

Annabelle Taylor

WRT 105: Remaking the Original

Text and Religious Dichotomies in Sci-Fi: Gender and Religion in *Doctor Who*

Through its fifty-year run, sci-fi sensation *Doctor Who* has shown twelve (soon to be thirteen) faces of the Doctor and dozens of companions. In 2005, television writer Russell T. Davies rebooted the classic series, and four years later Steven Moffat replaced him as head writer. The show's outlandish premises and plots ignite all sorts of controversy on the Internet, most critically from feminist bloggers who derail Moffat as a heinous misogynist incapable of writing a decent female character and from various Christian groups hissing that the Doctor is offensively portrayed as a wannabe messiah. Davies and Moffat do not deny the presence of religious imagery, and Davies has gone so far as to suggest, "the Doctor is a proper savior" (Sherwin). Both Davies and Moffat write the Doctor as a complex, almighty God rather than strictly a messiah, but only Davies creates equally satisfying companions by making them function as Christ figures; Moffat's companions are simple human followers. When the Doctor is God and the companion is Christ, they can truly be a team, saving people and aliens all over the universe. If the companion is just human, she cannot compete with the mighty Time Lord and is thus portrayed as weak and dependent.

There are two main categories to stylized Christ-figures: redeemer-figures and savior-figures. Redeemers take on the burden of humanity's sin, while savior types such as martyrs, clowns, and Job-like figures have quests similar to Jesus's mission to save the people (Malone 17-18). Davies's companions are savior figures. They might not try to convert everybody they meet to the Ways of the Doctor or save people from personal sin, but they do save people from the destructive tendencies and ambitions of the Doctor's enemies. They see people in trouble and refuse to leave until everyone is safe, even walking into situations where they recognize they might not survive. Most importantly, they are selfless in times of the greatest need.

Interesting enough, when Davies describes his companions he does not even bring up their Christ-like aspects. “Martha is clever, calm, but rarely says what she's really thinking. Donna is blunt, precise, unfiltered, but with a big heart beneath all the banter” (ch. 10). They all have flaws and therefore are not the spitting image of Jesus Christ. They are imperfect humans, and their imperfections allow them to be individuals rather than recreations of the same character over and over again. Their less-than-wonderful personality aspects, however, do not impact their ability to be Christ figures. They might be brash, introverted, and selfish, but in times of need they are able to put those aside and save humanity.

“The Last of the Time Lords” is rich with religious imagery that makes it very clear to the audience that it is Martha, not the Doctor, who will do the real work in saving the world. Much like how Jesus associated with prostitutes, tax collectors, and other “undesirables” as he spoke the word of God, Martha spends a year walking the Earth, finding people living as slaves in slums and telling them about the hope and trust they should have in the Doctor. She says:

...if Martha Jones became a legend then that's wrong, because my name isn't important.

There's someone else. The man who sent me out there, the man who told me to walk the Earth. And his name is The Doctor. He has saved your lives so many times and you never even knew he was there. He never stops. He never stays. He never asks to be thanked. But I've seen him, I know him...And I know what he can do (2007).

“The Doctor’s allies...spread his ‘gospel’, or story, to those they meet,” and Martha makes a point to meet everybody she can to fulfill her Doctor-given mission: tell the people of Earth about him, and get them to tell everyone they know (Deller 241). The Doctor’s approach initially seems like a scientific cause-and-effect scenario, but it sounds remarkably similar to instructions Jesus gave the first handful of people to discover his resurrection: “And he said unto

them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (King James Bible, Mark 16:15). The gospel is given to Jesus from God, much as this story is given to Martha from the Doctor. Similarly, when Martha says it is the Doctor who ought to be legend and not she, she channels Jesus yet again when he tells the disciples “...My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work” (John 4:34). In order to defeat the Master, Martha relies not on guns and weapons, but on faith and the power of prayer. By spreading the gospel, Martha centers all human thought—which the Master connected to the Archangel Network satellites—on the Doctor, creating a signal strong enough to heal him so he might cast the most severe punishment possible on the Master: forgiveness.

