

A Media Analysis on *Fleabag*
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Fleabag, created by and starring Phoebe Waller-Bridge, presents a nuanced exploration of gender relations through its protagonist's unfiltered and humorous perspective. Originating from Waller-Bridge's one-woman show performed at the 2013 Edinburgh Fringe Festival, this British comedy-drama series spans two seasons, delving into themes of self-discovery, relationships, and societal expectations, providing a candid portrayal of the challenges women face in navigating modern life. As Waller-Bridge takes on the titled character, her candid narrative style sheds light on the complexities of female identity, sexuality, and the impact of societal norms, contributing to a broader conversation about gender dynamics. In this media analysis, the focus is on unraveling how gender roles, the concept of self-objectification, and desire are interwoven into Fleabag's character. The examination will specifically delve into the dynamics presented in the first episode of the first season and the fourth episode of the second season.

Synopsis:

“I have a horrible feeling I am a greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, morally bankrupt woman who can't even call herself a feminist.”

Those are the words with which Fleabag, the main character of the show, describes herself in the first episode of the series. Fleabag, an unconventional, charismatic, and snarky protagonist in her 30s, grapples with the challenges of life in London, desperately trying to hold her world together. Navigating complex relationships, particularly with her uptight and successful sister Claire, and her emotionally distant father, Fleabag's tumultuous life is further complicated by the sudden death of her best friend and business partner, Boo. Despite her free-spirited nature, Fleabag

finds herself unable to progress toward a life she can take pride. She is constantly running away from her problems by relying on alcohol and sexual encounters. Amidst the chaos, Fleabag manages a failing guinea pig-themed café and engages in a series of disastrous romantic escapades. Her encounters include the charming but troubled "Hot Priest", whose arrival introduces a unique dynamic to the narrative.

Breaking the Fourth Wall

Before delving into the profound layers of Fleabag, one must explore the masterful use of direct addressing or "breaking the fourth wall", that is well dispersed throughout the series. Fleabag directly communicates with whoever is watching the show. This distancing effect is used as a poignant narrative device. Fleabag utilizes the technique in a brilliant way to depict its protagonist's secrets (including a death she feels responsible for and the trauma she still has because of it) and the way that she feels incapable of communicating with anyone about them. The technique also evolves throughout the series. Once the audience becomes privy to Fleabag's concealed truths, not only does her relationship with the viewers transform but so does her demeanor during these fourth wall breaks. She is more subtle and guarded, and the audience suffers the fate of anyone she has become close to — pushed away by her fear of vulnerability. Part of what is beautiful about her relationship with the Priest in the second season is that he actually notices when she speaks to the audience.

When analyzing this show, certain prominent themes regarding gender could be highlighted. Firstly, the vast ways people of all genders are portrayed in this show as each character defies their gender expectations in some way. Secondly, the way Fleabag believes the solution to all her life problems is sex, often depicted in the sexual circumstances she has no business being in. In this analysis, I will discuss just why she might be doing this. Lastly, I will be analyzing the

entry of a specific character who teaches her how to deal with her emotions effectively, something she religiously chooses not to do.

Gender Roles and Performance

Before addressing the way *Fleabag* addresses its control over the representation of gender, the concept needs to be established first. Judith Butler claims that gender is performative. This means that someone's gender identity is constructed of 'acts of gender' that are being performed and that do not exist outside of this performance. This is a fluid process, but not one that can be made by choice. This performance, for example, the way a person moves their body or speaks in conversation, is not determined by their assigned sex at birth but by a repetition of these acts that construct a gender identity. Consequently, this identity can be subjected to change.

There is a vast amount of ways gender roles are represented in *Fleabag*. Starting in the first scene of the first episode of the show, *Fleabag* is introduced by saying, "Do you know that feeling..." after which she proceeds to describe how she drank half a bottle of wine earlier, has put on lingerie and make-up and how she is pretending not to be expecting the man that has just rang her doorbell. Immediately, we are faced with a gender role in which women are expected to uphold a certain standard of beauty. The idea that a woman must be effortlessly hairless, ageless, and sexy.

In the first episode, *Fleabag* is also seen drinking, smoking, and swearing, calling a bank manager a 'perv' and describing her father's girlfriend as "not an evil stepmother, just a cunt." This form of consumption and use of language does not fit the stereotype of the respectable and passive woman as described by society, but neither does her appearance fit the given alternative, the 'overly sexual, masculine' stereotype. Her feminine and self-possessed appearance, combined

with her, sometimes rude, and promiscuous behavior all attributed to her overall, complex gender performance in this first episode.

