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Leading a Horse to Water: Investigating the Semiotic Motif of Water and Drowning in BoJack Horseman

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Dedications

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I know I would have made you proud. I wish you could be here to physically see me with my degree. Thank you for all the life lessons and I hope my work can help people in whatever way they need.

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Abstract

This semiotic analysis examines the affect that trauma, in the form of metaphor or semiotic motif involving water, has on the titular character of BoJack Horseman in Netflix's *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020) as well as how the use of water mirrors generational trauma passed down via historical associations. The impact that this trauma has upon these characters is frequently paired with water imagery and symbolism. The show's use of water draws particular attention to how its characters perpetuate aspects of their traumatic pasts in their day-to-day life and reveals the nuanced psychological impact inherent to trauma while simultaneously hinting at its deeper, intergenerational roots. Water is densely packed with sociocultural meaning and connotations across media genre and this meaning baked in throughout the centuries allows it to occupy a uniquely accessible symbolic niche; water is understandable because it is common in narrative and rich in meaning. Thus, water symbolism provides a rich basis for constructing a nuanced interpretation of trauma via synthesis of meanings assigned to other sociocultural works such as art, literature, or religion in order to examine the complex topic of intergenterational traumas in a thoughtful, visceral, and vivid manner. *BoJack Horseman* reveals that understanding why another individual acts the way that they do via narrative proves to be a powerful tool for comprehending the world at large. Visualizing something that is an invisible, abstract psychological concept via an essential element of life such as water is an extremely poignant means of understanding the self and others.

Keywords: BoJack Horseman, Sarah Lynn, trauma, narrative, semiotics, water, water symbolism, water imagery, semiotic analysis, relationships

Introduction

That is part of the beauty of all literature[1].

You discover that your longings are universal longings...

That you're not lonely and isolated from anyone.

You belong.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald, from *Beloved Infidel: The Education of a Woman* (1958)

BoJack Horseman is an animated, sitcom-style, Netflix comedy created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg and visually designed by cartoonist Lisa Hanawalt airing from 2014 to 2020. The show stars Will Arnett as the titular horse BoJack, Kristen Schaal as washed-up child star Sarah Lynn, as well as a handful of other very talented actors and actresses. *BoJack Horseman* stands out among other Netflix originals and streamed shows as it uses animated characters rather than live-action to portray subject matter dealing with dark, melancholy, and other uncomfortable topics unflinchingly as well as its heavy use of allegory, meta-commentary, and cultural reference.

The use of animation is crucial in telling the narrative of BoJack. Animation allows for an exploration of ambiguity related to the harsh reality of trauma in a manner that allows the viewer a degree of distance between themselves and the subject matter without cheapening or weakening the narrative message. This ambiguity owes itself to the inherent liminal nature of audiovisual and textual media as threshold realities between both physical and metaphysical space (Turner, 1969; Turner & Turner, 1978). As shown by Bjorn Thomassen's *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*, the

1 Literature can be taken to mean any form of media that, when consumed, allows the consumer to be transported into the world of the narrative, identify with the characters or events taking place, or engage in simulated experience or "play" with concepts explored in the narrative in question. This includes text-based media, audiovisual media, purely audio media, games or interactives, and even the burgeoning, field of virtual reality (VR) or augmented reality (AR) technologies.

concept of “liminality refers to any ‘betwixt and between’ situation or object (2015, p. 48)” thus media or experiences occupying a state between given contexts, perspectives, or established norms are liminal by nature. Media texts and visuals, for example, are liminal spaces between the intended message of the creator and the interpretation of the viewer. The media is neither a depiction of an objective truth nor wholly its interpreted meaning, but a simulation. Therefore, the portrayal of trauma necessitates a liminal space in order to be consumed as a narrative as liminal space allows for the realities observed and expectations of the viewer to be simultaneously engaged.

The inherently non-threatening and accessible nature of animation further facilitates this in a manner that does stylize the situations portrayed but does not caricaturize their darkness. *BoJack Horseman*'s use of the animated cartoon format further augments its sitcom structure—in which a fixed set of main characters interact to maintain narrative continuity—yet it does not, unlike many other sitcoms, feature set stand alone episodes that failed to impact the plot.

Despite dramatic overtones, the actions of *BoJack Horseman*’s characters and the consequences of these actions directly shape the narrative, but do not do so in a way that prevents viewers from projecting themselves and their lived experiences onto the narrative. For this accessible portrayal of complex topics, the show has earned the renown of audiences across the United States as well as multitude of awards on the Internet Movie Database, which is listed as follows: the 2019 Broadcast Film Critics Association Critics Choice Award for Best Animated Series; the 2018 & 2019 Online Film & Television Association (OFTA) Television Award for Best Animated Program; and the 2018 Writers Guild of America, USA Award (TV) in Animation for Kate Purdy’s Episode: "Time's Arrow (2017)".

Thus, as evidenced by the plethora of film and television awards the series has won, the events and interactions portrayed in BoJack Horseman carry a palpable narrative weight only augmented by

the narrative's unflinching acknowledgment of trauma and interpersonal dysfunction. I believe that a semiotic analysis of the use of water as a motif in *BoJack Horseman* reveals useful and applicable modes of communicating the realities of contemporary issues such as the trauma inherent to life in a late capitalist, hierarchical, post Web 2.0 Society. The use of the familiar—water as signifier—to describe an often "invisible" abstract concept such as trauma allows for viewers preexisting semiotic schemata to be expanded upon and new perspectives to be more readily accepted as water itself acts as a perceptual anchor.

This analysis is based in Bathes' Semiotic Theory as defined in *Elements of Semiology* (1968) as the phenomenon of science or symbols being assigned connotative meaning within a sociocultural context. This signified meaning is mediated by sociocultural norms—histories or traditions passed down via generations—as well as the lived experiences of the viewer. Drawing from literary and communication analyses of water as a semiotic motif associated with trauma, I reveal the salience of investigating popular streamed media such as Netflix shows which tackle complex uncomfortable topics in engaging ways, such as *BoJack Horseman*.

The intimate and leisurely nature of streaming services such as Netflix—wherein viewers are able to watch and consume narratives in the cover of their own space, at their own pace—allows for the viewers to organically experience the narrative in a way that facilitates the imposition of distance between themselves and said narrative. The flexibility to consume a narrative inherent to streaming services and platforms avoids the time and place constraints of traditional film, theater, and or television. Netflix also occupies a unique position as a monolith in the streaming service niche both domestically and internationally. Therefore, Netflix originals like *BoJack Horseman* have a large

likelihood of reaching individuals struggling with trauma similar to that portrayed in the show. Specifically, the use of water in the show's opening sequence, the Sarah Lynn-BoJack relationship, and BoJack's dreamlike flashback sequences all present useful data for dissecting contemporary animation which increasingly broaches previously taboo subjects. Such subjects include but are not limited to trauma, addiction and, hyper-visibility in the post Web 2.0 era.

We live in a deeply narcissistic era, predominately concerned with attention, spectacle, and aesthetic as means to power. Netflix's *BoJack Horseman* is also a deeply narcissistic narrative wherein the titular character is unable to truly love, heal, or connect with any other being beyond the surface of the pool or in his own reflection seen within them. Like the myth of Narcissus, BoJack is unable to look past himself and see that his pain and fixation on himself, rumination, and radical acts of forgetting were causing him and the other around him pain.

BoJack Horseman represents the repetition of a narcissistic cycle and like the myth of Narcissus itself relies heavily upon water imagery to accomplish its ultimate goal of warning against a drowning in a life lived only for reflections. For this reason I delve into the plethora of historical, mythological, and literary meanings assigned to the unassuming element of water as well as the myriad of ways that *BoJack Horseman* also utilizes this universal semiotic device to communicate similar themes of oppression, loss, and trauma in the lives of its characters. As revealed throughout the literature review and analysis of water, it can be seen that the element is truly a liminal motif; that is to say that it represents a duality between life and death, rebirth and stagnation, as well as healing and pain. The connection to horses throughout mythological record in tandem with water, death, and trauma to young women is almost eerily prescient in the historical archive of media imagery. The use of such motifs in

BoJack Horseman also present interesting opportunities for academic thought regarding abolitionist feminism and the analysis of communicative media attempting to depict trauma and its impact on the life of the individual.

This deep societal narcissism is omnisciently present in the oeuvre of the progenitors of much of Western media's semiotic archive such as Shakespeare. These many seminal works wherein tragedy, redemption, and healing from trauma are almost entirely reserved for members of the nobility or divinely blessed. Erich Auerbach describes Shakespeare's penchant for allowing monstrosity among the nobility but not among the lower classes expertly in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature.* Auerbach then goes on to describe Goethe's misunderstanding of the essence of Hamlet's character, similar to the character of BoJack Horseman, which is as follows:

> Must we assume that Goethe failed to sense Hamlet's native force, which continues to grow throughout the course of the play, his cutting wit, which makes all those about him tremble and flee, the cunning and boldness of his statements, his savage harshness towards Ophelia, the energy with which he faces his mother…...Despite the fact that he again and again puts off the decisive deed, he is by far the strongest character in the play. There is a demonic aura about him which inspires respect, awe, and often fear. Whenever he does move into action, it is quick, bold, and at time malicious, and it strikes the mark with assured power (Auerbach, 2013, *Mimesis*, P. 329).

