

Kollegium Spiritus Sanctus Brig

Maturaarbeit 2023/24

Fleabag

A comparison of different portrayals of feminism

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1 Introduction

Nowadays, words like feminism, sexism and misogyny are used in various contexts, often with meanings that differ. Although those terms do have fluctuating definitions, based on one's origin, race, sexuality and other social background they all have a foundation, on which further theories are built.

Feminism is a very present topic in the British comedy-drama television series *Fleabag*. Adapted from her one-woman show, Phoebe Waller Bridge plays the title character in the series, telling the story of a young woman facing the grief followed by her mother's and later her best friend's death (Jessica Beaumont, 2). In order to cope with all her struggles, the character known to the audience just as 'Fleabag' uses sex and sexual explicitness, vulgar behaviour towards her close ones and overall, a rather unhealthy lifestyle.

On introducing the main character, Waller Bridge shows the contrasting sides of Fleabag. She does so by presenting Fleabag's sexual desire, regardless of circumstances like place and time as a very first scene. Shortly after, Fleabag and her sister, Claire, attend a feminist lecture. The two sisters quickly reveal a conflict they share and must face every day. After their mother's death due to breast cancer, their father becomes romantically involved with their godmother. While Fleabag and Claire do not always share the same opinions, one thing remains clear – their godmother's suppositions are far more alienated than anyone else's.

The present paper addresses the differences and similarities between Fleabag, Claire, and The Godmother. To achieve this, multiple feminist theories will be defined and situated into the context of the three lead female characters through analysing key scenes of the show *Fleabag*. To conclude the analysis of each character, a brief description of their development is provided to show their complexity and potential. At last, a summary of the analysis will be developed in order to respond to the initial question namely, to show the different feminist approaches portrayed as three characters in *Fleabag*.

2 Literature review

2.1 Principle of Self-Determination

Margaret Sanger claims that “no woman can call herself free who does not own and control her body” (Britannica, Margaret Sanger). During Sanger’s activist years, she spoke of the right of birth control and how women must have the ability and freedom to control their own reproduction. Having this freedom, according to Sanger, leads to “the freedom of expressing one’s own sexuality without the fear of pregnancy” (Ravichandiran 5; Roberts 196-197). Therefore, the concept of self-determination in feminism emphasizes the importance of women having control over their decisions. This means that they should be free social expectations and structures.

2.2 Post Feminism

The rise of women’s rights was particularly prominent during the 1960s and ‘70s, with a big part of it taking place in the United States. Those rights included greater personal freedom. This meant that women had the right to choose – they could choose a career and were not stuck with being stay-at-home mothers. Additionally to that, they could actively participate in politics after having received the right to vote (Britannica, women’s rights movement). Legally speaking, during this time, the Second-Wave Feminism provided women with formal equality. Nevertheless, social expectations and norms persist up until today. Among them is the gender discrimination at the workplace, as well as “demands and pressures on women to balance career and motherhood”. These factors shape the paradox of Post-Feminism (Crofts und Coffey). Despite the legal recognition of expansion of gender equality, social beliefs remain. Legally speaking, women have more rights than they did decades ago but in their daily life, they are continuously discriminated based on their gender (Keisu und Brodin 2).

2.3 Intersectional Feminism

The term *Intersectional Feminism* is of great significance as it shows how differently feminism can be defined. Many people associate the term feminist with negative images and stereotypes, such as “ ‘communism’ and/or ‘radicalism,’ and the feminist subject is often seen as an unattractive, humourless, ‘man-hating,’ militant lesbian zealot” (Hoskin, Kay E. and Karen L.). As a result, individuals misconceive feminism as a superficial movement. *Intersectional feminism* shows how factors including race, gender identification, and age create a diverse approach to combatting oppression.

2.4 Performative Feminism

The term *Performative Feminism* is the process of supporting feminist ideas by comments, gestures, or behaviours that may or may not be consistent with key feminist beliefs or result in significant societal change. Essentially, it is the act of displaying feminist language or symbols in public with the intention of coming off as progressive or socially conscious – often without a sincere dedication to feminist activity or ideals. The concept of *Performative Feminism* is often associated with engaging in behaviours solely for self-gain, without aiming towards the goal of equality (Keys-Kukoricza 4-5).

