Pandemic Polyphony: Memory Construction and Intersecting Narratives in *Station Eleven*

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Abstract

This research conducts a meticulous examination of the multifaceted characters in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2015), investigating the complexities of memory, societal reactions, and the reconstruction of communal narratives following a devastating pandemic. Utilizing Bakhtin's concept of polyphony, the study argues that the novel's narrative structure is defined by a dynamic interplay of diverse voices. By exploring the interactional aspect of these stories, the research reveals a range of voices, viewpoints, and storylines. Characters from varied backgrounds, navigating both pre- and post-apocalyptic worlds, grapple with the virus's aftermath, offering unique recollections and interpretations. The study posits that an intricate tapestry of experiences, woven from the polyphony of narratives, presents a multifaceted portrayal of human responses to catastrophe. Importantly, the research contends that these intersecting narratives shape collective memory. Bakhtin's theories illuminate the interplay among the characters' voices, reflecting the complex societal reactions to the pandemic. The study concludes that the novel crafts a sophisticated mosaic of memories, where individual recollections intersect and contrast, thereby contributing to a shared understanding of past events.

Keywords: Apocalyptic; Collective Memory; Pandemic; Polyphony; Societal Collapse.

Introduction:

Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2015) intricately explores the aftermath of a catastrophic epidemic, intertwining themes of memory, societal reestablishment, and human experience amid extreme adversity. The novel delves deeply into the interconnectedness of pandemics, collective memory, and narrative reconstruction following societal collapse. Unlike

conventional post-apocalyptic stories, *Station Eleven* explores themes beyond mere survival. It highlights the crucial role of artistic expression and culture during catastrophic times (Méndez-García 111). The novel diverges from typical survival-oriented motifs by emphasizing the significance of artistic endeavours in perilous settings, underscoring their value amidst adversity (Feldner 165). However, despite its utopian prospects post-catastrophe, this idealized perspective can unintentionally undermine the socio-critical purpose of the genre (Leggatt 1; Punkari 2).

Research within the framework of trauma theory further enriches the understanding of *Station Eleven's* characters and themes. Trauma theory, as highlighted by Guido, enriches readers' understanding of characters' psychological trajectories in narratives like *Station Eleven*. This theory facilitates comprehension of survival challenges, loss, and adaptability in post-apocalyptic environments, linking modern society with past catastrophes and fostering empathy for real-world disasters (Guido). According to Paulus, the novel shifts focus from survivalist narratives to the human condition and the arts amid crisis. This thematic shift emphasizes the necessity of cultural preservation and humanistic principles, often overlooked in apocalyptic discourse, underscoring their importance in ensuring sustainable existence during tragedy.

Despite insightful perspectives, notable research gaps in *Station Eleven* persist. The intricate role of art in societal reconstruction post-catastrophe needs deeper investigation to understand how it influences resilience and cohesion. Additionally, trauma dynamics require broader analysis beyond individual characters, exploring collective trauma's societal implications and long-term psychological effects. Furthermore, comprehensive examinations of societal responses, cultural norms, and value systems after a catastrophe are underexplored. Addressing these gaps would enhance scholarly understanding, offering a nuanced comprehension of *Station Eleven* and its thematic intricacies within post-apocalyptic literature.

This study aims to bridge these gaps by leveraging Bakhtin's concept of polyphony to add new dimensions to the analysis of Station Eleven. Polyphony, as proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1927), refers to a narrative structure that incorporates multiple voices and perspectives. Bakhtin's analysis of Dostoevsky's works reveals them as exemplary instances of polyphony in literature, presenting "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (Bakhtin 6-7). He emphasizes that primary characters are autonomous subjects within the narrative, contribut-

ing purposeful speech to the imaginative construct. Bakhtin's framework provides a critical lens to dissect the novel's intricate narrative structure, characterized by multiple voices and perspectives. By applying the concept of polyphony, this study will examine how each character's voice contributes to the complex tapestry of memories and experiences, revealing the multifaceted nature of societal reconstruction post-pandemic. This approach is vital because it highlights the diverse perspectives within the narrative, demonstrating how the interplay of different voices shapes the collective memory and cultural identity in the aftermath of catastrophe. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for comprehending how societies navigate and reconstruct themselves after traumatic events. Furthermore, this analysis will underscore the importance of cultural preservation and the arts in fostering resilience and continuity in post-apocalyptic settings. It will provide valuable insights into human endurance and cultural preservation, contributing to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of how literature reflects and informs our responses to disaster.

