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ENG 190 C

Final Essay

Title: Rebirth and Renewal in the postapocalyptic Landscape

"There are people who, after fifteen years of perpetual twilight, long only to go home" (Mandel 2015: 83). This is a quote from the comic series, Dr. Eleven. Dr Eleven is a self-conscious narrative within Emily St. John Mandel's post-apocalyptic fiction, *Station Eleven.* Through this quote, Miranda quite literally poses the desire to go home, back to alien-invaded Earth. However, the comic was created to exhibit the parallels with the novel itself. Therefore, such a verbatim also reflects the novel's overarching theme of belonging. Moreover, both of these works also further showcase the various landscapes of post-apocalyptic fiction. Dr Eleven showcases a storyline that in all of its glory is fictional and unfathomable. However, Station Eleven holds a more realistic approach to this genre. Distinctively, this is a post-covid world. This is life after two years in isolation. For that reason, readers are presently forced to confront the harsh realities of the world depicted in the novel's pages. Finally, this novel serves as a significant allegory of rebirth and renewal in society. It suggests that despite living through dark times, there is always an opening for change. However, is this change that returns to the familiarity of the past, or a change that creates a new normal? Regardless, both changes stem from the urgency of wanting to belong. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze this through the dissection of various characters, symbols, and events from Station Eleven.

Station Eleven is a post-apocalyptic fiction that evaluates the importance of modern society taking into account that the novel is set fifteen years after a deadly pandemic has eradicated 99% of Northern America. Hence, from the very beginning, the author sets up the underlying feeling of nostalgia for what is gone within various aspects of the plot. Where there is loss, there is a sense of reminiscence. The book showcases the characters grappling with the realities of the new world they now live in. Through the lens of survivors, the readers see the navigation of civilization in the wake of ruins. These are survivors who are forced to confront the feeling of loss, mourning, and the forgotten comforts of a world that is gone. Therefore, within this structure, the readers can articulate an interchange between nostalgia and remembrance. There is an apparent disagreement within the struggle between clinging to the past and daring to envision the future. In the context, of clinging to the past, various characters can be seen holding onto memories for better or worse. Memory, in the entirety of the novel, acts as an intricate theme. The characters each have a varying response to remembering the past. Some characters in the novel explore how memory acts as a beacon of comfort and hope. Moreover, another showcases memory as a rather hindrance to the broader theme of renewal. The novel's main character, Kirsten Raymond herself articulates memory as multifaceted. In the novel, Kirsten collects books and magazines in abandoned homes. This encapsulates the vision of the old world alive within her mind. However, while she reminisces the happier memories, she does find solace in actively forgetting certain memories. Kirsten from the get-go is unable to remember memories from year 1 of the pandemic. This could be a motor reflex or a conscious reflex of the mind to block out any traumatic memories. In an interview with Francois Diallo, Kirsten exclaims "Town members want to talk about what happened, about the past" (Mandel 2015: 115). To this Diallo asserts," The more we know about the former world, the better we'll understand what happened

when it fell" (Mandel 2015: 115). To this statement, Kirsten haughtily responds "But everyone knows what happened" (Mandel 2015: 115). This response articulates Kirsten's view that she believes that engaging in such a discussion is futile. Hence, she finds comfort in the act of forgetting and is one such character who does not believe in the importance of the old world in the rebirth of a new one.

On the other hand, some aspects of the previous world are preserved and still revered back to. This one factor is the recurrent theme of art. Art is a component in the novel that endures. It is almost striking how resilient art and culture conjure up in the face of adversity. It conjures up and preserves the memories of the lost world. The Travelling Symphony is a group of actors and musicians who move from settlement to settlement spreading the ever-present relevance of Shakespeare. They bring about performances of classical music and Shakespearean plays to scattered survivors. This is a positive example of inspiring oneself from the joys of the past. However, it does raise the question that is the Travelling Symphony able to spread positivity in the face of destruction only because they left behind the negativity of the past. If Kirsten Raymond had not chosen to forget the trauma would she have not been so optimistic in the post-apocalyptic world? Regardless, their dedication to preserving the arts speaks to a deeper commitment to maintaining humanity's cultural importance in a world where survival is the primary concern. To draw more on artifacts turning into aesthetic connotations of the past, a notable mention is the Museum of Civilization by Clark. This museum acts as a collection of items that remind the people of how simple and young the simple joys were. It paid homage to the big and small achievements of the pre-pandemic world. It is unusual to a great extent because these are devices that were previously mundane and are now glorified to a greater extent. This

shows that despite wanting to move forward, people will always hold onto what was. The figments of a civilized world seem like a play of paradise in the eyes of the survivors.

This brings this paper onto the exploration of civilization within the novel. Mandel gives a rejuvenation to the meaning of civilization within her novel. Through the comparative narrative of life before and after a pandemic, she showcases civilization in its miscellaneous form. In the pre-apocalyptic, pre-pandemic world civilization is viewed as the ordinary. It is tedious, monotonous, and rather problematic. Whereas, in the post-apocalyptic, post-pandemic, and post-modern world the old and previous tedious routine of life is glorified and reminisced. This is largely due to the complete cut-off on technology. The world went from being virtually connected to being virtually and physically isolated. In modern society, it is rather normal to be so dependent on technology that you are isolated by it. However, this new world is a place with no technology. Airplanes, radio, television, and the Internet are not the usual norm anymore. People are in all senses disconnected from one another. Therefore, it can be articulated that isolation is also a driving factor in reminiscing the old world. The survivors in Mandel's world realize how reliant they are on the comfort of civilization. This is largely seen through the symbol of airplanes in the novel. Airplane a symbol of civilization, represents the importance of connectivity in the modern world. In the novel, there are scenes where survivors often longingly look up at the skies hoping to see a plane cruising up above. This gives hope that there is a world out there where civilization still exists. This mere thought is an attempt at escaping the newfound reality and tricking oneself into being hopeful. However, is this hope for the revival of the old world, or the possibility of a new world?

