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“And We’re Happy, So Happy, to Be Modern Women”: Dissociative Feminism on Screen and in Literature

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“And We’re Happy, So Happy, to Be Modern Women”:

Dissociative Feminism on Screen and in Literature

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Honors Thesis

University of Connecticut Department of English

Advised by Kathy Knapp, PhD

29 April 2022

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Abstract

On-screen and literary works have increasingly represented a new, digital-age wave of postfeminism: dissociative feminism, which rejects happy-go-lucky, sex-positive fourth-wave feminism, instead embracing nihilism. Fleabag, the titular character of the hit BBC miniseries *Fleabag* (2016–9), embodies dissociative feminism, though she ultimately comes to reject this darkly relatable perspective. However, social media largely ignores this latter, essential aspect of her character arc and has taken to romanticizing Fleabag’s feminist ideology, effectively constructing a harmful and dangerous virtual echo chamber of dissociative feminism. Participants in this online discourse should instead turn to the HBO limited series *I May Destroy You* (2020) for guidance on exiting the dissociative feminism echo chamber, and to *Fleabag* for guidance on wholly abandoning the movement in favor of a more hopeful feminism: individualized feminism.

Introduction

I'm on the editorial board of my university's undergraduate literary magazine, and it turns out that end-of-semester journal launch parties cost a pretty penny. So, we've been fundraising the best way English majors know how: by running a "blind date with a book" sale. We wrap up donated texts in paper and write a couple notes about their content and themes on the cover: "Modern-day Holden Caulfield goes on a summer road trip," "*The Great British Bake Off* meets *Pride & Prejudice*" "The inherent homoerotism of using sports as an excuse to touch another man." Customers are surprised with a new book, we get to pay for our catering, and everyone goes home happy.

When we were labeling the wrapped books prior to the event, one editor wondered aloud, "I don't really know what to write for this one. It's about some lady who... Well, she's pretty unlikable, but you feel for her. It's got some great deadpan humor, and it's feminist in that 'screw all men' kinda way. So maybe something about defying convention?"

"Just write that she's in her Fleabag Era," another editor quickly suggested.

We all readily agreed, familiar with the "Fleabag Era" internet phenomenon. In late 2021, social media began rallying around the feminism of Fleabag, the titular female protagonist of the BBC miniseries *Fleabag* (2016–9). Like many modern women, Fleabag rejects mainstream, fourth-wave feminism, critical of its happy-go-lucky, sex-positive ideology that does little to recognize the omnipresence of the male gaze, which dictates her behavior. So, Fleabag retreats into what *Buzzfeed* writer Emmeline Clein has coined as dissociation, or dissociative, feminism, which prides itself on allowing women to wield power over men from within the gendered panopticon. However, dissociative feminism is nihilistic and self-destructive, encouraging women

to “give up” on advocating for gender equality and cope by detaching from reality. Fleabag realizes as much at the end of the show, ultimately choosing better for herself and abandoning the movement.

But, social media users who identify with dissociative feminism willfully ignore this latter, essential aspect of Fleabag’s character arc and instead romanticize her earlier behavior. Ensuing online discourse has culminated in the development of “Fleabag Era” rhetoric, which celebrates young women who identify with Fleabag’s initial approach to empowerment. Overwhelming interaction with Fleabag Era discourse insulates users in a virtual echo chamber, which ultimately ensures dissociative feminists continue to self-destruct.

Fortunately, dissociative feminist texts advocate for healthier alternatives to fourth-wave backlash than resounding nihilism. The HBO limited series *I May Destroy You* (2020) provides audiences with sound advice on exiting the dissociative feminism echo chamber, and *Fleabag* openly endorses an entirely new feminist ideology: individualized feminism, a loosely organized approach to feminism that encourages personalized empowerment.

Mainstream Feminism and Dissociative Feminism

The Evolution of Mainstream Feminism

On January 18, 2020, like any bored Connecticut college student stuck home over winter break, a friend and I took the Metro-North into New York City. As we sped along the shoreline, I was torn away from intently mapping out our route from the Greek and Roman Art collection to the Arms and Armor exhibit by excited, chattering voices. I looked up just as a new passenger breezed past my row, grazing my leg with a white sign held loosely in their hand. I craned my neck and squinted at the neon pink lettering as they moved further down the train, making out, “WHO RUN THE WORLD? GIRLS!” Then I noticed the smattering of pink hats just barely visible above the grimy red seats. Ah. I turned to my friend, remarking, “I’m pretty sure today’s the Women’s March.”

She looked around idly. “Huh, I guess so,” she replied before returning to her book.

I was a bit ashamed it had slipped my mind. The Women’s March is *the* trademark event of modern, digital-age feminism. First organized as the Women’s March on Washington in response to the January 2017 presidential inauguration of Donald Trump (whose misogyny is less than debatable), the movement rapidly expanded across the country and became an annual, women-led celebration of “a diverse range of issues” (Prasad; Women’s March). Though perhaps intentionally vague, allowing for activists of all sorts to partake in the event, the Women’s March website identifies its key goals as “promoting feminist economies...reimagining democracy...ending white supremacy” and, of course, harnessing “the political power of diverse women” through grassroots protest (Women’s March). Though my main concern in January 2017 was passing my driver’s permit test and memorizing isotopes for my chemistry midterm, I

remember scrolling through Instagram and pausing to like every picture of an attendee's unique sign. Feminism did not yet play a major role in my life, but I nonetheless felt a tightness in my chest, a sense of pride, in watching the Women's March movement blossom.

The Women's March epitomizes the many appeals of fourth-wave feminism and its predecessors. The term "feminism" can be "traced to nineteenth-century French political discourse," as its original French form, *féminisme*, "has long been attributed to Charles Fourier...the audacious thinker...who understood so well that the essence of women's emancipation lay in eradicating their legal and economic subordination to men. The dates of attributed origins nevertheless vary from 1808...to 1841" (Offen 45). Organized protest for women's rights involving activists of all gender identities began to gain traction shortly thereafter—not as an effect of Fourier's writing, but instead in tandem with growing support for the cause.

Feminism can be categorized into four mainstream waves (though they are by no means clear-cut ideological products of linear progress, instead often overlapping). First-wave feminism began in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This initial push sought "to open up opportunities for women, with a focus on suffrage...formally [beginning] at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 when three hundred men and women rallied to the cause of equality for women" (Rampton). Texts such as the Seneca Falls Declaration and Sojourner Truth's "Ain't I A Woman?" speech function as historical markers of this initial push for feminism against the cult of domesticity (Rampton).

Second-wave feminism did not begin until nearly half a century later. Amidst the anti-war and civil rights protest of the 1960s, feminists embraced more radical demands, focusing on "sexuality and reproductive rights" (Rampton). Though second-wave feminism did not bask in

nearly the same independent political spotlight as its former wave, it utilized social analysis grounded in “a fusion of neo-Marxism and psycho-analytical theory...to associate the subjugation of women with broader critiques of patriarchy, capitalism, normative heterosexuality, and the woman's role as wife and mother,” making for an era of multifaceted protest (Rampton).

Second-wave feminism did not give way to the third wave until the mid-1990s. A far cry from earlier waves, third-wave feminism embraced “lip-stick, high-heels, and cleavage proudly exposed by low cut necklines...defining feminine beauty for themselves as subjects, not as objects of a sexist patriarchy” (Rampton). Derogatory terms like “slut” or “whore” ricocheted off the third-wave feminist and were instead reclaimed as tools of mimicry. In light of growing access to the internet, feminists sought to develop a more inclusive, dynamic, and multi-cultural movement, so core values like creativity and flexibility were at its heart (Rampton).

Fourth-wave feminism represents a return to the structural rigidity of first- and second-wave feminism, rejecting “the complacency of third wavers” (Rampton). Founded in the 2010s, this current push embraces public discourse—namely about violence against women, the wage gap, and body positivity—whilst retaining the intersectionality and sex positivity of the third wave (Rampton). Thus, fourth-wave feminism is a culmination of its predecessors, and efforts such as digitizing the mid-2000s anti-sexual violence “me too.” movement, as well as staging the Women’s March, demonstrate the contemporary emphasis on normalizing feminist dialogue (Koffman).

The Pitfalls of Fourth-Wave Feminism

Fourth-wave feminism evidently fares well on paper; few can dispute that gender equity belongs in the digital media spotlight.

So why did I feel so uninspired on that train? Where did that tightness in my chest, that pride, from all those years ago disappear off to? Truthfully, while fourth-wave feminism feels like the “right” thing to do, I am not sure how much it actually empowers me.

