





THE DOCTOR (MATT SMITH)
AND AMY POND (KAREN GILLAN)

The New Man:

The Regeneration of *Doctor Who*

Dave Hoskin considers the different touches of the two writers keeping alive this much-loved character.

It wouldn't be *strictly* accurate to say that *Doctor Who* was broken. Russell T. Davies had nagged the BBC for years to let him revive the series, and in 2005 he proved just how successful the show could be. Having built a career on harnessing ordinary characters to high-concept storylines (*The Second Coming*, *Bob & Rose*), Davies emphasised the thrills and fun inherent in *Doctor Who*'s format, determined to plug it directly into mainstream culture. Thus, when the Doctor met William Shakespeare, the Bard was characterised as an Elizabethan Noel Gallagher, and the Daleks' latest cunning plan could conceivably involve a space-age version of *Big Brother*. The result surprised even Davies, and was nothing short of a massive critical and ratings success.

So yeah, broken is a bit strong a term, but after four years of this formula, it was difficult to watch the final days of David Tennant and not concede that *Doctor Who* was starting to look tired. The high-concept hijinks were tending towards bloat, with the characters increasingly swamped by *bigger* crises, *bigger* villains and *bigger* opportunities to make people cry. Perhaps recognising he'd done all he could,

Davies decided to step down, and soon after it was announced that his replacement would be Steven Moffat. This was very good news. Like Davies, Moffat was one of the most sought-after writers in British television, and he'd also played a key role in *Doctor Who*'s revival. Standing head and shoulders above all the other writers, Moffat's episodes were scarier, more imaginative and plotted with far greater rigour. In short, for those who'd become disenchanted, Moffat looked like the man to fix *Doctor Who*.

In hindsight, the interesting thing is just how little the show *did* change. In Moffat's first year the mix of stories was largely the same: there was another ongoing story arc involving the companion and her family, and everything built to a big finale involving the Daleks. However, contrary to many of his supporters' expectations, the main reason Moffat persisted with the formula was because he fundamentally *liked* what Davies had done. Consequently, the style of *Doctor Who* remains just as funny and fast-paced, and there's still a heavy reliance on high-concept ideas. That said, although the outline of the show is still very much the same, there's no doubt the

difference is in the details. What's interesting, though, is that while some ascribe these differences to the way Moffat handles drama, I think the real answer lies elsewhere.

A dark fairytale

The sheer amount of thinking you have to do, to make this work! When I read scripts that are bad, it's often because they're just lazy. The writer hasn't thought things through in the way that I would. There was a quote from John Cleese when he was ruling the world with Fawlty Towers: 'If I'm any good at writing comedy, it's because I know how hard it's supposed to be.' And that's it. It's shockingly difficult and emotionally upsetting!
– Steven Moffat¹

When he was drawing up the style guide for modern *Doctor Who*, one of Davies' key precepts was that the show should be as funny as possible. There had always been a strong seam of wit in the classic series, but mindful of the need to make the relaunch a prime-time success, Davies was determined to push the jokes even harder. Moffat agreed with this strategy, but what's interesting to note is the way their respective approaches to comedy inform their overall vision. Davies' comedic style, for example, has always tended to accentuate the outrageous. *Queer as Folk* makes us laugh because of the protagonists' gleeful transgression of social norms, while *Mine All Mine* revolves around the fundamentally ridiculous idea of a man inheriting the city of Swansea. This exuberant don't-let-facts-get-in-the-way-of-the-punchline philosophy also applies to the way Davies created villains for *Doctor Who*. Lady Cassandra in 'The End of the World' is a recipient of so much plastic surgery that she's little more than a vain sheet of skin, and John Simm's portrayal of the Master is both funny and scary precisely because Davies emphasises the character's insanity.

Moffat, on the other hand, is a specialist in farce. Just as his previous shows *Chalk and Coupling* use misunderstandings to create intricate comedic situations, his monsters are motivated by similar lacunae. Thus the grotesque Empty Child is the creation of alien medical technology that doesn't understand human physiology, and as in most farce, the story's resolution occurs when the characters allow their secrets into the open. In a similar vein, Moffat's first script as head writer introduces Prisoner Zero, an alien shapeshifter hiding out on Earth. The twist is that because Zero doesn't get the differences between the various earthly lifeforms, his impersonations are imperfect. When he disguises himself as a man walking his dog, the former barks angrily



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at passers-by while the latter stares silently. Elsewhere, he attempts to pass himself off as a mother and her children, and, although his disguise is more convincing, the Doctor realises that something is amiss when one of the little girls suddenly starts talking like an adult.

