

Journal with Sophie

by Satya Limanta

Submission date: 05-Oct-2022 02:59PM (UTC+0700)

Submission ID: 1917191070

File name: 1-13121-24807-1-SM-with_Sophie_Ariella.pdf (433.05K)

Word count: 3795

Character count: 20197

Childhood Trauma Aftermath on the Adult *BoJack Horseman*

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ABSTRACT

In recent decades, adult animation has garnered its own audience due to its mix of dark humor and slash of reality. One popular series is *BoJack Horseman*. The show intrigues me because throughout its six seasons, it manages to show how childhood trauma deeply affects BoJack, the main character, as an adult. In this study, we want to analyze the root causes of BoJack's childhood trauma and the coping mechanisms he did. The findings of this research suggest that there are two main reasons: maltreatment from caretakers and loss of a loved one. Furthermore, there are four forms of maltreatment from his parents: hurtful words, broken marriage, domestic abuse, and gaslighting/guilt tripping. To cope with his trauma, BoJack used four strategies: escapism, dark humor, suicide attempt, and professional help. Through a combination of these four strategies, BoJack was forced to deal with his childhood trauma to become a better person.

Keywords: childhood trauma; latent vulnerability; root causes; coping mechanisms

INTRODUCTION

Animation as a form of entertainment still garners its own audience. Animation itself can be defined as "a film made by hand, frame-by-frame, providing an illusion of movement which has not been directly recorded in the conventional photographic sense" (Wells, 1998, p. 10). Although animation is often associated to be marketed towards children, there is a type of animation which caters a more mature audience: adult animation. One example of an adult animation is Netflix's six-season series, *BoJack Horseman*. The series follows the protagonist, *BoJack Horseman*, as he navigated through adulthood while dealing with the aftermath of his childhood trauma. Throughout the series, the viewers learnt about the roots, effects, and coping mechanisms of BoJack's childhood trauma.

The theory used in this study is McCrory's and Viding's (2015) latent vulnerability. They first introduced the concept of latent vulnerability as, "... measurable changes that follow from experiences of maltreatment that are latent in so far as they do not necessarily have an immediate clinical manifestation, but nonetheless are associated with an increased risk of, or vulnerability to, future psychiatric disorder" (p. 494). Children who face trauma would be more likely to grow up experiencing psychological issues, which would branch out to behavioral consequences as well. Therefore, we found it intriguing to see how BoJack's childhood trauma panned out from the root causes to the coping strategies he used to overcome said trauma.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the writer discusses her findings. This section is divided into two parts: (1) the roots and effects of BoJack's childhood trauma and (2) his coping mechanisms to overcome said trauma.

The Roots and Effects of BoJack's Childhood Trauma

Childhood plays an important role in someone's life because it is when they are the most susceptible to new information. Adults have a hard time changing their behavior because it has been ingrained in them, but children are easy to mold. In BoJack's case, these stressors shape

his worldview, self-perception, attitude, and behavior. The two major roots of BoJack's childhood trauma are the maltreatment from caretakers and the loss of his loved one.

First of all, BoJack was poorly treated by his parents. There were four main forms of maltreatment he experienced: hurtful words, broken marriage, domestic abuse, and gaslighting/guilt-tripping. Firstly, BoJack's parents mistreated him through hurtful words. Hurtful words can be considered as verbal abuse, which means "the use of derogatory, negative language to harm another person" (Stark, 2015, p. 1). Here is an excerpt from the episode *Brand New Couch* (Season 2, Episode 1):

Beatrice: ¹ You know, I was beautiful **before I got pregnant**.
 BoJack: I know.
 Beatrice: You **ruined** me, BoJack.
 BoJack: I know.
 Beatrice: You better grow up to be something great to make up for all the **damage you've done**.

Beatrice, BoJack's mother, blamed BoJack's birth for ruining her appearance and life, even though he did not have power over it. As a result, she expected BoJack to compensate for it by being a successful person. Hurtful words also negatively affect BoJack's self-esteem. In her study, Stark (2015) said that children who faced verbal aggression are more susceptible to "impaired perceived competence" and "low self-esteem" (p. 997). In *The Shot* (Season 2, Episode 9), BoJack was supposed to act as Secretariat and cry because he found out he might be responsible for his brother's death in the Vietnamese War. However, he struggled to cry in front of other people, so he started unleashing self-loathing words to himself. Here is how the dialogue went between him and the movie director, Kelsey:

BoJack: ¹ Look, I know what you're going to say. I'm a **dumb** sitcom actor who's **in over his head**. I'm sorry that I thought I could do this. And I'm sorry I made you come here. I'm sorry for everything. I don't know what I'm doing.

