



UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DO CEARÁ
CENTRO DE HUMANIDADES
DEPARTAMENTO DE ESTUDOS DA LÍNGUA INGLESA,
SUAS LITERATURAS E TRADUÇÃO
CURSO SUPERIOR DE LICENCIATURA EM LETRAS-INGLÊS

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**ELIZABETH HARMON'S FLAWS: A COMPARISON OF THE MAIN
CHARACTER'S NEGATIVE TRAITS BETWEEN THE FIRST AND LAST
EPISODES OF *THE QUEEN'S GAMBIT* NETFLIX MINISERIES**

FORTALEZA

2024

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Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso apresentado
ao Curso Superior de Licenciatura em
Letras-Inglês, como requisito parcial para
obtenção do título de Licenciada em
Letras-Inglês.

Orientadora: Profa. Dra. Dolores Aronovich
Aguero

FORTALEZA

2024

Dados Internacionais de Catalogação na Publicação
Universidade Federal do Ceará
Sistema de Bibliotecas
Gerada automaticamente pelo módulo Catalog, mediante os dados fornecidos pelo(a) autor(a)

C338e Cassiano, Ana Clara de Oliveira.

Elizabeth Harmon's Flaws : A comparison of the main character's negative traits between the first and last episodes of The Queen's Gambit Netflix miniseries / Ana Clara de Oliveira Cassiano. – 2024.
45 f. : il. color.

Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso (graduação) – Universidade Federal do Ceará, Centro de Humanidades, Curso de Letras (Inglês), Fortaleza, 2024.

Orientação: Profa. Dra. Dolores Aronovich Agüero.

1. O Gambito da Rainha. 2. Desenvolvimento de personagem. 3. Arco de personagem negativo. 4. falhas. I. Título.

CDD 420

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Aprovada em: 24/09/2024.

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RESUMO

Este trabalho acadêmico tem como principal objetivo determinar os defeitos mais proeminentes da protagonista da minissérie *O Gambito da Rainha*, usando as definições e conceitos de *The Negative Trait Thesaurus: A Writer's Guide to Character Flaws* (2013), de Angela Ackerman e Becca Puglisi, um livro escrito como um guia para escritores criarem personagens mais bem construídos, com arcos e defeitos. As características negativas destacadas aqui são selecionadas a partir do primeiro e último episódios da minissérie, considerando todos os comportamentos, situações e atitudes conectadas a cada uma delas, de acordo com o trabalho de Ackerman e Puglisi. Ademais, é feita uma comparação da retratação de cada característica nos episódios escolhidos, assim como o uso do conceito de desenvolvimento de personagem em *The Negative Trait Thesaurus*, procurando explicar como isso é representado na personalidade de Elizabeth Harmon ao final da minissérie.

Palavras-chave: *O Gambito da Rainha*; desenvolvimento de personagem; arco de personagem negativo; falhas.

ABSTRACT

This academic research has the main objective of pointing out the miniseries *The Queen's Gambit*'s protagonist's most prominent flaws, using the definitions and concepts from *The Negative Trait Thesaurus: A Writer's Guide to Character Flaws* (2013), by Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglisi, a book written as a guide for writers to create well constructed characters, with arcs and flaws. The negative traits highlighted here are selected from the first and last episodes of the miniseries, considering all the behaviors, situations and attitudes connected to each of them, according to Ackerman and Puglisi's work. In addition, a comparison of the portrayal of each trait in the chosen episodes is made, as well as the usage of *The Negative Trait Thesaurus*' concept of character development, seeking to explain how it is represented in the personality of Elizabeth Harmon at the end of the miniseries.

Key-words: *The Queen's Gambit*; character development; negative character arc; flaws.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Queen's Gambit is a seven-episode Netflix miniseries, directed by Scott Frank and based on the homonymous novel, by Walter Tevis. It follows the story of Elizabeth Harmon, an orphan who is found to have incredible chess playing skills and, as the episodes go by, faces all kinds of challenges which stand in her way of becoming a chess World Champion. The miniseries was released in 2020 on Netflix and was highly acclaimed by critics and public, becoming one of the the most watched shows on the platform that year.

Featuring a rather complex and captivating main character, *The Queen's Gambit* big success is not only credited to the great cinematography or soundtrack: from the first to the last episodes, viewers watch Elizabeth “Beth” Harmon turn from a child to adult, as well as all her adventures, struggles and emotional moments regarding her growth in chess and, especially, as a person.

At the beginning of the series, we are faced with the tale of a gifted orphan who happens to find pleasure in learning and playing chess, as well as facing opponents throughout the episodes, as a simple “winning vs. losing” type of show. However, as the story develops and time goes by, Elizabeth’s interactions with different characters and the development of an alarmingly growing drug addiction, she faces much deeper and internal challenges and the audience gets to follow how she deals with each event.

Elizabeth, played by the award-winning actress Anya Taylor-Joy, fascinates both viewers and other characters in the show with her smarts, geniality and increasing charm throughout episodes. First by shocking people at Methuen Home, the orphanage she is sent to after her mother passes away in a car crash; Elizabeth befriends a custodian who teaches her how to play chess and, as the custodian, Mr. Shaibel, notices her atypical swiftness at understanding the game rules and strategies, he promptly tells the local school chess club about her skills, thus starting her path as chess player.

With age, Elizabeth’s obsession with winning the game grows, as well as a foul addiction to calming drugs, which she picked up at the orphanage she was at before being adopted. The mix between her addictions to both winning and drugs and, later, alcohol as well, is one of the central points of the story, given that Elizabeth struggles with the effects of her addiction having consequences on her game play, since from early on in the series she credits most of her wins to the effects of drugs.

Spending years trusting that the calming drugs were the only way she could win a chess game, she relies all her confidence on the pills, playing boldly when she takes them. However, this ongoing practice starts backfiring, affecting her relationship with friends, love interests and even playing skills. Growing up in her infancy with her biological mother who was emotionally and mentally unstable, Elizabeth had been advised the only person she could ever trust was herself; consequently, the protagonist pushes away many people who care for her and has a hard time accepting help from others, making it difficult to mature both as a person and chess player.

With this attitude, Elizabeth can't help but consider all her opponents as enemies and not as simple fellow players who happen to be as excited about chess as herself. She finds herself in various situations in which she treats other players roughly and with unfriendliness, looking at them as obstacles between her and the World Champion title. She pushes away people who try to help her with chess and addiction problems, friends who are worried about her, treating them harshly and avoiding strong emotional connections.

These particular struggles listed are thoroughly explored and worked on in the miniseries, and it is possible to watch Elizabeth overcoming her biggest fears and flaws, suffering from breakdowns and addiction relapses, culminating in an extremely inspiring ending as a confident World Champion and more accomplished woman.

Although the show was inspired by a novel by Walter Tevis, this research will be solely based on the Netflix miniseries, picking specifically the first and last episodes to work with, for they represent the starting point of Elizabeth's story and the conclusion. In the first episode, Elizabeth is only seen as a small child who is still discovering her love for the game of chess, and in the last episode, Elizabeth is already an adult and qualified for competitions with Chess Grandmasters – both episodes essentially show Elizabeth's beginning and outcome in her path as a chess player, being faithful to their own titles: "Openings" and "End Game".

With the information gathered from the two selected episodes and Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglisi's *The Negative Trait Thesaurus*' concepts of flaws and character development, I will list the main character's most prominent negative traits and compare them between the two episodes, and analyze how these traits change or develop from beginning to the end. Moreover, I will use this comparison to highlight how the miniseries' portrayal of character growth worked and was connected to Elizabeth's path of dealing with her major flaws.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

For this research, the main source will be the Netflix miniseries *The Queen's Gambit* (2020), more specifically the first and last episodes of the series, titled "Openings" and "End Game". The first episode covers the details of the main character's discovery of her passion for the famous game of chess. Elizabeth Harmon, sent to an orphanage after losing her mother in a car crash, presents an uncommon mastery of the game within a small amount of time, at the age of nine. The episode marks the beginning of Elizabeth's trajectory as an upcoming chess player. The last episode concludes the tale of her path in chess, as she is already an adult and professional player.

To better support the definition of flaws in the character, I will be utilizing *The Negative Trait Thesaurus: A Writer's Guide to Character Flaws*, a book published in 2013 by Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglisi. After explaining the definition, origin and consequences of flaws, the authors present a very useful thesaurus of negative traits that serves, mainly, for authors to consult and develop complex and well-thought characters. I, however, will be using this thesaurus and its definition and explanations of flaws to point out Elizabeth Harmon's main flaws and make a comparison between the first and last episodes of the miniseries.

