


## Diane Nguyen's Literacy as Individualism and Its Impact on Interpersonal Relationships in *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020)

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### ABSTRACT

Literacy is often understood not merely as a set of technical skills, but as a practice closely tied to identity and personal experience. In *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020), this understanding is reflected through the character of Diane Nguyen, whose writing functions as a means of self-construction. This study examines how Diane's literacy practices align with the concept of literacy as individualism and how they influence her interpersonal relationships. Using a qualitative interpretative approach to examine both textual and visual elements of the series, selected scenes across all six seasons are analyzed through Williams and Zenger's concept of literacy as individualism and Sullivan's interpersonal theory. The analysis focuses on Diane's writing practices and their impact on her relationships with other characters. The findings show that Diane's literacy practices reflect a concept of literacy as individualism, as they are closely tied to emotional struggle, authenticity, and personal experiences. However, these practices also create tension, misunderstanding, and emotional distance in her relationships.

**Keywords:** *Literacy as Individualism; Interpersonal Relationships; Authorship; Writers' Struggle*

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## INTRODUCTION

*"When I was a little girl, I thought that everything, all the abuse and neglect, it somehow made me special. And I decided that one day I would write something that would make little girls like me feel less alone"* (S6:E10 "Good Damage").

This is one of the most famous quotes from the show *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020), by one of its significant characters, Diane Nguyen. *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020) is a Netflix television series created by Raphael Bob-Waksberg, well known for its exploration of heavy themes such as trauma, mental illness, identity, and celebrity culture. The story is presented in an anthropomorphic-animated style and follows the lives of several characters, including Diane Nguyen.

Diane is portrayed as a Vietnamese-American feminist and writer who is principled and often struggles with her writing. She works hard to achieve her goals and to defend what she believes in. Throughout the series, writing is presented not only as a career but also as a means of seeing herself and how others perceive her. Writing is depicted as an important element of her identity. She processes trauma, expresses moral concerns, and defines her sense of self through writing.

In a broader sense, literacy is not merely the ability to read and write. While literacy studies were traditionally viewed strictly as a set of technical skills, they have evolved significantly toward understanding identity-based literacy practices. Gee (1989) challenges the traditional view of literacy as merely a set of cognitive skills, emphasizing that language use is always shaped by social and cultural contexts. Furthermore, although literary analysis has traditionally focused on written texts, contemporary cultural studies

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increasingly recognize animated television series as complex literary texts. Series such as *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020) employ sophisticated narrative structures, visual symbolism, and deep character development comparable to those found in traditional literature, making them suitable for examining themes such as identity construction and interpersonal relationships. The New Literacy Studies (NLS) framework further expands the concept of literacy practices as context-dependent, shaped by the social, cultural, and communal contexts in which they occur (Street, 1984). Supporting this broader understanding, Barton & Hamilton (2012), in their collaborative work, distinguish between literacy events and literacy practices. Literacy events refer to specific activities involving reading or writing, while literacy practices describe the broader, patterned ways in which people use literacy in their daily lives.

Within this framework, in a section of their book, Williams & Zenger (2007) introduce the concept of literacy as individualism, which is a common pattern in which literacy is portrayed as an important part of a person's identity. In this representation, authors are often portrayed as different from ordinary people. They are often depicted as eccentric, emotionally intense, or psychologically troubled characters. Writing is also closely associated with suffering, as authors are shown struggling with emotional pain, illness, romantic failure, family conflict, or writer's block. Suffering becomes a central part of the writer's identity, and in many narratives, it leads to tragic or deeply unhappy outcomes. From this perspective, pain is not accidental but is treated as a necessary part of the meaningful writing process.

In addition, writing is often represented as a sudden burst of creativity that comes from the "soul" and not the result of years of learning, collaboration, or everyday practice. As a result, literacy appears as a rare gift that distinguishes the writer from ordinary people. The representation is further supported by the use of symbolic writing tools. Writers are often depicted using old-fashioned or labor-intensive technologies such as typewriters, fountain pens, or handwritten manuscripts rather than efficient modern devices. Literacy as individualism differs from how literacy is often represented in other media, where reading and writing function as social, collaborative, or practical activities. In such narratives, literacy connects people, helps them communicate more effectively, and serves useful purposes. In representations of literacy as individualism, however, writing sets the writer apart from others. Writing is represented as coming from personal desires, emotional struggles, or inner "demons."

