

Existentialism as Portrayed in the Netflix Series Bojack Horseman

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ABSTRACT

BoJack Horseman is a 2014 adult animated series created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg. Set in an alternate reality where humans and anthropomorphic animals co-exist in harmony, BoJack, voiced by Will Arnet, is a washed up actor who had gained recognition in the 90's on the sitcom, Horsin' Around. The sitcom revolved around a young bachelor trying to raise human children who had been orphaned. The series is a dark and twisted take on the ugly narcissism and toxicity of the entertainment industry. The use of animation and bright colours is quite metaphorical as the series talk about the dark and depressing reality of life. In this paper, we would like to discuss the nineteenth century philosophy, existentialism and how the theory is depicted in the BoJack universe.

Keywords : Existentialism, absurdism, BoJack Horseman, anthropomorphism, cinema, philosophers, metaphor, dark, disillusionment, reality, meaninglessness, existence

Introduction

BoJack Horseman is a 2014 Netflix original adult animated series created by Ralph-Bob Waksberg. The story revolves around an anthropomorphic horse named BoJack and is set in an alternate reality where humans and anthropomorphic animals coexist. Bought to the screen in colourful animation, the show is a satire and a dark take on the narcissistic and toxic traits of the entertainment industry, Hollywood. Existentialism is a nineteenth century philosophical trend that was introduced through the works of Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. It is a philosophical theory or approach that refers to a person's life as a free and responsible individual, capable of making their own developments in life, that is, through the act of will, and suffering its consequences through existence. Although existentialism saw its opening over the centuries, it was not until twentieth century that it was accepted as a philosophical theory. Kierkegaard introduced the theory but never termed it as such. It is debatable if he would agree to the modern definition of the theory but his works offer some of the most prominent strains of existential trends. According to Kierkegaard, each individual is responsible for giving a meaning to their own life and to live it passionately and authentically. Many philosophers of the nineteenth and twentieth century were of the opinion that the traditional philosophies were too abstract or detached from human experiences. The main idea of the theory came out to the world after World War II and through the works of Jean-Paul Sartre.

Objective Of Study

The paper focuses on the existential allusions portrayed in the series where protagonist, BoJack is a washed-up 90's sitcom actor. All through the six seasons of the series, we find BoJack struggling to find a purpose in his life. The series uses Hollywood as a metaphor on existence itself. BoJack's constant struggle to find a meaning and purpose in his life, his attempts at trying to win an Oscar, all show that his life would be one without meaning and neither would he, as an actor, be leaving behind a worthwhile legacy. BoJack's constant search for this meaning leads to his overuse of escapist means to run away from his depressing reality. The show asks a question that is addressed to most celebrities. Despite having everything they would need, money, fame and power, why do they find themselves unhappy? A similar question was put forward by the seventeenth century philosopher Blaise Pascal, who is considered as one of the precursors of existentialism. According to Pascal, when humans are left idle for too long with nothing to do and no purpose, they end up contemplating their own insignificance in this universe and this ultimately burns them and

they are spirited out completely. The key way of coping with existentialism is by distracting oneself and this is seen throughout the series. In fact, every main character of the series seems to do the same.

Many of the philosophies shows what the existentialists has proposed in their literary narratives are represented in the series. The prime example of this representation is that of radical freedom. Radical freedom was proposed by the twentieth century philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre in his theory of existentialism and is one of the prime focus. According to Sartre "existence precedes essence" (Sartre, "*Existentialism is a Humanism*,"²⁰) that is the purpose of a being precedes the existence of the being itself. When this is considered in the perspective of an existential nihilist, existence is insignificant and meaningless. In technicality, BoJack has no purpose or meaning to his life. There is no matter that is keeping him from stealing the D of the Hollywood sign or from going on a three-month long bender. But at the same time there is nothing that is forcing him to do these things either. This is the other side of the perspective. The being is in complete control of its own decisions and choices. This freedom or this control over one's own choices is what Sartre calls radical freedom. There is no "deep down" for BoJack's depiction; just the one BoJack who is responsible for his own decisions and choices and he who is entirely defined by them and its consequences. The writers took an upbeat approach to Sartre in the show, using water as a symbol for BoJack's radical freedom. BoJack often finds himself overwhelmed by water but after his experiences with water in season three in the underwater episode, when he falls off the taffy factory's ledge, he actually sees water for what it truly is: a medium of incredible opportunity rather than an intimidating and frightening power. The next depiction that we see is the embracing of the absurd. Mister Peanut Butter and Cuddly Whisker's journey to happiness and harmony after realizing the nihilism they face is reminiscent of twentieth-century French theorist Albert Camus and his absurdist theory. According to Camus, world is nonsensical and meaningless, but humans are desperate to find a cause or purpose in it. This disparity was called "the absurd" by Camus. There are only three options once one is conscious of "the absurd": return to normal life and without thinking about it at all, commit suicide, or rebel, that is, embrace it. Accept the absurdity and be content despite it. In his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus," Camus illustrates these ideas. It tells the story of a guy who is doomed to move a big boulder up a hill every day, only to watch it roll back down. When Sisyphus recognizes the absurdity of his practice yet chooses to be joyful despite it, he becomes Camus' "absurd hero. In the series, a baboon can be seen jogging up the hill near BoJack's house every day, illustrating this philosophical ideology ". He runs up the same hill every single day and in one episode he advises a tired BoJack that one should do it every day and that is the challenging task and not the task in itself. Driving is another theme that is seen in the series. Driving serves as a means of escape for BoJack from the absurd. When he let go of the steering wheel, BoJack submits to the absurd and tries to commit suicide. But when he sees the wild horses that run in the field, they end up becoming Camus' infamous "absurd hero." They embrace the absurd, do their meaningless tasks, and exist happily despite the insignificance.

