

**Rod Serling**  
**Man from the Twilight Zone**  
By  
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I was once considered the world's top expert on Rod Serling, an undeserved and short-lived misnomer. At some point between 2002 and 2004, I heard an NPR report about Rod Serling, creator of the iconic *Twilight Zone* television series, which I mentioned to a church member who informed Serling had been a Unitarian. So, I decided to learn as much as I could about him and write a sermon which became the original, "Rod Serling: Man from the Twilight Zone."

It turned out that very little was written about Serling back then. After searching bookstores and libraries, I found just two books, Marc Scott Zicree's, *The Twilight Zone Companion*, which is essentially an episode guide written in 1982, and a library copy of Gordon Sander's biography, *Serling: The Rise and Twilight of Television's Last Angry Man*, written in 1992. It was also in the early days of the Internet, my Louisville congregation had just gotten its first website, and I'd only just begun publishing my transcripts online. Yet, for a short time thereafter, searching for my name on Yahoo (before Google became the dominant search engine) resulted mostly in mentions of my Rod Serling sermon, because there was literally nothing else about him online.

In a 2004 online discussion, for example, a person quotes me, then says, "No reference is given, and I have no idea who Dr. Eklof is." Prior to this, my transcripts were for my purposes alone, but comments like these made me realize the necessity of formally citing my sources, which I've done ever since. Six or so years later, I even earned my doctorate, just to make an honest man of myself. I also received an email from one of Serling's best friends thanking me for writing such a fitting "tribute to Rod," as he put it, and letting me he'd given a copy to his widow, Carol Serling, who passed in 2020 at age 90. I even received an invitation to come speak about him at Antioch College, where he and Carol met and where he studied theatre and broadcasting and earned his bachelor's degree in 1950. I accepted the invitation, but never heard anything more about it. Perhaps they realized I wasn't quite the expert the internet made me out to be.

Nowadays, nothing on the internet connects me to Serling, except the announcement on our church website that I'm discussing him again today. My original digital transcript has disappeared, perhaps somewhere into the Twilight Zone. Fortunately, I recently found a hard copy of it, which remains the basis of what I'll say next, as one who remains, not an expert, but a great admirer of this inspiring and brilliant man.

FADE IN

*There is fifth dimension beyond that which is known to man. It is a dimension as vast as space and timeless as Infinity. It is the middle ground between light and shadow, between science*

*and superstition, and it lies between the pit of a man's fears and the summit of his knowledge. This is the dimension of imagination. It is an area we call the Twilight Zone.*

Imagine if you will, a man trapped in a world and time not his own; a giant who stood only 5 foot 4 inches tall; A man of peace who lived and fought in a time of war; A man forever bound by nostalgic love to his roots in a small town, but powerfully drawn to the bright lights and golden opportunities of the big city; A man courageously committed to his duties as a citizen of humanity, yet a victim himself of bigotry and hatred; A man who may have lived longer than he should have expected, though his life was cut tragically short. Imagine all this, and you might begin to understand the heart of the man we call Rod Serling.

## ACT I

Rod Serling was a plagiarist. At least that's what many of his critics claimed, particularly other writers struggling to succeed in the area of science fiction. One very loud accuser, more than Serling's equal as a successful sci-fi writer, and his fellow Unitarian, was Ray Bradbury. Serling countered that he had never intentionally stolen another writer's work. Indeed, all the suits against him proved unsuccessful, with the exception of one in 1963 which, on the advice of his lawyer, Serling settled out of court for \$6500.

I would argue, however, that Serling was an unintentional plagiarist. He packed a lot of experience into his short stature and even shorter life. Everything he ever saw, said, or did, including conversations with others, their shared ideas, and the stories and articles he read lingered somewhere in the back of his imaginative mind waiting to be reborn in the *Twilight Zone*.

Take, for example, its very first episode, *Where is Everybody?*, which aired October 2, 1959, in which a man in an Air Force jumpsuit finds himself without a memory in a town completely void of people. After being driven nearly crazy in his search for others, the lonely man begins pushing the "walk" button at a stoplight over and over. In the end we learned the button is actually a panic button and the man is really an astronaut-trainee strapped within an isolation chamber to simulate Space Flight. After 484 hours of being left alone, he simply lost it. As host of the show, Serling closes the episode with, "*Up there, up there in the vastness of space in the void that is sky, up there is an enemy known as isolation. It sits there in the stars waiting, waiting with the patience of eons, forever waiting ... in the Twilight Zone.*"

Serling got his inspiration for this story from two sources, a *Time* magazine article about isolation experiments being performed on astronauts, and, in his own words, "I got the idea while walking through an empty lot of a movie studio. There were all the evidences of a community—but with no people. I felt at the time a kind of encroaching loneliness and desolation, a feeling of how nightmarish it would be to wind up in a city with no inhabitants."<sup>1</sup> There's even a scene in the episode during which the amnesiac finds himself trapped in a phone booth. After several moments of panic trying to push the door open, he

finally realizes it opens inward. In reality, this had once happened to Serling while on the payphone at an airport.

