FEMINISM AND THE WOMEN OF STARS HOLLOW: THE GILMORE GIRLS

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

It is hard enough being a mother who works, juggles daycare, doctor appointments, teacher-parent conferences and at the end of the day cooks a nutritious meal for her husband and children. What is even harder is being a single mother who must tackle all these tasks by herself on her paycheck alone. Now consider adding to this burden sending your child to a private secondary school. Given the median income of a single mother, the dream is out of reach. In reality, there are single mothers that probably would not even attempt to send their child to a private school, but then again they are not Lorelai Gilmore, the main character in the *Gilmore Girls*, who has rich parents she can run to for financial help. To remedy her problem of tuition money needed for her daughter’s education, Lorelai Gilmore pays a long overdue visit to her parents, who give her the money on one condition—that she and her daughter, Rory, must visit every Friday night for dinner. This scenario provided the pilot episode of the *Gilmore Girls* that first aired on October 5, 2000. Set in a fictional town the *Gilmore Girls* depicts the life of Lorelai Gilmore. Lorelai, a young single mother, lives in Stars Hollow, Connecticut, where everyone knows everybody, doors are never locked, and such amenities as a grocery store are within walking distance. Lorelai’s young daughter, Rory, is 16-years-old and close to her mother. Emily Gilmore, Lorelai’s mother and Rory’s grandmother
has had a strained relationship with her daughter in the past, as well as has been absent for most of Rory’s childhood, except for visits on holidays.

Lorelai Gilmore’s experiences as portrayed in the *Gilmore Girls* stand in contrast to the struggles faced by single mothers on a daily basis in the U. S. According to the U.S. Census Bureau in 2000, there were a total of 105,480 reported households in the U.S. Of those households 19.943 million households had a female head of households reported; and 18.136 million non families household, where a female was head of the household. The medium family income reported for 2000 was $50,046 and for non family households it was $25,205. Through the magic of entertainment, single white motherhood has, over the last twenty-five years, been portrayed as chic. It could be argued this phenomenon began with such shows as *Murphy Brown*, which aired from 1988 until 1998, and with *Friends*, which aired from 1994 to 2004. The *Gilmore Girls*, a drama that aired from 2000-2007, perpetuated the romanticization of single motherhood. In this show the lead character, Lorelai Gilmore, becomes pregnant at the age of 16. Lorelai decides to raise the child on her own, forsaking the help of her wealthy parents or the father of her unborn child and his wealthy family. The focus of this family drama, as it was billed, centered on the close relationship of Lorelai and her teenage daughter, Rory.

According to Rockler (2006), by and large, prime time television does not provide its viewers with the day-to-day struggles of single women. “Women’s struggles…are seen not as political issues, but as lifestyle issues that they must cope with therapeutically” (p. 250). As Rockler points out in her study of *Friends*, the female characters are self-absorbed and do not exhibit a consciousness that their personal
struggles are connected to a systemic, political context that transcend their own circumstances (p. 245). Rockler states that the show did not provide “equipment for living for understanding women’s issues within political contexts” (p. 245). Rockler’s observation also applies to the *Gilmore Girls*.

This thesis expands on Rockler’s study and further explores the use of therapeutic rhetoric in popular culture by looking at the *Gilmore Girls*. I explore the strategies used to depoliticize women’s issues by examining the narratives, themes, and images in the episodes of *Gilmore Girls*. To provide insight into how the depoliticization of women’s issues operates in popular culture, I will examine the *Gilmore Girls* for the show’s portrayals of single motherhood. Specifically, I will look at the framing of obstacles faced by Lorelai Gilmore and how those obstacles were overcome in the show.

Popular television shows such as *Friends* and the *Gilmore Girls* rely heavily on therapeutic rhetoric as is seen in the life of Lorelai, who made single motherhood in Stars Hollow look attractive and easy every week. Therapeutic rhetoric is defined by communication scholars (e.g., Cloud, 1996, 1998; Peck, 1994; White, 1992) as discourse that discourages citizens from contextualizing their personal problems within structural power dynamics. This ideology, which depoliticizes women’s issues, is not new but rather a recurring theme in popular culture.

Therapeutic rhetoric has been studied in contexts of television, psychotherapy, political and cultural discourses by such scholars as Cloud (1998) and White (1992). This thesis contributes to that body of literature by focusing on the portrayal of white single motherhood as seen in the *Gilmore Girls*. Specifically, the following analysis looks at how viewers were encouraged to understand single motherhood.
The *Gilmore Girls* did not gain as broad an audience as *Friends*; nor did the show win numerous Emmy Awards. However, it had a seven-year run and won the “Outstanding New Program Award” by the Television Critics Association in 2000-01. The show first appeared on the WB network for the first six seasons. In 2007 the WB merged becoming known as the CW network. The final episode aired in May 2007; however, reruns can be viewed on the ABC network.

The *Gilmore Girls* was the creation of writer Amy Sherman-Palladino, who was the creator of the show until the seventh and final season when new writers took over. In this thesis I have chosen to analyze the first six seasons, focusing on seasons one, three, and four that can be found on DVD. The *Gilmore Girls* is about a single mother and her close relationship with her daughter. Other characters help to supplement the plot such as Emily Gilmore, Lorelai’s mother and Rory’s grandmother, and Sookie and Lane, Lorelai and Rory’s best friends. Drawing on the work of Rockler, I also will provide insight into how the depoliticization of women’s issues functions through the rhetorical strategies that operate within the *Gilmore Girls*. 
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

In the following literature review, I examine scholarship on therapeutic rhetoric and what scholars have said concerning this form of discourse and its roots in popular culture (Cloud, 1996, 1998a, 1998b; Peck, 1994; White, 1992). This discussion will also include a history of therapeutic rhetoric, which stems, as scholar Gans (1998) has said, from the ideology of individualism and Burke’s (1966) idea of the terministic screen. Next, in this literature review I will examine scholarship on the representation of single motherhood. This discussion and examination of other scholarly work on this subject matter is important in the development of the analysis of the Gilmore Girls.

A Quest for Therapeutic Rhetoric

Individualism is the one constant element seen and desired in the American people. According to Gans (1988), individualism is the desire to be in control of one’s personal life and the desire for privacy. “Individualism is the pursuit of personal freedom and of personal control over the social and natural environment” (Gans, 1988, p. 1). Individualism in America has been instilled in generations of people as far back as the “founding fathers.” According to Burke (1966), individualism is a terministic screen through which Americans understand and discuss social issues (p. 44-62).
As Blakesley (2002) explains:

Terministic screens is the concept that not only does the nature of our terms affect the nature of our observations by directing the attention to one field rather than to another, but that these observations are implications of the particular terminology in terms of which the observations are made. The terminology of any philosophy, or any other field that makes systematic observations using symbols, functions as a terministic screen, enabling certain perspectives while eliminating others. (p. 200)

Like all terministic screens, the vocabulary of individualism allows Americans to “select” certain portions of “reality” while “deflecting” others (Burke, 1966, p. 45). This discourse to understand and discuss social problems through this terministic screen as Burke describes is where therapeutic rhetoric got its roots. “Americans who operate within the terministic screen of individualism may share a vocabulary that allows them much insight into individual behaviors, but they may lack insight into the complexities of social problems” (Rockler, 2003, p. 100). Along with individualism came the idea of “the American Dream” where everyone has the ability to achieve an ideal life.

