

Personal Issues and Struggles in Life: A Thematic analysis of Bojack Horseman

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Abstract

Bojack Horseman is a Netflix original TV-series that was first published in 2014 and aired its final season in 2020. The series addresses different societal themes, of which five will be analyzed in this thesis. The themes that were chosen are nihilism, depression, addiction, self-image, and being seen. The themes will be analyzed applying thematic analysis. Mainly this thesis will be presenting the themes through different characters' actions, thoughts, and dialogue. The main point is to show how the characters' actions bring out the reoccurring themes in the show.

The analysis of this thesis is based on the aspects of the themes that the characters establish. The titular main character, Bojack Horseman, is in the most important role in the analysis. Bojack brings out with his actions for example different symptoms of depression and their effects on his life. In addition, Bojack often suffers from existential crisis and feels that his life or existence does not have any profound meaning. Bojack also suffers from drug and alcohol addiction which causes more and more difficulties in his life. Bojack's behavior during the series often also affects other characters' lives. A flashback in the series shows how Bojack teaches the child actor Sarah Lynn that she has to do everything she can to maintain the attention of her audience. This causes Sarah Lynn to develop a drug addiction and issues with her self-image.

A character called Diane Nguyen is also an important part of the analysis. Diane struggles almost the whole series with identity issues which later lead into a nihilistic crisis when her own self-image breaks down. Nihilism is addressed through several different viewpoints: identity crisis, escapism, and the finding of meaning in one's life are all important parts of the analysis. Diane, like Bojack, attempts to find meaning to her own life and is driven into an identity crisis because of the perceived lack of meaning in her life. Diane further attempts to numb the feelings of meaninglessness with alcohol, and wallows for months in the feeling of finding everything meaningless.

The theme *being seen* addresses particularly how important it is to an individual to be recognized and accepted by others. Due to Bojack's difficult childhood, it is difficult for him to form any meaningful relationships in his personal life. However, Bojack craves the feeling of being recognized as he is. The theme addresses the humane need to form intimate relationships, and what it means to be spiritually intimate to Bojack. The theme of *being seen* is closely tied to the theme of *self-image*. Bojack often feels himself worthless and "*garbage*", as he himself puts it. Regardless, Bojack craves recognition and acceptance that he is, like others, a person worth of love.

Bojack Horseman on Netflix Original tv-sarja, joka julkaistiin ensimmäisen kerran vuonna 2014 ja jonka päätöskausi ilmestyi vuonna 2020. Sarjassa käsitellään erilaisia yhteiskunnallisia teemoja, joita viittä analysoidaan tässä tutkielmassa. Valitut teemat analyysiin ovat nihilismi, masennus, huumausaineriippuvuus, minäkuva ja nähdyksi tuleminen. Teemoja analysoidaan temaattisen analyysin keinoin. Pääasiassa tässä tutkielmassa käsitellään edellä esitettyjä teemoja eri hahmojen käytöksen, ajatusten ja puheiden kautta. Tarkoituksena on esitellä sitä, miten sarjan päähahmot tuovat esille sarjassa jatkuvasti käsiteltyjä teemoja.

Tutkielman analyysi pohjautuu pääasiassa hahmojen esille tuomiin aspekteihin teemoista. Sarjan päähenkilö, Bojack Horseman, on analyysissa tärkeimmässä osassa. Bojack tuo esille käytöksellään esimerkiksi erilaisia masennuksen oireita ja niiden vaikutuksia hänen omaan elämänsä. Lisäksi Bojack usein kärsii eksistentiaalisesta kriisistä ja kokee, ettei hänen elämällään tai olemassaolollaan ole merkitystä. Bojack kärsii myös huumausaine- ja alkoholiriippuvuudesta, mikä aiheuttaa hänen elämänsä entistä enemmän hankaluuksia. Bojackin käytös sarjan aikana vaikuttaa usein myös muihin sarjan henkilöihin. Sarjassa nähdyssä takaumassa ilmenee, että Bojack opettaa lapsinäyttelijä Sarah Lynnille, kuinka Sarah Lynnin täytyy antaa kaikkensa tyydyttääkseen yleisöään. Tästä syystä Sarah Lynn ajautuu vaikeuksiin addiktion ja minäkuvan kanssa.

Myös henkilö nimeltään Diane Nguyen on tärkeässä osassa analyysia. Diane kamppailee lähes koko sarjan ajan identiteettiongelmien parissa, jotka myös johtavat nihilistiseen kriisiin, kun hänen oma identiteettikuvansa romahtaa. Nihilismia käsitellään tutkielmassa useasta eri näkökulmasta: identiteettikriisi, eskapismi ja elämän tarkoituksen etsiminen ovat kaikki tärkeitä osia analyysia. Diane, kuten Bojack, yrittää etsiä merkitystä omaan elämänsä ja ajautuu kriisiin identiteettinsä romahduksen ja merkityksen puutteen johdosta. Diane pyrkii turruttamaan merkityksettömyyden tunteitaan alkoholilla, ja velloo kuukausia siinä tunteessa, että millään ei ole mitään merkitystä.

Nähdyksi tulemisen teemassa käsitellään eritoten sitä, kuinka tärkeää yksilölle on, että toiset näkevät hänet sellaisena kuin hän on. Bojackin hankalasta lapsuudesta johtuen hänelle on vaikeaa muodostaa läheisiä suhteita kenenkään kanssa. Kuitenkin Bojack sisimmissään haluaa tulla nähdyksi ja tunnistetuksi omana itsenään. Teemassa käsitellään inhimillistä tarvetta henkiseen läheisyyteen muiden kanssa, ja mitä merkitystä sillä läheisyydellä on etenkin Bojackille. Itsetuntoa käsittelevä teema on läheinen nähdyksi tulemisen teeman kanssa. Bojack kokee usein itsensä arvottomaksi ja ”roskaksi”, kuten hän sen itse sanoo. Kuitenkin Bojack kaipaa arvostusta ja tunnustusta siitä, että hän on, niin kuin muutkin, läheisyyden arvoinen henkilö.

