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En undersøkelse av stereotypier av mødre i *Fleabag* (2016) av Phoebe Waller-Bridge

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Abstract

The basis of this thesis is a close reading of the 2016 TV-series *Fleabag* written by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, exploring and investigating the maternal stereotypes that are presented. Waller-Bridge reuses the fairytale narrative in telling the story, which is showcased through tropes and conventions that are typical for the fairytale genre. The thesis revolves mainly around three characters and which stereotype they are given, and how it is displayed, reviewing one character at a time. Starting off with the absent mother, and the effects of her absence on the narrative and surrounding characters. Followed by the “wicked stepmother” or Godmother in this case, and then a duality of stereotypes with both stepmother and biological mother. In order to put the maternal stereotypes into perspective, a short discussion of the title character is also included, and how she is presented as neither maternal nor stereotypical. Female relationships and mothers are discussed through close readings of dialogue and stage directions.

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1. Introduction

Fleabag is a British comedy-drama series written by and starring Phoebe Waller-Bridge, directed by Harry Bradbeer and Tim Kirkby. *Fleabag* was first written as a one-woman show premiering in Edinburgh in 2013, and was turned TV-series in 2016 and 2019.¹ The series won critical acclaim and built a strong fan base based on its honesty, both sexual and emotional, while exploring characters that were unlikable and relatable at the same time. In terms of innovation, what is perhaps most interesting about the series is the way that Waller-Bridge thematizes and criticizes different types of maternal stereotypes and female relationships. In this thesis, I am going to focus on representations of different types of maternal stereotypes. The thesis will analyse three different characters, the absent mother, Godmother, and Claire, and shed light on which stereotype they are given and why, while supporting the arguments with theory. Women and mothers are subjects to stereotyping all throughout their lives, resulting in negative attitudes against them, which is why I have chosen this exact topic for my thesis.

Seeing as the TV-series follows the title character of *Fleabag*, the thesis will do close readings of stage directions and dialogue of these three female characters interacting with her. We are shown the world through the eyes of *Fleabag* (we never learn her actual name). Keeping in mind that she is an unreliable narrator, and the rest of the characters are presented through her.

1.2 The Fairytale narrative

On the basis that Wilson-Scott classifies *Fleabag* as a “modern-day fairytale”² this thesis will make arguments and draw conclusions based on tropes, conventions, and stereotypes that are typical for the fairytale genre. However, disagreeing with the wording of “modern-day”, *Fleabag* reuses these conventions and tropes from the fairytale genre, without directly reinventing them to become more “modern”, there is nothing really new about it in relation to the genre. Marina Warner defines the fairytale, first of all, as a “familiar story”, with other characteristics being subordinate.³ The series thematizes topics such as friendship, grief, family, and romantic relationships, in a familiar manner, both in the sense that the viewer can

¹ Hannah Jane Parkinson, “Farewell *Fleabag*: The Most Electrifying, Devastating TV in Years,” *The Guardian*, April 8, 2019, sec. Television & radio, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2019/apr/08/farewell-fleabag-the-most-electrifying-devastating-tv-in-years>.

² Joanna Wilson-Scott, “Both Absent and Omnipresent: The Dead Mother in *Fleabag*,” *Feminist Media Studies* 20, no. 2 (2020): 273, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1546207>.

³ Marina Warner, *Once Upon a Time: A Short History of Fairy Tale* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 14.

relate to the topics, and it is familiar to the fairytale genre. Waller-Bridge presents a series of traditions from the fairytale genre such as the wicked stepmother, the absent mother, the weak or passive father, and the abused child looking to make her life a little better. Seeing as all of these tropes are reused in *Fleabag*, this thesis would rather classify the series as an “urban fairytale”, in the sense that it plays out in London rather than a castle in the woods. Warner writes: “Fairy tales were denounced as a blunt tool of patriarchy, the bourgeoisie, cosmetic surgeons, the fashion industry, and psychoanalysts bent on curbing girls’ energies and desires.»⁴ This as a result of women who grew up on fairytales in the post-war era, protesting against the lies and stereotyping made upon female characters in fairytales. In a sense, fairytales have contributed to cement women’s roles in society and in the home, for a long time and women are still affected by these stereotypes to this day.

