A World Without Us: Plague, Pandemic, And Post-Apocalyptic Vision in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*

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Abstract

This paper explores Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) through the lens of plague, pandemic, and post-apocalyptic vision, situating the novel within the political, imperial, and cultural anxieties of the early nineteenth century. Shelley's text departs from inherited models of religious apocalypticism, replacing eschatological teleology with a secular, speculative meditation on extinction and survivorship. Disease operates simultaneously as a literal agent of mass destruction and as a multivalent metaphor for the disintegration of social, political, and moral orders. In doing so, *The Last Man* subverts the redemptive closures typical of apocalyptic narratives, presenting instead a bleak, destabilizing vision of isolation, loss, and the erosion of communal bonds. The paper argues that Shelley's representation of denial, disinformation, and racialized hierarchies within the context of contagion anticipates the epistemic and ethical dilemmas of later global health crises. By foregrounding the fragility of civilization and the limits of human agency, *The Last Man* interrogates the entanglement of disease, power, and identity, offering an early but strikingly prescient reflection on catastrophe as a force that reshapes political and cultural norms. The novel thus emerges as a foundational text for understanding the post-apocalyptic imagination in its modern, secular form.

Keywords: Post-apocalypse, Plague, Disease, Survivorship, Global Pandemic.

Introduction

The post-apocalyptic genre, commonly linked with popular culture, is seemingly the result of a gradual literary evolution rather than a sudden emergence. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word 'apocalypse'[1] comes from the Greek meaning 'any revelation or disclosure'. The post-apocalyptic fiction is a narrative that takes place after a revelation of some kind.

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[1] The word "apocalypse" comes from the Greek "ἀπό," meaning "off" and "καλύπτειν," meaning "to cover."

Following a small group of survivors as they try to retain their pre-apocalyptic identities, the post-apocalyptic novel reveals truths about humanity to both the characters within the narrative and the reader. The origins of this genre can be traced back to ancient apocalyptic myths, including religious texts and seasonal renewal rituals that imagined endings as pathways to purification or progress, ushering in the promise of a better world. In his essay "Apocalypticism and Popular Culture", Lorenzo DiTommaso examines apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic narratives from a religious studies perspective. He argues that what we now call the post-apocalyptic imagination is essentially an offshoot of apocalyptic thought, a category that tends to reinforce the common assumption that post-apocalyptic fiction simply needs a setting after some catastrophe (DiTommaso 495-97). As he points out, "'Postapocalyptic' is, strictly speaking, an oxymoron. In the biblical worldview, the end time is an event, not a backdrop for storytelling… After the salvation, the narrative terminates; there is no sequel" (496). Apocalyptic themes have long shaped fictional visions of the world's end and its aftermath. In the initial years of the 19th century, writers began exploring secular alternatives to religious apocalypse. Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) broke from the myth of renewal, portraying a secular, irreversible end. Her story of plague helped shape the trajectory of post-apocalyptic writing, inspiring later depictions of catastrophic futures and worlds beyond the customary apocalyptic paradigm.

In his lecture, "The Apocalyptic Tone in Philosophy", Derrida states that the term 'apocalypse', essentially means to 'uncover' (Leavey 4). In another essay titled, "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Seven Missiles, Seven Missives, Full Speed Ahead)" Derrida treats nuclear apocalypse as an elusive signifier, composed solely of its linguistic or textual referents, and devoid of an inherent or essential meaning. Rather than its "literally apocalyptic power", the looming threat of nuclear catastrophe is constituted by utterances and texts that, in predicting an apocalypse, make

it real. Perhaps Derrida's most important idea is that the nuclear condition is "fabulously textual" (Derrida 23), a phrase that primarily refers to explicit discussions or arbitrations of nuclear war and the idea that words and statements can function as weapons themselves. Rather than highlighting the human casualties or devastation that an apocalyptic war might cause, Derrida instead emphasizes "the possibility of irreversible destruction, leaving no traces, of the juridico-literary archive, that is, total destruction of the basis of literature and criticism" (26). In this context, a nuclear conflict threatens both human survival and the wholesale eradication of the "juridico-literary archive", the complete corpus of human writing. The nuclear threat, then, is not only composed of texts, but threatens the historicity and possibility of these texts. However, when *The Last Man* was written, Shelley did not anticipate a nuclear war in the 21st century but Derrida's fear of eradication of the total body of human writing is quite evident in the novel. This anxiety is especially palpable in the novel's conclusion, where the lone survivor, Lionel Verney, embarks on a solitary voyage with only the works of Homer and Shakespeare as his companions. The scene evokes a profound question: after a civilization-ending apocalypse, who will be left to bear witness to and preserve the remnants of literary culture? In the absence of readers, literature itself becomes vulnerable to extinction, mirroring the fate of humanity.

