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Shakespeare and Intertextuality in Station Eleven and its adaptation

Master's thesis in Language Studies with Teacher Education

Supervisor: Domhnall Mitchell

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Abstract

This thesis presents a study of intertextuality to Shakespeare's works in Emily St. John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven* and its television adaptation of the same name. Through a literary analysis with components of an adaptation analysis, the aim of the study is to understand how Shakespeare's classic plays influence the narrative structure, character development, and thematic depth in Mandel's work and the adaptation. The analysis explores the various layers of meaning that Shakespeare's texts add to the post-apocalyptic setting of *Station Eleven*, and the difference it creates in the two *Station Eleven* works.

Multiple levels of intertextuality are explored: thematic connections, character similarities, and plot parallels. The research also explores themes such as family relationships, betrayal, loss, grief, and existential angst, tracing these elements back to *King Lear* and *Hamlet* and presenting their resonance throughout *Station Eleven*.

Additionally, character parallels are analysed, such as Arthur Leander's resemblance to King Lear as a tragic hero, and the similarities between Kirsten and Cordelia, as well as Tyler and the complex title character and protagonist in *Hamlet*.

Beyond these main texts of analysis, the study also considers broader connections to other works by Shakespeare, which resonate in *Station Eleven* through themes such as the human condition. This includes examining how the narratives address universal themes such as the struggle for survival, the quest for meaning, and the impact of art and culture on human life.

Reference style: APA 7th edition, with supplementary footnotes.

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Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Possible challenges in the adaptation process	3
2.1 Length	3
2.2 Narrative and characters	5
3. Adaptation analysis history and variations	7
4. Shakespeare connections.....	9
4.1 Introduction	9
4.2 Shakespeare in the novel	11
4.2.1 <i>King Lear</i> in the novel	11
4.2.2 Tragic Hero connections.....	15
4.2.3 Connections to <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>	19
4.3 Shakespeare in the TV-series	20
4.3.1 Comparing <i>King Lear</i> and <i>Hamlet</i>	20
4.3.2 <i>Hamlet's</i> Integration in the TV Series	21
4.3.3 Metadrama and the Play-Within-a-Play.....	22
4.3.4 <i>Hamlet</i> references and visual elements	24
5. Miranda's connection to the discovery of America.....	28
6. Conclusion	30
References	32
Appendix	35

1. Introduction

In 2014, Canadian author Emily St. John Mandel released her fourth publication, a post-pandemic novel titled *Station Eleven* (Mandel, 2014). The novel received widespread recognition, securing nominations for several prestigious literary awards and winning the Arthur C. Clarke Award in 2015. In addition, *Station Eleven* was a finalist for the National Book Award and PEN/Faulkner Award, was an Amazon Best Book of the Month, and was named one of the best books of the year by more than a dozen publications. The novel's international appeal is evidenced by translation into 27 languages, as noted by the National Endowment for the Arts (2018). *Station Eleven* also gained praise from notable publications such as *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*. In her review for *The Guardian* by Justine Jordan, Mandel is praised for navigating the all-too-familiar narrative of the apocalypse in a unique way and thereby creating something new and interesting, focussing on individuals rather than a collective destiny (Jordan, 2014). Mandel's unique approach distinguishes *Station Eleven* as a standout contribution to the apocalypse genre.

The plot starts with a former A-list actor, Arthur Leander, collapsing and dying on stage while performing *King Lear*, the famous tragedy by William Shakespeare. Simultaneously, a deadly virus called "the Georgia flu" rapidly spreads worldwide. As the story progresses, the focus shifts to include various people with different roles in Arthur Leander's life. We learn how they adapt to their new post-apocalyptic reality and are afforded glimpses into their past. The narrative jumps between different timelines, including Arthur's past, the early days of the pandemic, and the twenty years after the flu. The narrative introduces "The Travelling Symphony", a troupe of actors and musicians who put on productions of Shakespeare plays. The novel weaves together different threads, exploring the interconnectedness of the characters left in the world after Leander's death on the day later known as "Day 1".

On December 16, 2021, HBO Max premiered a miniseries adaptation of *Station Eleven*, created by Patrick Somerville. The cable and streaming television network Home Box Office (HBO) is recognised as one of the Anglophone world's leading broadcasters of quality entertainment, famous for creating critically and commercially successful series such as "The Wire" (2002-2008) and "The Sopranos" (1999-2007). The TV show retained the novel's original title and consisted of 10 episodes, each ranging between 44 and 59 minutes in duration. In her review for *The Guardian* on January 30, 2022, Lucy Mangan praised the TV adaptation, awarding it four out of five stars and describing it as "deeply unsettling, even in the bits it gets wrong" (Mangan). Mangan's review touches on the contrast between the TV show and real-life experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. She emphasises the beginning of the flu in the show, noting the depiction of an empty supermarket on the first day of the pandemic. Mangan suggests that this portrayal differs from reality, arguing that long lines and chaos in supermarkets would have been more realistic. In another review, James Poniewozik of *The New York Times* describes the TV show as "[...] the most uplifting post-apocalyptic show you're likely to see" (Poniewozik, 2021). Poniewozik credits the TV show with providing catharsis in the context of the COVID-19 experience, as well as surprising moments of laughter, and his assessment is a positive one. Another review, by Emily St. James for *Vox*, notes that "Emily St. John Mandel's beloved novel should be difficult to adapt for TV," and raises the

question of how one can successfully adapt a novel with intricate connections between characters and shifting timelines to the medium of television (St. James, 2021).

2. Possible challenges in the adaptation process

The challenge of adapting a novel for television brings the need to recognise and navigate the differences between the two storytelling media to the forefront. To begin unpacking these challenges, we can look at the constituents of a novel. In the seventh edition of *Studying the Novel* (2017), Jeremy Hawthorn quotes the definition of "Novel" in the *Oxford English Dictionary*:

A fictitious prose narrative or tale of considerable length (now usually long enough to fill one or more volumes) in which characters and actions representative of the real life of past or present times are portrayed in a plot of more or less complexity.

(Hawthorn, 2017, p. 1). Hawthorn suggests that this definition might sound obvious but has some crucial points. This definition articulates that a novel usually has a narrative or tale depicting actual life elements through a double chronology. The text is usually written in prose rather than verse; it is of "considerable length", unlike a short story or a novella (Hawthorn, 2017, p. 1). Most importantly, the novel has characters, action, and a plot.

2.1 Length

"[We] feel that a novel should involve an investigation of an issue of human significance in such a manner as allows for complexity of treatment, and by common consent a certain length is necessary for such complexity" (Hawthorn, 2017, p. 9). A certain length is necessary to deal with the themes usually present in a novel, but how can it achieve this demand if the novel is adapted into another medium? When adapting a novel into another medium like television, this demand for length becomes a challenge. How can one maintain the depth of thematic exploration typically found in a novel when adapting it for television? Unlike a novel, a TV show typically follows a structure of seasons and episodes rather than volumes and chapters. Converting chapters into episodes is not a straightforward process, and the length needs to be considered in the adaptation process.

In the case of *Station Eleven*, which consists of 55 chapters, a direct one-to-one adaptation to episodes would not be possible for several reasons. The chapters in the novel vary widely in length, and TV episodes usually stick to a specific runtime. This narrative flow and pacing could be too slow for TV, as novels usually go deeper into stories and provide more detail to the narrative. One chapter that would be particularly challenging to adapt directly is Chapter 6 in the novel. This chapter spans only two pages and lacks a clear narrator (Mandel, 2014, p. 31). It begins with the words and subtitle, "An incomplete list," and continues to enumerate aspects of modern society that vanish after the pandemic, such as, "No more flight. No more towns glimpsed from the sky through airplane windows, points of glimmering light; no more looking down from thirty thousand feet and imagining the lives lit up by those lights at that moment" (Mandel, 2014, p. 31). Adapting this chapter poses challenges due to its brevity and lack of a distinct narrator. However, hints suggest that the narrator could be one of the characters familiar with the *Station Eleven* comic and particularly intrigued by space exploration. For instance, a passage from the stream of consciousness mentions, "No more spacecraft rising up from Cape Canaveral, from the Baikonur Cosmodrome, from Vandenburg, Plesetsk, Tanegashima, burning paths through the atmosphere into space" (Mandel, 2014, p. 32). This suggests that the narrator could potentially be Miranda, Tyler, or

Kirsten. Regardless, adapting this chapter would require TV series creators to determine the narrator's identity and integrate it into the storyline effectively. Given its stream-of-consciousness style rather than dialogue, it may pose a challenge in helping drive the plot forward.

To then give the novel the new structure of a TV show, one must consider how to distill the novel's essential details and nonlinear narrative into an episodic format, considering that the condensed format of a TV series allows less time for the nuanced storytelling and detailed character development found in the novel. Verbal details, details of settings, places, people, and clothing need to be portrayed with attention to the depth of the novel's world. An essential aspect of *Station Eleven* is its ability to use many different characters and timelines to drive the plot forward. The adaptation process needs a strategic approach to maintain the story's complexity while ensuring it effectively translates to the visual medium.

The portrayal of fictional events that closely mirror reality often aims to achieve a sense of realism, drawing the audience into a world that feels authentic and relatable. Although the Georgia Flu depicted in *Station Eleven* is a fictional creation, it is the only element that can be classified as "unrealistic". However, this claim invites discussion, particularly considering the uncanny parallels to the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, this attempt at achieving authenticity allows viewers to connect with the characters and emotions portrayed, facilitating a deeper exploration of the human experience, even in crisis. In the case of *Station Eleven*, where a central theme revolves around the experience of human existence, the pursuit of realism becomes particularly significant. The motto: "Survival is insufficient", borrowed from *Star Trek*, is not only written on the sides of the Travelling Symphony's lead caravan but is also tattooed on Kirsten's arm (Mandel, 2014, p. 120). This emblematic phrase encapsulates the troupe's belief in the significance of the human condition. It suggests that merely surviving is not enough for a fulfilling life. Humans seek meaning, connection, and purpose beyond mere existence. For The Travelling Symphony, art provides them with purpose, yet the friendships made, and the sense of community forged through their shared journey are equally vital.

Achieving realism in a TV series adaptation that concerns themes of human experience creates a necessity for focusing on elements that convince the audience they are witnessing real people in authentic situations. This entails authentic visuals, natural dialogue, actors who can convincingly portray characters from the novel, and faithfulness to core themes experienced by readers. A particular challenge is to translate the post-apocalyptic setting, which is vividly painted in the novel, through visual effects and depiction of the world after technology has vanished and societal order has collapsed due to the demise of most of humanity. The adaptation can vividly animate the novel's setting, leveraging visual elements to portray aspects that are challenging to convey through the constraints of television's duration. For instance, some scenes could vividly illustrate the contrast between the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic world. This could be achieved by showing the uncontrolled transformation of vegetation, how the lack of electricity changed the look of cities at night, and the noticeable change in people's appearances. The adaptation can use the power of visual storytelling to convey in seconds what might take paragraphs to describe in a novel. By selecting and adapting key elements for visual impact, the adaptation can maintain the story's complexity while accommodating the constraints of the TV format, such as its length.

