

The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy:  
A Metaphorical Look at Life, the Universe, and Everything

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## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Preview.....	3
Literature Review.....	3
Justification.....	8
Rhetorical Context.....	9
The Guide Metaphor.....	11
The Deep Thought Metaphor.....	13
The Earth's Destruction Metaphor.....	14
The Vastness of the Universe Metaphor.....	16
Conclusion.....	18
Works Cited.....	21

## Introduction

The film, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, deals with life's apparent futility and the unknowable purpose of human existence in a humorous and irreverent way. It pokes fun at man's many vain attempts to discover what the purpose of life might be; in the end we might discover that the purpose of life is not the destination, but the journey. I chose to examine this artifact because of its enduring and cross-generational appeal. Whether exposed to the original radio series, one of the books of the canon, or indeed this film, Douglas Adams' apparent creativity will attract one like a moth to the flame. Although Adams has passed on, the mantle of his work has been taken up by others and his legacy shows no signs of waning. For these reasons I felt this artifact was worthy of closer examination given its influence not only on the generation just passed, but the present and future generations that will surely be impacted by Adams' contribution to literature. The film *Hitchhiker's* is ripe with metaphor urging the viewer to harvest its many messages, but be warned a bushel basket is not large enough to hold the bounty this film contains; you will need a truck. *Hitchhiker's* uses its many metaphors to shape a worldview (universe view) that truth is unknowable, that the purpose of life is a closely guarded secret, and any attempt to discover these things will be thwarted post haste. Douglas Adams uses metaphor to great effect to convince us that we cannot know the answers to life's burning questions; we are shown parallels and types which shadow our realities

and provide a mental shortcut to understanding deeper and richer ideas. This imagery is possible because of our innate abilities to link abstract concepts, not just through linguistic metaphor, but as a mental heuristic that is fundamental to the processes involved in human learning.

## **Preview**

First, I will explain metaphor criticism and why I chose it to analyze this film. I will then address why I think this film should be analyzed. I will layout the rhetorical situation of how this film came into being. Then, I will describe a few of the elements of the film that speak to its underlying purpose: the narrator, the premise of the film, and the scale emphasized by the film. An examination of some of the metaphors found in the film will be interspersed throughout this essay. I then will discuss what can be gleaned from this artifact and what needs further examination.

## **Literature Review**

I chose to analyze this movie using metaphor criticism because of its heavy reliance on the use of metaphor to convey its message. Metaphor criticism analyzes a rhetorical artifact by looking closely at the uses of metaphor contained within it. In his book, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, I. A. Richards describes the principal subject of the metaphor as the “tenor,” and he uses the term “vehicle” to describe the comparison being made. Therefore, if we take the metaphor, “dumb

as a box of rocks,” the vehicle of this metaphor is the box of rocks, and the tenor of the metaphor is stupidity. The purpose of this metaphor is to convey a level of stupidity, the box of rocks is the means by which that stupidity is conveyed.

Richards makes the astute observation that: “The vehicle is not normally a mere embellishment of a tenor which is otherwise unchanged by it but that vehicle and tenor in co-operation give a meaning of more varied powers than can be ascribed to either.” Given this statement we can postulate that one’s choice of metaphor colors in influences the perception of the thing being described, the tenor. So if, for example, we wish to express our enjoyment of a freshly laundered shirt, and we liken it to, “the fragrant breezes of spring,” the significance of our enjoyment would be heightened in the use of this metaphor over one that compared our enjoyment of a freshly laundered shirt to, “the musty yet comforting smells an old book.”