3 Methodology

Feminist readings provided as a first step an excellent approach as how to get closer to the theoretical part of feminism. This proved very useful as it gave a better overview of how feminism plays a big part in *Fleabag*. After having created mind maps for all three characters they were further on extended with chosen theories. An in-depth study of central concepts such as intersectional, liberal, and corporate feminism, as well as the principle of self-determination, was crucial in broadening the connection to the series. It established the basis for the analysis. Subsequently, the printed transcription of *Fleabag* helped with the

familiarisation with the series and the further analysis of the later selected scenes. The transcription is used in this paper to make the story easier to visualise.

To analyse the representation of feminist themes in *Fleabag* a combination of the methods – qualitative content analysis and textual analysis – have been chosen. The choice of content analysis is due to its ability to analyse visual elements like patterns and visual symbolisms in the selected episodes. It also studies narrative elements like dialogues or narration which in *Fleabag* are performed by Phoebe Waller-Bridge. The textual analysis approach has been chosen as it explores the linguistic area of the series (Kuckartz; Zhang and Wildemuth 1-2). Additionally, it focuses on the narrative structure and clarifies the contribution of those elements to the themes and characters of the story. Therefore, a combination of the two methods corresponds well to the aims of this analysis, as it provides a deeper understanding of the complexity of the series.

In order to be able to look at *Fleabag* with the help of key feminist theories, specific episodes and scenes have been chosen based on criteria which have a relevance to the feminist themes. Said criteria include scenes with the presence of vulnerability connected to self-image and sexual desires of the specific characters. Another important aspect of the criteria are elements which challenge patriarchal structures and stereotypical expectations under these structures. The three characters, Fleabag, Claire, and the Godmother have been chosen with the idea of presenting feminist theories. The theories do not necessarily have the same concepts and are overall contradictory in some points. Therefore, these characters reveal intersectionality of feminist issues and how these issues depend on numerous factors, including age.

For instance, the Godmother stands for an older, less modernised perception and portrayal of feminism. Another way of showing this intersectional feminism is how Claire embodies a foil for Fleabag. Barreto explains that for one character to foil another “similarities must exist, but differences must predominate so that the contrast can be more obvious” (2). Claire strives continuously towards the stereotypical values of a heteronormative lifestyle. She obeys to the qualities deemed important for women by society even when it makes her feel miserable. She does so by staying with her husband after years of a marriage which makes her unhappy. On the contrary, Fleabag rejects these values and

sets her own by expressing her sexuality openly. She refuses to be tied down to one single person and explores her interests. Such distinctions aid to highlight the complexity of the chosen characters and therefore the profundity of the series. This is why these characters are ideal for the analysis of feminism in the series.

Consequently, the chosen combination of the two analysis methods followed by the diverse range of selected episodes and scenes provides a stable basis to the analysis of the feminist themes presented in *Fleabag*. With the help of this methodology, the transparency and complexity of this show are shown in a clear way. As a result, this analysis accentuates the broader understanding of the variety of feminist portrayals in the series as well as in everyday life.

4 Fleabag

4.1 Character introduction

The opening scene reveals Fleabag's main way of coping with the pain of losing her mother and best friend, namely through having meaningless sex. She shows that she cares about nothing more but the act of performing sex with others, which is to be observed on multiple occasions, both explicitly and implicitly, throughout the entirety of the series. Her inconstant relationship with her boyfriend Harry proves that she is not looking for any serious relationship. While struggling with her identity, not being certain if she can even call herself a feminist, Fleabag comes across many issues, struggling to find a way to fulfil feminist values. Due to instability and inconsistency in her life, she finds feminism to be the one thing to be able to hold on to. Feminism plays a balancing role in Fleabag's life. This is because she needs something stable and clearly defined to shape her own identity. Fleabag finds herself conflicted, as feminism does not have a one-dimensional definition. It is why she questions throughout the entire series whether she fits in the description of being a feminist. She very often struggles with deciding what the right action is and how she can do better. It is clear to the audience that she suffers from loneliness. Fleabag needs a sense of belonging, even more after having lost her mother and her best friend. She tries to find where she belongs to but frequently goes back to her old habits of being self-destructive and careless about the

well-being of others. She is torn between filling this loneliness with either sex or becoming a better person. Her struggle to remain an altruistic person, showing that she cares for her loved ones is in a way a trauma response. She connects love with loss. The grief she had to endure keeps coming back to her daily life, removing any progress she has made. This makes her go back to her unhealthy coping mechanisms and feeds her loneliness.

