

# The Whistle Stop Café and Luke's Diner: The Village Café as Utopian Space for Women in *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* and *Gilmore Girls*

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This paper compares the Whistle Stop Café in Fanny Flagg's novel *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* (1987) to Luke's Diner in Amy Sherman-Palladino's television show *Gilmore Girls* (2000-2007). These fictional restaurants complicate traditional binaries of male/female, public/private and domestic/commercial, which creates utopian spaces where women exert power and agency. The utopian inclusivity of these spaces is limited, however. Only white, privileged, educated, slender women enjoy them. Using close reading and theory from food and beverage studies, I analyze how the consumption of food and beverages helps construct the gendered identity of the characters that have access to and power in these fictional cafés, and how gendered power dynamics have changed over time. I also outline directions for future research, arguing that cultural objects including literature and television illuminate the gendered power dynamics of real-world public spaces in ways that are relevant to contemporary society.

## Introduction

This essay compares the Whistle Stop Café in Fanny Flagg's 1987 novel *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* (1987) to Luke's Diner in Amy Sherman-Palladino's television show *Gilmore Girls*, which aired between 2000 and 2007. I argue that the two cafés are similar in that they both offer a utopian space where women can be themselves, enact their desires, and speak their minds without fear of judgement or violence. Through a comparison of these two fictional cafés, I show the ways in which gendered power dynamics have changed over time from formal to informal modes of power. Both spaces, as I will show, are inclusive, but their inclusivity is limited. They offer utopian spaces for the gendered other but not the racialized other, and they perpetuate unrealistic ideas about women's bodies. Additionally, both spaces face a constant struggle to maintain their utopian status. Throughout the essay, I also analyze the way

that consumption of food and beverages helps construct the gendered identity of the characters frequenting these fictional cafés.

First, I define my conceptualization of a utopian space for women. Second, I analyze the significance of the fictional restaurant space in relation to gender and power. These two steps function to lay out a theoretical framework for the essay. Third, I explain, through selective close readings of my two cultural objects, how utopian spaces for women are constructed in the two narratives, and I examine the representation of gendered identity through the consumption of food and beverages. I also discuss some of the limitations of the two utopian spaces. Finally, I outline possible directions for future research by exploring the ways in which the fictional cafés can help researchers theorize the gendered power

dynamics of real-world spaces.

### **Theoretical Framework: Defining a Utopian Space for Women**

Within the context of this essay, I conceptualize a utopian space for women as a space where women are safe from physical and verbal violence. I base this definition on the observation that real-world spaces are often rife with threats for women. Research in urban studies has shown that “fear of potential unwanted interactions [limits] women’s access to urban space” (Beebeejaun 6). Thus, a utopian space for women is one where women need not fear unwanted interactions. Additionally, I define utopian spaces for women as free from the confinement imposed by cultural or societal expectations of femininity, including the pressure to be demure, submissive, conventionally attractive, and heterosexual. In line with the work of Susan Brownmiller, who describes femininity as a “tradition of imposed limitations” (10), I consider these societal expectations or constraints as constitutive of femininity. Within the context of this essay, a utopian space for women is one in which the limitations imposed by femininity do not limit or constrain women. Further, vulnerability, one of the traits culturally associated with femininity, is not a weakness within these spaces. Brownmiller notes that “the feminine principle is composed of vulnerability” (15), or, in other words, that to be feminine is to be vulnerable. By contrast, this essay understands a utopian space for women as one in which vulnerability is not exploited or even perceived as a weakness but instead perceived as a strength.

Societal expectations of femininity also relate to food and the body, two concepts that are relevant to the ways that women inhabit culinary spaces. These expectations placed on women and their bodies are summarized by Giovanelli and Ostertag who observe that “fat women are . . . the antithesis of what it means to be appropriately feminine” (290). While the culinary spaces analyzed in this essay are utopian in some ways, they nonetheless do not feature fat bodies. This suggests that they are not accessible, and therefore not utopian, to women whose bodies do not look as slender as society deems appropriate for women.

