



Research Article

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The Unruliness of *Fleabag*: A Tightrope of Intimacy and Distance

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Abstract: Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s dramatic monologue, *Fleabag*, examines the unnamed female protagonist’s immersion into an experience of loss, grief, familial troubles and emotional depravity. The protagonist primarily appears to be an emotionally volatile, quite cynical and quite sexually active young woman. Her tight grasp of the audience’s attention constitutes a vital device around which the whole narrative is constructed. Waller-Bridge’s protagonist craves to establish an authentic emotional connection by attempting to remedy the unresolved trauma that resides in her recent past. The construction of the narrative of a seemingly “bad feminist” builds on moments of shame, desire and endless humor. This article explores theatrical approaches to the alienation effect by examining the writer’s attempt to forge a complex relation of intimacy and distance with the audience by exploiting audience attention. The protagonist draws pleasure from experiences of “abjection”—including various discomfiting experiences edging on pain and shame—in an attempt to attain a state of “ecstasy”. In truth, this pertains to her endeavors to expel what makes her emotionally volatile by drawing pleasure from painful and self-damaging modes of behaviour.

Keywords: contemporary drama, abjection, monologue, alienation, affect, *Fleabag*, Phoebe Waller-Bridge

A Cynical Protagonist: Immersing into Vulnerability

“I am not obsessed with sex, I just can’t stop thinking about it” (*Fleabag* 7). *Fleabag* is a female monologue written by the critically acclaimed British writer, actress and producer Phoebe Waller-Bridge. It constitutes Waller-Bridge’s debut play, a one-woman performance, and was first performed at Underbelly as part of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. In view of its success, it was later adapted into a popular and critically acclaimed TV series. *Fleabag* is the play’s unnamed female protagonist and sole narrator, a girl on the verge of entering the stage of womanhood grappling with consecutive losses, grief, family troubles and near-bankruptcy. *Fleabag* primarily appears to be an emotionally volatile, quite cynical and quite sexually active young woman. To clear the air, she is not a sex addict, she only longs for emotional stability. The protagonist craves to establish an authentic and profound emotional connection by attempting to remedy the heartache caused by the untimely death of her mother from breast cancer and the recent, tragic loss of her best friend, Boo, from a self-inflicted accident. A process of (re)claiming this wayward connection commences as she begins her monologue, forging

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the narrative of an ostensibly “bad feminist”, building on moments of shame, desire and endless humor. Fleabag’s monologue is constructed in such a way by Waller-Bridge that it approximates a deeply confessional experience, infused with flashbacks of intimate moments with her best friend, Boo. What is noteworthy is that this series of devastating losses has Fleabag resort to her sex drive as a means to restore the emotional connection that has been severed by having multiple sexual encounters and attempting to draw pleasure from experiences of “abjection”—including some discomfiting experiences edging on pain and shame. This paper attempts to highlight the fact that the protagonist’s narrative is in an open dialogue with the philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva’s discussion of “abjection” and “jouissance”, with the “abject” being “what one spits out, rejects, almost violently from oneself” (McAfee 46) and with “jouissance” signifying a kind of ecstasy related to impulse, desire and the “continually dissolved [and] displaced subject” (Fountain 194). On a similar note, the protagonist endeavors to expel what makes her emotionally volatile by drawing pleasure from painful and self-damaging modes of behaviour.

The narrative power of Fleabag’s monologue immediately has the audience on a tightrope, balancing between intimacy and alienation. In the first section of this paper, I argue that the narrator’s storytelling proves to be compelling for the spectator right from the start, as she frequently turns to the audience and directly recounts her moments of “abjection”, whilst purposefully obscuring aspects of her narrative only to reveal them at the end of the play. In the second section, the current article illuminates that Fleabag’s intimate confessions place her audience in the center of the experience, by manipulating spectators’ attention and drawing them disturbingly close while at the same time blatantly distancing them. The narrator manages to build affective intensity and create a compelling monologue which involves shameful experiences, shocking revelations, unruliness and disturbing details, thus intensifying the play’s shock value. The audience is unwillingly exposed to distressing facts and unsure of what to do with them. An affective pull is, therefore, devised which profoundly unsettles the spectators and forms an unhomely space for the audience—having the latter take a deep dive into Fleabag’s traumatic experience and irrecoverable loss, all the while maintaining a veil of humour and disguising moments of tragedy with elements of comedy.

