

Whether you liked the episode or not, the Series 12 episode *The Timeless Children* written by Chris Chibnall was a big story in the show's history. By the time of Jodie Whittaker's Doctor, we were certain about the full story of the Doctor's life, that they were from and born on Gallifrey, and had fifteen incarnations in total, that's until *The Timeless Children* revealed multiple things about the Doctor's life that changed what we thought we knew, and here's a recap of everything we learned...

On a deserted planet, a space explorer called Tecteun from the planet Gallifrey found the Doctor as an abandoned child next to a monument under a wormhole to another universe. After adopting and bringing the Doctor to Gallifrey, Tecteun discovered after a fatal accident that her daughter could regenerate, and after years of experiments which forced them to regenerate five times, Tecteun was able to splice the child's DNA into Gallifreyan DNA, leading to the development and founding of Time Lord society. Some time after the Time Lords established the policy of non-interference in the affairs of other peoples and planets, Tecteun and a number of Time Lords created a black ops organisation called Division in order to secretly interfere in the affairs of other peoples and planets. Division recruited the Doctor, and they worked as an operative for them for an unknown number of incarnations until Tecteun had the Doctor mind-wiped, reset into a baby, and returned to Gallifrey to start a new life, and this boy grew up to be the person we know as the First Doctor.

Now it's fair to say that a lot of people didn't like these revelations, which I fully understand, but I think when you take time to process them, several of these revelations aren't without foundation and don't actually change the Doctor or Doctor Who in a fundamental and damaging way.

The most disliked reveal in *The Timeless Children* was the Timeless Child concept itself, which is that the Doctor was the origin of the Time Lord's ability to regenerate, meaning that all of the achievements the Time Lord founders made wouldn't have been possible without the Doctor, and so I understand why people dislike that because it makes the Doctor extremely important to the history of an entire civilisation. I think what some people don't realise is that the Timeless Child isn't the Doctor having Pre-Hartnell lives, or the Fugitive Doctor, or the Doctor being a foundling who was adopted by Tecteun and brought to Gallifrey. The Timeless Child is the Doctor being the origin and source of regeneration, and that exists as it's own concept, separate to the other concepts I gave example of, as Tecteun didn't adopt the Doctor because they could regenerate, she adopted them because she saw them as a discovery to be taken.

In the third 60th Special, *The Giggle*, the Toymaker said to the Doctor that he made a jigsaw out of his history, which Russell T Davies said in the video commentary for that episode was an explanation for the Timeless Child and the Doctor being half-human. Building on this in detail, an explanation for the Doctor being the origin of regeneration as the Timeless Child, is that the Toymaker messed with the images of the Doctor's hidden past in the Gallifreyan Matrix to make it appear as if the Doctor was the origin of regeneration in order to drive the Master insane and kill every Time Lord, because it was the Master discovering that a piece of the Doctor's DNA was within him that made him go mad. But what you could say is that before the Toymaker tampered with the images, it showed that the Doctor was one of several Gallifreyan children, the Doctor being the only adopted Gallifreyan, used as test subjects of regeneration experiments, perhaps after exposure to the untempered schism, and in the end, it was another child's DNA that ended up being gene spliced into the elite of Shobogans, and not the Doctor's.

This re-contextualises the Timeless Child so that the Doctor isn't the origin of regeneration and their DNA isn't in every Time Lord, but keeps all of the other concepts revealed in The Timeless Children like the Doctor having a Pre-Hartnell life, Division, Tecteun, and the Doctor being a foundling who was adopted and brought to Gallifrey, because those things do fit with the Doctor's character and the history of the show, and don't need to be in-universe retcons of the Toymaker. When you remove the Timeless Child from those other concepts, you can see how great they are.

The Doctor being a foundling who was adopted is a concept that was personally inspired by Chibnall's own life because in the Doctor Who Magazine, he revealed that he's an adoptee.