As evidenced above *Hamlet* is, as is *BoJack Horseman*, a narrative primarily concerned with an emotional tyrant hellbent on projecting and avoiding his suffering. These narratives concern men who

are unable to process their own emotions and thus turn them onto those with less power, exploit gendered inequalities, and maliciously manipulate those around them for personal gain.

These individuals are also consistently associated with water and the drowning of young women, whether metaphorical via allusion or literal via narrative action. For this reason, among the other mythological and historical connections to water, I have chosen to engage in an alternative paradigm analysis of the ritual use of water as semiotic motif in narratives, such as *BoJack Horseman*[2], wherein the use of water in the narrative acts as almost a ludonarrative device to simulate experience with trauma through consumption of the entertainment object. I believe an analysis into the semiotic use of water motifs stands to offer crucial insight into how we engage in 'play' or simulated experience when consuming narratives—even for entertainment purposes—in particular narratives concerned with trauma, emotional growth, and healing rather than spectacle in a purely aesthetic sense. Not only this, but an analysis of the core semiotic devices of media such as basic elements like water or fire offer crucial insight into how this 'play' experience plays a role in determining the sociocultural construction of our perceived reality as well as affirming certain schematic behaviors which may be both progressive and detrimental to individual growth. Examples such as toxic masculinity, the suppressing of emotions, and repressing of the self in favor of capitalistic values which present as cognitive dissonance are some core themes that may be discussed with seemingly 'simple' symbols such as water in a way that is unassuming to a viewer as well as seemingly 'familiar'.

2Animation in particular seems to be engaging in a focus on the semiotic narrative importance of crucial elements such as water, fire, earth, and air as proxies for complex, abstract emotional concepts examples can be readily seen in *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* (2020), *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005-2008), *Steven Universe* (2013-2019), and many other recent animated shows which engage in a narrative dialogue surrounding trauma and social connection. These examples all utilize water in specific ways to illustrate the mental aspect of trauma as well as its ability to oppress and consume the individual.

As indicated throughout this thesis, water has become ubiquitous as a shorthand symbol for oppression—particularly of women—via drowning or submersion, healing, and the other-worldly or abstract or even emotional experiences. This familiarity of meaning cross-culturally and intergenerationally allows for the symbol—and other symbolic images or figures associated with the element of water such as gods or deities, mythological figures, horses, and personifications of death—to hold lasting meaning for the communication field in regards to analysis and thought (Carr-Gomm, 2005).

The Context of *BoJack Horseman*

"I'm responsible for my own happiness? I can't even be responsible for my own breakfast!"

—*BoJack Horseman*, "BoJack Horseman: The BoJack Horseman Story, Chapter One"
Season 1, Episode 1

The series takes place in a fictionalized Hollywood known as "Hollywoo" where in the titular BoJack Horseman, a washed-up celebrity, grapples with his fall from fame by turning to escapism, drug addiction, alcoholism to avoid his feelings of irrelevance and vulnerability. The former 90s sitcom star of *Horsin' Around*—a show within the show of *BoJack Horseman*—represents a sobering reality: the struggle for self-fulfillment and happiness remains despite great achievement. Such a struggle rises from a deep-seated feeling of incompleteness stemming from past traumas both BoJack's own and those of his mother Beatrice as well as her mother, Honey Horseman. These traumas include childhood neglect, loss of those closest to them, and seeking external validations for their self-worth. BoJack's self-concept is rooted in what others perceive him to be and this outward focus forces BoJack to live in a role that no longer suits his needs as an individual. Through the use of water and flashback, it is revealed that BoJack's focus on achievement at the cost of self-exploration and care has ultimately perpetuated the deep loneliness, disconnect, and melancholy that follows from a self-concept based on external validation and was ultimately thrust upon him by his own ancestors' experiences.

BoJack forces himself to become mutable despite feeling as though, as motifs suggest, he is being consumed and surrounded by his lived reality. In refusing to face his accountability in his own growth, BoJack carries his trauma with him and inflicts it upon others in the form of motifs of rot, drowning, alcohol, and other water-heavy semiotic devices. Attempts to, like water, fill the emptiness

and play the role others provide leave the character's ultimately unsatisfied. The somber drama, or perhaps tragedy, of BoJack's life may seem contradictory to the show's comedy genre, yet the use of jokes and dark humor mirror the means in which many people struggling with traumatic experiences or mental illness such as depression use to cope with a world that seems at times to be exceedingly bleak.

The narrative speaks to individuals at a point of transition in their lives—a liminal space—that is rooted in the experiences of creator Bob-Waksberg as he himself had waited through the dark waters of transition upon moving to Los Angeles in his real life. Bob-Waksberg attempted and succeeded in conveying an existential ennui that, to many, may be incredibly off-putting as it forces the viewer to confront the uncertainties of life as well as the concept of happiness with a critical, if sometimes cynical lens. Bob-Waksberg had the following to say regarding the creation of *BoJack Horseman*:

> I remember, you know, sitting on that hill over the city and, um, feeling like I was like literally on the top of the world, but I never felt more alone and isolated. That was kind of the beginning of the character-guy [BoJack] because he's had every opportunity for success but still can't find a way to be happy (GoldDerby / Gold Derby, 2017, June 08).

In capturing a moment of triumph tinged with melancholy, a narrative exposing the nuanced feeling of transition came into being. The show's comedy style and animation is not everything it seems; as the viewer becomes further acquainted with the characters and setting it becomes increasingly clear that deep complex narratives are hidden just beneath the surface. In this way, *BoJack Horseman* presents itself as a meaningful narrative on trauma as well as the ways in which an individual navigate said trauma.

Previous Interest in *BoJack Horseman*

> Even when BoJack is not touching on social issues, its creators do not miss a beat… Nods to literary works are also hidden in the dialogue…
>
> ...Despite the wit, talent, and intelligence of the script, the show never feels pretentious or pedantic. This is BoJack's [*BoJack Horseman*'s] greatest feat, as it provides smart commentary without force-feeding it to the audience. It succeeds in reaching every type of viewer, as anyone can gain something by watching it, even if it's just a laugh.
>
> —Nathan Rhind, 'BoJack' Final Season Delivers Smart Social Commentary' (2020)

BoJack Horseman presents itself as a meaningful narrative regarding trauma and the academic attention the show has been paid reflects this alongside its already enormous amount of journalistic praise. Existing research on BoJack Horseman ranges from analyses of anthropomorphism as a tool of social critique, such as in De Koster's Animals and Social Critique in *BoJack Horseman* (2018), to examinations of existential ennui, the vacuity of contemporary life, as well as the simultaneous commodification and diminishment of experience seen in depictions of mental illness, gender, and trauma. Further critiques of *BoJack Horseman* include analyses of escapism and isolation such as in Saura's *BoJack Horseman* or The Exhaustion of Post-Modernism and the Envisioning of a Creative Way Out (2019); analyses of the show's portrayal of sexual and gender identity such as in Cuthbert's When We Talk about Gender We Talk about Sex: (A)sexuality and (A)gendered Subjective (2019).

Social critiques regarding BoJack Horseman are seen in both Chep's Horsin' Around: An Autoethnographic Critique of Trauma in BoJack Horseman Through Abject and Affect (2019) and Pabst's Why the Long Face? Narratives of Depression in Netflix's BoJack Horseman (2017) as well. These analyses make up the bulk of academic insight into *BoJack Horseman*. My research adds to this tradition of looking beneath the surface to engage with how reality is shaped by and given meaning via circulated narratives. How themes of trauma, struggle, and marginalized experiences are depicted

through art reveals crucial insight into how society conceives of those topics as a whole, values individuals that have experienced these things, and thus mediates how individuals respond to real life situations.

I add to the existing discourse by redirecting focus from not only the overarching themes of trauma but in focusing on how trauma and its impact is signified via water: by focusing on the signifier as a narrative tool. The means in which a metanarrative cultural motif such as water is used to communicate themes of trauma allows for a more thorough understanding of not only BoJack Horseman's narrative, but the ways in which referentiality and underlying assumptions attached to semiotic devices informs an individual's understanding of reality. If one better understands the foundation of narratives regarding trauma, one is better able to understand the underlying sociocultural concepts being critiqued and thus the narrative as a whole. I urge a focus not only on the semiotic building blocks of meaning that carry immense narrative weight that warrants detailed attention, but also those which may often pass unnoticed due to the innocuous or common nature of the symbol and signifier used, such as in the case of water.

Literature Review

Why Water as a Signifier?

Narratives, outside of lived experiences, are the primary means in which individuals construct their understanding of reality, cultural values, and inform their social interactions (Bourdieu, 1979, pp. 77-85; Hovland & Sherif, 1980; Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). In other words, narratives act as hyper-real simulations of the liminal space between lived experiences and those absorbed via histories, mythos, or other renderings of reality. Communication involves the transmission and interpretation of social values and norms, thus is mediated by both the lived reality of the individual and constructed conversance (Bourdieu, 1979, pp. 77-85; Baudrillard, 1994; Jewitt & Oyana, 2001). As such, the interpretation of audiovisual and textual semiotics shapes the real behavior of audiences across a multitude of fields from entertainment media to the dissemination of health care or emergency information (McLeod, 1999; Murphy, Frank, Chatterjee, & Baezconde-Garbanati, 2013). In order for narratives to impact their audience and prompt them to contemplate abstract concepts, the audience must be able to recognize the semiotic motifs or artifacts as familiar or meaningful or reflecting some sort of truth within which they feel included. This can include a familiar setting or cultural meaning tied to a symbol. These symbols then act as anchors of identification for an audience and increase investment within a narrative (Green, Brock, & Kaufman, 2004; Hodge, 2014; De Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders & Beentjes, 2012).. As such, the audience is able to engage with subject matter that they may never be able to experience themselves as they have a means of relating to the narrative despite this basic disconnect.

