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**Living in a Mad Fat Body:**  
**The Negative Effects of Body Dissatisfaction and Mental**  
**Illness on The Female Protagonist from *My Mad Fat Diary***

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA Dissertation

Author: Sandra Alfaro López

Supervisor: Sara Martín Alegre

Departament de Filologia Anglesa i de Germanística

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## **Abstract**

In British TV series *My Mad Fat Diary* (2013-2015), the audience dives into Rae Earl's complicated teenage years, following her journey as she accepts her insecurities and heals from her mental disorders. The title of the show reveals for itself the topics which complicate the protagonist's life and simultaneously conform her identity: fatness and madness. Taking into account that Rae is a dual character, affected by the previously mentioned matters, the viewer has direct access to experience life through the struggles of not only a fat woman, but also from the perspective of a mad individual.

Although Fat Studies have become an emerging academic field which mainly focuses on fat bodies from a humanistic and social perspective, little research has engaged with *My Mad Fat Diary* and its protagonist. Despite the fact that Rae Earl's struggles as a fat woman contribute immensely to the field, a very low number of studies has turned her character and life experiences into a relevant aspect worth analyzing.

Thus, I intend to explore Rae's life experiences as a fat woman and mad individual, but also the factors which contribute to both her fatness and madness. Moreover, this dissertation is also concerned with therapy as a healing tool which guides Rae towards self-acceptance and a new mindset in regards to her mental health.

Furthermore, I will argue that female sexuality can be affected negatively by fatness. The present study also claims that producers portrayed Rae as a subject who desires, even though her insecurities regarding her body size prevent her from engaging in positive sexual relationships. Finally, I will analyze her evolution: low self-esteem, transformed into self-love, guides Rae towards happiness as she leaves to a fresh start.

**Keywords:** *My Mad Fat Diary*, Rachel "Rae" Earl, fat studies, body dissatisfaction, mental health, female sexuality, women studies.



## **0. Introduction**

*My Mad Fat Diary* (2013-2015) is a comedy-drama TV show produced by British channel *E4*. It is based on Rachel Earl's collection of diaries that she wrote as a teenager but which were only published later in her adult life. Although the book collects more information, details and characters than the TV series does, both succeed in the portrayal of mental health, fatness and female sexuality within the experiences of a sixteen-year-old girl. Therefore, the focus of this dissertation is the extensive analysis of *My Mad Fat Diary*'s protagonist, Rachel "Rae" Earl, played by BAFTA-winner actress Sharon Rooney, following the girl's journey in relation to the previously mentioned topics.

The show, set in 1996 Stamford, Lincolnshire, follows Rae's story in a total of sixteen episodes which are divided at the same time into three different seasons. First season, directed by Tim Kirkby and Benjamin Caron and written by Tom Bidwell in collaboration with Rachel Earl, presents a fragile, overweight teenager Rae who has just left a psychiatric hospital after spending four long months of recovery. Although her return to the real world feels scary at first, Rae soon reunites with childhood best friend Chloe, who introduces our protagonist to what she calls "the gang", composed by Chop, Izzy, Archie and Finn. From episode one to episode six, Rae makes a huge effort to become friends with the rest of the group as she struggles to keep her insecurities and her mental illness as a secret.

Even though the events that take place in Rae's life are very diverse, fatness, mental health and the character's sexuality are three recurrent aspects that keep challenging her life throughout the whole series. Fat Studies, an emerging academic area of research, is concerned with the ways in which fatness affects people and conditions some aspects of their life. Recently, there has been growing interest in the

field from a social perspective rather than a medical one, which was highly common in past research. The importance of such approach relies on the fact that fatness affects personal experiences and defines an individual's identity to some extent. As Sophie Smailes states in her research, "fat stigma, women's body dissatisfaction and the implications of having a body which does not conform to the prescriptions of slimness are hugely damaging to women" (2014: 51). For the purpose of this dissertation, I will only focus on the relation between fatness and gender in an attempt to explore the experience of Rae as a fat woman.

In the same way, Women's Studies has also become a relevant field for authors and critics. According to Harjunen (2009: 46), "the goal of feminist research has often been openly political; it has aimed to better women's lives, change structures of society to be more accommodating to women". In terms of fatness, a social movement has emerged in the recent years aiming to empower fat individuals and raise awareness of social discrimination and fat stigma. On the other hand, feminist theory has also focused mental health and female sexuality as central issues of research. Women's Studies, thus, encompasses several aspects of women's struggles in order to raise awareness and examine women's lives and experiences in relation to gender oppression.

Nevertheless, *My Mad Fat Diary* has failed to draw the attention from the academic field. Although considerable research has been devoted to fatness, mental health and female sexuality, three aspects which recurrently appear in the series, only very few studies have placed the VMGMind<sup>1</sup>-awarded series as their main concern of study. In fact, May Friedman (2017) attempted to explore the television program through a contemporary feminist perspective, successfully analyzing both "madness" and "fatness". However, her study does not consider Rae's sexuality as an aspect which

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<sup>1</sup> The Mind Media Awards are concerned with mental health and therefore recognize and celebrate the best portrayals of such topic in the media. *My Mad Fat Diary* was claimed to be the best TV Drama series in 2016.

can be influenced by both her mental illness and her body size. Moreover, Friedman provides little attention to the show's ending and, accordingly, to Rae's journey as a whole: her process of self-acceptance and healing, equally relevant in the story, are overshadowed by other matters in Friedman's article.

