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„A Custom-Tailored Coat of Pain Wrapped Around a Broken
Heart:
Interconnectedness of Loneliness and Female Singleness in
the Series *Fleabag*“

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1. Introduction

“I was twenty-seven and in a cynical spiral. Convinced my work and my brain carried less value than my desirability, a rage grew in me at the invisible lectures I felt I was getting all the time about how to be a woman, how to be a feminist. That the world measured a female’s worth only by her desirability. I read an article once that said that a woman’s prime was at age twenty-five, because that is when she was considered at her most sexually attractive. Everywhere I looked there were inexplicably naked women – posters on the Tube, adverts for toothpaste, dog food. Someone would have their tits out. Porn was something that people gorged on rather than dabbled with. We were becoming numbed by it, and I was teetering on the edge of a depression. From there I looked down into the abyss and at the bottom of it was Fleabag looking up at me, in lipstick.

Her attitude. Her humour. Her ability to sum a person up and eviscerate them with a single, brutal insight is what drove me to write her. She said the unsayable, but it was the truth, albeit bent with cruelty. She was in her custom-tailored coat of pain wrapped around a broken heart. The bitter author of her own tragedy. It was her fault. She could not complain, she couldn’t blame it on anyone. She didn’t feel sorry for herself and she didn’t attribute her flaws to any one event or ordeal that she had experienced. One day she woke up with an audience watching her so she did the only thing she could... put on a show.”¹

This introduction to a character can be captured as the birth of the BBC show *Fleabag*. The series came to life in July 2016, when it appeared on screen. The first season was an instant hit and by the end of the second season which aired in 2019 the show was rewarded with six Primetime Emmy Awards and a Golden Globe alongside numerous nominations and enormous praise of critics and audience.² Based on a one woman stage show written and created by the British actress Phoebe Waller-Bridge the show follows a young, frivolous yet sorrowful woman living in London, trying to cope with grief and disconnection from the world. Her name remains unknown to the audience, but her story and struggle are known to almost anyone, as it is a story of loneliness and the desire of belonging. The success of this widely acclaimed show indicates public resonance with the issues touched within this production. Hence it is of value to examine such a contemporary cultural product in order to understand how it potentially affects individuals and contributes to a social discourse.

¹ Waller-Bridge, Phoebe (2019) *Fleabag. The Scriptures*, London: Sceptre, p. 407.

² Golden Globe Awards: *Fleabag*, <https://www.goldenglobes.com/tv-show/fleabag>, last access: 18 June 2021. Television Academy. Emmys: *Fleabag*, <https://www.emmys.com/shows/fleabag>, last access: 18 June 2021.

Since awareness of the health threatening consequences of loneliness is increasing and its problematic spread has led to references such as the ‘loneliness epidemic’ it can be assumed that the specific portrayal of a single woman experiencing loneliness is one of the key aspects that contributed to the wide recognition of *Fleabag*. Not only was Phoebe Waller-Bridge often praised for her feminist writing, media and audience echo online often reasoned their admiration by appreciating how relatable the show was.³ *Fleabag* can be described as a character deeply struggling with the disconnection to the world around her and the show reflects on the issue of loneliness through the representation of a lonely young woman in the context of modern city life.

The spread of an actual pandemic in 2020 which resulted in worldwide lockdowns, isolation and obligatory quarantines fostered loneliness for individuals around the globe at the same time. What was fascinating about this crisis was the simultaneousness of loneliness among millions. Although this feeling is a highly individual and subjective experience, it can be shared by everyone at the same time. Being lonely together holds a paradox that becomes obtrusively evident amidst a global pandemic that demands for social distancing and invites to raise more questions concerning this actual health threat. While the world is consistently becoming more and more populated, all the more people seem to get more and more lonely. Depending on one’s individual living location one might be surrounded by a vast number of fellow human beings, in cities or conurbations, who are seemingly more available or reachable through modern technologies. However, experiencing a lack of social connection is becoming increasingly common. Since loneliness does not only affect one individually but has immediate effects on society as it can severely harm people’s health and consequently decrease their ability to contribute as a functioning citizen to their social environment, it is of urgency to pay attention to this silent threat.

As the creation of a Ministry of Loneliness proves, the United Kingdom and its population suffer so drastically from loneliness, that severe efforts to raise awareness had to be made. Since loneliness is a subjective and very individual experience it is of interest to find sources and conditions that contribute or lead to feeling lonely. Even though loneliness is not necessarily linked to singleness, being single can have a significant impact on the individual’s experience

³ Frankland, Heather (22/08/2019) „Fleabag: 10 Real Moments That We Can Connect To“, *Screenrant*, <https://screenrant.com/fleabag-show-relatable-moments/>, last access: 22/06/2021.

Thakur, Nishant (06/10/2020) „Life Lessons From Fleabag: Scroll Down For The 10 Most Relatable Quotes From The Show“, *DKODING*, <https://www.dkoding.in/latest-news/life-lessons-from-fleabag-relatable-quotes/>, last access: 22/06/2021.

Hannah Hoolihan (29/07/2021), “Why Phoebe Waller-Bridge Is One of the Best Writers Working Today,” *Collider*, <https://collider.com/phoebe-waller-bridge-writing-explained/>, last access: 22/06/2021.

of feeling lonely. In regard to this linkage, the gender difference plays a noteworthy part. Tuula Gordon concludes in her studies on single women back in 1994, that ‘singleness [cannot] be sidestepped and ignored when women organise their lives, or when they reflect on their lives’. As portrayed in *Fleabag*, the protagonist is regularly confronted with her single status by her environment. Reasons for these confrontations stem from clichés and stereotypes, such as ‘the single woman as a threat to men and marriage.’⁴

Contemporary History and Visual Culture are inconceivable without visual products such as TV-shows, which is why it is worth examining these cinematic representations as well as the causes for a positive or a negative reception by the public. Since *Fleabag* resonated deeply not only with me personally but cross-culturally with so many, I became curious about the underlying yet triggering themes that would allow for a diverse audience to relate and connect. As the series covers a wide range of issues, I will focus on the two constituting aspects of the story and its course of events, since most intentions behind plot driving actions stem from a) the loneliness that is burden and struggle to almost all characters and b) the desire for a successful single identity for women of a certain age.

Fleabag deals in a unique way with the emotional state of loneliness and the social state of being a single woman. Her character is ‘confronted with the expectations piled onto women in contemporary neoliberal society’⁵ and hence the show touches not only issues of femininity, female sexuality, spinsterhood and solitary women, but also approaches matters of loneliness on many different levels. While loneliness is in no way gender-exclusive scientific data like in Gordons studies shows that there are gender differences as well as a correlation between female singleness and loneliness. If this tendency is taken into account *Fleabag* and its story line creates a valuable approach reflecting on this interconnectedness, which will be analysed in the following. It will be determined how the series breaks with common gender stereotypes, such as the frustrated spinster, hence offers a new narrative of successful female singleness. To prove this hypothesis the progressive portrayal of a self-sufficient female character will be examined in order to bring forward the complexity of desire for connection and freedom at the very same time with which women are likely to struggle to combine when still tied into social structures that continue to impose concrete gender roles on them. The representation of complex

⁴ Gordon, Tuula (1994): *Single Women: On the Margins?*, London: THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD, p. 196.

⁵ Orlaith Darling (2020) “*The moment you realise someone wants your body:*” neoliberalism, mindfulness and female embodiment in *Fleabag*, *Feminist Media Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2020.1797848

femininity in pop culture like in *Fleabag* contributes to the ongoing gender discourse and to do so too is the intention of this thesis.

Before establishing a theoretical context for this work to then dissect the show into fragments in order to explore and investigate the mentioned main aspects a short synopsis of the story shall be given to help contextualise specific scenes.

Fleabag is a female-centric comedy show about an outrageous, cynical, funny yet struggling woman in her early 30s living in London, who is not once called by name but in the scripts is simply referred to as Fleabag, like she will be in this analysis. Her life is defined by her hypersexuality, her lack of success jobwise, the death and loss of her mother as well as of her best friend resulting in an intense desire for connection. Influenced by a culture and family that maintains the attitude of the stiff upper lip in order to overcome tragedy and trauma Fleabag blocks out the grief and guilt she carries within in order to shut down emotionally. Instead she plays a show for her environment as well as for the fictive audience following her, eager to portray the hilarious, carefree person she wishes to be. Through direct audience address she is able to narrate her own story and reframe situations to present her personal reality through commenting on her daily experiences, gives summaries of characters she encounters and makes jokes whenever she can. This communication with the camera is not reduced to language but also happens on a non-verbal level through her mimic expressions like when she raises her eyebrow or twists her mouth as a comment on the current situation. Fleabag runs a café by herself, a business far from success that she struggles to keep. She opened it with her friend Boo (Jenny Rainsford), who died in a semi-intentional accident. After Boo had found out that her boyfriend was cheating on her she ‘wanted to punish him by ending up in the hospital and not letting him visit her for a bit’⁶ but instead got killed in the traffic collision she had inflicted. By the end of *Season 1* it is revealed that Fleabag is the one who slept with Boo’s boyfriend which leaves her racked with guilt and with the belief that she deserved to be alone and had to deal with her grief on her own. Her sister Claire (Sian Clifford), married to an obnoxious, shamelessly sexist alcoholic named Martin (Brett Gelman), is an uptight, distant, career driven workaholic far from being warm. Her main ambition is to keep things in order as well as keeping up the appearance of a functioning family system. However, her deep love for Fleabag is undeniable and even though they are each other’s complete opposite they understand one another on a deep level due to the story and bond they share. The death of their mother has had a different impact on the two of them as Fleabag is unable to overcome the loss while Claire

⁶ Waller-Bridge (2019), *Fleabag*, p. 31.

was able to find a way to deal with it. They both reflect their own deficiencies but also their strengths towards each other, which at the same time evokes admiration as well as self-doubt within themselves for the other. Claire focused and succeeded in building financial security as well as a secure social network by maintaining a convenience marriage, while Fleabag managed to create a life of autonomy and little restriction. They both hold what the other is lacking. When Martin tries to kiss Fleabag at Claire's birthday party the two sisters are torn apart for Claire decides to stay in the marriage after she learns about the betrayal and rejects Fleabag. In the second season they reunite, and Claire eventually leaves Martin in the last episode to follow her own desire. Their father (Bill Paterson), an elderly man of little to no words, gets into a relationship with their godmother (Olivia Coleman) after the death of his wife and mother of his children. His relationship to his daughters is distant and seems to be reduced to fulfilling the bare minimum of fatherly duties by trying to check in on their physical well-being. In the second season he eventually remarries eager to start a new life, which is painful to Fleabag in many ways. Partly because she herself is not able to move on, but also because of her godmother who is an intruder if not a homewrecker in Fleabag's eyes and sees herself threatened by the daughters and their role in the father's life. While the first season brings forward the highly reserved character of the relationship between the family members, the second season allows them to come closer together. An addition to the difficult family construct is a new character introduced in the beginning of the second season. The priest who is supposed to marry Fleabag's father and godmother takes a central role as he becomes the main character's love interest. Not a saint himself he drinks and swears a lot but deeply believes in the moral code of the Holy Bible having found guidance to help bear his own lostness. He shows interest in Fleabag and soon deeply cares for her wanting to help her as he sees her pain in a way no one else does. The depth of their connection becomes obvious when the priest witnesses the moments of Fleabag's disappearing when she turns to the camera talking to her ever-present audience, to her fictive friends. For Fleabag he even breaks celibacy, and she allows herself to feel and fall for someone again. By expressing her love for him to him in the final episode Fleabag is able to reconnect to herself as she dares to get back in touch with her feelings. Even though the priest reciprocates her feelings he decides to go with God and so they part. However, the last scene shows Fleabag saying goodbye to her audience and continuing her path on her own, not in need to put on a show any longer or to be with a man she knew all along she could not have. She walks away from the camera as a self-sufficient woman without a romantic partner by her side but with love in her heart and family behind her back.

The aim of this analysis is to outline stereotypical gender roles in regard to the single status of women as well as the examination of how these stereotypes are apprehended, represented, neglected and negotiated by the characters within the diegetic world. In order to bring forward the transgressive character of the show connecting points between the emotional state of the female lead and her social status as a single woman are to be determined and forms and modes of representation of loneliness will be analysed. Defining the nexus of female loneliness and singleness in *Fleabag* through a visual and textual analysis is supposed to contribute to the ongoing debate on gender representation, question ideas of successful femininity and also raise awareness about the severity and complexity of loneliness as a form of social disconnection. In aspiration to understand the human condition of loneliness more deeply this research poses as foundation for an essay film titled *sonder* complementing this Master thesis with a visual exploration of the emotional state in question.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Loneliness as a Modern Emotion?

An attempt to date the birth of an emotion is quite obviously an endeavour determined to fall through. What can be seen as one of the first references of loneliness within Christian and Jewish cultures, is the creation of Eve for it was not in God's plan to be alone.⁷ However, literature very frequently refers to *loneliness* as a modern emotion and justifies this assumption in regard to the etymology of the word. Only around the year 1800 the term 'loneliness' appeared in published texts in English with notable frequency but achieved great prominence today, as terms like the 'loneliness epidemic' insinuate. Not only the frequency in usage has changed, the meanings of loneliness have as well. Before the 18th century, loneliness referred primarily to the physical state of 'oneliness' and 'meant simply the condition of being alone.'⁸ Today it refers to a rather painful experience caused by a lack of social connections. The evolution of this emotion resembles the 'survival of the fittest' as it can be compared to hunger for connection. Only those who are able to adapt and learn how to become sociable can satisfy their needs. Today loneliness finds a central place in modern societies as it has become one of the most severe health threats even leading to developments such as the creation of a Ministry

⁷ van Staden WC, Coetzee K. (Nov 23, 2010) *Conceptual relations between loneliness and culture*. Curr Opin Psychiatry. (6):524-9. doi: 10.1097/YCO.0b013e32833f2ff9. PMID: 20838346.

⁸ Bound Alberti, Fay (2019) *A Biography of Loneliness: The History of an Emotion*, Oxford: University Press, p. 18.

of Loneliness in the UK⁹. Of course, an emotion is neither experienced in the same way around the world nor by every individual, but it is undeniable that globally the meaning and the importance of the issue of loneliness has changed so dramatically to the effect that research concerning this topic is of increasing importance.

When speaking about loneliness, one has to be aware that first and foremost it is a matter of natural human experience that was essential in human evolution and is not to be eliminated. However, when loneliness becomes chronic it, in fact, turns into a severe health threat and a condition that decreases the quality of living for an individual drastically. In a 2010 report by the Mental Health Foundation it was registered that 60% of 18 to 34-year-olds in the UK acknowledge to feel lonely ‘often’.¹⁰ A decade and a pandemic later the numbers are on the rise and to refer to a ‘loneliness epidemic’ makes for no exaggeration.¹¹

2.2 Forms of Loneliness

*the irony of loneliness
is we all feel it
at the same time*

Together – Rupri Kaur¹²

What Rupri Kaur captures in her poetry is the fascinating paradox of loneliness: while it is a purely subjective and individual feeling, it is undoubtedly known to every single living individual. The emotion of feeling lonely is part of the human experience and stems from the biological need for social connection.¹³ Like hunger for food, loneliness is a bodily function that reminds human beings, social animals, to reconnect, as in the era of hunters and gatherers a secure integration in a group was decisive for survival. At the time, being alone was a death sentence. In today’s life, it might not be as acute of a danger as it used to be, however, we are still wired for strong communal security. As Vivek Murthy puts it in his book *Together*:

⁹ GOV.UK, *PM launches Government’s first loneliness strategy*, online access: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/pm-launches-governments-first-loneliness-strategy>, published 15 October 2018, last accessed: Jan 19, 2021.