Perhaps the monetization and subsequent cheapening of protest has soured the appeal of fourth-wave feminism. A key attribute of the movement is its online presence, which functions as a double-edged sword: while the internet undeniably allows feminists from around the world to connect in ways previously unimagined, it also invites corporatization. In an analysis of fourth-wave feminism in the United Kingdom, researchers found that “[t]he ways in which Western capitalism has attempted to co-opt liberation movements...is well-documented” (Day and Wray 11). When cyberspace began to expand at the turn of the 21st century, “the discourse of ‘girl power’ was deployed by mainstream media to construct a version of girlhood which was essentially apolitical...This discourse was seized upon by both consumer capitalism and the media to essentially sell a product to young women” (11). Over the past decade, bookshelves have become crowded with “highly-marketised, ‘feminism-lite’ books...There have also been numerous attempts to ‘rebrand’ feminism launched by women’s magazines” (11). Thus, feminism in the internet era has been “reduced to a marketing strategy that can be capitalised upon by selling tee-shirts featuring feminist slogans or popular books” (11). For example, the 2017 Twitter renaissance of the me too. movement, which sought to empower individuals to speak up about sexual assault, quickly devolved into a celebrity-infested, “‘trickle-down’ approach” (Koffman). Thus, fourth-wave feminism lives “within the confines of capitalism, isolating any issues of gender, race and

identity until they are completely removed from notions of class and power” (Koffman). Gender equity surely ought to mean more than a cashmere sweater embroidered with “consent” (Bergman).

This capitalist co-opting of protest does not have much progress to show for itself, as demonstrated by both the persistence and the consistency of the wage gap—one of the fourth wave’s trademark concerns. According to Payscale’s 2021 survey of workplace wages, the opportunity pay gap (which assesses the median earnings of men and women) “has decreased by \$0.08 since 2015. In 2021, women [made] only \$0.82 for every dollar a man [made], which is one cent more than...in 2020. However, this improvement could be attributable to lower paid women leaving the workforce due to layoffs or family care” (Payscale). The controlled gender pay gap, which assesses the earnings of “men and women with the same employment characteristics,” has not fared much better, as “women earn \$0.98 for every dollar earned by an equivalent man...The closing of the controlled gender pay gap has slowed in recent years, shrinking by only a fraction of one percent year over year. It has shrunk a total of \$0.01 since 2015 (Payscale). Progress clearly has yet to progress.

Given the wage gap is just one of several trademark fourth-wave feminist issues that has yet to undergo real, fundamental change, a redemption arc for the movement’s monetization does not appear to be in the books. In an overview on feminist headway, the Russell Sage Foundation found that after the ““great strides”” made during the second wave, “[d]espite living in an era of empowerment conferences, you-go-girl advertisements, and self-avowed feminist celebrities,” women’s progress has since ““slowed or stalled”” (Friedman). Aptly summarized by writer Ann Friedman, “The 21st century has not been great for women” (Friedman).

However, patience is a virtue. After all, it took first-wave feminists well over half a century to secure the right for women to vote. This inability of fourth wavers to maintain long-term composure appears inherent to the tech-savvy, capitalist nature of the movement. In a University of Texas at Arlington study, researchers asked “[p]articipants...to wait for downloads and stay on hold over the phone, leading many of them to abandon their process of waiting,” as today’s “fast-paced technological environment has heightened...reliance on instant gratification” (Lim). Accordingly, internet-savvy fourth wavers, contented by the luxury of Amazon Prime two-day delivery, are more likely to become dejected by a lack of progress than feminists of the past. However, when small steps forward begin to feel like a standstill or, even worse, steps backwards, it is only human that patience wears thin.

The Inherent Hopelessness of Dissociative Feminism

I summer in the Hamptons. But not in the cool, *my-daddy-is-the-president-of-Chase-Bank-and-this-is-our-third-house* way. More like the uncool, *New-York’s-minimum-wage-is-higher-than-Connecticut’s-so-I-might-as-well-waitress-at-a-grimy-clam-bar-and-live-in-ramshackle-provided-housing* way. I work with a couple of friends from high school and a few humble locals. (You’d be surprised by how few Hamptonite teenagers have never worked a day in their lives. Or maybe you wouldn’t).

My female coworkers are beautiful. Kelly with her dimpled smile, Sam with her sea-green eyes, Graciela with her ringing laugh. They’re also categorically hot, and in the eyes of men, women are one of two things: hot or cute. Fuckable or adorable. An object of attraction or simply an object. I’ve always tended to fall into the latter category.

Which should be a blessing, especially because the Hamptons are rife with (privileged) men who know no bounds. When Kelly gets called “baby,” I get called “honey.” When Sam receives an unwanted number scrawled on a receipt, I receive a rushed signature. When Graciela gets asked what she’s doing after work, I get told not to work myself too hard in the hot summer heat.

One night at a bonfire, Kelly recounted to us how she’d been suntanning earlier that day when a 30-something-year-old man approached her and asked her to go out clubbing. She was 19. She’d typed his contact information into her phone to hastily (and safely) end the encounter, but insisted to us that she wouldn’t follow up.

While I was quick to ask if she was okay, a sharp pang of hurt twisted my heart. *Why can’t I be wanted like that?* Then, shocked by and disgusted with myself, I immediately tamped down my emotions and giggled with the rest of the girls, lamenting about how disgusting men can be. “I’m glad that’s never happened to me!” I lied.

Film theorist Laura Mulvey would reassure me that I am not a bad or broken feminist: my behavior is merely a product of the male gaze. The term originates from her famous journal article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” published in 1975. Mulvey asserts that film reflects societal notions regarding sexuality, as male characters have an active gaze whereas female characters are merely passive participants. Therefore, in film, there is a dangerous power imbalance that resonates with viewers, encouraging male spectators to project “his look on to...his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence” (Mulvey 12). Thus, film is unfortunately built on these “voyeuristic active/passive mechanisms” where men take women “as objects” and “[subject] them to a controlling and curious gaze” (8).

Though the male gaze began as an element of filmic analysis, it has since gained traction as a pervasive social construct applicable outside the realm of film theory. It is an ever-present, invisible, voyeuristic force that encroaches upon the lives of women. 20th-century philosopher Michel Foucault recognizes as much in his book *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Foucault details the systemic violation of independence ingrained in society, which he deems a result of panopticism. Panopticism is a social system best described through the metaphor of a prison. In Foucault's prison, inmates are trapped alone in cells "pierced with wide windows" through which a supervisor can constantly monitor their behavior. Anxious to avoid punishment, the inhabitants of these "small theaters" are made to be performative for the possibly watching eyes of the supervisor. Prisoners of the panopticon are thus induced into "a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" because the fear of potentially being watched ensures complacency (Foucault and Sheridan 161–200).

Panopticism is therefore built into gender-based social dynamics such as the omnipresence of the male gaze, which deters female autonomy. Margaret Atwood, author of the famously feminist and anti-fascist *The Handmaid's Tale*, recognizes as much in one of her lesser-known works, *The Robber Bride*:

Male fantasies, male fantasies, is everything run by male fantasies? Up on a pedestal or down on your knees, it's all a male fantasy...Even pretending you aren't catering to male fantasies is a male fantasy: pretending you're unseen, pretending you have a life of your own, that you can wash your feet and comb your hair unconscious of the ever-present watcher peering through the keyhole, peering through the keyhole in your own head, if nowhere else. You are a woman with a man inside watching a woman. You are your own voyeur. (Atwood 721–22)

Evidently, the patriarchy acts as a panopticon in which men are the supervisors and women are the prisoners locked in cells, subjugated to the male gaze. Women are conditioned to be desired, to perform for men, to feel out of place when they are not objectified by womanizing bachelors in the Hamptons.

Mulvey's male gaze and Foucault's panopticism lack any hopefulness, espousing Atwood's dystopian imagery. Ultimately, the only lasting solution appears to be metaphorically blinding men and destroying the prison—a daunting task, even for the most determined of feminists. Escaping the watching eyes of men, rejecting the need to be desired, and ultimately gaining autonomy and power appear to be far from within reach.

But what if there was a way to cope with this burdensome truth?

Writer Emmeline Clein offers one possibility. In her 2019 *BuzzFeed* essay “The Smartest Women I Know Are All Dissociating,” Clein reflects upon the pitfalls of fourth-wave feminism and concludes that this movement has unfortunately not made “much of a crack in the bell jar,” largely due to its refusal to abandon its capitalist-happy narrative and acknowledge the significance of the male gaze (Clein). She also alludes to what *New York Times* opinion writer Michelle Goldberg explains in her 2021 column “Why Sex-Positive Feminism Is Falling Out of Fashion”:

Sex positivity—the idea that feminism should privilege sexual pleasure and fight sexual repression—has dominated feminism for most of my life...[It] saw sexual fulfillment as part of political liberation...But sex positivity now seems to be fading in fashion among younger people, failing to speak to their longings and frustrations...In a July BuzzFeed News article headlined, “These Gen Z Women Think Sex Positivity Is Overrated,” one 23-year-old woman said, “It feels like we were tricked into exploiting ourselves.” (Goldberg)

Fourth-wave feminism politicizes, and ultimately markets, women's sexuality, offering up exactly what the patriarchy craves on a silver platter.

Hyperaware of the futility of mainstream resistance, Clein and her fellow dejected feminists have therefore “[given] up on shouting and complaining, and instead [taken] on a darkly comic, deadpan tone” when discussing gender issues (Clein).

Enter: dissociative feminism.

