

The Goodness of Gilmore: Examining the Moralization of Reading in the Rory Gilmore-inspired Readathons of BookTube

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ABSTRACT

Abstract: This paper seeks to find out how assumptions surrounding the moralization of reading appear in the BookTube videos of readers inspired by Rory Gilmore, the bibliophilic protagonist of the Warner Bros. comedy-drama series *Gilmore Girls*. In doing so, it aims to illuminate the ways in which the myth of the “moralization” of reading is used to disguise complex relations between class, privilege, and meritocracy, both within *Gilmore Girls* and without. Building from the scholarship of Harvey J. Graff, Deborah Brandt, Q. D. Leavis, and Janis Radway, I first analyze how literacy has come to be associated with goodness and what sort of literature is thought to be related to moral righteousness. Using this framework, I then analyze the appearance of reading in *Gilmore Girls* itself, concluding that beliefs surrounding the virtue of reading linger even in the fictional world of Stars Hollow. Finally, I analyze two Rory Gilmore-inspired readathon videos, arguing that by echoing Rory’s own perspectives on reading, BookTubers demonstrate that the belief that reading is an unequivocal moral good persists, even if readers themselves are not aware of it.

Introduction

Rory Gilmore, one of the protagonists of the comedy-drama series *Gilmore Girls*, is well known for a variety of reasons: her affinity for coffee; her close relationship with her mother, Lorelai; and perhaps most of all, her reading habits. Rory is a prolific reader, known for consuming an awe-inspiring amount of classic literature before she even graduates high school. It makes sense, then, that her literacy has inspired and united readers across the globe, who engage in “Rory Gilmore readathons”—in which they challenge themselves to read as many books from the “Rory Gilmore reading list” as possible—on YouTube. However, implicit within these videos, and in discussion surrounding Rory’s reading habits, is a series of assumptions around the morality and value of reading.

It seems obvious that, since Rory reads, she is a good citizen, student, daughter, and friend. But where did these assumptions come from? And what implications do they have for the readers who attempt to imitate Rory’s reading habits? In this article, I analyze two “Rory Gilmore readathon” YouTube videos with the goal of answering these questions. Beginning with the history of the moralization of reading, I chart the ways in which literacy has come to be associated with righteousness, productivity, and honor—and how certain types of literature are thought to help in achieving these values. Then, I analyze how these values are reflected in *Gilmore Girls*, examining the show’s complicated coverage of class and education. Finally, I examine the Rory Gilmore readathon videos, and—based on how readers echo Rory’s own perspective on the morality

of literacy—I argue that the videos reveal the ways in which assumptions surrounding the implicit values of reading are still alive and well—even if readers themselves do not recognize them.

The Literacy Myth

Before we can begin to understand how these YouTubers interpret Rory Gilmore’s reading practices specifically, we must first understand how reading itself has become associated with morality and righteousness. What values are ascribed to reading? What kind of person is a “reader”? And what type of books do these virtuous readers read? Perhaps the best place to start is “the literacy myth,” a term coined by Harvey J. Graff in his 1979 monograph *The Literacy Myth: Cultural Integration and Social Structure in the Nineteenth Century*. Graff’s notable work charts the place of literacy in the nineteenth-century, concluding that literacy “has been invested with immeasurable and [...] ineffable qualities, purportedly conferring on practitioners a predilection toward social order, an elevated moral sense, and a metaphorical ‘state of grace’” (Graff 17). In other words, Graff argues that “literacy is represented as an unqualified good, a marker of progress and a metaphorical light making clear the pathways to progress and happiness” (21). By this logic, the assumption inherent in nineteenth century reading practices was that of moral transformation: by reading, one could transform oneself into an upstanding, righteous citizen. By the same logic, those who *did not* (or *could not*) read were unprincipled, as illiteracy “is associated with ignorance, incompetence and darkness” (Graff 21). Yet, as the title of Graff’s work implies, the allegedly extraordinary power of literacy is, in fact, a myth—reading is not a metaphorical magic wand that can erase or prevent moral misdoings. While this fact does not mean that literacy is entirely invaluable, Graff instead explains that “like all myths, the literacy myth is [...] an expression of the ideology of those who sanction it and are invested in its outcomes” (20). We may ask, then: What ideology is behind the incessant moralization of literacy?

