

Engl 192DF Paper 2

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Physical Vs. Emotional Manifestations of Nostalgia in *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Station Eleven*

Nostalgia is a mechanism used within a post-apocalyptic framework to connect characters to the past, which in turn defines their positionality in the current world. Within the texts *The Handmaid's Tale* by Margaret Atwood and *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel, nostalgia contrasts the freedom and stability of the former world with the oppression and danger of the current world. In this essay, nostalgia is analyzed within these texts through the following two viewpoints: nostalgia as a means of psychological escape from the harsh reality of the current world and nostalgia as a means of cultural preservation to keep the past alive, generating hope for the future world. Both nostalgia as a psychological escape and as cultural preservation function in a post-apocalyptic framework to reinforce the power of the past to mold the current and future, revealing how mundane objects and memories shape people's connection to the world they live in. Psychological escape and cultural preservation are both physical and emotional manifestations of nostalgia that the main female protagonists in both dystopian texts use. Ultimately, with the essence of nostalgia, characters living a post-apocalyptic world have moral and social reference points from which to base their beliefs; connection to the past is what fuels not only survival, but also progress and rebellion in a post-apocalyptic world.

In "Thus Spoke the Grid," a scholarly article by Alicia Fahey, functions of objects and memories in *Station Eleven* are analyzed in the context of a post-apocalyptic world. Fahey focuses on the "kinetic archive," which is an archive of objects that is characterized by "precarity

and chance” (Fahey, 88). The importance of the archival of objects and memories that have been formed naturally and due to movement is relevant to the two dystopian texts being analyzed. The key characters within these texts feel a connection to objects which remind them of their past, such as the *Vogue* magazine Offred receives and Kirsten’s glass paperweight, ultimately showing a greater connection to their past-identities. Furthermore, this connection to past selves is what empowers the characters survival and nonconformity in a post-apocalyptic world. The thesis of Fahey’s article which aids in analyzing the texts on the basis of nostalgia is the following: “The postpandemic world highlights the notion that inanimate objects participate in forming networks of value” (Fahey, 88). In other words, objects preserved in the post-apocalyptic world create connections between people surviving under dystopian conditions. These objects likewise create a connection between past and current identities, which is a tool used by characters living in a post-apocalyptic world to remember their sense of self.

Within *The Handmaid’s Tale*, nostalgia is a tool that connects Offred to her past life. Though she is living under a patriarchal society, she constantly uses memories from her former life to mentally escape from the trauma she is experiencing. Her ability to remember her life with family and friends, as well as her connection to the objects around her, allows Offred to survive under the harsh regime of Gilead. Nostalgia is paramount to Offred’s survival as it demonstrates how her past has formed her moral reference points, causing her to have small moments of rebellion throughout *The Handmaid’s Tale*. For example, a moment of dissent connected to Offred’s nostalgia for the past occurs when she receives the *Vogue* magazine from the Commander. Inside Offred’s personal narration, she thinks, “There they were again, the images of my childhood: bold, striding, confident, their arms flung out as if to claim space, their legs apart, feet planted squarely on the Earth” (Atwood, 157). The *Vogue* magazine is not only

familiar to Offred because of the images, but rather because it reminds her of the woman she used to be. She recognizes the agency that the woman in the magazine had, which connects Offred with her own agency that was taken away from her by the patriarchal government. The magazine is a physical manifestation of nostalgia that fuels Offred's resistance, allowing her to connect to her past self and have temporary psychological escape from the Gilead regime. Similarly to the magazine, which operates as a physical manifestation of nostalgia, Offred also has moments of remembrance which represent emotional manifestations of nostalgia.

An example of an emotional manifestation of nostalgia within *The Handmaid's Tale* occurs during a private conversation between Offred and the Commander regarding the topic of love. During this conversation, Offred begins to think about her relationship with Luke and her positionality in the former world. Offred has nostalgia for the way love was able to exist before the Gilead regime, and she recounts, "It's strange to remember how we used to think, as if everything were available to us, as if there were no contingencies, no boundaries; as if we were free to shape and reshape forever the ever-expanding perimeters of our lives" (Atwood, 227). As Offred is examining her former freedoms, she is demonstrating an emotional manifestation of nostalgia in which she remembers her past feelings and contrasts them to her current state. Her former feelings now appear naive to her; however, her nostalgia for the past leaves her longing to feel these freedoms again. This resonates with Fahey's arguments in "Thus Spoke the Grid," because Offred is demonstrating a "recalibration of attitudes...that is motivated by affective connections to the past (Fahey, 88)." In other words, Offred's feelings towards the past are paramount in shaping her emotional connection to the world she is currently experiencing. Furthermore, the emotional manifestation of nostalgia is vital to Offred's survival under a patriarchal society, as she is often withheld from objects from her past. Since Offred is not

