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### Of Gods and Time Lords

In popular culture there are few things more British than *Doctor Who*, so when Marie Phillips set her 2007 novel *Gods Behaving Badly* in modern day London, it's not entirely surprising that the fabled time lord was mentioned. While the reference was made in a single throwaway line spoken by a delusional Zeus – "I like *Doctor Who*. He's a god too." (Phillips 133) – it raises an interesting question: just how similar are the gods in *Gods Behaving Badly* to *Doctor Who*'s eponymous character, the Doctor, and by extension, which themes and ideas, if any, are central to both? At first glance, it would seem an odd comparison – rambunctious gods who mess with people for fun in contrast to a lone time lord who saves worlds and civilizations? Despite this disparity, the idea is more grounded than one might expect.

For the unfamiliar, *Doctor Who* is a long lived television series first produced and aired by the BBC from 1963 through 1989. In 2005, the series was revived and has continued through the present day. Put simply, the show follows the adventures of the Doctor, a renegade time lord who travels through time and space. The Doctor's home planet, Gallifrey, was home to the time lords, a species who have long lifespans and have mastered time travel. In the show's lore, the time lords were in a war which devastated both sides, resulting in the loss of Gallifrey along with the rest of the time lords, leaving the Doctor as the sole survivor<sup>1</sup>. While *Doctor Who* often tells

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<sup>1</sup> More or less – for the purposes of character analysis this is true; however the show often retcons events in order to have recurring villains from the classic series reappear.

stories that involve faraway worlds and far-fetched ideas, at its core, the stories are ultimately about the characters. The show is as much about the various human companions and civilizations being saved as it is about the Doctor. By utilizing a character driven plot, *Doctor Who* can focus on themes and ideas closer to home, allowing the viewer to relate, while still providing a platform to explore ideas that may not otherwise be within reach. One such example is longevity: while the exact age of the Doctor isn't definitive, he has been quoted to be around a thousand years old. Despite his long life, the Doctor doesn't appear to age – when mortally wounded, the Doctor regenerates and gets a new body. This places the Doctor in a unique position to face the effects of longevity without the effects of physically ageing.

While the Doctor can often be described as good-humored and optimistic, this is in part a façade for the lonesome wandering traveler he has become. In “Meanwhile in the TARDIS,” Amy, the eleventh Doctor's companion, wants to know why she's travelling with the Doctor. The Doctor explains that he can't see it: “I look at a star and it's just a big ball of burning gas and I know how it began, I know how it ends... and I was probably there both times. Now after a while everything is just stuff. That's the problem: you make all of space and time your back yard and what do you have? A back yard. But you, you can see it. And when you see it I see it.” This moment between the Doctor and Amy gives a glimpse into the Doctor's character, showing that he has indeed become jaded by time underneath his usually enthusiastic persona. This dreary sense of being is in addition to a loss that the Doctor goes through over and over again: in “School Reunion,” the tenth Doctor explains to his companion, Rose, “You can spend the rest of your life with me, but I can't spend the rest of mine with you. I have to live on. Alone.” Throughout the show, the Doctor has had a number of companions, and each he's eventually had to part ways with, one way or another. A glum perspective on this was presented

in “The Lazarus Experiment,” where the Doctor says that “I’m old enough to know that a longer life isn’t always a better one. In the end, you just get tired; tired of the struggle, tired of losing everyone that matters to you, tired of watching everything you love turn to dust.” Despite the negativity shown in the aforementioned quotes, that isn’t all there is to the character. The Doctor’s personality is dichotomous: at times he can have all the force of a freight train with a calm fury or rage, yet at others he can be childishly playful. These extremes are brought on by age, with the Doctor growing less forgiving of his enemies, but at the same time, becoming more lighthearted with his companions. His positive attitude is as much a way to hide as it is a way to run from his jaded perspective and loss.

