

GRADE 10 ENGLISH STUDY GUIDE

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

By Anna Jacobson and Andrew Dickson

Douglas Adams:

Douglas Adams was born March 11, 1952 in Cambridge, England, the week after the discovery of the DNA molecule by Watson & Crick at Cambridge University. After attending a prestigious boys' boarding school and studying literature at Cambridge, he broke into broadcasting at the BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation) with a script for a science-fiction radio show called *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. A phenomenal success, it was later adapted into a TV series, five novels, a video game, and a feature film.

Hitchhiker reflects Adams' life-long interests in comedy, technology, travel and philosophy. He attended Cambridge less to study literature than to get into *The Footlights Club*, a legendary comedy group that spawned the careers of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*. He was anecdotally the first person in Europe to buy an Apple Macintosh computer at its launch in 1984. He claimed he conceived the title of his book whilst drunkenly stargazing in a field in Innsbruck, Austria, with a copy of *The Hitch-hiker's Guide to Europe* in his pocket. He was a staunch atheist, but was fascinated by the role religion has played in the history of society. All of these interests combine in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* as a satire of the late 20th century.

Adams wrote *Hitchhiker* in the late 1970's, at the advent of a technological revolution. It preceded dozens of household technologies we now take for granted: cable TV, the internet, personal computers, wireless phones, compact discs and DVDs. (We did, in fact, think digital watches were "a pretty neat idea".) The digital revolution of the late 20th century spawned "The Information Age", just as the Industrial Revolution gave rise to "The Machine Age" 100 years before. Adams extrapolated the information age to its extremes in *Hitchhiker*, humorously prophesying many of the expectations we now have of technology.

The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy is not only the title of the novel, but also of a portable tablet encyclopedia in the novel. Sadly, Adams died of a heart attack in May of 2001 at the age of 49. One can only imagine what he would have made of the iPod, the iPhone and the iPad.

SATIRE:

Satire seeks to expose vice, stupidity and corruption, in order to chasten and correct it. While traditional satire stirs up the reader's sense of moral outrage, Adams' book simply parodies human society by exaggerating it. Some of his targets include technology, bureaucracy, philosophy, and good old human vice.

For the purpose of analyzing *Hitchhiker*, there are two flavors of satire, one bitter, and one sweet.

Juvenalian Satire, named after the Roman poet Juvenal, devastates its target with scathing, crass and contemptuous mockery. It is harsh, cynical and bitter, betraying no hope that its mockery will actually

change the world's or its inhabitants' brutality. *The Colbert Report* and *South Park* are probably the best example of Juvenalian satire on TV today.

Horatian Satire is characterized by the restrained and good-humored perspective of the Roman poet Horace. It tends to mock foolish behavior, but it usually spares the person who commits it. Horatian satire is therefore humane and somewhat forgiving of human folly. TV sitcoms that elicit a sympathetic "Awww" as much as they bring out laughter are Horatian. Think of *Friends* or *How I Met Your Mother*.

Hitchhiker contains both kinds of satire, depending upon its target. As you read, keep a list of significant events and decide whether this satirical novel is overall an example of Juvenalian or Horatian satire.

SCIENCE FICTION:

Hitchhiker draws on the conventions of science fiction. Set in the future or in an alternative world, sci-fi creates fictional technologies, devices that make the impossible possible. The "Men in Black", for example, keep alien encounters secret by zapping witnesses with a memory wiping ray.

Science fiction, according to Encyclopaedia Britannica, "is a modern **genre**.... The genre formally emerged in the West, where the social transformations wrought by the Industrial Revolution first led writers and intellectuals to extrapolate the future impact of technology.

"By the beginning of the 20th century, an array of standard science fiction 'tropes' had developed around certain themes, among them **space travel, robots, alien beings, and time travel**. The customary 'theatrics' of science fiction include **prophetic warnings, utopian aspirations, elaborate scenarios for entirely imaginary worlds, titanic disasters, strange voyages, and political agitation of many extremist flavours....**"

Science Fiction pioneers Jules Verne (*Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea, Journey to the Center of the Earth, Mysterious Island*) and H. G. Wells (*War of the Worlds, The Time Machine, The Island of Doctor Moreau*) originated the great stories, themes and plot devices of the genre. Judging by the familiarity of these titles, and their continual movie incarnations, their work and the genre they invented has endured.