Semiotic motifs and symbolic associations tied to critical elements of life such as water are thus inherently familiar and offer a myriad of meanings to the narrative in which it is used as a symbol. Water as a semiotic motif is therefore inherently linked to the cultural mythos and artistic works of the

larger surrounding society. As these meanings permeate cultures they can become functionally invisible, being almost automatically assigned a normative meaning. These symbols become shorthand for their assigned meanings and thus establish a set of expectations for the audience which the narrative can either affirm or subvert. Therefore, examining the modes in which the semiotic motif of water mediates a narrative's impact—including possible interpretations as well as the perceived meaningfulness of depicted scenes—reveals crucial insight regarding the ways in which an individual's society constructs "truths." This additionally allows for an exploration of perpetuated norms associated with the symbolic uses of the motif in regards to interpreting or decoding media messages (Hall, 1974; 1980; 1994; 1997).

Continuing this logic, it is of critical importance to discuss the power of specifically framed semiotic motifs have on influencing the way an individual views the world or a piece of media. In other words, the context within which the signifier is placed mediates the signified. The aesthetic judgments involved in determining the perceived meaning of a work further influence the power of the message as the audience is forced to put art in the context of a larger interconnected web of social connection. This applies to the setting depicted within the narrative as well as the audience's context regarding the time, place, and space of said narrative (Barthes, 1968; Fairhurst & Sarr, 1996; Scheufele, 1999). Thus, narratives utilizing symbols such as water are creating a complex layered message communicated through a mosaic of connotations which engage their audience in constructing meaning within the liminal space between depicted and lived realities (Salomon, 1984; Johnson, 1995; Thomassen, 2009).

Liminal space is necessary to communicate phenomenon that are deeply personal such as traumatic events as well as the lasting impact that these events have upon the individual, their community, and their nation (Lemma & Levy, 2004). This liminal space allows narrative to become displacement fiction or fiction which critiques the ways in which memory, meaning, and context

become tied to place and space by revealing the areas of connection previously eclipsed by subjective personal experience. The fiction becomes a forum for analyzing the undercurrents of traumatic or painful experience of sociocultural pressure, expectations, and oppressive norms which haunt the audience in both their daily lives and memories by bridging the liminal gap between the personal and impersonal.

Major characters in BoJack Horseman are represented throughout the series by water symbolism, the most glaring example being the very introductory opening sequence of the show, wherein the titular BoJack Horseman falls into his swimming pool.

The swimming pool itself, as often represented throughout literature, is a semiotic motif symbolizing control, social connection, and an aesthetic desire to cultivate an image of pristine wealth. In other words, the aesthetic of leisure portrayed via a symbol that can represent the crushing oppression of submersion; this is a common symbolic technique often sued in Shakespearean media transliterations wherein the oppression of feminine identities is often explored via imagery of submersion and drowning (Ross, 2004). The pool itself is a metaphoric symbol for the trauma holding BoJack away from truly meaningful relationships, as is seen when he falls into the pool during the show's introductory scene and simply stares at Diane and Mr. Peanutbutter. The pool is earlier seen in the background of the intro with Diane smoking a cigarette next to the water, in most versions of the introductory scene, before coming into the house with the rest of the cast. This itself plays into the meaning of the pool as a metaphor for BoJack's trauma and need to repress it. Diane is the character most familiar with BoJack's trauma—the depths of his pool—yet still wants to come into BoJack's internal life. It is no mistake that the audience is invited to relate to and engage with BoJack's narrative at the pool's edge and it is at the pool's edge that BoJack engages in the deepest of his social connections.

The pool scene is alluded to in the painting that BoJack has in his study, a transliteration of David Hockney's 1972 *Portrait of an Artist (Pool with Two Figures)*wherein the depicted artist watches on as a swimmer struggles underwater. In an interview with *Vice* it is revealed that Hockney's painting speaks to the longing and pain of wanting to be close to someone that remains disinterested (Specter, 2018, September 13). This early example mirrors BoJack's compulsive need to perform for others rather than address his trauma as exemplified throughout the narrative as well as the negative impact this has upon his psyche and relationships; it is of no surprise that the disinterested artist in the painting also resembles BoJack's father Butterscotch Horseman—featuring the same brown coloration and white forehead streak as Butterscotch—who treated BoJack with utter disdain and disinterest. The drowning motif, swimming pool, and reference to BoJack's father also serve to support the reading of water as a metaphor for BoJack's trauma. BoJack's childhood flashbacks to his childhood depict him in a sailor suit, further connecting him to the water motif; this motif is particularly salient in the Season 2, Episode 1, "Brand New Couch" wherein BoJack is pictured wearing a sailor suit as he recounts a traumatic memory with his father, Butterscotch Horseman, while the latter constructs a ship in a bottle.

The bottled ship is interesting in that it represents a vessel meant for moving forward over tumultuous seas instead being locked into place, an apt metaphor for both of BoJack's parents as they are continuously depicted as being trapped in an unhappy and abusive relationship throughout the show's narrative. BoJack even finds himself treading water within the painting during a drug induced hallucination in Season 1, Episode 11 of the series—"Downer Ending"—directly referencing his struggle with life, responsibility, and his feeling of simply "treading water," or barely staying afloat in face of the challenges of daily life, using terminology often used to describe the feeling of trauma and mental illnesses such as depression (Karp, 1994; Riley, Spiers, Chew-Graham, Taylor, Thornton, & Buszewicz, 2018). During the hallucination, BoJack's inability to do more than keep himself alive and

tread water is directly referenced by the BoJack asking the hallucinated version of Diane, while they both watch BoJack struggle to tread water inside the painting, "Shouldn't we help him?" to which Diane responds cheerfully, "No, he loves treading water." Much like the ways in which water imagery and symbolism is used to communicate the futile feeling of solely keeping one's self alive in the midst of depression and trauma, BoJack shows the audience and himself that he truly feels helpless and unable to do anything but survive at this point in his life. Earlier in this same episode, BoJack muses about ending his autobiography with a fictional depiction of drowning at a cottage in Maine.

The direct reference to drowning himself paired with an acknowledgment of feeling too weak and tired to continue furthers this metaphoric connection to BoJack's feeling of being unable to cope with the push and pull of his lived experience of trauma. The connection to Maine and a waterfront cabin visually references both his family's lake-house in Harper's Landing, Michigan—depicted in Season 4, Episode 2, "The Old Sugarman Place" as well as Season 4, Episode 11, "Time's Arrow"—as well as BoJack's further musings about his ideal life with old-flame Charlotte Carson. These musings involve a pinning for fulfilling home life and the connection to Maine, where Charlotte had told BoJack she was moving, in tandem with their fictional child, Harper, point to BoJack using this fantasy as a means to avoid the unsettling reality in which he finds himself as well as a means of "drowning" the parts of his personality he finds unbearable if only symbolically.

BoJack himself is not the only character followed by a practical sea of water motifs, his former best friend and co-worker Herb Kazzaz is heavily represented by motifs of the ocean, clean water, and death via his cancer and past charity work involving bringing clean water to children in need (Season 1, Episode 8, "The Telescope"). This is particularly relevant as Herb seems to represent redemption and healing to BoJack, as he sees Herb as a means of making up for his own guilt at allowing his friend to be fired from their television show *Horsin' Around*, as revealed earlier in the season. Upon Herb's

denial of forgiveness for BoJack's actions, the view to the ocean is closed off by curtains and Herb demands that BoJack leave his house. The next time BoJack enters Herb's house and views the ocean there is for Herb's funeral in Season 2, Episode 3, "Still Broken". The symbolism is palpable here and extends beyond this one central character in BoJack's life. Characters central to BoJack's growth such as Sarah Lynn and Secretariat are also represented by explicit water imagery; the former having died of an overdose due to BoJack's neglect to seek help and the latter having an entire episode Season 6 named after his poem, "The View From Halfway Down," describing his suicide by drowning.

A discussion regarding the intertextual metatextual nature of the meanings tied to symbolically rich signifiers such as water allows narratives such as *BoJack Horseman* to be engaged with on a fundamentally deeper level regarding a society's values. Understanding the modes in which texts utilize common semiotics to engage in a larger conversation with other texts within similar sociocultural contexts allows for a more complex or critical conception of the signifier being examined. In essence, examining a signifier in an intertextual context allows for a greater understanding of the theses and perhaps even unintended meanings of a particular narrative being investigated or consumed (Culler, 1976; Allen, 2011). *BoJack Horseman* utilizes this inherently networked mode of meaning-making exceptionally to examine trauma using a familiar motif.

