

Article

“You Don’t Have Anybody”: Failed Relationship, Guilt, and Psychological Cycles in BoJack Horseman

Alexandria Austin*

Faculty of Arts and Science, Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada

* Correspondence: 20avja@queens.ca

Abstract: BoJack Horseman offers a psychologically rich exploration of how unresolved trauma, guilt, and maladaptive interpersonal patterns sustain cycles of self-destruction. Through an analysis of BoJack Horseman’s relationships with Todd Chavez, Herb Kazzaz, and Sarah Lynn, this paper examines how failed relationships both reflect and reinforce underlying psychological vulnerabilities, including unresolved childhood trauma, narcissistic tendencies, abandonment anxiety, and chronic shame. Drawing on psychological theories of trauma, cognitive distortions, moral disengagement, and interpersonal functioning, the paper argues that BoJack’s repeated attempts to seek redemption or alleviate guilt fail because they prioritize self-presentation over genuine accountability. Rather than presenting redemption as inevitable, the series demonstrates that unresolved psychological wounds can perpetuate destructive relational cycles unless individuals confront both the consequences of their actions and the underlying mechanisms driving them. Ultimately, BoJack Horseman portrays failed relationships not simply as narrative tragedies but as psychological case studies of guilt, emotional stagnation, and the difficult process of personal change.

Keywords: BoJack Horseman; trauma; guilt; interpersonal psychology; self-destruction; moral disengagement; emotional regulation; psychological cycles

1. Introduction

"One day, you are gonna look around and realize you don't have anybody," Herb Kazzaz angrily stated, someone whom BoJack betrayed years ago in “Let’s Find Out” (Season 2, Episode 8) after Herb sees BoJack’s selfish and destructive behaviors firsthand and decides to warn him of the potential future if he continues down this path. The animated TV series *BoJack Horseman* is set in a world where humans and animals live together. The viewer follows BoJack eighteen years after his fame from the popular 1990s TV sitcom *Horsin’ Around* has dried up.

Relationships are crucial in physical, emotional and psychological development, influencing our emotional resilience and self-destructive tendencies. Peer relationships shape our sense of identity, self-worth, and emotional regulation. When these connections are positive, they can serve as a source of support and growth, providing individuals with validation and a sense of belonging. However, when these relationships are marked by dysfunction, betrayal, or codependency, they can contribute to cycles of guilt, avoidance, and self-destruction. Understanding the balance between these dynamics provides insight into how to maintain meaningful and supportive interpersonal connections. This dual nature of relationships is particularly evident in the character BoJack Horseman from *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020). This show presents an unflinching exploration of depression, addiction, and the long-term consequences of unresolved trauma. Through an analysis of BoJack’s self-destructive behaviors, maladaptive coping mechanisms, and interpersonal dynamics, this paper examines how his unresolved guilt, substance dependence, and deeply ingrained cognitive distortions perpetuate cycles of harm, both to himself and to those around him.

At its core, *BoJack Horseman* is a show about the complexities of human (and anthropomorphic animal) emotions, focusing on themes of regret, self-worth, addiction, and the lasting impact of past decisions. The series blends dark humor with deep existential and psychological questions, portraying BoJack as a deeply flawed character struggling to break free from patterns of self-destruction. It highlights that personal growth is possible but often hindered by deep-seated fears and unhealthy coping mechanisms. The show's raw and sometimes surreal storytelling forces viewers to confront difficult questions about morality, redemption, and whether actual change is achievable. Though it is essential to acknowledge that BoJack Horseman is a fictional show whose characters do not exist, the psychological themes it explores align with real-world principles of human

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behavior and mental health. Even though BoJack himself is half man, half horse, as his name suggests – “Horseman”- analyzing BoJack through the lens of psychological research allows the audience to gain a deeper understanding of how peer relationships impact mental well-being in the real world.

Discussions about *BoJack Horseman* often focus on its portrayal of depression, addiction, and existential despair. Many analyses emphasize the tragedy of BoJack’s life and his struggle to break free from self-destructive cycles. However, while much of the discourse highlights BoJack’s trauma and the external circumstances that shaped his behavior (Slyt 2021; Cartoon Detective 2025), this paper shifts the focus to his interpersonal relationships and how they both reflect and perpetuate his psychological struggles. While BoJack’s actions are often viewed as the inevitable result of his past pain, this paper argues that his relationships actively contribute to his continued self-destruction, reinforcing his cognitive distortions and justifications for harmful behaviour.

To explore this argument, this paper will examine the key relationships that define BoJack’s character and influence his decisions. The first section will analyze his friendship with Todd Chavez, particularly during “Zoes and Zeldas” (Season 1, Episode 4), in which BoJack sabotages Todd’s rock opera to maintain his dependency. The second section will delve into his relationship with Herb Kazzaz, as seen in “The Telescope” (Season 1, Episode 8), in which BoJack’s betrayal and subsequent attempt at reconciliation illustrate his ongoing struggle with guilt and self-interest. The third section will examine his relationship with Sarah Lynn, especially the catastrophic consequences of their dynamic highlighted in “That’s Too Much, Man!” (Season 3, Episode 11), and “Xerox of a Xerox” (Season 6, Episode 12), culminating in his confrontation with his regrets in “The View from Halfway Down” (Season 6, Episode 15). Finally, the paper will discuss what these patterns suggest about BoJack’s psychological state and future, both of which remain unexplored after the show ends. By analyzing these relationships and the underlying psychological mechanisms, this paper seeks to demonstrate how BoJack’s interactions with others serve as both a reflection of and a catalyst for his internal struggles. His repeated cycles of self-sabotage, guilt, and avoidance highlight the devastating impact of unresolved psychological trauma, emphasizing the importance of healthy relationships and self-awareness in the journey toward well-being.

2. Keeping Todd Close: The Art of Sabotage

Introduced as BoJack’s aimless yet optimistic roommate, Todd Chavez quickly becomes a central figure in BoJack’s emotional ecosystem. BoJack’s friendship with Todd illustrates a toxic codependency that feeds BoJack’s deepest psychological wounds. BoJack is a character who desperately desires connection and understanding, yet routinely undermines his relationships by ignoring boundaries, actively self-sabotaging, and consuming excessive amounts of drugs (Johnny 2 Cellos 2021). BoJack’s ignoring of boundaries is no more evident than with Todd in “Zoes and Zeldas” (Season 1, Episode 4), in which BoJack, terrified of abandonment, sabotages Todd’s up-and-coming success to keep him tethered. Todd finds purpose and joy in developing a rock opera in this episode, even attracting potential investors. Instead of supporting his friend’s growth, BoJack feels threatened by Todd’s independence and cruelly belittles Todd’s project, joking that it is “worse than a hundred September 11s” – until Todd loses confidence, “Zoes and Zeldas” (Season 1, Episode 4). BoJack even pretends to mentor Todd while plotting to derail the rock opera by exploiting Todd’s old video game addiction. By the episode’s end, BoJack’s scheme succeeds: Todd abandons the project after a relapse into gaming, remaining safe by BoJack’s side. This storyline is the first significant demonstration of BoJack selfishly dragging others down to avoid being alone, with Todd becoming the first, but not the only, victim (Rahman 2021). BoJack’s relationship with Todd thus establishes a template of interpersonal damage¹ that will repeat throughout the series.