2. The absent mother

The absent mother in *Fleabag* is erased from the narrative by the father as he marries someone new, however, she is still present as a cultural framework for her daughters. “The most powerful way in which a mother’s work is erased and devalued is through her death or absence”.⁵ Berit Åström reuses the term “symbolic annihilation” in describing the resilient trope of the absent or dead mother in popular culture, a trope in which the mother is routinely removed from narratives. Although absent, the mother still serves a purpose in the telling of the story, whether that be constituting an emotional crisis or a temporary setback for the child, or simply just to be referred to in passing. While in some stories, the absent mother can allow for the father and child to form a deeper emotional bond than what they were able to have while the mother was still present.⁶ Nevertheless, the absence of the mother does not mean she is lacking in relevance in the telling of the story, the absent mother in *Fleabag* is absent, yet omnipresent. She is frequently mentioned in dialogue, we see flashbacks of her funeral, additionally she is present through extensive symbolism creating imagery of the maternal throughout the series. As mentioned above, an argument can be made stating that *Fleabag* can be classified as an “urban fairytale”, the fairytale genre often being characterized by an absent mother, a weak or passive father, alongside a wicked or evil stepmother.⁷ The passing or absence of the mother naturally enables the father, who might be weak and passive

⁴ Warner, *Once Upon a Time*, 117.

⁵ Berit Åström, “The Symbolic Annihilation of Mothers in Popular Culture: Single Father and the Death of the Mother,” *Feminist Media Studies* 15, no. 4 (2015): 594, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2018.1546207>.

⁶ Åström, 594.

⁷ Wilson-Scott, “Both Absent and Omnipresent: The Dead Mother in *Fleabag*,” 275.

due to grieving the loss of his wife, and therefore perhaps more likely to neglect his children. Seeing as the father in *Fleabag* has two adult daughters, it shall not be argued that he is directly neglectful of his children, but more so passive and distant, and arguably an enabling element in Godmother's negative behaviours.

The absent mother in *Fleabag* is mentioned for the first time already in the very first episode. Claire asks her sister if she had washed her hands after a trip to the restroom, Fleabag answers with "its not like I grew up without a mother."⁸ We do know that the mother died of cancer three years prior to the start of the series, when Fleabag was around thirty.⁹ With Fleabag saying this, it is giving the viewer the impression that even though their mother is dead, she still did her "motherly duty" of teaching them basic life skills such as washing one's hands after a trip to the restroom. Maybe even saying that even though their mother is no longer with them, she still does not need to be replaced. It could also be argued from this passage that the mother was the parent who taught them basic skills while their father had other duties around the home, possibly not relating as heavily to childcare, which would explain why the two daughters are not as emotionally connected to their father after the death of the mother. Additionally, furthering the stereotype in which the mother is the one in charge of childcare. Fleabag explains to the viewer: "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."¹⁰ This is also the first time Godmother is introduced in conversation. It seems as the father is aware of the lack of female influence in his daughters' lives, which is arguably the reason why he sends them to these feminist lectures, as well as a silent retreat on Mother's day, alongside, perhaps, a feeling of guilt, and realization that he alone is not capable of nurturing his daughters to the extent that he knows he should. One could also choose to look at the quotation above as the father also being aware that he cannot replace his late wife with another maternal figure for his two daughters, realizing that his new significant other will never be seen or act as a replacement mother for neither Claire nor Fleabag.

The gilded torso serves as a symbol of the maternal for Fleabag throughout the series, riddled with humour but still giving Fleabag a sense of closure after the passing of her mother. The gilded torso is a sculpture of a woman which Fleabag steals from Godmother's art collection, and described as an expression of how women are subtle warriors, strong at

⁸ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 17.

⁹ Waller-Bridge, 73.

