



The Subtextual Elements Of Surprise In Jack Douglas' *Test Rocket*

Rommel Utungga Pasopati¹, Khaled Ahmed Mohammed², Akmal Dafa Hizbullah³, Yasmine Azzah Adillah Wirnoto⁴, Raddine Salsabiyla⁵, Kusuma Wijaya⁶

^{1 3 4 5 6}Universitas Dr. Soetomo, Surabaya, Indonesia

²Universitas Narotama, Surabaya, Indonesia

^{1*}rommel@unitomo.ac.id

Abstract

This article exposes the matters of elements of surprise in Jack Douglas' flash fiction entitled *Test Rocket*. There is a space station sending a test rocket in which any animal may be sent with it. Meanwhile, the rocket comes back but with bigger postures and with a man in it. Through qualitative method and explorative approach, this paper analyses how the mission to other planet in Douglas' story contains mysteries as well as subtextual surprises. The surprises could be stated as the mouse that is sent and returns as a man, the man is an alien, or the man is the alien waiting for further attacks by his people. The surprise is not clear but implied since audience is asked to think more about how people in the space station think about the test rocket. In conclusion, *Test Rocket* contains subtextual elements of surprise in which there are unexpected events after sending the mission to Mars. It can also be known that there will always be unbelievable and unexplainable things happening in space.

Keywords Element of Surprise, Jack Douglas, *Test Rocket*

INTRODUCTION

Test Rocket is a flash fiction written by Jack Douglas in 1959. The story tells about a space station sending a test rocket to Mars. The people including the Captain and the Doctor speak about the animals sent to outer space. Then, the situation erupts to existence of a returning rocket with a man inside (Douglas, 1959). The man is calm, but the Captain and the Doctor are suspicious to him. They keep asking to themselves and the crews about the man. Still, they could not find the exact answers. The story ends with the Captain and the Doctor drinks whiskey, waiting for the next move with their unfinished minds about the man and the returning test rocket.

The story is such a popular sci-fi tale at that time. It reminds audience about the mysteries of outer space (Douglas, 1959). It also speaks about how humans may never know what is happening outside earth. They even do not know the real postures of other people outside this planet. In that sense, there is a growing surprise in this story. However, that surprise is still flourishing, waiting for the audience to reveal (Chee & Tan, 2018; Douglas, 1959). Indeed, as any surprise may come without caution, the twist of this story is similar. However, this story does not provide the plot twist in itself, Douglas asks the audience to subtextually dive in to the story and think about what is going on in the lines of his fiction.

Surprise is something beyond expectation. Though unexpected, it still could be understood in its crucial subtextual elements. The first one is that surprise is a matter of emotion. It is shaped through people's perceptual expectations and experience (Chee & Tan, 2018; Tobin, 2018). In that case, people's belief is also disturbed by such factual aspects given, for example in a text. Second, surprise could be both shocking and mild. Both of them somehow are quite unnoticed by audience. It could also be upsetting or distracting since it shakes audience's normal understanding of something (Ekman, 2003; Tobin, 2018). Third, surprise is a matter of flash reinterpretation of such issue. In this aspect, the plot is constructed to such end, but then the end is unexpected. It also means that surprise is that revelatory to the audience (Ekman, 2003; Fabb, 2023; Tobin, 2018). Fourth, surprise is actually quite neutral. It is part of a reaction in which action comes without any precedent. As the reaction comes, it also shapes further expressions to the audience.

Test Rocket by Jack Douglas depicts the importance of the element of surprise. It also shows the novelty of this research, especially in how some things cannot be taken for granted, such as the unwanted delivery of the rocket and the mystery that triggers questions with each activity. The event element in Douglas' flash fiction creates a stunning impression, which leads the audience towards an unwanted event (Douglas, 1959; Niemand & Beedle, 2020). In *Test Rocket*, the event element is used to set up events that are not directly related, such as the unwanted return of the rocket. This makes the story more complex and has more impact on the audience.

