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Microreading: The Failings of Society and Artificiality in “Super-Toys Last All Summer Long”

In “Super-Toys Last All Summer Long” (1969), Brian Aldiss engages the reader with his depiction of a picturesque futuristic society that is on the verge of creating a new form of intelligent life. But behind the superficial landscapes that cover the windows of their apartment and deep within the slender figures of the high class in this society, readers notice that technology and artificiality have only exaggerated the insecurities and issues that plague this society, namely loneliness and overpopulation. Aldiss places Monica and Henry Swinton, along with their artificial son David and his toy babysitter Teddy, at the center of his story, serving as the ideal nuclear family in a troubled society. Yet even with their lavish house and their synthetic son, the Swintons are far from feeling happy. With “Super-Toys Last All Summer Long”, Aldiss hones in on the emotional disconnect that exists in this ideal society, one which has failed at replacing the human desire for genuine affection and one that is now learning the irreplaceability of what it means to be human.

Aldiss opens in a beautiful, yet slightly troubling opening scene where we see Monica Swinton chasing David in an attempt to connect with him. The Swinton’s residence is visually enticing, as Aldiss describes “in Mrs. Swinton’s garden, it was always summer. The lovely almond trees stood about it in perpetual leaf” (Aldiss, p.444). This perfection in the atmosphere is placed in contrast with the troublesome nature of David and Monica’s relationship as mother and son.

It seems that this trouble originates not from a lack of effort but a lack of understanding between the two. As Aldiss describes, “she [Monica] had tried to love him [David]” (Aldiss, p. 444). Yet, the reader does not feel that Monica is to blame. Readers are introduced to David with the description that “at the age of three, he [David] showed no fear of the ultrasonic dryer in the kitchen” (Aldiss, p.444). It appears that David is not like other children, and he appears to only be able to interact comfortably with Teddy, his synthetic teddy bear which has been programmed for comfort. Ironically, Teddy’s coding for comfort is enough to provide reassurance to the confused David, who cannot understand why he cannot communicate with his mother, but not to Monica, who cannot understand why her son is running away from her. In Monica and Teddy’s only brief interaction, Teddy fails to be of help. Teddy obeys orders, as he is programmed to, but is too simple to understand the nuances of real human interaction, evident when Monica asks “Why can’t we [Monica and David] communicate?” (Aldiss, p.447) to which Teddy replies “David’s upstairs” (Aldiss, p.444). When requested to give insight into David’s emotional state, Teddy replies with a calculated response about David’s whereabouts. Since Teddy and David are similar in both being synthetic life forms, nothing uncanny arises in their interactions. When Teddy is asked to interact with an actual human, he struggles to fulfill his function. This example offers evidence for the failing of technology to *replace* human cognition and interaction, although it does point to the benefit of having robots to *complement* our everyday tasks, such as watching over David.

There are numerous other ways that Aldiss indicates that humanity’s overreliance on technology has led to the failing of society. From a community perspective, the excessive vanity of individuals has led to a belittlement of societal issues at large. As Henry puts it in his speech to

the directors at Synthank “ ‘Amid all the triumphs of our civilization—yes, and amid the crushing problems of overpopulation too—it is sad to reflect how many millions of people suffer from increasing loneliness and isolation’ ” (Aldiss, p.448). Aldiss uses this dialogue to highlight the obsession with problems of the self in this society. In spite of increasing hunger due to overpopulation, the upper class to which Henry belongs is worried about their own loneliness. This society has not used technology to fix the problems plaguing Earth but instead has chosen to use their ingenuity to creatively ignore them. The Crosswell tape-worm that keeps people slender and the serving-man models which improve yearly in the hopes of reaching a fully functional humanoid form are blatant ways in which this society is propagating the problems caused by world hunger and overpopulation, respectively. The product of all this human innovation to satisfy the self turns out to be surprisingly unsatisfactory. Aldiss uses the broken relationship between Monica and David to highlight the lack of happiness that exists in the upper classes to whom all of these luxuries are afforded. Regardless of all the synthetic life surrounding them and the beautiful landscapes that can be called upon at the push of a button, Aldiss gives the reader a sense that true genuine human emotion is becoming increasingly rare. When Henry returns to an emotional and excited Monica, he is taken aback. Aldiss writes that as Henry is “pulling back to look at her [Monica’s] face, he [Henry] saw how she seemed to generate light and beauty. It was months since he had seen her so excited. Instinctively, he clasped her tighter” (Aldiss, p450). The cause of such an outburst is that the Swintons have won the parenthood lottery and are now going to be a real complete family with a human son, but there is an underlying expression through the story that otherwise, life has become stagnant in this tech-filled, lonely society. To the Swintons, artificiality and technology are not enough.

There are a pair of heart-wrenching moments in the story where Aldiss creates ambiguity which forces the reader to question what is the reality of a scene. In the first, Teddy tells David that he may need to go to the psychiatrist again if he keeps experiencing confusion and loneliness. David responds “ ‘I hate that old psychiatrist—he makes me feel I’m not real’ ” (Aldiss, p.449). Aldiss later brings to light that David was experiencing confusion due to trouble with his verbal-communication center and that he may need to be sent to the factory again. Even in this context, the excessiveness society makes the reader question David will actually go to a therapist or if this memory is implanted after he leaves the factory in order to ensure that he doesn’t recognize his own artificiality. In the second scene, Monica walks into David’s room to find a bunch of half-written letters for her sprawled out on the floor. After reading through a sampling of them, Monica “dropped the pieces of paper and burst out crying” (Aldiss, p.449). Given that Monica is aware of David’s artificiality, the reader is left wondering whether Monica is moved by his attempts to communicate love or whether she is heartbroken that her little boy will need to be fixed once more. Through these scenes, Aldiss begins to fade the meaning of reality in the reader’s mind.

A literary tool that is used by Aldiss to distinguish between real and fake throughout the story is the imagery of eyes. In the opening description of Monica Swinton, we hear that she is “twenty-nine, of graceful shape and lambent eye” (Aldiss, p.444). This is placed in contrast with the description of Synthank’s directors, whose appearance Aldiss describes in this regard: “an earlier and less sophisticated generation would have regarded them [directors of Synthank] as beautiful people, apart from their eyes” (Aldiss, p.445). Finally, the most synthetic character, Teddy, addresses David with “bear’s eyes [that] regarded the boy unflinchingly. ‘You and I are real,

David.' " (Aldiss, p.447). Despite all of the artificiality that can be created with other aspects of outer appearance, such as the slender figures of the directors or the soft plush of a teddy bear, the eyes appear to be selected by Aldiss as the one characteristic that cannot easily be faked.

Aldiss ends the story by questioning again the meaning of *what it means to be real*. In contrast to the earlier scene where David asks Teddy what is real and Teddy replies saying that real things are good, in the closing scene David asks Teddy whether Monica and Henry are real, to which Teddy replies " 'You ask such silly questions, David. Nobody knows what 'real' really means. Let's go indoors' " (Aldiss, p.451). This response, much deeper than the first, seems less formulaic and more genuine. Aldiss uses Teddy, now a little wiser than before, to show the reader that in a society where individuals live in their own bubble by ignoring issues of overpopulation, cheating the effects of overeating like obesity, and taking control of their perceived environment, how is a humanoid robot any less real than the "reality" these characters are living?

Works Cited

Aldiss, Brian W. "Super-Toys Last All Summer Long (1969). *The Wesleyan Anthology of Science Fiction*. Ed. Arthur B. Evans, et al. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2010. 444-451.