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How Human Needs Shape One's Psyche

If the world collapsed today, in what ways would society preserve the culture of the old world—not just to live for mere survival, but to find purpose in the new one? In *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel, the story explores the lives of society through a post-pandemic lens where characters are forced to not only fight for food, shelter, and basic needs, they are forced to fight for purpose. When viewed through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the novel reveals how "survival is insufficient." This hierarchy was developed by Abraham Maslow in the late 20th century, as a psychological framework proposing that human motivation moves through a five-tier pyramid. This theory starts with simpler needs like physiological and safety needs, then continues to love and belonging, and eventually moves to esteem, then up to the highest level, self-actualization (Abu Bakar et. al. 454). An article on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs dives into how it is applied to environmental issues. This investigation analyzes studies that research connections between human needs— including psychological needs, safety, belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization—and how they relate to environmental concerns; also delving into the idea that Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs goes hand-in-hand with how environmental issues affect the human psyche and need for purpose. This is important because it helps to evaluate the human needs that are pivotal in stimulating personal growth and fulfillment. This analyzation technique is a crucial part in understanding how the human psyche works and the personal need to find purpose in life. According to Maslow, the more basic needs generally

need to be satisfied first before moving up a level. *Station Eleven* vividly expresses how individuals can move throughout the hierarchy, they can fluctuate, depending on their personal experiences and psyche. The novel examines how people find purpose through aspects like finding community through art and performing, feeling a sense of purpose through building order and finding meaning, or even feeling a sense of love and belonging through using leadership in a deceived and distorted way; however, if there is a lack of these human needs, it can cause an imbalance in one's psyche. Ultimately, this novel highlights how mere survival is not enough to make life worth living, but the harsh circumstances bring opportunities to help meet human needs, giving one a purpose, and making life more than just "survival."

Kirsten's movement through Maslow's hierarchy, from childhood to adulthood, throughout *Station Eleven* reflects her consistent progression, as she moves from fighting for basic survival to seeking purpose and identity. In the beginning of the novel, Kirsten's main focus is her physiological and safety needs, as she navigates survival after the collapse as a child. Kirsten was only eight when the Georgian Flu collapsed the world, making her earliest memories violent and fearful. Because of this, her identity becomes physiological, focusing on finding water, food, shelter, and warmth due to the constant danger they were in. Decades of research have revealed a deep connection between childhood socioeconomic status and brain development. While this can be beneficial to the children in society, if needs are not met, it can negatively impact day-to-day experiences, altering the brain development of kids in today's society (Schneider, Julie M., et. al. 1). Kirsten's drop in socioeconomic status after the collapse forces her into instability, causing chronic stress. Ultimately, her psyche is forced to become vigilant in order to survive: she learns to hunt, navigate territory, and stay alert. Also, due to the lack of rules and protection post-collapse, she learns to evaluate danger. This is seen when she

carries knives; however, this is not for violence, but for control and protection. The Dr. Eleven comics are also a material need that helps to build her character throughout the story, as it provides a stable safe space with consistency in a world that was pure chaos and danger. As Kirsten gets older, she becomes a member of the Travelling Symphony. This causes her to progress up Maslow's Hierarchy, which gives her purpose through a sense of belonging. A study on group play therapy highlights how this form of therapy allows people to express themselves in a safe, comfortable environment, while allowing them to interact with peers (Celik and Gluloglu 822). This practice allows people to process trauma and rebuild trust through shared creative expression. Kirsten's journey with the Travelling Symphony goes hand-in-hand with this form of group therapy: when Kirsten makes the decision to join the Symphony, the group became a safe environment that gave her a sense of a community, a shared purpose, stable relationships, and a sense of emotional safety. It was also the first time she was truly able to trust others and exist beyond just survival. In the end, her needs move into esteem and self-actualization through performing and art. As the Symphony continues, Kirsten becomes a highly respected leader within the Symphony, which causes her to regain connection with others, moving her to the next layer of the hierarchy. Her identity becomes tied not to surviving, but being good at something meaningful. The act of performing gives Kirsten confidence, purpose, and accomplishment, causing her psyche to shift. As her psyche shifts, she is no longer stuck in survival mode and begins to value beauty, art, and self-confidence. With this shift, she reaches the highest level in Maslow's hierarchy. Throughout the storyline, Kirsten's main motivation is that "Survival is insufficient" (St. John Mandel 58). It is seen through this quote that Kirsten believes survival is not enough to live life to its fullest potential, but that purpose and identity give life true meaning. After she lost her childhood and sense of stability, simply "surviving"

