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## Branding the Family Drama: Genre Formations and Critical Perspectives on *Gilmore Girls*

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## Branding the Family Drama

### *Genre Formations and Critical Perspectives on Gilmore Girls*

AMANDA R. KEELER

Before its debut on October 5, 2000, *Gilmore Girls* had already made television history. According to an article published in *American Demographics* that year, *Gilmore Girls* was the “first advertiser advocated show” funded by the Family Friendly Programming Forum (FFPF), a group consisting of major U.S. corporations, who offered up a million dollars to “fund ‘family-friendly’ script development at the WB,” the network that in 2006 partnered with UPN to become the CW (“Television” 2000). Taking into consideration other family-friendly dramatic television series aimed at multigenerational audiences on the CW, such as *7th Heaven* (1996–2007) and *Everwood* (2002–6), one might ask how a program about a single, never-married mom (until the final season), raising her daughter, could constitute family-friendly fare. What particular elements of this Amy Sherman-Palladino creation led the FFPF to fund its development? And is “family friendly” a viable genre label? In the context of television programming and criticism, does genre even matter anymore, considering the hybrid nature of most contemporary series?

In this chapter I will investigate what critics have written about *Gilmore Girls* and how the show has been linked to similar programs in terms of genre classification. My analysis will allude to other “family-friendly” CW programs that preceded the 2000 debut of *Gilmore Girls* as well as a host of others that followed over the course of its seven-season run. In this manner, the “family-friendly” classification

can be investigated and formulated as part of the “discursive clusters” that surround *Gilmore Girls*, a program that falls between comedy and drama, teen and adult demographics, and family-oriented programming and left-leaning characters and situations.

What is it about *Gilmore Girls* that warrants such investigation? Simply put, this program contains a combination of elements that no other television program—currently or in the past—can boast: a mixture of strong female characters, with an emphasis on teenage and middle- and senior-aged adults’ lives, and the show is quirky, populated by odd characters, all dealing with everyday problems, as well as some that most people will never face. The program was a triumph for the fledgling WB network almost immediately after its debut in 2000. It was one of the network’s only programs to consistently score relatively high Nielsen ratings, particularly in relation to its Thursday-night competition on NBC, *Friends* (1994–2004). An hour-long drama/comedy shot on film and lacking a laugh track or live audience, *Gilmore Girls* was in many ways the anti-*Friends*, and perhaps for that reason drew viewers seeking something completely different. At the very least, the fact that this new, critically lauded program was earning high ratings on a minor network, despite competing against a mainstream major-network sitcom, begs further examination.

What, exactly, is this most unusual show all about? *Gilmore Girls* is an hour-long ensemble series centered on the lives of two Gilmore family members: sixteen-year-old Rory Gilmore and her mother, thirty-two-year-old Lorelai Gilmore. Their dynamic, sisterlike interactions and separate lives spent at school and work drive much of the comedy and drama of the show. Two other generations of Gilmore women are part of the narrative as well: Emily Gilmore, Rory’s maternal grandmother, and Lorelai “Trix” Gilmore, Lorelai’s paternal grandmother (also known as “Gran”).

At the foundational level, the show is a family-centric dramedy featuring several concurrent storylines and an ensemble cast of characters who complement the eccentricities of these women and reside primarily in Stars Hollow, the fictional setting of *Gilmore Girls*. This formula is consistent over much of the show’s seven seasons, with

minor conflicts being resolved—usually within one or two episodes—through interpersonal discussions among the main and supporting characters. Larger conflicts, mostly family-related issues linked to Lorelai's tense relationship with her mother, Emily, and her father, Richard, ebb and flow season to season.

One notable aspect of *Gilmore Girls* is its generically hybrid nature, something frequently commented upon and debated by television critics and fans alike. To better understand how diverse groups of audiences have discussed and written about the show, I have looked to a number of sources with an eye to consolidating these various discourses. First, it should be noted that the least amount of writing available on the program is in scholarly books and journal articles. This discovery, in addition to my abiding interest in this particular television program, has led me to write this chapter to add to the existing literature and to better understand my own fascination and fandom.

