

SINGLE TEXT ANALYSIS: EMILY ST. JOHN MANDEL'S STATION ELEVEN:

DISCUSS THE ROLE OF MEMORY IN 'STATION ELEVEN.'

Survivors of the decimating pandemic in Emily Mandel's 'Station Eleven' are wrenched from the liberties of their highly civilised world and forced to cope with the adversities of a world rippled with chaos and dysfunction. By rendering memories as having the power to inspire and empower, as well as traumatise and stifle one's life, Mandel's novel engages in a nuanced exploration of the power of memory itself. Memory is presented as a pivotal element that promotes individuals to learn and grow from their past failures. Although longing for the pre-collapsed world is often a harrowing experience, it can motivate communities to find meaning by repurposing technology as art and restore human ingenuity. However, the powerful and retrograde sway of nostalgia that people experience in the aftermath of a disaster can cause survivors to dwell solely in the past and thus sleepwalk through their new existence. Furthermore, traumatic memories associated with significant loss can erode one's sense of morality, motivating individuals to embrace religious explanations as a means of assuaging personal suffering. The novel ultimately encapsulates the tension between reminiscent nostalgia for the past and imagination for the revival of a new civilisation, endorsing the latter as more practical and empowering.

Recollection of the past can help an individual learn from their past failures and grow towards an authentic self. As Arthur escapes Delano Island and becomes "unpleasantly famous" and obsessed with celebrity and fame, he becomes stultified by the anodyne culture of modern superficiality. However, employing elegiac language, Mandel describes the moment 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", as worth praising. By reminiscently tracing back, with "sheer volume of regret", to all the relationships that he "neglected until they faded out" Arthur realises that he is in need of redemptive transformation to not only a "man who [gives] his fortune away", but also to a father who values family. Thus, memory can play a transformative role in individuals and promote development. Likewise, Clark's striking epiphany that he is equivalent to the modern 'iPhone zombies' who sleepwalk through life and develop superficial relationships enables him to "me[et] his closest friends" at Severn airport. He establishes genuine camaraderie sustained on empathetic understandings rather than "long distance calls", indicative of his revelation of the 'disconnected modern world' so clearly condemned by Mandel and his attempt to redeem his ignorance towards such societal flaw. Mandel upholds Arthur and Clark as proponents who examine the memories of their past failures and mistakes to imagine new roles and abilities, demonstrating the empowering influence of memory on one's personal growth from failure.

Upon remembering mankind's accomplishments, collapsed communities can restore hope and inspiration by preserving art and beauty. Asserting that "people remember what's best about the world", Mandel highlights how communal acknowledgement and preservation of "taken-for-granted miracles" of the past can help communities restore a sense of creative ingenuity and purpose. Indeed, Mandel delineates Clark as an embodiment of such reminiscent nostalgia that can sustain and motivate the human spirit. Clark is profoundly "moved" by the "human enterprise each object had required". Such gratitude gradually adopted by Clark and the community at the Terminal is further evident in the survivors' contributions to the Museum of Civilisation, a repository of "beautiful objects" and various obsolete items which are elevated by the catastrophe to the status of cultural artefacts. The Skymiles Lounge becomes a sanctuary where people pray to "clin[g] to the hope" that "the world they remembered could be restored" and is emblematic of Mandel's depiction of memory as the first step towards appreciation of humanity's lost wonders and splendours.

It is only when humanity nostalgically reflects on its accomplishments and liberties absent in a new world that great appreciation and celebration of the “mundane” and “simple” emerge – an attitude and appreciation that Mandel clearly endorses to her contemporary audiences.

However, some individuals who resort to memories as an accessible vessel of nostalgic escape from the horrors of a destroyed world become shackled to the past. In the aftermath of Georgia Flu’s destruction, longing for the return of the former world becomes a form of escapism by survivors who refuse to accept and dream of a new civilisation’s reconfiguration. The limiting influence of memory is articulated by Kirsten’s belief that “the people who struggle the most” are those who “remember the old world clearly,” insinuating how the nostalgic desire to return home can never be fulfilled, and is instead complicated by a sort of pain that only children born after the collapse are protected from. To reinforce this, Mandel further employs ekphrasis through Miranda’s Dr. Eleven graphic novels, where a band of survivors inhabit an artificial station after Earth is invaded by a hostile civilisation. The reminiscent scene where Dr Eleven “look[s] over [his] damaged home” and “tr[ies] to forget the sweetness of life on Earth” underscores his predicament of having to forget the amenities of earthly life in order to move on, an attitude epitomised by many survivors of the pandemic. On his space station, a ‘schism’ occurs between people who live in the Undersea and ‘long only to go home’ and people who live above on the islands and wish to forge something new. By drawing a binary division between those who, in the face of adversity, retreat into memory and the past, and those who instead use memory to imagine radical alternatives and recover past splendours, Mandel pushes aside nostalgic reminiscence in favour of boundless creativity. Thus, Mandel criticises those who surrender to nostalgia’s comforting embrace and sleepwalk through their new existence with no vision for the future.

Mandel cautions readers that traumatising memories of unexplainable tragedy or loss can also distort an individual’s sense of rationality and demoralise them, rendering them a threat to society at large. While Year Twenty is a relatively “calmer age”, the undercurrent of fear and violence due to reoccurring traumatic memories of the cataclysm continues to pervade the lives of some. Mandel’s characterisation of the prophet and his followers as a religious sect devoid of ethical boundaries is a direct representation of how the “misfortune of remembering everything” can lead to the abuse of religious ideologies and fear tactics. Resorting to his mother’s mystical determinism that “everything happens for a reason,” Tyler perverts the reconstructive nature of memory, constructing the pandemic as a predetermined inevitability to comfortably justify the unbearable recollections of the flu that Kirsten becomes otherwise safeguarded against by her inability to remember the details of Year One. Believing that Georgia Flu is a “great cleansing” of the “impure,” members of the doomsday cult twist biblical testimonies and the apocalyptic distinction between the elect and the non-elect to commit ruthless actions – from killing to enslaving - which they commit “[A]ll the time smiling.” Thus, while Mandel highlights recollections of past failure as critical to an individual’s personal growth, she presents traumatic memories as able to strip one of their moral compass and conscience.

At its heart, the novel suggests memory can be harnessed as either a limiting or empowering influence, depending on the degree of loss experienced by each individual. While Mandel does not offer a simple insight into the complex role of memory and its role in a post-apocalyptic setting, she nonetheless constructs a world in which those who escape the present through reminiscent nostalgia for the past are clearly divided from those who imagine the cultivation of a wondrous civilisation anew.