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*Toy Story:* A Children’s Movie with Hidden Depths

My best friend growing up was a toy named Bruce Wayne. You might know him better as Batman. He was friends only with me, and I was the only one who could see him. Nobody would believe me when I told them about our adventures: not my parents, not even my brother. It got to the point that even I started to question if Batman was real. Was I just losing it? Desperate times called for desperate measures. I began running tests, culminating in me tossing Batman down the stairs in my hallway. I wanted him to sit up, brush himself off—anything at all. The only reaction I got was paint chipping off his armor, and a rip in his cape. Things were getting dire.

My parents came to the rescue. One day, they brought home an old, dusty, battered VHS tape, outdated even then, when I was a kid. On that tape was a movie: *Toy Story*. And *Toy Story* breathed life into my flagging belief in Batman. Finally, here was undeniable proof that Batman was real. It put the action back into my action figure and explained everything. Batman was alive and real; he just waited for me to leave the room before he came to life.

*Toy Story*, digitally animated by Pixar, was first released in 1995 and directed by John Lasseter. It has now become a successful franchise with a total of four films. Although classified as a children’s film, I believe it is a cinematic masterpiece. The story starts off with the two main characters Woody (voiced by Tom Hanks) and Buzz LightYear (voiced by Tim Allen). Both toys belong to Andy. The only difference is that Woody is aware that he is a toy and meant to be played with while Buzz is not. He believes his identity is as a Space Ranger. What Buzz doesn’t understand is none of it is real. He adamantly fights Woody on this, which helps progress the movie forward. Eventually they find themselves lost from their owner and must find their way back.

Throughout Buzz’s and Woody’s adventure, the director utilizes anthropomorphism—the attribution of human characteristics—to the toys. In different scenes and dialogue, we learn about both characters and how they interact in social settings. *Toy Story* seems to be a lighthearted film filled with witty comedy and inside jokes. Yet it explores serious social questions like bullying, psychological development, and trauma in a way that is accessible to its young viewers. Buzz Lightyear and Woody the Cowboy deal with a significant amount of pain and trauma, including challenges to their self-confidence. Although the movie treats their struggles with humor, they actually work through a variety of emotional difficulties and face several threats. The “toy story” of the title becomes a very human narrative of emotional growth and friendship.

Toy Story As Anthropomorphic Ironic Joke

Anthropomorphism is defined as a nonhuman entity in literature or film having human traits, emotions, and behaviors. In *Toy Story*, all the characters possess these qualities. They are all self-aware except Buzz. Buzz believes his back story and character arc is real. The other toys know they are meant to be played with by Andy: their owner. Yet Buzz has no realization of this. Eventually Buzz sees other Buzz LightYears exactly like him and accepts that he is a toy. Accepting that he is a toy allows him to accept his purpose and identity. This, surprisingly, makes him more human because self-awareness allows for progression: “Only when Buzz reaches this state of self-awareness does he become—morally—fully ‘human’...In terms of animacy, Buzz is a complex figure. He is a manufactured toy, neither supernatural nor truly ‘free,’ but he is capable of emotion, altruism, cleverness, and self-consciousness, all hallmarks of being human…Ironically, accepting that he is a toy makes him human” (Nelson and Vihma 208). When Buzz understands who he is, he raises his own potential and becomes free of assumptions and preconceived biases.

Furthermore, as Matt Roth notes, “It's only when he [Buzz] sees a television commercial for himself that he realizes the awful truth –that he is a kept object whose only purpose is to pleasure powerful juveniles.” (92) That’s the harsh reality that Buzz comes to terms with. He realizes what toys are really for in the real world. This brings us back to the idea that the toys are sentient and able to comprehend what’s happening around them, thus making it ironic.

Furthermore, the toys appear more alive than the humans. They showcase feelings, while some of the humans seem more robotic. These toys have their own lives and are self-conscious about their actions. Yet when Andy comes into the room, they immediately drop to the floor and become lifeless. The toys become actual toys. Andy cannot find out they are all sentient or who knows what the consequences would be? This is a successful use of irony. It is a joke within a joke.