The present study aims to explore and analyze the character of Rachel Earl, arguing that her fatness and her madness negatively affect different aspects of her life. The objective is to also follow Rae's journey and development as she transforms herself and her fragileness into a strong and recovered version of a young woman. In order to achieve such proposal, I will examine her struggles with respect to fatness and mental health in an attempt to illustrate the ways in which these two factors influence her teenage years. Moreover, I will explore the factors that trigger her body dissatisfaction and her self-destructive behavior in stressful situations.

Secondly, a deeper understanding of the process of recovering from anxiety and depression will also become a key point in my study. The therapy sessions carried out by Rae's doctor will be analyzed in order to prove its importance in the show and its impact on the protagonist's life. I will claim the innovative approach of the show: by the end of the series, Rae accepts her body and becomes more confident instead of changing her body-size to find happiness.

Finally, I will also establish a connection between self-image and sexuality by taking a closer look at Rae's relationships, both romantic and sexual, due to the fact that there is evidence for the relationships being highly influenced by her negative perception of her own body. Furthermore, an extensive analysis will be presented in order to understand the ways in which Rae experiences her female sexuality from the perspective of a fat woman. Lastly, I will also claim that self-love is necessary for fat women to experience positive relationships by analyzing the final season of the series.

## **1. Fat and Madness Intertwined in *My Mad Fat Diary***

### **1.1. A Dual Character: Struggles Regarding Body Dissatisfaction and Mental Illnesses**

The title of the show becomes rather self-explanatory: *My Mad Fat Diary* deals with both madness and fatness equally. The audience, thus, is aware from the outset that this series will deal with important matters such as obesity and mental health. However, the show's approach is far from what is expected; it departs from what is often found in other media productions that include "mad" or "fat" characters. Instead, Rae Earl becomes relatable due to her beautiful, funny and clever mind, but also because of her insecurities and vulnerabilities which are recurrently shown in numerous scenes.

The choice of actress is accurate to the extent that it adds more realism and honesty to the series: Sharon Rooney fits Rae's description perfectly. As Harjunen states in her book, one must differentiate between "being fat" and "feeling fat", since "it is crucial to point out that thin women who "feel fat" lack one vital dimension of the fat experience" (2009: 32). Therefore, Sharon Rooney is fundamental in the television series as she becomes a real and visual depiction of a fat body.

Rae is, therefore, a character affected by both her fatness and her mental health. In order to analyze her, one must consider the reasons that lead Rae to feel dissatisfied with her own body. Such insecurities have in turn an effect on her mental health, which will be discussed later in the study. In their project, Barker & Galambos (2003) identify the factors that can trigger body dissatisfaction: physical risks such as weight and contextual risks such as being teased about appearance, among others. In *Ladies and Gentlemen* (1x03), Big G's gang call her names such as "Moo-oo-oose! Jabba! Scrubber!" in an attempt to mock and bully her.

In terms of body-image, Rae constantly compares herself with everyone around her. The first instance we have about this is found in the very first scene that Rae shares

with her mother: the woman is on a new diet, having a hard time losing weight. Recent studies have claimed:

Adolescent girls whose peers or family members hold negative attitudes about being overweight have been found to be dissatisfied more with their bodies than are girls whose peers and family members do not hold negative attitudes about weight. (Barker & Galambos, 2003: 145).

Thus, Rae's body dissatisfaction seems to be influenced to some extent by her mother's own dissatisfaction. However, she also compares herself in many occasions with gorgeous best friend Chloe, played by British actress Jodie Comer. For instance, there is a scene in which Chloe admits to having started smoking because "You know, it keeps you thin" (Chloe 1x01).

A contrast between teenage Rae and a younger version of herself is also shown in Episode 1: *Big Bad World*. This scene, which takes place in the protagonist's imagination, proves that Rae's body dissatisfaction occurs in her adolescent years. During the conversation, teenage Rae advises her younger self not to eat too much, to which the child responds: "I don't care if I get fat. [...] I don't like boys. And even if I did like boys and I was fat and I wore a swimsuit, they'd like me anyway [...] Because I'm brilliant" (Rae 1x01).

Nevertheless, Rae's most important characteristic is her willingness to escape from her fat body. A combination of low self-esteem and the fact that her body-size does not conform to society's beauty standards result in a sixteen-year-old girl who exercises in order to look thinner and become desirable and accepted. In *Touched* (1x02), Rae makes use of the following words to describe herself: "I am a body dysmorphic without the dysmorphic. I am a bulimic without the sick. I am fat". The scene that follows is a powerful dream in which Rae gets rid of her fat body as if it were

a suit that she can unzip and burn, revealing a beautiful and thin girl that is hiding on the inside.

Her insecurities regarding body-size manifest in many ways and means. Although Rae feels confident with some aspects of her personality, such as her music taste, she does not feel positive about situations in which her physical appearance is exposed to general judgment. In *Girls* (2x03), Rae confines Stacey with one of her deepest secrets: she is incapable of eating in front of others.

If I eat unhealthy food then people will think, "Oh, look at that fat cow, no wonder she got to that size". And if I eat healthy food, then they think, "Well, who are you trying to kid, love? You didn't get to that size by eating salads" [...] You know, I used to think that I loved food. But I don't. I fucking hate it. (Rae 2x03)

Such a powerful statement indicates the challenges that fat people have to face in their day-to-day life regarding not only food but also fat stigma. According to Friedman (2017), this scene proves how pressured fat people are in terms of control: they are torn between showing excessive self-control but at the same time they are ashamed to evidence a lack of it.

