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La amistad sobre el amor romántico y el sexo en
Fleabag
Friendship over Romantic Love and Sex in *Fleabag*

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Abstract

This BA dissertation explores how the series *Fleabag* (2016) gives more relevance to friendship and non-sexual bonds than to the heterosexual couple and sex. This is achieved through formal devices such as the protagonist's role as a narrator-focaliser and syuzhet in key episodes. The dissertation demonstrates how the series subverts the conventions of the romantic comedy and questions the myths of romantic love. It offers a postfeminist gaze that problematizes emotional dissatisfaction, trauma and loneliness, and presents friendship as the true safe space of support and healing for the protagonist.

Resumen

Este trabajo de fin de grado explora cómo la serie *Fleabag* (2016) da más importancia a la amistad y los vínculos no sexuales que a la pareja heterosexual y al sexo. Esto se consigue mediante recursos formales, como el papel de la protagonista como narradora-focalizadora y el syuzhet en episodios clave; el trabajo demuestra cómo la serie subvierte las convenciones de la comedia romántica y cuestiona los mitos del amor romántico. Todo ello permite ofrecer una mirada postfeminista que problematiza la insatisfacción emocional, el trauma y la soledad y presenta la amistad como el verdadero espacio seguro de apoyo y sanación para la protagonista.

1) Introduction

Fleabag is a TV series written by and starring Phoebe Waller-Bridge, premiering in 2016 and set in contemporary London. It emerged as one of the most polemic and acclaimed shows by the critics. Though often described as a dark romantic comedy, *Fleabag* undermines many of the narrative and emotional conventions of the genre. Instead of centring on the protagonist's quest for love, the series reorients its focus around the importance and impact of female friendship and its absence. At a time marked by the fourth wave of feminism, growing critique of heteronormativity and awareness of mental health, *Fleabag* responds to a shifting cultural climate which questions romanticist myths. This dissertation explores how *Fleabag* privileges friendship over romance and sex, and argues that it is through this choice that the series develops its ideology on grief, trauma, gender and intimacy.

Fleabag is set against the context of contemporary urban life, specifically post-austerity London in the wake of Brexit. *Fleabag* captures the isolation, economic instability and contradictions experienced by a generation of women suffocated by their professional careers and the feminist self-empowering messages. Scholars such as Angela McRobbie have shown that the so-called "postfeminist" woman is often expected to be successful, sexually liberated, emotionally available and social at the same time (134). The protagonist, named like the series, embodies the failure of the postfeminist woman; she is promiscuous but emotionally deprived, independent yet deeply insecure, and witty but self-destructive. Her failed sexual and romantic relationships reflect a broader condition of disaffection that many heterosexual women may experience. In this context, the protagonist's only fulfilling and true friend, Boo, becomes the main emotional focus of the first season of the show. Boo's importance to Fleabag relies on her as a friend but also on her passing; Boo died after a car ran over her. This happened in an attempt to hurt herself to

make her boyfriend feel guilty for his infidelity, but the bicycle struck her so hard that she fell onto the road.

Starting from the premise that Fleabag favours friendship over romantic and sexual relationships, I wish to analyse the narrative resources it employs to present friendship as a more satisfying alternative than conventional romantic bonding. This premise invites us to critically reconsider the current concept of heterosexual couples. Heterosexual bonding seems to bring about happiness and self-fulfilment, culminating in offspring and marriage as the final mission in life. Nonetheless, *Fleabag* suggests an alternative and a critique of this model. We are shown a middle-aged woman whose romantic relationship with a man called Harry is turbulent, ridiculous and dysfunctional. She does not even enjoy her sexuality with her lover, with whom she has estranged and theatrical sexual encounters, and with whom she is not herself, so that she can be found sexy.

Formally, the series defends this idea through several devices. The first and most outstanding one, the use of direct address through the break of the fourth wall, constructs a unique relationship between Fleabag and the viewer, substituting her former confidant, Boo. These asides create a special intimacy and reinforce the absence of a true friend in Fleabag's life. The second one is the resourceful use of irony, satire and failed communication to highlight Fleabag's inability to connect and the growth of her isolation. In contrast, flashbacks to Boo are marked by genuine reciprocity, warmth, and understanding. Finally, the evolution of Fleabag's relationships with secondary characters, particularly her sister Claire and the banker, also reflects a shift of focus from romantic partners to non-sexual bonds.