Jhally and Lewis (1992) argue that “the American Dream is not an innocent ideological notion” (p. 74). It is a way to convince the public no matter their circumstances, the system is fundamentally fair (p. 74). “Television, in the United States, combines an implicit endorsement of certain middle class life-styles with a squeamish refusal to confront class realities or class issues” (p. 74).

According to White (1992), “the deployment of discourses on the family, the media, consumer culture, and therapeutic and confessional relations and that these intersections and convergences among these discourses is not unprecedented at first
White goes on to state, “a large and varied body of scholarship has laid the theoretical and historical groundwork for initially recognizing the presence of therapeutic strategies on television” (p. 6). This idea of therapeutic strategies, discourse presented through the media, along with the idea of individualism comes together as therapeutic rhetoric. According to Rockler (2006), therapeutic rhetoric has come from the lack of sociological imagination seen in U.S. culture, “It is defined as a discourse that discourages citizens from contextualizing their personal problems within structural power dynamics” (Rockler, 2006, p. 247). “Therapeutic discourse has assumed and developed an understanding of the status of the therapeutic as a master narrative strategy of contemporary mass media where the nature of subjectivity is promoted” (White, 1992, p. 11). “Therapeutic refers to a set of political and cultural discourses that have adopted psychotherapy’s lexicon—the conservative language of healing, coping, adaptation, and restoration of a previously existing order—but in contexts of sociopolitical conflict” (Cloud, 1998a, p. xvi).

As Cloud (1998) argues, therapeutic rhetoric promotes status quo power relationship by directing the citizens’ attention away from the causes of social inequality. Cloud explains:

The therapeutic as a political strategy of contemporary capitalism by which potential dissent is contained within a discourse of individual or family responsibility…In contrast to scholars of liberalism who applaud therapy’s near-exclusive emphasis on individual initiative and personal responsibility, my argument insists on acknowledging the collective and structural features of an unequal social reality in which individuals are imbedded and out of which our personal experience, in large part, derives. (p. xiii)
Peck (2003), states “a therapeutic ‘mode of thinking about self and society’ has become widely dispersed in contemporary American culture, shaping the way we think about ourselves, relationships, institutions, and politics” (p. 94). Therapeutic discourse, when organized around individuals, has the tendency to explain everything into terms related to the individual. Individuals are expected to see that any problem can be restructured through communication to encourage people to take responsibility for their own self and that they do have the power to change their situation beyond their own lives (Peck, 2003).

In this way citizens are to find solutions to their own problems without looking toward or blaming society as a whole. According to Cloud, cultural texts dictate the obedience of the mass audience to the values, norms, perceptions, beliefs, sentiments, and prejudices (1996, p. 118). “The rhetorical function of therapeutic discourses in such contexts is to encourage audiences to focus on themselves and the elaboration of their private lives rather than to address and attempt to reform systems of social power in which they are embedded” (Cloud, 1998a, p. xvi).

Therapeutic rhetoric demands that individuals cope with their own money, work, and relationship problems as individual “disease” that can only be “cured” by the person taking a personal initiative to fix problems and not to see their problems as socially constructed (Rockler, 2006, p. 247). Citizens are to solve their own problems by changing their behaviors on a personal level and are not to understand those problems as the result of systemic issues like patriarchy, racism, or class structure. Citizens are to fix themselves so that they function better within society (Rockler, 2006).
According to therapeutic rhetoric, any problems, they the citizen, encounters are their problem that they must handle and find a solution to. According to Cloud (1998a):

The rhetorical function of therapeutic discourses in such contexts is to encourage audiences to focus on themselves and the elaboration of their private lives rather than to address and attempt to reform systems of social power in which they are embedded. (xvi)

“Therapeutic rhetoric is hegemonic because it is a discourse within which it is difficult to discuss or encourage social transformation” (Rockler, 2003, p. 100). Social transformation is not acceptable under a hegemonic society. Hegemony is the spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed upon social life by the dominant fundamental group (Blakesley, 2002, p. 197). In other words, hegemony refers to “the myriad ways in which the institutions of civil society operate to shape, directly or indirectly, the cognitive and affective structures through which men [and women] perceive and evaluate problematic social reality” (Femia, 1981, p. 24). Hegemony fosters a status quo because it directs citizens away from political action. “What is significant is that the personal always wins out over the political, the personal is always privileged, because the political issues are never dealt with in the realm of the political, but always in the realm of the personal” (Dubrofsky, 2002, p. 283). Likewise, Cloud argues, “that classical hegemony theory calls attention to compromises and that a rhetorically crafted concordance presents a façade of democratic compromise while it obscures the conventional effects of the compromise” (p. 118).

“Hegemony refers to the ways in which dominant groups maintain their position through
various symbolic or ideological processes,” (Triece, 2001, p. 19). Triece further argues that word choices, metaphors, argumentative form, tone, stylistic markers, formatting decisions, and visual images can reinforce a specific worldview and support the prevailing economic and political system.

According to Cloud (1998a), racism, sexism, and capitalism are seen as obstacles to one’s individual mobility. Social realities are obscured in therapeutic discourses that locate the ill not with society but with the person (p. xiii). Rockler (2003) also argues that therapeutic rhetoric redirects attention and awareness away from a power structures disparity, and that individuals who publicly evaluate the system often are the one’s blamed for the controversies caused from their actions (p. 247). According to White (1992), a gender construction that uses heterogeneous strategies encourages a continual renegotiation of class, gender and history. This renegotiation is seen in the portrayal of women in the media.

*Hey Lady, it’s Your Problem not Society’s*

Rather than encourage women to channel their social frustrations into social activism, popular shows emphasize that women should take responsibility for their own problems. Dow (1996) argues that television programs often depoliticize feminist issues. For example, the sitcom *One Day at a Time*, which appeared on television in the mid 1970s, was transformed from a relatively politicized portrayal of a divorced woman into a depoliticized “feminist Horatio Alger story” that focused on an individual woman’s struggle to make it on her own (p. 81). According to Dow, by placing the source of the problem in individual situations or persons, television assures us that only selected
women need/desire such change; and the site of change for those women who need/desire it is their individual consciousness rather than society as a whole (p. 81). Further, television’s therapeutic discourses are implicitly associated with a specific gendered audience, the female audience (White, 1992, p. 35).