Another source, this time to assist Ackerman and Puglisi's concept of character arc, will be the "Character Development Definition: A Look at 40 Character Traits", an internet article by Sean Glatch and Jack Smith (2024) about the development of a character throughout a story. This article also deals with both positive and negative traits but I will focus mostly on the negative ones; the positive traits, however, will be mentioned through the analysis, though only slightly, given it is not the main kind of trait I am focusing on.

2.1. THE FIRST EPISODE: “OPENINGS” BRIEF

In the next two sections, I will make a brief summary of the two episodes selected for this research, considering it is important to highlight the episodes’ events in general before talking about specific scenes. The two episodes chosen are some of the most symbolic in representing Elizabeth’s flaws and traits, as they do show the beginning and the end of her journey and, especially, how her personality and attitude change and grow from ever since she was a child up to an adult. Given the contrast between the two episodes – in which is it shown how she starts versus how she ends in the story –, they act as parallels to point out her main traits as a character: from the first episode as a look at Elizabeth’s child self and still developing personality, to the last one where Elizabeth is an adult with a full formed personality and new attitudes.

The first episode begins with a “peek into the future”, where Elizabeth is already an adult. There is no information about her story, who she is or what she does. Viewers can only assume Elizabeth is extremely late for a match, having fallen asleep under very uncommon circumstances: in a bathtub and still dressing her last night clothes. Elizabeth drinks a small bottle of alcohol and takes some pills before running to the place the match is happening. In this scene, viewers get to take a first look at Elizabeth’s face: disheveled, clearly hangover and unstable.

Figure 1 – First look at Elizabeth's face during the match, at the beginning of Episode 1



The first scene is cut abruptly to right after a disastrous car accident, a few years before. We see young Elizabeth Harmon – who miraculously survives the car crash without a scratch – be sent to Methuen Home, an orphanage in Kentucky, due to losing her biological mother and not having contact with her father. Elizabeth is a small, quiet and rather observant child who appears not to have very good social skills.

Figure 2 – Elizabeth Harmon right after the car crash that killed her biological mother



In the orphanage, Elizabeth has to adapt to a new routine – new clothes, a new haircut that wasn't her choice and attending classes with never-seen before people, etc. She obediently, and rather quickly, understands and learns about this new way of life, never questioning the rules. Elizabeth also meets Jolene, another orphan who she soon befriends; Jolene, in a very blunt and matter of fact way, talks about how the orphanage works, swears constantly and gives Elizabeth bits of advice every now and then.

A very significant introduction in the episode is the custodian, Mr. Shaibel, who gets Elizabeth's attention and interest when she notices him alone in the basement, playing a strange game on a checkerboard, with different pieces. Not knowing or understanding the game, Elizabeth asks the custodian to teach her, but he refuses. Elizabeth keeps peeking into his lonesome matches and due to her unique observing skills, she acquires some rules of the game without being taught. This ability impresses Mr. Shaibel who, finally, allows Elizabeth to play with him.

Figure 3 – Elizabeth and Mr. Shaibel play their first game in the orphanage's basement.



As Elizabeth's interest in the game of chess slowly turns into an obsession, she also develops a dependence on calming pills, which the orphanage uses as part of their routine to keep the orphans "at bay". Elizabeth deems the effect the pills have on her to be good; following Jolene's advice of taking the pills only before bedtime, Elizabeth finds that she, incredibly, can imagine a chessboard and move chess pieces in her mind, replay matches, practice new moves and even remember them by heart. This newfound ability makes Elizabeth associate the pills with her visualization of the game so, as time passes, she starts taking more and more pills, excited about the way they make her feel and how they provide a better way to see her game.

After some time, Mr. Shaibel, extremely impressed by Elizabeth's genius ability in chess at such a young age, calls the head of the High School Chess Club, who visits the orphanage to analyze Elizabeth's playing skills and, being shocked by young Elizabeth's mastery of the game, invites her to play a simultaneous match against his Chess Club members at the High School. At the same time this happens, the orphanage cuts the tranquilizers from their routine, having been found out by the government.

Elizabeth suffers her first withdrawal symptoms. She feels nervous and uneasy about her upcoming matches due to not having enough pills to achieve the feeling she was already used to feeling while playing. It almost undermines her outcome in the matches if not for Jolene secretly giving her a small amount of pills right before Elizabeth leaves the orphanage. With that, Elizabeth easily beats the twelve members of the High School Chess Club, playing against them at the same time for the short period of an hour and twenty minutes.

Back at the orphanage, now with no more pills being given away, Elizabeth's dependence on the drugs slowly start affecting her, even in a worse way, because an enormous jar of her desired green pills is exposed almost like a temptation. Elizabeth becomes more confrontational about not being able to get more pills to the point of arguing with one employee, before being sent away without the drugs.

Elizabeth's new snappy attitude culminates in the very last scene of the episode, where Elizabeth breaks into the orphanage's pills storage without anyone noticing, steals the jar of pills – not before taking a handful of them into her own mouth and more handfuls into her pockets – and, now in front of the whole orphanage who caught her in the act, passing out from the overdose and shattering the jar of pills across the orphanage's floor.

Figure 4 – Elizabeth stealing the jar of calming drugs
before overdosing



2.2. THE LAST EPISODE: “END GAME” BRIEF

Six episodes later, Elizabeth Harmon is shown now as an adult. Viewers who have watched the past episodes follow an adventure of her career in chess, her ups and downs, her many victories and crushing losses, and all the exciting events of a professional chess player’s life. Now, however, Elizabeth is living alone, suffering from a downward spiral from her drug and alcohol addictions, facing the possibility of missing her upcoming international chess tournament in Russia, a competition that could give her a World Champion title.

The episode starts with Elizabeth receiving an unexpected visit from Jolene, her first friend from the orphanage, with whom she had lost contact, since being adopted and leaving Methuen Home. Jolene, now an adult with plans of starting Law School, brings the news that Mr. Shaibel, the custodian who taught Elizabeth to play chess, has passed away, and invites Elizabeth to attend his funeral in two days. The two friends catch up on their respective lives and, consequently, Jolene confronts Elizabeth about her addiction problems, calling her out for allowing the situation to get worse and continuing to do so.

On the way to the funeral, Jolene and Elizabeth stop at Methuen Home, their old orphanage, and Elizabeth shares that she would never want to go inside the orphanage again. However, after Elizabeth feels uneasy about the fact that no one in the funeral seemed to be actually sad or to want to be there, she decides to visit the place one last time. Elizabeth walks directly into the basement she used to play with Mr. Shaibel and is taken aback by a mural made by her deceased old friend about all her chess career, meaning Mr. Shaibel had been following her trajectory ever since day one; this brings Elizabeth to tears and Jolene comforts her.

Figure 5 – Elizabeth cries over Mr. Shaibel’s death.



Midway through the episode, Elizabeth seems more focused on going abroad for the tournament, and after trying all her possible options to get money for the trip, given that she has no way of going to Russia with her own resources, Jolene finally offers to pay for her flight, which Elizabeth is reluctant to accept but ends up not having another choice and promising to pay her back if she wins the competition. From the middle to the end of the episode, Elizabeth participates in some of the most exciting chess matches in the entire miniseries and, at the same time, fights her addictions.

Through her matches, Elizabeth shows how much she is able to do without drugs, facing powerful opponents by herself in an unknown country, with unknown people. As she nears the end of her matches, Elizabeth is surprised by an old opponent from the USA, Townes, who stays with her and offers his help. At the verge of facing her biggest and toughest rival, Vasily Borgov, whom she lost to in the match shown in Episode 1, Elizabeth receives an unexpected and yet wonderful help from all her chess player friends, who get together to assist her through her last and most important game.

Figure 6 – Elizabeth’s old chess friends give her advice on the match against Borgov



With the new source of help, Elizabeth completely abandons the idea of using drugs to get her through a match and plays calmly against her last opponent, following the advice she received earlier. However, as Borgov manages to get around her ready-made plans for the match, Elizabeth finds herself in a situation already well-known to her: pushed into a corner and in need of visualizing the game better in order to think of a counterattack. In past episodes, when Elizabeth was in this type of situation, she would always turn to pills and alcohol, but in the last episode, viewers are happily surprised to see her picturing the game's board on the ceiling during the match, providing one of the most exciting scenes of the miniseries.