Adapting a novel into a TV series, especially *Station Eleven*, can be a challenge in managing complex timelines and storylines in a format that allows for less detailed presentation of characters through narrative description, interior monologue, and dialogue. *Station Eleven* consists of an array of different characters, including Kirsten Raymonde, Arthur Leander, Miranda Carroll, Jeevan Chaudhary, Clark Thompson, Elizabeth Colton, and Tyler Leander, each contributing significantly to the narrative. However, condensing the numerous characters into a relatively short TV series creates challenges in getting to know and understand the characters in the same depth as experienced in the novel. To address this challenge, adaptation strategies may involve focusing more on certain characters while reducing the prominence of others. Alternatively, the adaptation can resort to reducing the amount of movement back and forth in time or between characters. Ultimately, the strategy must seek to balance the narrative depth and the practicalities of storytelling in a visual medium.

2.2 Narrative and characters

“Novels and shorter works of literary fiction are *narratives*: in other words, they all in some sense present readers with a ‘telling’ rather than an ‘enacting’, and this distinguishes them in an important sense from the drama” (Hawthorn, 2017, p. 6). This presents a key challenge in transitioning from the narrative-driven storytelling of the novel to the visual storytelling required for television. Subsequently, the novel *Station Eleven* differs from its adaptation in its story presentation. The challenges of adapting the novel into a TV series are similar to those encountered when transforming any narrative into a drama. One such challenge lies in translating the narrative techniques employed in the novel into visual form. An instance of such introspection occurs in Chapter 26, where Clark reflects on his life, questioning his true happiness and the trajectory of his existence: “Because he had been sleepwalking, Clark realised, moving half-asleep through the motions of his life for a while now, years; not specifically unhappy, but when had he last found real joy in his work?” (Mandel, 2014, p. 164). Without these internal reflections, the depth and complexity of the characters’ experiences risk being diminished in the televised adaptation. One effective method to maintain such introspection in the TV series is through the presence of an omniscient narrator who articulates characters’ thoughts or by allowing characters to vocalise their internal dialogue either to themselves or to another character. However, ensuring realism is essential in a TV series adaptation, necessitating convincing conversations or monologues. Creators of TV series, particularly those adapted from novels, must explore alternative avenues to convey characters’ inner thoughts, such as through dialogue, flashbacks, or visual cues like clothing choices.

Another challenge that the adaptation from novel to TV series faces is the element of character development that happens throughout the novel. Character development is immensely connected to the narrative in *Station Eleven*, which poses another challenge concerning the portrayal of this aspect in the adaptation. In an interview with *f(r)iction*, Mandel, the author of *Station Eleven*, discussed her choice of narrative style, which involves navigating between timelines and multiple characters.

It’s a structure that I’ve been using since my first novel. I find it to be an interesting way to tell a story, partly for reasons of narrative tension - you can move toward climaxes in two timelines simultaneously - and partly because it’s a structure that lends itself to very in-depth character development because you see those characters from different points of

view and at different times in their lives. I also enjoy the challenge of this type of structure. Making it work is like solving a complicated puzzle.

(Griffith, 2015). Mandel's use of multiple timelines and perspectives allows for deep character exploration, which may be difficult to convey effectively on screen within episodic constraints. If the adaptation limits the use of multiple perspectives, viewers may not experience the same depth and complexity of a character's portrayal as readers do. To make up for this narrative change, the adaptation can choose critical perspectives that are most essential to the central narrative and character development. Scenes and interactions that reveal crucial aspects of characters' personalities, motivations, and relationships can be prioritised.

3. Adaptation analysis history and variations

Julie Sanders defines adaptation studies as the “reinterpretations of established texts in new generic contexts or perhaps with relocations of an ‘original’ or source text’s cultural and/or temporal setting, which may or may not involve a generic shift” (2006, p. 19). This interdisciplinary field includes both the realms of film studies and literary studies, once perceived merely as a “hybrid” subject, but now recognised for its significant contributions to understanding the interaction between literature and other media (Cartmell & Whelehan, 2007, p. 1). Adaptation studies investigate the transformation of narratives, texts, or ideas from one medium to another. Sanders further explains that adaptation is a subset of intertextuality, involving practices that can trim or expand the original work’s scope, change its genre, offer commentary, or provide reimagination or recontextualisation (Sanders, 2006, p. 17). Adaptation serves multiple purposes, from simplifying texts for new audiences to updating them to maintain relevance, a process often seen in the adaptation of classic literature and drama for television and cinema, with Shakespeare being a notable example (Sanders, 2006, p. 19).

While the analysis of adaptation processes has always been a fundamental aspect of storytelling, it was not until the late 20th century that formal scholarly pursuits in adaptation studies began to emerge. Adaptation theories became more established in the humanities during the 1980s and gained mainstream recognition by the early 1990s, marking a shift from traditional fidelity criticism towards more nuanced approaches such as intertextuality and medium specificity (Johnson, 2017, p. 5).

Traditionally, the discourse of fidelity has dominated adaptation studies, emphasising the importance of faithful reproductions of original texts. As Linda Hutcheon notes:

For a long time, ‘fidelity criticism’, as it came to be known, was the critical orthodoxy in adaptation studies, especially when dealing with canonical works such as those of Pushkin or Dante. Today that dominance has been challenged from a variety of perspectives

(2006, p. 7). As this field has evolved, the focus on fidelity has become increasingly irrelevant. Scholars like Robert Stam note that fidelity criticism has often limited the creative potential of adaptations (2000, pp. 54-76). Similarly, Brian McFarlane argues that fidelity discourse has overshadowed more productive ways of understanding adaptations, such as through intertextuality (1996, p. 8). Instead of adhering to fidelity, this thesis explores how adaptations can offer new perspectives and insights through the concept of intertextuality.

A central component of this exploration is the concept of intertextuality, particularly how Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven*, and its TV series adaptation, integrate Shakespearean themes and works into their respective narratives. Julia Kristeva introduced the term intertextuality in her essays “Word, Dialogue, and Novel” (1966) and “The Bounded Text” (1967). She conceptualises the text as a dynamic site of relational processes and practices rather than static structures and products. Kristeva writes that the “literary word” is “an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning),” and describes the text as a dialogue among writings of the writer, the addressee, and the contemporary or earlier cultural context (1980, pp. 65-66). This

thesis will explore the complex ways *Station Eleven* incorporates Shakespearean elements, both in its original novel form and its television adaptation.

Shakespeare's works, renowned for their thematic depth and complex character portrayals, provide a rich source of intertextual material. For instance, *Station Eleven* opens with a performance of *King Lear*, which not only sets the stage for the novel but also introduces themes of power and familial conflict that resonate throughout the story. The television series, on the other hand, emphasises motifs from *Hamlet*, such as revenge, mortality, existential angst, and troubled relationships with parental figures. These choices in intertextuality are not merely displays of learning; they are integral to the narrative and thematic development of both the novel and the TV series. The different choices of Shakespearean references highlight the writer or adapters deliberate decisions in invoking specific themes and narratives. This focus on Shakespeare provides a means for understanding how the original and adapted works convey their distinct yet intertwined stories and themes.

By comparing and contrasting the original source material with its adapted form, this study will illuminate how these components are translated from text to television. This examination centres around intertextual references to Shakespeare's works and examines how they are interwoven into Emily St. John Mandel's novel *Station Eleven* and its television adaptation. The study explores how these intertextual references contribute to narrative complexity, enrich character portrayal, and evoke thematic resonance within each medium. More importantly, this thesis analyses the differences between the novel and the TV series in the use of Shakespearean themes, examining the factors that influenced these distinct choices during the adaptation process and their impact on narrative significance.

4. Shakespeare connections

4.1 Introduction

Station Eleven inhabits multiple references to Shakespeare's works, appearing both in the original novel and the adapted TV series. The references to Shakespeare are crucial to the narrative, as the plays performed by the Travelling Symphony are so significant to our understanding of the lives of the characters within the post-apocalyptic world. The intertextual references to Shakespeare are evident in how they pay homage to Shakespearean plays through performances, as well as in the shared themes and character parallels between Shakespeare's works and both versions of *Station Eleven*. Though, the utilisation of intertextual references to Shakespeare is variable across the two different iterations of *Station Eleven*. Focussing on these aspects of intertextuality to Shakespeare in the original *Station Eleven* work and its adaptation allows for a more nuanced analysis of the adaptation choices, particularly concerning the specific theme of intertextuality to Shakespeare's works.

The novel *Station Eleven* is rich with intertextual elements, even going beyond allusions. The narrative layers include a meta-narrative that alludes to a fictional comic book also titled *Station Eleven*, intertwining with the novel's complex storyline. Additionally, each character has their own storyline, which occasionally intersect with other characters', as well as movement between different timelines. This choice of complex narratives and frequent references to other works illustrates how much one can learn about the essence of this specific novel by analysing the variations between the two works in how they have chosen to change or transfer these characteristics in the adaptation. References to other works can therefore play a vital role in adaptation analysis, shedding light on how references to other works evolve during the transition from one format to another.

The enduring nature of Shakespeare's works was recognised early on by his contemporary Ben Jonson in the eulogy "To the Memory of My Beloved the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare". Jonson famously proclaimed, "He was not of an age but for all time!", claiming a universal quality to Shakespeare's writing which was then promoted in Anglophone culture for centuries afterwards. (Jonson, n.d.). In both the novel and television adaptation of *Station Eleven*, Shakespeare's plays still live on even after civilisation has collapsed. Mandel aligns herself with the notion of timelessness in an interview with Claire Luchette for the digital magazine *Bustle*, in which she explains the choice to focus on Shakespeare's works over others. She explains:

The reason I ended up going with Shakespeare is that when I was first describing this play to my husband a few years ago, he said people would want what is best about the world, which really stayed with me.

(Luchette, 2014). Consciously or unconsciously, Mandel's husband was echoing Matthew Arnold's¹ idea from 1869, that culture should involve "the best that has been thought and said in the world."² (Collini, 1993, p. 79).

Mandel views Shakespeare's plays as embodying the best of humanity, a sentiment echoed by Dieter, an actor in *Station Eleven's* Travelling Symphony, who remarks, "People want what was best about the world", referring to the pre-pandemic era (2014, p. 38). Additionally, Mandel notes that the Travelling Symphony in the story mirrors the theatrical traditions of Shakespeare's time, and Shakespeare himself lived during a period that could be considered post-pandemic, which further influenced her choice³. This connection to Shakespeare emphasises the enduring cultural significance of his works in a world grappling with collapse.

