

Anxiety in The Twilight Zone

Or, How a 60-year-old show can still unsettle a modern viewer

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Abstract

The original version of *The Twilight Zone* stands the test of time, when other shows of its era do not, because it continually addresses anxieties that were common in 1960 and continue to be common today. After watching the first season, I noticed six anxieties that came up repeatedly. They were: You are alone; You will die one day; Your fate is not in your hands; You will be the agent of your own destruction; You do not belong here; and You are part of a society, and that society is insane.

Keywords: Television, Anxiety, *Twilight Zone* (1959-1964), Rod Serling

Introduction

It has been many years since I stopped trying to suppress my tendency to analyze television shows in terms of structure, writing, characterization, and theme. Nobody else may care, but I can't turn off that analysis when I find myself disappointed by a show, or if a show turned into a treasured appointment every week. Every time, I would end up asking myself, "Why don't I like this show?" or, conversely, "What did they do right?"

Television shows often belong to specific eras, and certain tropes don't necessarily update to later eras well. *My Little Margie* or *I Married Joan* were sitcoms that were about a middle-aged man and a dizzy woman in his life; *Ozzy and Harriet* and *Father Knows Best* have middle-aged couples teaching valuable lessons to their teenaged children. All of these sitcoms belong in the 1950s. The 1960s had sitcoms where a young man discovers that someone in his life has a fantastical quality that he has to keep hidden - like *Bewitched*, *My Favorite Martian*, or *I Dream of Jeannie*. None of these tropes makes for a viable show decades later, and a viewer would have to understand the era in which it was made if they wanted to enjoy it. There are still other shows which, despite changes in setting and social attitudes, continue to be entertaining beyond their context. They are the classic shows that most viewers are familiar with.

The Twilight Zone is one of these classic shows. As an anthology series with horror overtones, it also stands as a show that ought to be able to be updated to reflect more modern storytelling. It's been rebooted three times, and the results have been spotty. (Full disclosure: I have not watched the most recent reboot, because I don't have room for yet another streaming service.) The original series does a better job of telling its stories, and directly capture a viewer's anxiety, than the newer versions do. I believe that the main problem has to do with the later series' focus on the sudden, ironic twist. The real success of the original show comes from the anxiety it

draws on. It's the anxieties that make the original version of *The Twilight Zone* current, even decades later. These anxieties are still part of our lives.

Naturally, I made a list of the anxieties, after giving the first season a close watch. The anxieties being played upon are:

1. You are alone.
2. You will die one day, and you won't be able to prevent it.
3. Your fate is not in your hands.
4. You will be the agent of your own destruction.
5. You do not belong here.
6. You are part of a society that is insane.

Individual episodes might employ repeated tropes, and combine with one or more of these anxieties. Not all of them work very well, but those that don't work usually don't work very directly on the anxiety it's trying to address. But the ones we remember all have a pretty direct connection to one of these six things we're afraid of.

The narrative tropes often have their own anxieties built into the stories. Finding yourself in a strange place, being different, being given the opportunity to use great power, or discovering that you no longer have the advantages of youth - all of these can combine with one of the anxieties above in different ways. And they provide great story hooks as well. The people in these episodes are incredibly human, capable of pettiness or greed or cruelty, which makes them their own worst enemy. All any of these characters has to do is to not listen to the better angels of their nature in order to condemn themselves to a terrible fate. Submitted for your approval are a few examples.

You are alone

We are all unique individuals, and that is a good thing. It's an essential part of our psyche. But that also means that you will encounter an experience that no one can go through with you. It may even be that, ultimately, your entire life will be something that you can't really share - no one can go through it with you, because they aren't you.

The pilot episode¹ of the show is from the point of view of a man who finds himself in an empty town, with evidence of people - food burning on a stove, for instance - but no people. Other episodes follow suit. A woman drives at night, refusing to stop, because she sees the same man every time she stops, but no one else does.² Three astronauts crash-land on an asteroid, and have to keep themselves alive long enough to be rescued, balancing their desire to stick together against the suspicion that none will survive if they try to make sure all three do.³ These are all episodes that work on the very basic fear that we are alone, and that it becomes clear when facing a crisis. In each case, the protagonists need to figure out how to address the fact of their aloneness in order to survive the crisis. It's rare that any episode starts with a protagonist that

doesn't wish for human connection, but one of the most memorable of these episodes is "Time Enough at Last."⁴

Burgess Meredith plays a bank teller who would much rather read than to anything else in the world. That includes doing his job, socializing with friends, or being a good husband to his wife. His wife would like to talk with someone at dinner, but he is hiding a book in his lap under the table. He can't cash a check for someone at the bank, because he's reading. There is no reasonable compromise here - he wants to read, and doesn't want to interact with humans. One day, while sneaking a book into the vault during his lunch break - as so often happens - nuclear Armageddon wipes out all human life except him. The buildings are intact, and there's plenty of food to keep him alive. He realizes that this means he can, at last, do nothing but read. And with the terrible, ironic twist at the end, the books are no good to him. Human extinction looked like the perfect solution to his problem, but I don't think there was a show on television in that era that would have allowed him to benefit from the apocalypse.