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1. Introduction

Bojack Horseman is a TV-show that debuted on *Netflix*, the online streaming service, in 2014 and aired its final season in 2020. The show was created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg for Netflix Original series. Tying together comedy and drama, the show tackles some very important societal themes. It brings light to depression, addiction, sexism, racism, and many other varying issues in the society. Of these issues, this thesis focuses mainly on depression, addiction and some other additional themes introduced throughout different seasons of *Bojack Horseman*.

Bojack Horseman was specifically chosen for this thesis because of its uniqueness; being set in alternate universe in Hollywood, Los Angeles, it creates a familiar but still a little different world from ours through characters, events, and the setting in general. Introducing anthropomorphic characters in addition to human characters, *Bojack Horseman* has a unique and distinguishable style. By including many different important themes in its storytelling, *Bojack Horseman* takes a stand in social critique in its own way. Therefore, thematic analysis was chosen as the most prominent way of analysis for this thesis as it allows a case-by-case exploration of the ways in which these themes are present in the show.

This thesis looks at five different themes taken from *Bojack Horseman* and analyses them through the characters' actions and dialogue in the show. These slightly overlapping themes are only a few of important themes in the show which have been decided due to their constancy in their appearances in the show. The themes introduced in this thesis are major characteristics of the show and appear in several different ways throughout the seasons. This will be further explained in the analysis of this thesis.

1.1. Thematic Analysis and Close Reading.

Dr Nadia Anwar explains in her article *Thematic Analysis: A Helpful Method for Literary Research* that thematic analysis in analyzing literary texts emphasizes open-ended answers to questions and flexible interpretation of the data at hand (Anwar, 2018). She further demonstrates that, in thematic analysis, the themes are picked from the corpus, that is, the data set, and are then analyzed according to the interests of the researcher. Moreover, Anwar states that thematic analysis is a method that helps in identifying and analyzing specific repeated patterns in the data set.

Thematic analysis is especially suitable for this thesis, because first, the data set is vast and the analysis will benefit from analyzing specific repeated patterns, as explained above, rather than attempting to account for all the data. Secondly, because the series *Bojack Horseman* has very specific themes arising right from the beginning of the series and staying more or less similar throughout the show, their analysis will prove to be fruitful and providing insight into the show as a whole.

Another medium for analysis used in this thesis is close reading, which is a way of reading a text to uncover different layers of meaning which then lead to deep comprehension, as defined by Nancy Boyles in her article *Closing in on Close Reading*. She explains that close reading can help a reader to improve their comprehension of a text. Therefore, close reading is used as a method of analysis in this thesis to improve the quality of the analysis itself. Boyles further states that close reading goes further than only reflecting on a text: she explains that the best thinkers monitor and assess their analysis of the text (Boyles, 2012, pp. 37).

1.2. [Bojack Horseman: A Netflix Original Series](#)

Bojack Horseman is a Netflix original television series created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg, filled with dark humor and drama (*Bojack Horseman*, IMDb). It premiered in August of 2014 and aired its final episode in January of 2020. The series is based in modern day Hollywood, or as it is called in the show, *Hollywood*. Many of the characters are anthropomorphic animals of different species, which brings the show some color and humorous perspective. *Bojack Horseman* tells the story of its titular character Bojack (voiced by Will Arnett), and the series follows his struggles with substance abuse, depression, and other difficulties. The first season begins with Bojack hiring a ghost-writer called Diane Nguyen (Alison Brie) to write his memoir, and from there it follows the life of several different characters and their everyday lives. The series focuses on just a few main characters but introduces some minor characters as well.

Bojack himself is a celebrity in his 50's, having become famous through a popular sitcom called *Horsin' Around* which aired in the 1990's. The show lasted for almost ten seasons, and Bojack made his fame and fortune during that time. It is revealed that, after the show ended, Bojack dedicated his life to alcohol, drugs, and meaningless sex. Immediately, during the beginning of the very first episode, an interviewer asks Bojack what he has been doing all these years since *Horsin' Around* ended.

INTERVIEWER: *What have you been doing since the show's cancellation 18 years ago?*

BOJACK: *That's a great question, Charlie. I, uh... Uh, I... Um...¹*

From this very first scene with Bojack, the audience can already get the picture that his life has not been very active during the recent years. Earlier in the same interview, Bojack mentions that he is very drunk, and after that comment, the fact that he cannot answer a simple question about his recent years paints a clear picture of Bojack's years wasted.

Throughout the entire show, the audience is presented with the development of Bojack's character and how he handles his addiction and depression. With the company of his friends, Bojack faces different kinds of struggles varying from inebriated sprees often caused by depressive episodes and anxiety, struggling to find meaning in one's life, and the stress of being in a spotlight all the time.



Image 1 (Bojack Horseman, season 1, episode 6)

Image 1 shows how Bojack often turns to liquor when he appears to lose control over his life. It is a habit of his which is repeated in many instances throughout the show and captures the essence of Bojack's substance abuse problem. Bojack turns to alcohol or other intoxicants, like pain killers for instance, when he feels that he needs to fill something inside him that cannot be cured by other means. His line in this image, "Well, nobody knows me like you", shows how desperate Bojack is for closeness and intimacy, but feels that no-one can understand his true self accurately. In addition to feeling misunderstood, Bojack experiences failure to connect with other people on a deeper level. These and many other aspects will be further discussed in the analysis section of this thesis.

¹ "Bojack Horseman: The Bojack Horseman story, chapter one." Bojack Horseman, season 1, episode 1. 2014. Netflix.

1.2.1. Tone

The tone of the series is overall very dark. The topics discussed in the show are serious and often even controversial, rarely being addressed so directly not avoiding the gruesome truth of reality. Some of the topics include for example sexism, racism, addiction, and the #metoo-movement. The seriousness of this series is alleviated by continuous dark humor, pop-cultural references, and animal puns.