Mandel clearly subscribes to the idea that Shakespeare's plays live on even when most of humanity has perished. However, even Shakespeare recognised that this immortality was relative: "So long as men can breathe or eyes can see, So long lives this" he wrote in Sonnet 18, "Shall I compare thee to a Summer's Day" (Shakespeare, n.d., *Sonnet 18*). This can be taken even further: so long as educated, English-speaking people can read and understand literary conventions, so long lives Shakespeare. Moreover, one of the ways Shakespeare survives is through the device of intertextuality, thoroughly defined in *Studying the Novel* by Hawthorn: "A relation between two or more texts which has an effect upon the way in which the intertext (that is, the text within which other texts reside or echo their presence) is read" (Hawthorn, 2017, p. 282). By analysing how Shakespeare is referenced in the *Station Eleven* novel, one can learn more about the novel itself, by identifying and analysing what choices have been made in selecting specific plays or scenes, similarities to characters, or references in the setting. The ideas, struggles and other similarities can be examined to discover underlying themes in the two stories. What do these choices imply about the themes or characters in the novel or about the individuals who mention Shakespeare or perform his work? We can apply the same method to the adaptation: are the choices the same, and if not, what might the implication of these differences mean - for both the series and the novel?

In both *Station Eleven* works, a central storyline concerns a group of travelling actors and musicians who perform classical music and put on productions of different Shakespeare plays 20 years after the Georgia Flu. As a result, the novel naturally includes multiple references to Shakespeare's plays. In the opening of the novel, and the

¹ Matthew Arnold was an English Victorian poet and literary and social critic. Willey, B. (2024, April 11). *Matthew Arnold*. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Matthew-Arnold>

² New York Times (Section C, p. 1) interview 6 September 2014: 'It seems to me that in a post-apocalyptic scenario, people would want what was best about our lost world, and in my entirely subjective opinion, what was best about our world would include the plays of William Shakespeare' Alexandra Alter, *The World Is Ending, to the Joy of Readers*.

³ "'Then I must be thy lady.' Lines of a play written in 1594, the year London's theatres reopened after two seasons of plague. Or written possibly a year later, in 1595, a year before the death of Shakespeare's only son. Some centuries later on a distant continent, Kirsten moves across the stage [...] Shakespeare was the third born to his parents, but the first to survive infancy. Four of his siblings died young. His son, Hamnet, died at eleven and left behind a twin. The plague closed the theatres again and again, death flickering over the landscape. And now, in a twilight once more lit by candles, the age of electricity having come and gone, Titania turns to face her fairy king." (Mandel, 2014, p. 57)

TV-adaptation, as the deadly “Georgia Flu” pandemic begins to take hold, we are introduced to a central character, Arthur Leander, performing as King Lear in Shakespeare’s tragic play of the same name. This marks the final night of Arthur’s life, as he passes away from a heart attack while performing on stage. Kirsten, another central character, plays one of King Lear’s daughters. In the audience is Jeevan, another important character in the novel, who notices that Arthur is delivering the wrong lines. Drawing on his familiarity with the play, Jeevan attempts to resuscitate Arthur Leander. Both iterations of the *Station Eleven* narrative share this common starting point, yet the eventual divergence in their narratives presents an intriguing subject for analysis. First, we will delve into the Shakespearean connections within the novel, particularly focusing on the pivotal performance of *King Lear*. Then the TV series will be analysed, examining its intertextual references to Shakespeare’s works while comparing and contrasting it with the original novel.

4.2 Shakespeare in the novel

4.2.1 *King Lear* in the novel

Shakespeare’s influence in *Station Eleven* is profound, as indicated by the novel’s opening lines: “THE KING STOOD in a pool of blue light, unmoored. This was act 4 of *King Lear*, a winter night at the Elgin Theatre in Toronto” (Mandel, 2014, p. 3). The reference to “The King” not only alludes to King Lear but also to Arthur Leander, the successful actor who plays him in the production. The decision to open *Station Eleven* with a performance of *King Lear* establishes a thematic background for the novel’s narrative. The themes of relationships, family, and betrayal in *King Lear* introduce tension as readers will wonder which parallels will play out in *Station Eleven*. Throughout this analysis, the resonance of themes, characters, and narrative elements from *King Lear* within the world of *Station Eleven* will be examined. The influence of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* on *Station Eleven* becomes particularly evident through its thematic presence in Mandel’s narrative, especially in the opening scene. By analysing the shared themes, characters, and narrative elements between these two works, this study aims to uncover the intricate connections that enhance the storytelling in *Station Eleven*, thereby highlighting the enduring relevance of Shakespeare’s works.

The narrative of *Station Eleven* begins amidst the performance of Act 4, Scene 6 of *King Lear*. In this scene, Edgar, the legitimate son of Gloucester, adopts the persona of Poor Tom, a mad beggar, to conceal his identity from his blinded father, leading him to believe they are at the Cliffs of Dover. Gloucester, seeking release from his suffering, attempts suicide, but Edgar deceives him into thinking he miraculously survived a leap from the cliffs (Shakespeare, Harrison, & McDonnell, 1962, 4.6.1-80). Lear encounters Gloucester and Edgar on the heath by chance. His entrance into the scene is preceded by the stage direction “[Enter Lear, *fantastically dressed with wild flowers*]”, an unusual look for the King which signals his unstable state of mind (Shakespeare, Harrison, & McDonnell, 1962, 4.6.80-85). Lear appears unwell, speaking incoherently and ranting about adultery and women. During this part of the performance, which appears in the opening page of

the novel, Arthur speaks three lines from *King Lear*⁴: in what follows, these are represented in bold in the sequence of their presentation in the novel, and then followed (in normal font) by their immediate context in the play. Act, scene, and line numbers are provided immediately after these quotations, in parenthesis. This is to show that the lines do not follow the sequence of Shakespeare's original, and that Arthur Leander is skipping lines, and reciting them in reverse order.

Gloucester:...**Dost thou know me?**

Lear: **I remember thine eyes well enough.** Does thou squiny at me? No, do thy worst, Blind Cupid, I'll not love. (4.6.138-41)

Down from the waist they are Centaurs, (4.6.126-32)

Though women all above.

But to the girdle do the gods inherit.

Beneath is all the fiends'; there's hell, there's darkness,

There's the sulphurous pit, burning, scalding,

Stench, consumption! Fie, fie, fie! Pah! pah!

I pardon that man's life. What was thy cause? Adultery?

Thou shalt not die: die for adultery! No:

The wren goes to't, and the small gilded fly (4.6.114)

Does lecher in my sight.

This is a good example of how Mandel uses allusions. That the lines are spoken out of sequence reveals the confusion of the character playing the role, because he has suffered a heart-attack and is losing consciousness. The lines go backward in terms of their chronology in the play, and Arthur Leander is himself regressing in a way. Given how many scenes and lines Mandel could have chosen, it is interesting that she chose these. To a certain degree, each line offers insight into Arthur's complex character. The first line is about love, and over the course of the novel we learn that Arthur has married three times, and that he is in a relationship now with a woman who is about half his age. This suggests a character who is increasingly seeking to connect with youthful love. Perhaps Arthur's pursuit of younger partners reflects a desire to reclaim aspects of his own youth and innocence, seeking a connection with the person he once was, before he was burdened by the weight of his mistakes.

The second quotation, portraying women as humans from the waist up, but animal-like from the waist down, reveals a conflicting attitude within Arthur towards women. As a highly successful actor immersed in the world of fame, his view of femininity and sexuality might have become distorted over time. The metaphorical portrayal of women as divided beings could suggest a conflict within Arthur between an idealisation of their beauty and glamour versus a distaste for sexual realities. Having lived much of his life in the spotlight, where people often seek out celebrities at any cost, Arthur might have encountered women who masked their true selves to align with societal expectations or to what they believe are his standards as a celebrity. This constant exposure to superficial interactions could contribute to a skewed perception of women, where outward beauty and glamour may overshadow genuine connection and authenticity. This

⁴ The following lines are derived from a 1962 edition of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, edited by Harrison and McDonnell (4.6.115-138).

disillusionment could have led Arthur to abandon any meaningful connections due to unrealistic expectations, leaving him with a bitter and divided attitude towards women. The contrast between perceived ideals and his real-life experiences may have left him with a sense of dissatisfaction and alienation from women, ultimately shaping his divided views on femininity and relationships.

The third line concerns adultery, and Arthur repeatedly begins new relationships before he has ended others. The second and third lines are also about the consequences of physical love outside marriage: in religion, damnation to Hell; in some societies, punishment by death. Subsequently, these lines also suggest a sense of guilt, regret, and moral apprehension.

The same scene is revisited at the end of the novel, where more insights are given into Arthur's thoughts. For instance, as learned in the beginning of the novel, right before Arthur collapses, "He cradled his hand to his chest like a broken bird" (Mandel, 2014, p. 3). At the end of the novel, the significance of this movement is uncovered;

He held his hand to his chest and it seemed to him that he'd done this before, something familiar in the motion. When he was seven years old on Delano Island, he and his brother had found a wounded bird on the beach. 'The wren goes to't,' Arthur said, thinking of the bird, but to his own ears his voice sounded choked, Edgar looking at him in a way that made him wonder if he had flubbed the line, he was so light-headed now. 'The wren...'

(Mandel, 2014, p. 329). This glimpse into Arthur's mind provides context for the third line he uttered as he was collapsing, referring to "the wren". It reveals that his thoughts were not about women in this instance but rather about a childhood memory triggered by the sensation of cradling his hand to his chest, "exactly as he'd held the bird" (Mandel, 2014, p. 329). Arthur remembered the feeling of the bird's heart stopping in the palm of his hand, just like his own heart was about to. Arthur's reflection offers a glimpse into his mindset as he neared his end. As he slipped out of consciousness, Arthur's flashbacks from his childhood stress the theme of fleeting innocence. The recitation of these Shakespearean lines in his final moments, as well as the confusion of his speech, reflects Arthur's journey in life. He is confused, but also a man dealing with the consequences of his mistakes and relationships, seeking comfort in the memories of the past.

