

Review of *Fleabag*: Family Dysfunction and Mental Health

Anda Zhao

Department of Applied Psychology and Counselor Education, University of Northern Colorado, USA
anda.zhao@unco.edu

Abstract: *Fleabag*, a British series by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, received global recognition for its exploration of feminism, grief, and family dysfunction. This analysis highlights the series' impact through these lenses, discussing its therapeutic values and noting its limited socio-economic and cultural scope. Employing the Dysfunctional Family Survival Roles model, the review examines *Fleabag*'s portrayal of complex family dynamics and coping mechanisms, showcasing its relevance to mental health and family support professionals. *Fleabag* stands as an impactful cultural artifact, contributing to a broader understanding of personal and familial healing processes.

Keywords: TV Show, Media Review, Grief, Dysfunctional Family, Dysfunctional Family Survival Roles

Introduction: Contextualizing *Fleabag* in Contemporary Media

In contemporary media, the depiction of mental health, family dynamics, and feminist narratives reflects societal attitudes and drives conversation and change. Audiences increasingly seek authentic representations of complex psychological experiences and nontraditional gender roles. *Fleabag*, created and performed by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, exemplifies this shift towards more sophisticated storytelling.

Fleabag, a British television series that aired from 2016 to 2019, received global recognition, winning awards such as Emmys and Golden Globes, tells the story of a young woman in London coping with the death of her mother and best friend, known only as *Fleabag*. The series portrays a flawed yet relatable female protagonist navigating personal and familial turmoil. *Fleabag* resonates with viewers through the candid exploration of issues like feminism, grief, and self-discovery, reflecting broader societal issues concerning mental well-being (Humble, 2020; Simmons, 2020).

Fleabag's counter-stereotypical portrayal of female embodiment, kinship, and grief through the protagonist's lens is commendable (Darling, 2022; Killian, 2021). By showing *Fleabag*'s flawed heterosexual relationships that reflect her frustration and disillusionment, the series resonates with the concept of "heteropessimism"—a performative disaffiliation with heterosexuality due to inherent disappointments (Holzberg & Lehtonen, 2022). Through humor and irony, *Fleabag*'s anxieties about her feminist identity address the difficulties of living up to feminist ideals in a world with conflicting expectations of women (Holzberg & Lehtonen, 2022). The use of direct address, where *Fleabag* talks directly to viewers, allows for a deeper connection with her experiences (Killian, 2021; Shuster, 2021).

Fleabag is rated for viewers aged 12-18+ across countries where the show is available (IMDb., n.d.). The series addresses universal themes of loss and resilience in adulthood, making it relevant to a wide audience. Available on platforms like Amazon Prime Videos and YouTube, subtitled in over 30 languages, the series ensures diverse global viewership. Another strength of *Fleabag* is its ability to interweave humor with the exploration of grief, guilt, trauma, and family dysfunction. However, the portrayal of psychological recovery and coping mechanisms is often individualistic and relies on humor. While this approach attracts many viewers, it may oversimplify the complexity of mental health issues and recovery for some. The show's focus on a narrow socio-economic and cultural perspective and its limited representation of racial and socio-economic diversity are notable limitations, highlighting areas for broader exploration and inclusivity in future narratives.

Therapeutic Reflections on Grief and Loss: Continuing Bonds, Coping, and Meaning-Making in *Fleabag*

Mental health researchers, educators, therapists, and those encountering similar life struggles can also be the potential audience, as *Fleabag* provides a rich narrative to explore therapeutic concepts, coping techniques, and growth.

One such concept is continuing bonds for grief, defined as the continuation of a relationship with a deceased loved one in adjusted forms (Millar & Lopez-Cantero, 2022). At *Fleabag*'s mother's funeral, she says to her best friend Boo, "I don't know what to do with it, with all the love I have for her. I don't know where to put it." Boo replies, "I'll take it." Giving the love of a deceased loved one to another living loved one aligns with the principles of Continuing Bonds Therapy, which involves maintaining a connection with the deceased through engagement with others who knew them (Valentine, 2008). Later, the show illustrates that *Fleabag*'s behavior contributed to Boo's risky decision, which led to Boo's death, and *Fleabag* uses avoidance coping, including dissociation, to separate herself from the distress of loss and guilt (Hayes & Steffen, 2017; Holahan et al., 2005), shown as her talking to the camera about her honest thoughts or imagining Boo responding to her while spacing out from actual conversations.

Therapeutic interventions, such as exploring the here-and-now form of the relationship with the deceased and practicing meaning-making, may help clients like *Fleabag* navigate their grief (Hayes and Steffen, 2017). These methods respect clients' perspectives and provide a nuanced understanding of their relationship with the deceased, allowing for fluid and emotionally integrated continuing bonds (Hayes and Steffen, 2017). In the show, *Fleabag* honors Boo by running their co-founded café and making it a successful small business, continuing their bonds and giving more meaning to their friendship.