This dissertation is divided into two main parts. Each part supports the central argument from a different formal angle, both focusing on narratological aspects.

The first part will examine Fleabag as a narrator-focaliser in a pivotal scene from season 1, episode 2. Drawing on narrative theory (particularly Brüttsch's work on the direct address and unreliability), this chapter examines how the protagonist's subjective asides reframe our perception of romantic and sexual relationships with men, especially Martin and Harry, while she highlights the emotional void left by Boo. Her consistent use of black humour, satire, deviation and discomfort will highlight the critique of these men, in contrast to the seriousness of Boo's flashback, indicating a deeper value of their connection.

The second part focuses on episode 6 of the first season. It analyses how the series' *syuzhet* reinforces its thematic privilege of friendship. It will be based on studies from scholars such as Bordwell, Chatman and Genette, and will explore the manipulation of time through flashbacks, the modification of duration and frequency, and several editing techniques that juxtapose the present with Boo's scenes from the past. This will oppose the superficiality and absurdity of sex and love in the *Sexhibition*, in contrast with the transcendence of Boo's presence in Fleabag's life and her memory, and the banker's supportive behaviour and new friendship.

Throughout the dissertation, the series' close analysis and key secondary sources will support the argument that *Fleabag* is not merely a romantic comedy, but a radical subversion of the genre. The show redefines intimacy, criticises heteronormative expectations, and responds to contemporary feminist discourses. Through humour, formal innovation and fragmentary narration, it elevates the value of friendship as a site of loyalty, forgiveness, and healing in an age of romantic disillusionment.

2) Fleabag as a Narrator-focaliser

2.1) Introduction to the Scene

2.1.1) Emotional and Narratological Context

The scene I have chosen is from episode 2, the scene where she visits Claire and Mark's house to sell the statuette to him. During a visit to her sister Claire's house to sell the golden statuette she has stolen from her stepmother to Martin.

In the previous episode, Claire is introduced to the spectatorship by Fleabag when they go together to a feminist conference. She is a stiff, disciplined, serious and successful woman. Fleabag and Claire have a tense and emotionally distant relationship, although they sometimes try to become closer. Also, Fleabag has tried to ask her for money for her cafe but failed, so she is now trying to sell the golden statuette. Additionally, she has an estranged relationship with her boyfriend Harry, with whom she frequently breaks up and comes back. Moreover, she explained how Boo died hit by a bicycle in an attempt to make her boyfriend feel guilty. This event has traumatised Fleabag, but we still do not know the exact reason.

2.1.2) The Plot

In the scene, Fleabag visits Claire, which surprises the latter. Fleabag clarifies she wants to talk to Martin, Claire's husband, which once again impacts Claire. They go to Martin's office. Fleabag asks Claire if she can leave them alone, with the excuse of preparing Claire's surprise birthday party. Then Fleabag offers the statuette to Martin, who examines it with admiration. They agree that he will sell it if he can get a 10% benefit. Finally, Fleabag begs Martin not to tell Claire about their deal, and if he does, she will tell Claire he is still watching gangbans. Fleabag checks Martin's laptop to discover that he was not watching porn but buying a customised necklace for Claire, which disappoints Fleabag. After this, Fleabag chats a bit with her sister at the door. Claire asks about her boyfriend Harry.

Fleabag jokes that they are engaged, but then states that he is tidying up his belongings. Then, Fleabag shows us a misogynistic comment he made to her.

Back at Fleabag's house, she realises how empty Harry has left it. Then she explains to us some of Harry's behaviours during a break-up. He cleans compulsively, which Fleabag sometimes takes advantage of. But Harry always leaves a small dinosaur toy as an excuse to come back. In the next shot, we see her in the bathroom while she explains her obsession with sex, how dramatically she sees it, and highlights that she likes it because she feels validated and desired, not because of the feelings and sensations. Then, she manifests her intention of having sex with another person before Harry comes back. Finally, she takes to the streets explaining how sexy she feels in her outfit, while a fat, nasty-looking guy approaches her and insults her. When she is about to cross the street, a bike passes in front of her, which instantly reminds her of how Boo died.