Figure 7 – Elizabeth visualizes the game without the pills



Now able to use her abilities to the fullest without the interference of drugs, Elizabeth manages to defeat Borgov and win the World Champion title. The miniseries ends with her walking by herself through the streets of Moscow, heading directly to a public place where elderly men are playing chess in the open. She is recognized by one of them as “Liza Harmon”, the Chess World Champion, and is suddenly met by enthusiasm and uncountable handshakes. In the last scene, we can see one of the old men inviting Elizabeth to play a game, which she accepts, the scene undoubtedly referencing her first chess match ever against Mr. Shaibel.

Figure 8 – Elizabeth is recognized by the old street chess players



2.3. THE NEGATIVE TRAIT THESAURUS

The Negative Trait Thesaurus (2013) by Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglisi (2013) begins with a foreword by Carolyn Kaufman, a psychologist, giving a brief introduction to the contents of the book and what there is to say firstly about characters' traits and flaws. The authors make it clear problematic traits – flaws – are important when authors are making up a character, since that's exactly the center of the very story the author wants to develop. They also explain authors might have difficulty writing characters who are different from their own personalities. About this, they give the example:

If you, the writer, are a forthright person, you may find it difficult to get inside the head of someone who is timid or withdrawn; if you are cautious and conscientious, you may find it difficult to understand people who are reckless and impulsive. (ACKERMAN, PUGLISI, 2013, p. 9.)

By this, the authors explain that, due to a clear and oftentimes great difference between an author and a character's personalities, this author will have obstacles set by their own personality while developing the character, for they will have a hard time understanding how this character's mind might work or even how they would react to different situations the author might put them through. In other words, it is necessary for authors to detach from their own opinions and attitudes in order to create a genuine character who acts in their own ways and based on their own personality.

The Negative Trait Thesaurus: A Writer's Guide to Character Flaws (2013) is a compilation of negative traits to help authors build their characters in the most interesting way possible, construct their personalities carefully and make the most of what they are trying to portray while choosing each characters' negative traits. About these particular traits

and how an author should handle them in a character, the “Jonah Complex” is presented, a brief explanation on how change is important for a character’s growth and, even, how an author should approach the process of change.

Using the biblical story of Jonah, who was given a mission by God and, while trying to escape from doing this said mission, God sent Jonah overboard and he was swallowed by a whale, which takes him, begrudgingly, directly to the place he should start his God given mission. This story is used to explain how an author has to impose change upon a character in order to make it happen. There must be a heavy factor – or, as Kaufman and the authors of the *Thesaurus*, Ackerman and Puglisi, call motivations – that will *force* a character into the process of changing negative traits.

In the process of writing, authors will have a constant worry to create interesting stories and characters. Readers, as Ackerman and Puglisi explain, are not only looking for entertainment, but for books to contemplate their own selves and the truth about the world around them. They feel a pull when characters are so well written that it is almost like living their lives through them – feeling what they are feeling, suffering their pains, etc. The authors question why the character’s personal searches for meaning in life affect readers so much.

The authors’ take on the definition of a flaw begins with an explanation about traits in general: a group of actions, reactions and characteristics which can define and distinguish a person. Ackerman and Puglisi’s concept of trait lies on the things a character values, directly connected to their biggest desires and ambitions and, therefore, from these values, there are also things they deem not worthy of doing or abiding, such as the opposite of their values or things that compromise their own values or goals. To better explain this, the authors set a simple example:

[...] a character who dreams of winning an Olympic gold medal may have traits like determination, a strong work ethic and perseverance. Because he values fairness and hard work, he will most likely avoid steroids and other shortcuts, instead following a routine of strength and training, healthy eating and honing the techniques needed to reach his goal. (ACKERMAN, PUGLISI, 2013, p. 14.)

So traits are but consequences of, mostly, a character’s path to fulfill their desires and goals, fueled by their own moral code. These goals, mixed with one’s life experiences, dictate a pattern of reactions and behaviors which form a personality and, inside this personality, all the traits that can help, for instance, a reader recognize and understand a character.

Ackerman and Puglisi (2013) divide traits in three kinds: positive traits – associated with positive developments in the personality, honorable attitudes, beneficial relationships

with oneself and others; negative traits or flaws – to put it simply, are quite the opposite of positive traits, contributing to one’s downwards spirals and behaviors which may have little to no consideration to the well-being of others or themselves, leading to miserable situations; and neutral traits – these don’t have their meaning in depth by the authors nor in their other works, but are described to be difficult to categorize and not entirely inside the positive or the negative definitions of traits.

About the origin of negative traits, one of the main elements to induce a character to develop a flaw are the past experiences, alongside with many others such as the environment in which they grow or live, genetics and inspirations. All characters – as most people –, being driven by the mystery of self-knowledge and the discovery of the meaning of their own lives and what is their objective in the world, seek for self improvement. Through this process of change, strong experiences ought to happen and mark the characters for life. Some of these experiences are much stronger and can be traumatizing, which the authors call wounds.

The wounds are factors that directly affect the behavior of characters because those wounds must be extremely strong, so strong that they have a considerable weight into what the character does and says in many to all life situations. These are traumas that hurt the character so badly they do not wish, in any circumstance, for them to happen ever again, so a chain of behaviors are developed in order to consolidate this self protective mindset.

Ackerman and Puglisi (2013) also list some responses the character must have in consequence of the wounds. The central response to a wound is a “lie”, or the false belief that it is important to take extreme protective measures to avoid more wounding; from this false belief, the character will start generating fears that lead to changing behaviors, which lead to developing negative traits.

This is how the “lie” works for the author’s advantage. There’s what they call a “basic need” and a related lie to this specific need, as we can see from this example the authors include in the *Negative Trait Thesaurus*: a character who has a basic need to keep someone specific or their family safe, might believe the following lie: “I don’t deserve to feel safe” (ACKERMAN, PUGLISI, 2013, p. 16.). This is how the authors advise to build a lie within an emotionally damaged character, by interconnecting the lie to a specific need, goal or ambition.

The authors add the importance of defining a major flaw to the character, which, like the wounds, must be directly connected to a bad experience. This flaw or, depending on the author, *flaws*, stronger than all the other minor flaws, will be the precursor of the character’s major weaknesses and thus the biggest obstacle he or she will have in the self improving

process. The authors highlight that the only way the character will be able to get over this is through revisiting the origin of the flaw and making peace with his or her wound.

Some characters, not wishing for others to see their weaknesses or flaws, opt to hide this image with what Ackerman and Puglisi (2013, p. 17) describe as a “persona”, a fake set of behaviors and features which serve to conceal the characters’ “dark” parts that they feel too guilty or ashamed to reveal. Deep diving through this mask and into the lie and wounds is how an author would be able to create a very detailed and intricate character.

Negative traits will also have an impact on one’s relationships, which is another key element to an entertaining character. Common interactions and, specially, interactions with other characters who have completely different personalities are opportunities authors have to ignite tension and conflicts. About this, Ackerman and Puglisi (2013) assert that positive traits can generate clashes between characters, however, it is the negative traits that do the most damage in relationships, providing annoyances, arguments and even fights.

The authors include advice for other authors to represent and better demonstrate a character’s flaws, such as ways of thinking, being sensitive to some situations that might show in a clearer way their weaknesses and feelings that trigger highly emotional reactions or specific behaviors. All these must be taken into consideration by the author, regarding all characters differently, according to each of their personalities, in order to build a more believable and accurate set of characters.

Considering the authors definition and explanations of negative traits and their consequences in a character’s life, *The Negative Trait Thesaurus* is set up for authors to have a compilation of flaws, a general look over them and therefore be able to include these in their writing as a sort of mixture of traits and, by themselves, create a character that, depending on which negative traits they choose, will be unique and profound.

3. METHODOLOGY

In this research, I will point out which are Elizabeth Harmon's main flaws in *The Queen's Gambit* and compare how these flaws are portrayed in the first and last episodes of the miniseries, utilizing the concepts of negative traits and character development from Angela Ackerman and Becca Puglisi in the work *The Negative Trait Thesaurus* (2013).

The first part of the development of this research will be the preparation of a list of Elizabeth's main negative traits carefully selected based on *The Negative Trait Thesaurus*. Using the explanations in the thesaurus, I will be pointing out scenes, dialogues and other visual elements that can show how the character indeed has these negative traits, mostly like a match between the explanations and elements in the miniseries that can confirm the flaw is present in Elizabeth Harmon's personality.

