The Oscars recognize *Toy Story*’s evolution

It is the nature of a creature—or toy, or movie franchise—to outgrow its context and move on.

by Claire Miller Colombo in the March 11, 2020 issue

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Rare is the overtly theological film. *Toy Story 4*, winner of this year’s Academy Award for Best Animated Feature Film, is one of them.

In the movie, Sheriff Woody clings to the only sense of purpose the cowboy doll has ever known: being there for his kid. Unfortunately, his current kid, Bonnie—you may remember that Andy, his original kid, went off to college—has shelved Woody in favor of a new creation named Forky. When Forky goes AWOL, Woody mounts a rescue mission that distracts him from his own quandary and rekindles his waning sense of purpose. In the end, however, the crisis reasserts itself: How far should a toy’s selfless devotion to a child go? Once conditions change, is it okay to leave the room?

Toy Story 3, thought to have been the last of a trilogy, won the 2011 award for best animated feature, and in the weeks leading up to the Oscars there was speculation that the academy wouldn’t reward the franchise for “pushing it” with a fourth

offering. Viewers and critics alike wondered with Woody whether his story had outlived its purpose.

But *Toy Story 4*'s win indicates otherwise. It suggests that the academy appreciates what the movie is trying to say: that it is the nature of a creature—a living being, a toy, a movie franchise—to outgrow the context that once defined it and to move toward something bigger. In its articulation of this theme, the movie affirms the sort of creaturely evolution that Paul describes in Corinthians 1:11: the "ever after" of putting formerly appropriate childish things—including childish gods—away.

You might think such an idea would be uncontroversial, but at least one reading of the movie's theological themes cries heresy. In his *Catholic World Report* review, Nick Olszyk lauds the *Toy Story* franchise for having given us "one of the best theistic allegories in pop culture"—a world in which the toys' devotion to their child echoes the human devotion to God. Olszyk blasts the latest installment, however, for violating the terms of its own allegory, arguing (spoiler alert!) that Woody's final act of leave-taking from Bonnie and the gang to explore the world with Bo Peep—his old flame from Andy's house, with whom he is reunited on this movie's rescue mission—is self-serving. "Woody selflessly protects Forky for Bonnie," Olszyk writes, "but in the last minutes leaves her to embrace the 'free-lance' life with Bo. The implication is devastating. It was never about [the child] at all. Meaning comes from one's own identity, not service to another."

Olszyk's argument presumes that "service to another"—he means the child, and he means God—is always nonpathological. By virtue of its selflessness, it is always good and hale and wise. His argument also presumes that both our identities and our spiritual frames of reference are static and inert (one might say *wooden*) rather than dynamic, breathing, and verdant (one might say *woody*). In Olszyk's view, vocation does not evolve. Once we think we have found our place in relation to the God of our inheritance, that place and that relationship, as we understand them, will never change. (Also, and more troublingly, his argument dismisses Woody's turn toward Bo, now a childless toy of the streets, as decidedly *not* service to another.)

But there's another way to read the movie theologically. If in the past the *Toy Story* franchise gave us "one of the best theistic allegories in pop culture," it may in this installment offer a critique of pathological theism—of devotion for devotion's sake, of childish loyalty gone awry. The heavy hand with which the film engages its theological themes is a good clue that it means to draw our attention to and,

perhaps, challenge them.

Consider, for example, the movie's creation theme, introduced in the opening minutes. Bonnie is afraid to go to kindergarten, and Woody stows away in her backpack to offer whatever support he can. Once in the classroom, he keeps vigil from her cubby while she navigates the daunting new landscape. When another child swipes her crafting materials, Woody covertly supplies Bonnie with substitutes from a nearby trash can: plastic spork, crayons, pipe cleaners. These she shapes into the goofy humanoid entity she calls Forky, which immediately becomes her favorite toy.

The scene echoes the Genesis creation scene in obvious ways. Bonnie shapes a being out of inanimate matter, gazes with wide-eyed wonder at the work of her hands, and sees that it is good. She marks it as her own, writing her name on the bottom of its Popsicle-stick feet. And she loves it despite its flaws, including the fact that Forky is made from trash.

And unto trash he feels he must return: Forky can't help but hurl himself pell-mell into any garbage bin that presents itself. Back at the house, as Woody wrestles Forky out of a trash can for the umpteenth time and hauls him into bed with a Brobdingnagian Bonnie, Forky resists.

"Bonnie scary!" he says to Woody.

"No, Bonnie's not scary; she loves you," Woody replies, revealing in a single line of Gospel dialogue that the deity is merciful rather than punitive.