The 1950's classics *Forbidden Planet* and *The Day the Earth Stood Still* defined the genre in film, while the 1968 TV series *Star Trek* brought it into living rooms. In the 1970's *Star Wars* set a traditional epic hero cycle in a futuristic galaxy, while *Independence Day* reiterated the alien invasion with blockbuster special effects in the '90's. *Men in Black* is closer to the tone of *Hitchhiker's Guide*, hilariously exploring the idea of aliens living among us. Watch these trailers and check off the list of tropes they share:

[*Forbidden Planet*](#)

[*Day the Earth Stood Still*](#)

[*Start Trek Credits*](#)

[*Star Wars*](#)

[*Independence Day*](#)

[*Men in Black*](#)

As you read *Hitchhiker*, keep a list of sci-fi tropes that Adams employs and parodies.

While serious science fiction tries to keep its stories technologically plausible, Adams justifies the wild coincidences in his book by having his characters travel on “The Heart of Gold”. The Heart of Gold is a staggeringly advanced spaceship powered past light speed by the Improbability Drive, an engine that runs on statistics. Turn on the drive, and improbable things are likely to happen. The improbable motor of the ship becomes the motor of an improbable plot.

Travel narratives: In the tradition of travel narratives, ships and planets, or islands in space, represent not only different worlds, but also symbolic values, just as islands represent various choices for Odysseus in *The Odyssey*. Travel narratives explode in popularity during ages of exploration, from the Greek colonial age to the Age of European Exploration to the tall tales of the American frontier. They embody the imaginative potential of unconquered land, the promise of wealth and new resources, and the hope of ideal new societies that avoid the corruption of the home country. Science fiction does the same things that traditional travel narratives do, except in space exploration.

Technology: Adams simultaneously glories in technology’s fantastic potential, and mocks people’s faith in machines to solve their problems. He recognizes that technology is driven by human desires and therefore can be as silly as human desires are. *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, an electronic “book” that Arthur and Ford carry with them, can be seen as a prophetic parody of internet resources, especially search engines and Wikis. Just because the *Guide* has the capacity to transmit volumes of information, doesn’t guarantee that information’s quality or accuracy.

Adams also foresaw the dreaded computerized customer service telephone agent. He reveals the absurdity of endowing machines with “genuine people personalities” by showing that the more closely computers approximate human behavior, the more obnoxious they become to actual humans.

Bureaucracy: One of Adams’ main satirical targets is bureaucracy. Our bureaucratic systems (government, health care insurance, the customer service line at the phone company) have become more opaque and arbitrary. Arthur Dent is belatedly informed that his house is going to be demolished to make way for a traffic bypass, just as Earth is to be demolished for a hyperspace express route. As the demolition captain explains to a panic-stricken planet, “*There is no point in acting all surprised about it. All the planning charts and demolition orders have been on display in your local planning department in Alpha Centauri for fifty of your earth years, so you’ve had plenty of time to lodge a formal complaint and it’s far too late to start making a fuss about it now*” (31). No one on earth could have known of these plans, and nobody knows who made them; we only see the thugs sent to execute them. In the 1970’s, as is often true now, when faced with enormous bureaucracy, it seems as if there’s nothing to be done but capitulate. In the words of the Vogon soldier, “Resistance is useless!” (62).

Philosophy: Douglas Adams’ atheism rests on a lack of proof of the existence of God, and upon skepticism that the existence of God can be proven empirically. He finds the universe absurd based upon its apparent negation of human endeavor. In the plot, anything that happens happens by sheer coincidence and not by design, which is why the coincidences that bring people together are explained in probability statistics, and not by fate or divine will. Therefore the randomness of the universe renders intentional action useless, and resists humans’ attempts to find meaning in events or philosophies.

