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More Man Than a Horse?

***BoJack Horseman* and its Subversion of Sitcom Conventions
in Search of Realism**

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ABSTRACT

As the television market diversifies and fragments, TV show creators in the postmodern era have been pushed to subvert the conventions of various genres to stay relevant. This research uses a combination of genre analysis and close content analysis of the Netflix original series BoJack Horseman to identify several conventions of the situation comedy genre that the show subverts. Through an unconventional handling of irony, tone, unique form, and subject matter, BoJack Horseman manages to transcend generic expectations by portraying a dark, realistic worldview. Contrary to the traditional view of the situation comedy as a media oriented towards escapism, BoJack Horseman's realistic outlook serves as a way for viewers to confront painful emotions and better understand how to deal with them.

INTRODUCTION

Sitting on a rooftop looking out at the Los Angeles night sky, BoJack Horseman and longtime friend Diane Nguyen reflect on their long and complicated history and the fact that this may very well be the last time either of them see each other. BoJack tells a story from his recent time in prison, and concludes with the observation, "Well what are you gonna do? Life's a bitch and then you die, right?" To which Diane responds, "Sometimes. Sometimes life's a bitch and then you keep on living," and so concludes the last episode of a six-season long Netflix original series in a way so raw and vulnerable that no one could've predicted it when the series aired in 2014. At first glance, *BoJack Horseman* is another grain of sand on the beach. Its arrival in the online streaming world marked the umpteenth time a show had been produced featuring an older man who does bad things; it was yet another in a long line of adult animated sitcoms featuring dark, meta humor and a deeply flawed protagonist. And yet, through a commitment to originality the show defies expectations by refusing to conform to any of its usual categorizations.

Created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg and released on Netflix on August 22, 2014, *BoJack Horseman* is an animated comedy-drama that takes place in a fictionalized version of Hollywood (known in the show as “Hollywoo” after the “D” in the Hollywood sign is stolen) where humans and anthropomorphic animals co-exist. BoJack Horseman (Will Arnett) is a washed-up horse actor who found fame in a popular ‘90s sitcom called “Horsin’ Around.” Now struggling with the pressures of fame, depression, addiction, childhood trauma, and maintaining relationships with those he’s closest to, BoJack finds himself in difficult situations often and nearly always makes the wrong decision. Other major characters include his friend/enemy/rival Mr. Peanutbutter (Paul F. Thompson), who often serves as an upbeat foil to BoJack’s toxic negativity. Mr. Peanutbutter is the star of his own ‘90s sitcom, a rip-off of “Horsin’ Around” called “Mr. Peanutbutter’s House.” He marries a writer named Diane Nguyen (Allison Brie), who ghost-writes BoJack’s memoir in season one. Diane serves as a moral center to the show, fighting for justice and female equality throughout the series and constantly offering BoJack advice or support despite the rocky relationship between the two. Joining them are BoJack’s wacky roommate Todd (Aaron Paul), and agent/manager/on-again-off-again girlfriend Princess Carolyn (Amy Sedaris).

The show has drawn attention for pushing the envelope of what a sitcom is and what it can accomplish. It explores dramatic themes and dark subject matter that sitcoms of the past have steered away from, and in doing so carved its own place in television history. It is not the first animated drama; Japanese anime has explored dramatic themes and a few modern shows such as *Steven Universe* have done similarly, but in the limited scope of western adult programming, *BoJack Horseman* stands out. It has been nominated for two Primetime Emmy Awards, and won a number of others, including multiple Annie Awards, Critics Choice Television Awards, and

Writers Guild of America Awards. Despite this positive critical reception, the show has received little scholarly attention for how much it has accomplished. It turns the animated sitcom genre on its head by subverting or parodying many elements of traditional television programs. By experimenting with form, style, structure, and tone, *BoJack Horseman* cements itself as a show to be watched for more than just enjoyment. The show has been lauded for its vulnerable and emotionally hard-hitting portrayal of life in the modern world. Unlike many of its predecessors, *BoJack Horseman* employs a *serialized narrative*, meaning that episodes exist on a long timeline rather than self-contained loops. This is important because central to the show's philosophy and a major derailing from the status quo of conventional sitcoms is that in BoJack's universe and ours, there are no happy endings. Characters live their lives as a series of moments in a constant battle to keep moving forward. Along the way they encounter deep sorrow, fear, joy, betrayal, and a host of other human emotions. Through these tender emotional moments, audiences have found real catharsis - whether these human emotions were being felt by actual humans or anthropomorphized animals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For as long as sitcoms have existed, there has been scholarship covering them. America's favorite genre presented on its favorite medium has been endlessly talked about by fans, critics and scholars who debate what makes a show a sitcom and what makes a few special sitcoms stand out. Despite all the discussion, scholars can never seem to agree on a constant and comprehensive definition of the sitcom genre itself. In 1985 Larry Mintz offered his own definition:

A half-hour series focused on episodes involving recurrent characters within the same premise. That is, each week we encounter the same people in essentially the same setting. The episodes are finite; what happens in each episode is generally closed off, explained, reconciled, solved at the end of the half hour . . . The most important feature of sitcom structure is the cyclical nature of the normalcy of the premises undergoing stress or threat of change and becoming restored. (qtd. in Mills, 28)

Influential author Brett Mills explores this definition of the “classic” or “traditional” sitcom but goes on to point out its limitations in describing today’s postmodern television programs. Like most cultural forms, the conventions, styles, and structure of sitcoms are not set in stone. These kinds of shows have evolved so much over time that the family-oriented warmodies of the 1960s and ‘70s (*The Brady Bunch*, *The Beverly Hillbillies*, *The Andy Griffith Show*) possess only a slight resemblance to the ironic, nihilistic comedies of the postmodern era (*The Office*, *Seinfeld*, *Friends*).

To say that *BoJack Horseman* is the only sitcom to break away from longstanding conventions of the genre would be misguided and incorrect. Most modern sitcoms do, as will be explored later. Laying out how shows such as *The Office*, *Friends*, and *Seinfeld* have in the past carved out their own niches by playing with style, narrative structure, and form will highlight how *BoJack Horseman* does these things to a greater degree, with a different purpose, and to a different effect.

Sitcoms are, by nature, hard to define due to the evolution they’ve undergone. In looking at the sitcom genre specifically, it may be worth exploring what genres are and encapsulate. Paul Attallah offers a definition of genre: “*Genres are ways of organizing, regulating, and hierarchizing themes, signifiers, and discourses*” (96). Different forms of televisual storytelling

prioritize different values, forms, and stories. Documentaries focus on factual research and interviews, captivating visuals, relevant social problems. Game shows prioritize spectacle, consumerism, celebrity, and suspense. Rather cynically, Attalah claims that the representative constituents of sitcoms are so varied that their overarching genre tends to seem useless. Still, he says that if we contextualize genres within the “institution” of television, we can gain an insight into their relevance. Sitcoms prioritize their comedic elements, a sentiment that Mills echoes.

