, find clues about all of them, start suspecting about one, but the ‘bad guy’ turns out to be another person different from the one they were investigating, and at the end they always get caught. Therefore, being familiar with what is going to happen and knowing that justice is going to prevail can be comforting.

Sitcoms are another type of comfort show. They are short and easy to watch, and the spectator knows they are going to make them laugh or at least feel better. Some have many characters, which makes the viewer identify with one easily, and they tend to get along well between them, avoiding arguments and therefore being more comforting. Examples for shows within this category are *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004) or *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-2020).



Likewise, reality TV can also be comforting for different reasons. On the one hand, people could enjoy watching the luxuriant lives of rich people, wishing it could be them who were living them. For example, in shows such as *Keeping up with The Kardashians* (E!, 2007-2021) or *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* (Bravo, 2010-present). On the other hand, cooking shows like *The Great British Bake Off* (BBC 2, 2010-present) are also comforting for their viewers, since they show people cooking and nothing else.

For many people, the best comfort shows are the ones that portray daily life situations, shows in which the spectators can see themselves and relate to the situations happening on the screen. A clear example is the TV series that I will be analysing in this dissertation, *Gilmore Girls*. It is the ultimate comfort show for many people. Viewers get involved in the lives of the series' main character, a young mother (Lorelai Victoria Gilmore) and her teenage daughter (Lorelai "Rory" Leigh Gilmore), and for the time the episode lasts, they forget about their own lives and become inhabitants of Stars Hollow, Connecticut, the fictive small town where the action takes place. Shows like this one create a feeling of belonging; the spectator feels like a character while watching the show. Anna Goldfarb states that "humans have an innate need to belong to larger groups for our survival, and we are biologically programmed to find solace in stories" (2022, n.p.). That is why these programmes are comforting, because viewers feel like they belong to something while watching it.

What all these shows have in common, is that they allow their audiences to escape reality. Today, society lives a very stressful life full of issues, so what they long for the time when they will turn on the TV at night and will watch something that can make them forget about their lives just for a while. Although the genre depends on the viewer, the opportunity to experience a different reality with different people, a reality that you already know and feel comfortable with, is what makes many people re-watch their favourite shows instead of watching new ones.

### 1.3. "I'm fine, I'm just being dramatic, it's what I do": The Concept of Dramedy

One of the most successful genres in TV fiction is dramedy, a hybrid between comedy and drama that features elements from both (Matt,<sup>1</sup> 2022, n.p.). The main feature of dramedies, and one of their sources of success, is that they are realistic. The characters, usually the main ones, face issues that are common in life. Comedy usually focuses on

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<sup>1</sup> This is how the name of the author appears in the text I have consulted.

absurd situations to make the audience laugh, whereas drama focuses on dramatic situations. By combining the two, producers create a genre that is more similar to reality. This is one of the reasons why dramedies have become so popular: they explore situations that are relatable. These types of shows usually use comic relief in dramatic plots, making humorous approaches to dark subject matter and/or tragicomic portrayals of characters (Havas & Sulimma, 2020, n.p.). Being able to create a series where people can identify themselves with either the characters or the plot is not as easy as it may seem. Creeber explains in his book *Serial Television: Big Drama on the Small Screen* that dramedies blend generic modes of soap opera, drama, and comedy to engage with individualised or “micro” identity politics around gender, sexuality, and community (2004, p. 115.)

Sometimes dramedies have an activist undercurrent. Nowadays, social critique is present in many TV shows, especially because the show’s plots try to resemble real life, where situations of injustice are always found. If we create a show where the goal is to portray daily life situations, it would be impossible for the characters not to encounter cases of injustice that directly affect them, be it because of gender, race, class, or a combination of them. This is the reason why dramedies very often revolve around women’s stories and gender issues. The protagonists of this type of show are usually women learning how to navigate through life. The fact that dramedies normally revolve around women is therefore not a coincidence, it is sometimes also related to the critical tone that they often have. When telling a story about a woman, if the goal is to make it realistic, it would always need to have a dramatic part because their gender is a key factor in every aspect of their life, and they will have to go through situations that a man would never have to.