Station Eleven: A Brief Overview

Station Eleven centres on the lives of several key characters before and after a global pandemic, referred to as "the collapse," which decimates the majority of humanity. The narrative, spanning nineteen years, utilises non-linear storytelling techniques, alternating perspectives and timelines among the characters. Central to the plot is actor Arthur Leander, whose life journey includes a successful acting career, troubled marriages, and an untimely death while performing "King Lear" just as a severe influenza, known as the Georgia Flu, rapidly spreads, causing societal collapse.

The plot follows characters negotiating the post-apocalyptic landscape after the collapse. This includes Elizabeth, her son Tyler, and Clark, who find themselves stranded at an airport where Clark later develops a Museum of Civilization. Kirsten Raymonde, who joins the Traveling Symphony after losing her brother, experiences religious unrest under the leadership of a Prophet, revealed to be Tyler.

The climax of the narrative sees conflicts between the Traveling Symphony and the Prophet, leading to the Prophet's downfall. In the aftermath, Kirsten and the remaining Symphony members regroup at Severn City Airport, offering a glimmer of hope for reconstruction amidst the harsh post-apocalyptic environment.

Polyphony

Diverse Voices and Perspectives

Robinson argues that Bakhtin interprets Dostoevsky's work as a collage of different voices; each voice having its own framework, authenticity, and narrative weight. *Station Eleven* exemplifies this by presenting a diversity of independent and unmerged voices, creating a complex narrative tapestry. With each character contributing a unique voice to the plot, the novel offers a nuanced depiction of post-apocalyptic life and the human condition in the aftermath of a pandemic. Each voice in *Station Eleven*, whether it belongs to an actor, survivor, artist, or cultist, possesses its own framework, authenticity, and narrative weight. This array of voices shapes the narrative landscape, forming a choral chorus that is not subordinated to the singular voice of the author. As Bakhtin argues that in contrast to placing emphasis on a chronological or linear flow of events, Dostoevsky directed his attention towards the simultaneous existence and interaction of many elements within a spatial framework, as opposed to a temporal one: "The fundamental category in Dostoevsky's mode of artistic visualizing was not evolution, but coexistence and interaction. He saw and conceived his world primarily in terms of space, not time" (Bakhtin 28).

This assertion succinctly conveys a crucial element of Dostoevsky's artistic outlook. His narratives deviate from a precise timeline or chronological progression by featuring a multitude of individuals, ideas, and moral stances coexisting and interacting inside the narrative space. This spatial paradigm posits that within the same narrative universe, contradictory or competing perspectives, moral quandaries, and psychological strains coexist simultaneously.

In a similar vein, Polyphony makes it easier to include a variety of voices in *Station Eleven*, thus capturing the variety of sensations that arise during a pandemic. An assortment of characters, including Arthur, Miranda, Jeevan, and Kirsten, exemplify diverse reactions, sentiments, and adaptive strategies when confronted with calamity in the narrative. The range of human experiences that are reflected in this diversity provides a more comprehensive knowledge of how individuals manoeuvre through crises. According to Bakhtin, language possesses dialogical attributes by interweaving diverse textual allusions and by continually remaining open-ended, defying definitive conclusions. Nevertheless, he argues that polyphony surpasses the simple juxtaposition of opposing opinions or a homogeneity of discourse in which each perspective is given equal sig-

nificance (Robinson). This is reflected at numerous places in the story. An illustrative instance can be observed in the dialogue between the characters Dieter and Kirsten as they dispute the adage "survival is insufficient":

> Survival is insufficient: Kirsten had had these words tattooed on her left forearm at the age of fifteen and had been arguing with Dieter about it almost ever since. Dieter harboured strong anti-tattoo sentiments. He said he'd seen a man die of an infected tattoo once. Kirsten also had two black knives tattooed on the back of her right wrist, but these were less troubling to Dieter, being much smaller and inked to mark specific events. "Yes," Kirsten said, "I'm aware of your opinion on the subject, but it remains my favourite line of text in the world." She considered Dieter one of her dearest friends. The tattoo argument had lost all of its sting over the years and had become something like a familiar room where they met (Mandel 113).

