

Project 2 | Assignment 5

We often use stories—real or imaginative—to raise ethical and moral questions about the character and quality of our private and public lives. Sometimes, these narratives are formed in the genre of the *fable*, an explicitly “moral tale” designed to offer readers a troublesome situation in which a character is placed in an ethical dilemma of one kind or another, and chooses to act in a way that demonstrates—or violates—human goodness or some other moral value (courage, honesty, faithfulness, etc.) Scripture, for instance, is filled with *parables*: stories valued because they often evoke dilemmas where one’s faith in or obedience to God is tried and tested. Like fables, parables instruct readers, doing so in a way that allows them to appreciate and enjoy the story because it allows them to glimpse characters as if they were flesh-and-blood people, flaws, foibles, and all.

The Last Town on Earth can be read in a number of ways. It’s an exciting story of crime and punishment; it’s the story of epidemiological nightmare; it can be read as a love story or as a psychological drama; it could be read as an elaborate allegory of sacrifice and redemption. As readers interested in the socio-ethical and socio-psychological effects of a deadly epidemic on members of a community, we may read the novel as a fictional case study of human response in the face of danger and precarity. We can envision a range of questions to provoke our further thinking:

- What are the potential strengths and limits of an experimental community like Commonwealth?
- What ties hold Commonwealth residents together? Is the “common good” fully compatible with the “common wealth?”
- How is mutual care distributed in the town? Who cares for others in what sorts of ways?
- What makes self-imposed quarantine a reasonable choice in the face of an epidemic? What makes self-imposed quarantine a fragile arrangement?
- What lessons from the novel might we apply to our own pandemic lives?

We can envision a host of additional questions, many of them focused on *choices* we make in the midst of anxiety, uncertainty, and constant fear. Such choices often have ambiguous consequences, likely involving a trade-off: an exchange of our own security for the safety of others; or an exchange of other’s well-being so as to secure our own.

Using the novel as a case study in pandemic living, I ask that you focus on the many ways in which it makes readers aware of *vulnerability*, a universal condition of human limits and relative fragility in the face of environmental forces, bodily harms, emotional instabilities, and everyday challenges, accidents, and difficulties, both major and minor. To unveil this concept, I ask that you read an article by Martha Albertson Fineman, a law professor at Emory University, a specialist in human rights law and feminist legal theory. Fineman’s “The Vulnerable Subject: Anchoring Equality in the Human Condition” defines *vulnerability* as an inherent human

condition that, once embraced, stands to transform the uneven ways in which the state distributes justice and, ultimately, equality to its citizens. In essence, Fineman finds the dominant view of the human as an individual, self-sufficient entity whose liberties are of utmost concern to the state, an incomplete view of the members of any community. She questions the so-called *neo-liberal* view of the “autonomous and individual subject” that guides—and limits—the state’s responsibility (as she sees it) to address, and if possible, mitigate our vulnerabilities, especially those that come as the result of structural inequities.

Though Fineman is interested in critiquing the long tradition of liberalism and state policies, I ask that you focus mostly on her remarks dealing explicitly with vulnerability as a condition of human life. About half her essay works on the concept, and I would like you to pay most attention to how she defines vulnerability and argues for the advantages of our embracing it as a primary condition of our lives. For Thursday’s seminar, please develop a set of notes that you can draw upon that sketch out the primary features of her definition, and be prepared to talk about what we need to modify in our common beliefs about one another in order to embrace her view. What old ideas would we need to jettison? What would we need to pay different attention to? Soon, you’ll be making use of Fineman’s argument in service of your own argument about the novel, so it’s important to make note of passages where Fineman clarifies her concept and envisions how adherence to it will improve the government’s response to human fragility.

Also, please read Part IV: “Specters” (321-387) and be prepared to give us your take on the significance of the book’s ending.