The thing is, when Kelsey asked everyone else but BoJack to leave the room, she did not say any negative words towards BoJack. It was BoJack who suddenly put himself down. BoJack felt that he had failed Kelsey, who picked him to play Secretariat and said she never made the wrong choice. The idiom "in over his head" means BoJack was entangled in something too difficult for him to deal with. It was detrimental for his self-esteem because he promised his mother that he would be a great person to make up for his existence, yet he could not even do a simple crying scene.

Secondly, BoJack's parents broken marriage also added salt to his wound. Butterscotch, BoJack's father, cheated on Beatrice with at least his maid and secretary. In *A Horse Walks into A Rehab* (season 6, episode 1), BoJack accidentally walked into Butterscotch having intercourse with his secretary:

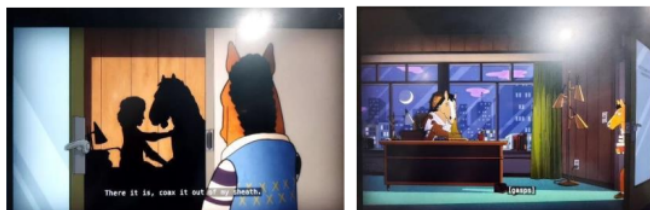


Figure 1. BoJack walking in on his father and the secretary's affair.

The sequence shows BoJack finding out about his father's adultery act. The left image uses over-the-shoulder (OTS) shot whereas the right one uses long-shot. According to the Nashville Film Institute (NFI), OTS is used to provide the viewers with the character's point of view. In this case, we see Butterscotch and his secretary's silhouette from BoJack's perspective. Therefore, the viewers can put themselves in BoJack's shoes when he found out about Butterscotch's affair. On the other hand, the long shot in the latter figure is used to establish the setting and incorporate all characters who are involved (Lewis, 2014). Thanks to the long shot, the viewers can get a glimpse of Butterscotch's office, the affair in action, and BoJack's reaction.

BoJack's parents' broken relationship traumatized BoJack so deeply that it also affected his relationships with women as an adult. For one, BoJack had a fear of commitment. Princess Carolyn brought this up in the pilot episode. This is how the dialogue goes:

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 Princess Carolyn: Oh, face it. You're **afraid of commitment**.
 BoJack: I'm not afraid of commitment! I commit to things all the time. It's the following through on that commitment that I take issue with.

In other words, "following through on that commitment" refers the efforts that come with the commitment. BoJack feared intimacy because it comes with vulnerability. When one is vulnerable, he is more susceptible to getting hurt. As a child, BoJack witnessed how his parents' marriage fell apart, so he did not want to get hurt the way his parents hurt each other.

Additionally, he feared having children. His fear is mostly shown when he was dating Princess Carolyn. In *BoJack Horseman: The BoJack Horseman Story, Chapter One* (Season 1, Episode 1), Princess Carolyn asked BoJack to break up because she wanted to start thinking about her future. Their conversation went as follows:

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 Princess Carolyn: I mean, you don't respect me enough to have a baby with me.
 BoJack: Whoa, what? I never explicitly said that.
 Princess Carolyn: You said it with your actions.

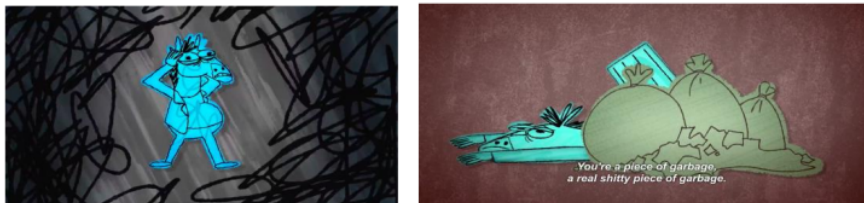
BoJack went through great lengths to avoid the topic when Princess Carolyn brought up her wish to have children. This is because he was afraid of repeating the same mistakes his parents made. The thought that he might end up just like Butterscotch and Beatrice scared the life out of BoJack because he hated the way his parents treated him.

Thirdly, BoJack domestic abuse, both as a witness and victim. As a witness, he witnessed how his parents always resorted to violence when their arguments got heated. In *Brand New Couch* (Season 2, Episode 1), BoJack overheard his parents arguing about kitchen utensils. However, instead of trying to understand each other and finding a middle ground, Beatrice smashed a plate, which Butterscotch took as a challenge. Here is a screenshot from the scene:



Figure 2. Butterscotch's silhouette throwing a plate to the floor.

The picture above shows BoJack who was trying to watch Secretariat on national television, with Butterscotch's silhouette who threw a plate. Butterscotch's and Beatrice's voices overpowered the television sound. During this quarrel, BoJack did not see his parents directly, whereas the viewers got a glimpse of their silhouette. However, it was enough to depict how children are exposed to domestic violence. From the viewpoint of mise-en-scène, young BoJack was presented smaller than his father's silhouette, which symbolized how small and powerless he was compared to his parents. He also looked away from the fight and watched the television from proximity, showing how he distracted himself from his parents' fights. Children who witnessed domestic violence are more susceptible to cultivating mental health issues in adulthood. This became true for BoJack. In *Stupid Piece of Sh*t* (Season 4, Episode 6), the series portrayed BoJack's inner battles with his mental struggles through animated doodles. The following screenshots show BoJack's doodles



representing his mental struggles:

Figure 3. BoJack's inner thought.

