**The Matrimony of Artificial Intelligence and Post-modern Literature in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy***

**Rebecca Philpot**

**Nottingham Trent University**

**English (BA) Hons**

[**N1021480@my.ntu.ac.uk**](mailto:N1021480@my.ntu.ac.uk)

Literature is the creative reflection of our reality; Artificial Intelligence is all but an alien passer-by attempting to mimic the complexity of the human condition. Postmodernism is a literary genre, rewriting society through a lens constructed of intertextuality and the exploitation of, ‘the ludicrous to the luxurious’[[1]](#footnote-2).A text where Postmodernism and AI intersect is *The* *Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy,* which follows the protagonist Arthur Dent after the world as he knows it is destroyed, saved by his newly discovered-to-be-alien friend, Ford Prefect, the novel is the documentation of their journey throughout space*.* This article will explore the matrimony of AI and its presence in Post-Modern literature, through close analysis of this novel.

AI in the words of theorist Robert C. Schank is: ‘a machine’s attempt to explain the behaviour of the (human) system it is trying to model’[[2]](#footnote-3).Schank establishes how AI is intelligence’s attempt at mirroring humanity, this context is important to consider when looking into fiction containing AI. In a novel by Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to The Galaxy,* it parodies the human experience by using Marvin, a nihilist robot, as a mouthpiece for social commentary on the meaning(less) of life. When Marvin states ‘I think you ought to know I’m feeling very depressed. It said. Its voice low and hopeless’[[3]](#footnote-4) .There is an irony being explored here by Adams, Marvin has a vast intellectual capacity, yet is held back by his wiring to humanity. By looking into the applied concept of humanity; implementing social ideologies such as politics and gender roles onto Marvin who is disassociated from human structures make him a metaphor for the critique of humanity. Marvin’s affliction with his feelings and broadcasting them is another point of comedy his ‘hopeless’ voice is heard throughout the background of the novel; his pessimism driving other characters away. His affiliation with sentiency does him more harm than good. In accordance with this, what is most surprising is commentated on by Jerry Goodenough who says Marvin; ‘confounds the expectations that science fiction has given us about robots and other ‘artificially intelligent’ beings’[[4]](#footnote-5).Goodenough exploits how Marvin’s comedy was a flawless reimagining of artificial intelligence in fiction from its release in 1979. Marvin is a multifaceted android, haunted by the very human feeling of existential angst, which contrastingly brings readers comedic relief. The fragmentation of Marvin is key to helping our understanding of post modernism, the novel is through and through fantastical and absurd and lends itself to the idea that: ‘Postmodern fiction tends to be marked by an ambivalence towards realism than to reject it outright’[[5]](#footnote-6). This ambivalence is felt through Adams’ subversion of the ‘disaster movie robot’ stereotype in fiction such as ‘Ava’ in *Ex Machina,* instead Adams markets Marvin as a reluctant figure of insight into the human mind.

AI representation in fiction then is highly malleable, and Adams uses such a concept to enforce satire and provide comedic relief in the novel. Another character of significance is ‘Deep Thought,’ described as being: ‘the greatest, most powerful computer of all time’[[6]](#footnote-7) and is tasked with discovering the answer to the universe and everything. Deep Thought complies taking seven and a half million years to do so and answers with, ‘Forty-two” said Deep Thought, with infinite majesty and calm’ [[7]](#footnote-8).Here Adams takes a philosophical concept and builds pages upon pages worth of tension building dialogue, all for an answer that feels underwhelming. The question perfectly frames how post modernism can be used as casual critique and in this instance it’s the human insatiable desire for knowledge: ‘the answer “forty-two” fell significantly short of their expectations, Deep Thought replied that the problem was not in the answer but rather in the fact they “never actually …knew the question.’[[8]](#footnote-9), inspiring literal deep thought. Adams exasperates readers by taking a convoluted subject matter and debasing it through the simplicity of Deep Thought’s reply. Adams initialises the idea that people who spend years and years pondering the meaning of life are only going to be disappointed with the answer, reiterating the ceremony of AI and postmodernism in Adams’ work. Adams orchestrates postmodernism by portraying, ‘the enigmatic omnipresence of information.[[9]](#footnote-10) Through the personification of Deep Thought.

The absurdity of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* is only further enforced through the realism of Arthur Dent. His presence as an ordinary middle-aged human man, foil the surrounded by names such as ‘Zaphod Beeblebrox’ juxtaposing each other and make for a more preposterous storyline appealing to the post-modern genre. When readers are first introduced to Arthur, he has only one headache to deal with, ’it hadn’t properly registered yet with Arthur that the council wanted to knock it down and build a bypass instead’[[10]](#footnote-11).The demolition of his home functions as the foreshadowing to more extreme events, whilst maintaining a camaraderie with readers about the growing pains of adult life and encroachment. This is where realism and Artificial intelligence crossover, ‘realism depends upon the practice of mimesis, the Greek term for ‘imitation’ (brought into literary theory by Aristotle), the idea that art and literature can reproduce aspects of the real world’[[11]](#footnote-12).Which reiterates what Schank critiqued about AI; Realism is written by people and therefore manages to successfully mirror the real world, whereas AI’s lack of consciousness and emotional intelligence conflicts its ability to portray realism.

The collaboration of AI and Post-Modernism work symbiotically, both feeding off the other, there have been various attempts at using AI as an interface for the structure of Post modernism, which requires a certain level of separation from the human to convey irony and satire. The use of AI applying intertextuality in the novel is both amusing and disconcerting, when the characters are plummeting to an almost certain death, ‘Eddie’ the computer says: *‘When you walk through the storm*…it whined nasally, *hold your head up high*’.[[12]](#footnote-13)The entanglement of their mortality being on the line and the computer referencing the song, *You’ll Never Walk Alone* originally a song from a musical about a husband dying in the arms of his wife, provides an ironic contrast. Adams’ use of intertextuality builds upon the satire being built within the setting, this and ‘whined nasally’ correlate with the idea of Adams creating anthromorphic AI characters. Which is evidence that even though the computer does everything to come across as sincere, there is still confirmation of the fissure between the human and non-human, portraying the innate scepticism of postmodernism. Continuing from this, an article on AI in fiction claims, ‘Science Fiction serves as a distorting mirror and metaphor to reflect on the human condition and socio-political issues in relation to and beyond technology’[[13]](#footnote-14). AI is simply made to be the art of reflection and the mirror is indeed distorted in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* as Adams makes the AI presence feel disruptive as possible through Arthur’s observations throughout the text.

The novel captures the remarkable sense of both calm and chaos, wielding post modernism in a satirical fist by gripping onto ideas about AI and the world. You experience both ‘the ironic sense of the interweaving of disaster and triviality’[[14]](#footnote-15).This characteristic polarity of *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy,* handles realism and absurdism through the novel’s quintessential British undertones in the passive aggressive tone from Marvin and the politeness despite disaster in Arthur. The novel is without a doubt character driven, with characters such as Deep Thought, there is a dark humour around humanity and philosophy being created. A wider cultural critique is disputed through the compliment of the anthromorphic disposition created by AI characters and malleability of the postmodern genre.

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6. Adams, p. 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. Adams, p. 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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9. Steven Connor, *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed.by, Steven Connor, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 62-82 (p. 72). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Adams, p.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Nicol, p.18. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Adams, p.109. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
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