As a consequence, one of Fleabag's major traits, which keeps reappearing in the series, is her close connection to the audience. She does not feel judged by the people who are watching her story without being able to have an influence on it. She is the most vulnerable with the viewers by continuously breaking the fourth wall, as she shares most of her intimate and dark thoughts. Fleabag is only capable of making one such bond with people who cannot reach her. Reason for this is that she does not have the need to protect herself from hurting someone and being hurt herself because she perceives the audience as an inanimate object, because it is out of her reach. This is just enough for her to feel like she has someone by her side without the feeling of constant judgement and disapproval.

The following analysis focuses on how Fleabag copes with her problems and how this is connected to feminism.

4.2 Key scenes and interpretation

4.2.1 Sexual explicitness

The series starts with the introduction of Fleabag, the main character, in medias res, which means in the middle of a narrative. Fleabag speaks to the audience, as she does throughout the series. She shares every intimate moment with the viewers. Fleabag stressfully prepares herself for a man to come to her house in the middle of the night to have sex. She spends more time interacting with the audience during this scene than she does with the man she calls Arsehole Guy. The following morning Fleabag attends a job interview and encounters a man in the bus who she refers to as Bus Rodent. She tells him about her fluctuating relationship with Harry, describing him as her former partner. Fleabag and Bus Rodent swiftly exchange phone numbers. Later that day, Fleabag goes on a date with Bus Rodent, during which she feels conflicted as she realises he is interested in her in more than

a sexual way. He politely declines, preferring to stay in the bar, when she suggests they go to either her or his place.

FLEABAG

Ok, what the fuck is your problem?

BUS RODENT

Oh. Um, nothing. I um ... I like you.

FLEABAG

(grabbing her bag)

Ok. You're a dick.

BUS RODENT

What's going on?

FLEABAG

You're pathetic.

She gets up and walks to the door. (Waller-Bridge, Fleabag The Scriptures 32)

As shown in the dialogue between Fleabag and Bus Rodent, Fleabag feels uncomfortable when the person in front of her does not reciprocate her sexual desire. She becomes disrespectful and seems unfamiliar with this kind of approach towards her. She shows to have control over the situation by using vulgar speech like swear words and offends Bus Rodent multiple times. The vulnerability expressed by Bus Rodent is immediately rejected by her. Instead of communicating her confliction, she swiftly distances her from the situation and leaves. This shows that Fleabag tends to be a very avoidant person once she faces a situation outside of her comfort zone. This is exactly what happens as Bus Rodent attempts to form a closer relationship with Fleabag.

The main objective of this scene is to accentuate the troubles Fleabag faces as her fear of emotional intimacy grows. After Fleabag leaves the bar, she subtly introduces her late best friend, Boo. Waller-Bridge tells Boo's story using flashbacks which occur to Fleabag very often. Those flashbacks are of moments the two of them shared in their friendship. Fleabag and Boo worked in a café together and spent most of their time with each other. It is portrayed as a calm and loving friendship. Fleabag exposes how her sexual tendencies are what led to the tragic death of her friend. Fleabag has sex with Boo's boyfriend and Boo does not know who the woman she was cheated on with was. She simply wishes to get her boyfriend's attention back. She does so by trying to get in a small road accident. Instead, Boo gets herself killed leaving Fleabag drown in her guilt.

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 actually think she'd die, she just found out that 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 laughs)

She was such a dick. (Waller-Bridge, Fleabag The Scriptures 40)

Shortly after her date with Bus Rodent, Fleabag speaks to her taxi driver on her way home. She reveals to her audience for the first time what has occurred to her best friend. She seems to once again distance herself from this painful situation by making fun of the situation. She lowers the seriousness of the situation by calling Boo a "dick" (Waller-Bridge 40). The absence of interest to engage in relationships beyond purely physical ones is her way of avoiding any further complexities caused by emotional intimacy. As her guilt and sadness for her best friend consume her mind, she becomes increasingly emotionally

unavailable. She blames herself for the loss of her best friend and therefore creates a wall between the emotional and physical affection she experiences in relationships. This can be interpreted as a way of self-punishment. Fleabag does not feel deserving of love and compassion because she feels incapable of giving any in return. Rather she thinks the only thing she can do is to cause pain, followed by her best friend's death which is why she decides to create that distance to emotional connections. If the emotional objective is lacking, there is a lower risk for her to cause and endure any further emotional pain.

