A Rhetorical Criticism of
“Fleabag”: Tragicomedy and
What it Means to be A Feminist

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Introduction

Relaying the thoughts of women everywhere, Phoebe Waller-Bridge in “Fleabag” states that “being proper and sweet and nice and pleasing is a f**king nightmare. It’s exhausting.” (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2016). Winning over 19 awards, while only being 2 seasons long, it is safe to say the television show “Fleabag,” has had a great impact on a lot of people. In my essay, I argue that Phoebe Waller-Bridge utilizes tragicomedy in order to convince the audience that there is not just one right way to be a feminist. In order to do so, I will first provide some background information. This is going to include who Phoebe Waller-Bridge is, a review of the history of feminism from the 1970s to the rise of a new kind of feminism in the 2010s, and what was going on in Phoebe Waller-Bridge’s career when she decided to create, write, and star in this hit television show, “Fleabag.” I will then move on to discuss how Waller-Bridge implements tragicomedy in the show. I will do this by delving into different scenes from the show that display how the themes and attitudes towards feminism evolve from the beginning of the show to the end. The themes in these scenes demonstrate how being a feminist doesn’t mean behaving in any one specific way, there are multiple approaches or outlooks that one can have and still call themselves a feminist. Therefore, Phoebe Waller-Bridge shows how feminists come in many different forms through the use of tragicomedy.

Who is Phoebe Waller-Bridge:

Before discussing the show, it is important to know who Phoebe Waller-Bridge is. Phoebe Waller-Bridge is a 37-year-old woman from London, England. She was born on July 14, 1985, and grew up in her childhood home, which was in the affluent neighborhood of Ealing in West London (Kozan, 2023). This was very close to the comedy studio that produced both
Monty Python and Downton Abbey, two very successful shows (Ruiz, 2017). Waller-Bridge was brought up by both of her parents, who are divorced. Her mother, Teresa Mary, worked for the Worshipful Company of Ironmongers. Her father, Michael Waller-Bridge, co-founded the first fully electronic share market in London, known as Tradepoint (Kozan, 2023). Waller-Bridge also has a 32-year-old sister, Isobel, who is a music composer, and a 28-year-old brother, Jasper, who is a music manager (Kozan, 2023). Waller-Bridge was raised in a very creative environment where her parents allowed her to express herself however she wanted. Even when she decided to dress like a boy from ages six to eleven, or write elaborate radio shows for her sister to perform, her parents were supportive (Ruiz 2017). This support did not last forever, when Waller-Bridge attended the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art at seventeen, she quickly realized that there were no parts that she was interested in, all the roles she was given were that of an uncomplicated, one-dimensional victim. When she demanded a role that didn’t stereotype women, she was given a background character (Ruiz, 2017). These frustrating conditions are part of what inspired Phoebe Waller-Bridge to want to explore and create her own complex female characters (Hess, 2019). These early experiences of being pigeonholed into one-dimensional female roles and denied the opportunity to portray more nuanced, multi-dimensional characters also laid the groundwork for Waller-Bridge's future feminist explorations through her writing

**Feminism Throughout History:**

**Feminism before 1970:**

The idea of feminism and what it takes to be a feminist has overgone many changes throughout history. While the feminist wave began in the United States, it quickly gained traction in Great Britain and Germany during the 1960s (Fougeyrollas-Schwebel, 2003). There are many
different types of feminism, in fact, both the term feminism and the politics it represents have
been continually transformed by the evolving responses of women and men from a variety of
cultures. Women’s politics have developed organically in settings so diverse that the plural
feminisms more accurately describes them (Freedman, 2002). The term feminism has always
been controversial, in large because of its association with radicalism and in part because even its
proponents disagreed with or didn’t identify with the label. Even some women who supported
women’s initial emancipation rejected the term feminist. This reluctance often stemmed from the
perception that the demands of the middle class for suffrage and property rights didn't adequately
address the pressing concerns of working women, such as fair wages and job stability.