The greatest amount of discourse available on *Gilmore Girls* can be found in trade magazines concerning industry discussions of the program, the CW network, and the show's stars. I culled this data primarily from *Variety* and *Entertainment Weekly*, both of which provide valuable insights into the program through the eyes of critics who work with one foot inside and one foot outside the television industry. The writers contributing pieces to these two publications are uniquely qualified and situated to speak to everyday viewers of television as well as industry professionals. Finally, I also examined as many accounts of the program that I could locate from local and national newspapers, "family-friendly" and parental guidance Web sites (such as the Parents Television Council [PTC] and the Family Friendly Programming Forum), online blogs, and critical assessments of other programs that make passing references to *Gilmore Girls*, itself one of the most reference-filled series on American television.

As this chapter primarily concerns the debates that surround the show in reference to its genre, it is important to first define what is meant by the term *genre* and how scholars have typically formulated opinions on this crucial matter of terminology. The television scholar whose work has proved to be the most illuminating in terms

of classificatory status is Jason Mittell, author of *Genre and Television*. Mittell challenges existing conceptions of genre formation specifically relating to television programming. He writes, "Texts themselves are insufficient to understand how genres are created, merge, evolve, or disappear. We need to look outside of texts to locate the range of sites in which genres operate, change, proliferate, and die out" (2004, 9). In his formulation of genres as "cultural categories," Mittell repeatedly pushes for analyses that move outside of the television text and examine instead the "discursive formations," including factors such as audience reception, critical interpretations, and industry discussions, to name a few (ibid., 13, 18). This conceptualization of genre is born out of Michel Foucault's discourse analyses, where, by Mittell's assessment, genres "work as discursive clusters, with certain definitions, interpretations and evaluations coming together at any given time to suggest a coherent and clear" label (ibid., 17). What is most fascinating about Mittell's framework is his contention that genre study entails not just an analysis of one specific show but rather a cultural and historical examination over time through several related programs, as well as through critical, scholarly, and fan discussions. Relying on Mittell's methodology, this chapter will examine *Gilmore Girls* and the disparate genre assessments surrounding it from a multitude of sources, which define the program along a range of contrasting and complicating classifications, from "family friendly" to "dramedy."

### "But I'm a Half-Hour Woman!"

In a 2002 interview series creator and executive producer Amy Sherman-Palladino stated that *Gilmore Girls* is "a family show, which means we write about real family life, and that encompasses deep emotional pain, awfulness and Prozac and hopefully therapy, and a lot of happy and funny stuff as well" (quoted in Zahed 2002). Here, Sherman-Palladino opts not to place the "family-friendly" tag firmly within the confines of traditional domestic dramas that involve married heterosexual couples, but rather puts drama within families, in whatever form that family takes. Alternately, Joy Press writes, "Sure,

some of *90210*'s fans turned to *Dawson's Creek* and *Gilmore Girls*, but [these] wholesome series [lack] a certain glitz and tawdriness" that shows like *The O.C.*, on FOX, provide (2004, 49).

From this statement one can sense that *Gilmore Girls*' family friendliness stems not only from the content of the show but also from its relation to other programs. The television show that Press references, *The O.C.* (2003–7), starring former *Gilmore Girls* regular Adam Brody, also functions as a family drama of sorts, one whose storylines are spread among several families. Despite this moniker, *The O.C.* has been classified by the Parents Television Council as a red-light show that "may include gratuitous sex, explicit dialogue, violent content, or obscene language, and is unsuitable for children" ("Family Guide: *The O.C.*" n.d.). In relation to shows like *The O.C.*, *Gilmore Girls* contains elements that usually denote "family-friendly" fare, such as the strong mother-daughter bond and the multigenerational emphasis. However, next to a more conservative program like *7th Heaven*, Amy Sherman-Palladino's snarky take on mother-daughter relations and New England eccentricity is a world apart. The Parents Television Council Web site classifies *7th Heaven* as a green-light program, a "family-friendly show promoting responsible themes and traditional values," while *Gilmore Girls* earns a yellow light, meaning that it is a show that "contains adult-oriented themes and dialogue that may be inappropriate for youngsters" ("Family Guide: *Gilmore Girls*" n.d.). Sherman-Palladino stated outright, before the program's debut in 2000, "It's not going to be *7th Heaven*," meaning that the show would not succumb to the saccharine-sweetness of that "green light" show (quoted in Fretts 2000a, 80).