Water is necessary for life, abundant in nature, and in a state of constant change both in real lived experiences and in narratives such as *BoJack Horseman*. It is of no surprise that such an element has accumulated a myriad of sociocultural meanings across multiple communities while maintaining a set of universal connotations applicable to the human experience at large. For these reasons, water was chosen to be analyzed as a semiotic device of great importance to communicating the themes relating to the cycles of trauma as commented upon by the narrative of Netflix's *BoJack Horseman*. Thus, as water is acknowledged as "present in most environments, and the 'multiple sensory pathways'

engaging with [water] recur[s] (*sic*) crossculturally" an analysis of its semiotic use in narrative stands to reveal much about the society in which the narrative is created (Strang, 2005, p. 99). This critical importance to human life as well as the modes in which change is exemplified via water's amorphous state changes and flow allows for broader sociocultural themes of meaning to be gleaned from the shape and usage of water in narrative. These brief touchstones reveal the broader implications of water as semiotic motif throughout the series and tie very neatly into the English-speaking media use of water as seen clearly through references to Shakespeare, cultural shifts, and other ways in which water has carried an older and often darker connotative meaning along with its use in art via intertextual and metatextual reference to existing motifs. These meanings are laid bare through an examination of the historical context of water as used as semiotic motif in English-language art and the references seen throughout *BoJack Horseman* to said art. Table A outlines the general meaning assigned to water across geopolitical, sociocultural, and mytho-historical boundaries which when taken altogether leaves the globalized or "Western" media conception of water as best understood in today's contemporary context.

Research Questions

RQ1. How does BoJack Horseman use the semiotic motif of water to communicate themes of trauma and coping with said trauma?

RQ1a. How does BoJack Horseman use intertextual references to augment its use of water to communicate its themes of trauma?

RQ2. How does the portrayal of the water motif or symbol of the submerged woman act as shorthand for trauma in *BoJack Horseman?*

RQ3. Does the portrayal of trauma—in particular trauma related to parental figures and relationships—reveal underlying assumptions held for both men and women as representational objects to embody overarching sociocultural values?

RQ4. Is this use of semiotic shorthand effective in revealing struggles over gender, performance, and identity in enmity with the sociocultural, political, and ideological concerns with the role of women and feminine-coded people in society?

Methodology

This study serves as a critical semiotic analysis of *BoJack Horseman,* based in Roland Barthes' semiotic theory, to reveal how purposeful and meaningful usage of traditional semiotic motifs can be used as dynamic tools for exploring deeply personal and contemporary concerns. Critical semiotic analysis of visual elements of communication—particularly in the case of entertainment media—provides crucial insight into how art, animation, and narrative text aesthetically reproduce the overarching value systems of the hegemonic, dominating power structure in which the narrative is created. Oftentimes the semiotic motifs and codes built into the way narratives are constructed are unassuming or subliminal unless one knows the historical, mythological, and metatextual context of the imagery being used. In the case of this thesis, water is examined as a metaphysical representation of trauma and the modes in which trauma seeps into the lives as those that experience it. Water is used to connect the *BoJack Horseman* narrative to intertextual and metatextual meanings such as rebirth, healing, drowning, and power tied to water's importance to the human condition as well as a work solidified in a broader sociocultural context. A semiotics-focused approach to this analysis is critical in order to articulate the nuanced co-construction and use of iconic symbolic objects to convey a wealth of historical as well as currently socially-constructed meanings in not only animated, streaming media but across the wider fields of visual arts, literature, and audiovisual media communication.

An analysis of the opening sequence's use of water symbolism in the pool as well as a look into the symbolic use of water in association with Sara Lynn's Ophelia-esque story line will be combined with a discussion of the use of the water imagery and symbolism within dream sequences in order to synthesize and offer critical commentary on how water is used to communicate themes of trauma throughout the narrative *BoJack Horseman*. A total of 9 specific episodes will be analyzed. The episodes to be analyzed, divided by season, are as follows: season 1 episodes "The Telescope" and

“Downer Ending” as well as the season 2 episodes “Still Broken,” and “Escape from L.A.”. Season 3’s “That's Too Much Man,” “It’s You”, and “Fish Out of Water” as well as season 4’s “The Old Sugarman Place” will be examined.. The final specific episode to be analyzed will be season 6’s “The View from Halfway Down” and “Nice While It Lasted”. These episodes have been chosen as they depict characters such as the titular BoJack, as well as critically important characters such as Sarah Lynn, interacting with their trauma and heavily use the semiotic motifs of water to communicate nuanced ruminations on trauma. All episodes of BoJack Horseman are approximately 30 minutes in length and thus only semiotically significant uses of water were chosen to be examined.

The multiple overlapping, metatextual, and interconnected social nature of water imagery as an extension of the abstract conceptualization of trauma necessitates a meandering path through the assigned meanings as observed in narrative-action before being able to glimpse the wider implications these semiotic choices hold for society. Thus, the meaning interwoven in the betwixt and between—the liminality of the narrative at specific junctures or depicted experiences—guides my choice of episodes. Analysis and interpretation is necessary to grasp the liminal expression of water as traumatic representational object lest we mistake the sign for signified. The episode list may seem sporadic before actually experiencing the narrative firsthand or engaging with an analytical discussion of the portrayal of water within the show. The episodes to be used are summarized in Table B.

Implications & Discussion

Drinking in the Trauma, Water Symbolism in *BoJack Horseman*

> In this terrifying world, all we have are the connections that we make.
> —*BoJack Horseman*, "Fish Out of Water", Season 3, Episode 4

Water, due to this deep and tumultuous history associated with death, occupies a unique semiotic niche; encapsulating both generational fears and pain as well as traumas of the contemporary culture and society in which it is invoked. Water played a central role in the cultural and social lives of the English, Celtic, Germanic and Scandinavian cultures which ultimately laid the symbolic groundwork for meaning-making in regard to water in Western media. Water is inherently a connective force for social groups as a site of drinking water but also bathing, ritual cleansing, some funerary practices, and other daily necessities or household needs. In these cultures water and sites of water were often utilized for ritual practices related to funerary, mnemonic, or social customs associated with loss (Sanmark & Semple, 2010). These sites were meant as offerings to both the gods and the dead, as rites for funerals[3], and as a means for disposing of objects thought to have a "complex social biography" or existing social meaning for their associated communities (Sanmark & Semple, 2010, p. 51). Water is thus associated, throughout these cultures, with the liminal space between life and death as well as the idea of social bonds or traumas being able to resonate across boundaries. These meanings were reinforced throughout periods such as the Tudor Era wherein water became more heavily intertwined with death and the traumas that follow in its wake. The layers of historical record which have impacted and shaped the ways that water is utilized in both Shakespearean works and those such as BoJack Horseman therefore stand to offer a richer, more detailed understanding—not only of media that

3 There is also an association with horses and funerals, water, and death (Sanmark & Semple, 2010, Pp. 127-157). This association exists in the mythological and historical record in many iterations from the mythological Scottish Kelpie and Orcadian Nuckelavee to archaeological evidence of horse funerary sacrifices. Horses have been visualized as bridges between life and death as well as a heavy associated with bodies of water and, interestingly, associated with the death or spiriting away of young women.

utilizes water to communicate their own narrative themes of trauma but also—of the ways that generational traumas cannot be divorced from the semiotic imagery of water. In other words, the historical context of water as used in *BoJack Horseman* augments the existing narrative message and prompts deeper introspection regarding the meaning inherent to the imagery used as well as the implicit ways that traumatic historical occurrences have colored the meaning associated with symbols.

The semiotic motif of water thus builds on the concepts of oppression, trauma, and inherent danger as well as rebirth as established throughout the historical media record. In essence, water as semiotic motif has been primed to position consumers of a narrative in a favorable place to identify with the suffocating and inundating feeling of trauma as represented in particular by themes of drowning. This serves to allow the audience to better identify with the perspectives and "lived experience" of the characters engaging with the traumatic effect of the water motif within the narrative. Much of contemporary English-language media inherits symbolic as well as connotative meaning from the works attributed to William Shakespeare; this is evident by both the prominence of his name in the fields of literature, visual arts, and education as well as the references to his attributed texts found throughout contemporary media, such as *BoJack Horseman* (Shellard & Keenan, 2016). As with any collection of works which exerts an influence 400 years beyond the lifespan of its creator, the meanings that were implied by symbolic semiotic motifs such as water carry historical value and weight that may be imperceptible to modern audiences. These historical connotations and meanings directly intertwined with the daily lives of individuals living within the cultural context in which the referential works were created. As such, one must look to the lived experiences, dangers, and moral perspectives held by those existing during the period of Shakespeare's life and work: the Tudor Era of the British Isles (CE 1485-1603).

Water held an even more crucial and dangerous place in the lives of Tudor Era peoples, such as Shakespeare, whom were forced to seek out often treacherous bodies of water in all manner of weather conditions for the purpose of bathing, washing, consumption, and other aspects of daily life. The massive amount of labor required for water transport has largely been removed from 21st century notice. Deaths by drowning and other water related activity were incredibly common in the era of Shakespeare's life; from drowning while washing after work to slipping to their deaths while collecting water for use in the household. All peoples no matter their economic class or status faced a greater threat from water and drowning in the Tudor Era than that of the contemporary age, accounting for nearly half of all accidental deaths in contrast with relatively small numbers of deaths by drowning in the 21st century (Gunn & Gromelski, 2012). A study by Gunn and Gromelski found that between the period of 1558-1560 approximately 48% of accidental deaths were by drowning when compared to approximately 2% of accidental deaths recorded in the same area during 2010 (Gunn & Gromelski, 2012). This drastic difference in life experiences highlights the symbolic use of water as signifier of both death and trauma when taken into account the sheer number of accidental deaths by drowning that occurred during the period.