You will die one day

You, being a unique individual, live in a finite stretch of time. There is a large part of human history where you were not present, and there will be a large stretch of time that will exist after you're gone. Sometimes, it's easy to fixate on the fact that there will be a time where you will cease to be alive.

There are so many episodes harping on this anxiety in the first season. It's often combined with other anxieties for extra flavor, but it's clear that this is a major anxiety for this show. A combat officer in the Pacific can see something on the face of his comrades that tells him that they will die soon.⁵ A man is afraid to go to sleep, because he believes that a woman in his dreams is going to kill him.⁶ A pilot from World War I gets lost in the clouds and lands at a present-day air base, escaping certain death.⁷ A washed-up trumpet player steps in front of a truck and finds himself in a strange place where nobody sees him.⁸ These are all episodes where people have to deal with the immediate certainty of their own death. The ones that end happily are the ones where the protagonist makes peace with this certainty. One of my favorites in this category is "A Pitch for the Angels."⁹

An old peddler, having given up the idea of living well years ago, lives in a tiny room in New York City somewhere. He pitches trinkets and gadgets from a case, and every year fewer people stop to listen. The Angel of Death comes to see him, for obvious reasons. The Angel tells him that the only way to put off the moment of death is to fulfill an ambition or a goal that had eluded him in life. The peddler comes up with the only thing he can think of - a pitch so good that the angels themselves would line up to buy. It's a dodge, of course. If he quits peddling, he can live forever. There is a catch, however, and unintended consequence. The Angel of Death has to return with someone before midnight, and a beloved little girl has taken ill. The peddler realizes that he has to correct his mistake, and spends hours delaying the Angel by the only means at his disposal - he pulls out his case and pitches one thing after another, dazzling the Angel of Death until the clock strikes twelve. He's achieved his stated ambition, and the Angel takes him away. The peddler's story has a happy ending, because he has embraced the fact that he will die, and he can't change it.

Your fate is not in your hands

A lot of American mythology is founded in the idea that, no matter what disadvantages you may have, you can find a way to overcome them and make a life for yourself that will satisfy your needs and ambitions. Somehow, we all will prosper. And if we do not prosper, it must follow that our own lack of industry, creativity, or chutzpah is to blame. Any of us who do not have everything we'd hoped for can only look at themselves for the reason why. A person who doesn't turn out to be financially comfortable, doing work that has meaning, and with an emotionally satisfying family life? That person must possess some flaw that has turned them into a failure. It's all hokey, of course. We're talking about the American Myth here - it simply isn't true. It's possible that one can make a good life for themselves, but often there are too many disadvantages that are too great to achieve that goal. Not to mention the fact that it's impossible for everyone to be a world champion boxer, or the boss of a company, or a peddler who can afford a two-room apartment with a window. Rod Serling has a certain fascination with the American failure - a man (usually a man) past his prime, with most of his opportunities in his past, poor, directionless, and friendless. In episodes featuring a failure, he usually finds himself presented with one last, unexpected, long-shot opportunity to finally be a success. The episode that gives us the best view of this is "The Big, Tall Wish."¹⁰

An over-the-hill boxer has one last chance to win a championship. A boy in the building where he lives tells him that he will make a big, tall wish to make sure the boxer wins. Against all odds, and despite being outclassed by his opponent, he wins. When he comes home, the boy tells the boxer that the victory was the result of his big, tall wish. The boxer won't have it - he succeeded on his own merits alone. The boy tearfully begs the boxer to believe in the wish and acknowledge that someone else had a hand in his victory. But the boxer can't believe in a benevolent twist of fate - he had to have done it completely on his own. The wish then falls apart, and he realizes that he didn't overcome the disadvantages he had, and that the other fighter knocked him out. He had to believe in the wish in order for it to take hold, but he refused to allow the thought that he didn't make it on his own. His fate is tragic, because he had to believe that his individual effort was all he needed - not luck, not a boy's wish, not access to better resources. Since he insisted on relying solely on his own effort, he lost the fight. The tendency, often attributed to the American character, to go it alone and depend on our rugged individualism, is a powerful notion. But we often overlook the fact that, aside from certain decisions we make, our lives are the result of a lot of factors outside of our control. It's a notion that's very hard to let go of, even if it harms us.

