



FACULTADE DE FILOLOXÍA

Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas

Traballo de Fin de Grao

Curso 2022/2023

**Humour as Defence Mechanism: Coping with Grief and
Guilt in *Fleabag***

Autora: Nerea Grobas Barciela

Titor: Jorge Sacido Romero

Traballo de Fin de Grao presentado na Facultade de Filoloxía da Universidade de Santiago de Compostela para a obtención do Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas



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Título: Humour as defence mechanism: coping with grief and guilt in *Fleabag*

Resumo [na lingua en que se vai redacta-lo TFG; entre 1000 e 2000 caracteres]:

Fleabag is a monologue written by Phoebe Waller-Bridge and first performed in 2013. It was later adapted for television as a series on the life of Fleabag, a young London woman, who faces the deaths of the two central female figures of her life. The first one is her mother, dead because of breast cancer three years before the beginning of the story and, more recently, her best friend Boo, who died accidentally flattened by a group of cyclists when trying to get herself hurt. Despite the tragic events mentioned before, the tone of the monologue is comic and irreverent, just like the protagonist, as she confronts the deaths and her life's troubles with humour. The aim of this study is to analyze the process of grief from a psychoanalytic perspective based primarily on Sigmund Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) and *Humour* (1928). Humour is a self-defense mechanism used by the grief-stricken and guilt-ridden protagonist, Fleabag, to cope with a reality that is actually extremely painful for her. Particular attention will be paid to the two mother figures, Mother and Boo, whose absence pushes Fleabag into a frenzy of sexual relations that never develop into fully satisfactory relationships with men. Fleabag's pain is aggravated by a profound feeling of guilt for her detachment from her family and for Boo's death.

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Santiago de Compostela, 3 de novembro de 2022.

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- Humour as Defence Mechanism: Coping with Grief and Guilt in *Fleabag*
- El humor como mecanismo de defensa: afrontar el duelo y la culpa en *Fleabag*
- O humor como mecanismo de defensa: afrontar o dó e a culpa en *Fleabag*

Summary

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Keywords: Psychoanalysis, Fleabag, mourning, melancholia, lost object, guilt, humour, trickster, persona, social mask.

Declaración de orixinalidade

Eu, Dna. Nerea Grobas Barciela, estudante do Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesas na Facultade de Filoloxía da Universidade de Santiago de Compostela

Declaro que:

O presente Traballo de Fin de Grao, denominado *Humour as Defense Mechanism: Coping with Grief and Guilt in Fleabag* foi elaborado respectando a propiedade intelectual de todos e cada un dos autores referenciados, en virtude do cal afirmo que esta obra é inédita e da miña única autoría.

En Santiago de Compostela, 28 de Xullo de 2023.

Asdo. Nerea Grobas Barciela

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'N. Grobas Barciela', written over a horizontal line.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this BA thesis is to develop an extensive analysis of humour as a defence mechanism in the process of mourning and guilt of the protagonist Fleabag in the eponymous monologue, published in 2016.

I have chosen grief and humour as the main focal point of the project for various reasons. Grief is an intrinsic consequence of death or loss, which means that every human being that lives in society is doomed to experience the disappearance of a loved person. One of my major motivations for choosing this topic was my mother's experience with bereavement, as she lost her mother when she was still a child and, later on, when already an adult, her father. Each of these situations of grief were processed differently, on the one hand, because of the stages in life my mother was in, and, on the other hand, because of the historical period in which they happened (the early 1980s and the early 2000, respectively). Moreover, I was also inspired by works from different literary traditions such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1603) and Federico García Lorca's *La casa de Bernarda Alba* (written in 1936; first published and performed in 1945). Each of them approaches loss from a distinctive perspective, is inscribed in a different historical context, belongs to the cultural tradition of the country and feature characters with different personal traits. Yet, it is plausible that grief that is experienced during same stage in life will have common characteristics to help overcome the death of a loved one. However, as time progresses, other means of coping with loss are available, such as is the case with humour represented by the title-character: Fleabag. The protagonist stars in a play set in modern-day London in which she, a sex-obsessed woman with a broken family and a failing business, tries to overcome the recent death of her best friend Boo as well as the deeper and more intense grief for her mother's passing. The use of humour as a way of dealing with a reality in which neither Boo nor her mother exist any longer serves, at first glance, to assuage or fence off the pain caused by both deaths. Fleabag has not only succeeded in being a relatable character through her playful demeanour that sometimes revealed her true vulnerability, but also has become a representation of a postmodern world in which humour plays an essential role not only in interacting with others but also in overcoming traumatic events. This play, later adapted into a TV series, is part of the boom of witty comedy in TV series, such as *The Office* (2005) or *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* (2015).

This work addresses, therefore, two major aspects of postmodern life, as well as universal themes of world literature such as the loss of a loved object and humour as a mechanism to

cope with such loss. Therefore, a close reading enriched with psychoanalytical theory will be conducted in order to, first, provide an understanding of how the identity of the protagonist of the play is forged during grief as well as to identify the origin of the character's sense of guilt and the role it plays in her psychic development. Humour will be analysed as a mechanism to help Fleabag cope with the death of the two loved ones. Humour reveals itself as a double-edged instrument: on the one hand, it does serve Fleabag to cope with grief; in a seemingly effective manner, and, on the other, said mechanism functions in a self-defeating way which creates further obstacles for the protagonist in truly overcoming the death of her mother and Boo. These reactions are not mutually exclusive: that is, Fleabag may have used humour in a mature way in the first instance. However, as a result of a possible inadequacy in dealing with the profound grief caused by the loss of her mother and Boo, she adopts humour as a primary way of interacting with the world, revealing her inability to establish a deep and intimate relationships.

The present work is divided into two chapters: the first one provides the theoretical framework in which psychoanalytical concepts are supplemented by sociological notions related to grief, guilt and humour, whereas the second one analyses the play and focuses mainly on the protagonist: on how grief affects her and her interaction with the world and in particular with men, and, furthermore, on the function of humour as an aid in dealing with the death of the loved ones.

The theoretical framework more precisely rests on primarily Sigmund Freud's distinction between mourning and melancholia or on his conceptualisations of libido and (de)sublimation. It also draws on Donald L. Carveth's typology of five classes of guilt, on Anna Freud's definition of "defence mechanism" and a first classification of these, on George E. Vaillant's later typology of defence mechanisms (which includes humour), on Terry Eagleton's approach to the three main theories of humour (release, superiority and incongruity), on C. J. Jung's theory of archetypes, persona, shadow and the trickster, and finally, on sociologist Erving Goffman's distinction between primary and secondary frameworks as the way to organise individual and collective experience, he helps to amplify the theoretical and analytical approach from individual to society.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. On Mourning, Melancholia and Guilt

Before engaging in the analysis of the primary work, it is imperative to clarify certain points concerning the terms “mourning” and “melancholia”, as both bear some basic similarities. To do so, we will use Sigmund Freud’s essay “On Mourning and Melancholia”, originally published in 1917 and included in *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia* by Freud (2005). In it, the father of psychoanalysis explains both the differences and the similarities between the two notions. First, Freud warns us the line that divides them is permeable, as in certain cases mourning can become so severe that it might be transformed into a state of melancholia. The differential element between those, then, resides in the fact that, in melancholia, the ego has not accepted the loss of the love object, while in mourning the ego is grieving such loss during a determinate period of time. In other words, in melancholia, the change in the role of the love object is linked to the unconscious, as it is responsible for doing an internal work to exhibit the melancholia.

Another similarity that can be found between the two phenomena are the patient’s reaction to the lost object. The widespread characteristics of such processes are:

The same painful mood, the loss of interest in the outside world – except as it recalls the deceased – the loss of ability to choose any new love-object – which would mean replacing the mourned one – turning away from any task that is not related to the memory of the deceased. (Freud, 2005, 273)

However, melancholia contains another trait: the disorder of self-esteem, in which the patient feels a “reduction in the sense of self, expressed in self-recrimination and self-directed insults, intensifying into the delusory expectation of punishment” (Freud, 2005, 274) and thus, a great loss of ego libido. This disorder of self-esteem is due to the fact that the ego has not accepted the new reality in which the love-object is not found, as well as the fact that the ego may feel responsible for such loss. Therefore, the difference lies in the cause of such suffering, in the case of mourning, the loss of the love object due to its death makes the world become an empty place where there is no room for happiness, while in melancholia, in addition to the world, it is the ego who has become empty and has no capacity for love and for coexistence in the world. Anna Freud distinguishes between two terms that reinforces the difference of the ego’s reaction in mourning or melancholia: inhibition and restriction of the ego. The author establishes that “in the former the ego is defending itself against its own inner processes and in the latter against

external stimuli” (1993, 98). That is, the inhibition of the ego is more likely to be found when the ego is suffering from melancholia, since the cause of suffering is the ego itself, whereas the restriction of the ego is more likely to be found in mourning, since the external circumstances, i.e., the death of the love object, are the reasons for the ego’s suffering.

After some preliminary remarks on the two processes, we must explain the role of the libido in the ego’s relation with the love object and, particularly, the role of the now-free libido when the love-object is lost. The libido has a fundamental role in the bond of one’s ego to a particular person because it is the force that binds each of us to others. That is, the libido constrains the ego to be attached to a certain person, the object-choice, and thus, a bond between them both is created. However, when the chosen love-object is lost, the libido invested in it returned to the ego. Freud (2005, 280) explains that “the loss of object had been transformed into a loss of ego, and the conflict between the ego and the beloved person into a dichotomy between ego-criticism and the ego as modified by identification”. In other words, the ego enters into an identity conflict, since there is a part of the ego that has been lost and the other who identifies with the lost object.

Torok and Abraham coin new terms such as ‘crypt’ and ‘cryptofantasy’ to explore further this identification with the lost object:

For, necessarily, we are talking about an imaginary and covert identification, a cryptofantasy which, given its unutterable nature, cannot show itself in the light of day. The identification concerns not so much an object who no longer exists but essentially the “mourning” that this “object” allegedly carries out as a result of losing the subject; the subject, consequently, now appears to be painfully missed by the “object.” It is obvious that an identifying empathy of this kind could not say its name. Let alone its aim. Accordingly, it hides behind a mask, even in the so-called periodic states. This mechanism consists in exchanging one’s own identity for a phantasmic identification with the “life”—beyond the grave—of an object lost as a result of some metapsychological trauma. Awaiting something better, we have named this very specific mechanism: endocryptic identification. (1984, 224)

As reflected above, the identification with the object is nothing more than a mask, a coping mechanism for the trauma of the loss of the object, which Torok and Abraham call ‘endocryptic identification’. The fact that the patient’s ego creates this ‘crypt’ suggests that his new, non-existent reality of the loved object is so painful and insufferable that s/he needs to create a fantasy in which he can bear to live and the object with he/she identifies goes on living. It

should be noted that this process is widely present in people suffering from melancholia, although it is not exclusive of other phenomena such as manic-depressive syndrome or fetishism, and is conducted secretly, unconsciously by the subject.

