

## **Social Justice from the Twilight Zone: Rod Serling as Human Rights Activist**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Rod Serling achieved critical acclaim in the First Golden Age of Television writing realist teleplays that express a strong moral sense and social consciousness. With the decline of anthology drama at the close of the 1950s, Serling created *The Twilight Zone*, which would become a forum for telling relevant stories while circumventing commercial and bureaucratic interference. As a means of exploring Serling's use of drama as a tool for social justice, this paper compares themes from *The Twilight Zone* and *Night Gallery* with charter and constitutional statements of human rights. The United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* is the moral template applied in this discussion. Serling saw drama as a political act and his commitment to social justice often extended to his activities off the page. The content and consequences of his 1968 speech at Moorpark College are cited as an important example of his real world political behavior.

**Keywords:** Rod Serling, Twilight Zone, Night Gallery, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Science Fiction Television, Golden Age of Television, Television Censorship

## THINGS AND IDEAS: POLITICS AND SCIENCE FICTION

The use of futuristic settings and narratives to convey social messages and political arguments is not new to science fiction in any medium. Examples range from the techno-optimism of Hugo Gernsback's *Ralph 124C 41+* (1911), the dystopias of Huxley, Zamyatin, and Atwood; the literary and cinematic future histories in Wells' *Things to Come* (1936); and even the morality plays sometimes found in the television series *Star Trek* (1966-29) and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-94). Not every science fiction story may be a political tract, but science fiction can be a relevant and powerful vehicle for social commentary. As the scholars Hassler and Wilcox observed:

The politics of the real world on our planet continues with events, with struggle, with individual and collective success and failure. The fictional world of science fiction continues to be reinterpreted, newly invented and widely attended to in our culture. (vii)

In other words, ongoing and active connections exist between politics and science fiction – with events, things, and ideas forming the basis of social polemics and serving as part of the fictional world where the stories take place. From Jonathan Swift's book *Gulliver's Travels* (1726, amended 1735) to Cory Doctorow's *Little Brother* (2008) and the Canadian television series *Orphan Black* (2013-2017), politics have provided both cultural fuel and creative structures for speculative storytelling, most especially for the science fiction genre.

Rod Serling started his writing career as one of television's "angry young men" from the medium's first golden age in the 1950s and the author of many critically acclaimed realist dramas.<sup>1</sup> He is now primarily remembered as a leading practitioner in the fields of science fiction, fantasy and horror; his best-known television projects were *The Twilight Zone* (1959-1964) and, to a lesser extent, *Night Gallery* (1969-1973).

On the surface, Serling's literary career path might appear to represent a major change in genre and creative focus (from realist to fantasist), but on closer examination, there is a consistent and growing concern with human worth and social justice in all of his major works. As noted by scholar Leslie Dale Feldman: "...his writing was more than science fiction; it was political theory" (6).

This paper examines three episodes of *The Twilight Zone* and three *Night Gallery* segments and compares them with specific articles from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [UDHR]. These examples represent the range of Serling's work in speculative fiction with some of the most overt statements of political themes. The purpose of this comparison is not to assert that Serling set out to deliberately educate viewers about a specific international legal charter, but to explore how the political message of one of the 20th Century's most important television dramatists closely parallels and complements the goals of a landmark proclamation of human freedom and dignity.

## CULTIVATING THE VAST WASTELAND

Examining the broader cultural and political contexts in which these episodes of *The Twilight Zone* and *Night Gallery* were produced is informative because the state of American broadcast television in the 1960s both shaped the course of Serling's career as a writer, and influenced the content and format of his scripted dramas.

In his famous 1961 speech, "Television and the Public Interest," to the National Association of Broadcasters, Federal Communications Commission Chair Newton Minow noted that there were indeed *some* excellent television programs on the three existent national networks and he even named *The Twilight Zone* as one of them. However, the FCC chairman then issued the following challenge to network professionals:

But when television is bad, nothing is worse. I invite each of you to sit down in front of your television set when your station goes on the air and stay there, for a day, without a book, without a magazine, without a newspaper, without a profit and loss sheet or a

rating book to distract you. Keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that what you will observe is a *vast wasteland* [emphasis added]).