This leads to the conclusion that Fleabag expects not only to be sexually objectified, but to be treated like an object. From a feminist point of view, while Fleabag isolates herself emotionally, she exercises autonomy over her own body and therefore envisages the principle of self-determination. The principle of self-determination is reflected in many feminist theories, such as liberal feminism. Margaret Sanger claims that “no woman can call herself free who does not own and control her body” (Britannica). During Sanger's activist years she spoke for the right of birth control and how women must have the ability and freedom to control their own reproduction. Having this freedom, according to Sanger, leads to “the freedom of expressing one's own sexuality without the fear of pregnancy” (Ravichandiran 5; Roberts 196-197). In Fleabag's case, she exercises the freedom and autonomy over her body by setting boundaries of limitation to physical relationships only. She makes this choice on her own terms and therefore has the full freedom and ability to control not only her reproduction, as Sanger claims, but also expresses a sexual liberation.

4.3 Character development

In the second season, Fleabag falls in love. This is a big change for her. Although it happens without her wanting it, Fleabag eventually gives in to her feelings. She figures out it is not worth to avoid this kind of situation, because she begins to feel happy and comfortable around the man she loves. It is a very difficult experience for her as it is the opposite of her superficial sexual relationships. Having avoided being attached to anyone for so long, Fleabag finally takes the first step and makes herself vulnerable. This helps her to

process the trauma of losing her mother and best friend and allows her to love, even with the prospect of losing that person.

5 Claire

5.1 Character introduction

The first time Claire is encountered in the series is at a feminist lecture. Fleabag and her sister Claire visit it because their father bought them tickets. Fleabag introduces Claire to the audience by saying that she is “uptight and beautiful and probably anorexic, but clothes look awesome on her so ...” (Waller-Bridge 16). This description provides the viewers with a quick look into the prioritisation of appearance above mental health and stability. This prioritisation of looks indicates the social expectations of women under patriarchal structures. Claire tends to follow these expectations and is the opposite of the person Fleabag portrays. While Fleabag works on finding herself by opposing any stereotypical behaviour, it is exactly where Claire feels the most secure. Claire, similarly, to her sister, needs a source for balance in her life. For this stability she turns to structures created by society. She feels protected and not in danger when she follows the societal rules. This is because, as a foil to Fleabag, she does not like to stand out. She is reserved and holds back on complaining about things going wrong in her life. While struggling with an unhappy marriage and a job which is far from what she wants to pursue, she refuses to do anything against it, as it would mean for her to go out of her comfort zone. Following given rules and societal expectations is easier than to question how authentic and useful all these social structures are. On many occasions it is shown how Claire is disgusted and at the same time impressed by how her sister handles any inconveniences, such as struggles in her marriage. This is why Claire’s struggles are depicted differently than Fleabag’s. Her coping mechanisms with stress and difficulties alter from her sister’s. Claire tries to remain grounded while Fleabag spirals and does impulsive things, including having meaningless sex.

The following analysis has the aim to show how Claire embodies the issues faced by women in male dominated corporations and therefore presents a very important feminist

theory – Corporate Feminism. Additionally, because Claire foils Fleabag, the analysis of her character provides a deeper look into her own ideologies as well as Fleabag's.

5.2 Key scenes and interpretation

5.2.1 Claire's career and marriage

In the beginning of the series, Claire is a person who follows what society tells her, without thinking of what more she would like out of life. Her first appearance is in a scene with Fleabag. Throughout the series, she is rarely ever shown without her sister. This has been done with the idea of strengthening the contrast between the two characters. During the feminist lecture, Fleabag speaks to the viewers, making it clear that she is struggling financially. She hesitates to ask her sister for money. Once the opportunity to share the troubles she is facing with Claire arises, she decides to lie and pretend that the café she opened with Boo has been going well. Shortly after, Claire finds out that Fleabag and her boyfriend Harry have separated once more. Claire judges her sister for the way she treats her relationships. Fleabag defends herself by making fun of Claire once having been intoxicated and thereof having done something immature. Claire counters her by bragging – “I have two degrees, a husband and a Burberry coat.” (Waller-Bridge 27).

