Understanding BoJack Horseman

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Depression and joy are both antonyms of each other. Not many can find an intersection between the two, yet, one show has been able to demonstrate that the two go hand in hand—that show is the *BoJack Horseman* show. This show beautifully looks at depression and the pursuit of happiness without shame or censorship. Moreover, the BoJack Horseman show takes an unapologetic look at the many aspects of depression to show how severe and complex it can be. For some audience members, this is what makes the show so great; however, for others, this can make depression seem like an excuse for bad behavior.

To understand the influence that the BoJack Horseman show has on its audience, we will explore all the BoJack Horseman episodes and their implications. Hopefully, we will be able to answer what kind of influence this show has on people with and without depression.

**Literary Review**

The *BoJack Horseman* show debuted in April of 2014 and was created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg and illustrated by Lisa Hanawalt. This show is an adult animated Netflix series is often called a, “dramedy” or “meta-sitcom”. It features an anthropomorphic horse named BoJack who is full of self-loathing, self-sabotaging habits and problems with substance abuse. He is doing his best to make a comeback after the death of the “Full House” sitcom knock-off he once starred in called “Horsin’ Around”. BoJack is played by Will Arnett and is accompanied by his talent agent slash on-and-off girlfriend Princess Carolyn, played by Amy Sedaris, and his only true friend Todd is played by Aaron Paul.

The show’s biggest strength is the fact it is depressingly realistic. Many love the fact that, “its main character lets his friends down constantly, and they respond by spouting off bracing truths about the creeping disillusionment that characterizes adulthood” (Beery, 2016). Bob-Waksberg, during an interview, suggested that the entire point of this show is to demonstrate that life isn’t easy (Opam, 2015). Currently, there is only three seasons on Netflix, however, season four is rumored to air summer of 2017.

It is no surprise that the *BoJack* show has a 94% average audience rating on Rotten Tomatoes. Its main critique states that the show matures, “into an ambitious comedy that sensitively blends wackiness with dark, nuanced drama” (2015). Both season two and season 3 end, “with un-foreshadowed moments of radical grace that declare that changing one's life is, indeed, possible” that audience members (and myself) love (D'Addario, 2016). After hours of binging on Netflix with these characters, these moments of hope “feel good, and vital” (D'Addario, 2016).

Another positive critique of the show praises the use of animation when dealing with extremely sensitive topics and emotions. Within the series, humans interact and live with humanoid animals. Moreover, we watch the main characters go through optimistic misery season after season. Zoe Beery (2016) believed if it was not animated the, “it would be unbearable to watch a human being subjected to such hopeful suffering”. She suggests that hearing, “the endless stream of brutal observations would sound overwrought” from an actor’s mouth but from a horse, “[it] works pretty well” (Beery, 2016).

Nevertheless, the most consistent and positive critique of the *BoJack Horseman* show demonstrates admiration for the way this show merges bleakness with joy. As previously said, the creator of the show believed this was the main point of the entire series. He wanted to introduce, “this idea of the very dark and the very wacky kind of rubbing up against each other” (Opam, 2015). Due to this intersection of depression and joy, many millennials have an interesting, often love-hate, relationship with this show and BoJack. Bob-Waksberg believed that this is loved because, “they’re at the heart of where we come from” (Peikert, 2014). It makes the audience feel less alone, feel hope and feel that life, although it is hard, is possible.

*You're The Worst*, *Wilfred* and *Rick & Morty* are some shows that have a comedic style that is similar to BoJack Horsemen. Each show features self-destructive character, a dark and morbid sense of humor, and funny animal puns. *You’re the Worst* and *Rick & Morty* were both shows that were well received by the audience for it realistic yet awful characters and good sense of humor. One critic originally reported *You’re the Worst* to be a terrible comedy but later retracted his article with a single statement: “It’s way more simple: I was wrong. This is my mea culpa” (Goodman, 2015). On the other hand, *Rick & Morty* received 98% average audience score on Rotten Tomatoes and was praised by IGN for being special, clever and inventive (Schedeen, 2015). Conversely, *Wilfred* was not received as well as the others. On Metacritic, it has an average user score of 7.4/10. While some applauded its laughable moments, others hated it for its lack of witty humor or even its over usage of irony (2011).

