



**Resilience Amid Ruins: A Logotherapeutic Analysis of
Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven***

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Abstract

The corpus of literature concerning pandemics and disease outbreaks, within the genre of post-apocalyptic pandemic fiction, has seen a notable surge, particularly in the wake of COVID-19 crises. These works, which often delve into the existential search for meaning amidst societal collapse, suffering and chaos, resonate profoundly with the contemporary world. There is a scholarly imperative to investigate the portrayal of optimism and resilience in the face of adversity, as depicted in pandemic literature. This study aims to elucidate optimistic coping mechanisms depicted in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* (2014) a seminal work in its genre with striking similarities to the era of COVID-19. This analysis will utilise Viktor Frankl's optimistic existential philosophy, Logotherapy, as a framework to examine how the novel's characters navigate and find meaning in their drastically altered, post-pandemic reality. The study aims to elucidate how Logotherapy's principles align with the character's experiences and their search for meaning in a decimated world.

Keywords: Logotherapy, pandemic, *Station Eleven*, Existential philosophy, Viktor Frankl, Post-Apocalyptic fiction, resilience

The corpus of literature has been replete with narratives centred on themes of pandemics, epidemics and disease outbreaks. Such narratives have long held significance but gained heightened relevance in the context of the recent COVID-19 crisis. Katherine Schwetz of the University of Toronto observes that the social upheaval triggered by COVID-19 echoes in many dystopian, apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic works, fuelling an upsurge in interest in fiction and films revolving around contagious diseases (Schwetz 2020). Such narratives, falling under the

broader umbrella of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction, a subgenre of speculative fiction, delve into human suffering and societal collapse triggered by catastrophic hazards. These fictional depictions are particularly relevant in depicting the harrowing realities of life amid disease outbreaks of varying scales characterised by themes of chaos, loss and disintegration of social structures reflecting a profound sense of existential crisis and meaninglessness. Beyond painting a picture of despair, these fictional narratives offer means to comprehend and cope with adversity. They transcend mere escapist narratives and serve as instrumental mediums and conduits for learning from portrayed attempts to make sense of life experiences amidst catastrophic scenarios. In this context, *Station Eleven* (2014) by Emily St. John Mandel emerges as a poignant classic within this genre of post-apocalyptic pandemic fiction. This novel, a non-linear narrative is set against a backdrop of a civilization decimated by a pandemic, the “Georgia flu” (17), where survivors struggle to rebuild remnants of the society. Central to the story is a travelling group of musicians and actors called the “Travelling Symphony” and their attempts to cope with the crises and the post-collapse world through art and resilient attitudinal shifts. With its depiction of the fictional pandemic Georgia flu, the novel reflects striking similarities to the COVID-19 era and resonates with the anxieties of existential crises, the quest for meaning and the fear of a societal crumble which ensued. Mandel uses the characters in the Novel, and their engagement with art to demonstrate how individuals can transcend suffering through creativity, experiences and attitudinal shifts. Such attempts to cope with or transcend suffering align with the philosophical crux of Viktor Frankl’s theory of Logotherapy, which encourages individuals to find purpose and meaning out of their adversities in spite of their inevitability (117). This study aims to position *Station Eleven* as an encapsulation of optimistic meaning-making attempts through art and resilience as a medium for overcoming and coping with suffering. The study intends to explore the characters in the novel, reflect and resonate the philosophical tenets of logotherapy and its categorical values, through their efforts to find meaning.

Logotherapy, propounded by Viktor Frankl, posits the search for meaning in life as the primary motivational force in humans. The fundamental tenets of Logotherapy are “will to meaning” and “freedom of will” which assert that humans have free will to choose their responses under all circumstances. Logotherapy believes that life has meaning in all circumstances, even in unavoidable suffering and misery (Frankl 3). Frankl’s Logotherapy views three ways of attaining meaning and purpose in life. These ways of attaining meaning also known as Categorical values

are creative values, experiential values and attitudinal values. They consist of optimistic attempts to attain purpose or meaning through creation, doing a good deed, experiences like love, beauty and truth, and the stand one takes towards an inevitable suffering (115). These logotherapeutic categorical values gain significance in analysing and comprehending human behaviours in adverse scenarios of post-apocalyptic pandemic fiction. In such narratives, where characters often encounter extreme conditions and ensuing existential crises, the principles of Logotherapy become pivotal in understanding their journeys.