## ACT II

Growing up Jewish in Binghamton, New York, Serling experienced other kinds of isolation. Although Binghamton had its own synagogue and Jewish Community Center, things were far from great for the city's Jewish citizens. In 1925, only a year after he'd been born, a Klan backed mayoral candidate won the Republican primary and came extremely close to winning the general election. Those were the years membership in the KKK soared into the millions, and the state's Klan headquarters were located just one county over from Binghamton's. At the time, Jews were refused jobs, weren't allowed to live in certain neighborhoods, nor membership in the Binghamton Club, a restriction that would last into the 1960s.

Jewish kids like young Rod Serling would also have to put up with cruelties at school, like having their examinations deliberately scheduled for the Jewish High Holy days. Later in life, he would marry a non-Jewish girl, Carol Kramer, from an extremely prominent family. As a result of their union, Carol was completely disowned by her family, which must have stunned Serling deeply. In 1967, he told a *Los Angeles Times* reporter, "I happen to think the singular evil of our time is prejudice. It is from this evil that all other evils grow and multiply. In almost everything I've written, there is a thread of this: man's seemingly palpable need to dislike someone other than himself."<sup>2</sup>

There's even some suggestion Serling became a Unitarian, as was common among Jews at the time, because it allowed him to maintain his own Jewish identity without being ostracized by the Christian majority. According to a Wikipedia article, which does include citations, "He joined the Unitarian church in college, which allowed him to marry Kramer on July 31, 1948."<sup>3</sup> According to an online dictionary of famous Unitarians, "He was also inspired by the words of Unitarian educator Horace Mann, that first President of Antioch College, 'Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.'"<sup>4</sup> This further persuaded him and Carol to join the Unitarian Church. They eventually became active members and generous contributors to the Unitarian Community Church of Santa Monica, California.

In a particularly disturbing episode entitled, *Deaths-Head Revisited*, Serling directly takes on the Holocaust. In the story, an SS (Schutzstaffel) Captain of the Nazis regime's most elite Guard is revisiting the ruins of a concentration camp where he is haunted by the ghosts of those he once tortured to death. Their lingering spirits put him on trial and force him to experience the same suffering his victims felt. In the end, he's driven insane, and we see the frightening spirits of the dead standing before us. Serling close with:

*All of the Dachaus, the Belsens, the Buchenwalds, the Auschwitzes, must remain standing—all of them. They must remain standing because they are a monument to a moment in time when some men decided to turn the earth into a graveyard. Into it they shoveled all of their reason, their logic, their knowledge, but worst of all, their conscience. And the moment we forget this,*

*the moment we cease to be haunted by this remembrance, then we become grave diggers. Something to dwell on and remember, not only in the Twilight Zone, but wherever men walk God's earth.*

This was the only time an episode didn't end with the words, "Twilight Zone."

### ACT III

In spite of his "Jewishness," the athletic, handsome, outgoing kid with a great smile that everyone seemed to remember, proved to be popular among his schoolmates. Once he graduated from high school, Serling decided to join the paratroopers. He was rejected at first because of his height, but eventually found an outfit that let him slide through the system. Serling, however, was disappointed that he was assigned to the Pacific to fight the Japanese rather than the Nazis. Many things happened to him in the military that later became concepts in his writing. He would begin his career as a writer for military radio. He would take up boxing, winning 16 out of 17 fights. His father would die of a heart attack at age 52, foreshadowing his own fate. He would be wounded with shrapnel. Worst of all, his psyche would be strained by the horrors of war for the rest of his life causing him to be against the very idea of war.

In one *Twilight Zone* episode, for example, *A Quality of Mercy*, he takes a gung-ho American soldier, anxious to prove his manhood (much as Serling once was), who is stationed in the Philippines during the War, and suddenly transforms him into a Japanese Lieutenant so that he can begin to see things through his enemy's eyes. By the time of the Vietnam War, Serling's antiwar sentiments had fully matured, and he took to the lecture circuit speaking against it. In a 1968 commencement address to a group of high schoolers, he asked, "Are you tough enough to try to build a world in which young men can live out their lives in fruitful pursuit of a decent, enriching consummation of both their talents and hopes? If survival calls for the bearing of arms, bear them you must, but the most important part of the challenge is for you to find other means that does not come with the killing of your fellow men."<sup>5</sup>

Serling's liberalism probably developed after World War II at Antioch college, which he attended on the GI bill. Antiochans prided themselves on their liberalism. They birthed numerous cults and communes and seemed to despise any and every institution. They had no respect for organized religion or organized education. There, the students were free to set their own class schedules, going to whatever lectures that interested them. They even developed a completely meaningless college anti-yell:

Boomalack, boomalack, boomalack, a-beam,  
Riff-raff, riff-raff, riff-raff ream,  
Ip skiddy iki wahoo wah,  
Antioch, Antioch, RAH-RAH-RAH!