As far as mental health is concerned, viewers are never told Rae's official diagnosis. Only through Rae's words and visual scenes which include self-harm, panic attacks or feelings of extreme guilt, loneliness and devastation serve as indicators for her mental illnesses: depression and anxiety. In season one, Rae tries to hide her "madness" by following her mother's lie about her summer holidays, explaining that she has been to France instead of a mental hospital.

Season one is, therefore, concerned with duality in the sense that Rae is constantly torn between "acting normal" and being open with her new group of friends about her mental health. She also struggles with the comfort of a known place such as the hospital and the fear of the unknown, which is, in fact, society and new social

interactions: “Being in a pub is weird when eight hours earlier you were in a mental ward. I felt like a criminal, like a renegade, like it was so obvious I wasn't meant to be there” (Rae 1x01). In a conversation with her therapist, Rae admits to have been brave in the past. However, when asked for the reason why she is no longer brave, Rae answers: “The world happened” (2x04).

Consequently, her response to stressful or emotionally painful situations denote her fragile mental state. For instance, in *Big Bad World* (1x01), Rae is forced to stand outside a shop in a swimsuit, which makes her feel anxious and insecure. Her response is to binge eating, which she continually had made reference to throughout the episode in an attempt to convince both the audience and herself that she had stopped carrying out such self-destructive habit.

Regarding self-harm, in order to understand Rae’s self-destructive behavior one must first analyze the risk factors that lead her to hurt herself and attempt suicide in several occasions. According to researchers Keith Hawton, Kate E. A. Saunders and Rory C. O’Connor (2012), some factors associated with self-harm are the following:

Interpersonal difficulties during adolescence (including difficulty making new friends, frequent arguments with adults in authority and peers, frequent cruelty toward peers, loneliness, and interpersonal isolation) are independent predictors of suicide attempts in late adolescence or early adulthood. (Hawton, Saunders & O'Connor, 2012: 2375)

Therefore, Rae’s personal difficulties, such as loneliness, lack of self-esteem, a bad relationship with both her mother and her absent father become factors which trigger her in many occasions and result in either self-harm or suicide attempts. In episodes such as *It's a Wonderful Rae: Part 2* (1x06), for instance, guilt, isolation and hopeless feelings regarding her own life situation provide the writers of the show with the opportunity to explore the mind of a teenager who deals with depression:

For the first time in months, I don't care about food. I don't care about filling the gap by eating, or by hurting myself a little. The gap's too wide now. I tried so hard to be someone

everybody could like. But no matter how hard I try, I'll always be the same, ridiculous, pointless blob<sup>2</sup>. I'll always hurt people. And I'll always let people down. (Rae 1x06)

Due to the fact that the audience is constantly aware of Rae's thoughts and emotional highs and lows, Rae's character becomes an accurate portrayal of mentally ill people and the experiences they endure. In episode *It's a Wonderful Rae: Part 1* (1x05), Rae states:

When you're sick, you don't belong to yourself any more. You don't get a say. Every doctor is another parent, every ward another classroom, every pill another piece of their bollocks that you have to swallow. So that was it. No booze because of my pills and no rave because of my cowbag of a mum. (Rae 1x05)

Although Friedman (2017) does not make reference to this scene in her study, her theory of control, previously discussed, can also be applicable for mentally ill people. Rae provides evidence as to what extent people with mental illness lose control in decisions regarding their well-being. Despite the fact that her beliefs involving her capability to consume alcohol and attend a rave, and her willingness to do so, she is prevented by external institutions such as her mother and doctors.

As a whole, madness and fatness intertwine in *My Mad Fat Diary* to construct a character whose life experiences are influenced by this duality. On the one hand, her fat body prevents her from day-to-day situations such as eating in a restaurant. On the other hand, her mental illnesses also prevent her from enjoying social activities and trigger her to either binge eating, self-harm or contemplate the idea of suicide. Even though the television series explores these two important issues and show Rae's vulnerability and insecurities in numerous occasions, *My Mad Fat Diary* also becomes a glimmer of hope for those struggling with similar matter. By the end of third season, thus, Rae has learnt

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<sup>2</sup> *Blob* is a word used in English slang which means "a person who is fat". Source: <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=blob>



how to handle her problems and feels prepared to face the adult world on her own regardless of her body-size and her mental illnesses.

## **1.2. Therapy: A Journey Towards Healing**

One noticeable feature of *My Mad Fat Diary* is therapy. In the show, therapy sessions are conducted by Dr. Kester Gill, an intelligent man who eventually turns out to be facing his own problems which involve a failed marriage and, consequently, a tedious divorce process. The dialogues between Rae and Kester, played by Ian Hart, become key aspects in Rae's journey transformation from a "little broken bird" (Kester 1x01) to a woman who is capable to handle problems on her own.

Despite the fact that Rae initially refuses to be open about her struggles regarding mental health, as can be seen in episode *It's a Wonderful Rae: Part 1* (1x05), where she claims that she attempted suicide because "I was bored, I was lonely, I had no mates" and that "Sometimes there is no why. I just did. And being here and being asked about it every bloody day is what's keeping it alive" (Rae 1x05), she eventually learns to identify, explore and handle her deepest emotions and thoughts. Kester's therapy sessions, thus, encourage her to "talk about the power of positive thinking" (Kester 2x02) in an attempt to overcome negative self-talk and pessimism.