¹⁰ Waller-Bridge, 17.

heart. Fleabag asks Godmother if she can have the sculpture but is turned down, resulting in Fleabag stealing it off of Godmother's shelf, hides it in her clothes and reveals it to the audience in the taxi headed home.¹¹ The act of stealing the gilded torso can be interpreted as a reclamation of the lost mother, and at the same time, an act of denial of Godmother's maternal role.¹² The gilded torso keeps going back and forth, from owner to owner, throughout the whole TV-show, ending with her giving it back as a wedding present to her father and Godmother in the final episode. Symbolizing that the maternal touches each of the characters in different ways. The sculpture makes its way from character to character, and both Martin and Claire possess it for a short period of time, Fleabag hands it out as a "prize" at an award ceremony, it keeps making its way on to the screen. After Fleabag gifts the sculpture back to Godmother in episode 6 of the second series, Godmother tells her that out of all the pieces of art she could steal, she found it strange that the gilded torso was the one that she took. Fleabag asks why and Godmother reveals that the sculpture was based on Fleabag's late mother, Fleabag is enraged.¹³ The journey of the gilded torso does not end there, however, the very last moments of the series contains the sculpture based on her mother. Priest has left Fleabag, and there is a bitter sweet vibe where the audience knows that Priest followed his heart, and Fleabag has finally been given a healthy ending to a complicated but loving affair, giving her a sense of closure for all the toxic relationships from her past. We see her pulling out the sculpture from her bag, but remaining silent. The stage directions goes as follows: "She looks at it... Her golden mother, sat with her at a bus stop in the middle of the night. Just the two of them."¹⁴ Fleabag walks off camera, and that is the ending of the series. Ending the show with Fleabag finding comfort in having her symbolic mother by her side at the heartbreaking ending of an affair takes away some of the power that the absent mother trope holds over some works of popular fiction today. Fleabag can be at peace with the breakup, finding closure in the comfort of her omnipresent, golden mother, even if she is no longer with her in person, she is with her at heart, and as a symbol through the gilded torso.

Waller-Bridge also establishes an image of the maternal and the absent mother through viewing and conversations about breasts. "Dad book us appointments once a year to make sure that our tits don't turn on us like Mum's did"¹⁵ The mother died of breast cancer,

¹¹ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 30-33.

¹² Wilson-Scott, "Both Absent and Omnipresent: The Dead Mother in Fleabag," 287.

¹³ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 386-87.

¹⁴ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 407.

¹⁵ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 134.

despite having a double mastectomy, which Fleabag explains to the camera, and that it was particularly hard because she had “amazing boobs”.¹⁶ It is clear that the father is worried about his daughters falling subject to the same disease that killed his wife, and is trying to do his part by scheduling these appointments to make sure his daughters stay healthy. Breasts have been a symbol of maternity and femininity for a long time¹⁷, having the mother fall ill to such a feminine disease may be a deliberate choice. Even though the mother dies before the series starts, it can be seen as an act of foreshadowing. The reason being breasts being one the first things an infant encounters when entering the world, a symbol of maternity, and then having ones breasts removed along with the symbolism of the maternal, and therefore foreshadowing two daughters losing their mother.

3. Godmother

There are several apparent similarities between the character of Godmother and the fairytale archetype of the wicked stepmother, such as both verbal and physical abuse, forcing involuntary labour on her step-daughter, and taking advantage of the weak or passive father figure. Godmother does act as the antagonist in Fleabag’s story, however she is a more complex and multi dimensional character than the typical wicked fairytale stepmother. The typical fairytale stepmother is usually seen as a pure antagonist with only evil intentions and plans, but what is interesting about the character of Godmother is that although she appears as a strong, resourceful and powerful woman, she is deeply insecure and lonely. In familiarizing with the character of Godmother it becomes more evident the more you analyse, that she is, in fact, a tragic character.

There is a sense of irony in the naming of the character, Godmother. Cultural associations with the word may lead people to think about “bibbidi-bobbidi-boo” versions, that is, kind and generous fairy godmothers that aid the protagonist in getting her wishes fulfilled, or a close female friend or relative in charge of taking care of you if you were to be orphaned one day. Godmother’s relationship to Claire and Fleabag did start out as the latter. In a flashback of the mother’s funeral, Godmother is taking care of the girls, making sure that they are doing fine considering the circumstances. Here, Godmother enters the frame to tell the girls that people are starting to arrive, and the stage directions tell us that: “The girls

¹⁶ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 73.