¹⁰ Griffin, Jo (2010) *The Lonely Society?* London: Mental Health Foundation, https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/sites/default/files/the_lonely_society_report.pdf, last accessed: March 10, 2021.

¹¹ Mental Health Foundation, *Almost a quarter of adults living under lockdown in the UK have felt loneliness*, <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/news/almost-quarter-adults-living-under-lockdown-uk-have-felt-loneliness>, last accessed: March 10, 2021.

¹² Kaur, Rupri (2017) *The Sun and Her Flowers*, London: Simon & Schuster UK Ltd.

¹³ Day, F.R., Ong, K.K. & Perry, J.R.B. Elucidating the genetic basis of social interaction and isolation. *Nat Commun* 9, 2457 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-018-04930-1>, last accessed March 10, 2021.

‘Evolution is slow to catch up on rapid societal change.’¹⁴ Loneliness has been revealed as one of the most serious health threats of all. In recent years there has been an increasing amount of research on the effects and risks that loneliness can have on ‘physical, psychiatric and psychosocial functioning’ of humans.¹⁵ To only name a few, the social pain that is experienced as loneliness can cause or worsen depression¹⁶, alcoholism¹⁷, social anxiety¹⁸, obesity and elevated blood pressure¹⁹, diminished immunity²⁰ as well as premature mortality²¹. Once suffering from loneliness becomes chronic it can become self-sustainable and therefore even more dangerous.²²

While almost everyone experiences loneliness, it is not the same experience for everyone. Weiss differed between two types of loneliness and attributed it as a relational deficit, when the individual’s relationships do not live up to the expectations, either in quality and/or quantity. Another distinction is made between emotional and social loneliness, whereas the first defines the lack of ‘close’ relationships and the latter a lack of a social network in general.²³ Loneliness-researcher Ami Rokach determined certain characteristics ‘extracted from various theoretical orientations’ that are commonly perceived in the 21st century being ‘the age of relationships’. Alongside experiences of ‘being alone, feeling alone, unloved, unimportant, and uncared for’²⁴ other themes that characterise feeling lonely were defined:

¹⁴ Murthy, Vivek (2020) *Together. Loneliness, Health & What Happens When We Find Connection*, London: Profile Books Ltd, p. 95.

¹⁵ Rokach, Ami (April 2018) *The Effect of Gender and Culture on Loneliness: A Mini Review*, Emerging Science Journal, Vol. 2, No. 2, doi:10.28991/esj-2018-01128, March 10, 2021.

¹⁶ Hawkley, L. C., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2010) *Loneliness matters: A theoretical and empirical review of consequences and mechanisms*. *Annals of Behavioural Medicine*, 40, 218-227. doi: 10.1007/s12160-010-9210-8, 10.03.2021

¹⁷ Akerlind, I., & Hörnquist, J. O. (1992). *Loneliness and alcohol abuse: A review of evidences of an interplay*. *Social Science & Medicine*, 34, 405–414. doi:10.1016/0277-9536(92)90300-F, 10.03.2021.

¹⁸ Kearns, A., Whitley, E., Tannahill, C., & Ellaway, A. (2014). Loneliness, social relations and health and well-being in deprived communities. *Psychology, Health & Medicine*, 1–13. doi:10.1080/13548506.2014.940354

¹⁹ Hawkley, L. C., Masi, C. M., Berry, J. D., & Cacioppo, J. T. (2006). Loneliness is a unique predictor of age-related differences in systolic blood pressure. *Psychology and Aging*, 21, 152–164. doi:10.1037/0882-7974.21.1.152.

²⁰ Pressman, S. D., Cohen, S., Miller, G. E., Barkin, A., Rabin, B. S., & Treanor, J. J. (2005). Loneliness, social network size, and immune response to influenza vaccination in college freshmen. *Health Psychology*, 24, 297–306. doi:10.1037/0278-6133.24.3.297.

²¹ Holt-Lunstad, J., & Smith, T. B. (2015). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: A meta-analytic review. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 10, 227–237, 10.03.2021.

²² Cacioppo, J. T., Chen, H. Y., Cacioppo, S. (2017) *Reciprocal Influences Between Loneliness and Self-Centeredness: A Cross-Lagged Panel Analysis in a Population-Based Sample of African American, Hispanic, and Caucasian Adults*, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167217705120>.

²³ Weiss, R. S. (1973). *Loneliness: The experience of emotional and social isolation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

²⁴ Rokach (2018), p. 59f.

- a. Loneliness is an experience of separation
- b. It may arise at birth or in childhood and remain throughout one's life
- c. It is associated with invalidation of meaning
- d. It is difficult to tolerate
- e. It motivates humans to seek meaning and connection
- f. It may have an evolutionary basis, and
- g. It signals the potential for growth and new possibilities.

That means, loneliness as a phenomenon is essentially a subjective experience and 'influenced by personal and situational variables.'²⁵

2.3 Culture, Gender and Loneliness

The influences of culture, environment and socio demographic disposition on the experience of loneliness is not to be underestimated, hence a very sensitive approach is required to understand the connection between emotion and location.

Such personal and situational variables as gender and culture have an immense influence on the individual's socialisation.²⁶ Personal beliefs and expectations are shaped by cultural values as well as hegemonial structures of social organisation which set the conditions that demarcate the space within the subject can manoeuvre. Research has shown that not only the individual's experience of loneliness depends on their cultural environment, but also the level of loneliness differs significantly across cultures.²⁷ One particular differentiating factor is individualism in contrast to collectivistic cultures that put focus on group interests, whereas individualistic cultures see the individual at centre. 'Individualistic values tend to dominate in "weak family" areas, whereas 'strong family' dominates collectivistic cultures.'²⁸ Hegemonic beliefs and values of a culture shape the individual's expectations for social connection and hence the emotional reactions when these expectations are not met.²⁹ Undoubtedly, social connectedness is a significant determinant for a frequent experience of loneliness.³⁰ The feeling of social connection, however, is not determined by the size of the social network around the individual, rather it is the quality of relationships within the network that is pivotal. This quality can be

²⁵ Rokach (2018), p. 60.

²⁶ Nicolaisen, M. & Thorsen, K. (2014) Who are lonely? Loneliness in different age groups (18-81), using two measures of loneliness. *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 78(3) p. 229-257.

²⁷ Rokach (2018), p. 61., McHugh Power, J.E., Hannigana, C., Carneya, S. & Lawlor, B.A. (2017). *Exploring the meaning of loneliness among socially isolated older adults in rural Ireland: a qualitative investigation*. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 14(4), 394–414. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2017.1329363>.

²⁸ Rokach (2018), p. 61.

²⁹ Fokkema, T., de Jong Gierveld, J. & Dykstra, P.A. (2012). Cross-national differences in older adult loneliness. *The Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied*, 146 (1–2), 201–228.

³⁰ Furman, W., & Buhrmester, D. (1992). *Age and sex differences in perceptions networks of personal relationships*. *Child Development*, 63(1), 103–115. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.1992.tb03599.x.

measured by whether a person finds oneself close to someone else, whether they have someone to confide in, someone to share with and rely on.³¹ Within such an environment the individual can develop an enduring sense of self in relation to the world around.³² One particular social network is of significant importance, as it poses as the first social group a new-born individual encounters and becomes socialised within: the family. The degree of closeness is among the strongest and most intense, as one is likely to experience care, protection, love and attention as well as feeling understood.³³ Relationships with parents play a big part in adolescents' experience of loneliness and preventing such, but also positive sibling relationships can constitute strong bonds.³⁴

Even though these factors seem utterly distinct and like the individual's fate, the culture within which people operate and socialise sets the preconditions for certain behaviour, especially in relation to others. While southern European countries have generally rather tight knit families ties and an 'open house' culture, northern Europeans tend to live more isolated, as the number of single households indicates. While living alone is among many vulnerability factors that can cause feelings of loneliness, it is not predetermining as it is the individual's interpretation of the circumstances which determines whether one feels like something is missing or not.

2.4 Loneliness in the UK

How a subject interprets a certain situation depends on the cultural codes and practices they are familiar with. Since sole-living has become an increasing trend in the United Kingdom over the past 30 years, it could be assumed that this form of living is appealing to many people. Alongside this socio-demographic shift, also the 'rise of the single person' has been captured in the UK as a 21st century phenomenon and singleness becomes a much more welcomed choice in opposition to the hegemony of the couple.³⁵ Albeit the growing number of singles, the UK

³¹ Karcher, M. (2011). *The Hemingway: Measure of adolescent connectedness. A manual for scoring and interpretation*. Unpublished manuscript, The University of Texas at San Antonio, TX. Retrieved from www.adolescentconnectedness.com, last accessed: March 9, 2021.

³² Townsend, K. C., & McWhirter, B. T. (2005). *Connectedness: a review of the literature with implications for counseling, assessment, and research*. Journal of Counseling & Development, 83(2), 191–201. doi:10.1002/j.1556-6678.2005.tb00596.x.

³³ Blum, R. W., & Rinehart, P. M. (1997). *Reducing the risk: connections that make a difference in the lives of youth*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, Division of General Pediatrics, Adolescent Health. p. 15.

³⁴ MacEvoy, J. P., Weeks, M. S., & Asher, S. R. (2011). *Loneliness*. In B. B. Brown, & M. J. Prinstein (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of adolescence* (vol. Vo1. 2, pp. 178–187). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

³⁵ Budgeon (2008 'Couple Culture and the Production of Singleness', *Sexualities*, 11(3), p. 301–325. doi: 10.1177/1363460708089422., p. 310.; also: *Living alone in the UK*, Office for National Statistics, 4 April 2019, <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/families/datasets/livingaloneintheuk>, last accessed: March 24, 2021

was faced with a far more swift change which led to such drastic developments that the government had to take action against what spread like a disease: ‘the loneliness epidemic’. Since loneliness is a subjective and relatively complex concept it is rather difficult to measure, however research has brought forward certain socio-demographic key factors that are considered to have a central impact on the individual and one’s likelihood to suffer from loneliness. A 2011 case study on loneliness among adults in the United Kingdom aiming to ‘compare the prevalence of loneliness across the whole range of adult age’ worked with the following major vulnerability/protective factors³⁶:

1. Age and gender
2. Perceived mental and physical health
3. Household size and marital status
4. Perceived and reported social resources including the availability of a confiding relationship.

The research focusing on ‘contemporary Western (post) modern societies’ concluded that, ‘for all age groups, females are more likely to report loneliness than males’ and ‘for severe loneliness, this fluctuates across the age groups with the highest differentials being for the 35–44-year age group.’³⁷ While loneliness in the UK is certainly wide spread among the oldest as well as the younger generations, it is experienced throughout all age groups. What can be interpreted as a vulnerable factor is not only being female, but also being single/unmarried and/or sole-living as the research suggests. ‘Protective factors’ such as good health, tertiary education or having a confidant³⁸ can have a positive influence on the prevention of suffering from loneliness. Communal living or more generally, living in larger households, too, falls among ‘protective factors.’ However, living alone and unpartnered constitutes a lifestyle that is strong on the rise, which can be identified as a demographic shift suggesting a ‘post-couple Britain’³⁹. So even if there is a general trend within an entire culture towards being single, women are more likely to also experience loneliness. In prospect of the analysis to follow, I want to put a spotlight on the 30 – 50 age group, as within this cohort women are especially vulnerable to loneliness.⁴⁰ There are suggestions that men are simply less likely to report feeling

³⁶ Christina R. Victor & Keming Yang (2012) The Prevalence of Loneliness Among Adults: A Case Study of the United Kingdom, *The Journal of Psychology*, 146:1-2, 85-104, DOI: 10.1080/00223980.2011.613875, p. 90.

³⁷ Ibid. p. 93f.

³⁸ Ibid. p. 96.

³⁹ Rayner, J. (2000) ‘We Want to Be Alone’, *The Observer Review*, Sunday 16 January: 1–2.

⁴⁰ Franklin, A.S., Tranter, B. (2008) ‘Loneliness in Australia.’ Occasional Paper 13, Housing and Community Research Unit, University of Tasmania.

lonely due to an unwillingness to admit to ‘what is socially stigmatized.’⁴¹ This would align with stereotypical gender roles that put a ban on vulnerability for men. However, while this study does not wish to fail to point out this potential explanation for the gender gap in this age group, the author argues that this is not the sole reason. One hypothesis that could impact the gender difference are the social expectations towards women, that nurture certain hegemonic beliefs of normative life designs such as motherhood.

‘Romantic love, partnership, marriage and motherhood form the cultural context of women and resonate in representations of them. They form a framework within which personal lives and subjectivities are constructed.’⁴²

2.5 Breaking Fate and Facing Blame: Single Women in Modern Western Societies

Most of the time the individual is not aware of the framework within one designs their life. Most regulating structures and categories remain invisible until some irritation of the existing order occurs and a deviation from the norm is created. This also accounts for our intimate lives and our sexuality that are just as well influenced by such regulative forces. Heterosexual coupledness is one of the normative categories taken for granted in Western cultures and therefore perceived as natural or an ideal to achieve. Consequently, singleness carries a stigma of failure and loneliness. Because the single status is framed as problematic or ‘unnatural’ in opposition to the more dominant form of coupledness, unpartnered individuals are often forced to account for the organisation of their intimate lives. Even though more and more people choose to be single and deconstruct the narrative of the ‘natural’ desirability of coupledness, they often still have to construct other narratives for themselves to create a positive identity, aware that they do not live up to normative expectations. Especially for women of a certain age the single status can create discrepancies as the structure of the nuclear family determined marriage and motherhood as key factors for a successful performance of mature femininity.⁴³ In most cultures throughout history women were positioned on the margins of society. ‘By refusing the conventions of marital vows and family life, single women have presented a challenge to patriarchy and a disruption to gender norms.’⁴⁴ Their nonconformity was inevitably interpreted as a threat to the existing order and brought forward stigma, such as the

⁴¹ Rokach (2018), p. 60., Borys, S., & Perlman, D. (1985). ‘Gender differences in loneliness.’ *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 11. 63-75.

⁴² Gordon (1994), p. 1.

⁴³ Budgeon, S. (2008) Couple Culture and the Production of Singleness, *Sexualities*, 11(3), p. 301–325. doi: 10.1177/1363460708089422.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 309.

‘nun/prostitute’ classification or negative stereotypes as the ‘old spinster’ or the ‘femme fatale’. Up until now, despite the increasing popularity of singlehood, research shows that there remains a stigmatised notion of ‘failure’ to the female singleness.

The position of single women in society is still ambiguous and even within one particular culture or cohort they cannot distinctively be classified as either autonomous individuals or as marginal to society; they constitute a heterogenous group.⁴⁵ What can be captured, however, is a shift towards a new idealised femininity that promises resolution: the ‘empowered, autonomous woman’.