Feminism in the 1970s:

The 1970s marked a pivotal era in the history of feminism, characterized by a surge of
activism and cultural shifts worldwide. Building upon the groundwork laid by the second-wave
feminism of the 1960s, this decade witnessed a diverse array of feminist movements challenging
entrenched patriarchal structures. Issues such as reproductive rights, workplace discrimination,
and sexual liberation took center stage, inspiring women to demand equality in all spheres of life
(Fougeyrollas-Schwebel, 2003). In the United States, landmark events like the Roe v. Wade
Supreme Court decision legalized abortion. Amidst this era of feminist resurgence, the Roe v.
Wade decision not only symbolized a triumph for reproductive rights but also led to fierce
debates that continue to shape political discourse and mobilize activists on both sides of the
abortion issue (Garrow, 1994). Additionally, the passage of Title IX in 1972, which prohibited
sex discrimination in educational institutions receiving federal funding, further bolstered the
momentum of the feminist movement by opening doors to greater opportunities for women in
academia and athletics, while also confronting systemic gender inequalities (Johnson, 1994).
Globally, women's movements in countries like Iran and China fought against oppressive regimes and traditional gender roles. The 1970s fostered a climate of empowerment and solidarity among women, laying the groundwork for continued progress in the pursuit of gender equality.

**Feminism in the 1980s:**

The 1980s saw feminism undergo further evolution and diversification, responding to changing social and political landscapes. While some aspects of second-wave feminism continued to gain momentum from the 70s, such as advocacy for reproductive rights and workplace equality, this decade also witnessed the emergence of new feminist perspectives and movements. Intersectional feminism gained prominence, highlighting the interconnected nature of gender oppression with race, class, and sexuality. This era saw the rise of prominent feminist voices like bell hooks, who chooses not to capitalize her name in an effort to shift focus away from her and towards her message (Rowbotham, 1989). It is for the same reason that bell hooks doesn’t call herself a “Black feminist,” she wants women to think less about feminism as an identity, and more about what they can do for the movement. Another active feminist at the time is Audre Lorde, who challenged mainstream feminism to be more inclusive and attentive to the experiences of marginalized communities (Dudley, 2006). The 80s also marked the rise of backlash against feminism. This is often referred to as the "anti-feminist backlash," and became more pronounced, fueled by conservative ideologies and media sensationalism as well as those who felt it was too radical of a movement. Despite these challenges, feminist activism persisted, laying the groundwork for ongoing efforts to dismantle gender-based discrimination and oppression.

**Feminism in the 1990s:**
The 1990s marked a period of both progress and challenges for feminism, as the movement continued to evolve in response to shifting societal norms and political climates. Third-wave feminism emerged as a prominent force, emphasizing individuality, diversity, and the intersectionality of oppression (Gillis et al., 2004). This wave of feminism sought to address the experiences of women of color, LGBTQ+ individuals, and other marginalized groups often overlooked by mainstream feminist discourse. Issues like reproductive rights remained a part of the conversation, but new issues such as sexual violence and representation in media gained renewed attention. Movements like Riot Grrrl, which can be described as an underground feminist punk movement that combines feminism, punk music, and politics, sparked cultural change through music, zines, and grassroots activism (Briggs, 2015). However, the 1990s also saw continued backlash against feminism, with conservative forces pushing back against gains made in previous decades. Despite these challenges, the feminist movement persisted, laying the groundwork for ongoing advocacy and activism in the pursuit of gender equality and social justice.

**Feminism in the early 2000s:**

The show “Fleabag” was released in July of 2016, around the same time that a new type of feminism was gaining popularity. This type of feminism can be deemed “feminism against ‘the feminine’” and is most popularly demonstrated as women rejecting all characteristics that could be deemed feminine (Sandford, 2001). This new wave of feminism was reflected in Hollywood with an influx of new movies and television shows with female protagonists. However, while these female heroines had some traits that women could relate to, what emphasized their importance in the narrative, was their typically male characteristics or tendencies. So, rather than giving these women a new narrative of their own, they were put on
the same male path that had been seen previously in roles given to men (Hall, 2016). The value of these female characters was measured on their ability to prove themselves on men’s terms, they had to be fighters who excelled in traditionally male activities (Hall, 2016). Similarly, the television that claimed to be feminist vilified feminine characteristics with its hyper-feminine depiction of villains and antagonists (Cuklanz, 2007). Overall, feminism in the 2010s was more focused on gender integration and de-differentiation rather than women embracing their femininity. If women wanted to be respected, then they were encouraged to act like men and abandon their femininity. This change in feminism can be seen in the show “Fleabag” through the characteristics of different characters that are considered feminists, as well as how they behave and talk about feminism.