But why is this irony so important? Irony is “a literary technique, originally used in Greek tragedy, by which the full significance of a character's words or actions are clear to the audience or reader although unknown to the character” (Oxford). The reason viewers enjoy it is because it’s the opposite of what you anticipated: “It is used in everyday conversation to convey sarcasm and subtlety of thought” (Alleyne). The use of irony and anthropomorphism in the film gives the toys more depth, and layers, making them seem more human, which is much more complex than just being a plastic toy. Furthermore, it also gives us, the viewer, a way to make sense of these toys. We can understand what they’re feeling and how they’re reacting. In addition to that, in the beginning of the film, Andy throws Woody on the bed and leaves to go downstairs. The minute he leaves, and the coast is clear, all the toys begin to come alive. What we see here is the use of dramatic irony as well as an anthropomorphic joke. The difference between dramatic irony and regular (situational) irony is the audience is aware of the reality of the situation. In this example, the toy’s significance and actions are clear for us as audiences, but unknown to the characters, making it ironic for the audience.

In addition to this, having this irony furthers the plot while also creating suspense for the viewer. In one scene in the movie, Buzz LightYear and the Little Green Men (aliens) end up in a claw machine. To the Little Green Men, ‘The Claw’ is a higher power and if chosen they end up “going to a better place” (Lasseter, John. Toy Story. Buena Vista Pictures, 1995). As viewers, we know the truth; we control the claws and there is no higher power. Yet it could be argued that humans are the higher power. There is irony in that we do the same thing as the aliens; the only difference is the claw is our death. And the higher power is as unknown to us as the claw is to aliens. But the Little Green Men don’t know any better. They are rejoicing and praying to be chosen. The idea and belief of a higher power implies that the Little Green Men have a religion, which is an anthropomorphic trait. In addition to this, in this scene, to further the plot and suspense, it is no other than the evil neighbor Sid who is controlling the claw. The Little Green Men should be fearing for their lives, as Sid is someone who tortures and destroy his toys. The audience has questions; what will happen to the aliens? Where will Buzz and Woody end up next? This excellent usage of dramatic irony motivates the viewer to keep watching and hooks them on.

Intertextuality and Easter Eggs

Intertextuality is when other texts are mentioned or parodied, for comedic or dramatic purposes. According to Richardson, “The term ‘intertextuality’ refers to the idea that texts are in a constant dialogue with one another. ‘Texts’ include social and cultural artifacts as well as aesthetic ones” (20). In the film, this is done numerous times, starting with the most famous and well known: the Pixar Lamp. In the beginning of every Pixar film, the lamp jumps on the i in Pixar. That is their logo, and franchise that they sell. They want viewers to recognize them by this lamp and associate it with them. Now in the film, we see the lamp in Andy’s room and behind Woody in certain scenes. Although the lamp is not considered a toy, it does beg the question, how does the lamp keep switching places and moving around? In their logo and calling card, the lamp jumps on the i and squashes it. The lamp replaces the i.

Therefore, Pixar could insinuate the lamp is alive. It subtly moves around for the viewer to notice and follow along. Which brings us to the previous paragraph: a joke within a joke. The director wanted us to take careful notice and find these easter eggs/hidden messages to think about the film and laugh about it in the end. Another example can be found when Rex the Dinosaur chases after Barbie in her dream car. He runs after them down the aisles, and Mr. Potato Head looks at the rearview mirror to see Rex right behind them: jaw and teeth out. This exact scene is a parody and allusion to the movie *Jurassic Park*. In *Jurassic Park*, the crew is chased by a giant T-Rex; when looking at the mirror they see the dinosaur trailing behind. We as the audience who have seen *Jurassic Park* know they are referencing it and parodying it. By creating this imitation, and deliberate exaggeration, a humorous effect is produced. In this scene the utilization of anthropomorphism was when Mr. Potato Head looks back to see Rex’s teeth coming right for them, he gives a startled yell. Yet also for the younger ones who have not yet comprehended the allusion, they may perceive it as literal, and fear for the safety of Mr. Potato Head.