According to Deborah Brandt in “Drafting U.S. Literacy,” the almost holy reverence for literacy emerged from

early religious societies (488). Building off of the research done by Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens in 1981—which analyzed nineteenth-century rationales for literacy in colonial America—Brandt explains that “in the Protestant worldview, literacy signaled that personal contact had been made with the word of God” (488). Thus, “knowing how to read was synonymous with knowing what and how to believe” (Brandt 488); to play on the popular saying, it was literacy—not cleanliness—that was truly next to Godliness. Brandt goes on to argue, however, that the “ideological core” of literacy shifted with the advent of World War II (500). Whereas nineteenth century literacy was grounded in socialization and commitment (as “submitting to the process of becoming literate mattered more than actual results” [Brandt 488]), the literacy of 1940s America became a valuable resource meant for productivity (Brandt 487). While there was emphasis on the importance of literacy throughout World War I (Brandt 491), the Selective Service System of World War II treated literacy as an absolute imperative. The advent of new technologies, all of which required more training and symbol recognition, meant that the ability to read and write was “a needed raw material in the production of war—a collateral investment needed to get the most out of investments in technology” (Brandt 495). Thus, the values ascribed to literacy had notably changed: while “in the old ideology, literacy was a value *added*, [...] in the new ideology, literacy (like other human skills) figures as a cost of production” (Brandt 500; emphasis added).

Thus, we return to the present day, where both of these ideologies linger. The perspective of reading as a moral activity has endured well into the twenty-first century, as “literacy remains a cultural mandate, taught and learned as a general good” (Brandt 487). Yet, at the same time, the productive impulse of World War II persists; literacy is *also* seen through the lenses of “school success and economic variability” (Brandt 487), not just personal development or pleasure. This dual perspective is especially evident in the conversation surrounding the legitimacy of certain types of literature. If readers are to be upstanding, productive citizens, what books should they read? And what types of books should they avoid?

The Right Kind of Reading

In “The Book Market,” published in *Fiction and the Reading Public* in 1932, Q. D. Leavis analyzes the reading habits of twentieth-century England. Consulting sales records and book clubs, Leavis concludes that “the book-borrowing public has acquired the reading habit while somehow failing to exercise critical intelligence about its reading” (14). Leavis’ disappointment was brought on by the apparent popularity of detective stories, books based on films, and circulating fiction—all of which, according to her, would “convey very little, if anything, to the merely literate” (14). Clearly, Leavis illuminates the fact that, within the field of literary criticism, there are types of literature that are accepted, and types of literature that are decidedly not. The “accepted” books are those that belong to the classification of “literature”—presumably, this includes classics and “the ‘literary’ novels of the age”—while the “unacceptable” books are those that prioritize entertainment and pleasure over literary merit (Leavis 19, 14). Implicit in Leavis’ statement that the public has lost the ability to “exercise critical intelligence about its reading” (14) is the fact that “proper” reading is just that: exercise—it demands a certain intellectual rigour. “Good” readers do not consume books passively but engage them from some sort of critical perspective. One can imagine Leavis sighing loudly as she proclaims that “the French buy books because France has an educated public,” while “the English buy journals and periodicals” (16)—in this context, “journals” and “periodicals” sound like curse words.

Although Leavis published “The Book Market” in 1932, this implicit hierarchy of literature is still reflected in Janice Radway’s 1997 monograph *A Feeling for Books: the Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste and Middle-Class Desire*. In the introduction, Radway describes the shame she felt as a graduate student on account of her penchant for popular fiction, claiming that she “tried hard to keep [her] voracious taste for bestsellers, mysteries, cookbooks, and popular nature books a secret [...] including from the more cultured and educated self [she] was trying to become” (2). While eventually Radway discovered methods for understanding the canonical classics of literature, she explains that these “new tastes somehow failed

to duplicate precisely the passion of [her] response to those other, suspect, supposedly transparent, popular books” (3). Those works of popular fiction prompted “physical sensations, a forgetting of the self and complete absorption into another world” (3), whereas the books of “high culture” carried with them “the threat that somehow [she] might fail to understand, might fail to recognize their reputed meaning and inherent worth” (3-4). Thus, Radway illustrates that the hierarchy of literature functions bilaterally: whereas highbrow readers such as Q. D. Leavis look down upon works of popular fiction, middlebrow readers such as Radway (and the Book-of-the-Month Club readers) are equally skeptical of the chilly and inaccessible world of so-called “high culture.” Despite the common belief that popular or middlebrow culture (and thus, middlebrow reading) is “a watered-down version of a more authentic high culture,” Radway argues that it is “a culture with its own particular substance and intellectual coherence”—and thus, it has its own opinions (12).