Amy Sherman-Palladino herself has made a point that the family-friendly assessment of *Gilmore Girls* is based less on plots and storylines than on the characters—quirky individuals who appeal to actual families viewing the program, a series whose attraction can be partly attributed to its multigenerational cast. This widens the appeal for several divergent family members rather than solely teenagers, differentiating it from other CW television programs like *One Tree Hill* (2003–). In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, FFPF member and corporate

vice president for Johnson & Johnson Andrea Alstrup said, “We were looking for programming that wasn’t what people typically thought of as family friendly. We needed to break that mold, to attract the broadest range of audience” (Weiner 2002, 66). What they attempted, and succeeded at, was creating a multigenerational ensemble cast to “skew older,” a program that moved away from a singular appeal to teenagers toward a program that their parents could enjoy and approve of as well (Bergman 2000). The CW’s Web site for *Gilmore Girls* adds the following statement, “The strong and loving mother-daughter relationship portrayed in *Gilmore Girls* reflects the growing reality of this new type of American family,” presumably meaning nontraditional, single-parent households (CW Web site, [www.CWTV.com](http://www.CWTV.com)).

From the beginning it was acknowledged that *Gilmore Girls* would not be a traditional “family-friendly” program, meaning that it would not exclusively focus on intact, married heterosexual families with children. When asked how the FFPF felt about Lorelai being an unwed mother, Alstrup replied, “There were discussions about that but we didn’t feel that was a critical part of the story” (Weiner 2002, 66). To frame this differently, rather than consider *Gilmore Girls* unfamily friendly because of the unwed-teen pregnancy at the heart of the show’s premise, the counterpoint to this plot is the program that wasn’t produced: one that could have focused on a pregnant sixteen-year-old girl who has an abortion. Instead, the “family-friendly” element implicit in this formulation hinges on the presence of a young woman who—when forced to make a difficult decision—chose the “right” path, one that made her accountable for her youthful indiscretion. In the fifteen years between Rory’s birth and the program’s starting point, it is acknowledged that Lorelai has worked hard and is now a successful business owner, someone whose “accidental” daughter is the center of her sometimes difficult but satisfying life.

The series does not portray the “what if” factor: what if Rory had never been born? But the show is also quick to highlight Lorelai’s missed opportunities and the consequences of her unplanned teen pregnancy, such as missing out on her cotillion and attending college, and the strained relationship with her mother. All of these factors are

ushered forth not so much through Lorelai's character development but through Rory's, as their friends frequently make references to the things that the latter girl is able to do that her mother was not. All of the sacrifices Lorelai makes in her life are construed as opportunities for Rory and as lessons to prevent her from making a similar "mistake," to ensure that she will not follow the same path that Lorelai (accidentally) took. This is not to say that the program never focuses on regret, but Lorelai's accidental pregnancy is implicitly posited as a less than ideal condition for someone who aspires to do great things at an early age. It is this "less than ideal" status that underlines the relationship between mother and daughter. There are no regrets, but also no romanticizing of the difficulties and sacrifices endured by Lorelai to ensure that Rory will have the opportunities to fulfill her intellectual and educational goals.