Dow argues that some female centered programs did function politically and offered a vision of what feminism meant (p. 5). “It is possible for television to be acknowledged as fiction and yet be experienced as realistic in its characterization or treatment of issues” (Deming, 1990, p. 41). However, Dow further argues that consciousness-raising portrayed in popular culture targeted at women was largely limited to self-help solutions. Beside self-help solutions geared toward women, women are seeing no true representation of themselves on television. According to Southard (2008), postfeminist television typically portrays women of economically privileged backgrounds, who can explore their independence. “Thus, not only do television’s single female characters appear isolated and individualist, but their race, economic status, and sexuality are unrepresentative of women in general” (p. 154). Such is the case in the *Gilmore Girls*, explored in this thesis.

In those instances therapeutic rhetoric and the depoliticization of women continue to push the problem from society back onto the individual. In other words, media portray women’s issues as their own, even placing the blame on women. The mass media and society in general tell women what is acceptable as a “good” mother and what is unacceptable as a “bad” mother. Douglas (1994) notes, “In a variety of ways the mass media helped make us the cultural schizophrenics we are today, women who rebel against
yet submit to prevailing images about what a desirable, worthwhile woman should be” (p. 8).

*How Good Mommies and Bad Mommies Measure Up*

One image women must battle is the portrayal of the mother, whether on television or in other forms of mass media. A woman who also happens to be a mother must be perceived as a “good” mother. However, the definition of a “good” mother depended on her marital status, race, and even social class standing. According to Valdivia (1998), if the mainstream media is any indicator of reality, bad mothers are the stuff of everyday life and especially, when it comes to single mother. “Quite simply, single mothers are bad, and their children do not fare well. Furthermore, negative discourses about single motherhood prevail throughout our culture” (Valdivia, 1998, p. 272). According to Ladd-Taylor and Umansky (1998), the twentieth century has seen the labeling of the “bad” mother. “By virtue of race, class, age, marital status, sexual orientation, and numerous other factors, millions of American mothers have been deemed substandard” (p. 2). Ladd-Taylor and Umansky (1998) argue that the label of “bad” mother can simply mean a woman whose action do not harm her child, but are perceived by society as harmful to the child (p. 3).

The labeling of “good” mother and “bad” mother is also greatly shaped by race. Collins (1990) study of “controlling images” of black women show black women portrayed as stereotypical mammies, matriarchs, welfare recipients, and hot mammas. Collins (1990) notes these stereotypes are essential to the political economy of domination fostering black women’s oppression (p. 67). The mammy was the one who
raised the elite white slave owner’s children often neglecting her own (p. 75). Another label for black women is the matriarch. Black women seen as matriarchs allegedly degraded their men, therefore, forcing these men to desert their families. These mothers were blamed for the failure of their children (p. 76). The Jezebel or “hot mamma” is the sexually aggressive black woman. “The fourth image [Jezebel] of the sexually denigrated Black woman is the foundation underlying elite white male conceptualization of the mammy, matriarch, and welfare mother” (p. 78). Another controlling image put upon the black woman is that of the welfare mother who could not adequately provide for her children and sought the help of the government. This mother also continued to have children to stay on the “system” (p. 76).

Welfare can happen to anybody; but especially, it happens to women through circumstances beyond their control (Tillmon, 1972). Historically, welfare mothers have been portrayed in the media as immoral, lazy, or as misusers of their welfare. This has continued to be the portrayal (Douglas & Michaels, 2005, p. 175). According to Douglas and Michaels, during the late 1980s and 1990s, politicians and the news media cast welfare not as beyond a woman’s control, but rather a way a life she chose (p. 175). Many media portrayals of the welfare mother focused on minorities. As the media became obsessed with the status of the family and motherhood, according to Douglas and Michaels, it was African American mothers and other mothers of color who became the scapegoats onto which white culture projected its fears about mothers leaving the home, rejecting their maternal instinct and neglecting their children (p. 176). “The news frame had changed: The target was no longer the system, it was the mothers themselves”
(Douglas & Michaels, 2005, p. 177). Because of these depictions, black women have less of a voice and are rarely portrayed in mother roles on television.

However, even the white mother came under attack by society. According to Douglas and Michaels (2005), postfeminist mothers were returning to the idea of June Cleaver and were sacrificing the working world for the world of children, cookies, play dates and housework. “Beginning in the late 1980s, and steamrolling through much of popular culture in the 1990s, was a new glorification of domesticity and over-the-top levels of hypernatalism” (p. 205). However, Douglas and Michaels points out that television did have a few defiant mothers’, who thumbed her noses to the new momism such as those on Roseanne (1988 premiere), and Married With Children (1987 premiere).

On the other hand was the portrayal of the “good” mother. According to Douglas and Michaels (2005), these mothers were endlessly supportive of their kids, never yelled, endured their kids’ misbehavior, and were slim and trim (p. 217). Douglas and Michaels (2005), argue that the media portrayal of “good” mothers was a mother who put her children first, while the “bad” mother wore fancy business suits and carried briefcases. Women, however, struggled with the vision of the new mother compared to the images of motherhood they grew up with. According to Bassin, Honey, & Kaplan (1994), the new mother is one who clearly has needs of her own, but must reconcile these needs with those of their children (p. 4). “However, rather than seeing solutions to these conflicts in social or political terms (that is, adequate day care, shared parenting, parental leave), these women continued to create representations of the mother as she who shoulders the burden of care” (p. 4).
Many of the media define a “good” mother as married woman with children. The single mother was still looked at through a skeptical lens. According to Valdivia (1998), “popular culture as a site of struggle over meaning and values would be expected to engage in and contribute to the discourse of single parenting throughout society at large” (p. 277). Although the nuclear family was never the dominant family structure in reality, it was in a mythical sense. Valdivia notes that the representation of the “good mother” was those mothers who do not experience work and child care issues. These mothers either do not work or their work is flexible and pays enough that they can afford to spend ample time with their children (p. 289). This thesis adds to studies of media representation of single motherhood by examining the ways that single white motherhood is romanticized in the *Gilmore Girls*.

As mentioned earlier, a therapeutic lens precludes a nuanced portrayal of single motherhood. The images of single women and single mothers in the media are romanticized in terms of the struggles these women face. Instead of showing the true obstacles women may face on a daily basis, the media depoliticize these struggles to fit within the allotted time. A critical method will be used to study how the media uses therapeutic rhetoric when addressing women’s issues.

