



A Dimension Not Only of Sight and Sound but of Satire

Laura Rose Purkey, California University of Pennsylvania Honors Program
with Dr. Keat Murray



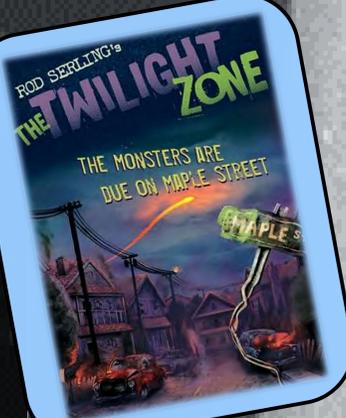
Introduction: Iconic television series *The Twilight Zone* aired from 1959-1964, during the infant stages of TV. Due to the networks' hesitancy to address serious issues, creator and writer Rod Serling uses the guise of science fiction and fantasy to critique societal and cultural themes. The themes are broad enough to apply to a wide audience while surviving the test of time. Though many have analyzed the political significance of *The Twilight Zone*, the distinct type of humor characteristic of the "dimension of mind" has largely been unexplored.

Thesis

The Twilight Zone presents social and cultural commentaries through a unique brand of humor combining satire, Rod Serling's nonchalant delivery style, and characteristic "sick joke" twist endings.



Figure 1 (left): Rod Serling introducing an episode, characteristically smoking a cigarette. Figure 2 (below): Poster promoting "The Monsters are Due on Maple Street"



The Twilight Zone utilizes satire to critique the worst parts of humanity, chastising human inclination to act without moral integrity. Serling criticizes a host of human vices. Typically, the series mocks these faults through storylines that consistently lead to failure in surviving *The Twilight Zone*.

In "The Howling Man" Serling displays a young man's incapability to believe the truth due to his prejudices, playing on the old adage "everything is not as it seems." The satire becomes obvious as the story repeats itself in the end.

"The Monsters are Due on Maple Street" exposes human conformity, as residents of a neighborhood are quick to turn on each other when their technology starts acting up. In fact, there are no "monsters" other than the residents themselves.

One of the most defining features of the show is Rod Serling himself. Limited success arose from recreations of the series, leading scholars like Rodney Hill to deem Serling the "irreplaceable factor." Mr. Serling's characteristic clipped, nonchalant delivery among the chaotic plots of *The Twilight Zone* creates a distinctly individual comedic tone. His remarks are littered with intelligent jargon and quirky epithets and give the audience context. Serling's unique introductory and closing remarks remain outdone in television even today.

A case in point is "Nick of Time." Instead of introducing William Shatner's character as 'husband' Serling describes him as the "male member of a honeymoon team." In "Of Late I Think of Cliffordville" Serling wraps up the story of a greedy, ruthless businessmen who loses his monetary fortune to a janitor by saying of the tale, "nice guys don't always finish last" and calling it a tale of "iron men and irony, delivered F.O.B. from *The Twilight Zone*."

Works Cited

"Anthology Terrain: Mapping The Twilight Zone's Cultural and Mythological Terrain." *The Essential Science Fiction Television Reader*, by Rodney Hill, University Press of Kentucky, 2008, pp. 111-126.
"The Twilight Zone." *Essential Cult TV Reader*, by Jonathan Lampley, The University Press of Kentucky, 2015

Picture Credit: All Images Accessed from Pinterest (with corrections) except Figure 2 that was retrieved from Blogspot.



Figure 3 (left): The "Mystic Seer" from "Nick of Time". Best not to ask it any questions. Figure 4 (below): Ms. Devlin from "Of Late I Think of Cliffordville"



Figure 5: Still from "The Eye of the Beholder"

Many episodes follow a pattern of "sick joke" twist endings. These signature endings punctuate the social and cultural commentary and cement the satiric tone.

One such episode is "I Shot an Arrow into the Air." Three astronauts believe they have crash-landed on an asteroid, with little to no chance of survival. One of them immediately turns on the others, killing them with no hesitation. After wandering the landscape for hours, he discovers a sign for Reno, Nevada. They had never even left the Earth; his actions of violence had been in vain.

The famous "The Eye of the Beholder" likewise ends in a sick joke. A woman lives in a hospital, her "hideous" face bandaged and hidden from society. After performing a surgery that results in "no change," she rips off the bandages in frustration—she's actually beautiful. Meanwhile, the camera pans to all the doctors, who have distorted, "ugly" faces. Thus, beauty is in the eye of the beholder.

"There is a sixth dimension beyond that which is known to man. It is a dimension as vast as space, and as timeless as infinity. It is the middle ground between light and shadow, and it lies between the pit of man's fears, and the sunlight of his knowledge. This is the dimension of imagination. It is an area that might be called, The Twilight Zone."