"super toys last all summer long" by brian aldiss essay sample

" Super Toys Last All Summer Long" by Brian Aldiss Essay Sample

1. Compare the story " Super Toys Last All Summer Long" with the movie Artificial Intelligence. Do they use the same symbols? Do they have the same themes? Explain why or why not.

Adapting literature for the big screen is a risky process, and can yield great results as well as a poor, butchered, dubbed-down version of an otherwise major work. Fortunately, Stanley Kubrick ' s Artificial Intelligence movie has proved, by its extended use of dystopia and its focus on the human/machine relationships, to be a worthy extension of Brian Aldiss' short stories, going deeper than what the author originally anticipated. To fully grasp the nature of the changes between the story and the film requires a good knowledge of the concept of dystopia, a careful examination of its applications in this particular story, and a general overview of the human/machine relationships.

Dystopia is a word meaning: " 1: an imaginary place where people lead dehumanized and often fearful lives 2: ANTI-UTOPIA" . This concept has shaped the whole genre of science fiction, and can be found at varying degrees in a myriad of different applications.

Typically, a dystopia focuses on one or more elements symptomatic of the greater dangers in store for mankind, whether they be an extreme environmental pollution, overpopulation issues, rising violence and crime activity in cities, large and coldly inhuman bureaucratic structures, or malevolent economic exploitation. In short, the rich get even richer while the

poor fall well under the minimal conditions required to lead a decent life, especially in such a society of technological profusion.

In true dystopian mentality science, as well as arts, politics or philosophy, leads to the result of furthering the inequalities present in human society instead of serving the noble goal of bringing mankind together. However, there are many different angles of approach to these ideas, and the concept of dystopia must be further divided in two distinct types: conservative and radical. Note that not all conservative dystopias are necessarily science fiction, while a radical dystopia can hardly be conceived without a science fiction background.

Conservative dystopias address the fear of a breakdown in social order and established ways. They often deal with the disintegration of the family and the reduction of individual liberties by centralizing governments; as a result, the oppressed individual must seek refuge in nature or reminiscences of the past. Prime examples of conservative dystopias include George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four and Arthur Koestler's Darkness at Noon. Radical dystopias, on the other hand, deal with the dangers of rising pollution, superior technologies – such as robots or cloning -, nuclear power, economic and industrial exploitation, and advanced capitalism. The growing mechanization of life is a key theme in these stories, which often resort to cyborgs (CYBer-ORGanisms) or thinking supercomputers to embody this concept. Two of the most famous radical dystopias are 2001: A Space Odyssey and Blade Runner.

Artificial Intelligence and Super-Toys Last All Summer Long differ somewhat in their expression of the concept of dystopia. While it presents some interesting elements of both types, Aldiss' short story is definitely more conservative than radical. It is first and foremost the tale of an android boy who cannot be loved by his mother; the overpopulated world and the melting of the ice caps due to the greenhouse effect lie in background of the story, and could very well be replaced by any other plot device allowing the author to deal with the problems of childbirth control. There lies the real issue of the setting: in the diminishing of freedoms available to people, as represented by Monica who, in accordance with pure regression of women's rights, is reduced to the role of mother, completely devoid of any substantial occupation and perfectly isolated from the world in her artificial garden. This garden generated by the Whologram also embodies the escape in nature and memories of days bygone of people living in an unbearable reality. And finally, the impossibility of her having a child leads to the creation of a mechanical android boy to replace the lack – something which, Aldiss says, can not be as easily done.

All these themes at the core of the story are true to conservative dystopias; however, they did not move from the written word to the big screen without permutation. The first enormous difference is that in Artificial Intelligence, the Swinton couple already has a child, Martin, who is in cryogenic storage until his terminal disease can be cured. Right from the start, David serves as a fill-up while Martin is away; thus the question central to Aldiss, " Can a mother love a robot child?" (and by extension, a child which is not her own) can easily shift to " Can a mother love a child while waiting after her own?".

In the movie, the Swintons – as well as the spectator – know from the beginning that David is not there to stay; thus the question of morality has a lesser weight than the conflict between organic and synthetic, between man and machine.

This conflict is yet another difference between the movie and the short story. In his techno-fable, Aldiss creates something of a balance between organic and mechanic, as Henry Swinton declares in his speech:

-There have been mechanicals on the market with mini-computers for brains – plastic things without life, super-toys – but we have at last found a way to link computer circuitry with synthetic flesh.

One can even picture the " dial on [Monica's] wrist" as an epidermal watch, an implant which people have in their skin, as further evidence of a symbiosis between man and machine, whereas each one is clean-cut apart from the other in Kubrick's movie, as the spectator learns in the " flesh fair" scene. It is there said that humans hate machines because they know that once their time on the Earth has come to an end, the machines are going to survive and continue evolution. There is no possibility, in Artificial Intelligence, to stand as a cross between " mecha" and " orga". Even Gigolo Joe, a robot made to perform sexual activities, which is theoretically the most intimately human act possible, is damned like any other machine. Mechanization, while on paper such a great idea, turns out to be something clearly negative.