In an effort to define the sitcom genre in as certain terms as possible, Attallah discusses how it is a “narrative necessity of situation comedy that the ‘situation’ remain unchanged” (107). He is referring to the tendency of sitcom episodes to start and end in a state of normalcy; any conflict that arises early to mid-episode is quickly resolved and everyone returns to feeling happy (or in darker shows, at least back to the non-heightened emotional state of the beginning). Suggesting that the cyclical and never-ending nature of most sitcoms is essential to the genre misses the mark, as is seen by the immense narrative arc seen in *BoJack Horseman*. The past not only has real consequences in the show’s present, but actions and events in earlier episodes have tangible effects in later ones. *BoJack Horseman* is not the first show to put emphasis on character growth and multi-episodic story arcs. Gradually at first, and then with rapid development following the airing of Jerry Seinfeld’s massively influential show *Seinfeld*, sitcoms took a turn away from the conventions of old and toward more socially relevant, edgy, ironic, postmodern themes.

Judy Kutulas notes that sitcoms have historically broken away from conventions little by little, with each new show changing the formula or playing with style just a little bit. In 1970 *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* “grafted the edifice of the family sitcom onto the workplace, where it has mostly stayed ever since” (1173). Later sitcoms began to reject circular harmony (the idea

that the original state of normalcy is “disrupted by selfishness or insensitivity that ends with the restoration of harmony”) and feature more complex plots than the simple two-act structure of *The Dick Van Dyke Show* or *I Love Lucy* (Kutulas 1174). B and C plots became common elements, weaving two or more unrelated sequences of events to a common thematic conclusion.

Attalah and Kutulas both point to *Seinfeld* as the premier example of a show that purposefully defied and parodied the conventions of sitcoms and thus changed the genre forever. *Seinfeld* stands as an example of what Attalah would call a “relevant sitcom,” Kutulas a “literate sitcom,” and still others a “postmodern” one. All alluded to the new “mode of comedy” that the show pioneered, categorized by an altering of characters, plot, and subject. *Seinfeld* is a show touted as being “about nothing,” in reference to its focus on life’s banalities rather than the misadventures of an army squadron in *M*A*S*H* or the show business dreams of a New York housewife in *I Love Lucy*. Its characters are not family or coworkers, but rather live in the same building and are too self-absorbed to be considered a “constructed family” as is the case in *Friends*.

1994’s *Friends* took the sitcom genre another step forward. Kutulas explains how “flashbacks, dialogue, and plot points” gave viewers enough information to “piece together a complex understanding of the Friends’ personalities, including the childhood traumas that shaped them” (1177). Origin stories were explored for each main character in alternative storyline episodes, an uncommon trope before *Friends* but one that has been adopted by a few in modern times, *BoJack Horseman* included.

Attallah claims that the family is the primary vehicle for the sitcom’s narrative, and for most shows this holds true. Whether real families or the constructed ones of *Friends* or *The Office*, family members and close friends or coworkers are the conventional focus of

sitcoms. *BoJack Horseman* is a notable exception to this generalization, insofar as the titular character has a very dysfunctional relationship with family and close friends, and navigating these relationships is a major obstacle for him. BoJack is often alone and deals with things alone, even when people are willing to lend a helping hand. The main cast is made up of BoJack's friends and coworkers, yet it still doesn't quite fit in with workplace sitcoms such as *The Office* or *Arrested Development* since *BoJack Horseman*'s characters merely work in the same industry rather than for the same company or organization. This imposed distance prevents them from forming a unit that could be considered a constructed family.

Such a bold departure from the structural norm could only be palatable in a postmodern sitcom, the constituents of which have developed a darker, more ironic or even nihilistic tone. Whereas family and family values took center stage during the sitcom's early stages, as the genre has evolved, shows have been given license to play with theme and content. With the rise of the postmodernist movement in the 90s, media forms embraced an attitude of irony, irreverence, and distrust of tradition. Eric Detweiler explains how irony came to be a staple of television comedy, and how it can operate differently in various sitcoms yet remain present in some form. In *The Office*, Jim's sideward glances at the camera are ironic due to the mockumentary form of the show, as Jim can break the fourth wall in order to let the audience know he's "in" on the joke. "The humor of the scene stems in large part from the fact that the characters are not in on a joke that the episode's audience gets," Detweiler says (728). Characters remain oblivious to the absurdity of the line they've just spoken, and that's funny; when there's a select few who do understand and they directly address the audience, irony is used to heighten and explore the humor. Detweiler argues that *Seinfeld* uses irony in a different way than *The Office*. In *Seinfeld*, it is used as a "nihilistic tool." As if to say, "there is no escaping life's banalities and miseries, so

we may as well make fun of our hopelessness,” the show “engages in a self-reflective critique of the sitcom itself” (729). *BoJack Horseman*, as will be detailed later, is not afraid to make a stand on large societal issues, yet it remains humorous, ironic, and satirical in its portrayal. Like much of what has been outlined thus far, a common theme in this research is how *BoJack Horseman* employs similar techniques to subvert and parody genre as other shows that have come before, with a different purpose and outcome.

Detweiler argues that much of *Seinfeld* and *The Office*'s success in using irony came from the fact that jokes rely on, as David Foster Wallace puts it, “involution, self-reference, meta-television. It is in-joke within in-joke” (qtd. in Detweiler, 728). This is in reference to the importance of intertextuality to new sitcoms, a technique whereby other texts are mentioned or parodied for comedic or dramatic effect. Intertextuality is further explored by Kelly L. Richardson in her analysis of *South Park*. Looking at the success of *South Park* as the quintessential modern animated sitcom, Richardson notes that a keen awareness of the media landscape in which texts exist is key to those texts staying relevant. She notes that by not only referencing but incorporating aspects of other competing shows, the comedy of *South Park* is enhanced.