Allison Weiner writes that many critics were initially "skeptical; most assumed the show was being used to advance a right-wing agenda," because of the initial funding it received from the FFPP (ibid.). This assumption is not entirely without merit. *Gilmore Girls*, like all televisual texts, is open to socially progressive or politically retrograde readings alike. Just as genre is prone to hybridity and at least partially predicated on a formulation of multiple sites of meaning, so too do televisual texts flit between several interpretations and therefore frustrate monolithic readings. With this freedom of personal interpretations people have claimed TV programs and films as representing precisely what another group may feel the same texts rally against. For example, depending on one's critical perspective, a program like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB/UPN, 1997–2003) can be understood as a family drama or as a horror and science fiction hybrid. In the first season, Buffy's family is made up of her blood relations (her mother, her absent father), but very quickly her family expands to include her friends Willow and Xander, and Giles, her "Watcher." Like *Gilmore Girls*, this Joss Whedon series has a multigenerational appeal with a diverse cast of characters that works on several levels for a variety of viewers and interpretations. Though "family oriented," *Buffy* is not without criticism, either. Many of the show's critics were



concerned with the violence depicted on the program, as evidenced in Lisa Parks's essay "Brave New *Buffy*: Rethinking "TV Violence" (2003). In that essay she convincingly argues that the violence in *Buffy* works on an allegorical, rather than literal, level. Parks, for one, points to the cultural scapegoating of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* after the Columbine school shootings in 1999.

In this regard, any textual reading acts as a personal reflection within broader social and cultural issues at a particular moment in time. Rather than look at this program from my personal experience, I instead am interested in exploring genre by examining existing critical readings. Here, genre analysis is not a matter of adopting the preferences or prejudices of any one critic, but rather a means of looking at what several writers have expressed about *Gilmore Girls* and synthesizing their assessments. Many of these assessments were made near the beginning of the show's conception in 2000. But, as Jason Mittell writes, genre formation is a "fluid and active process" (2004, 16). In deference to the program's early "family-friendly" status, the Parents Television Council, years after the series premiered, gave it a yellow-light warning, noting that the program is "not very family-friendly" because of its "harsh language" and "casual treatment of sexual material" ("Family Guide: *Gilmore Girls*" n.d.). In 2003 *Entertainment Weekly* stamped a "Parental Warning" on the program due to Rory's relationship with then-boyfriend Jess Mariano, although these incessantly bickering characters do not engage in any explicit sexual experimentation (EW Web site, [www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,411599\\_7,00.html](http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,411599_7,00.html)). Despite these elements, not everyone agreed with the PTC's yellow-light warning: former child star Jerry Mathers, of *Leave It to Beaver* (ABC, 1957–63) fame, told an interviewer that he was turned on to *Gilmore Girls* by his daughter. He is quoted as saying, "*Gilmore Girls* is good. I just think there should be a few things kids could watch" (quoted in Wilonsky 2003). Executives at Disney seemed to agree with Mathers's assessment, as the ABC Family channel acquired the "exclusive off-network rights" to *Gilmore Girls* in 2003 (Grego 2003). As well, in 2001 the program won the Family Television Awards' "Best New Series" prize.