"Some of the inspiration for that was personal because it's an adoption myth and I was adopted. The thing about where you're from versus who you are... that's really personal to me. But I also think it's inbuilt into Doctor Who, because with each regeneration the Doctor is remade; you're a new person each time and you get to make new choices. When you disrupt that sense of knowing where you come from, you can take the Doctor to all sorts of new places. I was just digging deeper into what was already there, making it a personal and emotional story"

And while at Gallifrey One in 2023, Chibnall said this at one of his panels...

"I didn't come in thinking 'oh I'm gonna make the Doctor an adoptee. It wasn't about having an agenda, more about, ah, this fits with the character. The idea of the Doctor being an adoptee and foundling shines with the Doctor being a mystery and an enigma"

And this is also personal topic for me because I'm an adoptee myself. I was placed into foster care when I was two months old, and had two foster families until I was adopted when I was two years old. Having watched Doctor Who from Hartnell to Gatwa, the Doctor stands out very clearly as an adoptee-coded character, with their behaviours and character traits mirroring those of an adoptee. One of the core parts of the Doctor's character is their fear of loss and abandonment, which was first seen in The Chase in 1965 when Ian and Barbara asked the Doctor if they could return home.

THE DOCTOR: I don't want to know! I want none of this! I've never heard such nonsense in my life! You'll end up as a couple of burnt cinders, flying around in space. You idiots! You are absolute idiots!

BARBARA: We are not idiots! We want to go home!

IAN: Yes, home! I want to sit in a pub and drink a pint of beer again. I want to walk in a park and watch a cricket match. Above all, I want to belong somewhere, do something, instead of this aimless drifting around in space.

DOCTOR: Aimless? I've tried for two years to get you both home!

IAN: Well, you haven't been very successful, have you?

DOCTOR: How dare you, young man. How dare you, sir! I didn't even invite you into the ship in the first place. You both thrust yourselves upon me!

BARBARA: Oh, Doctor, stop it!

DOCTOR: Oh, for heavens sake, I've never heard such nonsense.

BARBARA: Look, I know we thrust ourselves upon you, but we've through a great deal together since then. And all we've been through will remain with us always. It'll probably be the most exciting part of my life. Look, Doctor, we're different people, and now we have a chance to go home. We want to take that chance. Will you help us work that machine?

DOCTOR: No! No! I will not aid and abet suicide.

IAN: Oh, he's as stubborn as a mule.

VICKI: Doctor? Doctor, you've got to let them go if they want to. They want to be back in their own time.

DOCTOR: Don't you want to go with them, child?

VICKI: What for? What would I want to be back in their time for? I want to be with you. Doctor, you've got to help them.

This is one of those uncommon times the First Doctor shows a childlike sense of vulnerability, revealing that loss and separation are something that deeply affects him. And it's the same every time from *The Green Death* (1973) to *The Angels Take Manhattan* (2012), when the Doctor is left by or has to leave their companions, it breaks their hearts in a very deep way.

## MONTAGE OF COMPANIONS LEAVING THE DOCTOR

In these moments when the Doctor is left by their companions, it always brings out the vulnerable child in them, like they're reliving childhood trauma. For adoptees, attachment, separation, and abandonment issues are very common difficulties for us because of the trauma of being separated from our birth parents, and I'm not using that word lightly. It's traumatic because the attachments that we'd formed with our birth mother and father, in and out of the womb, are severed when we're separated from them and placed into a new and unfamiliar environment, whether that be foster care or straight from the birth parents to adoptive parents, which is more of an adoption practice in the US. And even if parental and familial separation happened to someone as a baby or infant like the Doctor was, that doesn't mean they can't remember. The child psychology service states that "babies and infants absorb traumatic experiences not as events but as part of their reality and use them to develop their way of being," which is why a child who experiences parental separation has abandonment, separation, and attachment trauma. And so the Doctor having been separated from their birth parents, found alone and adopted, just completely fits with who they are.

