

Falling in Love With “Fleabag”

I’ve watched “Fleabag” more times than I care to admit, and I’ve stayed up until 2am rewatching clips and crying more times than that. But even a massive fan like myself struggles to understand how a show, with only 12 half-hour episodes and two seasons, has such a persistent grip on its audience years after its series finale. One reason is Phoebe Waller-Bridge, the show’s creator, titular character and sole writer, as the show was based on a one-woman play she wrote in 2013. The other reason is its perspective on love that is at once unique and universal. I’m reminded of season two’s opening line that wholeheartedly characterizes its finale: “this is a love story.” This line provides a perfect framework for the finale, because the episode traces how love ruins and liberates us, how love reveals who we are and how we must move forward, even and especially when we least want to. The episode illustrates how, in the pursuit of “choosing the right place to put [love],” we often forget that one of the most important places to put it is within ourselves. The masterful subtleties in various moments of the episode build up to a brilliant whole that becomes something much greater than a sum of its parts — it paints a heartbreakingly honest picture of love in all its forms and the universal experience of how we’re changed by them. The best way to honor this series is to discuss the most beautiful subtleties in all of the series’ love stories, because they are what make “Fleabag” so effortlessly poignant, painful and beautiful.

The central love stories are the blasphemously enticing will-they-won’t-they between Fleabag and The Priest that tugs on your heartstrings until the last beat, the strained yet tenacious bond between Fleabag and her sister Claire and Fleabag’s struggle to love herself. The episode also concludes smaller yet crucial love stories, namely between Fleabag and her father who can never find the right words, between Claire, Martin and their deteriorating marriage and between

Fleabag's stepmother and father: the entire episode is centered around their wedding. This is precisely where Fleabag and her father have a long-awaited heart-to-heart, where Claire and Martin's marriage falls apart for good, where Fleabag hears Claire's surprising admission of sisterly love, where The Priest decides he cannot give up his priesthood for Fleabag and, in an epiphanic culmination of it all, where Fleabag realizes she must love herself.

During Fleabag and her father's heart-to-heart, it is the first and only time in the series where he tells her he loves her... but it's immediately upended by the gut punch "but I'm not sure that I like you all the time." The scene is a sigh of relief, and yet there's this second-hand awkwardness that demands you look away. Bill Paterson makes the role of a distant, broken father seem like child's play; his words and body movements stutter and stumble out almost as if by accident. Waller-Bridge's writing at the end makes up for the scene's awkward hiccups when he says that Fleabag "[knows] how to love better than any of us. That's why [she finds] it all so painful." The father's unprecedented raw honesty and Fleabag's failure to hide her shock changes our perspective — the writing and acting imply that, even with her struggles, Fleabag is the least dysfunctional of them all.

The subtle writing and acting choices when Claire debates about chasing after her lover are what make Claire and Fleabag's relationship so beautiful. Claire says that Fleabag is "the only person [she'd] run through an airport for." Sian Clifford delivers this line so offhandedly and flippantly, as if it was something Fleabag should've known the entire time, and yet Waller-Bridge's silence (and Clifford's confused double-take in response), captures the essence of their entire relationship, in which Fleabag has never truly felt loved by Claire but is now forever changed by her words.

If the job of an actor is to give life to the script and their character, Andrew Scott undoubtedly excels as The Priest, because he doesn't just give them life — he resurrects them. His performance is so awkwardly endearing that it makes us believe in even his character's most unbelievable moments. His swaying and brief glances to the sky for God's support create a priest so anxious for his sermon that it becomes almost inevitable for him to swear in front of everyone despite how unrealistic that actually is. When he breaks up with Fleabag, you can see Scott's brilliant choices: he ever-so-gently leans to kiss her but turns his head. His movements are so subtle you'll miss them if you blink, and yet they reveal the most about his character and his relationship with Fleabag.

Lastly but certainly not least is Waller-Bridge as Fleabag. Waller-Bridge's effortless breaking of the fourth wall deserves infinite praise, because if, at any moment, this breaking is made even slightly unbelievable by her acting, the illusion is completely ruined (spoiler alert: it never is). With every glance, you can tell exactly what she's thinking and what she wants us to think. The final scene, where Fleabag shakes her head (telling us not to follow her) and waves goodbye, is so powerful because of both her performance and how Waller-Bridge has crafted the show. The main story engine is not clear-cut; while other subplots rely on classic tropes, we're left with the real driving question: will Fleabag ever get better? Waller-Bridge ingeniously makes the answer inextricably linked with the show's conclusion and our awareness of our identity as the viewer, Fleabag's closest friend: yes, she will get better — but in order for her to do so, we can't be there to see it. She's invited us into her life, and at the very moment when she learns to love herself, we're reminded that the only reason we can see her — and the reason she can see us — is because she's struggling, and therefore the show must end (and we must leave) when her struggles do. This subtle conclusion makes the finale so gut-wrenchingly palpable that it touches

the lives of viewers in such a way that their feelings can only be momentarily satisfied by writing a review four years after it has ended.