In a 2015 article Shelly Budgeon uncovers the problem with this call for a new ‘femininity that constituted by values of choice and empowerment is now present in popular culture, media representations and public discourse.’⁴⁶ In the context of Western liberal capitalist cultures the free choice for women is questionable, as the marriage ideology is still part of dominant cultural norms. Within such an environment ‘women’s choices, organized through hegemonic gender relations, continue to be a site of regulation.’⁴⁷ Media representations advertise the sexually free, libidinous and pro-active female and equate this masculine mode of sexuality with empowerment. What is problematic about these suggestions is that they

‘[do] not destabilize conventional gendered constructions of normative heterosexual desire organized in opposing terms of emotion/reason, passive/active, and relational/autonomous, and as such, there is no indication that a feminine sexual desire defined in autonomous terms results.’⁴⁸

Ultimately, the binary relation of masculinity and femininity is maintained, as well as the ideals attached to them such as the complementary couple. Not only is heteronormativity disguised behind these neo-liberal mechanisms that push women towards self-optimising identity work, in order to succeed in performing a ‘new’ yet idealized femininity, that is understood and performed through acts of sexual liberty and autonomy.

An understanding of gender as a performative act is a premise for this argument. Certain performative acts can be identified as male or female based on ‘shared normative conceptions associated with those categories.’⁴⁹ Any deviation from such shared norms can position the individual as an outsider and thus makes them accountable for their nonconformity. Within neo-liberal, self-managing ideology consequences of nonconformity and a lack of success in

⁴⁵ Bound Alberti (2019), p. 157.

⁴⁶ Budgeon, S. (2016) *The ‘problem’ with single women: Choice, accountability and social change*, Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 33(3), doi: 10.1177/0265407515607647, p. 406.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 409.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 403.

performing femininity, which Western cultural norms understand as complementary to masculinity, can create a 'deficit identity'.

In Lahad's study on the label of selectiveness in relation to women, a textual analysis of web columns focused on female singleness, the contradictory role is revealed in which women are regulated in shaping their lives up to date.⁵⁰ Like mentioned above, sexual liberation and agency over one's own sexuality are key factors that constitute the so-called 'new' femininity. Mastering self-management is supposed to lead to satisfaction, completeness and fulfillment. If a woman fails to achieve these goals, there is only herself to blame. Either she is not pro-active enough or too selective. Therefor free choice quickly becomes an illusion as the success in performing femininity only allows a biography that eventually supports the existing heteronormativity. Hence, singleness in women is also more of a privilege for a certain age group, within which it is socially accepted, if not promoted, to focus on education, career and self-development. But once the stage of normative singleness is passed, the single status is not interpreted as a consequence of choice but implies a deficit and classifies single women as too 'choosy'. On these terms empowerment becomes more of a slogan for mastering the art of self-governance and self-optimisation, placing 'the single women back on the maternal heteronormative life track.'⁵¹ As Lahad's analysis shows the 'new empowered femininity' is not all that inclusive, and through simplistic language used within the discourse it is suggested that single women can take their 'liberties too far'.⁵² This adds to Budgeons' observation:

'Among other things they are seen to be selfish, deviant, immature, irresponsible, lonely, unfulfilled, emotionally challenged, lacking interpersonal ties and strong social bonds. Indeed studies have shown that there are very few positive representations of uncoupled lifestyles available as resources for people to draw upon in constructing a positive identity.'⁵³

Late singlehood is likely to be perceived as an indicator of failed self-agency. Cure for this misinterpretation of empowerment and exploitation of freedom is to be found in compromise and lowering of expectations. Ultimately, women finding themselves in late singlehood are encouraged to make alterations to their conduct of life in order to contribute keeping up the heteronormative order.

⁵⁰ Lahad, K. (2013). *'Am I asking too much?' The selective woman as a new social problem*. Women's Studies International Forum, 40, 23–32.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 24.

⁵² Ibid., p. 31.

⁵³ Budgeon (2008), p. 309., also: Chasteen, 1994; Reynolds and Wetherell, 2003; Zajicek and Koski, 2003.

Constructing a positive self-image for women has not become any easier as the social expectations circulating are ambiguous. While being encouraged to live autonomously and to take agency over one's intimate life, the same sexual desire is still presumed for everyone and when one is not capable of creating a fulfilled life on these terms, they themselves are to blame. If they experience dissatisfaction or loneliness they probably have gone out on a limb and now suffer from the consequences of not following the normative path. The lack of positive representations of uncoupled lifestyles might have come to more prominence within recent years, but this rarely extends to female singlehood. It is to claim that *Fleabag* does bring forward a positive image of a single woman, even if she is heart-broken, lonely and desperate. However, the solution for healing and dealing with her pain does not lie in simply lowering her standards in order to find a man to settle with. The following analysis examines how the female protagonist's experience of loneliness is not stemming from her single status. It is the aim to show how *Fleabag* is not promoting normative coupledness or framing it as a cure for a deficient identity but breaks social norms and allows for a female representation beyond traditional femininity.

3. Method

This analysis focusses on discovering connections between the protagonist's experience of loneliness and her social status as a single woman in the BBC show *Fleabag*. To argue a certain significance of this contemporary media product, that resonated so widely with critics and audience, it is to claim that this series creates a positive image of a single woman without suggesting a deficient identity, which has no need to be *repaired* through a heteronormative relationship/a romantic partner/a man. Since single women have always faced a rather marginal position globally but, regarding this thesis, specifically in Western societies and their marriage-centred structures, their experience of loneliness was likely to be linked with their deviation from the norm. *Fleabag*, however, portrays a woman suffering from loneliness without suggesting resolution through marriage and therefore framing female singleness not as a choice in lifestyle which consequently has to result in pain for the women in question.

The aim of this analysis is to prove the articulated hypothesis, as well as detect the main aspects, causes and reasons for an individual's loneliness and singleness. Through a visual and textual analysis of explicit scenes these main aspects will be explored, contextualised and put into connection to allow for a deeper understanding of the topics in question. The content of all episodes will be analysed with focus on character, dialogue and cinematographic imagery,

which are inevitably linked since certain interactions in relationship reveal features about the constitution of character.⁵⁴ This approach follows Áine F. Loiré's analysis of *Sex and the City* and its gender representations, since this research, too, focuses on the portrayal of a single woman. In an interdisciplinary manner Loiré divided the content into main themes setting focus on female empowerment, which is also part of this work's research interest.

The gender aspect, however, is only one of the two main aspects which will be put into focus. It is the universally shared emotion of loneliness, with which the protagonist's single status is supposed to be brought in relation. Loneliness as well as singleness are issues that are linked to human nature as social creatures, which is why relationships between characters as well as with the fictitious audience will be highlighted and shall serve to structure the content into main categories. Furthermore, dialogue in terms of interaction will be taken into account, whether it is performed verbally or non-verbally, like the main character's communication with the camera. Since this is a qualitative research that will extract overarching themes in order to find points of connection, the following analysis guiding question will serve as common thread throughout the scene analysis.

3.1 Analysis Guiding Questions

- *What circumstances influence her experience of loneliness? How are they intertwined with her single status?*
- *How is the ambiguity between the status of an autonomous individual and the status of a marginal 'other' portrayed?⁵⁵*
- *What forms of disconnection (self/world, individual/society, body/mind) can be detected and do they contribute to the characters' loneliness? If so, how?*
- *How are the female characters moving beyond traditional femininity?*
- *How do the female protagonists move between being isolated heroines and social beings like friends or sisters? In what situations and with what intention do they interact with others?*
- *What are their strategies to find connection? With regards to this question, what relevance is brought to their bodies or their physical appearance more generally? What forms of objectification of the female body are being touched upon in the show?*

⁵⁴ Áine F. Loiré (2011) "Forbidden fruit or conventional apple pie? A look at *Sex and the City*'s reversal of the female gender" *Media, Culture & Society* 33, no.1, p. 35-51.

⁵⁵ Budgeon (2016), p. 64.

- What stereotypes and demonisations of solitary women can be detected? In what kind of context are they embedded?
- What relevance is attributed to sisterhood and alternative networks outside a romantic partnership/marriage? If there is a sense of community, how is it created?
- What external pressure is put on single women in terms of finding a romantic partner?

4. Analysis

*Loneliness pays.*⁵⁶

- Fleabag

4.1 Fleabag: A Girl In Armor

The widely acclaimed BBC series *Fleabag* produced by *Two Brothers Pictures*⁵⁷ has often been praised for its outstanding feminist writing by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, but also for its progressive gender representation. This research aims to support this assessment, since the complexity of characters goes beyond stereotypical depictions of gender. The show offers diverse representations of masculinity while setting focus on female autonomy and self-sufficiency. The direct audience address of the main character serves as an instrument of control that allows for agency in telling her story and portraying the world around her. *Fleabag* is not a story *about* a woman; it is the story of a woman, told by a woman. Control and agency are also brought forward in the realm of sexuality. Fleabag uses sex for her own purposes as a self-empowered subject and is not being considered an object to be made use of. In the first season the focus lies on this portrayal of autonomy, while the second season brings attention to the topic of vulnerability, which ultimately serves as a tool for emancipation and freedom for Fleabag. Her signature look, defined by her dark coat and red lipstick, highlights her relation to the world around her. With her coat pulled tight she protects herself from the roughness and cold that she feels in all her loneliness, much like her heart that she protects with a coat too, afraid it could get hurt again. Her red lips on the other hand reflect her relation to herself and her femininity. Putting on make-up is not only an investment of time in oneself, it also allows for agency to highlight certain features of the physical self with the intention to be seen and recognised. The red colour draws attention to her lips and reflects on a woman's innate

⁵⁶ *Fleabag*, S02E02, 00:07:25.

⁵⁷ "Productions," Two Brothers Pictures, <https://www.twobrotherspictures.com/productions>, last access: May 21, 2021.

sensuality that is consciously put on display. Part of her is in want of softness and space to feel and connect, while another part is in defence and eager to hold distance to the people around her. Fleabag's character develops throughout the two seasons, gaining certain relief through learning how to love again and healing in the process of her emancipation from her past. In the final scene and the definite end of the show she still wears her coat pulled tight for she accepts the fragile part in her that needs to be protected, perhaps a little longer. By embracing the torn parts within her and trusting herself that she could hold the pieces together she proves to be truly independent and self-sufficient. When she is no longer in need of 'fixing' herself or her story, she is also able to leave her secret followers behind, for whom she constantly needed to reframe the image of herself.

4.2 A Risky Flirt: The Direct Audience Address

The secret followers make one remarkable feature about the show *Fleabag* as it builds a uniquely intimate relationship between the spectator and Fleabag. Through her gaze pointed at the camera and the direct address of the audience the main character is able to tell her story herself. Viewers never leave the protagonist's side as there is not one scene in the show that does not involve Fleabag. However, the relationship between the camera and Fleabag changes throughout the two seasons of the show.

While the structure of direct audience address is one characteristic of broad cast television and its narrative structures, it used to be rarely applied within fictional shows since these tend to follow cinematic conventions like maintaining the fourth wall between the diegetic world and the actual world. However, within recent years there has been a changing trend within this genre towards the use of modes of direct address. To example a few, *Modern Family* (2009-present) has the characters sat in front of the camera frequently commenting on occurring events, *The Office* (2005-2013) follows the same mockumentary style that allows the characters to look and gaze at the camera in commenting sense or *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000-2006) in which the protagonist confides in the audience as in a diary. Dorothee Birke and Robyn Warhol argue for two main traditions of narration using the direct audience address: First, there's one where a narrator figure is created that speaks in the first person to fictive addressees (for example a classic voice-over narration) and is used as an explanatory framing device. A second one adapts documentary techniques, 'where both presenters and interviewees can appear to address an

audience by looking directly into the camera.’⁵⁸ The direct audience address has been a popular story-telling tool in comedies and used by some of the most influential filmmakers like the Marx Brothers or Woody Allen. It allows for a more intimate connection between character and audience as well as more freedom in the style of narration. In comedy this freedom makes it possible to incorporate jokes or to add comments without interfering with the storyline famously exemplified in Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall*. The character of Alvy stands in a movie line and gets furious about the stranger behind him, holding a monologue about media and Marshall McLuhan’s work. Alvy literally steps out of line and breaks the fourth wall to complain to the camera. He brings the actual Marshall McLuhan into the picture, who then belittles the annoying stranger and by that makes Alvy’s fantasy come true. Facing the camera, he lets the audience know that it is nothing but a fantasy of his that they got to witness: ‘Boy, if life were only like this.’⁵⁹

Within the comedy show *Fleabag* the direct audience address allows the main character to narrate and add information that is relevant to her in a certain situation or mostly just pulls a joke that would be too inappropriate for people around her. But also, it serves as a tool to add meaning or to reframe a moment through humorous side notes.

4.2.1 Someone Akin

Beginning with the first moment the character of Fleabag is introduced, a deep, familiar connection is established by her instantly speaking to the camera. The audience is not only invited to follow her through her days, she downright puts on a show and covers every hurtful or weakening emotion with charm and humour in order to maintain a frivolous and jolly appearance. This pattern becomes evident during the introduction of her at the very beginning of the show. In an opening monologue the first phrase we hear from Fleabag is a question directed at the came

⁵⁸ Birke, D., Warhol, R., *Multimodal You: Playing with Direct Address in Contemporary Narrative Television*. in: Jan Alber, Greta Olson (2017) *How to Do Things with Narrative : Cognitive and Diachronic Perspectives*. De Gruyter; <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.uaccess.univie.ac.at/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzE2Mzk4MTBfX0FO0?siid=eae5945a-b20f-4b18-854c-f23965ce71d3@sidc-v-sessmgr03&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1>, last access: March 20, 2021

⁵⁹ Allen, Woody, *Annie Hall*, DVD, 93min, USA 1977, 00:10:05 – 00:12:54.

FLEABAG

You know that feeling when a guy you like sends you a text at 2 o'clock on a Tuesday night and asks if he can 'come and find you' and you accidentally make it out like you've just got in yourself, so you have to get out of bed, drink half a bottle of wine, get in the shower, shave everything, put on some agent provocateur business, suspender belt, and wait by the door until the buzzer goes -
And then you open the door to him like you'd almost forgotten he was coming over.⁶⁰

Fleabag opens the door to a handsome man and they “immediately get to it.”⁶¹ While they are having sex, Fleabag continues her monologue directed at the camera, indicating she is not at all present in either the moment or in her body. Captured in a close-up she fixates on the fictive audience she explains the situation to, while she has her back turned towards the man in her bed, who is not even in focus and therefore the background is designated to him. The character of the man as well as his presence are of little importance. Even the next morning when she wakes, she immediately continues her conversation with her fictive audience which still builds on the beginning question “Do you know that feeling...” The question itself is irritating, as she is referring to a ‘feeling’ when it is really about a certain behaviour, or more a reaction to specific events occurring in her life. While we learn nothing about how she is *feeling* but what she is doing, the question does reveal her desire to connect and relate. She wants to know if there is someone else out there doing the same things she does or whether she is abnormal. We learn that sex is not an act of intimacy for her, not a moment in which she connects with another human being but more something that she does out of habit, quite unconsciously even. Although his satisfaction seems to be primary, she would not make an effort to actively contribute in the play but remains passive and silent. What he does to her body does not bother her. Apparently detached from her own physical self, she also seems to be disconnected from the world around her as she focusses on narrating her experience instead of engaging with the man in bed with her. Rather, she engages the audience through some sort of one-way communication and is eager to keep her spectators entertained. Using verbal and non-verbal commentary to frame certain situations she tries to counteract potential judgement from her audience. As the camera is paying witness to her actions and experiences, which may not meet certain social or moral standards, Fleabag twists the connotation to a situation jokingly.

