

---

This is the **published version** of the bachelor thesis:

Kortabarría Suárez, Lide; Martín Alegre, Sara , dir. The Magnetic Pull of the “Hot Priest” : a Deeper Look into the Priest’s Appeal to Fleabag in the TV Series Fleabag. 2023. 33 pag. (Grau en Estudis d’Anglès i Espanyol)

---

This version is available at <https://ddd.uab.cat/record/280838>

under the terms of the  license



DEPARTAMENT DE FILOLOGIA ANGLESA I DE GERMANÍSTICA

**The Magnetic Pull of the “Hot Priest”: A Deeper Look  
into the Priest’s Appeal to Fleabag in the TV Series**

*Fleabag*

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

Author: Lide Kortabarría Suárez

Supervisor: Sara Martín Alegre

Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística

Grau d’Estudis d’Anglès i Espanyol

June 2023

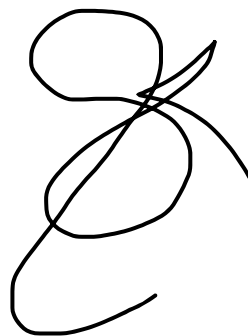
**Statement of Intellectual Honesty**

**Your name: Lide Kortabarria Suarez**

**Title of Assignment: Treball de Fi de Grau**

I declare that this is a totally original piece of work; all secondary sources have been correctly cited. I also understand that plagiarism is an unacceptable practise which will lead to the automatic failing of this assignment.

Signature and date: June 11<sup>th</sup> 2023

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and a long, sweeping tail that curves to the right.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

0. Introduction .....	1
0.1. <i>Fleabag</i> 's success and current research .....	1
0.2. Objectives .....	2
1. Fleabag: Seeking recognition and coping with loss .....	3
1.1. Direct address: Gaining visibility .....	3
1.2. Fleabag's relationships with other men: Sex and a lack of true understanding .....	9
2. The Priest: Celibacy and acceptance .....	15
2.1. Catholic priesthood and unattainability .....	15
2.2. Feeling seen and self-acceptance .....	20
3. Conclusions and Further Research .....	24
Works Cited .....	27

## **Acknowledgements**

First, I would like to thank Prof. Sara Martín for her guidance, help and support during the process of creating and writing this dissertation. I would also like to thank my family for encouraging me to take up this degree and for always having my back. Finally, I want to thank everyone that has been part of my life during these four years in university: thank you for making my time here special.

## **Abstract**

In TV series *Fleabag* (2016-2019) by Phoebe Waller-Bridge the protagonist navigates the aftermath of some personal tragedies while using the show's viewer as her main confidante. The second season of the series follows her love story with a Catholic priest played by Andrew Scott, who is usually referred to as "The Priest" or the "Hot Priest" and has completely captivated the audience. Thus, the present dissertation aims to determine which are the factors that make Fleabag fall in love with the Priest, making this unusual story possible.

The first part of the dissertation identifies Fleabag's needs through an analysis of the technique of direct address and her behaviour when she is seen with other men. Her continuously breaking the fourth wall to talk to the audience manifests a clear desire to be witnessed and understood. However, none of the men in her life are able to fulfil this need, and her relationship with them is mostly sexual. I will also argue that this need for male validation through sex comes from the lack of love and appreciation that she receives from her father.

After having established Fleabag's necessities, the second part examines how the Priest fulfils them by looking at the role which his Catholic priesthood, and therefore celibacy, plays in their relationship. I contend that it is his celibacy what first attracts Fleabag, while the fact that he sees her truly for who she is, indicated by the technique of direct address, is what makes her fall in love with him.

**Keywords:** *Fleabag* (TV series), Fleabag (character), Hot Priest (character), Catholic priesthood, masculinity, TV Studies, sexuality, Gender and Women's Studies

## **0. Introduction**

### **0.1. *Fleabag*'s success and current research**

Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* follows a 33-year-old English woman who runs a café in London and tries to cope with her messy and chaotic life in a witty, humorous manner. Released on Amazon Prime Video, the show has been praised by critics and audience alike since the airing of its first season in 2016 for its performances, writing, humor, and exploration of complex themes such as sexuality, mental health, and feminism. All these factors have contributed to its popularity and to create the "*Fleabag* phenomenon" (Snapes) that many talk about. However, this widespread recognition could not be conceived without considering the romantic relationship between Fleabag and the "Hot Priest", a love interest, played by Andrew Scott, who is introduced in the second season of the show. The Priest has become one of the most beloved characters of the show due to the relationship he shares with Fleabag, to the extent that he has become a bit of a sex symbol (Gorton) despite his condition as a celibate man.

Despite its newness, there has been a significant number of scholars interested in studying *Fleabag*, which highlights its relevance in the field of current Television Studies. Some scholars such as Shuster (2021) or Woods (2019) focus their study on the narrative technique of direct address used by the protagonist. Whereas Shuster (2021) centers on how the use of direct address affects current television, Woods (2019) takes a feminist comparative approach and analyzes how the technique allows the audience to better connect with the female protagonists of *Fleabag* and Michaela Coel's *Chewing Gum* (2015-2017), a similar series which aired on the British E4 channel. However, they both try to find the meaning behind Fleabag's relationship with the audience and the show's constant breaking of the fourth wall. Other academics, such as Holzberg and Lehtonen

(2021), choose to concentrate on the show's feminist content when conducting their research. They zero in on Fleabag's sexuality through a feminist and queer reading of the show and the relationships portrayed in it. In her study, Humble (2022) offers a character analysis of Fleabag, in comparison with the protagonist of the CW show *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015-2019), created by Rachel Bloom and Aline Brosh McKenna, to examine how these women deal with their pain and learn to honor their feelings. What these studies have in common is that they all, in some way, make a character study of the protagonist of the show, Fleabag, in order to make their point. However, the rest of the characters in the series have been significantly less analyzed by scholars. Despite his popularity, the character of the Priest and his relationship with Fleabag have not been thoroughly analyzed so far except for some brief discussions in a few articles like Holzberg and Lehtonen (2021).