According to Barry Brummett (2006), “a critical method wants to know about meaning. It asks, what does a text, an experience, an object, an action, and so forth mean to different people?” (p. 97).
A critical method seeks to evaluate that which it studies, to make some judgment about whether that object or experience’s meanings and influence are good or bad, desirable or undesirable, and so forth (p. 97). Brummett (2006) explained this by stating:

As critics reveal the meanings of texts and artifacts, they are simultaneously doing two things: (1) critics are explaining the rhetoric of popular culture, since…what texts and artifacts mean are the ways in which they influence people… (p. 99)

One who examines these teachings of symbols and views set forth by the media to the public is the work of a critic.

By using a rhetorical perspective, a critic is interested in what influences or persuades people (Campbell & Huxman, 2003, p. 2). “A rhetorical perspective, focuses on social truths, that is, on the kinds of truths that are created and tested by people in groups and that influence social and political decision” (p. 2). These truths represent what people agree to believe or accept.

According to Douglas Kellner (2009):

Radio, television, film, and the other products of media culture provide materials out of which individuals in contemporary media and consumer societies forge their very identities, including sense of self, notion of what it means to be male or female, and how people experience class, ethnicity and race, sexuality, age, nationality, and other markers of identity. (p. 5)

Budd, Entman and Steinman (1990) argue that people do not make any meaning they choose from at text (p. 170). People do not rewrite text, but understand its meaning through a limited number of coherence-producing schemata (Budd, et al. 1990). Media culture helps to shape our views of the world and deepest values, defining what is good
and evil, the positive ideals and sense of who we are as people (Kellner, 2009). Kellner goes on to state that, “media stories provide the symbols, myths, and resources that constitute a common culture and through the appropriation of which individuals become integrated into their culture and society” (p. 5). Brummett (2006) explains that all forms of entertainment can be very telling about people, and that the entertainment forms can be looked at as artifacts.

According to Brummett, there are requirements to understanding the shared meanings and group identifications that “others may understand something of what it means, but it is really the people ‘in the know,’ those who identify with the group (or groups) for which the artifact speaks, who find the richest meanings…” (Brummitt, 2006, p. 19). When groups of artifacts come together in a “system,” cultures are formed, and these cultures help us to place into categories and their particular ideologies (Brummett, 2006, p. 26-27).

According to Kellner (2009), it is through the media, which are a form of pedagogy, that teaches people how to be men and women, how they should dress, look, and consume, how to be successful, and how to avoid failure. “Media culture teaches individuals how to fit into the dominate system of norms, values, practices, and institutions, and demonstrates punishments for failure to conform” (2009, p. 6). To be a critic of cultural studies or popular culture, according to Brummett (2006), one must explain the rhetoric of popular culture by taking the texts and artifacts examining the meaning in which they influence people (p. 99). It is essential for critics to not only
establish the messages that are being sent by a particular artifact, but to determine in what ways those messages perpetuate or challenge traditional ideologies.

According to Brummett, a text is a smaller interrelated set of signs and artifacts (p. 34-35). Brummett states, (1) a text wields rhetorical influence because of the meanings it supports and that people make texts so as to influence others, and (2) because texts have different meanings they often are sites of struggle over meaning (p. 91-92). According to Brummett, whatever influence texts have on people’s thoughts and action arises from what those texts mean to those people (p. 92). Perhaps the most crucial of all questions is that of power.

Brummett (2006) elaborated on this idea by claiming that “critical studies examines what power is or what it has been understood to be, and how power is created, maintained, shared, lost, and acquired” (p. 101). Critics are given the task of assisting the world in understanding the meaning behind a text or artifact. By assisting, critics may expose the population to possible manipulations and intervene in order to “change the world for the better” (Brummett, 2006, p. 99).

Or put another way, Kellner states, “learning how to read, criticize, and resist sociocultural manipulation can thus help empower one in relation to dominant forms of media and culture” (2009, p. 6). Since a text has the power to influence those exposed to the text, it is important to examine what meanings are being sent and to know “what else is going on besides the obvious” (Brummett, 2006, p. 96). With this in mind this is the role of rhetorical critics. Brummett further states, “the critical scholar must be prepared to
dig into texts, to think about the ways people are being influenced as well as entertained, informed and so forth by such texts” (p. 96).

However, Kellner states, a more sophisticated method of textual analysis derives from more advanced understanding of texts, narratives, and representations, as well as the contributions of critical concepts. The critical concepts Kellner is referring to are ideology and hegemony, and are needed in studying the meaning of texts (2009, p. 12).

“The products of media culture require multidimensional close textual readings to analyze their various discourses, ideological positions, narrative strategies, image constructions, and effects” (p. 13). These close textual readings focus on certain features of a text from a specific perspective, and each individual perspective explains some features of a text while ignoring others (p. 14). One form of rhetorical criticism is feminist criticism.

*What does Feminist Rhetorical Criticism Attempt to Accomplish?*

Feminist rhetorical criticism in the past, attempted to bring the marginalized voices of women back into history where they belong alongside men (Ronald & Ritchie, 2005; Glenn, 1997; Bizzell, 2000). “Recovery and gender critique are two general research methods feminist have brought to rhetorical studies to challenge the ways patriarchal oppression has shaped its study and textual tradition (Ryan, 2006, p. 23). According to Steeves (1987), the aim of feminist theories is to understand the origins and nature of women’s universal devaluation in society (p. 96). According to Biesecker (1992), early feminist research addressed recovery primarily, bringing exhilaration, but also concern that recovery projects reinscribed patriarchal hierarchies by their complicity.
in promoting the “ideology of individualism that monumentalizes some acts and trivializes other” (p. 147). Biesecker feels by promoting individual rather than collective women, early feminist recovery efforts duplicate traditional canon formation and patriarchal hierarchical patterns (p. 147).

Although the above mentioned scholars are referring to written text and women speaking publicly, feminist rhetorical criticism can work within the sphere of media studies. Feminist rhetorical criticism can be used through the images of women, an early form of feminist criticism, according to Steeves (1987). Steeves further states, in media studies, content analyses of the presence or absence, stereotyping, and devaluation of women was abundant in scholarly journals.

As for cultural studies, Steeves (1987) states that “many scholars are influenced by Marxism and the Frankfurt School, which assumed that mass cultural forms are instruments of capitalism to silence the working class, including most women” (p.113). Under this school of thought, scholars “study content to show the ways media representations reinforce nuclear families and class distinctions that sustain capitalism and women’s secondary status” (Steeves, 1987, p. 113). Goldman, Heath, and Smith (1991) argue that “an asymmetrical correspondence has been established over the years between women’s direct experience of struggle and contradictions in everyday life and how their lives are represented in the mass media” (p. 334). They state that commercial attempts to design a non contradictory alliance of feminism and femininity have given rise to an aesthetically depoliticized feminism (p. 334).
Rapp (1988) states, “In commodity feminism, feminism ignores the social dimension which conditions the contradictions experienced in daily life. Feminism then becomes depoliticized as the media turns feminist social goals to individual life-style” (p. 32).

