

Supertoys – college essay



**ASSIGN
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Essay on " Super-Toys Last All Summer Long" 1. Ever since the industrial revolution, people have questioned whether the technological development has been moving too fast, for man to keep track with the moral and ethical dilemmas which may arise on the way. This theme has occurred in lots of literature and films throughout time. Worth mentioning is Frankenstein from 1818, Brave New World from 1932, 2001: A Space Odyssey from 1968 and The Matrix Trilogy from respectively 1999 and 2003. Along this line is the story " Super-Toys Last All Summer Long" by Brian Aldiss.

It deals with the subject of artificial intelligence and the relationship between man and machine, and it paints a picture of a dystopian society that has reached a stage where it is not longer possible to distinguish between a child or a machine - what is real and what is unreal. The story is told by an omniscient third person narrator, and takes place in a world where almost everything is build upon illusionary things. A world where people live in false surroundings made by holograms, and where there are no windows at the outer side of the buildings, which makes it possible for people to close their eyes to the reality.

Though the world is overcrowded, the people living in it do not have anything to do with each other, but live their own private lives, and the majority of the population tend to feel lonely. The greater part of human contact is replaced with various artificial life forms. In this world in one of the city-blocks, half a kilometer above the ground, do the Swintons live. The Swinton family consists of four members; the mother, Monica, the father, Henry, the " son", David, and the robotic teddy bear, Teddy. Monica is twenty-nine years old and has very good looks.

She spends all day in her garden, surrounded by lovely, always blooming almond trees and roses, or in her living room, alone, thinking, waiting. Even though she has David and Teddy to accompany her, she is lonely, while her husband is out selling synthetic life, trying to make the world nicer for all the lonesome souls out there. "Time waited on her shoulders with the maniac slowness it reserves for children, the insane, and wives whose husbands are away improving the world", (page 1, lines 22-23). Teddy does not give her much comfort, despite the fact that he is made to please.

Though he tries to analyze situations, in order to give the most appropriate answers, he cannot substitute real human contact, in that he is merely a robot and does not have any true emotions. This shows clearly on page 2 in lines 4-6: "» It isn't quite right. She won't understand. « Inside the bear, a small computer worked through its program of possibilities. » Why not do it in crayon? «". With David, on the other hand, it is a completely different situation. In the end we learn that he is in fact a robot and not a human being and that he has been acquired by Henry and Monica as a substitute for the son they are not yet allowed to have.

Although David acts like a human son, Monica is not capable of loving him. However, David seems to have real emotions and is perfectly capable of loving her. He asks questions concerning his own existence, does not know whether he is real or not, and feels insufficient and superfluous. We see David's feelings in a dialog with Teddy: "» I'm no good, Teddy. Let's run away! « [...] » If you feel so bad, you'd better go to the psychiatrist again. « » I hate that old psychiatrist - he makes me feel I'm not real. «", (page 3, lines 19-26).

He has the same feelings as a human being, needs the same attention, and even though David has been created synthetically, he is as much alive as his “parents”, who want to get rid of him as soon as they can have a “real” baby. As the title implies, David is to his parents only a super-toy that only lasts “throughout the summer”. Then again, it is summer all year in the Swintons’ garden, and David obviously does not see himself as just a toy. Important themes are therefore man versus machine, loneliness, and ethical responsibility towards artificial life forms.

The text questions whether machines really can replace humans in all aspects. Surely, they can help us with a lot of work, but can they also substitute for social relations with other humans? And if we do succeed in creating a “toy” with human emotions, are we not then obligated to treat “it” with the same respect and care, as we would treat any other living being? A message could be that we must think carefully and thoroughly before letting ourselves get carried away by all the new technologies available. When you read the article “If you kick a robotic dog, is it wrong?” by G. Jeffery MacDonald, the issues of the story suddenly become very real. We see that many owners of robotic dogs has a hard time, distinguishing between what is real and what is not. Even though they know, that the dogs possesses no feelings, they still feel guilty about mistreating them. As aforementioned the theme of mans responsibility towards his creations already occurred in 1812 in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein, where a man in disgust of his own doings, forsakes the creature, which he himself has made, although this creature’s only wish is to be accepted among humans. . As we get better and better at making artificial intelligence, more and more moral

and ethical dilemmas appear, and more and more questions have to be considered. In the poem "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace" by Richard Brautigan, we see how one can dream of a world "where we are free of our labors and joined back to nature, returned to our mammal brothers and sisters, and all watched over by machines of loving grace.", (lines 25-30). But the parentheses may signify that we are too eager to get there, and are moving too fast.

Frankenstein is a warning of what might happen if we do not realize the consequences of our actions before it is too late. The text "If you kick a robotic dog, is it wrong?", tells us that maybe we have already reached a stage, where we cannot tell the difference between simulation and reality. It is dangerous if people attach emotions to the toy, which it does not have, and become too emotionally involved with it. It is not good either if get used to treating robots poorly without consequence and this comes off on their general attitude towards living beings as well.

I do not necessarily believe that all technological progress is bad, but I share a lot of the same worries which are evident in the texts. I do not see any problem in artificially intelligent toys, but they cannot replace any living being, animal or human, and may never under any circumstances develop human emotions or self awareness - this can have severe consequences for us as well as the robot itself. I am very concerned about how fast everything is going at this point, compared to the natural evolution.