BoJack’s sabotage of Todd’s aspirations is driven by an intense fear of abandonment and a dysfunctional, one-sided form of codependency. Having Todd around provides BoJack with a constant companion who validates his existence; BoJack cannot bear the thought of Todd moving out or on. Rather than communicate this fear, BoJack exerts control over Todd under the pretense of “helping” him. In truth, BoJack’s narcissistic and insecure tendencies compel him to ensure Todd remains dependent. As Nima (Rahman 2021) describes, BoJack essentially takes Todd under his wing in the guise of mentorship, which is a way to ensure that Todd continues to be entirely dependent on him by keeping him close so that BoJack never has to be alone (Rahman 2021). This behavior reflects a toxic codependent dynamic² in which BoJack acts as a manipulative provider, and Todd unwittingly assumes the role of a dependent. BoJack’s behavior is a distorted version of this: he does not enable Todd’s positives, but rather his weaknesses, deliberately keeping Todd in a state of dependency. By pulling Todd back down whenever he shows signs of personal progress, BoJack is acting out of a desperate logic: if Todd needs him, he will not leave him. Such fear-based control is a hallmark of BoJack’s relationships, not just with Todd. As (Rahman 2021) observes, BoJack’s mental illness (notably depression and trauma) manifests in dragging down others with him, with Todd as the earliest example, in the order of show sequence, of this tendency. By infantilizing Todd and sabotaging his autonomy, BoJack feeds his own need to feel needed, and this need is rooted in BoJack’s terror of being alone. Psychologically, BoJack reinforces a traumatic schema³: he believes everyone will eventually leave or disappoint him. So, he preemptively engineers scenarios to keep them from leaving (even if it means stunting their personal growth). The tragic irony is that BoJack perpetrates a form of abandonment to avoid abandonment—abandoning the best interests of those he cares about, thus undermining the trust that bonds them.

Critically, BoJack’s wound – the deep psychological damage and loneliness underlying his outward behavior – drives this cycle. The show’s creator, Raphael Bob-Waksberg, noted that every main character has a core wound impeding their happiness,

¹ Shaped by the various disciplines of psychology and public health, interpersonal damage refers to any behaviour or action that causes physical, emotional, or psychological damage to another person within the context of a relationship. This including anything from abuse to manipulation, any form of harm that compromises trust and safety through these connections (Social Sci LibreTexts 2025).

² Toxic codependent dynamics based off the term “codependency” created in the 1950’s by Alcoholics Anonymous that describe a relational pattern that is characterized by an excessive reliance on another person for emotional or psychological needs, which often leads to an imbalance of power and loss of self-identity (Bacon et al. 2018)

³ A traumatic schema, a theory shaped by many contributors in the field, like Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet – as well as the founder of Schema Therapy, Jeffery Young, can be defined as a set of deeply ingrained beliefs, emotions, and behavioural patterns that develop in response to a traumatic event (Giroux 2023).

often sustained by their perceptions and actions (Writer 2019). BoJack's wound is his profound sense of unworthiness and fear of being unloved, stemming from an abusive childhood and years of hollow fame, and these feelings form a negative self-concept that BoJack cannot easily escape. Rather than confront his insecurity or risk vulnerability, BoJack seeks to control his interpersonal environment.

BoJack's interference in Todd's rock opera is a textbook case of relational sabotage rooted in psychological distress. It demonstrates how BoJack's internal struggles with low self-worth and loneliness translate into harmful behavior toward loved ones. BoJack can tolerate the thought of Todd succeeding independently because it threatens BoJack's role in Todd's life, thus BoJack's fragile sense of security. To undermine Todd's success, BoJack devises an elaborate sabotage. Upon learning that Todd had overcome a past addiction to a video game (the fictitious *Decapathon* series), BoJack seizes on this weakness. He secretly buys the latest *Decapathon VII* game and, through a staged encounter – even bribing a store clerk and the actress Margo Martindale – places it in Todd's path (Rahman 2021). The result is as cruel as it is effective: Todd, rekindling his gaming addiction, becomes engrossed in the game and misses critical rehearsals, causing his rock opera to collapse. BoJack's premeditated sabotage of Todd's project is depicted as a direct consequence of BoJack's pathology. His inability to be alone and the need to bring others down drive this scheme (Rahman 2021). In essence, BoJack sacrifices Todd's shot at happiness to preserve his emotional comfort. This sacrifice verifies that BoJack prioritizes his comfort and needs over the happiness and success of his dear friend, a selfish pattern that will recur in many of BoJack's relationships (Rahman, 2021).

From a psychological perspective, BoJack's sabotage can be understood through the concepts of moral disengagement⁴ and cognitive distortion⁵. Almost immediately after hurting Todd, BoJack experiences a flash of guilt and self-disgust – the show briefly illustrates BoJack's eyes bulging in shock at his cruel outburst (Rahman 2021). This indicates that, on some level, BoJack recognizes the moral reprehensibility of his actions. However, he cannot tolerate the shame and cognitive dissonance⁶ of seeing himself as a villain. To manage this, BoJack quickly rationalizes his behavior to himself, reframing the betrayal as a form of honesty or tough love. (Rahman 2021) notes that BoJack excuses his damaging behavior as simply telling the truth, a warped understanding of honesty, precisely because the alternative – confronting the fact that he deliberately hurt his friend – is too damaging and challenging for him to face (Rahman 2025). This is a clear example of moral rationalization⁷, a type of moral disengagement: BoJack convinces himself that his cruelty is in Todd's best interest ("someone has to tell Todd his opera was bad") or that it was an unavoidable truth, thereby blunting his guilt. Such cognitive distortions allow BoJack to disengage from empathy at the moment, protecting his ego at the cost of his relationships. In clinical terms, BoJack exhibits all-or-nothing thinking⁸ about himself, oscillating between seeing himself as a "good person" or a hopeless "bad person," which further warps his moral reasoning (Rahman 2021). If he has momentarily cast himself as "doing a good thing" by being honest, he can avoid the painful truth that he is actively betraying a friend. This distorted self-justification is how BoJack lives with himself after such transgressions, at least initially.

It is important to emphasize that understanding BoJack's rationale does not excuse his behavior. The series itself takes care to show the damage inflicted by BoJack's actions, even as it contextualizes his psyche. Like Todd, many of BoJack's friends are not oblivious to his mistreatment forever. BoJack's behavior towards Todd cannot be separated from his longstanding issues of trauma, addiction, and self-loathing. His impulse to sabotage is a symptom of a larger cycle of suffering. As the series later reveals in-depth, BoJack's destructive interpersonal patterns are rooted in an abusive childhood that instilled in him a fundamental sense of unlovability and guilt (Rahman 2021). That early trauma left BoJack with inferior self-regulation skills for managing his emotions and led him to fall back on unhealthy coping mechanisms that inadvertently hurt others. In Todd's case, BoJack's fear of losing his friend triggers panic and envy that BoJack does not know how to handle appropriately; instead, he lashes out and then represses the resulting guilt through substance use and denial, thus being an example of BoJack's self-destructive cycle. After undermining Todd, BoJack is shown turning to alcohol and pills – his ubiquitous crutches – to numb his conscience (Rahman 2021). BoJack self-medicates his unhappiness, temporarily allowing him to avoid fully confronting the harm he caused. However, the alcohol-fueled nights and pill binges only deepen BoJack's depression in the long run, exacerbating the very feelings of loneliness and self-hatred he was trying to escape. The implication is that BoJack is addicted not only to drugs and alcohol but also to the cycle of negativity that defines his comfort zone. He does not believe he deserves healthy happiness, so on some level, he finds a perverse security in familial dysfunction.

This cyclical, trauma-reinforced behavior is self-perpetuating. BoJack's self-hatred and guilt drive him to commit actions that confirm his worst self-image, which then creates more guilt, as a classic vicious circle of depression. (Rahman 2021) describes how BoJack's self-hatred places him in a cyclical pattern where he destroys and sabotages the relationships with those around him in order to fulfill the narrative about himself that he has built: that he is, in fact, an inherently terrible person (Rahman 2021). With Todd, however, BoJack never directly asks for forgiveness in Season 1 – perhaps because doing so would require admitting conscious guilt. Instead, he tacitly hopes the issue will be forgotten.

⁴ Moral disengagement, created by Albert Bandura, can be defined as the process by which individuals justify unethical behaviour by disengaging their self-regulatory mechanism, allowing them to act in ways that violate their own moral standards without experiencing guilt (Bandura 2002).

⁵ Introduced by Aaron T. Beck, a psychiatrist in the 1960's, cognitive distortions can be defined as systematic errors in thinking that lead to inaccurate or biased perceptions of reality (Sparkes 2015).