Does *BoJack Horseman* rely on self-referential humor and intertextuality? If the show is fourth wall-breaking and suggests a keen awareness of its identity as a Netflix program, it will surely put it into Kutulas' category of “literate sitcoms.” If this is indeed the case, it would seem to invalidate the claim that *BoJack Horseman* is radically different than any sitcom that has come before it. Based on a “preliminary soak” in the material, *BoJack Horseman* does seem to be a bold departure from other TV shows, even those produced by and distributed on online streaming services. Upon closer study, it becomes clear that *BoJack Horseman* does not operate

in such a vacuum. It takes inspiration from and closely resembles various conventions of other shows. The question then is not just *what style, structure, and narrative techniques is the show using that others are not*, but also *when the show does build on preconceived conventions, how does the degree and intent of these choices set them apart?*

South Park, The Simpsons, BoJack Horseman, and other animated programs are in a unique position to play with sitcom form and structure due to the freedom that animation allows. Characters can go anywhere and do anything in animated sitcoms without the need to construct expensive physical sets on a short timeframe. Holly Randell-Moon and Arthur J. Randell examine the aesthetics of contemporary animated sitcoms in the context of the irreverent spy comedy-drama *Archer*. They note that “despite the level of technical and aesthetic proficiency involved in the creation of animated television, and perhaps due in part to the medium’s beginnings and concentration in children’s programming, it is generally perceived to be less ‘serious’ than its live-action counterpart” (136). This stigma of unworthiness limits the amount of scholarship on animated sitcoms, and this, combined with the series’ novelty, likely explains the complete lack of literature focused specifically on *BoJack Horseman*.

Randell-Moon and Randell examine how animated programs can use quick visual gags and integrated “Easter-egg” self-references to their comedic benefit. This visual economy combined with snappy dialogue that can be easily edited to overlap furthers the humor of the show. Incorporating visual humor is an important part of postmodern animated TV shows, but few are as willing to take full advantage of the freeing nature of animation as *BoJack Horseman*. *BoJack Horseman* takes visual gags to the next level by making the gags carry narrative relevance and introduce serious dramatic themes. It plays with form by switching art styles to illustrate characters’ thought processes and uses flashbacks and memories to frame episodes in a

unique way. The show breaks convention to a greater degree than other shows – it fleshes out character and narrative arcs to the extreme (over many episodes or even seasons), plays with form in ways unheard of in television history, uses humor techniques in a way that elevates them past one-off gags and into dramatic relevance, and incorporates darker subject matter than many shows would dare. Further research will show what effect these subversions of convention have on the show as a whole. This research will seek to answer the question:

How does the style and structure of BoJack Horseman parody and subvert the conventions of television sitcoms? How does the degree and intent of these choices elevate the show such that it no longer fits the standard sitcom genre?

METHODS

BoJack Horseman pushes boundaries with the form, narrative structure, and subject matter of sitcoms. For this research, I closely watched 12 episodes of *BoJack Horseman*, taking careful note of the stylistic choices being made. Like many television programs, *BoJack Horseman* took some time to find its footing as the creators experimented with where they wanted the show to go and how far they wanted to push the envelope. As a result, I have elected not to study any episodes from the first season. Doing so will ensure that the show is represented at its fullest potential. After familiarizing myself with the series, I selected episodes that I thought would highlight the unique narrative forms, subject matter, and themes that the show explores.

Ranker is a review aggregate website that allows fans to rank their favorite TV show episodes, movies, songs, sports teams and more. Though not backed by professional critics, the 627 votes ranking all 76 episodes of *BoJack Horseman* were still a useful reference when

selecting episodes to study. The top four episodes are what I have deemed “special episodes,” because they are such radical experiments in form and style. These special episodes include: S3: E4, “A Fish Out of Water,” in which BoJack takes a trip underwater to attend the Pacific Ocean Film Festival. Most of this episode takes place without a single line of dialogue being spoken. S4: E9, “Ruthie,” presents a particularly bad day for Princess Carolyn as a flashback, as narrated by her fictional great-great-granddaughter Ruthie for a school project far in the future. This was not one of the top four episodes on *Ranker*, but I feel its structure in framing the episode around a future relative telling a story is unique enough to be included with the other special episodes. S4: E11, “Time’s Arrow,” the No. 1 ranked episode on *Ranker*, details Beatrice Horseman’s backstory and her present struggle with dementia. This episode takes full advantage of the animated sitcom medium to explore how time and space can seem warp and blend for people with this illness. S5: E6, “Free Churro,” is an episode in which, for nearly the full 25-minute run time, BoJack delivers a eulogy for his mother in one continuous monologue. This episode landed the show a Primetime Emmy Award nomination in 2019. Lastly is S6: E15, “The View from Halfway Down,” in which after breaking into his old home in a drunken stupor BoJack falls into a pool and almost drowns. The episode is a vision featuring all BoJack’s deceased loved ones that plays in his unconscious mind as his body begins to drown. BoJack must face his own mortality, the meaning of happiness and a meaningful life, and the ramifications of all his past actions, a fate very few sitcom protagonists ever face.

Seven other episodes were selected from the top 40 as ranked on *Ranker*. I chose episodes to study based on a familiarization with the entire series, and then selected episodes that would best illustrate the show’s ability to subvert conventions, such as irony, form, tone, or theme. Twelve episodes was a reasonable number given the time frame, and that number made

for a fairly even division of episodes into categories based on how they broke convention. Five episodes primarily play with form, four with narrative, and three with content. When watching these episodes, I consulted a schematic (*See Figure 1 below*) developed by researchers Jennifer Juckel, Steven Bellman and Duane Varan which provides a typology of humor techniques as employed by contemporary sitcoms. The categories they list have been adapted from those

Table 1: Definitions of techniques used in the new sitcom humor typology.

Humor Technique	Short Description
Absurdity	Nonsense, a situation that goes against all logical rules
Allusion	Indirect reference
Caught out	Unexpectedly get caught while wrongdoing or saying something reprehensible
Clumsiness	Lacking dexterity or grace
Coincidence	A coincidental and unexpected occurrence
Conceptual surprise	Misleading the audience by means of a sudden unexpected change of concept
Condescension	Displaying arrogance by patronizing those considered inferior
Deceitful behavior	Being deliberately misleading, concealing or distorting the truth
Irony	Saying one thing and meaning something else or exactly the opposite of what you're saying
Malicious pleasure	Taking pleasure in other people's misfortune; victim humor
Misunderstanding	Misinterpreting a situation
Outwitting	Outsmarting someone or the establishment
Parody	Imitating a style or a genre of literature or other media
Peculiar face	Making a funny face, grimace
Peculiar music	Funny, unusual music (when not as part of program structure)
Pun	Playing with the meaning of words
Repartee	Verbal banter, usually in a witty dialogue
Repulsive behavior	Offensive, aversive, disgusting behavior
Ridicule	Making a fool of someone, verbally or nonverbally
Rigidity	Someone who thinks along straight lines, who is conservative and inflexible
Self-deprecation	Expressing something negative about oneself
Wit	Ingenious humor

Figure 1: "A Typology of Humor," from Juckel et al., pg. 6

outlined by theorists Peter Berger and Buijzen and Valkenburg. Certain techniques were combined, added, deleted, or adjusted in order to better suit the sitcom genre.