Within Mittell's formulation of genre are two questions in regard to *Gilmore Girls*. First, does "family friendly" constitute a viable genre according to Mittell's criteria? And second, does *Gilmore Girls* fit better within another, more classically defined, category, like comedy or drama? To help determine what genre a program belongs to or relies on, Mittell asks, "Does a given category circulate within the cultural spheres of audiences, press accounts, and industrial discourses?" (2004, 11). In terms of labeling the show "family friendly," a designation that is part of the industrial-critical discourses discussed above, it seems a viable option. But among audiences, I found little evidence of references to the program as "family friendly." What I did discover, however, was a curious inclusion of the program in the lexicon of fans and critics alike, with myriad groups of people, such as television critic Bill Frost, using the program to describe other shows that also seemingly fall outside classical genre delineations. Frost, for example, refers to the half-hour WB program *What I Like about You* (2002–6) as "*Gilmore Girls* in New York" (2002, 33). In an interview professional baker Jami Curl uses the program to describe her viewing tastes, saying, "I don't even watch *Sex and the City*. I'm more of a *Gilmore Girls* person" (Clarke 2005, 49). Joy Press of the *Village Voice* writes, "*Gilmore Girls* is still the sweetest show on TV. It's also one of the smartest, weighing in somewhere between *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *The Sopranos*." Press goes on to write that Nancy, the pot-selling mom on Showtime's *Weeds* (2005–), "joins Lorelai Gilmore, the wisecracking mom of the *Gilmore Girls*, as one of the most flawed, fascinating women on TV, a giant fuck-you to the retro conservatism of Wisteria Lane," referring to the ABC television drama *Desperate Housewives* (2004–) (2004, 113). In a review for *Variety*, Michael Speier writes that *Everwood* (2002–6) is "a sound drama that does for father-son relationships what *Gilmore Girls* does for the women of the family" (2002). In describing a proposed reality show featuring the Gastineau family, *Variety* writer John Dempsey explains that the program will be "*Sex and the City* meets *Gilmore Girls*" (2004).

These and numerous other references made to the program and its characters by critics and viewers lack the phrase "family friendly," and

illustrate how the program has become part of the descriptive language to reference other television programs that also frustrate easy categorization. By these accounts, then, "family friendly" may not qualify as a genre according to Mittell's conceptualization, despite the proliferation of the term among certain critics and organizations. There appear to be two reasons this term is not circulating among viewers and most critics. First, despite the show's origins as specifically "family friendly," overt labeling of the show as such might dissuade potential viewers from approaching it, given the usual connotations that accompany such fare. Thus, if this term were a larger part of the show's discourse, then it might risk self-selecting its audience, to the detriment of higher ratings and advertising dollars. Second, although there is evidence that actual families, like Jerry Mathers and his daughter, do watch the program together, *Gilmore Girls* aired on the CW, a fledgling network known for its large number of teen dramas. Although the network has been forthright in labeling *7th Heaven* as "family friendly," such a designation might have hindered *Gilmore Girls* from gaining popularity among teenagers, the primary demographic of CW viewers, and forever cast it as something uncool or unwatchable in the eyes of young audiences. In actuality, the show pains itself to sustain a high level of hipness through the characters' witty banter, their endless pop culture references, and Lane Kim's fetish for all things punk rock. *Gilmore Girls* relies on two generations of teenage rebellion to showcase its hipness, as witnessed through current teenagers Lane and Jess and former teenager Lorelai. Although the show profiles teenage rebellion on many levels, their rebellion is filtered and presented in a mostly benign, domesticated nature.

Although "family friendly" does not constitute a viable genre category, these references lead to the second part of my genre analysis, suggesting that the program can be situated within either the comedy or drama category. Again, Mittell writes that if either one of these terms is used to describe a program's genre, then it must circulate within "cultural spheres of audiences, press accounts, and industrial discourses" (2004, 11). By citing other programs to describe *Gilmore Girls*, TV critics avoid having to classify a program that does not fall

purely into drama or comedy categories. Executive producer Sherman-Palladino writes, "There are these preconceived notions of what an hour-long show should or shouldn't do. . . . I'll let other people try to categorize it" (quoted in Zahed 2002). Here she is referring to the length of the program, an hour, which is generally associated with television dramas. By contrast, the half-hour show is usually associated with situation comedies. Mittell argues that, despite widely accepted practices of dictating genre by length of program or by time slot, such criteria might actually detract from our understanding of genre, especially insofar as a given program's hour-long length does not automatically make it a drama. Nor does *Gilmore Girls'* time slot (various weekday evenings at 8 p.m. eastern) necessarily denote prime-time comedy, although the show does have ties to that genre. Sherman-Palladino was previously a writer for *Roseanne* (ABC, 1988–97) and *Veronica's Closet* (NBC, 1997–2000), both half-hour-length sitcoms. When asked to create an hour-long program, she is reported to have said, "Are you on crack? I'm a half-hour woman!" thus complicating the genre labeling of *Gilmore Girls* even in the preproduction stages (Martin 2005).

