Sample Micro-Essay (with Commentary)

Question: "The Hammer of God" opens with a scene in which Captain Singh relives a moment from the past by means of a "Brainman." How does this scene predispose the reader to think about technology in general?

Technology as Two-Edged Sword in "The Hammer of God"

The first several paragraphs of Arthur C. Clarke's "The Hammer of God" represent technology as a force which can overcome human limitations and control the environment, but also as a force with problems and limitations of its own. Technology has in one sense overcome the limitations of time: the Brainman that Captain Singh uses in the opening scenes allows him to relive the past directly, rather than merely remembering it, even though what he relives happened "twenty years ago and a quarter-billion kilometers away" (526). In the past Singh relives—our future as imagined by Clarke—technology has overcome the limitations of geography as well. Entire houses are moved from place to place by the Skylift Service, and the places to which Singh's house is moved (the Saudi desert, the Great Barrier Reef) would in our own time be considered inhospitable places to live, suggesting that future technology has rendered all places on earth habitable by humans (525). This suggestion is reinforced by the narrator's remark that the home locale Singh now reexperiences, a forest, has been "tamed and gentled" by human intervention, guaranteed to be "free of dangerous animals" (525). But while technology makes possible all of these marvels, it always has the potential to break down. After Singh's move, "something had gone wrong with the food-recycling system," so that despite the system's "fail-safe backups," "there had been a curious metallic taste to some of the items coming out of the synthesizer recently" (525).
Since Singh is fearful of the monkey that he and his son see in the forest (525-6), he is apparently aware of the limits of technology's ability to "tame and gentle" the environment. Perhaps, too, technology has provided such a buffer between him and the environment that he no longer has any profound connection to it, as Singh is unable to identify the monkey precisely and depends upon the "Brain"--presumably some kind of computer or other information storage device--to help him identify it (525). Overall, Clarke's attitude towards technology seems to be one of cautious optimism: he applauds the advances that technology can make while remaining aware of technology's problems.