Dramedies are sometimes marketed as shows only for women and have a predominantly female audience. This makes sense when you consider that, until last century, almost no television show had plots about women’s stories, and if they did, they were written by white men who had no idea what it was like to be a woman, resulting in stereotypical plots that were completely far from reality. So, when a new fiction genre emerged during the 1990s in which women and their stories, not their bodies, began to be the pivotal point of a show, female audiences found more comfort in that type of fiction. During this time, TV shows focused on superficial aspects, typically the physical aspect and image, such as *Baywatch* (NBC, 1989-1990) or *Saved by the Bell* (NBC, 1989-1993), where women were completely objectified. This gave a completely out-of-touch image of women that fostered stereotypical gender roles and for men and women.

The political undertone of the role of the woman in society and what it means to be a woman is something that became more prominent in 21<sup>st</sup>-century TV shows. If we pay attention to dramedies from the early 2000s, the plot involves women's daily lives but is more focused on issues such as love and friendship. They do not reflect, in most cases, the constant discriminatory circumstances that women have suffered throughout history such as work conditions, house duties automatically attributed to them or the violence they suffer from men. In fact, *Gilmore Girls* does not particularly focus on such matters. It portrays two independent women who have several romantic plots throughout the show, but it also focuses on their professional lives. In the year 2000, when the show premiered, it was not usual to see a leading role of an unmarried woman who eventually founds her own business while raising a daughter by herself.

*Gilmore Girls* features a lot of dramedy. Elements of drama and comedy combine in each episode. When looking closely at the different plots throughout the seven seasons, it becomes evident that the element of drama changes between the two main characters, Lorelai (Lauren Graham) and Rory (Alexis Bledel). One of them is always experiencing a dramatic episode which may be related to their love interest, the relationship with their family, their professional life, or even their own mother-daughter relationship. Moreover, while one of them goes through this experience, the other is normally involved in a more comic plot. This is a perfect representation of the dramedy genre. If the two of them were going through an unhappy circumstance at the same time, the comic relief would be gone and the comfort show factor would disappear. In turn, if they were completely happy, the relatable element would disappear.

When talking about women's representation in audiovisual fiction, there is a test that has become popular among the public, especially young women. It is the Bechdel Test. It appeared for the first time in cartoonist Alison Bechdel's comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* (1983-2008), and it was created to measure the representation of women in film. The test is very simple, as it consists of three simple questions: 1) Are there at least two named women in the film?; 2) Do these women talk to each other?; 3) Do these women interact with each without mentioning a man? (Neville, 2023, n.p.). If, after watching a film or show, you are able to answer *yes* to the three questions, it passes the Bechdel Test. It looks very simple, but not many works of fiction actually pass the test. Some examples of unexpected films that pass the test are *Frozen* (Walt Disney Studios Motion Picture, 2013) or *Twilight* (Summit Entertainment, 2008) whereas films such as *The Avengers* (Walt Disney Studios Motion Picture, 2012) or the entire *Lord of*

*the Rings* (New Line Cinema, 2001-2003) saga do not. However, the fact that a film passes the test does not mean that it immediately becomes a feminist film or TV show; it can pass it and still feature misogynistic or sexist plots.

Since the appearance of the Bechdel Test, many others have been created to evaluate the representation of different marginalised groups of society, such as the DuVernay Test, created by Manohla Dargis in 2016, which evaluates the representation of people of colour in fiction or the Vito Russo Test (GLAAD, 2013, n.p.) for LGTB+ representation. This test is just an example of how the importance of representing women's stories beyond stereotypes have been increasing with time. This relates to the TV show I am analysing in this essay, *Gilmore Girls*, because it is a show that since the beginning has tried to portray women outside of the traditional roles previously assigned to women in fiction.

#### 1.4. "You've Been Gilmored": Family on Television

One of the most common elements in fiction has been the interest in the portrayal of family relationships. The family has always been a focal point in many Anglophone TV series; either the good, the bad, or even the non-existent relations of a family are usually a central plot or subplot of a show. What and how something is portrayed on television has always been a topic of concern for many sectors of society. Many controversies have emerged from television shows and films. Some people believe that the public may tend to imitate what is seen on television and acquire the ideas and behaviours seen on the screen, so how families have been shown on television has sometimes been a controversial topic as times evolve and the idea of the family starts to change.

