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Critique of Modern Environmental Practices in *Station Eleven*

1. Introduction

Like most post-apocalyptic fiction, Emily St. John Mandel predicts a bleak Earth in *Station Eleven*. Navigating through civilization remains the most pressing task for the characters, but Mandel also displays the chaos of living life after near-human extinction with metaphors and imagery of settings. Environmental destruction obviously lingers over modern-day Earth, and Mandel illustrates this fate beautifully in the Anthropocene in the novel. The Anthropocene refers to when humans begin to have a significant impact on the Earth's climate and ecosystems. This does not just include climate change, but also other environmental factors like the energy crisis, which intersect substantially. I will use modern research from scientists, including their predictions of the future Earth, in the analysis of Mandel's post-apocalyptic world. Descriptions of scenes and nature depict the decline in infrastructure and weather. The slow diminishing of fossil fuels throughout the novel and lack of renewable energy until the very end illustrate the energy crisis by demonstrating humans' dependence on these energy sources. Moreover, the ambiguity surrounding the ending revelation of electricity advances the skepticism toward modern energy practices. Further, the fictional story of the comic book parallels life on Earth, and reflects the worst outcome of climate change, with the planet in the comic book going mostly underwater due to poor decisions and practices from the people. In a critique of late

capitalism, Mandel's writing alludes to Fredric Jameson's famous aphorism: it may be easier to imagine the destruction of the Earth than the end of capitalism. Without addressing climate change directly in *Station Eleven*, Emily St. John Mandel portrays environmental destruction on post-apocalyptic Earth, like the energy crisis and global warming, with metaphors, imagery, and vivid descriptions of settings, ultimately critiquing humans' environmental practices.

2. Preliminary Climate Crisis Research

Prior to analyzing climate change in Mandel's text, a short investigation of modern climate change research is necessary. With information from modern scientists, one can make accurate testaments to the novel's portrayal of the matter. Two scenarios must be examined: first, how climate change is expected to look in the future if humans' destructive habits continue, and second, how climate change may look if humans suddenly went extinct. The latter scenario parallels the story more than the first because the Georgia Flu in the story wipes out nearly all the human population. Modern research may be slightly ahead of *Station Eleven*, because Mandel wrote it in 2014, but the main conclusions have remained similar over the last 10 years.

For the first scenario, as long as emissions do not drop substantially, greenhouse gas concentrations will continue to increase. The impact of this has countless avenues. Firstly, Earth's average temperature will rise. The average global temperature is expected to increase by 0.5°F to 8.6°F by 2100, more than likely being more than 2.7°F. Specifically in the United States, the rise in temperature is predicted to be higher, with projections of an increase from 3°F to 12°F, with more heat waves ("Future of Climate Change"). Further, precipitation patterns will change, and the total amount of precipitation will increase. Northern areas, like the Great Lakes region seen in the book, expect to become wetter, especially in the winter and spring. In the Midwest, heavy downpours occur frequently, but storms will intensify. In addition, forecasts

show an increase in sea levels. On the other hand, snowfall cover will decrease. All these lead to increased threats to humans' health and an unhealthier ecosystem. In the Midwest, correlating to rise in temperatures and humidity, heat stress and air quality will likely worsen, with more stress also put on livestock, subsequently harming a main food source ("Future of Climate Change").

For the second scenario, if humans suddenly left the planet, our destruction would lessen, but some of the impacts will stay. If we stabilized emissions and composition of the atmosphere remained steady, air temperatures would still increase, because the oceans take many years to respond to higher greenhouse gas concentrations. The effects could be seen for hundreds of years, and it could take thousands of years to get back to pre-industrial levels. Further, without oversight of all the machines we have built, flooding and explosions will occur, causing radiation, nuclear fallout, and fires. Mountains of waste would persist. Water corrosion would cause infrastructure like streets and buildings to collapse and degrade, with cities changing drastically: rivers forming, grassland created, and trees growing denser (Bryce). This research points towards human impact leaving a mark for centuries to come, whether our destruction continues or not.

Why does this research matter to *Station Eleven*? The symphony travels through a long-lasting, devastating heat wave while making its way to the Severn City airport. They also get hit with heavy storms and rainfall, altering their routes and plans. They travel through rundown cities with detailed infrastructure degradation and overgrown wildlife. The climate and environment largely influence the novel's direction.

3. Weather

Since Mandel does not refer to global warming, climate change, or the environmental crisis directly, inferences must be made by examining passages intently, like a close reading, because she uses vivid imagery and metaphors to illustrate what she does not say directly. To start the book, a snowstorm superimposes the chaos of the evening of Arthur Leander's death and the beginning of the deadly Georgia flu epidemic. Moreover, the snow globe, the most prominent symbol throughout the book, is introduced in the beginning and also alludes to climate: "...as a representation of planetary weather, with its micro-storm clouds gathering within, it is one of the metadata traces in the present moment of the hyperobject of global warming" (Eve). Most analyses of the paperweight omit the reference to climate change, and some may see its significance as a stretch, but the immediate prominence of the literal Toronto storm and fake storm in the paperweight prove that weather was set to play a crucial role in the plot. They also begin the theme of severe weather patterns disrupting the order of the story.