This overwhelming epidemic of death by drowning easily transitioned from lived traumas into semiotic motifs associated with death, suffocating social or cultural pressures, and themes of tragedy. According to academic inquiry, Shakespeare the author may have actually had firsthand experience with death by drowning. Tudor Era coroner's reports analyzed by Dr. Steven Gunn, as reported by Niall Boyce, detail the death by drowning of two young girls near Shakespeare's home town of Stratford-Upon-Avon during the playwright's adolescence. The deaths of Katherine Hamlet and Jane Shaxspere, the latter having drowned picking flowers in a manner eerily similar to the death of Ophelia as portrayed in *Hamlet,* provide circumstantial yet highly interesting details for analyzing the playwright's

work in regard to his use of water as semiotic motif for death. When taken into account with the themes of notable works such as *Hamlet, The Merchant of Venice, Richard III,* and *The Tempest* it can be clearly seen that water—in particular drowning—acts as shorthand for transformative experiences such as trauma or great changes which render the self or their world as alien (Boyce, 2012). Derivative works throughout the artistic and media sphere follow this trend of attaching water and death by water as supernatural, tragic, and deeply meaningful experiences. Thus, the echoes of Shakespeare's Tudor life and plays influences works such as *BoJack Horseman* which draw upon motifs of water as transformative and representative of an oppressive, deadly force under an unassuming surface and may even directly reference characters such as in Sarah Lynn's allegorical painting of herself as a fictionalized version of John Everett Millais's (1851-52) painting of the drowned Ophelia. *BoJack Horseman*'s narrative follows parallels to *Hamlet's* plot structure in other ways as well: not only is BoJack characterized as Sarah Lynn's much older lover, they both do nothing as the young woman spirals into dangerous but preventable situations. Like the titular Hamlet, BoJack seeks to ruminate in his suffering rather than accept the present reality. BoJack, in this dissociative escapism, imparts great pain unto those around him. BoJack drowns out the women in the narrative with both literal monologues and his unwillingness to meaningfully change his behavior, thus replicating patterns of traumatic violence that these women—and it is often the women characters that face the brunt of BoJack's trauma—have already experienced.

A Lamentation for Ophelia, Perpetuated Cycles of Trauma as Drowning Symbolism

Ophelia, Hamlet's mother says you were like a creature
incapable of comprehending your *own distress*,

because it was *native* to you. Is this why
when you felt the wet weight of the silk pulling you

under, you did nothing but sing?
And now, they claim your image—the beautiful dead woman.

You've become a common pornography,
a typical fantasy—a motionless woman's body.

Yes, perhaps Hamlet's mother watched you die
and did nothing; this drama was written by a man.

Not Woolf's imagined sister of Shakespeare,
she would have written you differently,

perhaps her Gertrude would have soiled
her robes to pull you out of the brook.

Would have risked her life to revive yours.
Would have given you a knife, led you

into her husband's bedroom, and together
like Judith and her handmaiden—

you would have taken his head.
—Anita Olivia Koester, Excerpt from "Constellation for Ophelia"

The submerged or drowned individual in Western or English-language media remains ubiquitous as a symbol for sociocultural oppression and the systematic nature of the trauma faced most often by women in largely patriarchal societies (Emmitt, 1993; Ross, 2004; Gunn & Gromelski, 2012). This association is clearly seen in film and thus easily translated to animation, like *BoJack Horseman,*

which draws connections between contemporary life and seminal pieces of English-language media such as the work of Shakespeare. *BoJack Horseman* calls attention to this semiotic association between the trauma of sociocultural oppression or alienation and that of drowning in the eleventh episode of the first season, "Downer Ending," wherein the titular BoJack connects the feeling of struggling to swim with that of feelings of oppression during a drug-induced hallucination. During the hallucination, BoJack sees an altered version of his copy of Hockney's "Portrait of an artist (pool with two figures)" wherein an image of BoJack is depicted drowning in the pool. BoJack turns to the hallucinated version of Diane Nguyen who has been accompanying him and inquires whether they should help the drowning horse while Diane replies, "No, he loves treading water." The hallucination then resumes as BoJack is increasingly distressed by what he witnesses. This clear acknowledgment of the unpleasant and distressing nature of "treading water" by BoJack further augments the audacity that he has to impose these same feeling upon his relationships with women in particular. The association between BoJack and swimming pools is made clear here, wherein the pool—as a personal, self-contained, constructed body of water—can be seen along with the meaning assigned to water to relate to BoJack's struggles with his own inner mind, past experiences, and personal relationships. It is of no coincidence that many instances of connection or attempted connection between BoJack and other characters occur at the poolside. The pool can be prominently seen throughout the drug-use scenes with Sarah Lynn and Todd —which are framed as a social bonding experience preceding the hallucinations—as well as many other scenes of connection or failed connections with prominent figures in BoJack's life.

At the intersection of water, swimming pool, and drowning symbolism lies episode 10 and Episode 11 of Season 3, "It's You" and "That's Too Much, Man!" respectively. In particular, BoJack's relationship with renowned in-universe publicist Ana Spanakopita expertly exemplifies the conception of trauma held by prominent scholars such as Cathy Caruth wherein the "traumatized person carries an

impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (Caruth, 1995, p. 5). BoJack Horseman as a character comes to exemplify the latter half of that statement, becoming a symbol of the generational and lived histories of trauma they have experienced rather than viewing themselves as able to seize control over their actions and often instead become, as Caruth speaking on Derrida notes, driven by “archival desire” to experience in a radical act of directed forgetting and remembering (Caruth, 2011). In an act of exerting control over one’s own narrative to avoid cognitive dissonance, a history is constructed on the obliteration of record and memory and the mind itself. This metaphor can be seen expertly in the episode “Time’s Arrow” wherein Beatrice’s past is explored and her traumas which have driven her cruel behavior are actively repressed and erased from ever being understood by her son, BoJack.

Following BoJack’s hiring of Ms. Ana Spanakopita, they engage in a whirlwind romance and several moments of utter vulnerability, in one of these conversational moments Spanakopita accounts to BoJack—after he comments that he feels he is drowning in expectations—a narrative of her past wherein she had driven her car into a lake (Season 3, Episode 10, “It’s You”). Spanakopita shares with BoJack that when you are drowning, you must breathe and take the time to navigate out of your situation. In the case of Spanakopita, she needed to follow the air bubbles to the surface to save herself from drowning. Ana Spanakopita’s dialogue with BoJack is as follows:

> BOJACK: It happened again. Why do I keep thinking things will make me happy? What is wrong with me?
>
> ANA: BoJack, don’t do this. Don’t fetishize your own sadness.
>
> BOJACK: Ugh, oh god. I’m drowning… I-I feel like I’m drowning.
>
> (BoJack clutches his throat in melodrama)

> ANA: BoJack, listen. When I was 17 years old I snuck out to a fraternity party. The roads were icy and I swerved into the lake. I came to underwater. It was dark and cold and I didn't even know which way was up. I thought for sure I was going to drown… and then I noticed when I opened my mouth the air bubbles floated up. And that's how I knew which way to swim.
>
> BOJACK: That is a terrifying story.
>
> ANA: BoJack, when you find yourself lost and disoriented and underwater and you don't know which way is up, it's important to breathe.

This narrative serves as an analogy for BoJack's streak of escapism and projection of his trauma onto others as he often refuses to do the work necessary to save himself. This is further supported by the opening theme and scene of the episode which directly follow this conversation, wherein BoJack faces the end of his relationship with Spanakopita due to the end of their Oscar-nomination campaign—BoJack was falsely nominated for an Oscar but did not receive one, sparking his renewed escapist tendencies and relapse. The lack of an ongoing "happy ending" or continuation with Spanakopita as well as discovering that the Oscar nomination was invalid leads BoJack to drive his car into his swimming pool in the middle of the Oscar-nomination celebration party thrown for him.

In acknowledgment of Spanakopita's narrative, BoJack watches the air bubbles rise to the surface and looks away before closing his eyes and giving up. He is rescued by his friend and fellow celebrity Mr. Peanutbutter, which only perpetuates BoJack's need to seek out others as a means of escaping his trauma rather than addressing it outright. In refusing to follow Spanakopita's advice to avoid both physically and metaphorically drowning, it is clearly shown that BoJack Horseman as a character has resigned himself to the perpetual, repeating cycle of generational trauma in refusing to break the cycle of escapism, alcoholism, and externalizing his pain through acting in impulsive or destructive manners.