The Creation of “Fleabag”:

Phoebe Waller-Bridge's exploration of complex female identities and defiance of traditional gender norms ultimately led to the creation of the iconic character, Fleabag. After graduating from the Royal Academy of the Dramatic Arts in 2006, Waller-Bridge remained untested until she was dared to perform a monologue at a local fringe festival in 2012. Waller-Bridge’s friend, Deborah Frances-White, was a writer and comedian behind the podcast “The Guilty Feminist,” she was also the one who encouraged Waller-Bridge to get on stage at that festival and perform a ten-minute stand-up monologue (Borge, 2020). Thus, was born the character of “Fleabag,” a sexually-free woman who is mourning the death of her best friend while trying to keep the café that they opened together afloat.

This comedic character was cathartic to the women in the audience, allowing Waller-Bridge to capture the attention of everyone in the room. Even though Waller-Bridge gave this monologue while alone on stage, sitting on a stool, with this multi-dimensional character, she
was able to move everyone in the audience. As Frances-White describes it, the audience was captivated by this character who like Waller-Bridge herself “wasn’t ashamed of the parts of herself that other women had been trained to find embarrassing, she reveled in them” (Borge, 2020). This lead Waller-Bridge to further develop this “Fleabag” character into someone that she describes as a “really dry-witted, dark-humored, naughty, sexually, voracious, unapologetic, broken woman” (Smart, 2020). This monologue was such a success that it led to Waller-Bridge starring in an hour-long one woman show revolving around the same character in 2013, leading her to win Critics Circle award for Most Promising Playwright (Wright, 2020).

After seeing the success of her one-woman show, Waller-Bridge created a television show, once again called “Fleabag,” that was picked up by BBC and Amazon Prime (Hess, 2019). In adapting this character to the screen, the main thing Waller-Bridge wanted to ensure, was that Fleabag maintained her “power of descriptive weaponry,” in which she could control the audience’s perspective (Wright, 2020). She chose to do this by having Fleabag break the fourth wall constantly, treating the audience as a confidant and close friend to Fleabag, giving them audience the inside scoop on Fleabag’s thoughts and motivations for her actions. This is the character that is now widely known and loved by so many women, the nameless “Fleabag.”

Waller-Bridge's compelling portrayal of the titular character, coupled with her masterful writing, earned the series widespread praise and accolades, including Emmy Awards for Outstanding Comedy Series and Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series. The show's ensemble cast also received praise for their performances, with standout roles from Olivia Colman, Sian Clifford, and Andrew Scott. "Fleabag" received further recognition for its deft exploration of themes such as grief, guilt, and self-discovery, cementing its status as a groundbreaking and unforgettable television series. Winning over 19 awards, while only being 2
seasons long, it is safe to say the television show “Fleabag,” has had a great impact on a lot of people.

**Tragicomedy as seen in “Fleabag”:**

**Season 1, Episode 1:**

Phoebe Waller-Bridge uses tragicomedy in order to show the audience that feminism isn’t linear. Often, Waller-Bridge does this through the dialogue given by Fleabag to other characters. In the first episode of the series, Fleabag and her sister Claire are at a feminist lecture where the lecturer proceeds to ask the audience to “please raise your hand if you would trade five years of your life for the so-called perfect body” (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2016). Immediately both Fleabag and Claire proceed to raise their hands, only to realize that they are the only two that are. After an embarrassing pause, Fleabag whispers to Claire, “we are bad feminists” (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2016). This is a funny moment amidst serious subject matter. While on the surface, the fact that these two grown women would take years off their life to fit a beauty standard seems horrible, it can also be seen as refreshingly honest. This highlights how sometimes, feminism can take on a performative aspect, where individuals engage in actions that seem to align with feminist ideals but may lack genuine commitment or depth. Some of the other women in the room with Fleabag as well as some women in the audience might have been feeling the same thing but were too afraid to admit it and be labeled a “bad feminist.” This lack of transparency can bring a halt to meaningful change. True feminism requires more than just outward expressions, it demands continuous introspection, critical engagement, and meaningful action to dismantle systemic oppression and foster genuine gender equality. Through this scene, Waller-Bridge is showing the messiness of feminism because on the one hand, it feels empowering because she is so honest and makes other women feel seen. But, on the other hand,
although she clearly has a desire to both be a feminist and be seen as one, Fleabag doesn’t understand the rules of feminism and sees herself as a bad person and bad feminist.