Coined by Clein to identify this pattern of nihilism, dissociation, or dissociative, feminism encourages women to “[interiorize] our existential aches and angst, [smirk] knowingly at them, and [numb] ourselves to maintain our nonchalance” (Clein). So, “[r]ather than complaining about their oppression or taking action to stop it...young, contrarian women...have decided to...simply exist as pained beings” (Peyser). This unsettling apathy falls somewhere between “simply giving up” and “a psychiatric condition: dissociation” (Aron; Peyser). According to the American Psychiatric Association, dissociation is “an unconscious coping mechanism that usually develops in response to trauma,” leaving “sufferers feeling disconnected from the world” (Peyser). There is a significant distinction between medically diagnosed dissociation and Clein's feminist dissociation—the latter of which falls under the umbrella of non-pathological dissociation. However, dissociative feminism undeniably elicits a detachment of the “consciousness from the immediate bodily and emotional experience”—textbook (non-pathological) dissociation (Peyser). Therefore, dissociative feminists submit to hopelessness, which can trigger this psychological trauma response.

Submitting to hopelessness registers as a diversion of frustration. Mainstream feminism, which errs on the side of gratuitous optimism and promotes the possibility of change within the

current societal framework, has no place for this behavior. Thus, dissociative feminism is distinctly postfeminist, meaning it attempts to make “sense of paradoxes and contradictions in the representation of women,” like those perpetuated by fourth wavers (Banet-Weiser et al. 4). Dissociative feminism does not belong to the realm of mainstream feminism; it ideologically stands alone.

It is important to note that the movement’s relative isolation is in part a result of its target base. Dissociative feminism appeals to women who are attracted to men; this includes transgender, bisexual, or otherwise non-heteronormative women, who are shackled by the male gaze just the same as a straight, cisgender woman. Non-binary people can certainly identify as dissociative feminists. However, the ideology’s grievance with the patriarchy stems from the latter’s problematic and rigid gender binary—men as active, women as passive—thus theoretically excluding non-binary people from dissociative feminism. The same goes for transgender men who may have grappled with dissociative feminism in the past. So, anyone can be a fourth-wave, mainstream feminist, as all it requires is a recognition of the patriarchy’s negative impact on society; but, dissociative feminism targets women trapped in the gendered panopticon.¹

Reparations

My friend is really good at Tinder. She plays it like a video game: if you make the right series of moves, decisions, plays, you win validation, admiration, power. With just the right

¹ Moving forward in my analysis of dissociative feminism, I will refer to dissociative feminists as women with she/her/hers pronouns for the sake of adhering to theory and maintaining clarity.

pictures (hot but not whorish) and just the right bio (vague enough to make any man think, “Oh, she’s so *cool*”), matches are guaranteed. Which sounds contradictory, because building a digital pseudo-personality meant to entice men should not be empowering. “But it *is*,” she explains to me. “It’s like reparations. We get to play *them*.” And even though I tease her to be nicer to her roster of prospects (“Maybe he’s a good listener! Maybe he watches movies directed by women!”), I know exactly how she feels. If I was brave enough to download Tinder and bare my singleness on the internet, I would probably do the same.

This control is intoxicating and dissociative feminism knows it. So, in addition to encouraging a freeing resignation to reality, the nihilistic movement also boasts a second, addicting primary draw: its endorsement of wielding power over men. Mulvey, Foucault, and Atwood collectively assert that, ideally, women should escape the watching eyes of men, reject the need to be desired, and ultimately gain autonomy and power. Dissociative feminism embraces a “going one for three” attitude—which is one more than fourth-wave feminism can offer—by aligning with the final of these three goals, albeit with a significant amendment: women should wield power *over men*, abandoning any implied attempts at gender equality. This, the movement argues, is the best it gets.

Wielding power over men can manifest in many ways, though it often whittles down to, consciously or subconsciously, “working the system.” A dissociative feminist is aware of the cards stacked against her—the omnipresence of the male gaze and her own gendered conditioning—and attempts to use the odds to her advantage. She flirts with men at bars for the confidence boost. She disinterestedly sexts a romantic prospect while eating dinner. She becomes a Tinder “cool girl.” She can then revel in completely nonreciprocal male attention, ultimately taking advantage of the very constructs that perpetuate the gendered panopticon. My friend makes a good point in likening

this notion to reparations. Though “reparations” has strong racial connotations, the term can apply to any amends being made, and wielding power over men is a heady turning of the tables (albeit from within the constraints of the gendered panopticon). After all, a dissociative feminist cannot be exploited by counterintuitive fourth-wave sex positivity if she exploits herself first.

Author Kristen Roupenian best illustrates the wielding of power over men in her ode to dissociative feminism, “Cat Person,” a short story published in *The New Yorker* in 2017. “Cat Person” follows the romantic adventures of a female college student named Margot who pursues a relationship with an older man named Robert. She is repulsed by Robert, though she is deeply consumed by his desire for her. She describes their first kiss as “shockingly bad...yet somehow it also gave her that tender feeling toward him...the sense that...she knew something he didn’t” (Roupenian). This demonstrates the power reversal typical of dissociative feminism, as Margot’s primary concern about their relationship is whether its dynamic has “shifted out of her favor” (Roupenian). Margot’s dissociation peaks in an unsettling sexual encounter with Robert driven by her attachment to his desire. She “[finds] herself carried away by a fantasy of such pure ego...Look at this beautiful girl, she [imagines] him thinking...I want her more than I’ve ever wanted anyone else, I want her so bad I might die. The more she [imagines] his arousal, the more turned-on she [gets]” (Roupenian). She then “[imagines] herself from above, naked and spread-eagled with this fat old man’s finger inside her...she felt like a doll...flexible and resilient, a prop for the movie that was playing in his head” (Roupenian). So, though Margot undeniably feels used, she takes grim derision in using Robert back, basking in desire she will never return. She exerts power over her partner despite her apparent submission.

“Cat Person” immediately went viral, thousands of “women of all ages” flocking to Twitter to proclaim “that they have *had this sex*” (Clein). Evidently, fourth-wave feminist calls for patriarchy-toppling sexual empowerment are falling flat. Dissociation is in.

Fleabag

A Brief History of *Fleabag*

I had my “feminist awakening” in college. In a far cry from my vaguely fourth-wave apathy in January 2017, I began thinking critically about my relationship with the patriarchy. About my jealousy in Montauk. About my empathy with my friend’s Tinder-ing. About how sometimes, my conversations with men feel more like a dissociative internal monologue.

INT. UCONN STUDENT UNION — DAY

MICHAELA

I’m a film minor, too! So what’re your top four on Letterboxd?

NPC MAN

Well I’m a big fan of Tarantino... I don’t know if you’ve heard of him.

MICHAELA

(to herself)

Holy condescension... And of course it’s Tarantino. All my money’s on his favorite being *Pulp Fiction*.

Michaela smiles sweetly, without even a hint of sarcasm.

MICHAELA

(to herself)

Ew.

MICHAELA (CONT'D)

(to NPC Man)

Yeah, I've heard of him.

NPC Man laughs, genuinely impressed by this basic knowledge.

NPC MAN

Wow, smart cookie!

MICHAELA

(to herself)

Double ew.

NPC MAN

So I'd have to say *Pulp Fiction* is right up there.

MICHAELA

(to herself)

Bingo.

NPC MAN

And definitely *The Wolf of Wall Street*, too.

MICHAELA

(to herself)

Sounds about right.

NPC MAN

You know, I'd say it's one of Tarantino's best. And Scarlett Johansson...

NPC Man stretches backwards and shakes his head, smiling in disbelief (ostensibly, at how sexually appealing the actress is).

Man!

NPC Man, blinded by self-confidence, has mixed up his white male filmmakers and Hollywood hot women; *The Wolf of Wall Street* is directed by Martin Scorsese and features Margot Robbie.

MICHAELA

(to herself, giddily)

Oh this is GOLDEN. Should I correct him? I'd LOVE to correct him.

She pauses.

MICHAELA

(to NPC Man)

Yeah, it's some great comedy writing!

NPC Man nods, looking at Michaela thoughtfully.

NPC MAN

(murmuring to himself)

I'm impressed.

Michaela closes her eyes and breathes. She smiles sweetly, without even a hint of sarcasm.

MICHAELA

(to herself, pained)

Why do I keep doing this?

Though I knew the answer—"It's the male gaze, duh"—I felt alone in my second-nature need for male validation and my dissociation via an internal monologue.

Fortunately, amid my college-era descent into the nihilism of dissociative feminism, I found solace in the popular culture Holy Grail of the movement: *Fleabag*.

Fleabag, the Golden Globe and Emmy Award-winning BBC miniseries, is a cultural sensation. Written by and starring British artistic phenom Phoebe Waller-Bridge, the television show began as a one-woman play. Waller-Bridge, struggling to find work in the mid-2000s and early 2010s, found herself at the 2012 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, where a friend and artistic colleague challenged her to perform a 10-minute stand-up slot. Waller-Bridge stole the show, immersing herself in a tragicomic monologue about "a sexually-freed woman mourning the death of her best friend while running a failing coffee shop themed around said best friend's guinea pig" (Borge). The character "'wasn't ashamed of the parts of herself that other women had been trained to find embarrassing—she revelled in them,'" embracing dark humor and dry wit to cope with her self-proclaimed brokenness (Borge). The performance was a success, and in 2013, Waller-Bridge

both produced and starred in an hour-long stage production based on the original monologue. Here, audiences were officially introduced to the titular, though textually unnamed, character: Fleabag (Borge).