does not satisfy her psychological needs, causing her to go and find purpose in something else. Through finding meaning in a broken world and bringing beauty to the places she travels, seeing art as the building blocks to mend humanity, and holding on to the comics, not for safety, but for purpose and identity, Kirsten reaches self-actualization. All in all, Kirsten's environment plays a crucial role in progressing her needs, because as her environment stabilizes when she joins the Symphony, her surroundings become secure, and she no longer has a reason to fight. Her relationships deepen, allowing her to form bonds that fill her void for belonging. Her identity also grows as she finds esteem and purpose in being a skilled actor and highly respected member of the Symphony. This purpose replaces her fear, making her desire to preserve art and hope become self-actualized, motivating her to keep going. In essence, finding a group of individuals that share the same interest and give constant support fills the void for love and purpose in one's psyche; ultimately the simplicity of socialization and belonging can shape one's identity, fulfilling their basic needs, and helping to perpetuate their needs through Maslow's hierarchy.

Clark's journey in *Station Eleven* demonstrates his gradual growth through Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, progressing from a man focused on consistency and stability to someone who found purpose through preserving culture and memory. After the collapse, Clark's needs are defined by his safety concerns as the environmental conditions were dangerous. In the novel, Clark ends up in the airport with a group of survivors, causing his mind to shift, focusing on securing food and water. He also wanted to ensure protection from the disease, enforcing rules to create order in the airport. According to multiple studies, public health, which includes the mental and physical functions of individuals, severely decreased during the COVID-19 epidemic, physical activity decreased approximately thirty percent, which prompted people to refrain from various physical activities (Shimokihara et. al. 2). Therefore, in the instance of a

world-wide pandemic or collapse, people refrain from doing anything, eventually causing them to lose hope and feel purposeless. Moreover, because survival becomes uncertain, the physiological needs are crucial to one's psyche and personal well-being in order to make it out alive and find true purpose and fulfillment in life. Over time, Clark becomes a leader, making a community at the airport. After stability returns, and his physiological and safety needs are met, Clark's psyche rises to find belonging. An article on environmental stability sheds some critical light on the conditions necessary for the first evolving protocells to survive over time in their environment. It also states that the emergence of evolutionary processes on Early Earth remains a fundamental step in the development of life as we know it (Daga et. al. 12). He creates a small society in the airport, and soon they begin to function and work together as a family. Now, Clark isn't just "surviving," he has a role to fulfill, making him feel needed. In the end, Clark's sense of purpose comes from running the Museum of Civilization, which gives him identity through esteem and self-actualization. As he gains respect, he becomes a leader to the people. He finds pride through helping build order and community in the airport. Another thing that Clark finds purpose in is The Museum of Civilization, as a self-actualized form of expression, showing he finds esteem through preserving the old world. Clark becomes changed by the events that unfolded, shaping his psyche in a more optimistic way, striving to accomplish finding purpose and meaning, "Clark was thinking about how lucky he'd been. Not just the mere fact of survival, which was of course remarkable in and of itself, but to have seen one world end and another begin. And not just have seen the remembered splendours of the former world" (St. John Mandel 231). This shift is pivotal because his purpose is no longer defined by his career, money, or routine, it is found through meaning and culture. Overall, Clark's transition through Maslow's hierarchy highlights how the stable airport became his community, helping to foster connection

and belonging with the people around him that looked to him as a leader. This purpose creates dedication in Clark, making him want to understand humanity and culture. Clark's character highlights how one can find purpose through leading others, in a positive way. There is significant importance in finding identity for something that is meaningful to an individual. This reason gives one the motivation and determination to accomplish their goal or idea, creating purpose and drive.

