

***Station Eleven Lesson Plan 1***  
Introducing the Post-Apocalyptic Genre  
Created by Emily Pearson & Rochel Bergman

**Overview:**

This lesson is designed to introduce students to *Station Eleven*, the dystopian genre, and how post-apocalyptic fiction relates to and differs from the dystopian genre. This lesson focuses on information from the first twelve chapters of the novel. For this reason, this lesson is best suited for the first day of teaching *Station Eleven*.

The Introduction to Genre Fiction portion of this lesson is adapted from the “Introduction to Genre Fiction” exercise included in Diana Fuss and William A. Gleason’s *The Pocket Instructor, Literature: 101 exercises for the college classroom* (Fuss and Gleason 199-201).

**Objectives:**

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Define the dystopian genre and trace how the genre connects to post-apocalyptic fiction
- Identify how *Station Eleven* fits into the dystopian and post-apocalyptic genres and where it may push back against genre conventions

**Class Structure:**

*30 minutes:* Introduction to Dystopian Fiction

- Start class by asking students to explain what they think dystopian literature is. Keep a list of student answers on the board or a powerpoint slide, if available. If needed, prompt students with the following questions: What elements does a story need to have to be in this genre? What kinds of character relationships, or events would you expect to encounter? What kinds of beginnings or endings? What kind of setting or time period? Why? Is there a typical consumer of this genre? If so, who? Why do people who enjoy this genre enjoy it?
- Before starting discussion of the first list, build on student associations by asking students to brainstorm examples of the dystopian genre from literature, film, television, video games, or other media. Record student answers in a second list on the board or powerpoint. Ask students to refrain from commenting on the list until it is complete.
- Open the floor to a discussion of the class-generated lists. Are there any listed genre conventions that students do not agree with? Are there any elements that should be cut from the list? Ask students to defend their answers as they offer their arguments.
- Ask students to help you draft a brief definition of the dystopian genre based on the list you have created together.

*15 minutes:* Lecture

- Provide students with a brief lecture introducing them to the history and current use of dystopias in literature.
  - The genre history for post-apocalyptic fiction is messy. It is a subgenre of speculative fiction, which is usually contained within sci-fi fiction, which itself is a part of Dystopian fiction. To get at an understanding of post-apocalyptic fiction, we are going to start with defining Dystopian fiction.
  - “Dystopia” as a term was coined in 1747 and defined as “an unhappy country.” “Dystopia” entered common usage as a term in the late twentieth century. It is

entwined with utopian literature as a genre. Gregory Claeys argues that dystopians are not inherently anti-utopian, but “grow out of existing trends towards dictatorship, economic monopoly, the degradation of the poor, or **environmental collapse.**” Dystopian literature is heavily linked with the sci-fi genre and can be both serious in tone and satirical.

- Throughout the 20th century, there were definitional controversies over what, exactly, dystopian literature is and does. Extensive literature was first produced in the 1960s on “anti-utopian literature” (to name a few more terms, reverse utopias, non-utopias, nasty utopias, pseudo-utopia). In the 60s, dystopian literature was seen as being a farewell to a utopian future that did not come to be. Post-1945, dystopian literature also expressed concerns toward the apocalypse due to atomic weapons and emerging technologies (thus, the connection between sci-fi and dystopian fiction is more firmly established). In the 70s, Alexandria Aldridge argued that dystopia is not reverse or anti-utopian, but developed a form that critiqued the Utopia. In other words, it comes out of the Utopian tradition. In the 80s we went back to anti-utopian definitions of dystopia, defining it as a “bad place” or “a non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived.”
- Connect the history of the dystopian genre to *Station Eleven*, setting up some points of comparison and contrast with the novel to be discussed at the end of class.
  - Literary dystopias can be understood as “primarily concerned to portray societies where a substantial majority suffer slavery and/or oppression *as a result of human action.*” For readers and critics of dystopian literature, many ask the following questions: 1) Are the societies depicted “worse” than our real-life society? 2) Does the work offer hope or the possibility of avoiding or alleviating negative outcomes?
  - Dystopian literature always features oppressive forces, but those forces are not always the result of direct human action in post-apocalyptic literature, which we see in *Station Eleven*. As we read through *Station Eleven* we will discuss how much the society emerges after the Georgia Flu conforms to or rejects the generic sensibilities of dystopian fiction.

#### *15 minutes:* Small-group Discussion

- Break students into small groups of 3-4 people. Ask half of the groups to quickly review Chapter 1 and the other half Chapter 12.
- Have each group answer the following questions:
  - Which genre conventions appear in your section?
  - In what ways does the text align with the convention?
  - In what ways does the text differ from the convention? What effect do those differences have?

#### *15 minutes:* Class Discussion

- Have the small groups convene to share their findings. Record the specific ways their section do or do not fit the genre conventions discussed earlier. If any new themes or conventions arise, add them to the list.

- In the last few minutes of class, ask students to return to Claeys' argument that dystopian literature often does not contain much hope. Based on what the class has read so far, does *Station Eleven* seem hopeful about a society after a devastating virus? What are the different ways some different groups respond to the crisis? What are the implications of those responses?

**Sources:**

Claeys, Gregory. *Dystopia: A Natural History*. Oxford UP, 2016.

Fuss, Diana, and William A. Gleason, editors. *The Pocket Instructor, Literature: 101 Exercises for the College Classroom*. Princeton UP, 2016.

Mandel, Emily St. John. *Station Eleven*. Picador, 2015.