Creating and communicating in such an intellectually and creatively bankrupt milieu filled with (in Minow's words): "unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder, western bad men, western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence and cartoons" offered little opportunity to tell stories of any value or artistic integrity. After Minow's speech, "a vast wasteland" became critical shorthand for the argument that television was undergoing an inevitable process of crass commercialism and the "dumbing down" of content to the lowest intellectual denominator. As of 1961, there seemed little potential to use drama and storytelling to explore political issues or advance the cause of human rights and social justice.

### **TRAVELING THROUGH ANOTHER DIMENSION: THE ACTIVIST DISGUISED AS ENTERTAINER**

By the end of the 1950s, Rod Serling was one of the most famous and honored writers in television. Teleplays such as *Patterns* (1955), *Requiem for a Heavyweight* (1956), and *The Comedian* (1957) were powerful and respected highlights of television's first Golden Age of drama. He received six Emmy awards for these and other plays, as well as the Peabody and Sylvania awards (Doll).

The impact of Serling's vision is found in Jack Gould's review of *Patterns* in *The New York Times*, printed soon after its first broadcast:

Nothing in months has excited the television industry as much as the Kraft Television Theatre's production of *Patterns*, an original play by Rod Serling. The enthusiasm is justified. In writing, acting and direction, *Patterns* will stand as one of the high points in the TV medium's evolution . . . a repeat performance at an early date should be mandatory.

In the era of live television drama, when programs were not routinely videotaped, a call for a rebroadcast was quite extraordinary and one that NBC agreed with, setting up a second performance the next month.

A survey of the body of Rod Serling's work reveals that he viewed the processes of writing and storytelling as political acts. Much of his fiction contains moral and political themes, and Serling publicly stated that it was the duty of writers to explore relevant and socially significant content in their work. He resisted the interference of sponsors, censors, or outside agencies in the exercise of this artistic responsibility stating that: "I think it is criminal that we are not permitted to make dramatic note of social evils that exist, of controversial themes as they are inherent in our society" (Zen).

Serling also had astonishing creative output. He wrote 99 of the 156 episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, and penned several major motion pictures including *Seven Days in May* (1964) and *Planet of the Apes* (1968). He found time to teach at Antioch College and was involved in political causes including the Unitarian Universalist Association, the American Civil Liberties Union, and campaigning for incumbent Pat Brown against Ronald Reagan in the California 1966 gubernatorial race (Zen).

Serling's concerns about the political meaning and artistic merits of scripted television led to the creation of *The Twilight Zone*. At the end of the 1950s, and increasingly in the 1960s, it was not unusual for writers to encounter regular interference with the content of scripts from sponsors who feared their products could be cast in an unfavorable light or that certain themes might alienate audience members and potential consumers. One biographer provides a specific example of this commercially-motivated censorship:

Serling was even more shocked and angered that year (1956) to what happened to "Noon on Doomsday", which was inspired by a murder case then in the news – the Emmett Till case, in which a young black boy had allegedly been kidnapped and killed by two white men who went to trial and were exonerated on all counts. (Sander 117)

Later, Serling described to interviewer Mike Wallace what happened to his script:

...I wrote the script using black and white skinned characters initially, then the black was changed to suggest 'an unnamed foreigner,' the locale was moved from the South to New England – I'm convinced they would have gone to Alaska or the North Pole and used Eskimos except that the costume problem was of sufficient severity not to attempt it. ("Featuring Rod Serling")<sup>2</sup>

To audiences in 1959 it may have sounded as though Serling, frustrated with the political and moral evisceration of this work, had surrendered in his artistic battle with sponsors and networks:

I don't want to fight anymore. I don't want to have to battle sponsors and agencies. I don't want to have to push for something that I want and have to settle for second best. I don't want to have to compromise all the time, which in essence is what a television writer does if he wants to put on controversial themes. ("Featuring Rod Serling")

"Controversial" in this context equates with political content and social justice themes. In the same interview Serling goes on to describe his latest project, an anthology series called *The Twilight Zone*. Here, the focus would be on good, entertaining stories that would avoid "controversy" and interference:

...these are very adult, I think, high-quality half hour, extremely polished films. But because they deal in the areas of fantasy and imagination and science-fiction and all of those things, there's no opportunity to cop a plea or chop an axe or anything.