Some episodes are noticeably lighter in tone than others, giving the show some balance, but most of the episodes include portrayals of a character experiencing some deep realization of themselves or life itself. One example of the type of humor in the series would be an instance in episode 2 *“Bojack hates the troops”* of season 1, during which Bojack purchases a box of muffins even though Neal McBeal, the ‘navy seal’ had “dibs” on them. After Neal goes public on how Bojack does not appreciate the troops, Bojack exclaims on phone, in live television, that *“Yeah, I ate them all in one sitting because I have no self-control and I hate myself.”*

This whole conundrum involving the box of muffins is a great example of the humor in *Bojack Horseman*, first because the character Neal McBeal is a navy seal and an actual anthropomorphic seal character. Second, a few words from Bojack happen to cause a large commotion where everyone is certain that Bojack hates all the troops, even though that was not at all what he meant, and everyone else seems to be ignoring his opinion on whether all troops should be called heroes or if that title should be earned individually. Third, Bojack throws the above-mentioned quote enraged to the TV interviewer, but it is clear to the audience that he means it, at least to some extent.

These kinds of seemingly silly or funny misunderstandings and commotions are the main story of some episodes, but some of them involve much deeper meanings. Regarding the tone of the series, Bob-Waksberg has commented on season 2 episode 11 *“Escape from L.A.”* in the following way:

“ There’s this thing in writers’ rooms where you’re always pitching the darkest story you’re never going to do... like, ‘can you imagine if the protagonist of our show tried to sleep with a 17-year-old girl? What kind of show would do that? That would just be crazy, right? We would never — right?’ But then it became, ‘What if we are that show? What would that look like?’”
(Variety 2020)

The tone of the series gets considerably more serious as the show advances. The first season of *Bojack Horseman* has a much more humoristic standpoint, but as the story and the characters develop and progress, the storyline starts to present more serious storylines and shows increasing struggles in the characters' lives. The first season is mainly focused on Bojack's struggle with depression and anxiety, but later on other characters show more depth and personal issues as well. The tones in the later seasons are much deeper compared to the first, and even the second season.

1.2.2. Anthropomorphic Characters

In *Bojack Horseman*, many of the characters are anthropomorphic animals. This means that they are animals who have been given human-like traits, and the extent of this in the series is that all animal characters in the series have mostly human bodies only excluding their heads and some other specific characteristics. The animals are also humane in the way that they feel and experience the world just like humans do.

In the movie and TV news website, Screenrant, Kyle Gehler published an article about the meaning of anthropomorphism in *Bojack Horseman* called *Bojack Horseman: Why the Show's World Really Has Talking Animals*. Gehler claims that by using anthropomorphism in the show, the show allows the audience to see themselves in the characters better (Gehler, 2020). If the show was using only human characters instead of animals, according to Gehler, it would be much harder for the audience to relate to the issues and the show would immediately seem much darker. In other words, using animal characters allows the audience to distant themselves from the abstract characters. The creator of the show, Bob-Waksberg has stated that (as quoted in Gehler's article) "*People project themselves onto [Bojack] more easily because he is not a person, - seeing a horse somehow feels more universal, or it feels more like, 'that could be me'*", (Gehler, 2020).

Bob-Waksberg's quotation explains clearly why so many people have felt they could relate to the characters of *Bojack Horseman*. Seeing people in the same situations could make the viewer feel repulsed by the characters' actions, but as they are not real people, their actions too can be viewed in a more abstract way. Furthermore, their actions are not directly linked to the person portraying them, since there is no real face to associate the actions with. This makes the characters' actions, dialogue and feelings more universal and thus more relatable to the audience.

Lander De Koster states in his dissertation *Animals and Social Critique in Bojack Horseman* that there is a clear contrast in the level of anthropomorphism between main and secondary characters. De Koster argues that while the protagonists in the series are elaborated and designed in detail, while secondary characters are much closer to being animal than human and have animal characteristics mainly for the comedic effect (Koster, 35-36). De Koster further elaborates this phenomenon by showing a specific example from season three episode nine, “*Best thing that ever happened*”, where a dog character is working as a valet. Bojack and Princess Carolyn are arguing, and to win time for herself Princess Carolyn throws away the car keys, and the dog working as a valet runs after them like playing fetch. Through this example De Koster shows the inequality of anthropomorphic development between protagonists and secondary characters: the valet seems to have much more animalistic traits than Bojack and Princess Carolyn and behaves accordingly.

1.3. Bojack Horseman: The Character

After Bojack met his glorious years in 1990’s, he has since succumbed into depressed and alcohol-coated life. He is filled with loathing towards himself and others and is all in all full of bitterness and insecurity. Bojack struggles with mental disorders such as depression and anxiety, battles with constant existential questions about the meaning of life and happiness and spends his days binge-drinking and watching episodes of his former television show. Through his autobiography written by Diane Nguyen, he hopes to rise again into *Hollywood’s* top celebrated people. His struggles with depression and substance abuse often drive him to do the most ridiculous things and is forced to face his fears of trusting and being known by others.

Bojack is the son of Beatrice and Butterscotch Horseman. When Bojack was young, his home life was highly affected by his parents’ alcoholism and unsuccessful, unhappy marriage. Bojack grew amid fighting, loveless parents, hateful mother and depressed father, his life reeking of tobacco smoke and whiskey. Although he rose to be a famous TV-star, it is almost obvious how his parents affected his problems in the future. As mentioned, he struggles with substance abuse, and is unable to form healthy long-term relationships with other people. Even though Bojack lives together with his young and goofy roommate Todd Chavez (Aaron Paul) and has been known to date several people during the series – including his agent, Princess Carolyn (Amy Sedaris) – he is not able to fully commit to other people, and not able to let anyone get close to him.

