

Station Eleven Lesson Plan 3

“Because Survival is Insufficient”: Art at the End of the World

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Overview:

This lesson is designed for students to consider the role of art within postapocalyptic fiction. Students will be asked to locate the different types of art present in the novel and discuss how these various art forms inform various characters’ perspectives. In doing so, students will determine what, exactly, is considered art and how we value art in times of crisis. This lesson is designed to follow an introduction to the dystopian and post-apocalyptic genres and is best suited for the second half of the unit.

Objectives:

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Locate the different genres of art referenced in the novel and discuss how that art influences various characters’ perspectives, pre- and post-apocalypse
- Articulate an argument for the value of art, of various forms, even when survival is difficult

Class Structure:

15 minutes: Warm-up Discussion Question

- Review the class-generated definition of dystopian fiction and remind students of postapocalyptic fiction’s place within the genre. These warm-up questions will help students connect the genre conventions of dystopian fiction to today’s topic on art.
 - Chad Walsh, one of the first major writers on dystopian writing, agreed with Huxley that one of the moral lessons from dystopian literature is that “you can have a society a quiver with creativity—arts, sciences, technological breakthroughs, everything—or you can have a safe and stable society. You can’t choose both” (qtd. in Claes).
 - As students respond to the following questions, and keep a running list of the artistic references included in their responses.
 - How true do we find this statement in the case of *Station Eleven*? How does the novel affirm or challenge this statement?
 - How can we understand this quote in relation to the novel’s repetition that “survival is insufficient”?

10 minutes: Shakespeare and Star Trek

- Provide students with some context about the prevalence of Shakespeare in post-apocalyptic fiction
 - Works such as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or *Brave New World* use Shakespeare as a representation of the old world, or culture. In these postapocalyptic texts, Shakespeare’s works are seen as potentially corrupting, either being outright banned or changed by the regimes in power.
 - Shakespeare’s works contain apocalyptic imagery, particularly by imagining the apocalypse as a return to “primitive times” (Conaway 6). In many ways, Mandel riffs on this theme, seeing the apocalypse as a possible “recovering [of]

modernity.” In other words, the return to a more “primitive” way of living is not the end, but a chance to recuperate what it means to be human.

- Provide context for the *Star Trek* quote for those unfamiliar with its origins.
 - Many are attracted to the line “Survival is insufficient” because it evokes a sort of Shakespearan quality to the average reader. However, the line is actually taken from a 1999 episode of *Star Trek: Voyager*. In that episode, the line is said by Borg drones, characters who typically live as a collective as part of a hivemind, the Borg. These characters are faced with either returning to the Borg, thus losing their individuality and autonomy, or living only a few weeks, but on their own terms. In this context, “survival is insufficient” means that being alive but as part of the Borg hivemind, merely “surviving” but without any autonomy, is insufficient. In *Station Eleven*, this quote is a motto for the Traveling Symphony, a sort of explanation of their dedication to theater and music in a time when simply surviving is a nearly impossible task.

20 minutes: Small Group Activity

- Split students into three groups (or six groups, depending on class size). Have students read different scenes that focus on art. One group will focus on references to Shakespeare, another on the self-published comic book, and the third group on the museum and newspaper. Each group will work to determine the use and meaning of their assigned references in the post-pandemic context of *Station Eleven*.
- Point students to the following pages for references to their assigned topic.
 - Shakespeare: 3-4, 35-36, 44-45, 57-58, 288, 328-29
 - Comic: 42, 83-84, 86-87, 104-105, 202, 213-14, 304, 324-25, 330
 - Museum and Newspaper: 108-09, 113-15, 132, 180-81, 184-85, 195-96, 255, 261-63
- Ask students to respond to the following questions as they work through their scene(s)
 - Why do you think this particular reference is still circulating in the context of the novel? How does the work referenced influence our main characters? Does it significantly impact characters beyond our main characters?
 - Do you think that this reference has the same significance to these characters as it has us for us? Why or why not? If not, what do you think is its new meaning?

30 minutes: Class Discussion

- Bring the class back together for discussion, and ask each group to share their answers to the questions from the previous activity.
- The students will respond to the following questions, based on the responses from each group. These questions will serve as a larger reflection on the role of art in post-apocalyptic fiction, specifically between “high art” and pop culture.
 - How does the museum make art out of what were once everyday objects? What makes these objects precious in the post-pandemic world?
 - How do the various forms and modes of art relate to each other?
 - Do we think some art is more valued than others? Why or why not?

- What do we think about the section breaks and how they mix references between Shakespeare and sci-fi?
- Ask students to return to the statement and questions from the warm up activity after finishing the discussion: Can you have a society that is both “aquiver with creativity” and also safe and stable?
- Ask students to consider how their initial responses to the quote “Survival is insufficient” has changed. Students can also respond by reflecting on how their answer to the statement by Walsh has changed based on discussion.

Sources:

Claeys, Gregory. *Dystopia: A Natural History*. Oxford UP, 2016.

Conaway, Charles. “‘All the world’s a [post-apocalyptic] stage’: The Future of Shakespeare in Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven*.” *Critical Survey*, vol. 33, no. 2, pp. 1–16.

Joyce, Elizabeth. “‘Survival is Insufficient’: Words I’ve Tattooed into my Skin.” *Medium*, 7 Feb. 2023. <https://medium.com/@WriterEJoyce/survival-is-insufficient-d47a407f940>

Mandel, Emily St. John. *Station Eleven*. Picador, 2015.