When literacy is represented in that way, it is not only connected to self-expression and self-discovery but also affects how individuals relate to others, as the construction of the self through literacy practices can influence decisions, conflict, emotional distance, and dependency within relationships. Diane's writing-related decisions always have consequences, one of which concerns her relationships. Whether she intends it or not, these consequences always follow her, whether positive or negative. To analyze these aspects, a perspective is needed that views identity not merely as an individual inner state but as something constructed and negotiated through interactions.

According to Sullivan (2013), personality develops through repeated patterns of relationships, and experiences of approval, disapproval, security, and anxiety in relation to significant others shape the self. From this perspective, the individual cannot be understood apart from the social environment, because the self develops through experiences with significant others across different stages of life. In his work, Sullivan (2013) introduces the concept of the self-system, which refers to an organized pattern of experiences, attitudes, and behaviors that an individual develops to protect themselves from anxiety in social interactions. This anxiety arises when an individual perceives disapproval, hostility, or threat, leading them to develop security operations to reduce the perceived threat. There are two types of security operations: dissociation and selective inattention. Dissociation happens when a person excludes certain experiences, feelings, or impulses from awareness. Selective inattention involves ignoring experiences that could threaten one's sense of interpersonal security.

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Sullivan (2013) further explains that the self-system is built upon specific mental images of the self and others, which he terms personifications. Sullivan (2013) defines personifications as mental images or personal impressions of the self and others that develop from repeated interpersonal interactions. These personifications are shaped by others' responses, particularly approval and disapproval. He further categorizes these into the *Good-Me*, formed through approval; the *Bad-Me*, shaped by disapproval; and the *Not-Me*, which emerges from overwhelming anxiety and is excluded from conscious awareness.

*BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020) has been widely discussed as a modern television series that addresses complex themes. Scholars from fields such as media studies, cultural studies, language studies, and psychology have examined the show for its portrayals of mental health, trauma, identity, and social critique in the show. Tanujaya & Limanta (2022) analyze how *BoJack's* adult behavior is shaped by unresolved childhood trauma, while Dewald (2024) highlights how the show's stylistic elements enhance its portrayal of mental illness. Lander (2018) examines the show as a critique of postmodern society, and Cochran (2021) explores its engagement with posthumanism and ecology. Amer (2023) further interprets the show as a "metamodern sitcom" that emphasizes the search for sincerity and meaningful connection.

The representation of literacy in popular media has been discussed in several studies that view literacy as a social practice rather than just a basic skill. Susan Jones (2017), for example, examines how bureaucratic texts function as mechanisms of exclusion within the British welfare system. The study highlights how literacy practices in the film *I, Daniel Blake* shape access to voice, agency, and justice, showing that literacy plays a crucial role in shaping individuals' lived experiences. In particular, Diane Nguyen, despite her central role as a writer, remains underexplored as an object of analysis. Existing studies on literacy representation also reveal certain limitations. Research applying Williams and Zenger's concept of literacy as individualism remains limited, and often focuses on themes such as power or achievement rather than on the relational consequences of literacy practices. For example, Diniar (2023) shows how literacy shapes Jo March's individuality in *Little Women* (2019), while Anti (2023) examines literacy as a source of power in *The Queen's Gambit*. However, these studies do not fully explore how literacy as individualism operates within long-form narratives or how it affects interpersonal relationships.

Similarly, studies using Sullivan's interpersonal theory, such as Sagimin & Damayanti (2019) and Amer & Aljamani (2020), emphasize the importance of relationships in shaping the self, but do not connect these dynamics to literacy practices. While previous studies have extensively explored themes of mental health, trauma, and societal critique, Diane Nguyen's role as a writer remains critically underexplored. Furthermore, existing research applying Williams and Zenger's concept of literacy as individualism has largely focused on traditional media, such as classic literature. Therefore, this study addresses these gaps by focusing on Diane Nguyen's concept of literacy as individualism to examine how writing functions as a form of self-construction, and Sullivan's interpersonal theory to analyze how these practices shape and affect her relationships with others.

