

“Super-Toys Last All Summer Long” by Brian Aldiss

Background Information:

- Like Ray Bradbury, Brian Aldiss was inspired by the technological advancements of his time.
- Brian Aldiss wrote and published his story in 1969. This time saw the further development of computers and artificial intelligence, the rise of NASA, and the first man being put on the moon.
- The world was also struggling with fast-rising population, and began to question the amount of resources they had. This brought up the discussion of whether money and resources were being used efficiently. Rather than spending money on tech, should they have been spending money on fixing problems of famine, drought, etc.?
- During this time, the role of women was still confined to the home. Men were seen as innovators, and earned money for their families, while women's duties were to care for the home and children.

Plot Summary:

(Exposition)

The story opens on Monica Swinton's house, which is surrounded by impeccable, beautiful gardens and filled with advanced technology. Monica watches her son David play happily in the rose garden, yet expresses a sense of dismay towards his actions (“*David, darling, do you have to be so awful*”). It is also quickly revealed that Monica may not actually love her son (“*She had tried to love him*”).

In addition, the reader meets Monica's husband Henry. Henry is the managing director of Synthank, a massive technology company, which is responsible for the creation of “synthetic life forms” and “super-toys.” As Henry addresses a board room full of employees introducing his new “Serving Man,” he reveals that their world is full of various inventions created to help humans live “perfect” lives. Henry seems to believe that his inventions will cure all of society's current problems, including loneliness.

(Rising Action)

Meanwhile, David continues through his own personal struggle at home. David attempts to write numerous letters to his mother in an effort to express his love and affection for her. David also questions the world around him, and grows more distressed and anxious as he is uncertain whether or not his mother loves him. He turns to Teddy (a super-toy designed by Henry Swinton to comfort and assist young “children” like David) for guidance, and reveals his desire to just run away; he fears that his mother will never love him back.

Monica attempts to pass time alone, ruminating on her struggle to love David and see him as a son. She later finds David's letters, and reacts mournfully. The letters remind Monica that while David loves her, she cannot return his feelings.

(Climax)

Monica receives news that she has won the Parenthood Lottery, meaning the government will allow her and Henry to have a child. Monica is very excited, and her feelings of despair and desperation begin to dissipate.

(Falling Action & Resolution)

Henry arrives home (with his serving-man), and receives the good news from Monica. The couple are over-joyed, and determine that will need to send David back to the factory. They claim "he's malfunctioning," but it is more likely that they finally feel as though they can be freed of David and his poor excuse to represent a real child, at last.

- **Setting (external)**

The world outside of Monica's home is revealed to be **over-populated**, **over-crowded** and filled with **towering** buildings. As a result of overpopulation, the world is also revealed to be riddled with various problems such as **starvation** (not enough resources) and **loneliness**.

The society of "Super-Toys" attempts to cure these problems through the use of technology (they build super-toys, the serving-man, etc.), but the technology fails to fix anything. The complex problems only continue to grow worse.

Evidence:

- "The Swintons lived in one of the ritziest city-blocks, **half a kilometer** above the ground" (page 7).
- "She reached out and changed the wavelength of her windows. The garden faded; in its place, the city center rose by her left hand, full of **crowding** people, **blow-boats**, and **buildings**... an **overcrowded** world is the ideal place in which to be **lonely**" (page 1).
- "Though three-quarters of the **overcrowded** world are **starving**..." (2).
- "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**. Our serving-man will be a **boon** to them... personal isolation will then be banished forever!" (5).

- **Setting (internal)**

In contrast, the world **inside** Monica's home is filled with various **technological innovations** and **elements of artifice** (fake) that allow the user to **distract** themselves from the **terrible realities** outside of their homes.

*****Similar to the people of "There Will Come Soft Rains," the people that exist within the world of "Super-Toys" seem to believe that technology is capable of improving their lives, and will solve every issue they may encounter; even complex emotional issues such as loneliness... but the technology is failing miserably.**

- "In Mrs. Swinton's garden, it was **always summer**. The lovely almond trees stood about in **perpetual** leaf" (page 1).