## **0.2. Objectives**

The present study aims to determine the factors that make Fleabag fall in love with the Priest. To accomplish such a proposal, Fleabag's actions and relationships, especially with men, are analyzed, so as to identify her needs. Celibacy within Catholicism is explored too, as it affects the discussion about the romantic and sexual attraction that exists between the two main characters.

Consequently, the body of the present dissertation is organized into two main parts. The first part concentrates on Fleabag, and more specifically on the relationship she shares both with the audience and with other men. The narrative technique of direct address that the show uses for Fleabag to communicate with the viewers is a key point of this study, as I argue that it demonstrates a need to have a witness, to be seen for her to



feel fulfilled. Additionally, her relationships with other men are also considered with the intention of studying the tense dynamics she usually has in these relationships and how they are different to how she behaves when she is with the Priest. This serves to argue that the other men that she has been with have never been able to fulfill her need to be understood, and that she has had relationships with them to cope with the trauma of the death of her mother and her best woman friend Boo.

The second part of the dissertation directs its attention towards the character of the Priest, played, as noted, by Andrew Scott. The fact that he is a Catholic priest is a crucial aspect to consider when analyzing the relationship he shares with Fleabag, and, therefore, a brief analysis of the relation between celibacy and the Catholic Church is offered. This is an important factor to claim that one of the reasons for Fleabag's attraction towards the Priest is the romantic and sexual unattainability that comes with Catholic Priesthood. Finally, by examining some of their interactions, I propose that the Priest is the only man in Fleabag's life who brings to completion her desire to be seen, thus making her fall in love with him.

## **1. Fleabag: seeking recognition and coping with loss**

### **1.1. Direct address: gaining visibility**

The first season of the TV show *Fleabag* follows its eponymous protagonist, played by Phoebe Waller-Bridge<sup>1</sup>, while she deals with the trauma of the death of her best friend

---

<sup>1</sup> The series was originally a play the English actress and screenwriter Phoebe Waller-Bridge wrote and starred in, which debuted in 2013. *Fleabag* was the first script she wrote which came into life, but, after that, she wrote and starred in *Crashing*, a comedy series for Channel 4, and has been a showrunner and actress for many successful TV shows and films such as *Killing Eve* (2018-2022) or *No Time to Die* (2021).

Boo. At the beginning of the show, the viewer has no idea of what has happened exactly: we see Fleabag with Boo in flashbacks, so it is possible to assume that something has happened to her, but it is not until the end of the first episode that Fleabag explains what went on:

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 decided to walk into a busy lane, wanting to get tangled in a bike, break a finger maybe. But as it turns out bikes go fast and flip you into the road. Three people died. (Waller-Bridge, "Series One: Episode 1")

Throughout the season, however, it becomes clear that Fleabag is hiding something, and, in the season finale, it is revealed that she was the woman Boo's boyfriend cheated with. We see Fleabag as this mess of a person because she feels guilty for her best friend's death, which is probably why she gives herself this ugly name and we never get to know her real one.

The series opens with Fleabag looking intently at her front door. Suddenly, she breaks the fourth wall and starts talking to the viewer about having a man over at an unexpected hour. Throughout the show, it becomes evident that she will continuously direct her attention towards us amid ongoing events onscreen. To recognize when she is doing this, the viewer must pay attention to whether she is gazing directly at the camera instead of at other cast members. This sometimes entails exchanges taking place where she is simultaneously talking to the viewer and to other characters. The interesting thing about this strategy is that we know that this is happening, but most of the characters onscreen are completely unaware of it.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> There are several other shows that use this technique too, for different purposes. For instance, in *The Office* (2005-2013) and *Parks and Recreation* (2009-2015), the fourth wall is continuously broken because of the shows' "mockumentary" format. Other shows that directly address the viewer include *Oz* (1997-2003), *What We Do In The Shadows* (2019-), *Sex and the City* (1998-2004) or *Peep Show* (2003-2015), among others (Muratore).

In this way, direct address becomes an integral part of *Fleabag*'s storytelling, with it serving to establish "a privileged relationship between protagonist and viewer" (Woods 2) and to evoke "whispered feminine confidences, a shared intimacy" (Woods 2). Fleabag also tries to connect with the audience and get them to empathize with her and her actions to feel justified by them, in a way. For instance, in the show's opening, she starts talking to the viewer by saying "you know that feeling when a guy you like (...)" (Waller-Bridge, "Series One: Episode 1"), trying to make them relate to her quite bizarre and singular experiences with men. This makes the viewer feel as if they are a friend due to the sense of camaraderie that direct address creates between them and the protagonist. Additionally, the audience's empathy and understanding towards Fleabag's actions grow, which might be harder to achieve through traditional storytelling methods. Thus, through this unique and intimate relationship, Fleabag draws the viewer into her world, making them feel invested in her journey.

It is interesting to note that, although not explicitly stated in any way, the audience seems to be implicitly gendered as feminine. The way Fleabag talks to the viewer is the same as the way a woman would talk to another woman. In this case, it could also be specified that she is directing her attention towards heterosexual women. She tries to make the viewer relate to her experiences, many of which have to do with sexism and sexuality, and it would be hard to relate to them from the point of view of someone who does not experience sexism and does partake in the relationship dynamics that exist in heterosexual relationships.

The camera follows Fleabag all the time, even when she does not necessarily want to be perceived and she wants to hide. For instance, in the final episode of the first season, we see her in her lowest moment after it is revealed by her sister Claire that Fleabag was the woman Boo's boyfriend cheated on Boo with. When that happens, it is clear that

Fleabag wants to be left alone, but she is not able to escape us, and the camera keeps following her. This indicates that the viewer is able to access absolutely everything about her, even the feelings and memories that she does not want to share with us.

However, aside from looking at direct address as a narrative technique, it is very important for this research to find out why Fleabag feels the necessity to continuously break the fourth wall and address the audience even when she is already talking to someone onscreen. Notably, from the very first episode, it is possible to notice that when the show uses flashbacks to show Fleabag in different situations with her friend Boo, she never addresses the audience. This heavily contrasts with the present-day timeline, in which she frequently looks at the camera and makes it very noticeable that something has changed. This raises the issue of what has prompted Fleabag to use direct address so extensively in the present day, and why she feels the need to establish a direct connection with the audience when she did not need it in the past.