In consulting their guidelines, I was looking for instances where *BoJack Horseman* conforms with the traditional techniques of television comedy. Beyond this, I was more concerned with how the show develops the basic tropes like self-deprecation, irony, and absurdity into something more, and even parodies them sometimes. For example, the show often uses repartee (i.e. witty banter) for the sake of the verbal gag, but also to develop an absurdist

plot line. A convoluted alliterative sentence is funny, but a plot point revolving around Todd Chavez being asked to “join Courtney Portnoy for a scorched soy porterhouse pork four-courser at Koi” as a publicity stunt is even funnier. True to the show’s grounding in the drama genre, when this publicity stunt falls apart and we glimpse Todd’s inner vulnerability due to his newly discovered asexuality, a cheap one-liner becomes a narrative vehicle and then a source of emotional catharsis.

In watching the selected episodes, I took detailed notes and was careful to mark down instances where the show plays with irony, form, tone, theme and subject matter. Instances of unique form include dream sequences, musical numbers, lack of spoken dialogue, memories and flashbacks, and unique framing. Tonal subversions include instances where absurdism, conventional TV tropes, and self-referential humor are used in service of a darker tone than is usually seen in sitcoms. I also took note of the way *BoJack Horseman* tackled social issues such as abortion, celebrity sexual assault, suicide, and mental health in a respectful yet humorous way. In reviewing my notes, I sought patterns and drew conclusions as to the effect that such subversions of sitcom conventions have. *Seinfeld* broke conventions in order to paint a nihilistic view of the human condition, *Friends* did it to explore the consequences of our past on our day to day actions. I compared my notes to my knowledge of contemporary sitcoms to see to what degree *BoJack Horseman* carves its own place in sitcom history, why it does so, and to what effect.

ANALYSIS

On the surface, *BoJack Horseman* is just another adult animated cartoon that just happens to be about a talking horse. But underneath all the absurdity of the premise, the animal puns, the

cheap gags, the witty alliterative banter, is something darker. *BoJack Horseman* is a sitcom, yes, but in its later seasons especially, it leans into its categorization as a drama more heavily. In studying just a few episodes of the show I've noticed how exactly the show breaks away from conventions that have held sitcoms stagnant for years. The effect that these subversions have is to ground the show in a deeper sense of realism, which is ironic considering its nature as an animated satire about anthropomorphic animals.

1. Irony

a. Classic Irony with a Relevant Twist

Juckel notes the humor techniques of conceptual surprise and irony being at play in the sitcom genre, and *BoJack Horseman* elevates these techniques beyond one-off gags. The ironic humor stems from the absurdity of the jokes used, and the characters being oblivious to their own absurdity. This function of irony is remarkably similar to that in shows like *The Office* as Detweiler would point out, but in *BoJack Horseman* there's something deeper going on. In S2: E7 "Hank After Dark," '90s sitcom star Mr. Peanutbutter (a golden retriever) is about to meet with legendary late-night talk show host Hank Hippopopalous, who is in the midst of a sexual assault scandal. Mr. Peanutbutter's friend and business partner Todd informs him that he "can't meet his hero on an empty stomach" and runs away to get him a sandwich. This mixing of aphorisms (i.e. "don't meet your heroes" being combined with "no man can be wise on an empty stomach") seems to just be Todd being his witless, comically oblivious self, but the throw-away line ironically reveals the darker theme at play throughout the entire episode. Hank Hippopopalous' allegations are a clear allusion to the Bill Cosby rape accusations, and just like his real-world counterpart, Hippopopalous faces no real backlash for his actions due to his celebrity status. Todd messing up the saying "don't meet your heroes" means that he is missing

the point – Hippopopalous is a bad man and is not to be messed with whether one has eaten or not. The mix-up highlights many of the show's characters' blindness of the fact that the heroes of the entertainment industry are not the infallible gods we paint them to be. It is representative of the real world outside the show that misses the point in celebrity sexual assault cases due to the obscuring nature of the star's fame and talent. Diane is the one character that sees through this veil, and her moral compass demands she makes a stand. She goes on the news to fight for justice, and through her actions the show makes a point about the importance of speaking up for the truth in celebrity sexual assault cases in the face of an industry that punishes those who do so.

In S5 E10: "Head in the Clouds," Diane is confronting BoJack for not putting in an effort to change his ways. BoJack goes on a long tirade about how guilty he feels for hurting so many people throughout his life, and claims that he is the one who has "suffered the most because of the actions of BoJack Horseman." Diane is upset by this and responds "that's been really hard for you, the main character in this story." In such a dramatic moment the humor of this ironic statement is somewhat lost, but the reason the statement is ironic in the first place still holds. BoJack is literally the main character in a story, the story the audience is watching. But within universe, he's just another piece in the puzzle. We often live our lives as if we *are* the protagonists in a movie or TV show, always prioritizing our own needs, thoughts, and perspectives, but that's simply not the case. BoJack knows he's hurt people; he openly acknowledges this fact. But if he realized just how much he's hurt people - if he saw how much Sara Lynn's death, and Herb Kazaz's firing, and his own betrayal of the Carson family has hurt them - he would work harder to change his ways. And ultimately, he does. He goes to rehab. But those things loom over him throughout the entire series and can never go away. He has to live with them, but even that doesn't make him the real victim. This show uses a quick ironic line

from Diane to point out the ramifications of allowing bad Hollywood men to adopt a victim mentality and stay in the right in both their own eyes and the eyes of the public.

b. Reversion

Irony also appears in the show in the form of quick reversions or rebuttals, when a character says or does one thing and then immediately says or does the opposite. *Modern Family* employs this technique to derive most of its humor, incorporating direct address through camera testimonials and then cutting to a situation opposite of what that character has just said. *BoJack Horseman* is unique in that it takes place in the entertainment industry in Hollywood, and therefore often uses ironic rebuttal to make a statement about the inauthenticity of Hollywood media. The entertainment industry is famous for quickly changing its stance on issues and for putting on a “façade” during public address to mask more controversial opinions. In “Hank After Dark,” Princess Carolyn follows Diane around *Manatee Fair* headquarters (an animal pun on *Vanity Fair*) as Diane tries to pitch her takedown piece on Hippopopolous. Princess Carolyn is supportive of Diane up to a point, but just as she’s saying “we women have to stick together,” she gets distracted by a passing fruit plate. The result is an ironic twist, but one which gets to deeper issues of women not having other women’s backs when fighting against patriarchal oppression, and the media cycle being quick to move on from “hot-button” social topics without proper resolution. The latter is illustrated at the end of the same episode when a story about Kanye West disliking Thin Mints prompts news anchor whale Tom Jumbo-Grumbo to announce, “Tis is the only thing I care about now!” A story about sexual assault that deserved more pressing coverage wraps up insufficiently because the media is distracted by frivolous issues. Other ironic inversions follow a similar format. In S3: E4 “Fish Out of Water,” BoJack complains to Princess Carolyn about horses being portrayed as unquestioningly obedient in a film and then replies “if you say so” in agreement with her command. The show uses irony to

introduce a thematic tension between the media and the public while remaining humorous, highlighting mainstream society's inability to deal with complex social issues. In this way, the show's creators bring the tone to a darker, more serious place.

