

The Black Archive #21
HEAVEN SENT



By Kara Dennison

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INTRODUCTION

Few episodes of **Doctor Who**, be it in the 20th or 21st century, have stirred quite as much reaction as *Heaven Sent* (2015). Daring for being a single-hander, daring as a metaphor for grief, daring visually and psychologically: it's no wonder that it went on to win a variety of awards, and be nominated and shortlisted for more.

The concept of the story itself – an ever-looping timeline – has been explored over and over in both Western and Eastern entertainment. Stephen King's **Dark Tower** series and short piece 'That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is in French' reflect his personal motto that 'Hell is repetition'¹. The 2016 film adaptation of *Dr Strange* (carrying with it some *Heaven Sent* vibes) used the concept of repetition as torture in rather an unexpected way. And *Groundhog Day* (1993), well, goes without saying. That film alone, while not the beginning of the use of the trope by any means, comes to mind in contemporary uses of it, especially within geek and genre entertainment – either via deliberate reference, or by virtue of the film's cultural spread.

This timeline, this rut, is examined as a Hell by the Doctor himself during the episode, and as a cycle of grief by everyone from scriptwriter Steven Moffat all the way down to yours truly. It's a powerful metaphor for what our lives become when we lose someone dear to us, and that symbolism can and should never be forgotten.

However...

With all the attention given to these metaphors for the viewer and their own life experience, it can be easy to overlook just how much this episode means for the Doctor – with regards to the 12th Doctor as an isolated portrayal, the Doctor himself as a character of more than half a century's standing, and the 'character' of the Doctor that our anonymous protagonist created for himself.

What we have here, from a symbolic and scriptwriting standpoint, is a textbook example of a character development episode. Everything from the architecture of the castle to the clothing the Doctor appears in after *Face the Raven* (2015) feeds into what is, in essence, an hour-long lesson (for the Doctor and for us) on who and what the Doctor is and what happens when that character's evolution is on the table. Just as the castle is the Doctor's bespoke torture chamber, the episode itself is the Doctor's bespoke character development playing field. Every turn, every plot point, every **room** simply adds fuel to this.

The episode takes visual cues from everything from German expressionism to *Citizen Kane* (1941) to director Rachel Talalay's own work in the **Nightmare on Elm Street** franchise. Put together, these visuals – as well as deep-seated symbolism in the Jungian tradition – build what is probably the clearest look we've had since 1963 at the psyche of the individual who has chosen to give himself the name of 'Doctor.'

Was it intentional? Were we meant to have this very clear Doctor 101 lesson? Or is it a by-product of the storytelling? Rather pleasingly, it doesn't matter – whether Moffat intended it or not, it's there for us to explore and to poke at, and gives us an impressive jumping-off point into the fall-out that occurs in *Hell Bent* (2015).

Most of all, it gives us a chance to see what the Doctor – as a metatextual character – does when cornered into such a thing. We know our hero, and we know that he does not like being told what to do². What happens, then, when his very TV show places him in a setting that is traditional and peculiar to growth and development? Considering this iteration of the Doctor is one heavily about exploring the nature of the character – from his early

¹ King, Stephen, endnotes to 'That Feeling, You Can Only Say What It Is in French', *The New Yorker* Summer Fiction issue, 22 and 29 June 1998.

² Clara as his 'boss' in Series 8 to 9 seems to contradict this, but even that drift from his headstrong nature feeds into this discussion.

questioning of his own morality³ to his swan song consisting largely of a list of what being the Doctor means⁴ – we are in for at least some answers. But for a series 9 12th Doctor, during his loss of Clara and prior to much of his later education, it's going to be just as rough on his own terms as anything he's done up to this point.

The Doctor – or rather, the person who calls himself 'the Doctor' – is a force to be reckoned with. And whether it's Time Lords wanting answers to an age-old prophecy or a writer demanding catharsis after the loss of a companion, the Doctor will rebel. Even if that means four and a half billion years of punching a wall⁵.

³ *Deep Breath* (2014).

⁴ *Twice Upon a Time* (2017).

⁵ The highest number mentioned in *Heaven Sent* itself is 'two billion years', but *Hell Bent* refers three times to 'four and a half billion years', which seems to be the definitive figure.

CHAPTER 1: A BESPOKE TORTURE CHAMBER

The wonderful thing about *Heaven Sent* is that it's not a stretch to analyse, or even to **want** to analyse – being informed that we're about to watch Peter Capaldi do a one-man show in a murder castle pretty much screams, 'Please deconstruct this.' From the previews it is clear that there will be a great deal of symbolism, and it's probably going to tell us something very important indeed before we go in for the final push of series 9.

It's also the literal centrepiece of a three-parter in a series full of two-parters. While the name pairing continues the theme begun with *The Magician's Apprentice / The Witch's Familiar* (2015), this is the keystone of the triptych created by *Face the Raven* on one side and *Hell Bent* on the other – the central piece that defines the decisions made after the former and sets the stage for the fall the Doctor takes in the latter.

We're given our answers to the riddle of *Heaven Sent* as soon as the Doctor punches his way out of the Confession Dial: his bespoke puzzle box is as much a confessional literally as it is symbolically. While its function is repurposed by the Time Lords for their own ends within the scope of series 9's story arc, its original purpose is served when it comes to the viewers' engagement with the Doctor (and, theoretically, the Doctor's engagement with himself). We, the viewer, do get a handful of straight answers – perhaps not as many as we'd like just yet, but we do get some insight. But even though he notes that he's 'nothing without an audience,'⁶ this is very much his own journey; and how (or if) he chooses to make it is just as telling as the blatant truths he blurts out when attempting to escape the Veil.

There are no attempts made to shy away from or 'vague up' the purpose of the castle, or the episode, at all. Yes, the purpose becomes clearer on repeat viewings. But even the opening hands the point to us: soul-searching. The manual on the castle wall (skimmed over visually and elaborated on by the Doctor in monologue) even lays out why we're all here:

'As you come into this world, something else is also born.
You begin your life and it begins a journey.
Towards you.
Wherever you go,
Whatever path you take,
It will follow.
You will notice a second shadow next to yours.'

Technically, of course, this is his rule book for the castle – for dealing with the Veil, specifically. But symbolically speaking, we're being told: this is an episode of self-exploration, of moving forward, of acceptance of parts of oneself one would prefer to leave unaddressed. Bluntly, on this week's very special **Doctor Who**, we will be getting character development.

And between the invocation of the Shadow and the use of an entire multilevel building as the Doctor's stage for self-discovery, we're already firmly in Jungian space.

⁶ All quotations from *Heaven Sent* unless otherwise noted.