Therefore, in melancholia the identification with the loved object is intrinsically related to the unconscious. However, for the unconscious to come into play, after melancholia materializes into the mind and heart of the ego, it needs three preconditions: the loss of the object, ambivalence, and the regression of the libido into the ego. According to Freud: “of such three preconditions of melancholia, we find the first two once more in the obsessive reproaches that we encounter after someone has died” (2005, 290). Freud describes ambivalence as a manifestation both altruist and egoistic:

On the one hand a strong fixation on the love object must be present, but on the other hand, and in contradiction to that fixation, there must be minimal resistance in the form of object-investment. This contradiction seems to require the object-choice, in accordance with a telling observation by Otto Rank, to have occurred on a narcissistic foundation, so that the object-investment, if it encounters difficulties, is able to regress to narcissism. (280)

It is important to notice that the ambivalence present in melancholia is likely to result in narcissistic traits, which are reinforced by the regression of the libido to the ego itself. These traits help the ego not to accept but to cope with the fact that it is, in fact, living a new reality in which the loved object does not exist. Freud describes it thus:

To each individual memory and situation of expectation that shows the libido to be connected to the lost object, reality delivers its verdict that the object no longer exists, and the ego, presented with the question, so to speak, of whether it wishes to share this fate, is persuaded by the sum of narcissistic satisfactions that it derives from being alive to loosen its bonds with the object that has been destroyed. (287)

Despite the great help that narcissistic traits offer to the ego, they can progressively aggravate and become a case of pathological narcissism, that is, what was once the antidote for the illness is now the cause of another one. This is why extreme caution must be taken with the mechanisms used by the ego to cope with difficult processes.

Mourning and melancholia, therefore, are two quite similar phenomena, which share a common cause for their occurrence: the loss of the love object. In addition, they share several effects on the ego, these being ambivalence and ego-constraint. However, there are several tangible differences between the two: firstly, in melancholia the ego has not accepted the loss of the love object which leads to the inhibition of the ego, whereas in mourning there is a restriction

of such. Furthermore, melancholia can become a pathological process, whereas mourning could never be since there is a simple solution to overcome it: the passage of time.

The grieving process does not follow any set rules, as each process of mourning is individual and unrepeatable. Despite this, patients tend to experience certain states in a certain order. According to Kubler-Ross and Kessler, there are five stages of grief which are “a part of the framework that makes up our learning to live with the one we lost. They are tools to help us frame and identify what we may be feeling” (2009, 7). Emphasis should again be placed on the fact that each process is different and, although the preferred order is the one mentioned below, it does not imply that it is the one reproduced by each patient. The stages of grief are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. The first one is denial, whose most characteristic symptoms are numbness, shock and, of course, denial itself. This state is usually the first that patients experience, as feelings of denial and shock are the most natural reactions of the ego, since they are the feelings that most help the ego to survive in the new reality in which it finds itself deprived of the love object. As they accept this new reality, they reach the next state: anger. The ego experiences anger towards any person or situation, which creates a “temporary structure to the nothingness of loss” (8). The ego, in this state, feels security, as it is a familiar feeling and with which it can control situations. Anger then becomes a bridge to the next state, which is bargaining. The feeling that is most present at this stage is guilt, deriving from the view of not having done enough for the lost object. The ego is anchored, even obsessed, with the past, unable or unwilling to let go these feelings of guilt; it is a way of torturing itself, as it does not believe it is worthy of living in a reality without its lost object. The ego, in a way, believes it is responsible for the death or loss of the lost-object and considers that the way to make up for it is self-inflicted pain. The next stage is depression, the first stage in which the ego reaches the present, thus becoming empty and sad. It is important to mention that if the person remains for too long in this stage, it is possible that it is no longer just another stage of grief but may have reached a state of melancholia. And finally, the last stage is acceptance. As its name suggests, at this stage the patient has managed to accept the new reality; although this is not equivalent to being well, or that the period of grief has come to an end; rather, it is a small light that appears after a period of flagrant shadows, it is the first step forward that the patient needs to resume her/his life, whether it be friendships, hobbies or studies, without feeling guilty about it.

Guilt is strongly linked to grief, since, as we have seen, it is one of the most frequent feelings in the mourning process. According to Freud, guilt is delivered by the superego, which

represents the ethical and moral values of culture (2018, 115). Donald L. Carveth disagrees with Freud, claiming that guilt resides in conscience, which, according to the author, would be the fourth structure of the mind after the id, ego and superego (2010, 115). Eli Sagan (1988) draws a contrast between the superego and the conscience. While the superego is identified with the aggressor who is burdened with feelings of hatred and resentment, conscience is identified with the caregiver, usually the mother, who provides love and care. Carveth (2010, 112, 113) summarises Sagan's understanding of conscience in this way:

The desire to nurture others as we ourselves have been nurtured, to help as we have been helped, and to love as we have been loved is what we mean by conscience. This is the true basis of morality, and it arises far earlier than the Freudian superego. For Sagan (1988), conscience arises in identification with the loving, comforting, and nurturing preoedipal mother and in our primordial tendency to turn passive into active. He describes "those delightful circumstances, familiar to all parents, when the infant first endeavors to feed the mother back" (Sagan qtd. in Carveth 2010, 169)

Such distinction between the functions of the superego and of conscience is influenced by Klein's earlier distinction between 'persecutory' and 'reparative' guilt, the former relating to the superego and the latter to the conscience. Whereas persecutory guilt causes the ego to engage in punitive and even sadistic behaviours towards itself and others, thus creating a manifestation that sets up the ego to repress the original guilt, reparative guilt is the one which helps the ego to identify negative behaviours in order to, as the name itself implies, repair and heal the ego. Carveth (2010, 117) establishes a range of types of guilt: justified and unjustified guilt, primitive and mature guilt, conscious and unconscious guilt, borrowed guilt, defensive guilt, survivor guilt, existential guilt, induced guilt, and collective guilt. The first two related types are justified and unjustified guilt, which are associated with consciousness and the unconscious respectively. The justified or conscious guilt is the one that "informs us we have done wrong and deserve to feel guilty" (118), while, on the contrary, unjustified guilt does not have the capacity to see one's wrongdoing which causes the ego to feel guilty for actions or feelings for which it should not feel guilty. The second paired types of guilt are primitive and mature guilt, which are the equivalent of Klein's terms persecutory or self-punitive guilt and reparative guilt explained above. Next, there are conscious and unconscious guilt. Conscious guilt might be justified or unjustified; whereas unconscious will, in most cases, be guilt that causes unmeasured pain, since both guilt and wrongdoing are, under these circumstances, unconscious and therefore there is no capacity to reflect on such acts. That is:

Because the superego knows everything and is always on the lookout for an opportunity to inflict pain, the inevitable consequence of refusing to suffer conscious guilt is painful self-punishment inflicted by the superego—unless such punishment is instead inflicted via projection on a scapegoat. (Carveth, 120)

Borrowed and defensive guilt are two types of unjustified defensive guilt. Borrowing guilt relates to the identification with a subject strongly attached to the ego, similarly to Freud's (2005, 279) theory of laments [*klagen*] being accusations [*anklagen*]. This kind of guilt is usually adopted after a loss of a loved object, as it is the case of mourning or melancholia. However, defensive guilt is the recognition by the ego, usually a child's ego, of a failure done by other subject, usually the parent. That is: the child blames himself for something that is not his fault, but his parents', as a response of the parent's inability to nurture him/her.

The survivor guilt is that in which one feels guilty for surviving after a traumatic event where other people died, while induced guilt is the one in which people burdened by guilt "induce their guilt in others" (Carveth, 2010, 125). In the case of existential guilt Carveth argues:

On one hand, there is the guilt arising from our failure to develop our potentials; on the other, the guilt precisely for doing so. Self-development involves disruption of a preexisting equilibrium, and this can entail a kind of betrayal of older relational covenant. (124)

Lastly, there is collective guilt, which is suffered by a community notwithstanding individual actions, i.e., Spanish collective guilt about colonization in South America.

2.2. On Defence Mechanism, Humour and a New Persona

2.2.1. Defence Mechanism and its types

Coined by Sigmund Freud and developed by her daughter Anna Freud, defence mechanisms are processes that the ego experiments as a reaction to certain events that he/she is not able to cope with. They are instruments that protect the ego from anxiety, depression or trauma, such as the death of a love-object. It is in the malfunction of such processes that has harmful consequences for her/his own ego. In order to understand such term more clearly, it is imperative to clarify the concept of transference:

By transference we mean all those impulses experienced by the patient in his relation with the analyst which are not newly created by the objective analytic situation but have their source in early—indeed, the very earliest—object relations and are now merely revived under the influence of the repetition compulsion (Anna Freud, 2018, 23)

In other words, it is an essential gizmo for analysts to apprehend the functions of each part of the mind, constituted by the id, ego and superego, and thus to help with the diagnosis of the patient. There exist two types of transference, in one of which resides the defence mechanism:

The transference phenomenon which we have interpreted falls into two parts, both of which have their origin in the past: a libidinal or aggressive element, which belongs to the id, and a defense mechanism, which we must attribute to the ego—in the most instructive cases, to the ego of the same infantile period in which the id impulse first arose (A. Freud, 2018, 25)

In her book *The Ego and the Defence Mechanisms*, published in 1936, Anna Freud collected the first classification of types of defence mechanisms, also known as mechanisms for ego protection or coping mechanisms, which includes ten types: regression, repression, isolation, reversal, projection, reaction formation, undoing, introjection, turning against the self and sublimation or displacement of instinctual aims.