After explaining which are Elizabeth's most prominent flaws, I will use Ackerman and Puglisi's notion of character arc in order to analyze how Elizabeth's negative traits change in the first and last episodes. The first analysis will address the flaws which were outgrown by the character: Ackerman and Puglisi claim that a character looks for, mainly, self improvement and self discovery, and the negative traits are obstacles that slow down this objective for the character; to achieve this, the character must go through processes of change that can remove these negative traits from her way. Therefore, I will be looking into the results of these changes in Elizabeth from the first into the last episodes.

The second step of analysis on the negative traits are the ones which were not entirely outgrown, but rather reshaped into characteristics of the character that were no longer large obstacles for her individual objectives, but instead renewed versions of these traits that seemed to be worked on into a positive form. These are the types of changes Ackerman and Puglisi determine as beneficial at some point through the character's story – negative traits, being originally created as a form of self-protection; sometimes do act as shields from harmful situations. In Elizabeth's case, a few elements of her personality that are initially listed as flaws end up helping in her self-development and growth.

At the end of this research, I will compare the two episodes chosen and explain how, even though Elizabeth seems totally different, the details in dialogue, actions and other visual elements of the narrative in both episodes can be linked together and even look similar, providing a conclusion to the character's battle of overcoming her own flaws from beginning to end and actually achieving this change. The last episode, for instance, is the most

important episode to represent the conclusion of Elizabeth's character arc, not only because it is the very last one but because it is filled with references to the beginning of her journey. These references also act as symbols to help viewers identify how the main character has definitely changed and is successful at her biggest challenge: overcoming her own flaws.

4. ELIZABETH HARMON'S FLAWS

In this section, I will be pointing out Elizabeth Harmon's main flaws that can be spotted in the first and last episodes. Using descriptions from *The Negative Trait Thesaurus* (2013), I will associate some traits of behaviors and attitudes described in the book to behaviors and attitudes seen from Elizabeth in the episodes chosen. It is also important to mention that some of Elizabeth's flaws are so strong that they generate other minor flaws as consequences; these subsequent flaws will be mentioned under the topics of which flaws they originated from.

I will, in the first place, briefly explain the definitions of the flaws selected and then show how this flaw is portrayed in the episodes. The list of flaws does not contain all of the character's flaws but only the main ones, and it is divided in, first, Elizabeth's stronger negative traits, such as: addictive – her major flaw –, obsessive and self-destructive; then, her minor flaws: disrespectful, stubborn and irresponsible.

Another noteworthy factor for this section is that these flaws, belonging to the same individual, are not separated from each other, fully divided. The flaws interconnect amongst themselves and many elements in some appear in others as well, so some of the listed behaviors and attitudes in Elizabeth mentioned here can be the manifestation of more than one flaw at the same time, therefore they are mentioned more than once.

4.1. MAJOR FLAW: ADDICTIVE (Greedy, grumpy, reckless)

According to *The Negative Trait Thesaurus* (2013), an addicted character is the one who has an inclination to be highly dependent on drugs, substances or other factors that could be the object of an addiction. Throughout all seven episodes, *The Queen's Gambit* highlights in many points of the story that addiction is Elizabeth Harmon's major flaw, and even looking at only the first and last episodes, it is still possible to come to this conclusion.

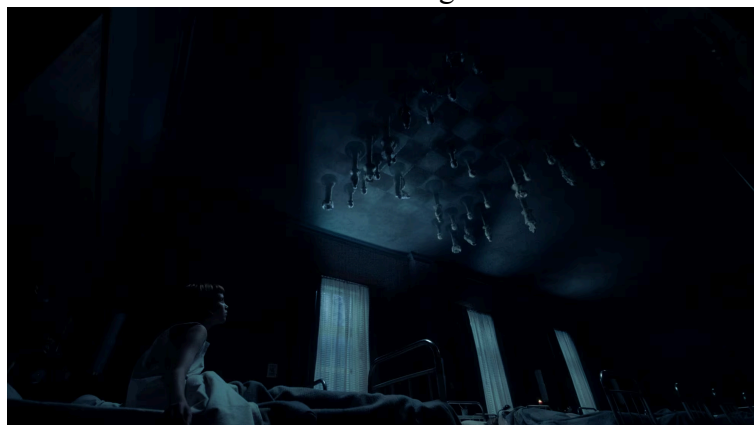
Picking up the addiction from being continuously given and stealing tranquilizers at nine years old at the orphanage, Elizabeth takes this habit through the rest of the episodes. The first episode, specifically, is rather used as a set-up for the base of her addiction, for instance, an introduction to the effects of the pills and how they were placed in Elizabeth's life in a way that makes it understandable for the viewers to sympathize to the reasons why she ends up becoming addicted.

From the very first scene, viewers can already assume Elizabeth has a clear problem with pills and alcohol, having fallen asleep inside a bathtub and having a drink and pills for breakfast before running straight to a match clearly hung-over. According to Ackerman and Puglisi (2013), one of the behaviors associated with addiction is jeopardizing important events due to it, and taking bold – foolish, even – risks. That is what viewers see firsthand about Elizabeth Harmon: a professional chess player who drinks the night before a big tournament day and attends hungover.

Back to Elizabeth’s stay in the orphanage, the pills, which are taken at daytime, are introduced to her routine as a way to make the orphans less problematic and easier to manage. Elizabeth is weirded out by the effects of the tranquilizers, and Jolene, her friend from the orphanage, scolds Elizabeth for not listening to her advice of taking the pills only before bedtime.

It is safe to say that Elizabeth’s soon to follow addiction to the pills is heavily associated with her passion for the game of chess. At the time she started taking the pills, Elizabeth had started playing in the basement with Mr. Shaibel and, due to her natural ability of easily visualizing the game inside her head during bedtime, she would continue to play and replay the game at the same time she took the pills. Consequently, young Elizabeth associates the effects of the tranquilizers to the way how she can see the game on the ceiling – an ability that always belonged to her, and was not a result from the drugs at all, as confirmed later in the last episode.

Figure 9 – Elizabeth’s ability to picture a chess game on the ceiling



As her obsession with the game of chess progresses, so does her disordered consumption of pills. Elizabeth, yearning more and more for better chess playing abilities, starts collecting pills in order to take them in large quantities before going to bed and to be

able to visualize the game on the ceiling. At some point, Elizabeth is taking about six pills at once, surprising even Jolene, who warns her not to “get too used to that feeling”. However, due to her age and a rather innocent personality, Elizabeth doesn't quite understand the dangers implied in the possibility of becoming dependent on the pills, instead nurturing the idea that the tranquilizers are a helping hand in her path of learning the game of chess.

One high point in Elizabeth's growing dependence on the drugs is when the orphanage cuts them from the children's daily routine. Having become used to the continuity of consumption and utilizing the drugs in her process of learning how to play chess, Elizabeth is taken aback by the sudden blockage on her source of getting more pills. At this point, her developing, soon-to-be major flaw is projecting branches of other small negative traits, as consequences in her behavior. For instance: grumpiness, recklessness and greed.

We see Elizabeth turn quite grumpy and greedy when asking Jolene for more pills a while before her first match at the Chess Club. She holds an unconventional rude attitude viewers hadn't seen in her before. Elizabeth is helpless and almost desperate, since a) she has an upcoming important match and b) she has no more pills to use and, therefore, be good at the game. This position of vulnerability makes Elizabeth's usually quiet personality change into someone who desperately wants the pills and would do unexpected things to get them.

These subsequent negative traits reach their climax when Elizabeth, consumed by her withdrawals symptoms, not having pills for a considerable amount of time and, on top of all that, being exposed daily to the temptation of the big jar of green pills right past a locked window, breaks into the room to steal a few for herself. However, from the desperation and unwanted abstinence, greediness and recklessness swarm Elizabeth as she not only takes a handful of pills and fills her pockets, but also decides to steal the whole jar.

These moments, summed up to the very beginning where she is taking the very same pills, can be used to make one clear assumption: Elizabeth's addiction would be a considerable, if not the major, flaw in her life. This assumption is confirmed when looking at the last episode, “End Game”, where Elizabeth is found in the middle of a breakdown. In the same episode, Elizabeth talks about this once, when contemplating all her duties: “But what I want... is a drink,” and a second time when her friend asks her what she needs to win her biggest match: “What I need... are... the pills. The booze. I need my mind cloudy to win. I can't visualize the games without them.” These two sentences solidify how, years later, Elizabeth still believes in the false idea that the drugs are the reason for her talent.