To discuss similarities and connections between *King Lear* and *Station Eleven*, we must look into the themes and characteristics of the characters in the play. *King Lear* deals with the ageing King of Britain, who wants to split his kingdom between his three daughters, on the condition that they demonstrate their love for him⁵. Two of the daughters confess, but the third one, Cordelia, refuses to make such an empty statement. Cordelia, who is also the only one who truly loves her father, is banished and disowned after she refuses to flatter him for the sake of gaining favour. The two other daughters quickly overthrow Lear, and he is left without a home, appearing to descend into madness as the plot unfolds. Simultaneously, Edmund, the "natural", or illegitimate, son of the Duke of Gloucester, and antagonist of the play, orchestrates a plot against his father and his legitimate brother, Edgar. Edmund betrays Gloucester, blinds him, and pursues political power. In the later stages, Cordelia, having married the King of France, returns with an army to reclaim Lear's kingdom. A reconciliation with her father occurs

⁵ William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. G. B. Harrison and R. F. McDonnell (1962; Harcourt, Brace & World), Act 1, Scene 1 & 2.

but is later captured and hanged in prison on Edmund's orders (Shakespeare, Harrison, & McDonnell, 1962, 5.3.255-260).

Kirsten makes another allusion to *King Lear* in the novel, reflecting on her past involvement with the play.

Twenty years earlier, in a life she mostly couldn't remember, she had had a small nonspeaking role in a short-lived Toronto production of *King Lear*. Now she walked in sandals whose soles had been cut from an automobile tire, three knives in her belt. She was carrying a paperback version of the play, the stage directions highlighted in yellow. 'Mad,' she said, continuing, 'fantastically dressed with wild flowers'

(Mandel, 2014, p. 35). Kirsten's memory of her prior involvement with the play demonstrates the enduring nature of art and underscores the importance of art in her life.

There are several themes from *King Lear* that resonate in *Station Eleven*, and among the most important are those of family relationships, betrayal, loss, and grief. These themes resonate strongly, particularly at the onset of the narrative, coinciding with the outbreak of the "Georgia Flu" pandemic. The themes of loss and grief resonate deeply in the character of Kirsten, who very much resembles the character she is hinted at playing in *King Lear*. "Earlier in the evening, three little girls had played a clapping game onstage as the audience entered, childhood versions of Lear's daughters, and now they'd returned as hallucinations in the mad scene" (Mandel, 2014, p. 3). The details of this production of the play are partially based on James Lapine's 2007 production of the play at the Public Theatre in New York City, where three little girls who played nonspeaking parts as Lear's daughters were included (Mandel, 2014, p. 335). This information is included in the Notes part, under Acknowledgements in *Station Eleven*, suggesting that Mandel was inspired by the play to the point where she had to include it in her novel. In an interview with *Bustle*, Mandel remarked on the pathos added by portraying the adult characters through the lens of their childhood, humanising their later evil deeds with a layer of sorrow (Bustle, 2014). In the novel, Kirsten is introduced only after the death of Arthur, when Jeevan takes her away to protect her from seeing what is happening on stage. Kirsten's portrayal of one of King Lear's daughters is acknowledged, although the specific character remains unspecified. However, subtle hints in the first page suggest that Kirsten may indeed be embodying the role of Cordelia. "'I remember thine eyes well enough,' Arthur said, distracted by the child version of Cordelia, and this was when it happened" (Mandel, 2014, p. 3). This establishes a point of contact between Arthur and Kirsten that is shown throughout the novel, suggesting that it was Kirsten he was distracted by as he fell onstage.

Cordelia, disowned and banished at the start of the play, loses her family, just as Kirsten does shortly after the pandemic begins. Both characters share the profound loss of Lear/Arthur, the father-figure. Kirsten, much like Cordelia, is characterised by her genuine love and loyalty, particularly towards Arthur, but also by her isolation. In the rehearsals for the play, Arthur, though unwell, is patient, kind, and supportive towards her and the two spend a lot of time together. The introduction to Kirsten in the novel occurs when Jeevan sees her on the side of the stage crying after his unsuccessful attempt at resuscitating Arthur. When Jeevan saw her, his first thought was, "Why had no one come to take her away from all this?" (Mandel, 2014, p. 6). When asked where

her mom was, Kirsten revealed that her mom would not be picking her up till eleven, and that Tanya, the “wrangler”, was the one taking care of her while she was there, although it was clear that she was not taken care of in the moment (p. 7). The absence of Kirsten’s parents on opening night suggests her need for a supportive adult figure, which Arthur briefly becomes in person, and then as an idealised figure whose past she attempts to retrace by looking for historical magazines that might mention or feature photographs of him⁶. Kirsten’s lasting thoughts about her relationship with Arthur are revealed in an interview with a journalist fifteen years after the outbreak, in which she states:

I don’t remember many details about him [...], but I’ve retained a sort of impression of him, if that makes sense. I know he was kind to me and that we had some sort of friendship, and I remember very clearly the night when he died.

(Mandel, 2014, p. 180). This quest, even 20 years later, reveals her deep sense of loyalty and love towards him.

4.2.2 Tragic Hero connections

Perhaps the most important reason for Arthur dying in the role of King Lear is that it surely invokes the generic concept of the tragic hero. The term *tragedy*, and consequently the concept of a tragic hero, is defined in the *Studying Literature* textbook:

A GENRE or MODE in which suffering and calamity are used to explore aspects of the human condition. According to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, the purpose of tragedy was to arouse pity (*eleos*) and fear (*phobos*) to induce a feeling of emotional purging (or *katharsis*) in the audience. Classical and Elizabethan tragedy typically focused on the life of a PROTAGONIST of high birth (usually a king or queen, prince or princess) who, because of a fatal TRAGIC FLAW or an error of judgement (HAMARTIA), experienced a disastrous reversal of fortune (*katastrophe*), and proceeded from happiness into suffering and even death.

(Goring, Hawthorn, & Mitchell, 2nd ed., 2010, p. 433) As a tragedy nears its end, another important element emerges: a moment of clarity or realisation on the part of the tragic protagonist about what they have done wrong, called *anagnorisis*. “Anagnorisis refers to a moment of recognition or revelation in which a character becomes aware of something significant, often accompanied by *peripeteia*, a sudden reversal of fortune for a tragic hero.” (Goring, Hawthorn, & Mitchell, 2nd ed., 2010, pp. 325, 407). The protagonists of both *Station Eleven* and *King Lear* share a common trait of high social status and catastrophic downfall due to a tragic flaw. To deepen the understanding of this parallel, the characters’ fall from grace, known as *peripeteia*, and their moments of realisation, called *anagnorisis*, will be examined.

King Lear is a classic illustration of a tragic hero, meeting the criteria outlined in *Studying Literature*. Firstly, holding the title of king makes him a protagonist of ‘high birth’, setting

⁶ In Chapter 38, Kirsten finds magazines with paparazzi pictures of two of Arthur’s ex-wives, Lydia and Miranda (Mandel, 2014, p. 200-201). Mandel very interestingly explores how some readers in real life imagine relations with the characters played by actors and derive meaning from these. In the novel, Kirsten finds magazines and pictures of Arthur in the abandoned houses she scavenges through, reflecting her fascination with his past and the characters he played. Mandel, E. S. (2014). *Station Eleven*. London: Picador.

him up for a dramatic downfall. His tragic flaw lies in his failure to discern the sincerity of his daughters' declarations of love, ultimately resulting in his descent into madness and the collapse of his kingdom. Lear's anagnorisis, the moment he realises his own fatal flaw, happens gradually throughout the play, but its start can be traced back to when he admits "my wits begin to turn", suggesting that he is beginning to see things differently than he did before (Shakespeare, Harrison, & McDonnell, 1962, 3.4.68). When Lear is reunited with Cordelia, he experiences a profound realisation (Shakespeare, Harrison, & McDonnell, 1962, 4.7.69-86). Lear is surprised and moved to discover that Cordelia has no ill intentions towards him despite his past mistreatment of her. This realisation marks a turning point in his understanding of love, loyalty, and familial relationships. He becomes aware of his past wrongdoings and grapples with the consequences of his actions. His ultimate fall from grace and his profound awareness of his mistakes culminates towards the end of the story when Cordelia is imprisoned and hanged on Edmund's orders, and he arrives too late to intervene (Shakespeare, Harrison & McDonnell, 1962, 5.3.255-259). Lear's despair and regret are deeply felt in Act 5, Scene 3, lines 304-311:

Lear: And my poor fool is hanged! No, no, no life!
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life
And thou no breath at all? Thou'lt come no more,
Never, never, never, never, never!
Pray you, undo this button. Thank you, sir.
Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips,
Look there, look there! [Dies.]

In Lear's final moments, his regret at Cordelia's fate and the consequences of his own actions illustrate the tragedy inherent in his character, ultimately leading to his death from heartache. This portrayal has established Lear as a classic tragic hero.

Arthur Leander diverges from the archetype of a tragic hero in some ways. He is not a king, a prince, or a general, but he does achieve a high degree of social status through his success as an actor. Though, interestingly, he bears the name of a legendary King⁷. Arthur, a legendary British King, is often linked with the Round Table of chivalrous Knights and the theme of the Holy Grail, along with other elements of the mediaeval quest narrative. However, Arthur Leander does not benefit much from this association. If anything, he appears more akin to the figure of Lancelot, whose adulterous affair with Arthur's queen, Guinevere, resulted in the downfall of his quest. Additionally, parallels may be drawn between King Arthur's advisor, Merlin, and Arthur Leander's friend, Clark Thompson, both wise and compassionate figures in their respective tales. Arthur was born on the fictional Delano Island on the coast of Canada, without fame or fortune. When questioned by a journalist about his romantic involvement with Miranda Carroll, he explains that they grew up in the same place, "It's not a hometown, actually, it's a home island. 'It's the same size and shape as Manhattan,' Arthur tells people at parties all his life, 'except with a thousand people'" (Mandel, 2014, p. 72). However, in modern interpretations of the tragic hero, one could argue that a famous actor at the pinnacle of his career would surpass conventional notions of 'high birth'. Today, film stars are given a unique status in society resembling modern-day royalty. As learned throughout the novel, Arthur is the focus of interest from magazines, paparazzi, journalists, and fans.

⁷ Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2024, April 15). *King Arthur*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/King-Arthur>

For instance, when Jeevan, working as a paparazzo, keeps Arthur and Miranda's home under surveillance, it showcases the intense public interest in their lives (Mandel, 2014, p. 101). Although Arthur was now less famous than he had been, his life was still interesting to others, especially because of his latest divorce caused by his wife, Lydia, cheating on him with a director (Mandel, 2014, p. 9). It is the complications in the lives of media royalty, their faults and frailties, that are fascinating.

Arthur's character reveals elements reminiscent of a modern tragic hero, additionally marked by his series of mistakes in life, despite his good intentions. His personal setbacks and challenges are often caused by his own tragic flaw, which is his inclination to pursue younger women, often to the extent of leaping into new relationships before existing ones had ended. This pattern of behaviour not only tarnishes his own reputation but strains his relationships with other people. This flaw is exemplified by the dissolution of three marriages. Arthur is involved in an ongoing affair with Tanya, who is responsible for the children portraying his character's daughters, even on the night of his death. This flaw also extends to other relationships in his life, such as a strained relationship with his son, and a noticeable shift in personality leading to a growing distance from his friend, Clark.

