

Station Eleven Lesson Plan 2
Revisiting *Station Eleven* After Covid
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Overview:

This lesson is designed to help students consider their own reactions as readers of *Station Eleven* in the context of a post-Covid world. This lesson is designed to follow an introduction to the dystopian and post-apocalyptic genres and the quotes referenced here are pulled from the first half of the novel (chapters 1-26).

Objectives:

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

- Compare previous pandemic responses and representations in art to current Covid responses
- Identify how *Station Eleven*, through its form and content, responds to and represents pandemic conditions

Class Structure:

15 minutes: Framing Exercise

- This exercise is designed to help students consider how reading *Station Eleven* after the Covid pandemic may shape their experience of the novel. Start class by introducing students to two different responses to fiction about the Covid-19 Pandemic published in popular outlets (*New York Times* and *NPR*) in 2022.
 - “The pandemic is also presenting new narrative and artistic pitfalls. Some writers worry a pandemic plot might drive away readers who want to escape our grim reality, but ignoring it might feel jarringly unrealistic. Others wonder if it’s too soon to recreate the atmosphere of a tragedy that’s still killing thousands of people every day. Then there’s the awkward narrative problem of how to turn what some have termed the “boring apocalypse” — a period of stasis that, for the most fortunate, has been defined by staying home and doing nothing — into a gripping story” (Alter, *NYTimes*).
 - “I, like I’m sure many others, had no interest in reading books about plagues generally or about how we were dealing with COVID-19 more specifically over the last two years. But as this pandemic seems like it will eventually turn into an epidemic or become endemic, I have started freeing myself up to read about these topics beyond daily news.... We are naturally inclined to stay away from things we find unpleasant, and there’s a chance pandemic literature strikes some readers as precisely that. However, the narratives we’ve seen so far have shown that the pandemic can be a starting point for any story — and that writing about it can be a way of processing trauma, an exercise in trying to understand its impact on our psyche. This literature can add to a growing map of work that helps us navigate not only recent history but also our present and immediate future” (Iglesias, *NPR*).
- Point out that both of these responses were written in 2022, when the pandemic was two years old but still causing serious harm. For this lesson, we have the benefit of approaching pandemic literature with more understanding of the long-term implications of the pandemic.

- Ask students to write a brief summary of how they felt approaching a novel about a super-deadly pandemic post-2020. Were they able to better relate to the fears the characters expressed? Did they find themselves putting up a critical distance? Ask 2-3 students to share their responses.

10 minutes: Mini-lecture on pandemic representations in the 20th century

- Start by comparing representations of Covid to representations of the 1918 pandemic in order to demonstrate how the literary world has historically responded to pandemics.
 - The 1918–1919 pandemic killed between 50 to 100 million people globally (to understand the scale, more people in the US died from the pandemic than in WWI, WWII, the Korean War, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq, combined). The pandemic was so large in scale that almost every single person was affected personally. At first, many people ignored the incoming influenza because war concerns were more prescient and the flu did not represent a threat to most people. As the influenza began to take hold, some newspapers reported on factory closures; however, unlike the 2020 pandemic response, global health systems were not prepared to mass publicize information on influenza, even though it was affecting the entire population, including healthy young adults.
 - The influenza pandemic in particular was incredibly traumatizing. By the second wave, many children and young adults were dying en masse, overwhelming hospitals (according to estimates, more than 5% of the world’s population died in two years). The symptoms were unusual and sudden, with symptoms as extreme as spontaneous bleeding. One survivor reports that “blood would shoot out [of orifices] as though kept under high pressure and spray to the end of [the] bed; and this happened about thirty times a day for about 8–9 days. . .” (qtd. in Outka). Mental instability from high fevers also occurred; patients reported some mental health issues following their sickness, such as depression or schizophrenia. The onset of symptoms was so sudden that people were suddenly falling ill or even dead in the streets and on buses. With the illness being airborne, many felt it to be a “phantom,” or death metaphorically lurking.
 - In hindsight, the literature during the period of the Influenza Pandemic was overwhelmingly focused on the war and silent on illness; Outka suggests this silence on illness was in part due to trauma as well as the lack of material presence. However, Outka theorizes not that the pandemic was not being represented, but that it was not being represented *explicitly*. Instead, the 1918 Influenza Pandemic was explored through metaphors, quick asides, or within the very forms of the works themselves. In one sense, one can contend that this mode of representation is fitting for the way that people actually lived through the 1918 pandemic because they were unable to address it directly.
 - One example of metaphorical representation of illness can be found in the focus on tolling bells; the illness is difficult to express linguistically, and is instead represented through literary techniques such as fragmentation to show how illness undermines a person’s sense of self and agency.
 - Many writers responded to the invisibility of the illness by creating making a material, “real” enemy to then scapegoat, typically by blaming a

- vulnerable population, such as immigrants and Jews, as well as through calling it the “Spanish Flu.”
 - Pandemic literature “eschews clear plots” or uses other literature tropes, such as protozombies; while there were heavy representations of corpses as a response to the war, there was a lack of attention to the “flu corpse”
- End the lecture by asking students to consider whether these tropes appear in *Station Eleven* and/or in other pandemic fiction they’ve encountered.

20 minutes: Small Group Activity

- Place students into groups of 3-4 and have them complete the following tasks:
 - Re-read the conversation between Jeevan and Hua on pp. 17-20, starting with “Okay. Have you heard of the Georgia Flu?” and ending with “A line drawn through his life.”
 - Answer the following questions:
 - What does the novel reveal to us at this first moment of recognizing the start of the Georgia Flu pandemic?
 - How does Jeevan anticipate seeing his life and time in general going forward from this moment?
 - How does Jeevan conceptualize and cope with the information that the Georgia Flu could be quite serious?
 - After answering these questions, re-read the conversation between the symphony members on pages 129-130, starting with “This had been a small school…” and ending with “So she shrugged instead of answering him.”
 - Answer the following questions:
 - How do Kirsten, August, Jackson, and Viola all cope with the reality of the school building and all it represents? How do age and experience factor into their reactions to the place?
 - How do different characters experience or conceptualize time in this scene, two decades after the Georgia Flu?

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.
- Lead students in a discussion that focuses on the feeling of time in the novel. How do characters mark the passage of years after the Flu? Was Jeevan correct in his assumption that there would be “a *before* and an *after*” that would divide everything?
- Ask students to consider the structure of the novel. Have them identify the main storylines in the novel (Arthur Leander pre-pandemic, Jeevan as the Flu hits, Kirsten in the traveling symphony)? How does the novel present these storylines; are they concurrent or in chronological order? How does the novel validate or complicate the idea of a bifurcated time in its structure?

Sources:

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Iglesias, Gabino. "Are We Ready for COVID-19 as a Central Theme in Literature." *NPR*, 24 February 2022, [https://www.npr.org/2022/02/24/1079823095/are-we-ready-for-covid - 19-as-a-Central-theme-in-literature](https://www.npr.org/2022/02/24/1079823095/are-we-ready-for-covid-19-as-a-Central-theme-in-literature).

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

Outka, Elizabeth. *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature*. Columbia UP, 2019.