By looking at the flashbacks, it is clear that this change has something to do with Boo and whatever has happened to her. We know that Boo was Fleabag's closest friend and the partner with whom she opened their guinea-pig themed café; they shared a very close and special connection that we do not see Fleabag have with almost anyone else in the show. Later in the series we find out that Boo accidentally killed herself by stepping into traffic after discovering that her boyfriend had been unfaithful to her, and that Fleabag was the person her boyfriend was sleeping with, although Boo never finds out about this. Fleabag misses her friend and confidante terribly, and this is emphasized all throughout the show, especially in season one. Firstly, the photography of the show presents a stark contrast between the flashback shots and the present-day shots. While the present-day shots are characterized by a cool and blueish tone, the flashbacks' tone is warmer.



Figure 1. Fleabag in the present (cool tones)



Figure 2: Fleabag and Boo in a flashback (warm tones)

This highlights the security and sense of intimacy and comfort Fleabag felt when she was with her friend, which has been ripped away from her due to her untimely, tragic death. The cool tones in the present-day timeline show how Fleabag feels a sense of loss without her friend, but they also emphasize the guilt she feels for this loss. Apart from

this, it is also possible to see the void that Boo's loss has left in Fleabag in the fact that she cannot let go of the guinea-pig themed café they opened together, even though it is clearly unprofitable (in the first season) and is costing her money to keep it open, as this scene explains:

**GODMOTHER:** Well. Maybe it's time to let the little restaurant go. Give it up. Sell it. Have a little holiday.

**INT. FLASHBACK, CAFÉ – NIGHT**

Fleabag and Boo are drinking and smoking in the café.

**FLEABAG:** We did this.

**BOO:** Mhm. And whatever happens, we never let it go. Ok?

(Waller Bridge, "Series One: Episode 5")

In addition to this, from the very beginning, the show also tells us that Fleabag's mother has passed away from breast cancer, and throughout the episodes we see how differently each member of her family navigates her loss. Although the mother never appears, her presence is like a ghost looming over the series; it is very clear that Fleabag misses her deeply, too. The overwhelming feeling of loss she has due to her mother's passing is best shown in a flashback after her funeral, when Fleabag is talking to Boo:

**FLEABAG (O.S.):** I don't know what to do with it –

**BOO:** With what?

**CUT TO: INT. FLASHBACK, DAD'S HOUSE. WAKE – DAY**

Boo and Fleabag sit together at a table. The wake seems over.

**FLEABAG** (tearful): With all the love I have for her. I don't know ... where to – put it now.

Pause.

**BOO** (matter of fact): I'll take it.

Fleabag laughs.

**BOO:** No, I'm serious. It sounds lovely.

She looks at Boo. She means it.

**BOO:** I'll have it.

(beat)

**BOO:** You have to give it to me.

**FLEABAG:** Ok.

**BOO:** It's gotta go somewhere.

(Waller-Bridge, "Series Two: Episode 4")

This passage displays how Fleabag regarded her mother as a very important figure in her life, and probably also as a confidante. Boo asking Fleabag to give her the burden of all

the love she had for her mother makes her passing away too all the more painful, as Fleabag is left with no one whom she trusts enough to love that much.

In this way, the show establishes that “Fleabag’s two major sources of recognition – her mother and her best friend – have been tragically ripped away. And so, throughout the series, Fleabag seeks out substitute forms of recognition. She wants to be seen by men, by her father, and, in the well-known trope of the show, the viewer” (Humble 901). This is the key to understanding the reason behind Fleabag’s constant need to address the viewer. She seeks recognition, since the people who understood her before are not in her life anymore, leaving her feeling isolated and disconnected. As a result, she turns to the audience for a sense of acknowledgment and validation: we are a kind of replacement for the confidantes that she has lost.

The fact that, after the death of her mother and her only friend, she turns to us highlights a need to be seen, as Humble says: “Fleabag needs a witness to feel alive, to validate her: part of the conceit of the drama is her capacity to grow out of this need to be seen – to learn to see and know herself instead” (Humble 904). This need to be witnessed is confirmed by Waller-Bridge herself, as, when talking about the end of the show she said: “Fleabag’s constantly grappling with this need for the audience to be there, to validate her, and also to leave her alone so she can experience things on her own” (qtd. in Humble 904). Consequently, this demonstrates that Fleabag feels a deep need to be seen and understood, which she tries to fulfill by turning to the audience.

## **1.2. Fleabag’s relationships with other men: Sex and a lack of true understanding**

To understand Fleabag’s relationship with the Priest, it is necessary to unpack the relationships she has with other male figures in her life. Through an analysis of the way she interacts with these men, it is possible to establish what the Priest offers that they do

not, what is lacking in her relationship with them, starting with her father. Family is another very important aspect of Fleabag's life, and, as such, we are able to see her father, whose name we never get to know, his girlfriend (Fleabag's Godmother), and her sister, Claire, constantly throughout both seasons of the show in many different situations. Fleabag's father, played by Bill Patterson, appears shy and reticent, lacks determination, and longs for company while struggling to connect with his daughters. Yet, it is possible to tell that he loves both of his daughters, and he cares for their wellbeing, at least partially, and is afraid they might suffer the same fate as their mother, as we see how he books yearly cancer checkups for them. Additionally, he sends them to feminist lectures and retreats, perhaps to honor his outspoken feminist wife. However, he struggles to communicate with them and clearly feels uneasy when alone with Fleabag. This is apparent from the very first scene when we meet him when Fleabag goes to his house in the middle of the night:

**FLEABAG:** Ok. Yeah, Ok. I'm – I don't wanna, I'm gonna. It was...

(She turns but then turns back)

**FLEABAG:** Oh fuck it. I have a horrible feeling that I am a greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, morally bankrupt woman who can't even call herself a feminist.

She looks desperately at him. She needs him now.

**DAD:** Well... Um...

(Pathetic, trying to make a joke)

**DAD:** You get all that from your mother!

She laughs a sad laugh.