METHOD

Through qualitative method, online and offline books and journals are used to explain Jack Douglas' *Test Rocket* through element of surprise. Through explorative approach, the data analysis includes attaining sources, reading

them, comparing with other issues, quoting into paper, and writing in references lists. The analyses involve critical points of hostile and benevolent element of surprise in strengthening and/or weakening identities of the characters and the rocket itself.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Test Rocket and Its Prolonged Issues

Douglas' flash fiction employs the understanding of the test rocket, the characters that speak of the rocket, the ambience of the space station, and the returning rocket and man (Douglas, 1959; Niemand & Beedle, 2020). All of them intertwine each other making such surprise at the end. The data below shows how the story moves forward by indicating some clues that may shape further twist at the end.

Captain Baird stood at the window of the laboratory where the thousand parts of the strange rocket lay strewn in careful order. Small groups worked slowly over the dismantled parts. The captain wanted to ask but something stopped him. (Douglas, 1959)

This quotation provides audience with a hint that something is not right. The Captain knows his own mission too well. However, something is moving unregularly. There is indeed an anomaly of the rocket. In this quotation, Douglas states that Captain's observation is the main aspect here (Douglas, 1959; Niemand & Beedle, 2020). He is the one responsible for all things, including any unknown thing that may come. However, he could not identify the bad issue that may come.

*"They are our markings?" Captain Baird asked. It was not the question. Captain Baird knew the markings of the Rocket Testing Station as well as the doctor did.
"Yes," the doctor said, "they are our markings. Identical. But not our paint."
Captain Baird turned back to the window. Six months ago it had happened. Ten minutes after launching, the giant test rocket had been only a speck on the observation screen. Captain Baird had turned away in disgust.
"A mouse!" the captain had said, "unfortunate a mouse can't observe, build, report. My men are getting restless, Johanssen." (Douglas, 1959)*

According to the story, the test rocket was only intended for departure and not for return travel. It may bring mouse, but the situation is different. The marking belongs to the space station but not in exact posture. Once again, the hint is given that something is wrong (Douglas, 1959; Kortekaas & Been, 2019). The background from the past is given to show wider indications to the audience. The situation is getting more intense from here.

*The strange rocket was tracked and escorted by atomic armed fighters all the way to the Rocket Testing Station where it cut its own motors and gently landed. In the center of a division of atomic-armed infantry the captain, the doctor, and everyone else, waited impatiently. There was an air of uneasiness.
"You're sure it's not ours?" Captain Baird asked.
The doctor laughed. "Identical, yes, but three times the size of ours."
"Perhaps one of the Asian ones?"
"No, it's our design, but too large, much too large."
Professor Schultz put their thoughts into words. "Looks like someone copied ours. Someone, somewhere. It's hard to imagine, but true nevertheless."
They waited two weeks. Nothing happened. Then a radiation-shielded team went in to examine the rocket. Two more weeks and the strange rocket was dismantled and spread over the field of the testing station. The rocket was dismantled and the station had begun to talk to itself in whispers and look at the sky.
Captain Baird stood now at the window and looked out at the dismantled rocket. He looked but his mind was not on the parts of the rocket he could see from the window.
"The materials, they're not ours?" the captain asked.
"Unknown here," the doctor said.
The captain nodded. "Those were our instruments?"
"Yes." The doctor still held the whiskey bottle in a tight grip.
"They sent them back," the captain said. (Douglas, 1959)*

The quotation above is the inciting conflict in this story. The long quotation shapes the intense in the ambience of the space station. However, it keeps going on until two weeks without any exact notice and even data. Things are still unknown to them. The Captain even asks the Doctor whether the rocket is theirs. It is confirmed, but the materials are not from earth. Surprisingly, the rocket test comes back, and there is a man inside. This conversation excerpt makes clear that there are a lot of unanswered questions (Douglas, 1959; Kortekaas & Been, 2019). Those include who sends the rocket and whether knowing that it will have positive or negative consequences.

The doctor crashed the bottle hard against the desk top. "Ask it, Captain, for God's sake!!"

The captain turned to face the doctor directly. "It was a man, a full grown man." The doctor sighed as if letting the pent-up steam of his heart escape. "Yes, it is a man. It breathes, it eats, it has all the attributes of a man. But it is not of our planet."

"Its speech ..." the captain began.