2.2) The Presence of the Narrator

Fleabag is the only narrator of this series. In formal terms, she is an autodiegetic, intrusive, restricted and on-screen narrator. She not only explains what is going to happen, or what is going on, but also comments on past and present events (such as Harry's flashbacks). However, we can consider her an unreliable and intrusive narrator because she stops the course of the plot to break the fourth wall, looking at us, the spectators, and expressing her opinion. These interventions are called "asides", as Brütsch explains it:

What's the connection between *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* [...] and *Fleabag* [...]? They both speak their opening words aside. They turn away from the characters around them [...] to grant us privileged access to the thoughts and feelings of their protagonist (Brütsch 1).

Her use of the fourth wall adds another layer of meaning to this scene, creating a double layer of narration: we witness what she lives with other characters, which contrasts or complements what she tells us. At the beginning of the scene, in her conversation with Claire, she tells her she wants to talk to Martin with a polite smile. However, when Claire reacts incredulously, Fleabag assures her that she wants to see Martin, looking at us with displeasure, which makes us understand she dislikes Martin. After this, in Martin's study, when he is closing the computer, Fleabag tells us he must have been watching porn, which adds private information about Martin. Immediately after, Martin makes a nasty joke, to which Fleabag reacts with disgust, looking at us. Her last reaction of disgust is after she opens Martin's computer and discovers his birthday gift for Claire. Further on, Fleabag talks with Claire at the door. When Claire asks for the toilet paper back, she looks at us, disappointed and calling Claire "tight". Then, Claire asks about Harry and expresses her approval of their former relationship, to which Fleabag responds by having a flashback of him making a misogynistic comment. Back at her apartment, Fleabag breaks the fourth wall again, starting a monologue with us as listeners, explaining what has been mentioned above.

To continue, it is relevant to analyse her use of humour. At Claire's house, we find sexual humour when referring to Martin's addiction to gangbangs. Then, she makes an ironic remark, underlying social critique, before she shows Harry's comment, highlighting contemporary men's misogyny. At her house, she starts an auto-destructive confessional monologue about her breakups with Harry and her sex addiction, which reveals her estranged perspective on her romantic relationship and sex. In the last seconds of the scene, when she goes out to the street, she exaggerates how sexy she looks, almost narcissistically, and uses irony to describe the nasty comment of the stranger.

Furthermore, her presence as narrator is highly subjective. At the beginning of the

scene, she expresses her aversion toward Martin, which contrasts with her politeness when addressing them. To the viewer, she unveils her true self, revealing her personal opinions, recollections and confessions. Her glances at the camera are another important on-screen element that adds subjectivity to her as a narrator, which we can see right from the beginning of the scene. Brütsch argues that, throughout the series, she makes increasing use of gestures: a gentle smile, a wince, or rolling her eyes towards the camera, to confide her inner thoughts to the spectator (7). This highlights how Fleabag relies on the camera to add her emotions and judgments of the events she is witnessing, rather than offering an objective account. Furthermore, she describes her disastrous relationship in a raw and humorous tone that is only accessible to us. Then, in the last part where she walks in the streets, she interprets her normal outfit as bombastic, and even anticipates the stranger's comment, conveying that this moment may be a collage of her mind. In other instances of the series, she even underreports information, increasing her unreliability, and even loses control of what she is saying versus the ensuing events, as Brütsch underscores:

But she has less control over what comes out in dialogue with other characters, or in moments of subjective memory. [...] cinematographic techniques start working [...] against her [...] by cuts, camera movement, and flashbacks into her carefully concealed past (Brütsch 13).

Fleabag's role as a narrator who subtly mocks romantic relationships and underscores friendship. During the scene, she confesses disgust for Martin to the camera several times, together with some negative explanations about him. This, combined with Martin's despicable dialogue with Fleabag, drives us to perceive Martin as a misogynistic and nasty man, and a negligible husband. Moreover, Fleabag's flashback of Harry and her

monologue about their breakups portrays another misogynistic partner and a dysfunctional relationship. However, the icing on the cake is the last part of the scene, Boo's flashback. It is the only part of the scene where she remains silent alone. This silence highlights how valuable that friendship was for her, undermining the previous interventions of Martin and Harry in the scene.