Another example of how Waller-Bridge uses tragicomedy in the first episode of “Fleabag” is shown in an exchange Fleabag has with her father. After arriving at her father’s door at 3am, clearly drunk and on the verge of tears she says; “I have a horrible feeling that I’m a greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, morally bankrupt woman who can’t even call herself a feminist” (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2016). Her father merely replies with the quip “well you get all that from her mother.” After making this joke, you can see Fleabag put back up the wall that had started to come down as she once again hides behind her humor. She then simply responds “good one” (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2016). While it seems like this outburst from Fleabag nothing but another demonstration of how she is a disaster and an outrageous person, it is actually one of the few times in the show that we see the truth behind Fleabag’s humor, revealing her real feelings, only to have them brushed off as if they are a joke.

Even though Fleabag plays off her statement as a joke, it is clear that she is actually having these fears. Fleabag has a desire to be a feminist but is afraid that she is failing. This is because she doesn’t know how to be one, so when she compares herself to the image of a feminist that she has in her head, they don’t match up. In including this, Waller-Bridge is allowing the women in the audience to live vicariously through Fleabag and see the feelings that so many of them have but are too afraid to say aloud. Most women want to be perceived as feminists by those around them, so they refuse to let anyone see their flaws and doubts.

**Season 1, Episode 4:**

Phoebe Waller-Bridge uses tragicomedy through exaggerated gender roles in episode four to show that there are multiple ways to be a feminist. In this episode, Fleabag’s dad bought
her and her sister Claire a gift for Mother’s Day, a weekend at an all-female retreat where they are to stay completely silent, doing mundane cleaning tasks the entire time. Interestingly enough, right next-door there is an all-male retreat, only they aren’t being quiet and cleaning. Instead, they are screaming obscenities and derogatory terms at blow-up dolls in an effort to manage the issues they have with women. Both retreats are comedically over the top, while also delving into the differences between how we treat men and women. It is clear how Waller-Bridge is setting up the female gender roles in this episode through how both Fleabag and Claire behave at the beginning of the retreat. Whilst waiting at the door to enter the retreat, Fleabag and Claire overhear a male voice yell “SL*ts!” to which Claire looks disturbed and Fleabag replies “yes?” (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2016). This dialogue serves multiple purposes, on the one hand the comedic timing is very funny, but on the other hand, it shows how Fleabag views herself due to her promiscuous nature.

As the episode continues, when Fleabag and Claire get to their shared room, we see Claire unloading an inordinate amount of skincare and beauty products, whereas Fleabag only has a singular product that she says is “for her face and body.” When Fleabag asks Claire what she would do if someone stole all her skincare, Claire replies with “I’d kill myself” (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2016). While the bluntness of the scene is entertaining, this brief interaction underscores the differing perceptions of feminism between the characters. Claire strives for perfection, epitomizing the societal expectation of flawless femininity, with a successful career and a polished exterior. On the other end of the spectrum, Fleabag embodies messiness and imperfection, yet both women struggle to fully embrace their feminist identities due to their perceived shortcomings. These two women couldn’t be more different, and while they both see feminist traits in each other, they don’t see them in themselves. This is because they have been
taught that being a feminist means having no flaws. This is an impossible standard to live up to, everyone inherently has flaws and shortcomings. If the criteria for being a feminist was being flawless, then there wouldn’t be any feminists or a feminist movement.