### **Theoretical Framework: Representations of the Culinary Space**

I compare the Whistle Stop Café to Luke’s Diner because both illustrate an interesting dynamic of gender, power, and a set of cultural ideas surrounding the culinary. Culinary spaces bring the domestic sphere, where food is traditionally prepared and is often associated with femininity, into contact with the public and commercial sphere, which is often associated with masculinity. As Alice McLean notes:

Feminist food studies has locked onto the domestic sphere as a conflicted site, one that simultaneously reproduces patriarchal values and, hence, the physical, intellectual, and ideological subordination of women and that serves as a space where women enjoy an amount of power and control far surpassing that which they exert over the public and political realms. (250)

McLean outlines the cultural binary that associates femininity with the domestic sphere and masculinity with the public and political sphere. She also identifies the contradiction that characterizes the domestic

sphere: it is simultaneously the realm of women's subordination, because it is permeated with patriarchal values, and the space where women are most powerful.

Historically, these two separate spheres have been constructed discursively to argue that "men and women have different relationships to the world based on their dominance of distinct social and economic arenas" (Julier 169). Women and men were thought to be different because women exert influence only in the private household sphere while men dominate the public, commercial sphere. This cultural binary generates a sense of ambiguity with regards to cooking, as observed by Angeline Godwin Dvorak in her analysis of southern cooking in literature. According to Dvorak, cooking can be construed as a "patriarchally imposed, gender-designated task", but also as a means for women to strengthen social ties, overcome hardship, and exert agency, thereby escaping patriarchal control (96). This essay explores the ambiguity identified by Dvorak and critiques the understanding of society as divided into separate gendered spheres that McLean and Julier identify by analyzing the commercial culinary establishment—the café—a space that blends the separate spheres and thereby undermines their binary opposition. Commercial culinary establishments bring the feminine domestic sphere into contact with the masculine public sphere by commercializing food. Food preparation, traditionally a private and feminine endeavor, is exploited for commercial gain, entering the realm of commerce that is traditionally associated with the public and masculine. Commercial culinary establishments like diners and cafés embody a blend of the traditionally masculine and feminine spheres and thereby undermine their distinction. As my analysis will show, this blend lends women a measure of agency.

### ***Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café***

I describe the Whistle Stop Café from Fannie Flagg's novel *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* as a utopian space for women primarily because, in the novel, the café offers one of the main characters, Ruth, a refuge from domestic violence. Ruth's friend and later romantic partner, Idgie Threadgoode, starts the café after taking Ruth away from her abusive husband when Ruth's son is born. In the novel's second timeline, the older Ms. Threadgoode narrates these events: "Poppa Threadgoode sat Idgie down and told her that now that she was going to be responsible for Ruth and a baby, she'd better figure out what she wanted to do, and gave her five hundred dollars to start a business with. That's what she bought the café with" (Flagg 245-46). With a loan from her father, Idgie starts the café to provide a safe space to have a family with Ruth in, to provide herself with employment and responsibilities, to provide Ruth with a friendly environment, and to ensure the financial security of her family. Ms. Threadgoode's choice of words describes the shift of patriarchal power from Idgie's father to Idgie herself. First, the patriarchal figure, Poppa Threadgoode, "sat Idgie down," which indicates his authority over her. He then tells her she is "going to be responsible for Ruth and a baby." By saying this, he transfers the patriarchal authority that he has over Idgie to her, encouraging his daughter to assume authority and responsibility over her family, which will now consist of Ruth and her baby.