For our analysis, we will only focus on the following three: repression, isolation and reaction formation. Repression is a mechanism that the ego can only undergo once since it “consists in the withholding or expulsion of an idea or affect from the conscious ego” (A. Freud, 2018, 54), that is, once a situation has been repressed, it cannot be repressed again, for it resides in the unconscious. Regarding isolation, this process, frequently present in patients with obsessional neurosis, consists in isolating a certain situation and detaching it from other thoughts associated with it. It is strongly related to the mechanism of avoidance, since said phenomenon is “a primitive and natural and, moreover, so inseparably associated with the normal development of the ego that it is not easy, for purposes of theoretical discussion, to detach it from its usual context and to view it in isolation” (A. Freud, 2018, 91). Hence, it could be concluded that avoidance is a part of the process of isolation, not a mechanism by itself. Likewise, reaction formation is also frequently present in patients with obsessional neurosis. It is a coping mechanism, whose highly use will expect a regular consumption of energy named anticathexis, that “secures the ego against the return of repressed impulses from within, while *by fantasies in which the red situation is reversed* denial is sustained against overthrow from without.” (A. Freud, 2018, 164)

The psychiatrist George Eman Vaillant (1986, qtd. Huma Fatima, Dr Pooja Mahour 2021, 1469) creates another classification which includes new types of defence mechanisms. He divides defence mechanisms into four different levels: Level I is known as pathological defence mechanisms, level II refers to immature defence mechanisms, level III denotes neurotic defence mechanisms, and level IV indicates mature defence mechanisms. Additionally, said

classification establishes a hierarchy based on the adaptiveness or matureness of these defences: that is, those which help the ego during a long period of time, rather than being beneficial only for a brief period. Level I, pathological defence mechanisms, includes defences that correspond to A. Freud's delusive projection and denial regularly present in dysfunctional individuals. To Level II, immature defences, belong those mechanisms that preserve indirectly the feelings of the patient and keep the ego from having to confront reality. This level includes passive-aggressive behaviour, acting out, hypochondriasis, projection and schizoid fantasy. Level III, neurotic defence mechanisms, which includes displacement, reaction formation, intellectualization, dissociation and repression, are regularly present and normalized in adults. Lastly, level IV, mature defence mechanisms, to secure the ego's protection and are perceived as the correct forms to face and attenuate conflicts. To Level IV belong altruism, anticipation, sublimation, suppression and humour.

Apart from the previous classification, Perry and Henry (2004, qtd. in Jesse A. Metzger 2014, 479) propose the following typology and its corresponding hierarchy:

A Hierarchy of Defense Mechanisms (Perry & Henry, 2004)

Defense level	Defense mechanisms
7 High adaptive (mature)	Affiliation, altruism, anticipation, humor, self-assertion, self-observation, sublimation, suppression
6 Obsessional	Isolation, intellectualization, undoing
5a Hysterical	Repression, dissociation
5b Other neurotic	Displacement, reaction formation
4 Minor image-distorting (narcissistic)	Omnipotence, idealization (of self/others), devaluation (of self/others)
3 Disavowal	Denial, rationalization, projection
2 Major image-distorting (borderline)	Splitting (of self/others' images), projective identification
1 Action	Passive-aggression (turning against the self), acting out, help-rejecting complaining

2.2.2. Theory of Humour

Humour, the main topic of analysis in the present section, is included in both classifications. In addition, all the authors agree on the fact that humour is a high adaptive or mature coping mechanism, since it helps the ego to be resilient and liberates it from “despotism of the reality principle and allows the pleasure principle scrupulously regulated free play” (Terry Eagleton, 2021, 19). Sigmund Freud affirms the following regarding the function of humour for the ego:

Humour has something liberating about it; but it also has something of grandeur and elevation. . . . The grandeur in it clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer. It insists that it cannot be affected by the traumas of the external world; it shows, in fact, that such traumas are no more than occasions for it to gain pleasure. (S. Freud qtd. in Jesse A. Metzger 2014: 485)

Terry Eagleton asserts that “the notion of humour as a form of relief forms the basis of one widely influential view of it, the so- called release theory” (2021, 10). The release theory which Eagleton has cited previously is one of the major approaches to humour, as well as the superiority theory, supported by authors such as Thomas Hobbes, Henri Bergson and Charles Darwin among others. Moreover, there exists a third major theory of humour, that of incongruity. These three theories are not the only ones that exist, for there are many others such as the play theory or the ambivalence theory; however, these could be included within the incongruity theory.

The release theory is distinguished by the delivery of the anxieties or fears of everyday life through laughter. Make a joke requires a balance between the moral injunctions of the superego and the primary impulses of the id. Yet, the humour present in jokes springs from different points. S. Freud believes, for instance, that humour in inoffensive jokes arises from “the release of the repressed impulse”, while in brutal or profane jokes it stems from “the relaxation of the repression itself” (2021, 12). “Desublimation”, as conceived by S. Freud, plays a major part in such theory:

The energies we invest in some noble ideal or exalted alter ego are released as laughter when it is rudely punctured. Since sustaining such ideals involves a degree of psychological strain, not having to do so can be a gratifying sensation (S. Freud qtd. in Terry Eagleton 2021: 14)

The superiority approach, first found in T. Hobbes's *Leviathan*, is characterized by the absence of sympathy since the latter “is the mortal foe of humour” (André Breton qtd. in T. Eagleton 2021, 43). The commonly named “black humour” would fit into this theoretical approach due to its distinctive sense of brutal and insensitive jokes. Such lack of empathy stems from the feeling of superiority, whether of class, gender or intelligence, that one must possess in order to make these kinds of jokes. For instance, Hélène Cixous maintains that “women's laughter [is seen] as a puncturing of male pretensions, and thus as a strike at superiority rather than a specimen of it” (Hélène Cixous paraphrased in Terry Eagleton, 2021, 40)

Lastly, the incongruity theory consists of a range of absurdities or rowdy jokes that unsettles the interlocutor, such as, for instance, a blasphemous joke in a serious context as is a funeral. Thomas Nagel creates a classification of absurdities, i.e., the falling of one's trousers, which are part of humorous incongruity (T. Eagleton, 2021, 68). For Michael Clark, humour that derives from incongruity is comic –not necessarily funny– because its absurdity, as in the case of surrealist comedy. Plays such as Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* or Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* are comic for their absurd nature –the waiting for someone/-thing unknown and the deficiency in communication between characters. – Other incongruities are delight because of their politically incorrect style, while other jokes are overshadowed by feelings of guilt, disgust or fear.

It is worth noting that the theories are not excluding, but inclusive. Jokes may be approached from more than one of these theories. This fusion occurs insofar as they achieve a more complete type of humour. An example is Charles Darwin, who considers humour to be composed of both superiority and incongruity.

Humour, then, is more than a performance or more than a “question of the body” (T. Eagleton, 2021, 102): it is a complex act that can be transgressive, have political or economic meanings, affirm a sense at once of individuality and community, be intelligent, absurd, excluding, critical, superior, heartless, and a form of repression or relaxation.

British humour will provide a more complete and direct context for Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag*. British humour is notable for the presence of *bathos*, a term first found in Alexander Pope's “Peri Bathous” (1727), which consists of a rhetorical anticlimax. Over time, the concept has been extrapolated to the realm of comedy, where it serves as a tool for understanding the physical function of humour (a merger of release and incongruity). According to Harold Nicolson, British humour in the nineteenth century corresponded to one that crossed class boundaries. He states that: “English humour, he maintains, is characterised by tolerance, kindness, sympathy, compassion, gentleness, affection, shyness and diffidence” (T. Eagleton, 2021, 123). However, the best-known view of British society is that founded in a class conflict, in which the upper class ridiculed the middle class through wit, a type of ingenious and sarcastic humour in which word games or the drawl are to be found. Nowadays wit is a characteristic of every British comedian, as much as wit is a way of life:

Wit is a vein of humour which disrupts conventional expectations, deviating mischievously from the predictable; but it does so for the most part lightly and casually, without the rancour of the political militant or the heavy-handedness of the bourgeois. (T. Eagleton, 2021, 128).

2.2.3. Humour as the foundation of a “persona”: Jung and Goffman

The psychoanalyst C. J. Jung created a range of archetypes that refer to universal tangible conceptions derived from abstract philosophical ideas of the collective unconscious that are transmitted through dreams. These are closely linked to Plato’s philosophy of the world of ideas, in the sense that both authors consider that there are certain universal ideas that find a worldly manifestation. In the case of Plato perfection, purity and mutability would be included in a metaphysical place, named the Hyperuranion. On the other hand, for Jung, the main archetypes include the “person”, the “shadow”, the “anima/animus” and the “self”. From this series of inherited concrete representations, the individual forges his or her own being out of the common characteristics of these four archetypes, that is, they are key elements of self-realization or individual integrity.

The archetypes most relevant for our analysis are the ones of persona and shadow, which are the first two steps of the “process of individuation”. Both phenomena are inversely associated, since the persona is the mask that the ego puts on in order to adopt social norms, whereas the shadow is the representation of the repressed impulses of the ego. The persona is a mask that every ego wears so as to be socially accepted. Masks include every external aspect of the ego: clothes, gestures, cultural practices, forms of communicating and behavioural norms. This archetype, then, is a bridge between the ego and society, a mechanism that aids the life in a community. It is not a portrayal of the true self, but a set of general and detached patterns. The persona performs in the same way as an actor, whose audience is every person he or she has to deal with, it is “una ‘voz teatral’ del inconsciente colectivo” (‘a “theatrical voice” of the collective unconscious’) (Anna Giardini, 2017, 95). This refers back to the original meaning of the word, the Latin term *persona* (‘mask’). In Ancient Times, the persona illustrated the wooden masks that Latin and Greek actors used in their plays in order to disguise in a more accurate form their characters and to help the audience to identify and understand the play better. One must bear in mind that it is essential to maintain a balance between the persona and the ego, otherwise the persona would coincide with the ego, leading identity conflict or loss. Thus, the shadow is everything that the persona rejects, the repressed impulses that are not accepted by society, what does not mean that they are negative or pejorative. Such archetype is divided into

the personal shadow, associated to an individual experience, and a collective shadow, linked to certain historical and cultural events from which discrimination arises (i.e., racism).

However, archetypes are always hypotheses or deduction, as they always require a perceptible representation. Terrie Waddell explains that such representation is called “image” and functions as “a projection of the archetype, an invisible, universal component of the collective unconscious, whereas its imaginal representation is determined by social and historical influences.” (2012, 13). Mythology and folklore culture are essential in Jung’s thinking because they provide a concrete representation of the archetypes. The “trickster” is said to be the representation of the shadow archetype, hence, a figure that is characterized by being deceitful, playful and disruptive. The portrayal of this archetype in literature and art is seen in instances of the female trickster, Eris, the Greek goddess of Discord and of the male trickster, Loki, the Nordic god of fire.

