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Science fiction as satire: An overview of Douglas Adams's the Hitchhiker guide to the galaxy

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ABSTRACT
Writers have long been interested in dealing with the adverse effects of science on the life of the human race. Earlier, the science achievements on various fields of life were looked at positively. However, sci-fi writers, since H. G. Wells' dark pessimistic view of man's future under the control of scientists, robots, or computers altered the general perspective, have been concerned with the undeniable damaging consequences of man's complete reliance on advancement of technology in managing his life. Douglas Adams believed that science should be viewed as dangerous and destructive because it neither ameliorated man's life nor it kept as it is; rather, devastated not only man's achievement throughout history, but also brought all humans' hopes of perfection to a horrible end. *The Hitchhiker Guide to the Galaxy* is clearly a document that condemns the destructive science that is responsible for the massacres perpetrated in many parts of this world. This paper, therefore, attempts at detecting Adams's views of man's future life, bearing in mind all the radical changes that are still taking place in this life.

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Introduction

The Origin of Science Fiction

Although science fiction, as a term, has always been difficult to define, it has broadly been explained in terms of being a mixture of romance, science and prophecy (Hugo Gernsback), realistic speculation about future events (Robert Heinlein), and a genre based on an imagined alternative to the reader's environment (Dako Suvin). Likewise, it has been called a form of fantastic fiction and a historical literature.

Science fiction is a genre or division of literature which variably distinguishes its fictional world from the actual world where the human race truly live: a fiction of the imagination rather than rational reality, or a fantastic literature. Dako's definition of science fiction implies that it is a "literary genre or verbal idea whose necessary or enough conditions are the presence and communication of estrangement and understanding, and whose main device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author's scientific environment."[2] Accordingly, it can be safely deduced that this genre usually makes use of a setting that is totally or partially exotic or far removed from the usual settings employed by writers of other literary genres and attempts to combine it with issues or concerns that are, more or less, in touch with man's life on this planet.

Oxford English Dictionary defines science fiction as an "imaginative fiction based on guessed scientific discoveries or outstanding environmental changes, frequently set in the future or on other planets and involving space or time travel',' adding that the term did not come into common usage until the nineteen-twenties. Apparently, what is meant by this definition is to differentiate "imaginative fiction" - to which science fiction belongs - from ''realist'' fiction, which involves more efforts at a literary truth in the human world. Whereas the realist writer, on the one hand, has to be as accurate or meticulous as possible in his / her construction of the story, the science fiction author, however, can employ his/her imagination to invent things not found in real world, on the other. Brian Aldiss's argument indicates that science fiction could not have originated earlier than Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein* (1818), because it is only in the nineteenth century that the term ''science,'' as it is currently perceived, became extensively and culturally known.[3] Some of the critics attribute the invention of the genre to two writers of different nationalities: H. G. Wells (1866-1946), a British; and Jules Verne (1828-1905), a French, giving science fiction freshness and originality. Those critics try to explain how crude or immature the initial attempts were. In connection with the argument of this group of analysts, this history, taking *Frankenstein* as its starting point, sees science fiction as a branch of Gothic literature. Brian Aldiss argues that science fiction, having descended from the Gothic mode, is hardly free of it, nor is the distance between the two modes great. The emphasis of the Gothic and science fiction tales is on the distant and the unearthly.[4]

Others, however, appear to be keen on observing the 'fantastic' or 'science fictional' elements in ancient or pre-nineteenth-century literature. For the former group of critics, the history of science fiction dates back at least to 1600. Significantly, the tradition of 'fantasy' is as old as literature and relevantly older than realist fiction. Almost all the oldest and greatest works of human culture contain magical episodes. Science fiction began with a short book by a German astronomer; written possibly around 1600 although not published until 1634, *Kepler's Somnium*. By the eighteenth century, this vigorous sub-genre of interplanetary adventures had turned out to be a prevalent major feature of European literature. Romancers, whose books were published all over Europe, took characters on adventures into the solar system. In addition, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1725) is the first English novel that effectively blends both genres of utopia and dystopia. Still, there is another history that begins with an