Dieter's scepticism, which underscores the maxim's origin in pop culture, contrasts starkly with Kirsten's steadfast belief in its significance. This divergence, symbolized by their differing views on tattoos, highlights their individual perspectives on permanency, identity, and risk.

Likewise, the novel generates a polyphonic narrative through the contrasting viewpoints of Miranda, an aspiring artist, and Arthur, a successful actor. Their relationship, initiated in Toronto and marked by their differing backgrounds, epitomizes Bakhtin's idea of coexistence and interaction across distinct realms of existence. As the narrative alternates between their individual experiences and shared moments, their divergent trajectories come to light. Arthur's journey from Toronto to the glitz of New York and Los Angeles illustrates the disorienting effects of fame, a stark contrast to the stability in Miranda's artistic pursuits and business commitments. Their interactions, characterized by both harmony and conflict, embody the polyphonic quality of the narrative.

What Bakhtin says about Dostoevsky's poetics is created by *Station Eleven's* multitude of characters, each of whom has unique experiences and viewpoints: "a concrete event made up of organized human orientations and voices" (Bakhtin 93). Bakhtin further states that "the essence of polyphony lies precisely in the fact that the voices remain independent and, as such, are combined in a unity of a higher order than in homophony" (Bakhtin 64). This is reflected in the narrative framework of *Station Eleven*, where a multitude of interwoven stories, memories, and experiences

from various characters merge to form a complex and layered narrative structure, offering a nuanced depiction of the aftermath of a devastating pandemic. The theatre serves as a thematic anchor in the book, signifying dialogism—a forum for the exchange of concepts, viewpoints, and civilizations. This is consistent with Bakhtin's theory of intertextuality and layered meanings, which is demonstrated by the story's hints and ties.

The polyphonic nature of the novel serves as an informative platform that portrays not only individual traumas and introspections but also the variety of resilient responses from the population in the face of adversity. The multimodal storytelling style weaves together multiple storylines, providing a nuanced exploration of both personal challenges and community resilience in the face of adversity.

Polyphony of Memories

The narrative's polyphonic style represents many approaches to conserving, interpreting, and addressing the past. It emphasises how memory, in conjunction with opposing viewpoints, determines characters' resilience and responses in the post-apocalyptic landscape. The consideration of memory as a vehicle for resilience in the face of chaos is central to our investigation. Characters wander the ashes of their old life, clutching fragmented recollections of a world destroyed by the pandemic. The world, as one character observes, has turned into 'a place where artifacts from the old world are preserved' (Mandel 146). Furthermore, the recurring motif of Arthur's ex-wife Miranda's graphic novel *Station Eleven* emerges as a tragic emblem of artistic expression and cultural preservation in the face of societal collapse.

Memory and Resilience

In the context of resilience, *Station Eleven* presents a polyphonic array of narratives, each showcasing different viewpoints on change. The documenting of various characters' distinct approaches to resilience results in this polyphony. In this book, the world has deteriorated significantly, with a sharp decline in population and the creation of little societies centred on derelict fast-food outlets. Continuous fear of threats needs continual vigilance, while scavenging for relics of the past becomes a vital part of life, with Kirsten actively involved in unearthing treasures of a bygone era. Shakespeare plays performed by Traveling Symphony also serve as a means of remembrance. In addition, a variety of items that are no longer needed transform into beautiful relics of the past that Clark has gathered

for the Museum of Civilization (Leggatt 3). The novel underscores the impressive adaptability of human nature by illustrating the extraordinary measures individuals are prepared to undertake to survive in a radically altered reality. It illustrates how individuals, in a number of narratives, assertively explore opportunities for advancement or attempt to find their footing within the newly configured societal structure.

