

'Fleabag', Guilt, and Beautiful Grief

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With the clatter of a donkey charging through a pit orchestra, *Fleabag* came crashing on our screens four years ago. In a show like this, jet black humour and sharp remarks concerning the very essence of womanhood (“Do I have a huge arsehole?”) run a mile a minute, so you’d think it would be easy to miss the deep moments. Where its star and creator, Phoebe Waller-Bridge, is concerned, ignoring those pivotal moments is rather impossible. Though *Fleabag* is dangerously, often perversely, funny the show has a spine made up of much more serious stuff – a spine weighed down by grief and guilt.



The eponymous Fleabag, played by Waller-Bridge, is heralded as a refreshing interpretation of a female lead role in her honesty but even more so in her capacity to do the *wrong* thing. By the end of the first episode it's obvious that Fleabag lives a lifestyle so unapologetically wrapped up in herself. After losing her mother and best friend in the space of a year, who can blame her? Well, evidently, she can.

It turns out that Fleabag's hedonistic pursuits don't go without causing a few bumps in the road, the most noticeable one being the complex feelings of guilt tied up with the death of her best friend Boo (played oh-so charmingly by Jenny Rainsford). When writing their relationship, Waller-Bridge tells Vanity Fair that she imagined how she would react if her real-life best friend was to die. Taking it a step further, she asked herself "But what if it was my fault?" We see that lighting bolt of guilt occasionally etched on Fleabag's face; "Not now," she grimaces to the audience as a confessional flashback momentarily dances across the screen. Moments like this allude to a character who, despite her apathetic wit and a wry smile, isn't quite holding it all together. "I think I'll always write vulnerable rascals." Waller-Bridge tells The Guardian, "I can't help but tell stories about loss or grief, in one way or another. Mainly I'm writing people who are desperate for love, but don't know how to ask for it." Though the show might deal out the big guns of grief to our protagonist, Waller-Bridge doesn't shy away from exploring more of life's losses. In Season One this is perhaps most apparent in The Banker, played by Hugh Dennis who's known for his more lighthearted appearances on BBC shows like Mock The Week and Outnumbered. Initially, his character seems just as comedic when we witness a painfully awkward yet deliciously sardonic exchange between himself and an accidentally shirtless Fleabag on their first meeting.



When we reach Episode Three, we meet The Banker again, who's experienced an emotional shift. "I touched a colleague's breast ..." he confesses to Fleabag, "I'm just a very ... disappointing man." The scene – not lacking in irony as far distant cries of "Slag!" echo through the hills – slows the tone of an otherwise racing show. Fleabag and The Banker sit upon the grassy hill of a countryside hotel; the former taking part in a silent retreat, the latter at a workplace harassment workshop (hence the profanities). Despite the outcries of misogyny, it's a beautiful scene.

As The Banker begins his monologue, Allistrum's March by The Gloaming plays on in the background, its pensive strings complimenting the scene's slow beats. "They keep asking me, 'What do you want from this workshop?'" he begins, "I want to move back home. I want to hug my wife. Protect my children, protect my daughter." Another moment of grief interlocked with guilt. He continues, his list of wants trailing from the big losses caused by his harassment up to the everyday mundanities that are lost at the hand of such indiscretions; mugs and dishwashers, cupboards and theatres. "I just want to cry," Fleabag retorts, breaking her vow of silence, "all the time." Cry for who, though, it is not clear. Her mother? Boo? Herself? The only certainty as two almost-strangers share a secret cigarette is that these quiet, beautiful moments of shared loss are as integral to *Fleabag* as breaking the forth wall and "using sex to deflect from the screaming void inside an empty heart."



As seen with *The Banker*, a character as brutally honest as Fleabag can grant those around her the room for self-reflection – but not so much herself. Whilst reading up for this piece, I was unsurprised to learn that people who’ve lost a loved one empathised with Fleabag’s coping mechanisms for grief. “There’s a polarization of choice that appears when your life is altered by death. You can either let it consume you and embrace what it is or run in the complete opposite direction, ignoring it completely,” writes Raven Ishak, observing that Fleabag chooses to run very hard. To really hammer that metaphor home, there’s literally a scene where she runs through a graveyard.

What *Fleabag* also shows us, though, is that grief will come for us whether we run from it or not. By the time Season Two arrives, Waller-Bridge offers an insight into what life has to offer when all the dust you’ve kicked up from running finally settles. Reconsolidated family bonds, reconciliations, there’s even time for romantic love and loss – but that’s giving away too many spoilers. *Fleabag* has received a mountain of praise for its veracity when it comes to all things female. But it’s a show that just as truthfully depicts loss: its nonlinear nature, the moments that make us feel inconceivably guilty, and – sometimes – the beauty of it all.