Adams mocks any attempt to answer spiritual questions with empirical evidence—a statistical answer turns out to be no answer at all. His characters build a gigantic computer to find the *answer* to “Life!... The Universe!... [and] Everything!” (152), only to find that they don’t know the *question*. A second computer is built, but after running a program for ten million years, it is destroyed five minutes before read-out. To compound the absurdity, Adams turns our notion of human supremacy on its head by making *us* the subjects of an elaborate experiment run by mice.

Human Vice: Adams shows just how out of control humans can be in *Hitchhiker* by lampooning greed, luxury, and hedonism. Zaphod Beeblebrox is a terrific embodiment of reckless pleasure-seeking that never seems to lead to satisfaction, or even actual pleasure. Exotic liquor washes across the pages, from “That ol’ Janx Spirit” to the “Pan Galactic Gargle Blaster”, although the effects from drinking these sound far from enjoyable. Greed takes on unfathomable dimensions on the legendary planet of Magrathea, whose industry of manufacturing custom-made luxury planets for the ultra-wealthy destroys the galactic economy.

Adams’ humor treats these behaviors more as harmless quirks than sins. He reserves his real scorn for the Vogons, and the petty, mean stupidity they display. Their cruelty is as casual as their poetry is bad, and to Adams, bad art might be the greatest sin. Adams is not so much a “rigorous moralist” as a “gentle humanist”, whose main characters display a fundamental decency and good humor that distinguishes them from their enemies. Their revulsion at violence and their awareness of their own self-absorption make them human and likeable in spite of their flaws.

PICARESQUE:

A Picaresque is a type of fiction dealing with the episodic adventures of a usually roguish protagonist (a *picaro*). *Hitchhiker* contains some qualities of the picaresque novel. It has a non-entity as a protagonist, an absurd and corrupt universe peppered with rascals, an episodic structure of loosely connected events, and a casually comic style where atrocities are passed off with a shrug.

The main characters in *Hitchhiker* are stock types in British comedy. All of them are visible in contemporary TV and movies (and can even be spotted in American sitcoms), especially *The Office*, *The Big Bang Theory*, *Two and a Half Men*, and *Shaun of the Dead*.

Arthur Dent is the representative for Earth readers, experiencing for us the disorientation of being the last Earthman in the universe. He is the most pathetic version of the Everyman, a nobody on an earthly scale, as Earth is nothing on the galactic scale. He is the ideal observer because he is so thoroughly left out of the loop, even the reader is ahead of him. While traumatized by increasingly improbable events, he remains staunch only in his quest for a cup of tea. That he is named after England’s legendary king (Arthur) and a minor injury (Dent) shows he is a hero destined to be treated like a football.

Ford Prefect, a writer researching the Earth for *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* is a survivor and opportunist who nevertheless shows friendly loyalty to Arthur by rescuing him from Earth’s demolition. Practical and socially adept, he still makes spectacular gaffes which he manages to finesse. “[He] had skimmed a bit on his preparatory research. The information he had gathered [about Earth] had led him to choose the name ‘Ford Prefect’ as being nicely inconspicuous” (10). (The Ford Prefect was a very common British compact car at the time, so for comparison’s sake, imagine meeting somebody at a party who introduced himself as Toyota Corolla.)

Trillian (Tricia McMillan) is the sexy yet sensible token female, the crush of every science fiction geek who wants a beautiful woman with a degree in astrophysics. She remains aloof and unattainable to Arthur, having been carried off by Zaphod Beeblebrox from a party in north London. She claims to be more interested in space travel than an actual relationship with Zaphod, and it's quite possible that she is using Zaphod for his spaceship as much as he is using her. She is arguably the most competent of all of the characters, but she isn't assigned much of a character or emotional life.

Zaphod Beeblebrox, Ex-President of the Galaxy and incorrigible libertine can be read as a picaro, incapable of learning from his experiences because he has deliberately sealed off part of his brain. His charm covers his sociopathic tendencies and may also serve as a stab at the emptiness behind the culture of celebrity worship: "Zaphod loved effect; it was what he was best at", but he's not very good at much else (37). While we never find out the reason why he steals the spaceship Heart of Gold, it's possible that he wants a moral core for himself, in the style of the Tin Man in the *Wizard of Oz*.

Works Cited

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