

Kirsten Glass

Nick Pawliuk / Catriona Leger

ENGL 4770

December 17, 2023

Where You Lead, I Will Follow: Structural Narrative Similarities of *On the Road* and *Gilmore Girls*

In the realms of literature and television, Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and Amy Sherman-Palladino's *Gilmore Girls* stand as iconic works that defy conventional storytelling norms. Despite being rooted in vastly different experiences and times, each weaves an elaborate tale that explores character flaws and transience inherent in the human experience. Written in 1951, and set against the backdrop of the Beat Generation, *On the Road* unfolds the journey of Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty as they traverse the American landscape while searching for the meaning of life. Meanwhile, in the quaint idyllic town of Stars Hollow, Connecticut, *Gilmore Girls* follows the intertwined lives of Lorelai and Rory Gilmore, a mother-daughter duo navigating the complexities of love, responsibility, and self-discovery in the first decade of the 21st century.

Central to both narratives are their relationships, with secondary characters, both passing and reoccurring, playing a key role in shaping the arcs of the central figures and the open endings featured in their lives. It's through this that the character-driven narrative is formed and left open-ended. This analysis seeks to examine these thematic elements within *On the Road* and *Gilmore Girls*, showing parallels in the use of imperfect characters, character-driven narrative development, and the power of transience in forming unresolved endings, creating space for audiences to connect with their nuanced explorations of the human experience.

IMPERFECT CHARACTERS

In *On the Road* by Jack Kerouac and *Gilmore Girls* by Amy Sherman-Palladino, the central narratives unfold through the lens of their imperfect characters. The ups and downs of their journeys within their respective stories are fueled by flaws like impulsivity and recklessness, inability to commit, self-destructive behaviors, and more. Highlighted in each character when facing internal conflicts flaws guide how they make decisions that lead to personal growth. These elements are most noticeable in the central characters Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty from *On the Road* and Rory Gilmore from *Gilmore Girls*.

On the Road opens with Sal's impulsivity as he decides to leave behind his stable life in New York due to the feelings of restlessness fueled by his recent divorce. Without planning his mode of transportation, he embarks on a cross-country journey with the goal to meet up with his friend Dean Moriarty (Kerouac 9-10). While this decision opens a world of experiences for Sal, it also highlights his impulsivity, as he leaves without careful consideration of the consequences or a clear plan. However, it's throughout his journey that Sal is exposed to new perspectives and people, like Teresa (50), as well as adventures outside of his experience, such as cotton picking (57). Overall, this contributes significant strides towards his personal mission of finding purpose and unconsciously leads to his personal growth.

In *Gilmore Girls* one of Rory's most infuriating moments according to fans (Saralaiti, 2022), arises at the end of season five and beginning of season six. After negative feedback from a mentor-like figure, Rory believes her future as a journalist is in jeopardy. Instead of addressing her fear of the future in a measured way, Rory resorts to stealing a yacht with her boyfriend, leading to her subsequent arrest ("Blame Booze and Melville"), and community service ("New and Improved Lorelai"). Her impulsive decision reflects her internal struggle and dissatisfaction

with her life. This is furthered when during her uncontrolled spinout she decides to sabotage her future impulsively further by dropping out of Yale (“A House is Not a Home”), leaving behind the world she entered because of childhood ambitions. These decisions highlight Rory's internal struggle with finding a balance between personal fulfillment and societal expectations. Although initially poorly navigated, these situations lead to creating a space for growth within her life. Without taking the time that she needed, she would have been unable to gain a new perspective on life outside the structured academic environment.

While not direct mirror images, these imperfect characters serve as examples of the pivotal character structural element in the narrative structures of both works. Creating a unique narrative space, these flawed characters reflect the human condition, inviting audiences to find common ground with the characters and their decisions amongst life's turmoil. It is through this shared approach that the authors create dynamic characters to move the story forward, leading to the exploration of broader themes.

CHARACTER-DRIVEN NARRATIVE

The central characters *On the Road* and *Gilmore Girls* are developed through the lens of character-driven narrative development. The narrative unfolds through Sal's perspective in *On the Road*, allowing readers to witness the world through his evolving perceptions. Through meeting an assortment of characters, he undergoes significant personal growth and self-discovery. Similarly, in *Gilmore Girls*, the dual protagonists Rory and Lorelai Gilmore's development are woven together as mother and daughter with the show structured around how each woman comes into their own at various points in their life in the eclectic community of Stars Hollow, Connecticut. The authors made a deliberate choice to adopt a character-driven

approach to storytelling in their stories, prioritizing these internal dynamics of their characters over external events or actions.