Much like the feminist scholarship just described, this thesis will use a rhetorical feminist approach to examine how the use of therapeutic rhetoric in the media depoliticizes women issues, namely those women of Stars Hollow in the *Gilmore Girls*. To provide insight into how the depoliticization of women’s issues functions in culture and how this rhetorical strategy directs women from taking political action, I examine the rhetorical strategies that operate within the *Gilmore Girls* expanding on the study by Rockler (2006), who examined therapeutic rhetoric in the television show *Friends*.

My thesis expands on Rockler’s study and further explores the use of therapeutic rhetoric in popular culture by looking at the *Gilmore Girls*. I explore the strategies used to depoliticize women’s issues by examining the themes and images in the rhetoric of *Gilmore Girls*.

To provide insight into how the depoliticization of women’s issues functions in culture and how this rhetorical strategy directs women from taking political action, I will examine the rhetorical strategies that operate within the show: 1) I will examine the representation of single motherhood as seen on the *Gilmore Girls* by looking specifically at the obstacles of single motherhood and how those obstacles are framed, and 2) how those obstacles are resolved in the *Gilmore Girls*.

In this thesis therapeutic rhetoric in popular culture is further explored by examining the artifact the *Gilmore Girls*. The research questions were as followed. How were women’s issues, namely teen pregnancy and single motherhood, depoliticization in
Gilmore Girls? How were obstacles the main character, Lorelai Gilmore framed and how those obstacles were overcome in the show?
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY: A CRITICAL APPROACH TO POPULAR CULTURE

In this chapter I explained the methodology used to examine the *Gilmore Girls*. I also will highlight the episodes chosen for this thesis that will be discussed in more depth in the analysis.

*Let’s go to Stars Hollow*

To discuss how therapeutic rhetoric is used in the television show the *Gilmore Girls*, a rhetorical feminist critical method will be used. The episodes that will be examined appeared in season one, season three, and season four, and will be representative of the show as a whole. Although the *Gilmore Girls* can be seen in reruns on the ABC Family Network, I have chosen to view these episodes from my personal DVD collection. For my analysis, I have chosen episodes 1, 18 and 19 from season one, episodes 8, 18 and 22 from season three, and episodes 2, 12, and 14 from season four that further exemplifies the use of therapeutic rhetoric. These episodes were chosen for their examples of, or lack of representation of therapeutic rhetoric seen in the *Gilmore Girls*. Six of the episodes were specifically chosen because of their content that dealt with issue of single motherhood. Three additional episodes were randomly chosen and may or may not exemplify therapeutic rhetoric.
The first episode to be discussed will be the pilot episode of the first season that originally aired October 5, 2000. There is more than one reason why this particular episode was chosen for examination. First, this episode sets the stage or storyline for the entire season and proceeding seasons, two through six. Second, the pilot episode is a good example of how the media, and in particular the creator of this show, uses therapeutic rhetoric to depoliticize single motherhood.

The following episodes were chosen to further show how therapeutic rhetoric is used to depoliticize single motherhood in the *Gilmore Girls*. The next episode to be examined is from the first season, episode 4: *The Deer-Hunter* that originally aired October 26, 2000. The next episode is episode 18: *The Third Lorelai* that originally aired March 22, 2001. The final episode that will be examined from the first season is episode 19: *Emily in Wonderland*, which originally aired on April 26, 2001.

In season three, the following episodes were chosen for analysis. Episode 18 titled *Happy Birthday, Baby*, which originally aired on April 22, 2003. The next episode to be analyzed is episode 21: *Here Comes the Son*, which aired on May 13, 2003. The final episode from this season to be analyzed is episode 22: *Those are Strings, Pinocchio*, which originally aired May 20, 2003.

From season four, the following episodes have been chosen for examination. The first episode is episode 2: *The Lorelais First Day at Yale*, which originally aired on September 30, 2003. The next episode will be episode 12: *A Family Matter*. This episode originally aired February 3, 2004. The final episode to be examined from this season is episode 14: *The Incredible Sinking Lorelais* that originally aired on March 17, 2004.
It is the hope that after the above mentioned episodes have been examined, the use of therapeutic rhetoric in this analysis will, as Rockler has stated, “provide a valuable lens for understanding the history of feminism and discourse about women in the United States” (2006, p. 248). Although not all episodes examined will be discussed at length those episodes that add to the scholarship set forth by Rockler, Cloud and White, in further defining therapeutic rhetoric will be highlighted.
CHAPTER IV
ANALYSIS

The Themes That Run From Hartford to Stars Hollow

The series the *Gilmore Girls* emphasizes the themes of teen pregnancy and single motherhood. The show portrays these themes in such a way as to depoliticize them. This process of depoliticization is a characteristic of therapeutic rhetoric, and is manifest in popular culture artifacts such as the *Gilmore Girls*. One way that teen pregnancy and single motherhood are depoliticized is through idealization, a rhetorical strategy that frames issues such as teen pregnancy and single motherhood in such way as to ignore the economic, social or political complexities of these issues.

The hardships surrounding teen pregnancy and single parenting, such as being the sole supporter of the family, juggling a career, raising a child, paying for an education are mainly absent from the storyline. The *Gilmore Girls* demonstrates that single motherhood is easy and that teen pregnancy is not a stigma, as in the case of the main character, Lorelai who is seen as an empowered woman. Lorelai made something out of her life, while raising a child at a young age. In the *Gilmore Girls*, the struggle for money is short lived and is resolved quickly for the characters, so that they do not have to go without any comforts. To understand the themes of the *Gilmore Girls* a brief overview of the series will be discussed.
**Gilmore Girls Synopsis**

The *Gilmore Girls* is set in the fictional, quirky, quaint, sleepy town of Stars Hollow, Connecticut. Stars Hollow was established in 1779 and has a population of 9,973. This town with its troubadour, idiosyncratic festivals, and eccentric residents take in single mom Lorelai Gilmore. Lorelai, the main character, is a white 32-year-old single mother raising her 16-year-old daughter Rory, who also plays a major part in the series. The opening scene of the pilot episode, which aired October 5, 2000, gives viewers the feel of the town as Lorelai is walking down the street lined with historic buildings that house locally owned and operated businesses. Lorelai is on her way to meet Rory for a cup of coffee in the town’s diner that happens to be located in an old hardware store. The series centers on the close relationship between mother and daughter, Lorelai and Rory, living in Stars Hollow “where mothers can be hip and cool, and adolescent daughters are kind and uncomplaining, prefer to hang out with family, and do not cause their mothers to worry” (Beail, 2009, p. 110).