Previous research has argued that Idgie is a character who "denounces femininity" (Dvorak 93); within the system of binary opposition that structures our understanding of gender, this also means to a certain extent that she embraces masculinity. By opening the café, Idgie is placed in a traditionally masculine and patriarchal role—she provides both a safe space and a measure of financial security for her

family. Yet, Idgie is not a man, which makes the café she opens a utopian space for women. While Idgie displays some of the characteristics associated with masculinity in this scene and throughout the novel, such as financial and social responsibility for her partner and child, she lacks the characteristics that made Ruth's previous domestic space unsafe: unlike Ruth's ex-husband, Idgie is not authoritative or violent. It is Idgie's dual role as protector, traditionally masculine, and caregiver, traditionally feminine, that makes the café into a utopian safe space for women. The female-dominated domestic space of the café replaces the male-dominated domestic space that Ruth had hitherto inhabited with her husband.

The café's utopian nature is also evident in other ways: it lacks the societal pressures of heteronormativity as well as economic struggles. Within the sphere of the café, Ruth and Idgie do not need to enact conventional, heterosexual femininity. Instead, they are free to have a romantic lesbian relationship, because the café is a space where women have the agency to act on their desires. The narrative relays that "Idgie and Ruth bought the café in 1929, right in the height of the Depression, but I don't think we ever had margarine there" (Flagg 313); thus, the café is described as a refuge from scarcity. The café is a place of plenty, where even the homeless, like the character Smokey Lonesome, are fed. Within the novel, food functions primarily as a source of emotional nurturance and a way to combat social inequality.

However, the utopian nature of the Whistle Stop Café has its limits: it is not entirely racially inclusive. Black people are not permitted to eat inside to avoid giving the violent Klansmen a reason to enter and disturb the protective space. At the same time, the café food is cooked and prepared by the same African Americans who are prevented from enjoying it as customers, a division of labor that echoes the historical situation in which "African American women [work] in the kitchens of white plantation owners" (Byrd 104). While the café offers a utopia for white women, Black women are still in an inferior position, similar to that of slaves. Black women thus become accomplices to their own exclusion through their work as cooks. The safety of the café for women comes at the expense of racial others as its utopian inclusivity does not extend to them.

### ***Gilmore Girls***

In the television series *Gilmore Girls*, Luke's Diner offers a utopian space for women. *Gilmore Girls* is situated in a town called Star's Hollow, and it follows the lives of mother and daughter Lorelai and Rory Gilmore. Luke's Diner is Star's Hollow's only café, and it is run by Luke Danes. The main characters, Lorelai and Rory, visit the diner in almost every episode to escape the difficulties of their romantic and social lives, including Lorelai's demanding mother and Rory's eccentric and difficult boyfriends. Luke's Diner is not the same type of utopian space for women as the Whistle Stop Café, primarily because the diner is managed by Luke, a man. Luke inherited it from his father, who owned a hardware store in the same location—the door of the diner is still adorned with the signage of a hardware store so that the diner's history as a male-dominated space is still explicitly remembered. Yet, by turning his father's hardware store into a diner, Luke has made the location accessible and welcoming to people of all genders.

The show's opening scene illustrates that Luke's Diner is no longer male-dominated by presenting Lorelai Gilmore as its real sovereign and resident coffee fiend. Luke knows this and wants to make sure

Lorelai does not have too much; yet Lorelai persuades him to serve her coffee anyway, which shows her ability to exert power over Luke using language. Through Luke and Lorelai's exchange, their banter shows that they are talking as equals, regardless of their different genders. While, in a sense, Luke holds the power because he controls Lorelai's supply of coffee, in a different sense, Lorelai shows that she holds the power over Luke because she is able to persuade him to supply her with the coffee.