Moffat's approach to monsters also highlights another stylistic difference: where Davies chiefly used high-concept ideas to fuel Hollywood-style blockbusters, Moffat uses them to craft dark fairytales. His stories are just as epic in their own way, but because of the way they're told, they feel spookier, more intimate. The best example of this fairytale approach is, of course, the Weeping Angels. Like vampires or jinn, the Angels' monstrous behaviour is restricted by rules, rules that Moffat deliberately based on

the childhood game 'grandmother's footsteps'. The intriguing thing is that when these mythic monsters return for a sequel, Moffat seems to have taken a leaf from Davies' book. Where the third season's 'Blink' felt like a contemporary ghost story, the fifth season's 'The Time of Angels' is set in the fifty-second century, involves cartloads of space marines and frankly looks a lot like *Aliens* (James Cameron, 1986). The atmosphere works well enough when the Angels stalk our heroes around a spooky cave system, but when the battle shifts to a spaceship, the imagery starts to jar. That's when Moffat demonstrates how to have your cake and eat it too. As in so many other science-fictional spaceships, this one uses a garden as a source of oxygen for long journeys. Realising this, the Doctor opens up an airlock to reveal a gloomy forest – the literal embodiment of all those scary places we're told to avoid in fairytales. He then proceeds to flee through the forest, pursued by the Angels, and despite being right inside the guts of the blockbuster machinery, the monsters couldn't look more at home.

A shift in tone

You have to remember that being scared of the dark and being scared of monsters is basically a childish impulse ... A grown-up isn't scared of the dark; a grown-up is scared of getting ill, or the children being sick, so what you're tapping into – the kind of fear that Doctor Who plays on – is that cowering in your bed at night as an eight-year-old, wondering what that shadow in the corner is ... Doctor Who isn't a childish programme, but it is childlike: it's a programme for children.
– Steven Moffat²

Moffat's brand of *Doctor Who* contains a fascinating contradiction. Although his various decisions have made the program feel creepier and more complex, in actuality the show has never been more deliberately aimed at children. Many would argue that Davies' version was more obviously childlike, but despite its brasher appearance, it always retained a persistently dark undercurrent. A good example of this tendency can be seen in the way Davies wrote season finales: whether deliberate or not, every single one of them felt bittersweet. The first saw the Ninth Doctor giving his life to save Rose (Billie Piper); the second saw the Tenth Doctor and Rose separated, apparently forever; the third saw Martha (Freema Agyeman) leaving the Doctor, realising that they would never be more than just good friends; the fourth saw Donna's (Catherine Tate) memories of their shared adventures wiped for good; and Davies' last hurrah was explicitly structured around the

Tenth Doctor's impending death. Moreover, as several of these examples demonstrate, Davies continually returned to a theme that had fascinated him throughout his career: unrequited love. Like Vince (Craig Kelly) in *Queer as Folk*, Holly (Jessica Hynes) in *Bob & Rose* or even Casanova, the Doctor's companions quietly pined for someone they couldn't have. Likewise, the Doctor, though less overt in affairs of heart, was also consistently portrayed as lonely. The primacy of this theme says a lot about Davies' approach; while he is often accused of making *Doctor Who* childish because of his more simplistic narrative style, such themes are always going to resonate best with an adult audience. Indeed, for all the supposed scariness of his stories, Moffat freely concedes that Davies was a darker writer than he, and much more likely to write about the bleakness of the human condition. Perhaps the most telling moment was Davies' final line. Even at the very end, when he might have been forgiven some valedictory triumphalism, the Tenth Doctor forlornly expires with 'I don't want to go.'

Conversely, when Davies was asked to identify the story Moffat kept returning to over and over again, his answer was similarly perceptive: parenthood. It's there in *Press Gang*, *Jekyll*, *Coupling*, and the four stories Moffat wrote for Davies, all of them bar one featuring children in danger.³ Furthermore, upon taking control, Moffat took this theme one step further by significantly tweaking the characterisation of the series' leading lady, Amy Pond (Karen Gillan).

It's true that Amy is another pretty young woman, and yes it's also true that, like Rose and Martha, she's attracted to the Doctor – so far, so adult. But here's the difference: unlike the other companions, Amy doesn't first meet the Doctor as a grown woman, she meets him when she's seven. Indeed, she's the very first person the newly regenerated Eleventh Doctor meets, with Moffat deliberately casting them as a version of Tigger and Winnie-the-Pooh. They immediately form a bond, he offers to take her with him, but thanks to his usual hamfisted piloting of the TARDIS, he arrives twelve years later. In his absence, Amy never quite grows up. She goes through the motions of becoming an adult – when the Doctor reappears she's got a job as a kiss-a-gram, has been through therapy and is soon to be married. But as we get to know her better, we also discover that Amy never forgot the 'raggedy Doctor'; we see that she's still got copious drawings, dolls and puppets of her 'imaginary friend'. When the Doctor finally does make good on his invitation to adventure, it's significant that Amy runs away with him with barely a second thought.

