

# Television Was Never the Same After 'The Twilight Zone'

The seminal classic changed television forever using science-fiction to enlighten audiences towards social justice.



A man with all the time in the world to read, but his glasses have broken. A misunderstanding that makes people believe aliens are there to serve them, but in actuality they plan to eat them. These are stories featured in the quintessential anthology series, ***The Twilight Zone***. Created and hosted by **Rod Serling**, *The Twilight Zone* ran for five seasons and aired 156 episodes from 1959 to 1964. As an anthology series, each week featured a

new stand-alone story that would find characters dealing with the strange and unknown. Simultaneously, Serling was captivating audiences with socially relevant topics that he hoped would change how people viewed the world. He introduced each episode with narration that proclaimed we were entering “the dimension of imagination,” and the world of television was forever changed.

Television before *The Twilight Zone* was all about family programming. Some of the biggest shows of the 1950s, including *American Bandstand* and *I Love Lucy*, were breezy entertainment families could enjoy together. That was important because television itself was in its infancy and many homes in the country were lucky to afford one TV for the entire family. That made watching shows on the big three channels (ABC, CBS, and NBC) an important bonding experience. The shows had to showcase family values and reach a particular standard of decency. Many other television genres including soap operas and game shows all got their start during this period. It wasn't until the 1960s that television became a force for political and social change as TV became a major influence in the Presidential election between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon.

Serling fostered his interest in writing as an editor for his high school paper, and during that time he was a big advocate for Americans enlisting in the war effort — for his own part he joined the U.S. Army during World War II, and [according to Biography](#), Serling became a paratrooper and was injured during the war. The military honored him with a Purple Heart, but combat has a way of changing people and Serling was no different. He turned his attention to the television medium with some fairly ambitious plans. He sought ways to change how people viewed the world they lived in, and he started with his big break on the TV business drama *Patterns*. The show was part of the long running anthology series, *Kraft Television Theatre*, and Serling won an Emmy for the drama which gave him clout to tackle other projects.

But that clout only extended so far. Serling found it frustrating that his scripts often faced scrutiny. During the 60s, there was a lot of pressure from sponsors who feared their products would be shown in an unflattering light when “difficult” topics were presented to audiences. Difficult topics meant stories that centered on discussions of political and social justice themes. Serling understood that through the power of television, he could send his messages of social justice to anyone who would tune in. These are the stories he was most interested in writing. An essay [by Hugh A.D. Spencer](#) paints Serling as a man deeply invested in the human rights of all people. He viewed writing and storytelling as a political act, adding that it was the duty of writers to discuss socially significant content in their work.

While often heralded as one of the defining shows of the 1960s, *Twilight Zone* aired its pilot on October 2nd, 1959. Serling was the center of the show; he wrote 93 of the series' 156 episodes, hosted every episode, and is an essential icon in television history. He has become synonymous with stories about the weird and unusual. Through the lens of science-fiction, Serling could bypass censors and deliver tales of wonder and awe while teaching viewers about perils of selfishness, racism, and "the inability to respect the rights and integrity of others," words which Serling delivered during his narration for the classic episode "The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street." *Twilight Zone* struggled in the ratings despite winning Emmy awards and garnering acclaim from fans, and since each half-hour episode featured a new story and new actors the show features some memorable actors including Burgess Meredith, Jack Klugman, Agnes Moorehead, and William Shatner. Episodes like "Time Enough At Last," "To Serve Man," and "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet" are not only examples of great *Twilight Zone* episodes, but they also exist as some of the finest half hour dramas that have ever aired on television. CBS canceled the show after its fifth season, but its effect on popular culture far surpassed even the most wild of expectations. *The Twilight Zone* is an institution of quality and stunning television, and unlike others at its time it's one that producers and storytellers are still trying to recreate.

CBS has brought *The Twilight Zone* **back many times** in the 60 years since its debut. First, came the feature film in 1983 that adapted some memorable stories while bringing new stories into the fold for the big screen. John Landis and Steven Spielberg were behind that endeavor, but the production was plagued with bad fortune and the movie didn't do enough to revitalize the brand. Despite lackluster returns, CBS tried to bring the series back a few years later having decided that science-fiction was a money maker in Hollywood, and the incarnation ran for 65 episodes and three seasons from 1985-1989. *Twilight Zone* went into hibernation again until 2002 when Forest Whitaker was tapped as the host, but the series only ran a single year and the brand was put away once again. 2019 sees the series rebooted for a third time, now with Jordan Peele (*Get Out*, *Us*) serving as both executive producer and host, and it will air on CBS All-Access. *Twilight Zone* will now find a home on a subscription service which may aid in its longevity better than if it had to survive based on ratings alone.

*Twilight Zone* has been instrumental in inspiring numerous TV series and movies over the years with science-fiction anthology series such as *Black Mirror*, *Amazing Stories*, and *Philip K. Dick's Electric Dreams* showing its DNA

running through many of their episodes. Some movies act as large scale adaptations of classic episodes too including the Serling-penned *Planet of the Apes* ("I Shot An Arrow Into The Air"), *Poltergeist* ("Little Girl Lost"), *The Truman Show* ("Special Service"), and *Us* ("Mirror Image"). Television has transformed in the years since *Twilight Zone* aired six decades ago, but it still owes a lot to this classic series. Rod Serling imagined a television show that could both entertain audiences and engage them in social causes, and there is perhaps no better use of the power of television.