The female trickster has been always perceived as a transitory path, associated with shape-shifting, in the traditional male trickster journey. Far away from reality, female tricksters have their own autonomy and agency, share some characteristics with male tricksters, but possess distinctive features. Ricki Stefanie Tannen (2014) distinguishes the female trickster in three main aspects: her postmodern embodiment, in which women are able to recognize their physical agency; the use of irony and humour as a revolutionary weapon; and the refusal of being victimized.

Ervin Goffman’s sociological study of the self and its communication with the world diverges from Jung’s, in the sense that Goffman draws attention to the social interactions within a community, rather than focusing on the individual.

Social life is perceived as a “mixed-motive game” (Philip Manning, 2013, 68) based on rules, codes and norms of behaviour, in which the more adapted to social norms one is, the more manipulated and deceived one becomes. The introduction of the self into society is similar to the relation between an actor and the audience, as every social interaction or every situation is articulated by frames.

The frameworks are distinguished in relation to the organization of individuals’ everyday experience. Attention must be drawn into the following classification: “primary” or “serious framework” and “secondary framework” (Eric Weitz, 2009, 5). The first consists of activities that require the immediate attention of the individual in order to protect his/her well-being, i.e.,

crossing a busy street, whereas the secondary is based on the suspension of the social norms that are enforced by the serious framework, in which humour belongs to the former.

3. ANALYSIS OF *FLEABAG*

3.1. *Fleabag*: coping with mourning and guilt

First of all, we must focus on distinguishing whether what *Fleabag* is suffering is mourning or melancholia. As explained above, both phenomena are very similar, stemming from the loss of a loved object, as in this case is the protagonist's best friend, called Boo, and contain several common traits, among them the loss of interest in the world and the loss of the libido of the ego that was concentrated on this now lost loved object. However, we find certain remarkable differences, which are decisive for understanding the distinction between these processes. The most determined is the denial of the loss of the loved object in melancholia, which produces a restriction of the ego and makes the process pathological, whereas in mourning, it is a temporal process in which there is an inhibition of the ego, produced by external stimuli.

Having clarified mourning and melancholia in general terms, we can state that *Fleabag* is undergoing a process of grief for, primarily, two reasons: the first is because in all instances in which *Fleabag* speaks of Boo, she refers to her in the past tense, being aware that Boo is nothing more than a reminiscence of the past that will remain in her memory. The second reason lies in the fact that the protagonist explicitly mentions on numerous occasions that Boo is dead and therefore not present in her life. We see how already at the beginning of the play she not only mentions the death of her friend, but also explains the cause of her death to the audience:

I opened the café with my friend Boo. She's dead now. She accidentally killed herself. It wasn't her intention, but it wasn't a total accident. She didn't think she'd actually die, she just found out that her boyfriend slept with 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 cycle lane, wanting to get tangled in a bike. Break a finger, maybe. But it turns out bikes can go fast and flip you into the road. Three people died. She was such a dick. I didn't tell her parents the truth. I told her boyfriend. He cried. A lot. (16)

This passage, in addition, shows how *Fleabag* engages her audience, with an unusual and irreverent way of recounting experiences. Her language, full of comedy and humour, is key to the following analysis because it originates from tragic events in her life that lead her to take refuge in humour as a method of escape or, as we will see in the next chapter, a defence mechanism. *Fleabag* tells us that her friend Boo died unintentionally, in a fatal bicycle accident, pretending to simply get hurt, as a way of reprimanding her boyfriend for sleeping with another woman. It is evident that both author and protagonist decide to write a comic death to introduce the audience to the form in which the play will unfold, as well as to introduce the light-hearted and playful character that Boo was until the very last day of her life. Another important piece

of evidence is that Fleabag does not tell us all about the reason why Boo threw herself in the middle of a bicycle crossing. Instead, she chooses to tell us that “she just found out that her boyfriend slept with someone else”. An audience completely external to the play might argue that the use of a generic noun group such as “someone else” to refer to the person the boyfriend slept with is justified in that the identity of that person is not relevant to the story. However, after reading or viewing the entire play, we know that this is completely false, as this identity is the focus of the story, since the third person in question is Fleabag.

The protagonist accepts her friend’s death; however, the immense guilt she feels leads her to hide the true nature of Boo’s death from the audience. It is not until the end that something related to the death of the café’s co-founder is mentioned again: “SISTER. After what you did to Boo. / FLEABAG (to audience). That wasn’t my fault. He wanted me... he... wanted me so...” (47). Her sister, angry at what her husband has told her earlier about Fleabag, lashes out at her in what is most painful: namely, Boo. The protagonist, far from making a joke about it, puts aside her characteristic comedy to try to explain to the audience what has happened. And yet, she is unable to produce a coherent argument out of her mouth. The first thing she does is defend herself, saying, “It wasn’t my fault”, implying that, in effect, this guilt that she says does not belong to her, is what she feels most guilty about, followed by some stammering in an attempt to defend her position. The absence of comic trait suggests that Fleabag is beginning to open up to herself and therefore to the people around her. She is beginning to accept her pain and live with it without needing to use humour as an escape.

The acceptance of the pain becomes more tangible in the second half of the play when the following voice message from Boo is repeated up to three times: “BOO (recorded voicemail). Hi this is Boo. I can’t come to the phone at the moment but leave a messaggio and I’ll get back to you” (38, 42, 45). The first time Fleabag plays it is due to the fact that his sister Claire has not lent her the money she needs to pay the rent of the coffee shop, consequently, she could lose the coffee shop she founded with Boo; the second time occurs after the rejection of Arsehole Guy, because he refuses to go to her house to have sex, so Fleabag, in a moment of desperation, decides to send a message to many people with whom she has slept in order to get some of them to accept her proposal. Finally, she seeks support from her father, who did not bother to open the door, spending all night watching pornography in an attempt to fulfil her sexual desire, while her sister does not answer her phone. All these instances express Fleabag’s desperation to be loved, and the pain she suffers every time someone rejects her. She constantly strives for some stability and love in her life, and yet no one, except for Boo, is willing to offer

it to her. Each time Fleabag feels lonely, she proceeds to listen to Boo's voice message in order to be comforted by her friend's voice and to feel her, even if only for the duration of the message, present in her life.

Through numerous flashbacks, the reader/audience learns how important Boo was in Fleabag's life. The protagonist recalls not only significant anecdotes about their friendship, including the guinea pig Fleabag gave Boo for her birthday, which became the theme of the café itself, or when they would close the café and get drunk together to the tune of a song, they had written themselves, but also common days working in the café:

Ten past eleven at the café. Quiet. Eerily so. Boo always used to play music, read out horoscopes and shrivel crisp packets in the microwave. Used to make the place stink, but she'd turn the little packets into key rings and give them to the people who were especially polite. (18)

It is at moments like the one above, a regular day when nothing out of the ordinary is happening, that Fleabag most noticeably perceives the absence of Boo. The protagonist describes the atmosphere of the cafeteria as "eerie", a sentiment that suggests darkness, sadness and even fear, associated with Fleabag's own current feeling. This sentiment contrasts with the atmosphere that Boo used to cause. Although Fleabag did not agree with certain activities that Boo did at the café, as it is shown in the use of "stink", an adjective with clear negative connotations, to describe the smell of the "shrivel crisp packets", she remembers with particular fondness how kind and generous Boo was: "but she'd turn the little packets into key rings and give them to the people who were especially polite". Boo was part of Fleabag's daily routine, making her absence all the tougher to cope with, and so she recalls with pain and even yearning for tasks she once abhorred.

Both friends owned a guinea pig-themed café. Fleabag gifted guinea pig named Hillary for Boo's birthday, with whom she became deeply obsessed. Hillary and Boo, animal and human, end up mimicking each other both physically and psychologically:

Boo made sense of the guinea-pig theme. She was all small and cute and put pictures of guinea pigs everywhere. I pretend they're not there. Which I suspect makes the whole guinea-pig-café experience a bit creepy.

Boo was built a bit like a guinea pig. No waist or hips. Straight down. She rocked it. And she was beautiful. Tricky though. Jealous. Sensitive. But beautiful and... my best friend (17)

After the death of Boo, Fleabag is left in charge of Hillary, who is also mourning the loss of her owner: "She called it Hilary and now I'm left with it". (35). Knowing that Boo was the

person on whom Fleabag most relied, it is quite conceivable that she created a narrative in which Hillary had been turned into the reincarnation of Boo, as a way of coping with the mourning more bearably, through the transfer of some of the libido attributed to Boo to something related to her. However, as Fleabag begins to come to terms with her grief, she no longer uses humour consistently and allows herself to experience a range of feelings such as anger, frustration or violence. In the following scene we observe how Fleabag allows thoughts of violence to creep into her mind:

Hilary's teeth are going again. Crashing against each other. The noise is unbearable. Relentless chattering. They do that when they're distressed or angry or – I can't listen to it. I take her out of her hutch. I hold her little body to my naked chest. I can feel her claws. She can hardly move. Her bones feel bent and her breathing is shallow. But the teeth are going like – she won't – I stroke her body. I look into her face through her ginger, punky bit. I imagine sticking my finger in to make her eyes pop out. I imagine it. I imagine doing that – I can't imagine doing anything else and as my hand moves down her body – I – I – (48)

Hillary is, then, the only thing that Fleabag has left of Boo next to the café that the two of them used to run. In this very passage, Fleabag is so angry by the sound of Hillary grinding her teeth (“I can't listen to it” [48]) that she decides to take Hillary in her arms and imagines that she is exploding her eyes with her thumbs. This thought suggests that Fleabag is in such immense psychological pain over the death of her friend that she needs to get rid of everything associated with her, including the guinea pig. It could be, in a sense, the same mental process that takes place with self-harm. In both cases the mental pain is so unbearable that they transfer it to physical pain because it is more manageable, and thus focus their attention on the tangible pain, temporarily pushing the mental pain aside. Fleabag reaches the point in the play where she would rather get rid of all living traces of Boo than face the pain and guilt she feels after sleeping with her boyfriend, Fleabag sees herself as the cause of her friend's death and, although she is beginning to explicitly process the mourning, she is unable to accept the guilt and move on. She is paralysed in a state of guilt, she believes that she deserves the pain she is suffering and instigates herself to suffer it because it is her punishment for the events that have transpired.