Throughout *Gilmore Girls*, the Gilmores' love for coffee is a recurring theme. When demanding coffee, Lorelai is neither patient nor polite. In season five, for example, Lorelai brushes off Luke's friendly greeting by demanding coffee: "I need caffeine. Whatever form you've got, I haven't had any all day. I'll drink it, shoot it, eat it, snort it, whatever form it's in, gimme" (20:09-20:18 "Women of Questionable Morals"). In this scene, and in the many other scenes in which she forcefully orders coffee, Lorelai undermines some of the expectations of demureness often culturally associated with femininity (Brownmiller 10). Rather than asking nicely, Lorelai demands coffee from Luke, subverting the traditional gendered dynamic in which men demand food or drink and women provide it. Throughout the show, Luke's role in the diner as manager, chef, and busboy also subverts traditional expectations of gender roles in which "women are credited with control over the purchasing, storing, cooking, and serving of food" (McIntosh and Zey 132). Because of these gendered expectations about who controls, prepares, and distributes food, Luke's presence behind the counter indicates the utopian, inclusive nature of the space as one not governed by traditional gender roles or hierarchies.

The Gilmores' love for coffee also has significant cultural implications for the protagonists' social identity as white women. In their extensive and sometimes gluttonous consumption of coffee, the Gilmores appear unaware of the beverage's history as a colonial commodity: "[The] history of coffee is infeasibly bound up with the rise of capitalism and the overseas expansion of European colonialism, establishing relations of domination and dependency both between Europe and its (ex-)colonies and within them" (Smith 512). Keeping in mind coffee's role in global inequality and post-colonial exploitation as described by Smith, the Gilmores' carefree consumption of coffee is a sign of their implicit perpetuation of the exploitative hierarchies established by white Western patriarchy.

Furthermore, coffee contains caffeine, a stimulant culturally associated with increased alertness and productivity, as well as with intellectual activities like writing and academic study. Coffee has been culturally perceived as "a soberer to spark intellectual clarity and creativity" (Topik 84). The Gilmores' excessive coffee consumption aligns them with the upper-middle class and its intellectual academic pursuits, as well as its privileged carelessness about where commodity goods like coffee come from and whose labor is exploited to bring coffee to American consumers. As Bryant Simon writes in *Everything but the Coffee: Learning About America From Starbucks*: "We buy things to say something about ourselves" (7), and buying large quantities of coffee like the Gilmores do indicates privilege, intellectualism and education, as well as the aforementioned complicity in global inequalities.

Another defining feature of *Gilmore Girls* is the protagonists' preoccupation with food, and the show's frequent representation of the spaces where food is served and consumed. In the show: "Interior shots of diners, kitchen nooks, dining rooms, and banquet halls depict eating as a class- and race-inflected activity . . . [W]here and what one eats mark socioeconomic status" (Mintz and Mintz 235). For example, Luke's Diner is the lower class, low-culture counterpart to the stately dining room in Lorelai's

parental home, where she received a constrained, upper-class upbringing. At Luke's Diner, by contrast, Lorelai can eat what she wants and love who she wants (Mintz and Mintz 240). Lorelai frequently visits Luke's Diner late at night after an uncomfortable visit to her parents in order to escape her mother's judgements and, by extension, the societal judgements placed on her as a single teen mother. In offering this freedom, Luke's Diner is a utopian space for Lorelai.

Lorelai is at the diner during the pilot episode to meet with her daughter Rory, but she is first approached by a guy named Joey who tries to hit on her. Lorelai politely and wittily rebuffs his advances. Once Rory enters Luke's Diner, Lorelai goes to get her daughter a cup of coffee, and Joey takes advantage of Lorelai's absence to hit on Rory instead. The following dialogue occurs:

[Behind Lorelai, Joey approaches Rory's table. Lorelai sees Joey talking to her.]

LORELAI: Ah. He's got quite a pair, this guy.

[Lorelai goes back to the table.] (...)

JOEY: Oh, hi.

LORELAI: Oh, hi. You really like my table, don't you?

JOEY: I was just, uh. . .

LORELAI: Getting to know my daughter.

JOEY: Your...

RORY: Are you my new daddy?

JOEY: Wow. You do not look old enough to have a daughter. No, I mean it. And you do not look like a daughter.

LORELAI: That's possibly very sweet of you. Thanks.