Rae's perspective of herself also changes along the series. As stated before, Rae's main problem is low self-esteem due to her body size. Therapy sessions become helpful as Kester guides her towards self-love and self-acceptance: "You have to start by not rejecting yourself. You don't deserve it" (Kester 1x06). A powerful scene from *Glue* (2x07) shows both Rae and her therapist facing the issue of self-esteem. When asked for how long she has not liked herself, Rae answers "I don't know. Since I was nine or ten" (Rae 2x07). As explored before in this dissertation, Rae's low self-esteem issues began

in the past, however, there was a time during her childhood in which she accepted and loved herself despite of her fatness.

Moreover, this scene is also powerful in the sense that it is brutally honest: Dr. Kester asks Rae to imagine a ten-year old version of herself. Afterwards, he pushes Rae to her limits as she now has to tell the little girl every negative adjective that she previously has used to describe herself: "Tell that little girl she's an embarrassment and worthless and useless. Because that's what you do every single day when you say that to yourself. When you convince yourself that you're an embarrassment and a burden" (Kester 2x07). In the end, the therapist advises her to soothe herself and talk to herself as if she was talking to the little girl.

By the end of season three, Rae finally realizes that, in order to go to university and become an adult, she needs to handle things on her own: " I'm gonna stop waiting for someone to come and save me" (Rae 3x03). It is in episode titled *Voodoo* that the audience witnesses Rae's change of mind as she begins to do things for "no-one else other than me" (Rae 3x03). Therefore, the show succeeds at the portrayal of a girl with extremely low self-esteem who turns into a more mature version of herself, capable of facing the world as well as her own emotions.

Unlike many other media productions, *My Mad Fat Diary* does not provide the audience an ending in which the protagonist only reaches happiness after losing weight and conforming to beauty standards. Instead, Rae's body size stays the same throughout the whole series: it is her interior that changes. This approach provides support to the third-wave feminist movement which "contends that fat women can achieve liberation via self-love" (Morris, 2019: 144).

Therefore, the television program aims to send the message that recovery in terms of mental health is possible through time and therapy, and that self-love is

necessary in order to have a positive outlook on life. At the end, Rae has shown progress in terms of emotional growth and mental stability while remaining the same on the outside as far as her body size is concerned. As she departs from Lincolnshire, she is prepared to leave her struggles regarding madness and fatness behind in order to face new adult experiences in Bristol.

## **2. *My Mad Fat Diary's* Portrayal of Female Sexuality**

### **2.1. Fat Sex: Analysis of a Fat Young Woman's Sexuality**

Fatness, one important factor that constantly influences Rae's life, does not only have an impact on her mental health but also on her experiences regarding sex. In the show, the character of Rae is portrayed as a subject who desires and the men in her life, such as Dr. Nick Kassar, Archie or Finn become the object of desire. Recent studies have shown that "the word *desire* is used to describe sexually embodied feelings and to suggest girls are similar to boys in wanting sex. *Subjectivity*, contrasts with objectification and is used to describe girls' ownership of their desire" (Lamb, 2010: 295). The TV series, thus, innovates in the sense that viewers experience new means of sexuality through the thoughts and desires of a fat female subject.

One important aspect to take into account while analyzing Rae's sexual experiences as a fat young woman is her low self-esteem. As stated before, Rae's insecurities have an impact on her life, preventing her from experiencing many situations and negatively motivating her to change her body-size in order to become appealing to the male population. Determined to seduce Archie, the object of her sexual fantasies, Rae states "If I wanted Archie to touch me, it was imperative there was a lot less of me to touch" (1x02) and immediately begins to exercise in an attempt to lose weight. Nevertheless, she resorts to other methods since she is incapable of losing

weight in such a short period of time: "If you want to make someone touch you and you can't change the way you look, I guess the next best thing is to hide it, with makeup, with clothes, with whatever you can find" (Rae 1x02).

Moreover, Rae blames herself at the end of *Touched* (1x02) when she surprises Archie in the locker room while he is spying on other men: "Did I do it? Did I make you gay? Was it me?" (Rae 1x02). After this big revelation, Rae goes further in her self-blaming and claims:

I knew you couldn't possibly like me. How could you do this to me? Why not just leave me alone in the first place? I know that I'm ugly and I know that boys don't like me, so why- why make me think that you did? (Rae 1x02)

Such affirmations indicate that Rae feels inferior to Archie since he is constantly described as a god-like figure and she describes herself as fat and ugly throughout the whole series. This inferiority complex, which is the result of low self-esteem, makes our protagonist believe that she is the problem instead of considering Archie's homosexuality the real reason why he cannot fall in love with her.

The TV series goes further in the development of Rae's subjectivity as a female who desires instead of an object of desire when in *Touched* (1x02) there is a scene by the end of the episode which includes a sexual fantasy. An on-screen female masturbation scene takes place afterwards as Rae explores her body: the result is a first-time orgasm experience. Actress Sharon Rooney has shared her thoughts on the scene, claiming that male masturbation is rather common on TV and "I thought: let's do it for the girls" (Mehera Bonner on Sharon Rooney, 2019). Therefore, the show becomes inclusive in the sense that female masturbation is represented in a way that it places Finn, a male individual, as an object of desire and Rae, a female subject, as a fat teenage girl who is sexually active.

Although Rae is portrayed as a subject, she also struggles with being sexually attractive to the opposite genre. For Hall (2010), "fat women are typically thought of as nonsexual". In *Ladies and Gentlemen* (1x03), Rae's new friends include her in their only-boys trip because "we see you as one of the lads anyway, so obviously we knew you weren't going to be a problem" (Chop 1x03). This episode, thus, discusses femininity and the ways in which fat women are often non-sexualized by male individuals. In an attempt to be perceived as more feminine, Rae for the first time does not try to hide or change her fat body but instead she attempts to become more similar to best friend Chloe, whom she admits to be jealous of due to Chloe's feminine attributes. This same issue is also discussed in *Don't Ever Tell Anybody Anything* (1x04) as she competes against Chloe for Finn's attention. The concept of "friend zone" is introduced and Rae begins to worry that she will only be appealing to Finn as a friend, which proves the non-sexualization to which fat women are exposed.

