Season 4 of Netflix's *BoJack Horseman*: Social and individual psychology

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Netflix released season 4 of its original series *BoJack Horseman on* September 8, continuing the sometimes comic, often tragic saga of eponymous character BoJack Horseman, a washed-up actor struggling with mental illness, the remnants of his receding fame and his self-destructive behavior.

BoJack Horseman takes place in an alternate version of Hollywood ("Hollywoo," after BoJack stole the D in the sign in season 1), where about half of the characters are anthropomorphic animals. As in prior seasons, the ensemble cast and the voice acting are remarkable, with BoJack (Will Arnett) joined by his former agent and ex-girlfriend Princess Carolyn (Amy Sedaris), his friend Diane Nguyen (Alison Brie), his former friend Todd Chavez (Aaron Paul) and his friend and current candidate for governor of California, Mr. Peanutbutter (Paul F. Tompkins).

The show's animation is colorful and attractive, in some ways contrasting with the often devastating content. The jokes are usually clever, and the numerous sight gags are one of the show's subtle strengths.

Season 4 picks up where season 3 left off: BoJack, having nearly committed suicide after finding out he wasn't nominated for an Oscar and being involved in the overdose death of his friend/former co-star, leaves Los Angeles. His friends move on, with Mr. Peanutbutter roped into running for governor against the incumbent Woodchuck Coodchuck-Berkowitz (Andre Braugher) and Princess Carolyn in a surprisingly happy relationship with Ralph Stilton (Raúl Esparza), while Todd explores his realization that he is asexual.

Overall, the season is an advance in many ways over season 3. At the end of season 3 this reviewer was concerned that *BoJack Horseman* ran the risk of establishing a seasonal pattern of BoJack trying but failing to find happiness, his friends trying and failing to help him and then becoming alienated from him, and BoJack reaching new lows near the end of each season.

Season 4 breaks the mold in this regard. While the stories are more disjointed and there is unfortunately very little examination of Hollywoo(d), the emotional developments are much more interesting. (Readers who do not want to have major season 4 plot points spoiled for them are advised to stop here.)

The season begins with Mr. Peanutbutter's campaign for governor, which is stage-managed by his corporate-connected ex-wife and causes tensions with liberal-minded Diane, especially after he mistakenly comes out in favor of fracking and has to put his money where his mouth is by fracking underneath their house.

While there are some healthy criticisms of American politics and its domination by money and celebrity—Mr. Peanutbutter's campaign manager says, "[This election] is about hope and freedom, and powerful lobbyists who pay me to elect a governor I can control, so that we can get legislation passed that builds private prisons on what we now call protected wetlands"—ultimately the population tends to be blamed for the current situation.

This season's BoJack-related story threads focus more on his family and family history, exploring how and why he is so self-destructive. BoJack is introduced to a teenager, Hollyhock (Aparna Nancherla), who claims to be his daughter and demands to see her grandmother. Beatrice Horseman (Wendie Malick, in an outstanding performance), who has developed severe dementia since BoJack last visited her in the nursing home, becomes a major fixture in his life again.

The most effective episodes of the season, including the traditionally heavy penultimate episode, focus on BoJack's mother, Beatrice, who we know from

previous seasons was in a loveless marriage with BoJack's father and was emotionally neglectful of BoJack when he was a child. As a result, BoJack resents his mother: "Seeing my mom is like a Terence Malick movie. Every 10 years or so is bearable, but more than that and it starts to get annoying."

Through flashbacks we see Beatrice's childhood: her brother was killed in World War II, her mother was devastated by this loss and her wealthy father forced her mother to get a lobotomy. Her father, the owner of a major sugar company, tells Beatrice: "Stop making books your friends. Reading does nothing for young women but build their brains, taking valuable resources away from their breasts and hips."

Skipping ahead, Beatrice is a Barnard College graduate concerned about the state of the world. The rebellious Butterscotch Horseman crashes her debutante ball, and says he's moving to California for the Beat poets: "Ginsberg, Cassady, Squirrelinghetti [Allen Ginsberg, Neal Cassady, Lawrence Ferlinghetti]." Beatrice falls for him and ends up pregnant with Butterscotch's child, and they elope to California.

Unable to succeed at writing and initially too proud to accept a well-paid job, Butterscotch blames "Squirrelinghetti and his horde of commie, liberal, Jew-loving rejects." After working at the fish canning factory for six years, he finally declares: "Fine! I'll take the corner office, with the company car, six-figure salary, and four weeks paid vacation, but if my novel becomes bad because I no longer remember what it's like to be working class, we'll know of whom to be blamed."

The Horsemans' transformation from somewhat liberal and socially concerned to right-wing and heartless—a transformation connected, but not in a mechanical way, to wealth—is one of the more interesting and thoughtful aspects of this season of *BoJack Horseman*, and makes it stand out in today's media landscape.

Also of note this season, as in previous seasons, is the show's treatment of mental illness. One episode in particular, "Stupid Piece of Sh*t," gives an intense look into BoJack's mental illness. This episode features his internal monologue, and the opening pre-credits sequence gives an idea of what is dragging BoJack down as he desperately struggles to be a good person.

Other episodes can be more confused, but manage to convey some observations on the entertainment industry. In "Thoughts and Prayers," for example, movie executives try to find ways of profiting off mass shootings by turning them into a feminist issue—offering only their "thoughts and prayers" but secretly cheering on mass shootings committed by men—only to have it blow up in their face when a woman commits a mass shooting. Overall, however, this is *BoJack Horseman's* strongest season yet.

In a few short episodes, *BoJack Horseman* manages to say a great deal about the way social relations and broader processes are refracted individually. All the backwardness, stupidity, wealth, pain, mental illness and oppression bearing down on society has a devastating and often tragic impact on individuals.

BoJack Horseman's ability to alternate between the tragic and the comic continues to yield some of the best television on offer today. This season ends on an unusually optimistic note for BoJack, with his attempts to become a better person yielding fruit even as his friends' relationships collapse. One hopes that season 5, which has already been announced, will continue to break new dramatic ground.