

# DESIRE OF THE ABSENCE OF THE OTHER IN *FLEABAG*

*Adriana Beltrano*

Love plays a vital part in desire. When we think of what we desire, at least in a colloquial sense, we often think of who we love, what attracts us, and what kinds of partners we pursue. We believe that we are searching for a fulfillment of love, but desire is also about excitement and desire of the taboo, the inaccessible, or the intangible, and that usually cannot coexist with a fulfillment of love. Relationships in media often fall into two categories: a strong, passionate love which is fulfilled and then becomes less passionate and more mundane, or a strong, passionate love which ends at its height. We may say we desire the former, more logical option of a prolonged love, and that might be true. The first manifestation of love is the type of love most of us end up in, but we seldom see this relationship play out in movies or shows. Most popular media (which I believe is itself a depiction of our deepest fantasies) prefers depicting the other manifestation of love—a love which is separated from and desires the other and a love which can revel in its melancholia of being separated from the other. We desire the absence of the other more than we desire the object of desire itself, and this is manifest in our art. Desire can never truly be fulfilled because once it is, it ceases to be something we desire. Subconsciously, we seek a safe, distanced castration from the other, or a desire that can never be fulfilled. I will discuss this phenomenon in the television show *Fleabag* using refusal of the second season's main characters to seek closure in a fulfilled relationship as well as its breaks in the fourth wall to illustrate the middle ground between desire of the other and desire for the lack of the other

We chase relationships to preserve and derive pleasure from our desire for love, but we also are subconsciously aware that the mundane trajectory of most healthy relationships is undesirable. If we were to model our real-world relationships on what is depicted in media, we would believe that we derive more pleasure from initiating a relationship and then watching it die than from staying in it. And, in a way, is this not true? “In this view,” Lauren Berlant argues, “Freud is supported by other schools of psychoanalytic thought that, for all their differences, agree that the will to destroy (the death drive) and preserve (the pleasure principle) the desired object are two sides of the same process” (25). The desire for the castration from the other rather than a desire for the progression of the relationship is an extension of the death drive, which arises as a part of melancholia. The end of love creates pain from which we can find pleasure. *Fleabag* illustrates this theory insofar as the relationship dies before it is fulfilled, but it also strays from the theory, as both characters actively choose to end the relationship rather than wait for its inevitable, cataclysmic ending.

The show *Fleabag* depicts a melancholic main character who has lost her best friend to suicide and who wounds herself through her nymphomania. Even in sex, she is castrated from the other: she is addicted to “the performance of it, the drama ... but not so much the feeling” (Waller-Bridge). At the end of the first season, it is revealed to us that she had sex with her best friend's partner, which resulted in her best friend committing suicide. From its inception, the show depicts a character whose desire is pushing people away from her (through suicide, or through less dire things

like breakups). Fleabag also has a habit of breaking the fourth wall, and it is interesting that this character with such a complicated relationship with desire feels she can only confide in an imaginary audience. She makes the audience a character itself, saying things to us that none of the other characters can hear. This film tactic usually creates a connection between the audience and its media, but as it is used here, it creates further disconnect between the figures who are on screen.

In an article for *The Century Christian* on the “moral center” of the otherwise “obscene” show, Kathren Reklis writes, “We are her witnesses and her allies, her private journal and her audience. Fleabag would have us believe her life is all a lark, an experiment to see how desirable she is and what she can do with the desire she elicits in others.” We are used as, to put it crudely, replacement best friends she can sidebar with and to whom she can throw quips. When she relies on her connection with the audience, she has no need to connect with the world around her, as she can provide meta-feedback to the camera instead. Fleabag thus finds herself in a position where there is distance between herself and those around her and where there is a literal screen between her and her perhaps imaginary confidants. It is almost reminiscent of the Catholic confession, which comes into play in a much more literal sense in the second season.

