

Media portrayals of class: analysis of doctor who



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The BBC series Doctor Who began in 1963 and ran until 1989. It was then rebooted in 2005 and is still being aired today. Despite the sixteen-year hiatus, the show has been portraying 'Britishness', in terms of individualism, public service, social class, gender, race and sexuality (Nicol, 2018), since it first aired. This essay will be discussing the representation of national identity and social class in the series from 2005 up until the present day, as well as questioning the intentions and accuracy of these representations. As the series has span over a large amount of time, it also allows comparisons to be made between mid-2000s episodes and ones airing today – allowing an analysis of how elements, such as national identity and stereotypes, have changed to emulate the current social climates.

Beginning in approximately 2005 and growing in popularity in the following years, the word "chav" has slowly become an acknowledged term to explain a person's social class. The word "chav" describes the stereotypical working-class person, expected to be aggressive, dangerous, lazy, and dressed in sportswear (Tyler, 2008). The term was first used in a Newspaper in 2002 (BBC News, 2011) and by 2005 had become a well-known expression and insult to target working class people (Crystal, 2006). Reinforcing the already wide-spread dislike of "chavs" was the increase in their representation in the media. TV Shows, such as Little Britain (2003), began to use "chav" characters for comedy, highlighting all the negative stereotypes, which only added to the negative public opinion, dehumanising and vilifying people who fit the social class associated with "chavs."

When Doctor Who returned as Christopher Eccleston in 2005, he was accompanied by a new sidekick, Rose Tyler. Rose Tyler is an understated

representation of a “chav.” She is introduced at the start of the first episode (‘Rose’, 2005) with a camera zooming in to the block of flats that she lives in and she mentions a stray cat that “come(s) in off the estate.” This suggests that she lives in a lower-class area as an “estate” is defined as a block of council flats used for people on benefits. Both of these are examples of the character’s social background and connotes that she comes from a working-class background. Many people understand the word “chav” to stand for “council housed and violent” (Manley, 2010) and the director’s choice to begin the episode with a shot of a block of flats and mention a nearby “estate” suggests that the audience are being conditioned to see her as a “chav.” As well as this, Rose has dyed blonde hair, and is introduced to the audience wearing hoop earrings, a hoodie, jeans and white trainers – all features of a stereotypical “chav” (Tyler, 2008). This is the outfit she is shown wearing to work which, for higher class viewers, may possibly create a disrespect for her character.

A notable period in the evolution of social class is the apparent death of class shortly after the 1980s. This was due to changes during the 1980s and Margaret Thatcher’s time as Prime Minister. In 1982, despite unemployment levels being historically low, the people had hope that the conservative government would bring with it a stronger system to help people financially (Biressi and Nunn, 2013). In the mid 1980s, with the rise of stock exchange and the stock market, more jobs became readily available. Working class people, mainly men, got the opportunity to work in stock exchange in London. People from Essex would commute daily for jobs in this area. The growing industry of stock exchange meant that the number of unemployed

and working-class people declined (Biressi and Nunn, 2013). Following on from this, similar jobs became more readily available to working class people; “ new forms of work based on the ownership, control, movement of and access to money led to the rise of new types of well-paid, middle class occupations” (McDowell, 1997, p. 14-15). The death of class relates to Thatcher’s views on success; believing that individuals make their own success, that regardless of a person’s social advantage or disadvantage, everyone has the same opportunities to become successful (Biressi and Nunn, 2013). Contrary to Thatcher’s belief that class and class struggles were no more, the rise of sociology led to a more well-rounded and advanced analysis of class, taking into account gender, race, ethnicity, social aspiration and material resources. Due to this, an acknowledgment of culture and individualism in relation to the ongoing changes of class relations was established and it became clear that class had not died and was still as significant as before, if not more so (Biressi and Nunn, 2013). The dynamics in the storyline of Doctor Who also connote this notion that class has not died. With all but two series of the show, the class difference between The Doctor and his companions was always evident. Whilst not all of the companions have been working class, they have always been portrayed to appear of a significantly lower social standing than The Doctor. Martha Jones, for example, was shown to come from a middle-upper middle class, with her father shown to be driving a Mercedes-Benz convertible (‘ Smith and Jones’, 2007). Despite the social class of the companions, The Doctor often seems superior to his companions in terms of intellect and cultural capital, mostly due to the character being portrayed by actors with middle class characteristics. The first series of the reboot, however, stars Christopher <https://assignbuster.com/media-portrayals-of-class-analysis-of-doctor-who/>

Eccleston (2005) who is an actor who openly discusses his struggles and the struggles faced by working class actors. As well as this, Jodie Whittaker, the latest Doctor in the most recent series (series 11, 2018), uses her own regional working-class Yorkshire accent and treats her companions as such, rather than as inferiors. Both of these series changed the dynamic of social status in Doctor/companion relationships.