Giving a definition of family is not an easy task. The word means something completely different to different people. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines family as "the basic unit in society traditionally consisting of two parents rearing their children" (2023, n.p.). Whilst maybe twenty years ago this was the traditional idea of family and the common pattern that many families followed, now we can see many different types of families that years ago would have caused a commotion. Since television has often tried to be a reflection of reality, the examples of family in fiction have also been changing with time.

Many types of families have been shown in fiction throughout history. In the beginning, they always followed the pattern of what is considered a traditional family: a husband who economically supports the family, the wife in charge of the house duties,

and the children. That is, television has shown what has been known as a nuclear or elementary family. Families have appeared in and have been a very important part of series since the beginning of television, with shows such as *I Love Lucy* (CBS, 1951-1957), the most popular American TV show in the 1950s. But as society has evolved and new types of families have emerged, fiction has done the same, incorporating new types of families into TV series and films such as uniparental or LGBT+ families. This has especially happened in genres such as comedy or soap operas, whereas in others like adventure or science fiction, the trend is not so evident.

The main genre where the role of the family is important is comedy. For example, *Modern Family* (ABC, 2009-2020) shows a big family with three different nuclear units inside it, where only one of them corresponds to what is considered the traditional family, whereas the other two are a homosexual couple with an adopted child and a young Latina married to an older man. A show like that would have been unimaginable years ago, but as the world has been evolving, new types of families have emerged, therefore have been portrayed on television.

Not only comedies revolve around families; dramedies and situational dramas also explore family matters in depth and have been evolving with time. One example is the television series *The Fosters* (ABC-Freeform, 2013-2018), which tells the day-to-day story of a non-traditional family. The parents are two women, Lina (Sherri Saum) and Steph (Teri Polo), who are raising four adopted children as well as Steph's biological son from a previous relationship. Thus, LGBT+ families as well as single-parent families, have been featured on television.

In *Gilmore Girls*, the prime nuclear family is just a mother and her daughter. This show challenges the traditional idea of the family previously shown in fiction, not only because of the absence of a father or the fact that Lorelai had her daughter at sixteen, but also because they behave in a way that was not typically seen before; they do not follow the social rules society expects a family to observe. One of the main examples is the difference between the two characters' personalities and how, on many occasions, Lorelai acts more like a daughter than a mother. Having had her child at such a young age often leads Lorelai to act immaturely.

Lorelai's parents show what a traditional family should be according to social rules, i.e., in it there is a father who is the source of income for the family, a stay-at-home mother, and the children. However, that pattern failed, and Lorelai ran away from home after becoming pregnant with Rory. Moreover, not many successful traditional families

are shown in the series throughout its seasons. For example, Rory's best friend Lane (Keiko Agena) lives with her mother, but her father is never mentioned.

Beside showing different styles of families in fiction, some series have portrayed families with different social classes and incomes. The traditional middle-class family usually portrayed in television has transitioned to other plots with families from the elite, such as in *Gossip Girls* (The CW, 2007-2012) or *Succession* (HBO, 2018-2023), to the very lowest marginalised classes, like the ones, for example, portrayed in *Shameless* (Showtime, 2011-2021.) Shows with rich families tend to become popular as the middle-class audience likes to get an insight into what it is like to be in such a position. Moreover, rich families in fiction tend to be dysfunctional, giving the public a certain relief in knowing that money is not supposed to be everything and that it eventually ends up causing trouble in the family.

A 2016 article from the online magazine *The Artifice* explores the idea of family and how there are two types of families: "There's the family that people are born and raised in, with parents and/or guardians, and then there's the family that people choose" (Mwalll,<sup>2</sup> 2016). Everyone has a biological family, even if they never get to meet them, but sometimes the supporting and loving factor of a family comes from people who are not familiarly related to you. This is also a concept covered in many shows, such as *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004) or *New Girl* (Fox, 2011-2018). We can also get a glimpse of this idea in *Gilmore Girls*, where Lorelai would turn to her friends for help instead of going to her family. She goes to characters like Luke (Scott Patterson) or Sookie (Melissa McCarthy), her friends, and only when no one else can help her does she go to her parents. She finds comfort and support in friends and neighbours and would do anything but rely on her biological family. Shows like these try to portray real life and show that it is not always the case that family members have a good relationship, and that sometimes you find the comfort and support in other people. During the next section we will be analysing the relationship these characters have and how gender and social class are present and make an impact on them.