Other characters in this episode are often as surprising as Fleabag herself. In contrast to her, sometimes harsh, behavior, her ex-boyfriend, Harry, is a very emotional man. He diverges from the typical performance of hegemonic masculinity through his portrayal of emotions and enjoyment of dramatic situations, as is shown by a flashback of their breakup. After seeing Fleabag partake in indecent behavior, he is seen dramatically shaking his head and storming out with a suitcase, an event that happened so many times before that Fleabag remains unimpressed. On the level of expressing emotions, their characters almost seem to be reversed. Women are often expected to be more emotional while traditional hegemonic masculinity does not often allow this expressive room.

Another interesting gender performance that can be seen is in the character of Fleabag's father. To the camera, Fleabag mentions, "Dad's way of coping with two motherless daughters was to buy us tickets to feminist lectures, start fucking our godmother and eventually stop calling." When she is emotionally struggling a little while later in the episode, she turns up at her father's door, asking for guidance. Instead of comforting his youngest daughter, he mentions how she "got that from her mother" and proceeds to call her a taxi, seemingly incapable of handling these emotions. Much like the stereotypical father depicted in most media, her father's instant reluctance to support his estranged daughter seems appalling yet expected. Because of the intense negligence, some men feel in acknowledging and respecting their own feelings, others confront the brunt of that, just like Fleabag does in this scene, where she upsettably leaves.

Her "super-rich power sister, Claire," as she describes her, seems to be a lot more restricted than Fleabag, with an extremely uptight posture and an inability to laugh at any of Fleabag's jokes.

She gets her fulfillment out of her “two degrees, a husband, and a Burberry coat,” as she describes it herself. At first sight, Claire seems to be somewhat fitting the stereotypical norm of the ‘respectable woman’ until Fleabag mentions how her sister once got drunk and pooped in a sink.

The characters’ traits represent gender as a diverse and complex concept, different in all characters, emphasizing the idea that gender truly is fluid, and thus so is gender performance. Specifically, Fleabag stands out from this respectable and passive norm, through her use of the direct address of the camera. Daringly, she looks into it, both verbally and non-verbally challenging the audience. As, later in the episode, when she steals money from her date and angrily walks out on him, she looks fearlessly into the camera, as if to challenge the audience to say something about her bad behavior.

Self-objectification and Reluctance to Emotion

Gender is not only represented through the character traits on their own, but in the interaction between Fleabag and the world around her, especially since most of her relationships are troubled. While going to a feminist lecture with her sister, Fleabag and Claire do nothing but argue. The only person with whom she seems to have had a true connection is her friend Boo, having made a pact that they would only trust and depend on each other. With Boo having passed away, Fleabag seems to have emotionally closed off even more, going against the emotionality that is usually a part of the feminine stereotype. When her sister finally does try to connect with her and asks her if she wants to go for a drink, Fleabag immediately turns this down. Claire’s following attempt at an embrace is then received with a slap because Fleabag is so startled by the sudden display of affection. An interaction like this would normally not be associated with two sisters because of the stereotypical emotionality, but with a performance of masculinity where this

openly showing of affection is less accepted. Claire then leaves, after which Fleabag immediately asks a stranger who is walking by if she maybe wants to go for a drink. This shows how she is desperately trying to find distraction in other people but refuses to let them in on an emotional level.

Most of Fleabag's short-term encounters are as distanced as those with her family and friends. The contact remains superficial, as when she starts dating a man she met on the bus. She shows the camera that she is repulsed by his terrible teeth, after which she continues to flirt with him anyway. They go out for a drink, and she cuts him off mid-sentence and asks if he wants to go home with her, which he instantly refuses. Fleabag gets furiously angry, steals his money, and walks out. She is not looking for conversations and connection but for distraction.

As mentioned, most of Fleabag's short-term relationships seem to revolve around sex. Most of her life seems to be dominated by this theme, like when her relationship with Harry ended because of her indecent behavior. When he warns her "not to show up on his doorstep, drunk and in her underwear, because that won't work this time" she just responds to the camera with "Oh, it will." She is utterly convinced that sexuality will fix the problem in the end.

At first glance, it does seem that Fleabag uses sex as a tool for power. However, it depicts Fleabag as a complex woman who, most importantly, has agency. She doesn't use sex to 'get what she wants'. Instead, it is the sexual intercourse that she wants. This again becomes clear when she encounters a drunk woman on the sidewalk. After helping her and calling a taxi, she asks if the woman wants to come home with her. The woman gets angry and turns her down. Though somewhat astonishing behavior, this does represent a free attitude towards sex. Where the 'respectable woman' is sexually passive and oriented towards marriage, Fleabag seems to be driven by a search for pleasure, also shown by her consumption of alcohol and cigarettes. This is

emphasized in the scene at the bus stop where it appears that Fleabag is not necessarily attracted to women but that she will make an exception when she can't get to sleep with a man.