Using the concepts of “The Lie” and “Basic Need” from Ackerman and Puglisi (2013), it is possible to notice that Elizabeth's negative trait of addiction checks on all these

requirements. Elizabeth, by her own words in the last episode, has a basic need of going to Russia and winning, however the lie she believes in is that she needs the drugs to win the games. Correlating these two factors – the basic need and lie – the authors of the novel and of the miniseries construct a convincing struggle in Elizabeth’s character. In fact, they construct a flaw so heavy that has been slowly growing from the start into a sizable obstacle that provides intriguing and exciting conflicts through the story until its conclusion.

4.2. OBSESSIVE (Dishonest, impatient, impulsive)

Ackerman and Puglisi’s definition of obsession is thinking about something specifically and having no control over these thoughts, so much that they affect someone’s life directly in their fixated behaviors and attitude. In “Openings”, Elizabeth’s obsession is only beginning to appear and viewers can see small signs that state clearly what the objects of this particular negative trait are: chess, winning and drugs.

The Negative Trait Thesaurus lists a few associated behaviors and attitudes in the obsessive character and the very first one they list is “Constantly thinking about the source of one’s obsession” (ACKERMAN, PUGLISI, 2013, p. 279). After Elizabeth discovers the game of chess, she becomes extremely interested and the idea of playing the game is constant in her mind, even imagining the chessboard in, gradually, more detail as she observes Mr. Shaibel playing in the basement. From a simple feeling of curiosity, chess begins to fill her thoughts throughout the next days after the discovery until it becomes what seems to be a priority in her routine.

One of the elements to portray the beginning of Elizabeth’s obsession is her frequent questions and conversations about the game. Being a very quiet character who talks only the necessary, Elizabeth seems to become way chattier when it is about chess, like the fact that about fifteen minutes through her story in the orphanage, she hasn’t spoken more than five lines but, after she sees Mr. Shaibel play, Elizabeth talks more frequently and asks more questions about it.

Elizabeth also demonstrates a growing obsession during the sequence of her attempts and failures to get Mr. Shaibel to teach her how to play. At first, Mr. Shaibel refuses to teach her because she is a stranger and in the next day, Elizabeth provides arguments to refute his reason not to teach her, explaining she lives in the orphanage, therefore she is not a stranger, and claiming she already understands a bit of the game just from watching. Then, finally,

proving that she really knows part of the game by telling Mr. Shaibel the movements of each piece, right after the custodian had told her girls do not play chess.

After the two of them start playing together more often and now that she can hold onto the first object of her obsession, a new one appears: winning. Elizabeth practices and replays movements during bedtime in order to beat Mr. Shaibel in a game, having lost all of the matches before. With this new objective in mind, Elizabeth takes more pills and chess begins to occupy her mind over any other thing, resulting even in dishonesty during classes, as she pretends to want to go to the bathroom or to clean erasers in order to play.

Elizabeth's desire to know as much as she can about chess also leads her to become more impatient, for instance when she insists Mr. Shaibel teaches her how to play, but also when, in their very first match, she demands he shows how to perform a Scholar's Mate, a checkmate in four moves, and he refuses. Then, Elizabeth proceeds to replay the exact same moves in her head during bedtime and learns how to do it by herself because she does not wish to wait for when Mr. Shaibel would want to teach it.

Another factor that indicates her obsession with winning and chess is how Elizabeth demonstrates more satisfaction in her chess playing achievements than in other types of winning. For example, when Elizabeth is able to reproduce the Scholar's Mate by herself, she smiles for the first time in the episode, a satisfied and victorious smile. However, later on, after the High School chess team coach gives Elizabeth a doll, her smile seems more forced and not even slightly happy, and on the same day Elizabeth throws the doll in the trash can. With this, viewers can assume common gifts are not amusing to her, only winning at chess and getting better at it.

Figure 10 – Elizabeth smiles after teaching herself the Scholar's Mate



In the last episode, Elizabeth's obsession, now fully developed and causing extreme damage in her playing skills and life overall, is portrayed in her breakdown consequences: being isolated in her house, not having any friends backing her up due to having pushed them away and dedicating most of her time to drug consumption rather than practicing chess. It is important to highlight that the last episode represents the beginning of Elizabeth's process of overcoming her biggest flaws. From the start of "End Game", Elizabeth is already contemplating the wreck her life has become and admitting she needs to change, so the elements that indicate her obsession aren't as apparent as in the first episode, however it is still possible to see the consequences of spending years feeding this flaw. Elizabeth is now fully dependent on the drugs and has difficulty abandoning the habit, and the early mixture of her three main obsessions (chess, winning and drugs) is consummated by then.

4.3. SELF-DESTRUCTIVE (Uncommunicative)

According to *The Negative Trait Thesaurus*, a self-destructive character is someone "inclined toward actions and choices that hurt oneself" (ACKERMAN, PUGLISI, 2013, p. 327). Through the two episodes selected, it is possible to notice Elizabeth is a character that seems to make a lot of choices that end up hurting herself emotionally or physically – making herself overdose on tranquilizers, for instance.

Ackerman and Puglisi also suggest that one of the causes for a character to become self-destructive is guilt or shame resulting from a past event (2013, p. 327). One important scene from the episode "End Game" is when, after keeping it a mystery through all episodes, a flashback reveals what Elizabeth's biological mother said to her before the car crash. After failing at getting Elizabeth's father to help her with her situation (poverty, addiction and a child to raise), Alice Harmon explains to her daughter there is a problem she needs to solve. When asked what this problem is, she replies "What I do with you", before crashing the car on purpose.

Figure 11 – Before causing the car crash, Alice Harmon tells Elizabeth to close her eyes



This scene implies Elizabeth might have seen herself, like her biological mother said, as a problem, or a burden. In the same episode, Elizabeth talks negatively about herself to Jolene, wondering if somehow she had erased her talents through the drugs, and even questioning if she was crazy like her mother.

Elizabeth had also pushed her friends away and isolated herself in her own house, drinking and taking pills. This uncommunicativeness is actually a consequence from her self-destructive behavior: Elizabeth seems to have a hard time asking for help and relying on others, actually creating a vicious circle of pushing people away, feeling bad about it but not trying to get them back in any way, choosing, instead, to find solace in the effects of drugs.

Elizabeth's self-destructiveness is nurtured through her addiction problems. According to Ackerman and Puglisi (2013), these harmful choices can be made because the character believes what they are doing is advantageous for themselves, and that's exactly her relationship with the drugs: thinking they are helping her achieve her goals. However, by definition, her attitude is bringing more harm than good for herself and the people around her.

4.4. DISRESPECTFUL

This particular negative trait is surely a minor one in the character's life and linked to Elizabeth's impatience and impulsiveness. It first appears in Elizabeth's personality in one of her first games with Mr. Shaibel. Elizabeth loses her queen piece during the game and, as she reaches to continue the game, Mr. Shaibel stops her and explains it is a sportsmanship habit to resign. Elizabeth looks angered and insists on continuing the game, but Mr. Shaibel is adamant, which results in Elizabeth swearing at him.

Figure 12 – Mr. Shaibel tells Elizabeth she has to resign



Another scene that brings out Elizabeth’s rudeness is when she is suffering from the cut of tranquilizers in the orphanage and is beginning to feel desperate. She approaches Jolene during mealtime and asks for more pills, but Jolene quickly interrupts her to introduce a new kid that had arrived in the orphanage, trying to change subjects. Elizabeth, however, ignores Jolene’s attempts and demands for the drugs, making Jolene sharply cut her requests with “I don’t wanna hear about it”.

These scenes highlights two aspects of the portrayal of disrespect in Elizabeth: she easily opts to rude attitudes towards someone who is being an obstacle between her and her main obsessions; and a concept such as “sportsmanship” is something she still does not value as a beginner chess player, although, amongst the players, it is very important.

4.5. STUBBORN

Being unyielding is the definition Ackerman and Puglisi use to explain a stubborn character whose cause to being like this includes being controlling, independent and having a strong need to win, which are all elements that can be used to describe Elizabeth Harmon.