It is also evident in the representation of working class people as “ chavs” in the media that class has not died and potentially never will. However, society is definitely becoming more understanding and aware of the hardships working class people can face and this is being mirrored in the media. For example, in comparison to the representation of Rose Tyler as previously mentioned, Bill Potts, The Doctor’s companion 12 years after Rose Tyler was introduced is also working class. Introduced in the first episode of the tenth season “ The Pilot” (2017), Bill Potts’ working class background is mentioned as it is revealed that she comes from a background of foster care and currently works in a cafeteria. This does not define her character though as it most likely would have done in the early seasons, as we saw with Rose Tyler, where her fashion, accent and family life were all being represented in a way to make higher-class viewers look down on her.

The media industry’s relationship with national identity has always been difficult and this is portrayed in the construction of race and ethnicity on British television (Hesmondhalgh and Saha, 2013). The “ commodification of race” (Hooks, 1992; Hutnyk, 2000, cited in Hesmondhalgh and Saha, 2013, p. 184) explains how the cultures and traditions of racial and ethnic minorities had become commodities to be borrowed or appropriated by the

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Caucasian majority; something that is often seen in the media. The commodification of race is part of a vast system of structural racism, labelling non-white groups as inferior (Hooks, 1995; Karla and Hutnyk 1998; Molina-Guzmán 2006, cited in Hesmondhalgh and Saha, 2013).

Multiculturalism can be defined as an attention to different cultures and a respect for a diversity of cultural perspectives (Liberetti, 2011). Rising immigration statistics and multi-ethnic integration in Britain over the last decade raised severe concerns within national communities, leading to public and political debates naming multiculturalism to be a failed agenda (Goodhart, 2013). Criticisms relating to the view that multiculturalism could lead the promotion of ethnic diversity (Parekh, 2000) led to criticisms that undermined national cultures and values. The rift between nationalism and multiculturalism that existed most strongly in the mid-2000s (Black, 2016) is still evident today, although the extent of it is much less dramatic. In the latest season of Doctor Who, The Doctor has a team of companions, consisting of a Pakistani woman, a Black man and a white man. This grouping represents multiculturalism and how it has changed to become a more accepted and respected notion.

Doctor Who is a widely popular television series with viewers from across the globe. With the 50th anniversary special, 'Day of the Doctor' (2013), being broadcast simultaneously in over 75 countries (BBC, 2013), the series has become a staple and a symbol of British culture. The sheer popularity Doctor Who has gained over the years and its' huge audience means that the

content of the show should be placed under a lot of scrutiny. To people in other countries, this may be the only representation of Britain they consume.

On one hand, it can be argued that Doctor Who, from 2005 onwards, is a positive and inclusive representation of national identity and values. The issue of race, for example, has been brought up several times in analysis of Doctor Who. With Rose Tyler's boyfriend, Mickey, and the second companion, Martha Jones, the series had already cast two Black companions (main characters) within the first 3 seasons. For these two characters, their race was coincidental, there was no mention of Rose and Mickey's interracial relationship and they were both well-loved characters (Gupta, 2013).

However, on the other hand, with Martha as companion, the series faced an amount of backlash. In one episode 'The Shakespeare Code' (2007), The Doctor and Martha travel back to sixteenth century England where she asks The Doctor if she would be safe. His response was "just walk around like you own the place, works for me." This could be interpreted as a perfectly innocent response of The Doctor's eccentric and bold character, however the lack of consideration from The Doctor is hard not to perceive as that of the team behind it, the BBC and its writers and directors. Suggesting that they lack the compassion to allow The Doctor to acknowledge the possible danger Martha may face as a Black woman in this time. Similarly, in 2008 as David Tennant was finishing his run as The Doctor, the BBC began to receive a lot of questions and there was a lot of discussion about why he had always been played by a white man. The producer at the time, Russell T. Davies, said "I think the more it's talked about, the more likely it is to happen" (Foster, 2008). This then leads to questions about the intentions behind there being a

non-white Doctor, if there ever is one, as it's a fine line between equality and tokenism. When looking for Tennant's replacement, two black male actors were favourites however they both declined out of fear of being used as a token black character (Gupta, 2013).

To conclude, Doctor Who as an influential television series has improved massively throughout its time on the small screen with a range of ethnicities featuring heavily in the storyline, despite The Doctor always being white. However, this is largely speculated to change in the coming years. Doctor Who is an encapsulation of national identity and, now, multiculturalism and shares British cultures with viewers from all over the world. As well as this, its' representation of social class, namely the comparison between the working-class representation of Rose Tyler and, later, Bill Potts, is effective in showing how society has changed to understand that a person's class or income does not define them and was a refreshing take on the negative and comedic "chav" stereotype portrayed on shows such as Little Britain (2003).

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