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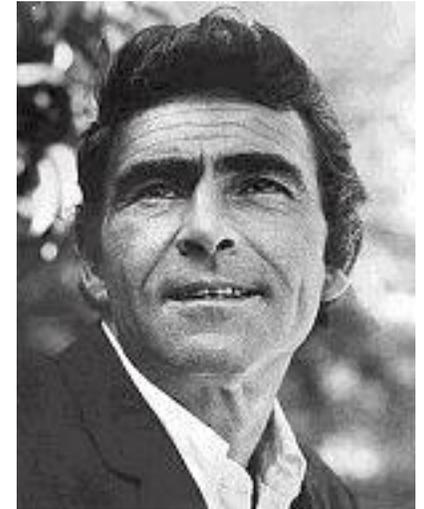
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Rod Serling

Rod Serling (December 25, 1924-June 28, 1975), one of television's most prolific writers, is best known for his science fiction television series, *The Twilight Zone*. He believed that the role of the writer was to "menace the public conscience." Throughout his life Serling used radio, television, and film as "vehicles of social criticism."



Rodman Edward Serling was born in Syracuse, New York to Samuel and Esther Serling. The Serlings, a Reform Jewish family, moved in 1926 to Binghamton, New York where Rod would spend the remainder of his childhood. The Serling family was involved in the Binghamton Jewish community; a community held together by ethnic underpinnings more than religious ties. Like many members of the local Jewish community, Serling's family infrequently attended synagogue except during High Holy days. Sam Serling, vice-president of the Reform temple, told Rod and his older brother Robert, "I'm not a good Jew, but I think I'm a good person. If you want to be very religious, that's up to you. My own philosophy is, I take people for what they are, not where they go to pray." Sam enrolled his sons in Sunday School at the local Jewish community center where director Isadore Friedlander and his wife, philosophical humanists, were spiritual mentors to many of Binghamton's Jewish youth. At high school, where he edited the newspaper, Serling experienced anti-Jewish discrimination when he was blackballed from the Theta Sigma fraternity. In an interview in 1972 he said of this incident, "it was the first time in my life that I became aware of religious difference."

After graduation Serling enlisted in the United States Army. Beginning in May 1944 he

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served with the 511th Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 11th Airborne Division in New Guinea and during the invasion of the Philippines. He was awarded the Purple Heart for a severe shrapnel wound to his knee. The war also took a permanent mental toll; he would suffer from flashbacks, nightmares, and insomnia for the rest of his life. When discharged from the army in 1946 he was "bitter about everything and at loose ends."



Serling enrolled under the G.I. Bill of Rights at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. In the late 1940s Antioch was famous for loose social rules and a unique work-study curriculum. Serling was stimulated by the liberal intellectual environment and began to feel "the need to write, a kind of compulsion to get some of my thoughts down." He was also inspired by the words of Unitarian educator [Horace Mann](#), first president of Antioch College, "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity." Serling would later feature these words and a rendition of Antioch's Horace Mann statue in the 1962 *Twilight Zone* episode, "Changing of the Guard." His first writings were short stories, mostly about the war. In "Transcript of the Legal Proceedings in the Case of the Universe Versus War" a heavenly trial was conducted with Euripedes as prosecutor, Julius Caesar as lawyer for the defense, God as judge, and a jury of twelve angels.



Courtesy of
Anthiochiana, Antioch
College



During his first year at Antioch, Serling met his future wife Carol Kramer, a Protestant. Both families had a difficult time accepting the proposed union. Serling's mother had always hoped her sons would marry Jewish women. Carol's father told her, "I absolutely forbid you to marry that black-haired little Jew." Shortly before their marriage Carol convinced Rod to convert to Unitarianism. She was not practicing her parents' faith and he had never shown interest in Judaism, though he always identified as being ethnically Jewish. The liberal environment at Antioch, which had Unitarian connections going back nearly a century, helped Rod and Carol to shed their family religious traditions and to accept Unitarianism as a convenient compromise. They were married in an ecumenical service at the Antioch chapel in the summer of 1948. They had two daughters, Jody and Ann.

In 1950 Serling graduated from Antioch with a degree in literature and took a job as a staff writer with radio station WLW in Cincinnati, Ohio. Passionately motivated to become a freelance writer, he worked days for the station and spent nights writing scripts at his kitchen table. By 1952 Serling's income from moonlight writing enabled him to quit WLW, focus on writing full-time, and move to the New York area. There Serling won Emmys for three early teleplays: *Patterns*, 1955; *Requiem for a*

Heavyweight, 1956; and *The Comedian*, 1957. His message in *Patterns* was that "every human being has a minimum set of ethics from which he operates. When he refuses to compromise these ethics, his career must suffer, when he does compromise them, his conscience does the suffering."

By the late 1950s the days of the live New York teleplay were over and the television industry had begun to move to Hollywood, where there was more money, equipment and talent. In 1957 the Serlings moved to Pacific Palisades, California. Serling believed "that of all the media, TV lends itself most beautifully to presenting a controversy." He found that with television he could "take a part of the problem, and using a small number of people, get my point across."

However, Serling quickly realized that to get a point across often meant creating scripts that contained controversial messages and dialogues. Corporate sponsors, on the other hand, had no desire to have their products matched with messages that might be deemed offensive. In 1959 Serling expressed his frustration: "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." Because of the hostile creative environment Serling began to see the advantages of writing science fiction and fantasy. He learned that advertisers would routinely approve stories including controversial situations if they took place on fictional worlds. Out of this realization came the television series *The Twilight Zone*, 1959-64, on which Serling and other writers would enjoy unprecedented artistic freedom.