Hypothesis

Existentialism is a philosophical inquiry that explores the problem of the human existence and centres on the lived experience the thinking, feeling, acting, individual. This is a poignant depiction of an individual's interaction with life, meaning and purpose and has been touted as one of the shows that has best tackled issues of mental health. The show depicts a fading celebrity's quest to preserve fame and alongside the quest for inward. The existential movement had deeply influenced literature and every other mediums of art. Over the years, many poets, authors and playwrights have expressed their ideas and views of the existential trend in a lot of their works. Some of the most popular works are by Jean-Paul Sartre in *Nausea*, Albert Camus' *The Plague*, *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger*, Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, etcetera. One of the major reasons for this trend is the influence of the French existentialists held over the literary world. Some of these existentialists include Simone de Beauvoir, Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Gabriel Marcet and many others. Literary works of these philosophers gained much popularity after the second World War, in fact, more than their philosophical works. The works of these French existentialists bought the idea of the philosophy to the reading public and soon led to influence many writers and philosophers over the centuries.

Existential philosophy and narrative styles of art have always had a natural affinity. This elucidated the deep influence philosophy had over literature and media all over the centuries. Cinematic narratives were helpful to narrate stories of the common man to the world and help them understand the 'absurdity' that the existentialists refer to or the 'meaning' of existence and open the viewers up to perspectives and interpretations that they never might have considered. Cinema also helps us understand and appreciate what the existential philosophers meant through their literary narratives. The theories, in general, can be quite hard to comprehend and understand. This is what cinema implies while dealing with an existential theme, most filmmakers use a technique called realist cinema to capture the true existential narrative. This was first recognized by the French critic Andre Bazin. Existential filmmaking talks about how and what it would be like to see the world from the protagonist's perspective whose beliefs about existence overlap with those of the existentialists. Through this paper, we can see how Raphael-Bob Waksberg created an existential reality through his character, BoJack Horseman, an extremely toxic and narcissistic anthropomorphic horse, in his series of the same name. Celebrities hide their true selves behind the dazzle and glamour of the industry just like how humans are trapped in their daily lives that conceal the absurdity of existence. The sitcom consists of six seasons which deeply explore the complexities of relationships and mortality.

Research Methodology

Theory of Existentialism

Existentialism is considered a school of thought that originated in the twentieth century, whereas in actuality, it is a trend or a tendency that had been observed in the history of philosophy. The philosophical trend had taken its course popularly in the twentieth century, but existential tendencies had been recorded in the works of many thinkers and philosophers much before the modern era. Blaise Pascal, a seventeenth century philosopher and writer, had explored existential themes in his works. His ideologies and theories had deeply influenced the pre-existential existentialists, Soren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. Kierkegaard and Nietzsche had made their contributions to the existential trend in the nineteenth century. It

was in the aftermath of the second World War that Jean-Paul Sartre came into the limelight with the “existential” ideas. The war and the conflict between religion and science had caused the people to be in a position where they, along with other philosophers had felt that many philosophical theories were too detached and abstract from actual human experiences. Another important figure is the Russian philosopher Dostoevsky. Some of his major works discuss the elements of existentialism. His work *Notes from Underground* deals with a man who finds himself unable to fit into the society and is unhappy with the identities that he had created for himself.

