

WESTPORT IN ROD SERLING'S *The Twilight Zone*

It is well established that growing up in Binghamton, New York greatly influenced the work of Rod Serling, the legendary television writer, but little is known of the three years Serling spent in Westport, Connecticut before moving to Hollywood.

Yet in that brief time, Serling not only came to overnight success as a television playwright, winning three Emmy Awards in a row, but those Westport years would resonate years later in episodes of his magnum opus,

The Twilight Zone...

WRITTEN & DESIGNED BY ARLEN SCHUMER

WESTPORT IN THE 1950's was a small town in suburban Connecticut's Fairfield County, a little over an hour northeast of New York City by car or commuter train—the New Haven line out of Grand Central Station that young “television playwright” Rod Serling used when going into the city's TV studios to oversee production of his live dramas that were airing on shows like *Playhouse 90*, *Studio One* and *Kraft Television Theatre*. Serling had moved his wife and two young daughters there from Cincinnati in late '54 to be closer to where the action was in the nascent medium...



...and Westport had already transitioned from its agricultural and shipping roots earlier in the century into a waterfront haven for artists and writers, so Serling must've felt he was in his element there, its suburban milieu familiar to him, having grown up in upstate New York.

Westport de GP
 —Deans A TV rizer Norwalk r 93 Westfair de GP
 —Seyna Alfred W capt WFD r 72 Davenport av Saug
 —Josephine wd Michael R 72 Davenport av Saug
 —Michael F (Helen R) sis cog Bridgeport h Wood
 Hill rd GP
 —Robert M student r Wood Hill rd GP
 —Soren Robert state policeman State E n W Parish rd
 GP h at Fairfield
 Serling Rod E (Carolyn K) writer h High Point rd
 *Surrealist Maria h Hillside rd GP
 Seryala Henry J (Hester G) dist mgr NY h Elm-
 wood la GP
 Sessman Barbara Mrs tchr Green Farm School r
 7 year Hills Point rd GP RD 3
 —Richard h rear Hills Point rd GP RD 3
 Suvilla Frank mush State Police r State E n W Parish
 rd GP
 Sverall Harry (Berice J) lawyer Fairfield h Marine
 av Saug Station

Plus, moving to Westport was, in Serling's words, “...a concession to my own particular hesitancy about all things big, massive and imposing...”

1957 Westport telephone book listing



Downtown Westport, intersection Post Road & Main Street

...New York TV and its people were such an entity.” Westport proved to be fertile ground for Serling, as he won three of his six career Emmy Awards during his three-year stay, for the live TV shows (above, left to right) *Patterns* (1955), *Requiem for a Heavyweight* ('56) and *The Comedian* ('57).

All three dramas took place in big city settings Serling had access to from Westport: big business, sports and entertainment, while *The Comedian* has scenes that take place in the lead character's “country home”—in Westport!



Westport's Famous Writers School advertisement, circa 1957, with a photo of Serling and his three Emmys.

Here are interesting facts about full-time and part-time careers in writing

Writing makes often a life of beautiful moments, emotional content and the freedom to live on your terms. But...the average cost of a college education is rising. Before you decide, here are some facts you should know.

How much can you earn?

John, the writer, earns from \$4,000 to \$15,000 a year, according to ability and experience. Staff writers on magazines earn \$7,000 to \$10,000. Authors with experience earn \$15,000 or more. If you have money, you can sell your work to newspapers and magazines for less up to \$1,000. For those who want to get the maximum on their investment, the \$100,000 investment \$250,000 for the same rights as a novel for \$100,000. For books.

The Writing Faculty of the Famous Writers School:

John Williams	Robert Coyle	Edgar Allan Poe	Mark Twain
John Galsworthy	Walter D. Young	W. Somerset Maugham	W. Somerset Maugham
Walter D. Young	W. Somerset Maugham	W. Somerset Maugham	W. Somerset Maugham

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Mr. Name (Please use last name first) _____
 Ms. Name (Please use last name first) _____
 Address _____
 City _____
 State _____ Zip _____
 Name _____
 Name _____



Westport's Saugatuck train station

TIME CHANGE

SERLING MOVES TO HOLLYWOOD



IN THE LATE FIFTIES, like Brooklyn's Dodgers and New York's Giants, the city's TV industry also moved to LA, and for much the same reason: money; shooting live in New York proved to be more expensive than filming series in Hollywood. So, too, after exactly three years living in Westport...