BoJack Horseman intimately illustrates how the deeply misogynistic, patriarchal male gaze reduces women to the role of objects to be used such as vessels for projected male trauma or as a means to avoid accountability for their own healing. Continuing the theme of BoJack's spiral into self-destruction and projecting his own trauma onto relationships in his life—particularly with women—the following episode of "That's Too Much, Man!" explores the ways in which BoJack engages in this societal performance of misogyny and of deferring emotional labor to women characters and other with whom he has an unequal power dynamic. BoJack, following his drug-fueled meltdown and during an ill-fated attempt to redeem himself in the eyes of the women he has wronged returns to Ana Spanakopita once again in "That's Too Much Man" wherein the two discuss life, death, and accountability. The conversation is as follows:

> ANA: After I almost drowned, I decided I would never again be weaker than water, so I became a lifeguard. On my first day of training, my instructor told me that there are going to be times when you'll see someone in trouble. You're going to want to rush in there and do whatever you can to save them, but you have to stop yourself. Because there are some people you can't save. Cause those people will thrash and struggle, and try to take you down with them.
>
> BOJACK: (Long pause.) What does that have to do with me?

Ana Spanakopita says goodbye to BoJack in this episode because she sees him for what he truly is within the narrative: a drowning person that will "thrash and struggle, and try to take you down with them." This salient moment comes in the middle of "That's Too Much, Man!" following a montage of BoJack's shattered relationships and toxic influence on those that care for him. The episode opens with Sarah Lynn waking up happily underneath a painting of herself as the drowned Ophelia and notes on her calendar that she has been 9 months sober from drugs and alcohol. She is then interrupted by a call from BoJack asking her if she would like to go on a bender of sorts with him to which she quickly

accepts and begins drinking vodka readily. This drink itself a reference to the alcohol given to her as a child by BoJack—as revealed in the episode "Xerox of a Xerox"--as well as a ready metaphor for the corrupting, disorienting, and poisonous nature of BoJack's relationship with the other characters of the show represented increasingly through clear alcohol such as vodka: corrupting forces masquerading as water bottles or a loving relationship. Before the death of Sarah Lynn—though foreshadowed in the beginning of the episode by the Ophelia painting—at the hands of BoJack's impulsivity, neglect, and poor ability to fill the role of father figure, the two characters spent the bulk of "That's Too Much, Man!" reopening the wounds of the women BoJack has harmed in the past and in some instances further harming them in the process.

The trail of destruction that BoJack relives with Sarah Lynn begins with the both of them breaking into the home of BoJack's former ghost-writer Diane Nguyen, stealing her food, and finally breaking her wrist in a drunken escape of her home. After leaving Diane with a broken bone the two fail to find and apologize to Todd Chavez, harass Ana Spanakopita several times before their crucial lifeguard narrative, and wake his agent Princess Carolyn in the middle of the night with his loud and unconvincing apologies. Both BoJack and Sarah Lynn then track down the daughter of BoJack's ex-friend Charlotte, Penny, whom BoJack had sexually assaulted when she was a minor after having brought alcohol to her senior prom in "Escape from L.A." They then stalk her on her college campus, immediately reopening years of trauma when BoJack stumbles into her—ultimately a terrified Penny escapes through a crowd of fans that swarm the celebrities. Sarah Lynn comments in the car as the two drive away from Penny's college campus that Penny was probably healed and doing fine until BoJack reopened the wound, much to the chagrin of BoJack. Sarah Lynn then discovers the heroin, also named "BoJack Horseman" that BoJack had stashed in his glovebox in a previous episode. This is the heroin that would end Sarah Lynn's life and prove just how deeply selfish and willing to inflict trauma unto

others that BoJack Horseman is as a character. Following a series of conversations wherein Sarah Lynn exposes that she hates her identity as a celebrity and feels robbed of a childhood as well as her real dreams where she is drowned out by BoJack, he convinces her to go to a planetarium with him—a location Sarah Lynn had requested to visit multiple times in the drug-fueled tour of BoJack's traumatized victims—wherein he continues to ignore her and monologue over her final words: "I want to be an architect."

BoJack pontificates to Sarah Lynn that there is nothing to worry about in life in a real sense because it does not matter what one did in the past or how one will be remembered, all that matters is "this precious moment that we are sharing together." He asks if she agrees, but she cannot respond. He nudges her and says her name multiple times in increasing urgency as the episode fades to black, but Sarah Lynn never responds.

Ultimately, BoJack's selfish prioritization of his own feelings and quest for redemption cost Sarah Lynn her life—an event foreshadowed by her association with the character of Ophelia. BoJack again prioritizes himself even after realizing Sarah Lynn is dying, waiting 17 minutes before calling an ambulance in response to her drug overdose as revealed in Biscuits Braxby's interviews with BoJack in "Xerox of a Xerox". An attempt to secure plausible deniability regarding his own involvement cost a young woman her life and simple association with BoJack, his unhealed traumas, and escapist tendencies has cost countless others their peace. BoJack's depiction as a wealthy actor frame the character perfectly as a vector for trauma, as Western society has a tendency to be willing to allow men in positions of social, cultural, or financial power to inflict widespread trauma onto others—in particular women and minorities—with impunity. Thus, BoJack Horseman offers a wealth of sociocultural knowledge for further analysis from the fields of trauma theory and feminist theory. Sarah

Lynn, Princess Carolyn, and Diane Nguyen—as well as many other characters—struggle with commonly traumatic sociocultural issues faced by women or feminine-coded persons.

Time's Arrow Flies Forward. Sites of Trauma, Experience, and Memory in Entertainment Media

People who lacked emotional engagement in childhood, men and women alike, often can't believe that someone would want to have a relationship with them just because of who they are.
They believe that if they want closeness, they must play a role that always puts the other person first
[italics added by thesis author for emphasis].
—Lindsay C. Gibson, PsyD, from Chapter 1 of *Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents* (2015)

I believe approaching BoJack Horseman's portrayal of trauma through water can be best discussed using ludonarrative as a tool to examine the cognitive dissonance that can occur when play as experience and the narrative defined by the institutional entity do not align. What I mean by this is that ludonarrative, in the context of entertainment media—such as *BoJack Horseman*—can be understood as a radical act of re-experiencing the self via consumption of simulated experiences. The consumption of media allows one to "play" with core concepts of identity and other abstract thought patterns without fear of cognitive dissonance or traumatic injury to the ego. This phenomenon can be explained succinctly via the notion of absence-presence. The Chicago School of Media Theory defines absence-presence as follows:

> ...being is not inexplicable or transcendent, but exists within a framework or state. Therefore the definitions of presence and absence explicitly rely upon the states within which they are found. Some examples of these states could be the world, images, and representations (Bell, n.d.).

Thus, it can be understood that the "realness" of a situation is subjective and impacts the meaningfulness of the experiences consumed or thoughts provoked in a more nebulous way than one may be persuaded to assume. Namely, the self is able to re-experience, re-interpret, and re-process trauma as well as other emotionally charged experiences through the consumption of stories, histories, or narratives by process of self-insertion into these vehicles of simulated experience. This is primarily

accomplished via transportation into the narrative world in some sense or identification with the characters or situations portrayed in a given narrative.

This desire to experience the self through consumption of media seems to stem from the deeply socially neglectful and narcissistic nature of the overarching capitalist social structure or, in even simpler terms, the ritualistic desire to replicate the dominating systems of power—to adopt the thought processes of Marx, Baudrillard, Carol Duncan, and Arendt. Repeated motifs, particularly regarding trauma, stand to reveal a great deal about the ways in which trauma in both processed and perpetuated by a culture obsessed with consuming and creating content especially in regard to hegemonic power structures as well as issues of structural inequality.

We, as academics and as lay-consumers of media, can look to media to inform us on whether our experiences with our society resonate with the values it seems to uphold. We must then ask ourselves what this does to those of us existing within it. How are we drowned by our society and do we offer help or do we watch as they sink into the depths, as have Ophelia and Sarah Lynn? What are we willing to do in the face of rampant consumption of traumatic media if not confront what this may spell out for the values and needs of our society as well as highlighting which facets of our culture are deeply rotted and in need of immediate change. Therefore, we must engage with the ultimate message of *BoJack Horseman* in regards to trauma and its impact on the ability to form meaningful relationships to not only the self—one's own identity—but also to others. That being said, the following episodes perfectly encapsulate BoJack's inability to establish healthy relationships with others due to both his own and his mother's generational traumas; "The Old Sugarman Place," "Xerox of a Xerox," "The View From Halfway Down," and "Nice While it Lasted." These episodes all utilize water as shorthand for the trauma BoJack has suffered as well as inflicted upon others in a manner that is poignant.

"The Old Sugarman Place" will serve as a focusing lens for the themes that *BoJack Horseman* tackles regarding trauma and social connection with the self and others. The narrative of this episode involves indirectly addressing generational trauma as well as reveals the sheer amount of work necessary to "patch up all the leaks." BoJack flees the consequences of his actions in Hollywoo and elsewhere and turns to his maternal grandparents' derelict summer-home in Harper's Landing[4], Michigan wherein a family legacy of trauma is metaphorically healed—if only a beginning—as well as confronts hollowed life of an individual trapped in their traumatic past as a literal fly on the wall.