A Bad Feminist, an Unruly Woman or Both?

What does it mean to be a “bad feminist”? In the case of Fleabag, it can be argued that one of the narrator’s attention-seeking techniques is portraying herself as a “bad feminist” both by engaging in multiple, meaningless sexual encounters and conjuring up ways to mock the concept of feminism altogether. The protagonist is a woman who remains unnamed throughout the play and goes by the name Fleabag in the script. She appears to be struggling with grief, financial issues, family conflicts and her own emotional instability. The amalgamation of humour and loss in the storyline surfaces as the narration progresses. As Fleabag commences her confessions to the audience, she states that her father’s way of coping with her mother’s loss is to send her and her sister tickets to attend feminist lectures. What follows is an instance which exemplifies how “bad feminism” is comically depicted in the play to evoke an affective response from the audience:

LECTURER. Before I begin, I want to ask you a question [...] I pose the same question to the women in this room today: please raise your hands if you would trade five years of your life for the so-called “perfect body”?

FLEABAG throws her hand in the air.

FLEABAG. Both of us.

Four hundred women stare at us, horrified.

We are *bad* feminists. (*Fleabag* 16) (emphasis original)

After their mother’s loss the two sisters have been distanced from each other and only meet up in these feminist lectures. Despite the fact that the simultaneous hand-raising reaction might be considered as a specimen of “bad” feminist behaviour, it builds a humorous bridge which operates on a double basis: It brings the two sisters together and mitigates their alienated relationship while also producing a humorous image and hence reinforcing a sense of closeness with the audience.

Fleabag constitutes a character who progressively unfolds as a bad feminist trying to cope with her reality. She aspires to establish a connection with the audience by creating a tight grasp of their attention. As her

confessions to the spectators unravel, she gradually exploits their point of focus by illuminating her “bad feminist” attitude and simultaneously obscuring her inner distress. According to Rebecca Wanzo, a “bad feminist” often makes an appearance in “precarious-girl comedies”, with the latter being a term which is grounded on the relationship between precarity and the comedy genre, making “endless alienation a source of humor” (Wanzo 29). In the “precarious-girl comedy”, the protagonist embraces “abjection”, inhabits an alienated space and the possibility of her forming any meaningful connections is practically disavowed. On the same wavelength, Fleabag inhabits a much similar space and recoils from emotional attachments whilst being portrayed as a sexually-obsessed woman, by all appearances. As she turns to the audience she confesses, “I’m not obsessed with sex. I just can’t stop thinking about it. The performance of it. The awkwardness of it. The moment you realise someone wants your body... not so much the feeling of it” (*Fleabag* 7). This intimate statement introduces a paradox and infuses sexual activity with an ironic tone and an element of comic relief. What follows right after in the play, however, shatters Fleabag’s carefully-structured facade of a “bad feminist” who makes hasty, sexually-driven choices and sheds some light on the insofar obscured aspect of the protagonist’s inner state—her emotional struggle with grief and loss. She informs the audience that she opened her café business with her friend, Boo, who accidentally killed herself by walking into a busy street. As Fleabag states, “it wasn’t her intention, but it wasn’t a total accident” (*Fleabag* 7). Boo simply wanted to draw attention and punish her boyfriend for having cheated on her with another woman “but it turns out bikes can go fast and flip you into the road. Three people died. She was such a dick” (7). This memory of Boo allows for a more nuanced understanding of Fleabag’s facade—one that does not merely suggest a seemingly “bad feminist” with a loose moral grounding who is emotionally unstable. Instead, it depicts a woman seeking for a meaningful way to remedy the painful experience of losing her friend by employing transgression and humor as a means to downplay an emotionally traumatic event.