## 2. Analysis

In this section, I will be analysing how *Gilmore Girls* characters are affected by two key factors: gender and social class. I will explore what impact these issues have on the different characters and how they are represented in the show overall. In the gender

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<sup>2</sup> This is how the name of the author appears in the article.

section I will be focusing mainly in the character of Rory and her image of innocent girl as well as the approach the show has to sex. In the second one, when referring to social class I will be seeing the difference between the upper and middle classes represented mainly by Emily and Lorelai.

*Gilmore Girls* is a TV dramedy that premiered on The WB in 2000 and continued for seven seasons until the last one finally aired on The CW in 2007. It was created by Amy Sherman-Palladino, and it stars Lauren Graham and Alexis Bledel. The show follows the life of Lorelai, a single mother who had her daughter Rory at the age of sixteen and left her house to raise her by herself. By the time the show starts, Rory is fifteen and they both live in the fictional town of Stars Hollow in the state of Connecticut. The series shows multiple different relationships between them and other inhabitants of the town, as well as with Lorelai's parents, Emily (Kelly Bishop) and Richard (Edward Herrmann), with whom she maintains a difficult relationship.

### 2.1. “*Women of Questionable Morals*”: Gender in *Gilmore Girls*

*Gilmore Girls* has a high number of female characters, so even if it is not directly addressed, gender plays a very important role in it: When it first premiered, it was often considered a feminist show. At that time, having two independent females as main characters was not something usual: “The show does not touch directly on feminist activism but instead focuses on three strong women of different generations struggling and overcoming challenges while developing and honing their feminist identities” (Ahlgren, 2018, p. 5). But revisiting it from a 2023 perspective can sometimes prove the contrary. Since the show finished sixteen years ago, the world has evolved in many ways, and what was normal and acceptable during the 2000s might not be now.

One of the first things in which we can observe that the show might not be as feminist as it first appears to be is how the idea of female independence that the character has is, on many occasions, not real. The reason why the characters may seem independent is because they live alone and have their own careers. However, almost every issue the characters face or situations in which they are involved are about men. Moreover, they often seek male validation too, especially from the men that surround them. Throughout the whole series, both Lorelai and Rory have always had a romantic interest. Whether it is a boyfriend or someone with whom they have some sort of romantic feelings or tension, a man is usually part of almost all their stories.

The main men that are involved in the Gilmore Girls' lives are Christopher (David Sutcliffe), Rory's biological father, whom Lorelai has known her entire life; and Luke, the owner of Stars Hollow's diner and Lorelai's friend. Lorelai dates both of them throughout the series. Rory also has three main romantic interests: Dean (Jared Padaleki), a new boy in town by the time the shows start; Jess (Milo Ventimiglia), a very problematic boy who is also Luke's nephew; and Logan (Matt Czuchy), a rich young man that she meets at Yale. In one way or another, they become dependent on all of these men. One clear example is how every time they needed to fix something in the house, they would call Luke to help them, or how Logan presented Rory with many opportunities thanks to his social status. So both Lorelai and Rory are not only dependent in a sentimental way, but they also depend on men for daily life issues.

One of the reasons why both characters seem to be always involved with men is because, although in different ways, both had an absence of male figures in their early lives. Lorelai has a father but a very distant relationship with him, and it never seems as if they have ever really bonded. Richard is a businessman who is always focused on his work and has old-fashioned thoughts and behaviours. Because of this, Lorelai always leans towards very opposite types of men; for example, Luke, who is a simple middle-class man, or Christopher, who, even though he comes from the same background, has always rejected that lifestyle and behaved in quite an immature way.

On the contrary, Rory lacks a father figure. Christopher appears in some moments of her life but is never constant, and although a big part of the show revolves around how Lorelai tried to raise her daughter in the best way possible, it would be almost impossible for Rory not to develop any father issues at some point in her life. Although she has relationships with different boys, her longest and even most successful one is with Logan, who resembles her father: a young man from a rich background who rejects that life and tries to break the mould but at the same time still takes advantage of his family's wealth.