The series, however, show a deep personal growth in Bojack's character. As the storyline progresses, Bojack is shown to fight his depression and addiction more and more. He comes to accept that he is not okay and even tries to seek help for his issues. Even if his self-help methods do not always work as he wishes, it still shows his willingness to fight. In the end of the fifth season Bojack signs in for rehabilitation program, and during the sixth and final season he overcomes his addiction and actively tries to lead a better and healthier life. Perhaps the most prominent proof of Bojack's character development is that when he is recognized on the street, during the series he goes from "hey, aren't you the Horse from Horsin' Around?" to "hey, you're Bojack Horseman!"

2. Explanation of the Analysis

This thesis will go explore several themes from the series *Bojack Horseman*, analyzing their meanings and messages to the audience. As well as the five themes identified in the series, some of the characters and their effect to the tone of the series will be assessed. Using examples from the show, the deeper meanings and distinctive features of media representation will be addressed. Using various external sources, the message and meaning behind these five selected themes will be examined. The external sources found to support this thesis' arguments are used in order to shed more light onto the issues, and moreover, to further explain the meanings behind the characters' actions and motives.

2.1. Major themes introduced

The major themes analyzed in this thesis are nihilism and existence, depression, self-image, being seen, and addiction. In this case, being seen means being acknowledged and recognized by others, and feeling important and loved in those moments. All these themes surface throughout the entire series in different ways and are brought to the viewer through different characters. Even though this is true, main points of the analysis will focus on the behaviors and actions of Bojack Horseman himself. It is possible to pick up other themes for the series too, such as sexuality, racism, and sexism, but these themes that were chosen seemed to be the most prominent and explicit, which is the reason why they were chosen for this thesis.

Depression and nihilism are possibly the most apparent themes in the series, shown constantly through Bojack's struggle with finding happiness and meaning in life. These themes, as well as the others included in this thesis, overlap in some parts, and are not considered completely individual aspects of the series. Often some examples included can show aspects of several themes at the same time, but the examples are still used to highlight one specific theme at a time to avoid confusion.

3. Main Analysis

3.1. Nihilism and Existence

Nihilism in this context means a mentality, where existence is seen senseless and meaningless (Merriam-Webster dictionary, *nihilism*). The theme of existence – especially the characters' struggle with their own existence and its meaning – is closely tied to nihilism. Bojack is seen in the series to often wonder about the meaning of his life, or whether life has any meaning at all. This is especially seen through his lines in the show: he is shown wondering his own place in the world, thinking about the meaning of existence.

In the show, Bojack escapes his life in *Hollywood*, Los Angeles two times due to a personal crisis. Both times he leaves without telling anyone about his departure and goes somewhere else only to return without finding any answers to his nihilistic questions. Through escapism, Bojack either hopes to find some clue to what his life is supposed to mean or attempts to find a different 'self' somewhere else, hoping it would solve his existential issues. The first time he leaves it is during season two, episodes 10 to 11. In the end of episode 10, Bojack is faced with a question asked by Diane: "When's the



Images 2 and 3: season 2, episode 10.

last time you were actually happy?” (images 2 and 3). This question drives Bojack to doubt his whole existence in *Hollywood* – if he cannot be happy here with all that he has, then where can he be happy?

After this question has been presented to Bojack, he jumps into his car and drives to Tesuque, New Mexico to see his old friend Charlotte Carson (Olivia Wilde). Bojack bonds with Charlotte’s family during his stay there, especially with Charlotte’s daughter Penny. Bojack ends up confessing to Penny that he *“didn’t like who he was in LA”*. This way Bojack has confessed his feelings of doubt regarding his life and identity in his *Hollywood* life and attempts to change himself for the better by moving to be somewhere else. However, Bojack is thrown out of the family residence by Charlotte when she finds Bojack and Penny together in the cabin of Bojack’s boat. 17-year-old Penny wanted to have intercourse with much older Bojack, and even though he refused, Charlotte caught them in the worst possible moment. After Bojack is thrown out, he returns to LA with the same mindset that he left with – even though he tried to escape who he is, in his own mind, his own actions caught up with him.

Through this escapism Bojack tries to find some happiness and meaning in his life. His unhappiness causes him to question the meaning of his life, and he often concludes that there is no meaning to anything. When unfortunate incidents seem to follow him wherever he goes, his life is presented as a chain of meaningless struggle with no result. Nihilistic thoughts rise in Bojack when he wonders the uselessness of existence, and questions whether anything he does matters after all. When faced with setbacks, Bojack often concludes that nothing seems to matter. He in a way gives up the control of his own life and admits his defeat. As if he was fighting against the very powers of the universe, whenever he ‘loses the battle’, nothing seems to matter to him anymore (image 4.)



Image 4: season 1, episode 7.

Walter Veit explains in his article *Existential Nihilism: The Only Really Serious Philosophical Problem* the philosopher Albert Camus' thoughts on *the absurd*: "*absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need or meaning and reason, and the unreasonable silence of the world*". Veit claims that there are two realizations related to the abovementioned *absurd*: the realization that life is meaningless and one's desire for meaning. In the instances where Bojack seems to lose all meaning in his life, as happens in the example presented above, his need for the meaning is realized: only when the meaning is gone, does he realize what he now is missing.

Existential nihilism is defined by Veit in his article as "*the denial of meaning and purpose*". Veit claims that even though nihilist thinkers often see life without any meaning and purpose, people still often long for some meaning in their lives (2018). Thus, even though nihilists feel that there is no meaning to life, they might try to find some meaning in other places. Those who find life completely meaningless might struggle with depression and feelings of melancholy.

Bojack, too, finds himself searching for some meaning and purpose in his life even when he sees no hope in his future. Bojack has gone through so many adversities in his life, that he feels that there are only other adversities ahead. Struggle is the only constant in his life, and he believes that life cannot change for the better at all. This causes Bojack to fall into despair more than often. Later in the series, however, Bojack attempts to find meaning in his life by working and hopes that by being remembered through his work after his death, his life will have had meaning.