The climax of the play is at the end of the story, which is constituted by Fleabag's final monologue in which she bursts wide open and admits that she is indeed responsible for all the bad decisions that have led her to lose control of her life:

What if I wrote that I fucked that café into liquidation, that I fucked up my family, I fucked my friend by fucking her boyfriend, that I don't feel alive unless I'm being fucked and I don't feel in control unless I'm fucking, because fucking makes the world tighten around me, that I've been watching people fuck for as long as I've been able to search for it, that I know that my body as it is now is really the only thing I have and when that gets old and unfuckable I might as well just kill it, that sometimes I wish I never knew fucking existed because somehow there isn't anything worse than someone who doesn't want to fuck me.

That I fuck everything. But this time, I genuinely wasn't trying to – I wasn't – I was –

Either everyone feels like this a little bit and they're just not talking about it, or I'm completely fucking alone. Which isn't fucking funny. (50)

By accepting her wrongdoings, the protagonist is able to release some guilt between the lines of the monologue and thus move forward in overcoming the death of her loved object. It is probable that, up to this point, Fleabag was going through the bargaining state among the states of mourning proposed by Kubler-Kloss and Kessler. This state is characterised by the strong pressure of guilt, in which the ego feels responsible for the death of the loved object and remains anchored in the past. Such characteristics correspond to the behaviours of the protagonist until the final monologue. Fleabag constantly recalls anecdotes with Boo through the frequent use of flashbacks, which form the crux of the play, and, as we have mentioned on numerous occasions, Fleabag feels deeply responsible for the death of her best friend, as well as an enormous sense of guilt on her back. However, the final monologue is a turning point in the character's development, for it is here that Fleabag acknowledges her mistakes and leaves room for self-forgiveness. As with any open ending, we do not know whether Fleabag manages to forgive herself and overcome her grief in the play. Nonetheless, in the television series created by the author and based on this work, one can perceive an evolution in the character due to the acceptance of guilt and the overcoming of Boo's grief, of which only the nostalgia of the great moments that Fleabag will be able to give her some relief through memory.

Following Carveth's (2010) classification, the kind of guilt Fleabag experiences could initially be categorised as mature guilt, a term related to Melanie Klein's 'reparative guilt'. Although Fleabag's guilt is initially mature, the fact that she has been living with this strong sense of guilt for a long period of time and, above all, that she begins to feel guilty for all other situations that are not related to Boo suggests that the type of guilt has transformed from mature to persecutory, that is, from a type of guilt that resides in the conscience and functions to make the ego aware of its misbehaviours in order to heal or alleviate the ego to one that inhabits in the superego, which punishes the ego without justification, with the only aim to torture it. It is

imperative to bear in mind that it is a female character that is being talked about, hence it must be not forgotten that gender is linked to certain values that are transmitted generation after generation through the patriarchal Western tradition, which consists of submission, dependency, prudency and purity among others. In order to maintain the status quo, the Western patriarchal system, along with the Judeo-Christian religion, promote feelings of guilt and shame. Female's sexuality is one of the main themes that undergoes guilt and shame, since Catholicism has been responsible for persecuting and torturing through shame women who want to celebrate their sexuality freely, instead of abiding by the purity demanded by that religion, which leads to a feeling of guilt with themselves.

Ruth Benedict, American anthropologist, explores the distinction between guilt and shame cultures in *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, in which the difference between Japanese cultural patterns and American one after II World War is analysed. The anthropologist believes that American society arrests on guilt while Japanese culture is the culture of shame:

“A society that inculcates absolute standards of morality and relies on men's developing a conscience is a guilt culture by definition. ... In a culture where shame is a major sanction ... a man does not experience relief when he makes his fault public even to a confessor. So long as his bad behavior does not 'get out into the world' he need not be troubled. ... True shame cultures rely on external sanctions for good behavior, not, as true guilt cultures do, on an internalized conviction of sin. ... [Shame] requires an audience or at least a man's fantasy of an audience. Guilt does not.” (Benedict, qtd. in Ivy 2008)

Taking this classification into account, it could be established that any neo-colonial society would be built on a culture of guilt, as individuals themselves create their own morality. However, within a hegemonic culture such as the US or the UK, which is of particular interest given that *Fleabag* is set in the capital of the country, there exist different realities, such as the gender-based reality in which women are taught to behave differently from men. S. Raving collects the terminology and compares it in terms of gender, she explains that:

For women, society has gone from a shame society to a guilt society. We used to burn witches, sew red letter As onto adulteresses, humiliate women who had sex out of marriage. Today we don't need to, we just let them torture themselves. (2019)

The genesis of *Fleabag*'s disruptive behaviour shows in her obsession with sex (“I'm not obsessed with sex. / I just can't stop thinking about it.” [15]), which leads *Fleabag* to seek validation through the hypersexualisation of her own body. In the final monologue she admits as much: “that I know that my body as it is now is really the only thing I have and when it gets

old and unfuckable, I might as well fuck it” (50). Fleabag recognises herself as an ephemeral capital that is used by consumers until it is useless for the market- the patriarchal system-, in her case, and in the case of every woman, when her body is no longer desirable for men, that is, when women no longer fit into beauty standards, portrayed by youth and thinness. Beauty standards have become detrimental to women, on the one hand, to those who do not have normative bodies, because they face, for instance, fatphobic discrimination, or on the other hand, to those who do fit the standards, because they are more likely to sexualise themselves in order to be desired. Either way, both sides are oppressed by the beauty standards that make every woman feel dissatisfied with her own body and in need of external validation in order to love herself. Fleabag is, without a doubt, a clear example of a canonical woman victim of the canons of beauty. Said hypersexualisation arises from the need to feel desired and loved and is accentuated by beauty standards, as it is only through sex that she finds a certain validation.

The use of nicknames is relevant to the play, as none of the men with whom she has had sporadic sexual relations has a proper name (“Chub Chub”, “Arsehole Guy”, “Attractive Looking Man”, “Tube Rodent”). These nicknames, which refer to their physique and could even be contemptuous, dehumanizes them and creates more distance between Fleabag and them. Fleabag’s motivations behind this decision could be twofold: the first one is the application of men as a transaction to feel at ease with herself, to satisfy her own sexual desires and the second one is as a result of the inability to get close to men in an intimate way.

Fleabag is constantly thinking about sex, even when the activity that is not related to that. She needs sexual motivation in order to achieve certain events, usually regarding economic issues, which might suggest that her thinking is subject to hypersexualisation. Said process could be described as the opposite of sublimation¹.

I run a guinea-pig-themed café. But it’s out of cash and it’s going to close unless a cheque falls out of the sky, or a banker comes on my arse, but neither are going to happen, and I don’t want to dignify the banker-man with a proper mention so I’m not going to talk about him or how I do sometimes wish I could own up to not having morals and just let him come on my arse for ten thousand pounds, but apparently we’re ‘not supposed to do that’, so okay. I won’t. Even though it would solve everything. I won’t. (13)

¹ Coined by S. Freud and included in Laplanche and Pontalis’ dictionary, the notion of sublimation is a process in which an individual is motivated through sexual desire to do certain activities not oriented to sexual satisfaction.

In the previous scene, where Fleabag is talking about how the dire economic situation of her café could be saved by the fall of a cheque or through prostitution with a banker. It can be perceived that, in order to express her frustration at such a critical situation, she needs a sexual motivation.

The obsession reaches such an extent that it is extrapolated to her language, that is, Fleabag conveys her messages through a sexual code:

Three nights ago I ordered myself a very slutty pizza.

I mean, the bitch was dripping.

That dirty little stuffed-crust wanted to be in me so bad, I just ate the little tart like she meant nothing to me, and she loved it. (13)

In the above-mentioned passage, we can see how Fleabag not only uses a series of terms with clear sexual connotations, as well as gender bias, such as “slutty”, “bitch” or “dirty” to describe a pizza, but also, she sexualises the pizza, treating it as if it were a sexual object she has power over. Fleabag projects her sexual desire onto a non-sexual related product, and through that projection, two events take place: 1. Fleabag disassociates herself from her identity and creates another one, one that has control over the sexual object, one that decides to eat: “the little tart like she meant nothing to me”; 2. Fleabag’s troubled relationship with feminism is exposed. Fleabag has a conflict with the current wave of feminism, since she feels that she is constantly letting down the movement due to her sometimes-immoral actions, often in a sexual context, such as the following in which she projects the desire not to be valued onto the pizza: “like she meant nothing to me.” or the banker passage in which she reconsiders her feminist ideology in order to obtain the required amount of money to save the café.

Fleabag’s language is characterised by an excessive use of the word ‘fuck’ throughout the play, and, particularly, in her final monologue, which she uses to emphasise her pain and to express herself in a more genuine way. Her life is so obsessively focused on sex that she is unable to separate it even when she is talking about her most vulnerable feelings: “What if I wrote that I fucked that café into liquidation, that I fucked up my family, I fucked my friend by fucking her boyfriend...” (51).

The fixation with sex is caused, as noted before, by an imperative need to be desired and wanted. Fleabag is unaware of any other possible method of interacting with men in a romantic

or sex-affective context than through relational codes linked to sex. Take the example of her partner at the beginning of the play, Harry-the only male romantic interest called by his first name and not by a nickname, suggesting that he is the only person with whom Fleabag has become more intimate. Despite this, she talks about her relationship with Harry with her characteristic comic tone:

Harry and I break up every twelve to eighteen months and when we do, well...

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 (15)

Fleabag does not often comment on her feelings about the break-up, instead she chooses to tell the audience about the delight she experiences every time she breaks up with Harry. Fleabag feels free whenever she is single, as for her Harry is nothing more than a toy that she gets bored of “every twelve to eighteen months”.

The very next affirmation– “I’ve often considered timing a break-up around whenever the flat needs a bit of a going-over, but I never know what’s going to set him off. Keeps me on my toes.” (15) –again reflects the protagonist’s representative humour which might suggest, on the one hand, that she does not, in fact, love Harry and remains in a relationship with him out of comfort or habit. On the other hand, that she really does love Harry but maintains a certain distance from him, through this humour, so that they do not reach such a point of intimacy that she shows herself to be totally vulnerable, as this could be due to her fear of being rejected by Harry if Fleabag shows herself as she is, or finally, that she wants a serious relationship with Harry but she is unfamiliar with how to behave in such a relationship and uses humour to focus her attention on her guilt and her discomfort with herself.