In *Post-Apocalyptic Culture: Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Twentieth-Century Novel*, Heffernan examines how these texts are structured. He argues that traditional apocalyptic narratives replicate the biblical arc of Genesis to Revelation, progressing through a beginning, middle, end, and final disclosure, whereas post-apocalyptic narratives dispense with that climactic unveiling of a "new heaven and new earth". Even when overt religious frameworks had faded, modernist stories about Man, the Nation, and History still retained an apocalyptic shape, presenting human action as propelling society toward an ultimate revelation. Post-apocalyptic culture, by

contrast, no longer invests in such faith in progress. Consequently, post-apocalyptic storytelling tends toward the postmodern, questioning whether endings can carry meaning at all. Within this context, *The Last Man*, though secular, adopts an apocalyptic form with a discernible beginning, middle, end, and revelation, yet simultaneously interrogates the very possibility of a meaningful conclusion. Claire P. Curtis, in *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract: "We'll Not Go Home Again"*, identifies three principal figures in post-apocalyptic social dramas i.e., the survivor, the companion, and the Other (Curtis 8), a pattern echoed in Lionel Verney's solitary journey with his dog as he searches for remaining human beings. Thus, the post-apocalyptic realm exists not only "after" the end of the world but also beyond the collapse of the mythic framework that once rendered endings significant. Rather than simply restarting history or inaugurating a new beginning, the post-apocalypse functions as an expanded interval between one ordered reality and the formation of another (Stifflemire 4). This imagined space is conceived as a "second world" ruptured from the first familiar, recognizable, and experienced. *The Last Man* (1826) operates as a modern post-apocalyptic myth, employing resonant allegory to depict the aftermath of both natural and human-generated disasters. Its plague narrative driven by war becomes an even larger metaphor for humanity's inability to rein in its own self-destructive impulses, culminating in potential extinction.

Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* begins with the collapse of the British monarchy in 2073. The narrator, Lionel Verney, then traces the complex social and political journeys of a group of friends who assume leadership roles in the newly formed republic. Lord Raymond strives to govern as Protector until he departs to join the Greek-Turkish wars, where he is injured and eventually dies. Following this, the outbreak of a plague on England's shores leads to the downfall of centralized authority and the enlightened rule of Adrian. Shelley critiques both Adrian's and

Raymond's conflicting view of republican form of governance and Imperialism respectively, as when the epidemic hits all and any form of governance failed to prevent it. Verney, on the other hand, aims to retreat imaginatively from the horrors around him. The narrative ends with Verney, now the 'Last Man' making his solitary way to Rome and marking the year 2100 "the last year of the world" (Shelley 259). In other words, he invokes the post-apocalyptic sublime: the clashing of the imagination with the reality of the indifferent nature where mountains, rivers, and nature go on while the human perish (Bakay 412). The existential and worldwide horror in *The Last Man* stems from its gradual and harrowing examination of personal and political betrayals that intensify war, corruption, and a plague, ultimately leaving a single survivor who records the 'history' of his 'species' near extinction. Interpersonal and international conflicts, much more than science and technology, serve as plot devices for advancing the existential and post-apocalyptic themes of Shelley's classic 'poliscifi' (Botting 3). It expands upon existential reflections on the meaning of life and death, their relationship to the construction of individual and collective identities, and the possible consequences of a catastrophic event that could endanger an individual, a community, or an entire species.

Discourse of disease and metaphor

In early 19th-century England, deadly illnesses included the plague, yellow fever, and cholera. Diseases like smallpox, malaria, and various fevers such as typhus were frequently referred to as forms of 'plague' or 'pestilence', and debates about how these illnesses spread were ongoing and unresolved (McWhir 23). The role of disease in Shelley's life is well known, from her mother's and children's deaths to her own battle with smallpox in 1828. Medical historians have distinguished two main theories of disease transmission in the early 19th century before the

microbiological discoveries by Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch[2]: the contagionist views that underlay quarantine laws and that were based on the belief in a particular source of infection - the 'contagium vivum' - transmitted by contact or body fluids; and 'anti-contagionism', which located the cause of disease to the very quality of the air itself, often a 'miasma'[3] generated in particular but remote places and carried on the winds (McWhir 23). While 'contagia' and 'miasmata' were "often not fully distinct, for both reached their victim through the air, though at greater or lesser distance from their source" (Hamlin 60), the politics of 'anti-contagionism' are pertinent to *The Last Man* as a plague afflicted post-apocalyptic text.

Mary Shelley refutes husband Percy Bysshe Shelley's Romantic ideal of anti-contagionism, where the Romantic artist is spiritually renewed through the creative force of the 'West Wind'. In his poem *'Ode to the West Wind'*, this wind symbolizes a positive, transcendent, and creative energy, a representation of the 'universal vision' that Mary Shelley, by contrast, depicts in decline (McWhir 37). She recognizes that some regions are safer during winter, and while spring is often linked with renewal and beauty, it also brings the return of pestilence. The 'seeds' that symbolize life may just as easily carry disease, and the 'West Wind' may spread destruction without offering protection. Shelley asserts that the plague that wipes out Varney's world is an epidemic, because it is attributable to a distinct property of the air, but unlike "the scarlet fever, or extinct small-pox" not contagious (Shelley 182). However, this awareness of anti-contagionism only makes plague's spread less controllable: "Bodies are sometimes in a state to reject the infection of malady, and at others, thirsty to imbibe it" (183). Promoting public health,

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[2] Koch's bacteriologists promoted public health strategies designed to eradicate bacteria, whereas Pasteur's acknowledgement of microbial variation informed laboratory efforts to attenuate bacterial virulence for vaccine production.