Serling wrote or adapted 99 of the 156 *Twilight Zone* episodes. The first season of *The Twilight Zone* opened with the episode, "Where is Everybody?" on October 10, 1959. This pilot had been originally pitched to CBS with the idea of Orson Welles as narrator. Welles asked for too much money, however, and the producers decided that Serling would do the narration. The series, with Serling's trademark appearances, ran for five years and won him two Emmys. From within the surreal world of *The Twilight Zone*, Serling addressed dozens of social issues such as prejudice ("The Eye of the Beholder," 1960), loss of identity ("Mirror Image," 1960), capital punishment ("Execution," 1960), censorship ("The Obsolete Man," 1961), the Holocaust ("Deaths-Head Revisited," 1961), ageism ("The Trade-Ins," 1962) and social conformity ("Number Twelve Looks Just Like You," 1964). In the closing words to "The Shelter," 1961, Serling expressed what he understood to be humanity's greatest challenge, "No moral, no message, no prophetic tract, just a simple state of fact: for civilization to survive, the human race has to remain civilized."

In 1962, Serling accepted a year long teaching position at Antioch college. He felt that he needed to "regain my perspective, to do a little work and spend the rest of my time getting acquainted with my wife and children." At Antioch he taught writing, drama, and

a survey course about the "social and historical implications of the media."

After saying, "television has left me tired and frustrated" Serling began to write more movie scripts. *Seven Days in May*, 1964, showed Serling's passion for nuclear disarmament and peace. Serling said, "If you want to prove that God is not dead first prove that man is alive." He tackled racism and anthropocentrism in the movie adaptation of Pierre Boulle's *The Planet of the Apes*, 1968. At the same time Serling continued to write for television. *The Loner*, 1965-1966, and *Night Gallery*, 1970-1973, however, left Serling bitter. He had little creative control and said of *Night Gallery*, "It is not mine at all. It's another species of a formula series drama."

The Serlings were active members of the Unitarian Community Church of Santa Monica, California. The minister of the church was Ernest Pipes whose humanist preaching suited Serling's outlook and with whom he corresponded on politics and the state of humanity. Serling was an ardent supporter of the Unitarian Universalist Association, the Santa Monica church, and the American Civil Liberties Union. He supported these and other organizations by accepting speaking engagements and with monetary donations. He was politically active, and in 1966 campaigned for incumbent Pat Brown against Ronald Reagan in the California gubernatorial race.

Serling's social activism also took the form of writing letters to newspaper editors. In one poignant example Serling responded to Dr. Max Rafferty, a religious conservative educator, who had a weekly column in the Los Angeles Times. On October 10, 1966 Rafferty's column addressed social reform and claimed that humanity's problems were not the responsibility of society but of the individual. The article's theme is well expressed in Rafferty's statement, "I don't feel guilty about crime in our cities because I'm not committing any." Serling's incensed response was published five days later. In it he rebuked Dr. Rafferty with his words, "The good doctor had best take his Bible in hand and discover what is the compassion of faith, the selflessness of worship and the charity of Christ" and concluded by saying, "[Dr. Rafferty] take note of what the ghost of

Jacob Marley said to Ebenezer Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. 'Mankind! Cries the ghost, was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business.'

In 1967 Serling said, "I happen to think that 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: a man's seemingly palpable need to dislike someone other than himself." Speaking about the Vietnam War at the 1968 Binghamton Community High School graduation, Serling said, "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 another means that does not come with the killing of your fellow man."

In his last interview, four months before his death, Serling was asked about reincarnation. He said, "I don't believe in reincarnation. That's a cop-out. . . . I anticipate death will be a totally unconscious void in which you float through eternity with no particular consciousness of anything."

Serling smoked cigarettes for most of his life, a habit that eventually took a toll on his heart. In May 1975 Serling had his first heart attack while mowing the lawn at the Interlaken lake house. Though the attack was mild, his health continued to decline and during bypass surgery Serling died. Two simultaneous memorial services were held, one at the Sage Chapel of Cornell University in New York and the other at the Unitarian Community Church of Santa Monica in California.

Rod Serling's personal papers can be found in the Special Collections department at the UCLA Research Library in Los Angeles, California and at the University of Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research in Madison, Wisconsin. The archives at UCLA contain personal and business correspondence from the last ten years of Serling's life as well as scripts and other *Twilight Zone* related materials. The University of Wisconsin has correspondence, scripts, speeches and articles, reports, press releases, clippings, and files on Serling's produced and unproduced writings for television, motion pictures, radio, and the theater. Serling continuously wrote letters to editors and published his thoughts

in newspapers throughout the country. A clippings archive of these writings exists in The Antiochiana Collection at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio. Biographer Joseph Engel wrote, "Serling apparently saved almost everything that crossed his desk from 1955 when huge success first enabled him to hire a secretary, to his death twenty-three years later. His correspondence included a veritable who's who of show business and politics Serling left a very revealing paper trail."

Serling's work includes published short stories, radio, television and movie scripts. Among his short story collections are *Patterns* (1957), *Stories from the Twilight Zone* (1960), *Into the Twilight Zone* (1964) and *The Season to be Wary* (1967). Hundreds of Serling's teleplays were produced for Playhouse 90, Hallmark Hall of Fame, Lux Video Theatre, and other anthology series. Notable teleplays include *The Sergeant* (1952), *Horace Mann's Miracle* (1953), *The Strike* (1954), *The Rack* (1955), and *The Dark Side of the Earth* (1957).

Biographies of Serling include Joel Engel, *Rod Serling: The Dreams and Nightmares of Life in the Twilight Zone* (1989) and Gordon Sander, *The Rise and Twilight of Televisions Last Angry Man* (1992). Detailed Information about *The Twilight Zone* including a synopsis of all episodes can be found in *The Twilight Zone Companion* (1989).

Article by [Beringia Zen](#) - posted September 16, 2001

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