King Lear is the role of a lifetime, although it is often reserved for men of a certain age. Arthur was 51 when he got the role, but many others have been even older. If Hamlet is seen as the role that younger actors aspire to, Lear is more the crowning glory: Laurence Olivier was in his late 70s when he played Lear in 1983⁸, Ian McKellen was 79 when he took the role in 2018⁹, Jonathan Pryce was 65 when he featured in 2012¹⁰. The role of Lear signifies an important achievement, an affirmation of maturity, experience, and mastery of the craft. Arthur landing this role at 51 establishes him as a highly acclaimed and respected actor in his own right. Clearly, his fame is at a peak with this role, likely paralleling his financial success, but his personal relationships and his health are at an all-time low. Arthur's failure to recognise what is truly important to him in time, and losing contact with his son, represents his fall as a tragic hero. The ultimate consequence of his flaw is, of course, his death.

In many ways Arthur shares similarities with Lear, a character intoxicated by power and consumed by ego, whose self-centred actions harm those closest to him and drive them away, like Lear does with Cordelia. It is only when Arthur is facing death that he confronts the emptiness of his existence and tries to make amends. The first sign of Arthur's recognition of his own flaw, anagnorisis, happens after remembering a fight he had with his first wife, Miranda, years ago and this recollection happens while he was on stage as King Lear, waiting for the crowd to roll in while he sat contemplating the division of his kingdom. "Years later in Toronto, on the plywood second storey of the *King Lear* set, the words clarified the problem. He found he was a man who repented almost everything, regrets crowding in around him like moths to a light" (Mandel, 2014, p. 327). He continues in this state of mind to list every regret in his life concerning his relationships to Miranda, Elizabeth, Lydia, Tyler, his friends, and his brother¹¹. He

⁸ Elliott, M. (Director). (1983). *King Lear* [Film]. Granada Television.

⁹ Munby, J. & MacGibbon, R. (Directors). (2018). *National Theatre Live: King Lear* [Film]. Richard Price TV Associates Ltd.

¹⁰ Attenborough, M. (Director). (2012). *King Lear* [Film]. British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).

¹¹ "If Miranda was so unhappy in Hollywood, why hadn't he just taken her away from there? It wouldn't have been difficult. The way he'd dropped Miranda for Elizabeth and Elizabeth for Lydia

realised his mistakes at the end of his life and was starting to become more human again. This was exemplified by a reunion with Miranda, and a plan to change his ways by moving to Israel after he was done playing *King Lear*, to be closer to his son (Mandel, 2014, p. 317). Much like Lear's desire to give up his kingdom, Arthur also felt the need to leave behind his old life to be with his child.

The moments of self-discovery and acknowledgement of mistakes are key elements in Lear's character arc, and Lear and Arthur's character arcs are very similar relating to this aspect. Arthur Leander does not have all the *literal* characteristics of the ideal tragic hero, but the intertextual references to *King Lear* and the overlaps between the two characters offer depth to the tragic themes of the novel. The novel opens with the death of Arthur, and the intertwining narrative with *King Lear* serves as a foreshadowing element, offering glimpses into the trajectory of Arthur's life as the narrative moves through time. This connection to *King Lear* subtly foreshadows Arthur's fall from grace as an anchoring element in the narrative of *Station Eleven*.

Additionally, another element of intertextuality with Shakespeare is encountered through the father-son dynamic present in both *King Lear* and *Station Eleven*. The relationship between the Earl of Gloucester and his illegitimate son in *King Lear*, has thematic parallels to the relationship between Arthur Leander and his son Tyler from his second marriage to Elizabeth Colton. Edmund is bitter towards his father for failing to acknowledge him, a sentiment that echoes in *Station Eleven* and plays an important role in driving the plot forward. This parallels the bitterness that Tyler Leander feels toward his father, exemplified by Tyler adopting "The Prophet" as his alter ego and becoming a cult leader who believed that the flu occurred for a divine reason and that those who survived were morally "chosen" people. The similarities here are subtle: Edmund is bitter because, as the natural or illegitimate son, the bastard, he has no rights of inheritance. Tyler comes to believe that he has a divine right to power and leadership. The actions of both Edmund and Tyler compensate in similarly violent ways for the lack of acknowledgement at the hands of their father.

In a way, Edmund hates for his father for not acknowledging him, and his plot to revenge himself against his "legitimate" brother Edgar, has connections to the relationship between Arthur, Tyler, and Kirsten. While Arthur mentored Kirsten during rehearsals for the performances of *King Lear*, Tyler was on the other side of the world desperate for attention and acknowledgement:

'Why are you calling?' That suspicious little voice. He remembered that Tyler was angry with him. 'I wanted to say hello.' 'Then why aren't you here for my birthday?' Arthur had promised to be in Jerusalem for Tyler's birthday, but he'd made that promise ten months ago and had frankly forgotten about it until Tyler had called him yesterday. Arthur's apologies hadn't landed.

(Mandel, 2014, pp. 323-324). Birthdays are, of course, emotionally charged events for children, but the first one with double digits is perhaps especially significant, as many children regard it with pride, as a kind of milestone. That Arthur could forget his son's

and let Lydia slip away to someone else. The way he'd let Tyler be taken to the other side of the world. The way he'd spent his entire life chasing after something, money or fame or immortality or all of the above. He didn't even know his only brother. How many friendships had he neglected until they'd fizzled out?" (Mandel, 2014, p. 327).

birthday, and the promise he had made, is not his finest hour, and undermines, or exists in the tension with, process of self-insight marked by thoughts such as “He wanted to call his son, but it was four a.m. in Israel (Mandel, 2014, p. 319) and “He didn’t want anything except his son” (Mandel, 2014, p. 322).

In both *King Lear* and *Station Eleven*, the characters of the Earl of Gloucester and Arthur Leander both shape the narrative through their actions, resulting in consequences for their children. In both stories, the feelings of disapproval by their father set off a chain of events that were marked by betrayal and revenge towards the character of the “sibling”.

4.2.3 Connections to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*

Throughout the novel, the Travelling Symphony put on performances of a range of different Shakespeare plays, although none of them serve as great importance to meanings of underlying themes or characters, as *King Lear*. Following a twenty-year leap after the outbreak of the pandemic, the Travelling Symphony’s first performance portrayed in the novel is Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a comedy. After discussing which play to perform after rehearsing *King Lear* all week, the troupe lands on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, proposed by the troupe’s director, as “[...] the evening calls for fairies” (Mandel, 2014, p. 44). The Travelling Symphony performs out of desire rather than necessity, allowing them to select plays based on mood or the troupe’s preferences. This approach implies that the selection of plays reflects the characters’ perceptions of the world and the society in which they reside. At this point in time, the Travelling Symphony is collectively more content with the state of the world as two decades have passed, and they all wish to do something positive that can give them normalcy and a taste of how the world once was. The choice of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* to be the first play performed by the troupe in the narrative can be said to suggest an attempt by the characters to keep their lives and the lives of others as light-hearted as possible.

But, again, Mandel can be said to be drawing on dramatic connections that are both general and specific. To begin with, a comedy has a happy ending, and the novel seems poised between the often Arcadian world of the comedy and the stormy, dark, one of the tragic *King Lear*. More particularly, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is largely set in nature, mostly in the forest, as is *Station Eleven*. Though this is often idealised, for example in the magical love scene between Titania and Bottom in Act 3, Scene 1, it is also chaotic and confusing, with the four main characters struggling to understand each other (Shakespeare, n.d., *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*). This choice could serve to explain Kirsten’s dynamics with her fellow cast members. For instance, she mentions the difficulty of maintaining eye contact with the character Sayid, playing Oberon, while she was playing Titania. This is because they had been a couple for two years until he cheated on her (Mandel, 2014, p. 45). So, there are echoes of Titania’s complex relationship with Oberon in the lives of the actors playing them, giving the choice of roles an added tension. In this way the novel resonates with both the general and specific themes of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

4.3 Shakespeare in the TV-series

In *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Adaptation Studies*, Yvonne Griggs looks at the term “re-vision” coined by Adrienne Rich, and considers how important it is to the act of critically examining and reinterpreting earlier texts with new insights (2016, p. 7). Julie Sanders further elaborates on revision in adaptation, stating, “Adaptation is frequently involved in offering commentary on a source text. This is achieved most often by offering a revised point of view from the ‘original’, adding hypothetical motivation, or voicing the silenced and marginalized” (Sanders, 2006, p. 18-19). However, Sanders adds that this is not always the case, and adaptations can have other motivations to change the content. But in the case of re-vision, looking back at older texts, the ideas and values present in them can be challenged and changed in the new form. Revisions do not need to undergo a medium transition, unlike adaptations, and they have the liberty to alter the original text without the obligation to preserve its “essence”. Griggs explains the concept of canonical texts, works that permeate our culture, and argues that a layering process takes place with them over time, in which other interpretations, adaptations, and responses to the original text create layers of intertextuality (2016, p. 41). An example of canonical texts which have been re-visioned is Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* by Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The Rhys novel and other works are described as being haunted by *Jane Eyre* and, in turn, haunting it, as they refract and re-vision the thematic concerns of Brontë’s novel through the “creative prism” of adaptation (Griggs, 2016, p. 41). Through her novel, Rhys seeks to contribute to the feminist and colonial discourses that have come to be applied to *Jane Eyre* in the historical process of its reading by others. It serves as an adaptation that reshapes the perception of the characters and politics of *Jane Eyre* (Griggs, 2016, p. 42).

The decision to shift the focus from one Shakespeare play to another in the transition from the novel to the TV series (from *King Lear* to *Hamlet*) can be considered a revisionist choice. By incorporating elements from *Hamlet* instead of *King Lear*, the TV series revises the novel’s approach to using Shakespearean themes to some degree. The question that arises is whether the decision is driven by a desire to revise the work and challenge the ideas embedded in the novel, or if it is simply a creative choice made for other reasons. The TV series reinterprets the narrative themes and character dynamics of *Station Eleven* through the lens of *Hamlet*, offering a fresh perspective on the story for viewers. In considering this change, it is not perceived as a critical “re-vision” similar to that of *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but more as a way to connect to a younger audience.