As the lead figures navigate their lives, secondary characters become instrumental in the main characters furthering the narrative. In *On the Road*, these characters serve as mirrors reflecting different facets of Sal's evolving identity and furthering his growth by challenging his perspectives. Carlo Marx serves as one such example of this type of character. As he sits in Sal's house, together with Dean and others just lounging when he asks,

"What is the meaning of this voyage to New York? What kind of sordid business are you on now? I mean, man, whither goest thou? Whither goest thou, America, in thy shiny car in the night?" (Kerouac 70-71).

In this scene Marx not only represents the Beat Generation's intellectual and jarring artistic pursuits but also contrasts Sal's own experiences, prompting an internal analysis of how both he and America are developing.

Similarly in *Gilmore Girls*, secondary characters dot the town of Stars Hollow, playing a crucial role in shaping the narrative. One such relationship is that between Emily Gilmore and Lorelai Gilmore. The relationship, featured as early in the series as the pilot episode, pulls and pushes Lorelai to change. In episode one, as Lorelai learns that she cannot afford Rory's new private school. She must mature past her feelings about her past and set aside her desire for independence to accept help from her parents. Emily uses this opportunity to force Lorelai and Rory back into the fold of their lives and social class by only agreeing to pay so long as they attend weekly Friday night dinners. Eventually as the first Friday night dinner takes shape tension arises from the characters conflicting values culminating in a fight ("Pilot"). This served as an important first step for Lorelai in no longer running from her past and starting the series'

growth arc. Over the course of the episode and series, Friday night dinners change Lorelai's life by allowing her to connect with Emily, giving a better perspective of her mother, learning more about being a mother herself and allowing her to mature in her responses and boundaries.

Echoing the realities of life, the opinions and values of protagonists and secondary characters as well as the transient nature of their relationships form fractures creating room for growth and change. Giving a unique power to the authors, these thematic choices allow them to control how much of the characters' lives the audience is allowed to enter and when they are prompted to exit, shaping endings that can be resolved or intentionally left unfinished. This connection closely mirrors the real-life journey of the audience as they transform the main characters in the texts into passing secondary figures, giving them a space in the open-ended narrative of their life.

THE POWER OF TRANSIENCE

It's through the lens of transience, that these flawed characters navigate physical and emotional landscapes within both narratives. Kerouac and Sherman-Palladino portray the beauty and challenges that come with embracing the fleeting nature of these moments and connections. Using their respective characters, a transient experience is created for the audience by following the main characters through different journeys with the other characters orbiting around them.

Dean Moriarty serves as the most important transient narrative character for Sal's development in *On the Road*. When he re-enters Sal's life to journey to Mexico, Dean's presence is marked by a sense of urgency and chaos (Kerouac 169). However, as Dean's restless nature and personal demons resurface, the strain on their friendship becomes palpable, with Dean eventually leaving Sal once again, this time with a deeper impact on Sal's psyche. He does this by abandoning Sal after he gets dysentery; he drives back to New York immediately to deal with

his divorce (173). It's only when Sal is better that fully understands how horrible Dean is in some ways, but he understands too that it's just the way he is (174). The open-ended nature of Dean's character allows for a development within the narrative that it otherwise would not have had, and a possibility of reconnection for the characters in the future.

In *Gilmore Girls* Christopher (Chris) Hayden personifies the short-lived nature of some relationships. His on-again, off-again romance with Lorelai and inconsistent presence in Rory's life shape how they connect with Chris. However, more than him, his relationship with his girlfriend and later fiancée, Sherry Tinsdale, introduces an additional layer of instability. Sherry's presence injects ongoing stress into the already delicate balance between Lorelai, Rory, and Christopher from their first meeting ("It Should Have Been Lorelai"). Later, in season 2 Christopher abandons a once again blooming relationship with Lorelai after learning that Sherry had become accidentally pregnant ("I Can't Get Started"), leaving Lorelai and Rory grappling with the consequences of the fallout ("Those Lazy-Hazy-Crazy Days"). Everything comes to a head when dropping Rory off at Sherry's baby shower Lorelai is forced into joining and is made to listen to attendee's praise Chris as a present father for his soon-to-be-born daughter. It's during this awkward event, and while dealing with her own feelings toward Christopher as an absentee father and former romantic interest, that Lorelai learns that Sherry looks up to her as a mother ("Take the Deviled Eggs..."). This allows her to refocus and prioritize her relationship with Rory over her feelings of jealousy and insecurities. Rory, in turn, gains insights into the complexities of adult relationships before Sherry and Chris leave their lives again.

