

STATION ELEVEN ANALYTICAL RESPONSE

‘There had always been a massive delicate infrastructure of people, all of them working unnoticed around us, and when people stop going to work, the entire operation grinds to a halt’ Station Eleven is a warning about the fragility of life. Do you agree?

It is the great cataclysmic devastation of the Georgia Flu, which “spread fast and vicious in the winter world”, that best captures Mandel’s warning against the fragility - not of life itself - but of civilisation. Undoubtedly, the storm-like flu would put an end to society’s most delicate, and perhaps most trivial elements - technology, social media, and “corporate respectability”. However, humanity was never quite so “fragile”. As long as there is humankind, there is life, and meaning and purpose can be continue to be discovered even in the darkest of times.

Mandel vigorously challenges the notion of an “impersonal... modern world”, much to say that it had “never been impersonal at all.” In fact, there had always been a degree of delicacy and attention required to enable society’s functioning, a comforting prospective for Clark upon reflecting on the intricacies in the production of a snow globe. Yet, due to civilisation’s heavy reliance on individual efforts, if people stop paying attention, or if they “stop going to work”, a societal collapse seems inevitable. Certainly, a city run by “high-functioning sleepwalkers”, people who were forever distracted by gossip tabloids and were “enraptured by [their] screen[s]”, is a highly vulnerable one of that. In the age of social media, Frank proposes it was “remarkable... that the lights stayed on as long as they did”. Perhaps then, the Prophet was not too deluded in saying that the virus was like a “cleansing angel”. In fact, it was rather successful in ridding the world of its passionless, shallow exteriors. Whilst Mandel accentuates the personality of civilisation, she undermines the everyday distractions that served to catalyse its very own downfall. It is for this reason she deems the importance of appreciating the miraculous inventions of the modern era, simply due to the ease at which they can be lost. Electricity, technology and even flight represent the ingenuity of humankind, but yet they are finite qualities of life and thus, her novel suggests, we should not take them for granted.

With that said, however, the termination of civilisation does not imply the loss of all humanity. Despite their darkened circumstances, survivors emanate hope, passion and goodwill as they attempt to salvage what is “best about the world”. The preservation and esteemed “importance of art” perhaps best exemplifies this. It is the timeless works of Shakespeare in which the Symphony are most known for, and in performing these, they invite a sense of elegance into their otherwise bleak era. Likewise, Kirsten is forever treasuring her Dr. Eleven comic books, providing her the same magical method of escapism as they did for Miranda. It is such a need for purpose, for “beauty and joy”, which lies at the core of human spirit and ultimately of life itself. However, humanity is also built on connections. The idea of a conventional family is distorted, as survivors take refuge in wherever and whomever they can call home, illustrated through Clark’s “aching tenderness” for his “fellow... compatriots” at the abandoned airport. In juxtaposition, the “loneliness” of civilisation particularly grasped Miranda, not to mention Arthur and his ever-so “distant son”. Here, Mandel implores the enduring quality of humanity, which not only survives the horrific Georgian flu, but flourishes in the absence of fragile civilisation.

Yet, all that is lost in civilisation’s self-destruction is not necessarily destined to the past. For Mandel, the restoration of order, of society, is a plausible future for humanity, and if nothing else, “its pleasant to consider the possibility”. The survivors of the flu collectively shore up the remnants of the former world, most notably in Clark’s establishment of the Museum of Civilisation. Here, it was the “remarkable splendour[s]” of modernity that were

preserved, namely a Nintendo console and an iPhone, which illuminate alongside a collection of the simplest, but perhaps the most “beautiful objects” of all. The Symphony too sought after “the traces of the former world”, collectively searching ways to reawaken what was now a skeleton of civilisation. Particularly, Kirsten and August hunted for magazine clippings, comic books and TV guides, and it was such ephemera which served as anchorage to the lost world, uniting both past and present. Essentially, the entire new world was grounded in reconstructing the old, yet not for the hope that “the world’s changes would... be reversed”, but simply for the prospect of restoring a lighter era. Maybe even in doing so, Mandel looks towards a future civilisation that is even more secure, less fragile, than the old.

Station Eleven urges us to be present, appreciative and certainly to be mindful of the “human enterprise” required to sustain society. Evidently, it is the absence of such awareness which is disastrous for the already so frail civilisation. However, even in the face of such a catastrophic collapse, “humanity would [not] flicker out”, but rather blossom, as only now could survivors truly “recognise... the beauty of flight”. Thus, whilst the entire novel is pervaded with optimism, the ending which foresees an “awakening world” instills Mandel’s point that indeed, civilisation is delicate and subject to destruction, yet the endurance of humanity most always offers the possibility of a new beginning.