Joe is the only other few men who is given a proper name, as he is relevant for the protagonist’s development, since his character acts as a father figure for Fleabag. Joe is one of the most regular customers at Fleabag’s café, serving as an emotional support for the protagonist:

FLEABAG. What’s... wrong, Joe?

JOE (sighs). Ah my girl, I just... I love people. I love people. But... they get me down.

FLEABAG. Yeah. People are... shit.

He turns and I can see into every deep line on his face.

JOE. Oh no, darlin’. People are amazing, but... when will people realise... that people are all we got?

FLEABAG. He smiles, but I feel a bit ambushed. I pretend I have to wash the cappuccino machine, go inside and wipe the nozzle a bit. (20)

Joe is one of the few people who cares about Fleabag's well-being, he continues to visit the café every day with the excuse of going as a customer. However, his main reason is to make sure that Fleabag is accompanied in order to make her feel less lonely as she processes her best friend's grief. However, she, unaccustomed to being cared for by a man, interprets this concern as a desire to sleep with her and acts correspondingly, that is, she undresses in front of him in order to satiate her own sexual desire:

JOE. Put your clothes back on, darling.

FLEABAG. What?

JOE. Put your clothes back on.

FLEABAG. Come on, Joe. I'm not going to judge you.

JOE. I come here for my tea, darling. And to see you. That was a sad thing that happened to your friend.

FLEABAG. You're weak.

JOE. That may be true, but... I'm going to go now.

FLEABAG. Stay. Come on. Please. Joe. I'm twenty-six years old, Joe.

He stops. He brings his hand down from his eyes. He finally looks at me.

JOE. Go home, darling. I'm sorry. This ain't my bag.

FLEABAG. I grab his arm as he walks past. He's thin but baggy. His skin pinches in my grasp. It's disgusting.

The door closes behind him. (47, 48)

We witness again Fleabag's despair at feeling validated through her body, and when Joe rejects her, she responds aggressively and with hurtful comments addressed to him, trying to provoke the same pain that Joe has inflicted on her. Phoebe Waller-Bridge, author and actress in the play, says in interview² the following about the protagonist's problematic relationship with sex:

The speech that she has about sex and that she's obsessed with it and that she can't stop thinking about it, well she's obsessed with every aspect of it except the feeling of it [...]. She defines herself by her sexual value in a way [...]. If there is somebody that doesn't want to,

² The speech is part of the interview by BUILD series in which the author Phoebe Waller-Bridge discusses the first season of the "Fleabag" TV series, based on the monologue that is being analysed in this BA Thesis.

that she's totally spun out because she has to be something other than a predatory woman or a sexual woman. [15:27-16:59]

Fleabag's inability to form romantic relationships stems from the lack of intimacy, care and love in her family. A closer look at her family circle reveals an absent father, a sister who is distant and diffident to Fleabag's values, a drunken and abusive brother-in-law, a selfish godmother and, most significantly for Fleabag's development, a deceased mother.

The first thing we are told about Fleabag's brother-in-law, that he (Martin) is always drunk and abuses women with the excuse of being a joke: "He's one of those men who is explosively sexually inappropriate with everyone. But then makes you feel bad if you take offence because he was just being FUN" (24). Martin, who is a self-centred, manipulative and unprincipled character, represents the canonical white man: a privileged middle-aged man who feels in control of every event he is invited for the very reason of being a man. Martin is possessive towards Claire, he cannot conceive of his wife being more successful than he is, and thus manipulates her into not taking the job in Finland. In addition, Martin uses alcohol as a pretext to get out of any immoral action he intends to take. Fleabag reports to Claire that: "her husband tried to touch me up at Christmas." (24), and it is Fleabag herself who, alienated from the patriarchal ideology, excuses Martin for such an indecent act as the violation of a woman's sexual freedom, by saying "I don't know why I said it. It's true, but he was drunk so..." (24).

The relationship between Fleabag and her sister, Claire, is quite distant, as expressed clearly in the following statement: "These lectures are every three months. It's virtually the only time I see my sister. She looks tired. We sit in the waiting room." (22). They rarely see each other, and when they do, it is in organised events rather than for an informal gathering. This estrangement may be due to the fact that Fleabag and Claire are women with completely different approaches to life. On the one hand there is Claire, a traditional woman, she obeys the role of a white middle class woman, the so-called "perfect life": a husband ("her *husband* isn't 'other people'. That her *husband* is her life" [p. 24]), a (step)son ("Jake is her stepson. He's really weird, probably clinically, but no one talks about that" [23]) and a stable, well-paid job:

so I ask her about her super-high-powered, perfect job-work-super-life. She tells me she's finally been offered the wet-dream of a job in Finland. Apparently they want to overpay and underwork her and she won't have to wear power suits any more. (23)

On the other hand, there is Fleabag, a woman on the margins of society, who does not conform to any norms of what an adult woman should comply with. She is single, lives her sexuality

explicitly and runs a bankrupt business. Fleabag is aware that their ways of coexisting within a community create a barrier between the two. In spite of this, Fleabag reluctantly seeks her sister's help in regard to the café's rent debt. At the beginning, in the scene of the feminist conference, Claire, more open-minded, agrees to lend her the money she needs to save the café but also decides to take the job in Finland and leave Martin. However, at the end of the play Claire changes her mind and refuses her the money, causing Fleabag to appeal to the bank and go to the interview that takes place at the beginning. This radical change of mind arises because of Martin, and what is certainly fear of his wife's more progressive mentality. Martin, in order for Claire to stay with him, tells her that it was actually Fleabag who tried to touch him and Claire, not trusting her sister, believes her husband, thus Fleabag, once again, is left alone when she is most needed.

Fleabag's father's absent presence, reminiscent of Sir Philip Sidney's 'O absent presence' poem, derives from the father's inability to maintain a paternal-filial relationship based on nurture and affection. As Fleabag herself says in the play: "Dad's way of coping with two motherless daughters was to buy us tickets to feminist lectures, start fucking our godmother and eventually stop calling." (22). Fleabag's father, instead of being a safe haven for his daughters after their mother's death, decides to withdraw physically but, most importantly, psychologically from them, leaving them symbolically orphans, by establishing a relationship with the protagonist's godmother, who was a friend of the mother. Even so, Fleabag continues to return home to be comforted, for in the most critical moments her inner child comes to the surface, in need of a paternal embrace. Fleabag goes twice to visit her father for emotional support, the first one, he opens the door, which seems to imply a willing to cover his daughter's emotional deprivations:

Suddenly I'm at a familiar doorstep. I ring the bell. [...] A light goes on. I see his silhouette as he trudges down the stairs. He must recognise me through the door, because his body language changes suddenly. He slowly unhooks the latch and opens the door.

(To DAD, very drunk.) Alright, Dad!

DAD. What's going on?

[...]

FLEABAG (drunkenly). Okay... I don't.... yeah... uh... what? It's a... hm... okay fuck it. Okay.

I have a horrible feeling I'm a greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, mannish-looking, morally bankrupt woman who can't even call herself a feminist.

He looks at me.

DAD. Well... You get all that from your mother (31)

On this occasion, the father, presenting himself as emotionally unable, is found to be inept at establishing an honest and intimate conversation with his daughter, unavailable to be vulnerable and genuinely supportive of his daughter. Instead, he responds nervously with a joke, causing the conversation to drift away from expected intimacy. However, the second time Fleabag goes to her father's house, he decides not to come down and open the door for her: "I can see his silhouette at the top of the stairs but he doesn't open the door." (43). The act of not opening the door could symbolise an emotional estrangement from his daughters, his real reluctance to support them, which transforms him into a ghost in life. In a way, attending feminist lectures is a way of dealing with the paternal absence.

Finally, the mother of the protagonist dies of breast cancer two years before the beginning of the play, hence before Boo's death. The implication of this is that Fleabag is not only processing the grief of her best friend but also that of her mother, which means that Fleabag, in a matter of two years, has lost two love objects who were the most pivotal figures in her life, and all the libido that was invested in them has been returned to the protagonist's ego. This resulted in a great ego restriction and enhanced her narcissistic traits.

According to the psychoanalysis, girls identify with their mothers. However, there are various approaches that differ with regard to the reason for the girl's identification with her mother. Freud (2017) establishes two phases in the development of the girl child: pre-Oedipus complex and after the Oedipus complex. The first is characterised by the child's adoration of the mother and the next by the child's rejection of and jealousy towards the mother after the discovery of a certain sexual attraction towards the father, which implies a change of object. Other psychoanalysts such as Melanie Klein, Luce Irigaray, Deanna Holtzman and Nancy Kulish disagree with this classification, adopting alternative options to the canonical mythological metaphor. On the one hand, Irigaray and Holtzman and Kulish opt for the Demeter-Persephone/Kore myth to theorise the introduction of the girl's sexuality into her identity and the mother's overprotection of hers. Irigaray uses said myth "as a potential model of a mother-daughter relationship that represents the relation as benign and necessary for the flourishing of and respect for fertility and life." (A. Jacobs, 2007, 180), whereas Holtzman and Kulish declare that "women blame their mothers, on the one hand, for not protecting them and, on the other hand, for keeping them ignorant of their genitals and their capabilities." (Paula P. Bernstein,

2004, 615). On the other hand, Irigaray and also Klein draw on the myth of Electra to represent the girl's rage towards her mother. Irigaray states that in adopting the Electra role, the girl "takes on the burden of the madness in relation to the mother that belongs to a whole culture" (Irigaray, qtd. in Amber Jacobs 2007, 186) while Klein believes that 'Electra's condition from the "frustration of her longing to be loved by her mother" and her rivalry with her mother for her father's love' (Klein, qtd. in A. Jacobs 2007, 186). The complex mother-daughter relationship is enhanced by the girl's desire to possess her mother's body in a sense that exposes the daughter's ambivalence towards her mother: on one side, adoration, on the other, anger and jealousy.

