Representation of Mother and Motherhood in Gilmore Girls: Analytical Essay

In this essay, I will analyse multiple moments which demonstrate the representation of ‘mother’ in Amy Sherman-Palladino’s hit series, Gilmore Girls. This essay will engage primarily with the mother-daughter bond shared by the protagonists Lorelai Gilmore, played by Lauren Graham, and her daughter Lorelai (Rory) Gilmore, played by Alexis Bledel. I will also examine and compare the relationship between Emily Gilmore (Kelly Bishop) and her daughter Lorelai highlighting the strained nature of their relationship. However, I will also discuss other representations of motherhood outside of the Gilmore clan, including Mia Bass, Mrs Kim, Lane Kim and Liz Danes. I will then compare the evolution of the relationships from earlier in the seasons to the ending, cross-referencing ‘A Year in the Life’ from time-to-time for comparison. Finally, I will briefly touch on and compare Gilmore Girls to more contemporary examples of mother’s in other television programmes. My analysis of various relationships between mother and daughter will reveal ‘what It means to be a little too close, [break down] the problems of boundaries and the impossibility sometimes with family’ (Brinkema, p.6) but also, how important that bond is.

Firstly, ‘although the program appears to revolve around the various love interests of both “girls,” […] the central crisis of Gilmore Girls is the extremely close friendship between mother and daughter’, namely Lorelai and Rory, who are more akin to sisters than mother and daughter (Brinkema, p.8). Not only do they share the same bloodline, but they even have the same name across three generations of Gilmore women. Rory is named Lorelai after her mother, who is also named after her grandmother Lorelai (“Trix”) Gilmore. Lorelai gave Rory her name “in the hospital all whacked out on Demerol. But [they] call her Rory” (Season 1, Ep.2). In a moment of “feminism” […], she decided that if men could name their sons after themselves, so could she’ (Brinkema, p.9). The transgenerational name is the only characteristic Lorelai intended on passing on from her affluent up-brining. However, as seen in the pilot episode of Gilmore Girls, Lorelai is forced to choose between sending Rory to the school of her dreams and asking her parents for financial aid to pay for Rory’s Chilton tuition. Her maternal drive to do the best for her child helps her succumb to her usual response of insurgency and instead agrees to obligatory “Friday night dinners” in return for the loan. This meeting is also pivotal as it is the first instance audience members are introduced to Richard and Emily Gilmore and thus the representation of their relationship or lack thereof, with Lorelai. A relationship which is held loosely together by their granddaughter Rory. Here, “mother” is represented as both arduous (Emily and Lorelai) and altruistic (Rory and Lorelai).

Secondly, like most mothers Lorelai just wants, ‘for important bio-psycho-social reasons, to nurture, provide for and socialize’ with her child (Bueskens, p.18). The extent to which she socializes with her child, on the other hand, is why Lorelai is represented as a new style of mother not often seen in television programs. The pair are often engaged in speedy dialogue at home or in Luke’s diner while consuming coffee voraciously. Their morning caffeine ritual is described as having surpassed habit and instead permeates the ‘narrative world of Gilmore Girls…, the narrative pacing is itself caffeinated-jumpy and, speedy, on speed’ (Brinkema, pg.11). Albeit unusual and at times annoying, their continual, out-sourced media references and quick discourse injects life into their scenes, providing much-needed entertainment. As well as,

occasionally provides comic relief during darker moments in the plot. When Gilmore Girls first aired on WB/ CW network in 2000, writer and producer Sherman-Palladino presented confused audiences with a uniquely close bond held by this mother-daughter duo. Their bond was so remarkable that Sherman-Palladino was once challenged for her depiction of Rory and Lorelai's relationship by Virginia Heffernan who stated that, '" A mother wouldn't do this." [To which AS-P replied], "This mother would. Because the relationship I'm doing here is not mother and daughter, it's best friends"' (Diffrient et al., p.9). This exact sentiment is evoked in Season one, Episode six (14.20) of Gilmore Girls on Rory's birthday, "I think you're a great, cool kid and the best friend a girl could have." "Back at you". The uncommon nature of the relationship illustrated, effectively establishes 'the compulsive ways in which fans consume this most contradictory of TV shows, which has the capacity to both comfort and challenge viewers' as proven by Heffernan (Diffrient et al., p.xv).