Returning to Rory

Having now understood the moralization of reading, we can return to *Gilmore Girls* and investigate how these ideologies may appear, whether consciously or not, in the show. Rory and her mother Lorelai—the titular *Gilmore Girls*—live in the fictional town of Stars Hollow, Connecticut. As Matthew C. Nelson explains in “Stars Hollow, Chilton, and the Politics of Education in *Gilmore Girls*,” Stars Hollow is “a kind of middle-class American ideal” (202)—it is a place that rewards hard work and honesty, where “if you excel at what you do—make the best coffee, cook the best food, grow the best produce—you will be successful” (Nelson 202). Thus, Stars Hollow is a sort of oasis for someone like Lorelai, who fled there on her own when she became pregnant at sixteen. While Lorelai’s parents, Richard and Emily Gilmore, are incredibly wealthy, their affluence is rarely glorified. In fact, it is *Lorelai* who is glorified, as she left a world of money and comfort to build a life of her own “with no help from anyone” (“Pilot”). *Gilmore Girls* frequently pokes fun at the world of Richard and Emily (which includes fancy meals, luxury cars, and live-in maids), making it dull and lifeless when compared to

that of Lorelai and Rory, which is described as one “filled with love and fun and books and music” (“Those Are Strings, Pinocchio”). Thus, Lorelai’s hardworking, blue-collar life in Stars Hollow is “set against the upper-class community of her parents [...] in Hartford” (Nelson 202). In short, “the deck seems to be stacked in favor of Lorelai’s middle-class life in Stars Hollow” (Nelson 203).

This fact holds true except for when it comes to Rory’s education. Lorelai, who is famously stubborn and self-sufficient, approaches her parents for a loan in the first episode of the show, intending to use it towards Rory’s tuition at a prestigious private school (“Pilot”). In fact, the show’s major plot points all revolve around Rory’s academic trajectory: her transferral from public school to Chilton Preparatory, her ambitions to attend Harvard, and her eventual admission into Yale (of which her grandfather, Richard, is a notable alumnus). While Rory still enjoys consuming “middlebrow” culture with her mother (they call *The Brady Bunch Variety Hour* the “golden age of television” [“Application Anxiety,” 00:00-00:05]), she is also entrenched in the world of academia, and thus is extremely well-read. When Rory’s boyfriend, Dean—a hardworking but academically challenged sixteen-year-old boy—makes a futile attempt to read Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina*, claiming that “Tolstoy’s just a little over [his] head,” Rory insists that he keep reading (“Star-Crossed Lovers,” 03:00-03:25). She claims that “Tolstoy wrote for the masses, the common man”—thus, in Rory’s view, “it’s completely untrue that you have to be some kind of genius to read [Tolstoy’s] stuff” (“Star-Crossed Lovers,” 03:00-03:25). In this way, Rory appears to have an ambivalent opinion on the morality of reading: while her personal reading list consists of many accepted classics (in one episode, she attempts to fit works by Edna St. Vincent Millay, William Faulkner, Gore Vidal, and Eudora Welty into her backpack [“Like Mother, Like Daughter”]), she does not judge those who read popular fiction or enjoy popular culture—she too understands its merit. However, at the same time, it seems that Rory personally conflates her *intelligence* with her *literacy*: on a visit to a Harvard library, she claims that she’s

a “failure” because she has only read three hundred books, compared to the library’s archive of thirteen million (“The Road Trip to Harvard”). In a humorous attempt to quell her nerves, Lorelai advises Rory to skip books like *Tuesdays with Morrie* and *Who Moved My Cheese?*—both of which are noticeably outside the canon of literary classics. Thus, the belief that certain types of literature are more serious and valuable than others lingers, even in Stars Hollow. It seems that, for Rory, “middlebrow” literature is valued only in times of leisure; when it comes to her education and future, she seems to understand that reading one type of book (classic literature) is far more important than reading another (popular fiction). Although Rory does not explicitly express the belief that her reading habits have a moral quality, we can see that she not only expects herself to be a productive, expansive reader—eliciting the theory of Brandt—but that she also categorizes her reading into a “hierarchy of literature,” such as that of Leavis and Radway.