Viewed from the technique of mise-en-scène, the screenshots in Figure 5.1 and Figure 5.2 show childlike doodles, which contrast the show's default animation style. The illustration resembles a child's drawing style. There is a sound overlay of BoJack's mind, such as shown in Figure 5.2. This scene takes place in BoJack's mind, so the combination of the audio and visual are BoJack's subconsciousness. It represents how these toxic patterns had been ingrained in BoJack's mind since childhood. Those negative beliefs remained in BoJack's head even after he reached adulthood because they piled up and became his subconsciousness. His exposure to domestic violence traumatized him because it activated the threat processing in his amygdala. According to McCrory and Viding (2015), the amygdala is a part of the brain which processes external threats. BoJack's self-defeating pattern is a result of this constant threat. Before other people could hurt him, he would hurt himself first by uttering self-defeating words and imagining unrealistic negative outcomes.

As a victim, young BoJack was not exempt from physical abuse. In *BoJack Hates the Troops* (Season 1, Episode 2), Butterscotch slapped his son when he gave an unsatisfactory answer. The following screenshots are the proof of the incident:



Figure 4. Butterscotch slapping BoJack.



Figure 5. BoJack tearing up.

The sequence shows how traumatizing Butterscotch's physical torment was for BoJack. From the viewpoint of mise-en-scène, the scene uses medium-shot to fit two people in it, otherwise called two-shot in mise-en-scène (Lewis, 2014). A study shows that adults who are abused as children are more susceptible to getting into abusive relationships or become abusers themselves (Yang et al., 2018). This is due to the children subconsciously learning that the abuse is the right way to treat other people (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2019). BoJack was no exception, with an example being an incident during the filming of *Philbert*:



Figure 6. BoJack choking Gina.



Figure 7. BoJack's house.

To provide some context, BoJack was filming a scene for *Philbert* with Gina Cazador, his co-star and girlfriend at that time. However, BoJack got carried away and kept choking Gina until she almost ran out of oxygen even though the director had said, "Cut!" This horrifying incident happened in *The Showstopper* (Season 5, Episode 11). From a mise-en-scène standpoint, the setting of the filming was a carbon-copy of BoJack's house. The similarity did not help BoJack to set boundaries between his life and his role as Philbert. Moreover, in the scene, Flip and Mr. Peanutbutter stood by as they watched BoJack assaulting Gina. The blocking of the scene emphasized that they were only bystanders who did not bother to intervene. BoJack's childhood trauma affected him so deeply that he turned out to be as violent as his father.

BoJack experienced a lot of gaslighting and guilt-tripping. Guilt-tripping is the use of guilt to manipulate someone else's thoughts, feelings, or behaviors, or provoke them to do something they would not normally do (Patterson, 2022). Butterscotch guilt tripped BoJack into not telling Beatrice about his adultery. As a result, BoJack became someone who lacked the conscience whether something he did was right or wrong. On the other hand, Beatrice leaned more towards gaslighting. The term refers to "a form of persistent manipulation and brainwashing that causes the victim to doubt her or himself, and to ultimately lose one's own sense of perception, identity, and self-worth" (Ni, 2017, p. 4). Beatrice gaslighted BoJack into performing in front of her audience even though BoJack stated he did not want to. She even reduced his son's worth into someone who was only "good at singing the Lollipop song", a performer not someone who had his own will and emotions. Beatrice's gaslighting made BoJack grow up to be someone who

repressed his emotions and had difficulties opening to other people, credits to his mother dismissing his feelings from gaslighting.

BoJack's Coping Mechanisms for His Childhood Trauma

BoJack had four main ways to cope with his trauma. The first and most recurring coping strategy was escapism. Escapism is the act of running away from reality to avoid real-life problems (Igreva, 2015). For one, he indulged in sex escapism. McCrory and Viding (2015) mentioned how children who undergo trauma would face more difficulty forming a long-term relationship. For BoJack, he ran away from his fear of commitment and having children by having sex with many women but never knotted a deep and meaningful connection with any. This is what Evans (2001) categorized as the "avoiding" type; BoJack used escapism to run away from real-life problems and childhood trauma. On the other hand, he also indulged in substance abuse. Using drugs and alcohol to escape from reality is considered the "extreme" type of escapism by Evans (2001), as it could endanger the doer's health and life in the long run.