James Underhill, the Head of English at the Université Stendhal Grenoble 3 France, said, in reference to the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt: “Poets have the capacity to shape our interior world, the intimate space within us, just as much as ideologies structure the frameworks within which we live and work” (Underhill 4). This is accomplished through skillful use of linguistic devices such as metaphor. We look to understand new situations, ideas and concepts by relating them to things we already know and understand. Aristotle said: “Metaphor is of great value both in poetry and in prose” (Roberts 154). The

framings of metaphors color our comprehension in myriad ways and inform our perceptions of the world around us. In Percy Shelley's work, *A Defence of Poetry*, he makes the point that "language is vitally metaphorical" (Shelley 28). By this he means that humans come envision new and difficult concepts most readily through metaphor. Through the use of metaphor new concepts are explained and apprehended most readily. Therefore, by examining the uses and forms of metaphor we gain deeper and more meaningful insight into the mind of the author, and are able to better assess the intentions and motivations that lay behind the specific metaphors the author chooses to use. In *Metaphors We Live By*, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson found that metaphors are not just rhetorical devices, or an utterance of poetic language; they discovered that the human mind processes and categorizes information in a way that necessitates the use of metaphor (Lakoff 4). By comparing two dissimilar things, one already understood and the second a new concept or idea, the human mind finds a shortcut to understanding; this is an efficient way to come to know.

Sonja K. Foss lays out the process for analyzing rhetorical artifacts using metaphor criticism. The critic reads or views the entire artifact paying close attention to the context of the piece and identifies the metaphor or metaphors within the text. The critic compares the metaphors, looks for similarities within the artifact and, analyzes the metaphors in the artifact to discover possible perceptions the intended audience may take away from the metaphoric message.

Foss says: "Here, the critic suggests what effects the use of the various metaphors may have on the audience and how the metaphors function to argue for a particular attitude toward the ideas presented" (Foss 272). The purpose then of metaphor is not to simply explain the meanings of the metaphor, but to analyze the intended purpose of the metaphor.

Richards lamented the fact that metaphor has been viewed as a slight of hand with words all through the history of rhetoric (Richards 90). This view, according to Richards, minimizes the important role that metaphor plays in the structure of human thought. The use of metaphor is the linguistic manifestation of the manner in which humans process information; the human ability to look for patterns in the way things work, and the ability to recognize the similarity of such patterns between and among processes that are dissimilar in every way except for these patterns is fundamental to human reasoning. Richards contends that metaphor should be given much more importance than traditional rhetoric has granted to it (Richards 95).

Some metaphorical symbolism seems to be universal in its application (Osborn 115). In the following metaphor, *meditation is a broom in the dusty hallways of the soul*, most of the terms in this metaphor cannot be universally understood. There are no hallways in the tribal huts of primitive Africa, meditation means different things to different cultures, so this metaphor and the symbols used within it cannot be understood by all people at all times, therefore,

it is not universal. Michael Osborn identified some universal concepts that are used cross-culturally and could be labeled universal or archetypal. There are five characteristics of archetypal metaphor that Osborn lists: they are popular in rhetorical discourses, time does not erode the popularity, they are based on shared human experiences; i.e., death and sex, archetypal metaphors are based on human motivations, and they are immensely persuasive (Osborn 116). He mentions disease-remedy metaphor, threat-reassurance metaphor, but his paper focuses on foreign universal topics: light/darkness, heat/cold, the sun, and the cycle of the seasons (117). These topics are powerful motivators when used in metaphor because of shared human experience and motivations. Because light and darkness evoke powerful emotions within us they lend themselves to effective rhetorical uses. Light is essential to be able to see to provide warmth and protection, conversely darkness lacks warmth, hinders the ability to see and conceals danger. Adams taps into these archetypal themes throughout this artifact, as we will see further on in this critique he uses the darkness and coldness of space to emphasize its bleakness and enhance our fear of it. Adams also uses fear to convey the gravity of situations, not that he makes the viewer afraid, but the character is afraid and by this he taps into that universal human emotion.