⁶ The theory of cognitive dissonance was developed by Leon Festinger, an American social psychologist, in 1957, explain how individuals experience psychological discomfort (dissonance) when they hold conflicting cognitions (beliefs, attitudes, or behaviours) (Harmon-Jones and Mills 2019).

⁷ Moral rationalization, constructed by many different people in the field, can be defined as the cognitive process by which individuals justify unethical or morally questionable actions to align them with their personal values or societal norms (Schwitzgebel and Ellis 2017).

⁸ The concept of all-or-nothing thinking, a concept rooted in the work of Aaron T. Beck refers to this type of thinking often involving individuals perceiving situations, events, or people in extremes, without recognizing the nuances or middle ground (Pittard and Pössel 2020).

BoJack's mistreatment of Todd ultimately revolves around abandonment anxiety⁹ and deep dependency issues. BoJack cannot trust that he is worthy of love, so he constantly expects abandonment; paradoxically, this expectation fuels behaviors that push people away or hold them back. With Todd, BoJack acts out a classic abandonment scenario: I will hurt you before you can leave me. As (Ortega-Castillo 2020) notes, BoJack engulfs those around him in his dysfunction; he effectively consumes Todd's opportunities to ensure Todd remains by his side (Ortega-Castillo 2020). This relational parasitism¹⁰ highlights BoJack's desperation: he would rather cause Todd's failure than risk being lonely while Todd thrives. This stance's moral and emotional bankruptcy is evident, and the show does not shy away from it – we are meant to see BoJack's behavior as deeply wrong, even as we grasp the pathetic loneliness driving it.

Todd may be easygoing and forgiving, but he is not a fool. In season 3, when evidence of the rock opera sabotage finally surfaces, Todd confronts BoJack in a moment of justifiable anger. He realizes that BoJack has been undermining him for years and calls him out directly. By this point, BoJack is on the verge of sabotaging yet another relationship (Todd catches him trying to ruin Diane's wedding), and Todd recognizes the pattern. Todd's confrontation is a crucial turning point – it forces BoJack to face the reality that his destructive habits are not isolated incidents but recurring behavioral patterns (Rahman 2021). The irreparable damage BoJack caused by Todd's relapse into addiction is laid bare, and Todd, finally asserting healthy boundaries, refuses to continue excusing BoJack's behavior. Although BoJack and Todd remain in each other's lives after this confrontation, their friendship is irrevocably changed. Todd clarifies that he will no longer be emotionally dependent on BoJack nor enable BoJack's toxicity. The trust and easy loyalty Todd once offered are gone for good. The lasting rift underscores the trauma BoJack inflicted on the friendship. In psychological terms, Todd, who often exhibits a forgiving, people-pleasing personality, finally acts in self-interest – a healthy response to BoJack's pattern of abuse. For BoJack, however, Todd's emotional withdrawal only feeds his cycle of guilt and loneliness further. He has effectively created the very outcome he feared: being left behind.

3. Fame Over Friendship: BoJack's Betrayal of Herb

BoJack Horseman's relationship with Herb Kazzaz was foundational to his career and emotional life. In the 1980s, Herb discovered BoJack at a comedy club and helped turn him into a star by co-creating the sitcom *Horsin' Around*. The two shared a genuine friendship and a mutual rise in Hollywood. However, this bond was severed when Herb was publicly outed as gay and summarily fired from the show due to network pressure. BoJack, fearing for his career, capitulated rather than defend his friend – a betrayal that would haunt them both for the rest of their lives. As (Rahman 2021) recounts, BoJack picked his career over his friendship and did not contact Herb for the next twenty years. This decision – abandoning Herb at his moment of greatest need – inflicted lasting damage. Herb lost his job and the support of someone he considered his best friend. For BoJack, the guilt and shame of this cowardice festered, contributing to the deep well of self-loathing and loneliness that defines his psychological struggles (Rahman 2021; Ortega-Castillo 2020). The fallout of Herb's firing thus established a template: BoJack's fear-driven, selfish choices lead to profound interpersonal loss¹¹, reinforcing the very depression and trauma he is trying to escape. Indeed, the series is applauded for avoiding neat or stigmatizing portrayals of such mental health crises, instead depicting consequences in a realistic, often uncomfortable manner (Ortega-Castillo 2020). In BoJack and Herb's case, the consequence was a two-decade silence and an irreparably broken friendship.

"The Telescope" (Season 1, Episode 8) forces BoJack to confront the guilt he has been suppressing. Learning that Herb is dying of cancer, BoJack reaches out in a misguided hope of making amends – a step he delayed for years due to fear and denial. BoJack's apparent motive is to apologize, but his underlying aim is self-serving: he seeks to relieve his guilt and obtain Herb's forgiveness as a form of emotional absolution (Rahman 2021). Psychologically, BoJack is attempting to alleviate cognitive dissonance – the tension between his self-image as a "good guy" and reality, having betrayed his closest friend. By making a grand gesture of apology, he wants to reassure himself that he is still decent at heart.

Upon arriving at Herb's home in Malibu, BoJack is engulfed in anxiety and nostalgia. The episode interweaves flashbacks of their 1980s friendship with the fraught present, underlining how far BoJack has sunk. Notably, the BoJack in those flashbacks is initially sober and idealistic, refusing drinks and, as Herb's "girlfriend," Charlotte, warns him, the "black tar" of Hollywood that eventually ensnares him (Rahman 2021). In the present timeline, BoJack is mired in that metaphorical tar – an alcoholic haunted by regrets – seeking a lifeline in Herb's forgiveness. Their reunion starts cordially enough, allowing a moment of reminiscing and dark humor, but this calm is short-lived, and BoJack's apology rings hollow when it finally comes. Herb immediately perceives that BoJack's visit is more for BoJack's sake than for true atonement: "You are here for you," Herb scoffs, recognizing the self-serving bias in BoJack's gesture (Johnny 2 Cellos 2020). In this emotionally charged confrontation, BoJack's longstanding defense mechanisms crumble. He can no longer morally disengage from his past actions by making excuses or minimizing them, and Herb's presence forces him to be accountable.

BoJack's characteristic tactic – sarcastic deflection, self-pity, substance-fueled numbness – fails in the face of Herb's raw hurt and anger. This is the first time BoJack cannot escape the moral accountability for what he did, and it visibly terrifies him. As the conversation escalates, BoJack shifts from contrition to pleading and then to frustration, illustrating his inability to accept the judgment he sought gracefully. His underlying belief that a simple apology would fix things was a profound miscalculation rooted in ego and denial. Herb's outright refusal to grant forgiveness triggers panic in BoJack, who realizes that his expected absolution will not materialize. In psychological terms, BoJack is experiencing the collapse of a self-serving narrative; he can no longer view

⁹ Rooted in attachment theory, developed by John Bowlby, abandonment anxiety refers to an intense fear of worry about being left alone or losing significant relationships, either physically or emotionally. This anxiety often stems from past experiences of neglect, loss, or trauma and can manifest as difficulty trusting others, clinginess, or a fear of rejection – all of which, match BoJack's behaviours (Treville 2025).

¹⁰ Being a metaphorical application of the biological idea of parasitism, relational parasitism refers to a dynamic in interpersonal relationships where one individual consistently takes from or relies on another without reciprocating or contributing equally (Bruton-Martin et al. 2022).

¹¹ Interpersonal loss refers to the emotional and psychological impact experienced when a significant relationship is disrupted or ends (Hobfoll et al. 2000).

himself as someone who merely “made a mistake but made it right.” Herb’s rejection leaves BoJack facing the unfiltered truth of his moral failure. This reckoning is what “The Telescope” (Season 1, Episode 8) delivers – not a sentimental reconciliation, but a brutally honest accounting of harm done. BoJack’s attempt to seek quick redemption is exposed as another form of selfishness, which Herb dismantles without mercy.