## METHOD

This study employs a qualitative interpretive research design to examine how Diane Nguyen's literacy practices in *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020) construct literacy as individualism and how this construction shapes her interpersonal relationships. The primary data source is all six seasons of *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020). The analysis centers on Diane Nguyen as the study's main subject. The data consists of selected scenes, dialogues, and narratives that portray Diane's engagement with literacy as individualism, as well as her relationships with other characters shaped by these literacy practices.

Data were collected through repeated, close viewing of all 77 episodes; however, not all episodes were included in the analysis. The comprehensive review was necessary to identify and select scenes relevant to Diane Nguyen's literacy practice. Only episodes

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containing significant writing-related moments were purposely selected for the analysis. The primary data extracted from the chosen episodes include transcribed dialogue from the official subtitles and visual scenes documented through screenshots.

The selected data were categorized into two main groups: scenes of Diane's literacy practices and her relationships that are influenced by those practices. The collected data were then analyzed using Williams and Zenger's concept of literacy as individualism. The analysis focused on identifying representations of authorship, individuality, suffering, and emotional struggle as reflected in Diane Nguyen's writing practices. To examine how these literacy practices affect her relationships with others, the analysis was followed by explanations grounded in Sullivan's concept of interpersonal relations.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Representation of Literacy as Individualism

This section of the article examines how literacy is represented through the character of Diane Nguyen in *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020), with particular attention to literacy as individualism characteristics. The analysis is based on the concept of literacy as individualism, proposed by Williams & Zenger (2007), which consists of a set of characteristics that represent writers in popular media.

#### *Writing as Identity Construction*

As a writer, Diane's literacy practices demonstrate a strong tendency toward literacy as individualism. Diane's literacy practices are often depicted in quiet, reflective moments of writing. One example can be seen in the opening episode of *BoJack Horseman* (2014-2020), where Diane Nguyen is shown sitting on a rooftop, holding a notebook and writing with a pen as she has a conversation with BoJack.



(a)



(b)

Figure 1. The Depiction of Diane Using Traditional Writing Tools Such as a Pen and a Notebook. (A) Diane Writes Bojack's Biography on the Rooftop (S1:E2 "Bojack Hates the Troops" 23:43). (B) Diane Writes Sebastian's Biography in Cordovia (S2:E9 "The Shot" 5:48).

In the show, Diane is often portrayed writing with traditional tools such as a pen and notebook, even though the setting is modern, when people typically write on laptops or smartphones. In Figure 1a, she is shown on a rooftop with BoJack. She is shown physically away from the crowd. This scene represents how her writing creates an internal world that distances her from ongoing interpersonal interactions. Similarly, in Figure 1b, she is shown clutching her notebook as she follows Sebastian St. Clair through a war-torn area in Cordovia.

According to Williams & Zenger (2007), representations of literacy often function as social or collaborative activities; however, in literacy as individualism, literacy is constructed as a means through which individuals engage with their own experiences, meaning writing can create a separation between the individual and their social environment, as attention becomes centered on internal thoughts rather than ongoing interpersonal interactions.

This emotional distance is evident when Diane's writing process pulls her away from important social and relational moments. For instance, when Mr. Peanutbutter tries to discuss their upcoming wedding, Diane deflects the conversation:

*Diane: Mr. Peanutbutter, you know I love you. And you know I am really excited about getting married, but right now I'm working, and I have a lot of thoughts in my head, and I can't really think about our wedding or*

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*the future or me being married to you. (S1:E9 "Horse Majeure", 04:32 - 04:43)*

This interaction shows how Diane's engagement with writing causes her to prioritize her own thoughts over her relational commitments, which creates emotional distance between herself and others.

Furthermore, Diane's construction of her identity is heavily dependent on the belief that authentic, meaningful work requires hardship and a larger humanitarian purpose. She expresses a deep dissatisfaction with comfortable, commercially successful writing and actively seeks out difficult situations to validate her status as a "serious" writer. This belief creates internal conflict regarding her career choices. For example, when Princess Carolyn offers her a highly paid position, Diane responds with hesitation:

*Princess Carolyn: Listen, the Turteltaub Company is making a movie about Secretariat. And since you're such an expert, they want to bring you on board as a character consultant.*

*Diane: What does that mean?*

*Princess Carolyn: Oh, it's the cushiest job in the world. You sit in a fancy chair and eat pastries all day. And then once a week, you say, "Secretariat wouldn't do that."*