Rory-Inspired Readers

Rory Gilmore’s own complicated (fictional) perspectives on reading are reflected in the Rory Gilmore-inspired readers of BookTube, a “subset or community of people posting content relating to books and reading via YouTube” (Thomas 124). Ciara Foster and CarolynMarieReads are two BookTubers who, based on their shared love for *Gilmore Girls*, decide to conduct twenty-four-hour Rory Gilmore-themed “readathons,” in which they attempt to read as many books from the “Rory Gilmore reading list” (a list of every book read by Rory on the show) as possible.

Ciara Foster’s video, posted on July 5, 2020, depicts her “trying to embody [her] inner Rory Gilmore” by reading, drinking copious amounts of coffee, and eating fast food (0:08-0:20). Foster explains that she was inspired to conduct such a readathon after filming a video in which she counted how many books she’d read from the Rory Gilmore reading list. Out of the 339 books, Foster laments that she has only read forty-eight, realizing that she has “a lot of work to do in order to reach Rory Gilmore-levels of reading” (0:43-0:49). The term “Rory Gilmore-levels of reading” implies that

readers (and watchers) view Rory's reading abilities as aspirational: the speed at which she consumes dense classics makes Rory something of a reading role-model. However, also implicit in Foster's personal dissatisfaction is the idea that failing to read at a "Rory Gilmore-level" is somewhat shameful or embarrassing. We can posit that, since Rory is viewed as something of an "ultimate reader," members of reading communities such as BookTube feel a sense of obligation or responsibility to match her capabilities. Over the twenty-four hours, Foster reads *Rita Hayworth and the Shawshank Redemption* by Stephen King, *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll, and—although only for five minutes (39:45)—*The Time Traveler's Wife* by Audrey Niffenegger. This selection of both classics and contemporary novels is explained by Foster as a matter of efficiency: she explains that this is her first time reading a classic during a twenty-four-hour readathon, because she finds contemporary novels "easier to read, so they're obviously a lot quicker for something like [a readathon]" (12:05-12:18). However, since "this is a Rory Gilmore readathon, and Rory is renowned for loving classics" (12:23-12:30), Foster feels that reading a novel such as *Sense and Sensibility* is necessary. Thus, Foster spans both "worlds" of literature, much like Rory does. Although she alleges that classics are more important than contemporary fiction, she still sees value in both. The hierarchy of literature interpreted from Rory by Foster is not one of stringent categories (such as that of Leavis), but rather one that leaves room for high and low culture alike. The second Rory Gilmore readathon video, published by CarolynMarieReads (Carolyn Castagna) on September 1, 2020, opens with a shot of a bookshelf. Castagna places her TBR (To Be Read) pile—which includes works by William Shakespeare, Ernest Hemingway, Edith Wharton, Arthur Miller, Kate Chopin, Samuel Beckett, John Steinbeck and Rainer Maria Rilke—in front of a wide collection of classic literature (0:00-0:10). From this shot alone, it is clear that—much like Rory Gilmore—Castagna herself is well-read, and also enjoys classic literature. In addition, her chosen books are all classics, as compared to Foster's mix

of classics and contemporary literature. Thus, from the outset, there is the implication that Castagna is a decidedly "serious" reader, perhaps even more so than Rory herself. We could postulate, then, that Castagna's interpretation of Rory's reading habits is different than Foster's: Castagna seems to have focused solely on Rory's identity as a "serious" reader, rather than her expansive tastes. Although Castagna does not say so explicitly, it is possible that she views contemporary literature as many people do: light, entertaining, and therefore not as important to read as classic literature. As the readathon continues, Castagna takes a more intensive approach to reading compared to her fellow readathon host; she approaches novels with pencil in hand and annotates as she reads (2:07). There are multiple instances throughout the video where Castagna is so taken with what she is reading that she has to stop and share it with the audience. Reading Rilke's *Letters to a Young Poet*, Castagna reflects on a quote she remembers: "it says: 'I need books to read like I need oxygen to breathe' and I completely relate to that" (Rilke 19; Castagna 5:12-5:25). She is excited by the fact that, just four pages in, Rilke's work has already been impactful, claiming that "[she has] a feeling that this book is going to have a lot of dog ears and annotations because [she's] already in love with it" (5:27-5:32). Thus, much like Rory attempts to share her love for literature with her boyfriend, we get the sense that Castagna is attempting to share her love for literature with her audience. Even if the works she is reading are complex or inaccessible (debatably few sixteen-year-olds have read *Waiting for Godot*), Castagna believes that they can serve to enlighten and inspire—she must share them with her audience. Thus, in a certain way, Castagna too believes in the literacy myth.