BoJack's second coping mechanism is by making dark jokes out of his childhood trauma. According to MacLeod (2020), joking about one's tragic life is part of cognitive reappraisal. In other words, BoJack humored himself to see his pain from a lighter perspective. Doctor Champ said that dark humor was BoJack's way of deflecting a sensitive topic. During one art therapy session, BoJack made a dark joke about his upbringings' failure as parents:

Doctor Champ: What about you, BoJack? Did you grow up in a house with a lot of art?

BoJack: Well, my parents practiced the **art of being terrible parents**.

Doctor Champ: BoJack, you can't **joke your way through this**. Everyone else in this group is trying hard to be honest.

Doctor Champ said BoJack could not "joke his way through this" because BoJack made dark jokes every time he was confronted with a difficult situation, particularly circumstances where he was bound to be vulnerable about his childhood trauma.

BoJack's third coping mechanism is suicide attempt. BoJack's attempts to end his own stemmed from his parents' maltreatment. Children who were traumatized would grow up to be more susceptible of mental health problems and life-threatening activities, like suicide attempts (Angelakis et al., 2020). There are a few instances where he tried to kill himself, but the one in which he almost succeeded was in *Nice While It Lasted* (Season 6, Episode 16):



Figure 8. BoJack floating unconscious in a pool.

From a mise-en-scène standpoint, the broken glass of the door was the aftereffect of BoJack breaking in. The floating pills near BoJack's body showed how he tried to overdose himself. In his dialogue, he remembered he might have not come out of the pool. People commit suicide when they foresee no future ahead of them. At this point, BoJack had no more reason to live. He was suffering from his childhood trauma aftermath: the mental health issues, the broken relationships, and the mistakes which seemed irredeemable.

In the latter seasons, BoJack's coping mechanism was predominantly him seeking professional intervention. Professional help was the most ideal method to cope with childhood trauma (McCrory & Viding, 2015). Unlike the previous methods, professional help dives into the roots while providing support for the symptoms. In BoJack's case, he went to a rehabilitation center where he met Doctor Champ, a fellow-addict-turned-doctor, who helped him through several medication and therapy to help him overcome his trauma and addiction.

CONCLUSION

Based on my analysis, BoJack Horseman faced two main roots of childhood trauma, one of which was maltreatment from his parents. Firstly, Butterscotch's and Beatrice's hurtful words traumatized him to the point he also hurt other people through his words. His words became unfiltered even towards the people whom he was close with. Secondly, their broken marriage tampered BoJack's ability to form a long-term relationship. Butterscotch cheated on Beatrice with his maid and secretary. BoJack even witnessed it with his own eyes. His parents' broken marriage would make him afraid of commitment. Instead of settling with someone whom he loves, he has a lot of one-night stands with women whose names he would later forget easily. He also feared having children of his own, as shown when his former girlfriend told him she wanted to have children with him. Third, BoJack witnessed and experienced domestic abuse. He witnessed how his parents fought until they broke utensils. As a victim, he experienced physical abuse from his parents. It later made BoJack into a violent person who passed the pain to everyone around him, including his co-star and girlfriend. Fourth, Butterscotch and Beatrice gaslit and guilt tripped BoJack to the point where BoJack lost the lines between good and bad. He became someone who sought for other people's validation. Additionally, he also lost someone dear to him from suicide. The person is Secretariat, a racehorse who was BoJack's childhood hero and parasocial father figure. As someone who did not have the best paternal role model, BoJack found solace in Secretariat's existence. However, when Secretariat took his own life, BoJack not only lost someone dear to him, but also felt like Secretariat's advice to keep going with life was useless.

Moreover, BoJack had several coping mechanisms for his childhood trauma. The first and most obvious one was escapism. BoJack did two kinds of escapism: sex escapism and substance abuse. As mentioned earlier, BoJack had difficulty forming long-term relationships due to his parents' broken marriage. Hence, he enjoyed sex escapism as means to escape his pain without having to be in a commitment. Next, his substance abuse ranged from alcohol to narcotics. BoJack's detrimental addiction was cultivated by his own upbringing. Butterscotch introduced him to alcohol, whereas Beatrice forced him to smoke cigarettes when he was still a minor. The viewers later learnt that BoJack did escapism so he would not have to feel his pain. Secondly, he also coped with dark humor to see his pain from a lighter perspective. He made fun of his parents' poor parenting skills instead of dwelling on his lack of fortune in the parental department. Then, he also attempted suicide several times and almost succeeded in his latest one. He committed suicide because he thought there would be a better place if he left the world. Finally, he sought professional help through a rehabilitation center. In the place, BoJack had a one-on-one session with Doctor Champ who helped him address the roots of his childhood trauma and the aftereffect he dealt with. He also found healthier ways to cope with his trauma which did not involve self-destructive aspects, such as painting, pottery, and hiking. Lastly, he found a community who struggled with the same thing as he did.

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