A gift for subtlety

The basis of the relationship between the Doctor and the companion really is a magic man from space and a child ... It's not boyfriend and girlfriend, it's not husband and wife, God knows, it's actually a magic man from space who can take you away, means you never have to go back to school, and a child. And that remains their relationship even when they're grown up a bit.
– Steven Moffat⁴

Put simply, Amy is the ultimate child character, and even her apparent imitation of her more adult predecessors by snogging the Doctor merely underlines this. Significantly, the very last thing we see when Amy first runs off with the Doctor is her wedding dress; her determined postponement of the wedding for as long as possible (and even her ambivalent response to her 'pregnancy' in series six) speaks volumes about her willingness to become an adult. Thus, where Christopher Eccleston and David Tennant – the Ninth and Tenth incarnations of the Doctor, respectively – happily kissed their leading ladies, Matt Smith's version recognises that Amy's advances are more about putting off her wedding than genuine attraction. Consequently, his reaction is like ... well, like a father being tongue-kissed by his daughter, and from this point the Doctor becomes noticeably more parental than ever before. He's already noticed that Amy doesn't seem to have any parents of her own, and by the time the season finale rolls around, it's obvious the real stakes aren't the destruction of space and time, but repairing the strange fairytale life she's leading. The final sacrifice, in which the Doctor heals the cracks that run through her life, makes everything explicit. He knows he won't survive this final gesture, but his death will allow Amy to resurrect her parents: 'You'll have your family back,' he concludes. 'You don't need your imaginary friend anymore.'

Needless to say, the Doctor *does* survive. Like Amy's real parents, he's too strong a 'story' for her to forget, and she resurrects him on her wedding day, just in time to witness her final symbolic step into adulthood. Again, the striking thing is that although Moffat's finale resembles one of Davies', the tone has noticeably shifted. Where the supposedly jolly Davies was always careful to leaven triumph with tragedy, scary old Moffat gives us an ending that's positively joyful. Amy gets her parents back, she marries her fiancé and her imaginary friend returns to do some daggy dad-style dancing with the kids at the wedding. Not only does this happy ending feel dramatically 'earned', it also feels just the right kind of Big. Davies had increasingly

backed himself into tighter and tighter high-concept corners (and came up with increasingly lazy solutions to escape them), but Moffat triumphs by giving us an apocalypse that can only be averted by the efforts of a magic man from space. The science fiction plot and fairytale themes mesh skilfully, the character arcs reach their logical conclusion, and like the image of the Angels hunting through the oxygen-forest, you're struck again by the raw intelligence and rigour that drives Moffat's imagination.

In fairness, as with Davies, Moffat is far from perfect; it's also obvious the higher workload has taken a toll. Those who expected 'Blink' every week have been sorely disappointed, and while the average quality of *Doctor Who*'s stories have certainly increased, the difference is hardly seismic. The key difference, though, and the one I prize above all others, is Moffat's gift for subtlety. Matt Smith's Doctor is still written with the same *joie de vivre* that was such a hallmark of Davies' reign, but there's less of the atonal gags, less of the braggadocio and an overall impression that things are quieter now. Perhaps the best way to put it is that this is a Doctor that isn't worried about a Time War; rather, he's an imaginary friend that can't bear to see children cry. He's the hero that fixes the cracks in your wall, faces down the Daleks with a biscuit and, when facing his end, asks only to be remembered as a story.

Yes, *Doctor Who* was tired when Steven Moffat found it – but now, with a new man in charge, it's wide awake once more.

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Endnotes

- 1 Jason Arnopp, 'Master of the Macabre', *Doctor Who Magazine*, no. 397, 2008, p. 34.
- 2 Steven Moffat interview, Radio Times, June 2007, <<http://www.radiotimes.com/content/show-features/doctor-who/steven-moffat-interview-2007/>>, accessed 1 May 2011.
- 3 And the one that didn't, 'Blink', was originally adapted from a short story told entirely from a child's point of view. Exactly why Moffat elected to turn Sally Sparrow (Carey Mulligan) into an adult is known only to him, but because of the fairytale vibe given off by the Weeping Angels, for my money 'Blink' still feels very much of a piece with Moffat's kids-in-danger aesthetic.
- 4 Steven Moffat, 'The Eleventh Hour' DVD commentary, *Doctor Who: The Complete Fifth Series*, 2 Entertain, 2010.