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Who, What, and Why? Character Motivation in *Doctor Who*

by Michael M. Levy

At my nine year old's Halloween party we had the usual collection of ghosts, witches, superheroes, and tramps. One little boy came dressed in a shabby trench coat, a plaid vest, an enormous floppy hat, and a ridiculously long scarf. The casual observer would have unhesitatingly labeled him a tramp, but he knew himself to be a superhero. At a science fiction convention I attended last year in Madison, Wisconsin more than half a dozen adults showed up dressed, like the nine year old, in nearly identical coats, vests, hats, and sixteen-foot scarves. They too looked like tramps but knew themselves to be someone else. Who? Yes, exactly. Doctor Who. Doctor Who is the central character of a BBC television series originally aimed at eleven to fourteen year olds; surprisingly, the BBC now estimates that sixty percent of the audience is adult. Although the *Doctor Who* series has had only the most limited of runs in this country, mostly on PBS, often late at night, it has developed a hardcore fan following comparable in American television history only to that of *Star Trek*. Whenever the series appears it draws strong ratings. Whenever book dealers acquire a few dozen long awaited copies of the *Doctor Who* novelizations they're gone in a matter of days.

At the center of the show's popularity is; of course, the Doctor, a flamboyant, enigmatic figure who has clearly joined that small pantheon of fantasy folk heroes who, like Tarzan, Flash Gordon, and Mr. Spock, have virtually taken on a life of their own. Five different incarnations of Doctor Who have appeared in this country; a sixth, played by Colin Barker, took over during the 1984 BBC run. Each Doctor Who is clearly related to the ones who come before and after, each is motivated essentially by the same combination of scientific curiosity and altruism, but each is a unique individual. Then there are the villains, some of whom are frequently returning regulars like the Master, the Daleks, and the Cybermen, some of whom make one-shot appearances, but almost all motivated by a self-centered desire for absolute control over others. An examination of what motivates these characters, as individuals and as types, should cast light both on the most important themes of the *Doctor Who* series and on its wide popularity with an audience of greatly varying ages. Though purists might be annoyed, I will, for convenience's sake, quote heavily from the novelizations.

Details of the Doctor's appearance and biography emerge gradually over the course of the series. Although he looks totally human, the Doctor is, in fact, an alien, a Time Lord from the planet Gallifrey. His anatomical differences, all invisible to the casual observer, conveniently from the point of view of the TV show's original 2500 pound per episode budget (Haining 23), include "two hearts, a temperature of only sixty degrees Fahrenheit, and [a] breathing rate [of] . . . four breaths to the minute compared with [the human rate of] twelve to sixteen" (Hulke, *Sea Devils* 103). Also he's over seven hundred years old.

In 1966, when William Hartnell, the original Doctor Who,

decided to leave the series, the show's producers hit upon the idea of writing into Hartnell's final script, novelized as *Doctor Who and the Tenth Planet*, the fact that each Time Lord can regenerate his body twelve times. Thus, in his last adventure Hartnell's character is shown "beginning to stoop a little . . . grown irritable and dictatorial of late" (Davis, *Tenth Planet* 10-11). As the novel progresses, the Doctor is unusually passive, taking little part in the proceedings, and then, as the story ends, is transformed. The tall, thin, white-haired Hartnell is replaced by Patrick Troughton, a smaller, younger man with "short dark hair and . . . a swarthy, almost gypsy appearance" (Davis 140). This daring maneuver, originally seen as nothing more than an unlikely attempt to prolong a successful TV series beyond its natural run, proved enormously popular, and the Doctor is now working on his sixth body. Other Time Lords have also been regenerated in the course of the series: the Doctor's arch-enemy, The Master (necessitated by the death of Roger Delgado who played the role), and one of his companions, the Lady Romana (necessitated by the unavailability of the actress who had played the part previously). The effect has been used with great success on several occasions, for example in *Doctor Who and the Deadly Assassin*, where the Master, having worn out his final body, spends most of the plot as a hideously decaying but ambulatory corpse, intent on destroying Gallifrey in his pursuit of continued life. Equally effective is the closing scene of *Doctor Who—Logopolis*, where Tom Baker's Doctor apparently gives his life to save the universe, only to transform almost magically into the Doctor's next incarnation, as played by Peter Davison.