*Diane: I don't know. I've already been offered this other thing. And did you know there are orphans in Sudan –*

*Princess Carolyn: Honey, you take this job, you can buy all the orphans you want.*

*Diane: No, I don't want to buy them.*

*Princess Carolyn: Look, if you really want to help people, it doesn't hurt to have a little money in your pocket. Take the job now, help the orphans later. There's always later. (S1:E12 "Later", 15:33 – 16:05)*

Although the job is described as easy, offering a high salary, and requiring minimal effort, Diane hesitates and instead shifts the conversation toward humanitarian concerns. Her reluctance to accept a comfortable and well-paid position suggests that she does not consider such work to be meaningful or fulfilling. However, this idealistic perception of meaningful work is later complicated by Diane's own experiences. In a later scene, when she's having a conversation with BoJack, Diane admits that she ultimately accepts the position as a character consultant.

*Diane: I actually decided to take a job on the Secretariat movie as a character consultant. When I first moved to L.A, I thought I was gonna be doing really important work. You know, writing stuff that makes a difference. But then you kind of fall into one thing and then another. (S1:E12 "Later", 21:27 – 21:38)*

Her reflection shows the tension between her initial aspirations and her actual career trajectory. While she continues to value this meaningful and impactful writing, her decision reflects a degree of compromise given the circumstances, as stated when she insists on taking a ghostwriting job in the war-torn region of Cordovia.

*Diane: I want to do something important. I want to help people and do good work and sleep on the ground and poop in a bucket. (S1:E12 "Later," 07:25 – 07:32)*

This tendency to prioritize writing over personal relationships is also connected to Diane's broader perception of meaningful work as requiring hardship and sacrifice. In this scene, she expresses her desire to accept a job in Cordovia, despite her husband's hesitation and discomfort with the decision. Diane insists on taking the opportunity, emphasizing that she genuinely wants the job. Although she has already produced writing that is relatively well known, she still feels she has not done anything truly important. For Diane,

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meaningful work can only be achieved through struggle, as reflected in her willingness to "sleep on the ground and poop in a bucket."

During the temporary halt in the production of Secretariat, Diane decides to accept a ghostwriting job in Cordovia, a war-torn region. She chooses to pursue work that she sees as more meaningful and impactful. The conditions in Cordovia are depicted as follows:



Figure 2. The War-Torn Conditions in Cordovia. (S2:E7 "Hank After Dark" 3:49)

Figure 2 shows an establishing shot of a desolate, grey landscape filled with burning rubble and military tents. The stark, dangerous environment visually contrasts with Diane's comfortable life in Los Angeles. The conditions in Cordovia show instability, danger, and limited resources, which further support Diane's willingness to place herself in difficult situations in order to do meaningful work. This scene aligns with the concept of literacy as individualism, in which authors suffer for their work.

#### *Literacy as Emotional Expression*

Another characteristic of literacy as individualism, as explained by Williams and Zenger (2007), can be seen in its connection to the Romantic tradition, in which authors are portrayed as individuals with deep emotional sensitivity who draw on experiences of love, loss, and personal struggle in their writing.

In Season 5 Episode 2, during her divorce process with Mr. Peanutbutter, Diane travels to Vietnam and writes a light travel article titled "10 Reasons to Go to Vietnam: A Girl Croosh Personal Travel Guide." At the beginning, she presents typical reasons for visiting Vietnam; however, by the end, she transforms the piece into a deeply personal narrative.

Diane, as a writer, focuses on emotional pain, heartbreak, and disorientation. This shift reflects the idea that writing is not merely a communicative act, but a process of expressing and making sense of personal experience. It is later revealed that the article is driven by her emotional response to witnessing her soon-to-be ex-husband, Mr. Peanutbutter, with another woman.

*Diane: But none of those reasons are why you actually went to Vietnam. The real reason you go to Vietnam is because you accidentally see your soon-to-be ex-husband kiss someone else... (S5:E2 "The Dog Days Are Over" 24:19 - 24:24).*





Figure 3. Scenes From S5:E2 "The Dog Days Are Over": (A) Diane Accidentally Saw Mr. Peanutbutter Kiss A Girl (24:42); (B) Diane Cries All the Way to The Airport (24:51); (C) Diane in Vietnam (25:25).