## Justification

This critique will look at some of the metaphorical concepts contained within the film. It will examine how the metaphorical themes are influenced by Adams framings of them. This film is an appropriate artifact to study because, the human race has sought to discover the meaning of life for eons; many religions and political systems have endeavored to provide answers to those questions of purpose that plague the human mind. It would be impossible to undertake such a mission as discovering what life is all about without employing the services of metaphor, which the author of *Hitchhiker's* does with good effect.

By analyzing this film I hope to point out some of the ways the creator, Douglas Adams, colors our perception of the universe; given the universal desire of mankind to know the machinations of the cosmos, this seems to be a worthy endeavor. From navel-gazing to star-gazing mankind continues to look for the purpose behind their very existence. Given the fact that metaphor is not merely a rhetorical device, but an ontological means of discovery, it seems appropriate to not only seek "truth" through its utilization, but to analyze said metaphors to discover the worldview promoted by their use. I don't think we will find the answers to "life, the universe, and everything" (Adams 113) within the artifact, but perhaps we can gain the perspective of a fellow seeker.

This film, and indeed the entire Hitchhiker's franchise, is worthy of consideration as it has had an impact on popular culture from its very beginnings

until the present day. An article about the first notebook computers in *Computerworld* magazine from 1983 makes reference to the likeness the “kneetop computer” bears to “The Guide” in *Hitchhiker’s* (Bartimo). More recently in the season finale of the new television series *The Flash*, one of the characters, Cisco Ramon, upon learning of a black hole that threatened to swallow the earth, referenced the title of one of the books of the *Hitchhiker’s* series when he says: “So long and thanks for all the fish” (*The Flash*). *Hitchhiker’s* has proven to have a long-lasting, far-reaching, and multi-generational effect on popular culture and is therefore deserving of further study.

### **Rhetorical Context**

The world came to know Adams’ universe of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* in 1978: first as a radio comedy, it then expanded to become a series of books, a stage show, a television series, a videogame, and a comic book series (*Hitchhiker’s* Wikipedia). Adams hilariously sarcastic writing was a big hit, first in Great Britain and soon it spread around the world. According to a 1982 article in *The New York Times*, the *Hitchhiker’s* series was: “Originally written for British radio in 1978, it was then produced as a BBC-television series and went on to become a best-selling book in 1979 in England and in 1980 in the United States” (*The New York Times*). The great success of the radio series opened up the way for Adams to take the story from its humble beginnings on BBC radio 4 to a Hollywood-funded film in 2005. The franchise has contributed much to

popular culture on both sides of the Atlantic. A couple of examples of these contributions are the phrase “don’t panic,” and the concept of a creature that translates from any language into the hearer’s native tongue called the Babel Fish. The website called [babelfish.com](http://babelfish.com) was named after the creature invented by Adams. The fact that the franchise has endured and contributed so much to the popular culture makes it a worthy choice for further study (O’Dair).

Adams parlayed his success with the radio series and subsequent books into what amounts to a cult following (O’Dair). This movie recaps very little of the story contained in the books or on the radio show simply because of time. Nevertheless, the film is an extremely important part of the *Hitchhiker’s* universe because of its accessibility to a more mainstream audience. Adams and his co-writer, Karey Kirkpatrick, created some new material for the film not found in any of the aforementioned sources. Given the vast scope of the *Hitchhiker’s* universe, there was no way to fit it all in to one movie; it is fortunate for the writers and the director that a complete retelling of the story was not expected. After all, fitting all the events of one book into a film is not possible, how daunting a task of condensing five books into one film must be. The film was released in 2005, shortly after the death of Adams, and received mixed but mostly favorable reviews (Hitchhiker’s Rotten Tomatoes). Adams writing style uses a flashback and flash-forward device, which makes a chronological recounting of the story not only incomprehensible, but impossible. However, by

perseverance, a sense of his worldview (universe view), as conveyed by metaphor, begins to become clearer.