This performance was, unsurprisingly, another success, and it caught the attention of BBC Three. The digital channel hoped to adapt the one-woman show into a miniseries featuring a full cast of characters. It proved challenging for Waller-Bridge to preserve Fleabag's breaking-of-the-fourth wall, as addressing the audience in a monologue is far different than doing so in a television scene with other characters. However, Waller-Bridge effectively translated this honesty to the screen, and season one of *Fleabag*, which consists of six hour-long episodes, was released in July 2016 to critical acclaim. Streaming services began clamoring over rights to the series, and Amazon Prime not only won the bidding war but also greenlit a second season, which would feature new and original content not featured in any previous iterations of the project. Season two, the final season of Waller-Bridge's project, premiered in May 2019 and introduces new characters whilst remaining true to the spirit of the original, unassuming 10-minute monologue (Borge).²

Fleabag Season One: Fleabag as the Ultimate Dissociative Feminist

Season one opens with 33-year-old Fleabag reeling from the death of her best friend Boo (Jenny Rainsford), with whom she ran a now-struggling guinea pig-themed café. Without Boo, Fleabag feels very much alone. It does not help that her family is wildly unsupportive. Claire (Sian

² In my analysis of *Fleabag*, I will focus on the television series as well as its published manuscript, *Fleabag: The Scriptures* (2019), which contains screen directions that provide further insight into Fleabag as a character.

Clifford), Fleabag's sister, loves Fleabag deeply but is unable to properly express her feelings, stifled by both her cold, anal attitude and her conniving husband, Martin (Brett Gelman). Fleabag's father, known only as Dad (Bill Paterson), also loves Fleabag. However, following the death of Fleabag and Claire's biological mother years prior to season one, Dad consistently chooses their godmother-turned-evil-stepmother, known only as Godmother (Olivia Colman), over both of his daughters, making for a strained father-daughter relationship.

As Fleabag attempts to navigate post-Boo life, she is challenged to reevaluate her relationship with men. Fleabag begins the series as the quintessential dissociative feminist. Foremost, she has her doubts about fourth-wave feminism. Dad frequently pays for Fleabag and Claire to attend fourth-wave feminist events in an attempt to properly raise "two motherless daughters" (Waller-Bridge and Kirkby, "Episode 1" season 1 09:37–38). When she and Claire attend *Women Speak: Opening Women's Mouths Since 1998*, a fourth-wave feminist lecture series, Fleabag clearly fails to buy into the speaker's can-do attitude. "Gosh, look at you all!" croons the female speaker (14:04–05). "Before we begin, I would like to ask you a question... Please raise your hands if you would trade five years of your life... for the so-called 'perfect body'" (14:17–48). Fleabag raises her hand "instinctively," as does Claire (Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag* 22). They are the only two audience members who do, and embarrassed, they put down their hands and curl into their seats. Fleabag whispers to Claire, "We are bad feminists," recognizing her detachment from mainstream gendered solidarity (Waller-Bridge and Kirkby, "Episode 1" season 1 14:50–57). The suggestive title of the series itself also mocks fourth-wave feminism, framing the movement as confusing empowerment with conformity.

Waller-Bridge further frames Fleabag as dejected by the fourth wave when she and Claire attend yet another feminist event—a silent retreat called "Women: Don't Speak." Run by a female

leader and a team of monks, the retreat aims for women to leave feeling “rested” and “inspired” after learning about mindfulness, or “trapping your thoughts in your skull” (Waller-Bridge and Bradbeer, “Episode 4” season 1 03:35–06:48). Evidently, this message contrasts that of *Women Speak*, and Fleabag is humored by these misguided navigations of feminism in the 21st century. Her outlook is decidedly postfeminist, as she is acutely aware of the (exaggerated) contradictions inherent to fourth-wave feminism. Should women speak up about body positivity? Should they prioritize their personal growth? Fourth-wave feminism is unsure, and Fleabag is critical of this shortcoming.

Like any good dissociative feminist, Fleabag also submits to hopelessness. Certain that fourth-wave feminism will never truly establish gender equality, Fleabag ceases protest against the patriarchy and internalizes her anger, embracing feminine messiness and pain. By her own admission, she is a “greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, morally bankrupt woman who can’t even call herself a feminist” (Waller-Bridge and Kirkby, “Episode 1” season 1 20:33–43); she confesses this to her father on his doorstep, extremely intoxicated at two o’clock in the morning, after dramatically walking out on a bad date with (and stealing twenty pounds from) a man who wanted conversation, not just sex (16:38–20:20). Outside these moments of emotional vulnerability, Fleabag makes light of her messiness. For example, in a flashback to a drunken night with Boo in their café, the pair sings, “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” (19:07–25). This satirical jingle illustrates that being a woman means coping with the inherent pain of female existence by making self-destructive, regrettable decisions. Even her name—which is never uttered on the show, like a secret between her and the viewer—reeks of messiness and pain: she is something dirty, something shabby, something used, something tired.

Fleabag explores her hopelessness-driven behavior when she goes out drinking with a fourth-wave girlboss-turned-skeptic named Belinda. Fleabag, her typically sarcastic tongue loosened by alcohol (and a messiness-induced emotional exhaustion), asks the older woman honestly whether she can promise that “[life] does get better” (Waller Bridge and Bradbeer, “Episode 3” season 2 11:44–6). Belinda, who has recently won a Best Woman in Business award, confides in Fleabag that aging is indeed a blessing in disguise:

Women are born with pain built in. It’s our physical destiny. Period pains, sore boobs, child birth, you know. We carry it within ourselves throughout our lives. Men don’t. They have to seek it out. They invent all these gods and demons and things, all so they can feel guilty about things, which is something we do very well on our own. Then they create wars so they can feel things and touch each other, and when there aren’t any wars they can play rugby. And we have it all going on in here, inside! We have pain on a cycle for years and years and years and then, just when you feel like you are making peace with it all, what happens? The menopause comes. The fucking *menopause* comes and it is... the most *wonderful* fucking thing in the world. And yes, your entire pelvic floor crumbles, and you get fucking hot and no one cares, but then... you’re free. No longer a slave, no longer a machine, with parts. You’re just a person, in business. (11:58–13:13)

Though Fleabag is somewhat inspired by this insight, it only reaffirms her resignation to innately feminine pain. So, despite the monologue ending on a (deceivably) optimistic note, Belinda’s message is decidedly nihilistic: women will never be seen as whole people in a patriarchal society until they “age out” of the system and are no longer deemed sex objects. But instead of blaming men, Belinda, like Fleabag, internalizes her anger and accepts that part of the female condition is living with physical, emotional, and psychological torment.

Fleabag copes with her pain through non-pathological dissociation, which manifests as breaking the fourth wall. Much like I turn to an internal monologue, Fleabag frequently interrupts conversations with characters with sly glances to, or even conversations with, the camera. This is made clear from the very first scene of the series, which establishes both her self-destructive and dissociative nature. The episode opens with Fleabag breathing heavily in the entryway of her home, dressed in a black trench coat, anxiously awaiting what the viewer assumes to be the arrival of a guest. But Fleabag immediately dispels any temporary confusion by turning to the viewer and telling them exactly what is going on, “earnest” and with a “touch of pain” (Waller-Bridge and Kirkby, “Episode 1” season 1 00:05–22; Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag* 7):

You know that feeling, when a guy you like sends you a text at two o’clock on a Tuesday night asking if he can ‘come and find you,’ and you’ve accidentally made it out like you’ve just got in yourself, so you have to get out of bed, drink half a bottle of wine, get in the shower, shave everything, dig out some Agent Provocateur business, suspender belt, the whole bit, and wait by the door until the buzzer goes? (Waller-Bridge “Episode 1” season 1 22–38).

Her doorbell rings, interrupting her rambling. After a brief pause, she turns back to the viewer, explaining, “And then you open the door to him like you’d almost forgotten he was coming over” (00:38–46). In enters a man, with whom she exchanges awkward small talk before “[getting] to it immediately” (00:46–59). They begin kissing, and the camera quickly cuts to her bedroom, where they are engaged in intercourse (00:59–01:00). However, even in this private moment, Fleabag is not present. She continues to speak to the viewer mid-act, matter-of-factly narrating their sexual activity (01:10–29). Even the next morning, when the man thanks her for the night “with a genuine earnest” (which she finds “sort of moving”), she is primarily ruminating on their engagement in

anal sex, concerned with whether she has “a *massive* arsehole” (01:32–02:59). Evidently, Fleabag dissociates in her everyday life, unable to remain present in, or even take seriously, intimate moments—physical, emotional, or otherwise. Instead, she makes dark jokes and cynical quips to the viewer, preoccupying herself with a self-inflicted numbness. This breaking of the fourth wall is the trademark narrative core of the series, and though it undoubtedly sweeps the viewer into Fleabag’s experience and makes for excellent humor, it also highlights Fleabag’s embodiment of dissociative feminism as a means by which to separate herself from her bleak reality.

