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# **To Infinity and Beyond: How the Evocation of Childhood Nostalgia in *Toy Story 3* Facilitates the Journey Into Adulthood**

*Paige Burnett*

Children everywhere have tried it at least once. They watch from inside closet caves or prop their ears against the door. They quietly peek from under covers or peer through keyholes. They crack the door just enough to see. They try and they try to scratch the itchy question at the back of their minds: what do toys do when no one is watching?

On November 22, 1995, a team of animators released a film about a toy cowboy and astronaut that gave children a glimpse into the world they could not see from under their covers or through keyholes. Disney and Pixar could not have imagined the standard *Toy Story* would set in the world of animation and film, or how it would capture the heart of the American family (“*Toy Story – Trivia*”). Children of the 1990’s and beyond have grown up with Woody and Buzz as staples of family home entertainment. But just as the original viewers of *Toy Story* and its sequel *Toy Story 2* were about to enter adulthood, Pixar introduced what may have been the final installment of the franchise: the anxiously awaited *Toy Story 3*.

In his review of the film in *Newsday*, critic Rafer Guzmán writes, “A sense of closure gives the latest movie a surprising power and poignancy. It’s sadder and scarier than its predecessors, but it also may be the most important chapter in the tale” (“*Toy Story 3: Andy Grows up*”). This sense of importance resonated with audiences. It brought them back into or toward an important chapter of their own lives, a chapter that is not easy to read or write – growing up.

This essay contends that by evoking nostalgia, *Toy Story 3* draws viewers into the past, teaches them about the Western way that brought their nation forward, and comforts them in the inevitable growing up process by allowing Andy, the symbol of their childhood, to move on without abandoning his past. The film becomes a representation of the viewer’s youth by utilizing relatable scenarios and experiences from their youth in order to render comfort during or after the harsh process of growing up.

## **Context**

Children and adults alike made *Toy Story* a household name and made Pixar films a staple of family entertainment. *Toy Story* was the highest grossing film of 1995 and was nominated for three Oscar awards, including Best Music, Original Song (“*You’ve Got a Friend in Me*”), Best Music, Original Musical or Comedy Score, and Best Original Screenplay (it was the first animated film to be nominated for the award) (“*Our Story*”). Due to the near universal acceptance of the original film by audiences and critics, *Toy Story 2* was released four years later, and it too received high acclaim and broke box office records. However, as time passed,

fans continued to hope for another installment to finish the story (Boggs and Petrie 173; “Toy Story 2 – Trivia”). So, in 2010, Pixar finally completed the trilogy. The crowds went wild.

*Toy Story 3* became the highest-grossing animated film of all time and the first to reach the billion-dollar mark (“Our Story”). It was also the first *Toy Story* film to win Oscar awards, including Best Animated Feature of the Year and Best Music, Original Song (“We Belong Together”). It was also nominated for three additional awards, most notably for Best Picture, one of only two other animated films to be given that privilege (“Toy Story 3 – Trivia”).

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences did not shower this film with accolades unduly. As with *Toy Story*, both audiences and critics were moved by the film and satisfied by its outcome. *Entertainment Weekly’s* reviewer, Owen Gleiberman, says, “...Even with the bar raised high, *Toy Story 3* enchanted and moved me so deeply I was flabbergasted that a digitally animated comedy about plastic playthings could have this effect” (“Toy Story 3 (2010)”).

Gleiberman was not the only one to feel an emotional impact. An *Entertainment Weekly* poll asked audiences how many times they cried during the film. The results were as follows: 30.66% of viewers admitted to crying at least once, with as many as 27% saying they cried more than they cared to admit. Only 12.42% said they had not cried at all (Bierly). Something within the story resonated with audiences. Adults were moved by this children’s movie, which prompted another article by Gleiberman titled, “Message to men: It’s okay to cry at ‘Toy Story 3’.” Clearly, *Toy Story 3* has a wealth of unspoken themes and symbols that excite curiosity and demand attention.

### **Method**

Generative criticism was used for the study of this film. According to Sonja K. Foss, “As useful as the formal methods of criticism are for discovering insights into rhetoric, they do not always allow what is most interesting and significant in an artifact to be captured and explained” (387). Therefore, rather than constrain interesting messages, formal methods were set aside in order to allow for the “free speech” of the artifact.