...Serling moved to the west coast in December, 1957. One of his '58 sales, a one-hour script, "The Time Element," was to *Desilu Playhouse*, owned by the husband-and-wife producing team of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz (who, in their fictionalized *I Love Lucy* TV series, had just moved from New York to Westport!).



THE TIME ELEMENT

Serling originally wrote it to be the pilot episode of a new series, *The Twilight Zone*, an anthology series of science fiction-like stories.

So when this offbeat drama of a man (film comedian William Bendix, left) who believes he goes back in time—to Pearl Harbor *before* the attack—received more fan mail and critical acclaim than any other *Desilu* program, no one was happier than Serling, because it made CBS pick up *The Twilight Zone* for their Fall '59 TV lineup.



Why science fiction? Because Serling was tired of fighting the powerful TV censors and advertising agencies who exerted an inordinate amount of control over the content of the shows they sponsored. After his '57 politically-themed teleplay "The Arena" was gutted by the two of all political relevance, Serling opined, "I would have had a much more adult play had I made it science fiction, set it in the year 2057, and peopled the Senate with robots."

Post Road & Riverside Drive intersection

Serling's "time element" would be a cornerstone of *The Twilight Zone* (as in its '63 commercial break graphic, above), a dimension described by him to be "...as timeless as infinity."

HOLLYWOOD

And though he might have put his time in Westport behind him, traces of the town's suburban, commuter and pastoral elements would later resonate in some of the greatest episodes of his timeless *Twilight Zone*...



"THE MONSTERS ARE DUE ON MAPLE STREET"



Rod Serling could have been describing Westport in this first-season *Twilight Zone* episode's trademark voiceover introduction:

"Maple Street USA, late summer. A tree-lined little road of front porch gliders, barbecues, the laughter of children, and the bell of an ice cream vendor.

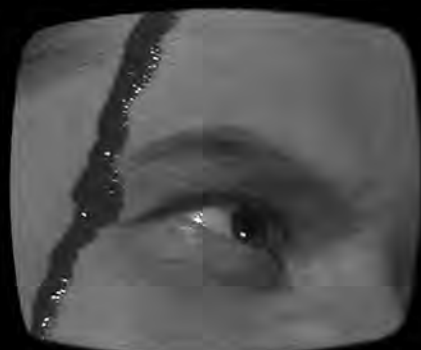
At the sound of the roar and the flash of light, it will be precisely 6:43 pm on Maple Street, a late Saturday afternoon, in the last calm and reflective moment. . . . before the monsters came."



To Serling, "Maple Street," whether in Westport or any American community, was indeed "Earth creatures' native habitat" (as in the above image, also from season one, "People Are Alike All Over"). "Maple Street" the episode details aliens' deceptive manipulations of earthmen's fear and hate to further their conquest—but, like most *Twilight Zones*, not in the way you expect them to. Following mysterious blackouts of electricity on their block, once-friendly neighbors unravel into an animalistic, rampaging mob, and as the sun falls...



...the episode becomes a kind of proto-*Night of The Living Dead*, as they metaphorically eat each other alive—an equally-scabrous indictment of paranoid McCarthyism, the epitome of the "we have met the enemy and they are us" approach: "They pick the most dangerous enemy they can find, and it's themselves," observes Serling's alien interloper, and, speaking to the *Twilight Zone* viewing audience, "All we need to do is sit back and watch." Serling's own voiceover conclusion was equally terse, timeless and trenchant...



"The tools of conquest do not necessarily come with bombs and explosions and fallout. There are weapons that are simply thoughts, attitudes, prejudices—to be found 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."



R O D S E R L I N G was born in Syracuse, New York, but raised downstate in Binghamton, which,

like Westport, was endemic of the northeast

United States in the first half of the 20th

century, replete with perfectly-kept parks, town

centers with vintage carousels and gazebos,

homes with front porches and back yards—

enough bucolic, Rockwellian Americana to

give the adult Serling such pangs of nostalgic


longing that they brought forth two of his greatest

Twilight Zone episodes, “Walking Distance” and...

“A STOP AT WILLOUGHBY”

The sister episodes each had thirtysomething (M)ad men—Serling’s doppelgangers—burned out from years of running the Madison Avenue rat race, and looking for some kind of respite. They find it, of course...but in *The Twilight Zone*.