After their initial meeting, Rory becomes increasingly interested in Logan because he is the exact kind of guy from whom her mother shielded her. More than a boring socialite, though, Logan exhibits intellectual curiosity as well as the bad-boy qualities that have always intrigued Rory—only this time with a sophisticated charm and educated worldliness. (Diffrient & Lavery, 2010, p. 309)

This is more than evident in season six episode fourteen, "You've Been Gilmored", when Christopher visits Rory in Yale, gets to know Logan better, and both discover the many things they have in common.



Another topic that *Gilmore Girls* sometimes deals with in a rather controversial way is sex. As mentioned above, this show premiered in the year 2000 on The WB, a television network accessible to the whole US. We are used to series full of explicit sex scenes such as *Bridgerton* (Netflix, 2020-present) or *Euphoria* (HBO, 2019-present). But a few years ago, on broadcast television, especially on The WB because it was a more family-centred channel, sex was in some ways taboo in TV shows and was never explicitly shown. The WB was a broadcast television which produced shows meant to be watched by the whole family, thus they could not feature any explicit sex scene. *Gilmore Girls* is not an exception, and it does not feature any explicit sex scenes during its seven seasons. Nevertheless, it is often subtly articulated around sex. The whole premise of the show is that Lorelai becomes pregnant with Rory when she is sixteen, so for a big part of the show, mainly the season where Rory is still in high school, there is this worry, especially from Rory's grandmother Emily, that Rory could suffer the same fate as Lorelai. For example, in season 1, episode 9, "Rory's Dance", the teenager is late from a dance she went to with Dean and Emily, and even Lorelai starts to worry that Rory might be having sex with Dean, which for Emily immediately means that she is going to get pregnant. In this regard, "Emily follows a much more old-fashioned, traditional belief regarding sexuality where a woman's virtue is of utmost importance" (Ahlgren, 2018, p. 18).

Lorelai wants Rory to wait to start having sex. This is linked to the innocent image of the perfect girl that Rory portrays, especially during the first three seasons. Rory's perfection and innocence are linked to her being a virgin, and even though Lorelai is open about sex, often making jokes about it, she still wants that image of Rory to remain intact. This is clearly seen in an episode where Paris (Liza Weil), Rory's friend at school, shares with Rory that she has had sex (3.16, "The Big One"). Rory tells Paris that she is still a virgin, and when Lorelai overhears the conversation, she claims: "I've got the good kid". She links Rory not having sex with being a good daughter. Moreover, later on in that episode, Paris finds out that she was not accepted into Harvard and immediately goes on a rant about how that is an immediate consequence of losing her virginity: "I'm being punished. I had sex, so now I don't get to go to Harvard", she claims. By the time this episode airs, the character is seventeen years old, and the person she lost her virginity to was her current boyfriend, so there is no reason to blame the character or make her believe that her rejection at Harvard has to do with her sex life. This sends a very problematic message, especially because the show has a mainly young female audience. It is telling

girls that success means not having sex; if you do, you will be rejected: “Every young woman of relevance on the show that loses her virginity faces negative consequences, creating the uncharacteristic message that sex distracts young women from their education” (Ahlgren, 2018, p. 40).

Virginity has always been gender-biased; it has always meant more for women, as they are seen as pure when they are still virgins. An article called “Gender and the Meaning and Experience of Virginity Loss in the Contemporary United States” claims that

studies of early sexuality in the 1970s and 1980s found that young women, while more permissive than in previous decades, continued to value virginity and predicate sexual activity on love and committed romantic relationships, whereas young men continue to express disdain for virginity, engage in sexual activity primarily out of curiosity and desire for physical pleasure, and welcome opportunities for casual sex. (Carpenter, 2002, p. 146)

Rory eventually ends up losing her virginity to Dean, her first boyfriend, in episode 4.22, (“Raincoats & Recipes”). During that time, Dean was married to another woman. The show spends four seasons waiting for this moment to be a completely chaotic and traumatic experience. However, it did not seem like something that important in the show. Rory faces some criticism from Dean’s former wife’s family, but soon everything is forgotten, and they even date again for a while. No one in the show seems to give importance to the fact that the moment everyone was afraid of ended up happening in one of the most twisted ways.

Withal, Rory not facing the consequences of her actions is somehow present throughout the whole show. This is once again linked to the perfect girl image that Rory has, especially in her town. Every inhabitant there sees her as this perfect, innocent creature that would never do anything wrong. This is especially seen when she has trouble with her boyfriends, everyone always blames the boy instead of Rory. In episode 1.17 (“The Breakup, Part 2”), after hearing that Rory and Dean broke up, Luke starts saying things like “I knew that kid was trouble” or “What does he think? He’s gonna do better than Rory?” He does not even process the thought that it might have been Rory’s fault because he sees her as perfect.