BoJack’s behavior in this episode can be unpacked through several psychological concepts. Moral disengagement is evident in how BoJack initially justified betraying Herb. At the time of Herb’s firing, BoJack likely told himself he had no choice or that protesting the decision would have been futile – mental rationalizations that allowed him to commit an immoral act while suppressing guilt. For years afterward, BoJack avoided contacting Herb, which reflects the classic avoidance component of cognitive dissonance reduction. Maintaining distance helped BoJack bury the uncomfortable knowledge that he had been a bad friend; not confronting Herb meant he didn’t have to reconcile that action with his preferred self-image. BoJack’s outreach two decades later is thus fueled by accumulated guilt breaking through his defenses. BoJack tries to resolve the dissonance by visiting Herb to prove to himself and Herb that he is fundamentally sound, just flawed.

As one video essayist observes, BoJack only wanted to eliminate his guilt, not genuinely heal Herb’s pain (Johnny 2 Cellos 2020). In seeking forgiveness, mainly to soothe himself, BoJack exemplifies how self-interest can masquerade as repentance. BoJack’s psyche also shows signs of trauma reinforcement in this encounter. The shame of betraying Herb has become part of BoJack’s internal narrative of failure, reinforcing a core belief instilled by years of emotional trauma: that he poisons every relationship he touches. BoJack’s resort to anger-snapping when Herb withholds forgiveness further illustrates his fear of moral accountability. Truly facing Herb’s condemnation means accepting himself as a selfish, cowardly person (in Herb’s words) who may not deserve redemption (Rahman 2021).

BoJack has spent years running from that exact admission; his entire pattern of addictions and grandiose attempts at self-reinvention can be seen as an escape from accountability and pain. However, in “The Telescope” (Season 1, Episode 8), there is no escape; Herb’s unwavering gaze and scathing words pin BoJack down, forcing him to confront the reality of his actions. His moral disengagement crumbles into moral engagement¹² – he is forced to fully acknowledge the wrongdoing. His self-serving bias is laid bare and rendered impotent. His cognitive dissonance peaks as the gulf between who he wants to be and what he did is made explicit. This encounter solidifies a traumatic memory that BoJack will carry forward, evidence that he truly can hurt people irreparably.

Crucially, the show does not offer BoJack (or the audience) the comfort of resolving these tensions. Bob-Waksberg noted that BoJack Horseman constantly wrestles “between the poles of radical forgiveness¹³ and a righteous quest for justice and retribution” (Writer 2019). Here, the pendulum swings firmly toward justice and consequence: Herb withholds forgiveness, delivering a blow that BoJack must absorb without being told it is okay. This narrative choice underlines the show’s commitment to honesty over consolation in depicting psychological struggle (Writer 2019; Rahman 2021).

The climax of “The Telescope” (Season 1, Episode 8) arrives in Herb’s devastating final monologue, which functions as both a personal catharsis for Herb and a moment of brutal truth-telling for BoJack. After BoJack begs for closure, Herb emphatically responds: “No. I am not going to give you closure. You do not get that.” He tells BoJack that he must “live with the shitty thing [he] did for the rest of [his] life.” Herb clarifies that some wounds do not heal, and some wrongs cannot be made right – a stark lesson in moral accountability. As Herb continues, he lays bare the core of BoJack’s character flaws:

“You know what your problem is? You wanna think of yourself as the good guy. Well, I know better than anyone else, and I can tell you that you’re not. In fact, you’d probably sleep a lot better at night if you just admitted to yourself that you are a selfish goddamn coward who takes whatever he wants and doesn’t give a shit about who he hurts. That’s you. That’s BoJack Horseman” (“The Telescope” (Season 1, Episode 8)).

BoJack Horseman has long clung to the idea that, despite his many failings, he means well or is secretly better than the awful things he has done. Herb ruthlessly dismantles this illusion, identifying BoJack’s pattern of using others and fleeing responsibility. Psychologically, Herb’s words force BoJack into a corner: either he accepts this as truth about himself (inviting immense shame) or rejects it and remains in denial. At that moment, BoJack’s stunned silence and defeated posture suggest that Herb’s verdict has landed. Herb articulates what BoJack has always feared: he is not a good person and never has been. This confrontation compels BoJack to see himself without the filters of fame, ego, or intoxication – an unflinching mirror held up by the person he hurt most. Herb’s speech also highlights the real source of his pain, as he says that he does not care about the lost job – “I did fine. I had a good life. However, what I needed then was a friend, and you abandoned me.” Herb thus emphasizes that BoJack’s sin was not professional but deeply personal. The betrayal was not in capitulating to the network per se but in BoJack disappearing from Herb’s life afterward, compounding the trauma. This distinction drives home the gravity of BoJack’s failure: he failed at basic human loyalty. It also nullifies any remaining rationalization BoJack might have – Herb explicitly does not seek pity for his career; he indicts BoJack for the abandonment. In other words, Herb’s refusal to absolve BoJack deprives BoJack of closure, a concept the show pointedly interrogates.

By denying closure, BoJack Horseman subverts the typical media narrative where a heartfelt apology earns quick forgiveness. Instead, Herb’s final stance is that BoJack must carry his guilt indefinitely, a consequence that becomes part of BoJack’s psychological landscape going forward (Rahman 2021). This moment forces BoJack to internalize a negative self-concept he has long tried to avoid. It is a harsh form of induced accountability therapy¹⁴: BoJack is made to fully confront the fact that feeling bad does not undo the damage he has done, and he must live with that knowledge. As a result, Herb’s monologue is a turning point for BoJack’s self-understanding. It externalizes BoJack’s darkest self-assessment from the mouth of someone he cannot dismiss.

¹² Moral engagement refers to the active commitment to ethical behaviour and positive social interactions. Involving taking responsibility for one’s actions, showing empathy and concerns for others, and resisting harmful behaviours or policies (Ellemers et al. 2019).

¹³ Radical forgiveness encourages individuals to view painful experiences as opportunities for spiritual growth and empowerment, reframing them as purposeful rather than harmful – aiming to free individuals from emotional bondage and foster inner peace (Writer 2019).

¹⁴ Induced accountability therapy emphasizes personal responsibility and active participation in the therapeutic process. It encourages individuals to take ownership of their actions, decisions, and progress, fostering self-awareness and resilience (Acerno et al. 1994).

Herb chooses not to forgive, and notably, he does so for his peace: “I’m dying, I’m not gonna feel better, and I’m not gonna be your prop so you can feel better,” he snaps (Rahman 2021). Herb has made peace with the past on his terms; forgiving BoJack would only serve BoJack’s emotional needs, not Herb’s. This stance leaves BoJack face-to-face with unmitigated guilt – a crucial psychological development. As Bob Waksberg suggested in interviews, this show often declines to let its protagonist off the hook easily, favoring an honest exploration of consequences over radical forgiveness (Writer 2019). Herb’s words embody that philosophy; they strip away BoJack’s last comfort and force him to reckon with himself like never before. BoJack leaves Herb’s house not uplifted or absolved but hollow and shaken – a man now carrying the weight of precisely what he did, with no one else to blame and no shortcut to self-forgiveness.

Time and time again, BoJack’s self-sabotaging actions – driven by narcissism, addiction, and unresolved trauma – result in irreparable breaks with a storytelling device: in each season’s most tragic moment, a character utters the word “fuck” to BoJack, symbolizing a point of no return (Rahman 2021). Herb was the first to do so, cursing BoJack as he kicked him out, thereby inaugurating the series’ motif that crossing specific lines permanently damages a relationship (Rahman 2021). This narrative reinforces a key theme – actions have lasting consequences that cannot be resolved neatly. For BoJack’s psychology, the fallout from Herb’s confrontation becomes a template for chronic guilt¹⁵. Deprived of Herb’s forgiveness, BoJack carries that guilt forward and, tragically, continues to add to it with new mistakes. Each subsequent betrayal piles onto BoJack’s conscience, further fueling his depression and substance abuse.

The series does not present this cyclical downfall to excuse BoJack but to illustrate the real, compounding nature of guilt and trauma. By the final season, the accumulated weight of BoJack’s misdeeds nearly destroys him. Importantly, BoJack Horseman never trivializes these outcomes: it insists that BoJack’s severe pain does not erase the pain he has caused others. This steady through-line, starting with Herb, is why critics have praised the show’s unflinching depiction of mental illness and accountability (GoldDerby 2020; Rahman 2021).