The narrator’s monologue moves the audience back and forth through multiple flashbacks. As a result, the spectator is thrust deeper into the protagonist’s struggles; this allows for the nexus of the “abject” and the “unruly” woman to rise to the surface. As Wanzo emphasizes, “precarious-girl comedies” are closely related to the “abject” and “embrace the otherness found in ‘abjection’ as a desired end” (29). According to Julia Kristeva, “abjection” is “a process of jettisoning what seems to be part of oneself” (5). It refers to something excluded and rejected - like sour milk or excrement - but never ultimately banished which continues to beseech and pulverize the subject (McAfee 46). Interestingly, the subject finds the “abject” both “repellent and seductive” therefore the borders of the self are, paradoxically, threatened and maintained at the same time (McAfee 50).

The unruliness of Fleabag, which progressively surfaces during the course of the narration, is highly enticing and has the audience in a tight affective pull with a combination of Kathleen Rowe Karlyn’s “unruly woman” and Julia Kristeva’s “abjection”. As the speaker’s storytelling evolves the spectator becomes even more engrossed and unsettled at the same time. What makes Fleabag’s proneness to “abjection” evident is the following example in which the narrator recounts a sexual misadventure saying, “I stood staring at a handprint on my wall from when I had a threesome on my period... I wish I could tell you my threesome story was sticky and awkward and everyone went home a little bit sad and empty, but... it was lovely. Sorry” (*Fleabag* 6). The image presented consists of both disturbing and sexually related details and thus urges the audience into a whirlwind of affective responses. Some might find this statement distasteful or “repellent”; others might find it “seductive”. Fleabag, however, seems unapologetic and leans towards Karlyn’s “unruly woman” who is defined by a sexual “looseness” and “a cluster of attributes that challenge patriarchal power by defying norms of femininity intended to keep a woman in her place” (10). This particular nexus of “abjection” and “unruliness” aims at both riveting and alienating the audience. The spectators are unsure of how to react to the current experience. Should they laugh? Should they pity the narrator? Should they be hopeful for her? What this results in is a sense of unsettlement which pertains to an amalgamation of closeness and distance.

Despite the fact that the experiences in discussion reiterate Fleabag’s facade of a “bad feminist” who is sexually active but has no moral backdrop, I will proceed to argue that the protagonist purposefully recounts these experiences, which relate to Kristeva’s “jouissance”, to contour her character’s proclivity to draw pleasure out of painful experiences in order to expel the trauma of her friend’s loss. Boo’s memory constantly reappears throughout the play in fragments and, interestingly, coincides with Fleabag’s sexual misadventures. All of the protagonist’s sexually-related activities, be it her random encounter with a man who she names Rodent, her threesome experience or her disturbing masturbation scenes, border on pleasure and distress. Fleabag’s way of

compensating, therefore, relates to Kristeva's "jouissance" which signifies a "total joy or ecstasy" and implicates an "impulse incapable of final satisfaction since desire is always displaced and displacing" (in Fountain 194). The narrator's sexual experience in the following instance merges desire and enjoyment with distress and the fear of failing to financially sustain her café, which serves as the only connective thread to her late friend:

FLEABAG. Lying in my office, the café numbers start to jump out at me like little ninjas [...] Lay there. Numbers, numbers, Obama, numbers, Zac, Obama, numbers, Zac – Suddenly I was on YouPorn having a horrible wank. Found just the right sort of gangbang. Now that really knocked me out, so I put my computer away, leaned over, kissed my boyfriend Harry goodnight and went to sleep. (*Fleabag* 5)

By extension, the audience is engulfed in the narrator's disturbing yet humorous experience. The spectator is drawn closer to the character, like looking through a peephole, as this intimate experience is narrated and is, nevertheless, rather astonished towards the end when it is revealed that the protagonist's boyfriend is sleeping next to her as she is trying to sexually please herself. The audience is, thus, once more exposed to information they did not expect.