These examples show how central characters in both *On the Road* and *Gilmore Girls* are shaped when utilizing the fluidity of secondary characters entering and exiting each other's lives. Thematically this narrative element allows for the unpredictability of human relationships, the

constant pursuit of self-discovery, and the inevitability of change to arise naturally. Transience becomes a powerful thematic element both works use in shaping their imperfect characters' lives to capture the essence of the human journey and create unresolved endings that invite audiences to reflect on the impacts of fleeting relationships on their real-life development.

UNRESOLVED ENDINGS

Unresolved endings become a foundational narrative tool born from the imperfections, transience, and character-driven developments that define the complex nature of life portrayed in *On the Road* and *Gilmore Girls*. In this acknowledgment, that resolutions are not always neatly packaged, Kerouac and Sherman-Palladino parallel life's unresolved endings to leave room for reconnection later, punctuate the closing of the story's curtain, and craft a similar experience for the audience's relationship to the storylines.

Kerouac uses Sal's friend Dean Moriarty as a transient character entering and exciting Sal's life with unresolved connections that not only to further Sal, but show that Dean himself is on a journey, although it is not shown, with the same depth as Sal. The narrative of *On the Road* concludes with Sal returning from the trip alone and settling in once again as Dean continues his life full of chaotic wanderlust. He is left alone contemplating the fleeting connections formed during their road trips together (Kerouac 177). It is only then Sal finally makes the choice to leave Dean behind, both literally and as an idol, that his growth on his journey of self-discovery can be seen. This unresolved ending underscores the importance of their bond, leaving room for readers to imagine potential future encounters between the two men now at such different points in their lives.

The parallel in *Gilmore Girls*' narrative is the relationship between Rory Gilmore and any of her romantic partners. Jess Mariano, Rory's second boyfriend, is a complex character who

leaves Rory's life abruptly more than once which makes him a temporary reoccurring character in her story. These ongoing unresolved endings allow for him to come back at important points in her life serving to push her development forward. This is most notable in season six episode eight when Jess surprises Rory by popping back into her drastically different life after she drops out of Yale. Shocked by how her boyfriend acted towards her during dinner, he finally confronts her about how she's given up on her dreams, with him saying, "What are you doing? Living at your grandparents' place? Being in the DAR? No Yale-- why did you drop out of Yale!?" ("Let Me Hear Your Balalaikas Ringing Out") Pushed by Jess's outrage, it is in the following episode that Rory finally shakes off her feelings of doubt and starts her return to school at Yale. By the end of the series their connection is open ended, leaving room for growth both together and apart in the characters' lives. This lack of closure allows the audience to connect with similar experiences they have had and speculate on Rory and Jess' storyline, contributing to the enduring interest in their dynamic even after the series has concluded.

Additionally, using this style of unresolved endings leaves room for the reintroduction of characters in later works. From the outset, the audience steps into the ongoing lives of these main characters within the narratives, and as they end the audience is made to feel like life goes on, this time without them watching. These narratives serve as windows into specific moments in the character's lives, that can be reopened later. One example of this was the creation of the limited-run series titled *Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life* by Sherman-Palladino. The short series opened the window directly into the now well-loved characters' lives, treating the audience to another glimpse of these characters experiencing challenges at a later point in their life (Sherman-Palladino, 2016). Without the open-ended nature of the narrative structure, Sherman-Palladino would not have been able to seamlessly add to her already powerful narratives.