With Martha equal to the Doctor in the audience's minds, her story ends with her taking control of her own fate. Having been in love with the Doctor but knowing that he will never feel the same for her, she becomes the only companion to leave of her own free will. She wants to stay at home and care for her traumatized family, who spent a year serving the Master, watching the Earth die, and believing she was dead. After years of medical school, she is now a doctor and she has people to take care of. Having saved the world, Martha sees that “people can become moral and can better themselves without a god or religion,” and therefore is confident that she will be just as good of a doctor as the Doctor, even if she is not following him (Deller 243). She is the Doctor's equal, and once she realizes this she is able to continue her life, saving people as she had done while traveling through time.

Even with Martha gone, the Doctor is not without his counterpart for long. Soon, Donna Noble appears and fills the void left by Martha, becoming the new Christ figure of the series. In “The Fires of Pompeii,” she is horrified to discover that they have arrived the day before Mount Vesuvius explodes and buries the city (and all of its residents) in layers of ash. She argues with

him as to whether or not they can try to save the people:

Donna: What, and you're in charge?

Doctor: TARDIS, Time Lord, yeah.

Donna: Donna, human, no! I don't need your permission. I'll tell them myself (2008).

The Doctor argues that because he is quite literally the Lord of Time, he gets to decide what points in history are fixed, what can change, and how they can be changed, even if it kills thousands of people. Donna on the other hand suggests that her human status is just as good as his race and that because her ethics are of a higher level, she need not wait for his signal to do the right thing. She knows that “to be human might be preferable, or at least more honorable, to being a Time Lord” (Deller 245). Although her morality is higher, the Doctor is still the one in charge of time, and it becomes Donna’s job to humanize him so he might have honor and show mercy. When the volcano erupts, she reminds the Doctor of his own burning planet and begs him to save “just someone...not the whole town. Just save someone.” Finally convinced, he agrees and rescues a Roman family with whom they had become acquainted (“The Fires of Pompeii” 2008). Donna reminds the Doctor of his godlike ability to save lives just as he is letting his godlike ability to let an entire city burn to death kicks in. Months after rescuing Quintus and his family from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius (with the TARDIS acting not unlike the arc in the story of Noah), it is revealed that the family's household gods are the Doctor, Donna, and the TARDIS (“The Fires of Pompeii” 2008). They are both saviors deserving of equal worship.

The story of Jesus as the Son of God is played out in Donna's final episode, “Journey’s End.” Trapped to burn inside the TARDIS by the Dalek ruler Davros, Donna connects with the Doctor's severed hand, mixes with its DNA, and becomes the DoctorDonna: part Time Lord, part human. With the wisdom of a Time Lord and the intuition of a human, she is able to foil Davros's

plans to control the universe and put 27 missing planets back into their proper places of the universe (2008). The DoctorDonna is literally a new Donna born through the power of the Doctor, the God figure. She is more capable than any human of doing the Doctor's work, and she is more imaginative and intuitive than any Time Lord. Although she eventually must have her memory wiped, as her new Time Lord mind is burning her alive, her savior persona is not forgotten because "...there are worlds out there, safe in the sky, because of her...there are people living in the light and singing songs of Donna Noble...the most important woman in the whole wide universe" ("Journey's End" 2008). Although Donna might not have found her potential without the Doctor, in the end it is still she who is most deserving of praise and songs throughout the universe.

On the Internet, blogs such as "Whovian Feminism" and "STFU-Moffat" have pages upon pages of posts dedicated to why Steven Moffat is the worst thing to ever happen to *Doctor Who*. In particular, they cut into him about what they believe to be his lack of strong female characters. Moffat is not the least bit pleased with the criticism; in an interview with the Washington Post, he retorts, "River Song? Amy Pond [two leading Doctor Who women characters he created]? Hardly weak women. It's the exact opposite. You could accuse me of having a fetish for powerful, sexy women who like cheating people. That would be fair" (Jeffries). He has a point: he is not a bad writer, and his leading ladies are definitely strong and sexy. What is truly problematic, though, is that strong and sexy are the only two real traits that can be used to describe them. They are not leaders or debaters. They cheat people like typical femme fatales, but they never save people like Martha and Donna do. In short, they are followers of the godlike Doctor, not Christ figures who go hand in hand with him.