### **The Guide Metaphor**

At the beginning of the film the viewer is introduced to the “Guide” (the repository of knowledge known as the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy), which serves as narrator throughout the movie. The visuals used when the Guide is speaking are simplistic, flat animations and they consist only of primary colors. The voice comes across as smooth, with excellent comedic timing and impeccable diction. These features add a depth to the role of a talking book, despite the primitive, two-dimensional cartoons shown when the Guide is explaining an entry relevant to the current situation. In the midst of chaos the “book” will interrupt the scene, give background to the scene, and then return the viewer to the action without spoiling the building momentum.

The metaphorical significance of the “book” being the narrator speaks to our predilection toward facts as being absolute. We tend to reference books and not trust individuals as the ultimate source of information; we perceive the written word as the final arbiter of information. We forget that the sources of all books are people; no book was ever written without a person being involved. Adams developed this concept of a portable all-knowing book before the advent of the Internet; this was his solution to developing a portable encyclopedia. This solution speaks to mankind’s insatiable quest for knowledge; we want to know

things for certain. This is even more apropos today, if there is any doubt about a piece of information, rather than ask someone that would know, we “Google” it. As the internet functions for us as the “go to” repository of all knowledge, so the Guide provides the same services for the characters in the film.

Ever since mankind learned to scratch hieroglyphs in clay tablets the ability to read and write has been a most valuable commodity. For with the power to write comes the ability to be immortalized, to be remembered by subsequent generations. With the power to read comes the ability to gain the knowledge of those that have come before. Mankind has proven that it will go to great lengths to acquire the knowledge of others, primitive tribes would consume the brain of those they conquered in hopes of gaining their knowledge, books were listed among the wealthy man’s most prized possessions before the advent of mass-produced literature, and rare books have been sold for what amounts to a small fortune in order to gain the knowledge contained within the book and gain the prestige of owning the book. The ability of the common man to purchase “the Guide” and a reasonable price serves the purpose of leveling the playing field in regards to knowledge. Information is no longer controlled and regulated by the rich and powerful, but everyone can have the power of knowledge contained in one easily accessible source. In this manner “the Guide” serves as the vehicle and universal access to knowledge is the tenor of the metaphor used by Adams, and

an argument can be made that this search for knowledge approaches an archetypal metaphor.

### **The Deep Thought Metaphor**

The premise of the film is that the earth is a powerful computer that was designed by a computer called Deep Thought. Deep Thought was built to calculate the answer to the ultimate question of “life, the universe and everything.” When after 7 1/2 million years Deep Thought had calculated that the answer was 42, Deep Thought revealed that “life, the universe and everything” is not a question and Deep Thought was not capable of calculating “the question.” Therefore the earth was built to calculate the “question.” However, the earth was destroyed to make way for a hyperspace bypass 10 minutes before its program was to be completed. Adams compares the treatment of Deep Thought to that of the treatment of a deity.

Mankind tends to look to external sources to validate or explain the purpose of life; this is what mankind does in the form of creating religions to provide the same functions. This is shown in the film by the portrayal of two priest-like figures which speak to Deep Thought and the enthusiastic, jubilant crowd waiting to “hear from on high” as it were. In this manner Adams reveals his atheistic tendencies; he reveals his feeling that religions are contrived in a vain attempt to provide answers to what life is all about. The tenor of this metaphor is religion and the vehicle is the cult of Deep Thought.

Adams continues to show the unknowable nature of the meaning of life in the destruction of the earth. The destruction of the earth emphasizes the ways in which the universe keeps its secrets. It is impossible to know what the meaning of life is, because one doesn't even know how to phrase the question. The metaphor of the unknowable question shows us the paradox of attempting to find meaning in life is that we don't really understand what we're looking for. "The meaning of life" is ambiguous at best; therefore, the phrase itself has no fixed meaning. What makes a life valuable or worthy of having existed is quantified differently by each individual person. We can see here in the framing of this metaphor that Adams does not believe that the meaning of life is knowable. Always, within the frame of his story, the cosmos seems to prevent anyone from discovering the purpose of life. Adams makes a compelling, if somewhat pessimistic case, that the vast, unknowable mysteries of the universe must remain just that, mysteries.