⁶⁰ *Fleabag*: Written by Phoebe Waller Bridge. Shooting Script 2nd March 2015, <https://www.scriptslug.com/assets/uploads/scripts/fleabag-101-episode-1-1-2016.pdf>, last access: March 23, 2021.

⁶¹ *Fleabag*, S01E01, - 00:00:50.

This, too, happens in the following scene, when Fleabag engages in a flirt with a stranger on a bus. Even though she has signalled to her friendly spectators that she is not attracted to the big-teethed man, she ends up chatting with him. As the ‘bus rodent’ (Jamie Demetriou) asks for her number and promises her to “treat her like a nasty, little bitch”, she looks at the camera in excitement, lifting her eyebrow. Evidently, she is aware of how inappropriate the statement might be interpreted, however, she is in no way appalled and lets the audience in on her likings as her confidants.⁶² Because she does not have to hide what might be socially unacceptable, she gains confidence as she presumes her audience on her side.

In the second episode she admits to the spectators that for her sex is not so much about the feeling of the act. Fleabag gives this explanation while sitting on the toilet, usually to be thought of as a moment of privacy and intimacy. With her bottoms down and her boyfriend once again gone, she invites the eye of the camera into this private space. Reassuring that she is not obsessed with sex she explains how she just cannot stop thinking about “the performance of it, the awkwardness of it, the drama of it. The moment you realise someone wants your body.”⁶³ Half-naked she is in no way insecure but feels safe to share as no actual person is around who could judge her. What is to be understood about her character through this statement is that sexual intimacy is never a moment of real connection to someone else but more a spectacle for her to be a witness of, to be distracted and entertained by. And so, it is something she allows for her audience to watch too as this relationship knows no boundaries. Her followers can come to the loo. Her sexual partners, however, can come physically close but will be kept at safe distance by having little conversation and sharing even less personal information with them. No one is supposed to know how lonely she is. In the beginning of season two she will describe using sex as a way to “deflect from the screaming void inside [her] empty heart.”⁶⁴

Fleabag discusses her sexuality openly with the fictive audience, although rather superficially. Once she becomes truly, emotionally intimate with another fellow human being, she will want privacy from the omnipresent spectators for she might find herself vulnerable and not in want of a humorous twist.

⁶² *Fleabag*, S01E02, 00:06:13 – 00:06:59, directed by Harry Bradbeer and Tim Kirkby, written by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, aired 27 December, 2016, on BBC One, <https://www.amazon.com/Fleabag-Season-1/dp/B01J4SSP6E>.

⁶³ *Fleabag*, S01E02, 00:05:07 – 00:05:27.

⁶⁴ *Fleabag*, S02E02, 00:14:20 – 00:18:50.

4.2.2 Friendly Ghosts/Haunting Foes

While spectators are allowed to learn about her honest opinions, fetch her cynical comments and even observe moments of sexual intimacy, she will not share true feelings or show vulnerability or shame. Ultimately, her tools for framing and shaping the perception of her followers are limited as she has no agency over what events in her life they get to witness and what not. Therefor she finds herself under constant observation and in need to cover emotional reactions. In the beginning of the first season she seems to be enjoying the company of her accomplices, but with progression of the story she becomes more and more anxious that she could be made out to be a liar, exposed to be a sad, desperate loner and eventually judge her as the “morally bankrupt woman who can’t even call herself a feminist”⁶⁵ she fears to be. Always alert about watching eye of the camera on her, Fleabag clings to cynicism and jokes to distract from her inner emotional state. Towards the finale of Season 1 and its climax, there is one scene in particular in which it becomes abundantly clear that the company of the fictional audience is no longer pleasant to her but rather a threat. After getting drunk and acting out at her godmother’s ‘Sexhibition’, Fleabag gets confronted by her father in public who for the first time speaks up in an elaborate manner and makes it plain obvious that he is allowed to move on from her mother’s death and deserving of happiness. In this moment Fleabag realises that her hard feelings did not stem from the repulsion she felt towards her godmother, but that she herself is unable to move on from Boo’s death and feels undeserving of love and happiness out of shame and guilt. The following scene shows Fleabag back in the cloakroom, where she was earlier downing several glasses of champagne by herself to deal with the task of serving as a hostess which was assigned to her by her godmother without consultation. Her sister Claire follows her and immediately tackles her about her misbehaviour. What caused Fleabag’s outrage apart from being dumped by a man who she thought had fallen for her, some classic cheap shots by her godmother and bumping into her ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend, was Claire showing up with her husband Martin. Claire had decided to follow her own desires and leave Martin after Fleabag confided in her that Martin had tried to kiss her. Claire admits that she is not taking the promotion she had been offered which would have been a huge reward for her hard work. The next moment Martin appears in the cloakroom announcing that he is here to help. As he puts his arm around Claire the couple form a union and despite the compassion for her devastated sister, she breaks her heart by indirectly accusing her of lying.

⁶⁵ *Fleabag*, S01E01, 00:19:38 – 00:21:30.

FLEABAG

Claire...

CLAIRE

—Please don't.

FLEABAG

No, Claire, he came out into the garden...

CLAIRE

I don't wanna hear it.

FLEABAG

Claire, you have to believe me.

CLAIRE

How can I believe you?

FLEABAG

Because I'm your sister.

CLAIRE

After what you did to Boo!

Fleabag is shocked. With her jaw dropped and her eyes wide open she starts stumbling. A buzzing sound accentuates the distress she finds herself in. As she looks into the camera, she realises that her ever-following audience has witnessed the whole scenario and she feels exposed. Memories of her friend Boo are intercut, and Fleabag tries to turn away from the camera, yet unable to flee from her voyeurs. No matter where she turns to, there is no escape from their gaze, from her past and her shame. The audience only now learns that Fleabag herself was the one who had slept with Boo's boyfriend, which pushed her towards self-harm resulting in her death. Now convicted of her crime, Fleabag starts sobbing, looking at her sister in despair and at the camera in fear. Claire apologises and asks her to take her point of view with tears in her eyes. She clearly is torn yet leaves with Martin when he instructs her to do so. After being left by her sister Fleabag cannot bear the look of anyone anymore, as she assumes each one is filled with judgement. She tries to escape the gaze of the camera as well as from her memories, which now aggressively push through to her conscious mind. Vivid recollections of Boo and her boyfriend, confessions of her love for him and eventually Fleabag's affair with the same man are shown to the audience through intercut scenes. Her deepest secrets and most shameful moments are revealed to the bodiless, omnipresent voyeur. The camera even takes an intimidating step towards her, which she backs away from and almost falls into a cloak hanger.

The buzzing sound turns into arrhythmic, agitated jazz music and while she is crying and trying to run away, she steps into a red light at the far end of the cloak room, which not only evokes associations of danger or the red light milieu but potentially also of her as a ‘femme fatale’. Unable to flee, Fleabag breaks down and remains left alone with her grief, her shame and without anyone to hold onto.⁶⁶ Exposed to the uncompromising gaze of the camera it seems evident that the power relationship between the audience and Fleabag is one that puts her in an inferior position through contracts of shame. By recognising herself through the gaze of the other she becomes more aware of her behaviour and how she could be perceived. She has constructed a deficient identity which is built on the belief of an inherent lack and an inability to do the right thing. Unable to share these feelings, she copes with the mostly negative feedback from her environment with humour and creates an identity for herself that is defined by carelessness and autonomy. But because we have more insight into her life and also her past, Fleabag is unable to cover up her loneliness and her lack of belonging.

4.2.3 “They’re always there.”

The first season of *Fleabag* establishes a relationship between the protagonist and the camera that serves as her one true intimate connection. While drawing from having that kind of confidante, the constant gaze also poses a potential threat that Fleabag cannot hide from. The second season invites a second ‘threat’ to her cover up play in the form of a sincere love interest. As the character of Fleabag evolves, she also becomes more aware of her relationship with the ever-present audience accompanying her. Still enjoying the possibility to narrate her life and joke about her experiences, she is confronted with the fact that this audience serves as a replacement for real-life relations. The act of confessing plays a huge part in this season as it is a revealing practice through which she brings forward a part of her identity that she so desperately wanted to neglect. Only through integrating these suppressed parts of herself she will eventually be able to find peace within herself and with her past by letting go of shame. What became famous as *Fleabag*’s ‘Confession Scene’ is not the first moment of self-acknowledgement in the second season of the show. Already in *Episode 2* Fleabag finds herself in a situation where she admits to the emptiness she feels in her heart and that her spectators actually step in as her friends.

After her father gave her a voucher for a counselling session, Fleabag ends up in a therapy session, planning to get the money for it back. The scene follows a shot/reverse shot pattern

⁶⁶ *Fleabag*, “Series 1, episode 6”, 00:14:20 - 00:16:20.

and besides an initial long shot establishing the room, the camera remains immobile and concentrates on the two women sitting opposite of each other. Except some distant ambient noises of birds chirping there is no distraction from the dialogue between the two, putting urgency on every question and answer. Even though the room is flooded with warm light, decorated with pastel colours and armchairs as well as a fireplace creating a living-room-like ambience, the atmosphere seems to be tense. The therapist (Fiona Shaw) contrasts with Fleabag as she transmits the impression of being an utterly serious person, not keen to play sweet, disapproving of jokes, yet extremely comfortable with the situation of the therapy session as she moisturises her forearms with relish. Meanwhile Fleabag gives her best to appear very put together and polite, legs crossed, and hands folded in her lap. When asked about her family she is able to react quite elaborate and shrugs it off with a joke. However, she is caught off guard when asked about her friends. We can see memories of her friend Boo in an intercut sequence and as Fleabag instantly tries to change topic, it is understood that she has not been able to answer the question sincerely. The counsellor continues to interrogate about her sex life, as she had mentioned before that she was not having sex to distract herself from loneliness anymore. Even though it was a rare moment in which she actually shared a truth about herself with a fellow human being instead of an anonymous audience, she immediately reacts with a joke that does not land with the audience in front of her but is yet again directed at her voyeurs when she gets confronted with it again. As the counsellor sums up the information Fleabag shared about her being “just a girl with no friends and an empty heart – by [her] own description”⁶⁷, she is snubbed. She frowns as her eyes spread wide open. Hit by this realisation she bows her head but searches to justify herself by claiming to have friends before she lets herself get overwhelmed with shame. When asked about whether she had someone to talk to she affirms with a wink at the camera. From this reaction it is understood that her fictive audience serves as her only source of trust and true intimacy. It is the first time that Fleabag confesses the existence of these ‘friends’ to her outside world. This way she becomes more aware that she lives in two separate worlds. Through her explanation that ‘they’re always there’ she cannot deny any longer the discomfort her omnipresent followers cause her and tries to shrug it off with laughter. Her reaction seems odd to the counsellor as a close-up shot shows her irritation. This reaction to her confession serves as an opportunity for Fleabag to reflect on herself, which she otherwise mostly tries to avoid. But the way she opens up to the therapist reveals an urgent need to speak the truth and express her pain that she has been trying to suppress for so long. As she becomes aware of her loneliness, she becomes desperate for advice, which will be

⁶⁷ *Fleabag*, S02E02, 00:14:31 – 00:18:51.

elaborated further in the ‘Confession Scene’. She knows the solution does not lie within a romantic endeavour, and neither does the man she falls in love with.

4.2.4 The Breakthrough

One character that was not only wildly loved by the audience, but also by Fleabag herself is the priest (Andrew Scott). He shows sincere interest in her as a person, in her life and her inner workings and in doing so he is the only one who truly sees her. The priest is able to discover so much about her emotional world that he can witness Fleabag’s escape into her ‘other world’, where she is with us and detached from her surroundings. Whenever he notices that Fleabag is drifting away and talking to us, he wants to know where she is going. His interrogations panic Fleabag as she fears she can no longer cover up her true self and her past. No one had ever taken notice of her absent moments before or cared about it. In *Episode 4*⁶⁸, when Fleabag and the priest have become closer and spend time together, they end up in her café. The set-up of the scene shows some similarities with the counselling session, as we see Fleabag in a one-on-one conversation in silence. The café is empty and warm daylight falls through the windows as the two sit by table. While the man she is falling for is seemingly relaxed as he is holding the guinea pig, that used to belong to her friend Boo, Fleabag is again tense. Sitting upright she is holding onto her cup of tea, trying to hold it together. The priest does not hesitate to interrogate about the place and hence about Fleabag’s past too, which instantly brings back memories of her dead friend. A shot/reverse shot holds them each in close-up and Fleabag looks at the camera nervously as his questions are bringing something up that she wanted to withhold from him, from us and from her consciousness. When he mentions her mother, she instantly tries to shift the focus away from her and asks him about his relationship with his mother. But he does not give in and becomes curious about her relationship to her mother, whom she had lost, too. He gazes at her gently with a kind smile on his face, whereas Fleabag seems to sit on needles and stares at him with eyes widepread, faking a smile to distract from the distress his questions cause her. Her rapid answers contrast his peaceful state and indicate that she wants to get out of the situation. In these moments she tends to zone out and turn to us. When the priest asks her whether she is still running the café together with her friend, Fleabag is forced to explain the absence of Boo and stumbles. It evokes a memory of her friend sitting in the café, eating a sandwich. Fleabag looks at the camera seeking for aid as she is struggling to find words which the priest takes note of. What we see next serves as the roots for a theory that *Fleabag* fans

⁶⁸ *Fleabag*, S02E04, 00:04:14 – 00:07:11

constructed to uncover the anonymity of Fleabag's follower. Her friend Boo, now in close-up, looks straight at the camera shaking her head, as if the gesture was directed at Fleabag advising her not to say any more. Clearly distracted by this image, Fleabag is out of words and ideas how to navigate the conversation into another direction. Feeling cornered she breaks eye-contact with the priest as she looks over her shoulder directly into the camera again and refers to him as 'a bit annoying, actually.' The priest notices her talking to someone else and pushes her to tell him where she is going in these moments. Fleabag gets more and more stressed out as she feels unsafe having an intruder into her personal space of mind. Because he can tell that she is keeping a secret, he pushes her further to open up. When Fleabag looks at the camera trying to maintain her cover and reassuring her voyeurs that there was nothing to hide, the priest looks directly at the camera, too, following direction of view. He tries to take her perspective, wanting to understand but of course Fleabag's imaginary followers are imperceivable to him. Now in panic to be completely seen through by the priest, Fleabag shouts to make him stop coming any step closer to her. The priest tries to calm her, telling her he only wants to get to know her, but it breaks out of Fleabag that she does not 'want that.' She breaks eye-contact and lowers her head with regret for she had outspoken a truth she maybe even was not aware of herself. When he explains he just wants to help her he even reaches out for her hand in order to maintain the connection she thought she had just broken. However, Fleabag feels victimised and hurt being put into a position of someone who needs to be fixed so she shuts down and signals him rather straight forward to leave.

In the next scene Fleabag, still agitated from the priest's breakthrough by breaking the 4th wall too, she hurries through the streets smoking a cigarette. The camera is up close, right in front of her and its movement is unstable, underlining her inner irritation. She is unable to pass by its gaze as memories of her mother's funeral catch her and become visible to her spectators in intercut sequences. Once again, she feels haunted by the camera. Her attempt to escape from the gaze is accompanied by dramatic music of wind instruments resembling funeral accompaniments. Completely shuttered and overwhelmed with shame, she literally tries to run away now from her ever-present voyeurs. She keeps turning around, checking if they are still there until she shakes them off when she disappears around a corner.