Is there a more heavy-handed way to indicate two characters are soulmates than to make one privy to the other’s internal conversation with herself? In the second season, Fleabag has decided to abstain from sex in an attempt to heal and perhaps in a subconscious attempt to avoid her melancholic death drive. Maybe it is because she is lonely, or maybe it is a desire for the taboo and for the unattainable, but Fleabag’s period of abstinence ends when she meets the priest who will perform her father and stepmother’s wedding. From the moment they meet, it seems as if he has insight into her inner self, her ego. Fleabag thinks to herself, “No one’s asked me a question in 45 minutes-” and is interrupted by the Priest asking, “So what do you do?” (Waller-Bridge). No one else has been able to hear Fleabag’s internal monologue. Fleabag casts out her desire, something she expected to remain unanswered, and finds it fulfilled by someone with whom forming a relationship will only end in heartbreak.

In a piece on *Fleabag’s* use of gimmicks to explore despair, Ada S. Jaarsma argues that: It’s not that the priest himself holds such magic that he is crossing over, in such moments, able to recognize or gesture to us as viewing witnesses. Rather, the priest is fully within Fleabag’s world, screened and distant from the viewers...Fleabag’s habit of relating to the camera, in moments of moral outrage...and of moral self-reckoning (am I about to do this bad thing?) tilts towards more intensive self-relations. “It’s a love story,” Fleabag proclaims at the beginning of season 2. It’s a love story with herself, Waller-Bridge amends. (92)

It could be argued that the Priest does not see Fleabag’s breaks in the fourth wall as a literal conversation with an external presence as we do, but instead as internal mumblings to herself. The Priest is privy to her breaks in the fourth wall because he understands her inside and out despite the fact that he is not in a position to become romantic with her. If we read her asides as inside jokes with herself and not as an actual conversation with an unseen voyeur, we see that the Priest is able to understand her because he is able to understand the only way she is able to show self-love and self-attention.

Fleabag also sees the assemblage of the Priest and the taboo of religion at a time in her life when she is vulnerable. Not only is attraction to a Catholic priest a societal faux pas, thus heightening the lack of any fulfillment of desire, but with his Catholic faith comes a sense of structure. Fleabag says in the show, “I want someone to tell me what to wear every morning...I think I just want someone to tell me how to live my life, Father, because so far I think I’ve been getting it wrong.” At a time of turmoil in her life, Fleabag is attracted to the stability of the Priest as well as the fact that she knows his religion touts spiritual connection and a certain way of life. But her being attracted to him for the assets offered by his occupation cannot coexist with the very same facts of his belief system. There is nothing more appealing to many of us than a taboo partner, which makes the relationships we prefer to form unstable, and in turn makes the desire for the castration from the other so prevalent. Yes, Fleabag may love him, but that desire was created by the context around him, not because of the likely potentiality for a future with him.

At every moment in their relationship, Fleabag and the Priest remind themselves that their relationship is not sustainable. “What if you meet someone you like?” (Waller-Bridge) Fleabag asks. The Priest responds, “I talk and drink and laugh and give them Bibles, and hope they eventually leave me alone” (Waller-Bridge). The Priest knows he loves her, yet knows it is best if they part ways. He is asking her to leave him alone. As they are, it is impossible for them to contain each other’s love. In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine contemplates his relationship with God after a past of sexual sin. “Is there anything in me, O God, that can contain You?” (St. Augustine 4). St. Augustine believes all he has ever or will ever know has been derived from his God, and yet, though he is filled with God, he knows he can never understand God’s intentions. It is fitting that Fleabag’s love interest is a Catholic priest. St. Augustine simultaneously lamented his castration from God, and yet loved nothing more than his God. To get any closer to God or melancholia would be to fly too close to the Sun. And just as God exists both outside of and internalized within us, melancholia exists both within and without. We internalize our pain until it becomes a part of us. When we are without it, we are with it, and when we are with it, we desire more. Technically, the Priest could leave the church and start a life with Fleabag, but oaths to devote your life to God are not taken lightly. Additionally, it would likely only be a matter of time before he became unfulfilled and even resentful. Circumstance, which in a way is a tragedy itself, is in the way of the formation of this couple. They are two viable singles, and yet they are not a viable couple, and the fulfillment of their relationship could never be as fulfilling as their castration from each other, whereby they can maintain their desires from afar.