¹⁷ Carmen Webb, Natalie Jacox, and Claire Temple-Oberle, “The Making of Breasts: Navigating the Symbolism of Breasts in Women Facing Cancer,” *Canadian Society of Plastic Surgeons* 27, no. 1 (2019): 50, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/2292550318800500>.

smile. They liked her back then.”¹⁸ This makes it clear that the two sisters have not always disliked Godmother, so why is their relationship so strained only three years later? In another flashback of the funeral, the two sisters are speaking with Boo, Fleabag’s best friend, observing Dad from the other side of the church. They watch as Godmother approaches Dad when Fleabag exclaims: “My God. She is shameless. (...) She’s definitely trying to fuck my dad.”¹⁹ There are many possible answers as to why Fleabag is having such a strong reaction to the interaction between Godmother and Dad here. Perhaps the reaction is triggered by her not wanting her mother to be replaced such a short time after her death, let her father have some time and space to grieve the loss of his wife before having to move on. Another answer could be that she is feeling territorial over her father, as mentioned earlier in the trope of the absent mother, the absence of the mother may open up for a closer relationship between father and child.²⁰ No matter what Fleabag’s reaction may be triggered by, this is arguably the moment Godmother is type casted as the “evil queen” or “wicked stepmother”, with her entering a new role in the urban fairytale, from a previous, more loving role. A common trope for dying mothers in Hollywood films, is to try to find a woman to replace them once they are gone. Someone who can love and care for their children alongside with the father.²¹ There is a possibility that the absent mother also did that with Godmother. It is revealed that Godmother used to be the mother’s student before the children were born, and that is how the godparent relationship came to life.²² So even though Fleabag, Claire and Dad all know that Godmother can never act as a replacement for their late mother, there is a possibility that the mother saw Godmother as a fitting replacement. What is also interesting to look into is how the grief surrounding them, seems to reduce Claire and Fleabag to children, which is something that is thematized throughout the series. The sisters argue like children even though they are both adults, but with a more child-like world view as a result of the death of their mother. Just like children in a fairytale, they are not allowed in certain parts of their childhood home once the new, evil stepmother moves in. Fleabag and Claire are no longer allowed upstairs where they both used to have their bedrooms as children, due to Godmother moving her art studio to the second floor of the house.²³ In a sense, their childhood home is

¹⁸ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 326.

¹⁹ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 328.

²⁰ Åström, “The Symbolic Annihilation of Mothers in Popular Culture: Single Father and the Death of the Mother,” 594.

²¹ Wilson-Scott, “Both Absent and Omnipresent: The Dead Mother in *Fleabag*,” 276.

²² Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 320.

²³ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 143.

the fairytale castle with forbidden sections, a place where they used to be free to roam, is now under control by the wicked stepmother.

The wicked stepmother forces Cinderella to work for her, degrading her and making her feel less than, all the while not being allowed to go to the ball. Fleabag is allowed to the ball, or Godmother's "sexhibition" in this case, however, being put to work as soon as she enters the room. In the final episode of the first series, Godmother hosts an art exhibition devoted to sex, bodies, and power. The "sexhibition" includes, among other things, the bidet where she had her first orgasm, paintings made mid-climax, and a wall of penises. Fleabag enters the exhibition, and is quickly handed a tray filled with glasses of champagne. Godmother also puts a sticky badge on her shirt that says "here to help".²⁴ Compared to the wicked stepmother of Cinderella, Godmother is not directly mean when instructing her stepdaughter to work for her, more so passive aggressive. By contrast, Claire is not asked to work, but to enjoy her time at the exhibition and mingle with family and friends. After some time, Fleabag rebels against the wicked stepmother, and drops her tray of champagne, quite dramatically, on the ground while making eye contact with Godmother. Fleabag rebelling directly against Godmother, instead of sneaking out behind her back like Cinderella did, makes her, in a sense, also rebel against the fairytale tropes of the series. Even though Fleabag is the "lost child" of this urban fairytale, she does not label herself as one of the characters in the way she does with the other female characters. There is a slight irony in how Fleabag, as the narrator, sees herself as a human being, but see the other female characters, as women.