### **The Earth's Destruction Metaphor**

Digressing a bit, just prior to the destruction of the earth we are introduced to Arthur Dent, the protagonist of the film, he is about to have his house knocked down to make way for a highway bypass. Meanwhile, unknown to him, the earth is about to be destroyed to make way for a hyperspace bypass. Both of these things, Arthur's home and the earth, are dear to him. He is keen to prevent the destruction of his home; however, he is unaware that his house will be destroyed when his home planet is destroyed. To prevent his house from being knocked

down Arthur lays in front of the bulldozer. The foreman of the crew sent to knock his house down is unsympathetic to Arthur's plight; telling him that the time for protests over the plans has passed. The vehicle of the metaphor is that Dent's house is about to be destroyed through the bungling of bureaucracy, the tenor of the metaphor is that his planet is to be destroyed for the same reasons. This metaphor speaks to the uncaring nature of bureaucracy; the inflexible, unwavering devotion to the following of rules that abandons common sense for the sake of the "common good."

We are then introduced to Ford Prefect, Arthur's friend; he is an alien, and he is a writer for *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*. He is on earth to expand the "Guide's" entry concerning the earth. Although Arthur is unaware of who or what Ford is, Ford decides to save Arthur's life by taking him along as he hitches a ride on one of the ships sent to destroy the earth. The ship they end up on is crewed by an officious and bureaucratic race of life forms, the Vogons.

The Vogons are large green creatures, with flattened noses. We find later in the film the reason that their noses are flattened is because on their home planet of Vogsphere there are long creatures with shovel-like heads living just under the topsoil, which rises quickly out of the ground and smacks the face of anyone that has an idea. Thus the Vogons are conditioned to simply follow rules without thinking. According to the "guide," the Vogons cannot feel or think and most of them cannot read; "they can only run things." This kind of bureaucracy affects us

all on a daily basis whether at school, at work, or at the DMV it is expected that everyone followed the rules explicitly.

The metaphorical significance of Adams' inclusion of extremist bureaucracy calls into question the practices we engage in during our perpetual search for life's purpose. The vehicle of this metaphor is militant bureaucracy the tenor of the metaphor systems we put in place to enable us to find meaning in life. Just as bureaucracy tries to establish a set of rules to which everyone must adhere, we tried to bring order to our lives by establishing parameters within which life should operate. Good or evil, bad or good, right or wrong, black or white, and light or dark, we tend to live by arbitrary rules or paradigms that, in fact, might have no basis in reality. In searching for what life is all about we impede ourselves with bureaucratic notions of how the search should be conducted; we fail to notice that the purpose of life is living it. I think this is among the deepest of Adams' metaphors; however, it is probably the most important one to understand. We make rules to find happiness and those rules in turn make us unhappy.

### **The Vastness of the Universe Metaphor**

The film starts out on earth, but very quickly the earth is destroyed and the subsequent scenes are on space ships, other planets, and even space itself. The vastness of the universe is portrayed in such a manner that the smallness of a single life form is accentuated. The tenor of this metaphor is the vastness of the

universe the vehicle of this metaphor is a factory that makes planets. An individual, compared to the vastness of the universe, is as indistinguishable as one solitary hydrogen atom is in the Earth's atmosphere.

There is a scene where Arthur is taken to a factory floor. However, this is not an ordinary factory; this is a factory that makes planets. In fact, this is the very factory in which the earth was manufactured. The immense scale of this planet making facility stands in stark contrast to the smallness of Arthur himself. The tenor of this metaphor is the vastness of the universe the vehicle of this metaphor is a factory that makes planets. This serves to further emphasize the hopelessness that anyone will ever find the meaning of life. Just as the human body is made up of an innumerable number of atoms, the universe is made up of an innumerable number of life forms. This comparison makes the point that it is absurd to think that there could be a person, a people, a planet, or even a galaxy for which the rest of the universe was created.

