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Irony in The Twilight Zone: How the Series Critiqued Postwar American Culture

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Irony in *The Twilight Zone*: How the Series Critiqued Postwar American Culture

David Melbye. Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

In *Irony in The Twilight Zone: How the Series Critiqued Postwar American Culture*, David Melbye provides meticulous analyses of the groundbreaking television series's use of irony as a narrative strategy to critique postwar America. Although other books on *The Twilight Zone* tend to serve as guidebooks to the series—see Marc Scott Zicree's *The Twilight Zone Companion* (1989)—or nonscholarly book-length studies such as Peter Wolfe's *In the Zone: The Twilight World of Rod Serling* (1997) or critical biographies such as Gordon F. Sander's *Serling: The Rise and Twilight of Television's Last Angry Man* (1992)—Melbye's study is the first scholarly examination of the show's use of irony as a narrative device. In his analysis of 140 of the series's 156 episodes, Melbye, who teaches a broad range of media studies courses in Southern California and has worked in the Hollywood television industry, has produced a mostly readable, if at times dense, account of *The Twilight Zone*'s place in postwar American culture through its use of narrative irony.

Melbye argues that *The Twilight Zone* employs irony as a tool of social critique in postwar America, a device the series consistently uses in each episode to such an extent, he claims, as to suggest that the ironic circumstances reflected in the series, in the series's moral universe, and in the series's larger social contexts cannot be separated. In making this argument, he responds to the work of M. Keith Booker's *Strange TV: Innovative Television Series from The Twilight Zone to The X-Files* (2002), a study that situates *The Twilight Zone* as a reflection of postwar culture and focuses on the formulaic, science fiction structure of the series. Melbye insists that *The Twilight Zone* is less a piece of formulaic science fiction as much as it is a series that, while still formulaic due to its reliance on the surprise twist ending, draws from multiple generic traditions whose main connecting thread is the presence of irony. As such, Melbye's book is an important study of not only one of America's most important and influential television programs, but it is also an important comment on how the series went beyond the confines of the

science fiction genre to produce a complex critique of postwar America.

Melbye divides the book into seven chapters. The first chapter focuses on the multiple cultural and personal influences on the show and on its creator Rod Serling, providing a useful overview of 1940s–1950's radio and television programming that inspired him to create an agenda for social critique. In Chapter Two, "Irony's Philosophical Legacy," the author provides a detailed overview of the intellectual history of irony from ancient Greece through postmodernism. Here, he draws heavily from Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), in which Rorty reviews Western thought and culture to show that irony arises, in part, from the incompatibility of philosophical inquiry with political contexts. Using Derrida, Heidegger, and Nietzsche, Rorty insists on a contingent nature of existence, leading to an ironic disposition toward the world—what Rorty calls the "ironist." The universe of *The Twilight Zone*, Melbye insists, is a television version of Rorty's argument, only "in this case, from a critique of metaphysics to *The Twilight Zone*'s critique of 1950's cultural tendencies and assumptions" (54).

Melbye then identifies five different kinds of irony that *The Twilight Zone* addresses, each one focusing on what he considers to be important reflections of Cold War America in the late 1950s and early 1960s. "Technological Irony" and "Invasive Irony" explore the future use of technology in the series and the way the series reflects Cold War fears of invasion and the irony that arises in episodes where those fears are misplaced. "Martial Irony" analyzes the series's portrayal of the military's ironic stances during both war and peacetime. "Sociopolitical Irony" explores Serling's use of irony to implicitly and explicitly critique politics. The last chapter, "Domestic Irony," analyzes the series's portrayal of multiple ironic tendencies in domestic settings. In doing so, the author insists that examining the series in terms of irony, rather than science fiction, recontextualizes its other genre-centric episodes, as well as nongenre episodes, into a larger cohesive pattern.

To that end, Melbye's book is often compelling reading and offers an important contribution to the reader's understanding of *The Twilight Zone* and to the use of irony as a tool of social critique. As such, this book could be used in numerous popular culture, American studies, and cultural studies courses and on reading lists.

—Tom Pace

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