In her study, Hall compiles the testimonies of many volunteers who openly discuss their sexual experiences as fat women. It has been claimed that "women are sometimes treated as trophies" (Hall, 2010: 14), however, women lose value depending on their body size. This idea is also represented in the show during a conversation between Rae and Chloe in *Touched* (1x02):

My sister used to be big. So, I know what this is like. And I know that boys don't like it. And it's not right, but that's just the way they are. You know, they think, if they go out with someone who's big, then the other lads will just take the piss. I'm sorry, but it's the truth. (Chloe 1x02)

Therefore, Rae's struggles regarding love and sex are not only confined to internal factors, such as her own insecurities, but also to social factors which include judgment from external forces.

Season Two explores issues regarding both insecurities about her appearance and external judgment as Rae's romantic relationship with Finn grows. Although Hall (2010) researches the different sexual experiences that fat women can go through, including the pressure to focus on "the needs and satisfaction of their sexual partners ahead of their own because they (fat women) feared their partners would otherwise lose interest " (Hall, 2010: 12), the show portrays the opposite side of the spectrum. In *Alarm* (2x01), Rae describes her first sexual encounter with Finn:

And that brings me back to the present day where you will find Finn with his index and middle finger upon my lady area [...] What if Finn didn't know what he was doing? I had hours and days and weeks of experience in the lady area, I knew how it operated. [...] What if he couldn't find my...? Oh! Holy Lord Jesus Christ! [...] This is heaven. I'm actually in heaven. He's using his thumb to tap. Oh, my God! He's a sex wizard! (Rae 2x01)

The focus on the scene is Rae's satisfaction, proving that Finn actually falls in the category of a partner who pays positive attention to the body of their female significant other (Hall, 2010).

Despite the fact that Finn is a positive partner, Rae's insecurities about her body lead her to sabotage their romantic relationship. Having stated before that Rae's body dissatisfaction partly derives from her mother's own dissatisfaction, one must consider the similarities between both mother and daughter in terms of romantic relationships. In *Touched* (1x02), Rae claims: "My mum's in a sham relationship. She's going out with this guy. And he's like handsome and fit and stuff. But she she's like me. She's a blob. A blob with a gob". It is emphasized that both mother and daughter's partners are "handsome and fit", whereas the female counterparts are described as fat in a negative connotation. The fact that both do not conform to the ideal of beauty influence Rae's

thoughts: it is impossible that her mother and herself could be desired by someone who fits such standards.

Therefore, physical differences between Rae and Finn, played by British actor Nico Mirallegro, play an important role in their relationship not only in terms of romance but also in sexual experiences. In *Alarm* (2x01), Rae refuses to have sex for the first time because she does not feel confident with her appearance. The couple also have an argument in *Radar* (2x02) due to the fact that Rae has avoided Finn in order to elude social judgment from college classmates:

Rae: You're an eleven and I'm a four.

Finn: I've got no idea what you're talking about.

Rae: You should be going out with people like Stacey, not someone like me. Most people, when they see us, must be thinking, "Oh, he must be mad, going out with *that*."

Finn: That what? That what?! You don't tell me who I can and can't fancy, all right? That is mine. That belongs to me.

Her insecurities and low self-esteem, along with social judgment, challenge Rae and Finn's relationship to the point that Rae decides to end their relationship in order to avoid feeling ashamed and being judged. It has been demonstrated that fat women suffer from social judgment when dating non-fat men due to the fact that "men are expected to demonstrate their masculinity through having sex and relationships with attractive women" (Hall, 2010: 17).

As a consequence, Rae has the need to look for sexual partners who physically resemble her. In *Inappropriate Adult* (2x05), Rae performs oral sex to classmate Liam, played by Turlough Convery, who suggests not to get undressed since "neither of us are oil paintings, are we? It's probably best if we just kept our clothes on" (Liam 2x05). Furthermore, she has sex for the first time ever with Liam in *Glue* (2x07). Whereas she is incapable of experiencing sex with Finn throughout Season Two, she feels confident and comfortable to experience it with Liam, whose body-size is more similar to hers.

Thus, Rae's choice of partner adds another struggle to the experience of sex from the perspective of a fat woman.

## **2.2. Self-Love: The Most Essential Feature for Positive Sex and Happiness**

Rae is a character that evolves: low self-esteem is transformed into self-love, confidence and self-acceptance by the end of Season Three after a long process of therapy as well as mental and emotional healing. These three components (self-love, confidence and self-acceptance) allow the character to enjoy her sexual experiences as "fat women's sexual health is likely to be better if they accept and embrace their bodies" (Hall, 2010: 13). Moreover, it also provides her with the opportunity to detach herself from dependent relationships and prioritize herself as can be noticed at the end of the last season, when she leaves behind her loved ones, including Finn, in order to live new experiences in Bristol.