Perhaps the most alluring aspect of dissociative feminism to Fleabag is its endorsement of wielding power over men. Though Fleabag hints at her attraction to women, such as when she tells Belinda she is “not strictly” a lesbian, the show exclusively focuses on her trysts and relationships with men (Waller-Bridge and Bradbeer, “Episode 3” season 2 11:09–10). Fleabag views men as vessels through which she can achieve validation; she does not even bother to name the majority of the men with whom she is involved, only referring to them by amusing monikers such as (the eponymous) Arsehole Guy, Bus Rodent, and Hot Misogynist. Like Margot from “Cat Person,” Fleabag “works the system.” Her on-again off-again relationship with Harry, her only official boyfriend (and the only male love interest who is ever named), serves as an example of her complicated relationship with both romantic commitment to and sex with men. Though Harry is depicted as hilariously (and perhaps annoyingly) emotional, he is a good person who truly loves the version of Fleabag she presents to him. Fleabag, however, does not feel the same for Harry, but continues to perpetuate their toxic relationship cycle to her advantage. For instance, Fleabag routinely breaks up with Harry when her apartment gets messy because he copes with heartbreak by cleaning; but, she never fears losing his affection since he always returns, hopeful to rekindle their relationship (Waller-Bridge and Bradbeer, “Episode 2” season 1 04:09–05:08). This

manipulation intoxicates Fleabag; just as Margot indulges in a sexual “fantasy of such pure ego,” Fleabag basks in the juxtaposition between her lack of attachment to Harry and his complete devotion to her. Jaded by the omnipresence of the male gaze, she resigns herself to the only form of empowerment she knows: working the system and wielding power over men.

Fleabag’s ultimate quest is to garner male desire by leaning into the gendered panopticon. She prioritizes this goal during her breaks from Harry, agonizing over “having to fill her emptiness” (Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag* 42). “Gotta think about all the people I can have sex with now,” she reflects to the viewer (Waller-Bridge and Bradbeer, “Episode 2” season 1 05:08–09). “I’m not obsessed with sex. I just can’t stop thinking about it. The performance of it. The awkwardness of it. The drama of it. The moment you realize someone wants *your body*... Not so much the feeling of it” (05:12–31). Even in mundane instances, she is hyperfocused on her perception by men. In one scene, she walks down the street and “sees a large, bruiser-looking man walking towards her. He is fixated on her. He is quite far away to begin with so it doesn’t matter if we can’t see his face clearly” (Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag* 43). Fleabag turns to the camera, dissociating, and tells the audience, “Yeah, you check me out, chub-chub ‘cause it’s *never* gonna happen. Oh God, he can’t believe how attractive I am. Kinda worried I’m gonna make a sex offender out of the poor guy,” confident in her ability to gain the upper hand in the realm of the panopticon (Waller-Bridge and Bradbeer, “Episode 2” season 1 05:54–06:04). Strutting confidently, she is “put out” when the onlooker passes her and mutters, “Walk of shame” (Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag* 43–4; Waller-Bridge and Bradbeer, “Episode 2” season 1 06:07–09). Fleabag is not upset about his promiscuous insinuation, but instead about his blatant lack of desire.

Her addiction to sexual validation from men culminates in the abrupt ending of her friendship with Boo. Boo’s death is established early in the series, with Fleabag darkly retelling

her fate in the very first episode: Boo found out her boyfriend was cheating on her and walked into moving traffic to “punish him by ending up in hospital and not letting him visit for a bit” (Waller-Bridge and Kirkby, “Episode 1” season 1 24:16–32). Obviously, this plan did not play out as intended, instead resulting in Boo’s immediate and brutal death. However, Fleabag avoids giving the viewer any further details for the majority of the first season, even telling the viewer, “Not for now,” when she interrupts an ambiguous flashback to an interaction with Boo’s boyfriend (Waller-Bridge and Bradbeer, “Episode 4” season 1 13:46–52). Fleabag’s evasion is explained at the end of season one when Fleabag, in the midst of a breakdown, confesses to a near stranger that she was Boo’s boyfriend’s “other woman,” unable to put aside her need to be desired for even the most important person in her life (Waller-Bridge and Kirkby, “Episode 1” season 1 21:51–03). Through tears, Fleabag devastatingly admits, “And sometimes I wish I didn’t even know that ‘fucking’ existed. And that I know that my body, as it is now, *really* is the only thing I have left and when that gets old and unfuckable I may as well just kill it. And somehow there isn’t anything worse than someone who doesn’t want to fuck me” (21:58–22:29). Evidently, Fleabag equates feeling whole to feeling desired—an aspect of dissociative feminism highlighted by the movement’s emphasis upon wielding power over men, often through sexual encounters—to the point of her self-destruction. Season one therefore concludes with one absolute: cool girl Fleabag is in pain.

The audience, immersed in her dissociative headspace, has been laughing at something that is not one bit funny.

Fleabag Season Two: The Light at the End of the Tunnel

Luckily, Fleabag’s vulnerable, revelatory confession in the season one finale functions as a turning point in her life, and throughout season two, she journeys away from, and ultimately

abandons, dissociative feminism. After admitting to a near stranger the hold male desire has on her behavior, fully realizing the extent to which dissociative feminism has consumed her life, Fleabag commits to changing her ways. Season two, which picks up a year after the first season, opens with a comical montage of Fleabag's newfound self-care activities. Turning to the camera, she reflects, "You know when you've done *everything*...And you feel... great" (Waller-Bridge and Bradbeer, "Episode 1" season 2 02:22–41). In between these statements, the screen flashes with clips from Fleabag's past year: working out in a local park, eating healthy food, making friends, and even turning down sex with Arsehole Guy (and all men, for that matter)—a major breakaway from dissociative feminism (02:24–41).

Of course, Fleabag's year of reflection has by no means "cured" her of her nihilistic feminism. The screen directions make clear that while Fleabag is going through the motions, they are not necessarily landing. She trains with a ridiculous (and uninspiring) "drill sergeant kind of guy"; looks to the camera with mock seriousness while eating avocado toast; laughs "with a bunch of 'friends' we've never seen before and will never see again"; and is greatly "conflicted" when turning down her suitor (Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag* 198–99). Furthermore, the self-care montage itself is a direct message from Fleabag to the viewer—a dissociative breaking of the fourth wall. So, this opening scene starkly contrasts that of season one when Fleabag is anxiously preparing for a late-night hookup with Arsehole Guy, symbolizing a significant breakaway from dissociative feminism; but, Fleabag undeniably continues to grapple with a complete rejection of the movement, setting the stage for her growth throughout season two.

Though season two primarily reprises the same cast, it introduces a new character—the priest officiating Dad and Godmother's upcoming wedding, known simply as Priest (Andrew Scott), and fondly dubbed Hot Priest by the internet. Priest serves as a romantic interest for

Fleabag, and as the pair's unconventional relationship develops throughout the season, his respect for Fleabag guides her journey away from, and ultimate rejection of, dissociative feminism.

Priest treats Fleabag, who sees relationships with men as transactional and dependent upon perceived sexual appeal, with no-strings-attached kindness. Though he confesses he returns her romantic feelings, he decidedly proclaims that they are “not going to have sex” because he wants to honor his religious vow of celibacy, but promises, “I’d really like to be your friend, though” (Waller-Bridge and Bradbeer, “Episode 3” season 2 20:47–21:28). This is presumably the first time a man has ever seen Fleabag as a human being as opposed to a sex object—a perception unaccounted for by dissociative feminism. While pursuing friendship with a man puts Fleabag outside her comfort zone, she quickly finds herself opening up to Priest, engaging in intellectual conversation about inconsistencies in the Bible and reminiscing on their mutual childhood love of Winnie the Pooh (17:39–18:06; Waller-Bridge and Bradbeer, “Episode 4” season 2 16:23–41). Though this friendship development is not without its challenges, as Fleabag remains reluctant to confide in Priest about her internal dissociative monologue, he thus begins to truly understand and see her. He even picks up on her fourth wall breaks—something no other character has ever done, stunning both Fleabag and the viewer. In a tense conversation at her café, he notes, “That thing that you’re doing. It’s like you disappear...What are you not telling me?...Tell me what’s going on underneath there!...I’m just trying to get to know you,” even looking “right down the barrel [of the camera] at us” with Fleabag (06:01–15; Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag* 320). Clearly, Priest subverts Fleabag’s expectations of men and interrupts her dissociative habits. Thus, the pair’s relationship demonstrates to Fleabag that dissociative feminism, while freeing, is self-destructive in its rejection of equal gendered power distributions and genuine romantic connection with men, closing her off from meaningful human interaction.