Figure 3a shows Diane's point of view as she sees her soon-to-be ex-husband kissing his new girlfriend. Figure 3b is a close-up shot of Diane's face in the car, highlighting her smeared mascara and raw expression of grief immediately after the triggering event in Figure 3a. Meanwhile, Figure 3c shows Diane standing alone in the center of a bustling Vietnamese market. Despite being surrounded by crowds and colorful stalls, she appears visually isolated. This framing reflects the core idea of Romantic authorship, in which the writer is deeply connected to human experiences such as love and loss, yet remains emotionally separated from others through their ability to perceive and process them in writing.

This deep connection between emotional expression and identity reaches its peak in Season 6, where Diane's depression is shown as a major part of her identity as a writer. When her partner, Guy, worries about her mental health, Diane explains that her depression is actually necessary for her work. As she states in one scene.

*Guy:* Seems unimportant in light of what you've been dealing with.

*Diane:* What I'm dealing with?

*Guy:* Your psychiatrist said you're depressed.

*Diane:* Okay, yeah, I've been a little depressed. But I'm not like depressed. I don't have depression.

*Guy:* You're smoking three packs a day, you've been wearing the same pajama bottoms for weeks-

*Diane:* This is all part of my writing process. My best stuff comes out when I hate myself. (S6:E7 "The Face of Depression" 03:34 - 03:50)

Her statement shows that Diane believes her value as a writer is tied to her emotional pain. She feels that if she is not suffering, she cannot produce anything meaningful. Williams & Zenger (2007) mention in the book that "real" authors are often shown as "tortured souls" whose writing comes from their "illness" and "struggles." When Diane says her best stuff comes out when she hates herself, she is following this "Romantic Author" idea. She thinks that for her writing to be good, it cannot come from a happy place. Society expects authors to suffer and struggle for their genius to be recognized. Diane has internalized this, believing that her depression is the "price" she must pay to be a talented individual

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This internalized belief is vividly reflected in the visual design of her living space and in her physical appearance.



Figure 4. Scenes From S6:E7 “The Face of Depression”: (A) Diane’s Messy Living Conditions While Attempting to Write Her Memoir (11:06); (B) Diane’s Changed Physical Appearance after Accepting Her Depression and Starting to Take Antidepressants (23:55)

In Figure 4a, the wide shot of Diane’s Chicago apartment shows extreme visual clutter: scattered trash, empty pizza boxes, and discarded clothes filling the frame. This chaotic mise-en-scène reflects her unstable mental state and her struggle to turn her trauma into the “profound” writing she wants to create, reinforcing the “tortured artist” trope. In contrast, Figure 4b presents a visual transformation after Diane begins accepting her depression and taking antidepressants. Her physical appearance changes, and the framing places her in a brighter and more socially connected environment.

However, this newfound stability makes it difficult for her to write her new book. She tries to write a collection of essays about her childhood trauma, but she finds it hard to start and to remember specific details. Instead of writing about her pain, she unintentionally starts writing a fictional story about a teenage detective named Ivy Tran. When she later shows this writing to Guy, he responds positively, describing it as enjoyable. Diane, however, insists that her book is supposed to be about trauma and damage, yet she feels unable to access the emotional pain she believes is necessary to write about it.

- Guy: *“Ivy Tran, Food Court Detective”?* Well, I like this. It’s fun.
- Diane: ***My book is supposed to be a profound treatise on damage. But I can’t even access my damage. I’m too hopped up on goof-berries!***
- Guy: *What the hell is a goof-berry?*
- Diane: ***I need to go to a dark place, and I can’t get there. When I’m with you, when we’re out, I feel good, I feel happy, but the minute I sit down to write-***
- Guy: *Hey. You were having trouble writing this book when you were depressed, and you’re having trouble now that you’re not depressed. Is it possible that you just –*
- Diane: *What? That I’m just a shitty writer?*
- Guy: *No. That you just don’t wanna write this book.*
- Diane: ***I do, though. It’s just hard. But that means it’s worthwhile. Good things are hard. I’m not writing The Mall-related Mysteries of Ivy Tran!*** (S6:E10 “Good Damage”, 11:15–11:54)

This moment reflects Diane’s belief that writing must come from pain in order to be valuable. Diane states that she needs to go to a “dark place,” suggesting that she associates meaningful writing with emotional suffering. Even when she is no longer depressed and feels happy, she struggles to write because she believes that happiness prevents her from producing meaningful work. Her statement that “good things are hard” further reinforces the idea that difficulty and emotional struggle are necessary conditions for writing. This conflict is later clarified in a conversation with Princess Carolyn, in which Diane insists that she must write her trauma essays.