"That isn't speech, Captain," the doctor broke in, breaking in sharply, "It's only sound." The doctor stopped; he examined the label of his bottle of whiskey very carefully. A good brand of whiskey. "He seems quite happy in the storeroom. You know, Captain, what puzzled me at first? He can't read. He can't read anything, not even the instruments in that ship. In fact he shows no interest in his rocket at all."

The captain sat down now. He sat at the desk and faced the doctor. "At least they had the courage to send a man, not a mouse. Doctor, a man." (Douglas, 1959)

The situation is getting more intense when the Captain and the Doctor know that there is a man inside the test rocket. Furthermore, the man could not speak and even read. Both the man are getting more curious in how the man could operate the rocket. They start to make any possibility that may come, including if there is someone or some people behind the returning of the rocket (Douglas, 1959; Kortekaas & Been, 2019). If the man could not read, he must be sent to earth by anyone. Then, he is merely a message sent to earth.

The doctor stared at the captain, his hand squeezing and unsqueezing on the whiskey bottle. "A man who can't read his own instruments?" The doctor laughed. "Perhaps you too have failed to see the point? Like that stupid general who sits out there waiting for the men from somewhere to invade?"

"Don't you think it's a possibility?"

The doctor nodded. "A very good possibility, Captain, but they will not be men."

The doctor seemed to pause and lean forward. "That rocket, Captain, is a test rocket. A test rocket just like ours!"

Then the doctor picked up his whiskey bottle at last and poured two glasses.

"Perhaps a drink, Captain?"

The captain was watching the sky outside the window. (Douglas, 1959)

Both the Captain and the Doctor then think about any eerie possibility of alien invasion to earth. They have proof that the rocket contains materials not from this planet. The man is also not intended to be inside that rocket since it should be a mouse. Interestingly, they still think rationally by logically connect every single aspect that they already get (Douglas, 1959; Kortekaas & Been, 2019). They are also open to any possibility, including the most irrational one. Then, the Captain staring out of the window is a symbol of his imagination of unlimited space outside earth.

In this story, Douglas uses the element of unexpected events to connect the plot with the audience. When the rocket is recovered, there are several anomalies that catch the eye, such as being the same size as a human, but the rocket is not made by humans (Douglas, 1959; Kortekaas & Been, 2019). This sets up some interesting events in the story, such as the introduction of a non-human individual and the testing of technology that includes human beings. The last hint of this story is stated in such fact that the test rocket should not be coming back to earth. However, eventually, the rocket returns and there is a man inside (Douglas, 1959; Kortekaas & Been, 2019).

Prolonging Elements of Surprise in Literature

In literature, it is quite known that things are not written in normal ways. The plots, the characters, the tones, and other elements of literature, are commonly written in extreme conditions. Indeed, it is to underline further imaginations that include both aspects of authors and audience as well (Fabb, 2023; Fadilla et al., 2024). By stating that, extreme points in literature may involve various subtextual kinds of plot twists, including such surprise as well. It is also indicated that surprise may be so triggering, but somehow it still contains such structures that could be learned, analysed, and even modified as well. That is how literature develops in advance.

Elements of surprise is somehow both in total and with any clue beforehand. If it is total, the clue is not given and somehow is not profound at all. It triggers audience's emotions in instant, showing the difference in total matters (Cole, 2020; Dewangga, et al., 2024; Petrovic, 2022). If any clue is given, it is usually quite hidden or being understood as common things for such literature. This framework is usually seen in detective stories where the doers are later known due to what they have done beforehand. Meanwhile, both aspects are pointing at the audience as the main target of surprise. Text is silent but the way audience understands is how it sounds as literature (Cole, 2020; Dewangga, et al., 2024; Petrovic, 2022). It is how meaning is born and consumed as a further surprise.

Matters of surprise are also related to psychological aspects of both authors and audience. It is about how common perceptions are deviated significantly. It is such gamble of perceptions at subtextual stake. If the perception is changed after the plot twist comes, the surprise is done and considered as successful (Cole, 2020; Dewangga, et al.,

2024; Petrovic, 2022). Meanwhile, it may fail if perception is not really changed. It may also involve cultural differences or even audience's wide tolerance of perceptions.