(Waller-Bridge, "Series One: Episode 1")

It is possible to attribute this attitude toward life and, especially, towards his daughter to the death of his wife, Fleabag's mother. The discomfort he feels with Fleabag, even though he loves her, is because she reminds him of his late wife, whose loss, three years prior to the events of the first season, has left him permanently injured.

The father finds the companionship that he craves after his wife's loss in the character of the Godmother, played by Olivia Coleman. We also never get to know her real name, so in this dissertation we will use the name she is given in the script:



Godmother. She was a former student and friend of Fleabag and Claire's mother, and, although not stated explicitly, it is clear that she was deeply envious of their mother, which is presumably the reason why she got together with their father when she died. She is an artist, and she appears to be very sweet, but her personality is very duplicitous, and she is very condescending and dismissive towards Fleabag, often making snide remarks and belittling her in front of others to gain power over her. This gets to a point where, in the fifth episode of the first season, Fleabag and Godmother are alone in the corridor and Fleabag pushes Godmother after she makes one of these comments. Godmother, as an answer, lets go of her mask and slaps her right across the cheek, only to later realize that the father has seen her do it. However, Godmother acts as if nothing has happened, and he decides to do so too, making it clear for Fleabag that he does not care about her enough to do something about the situation. The father's lack of response to Godmother's snide comments and actions against Fleabag deeply affect her, and it could even be said, as Wilson-Scott does, that he has been lost to her:

With ever-dwindling social and, more crucially, familial ties, Fleabag is – at least symbolically – orphaned. Her mother is dead and her father has been lost, the latter willingly into the arms of the “evil” stepmother hidden in the guise of the actual godmother. (Wilson-Scott 275).

This detachment that Fleabag's father shows towards her, added to his enabling of her stepmother's passive aggressiveness, has a profound impact on Fleabag, as she does not get the love or acceptance that she needs from him. This makes her feel rejected, leading her to seek solace in sex as a substitute for the love that she feels she has been denied, mistaking physical intimacy for emotional connection. It could even be said, looking at the first season of the show, that Fleabag is obsessed with sex, as she seeks it in all types of situations, with all types of men (and even women) who “are presented through stereotypical and often vulgar nicknames such as ‘Hot Misogynist’, ‘Arsehole

Guy' and 'Bus Rodent'" (Holzberg and Lehtonen 1904). Fleabag addresses her attitude towards sex in the second episode of the show:

**FLEABAG:** Gotta think about all the people I can have sex with now.  
(beat)  
I'm not obsessed with sex.  
(beat)  
I just can't stop thinking about it.  
(beat)  
The performance of it. The awkwardness of it, the drama of it. The moment you realise someone wants your body... Not so much the feeling of it.  
(Waller-Bridge, "Series One: Episode 2")

What demonstrates the fact that sex is for Fleabag a coping mechanism to replace the love she lacks from her father<sup>3</sup> is that she does not seem to enjoy the act itself but does enjoy the performance of intimacy. The sexual encounters involving 'Bus Rodent' or 'Arsehole Guy' are deliberately uncomfortable, as the purpose behind them is to emphasize that having a lot of sex does not make her successful, or happy. Moreover, the lack of enjoyment she gets from such interactions highlights these men's inability to truly understand her. As Holzberg and Lehtonen put: "What these characters ['Hot Misogynist', 'Arsehole Guy' and 'Bus Rodent'] share is a failure to understand or care about Fleabag's inner world, and an inability to keep up with her humour" (1904).

Furthermore, it could also be argued that something all these guys share is the fact that Fleabag has them figured out. Waller-Bridge herself admits that:

"[t]he thing I really got off on was putting a female character out there that was all-knowing about sex and one step ahead, who knew what the guys were thinking before they thought it and yet still played slightly dumb to them. Oh God, it brought me so much pleasure" (qtd. in Ivana 62).

This is made evident through direct address, as whatever she predicts about their behavior or actions, usually ends up happening. However, there are instances when she is wrong

---

<sup>3</sup> It is possible to link this to the Electra complex, coined by Neo-Freudian psychologist Carl Jung, which would be the equivalent for girls of what the Oedipus complex is for boys. However, there is not much empirical evidence to support this complex, and it is not nearly as widely recognized as the Oedipus complex.

about them, which demonstrates the lack of knowledge she has about these people's real personalities and the lack of real intimacy they share. This happens with "Arsehole Guy", when she thinks he has fallen in love with her when actually he is speaking about someone else:

**ARSEHOLE GUY:** And I don't want to have sex with anyone else. And that's never happened to me before.

He puts his hands on her face.

**ARSEHOLE GUY:** I'm in love... And I... Need to tell her.

Fleabag looks confused.

**FLEABAG:** Her?

**ARSEHOLE GUY:** Yeah, we've been together for a couple of months and physically she just never satisfied me (...)

Fleabag is stunned.

**FLEABAG:** Oh, no... God no, my erm – my ex is due back any day now anyway, so it's – I'm happy for you.

She pats him on the back. He smiles.

**ARSEHOLE GUY** (laughing gently): I knew you wouldn't give a shit.

**FLEABAG:** Well, what can I say? I'm sorry! I don't... Give a shit... (...)

Fleabag is embarrassed and stung. She glances at the camera. She tries to laugh it off.

(Waller-Bridge: "Series One: Episode 6")

In addition to her unfamiliarity with "Arsehole Guy", this scene also shows the necessity on Fleabag's part to be liked (and even loved) by people she may not even like or know well. I would contend that this behavior, like her relationship with sex, is a way to compensate for the lack of real love or intimacy in her life due to the passing of her mother and her friend, and his father's general passiveness.