Fleabag and Priest's eventual sexual encounter demonstrates her recognition of this sentiment. Despite Priest's efforts to resist his attraction to Fleabag, he decides to have sex with her. He arrives at her house, but before any sexual activity occurs, the pair stand on opposite sides of her living room, staring at each other as Priest explains his complicated feelings. The cinematography embraces symmetry, with Fleabag and Priest equally distanced from the edges of the frame and the space between them perfectly centered. They also stand at the same height and are both wearing all black, creating the illusion of a mirror image (see fig. 1). The symmetrical shot thus frames them as equals, utilizing filmic perceptions of space and harmony to establish a *mis-en-scène* representative of a healthy power dynamic. The first person to move closer and initiate touch is Priest, not Fleabag, and as he slowly undresses her and begins tenderly "making love" to her—an act of emotional closeness she previously found disgusting during her relationship with Harry—Fleabag shockingly pushes away the camera and the screen cuts to black (Waller-Bridge and Bradbeer, "Episode 5" season 2 21:31–22:26). Just as did Priest's ability to notice Fleabag's dissociation, this stuns viewers, who are accustomed to her comical narration during sexual encounters. She now refuses to dissociate, choosing intimacy over numbness. Clearly, when Fleabag and Priest decide to have sex, Fleabag recognizes the flaws of dissociative feminism, both conceding to the potential of an equal gendered power structure and embracing a decidedly less hopeless worldview by choosing emotional connection over dissociation.

Fleabag ultimately accepts that dissociative feminism is more harmful than helpful in her final conversation with Priest, which doubles as the final scene of the show. After Fleabag's father's wedding, the pair meet at a bus stop bench to discuss their relationship. They peacefully sit next to each other under the bus shelter, and this shot frames them again as a mirror image, the cinematography embracing symmetry to visually illustrate the presence of mutual respect and

equality (see fig. 2). Heartbreakingly, Priest chooses God over Fleabag, unable to commit to abandoning his religious vows. Fleabag tearfully accepts his decision, and they both confess their mutual love for one another in a final act of honesty. Fleabag, deeply unaccustomed to the openness of romantic love, even follows up her proclamation of love by insisting, “[L]et’s just leave that out there, just for a second on its own,” allowing the gravity of her emotions, as opposed to her typical apathy, to hang in the air (Waller-Bridge and Bradbeer, “Episode 6” season 2 22:26–23:57).

Her wholehearted rejection of dissociative feminism is cemented by the scene’s final shot. When Priest eventually leaves the bus stop, Fleabag begins to walk home. However, as the camera moves to follow her, Fleabag “looks at us. She smiles slightly with an imperceptible shake of her head. She’s asking us not to follow her. She turns and walks again up the street. The camera remains where it is. When she gets almost out of sight she turns and gives us a smile and a little wave. Then turns and walks off into the night. Goodbye. THE END” (Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag* 405). As Fleabag wanders off into the distance, the silence transitions into Alabama Shakes’ “This Feeling”: “See, I’ve been having me a real hard time / But it feels so nice / To know I’m gonna be alright / See, I’ve been having me a real good time / But it feels so nice / To know I’m gonna be alright” (Waller-Bridge and Bradbeer, “Episode 6” season 2 24:33–26:26). This sequence closing out the scene is simple—Fleabag walks away and wordlessly says goodbye—but textually rich. Though Fleabag flirted with abandoning dissociation during her sex scene with Priest by temporarily pushing away the camera, she now puts her foot down: she is done submitting to hopelessness and coping via dissociation. There is to be no more performativity for any voyeur. The music choice speaks to this momentous decision, reflecting her peace in retiring from dissociative feminism. Therefore, her relationship with Priest teaches her that numbly attempting to reap gendered reparations is only self-destructive; instead of sealing herself inside a dark bubble

of nihilism and apathy, she must risk potential hurt to experience relationships with men founded on an equal distribution of power.

Waller-Bridge has stated that season two will be the final installment of *Fleabag*, as it is truly “THE END” of Fleabag’s relationship with the camera (Ford); she is now on her own, encouraging viewers to do the same. So, while Fleabag is undeniably a symbol of dissociative feminism, her transformation in season two serves as a beacon of hope for those stuck in its vicious cycle of pain, promising that they, too, can stop performing.³

The Implications of *Fleabag*: Online Reception and Willful Ignorance

Both seasons of Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s television triumph have received glowing reviews for their unflinching depictions of dissociative feminism. Mike Hale of *The New York Times* notes the show’s “restless, almost feral energy and its slap-in-the-face attitude. Ms. Waller-Bridge knows how to combine naked confessionalism and comic artifice, and it allows her to tap veins of honest emotion” (Hale). He also notes the uncomfortable plot involving Boo’s death, which “works thematically” but unfortunately emphasizes “the harm women can do to other women”—an unfortunate result of Season One Fleabag’s nihilistic postfeminism (Hale). Hannah Jane Parkinson of *The Guardian* similarly praises the show’s portrayal of “characters who were not always likable, never mind lovable, but also often relatable,” recognizing Fleabag’s flaws as just those—flaws

³ Moving forward in my analysis of *Fleabag*, I will refer to Fleabag pre-abandonment of dissociative feminism as “Season One Fleabag,” and post-abandonment of dissociative feminism as “Season Two Fleabag” for the sake of clarity.

(Parkinson). Critical reception is careful to treat her as an imperfect individual from whose journey of growth viewers can learn.

However, many viewers—specifically young women who identify with dissociative feminism—celebrate Season One Fleabag’s submission to hopelessness. In fall 2021, over two years after the second season’s release, young women began posting TikTok videos of themselves staring into the camera, set to the *Fleabag* theme song. These videos were overlaid with text confessionals, boldly broadcasting feminine messiness and specifically referencing Season One Fleabag as a muse. TikTok users quickly coined a term for this submission to pain: being in one’s “Fleabag Era.” In @bbcprideandprejudice’s video, they write:

Men will never understand what it’s like to be in ur fleabag era. To seek vengeance for fun. To wash ur bangs in the sink. To be a glossier boy brow same doc martens since 10th grade fuck i cut my knee shaving again sorry i’m literally five minutes away but i actually am not showing up crying to silk chiffon in my prius girl. To be a WOMAN BORN WITH PAIN BUILT IN.” (Maya)

This user’s understanding of being in their Fleabag Era involves embracing feminine pain, even quoting Belinda’s monologue. @lonely_protest writes, “Men will never understand shaving with conditioner, free bleeding on the last day, hooking up with ugly guys because they will worship you, spraying it with febreze and throwing it in the dryer, the diva cup splashing you in the face when you take it out, oversharing your trauma after sex, being afraid of your mother but also becoming her,” (Garcia). This user references Fleabag by means of justifying her engagement in sex for validation, as well as her emotionally messy behavior.

Though it is difficult to approximate online interaction with this trend since relevant videos are posted to different versions of the *Fleabag* audio and with different hashtags (if they are posted with hashtags at all), videos related to the phrase “Fleabag Era” currently have an astounding 421.9 million views (“Fleabag era”). So, even if users are not posting their own confessionals, they are certainly seeing, liking, and sharing these proclamations of feminine messiness, spreading the (glorified) good word of *Fleabag: The Scriptures*.

The troubling online renaissance of *Fleabag* perpetuated by young women goes beyond a TikTok trend. Clips and screenshots of the TikTok videos have made their ways to other social media sites, such as Instagram (science experiment). Twitter users have their display names set as “[insert name] is in their fleabag era” (abby). One Tumblr blogger even posts a photo of their new *Fleabag*-inspired tattoo, captioned, “I’m in my fleabag era again” (FUCK!). And Spotify, perhaps the most private social media platform, boasts playlists titled with the likes of “fleabag type of crises” and “drunk fleabag era,” featuring songs such as “Everybody Here Hates You” by Courtney Barnett: “I feel I feel stupid, I feel useless, I feel insane / I feel toothless, man you're ruthless, oh yeah / I go to Loving Hut, I get my hair cut, I feel the same / I feel putrid, I'm getting used to it these days” (fewfita; mari). There is an undeniable intimacy and permanence to the dissociative feminism interpreted and subsequently glorified by young women in response to *Fleabag*. As @yeeti_the_ziti comments on @bbcprideandprejudice’s post, “It’s not a fleabag era it’s a fleabag evolution” (Ty). These young women are far from abandoning Season One *Fleabag*’s dissociative feminism.

Of course, social media is inherently performative. There is no telling whether these young women actually “seek vengeance for fun” or “[hook] up with ugly guys because they will

worship you.” It is even somewhat ironic that they claim to be deeply jaded by the gendered panopticon, yet willingly proclaim their messiness on the panopticon of the internet.

However, it is unfair to dismiss this online obsession with Fleabag’s flaws as a mere blip in hashtag tracking perpetuated by an “internet-addicted” generation. It is undeniable that mainstream feminism is no longer overwhelmingly resonating with young women and, wearied, many have gravitated towards the ideology of dissociative feminism. Season One Fleabag embodies this new way of thinking. At the end of her tearful confession about hurting Boo and wanting to “fuck everything,” she brokenly reflects, “Either everyone feels like this a little bit and just they’re just not talking about it, or I am completely fucking alone” (Waller-Bridge and Bradbeer, “Episode 6” season 1 22:22–41). This self-awareness of the destructive nature of her brand of feminism is isolating, which is precisely what Fleabag Era online users recognize and seek to subvert. The TikTok trend and its ensuing online discourse has created an accepting space for women to feel less alone in their grappling with dissociative feminism. Here, messiness is not only welcome, but also encouraged.