The idea that alien humanoids created the earth suggests that earthlings and all other lifeforms created God in the face of not knowing their true origins. In this metaphor we see clearly Adams' cynical view of religion, and his apparent belief that religion only stands as one of the universe's devices for obfuscation in the search for life's purpose. In this metaphor we see the staunch atheism of Adams; he speaks directly against a belief that God created the universe and indeed in God's very existence. To suggest otherwise flies in the face of

democratic reasoning, such reasoning seems to be the pinnacle of evolution to us, and indeed to Adams. To suggest that human life on earth is the sole reason for the existence of the universe would devalue every other life form or potential life form that exists throughout the universe. It is therefore inconceivable to Adams that earth and the humans living on earth are the epicenter of the universe, conversely, to postulate that the epicenter of the universe lies elsewhere is equally unbelievable to Adams. From Adams' perspective it is the innate insignificance of every life form in the universe that negates the possibility of any life form having predominance over any other life forms. All life forms are equal; therefore, all life forms are equally significant, or indeed insignificant. Whether the life form is an amoeba or a blue whale it does not matter; the difference in size between the two is insignificant when considering the scale of the universe. It is the vastness of the universe that imparts an inherent insignificance to every life form.

## **Conclusion**

These few metaphors give us a credible insight into the worldview of Douglas Adams. I have not attempted in this paper to examine each individual metaphor that Adams has used, but rather focused on the larger more thematic metaphors he employs. A line-by-line analysis of Adams' writing might produce a more cheery and optimistic conclusion. Given that this artifact is written as a comedy the cursory perception is definitely more lighthearted. But on closer examination we find more serious, troubling, and thought-provoking themes. We

see someone who is not only interested in finding life's purpose, but is willing to engage his inductive powers in order to find it.

Although he was searching for the meaning of life he despaired of ever finding it; the universe itself would prevent that from happening. I find some incongruities in his atheistic stance. He describes to the "universe" a sentient quality, one that is capable of preventing an individual realization of life's meaning. If he truly believed that the universe had the capability of knowing a person was close to finding the "truth" and had the capability of preventing that from happening, would not the universe then have a certain godlike quality? We will never know his answer to that question; anyone else's guess is as good as mine. I think he would claim that the actual problem would be that we do not know what question to ask.

Overall, I found Adams use of metaphor both engaging and effective; it is certainly a thought provoking film when you look past the gags. Metaphor not only aids in understanding complex issues, but also gives an insight into the mind of the rhetor; on both of these levels *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* is effective and thought-provoking. Did we find the answer? No, I don't think we did. However, we certainly gained the insight of a fellow seeker. Through his metaphorical expressions we found not just linguistic tricks, but new parallels and patterns which we can relate to our own search for the meaning of life. The use of metaphor lends itself to inspiration, we gain not only the perspective of the

author, but our mind runs to further parallels that we can extrapolate and apply to the metaphorical scene laid out before us. Although Adams has a pessimistic and rather unhelpful point of view, his methods of inquiry were insightful and, quite frankly, hilarious. Further, we find in the use of metaphor itself a powerful ontological tool with which we can relate past experience to situations we ourselves have yet to encounter. The use of metaphor allows us, in the case of Arthur Dent, to share in his emotional journey through the far reaches of space, even though we had never left the confines of this earth.

We have seen that there are some metaphorical topics that are universal and can be communicated cross-culturally, or even earthlings that alien. It is important for us to realize that metaphor is not merely a rhetorical trick or acute gimmick to make a point, but metaphor is integral to human thought processes. A study of a more scientific nature would be beneficial in this area. An examination of how empathy can be gained through metaphor would be a welcome addition to the scant but important investigations into the uses and benefits of metaphor thus far. After all, metaphor really is the cat's meow.

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