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- Diane: I understand you're trying to be helpful, in your own pushy, self-absorbed way. But I don't wanna write a middle-grade fiction detective series.*
- Princess Carolyn: I think you do, though. Because when I was reading it, I could tell you were having fun.*
- Diane: Yeah, but I'm not writing a book to have fun. If I don't write my book of essays now, I never will!*
- Princess Carolyn: So? Don't write your book of essays.*
- Diane: I have to!*
- Princess Carolyn: Why?*
- Diane: Because if I don't, that means that all the damage I got isn't good damage, it's just damage. I have got nothing out of it, and all those years I was miserable was for nothing. I could've been happy this whole time and written books about girl detectives and been cheerful and popular and had good parents, is that what you're saying? What was it all for? (S6:E10 "Good Damage", 23:16 - 23:58)*

Diane views writing as a means of justifying and giving meaning to her past suffering. For her, emotional pain is not only something to express, but something that must be transformed into meaningful work. This perspective further reinforces the concept of literacy as individualism, in which writing is closely tied to personal experience and emotional struggle. This highlights how deeply her identity as a writer is shaped by the belief that suffering must lead to meaningful outcomes.

### **The Impact of Literacy on Diane Nguyen's Interpersonal Relationships**

While the previous section examined how Diane's literacy practices show characteristics of literacy as individualism, this section focuses on how these practices influence her interpersonal relationships. As her engagement with writing becomes closely tied to her identity, it also affects how she interacts with others and how she perceives herself, particularly in moments of conflict.

The impact of literacy on Diane's relationships starts with her family. In Season 1 Episode 5, when she comes back to Boston for his father's funeral, Diane feels like an outsider in her own home. She describes her childhood as a time of rejection and loneliness:

- Diane: Yeah, well, I was pretty lonely, too. My family made my life miserable, and then they never forgave me for leaving. I'm just the member of family nobody likes. And my dad was the worst of them all. (S1:E5 "Live Fast, Diane Nguyen" 06:30 - 06:39)*

This quote is a perfect example of the Bad-Me in Sullivan's theory. Because her family treated her so poorly, Diane grew up believing that she was unlikable or unworthy. This creates a deep sense of anxiety. To handle this pain, Diane uses literacy as a security operation. She wants to be a successful writer to prove that she is not the "miserable" person her family thinks she is. This pattern continues in her professional relationships. In Season 1 Episode 7, when Diane finishes the biography, BoJack is very angry because the book is too honest and shows his flaws. He feels betrayed and wants her to change it. However, Diane insists on keeping the truth in the book, which creates tension in her relationship with BoJack.

- Diane: I am always on your side.*
- BoJack: Really? Like when you wrote that book? Was that you being on my side?*
- Diane: You're not still mad about the book.*
- BoJack: You manipulated me and completely took advantage of -*

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*Diane: Everything I did was to help you tell the story I knew you wanted to tell. You got everything you wanted because of that book. You were a joke, now people take you seriously. You were out of work, now you got your dream role.*

*BoJack: Okay, yes. All of that is true. But also, you were my friend and you hurt my feelings. And it's weird that you never apologized for that and that you still won't. (S2:E7 "Hank After Dark")*

This interaction between Diane and BoJack shows how her literacy practices directly affect her interpersonal relationships. Diane views her writing as a way to present what she believes to be an honest and meaningful version of BoJack's story. From her perspective, the book will be successful if it tells BoJack's "warts and all" as a celebrity. However, BoJack experiences the situation differently, focusing not on the outcomes but on the emotional impact of her actions. His statement that she hurts his feelings emphasizes the personal cost of Diane's literacy decision. According to Sullivan (2013), interpersonal relationships are shaped by experiences of approval and disapproval. Diane's actions are perceived as disapproval, leading to emotional discomfort and tension between them.

In Season 2 Episode 10, Diane's writing practices take her to Cordovia. She travels to Cordovia to document the humanitarian work of Sebastian St. Clair, a billionaire philanthropist. She hopes to find "real" meaning and make a tangible difference in the world. However, the trip was a disaster. She discovers that Sebastian is less interested in helping people and more interested in his own image. She returns to Los Angeles, and instead of going home to her husband, she crashes into BoJack's house.