Intertextuality enhances the experience for both mature and younger audiences. Both can follow along and enjoy the film in two different perspectives: “ Intertextuality defines communities of readers because the message depends—partially or entirely—on the audience understanding the reference…if one tells a joke involving an allusion, the joke may stand on its own without the audience needing to understand the allusion. An understanding of the allusion, however, will enhance the richness of the comedic experience” (Richardson 23). When I was younger, I personally did not get the reference to *Jurassic Park*, as I had not watched it yet. But now as I’m older and have seen a greater variety and wider range of films, the use of the reference is comical and nostalgic. It brings me back to my childhood. The allusion, to the film enhances my experience and comedic effect.

Which brings us to our next example. When Woody is captured by Sid and is escaping, he runs down the stairs of the house repeating the same line “There’s no place like home! There’s no place like home!” (Lasseter, John. *Toy Story.* Buena Vista Pictures, 1995, 45:15). To many this line may sound familiar and recreate childhood memories. This famous line was said by none other than Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*. Towards the end of The Wizard of Oz, Dorothy is given a pair of red heels to return home. She clicks her heels together and repeats the line “There’s no place like home!” (Vidor, King, et al. *The Wizard of Oz*. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), 1939). Henceforth, it’s hilarious that Woody repeats this which alludes to the Wizard of Oz as well as showing his human traits. He is praying and wishing that this is all a dream, and he is not actually at Sid’s house. When under distress, humans always seem to pray to a higher power in hopes that what we perceive is false. We pray that it’s all a dream and not reality. We do not want the reality to be true, for if it is then we must accept it. The whole situation is ironic, Woody is referencing another film and wishing to go home while also praying to a higher power.

Social Issues

In *Toy Story*, the toys exhibit human emotions, most notably Woody’s constant jealousy of Buzz. Woody is Andy’s favorite toy, and he enjoys being the alpha, or number one. But when suddenly his norms are disrupted by the new toy Buzz, he has no feelings to turn to except jealousy. He’s jealous he doesn’t get played with anymore. He’s jealous that all the other toys like Buzz more. He’s jealous because that’s human nature: “The competition for love means that we constantly fear that our competitors will win the love and affection of our partner and that we will, correspondingly, lose it…fear of loss is a threat to the relationship which is, by definition, jealousy if the relationship is valued” (Hansen 514). Woody has competition now, and he does not know how to deal with it. Woody’s jealousy festers, and eventually causes him to accidentally push Buzz out the window as a reaction. Audiences can relate to this feeling and understand it. As a child we all had a best friend, and then your best friend got taken by another friend. That sudden and overwhelming feeling of anger, and annoyance combined together is jealousy.

Why is this concept of jealousy so important in the film? Because of Woody’s jealousy he doesn’t have time to allow their friendship to flourish or to develop a bond with Buzz. Using anthropomorphism, we see Woody’s facial expressions and reactions when he meets Buzz. Woody’s eyes are rolled upwards, showing visible agitation and annoyance. Viewers can visibly see his jealousy and ignorance: “Ok guys, we’re all very impressed with Andy’s new toy,” he says in a sarcastic and annoyed manner. Although Woody implies that he is not impressed by Buzz, he is in fact intimidated by him with his new gadgets, sound system, and laser beam. Due to this, Woody loses out on a friend and develops a secret hatred for him. Yet as reluctant as Woody was, this feeling changes throughout the film. From jealousy, Woody eventually reaches acceptance. And that is a big part of human nature. The idea of acceptance and understanding of different people helps us move forward. Woody realizes Buzz is not his competition nor does he mean any harm. Just because Buzz is new, and Woody is old-fashioned, does not mean they’re any different. They are actually equals, they can share a friendship and a shared purpose. Woody grows as a person and accepts Buzz as one of his best friends: “Buzz, I need your help! You are a space ranger! You’ve got wings! You glow in the dark! You talk” (Woody 58:55). As the movie progresses, you see Woody grow fond of Buzz and learns to accept Buzz for who he is.