- “Their apartment had **no windows** to the outside; nobody wanted to see the overcrowded external world... Henry was surrounded by the friendly **illusion** of gardens set in **eternal summer**” (7).
- “She stood alone on her impeccable **plastic** gravel path” (1).
- “**Artificial sunlight** was growing long and golden across the lawn” (8).
- “Almost by reflect, she reached out and **changed the wavelength of her windows**. The garden faded; in its place, the city center rose by her left hand, full of crowding people, blow-boats, and buildings (**but she kept the sound down**). She remained alone. An overcrowded world is the ideal place in which to be **lonely**” (1).
- “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. Our serving-man will be a boon to them; he will always answer, and the most vapid conversation cannot bore him... not only will they possess their own computer, capable of individual programming; they will be linked to the World Data Network. Thus, everyone will be able to enjoy the equivalent of an Einstein in their own homes. Personal isolation will then be banished forever!” (5).
- “Teddy specialized in comfort... she could feel just the slightest vibration from its motor... he stood as she requested, arms set forward and open in the eternal gesture of embrace” (4).

- **Character(s):**

Monica: The wife of Henry Swinton and mother to David. She is depicted as a **beautiful, proud, lonely** and **desperate (depressed)** woman. Her days are often empty and spent wandering around her home looking for things to entertain her. She relies on technology as a distraction from her lonely and **empty** life and **without purpose**. She also appears cold/unloving, as she shows almost no affection for David, but does demonstrate a strong desire for an actual child. **Values family, motherhood or companionship.**

- “She generated **light** and **beauty**...” (page 7).
- “Monica Swinton, twenty-nine, of **graceful shape** and **lambent eye**, went and sat in her living room, arranging her limbs with **taste**. She began by **sitting and thinking; soon she was just sitting**. Time waited on her shoulder with the maniac sloth it reserves for children, the insane, and wives whose husbands are away improving the world” (1).
- “Monica prefers to stay home **thinking beautiful thoughts**” (2).
- “Monica **walked slowly about the house**. It was almost time for the afternoon post to come over the wire... she could take up her painting. Or she could dial her friends. Or she could wait till Henry came home. Or she could go play with David...” (4).
- “**Mummy’s lonely. That’s why she had you**” (Teddy to David, 6).
- “Why waste time talking to this machine? Why not simply go upstairs and scoop David into her arms and talk to him, **as a loving mother** should to a loving son?” (3-4).

Henry: **Intelligent** and **creative** as the creator of all of the technological innovations that exist in the story; **confident, outgoing, proud, social, busy, unconcerned with love and human emotion** (abandons his despairing wife in favour of work); strongly believes that technology will cure all of society's problems. **Values technology and "improving the world."**

- "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. Our serving-man will be a boon to them; he will always answer, and the most vapid conversation cannot bore him... not only will they possess their own computer, capable of individual programming; they will be linked to the World Data Network. **Thus, everyone will be able to enjoy the equivalent of an Einstein in their own homes. Personal isolation will then be banished forever!**" (5).
- "He sat down to enthusiastic **applause**" (5).

David (personified): The "son" of Monica and Henry; **lonely, anxious/worried** (about whether his mother loves him), **affectionate**, follows his **programming** and attempts to please his mother, **curious** about the world at large; though he seems to be aware that he is failing at this. **Values fulfilling his purpose of providing knowledge and love to his mother.**

- "David was staring out of the window. 'Teddy, you know what I was thinking? How do you tell **what are real things** from what aren't real things?' (page 3).
- "David crept round the side of the house. He climbed on to the ornamental seat under the living-room window and peeped cautiously in... **he watched fascinated**" (5).
- "**I'm no good, Teddy. Let's run away!**" (5).
- "I've got nobody 'cept you, and I'm **lonely**" (David to Teddy, 6).
- "Darling Mummy, I'm your one and only son and I love you so much" (6).
- "Plucking a bright pink flower, he carried it with him into the house... its beauty and softness reminded him of Mummy" (8).

Teddy (personified): **comforting**, helpful, a robot with **limited intelligence**, has difficulty lying as it contradicts his programming. **Values comfort.**

- "Inside the bear, a small computer worked through its program of possibilities" (3).
- "**Teddy specialized in comfort**" (3).
- "He stood as she requested, arms set forward and open in the eternal gesture of **embrace**" (4).
- "The circuits of the bear's brain were **too simple for artifice**" (4).