We know that the Doctor lacked a secure sense of belonging amongst the Gallifreyans and felt out of place on Gallifrey. A part of that is because they found Time Lord society corrupt and boring, but this also fits with the adoptee experience. What a lot of people probably haven't thought about is that when someone is adopted, we lose the genetic mirroring of our birth families and grow up with our foster or adoptive families, who we share no genetic traits and features with. This is why we can feel out of place and lonely because we're the only one of us in a sea of people who look like each other, and when it's not something that's really been explained to you, that can make it even more confusing. Having recently reconnected with my birth family, it's been a very strange and positive experience now having family who I look like and share features with me.

On top of this, because we've lost significant attachments, feeling a secure sense of belonging can be difficult going forward due to the fear that we'll experience loss again, and so feeling a sense of permanence is tricky. Not that both of these things mean that our adoptive families aren't our real families or that we don't belong with them, but these emotions and feelings are a natural response to what we've experienced.

And so this fits with the Doctor's relationship with Gallifrey, and explains why they felt out of place on Gallifrey and lacked a secure sense of belonging, which would mean that a part of the First Doctor subconsciously remembered that he wasn't from Gallifrey. With the Toymaker explanation for the Timeless Child in mind, the Doctor being an adopted Gallifreyan is a uniqueness that only

affects the Doctor. Outwardly, they look the same as every other Gallifreyan, and so them having had a different biology and origin doesn't make them special. It's no different to the uniqueness of an adoptee in their adoptive family or a person living in a country they're not originally from.

After the reveal that the Doctor wasn't from Gallifrey, I saw some fans say that the Doctor was no longer a real Gallifreyan, and that them saving Gallifrey in *The Day of the Doctor* was pointless because of that fact, but nothing could be further from the truth. Yes, *The Timeless Children* means that the Doctor is an adopted Gallifreyan, but from an upbringing perspective, that doesn't make them any less of a Gallifreyan than those native to the planet like the Master, Borusa, or the Rani. When the Doctor was adopted by Tecteun and brought to Gallifrey, they adopted a Gallifreyan/Shobogan identity, which only grew the more time the Doctor lived there. And the Doctor is still a Time Lord, for the same reasons, but also because of the fact that they existed pre-Time Lord society and became a Time Lord just like all of the other Shobogans like Tecteun, Rassilon, and Omega. The connection and attachment the Doctor has had with Gallifrey across the show's history isn't undermined by the fact that they weren't born there, because it's all about the connections and attachments you make as time passes, how that started out, whether through birth or through adoption, that doesn't make one more or less real than the other, adoption is just a different beginning. This false notion mirrors something that us adoptees can hear a lot from people, and that's our birth family being called our "real" family, implying that our adoptive family aren't because we aren't from them, but that is far from reality. I can't speak for every adoptee because unfortunately not every adoptee is adopted into a safe and loving family, and/or were adopted for the right reasons. But, for those of us who were, like me, we know without a doubt that our adoptive family are our real family, because fundamentally a family isn't about being related, it's about the love, care, history, attachments, and connections that are shared. The same with a person who grew up in one country, but is from and was born in another country. They are just as much of a part of the country they moved to as everyone else. This applies to the Doctor's name as well, because the Doctor not being native to Gallifrey means that their Gallifreyan name isn't their birth name, which some people have taken issue with. But again, the Doctor gaining that name through adoption doesn't mean that it's not their real name, and there's nothing to say that after wiping their mind and resetting them into a child, Tecteun didn't have the Doctor given the same name she gave them when she adopted them. The mystery of what their original name isn't ruined, and is now twofold because there's the mystery of their adoptive name and birth name. This theme of home and family not always being where you're from is shown through the Doctor's connection with Earth and humans. Adoption and adoptive families have always been one of the core themes of the show, with how the Doctor continually adopts companions and has built a gigantic adoptive family on Earth. For all the times the Doctor's said they don't have a home, Earth has been their adoptive home and humans their adoptive species for thousands of years.