Finally, I also find it necessary to examine the only serious romantic relationship that we see Fleabag in, the one with Harry. From the very first moment we meet him it becomes apparent that he is a nice guy who is emotionally very vulnerable. Later in the show, we find out that Fleabag and Harry's relationship is quite tumultuous, with them breaking up and getting back together continuously. Fleabag even tells the camera their "breakup routine", by which he empties and cleans her apartment and leaves a little dinosaur toy there as an excuse each time to come back and get back together. She jokingly explains to us how she has considered breaking up with Harry only because she

feels like the apartment needs a bit of cleaning. This shows how Fleabag “remains emotionally distant [with Harry] and reverses classical gender roles” (Holzberg and Lehtonen 1904). This last take is very interesting, as it is true that Fleabag is the stereotypical man in the relationship (emotionally detached, obsessed with sex, and making the decisions), while Harry would take the role traditionally attributed to a woman: he is very emotional, he does the cleaning, he cries after watching *Cats*, etc. (Holzberg and Lehtonen 1904). In addition, he is often emasculated in the show, for instance, in an art exhibition about Godmother’s sexual life, which is called “sexhibition” in the show, there is a model of Harry which has no penis. Apart from this, he also even calls himself Fleabag’s “girlfriend” at one point: “Uh yeah – I used to be her – girlfriend” (Waller-Bridge, “Series Two: Episode 2”). This reversing of gender norms serves to further emphasize Fleabag’s emotional detachment, this time in comparison to a more openly emotional person. In addition, the stark difference between Fleabag and Harry’s personalities highlights that they are not together because of a shared mutual understanding, but presumably because of a need they both share for validation through romantic relationships.

Fleabag’s behavior and attitude towards Harry demonstrate that the lack of emotional involvement she has with the rest of the men that have been mentioned is not only due to a lack of knowledge of their personalities, since Fleabag and Harry have been together for years. However, what Harry does have in common with the rest of those men she has been involved with is a lack of true understanding of Fleabag, which may be caused by her keeping herself emotionally distant from them and not allowing herself to be seen (another classic masculine attitude).

## 2. The Priest: celibacy and acceptance

### 2.1. Catholic Priesthood and Unattainability

Taking a first look to the character of the Priest in *Fleabag*, it is unavoidable to think that Fleabag's seemingly inexplicable attraction towards him may have something to do with his being a Catholic priest. The first indication we get of this is in the very name of the character itself. An interesting characteristic of the TV show is that, although we do get to know the name of some characters like Boo, Claire and her husband Martin, most of the characters' names are never stated, and that is why the viewer gets to know them as "Godmother", "Hot Misogynist", "Bus Rodent" or "Priest". The notable aspect of this is that these nameless characters are named after a distinctive quality or characteristic that Fleabag finds interesting about them. Consequently, we get to know that, at least initially, she is attracted to the Priest because of his cool demeanor, as at one point the script describes him as a "cool swearsy priest" (Waller-Bridge, "Series Two: Episode 1"), but also because of his Catholic priesthood. Fleabag first meets him in the first episode of the second season, when she is at dinner with her family to celebrate the engagement of her father with Godmother, and she is astonished to find out the man that is sitting next to her will be the Priest at their wedding. We get confirmation that she is indeed attracted to him at the end of this episode, when she gets into a cab with Claire, and they have the following interaction:

**CLAIRE:** The priest was quite hot.

**FLEABAG:** So hot.

An imperceptible smile on each of their lips.

Fleabag looks to the camera. She's back.

(Waller-Bridge, "Series Two: Episode 1")

Claire's remark indicates that the Priest, in a way, has enamored all the family. This is interesting, because Andrew Scott, who plays the Priest, is not so obviously or conventionally "hot", and yet the Priest is able to captivate everyone at the dinner table.

This is probably because of his undeniable charm, his intelligence, and his ability to be vulnerable (but not so vulnerable that he scares people away, like Harry) even when sitting at a table full of strangers. Apart from this, Fleabag's response to Claire's comment, followed by the stage direction that "she's back", lets the viewers know that she is seriously interested, whereas the name chosen to refer to him shows that the fact that he is a priest is relevant to this interest. Essentially, it reveals that she finds his priesthood compelling, and sexy.

However, for the purpose of this dissertation, understanding the reason why she finds a Catholic priest attractive becomes essential. To do this, it is important to look into what Catholic priesthood involves, more specifically, celibacy. In 'Celibacy in the Catholic Church: A Brief History', Thomas O'Loughlin explains how the idea of celibacy has evolved in the Catholic Church:

Celibacy is a classic example of how an idea from one period, if it gets lodged in law, can become self-perpetuating and eventually be seen as an ideal. When a law is repeated over a long enough period it justifies itself even if it does not accord with reality or the larger values it claims to serve. (O'Loughlin 46)

According to this author, the practice of celibacy among priests became mandatory in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, partly as a way to prevent the inheritance of Church property by the offspring of married priests (O'Loughlin 44). This is why, still nowadays, Catholic priests must take a vow of celibacy, although its significance has radically changed over the years to become a virtue, as many argued that "if the church was Christ's bride, and the priest Christ's representative, it followed that a married priest was an adulterer" (O'Loughlin, 44).

With this very brief analysis of celibacy in the Catholic Church, it is easier to understand the reason why the Priest's being a Catholic priest is so inviting to Fleabag, as his vow of celibacy makes him unattainable. As Andrew Crome puts it, "In *Fleabag*, the Priest's dog collar is not an expression of his sacramental status, but of his sexual

unavailability (and thus part of his appeal)” (Crome 8). In the previous part of this dissertation, we have seen that Fleabag’s relationships with men (excluding her father) are always sexual, even with her boyfriend with whom she had no real connection. It has also been affirmed that Fleabag relies on sex with men to replace the love and validation she lacks from her father. Consequently, her initial fascination with the Priest can be attributed to his pledge of celibacy as it presents a challenge for her, something she has not encountered before. The assertion can be made that Fleabag did not have a genuine interest in the Priest as a person initially, but rather she found him to be a captivating challenge. In the finale of the first season, Fleabag says that “somehow there isn’t anything worse than someone who doesn’t want to fuck me” (Waller-Bridge, “Series One: Episode 6”). Therefore, the Priest embodies both her worst nightmare and her greatest challenge, as she does not know whether he does or does not want her, since he cannot make a move on her. This is best represented by a scene in the fourth episode of the second season, when, after a flashback where Fleabag remembers the day of her mother’s funeral, she goes to Church at night in a moment of vulnerability. By this point in the show, Fleabag and the Priest have had numerous interactions, and he has told her that he finds his faith very helpful to cope with his issues and feelings, so Fleabag decides to give the Church a try. However, when she starts praying, she hears noise come from the sacristy, where the Priest is. He is clearly drunk, and Fleabag and him have the following interaction when she enters the room:

**PRIEST:** Oh my God, I thought you were just in my head. Then. I – I mean you were in my head then. But then you were there.