Interestingly, these users are well aware of season two of *Fleabag*; in fact, they exist on the same side of the internet that obsesses over Hot Priest and his healthy relationship with Fleabag. So, ignorance of Season Two Fleabag’s journey away from dissociative feminism is not an excuse for the toxic glorification of nihilistic feminism. These young women, blindsided by the validation of this virtual echo chamber, give others the courage to openly embrace a Season One Fleabag-esque ideology, and even set of behaviors, despite their knowledge of Fleabag’s long-term character arc. Evidently, the internet powerfully amplifies Season One Fleabag’s disillusionment with fourth-wave feminism.

Promulgating a willfully ignorant reading of *Fleabag*'s message is grounds for legitimate concern. The online behavior of Fleabag Era believers reflects not mere admittance to identifying with dissociative feminism, which could potentially foster reflection and growth, but instead borderline malice, which breeds purposeful self-destruction and outright hostility. It goes without saying that this conduct is under no circumstances just, regardless of the resentment-inducing omnipresence of the gendered panopticon. So, while joking about seeking vengeance against men or engaging in meaningless sex to emotionally manipulate one's partner can be darkly funny, even freeing, there is no way to determine between the users simply bandwaggoning on the trend and those genuinely acting upon it. Ultimately, Fleabag Era proclamations are downright braggadocious, goading an online, and effectively real-life, competition of who can best embody popular culture's favorite dissociative feminist: the deeply problematic Season One Fleabag.

But being in one's Fleabag Era is not sexy. It is not glamorous. It is not trendy, not productive, not empowering. It is only vicious and vindictive. Thus, young women are ultimately seeking solace from broken mainstream feminism in an isolating online community espousing an equally, if not more, broken brand of feminism. They must escape and, like Season Two Fleabag, part ways with their dissociative habits.

Onwards and Upwards

Goodbye, Virtual Echo Chamber!

Thankfully, I've never been sucked into the Fleabag Era echo chamber. My hours spent analyzing Fleabag's development throughout season two have conveniently coincided with the online romanticization of dissociative feminism, sparing me from the metaphorical trenches of the trend.

But I understand nodding along to the latest Fleabag Era TikTok that pops up on your For You Page. And I am all too familiar with buying into dissociative feminism in the first place.

I May Destroy You (2020) provides some guidance on grappling with the former of the two sets of behaviors. *I May Destroy You* is a limited series both created by and starring British entertainment powerhouse Michaela Coel as Arabella, a writer navigating life in modern-day London after suffering serious trauma—a plot similar to that of *Fleabag*. Arabella, like Season One Fleabag, embodies dissociative feminism. She consistently blows off important publishing deadlines to go on emotionally unfulfilling, but potentially sexually fulfilling, dates (Coel and Miller, “Eyes Eyes Eyes Eyes” 09:34–19:38). She regularly does copious drugs in nightclubs to stave off gendered reality (19:38–41). She even empties her bank account to fly to Italy, breaking into an ex-lover's house to obtain the reassurance of male desire (Coel and Miller, “Line Spectrum Border” 8:32–16:27). Arabella, like Fleabag, messily attempts to manipulate the gendered panopticon.

A defining aspect of Arabella's characterization is the impact of her trauma on her behavior. In episode one, Arabella is violently sexually assaulted by a man in a nightclub, which leaves her reeling (Coel and Miller, “Would You Like to Know the Sex?” 29:53–30:34). Rightfully

hurt and angered by the prevalence of sexual violence perpetuated by men against women, she turns to the internet to voice her frustration. Here, she finds a reassuring sense of community that assuages her loneliness, much like dissociative feminists turn to darkly comforting Fleabag Era discourse in light of socially constructed isolation.

But, what begins as posting a powerful Twitter rant about men walking free from sexual assault allegations soon devolves into orchestrating a dangerous, unproductive online dialogue. Fans agree with and amplify “whatever the fuck [she says]” (Coel and Miller, “Social Media is a Great Way to Connect” 8:46–7). Users begin doxxing rapists with an implied encouragement for others to take justice into their own hands (2:23–36). When she makes one of her friends wait out in the cold while she is conversing with a groupie, they even remark, “This echo chamber is freezing” (8:37–39). Arabella evidently prioritizes a toxic echo chamber over legitimate self-care in the wake of her assault.

However, after meeting with her therapist, Arabella feels encouraged to take a permanent leave from social media, an internet-era tool that “[promotes] speaking, often at the cost of listening” (20:11–14). Therefore, *I May Destroy You* suggests the only way to escape the dissociative feminism echo chamber is by disengaging with the internet—a logical solution. But logical does not mean easy. It takes great strength for Arabella to abandon her toxic, yet nonetheless supportive, online community. Her roommate even remarks, “Doing what we have to do doesn’t always feel good, does it?” (25:43–45). Young Fleabag Era women will inevitably face this same struggle.

Social critic Jia Tolentino affirms the difficulty of setting boundaries for internet interaction in her essay “The I in Internet,” writing, “[T]he worse the internet gets, the more we appear to crave it—the more it gains the power to shape our instincts and desires. To guard against

this, I give myself arbitrary boundaries—no Instagram stories, no app notifications—and rely on apps that shut down my Twitter and Instagram accounts after forty-five minutes of daily use” (Tolentino 32). Young women involved in Fleabag Era discourse ought to do the same as both Arabella and Tolentino, taking small but purposeful steps to remove themselves from dissociative feminism echo chambers—clicking “not interested” on TikTok confessionals, thinking critically about Fleabag Era tweets, or even just shrugging and continuing to scroll.

Some women have already come to this conclusion, even utilizing the internet to productively bring attention to the toxicity of the Fleabag Era bubble. For example, TikTok user @raynecorp overlays a video of them lying in bed with the text:

I’m in my real fleabag era (acknowledging my flaws, putting in a concerted effort to heal my relationships, learning that I am more than the bad things that happened to me, trying to accept personal responsibility without shame, recognizing that I am imperfect but not irredeemable, slowly but surely improving my life on my own terms, still being very funny) (women are born with pain built in but that doesn’t mean the pain has to be there forever). (internet princess)

This user recognizes that *Fleabag* ultimately warns against, not endorses, dissociative feminism. Twitter user @bad_angel_666 espouses a similar message, proclaiming, “leaving my fleabag season one era and entering my fleabag season two era” (Benjalynn). Like @raynecorp, this user urges Fleabag Era devotees to think critically about Fleabag’s growth throughout both seasons. Another Twitter user summarizes, “Not that I think any of this media is bad really but I cannot wait until we are over the Fleabag...era type of media. Cannot wait” (im normal). Evidently, the Fleabag Era echo chamber is slowly being recognized as a harmful atmosphere.

Goodbye, Dissociative Feminism!

However, abandoning dissociative feminism is another problem entirely.

I stand by my assertion that Season Two *Fleabag* serves as a model dissociative feminists can turn to for a definitive tutorial on how to leave behind the damaging school of thought. But, Waller-Bridge provides viewers with a frankly open-ended series of steps to follow:

- 1) Acquire a very hot priest.
- 2) Fall in love with said hot priest.
- 3) Choose the highs and lows of connection over the constant numbness of apathy.
- 4) Cinematically reject dissociative feminism by waving away a camera.
- 5) Find peace.

Okay, perhaps they are not quite *that* specific to *Fleabag*'s experience (we can't all afford to stumble across a hot priest), but it is understood that breaking the dissociative feminism cycle means becoming in touch with one's own emotions. So, steps one through four? Easy: viewers can live vicariously through *Fleabag*'s journey, experiencing her very same emotional journey and subsequent rejection of nihilistic feminism. Done, done, done, and done.

But step five is more nebulous. In the final scene of the show, *Fleabag* wanders away from the bus stop, broken-hearted but contented with her new, dissociation-free life.

And then what? How does she navigate this peace?

What type of feminist is *Fleabag* now?

Viewers can rule out fourth-wave feminism. From *Women Speak: Opening Women's Mouths Since 1998* to "Women: Don't Speak," *Fleabag* consistently questions and rags on mainstream gendered solidarity, and her development in season two does not bring her any

ideologically closer to this way of thinking. And, obviously, viewers can also rule out dissociative feminism.

In having been failed by two feminist schools of thought, perhaps Fleabag now takes a stance of neutrality, rejecting feminist labels entirely: “I am myself, not an ideology.” Though audiences are free to interpret the ending of *Fleabag* as they so choose, this analysis appears to be unrealistic. To refuse a feminist identity of any sort is to align with the patriarchy—one either supports gender solidarity or one does not—and it is illogical that Fleabag would take this metaphorical step backwards. For one, Priest teaches Fleabag not that feminism is limiting, but that dissociative feminism is self-destructive. Clearly, she could not possibly conclude from their interactions that refusing any feminist identity is the answer. Furthermore, Fleabag’s rationale for initially embracing dissociative feminism was an overwhelming awareness of the gendered panopticon. Despite now disengaging with dissociative feminism, she cannot erase her acute understanding of gendered societal flaws, and therefore neutrality is not an option. Evidently, *Fleabag* details how to reject dissociative feminism, but not how to navigate the patriarchy afterwards.