4.3.1 Comparing *King Lear* and *Hamlet*

King Lear is a play about ageing fathers, while *Hamlet* is one of youth, tragedy, adolescent love, and troubled relationships with parents. As Arthur’s character undergoes a reduction of relevance in the TV adaptation, the intricate themes associated with *King Lear* likewise lose their relevance, justifying the decision to shift focus towards *Hamlet*. Additionally, *Hamlet* is a well-known Shakespeare play, which might be more identifiable for a younger audience. Some of its storyline is repeated in other works, for instance, in the 2022 film *The Northman*, where the protagonist’s father is murdered by an uncle who then marries his mother: the protagonist is a prince called Amleth. *Hamlet* has become

so ingrained in popular culture that its themes and characters are widely recognised and understood, possibly a more accessible Shakespeare play to include in the TV series. This integration is exemplified by numerous contemporary improvisations on the play's story, including several versions explicitly designed for children.

In the novel, Arthur Leander is a central character, both in the sense that the novel begins and ends with him, but also because many of the characters have a deep and complex relation to him (three wives, a son, a friend, a fellow actor, a journalist/medic), and because he is the character whose life is most closely followed, from childhood to death, chapter one to fifty-three. Arthur's last performance in *King Lear* is also portrayed at the beginning of the *Station Eleven* TV series. The same Shakespeare play is depicted, and the familiar characters are introduced; however, this new format has reduced the connections between the original Shakespeare play and the *Station Eleven* TV series. In the novel, Arthur Leander is the centrepiece who ties all the storylines and characters together. In the TV series, he serves as more of a catalyst for the characters as they navigate the post-pandemic world. A significant reduction in his role allows for an expanded and more in-depth focus on the relationship between Jeevan and Kirsten. In the novel, Jeevan and Kirsten part ways after a brief encounter, while the TV adaptation continues to focus on their relationship. This extension is caused by Kirsten's desperate need to seek refuge with Jeevan, as her parents were missing as the chaos of the pandemic began. In the first episode of the series, *Wheel of Fire*, Jeevan walks Kirsten to the Chicago "L" after the play's dramatic ending. This responsibility typically falls to Tanya, who, on this occasion, has left with Arthur in the ambulance (Somerville & Murai, 2021, 7:30).

4.3.2 Hamlet's Integration in the TV Series

With Arthur's role reduced, there is less need for the tragic arc that underpins his career, and *Hamlet* gains a more prominent role in the TV series. The narrative in *Hamlet* is a familiar one, even to those who have not read it: it concerns the protagonist of the same name, the Prince of Denmark, Young Hamlet, and his quest for vengeance after the murder of his father, Old Hamlet, The King of Denmark. The deceased King returns as a ghost, revealing to young Hamlet that his uncle, Claudius, was the perpetrator behind the murder. Claudius usurps the throne following the death of the King and marries young Hamlet's mother, Queen Gertrude. Hamlet embarks on a mission to avenge his father's death, leading to a series of violent events (Shakespeare, 2003, *Hamlet*).

In an attempt to expose Claudius, Young Hamlet stages a play-within-the-play called *The Mousetrap*. This narrative technique, known as metadrama, is a significant element in the TV series, adding layers of complexity and intrigue to the storyline. However, his plan backfires, resulting in the deaths of several characters close to him, including his love interest Ophelia (Shakespeare, 2003, 4.7.163-172) and his mother Gertrude (Shakespeare, 2003, 5.2.267-290). Over the course of the *Station Eleven* TV series, *Hamlet* is staged three times. First, in episode 2, "A Hawk from a Handsaw", the play is performed at St. Deborah by the Water with Kirsten cast as Hamlet, coinciding with her encounter and subsequent confrontation with David, later revealed to be Tyler Leander, also known as "The Prophet" (Somerville & Podeswa, 2021, 24:08). Then, when the Travelling Symphony visits Pingtree, the troupe performs a modernised version of *Hamlet* set in 1990s USA, with Alex, a young girl who was born after the outbreak of the pandemic, cast as the titular character. The unusual modernisation of the play is due to accusations of the troupe being close-minded in episode 4, "Rosencrantz and

Guildestern are not Dead" (Cuse & Shaver, 2021, 18:09). Finally, in the series finale, "Unbroken Circle", performed at the Severn City Airport, Tyler is persuaded by Kirsten to take on the role of Hamlet, with Elizabeth, his mother, portraying Gertrude (Somerville & Podeswa, 2022, 26:42). Arthur's old friend Clark is cast as Claudius with Kirsten as director. Here, they are accentuating what Aristotle thought was the primary purpose of tragedy for its *audience*, catharsis: "through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions."¹² However, in the TV series, catharsis extends beyond the audience to the *characters*. Tyler utilises the character of Claudius, embodied by Clark, as a vessel for his pent-up anger towards Arthur and his mother, Elizabeth. With Elizabeth portraying Gertrude, the play becomes a catalyst for Tyler to confront the deep-rooted resentments of his past. While paying homage to *Hamlet*, the actors discover an unexpected alignment with their characters, giving the final performance a personal resonance and purpose.

4.3.3 Metadrama and the Play-Within-a-Play

The Mousetrap in *Hamlet* exemplifies Shakespeare's skilful use of the play-within-a-play, a distinctive trait of metadrama, which adds a layer of complexity to the narratives in his works. Metadrama, previously called metatheatre, was a term coined by Lionel Abel in his work *Metatheatre* in 1963 (Hornby, 1986, p. 31). However, Abel's book is described by Richard Hornby as a collection of only loosely connected essays. It only partially addresses the concept of metadrama, and not to a satisfactory extent, partially because of its lack of a proper definition (Hornby, 1986, p. 31). In *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception* (1986), Richard Hornby attempts a fuller definition of metadrama: "Briefly, metadrama can be defined as drama about drama; it occurs whenever the subject of a play turns out to be, in some sense, drama itself. There are many ways in which this can occur" (p. 31). Hornby deems "the play within the play" to be one variety of overt metadrama and uses *Hamlet* as an example of a type of play within a play, which Hornby calls "the inset type", in which the play within the play is set apart from the main action. This "inset type" is opposed to the type where the play within the play is the "main action", while the outer play is the framing device (Hornby, 1986, p. 33).

The concept of a play-within-a-play is pertinent to both the novel and the adaptation of *Station Eleven*. One of the most prominent examples in the novel is the performance of *King Lear* at the very beginning of the story. While the impact is reduced in the TV series, the performance's significance as an element of metafiction still stands. As the play unfolds on stage, Arthur suddenly collapses, and the character Jeevan breaks the fourth wall by intervening to administer CPR, attempting to save Arthur's life (Somerville & Murai, 2022, 2:48). This powerful scene exemplifies the concept of metafiction through blending the boundaries between fiction and reality. In addition to the prominent example of the *King Lear* performance, the TV series also incorporates other, perhaps more subtle, instances of metafiction.

However, the play-within-a-play structure is also apparent through the inclusion of another work within both the novel and the TV series, titled *Station Eleven*. In the novel,

¹² Encyclopaedia Britannica. (2024, February 18). *Tragedy*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/art/tragedy-literature>

there are two comic books: *Station Eleven* and *Dr. Eleven*¹³. In the TV series, this is simplified to a single comic book, *Station Eleven*¹⁴. For clarity and consistency with the terminology most frequently used by the characters, this work will be referred to as a “comic book” or “comic.” This comic book is a significant part of the plot in both the novel and the TV series, with an arguably more enhanced role in the TV series. The comic book is made by Arthur’s first wife, Miranda Carroll, who gives Arthur two copies of the comic book, which he hands on to Kirsten and Tyler before his death (Houston & Murai, 2021, 36:50). This comic book makes a significant impact on the two children in different ways. It shapes many of their choices, even as adults.

Additionally, while Kirsten is staying with Jeevan and his brother Frank in the latter’s apartment, she comes up with a plan to stage a play. Loosely based on one of the scenes in the comic book *Station Eleven* (Steele & Tcherniak, 2021, 35:18). Jeevan, Frank, and Kirsten live in the apartment together for a year until decreasing food supplies and increasing security threats force them to venture into the outside world in search of safety. However, Kirsten demands that they stay in the apartment until her play has been performed. An intruder kills Frank before they can escape - though, the fact is that he refused to give up a home he was supposedly leaving suggests that he never intended to go. (Steele & Tcherniak, 2021, 39:30).

The usage of the play-within-a-play is also evident in the three performances of *Hamlet* in the TV series, showing the audience connections between themes in both works, creating tension as to how these similarities might be followed through as the series develops. The first performance of *Hamlet* in *Station Eleven* happens in the second episode of the series. We are shown the performance from the play’s beginning, unlike *King Lear*’s dramatisation, where the narrative starts in Act 4, Scene 6. Kirsten plays the role of Hamlet, while Alex, born after the pandemic, as Ophelia.

As the performance of *Hamlet* has started, the newly hired actor Dan expresses his doubts about acting as Gertrude backstage. In response, Kirsten recalls her first acting lesson with Arthur Leander, sharing his advice, “It’s not about you” (Somerville & Podeswa, 2021, 24:31). Additionally, Kirsten remarks, “So you’re Gertrude, and you are, but your concern is your son, Hamlet. You put all your focus on me and it’ll free you up. I promise.” (Somerville & Podeswa, 2021, 25:00) In this line, Kirsten clarifies to viewers that she will be playing the role of Hamlet, while Dan is portraying Gertrude, and thus alerts us to how personally relevant the themes of anger, familial discord, and tension might be for her. When Gertrude and Hamlet are together on stage, flashbacks to Kirsten’s past are shown, from her time with Frank and Jeevan. “Thou know’st ‘tis common; all that lives must die, Passing through nature to eternity,” says Gertrude, and the scene immediately cuts to young Kirsten reading SMS-texts from her mom and dad (Shakespeare, 2003, 1.2.72, Somerville & Podeswa, 2021, 27:08). This constitutes a direct correlation between the character Hamlet and Kirsten, evincing shared experiences of parental absence, melancholic disposition, and emotional upheaval. Kirsten, just like Hamlet, not only acts out her grief but feels it, too. After Hamlet’s speech about deep grief, the scene cuts to young Kirsten showing Jeevan the SMS-texts she received from

¹³ “The comics Arthur Leander gave her: two issues from a series no one else in the Symphony has ever heard of, *Dr. Eleven*, Vol I, No. 1: *Station Eleven* and *Dr. Eleven*, Vol I, No. 2: *The Pursuit*.” (Mandel, 2014, p. 42).

