

STATION 11 ESSAY

A natural part of being human entails seeking others to form relationships with and seek understanding and comfort. In doing so, we help one another establish a state physical safety that we can be satisfied with as well as a state of achieving deeper psychological connections. Where humanity has experienced numerous tragedies far back as the bubonic plague, it is the support network of people – or lack there-of, as apparent in the case of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 that Emily St. John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven* is inspired by – that determines how civilisation overcomes and prospers from such misfortunes. By presenting a vacuous society preceding the Georgia flu and the struggling world afterwards, Mandel illuminates the importance of human interaction in both its physical and emotional forms to help fulfil humanity's various needs.

Mandel exposes how society values superficial goals or items instead of relishing companionship as she illustrates a society not too dissimilar to ours before the pandemic occurs. Characters such as Clark Thompson who disagree with the façade of society – take the parties with “cocaine and smooth girls with perfect skin” – develop a longing of “always [wanting] to escape” because of this “claustrophobic” characteristic of society that they live in. Mandel employs irony in the aspect that Arthur Leander throws “parties” with many people throughout his career, but instead uses them to elevate his popularity rather than establishing valuable bonds with others. A contrast between Arthur and Clark despite being close friends, as while Arthur feels the need to surround himself with success, Clark is comfortable with denying these standards of society, as accentuated by his individualised “usual uniform of [a] vintage suit ... [and] accessorised pink socks”. Through the use of a jarring colour such as “pink” and a contrast to the typical Los Vegas fashion to a “vintage suit”, Mandel cements an impression of Clark as someone who remains connected to humanity by preserving his sense of self. In turn, Clark who is fulfilled by his relationship with his husband juxtaposes to Arthur and his multiple failed marriages provides a comment on individuals such as Arthur and their lacking ability in maintaining relationships leading to being void of emotional gratification. Similarly, we begin to see a close resemblance to Arthur in flashbacks of Jeevan's career as a paparazzi before realising he wants “to do something that matters”. In scenes such as the aftermath of Arthur's party, we see Jeevan attempting to “take [Miranda's] picture” in order to achieve more success as a paparazzi. Correspondingly, Arthur constantly pursued his acting career for success which came with the consequence of failed relationships, thus only achieving material satisfaction. However, Jeevan admits that he is longing for something more meaningful, being “truth and beauty” which veers him from following in Arthur's footsteps, which is epitomised by the “line drawn through his life” creating a “divide between a *before* and *after*” due to the epidemic. Subsequently, Jeevan reassess how he wants to contribute to society, by deciding to become a paramedic following Arthur's death.

As Mandel depicts survival through the lenses of compassion and relationships, we acknowledge how humans create contentment following disorientating crises such as the Georgia Flu pandemic in *Station Eleven*. As we realise that Arthur Leander's lack of appreciation for sincere relationships are one of the major contributors to his death – and symbolic failure of his survival in modern society – the importance of affirming a sense of belonging with others is effectively advocated through the closeness of other characters such as the Travelling Symphony. By incorporating the travelling symphony and the sense of family that they inhabit, Mandel combats the fact that “hell is the absence of the people you long for” with the unity of people, which protects them from such loneliness that deteriorated Arthur. Additionally, by lamenting the loss of others and describing how the pain of loss can mimic “hell”, Mandel evokes hope from the travelling symphony; they manage to form a strong bond through their shared passion for art, thus creating a “truth ... that the symphony was their only world”. In turn, Mandel suggests that a lack of a sense of family forces people

to turn to other ways of coping with lonesomeness. Mandel exemplifies the heightened consequences of loneliness through Tyler, who desperately claims a group of people to himself – “my people and I...” – which is carried through by the repetitive use of inclusive of language that is commonly associated with the tactics of fascist leaders. Furthermore, Tyler’s ownership over others in creating his own cult adds to his aims to be a part of some form of unity for his own feelings of security and understanding of this new world. In essence, this could be noted as a survival mechanism for Tyler, although destructive, as Mandel demonstrates the imperative need for bonds with others in order to overcome hardships with others – not by one’s self.

Tantamount to physical survival, the aspect of emotional and psychological human connections is advocated by Mandel through the form of art as a medium of expression and relating to others. The symbol of acting is carried on throughout the novel, serving as a representation of escape from the pain of loss and change following the pandemic. As “almost everything, almost everyone” was “lost in the collapse”, the fact that intangible art forms such as Shakespeare could be carried through the Travelling Symphony means that there can be, and “still [is] such beauty” in this broken society. Acting provides a form of escape to Kirsten, who “when onstage ... fears nothing”. Through this insight - although small – into Kirsten’s motivation for acting, we understand how despite her being “some centuries later on a distant continent”, the identical action of acting that existed in Kirsten’s life before the pandemic allows a sense of psychological comfort for Kirsten. Furthermore, by performing Shakespearean plays the Travelling Symphony is effectively relating to how Shakespeare too experienced such tragedies, having lived “in a plague-ridden society with no electricity” to mend circumstances. Parallel to how Shakespeare utilised art as an emotional outlet for his struggles, the symphony relates to others emotionally by performing these plays to people who “want to know the best about the world” before the plague. By exploring different forms such as Shakespeare’s plays alongside Miranda’s sketchbook that she “carried ... in her luggage”, Mandel illuminates her concern of anything that holds memory of the past having its own sense of beauty and power, just like the Museum of Civilisation. With each character arguably searching for their own meaning – which is challenged in the post-pandemic society – their focus shifts from materialistic and superficial desires to more meaningful forms of experiencing life, such as relating to others whether personally or through art.

In conveying how the values of the same society developed from achievements to protection and safety, and moreover emotional fulfilment, Mandel condones the interconnections and relationships that come forth during challenging times. Mandel thus implores individuals to value what makes their lives meaningful and provides them with a sense of purpose as well as safety.