This happens again in episode 2.19 (“Teach Me tonight”), when Rory and Jess end up in a car crash. Although Rory keeps telling everyone that it was an accident, everyone ignores her and immediately blames him. This comes from episodes back when

no one agreed to that relationship because of Jess's background. He was a boy from a dysfunctional family who was often in trouble and wanted to drop out of school: "Jess presents a somewhat shocking (and, to many, widely disdained) presence. In the short time that he resides in Stars Hollow, he manages to steal Lorelai's beer, sass his uncle, and (gasp!) talk disrespectfully to the townspeople" (Diffrient & Lavery, 2010, p. 306). Because Rory was the perfect student who was going to go to an Ivy League university, everybody thought they could not be together because he would end up corrupting her. This is problematic because, although everybody considered Rory perfect because of her intellect, they still thought she was too naive to judge when someone was good for her or not or if someone could influence her. All of this is again a consequence of the innocent girl that Rory has, mainly in the first three seasons.

In later episodes, once her relationship with Logan is established, it is implied, although never clearly shown on screen, that they are having sexual relationships. However, for Emily and Richard, it is not that evident. During season six, Rory lives for a while in her grandparents' pool house after she has a fight with her mother for dropping out of Yale. In episode 6.17 ("I'm OK, You're OK"), they start to worry about the thought that they might be having sex in their house, so Emily arranges a dinner with a pastor who starts telling Rory that virginity is a virtue that she cannot waste with anyone: "He quickly monopolises the conversation to emphasise the notion that virginity is a virtue and once it is gone, one can never go back" (Ahlgren, 2018, p. 18). This is a perfect example of Emily's traditional and sexist values. Even though Logan is the boyfriend that she always wanted for Rory, she still wants her to stay a virgin since if she had sex, her pure and innocent image would be gone.

The *Gilmore Girls* characters are clearly influenced by gender, as discussed above. When it comes to gender issues, all types of matters are important and relevant, such as race, sexuality, or social class. The way gender issues affect women always depends on the many circumstances they are under. In this section, we are going to focus on social class and how characters behave depending on which social class they belong to and what consequences it has.

## 2.2. "Let me be frivolous and shallow, will you, please?": Social Class in *Gilmore Girls*

In the show, there are two differentiated social classes: the elite, wealthy upper class represented by Emily and Richard, and the middle class represented by Stars Hollow's inhabitants. The series tries to establish a separation between the two worlds: the rich city

and the small town. The way the characters behave completely changes depending on which social class they belong to. On some occasions, such as when Luke or Jess visit Richard and Emily's house or when Emily visits Stars Hollow, the differences between these two classes are more than different.

Richard and Emily clearly belong to a rich social class. This is made evident mainly because of the house they live in, the maids working for them, or how the first time we meet them is because Lorelai needs to borrow money from them. During the show, we get to see more of Emily than Richard, as he is often busy due to work. Emily portrays the role of the classic wife in charge of the house and mundane activities, but, due to their economic position, instead of doing the chores herself, she is in charge of managing the maids that take care of the house and cook. As Mastrocola affirms, “[h]er behaviour is also marked by an entitlement that she strives to pass onto future generations of upper-class wealth” (2018, p. 8). Because of her social status, Emily believes herself to be superior to her employees and to anyone belonging to lower social classes. Almost in every episode, they have different maids because she keeps firing them and not treating them with respect.

Another sign of Emily's status is her lack of emotion, or at least not showing it. Whether they are good or bad, overacting is always a source of criticism in the upper classes. Therefore, Emily tends to hide her emotions, especially if they are bad, and not show much enthusiasm if they are good. This is once again linked to gender and to how upper-class wives should always behave and never show what is on their minds. Besides gender, this also has to do with shame. Characters in high society often behave badly to try and avoid shame or people talking about them. One clear example of this is when Emily wants Lorelai to marry Christopher when she finds out she is pregnant. She feels ashamed of her daughter being pregnant at sixteen, so the only solution she can think of is for them to get married so that at least they would appear as the traditional family standard, even if this is not what Lorelai wanted. Throughout the show, Emily would often ignore what the rest of the characters wanted in order to do what she thought was right, which was actually what would make her less ashamed.