Godmother presents herself as a sexual woman and a feminist, as we have clearly seen in the episode of the "sexhibition", she does not however, avoid slut-shaming when it comes to the verbal abuse of her stepdaughter. According to dictionary.com the definition of slut-shaming is: "the practice of disparaging women, and occasionally men, for acting in a manner that violates "norms" regarding sexually appropriate behavior".²⁵ Godmother does this by making comments such as: "I was just pleased that you found someone else so fast"²⁶, or "you do turn over fast"²⁷ when interacting with Fleabag's dates or stories of dating. Victoria Smith has some insightful thoughts on the backlash of second-wave feminism "the outsourcing of misogyny, so men no longer has to do all that exhausting misogyny-ing

²⁴ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 170.

²⁵ "Slut-Shaming Meaning & Origin | Slang by Dictionary.Com," *Dictionary.Com* (blog), September 10, 2018, <https://www.dictionary.com/e/slang/slut-shaming/>.

²⁶ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 94.

²⁷ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 138.

themselves”.²⁸ Godmother seems to not think of Fleabag’s casual sex and dating life to be on the same wavelength as what she defines as “a good feminist”, and therefore is very direct and honest about her opinions whilst trying to disguise it as “nice” or “helpful” comments. Smith writes in another chapter that these types of generational tensions in feminism also resemble those in fairytales: resourceful orphans (or in our case, a motherless daughter) versus a wicked stepmother.²⁹

Godmother’s abuse against her stepdaughter does not end with the slut-shaming, she also has quite a few comments on Fleabag’s appearance, and at another point, slaps her across the face. To mention one example: “You really do look ghastly darling”.³⁰ To circle back to the starting point of this section, Godmother is a tragic and insecure character, the abuse is directed towards Fleabag rather than Claire out of, most likely, jealousy. Dad hosts a memorial lunch for his late wife, where Claire, Fleabag, and Godmother are all present. Godmother talks about how it is a sad day, and then proceeds to get the champagne in a cheerful manner. Later on in the episode, Dad is making a speech in honor of his late wife when the stage directions tell us that: “Godmother is visibly jealous. She can’t bear it when he says her name”.³¹ It is also mentioned multiple times throughout the series that Fleabag is so much like her mom, Godmother feels envious of her husband’s late wife, and the daughter that reminds them of her.

After peeling back the layers of Godmother’s personality and her as a representation of a maternal stereotype, the sexual aspect of her character in relation to the maternal is also thought-provoking. As we have seen, Godmother sees herself as a sexually liberated human being, but that is also something that in the eyes of society, does not always agree with the image of the mother. Møllegaard writes: “Myths of the good mother are intricately tied to social values about the mother’s body as soft, rounded, yielding, gentle, and ample, but not as sexy”.³² Seeing as Godmother is so open and honest about her own body and sexuality, it can almost be seen as a form of transgression. Transgressing in the sense that firstly, we do not see good mothers as sexy beings, and secondly, we do not see older women as sexy beings. With these cultural associations in mind, the viewer may find it altogether easier to demonize Godmother and label her a hag, even when looking away from her negative behaviours. All

²⁸ Victoria Smith, *HAGS The Demonisation of Middle-Aged Women* (Great Britain: Fleet, 2023), 200.

²⁹ Smith, *HAGS*, 230.

³⁰ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 32.

³¹ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 141.

³² Kirsten Møllegaard, “Dead, But Not Gone: Mother and Othermother in Holly Black and Ted Naifeh’s *The Good Neighbors*,” in *The Absent Mother in the Cultural Imagination*, 1st ed. (New York, NY: Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2017), 182.

negative traits aside, she is still a woman trying to navigate the patriarchy, just like the other female characters in *Fleabag*.