JILL PILL: *That's the whole point, nothing lasts.*

BOJACK: *No, I know, but see, years after I die, people will still be able to see me in Secretariat.*

JILL PILL: *And then what?*

BOJACK: *And then... I'll be remembered. If I win an Oscar, I'll be remembered.*

JILL PILL: *And then what?*

BOJACK: *Then my life will have meaning!²*

Nihilism is brought up in the show when the characters are going through their worst times. Diane experiences an existential crisis and travels to the war-torn Cordovia to write a book about Sebastian St. Clair, a philanthropist. However, Diane is not able to handle the death and destruction

² "Start spreading the news." Bojack Horseman, season 3, episode 1. 2016. Netflix.

of war and flies back to LA, ashamed and disappointed in herself. After this failed attempt to do something meaningful with his life, Diane falls into an identity crisis fueled by disappointment in her life. Due to struggling with the meaning and importance of her own life, Diane spirals into nihilistic episode. Losing the meaning of her own life, she also fails to find any meaning in the world at all. The collapse of her sense of identity further increases her lack of sense in the world: Diane ends up giving up on her core beliefs of altruism and she spirals into meaninglessness and lack of hope for the world.

Nihilism, in *Bojack Horseman*, is made visible in many ways. Crisis with identity and existentialism are common with the characters, and as shown before, particularly Bojack and Diane struggle with finding meaning in their lives and the world. Diane, trying to discover her place and meaning in the world, and Bojack, fighting the feelings of meaninglessness. Although these struggles present in different ways in the show, the one commonality with Bojack and Diane's struggles is the lack of recognized meaning in their lives. This, although differing from the traditional definition of nihilism (taken from Merriam-Webster dictionary), shows how the lack of meaning in one's life can lead to many different problems. The emptiness Bojack and Diane feel can be directly attributed to feeling meaningless in their own existence, which in turn links to nihilism.

3.2. Depression

Depression is one of the most important themes in *Bojack Horseman*. The characters in the show are shown to struggle with different symptoms of this mental illness: self-hatred, sadness, hopelessness, numbness, and with many others. Bojack, as the main character, is possibly the most important character regarding this theme and is also the one who is shown to struggle with depression the most. In addition to continuous substance abuse including both alcohol and various drugs, Bojack also is seen to wallow in self-hatred and hopelessness as well as shown to be very unhappy.



I want to feel good about myself.



The way you do.
And I don't know how.



I don't know if I can.

Images 7–9: season 2, episode 8

Bojack often participates in conversations regarding his unhappiness. In addition to images 2 and 3 shown before, he also mentions for example to Mr. Peanutbutter (Paul F. Tompkins) that he wishes he could feel good about himself (images 7-9). Bojack struggles with feeling content not only with his life, but with himself too. In addition to not feeling happy, he does not feel good about himself nor does he know if it is even possible for him to ever feel good or to be happy. This doubt increases when Bojack is faced with difficult situations; the unhappier he feels, the more certain he is he can never be happy at all. This often causes Bojack to spiral into a depressive episode, where he cannot find an exit from the situation.

In a *Bustle* magazine article from 2017, Courtney Enlow writes on the depiction of depression in *Bojack Horseman*, emphasizing the fact that *Bojack Horseman* gives the audience an honest and unembellished image of mental illnesses – she says that *Bojack Horseman* brings down different myths surrounding depression and how it is presented in media. Enlow also draws attention to how correct and real representation of depression in media can be helpful for those who have not been personally touched by it.

BEATRICE: *I know you want to be happy. But you won't be. And I'm sorry. It's not just you, you know.*

BOJACK: *What?*

BEATRICE: *Your father and I, we... well, you come by it honestly. The ugliness inside you. You were born broken. That's your birthright... You're Bojack Horseman, and there's no cure for that.*³

In the example above, Beatrice Horseman portrays the feelings of depression as “*ugliness inside you*” and being broken or born broken. Beatrice uses this imagery to present the reality of Bojack’s situation more accurately: he is not only feeling depressed, but there is also something greatly wrong with him (or so they feel). Different metaphors for depression are widely used to portray the feelings people experience. In this case, Beatrice uses the word “*broken*” to imply that there is something in Bojack that cannot be fixed, and that he will suffer because of it for the rest of life.

Enlow writes in her review that “*as someone who has lived with depression my whole adult life, having a show like this has been invaluable*” (2017). One of the most important aspects in the way *Bojack Horseman* depicts depression is the way it resonates with the audience. Honest and raw moments like the one shown above, taken from a conversation between Bojack and his mother, emphasize the barren reality of living with depression. Margaret Lyons writes in her review of humor and depression in *Bojack Horseman* that amid funny gags and jokes, “*everywhere you turn, someone’s struggling*”. Even though Lyons is reviewing only the first season, this is true for the whole show. Depression and other mental illnesses, like anxiety, are not portrayed only as the struggles of one person amid others, but every character has their own problems in their lives. This is possibly the most realistic factor in *Bojack Horseman*: everyone is struggling in their own ways.

Even though not everyone experiences depression in their lives, everyone has their own different struggles. *Bojack Horseman* portrays this fact by showing a great variety of different issues with the characters. The characters are shown struggling with for example financial problems, identity issues, anxiety, substance abuse, childlessness, single motherhood, abusive families, and sexual identity. This large spectrum of problems shows how everyone has their own issues to deal with. This is what makes *Bojack Horseman* relatable for the viewers: not one character is without some problems, and the problems they face are depicted realistically and truthfully. Depression, however, is not only shown as a struggle in life. It is shown as a serious condition with different associative symptoms, like addiction, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts. Depression is presented as a constant impediment that affects one’s life in many ways.

³ “*Brand new couch.*” *Bojack Horseman*, season 2, episode 1. 2015. *Netflix*.

