

STATION ELEVEN ESSAY

Station Eleven by Emily St John Mandel presents strong themes about purpose and what drives each and every one of us as well as what we define as a fulfilling life. She contends in the novel that it is better to be driven by truth and beauty than by socially-constructed ideals of success. She explores the notion that authenticity to oneself allows us to achieve fulfilment. Furthermore, she contends that a genuine purpose which is larger than oneself is essential in leading a fulfilling life. The novel also conveys that we should be inspired by the beautiful things in life which we often overlook in pursuit of success. However, being driven by success can also be a positive force in one's life as success can mean different things to every individual and may not always be selfish.

Mandel discusses the idea of authenticity throughout the novel and contends that individuals who fail to be genuine both to themselves and others lose their connection to society and the world around them. The most prominent example of this artificiality is seen in Arthur Leander, an individual who has become so obsessed with fame that he essentially begins to act out his life, feeling that his 'life resembles a movie'. This notion is heavily demonstrated when he meets Clark for dinner, and is 'performing' for the 'audience' of patrons around him. After this encounter Clark distances himself from Arthur, feeling as if Arthur is merely 'acting'. Many other characters lose their connection to Arthur through due to his inability to be genuine. Both Elizabeth and Miranda believe that Arthur has blurred the 'borders between performance and life' and become disconnected from Arthur, distancing themselves from both him and the 'tabloids and movies and divorces, the fame' and 'all those warping things' which built the façade of Arthur Leander. Even in his death everything seems to be fake. 'The snow was plastic' and even the actors around him, bearing 'fake eyelashes' and being referred to by their character names, struggle to see the line between reality and acting, not realising the nature of his odd behaviour. Arthur is an individual who has become victim to the pursuit of success and is driven by it instead of values such as authenticity. His life and death are very much parallel to the actual plot of King Lear with his three wives representing the 3 daughters and his death, much like Lear's, being very much in isolation. The very choice of King Lear for the play Arthur performs is used by Mandel to accentuate the notion that he is performing his life, his distinction between reality and façade becoming deteriorated. Ultimately, Mandel condemns Arthur and his obsession with fame and possessions over truth and genuine connection. This is demonstrated through his isolated death. This is contrasted to individuals like Clark who find purpose and break free of the 'sleepwalking' cycle through being genuine to themselves. In the post flu world, he returns to his old 'haircut' which 'made him feel like himself again'. He begins wearing earrings again and wears Annette's 'Lufthansa neck scarf in memory' of her, representing genuine connection. Clark finds fulfilment in redeeming his sense of authenticity which he loses when he becomes trapped in the Hollywood scene. Clark feels a sense of purpose in the post flu world far superior to that of the pre-flu world, portraying the importance of truth. Unlike other individuals such as Clark, Arthur dies alone and without redemption, a tragic circumstance which arises through his inability to be genuine, thereby conveying the idea that in order for individuals to have fulfilling lives they need to be driven by authenticity to both themselves and to others.

'Station Eleven' explores, in depth, the notion that individuals can gain a sense of purpose through meaningful work, which often involves either a devotion to art or to being of service to others, both of which extend past the interests of the individual. This is seen clearly through the character of Jeevan, who falls victim to the endemic of purposeless work prior to the collapse, but establishes purpose in the aftermath. Jeevan breaks out of a cycle of meaningless, 'sleazy' work with 'gossip' essentially 'paying his rent.' He sees no value in this work but rather does it for financial gain. In the pre-flu world, he cycles between 'a bartender, a paparazzo' and 'an entertainment journalist', eventually settling on entertainment

journalism 'which he felt was sleazy but less sleazy' than his prior work. However, this minor step forward to moral work does not provide Jeevan with any sense of purpose. In a sense, Jeevan, is saved by the collapse of society and finds fulfilment through his work. This begins with the 'awfulness of Arthur's death' that sparks 'the revelation that being a paramedic was the right thing to do with his life.' Jeevan, despite the tragic circumstance, feels pride in being 'the one to step forward' and assist. This drive that is established through Arthur's death continues throughout the collapse when we meet him again in Year 20. When Edward arrives injured, Jeevan steps forward and saves Edward's life and details that he 'liked being the man to whom people turned in bad moments' feeling invigorated by assisting others. In comparing Jeevan after the collapse to who he was before it we see that he has become driven by 'truth and beauty' rather than merely 'money'. He has found a profession 'that actually mattered' and has turned him away from the selfish work he was previously involved with. Through Jeevan's pursuit of new work Mandel contends that pursuit of meaningful work through helping others allows individuals to establish a sense of purpose. She praises Jeevan's revelation and commitment to others through his fulfilment and 'unexpected joy' in the post-collapse. Jeevan establishes a genuine sense of purpose, driven by passion and selflessness as opposed to individual gain, which allows him to lead a fulfilling life. Evidently, in order to find a deeper sense of meaning to life individuals need to cease working primarily for their own goals and dedicate themselves to an external matter, whether it be art or helping others. This selflessness is what defines purposeful work and is essential in finding satisfaction.