Overall, this scene plays a very important part in showing how contrasting these two characters are. It also mirrors Claire's values and demonstrates the priorities she has based on social expectations. Claire continuously judges her sister for the relationship she has with sex and mainly how carelessly she handles the one she has with Harry. Claire considers the marital status as a vital concept in her own life and does not understand how her sister overlooks this part. Another essential notion for the more rational sister, Claire, is her career. The quote above refers to her focus on three things, which shape her life and define success in her terms. “Two degrees” stands for the education and financial stability, “a husband” represents the marital status, and “a Burberry coat” can be connected to being financially stable, as well as the materialist importance of owning things.

After the feminist lecture, Claire visits Fleabag's café. They have a short conversation which reflects how Claire neglects her mental and physical health. As Fleabag states that

Claire appears stressed, Claire responds to her that it is the result of being successful. Right after this exchange, Fleabag makes a reference to Claire's declining physical health due to her eating disorder.

FLEABAG

Yeah I'm fine. You Ok? You look stressed.

CLAIRE

Well, I'm successful so ... Do you have rye bread?

FLEABAG

No. But I have normal bread you could just puke up after.

Claire does not disagree with Fleabag's statement and goes along with it. This indicates that her self-worth and body image are set in the background, which is connected to her priorities. The problem within those priorities is the fact that she neglects herself by trying to appear collected and calm. She may be successful in terms of what she presents to the others. Nevertheless, Claire hides the majority of the truth about how her life is actually going.

To begin with, Claire's career is not thriving, although she repeatedly says so. In reality, her definition of being successful only reflects the result of achieving something considered fundamental by the people surrounding her. This means that Claire focuses mainly on what is expected from her, for example by society, rather than what she would profit from the most. She dedicates an enormous amount of her time to her career because it makes her feel stable and grounded. Initially, Claire does not think of how her work life disadvantages her. She considers that feeling stressed and worn out are normal factors resulting from being successful. This changes rapidly, as a new job opportunity opens up for her. At her own birthday party, Claire receives a proposition to be promoted in Finland. Claire visits a silent retreat with her sister, for which their dad bought them tickets. She shares with Fleabag that she got the promotion in Finland. At first, she is hesitant about taking the job and almost turns

it down because of having to leave her husband Martin for it. Fleabag decides to help her sister, by revealing how Martin had tried to kiss her at Claire's own birthday party.

FLEABAG

(can't believe she is turning this down)

Oh come ON. Don't let other people get in the way of what you really want. Finland is what you really want!

CLAIRE

My 'husband' isn't ... 'other people' Ok.

(beat)

My 'husband'... is my life.

FLEABAG

Your 'husband' tried to kiss me on your birthday.

Claire looks like a train has hit her. (Waller-Bridge 135)

This moment reflects how Claire completely neglects her own needs. She makes choices based on what her husband tells her, describing him as her life. She also explains how it is also because of Fleabag that she refuses to leave, as she feels obligated to stay and take care of her. Fleabag tries to push her to think of herself for once. Claire continues to search for fulfilment in her life. For her, it is a turning point to find out her husband is genuinely not worth the sacrifice of a life-changing opportunity. She suddenly understands that she feels dissatisfied with her job and her personal life. She reveals this to Fleabag shortly after, being direct and determined. "Listen to me. I'm going to leave Martin. I'm going to give you the money for the café. And I'm going to go to fucking Finland." (Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag The Scriptures* 172). Martin still manages to convince Claire of staying with him, by claiming that it was Fleabag instead who tried to kiss him.

Claire is a product of *Post-Feminism*. She shows the downside of being a woman in a male-dominated world. The rise of women's rights was particularly prominent during the 1960s and '70s, with a big part of it taking place in the United States. Those rights included greater personal freedom. This meant that women had the right to choose – they could choose

a career and were not stuck with being stay-at-home mothers. Additionally to that, they could actively participate in politics after having received the right to vote. Legally speaking, during this time, the second-wave feminism provided women with formal equality. Nevertheless, social expectations and norms still persisted. Among them is the gender discrimination in the workplace, as well as “demands and pressures on women to balance career and motherhood”. These factors shape the paradox of *Post-Feminism* (Crofts und Coffey).