The expectations of the women at the retreat itself shows the types of traits that have been historically valued in women. The leader of the retreat is addressing all the women, welcoming them to “female only Breath of Silence retreat, Women Don’t Speak.” Immediately afterwards a man in the group stands up confused, saying that he is meant to be at a different retreat. We then hear a distant male voice yell “f*cking sl*ts!” and the man says, “ah that one,” as he runs away from the silent woman retreat (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2016). The head of the female retreat then goes on to say what the retreat is all about, “this weekend is about being mindful, it’s about leaving your voice in your head, and trapping your thoughts in your skull. Think of it as a thought prison, in your mind.” Once again, Waller-Bridge is using humor and the gross exaggeration of gender roles to show the juxtaposition between how society treats men and how they treat women. Women are expected to keep their thoughts to themselves whereas men can speak loudly about whatever they want and get praised for it. Waller-Bridge's comical use of exaggerated gender roles and contrasting retreats in this episode highlights the multifaceted nature of feminism and the ongoing struggle to dismantle deeply ingrained societal expectations that have been placed upon women.

Season 2, Episode 3:

Another instance of Waller-Bridge’s use of tragicomedy to show that feminists come in many different forms, is evident in a scene in the ninth overall episode, the third episode of the second season, where Fleabag is talking to a successful businesswoman named Belinda. Belinda just won an award for being the “Best Woman in Business.” After the two of them exchange
some jokes about how the award is just a “subsection of success,” Belinda begins jokingly musing about how she found menopause to be freeing, she says that “you are free, no longer a slave, no longer a machine with parts. You are just a person in business” (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2016). While it may seem ridiculous that a woman would not only embrace menopause, but look forward to it, Waller-Bridge included this nuanced scene full of the humor and jokes to disguise a much more serious and complicated topic.

While some women would be honored to receive an award such as this one, there are others that similarly to Belinda, would view it as an insult. By that same token, some people think that awards like this are necessary for the feminist movement, to give women the recognition they deserve. But, Waller-Bridge is showing that while some may think this way, it is also possible that some feminists view these awards as a participation trophy of sorts.

In including the dialogue surrounding menopause, Waller-Bridge is showing the audience how women are not taken seriously or seen as equals until they are stripped of what others define as making them a woman. Once people stopped looking at her sexually, they finally started looking at Belinda as a person rather than a woman. In fact, prior to giving Belinda her award, Fleabag’s sister Claire tells her to “make sure [the award] is not pink or anything horribly female” (Waller-Bridge & Bradbeer, 2016). Once again, the association here is that anything that can be considered feminine is a negative, and a woman who takes herself seriously wouldn’t want to be associated with it. This shows how as it stands, feminism is messy because even though it appears to be a movement of empowering women, many people that are seen as feminists tone down their feminine traits in order to gain success in a patriarchal society.

Waller-Bridge uses Fleabag and Belinda to show two very different types of feminists, one who is more stereotypically masculine in her mannerisms, and one who is very feminine.
However, in the way that Waller-Bridge writes the scene, she shows that there is validity in both of them, neither of them is right and neither of them is wrong. They are simply discussing their viewpoints and what their experiences have been like as women. Through this nuanced exchange between Fleabag and Belinda, Waller-Bridge illustrates the complex and often contradictory perspectives within modern feminism. She refuses to endorse any single viewpoint but instead embraces the multifaceted realities of women's experiences.

**Conclusion:**

All in all, Phoebe Waller-Bridge's critically acclaimed series "Fleabag" cleverly uses tragicomedy to challenge conventional notions of feminism. In this essay, we discussed who Phoebe Waller-Bridge is, the historical evolution of feminism, as well as what led Waller-Bridge to create the show “Fleabag.” We then delved into three episodes of the series, analyzing how through the multifaceted character of Fleabag herself, as well as her interactions with others, Waller-Bridge dismantles the idea that there is one right way to be feminist. This show highlights the complexities and the contradictions that often come up as women navigate conflicting societal expectations and their own desires. Fleabag's raw honesty, vulnerabilities, and unconventional choices remind us that feminism is not a rigid set of rules, but a continual process of self-discovery and empowerment. By embracing the messiness and imperfections of the human experience, "Fleabag" encourages a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of what it means to be a feminist. Waller-Bridge's witty blend of humor and pathos through tragicomedy invites audiences to embrace the multitudes within themselves and others, ultimately redefining feminism as a diverse tapestry of lived experiences rather than a narrow, prescriptive ideology.
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