Throughout the novel, Mandel contends that there are many beautiful things already present within our lives that we should value, but don't. She believes that we should be inspired by these things, and pay closer attention to them, rather than focusing on selfish pursuits. This is most notably seen through The Museum of Civilisation, which preserves objects from the past that, although having no genuine value or place in the post-collapse society, are valued for their beauty and their ability to connect us to the past. The Museum holds many objects such as iPhones, passports, credit cards and laptops, all of which have been rendered 'useless' by the collapse of society, but they still hold so much beauty through the power they have in allowing us to connect to the past and remember it. In the post-collapse world, beauty can be found in unexpected places, which Mandel believes we should pay more attention to. The world is described as 'radiant' and 'dazzling' as Kirsten describes the 'morning light' 'catching the flowers' and 'mossy front porches turned brilliant green'. Mandel conveys that we are constantly surrounded by beauty which we neglect as we're 'sleepwalking' through our daily lives, but noticing the world around us can inspire us far more than other selfish pursuits have the power to. Despite everything 'almost everything' and 'almost everyone' being 'lost in the collapse' 'there is still such beauty' in the world, seen through the little things that we often neglect, such as the environment or the technology in our life which we so heavily rely on. Often these things are only remembered once we have lost them, but can inspire us so much more than merely success. The incomplete list further details all of these things lost in the collapse, such as 'towns glimpsed from the sky through airplane windows', 'avatars', 'films', 'ball games' and 'concert stages' and utilises vivid imagery of these seemingly unimportant things to encourage the reader themselves to see value in what our world has to offer. The collapse itself allows people to begin to demonstrate gratitude and passion for the world. Both through the plot of the novel and the incomplete list, Mandel attempts to persuade readers that instead of focusing on the mundane pursuit of success and other related social expectations we should be taking the time to value the world around us and be inspired by it.

However, while success can be detrimental to an individual and cause them to live an unfulfilling life, there are many definitions of success, and in some circumstances, being driven by a personal view of success can allow a person to thrive. Just as objects can have different meanings to people, success can be defined in different ways and thus, while these pursuits may be selfish, they can provide fulfilment. This is seen through the characterisation

of Miranda. In 'previous versions of herself' she is seen to be trapped in an unfaithful marriage and 'never belong(ed)' to the group of people which surrounded her. She was 'marooned on a strange planet' parallel to the isolation which Doctor Eleven feels in the comic. While Miranda tends to be isolated throughout the novel, her escape from pretending to be attached to the people around her allows her to engage entirely in the comic. In a sense, redeeming herself and becoming authentic to who she is once again, instead of portraying a façade to fit in with the Hollywood lifestyle, is Miranda's definition of success. Once she divorces Arthur she, for the first time in her life, is free to pursue her own ambitions, no longer restrained by preserving her 'composed' and 'poised' image nor her abusive ex, Pablo. She 'repent(s) nothing' as she believes that she has achieved a fulfilling life, chasing complete freedom which she views as success. While this pursuit isn't selfless and only impacts her own life, it allows her to escape the entrapment of the Hollywood lifestyle and she instead can allow 'Station Eleven' to 'be (her) constant' which makes her feel 'peaceful' and 'happy'. This definition of success is not as artificial as Arthur's who becomes entrapped in his own obsession with physical possessions and fame and thus. It can serve as a source of inspiration and allows Miranda to achieve fulfilment.

Station Eleven explores the values which drive humanity forward and allow us all to continue existing with purpose. Through praising of genuine characters and condemning of ones who fail to be authentic, Mandel contends that in order to live a fulfilling life we must be truthful to ourselves and others, and must value this above success. Furthermore, we must commit ourselves to pursuits larger than our own interests for inspiration to continue forward with life. Finally, we must take the time to appreciate the world around us, for it can be a source of fulfilment and act as reason to surpass difficult times. However, while values such as truth and beauty may be more sustainable and applicable to everyone, using success as a reason for growth and prosperity can also be effective in some circumstances, despite being perceived as selfish, so long as it does not hurt others. Mandel argues that there is more to life than the social expectations we place on ourselves and others, and that instead of focusing on socially-constructed ideas of a fulfilling life we should demonstrate gratitude in the moment for the things we have in life and attempt to centre ourselves around causes larger than our own interests.