Which brings us to the movie's second theological theme: Woody, as leader of the toys, resembles, rather unsubtly, Christ among humans. He labors to redeem Forky's flawed understanding of himself, to persuade him of his *imago Dei* value. (When Forky asks, "Why do I have to be a toy?" Woody replies, "Because you have Bonnie's name written on the bottom of your sticks.") Once Forky, freaked out by this revelation of his identity, goes on the lam, Woody searches relentlessly for the one lost toy like a shepherd for a lost sheep. He tries, time and again, to explain difficult things to his slow-witted disciple toys. ("What would Woody do?" the toys wonder when he isn't around to guide them: WWWD?)

And, not least, Woody makes physical sacrifices for the benefit of his peers. In a hair-raising scene in the Second Chance antique store where Forky is being held

hostage, Woody consents to an operation that transplants his voice box into the cavity of Gabby Gabby, a defective talking doll who dreams of perfecting her existence with both a voice and a kid of her own.

At the end of the movie, Woody goes away. Just like Jesus did.

Is Woody's departure—his literal ascension to the top of a carnival carousel—a betrayal of the series' theistic allegory, as Olszyk argues? Is his self-ousting as misguided as Forky's attempts to self-dispose? Or is his leave-taking the fulfillment of the story—a story that embraces theism but also moves beyond it? Does Woody's exit signify an atheistic shucking of the God idea in general, or an evolution in his understanding of it?

A key scene in the film provides clues. After a narrow escape from the Second Chance store, Woody and Bo Peep—whose badass, staff-slinging self once did time in the shop and therefore is in charge of the mission—discuss their motley group's next move. Woody insists they go back for Forky, at the risk of all their lives. The others, including Bo, balk:

> Bo: Nobody wants this!
> Woody: I do.
> Bo: Why?
> Woody: Because.
> Bo: Why?
> Woody: Because it's all I have left to do! I don't have anything else!
> Bo: So the rest of us don't count.
> Woody: That's not what I meant. Bonnie needs Forky.
> Bo: No, *you* need *Bonnie*. Open your eyes, Woody. There are plenty of kids out there. It can't just be about the one you're still clinging to.
> Woody: It's called loyalty. Something a lost toy wouldn't understand.
> Bo: I'm not the one who's lost. [*Turning to the other toys*] Let's get out of here.

This dialogue introduces the possibility that Woody's devotion to Bonnie is not the thing that gives him purpose but rather the thing that keeps him from new life. It suggests that because this devotion is born of desperation and characterized by stagnation—and, relatedly, insensitivity to the disenfranchised—it is disordered. It is a brand of loyalty that borders on the fanatical. It stands in for purpose when true

purpose has left the set.

What Bo Peep is at pains for Woody to see is that a fanatical devotion to a childish, powerful figure, is a form of idolatry. When out of an overdeveloped sense of loyalty we fail to allow our understanding of ultimate reality to grow, we become distortions of ourselves. We languish in the closet—or garbage bin—of our own small but comfortable ideas.

Woody hints at this emerging wisdom in an early scene, as he and Forky make their way along a solitary road at sunrise. Forky has been more or less persuaded that he's not trash, and Woody is bringing him up to speed on life as the favorite toy of a child.

> Woody: It's pretty great . . . but, well, you watch them grow up and become a full person, and then they leave, they go off and do things you'll never see. Don't get me wrong, you still feel good about it, but then somehow you find yourself after all those years sitting in a closet just feeling—
> Forky: Useless?
> Woody: Yeah.
> Forky: I know what your problem is.
> Woody: What?
> Forky: You're just like me. Trash!
> Woody: What is it with you and trash?
> Forky: It's warm. And cozy. And safe.

If, however, we are willing to be uncomfortable, if we hold our certainties with humility rather than all-caps bravado, if we allow our understanding of God to change, and with it, since we are made *imago Dei*, our understanding of ourselves, if we trust the unfathomable reality that calls us repeatedly to new life, if we listen deeply to wisdom partners old and new—if we do all these things, then we neither dread change nor deem it heretical. Instead, we welcome each dislocation from a room we've outgrown, each first day of kindergarten, as meet and right. Like Woody—and, for that matter, like the resurrected Christ—we light out for the territory ahead, which we hope is the frontier of infinite love.

Just as the movie makes a good case for letting go of our childish devotions, it also made a good and subversive case for its own irrelevance as an Oscar contender.

Narratively, *Toy Story 4* affirms that the franchise, like Woody, has outlived its purpose, that it pushes into realms critics think it shouldn't. But I like to think the academy's affirmation of the film wasn't a default move but rather a recognition of its central questions at this moment in history: How, in our own lives, are we "pushing" our loyalties—to worldviews, to political figures, to tribes of all sorts, to our warm and cozy images of God—beyond their usefulness, beyond their ability to give life? How might we, as creatures who crave purpose, begin to resurrect into new ways of being that we can't yet fully fathom? How might we find and affirm the Forkys of the world—those "out there" and those in the trash bins of our own hearts?

In my book, raising these questions amounts to very good news indeed.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Toy Story grows up."