In the end, many of the critiques I found, such as Beery’s article, agreed that the BoJack Horseman show is, “one of the wisest, most emotionally ambitious and—this is not a contradiction—spectacularly goofy series on television” (Nussbaum, 2016). Even though *BoJack* is a simple story about a humanoid horse with *several* issues, he is loved for his honest representation of life.

**The Method**

Many critics praise the *BoJack Horseman* show for its ability to magically combine depression and joy. To understand and appreciate this combination we will use a form of rhetorical analysis presented by Sellnow’s textbook called the dramatistic perspective. Doing so will enable us to comprehend some of the themes within *BoJack Horseman* and how it teaches its audience how one ought to or ought not act. Before we can analyze the show itself, we will explore the rhetorical method by defining it and analyzing other articles that utilize the dramatistic method.

Dramatism was developed by a literary theorist named Kenneth Burke. He created dramatism as a means to compare the average human life to dramas. The textbook defines the dramatistic perspective as a method that, “helps us determine the underlying motives that justify breaking various rules for living,” (Sellnow, 2010, pg. 9). Essentially, dramatism is the analysis of human motives. The main goal of this method is to understand one’s motives and whether those motives justify or oppose societal rules.

There are several articles that utilize the dramatistic perspective to analyze human motives. The first article to do so is by Edward Appel (2008) who analyzed the literary use of generic labels such as "melodrama" and "tragedy". Appel does this by first analyzing "Melodrama" and its references, then compares the range of "melodrama" to the rhetorical range of "tragedy". Next, they attempt to validate the rhetorical tragedy in the eyes of Burke through his theory and communication practices, and finally, Appel proposes a taxonomy of four rhetorical genres. Appel concludes that "tragedy" and "melodrama" are just too serious. However, using the series of classifications that they provides clarity and order by having a range of taxonomies from, "most perfectly schematized to least perfect schematized, as per Burke’s philosophy of motivation" (Appel, 2008, pg. 191).

In another article by Treva Dean (2007) they used a dramatistic approach to, “examine the ways in which print media depicted New Orleans residents in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina,” (Dean, 2007, pg. 1). Throughout this essay, Dean argued that media coverage promoted the maintenance of social class divisions and caused the dispute over FEMA to grow through a pentadic study. Dean concluded that the media was at fault for the division between the two socio-economic groups because it failed to use unifying language that could have brought the two groups together (Dean, 2007, pg. 16).

Thirdly, an article by Arnie Madsen (1994) used dramatism to analyze, “the dangers inherent in the "bureaucratic" mindset that existing power structures exhibit as they attempt to uphold the status quo,” (Madsen, 1994). They believed that there was a relationship between dramatism and argumentation that failed to be acknowledged due to a lack of communication. In Madsen’s opinion, the dramatistic perspective requires “a focus on an individual’s argumentative utterances” in order to understand their motive (Madsen, 1994). By analyzing Burke’s theory and several terms and symbols, they concluded that it is the task of a critic to evaluate the dramatistic elements of argumentation to fully understand the claims and motivation of a particular circumstance.

The final example of good dramatism in use is presented from the textbook. The unpublished manuscript from Henderson and Karen analyzed the implication of the film *The Life and Death of David Gale*. Within the manuscript, they defined several of the terms that will be used throughout the essay, then they covered two aspects (the media centered criticisms and the commonplace of televisions) to explore how the extensive coverage of violence could lead the general public to the support or oppose capital punishment. Moreover, they used a pentadic study to analyze how some of the linguistics used within the film could have certain influences on the general public. In the end, they concluded that the film does not drastically change the minds of the general public but it did accomplish its goal of starting a dialogue around the issue of capital punishment.

Each of the articles covered used a similar technique when using the dramatistic perspective. They all defined the terms and/or theory from Burke’s concept of dramatism that they were going to use. Then they analyzed everything involved with their topic as well as the topic using a pentad study. Finally, they presented a lesson learned or solution within the conclusion to be gleaned from the media.

To successfully analyze the *BoJack Horseman show* from a dramatistic perspective, I will apply all of those steps. However, within the analysis section I will also attempt to diagnosis BoJack and use the pentad while also covering the implications that the sampled media creates (Sellnow, 2010, pg. 57-59). I believe diagnosing BoJack before using the dramatistic method’s pentad will help me better comprehend the motives and reasoning behind some of BoJack’s actions and how this particular show influences the perceptions of the general public. In addition, it will help me understand how a show such as BoJack’s influences those with and without depression on a regular basis.