Some choose to retain their memories of the past, whilst simultaneously acknowledging the reality "that the world's changes wouldn't be reversed" (Mandel 213). There are those who manage to transition smoothly and rapidly, subscribing to the belief that "It all passes" (Mandel 229), whereas others experience a more gradual and hesitant process of adaptation, advancing with a sense of reluctance as one character states, "For a whole decade after the pandemic, I kept looking at the sky" (Mandel 126).

In the post-pandemic world, for some, maintaining mental stability necessitates certain adjustments related to memory and vision, as expressed in the statement, "the maintenance of sanity required some recalibrations having to do with memory and sight" (Mandel 230). The novel further illustrates how some individuals are compelled to make a conscious decision between remembering and forgetting in the aftermath of devastating events. This is underscored in the phrase, "There were things Clark trained himself not to think about" (Mandel 230), highlighting the strategies some people employ to maintain their emotional equilibrium after witnessing catastrophic events. These different approaches and reactions are a testament to the resilience, adaptability, and complexity of human responses in the face of extraordinary adversity.

Within the main topic, resilience reveals itself through several narratives. Characteristics of the old world's relics are revealed through their preserved things. While Kirsten searches for remnants of Arthur Leander, a character who had a fleeting impact on her life, recollections of her mother's voice escape her. August, on the other hand, seeks TV guidelines to reignite his childhood fascination with television. Some people choose to ignore their past, while others, either to youth or choice, have no recollections at all.

Kirsten is dealing with interpersonal problems as a result of her experience with Sayid, and she is having challenges within the Symphony firm as a result of their former relationship. The world appears empty to her in the absence of the symphony. Hell is not other people for her, "[h]ell is the absence of the people you long for" (Mandel 235). However, Kirsten

consoles herself when she looks around the beauty of life:

> A deer crossed the road ahead and paused to look at them before it vanished into the trees. The beauty of this world where almost everyone was gone. If hell is other people, what is a world with almost no people in it? Perhaps soon humanity would simply flicker out, but Kirsten found this thought more peaceful than sad. So many species had appeared and later vanished from this earth; what was one more? How many people were even left now? (Mandel 139)

At other point, Kirsten muses about the difficult decision that must be made with regard to the past: "What I mean to say is, the more you remember, the more you've lost" (Mandel 183). Either one can work to maintain their sense of self by trying to recall bits and pieces of their past, or they can decide to let go of the past and move on. The drawback of recollecting bits and pieces of the past life is that it leaves one feeling empty all the time and makes one compare everything to the past.

Despite providing safety and community, the Symphony also fosters internal tensions and a sense of confinement. Sayid's inscription of Sartre's famous quotation "Hell is other people" is hilariously tweaked by a fellow company member to read "flutes," playfully remarking on community dynamics inside the group.

The polyphonic form emphasises memory's importance as a tool for survival. Characters cling to fragmentary recollections of a pre-pandemic world, underlining the importance of retaining personal and collective memories in trauma recovery.

Polyphony through Memory Artifacts

The old world's relics serve as memory artefacts, representing various viewpoints toward the past. "Because we are always looking for the former world", says Kirsten, "before all the traces of the former world are gone" (Mandel 123). This highlights the necessity of remembering the past but also of preserving it before scavengers erase all signs of it. The characters—Kirsten in particular—are always searching for artefacts that hold significance for their individual histories as well as remnants of the previous order. Because Kirsten wants to make sense of her own past, her experience searching for evidence of Arthur Leander is crucial. Kirsten and August represent opposing aspects of memory preservation through

their respective activities. Kirsten's obsession with Arthur Leander represents a personal connection to the past, in contrast to August's nostalgia for TV guides, which represents his longing for a specific cultural artefact. These disparate interests highlight various viewpoints on memory and its significance, displaying a polyphonic representation of their relationship with the past.