Generative criticism follows a nine-step process in order to garner an explanation from the artifact and draw conclusions from it. These steps include finding a curious artifact, coding that artifact, searching for an explanation of the coding, creating an explanatory schema, forming a research question, further coding the artifact, consulting the literature, framing the study and lastly, writing the essay (Foss 387). Investigating and analyzing the elements that the film revealed brought said unspoken themes and symbols to light. The process of generative criticism offers clarity on the intrigue of *Toy Story 3* and the profound connection it created in audiences.

### **Analysis**

Nostalgia is “pleasure and sadness that is caused by remembering something from the past and wishing that you could experience it again” (Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online, n.p.). By endearing the audience to itself, *Toy Story 3* is able to present themes and lessons that the audience may have missed if they had not been otherwise prepared. The film promotes this

sentimentality in four ways: nostalgic viewers, nostalgic toys, the American cowboy and growing up.

### **Nostalgic Viewers**

The opening sequence of *Toy Story 3* immediately takes viewers back to the opening of the original film that many young adult viewers may remember their childhood. The first frame is the trademark cloud wallpaper on young Andy's bedroom walls, and the opening sequence shows the toys in the midst of Andy's make-believe, in a world all his own. Ham returns as the evil "Dr. Pork Chop", and Mr. Potato Head reprises his role as "One-eyed Bart". The threat is still death by monkeys, and Slinky is still a force-field dog. Viewers are reminded of the unique way that Andy plays with his toys in the very first movie, as well as the stories they may have made with their own toys during playtime.

The film continues to stimulate nostalgic feelings by drawing on other memories from the first movie: beloved scenes such as the opening play time sequence, a staff meeting that Woody calls to communicate with the other toys, and beloved characters like Buzz Lightyear, Ham, Mr. Slinky and Mr. Potato Head. The film repeats jokes from *Toy Story* and *Toy Story 2*, including the three Little Green Men (LGM) repeating, "You have saved our lives. We are eternally grateful," or chasing after anything looking like a claw. The audience is reminded that the toys have not truly changed even though they, as viewers, have.

A series of Andy's home videos also appear at the beginning of *Toy Story 3*, furthering the sense of nostalgia. Andy sits in a fort with all of his toys, eating popcorn. He runs around the yard with Woody on his shoulders. His mother marks his height in the doorframe. These relatable childhood scenes draw audiences back into a time when they, too, were young, especially those young adults that were young with Andy. Eleven years between *Toy Story 2* and *Toy Story 3* called for filmmakers to show scenes of Andy's childhood that viewers have missed. This allows the audience reflects on their own childhood.

### **Nostalgic Toys**

The significance that *Toy Story 3* has for young adults does not negate the impact that the film has on audience members that were parents or those that were unborn when *Toy Story* was first released. Andy's childhood is entirely relatable to all ages, and glorifies the times many would wish to remember. Even the toys that are featured throughout the film allow all types of viewers to think back. Barbie and Ken take prominent roles, with clothes and styles that are modern as well as styles that date back to the 1960's. Ken also references an old 1979-1981 science-fiction television series, *Buck Rogers in the 25<sup>th</sup> Century*, when Lotso's henchmen capture Buzz ("Buck Rogers in the 25th Century"). Even an old style See 'N Say from Mattel is used as a gambling device by some of the villains, a toy that dates back to at least 1964 but is still produced today by Fisher-Price ("Vintage 1964 Fisher Price See N Say - The Farmer Says"; "Fisher-Price See 'N Say Farmer Says").

The toys also have nostalgic experiences themselves, creating relatable sentiment for the audience. The driving internal conflict within the toys is a longing for playtime. When Woody

calls Andy's cell phone to get his attention, Woody clutches it as he hears the voice of his beloved owner on the other end. The gang reflects together on friends that have moved on, such as Bo-Peep and Sketch. Woody tries to call on Buster, the family pet and his youthful dachshund steed in *Toy Story 2*, only to be reminded that his companion has turned fat, old, and grey. Things are not the way they used to be. The toys yearn for the old days; they miss playtime.