You will be the agent of your own destruction

We are told that we have agency, free will, the power of choice - whatever we call it, it's the ability we have to make decisions that benefit us. This anxiety is the opposite of that. This anxiety is the one that comes across most strongly in Twilight Zone episodes. It's usually the subject of the ironic twists that define the show. The reboots try to include the twist, but those twists never actually include the unintended consequence of a previous decision that causes so much pain. This anxiety is present in episodes like "The Chaser,"¹¹ or "What you need."¹² It's even flipped, where a woman gains agency in "Nightmare as a Child."¹³ But the one that stands out for me is "The Fever."¹⁴

Franklin, a self-righteous killjoy, shames his wife for winning a Las Vegas getaway - not that it stops him from going - and with the slightest exposure to the rewards of gambling, he can't stop trying to win the jackpot at a slot machine. It's a dynamite depiction of addiction, especially since Franklin is aware that, even though he wins every so often, it's never as much as he's put in up to that point. Before long, he needs to win the \$10,000 jackpot just to return home with a fraction of the money he started with. It wasn't the slot machine that really got him - it was his inability to admit that he'd been had. By the end of the episode, Franklin is blaming everyone and everything around him, which is why it doesn't seem so strange for him to hear the slot machine calling to him. He steps out of his room, and the slot machine is there. It follows him around. Sure, because that's what slot machines do. Franklin has assigned agency to an inanimate object, and he can't stop thinking about it, so naturally it will pursue him until he falls out a window. Franklin, having warned his wife about the insidious nature of gambling, wound up succumbing to it himself, and became the thing that he hated. That pretty much sums up a lot of "The Twilight Zone."

You do not belong here

This one shows up surprisingly often. It's present in a character ("A Stop at Willoughby"¹⁵), it's a theme ("And When the Sky Was Opened")¹⁶, and it's present every time there's a mid-life crisis. It's all over the place. A lot of characters find themselves in ordinary lives that they find unbearable. Sometimes, they find a way to make their lives livable. More often, if they mean to survive, they find a different reality that has room for them. There are so many to choose from with this anxiety, but the one I've chosen is "The Sixteen-millimeter Shrine."¹⁷

Somewhere in the Hollywood Hills, there is a large house, containing one woman who ruled the Silent Screen. Then it all came to a sudden end. Some would say that she got old. It's more accurate to say that she stopped looking like she could be 24, and the roles dried up. (This is a real thing - I did some reading once upon a time about 19th-Century actors, and it was common for a woman to play Ophelia and Juliet, then disappear from the stage to bear and raise children, and return to play Mrs. Capulet and Lady Macbeth. There were no roles for a woman between 25 and 50.) Almost overnight, the industry that she helped create turned its back on her. She, in return, has turned her back on it, choosing instead to play her old movies in a room in her house. She can't bear the modern world, not for its noise or speed, but because she couldn't make the transition from being the center of attention to being no one. So, she spends her time reliving her glory days, and refusing to admit that she's gotten older. Well-meaning enablers try to force her to acknowledge reality, but she's spent too many years wrapped up in the illusion. She disappears one day, and her enablers run her projector. The film shows all of the characters from all of her films come into her house to meet her. They all adjourn to another room, off screen. The man who had been trying to get her back to reality calls to her, and the woman on the screen stops to look directly at him. She blows him a kiss, drops a scarf, and walks away. When he leaves the projection room, the scarf is just where she dropped it. She is never heard from again. It's a tragedy, it's a horror. And it's the natural consequence of the life she'd chosen for herself.

You are part of a society that is insane

There's really only one thing worse than not belonging to the society you're in. We'd all like to believe that we are part of a rational society, capable of making decisions in our collective self-interest. The only problem with that is that there is plenty of evidence to the contrary. We might make a collective decision out of fear, bigotry, or a basic misunderstanding of the facts. We might even decide that our society possesses a quality that makes no sense, but individual members will refuse to try to change it. Sometimes you don't want to stand out, even if your society is crazy. The obvious first-seasons episode that evokes this anxiety is "The Monsters are Due on Maple Street."¹⁸

One lovely summer day, a neighborhood of comfortable, middle-class people find the power cut and no way to get information about what's happening. As day turns into night, and neither electricity nor information is forthcoming, frustration turns into tension. The good neighbors give in to petty grudges and paranoia. Before long, any person on the street might be the focus of unwelcome attention from their friends and acquaintances, and will throw suspicion on anyone else to make sure that they are not the odd one out when the mass hysteria requires a scapegoat. In the end, aliens view the chaos from a hilltop - this same hysteria is happening everywhere. The aliens won't have to go to war to destroy the humans. All they have to do is create tension, and humans will destroy themselves.