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American magazine editor, Hugo Gernsback, who invented the term 'science fiction' in 1927.[5]

Swift's novel uses a traveling hero as a means of visiting a variety of fantastic and utopian earthly societies (the diminutive Lilliputians or the gigantic Brobidignagians) in addition to ridiculing (in terms of theoretical and science-fictional field) the rational eighteenth-century view of science. Later on, Voltaire (1694-1778), a French philosopher, completed his popular novel *Candide* (1758) which satirizes optimism, for the world is full of natural disasters, such as earthquakes, tempests, as well as ones, such as barbaric religious acts, slavery, prostitution, venereal diseases and all sorts of suffering, which primarily result from human actions.

Such science-fiction novels as *Frankenstein*, or *Wells's The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) and *The Time Machine* (1895) tend to follow the frontier of scientific probability and attempt to examine how true or valid the limits of and the rules of such a hypothesis that speculates the infiniteness of any sort of life beyond this universe. Ultimately, this frontier expanded quickly all through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The nineteen-eighties witnessed an increasing concern with the scientific bases of H. G. Wells's writings, supported by a continual critical focus of the close connection between literature and science. This might be recognized in the writings of Frank Herbert (1920-1986). Herbert's epic novel *Dune* (1965) seems to be one of the well-integrated works of science fiction, consisting, approximately, of equal portions of hard science fiction, soft science fiction and science fantasy.

Science has played a major role in the history of utopian thinking, since any advancement in the scientific field will inevitably signify or mark the increase of human hopes and chances towards prosperity, development, and welfare. Nevertheless, the technological products brought about by experiments made in science laboratories were for the most part utilized for threatening and enslaving rather than liberating man of his worldly drudgery and misery. This is why science and technology had ceased to become symbols of human capability and intelligence; rather, they have come to be regarded, paradoxically, as signs of human weakness, destruction and limitation. In her book *Europe of the Dictators: 1919-1945* (1966), Elizabeth Wiskemann (1899-1971), an English journalist, refers to the atmosphere of war and dictatorship prevalent in Europe, which contributed considerably to the growth of the European sense of "bitter discontent and disturbance."[6] As such, the twentieth-century writers and thinkers of Europe started with the high hopes of a bright, glorious future for establishing an earthly, Eden-like paradise where all dreams of life would easily be accomplished and all the evils permeating man's life (poverty, sickness, exploitation, genocide, etc.) would be permanently eradicated or removed from it. Unfortunately, the course of the action ended with mindless destruction, including all fields of that life. The brightly optimistic ideal image of Europe earlier envisioned by thinkers and philosophers became, for the modern writers, the Europe of bloody dictators of the sort of Hitler, Stalin, and Mussolini.

Usually, a science fiction story is written for the purpose of pointing at or showing clearly the drawbacks, mistakes, shortcomings of a social code, principle, convention, or manner; a certain system or a regime is most likely to be ridiculed or criticized. In other words, one of the main functions of a science fiction story is to satirize and magnify the ills of something or of an individual by showing how the facial or outward appearance is chiefly incongruous with the hidden or inner reality. The general effect is certainly the arousal of laughter.

The Satirical Undertones in Douglas Adams's Science Fiction

The Hitchhiker Guide to the Galaxy[*] (1979) is one of the outstanding modern science fiction stories written by a prolific English writer, comic radio dramatist and musician called Douglass Adams (1952-2001). Like other science fiction stories, this one centers on the potential breakdown and indomitable destruction of the galaxy which entails the annihilation of the human race on the earth. Chaotic and confusing as they appear, science and technology are subjects for public attack and satire in spite of the glaring fact that they have offered great services to humanity. The point of irony obviously raised by Adams is that the services here should not be viewed literally; after all, those services turned out to be malicious, double-edged weapons. Adams' intensive scientific study and research render him a passionate believer in the pristine perfectibility of the galaxy.