*Diane: I really thought I could do it. I thought I could go far away and help people and be this best possible version of myself.*

*BoJack: What happened?*

*Princess Carolyn: I couldn't. I wasn't the person I thought I was. (S2: E10, "Yes And" 14:58 - 15: 08)*

The "best possible version" of herself is Diane's *Good-Me*. She believed that by doing "serious" writing in a dangerous place, she could finally be the person her family didn't think she could be. But the reality of the war created so much anxiety that her identity as a brave writer broke down. When she says, "wasn't the person she thought she was," she admits that her *Bad-Me* has taken over.

Sullivan (2013) explains how people develop ways of communicating and behaving to handle anxiety and protect their self-system, particularly in situations that threaten their sense of identity. In "The Shot" (S2:E9), after failing to continue her work in Cordovia, Diane returns to Los Angeles and stays at BoJack's house while continuously telling Mr. Peanutbutter that she is still in Cordovia.



(a)



(b)

Figure 5. Scenes From S2:E9 "The Shot": (A) Mr. Peanutbutter Asking About Diane Nguyen's Life in Cordovia (21:52). (B) Diane Nguyen Responding to Mr. Peanutbutter after Returning to Los Angeles (21:54).

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This scene shows how Diane's self-concept shapes her interpersonal behavior. From Sullivan's perspective, this act of lying serves as a security operation, allowing Diane to avoid interpersonal conflict and protect herself from the anxiety of admitting failure and disappointing her husband. The pressure to maintain this lie eventually leads Diane to create distance rather than face the situation. In her phone call with Mr. Peanutbutter, she says:

*Diane: I can't do this anymore. I can't talk to you on the phone all the time. It's too hard. I think maybe we should stop calling each other, for a little bit. I'm sorry. I just miss you so much. (S2:E10 "Yes And", 24:13 - 24:15)*

This scene shows how Diane manages her anxiety by limiting communication, choosing temporary separation as a means of self-protection. As Sullivan (2013) explains, security operation is a mental mechanism that people use to avoid or lessen anxiety caused by threats in relationships. In this scene, Diane asks Mr. Peanutbutter to stop calling her, which can be understood as what Sullivan called security operations, particularly selective inattention. Diane feels strong anxiety and guilt because she cannot live up to the ideal version of herself represented by her work in Cordovia. These operations function not by resolving interpersonal problems but by working as defenses, enabling her to maintain a sense of stability even when relationships are difficult.

Before the conflict in her marriage begins, there is a very important moment in Season 3 when Diane gets a new job at a website called Girl Croosh. Her boss, Stefani, asks if she would ever write a "hot take" or a negative article about her husband, Mr. Peanutbutter.

*Stefani: What if Mr. Peanutbutter does something problematic and you have a real hot take?*

*Diane: If I have a problem with my husband, I'm gonna talk to him about it directly.*

*Stefani: Okay, so what if you did that and he didn't listen, and you knew that, as much as you love him, and as much as he loves you, he's never gonna get it? And meanwhile, you also knew that your readers looked up to you and wanted to read your opinion? Would you write about it then? (S3:E12 "That Went Well" 18:39 - 19:02)*

Instead of stopping to think about this risk, the very next scene shows Diane going home and happily telling her husband, "I got the job!" This situation can be explained by a concept in Sullivan's theory called selective inattention. This is when a person ignores something that might make them feel anxious or force them to change their mind. Even though Stefani is describing exactly how the job could hurt her marriage, Diane chooses to ignore the danger. She insists on taking the job because her identity as a "writer that people look up to" is a very big part of her self-system. She wants to believe she is a good wife, but she also wants the power that comes with being a famous writer. This decision shows that her literacy is becoming more important than the stability of her relationship.

This leads directly to the explosion in Season 4. When Mr. Peanutbutter supports "fracking" in their backyard, the "mismatch" that Stefani warned her about finally happens. Instead of only talking to him "directly" like she promised, she uses her literacy to fight him publicly.