JOEY: So. . . daughter. You know, I am traveling with a friend.

LORELAI: She's sixteen.

(...)

[Joey and his friend exit the diner] (2:34-3:19 "Pilot").

In this scene, Lorelai and Rory are accosted by Joey's unwanted advances. It becomes clear in the show's opening scene that Luke's Diner is not devoid of male aggression, even within the illustrated utopian safe space.

Lorelai and Rory are able to rebuke Joey using three verbal tactics. The first is the element of surprise: Lorelai makes Joey profoundly uncomfortable by revealing that Rory is her daughter and that she is sixteen; the second tactic is wit: "Are you my new daddy?"; the third is mild condescension: "That is possibly very sweet of you. Thanks." In the face of this verbal hostility, the men quickly leave the Gilmores' domain. This scene establishes that the Gilmores are verbally skilled, which is a recurring source of comedy throughout the show and another indicator of their educated, privileged background.

### Comparing Luke's Diner to the Whistle Stop Café

The Gilmores' control over Luke's Diner as a utopian space for women does not lie in any ritualized exchange of power or money, such as Idgie's power over the Whistle Stop Café does. When Idgie is

endowed with responsibility by her father and by the financial means to materially possess the café space, she gains power by entering the bureaucratic patriarchal sphere of commerce. To have power over a space, Idgie has to become more like a man, such as her father. By contrast, the Gilmores exert their power over Luke's Diner through informal speech—for example, when Lorelai convinces Luke to serve her an eighth cup of coffee, or when mother and daughter fend off unwanted male advances using verbal skills, as demonstrated in my analysis of the pilot episode.

The less formalized, less patriarchally sanctioned power that the Gilmores hold over Luke's Diner is ultimately less powerful than Idgie's inherited power through masculine responsibility and wealth. If Luke decides to lock the diner up, the women cannot access it. As its manager and cook, Luke remains the most formally powerful character in the diner space, and in this sense, patriarchal power is not subverted or even evaded. At the same time, the Gilmores exert power in Luke's Diner which Luke condones because he likes them; even if he did not, their power to talk to him and about him would still exert a great deal of sway in the small, close-knit community of Star's Hollow. The power of women's speech and the threat of gossip that the Gilmores' hold, while less formalized, is more difficult to completely exclude from the community.

The Gilmores' informal, insidious mode of power is also successful in ruling Luke's Diner because the kind of male threat that they encounter is different from the one that Ruth experiences in Flagg's novel. In *Gilmore Girls*, male aggression is only verbal, while in Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café* (1987), male violence, such as the domestic abuse Ruth is subjected to, is physical and, at times, sexual. In the peaceful world of *Gilmore Girls*, speech and gossip are the greatest weapons. In Luke's Diner, Lorelai and Rory enjoy the freedom to speak their mind, which they sometimes lack when encountering the patriarchal structures of school, work or Lorelai's family. This freedom of speech is what makes Luke's Diner a utopian space.

However, Luke's Diner does not meet all of the criteria for a utopian space for women outlined earlier in this essay. While Lorelai and Rory are free to be their witty, outspoken selves in the diner without worrying about the societal expectations of femininity, they do encounter an unwanted interaction when Joey hits on them. In this situation, the Gilmores have the weapon of their verbal skills at their disposal. Arguably, this ability to defend oneself against unwanted interactions is a greater source of agency than the ability to take refuge in a utopian space where male threats are excluded, such as Ruth does in the Whistle Stop Café. The Gilmores' ability to fend off unwanted interactions creates the possibility that every space could be equally safe, welcoming, and accessible to women, provided all women possess the verbal skills to defend themselves. Yet this prerequisite of dexterous verbal skills places the onus on women to ensure their own safety. Put another way, women can be free to navigate any public space, provided they possess the skill to defend themselves against unwanted attention.