3.3. Self-image

The theme of self-image is closely related to the following theme of being seen. As will be explained in the section 3.1.4., Bojack is afraid of being seen or known by others because he fears that knowing his true self would make people resent him. This fear of people disliking his true self stems from deeply rooted self-image issues. Bojack sees himself as a person undeserving of love due to his personality, or self. Bojack sees himself as a bad person, an “asshole”, who is unredeemable and cannot be turned into anything good.

TILDA MADISON: *I had the abortion.*

BOJACK: *Nice. You don't want any little Bojacks floating around. Last thing this world needs is more of this garbage.*

HOLLYHOCK: *Uh, excuse me?*

BOJACK: *No, you're great, you seem cool, but if we could go back in time and prevent it... Right?⁴*

Bojack feels such a deep hatred for himself and his family alike that he exclaims that it is better not to have any offspring. Even though Bojack is having this conversation with his then assumed daughter, he feels that it is obvious for others too that it is better not to have any more of him in the world. As Bojack puts it, he sees himself as garbage, and does not think there is any reason to appreciate his or his offspring's existence. This self-hatred is so deeply rooted in him that he projects his self-image issues to his whole essence, claiming that it would be better not to have any of him in the world at all. This issue of self-hatred is so completely focused only on Bojack himself, that he does not stop to wonder how his thoughts might affect his offspring. However, after Hollyhock confronts him, Bojack states that that does not include her: this further shows how self-centered Bojack's self-hatred is. He himself is “garbage”, but anyone else with the same qualities is not – this shows how blinded Bojack is by this. He cannot see himself from the eyes of others, and consequently cannot see himself as any other than what he himself thinks. That is, he cannot position himself into the viewpoint of others, but rather is stuck in this biased image of himself.

⁴ “Commence fracking.” Bojack Horseman, season 4, episode 4. 2017. *Netflix*.

Another major part where the issue of self-image comes up is Hollyhock's struggle with her weight. In episode eight of season four, Hollyhock mentions to Bojack that "being around skinny girls" makes her feel like a "blob". The word "blob" she uses to describe herself shows that she is not completely comfortable in her own body and recognizes that her self-image is directly affected by being around people she feels are her superior. She feels inferior to the other girls because of her weight and is visibly uncomfortable feeling that way. Later in the same episode Bojack offers to take her out for ice cream or pizza, to which Hollyhock answers that she is not hungry.

In episode ten of season four it turns out that Bojack's demented mother Beatrice, who has been living with Bojack and Hollyhock for a while, has been drugging Hollyhock's coffee with medicine used to lose weight and is now addicted to amphetamines. Hollyhock ends up in a hospital, after which Bojack discovers Beatrice's scheme. Beatrice's issues with Hollyhock's appearance stem from her own childhood – her past is introduced in episodes two and eleven of season four. When Beatrice was a child, she was picked on at school and called fat, and her father (Bojack's maternal grandfather) was also concerned about Beatrice's weight. Because of the superficial environment of Beatrice's childhood, where a girls' looks were much appreciated over their intelligence, Beatrice too grew to obsess over girls' weight and appearance. Later on in her life, she then ended up reflecting these long-learned image issues to Hollyhock.

Eating disorders and body-image issues, even though appearing to be only a minor setback in Hollyhock's life, are instead a continuous theme in Bojack's life, too. Already in episode one of season one he is shown to be concerned about his weight. When Bojack and Princess Caroline were having a conversation in a restaurant, Bojack was continuously shown to eat pre-meal bread. When they decide to leave without ordering, the waiter asks Bojack to pay for the bread because he ate nine baskets of it. Later in the episode, Bojack is shown to obsess about the amount of bread he ate and beat himself up about eating so much.

BOJACK: *Yeah, but I didn't even eat that much bread. What did I have? I must have had...*

WAITER: *You ate nine baskets, sir.*

BOJACK: *Really? Great, now I'm gonna feel like a fat ass all week.*

BOJACK: *You've seen me naked. Do you think I'm getting chubby?*

PC: *You want to know the real reason we're breaking up?*

BOJACK: *What was that? Sorry. Couldn't hear you over the sound of my calories not metabolizing.*

BOJACK: *So yeah, technically I was dumb, but the real headline of the evening was "Dumb guy eats bread, gets fat, the end."
Wasn't there a pizza here a second ago?*

As seen in these examples taken from *Bojack Horseman* season one episode one, Bojack's eating habits and following regret is shown as a joke during an unrelated situation. Even though this is not shown as something serious, this continuing theme of Bojack being concerned about his weight and his appearance show how uncomfortable he is in his own body. Details like these are what make the character what he is and showing Bojack struggle with his self-image throughout the show like this shows how little he actually appreciates himself. Small mishaps like eating too much bread can send him into a spiral of self-loathing, which further emphasizes the fragility of his self-image.

3.4. Being Seen

Joshua Hook, a professor of psychology, writes in his article *The Need to Be Seen* (2016) that people have the need to know that they are "*important enough to be recognized and acknowledged by others*". By this, Hook means that people have an innate need to be recognized, seen, and loved as themselves. Hook explains that people who were not 'seen' by their parents, or could not meet their unrealistic expectations, have an increased need to be seen as adults (Hook, 2016). This theory can be applied to Bojack, too: he lived his whole childhood in a mentally abusive household, and now feels inadequate and not seen by others.

From the various flashbacks to Bojack's childhood in the show, it can be noticed that he was not appreciated in his family at all, and his parents could not see him as an individual with a personality and feelings of his own. Due to this constant belittling in his past, Bojack now is simultaneously terrified and desperate for others to recognize and acknowledge him as he is. The lack of recognition in his childhood has caused him to now have issues with any intimate relationship in his adult life: being too close to anyone seems impossible to him, but at the same time it seems to be something that he needs and desperately craves.