In an interview after the series finale, creator Raphael Bob-Waksberg expressed pride that the show “helps people talk about their feelings” and confront hard truths (GoldDerby 2020). One of those hard truths is that personal growth is taxing and that guilt cannot be wished away without genuine change. The Herb-BoJack storyline is perhaps the show’s most precise exposition of that truth: BoJack does not get a clean redemption arc with Herb, just as in life, not every person we hurt will forgive us. Instead, BoJack is left to contend with his guilt as a constant companion. In sum, BoJack’s betrayal of Herb Kazzaz in “The Telescope” (Season 1, Episode 8) is a microcosm of the show’s more extensive exploration of how broken relationships feed into psychological despair. “The Telescope” (Season 1, Episode 8) thus transitions the narrative from this singular, painful reunion into a broader examination of BoJack Horseman’s enduring pattern of sabotaged relationships and the psychological turmoil left in their wake. Each subsequent chapter of BoJack’s story will echo the themes first laid bear with Herb: guilt without easy redemption, the necessity (elusiveness) of personal accountability, and the hope that breaking the cycle is possible – but only if BoJack truly reckons with the man he is.

4. A Xerox of a Friendship: BoJack’s Self-Serving Grief and the Tragedy of Sarah Lynn

From the outset of BoJack Horseman, the relationship between BoJack and Sarah Lynn is framed as a warped surrogate father-daughter dynamic. As a child actress on BoJack’s 1990s sitcom *Horsin’ Around*, Sarah Lynn idolized BoJack as a parental figure and role model – at least the idea of BoJack, embodied by his TV persona as her caring father. BoJack failed to provide guidance or protection for Sarah Lynn once the cameras stopped rolling. Instead, he became an inconsistent, self-centered presence who drifted in and out of her life.

Sarah Lynn’s upbringing was already deeply troubled: pushed into stardom by an exploitative mother, saddled with an (assumed) abusive stepfather, and deprived of a normal childhood. BoJack was one of the few stable adults in her orbit during her formative years, yet he did nothing to shield her from the destructive trappings of fame. On the contrary, BoJack contributed to Sarah Lynn’s downward spiral, normalizing the vices that would later destroy her. He breached basic boundaries by introducing her to substance use at a young age – as he was using around her, he accidentally left a bottle of vodka, and Sarah Lynn drank it, leading her to get drunk at the age of 10. Later in life, he treated her more like a parting buddy than a child in need of guidance. By the time Sarah Lynn reached adulthood, she had internalized BoJack’s nihilistic worldview, believing that fleeting pleasure and oblivion were the only relief from her emptiness. In one poignant moment in her early twenties, she even confides in BoJack, “I know I’m smiling right now, but the light inside me is dying,” exposing profound despair beneath her pop-star celebrity façade (Ortega-Castillo 2020). BoJack offers no meaningful help in response to her confessions; thus, from her youth onward, Sarah Lynn’s emotional dependence on BoJack grows as he simultaneously validates her worst impulses. Their relationship’s fundamental imbalance – a vulnerable girl seeking approval and an adult who cannot even care for himself – lays the groundwork for tragedy.

Notably, BoJack Horseman’s creators ensure characters like BoJack and Sarah Lynn are crafted with complex psychological wounds rather than cartoonish simplicity. As mentioned previously, each central character has a wound. For Sarah Lynn, that wound is the trauma of being a commodified child star deprived of real love or stability. For BoJack, it is the residue of his abusive upbringing and resultant self-loathing. When these two broken people come together, their dynamic becomes mutually reinforcing in the worst ways. Sarah Lynn longs for the parents’ affection and direction that BoJack cannot give, and BoJack finds in Sarah Lynn an eager enabler of his vices – someone who still adores him unquestioningly, thus validating his ego. BoJack’s narcissistic need to feel important is temporarily satisfied by Sarah Lynn’s idolization, while her need for a caring father figure goes unfulfilled, and instead, BoJack models his toxic behavior. He casually imparts to Sarah Lynn his philosophy that life’s pain can be managed through substance-fueled escapism – a lesson she learns all too well. This dynamic effectively grooms Sarah Lynn into the very kind of addict that BoJack is, setting her on a path of self-destruction that BoJack will ultimately watch and help play out.

Throughout the series, BoJack oscillates between moments of neglecting Sarah Lynn and actively enabling her self-destructive behavior. The power imbalance between them – former father-figure idol and adoring fan – makes BoJack’s influence on Sarah

¹⁵ Using early contributions from Sigmund Freud, chronic guilt refers to a persistent and overwhelming sense of guilt that remains over time, often without resolution (Clark 2018).

Lynn profound. Key moments from their history illustrate this pattern. For instance, when Sarah Lynn re-enters BoJack's life as an adult, she is a substance-abusing pop star in crisis. BoJack initially pretends to take on a protective role, inviting her to stay at his house to escape bad influences. However, he soon reverts to joining her on a hedonistic bender that reinforces exactly the behaviors that are killing her. Instead of setting boundaries for the young woman who still calls him "Uncle BoJack," he drinks with her and even exploits her presence for his comfort. This early reunion establishes a tragic motif: BoJack offers an open bar and a cynical shrug whenever Sarah Lynn reaches out for support. Over and over, he chooses to be the cool friend or accomplice rather than the responsible adult she needs. In psychological terms, BoJack is an enabler¹⁶. He provides the means and social approval for Sarah Lynn to continue using drugs and alcohol, even at times when she attempts sobriety. The series clarifies that BoJack's enabling is not born of malevolence but of selfishness and emotional cowardice. He genuinely cares about Sarah Lynn on some level, yet caring in any active sense – requiring effort or sacrifice – is beyond him. Thus, neglect and permissiveness are easier. BoJack habitually avoids any uncomfortable confrontation or caretaking duty, instead choosing to join Sarah Lynn in her downward spiral so that he will not be alone in his misery.

A pivotal illustration of BoJack's failure to be responsible comes in "That's Too Much, Man!" (Season 3, Episode 11) – a notorious episode that charts a month-long drug binge the two characters undertake together. By this point, Sarah Lynn is 31 years old, out of rehab, and 9 months sober. When BoJack finds himself isolated and desperate for an escape from his guilt and depression, he calls Sarah Lynn, fully aware she is trying to stay clean, and invites her to go on a weekend bender. Tragically, she agrees without hesitation, immediately breaking her nine months of sobriety. BoJack's choice here is extraordinarily selfish and fateful, and he prioritizes his desire for a drinking companion over Sarah Lynn's fragile recovery, demonstrating a gross disregard for her well-being. As (Rahman 2021) observes, this episode represents the culmination of BoJack's most egregious behavior: BoJack is very responsible for Sarah Lynn's fate by preserving his wishes over the livelihood of a young girl in order to maintain his fame and comfort, ultimately committing the most selfish act that BoJack has ever committed: causing the death of the young, impressionable Sarah Lynn by failing to be a role model and father figure to her (Rahman 2021). Indeed, BoJack leads Sarah Lynn through an odyssey of intoxication, dragging her to bars and parties and even crashing an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting together, which essentially nullifies her hard-won sobriety and reinforces her fatalistic worldview. During this bender, BoJack even exploits Sarah Lynn's lingering fame and loyalty in the service of his agenda: he convinces her to accompany him on a quest to make amends to people he has wronged, which, in practice, is more about BoJack seeking catharsis than actually repairing relationships.

BoJack's actions toward Sarah Lynn cannot be explained without examining his deep-seated narcissism and the maladaptive psychology driving his behavior. BoJack often exhibits narcissistic tendencies that exacerbate his worst choices. He has a habit of concentrating every situation on himself, even when someone else is in crisis or need. This self-absorbed mindset helps explain how BoJack justifies enabling Sarah Lynn. BoJack is so caught up in his loneliness, pain, and desire for validation that he blinds himself to Sarah Lynn's perspective.