At the orphanage, through her new discovery of chess and the satisfaction of winning a game, Elizabeth feels at home. Perhaps, living a life in which many factors were uncontrollable for her – losing her mother, following a new routine, living with strangers –, having a mastery over a game and being very unique at it (due to her age and speed of learning) were things that comforted Elizabeth and gave her a new sense of control. As she mentions after her simultaneous match at the local High School: “It felt good. I never won at

anything before”, it is possible to notice she welcomes the feeling of winning and that it would be the beginning of her long relationship with victory.

This newfound desire of winning can easily be linked to situations previously cited in this work, such as the backtalks, demanding Mr. Shaibel to teach her, taking the pills at bedtime and even planning to steal the drugs secretly; all of these are examples of Elizabeth’s unyielding attitude when it comes to chess.

It is also important to highlight that even though Elizabeth’s stubbornness, heavily linked to insistence, is majorly a flaw, it is still a protective measure for her. We can see this portrayed clearly during her attempts of getting Mr. Shaibel to let her play the game; despite this flaw sometimes making Elizabeth seem childish or pushy, if it wasn’t for it, she would have never gotten to play the game with the custodian in the first place.

In “End Game”, Elizabeth’s stubbornness reappears when she is trying to get money to travel to Russia and participate in the chess tournament. Elizabeth is asked by the Christian Crusade, an organization that offered funds to her in previous travels for chess competitions, to make a statement regarding her religion, however, she refuses and, even though she has no money, promises she will pay back all the money they had already invested before she rejected making the statement. This shows her unwillingness to do anything just because of money, proving her stubbornness also serves as a protective measure to her own image in the world of chess.

Another moment is when, right after Elizabeth becomes a chess world champion, her security is listing all the activities she has to do to advertise her victory as much as possible, she looks very uncomfortable and decides to step out of the car in which they were riding to walk by herself, ending up playing chess in the street instead of doing what she was told.

4.6. IRRESPONSIBLE

A character who flees from accountability for his or her actions is the one who can be considered irresponsible, according to Ackerman and Puglisi (2013). When talking about Elizabeth Harmon, a character who has been through many hurtful experiences and ends up all by herself after a major decline in her chess career, falling into a sequence of irresponsible attitudes and choices is a fair answer to her struggles.

The first sign of irresponsibility in Elizabeth is in the beginning scene of the miniseries, where she, already an adult, attended an important chess match unprepared, drunk and hung-over. This particular flaw can't really be spotted in the first episode during Elizabeth's orphanage arc, considering her irresponsible attitudes appear through her adulthood after she becomes fully addicted to alcohol and tranquilizers. Therefore, anything else of Elizabeth's irresponsibility can only be seen in "End Game".

While looking for money to travel to Russia, Elizabeth ends up calling, as a last resort, Benny Watts, a fellow chess player. Having only the context of the first and last episodes, we cannot know much about Benny, however, with his angered reply to Elizabeth, we understand that at some point in their relationship, she chose the drugs over him – a consequence of her irresponsible behavior using drugs and pushing friends away.

These two examples of irresponsibility in Elizabeth, though brief, say a lot about how this negative trait affects her. For instance, her irresponsibility is not the type of prioritizing fun or not wanting to do hard work, but actually more individual-like: when backed into a corner, Elizabeth turns to the drugs with the false conception that they can help her, but end up compromising her duties and not solving the problem she put herself in in the first place. Her irresponsible behavior is rather an act of escape in which she feels more comfortable with and, consequently, avoids trying to find other solutions for her problems.

5. THE CHANGES IN THE TRAITS BETWEEN THE FIRST AND FINAL EPISODES

Ackerman and Puglisi explain negative flaws as elements that complicate the journey of a character from the beginning until the end, where he or she must have a new view of life and self. This process counts on many factors, both internal and external, that will weigh as the character struggles to achieve self improvement, especially when it is about overcoming flaws. About this, in the *The Negative Trait Thesaurus* it is explained:

A character arc works best when it mirrors the ups and downs of the outer story. As the character strives to overcome an antagonist or challenge, so must he overcome himself and his greatest fears. Throughout the arc, the damaged character must face himself and his shortcomings. To emerge healed and whole, he must acknowledge his wound and see the lie for what it is. Once he is able to let go of his false belief, the lie that has motivated his actions to this point will no longer control his life. (ACKERMAN, PUGLISI, 2013, p. 20.)

In the case of Elizabeth Harmon, the concept of character arc is worked through the entire miniseries and it is very prominent especially in the last episode, which is not only the conclusion to the whole story, but also a callback to the first one in many factors that will be listed in this section. Although analyzing only the first and last episodes it is not possible to see the entire process of character arc and growth, it is still possible to see the outcome and also connect this outcome to its beginning.

In the first episode Elizabeth's main negative traits are only hinted at, and are not either unseen or very prominent, because they are there only to be introduced. The final episode begins with Elizabeth at her lowest point in terms of struggling against her negative traits and, at the end, a peak with positive traits and self-healing elements, so it is necessary to make it clear that I won't be addressing the process of change in these traits and which occasions they have come to change or disappear. This analysis will only address how these traits are portrayed in both episodes, and interconnect them using the differences in the episodes, as well as Ackerman and Puglisi's concept of character growth.

To support this concept of character arc and development, it is also valid to mention what Glatch and Smith say about the element of flaws in the character's journey in their article: "[...] if someone in your story has negative character traits, they can certainly undergo a negative character arc." (GLATCH, SMITH, 2024). Taking the explanation of character arc as the process of growth of a character – mentally and emotionally –, Glatch and Smith claim that there is an arc specifically for the negative traits, which concerns only the change of

aspects in a character's flaws. This change is important not only for the character, but also to the resolution of the story, given that, according to Glatch and Smith, not overcoming a negative trait might result in tragic events for the character in the end. About this, they summarize:

[...] A story's character arc is the evolution of certain character traits alongside that character's inner journey, which impacts whether or not they overcome the story's conflict. (GLATCH, SMITH, 2024).

This section will be divided in two parts. The first one with Elizabeth's flaws that were surpassed, using the Thesaurus' guide of how to overcome each negative trait and connecting it to how Elizabeth overcomes the traits in the final episode; the traits which were surpassed being: addiction, self-destruction, disrespect and irresponsibility. The second part explains the traits which were reshaped or, in other words, are still present in Elizabeth's personality, but in a new version, not harmful to herself; for instance, the traits of obsession and stubbornness.

5.1. SURPASSED FLAWS IN THE EPISODES

This section will go over the negative trait Elizabeth Harmon overcomes at the end of the miniseries, utilizing Ackerman and Puglisi's concepts of character arc and growth. It is valid to mention that in the sections of each flaw in *The Negative Trait Thesaurus*, the authors present a number of ways to how a character would be able to surpass them, and in this topic of the research, I will link these guides to how *The Queen's Gambit* portrayed Elizabeth's triumph over her main flaws. This section will be divided in four topics for each flaw, explaining *The Negative Trait Thesaurus'* takes on overcoming the traits and how the miniseries shows the main character's growth in dialogues, attitudes and behavior.

5.1.1. ADDICTIVE

The first thing Ackerman and Puglisi argue that begins the process of overcoming addiction is: “[...] the character must hit rock bottom. The first steps are for him to admit he has a problem and have the desire to change.” (ACKERMAN, PUGLISI, 2013, p. 59). In

Elizabeth's case, the last episode begins with her already fallen into this "rock bottom" state: she has no friends around, she is not playing chess and, on top of everything, her house is filled with alcohol and bottles of tranquilizer pills.

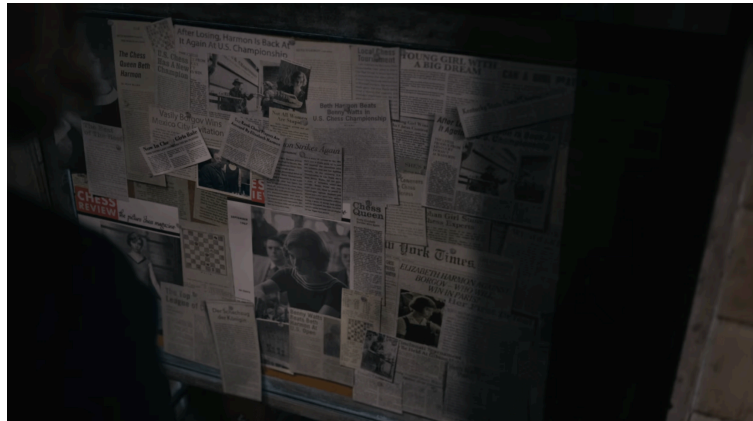
With Jolene's visit – which checks one of the requirements of overcoming addiction in *The Negative Trait Thesaurus*: having support of friends and family –, Elizabeth begins venting about her problem and, once more providing another element in the process of surpassing this flaw, she admits she has been only drinking and taking pills and that she needs to quit. Her old friend's visit is the first push to help with Elizabeth's struggles against the drugs in the miniseries final episode; Jolene immediately calls her out on things such as not answering her phone, drinking, taking pills, the mess in the house and, especially, making her situation worse than it is instead of trying to fight it. "My advice? Stop digging" is what Jolene tells her after finding out Elizabeth's current state of rock bottom, advising she should stop fixating on things that are not helping her feel better or change her situation.