In “Willoughby,” actor James Daly (actress Tyne’s father), pummeled by his boss’ daily harangue of “*This is a push business! A push-push-push business! Push and drive! All the way! All the time! Right on down the line!*” seeks refuge in “Willoughby,” a turn-of-the-century idyll he daydreams of during his commute from Westport to New York City—you can hear the conductor announcing the familiar New Haven line stops during the episode. At home, he feebly responds to his ultra-materialist shrew of a wife



AND YOU MAY FIND YOURSELF
IN A BEAUTIFUL HOUSE
WITH A BEAUTIFUL WIFE
AND YOU MIGHT ASK YOURSELF
WELL HOW DID I GET HERE?

—David Byrne and The Talking Heads
“Once in a Lifetime,” 1980



IF I HAD THE MEANS
I THINK I WOULD LIKE TO BE
IN VICTORIAN TIMES.
SMALL TOWN. BANDSTANDS.
SUMMER...

—Rod Serling, from one of his last
interviews before he died in 1975



ON THE TRAIN FROM WESTPORT TO NEW YORK

what would become a familiar refrain of the '60s counterculture: “*Some people aren’t built for competition. Or big pretentious houses they can’t afford. Or rich communities they don’t feel comfortable in. Or country clubs they wear around their neck like a badge of status.*” After he quits his job and his wife leaves him, a desperate Daly, in his mind, steps off the train to stay in edenic Willoughby forever; in reality, he jumps off the train to his death. “*Turn on, tune in, and drop out,*” indeed, and Serling’s favorite episode of the series.

"THE SHELTER"

Rod Serling's acute ability to identify both primal and post-war American fears and crises, then build stories around them, set in commonplace surroundings—like the suburban milieu of a Westport—was perhaps the single factor most responsible for the success and longevity of *The Twilight Zone*, a psycho-American Gothic of sorts.

In "The Shelter," which presciently aired a year before the October '62 Cuban Missile Crisis, Serling zeroed in on the greatest of post-war fears, the threat of nuclear war, by depicting suburban neighbors at a dinner party who, after hearing a radio warning that bombing was imminent, degenerate, *Lord of the Flies*-like, into a raging mob clawing each other over access to the lone fallout shelter—the host's. Though it turns out to be

a false alarm, the thin veneer of civilization had been peeled off like cheap cellophane, and the damage done. But, the host rues, "I wonder... if any of us has any idea what those 'damages' really are. Maybe one of them was finding out what we're really like when we're 'normal.' The kind of people we are, just underneath the skin—a lot of naked, wild animals who put such a price on staying alive that they'll claw their own neighbors to death just for the privilege!"

This wasn't your father's suburban sitcom, as Stephen King observed in *Danse Macabre*, his 1981 historical survey of science fiction, fantasy and horror: "Rarely has any television program dared to present human nature in such an ugly, revealing light." But countering that pessimistic worldview was Serling's concluding, moralistic message, of which he said in an interview after the episode aired, "The essence was that for the human race to survive, it has to remain civilized."

ethical problem of what would happen if there were an alert sounding, and neighbors with children said, 'Please let us in!' I was up in the air about it; I didn't know what position, philosophically, to take.

Now we've decided we're not going to build one, for very realistic reasons: if we're to survive, what do we survive for? What kind of world do we go into? I'm not sure I want to survive in that kind of world..."

Serling gave the reason for the fear of the age in "The Shelter's" sister episode, his adaptation of fellow-*Twilight Zone* writer Richard Matheson's short story, "Third from the Sun":

$$E=mc^2$$

OPENING GRAPHIC, 1963

"People are afraid because they subvert every great thing ever discovered, every fine idea ever thought, every marvelous invention ever conceived. . . They subvert it. . ."



"They make it crooked and devious. . . Then too late, far too late, they ask themselves the question why. . . By then it's too late. . . everything is too late."



SERLING SAID of "The Shelter" in a Fall '61 interview, "I wrote it because it had great immediacy. My wife and I'd been talking about building a shelter, and we were struck by the moral and



"ON THURSDAY WE LEAVE FOR HOME"



Rod Serling perceived that the benign quest into space nevertheless carried with it the destructive imperialist desire to invade and conquer. This need to subjugate others brings on the downfall and comeuppance of a demagogic leader of



stranded space colonists in "Thursday" (Serling's best one-hour episode from the '63 season), who finds that, upon rescue from years of isolation, he can't navigate freedom better than captivity; though a leader, he can't let his people go.



Left alone in a cave, deluded, thinking he's still addressing his flock that has long ago departed for Earth, the actor James Whitmore recites some of Serling's most poetic prose, as much about his character recalling his home planet as it was Serling perhaps nostalgically remembering his childhood home in bucolic Binghamton—or his brief, but memorable stay in wooded Westport, Connecticut?