Fleabag and the Priest’s final scene is bittersweet; it is obvious that this is the end. They have consummated their relationship, and they can go no further. Fleabag tells the Priest that she loves him for the first time in this last meeting. Though the Priest later reciprocates this sentiment, his initial response is, “It’ll pass” (Waller-Bridge). This reaction is meant in humor yet conveys his sadness over their unspoken decision. The Priest is not dragging this relationship out. It *will* pass; there is no other option. If they are to ensure that their desire for each other remains intact, then they must part ways. And part of the pleasure of the relationship is derived from this ending. When fans of *Fleabag* discuss the show, no scene is more referenced than this scene of love being asked to pass. It is a melancholic masturbation of grief; whether we are in-text or part of the audience, we

hyper-fixate on moments of loss and derive a sort of pleasure from this unfulfillment of desire. Bruce Fink explains, “The fundamental fantasy stages the relationship between the subject and the lost object that provided this now prohibited satisfaction. Desire, as expressed in and propped up by the fundamental fantasy, is determined and conditioned by the satisfaction that has been prohibited and renounced” (67). It is never truer that we only appreciate what we had when it is gone than when dealing with desire. Desire is a fickle beast, and every fulfilled relationship turns boring or sour. Fleabag proves that the only way to preserve desire is to castrate oneself from the object of desire. The only way to make desire eternal is to leave it unfulfilled.

Reklis suggests that the Priest’s “power to shake up her expectations is revealed primarily when the show begins to play with the direct addresses to the camera...In interrogating Fleabag’s need to frame her own life for an imagined audience the show cuts straight to the heart of her moral growth: when she can measure her life by her relationships, how she sees others and is really seen, she won’t need us to follow her home.” Additionally, as Fleabag grows closer to the Priest, she becomes more infrequent with her breaks in the fourth wall. After the Priest leaves her, Fleabag gives as a knowing smile; she walks away then looks back at the audience for the last time and she bittersweetly waves goodbye to the camera. It is an unspoken truth that this is the last time she will turn to us. Whether that is because through unfulfilled desire she was able to recognize that the true love story was with herself or because someone was finally able to see her is up to interpretation. We are left with the message that, sometimes, heartbreak (or lack of the other) is for the best. She knows this chosen ending was for the best, and though it is sure that she will grieve the loss of her love, it is better than lamenting its presence.

When we subject ourselves to love, we are also giving up control. We do not know what will happen or how our object of desire will view us or treat us, and while this can be exciting, it is mostly terrifying. I would argue that the desire of the absence of the other, as depicted in *Fleabag* and other media, is a means of regaining control. If one’s heart has been broken, then one may say, “At least now I know you were going to hurt me all along,” or, if a relationship has ended, one may say, “At least I am no longer giving you the chance to hurt me.” The absence of the other can be more desirable because it forces the scenario of romance to become more stable. Ironically, Fleabag’s pining for the Priest could be viewed as more stable than if he were fully available because both characters immediately know nothing can come from this and that there is an inevitable end. In an interview with NPR, Waller-Bridge talked about this certainty in the chaotic in terms of Fleabag’s relationship to sex: “So she’s like, the moment she sees desire, you know, flutter across somebody’s eyes, she’s like, ‘I know this game. I know what we’re doing here. I just need to do this; that person will do that; we’ll end up having sex and then I’m in control. I am desired.’ And for a short moment, you know, she has agency over her life.”

The end of Fleabag’s relationship with the Priest also begs the question: what if these characters hadn’t ended their relationship? What if they had not opted for a safe certainty? What if they had allowed it to carry on into disaster? I believe this conversation would benefit from the addition of other examples of desire in film that ended differently. The ending of *Fleabag* exists in the purgatory between fulfillment and unfulfillment of desire; this is different from the rose-colored endings we perhaps usually expect from media. Slavoj Žižek writes that in the film *Titanic*, once Rose