In the pilot episode, viewers meet Lorelai and Rory for the first time; and as the years or seasons pass, viewers follow these two women’s lives. Along the way Rory grows up, goes to college, falls in love and gets her first job after college. Viewers also get to see Lorelai get engaged and then unengaged twice, realize her dream of opening her own inn with her friend Sookie, try to keep her controlling parents from running her life, and struggle with Rory’s departure to college and afterward. The journey of these two women trying to maintain their close mother-daughter relationship, while navigating the “ups” and “downs” of everyday life, is what makes up each episode.
According to Silbergleid (2009), when the *Gilmore Girls* premiered in the fall 2000 it had the distinction of being the first program financed by the Family Friendly Programming Forum, an organization charged with supporting and promoting the development of family friendly content (p 93). Silbergleid goes on to say, the Family Friendly Programming Forum promotes programs that have a family central focus and that are appropriate in theme, content, and language, and portray a responsible resolution of issues (p. 93). Given that issues are resolved within the confines of an episode or two, the show does not address complexities surrounding single motherhood. As Beail points out (2009), given the genre, they do not end up homeless, scraping by on food stamps, or repeating a cycle of interrupted education and teen motherhood. (p. 106). While statistics show that women are hit hard by single motherhood, Lorelai Gilmore does not appear affected by money concerns. If money is needed for tuition, home repairs, or purchasing property, the problem is quickly solved, often by means that are not available to the average single mother. As mentioned earlier, teen pregnancy and single motherhood are seen as idyllic in the *Gilmore Girls*. The show tells the audience these issues are resolved by means that are not accessible to most single mothers, let alone a single mother who becomes pregnant as a teenager.

*Teen Pregnancy Is Easy If You Are a Gilmore*

In the *Gilmore Girls* teen pregnancy was only seen through flashbacks or discussed through the dialogue between characters. The *Gilmore Girls* portrayed teen pregnancy in an idealistic way. While most young women face hardships when choosing to have a baby while still in high school, viewers of the *Gilmore Girls* get the impression there are no obstacles. In the case of Lorelai Gilmore, becoming pregnant as a teenager
and struggling through those years was not the main focus of the *Gilmore Girls.*

According to Silbergleid (2009), “the lack of any in depth discussions of teen pregnancy on the *Gilmore Girls* closes off any dialogue of the complexities of teen motherhood and the harsh economic realities faced by most single mothers in contemporary American culture” (p. 96).

Although viewers get a brief glimpse of Lorelai’s life as a teenage mom, as well as her life under her parents’ home in a few of the episodes, the pilot episode of the *Gilmore Girls* starts years later. Lorelai becomes the manager of the Independence Inn and Rory is in high school. Lorelai has been able to purchase a home, vehicle, and see to it that all her and Rory’s needs are met without any financial help from her family or public assistance. Viewers get the impression that Lorelai is a single mother that has the means to live quite comfortably. Lorelai comes from a former privileged life of old money, debutant balls, and Ivy League schools. Although she has forsaken the bourgeois lifestyle by leaving home at a young age to live as a single mother in Stars Hollow, Lorelai’s has done well for herself on a maid to manager’s income.

Lorelai’s privileged background indicates she had several options such as abortion, adoption, or even marriage. However, Lorelai chooses to have her baby on her own without even the help of her parents. Despite the fact Lorelai chooses to have her baby, she is not stigmatized for her decision to be a single mother. It is this portrayal of teen pregnancy in the *Gilmore Girls* that plays into pre-existing notions of teen pregnancy when it comes to race and class.
According to Solinger (2005):

In the minds of many Americans, legitimate pregnancy now has less to do with having a husband and more to do with having “enough money.” In the minds of many people, legitimate pregnancy has now become a class privilege reserved for women with resources. Other women—those without resources—who get pregnant and stay pregnant are often regarded as making bad choices. (p. 217)

Lorelai, because she is white and her class standing, is not seen as making a bad choice in keeping her baby. She and Rory are embraced by the town folk of Stars Hollow. Mia, the owner of the Independence Inn, gave Lorelai a job and place to live allowing her to work her way up to manager. As Cooper argues (2006), the stereotypes of Anglo-American normalcy seen in the Gilmore Girls “further subverts the classic formula for televised family drama by giving star-billing to an unwed mother who is not stigmatized for her choices” (p. 174). An important feature of therapeutic rhetoric, according to Cloud (1998a), is the tendency to encourage citizens to perceive all political issues, conflicts, and inequities as personal failures subject to personal amelioration (p. 3). Depending on race and/or class status teen pregnancy may be seen as a failure that is solely the individual’s problem, and not a societal problem. Lorelai’s pregnancy is not seen as a problem for society, or even as an individual problem or personal failure. Instead, it is portrayed as a personal triumph as she is able to support and raise her child without any help from government assistance. Neglecting the fact Lorelai does receive help from her family and the community of Stars Hollow.

However, there is one person in Stars Hollow who does feel Lorelai made a bad choice to be a teen single mother. That person is Mrs. Kim. Mrs. Kim is Rory’s best friend, Lane’s mother, and it is Mrs. Kim’s feeling that teenagers should not become
pregnant and or single parents. In the pilot episode Mrs. Kim does not sound happy when Lane and Rory show up at Lane’s house after school. Rory mentions that after all the years the two girls have been friends that Lane’s mother still does not like her. According to Lane, Mrs. Kim’s dislike the fact Lorelai is a single mother. Mrs. Kim, although living in America has strong ties to her Korean upbringing. Mrs. Kim also is not afforded the opportunities Lorelai had access to because of class status and race.

Another character not happy with Lorelai’s choices is her grandmother. Lorelai’s grandmother, the eldest Lorelai also was not pleased by Lorelai’s pregnancy. During a visit she makes it clear it was a scandal considering the Gilmore standing in society, but in the same sentence commends Lorelai for being hardworking and providing for her child (The Third Lorelia, season 1, episode 18). On the other hand, Lorelai’s parents, Emily and Richard do not blame Lorelai for her teen pregnancy (Pilot, season 1). They blame her for not marrying Rory’s father, Christopher, and instead choosing to be a single mother. Emily and Richard also blame Lorelai for taking Rory away from them. Lorelai feels her parents are controlling, and Lorelai being rebellious against the confines of her privileged lifestyle decides to take Rory and move away. Lorelai refused her family’s support emotional and financially for years until the pilot episode.

*Single Motherhood Lorelai Style*

Single motherhood, a theme closely connected to teen pregnancy, provides the main storyline in the *Gilmore Girls*. In the show both these issues are depoliticized throughout the episodes. The show idealized single motherhood by making it appear easy. The show’s portrayal of single motherhood lacked the difficulties that can accompany being the sole provider and parent.
At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the cultural and political landscape in which the *Gilmore Girls* aired was a contentious space when it came to issues of motherhood and family (Silbergleid, 2009, p. 96). According to Silbergleid (2009), both in the population and popular culture we saw a rise in single motherhood during this time. Stacey (1996) argues the nuclear family became a thing of the past. More children are growing up in single parent household than before, and the rise in single parenting by the mother even became acceptable on television. The family portrayed in the *Gilmore Girls* was not one of a nuclear family, but of a single parent household. Stacey (1996) describes this postmodern family form by stating the family of women has replaced the patriarchal family of the past (p. 51). Lorelai Gilmore is one of those single parents living the postmodern family life. This is the image Lorelai portrays that of a single mother who is providing stability and prosperity for her home. Lorelai’s portrayal of single motherhood is that of “make believe” television. “Indeed, the show is the ultimate presentation of the American dream, single mom style, even as it elides the class and race realities that make Lorelai’s success possible in the first place (Silbergleid, 2009, p. 99).