4. Claire – the neutral stepmother

The character of Claire represents a duality within maternal stereotypes in this series, both as a stepmother and as a biological mother. This section of the thesis will focus more heavily on the latter, seeing as it may be a more significant element in attempting to understand Claire as a character, and how she acts a representation of the maternal in this series. Claire is Fleabag's more put-together, and sterner older sister. When first introduced in episode one of the first season, Fleabag describes her sister as "Uptight and beautiful, and probably anorexic"³³ which is a stark contrast to the title character in the sense that Fleabag appears to be more relaxed and easy-going. As stated above, Claire represents two different maternal stereotypes in the BBC series, as she is presented both as a stepmother and as a biological mother. Claire is married to Martin, who has a son from a previous relationship, fifteen-year-old Jake. In contrast to Godmother, Claire is neither viewed nor presented as the "evil" or "wicked" type of stepmother. In fact, viewers may not even have a direct opinion on her role as a stepmother seeing as it is not a focal point for this character. In the series, we get to know Claire as more of a career woman, hosting a business birthday, an award ceremony for women in business, and having a job with a high social status with a big office. There are, however, some scenes in the series in which we can get a picture of what Claire is like as a stepmother. In the fourth episode of the first series, Jake is introduced for the first time in conversation between Fleabag and Claire. They are talking about a possible big promotion coming up for Claire in Finland, where she tells Fleabag that she will turn it down if offered to her, because Martin thinks it will be unfair to Jake. Fleabag turns to the camera and tells the viewers "Jake's her stepson. (...) He freaks out if she's gone for longer than a day and has this thing about trying to get in the bath with her".³⁴ This statement is picked up in a later episode, as well, where, in episode six of the second series, the first thing Jake says when entering the frame is: "Where's Claire?"³⁵ There is an apparent emotional bond between Jake and Claire, even if it might be slightly one sided. Claire is portrayed as a slightly cold and introverted character, which makes it all the more surprising that the bond is so strong. It also serves as an opposite to the wicked stepmother archetype, having the child be so fond of the

³³ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 16.

³⁴ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 124.

³⁵ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 383.

stepmother. Claire is not a typical maternal person, but adopts the emotional and practical responsibilities of being a mother, even though she has an important job and other areas of responsibility. Considering that the bond between Claire and Jake appears to be one sided, it is also relevant to give some thought as to why Jake attaches so strongly to his stepmother rather than his biological father. We do not know anything about Jake's background, but it seems as if he struggles with some fear of abandonment, or lacking in attention from his father, as he latches so strongly onto Claire. Jake's biological mother is never mentioned, but we do get to know his biological father, Martin. Most of Fleabag's interactions with Martin include some form of conflict, whether that be him trying to kiss her, or her making comments about his obvious alcohol problem, both directly to him and to the camera. The viewer does however get a description of what he is like in his relationship and as a father, in the very last episode. In this scene, Martin is telling Claire about the reasons for them not to get a divorce. "I mix up birthdays and I have an alcohol problem (...) I pick up Jake from shit, I make dessert for Easter (...) and I don't make you feel guilty for not having sex with me".³⁶ From this passage alone, Martin reveals that their relationship is nowhere near the definition of a "perfect marriage" or that he is the "perfect father". It can be argued from this passage that Claire functions as the "default parent" for Jake. The term "default parent" describes the one parent, presuming there are two, who is first priority when it comes to childcare and responsibilities around the home.³⁷ Therefore, if Claire functions as the "default parent" for Jake, it comes as no surprise that their emotional bond is stronger compared to the one with Martin. When looking at the unpaid labour of the home and childcare, as we see in the quotation, Martin makes dessert for easter, and drives Jake where he needs to go. Making the viewer assume that Claire is doing the rest of the unpaid work, which is not surprising seeing as women carry out about 60 percent more unpaid work than men.³⁸ Considering that an argument was made stating that the absent mother in *Fleabag* was the one in charge of childcare responsibilities, and the father in charge of other things, there is a sense of irony in how the generational relationships are echoed. Claire is taking the responsibilities of a traditional mother, just like her own mother, while the both Dad and Martin seems to take on work that does not necessarily involve childcare.

³⁶ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 393.

³⁷ Amber Thornton, "The Default Parent Syndrome: More Than Just a TikTok Trend | Psychology Today," November 14, 2022, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/the-balanced-working-mama/202211/the-default-parent-syndrome-more-just-tiktok-trend>.

³⁸ Smith, *HAGS*, 97.

