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Fleabag and the Modernization of the British Comedy

In British culture, there is a draw toward media content that realistically depicts life and human experience, unlike the American counterparts which tend to over-sensationalize and sugarcoat content for audiences to digest. The dark comedy *Fleabag* from creator Phoebe Waller-Bridge is an example of a modern take on the British desire to see accurate representation in action. The depiction of womanhood and mental health in the show is raw and unrestrained in a way that even British television hadn't seen at the time of its release in 2016, fully unpacking the tolls that come along with both while making light of the difficulty. *Fleabag*'s transparency in storytelling to depict the struggles of women and the many faces of mental illness made it a modern take on the classic values of British entertainment and comedy.

Phoebe Waller-Bridge is best-known for her role as star, writer, creator, and producer of *Fleabag*, but her career spans far beyond that. She is a multi-talented creative who works throughout the television industry and beyond as an actress, writer, and executive producer. As a television writer, Waller-Bridge is credited for *Killing Eve*, *Crashing*, *Drifters*, and soon *Mr. and Mrs. Smith*. In recent years Waller-Bridge has started to transition into movie writing, most recently seen in the new James Bond movie *No Time to Die*. As an actress, she's been in movies such as *Solo: A Star Wars Story*, *Goodbye Christopher Robin* and the *Iron Lady*, the shows *Crashing*, *Broadchurch*, *Run*, and of course *Fleabag*. Her role as both an actress and writer in *Fleabag* won her numerous awards, including three Emmys, two Golden Globes, two Critics' Choice Awards, a Screen Actors Guild Award, and a BAFTA for Best Actress in a Comedy Series. Additionally, she has established her own production company, Wells Street Films, and is

currently the co-Artistic Director of the DryWrite Theatre Company (“Phoebe Waller-Bridge” 1). With genres spanning from comedy to sci-fi and credits from the stage to television and film, Phoebe Waller-Bridge has risen through the ranks in the entertainment industry and made her unique stories heard.

Fleabag aired for the first time on the BBC in 2016. The show follows the story of “Fleabag”, played by Waller-Bridge. She’s a quirky woman in her 30s known as a bit of an oddball who has no interest in taking the path most traveled. Fleabag and her best friend, Boo, were inseparable and opened a guinea pig-themed cafe together until Boo’s tragic death. Before the death of her best friend, Fleabag had recently lost her mother to cancer. Now reeling from the loss of two people so close to her, Fleabag is dealt yet another unfortunate card as her godmother swoops in after her death, falling in love with her father with no sympathy or awareness of anyone beyond herself. Fleabag’s already-complex relationship with her sister, Claire, then only adds to the situation and feelings of loneliness and isolation. Claire is everything that Fleabag is not- she’s a pulled-together, successful businesswoman with a husband and a child. While their relationship has its redeeming moments, the two have trouble seeing eye-to-eye even after the death of their mother. Now stuck with the failing and probably too-niche-to-succeed coffee shop paired with a strained relationship with her family, *Fleabag* follows her journey navigating grief and the world that just seems to be dealing her one unlucky card after another.

As one of the most nationally and internationally successful comedies in the last few years, *Fleabag* sets an example of what the new modern comedy may look like through the British lens. In British television, there are certain values and priorities that distinguish England’s shows from other international giants. British viewership tends to have more interest in realism, looking into the lives of characters whose stories are transparent and raw. British viewers also

tend to have a “particular kind of humorous response to the world falling apart” that makes them a suitable and enthusiastic audience for a darker, more realistic comedy like *Fleabag* (Harrison 1). In recent years there’s been much more of a push from audiences for an accurate representation of race, gender, mental health, and more in television. In *Fleabag*, the portrayal of women beyond general stereotypes, the complex characters, and raw depictions of mental illness are what set it apart as the future of British television.

Written by a woman, *Fleabag* brings in the unique asset of the female gaze, not often seen in television as the male gaze is prevalent in our media. Women written by men tend to uphold stereotypes and unachievable standards created by society, even though sometimes unintentional. While a man may be able to write female characters to some extent, they will likely not be able to understand the nuances of womanhood the way a woman would. Stereotypes of women are not only harmful to public perception of women and affect discrimination, but can also alienate women from feeling truly represented in the media as many of these stereotypes are negative. Especially through the male gaze, female characters tend to be overly sexualized and seen as emotional or sensitive, making them more soft-spoken with people-pleaser tendencies (“Women: Representation of Gender” 1). The writing of *Fleabag* gives its female characters an identity beyond their gender by showing them as vulnerable and human, even at points showing the effects of these internalized stereotypes. This is especially true for female leads like Fleabag and Claire.