Conflict and Memory

The difficulty in Kirsten's relationship with Sayid echoes the conflict between individual memory and social existence. The Symphony, as a collective, provides safety and community while also causing interpersonal conflicts based on common knowledge. Within the Symphony, the juxtaposition of Sartre's phrase and its comical change ("Hell is other people" replaced with "flutes") embodies the community dynamics and diverse opinions within the ensemble, demonstrating the polyphony of perceptions regarding communal life and its obstacles.

Resilience Amidst Conflicting Memories

Characters navigate conflicting recollections, forming durable links to the past while struggling with modern interpersonal issues, despite the grim conditions. This juxtaposition depicts the complicated network of individual and social responses to a new reality through the complex interaction of memory, resilience, and societal adaptation within a polyphonic framework. "The main corpus of resilience narratives", argues Theocharis, "is connected to various resilience strategies that the voices have employed in their life and in their endeavour to survive, to adapt and even to prosper" (Theocharis 196).

Memory and the impending epidemic are intricately intertwined throughout the narrative, reflecting the concept of polyphony through the interwoven experiences and different perspectives of the characters. The concept of memory is of utmost importance, since several people, most notably Kirsten and August, hold cherished relics that represent the world prior to the collapse. The recollections of individuals, exemplified by Kirsten's enduring recollection of Arthur Leander's countenance despite having forgotten her mother's voice, serve as a reflection of how cultural and personal memories are selectively preserved in the midst of societal turmoil. Selected memory preservation serves as a coping technique and a method of maintaining personal identities in a catastrophe-reshaped environment. The narrative encourages readers to interact with the story on mul-

tiple levels by emphasising the interdependence of the characters' lives through the interaction of the past and present in a non-linear fashion. Through the provision of information regarding Arthur's birthplace and his subsequent disappointment with fame, in contrast to Miranda's unwavering dedication to her artistic endeavours, the story weaves together a network of recollections that expose the conflict between sincerity and ambition in the era preceding the pandemic. Moreover, the imminent epidemic casts a menacing gloom over the relationships and decisions of the protagonists. A sense of impending catastrophe is woven into the narrative of Arthur and Miranda, which adds dramatic irony to their story. The contrast between intimate interpersonal connections and the broader social context highlights the precarious nature of human bonds in the face of imminent disaster.

The narratives of the protagonists connect and diverge, exposing their unique perspectives, recollections, and reactions to the aftermath of the epidemic, so producing polyphony. Every character embodies a distinct voice that enhances the overall narrative by giving a multitude of perspectives. By juxtaposing Jeevan's evolution from a paparazzo to an interviewee with Arthur and Kirsten's divergent recollections of the past, a polyphonic narrative is constructed that intricately interweaves individual viewpoints and emphasises the diversity of experiences.

Furthermore, the varied recollections depicted—scattered, individualistic, and frequently sentimental—exemplify Bakhtin's notion of polyphony through the presentation of a chorus of recollections that converge into the overall story. Similar to a symphony of viewpoints, the narrative structure's oscillation between distinct chronological planes and geographic places facilitates the convergence of diverse voices and experiences. The complexities of personal remembrance are highlighted by Kirsten's fractured recollections and Miranda's selective memory, which illustrate how memory functions as a mosaic of subjective experiences that are frequently selective and fragmented.

Miranda's choice of clothing, illustrating her evolving sense of self, exemplifies various modes of self-expression. By purposefully donning clothing as a means of protection, she emphasises the intricate relationship between individuality and society conventions, thereby underscoring the multitude of factors that can shape one's sense of self. Moreover, during her last moments, Miranda reflects onto *Station Eleven*, which is adorned with metaphors of the sky and water, reflecting a confluence of symbols in a polyphonic fashion. The integration of these components represents

a cohesive amalgamation of Miranda's internal musings and the exterior environment, exemplifying a myriad of interrelated patterns and ideas.