- **Conflict:**

Person vs. Society → Monica vs. The Technological Driven/Obsessed World

The wealthy and powerful humans within this society (including Henry Swinton) have created a virtual world full of technology, and have sold various technology to the masses, convincing them this technology will enhance their lives. Further, the government has restricted individuals from having children, as a means of amending the issue of overpopulation. **This society, which continues to purchase this technology, seems to believe that the technology, especially the super-toys, may actually be capable of enhancing their lives.** In reality, the majority of people in this world, who spend all day at home with their technology, **are further isolated.** The technology is simply a temporary **distraction** from their larger problems, and people like Monica who have been convinced this technology is necessary are caught in the middle.

Person vs. Self → Monica vs. Self (Her Inner Emotional Turmoil)

Monica who has not yet been granted permission to have a child, spends all day with her super-toy son, David. She wants to believe that the technology her husband creates will enhance her life, and will act as a suitable companion to pass the time with. Unfortunately, Monica **still feels lonely & does not receive any comfort from the technology around her.** Further, her longing for a child is not quelled by the presence of David, and the reader observes her checking the mail frequently for updates on the “parenthood lottery” in hopes she will be granted the opportunity to have a real child.

“Person” vs. Person → David vs. Monica

David “loves” Monica, and tries to pursue a normal mother-son relationship. Monica does not return these feelings, and **she feels distressed by David’s presence.** Monica cannot love an actual robot, as David is not an adequate solution to Monica’s problems. **Instead David is a reminder of everything she wants but cannot have (a real child/real love/real connection).**

- **Symbols (Why were these inventions created in the first place?)**

- **Teddy = the human desire for comfort, friendship, or companionship.**
 - “Teddy specialized in comfort” (3).
 - “He stood as she requested, arms set forward and open in the eternal gesture of embrace” (4).
- **Serving-Man = society’s dependence on technology (servant), and a desire for power; the privileged portion of society (as only the wealthy can afford a novelty like the serving-man).**
 - “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. Our serving-man will be a boon to them; he will always answer, and the most vapid conversation cannot bore him... not only will they possess their own computer, capable of individual

programming; they will be linked to the World Data Network. Thus, everyone will be able to enjoy the equivalent of an Einstein in their own homes. **Personal isolation will then be banished forever!**" (5).

- **David = society's need or desire for love, connections & affection** (to both give/receive); **society's misguided desire to fix every problem (loneliness) with technology.**

- "Mummy's lonely. That's why she had you" (Teddy to David, 6).
- "Darling Mummy, I'm your one and only son and I love you so much" (6).
- "Why waste time talking to this machine? Why not simply go upstairs and scoop David into her arms and talk to him, as a loving mother should to a loving son?" (3-4).

- **Roses = love/affection; humanity's desire for beauty → but one that is perfected and modified/manipulated by mankind.**

The only "real" object in the house – the roses are not part of the illusion that the reader sees elsewhere. It's the one thing in the story that is regarded as truly beautiful (by David), and consequently it is the only thing that is real. However, the roses have been modified, and have been made to be free of imperfections, showing that this society is so desperate for perfection that they will modify even objects that are naturally beautiful.

- "Plucking a bright pink flower, he carried it with him into the house... its **beauty** and softness reminded him of Mummy" (8).
- "These roses are guaranteed free of imperfections" (7).

- **The house = human's dependence on technology**, and their **desire to escape or distract themselves** from their loneliness and the bleak reality of the over-crowded world outside.

- "Almost by reflect, she reached out and changed the wavelength of her windows. The garden faded; in its place, the city center rose by her left hand, full of crowding people, blow-boats, and buildings (**but she kept the sound down**). She remained alone. An overcrowded world is the ideal place in which to be lonely" (1).
- "Their apartment had no windows to the outside; **nobody wanted to see the overcrowded external world**... Henry was surrounded by the friendly illusion of gardens set in eternal summer" (7). [Whologram]

- **Irony**

- **Situational Irony →**

The people of this society believe that the technology will improve their lives and cure their difficult emotional problems, when in fact it continues to make their lives worse, as it keeps them contained in their homes, further isolated & lonely.