In 1954, after the *Cincinnati Enquirer* lambasted journalist Edward R. Murrow for his historic broadcast against McCarthyism, Serling wrote a courageous and public response to

its Editor rejecting Joseph McCarthy, his supporters, and the Paper's, as he put it, "campaign to delineate people in the Either-Or classification." Later, as television's Aesop, Serling took up the matter again in a classic *Twilight Zone* episode, *The Monsters Are Due On Maple Street*. It's about an idyllic neighborhood whose inhabitants begin to turn on each other after a boy who has read way too much science fiction warns them that human looking aliens have invaded Maple Street. At first, they pay him little attention, but slowly begin turning on one another, allowing unfounded fears and suspicion to destroy their once peaceful life together. At the episode's closing, Serling warns all of us that:

*The tools of conquest do not necessarily come with bombs and explosions and fallout. There are weapons that are simply thoughts, attitudes, prejudices—to be found only in the minds of men. For the record, prejudices can kill and suspicion can destroy, and a thoughtless, frightened searched for a scapegoat has a fallout all its own—for the children, and the children yet unborn. And the pity of it is that these things cannot be confined to the Twilight Zone.*

#### ACT IV

After he and Carol married and graduated from Antioch, Rod decided to become a writer and broke into the business as a staff writer with WLW, the same radio station that employed Earl Hamner Jr., who went on to create *The Waltons* TV series. Serling got his big break after *Kraft Television Theatre* produced his teleplay *Patterns*, about the cruelties and inhumanities of the corporate world. *Patterns* made him an overnight star and single handedly changed the face of television drama. After struggling for more than a year to prove he was more than a one-shot-wonder, Serling did it again with what he considered his favorite work, *Requiem for a Heavyweight*. The touching story about a washed-up boxer who ends up selling himself out to become a wrestler was inspired by a news story about his favorite boxer, Joe Lewis, who had begun wrestling for a living in real life.

*Requiem* won Serling his second Emmy. The first was for *Patterns*, and he'd later win his third, which was unprecedented at the time, for *The Comedian*, starring Mickey Rooney. Despite his tremendous success, the greatest television writer ever grew increasingly weary of compromising his work just to please sponsors. Having to change simple things, like "got a match," to, "got a light," to please the Ronson Lighter Company, for example, were annoying enough, but more troubling was television's general tendency to stay away from anything controversial to appease its sponsors. Serling felt strongly that television was a kind of pulpit from which to speak against social ills.

His conflict came to a head during the production of his teleplay, *Noon at Doomsday* about the violent murderer of an elderly Jewish man who is acquitted by the residents of his small hometown. When a reporter asked Serling if the story was based on Emmett Till, the true story of a fourteen-year-old black boy who was kidnapped and murdered in Mississippi, whose murderers were acquitted by an all-white jury, thousands of letters poured into United States Steel Company, sponsor of the program, threatening to boycott. As a result,

the elderly Jew was changed to an unnamed foreigner and the word “lynch” was entirely removed from the script. They even wanted to change the character of the homicidal maniac to a good American boy who temporarily went wrong.

That’s when Serling gave up writing drama and created *Twilight Zone*. Initially, people thought he was crazy for “going sci-fi,” something considered unworthy of someone with his talents. During a 1959 interview, the famous newscaster Mike Wallace asked, “So you’re giving up writing anything important for TV?”

“If by important,” Serling said, “you mean to try to delve into current issues, you’re quite right. But I’m convinced this will help my career. In eleven or twelve years of writing, I can lay claim to this, I have never written beneath myself. I have never written anything I did not want my name attached to.” He went on to say:

I think it's criminal that we are not permitted to make dramatic note of the social evils that exist, of controversial themes as they are inherent in our society. I think it's ridiculous that drama, by which its very nature should make a comment on those things which affect our daily lives, is in a position, at least in terms of television, of not being able to take that stand.<sup>6</sup>

And he was right about it all. Not only did the move help his career, winning him three more Emmys for *Twilight Zone*, but he found that the sponsors didn't bother him if he dealt with controversial issues disguised as parables in the form of science fiction, horror, and fantasy. Serling wrote over 90 of *Twilight Zone*'s 156 episodes, which ran from 1959 and 1964. He also became known for its twist endings and is the writer responsible for adding the closing scene to the 1969 film, *Planet of the Apes*, when astronaut George Talor, played by Charlton Heston, discovers the Statue of Liberty half buried in sand, realizing he's not on another planet after all, but has been on a post-apocalyptic Earth all along.