4.3 Conclusion: Constructing Intimacy

The analysis of these scenes aims to frame the relationship between Fleabag and the camera and underline its complexity. Not only can it be seen as a substitute for the lack of intimacy and connection she is experiencing but rather for her, the others' observation becomes an unpleasant

reflection of herself and her past. In the beginning of the show, the audience fulfils the function of a confidante by following her and therefore replaces an essential bond that she is lacking in the world around her. After the loss of her mother as well as her best friend she has not been able to build a strong connection to another fellow human being as the guilt and shame she carried kept her from opening up and showing her true self. But also, her spectators are not supposed to gain access to her emotions and should rather enjoy her cynical humour and find entertainment in watching her frivolity. It is the only way she can maintain some sort of control over the perception of herself and her life. Worried that someone else could think as badly of her as she does herself, Fleabag finds herself under constant pressure of covering up her feelings. However, she cannot control when she is being watched, which gives her relationship with the audience a friend/foe dynamic. The one-way communication allows her to be seen and heard, while most people around her show only little interest and interact superficially with her. At the same time, she finds herself constantly on guard which makes it impossible for her to hide. She herself would describe this relationship as “a bad one”, as she refers to the priest’s relationship to God the same way.⁶⁹

The direct audience address becomes less and less frequent as the show and its protagonist are progressing. There are fewer occasions where Fleabag needs someone to turn to and in the final episode, she can leave behind what has been following her, so she waves goodbye at the camera.⁷⁰ Even though she is able to let go of this relationship, it was important at an earlier stage in her life when her grief as well as her loneliness were so overwhelming that she had to create a substitute for what she was missing. Therefore, the direct camera address does not only engage the audience and brings us closer to Fleabag but is a self-created connection of her own that she cannot find in the world around her. Even though the looks she flings at the camera are sometimes flirty, there is no romantic desire that needs to be fulfilled. It is implied that a romantic other or a sexual relationship cannot compensate her feeling of loneliness. This is supported by the finale of the show, when Fleabag is being left alone at the bus station by the priest after expressing her love to him. Despite being denied a romantic relationship, she is still strong enough to leave her audience, her fictive company behind and move forward on her own. This can be seen as an indication that she has found a sense of belonging within herself and therefore becomes self-sufficient.

⁶⁹ *Fleabag*, „Season 2, Episode 2“, 00:14:32 – 00:18:52.

⁷⁰ *Fleabag*, „Season 2, Episode 6“, 00:21:27 – 00:26:00.

4.4 Women Around

Since the intense connection Fleabag pursues with the camera is fictive it is to investigate of what significance other relationships are and what influence they have on her experience of loneliness. The introduction of the character reveals that she is not longing for men in a romantic sense or partnership in general, which implies that her values are not aligned with the heteronormative ideal of coupledness. Still she experiences a feeling of lack and admits on more than one occasion that she does not know how to fill the void inside her heart. In order to find the underlying reasons this deficit stems from one must examine the character's surrounding and main influences.

4.4.1 Sisterhood: Particular Family Dynamics

One prominent role besides the series' protagonist is the character of Claire, her sister. Their relationship evolves throughout the two seasons from one that is characterised by distance and politeness, to one that is built on deep love and trust. While the two sisters could not be more different, they share the same story and background of having lost their mother and now being faced with a father who is incapable of dealing with his motherless daughters. Despite being the exact opposite of each other they do share the same perceptions of life and fundamental values which serves as the basis of their love for each other. This becomes clear when Claire's character is introduced.⁷¹ The two sisters meet at a feminist lecture that their father has bought them tickets for in order to substitute for the lack of feminine input consequential to their mother's death. Fleabag rushes down the stairs of a lecture hall and squeezes through the rows to have a seat next to "a serious, well-dressed woman, reading a kindle."⁷² Before they begin with any kind of interaction Fleabag turns to the camera and introduces her sister to the fictive audience by describing her first and foremost as uptight which Fleabag herself is not even in the slightest. That is underlined when Claire comments on Fleabag's late arrival without even looking up and Fleabag shoots back a vulgar answer, explaining that she had 'to do a flash poo in Prêt.' In a motherly manner Claire wants to know whether she washed her hands as if she was to discipline a child. Playing along with this dynamic Fleabag takes pleasure out of provoking her sister and wipes her hand on Claire's face. Evidently so, the most prominent deviance between the two lies in their approach on seriousness. Following a shot/reverse shot pattern their dialogue resembles an interrogation focused on information, not emotion. When

⁷¹ *Fleabag*, S01E01, 00:08:59 – 00:18:52.

⁷² *Fleabag*, Script: <https://www.scriptslug.com/assets/uploads/scripts/fleabag-101-episode-1-1-2016.pdf>, last access: 18/04/2021.

Fleabag wants to take off her coat and reveals that she is wearing a shirt that she had stolen from her sister years ago the topic of their conversation quickly shifts. The camera crosses the line and jumps to a position behind Claire, making the spectator one of the actual audience members in the lecture hall. Fleabag again turns to us with the warning that ‘this is going to be tense’ as it will shine a light on the issues of success and failure. When Claire begins to mention her sister’s café, Fleabag snaps, framing business and success a stiff subject for the two sisters, since they are not both on the receiving end. After a brief argument Fleabag tries to resolve the tension between them with a compliment, grinning as she knows this dynamic is play. In play it is not necessary to talk about real world problems and the severity of things. She then turns to the camera again, which now is positioned next to Claire framing Fleabag through an over shoulder shot and indicating that the fictive audience is no longer equal to both of them as participants of a lecture but rather serve as Fleabag’s intimate confidants. She admits that she would need monetary help of her sister but is unable to ask for it. The lack of physical distance between them makes it evident that the two are close as Fleabag almost leans over Claire when talking to the camera. While there might be barrier in communication between the two, Claire senses that her sister is holding back and gets ahead of her, asking if she was in need of money. However, Fleabag denies since she is incapable of dealing with the latent sibling rivalry that they have not gotten over yet. While their differences manifest in the unemotional nature of their communication, the deep love and connection they have for each other is undeniable. Claire deeply cares for her sister and is worried about her, constantly asking her whether she was ok. While Fleabag tends to neglect the motherly concern of her sister, she would do anything for Claire and never fail to encourage her to emancipate and follow her dreams. Despite representing strong oppositions, they complement each other. But symbiosis does not come easy to them.

Since the sisters’ relationship is of incomparable significance, a whole episode was dedicated to its complexity. Phoebe Waller-Bridge, writer of the show as well as the creator of the character Fleabag, sees every tease towards Claire as an attempt to connect with her. She wants to play in order to feel less alone. However, she always misfires with her jokes. In the beginning of *Episode 4* Claire voices her rejection for her sister’s teasing.⁷³ The two were gifted a silent retreat weekend from their father for Mother’s Day. The two find themselves in a special setting for a conversation, as they are driving in a car with Claire behind the wheel. While the closed off space of the vehicle creates an intimate space, the situation allows no eye-contact which is

⁷³ *Fleabag*, S01E04, – 00:02:00.

a direct way to connect with others. Once again, in this situation they are fighting about navigating to the retreatment centre but when Fleabag tries to lighten the latent tension between them, Claire bursts into tears and sobbingly tells her sister not to make this fun. When the car is stopped by the side of the road and the two can face each other again, Claire demands from her sister to not take the piss all the time and not finish her sentences, when Fleabag is about to do just that. She knows she cannot hold something back from her sister, because there is such a deep connection and common story they share. In this moment the sibling bond between them burdens Claire, as she tries to keep her life together, while Fleabag poses a threat to her seriousness and her life choices. Her sister represents the alternative she never went for that promises more autonomy and freedom. As the audience learns later in the series, Claire admired her sister's unconventionality and free spirit. By the end of the episode, she will leave Fleabag behind at the centre, after Fleabag had shared with Claire that her husband Martin had tried to get on with her sister. However, the night before they share a bed like little kids.⁷⁴ They have a room to themselves, a closed space no one else can intrude in. In the safety in of the dark they can let go of their adult appearances and return to a childhood memory symbolic for their special bond. Hand in hand, snuggled up together in a single bed this moment portrays a kind of intimacy exceptional to Fleabag's other encounters. While this episode underlines the character of their sibling kinship, their relationship transforms in the course of the show and can be compared to a platonic love romance. As each of them goes through deep personal crises and faces difficulties in trusting and revealing oneself to the other, they return to their inherent love for each other.

The very last episode of *Fleabag* can be interpreted as dedication to romance, if not in the sense of the stereotypical "happily-ever-after"-myth. It is the wedding day of their father and their godmother, but also the two sisters find themselves on the passage of entering new chapters of their lives. Fleabag wakes up next to the priest and will be able to express her genuine love for him, for another being, which will enable compassion and love for herself to overcome the guilt and shame she carries. Claire announces to leave her husband, after coming out with the truth to her family that she was the one who had a miscarriage earlier in *Episode 1*. Fleabag had covered up for her sister and told the family that she was the one who had had the miscarriage. At the wedding Martin forces Claire to beg him on her knees to leave her and so she follows his last demand to finally free herself from suppression and make way for her true desires. She

⁷⁴ *Fleabag*, S01E04, 00:23:08 – 00:24:07.

is able to do so, because her sister is present and will not let her alone. The three of them stand in the kitchen and are positioned in a triangular arena. Martin and Claire on each side of the kitchen with the kitchen island between them and Fleabag right in between them overwatching the field but remains silent. Claire wears a rosé dress that makes her even more pale and ghost-like. The fake piece of hair on the back of her head completes the picture of a woman almost vanished within herself. In contrast Fleabag shines in a short, bright red dress in the middle of the frame, representing the strength of her innate femininity her sister needs as support in this moment. Fleabag lets Claire fight her own fight and follow through with what she has set her mind to autonomously. Martin screams hysterically trying to manipulate Claire into staying by suggesting she is just as broken as he is. But Claire even goes down to kneel in front of him for she finds the strength to withstand this one last humiliation in order to win her freedom back. It is Fleabag's presence that instead of making her feel ashamed empowers her. When Fleabag reaches out for Claire's hand to help her get up off the floor, she herself has, too, become a person who is not in need of help anymore but is strong enough to help her loved one to get up and follow her dreams.

The final interaction in the show between the two sisters is a love confession from Claire to Fleabag. During the wedding ceremony, the peak of the socially constructed ideal of the biography of a traditional partnership, Fleabag pushes Claire to leave the function and run to the airport for the man she actually loves. Claire rejects the romance cliché, so very common in cinematic storytelling, and stresses the irrationality in running after a man. Then she continues: "The only person I'd run through an airport for is you." Within the business of the wedding ceremony and among dozens of guests around they once again create a little closed space of intimacy for themselves. Claire's declaration of ultimately unconditional love is what makes their relationship essential for both of them. While they struggle to verbalise how they feel for each other, they prove deep care and love through their actions and create a safe space for one another. Their love story is of far more significance than both their romantic affairs with men since it is a story of success. They both struggle with ambivalent feelings for one another: they make each other mad, yet they love each other. They overcome a severe fallout and put aside any dissent in the instance one of them is in need. By experiencing this kind of forgiveness and unconditional love they both evolve and become more independent women. This narrative suggests that successful womanhood is not equal to the pursuit of a traditional, romantic relationship but to find safety and support in connection with another human being.

4.4.2 The Mother Figure

Joana Wilson-Scott⁷⁵ argues in her article that despite the tendency in popular culture of mother figures disappearing *Fleabag* puts the mother in a very special position of omnipresence although she is absent in physical form. The first episode ends with Fleabag showing up drunk at her father's house confessing her feelings of uncertainty about life and about herself.⁷⁶ She stands on his doorstep out in the dark, waiting for an invitation to come in which never comes. She keeps up a smile, while her eyes water with tears. The street behind her is empty and no one else is around. Her father is shown in his bathrobe looking exhausted. He steps into the doorway as if he was to guard the entrance of his house. Behind him the warm inside of an idyllic home is revealed with stairs leading upstairs. It is not Fleabag's home anymore and when she is about to leave, she turns around once more, now standing on the steps looking up to her father, desperately in need of someone caring she can confide in:

FLEABAG

Ok fuck it. 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.

DAD

Well... You get all that from your mother!

FLEABAG

Good one!

DAD

I'm - I'm going to call you a cab, darling.
Don't go upstairs.

Instead of being invited in, she is being sent away by her father. When he leaves to call for someone to pick her up and take her away Fleabag intrudes her former home. Ignoring his instructions, she walks straight upstairs. In an act of defiance, she walks into her Godmother's studio, interrupting her painting. The situation is instantly filled with tension and after a few formal, empty phrases and an attempt by her godmother to ask about her wellbeing, Fleabag lays eyes on a small tin sculpture of a woman's torso and legs on a rack in the studio, seemingly torn towards the beheaded naked female body with big breasts. She interrupts her Godmother with the comment: 'Poor fucker.' pointing at the piece.

⁷⁵ Joanna Wilson-Scott (2018): *Both absent and omnipresent: the dead mother in Fleabag*, Feminist Media Studies, DOI: 10.1080/14680777.2018.1546207.

⁷⁶ *Fleabag*, S01E01, 00:19:38 – 00:21:30.

GODMOTHER/STEPMOTHER

Yes. She's actually an expression of how women are subtle warriors... strong at heart. How we don't have to use brute, muscular force to get what we want. We just need to use our –

FLEABAG

Tits.

GODMOTHER/STEPMOTHER

Innate femininity.

FLEABAG

Yeah. Tits don't get you anywhere these days. Trust me.

Referring to herself and her lack of success and love, she picks up the statue. As she holds it in her hand with her head bowed as if she were looking at herself. Her grip tightens after her godmother explains it is worth a lot of money as if it belonged to her in a way. Fleabag ends up stealing the little treasure she sees caught in a place that neglects someone like her. In the course of two seasons the sculpture will be passed on, given away and taken as a stolen piece of art. In the final episode Fleabag wants to give it back to her godmother on the wedding day in order to make peace, to perform maturity and to return the woman to whom she belongs. Thinking she is doing the right thing she is then enlightened by her godmother that the sculpture was built after Fleabag's mother. And so, Fleabag decides to steal it yet again, to keep it with her for she still needs her mother and her presence. While her mother belongs to her, she does not belong into her family home anymore, which she might have sensed the moment she decided to steal the sculpture. But as a descendant of her mother she feels that a replica of her does not belong there any longer either. The importance of a mother figure and the impact of motherly love is something that can neither be replaced nor forgone even when Fleabag has learned to let go of the past and to love again. Yet she insists on keeping the naked body modelled after her mother to stay in touch, skin to skin.

In the final scene Fleabag is left by the priest and sits alone in a bus station.⁷⁷ First, a wide shot shows the two sitting on the bench holding hands before they have to let go of each other. In the left side of the picture there is only a dim streetlight shining through the dirty glass of the station, while the two are placed in the right corner in the dark. After she finds out that the priest chooses God over her and she declares his love for him, he grabs her hand and tells her: 'It'll pass.' As they sit in silence and the priest sighs, showing how hard the situation is on him, Fleabag changes topic mentioning that the bus is not magically coming, as if to reassure that even if she or they both hoped for a wonder, nothing will change their reality. The priest

⁷⁷ *Fleabag*, S02E06, 00:21:28 – 00:25:50.

withdraws his hand, announcing he would walk and gets up. He is leaving an empty space beside her enhancing her 'oneliness' visually. Again, she is on her own, but it is no moment of loneliness for her. Her heart is filled with love for a fellow human being, and she succeeded in expressing her feelings and connecting. We see her in close up, grasping for air as she breaks into tears. Behind her is a graffiti of the Hungarian word for 'life'⁷⁸ which connects to Fleabag's initial desperation about how she does not know how to live her life and the feeling of lack she is experiencing. She looks up at the electronic timetable, which now says that the bus is cancelled and so life pushes her to do the same as the priest and walk her way. In this moment, the backing song *This Feeling* by Alabama Shakes starts to play.