The Prophet's journey shows how a person can move through Maslow's hierarchy in a distorted and cruel way when one's psyche is unstable. As a child, Tyler survived the collapse physically, but his emotional safety was shattered. Due to this, he grew up isolated and afraid, heavily influenced by his mother's fear and Arthur's fame. Technically, he had the physiological needs, but not in a healthy and safe environment. A study was conducted on how the exposure of traumatic events to children and adolescents can cause many psychological disorders such as post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). PTSD is an emotional reaction to traumatic events, which can be hindering and disabling (Kousha and Tehrani 1). Tyler never experienced real belonging or genuine relationships, so he found "love" and "belonging" through the devotion of his followers. The term "The Prophet" was a way of giving Tyler the status, authority, and admiration he craved, which made him feel "loved," but his role was rooted in manipulation and contortion, which gave him control through fear rather than love. A personal story by Andrew Valeras highlights his troublesome journey as he tries to navigate life in the midst of socioeconomic disparities. Valeras talks about how being a white man in healthcare, he tries to find purpose in hard times, and use his roles for good (1). This contrasts the Prophet's mindset; Tyler seeks self-actualization through power, since he never gained esteem from relationships or identity. His harsh teachings through manipulation gave him "purpose." As humans, each

individual has the ability to choose to use their power for good or evil. Due to the experiences Tyler faced as a child, his basic needs were unmet, causing him to force the people around him to agree with his ways. This highlights how as a society, our actions are impacted by our experiences and the people around us. Another component that gave him purpose was the “Book of Revelation,” which he used as a guide in life to justify his actions and ways of leading. An example of this is when the Prophet said, “[t]he great cleansing that we suffered twenty years ago, that flu was our flood. The light we carry within us is the ark that carried Noah and his people over the face of the terrible waters, and I submit that we were saved” (St. John Mandel 60). The Prophet continuously quotes scripture to convince his followers that the Georgian Flu was meant to happen. When people resonate religiously or morally in a certain area, they lean their beliefs onto how they act towards others. For Tyler, this creates false teachings through distortion and cruelty. The Prophet then goes to say that they were saved because they were meant to bring the light, spread the light, and be the light. He says they are the light and they are the pure (St. John Mandel 60). His twisted and manipulative way of self-actualization, makes him think the events that have unfolded is destiny, but realistically, it is trauma and misinterpretation that he uses to make it look like purpose. So, instead of becoming his best self, he became shaped by fear and grief. Ultimately, Tyler’s psychological and safety needs were disrupted at an early age due to the collapse, which built his worldview on fear and trauma due to his unmet needs. Thus, his sense of love and belonging was damaged due to the loss of his family and global destruction, causing him to fail in building healthy relationships. This instance is what leads him to create a cult-like group to force control, in order to give him belonging and purpose through power rather than genuine connection and love. Throughout the book, Tyler’s esteem and self-actualization is found through seeking dominance and fear, believing he was

“chosen” for divine purpose, highlighting how his self-actualization was shaped by trauma; this causes him to be bitter towards the fact his experiences were never authentic, and instead of giving him purpose they made him feel purposeless. This created bitterness in Tyler, causing him to deceive the people around him. This highlights the significance of how people's experiences can shape their psyches. If the experiences that are faced are positive, one's basic needs are met, and if the needs are not met, it can cause stagnation or regression, which the Prophet exemplifies well. Therefore, environments and experiences can ultimately change the psychological state of an individual, for good or evil.

Overall, as each character progresses up, or down, Maslow's hierarchy, it reveals something different about each person psychologically within society. Kirsten's persistence helps her rise from the disorder of her unmet physiological and safety needs, toward love, belonging, and esteem. Eventually, she finds her purpose through being a highly recognized member of the Symphony, showing how finding community through a shared purpose can heal a broken psyche. For Clark, his steady progression through the hierarchy shows that humans need order and meaning in life. By rebuilding the Museum of Civilization it shows how structure can fulfill higher needs in order to find one's identity within society. To contrast, the Prophet's decrease in the hierarchy is rooted through trauma and the lack of love and belonging, causing him to warp his sense of purpose into control and manipulation. Showing that the environments and experiences that individuals go through shape how their psyches form, and how they move through Maslow's hierarchy. Together, the journeys these characters face mirror how different people within society respond to crisis: when basic needs are stripped away, the human mind becomes fragile and vulnerable, but through belonging, stability, and connection, people can rebuild the world, find purpose, and give more meaning to life than just “survival.”

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