c. Dark Subject Matter as an Ironic Device

BoJack Horseman plays with subject matter by tackling tough content that other shows won't and doing so with respect and profound insight. Celebrity sexual assault, mass shootings, Hollywood whitewashing, fracking, and abortion are all major plot points throughout the series. One could argue that addressing such themes in a comedy lessens their perception as serious issues. This has been the argument against dark humor in general since it became a widely used technique, especially in the postmodern era. *BoJack Horseman* defends itself in two ways. First, the show is a comedy-drama, not just a comedy, and it has leaned heavily into the drama portion of that categorization even since the beginning. As the seasons progressed this tendency only increased, as BoJack continues to deal with the consequences of all his past actions combined. Secondly, in a scene from "Brrap Brrap Pew Pew" (named after teen dolphin rapper Sextina Aquafina's hit song about her televised abortion), Diane is questioning whether the titular song makes light of a hotly debated issue like abortion. A woman in the waiting room of the abortion clinic assures Diane that "getting an abortion is scary...when you can joke about it, it makes it less scary." In this way, the writers are justifying their use of dark humor throughout the series, and they are proven correct as thousands of fans have reached out to the show's creators and expressed their gratitude in giving them the vocabulary and confidence to talk about these issues.

As will be seen through all forms of convention subversion, *BoJack Horseman* aims to ground the show in a deeper sense of realism. By constantly showing the sides of life that are messy, confusing, saddening, and unattractive – sides that the warmedies of the '60s and '70s generally strayed away from and that postmodern shows are only dipping their toes into –

BoJack Horseman manages to present a portrayal of life that's washed free of sugar-coating. As mentioned before, the show is animated and has an absurdist premise, so it is ironic that it should pursue realism to this degree. Furthermore, the show finds irony in that it is a product of the entertainment industry, the very thing it parodies, which is famous for its glamorization of spectacle and novelty over depth of substance.

2. Tone

a. Absurdism as a Tonal Vehicle

BoJack Horseman uses humor in a way not commonly seen: to further the dramatic tone of the show. Jokes are absurdist, cheesy, and sometimes cliché, but they are used to further a message. They are often effective not in spite of their absurdity, but because of it. In "Fish Out of Water," BoJack is attempting to apologize to Kelsey Jannings, a former director who was fired as a result of actions he convinced her to take. He is unable to do so because he's suddenly swept up by a passing school of sardines and shuttled into a bus. This absurd scenario leads to the punchline of being packed in "like sardines" and unable to escape the bus, but it leads to BoJack being unable to make amends with the Kelsey, and this permanently ruins his relationship with her. It makes a statement about how in life, apologies are often messy and difficult and must be dealt with while one has the chance or else one risks missing the opportunity forever. *BoJack Horseman* is unlike many shows with floating timelines, where events can happen that have little effect on the show's narrative as a whole as they can be "retconned" in later episodes. (That is to say, events can be reinterpreted or intentionally ignored to account for inconsistencies or allow a plot twist, thus ensuring "retroactive continuity.") In *BoJack Horseman*, every event plays a part in shaping BoJack's story. Relationships are not instantly mended at the beginning of the next

episode, and BoJack must live with this guilt just as someone would in real life, where there are no magic do-overs.

b. Parodying TV Tropes

When the show parodies well known TV tropes, it does so to great effect. One such trope is a scene featuring two characters discussing their lives while in the front seats of a car. In S3: E11 “That’s Too Much Man,” *BoJack Horseman* turns this trope on its head by having BoJack and Sarah Lynn on a bender, recklessly drunk driving his car while chatting about the immense guilt both characters feel. Later in the same episode, BoJack is trying to make amends with his former publicist, Ana Spanakopita. She’s trying to explain a deep concept to him, but he keeps blacking out and running off, as evidenced by quick cuts and BoJack’s frustrated sighs. Each time he returns, Ana restarts her story and we are met with a cliché slow zoom with a soft and slow piano or strings instrumental or choir behind it, indicating a serious, heartfelt moment. The subversion comes when the music quickly cuts with each blackout but builds to the one instance when BoJack does manage to hear the whole story and the dramatic theme can play out. The poignancy of the writing helps the visual and audio techniques feel less cliché, as Ana insightfully explains that sometimes “there are some people you can’t save, ‘cause those people will thrash and struggle and try to take you down with them.”

A popular trope in framing a TV episode is to begin and end with the same scene, or shots whose compositions mimic each other. This technique is called “bookending,” and it’s used to show how characters or situations change; given everything the audience/character has just gone through, we see the same scene again in a different light. It can also be used to show just the opposite, that despite everything they’ve gone through, some characters continue to repeat past actions. S5 E2: “The Dog Days Are Over” opens with a show of Diane hysterically crying. She’s on her way to the airport to get as far away from LA and her problems as possible. The episode

chronicles her misadventure in Vietnam trying to “find herself,” and ends with her coming back to LA to be picked up from the airport by her husband Mr. Peanutbutter who confesses that he’s waiting on Diane to finalize the divorce papers and that is seeing someone else. This triggers a flashback to a party where Diane watches him kiss this someone and triggers the hysterical crying that started the episode. This bookend is being used to show how things have irreparably changed in Diane’s life, and there’s nothing she can do about it but keep going through the motions and healing in her own way. “Time’s arrow neither stands still nor reverses. It merely keeps moving forward,” as Beatrice Horseman would point out. This sentiment combined with Diane’s decision to go to Vietnam might be indicative of show creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg’s regrets at casting white actress Allison Brie as a Vietnamese American. This choice is one that Bob-Waksberg has publicly lamented. In an interview for *Slate Magazine*, he says in reference to selecting an all-white cast, “I wish I had been paying closer attention at the time” (Kang). He goes on to say that he believes the show has in some ways been hurt by this decision. The themes of change being impossible and the necessity of forward progress in the show mirrors Bob-Waksberg’s thoughts on the issue, that he cannot change what has already been done, but he resolves to be more conscious of these kinds of decisions in the future and to avoid “white-coding” Diane out of fear or guilt in further episodes. Bookending and other techniques which reinforce the show’s narrative continuity further the message that unlike in sitcoms of the past, there is no fabled return to normalcy in real life.