BoJack Horseman is a 2014 Netflix original adult animated series created by Ralph-Bob Waksberg. The story revolves around an anthropomorphic horse named BoJack and is set in an alternate reality where humans and anthropomorphic animals coexist. Brought to the screen in colourful animation, the show is a satire and a dark take on the narcissistic and toxic traits of the entertainment industry, Hollywood. The animation and the upbeat background music scores all adds as a metaphor to the main theme of the series, that is, a dark and depressing take on the reality of existence. This is an appropriate given to the show's emphasis on the inevitable disillusionment that comes with looking under the surface. The most important depiction of the existential theories is at the final episode of the series, “*The View from Halfway Down*”. To accept the absurdity of existence is in a way similar to accepting one’s own mortality. BoJack’s inability to accept his mortality led to his existential dread and toxic characteristics. Existential dread or existential crisis can be defined as moments when individuals contemplate if their existence has a purpose or meaning and it ultimately leads them to a negative space as they realize the truth behind their existential inquiry. The episode takes place in BoJack’s mind as he is drowning in his own pool while swimming after being intoxicated. The episode shows all the characters in the protagonist’s life who played a vital role in making him who he was. Throughout the episode we see the characters raise many important philosophical questions. Each question is represented by the characters but in actuality, these existential questions are what BoJack asks himself. BoJack's journey through his near-death experience showcased his own grappling with his past, the meaning of life and the acceptance of his own mortality. When the tar of doom finally consumes BoJack towards the end of the episode, we see that he has finally accepted his mortality as he accepts the death that’s waiting for him at the other end. Through this experience, the protagonist comes to a greater understanding of himself and what a meaningful life means for him. It is only when one accepts their own mortality can they accept the true essence of the existential philosophy. The accepting of one’s own mortality and yet continuing to live their life happily can be considered as an absurdist end to the existential dread an individual might feel. Just like Sisyphus, BoJack found the meaning to his existence despite the absurdity of it and chose to live it through each time. The most important depiction of the existential theories is at the final episode of the series, “*The View from Halfway Down*”. To accept the absurdity of existence is in a way similar to accepting one’s own mortality. BoJack’s inability to accept his mortality led to his existential dread and toxic characteristics. Existential dread or existential crisis can be defined as moments when individuals contemplate if their existence has a purpose or meaning and it ultimately leads them to a negative space as they realize the truth behind their existential inquiry. The episode takes place in BoJack’s mind as he is drowning in his own pool while swimming after being intoxicated. The episode shows all the characters in the protagonist’s life who played a vital role in making him who he was. Throughout the episode we see the characters raise many important philosophical questions. Each question is represented by the characters but in actuality, these existential questions are what BoJack asks himself. BoJack's journey through his near-death experience showcased his own grappling with his past, the meaning of life and the acceptance of his own mortality. When the tar of doom finally consumes BoJack towards the end of the episode, we see that he has finally accepted his mortality as he accepts the death that’s waiting for him at the other end. Through this experience, the protagonist comes to a greater understanding of himself and what a meaningful life means for him. It is only when one accepts their own mortality can they accept the true essence of the existential philosophy. The accepting of one’s own mortality

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Review of Literature

Jean-Paul Sartre (21 June 1905 – 15 April 1980) a French philosopher, is one of the most prominent figures in the philosophy of existentialism. Some of Sartre's popular and important works include *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946), *Nausea* (1938), *Being and Nothingness* (1943), *No Exit* (1943), *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1947). But the father of Existentialism is Soren Kierkegaard, a nineteenth century philosopher, son of a wealthy Danish merchant who never held an academic post but wrote a lot. Kierkegaard is considered as the founder of existentialism especially Christian existentialism.

Bojack Horseman by Raphael Bob-Waksberg can be considered as one of the most genuinely existential TV shows. Unlike a lot other television series' that deal with existentialism, *Bojack* stands apart due to its precision and accuracy in portrayal. *Bojack* being the washed-up actor he is, tries to get back into the world of fame and tries to make something out of his career. He wants an Oscar, he wants to act in indie films. He wants to be the type of artist who every actor stereotypes to be the one that ends up being successful. *Bojack's* relentless attempts at making something out of his dying career forms the very foundation of the series. He is on a journey for an Oscar and for some meaning in his life. But soon enough we find that he finds neither. *Bojack* keeps falling back into his self-sabotaging ways and ends up losing every relationship he held dear. His constant addiction to every intoxicating substance that his money can buy him and his alcoholism constantly keep him from feeling anything real and he end up using his relationships as collateral damage to his pain and addiction. The series is not just a portrayal of the irrationality of existence, it shows how to make meaning of that irrationality through hope and life.

Analysis and Major Findings

This paper strives to help bring into readers a sense of appreciation for the beauty of representation of a complex philosophy like existentialism on screen. The use of long shots to create a sense of distraction to make the viewer understand the absurdity and irrationality of existence solely through the screen and nothing else is a feat to be appreciated. *Bojack Horseman* sets an example of being one of the darkest animated series portraying a complex topic with such precision and never losing the pace.

Conclusion

Over the years, many filmmakers have approached the theme of existentialism in their works. The use of cinematic and visual narratives to illustrate the complexities of philosophy helps the viewer understand the world a little better. After all, art is the best expression of the bare human psyche.

The existential theories that the existentialists proposed over centuries are portrayed in the series through the protagonist. As mentioned earlier, cinematic narratives help the viewer understand the philosophical aspect better and through this series we see that, many of the philosophies that were proposed by existentialists are portrayed in the character to its best. As Camus' "absurd hero" found happiness despite the absurdity of existence, *BoJack* found meaning in his life by accepting his own mortality.

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