Symphony and Polyphony

The Symphony *in Station Eleven* embodies the concept of polyphony in several ways:

Diverse Voices: The Symphony is composed of members who possess a wide range of backgrounds, abilities, and points of view. Every participant imparts a distinct viewpoint to the shared storyline. Bakhtin's concept of polyphony—in which the interaction of numerous voices generates an intricate and multifaceted plot—is shown by the fusion of these narratives.

Multifaceted Performances: The Symphony's concerts exhibit a seamless fusion of varied artistic forms through the incorporation of Shakespearean plays, music, and storytelling. A complex and multifaceted plot is developed as a result of the convergence of numerous artistic forms in this work, which mirrors the diversity of voices found in literature. The diversity of perspectives and attitudes toward their wandering lifestyle subsequent to the societal breakdown exemplifies the intricate and complex character of their encounters and convictions.

Unity in Diversity: In both concerts and emergencies, the Symphony operates as a cohesive unit, demonstrating the harmonious coexistence of many skills and backgrounds, in a manner analogous to the harmonies generated by numerous voices in polyphonic music.

Fundamentally, the Symphony functions as a miniature representation of polyphony, mirroring Bakhtin's notion by virtue of its varied vocal contributions, interwoven storylines, and the harmonic amalgamation of artistic manifestations within a unified structure.

The Symphony's importance in *Station Eleven* transcends its mere musical renditions. The Symphony, operating as a mobile orchestra that traverses post-apocalyptic landscapes, symbolises fortitude, the preservation of culture, and human connection in the face of disaster: "The Symphony was insufferable, hell was other flutes or other people or whoever had used the last of the rosin or whoever missed the most rehearsals, but the truth was that the Symphony was their only home" (Mandel 52). August, one of the characters, recognises the Symphony's importance as their only apparent

refuge in a divided world, but proclaiming it to be intolerable on account of internal strife and trifling disagreements.

Conclusion

Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* masterfully explores the aftermath of a devastating pandemic, offering a rich tapestry of memory, societal reconstruction, and human experience amid adversity. The novel stands out in the post-apocalyptic genre by emphasizing the significance of artistic expression and culture, as opposed to mere survival. Through its intricate narrative and diverse characters, *Station Eleven* presents a polyphonic narrative, echoing Bakhtin's concept of multiple voices and perspectives, which enriches the reader's understanding of post-pandemic resilience and adaptation. As Theocharis observes, "Polyphony shows respect to the victims, and thanks to its choral character it allows the reader to experience the stories in multiple levels" (188). The polyphony provides a multifaceted portrayal of the human experience post-calamity, offering valuable insights into individual responses and societal reconstruction.

The study underscores how the novel's polyphonic structure illuminates various facets of human response to catastrophe. Each character's unique voice contributes to a complex narrative that reflects their individual and collective struggles and triumphs. This narrative technique not only enhances the depiction of personal and societal recovery but also highlights the importance of memory as a tool for resilience. Characters cling to fragments of their pre-pandemic lives, underscoring the essential role of memory in navigating and surviving the new world. Moreover, the Traveling Symphony symbolizes the collective effort to preserve culture and humanistic values in the face of disaster. Their performances and interactions epitomize the polyphonic essence of the novel, demonstrating how diverse voices and experiences coexist and interact within the same narrative space. This collective endeavour reinforces the notion that artistic and cultural endeavours are vital for sustaining humanity in extreme conditions. Despite these insights, gaps in the literature remain. There is a need for further exploration of art's role in societal reconstruction and a deeper analysis of trauma dynamics beyond individual character studies. A more comprehensive examination of societal responses and cultural norms post-catastrophe would enhance our understanding of the broader implications of collective trauma in post-apocalyptic settings.

In conclusion, *Station Eleven* provides a profound exploration of the human condition through its polyphonic narrative. By weaving together

multiple voices and perspectives, Mandel offers a nuanced depiction of resilience, memory, and the enduring power of art and culture in the wake of a global catastrophe. This study not only bridges existing research gaps but also enriches the discourse on post-apocalyptic literature, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of human survival and adaptation.

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