*Diane: Drop out of the race. I've written another piece for Girl Croosh. It's called "The Case Against Mr. Peanutbutter." When I hit this button, the post goes live.*

*Mr. Peanutbutter: Diane, don't.*

*Diane: I don't want to. And I won't, if you drop out of the race.*

*Mr. Peanutbutter: Jesus, Diane. You can't do that.*

*Diane Nguyen's Literacy as Individualism and Its Impact on Interpersonal Relationships in BoJack Horseman (2014-2020)*

- Diane:* Because you're the only one allowed to make decisions for this family?
- Mr. Peanutbutter:* No. Because it's gonna come off as a weird lovers' spat, and it's just going to embarrass everyone.
- Diane:* Well, I'm sorry if I embarrass you. You told me you weren't going to frack, and now I can't turn on a faucet in my own home without getting third-degree burns.
- Mr. Peanutbutter:* Oh, I get it. So, like always, you're mad at someone, so your solution is to air your dirty laundry for everyone to see.
- Diane:* No. This is not about us. I don't want you to be governor because you would be bad at it, because you don't stand for anything. (S4:E4 "Commence Fracking" 23:12 - 24:01)

In this situation, Diane feels a lot of anxiety because her husband is doing something she thinks is wrong. To feel secure again, she uses her writing as a security operation. Instead of supporting her husband, she chooses her role as a "principled writer" over that of a wife. This causes a huge break in their relationship because Mr. Peanutbutter feels betrayed. By looking at these two scenes together, it can be concluded that Diane's literacy practices didn't just happen to hurt her marriage, she chose a path where her writing would eventually come first.

The final story of Diane's journey shows the peak of her internal conflict. In Season 6, Diane is living in Chicago with her partner, Guy. While Guy provides a supportive, loving interpersonal environment, Diane is struggling to finish her book of essays. She stops taking her antidepressants because she believes her "self-hatred" is necessary for her writing. This leads to a breakdown where she tells Guy

- Diane:* I stopped taking my meds.
- Guy:* Why?
- Diane:* Because I'm terrible! I'm a stupid person! I deserve this!
- Guy:* No. You're not a stupid person, but you can't just—
- Diane:* I want to die! It's so much worse than before.
- Guy:* Baby, you're going through withdrawal.
- Diane:* Do I just have to be on drugs forever now? How am I gonna finish my book?
- Guy:* Okay, forget about the book for a second.
- Diane:* I can't! It's the only thing that matters. (S6: E10, "Good Damage" 17:28 - 17:48)

This scene is a perfect illustration of the *Bad-Me* in Sullivan's theory. The *Bad-Me* is the part of the self that is built from experiences of disapproval and anxiety. When Diane calls herself "terrible" and "stupid," she is repeating the voices of disapproval she heard growing up. Furthermore, Diane's security operation, her literacy, is actually causing her more anxiety. When she says the book is "the only thing that matters," she shows that her entire self-worth is tied to her productivity. She is terrified that if she becomes "happy" on medication, she will lose her identity as a writer. However, the resolution of this interpersonal situation shows a shift. Unlike her relationships with BoJack or Mr. Peanutbutter, her relationship with Guy allows her to eventually let go of this "tortured" identity. By the end of the season, she stops trying to justify her "damage" through a serious book and instead writes a fun series of detective novels. This shows that she has finally allowed her *Good-Me* to lead her literacy practices. She moves away from using writing as a defense mechanism for her pain and starts using it as a healthy way to connect with her new life and her new relationship.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis, Diane's literacy practices in *BoJack Horseman* (2014–2020) reflect literacy as individualism, where writing functions not only as professional work but also as a means of identity construction. Influenced by the "Romantic Author" perspective, Diane associates meaningful writing with emotional struggle, authenticity, and personal suffering, making literacy deeply connected to her self-worth and purpose. However, these practices also shape her interpersonal relationships, often creating emotional distance and conflict with others, particularly *BoJack Horseman* and Mr. Peanutbutter. Through Sullivan's interpersonal theory, Diane's writing can be understood as a security operation developed from repeated experiences of disapproval and anxiety. By combining Williams and Zenger's concept of literacy as individualism with Sullivan's interpersonal theory, this study highlights literacy as both self-construction and interpersonal negotiation. Furthermore, the study demonstrates how contemporary animation can represent complex issues of identity, trauma, and relationships. Future research may further explore Diane Nguyen's character within broader media and literacy studies.

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