As noted earlier, radical dystopias make a major concern out of the growing mechanization of life, which in turn engenders massive pollution problems.

Both of these themes, while mentioned in the story, are much more present in the movie. In Artificial Intelligence, the setting is not merely hinted at, but is shown right from the beginning. This alone indicates a deliberate choice in giving as much importance to the setting and the world in which the action takes place as the characters and their conflicts.

In truth, the movie is an even split between Aldiss' three short stories Super-Toys Last All Summer Long, Super-Toys When Winter Comes, and Super-Toys in Other Seasons. As such, the issues that Kubrick introduces in the first 45 minutes of the movie (which is the part based on Super-Toys Last All Summer Long) do not necessarily carry on with even weight as the movie progresses, but rather subside to allow him to raise other questions true to a radical dystopia. In this regard, the whole " flesh fair" scene where " mechas" are being destroyed for the enjoyment of people is both a warning regarding superior technologies – that is, humans will not always use them for the right purpose – and a reminiscence of past humanity crimes, a neo-racism that merely shifted from skin color to body texture and internal composition.

This scene thus addresses both conservative and radical dystopic themes, something which Aldiss' story did not really do.

The theme of relationships between humans and machines was, in Super-Toys Last All Summer Long, very important. Aldiss showed in his story a reverse side of the classic question " Can a machine love?", asking rather " What if a machine could love? Could any human reply with equal feelings?". An important notion to help understand this question is the concept of

simulacrum, as coined by French theorist Jean Baudrillard. A simulacrum is an operational double of a given reality, a perfect descriptive machine which gives all the traces of reality and disrupts its possibilities of change due to the unforeseeable surprises of life. The popular video game The Sims, for example, attempts at being a simulacrum of domestic, everyday, ordinary life.

Baudrillard continues on saying: " The simulacrum is never what hides the truth, – it is reality that hides there is none – the simulacrum is true.". This idea of the copy being truer than the original follows the same train of thought as the story writing classic " Reality is stranger than fiction". David's love is perfect in the sense that it is programmed and embedded in him, thus unwavering, unalterable. He is not subject to having an emotional crisis, shouting to his mother " I hate you!" as a normal child would do if she denies him dessert, for instance. This love is symbolized in the story by the rose David picks up – his love is perfect, as artificial as the rose from the artificial Whologramic garden. It is only fitting that in the story, David could not find any words to express this perfect " feeling" in his letters, for his love exceeds human standards and thus can not be qualified by their words. Again, the movie goes even further along this idea with the character of Gigolo Joe, who is the perfect lover, better than reality itself.

Finally, it is easy to see Kubrick's intellect in Artificial Intelligence, and how it ties in perfectly and adds to Brian Aldiss' themes and story. As he had shown in 2001: A Space Odyssey, Kubrick was interested in the human/machine relationships. In the latter part of this movie, a ship controlled by the supercomputer HAL is en route to Jupiter, with two crew members aboard.

The interesting phenomenon that occurs is that the computer – limited to a voice and a bright red spot that never alters, thus only a voice, really – is obviously much more human than the crew members aboard. Kubrick directed them to play as neutral as possible, including when Dave receives a message from his parents wishing him a happy birthday; he is frigid like a statue, and there is never the slightest change of emotion in his eyes or voice. And by contrast, HAL's tone becomes hesitating when he speaks in personal terms; pride can be perceived when he claims he is the most powerful supercomputer; he even tells Dave that he is " afraid"!

In Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey, there is a reversal of the conventional roles: machines are humanized and the humans, mechanized. Both are straying from their path, getting away from their nature because of external circumstances and pressures: the humans in their need of machines for their everyday life, and the machines because they are created by humans who more and more try to make them in their likeness. This last theme can only be seen in a very concrete, first-degree and imperfect way in Aldiss' short story, because of the (debatable) cybernetic implants in humans or the fact that Teddy plays the role of counsellor to David; but, as Henry Swinton himself tells the reader, Teddy is part of the " mini-computers for brains – plastic things without life, super-toys". The fact that at one point he simply repeats the same advice twice – until, it can be gathered, David chooses to respond – goes to show how approximate and far from being " humanized" he really is.

This theme is much more developed in the movie, right from the beginning when Monica, confused about David, puts him in a closet to have him out of

her way, suspending all moral judgements and feelings unique to human nature, much as a machine would analyse the possibilities and settle for the quickest answer, and all through Gigolo Joe's character, who sticks to David with friendship and sincere affection, traits which a cold, calculating machine would have never heard of.

Clearly, Stanley Kubrick's ideas positively influenced and enhanced Brian Aldiss' Super-Toys Last All Summer Long. Given the different types of dystopia on which each one focused and their slightly differing views on the machines/humans relationships, it may not be a perfect adaptation. However, both the short story and Artificial Intelligence are a warning to those of us that wish to play God and create minds in our own likeness, a reminder to stop the madness before we come to this.

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