4.1 Claire – the grieving mother

Compared to her role as a stepmother, Claire's role as a biological mother is more of a focal point in her storyline, which is why this section will attempt to do a more detailed analysis on the subject. In this episode the family are at a restaurant along with the Priest who is to wed Godmother and Dad later in the series. The episode is set a year after the first series, a year in which Fleabag and Claire have not spoken due to an unresolved argument regarding Martin. Claire goes to the bathroom and stays long enough for Fleabag to go check on her. When she enters, Claire asks Fleabag for a sanitary towel, it is then revealed that Claire is having a miscarriage rather than a regular period. Fleabag tries to help clean the blood of her sister's legs, but the act is quickly shut down. Instead of doing a close reading of the dialogue in this scene, the stage directions are an affective tool to understand how Claire handles the situation: "Emotion comes to the surface for a split second as she shuts the door to sort herself out. Beat. Fleabag waits. Claire comes out. All sorted."³⁹ Fleabag then tries to negotiate with Claire for them to go to hospital, in spite of that Claire does not want to make a big deal out of it, and wishes to stay at the family dinner as if nothing happened. In trying to understand the reason behind the choices made by Claire in this scene, there are two arguments that stand out. Number one being that she simply does not want to draw attention away from her dad and Godmother at the dinner they are hosting for the family, not wanting the focus and attention to be shifted over to her rather than the soon to be married couple. Which also signifies another common stereotypes about mothers, always putting others before themselves, to be a self-sacrificing "angel in the house".⁴⁰ Alternatively, argument number two being related to the shame and grief which follows a miscarriage, and what is often seen by society as an exaggerated and pathological response to what some see as a "minor occurrence".⁴¹ Seeing as the topic of Claire's miscarriage is repeatedly spoken about throughout the second series, it is more plausible that the second argument is the strongest one. Also supporting this argument, is Fleabag's act of "taking the fall" for the miscarriage. When coming back to the table with the rest of the family, Fleabag still wishes to take Claire to hospital, and refuses to sit down. When asked about it, Fleabag cannot think of any other excuse but to admit to the miscarriage herself, making sure not to involuntarily expose her sister.⁴² Throughout the series and especially this episode, Claire seems to be concerned with

³⁹ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 228.

⁴⁰ Rebecca Solnit, *The Mother of All Questions: Further Feminisms* (London: Granta Books, 2017), 9.

⁴¹ Nancy Gerber, "Grief, Shame, and Miscarriage," in *Interrogating Pregnancy Loss: Feminist Writings on Abortion, Miscarriage and Stillbirth* (Canada: Demeter Press, 2017), 45.

⁴² Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 233.

keeping up the façade of constant control and strength, all the while somewhat suppressing her own emotions, like we saw in the stage directions for this scene. Waller-Bridge's way of showcasing a trauma such as pregnancy loss also correlates with Gerber's writings about the stigma surrounding miscarriages; that is women are often hiding or silencing these types of stories of pain and trauma in fear of exposing themselves as ill-equipped or inadequate for the demands of motherhood.⁴³ Gerber's writing is about women who grieve the loss of pregnancies, and how they are dismissed as hysterical, over emotional and irrational.⁴⁴ So in a way, the patriarchal society is telling women to stay silent while experiencing such trauma, making mothers feel ashamed to share something that is indeed very normal, and as Rebecca Solnit puts it: "shame is a great silencer".⁴⁵

As mentioned earlier, Claire's miscarriage is a frequent topic in dialogue throughout the second series. In the second episode Claire meets Fleabag at her café to have a chat before they go to visit Dad and Godmother. Claire admits that no one knew about the pregnancy before she miscarried, not even Martin, who still believes that Fleabag was the one who miscarried at the family dinner. Claire proceeds to tell her sister that she never wants anyone to ever know about it, and that it is normal not to share the news before entering the second trimester.⁴⁶ Even though we do not know the exact age of Claire, we do know that Fleabag is 33 years old⁴⁷, and that Claire is her senior. Assuming that Claire is a couple of years older than her sister, she would be considered at advanced maternal age, previously known as a "geriatric pregnancy" and a higher risk pregnancy if she happens to be over 35 years old at the time of her estimated delivery date.⁴⁸ When having a baby at this age, there is an elevated risk of pregnancy loss. Something Claire is most likely painfully aware of seeing as her character is portrayed as a "control freak". More and more women choose to acquire an education and start a career before feeling inclined to reproduce⁴⁹, just like Claire, which for some, is too late. When talking about Claire's age in relation to her pregnancy, it is also worth while to mention how her life and career would be affected by having a baby at a later stage in life, or advanced maternal age. Like many other women, Claire has most likely been

⁴³ Gerber, "Grief, Shame, and Miscarriage" 43.

