

project 2 | assignment 4

For Tuesday, October 6, I ask that you read Part 3: “Sacrifice” (213-317). Sacrifice is an important concept to examine during a pandemic. On a basic level, sacrifice may refer to the everyday routines and comforts that we give up in order to avoid becoming infected. In this sense, sacrifice involves some level of exchange: by quarantining ourselves, we exchange free movement for safety. Likewise, by not wearing masks in public places, one sacrifices the potential for infecting others and becoming infected for the “right” to do as one pleases.

You will recall that in the early days of our pandemic, there was a run on toilet paper—a humble, but necessary staple. The stampede on store shelves left people scratching their heads. Was this the result of a lack of information about toilet paper and its supply chain (after all, there was originally no shortage of the product within the supply chain). Was it about too little information about the nature of the quarantine: what it would involve, exactly, how long it would last, what we could expect to find in grocery stores as time passed? Was it the result of a fear that others would grab rolls of toilet paper before we could? Was it a hard-wired response to scarcity deep in our subconscious? Was it a sense that we had to take care of our households by ensuring we had a tremendous supply—much more than “enough?” Was it a protectionist impulse to secure material for ourselves and our own families? Was it therefore “selfish” or “an act of care?” Is the run on toilet paper a comic metaphor for something more ethically serious—the way it revealed an uneasy truth that we might choose to act in ways we normally would not (by hoarding, or worse)—in a time of pandemic panic?

Many factors begin to cause a breakdown of the common weal in Commonwealth, and like our own frenzied hoarding of toilet paper, can begin in small, at first seemingly insignificant, ways. “Sacrifice,” the section’s title, shifts meaning depending on who is exchanging what for whom. Were those who hoarded toilet paper sacrificing others’ “well being” for their own comforts and security? Were those who did not hoard sacrificing their own sense of security to make it possible that others might feel more secure? Can someone, by taking what might be seen as prudent precautions make another member of the community less secure, more vulnerable?

In seminar, be prepared to point to a moment of sacrifice that takes place in this section of the novel. Be prepared to describe the characters effected by the “exchange” of one thing for something else. What are the moral complications that result? In other words, is one traditionally-valued “good” suspended (if only for the moment) so that some other “good” can flourish—as in a person choosing to sacrifice her comfort for someone else’s security? (Here, a “good” refers to any of the positive ideals that members of a community values.