Creative Values and Self-transcendence: Art and Altruism in *Station Eleven*

In stories of catastrophic events and human suffering, Logotherapy provides a framework to understand character behaviour and the motif of the existential quest for meaning as reflected in their survival journey. These narratives, often set in realities where societal norms have collapsed, highlight the search for meaning as not just psychological but fundamental for survival. Logotherapy's notion of creative values refers to finding meaning through creation or by performing an act of good deed (Frankl 115). In the realm of post-apocalyptic fiction, this is illustrated by characters who engage in creative activities as a means to cope with their altered reality. In Mandel's *Station Eleven*, characters create and perform art, and music and strive to preserve cultural artefacts. These acts transcend mere survival tactics and become essential for maintaining identity and purpose in a chaotic world. These acts align with Frankl's view that creativity, forming one of the categorical values of logotherapy, can offer profound fulfilment and meaning, even in dire circumstances (147). The novel's characters find solace and meaning in their artistic and creative endeavours amidst the chaos caused by the Georgia Flu.

Miranda's "Dr. Eleven" comic series exemplifies these creative values. Emerging from her own turmoil, the comics become a beacon of hope and a symbol of the lost world for characters like Kirsten. For Miranda herself, the act of creating the comics is seen to offer her an evident sense of stability and purpose when the world around her is collapsing (Zhong 17). While she felt that she was getting sick with the flu "She spent some time, Sketching, trying to calm herself." (226).

The Travelling Symphony, with its troupe of travelling musicians and actors, epitomizes creativity in the post-apocalyptic world. Their motto, "survival is insufficient" (17), resonates with the human need for meaning beyond survival. Their performances of Shakespeare and music to scattered communities are not just entertainment but creative acts of finding affirming purpose through art in a world overshadowed by loss.

The creative endeavours in *Station Eleven* serve as links to the characters' pre-pandemic identities (Patra 709) and as mechanisms for processing their grief. Art becomes a medium for the characters to reconnect with their past selves and piece together memories of a lost world. Through creativity, they confront and make sense of their suffering, embodying Frankl's idea of deriving meaning from creative values. The novel aptly demonstrates the power of creative pursuits in coping with immense suffering.

The Self-transcendent deeds are yet another principle of Logotherapy seen subtly interlaced in this post-apocalyptic narrative of Mandel. The instances of self-transcendence as Frankl says acts of giving oneself to a cause to serve ..." (115) are vividly portrayed, aligning closely with Viktor Frankl's concept of self-transcendence in logotherapy. Characters in the novel frequently act in ways that transcend their own self-interests, contributing to the greater good and enhancing the collective understanding of the human condition. One of the most striking examples of Self-transcendence is the "Travelling Symphony" and their commitment to bringing Shakespeare and the music to scattered is a selfless endeavour to preserve cultural heritage and provide solace to others. The symphony's members, especially Kirsten Raymonde, risk their safety to keep the flame of culture and civilization alive. Their acts serve as a means of processing their grief and making sense of the world while being self-transcendent and altruistic.

Clark Thompson exemplifies self-transcendence through his creation of the Museum of Civilization. By collecting artefacts from the world before the collapse, Clark provides a bridge between the past and the present. His actions go beyond mere nostalgia; they are an attempt to offer a sense of continuity and understanding for future generations. Clark's efforts in curating these remnants of a lost world become an act of selfless service, contributing to collective memory and shared human experience for future generations to come. The novel also presents self-transcendence in smaller, more personal moments. Characters like Jeevan Chaudhary, who initially reacts to the pandemic with panic, eventually find purpose in caring for his brother paralyzed by fear. This shift from self-concern to caring for another is a subtle yet powerful example of transcending one's own needs in favour of helping others, these instances in *Station Eleven* align with Frankl's philosophy that "the more one forgets himself—by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love the more human he is" (Frankl 115).

Experiential values: Artistic experience in *Station Eleven*

Logotherapy believes that one of the ways to find meaning in life is by experiencing something such as goodness, truth and beauty, by experiencing nature and culture or by loving another human being (Frankl 115). In *Station Eleven* Mandel profoundly illustrates the role of art and the potential of experiencing art as a medium of overcoming suffering, offering nuanced exploration of how artistic expression and experience of it aids in coping with a post-apocalyptic world. The novel is replete with instances where art becomes a beacon of hope and a tool for survival, both physically and emotionally.