2.3) Focalisation

Originally, *Fleabag* was adapted from a theatrical monologue by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, which explains its direct address style, as Beaumont (1) highlights. According to Faye Woods, its utility was “to retain the affective, intimate pull [of] the theatre piece” (Beaumont 1).

On the one hand, there is an alternation between external and internal focalisation. There is a use of internal focalisation when she addresses the camera through her reactions, clarifications and final monologues in her house and on the street. However, although common in internal focalisation, there is no use of POV shots, but she addresses the audience as "you" while looking at the camera. These instances of eye-line matches or reaction shots offer commentaries outside the diegesis, only accessible to the spectators.

On the other hand, we also have external focalisation. For instance, an establishing shot of her house and Martin's office. These shots contrast significantly with her comments breaking the fourth wall. These changes make the spectator feel as though they are accompanying Fleabag to these sites, creating a special bond with her. This point also highlights the ideological positioning through focalisation. By privileging her viewpoint and giving us access to her inner thoughts, the scene invites us to align with her, which can raise questions about her reliability.

It is important to explore "the extent to which a story is bound to the experiential and

cognitive stance of a specific figure can be anything between all and nothing” (Brütsch 11). That is, this story combines the protagonist’s perspectives with the external focalisation of her experiences. Nevertheless, not only is it necessary to broadly define the narrative situation and the perspective, but also to question the opinions, attitudes and information that these asides convey. The descriptive portrayals, intonation and nonverbal language, along with a colourful *mise-en-scène*, encapsulate Fleabag's sensitivities. In the asides, we can see how, at the beginning, the camera height changes, focusing her from above, maybe to highlight the change from the diegetic world to us. Moreover, there are brief expressions of disgust, as explained before, and a change of attitude, in which she turns from courtesy and politeness to transparency and radical honesty. She also lies to the characters but not to us. Lastly, she gives a long monologue where she explains her turbulent relationship and her need for validation through sex, throughout her house, an intimate space. The scene culminates in the flashback of Boo in her attempt to hurt herself. Therefore, we can state that the audience is a confidant to whom she transmits her stance on friendship, sex and love: her relationship with Harry is absurd and turbulent, Martin is a pervert and negligent husband, but above all, we as the audience are the only characters to whom she can confide her discomforts, thoughts and opinions. And the audience to her is not a romantic partner, nor a sexual one, but another friendship, just as Boo’s.

Additionally, the instances of external focalisation in which she looks at the camera are a technique called "direct address" in film studies, as Gibbons (108) explains it:

Brown defines direct address as a phenomenon in which on-screen characters ‘appear to acknowledge our presence as spectators; they seem to look at us. Brown outlines that [...] telecinematic direct address can also work, to the contrary, to ‘intensify our relationship with the fiction’.

At this point, it is evident that this direct address is used to bond with Fleabag as a focaliser, to align with her backstory, reactions and discourses. It is not a coincidence, then, that in this scene we witness two examples of defective romantic partners at the same time.

Furthermore, in the series, when Fleabag suddenly looks at the camera and speaks to the audience, the story shifts in perspective. This shift is called “worldswitching” because we move between two versions of the story’s world. Therefore, two different diegetic worlds are being created, or “text-worlds”, as Gibbons (115) coins it. One version shows the regular events happening to Fleabag, and the other is the personal world where she shares her thoughts with us. These terms come from the Text World Theory: Sorlin states that the Text World Theory differentiates between a “Text World” (what happens in the story) versus a “Discourse World” (how the story is told and the relationship between the narrator, the characters and the audience) (Gibbons 110). These text-worlds may contrast or complement each other. Above all, it is clear that the Discourse World of *Fleabag* makes a statement on Fleabag and her relationship with romantic love, sex and friendship: the flashbacks and their impact on Fleabag show the trauma and importance that Boo had in her life, her estranged and humorous relationship with Harry shows her indifference about romantic love, the commentaries on Martin portray her disgust towards Claire’s husband and marriage, and her confession about sex unveils her need of external validation to feel valid and worthy.