Hitchhiker portrays the adventures of an English man, Arthur Dent, who escapes the destruction of Earth by an alien race called the Vogons. His friend, Ford Perfect, with whom he escapes, turns out to be an alien from a smaller planet. After they are moved to and discovered on a Vogon spacecraft, the Vogons attempt to get rid of Arthur and Ford. However, the two of them are strangely rescued, ending on Zaphod Beeblebrox's stolen spaceship, "the Heart of Gold," powered by the "Infinite Improbability Drive." From a first glance, the story seems dedicated to be taught or read for children, as it contains many features of bestseller fiction, such as entertainment, thrill, or suspense. Yet, when studied carefully, the book contains larger and deeper meanings touching upon man's existence.

Douglass Adams skillfully blends his scientific experiences and knowledge with imagination (non-realistic realms). Being a frustrated reformer, what is impossible for him to achieve realistically in life, he tries to carry it out in his own world of fantasy. What appears extremely significant for him is that he is working hard to do scientific researches with which he can save human beings from some future disasters mainly caused by science and technology. Evidently, he warns against an impending terrible scientific catastrophe awaiting human beings.[7]

Although the novel focuses primarily on exploring new dimensions of the human condition, Adams's ideas of absurdness, as advocated by Sartre's Existentialist philosophy, is abundantly illustrated, seeing that it contributes to the overall theme of absurdity and the necessity for constructing meaning for the human existence. In an introduction to the first chapter of *Hitchhiker*, Adams writes:

Far out in the uncharted backwaters of the unfashionable end of the western spiral arm of the Galaxy lies a small disregarded yellow sun. Orbiting this at a distance of roughly ninety-two million miles is an utterly insignificant little blue-green planet whose ape-descended life forms are so amazingly primitive that they still think digital watches are a pretty neat idea.'[8]

Obviously, the theme of meaninglessness of human existence, even though suggested in a comic or satirical manner by Adams, is introduced in the very first page of the novel. Adams portrays a universe in which the Earth, and well as humankind, is tiny and utterly insignificant on the greater scale of things. In chapter one, the reader is introduced to Arthur

[*] Hereafter referred to *Hitchhiker*.

Dent, the insignificant and utterly ordinary Everyman, who is in a comically fruitless journey towards salvation. In Arthur is reflected or embodied the absurdity of the human condition and the consequent ambiguity inherent in every individual's life, in addition to the solitary struggle to construct a sense of what seems senseless. Arthur lives in a bubble filled with everyday, unimportant phenomena, such as kettles, plugs, refrigerators, and so on.[9]

In the course of *Hitchhiker*, however, Arthur comes to encounter the sheer facts that underlie the meaninglessness of the universe and of his life as an impotent 'little man.' Yet, he also learns how to 'spin out his bubble', and to shape meaning, even if the resultant one is essentially farcical, absurd, and grotesquely comical. Furthermore, he finds out that keeping oneself occupied, as the two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1953) do, is the sole means of survival for its own sake. Arthur comes to know, metaphorically speaking, how to count the bricks and crevices in his cell. These and other attempts meant to make meaning are reminiscent of the "Theatre of the Absurd" in that the movements and actions of both protagonists, Arthur and Ford, refer to the concept of the grotesque. For the readers, these characters are transformed into clowns.[10]

Adams's Comic Portrayal of Reality in Hitchhiker

In his novel, Adams highlights a number of twentieth-century concerns and issues, on both the societal and environmental levels. He is particularly concerned, for example, with bureaucracy and the incompetence of human institutions and systems.[11] In the very first chapter, Mr. Prosser asks Arthur how it is possible that he knows absolutely nothing about the plans to demolish his house, reminding that the plans have been available for the last nine months. The following dialogue between Arthur and Prosser emphasizes the ridiculous ineffectiveness of some human institutions:

"But the plans were on display…" "On display? I eventually had to go down to the cellar to find them". "That's the display department." "With a torch." "Ah, well the lights had probably gone." "So had the stairs." "But look, you found the notice didn't you?" "Yes," said Arthur, "yes I did. It was on display in the bottom of a locked filing cabinet stuck in a disused lavatory with a sign on the door saying Beware of the Leopard." (p. 9)

A highly entertaining section presented by the novelist is Ford's and Arthur's attempts at deriving a meaning while being caught on prehistoric Earth. Their actions are rooted in the madness that results from living in a world devoid of purpose or direction.

Another illustrative dialogue between Arthur and Ford in the first chapter satirically reflects the fantastic side that is based but far removed from science. This dialogue is, however, also very significant in revealing the theme of futility of construction meaning and then attaching it to life:

"I thought you must be dead…" (Arthur) said simply. "So did I for a while", said Ford, "and then I decided I was a lemon for a couple of weeks. I kept myself amused all that time jumping in and out of a gin and tonic". …"Where ", (Arthur) said, "did you…?" "Find a gin and tonic?", said Ford brightly. "I found a small lake that thought it was a gin and tonic, and jumped in and out of that. At least, I think it thought it was a gin and tonic. "I may", he added with a grin which would have sent sane men scampering into trees, "have been imagining it." (p. 11)

Ford also tells Arthur that he visited Africa and that he behaved very oddly there. For example, he took to being cruel to animals, 'but only…as a hobby' and he tried to learn to fly. Ford's actions and attempts at discovering some meaning are not merely based on the grotesque: they actually radiate insanity. However strange Ford's actions may appear to be, it is easy for humankind to identify with him, seeing that everyone experiences the emptiness at the centre of an existential enclosure or, as Adams would like to call it, "bubbles," and the subsequent urgency to 'spin the bubble' outward to derive a meaning, even though utterly trivial and preposterous. Because he has not been provided with whatever he is actually in need of, man has to work hard to prove his existence in one way or another, before it is too late.[12]

Relevantly, Adams's dark vision has some prominent prophetic and optimistic qualities: it might be regarded as intrinsically positive, since it does not merely denounce, but also aims to heal the maladies of twentieth-century society.[13] The satirical notes propounded every now and then are intended to bring man down to earth and drive the sense of pride and grandeur out of his mind.

The human false impressions of grandeur are evident in *Hitchhiker*. In chapter twenty-three, for instance, Adams comments on these fantasies of grandeur by mentioning that human beings might in fact be inferior to some creatures such as dolphins and mice, and not vice versa:

... On the planet Earth, man had always assumed that he was more intelligent than dolphins because he had achieved so much – the wheel, New York, wars and so on – whilst all the dolphins had ever done was muck about in the water having a good time. But conversely, the dolphins had always believed that they were far more intelligent than man –for precisely the same reasons. (p. 57)

Another phenomenon which, according to *Hitchhiker*, has been misinterpreted by man is the close relationship between laboratory mice and human beings. Adams satirically suggests that human beings are, in fact, the creatures being experimented on. This comment serves to further put emphasis on humanity's utter insignificance and absurd illusions of eminence. Instead of just being a denouncing factor as it is shown in other classics of science fiction, scientific development has acquired here a new role, that is, to reveal to human beings the whereabouts of their faults, shortcomings, and defects, together with the maladies and ills of their institutions.[14]

Remnants of the fantastic transitions between 'reality' and 'dream world' are likewise manifest in *Hitchhiker* right from the very beginning, where the author depicts Arthur's struggle to prevent his house from being pulled down by the government, in order for a bypass to be constructed (this reflects the major plot of the Earth's demolition by the Vogons for the purpose of building an interplanetary bypass).[15] When Ford realizes that the Earth is about to be everlastingly obliterated or wiped out from the galaxy, he attempts to convince the astonished Arthur to leave his precious home in order for them to escape a certain death. By means of absurd logic, Ford manages to persuade Prosser, the person in charge of the demolition of Arthur's home, to lie in the mud in front of Arthur's house, where, until a moment before, Arthur has lain himself:

"Come on", Ford said to him, "get up and let the man lie down". Arthur stood up, feeling as if he was in a dream. Ford beckoned to Prosser who sadly, awkwardly, sat down in the mud. He felt that his whole life was some kind of dream and he sometimes wondered whose it was and whether they were enjoying it. (p. 71)

Thus, even in the opening paragraph of the novel, the hesitation as to the nature of reality is introduced. In addition to

this overwhelming sense of hesitation, related suggestions of madness and delusion indirectly come forth 'Mr. Prosser's mouth opened and closed a couple of times whilst his mind was filled with inexplicable but terribly attractive visions of Arthur Dent's house being consumed with fire …. Mr. Prosser was often bothered with visions like these, and they made him feel very nervous.' Moreover, Prosser wonders why his brain is occupied by 'a thousand hairy horsemen all shouting at him' (p. 66). This preoccupation with madness serves as a reminder of man's unjustifiable sense of glory, false as it is presented here, in contrast with the vastness of the galaxy and its unknown occupants. As a matter of fact, Ford's and Arthur's bouts of madness provide another example of the vague nature of reality in Adams's fantastic landscapes.[16] On being rescued by the "Heart of Gold," the space-time range is most likely a little distorted. Hence, Arthur and Ford witness a series of inexplicable phenomena, and thus come to the conclusion that they must be mad:

"It looks just like the sea front at Southend". "Hell, I'm relieved to hear you say that ….. because I thought I must be going mad". "perhaps you are. Perhaps you only thought I said it" … "Well, perhaps we're both going mad" … "Well, do you think this is Southend?" "Oh yes". "So do I". "Therefore we must be mad." (p. 30)

Later, for the purpose of aggravating Arthur's and Ford's concern that they might be losing their minds, a passing maniac with five heads and an elderberry bush adorned with kippers mentions something about the weather being fine, before a million-gallon vat of custard suddenly empties itself over their heads. It is at this moment that Ford and Arthur realize that something bizarre is happening, and they grow so confused that their sense of hesitation as to the nature of the absurd event is further affirmed. Instead of merely accepting the possibilities of dream and reality, they question their own mental power based on the laws governing the world as they know them. In Adams, characters never become accustomed to the glimpses of alterity, and question their sanity intermittently.[17]

In addition to the abovementioned incomprehensible events, Ford and Arthur, encounter a troupe of monkeys claiming to have composed the script for *Hamlet*. In this regard, the reference to *Hamlet* proves significant in the sense that madness constitutes one of the major themes in the play: "*Hamlet* is about insanity. Madness is the means Shakespeare used to convey the disillusion … that pervades the characters …. Madness is, moreover, essential to the structure of the play as well as to the development of its themes."[18]

Finally, just as Arthur becomes used to the fact that the myth of Magrathea has turned out to be real, he once again questions his own sanity upon hearing that the earth was in reality a computer designed to calculate the ultimate question, and that it was actually governed by white laboratory mice. His reaction to Slartibartfast's account is simply, "Look … would it save you a lot of time if I just gave up and went mad now?" (p. 59).