Other toys also look back with longing. Lotso, the vengeful villain, is lost along with two other toys, a sad clown named Chuckles and a baby doll called Big Baby. When the film flashes back to their time with their owner Daisy, a warm glow shines around the whole scene. However, when the toys are accidentally forgotten, rain starts to pour and the trio marches on to find their owner. They get to her bedroom window where the warm glow of love shines from the little girl. They peer in to see that Lotso has been replaced. Enraged, the bear drags them away, refusing to let them return to her warmth. It is no surprise then that both Chuckles and Big Baby have a scene where they sit looking at the moon, basking in the glow of the moonlight. Each seems deep in thought as they gaze into the light of the night sky, perhaps remembering a time when a different sort of glow warmed their hearts.

The nostalgia expressed in the toys and the nostalgia being evoked in viewers is the draw that brings audiences into *Toy Story 3*. It brings people back to a place they may long to return to – childhood. It gives mature viewers a reprieve from the responsibilities that adulthood has saddled them with, in order to relive their youth again through the tale of the toys they grew up loving.

### **The American Cowboy**

The characters are not the only ones looking to the past. Woody's persona as cowboy and his role as hero points back to the timeless tradition of the Old West, a staple in the United States for stories and films. The cowboy is an American icon that is recognized around the world and is still a strong part of the country's identity. Cowboys reach back into the myth and lore of a wilder America during a time when men were considered to have true-grit, guts, and self-reliance. The western genre is a romanticism of that period, and it carries the tradition into modern culture. Journalist Chad Nane sums it up this way: "Westerns are the internal mythology of America. They are the documents of our Westward expansion and the repository of our own unique warrior folklore" ("It Takes True Grit to Make a Good Western").

Woody is a toy that is made for those that are enamored with this western lore. Older audiences can relate to a time when they played cowboys and Indians and watched movies featuring rough and tough men, such as John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, and the Lone Ranger. Audiences learn in *Toy Story 2* that Woody is in fact part of an old black and white western TV show, *Woody's Roundup*, supposedly made in the early days of television. He is the creation of the dramatization of the Wild West.

Though Andy is a child of the 1990's, he has a heart for the Old West. In the second film, Andy heads to a cowboy summer camp to live out his dreams of tumbleweed towns and trusty horses. Andy's boyish love of cowboy culture is not merely conjured for the sake of a screenplay. Children today still enjoy the Wild West. For instance, photographer Brandon

Stanton tells the story of a boy named Rumi that he saw in Washington Square Park, New York. Rumi and his mother were selling cowboy supplies in order to raise money so that he could buy a horse. He had wanted one his entire life and was doing whatever it took to reach his goal – much like a cowboy (Stanton).

Children today seem to have lost interest in cowboys because more modern heroes distract them. Even Andy receives a Buzz Lightyear action figure in the original film, a space ranger and futuristic hero that represents the movement that America and society made away from Western icons like John Wayne to space heroes like Luke Skywalker. Buzz's nifty laser beam and pop-out wings make him a technological advancement and Woody a thing of the past. However, *Toy Story* ends with a peace between the two toys, exemplifying that unity between the old and the new can be used to reach new heights. Buzz even takes on the unspoken role of deputy as he assists the sheriff in subsequent films to lead the toys. Thus, Woody represents a timeless childhood treasure of a Western hero, something old but also worthwhile.

He is also a special type of cowboy, which furthers his significance; Woody is a sheriff. Sheriffs played an important role in taming the West. According to Sheriff Harry C. Buffardi, "Confronted with serious issues of crime, disorder, vice, and violence, the pioneers of the old West turned to members of their communities to enforce order" ("Sheriffs Help Tame the Wild West"). From the start of the *Toy Story* franchise, Woody is the one in charge of his fellow toys, looking out for his fellow toys and for his owner, Andy. Andy symbolizes the American frontier that the cowboy supported and explored, helping to build it to its highest potential. Woody exudes an inner sense of duty to the boy whose name is written on the bottom of his boot, and he imparts that responsibility to the toys around him, just as the cowboy sends a patriotic feeling into modern Americans for the country whose flag they fly.

*Toy Story 3* emphasizes this symbolic persona in Woody. Unlike the other films in the franchise, he is consistently called "Cowboy" or "Sheriff" as if to make clear his figurative role in their community and in the story of *Toy Story 3*. The Western code seems to be the basis for his principles as a toy: principles of justice, teamwork, honor, and loyalty. He knows Andy needs him, even in such a small way as sitting around at college, just as the American culture still hangs on to the cowboy as if there is something in the icon that modern society still needs to hold on to.