3) The Syuzhet of *Fleabag*

3.1) Introduction to the Episode

Episode 6 of *Fleabag*’s first season, “Sexhibition”, arrives at a narrative crossroads: after five episodes of chaotic relationships, self-sabotage and impulsiveness, this episode conveys the importance of Boo’s friendship in Fleabag’s life, and the chaos and lack of meaning of love and sex for the main protagonist.

This section will situate "Sexhibition" within the overall narrative of the series and will explore how the episode utilises the technical resources of the syuzhet to negotiate emotional authenticity. By this juncture in the season, Fleabag comes to an extreme point of isolation and incapability to attach romantically or to enjoy sexual encounters. She has also witnessed the stable but dysfunctional marriage of Martin and Claire, even leading to her becoming a victim of Martin's non-consensual kiss. Moreover, the episode stages what seems to be a glorification of sex through Matrigna's Sexhibition, only to ironise Fleabag's relation with it and with dating, in contrast with the emotional wound that her best friend's passing means to her.

I will first delineate the episode's fabula and contrast it with its syuzhet. Significantly, its juxtaposition of Fleabag's flashbacks, the use of cross-cutting, the change of focalisation, and the modification of Aristotle's narrative structure, among other resources, will collaboratively reorient our focus from insignificant erotic or romantic bonds to the relationship with Boo.

3.2) Theoretical Framework

3.2.1) Syuzhet and Fabula

First, it is relevant to clarify some key concepts that will be coined in this section repeatedly. We need to understand the difference between 'syuzhet' and 'fabula'. In Tomashevsky's words, "In short, the [fabula] is what really happened, and the [syuzhet] is the manner in which the reader learns about what happened." (Gaudreault and Marion 62-63). Or, in some more detail, "The [fabula] is opposed to the [syuzhet], which is constituted by the same events, but which respects their order of appearance in the work itself and the sequence of informations that designates them" (Gaudreault and Marion 63). In essence, the fabula is the raw chronology of the story, whereas the syuzhet is the disposition of the events chosen by the director.

3.2.2) The Fourth Wall and the Confessional Mode

Turning to the breaking of the fourth wall and the confessional mode, which is largely used in this episode, we understand that, as mentioned before, "since it is adapted from a theatre piece, the audience address originated from the main character narrating her life for the theatre audience" (Ceylan 6). Moreover, the device of breaking the fourth wall is used "to create an intimate relationship with the audience and create an 'unreliable narrator' for the story" (Ceylan 7). In the entire series, we are aware that she glances at the camera, completes her affirmations privately or explains to the audience what is happening, all leading to adding honesty and vulnerability to the construction of the plot and her character (Ceylan 7). Interestingly, at the end of this episode, she stops introducing flashbacks or making private comments, meaning that she is starting to resolve her problems and process her trauma, detaching from us. As a result, the fourth wall has been used to complete the character's evolution (Ceylan 7).

3.2.3) Romance and Friendship in *Fleabag*

Regarding friendship and romance, some scholars have focused on the fields of hetero-pessimism and postfeminism present in the series. Holzberg and Lehtonen (1) define hetero-pessimism as a combination of "performative disaffiliations with heterosexuality, usually expressed in the form of regret, embarrassment, or hopelessness about straight experience". These last emotions mentioned can be seen represented during the episode to be commented on. From a postfeminist perspective, Fleabag's failure in romantic and meaninglessness in sexual encounters can be related to how "the fantasies of the 'good life' highlight the centrality of heteronormativity to contemporary imaginaries of feminism" (Holzberg and Lehtonen 1).

However, this 'good life' that heteronormativity suggests may not be found in romantic relationships, but in meaningful friendships. According to Ceylan, the moments that carry the most emotional weight occur in the flashbacks. Boo's death serves as the central turning point of the first season, pushing Fleabag to meaningless heterosexual encounters. In these flashbacks, Fleabag lowers her defences, and there is no more use of direct address. This change suggests that she no longer needs the audience as an emotional waste dump since she already has Boo present as her confidant (7), and not her boyfriend and lover.

3.3) Fabula Reconstruction

In the narrative chronology of *Fleabag's* episode 6 of the season, the events start with Fleabag having a frenetic sexual encounter with her lover. He repeatedly emphasises the smallness of her breasts, and she anticipates that he is going to lose his erection because he is in love. A pencil on his bedside table triggers a flashback, where we turn to Fleabag and Boo chatting and reading the newspaper in their cafe. Fleabag comments on a news article where a child has introduced a pencil into a hamster's butthole, and they lock him up in an underage prison. Boo reacts unbelievably to the last fact rather than the hamster's incident. She reasons that people make mistakes, so they put rubbers on the ends of pencils.