**FLEABAG:** You Ok, Father?

**PRIEST:** Fuck you, calling me Father, like it doesn’t turn you on just to say it.

(Waller-Bridge, “Series Two: Episode 4”)

This shows that the Priest is aware that partially his priesthood, which is the very factor preventing them from pursuing a romantic relationship, makes him attractive to Fleabag.

Nevertheless, the Priest finds himself giving in to temptation and kissing Fleabag in a captivating scene in the Church's confessional when Fleabag confesses her fears and insecurities (though not her specific actions, for instance, with Boo and her boyfriend) to him and allows herself to be truly seen by him, which is ironic, because, as they are in a confessional, he cannot see her while she is telling him this:

**FLEABAG:** No, I want someone to tell me what to wear every morning ... I want someone to tell me what to eat, what to like, what to hate, what to rage about, what to listen to, what band to like, what to buy tickets for, what to joke about, what not to joke about. I want someone to tell me what to believe in, who to vote for, who to love and how to ... tell them.

(beat)

I just think I want someone to tell me how to live my life, Father, because so far, I think I've been getting it wrong.

(beat)

And I know that is why people want people like you in their lives. Because you just tell them how to do it. You just tell them what to do. And what they'll get out of the end of it. And even though I don't believe your bullshit and I know that scientifically nothing I do makes a difference in the end anyway, I'm still scared, why am I still scared?

(beat)

Just fucking tell me what to do, Father.

(Silence.)

She looks to the grate. She can't make out his expression. A long pause.)

**PRIEST (O.S.):** Kneel (...)

(He holds her face in front of his for a moment. Deciding.)

She moves her lips forward and they kiss. (...)

They keep kissing. The passion builds and builds ...

But then—

A painting of Jesus falls off the wall. It hits the church flagstones with a crash.

They immediately stop. They both turn to look at it).

(Waller-Bridge, "Series Two: Episode 4")

It is the emotional intimacy they reach at this point that makes the Priest cast aside his celibacy and be sure that he wants Fleabag, only to be interrupted by God (presumably) intervening by making the painting fall. However, God's intervention does not hold them back for a long time, and one episode later the Priest will fully break his pledge of celibacy by having sex with Fleabag.

Being able to communicate these anxieties of hers to the Priest and seeing that she has not scared him away also makes the Priest more attractive in Fleabag's eyes. Once



this scene happens, she stops seeing him as a challenge. Their relationship is not simply a matter of attraction anymore: they have already fallen in love with each other. Paradoxically, the absence of sex initially paves the way for deeper emotional intimacy between them, as she feels secure enough to open up to him. There is a key moment in episode 3 that represents exactly this:

**FLEABAG:** What if you meet someone you love?

They hold eye contact

**PRIEST:** We're not going to have sex.

Fleabag glances at the camera

**PRIEST:** I know you think that's what you want from me. But it's not. It won't bring anything good.

They laugh, there's a spark.

(Waller-Bridge, "Series Two: Episode 3")

The security that their relationship cannot be sexual, in contrast with the relationships she has had with all the other men she has been with, opens the door for romance, a door that Fleabag did not even know was available to her. Holzberg and Lehtonen make a very interesting point about the significance of the Priest's vow of celibacy for the idea of romance in the story:

While Fleabag's desire for normative coupledness with the Priest remains unfulfilled due to his vow of celibacy, it is precisely because of this impossibility that the fantasy of conventional romance can be kept alive. The reality of heterosexual coupledness is deferred, displaced onto an imaginary future, which is perhaps also the reason behind the Priest's seemingly near-universal desirability. Because both Fleabag and the viewer know that the relationship will never be actualized, we can fill it with our own imaginary instead. (Holzberg and Lehtonen, 1909)

However, even though they are in love with each other, the Priest ends up prioritizing his love for God over his love for Fleabag in a heartbreaking scene in the series finale, which will be analyzed later in this dissertation. With this ending, it is clear to the viewer that both have fallen in love, and that it is because they love each other but they have different aims that they cannot be together.

## 2.2. Feeling seen and self-acceptance

In the first part of this dissertation, I have discussed direct address and how it manifests a need on Fleabag's part to be understood by the people around her. It has also been established that it is precisely because no one around her fulfils this need that she uses direct address to try to recreate a sense of camaraderie that she had with Boo or her mother with the viewer. No one on the show sees her break the fourth wall to talk to us, that is why it comes as a shock to both the viewer and Fleabag herself when the Priest notices it:

**FLEABAG:** I'd like to be your friend too.

(to camera)

We will last a week.

**PRIEST:** What was that?

**FLEABAG:** What?

**PRIEST:** Where did... Where did you just go?

**FLEABAG:** What?

**PRIEST:** You just went somewhere.

(Waller-Bridge, "Series Two: Episode 3")

From this moment on, "the Priest is shown as aware of Fleabag's direct addresses, since he reacts to her direct addresses of us, something no other character in Fleabag is capable of doing" (Shuster 331). What this means, considering what has been determined in the first part of this dissertation, is that the Priest can understand Fleabag in a way that no one in her life can. He acknowledges and responds to her need to feel seen because he is able to recognize her seeking this understanding with the viewer. He is the first character since Boo's death that has made her feel this way, and it is precisely through the technique of direct address, which is, in a way, a replacement of her, that this is shown. A scene that reveals how truly comfortable she feels with the Priest is in the following episode, where she gets confused and, instead of talking to the viewer, she talks to him by accident:

**PRIEST:** And you never felt them... Go somewhere?

**FLEABAG:** (accidentally to camera) No, they were already gone.

(accidentally to Priest)

His beautiful neck.

Beat.

**PRIEST:** What?

Fleabag, panicked, look to camera.