A similar bookending technique is seen in S5 E10: “Head in the Clouds,” where a giant balloon version of the in-universe TV show character Philbert (played by and sharing a close resemblance to BoJack Horseman) floats over esteemed character actress Margo Martindale. The end of the episode sees Diane accidentally loose the balloon from its tethers, and as it flies away,

we get a very overt symbol of BoJack literally looming large over the people he's hurt. In this instance, the bookend is used to show how BoJack's terrible actions are cyclical and unchanging; he continues to hurt people again and again until finally taking action at the end of season five by checking into rehab.

c. Poignant Scriptwriting to Balance Lack of Closure

The show often incorporates moments when a character (often Diane, who despite her own dysfunctions serves as a moral grounding for the show) will begin a long monologue explaining something about life or the human condition. These are extremely well-written and insightful, and while other shows have their deep moments, the frequency with which they happen in *BoJack Horseman*, and their poignancy, is noteworthy. In S4: E6 "Stupid Piece of Sh*t," Diane explains why marriage is worthwhile because deep down there's a "nugget of something real and pure" even though it's based largely on promises we can never guarantee we'll keep. In "Escape from L.A.," BoJack's friend Charlotte explains that "you can't escape you," in observation that the core of your personality stems not from your surroundings or career or peers but your own choices and beliefs. These dramatic points often disrupt the logic that BoJack has been using to justify his poor choices or else provide some other emotional climax yet are usually placed towards the end of an episode. The return to a "state of normalcy" that Attalah describes is thrown out the window as there is often no resolving action to episodes. In S6 E15: "The View from Halfway Down," BoJack's unconscious mind faces mortality itself. After some fighting, he accepts the void as blackness swallows both him and the screen up, and the music ramps up to a single, blaring tone resembling a heart monitor flatlining. Through this monotonous beep, the credits role, with the viewer not entirely sure whether BoJack has lived or died. Climactic moments are either returned to at the very beginning of the next episode or left to linger as time passes and BoJack and the viewer wrestle with their consequences. The result of this tension is

not only a solidification of the implication that this show forsakes a return to normalcy, but also to further the linear nature of the narrative. Viewers are literally dragged along the course of character's lives, whether that path forges through good times, or bad.

d. Self-Referential Humor and Satire - with a Darker Tone

The show presents a satirical view of Hollywood and the entertainment industry as a whole, and it makes frequent reference to stars, movies, and production staff both past and present. In a way these in-jokes are self-referential, as the show itself is a product of the industry it parodies. *Seinfeld* makes use of self-referential jokes, but as the show is about everyday city life and not show business, it can never get quite as meta as *BoJack Horseman*'s premise allows it to be. For example, when BoJack is up for an Oscar for his performance in *Secretariat*, he meets fellow nominee Jurj Clooners, an obvious spoof of real-world actor George Clooney. Jurj explains that BoJack was never going to be seriously considered for the Academy Award, saying that his name just wasn't as well established as other more famous actors. The irony of Jurj claiming that names like "Lernererner DiCapricorn" or "Bread Poot" are "real names" in cinema comes from the fact that these names are obviously not "real" in our sense of the word. This is played for comedy, but it gets to the more serious point that it can be hard for small, independent creators to get recognized for their work in the entertainment industry. It might even be doubly self-referential if it hints at creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg's initial struggle in getting *BoJack Horseman* picked up by a major studio.

The show's creators are hyper aware of the choices they are making and sometimes point these out through character dialogue. In "That's Too Much Man," the entire episode features a structure whereby an incredibly intoxicated BoJack blacks out and the screen blurs to black and then reappears in a different setting, with BoJack confused as to the sudden transition. The implication is that time has passed but neither BoJack nor the viewer are aware of the events that

occur in this time. During one of these blackouts, BoJack experiences a flashback to his time during the production of “The BoJack Horseman Show,” a flopped in-universe sitcom. Producer Cuddlywhiskers describes the failure of a recent episode of “The BoJack Horseman Show,” saying “I was afraid your character trying heroin would be a bridge too far. And a disjointed blackout structure with a one flashback in the middle really confused our audience. And they hated all the fourth-wall breaking meta jokes.” Ironically, these techniques are the exact ones being used in that episode of *BoJack Horseman*, and in pointing them out, the show makes a meta joke. It shows that they are not afraid to experiment with style and tone like this, and they will boldly defend their choices in universe if they have to. This demands audiences look closely at what the show is doing stylistically and why, encouraging deeper engagement with the show and its themes.

3. Form

a. Playing with Time

As an animated program, *BoJack Horseman* is given license to play with form and visual style more-so than its live action predecessors. Because of its rigid chronology (the narrative is one long arc with events having great effect in episodes many seasons after they occur), the show puts deep emphasis on the theme of time. Flashbacks, dream sequences, time skips with title cards, and memories help compress or lengthen time in the show to highlight its importance. Flashback sequences are not usually visually distinct from the rest of the show (there’s no color filter, blur, or other superficial indication), but background signs, billboards, and marquees will be different to indicate the time frame, as will characters’ speech patterns and mannerisms. In the flashback to the 1994 Animal Choice Awards that opens “Hank After Dark,” Mr. Peanutbutter takes a selfie with Hippopopolous using a film camera and then remarks, “I think we got it!

We'll find out in four to six weeks.” Small details like this introduce bits of humor but also highlight the lengths the creators go to ensure continuity and stress how the past has had such a big influence on all the main characters. As explained previously, “That’s Too Much Man” uses a disjointed blackout structure, to the effect that the audience is not granted omniscience. If in this episode BoJack doesn’t get to experience events, neither does the audience. Sarah Lynn ultimately dies as a result of her bender with BoJack, and later episodes will reveal that BoJack waited to call emergency medical professionals to avoid responsibility for her death. The effect of the blackout structure in “That’s Too Much Man” is an increased sense of unease and confusion, as now both audience and character must piece together the ramifications of Sarah Lynn’s death following the bender with incomplete knowledge of the events leading up to it. By playing with form, *BoJack Horseman* not only emphasizes the importance of time in its characters’ lives but reinforces the fact that we have to deal with the messiness and consequences of life, no matter what.

b. Visual Style

While flashbacks do not change the visual style of the show, asides, memories, and thoughts are illustrated on screen using various techniques that break the style convention of the show. In “Stupid Piece of Sh*t,” BoJack is constantly struggling with his depression and anxiety, as evidenced by a voiceover representing his “inner monologue.” This voice inside his head is abusive and contradictory, and sometimes illustrated by a cutaway to a chaotic animation featuring scribbled depictions of BoJack’s thought process. These scribbles depict BoJack and his peers the way he views them (so he is shown to be more over-weight than he actually is, his mother is shown with devil horns and sharp teeth, Mr. Peanutbutter is constantly dim-witted and overly happy). The chaotic nature of these sequences is a poignant depiction of the complicated mental state of the depressed and perpetually drunk, and the art style helps it stand out as an

illustration of a thought process rather than “real” events. Mental processes are often illustrated with a paper cut-out visual style, a nod to a more tangible element of the real world than digital animation. This not only normalizes mental illness and negative thought patterns by associating it more closely with the real world than the rest of the show, but furthers the divide between real and unreal, a division to be explored later.

c. Framing

Several episodes of *BoJack Horseman* stand out in the way they frame the episode around a particular concept. The freedom that the animation medium provides allows for virtually limitless possibilities to shift the presentation style on its head. *BoJack Horseman* isn't the first to do this. *Family Guy* has seen episodes that are shot for shot parodies of the *Star Wars* films and have framed various other episodes around different time periods, settings, or character dynamics. *Rick and Morty* has explored side character backgrounds in episodes that are framed such that they feature the titular protagonists very little. The difference is that because *BoJack Horseman* is centered around such a serialized narrative, the frames are used to look at the central narrative from a different perspective rather than to abandon the main story all together for a fanciful romp.