The idea of practicing acceptance and embracing change is a social issue that should be embraced wholeheartedly. It should be taught in every classroom, and to young children. There are old toys, new toys, pretty toys, plain toys, each unique in their own way. Regardless of price and size, Andy loved his toys all individually. You can take this as symbolic to people of all colors and the different diversity that we see in everyday life. By learning to accept one and all, you can enjoy everyone’s uniqueness. Change is bound to happen, and it is unpredictable. It is human nature to fear change, yet in *Toy Story* Woody learns to embrace it. We have no control on the future, whether a new toy is coming or a toy becomes broken. As the young audiences watch the movie, they will begin to understand and learn what some critics have called “emotion regulation”:

Emotion regulation is the ability to adapt and change one’s emotions and control emotional displays in a variety of situations…cartoons can provide the framework for building empathy, tolerance, and friendships and reinforce social-emotional, problem-solving, and conflict resolution skills in young children… Sharing high-quality cartoons with children may heighten their awareness of emotions, enhance their sensitivity to other’s feelings, promote empathetic behaviors toward others, and foster moral development…” (Harper 514).

Showcasing each toy’s different reaction allows for multiple viewpoints and gives the audience valuable lessons. Children learn to control their emotions through the movie and develop social awareness.

In addition to that, “Pixar helps us to understand how to coexist with others through Woody. Expressing these themes literally, such as the cowboy learning to share top spot with Buzz, shows kids that there doesn’t need to be a dominance hierarchy” (Power). Kids begin to learn how to coexist and share the spotlight with other kids. In coexistence there is no winner or loser, just active acceptance, and an embrace of diversity. There is no need to fight for attention and be the ‘alpha.’ Everyone is equal regardless of who they are and what special attributes they process. Young adolescents visually see the importance of coexistence and the bonds that can be formed.

Many friendships start with a rocky start and develop into something extraordinary. After accepting change and understanding who Buzz is, we see Woody grow as a person through friendship. Woody was jealous and self-centered, while Buzz believes himself to be a real space ranger. When Buzz does eventually realize he is just a toy, he becomes depressed and gloomy. Yet it is Woody who steps up in a leadership role with words of encouragement. He persuades and convinces Buzz that being a toy and being played with by an owner has many advantages.

This is when we see a friendship start to blossom. Woody and Buzz each develop their self-identity and work together to escape Sid’s house: “Friends can help in the development of one’s identity and individuality through social comparison and opportunities to work through questions and issues…The give and take of cooperation is a defining characteristic of friendship” (Reohr 211). Woody helps Buzz find his self-identity and who he really is. Buzz is conflicted and in no shape to continue during this time of self-reflection. Persuading Buzz to find his way back to Andy becomes Woody’s form of redemption and shows his true character. Likewise, Buzz helps Woody become a better person. Woody realizes he was in the wrong and accepts fault.

Towards the end of the film, when they do escape from Sid’s house, we see the cooperation between the two and the so-called defining characteristic of friendship. This is the peak formation of the partners Buzz and Woody. They are launched from the R.C Car and use Sid’s rocket to reunite with the gang. Buzz holds onto Woody as they soar through the air. As they’re falling with style, as Buzz claims, Woody says to him “To Infinity and Beyond!” By using Buzz’s own catchphrase, he shows true acceptance and friendship. He is no longer jealous of Buzz; they now share a bond: love for Andy and a desire to get back to him. After landing in the car and returning to Andy, the movie ends with a mutual wink, concluding the movie and validating their friendship.