Surprise is indeed also shaped through people's perceptual expectations and experience (Kortekaas & Been, 2019; Tobin, 2018). It is matter of going beyond expectations. It is situated when expectations are going out and filled with new knowledge in instant. In this case, a surprise will happen if the audience perceive something but they do not already know about the contents. New perceptions are given and audience's minds are pushed to verify and validate the surprise in instant either (Kortekaas & Been, 2019; Tobin, 2018). The surprise could result to suspicious, eerie, funny, and even disgust feelings regarding any surprise given to the audience.

Furthermore, surprise in matter of literature is quite common, structured, and universal. Those three aspects are indicated so that the audience or the readers know what the surprise means. It leaves out matter of being particular though the consumptions of meanings are quite reflected in personal experience. Any other surprise is also quite subtextual, uncanny, and sublime that requires audience to understand more (Kortekaas & Been, 2019; Tobin, 2018; Zappia, 2014). It is common so that everyone who consumes the texts may know what kind of surprise is given. The common points are usually involved in any issue or clue before the twist is stated at the end. The structured point is actually at the end of the text in which previous matters are supported by former aspects. The universal part is like playing with a joke, somehow it should be known by knowledge of the audience, but not as the usual ones (Kortekaas & Been, 2019; Tobin, 2018; Zappia, 2014). It should represent something else that trigger another conception.

One simple yet effective point in building surprise is to pay attention to the plots. Exactly, plots are the most important aspect in literature. By directing plots, such twists could be made at the end by focusing on previous indications of surprise. Plots should be pointed to a direction, then slowly or instantly produce such different impressions (Cole, 2020; Dewangga, et al., 2024; Iwata, 2009). The impressions are the keys to surprise that are needed to be more coherent but inevitable. It is like playing with audience's minds. Some logical aspects are given in the first matters, but then it show another illusion that comes up to the twists and surprises.

Surprise should also use the efforts of suspense in literature. Meanwhile, both of them are different. Surprise takes point in effect-oriented, while suspense is process-oriented. The suspense may shape bridge to the surprise, but the surprise will break the suspense in instant (Cole, 2020; Dewangga, et al., 2024; Iwata, 2009). Therefore, suspense may bring out surprise but only in one direction. The subtextual suspense is used to hook the focus of the audience regarding certain issues. The hook is to get the interests of the audience so that they still pay attention to the end. It is also used to give clues to the audience so that their knowledge is disturbed by the surprise at the end (Cole, 2020; Dewangga, et al., 2024; Iwata, 2009). The suspense could create such tensions that later will be broken by the surprise. It will also later shape another perception from audience's mind to produce new meanings regarding the given text.

Another philosophical point of elements of surprise is seen from Ludwig Wittgenstein's idea of language (Wittgenstein, 2001; Zappia, 2014). The limits of language are the limits of the world, and whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent. Matters of surprise indeed break the rule of language by imposing such new understanding in between. It gives another perception as it may show such enigmatic elements to the audience (Wittgenstein, 2001; Zappia, 2014). Such surprise is also challenging boundaries of meanings of the audience. The author of the text then provides such new truth in knowledge that is quite inevitable. It may be caught later as new meanings, but its former understandings are evading various usual articulations and comprehensions of language.

The idea of surprise is related to the suspense either when the meanings are actually postponed until those are revealed at the end. It is in line with what Jacques Derrida indicates with *différance* (Derrida, 1978; Pasopati et al. 2024). The text intentionally highlight that the meanings contained is inadequate and needs such punch at the end. It should also be interpretative that the minds of the audience keep working alongside the flow of the text. It should also show such uncertainty that make questions for the audience, waiting them to be answered at the last points (Kortekaas & Been, 2019; Tobin, 2018; Zappia, 2014). Furthermore, any surprise should also touch such human experiences and understandings so that the audience may get the punch by absorbing another perception at the end.