Conclusion

After watching a season, I notice that the anxieties at work are the flip sides of some of the happy truths we tell ourselves. "You are alone" is just the dark flip side of "You are unique." The acknowledgement of the fact that you are alive right now automatically acknowledges the fact that one day you will die. The fear that "Your fate is not in your hands" is a direct contradiction to what we like to believe about ourselves - we like to believe that we control our fate. A belief that we can act in our own informed self-interest, plus the law of unintended consequences, means we could easily be the agent of our own destruction. We like to think of our society as tolerant and welcoming, but there could always be a way in which you are different enough that "You do not belong here." And, of course, being part of a group of like-minded individuals that believes we can act in concert to allow everyone to prosper can be completely undercut if that society is insane. It all boils down to the worry that if human endeavor is the solution, human behavior must be the problem. We can undo ourselves in no time, if we let it happen. There are many happy endings in *The Twilight Zone*, and all of them are stories of people defeating the anxieties here. But even the happy endings are cautionary tales, meant to remind us to know ourselves, refuse to be blind to our faults, act with empathy, and always strive to be the person we imagine ourselves to be.

References

- ¹ *The Twilight Zone*, season 1, episode 1, “Where is everybody?” directed by Robert Stevens, written by Rod Serling, aired 2 October 1959 on CBS.
- ² *The Twilight Zone*, season 1, episode 16, “The Hitch-Hiker,” directed by Alvin Ganzer, written by Rod Serling (based on a radio play by Lucille Fletcher), aired 22 January 1960 on CBS.
- ³ *The Twilight Zone*, season 1, episode 16, “I shot an arrow into the air,” directed by Stuart Rosenberg, written by Rod Serling (based on a story by Madelon Champion), aired 15 January 1960 on CBS.
- ⁴ *The Twilight Zone*, season 1, episode 8, “Time enough at last,” directed by John Brahm, written by Rod Serling (based on a story by Lynn Venable), aired 20 November 1959 on CBS.
- ⁵ *The Twilight Zone*, season 1, episode 19, “The Purple Testament,” directed by Richard L. Bare, written by Rod Serling, aired 12 February 1960 on CBS.
- ⁶ *The Twilight Zone*, season 1, episode 9, “Perchance to Dream,” directed by Robert Florey, written by Charles Beaumont, aired 27 November 1959 on CBS.
- ⁷ *The Twilight Zone*, season 1, episode 18, “The Last Flight,” directed by William F. Claxton, written by Richard Matheson, aired 5 February 1960 on CBS.
- ⁸ *The Twilight Zone*, season 1, episode 32, “Passage for Trumpet,” directed by Don Medford, written by Rod Serling, aired 20 May 1960 on CBS.
- ⁹ *The Twilight Zone*, season 1, episode 2, “One for the Angels,” directed by Robert Parrish, written by Rod Serling, aired 9 October 1959 on CBS.
- ¹⁰ *The Twilight Zone*, season 1, episode 27, “The Big Tall Wish,” directed by Ron Winston, written by Rod Serling, aired 8 April 1960 on CBS.
- ¹¹ *The Twilight Zone*, season 1, episode 31, “The Chaser,” directed by Douglas Heyes, written by Robert Presnell Jr. (Based on a short story by John Collier), aired 13 May 1960 on CBS.
- ¹² *The Twilight Zone*, season 1, episode 12, “What You Need,” directed by Alvin Ganzer, written by Rod Serling (based on the short story Henry Kutter and C. L. Moore), aired 25 December 1959 on CBS.
- ¹³ *The Twilight Zone*, season 1, episode 29, “Nightmare as a Child,” directed by Alvin Ganzer, written by Rod Serling, aired 29 April 1960 on CBS.
- ¹⁴ *The Twilight Zone*, season 1, episode 17, “The Fever,” directed by Robert Florey, written by Rod Serling, aired 29 January 1960 on CBS.
- ¹⁵ *The Twilight Zone*, season 1, episode 30, “A Stop at Willoughby,” directed by Robert Parrish, written by Rod Serling, aired 6 May 1960 on CBS.
- ¹⁶ *The Twilight Zone*, season 1, episode 11, “And When the Sky Was Opened,” directed by Douglas Heyes, written by Rod Serling (Based on a short story by Richard Matheson), aired 11 December 1959 on CBS.
- ¹⁷ *The Twilight Zone*, season 1, episode 4, “The Sixteen-Millimeter Shrine,” directed by Mitchell Leisen, written by Rod Serling, aired 23 October 1959 on CBS.

¹⁸ *The Twilight Zone*, season 1, episode 22, “The Monsters are Due on Maple Street,” directed by Ron Winston, written by Rod Serling, aired 4 March 1960 on CBS.