Claire shows this paradox of *Post-Feminism* in a very clear way. She suffers under the pressure of being viewed as successful by society. For her to be perceived that way, she repeatedly sacrifices her own fulfilment and well-being by mainly focusing on how to please the expectations of everyone else. Typically, during this process, she neglects herself and struggles to balance her success and happiness as well as her desire of being not only being a wife but at the same time a person with ambitions and goals. This is why Claire needs the push of Fleabag in order to pursue her dream and to take the job promotion. For her to achieve this, she has to put herself first.

Fleabag’s exercise of autonomy over her body and the sexual relationships she undergoes are similar to Claire’s opportunity to embrace the same autonomy when it comes to her professional life. Due to the paradox of *Post-Feminism*, Claire realises she has the full freedom of making a choice concerning both her professional and personal life. She is given the opportunity to evolve professionally. On the contrary, she faces the social oppression of having to obey the values of being a married woman.

On the other hand, most workplaces today are rhetorically committed to gender equality, but this societal identity makes it difficult for workers to articulate experiences of gender difference or gender inequality. Still, gender hierarchies and inequalities persist; for example, in the forms of male dominance in top positions and lower pay in women-dominated occupational tasks and jobs. (Keisu und Brodin 2)

Keisu and Brodin explain the effect of the paradox. Despite the legal recognition of expansion of gender equality, social belief, such as gender inequality, persist. Legally speaking, women have more rights than decades ago, but in their daily life they are continuously discriminated

based on their gender. In Claire's case it means that she can pursue her own career and prioritise herself, but there lies the possibility of her choice being socially rejected. This rejection does not need to occur in a physical manner, for example by being denied to take on a high positioned job. On the contrary, she might be treated unfairly at her new job if she decides to take it, implying a socially anchored rejection. Accepting the promotion might make her seem self-centred and like an awful wife. All that suggests that she will suffer under the patriarchal structures in place if she decides to take the job. On the other hand, by declining the promotion she submits to these values and suffers due to the unfulfilment in her life.

Nevertheless, her perspective on life suddenly changes, but she is still confronted with her responsibilities and the selfishness of leaving her family behind. After discovering her husband was disloyal, she uses his infidelity as an excuse to pursue her dreams. This leads to the interpretation that Claire is searching for a justification to act selfishly. She is aware of the social predispositions of being seen as egoistic for going on one's own path. Despite that, she chooses to pursue the individual opportunity which was offered to her. By doing so, Claire challenges social expectations and values and emphasises her well-being and personal fulfilment. Should she decide to keep her relationship with Martin, he is no longer the deciding factor for her future as she regained her independence. She accepts the job in Finland and by doing so, she makes a further step in the progress of gender equality by challenging persistent expectations, norms, and values. Thereby Claire shows her determination of living a life for herself and on her own terms. As a result, Claire influences the feminist movement by simply taking a step forward in her professional life.

5.3 Character development

Claire continues to put herself first. She decides to leave the marriage that was making her miserable and finds someone else who shares her determination and dreams. She goes on to pursue her career in Finland. By taking this single, crucial step, Claire inspires many women around her, such as her sister Fleabag to think about their well-being and to take an active role in their life, which brings about a positive change for equality.