Back in the present, the guy tells Fleabag he has something important to confess to her later. Then, they arrive at the Sexhibition, where Matrigna, her father's girlfriend, forces Fleabag to work as a waitress. Matrigna gives her opening discourse, stating that sex connects and opens the mind, and even brings life. This triggers a flashback where Boo is crying because of an infidelity. Then, she exposes her masterpiece, the stolen statue, as a symbol of feminine liberation. After that, the guy confesses he is in love, but with another woman, so he wants to stop their encounters, even though he loves her breasts. Fleabag consoles herself saying that her ex will return to her any time.

Later, we see a statue of Harry castrated, and Harry appears with his new girlfriend, Elaine. He clarifies that he will not get back his dinosaur (meaning that he will not return to Fleabag), and by answering Fleabag's question, we know he does not desire her anymore. All of a sudden, Claire arrives with Martin and wanders around. Matrigna reminds Fleabag to distribute the champagne, but she hides and drinks all the glasses while remembering Boo. Fleabag comes out and drops the glasses defiantly, which enrages her father. Fleabag hides again, and Claire confesses she will depart her promotion in Finland. Martin appears and declares that it was Fleabag who kissed him. Fleabag bursts into tears trying to defend her point, and Claire justifies it by mentioning what she did to Boo, which triggers a sequence of flashbacks of Boo crying about the infidelity and killing herself, and of Fleabag and Boo's boyfriend having the affair.

Near the end of the episode, Fleabag leaves the exhibition for the parking lot, where his father is leaning on his car. They talk of their similarities, and the father complains about Fleabag disturbing him. He states that her mother would have loved her dropping the glasses. Her father admits he misses her wife and Fleabag Boo. Fleabag calls Boo, and her voicemail sounds, and she recalls Boo and her at the cafe again.

Finally, Fleabag is considering suicide, but the banker suddenly comes into the cafe. He highlights the guinea pig theme of the cafe. Fleabag clarifies she has no stock, and she starts a poignant confession: she feels guilty for many things and fears that no one wants to have sex with her. She makes it clear that she did not want to flirt with him, and complains about her promiscuity and loneliness. He leaves and comes back to interview her again, concluding on the fact that people make mistakes, and Fleabag quotes Boo's phrase about pencils. In the end, they stare at each other with complicity and compassion.

3.4) Syuzhet Analysis

3.4.1) Syuzhet

The syuzhet stands out in *Fleabag* as a visual creation, and more relevantly in the last episode of the series. *Fleabag* requires the spectatorship to reconstruct the events actively (Bordwell 34), the fabula of the present and the past, to understand Fleabag's internal turmoil. Moreover, the syuzhet comprises a combination of techniques that include flashbacks, restricted narration and ellipses (Bordwell 78).

To continue, we can find two types of syuzhet in the history of cinema: classical Hollywood vs. modernist syuzhet. The classical one is characterised by a traditional, “linear and goal-oriented pattern”, emphasising a cause-and-effect structure (Thompson 16). However, *Fleabag*'s fragmented and ambiguous structure underscores its modernist narrative structure. The modernist syuzhet is a narration which deviates from traditional narration through ambiguity, noticeable editing and fragmentation, which replace the order and cohesion of the classical syuzhet (Bordwell 206). Time is highly modified in this kind of syuzhet. Genette enumerates a list of devices by which it is manipulated: order, duration and frequency (35), which we will analyse in depth in the last episode of *Fleabag*.

3.4.2) Order

The episode opens *in media res* with an unmediated sexual encounter between Fleabag and her lover, deviating from classical exposition. This immediate immersion suggests Fleabag's emotional and vital disorientation. Despite this deviation, the episode follows Aristotelian narrative exposition, as we find a scene rising to the climax (Fleabag's fight with Claire and the sequence of flashbacks) and a *denouement* shortly after (the conversation with her father and the cafe scene with the banker, comprising a final catharsis). This structure is fragmented by continuous flashbacks and camera-aside comments and glances. The parallel storylines create a temporal disjunction between the Sexhibition and the private emotional fallout of Fleabag's burnout and trauma, and her fight with Claire.