According to Caleb Pirtle and Jack Bryant, authors of *Being a New and Original Exploration, in Art and Words, into the Life and times of the American Cowboy*, the cowboy did have a crucial role in the development of western America. They write,

"For almost two decades the cowboy had ruled a land few men dared call their own. Only he had been rugged enough, perhaps foolish enough, to ride across uncharted terrain. Now, in his footsteps would grow communities, then villages, then cities. And, suddenly, there would be no room left for him." (129)

Woody once endured trials as the sheriff of the toys, helping Andy to grow. He starts to feel the pinch of Andy's personal development as Andy gets ready for college, much like the dwindling need for cowboys in the mid-1900's. As America expanded and grew, the need for frontiersmen and explorers dwindled (Pirtle and Bryant 145).

*Toy Story 3* brings the audience into the point of the cowboy's journey where there is not much room left for him. He is becoming a memory, much like the real cowboys of the West became. Woody's battle throughout the film is to make it to the last frontier: college. So essentially, Woody's journey throughout the plot is his final Western adventure.

The story starts with his attempt to keep his "town" united. There are few toys left when he calls a staff meeting at the start of the film, much unlike the times portrayed in *Toy Story* when he is in charge of masses of toys. In a way, the toy box has become a ghost town. With the help of his deputy, Buzz, he tries to still their fears of a fate in the dumpster, cursed to be unloved and abandoned. He reminds them, "Through every yard sale, through every spring cleaning, Andy held on to us! He must care about us or we wouldn't be here" (*Toy Story 3*).

However, things start to fall apart when the other toys are mistakenly thrown out and decide to go to Sunnyside Daycare. He follows them to try and appeal to them. He had learned in *Toy Story 2*, when he is offered the opportunity to be admired at a museum, that the grass is not greener unless it is in Andy's pasture.

"Look everyone, it's nice here – I admit," he says to Buzz and the rest. "But we need to go home... I have a kid. *You* have a kid – Andy! And if he wants us at college or in the attic, well then our job is to be there for him" (*Toy Story 3*). His friends, however, believe that Sunnyside Daycare is the solution to their need for love and playtime. Even Buzz, his deputy, is not willing to return for Andy. They are ready for a new frontier, leaving the cowboy yearning for a West that is shrinking quickly.

Woody knows that he will have little use soon, but he still will pull through for Andy no matter what the costs, even to the point of complete self-denial. For instance, when Bonnie picks him out of a tree after a failed escape attempt, she brings him home and makes him the hero of her playtime. He clearly has a special place in her make-believe, just like the iconic Old West has a special place in the lore and mysticism of America. This cowboy's ability to excite Bonnie's imagination enralls the other toys, much like the freedom of the cowboy enralls countries around the world. Japan, for instance, is still excited about rodeos and the role of the cowboy in manifest destiny and settlement in America (McDowell and Allard 30).

However, his hat, the symbol of his persona, has been left at Sunnyside. He learns that the daycare is a horrific place and that his friends are now imprisoned there. Sunnyside is the antithesis of the free world and Wild West that he symbolizes. By leaving his hat, his "town," and his deputy behind in a prison, he leaves his identity behind. Even Bonnie's toy peas do not believe he can be a real cowboy without his hat, the symbol of all that he stands for. He cannot just settle to live in a new playtime paradise. He returns to set them free.

The remainder of his journey exemplifies the cleverness and wit that is required of a cowboy to make it in the wild. With his hat returned to him upon his arrival at Sunnyside, he is restored to his symbolic place as sheriff and cowboy. For this adventure, he must rescue his deputy Buzz and free the toys that are the citizens of his town. He plans an elaborate prison break, restores Buzz (albeit a Spanish version, which could be an allusion to the significance of the *ranchero* and the current changing landscape of American culture), and nearly escapes.

Lotso, the outlaw, ruins the plans and sends them to the dump. Woody must use all of his bravery and cunning to escape. He must save the toys; he must return to Andy.