6 The Godmother

6.1 Character introduction

While Fleabag and Claire share a lot of differences in how they perceive the world and deal with their problems, there are also some similar issues which they have to face together. One of them is the aftermath of their mother's death. After the loss of their mother, their grieving father decides to marry their godmother. She happens to have been one of the closest friends of their late mother. The Godmother, a nameless character, is introduced after Fleabag drunkenly storms into her father's house from her rather bad date with the Bus Rodent. As she waits for her father to call her a cab, she goes upstairs to her now stepmother. Tension surrounds them from the first moment on. Fleabag's first description of her is once again as crucial to the introduction of the character, as it was with Claire. Fleabag says about The Godmother, "To be fair. She's not an evil stepmother. She's just a cunt." (Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag The Scriptures* 37). Fleabag clearly disapproves of her father's new relationship and takes it out on The Godmother. The relationship the two have is competitive because they have opposing personalities. The Godmother portrays a charismatic and especially positively inclined person. She projects peace and stability, as well as success owing to her art career. Her overly confident behaviour indicates an underlying complexity. She is trying to compensate her negative qualities by being overly positive. She often speaks less than what she is genuinely thinking of. When Fleabag asks her what she is doing as she enters her room, The Godmother says: "Oh, painting. I find the night-times very ... peaceful. Usually!" (Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag The Scriptures* 37). By using the word "usually", The Godmother accentuates how Fleabag has disrupted her peace. Right after, The Godmother pretends to be worried and to care about Fleabag's well-being and asks her if everything is okay. Oftentimes, As shown in the example given, The Godmother tends to play-act in front of others. Her articulation, words, and actions point to a performance she puts up to present herself in a particular way. As she, similarly, to Claire, wants to be perceived by society as a collected person. The Godmother also tries to follow social norms and does not shy away from conforming to stereotypes intrinsic to traditional gender roles. For instance, men are considered dominant and assertive, while women are the emotional nurturers.

Through the performance she gives, The Godmother shows a significant piece of her personality. She wants to create a certain impression of herself by pretending to be kind, caring and progressive. She does not only use this in her relationship with Fleabag, but also in her daily life, for example with the way she presents her artwork as thoughtful and inclusive. The Godmother pretends to care about Fleabag as much as she pretends to care about feminist ideas. She remains on the surface of any issue, manipulating the people around her into thinking that she is actively engaged in solving social problems. These include the issues women face in their lives., like discrimination at their workplace. She alludes to the empowerment of women, but she does not fully immerse herself in the problem; instead, she remains on a superficial level, pretending to show understanding. The following analysis aims to present the Godmother's performative feminism and show its impact on the feminist movement.

6.2 Key scenes and interpretation

6.2.1 “Art exhibition” – Illusion of Empowerment

As Fleabag visits her father’s house, she points to a sculpture in The Godmother’s art studio. It is a sculpture “of a female legs and torso with large breasts but no arms.” (Waller-Bridge, Fleabag The Scriptures 37).

GODMOTHER

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

FLEABAG

Tits.

GODMOTHER

Innate femininity. (Waller-Bridge, Fleabag The Scriptures 38)

The description of the sculpture suggests a deep understanding of female strength, femininity, and how they are represented in art. For *The Godmother* women do not attain the same strength as men do. They do not need physical strength, but should only use what she calls “innate femininity” (Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag The Scriptures* 38). With this concept, *The Godmother* hints to her belief of an innate notion of femininity. She claims that there are essential characteristics associated with either being a man or a woman. These qualities are not intertwined and belong strictly to either of the two mentioned genders. This characterisation indicates that *The Godmother* does not differ between sex and gender. She sets out particular attributes and divides them into two separate groups of either female or male. According to Simone de Beauvoir, one is not born, but becomes a woman (301). In this case there is a clear distinction between sex and gender. Beauvoir argues that gender is an aspect of identity acquired gradually, while sex is anatomically distinct (Butler 35). Butler states that if this distinction is intact, it is not possible to ascribe women’s social functions to biological necessity (35).

This is a distinction *The Godmother* does not make. By not doing so, she disregards the complexity of women and their identity. Her claiming that women have innate mental features leads to the point that there is no possibility of change. She portrays women as weak and, thereof, accentuates traditional and stereotypical gender norms. Those imply that women are a weak being and men are superior to them. The contrast between muscle force and innate femininity clearly highlights their traditional gender norms.

Additionally, with her statement about women not needing physical strength, *The Godmother* at first gives an impression of being progressive and having a feminist leaning. She sounds as if she were empowering women by saying that they are emotionally strong enough – “strong at heart” – which is enough to protect themselves and get what they desire. If one delves further into her words, it is easily recognisable that she conceals a big part of her negative qualities by using excessive positivity. She reduces women to their emotional factors and overlooks their ability to be both emotionally and physically strong.