In contrast to the snowstorm, the travelling caravan, twenty years after the Toronto scene, faces severe heat. There is vast contrast between the two settings, being on opposite sides of the spectrum of weather patterns, but they relate by both being extreme weather occurrences. With the characters and dialogue taking most of the attention of the reader, the covert references to the heat do not take the spotlight; however, it is referenced more than fifteen times during the Travelling Symphonies passage to St. Deborah by the Water and the Severn City airport. The first few lines of chapter seven detail it most directly:

TWENTY YEARS AFTER the end of air travel, the caravans of the Traveling Symphony moved slowly under a white-hot sky. It was the end of July, and the twenty-five-year-old thermometer affixed to the back of the lead caravan read 106 Fahrenheit, 41 Celsius.

They were near Lake Michigan but they couldn't see it from here. Trees pressed in close at the sides of the road and erupted through cracks in the pavement, saplings bending under the caravans and soft leaves brushing the legs of horses and Symphony alike. The heat wave had persisted for a relentless week. (Mandel 38)

As someone who grew up very close to Lake Michigan in the Midwest United States, this extreme heat is unprecedented. Mandel captures the extremes of this occurrence, detailing the intense triple-digit temperature and its egregious duration of a week. Her description sits deeper than just numerical representations, with a "white-hot sky" and specifying the Symphony's slow movements. In the pages that follow, the exhaustion of the symphony and the animals that carry them are further detailed. Along with the heat descriptions, the scene also depicts overgrown nature, with trees "erupting through cracks" and "saplings bending under the caravans". This imagery creates a dystopian setting, solidifying a futuristic scene. The overgrowth of nature augments the extreme heat in highlighting future global warming. This setting reflects the expectation of rising global temperatures and an increase of midwestern heat waves (as noted in section 2).

Continuing the theme of extreme weather patterns, the symphony battles a bad storm, while still under extreme heat. While traveling, Kirsten and the crew face "Flashes of lightning and thunder, at first distant and then close" (Mandel 123). Navigating the storm makes their trek all the more difficult, forcing them to stop for longer periods of time and take shelter in poor conditions. These three extreme weather scenarios (snowstorm, heat wave, and rainstorm)

solidify a theme and underscore almost every setting encountered. Mandel includes the diversity in climate to highlight the change in atmospheric conditions in the future. The rise of climate change disrupts all parts of the character's daily lives, sending a message that this is not the future we want.

4. Comic Book

Miranda's comic book repeatedly contextualizes the lives of the characters in the book. The comic obviously connects the lives of the Prophet, Kirsten, Miranda, and Arthur, but the contents within it also provide valuable insight about the state of the world. Within the comic, humans are forced to leave Earth because of an alien invasion, so they set up many space stations, one named *Station Eleven*. This station gets damaged because of human ignorance and neglect, which causes most of the surface to get covered in water, killing almost all its people. There then forms two main factions on the planet: one living on land and the other, called the "Undersea", living underwater. Near the end of the book, Tyler, as a child, explains his perception of the outer-space society: "'It's like a planet, but a little planet', Tyler said. 'Actually it's sort of broken. It went through a wormhole, so it's hiding in deep space, but its systems were damaged, so on its surface? It's almost all water'. He was warming to his subject" (Mandel 291). Despite the obvious fantastical set-up in the comic, there exist many parallels between its planet and modern Earth. Firstly, human ignorance and neglect is destroying the planet, and one of the main impacts of this neglect is rising sea levels. Scientists expect many coastlines to be submerged underwater in the coming years. The advanced technologies that cause deep-space destruction correlate to the combustion engine, which is the catalyst for industrialization and emissions that doom the Earth. Further, Tyler grows up in an airport, the place that represents the epitome of climate change, where emissions are generated in the greatest amounts. The line

directly after Tyler's dialogue states, "He was warming to his subject", which notes an extremely subtle reference to global warming (Eve). The comic book in *Station Eleven* indirectly references the potential for climate change disaster on Earth, a subtle, yet astute metaphor from Mandel.

5. Energy Dependence

The most obvious of the environmental factors portrayed in *Station Eleven*, the fuel slowly diminishes over the first few years of post-Georgia Flu society. The importance of fuel to society holds evident, as the diminishing of energy sources is one of the most defining features of the direction of where civilization moves after the pandemic, both literally and figuratively: "By then most people had settled somewhere, because the gasoline had all gone stale by Year Three and you can't keep walking forever" (Mandel 40). The end of gasoline forced people to establish themselves in a single location. Without it, they could not travel the same as pre-pandemic times. Mandel further highlights this dependence at the start of chapter six using a form of repetition:

AN INCOMPLETE LIST: No more diving into pools of chlorinated water lit green from below. No more ball games played out under floodlights. No more porch lights with moths fluttering on summer nights. No more trains running under the surface of cities on the dazzling power of the electric third rail. No more cities. No more films, except rarely, except with a generator drowning out half the dialogue, and only then for the first little while until the fuel for the generators ran out, because automobile gas goes stale after two or three years. (35)

She recounts basic activities that need energy to depict just how much our lives would be turned around if fuel sources depleted. Most people would not think of losing these things, like going to a ball game or reading on the porch. They are leisurely, not necessities. However, these

entertainment activities are just as important as survival endeavors, as the repeated theme affirms, “Survival is insufficient”. On the other hand, she recounts abstract ideas that would also be taken away: “No more cities”. Whether it takes thousands of Terawatts, or just a few Watts of energy, these basic functions of life no longer exist. If they do exist, they lack the quality that they used to have, like films that are not as good with the dialogue being drained out by the sound of the generator. Fossil fuels generate the vast majority of our energy, but renewable energy sources also got destroyed and cannot be relied upon. The repetition of this passage with many distinct references proves human’s dependence on energy sources and critiques the way of life we have grown accustomed to. She “reveals the extent at which Western culture is epitomized by... our energy production and consumption” (Smith).

The ending of the novel adds ambiguity to the complex topic of energy systems. The epiphany of light being implemented on a large scale causes an inflated reaction from Kirsten:

"Look there,' Clark said, 'to the south. It's what I wanted to show you.' She followed the line of his finger, to a space on the southern horizon where the stars were dimmer than elsewhere in the sky. 'It appeared a week ago,' he said. 'It's the most extraordinary thing. I don't know how they did it on such a large scale.' . . . at first she couldn't comprehend what she was seeing. . . . In the distance, pinpricks of light arranged into a grid. There, plainly visible on the side of a hill some miles distant: a town, or a village, whose streets were lit up with electricity." (Mandel 280)

Kirsten immediately denies the phenomenon, saying, “It isn’t possible” (280). The spectacle was something that had not been seen for 20 years; they put the idea to the side and forgot about it. The passage goes no further with any of the characters’ reactions to the sighting, leaving questions remaining. The immediate impression is that this is a positive development, however,

there are no assurances to back up this claim. Nobody knows how electricity was achieved or how it is being used, aside from some lights. Energy systems are leading the modern planet toward environmental decay, and, thus, may not be as positive as one would hope. A return to the old system could leave this new civilization down the same path, while the development of new systems can find more sustainable solutions. The abolition of previous civilization opened opportunities for the new civilization that comes about. Unless these opportunities are used properly, the previous oppressive systems will continue. The ambiguous ending forces a critical analysis of the developments at hand (Smith), which provides another critique of modern energy practices by looking at these overconsumption and overproduction habits from a unique perspective.

6. Conclusion

The irony of this analysis of Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* is that the near extinction of humans would be the solution to the climate crisis that heals the planet the fastest and mitigates climate change to the greatest extent, yet this analysis is linking details in the book to allusions of environmental harm. Shouldn't the environmental harm be minimal with the premise of the book being a pandemic that wipes out the population? This irony makes it all the more difficult for Mandel to critique modern systems that cause damage to the planet. Despite the difficulty, Mandel manages to critique our society beautifully.

One of Mandel's obscure references not caught by most features Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*, an 1855 novella. In this novella, Amasa Delano is a shipman who boards a Spanish slave ship. A mutiny occurs on the ship, where the slaves take over the ship and force the ship's captain, Benito Cereno, to act as if nothing had happened. Cereno and Delano lead an elaborate dialogue, and Delano misses all the obvious clues that the ship has been taken over.

When Delano finally figures it out, he takes merciless revenge on the slaves. In reference to *Station Eleven*, Delano Island is the name of the place where Arthur and Miranda grew up, one of the secondary settings in the novel. Delano is an actual island in Ontario, but the island in real life has no significance to the novel aside from the name. The sly reference “hints at its critique of the temporality of climate change denial: an ever more desperately and aggressively enforced blindness to an atrocity that has already happened and that, when the truth finally hits, will unleash butchery of the kind that ends Benito Cereno” (Vermeulen). Despite leaving the island at a young age, it continues to haunt Arthur, as Arthur’s friend publishes the letters that Arthur sends back to her on the island. *Benito Cereno* entails a denial of the humanity of slaves, and *Station Eleven* illustrates the cost of denial. In Melville’s novella, the cost is the lives of several slaves, while for Mandel, the cost of denial may be the habitability of the planet (Vermeulen). The need to undo denial lies in the center of finding solutions. Climate change cannot be solved if people continue to deny the science of its existence.

Station Eleven is centered around a pandemic that wipes out 99.6 percent of the population. It jumps from settings before, during, and after the epidemic, showing the contrast of people’s lives in these three timelines. It does not address environmental harm directly, but it does discourse vital elements of the Anthropocene: global warming, energy depletion, and the destruction of nature (Vermeulen). Through remarkable literary techniques, Mandel critiques the modern practices of humans that may lead to the destruction of the Earth.

Works Cited

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