

Doctor Who: The Satan Pit – Programme Notes

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A mysterious planet, hidden in an isolated corner of the universe.

A strange blue box arriving with a whirring, groaning noise and without explanation.

An ominous message – 'Welcome to Hell' – scrawled on a wall next to an ancient, untranslatable language.

The sudden appearance of grotesque-looking creatures threatening our heroes in a cliffhanger that takes us into the iconic theme tune.

The opening of 'The Impossible Planet' has many of the hallmarks of a *Doctor Who* story, providing a template for countless other episodes, especially across the post-2005 reboot. There's a lurking danger, unleashed by a combination of ego and bad luck. There's the disappearance of the TARDIS (a surprisingly common occurrence) that reinforces just how much the Doctor relies on his magical blue box ('it's everything I've got!') And, of course, there's the Doctor's complex but enduring relationship to humans – both individually and as a species.

The band of plucky scientist-adventurers living in Sanctuary Base 6 are typical of many of the humans that the Doctor comes across in the rebooted series. Humanity in *Doctor Who* is defined by curiosity, exploration and discovery, as having an innate dream to see the universe, to expand humanity's horizons across all of space and to the end of time. In many ways *Doctor Who*'s human characters act as a mirror reflecting the Doctor back to themself. Just as the Doctor stole a TARDIS and ran away to see the stars, humankind also finds any means possible to escape Earth. This breeds a persistent admiration for humanity in the Doctor that emerges again in these episodes. The crew are facing two impossible situations (falling into a black hole and being devoured by a mysterious Satan-like beast trapped below them) that are both reward and punishment for daring to seek out the stars. When faced with that combination of excitement and danger, peppered with a dash of self-sacrifice, the Doctor can't help but respect them and, of course, risk everything to try and save them.

If the Doctor has an openly deep emotional attachment to humanity as a whole, when it comes to the individual humans closest to them, the tenth Doctor at least is happier placing invisible

boundaries. One of the key features of the series reboot was an implicit acknowledgement of the Doctor possibly, maybe having romantic feelings. Whilst the presence of Susan, the first Doctor's granddaughter, suggests some kind of family life – and the romantic emotions that go with it – the Doctor is frequently positioned as separated from human emotions, capable of making difficult decisions because they aren't swayed by pesky emotional attachments. In contrast to the original run of the series, the rebooted series openly and repeatedly played with the possibilities of the Doctor's relationship to their companions, most notably Rose.

'The Impossible Planet'/'Satan's Pit' is a key turning point in the Doctor/Rose relationship. After a sudden and unexpected regeneration followed by multiple episodes packed with flirtatious interactions, these episodes set out the Doctor and Rose's contrasting viewpoints on who they are to each other. As they contemplate a TARDIS-less future, both start imagining what life could be like without adventures through time and space. For Rose, the imagined house – one they could share – is a wistful dream, for the Doctor it's inconceivable (though, ironically, is exactly what happens to David Tennant's second iteration of the Doctor in 2023's 'The Giggle'). The episode's resolution, however, relies on their inability to give up on each other. Of course, the pair are heading inevitably to an enforced separation in just a few episodes time, nicely foreshadowed here. Although Rose would eventually get her (sort of) happy ending thanks to some narrative and metacrisis trickery, at this point their relationship is defined by their unwavering faith in each other and the Doctor's unwillingness to completely embrace what they mean to each other.

The relationship between the (Ninth and Tenth) Doctor and Rose didn't just signal a shift in how the series handled romantic attachment and its main character's emotional inner life. It was also a key reason for the reboot's popularity and the resurgence of the series to become a behemoth of British TV culture. The 2006 series flourished on the chemistry between its two leads, cementing a successful return the previous year from a long period in the televisual wilderness. 2026 offers (yet) another crisis/turning point in the series' history that carries echoes of 1989. When the BBC put the call out for a new production company to take over the series, there was a not-so-subtle undercurrent that implied the series had lost its way and was in need of not just a restart but another reboot. Despite proclaiming the series as 'one of the most enduring and distinctive brands in global television', and that future series – whenever they appear - should 'remain true to the values and characteristics that have made *Doctor Who* a beloved series across generations', there was also an expectation that any pitch should bring 'a new perspective that ensures *Doctor Who* remains relevant, surprising, brave and inspiring for both long-standing fans and new audiences'. The series is grappling with one of the longest creative histories of any television programme whilst also looking for new direction.

However, the call for new production companies to take it on was met by several creative juggernauts of British television including Jed Mercurio and the BBC's great commercial rival, ITV Studios. The series' potential and its centrality to British television culture clearly remain undimmed and the series' economic and strategic importance to the BBC – as a global brand they've spent the last twenty years building – means that retreating to the wilderness is impossible. An alternative solution is needed, one that can rally both the *Doctor Who* fanbase and bring new audiences to the series. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that fans are being given a chance to celebrate when the series was at the height of its popularity. This special screening acts as a reminder that we all share a deep affection for a strange, twin-hearted alien who adores Earth over all other planets, even their own. After all, when a plucky group of passionate humans face a threat to the way of life – or TV programme – they love, you can always call on the Doctor.