But where does the program fit in this either-or configuration? The reasoning behind using existing television shows to describe "hybrid" programs like *Gilmore Girls* solves the problem of indistinguishable genre classification. Some critics have described the program as a straightforward drama. In 2000 Michael Schneider wrote that the WB network was adding "one new drama, the mom-daughter opus *Gilmore Girls*." According to Dan Jewel, the program is "a quietly intelligent, witty drama" (2002). *Gilmore Girls* is an "adroitly written, light drama," writes Ken Tucker of *Entertainment Weekly* (2000). These assessments of the program's drama categorization are really the exception rather than the rule. Indeed, many more critics refer to the program as a "dramedy," a hybrid genre mixing drama and comedy. Critic Michael Speier writes that *Gilmore Girls* and other shows like *Ally McBeal* (FOX, 1997–2002) and *Sex and the City* (HBO, 1998–2004) "fall into the mixed-bag mold. They're dramedies" (2002). Alison Weiner writes, "In one fell swoop, this dramedy about an

unmarried mother and her teenage daughter has managed to get conservatives and liberals agreeing on fine family entertainment” (2002, 66). *Entertainment Weekly* critic Bruce Fretts writes that *Gilmore Girls* is “the WB’s engaging family dramedy.” Another *EW* critic writes that the program “is a pitch-perfect attempt at a young adult dramedy for the teencentric network” (Baldwin 2000).

In her book *Redesigning Women*, Amanda Lotz writes that, in the case of programs that straddle the line between comedy and drama like *Gilmore Girls* and *The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd* (NBC, 1987–91), the term “‘comedic drama’ replaces the increasingly common industrial term ‘dramedy,’ which has been used more frequently in response to a shift from traditional situation-comedy forms throughout the late 1990s, but lacks theoretical delimitation or precise use” (2006, 32–33). Most critics, however, have not taken up the language Lotz uses in her book. Industry writing repeatedly refers to the program as a “dramedy.” Thus, there is a consensus among critics that the program is neither outright comedy nor purely drama but rather a combination of both. But if this is an industry term, what do audiences consider the program? And if audiences are not referring to *Gilmore Girls* as a dramedy, then does it too fail the genre classification set up by Mittell? By his accounting, the program is neither a drama nor a comedy, neither “family friendly” nor purely a program for teens or adults. If it is this difficult to classify a program, why, then, does genre matter at all?

### Making Meaning of Genre

Genre delineations help periodicals such as *TV Guide* and *Entertainment Weekly* classify programs for the sake of readers’ easy reference. By labeling a program a “drama,” the audience knows immediately that it will likely be one hour long (counting commercial advertisements), occur during prime-time evening hours, and probably be more invested in character development than in zippy verbal and visual gags. Labeling a program a “comedy” means the likelihood that a program will air during prime time, will usually be thirty minutes in length,

will often be a situation comedy, and will be accompanied by a laugh track or the presence of a live audience on set. These generic criteria are the foundational building blocks that allow critics and viewers to extrapolate additional characteristics of a program. Moreover, these simple determinations have accrued over time through popular discourses. When writers for *TV Guide* refer to a series as a comedy, they are adding that program to a lineage of other shows associated with that genre. This process, according to Mittell, is “fluid and active,” with genres constantly and forever ebbing and flowing in different directions, mutating with each new program that emerges on the televisual landscape (2004, 16).