Today, after more than half a century, *Twilight Zone* remains as relevant as ever. A couple I nights ago I watched an episode entitled *A Thing about Machines*, about a man who becomes so frustrated with his machines that he often abuses them, kicking his television, smashing a chiming clock to the floor, ripping a ringing phone from the wall, and tossing a radio off the banister. In the open, Serling says, “*In short, Mr. Bartlett Finchley is a malcontent, born either too late or too early in the century, and who in just a moment will enter a realm where muscles and the will to fight back are not limited to human beings. Next stop for Mr. Bartlett Finchley—the Twilight Zone.*”

As the story proceeds, while alone in his home, Finchley is attacked by his machines, beginning with his typewriter repeatedly typing out the sentence, GET OUT OF HERE, FINCHLEY. In what quickly becomes a nightmare, the TV turns on by itself and repeats the same message, “Get out of here, Finchley,” as does a voice from the disconnected phone. Even the smashed clock begins repeatedly chiming. Finally, his unplugged electric razor chases him downstairs and out of the house, where his own car begins chasing him through the neighborhood until he has to jump into a neighbor’s swimming pool to escape it. Too

frighted to come out, Finchley drowns. For me this episode, which first aired in 1960, when our technology was far less advanced than it is today, before we had computers and smartphones and artificial intelligence, shows our fear of technology was, even then, great enough to turn into a good horror story, and makes me wonder if today such fears may be just as exaggerated.

But I think one the most relevant episode for us today is, *The Mind and the Matter*, written in 1961, about Archibald Beechcroft, a man who despises people, yet lives in a bustling city, has to ride to work on a packed subway, and works in crowded office. Fed up, he tells his boss, "If I had my way, here's how I'd fix the Universe. I'd eliminate the people. I mean crush them off. Get rid of them. Destroy them. Decimate them. And there'd be only one man left, me!" Hard to believe this is one of the more light-hearted episodes, given the protagonist's wish to commit global genocide.

After reading a book, *The Mind and the Matter*, about the power of concentration, Beechcroft concentrates hard enough to make everyone but himself disappear. But he doesn't finish one day moving through the empty city, traveling alone on the subway, and being completely by himself at work, before becoming bored a lonely enough to realize the problem wasn't other people, just that they were all so different from him. So, using the power of concentration again, he repopulates the world with people just like himself. Again, it's not long before he realizes everyone is unhappy, rude, and intolerant of everyone around them. He concentrates one last time, just long enough to return the world to its natural order and is more content than he's ever been in his life.

Nowadays, it seem too many of us, on both the left and the right, are utterly intolerant of those with different ideas than our own, and we wish to make them go away, not with magical thinking, but by demonizing, discrediting, and deplatforming them so they can't be heard or acknowledged by us or anyone else. Like Beechcroft, we want to make them invisible. Too many of us want a world in which everyone is just like us, believing it would then be perfect. Hopefully, like him, we'll also learn how boring, lonely, and unremarkable such a world would be, and, as Serling says at the end of this episode, "*that with all it's faults it may well be that this is the best of all possible worlds. People notwithstanding, it has much to offer. Tonight's case in point ... in the Twilight Zone.*"

FADE OUT

As prolific a writer as he was, Serling seemed destined, like his father, to live a short life. He smoked as many as four packs of cigarettes a day and drank coffee incessantly. On June 28<sup>th</sup>, 1975, when he was only 50 years old, Serling died from his third heart attack while undergoing open heart surgery. Prior to his death, he told one of his writing students that he'd been working on a story about a man who provided the residents of his small town with a potion of eternal life. But the same man had grown tired of life and was ready to die. Perhaps, Serling was that man, a man who died just as he had lived, with and open heart.

## Rod Serling: Man From the Twilight Zone

*Rodney Edward Serling was born in Syracuse, New York, on Christmas Day, 1924 and liked to refer to himself as "a present that was delivered unwrapped." His gift to us is his inspiring vision of a better world, a world of peace and kindness and understanding, where all people, no matter who they are, where they are from, or what they look like, are valued, and respected, and cared for. Perhaps he's there right now, waiting for each of us to join him in this wonderful possibility called the Twilight Zone.*

<sup>1</sup> Zicree, Marc Scott, *The Twilight Zone Companion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Silman-James, Press, Los Angeles, CA, 1982, 1989, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Sander, Gordon E., *Serling: The Rise and Twilight of Television's Last Angry Man*, A Dutton Book, (Penguin Group), 1992, p. 207.

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rod\\_Serling](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rod_Serling)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.uuworld.org/articles/twilight-zone-writer-challenged-prejud>

<sup>5</sup> Sander, *ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydXkZ\\_hDztc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ydXkZ_hDztc)