¹⁴ (Houston & Murai, 2021, 5:09)

her mother, which reads as follows: "The body of the owner of this phone is located in the morgue at Lakeview Memorial Hospital. Do not come here." (Somerville & Podeswa, 2021, 29:26). Throughout the episode, references to Arthur Leander, Kirsten's parents, and her past with Frank and Jeevan underscore the theme of parental loss and longing from *Hamlet*. All of Kirsten's traumatic memories are brought back while performing *Hamlet*. Earlier in the episode, Sayid, Kirsten's ex-boyfriend, asks if she had been at the cabin, referencing the cabin Kirsten and Jeevan stayed in after leaving Frank's apartment. Sayid's question suggests that Kirsten usually looks for Jeevan when she is in the area, indicating the eventual separation of the two almost 20 years earlier. Using the play-within-a-play trope in this context establishes Kirsten's connection and feelings toward other people. It sets the scene for the continuation of what happens in both year 20 and the flashbacks to previous years.

4.3.4 Hamlet references and visual elements

The title of Episode 2, "A Hawk from a Handsaw", also comes from *Hamlet*, more specifically from Act 2, Scene 2, line 403, when Hamlet utters: "I am but mad north-north-west. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw." (Shakespeare, 2003, 2.2.403). Being able to tell a hawk from a handsaw suggests an ability to detect deception, hinting at a character's skill in seeing through false appearances. It foreshadows themes of deceit and eventual revelation in *Hamlet* and the TV series *Station Eleven*. The episode features the first encounter between Kirsten and "David", Arthur's son by Arthur Leander, who is later revealed to be Tyler Leander, the prophet. This deception, along with Kirsten's sceptical scrutiny, may be what the title alludes to. In this episode, Kirsten is given a knife by another character and remarks, "This likes me well" (Somerville & Podeswa, 2021, 19:10), quoting Act 5, Scene 2 of *Hamlet* (Shakespeare, 2003, 5.2.237). This quotation is an example of a reference to Shakespeare's works that could easily go unnoticed by viewers, demonstrating the depth of both obvious allusions to Shakespeare's works and the subtle, well-crafted inclusions of his words. Kirsten's comment further cements the thematic link between her character and Shakespeare's Prince of Denmark. This line, spoken by Hamlet when preparing for the final confrontation, mirrors Kirsten's readiness to face her challenges head-on, armed literally and metaphorically with the tools she needs. Kirsten's comment creates a palpable tension between *Hamlet* and *Station Eleven*. *Hamlet*, known for having one of the bloodiest endings of any Shakespeare play because of its revenge plot, casts a dark shadow over the series, heightening suspense and anticipation, leaving the audience to wonder if a similar fate awaits the characters in *Station Eleven*. Kirsten's reference to *Hamlet* amplifies this tension, drawing viewers deeper into the narrative as they question whether the series will follow a tragic trajectory or offer a glimmer of hope amidst the chaos.

A difference in the connections to Shakespeare between the novel and the TV series is the heightened focus on preparation, stage, setting, and costumes for the performance in the TV series. In episode 2 of the series, Kirsten is dressed as Hamlet in an unusual and striking costume made from old, black parka sleeves sewn to a jacket, with a red hood and orange makeup around her eyes, which are connected by a line over the bridge of her nose (Somerville & Podeswa, 2021, 24:24). In the same episode, earlier in the day, multiple comments are made concerning props for the play. Someone in the background asks if anyone wants to go on a prop hunt (Somerville & Podeswa, 2021, 4:04) and,

later, Kirsten asks Alex if she wants to go on a prop hunt with her, which they do (Somerville & Podeswa, 2021, 9:33). This focus on preparations for the play suggests the importance of planning and creating the visual elements in the performances for the Travelling Symphony, but also makes us much more aware of the importance of *Hamlet* for the series, as well as drawing our attention to visual elements more generally. Another subtle reference to *Hamlet* that mainly relies on the visual element happens in episode 7, called "Goodbye, my Damaged Home". In the previous episode, Kirsten left the Travelling Symphony to find and confront The Prophet and his child army for killing their former director, Gil. She finds him, but her plan to kill him is ultimately stopped by the greater threat of the Travelling Symphony becoming prisoners at the Museum of Civilization (McCaron & Shaver, 2021, 23:05). Tyler convinces Kirsten to follow him to the Museum of Civilization to find her friends, on the condition that she sneaks him in, pretending to be an actor in the troupe. On the way there, they are attacked by a group called the Red Bandanas (McCaron & Shaver, 2021, 39:55). Kirsten is hit by poisoned darts, causing her to hallucinate, which marks the opening of the next episode, in which she talks to her younger self (Steele & Tcherniak, 2021, 0:25). Delirious, Kirsten relives her last days in the apartment with Jeevan and Frank. She talks to herself as a child and watches over her previous interactions with the ones who took care of her for a year after the pandemic killed her parents. She tries to change some of the things she regrets, for example, asking her younger self not to perform the play, saying that "you leave one day too *late*", but ultimately, she realises that "This wasn't your fault. This is just what happened" as she tells young Kirsten. Eventually, young Kirsten and Jeevan are seen leaving the apartment (Steele & Tcherniak, 2021, 47:30), marking a shift from the last time Kirsten saw the apartment to the present. Still drugged and visibly hurt (we see dark blood vessels gradually moving up her arm), adult Kirsten witnesses the apartment change in appearance from how it was when she last saw it to how it is now. Then Kirsten walks into Frank's bedroom and looks at his skeletal remains on the bed (Steele & Tcherniak, 2021, 48:20). Finally, she says goodbye to her old friend. This scene echoes one of the most famous scenes in *Hamlet*, Act 5, Scene 1, in which young Hamlet holds the skull of Yorick, the court jester from his childhood, not long after he has learned of Ophelia's death (Shakespeare, 2003, 5.1.152-209). Like Hamlet reflecting on the fragility of life and the inevitability of death while holding Yorick's skull, Kirsten's farewell to her old friend in the TV series evokes similar themes of mortality and loss. These themes resonate deeply within the character of Hamlet, perhaps especially in Act 3, Scene 1 of the play, famously introduced by the phrase "to be or not to be" (Shakespeare, 2003, 3.1.56-89). In *Hamlet's* timeless soliloquy, the question "to be or not to be" echoes the existential themes central to the play and *Station Eleven*. The Travelling Symphony embodies this struggle for meaning in a post-apocalyptic world, where their motto underscores their pursuit of a purpose beyond mere existence. In a way, the Symphony answers Hamlet's existential question with their motto, "survival is insufficient". Just as *Hamlet* grapples with life's uncertainties, the Symphony confronts its existential dilemmas, continuing with courage and conviction, seeking significance amidst chaos. This motto is also the name of the sixth episode of the series, marking its importance (McCarron & Shaver, 2021).

Kirsten's hallucination and flashback to her time in the apartment with Jeevan and Frank relies primarily on visuals and symbolism without seeking to advance the plot. However, this scene reveals a great deal about the characters, their relationships, Kirsten's desires to change the past, and the closure she seeks. The meaning conveyed through these visual elements creatively bridges the novel's complex narrative and temporal shifts with

the visual strengths of the television medium. In addition, the costumes, music, and scenography—the essential visual elements in *Station Eleven*—along with the dramatisation and vocal expression of emotions, replace the descriptions of characters' thoughts that are typically found in prose fiction. These elements collectively create a vivid and convincing experience, translating the characters' introspection into tangible and expressive performances.

That the comic book holds significant resonance for characters like Miranda, Frank, Tyler, and Kirsten, is a leitmotif of the TV series. Each of these characters harbours a deep connection to the comic book, and for some, it borders on obsession. What binds these characters is their shared experience of enduring traumatic events that have profoundly shaped their lives. Miranda experienced the trauma of her family dying when she was a child, as revealed in Episode 10 when Miranda and her colleague Jim are sitting together in her hotel room after being infected by the virus (Somerville & Podeswa, 2022, 13:50). Jim reacts with surprise at Miranda having made the comic *Station Eleven*, and Miranda answers "I started the day my family died" (Somerville & Podeswa, 2022, 14:00). Miranda has a short flashback to herself as a child drawing something similar to a hurricane, which echoes later in the episode when she hears the name "Hugo" (Somerville & Podeswa, 2022, 15:20). We are shown another flashback to the same day, where a TV is displayed, showing a hurricane with the name "Hugo" on the news, also displaying the words "There is no rescue mission", suggesting that it was the hurricane that killed her family. This is confirmed later when she is trying to convince the pilot of a plane with infected people to not let them out, while telling him about her family who passed away and echoing the words "There is no rescue mission" (Somerville & Podeswa, 2022, 41:00). This trauma is ultimately what spurs Miranda to help the people in the airport by stopping the people in the infected plane from entering. The visuals in this scene are crucial to the portrayal of past traumas.¹⁵

Tyler and Kirsten also have trauma, both connected to familial bonds. In that way, and others, they are connected to *Hamlet*. Both of them use the *Station Eleven* comic to deal with their trauma, but they derive different meanings from it. Tyler is angry and resentful and creates a cult-like child army, while Kirsten maintains her connections to the past by finding historical magazines that mention or have pictures of Arthur, and she holds on to art and its enduring power in the post-pandemic world. One reason they derive different meanings from the comic might be because they had different experiences while reading it. Tyler only had the comic for a short while since it is given by Miranda to Arthur in Episode 3, in his dressing room (Steele & Tcherniak, 2021, 4:35). Tyler receives the comic from Elizabeth in Episode 5 (Jefferson & Tcherniak, 2021, 34:00), and he reads the comic book for a month while in quarantine in a private plane with Elizabeth after he was in contact with a possibly infected person. Elizabeth even remarks: "You haven't looked up from that thing in three weeks. What are you doing?" and Tyler is shown with his eyes closed, whispering to himself repeatedly, "There is no before." (Jefferson & Tcherniak, 2021, 41:13). After their quarantine, Tyler overhears hurtful conversations about him, and he is shown walking out to the infected plane holding a container full of a flammable substance and is then seen sitting in the plane with his *Station Eleven* comic copy, and a

¹⁵ Frank is also affected by a traumatic experience with an injured hip caused by war trauma, and the lasting effects of this trauma is signalled through his continued use of heroin, which is shown in Episode 7 when flushing it down the drain before Jeevan and Kirsten arrive at his apartment (Steele & Tcherniak, 2021, 4:50).

lighter which he flicks on and off (Jefferson & Tcherniak, 2021, 45:50). Then, Tyler sets fire to the plane and is seen hiding by the burning aeroplane without the copy of *Station Eleven* in his hands, suggesting that he used this copy to set the aeroplane on fire, or that he left without it (Jefferson & Tcherniak, 2021, 49:10-50:35). Tyler experienced the trauma of “losing” his father in a sense, and he coped with his trauma¹⁶ by immersing himself in the comic book, finding solace and meaning in the phrase “There is no before.” Kirsten, on the other hand, had much more time with the comic book. She also had people around her who immersed themselves into the narrative of the comic, helping her understand it. This is exemplified by the play Kirsten stages, with Jeevan and Frank cast as characters from the comic book, in Episode 7 (Steele & Tcherniak, 2021, 35:36). Frank also borrows Kirsten’s copy of the comic multiple times and his expertise as a journalist might have helped her grasp its deeper meanings: in Episode 7, Kirsten and Frank talk about the book, and he says, “It’s good though. I can relate”, to which Kirsten asks, “To who?” and he says, “To all of them”, showing Kirsten that the comic book’s characters embody universal aspects of the human condition (Steele & Tcherniak, 2021, 8:30). This recognition aids Kirsten in realising that the comic is not just a personal escape but a reflection of broader human experiences, helping her process her own trauma and find solace in the shared narratives within the book.