The Eleventh Doctor continues the trend of religious iconography, but Moffat presents

him as the singular potential savior. Moffat's first episode as head writer begins with the voiceover of a younger Scottish girl named Amelia Pond. Although it sounds like she is writing a letter to Santa, when she appears on screen she is seen on her knees and hands together, praying for somebody to come and fix a crack in her wall that turns out to be a crack in space. As if an answer to her prayer, the TARDIS comes crashing into her garden and out pops the Doctor. He cannot stay long, but promises to return in five minutes to repair the crack. He miscalculates and returns twelve years later to find Amelia grown up into Amy, the Girl who Waited. After some initial animosity, she joins him in the TARDIS as his new companion (“The Eleventh Hour” 2010). Her forgiveness leads to an almost blind faith that the Doctor will always be able to save her. He can lead her down any road and feed her as many white lies as he pleases, but she will always follow him.

Amy's new unfaltering truth is exemplified later on in “The God Complex.” An alien Minotaur that feeds off of faith traps the Doctor, Amy, and her husband Rory in a hotel that houses everybody’s worst fears. The Doctor spends the majority of the episode trying to figure out who brought them there, why, and how to leave, which Amy completely trusts his ability to do. She does not assist and she does her best so as not to bother him while he works. As it turns out, she brought them: her “most fundamental faith” is her belief that the Doctor will rescue her. In order to defeat the monster, the Doctor visits Amy's biggest fear, the young Amelia Pond waiting by the window for her Raggedy Doctor, and tells her to “forget [her] faith in [him],” that everything he did that appeared wonderful and heroic was actually a ploy for attention and adoration. Once Amy's faith is visibly broken, the monster dies (2011).

Trust is a vital component of the relationship between Doctor and companion. The companion must trust the Doctor's intellect to get them out alive, and the Doctor must trust the

companion's human judgment to take the reigns from him when necessary. Both Davies's and Moffat's companions trust the Doctor, but it appears that only Davies's Doctor trusts his companions. When face-to-face with the devil himself and realizing that only his companion, Rose, can save the day, Davies's Doctor declares, "I've seen fake gods and bad gods and demi-gods and would-be gods...But if I believe in one thing... just one thing... I believe in her!" ("The Satan Pit" 2007). When Amy asks Moffat's Doctor "who do Time Lords pray to," he does not have an answer ("The God Complex" 2011). He does not place any faith in her, and that is how he realizes that he could not have brought them to the hotel. Because Amy is not exceptionally trusted, she cannot be considered the Doctor's equal.

By not giving Amy the chance to save a single soul, Moffat takes away the symbol of the Christ figure and creates a universe that is controlled only by one lonely God. There is nobody for the Doctor to argue morals with because suddenly there is nobody equal to the Doctor. The purpose of the episode is entirely to show just how much of a submissive believer Amy is. By traveling with the Doctor, "she's chosen circumstances so that others will look after her" (Jacey 52). Her faith is only temporarily broken; as soon as the Minotaur from the hotel dies, her trust is immediately restored and she finds herself in tears when the Doctor decides to move on without her. She will follow the Doctor through anything as long as he tells her to. Essentially, Amy is a pretty, obedient companion who clings to the Doctor like a lost child.

After the Doctor loses Amy to the Weeping Angels, Clara Oswin joins him for adventures every Wednesday. Although Clara is not aware until the end of season seven, she is an enigma for the Doctor to solve and not just someone he enjoys traveling with. He meets her twice before he begins traveling with her, and both times she mysteriously dies. In the season seven finale, she discovers that she is not the "Impossible Girl," but rather the girl who was born to save the

Doctor. Although she seems like a martyr, her self-sacrifice stems from an impulse need to save one rather than a newfound purpose to save all.