I'm surprised it's actually taken this long for the show to acknowledge that adoption is a big part of its identity. When companions leave, the Doctor's legacy is always carried on by them, by how they act and behave, but this also fits with how several companions have gone on to look after children who needed care, like Sarah Jane adopting Luke, Tegan adopting a son, Rory and Amy adopting Anthony, and Ben and Polly running an orphanage in India, and I'm sure that many other companions have gone on to adopt or foster children too.

In *The Writer's Tale*, Russell T Davies confirmed that the Woman who appeared to Wilf throughout *The End of Time* was intended as the Doctor's mother. But after *The Timeless Children*, some fans claimed that threw a spanner in the works, that the Woman couldn't be the Doctor's mother because

the Doctor isn't native to Gallifrey. But what they mean is that she couldn't be his birth mother, but that doesn't ruin or mess with the intention. All it means is that the Woman was the Doctor's foster or adoptive mother, and that doesn't make her less of a mother; a mother is a mother no matter what kind. I only use this term to differentiate, but my adoptive mum and dad would go to the ends of the Earth for me, and me for them. The scene and the intent still have the exact same impact as it had before.

A big part of the Doctor's character is the mystery and enigma behind them, like what their original name is. The reveal that the Doctor is a foundling not only fits with the Doctor's character for the same reasons given for them being an adoptee, but it's also a great way of adding to the mystery of the Doctor in a real way. When a child is found abandoned, they just appear out of nowhere with absolutely no context of their personal history or identity; the only people who know are the birth mother, plus the birth father if he was involved, and anyone else the parents told like family and/or friends. To a foundling and everyone else in existence, their origins are a mystery, the most basic fundamental facts of their own identity are missing. I think what's clever about the reveal that the Doctor is an adoptee and foundling is that while it does reveal something huge about the Doctor's past, at the same time the foundling aspect reintroduces a lot of mystery to their past because we only have the perspective of Tecteun, the person who found the Doctor as an infant, and so everything that happened before the Doctor was found like why they were abandoned and where they come from is completely unknown, echoing and emboldening the titular question of the show Doctor Who?

It's great that Russell T. Davies is continuing with this in his new era, and I hope that the emotional impact of it is further explored in seasons to come. When promoting Season 1, Russell said about the Doctor being an adoptee and foundling that he hopes...

"That is the journey and hopefully for seasons to come. It has put the Doctor in a very interesting position and what I love about this notion of him being a foundling, an orphan, is that it fits with the image of the Doctor anyways. He's always been alone, travelled on his own, needs a companion, finds new ones to take with him, then it breaks his heart when they leave. So, that's a man always searching for a family, always creating a found family, which is wonderful, I love that. And so it fits for him to be adopted, to have been lost in the universe abandoned as a child. It's one of those great bits of lore that actually resonates with what the character always was, I'm overjoyed with it."

I've been saying this for years, and so it's really validating that Russell, who isn't an adoptee, can see it too. In a press interview with (name) Russell said:

"Those fantasy words (Timeless Child) don't mean a lot, but what does mean a lot is if you say he's a foundling, if you say he doesn't know where he's from, if you say he was adopted by the Time Lords, which means he is still a Time Lord, to be adopted by someone is to become them. And adopted people will say that very passionately that their (adoptive) mother and father is their mother and father"

The overall reveal of The Timeless Children was that there were incarnations of the Doctor before Hartnell's Doctor, that The Tenth Planet in 1966 was not the first time the Doctor had regenerated, which wasn't popular for some fans, but what isn't widely known is that Pre-Hartnell incarnations are a concept as old as regeneration. In The Power of the Daleks, the serial following The Tenth

Planet, the newly regenerated Doctor is written as if he had regenerated before, and Steven Moffat pointed this out in an interview with Radio Times, saying that...