*The Twilight Zone* did not, in fact, represent surrender, but rather a change in tactics, a covert operation. The anthology series would become a forum for telling relevant stories while circumventing commercial or bureaucratic interference. Serling's creative strategy was to set the narratives in an imaginary setting with fantastical characters but to give them greater resonance and relevance by making them *about* something.

## **A SIGNPOST FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE: THE UNITED NATION'S UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

Rod Serling may have started writing as a social realist, but he quickly developed a master's understanding of the power of mass entertainment and how popular culture works in the context of broadcast media. He was a major dramatist with a prevailing political sensibility and with an awareness of the polemic potential of speculative fiction; the struggle for human rights was likely critical inspiration to his creative vision. Some of the themes and ideas in Serling's speculative fiction are so central that it is possible, and even useful, to compare themes from *Twilight Zone* and *Night Gallery* episodes with charter and constitutional statements of human rights, such as, the United Nation's Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

Briefly, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in December 1948 and in 1976 it was ratified as international law. The Declaration was a response to the atrocities and conflicts of World War II and is the first worldwide expression of the inherent rights of all persons. The UDHR is significant because it was developed by an international body and as such represents one of the most inclusive and comprehensive statements of human rights to date.

Referring to the values and principles set out in the UDHR can serve as a series of "signposts" into the significance of television dramas whose popularity endures and grows decades after they were first broadcast.

## **ROBOTS, MILITARY SCHOOLS, AND TRUTHFUL EDUCATION: "THE ACADEMY" AND "THE CLASS OF '99"**

Access to, and the content of, education is viewed as a fundamental human right in the UDHR and the morality of education is also a central theme in one of Serling's most powerful speculative stories. Article 26 of the UDHR states:

Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

Both of these dramas explore the role and process of education; or rather the potentially nightmarish consequences of the perversion of education where schooling is not directed to the humane growth of the student but rather dedicated to the subjugation of the individual to a controlling (and inhumane) social structure.

In the *Night Gallery* segment, "The Academy," Mr. Holston is given a guided tour of Glendalough Academy by its Commandant. Holston's goal is to determine the suitability of this military school for his son, Roger. The establishing shots and opening dialogue quickly reveal that Glendalough is an isolated and highly exclusive institution and that Holston is a man of considerable means. The conversation between Holston and the Commandant tells the audience that Roger has a chronic discipline problem and the application of a strict regime of traditional curriculum and military discipline may be precisely what the boy needs.

"Discipline is the major item word here," the commandant states. Studies and the daily schedule are accompanied by continual drill: "Physical drill...drill at every level." Shots of the Academy students in the mess hall, classrooms and grounds, uniformed and moving in unison illustrate the Commandant's assertion.

The episode is structured as an expositional exercise where the Commandant gradually explains more and more about the nature and purpose of the Academy: First, Mr. Holston learns that Glendalough is a self-contained world with little contact with family and the outside world. Then, when Holston asks an older man in uniform how long he has been employed by the Academy, the man replies that he is actually a student and has been enrolled there for his entire adult life. This is the first major revelation in the story: essentially enrollment in the Academy is a form of life imprisonment. The final revelation occurs when Holston shares his own beliefs and charges that his son Roger is "a rotter" and being locked in the Academy for the rest of his life is just the thing for him.

The dramatic tension emerges from the gradual discovery of the true terrifying nature and purpose of the Academy where education has been turned into an insidious form of incarceration, plus the sudden revealing of the antagonism between a father and his son – a generation gap in this American family.