Another great element used to let the need to change sink into Elizabeth's mind is going back to the orphanage. Referring to Ackerman and Puglisi's character arc element, where they explain a character must revisit their wounds so they can heal, Elizabeth is now revisiting the exact place her addiction began, now that this flaw is the biggest wall in between her and an important life goal: to be the chess world champion.

What makes this return to the orphanage powerful in Elizabeth's story is not only going back to the basement she used to play with Mr. Shaibel, where her passion for chess began, but also discovering that he had followed her career ever since she left the orphanage. It is safe to declare that this moment is Elizabeth's "whale" in the "Jonah Complex" mentioned in *The Negative Trait Thesaurus*. Elizabeth is pushed against the wall by the simple discovery that someone she appreciated believed in her the whole time, and she has no choice now but to aim for self improvement rather than stain her mentor's legacy, hence, the "whale" that forces her into the needed actions.

Revisiting the orphanage is also a way used by the creators of *The Queen's Gambit* to help Elizabeth rethink her priorities in life, considering it is where she discovers chess but also where her addiction begins. Elizabeth looks uncomfortable while walking across the orphanage, but more at ease when she goes down the basement, almost like a sign she does not want to define herself by the drugs the place offered her, but rather the game of chess and her friendship with Mr. Shaibel. Going back into the orphanage is the hinge that connects Elizabeth's downward spiral to the beginning of her actions to overcome her addiction.

Figure 13 – Elizabeth finds Mr. Shaibel’s collage of her achievements in the basement



Elizabeth also, to her surprise, receives a lot of help from friends in this last episode, not only Jolene’s visit to her house but also her help in paying for Elizabeth to travel and participate in the world chess tournament. She also gets one of her old opponent’s company in Russia after a few days by herself and, on top of all that, the sudden support of her chess friends’ group to advise her before her most important match. As Jolene mentions in the same episode, “I’m not here to save you. [...] I’m here because you need me to be here”, her friend Townes’ “Consider me your second”, and “We’re so proud of you” from her chess friends circle are all examples of reassuring moments that Elizabeth needed to understand they are not the solution to her problem, but are one of the keys for her to have confidence in her overcoming process.

Healthy alternatives for dealing with stressful situations are another way of fighting addiction according to Ackerman and Puglisi. It is possible to see these changes in small moments through the last episode, as Elizabeth, twice, refuses alcoholic drinks, flushes her pills down the toilet and goes to sleep instead of partying during the night. These can be compared to her attitudes in the first episode, where she seeks for the drugs non stop and refuses to rest in the adequate time.

The last element to mention in Elizabeth’s battle against addiction is the outcome of her matches in the world chess tournament. Although winning every game would be, for many, a cliché ending when it comes to stories about competition, in Elizabeth's story it is an inspirational conclusion. The result of her matches are reflections of her efforts to free herself from the bounds of addiction, especially in her match against Borgov, where she is, again, pushed against a wall, when her opponent makes a particularly tricky move (in other words,

during the game she has another “whale” moment), Elizabeth finds that she can still visualize the game without taking drugs and earns her victory with dignity.

5.1.2. SELF-DESTRUCTIVE

To overcome a self-destructive trait, *The Negative Trait Thesaurus* indicates that the character needs a positive mindset and a clear understanding of what is causing him or her to feel like this, and these actions come mostly from the support and patience of friends and close ones. It is important to recall that the main consequence of Elizabeth’s self-destructive behavior was pushing people away and refusing to share her feelings and struggles with anyone else, instead turning to what she had been used to: the drugs.

The elements in the miniseries used to highlight Elizabeth’s process of changing this harmful attitude focus on making her see what is the major reason for her way of thinking, more specifically in two important scenes during her match against Luchenko, one of the Russian players at the tournament who is also a grandmaster. In the episode, Luchenko is described as a formidable player who would be a significant opponent in the tournament; after their match is adjourned, Elizabeth, who is staying in the same hotel as the other players, happens to see Luchenko and his fellow Russian chess players discussing their match and working ways of defeating Elizabeth together.

Although the only reaction we see from Elizabeth after that is going straight to studying the game by herself, it is important to notice that, instead of opting for drastic actions like getting drunk or taking pills out of stress, she deals with the situation in a calm and collected way. Ackerman and Puglisi suggest that a self-destructive character needs to build in confidence by dealing positively with the causes of this flaw (2013, p. 329). In Elizabeth’s case, her self-destructive behavior would come as a way to cope with a crisis in her game play, forcing her to immediately take the drugs. However, in the last episode, she does not panic or feel the need to have the drugs in order to prepare for the continuation of the match, instead studying by herself and doing what is within her reach.

The second crucial scene for surpassing this flaw in Elizabeth’s story also happens during the same match. Right after resigning, Luchenko catches Elizabeth off guard by saying: “You are a marvel, my dear. I may have just played the best chess player of my life”. This scene can be compared back to back to Mr. Shaibel’s compliment to Elizabeth in the first episode: “To tell you the truth of it, child, you are astounding”. In many scenes,

Elizabeth did get compliments for her talents, however these two in particular are the very first and last compliments she receives in the entire miniseries, creating a full circle back to Elizabeth's roots, but also to her new self, as someone who is starting to get her confidence back. Also, a compliment from a player as brilliant as herself is certainly a boost to that journey.

Figure 14 – Elizabeth gets teary-eyed by Luchenko's compliment



These compliments can also be compared to Elizabeth's clear trauma of hearing her mother calling her a problem. In "End Game", she confesses to Jolene she thinks she might be going crazy like her mother, which indicates her biological mother still had an influence in Elizabeth's mindset even after many years. Being a prodigy and not having many other people to relate to, Elizabeth has a difficulty understanding her own abilities, which for years were mixed with addiction and false beliefs that her sanity is not intact. However, in Russia, in the same place as people as skilled as herself in the game and, on top of all that, receiving recognition and compliments, Elizabeth has not only a confirmation of her value but reassurance of her life choices, especially the ones related to self-improvement.

5.1.3. DISRESPECTFUL

Ackerman and Puglisi explain in a simple way that one can only overcome being disrespectful when this flaw gets in the way of the character and his or her important objectives; as they mention in the *Thesaurus*: "One of the reasons disrespectful characters continue to be rude is because there is no true consequence [...]" (2013, p. 127).

As for Elizabeth, when comparing her attitude in the games in the first and last episode, the changes are very perceptible. For instance, there is the fact that Elizabeth doesn't have the element of drugs in the way of her playing anymore, which were the major contributors to her snappy behavior in the first episode, as well as a bad influence on her visualization of the game. From that, it is possible to state that she is not the same person as before at all; she acts much more politely towards her fellow chess players and also much less smug, welcoming their losses with respect and even voicing her own admiration for them, as she did in the game against Luchenko. Elizabeth also notices signs of admiration from her opponents, as seen in the scene where she leaves from a game she just won and Borgov, then world champion, gets up to analyze her board. These moments contribute not only to let Elizabeth know her own esteem as a professional chess player, but also, upon seeing the respect others have for her, to develop respect back to others and, especially, to herself.

Furthermore, in all the moments of achievements for Elizabeth through the tournament in Russia, as well as all scenes in which people would demonstrate huge appreciation for her, she would always react humbly and with an emotional expression. These scenes allow her character to perceive her own triumphs, progress in her chess career and, more importantly, in her struggle against drugs – from the small girl who desperately clinged onto the pills in order to win, to a sober and capable professional.