In the sixth episode of the second season everyone goes to visit *The Godmother*’s “sexhibition”. She describes her concept of the exhibition as a way of showing her journey through her physical and sexual life. She accomplishes this by displaying a collection of

photographs of her nude body from the last thirty years. Once again, she uses her articulation and her choice of words to give the impression that her aim is to promote the empowerment of women. In this case, she claims to be promoting body positivity. But she soon reveals that she is not. Once again, the speaker uses her articulation and her choice of words to give the impression that her aim is to promote the empowerment of women. In this case, she claims to be promoting body positivity as the body changes over the years. Such changes are often looked down upon. Instead, The Godmother quickly breaks this act. “Well, I think it’s important for women of all ages to see how my body has changed over the years. I think they have to have a healthy perspective – on my body.” She reveals that her central aim is to draw attention to herself, not to empower women or address issues beyond herself. This way, by displaying her body under the guise of empowerment, The Godmother manipulates her viewers (Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag The Scriptures* 162).

The key issue with performative allyship is that it is associated with engaging in specific behaviors for the individuals own self-gain (Kutlaca & Radke, 2023). Furthermore, it suggests that those who encompass performative allyship have no inclination towards the goal of equality (Keys-Kukoricza 4-5).

The definition above explains that the allyship and feminism displayed by The Godmother originates from egoistic tendencies. She uses feminist ideas, such as body positivity, to project a positive and inclusive image of herself. The Godmother does so because her aim is to perform. This is why *Performative Feminism* is a relevant feminist issue that accurately characterises her. By referring only to superficial issues, it does not actively engage in addressing systematic problems. Thus, The Godmother does not contribute to any meaningful change in the feminist movement. In this manner, she is not only an opposing character to Fleabag, but also to Claire. Fleabag repeatedly opposes existing gender norms and actively works to break down stereotypes that have a discriminatory effect. Such stereotypes include women being defined by their partner. This is why Fleabag exercises bodily autonomy. Although Claire tends to follow the norms set by society, she decides to go against them and create her own values, such as prioritising her career. On the contrary, The

Godmother not only follows these societal values and norms, but she also actively promotes them. She does not work to dismantle systemic problems, nor does she contribute to positive change. The Godmother's lack of active participation in the feminist movement leads to the conclusion that she is selfish and does not care about equality between men and women.

6.3 Character development

As contrasting as The Godmother is to Fleabag and Claire, so is her development during the show. She is the only one of the three to not have a notable change in her values and ideologies. Nevertheless, her persona shows more in-depth features as the show goes on. She becomes more vulnerable and her insecurities more nuanced. It becomes clearer why she acts in her excessively positive way. She is the second wife to her husband and feels inferior to his previous partner. Therefore, she wants everything to be flawless. This is why she turns everything into a play, as she wants to create an ideal space for her husband. She feels insecure because she is new to the family and does everything to bring it together, but during the process, she creates a different image of herself.

7 Conclusion

In order to show the different feminist approaches in Fleabag, a comparison was made using the three main female characters. By selecting key scenes for each of them, a link was made to particular feminist theories. Fleabag represents a person who prioritises her own bodily autonomy. She goes against all socially created norms and binaries, such as having to perform in a certain way in order to conform to the stereotypical view of women. In this way, Fleabag exercises the principle of self-determination. Claire, on the other hand, uses this set of social values to create stability in her life. However, as a product of post-feminism, Claire realises her potential and decides to set her own values. This allows her to pursue her dream career and later find happiness in marriage. Finally, The Godmother represents a crucial point in any activist movement. As an artistic individual, she spends much of her time performing. Performing activism is her way of getting her entourage to like and respect her. She pretends

to be a very positive and informed person, but it is obvious to the audience that she is only showing a superficial part of her personality. She is a deeply vulnerable person who wants to be accepted in the new family she has joined. She resorts to performative activism because it allows her to shape her personality and project a better, more pleasant version of herself.

The research and analysis of this paper does not only provide the reader with information on how diverse the representation of feminist topics is in the confines of the show *Fleabag*. It shows just as well how older theories still play a crucial role to this day. The results of particular feminist movements, such as Post Feminism, still affect the way our society thinks. Therefore, this paper does not simply show a representation of feminism on television. It also contributes to the broader understanding of issues faced by women in connection to their identity, sexuality, and professional life. Additionally, it provides a closer look into a realistic representation of women and the limits imposed to them in many aspects of their lives.

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9 Plagiarism Declaration

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