So, who is the real villain, "the rotter" in this case? Could Roger's behavior be a reaction to his father's cruelty and callous nature? Is the audience witnessing some manifestation of a dysfunctional family? Or perhaps the son's rebellion is some form of political action? The answers to these questions can't be known because the story stops at this point. However, one could conclude that "The Academy" represents a monstrous distortion of the right to education, because in this episode, schooling becomes a form of punishment. The premise represented by the Academy is a violation of the next provision in the UDHR's statement of educational rights, which declares:

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. (Article 26)

Based on a 1965 story by David Ely, "The Academy" was broadcast in 1971 in the midst of a decade of anti-war and civil rights protests, and a climate of unrest and civil disobedience on many college and university campuses – including the Kent State University shootings on May 4, 1970. It is not difficult to imagine that

at least some of the television audience believed that a return to traditional education with a heavy emphasis on conformity and discipline was exactly what the then-younger generation needed to restore order to society. The unfulfilling resolution and lingering message of “The Academy” is a challenge to such socially conservative attitudes because the excesses of discipline run counter to the development of the student’s intellect and personality. Further, the suppression of civil rights undermines the fundamental values of a democratic and open society.

The *Night Gallery* episode “The Class of ‘99” also addresses the question of education, and produced in the same year as “The Academy,” shares the same sociopolitical context. The action in “The Class of ‘99” starts in a lecture hall of a slightly futuristic, co-educational university. The professor administers an oral exam to the class after informing them of the test’s format:

Let me review briefly our procedure: I will direct random questions to each of you and will grade you immediately. Keep in mind, however, that the question may be repeated at any time to someone else.

In doing so, the professor makes it clear that the audience is about to witness an extraordinarily difficult exam that is a manifestation of a very exacting and unforgiving educational system. The professor is very formal and authoritarian, and there is no evidence of empathy or even communication between the students.

For the first set of questions, the professor draws upon arcane fields of math and physics; and because the subject matter seems so far removed from the students’ normal experience, the exam is extremely taxing and with questionable relevance. The questions soon address even more challenging issues and the tone of the oral exam shifts from intense competition to outright hostility. When the Professor asks a student (Mr. Clinton) if an African American classmate (Mr. Barnes), represents a “special problem,” Mr. Clinton responds, “Possibly inferior,” looks towards Barnes, and adds, “Being black, he might be inferior.”

The rest of “The Class of 99” unfolds like a dramatization of a social psychology experiment that might have been designed by Stanley Milgram<sup>3</sup>, in which the students are coached through different conflict situations based on race, class, income, politics and war. Every time the students follow the instructions of the professor there is a certain amount of psychological and physical violence involved: Verbal abuse, slapping, spitting and even gunfire. As in Milgram’s experiments, students execute noxious, even criminal, behavior under the Professor’s orders because it all occurs at the behest of an intellectual authority.

Unlike most of Milgram’s test subjects, one of the students (Mr. Etkins) eventually rebels and refuses to kill another student, Mr. Chang, who has been identified as a member of an “enemy culture.” Mr. Etkins is gunned down by another student (Mr. Johnson) for his trouble and his destruction reveals the true nature of the Class of ‘99. They are humanoid robots built by the university to repopulate society, which has been devastated by war and environmental degradation. As Mr. Johnson, now the class valedictorian, states, education is crucial to achieving the university’s ultimate goals for the class of ‘99:

All that we know...our attitudes...our values...are part of the integral data fed into us and we shall use them as a point of beginning. We must be just...but ruthless in terms of survival. We must recognize that many of the ancient virtues are simply weaknesses.

Clearly, the education of the Class of ‘99 is not dedicated to their personal development or to instilling a respect for human dignity and freedom. Instead, the university has inculcated the class with cultural misunderstandings, intolerance and hostility. Serling’s thesis can be understood both as a criticism of contemporary education which often stress so-called “utility” over morality and a fear of where such trends will take society in the future.