The five Doctors vary considerably in both their appearances and their personalities. As Peter Haining describes him, the first is "a kind of eccentric Victorian gentleman with long white hair, frock coat and winged collar . . . given to moments of intolerance . . . irascible and petulant" (9). The second Doctor is much more of a clown, a "cosmic hobo" (Haining 9); Patrick Troughton in fact patterned his characterization on Charlie Chaplin's little tramp (Haining 43). The third Doctor is a much bigger man, an athlete "given to moments of showmanship and flamboyance" (Haining 10). Jon Pertwee, the actor who played the third Doctor, was himself a sports car driver and former circus performer, and with his characterization the Doctor takes on some of the trappings of the conventional super hero. Playing the fourth Doctor, Tom Baker toned down the physical. His Doctor, a truly inspired creation, comes across as a fey but infectiously friendly sort, almost a holy innocent, by turns masterful and terminally absent minded. The fifth Doctor, the youngest so far, seems the least eccentric of the bunch, impetuous, vulnerable and temperamental at times, but basically level-headed, a return, perhaps, as the actor Peter Davison suggested in a September 1982 interview in *Starlog*, to the first Doctor's unrecorded youth.

Despite variations in appearance and personality, the five Doctors share two important traits. The first is scientific

curiosity. Time after time the Doctor's adventures are initiated by his obsessive interest in the unknown. In *Doctor Who and the Underworld*, for example, the Doctor's time and space machine, the TARDIS (for Time and Relative Dimension in Space), is exploring the edge of the universe but, due in part to the Doctor's abstracted appreciation of that "magnificent nothingness" (7), the vehicle narrowly avoids being pulled into a spiral nebula. In *Doctor Who and the Keeper of Traken*, the TARDIS's controls suddenly malfunction. When the Doctor's companion asks him what is happening, his response to the problem is typical:

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"You're supposed to know these things. You're a Time Lord, aren't you?"

"My dear Adric, if I knew what was going to happen all the time there'd be no fun in anything."

The second trait which dominates the Doctor's personality is altruism. Again and again he involves himself in other people's problems, usually with no thought for his own safety. His beliefs are essentially democratic and humanistic, what Tulloch and Alvarado call the "'liberal' values of antiviolenence and racial tolerance" (30), and he is implacably opposed to any attempt by one culture to impose its will on another, as for example, in *Doctor Who and the Horns of Nimón*, where the Skonnons, a totalitarian race, attempt, with the aid of a mysterious, super-powerful being called the Nimón, to enslave the neighboring planet of Aneth. The Doctor first tries to reason with the Skonnons and their allies, but finding them irrationally belligerent and unwilling to compromise, single-handedly defeats them. Afterwards he takes the least objectionable and only surviving Skonnnon leader aside and lectures him on "the folly of imperialistic ambitions" (108) and the value of mutual cooperation. In a later story, *Doctor Who—Terminus*, the Doctor investigates a treatment center for the victims of a horrible

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disease. Finding safety conditions not to his liking and the patients used as slaves by the corporation that runs the institution, the Doctor braves the danger of possible infection to find a cure for the disease, sets the treatment center to rights, and, almost by chance, saves the entire galaxy from a second Big Bang. In story after story the Doctor either lands on a planet torn by strife and helps the good side or, present on a planet (often Earth) when it is invaded by aliens, leads the defense against the invaders. His ongoing battles with the Cybermen, the Daleks, and the Master almost all fit one or the other of these scenarios.

Though scientific curiosity and altruism are the most important traits shared by the Doctors, they have several other traits in common. All tend to be absolutists of a very British, upper crust sort. Though he invariably defends democracy, the Doctor demands more or less complete obedience from his companions. He often fails to get it, of course, but his humorous grumbling when disobeyed, and the fact that this disobedience usually sets up a dangerous situation from which he must rescue his companions, invariably allows him to remain an authority figure at the story's end. The Doctor is also quite secretive, either because the matter at hand is simply beyond his companions' comprehension or, as is clearly sometimes the case, because he enjoys being secretive and superior. He is a genius and the master of enormous knowledge, but he is not beyond

pretending to know more than he really does and is occasionally proven wrong, as, for example, in his argument with K-9, his robot dog, and his assistant Romana in *Doctor Who and the Horns of Nimón*:

"Now she should hold steady."