Lorelai, on the other hand, seems to belong to the middle class, the same as people living in her town. She works as a manager in an inn, where she started as a maid when she first got to Stars Hollow. She lives in a rather normal house with her daughter, Rory. We learn in episode 1.19 (“Emily in Wonderland”) that they used to live in a barn inside the inn's garden. It is also interesting to mention that the inn was called “The

Independence Inn” clearly referring to the independence that Lorelai felt when she ended up there after leaving her parents’ house. Later, Lorelai and Sooky open their own inn. Because of the environment, Lorelai surrounds herself and the town she lives in, we could state that she in fact belongs to the middle class. However, both Lorelai and Rory are somehow in between these two social classes. It is clear that other characters living in Stars Hollow, like Luke, Sooky, or Lane, are middle class, but Lorelai and Rory seem to benefit from their family’s wealth and always have better opportunities and economic backup behind them. For example, when referring to the house, it has every necessity covered, and they never seem to need more than that. Moreover, when Luke wants to buy a bigger house for them to live in episode 5.22 (“A House Is Not a Home”), Lorelai refuses, not because of economic issues but just because he has a sentimental attachment to her house.

By the time the show starts, Lorelai works as a manager in a local inn, later she starts her own business. It is seen in the series that she completes a business course that allows her to get the knowledge to carry on this job. However, and especially when Lorelai tries to buy an old inn to make it hers and Sookie’s, their economic situation should not be extremely wealthy as Lorelai is the only source of income in the family, but on many occasions, this is not reflected: “Economically, she acts as though she can shed the privileges of her wealthy upbringing and embody the image of an autonomous, self-made entrepreneur. However, her allegiance to a poverty of choice (rather than necessity) and upward mobility, obfuscate the recognizability of her class membership” (Mastrocola, 2018, p. 2).

Social classes are mainly divided according to the income of the members of each class. However, sometimes other type of distinctions could be possible, “in some contexts, the term middle class may refer to a group with shared values or views, but much of the time it is intended to refer to those who fall within a particular range of incomes” (Cashell, 2008, p. 1). So, if we leave aside economic matters, ideologically speaking, Lorelai is closer to the middle class than to the upper class. She has employees under her management at work and always treats them with respect; she seems to have a certain class consciousness. Moreover, she is not embarrassed by things such as having worked as a maid or graduating when she was thirty, something that Emily seems to find hard to process.

Perhaps the bigger difference between Lorelai and Emily is not the money itself but the difference between the activities they develop. Lorelai works to obtain money and

take care of her house and her daughter, while Emily manages the house and Richard is the one bringing the money home. Yet Emily constantly begs for recognition of her labour, as if she were the one actually doing the chores in the house: “For example, she insists that she deserves recognition for the preparation of meals, not because she actually cooked or served the food but because she commanded her maid’s preparation of it” (Mastrocola, 2018 p. 11). However, Lorelai does not ask for recognition because she understands that what she does is her job, and it is how she gets her income.

It is also interesting how both characters reject each other’s lifestyle and social status. Emily fits perfectly into the role of the rich wife and rejects the kind of life that Lorelai lives. However, we can see that Lorelai is a free woman, and her actions are guided by what she wants to do, whereas Emily is trapped in a world where social convictions are extremely important and is only able to do certain things that make her life boring. She focuses too much on things like the maids or decorating the house because she has nothing else in her life to focus on. Besides being mean and manipulative, sometimes spectators can feel pity for her. For example, in 6.19 (“The Prodigal Daughter Returns”), Emily is sad because she argued with Rory, and her way to feel better is by trying to buy a plane. She tends to fill the void with purchases.

Emily always keeps her manners and vocabulary intact whilst Lorelai usually tells what she thinks and is constantly making jokes which in Emily’s environment would not be appropriate. “Whereas Emily’s behaviour is constrained by upper class customs, in her chosen life Lorelai is free spirited and prone to vulgar witty and emotional outburst that, by comparison, confer an authenticity onto Lorelai’s character” (Mastrocola, 2018, p. 12). Lorelai never shows regrets about having left that environment, she is happy with the life she has and even though she still has that economic help to reach to in case of need, it is also true that she did not ask for it until Rory was sixteenth and it was for educational purposes.