This constant self-objectification as a cry for help is quite noteworthy in *Fleabag*. Not only does she try to get each man she meets to sleep with her, but she does so by appeasing herself to the male gaze. She tries her level best to make herself feel and look sexy so that she can be validated through men's interest in her. This leads her to find herself in romantic circumstances that do not treat her well and leads her to find her importance solely in her capability of getting a man to sleep with her. This is evident when she is seen having a conversation with a bank loaner where she states, "Somehow, nothing is worse than not having anyone who wants to fuck me. Everyone feels this way. Either that or I am extremely lonely." This shows how scary self-objectification can be for a person as it might diminish your self-concept.

Divided Desire and the Hot Priest

In the second season, a new man enters Fleabag's world, a priest who is officiating her father's wedding and to whom she grows rather close. Personally, this is an interesting choice of character type, since priests are often associated with celibacy but also with a certain patriarchal position of power. A position that seems in contrast with Fleabag's feminism and agency. This is everything but a stereotypical priest though, as he drinks, smokes, and swears a lot. He is also able to joke about his religion and seems to struggle with his faith, especially now that he has met Fleabag.

Interestingly, the priest seems to combine most characteristics of the men in Fleabag's life into one. Their conversations are often on an emotional level like she has with Harry, but he tells very little about himself. Like her father, he has an emotional barrier, partly created by his

patriarchal position. Even though he is a priest, the character also has a sexual dimension. Not only in Fleabag's eyes since she finds him very attractive, but through the comments he makes, saying to her, "Oh stop calling me father, like it doesn't turn you on just to say it."

The priest ends up having an immense impact on Fleabag and some of her armor seems to dissolve because of it. Flashbacks reveal her buried grief for Boo and her mother, leading her to open to the priest. In a confession booth, she grapples with conflicting desires, admitting a longing for a traditional marriage despite her strong feminist persona. This inner conflict becomes a poignant moment, challenging societal expectations. In this confession, her struggle with her independence becomes clear. Having been established as a strong, independent feminist, she confesses that she wants to be told what to do. This feeling is, to her, so incredibly "wrong" that she must confess it to a priest, making this longing almost sinful. In the present era of post-modern feminism, many women have started to question their true ideologies and goals. It is assumed that each "modern woman" wants to work, earn a high-paying income, and delay getting married and having children. But somewhere, on the other end of the spectrum, there are women, like Fleabag, who struggle to accept that they might enjoy getting married and would like to live a life with a partner who tells them what to do.

Fleabag's direct address is also a large influence on her control. In the first episode, she decided what the camera saw, while other characters were oblivious to its existence. However, when she meets the priest, she starts making mistakes in her direct address during conversations with him. While they are sitting in her café, she is avoiding his questions, looking into the camera instead of answering him. He notices this and yells to her, "What is that? That thing that you are doing. It's like you disappear. What are you not telling me? Tell me what's going on beneath there!" He is the first character who notices the camera. When, at the end of the episode, he

mentions to her how she doesn't like answering questions, she awkwardly looks into the camera in response, after which he does the same.

Where Fleabag was obsessed with sexuality in the first episode, now she has fallen in love with a man who will not have sex with her. Because of the priest's celibacy vow, she is forced to simply enjoy his company. This comes to a culmination when, after her speech in the confessional, the priest is unable to control himself and breaks his vow for her. They kiss, and while Fleabag is trying to take his clothes off, a painting of Jesus falls off the wall with a loud bang. The two jump away from each other as if directly punished by God himself. The priest looks at her, confused and sad, after which he walks away. Fleabag, being left alone in the church, looks into the camera with a furious look in her eyes. When, in a later episode, the two do finally have sexual intercourse, Fleabag turns the camera away. This is different from her previous encounters. These moments are intimate and therefore private. Her relationship with the camera has changed and because she doesn't consciously choose to show her sexuality anymore, the camera has turned into an unwanted and intruding gaze.

Conclusion

As an audience member, seeing how Fleabag's journey of finding herself and dealing with emotions like grief unravels is a treat. In a very authentic way, she bears no expense in being her true self, full of flaws and extreme characteristics. Perhaps her authenticity is the reason why the character is remained unnamed throughout the show. Perhaps, this was a strategic move conducted by Waller-Bridge; for each woman watching to see themselves in the unnamed character. The unkept, unclean, and sometimes unappealing nature of Fleabag implies the use of the name, hinting at the emotional disarray that runs under the surface.

Reference

Waller-Bridge, P. (Director). (2016, July 21). *Fleabag* [BBC One]. Two Brother Pictures.