Even the catchy theme song of the movie is about friendship. In the beginning of the film, we hear Randy Newman’s “You’ve Got a Friend in Me” which was specifically created for this film. Lasseter wanted to emphasize and foreshadow the bond Woody and Buzz share. Even the ending of the song matches with their friendship. It fades out with “And as the years go by, our friendship will never die.”

As the movie goes on, the last example of a valuable social lesson we learn is to dream big and allow your imagination to run free. Being human as stated previously gives us the ability to have creativity and imagination. We have that free reign to do what we want, and when we want. As a young child, we hear from our parents, teachers “anything is possible” and to “aim for the moon, and if we miss, at least we’ll end up among the stars.” Even in *Toy Story* this is shown through Woody’s and Buzz’s iconic catchphrases “Reach for the sky,” and “To Infinity and Beyond.” Both are metaphors and allusions for children to dream big and pursue challenging goals. The director wants children to pursue their dreams and not give up, indicating there are endless possibilities out there.

Dreaming “big” and thinking about the future is an attribute known specifically to humans. Other mammals do not have the ability to do so, but we can see Buzz’s and Woody’s dreams and aspirations throughout the film. The director gives Buzz and Woody a common purpose. They want to be loved by their owner. As Buzz puts it “Life’s only worth living if you’re being loved by a kid.” Having a sense of purpose makes life easier and by failing it makes us humans. Having dreams and goals makes us humans.

The feeling of getting lost in doing what you love can be applied here too. We see Andy happily running around with Buzz in one hand, and Woody in the other. It is pure innocence being displayed: the feeling of not having a care in the world and being able to enjoy free time. The exaggeration of time being slowed down and the emphasis on just play time enhances the lesson. That feeling of freedom and being able to release your inner child is indescribable. *Toy Story* is teaching the audience to not forget their inner child and to not be stuck doing something you hate. People need time to destress and enjoy life for what it is. Free time can be hard to come by as adults with all the work, and chores: “Being in touch with the joys of childhood can be an excellent way of dealing with challenging times” (Raab). Having this release allows you to deal with hidden pain and trauma.

Trauma

This brings us to our next point. In the film there are numerous situations which showcase trauma and painful memories. Trauma can come in different shapes or forms. It can be a painful memory, past bullying, PTSD, etc. When escaping from Sid’s house, Woody and Buzz gain help from some of Sid’s ‘creations.’ He’s what you would call a modern-day Dr. Frankenstein. Sid likes to mutilate toys and transfer different body parts to different toys. The first toy that comes up to them is an old doll’s head attached to mechanical spider legs. Woody and Buzz are visibly frightened and shocked. The next toy that comes up is a pair of Barbie legs with a toy fishing pole as a head. There is also a jack in the box with a rubber hand in place of a head, and a toy soldier attached to a skateboard. It’s quite overwhelming and traumatic for Woody and Buzz to comprehend at first. The mixed creation of toys all come up to Woody and Buzz in a group. They are disturbing and foreign to Woody and Buzz. They lack facial features, and do not speak. To reinforce this view of monsters, Woody and Buzz shout a collective of terms to address them: “They’re cannibals!” “They’re monsters!” “Back away you savages!” (Lasseter, John. Toy Story. Buena Vista Pictures, 1995, 45:04) . Audiences hear this and sympathize with our protagonists, fearing the monsters as well.

But as the movie progresses, the protagonists are clearly in shock and go through a mix of emotions. They go from denial and fear to familiarity and empathy. After they work together, Woody and Buzz are grateful to them: the creations. Woody says “sorry….I thought you were gonna…you know… eat my friend [Buzz]”. Although the creations are incapable of responding, they show receptive understanding. We as the viewers then become familiarized with the creations and empathy occurs. We realize they are victims too. These creations are non-threatening and can be trusted. When the toys all work together as a team, we see the tone shift and how they are now respected and individualized: “Rollerbob and I don’t move till we get the signal! Okay let’s move…Nice work fellas!” (Woody). Woody gives each of them names which validates their identity and moves them from strangers to having a personal connection.