⁴⁴ Gerber, "Grief, Shame, and Miscarriage" 42.

⁴⁵ Solnit, *The Mother of All Questions*, 39.

⁴⁶ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 253.

⁴⁷ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 299.

⁴⁸ "Is Geriatric Pregnancy High Risk?," November 23, 2022, <https://www.nebraskamed.com/womens-health/pregnancy-birth/is-geriatric-pregnancy-high-risk>.

⁴⁹ Man Yee Mallory Leung, Fane Groes, and Raul Santaaulalia-Llopis, "The Relationship between Age at First Birth and Mother's Lifetime Earnings: Evidence from Danish Data," ed. Joshua L Rosenbloom, *PLOS ONE* 11, no. 1 (January 22, 2016): e0146989, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0146989>.

asked many times when she is planning to reproduce, as if women's reproductive activities are public business. Mothers who succeed in business are also sometimes seen to be neglecting someone, most often a child.⁵⁰ There is a strange juxtaposition in this, women's reproductive activities seem to be regarded as public business, while women's problems seem to be regarded as personal and private, at the same time, men's problems are public affairs. Also supporting this argument is Godmother's reaction when Claire admits to the miscarriage at Godmother and Dad's wedding: "Sorry, but whoever had a miscarriage, could you take it to the kitchen?"⁵¹ A comment that is trying to silence Claire further, even though she has stayed silent about the loss of her pregnancy all throughout the second series of *Fleabag*.

5. Fleabag

Before concluding this thesis, I find it necessary to also look at the character of Fleabag, seeing as she is the one presenting the other characters to the viewers. The only maternal aspect of the title character, is that she takes care of her guinea pig, Hilary, other than that, Fleabag does not present or label herself with any maternal stereotype as she does the other female characters in the series. There is an irony of her placing all other women in her life under a stereotype, except for herself. In a sense, she sees herself as a human being, but sees Claire, her mom, and Godmother, as women and mothers. Even her name being genderless underlines this view. The audience perceives Fleabag as a contemporary and liberated individual, but it is clear that her own thoughts about others are not as liberated, but more so reflects the societal viewpoint on women.

When it comes to placing Fleabag in the fairytale narrative, it has already been established that she is "the lost child" or the protagonist, however, she does not procure the happily ever after fairytale ending that is expected of this narrative. When looking at the romance between Fleabag and the Priest, in the end he makes the decision to stay with the church rather than continue to have a romantic relationship with Fleabag. In a feminist context, this is a rather captivating ending, having Fleabag end up by herself rather than with a man.

⁵⁰ Solnit, *The Mother of All Questions*, 9.

⁵¹ Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag, The Scriptures*, 391.

6. Conclusion

Placing such stereotypes on women in works of fiction and popular culture can be a double-edged sword. On one hand, it can help the viewer dissect and analyse a piece of fiction, and connect it to other work in an easier way, making the intertextuality more clear and nuanced. As seen in this thesis, where I have connected *Fleabag* to the fairytale genre to develop better understanding. As we have seen with Godmother, she is not the antagonist alone, she is a more multi-dimensional character than the other “wicked stepmothers” that are seen in classic fairytales. On the other hand, the stereotypes that are put on women in today’s patriarchal society can be harmful and generalizing. When thinking about just the word “stepmother”, a lot of people may automatically have negative associations or attitudes directed towards the word alone, perhaps even making it harder for women entering the role for the first time.

Claire, Godmother, and the absent mother are all valid and contemporary representations of mothers, some being more so than just mothers. Neither Claire nor Godmother are reduced to their motherhood alone, but still have other interesting facts and traits about them, such as careers and hobbies outside of the home. Claire even acting as an opposite to the “wicked stepmother” archetype. When it comes to the absent mother, she is more so reduced to her motherhood, in a very stereotypical and idealizing manner. The trope of the absent mother in *Fleabag* is reused in a way that have been seen a number of times before, in a very similar manner, considering it is a general trend in various works of popular fiction.

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