“The big plot holes that no-one ever mentions is in The Power of the Daleks, just to get nerdy, The Doctor talks as if he's done this before. The first time it happens, he wanders around that first episode behaving as if, 'Och my old body wore out, I got a new one. He does not behave as if it's his first time. And later on it's retconned into the idea that it was the first time. But that doesn't fit.”

And this is intentional because a cut line from The Power of the Daleks script had the Doctor pick up a ring and state to Ben and Polly that he had worn it the last time he was renewed, and so the idea has always been there and subsequently played with throughout the years, even when the 1977 serial The Three Doctors stated that Hartnell was the First Doctor. For example, in Part 4 of the 1976 serial The Brain of Morbius, the Fourth Doctor fought a Time Lord criminal called Morbius, who he challenged to a mind-bending contest. On a display screen, we saw Morbius pushing the Doctor back through his previous lives, but it didn't stop at Hartnell, because eight more faces appeared as Morbius proclaimed back to your beginning. Some people theorised that those eight faces were Morbius, but Phillip Hinchcliffe, the producer of the story, said that...

"It is true to say that I attempted to imply that William Hartnell was not the first Doctor. We tried to get famous actors for the faces of the Doctor, but because no one would volunteer, we had to use backroom boys.” And Phillip was actually one of those backroom boys who appeared as one of the eight faces of the Doctor.

The idea of the Doctor having lives before Hartnell wasn't built on again until the Seventh Doctor's era, when script editor Andrew Cartmel decided to reintroduce the mystery back into the Doctor's life that had been depleted across the years by seeding it throughout several stories that, before Hartnell's Doctor, the Doctor had been a founder of Time Lord civilisation along with Rassilon and Omega, with elements of that life coming back into the Doctor's life in his Seventh incarnation.

The first story where the Doctor's ancient past started to catch up with him was in Remembrance of the Daleks, hinting to Ace that he was there...

THE DOCTOR: A long time ago, on my home planet of Gallifrey, there lived a stellar engineer called Omega.

ACE: Stellar? As in stars? You mean he engineered stars?

THE DOCTOR: Ace!

ACE: Sorry. Go on.

THE DOCTOR: It was Omega who created the supernova that was the initial power source for Gallifreyan time travel experiments. He left behind him the basis on which Rassilon founded Time Lord society, and he left behind the Hand of Omega.

ACE: His hand? What good was that?

THE DOCTOR: No, no, not his hand literally. No, no, it's called that because Time Lords have an infinite capacity for pretension.

ACE: I've noticed that.

THE DOCTOR: The Hand of Omega is a mythical name for Omega's remote stellar manipulator, a device used to customise stars with. And didn't we have trouble with the prototype.

ACE: We?

THE DOCTOR: They.

From the same serial, there was a cut scene from the UK broadcast but kept in some international broadcasts, and was recently reinserted into the updated version of Remembrance of the Daleks in the Season 25 Collection boxset.

DAVROS: You flatter yourself Doctor. In the end you are merely another Time Lord.

THE DOCTOR: Oh Davros. I am far more than just another Time Lord.

In the Silver Nemesis, a living metal called Validium, which was created by the Time Lord founders as a defence for Gallifrey, came to Earth in 1988 and told Lady Peinforte about the Doctor's involvement in the creation of Time Lord society.

ACE: The Doctor's not just going to give you the bow. Tell her, Doctor. Tell her.

PEINFORTE: Doctor who? Have you never wondered where he came from, who he is?

ACE: Nobody knows who the Doctor is.

PEINFORTE: Except me.

ACE: How?

PEINFORTE: The statue told me.

ACE: All right, so what does it matter? He's a Time Lord, I know that.

PEINFORTE: Well, Doctor?

DOCTOR: If I give you the bow

PEINFORTE: Your power becomes mine, but your secrets remain your own.