'I just kept hoping, I just kept hoping
The way would become clear
I spent all this time
Try'na play nice
And fight my way here'

We see Fleabag in a wide angle shot in the bus station, as a fox enters the picture. She then guides the animal into the direction of where the priest had gone, who believes himself to be haunted by foxes. Before she can bring herself to get up, she pulls out the tin statue of the female torso, a representation of her mother that she has stolen yet again and that she identifies with. The camera jumps into a close up to capture Fleabag's hands grabbing the piece tight and gently resting her head on it. This emphasises the soothing she experiences through her mother and she looks into the camera smiling peacefully. Now, that she feels connected to her mother again she feels more whole.

'See, I've been having me a real hard time
But it feels so nice to know I'm gonna be alright'

The evolution of Fleabag's character through loneliness ends with yet another lost lover but, more importantly, the discovery of her own strength. It is not only the motherly love that she was able to experience but to find a way to reconnect with this love that she incorporated so it creates a source from which she could draw, even if a romantic love did not succeed. After the funeral of her mother, she no longer had access to this place of safety and belonging that a

⁷⁸ Shadijanova Diyora (2019), "These are all the meanings you have missed on Fleabag", *The Tab*, <https://thetab.com/uk/2019/04/09/these-are-all-the-hidden-meanings-you-may-have-missed-on-fleabag-97670>. last access: 01.05.2021.

loving relationship can constitute. By daring to express and feel genuine love for someone new in her life, Fleabag could break the pattern of detachment that caused her burdening loneliness.

4.4.3 The One - Defining Friendship

The one other defining relationship for Fleabag is connected to yet another traumatic loss, that made her fall into an abyss of loneliness and disconnection she feels unable to escape. The audience is introduced to Fleabag's best friend Boo in a flashback sequence during the lecture that she and Claire attend. The memory of Boo is triggered by Fleabag's itching pants when she is sitting in the lecture hall with Claire. She is reminded of when Boo and her were shopping together. In the flashback scene the front view of two doors of a fitting room are crosscut. Behind one of them is Fleabag, shouting she was in need of new pants. Behind the other door Boo is repeatedly shouting that she hates her body. The camera jumps into an American shot, so when the two women step out of their individual booth, they face each other. Boo, wearing an oversized dress, instantly shares her thoughts on what Fleabag's outfit, while she has her coat folded in her arm. She makes clear how very much she dislikes what Fleabag is wearing, not realising she had worn these clothes all day. When Fleabag gets upset about the unintentional insult, she throws her coat down and other pieces of clothing at her friend. Boo immediately wants to make up for the damage done, promises to buy her sexy pants and wraps her arms around Fleabag, holding her tight. Now that she is in a public space with her sister this piece of clothing starts to itch and brings attention to what and who Fleabag has lost, constituting a metaphor for how uncomfortable these memories are to her. She is still wearing something of her friend, carrying around mementos, unable to let go and move on. As established before, Fleabag struggles to speak the truth, while her friend Boo always did, directly and unfiltered. The safe space that was created through their friendship allowed for truth to be expressed and authenticity to be lived. It is the core value of their relationship. This unique understanding that they have for each other serves as the basis for trust and connection.

In another flashback, later in the episode, this is captured in the ritual of a pack they had made in the past. The two women sit in their café at night, drinking and singing songs. The camera looks through the glass door, into a space of their own. Boo just turned the door sign to closed and walks back to Fleabag, sitting by a small table in the middle of "their little kingdom they built"⁷⁹. They are smoking while Boo fills up Fleabag's wine glass, always looking out for her.

⁷⁹ Waller-Bridge (2019), p. 26.

Inviting her friend to sing as she intones an improvisation. ‘Another lunch break, another abortion, another piece of cake, another cigarette’. As Boo joins in they sing ‘And we’re happy, so happy, to be modern womennnnnn.’ The two sit closely together, locking eyes while singing about their lives. The main lights in the café are turned off, only a dim beam of light falls upon them. Drunk Boo leans in and holds Fleabag’s face in her hands to make sure she has her full attention to listen carefully which implies a certain urgency and importance to this endeavour. She suggests a deal for them to “never ask anyone for anything” for “they don’t get it.”⁸⁰ This pact is only reserved for them and makes them a union, excluding themselves from the world around. Therefore, when Boo leaves the union through a self-inflicted accident and is never to come back, she breaks their contract. Fleabag is scarred by grief but also filled with a fair amount of anger and frustration she withholds. The denying of feelings and emotions can lead to an intense experience of loneliness, as the individual must isolate and carry the burden internally, all by oneself. Only when Fleabag is drunk and the loneliest, she can let out a truth most often unspoken.

At the very end of the first episode she sits in the back of a cab after having showed up at her father’s house in need of help and guidance and confiding her deepest insecurities to him which only led to being sent away by him.⁸¹ We see her in a close up shot, staring out the window of the car into the dark. The cab driver has initiated some small talk and found out that Fleabag ran a café. He is shown from behind with his eyes set on the road, while his reflection in the rear-vision mirror is out of the camera’s focus. This way he becomes an anonymous interrogator who asks Fleabag to tell her story after she admits that she “kind of” runs the café on her own. The camera frames her from a low angle and is shaken by the impact of the driving car, indicating that there is an anonymous audience beside her in the closed space. Fleabag lets her head fall against the neck rest, a little out of control due to the alcohol infused.

FLEABAG

I opened the cafe with my friend Boo.

DRIVER

Cute name.

FLEABAG

Yeah. She’s dead now. She accidentally killed herself. It wasn’t her intention but it wasn’t a total accident. She didn’t think she’d actually die, she just found out her boyfriend fucked someone else and wanted to punish him by ending up in hospital and not letting him visit her for a bit. She decided to walk into a busy cycle lane, wanting to get tangled in a bike, break a finger maybe.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ *Fleabag*, S01E01, 00:23:40– 00:25:30.

But as it turns out bikes go fast and flip you into the road.
Three people died.
She was such a dick.
So yeah.. kinda on my own.

Phoebe Waller-Bridge, creator and star of the show, intended the first season of *Fleabag* to be about cynicism, while the second was supposed to be about hope. This scene captures the use of cynicism as a coping mechanism. Even though Fleabag feels to some degree responsible for her friend's death and is tormented by guilt, she also feels left alone and no longer a part of a couple that was bound together by a vow. Expressing her anger by calling her dead friend a dick is cynical but more importantly it is an expression of feeling denied and a revelation of self, which she does not allow to show. With this part of her kept in the dark she suffers from loneliness. The bitter jokes serve as remedy to find relief from the pain of suppression. That way she is not forced to show her vulnerability, instead she is able to fake the kind of resilience she expects of herself. In this scene it is not only cynicism that helps her to find a voice for her deepest thoughts and feelings. When the cab driver does not respond to her story and the camera pulls his face in focus in the rear-vision mirror, we can witness the judgement that Fleabag fears from others and holds for herself. She continues to stare out the window as "she drunkenly, and sadly smiles."⁸², she starts unbuttoning her coat. Underneath she has on only her bra, as earlier in the episode she had to return the top she was wearing to her sister, to whom it belonged originally. Revealing her topless upper body, she pulls out the tiny statue of the naked woman torso she had stolen from her godmother. She lets it rest against her belly and while she is looking at it, a moment of intimacy is created letting her miss the sceptical look of the cab driver through the rear-vision mirror. Fast cymbal percussion starts, and hard guitar riffs start to play as Fleabag is still mesmerized by the golden body. When the music breaks into rough rock music she lifts her head and looks at the camera with a cheeky smile on her face. Although she is not aware, that the body she is holding, is a representation of her mother, the figure was there when she let her guard down and revealed some of her truth. In the script of the episode the final line says:

Two women. One real. One not. Both with their innate femininity out. End.

Being reminded of her femininity she can allow herself to let out something she withholds because of manners, social expectations and shame. What paves the way for this expression is

⁸² Waller-Bridge (2019), p. 32.

a woman friend, a mother, a female figure. It is not even their physical presence that is needed to remind her what it means to share feelings - which would be a way to connect to other humans. It is interconnected womanhood and sisterhood that cracks open the hidden, dark parts of oneself and illuminates what causes loneliness. However, Fleabag only ever thought of one woman since her mother's death as such a confidante to do so.

While her cynicism is a way of coping with her anger that she tells herself to be illegitimate, her loneliness is nurtured by the suppression of certain negative feelings. The loss of her significant other, which was not a romantic partner, pushes Fleabag into an existential crisis. Her understanding of self is shattered, and she lacks the means to substitute for it. Since Boo was the only one, she could confide in and who would understand her, she has no possibility to share her pain stemming from the guilt and shame she carries. By the end of season 2 we learn that Fleabag feels responsible for her friend's death, who died in an attempt to hurt herself in an accident in order to punish her boyfriend for cheating on her by guilt-tripping him. Since Fleabag was the one who Boo's boyfriend cheated on with, she blames herself for her friend's death and her own misery. Later we find out that her sister Claire must be the only one she confided in, as she appears to know the whole story, when she refuses to believe Fleabag about her cheating husband. The recurring theme is the capability of innate femininity that inspires to express feelings and to be in touch with one's emotions in order to avoid disease-causing suppression and utter loneliness. Fleabag is not only on her own since she had lost her mother and best friend, she is lonely because of the lack of female connection that allowed for authenticity and shamelessness, creating a space of unconditional love.

4.5 Shape of Men

The claim of this work is that *Fleabag* is of such unique character because of its portrayal of a lonely young woman at her most fertile age who will not find relief in finding a man nor within normative coupledness. As discussed above, western cultures place the heterosexual couple at the centre and therefore design the ideal of successful womanhood around marriage and motherhood. However, cultural, socio-demographic and philosophical shifts alongside deconstructions of what is taken for granted led to an unveiling what disguised as the 'natural' order while uncovering alternatives for female biographies. Nonetheless, singledom as a deviation from the norm still poses challenges in constructing a positive self-image for individuals, especially for women of certain age. Since the main character in *Fleabag* is, too, confronted regularly with her single status, it is of importance to take a look at the realm of

romantic love and the framing of maleness within the show, in order to gain a broader understanding of the other.

4.5.1 A Boyfriend Is Not A Necessity

Many reviews and other media reactions referred to the character of Fleabag as a highly sexually active woman, framing it as an unlikely or extraordinary feature of a female person. As illustrated earlier, the introduction of Fleabag establishes a character that indeed pursues a frivolous approach to sexuality. She sleeps with a man while not being truly present in the moment but rather commenting the situation to a fictive audience, next she finds herself in a flirt with a stranger on the bus, which she clearly finds not attractive but an easy catch, framing it as a practical rather than an emotional endeavour. When the man referred to as the ‘Bus Rodent’, due to his enormous incisor teeth, asks for her number and assumes she has a boyfriend, she hesitates to respond to his request. The audience then gets an insight on her last relationship through a flashback or more specifically, on how the relationship ended.⁸³ The flashback scene cuts into a close up of a laptop screen showing former US-president Barack Obama in the midst of a speech, capturing the words: “Power rarely gives up without a fight...” As the room is established, Fleabag is shown lying in bed with the laptop on her lap and her face creased with concentration. In one hand she holds a slice of pizza, the other, however, slowly moves under the covers and Fleabag starts to masturbate. This sequence reveals aspects of her sexual desire as well as her ideal of masculinity that is connected to the idea of men in power, as she is aroused by an embodiment of such. While she is losing herself in a fantasy the camera holds her in focus, as unexpectedly beside her in the background of the frame a real man appears out of the covers. Harry, her boyfriend, had been lying next to her the whole time. As he is being put into focus, he is waking up to his girlfriend masturbating to Barack Obama. Even though he asks what she is doing, he has put the pieces together and rushes up, clearly upset. Wearing nothing but shorts, he reveals himself to be a skinny, fragile looking man. The scene unfolds into a very common narrative, yet the gender stereotypes do not follow a cliché. Harry immediately starts to pack his bags in a dramatic manner, confronting Fleabag with his awareness of what she was doing. Fleabag does not hesitate to lie, telling him she was watching the news. Her boyfriend, however, despite being full of hope for the better, demands proof by asking what Obama was saying in the speech. About to tear up he appears vulnerable and desperate for someone willing to fight for love. From his standing position he is looking down

⁸³ *Fleabag*, S01E01, 00:04:19 – 00:06:12.

on his girlfriend who tries to manipulate him with puppy eyes. When Fleabag remains silent, he repeatedly asks her not to hold him back and not to say anything, scared he might fall for her again, powerlessly. As he heads towards the door, still shirtless and unprotected, he stops by her bedside in order to justify himself for having been there for her. The camera holds a close up on Fleabag, listening humbly without response, covered in a duvet remaining in her comfort zone. Only when he forbids her to show up at his house again, trying to seduce him, she turns to the camera, her fictive audience, reassuring us with a cheeky smile that this manipulative strategy will work on him again. Before Harry exits the door, he stops to educate her that Obama's speech was about democracy, but he is interrupted mid-sentence by a cut, back to the scene of Fleabag's present bus flirtation. This leads to the conclusion that Fleabag's understanding of romantic affairs and monogamous partnership is about power relations. Breaking with stereotypical gender roles, she is the one using her assets in order to manipulate her opponent and maintain her position of power. Normative, heterosexual coupledness is framed as a relationship based on a system of superior and inferior participants that stand in competitive positions. It is not connected to a belief of fulfilment and mutual enrichment. As Fleabag lets the audience in on her secret, again, of how she plays men with strategy and performance, it becomes evident that romantic endeavours serve as playground for entertainment and self-legitimation. The underlying dynamics are transactional, not relational. Relationships with men are about winning and gaining in contrast to those with women, which are about sharing and receiving.

This is once more emphasised when we see her again, back on the bus with the stranger who shows interest in her. When he is told that Fleabag has recently gone through a breakup, he wants to know how her recent ex-boyfriend had managed 'to fuck that up.' Quite frankly Fleabag explains:

FLEABAG

Oh he was just - he was really supportive with my work,
he'd cook all the time, run baths, Hoover, laugh at my jokes,
he was great with my family and my friends loved him.
Plus, he was really fucking affectionate.⁸⁴

What she mentions about her ex-boyfriend can be interpreted as features that are commonly seen as desirable in the quest for a romantic partner. However, none of the above is in anyway

⁸⁴ Waller-Bridge, Phoebe (May 02, 2015), *Fleabag. Shooting Script: Episode 1*, p. 9.
<https://www.scriptslug.com/assets/uploads/scripts/fleabag-101-episode-1-1-2016.pdf>, last accessed: May 02, 2021.

a necessity in Fleabag's life that she is lacking. While she can appreciate Harry's support and acknowledge his positive traits, it is nothing that she feels blessed with or could not live without. Even the most noble and caring behaviour of a man can substitute for a deep connection to another human being that could actually cure Fleabag's loneliness.

4.5.2 Relatively Present: The Father Role

Introduced in the very first episode the character of Fleabag's father defined by lack, whether in form of his lack of words or his lack of presence in his daughters' lives. Before her father appears on screen, Fleabag mentions him on a side note when she and her sister Claire attend a feminist lecture.⁸⁵

'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.'