promises her life beyond the boat to Jack, "...at THIS moment the ship hits the iceberg, in order to PREVENT what would undoubtedly have been the TRUE catastrophe, namely the couple's life in New York..." (Žižek). That true catastrophe would be a resentful relationship that eventually fizzles out. Because Jack died, Rose was allowed to continue in a state of melancholia and grief over her lost love. Had her object of desire not died, they would be stuck together, penniless in New York, much as Fleabag and the Priest would have been stuck together, godless and purposeless. As much as we like to believe that true love conquers all, it can have a difficult time conquering societal pressures and the simple fact of internal desires. It also may seem egregious to argue that such a significant tragedy could not compare to how truly tragic it would be for their romance to continue and end in anything other than grand tragedy; however, most of us do not desire romance which turns into the mundane.

"The catastrophe thus occurs in order to save their love," Žižek writes of Jack and Rose, "in order to sustain the illusion that, if it were not to happen, they would have lived 'happily forever after.'" While the tragedy of the sinking of the Titanic is exacerbated by the end of Jack and Rose's relationship, in some ways, *Titanic* is paradoxically not tragic, or rather, not as tragic as it could have been. If one of the two lovers had not died in the sinking, the true tragedy of the film would not have been avoided. Jack and Rose's love would have failed in the real world, and their desire for a happily ever after, even if that ever is not that long, would have been left unfulfilled. Because Rose was castrated from her other, she can pine for him from afar with the knowledge that she will never have him. And perhaps his death even relieved her; perhaps she knew this would not work out and knew that she was chasing her desire for him despite herself. She never has to live with the fact that her love turned sour, and the issue of their incompatibility goes unquestioned.

Compare this to the ending of *The Graduate*. After Benjamin crashes Elaine's wedding, they flee the church together in a state of passion and excitement. As the pair of lovers settle into the back seats of the bus, their wide smiles slowly shrink into looks of despair. It seems as if they are thinking: what have we done? They have chased unrealistic desire to the point of no return. Their dramatic moment was an uptick in their relationship, and as there is no way to go back on what they've done. In *Titanic*, Jack and Rose were choosing to be together, but tragedy forced them apart and kept them fond of each other through both life and death. In *The Graduate*, they have chosen to be together, and now they must be together. Fleabag and the Priest know that they desire each other, and yet they know that that desire and satisfaction will disappear if they continue. And thus, we are sent the following message: if they want to avoid tragedy, they must deliberately choose to end it. "The pleasure given up seems all the more valuable now that it is lost (it seems we didn't know we had it so good)" (Fink 67). We can look back on our past happiness as a fixed moment in time through the lens of our current pain. A love or desire trapped in the resin of loss and nostalgia allows for the memory of a time of fulfillment of desire itself to never be lost. This distancing from satisfaction gives the desirers a power over their desire, and this is what makes *Fleabag* so interesting. Fleabag and the Priest chose melancholia over fulfillment because they knew fulfillment could only end in disaster, and because they knew that being castrated from the object of our desire is the sweet pain which we all ultimately desire. This ultimately maybe what made *Fleabag* such a cultural phenomenon. It is the tale of a woman who has simultaneously won and lost at the game of desire.

She leaves the situation knowing she is still wanted yet does not give her object of desire any future power to hurt her.

Finally, what does this representation of desire in media mean for us? “The bold argument of Mediated Intimacy (Barker et al., 2018) is that media of various kinds play an increasingly important role in shaping people’s knowledge, desires, practices and expectations about intimate relationships... It is also about the wider cultural habitat of images, ideas and discourses about intimacy that circulate through and across media: the ‘happy endings’ of romantic comedies...” (Barker). Sex and love advice in the media are usually targeted towards a heteronormative audience, and even this paper can be assumed to be heteronormative as I have obviously discussed only heterosexual couples in terms of depictions of desire in the media. The question is begged: what message is media sending in regards to societal ideas of heteronormativity with romances such as those in *Fleabag*, *Titanic*, and *The Graduate*? Mediated Intimacy argues that while our realities can shape our media, our media can also literally change how we view our actual relationships. Anyone who has ever found themselves wondering where the “spark” went or why their relationship is not as exciting as it was before may have been impacted by this. Art rarely depicts loving, long-term relationships. We either see the rush of initially getting into a relationship, as in *Titanic*, or the turmoil of getting out of one or realizing the relationship was a mistake, as in *The Graduate*.