3.4.3) Duration and Frequency

Narrative duration is manipulated through ellipsis, given that Boo's accident and Fleabag's betrayal are withheld and only retrospectively disclosed. These moments accumulate affective weight as they are repeated; we find Boo in various contexts and situations: painting her nails, talking to Fleabag about mistakes, discovering her boyfriend's affair, looking at the street and dying. These repetitions reinforce her meaningful presence in the story and Fleabag's memory, unveiling her guilt and nostalgia.

3.4.4) Editing

Editing is an essential part of the syuzhet of the episode. There is the use of cross-cutting between the staged environment of the Sexhibition and the flashbacks of Boo. This juxtaposition draws attention to the physicality of the sexual exhibition promoted by Matrigna in contrast to the emotional pain of the loss of Boo; it opposes how sex is celebrated in the present, but it killed Boo in the past. A series of montage sequences compresses the narrative time, particularly in Fleabag's breakdown near the end of the episode, where brief fragments of Boo's death, her betrayal and the emotional aftermath are rapidly juxtaposed. This mode of editing collapses temporal boundaries and renders visible the continuity of trauma. In addition, jump cuts during the champagne service highlight Fleabag's emotional deterioration in the context of the Sexhibition; to her, sex is not to be celebrated.

3.4.5) Fourth-Wall Inserts versus Final Confession

As Fleabag has done throughout the series, she starts the episode by making an aside, here during a sexual encounter with her lover, underlining her obsession with being sexually attractive ("Stay sexy") rather than enjoying the sensations. Nevertheless, as the episode

progresses, these asides turn from ironic or absurd remarks into mechanisms of self-exposure. The delayed revelation of the intensity of her trauma and her last confession to the banker restructured earlier narrative information, producing a retrospective reframing of meaning. The final confession turns from irony to sincerity for the first time in the season. It is the first time she has been honest in talking to a character instead of us, serving as the catharsis of the episode.

3.4.6) Props and Characters

The pencil at the beginning of the episode triggers the memory of the cafe scene, where Boo expresses her empathy towards human mistakes. After several scenes where Fleabag experiences intense guilt about her affair, in the end, she quotes Boo's phrase about the pencil: "That is why they put rubbers at the ends of pencils", after the banker says that people make mistakes.

About characters, they appear and reappear significantly throughout the episode. Boo's repeated return via flashbacks punctuates the narrative's main focus (Fleabag's trauma and guilt). Claire's mid-exhibition entrance coincides with the start of Fleabag's fall (her starting to drink the champagne, the fight with Claire, and the flashbacks). Finally, the banker's reappearance introduces emotional closure through external validation, contrasting the internal judgment of Fleabag.

3.5) Thematic Reading: Friendship over Sexhibition

Episode 6 of *Fleabag*'s first season explores the emotional disaster of romantic and sexual bonds, ultimately positioning friendship and its memory as the only source of genuine human connection, compassion, meaning, and forgiveness. Through fragmented flashbacks, the Sexhibition, and the protagonist's internal breakdown, the syuzhet unveils Boo's importance, Claire and even the banker's, over the guy, Harry, Martin, and the Sexhibition.

It is a clear statement on solidarity and friendship-based relationships over sex and romanticism, portraying them as enduring over time and more emotionally fulfilling.

The Sexhibition serves as a metaphor for the hollowness of performative sexual liberation. While Matrigna declares in her opening speech that "sex brings life", this assertion is immediately contradicted by Boo crying desperately over her boyfriend's infidelity. What is more, although Boo never learns that it was Fleabag who had sex with her boyfriend. This dramatic irony highlights the consequences of the sexual betrayal of their friendship. Boo accidentally kills herself after the affair, suggesting that sex, rather than bringing life, joy and connection, brings death, despair and chaos.