At the start of the episode[5] BoJack meets Eddy, a common fly and handyman who notices the disrepair to the Sugarman home. As BoJack attempts to fix the leaks family home—many scenes involve water from the pipes or in the form of the lake which the Sugarman's summer-home overlooks—BoJack is able to experience both growth towards healing relationships and past traumatic wounds but also learns that individuals can become trapped at certain stages of grief, unable to do anything but perpetuate and relive their trauma. Despite being a near-ritualistic site of trauma for the Sugarman and Horseman families, this is ironically the place that BoJack helps Beatrice remember as a means of escaping the confusion of her dementia in the few acts of tenderness towards her shown in the series. This episode ends with BoJack saving Eddy from near drowning—reminiscent of his talk with Anna Spanakopita—wherein Eddy laments being saved and curses BoJack for not letting him drown; perfectly exemplifying the essence of an individual trapped drowning in the rumination of their own trauma and their willingness to thrash despite being saved.

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4 A reference to "Harper," BoJack's hallucinated child with the love of his young life, Charlotte. Interestingly enough, the seahorse baby seen in "Fish Out of Water" seems to share a similar base model with Harper. This plays along purposefully and perfectly with the association with all three characters and water imagery as a stand-in for the loss those relationships represent for BoJack.

5 An episode which features parallel storytelling with both the trauma faced due to Sarah Lynn's passing as well as Honey Sugarman (Beatrice Horseman's mother) also has her tragic mania and subsequent lobotomy performed for the audience alongside Beatrice's flashes of tortured childhood. This childhood is further expanded upon in "Time's Arrow" wherein Beatrice's memories—many of which features the color blue and fountains—are examined narratively.

The fourth episode of Season 3, “Fish Out of Water,” perfectly encapsulates the ways in which isolation can both perpetuate toxic cycles of dissociative escapism or prompt self-reflective healing depending on environmental factors. When BoJack is subjected to a trip to Pacific Ocean City—reminiscent of Japan as depicted in *Lost in* Translation (2003) a film to which this episode is often compared—wherein this profound affect that the isolation from connection made suddenly apparent through a foreign setting, so too is this the case for *BoJack* Horseman. Pacific Ocean City is modeled after East Asian metropolitan areas and is conveniently located at the bottom of the Pacific Ocean, inhabited by aquatic anthropomorphized animal people. Facing the rejection of a surrogate mother figure in the producer Kelsey Jannings, BoJack unsuccessfully spends the episode attempting to apologize to her while also tending for a lost child—a baby seahorse—left without its parents. This metaphor for caring for the wounded inner child combined with seeking approval from a mother figure as well as themes of isolation under water seems obvious on paper, however the nature of an experientially driven narrative may often mean that the forest is missed for the trees. That is to say that the meaning tied to the imagery used may require multiple viewings in order to tie together subtle plot threads and emotional themes.

BoJack ends the episode, after helping save the baby seahorse, better understanding his ability to bring good into the lives of those he connects with through good deeds and avoiding old patterns of escapism through alcohol or other substances. BoJack attempts to write his feelings down for Jannings, lamenting that “In this terrifying world, all we have are the connections that we make.” The following scene where BoJack attempts to give the note to Jannings cements the concept of a traumatic environment or upbringing or experience eroding one’s ability to socially connect and communicate with others as BoJack’s note dissolves shortly before he discovers he is able to easily speak the entire time—a crucial part of this episode was that it was a “silent episode” and featured no dialogue until the

end. BoJack then leaves Pacific Ocean City, an underwater site of connection, and returns to old patterns despite having a burgeoning sense of self-growth and change being needed. Unfortunately, the echoes of past trauma and emotional neglect lead BoJack to perpetuate the cycles of pain with which he is most familiar.

These routines of familiarity only bringing about a perpetual cycle of trauma is a consistent theme in *BoJack Horseman* and one that continues most poignantly in the final season of the series as well as in the aforementioned "Fish Out of Water," "Time's Arrow," and "Old Sugarman Place". The final season also contains themes that have direct applications to the field of communications, sociology, anthropology, and any other field which seeks to better understand how both meaning and behavior—particularly violent, traumatic, or hegemonic values—are ingrained into the media both created, consumed, and replicated by a society. This is of particular concern in a post-Web 2.0 society of instantaneous communication and interconnection. The very introductory sequence of *BoJack Horseman*'s sixth season engages with this idea of images revealing deeper rot within society itself, flipping through a montage of BoJack's most traumatic—nearly all water-related—incidents with others with whom he attempted to have a relationship or genuine connection.

Memory and the Cycles of Trauma. Rising Like a Terrible Fish

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
Whatever I see I swallow immediately
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
I am not cruel, only truthful ,
The eye of a little god, four-cornered.
Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is part of my heart. But it flickers.
Faces and darkness separate us over and over.

Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
Searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.
—Sylvia Plath, *The Mirror*

The sixth season of *BoJack Horseman* features an opening sequence that is hauntingly darker than those of previous seasons. The opening sequence not only features a film burn effect, but also a sort of slideshow montage through all of BoJack's traumatic memories of failed relationships; all locations in the montage are sites of trauma associated heavily with water and those, particularly women, that he had traumatized throughout the show. First featured is the night sky overlooking BoJack's mansion—the night sky being heavily associated with Sarah Lynn's death at the Observatory —followed by a fade into a scene from *Horsin' Around* zooming in on younger Sarah Lynn while an image of young BoJack stares onward at the audience. A distorted version of the theme song plays over the haunted opening sequence as we are forced to relive all of BoJack's shame and guilt just as he does. The montage continues, showing Herb Kazzaz dying of cancer overlooking the sea; this scene is

followed quickly by the Tesuque water tower where BoJack and Penny shared an emotional moment before attempted statutory rape.

As the water imagery and connection to death and trauma grows, we are shown a flash of an individual overdosing on the heroin strain named after BoJack with the graffiti "BoJack Kills" on the wall behind him. The meaning is abundantly clear. A scene from "Fish Out of Water" acts as a fade-out before images of the derelict Sugarman Place fill the screen, followed by Beatrice in hospice, and her coffin shortly after. The set of a television show BoJack was starring in—before assaulting his supporting actress in a drug-induced stupor—is the next scene to fill the screen. We then return to the Observatory, framed in stars, and site of Sarah Lynn's untimely death at the hands of BoJack's negligence. BoJack then falls backwards from the Observatory deck into the darkness—foreshadowing for things to come at the end of the series—before plunging into his swimming pool and sinking to the bottom and the opening sequence return to the normal turn of events.

It is clear by sixth season's opening montage of imagery, departure from the established opening sequence norms, and heavy use of water motifs paired with sites of trauma that *BoJack Horseman* is a narrative deeply invested in communicating the connection between water, death, and trauma—particularly trauma caused by BoJack himself due to his unwillingness to confront his own past before dire consequences arise.

The convergence of death and water symbolism is vividly apparent in the episode "The View From Halfway Down," named after a poem narrated by Secretariat describing the feeling of horror he felt as he plummeted into a river committing suicide. "The View From Halfway Down" is a very dark, deeply depressing, and haunting penultimate episode of the show.

A full experience of the animation, musical score, and tone of the narrative itself are necessary to fully capture the essence of the episode, however, I will give an overview of the myriad of ways that

“The View From Halfway Down” uses the water imagery and traumatic narrative elements interwoven seamlessly throughout *BoJack Horseman* in a final crescendo of metaphoric analogy as exemplified in Table C.

A Necessary Reckoning and the End to Cycles of Trauma

Attentive and reliable emotional relationships are the basis of a child's sense of security.

...

Parental neglect and rejection in childhood can adversely affect self-confidence and relationships in adulthood, as people repeat old, frustrating patterns and then blame themselves for not being happy. Even adult success doesn't completely erase the effects of parental disconnection earlier in life [italics added by thesis author for emphasis].

—Lindsay C. Gibson, PsyD, from Chapter 1 of *Adult Children of Emotionally Immature Parents* (2015)

As revealed time and time again throughout the series, BoJack was profoundly neglected as a child in the same way that his mother and her mother before him were also neglected in their close personal relationships. This neglect has made him blind to the emotional, social, and personal needs of others outside of a means of satisfying an internal—often narcissistic—desire. This behavior ultimately leads BoJack on a destructive, cyclical, perpetuating pattern of seeking out fulfillment through others using the only skill he was ever praised for as a child: performance. This lack of reliability in his narration of events and lack of reliability as a character within the narrative itself reflects his lifestyle of performance. His inability to truly be vulnerable with those he connect with is also deeply rooted in this performative nature, as reflected in the death-burlesque-show featured in "The View From Halfway Down," wherein his previously deceased friends and family sang and danced for BoJack's amusement before being consumed by black, tar-like water. BoJack was profoundly affected by and, in turn, profoundly impacted each individual that was present in the hallucination witnessed in "The View From Halfway Down" and his current relationships would soon share this fate.