5.1.4. IRRESPONSIBLE

Much similar to overcoming self-destructiveness, this negative trait, according to *The Negative Trait Thesaurus*, also requires that the character must be put in a situation where he or she will face the consequence of carrying this flaw in their personality in order to change, otherwise they would just hurt someone in the process. As mentioned before, Elizabeth has this situation when, after having practically traded her chess career and friends for drugs, she finds herself hitting rock bottom. “I have to go (to Russia). If I don't, there's nothing for me to do. I'll just drink” is her reasoning at the beginning of “End Game”; in other words, she recognizes her irresponsibility is hurting someone in particular: herself; and, if she does not do anything about it, her situation would become even more miserable.

Elizabeth redeems herself throughout the last episode by changing her addictive behaviors, accepting help from her friends, denying offers of drugs and alcohol and, especially, winning the last match that gives her the world champion title.

It is interesting to recall the very first scene of the series, when she was playing hungover and on tranquilizers. Even though the result of the game isn't shown in any of these two episodes, viewers can assume she had lost that match. Now, however, in the last episode, Elizabeth is different, she is well prepared, her expression is much calmer and she has no distractions or other factors to stop her from reaching her full potential.

5.2. RESHAPED FLAWS IN THE EPISODES

This section will go over the negative traits in Elizabeth Harmon's personality which are reshaped. According to Ackerman and Puglisi (2013), all negative traits have a positive side that can be useful for the protection and dignity of a character. Although the flaws do show characters in a bad light and can affect them in a harmful way, they still can be used for this character's good. This part will be divided in two topics for each of the reshaped flaws: obsessive and stubborn, comparing how these flaws appear in Elizabeth's behavior and attitude and how they can have a positive outcome for her in the last episode.

5.2.1. OBSESSIVE

An obsessive character who recognizes the harmful aspects of their fixations is on the right path to overcome this flaw, according to Ackerman and Puglisi. Positive achievements would certainly help ease this negative trait, however the only way to fully surpass it would be to understand more about the obsession, its causes and effects.

From the start of the miniseries to its end, it is clear that Elizabeth's main obsession is chess and it had become exceptionally relentless due to her drug addiction and obsession of winning over anything else. However, when she is finally free from the restraints of the drugs, her obsession is reshaped into something new. Elizabeth continues to be infatuated with chess, but without carrying the toxic aspects of obsession which not only severed her relationship with people who cared for her, but also compromised her playing skills.

The outcome of her matches in Russia as a result of competent studying and preparation, as well as her popularity amongst the chess players and fans show clear signs of someone who is, indeed, obsessed with the game. Yet, Elizabeth has more positive feedback

from her new way of handling her obsession than before; she is now channeling this trait in a healthy way – being studious, reasonable, calmer –, using it as an advantage in her journey of achieving her life goals.

Differently from the first episode, where Elizabeth did not hold much control over how much she could play chess or, even, her own abilities, in the last one she has a bigger mastery of her game, as a clear consequence of her mastery over herself. By dealing with her addiction problems, recognizing her own weaknesses, and preparing herself properly before the games, she manages to find herself a steady position that allows her to enjoy the fullest of her love for chess.

This arc regarding her obsessiveness is cleverly closed with the very last scene, where she plays chess with strangers in the streets of Moscow. Elizabeth refuses to participate in congratulatory events of her victory, choosing to walk by herself and play with the elderly men who she saw earlier in the episode. This scene shows how her character feels burdened by empty rewards of playing chess professionally, such as meeting the president, having dinner with important people and giving ready-made statements to the press. Elizabeth shows that her passion for chess is not due to these kinds of trophies, as she proceeds to play chess simply to have fun. The ending can be linked to her games with Mr. Shaibel, where she couldn't care less for receiving dolls, but only playing for the sake of playing, not for the titles.

Elizabeth's story is concluded with her dressed up with an outfit that resembles the white queen piece of chess, providing viewers a visual signal to how she, now, has more control in her own life than she'd ever had before, and that she prevails over the obsession which once had a hold over her.

Figure 15 – Last look at Elizabeth's face, at the end of episode 7



5.2.2. STUBBORN

Asking and accepting help, trying to solve problems and embracing criticism and counsel are some of the things a stubborn character must do to start overcoming this flaw. Like the trait of obsession, Elizabeth reshapes, too, her stubbornness for her own gain as she aims for the chess world championship title.

In the first episode, we can already see that Elizabeth uses stubborn measures to have her own way at things and, in the last, as a self protection method or to maintain her values intact in situations in which people force her to pretend to have a different mindset, in other words, when she is forced to be someone she is not.

Elizabeth refuses to make statements other people prepared for her, even when the payment of her trip is at stake. This shows how she prioritizes her image and own dignity, not accepting other people to define who she is or how she thinks. This can be directly associated with the first episode, when Elizabeth is told what to do continuously – having her hairstyle, clothes, studies and routine chosen for her –, but now she takes care of how she wants people to perceive her and does not accept when someone else tries to dictate how she should be acting.

During “End Game”, when her security tells her she should give interviews even though she is tired and does not want to, Elizabeth manages the questions of reporters with confidence and sharp answers like “Will you put me on the cover?”. She also insists for the reporters to print Mr. Shaibel’s name, completely ignoring what her security asked her to tell the press. This scene also highlights how her character won’t abide by what others want her to do, rather doing everything in the exact manner she wishes to and, so, preserving her authenticity.

Elizabeth’s stubbornness reappears in a similar situation when she leaves her security in the car after he lists her an unwanted schedule, playing chess in the streets instead. This trait is also accentuated during the last match against Borgov, when her opponent offers a draw. The commentator explains that the draw is a great opportunity and that Elizabeth should accept it, but she refuses it and wins the game.

These are examples of how the trait of stubbornness is now solely used to help Elizabeth through uncomfortable situations, or when she needs to back herself up. Not only is she being her own support, but she also accepts help from her friends in preparing the last

match. The last episode makes it clear that even though Elizabeth surely can take care of herself – as she plays brilliantly through the first matches without help –, she also now has the humility of accepting advice from others and trusting the ones closest to her.

6. CONCLUSION

With the comparison of the first and last episodes of *The Queen's Gambit* miniseries, and considering *The Negative Trait Thesaurus'* arguments to how to overcome the selected negative traits of a character, it is possible to conclude that many of the elements described by Ackerman and Puglisi (2013) do appear in the Elizabeth Harmon's story as factors that help her surpass each negative trait in order to achieve her objectives in life.

It is also possible to argue that Elizabeth deals with her negative traits in two different ways: to completely overcome the flaw or to turn her flaw into a tool that will harmlessly help her achieve her goals, referencing directly the original purpose of a negative trait: to protect the character from having more hurtful experiences. In addition, recalling Glatch and Smith's highlight on overcoming negative traits as important for the outcome of the story, it is certain that this can be applied to Elizabeth, considering that surpassing her major negative traits is the key for achieving a positive result in the end of her story.

By overcoming her major flaw, addiction, Elizabeth begins the process of overcoming all others, considering her most prominent flaws acted in a domino effect from addiction into the following ones, which were intertwined with her passion for chess, thus creating the complexity of her arc of learning how to deal with each flaw. Having her life goals settled upon her career as a chess player, her flaws acted as obstacles which not only prevented her from achieving these goals, but also compromised her relationship with her own image and with the people who cared about her.

With her healing process heavily based on receiving help from friends and understanding more about her past wounds, Elizabeth works to become a better version of herself, removing flaws that inhibit her, recognizing her own values as a person and as a chess player. From someone who felt misfit due to her own history and uncommon genius, she successfully points out the lies that gave consistency for her flaws, regains control over her life and comes out victorious not only from a chess match but also from internal conflicts that accompanied her through the entire story.

Moreover, although only analyzing the beginning and conclusion of Elizabeth's story and not delving in the middle process of the development and other consequences of her flaws, it is still feasible to understand her character, considering the creators build a start-to-end circle that allows many scenes, dialogues and visual elements to be linked to each other, even though they belong to different episodes.

The outcome of Elizabeth Harmon's saga becomes, like *The Negative Trait Thesaurus* defends, compelling for spectators, due to the changing elements in the negative character's arc serving as base for the conclusion of the story. How her negative traits can be connected to her past wounds and, also, be interconnected to each other, provide complexity for the character and create an arc worth following from the beginning to the end. The set-up of Elizabeth's flaws in the first episode culminating in her victory make up an inspiring narrative that explores the importance of conquering not only a game but also herself.

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