When he calls Sarah Lynn, he frames it internally as his need for companionship, not her risk of relapse, then when he pushes her to continue the bender despite her physical and emotional exhaustion, he is driven by his fear of being alone with his thoughts; even to the very end, when Sarah Lynn lies unconscious, BoJack's first instinct is self-preservation rather than immediate concern for her life. These are textbook narcissistic behavior's – BoJack does not lack remorse or the capacity to care altogether. However, his default is to view others based on how they reflect or impact him. Indeed, BoJack's narcissism is pointed out by multiple characters in the show. Herb Kazzaz woke BoJack up, telling him bluntly that he cannot do bad things and expect everything to be okay, but Sarah Lynn, tragically, never confronts BoJack in this way; she never stops adoring him.

Beneath the narcissism, however, BoJack does carry immense guilt for what transpires with Sarah Lynn – a guilt that accumulates gradually and overwhelmingly after her death. The series shows BoJack's guilt in subtle ways before it becomes explicit. For instance, after he returns from the "That's Too Much, Man!" (Season 3, Episode 11) bender, BoJack vanishes from Los Angeles for months in an impulsive attempt to escape the remorse and self-hatred triggered by Sarah Lynn's overdose. When he returns, he cannot even bring himself to utter Sarah Lynn's name for a long time, indicating how deeply her memory is embedded in pain. BoJack's nightmares and hallucinations begin to feature Sarah Lynn, reflecting classic symptoms of trauma and guilt.

Notably, in BoJack's darkest moment of introspection – the near-death experience of "The View from Halfway Down" (Season 6, Episode 15) – an apparition of Sarah Lynn appears as one of the ghosts of his past, underscoring how her death haunts his conscience. He mutters an apology to her in that hallucination, revealing that a part of him has never stopped agonizing over his role in her demise. Guilt, in BoJack's case, coexists with narcissism in a torturous cycle: he feels crushing guilt, which feeds his self-loathing, which in turn drives him to seek relief in substances and ego-validation, which leads him to hurt others again. This cycle is essentially BoJack's tragedy; as the show's creator has noted, actions in BoJack Horseman have lasting consequences, and Sarah Lynn's death is the single most significant consequence that does not simply reset; the emotional toll lingers, and the damage accumulates season by season, and the show uses it to alter BoJack's trajectory permanently (GoldDerby 2020). Even if BoJack does not constantly express guilt verbally, he shapes his depression and behavior's. By the final season, BoJack's burden of guilt over Sarah Lynn directly drives him to attempt to make amends and to get sober, though, characteristically, these efforts are as much about easing his pain as honoring Sarah Lynn's memory.

Complicating matters, BoJack exhibits a marked pattern of moral disengagement and self-serving rationalization¹⁷ in the aftermath of Sarah Lynn's death. Immediately after Sarah Lynn collapses in the planetarium, BoJack makes a fateful decision: he waits seventeen minutes before calling 911 for emergency help. At that time, as later revealed, Sarah Lynn was unresponsive but not dead; she was alive, but BoJack waited to call. So, why did BoJack wait? The implicit answer is horrifying: BoJack was trying

¹⁶ Referring to someone who supports or allows another individual's harmful or self-destructive behaviour, either intentionally or unintentionally, by providing excuses, resources, or avoiding consequences (Jenkins and Demaray 2015).

¹⁷ Self-serving rationalization is a psychological defense mechanism, closely tied to Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, introduced in the 1950s – where individuals justify their actions or decisions in a way that protects their self-image or avoids guilt (Quilty-Dunn 2020).

to fabricate a scenario in which he would not be blamed for her death. He likely hoped that by the time help arrived, Sarah Lynn would be beyond saving, removing the pressure on him to explain what had happened so he could claim he had just found her like this. So, BoJack lies to the authorities and the public about the circumstances. He tells the paramedics that he had found Sarah Lynn already unconscious at the planetarium after she called him – this call being something that BoJack made himself after the events of "That is Too Much, Man!" (Season 3, Episode 11). It is revealed that after BoJack couldn't get her to wake up, he took her phone and called himself, sitting on the phone for 2 minutes to make it look like she had asked him to be with her. Thus, implying that he was not even with her during her final binge and that her overdose was an unfortunate accident he happened upon (Rahman 2021).

This deceit is a prime example of BoJack's moral disengagement; rather than face the horror of what he allowed to happen, he constructs a narrative in which he is just a grieving bystander. By distancing himself from his agency in Sarah Lynn's death, BoJack temporarily shields himself from legal repercussions and public shame, but at the cost of gross dishonesty and cowardice. In psychological terms, he neutralizes his guilt through externalization¹⁸, blaming circumstances and minimizing his causal role. BoJack's inner monologue allows him to live with himself, however tenuously, for the following months. However, this self-serving bias cannot hold forever. Eventually, the truth surfaces, and with it, BoJack's layers of moral disengagement are peeled back in full view of the world.

If "That is Too Much, Man!" (Season 3, Episode 11) represents BoJack's moral base, the reckoning comes in "Xerox of a Xerox" (Season 6, Episode 12). In that episode, BoJack is finally publicly confronted with the truth about his and Sarah Lynn's final night. A hard-hitting investigative report uncovers BoJack's lies, including that he delayed calling 911 for 17 minutes. BoJack agrees to a televised interview with Biscuits Braxby, a talk-show host, to salvage his reputation. What ensues is a masterful depiction of a man's attempt at controlling the narrative, even as it crumbles beneath him. Initially, BoJack approached the interview as a carefully managed PR opportunity. His agent coached him to express appropriate remorse and frame himself as someone who has grown since the incident. Indeed, in the first two-part interview (shown in the preceding episode), BoJack successfully paints a sympathetic picture of himself: he admits to past mistakes in vague terms, emphasizes his newfound sobriety, and appears contrite and earnest. The public reaction to the first interview is cautiously optimistic, suggesting that BoJack's self-serving strategy – to present his pain and recovery as the story's center – is working. Reflecting BoJack's continued narcissism and self-serving bias, even in confessing, he centers the narrative on his redemption arc rather than squarely on Sarah Lynn, the real victim. BoJack's on-air interview then comes off as a performance, a bid for public forgiveness without fully owning the darkest details; in essence, BoJack is still trying to script reality to avoid the worst consequences (Johnny 2 Cellos 2021).

Drunk on the public reactions to his first interview, BoJack agrees to do a second interview. Unfortunately for him, in the second interview, which comprises "Xerox of a Xerox" (Season 6, Episode 12), BoJack loses control of the narrative. The interviewer blindsides him with direct, specific questions about Sarah Lynn's death that he is unprepared to answer deceitfully. Crucially, Biscuits asks BoJack point-blank about the 17-minute delay. At this moment, BoJack's carefully constructed façade falters, and he realizes that excuses will not suffice. The stark truth is laid out for the audience: BoJack Horseman, beloved sitcom actor and ostensibly Sarah Lynn's friend, chose to let her lie and die rather than call for help because he was afraid of personal repercussions. This revelation forces even the most BoJack-sympathetic viewers to reevaluate his character. As (Rahman 2021) puts it, when BoJack is made to bear the ultimate consequences of being a major contributor to the death of Sara Lynn, the audience is forced to question whether this 'rock-bottom' moment will ignite any substantial change within BoJack or if it simply confirms his moral bankruptcy (Rahman 2021). After this interview goes live, the public turns on BoJack in outrage. No amount of teary-eyed apology can outweigh the cold fact of his negligence. In (Johnny 2 Cellos 2020) video essay, they explain that BoJack has indeed become a copy of a copy of toxicity, perpetuating the trauma he once endured onto others like Sarah Lynn, and the public exposure of his misdeeds is the ultimate consequence of that cycle.