Art's potential to offer purpose in *Station Eleven*'s ravaged world is further exemplified through the character, Clark. He curates the Museum of Civilization, a collection of objects from the pre-pandemic world. Through this museum, Clark engages in an artistic endeavour to preserve the remnants of their lost world, offering a window into what once was. This act of preservation serves as a form of storytelling, a way to connect with the past and educate future generations. Clark's museum becomes a place of reflection and learning, a space where survivors can confront their grief and begin to understand their new reality. Moreover, in the post-collapse world remnants of the lost world offer him a purpose in life. He experiences beauty in almost everything which kindles his interest in turning into a curator.

Clark had always been fond of beautiful objects, and in his present state of mind, all objects were beautiful, he stood by the case and found himself moved by every object he saw there, by the human enterprise each object had required. (255)

Kirsten carries a glass paperweight which was gifted to her before the flu outbreak. Her act of carrying the paper weight everywhere with her not just as a token of memory but simply because of its beauty as she says "I thought it was beautiful. I still think it's beautiful". (Mandel 184). This act of Kirsten stands as an example of logotherapy's notion that experiencing beauty can offer meaning in life.

In *Station Eleven*, the experience of Artistic expression also serves as a medium for coping with loss and trauma. Characters use art to process their experiences, to mourn what they have lost, and to articulate their hopes for the future. The novel's frequent references to Shakespeare's works, particularly "King Lear", resonate with the themes of tragedy, endurance, and the human condition, reflecting the character's struggles in their own lives.

The symbolic significance of the "Station Eleven" comic book within the novel encapsulates the transformative power of art. The experience of reading the comic offers solace to the characters

grappling with the decimated reality. The character Tyler “spent his days curled in an armchair in Skymiles Lounge, reading his comic books over and over again.” (245).

Kirsten Raymonde, a central character and a member of the symphony, finds personal solace and identity in the comic book “Station Eleven”. This comic book, given to her by Arthur Leander before his death, becomes a treasured possession, a link to her past, and a source of inspiration (Patra 5). The comic’s story, set on a space station where humanity seeks refuge after Earth becomes uninhabitable, mirrors the post-pandemic world Kirsten inhabits. Her attachment to the comic book is not just about nostalgia; it represents her search for meaning and understanding in a fractured world. Her experiences of the art through the comic book serve as an anchor in her turbulent life. Moreover, Kirsten and August envision and imagine parallel universes based on the comic as a coping mechanism. Kirsten “tried to imagine and place herself in that other, shadow life.” (201). These instances reflect logotherapy’s notion that experiencing art can offer avenues to attain purpose in life as the experience of reading the comic book instigates an escapist attitude in the characters (245) and along with *Star Trek* have become sources of meaning for characters like Kirsten (Patra 709). The comic book is not just a piece of pre-pandemic; it becomes a metaphor for survival and the enduring human spirit. The comic book’s story of a space station refugee becomes an allegory for the character’s search for safety and offers escapist solace in a hostile world.

The travelling symphony is a vivid example of artistic experience serving as avenues to attain meaning in life. Their dedication in performing Shakespeare and in playing classical music amidst the ruins of civilization is not merely about preserving culture; it becomes an act of artistic resilience against the despair of their new reality. For the symphony art is a lifeline, offering a semblance of normalcy and beauty in a world stripped of its comforts. Their performances become communal events, drawing survivors together and fostering a sense of community. In this way, art transcends its aesthetic value, becoming a vital component of rebuilding and maintaining a semblance of society thus aiding the performers in finding purpose in their post-collapse world by experiencing art (McRackken, January 26, 2022).

Attitudinal Values: Resilience and Hope in *Station Eleven*

The third categorical value of logotherapy, attitudinal values, involves finding meaning through one’s response to unavoidable suffering. Characters in post-apocalyptic literature frequently encounter insurmountable losses and challenges. Their reactions to these situations, whether

through maintaining hope, resilience or embracing the inevitability of suffering reflect the logotherapeutic notion that meaning can be found in every form of existence, even the most squalid ones and in suffering particularly. In *Station Eleven*, the character Jeevan Chaudhary chooses to have a resilient attitude to face hopeless conditions by accepting the inevitability of adverse conditions and suffering. This is reflected in his statement “There’s still a world out there” (183) even in hopeless conditions where his brother is paralysed and suicidal amidst a rapidly spreading lethal Georgia Flu (17).