Although Rae's first sexual experiences are shared with classmate Liam, she retakes her relationship with Finn by the end of *Glue* (2x07). However, Finn and Rae's romance is proved to be codependent throughout the whole series. This is due to the fact that Rae initially shows low self-esteem in regards to her lover, for instance, when she tells him "You don't have to kiss me because you feel sorry for me" (Rae 2x01). Unable to understand that someone who fits into male beauty standards could fall in love with her, she constantly wonders "So why does he like me?" (Rae 2x02) and thus begins to feel inferior in their relationship. Even though Finn has proved to be a positive partner who even explains the reasons why he likes Rae, claiming that "It's because you're strong. You just haven't realized it yet" (Finn 2x07), she is unable to have sex with him until she embraces her fat body and ignores the fact that society can judge them as a couple conformed by a fat woman and a skinny young man.



Consequently, Rae and Finn begin to fully enjoy their romance in *Who Is Stan Ford?* (3x01). This episode shows the improvement in their sexual encounters which become more positive and enjoyable to Rae since she is able to be comfortably undressed in front of him, unlike previous scenes where she constantly excused herself in order to avoid nudity and sex. During the brief scene, her thoughts support the idea that their sexual experiences have become more positive: "There was something about being with him... Our bodies just went together, like sexually explicit Lego" (Rae 3x01). In terms of emotional needs, their relationship remains codependent as Rae considers rejecting university to stay in Stanford with Finn in order to preserve their relationship.

The idea of self-love as being not only important but also necessary in romantic relationships is introduced in *Voodoo* (3x03) when Rae realizes that she needs to prioritize herself and her future instead of her romance with Finn. The bathroom scene, which consists of an imaginary suicide attempt that results in an unreal version of Finn saving her, leads our protagonist to the conclusion that "No-one was coming to save me, I'd have to do this on my own" (Rae 3x03). The idea of prioritizing herself above her romantic partner is also reassured later in the episode when Rae takes her A-Levels and thinks: "I just knew I had to try. Bit by bit, question by question, for no-one else other than me" (Rae 3x03).

Therefore, the show's fat and mad female protagonist eventually chooses herself and her dreams over a romantic relationship. Producers and directors provide the audience not with an ending in which the fat protagonist is happy dating the skinny man, but with a strong fat female individual that has learned how to accept and love both her imperfections and strengths, and prioritizes herself over a romantic relationship. The TV series sends out the message that self-love is crucial in order to

have positive and enjoyable sexual relationships, but also to neglect romantic relationships which are codependent.

### **3. Conclusions and Further Research**

This dissertation has analyzed the experiences of *My Mad Fat Diary's* protagonist Rachel "Rae" Earl as a fat woman. It has researched the external and internal factors that trigger the character into developing insecurities regarding her body size which consequently lead her to low self-esteem and significant body dissatisfaction. In terms of appearance, this study has analyzed the different ways in which the protagonist attempts to transform or hide her fat body. Moreover, it has argued the duality of the character, classifying Rae not only as a fat individual but also as a mad individual. Her experiences regarding madness have also been examined in order to understand her reactions in stressful situations, which include binge eating, self-harm and various suicide attempts.

In this study, therapy has been scrutinized to prove Rae's growth as a person, following her journey from fragile to strong and confident. It has been confirmed that acceptance of her fat body improved her mental health and provided Rae with useful techniques and advices which changed the way she reacted to anxious situations and confronted society. The show, thus, succeeds at the portrayal of therapy as a necessary element in the process of healing. In addition, the TV series do not remove Rae's fatness and madness from her, but provide the audience with an ending in which the girl accepts those characteristics and moves to a new stage of her life with a new mindset, but no physical change.

Finally, female sexuality is also analyzed in this dissertation. *My Mad Fat Diary* provides a new outlook on the fat woman's experience regarding sexuality and romantic relationships: Rae becomes a subject who desires and her love interests become objects

of desire. Moreover, the fact that Rae sabotages her relationships due to low self-esteem and insecurities regarding her body size indicated that fat women do not experience positive sex and romantic relationships unless they also feel positive with their bodies. Lastly, the idea of self-love is introduced at the end of the series, providing the audience with an innovative ending.

For future research, this dissertation is interested in the comparison of fat women in British TV. Although Rae's experiences contribute immensely to Fat Studies, it is worth investigating how British TV portrays fat women as well as finding similarities and differences to Rae's experience of fatness. Moreover, this study is concerned with Finn and Rae's relationship as a couple confined by a fat woman and a skinny man. Although this dissertation has argued that Finn is a positive sex partner, it is interesting to take into account the different dynamics and roles that such couples take, and how they are represented in television. Lastly, *My Mad Fat Diary* is based on the real diaries of Rachel Earl. For this reason, it would be fascinating to compare both the show and the written work in order to prove whether the TV series portrayal of fatness and mental health is accurate or not.

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## **Annex**

**1x01 “Big Wide World”:** Overweight sixteen-year-old Rachel “Rae” Earl is released from the mental institution where she has spent most of her summer and is taken home by her mother, who hides her new boyfriend Karim, an illegal Tunisian immigrant, in the trunk of the car. Rae is then invited by Chloe, her old best friend, to a local pub where she is introduced to the gang for the first time: Izzy, Chop, Finn and Archie, who instantly becomes Rae’s main romantic interest. She struggles to fit in at first, but finally manages to impress everyone with her music knowledge. Everything gets complicated when Rae has to prepare for Chloe’s pool party since she feels embarrassed about her own body and the self-harming marks on her legs. She gets stuck in the pool slide due to her size, but she handles the situation in a way in which she laughs it off and continues to enjoy the party with the rest of the gang.