### **PRIVACY, PERSONHOOD, AND ALIENS: "THE MONSTERS ARE DUE ON MAPLE STREET"**

Just as "The Academy" and "The Class of '99" can be interpreted as critiques of educational systems, so too can the seminal *The Twilight Zone* episode, "The Monsters are Due on Maple Street" be interpreted as a critique of McCarthyism and similar political witch-hunts. UDHR Articles 6 and 12 address the rights of personhood, privacy, and reputation, which were rights directly under attack during the McCarthy era:<sup>4</sup>

Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law. (Article 6)

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honor and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks. (Article 12)

At first, there is little to suggest the serious and dangerous subject matter of, "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street." The opening shots could be from *Leave It to Beaver* (1957-63), *The Andy Griffith Show* (1960-68), or any other family situation comedy of that era: A pastoral suburban neighborhood, with freshly cut grass, polished new cars in driveways, and friendly (and white) neighbors in every house. However, this is the Twilight Zone and not Mayberry and the narrator suggests that this serenity will not last long: "Maple Street. Six-forty-four P.M., on a late September evening. [A pause.] Maple Street in the last calm and reflective moments...before the monsters came!"

Happiness on Maple Street is the result of certainty, security and conformity. Ambiguity and the threat of danger stress community life; and in turn jeopardize the human rights of its residents. The tension in this story starts with a meteor passing overhead and the unexpected interruption of electrical power, communications and transportation – the essential services and infrastructure that make suburban life possible. A potential crisis of uncertainty is then made worse when Tommy, who looks to be between 12-14 years old, refers to science fiction scenarios from comic books as possible explanations to Steve Brand, the episode's viewpoint character: "That was the way [the aliens] prepared things for the landing. They sent four people. A mother and a father and two kids who looked just like humans... but they weren't."

Steve replies, ironically: "Well, I guess what we'd better do then is run a check on the neighborhood and see which ones of us are really human."

As the episode continues, events and situations that would normally be regarded as innocent or trivial by most suburbanites occur: Lights flash on and off, car engines start and stop, owning amateur radios and suffering from insomnia (which one neighbor admits to) – are now seen as highly significant and potentially dangerous.

Steve Brand is one of the few residents who seriously questions the "aliens among us" theory and struggles to defend both his own and his insomniac neighbors' integrity and reputations. Brand also defends his right to privacy when his neighbors insist on coming into his home to determine if he has been using his radio to signal the space aliens. Mrs. Brand, his wife, tells the insistent crowd of neighbors that he just has an amateur ham radio, and offers to show them the equipment in the basement. In response, Steve whirls upon her and orders, "Show them nothing! If they want to look inside our house – let them get a search warrant."

This specific confrontation is interrupted by a car that mysteriously starts on its own and more flashing lights – but it is brief reprieve for Brand who is eventually overwhelmed by his neighbors as Maple Street degenerates into house-to-house warfare using torches, axes, and firearms. Meanwhile, actual alien invaders observe the chaos from their distant spacecraft, noting that the inhabitants of all the Maple Streets in the world cannot imagine any menace greater than themselves. The aliens have identified the inability to respect the rights and integrity of others as a fundamental human flaw that invaders can easily exploit. We are the monsters on Maple Street.

This episode concludes with the following powerful words literally delivered in Serling's voice as the

episode's narrator:

The tools of conquest do not necessarily come with bombs and explosions and fallout. There are weapons that are simply thoughts, attitudes, and prejudices to be found only in the minds of men. For the record, prejudices can kill and suspicion can destroy and a thoughtless frightened search 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!

This closing narration is a stark and unforgettable warning about the dangers of social paranoia and the failure to respect the dignity and privacy of others. When we disregard these rights we place the essential ties of trust that hold communities together at risk. The chaos at the end of "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street" can even be interpreted as a demonstration of the need for legal and moral charters such as the UDHR.

### **INDIVIDUALITY, COMMUNITY, AND ASYLUM: "THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER" AND "THE DIFFERENT ONES"**

Even by 1960, the values expressed in "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street" would have seemed familiar to those followed Serling's work. The inherent value of the individual and the need to protect the individual, are frequent themes throughout Serling's literary career, starting with the abandoned executives in *Patterns* (1955) and the *Night Gallery* episode, "They're Tearing Down Tim Riley's Bar" (1971) through to the charity placement child in, *A Storm In Summer* (1970, remade 2000).