When the Doctor's timeline is corrupted by the Great Intelligence, stars, worlds, and entire populations start to die. Clara realizes that in order to reverse this, she must enter the Doctor's time stream, correct all that's been tampered with, save him again and again, and then die. When River Song appears and tries to stop her, insisting that the real Clara will die and only copies scattered across time and space will be left, Clara replies "I'll be real enough to save him" ("The Name of the Doctor" 2013). As millions of people are dying, Clara's only thought is to save the Doctor so that he might in turn reclaim his victories. Clara might be viewed as a martyr, one who "give[s] a testimony by their death to the meaning of their lives and their personal integrity" (Malone 45). However, to be a martyr she must first be a savior Christ figure as previous companions have been. If that were the case, it is likely that her words would be slightly altered, asking River if the copies of herself would be real enough to save "them," not "him." She must save God so he can save the rest, but the thought never occurs to her that she could save them herself.

Furthermore, before entering the time stream she reasons that "it's like my mum said, 'the soufflé isn't the soufflé, the soufflé is the recipe'" ("The Name of the Doctor" 2013). Void of any larger personal meaning than her brand-new relationship with the Doctor, the real Clara has no meaning herself. The only Clara that matters is the Clara that allies herself with the Doctor. The Doctor's godlike status is furthered, while Clara's position is made even less significant. As said in John 15:5 "I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing." Here, God speaks of the common man rather than about the extraordinary Jesus Christ. Those who follow God can find purpose

and meaning, but those who do not are incapable of such pursuits. If Clara were to continue the companion's tradition of becoming a Christ-figure, then she could be both a follower of the Doctor and have meaning all on her own. Stripped of this critical piece of characterization, she relies completely on the Doctor for her entire personage, for without him she would be nothing.

Amy and Clara do not have titles befitting of saviors and heroes. While Martha is the Woman who Walked the Earth, Amy is simply the Girl Who Waited. Donna gets to be the Most Important Woman in the Universe, but Clara is merely the Impossible Girl. While none of them could hold these titles without the Doctor, Moffat's childlike companions cling to the Time Lord and are incapable of saving themselves or others. By giving his companions the symbolism of the Christ figure, Davies makes Martha and Donna complex, realistic, and extraordinary. In comparison, Moffat's lackey companions are unfortunately one-dimensional people following the Doctor through multiple dimensions of time and space.

Works Cited

- Davies, Russell T and Benjamin Cook. *The Writer's Tale*. London: BBC Books, 2010. Kindle file.
- Deller, Ruth. "What We Need Is...A Doctor." *Doctor Who and Philosophy: Bigger on the Inside*. Chicago: Carus Publishing Company, 2011. Print.
- "The Eleventh Hour." *Doctor Who: The Complete Fifth Series*. Writ. Steven Moffat. Dir. Adam Smith. BBC, 2010. DVD.
- "The Fires of Pompeii." *Doctor Who: The Complete Fourth Series*. Writ. James Moran and Russell T. Davies. Dir. Colin Teague. BBC, 2008. DVD.
- "The God Complex." *Doctor Who: The Complete Sixth Series*. Writ. Toby Whithouse. Dir. Nick Hurran. BBC, 2011. DVD.
- Jacey, Helen. *The Woman in the Story*. Studio City, CA: Michael Weise Productions, 2010. Print.
- Jeffries, Stuart. "There is a clue everybody's missed': Sherlock writer Steven Moffat interviewed." *The Guardian*, 20 January 2012. Web. 10 November 2013.
- "Journey's End." *Doctor Who: The Complete Fourth Series*. Writ. Russell T. Davies. Dir. Graeme Harper. BBC, 2008. DVD.
- King James Bible*. ed. Andrew Derek. Lisle, IL: Project Guttenberg, 1992. Web. 17 December 2013.
- "The Last of the Time Lords." *Doctor Who: The Complete Third Series*. Writ. Russel T. Davies. Dir. Colin Teague. BBC, 2007. DVD.
- Malone, Peter. *Movie Christs and Antichrists*. New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1990. Print.
- "The Name of the Doctor." *Doctor Who: The Complete Seventh Series*. Writ. Steven Moffat. Dir.

Saul Metzstein. BBC, 2013. DVD.

“The Satan Pit.” *Doctor Who: The Complete Second Series*. Writ. Matt Jones. Dir. James Strong.

BBC, 2006. DVD.

Sherwin, Adam. “Christians Protest as Doctor Who is Protrayed as a 'Messiah'.” *The Times*, 21

December 2007. Web. 4 December 2013.