The *Gilmore Girls* depicts a utopia. As pointed out earlier by Beail (2009), Lorelai Gilmore does not end up homeless and her daughter Rory does not repeat the cycle of single motherhood. According to Rapping (2008), the bourgeois culture incorporates utopian visions and values to liberate people from the constraints of realism and to give them a glimpse of a better world (p. 239).
Silbergleid explains (2009):

It does not take much to figure out that Lorelai’s story is unlikely, even fantastical and utopic. How does a teenage mom manage to work her way up from a maid living in a shed to running the inn, owning her home, and sending her child to private school? (p. 98)

Lorelai takes responsibility for her teen pregnancy and single motherhood status and appears to lead a utopian life. Economic issues surrounding the theme of single motherhood do play a role in the Gilmore Girls, but not as long-term hardships that cause sacrifices. The Gilmore women do not have to cut back on eating out, or shopping for clothes. When Lorelai does encounter obstacles concerning money, not only is there a resolution in an episode or two, but a solution is at her fingertips and takes little effort on her part. For example, when money is needed for Rory’s school tuition in the pilot episode, all Lorelai had to do was go visit her parents and ask for the money.

Lorelai’s story of overcoming hardship illustrates one of the functions of therapeutic discourse. According to Cloud (1998a), this function of the rhetoric of therapy which is to encourage identification with values such as individualism, familism, self-help, and self-absorption (p. 2). Lorelai is seen as an individual who pulls herself up by the bootstraps and is happy. She is content to be her own person, working, and raising Rory. Lorelai provides a place to live for her child that is not a rundown apartment in government housing, but a cute potting shed by a pond. Both Lorelai and Rory have special feelings for their first home as Rory explains to Emily (Emily in Wonderland, season 1, episode 19). Never is Lorelai and Rory’s humble beginnings in the potting shed seen as horrible, or a struggle. They are fonder of the shed than the two-story home they live in now. This romanticized view of a struggling single mother cannot be compared to
what most single mothers may face. These mothers are working to get out of the living conditions they are in and do not see their surroundings as ideal. Lorelai helps herself reach a better life, as she worked her way up from a maid to the manager of an inn. She also is seen as providing for her family.

During the seven-year run of the *Gilmore Girls* viewers never heard Lorelai complain about her status as a single mother. Being a single mother raising a child in a small town was easy for Lorelai. Everyone in town adores Rory and Lorelai for that matter. Lorelai is a successful single mom who is young, pretty, and devoted to her child. Rory is seen as the perfect child. In Lorelai’s world single motherhood is not a struggle. There are no issues of childcare, because Lorelai and Rory lived in the potting shed on the grounds of the inn. Rory was welcome around the inn, and as she got older helped during special events. Lorelai being a mere child herself when Rory was born is more of a friend to her daughter than a mother. Lorelai, as mentioned earlier is also seen as a good mom, who is willing to make sacrifices for her daughter. These sacrifices include going to her parents for financial support to send Rory to school. Lorelai also is willing to give up her dreams so that her Rory can go to college.

Rory looks up to her mother and during Rory’s valedictorian speech Rory credits her mother for her success (Those are Strings, Pinocchio, season 3, episode 22). Lorelai and Rory’s relationship is a close one. This is seen in the pilot episode when Rory meets her mother at the dinner for coffee and asks her mom for some lip gloss. Lorelai pulls out several different flavors of gloss and even goes to get Rory a cup of coffee. Lorelai’s support of her daughter even goes as far as spending the night in Rory’s dorm room on her first night at college (Lorelai’s First Day at Yale, season 4, episode 2). Rory is
homesick immediately after moving into her dorm room and calls her mother. Lorelai returns to Yale to be with her daughter. After a party that includes food from every takeout restaurant in the area, Lorelai stays the night with Rory. Lorelai is able to be there for Rory, although she is the sole supporter of the family unit. Viewers get the impression Lorelai works but can afford the luxury of setting her own schedule to meet her duties as a single mother.

Although Lorelai is portrayed as self-sufficient, issues of money for education, home repairs, purchasing and remodeling property, pose dilemmas and storylines in several episodes during the run of the *Gilmore Girls*. In the pilot episode the Gilmore women need money for prep school and again in season three for college. Also in season three, Lorelai needs money to purchase property, while season four addresses the need to finish remodeling property. However, the *Gilmore Girls* presents a world in which the rhetoric of self-sufficiency overcomes simple math; and while the show does mention the difficulties of Lorelai’s early years with Rory, it presents characters who are upwardly mobile (Silbergleid, 2009, p. 98). Although there are financial issues, they are resolved quickly and simply, and do not show viewers life outside the world of Stars Hollow. As Silbergled (2009) argues, the dialogue highlights self-reliance and choice, while ignoring the way such choices are only available to those of certain class and color (p. 101). The *Gilmore Girls* presents the ideal; the system is fair when it come to economic success.

The show lacks obstacles most women face such as pay differentials that are determined by race and gender. The *Gilmore Girls* portrays the message that despite teen motherhood and single motherhood, one can aspire to have a lifestyle of one’s choosing. The fact that Lorelai has been able to achieve all she has and raise an exceptional child implies that
any self-sufficient woman can achieve the same. If the woman is not able to be a single mother and have a career, the fault is hers because she is not able to improve herself (Rockler, 2006, p. 257)

Lorelai is seen as a “good” mother and not a “bad” mother; and, according to Douglas and Michaels (2005), Lorelai is supportive of her child and puts her child first. As Beail argues (2009), “Lorelai ends up owning an inn and a cute house, and Rory is a brilliant, good mannered child who thinks her mother is cool” (p. 106).

Lorelai is portrayed as a good, successful mother and does not appear to face major hardships that have no resolution. Silbergleid (2009) argues, Lorelai reads as a paradigm of a young woman’s victory over obstacles. Lorelai is not “the culturally deplored welfare mom incorrectly assumed to be young, African American, and lazy, but instead is an illustration that desire and hard work bring happiness and success” (p. 94). This impression has even carried over onto television as white single mothers do not appear to receive public assistance. This notion that one can pull themselves up by the bootstraps arguably is the very principles that bind the so-called American dream (p. 94).