Family Systems and Survival Roles: A Dysfunctional Family Through a Psychological Lens

Fleabag is also characterized by its narratives of family dysfunction, making it rich for analysis of mental health and family dynamics. With actual functioning within families existing along a continuum (Beavers, 1982), a dysfunctional family refers to patterns that are not working for the members and are associated with symptoms of distress (Walsh, 2012). An integral analysis hinges on applying the Dysfunctional Family Survival Roles model, initially proposed by Wegscheider-Cruse (1989). This model is relevant to the series' thematic core of a dysfunctional family, offering a structured approach to exploring the psychological underpinnings of the characters' behaviors and coping mechanisms. *Fleabag* presents characters who assume roles aligning with Wegscheider-Cruse's archetypes, such as the enabler, the hero, the scapegoat, and the mascot.

Fleabag's navigation of her grief and guilt—compounded by fractious family relationships—exemplifies her scapegoat role. Her sister Claire embodies the family hero, striving for perfection to mask the family's underlying problems. Their father's passive demeanor aligns with the enabler role, permitting the family's avoidance of confronting their deep-seated issues. Claire's husband Martin's role as the mascot showcases how individuals employ humor and distraction to cope with pain and avoid addressing deeper emotional truths.

Furthermore, the competitive nature of *Fleabag* and the godmother exacerbates family tensions, while Claire and Martin's avoidance strategy leads to the deterioration of their marriage (Galvin et al., 2014). The exchange of gifts symbolizes attempts at reconciliation and manipulation, underscoring the dysfunctional communication patterns and relationship currencies at play (Galvin et al., 2014). Through this methodological lens, the analysis delves into the character-driven narrative of *Fleabag*, highlighting its significance as a cultural artifact and medium for psychological insight.

Conclusion: *Fleabag* as a Case Study of Psychological Complexity

Fleabag contributes to media intersecting with feminism, grief, family, and mental health. For professionals in these fields, it serves as both a case study and a cultural touchstone. By engaging with *Fleabag*'s narrative depth and character development, viewers and professionals alike can gain a deeper appreciation for the intricacies of human relationships and the ongoing journey toward healing and growth.

Acknowledgments

The author received no funding or support for this project. The author has no conflict of interest.

References

- Beavers, W. (1982) Healthy, midrange and severely dysfunctional families. In E Walsh (Ed.), *Normal family processes* (pp. 4S66). Guilford.
- Darling, O. (2022). "The moment you realise someone wants your body:" neoliberalism, mindfulness and female embodiment in *Fleabag*. *Feminist Media Studies*, 22(1), 132-147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2020.1797848>
- Galvin, K., Bylund, C. L., & Brommel, B. (2014). *Family Communication: Cohesion and Change* (10th edition). Routledge.
- Hayes, J., & Steffen, E. M. (2018). Working with welcome and unwelcome presence in grief. In D. Klass & E. M. Steffen (Eds.), *Continuing bonds in bereavement: New directions for research and practice* (pp. 163–175). Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315202396-16>
- Holahan, C. J., Moos, R. H., Holahan, C. K., Brennan, P. L., & Schutte, K. K. (2005). Stress generation, avoidance coping, and depressive symptoms: a 10-year model. *Journal of consulting and clinical psychology*, 73(4), 658–666. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-006X.73.4.658>
- Holzberg, B., & Lehtonen, A. (2022). The affective life of heterosexuality: Heteropessimism and postfeminism in *Fleabag*. *Feminist Media Studies*, 22(8), 1902-1917. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2021.1922485>
- Humble, C. (2022). Mirrors and masquerades in *Fleabag* and crazy ex-girlfriend. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 103(5), 895-908. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00207578.2022.2116854>
- IMDb. (n.d.). Parental guide for *Fleabag*. IMDb. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt5687612/parentalguide>
- Killian, K. (2021). *Fleabag* (2016-). *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, 33(1), 101-102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08952833.2019.1685152>
- Millar, B., & Lopez-Cantero, P. (2022). Grief, continuing bonds, and Unreciprocated Love. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 60(3), 413-436. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjp.12462>
- Shuster, M. (2021). *Fleabag*, Modernism, and New Television. *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 51(3), 324-336. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cras-2020-013>
- Simmons, W. J. (2020). Bad Feminism: On Queer-Feminist Relatability and the Production of Truth in *Fleabag*. *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 61(1), 32–46. <https://doi.org/10.13110/framework.61.1.0032>
- Valentine, C. (2008). Continuing Bonds in Contemporary Society. In *Bereavement Narratives: Continuing bonds in the twenty-first century*. Routledge.
- Waller-Bridge, P., Bradbeer, H., Kirkby, T., Clifford, S., Paterson, B., Dennis, H., Rainsford, J., Gelman, B., Skinner, H., Colman, O., & Aldridge, B (Producers). (2016-2019). *Fleabag* [TV series]. Two Brothers Pictures.
- Walsh, F. (2012). The new normal: Diversity and complexity in 21st-century families. In F. Walsh (Ed.), *Normal family processes: Growing diversity and complexity* (4th ed., pp. 3–27). The Guilford Press.
- Wegscheider-Cruse, S. (1989). *Another chance: Hope and health for the alcoholic family* (2nd ed.). Science and Behavior Books.