Fleabag from the start of the show is presented as a character beyond the bounds of usual female stereotypes. To start, Fleabag is portrayed as a very sexual woman, but by her own accord and without being sexualized. Although *Fleabag* shows her in bed with men, or talking about sex with men, she is never shown through the male gaze. She’s dressed modestly, makes jokes about

her unconventionally attractive body type, and she doesn't flaunt or brag about her sex life to others beyond the audience. When done through the male gaze, it's rare to see the woman's point of view and to hear about a woman's sex life outside of the commentary of male characters. According to a study from the Centre for Study of Women in Film and Television, women are "more likely to be defined by their marital status than their male counterparts while male characters were almost twice as likely to be portrayed as leaders," ("Fleabag': Television's Newest Anti-Hero" 1). Additionally, Fleabag defies stereotypes with her crudeness, overly-honest comedy, and raw depiction of waning mental health. Fleabag is by no means a lady-like figure and although some critics have called the show vulgar and overly sexual for this reason, arguably it's one of the most human pieces (Skinner 1). The character of Fleabag directly challenges the stereotypes of women and shows a truthful depiction of a woman beyond them.

Claire, Fleabag's sister, is another example of an unconventional female character that is a more transparent, accurate representation. Throughout the show, Claire is spoken about as the golden child. She has a family, she has a good job, and her life looks especially pulled together next to Fleabag. However as the show unfolds, it becomes clear that there's more behind the facade of the "perfect" woman with the "perfect" life. Claire has many struggles, including being stuck in a marriage with a man that she doesn't feel happy with. Like Fleabag, Claire also has a complicated relationship with her family, especially her father and stepmother. Claire's character is important in the series as she directly represents the common stereotypes of successful women while simultaneously breaking them. She has a perfectly manicured image, but works tirelessly to keep it up at the expense of her mental health. She has a seemingly wonderful husband and child, but he is emotionally abusive to her and even tries to cheat on her with Fleabag. She's even dealing with internalized stereotypes of women as she tries to suppress her emotions to avoid

being the overly-emotional woman. Claire is an accurate depiction of the layers to women as characters beyond family life or work life. Even she learns that she can't hide behind this image and pretend her feelings don't exist.

Transparent, raw characters and story are important to British audiences and *Fleabag* most certainly provides that. Most recently, there's been an increase of "tragicomedies" or "sadcoms", which are television programs that take the worst of situations and get a laugh. Because "humour contrasted with moments of melancholy can render them more acute" audiences value their humanity and the unique emotions these stories can evoke (Harrison 1). *Fleabag* solidifies its place as a tragicomedy through its use of the anti-hero, direct address from Fleabag, and depiction of mental health.

Throughout the two seasons of *Fleabag*, there is arguably not one traditionally likeable character as each character has real flaws that make them anti-heros. The beauty of anti-heros, however, is that despite their flaws audiences somehow find themselves rooting for them. In the case of *Fleabag*, she is constantly displaying self-destructive behavior, setting herself up for trouble and chaos. Even though a viewer watches her voluntarily make the decisions that weave her into these webs, they want her to find her way out and they sympathize with her. Maybe it's because she's "a woman who is spiky, divisive and not trying to be liked," or maybe it's that, when given the whole picture of someone's personal life and mental health, people are willing to cut more breaks or relate ("Fleabag': Television's Newest Anti-Hero" 1). The raw depiction of human experience through the use of the anti-heroism in *Fleabag* makes the characters more realistic, adding to the depth which makes it follow values of the British audiences.

Fleabag makes the anti-hero especially "likeable" and easy to understand or relate to through the use of direct address. The use of the direct address here is also known in television as

“breaking the fourth wall”, where the character turns to face the audience, speaking directly to them and acknowledging that they’re watching the story unfold. *Fleabag* is “adapted from a theatrical monologue and owes its mode of direct address to this dramatic past,” as this is a technique frequently used in stage performances to create a relationship between the characters and the audience (Beaumont 1). The breaking of the fourth wall in *Fleabag* creates an almost conversational dialogue between Fleabag and the viewer. The show becomes more intimate, including the viewer and making them a part of the story as they watch her struggle. The transparency in writing and use of direct address make the character of Fleabag more vulnerable, which is especially crucial in the accurate depictions of her deteriorating mental state. *Fleabag* is notorious for being one of the most accurate depictions of mental health, more specifically depression and grief. Throughout the show it becomes more and more evident that “her mischief and humour are a mask for her jagged grief and her struggle to cope with the loss of her mother and best friend,” (Harrison 1). She is left alone with the trauma of losing those close to her and a coffee shop that can barely sustain, only reminding her more of what she’s lost. While not every moment of the show is showing her struggle, the balance between quirky and raw monologues portrays the layers to mental illness and how it manifests in a person’s everyday life. *Fleabag* shows the reality of what it is like to live with mental illness in a way that is personal and digestible for audiences through the use of direct address and honesty.

Fleabag is an example of a modern British comedy because of its place as a “tragicomedy”, telling real stories and balancing between laugh-out-loud humor and personal struggle. The dark comedy writing by Phoebe Waller-Bridge is unique and plays into the values of British viewership toward transparent, raw content and accurate depictions of our world. She achieves this through the portrayal of women, realistic anti-heroes, and depiction of mental

illness in the series. Since its premiere in 2016, more dark comedies like *Fleabag* have gained traction around the world.

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