Other dissociative feminist texts still fail to give a better answer for exactly what comes after the rejection of dissociative feminism. In “Cat Person,” Margot unceremoniously dumps Robert via text and the story ends (Roupenian); there is no moment of realization, and it is unclear whether Margot even rejects dissociative feminism. In *I May Destroy You*, while Arabella does experience a moment of realization and steps away from the virtual echo chamber, it is similarly unclear whether she wholly rejects dissociative feminism (Coel and Miller, “Ego Death” 36:01–16). So, these texts provide even less insight into post-dissociative feminism life than *Fleabag*.

Even dissociative feminist texts outside those primarily explored in this study fall short of providing any specific guidance. *Normal People*—both the 2017 novel by Sally Rooney and its 2020 television adaptation directed by Lenny Abrahamson and Hettie Macdonald—and the 2018 novel *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* by Ottessa Moshfegh have received the Fleabag Era treatment—that is, they portray women grappling with dissociative feminism, and though the characters in question ultimately reject the nihilistic school of thought, social media has nonetheless rallied around their messiness (Peyser; Oldroyd). And, again like *Fleabag*, they fail to provide readers with a clear-cut answer as to what follows dissociative feminism. *Normal People* ends with the main female character, Marianne, finding peace after a series of broken relationships with men (Rooney 272–73); *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* ends with the main, unnamed female character—very *Fleabag*—finding peace after a year of on-and-off medically-induced dissociation (Moshfegh 276–89). While the endings are hopeful, much like the *Fleabag* bus station finale, they undeniably lack specific guidance on navigating feminism after “step five.” Even dissociative feminist texts with far less popularity in popular culture, like the 2020 novel *Luster* by Raven Leilani, end with bus station-esque scenes without truly pressing forward (Leilani 226–27). Clearly, though dissociative feminism is a rich and burgeoning source of exploration in contemporary literature and on-screen texts, these works fail to provide audiences with an unambiguous roadmap for navigating feminism after waving away the camera.

Hello, Individualized Feminism!

However, *Fleabag* and other dissociative feminist texts embrace ambiguous endings for good reason. When Fleabag waves away the camera, she is truly free for the first time in her life: free from confused fourth-wave feminist lectures series, free from her internal dissociative

monologue, free from any theoretical guidelines on how to be a feminist. So, in tuning into her emotions, she can begin step five—finding peace—and plunge into uncharted waters: discovering what feminism means for her. Fleabag thus embraces what I will call individualized feminism.

Unlike a fourth-wave or dissociative feminist, an individualized feminist does not focus on the big picture. They are aware of the wage gap and the male gaze, of sexual assault statistics and the panopticon. Yet, instead of attempting to chase down these truths with generalized direction on navigating a patriarchal society—be it protesting in pussy hats or wallowing in self-destructive behavior à la fourth-wave and dissociative feminism, respectively—they choose to focus on what personally empowers them, appealing to feminists of all gender identities.

Audiences are never shown what personally empowers Fleabag. They can make assumptions—perhaps she feels most at peace with herself when she focuses on building friendships that precede romances, or when she only engages in sexual activity with people for whom she truly cares—but Alabama Shakes’ “This Feeling” fades in as Fleabag fades out, and Waller-Bridge cuts to black before potentially showing how Fleabag proceeds with her life.

While this lack of explicit post-dissociative feminism guidance can be seen as a weakness of *Fleabag*, as the show pivots from clearly outlining dissociative feminism to forcing audiences to blindly navigate personal empowerment, the work’s open-endedness is both purposeful and necessary. Though fourth-wave feminism and dissociative feminism both fall short of uplifting gender equality for very different reasons, one shared failure is a lack of attention to the personal. Fourth-wave feminism reiterates the same pseudo-empowering, corporate-approved slogans; dissociative feminism literally champions emptiness and monotony. So, individualized feminism attempts to remedy this lack of person-specific connection to progress and breathe new life into feminism, centering the individual as the actor instead of sidelining them as the follower. The

movement even inadvertently staves off virtual echo chambers, as there is little echoing to be done in a chamber of one. Individualized feminism is truly what a participant makes of it. Thus, *Fleabag*'s viewers, as well as the consumers of other dissociative feminist texts, must be left to their own devices to shape their individualized feminism, instead of merely mimicking art and having their attempts at self-improvement fall short of enabling inner peace.

Conclusion

Being an individualized feminist is easier said than done. I recently went to see a movie with a male classmate. (Five stars for *Everything Everywhere All at Once!*) He always asks me how my day is. (It makes me smile every time.) We text about the latest comic book film and television adaptations. (*Moon Knight*'s been knocking our socks off.)

It's the first time I've happily pursued a purely platonic relationship with a man. I'd like to think he sees me as a whole person, a friend, and I'm okay with that; I don't need to be wanted nearly as much as I used to.

But I still cool girl-ified myself before driving to the theater: I fine-tuned my eyebrows (but left a few stray hairs for a "natural" aesthetic), pulled on shorts that flattered my waist (but ensured they weren't overly revealing), and defined my curls (but tousled them just enough to look like I didn't try). A completely effortless look.

I'm still a little bit that jealous, jaded girl from Montauk.

However, if I've learned anything from the evolution of feminism, it's that the path to real empowerment can be complicated. Organized feminism began in the mid-1800s, and its four subsequent waves have built upon each other, advocating for gender equality with a genuine optimism and drive. The current fourth wave's utilization of public discourse to advocate for gender issues with a sex-positive, can-do attitude normalizes feminist dialogue in the internet era. However, mainstream cries for change fall flat in light of the fourth wave's monetization and lack of progress.

Dissociative feminism, an outlet for women dejected by the mainstream push for gender equality, abandons the fourth wave's happy-go-lucky attitude and instead encourages a nihilistic

approach to empowerment, believing it futile to resist the influence of the male gaze. So, dissociative feminists lean into the gendered panopticon, basking in the intoxicating power of wielding power over men by “working the system.”

Dissociative feminism is present in contemporary texts, such as *Fleabag*. Fleabag initially embodies dissociative feminism; she is deeply critical of the fourth wave and honest about her feminine messiness, often dissociating and confiding in the audience about her exasperation with, but dependency upon, men and their validation, respectively. But, Fleabag ultimately recognizes the self-destructive nature of the movement and, encouraged by her newfound, Priest-related clarity, abandons dissociative feminism.

However, social media users who identify with dissociative feminism willfully ignore Fleabag’s crucial character development and instead celebrate her earlier submission to hopelessness. These users, who tend to be young women, have developed a “Fleabag Era” virtual echo chamber. In this online community, they proclaim their feminine messiness and are met with resounding support from like-minded individuals, which, while darkly validating, unfortunately insulates them from recognizing the faults of the movement.

Luckily, dissociative feminist texts provide nihilistic feminists with guidance for moving onwards and upwards. *I May Destroy You* identifies the toxicity of virtual dissociative feminism echo chambers and urges viewers to reevaluate their relationship with online interaction. And, *Fleabag* introduces a healthier alternative to dissociative feminism: individualized feminism, which focuses on personal empowerment.

I don’t think dissociative feminism is in any rush to dissolve, but I also don’t think that’s such a bad thing—so long as we think critically about the movement to reap its revelatory insights.

Then, dissociative feminism can be a vessel for self-reflection, for progress, for finally choosing better, and the texts it inspires are smart and relevant; works like “Cat Person,” *Normal People*, and especially *Fleabag* have the potential to spark much-needed conversation about what it means to be a modern feminist. A modern woman. *Fleabag* grows from her pain, and that we must.

And growth does not end with abandoning dissociative feminism in favor of personal empowerment. For one, individualized feminism is by no means a fix-it-all, one-stop-shop solution for gender issues; “finding peace” is not an option for people of color, disabled people, and other individuals from marginalized communities who face a wider variety of struggles than *Fleabag*—a white, able-bodied, cisgender, middle-class woman. Furthermore, fourth-wave feminism will eventually evolve into a fifth wave, infusing a new (and by human nature, flawed) ideology into mainstream discourse. Perhaps women will then, again, coalesce around nihilism and spark a second wave of dissociative feminism.

Change is guaranteed, but also unpredictable.

To grow with this change, we must evolve alongside feminism, keeping up with the quickening, contemporary exchange rate of ideas by thinking critically about socialized behaviors, and especially the media we consume. But, I hope that in navigating the complex, shifting waters of feminism, raw and illuminating on-screen and literary works will always remain a beacon of clarity and hope.

For now, I’m taking things slow. My friend and I are going to see another movie this week. (To be determined if *The Northman* is also five-star worthy). I’m excited to put the tweezers down, throw on some jeans, tie back my hair, and walk out the door. I’m choosing better, and I think that’s a good first step.

Figures



Fig. 1. Fleabag and Priest stand facing each other in her living room from Kirsten Krauth; “Falling for ‘Fleabag’: On the Problematic Hotness of Andrew Scott’s Hot Priest”; *Medium*, A Medium Corporation, 6 Oct. 2019, https://miro.medium.com/max/1400/1*s4IhIMU8h5_OAbN3q4ftww.png.



Fig. 2. Fleabag and Priest gaze at each other at a bus stop from Fleabag [@fleabag]; “‘Stop crying it's just a show’ / the show:”; *Twitter*, 25 March 2021, <https://pbs.twimg.com/media/ExWN7bBWgAMG9AH?format=jpg&name=900x900>.

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