"I repeat, Master, the TARDIS is still moving."

"Nonsense, K-9, I've just immobilized her, haven't I?"

"Affirmative."

"Well, then?"

"The TARDIS is still moving. Accelerating fast."

"—K-9's right, you know, Doctor!"

"What? How can he be right when he's just disagreed with me?"

"—The TARDIS seems to disagree with you as well. Look!"
(16)

Although each of these traits is modified by its interaction with the differing personalities of the Doctor's various incarnations, the result is invariably endearing. Further there is the Doctor's total disinterest in personal power, his absolute loyalty to his friends and his principles, his apparent lack of romantic interest in his often beautiful female companions, and his occasionally wacky sense of humor. Also there is his strongly emotional nature. When taunted by a supposedly emotionless Cyberman that his strongly held feelings are a serious weakness, the Doctor "explode[s] with exasperation. 'Emotions also enrich life. . . . When did you last enjoy watching a sunset, or smelling the scent of flowers?'" (Marter 101).

The Doctor's opponents almost invariably share his superhuman intelligence, but their personalities stand in stark contrast to his. Where he loves science and knowledge for their own sake, they see them only as a means to an end. Where he is altruistic, helping others with no regard to his own profit, they invariably seek power over others, sometimes for themselves, sometimes for their race. Such aliens as the Daleks, Cybermen and Nimón may feel group loyalty, but personal friendship is unknown to them. The leader of the villains in a *Doctor Who* story sees his followers essentially as pawns to be used up at need and without remorse. Some, like the Master, are willing to do anything to accomplish their ends. In *Doctor Who and the Deadly Assassin*, for example, the Master tampers with "the whole source and foundation of Time Lord power. . . . He'd have destroyed Gallifrey, the Time Lords, everything—just for the sake of his own survival!" (107) Similarly, the Cybermen will stop at nothing to preserve their empire: "They had no use for the small blue planet. When they had finished with it, stripped it of its precious metals. . . they would leave it shattered and lifeless" (Davis, *Cyberman* 8).

Furthermore, villains in the *Doctor Who* series are almost invariably hostile to emotion, or at the very least all positive emotion. The Master hates the Doctor because he is "insufferably compassionate" (Dicks, *Deadly Assassin* 110) and sneers equally at his indomitable optimism:

"Indeed? And what makes you so sure this is going to work?"

The Doctor smiled pleasantly. . . . "While there's life, it's six of one and a half dozen of the other."

"Wooly thinking, Doctor" sneered the Master.

"Very comforting when worn next to the skin."
(Bidmead 116)

Neither the Cybermen nor the Daleks, we are told, feel any emotion at all. Supposedly they both operate entirely through logic, though, in fact, their mechanical voices are often described as "rasping," "harsh," "grating," or "sulky," and on one occasion at least as "rising to a pitch almost of hysteria" (Dicks, *Day* 56). Indeed, both races seem to exist in a constant whirl of contentious vexation, the Cybermen with their constant staccato

orders, "No one will move. You will remain still. If you move, you will be killed" (Davis, *Cybermen* 89), the Daleks with their repetitive, grating chant of "Exterminate! Exterminate!" (Dicks, *Genesis* 140). Interestingly, neither race is the true robot their machine-like exteriors and mechanical voices might lead one to think they are. The Cybermen, rather, are the end result of an organic race's search for immortality through cybernetics, their bodies "replaced limb by limb, with plastic and steel" (Davis, *Cybermen* 7). The Daleks, inside their casings, are vaguely octopoidal mutants with three-clawed talons. (Haining 30-31). Both races, in their unfeeling facelessness, their totalitarian mindset, and their advanced technology can perhaps be seen as symbolic of the dehumanization of modern society.