The rising action of the episode, coinciding with the course of the Sexhibition, escalates not through celebration but into emotional instability and absurdity. In other words, "*Fleabag* acts as a lens through which to view the affective life of heterosexuality's cultural production" (Holzberg & Lehtonen 9). The Sexhibition becomes increasingly absurd, featuring sexualized art pieces and penises. At the same time, deeper tensions simmer beneath the surface, such as Fleabag's trauma or Claire's discomfort about her husband and about giving up Finland. These tensions explode during the confrontation with Claire and Martin, where Claire questions Fleabag's allegation against Martin's kiss and mentions her betrayal towards Boo. However, the true climax comes afterwards, in Fleabag's attempted suicide, mirroring Boo's manner. Here, it becomes evident that her most intense negative feelings, the sense of loss and guilt, stem not from her sexual or romantic relationships but from the loss of Boo. The climax transitions towards the falling action when she is accidentally stopped by the banker, who approaches by car and asks her if she is okay. This event again makes it evident that friendship is the true force of salvation and of meaning in life; it is what sticks her to life.

The flashbacks of Boo are central to the episode's syuzhet, serving as both an emotional anchor and a moral compass. Her phrase, "people make mistakes", is first

delivered after humorous news about a kid penetrating a hamster with a pencil. Despite this, it returns in the episode's final moments as a symbol of forgiveness and compassion. The banker first declares "people make mistakes", mirroring Boo's phrase, and is followed by Fleabag, who says "That's why they put rubbers at the end of pencils". This complicity between them and the repetition of Boo's forgiving phrase at the end of the very last episode of the season highlights how the friendship with the banker has concluded the day in forgiveness and empathy, something that our main character mainly needed, and has not been fulfilled by romantic love or sex.

4) Conclusion

This dissertation has aimed to explore how *Fleabag*, through its original use of formal devices, especially the role of Fleabag as a narrator-focaliser and the construction of the syuzhet, privileges the perspective of friendship over romantic and sexual bonds. While the series may initially appear to follow the traits of a romantic comedy, its form and content quickly disrupt these expectations, making a master critique and reflection on human relationships, loneliness and trauma.

It allows us to reflect on the conventional and cisheteronormative couple hierarchy that media and film tend to normalise. Romantic love may continue to dominate the narratives of popular culture and, in different ways of telling women's identity and the quest for fulfilment, but here, *Fleabag* offers a strong counterexample: a narrative where friendship is the most important and lasting relationship. As Holzberg and Lehtonen argue, the proliferation of postfeminist representations of heterosexuality is increasingly filled with "performative disaffiliations with heterosexuality," and often the disappointment and futility of romantic partners in women's lives (1).

The first part of the analysis has focused on Fleabag's role as a narrator-focaliser in

episode 2. Her direct address to the audience invites viewers to her internal dialogue, marked by irony, guilt and alienation. These confessions expose the emotional distance she creates from her environment and emphasise the unreliability of her behaviour inside the diegesis. This dual perspective allows the series to criticise characters such as Martin and Harry, who are portrayed as hollow and absurd romantic partners. Her private commentary reveals her disgust towards Martin and her disillusionment with and dysfunctionality of her relationship with Harry. Both men are emotionally incompetent and ultimately irrelevant to Fleabag's healing and main concerns.

The second part of this dissertation is centred on the syuzhet of episode 6. Narrative fragmentation, flashbacks and ellipses deepen the portrayal of Fleabag's psychological state. The Sexhibition, staged as a memento of sexual liberation and celebration, only results in absurd moments, traumatic flashbacks and an intense fight over sexual harassment. The recurring flashbacks to Boo are what break the positive statement about the sex of the exhibition. Boo's phrase and heartbreaking scenes function as moral and emotional centrepieces, leading Fleabag towards desperation and ultimate self-compassion. The final scene, in which the banker repeats Boo's compassionate message, marks the end of this cycle of self-loathing, emphasising the friendship and trust they have built, and how friendship has brought Fleabag the compassion she needed.

All in all, *Fleabag* brilliantly subverts the structure and expectations of romantic comedy. While the spectators are initially bound to expect fulfilling and exciting romantic partners, the series ultimately suggests that this may not be the case, and it may be a friendship that brings healing and safe interactions. By foregrounding the narrative techniques of narration, focalisation and syuzhet organisation, we have witnessed the redemptive force of non-sexual bonds over idealistic amorous or sexual bonds, mainly Boo and the banker, over Harry and Martin.

5) Works Cited

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