*Fleabag* is different. It denies a happy ending and an unhappy continuation. Instead, Fleabag and the Priest choose to recognize that their union is impossible and end things on their own terms, providing an ending which is bittersweet. The message of films such as *Titanic* and *The Graduate* are very Lacanian in that they offer a very limited view of how desire can play out. While I contend that desire being the absence of the other is emphasized in *Fleabag*, I also argue the ending of its main romance is optimistic. Fleabag has been able to grow past needing to turn sarcastically to an imaginary audience; she now knows she can turn to herself. Her improbable love affair didn’t work out, but it didn’t work out on their terms. It is a sign of independence for Fleabag and perhaps a message that when desire is based on mutual respect, even when it is taboo and even when it is not fulfilled, it will foster growth. Perhaps *Fleabag* provides its audience with a model for a relationship which ends on good terms yet still ends. Waller-Bridge is quoted as saying that the relationship with the camera is “the central relationship to me, and so in bringing it back I was most concerned with how to create a new relationship with the camera: Firstly, the camera knows her secrets, so the relationship with how I look at the camera is going to be different; and then, secondly, the idea of somebody else seeing it and what that would mean for her” (Ford). Our desires are not always going to be fulfilled, and it may be difficult to find satisfaction in the fulfillment of relationships, but once we get to a place where we are prepared to be more open with ourselves, we can find fulfillment even in unfulfilled relationships sparked by desire.

**Adriana Beltrano** is a senior majoring in English and political science at the University of Florida. She is interested in analysis of popular media ranging from film to music and loves discussing the real-world implications of art. She is currently working on a thesis regarding gender in the discography of Bruce Springsteen.

## Works Cited

- Augustine, and Peter Constantine. *Confessions*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2020.
- Barker, Meg-John, et al. "Mediated Intimacy: Sex Advice in Media Culture." *Sexualities*, vol. 21, no. 8, 2018, pp. 1337-1345, [journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1363460718781342](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1363460718781342).
- Berlant, Lauren Gail. *Desire/Love*. Dead Letter Office, BABEL Working Group an Imprint of Punctum Books, 2012.
- Cameron, James. *Titanic*. Paramount Pictures, 1997.
- Fink, Bruce. *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique*. Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Ford, Rebecca. "Fleabag' Creator-Star Phoebe Waller-Bridge on Hot Priest and a Possible Season 3: 'I Feel like It's Done.'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, 3 Oct. 2019, [www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/fleabag-star-phoebe-waller-bridge-shows-alleged-final-season-i-feel-like-done-1229270/#](https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/fleabag-star-phoebe-waller-bridge-shows-alleged-final-season-i-feel-like-done-1229270/#)!
- Jaarsma, Ada S. "Fleabag's Pedagogy of the Gimmick." *Open Philosophy*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2021, pp. 90-104, [www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/opphil-2020-0156/html](https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.1515/opphil-2020-0156/html).
- Nichols, Mike. *The Graduate*. Embassy Pictures, 1967.
- NPR Staff. "Writer Created 'Fleabag' by Looking at What She Loved, Then Taking It Away." NPR, 6 Nov. 2016, [www.npr.org/2016/11/06/500707375/writer-created-fleabag-by-looking-at-what-she-loved-then-taking-it-away](https://www.npr.org/2016/11/06/500707375/writer-created-fleabag-by-looking-at-what-she-loved-then-taking-it-away).
- Reklis, Kathryn. "Can a Fleabag Clean up Her Act?" *The Christian Century*, 12 July 2019, [www.christiancentury.org/article/screen-time/can-fleabag-clean-her-act](https://www.christiancentury.org/article/screen-time/can-fleabag-clean-her-act).
- Waller-Bridge, Phoebe. *Fleabag*. BBC, 2016-2019.
- Zizek, Slavoj. "A Pervert's Guide to Family." *Lacan.com*, <https://www.lacan.com/zizfamily.htm>.