Thus, the final episode of *BoJack Horseman* is aptly titled "Nice While it Lasted". The episode itself covers the farewells that BoJack's friends have bid him during his time in prison for previous crimes. It is also the episode following BoJack's attempted suicide. The family that had moved into his

previous residence discovers him floating in the swimming pool and he is rushed to the hospital. The telltale heartbeats on the monitor that ended the previous echo are called back upon as we see BoJack has survived. He is then sentenced to prison for breaking and entering—as a result of the attempted suicide in the family's pool. Following prison, BoJack discovers his friends have indeed moved on without him. This is especially poignant at Princess Carolyn's "wedding" where it is revealed that this is merely the industry ceremony, not the intimate ceremony for friends and family to which BoJack was not invited. This sets off a cascade of farewells between all of the major cast members and BoJack, with Diane's goodbye being the longest and hardest to listen to from an emotional standpoint. He had deeply traumatized her with the phone-call threatening—and seemingly succeeding—with a suicide attempt by drowning. An excerpt from Diane's conversation with BoJack regarding the night of his attempted suicide and subsequent hallucination is as follows:

> DIANE: I wish I had my phone so I could play you the last voicemail you left me. Did you remember that you left me that voicemail?
>
> I thought you were sober. You told me you were sober. And things were good in my life and I was thinking about my future. And I woke up one morning. And I had this voicemail.
>
> You were happy in the voicemail. You sounded happy. Or slightly sardonic or glibly nihilistic, or however you describe the feeling you get that's the closest to the emotion normal people call happy. And you were clearly intoxicated and you were talking about swimming.
> "I'm going swimming," you said "Since nothing matters anyway and nobody cares about me, I might as well go swimming, right? Call me back if you don't want me to go swimming. Otherwise, I'm just gonna assume you don't care."

I thought you were dead. For seven hours I couldn't get in touch with anyone, and I was sure you were dead, and it was my fault for leaving you. For feeling good. For not worrying. When I left for Chicago, you promised me you were gonna be okay. But, I made you promise that. Was I selfish for believing you?

When I found out you weren't dead, I was angry. I was relieved, but I was also angry that I'd given you that power over me. I was angry at you for a really long time.

I wish I could have been the person you thought I was. The person who would save you.

BOJACK: That was never your job.

DIANE: Then why did you always make me feel like it was?

Diane is utterly defeated as well as furious in this conversation with BoJack. He felt he had to literally drown himself rather than confront his traumas in order to grow. Others needed to let him heal through his own pain or he would repeat patterns of abuse and neglect that he had learned—despite hurting someone very deeply in this very process—especially if these individuals served to support BoJack emotionally in a way he had not experienced as a child. He had to parent himself—even if structure was forcibly applied to facilitate this—to confront his abusive behaviors, unfortunately, through acts of radically impacting others.

Diane's conversation with BoJack reveals a deep seated rot at the heart of Western society: the lack of accountability held for the impact that unhealed trauma, narcissistic abuse, and the abuse of

women has upon generations as well as the powerful actors in the dominant power system. The culture that creates monstrous individuals also needs monstrous individuals to be unable to heal in order to facilitate the cycle. Thus, consequences are difficult to bring to those with the financial, political, or social influence to avoid accountability are able to—just as BoJack did—just that. The media and other forms of visual culture that a given society creates will reflect this absence-presence ideology that drives the creation as well as replication of power inequalities via symbols. *BoJack Horseman* reveals just how deeply anti-feminist, traumatic, and narcissistic the society—a fictionalized version of the United States of America—that protects and lauds monstrous individuals must be, in and of itself. This highlights the need for an end to such behavior before any future healing for the victims is possible. Abuse and violence, even if the result of trauma and abuse or violence themselves, are not to be tolerated in a society prioritizing self-growth and mentally healthy individuals.

Conclusion

BoJack Horseman as a series revealed the myriad of nuanced manners in which individuals can heal or cope in both healthy, unhealthy, dissociative, and destructive ways. The variety of options and choices examined by the narrative can be understood as instances of ludonarrative experience or simulated experience wherein the audience is able to "play" with the concepts represented. This play involves comparing and contrasting the portrayed experiences with the beliefs and behaviors of the self in an act of self-reflection or interpretation. Analysis of core semiotic elements such as water, in their historical contexts, provides crucial insight into how these experiences simulated through media consumption play a role in determining the sociocultural construction of our society.

Western society has a tendency to be willing to allow—particularly masculine-coded—individuals with social, cultural, or financial power to inflict widespread trauma onto others with impunity and this is reflected in the narrative of *BoJack Horseman.* Such a depiction offers an abundance of sociocultural content ripe for further analysis from the fields of trauma theory, feminist theory, and other communications fields. Sarah Lynn, Princess Carolyn, and Diane Nguyen—as well as many other characters—struggle with commonly traumatic sociocultural issues faced by women or feminine-coded persons, for example. Addressing the toxic masculinity inherent to existence under a patriarchal society—or society emerging from under the foot of previous patriarchal rule—will involve a radical acknowledgment of emotional suppression and repression of the self in favor of capitalistic values which present as cognitive dissonance. These core themes of many theoretical dialogues as well as burgeoning entertainment media narratives that may be discussed with seemingly 'simple' symbols such as water—in a way that is unassuming to a viewer as well as seemingly familiar—present astounding opportunities for future academic inquiry and social good. It is for these reasons that I engaged in this alternative paradigm analysis. Examining the ritualistic use of water as semiotic motif

in narratives, such as *BoJack Horseman*, revealed that water acts as a ludonarrative device to simulate experience. Holistic analysis of experiences with trauma via the consumption of entertainment media like Netflix's *BoJack Horseman*, I believe, stands to offer crucial insight into how we as a society engage in 'play' or simulated experience when consuming narratives—rather than simply consumption of spectacle in a purely aesthetic sense—as a means of constructing as well as reaffirming the core "truths" guiding the overarching values of the hegemonic social-system.

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Appendix

Table A. The "Water Table" or Various Meanings Assigned to Water

Geopolitical Location	**Assigned Meaning**
Near Eastern/Mesopotamian/ Egyptian/Abrahamic Religions	• chthonic (underworld) associations • immortality, liminality, rebirth • death, floods, drowning • passage of time, cyclical rebirth of the day and night cycle *Desert societies heavily tied to rivers and rain seasons, thus water becomes tied to thoughts of cleansing, rebirth, and divinity as well as death.*
East Asian	• association with primordial chaos or creation myths • origin of all earthly things • societies heavily tied to rivers, oceans, and rain seasons *Island nations like Japan (or the UK in the case of Europe), peninsular nations like Korea, and nations dominated by massive rivers—as well as requiring large amounts of water for agriculture—like China also placed a heavy significance upon water as a symbol tied to thoughts of cleansing, rebirth, and divinity as well as death.*
European	• Association with Phlegmatic Humor, drowned women, funerals, death, rebirth, liminal space, dreams, horses • transportation, societal trauma, shapeshifters
Greco-Roman/ Mediterranean	• Chthonic (underworld) associations • traumatic chasing/rape of women, illegitimate offspring, divine births • isolation, travel • divinity, Gods and Goddesses, adventure, war
Latin American/Indigenous American	• Association with shapeshifters • drowning, death, liminality, trauma, drowned women (La Llorona)

Table A. The "Water Table" or Various Meanings Assigned to Water

Table B. The Episodes Chosen

Season & Episode No.		**Episode Name**
Season 1	Episode 08 Episode 11	“The Telescope” “Downer Ending”
Season 2	Episode 03 Episode 11	“Still Broken” “Escape from L.A.”
Season 3	Episode 04 Episode 10 Episode 11	“Fish Out of Water” “It’s You” “That’s Too Much, Man”
Season 4	Episode 02	“The Old Sugarman Place”
Season 6	Episode 15 Episode 16	“The View From Halfway Down” “Nice While it Lasted”
Miscellaneous Season 6	Episode 12	“Xerox of a Xerox”

Table B. The Episodes Chosen

Table C. Water & Death Imagery in "The View From Halfway Down"

Semiotic Motifs	**Meaning Associated or Symbolism**
<u>Characters</u> • Beatrice Horseman • Butterscotch Horseman/Secretariat • Crackerjack Horseman • Corduroy Jackson Jackson • Herb Kazzaz • Sarah Lynn	Their deaths or traumas are all related to some form of water imagery, death by drowning or suffocation, death by metaphorical drowning (oppression or expectations or trauma). *As noted throughout this thesis, death and water are very tightly interlinked symbolically.*
Black Water/Leaking Roof of Beatrice Sugarman's Mansion	• This represents the rot and leaking trauma within BoJack's life as well as his active drowning outside of the hallucination within the episode. The black color seems to be a reference to Charlotte's comment about BoJack being like a tar pit in earlier seasons. Every mention by a character present in the death-hallucination of a trauma is met with a drop of the black water. Towards the end of the episode, the characters and entire screen are consumed by the tar-like liquid.
Hydrangeas	• Hydrangeas are named for the Greek word for water (*hydros*) and require a massive amount of it to grow well. The color of the hydrangea flower is also determined by the pH of the water in the soil, furthering the connection. • The hydrangea is also toxic, proving fatal in some cases. • The ties between water and trauma within *BoJack Horseman* when paired with the use of hydrangeas growing out of control and blocking exits as BoJack attempts to escape a metaphorical version of death is fitting. *As noted throughout this thesis, death and water are very tightly interlinked symbolically.*
Bird Trapped in the Living Room	This semiotic motif signifies death in the family among many European and European-American cultural groups, usually by means of folk-mysticism. *As noted throughout this thesis, death and water are very tightly interlinked symbolically.*
'Drowned BoJack' Version of Hockney's Painting	• BoJack is drowned, floating dead, in a painting otherwise depicting him treading water in its real world counterpart.
BoJack's "Last Supper"	• Water bottle association with Sarah Lynn's death

Table C. Water & Death Imagery in "The View From Halfway Down"