Ultimately, both Kirsten and Tyler relate to young Hamlet because they have both lost a father-figure: their enduring trauma and their shared connection to *Station Eleven* further connects the two. However, their differing interpretations of the comic book highlight their individual coping mechanisms and paths toward healing. While Tyler’s interpretation leads him down a path of destruction and control, Kirsten’s understanding fosters a connection to art and memory, helping her to find meaning and continuity in a fractured world. However, both ultimately find some degree of catharsis through their respective performances of *Hamlet*.

¹⁶ He also witnessed a man he was trying to help die right in front of him (Jefferson & Tcherniak, 2021, 39:16). Following this, he was forced into quarantine, and after this, he overheard Clark referring to him as a “destroyer,” in contrast to his father (Jefferson & Tcherniak, 2021, 47:23).

5. Miranda's connection to the discovery of America

There is another intertextual reference to Shakespeare's works within the novel and the adaptation concerning the character, Miranda. Not only is there a character with the same name in *The Tempest* by Shakespeare, but the similarities between the characters are remarkable. In *The Tempest*, Miranda is Prospero's daughter. The elements of ships and islands resonate in both works, as Miranda comes from the Virgin Islands in the novel and works as a shipping executive, while Act 1 Scene 1 of *The Tempest* is set on a ship at sea (Episode 10, 41:07). Miranda has an interest in otherworldly ideas of distant islands and magical elements, shown through her creation of *Station Eleven* and *Dr. Eleven* which also resonate with *The Tempest*. There is also an element of play-within-a-play in this Shakespeare work, as there is an element of metafiction through Miranda's comics, further establishing Miranda Carroll as a complex character within the *Station Eleven* universe. In *The Tempest*, Miranda is banished to an island forever as a young girl. At the end, she is married to the shipwrecked prince, Ferdinand, and speaks: "How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world, That has such people in it!" (Shakespeare & Ermitage, 2002, 5.1.206-207). This remark can be read as promoting similar themes of new opportunities and possibilities, suggesting that even in the midst of chaos and misery, there is hope for a better world. This theme is further echoed in *Station Eleven*, particularly towards the conclusion of the narrative, when Clark reveals the view of a distant city illuminating the darkness: "In the distance, pinpricks of light arranged into a grid. There, plainly visible on the side of a hill some miles distant: a town, or a village, whose streets were lit up with electricity." (Mandel, 2014, p. 311). This parallel between Shakespeare's evocative words about a "brave new world", and the idea of a brave new world at the end of the novel, are linked by the name of the character, Miranda, who seeks to experience both.

First performed in 1611 and published in 1623, *The Tempest* is thought by some scholars to have been based on an historical shipwreck of 1609, and Miranda's comments, though not literally about America, have come to be associated with ideas of travel and exploration that overlap with Anglophone experiences in what was often called the "New World" in the early 1600s. Critics and scholars alike have noted this correlation, drawing parallels between Miranda's journey and the historical context of America's colonization, encapsulated by the concept of manifest destiny¹⁷¹⁸¹⁹.

¹⁷ Manifest destiny is the idea that it was the divinely ordained right of the United States to expand its borders to the Pacific Ocean and beyond during the 19th century, driven by a belief in the superiority of American civilization and the mission to spread democracy and Christian values across the continent. This ideology fuelled westward expansion, leading to the acquisition of vast territories, including the Louisiana Purchase, the annexation of Texas, and the Oregon Territory, often at the expense of indigenous peoples and other nations.

Encyclopaedia Britannica (2024, April 17). *Manifest Destiny*. Retrieved from:

<https://www.britannica.com/event/Manifest-Destiny>

¹⁸ *BRITISH EMPIRE IN THE TEMPEST*. (n.d.). Shakespeare's Globe. Retrieved from:

<https://www.shakespearesglobe.com/learn/secondary-schools/playing-shakespeare-with-deutsche-bank/the-tempest-playing-shakespeare/language-and-analysis/the-tempest-british-empire/>

¹⁹ *The Tempest and the New World*. (1979). *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 30(1), 29-41.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/2869659>

Due to space constraints, further exploration of the connection between *Station Eleven* and the character Miranda's namesake in *The Tempest*, as well as its connection to the westward expansion of America, is not feasible within this passage. Consequently, this passage serves as an invitation for future study on these connections.

6. Conclusion

This thesis has explored the process involved in adapting Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* from a novel to a TV series, with particular emphasis on the different choices made by the novelist and scriptwriters with regards to intertextual references to Shakespeare's works.

By examining the novel's transition into a television series, focusing on different characters, Shakespearean plays, and narrative elements, this study has illuminated the artistic decisions that shape both versions, highlighting the distinct approaches taken in mediating context and theme. In the novel, *King Lear* is prominently featured, especially in the opening scenes where Arthur Leander's performance is abruptly cut short by his collapse and eventual death. As he speaks his final lines, he incorrectly recites them in reverse order, showcasing Arthur's confusion as he dies on stage, but also suggesting a conflict in himself about women and their nature which primes us for his many relationships with younger women over the course of the novel.

The themes of *King Lear* - family relationships, betrayal, loss, and grief - resonate deeply within the novel. For instance, Kirsten's character, which is hinted at being Cordelia, shares traits of love and loyalty towards a father figure, reflecting her efforts to help Arthur. Arthur Leander embodies the tragic hero archetype similar to Lear. His downfall and subsequent realisation of his mistakes draw a direct parallel to Lear's journey, and there is arguably a moment of anagnorisis towards the end of the novel, where he realises that his priorities have been wrong and wants to spend more time with his child. Arthur's relationship with his son Tyler and his protegee Kirsten echoes the father-son dynamic seen in Gloucester and Edmund, as well as the sibling relationships of Edmund and Edgar. The novel also draws general and specific connections to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, such as the dynamics between actors and characters with complex romantic relationships.

The TV adaptation makes revisionist choices, shifting focus from *King Lear* to *Hamlet* to possibly appeal to a younger audience. *Hamlet's* themes of revenge, mortality, existential angst, and troubled relationships with parental figures are emphasised through multiple performances within the series. The play-within-a-play structure is mirrored in various elements of the TV series, such as Arthur's death on stage, the comic book, Kirsten's *Station Eleven* play, and several productions of *Hamlet*. These references are not merely displays of learning but serve as narrative strategies to enrich the story's thematic depth. In both the novel and the TV series, intertextuality with Shakespeare's works is a deliberate strategy to enhance thematic complexity. The novel's reliance on a multi-character, multi-timeline narrative is partially contrasted with the TV series' visual storytelling and focus on specific relationships, such as that between Kirsten and Jeevan. This adaptation choice underscores the TV series' emphasis on visual metaphors and collective experiences, as seen in the repeated performances of *Hamlet* and the symbolic use of the comic book *Station Eleven*. The character of Arthur Leander in the TV series is given less narrative weight compared to the novel, allowing for a deeper exploration of other characters. This shift enables a focus on Kirsten and Tyler's shared experiences and trauma, further linking them to young Hamlet through their connections to the loss and catharsis which are revealed during discussions about, and performances, of *Hamlet* put on by the characters. This connection provides viewers with a deeper understanding of

the characters' inner lives and the overall theme of the human condition which we find in both versions of *Station Eleven*.

In conclusion, the adaptation of *Station Eleven* emphasises the potential for intertextual references to enrich narrative complexity and thematic depth. By moving beyond traditional fidelity criticism, this study has shown how intertextuality allows adaptations to emerge as creative works that engage audiences in new ways. Both the novel and its TV adaptation offer unique perspectives on Shakespearean themes and characters, showcasing the transformative power of adaptation in reinventing narrative art. This analysis contributes to the broader discourse on adaptation studies, demonstrating the enduring relevance and creative potential of intertextuality in contemporary storytelling.

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Appendix

Relevance of the master's thesis for work in the Norwegian Educational System.

My master's thesis, which explores the intertextuality in Emily St. John Mandel's *Station Eleven* and its adaptation to Shakespeare's works, is highly relevant to my work as a lecturer, aligning both with goals from the Norwegian core curriculum. The research in this thesis offers several specific benefits and applications for teaching literature and media studies.

This research has forced me to think critically and individually to interpret texts and connections that have not been extensively explored before. This has given me experience in fostering the skill of interpretation of different forms of literary texts, as well as working with texts over time. I have learnt about how texts can be interpreted and reinterpreted, and transformed across different media, which serves as another critical skill for English students. These skills align with the core curriculum, specifically "competence in the subjects", which states "School must provide room for in-depth learning so that the pupils develop understanding of key elements and relationships in a subject, and so they can learn to apply subject knowledge and skills in familiar and unfamiliar contexts"²⁰ By integrating this experience and knowledge into my teaching, I can help students develop a deeper understanding of literature and media, enhance their critical thinking abilities, and encourage in-depth study of texts through extended projects. This approach will equip them with valuable skills that can be applied in "unfamiliar contexts", such as their future studies or careers.

Additionally, my work with *Station Eleven* has given me insights into the practical applications of intertextuality and adaptation studies, which are increasingly relevant in a multimedia learning environment. This aligns with one of the "Competence aims after Vg1 programme for general studies", which states a learning aim common to all English subjects, "discuss and reflect on form, content and language features and literary devices in different cultural forms of expression from different media in the English-language world, including music, film and gaming"²¹ By applying these insights and methods in my teaching practice, I aim to create a learning environment that not only meets the academic standards set by the Norwegian Educational System but also inspires and prepares students for the complexities and interdisciplinary nature of the modern world.

²⁰ Norwegian Directorate for Education and Training. (2020). Core curriculum - values and principles for primary and secondary education. <https://www.udir.no/lk20/overordnet-del/prinsipper-for-laring-utvikling-og-danning/kompetanse-i-fagene/?lang=eng>

²¹ Ministry of Education and Research (2019). *Curriculum in English (ENG01-04)*. Established as a regulation. The Curriculum for Knowledge Promotion in Primary and Secondary Education and Training 2020. <https://www.udir.no/lk20/eng01-04/kompetansemaal-og-vurdering/kv6?lang=eng&curriculum-resources=true>



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