The episodes "The Eye of the Beholder" (*The Twilight Zone*, 1960) and "The Different Ones" (*Night Gallery*, 1971) also explore the plight of nonconformists in a world that demands uniformity. These stories can be viewed as inversions of each other: In, "The Eye of the Beholder," the audience meets a normal-looking woman surrounded by a society of monsters. In "The Different Ones," a young man with bizarre facial deformities lives in a world of people who look just like ordinary humans.

In both episodes, the person who is different is abused by the conforming majority, which makes monstrosity not a function of outward appearances but rather of an internal failure to respect the dignity and innate rights of others.

In "The Eye of the Beholder," Janet Tyler awakes in a hospital bed, her face completely covered in bandages, awaiting the results of the series of State-mandated cosmetic surgeries. Although the audience cannot see Janet's face, the dialogue indicates that her appearance is considered so grotesque that she must undergo treatments to make her closer to "the norm." Janet has little say in the course of her treatments or even in the details of her daily life – she's not allowed sit in the hospital garden or even open the window of her room. Janet is not a citizen, a person with rights; she is a patient, a medical and social problem whose different appearance prevents her from functioning in society. Janet Tyler is defined by the State as a problem that must be solved by Janet's surgeon, and the staff at the hospital who are agents of this paternalistic but ultimately oppressive society. Janet's experience exemplifies the medical deprivation of human rights and civil liberties. While the authorities stress their compassion for Janet's situation they also say that this is her final treatment and that she is running out of options. Just before her bandages are removed, her surgeon, Dr. Bernardi warns her, "This is your eleventh visit to the hospital where you have received the mandatory number of treatments and afforded as much time as possible, Miss Tyler." Even Tyler's status as patient will not protect her from her persistent individuality indefinitely.

In the *Night Gallery* segment, "The Different Ones," Victor Kotch is also marginalized because of his hideous appearance, albeit not as a hospital patient but as a housebound recluse who only interacts with his widowed father, Paul Kotch. Paul tries to protect Victor in the context of a traditional family, but both



know they will eventually be unable to shield themselves from growing verbal and physical assaults from an increasingly hostile community.

Paul Kotch uses his videophone to contact the Office for Special Urban Problems for help, but learns that his son's condition is so extreme that it is beyond the scope of the State's compassion and capacity to help. Furthermore, Victor's unusual appearance is in violation of *The Federal Conformity Act of 1993*<sup>5</sup>, which requires Paul to "do something" about his son before higher authorities are called.

In both episodes, the "State" is the off-screen villain with the power to end both Janet's and Victor's lives. After the failure of Janet's final treatment, she asks to be euthanized, but her surgeon, Dr. Bernadi is reluctant to do so, instead encouraging her to immigrate to one of the officially sanctioned colonies set up for "people of her kind."

The State in "The Different Ones" is less compassionate, there are no such communities in Victor's world, and the representative from the Office of Special Urban Problems even raises the possibility of euthanizing Victor, saying, "Putting him to sleep for humanitarian reasons is hardly an act of murder, Mr. Kotch."

Victor Kotch and Janet Tyler escape death and their oppressive situations by fleeing to different, more tolerant, communities. Janet meets a representative of one the colonies who is "just like her," beautiful and physically perfect by the viewers' own standards but deemed "ugly" by her own society. Victor ultimately leaves the Earth as a part of an interplanetary cultural exchange program, where he meets people who are "just like him," grotesque yet kind and accepting.

"The Eye of the Beholder" and "The Different Ones" can be viewed as test-cases demonstrating the need for the following principles expressed in the UDHR:

...All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights...Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country" and, "Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution..." (Article 14)

Both "The Eye of the Beholder" and "The Different Ones" have happy endings but they offer a qualified happiness; seeking asylum, which means an individual is forced to leave their native land, is a right of last resort. Though Janet and Victor ultimately find acceptance among "their own kind," Serling criticizes actual modern societies that cast out the "different ones" because the societies refuse to tolerate nonconformity.

### **"THE OBSOLETE MAN" AND THE RIGHT TO LIFE**

The "Obsolete Man" (1961) is an episode of *The Twilight Zone* that features direction and acting that could be from a Berthold Brecht play with sets and cinematography that are reminiscent of German expressionist cinema. As with many *Twilight Zone* and *Night Gallery* stories, the intent is to create a sense of nightmare and "The Obsolete Man" is a political nightmare.

