

Exploring the Similitudes in Small-Town Drama Series: A Study on the Exploration of Similitudes in Small-Town Drama Series

Ravisankar. S

Academic-Cum-Teaching Associate

Abstract

This paper analyses five popular television series—Virgin River, When Calls the Heart, Good Witch, Gilmore Girls, and Heartland. The objective of the study is to identify and reflect recurring common themes and narratives. The selected shows taken for the study have its unique setting, plot, character sketches and narratives. On the contrary to this basic fact, these shows share many commonalities which shape the different narratives beautifully. Such commonalities include a protagonist aiming to level up a life through a fresh start (Elizabeth Thatcher in When Calls the Heart, Lorelai Gilmore in Gilmore Girls, and Melinda Munroe in Virgin River), a confined small town community, workplaces of characters as prominent settings, happenings in family, and a sweet blend of romance, relationships, romanticism and personal growth. Some traits may vary as Cassie Nightingale in Good Witch is a native of Middleton and Amy Fleming in Heartland built her life from scratch in the Dude Ranch at Hudson itself. Through comparative analysis, this study reflects how these TV shows depict the intricacies aligned with the small town life and human relationships, offering viewers a soothing and connecting visual experience.

Keywords: Small-town drama, television show/series, community, family intricacies, setting & plot.

Introduction

Television dramas often reflect familial and societal values ingrained with human experiences on a daily basis. The shows Virgin River, When Calls the Heart, Good Witch, Gilmore Girls, and Heartland offer narratives set in small towns, panning their focus on characters who steer their personal life through daily challenges and relationships. All of the aforesaid TV shows have garnered substantial viewership by portraying relatable threads such as starting afresh, community backing and unity, and the intricacies of family life. This paper aims to explore the commonalities among these shows and other similar factors amplifying the message of each episode by shedding light on the global dimension of the postulates of 'small-town' dramas. In this era where crime thrillers and fantasy genres are gaining more momentum in terms of popularity, dramas differ in the way they connect with the civilians, especially the daily employees to help them have the strength of their own convictions. The aforementioned TV shows portray the script of a particular episode in such a way as to present an event or a problem before its daily audience, how the characters deal with it, the emotions involved, how they arrive at a conclusion, or a consensus through open communication.

Research Methodology

This study executes a qualitative comparative analysis of the five TV Shows, namely Virgin River, When Calls the Heart, Good Witch, Gilmore Girls, and Heartland. Episodes from each show were selected to reflect on key narrative arcs and reverberations of the deeds of the characters which adds to the essence of the entire show. The analysis focused on identifying common but unique themes, character archetypes, and structure of the plots. In addition to the aforesaid, viewer reviews and critical analyses were also referred to understand the nature of audience reception and interpretation of these themes.

The methodology comprises the following steps:

1. Research Design

Qualitative comparative analysis: This study employs qualitative comparative analysis to examine the various elements of the aforementioned TV shows. This method is appropriate for understanding the nuanced meanings and underlying messages conveyed through the shows' narrative and visual elements.

Descriptive and Interpretive Approach: The analysis is both descriptive, focusing on the distinctive features of the shows, and interpretive, aiming to unveil the inner meanings and cultural contexts of small towns.

2. Sampling

Show Selection: Virgin River was selected for its fresh narration of drama, the scenic beauty of Virgin River acting as the context for the central characters to thrive through the challenges of life mindfully. It was also selected as it discusses the intricacies of relationships, reinvention of life, honest and deep communication, and also the dimensions of life on a daily basis to which the audience could connect swiftly and smoothly.

When Calls the Heart was identified right from the synopsis written on Netflix where it is written about a woman leaving her upper crest life behind, travels across the west to teach the children of a small mining community. She finds herself there, recognizes how teaching shapes her life as a primary important factor. Good Witch was selected due to its unique storytelling pattern blending the aesthetics of Drama and Fantasy. Good Witch too discusses the advancement in life happening when new things occur.