Additionally, they have the resources and intellectual capacity to create truly innovative products for society that could solve some of society's most detrimental issues. However, companies like Synthank are misguided and misuse

these resources making products that do not solve anything; the inventions they produce are only of “benefit” to a small portion of the population (the über rich).

Finally, Monica and Henry’s world is horribly overpopulated and overcrowded, and yet the biggest problem facing both the rich and the poor is loneliness and isolation. People are not being forced together, but instead, driven apart.

E.g. The Crosswell Tape is meant to make people’s lives more perfect and convenient (the wealthy can eat more without gaining any weight), but it does not solve the more pressing issue of famine/starvation.

Monica (and likely many other wealthy housewives like her) has a home full of tech, and yet she is still unhappy. The super-toys have also been designed to enhance human life. David, specifically, has been designed to love and bring comfort to Monica. Unfortunately, Monica does not love him and only feels more distressed by his existence and presence in her life. Again, David just serves as a reminder to Monica about what she cannot have and desperately wants: a real child. Overall, Monica is evidence that the efforts of Synthank are a failure, and the belief that technology can fix all of their problems is untrue.

Dramatic Irony →

David does not know he is a robot, designed to substitute for a real child.

He believes he IS a real child that his mother should love (hence why he consistently questions reality and wonders why he cannot connect with his mother properly). However, David is a super-toy who has been designed to serve as a placeholder for couples who cannot have a child of their own, due to population control & reproductive restrictions.

At the end of the story, he also does not know that Monica and Henry have been approved by the government to have an actual child, which will likely result in his return to the super-toy factory.

However, the reader learns that David is a robot when Henry asks, “Is David malfunctioning” (page 8).

Epiphany →

David does not know he is a robot, designed to substitute for a real child (also see above).

The story does provide hints/foreshadowing of David’s unusual qualities throughout the story, that support the realization at the story’s end that David is a robot.

For example, it is stated that Monica does not love him (an odd statement/sentiment for a mother to express about their child). Additionally, the author notes that David is 3 years old, but he can write full sentences, he is philosophical (and asks the world’s biggest questions – “What is reality,” “Is time real,” etc.), he is unafraid of loud sounds (ultrasonic dryer), he regularly visits a “psychiatrist,” etc.

However, the reader learns that David is a robot when Henry asks, "Is David malfunctioning" and Monica notes that his "verbal communication center is still giving trouble" (8).

Nothing in the Swinton's mansion is real, it has all been created by holographic technology.

The story notes that it was "always summer" at Monica's house, the leaves "stood about in perpetual leaf" and even the gravel in her garden was "plastic" and "impeccable" (1).

It also notes that she could change the image shown through her "windows." Monica could "[change] the wavelength of her windows" and the "garden [would] [fade]" to be replaced by an image of the city center in "overcrowded" and polluted state (1).

However, near the story's end, when Henry Swinton returns home to Monica, the narrator provides a more accurate view of the Swinton's home, which is not a mansion at all. The Swinton home is actually a small apartment "half a kilometer above ground," that has been "embedded in other apartments" and therefore has "no windows to the outside" (7). The entire apartment has been manipulated by a device called a "Whologram" to look like a large mansion with a grand garden, "which can create huge mirages in small spaces" as well as "artificial sunlight" (7, 8). When Henry enters his home, "a Georgian mansion appeared to welcome him," and he is instantly "surrounded by the friendly illusion of gardens set in eternal summer" (7).

This description from the narrator tells us that the world that Monica and David are ensconced in throughout the story, is all an "illusion" or "mirage" to make their home seem grander and more beautiful than it is. The garden, the windows, the sweeping size of the mansion, the perfect Swinton home, is all simulated. Nothing in the home is real. The house seemingly shields the Swintons, and other wealthy families like them, from the overpopulated and polluted world outside of their home, full of famine and loneliness.

Both epiphanies help the reader to understand just how deeply this society depends on technology to fix their problems. All of their solutions/innovations only make things worse, as the real problems of the world are essentially ignored or treated with misguided intentions, and then are exacerbated.

THEME

Topic (one word or short phrase):

technology & loneliness & isolation & humanity & reality

Theme (complete statement that explains the message or lesson of the story, including a cause and effect):

This is up to you to determine... ☺