Romney Wordsworth, who states his profession as "librarian," has been tried by the State and has been judged in the words of the State's Leader as "obsolete" and a "bug not a person." This teleplay is one of Serling's most passionate pleas for human dignity and the events of the story touch on the right of worship and belief, as when Wordsworth disputes the Leader's broadcast proclamation, "The State has proven that there is no God!"

The "Obsolete Man" also refers to the right to freedom of expression and education when the Leader argues that Wordsworth's profession has no value:

You're a librarian, Mr. Wordsworth. You're a dealer in books and two-cent fines and pamphlets in closed stacks in the musty finds of a language factory that spews meaningless words on an assembly line. WORDS, Mr. WORDSworth. That have no

substance, no dimension, like air, like the wind. Like a vacuum, that you make believe have an existence, by scribbling index numbers on little cards.

Both freedom of worship and belief and freedom of expression and education are dependent on the more fundamental right to life, liberty, and security as stated in Article 3 of the UDHR.

Mr. Wordsworth is more effective in defending his human dignity and rights than Steve Brand was in “The Monsters are Due on Maple Street” because he paradoxically exercises the one right the State does extend to him: the right to select the method of his execution.

By choosing death by explosion, which is broadcast live on television, Wordsworth demonstrates the cowardice and moral weaknesses of the Leader who, trapped in the same room with Wordsworth and the bomb, pleads for his life and is finally granted mercy by the condemned man. This action reveals the inherent contradiction of this totalitarian state and as the episode’s closing narration notes: “Any state, entity or ideology that fails to recognize the worth, the rights, the dignity of man...that state is obsolete.”

In the surreal closing scene, the Leader returns to the courtroom after Wordsworth’s death, only to be physically torn apart by his followers. One could interpret this scene as Serling asserting that a society that abandons respect of human rights, individual dignity, and social justice is ultimately doomed to barbarism and destruction.

### **THINGS AND IDEAS IN THE REAL WORLD: THE MOORPARK COLLEGE SPEECH**

Serling did not restrict his political statements and actions to fiction as noted earlier; he was active in a number of political organizations and supported a range of progressive causes, particularly those associated with the Civil Rights and Anti-War movements:

As he carved out a critically and commercially successful career as a scriptwriter and television producer, Serling maintained an active agenda of writing such letters<sup>6</sup> to newspapers, to both fans and detractors and giving political speeches. (Boulton 1227)

Just one example of Serling stating and acting on his political beliefs is found in his 1969 lecture “The Generation Gap,” at Moorpark College. His talk has a truly remarkable opening:

... I refused to sign a loyalty oath which was submitted to me as a prerequisite both for my appearance and my pay... I did not sign the loyalty oath and I waived my normal speaking fee, only because of a principle. I think a requirement that a man affix his signature to a document, reaffirming loyalty, is on one hand ludicrous – and on the other demeaning...I believe that in a democratic society a man is similarly loyal until proven disloyal. No testaments of faith, no protestations of affection for his native land, and no amount of signatures will prove a bloody thing – one way or the other as to a man’s patriotism or lack thereof. (In Marshall)

Serling refused to comply with a requirement of the State of California, which he believed questioned his loyalty, personal integrity, and violated his rights of free expression and presumed innocence. He had a valid point; as Article 19 the UDHR states,

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

There were costs to Serling for taking this stance. For a successful writer and celebrity, foregoing the fee for a speech may seem insignificant; however it is very likely that Serling earned the enduring animosity of those in

power who created and supported the loyalty oath legislation.

While Serling ends his lecture with specific reference to the American involvement in the War in Vietnam, his criticisms shed insight into twenty-first century concerns such as racism, the rights of privacy, and personal integrity, as well as the growing militarization of society.

