

Women in the Apocalypse: Power and Gender in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

Author: Samantha Eldredge | Mentor: Dr. Margaret Savilonis
Department of English, Sponsored by UNH SURF

Emily St. John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven* is a story that spans over time to tell the story of how the fates of Kirsten Raymonde, Jeevan Chaudhary, Arthur Leander and Miranda Carroll connect despite the epidemic that rocks their world. In the opening scenes of the novel, Arthur Leander, a renowned actor, dies of a heart attack while on stage for a production *King Lear* in which he plays the titular role, despite Jeevan's efforts to resuscitate him, as he had been watching the play in the audience and had recently finished EMT training. Young Kirsten, who had been acting in the play as one of the King's daughters, is troubled by his death, as is Jeevan, but that worry is pushed to the side by the onset of the Georgian Flu outbreak, which decimates most of humanity. The novel jumps forward to twenty years in the future, and shows how the Earth and civilization attempt to rebuild. Kirsten moved on to wander the new territories of what's left of the United States and Canada with the Travelling Symphony, an organization that performs music and Shakespeare's plays. Kermode suggests, "No longer imminent, the end is immanent" (68), meaning that the end by an apocalypse is not imminent, as in about to happen, but immanent, as in completely natural. Kermode goes on to explain that stories about the end of the world, like the literature of an epidemic, help us to understand our place in the world, as our ends are a natural part of existence, and in accordance with its Greek roots, can reveal the true order of the world. In the case of *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel and *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood, these fictional apocalypses, though similar in nature, serve as very different examples of what post-apocalyptic fiction can represent, specifically to women's representation, and revealing their true order.

Both novels have received high recognition in the literary community, despite the fact that they may also be considered science fiction, which typically denotes less merit. One writer for the *New York Times* suggests that, in the case of *Station Eleven*, the reason it has garnered such attention is that it focuses "on character development and relationships against the backdrop of a global calamity. The apocalypse becomes more of a setting than a plot point" (Alter 1). It is the literary merits of the work that far outweigh the other elements. Kermode asserts that apocalypse literature makes greater, common statements about human nature, and that from these we can take away comfort and