DOCTOR: It's all over, Ace. My battle, all my battles, I've lost. I can only surrender.

PEINFORTE: Yes.

DOCTOR: But not to you. The Cybermen will have the Nemesis.

LEADER: This is most rational, Doctor.

PEINFORTE: But I know your secrets.

DOCTOR: Very well, tell them.

PEINFORTE: I shall tell them of Gallifrey, tell them of the old time, the time of chaos.

DOCTOR: Be my guest.

PEINFORTE: Your secrets

CYBER LEADER: The secrets of the Time Lords mean nothing to us.

This idea that the Doctor was an important figure in Time Lord history actually goes back to something the Doctor said at the end of The Daleks, Part 7, that aired in 1964.

THE DOCTOR: To rebuild a whole new world. How I envy you.

ALYDON: But you must stay and help us. We could learn from you.

THE DOCTOR: Oh, no, no. I'm afraid I'm much too old to be a pioneer. Although I was once amongst my own people.

In The Curse of Fenric, we got to meet an enemy of the Doctor that he'd encountered in his pre-Hartnell life, an ancient being of evil called Fenric who, speaking of his previous encounter, says...

JUDSON: For seventeen centuries I was trapped in the shadow dimensions because of him. He pulled bones from the desert sands and carved them into chess pieces. He challenged me to solve his puzzle. I failed. Now I shall see him kneel before me before I let him die.

And finally, in Ghost Light, the Doctor encounters a being called Control who had been cataloguing all species in the universe, but at the end of the serial, Control says...

CONTROL: Doctor, something tells me you are not in our catalogue, nor will you ever be.

DOCTOR: You're busy. Must fly.

ACE: Bye, bye.

DOCTOR: Come on.

Suggesting that the Doctor might not be natively Gallifreyan because that's a species you would've expected Control to have catalogued already.

And so the Doctor having a pre-Hartnell life has always been there, but was just a forgotten but not de-canonised idea that sat there, and it just took until Series 12 for that idea to be woven into canon in a way that fits with the narrative that Hartnell was the first, which is that the Time Lords mind-wiped and reset into an infant, meaning that Hartnell's Doctor was the first of a brand new life cycle and a blank slate with no memory of his prior incarnations, and so every action and decision he made was his own. But ultimately, Hartnell's Doctor has never been defined by what numbered incarnation he is; he's defined by the fact that he ran away from Gallifrey with his granddaughter and came to Earth, meeting two school teachers and going on adventures throughout time and space helping and saving people. He doesn't need to be the very first incarnation in order to do those things, and there being incarnations prior to him doesn't change any of that history; it's all still there.

The Doctor being a Time Lord who decided to steal a TARDIS and run away to have adventures across time and space isn't at odds with them having a forgotten ancient past where they were a Time Lord pioneer, it emphasises that the Doctor, the person who helps and saves people, is who they are now because that's the person they chose to be. The Doctor is still the Doctor.

And in fact the Doctor being a foundling who was adopted and brought to Gallifrey goes back to the original mystery of the show. In an SFX interview between Russell T Davies and the first producer of the show, Verity Lambert, she said...

"You see, I didn't have any Time Lords at all. He was a mystery. That's why he was Doctor Who. Had he stolen this thing called a TARDIS? He didn't know how to work it – was he an absentminded professor? Was he a criminal? Was he on the run?"

And SFX asks her...Did you have a background for him worked out in your own heads? And Verity says...

"No, I had no idea. We had this mystery character, who didn't have a background, who was just there, and could have been anything, and that was actually more interesting than trying to give him a background. At that point we wanted him to be a mystery."

And so while yes you could say that the Doctor being an adoptee and foundling does add some background to the Doctor, it isn't without foundation because it fits with the character, but at the same time it also removes background from the Doctor because them being a foundling means we don't know where they came from and why they were alone by a monument under a wormhole on a

deserted planet, their origins are a complete mystery and the show is back to where it started in 1963.