What occurs, then, when the mother is absent? The most noticeable thing is that, without the presence of a mother, the daughter has a series of deficits related to maternal affection and caregiving which, most probably, will result in a series of affective shortcomings in the rest of her interpersonal relationships. Carmen Alborch states: "la relación madre-hija es el vínculo más íntimo, más intenso, más simbiótico y simétrico que se conoce entre dos seres humanos" (2011, 87), which encapsulates the relevance of the mother figure. Despite her utmost relevance in the development of the child, the mother figure is often absent in popular culture, which is defined as the dead mother trope³, into which Fleabag's mother-daughter relationship fits. This trope is usually employed to create a more dramatic plot to connect with the reader/audience. The fact that her mother is dead, and thus absent, does not mean that she cannot still be present in some way in the protagonist's life. In Fleabag's particular case, her mother is not mentioned much during the play, yet she is represented through her breasts, a very relevant imagery for her character since she died of breast cancer. Through the few allusions to the mother, Fleabag's ambivalence towards her mother can be perceived: on the one hand, Fleabag worships her mother's breasts, which are the representation of femininity and sexuality: "It was particularly hard because she had amazing boobs" (21). But at the same time, she is jealous of both her mother's body and her sister's body: "My sister's got whoppers. But she got all of Mum's good bits." (22)

Likewise, the dead mother trope creates another one: that of the evil stepmother. In the case of Fleabag, the godmother usurps the physical and metaphorical space of the mother. Although she is only mentioned twice, on one of the occasions the godmother's spatial appropriation is

³ The trope is traced back to the 19th century with the publication of *Kinder-und Hausmärchen* in 1812 by the Brothers Grimm, who use the trope of the dead mother in stories such as "Snow White", "Cinderella" or "Hansel and Gretel".

observed, as she sleeps in Fleabag's father's house, in the room that formerly belonged to the mother: "I can hear my godmother trying to be quiet at the top of the stairs." (p. 32). In relation to the symbolic space, it is the father himself who sullies the image of the mother by comparing, through a joke, both mother and daughter in a pejorative way: "I have a horrible feeling I'm a greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, mannish-looking, morally bankrupt woman who can't even call herself a feminist. / He looks at me. / DAD. Well... You get all that from your mother" (32). This "situate[s] them both [Fleabag and her mother] outside the new family unit: the father and the stepmother, who live together in the family home, discuss Fleabag and her mother as if they were exterior to it, which, in effect, they now are." (J. Wilson-Scott, 2020, 280).

The cause of the few mentions of her mother could be due to the fact that the pain Fleabag feels towards her mother's death is so insufferable that the protagonist is unable to cope with her death with the defence mechanism of humour. Such mechanism, used since the beginning of the play, has been most certainly adopted by Fleabag in imitation of her father's interpersonal behaviour-one must remember the scene in which Fleabag goes to her father's house in despair and he responds with a joke instead of consoling and reassuring her-. This pain, which she cannot even cope with through humour, is so deafening that needs to be confined in a tiny, obscure space of her mind, which she cannot access very often and, when she does, that said event is fully detached from all the feelings associated with it, which is why, according to the classification established by Anna Freud, she uses the defence mechanism of isolation, a process that functions as follows: "it simply removes the instinctual impulses from their context, while retaining them in consciousness" (2018, 39). It is worth noting that, in the first season of the Fleabag series based on this theatrical monologue, the mourning process of the mother is distinguished from the one developed in this play, due to a major difference between both artistic pieces: the period of time in which they unfold. The monologue takes place over three days, while the play takes place over a longer period of time, which allows for an evolution on the behalf of the protagonist, who leaves behind the isolation related to her mother's death, a sign of a certain overcoming of her mother's grief, and instead uses her characteristic humour to talk about her. She even manages to express herself honestly about the memory of her mother., i.e., her mother's memorial lunch (episode 5, season 1). J. Wilson-Scott argues that Fleabag's mother is simultaneously absent and omnipresent through breast imagery:

A form of feminine symbolism frequently associated with sexuality, breasts also have the power to evoke motherhood, all the more important in narratives in which a mother is absent, and it is through extensive breast imagery in *Fleabag* that the lost mother comes to be omnipresent. (2020, 276)

3.2. Fleabag and her persona through humour: the Female Trickster

3.2.1. Trickster's motifs

Jung's archetype of the trickster is embodied by a disruptive, playful, foolish male or female character. Associated with the shadow, this archetype expresses a willingness to experiment with repressed impulses.

The presence of a trickster in a narrative is detectable through a series of defining features and motifs of this character type. According to Helena Bassil-Morozow (2020), these are entrapment, shapeshifting, boundary-breaking, having a nickname instead of a name or having several names, the presence of animals, boundless creativity, loss of control, dissolution of the character at the end of the narrative, scatological jokes and promiscuousness. The subject of analysis, the eponymous protagonist, clearly exhibits many of these characteristics or motifs: entrapment, having no name, loss of control, presence of animals, scatological jokes and promiscuousness.

We may find an early instance of entrapment in the *Odyssey*, the episode in which Odysseus is trapped in Ogygia by the nymph Calypso, entrapment gibe is frequently identified in trickster narratives as a physical imprisonment. Nonetheless, entrapment can be metaphorical or symbolic as well. In *Fleabag* we find the latter. Fleabag is entrapped in a range of problematic conducts that lead her to feel frustrated, confused and guilty about her decisions in life, and hence, unable to move forward and leave behind the current state of paralysis. Fleabag's behaviour might remind us to James Joyce's *Dubliners*, which portrayed the widespread spiritual and moral paralysis of Dubliners at the time. The city of London might function as a symbolic prison: "I'm in a cab. I can go anywhere. So I tell him to take me to... my flat." (32), similar to the way Dublin works for Evelyn in the eponymous short story, included in *Dubliners*. Evelyn has the desire to leave Dublin for Buenos Aires, and yet, she is unable to leave the capital, unlike Fleabag. The latter not only has the possibility of going anywhere, but also the freedom to pursue another path in life after overcoming the death of her mother and of Boo, and after changing her unhealthy habits. Though Fleabag is aware that she can change her life, she decides to go back to a familiar place. Her paralysis seems to prevail over her urge to

escape from everyday routine. The protagonist is incapable of letting her feelings of guilt go away, for two reasons: on one hand, she wants to torture herself because she feels responsible for Boo's death, and on the other, because she has become so accustomed to living in this way that it is now a comfortable and does not actually want to leave.

As mentioned before, the presence of nicknames and thus, the absence of titular names is crucial for the play. Helena Bassil-Morozow believes that "having a nickname instead of a name marks the trickster's departure from the norm; it demonstrates its inability to belong to society (and the state) that aims to record individuals' credentials and to neatly profile them." (2020, 37). Fleabag, having no name of her own, is, in effect, a marginal character who disobeys social norms.

Bassil-Morozow comments on the loss of control motif that "[a] trickster narrative is a story of loss of control, of temporarily existing in a liminal space: in its course, the characters (including the protagonist) and their environment undergo a transformation brought about by chance, chaos or other unpredictable forces" (2020, 34). In *Fleabag*, there is no grand tragic collective event such as a war or a famine, it is just the disruption of the small community of family and friends whose life is disturbed by the deaths of Boo and her mother. The protagonist, then, embarks on a journey towards her wellbeing, in which she will have to overcome the liminal situation in which she is, leaving behind the shield of humour that kept her stranded in a marginal zone.

Hillary, Boo's guinea pig, is an essential part of Fleabag's life, since she is her friend's last remain. This creates an ambivalent relation between the animal and the protagonist. According to Bassil-Morozow, in trickster narratives animals embody the trickster's energy as well. Moreover, they are usually related to shapeshifting, for the reason that most tricksters have altered, at some point of the story, their appearance from human to for an animal-like. In a sense, such metamorphosis is what occurs with Boo and Hillary. Boo, also an unruly character, much similar to Fleabag in personality, died and her soul, presumably, was then transmitted to Hillary. Jung, on his part, explains that the animal motif emerges in order to "show the transitional nature of the trickster; the fluidity of its consciousness as it learns to become human but is not there yet" (Bassil-Morozow, 2020, 39). This liminal space in which the trickster dwells might be equivalent to the mourning process the protagonist has been living through. Fleabag has been residing in a space between the depression for having lost two love objects and her new reality of overcoming said loss. In this in-between space, Hillary functions as the

transition, as Fleabag's helper in taking a step forward in her path towards personal growth and stability.

Fleabag, parallel to other tricksters, is obsessed with sex, with meaningless encounters with men and with the consequent emotional detachment and dissatisfaction. The reason of such obsession has been discussed in the previous section of the analysis. However, the connotations of Fleabag's obsession with sex are different from those in male tricksters. The female is judged and pointed at because of her gender and insofar as it clashes with what is expected in a woman in society.

Finally, the last motif present in Fleabag is scatological jokes. As we now have learnt, Fleabag's humour, a major feature of her character, is mostly scatological and is mainly expressed through taboo-breaking jokes. She opens up with comments that are not well received coming from a woman: she talks about the period, defecation and female sexuality: "I stood staring at a handprint on my wall from when I had a threesome on my period." (2016, 16); "Boo loved poo stories, so couldn't actually deal with the glory of this one". (28); "The TV has gone and it smells like he did a shit. He never used to shit in the flat. He was really weird about it. Used to go to the pub over the road." (43, 44). Fleabag, like every female trickster, expresses her anarchic energy through humour, which becomes an instrument of resistance against feminine standards. The protagonist uses humour to fight against the imposed female persona, which tends to conform a determinate canon that is misogynistic, old-fashioned and oppresses every woman who longs to break social life conventions that entrap human beings into inauthentic personas.

3.2.2. Female persona vs female trickster: Claire and Fleabag

What is, then, the standard of womanhood? In *Fleabag*, we find a perfect example of this: Claire. We briefly mentioned before the differences between the protagonist and her sister. Claire reproduces the features of the "good woman": she is a good wife and (step)mother, has a decent and stable job, and does not say bad words. Although Claire is supposed to have a satisfactory life, she is still unhappy. At the feminist conference, Claire makes it clear to her sister that she was willing to leave her persona behind in order to follow her dream job in Finland, and finally own her agency and her autonomy as a woman. Fleabag's sister has finally realized that she had been wearing a mask in order to play along the social game, to fit in in a world full of manipulation and deception. However, the risks of escaping from a comfortable life were so huge that she decided to play her female persona, which, she feels, is at a far

remove from her true self. H. Bassil-Morozow claims that Claire is afraid of her own thoughts and emotions, and blames Fleabag for her attempt to pursue a new life:

FLEABAG. You're not going to Finland.

SISTER. No.

