

‘THE TRAVELLING SYMPHONY’S MOTTO IS “SURVIVAL IS INSUFFICIENT”.’ IS THIS MOTTO MANDEL’S MESSAGE IN STATION ELEVEN?

Survivors of the decimating pandemic in Emily St. John Mandel’s ‘Station Eleven’ are wrenched from the warmth and safety of a highly civilised world and propelled into an era of savagery and chaos. At the heart of the novel is Mandel’s examination of a fruitful existence beyond the primal instinct to survive, compressed into the repeated motto “survival is insufficient.” Mandel postulates that artistic expression and theatrical literature are found at the hearts of many survivors as what dictates the fulfilment of their lives. In addition, she further renders genuine genuine camaraderie and friendship as not only critical in withstanding turbulent times, but also salient in elevating and rejuvenating the human spirit. Mankind’s celebration and appreciation of the beauty of the miracles of existence around us is another indicator of Mandel’s belief that one must find purpose and recognition in order to live a life beyond mere survival.

At the centre of the novel is the celebration of human ingenuity through artistic enterprise, a communal entity that renders the lives of many as meaningful. In a world devoid of modern recreation and digital entertainment, the unwavering ‘Travelling Symphony,’ a peripatetic troupe of musicians and actors find joy in their shared endeavour of offering Shakespearean performances to unite damaged settlements. A deeper examination of art’s empowering influence is illuminated through Mandel’s incorporation of *Midsummer Night’s Dream* on a symbolic level. Upon finishing the performance to those at St Deborah, the stage is greeted with a “standing ovation” and “tears of joy”, suggesting artistic entertainment is a communal service cherished by everyone, irrespective of religious insanity and irrationality. That the performance also prompts its performers, such as Kirsten, to “never feel more alive than ... onstage” is a direct indicator of art’s ability to elevate and rejuvenate the human spirit, critical to achieving a life of purpose and meaning beyond the primal drive to survive the pandemic’s traumatic aftermath. Thus, Mandel seems to endorse human ingenuity in the form of artistic endeavours as integral to a purposeful and fruitful existence.

The novel’s examination of “survival is insufficient” is further reminiscent in Mandel’s advocacy of genuine camaraderie and human connectivity at large. Despite the exhaustive catalogue of petty resentments and grudges amongst members of the Travelling Symphony, they remain fiercely united and able to overcome the flu’s adversities, evident in their steadfast resolution to reconcile with their companions, Charlie and Jeremy. The reminiscent scene where Kirsten, in what she considered the last moments before her demise, stares away from the barrel of the shotgun while yearning to “talk to August” and reflecting on the “moments of beauty” throughout their platonic friendship, further suggests that camaraderie offers empowering comfort, to the extent of conquering the fear of death. Thus, Mandel suggests that the real loss of hope and purpose is not the absence of a civilised world, but rather that of enduring closeness of human connectivity. A telling insight into this is the gratified Sartre’s quote which Kirsten adapts into her own mind, “Hell is the absence of those you long for.” Mandel reinforces the necessity to treasure genuine relationships beyond mere survival through upholding the model of Arthur, a man who epitomises our unseen and unappreciated connections. After becoming stultified by the anodyne, superficial hollywood ‘bubble’, Arthur undergoes a striking revelation that he still primarily values family and friendship above all. Mandel employs elegiac language to present the moments before Arthur’s death, where he sits on his throne and envisions a “secret list of everything that was good,” including “Tyler in the bathtub” and “Elizabeth in the pool at night.” His “sheer volume of regret” of not fostering his relationships before they “faded out”, then his transformative redemption to become a better father and give his “fortune away” is a direct representation of how genuine, profound relationships prompt appreciation and the re-examination of a meaningful existence. Mandel upholds Arthur as an egotistical figure who must recover his

relationships to take back an element of life, inviting admiration for her proponent. Thus, Mandel accentuates friendship's role in offering comfort and purpose to one's life.

Beyond art and camaraderie is Mandel's endorsement for mankind to rediscover purpose and inspiration through the appreciation of beauty. In the pandemic's aftermath, communities who bond in the common ground of celebration of the beauty of mankind's achievements flourish the most. Mandel delineates this through Clark, the curator of the Museum of Civilisation. His gallery of artistry which functions as a repository of "beautiful objects" hosts various obsolete devices and items that are elevated by the catastrophe to the status of artworks and cultural artefacts. Clark is profoundly "moved" by the "technological enterprise each object has required" and the entirety of their paths to consumption. Such gratitude is likewise reflected by those at the Terminal, as Skymiles Lounge soon becomes a sanctuary where people unite and pray to "cling onto the hope" that the "world that they remembered could be restored." By repurposing technology of the former world to objects of appreciation, settlements burgeon with meaning and creative ingenuity. Through this, Mandel postulates that beauty is premised on scarcity; great appreciation and celebration of the "mundane" and "simple" miracles of existence and "lost wonders" of technology around us only emerge following their absence, when we acknowledge their finitude and the fragility of civilisation itself. Mandel seemingly advocates for her modern readers to wake up and appreciate the beauty of mankind's technological liberties, whilst simultaneously rendering beauty itself as able to provide meaning and purpose despite the necessity of basic survival in a catastrophe's aftermath.

In essence, Mandel's novel examines how artistic ingenuity, camaraderie and human connectivity, as well as appreciation and celebration of beauty, all serve as entities that can enable individuals to live fruitful lives beyond the demanding ordeals of chaos and destruction. By narrating the positive transformations of individuals and communities after engaging with these meaningfully profound aspects of life, Mandel celebrates the inherent nature of humans to sustain meaningful existences, even following societal and technological collapse.