In the beginning of the series, in season one when Diane starts to write Bojack's memoirs, a major issue they face in the writing process is Bojack's inability to open up. Even though Diane's job is to write a book about Bojack, Bojack finds himself unable to talk about his life and experiences. This inability comes from Bojack's issue with being seen by other people as he is – he would rather maintain a façade of a successful actor rather than tell everyone about who he really is. Even though he tells Diane he wishes to publish an honest memoir rather than “*an empty-calorie celebrity tell-some*”, as Diane herself puts it. After some encouragement from Diane, Bojack finally ends up talking about his childhood, and thus surrenders himself to the ordeal of being known deeply by someone.

Bojack is certain that when people grow to know him better, they will start resenting him for who he is. He keeps everyone at an arm's length and avoids getting into close relationships with anyone. The theme “*being seen*” refers to Bojack's fear of being known by and being close to others. His fear of intimacy affects his relationships with his friends, lovers, and coworkers alike. Bojack's perception of self mostly stems from his coping mechanisms: when someone gets too close to him, he lashes out and sabotages himself. This is not because he is “an asshole” as he sees himself, but because he cannot fathom being vulnerable and honest around others.

WANDA: *What happened, Bojack?*

BOJACK: *Same thing that always happens. You didn't know me. Then you fell in love with me. And now you know me.⁵*

In this example, taken from *Bojack Horseman* season two episode ten, Bojack claims that Wanda was better off not knowing him on a deep personal level. Bojack feels that when someone comes to know him deep enough, they will find him unlovable. Most of all, he is afraid of people seeing how broken he really feels: he has been keeping up a wall between himself and others for all his life and cannot find the courage to expose his true feelings to anyone. This is where Bojack's issues with being seen, or being known, stem from – he is afraid that people who know him well enough will eventually leave him, like Wanda did at the end of their romantic relationship. Even though Bojack is afraid of this happening with people, he wishes deeply that people would know him like Wanda did and eventually accept him as he is, instead of leaving.

⁵ “*Yes and.*” *Bojack Horseman*, season 2, episode 10. 2015. *Netflix*.

The first time Bojack opens up to someone in the series is when Diane is writing his memoir. It is revealed that Diane and Bojack grew close because Diane now knew Bojack better than anyone ever had. They considered each other their best friends, and Diane, in Bojack's experience, was the first not to leave after getting to know him. This experience was possibly a proof that someone could know him and still love him, even though he felt so unsure of it. Further in the series Bojack opens himself more to other characters as well; he has heartfelt conversations with Princess Carolyn and Mr. Peanutbutter, for example. The first experience with Diane perhaps gave Bojack courage to be more open with other people, even though his self-hatred and fear of abandonment still loomed in the background waiting to resurface.

In episode six of season 5 Bojack holds a eulogy for his recently deceased mother in her funeral. During the eulogy, Bojack mentions several times his mother's last words, "*I see you*". Even though in the end of the episode he realizes that his mother's words actually meant the "Intensive Care Unit", ICU, during the episode he talks about how everyone wishes to be seen. Bojack explains that, at first, he thought of the words "*I see you*" not as judgement or acceptance per se, but just as a statement of being seen, "*a simple recognition of another person in the room. 'Hello there, you are a person, and I see you'*". He goes on to explain that in that moment he realized how being seen was the thing he had missed all this time, the feeling of connection with a person close to him.

In the same episode, Bojack tells how him, his dad and his mother had a mutual understanding of how "*screwed up*" they all were. He explains how they all understood each other, and he says, "*she knew what it was to feel like you're drowning with the exception of these moments, these very rare, brief instances in which you suddenly remember... you can swim.*" Even though Bojack did not have a close relationship with his parents, he could appreciate the meaning of having known each other better than anyone. Because Bojack hated the people he shared this deep connection with, he craves the same type of relationship with someone better – someone, who could know him as well as his parents did and still accept him.

3.5. Addiction

The theme of addiction is closely tied with depression and nihilism. When faced with difficulties, Bojack often relies on alcohol or drugs (sometimes both) to medicate himself. Addictive substances,

in the show, give Bojack a form of escapism. In several episodes, Bojack's alcoholism is only mentioned casually. Sometimes he takes a sip from his flask in a situation where drinking might be frowned upon, and some other times he is shown to start drinking at noon. Casual day-drinking is the norm for the protagonist, as he uses intoxicants to numb whatever he is avoiding of feeling in the situation. He attempts to escape from depressive, anxious and self-hating thoughts through numbing those feelings with different substances. That escapism, however, has grown into serious addiction to alcohol and later to pain killers as well.

In the episode *Bojack hates the troops* (season 1 episode 2), Bojack's drunken email to Diane says "*I just took a bunch of horse tranquilizers, - I just use a small dose to help me fall asleep at night and then a much, much larger dose to get me through the day.*" According to this quote from very early of the series, Bojack needs to be intoxicated to survive through his every-day life. Bojack uses different intoxicants to numb himself – as stated above, this is closely tied to the theme of depression. because Bojack does not have appropriate measures to treat his mental illnesses, he succumbs to substance abuse to "*get through the day*", as he himself puts it.

With his addiction, Bojack depicts the difficulties of living with depression and mental health problems to the viewer. Even though numbing one's feelings with alcohol and drugs might not be the accepted way of treating one's mental health, it is more common than is socially accepted. Often untreated mental health issues, like in Bojack's case, can lead to substance abuse to medicate oneself.

When things do not seem to go his way, Bojack relapses into week-long episodes of drug abuse and binge-drinking. For example, when Bojack attempts to confess his romantic feelings to Diane, which are only not reciprocated but Diane also ends up engaged to Mr. Peanutbutter, Bojack goes on a two-week drinking bender of which he afterwards has no memory of. In addition to not having any memory of the bender itself, he had also managed to forget about Diane's engagement. When Princess Carolyn reminds him of the engagement, he attempts (and fails) to continue drinking to forget.