**FLEABAG:** What?

**PRIEST:** You just said ‘his beautiful neck’

(Waller-Bridge, “Series Two: Episode 4”)

This serves to demonstrate how much of a confidante the Priest is progressively becoming for her, to the point where she feels as comfortable talking to him as she does with us. This connection and comfort between them are best seen in the numerous silences and stares that they share, something that did not happen with the rest of her male partners. Andrew Scott argues that “a lot of the dynamics of their relationship, actually, I think sometimes were set up by the silences between them and the looks between them. They counted for a lot” (in *Vanity Fair* 15:24 – 15:32).

However, Fleabag is also afraid of allowing someone into her inner world, as shown by the scene in that same episode when he looks directly at the camera, confused, after she does, and she gets extremely nervous. She has become used to having nobody in her life who fully comprehends her anymore, as well as to having to turn to direct address to find some type of validation, so it is difficult and shocking for her to find that in the Priest. Nevertheless, she ends up accepting it, and “having fallen for someone who really knows her, Fleabag gradually stops turning to the viewer. She no longer needs us” (Humble 907).

Apart from this, it is also interesting to note that Fleabag also stops having this necessity to have a witness regarding sex too. Throughout the show, Fleabag is repeatedly shown having sex with multiple partners knowing that the viewer, her confidante, is watching her, as she even interacts with us on some occasions. Yet, when she has sex with the Priest, we see that this need to be witnessed by us has disappeared, because she is already being looked at by someone who does legitimately get her, so she does not need us. This is why, in episode 5, when the Priest goes to her apartment and they finally end up having sex, she pushes the viewer away:

She falls quiet. He opens her coat. She leans forward and kisses him gently. He suddenly goes for it. He's a pro... he just needed permission.

**INT. FLEABAG'S FLAT. BEDROOM – NIGHT**

Fleabag and the Priest are in bed. He is on top of her, it's passionate.

She looks at the camera, then pushes it forcefully away.

(Waller-Bridge, "Series Two: Episode 5")

This scene shows how she wants the moment to be theirs and does not feel the necessity to share it with anyone else. It serves to give the viewer a sense of how Fleabag has grown thanks to her relationship with the Priest, after having felt stuck for some time.

The culmination of this growth happens in the finale of the show, in the scene between the Priest and Fleabag that has been previously mentioned. The Priest tells Fleabag that he has chosen God, despite her having told him that she loves him, and him loving her too:

**FLEABAG:** It's God, isn't it?

Beat

**PRIEST:** Yeah

Fleabag smiles and nods.

(...)

**FLEABAG (CONT'D):** I love you.

They sit with the words.

Pause. She looks at him.

He takes her hand.

**PRIEST (gently):** It'll pass.

Beat.

She smiles.

(Waller-Bridge, "Series Two: Episode 6")

The conclusion of Fleabag and the Priest's romantic arc may have disappointed some viewers who were rooting for them to end up together. Nevertheless, this does not negate the success of their relationship. Instead, as Andrew Scott highlights, their separation demonstrates a deep level of consideration and love for one another, as they are able to take the difficult decision that will be better for both of them in the long run:

If he did choose Fleabag, how would that end up? And sometimes you just have to make very very hard decisions out of love, actually, and that is not something we see a lot in movies and TV, and it almost strengthens the love. In a story that can be about sex and the scene is naughty, it's actually a very beautiful idea that you love somebody and then you let them go. (in *Vanity Fair* 16:15 – 16:39)

However, apart from the love story with the Priest, this scene is also significant because it marks the end of direct address in the show. This means that the series starts when Fleabag starts addressing the viewer to fulfil her need to be seen and ends when she does not need to address us anymore, as this need to be validated by others disappears. After the Priest leaves, Fleabag stands up to leave too, and the following happens:

She stands up, puts her bag over her shoulder and, holding the statue of her mother<sup>4</sup> in her hand, she turns to walk.  
The camera moves with her for a couple of steps.  
She stops, feeling it follow her. She looks at us. She smiles slightly with an almost imperceptible shake of her head.  
She's asking us not to follow her.  
She turns and walks again up the street.  
The camera remains where it is.  
When she gets almost out of sight she turns and gives us a smile and a little wave.  
Then turns and walks off into the night.  
Goodbye.

(Waller-Bridge, "Series Two: Episode 6")

The scene takes place at a bus stop, a liminal space. This is quite symbolic because they both have experienced a sense of transformation in their relationship. Fleabag's "temptation" has helped the Priest realize that his faith is stronger than his desire for her, as he has chosen God, and the Priest has helped Fleabag realize she does not need to be witnessed and validated by us: she does not need us anymore. She has learned that she has to live with herself and love herself the way the Priest does his faith. In a way, she becomes aware that everything in her life "will pass", and she will be the only person that she can take for granted. When the Priest says "it will pass", he is trying to comfort and convince both Fleabag and himself that their love for one another will fade away, and that there are more important things for both of them to focus on than in trying to maintain a romantic relationship with each other. The Priest chooses his faith, and Fleabag realizes

---

<sup>4</sup> This statue is a leitmotif of the show. It first appears in the first episode, and it is an art piece Godmother makes of a woman's torso, taking Fleabag and Claire's mother as inspiration. Fleabag steals the statue from her, thinking she can sell it, and it goes through many different hands, but it always ends up making its way back to her somehow.

she has to choose herself and that doing this will be for the better. Consequently, this liminality does not mean that they have not been extremely influential for one another. Ultimately, although not a perfect match due to his faith and his commitment to being a priest in the Catholic Church, the Priest is very helpful to Fleabag in that he helps her get out of her destructive habits and probably start a journey of self-acceptance.

Therefore, I would argue that what draws Fleabag towards the Priest romantically is this understanding –something that has become rare for her. However, when he chooses his faith over their potential relationship later in the show’s storyline it becomes clear to her that only she can genuinely fulfil herself. Their relationship has been an incentive for her personal growth and self-realization, which is the main plot of the season, and the main lesson it is trying to convey for the people watching the show. In the opening scene of the second season of the series, Fleabag says to the camera “This is a love story” (Waller-Bridge, “Series Two: Episode 1”). The love story she is truly referring to is not her romantic connection with the Priest, but the love story Fleabag has with herself.