Furthermore, like all mothers and their children, or even best friends, there are going to be times when relationships are strained. It is demonstrated in Season one, Episode one, that Lorelai and Rory are no exception to this. Lorelai having debased herself while asking for the Chilton loan from her parents, becomes increasingly frustrated with Rory, who at this stage decides to defy her mother and stay at her current school as Dean is there. This is the first instance in the series whereby a romantic interest comes between the pair. It is also the first stage of Rory's rebellious faze which spans throughout her teenage years and one of the few common tropes exhibited in "normal" mother-daughter relationships. The idea that Rory and Lorelai's bond was considered too "perfect" for so long proves that it is one that can only exist in fiction. Sherman-Palladino presents the two characters bond as infallible up until this point in the program. Finally, audiences are provided with a glimmer of realism when the two come head-to-head. However, this turbulent time in their relationship is short-lived as 'mothers and daughters collide with speed and allusion in a particular [way. But,] Gilmore Girls is a preeminent example of elasticity (Brinkema, p.15). The elasticity in this instance represents the bond between parent and child and the ability to overcome adversity.

This concept is later highlighted by Lane who states that "This rift is just nature's attempt to find some equilibrium. You and Lorelai have gone too many years without fighting" (S6, E4, 32.00). Lane's allusion to the imbalance of "nature" further emphasizes the irregularity of their closeness. It is impossible to discuss Gilmore Girls without reference to at least one cultural reference as the show frequently does. A contemporary comparison of mother-daughter relationships which are "normalized" can be seen in ABC's Modern Family, a television program which centres on family life. Claire Dunphy's turbulent relationship with her daughters is a prime example of how mothers are often likened to the "strict" parent while fathers are considered the "fun" parent. Lorelai and Rory's relationship instead parallel's Phil Dunphy's relationship with his son Luke. The father and son may be considered as closely linked as the Gilmore mother-daughter duo as their relationship surpasses a familial one and spans into the realm of friendship. This is demonstrated by Phil who mostly refers to Luke as 'buddy'. Notably, Gilmore Girls has become a part of the cultural reference sphere as 'now TV writers, directors, and producers are responding with their own references to Gilmore Girls. Scrubs, [for instance], refers in a gender-bending admission by male characters, to Lorelai and Rory [stating that they] "speak so fast, but so true."'(Diffrient et al., p.xvii).

Although the focus of Gilmore Girls concentrates mainly on Lorelai and Rory's bond, Lorelai and Emily's fractured relationship is the perfect antithesis to the largely positive relationship between Lorelai and Rory. At first, Emily Gilmore may be perceived as a privileged, sharp and

hardened woman when presented. However, once we are familiarized with the multifaceted character, we see a hurt mother whose sixteen-year-old daughter left home, taking her granddaughter with her. The relationship Emily and Lorelai have is complicated at best as although Emily raised Lorelai as she had been raised, in prosperity, they have different principles. Tired of disappointing her high-standing parents, Lorelai chose to make a life of her own which subsequently, disappointed them. Typical interactions between the mother and daughter generally include Lorelai making jokes and Emily responding with quips. As seen, for example, in Season three, Episode six, (3.02) “Well, apparently this lovely girl came home to find her husband giving the nanny a nice little bonus package… The man was shot thirty-five times.” “At least she had a husband to kill.” Emily of course having the last word.

Lorelai does her best for so long to keep her mother at arm’s length as a means to prevent the inevitable arguments which often ensue. However, by shutting out her parents, she inhibits herself from having the relationship she truly wants with them. As asserted by Petra Buesken’s, author of Modern Motherhood and Women’s Dual Identities, ‘the same social structure that marginalizes women and greatly intensifies and isolates “their work”, also opens up avenues for entertaining the public sphere and, in turn, for individuation and autonomy… the individualized mother’ (p.10). Sherman-Palladino explores the entertaining prospects of the autonomous and individualized mother through her representation of Lorelai who seemingly avoids any chance of parallelism between her and her mother.