But there comes a point where the toys face the trash furnace. There is no means of escape, so the toys begin to accept their fate. Woody stares into the inferno, his eyes being the last to close. He sees his inevitable end and realizes that he has run his course.

Fate would have it that the three LGM rescue the band with the Martians' beloved "claw," the deity to which they are enamored by throughout the franchise. It is perhaps a symbol of the Divine, a piece of American Christianity that presents itself subtly throughout history, the West and in modern culture. It could also be, like in many good stories, the salvation that comes by means other than the hero, just in the nick-of-time.

Then, it is time for the wayward toys and their Sheriff to return to Andy. The "town" agrees that they will follow the hero home. They agree to serve Andy in any way they can, even if he just needs the support of the memories he made with them. Woody will sit around at college, and Buzz and the gang will sit in the attic if need be. They will wait for Andy to need them again. In like manner, the cowboy will wait for America to need him again.

The "town" toys, however, are given an entirely new frontier other the attic. Andy affectionately passes on the playthings he has grown up loving, just as Americans pass on pieces of the cowboy heritage through western films, such as the yearning for adventure, trusty horses, and true-grit. But Bonnie is unsatisfied without the true embodiment of the Wild West. She looks hopefully into the box that the other toys came from. She sees Woody at the bottom and exclaims, "My cowboy!" She too has identified with Woody's heroic spirit, having played with him already when she plucked him from the tree.

Andy is shocked to see Woody in the group of toys he plans to give away. He has no intention of passing on this toy, this symbol of his childhood and quiet dreams of a wilder time, of bravery and adventure. When Bonnie reaches for Woody, Andy pulls away, grappling with the idea that it is time to let go of *his* cowboy.

However, as he looks into the face of the sheriff that has journeyed with him for so long, that has created the communities, villages, and cities of dreams and accomplishments in his life, he informs her that he is the roughest, toughest cowboy in the West. Still, there is more to him than that. "Now Woody," Andy says to Bonnie. "He's been my pal as long as I can remember. He's brave, like a cowboy should be – and kind, and smart. But the thing that makes Woody special is he'll never give up on you – ever. He'll be there for you no matter what" (*Toy Story 3*). Finally, Andy is ready to move on. He knows that Woody and his childhood memories with the cowboy toy have brought him this far, and he cannot help but honor that.

Woody is the representation of nostalgic America, a time that is glorified in the heart of the United States. The description of the old American virtues of intelligence, compassion, and loyalty is symbolized in Andy's description of Woody's cowboy heart. Because of his representation of the Old West ways that characterize the independent, free-spirited American, audiences start to look back at how the past has shaped the present, how the new is born from the old, and how looking back can create progress.

A part of the childhood of this country has become a part of the childhood of American boys and girls, and as the Wild West helped America grow, so do the myths of the cowboy equip children with the true-grit needed in adulthood.

## **Growing Up**

Woody is not the only symbol used within the film. There is also a deep connection between Andy and the viewer. Audiences of the *Toy Story* films have created an undeniably special relationship with these characters. The anticipation for *Toy Story 3* and the response to its release were historic in the world of animation and film. Obviously, the film gave audiences something much more profound than entertainment. A portion of the audience had grown up with these films. A portion of the audience had allowed themselves to be children again by watching them with their own kids. But as it turned out, Andy, the boy that represented them all, had grown up.

With growing up comes the issue of moving on from childhood into adulthood. Early into the film, the toys recognize this. With the pain of almost being trashed still fresh, Jessie reminds the sheriff, “Andy’s moving on Woody. It’s time we do the same” (*Toy Story 3*). *Toy Story 3* itself had the aura of moving on in its very essence. Although there have been rumors of a *Toy Story 4*, spawned by comments made by Tom Hanks to BBC, Andy’s growing up had to be addressed after 11 years of story silence (“Toy Story 4”; Guzmán). A sense of closure seemed to be demanded from audiences and provided for by the filmmakers. Even John Lasseter, the original director and writer of *Toy Story*, passed on the torch to Lee Unkrich, a director of other Pixar films (“Toy Story 3 – Trivia”). The trilogy itself is growing up.