Despite this description conveying grievance in disguise of cynicism, Fleabag ends up at her father's doorstep by the end of the first episode in search of guidance and emotional shelter. A frail, elderly man answers the door only to then send her away when she is most in need. Her father is unable to finish a single sentence or to be of any help in any other way. His inability to express himself clearly and communicate openly is a character trait Fleabag shares with her father. The first six episodes of the show frame him as the insufficient parental left-over after her mother's death, which evokes a feeling of abandonment in Fleabag that serves as an essential source of her loneliness. Her father creates no space of security for his adult daughter, who still finds herself in need of such. After the mother's death he secured his own happiness and well-being first, by moving on (-to the next relationship). Unlike her father, Fleabag is still tormented by grief and incapable of letting go, which separates the two of them even further. After Fleabag makes a scene at her godmother's 'Sexhibition' she is left behind by Claire, her father turns his back on her and Fleabag breaks down all alone in the wardrobe of the gallery. When she leaves the place, she finds her father outside on the street by the side of a car, hiding his face in his arm as he is crying. Fleabag approaches him silently and as he notices her, he turns around to lean his back against the car, wiping away his tears. His daughter joins him with dried tears on her face herself, holding a cigarette in her hand. In the dark of the night with their backs up against the side of a car they have to face each other in their brokenness. There is no one else around, only parked, lifeless vehicles which reflect some dim streetlights in the

⁸⁵ Ibid. p. 11.

background. A shot/reverse shot montage shows her father struggling to face his daughter eye to eye, while she is turned towards him in hope or rather in expectation of some affection. Instead he keeps his head straight and tries to come up with some similarities they have in common. They shared the lines on their foreheads and their stubbornness, he concludes, and Fleabag adds their mutual sadness as they simultaneously wipe their noses both with their right hand. Her father shakes his head and continues to say with a breaking voice:

“Jesus, why do daughters get to say that they’re fucked up by their fathers, when it’s so often the other way around?”

Not knowing how to react to this subtle hint of an accusation they chuckle, and Fleabag offers him a toke of her cigarette, seducing him to a little self-harm in hope to connect over a sharing experience while proving his point. He is tempted but throws it away once he has taken it anyway. With this gesture he distances himself from his daughter, making clear they are not the same and he does not appreciate her actions. Instead he refers to her mother, who ‘would have admired [her] little performance’ at the ‘Sexhibition’. Fleabag has lost those who would not judge her or even love her for not fitting in. Her father does not try to hide the fact that he is not one of them. As Fleabag’s godmother appears in the far background of the picture, her father sends her away and she once again is left with a dead mother and a disapproving father. In her life there is no family bond creating a safe space of unconditional love, rather she is rejected and left alone, even by her sister. Although every family member is craving for love and connection, they do not turn to each other but rather look for some kind of partnership. Whether it is Claire’s unhappy marriage or the father’s new romantic relationship, for the close people around Fleabag the way to cope with grief leads through any kind of partnership, no matter if it is a destructive one or a brand new one. However, they all share the same fear of being alone with their feelings and so they are all in need of someone else. It is only Fleabag who looks for support within the realm of relatives and family unlike the others.

While during the first season Fleabag’s disappointment in her absent father after her mother’s death is discussed frequently, the second season establishes a whole new relationship between Fleabag and the only parental figure left in her life. In the first episode the whole family comes together at a restaurant for the engagement party of Fleabag’s father and godmother.⁸⁶ Fleabag has again left the table to have a smoke outdoors in need of a break from the family dynamics.

⁸⁶ *Fleabag*, S02E01, 00:13:18 – 00:15:00.

She is standing in front of a brick wall in a back alley barely illuminated by a streetlight. The camera is pointed at her head-on, putting her up against the wall as if she was caught in a moment of no return. Her father steps into the picture and the compositions resembles the last scene analysed above. He keeps certain distance between himself and his daughter before he stops beside her. With their backs against the wall the two face a situation of discomfort they cannot escape. As father and daughter, they look nothing alike and Fleabag represents a much stronger and more confident opposite to the small and insecure man beside her. The red lipstick as well as the cleavage of her jumpsuit revealing skin and figure bring forward her innate femininity, while the cigarette in her hand emphasises her autonomy. Her look displays female strength, which even her father notices when he mentions: 'You look strong.' He recognises a transformation in his daughter but did not witness the process of change due to his absence in her life. Because he missed her birthday, too, he now hands the tall woman beside him an envelope, which is supposed to promise help 'in case she is struggling.' Fleabag explains how she is not in need of support in terms of money, but when she notices a sense of care in his gesture, she accepts the present. Within her, there is a deep want to be seen and cared for that her father left unsatisfied. Later, back at the dinner table, it will be revealed that the envelope contains a coupon for a counselling session. Unable to meet his obligations as a father and caregiver, he wants to help her help herself. His lack of attention and time for his daughter, however, lets him jump to conclusions and assumptions from the rare impressions he gets of Fleabag. In this scene, he perceives her as strong and calm, which irritates him so much so he must say:

DAD

I just want to check that you... that you and I are...
We'll you're being very... You're not being naughty.

FLEABAG

No.

DAD

Why?

FLEABAG

Well, because... I guess... It doesn't matter.

While they both are chuckling out of awkwardness throughout the whole scene, Fleabag's smile freezes when she explains why she withdrew any kind of engagement at this family reunion looking into her father's eyes in earnest: Because she carries the belief nothing she does or says matters, because she believes *she* does not matter, Fleabag partly gave up on her family and

especially on her father. She ascribes irrelevance to herself which feeds her deep feeling of loneliness.

Fleabag's life is impacted by two fathers who form strong contrasts: Firstly, there is her biological father who is inarticulate and unable to support her and secondly, the spiritual Father who proactively builds a connection since he recognises her and her shared feelings of loneliness.

4.5.3 Falling For A Father: The Priest

For there was never a second season of *Fleabag* planned, its huge success came with astonishment but was more than well received by audience and media. While *Fleabag* fans had fallen for the main character in the first season, the second season brought another character which became centre of attention, often referred to as “hot priest”. Played by and specifically written for Andrew Scott, the priest represents the impossible love that creates the core of the second season. Beside this factor of tragedy there is the topic of hope, intended as the overarching narrative connecting the season's six episodes. The first one opens with Fleabag in a rather fancy, dim-lighted public bathroom washing her hands. Soft piano music plays in the background accompanied by a soft woman's voice singing ‘You are the one I wanna be close to...’ The camera jumps into an over the shoulder close up of Fleabag framing her reflection in the mirror. As she lifts her head, we see her face partly covered in red as blood comes streaming from her nose down to her chin. With calm she cleans herself with a wet towel, showing no sign of irritation. From offscreen comes a knocking sound on the bathroom, followed by a male voice kindly checking in on her: ‘Can I do anything?’ It remains unknown who is trying to help her as the camera stays on Fleabag, who politely declines. The voice continues to inform her that ‘They’ve gone.’ Fleabag turns away from the mirror and as the camera follows her, we see another woman on the bathroom floor beside her. The woman's nose is bleeding as well, yet unlike Fleabag her eyes are wide open, and she appears to be in shock. Fleabag hands her a towel and without further interaction she turns back to check herself in the mirror one last time, fixing her hair. Then she looks directly at the camera and declares: ‘This is a love story.’

By her own description the second season is constructed around a love story that most evidently is closely connected to pain and wounds as her blood covered face indicates. However, it is quickly established that Fleabag has gained an ability to maintain certain strength and self-agency, as she cleans herself up and does not need anyone, any man to do anything for her. Her ability to withstand a hit and not be knocked to the ground by a love story, leaves the other woman on the bathroom floor in awe. While she shows no sign of vulnerability, this

introduction establishes the gained strength that will allow her to open up and let her fall in love despite the risk of loss, heartbreak and even more pain. The question that remains is what role the priest has in the process of this transition?

After a dispute with her sister who sent her away with the words “We are not friends. We are sisters. Get your own friends.”, Fleabag seeks shelter at the priest’s house late at night.⁸⁷ He immediately invites her in when he opens the door drowsily, eager to be there for her when she is in need. Fleabag’s way of dealing with her loneliness and longing for connection has changed through the priest’s appearance in her life since he is devoted to help and verbalises an invitation to open up, to speak out, to come in on many occasions. He sees her and senses her desperation but instead of shying away from a person in need he leans in, signalling to Fleabag that it is okay not to be okay. While throughout the first season Fleabag has been asked on multiple occasion by members of her family whether she was okay or not, none of them offered her space in their lives. This is the first time someone pulls her close when she longs to connect, instead of keeping distance. When she appears on his doorstep waking him from his sleep, like she did with her father in season one, she is not sent away but welcomed in. The priest had given Fleabag the bible in the previous episode in an attempt to help her help herself, as he senses how she, too, is longing for guidance. He, on the contrary, dedicated his life to God and relies on spiritual guidance. Their connection is based on their shared issues in dealing with life’s complexity and navigating through a chaotic world of disconnection. When they sit down in the priest’s home to drink cans of G&T, Fleabag wants to discuss inconsistencies she noticed in the bible, indicating her deep belief that there is no salvation for her feelings of lack and loss. The priest continues to refer to the bible as moral code and to describe God’s plan for him to love people as a father. When Fleabag goes further into challenging the priest’s belief by making him negotiate his capacity to love many people, they hear a noise from Sister Pam who lives with the priest. She is upset about their unruly conversation and so they have to leave ‘God’s House’ and continue outside this shelter.

The two sit next to each other on a bench in the backyard of the priest’s home. Warm light comes falling out the stained-glass windows, serving as a reminder of the church being a representative space of his faith which he left to speak with a woman who is eager to challenge his place of belonging. The camera jumps into a medium wide shot of the two, showing Fleabag turned towards the priest with her eyes on him, while he stares into the distance not allowing for eye contact at first. When he admits that she makes him question his faith and it only brings

⁸⁷ *Fleabag*, S02E03, 00:16:59 – 00:17:29.

him closer to God a rattling from the bushes offscreen lets him jump. The priest assumes it must be a fox and as he is walking the backyard startled the camera follows him. He is agitated and explains that foxes have been following him for years and he does not know what they want from him. This interference takes place during a conversation the two have on belief and faith. When he finally sits down again beside Fleabag the camera is positioned by his side showing him close up yet out of focus. Staring into the dark of the backyard he shudders. Fleabag who is put into focus keeps her eyes on the priest, confused about his agitation. When they try to pick up the conversation Fleabag asks whether he has doubts and continues to admit that she could never live in celibacy. Again, their conversation is interrupted by a rattling in the bushes and seemingly frightened the priest shoots up again, desperate to find an answer to why they will not leave him alone. The foxes which are never actually visible up until the final scene at the bus station, when he and Fleabag part, seem to represent his past as well as the threats to his commitment to the Catholic church and celibacy. Forced to face these challenges, part of which is his affection towards Fleabag, he sits back down and turns towards her, this time allowing for eye contact.

FLEABAG

I just... I couldn't give up sex forever. It's just too, too...

PRIEST

Celibacy is a lot less complicated than romantic relationships.

FLEABAG

What if you meet someone you like?

PRIEST

I talk and drink and laugh and give them Bibles, and hope they eventually leave me alone.

FLEABAG

What if you meet someone you love?

PRIEST

We're not gonna have sex. I know that's what you think you want from me, but it's not. It won't bring any good.

FLEABAG

Well, it might.

PRIEST

It won't.

I've been there many times before I found this.

Ever since Fleabag's revelation during the previous *Episode 2*, in which Fleabag opens up to a therapist about how she used sex to deflect from the void in her empty heart and how sex did

not bring anything good for her, the audience as well as Fleabag know that the priest is right. He shares the same experience of not finding fulfilment in romantic relationships and suffering from this kind of love. Fleabag knows how sex and some decisions she made around it had brought terrible consequences to her life, like losing her best friend or frustration when giving herself away to strangers would not numb the pain that she carried within her. Nevertheless, she associates sex with love as it is one way that makes her feel seen or, rather, her body. This kind of recognition and desire constitute parts of her understanding of love. When the priest tells Fleabag that he would want to be her friend, she claims to reciprocate that feeling but then turns to the camera and declares full of pity: 'We'll last a week.' She has no hope for either a relationship with a man that is not based on sex, nor for a friendship based on love and understanding for her. In this scene, the priest also becomes aware of Fleabag's 'invisible friends' or the fictitious audience she turns to when in need to say something she cannot communicate to a present fellow human around her. His awareness of her breaking the fourth wall and 'going to another place' makes him the only person who sees all of her, even the parts she wants to hide. Even though this ability of his makes Fleabag nervous and worried, for she cannot keep up the façade she usually does and therefore has to admit certain things to herself at the same time she has to do towards the priest, she feels drawn towards him. It could be assumed that it is his unavailability that holds a sense of security within the idea of an impossible love that would never happen and therefore never request her to take a risk and reveal her real self. However, it is more than evident that their shared feeling of loneliness is what connects them. Celibacy can be seen as a wound that never really heals as the choice itself brings a certain kind of loneliness, the lack of human touch and physical intimacy. For Fleabag this flapping wound is love itself, as the loss of loved ones left her with a void she cannot fill. Even if they did not leave her by death, they might have turned away (from her) like her sister and father did. Both, that is the priest and Fleabag, are afraid of emotional intimacy as they do not know how to handle the overwhelming intensity of love.

4.6 Alone In The World: The Existential Angst

But not only do they share the fear of love and the potential pain that comes with loss, they also share a different kind of feeling of loneliness: Both are riddled with existential angst. Through confessions they admit to each other that they do not know what to do, which refers to the human condition of feeling lost and overwhelmed by the task to make sense of life in a world full of uncertainty. *Episode 4* of the second season brings the two characters eventually together on a physical level after Fleabag shares her deep anxiety and the mental overload the human

experience causes her. First, she pushes the priest away when he is getting too close, repeatedly inquiring about her relationship with the fictitious audience that he witnesses in moments when she seems to zoom out in order to escape a situation. When she refuses to let him in and takes away the love, she already holds for him, she is reminded of her mother's funeral and the support of her best friend Boo. By the end of a flashback scene of the funeral ceremony she asks Boo what to do with all the love she had for her mother. Her friend tells Fleabag to simply give it to herself, she would want all that love. As we know, Boo later died as well and so it is to assume that Fleabag again does not know who to give her love to. The memories of her mother's funeral and the following desperation bring her to the decision to go to church at night, where she sits in silence in an attempt to pray. However, her moment of contemplation is interrupted by music, coming from the priest's room where she then finds him. As he, again, tries to find out what weighs her heart and Fleabag is unable to share her feelings, he invites her to the confessional.⁸⁸ Fleabag gives in to his request and steps into the booth. The camera frames her in close up in the dark box that has only a little dim light falling through the barred window that separates her physically from the priest. She is alone in a closed space, with nothing but a glass of liquor in her hand and lipstick on her face. The priest's voice pushes Fleabag to tell him her sins, promising it will make her feel better and admitting he wants to know. With her head turned towards the light she takes another sip of liquor, evidently uncomfortable in the situation she keeps smiling and admits to some of her sins concerning her sex life. When the priest asks her to go on, she stumbles. Rapid, bright flashbacks of Boo are intercut as the camera jumps even closer to Fleabag's face in the semi-darkness of the confessional. She struggles for words until she dares to tell him everything that matters to her:

'I want someone to tell me what to wear in the morning. (...) I want someone to tell me what to wear EVERY morning. I want someone to tell me what to eat. What to like, what to hate, what to rage about, what to listen to, what band to like, what to buy tickets for, what to joke about, what not to joke about. I want someone to tell me what to believe in, who to vote for, who to love and... how to tell them. I just think I want someone to tell me how to live my life, Father, because so far I think I've been getting it wrong — and I know that's why people want people like you in their lives, because you just tell them how to do it. You just tell them what to do and what they'll get out at the end of it, and even though I don't believe your bullshit, and I know that scientifically nothing I do makes any difference in the end anyway, I'm still scared. Why am I still scared? So just tell me what to do. Just fucking tell me what to do, Father.'