CONCLUSION

It's these unresolved endings within the narratives of *On the Road* and *Gilmore Girls*, that emphasize the transient nature of relationships and offer opportunities for reconnection, whether through character reintroductions or through official story continuations. This narrative technique not only enriches the storytelling experience but also encourages a dynamic relationship between creators, their creations, and the audience. It serves to also establish how the authors believe that life is a continuous journey, often marked by unresolved questions and unpredictable outcomes. This narrative strategy challenges the conventional expectations of storytelling that offer closure and neatly packaged conclusions. Instead showing the messiness of life that gets in the way as characters are pushed to confront the unfinished nature of existence. As the audience navigates these unresolved endings, they are prompted to reflect on their own relationships, underscoring the authors' intention to provide a more authentic and relatable portrayal of life.

The structural narrative similarities between Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* and Amy Sherman-Palladino's *Gilmore Girls* provide a captivating exploration of the human experience. Sal Paradise, Dean Moriarty, Lorelai, and Rory Gilmore are central flawed characters navigating the turbulent journey of self-discovery. They are used to serve as a reminder that flaws are human and that from challenges with personal flaws comes growth. Additionally, through fleeting moments and connections between characters, it's shown that the beauty and challenges of life are never experienced alone. Ultimately, while loved, and hated, by many *On the Road* and *Gilmore Girls* serve as powerful timeless testaments to the richness of the human experience. It is through their structural narrative similarities that both works transcend mere storytelling and become an exploration of life itself through which we, the audience, can learn about our own journeys.

Works Cited

- “A House is Not a Home”. *Gilmore Girls*, created by Amy Sherman-Palladino, season 5, episode 22, Dorothy Parker Drank Here Productions/ Hofflund Polone/ Warner Bros. Television, 17 May 2005. *Netflix*, <https://www.netflix.com/ca/title/70155618>.
- “Blame Booze and Melville”. *Gilmore Girls*, created by Amy Sherman-Palladino, season 5, episode 21, Dorothy Parker Drank Here Productions/ Hofflund Polone/ Warner Bros. Television, 10 May 2005. *Netflix*, <https://www.netflix.com/ca/title/70155618>.
- “I Can’t Get Started”. *Gilmore Girls*, created by Amy Sherman-Palladino, season 2, episode 22, Dorothy Parker Drank Here Productions/ Hofflund Polone/ Warner Bros. Television, 21 May 2002. *Netflix*, <https://www.netflix.com/ca/title/70155618>.
- “It Should Have Been Lorelai”. *Gilmore Girls*, created by Amy Sherman-Palladino, season 2, episode 14, Dorothy Parker Drank Here Productions/ Hofflund Polone/ Warner Bros. Television, 12 Feb. 2002. *Netflix*, <https://www.netflix.com/ca/title/70155618>.
- Kerouac, Jack. *On the Road*. New York: The Viking Press Incorporated, 1959.
- “New and Improved Lorelai”. *Gilmore Girls*, created by Amy Sherman-Palladino, season 6, episode 1, Dorothy Parker Drank Here Productions/ Hofflund Polone/ Warner Bros. Television, 13 Sept. 2005. *Netflix*, <https://www.netflix.com/ca/title/70155618>.
- “Pilot”. *Gilmore Girls*, created by Amy Sherman-Palladino, season 1, episode 1, Dorothy Parker Drank Here Productions/ Hofflund Polone/ Warner Bros. Television, 5 Oct. 2000. *Netflix*, <https://www.netflix.com/ca/title/70155618>.
- “Take the Deviled Eggs...”. *Gilmore Girls*, created by Amy Sherman-Palladino, season 3, episode 6, Dorothy Parker Drank Here Productions/ Hofflund Polone/ Warner Bros. Television, 5 Nov. 2002. *Netflix*, <https://www.netflix.com/ca/title/70155618>.

“Those Lazy-Hazy-Crazy Days”. Gilmore Girls, created by Amy Sherman-Palladino, season 3, episode 1, Dorothy Parker Drank Here Productions/ Hofflund Polone/ Warner Bros.

Television, 24 Sept. 2002. Netflix, <https://www.netflix.com/ca/title/70155618>.

Saralaiti. “Rory dropping out of Yale was the most frustrating thing ever.” Reddit, 2022,

https://www.reddit.com/r/GilmoreGirls/comments/10qe9uy/rory_dropping_out_of_yale_was_the_most/

Sherman-Palladino, Amy, creator. Gilmore Girls: A Year in the Life. Warner Bros. Television,

2016. Netflix, <https://www.netflix.com/ca/title/80109415>.