Gilmore Girls was selected owing to its disciplined storytelling style right from the pilot episode establishing the characters gradually and subtly. It also encompasses the great dimension of independence, endurance, attaining the equilibrium of life, and financial balance.

Heartland ponders through the intricacies, hardships and achievements of Amy Fleming who reflects the tenacity and proclivity of equestrian racing to attain a holistic life. Heartland portrays how a ranch becomes the broad context witnessing the roller coaster ride of life and also being the fulcrum in which the entire system is pivoting around. The aforementioned led to select Heartland as a sample.

Scenes and Segments: Key scenes and segments of the TV shows that exemplify the major themes—such as reinventing life, endurance, and hope—were identified and analyzed in detail through major episodes.

3. Data Collection

Primary Data: The primary data of this study is the TV shows themselves, namely, Virgin River, When Calls the Heart, Good Witch, Gilmore Girls and Heartland. The shows in general and some episodes in particular were viewed multiple times to garner the deep comprehension of its narrative structure encompassing the struggles and beauties of daily life. The aforesaid were also viewed to ensure the holistic understanding of the themes such as principles in life, honest and open communication, emotions and work-life drama through the subtle and gradual character development and the scenes which evoke the viewers innate ability to deal with the daily struggle and drudgery of life.

Secondary Data: Relevant secondary sources, including reviews, critiques, interviews with the director and actors, and articles on all of the five TV shows, and also articles on the novels of the same name of the TV Shows *Virgin River* and *When Calls the Heart* written by Robyn Carr and Janette Oke respectively, were also examined to provide more magnitude to the context and support the analysis.

4. Analytical Framework

Thematic Analysis: The shows were analyzed thematically, focusing on key themes such as solitude, endurance, personality and identity, reinvention of life and hope. This involved identifying recurring motifs, symbols, and narrative elements that contribute to these themes.

Character Analysis: The development of the protagonists, Melinda Munroe, Elizabeth Thatcher, Lorelai Gilmore, Amy Fleming and Cassie Nightingale, and other key characters were examined to analyze how their navigation reflects the shows' broader themes.

Cinematic Techniques: The use of cinematography, sound design, editing, and direction was analyzed to comprehend how these techniques contribute to the shows' emotional and thematic aesthetics and impact.

Cultural and Social Context: The study includes an analysis of the exploration of the shows' cultural and social reflection, particularly in relation to the experiences of characters mainly of the working class in the western community.

Findings



1. Protagonist setting out fresh life anew

Each of the shows features a protagonist who either relocates to or inhabits a small town to get rid of their uneasy past and gather a new chapter of life. For instance, in *Virgin River*, Melinda Monroe moves to a remote town called Virgin River as part of her personal healing as an after effect of a huge grief caused by the death of her beloved ones. She also wanted to attain an equilibrium in her career also. There she joins as a nursing assistant to Doctor Mullins, the point from where she perceives life as a new whole.



Similarly, Elizabeth Thatcher in *When Calls the Heart*, leaving her upper-crest life behind, travels across the west to teach the children of a small mining community. She finds herself there, recognizes how teaching shapes her life as a primary important factor. Here self-discovery and adaptation is deeply discussed.



Good Witch tells the story of a very dynamic, vibrant and positive lady called Cassie Nightingale who deals with the factor of single motherhood and independence reflecting the power of being in an occupation and always being engaged in something. She also conveys the importance of mindfulness to the audience from where the element of fantasy creeps into the show which is another significant reason to select 'Good Witch' for the study. Good Witch also portrays how new things in life can have a greater impact in daily human lives. Dr Sam Radford and his son Nick holistically transforms the life of Cassie and her daughter Grace in an enlightened kind of way.

Heartland depicts perseverance, compassion and dedication of Amy Fleming, Georgie Fleming and Lou Fleming and many other connected characters towards life and occupation which constitutes the holistic element of drama content in the context of daily life. Although her spouse Ty dies, she reinstates the message of building and moving on with life more independently with her daughter building her life from the scratch with her mother. Alongwith that Amy proposes the concept of eternal love too.