⁸⁸ *Fleabag*, S02E04, 00:20:10 – 00:24:50.

Desperate for guidance and in search of surrender she reveals herself to another human being. Different to the way she reveals parts of herself to the fictive audience in order to maintain a certain amount of control, she now makes herself completely vulnerable. The deep want for meaning is a longing the priest shares with her. However, he has chosen the way of God, or at least tries to follow this pre-made path, a path designated for men that comes with the cost of a certain freedom. Nonetheless, he struggles just as much as Fleabag with his desire and love for another human being whose lostness resonates deeply with him. Her womanhood holds the privilege of the kind of freedom he had to sacrifice. And so, they complement each other through their shared desire for each other, through the longings they find in each other and their mutual understanding as they share the overwhelming feeling of existential angst.

In the next episode the priest confesses to his own lostness and weakness through his actions and words. This time he shows up at Fleabag's door after their moment of intimacy in the confessional, where they were about to sleep with each other until a painting fell of the wall and interrupted them. To the priest's interpretation, this was a sign or rather a warning of God. He surprises Fleabag at her house when she was expecting another man for casual sex, wearing nothing but her coat and underwear underneath. Nevertheless, she lets the priest in and when their conversation is interrupted by the other man she had initially invited, Fleabag hurries to the door to send him away in order to maintain the intimate moment with the priest. Back in the living room, she finds the priest standing across the room, nervous and vulnerable. He has left the chapel to find her and walked through the rain that can be heard from offscreen. Now in the arena of her home, where she keeps her protective coat on, they face each other eye to eye. The camera appears as a present spectator through its subtle motion while staying located in one corner of the room. The priest begins to explain how he cannot be physical with her and that he is supposed to love one thing. But as Fleabag turns to the camera and shares with the fictive audience her assessment of the situation that they are going to have sex, the priest loses his temper and yells:

'For fuck's sake! Stop that! I don't think you want to be told what to do at all. I think you know exactly what you want to do. If you really wanted to be told what to do, you'd be wearing one of these.'

He plucks at his robe, suggesting that he truly is lost and chose the commitment to God and religion in order to find relief of life's overwhelming magnitude.

Fleabag and the priest find a deep connection, not only because of sexual attraction. They are caught in the same misery of the human condition, torn between the want to be taken care of,

to be loved and to eventually surrender, and on contrary the desire to be in control, to live freely and independently. Their doomed love can be seen as a reference to the struggle of carrying the need for meaning, for something bigger to help them find reason for all the pain and suffering as part of the human experience. The unknown evokes a feeling of loneliness of finding oneself in an incomprehensible world without any idea what to do or where to go. The show addresses this existential angst and the consequential need for guidance. However, the solution lies not within a romantic other, that often is believed to bring fulfilment. The kind of loneliness they both experience stems from more of an individual than a relational lack, which touches a much deeper level of isolation. For that reason, the answer to their lostness does not lie in normative partnership in hope for a place of belonging, but through each other they are confronted with their quest to find belonging within themselves. Hence, falling in love let them both face the challenge of introspection and coming to terms with one's own truth, which is why they both make a confession. To each other as well as to themselves. For they know that a partner or their romantic relationship cannot resolve the crisis both of them are in. However, a loved one can serve as a reflection of oneself and create a gateway to the essence of the human condition. Therefore, it is not a romantic affair that promises relief but love and connection that serve as support through the human experience.

The acceptance of herself, of her past and her flaws is what brings her the connection she needed most. Not a partnership with another human being, but the reconnection to herself. The visual representation of her inner complexity supports the assessment of *Fleabag* being a show of progressive gender roles, as it avoids stereotypical portrayals of a norm.⁸⁹

5. Résumé

*loneliness is a sign
you are in desperate
need of yourself*
- Rupi Kaur⁹⁰

Fleabag is the story of a woman in a “custom-tailored coat of pain wrapped around a broken heart”. The pain she carries is one of great loss and loneliness, defined by the feeling of being lost: Lost in a culture and a surrounding that suggests one has to walk alone and figure it out by

⁸⁹ Dyer, Richard (2002) *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representation*. Hove: Psychology Press.

⁹⁰ Kaur, Rupi (2015) *Milk and Honey*, Simon & Schuster.

oneself. The loss of her mother and her best friend leave her without a confidante, without someone she can rely on, who will understand her. Since she feels responsible for her friend's death but is lacking the means to share her feelings of guilt, shame and sorrow, she is unable to connect with someone else. This inability to reach out to people around her stems from the belief that one is doomed to figure out how to navigate through life all by oneself and to withstand tragedy and trauma in silence. Because Fleabag will not share her inner workings and feelings, she distances herself from the world around her. During the first season she is asked by her family regularly whether she was okay, since they are aware of the traumatic experiences she has gone through. Fleabag continuously gives a dishonest answer, claiming she was okay. The flashbacks the audience gets to witness through the inevitable eye of the camera, however, tell a different story and reveal details about the unique bond she had with her friend Boo. The regret and guilt she feels concerning her death make Fleabag neglect a part of herself for she cannot forgive and free herself from the weight of these feelings. Hence, she also disconnects from herself in order to keep moving on and at least try to turn the situation into a good show. Through creating a relationship with a fictive audience, she empowers herself to modify and reframe events in her life and the meaning of these. By the awareness of the gaze of the other she gains more consciousness about her life's constitution and her own flaws according to social standards. By altering her story with jokes and humour, she resists to adapt and follow the mainstream and at the same time refuses to show her real self to the world around her as well as to her followers behind the camera.

When Rupri Kaur writes about being in need of oneself when burdened by the feeling of loneliness it is the disconnection from Self she is referring to. In the character of Fleabag this kind of detachment becomes evident through her relationship to her own body or rather the lack of such. Sex is supposed to serve as distraction, not as pleasure. In the first season she is not present in the moment she is sleeping with someone, but narrates the happening to the anonymous audience, distracted yet again. Struggling with the challenge of living up to the standards of a 'good feminist' in the modern world, she finds herself in a routine of picking up men for meaningless sex in order to find reassurance of her own desirability. Tormented by self-neglect she uses her body to find some kind of affirmation and legitimation for her being. In her constant state of hiding her feelings she substitutes the want for recognition through her physical self by presenting it to men, specifically, in order to be seen. This compensation brings forward the problematic aspect of traditional femininity that reduces a woman's body to be her only desirable feature. However, the objectification of her own body is not aimed at men's

pleasing but based on the intention to find a way to be shown how it is possible to desire herself through the eyes of the other. Since she cannot find a way to love and accept all of herself, she tries to create experiences where she feels that at least a part of her, her physical self, is accepted and even wanted. Even though she uses sex and her own body to make up for an internalised lack, it is not her desire or need to find a man. In this sense, the main character moves beyond traditional femininity that requires a male partner or one that needs to take the role of the mother, and this way the show offers an alternative, more autonomous and self-sufficient woman's biography. Fleabag's understanding of her own sexuality is liberated from social norms and she is driven by a sense of eroticism for she hungers for aliveness. She explains to the audience, how she loves "the drama of it"⁹¹ and refers to the vitality and excitement that come through play, evoking eros, inviting life force. In this sense, it becomes evident how the female lead character is not longing for the physical pleasure nor is she looking for a man in hope to find some kind of fulfilment in a monogamous relationship, but instead she is following her strong desire to come alive stemming from the pain of her shut down parts that make her half dead (emotionally) and lonely. For Fleabag the source of vitality transcends throughout the show and eventually it is love that makes her feel alive again. When she meets the priest and steadily grows feelings for him, she stops pursuing other men and meaningless sex, for she does not want or need the drama anymore. It is the deep connection to him that substitutes the play with others.

Play is vital for the survival as well as the revival of Fleabag. Like children play and create company out of their vivid imagination, Fleabag, too, calls into existence fellows that eventually turn into followers. As analysed before the relationship with the fictive audience who she addresses directly is ambivalent. It is a relationship created out of necessity as there is no one around for her to confide in. Since this fictive character is need for social connection, yet unable to allow and build it in her reality, she creates an alternative world in which she has her accomplices. Through the spectators of the show she decided to put on she finds escape from the solitude she constructed and decided for herself. Only through the development of her character she becomes capable of letting go of her past, her hope to be rescued by her family and those gone, her mother and her best friend, she takes ownership of her life. This form of empowerment gives her the capacity to deal with the affection she receives from the priest. First taken as a threat to her one space of intimacy, the relationship to the fictive audience, she then allows for her feelings towards the priest to exist. She dares to love, knowing it is an impossible love that will never lead to a normative, monogamous relationship in the romantic sense. But it

⁹¹ *Fleabag*, S01E02, 00:05:07 – 00:05:27.

is love that allows her to feel a connection to a fellow human being, she refused herself after the loss of her mother as well as of her best friend, for which she felt responsible for. It is the reconnection to herself through the means of a romantic endeavour that defines the character development of this female protagonist.

But not only Fleabag's relationship to herself is problematic and defined by lack, also the connection to her environment is shaped by severe deficits. Her withdrawal from the world around her is self-inflicted, however, her immediate environment cannot offer her a secure place to open up. Shame and guilt distance her from those around her and there is no role model who could show how to overcome such burdens. Her father as well as her sister are masters of suppressing emotions, rather they secretly admire Fleabag's capacity to feel. However, the cultural and social surrounding suggests swallowing up any kind of emotion and under no circumstances burden someone else with it. This results in Fleabag not knowing where to put her love either, since her mother and her best friend were the ones, she was able to share it with. By finding someone to love and express it in a truthful way, she regains a long-lost power that nurtures a sense of aliveness which even inspires her uptight sister. Through liberating herself from the prison of suppressed feelings she helps Claire to liberate herself, too. In this sense *Fleabag* depicts two women who manage to succeed and embrace their innate femininity autonomously and without the rescue of a man. Rather through the means of a loved one, through a sincere connection to another fellow human being they find independence and self-sufficiency.

In conclusion, the aspects of loneliness and singleness in the show *Fleabag* are interconnected, however, it is not suggested that it is a female issue to be resolved through a male romantic partner. The loneliness the characters experience stem from the inability to share feelings and the fear of vulnerability. They find themselves in an existing cultural construct of shame, which determines what characteristics and what behaviour is shameful. Through these limitations they struggle to trust, to share and hence to connect. Only when these obstacles are overcome, they are able to unite and thrive. Community and a sense of belonging serve as redemption from loneliness and support self-sufficiency. To prove the hypothesis of this thesis, *Fleabag* moves beyond traditional femininity in its portrayal of female characters for they do not follow the norm of coupledness and marriage or motherhood. Instead, autonomy and love can be achieved at the same time and are not exclusive.

This research brought forward the importance of connection, communication, community and a sense of belonging that is essential to decrease experiences of loneliness. The term ‘sonder’ describes the realisation that ‘each random passerby is living a life as vivid and complex as your own’⁹² and therefore holds the potential to empathise with another human being. This realisation may even invite to engage with a stranger, since it builds on the conception on life built on common ground. Following this thought this master’s thesis is complemented by an essay film to be thought as visual poetry. Titled *sonder* the film aims to question the origin of loneliness and deals with diverse facets of this human condition that is paradox, destructive yet abundant.

⁹² Koenig, John: „sonder“, *The Book of Obscure Sorrows*, 2012, <https://www.dictionaryofobscuresorrows.com/post/23536922667/sonder>, last access: 26.06.2021.

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Abstract

Deutsch

Diese Masterarbeit beschäftigt sich dem Zusammenhang von Einsamkeit und dem Single-Status von Frauen in der Serie *Fleabag*. Die BBC Serie, deren beiden Staffeln (2016 & 2019) international auf große Resonanz traf und auch von Kritiker*innen für ihren feministische Zugang gelobt wurde, thematisiert die Herausforderungen und Schwierigkeiten einer in London lebenden Frau Mitte dreißig. Frech, zynisch und sexuell aktiv erzählt und kommentiert sie ihre Erfahrungen einem fiktiven Publikum durch die Kamera. Gezeichnet vom Tod ihrer Mutter und ihrer besten Freundin kämpft sie mit Einsamkeit, Haltlosigkeit und dem Wunsch nach Verbindung. Eine Analyse der Serie zeigt, dass durch die kulturell beeinflusste Unterdrückung der Gefühle, durch Scham und fehlender Selbstakzeptanz die Protagonistin sich von ihrer Umwelt distanziert, worauf ihre Vereinsamung zurückzuführen ist. Es ist die tiefgehende Verbindung mit einem anderen Menschen, die ihr ermöglicht ein selbstständiges und autonomes Leben zu kreieren. Allerdings ist es nicht eine romantische Paarbeziehung, die sie rettet, sondern die Fähigkeit, sich mit sich selbst, ihrer Innenwelt und ihrer Geschichte neu zu verbinden. Dadurch wird eine tiefgehende Verbindung zu einer anderen Person erst möglich. In diesem Sinne hebt sich *Fleabag* von dem Narrativ der hilflosen, ledigen Frau ab und bietet eine Darstellung, in der erfolgreiche Weiblichkeit nicht an Ehe oder Mutterschaft gebunden ist. Gleichzeitig werden Strategien zum Umgang mit Einsamkeit veranschaulicht und Aufmerksamkeit auf eine reale Sozialproblematik gelenkt, weshalb eine tiefgehende Auseinandersetzung mit diesem popkulturellen Medienprodukt von Bedeutung ist. Ergänzend zu dieser Masterarbeit entstand der Essayfilm *sonder*. Als visuelle Poesie zu verstehen, wird ein menschlicher Zustand erforscht; ein gefürchteter, aber schöpferischer Abgrund.

English

This master's thesis deals with the connection between loneliness and the single status of women in the series *Fleabag*. The BBC series' two seasons (2016 & 2019) resonated with a wide audience internationally leading to a huge success and praise of critics for its feminist approach. The show addresses the challenges and difficulties of a woman in her mid-thirties living in London. Cheeky, cynical and sexually active, she tells and comments on her experiences to a fictional audience through the camera. Marked by the death of her mother and her best friend, she struggles with loneliness and unsteadiness. An analysis of the series shows that through the culturally influenced suppression of feelings, through shame and a lack of self-acceptance, the protagonist distances herself from her environment, which results in her loneliness. It is the deep connection with another person that enables her to make her way as an independent and autonomous woman. However, it is not a traditional coupledness or a romantic relationship that saves her, but the ability to reconnect with herself enabling a deep connection with another person. In this sense, *Fleabag* breaks with the common narrative of the helpless, single woman and offers a representation in which successful femininity is not tied to marriage or motherhood. At the same time, strategies for dealing with loneliness are portrayed and attention is drawn to a real social problem, which is why an in-depth examination of this popular culture media product is of importance.