### **3. Conclusions and Further Research**

The present dissertation aimed to determine what makes Fleabag fall in love with the Priest in the popular series of the same name through an analysis of her needs and her relationship with him. Two main factors that have been highlighted. The first is the very fact that he is a priest who has sworn off sex, as this makes him unattainable for her, which is what sparks her interest in him at first. Secondly, what makes her love him is his ability to relate to her on an emotional level far surpassing anyone else – except for Boo and her mother, who have passed away.

In earlier parts of this dissertation, it has become clear that the sexual relationships with men function as compensation for missing fatherly love in Fleabag’s life. Although

sex does not necessarily bring her personal satisfaction, knowing that there are always options available to engage sexually brings her temporary validation. Nevertheless, none of these partners has come close to understanding Fleabag truly for who she is – including her past boyfriend, Harry. This ultimately explains why the Priest catches Fleabag’s eye instantly – his celibacy acts like a unique challenge she cannot resist and creates an air of intrigue within their dynamic.

However, despite this being the reason that sparks her interest at first, it is because of his true understanding of her personality that Fleabag falls in love with the Priest. Through her use of direct address from the very beginning of the series, Fleabag shows how alone she feels, and manifests a need to be witnessed in order to feel validated. She seeks the external validation that she felt with Boo or her mother, which she no longer finds, in the audience. It is also through direct address that we learn that the Priest, in very little time, has managed to reach Fleabag’s internal world, as he is able to witness her interactions with the viewer, and he is even capable of breaking the fourth wall himself.

Apart from this, it is through the Priest’s decision to choose his faith over a possible romantic relationship with Fleabag that she realizes she needs to accept herself and reject this necessity for external validation. For this reason, the series ends with her saying goodbye first to the Priest, and then to the audience, since she is going to reject this need to be witnessed by anyone but herself and start a journey of self-acceptance. Therefore, the ultimate act that deepens Fleabag’s love for the Priest is the fact that he chooses not to pursue a romantic relationship with her, making her aware of what she needs to do to get better, starting by leaving the audience behind.

For further research, it would be interesting to continue exploring side characters of the show, since, as it has been mentioned in this dissertation, there is a quite notable lack of analysis of them in comparison to the protagonist. Despite it being quite a short

series, its characters are very rich, so I would suggest that Fleabag's relationship with them be examined too. It would be interesting to compare the stark difference in personality between her sister Claire and herself, and what the meaning behind these differences might be. This dissertation also opens a conversation on how only short-lived romance is idealized today, because the viewer does not have to deal with reality and can feel in the gaps left by the show with their own imagination. It would be interesting to explore other TV shows where this happens and determine what are the factors that make us, as viewers, fall in this idealization of such short-lived romantic stories. Additionally, this would contribute to research in the field of TV studies, which is relatively recent, thereby aiding in its expansion.



## Works Cited

### Primary Sources

*Fleabag*. Created by Phoebe Waller Bridge, Two Brothers Pictures, 2016-2019.

### Secondary Sources

- Crome, Andrew. "'Wonderful', 'Hot', 'Good' Priests: Clergy on Contemporary British TV and the New Visibility of Religion Thesis." *Religions*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2020, p.38 –, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel11010038>.
- Gorton, Thomas. "From Hot Priest to *Black Mirror* Star, Andrew Scott Is Having a Moment." *Dazed*, 4 June 2019 <https://www.dazeddigital.com/film-tv/article/44646/1/andrew-scott-black-mirror-fleabag-sex-symbol-interview> Accessed 7 March 2023. Accessed 7 March 2023.
- Holzberg, Billy and Aura Lehtonen. "The Affective Life of Heterosexuality: Heteropessimism and Postfeminism in *Fleabag*." *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. ahead-of-print, no. ahead-of-print, 2021, pp. 1-16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1922485>.
- Humble, Catherine. "Mirrors and Masquerades in *Fleabag* and *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend*." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, vol. 103, no. 5, 2022, pp. 895-908, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207578.2022.2116854>.
- Ivana, I. M. *In Praise of Unlikeable Women: Exploring Unlikeability in "Postfeminist" Times in My Year of Rest and Relaxation and Fleabag*. 2020. Utrecht University MS thesis. <https://studenttheses.uu.nl/handle/20.500.12932/36537>
- Muratore, Genevieve. "10 Iconic Shows That Demolish the Fourth Wall". *Collider*, 10 December 2022 <https://collider.com/best-tv-series-that-break-the-fourth-wall/#39-what-we-do-in-the-shadows-39-2019>
- O'Loughlin, Thomas. "Celibacy in the Catholic Church: A Brief History." *History Ireland*, vol. 3, no. 4, 1995, pp. 41-46.
- Shuster, Martin. "*Fleabag*, Modernism, and New Television." *Canadian Review of American Studies* 51.3 (2021): 324–336. Web.
- Snapes, Laura. "Kneel! How the Whole World Bowed down to *Fleabag*... and her Hot Priest." *The Guardian*, 23 December 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/dec/23/kneel-how-the-whole-world-bowed-down-to-fleabag-and-her-hot-priest>. Accessed 7 March 2023.
- Vanity Fair*. "Andrew Scott Breaks Down His Career, from 'Fleabag' to 'Sherlock'." *YouTube*, 7 October 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZ3YfZgjAw&t=1015s>
- Wilson-Scott, Joanna. "Both Absent and Omnipresent: The Dead Mother in *Fleabag*". *Feminist Media Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2020, pp. 273-283, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1546207>
- Woods, Faye. "Too Close for Comfort: Direct Address and the Affective Pull of the Confessional Comic Woman in *Chewing Gum* and *Fleabag*." *Communication Culture & Critique*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2019, pp. 194-212.

## **Image Credits**

Figure 1. <https://www.loslunesseriefilos.com/2018/03/series-fleabag-amazon-prime-video.html> (Access date: 20 May 2023)

Figure 2. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/intersections/201906/painful-perfection-review-the-tragicomic-series-fleabag> (Access date: 20 May 2023)