Monologue, Narrativity and Direct Address

"Fleabag turns to the audience. I send my ex a picture of my vagina. I send Harry a picture of my vagina. I text Lily. Still nothing from my sister" (*Fleabag* 30). Fleabag will share everything with you and then push you away when you least expect it. Drawing on Deborah R. Geis' discussion on monologue and narrativity, I will argue in this part of the essay that Waller-Bridge utilizes the ability of the monologue to affect the narrative of the play, to manipulate the spectator's imaginations and redirect their attention (13), thus placing them in the center of the experience. The memory of Boo's death constantly pierces through Fleabag's narration of her sexual misadventures and highlights the "narrative power" of her monologue. As Geis illustrates, the monologue has a capacity for manipulating, compressing and transforming time within the drama that unfolds before the spectators (10). Susanne Langer reminds us that theater exists within a "perpetual present", nevertheless, the monologue allows the playwright to "dislocate, fragment and otherwise transform this perpetual present into other temporal modes" (Geis 11). Thus, the monologue permits the speaker in our discussion to foreground the loss of her best friend through a fragmented memory which often intercepts the plot in the form of voicemail messages or flashbacks. What this eventually results in is moments loaded with affective intensity. The spectator undergoes a transformation into a figurative tightrope walker, balancing between closeness and distance. The spectators become uncertain of how they should feel or react to the protagonist's narrative since they are being pulled closer to her intimate experiences and then pushed away into a space of alienation, dominated by the trauma of Boo's death. Followingly, to some extent they become defamiliarized with the play at hand. This becomes evident as Fleabag's recollections of Boo constantly intersect the storyline and reoccur even more frequently towards the end of the play.

As she continues to struggle with the troubles of adulthood, such as avoiding bankruptcy and striving to maintain her café, Fleabag exploits the audience by transporting it from the "here" and "now" to a dislocated time in which Boo's memories exist, thus departing from moments of comedy and taking a plunge into the traumatic effects of loss. Fleabag's narrative is characterized by fragmentation and non-linearity, two elements of postmodernism which are highlighted in the following example. The protagonist firstly focuses on a random male figure described as "one guy in the corner drinking tap water and using the plug, quite attractive actually, but he doesn't look at me, even when I purposefully drop a cucumber so I have something to bend over for" and then unexpectedly shifts to a vivid memory of her late friend, "Boo always used to play music, read out horoscopes and shrivel crisp packets in the microwave [...] [a]nd she was beautiful. Tricky though. Jealous. Sensitive. But beautiful and... my best friend" (*Fleabag* 9). The narration overtly and suddenly transcends from a moment loaded with sexual innuendo to a more heartfelt snapshot of Boo, thus compressing time and diverting the audience's focus whilst betraying Fleabag's emotional volatility and vulnerability.

The protagonist craves her audience's attention which she deftly manipulates in order to have the spectators on their feet. What she, therefore, manages is to build moments loaded with emotional intensity in

which the audience is unsure how to react and ends up engulfed in a sense of unhomeliness. What is therefore forged is a vexed relationship between the audience's visceral reaction and emotive response to Fleabag's storytelling. As mentioned before, the speaker many a time turns to the audience and narrates in a way that resembles sharing her secrets to her confidants. As the play evolves, however, Fleabag's narration becomes even more fragmented and betrays her distraught position. Her reminiscing about Boo escalates as Boo's voicemail recordings intersect the monologue even more often, resembling a negative recollection she cannot shake off. Her sexual encounters continuously fail to ameliorate the trauma of her friend's loss, reaching a point where it is suggested that she cries after a sexual experience (*Fleabag* 28). Her relationship with her sister remains tumultuous and unresolved. Up to the middle of the play, the narrator manages to keep her audience on a tightrope, balancing between intimacy and alienation, comic relief and traumatic events. Nevertheless, as the end of the play approaches this balance is jeopardized and the audience's attention is redirected from Fleabag's humorous encounters to what she has so far kept a secret; Fleabag is exposed:

FLEABAG. Why is [Martin] still here?
 SISTER. He didn't touch you.
 FLEABAG. He tried.
 SISTER. He said it was more like the other way round.
 FLEABAG. That's not true.
 SISTER. Why would I believe you?
 FLEABAG. What? Because I'm your –
 SISTER. After what you did to Boo.
 FLEABAG (to audience). That wasn't my fault. He wanted me... he...
 wanted me so... (34)

After Fleabag alleges that her sister's husband, Martin, attempted to sexually harass her, her sister's disbelief culminates in the revelation of Fleabag's big secret. The above excerpt implies that Fleabag is responsible for Boo's self-inflicted accident which led to her death since the latter tried to injure herself after learning that her boyfriend had been unfaithful to her. The audience now finds out that the protagonist was the cause of this predicament. At this point, the narrator turns to the audience members to reconcile and draw them closer again after having radically distanced them with the aforementioned revelation. Following Deborah R. Geis's train of thought, the speaker's directness reasserts the audience's very powerlessness (14). The spectators are defamiliarized and helpless after having forfeited their "pseudoprivileged status as the character's confidants" (Geis 14). The spectator is not simply let in on a secret, he/she is being misled. Eventually, the speaker gains agency through the narrative power of her monologue and unloads what has been burdening her. Nevertheless, the audience loses its trust and winds up having been tricked and unsettled.

Conclusion

Fleabag's monologue inspires an intricate relationship with the audience by forging an intimate connection with the spectator only to, finally, tear it apart. By utilizing direct address, dissolving the fourth wall and embellishing her confessions with a humorous note, Fleabag weaves an intimate story in which comedy is fused with discomfort, loss and guilt. On the surface, her storytelling follows the facade of a "bad feminist" who is excessive, acts upon her desires, borders on transgression and is, all in all, an "unruly" woman that departs from patriarchal stereotypes and cannot be easily confined. The audience is often directly addressed and is given access to the protagonist's sexual activity, which is displayed with a humorous and cynical tone, as if being let in on intimate aspects of her life. Notwithstanding, on a deeper level this overt access into the protagonist's experiences does not merely offer a discomforting pleasure or a sense of closeness, but rather aims to divert the audience's attention from Fleabag's shortcomings.

The carefully-constructed tightrope of intimacy and distance fulfills a double purpose: It serves to conceal Fleabag's secret and guilt which are exposed in a culmination of confessions near the end of the play. It also manages to create an intense and affective experience for the spectator, who is placed in a "pseudoprivileged position" as the narrator's confidant. The series of confessions and revelations aim at manipulating the point of focus. This shift occurs from the portrayal of random sexual encounters and moments of pleasure, to emotional instability, lack of a meaningful connection, loss, painful reminiscing and finally to the full disclosure of

moments of guilt and shame. Waller-Bridge employs flashbacks and a deep dive into an intercepted mental journey with an aim to unearth the main character's unresolved trauma. Additionally, this method suggests an attempt to revisit traumatic events and achieve recuperation by plunging into the sites of memory, be it Fleabag and Boo's intimate discussions or recollections of Boo's sayings.

As Fleabag is exposed, the audience is distanced and alienated too by being exposed to her obscured guilt. The narrator is (to some extent) responsible for her friend's death by being sexually involved with Boo's boyfriend at the time. Remorse, shame and guilt take center stage and replace the thrill and humour of random romantic adventures, as portrayed in the beginning of the play. The numerous instances of comic relief are supplanted with a feeling of alienation. Due to the protagonist's final revelations the audience comes to realise that the previously constructed sense of intimacy with the main character is a fabricated one. Hence, intimacy gives way to a sense of unfamiliarity towards the protagonist. The "narrative power" of the speaker's monologue is prominent throughout the whole play and results in unsettling the audience by creating an unhomelike space. The spectator's imaginative capacity and attention is directed by the monologue's narrator, as Geis highlights, something which builds up to a captivating performance charged with an intense physicality (15). Finally, the spectators are indeed placed in the center of the experience and that is exactly where they are being tricked and defamiliarized.

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