Gilmore girl Lorelai reaches Stars Hollow when Rory Gilmore her daughter was only one year old. She came to Stars Hollow leaving her parents' house at the age of seventeen and led an Inn called Independence. The name of the Inn itself shows that how importance the factor of Independence is for her. Lorelai and Rory keeps them for each other, framing the mother-daughter bond while keeping their own lives alive for themselves. Stars Hollow acts as a second arena



2. Close-Knit Community

The default setting of all these TV shows is a small town, namely Virgin River in Virgin River, Middleton in Good Witch, Hope Valley in When Calls the Heart, Stars Hollow in Gilmore Girls, and Hudson in Heartland. Communities are portrayed as reflection of unity and support in a basic cum intricate daily life context. Daily lives blend with community affairs. In *Gilmore Girls*, the residents of Stars Hollow are honestly involved in harmonising and helping each other. In *Heartland*, the family ranch acts as a hub for community interactions which leads to foster the community as a whole

3. Family Dynamics and Relationships

Family relationships are the core factor in these dramas. *Good Witch* explores the bond between Cassie and her daughter Grace, reflecting generational connections so beautifully. Good Witch also discusses the paramount importance of personal growth in everyone's life through the eyes of Cassie. Grace endures her academic, love and personal life through her choices which makes her stronger. Good Witch conveys the idea that you should follow your own path in your way so that one can become one's strongest, individual and distinctive self. Grace only gets the guidance by her mother Cassie only when she breaks down. That is how she learns the lessons and values of life.

When Calls the Heart delves into the challenges faced by widowed women who take on roles traditionally held by men that too in the 1900s emphasizing the power of resilience and community support. The main setting is the school where Elizabeth Thatcher, the protagonist, teaches the students in the mining community called Hope Valley. The school is where the students irrespective of their ages study the academic and life lessons. Ms. Thatcher also teaches the values of teaching, the etiquettes a teacher should follow which can be incorporated in the current era too. Although the story is set in the 1900s, the first episode was aired in 2014. Elizabeth Thatcher reflects the power of independence as she leaves her affluent family to nurture her passion, that is teaching. She builds herself a life there even though she lacked even the basic facilities during the infancy of her days in Hope Valley. Though her father is ready to do anything for her, she needs to earn her own life credentials. She also carries forward the values she learned to her younger sisters too. Abigail, who helps her and eventually becomes her friend, guides her through the ups and downs of Hope Valley. Cody, the young gentleman of Hope Valley is adopted by Abigail who had the great fortune to be loved as a priority by that orphaned son. Cody becomes the lovable person by everyone in Hope Valley, his imperfections being corrected by his teacher, Elizabeth Thatcher.

Emily Gilmore, Lorelai Gilmore and Rory Gilmore constitutes the 'Gilmore Girls', where Emily Gilmore is asked to provide a loan for Lorelai to teach her daughter Rory in Chilton School with the assurance of repayment. This reflects the strong foundation of Family bonding and the power of independence. Emily takes care of Lorelai more than Rory, her granddaughter. Rory, similar to Grace, takes her own path guided by Lorelai at crucial and pertinent junctures.

Heartland goes through Amy Fleming's passion and connected ones where the family tree expands to her sister, father and grandfather and the other connected ones. Equestrian riding is reflected as a compassion and an occupation mainly through the eyes of Amy who is the noble daughter of the family who also keeps her connections alive and respectable with her own principles being the strongest. Among the mentioned families, Fleming's family is comparatively the largest one. Amy can be perceived as the fulcrum in which their entire family system is pivoting around. Jack, her grandfather being the constant support for her and others.