**Analysis**

The sad truth is that mental illness is not always accurately depicted in media. This truth can be repeatedly seen in films and shows as early as 1956 in “The Bad Seed” or in Alfred Hitchcock's classic film "Psycho”. Even in popular television dramas like “Law & Order: Special Victims Unit” and in recent films such as, “Silver Linings Playbook” where mental illness is as an excuse for poor behavior or depicted as one-dimensional. Examples such as these all influence society’s perceptions of mental illness in a harmful manner. However, in the recent years there have been shows that combat these poor depictions of mental illness. One such show is the BoJack Horseman show which dauntlessly explores all the facets of depression.

This Netflix show quickly became popular for more than just its witty humor. It is safe to say that a show as popular as BoJack Horseman has an influence as large as its audience. For this reason, it is important to ask: how does this show influence its audience’s perception of depression while considering whether or not its depiction of depression is somewhat accurate or all together flawed? To answer these questions, we will explore the different aspects of depression and how it relates to BoJack and then analyze the series using Burke’s Pentad.

**Understanding Depression**

For this analysis, it is important that we better understand the different facets of depression. Depression is often defined as a disorder which causes a person to persistently feel sad or down, yet, there are still many disagreements on whether or not depression is a mental illness or a brain disorder. However, there are no disagreements that depression always inhabits a person’s ability to perform their day to day tasks in some shape or form. Although there are several different types of depression, over “14.8 million adults suffer from major depression” (WebMD, 2005) and BoJack is no exception.

Throughout the series BoJack demonstrates several symptoms of depression. For example, some of his symptoms include: feeling worthless or guilty, trouble concentrating and trouble sleeping, and thoughts of suicide (and suicide attempts). An ordinary psychologist would also point out that BoJack frequently of exhibits self-destructive behaviors such as projection, self-sabotage and alienation—all of which can be a sign of childhood trauma and/or mental illness. BoJack’s relationship with his best friend Todd provides a clear example for all these qualities. He constantly verbally abuses him by saying he is not wanted or, more commonly, to shut up whenever he speaks. BoJack has also sabotaged that friendship more than once by preventing Todd from completing his Rock Opera (Bob-Waksberg, 2014). Regardless, it is safe to assume that BoJack has been feeling depressed for over 20 years since his depression mainly began after the failure of his sitcom, “Horsin’ Around”. Thus, his depression is persistent.

Based on his symptoms, I believe that BoJack suffers from dysthymia which is a persistent, low-grade depression (WebMD, 2005). One could think of dysthymia as a dark cloud that constantly follows you around but does not hinder them from completing their day to day tasks. Dysthymia can also be easily controlled, however, if left uncared for it can grow into a more severe form of depression. Dysthymia often goes uncared for because people try to cover it up with other things such as work or even sex; however, in BoJack’s case, he tries to hide his depression by partying, or binging on drugs and alcohol.

Some might argue that BoJack suffers from situational depression, however, I beg to differ. BoJack consistently displays these symptoms. Occasionally, there is something that causes BoJack to have a *trigger* which causes him to spiral further into his depression. There is a term for people with dysthymia who also experience situational depression and when that happens it is called double depression (WebMD, 2005). Most of the time BoJack experiences this when he speaks with his mother and in other episodes where he is confronted by the past.

**Using the Pentad**

The pentad is one of Burke’s methods for analyzing and justifying rule-breaking behavior that occurs within dramas. It contains several parts for analysis such as the act, the agents, the scene and the purpose which all help understand an agents reason for breaking societal norm (Sellnow, 2010). The Rule Breaking Act that we witness within the series is the fact that BoJack is depressed and still unhappy after he has received everything he wanted. Throughout the series BoJack’s main goal is to star in the film Secretariat and win an Oscar. Even in flashbacks of BoJack’s early childhood, Secretariat has been an integral part of his life. By season 3 he has all of this.