One of the most damning judgements of BoJack's conduct comes from the audience's collective response in the show – mirroring that of real-world viewers and critics. There is broad agreement that BoJack's 17-minute hesitation was unconscionable – it is frequently cited as the worst thing he has ever done. That act transcends mere flawed behavior and enters the realm of the unforgivable for many: it was a calculated act of selfishness that directly cost Sarah Lynn her life. In failing to dial those three numbers in time, BoJack betrayed the last vestige of human decency expected of him. The fallout in BoJack Horseman's final episodes sees BoJack face legal consequences, public vilification, and the collapse of virtually every remaining relationship in his life. For BoJack, who pathologically feared being unloved and alone, this is poetic justice – he ends the series a pariah, his attempts at garnering sympathy largely seen as too little, too late. Importantly, the show resists giving BoJack a tidy redemption or absolution, as the creator stated, "it is up to the individual viewer to decide for themselves if BoJack is forgivable or redeemable or deserving of that" – the narrative itself withholds any comforting answer (GoldDerby 2020). In Sarah Lynn's case, most viewers would argue that BoJack's actions can never be excused, no matter what personal growth he claims afterward. Sarah Lynn is gone forever, and BoJack must live with that truth. The series thereby underscores a core theme: accountability. Actions have irreversible consequences, and even a protagonist as charismatic and complicated as BoJack Horseman is not exempt from the moral weight of his decisions.

BoJack's relationship with Sarah Lynn is the most tragic and psychologically complex bond in the series, epitomizing his broader inability to form healthy, mutual relationships. In Sarah Lynn, we see the full toxic flowering of BoJack's influence: a once-bright child turned into a despairing addict who dies under his care. The arc of their relationship – from a sweet TV father-daughter to substance-fueled confidants to, ultimately, victim and perpetrator – reveals how BoJack poisons what he touches, even when he desperately means not to. It is a dark illustration of how trauma begets trauma: BoJack, damaged by his parents, in turn, damages Sarah Lynn, creating a ripple of pain across generations. In more clinical terms, BoJack reinforces Sarah Lynn's deepest wounds – abandonment and exploitation – instead of helping to heal them. He cannot reciprocate the genuine love and admiration she has for

¹⁸ Rooted in psychoanalytic theory, particularly in the work of Sigmund Freud, externalization refers to the process of projecting one's internal thoughts, feeling, or characteristics onto the external world or other people. In psychology, it is often considered a defense mechanism, where individuals unconsciously attribute their own traits or emotions to others (White and Epston 1990).

him because he does not truly love himself or know how to care for others. In sum, their relationship is a cautionary tale of un-addressed psychological issues playing out in interpersonal ruin: BoJack's narcissism, guilt, and unresolved trauma rendered him incapable of being the guardian Sarah Lynn needed, and instead, he became an agent of her destruction. The tragic outcome – Sarah Lynn's overdose and the crushing guilt and consequences that followed – ultimately forces BoJack (and the audience) to confront the series' central moral question: Can someone like BoJack Horseman be forgiven, or even forgive himself? The answer is left appropriately ambiguous. In the end, BoJack Horseman is left to face the truth that genuine, healthy relationships will forever elude him until he breaks the cycle of selfishness and honestly accounts for the lives he has harmed. Sarah Lynn's absence – an irreplaceable loss he caused – is the enduring ghost that will haunt every tentative step he takes toward redemption if redemption is possible (Rahman 2021; Johnny 2 Cellos 2021).

5. The View from Halfway Down: BoJack Confronts Himself

Season 6's penultimate episode, "The View from Halfway Down" (Episode 15), is a surreal psychodrama in which BoJack's subconscious stages a final reckoning as he hovers between life and death. The entire episode unfolds as an imagined dinner party attended by figures from BoJack's past who have all died – a theatrical manifestation of his deepest traumas, regrets, and fears. In this near-death hallucination (triggered by BoJack's near-drowning), the show's writer dramatizes the shutting down of BoJack's mind as it approaches oblivion. BoJack slowly realizes he is drowning in his real-life pool, even as he converses with his deceased mother, his former mentor, and others in the dreamscape. The episode's experimental format allows an unflinching exploration of BoJack's psyche: each guest and each performance in the dream symbolizes a piece of his psychological architecture – unresolved guilt or formative pain – forcing BoJack to confront the full scope of everything that haunts him in one concentrated experience. "The View from Halfway Down" (Season 6, Episode 15), a title based on a poem, is a compelling portrayal of a character who literally and figuratively confronts his morality and accumulated demons (Johnny 2 Cellos 2020).

*Deep breath, stand back, it is time
Toes untouch the overpass
Soon he's water bound
Eyes locked shut, but peek to see
The view from halfway down
A little wind, a summer sun
A river rich and regal
A flood of fond endorphins
Brings a calm that knows no equal
You're flying now
You see things much clearer than from the ground
It's all okay, it would be
Were you not now halfway down
Thrash to break from gravity
What now could slow the drop
All I'd give for toes to touch
The safety back at top
But this is it, the deed is done
Silence drowns the sound
Before I leaped, I should've seen
The view from halfway down
I really should've thought about
The view from halfway down
I wish I could've known about
The view from halfway down*

Secretariat, BoJack's childhood idol, recites the eponymous poem "The View from Halfway Down," describing the terrifying moment of irreversible regret during a suicide leap. This poem – a centerpiece of the episode – voices the realization that BoJack is grappling with the fear that it is too late and the life he squandered cannot be reclaimed. This poem highlights how, within this dreamscape, BoJack sees his options as he drowns. He knows what he has done is wrong, and in the past, he believed that he deserved death, but now that he is looking at his life from above, he does not want to die. He hears straight from his idol that if he goes down the same road, he will regret the option of suicide. Notably, BoJack's hallucinated dinner companions reenact his most traumatic life events and deepest regrets with his mother and other characters present. For example, Sarah Lynn's presence embodies BoJack's profound guilt and sorrow over the innocent life he destroyed. Similarly, BoJack's estranged friend Herb represents BoJack's unresolved remorse and longing for absolution. In psychological terms, BoJack is experiencing something akin to ego death, a dissolution of self that occurs in near-death states when one's life narrative and identity collapse into a singular confrontation with morality (Martial, Geraldine and Olivia et al. 2021). The boundaries between BoJack's ego and reality dissolve; he cannot escape witnessing the trust of his actions and who he has become. In this liminal state, all BoJack's defenses fall away – sarcasm, denial, distractions – leaving him face to face with the core of his suffering: a pervasive sense of guilt, emptiness, and existential fear.

What makes "The View from Halfway Down" (Season 6, Episode 15) so significant is that it elevates BoJack's crisis into a universal meditation on death, regret, and the search for meaning. Critics often label *BoJack Horseman* a portrait of millennial

depression¹⁹; however, this episode situates BoJack's despair in a broader human context of existential dread and guilt, an experience of all, not just those born within a specific year gap. Throughout the series, characters of all ages repeatedly question the meaning of life, success and happiness, and BoJack's journey exemplifies how trauma and depression can lead to profound nihilism (Ortega-Castillo 2023). In this episode, these abstract questions become viscerally immediate: facing the void, BoJack embodies the terror of life deemed wasted and the longing for another chance. The show invokes themes from existential psychology²⁰ – confronting the ultimate concerns of death and meaninglessness (Yalom 1980) – as BoJack teeters on the brink of nonexistence. We see in BoJack a case of what some psychologists term depressive realism²¹: his depressive mind tends to view life with bleak honesty, stripped of comforting illusions. In his hallucination, this manifests as an uncompromising inventory of his failures; the usual optimistic filters are absent, and BoJack's self-assessment is as harsh as it is arguably truthful. Indeed, BoJack's internal monologue has long been laced with a kind of cynical realism about himself, and those beliefs are played back to him through the voices of those he hurt.

Nevertheless, the episode also hints at a sliver of hope implicit in “The View from Halfway Down” (Season 6, Episode 15) – the notion that one wishes to turn back at the halfway point (mid-fall or mid-life). BoJack's panic as the dark void swallows the dinner party suggests that, deep down, he does not want to die; he wants the chance to change course. This climactic nightmare thus reveals the whole architecture of BoJack's mental state: a man crippled by shame and haunted by the past but not entirely devoid of the desire for redemption. By the end of the hallucination, as BoJack is left alone in total darkness, the audience is confronted with the essential question: having seen the view from halfway down, will BoJack succumb to despair, or can he find a way to climb back toward life? In other words, the stage is set to ask whether BoJack can reconstruct himself, psychologically and morally, when he wakes up from this near-death experience.