FLEABAG. Why is he 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. (46, 47)

Claire prefers to believe her husband instead of her sister so as to maintain her life in order. It is only in the TV series where we can perceive certain trickster-like conducts such as when she confesses having had a miscarriage, thus ruining the image of a “perfect family” (episode 1, season 2), or when she finally decides to escape to Finland with her coworker Klare (episode 6, season 2).

On the other hand, there is Fleabag: a postmodern trickster. She finds her mental and physical agency through her sexuality and strange behaviour. Fleabag is not in search of perfection, but in search of a way to express herself freely, which means disobeying restricted social norms. She is the embodiment of the shadow and of the trickster archetype. Thus, she releases her repressed impulses, which includes politically incorrect jokes and sexual random encounters. She creates chaos around her and moments of embarrassing so that sometimes people (specially, Claire, her father, Martin) question the kind of life she is leading. However, the result of Fleabag's troublesome behaviour and her view of life is emptiness, rather than fulfilment. She constantly challenges social norms, and, as a result, she remains trapped in a liminal space in which she is and feel detached from her fellow human being. Her comic behaviour, provisionally works as a way to overcome the death of her mother and of Boo, becomes other mask she puts on to never reach a deep level of intimacy.

3.2.3. Fleabag and feminism

Fleabag has always had a complicated relationship with feminism. We have seen that she is quite disappointed about the equalitarian movement. Fleabag, despite her rebellious nature, wants to be perceived as a “good feminist”, someone who is in total control over her own body and mind. Feminism then works as a maternal figure for Fleabag since, on the one hand, the movement serves as a powerful support she does not want to be disappointed; but, on the other, she does not take the movement seriously, as if she had already given up the fight for an equality. This ambivalent relationship, similar to a mother-daughter relationship, is expressed thus:

So, 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. (26)

This scene is part of the feminist conference where Fleabag and Claire attend at the beginning of the play. She has the desire not let down the movement. In this scene, both characters experiment the same sense of shame and guilt for not being “good enough feminists”. Such feeling arises from the persona that both adopt, which in the case of Claire, is frequently present in her conduct and social interactions, whereas in Fleabag’s case it is basically non-existent. Both characters want to feel part of the group of women gathered in the conference room. They want to be good feminists and be able to give up for instance, the desire of having ‘the perfect body’ that the media encourage women to covet. However, they fail to achieve their own agency regarding the image of their body. Said sense of guilt for not being a good enough feminist will haunt Fleabag throughout the play. In the scene where Fleabag and her father have a conversation in the latter’s house, she says: “I have a horrible feeling I’m a greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, mannish-looking, morally bankrupt woman who can’t even call herself a feminist.” (32). Fleabag has a conflict with feminism, since she is constantly trying to have the movement’s approval as a substitute of her mother’s.

In regards to the other side of the relationship with feminism, Fleabag affirms: “I’m trying to read an article about how the word ‘feminist’ has apparently become dirty. I try to engage, but

it just makes me think of a bunch of dirty little feminists” (20). This illustrates the way the protagonist’s negligence is covered with playfulness. Fleabag makes fun of the movement as if it did nothing to do with her, revealing a sense of nonchalance and indifference.

According to M. E. Flaherty (2022), the character of Fleabag embodies dissociative feminism, a new wave of the feminism which is frequently represented in social media and TV series. This new wave of the equalitarian movement involves a sense of nihilism, self-defeat and detachment. Emmeline Clein, who coined the term in 2019, explains that “dissociative feminism is nihilistic and self-destructive, encouraging women to ‘give up’ on advocating for gender equality and cope by detaching from reality.” (M. E. Flaherty, 2022, 1, 2). Flaherty believes that dissociative feminism is a reaction to the patriarchy panopticon⁴ who controls women’s behaviour through the male gaze⁵ (2022, 11). Feminists of this persuasion are encouraged to relinquish the resilient and determined attitude inherent to feminism, and are aided instead to accept that they cannot alter their unprivileged and discriminated situation. Fleabag, who was already detached from reality after the loss of her mother and Boo, embraces the nihilistic vision of dissociative feminism. However, in her final monologue, she admits that her trickster attitude has been noxious and negative towards her interaction with the world and such archetype has been sort of a stronghold to fence of the pain caused by both deaths.

Therefore, Fleabag’s relationship with feminism is similar to the ambivalent mother-daughter relation: Fleabag longs for acceptance, yet adopts an alternative attitude of by detachment. The author of the play, Phoebe Waller-Bridge, maintains said conflictive relationship as follows:

Her relationship with feminism is so complex because she is vulnerable with it. She doesn’t understand the rules of it. She knows in her bones that it’s the thing she wants to be and she wants to identify as a feminist but she feels like she’s letting feminism down all the time. (Phoebe Waller-Bridge, 2020, 00: 38 – 00: 46)

3.2.4. Fleabag and humour

Fleabag’s humour is quite British since it is also a combination of incongruency, attitude of superiority and wit. Fleabag applies humour not only to taboo themes such as the period or female sexuality but also to situations or topics where it is not acceptable. Taking for instance

⁴ M. E. Flaherty’s gendered panopticon springs from Michael Foucault’s concept of panopticon: a way of controlling human beings who are being supervised in a prison without being aware of it. Flaherty takes this term and applies it to a gender-based situation in which women are the ones imprisoned in the cells that are controlled by men.

⁵The term, coined by the film theorist Laura Mulvey in 1975, consists of the phallogocentrism pervading the film industry, which sees women as a mere object, represented according to the male point of view.

the following extract: “And I spend the rest of the day wondering... / Do I have a massive arsehole?” (34). Fleabag speaks clearly about her sexuality and is not afraid of not behaving in acceptable ways. The protagonist does not take herself seriously, which, according to George Orwell is the aim of a joke: “[the aim of a joke] is not to degrade the human being, but to remind him that he is already degraded.” (T. Eagleton, 2021, 21).

Feminism is another topic that is also a target of her wit. As we have already seen, Fleabag’s relationship with the movement is quite complex, that is why she uses humour in order to make fun of things that she does not completely understand, to attenuate or normalise certain operations such as abortion, which is the theme of the song that Fleabag and Boo sing while drinking at the café: “Another lunch break, another abortion. / Another piece of cake, another two, fuck-it, twenty cigarettes. / And we’re happy, so happy to be modern women.” (31), or for the sake of joking. It is evident that the abortion joke is made in order to normalise the free election of women over their bodies. However, the incongruity factor also accounts for its comic effect (in the sense that abortion is not a usual topic to make fun of) alongside the superiority factor (since Fleabag’s joke does not express any sympathy for people who may feel sensitive after having been through an abortion).

Lastly, the following joke is in relation to a really delicate topic as it is violence against women:

Middy. Still haven’t heard from my sister. Martin’s going to hate me. I picture his massive, Scottish head. Hope he hasn’t beaten the shit out of her or anything. No, he’d never do something as sexy as that.

I’m joking. Jesus. (36)

This is probably the joke that causes the greatest degree of rejection and disgust in the play. Fleabag follows her *modus operandi*, meaning that in order to make this joke she applies an attitude of the superiority combined with incongruity and wit. Comicity stems not from its being fun, but its unexpectedness. Incongruity also lies in the combination of violence against women and sexuality, which is more in tune with a misogynist discourse, since the delight in such thing derives from the objectification of women. This brutal and ruthless joke, which at first seems out of context, is the perfect instance of how Fleabag uses humour as a mechanism not only for coping with the death of her mother and Boo but also to keep a distance from what Goffman calls the “game of social life”. The protagonist uses such jokes as a way to continue to live in the margins of society, to prevent having a real intimate connection with anyone.

Humour then functions in two different ways. First, to make Fleabag a relatable character to the reader/audience throughout the play/series. The disastrous life of the protagonist, the use of wit so as to hide a deep sense of grief and guilt, and the hints of vulnerability make Fleabag the perfect character to engage people who are feeling lost and lonesome, but also to represent postmodern dissociative feminism who is weary of battling against the patriarchal system. Secondly, humour works as a defence mechanism that aids her to cope with the loss of the two love objects, her mother and Boo. The psychiatrist G. E. Vaillant considers that humour is a mature defence mechanism defence which is frequently used by functional adults. However, the excessive use of humour has become counterproductive for the protagonist, since it makes her nearly inaccessible to encounter an intimate relation not only with men but also with her family and with her true self.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Two conclusions can be drawn from the argument developed in this BA Thesis. The first one is that Fleabag uses humour effectively to cope with the loss of her mother and of Boo since it helps her to understand her new reality in which her mother and Boo do not exist. And the second one is the Fleabag's frequent use of humour to overcome her mourning makes her come near to Jung's archetypal trickster whose features are playfulness, rebellion and inhabiting a liminal space. Thus, the defence mechanism that began by helping her to overcome her grief has ended up pushing her to the margins of society where she is unable to establish intimate and honest relationships. However, Fleabag's disruptive behaviour, associated to that of the trickster, frees her from participating in the social game, in which each individual adopts a persona, puts on a mask that hides his/her real self in order to be socially accepted. To this must be added the sense of guilt for Boo's death that torments Fleabag, which keeps her anchored to the past and prevents her from fully healing from her grief. Ultimately, it is important to note that the mother's death has marked the protagonist's personal development, which includes the inability to maintain close relationships, the obsession with sex, the hypersexualisation of her body and the imperative urge to be desired and loved. The absence of the mother, in addition to the lack of support from the rest of the family, leads Fleabag to adopt a disturbing and hilarious attitude.

The analysis of Fleabag's narcissistic character would constitute an interesting line of future research. The protagonist possesses certain narcissistic traits as a consequence of the great amount of introverted libido after the objects in which it was invested are lost. This could be examined as a case of pathological narcissism, or, on the contrary, a case of provisional narcissism in which the ego tries to cope with the loss of the loved objects. Secondly, the adaption of grief and guilt in the TV series Fleabag, based on the eponymous monologue, could be also a worthy object of future research. The core of the analysis would focus on the similarities differences in the ways in which the character's development is presented in both. Moreover, the analysis of grief in the film *Aftersun* directed by Charlotte Wells (2022), which focuses on the protagonist's memory of a holiday in Turkey with her father as a child. The central point of the film is the role of nostalgia as a way of coping with the loss of a loved one. Finally, it would be interesting to draw a comparative analysis of grief with the characters of Ophelia in *Hamlet* (1603), Bernarda in *La casa de Bernarda Alba* (written in 1936; first published and performed in 1945) and Fleabag in *Fleabag* (2016) that would consider questions of historical context, life stage and individual characteristics.

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