Virgin River is quite different from the aforesaid, that the families in Virgin River are more nuclear ones, self made ones, families reflecting the essence of a fresh start, of Mel and Jack, of Preach and Paige, of

Dr. Vernon Mullins and Hope and of Brie and Brady and the like. The aforesaid families have dysfunctional qualities. Paige was replaced by other women in the life of Preacher. Mel and Jack had intermittent break ups. Vernon has issues with Hope, but deep down the heart she is the only woman in the world he loves the most. Virgin River also enhances the concept of Karma, where Charmaine, ex-wife of Jack, regrets the way she dealt with him when she had a relationship with her second partner. Jack Sheridan is a great lover, husband and a prospective good father too. Mel is listened to, respected and admired by Jack in a profound magnitude. Though he lost feelings for his ex wife Charmaine, he does his role in her life gracefully.

4. Romance and Personal Growth

Romantic relationships often serve as catalysts for character development in the mentioned shows. In *Virgin River*, Melinda's evolving connection with Jack Sheridan helps in her emotional healing. Similarly, in *Gilmore Girls*, the romantic adventures of Lorelai and Rory Gilmore are interconnected with their personal growth and family dynamics. In *When Calls the Heart*, Elizabeth is well guided and led by Jack Thornton, the mountie there, who respects her profession and her personal space very much. In *Good Witch*, Cassie is supported by Dr. Sam Radford, who in all of her endeavours is with her as a very supportive and prospective partner. Dr. Sam is not interruptive but a supportive neighbour and a partner. Cassie can guess as a Good Witch, who is approaching when someone is around her with her fantasy abilities. The said fantasy genre is confined to only such moments when someone is approaching her. This sensation for Dr. Sam Radford is much more intense as she also respects him at a level of greater magnitude. In all of the four seasons, Sam turns up mainly when Cassie cooks something or when she is at her shop 'Bell, Book and Candles' or when she is emotionally down which is rarest of the rarest. In *Heartland*, Amy Fleming is attached to Ty who stands with her in her journey of life keeping his own interests intact. Amy is guided in all her junctures with Ty as a fuel

Conclusion

The television drama shows *Virgin River*, *When Calls the Heart*, *Good Witch*, *Gilmore Girls*, and *Heartland* share common narrative elements that enhance personal growth, community harmony, and the intricacies of family life. Through their depiction of small-town setting and relatable characters, these shows evokes audiences' suffering, hope, revival, connection and resilience.

References

1. Wikipedia contributors, "When Calls the Heart," *Wikipedia*, April 15, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/When_Calls_the_Heart.
2. Biswas, A., "Virgin River vs. Good Witch: Similarities and Differences Between the TV Shows, Explored," *Soap Central*, March 3, 2025, <https://www.soapcentral.com/shows/virgin-river-vs-good-witch-similarities-differences-tv-shows-explored>.
3. The Cinemaholic, "7 Shows Like *When Calls the Heart* You Must See," *The Cinemaholic*, April 10, 2025, <https://thecinemaholic.com/shows-like-when-calls-the-heart/>.
4. Wide Open Country, "9 Shows Like *Virgin River* for More Dreamy Romantic Drama," *Wide Open Country*, March 2, 2025, <https://www.wideopencountry.com/shows-like-virgin-river/>.
5. Business Insider, "Best Shows to Watch if You Love *Virgin River* on Netflix," *Business Insider*, April 12, 2025, <https://www.businessinsider.com/tv-series-that-are-like-virgin-river>.
6. Hoffman, A., *The Foretelling*, Scholastic Press, 2003.

7. Roberts, N., *Three Sisters Island Trilogy (Includes Dance Upon the Air, Heaven and Earth, Face the Fire)*, Jove Books, 2001.
8. Oke, J., *When Calls the Heart*, Bethany House, 1983.
9. Oke, J., *When Comes the Spring*, Bethany House, 1985.
10. Brooke, L., *Coming Home*, Scholastic Inc., 2000.
11. Brooke, L., *After the Storm*, Scholastic Inc., 2000.