The adult-like qualities of certain themes in the film prove that the trilogy is moving toward its own form of maturity. The film starts to bring up the topics that adolescents face when they begin to move into adulthood: death, finding a life partner, and understanding abandonment. For example, there are numerous near-death experiences and romances between Jessie and Buzz, as well as Barbie and Ken. Many parents felt as though the film was under-rated, wishing that *Toy Story 3* was given a ‘PG’ rating rather than ‘G’ by the Motion Picture Association of America (Handley).

Another theme of adulthood that arose was Andy’s mother’s struggle to let go. The last few minutes of the film begin to really accentuate the idea that this is a necessary farewell for her, but not a severing of relationships. Andy’s mother begins to choke up as she sees her son’s empty room. “I wish I could always be with you,” she says. “You will be Mom,” Andy replies. The toys build upon this idea as they bid farewell to Woody. Phrases such as, “This isn’t goodbye,” “Take care of Andy,” and “You know where to find us cowboy,” each remind the viewers that although the end is drawing near, it is not truly the end (*Toy Story 3*). It encourages adults to find that nostalgic place which may be gone for now, but not forever.

Andy is also an example of spreading the joy of childhood. Much like a parent that passes on the enjoyment of his or her youth to his or her own kids, Andy sees the need he had as a boy in Bonnie. “They mean a lot to me,” he tells her as he looks over his childhood treasures (*Toy Story 3*). Indirectly, he asks her to let the icons of his memories live on by creating her own. The

movie makes a very clear point of this when Andy finally relinquishes Woody. Andy's hands passing the cowboy into Bonnie's hands is a significant representation of letting go. It marks his acceptance of his move into adulthood. He has officially passed the torch. However, he does not tear himself away to officially make his way in the world without the childishness of playthings. Instead, audiences watch Andy as he runs around the yard with Woody on his shoulders, just like in the opening sequence of home videos. Andy looks back at his beloved toy the same way he did as a boy; nothing has changed except his age. Thus, the timelessness of childhood is revealed. Adults may move on, but they can also remember. They are encouraged to gaze upon their fondest memories and allow those thoughts to be part of their core being. To grow up, they do not have to let go.

Andy acknowledges this too. Although he struggles to relinquish his toys, he looks back fondly at them after playing again for one last time. "Thanks guys," he says softly, recognizing the way in which a bunch of toys and childhood memories have prepared him for the journey ahead. As he drives away, he does let go, but he knows innately what Buzz says to Woody as he gets ready for the attic: "We're Andy's toys, and we'll always be there for him" (*Toy Story 3*).

The film closes with a panoramic view of Bonnie's street, revealing a sky full of clouds that look identical to the wall in Andy's room. What started as the wallpaper that lines the room where Andy dreamed and played ends in the vastness of a sky of limitless possibilities and frontiers to explore. It is a symbol of how childhood never truly leaves us; it just turns into a much bigger world instead.

### **Conclusion**

The use of generative criticism revealed that *Toy Story 3* takes audiences on a special journey. The sentimental elements of American childhood exhibited in the film create a sense of nostalgia in audiences that eases the burden or memory of their journey into adulthood, while teaching them about the vital role that the American west has on modern society. It is no wonder that many movie-goers cried as they rode this emotional roller coaster, fearing the death of their beloved childhood characters and remembering the time when they, too, passed on their memories in order to explore the age beyond youth.

As per the argument of this paper, this film provides a look into the past in order to allow audiences to explore the future. It reminds them of where they came from without demanding that they hold to it with clenched fists. They are not told to refuse to grow up. Rather, they are encouraged through their representative Andy to pass along the torch and to go boldly where no man has gone before: in the words of Buzz from *Toy Story*, to infinity and beyond.

Regardless of whether the viewer's childhood was filled with parental support, peer support, familial support or no support at all, Andy's toys symbolize what *Toy Story*, *Toy Story 2*, and *Toy Story 3* are meant to do for audiences – be there for them. Pixar has continued to make *Toy Story* shorts, but overall the full-length pictures have made their statement. Whether the large-scale production of these movies ends or not, the message in the current finale is clear. *Toy Story* will always be waiting on the shelves for audiences to pull out again to relive simpler days. Buzz and the gang will be ready to make kids laugh for generations to come. And a friendly

sheriff, the symbol of the American past and an America to come, will continue to live up to what Andy says: “He’ll always be there for you” (*Toy Story 3*).

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