The show has a clear excess in every episode, an excess of many kinds. For example, when referring to Lorelai and Rory, there is a clear excess of food. With Lorelai, one of her main personality traits is that she cannot cook; therefore, they are always seen eating out or ordering a takeaway. It is on rather rare occasions that we see any of them cooking. Leaving aside the unhealthy aspect of the matter, both eating out and ordering takeout are not cheap activities. There is a need for a comfortable economic position to be able to afford all that food. That is also very present in Sookie’s kitchen at the inn, which is always completely crammed with colourful food and dishes; a disproportionate

amount of food especially if we have into account that the inn is not that big. Moreover, the food is always visible in the kitchen scene. While the characters are talking, there is always food visible in the counter, while cooking it or simply people walking around with it.

But the food is also used to differentiate social classes. In Stars Hollow, the most popular place to eat is Luke's Diner, where everything that is served is more in the fast-food sector. Lorelai and Rory also have pizza or Chinese takeout. But on Friday night dinners, when Lorelai and Rory go to Richard and Emily's house, the food served there is always slow-cooked by chefs with fresh and expensive ingredients. Emily shows her disgust at the food Lorelai and Rory eat on many occasions. For example, in season 1 episode 8 ("Love and War and Snow"), Rory is stuck in Richard and Emily's house because of a snowstorm, so they need to find something on the fridge to eat. They find a frozen pizza, but Emily and Richard refuse to eat it at the beginning: "EMILY: Rory, you're not serious. / RICHARD: that hardly looks like dinner. / EMILY: I agree. Rory, that's food that you eat at a carnival or in a Turkish prison".

It is clear that the characters in this show act according to their social class and the convictions it carries. In the case of Lorelai, she has a wealthy background and still makes use of her family wealth when in need. However, because of the environment she lives in, she is closer to the middle class. Moreover, she chooses to stay in that world because it is where she feels free.

## **Conclusion**

This project has analysed the TV show *Gilmore Girls* according to two main issues: gender and social class. In order to do that, it has introduced concepts necessary to understand the relevance of the show. It has taken the source and examined it from a 2023 perspective, which has allowed it to discover some flaws or issues that might not have been perceived during its emission.

With concepts such as "popular culture" or "dramedy", it has been proven that not only what some consider "high culture" should be a topic of academic discussion, but other areas such as television are also important to explore, as has been the case during the last decades. Popular culture and TV shows are great sources of analysis, as they often hide topics and aspects that are relevant to study. They also provide new concepts that develop new studies, such as the concept of "comfort shows", which have proven to have a whole psychological process behind them.

Since this project deals with fiction and television, it has also provided an insight into family in fiction. The representation of family has been one of the aspects that has changed the most since the beginning of television history. The so-called “nuclear family”, consisting of a father, a mother, and the children, is no longer the role model for fiction, and with some examples provided in this essay, it is clear that now TV shows include different models of family to represent real society and how many types of families are possible.

When analysing gender, this thesis has proved that what at its time was often considered a feminist show is not so. *Gilmore Girls* creates an idea of independence around the female characters that is not real. Their issues often revolve around their love interests, and they tend to depend on men frequently. Moreover, one of the topics that the show deals with in the worst way is sex. It portrays, mostly through the character of Rory, situations inside the show where sex was seen as something to be ashamed of or as something to make a woman look less professional or focused. The series, although not in an explicit way, is very sex-centred on many occasions, but it ends up always being an issue that gives a very old-fashioned and negative message to the young audiences watching the show.

Lastly, when analysing social class, I have discussed how, although the series has a clear division of classes, that division fades with the characters of Lorelai and Rory, especially Lorelai. They seem to belong to the middle class because of where they live and mainly because of how they think, but the truth is that they always get economic help when needed. The whole reason why Rory can have access to a better education is because of her family’s wealth, something that is not the case for many other inhabitants of her town.

In conclusion, this essay has dealt with many concepts and topics to try to illustrate how *Gilmore Girls’* characters behave and are affected by gender and social class, and how these types of issues are always connected and affect each other. Women’s issues are affected by many other issues such as in this one social class so its important to always check the background of characters to understand why they behave the way they do.

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