Rory's Impact

Why does it matter that Rory Gilmore, and thus the readers she inspires, perpetuate Graff's literacy myth? To answer this question—and thus illuminate the purpose of this article as a whole—we can return to the discussion of class in the world of *Stars Hollow*. As previously mentioned, *Gilmore Girls* is a show that presents a complex (and, at times, misleading) depiction

of how class, privilege, and hard work converge. While watchers are led to believe in the meritocracy of *Gilmore Girls*—in which the child of a single mother can attend preparatory school and Yale University if she only applies herself to her studies—the reality of Rory Gilmore’s success relies much more on money than bookishness. It is simply a fact that Rory’s prestigious education is a product of familial prestige and wealth, as her grandparents fund her tuition to both schools and her grandfather’s connections at Yale University allow her to gain admission. While it is indeed true that Rory is intelligent and well-read, it is not these qualities alone that allow her the comfortable and successful life that she leads. However, it is the ways in which *Gilmore Girls* depicts Rory’s reading—insisting that, if watchers simply read as many books as Rory, they too can attend an Ivy League school—that perpetuates the literacy myth, disguising the impact that class and wealth have on her success.

A common theme throughout the Rory Gilmore-inspired BookTube videos is a sense of self-surveillance—readers feel that they must monitor and discipline their reading speed, interests, and habits in order to eventually reach “Rory Gilmore-levels of reading” (Foster 0:43-0:49). The anxiety BookTubers feel surrounding their distance from Rory’s level of reading reflects the ways in which reading less than Rory is not perceived as a simple disappointment, but an indication of how far one is from eventually living the picture-perfect Stars Hollow life. Never mind the fact that Rory Gilmore has never been obligated to work part time to support her family—or that she is a white woman living in a middle-class utopia—it seems that reading is a universal catch-all, one which watchers and readers alike believe they should apply to their own lives. Understanding how *Gilmore Girls* continues to perpetuate the false moralization of reading becomes especially important once real-life readers begin to measure their own success—both bookish and otherwise—against that of Rory’s. Luckily, the two BookTubers in the selected videos have the time, abilities, and resources to attempt to join Rory in her bibliophilic ways—but much could be said about the readers who do not.

Conclusion

It is certainly not the goal of this article to delegitimize the Rory Gilmore-inspired readers of YouTube. After all, both readers explain that their inspiration for the readathons is rooted more in a shared love for *Gilmore Girls* than any sort of intellectual endeavor: after completing a book from the Rory Gilmore reading list, readers are, more than anything, “happy to think that Rory has read it too” (Castagna 55:39). Thus, we can assume that the enjoyment derived from such an activity does not come from a sense of moral superiority or obligation, but rather from friendship and the sharing of interests—a very noble endeavour indeed. However, it is worthwhile to investigate what assumptions underlie the reading practices that take place on our television screens, as we can see the ways in which they quickly become recycled and reinforced by watchers and fans. In fact, examining how the beliefs around reading in *Gilmore Girls* are recycled and perpetuated in the videos of BookTubers such as Carolyn Castagna (CarolynMarieReads) and Ciara Foster may open up another discussion surrounding how BookTubers themselves become literary role models. While a complete survey of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this paper, it is plausible that young fans idolize their favourite BookTubers much in the same way that Castagna and Foster idolize the reading habits of Rory Gilmore. Thus, while the *literacy myth* seems to be relatively harmless in the hands of Rory Gilmore, it is nonetheless important to keep a critical eye on TV series such as *Gilmore Girls*, even if they are fan favourites. We may take comfort in the fact that Rory herself enjoys engaging critically with the media she consumes, whether it is trashy television or a Tolstoy novel—perhaps she would even enjoy reading an article such as this.

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