The American dream, according to Jhally and Lewis (1992), convinces the public that the system is fair no matter what personal struggles they may have (p. 74). The *Gilmore Girls* presents a similar representation of the American dream in the portrayal of Lorelai and the accomplishments achieved on her own. This idealistic thinking that the “system is fair” is further exemplified in the episode where Emily visits Stars Hollow for the first time (Emily in Wonderland, season 1, episode 19). Rory takes her grandmother on tour of town. It is in this episode viewers see the humble housing Lorelai first lived in when she moved to Stars Hollow with an infant Rory. As mentioned earlier, Lorelai was
taken in by the inn owner Mia, who gave Lorelai a job and a place to live, the potting shed located on the grounds of the Independence Inn. This was no ordinary potting shed, only large enough to hold shovels and rakes. This shed had several windows, flower boxes with flowers, and plumbing fixtures. The potting shed resembles a small house from the outside and is large enough for two people to live in. This modest shed is also located by a pond with swans.

As the pilot episode progresses, a dream of both Lorelai and Rory’s is coming to fruition. Rory has been accepted to the elite prep school of Chilton in Hartford. By attending Chilton it will give Rory a better opportunity to pursue her and her mother’s dream of Rory attending Harvard University. Lorelai does not have the money, but her parents do. Lorelai comes from “old” money. Her ancestor came over on the Mayflower; her mother Emily is a member of the Daughters of the American Revolution; and her father Richard has done well in the insurance business. Lorelai receives a letter from Chilton stating she needs to pay the full tuition to the school by the following Monday, the day Rory is set to start at her new high school.

After discussing her economic dilemma with her best friend Sookie, Lorelai decides to go visit her parents on Sookie’s urging. Lorelai and Rory only visit the elder Gilmores on holidays. As Lorelai begins to tell her parents the reason for her visit, her father Richard immediately assumes she needs money and is willing to write Lorelai a check. However, Emily has one condition for the loan, which is for Lorelai and Rory to have dinner with Emily and Richard every Friday evening. Lorelai not only has solved her need for the tuition money, but does not have to pay her parents back one dime.
Later in season 3, another economic issue arises when Rory is denied financial aid assistance to attend Yale (Here Comes the Son, season 3, episode 21). To solve this problem, Lorelai decides to use the money for Rory’s tuition, instead of purchasing the Dragonfly Inn. This money Lorelai receives from a bond her father established for her when she was born. Richard gives Lorelai this gift on her birthday (Happy Birthday Baby, season 3, episode 18). Lorelai takes the money and pays her parents back on the loan and banks the rest. However, Rory finds out her mother’s plan (Those Are Strings, Pinocchio, episode 22). Rory wants her mother to use the money to purchase the Dragonfly Inn, which has been Lorelai’s dream, instead of using it for college. To solve this economic issue, on the day Rory is to graduate from Chilton, she goes to her grandparents and asks them for the money to attend Yale. Again the money is handed over with the simple stipulation that Rory is to resume Friday night dinners with her grandparents. Rory, following in her mother’s footsteps, has solved her financial problem and Lorelai’s. Rory can go to an Ivy League college and Lorelai can become an owner of an inn.

However, none of these financial issues detour the two Gilmore women from taking their backpacking trip through Europe, which is discussed in this same episode. Lorelai and Rory never discuss postponing or cancelling their trip in order to afford the inn or college tuition. Silbergleid (2009) explains, what the Gilmore Girls does not reflect is that Lorelai and Rory can afford such luxuries because they have Richard and Emily’s money as a safety net (p. 101).

Although Lorelai does not always run to her parents for financial support the fact remains she comes from money, and has that option. The financial support also comes
from Lorelai’s grandmother. Grandma Lorelai pays a visit (The Incredible Sinking Lorelais, season 4, episode 14), and over dinner the eldest Lorelai realizes Lorelai is in trouble. Repairs to the Dragonfly Inn have gone over budget and, to complete the inn on time, more money is needed. Although Lorelai has not mentioned her dilemma to her parents and plans to ask her friend Luke for the money, her grandmother chastises Richard and Emily for not helping their daughter. Lorelai Gilmore is never in a financial bind for long and is able to receive the funding needed to continue to live her privileged single mother life style.
“The genius of *Gilmore Girls* is that it’s about class, it’s about small towns, it’s about Eastern Establishment snobbery, it’s about gender options, it’s about single-parent households, and it’s about mother-daughter relationships” (Cooper, 2006, p. 172). In this thesis the representation of single motherhood was examined, specifically looking at the obstacles of single motherhood and how those obstacles are resolved as seen in the *Gilmore Girls*.

Lorelai Gilmore never seems hardened by her struggles. Her struggles are minimized by the fact she has options that most single mothers in reality do not—money and a support system that includes her parents and the residents of Stars Hollow. Lorelai also does not face the stigma of being a single mother, who at the age of 16, had her child. Instead she is embraced by those who know her and commended for her struggles to raise a child on her own. However, Lorelai came from a privileged background and her struggles were easily resolved because resolved due to race and class privilege, issues that remain visible throughout the show. As Silbergleid (2009) explains it, Lorelai is depicted as a self-sufficient heroine, and the *Gilmore Girls* disguises any meaningful discussion about the controversies surrounding teen pregnancy, single motherhood, and the welfare state in the United States (p. 94). Silbergleid further argues, the *Gilmore Girls* present a unique advantage to think about the nature of motherhood and family in the
popular sphere, suggesting that television representation and political agendas do not go always go hand in hand.

In the *Gilmore Girls*, issues surrounding single motherhood are depoliticized. As the analysis showed, the *Gilmore Girls* contributes to the myth that women’s economic conditions surrounding single motherhood are fair. Lorelai is not entirely self-sufficient when she has obstacles to overcome. Lorelai has a family support system that also is her financial support system as well as support from the community that she lives in. This utopian vision and lack of stigma surrounding teen motherhood further perpetuate the ideal that despite these issues the American dream can be achieved. According to Beail (2009), playful, fun-loving dramedies focus on individual experience and divergent perspectives among women that assumes equality (p. 112). However, Beail argues, these dramedies “fail to grapple deeply with the dilemmas that women as a group may face or to connect with a larger context of feminist history and political action” (p. 112).

Like Rockler’s (2006) analysis of the show *Friends*, this analysis demonstrates that the *Gilmore Girls* contributes to therapeutic discourses that discourage women from demanding better material conditions. It does not provide the equipment of living in understanding women’s issues within political contexts for many single mothers. What the *Gilmore Girls* does provide is an idealistic look at motherhood void of the true reality
of raising a child on one’s own. “Television shows do not just reflect everyday life; they participate in the creation of it” (Beail, 2009, p. 99). And this can be said of the Gilmore Girls, as the show created an idealized depiction of single motherhood for viewers.
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