Related to madness is the theme of drug, whereby Ford's preoccupation with liquor proves noteworthy. The entry on alcohol in *Hitchhiker* also proves interesting. The Guide says that the effect of the Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster is that of "having your brains smashed out by a slice of lemon wrapped around a gold brick" (p. 47). The many references to alcohol in the "Hitchhiker series", along with its sleep-inducing and hypnotic effects, function not only as a source of comic relief, but also a comment on the subjective nature of reality. The allusions to alcohol - and beyond which to drug - also serve to comment on an odd view of the fantastic landscapes; on a reality as the product of a deranged or intoxicated mind.[19]

Besides, during the protagonists' travels through the vast landscape of outer space, Zaphod claims to have located the mythical planet of Magrathea. Ford responds to this revelation by accusing Zaphod of insanity: 'You're crazy, Zaphod … Magrathea is a myth, a fairy story' (p. 43). Ford thinks that it is sufficient to gaze at a strange new planet without being tempted to believe the myths surrounding it: '"Isn't it enough to see that a garden is beautiful without having to believe that there are fairies at the bottom of it too?" (p. 44). Magrathea is, however, one of the phenomena which are confirmed by the protagonists as being real. On reading the novel, the reader, on his / her part, is never sufficiently assured about the nature of what is real and what is not.

Although the mythical Magrathea turns out to be real at the narrative level, Zaphod doubts his reasoning once again while the party explores Magrathea. In order to investigate the notion of madness in relation to Zaphod Beeblebrox's character, one should consider his account of cauterizing his own brain. As the protagonists pass through the unfathomable pathways of Magrathea, Zaphod refers to the sections of his mind that seem to be dysfunctional. He then relates the story of having discovered that he has tampered with his own brain in a desperate attempt to keep a secret, even from himself. On being questioned as to whether he is crazy, he replies: 'It's a possibility I haven't ruled out yet' (p. 45), thus sustaining the hesitation between reality and fantasy. However, it is confirmed that none of the characters are indeed mad, it is only suggested. Once again, madness and the experience of an alternate 'reality' prove relative terms in discussing Adams's nihilistic world. What manifests as madness for one character might be perfectly 'real' to another.

Related to the concept of the hesitation between the real and the fantastic is the notion of dream. At one stage during their visit to Magrathea, Zaphod, Ford and Trillian are shown a simulated, Virtual Reality, a catalogue of exotic planets manufactured on Magrathea. This informational illusion comments on dreaming and the hesitation between the real and the fantastical, since it is alternative landscape existing beyond the borders of the 'real.'[20]

Notes

1- "Introduction" to *Hitchhiker Guide to the Galaxy*, http:/ fds.oup.com./13/9/97801995577455-prelim.pdf. retrieved on 1 / 4/ 2014 p. 1 out of 5.

2- "Definition", http://palgrave.com/pdfs/0999970225.pdf. retrieved on 25/1/2014. p. 1 out of 30.

3- Ibid.

4- Robert Adam, *Science Fiction* (London: Taylor and Francis e-library, 2006), p. 1.

5- Allen David, "Science Fiction: An Introduction" (Lincoln: Nebraska: 1973), p. 14. www.cliffnotes.com.

6- Elizabeth Wieskmann, *Europe of Dictators, 1919-1945* (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1967), p. 9.

[7] Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls, eds., ***The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature*** (Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 44.

[8] Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker Guide to the Galaxy*. http://en.bookfi.org/s/?q=the+hitchhiker%27s+guide+to+the+galaxy&t=0 retrieved on 29 / 11/ 2013. p. 1. All subsequent references to this novel, which are hereafter cited parenthetically within the text, are to this edition.

[9] Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls, p. 62.

[10] Adam Roberts, ***Science Fiction*** (London and New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2006), p. 132.
[11] Allen David, p. 14
[12] Jesse Matz, ***The Modern Novel: A Short Introduction*** (Blackwell Publishing, 2004), p. 77.
[13] Ibid., p. 80.
[14] Richard Bradford, ***The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction*** (Blackwell Publishing, 2007), p. 118.
[15] Ibid., pp-134-135.
[16] Robert Adam, p. 20.
[17] Jesse Matz, p. 48.
[18] Dominic Head, ***The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction, 1950-2000*** (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 66.
[19] Ibid., p. 49.
[20] Ibid., p. 52.