The trauma in this scene is the fright that is first given to Woody and Buzz. Likewise, as young children watching this film, the audiences will be traumatized by the creations. Displaying trauma in this way through cartoons allows adolescents to explore sensitive subjects and complex human behavior that are not easy to discuss. Children are young and innocent. They have not yet witnessed the horrors in our world. By giving them a glimpse of the real world and seeing “creations,” “monsters,” etc. It shows not everyone's the same, and not every creation is going to be friendly and as accepting as the ones in Woody and Buzz. When meeting those creations, although they were mute, they were still highly functioning. Woody and Buzz show that upon meeting them, their reactions are acceptable and teach the young audience ‘stranger danger.[[1]](#footnote-1)’ In addition to that, another interpretation of the “creations” could be as symbolizing the physically disabled. By using this movie to teach students about them, it is an ideal way for auditory and visual learners to learn. “...movies, if framed by critical questions, become useful for all classrooms at all levels. It is the work of disability studies in part to question and change the representation of people with disabilities'' (Preston 58).

Another form of traumatic event I noticed in the movie was the concept of bullying. Woody can be identified as the perpetrator, and Buzz as the victim. By introducing this trauma young, kids can learn not what to do and how to not be traumatized. For example, political cartoons: adults still read and analyze them. They talk about real issues and throw jabs at senators, the President, etc. But, by including familiar pop culture references, it captures their attention: “incorporating popular culture allusions into political cartoons gives you another connection with readers interested in politics. They don't expect to see politics tied to particular movies or images, but the unexpected gets their attention” (Rogers). Likewise, familiar cartoons can also attract family members. Both can be used and connected to establish a connection to speak about trauma.

Additional examples of trauma include disillusionment and abandonment, both set in the film. Buzz’s whole world is turned upside down when he finally realizes he is a toy. His mental health is now a serious concern. Imagine everything you thought to be real is now a lie. You have no attachment to your previous life: this could cause a split-personality disorder. These are all real things that could happen that relate to trauma. Buzz sees that he is made in Taiwan and is mass produced. He is not unique anymore; he is just like everyone else. For abandonment, there are children who are left to foster care and abandoned at a young age. This can cause trauma and seriously detrimental PTSD. Woody is jealous and fears being abandoned and useless. He wants to be played with. These two examples of trauma can be seen in the film.

Woody and Buzz both learn to accept their trauma and different ways to resolve it: “Seeing and interpreting images is a vital part of what it means to learn and to know… in order to support teaching multiple literacies, students must be overtly taught to engage in and critically reflect” (Conners 263). By seeing these situational trauma, adolescents and students are taught how to cope and react. Escapism is a coping mechanism and a way in dealing with trauma and anxiety. Adolescents can “escape” into the screen with Buzz and Woody to learn how to be prepared for situations.

In summary, *Toy Story* is more than just a children’s film or a simple animation. Using anthropomorphism, director John Lasseter finds a way to showcase social questions like bullying, psychological development, and trauma in a way that is accessible to its young viewers. He does this through witty comedy and inside jokes. After all, there’s nothing like humor to get us serious. Although the film consists of ironic jokes, and hidden easter eggs, it still finds a way to respond to these social issues. For bullying and psychological development, we see Buzz and Woody’s friendship grow. For trauma, we see the different creations that Sid tortures. Each social interaction teaches the young viewer something new. When these elements are viewed together, the film becomes a kind of “safe space” to talk about tough questions for the viewers. When Woody and Buzz finally work together and partner up, the film becomes healing. The film works through trauma to land the viewer in a place of reconciliation and have a satisfying ending. To be able to come through the pain, the growth is apparent. With each growth, it’ll lead the viewer “To Infinity and Beyond!”

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1. Stranger Danger is a term, idea, or warning that all strangers can be potentially dangerous. Therefore keep your eyes peeled and be on guard. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)