S4: E9 “Ruthie” opens in what is clearly meant to be the distant future, as evidenced by the presence of advanced technology such as robots, hoverboards, and cybernetic body modifications. Ruthie is a supposed relative to Princess Carolyn, and the episode is framed a class presentation about a “day in the life” of her ancestor. What follows is a complete episode of *BoJack Horseman*, complete with B-plots, much to Ruthie’s teacher’s chagrin. When Ruthie explains the backstory to Princess Carolyn’s necklace, the visual style again changes to images of photorealistic cats superimposed over human bodies in photorealistic environments. This is a wildly different style to anything else seen in the show, but it makes a point. The sequence is

invalidated when the claim it makes (that Princess Carolyn's necklace was passed down through generations from the "Old Country") turns out to be false. The necklace was costume jewelry which Princess Carolyn's mother had lied about out of shame for living in poverty. This is a massive blow to Princess Carolyn, who just prior had learned that her pregnancy was no longer viable. Ironic that a sequence utilizing such realistic visuals would be used to illustrate a lie. The episode builds to the final scene where, after a day full of awful news, Princess Carolyn explains that when she feels sad, she envisions a many-times-great-granddaughter giving a presentation to her class about how great she was. This reveals that the entire premise of the episode was fake, a sentiment that BoJack Horseman expresses. It's the show's ability to feature such out of left field concepts like Ruthie while coming around again to ground it in the "real world" that sets *BoJack Horseman* apart. Princess Carolyn replies to BoJack by saying "yeah, well, it makes me feel better." Real or unreal, a lie or genuine truth, the episode is framed the way it is to drive home the point that sometimes life will beat us down and we have to take solace in whatever happiness we create for ourselves. It's BoJack's unwillingness to take responsibility for his own happiness that continues his cycle of destruction.

Other episodes use unique frames of reference in a similar way, to further the narrative from a different angle and to convey some truth about the way life is. "The Dog Days Are Over" is framed around a travel blog post that Diane is writing for the website "Girl Croosh," and through it the audience sees the importance of change and the pressures Diane's job was adding to her life. S4 E11: "Time's Arrow" follows a series of memories and flashbacks of Beatrice Horseman's adolescence and we understand how she came cold, neglectful mother she is, and how Dementia warps the perceptions of those living with it.

“Fish Out of Water” is an episode in which nearly no dialogue is spoken due to it taking place in an underwater city. Physical comedy takes center stage, and the visual style is really pushed when BoJack follows a baby seahorse that he is trying to reunite with its father into the deep sea. What follows is reminiscent of a dream sequence as BoJack and the infant bounce wordlessly along bioluminescent sea anemones to instrumental music. Without a single word spoken, we get to see BoJack in a vulnerable state, suddenly responsible for a helpless child. The tender moments he has trying to protect the seahorse are especially poignant considering he’s never learned how to be a father with his own father being neglectful and abusive his whole life. Such a bold departure in form is delightfully refreshing. The episode proves that innovative forms of storytelling can be just as effective as conventional methods. The lack of dialogue may also be a nod to the social norms surrounding the lack of communication between fathers and sons in mainstream society, which makes yet another insightful point without actually saying anything. Not many television shows have included dialogue-free episodes, and certainly not animated ones which can do so much more with that premise considering their penchant for striking visuals.

If the show proves itself being adept at wordless storytelling, then the episode that won it an Emmy nomination, S4 E6: “Free Churro,” proves that just the opposite can also be effective. “Free Churro” consists of two monologues, both delivered by BoJack’s voice actor Will Arnett. The first is a short pre-credits scene where a young BoJack is picked up from soccer practice by his lamenting father, and the second is a eulogy that spans the rest of the episode. Reviewer Alan Sepinwall writes for *Rolling Stones* that “Free Churro” is “the season’s greatest triumph,” praising the monologue as being “equal parts insightful and oblivious, poetic and self-aggrandizing.” He notes that while some live-action TV shows have attempted a similar concept

– *Underground* featured an hour-long monologue from Harriet Tubman – it goes against all unwritten rules concerning what makes for good animation. And yet it works. Eulogies are never really for the dead; they cannot hear what is being said. BoJack views the eulogy like he does most other opportunities in his life, as a chance to perform. It quickly becomes all about him and through the intimacy of a eulogy we learn much about BoJack’s character.

Form and framing are broken in a number of ways in the show, but none have held such an impact as the penultimate episode of the show, “The View from Halfway Down.” After drunkenly breaking into what used to be his house in the previous episode, BoJack arrives at what appears to be the old Sugarman place, the house of his maternal grandparents. What unfolds is a dream sequence that plays out in BoJack’s unconscious mind while his body begins to drown in his pool. The episode is jam-packed with symbolism, from the constantly shifting paintings on the wall to the mysterious black tar dripping from the roof, to BoJack’s father arriving to the dinner party in the form of his childhood idol, runner Secretariat. Research centered solely on this episode and its themes and symbols alone could fill a novel, but suffice to say that this episode is a wild leap for both animation, television, and storytelling as a whole. In his dream BoJack meets up with many of the people who were close to him that have died and the characters have a heartfelt discussion over what any of their lives meant, what makes a life well-lived, the nature of happiness and sacrifice, and ultimately, the ramifications of suicide. It’s interesting to note that all of these characters are not actually themselves in this episode, they only exist as creation of BoJack’s mind creations. They appear to him the way he envisioned them – his mother is especially quarrelsome and disapproving, his uncle Crackerjack who died in World War II is every bit as noble and selfless as his sister Beatrice painted him to be. Everything these characters say about the nature of life and death is revealing of BoJack’s own

thoughts and fears. The episode concludes with each character, BoJack included, performing some kind of act before being swallowed by “the void,” illustrated as both a doorway to pitch blackness and an oozing, sentient black tar. It is a poignant meditation on the nature of mortality and an ambitious undertaking that no sitcom has tackled in such an elucidating way before. It is compelling to watch BoJack struggle to piece together which parts of the complicated vision he’s seeing are real and which are fake, a juxtaposition he struggles with throughout the entire series. In the end his acceptance of the void’s beckoning is hauntingly beautiful in a way only *BoJack Horseman* could pull off.