allowed to keep objects in her room or view them at will, she majorly relies on her own recollection of the past to sustain herself mentally. Though she recognizes that they are not always accurate, Offred spends time piecing together moments and memories from the past in order to better understand how she has ended up in her current position. For Offred, nostalgia is both physical, sparked by seeing objects which connect to her past, as well as emotional, which represent memories that give Offred a psychological escape from the dystopian landscape she lives in. Overarchingly, Offred's physical and emotional manifestations of nostalgia further her noncompliance to the expectations and rules of a patriarchal society. Similarly to Offred, Kirsten, the female protagonist in *Station Eleven*, experiences nostalgia in ways which alter her positionality in a post-apocalyptic world.

Kirsten, though lacking memories from the time before the Georgia Flu, establishes nostalgia as a physical means to connect with the former world. Her collection of objects, which she carries around with the Traveling Symphony, represents her longing to understand the pre-apocalyptic world. For example, the paperweight she carries around "was of no practical use whatsoever, nothing but dead weight in the bag but she found it beautiful" (Mandel, 66). The paperweight symbolizes not only a connection to the past itself, but to the people living within that time period, as it was passed from Clark to Miranda to Arthur to Tanya to Kirsten. Similarly, Fahey analyzes the paperweight as a "physical manifestation" of the connection between the primary characters in the dystopian text (Fahey, 93). The paperweight, as well as the other objects Kirsten has collected, is a physical manifestation of nostalgia, because it provides her with ideas of what the past and the people who lived in it were like. Furthermore, Kirsten, unlike Offred, does not use this physical manifestation of nostalgia as a way to psychologically escape from the current world, but rather as a way to understand and connect with the past. Her loss of

memories has led Kirsten to have a strong interest in aspects of the past world and how these aspects may affect the future. Kirsten's physical manifestations of nostalgia have furthered her interest in the cultural preservation of objects, demonstrating how nostalgia has aided in survival and progress in a post-apocalyptic world. Similarly, Kirsten's connection to Clark, which comes to fruition at the end of the novel, represents their shared interest in cultural preservation, which is rooted in the physical manifestation of nostalgia.

Kirsten and Clark are separated and unknown to one another throughout the majority of *Station Eleven*; however, they are connected in their goal of discovering and sharing parts of the past world. Clark, stranded at the Severn City Airport after the influx of the Georgia Flu, created the Museum of Civilization, a space in which objects that no longer serve their original functions are held and observed. Mandel describes Clark as, "He stood by the case and found himself moved by every object he saw there, by the human enterprise each object has required" (Mandel, 255). Clark, like Kirsten, is interested in the cultural preservation of objects that no longer function in society as they did pre-apocalypse. Fahey analyzes the Museum of Civilization as "an act of remembrance" and as "the collective efforts of a community of people finding purpose in creative activity while in the midst of precarious living in the new world" (Fahey, 96). The emphasis on the space housing objects that no longer have purpose represents how they are being collected purely for nostalgia's sake. The Museum of Civilization holds physical manifestations of nostalgia, which connect the survivors of the post-apocalyptic world to their experiences in the former world. Kirsten demonstrates this same interest in collecting objects as an act of remembrance through her exploration of abandoned homes. She and August explore abandoned homes not only for the reason of gathering materials, but also for the reason of examining elements of the past. As Kirsten is thinking about why she enters these homes she thinks,

“Because we are always looking for the former world, before all the traces of the former world are gone” (Mandel, 130). In this instance, nostalgia is a physical manifestation of knowledge itself. Kirsten’s ability to understand the pre-apocalyptic world furthers her survival in the post-apocalyptic world. Furthermore, her knowledge of the past generates hope that elements of the world that Kirsten once knew might one day become a part of society again.

Both Offred and Kirsten, though living in vastly different post-apocalyptic worlds, use nostalgia as a tool to fuel survival in difficult times. Offred experiences both physical and emotional manifestations of nostalgia as she relies on her memories as a way to escape the psychological trauma of a patriarchal society, as well as the physical objects around her to remember her sense of self and agency. Contrastingly, Kirsten experiences physical manifestations of nostalgia rather than emotional as she relies on her exploration of objects to learn about the past rather than her own personal memories. Furthermore, Offred’s manifestation of nostalgia is primarily a means of psychological escape, while Kirsten’s manifestation of nostalgia is a means of seeking knowledge and cultural preservation. Though these forms of nostalgia are different, they both succeed in fueling the survival and rebellion of the main female protagonists within these dystopian texts. Offred and Kirsten’s knowledge and connection to the past cements their moral viewpoints, which prevent them from becoming complacent in a post-apocalyptic society.

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Works Cited

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