The Travelling Symphony, as a group of artists journeying through the devastated landscape, becomes an exceptional model of resilience. Their commitment to preserving art and culture amidst the ruins is a testament to the human spirit’s indomitable will. The symphony’s motto, “survival is insufficient”, borrowed from *Star Trek* (119), encapsulates their belief that existence without meaning is inadequate for true human fulfilment.

Their relentless pursuit of art in a world bereft of former comforts becomes a profound assertion of hope and a deliberate choice of resilient attitude and perspective in adverse conditions. The Symphony, in choosing not to succumb to despair, personifies Frankl's notion that one’s attitude towards life’s challenges is a crucial determinant of meaning. Frankl says “If one cannot change a situation that causes him suffering, he can still choose his attitude.” (148). The novel also subtly underscores another logotherapeutic principle: the freedom of will (Frankl 3). Such freedom of choosing one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances is evident in the way characters like Elizabeth and Tyler, Arthur’s ex-wife and son, interpret the pandemic. Their descent into a dogmatic cult showcases a contrasting response to suffering, where meaning is derived from their misplaced sense of destiny and prophecy which serves as their medium to cope with the adversity even while starkly deviating from the constructive paths chosen by Kirsten and Clark.

Conclusion

Thus, in *Station Eleven*, Emily St. John Mandel adeptly interlaces the principles of Logotherapy within a post-apocalyptic narrative, showcasing how characters derive meaning from calamity through creation, good actions, adapting resilient attitudes and experiencing beauty and art. The novel vividly illustrates Victor Frankl’s logotherapeutic philosophy that even amidst despair, individuals possess the freedom to choose their attitudes towards suffering and actively seek meaning. The creation of the Travelling Symphony and Clark’s Museum of Civilization are acts of good deeds amidst chaos, where preserving art and culture becomes a beacon of hope.

These endeavours embody the logotherapeutic values of engaging in meaningful deeds and contributing positively to the larger community. The Symphony's Commitment to bringing Music and Theatre to a Fractured world not only upholds cultural legacies but also instils a sense of purpose and belonging, both for the performers and their audience. Kirsten's attachment to the "Station Eleven" comic Book symbolises the profound impact of art in providing solace and a bridge to the lost world. This connection highlights the significance of experiencing beauty and love through art, which serves as an anchor in turbulent times. Likewise, Clark's Museum is a testament to the human need to connect with the past, offering a lens through which to view and understand the present. The narrative also explores the notion of self-transcendence and the capacity to shift attitudes in the face of an inevitable, desolate reality. Characters in the novel demonstrate the will to attain meaning and a quest for purpose in their post-apocalyptic setting. Their journeys are marked by acts of self-transcendence, where the focus shifts from personal suffering to the well-being of others and the preservation of human culture.

In this way, this study has examined the encapsulation of logotherapeutic ways of meaning-making in adverse conditions as depicted through the characters of *Station Eleven*. The study delves into ways in which the characters in the novel embody the principles of Logotherapy, particularly its optimistic approach to meaning-making in the face of adversity, as exemplified by the global pandemic depicted in the novel. This study is significant in its illumination of literature's capacity to steer readers towards reading speculative pandemic fiction not as a mere source of escapism but as a potential source to adapt coping mechanisms for dealing with inevitable suffering and catastrophic events. Mandel with her description of the zero hour, offers striking relatability for readers from the present COVID-19 era and asserts that there is no return to pre-pandemic normalcy when she says "There was no place they could walk to where life continued as it had before..." (37). The pandemic marks a divide "between a before and an after, a line drawn through life" (20) as reflected in the new normal period of COVID-19 characterised by the constant prevalence of the threat of new viral strains This parallel, offers deep resonance with the shifts ushered in by COVID-19, underscores the novel's relevance and illustrates literature's potential to offer nuanced perspectives on the new normal and coping mechanisms for similar adversities in reality. Studies prove that in clinical settings Logotherapy has demonstrated efficacy in addressing issues such as depression, anxiety, substance abuse, psychosis, grief, and despair related to terminal illnesses (Marshall and Marshall,2017). In a similar vein, applying Logotherapy as an

interpretive framework to the post-apocalyptic genre can be remarkably beneficial, providing readers with valuable lessons on navigating adverse scenarios, a pertinent concern marked by the contemporary context of a global health crisis.

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