The Surprise as the Limits of Perception and Reality in *Test Rocket*

The changes made by the author of this story can give rise to various reactions from readers. Some feel surprised, confused, and even curious. It is a sign of things to come when Captain Baird, staring out the window, sees something peculiar among the debris that is flying on a regular basis. The hint includes the past or from the experiences of others, in this case is from the Captain himself. Furthermore, when the rocket returns on its own, the Captain is shocked and taken aback. He has unexpected feeling of the returning rocket. It is so odd with implicit or explicit expectations or beliefs (Douglas, 1959; Kortekaas & Been, 2019). It is beyond his own belief in both of his experience and scientific knowledge. He is facing such unpredictable scheme of mismatch between reality and his own understandings.

The crew is more startled that someone dispatches a human-sized rocket when they learn that the returning rocket has space for a human-sized crew member. However, the reality that it is merely a test rocket raises more concerns and surprised everyone. It is the main plot twist that surprises the reader. It is also beyond any prediction that such test rocket may return with a man inside. It is not possible and unpredicted, but somehow, it happens (Douglas, 1959; Tobin, 2018; Zappia, 2014). It is indeed giving new knowledge, though it is uncomplete yet, to anyone in the space station. Surely, it disturbs any previous understanding that the people know about rocket and outer space conditions.

Douglas' story further shows such unanticipated experiences. The anticipated ones are usually known as probabilities, but somehow the test rocket is beyond of them. Its occurrence is unexpected as it may raise another possibility of other creatures besides human beings from outer space (Douglas, 1959; Tobin, 2018; Zappia, 2014). The Captain, the Doctor, and all the crews are no longer confident of their own knowledge. They are shaken by knowing that their accuracy of knowledge is nothing in front of this unknown reality. In the text, there are clues given in the former paragraphs. Main clues are about uneasiness shown by the Captain and the Doctor. Their roles are crucial as the main directors of the project. However, they are curious and doubtful about their own understandings about what is going on (Douglas, 1959; Tobin, 2018; Zappia, 2014). This situation exactly also triggers the audience's perceptions about disturbing reality that is happening.

The plot twists in this story set questions abounding into the reaches of human cognition. The darker elements of the story—the weird recurrence of the test rocket with its inexplicable passenger-shed light upon epistemic lacuna, or areas of audience's lack of knowledge. This goes on to perpetuate what Immanuel Kant says about human cognition (Kant, 20027; Pasopati et al., 2024). It is indicated that there are things that are being limited to the phenomena, or that which is observable. Another thing that is known as the thing-in-itself, or noumenon, remains beyond empirical reach. The return of the rocket thus signifies an encounter with that noumenon, one which bursts the bonds of scientific knowledge and exposes one to the inadequacy of cognizance. In noumenon, people could only guess what is really going on (Kant, 20027; Pasopati et al., 2024). That is a space for surprise to develop and find its subtextual significant point.

These surprising events challenge the crew's and audience's perceptions, pushing them to confront the limitations of their own understandings. The surreal nature of the returned rocket disrupts not only scientific reasoning but also the very fabric of reality as perceived by the characters. This twist intensifies psychological yet subtextual tension, inviting philosophical reflection on what defines knowledge and existence. Furthermore, this unexpected clash between the known and the unknown serves as a reminder that human cognition has limits, especially when confronted with cosmic mysteries. In Douglas' *Test Rocket*, the unanticipated outcomes reveal not only the strangeness of the universe but also the inherent unpredictability of human endeavors, leaving subtextual lasting questions about reality.

CONCLUSION

In the backdrop of the foregoing discussion, strangeness in Jack Douglas's short story of *Test Rocket* finds a major and very significant application to elicit a sort of sustained surprise effect through its plot. The unexpectedness in the story—a mouse returning as a man—the implications of the man being some sort of alien or some emissary—simultaneously disturbs scientific knowledge and instigated philosophical realization. This frustration of scientific expectations underlines the story's engagement with the limits of human understanding. It reflects considerations about the limitations of human cognition and indicates that there is something in reality that could escape empirical knowledge. Besides, in telling about the unknown, this story certainly echoes the theories of how conceptual frameworks modulate our view of reality and those of meaning being in endless deferral. Thus, *Test Rocket* raises questions about the boundaries of scientific and empirical knowledge and invites a philosophical exploration of reality and human comprehension as to whether, in fact, there are dimensions and entities beyond any grasp. It is matter of surprise regarding outer space in stake.

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