6. BoJack's Future: A Cycle or a Hundredth Chance?

The final section of BoJack's story – and the series finale following his near-death experience – poses a sobering question: After so many cycles of self-destruction, is lasting change possible for BoJack Horseman? From a clinical psychology perspective, BoJack's trajectory is familiar – a person with deep trauma, addiction, and chronic depression who repeatedly tries to improve but often backslides. His life has been a cycle of brief advances and dramatic relapses, leading some around him to doubt that he can ever truly change, understandably. However, psychology also recognizes that recovery is an uneven, long-term process, especially for conditions like substance use disorder and complex trauma. There is no simple cure that eradicates BoJack's issues. Instead, any real growth would require sustained effort, accountability, and professional help over an extended period (Rahman 2021). As (Rahman 2021) observes in an analysis of the series, mental illness and addiction are lifelong journeys – one does not heal in a linear sense so much as learn how to cope and live with these struggles' day by day. BoJack's story reinforces this understanding by eschewing any fairy-tale transformation. Even after his near-death experience, BoJack continues to face consequences, including a prison stint and the ongoing challenge of himself. The question “cycle or hundredth chance” highlights that BoJack has been given numerous chances before – will this time be different? Contemporary clinical insight would say that meaningful change is possible but hinges on several key factors: genuine remorse without crippling shame, an internal motivation to change, and a supportive environment that fosters accountability.

One crucial psychological distinction for BoJack's potential recovery is that between guilt and shame, and BoJack carries enormous guilt for the people that he has hurt, and appropriately so. In the final episodes, he does begin to acknowledge this guilt openly – for instance, confessing his misdeeds on television and accepting punishment. In psychological research, guilt is a moral emotion that can motivate reparative action and personal change (Tangney, Jeff and Debra 1996). By feeling guilt, BoJack recognizes that what he did was wrong and that he owes a debt of amends – this mindset can push him to try to make things right or to avoid repeating harm. Shame, however, has been the more dominant force in BoJack's psyche over the years – the feeling that he is irredeemably flawed or broken. Shame is linked to self-loathing and a sense of defectiveness, and it often leads to withdrawal, hiding, and further destructive behavior rather than improvement (Tangney, Jeff and Debra 1996). Throughout the series, BoJack's shame drives him into binges and denial; when he believes change is hopeless, he sabotages himself, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure. For BoJack to break the cycle, he must shift from paralyzing shame to healthier guilt, accepting responsibility for his actions while believing that he can grow. This aligns with shame resilience theory, which emphasizes developing empathy and self-compassion to combat destructive shame (Brown 2006). BoJack will need to forgive himself in a measured way: not to evade responsibility, but to let go of the notion that he is only the sum of his mistakes. Such self-compassion is difficult for someone with BoJack's history, but without it, any self-hatred relapse could trigger another downward spiral.

Finally, BoJack's potential for growth will depend on his support systems and willingness to remain accountable. Shame thrives in secrecy, whereas recovery often requires openness and connection. It is encouraging that BoJack still has a few people who care about him – Princess Carolyn, Todd, and Diane. While their relationships with them are forever changed, they have not entirely abandoned him. A central theme of the finale is cautious hope: BoJack and Diane's last rooftop conversation acknowledges that life will go on with uncertain outcomes, encapsulated in Diane's line about how “life is a bitch and then you keep living” – a bittersweet recognition that surviving means the work is never over. BoJack's story refuses to either condemn him to eternal misery or grant him a tidy redemption; instead, it lands on a nuanced middle ground: he is alive, accountable, and still capable of making better choices, but no one (including BoJack himself) can be sure if he will. In therapeutic terms, BoJack has achieved a degree of insight and faced his rock bottom, which are often the first steps in recovery. However, he will likely always be an addict in recovery and a person managing depression, one day at a time. This show's legacy – helping people to talk about their feelings – underlines a final psychological truth relevant to BoJack's future: change happens in community and conversation by breaking the isolation of

¹⁹ See Parashar (2020) for more information regarding millennial depression.

²⁰ Drawing from theories in existential philosophy, existential psychology is a branch of psychology that emphasizes the subjective meaning of human experience, the uniqueness of the individual, and person responsibility reflected in choice (May 1983).

²¹ See (Feltham 2017) to understand more on the term depressive realism.

shame. If BoJack can continue to engage honestly with others about his guilt and pain, he stands a better chance of maintaining whatever progress he makes.

In conclusion, BoJack's journey illustrates the messy reality of personal transformation. He is neither beyond hope nor cured in the traditional sense. Clinically, we expect someone like BoJack to improve with sustained effort, especially now that he has reached profound insight and consequence. However, relapse and struggle will likely remain part of his narrative. BoJack once wondered if he was doomed to repeat his mistakes (Writer 2020). The answer, as presented by the show's finale, is intentionally left ambiguous, mirroring real life, where recovery is tentative and ongoing. *BoJack Horseman* ends not with a grand catharsis but with a quiet moment of human connection, suggesting that while the cycle may not be broken entirely, BoJack at least understands the cycle now. That self-awareness, combined with accountability, gives him a chance, perhaps his hundredth, but a chance to forge a different path. Whether he succeeds will depend on his ability to move forward without forgetting the view from halfway down, using guilt as a guide for reparative action rather than a weight of shame to drown under. In the end, BoJack's future remains unwritten, a sober reminder that for those fighting inner battles, the work of change is perpetual, and the outcome is never guaranteed. However, every day is an opportunity to try again.

7. Conclusion

AI-assisted disclosure has both governance challenges and opportunities. To be trusted, deployment needs to be integrated with governance, auditability, explainability and human oversight. There is a strong case for hybrid human-AI governance systems to offer the best pathway towards accountable and transparent disclosure practices. AI-powered disclosure is a major leap forward for organizations in their reporting abilities. The incorporation of AI into disclosure processes, however, poses significant challenges of accountability, transparency, auditability and explainability. Governance mechanisms are crucial to ensure that AI systems build, not destroy, stakeholders' trust. There is a need for a mix of explainability mechanisms, wide-spread audit trails and human-in-the-loop review mechanisms to achieve effective governance. There is a need to keep human oversight at the heart of disclosure decision making, and have AI to be an assistive tool, not the decision maker. Businesses that effectively in corporate governance, auditable, and explainable elements into their disclosure practices using AI will be more likely to achieve regulatory compliance, stakeholder trust, and organizational legitimacy. The psychological intricacies of BoJack Horseman's relationships reveal a deeply wounded character who oscillates between seeking redemption and succumbing to self-destructive tendencies. His unresolved guilt, addiction, and maladaptive coping mechanisms not only perpetuate his suffering but also inflict harm on those closest to him. Through his relationships with Todd, Herb, and Sarah Lynn, we see how BoJack's fear of loneliness and dependence on others create toxic cycles from which he struggles to break free. These relationships underscore the critical role that interpersonal connections play in shaping an individual's psychological well-being, both positively and negatively. While BoJack Horseman presents a bleak depiction of addiction, regret, and self-sabotage, it also serves as a commentary on the human condition. The show suggests that change is difficult but not impossible. However, genuine transformation requires more than fleeting moments of remorse for BoJack; it necessitates a fundamental shift in how he views himself and others. His story serves as a cautionary tale about the consequences of unaddressed trauma and highlights the importance of meaningful relationships in the pursuit of healing. Ultimately, BoJack's journey illustrates that while past mistakes cannot be erased, personal growth is an ongoing process. His struggles highlight the significance of accountability, self-awareness, and the impact that social connections have on mental health. As viewers, we are left questioning whether BoJack will ever break free from his patterns or if he is doomed to repeat them. This ambiguity makes BoJack Horseman such a powerful and psychologically resonant narrative that forces us to reflect on our relationships, choices, and capacity for change.

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