Another character, in addition to Bojack, who struggles with addiction is Sarah Lynn. Sarah Lynn was a child actor in *Horsin' around* and has since only gained more and more publicity. She makes a comeback in Bojack's life when she is already thirty years old, being over a decade since the two saw each other last. When the two worked on *Horsin' around* together, Bojack made a number of giving his everything to the audience. He teaches Sarah Lynn that she should do whatever she

could to please the public, and so she did. Owning her life to the audience, Sarah Lynn too ended up using drugs just like Bojack. Even though she had sober periods in her life, she always relapsed.

For Sarah Lynn, the reason for her drug abuse could have been the feeling of not having control of one's life. Lidya Saliba, in her article "*Don't Stop Dancing' – The Tragedy of Sarah Lynn*" states that the fame she claimed with her role in *Horsin' Around* and later pop-albums dragged her from her own identity into something that she felt other people would enjoy. She dedicated her life to performance and entertaining, and thus left her personal identity to a subsequent role growing up. This is shown to be because of a speech Bojack gave her when she was young:

BOJACK: *Hey, you see those people?*

SARAH LYNN: *Yeah.*

BOJACK: *Well, those boobs and jerk wads are the best friends you'll ever have. Without them, you're nothing. Remember that. Your family will never understand you, your lovers will leave you or try to change you, but your fans, you be good to them, and they'll be good to you.*

*The most important thing is, you got to give people what they want, even if it kills you, even if it empties you out until there's nothing left to empty. No matter what happens, no matter how much it hurts, you don't stop dancing, and you don't stop smiling, and you give those people what they want.*⁶

This speech that Bojack gives to Sarah Lynn affects her whole life from there on. Dedicating her whole life to performing, Sarah Lynn had no time to figure out herself, and eventually exhausted herself in search for approval from the audiences.

Much like Bojack, Sarah Lynn uses different intoxicants to numb her feelings. Although their issues were different and came from different places, their struggle with addiction was similar. Sarah Lynn, however, masked her addiction with constant partying, and did not wallow in self-pity and drink alone like Bojack so often did. Sarah Lynn attempted to fill the feeling of emptiness inside her with wild parties and different people, whereas Bojack preferred to be left alone and drink at home. After one another drug-fueled bender with Bojack, this lack of control proves fatal to her.

⁶ "Prickly-Muffin" Bojack Horseman, season 1, episode 3. 2014. Netflix.

4. Findings and Further Research

The characters' behavior gives insight to their personal issues, and that is perhaps what the show is all about. Every main character in *Bojack Horseman* goes through something difficult in their lives, as people always do. The characters' behavior depicts the themes in various, complicated ways, and through the behaviors the audience can see the themes of depression, intimacy issues and many others being normalized and humanized. Through the struggles of the main character Bojack Horseman, depression, addiction, and meaninglessness of life can be seen in a relatable, although dark and sometimes troublesome ways. Bojack and the other characters give life to issues that are often not addressed in popular media, and that is what makes the show so interesting and relatable.

The themes chosen for this thesis are depicted clearly through the characters. Bojack and Diane, mainly, bring out the issues in a clear and understandable way. Depressive and nihilistic episodes in the show are addressed so that the audience can easily relate to the characters: the audience can see a bit of themselves in the actions, thoughts, and dialogue of *Bojack Horseman* characters.

The issues examined in this thesis are not only related to the show *Bojack Horseman*; they are universal themes that can be applied to the real life as well. We, as people, often struggle with many different problems in our lives, be it mental illness, addiction, relationship problems or other issues. *Bojack Horseman* brings these issues out of the dark and addresses them directly, without holding back where someone else might not have the courage to speak out. It is important that these themes are discussed openly, and *Bojack Horseman* does just that.

It could be further researched how the normalization of, for example mental illnesses, can affect the society's attitude towards them. The normalization of these issues can be seen as having a positive affect in whole, and the effects of this could be studied further. It would also be useful to see how several different tv-shows or movies depict these issues: a comparative research of different mainstream shows, or movies would perhaps give light to the issue of misrepresentation in media.

5. Conclusion

These five themes examined in this thesis bring out many different aspects of the Netflix original series *Bojack Horseman*. Nihilism and existence, depression, self-image, being seen, and addiction

are the most prominent issues in the characters' lives and are prominent throughout the show. The themes are brought to the audience's attention mainly through the characters' behavior, thoughts, and actions, and thus these are the subjects analyzed in this thesis. It is notable how clearly Bojack Horseman and other characters' behavior brings forth these selected themes, and how their actions shed light onto these societal issues in the show.

Bojack Horseman, as the titular main character, is in the most important role in the analysis. Instances from his behavior and dialogue can be applied to every theme addressed in this thesis, and thus the analysis is mostly based on him. Bojack suffers from deep depression, anxiety, negative self-image, and struggles with feelings of meaninglessness. His depression is visible through his constant unhappiness and a feeling of emptiness inside him. Even his mother Beatrice says, *"You're Bojack Horseman. And there's no cure for that"*. Bojack often self-medicates himself by numbing his feelings with drugs or alcohol, and he is seen drinking excessively in numerous parts of the series.

The excessive drinking and occasional drug abuse are persistent parts of Bojack's life. It is revealed that he uses horse tranquilizers to "to get through the day". This abuse of different substances is, like depression, a continuing theme throughout the show. Bojack, as well as occasionally Diane and Sarah Lynn too, use different substances to numb whatever feelings they are avoiding in their personal lives. Bojack attempts to fill the void inside him and numb the feelings of loneliness, whereas Sarah Lynn wants to constantly party and have fun without having to face the realities of her life.

Bojack's self-destructive habits, like pushing other people away, contribute to the analysis of this thesis greatly. He seems to be unable to form meaningful relationships with other people, and even if he has long-term romantic relationships or friendships, he attempts to keep everyone else at an arm's length. Even though Bojack craves to be recognized and accepted by others (i.e., be seen), he seems to protect himself from abandonment by keeping a safe distance to everyone. This, however, somewhat changes during the series when Bojack and Diane grow to be close friends and Bojack learns to open up and be more appreciative of spiritual intimacy with others.

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