### **BETWEEN LIGHT AND SHADOW: THE ARTIST AS DISGUISED ACTIVIST**

When we compare themes from vintage television programs with clauses from an international legal document we are engaged in much more than a curious categorization exercise. There is an almost intuitive appeal and intellectual impact when we view the artistry of *The Twilight Zone* and *Night Gallery* through the ethical lens of the UDHR.

The UDHR expresses values and principles that Rod Serling embraced as a writer, as a citizen of his country, and as a human being. Much of his work addresses the dangers of intolerance, prejudice, and systemic cruelty. It is not surprising that Serling used fiction, whether realist or magic-realist, in combination with real-world activism to oppose injustice and promote his political views.

The creative strategy that led to the creation of *The Twilight Zone* was ingenious because it became more than a way to avoid interference from sponsors and network censors. The ongoing popularity of *The Twilight Zone*, *Night Gallery*, and even later projects, such as *Witches*, *Werewolves and Warlocks* (1963), *The Season to be Wary* (1967), and *Planet of the Apes* (1968), generated vast audiences for Serling's work and these audiences renew with each new generation. As biographer Joel Engel observes:

...(Serling) remains to this day...the only writer whose name, face and voice are easily recognizable to the masses...There can be no overestimation of the impact that Serling's series has had on popular culture. (343)

Many viewers and readers may be drawn to the fantastical nature of such speculative stories for their entertainment value, but some audience members will probe deeper, seeking to discover the moral core of these narratives.

Part of Rod Serling's legacy is undoubtedly political. It is difficult not to feel moved by the rejection and shame of Janet Tyler in "The Eye of the Beholder," or experience rage and disgust at the cynical curriculum governing "The Class of '99." These are brilliantly produced works of science fiction, but they are also powerful pieces of political fiction. The opening narration to the first season of *The Twilight Zone* provides insight into the still-extant popular appeal of Serling's stories more than half a century later:

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

These narratives originate from the fringes – those aspects of our experience that are hard to define, that are about more than one thing – and makes viewers want to keep thinking about the social challenges and moral choices facing humanity. Ultimately, the ideals of human worth and dignity cannot only be appreciated at the legal or intellectual level – they must be embraced in our hearts and imaginations, and, as Serling demonstrates, science fiction is a frequent reminder that we must do so.

## ENDNOTES

[1] *The Last Angry Man* is the title of Gerald Green's 1956 novel about an uncompromising physician and struggling television producer. The term was sometimes paraphrased to describe radio writers and producers such as Norman Corwin, Arch Oboler, and Orson Welles, whose work often addressed controversial social issues. The expression "television's angry young men" was also applied to emerging writers including Rod Serling, Paddy Chayefsky, Reginald Rose, and Sterling Silliphant, who were primarily associated with live and anthology drama in the 1950s. Of the latter group, Serling was the one to remain the longest and most involved with television, both asserting the artistic and political potential of the medium while denouncing its trivialization and excessive commercialization (Sander iv).

[2] The context of the Mike Wallace interview does not reveal the full extent of reviews, revisions, and re-writes that "Noon at Doomsday" and an alternate version of the Till case, "A Town Has Turned to Dust," were subject to. Christopher Metress' overview of the development process for these scripts makes a persuasive case that the core problem was a deep and intractable reluctance by sponsors and networks to address the issue of racial injustice at a time when television advertising markets were opening up to Southern States in the 1950s.

[3] Stanley Milgram (1933 –1984) was a social psychologist, best known for his controversial experiment on obedience conducted in the 1960s at Yale University. Milgram studied the willingness of study subjects to obey a researcher (an authority figure) to the extent that they thought they were administering potentially fatal electrical shocks to another study subject.

[4] From 1950 to 1956, thousands of Americans were accused of being communists or communist sympathizers and were subjected to intense investigation by government and private-industry agencies. Named after the dogged anti-communist pursuits of Senator Joseph McCarthy, "McCarthyism" now describes reckless accusations and attacks on the character or patriotism of individuals.

[5] A fictional construct in this story.

[6] Here, Boulton is using as an example a letter written by Rod Serling to the *LA Times* where he both satirizes and criticizes a leading pet food maker for sponsoring a televised speech by the founder of the John Birch Society (1226).

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