In *Gods Behaving Badly*, the Greek gods are also in the position to live long lives, and like the Doctor, what’s on the surface and what lies beneath are vastly different things. While the gods cause mischief and take on menial – though amusing – jobs, there is a dissatisfaction when one digs deeper. This is exemplified in a quote from Artemis: “The house is cleaner, but what difference does that make when we’re all still living in it?” (Phillips 71). Here, Artemis admits to Eros that despite the house being physically cleansed, she feels that filth remains in the form of the gods themselves. This reinforces the title, as the gods’ behavior, simply put, is bad; bad to the point of being associated with the grime and sediment used to describe the house. Eros is also shown to be tired of the life they live, at one point suggesting that perhaps dying wouldn’t be so bad, in saying “Listen, though. Just imagine it. The peace of it. Being somewhere else. Away from all this. Not having to be responsible for anything.” (Phillips 74). Artemis initially dismisses the idea, but later when Demeter says that she’s dying, “To her surprise, Artemis felt a little bit jealous.” (Phillips 86). While the other gods aren’t so vocal with their dissatisfaction, they do feel a lack of power and reminisce the times they were worshipped.

Long after the heyday of both ancient Greece and the time lords, the Greek gods and the Doctor are forced to live on. Outside the main characters in their respective stories, neither the gods nor the Doctor have fame amongst the general populace; if anything, they're quite literally the stuff of legend. In *Gods Behaving Badly*, this is demonstrated through a lack of belief in the gods. The idea of belief is brought up throughout the story – belief in the gods, belief in the human characters, belief in religion and mythology. In *Doctor Who*, belief is also an often recurring theme. While many *Doctor Who* stories both involve and are resolved by belief, one in particular stands out.

The *Doctor Who* series 3 finale, “Last of the Time Lords,” involves the Doctor’s longtime adversary, the Master, a time lord who escaped the war and destruction of Gallifrey. Put simply, the Master had killed much of the population of Earth, enslaved the rest, and artificially aged the Doctor. Having conquered Earth, the Master had his sights set for the universe. Meanwhile, the Doctor’s companion, Martha, managed to escape detection and travel the globe, spreading word of the Doctor and giving people an instruction: to believe in the Doctor at one particular moment. Being *Doctor Who*, it was explained that the thought power of the belief was consolidated using a psychic network the Master had set up, which the Doctor was able to tap into while Martha spread the word. Regardless of the technobabble used to explain the means, the end result was that the combined belief of the population of the Earth was enough to produce a tangible effect, reversing the artificial aging of the Doctor, allowing him to reverse time and foil the Master’s plans. This is strikingly similar to the ending of *Gods Behaving Badly*, wherein Neil gives a speech to generate belief in the gods, and the belief is enough to not only restore power to the gods, but also regenerate their bodies. Interestingly, the process of the gods’ regeneration is described as such: “White hairs turned dark, muscles bloomed, wrinkles

smoothed out. They seemed to be exploding with light.” (Phillips 287). While likely unintentional, this description may seem remarkably familiar to fans of Doctor Who, as the Doctor’s regeneration scenes could be described very similarly. In reality, while belief on its own isn’t sufficient to will things into existence, the similarity between the resolutions of *Gods Behaving Badly* and “Last of the Time Lords” cements the idea that belief is indeed something powerful.

Both *Gods Behaving Badly* and *Doctor Who* tell stories of characters who have lived centuries. While causing mischief is the polar opposite of saving worlds, both the gods and the Doctor experience an undercurrent of unpleasantness associated with their longevity, which they choose to hide behind their outward facing personalities. Although one may expect the hero of the story to be the one with old age and wisdom, in the case of *Gods Behaving Badly*, and more often than not in *Doctor Who*, it’s not solely the gods or the Doctor who saves the day: it’s the common, everyday people. Ultimately, *Gods Behaving Badly* and *Doctor Who* aren’t stories about their long-lived characters, but rather, they’re stories about people and their capability for belief – and how having belief can make a difference, even at the end of the world.

Works Cited

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