The agency refers to the tools, means and techniques employed to accomplish the act (Sellnow, 2010). Majority of the tools used can be found in episode 10 of season 3. For one, you have the Oscar nomination, which puts BoJack close to his goal of an Oscar—the main goal after the completion of the film. Secondly, you have his reaction right after he receives the news, he says, “I feel...I feel…. I feel….. the same,” (Bob-Waksberg, 2014). Next, you have the suicide attempt which clearly demonstrates that he is in the same mindset even though he has gotten what he has wanted.

Why would BoJack still be unhappy after accomplishing his goals? This question refers to the purpose which is the explanation offered as to why the agents engaged in the rule breaking behavior. In BoJack’s eyes, he would argue that it’s just who he is. He is a “husk of a man” and he truly believes that nothing will make him happy. However, this can be directly attributed to his depression.

On the other hand, the purpose for his rule breaking behavior is better explained through the motive. After being portrayed as a terrible person or, in the eyes of Burke, charged as guilty, BoJack uses mortification to absolve his guilt. Mortification is when the agent punishes himself to deal with the guilt for wrongdoing (Sellnow, 2010). This is seen repeatedly through his self-destructive and relationship sabotaging behavior. In the earlier seasons, BoJack might argue that his wrongdoing is justified because he is following a higher calling. To Burke this would be called transcendence (Sellnow, 2010). However, BoJack consistently destroys himself and the things around him. For example, in the earlier seasons BoJack destroys Todd’s Rock Opera in order to keep Todd around or, later in season two, BoJack tries to sleep with his friend’s daughter because the friend wouldn’t sleep with him. Toward the end of season 3, Todd explains BoJack’s absolution of guilt nicely, he says, “you can’t keep doing [terrible] things and feeling quilty about it,” (Bob-Waksberg, 2014). Essentially telling BoJack that feeling guilty and punishing yourself doesn’t make it any better.

In the end, BoJack can’t help how he feels. He believes that he is destined for sadness and that he can never find happiness. He expresses this in season 2, when he says, “I keep thinking this film is my last shot at happiness,” (Bob-Waksberg, 2014). However, he constantly comes to the realization that nothing he does matters. As an audience, this is often heartbreaking because we have been with BoJack through everything. We, as an audience, relate to BoJack on a deeper, yet intimate level and even develop a sense of attachment by the end. For many, BoJack’s character is a way to self-reflect on their own lives and depression or open their eyes to the harsh realities of it (Eikenberry, 2016).

**Implications**

After analyzing BoJack’s actions, it is clear to see that BoJack is an extremely sensitive, yet complex character. BoJack’s negative persona and dialogue affects its audiences on a moral and action-based level. From a moral perspective, BoJack teaches those with depression how to *not* act while influencing audience members without depression persception of what depression looks like. However, through BoJack’s negative actions, he encourages his audience members to take positive actions.

As previously stated, BoJack’s character can be a way for one to self-reflect on their life and actions. For many audiences members with depression, it can be a way for to recognize self-sabotaging behavior and decide to put a stop to it. On the other hand, it can be a way for them to prevent self-sabotage behavior by connecting with BoJack (and possibly seeing oneself as BoJack). An audience member can decide through BoJack rule-breaking behavior to never become that way. However, BoJack’s behavior also influences audience members without depression. I believe for those who have never experienced depression in some shape or form might gain a negative perception of what it looks like to have or be around someone who has depression. Even though BoJack is a good example of depression, it’s important that the audience recognizes that BoJack is dramatized and does not represent all people with dysthymia or situational depression.

Through BoJack, the audience is also influenced and encouraged to take positive actions through BoJack’s rule-breaking behavior. I believe that BoJack encourages people with depression to seek help whether it’s through family or professional means so that one does not become like BoJack. Overall, BoJack encourages everyone to have a better understanding of mental illnesses to prevent people from becoming like BoJack.

Even though BoJack is a simple anthropometric horse, he influences and, in some cases, helps his audience. For many, binging this Netflix series helps them feel less alone and more accepted because this show does an excellent job of telling the audience how complicated and difficult having depression can be. It clearly influences audience members with and without depression by teaching them how to not act within society through BoJack’s self-sabotaging and self-destructive behavior. Best of all, his actions encourage all audience members to take action by seeking help (if need be) and educating themselves about mental illness. Personally, I look forward to seeing how BoJack progresses as a character in the fourth season come April.

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