Within this dynamic process *Gilmore Girls* stands out as a new class of TV programming that occupies a relatively uncharted, undefined middle ground in terms of genre. Although this is not necessarily problematic on the surface, and while such matters do not detract from audiences’ recognition, understanding, or appreciation of the show’s textual parameters, the lack of language for such phenomena does impact the series in other ways. In an article titled “*Gilmore* Goes Laffer Route on Ballots,” Geoffrey Berkshire writes that *Gilmore Girls* is “praised by critics and embraced by viewers but seemingly invisible to Emmy voters” (2002). In a *Variety* article titled “Dramedy Makers Need to Choose Sides: *Ed*, *Sex*, *Gilmore* Tough to Categorize,” Michael Freeman writes, “Hour-long series such as the WB’s *Gilmore Girls* . . . are submitted for Emmy consideration as comedy series, even though they really are dramedies” (2003). Berkshire agrees with this assessment, writing that “the blend of comedy and drama makes for a refreshing Emmy-worthy series but results in an Emmy quandary: Which of these series categories is a better fit?” (2002). Although the show has comedic moments, it is still sometimes heavily dramatic, such as the narrative developments that led to Rory’s breakup with Dean and the ongoing frustrations surrounding Lorelai’s relationship with her parents. Classification, then, proves to be problematic insofar as these classically defined categories can mean the difference between winning and losing highly coveted television industry awards.

To highlight the conundrum of classification, a quick glance at the awards for which the show has been nominated over its seven-year run might illustrate a similar schizophrenic differentiation. In 2001 and 2002 the Television Critics Association nominated *Gilmore Girls* for “Outstanding Achievement in Drama.” Three years later, in 2005, it nominated the program for “Outstanding Achievement in Comedy.” The Teen Choice Awards nominated the program for “Choice TV, Drama” in 2001 and 2002. In each of the next four years, however, the Teen Choice Awards nominated the program as “Choice TV, Comedy.” The Satellite Awards deemed the program “Best Television Series, Comedy or Musical” in 2005, but that same year the People’s Choice Awards nominated it as “Favorite Television Drama.”

In 2002 Lauren Graham was recognized by the Hollywood Foreign Press Association (responsible for the Golden Globes) for her role as Lorelai and was nominated for “Best Performance by an Actress in a Television Series—Drama.” That same year the Satellite Awards nominated her for “Best Performance by an Actress in a Series, Comedy or Musical.” In 2002 the Television Critics Association nominated Graham for “Individual Achievement in Drama.” Four years later it nominated her for “Outstanding Individual Achievement in Comedy.” The Screen Actors Guild maintained its stance year to year by nominating Graham in both 2001 and 2002 for “Outstanding Performance by a Female Actor in a Drama Series.” Alexis Bledel was nominated in 2001 and 2002 for “Best Performance in a TV Drama Series” by the Young Artist Awards. In 2002 the Satellite Awards nominated Bledel for “Best Performance by an Actress in a Series, Comedy or Musical.” The Teen Choice Awards recognized Bledel several times over the course of the program, first as “Choice TV Actress, Drama,” in 2001 and 2002, and later as “Choice TV Actress, Comedy,” in 2004, 2005, and 2006.

As for the program being ignored by the Emmys, this anecdote was not entirely the case. In 2004 the show won its one and only Emmy, for Makeup. Interestingly, the one Emmy Award earned by the program was in a category that did not necessitate a genre differentiation.

In my attempt to begin unpacking the proposed genre term *dramedy*, one largely overlooked aspect makes itself felt, a curious sense that most of the shows labeled “dramedies” by critics are programs that center on female characters. Shows such as *Sex and the City*, *The Days and Nights of Molly Dodd*, *Ally McBeal*, *Gilmore Girls*, and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* have all been coined “dramedies.” Although, on the surface, this seems insignificant, it speaks to the ways in which female characters have been portrayed on contemporary network television. Though there has been a surge of female characters and female-protagonist-driven programs on American television in the past ten years, in a way the conflation of drama with comedy undercuts what appears, on the surface, to be gains for more female representation on television. When a female-centric dramatic program uses comedy to lighten the emotional load, it can be read as a displacement of seriousness. This means that, on one level, there is an inability to take female characters’ emotional states and personal or professional challenges at face value, and thus comedy is added to them to make light of their true struggles. In this way *Gilmore Girls* mirrors the lack of seriousness afforded soap operas, which operate on different levels between viewer perceptions, from critics who belittle the programs to viewers who are willing to follow character and narrative arcs for decades.