My comparison of the Whistle Stop Café and Luke's Diner also brings to light one similarity: in both spaces, food is never scarce. Both spaces enable and encourage gluttony. In relation to this essay's main topic of utopian spaces for women, this emphasis on plenty can be interpreted as subversive on the one hand and as indicative of societal pressures placed on women on the other. Women eating as much as they want of whatever they want may be read as a liberating act in a society that stigmatizes female pleasure. At the same time, because in both restaurants women are depicted eating endlessly without

ever gaining weight, these representations contribute to the societal pressure on women to be effortlessly thin, as well as to embody the aforementioned beauty standards of skinniness identified by Giovanelli and Ostertag without ever dieting. The Gilmores, for example, “are able to be gluttonous without ever having to cope with the consequences of uninhibited eating” (Diffrient xxx). In Flagg’s *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*, food is linked to emotional nurturance, and those who do not indulge in excessive eating are depicted as emotionally cold. While the cafés analyzed in this essay offer fictional women a place to eat as much as they want unashamedly, they simultaneously perpetuate unrealistic expectations for women regarding eating and body image. Ultimately, this comparison of the Whistle Stop Café and Luke’s Diner shows a development from spaces where women can take refuge to spaces where women can exert agency, each of these two types of spaces has its benefits and drawbacks.

## Conclusion

In this essay, I have illustrated through select examples from both *Fried Green Tomatoes in the Whistle Stop Café* and *Gilmore Girls* how gendered power dynamics work in fictional restaurant spaces. In the Whistle Stop Café, Idgie’s power is absolute and formalized by her ownership of the café, creating a space where women like Ruth can feel safe from the threat of male violence and where Idgie and Ruth can be themselves without feeling the pressure to adhere to societal expectations of heteronormative femininity. By contrast, in Luke’s Diner, the Gilmores’ power is contested, informal, and exercised primarily through speech. The women do not experience the societal pressure to be demure and defer to men. While their witty, clever speech enables them to exert agency and express individuality, not only within the diner but also in other public spaces, this use of speech as armor means that the responsibility for keeping unwanted male attention at bay lies with the women themselves.

These different power dynamics reflect a change in real-world gendered power dynamics. While in Idgie’s Depression-era women could only obtain power by enacting a masculine part, entering into patriarchal structures and co-opting masculine public spaces, in the early 2000s of *Gilmore Girls*, approximately seventy years later, women access power using language and take charge of public spaces themselves. In a sense, then, in the contemporary era, language enables women to exert power that escapes patriarchal bureaucracy.

Both the Whistle Stop Café and Luke’s Diner are also limited in the kind of refuge they offer from the social constructs of femininity. While Idgie and Ruth freely express their same-sex love for one another in the café and offer safety to economically disadvantaged characters, racial others are excluded from their utopian restaurant space. In *Gilmore Girls*, Lorelai finds comfort in Luke’s Diner because of its distinction from the stifled upper-class environment in which she grew up. At the same time, the Gilmores embody white, educated, upper-middle class femininity, and thin privilege. They also experience the leisure and pleasure of almost endless supplies of food and coffee because they benefit from global inequalities—their carefree attitude towards consumerist consumption in general and coffee in particular illustrate this. Furthermore, the Gilmores’ protection from unwanted male advances lies in their exceptional verbal skill, which depends on their whiteness, class background, and education for its success.

In this essay, I have shown that cultural objects including literature and television can illuminate the gendered power dynamics of public spaces, with a focus on the culinary space, in ways that are



relevant to contemporary society. Whether the shift from formalized bureaucratic power to informal rhetorical power in these two cultural objects is indicative of a historical shift in power dynamics between genders, and whether this shift can be observed elsewhere in popular culture and perhaps in reality, are all questions for future research. I have also argued that, while the Whistle Stop Café and Luke's Diner offer utopian spaces to some women, women of color and fat women are excluded from their welcoming embrace. The ways that gender, class, race, and body shape intersect with regard to the accessibility of utopian spaces for women are another potential avenue for future research.

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