In the context of hope and imagination, it is only fair to reenter the world of Miranda's Dr. Eleven. It is a work of fiction that Miranda imagines and creates. The comic series acts as the

primary symbol that implores the readers to infer the importance of imagination in a post-apocalyptic world. The comics mainly act as a distraction from reality and an entryway into the more likable world of imagination for characters like Kirsten. Well into the novel there comes a scene where Miranda meets young Kirsten moments before the outbreak. Miranda in that moment predicts Kirsten's future in the following lines, "she looked like someone who'd been well-cared for and coddled all her life. She was probably someone who would grow up to be like Miranda's assistant Laetitia, like Leon's assistant Thea. unadventurous and well-groomed" (Mandel 2015: 212). This scene showcases the idea that the future may seem rather predictable but that is not even true in the slightest. More importantly, Kisten did not grow up to be like one of Clark's corporate cronies. This is to a large extent because of a life-threatening and world-altering event. However, it would be unfair to say that Kirsten and her imagination had no role in shaping the individual she grew up to be. The series of events and the timing of such events played a huge role in the novel. Kirsten received the comic before the pandemic. Kisten was under the imaginative guidance and influence of Arthur well before the pandemic. Therefore, the coping mechanism of an escapist to the world of imagination was well-wired into her before the end of the world. Hence, it is debatable whether Dr Eleven or Arthur gave Kirsten the creative freedom and ability to temporarily shut down from the world. Arthur gave her the confidence to think creatively and ultimately use the comics as a distraction from the realities. Arthur is a creator and he channeled that same ability to his pupil, Kirsten, As creators they utilize imagination to transform impossibilities into possibilities. Therefore, in the context, of the post-pandemic world, Kirsten channeled her abilities as a creator to use imagination as a transformative tool to garner hope.

To channel more on creative agency, an important stream of events seen throughout the novel is the continued appearance of Shakespeare. The traveling symphony was a way through which the relevance of Shakespeare was kept alive. The remembrance of the joys of the old world was kept alive. However, this sentiment was not shared by all. “Survival might be insufficient, she’d told Dieter in late-night arguments, but on the other hand, so was Shakespeare. He’d trotted out his usual arguments, about how Shakespeare had lived in a plague-ridden society with no electricity and so did the Travelling Symphony. But look, she’d told him, the difference was that they’d seen electricity, they’d seen everything, they’d watched a civilization collapse, and Shakespeare hadn’t” (Mandel 2015: 288). Through this dialogue Clarinet also known as Sidney, a musician with the Travelling Symphony articulates a sense of pessimism. This tone almost seems to articulate the idea that Clarinet felt offended by the idea that something from the past dared to compare themselves to what they were going through psychologically. Therefore, she emphasizes the idea that while it is important to remember the past, the past cannot however be a means through which the post-apocalyptic world is interpreted. As readers, one cannot help but question whether there is a newfound animosity against the old world itself. Over and above that, the interpretations of Shakespeare within this novel are endless. A major aspect of Shakespeare’s work is tragedy. Similarly, the setting and situation within Station Eleven is also nothing short of a tragedy. Contextually, it would be understandable for the Travelling Symphony to entertain acts of plays staging Macbeth, Hamlet, or even King Lear. However, they chose Midsummer Night’s Dream. A play that is more of a comedy that explores the overarching theme of new beginnings and revival. Therefore, the consistent appearance of this play throughout the novel foreshadows the possibility of a Utopian future.

Moreover, to interconnect themes, there is a subtle hint at the theme of civilization in this example. King Lear was a play that acted as the beginning of the novel when the world was different. People were used to a different definition of civilization. A civilization that was so monotonous that one did not have the time to think about the joys of life. King Lear is about order against chaos and family relations. This foreshadows the eminent chaos that is soon to befall. It foreshadows the idea of families falling apart and human connections breaking because millions died. After the collapse, however, society has progressed. The survivors understand the realities of death firsthand, and not just through the depiction of plays. Therefore, it is only fair that Travelling Symphony focuses its production on more uplifting themes that they had previously taken for granted. Therefore, would the survivors of the post-apocalyptic world entirely want to regain the old world? The world that was devoid of any real emotions that did not have a real taste of death?

The theme of rebirth and renewal as well as the influence of the old world in the said new world is a vast topic. Throughout the novel, various aspects can be analyzed to conclude. However, there will always be dispersing views because Mandel never explicitly mentioned an underlying Utopia. This is something that she left with the readers at their discretion. However, in one passage of the novel, Jeevan recounts the idea that the Georgia Flu would be “the divide between a before and an after, a line drawn through his life” (Mandel 2015: 20). It has been rather clear throughout this paper that characters feel as if they are trapped in a reality where they are constantly yearning for the life that can never be recreated. They also fear the possibility of merely surviving the new future just the way they survived in the old pre-pandemic civilization. These are all instances of survival that are “insufficient”. Therefore, is Utopia even possible if the dauntingness of the past is not changed? It is possible because Utopia is not a final

destination. It is not a physical location, but a way to live and not just survive. When the survivors look up hoping to see an aeroplane fly by, they do not hope in the reality of going back to the way things were. They aspire to the imaginative hope of building a future that has its own remodeled civilization. The pandemic acted as a window to the reality that the way they were living earlier was not living but just surviving.

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