**1x02 “Touched”:** In this episode, Rae is worried about relationships and begins to exercise in order to lose weight and be able to impress the male population, especially Archie, whom she thinks about all the time. Due to her lack of sexual experience, Rae also decides to borrow a book from the library to learn more about the subject. Her mood changes drastically when Archie unexpectedly asks her out on a date and soon they are kissing and touching in a swimming pool. Both Chloe and Izzy prepare Rae for the second date: they do her makeup and choose her clothes, but Archie never shows up. She soon discovers that Archie is gay. He explains that he is too scared to come out and, in order to make it up for her, Archie agrees to spread the rumor that he was the one being broken-up with.

**1x03 “Ladies and Gentlemen”:** Rae and Chloe’s relationship face difficulties when our protagonist finds out that her best friend is secretly dating their P.E. teacher. The situation only gets worse when Chop and Finn invite Rae to a rock concert but leave Chloe out because she is not “one of the lads”. Rae gets angry when she realizes that the boys perceive her as “masculine” and begins to act more like Chloe and Izzy, repressing part of her funny personality and replacing it for “feminine traits”. Moreover, she starts to develop romantic feelings for Finn when he defends her in front of a group of bullies. On the day of the concert, Rae makes the decision to stay with Chloe due to her complicated situation: she has broken up with her boyfriend and is planning to have an

abortion. They share a lovely afternoon together after a rushed visit to an abortion clinic, but Chloe betrays Rae by leaving her alone after a phone call from the P.E. teacher.

**1x04 “Don’t Ever Tell Anybody Anything”:** Rae is falling in love with Finn but worries that he will not be romantically interested in her and see her only as a friend, so she takes advice from her friends from the hospital and begins to treat Finn coldly and distant. She is also concerned with being honest, and considers telling everyone the truth regarding her mental health, but Chloe insists that is is a bad idea. In this episode, Rae also discovers that her mother wrote her postcards and signed them by the name of her absent father. An angry Rae then decides to set up a party when her mother leaves with Karim to Tunisia for a couple of days. During the party, the gang plays “Spin the Bottle” and Rae and Finn end up in a closet together, where they discuss Rae’s behavior and come to terms. Next day, Chloe admits that she fancies Finn and Rae decides to remain silence about her own feelings for the boy.

**1x05 “It’s a Wonderful Rae: Part 1”:** A rave is taking place in the town but Rae’s mother tries to prevent her from going. After feeling sick and vomiting, Rae visits the doctor and discovers that her medication is incompatible with alcohol, so she decides to stop taking pills. A heated argument with her mother results in Rae leaving the house and attending the rave with the rest of the gang. She consumes a considerable amount of alcohol and drugs. During the party, Rae sees Chloe and Finn kissing and so she abandons the rave and returns home. Kester, her psychologist, calls to inform about Rae’s hospital friend Tix, who is now in a very bad condition after Rae forgot to show up at the dinner they had planned in order to help Tix with her eating disorder.

**1x06 “It’s a Wonderful Rae: Part 2”:** In this final episode, Rae is in a very dark place due to Tix’s situation. Moreover, Chloe tells her about her feelings regarding Finn. Rae accidentally forgets her bag and diary, an event that leads to Chloe reading everything Rae has ever written about her. She begins to feel more anxious and depressed as she does not have anyone to talk to. Her mental deterioration eventually leads her to a suicide attempt, but she is only poorly run over by a car. When Rae wakes up from a dream, she decides to visit Kester and open up about her suicide attempt and her feelings towards her absent father. In her mother’s wedding, Rae gives a speech and

reveals the truth regarding her mental health. The two best friends make up and afterwards Rae discovers that Chloe is not Finn's romantic interest, but her. The season ends with a conversation between Kester and Rae in which both realize that she is now ready for therapy.

**2x01 "Alarm":** Second season starts with Rae writing a letter to Tix after realizing her diary is full. In this letter, she recaps every important event from the summer holidays. Now that 6th Form college is about to start and her romantic relationship with Finn is only getting better, Rae worries about her virginity after a friendly conversation with Chloe and Izzy. A camping trip is set right before summer ends. Rae prepares herself by buying lingerie and watching a pornographic video secretly borrowed from her mother, but when the moment comes, her body image issues sabotage the moment and prevent her from having sex. After the camping trip, both Rae and Kester find out that Tix has passed away, and so Kester suggests that group therapy would be beneficial to Rae. When she finally decides to take the psychologist's advice and attend a group therapy session, Rae realizes that a college student, Liam, is also attending such sessions.

**2x02 "Radar":** Rae is called by the college principal to explain herself about an event that could get her in trouble. Instead of suspending her for setting an alarm off, the principal decides to put her on a warning and Liam, who witnessed the whole alarm situation, promises to keep it a secret. While Chloe worries about not being popular enough, Rae becomes more and more insecure in her relationship with Finn as she wonders why a good-looking and popular boy like him would want to date someone like her. Therefore, she begins to compare herself with Finn's gorgeous ex-girlfriend Stacey. In an attempt to stop rumors spreading around college about her relationship with Finn, Rae decides to break up with him and instantly feels better at the thought of not having to get naked in front of him. She also finds out that her mother is pregnant. The last scene portrays a stress-free Rae bonding with Liam in one of their therapy sessions.

**2x03 "Girls":** Now that her relationship with Finn has come to an end, Rae feels lonelier than ever so she decides to try fitting in with the most popular girls in college. In order to do so, she has to change her musical taste and become interested in "girly things" like makeup, clothes and boys. She even goes further and trusts Stacey with one

of her deepest secrets: Rae struggles to eat in front of other people because of her weight. However, Stacey betrays her by exposing Rae in front of the popular gang, forcing her to eat in front of everyone. Soon enough, Rae and Chloe plan revenge and everyone ends up in bad terms with Stacey. Moreover, Archie's secret is also revealed to his new girlfriend Lois: Rae exposes his sexual orientation because she is tired of being friends with someone who is "so fake".