4. Theme – Real vs. Unreal

Through a close watching of the show, an overarching theme surfaces which is the dichotomy between the world of the real and the world of the unreal. These two worlds are constantly in conflict and navigating between them causes trouble for all the major characters. BoJack encounters this struggle the most. The fictional world of his sitcom “Horsin’ Around” juxtaposes with his real life. His belief in the logic of sitcoms – that there can be closure, that happiness can be permanently gained by winning awards, having a family, or falling in love – keeps him on his cycle of destruction that has caused so much misery. Further contrasts exist between BoJack’s experiences and Philbert’s, his past versus his present, and drug fueled hallucinations versus real life. Diane experiences this juxtaposition between life in LA and life in Vietnam. She lives out a fantasy leading an American crewman around the city of Hanoi and letting him believe she is a native, all the while writing an article for her real American job. In other episodes she struggles to be her “real” self while married to Mr. Peanutbutter, but only in her divorce and new relationship with Guy in Chicago does she find peace.

The characters in *BoJack Horseman* all experience this duality of reality in different ways, but with a common theme. To each, reality is difficult, negative, a thing to be avoided. Through flights of fancy, dreams, and even illnesses in BoJack's mother's case, they escape reality in search of something better. They seek something that will change the way things are and make them happy. Reconnecting with an old friend Charlotte in New Mexico, visiting Vietnam to find oneself, reliving debutante balls and a past full of freedom, all of these things provide temporary relief, but then come crashing down on each of them. *BoJack Horseman* constantly brings up the divide between the real and the unreal, even through the animation style itself. The anthropomorphic characters live in an absurdist world of hand-drawn digital animation, and the show's departures in animation style play with how reality looks even more. This contrasts with the very real themes and emotions that come up and force us to reconsider the boundaries between the real and unreal. The use of this contrast comes down to showing how in our world and BoJack's, existence is hard. Life challenges us every day but we have no other choice than to live through it and do the best we can. We cannot change the way things are, nor can we fix our past actions. Beatrice Horseman repeats a phrase her mother taught her when she was a child as BoJack drives her to a nursing home, "Time's arrow neither stands still nor reverses. It merely marches forward." This is a major theme and life lesson in the show - that above all, all we can do is keep moving forward.

CONCLUSION

It would not do the show justice to say that all these subversions of generic conventions are simply there to differentiate the show from its contemporaries. This is certainly the effect, but the purpose, as previously stated, is to ground the show in a sense of realism. Life is often messy and confusing, and to portray it as otherwise would be contrary to everything the show stands

for. Through characters' ironic obliviousness towards the absurdity of their actions, *BoJack Horseman* conveys that life too can be absurd and sometimes all we can do is laugh. Through the use of dark humor, the show gives viewer an outlet to face scary things like abortion or school-shootings. Parody of classic TV tropes and witty humor take dark and serious twists. Flashbacks, framing, and departure in animation style highlight the inescapability of the past and the toll this can have on our mental states.

To lean this far into dramatic themes and tones so often could be seen as off-putting, even depressing, to viewers. The show references this when BoJack and Herb Kazzaz, director of his '90s sitcom "Horsin' Around," are discussing the prospects of the show. Herb is keenly aware why "Horsin' Around" resonates with audiences; he says, "This is a situation comedy. No one watches the show to feel feelings. Life is depressing enough already." As scholars like John Attalah and Judy Kutulas point out, early sitcoms before the postmodern movement focused on "family [and family values] as the primary vehicle" of the narrative. Uses and Gratification Theory suggests that people consume media for different purposes, and these purposes are not set in stone. Warm comedies of the 60s may have dealt with difficult themes and dramatic plot lines, but their primary purpose was escapism through comedic relief. On the contrary, *BoJack Horseman* does not prioritize its comedic interest, and instead proves itself to be the first real Western animated drama. Despite its dramatic focus, *BoJack Horseman* manages to avoid being too depressing thanks to the poignant dialogue that serves the show as a source of hope and inspiration. Through long monologues or one-liners followed by a pensive silence, the show incorporates lines of true insight to the human condition. In this way, viewers are able to go through a catharsis, feel deep and painful emotions but come out the other side feeling proud of themselves for confronting them and learning lessons better than BoJack is able to. These

moments emphasize the main usage viewers have gotten from *BoJack Horseman* – not to escape the realities of life, but to appreciate their existence, and better understand ourselves so that we're equipped to tackle them head on. *BoJack Horseman* uses and abuses the conventions of TV sitcom to accomplish this, and in this way transcends the genre to become something more.

Without complete knowledge of all of *BoJack Horseman*'s contemporaries, it's difficult to make a direct comparison of the style and structure of the show to others to see what exactly the show does that is completely unique. No media text exists in a vacuum, so while *BoJack Horseman* does find ways to play with form, tone, irony and theme, in many ways it must resemble in some way those shows that have come before it. But I can say with confidence that its purpose as a cathartic drama makes it unique among the sitcom genre. This study focused on how *BoJack Horseman* differentiates itself from other sitcoms, but further research could explore how *BoJack Horseman* builds upon the conventions laid out before it. Its unique visual style and use of animal puns factor into its lighter side, which was only marginally addressed in this study but could make for interesting research.

During his eulogy in "Free Churro," BoJack says, "All I know about being good comes from TV." This is an extremely revealing piece of his character and holds real weight when considering the show as a whole. Like BoJack, we construct our identities and the value systems based on the media we consume, even though some are more susceptible to this influence than others. If the shows consumers watch feature only surface-level issues that are magically resolved at the end of an episode, those viewers may get a skewed idea of the way real world conflict is resolved. *BoJack Horseman* stands out as quality programming that can help those that watch it understand their problems with relationships, substance abuse, work/life balance, mental illness, and a host of other problems. There is a certain risk in the fact that BoJack

himself is not a good role model to be emulated. His destructive behavior, both to himself and others has gotten a lot of people hurt. When BoJack plays a similarly destructive police detective character on the show-within-a-show *Philbert* and tries to praise the show for making people who have hurt others feel less alone, Diane confronts him by saying, “That’s not the point of *Philbert*, for guys to watch it and feel okay.” Later she follows this up with “I don’t want you, or anyone else, justifying their shitty behavior just because of the show.” This sentiment might mirror the one held by the creators of the show. They do not want viewers to watch BoJack make cataclysmic decisions that ruin the lives of others, and subsequently come to believe that any similar decisions they’ve made are acceptable. But through all the bad decisions, nearly every main character has a moment where they can help guide one another through moral ambiguity towards a path of goodness. In these moments, the poignancy of the writing ensures that viewers can also see the value of recognizing bad behavior and taking steps to correct it.

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