This brings us to a key point in our understanding of the powerful attraction which *Doctor Who* holds for its audience. The series is frequently derivative; its plots are often lifted from Greek myth such as the Minotaur story in *The Horns of Nimon*, from popular science fiction films such as *The Fantastic Voyage* in *Doctor Who and the Invisible Enemy*, or from general literature such as *The Prisoner of Zenda* in *Doctor Who and the Androids of Tara*. Over the years it has occasionally degenerated, as have so many other science fiction series, into a monster of the week situation. But one significant theme has emerged over and over again. Whether we examine the continuing series stories involving the Daleks, the Cybermen, the Autons, and the Master, or such one shots as *Doctor Who and the Horns of Nimon* and *Doctor Who and the Giant Robot*, we must realize that the conflict is almost invariably between democracy and totalitarianism and, more specifically, between humanism and dehumanizing technology, what Tulloch and Alvarado call "mechanistic rationalism" (44). Although *Doctor Who* is himself a master scientist and engineer, his use of technology is almost always minimal. On the outside his TARDIS looks like an old-fashioned wooden police box; but on the inside, although containing a certain amount of 'high tech' gadgetry, it has room for wood paneling, an antique hatrack, a stone-walled cloister, and all the comforts of home. The Doctor's robot, K-9, although enormously intelligent and powerful, is both physically unimposing and totally subject to the Doctor's will, a brilliant

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servant and happy in its limited role. The Doctor fixes things with small, hand-held tools, most commonly his sonic screwdriver, and he is more likely to use a long scarf or his "Venusian karate" as a weapon than a ray gun. His clothing, speech patterns, and personality, regardless of which incarnation he is in, invariably call to mind a somewhat earlier age. His virtues are those most frequently associated in our minds with either Victorian England, some nebulous counter culture, or that personal past we all share, childhood.

In contrast, most of the villains in the series are obsessed with technology. It dominates their thought patterns their actions. In *Doctor Who and the Giant Robot*, for example, a fascist organization called the Scientific Reform Society uses a gigantic robot to steal information which will allow the group to explode all of Earth's atomic weapons simultaneously. Sealed in their super-advanced bunker, guarded by heavy weapons and the robot, they demand that our planet bow down to their technology-centered concept of a rational world order, but they are defeated by the Doctor, using only his sonic screwdriver, a platoon of Britain's finest, and some inspired common sense. In this story, as in many similar ones in the series, it becomes clear that technology is not to be seen as innately bad. It is dangerous, however, and the danger lies only secondarily in what it can do

to our bodies. More important is what it can do to our minds.

This brings us back to the Daleks and the Cybermen. The stories involving these two recurring opponents of the Doctor are occasionally among the weakest in the whole series in terms of plot logic and scientific probability, yet they have done an amazing job of grabbing the viewing and reading public's imagination. The menacing giant salt shaker figure of the Dalek has become so much a part of British culture that in 1981 the *Daily Mail* could run an editorial cartoon in which a Dalek was seen attacking a labor union meeting outside a British plant and expect the cartoon's implications to be understood without additional comment (Haining 32). The British reaction to the Daleks and, to a lesser extent, the Cybermen, goes far beyond what one could expect based on the stories' literary merit. An objective correlative for that reaction must thus be searched for on a symbolic level. Many of the *Doctor Who* plots portray a battle between the humanistic mind set and hostile technology, and the Daleks and Cybermen symbolize that hostile technology uniquely well. They are not merely machines. They are living, previously more-or-less human beings who have chosen of their own free will to become machine-like. It is this sense that the dangers of technology can strike at us not just through machines but through other people, our friends and neighbors perhaps, who have been suborned into the machine culture, that is most frightening. As Walt Kelly's Pogo once said, we have met the enemy and he is us.

Herein lies the controlling theme of the *Doctor Who* series and, I think, the most important reason for the show's enduring popularity. Personified in the Doctor and his various opponents is a central conflict of our age. The Doctor is very much the person we would like to be, wise, altruistic, and powerful, but able to maintain a child-like ability to wonder at the marvelous discoveries modern science presents to us. The Daleks, Cybermen, and other villains, however, represent what we fear these discoveries may do to us, how they may change us or, worse yet, those in power over us. Between the Doctor and his opponents our future lies teetering. Will we control our technology or will it control us? Will it dehumanize us or allow us to become more fully human? By both achieving victory and maintaining his innocence, on a week to week or book to book basis, *Doctor Who* assures us that, at least for now, humanity will triumph.

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