**2x04 "Friday":** Although Rae tries to apologize, Archie still feels angry at her and refuses to forgive her for revealing his sexuality. Meanwhile, Lois threatens to spread Archie's truth only if he does not do so before Friday. Moreover, Finn and Rae come to terms and retake their initial friendship. She also finds out that Liam is dating another girl, Amy, who becomes suspicious about Rae and Liam's friendship. Amy confronts Rae, threatening her with physical violence and giving her an ultimatum: Rae has got until Friday to explain her relationship with Liam, otherwise the consequences will be disastrous. Both Archie and Rae feel scared, so they decide to leave the town before Friday but finally come back. When the day comes, Archie confesses his sexuality and Rae tells Amy that she in fact has kissed Liam.

**2x05 "Inappropriate Adult":** While Archie has been kicked off the football team and is now struggling with his social status, Chloe is dating a twenty-four year old boy, Finn has got a new girlfriend and Amy and Liam have broken up, Rae feels desperate to be treated like an adult and decides to visit her absent father, Victor. After the visit, Rae decides to keep her relationship with Liam as something casual. She also is invited to a party where one boy tries to sexually abuse her by locking her in a bathroom. Her best friend Chloe refuses to leave the party and accompany Rae, so she ends up at Kester's before she comes back home. On the one hand, Archie is angry with Chop due to his homophobic behavior, Izzy has cheated on Chop and decides to break up with him, Finn moved to another town because of a job offer and Rae confronts Chloe for everything that happened at the party. At the end, Rae realizes that the gang "does not longer exist" and loses her virginity with Liam.

**2x06 "Not I":** Chloe is reported to be missing when she does not show up at the musical held in college. A worried Rae looks for her and accidentally finds Chloe's diary in her bedroom. She soon starts reading it, finding out Chloe's feelings towards



her regarding some past events: the time Chloe dated their P.E. teacher or the time when both girls became rivals for Finn's love and attention. However, Chloe describes her best friend as "a beautiful person, not bitchy and broken like me", which makes Rae realize that Chloe is not as confident as she pretends to be. Feeling both worried and guilty, Rae starts looking for her as she remembers every single good detail about their friendship. In the process, Rae finds out that her father is going away on vacation without her, which disappoints her. After breaking up with her older boyfriend, Chloe appears at college but leaves when she has an argument with Rae, who has to take Chloe's role as the lead singer of the musical. The performance turns out in disaster and Rae looks for comfort in Liam.

**2x07 "Glue":** In this final episode, Rae struggles with different aspects of her life. First of all, she is confronted by her mother, who disapproves Rae's visits to her father and accuses her of resenting the new baby. Secondly, Rae feels lonely at college since she has distanced herself from Chloe and the gang has disappeared. Following Kester's advice, Rae decides to take action to improve her situation. She manages to save her mother when the woman starts bleeding, and now feels happy to have a half-sister. Moreover, she also saves Chloe from her boyfriend and the two girls come to terms with each other, returning college as a powerful couple. She also manages to reunite the group and retakes her relationship with Finn when he leaves his job and comes back from the countryside.

**3x01 "Who Is Stan Ford?":** In 1998, Rae and her friends prepare themselves to take their A-Levels. After a disastrous interview at the University of Bristol, Rae believes that her opportunity to leave Stamford is over, only to find out that she in fact has been admitted. Rae makes everyone believe that she has been rejected in order to earn some time and make a decision about her future. Meanwhile, Archie loses his virginity, Chop gets a tattoo to honor the gang, and former student Katie Springer gives a speech about the benefits of university. In a meeting, Kester tells Rae that the time has come to end their therapy sessions as she is prepared to face the world for herself. When Finn finds out that Rae has been lying about her university admission, he decides to break up with her, which causes Rae to hurt herself and decide that she is going to stay in Stamford. The gang reunites and have a car accident on their way to Finn's house.

**3x02 “Rewind”:** Now that Chloe is unconscious in hospital, Rae begins to blame herself for the accident and refuses to study for the up-coming exams as she does not see them as something important anymore. She desperately tries to find a way to help her best friend and apologize for what happened, but her attempts only result in more self-guilt. Although the gang plans to visit Chloe when they find out that she has woken up, Rae ends up being the only person who is not invited. A few days later, she takes the A-Levels exams for Chloe hoping it will fix things, but it only makes everything worse. After a deep conversation with Kester, who has not been working at the psychiatric for months, Rae sneaks in at the hospital and finally apologizes to her best friend. A second chance is then given to Rae so she can re-take her exams. When Rae heads to Finn’s house to fix their relationship, she discovers that he has been actually seeing Katie Springer during their break.

**3x03 “Voodoo”:** After finding out that Kester has not been working for months, Rae confronts him while he insists that she is ready to finish therapy and advises her to look for the right answers to her problems in her diary. A conversation with Katie Springer makes Rae feel guilty for always laying her problems onto Finn and the rest of the members of the gang. It affects her to the point that she even imagines her own suicide before deciding that she is going to take control of her own life. She finishes her exams, urges her mother to move to Tunisia with Karim and the baby, attends the end of term prom and comes to terms with Finn, putting an end to their romantic relationship. Two months later Rae heads to Bristol, ready to start her new college life.