Cable channels such as Lifetime have attempted, with great success, to fill a perceived programming gap by attracting women to television shows with an emphasis on drama and women’s life stories. At issue, then, is whether women’s dramas—and not dramedies—are to be found on network television, or only on select cable channels. Lifetime is able, as a cable channel, to narrowcast in order to fit the needs and wants of any demographic group of its choice. The five broadcast networks (ABC, NBC, CBS, FOX, and the CW) must provide as broad a range of options to attract the widest and most diverse audience for the sake of profits (derived through advertisement dollars). I am not condemning these dramedies; quite the opposite. But I do not want to dismiss the idea that these programs might mix comedy and drama in order to make them “watchable” for male viewers, in the process making serious “female” moments more easily digestible. But,



as an aside, for as many ensemble shows featuring nearly all-male casts (such as *The West Wing* [NBC, 1999–2006]), where are the female-only ensemble dramas to counterbalance this trend? Why has gender gotten so tied up in these genre specifications?

In wrapping up this examination of *Gilmore Girls*, a brief discussion of the CW network aids in my assessment of genre formations. In 2001 Bruce Fretts wrote, “The WB has never appeared on the TV Academy’s radar screen—witness the lack of nominations for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Felicity*. Maybe this exquisitely crafted family dramedy [*Gilmore Girls*] will break the jinx.” As noted above, this has not been the case. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Felicity* (1998–2002) have both gone off the air. Original episodes of *Gilmore Girls* have left the airwaves and are in syndication, a shift that was precipitated one year prior to the show’s conclusion by executive producer Amy Sherman-Palladino’s exit from the series (at the end of the sixth season, in 2006). What is evident from the above quote is not only the nature of the CW but also that its programs have been overlooked. Although popular with audiences, a program like *Dawson’s Creek* was never a favorite among critics, whereas viewers and critics alike lauded *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Felicity*, both teen-friendly, female-centric ensemble series on the WB. The CW’s fringe status, in conjunction with the somewhat lower status usually afforded television programs popular with teenagers, as well the marginality of programs with female protagonists all converge in the critical slighting of programs like *Gilmore Girls*. Though any of these reasons may have contributed to these programs’ relative lack of Emmy nominations, they all follow a pattern and resonate with broader cultural attitudes and taste-based distinctions of television programming in the United States.

What, then, does an analysis of the dramedy form entail for future assessments of *Gilmore Girls*? Throughout this chapter I have raised several questions so as to emphasize that a multitude of impinging factors, critical judgments, and fan practices build on and play off one another. Any assessment of this show’s generic affiliation, though, can never be final, as genre itself is always in flux, caught up in the shifting discourses surrounding new and earlier programs. Jason Mittell

presents a formulation of genre that is nuanced and entirely appropriate, and I have adopted his model because it allows for the complications of many factors in determining the categorical affiliation of *Gilmore Girls*. Although there are elements that Mittell chooses not to include in his formulation, factors such as ideology and star status, his method provides a useful framework upon which to build more elaborate analyses of genre. Thus, I have attempted to locate *Gilmore Girls* within the discursive clusters that have led me to discuss its tenuous status as a “family-friendly” program, a “dramedy,” and as a teen-centric show on the CW.

In the end, it is clear that, according to Mittell’s reading protocol, the program does not fit conveniently or completely into any one of these categories. But perhaps that is the power of a program like *Gilmore Girls*, which moves the line between these disparate typologies that together prevent it from adoption by any one audience. Instead, it appeals to a variety of viewers. Though it might be perceived as a weakness that *Gilmore Girls* eludes any simple genre classification, this is also the program’s strength, for it is able to fluidly cross boundaries within which other shows remain trapped.