[3] The miasma theory is an abandoned medical theory that believed that diseases such as cholera, chlamydia, or the Black Death were caused by a *miasma* (μίασμα, Ancient Greek for 'pollution'), a noxious form of "bad air".

sanitation, and moral order as ways of reducing susceptibility, Verney at an early stage of its spread thinks that the plague's "chief force is derived from pernicious qualities in the air, and it would probably do a little harm where this was naturally salubrious" (194). The novel soon demonstrates the futility of all such measures against the fatal atmosphere. By keeping it obscure whether the plague spreads through the air, physical contact, or both, Shelley avoids identifying it as a clearly defined or specific illness. Whether the mode of infection was airborne, 'contagious' by physical contact, or both, Shelley refrained from defining 'plague' as a specific disease (Hunt 839). When *The Last Man* was published, opinions differed as to whether or not 'plague' could be passed from one person to another, or from an object to a person, by contact or body fluids. Shelley's disapproval of this view is explicit in the text where the protagonist, Verney, observes that, "the plague was not what is commonly called contagious, like the scarlet fever, or extinct small-pox, was proved" (Shelley 182).

In *The Last Man*, "words" themselves appear as the primary vehicle for transmitting the plague. The disease initially enters the narrative not as a physical contagion but as an airborne notion; a word, a rumor, whose power shapes people's minds and imaginations. The first explicit mention of "plague", either literal or figurative, occurs in Volume II, where it begins to exert influence over Perdita: "One word…had alarmed her more than battles or sieges. That word, as yet it was no more to her, was PLAGUE" (Shelley 137). Shelley intertwines the physical malady with moral and even supernatural forces. When Evadne lies dying of an unnamed illness, she addresses Raymond, declaring, "Fire, and war, and plague, unite for thy destruction" (142), implying that her curse initiates the plague's spread. In the text, words spread like the diseases they signify: never used in Volume I, but as soon as the word 'plague' enters the novel it spreads with Evadne's curse and Raymond's audacious victory and death. Shelley's emphasis on transmission

of plague is metaphorically as well as medically significant, especially given her novel's emphasis on the spread of words, ideas, and narratives. Though she mentions specific diseases like smallpox, yellow fever, plague, and typhus, Shelley also taps into the broader symbolic meaning of plague as a metaphor for harmful influences, systems or beliefs. By depicting humanity's downfall through plague, *The Last Man* transforms abstract discussions of disease into tangible narrative. Later works like Camus's *The Plague* (1947) and Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) follow in this tradition, using contagion as a metaphor for political ideologies such as fascism or imperialist warfare that erode a society's moral and human foundations.

Community, mobility and survivorship

Anderson in his *Imagined Communities* claims that community and identity are interrelated. This dynamic is clearly reflected in the way post-apocalyptic texts intertwine individual identity with the structure and survival of a community. Anderson claims that the term "community" that reflects a nation in particular is imagined, and "[i]t is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Reid, A., & Anderson 7). Whether small or large, communities are an important component of the post-apocalyptic genre, yet they are tenuous and unstable. Communities tend to be formed for reasons of survival, which leads to groups forming around individuals who possess strength, decisiveness, and leadership capabilities. As seen in *The Last Man*, the 'plague' vehemently strains the very notion of community, compelling a reevaluation of the number of people needed to continue a nation as a living community. These pervasive fears, centered on national solitude, are exaggerated through the plague and the mobility of survivors. Although Shelley exhibits a connectedness to a place of origin, terms like "nation"

are extremely elusive, and must be analyzed when reading into Shelley's personal life and her overall intentions for the 'last man'.

As Young-Ok An states, that this disease "rapidly breaks loose various fixed identities or dynamics, unsettling, dislocating, and displacing the existing chain of identities and events" (An 582). In the novel, plague causes dystopian chaos by gradually erasing the fixed idea of national identity and class differences. When the epidemic shows its effects in Athens, Verney remarks: "Raymond's beloved Athenians, the free, the noble people of the divinest town in Greece, fell like ripe corn before the merciless sickle of the adversary" (Shelley 178). Shelley asserts that even Greece "the divinest of town" could not fight the deadly plague implying that the effect of plague is beyond the nations and identities. Moreover, by showing the destructiveness of the epidemic in both towns and countries, Shelley underlines that people get affected no matter what nation or class they belong to. She suggests that the plague also changes the perspectives of her characters. When faced with an incurable plague, the former Queen of England, who had previously disapproved of her daughter Princess Iris's marriage to Verney, reevaluates her stance and ultimately offers her forgiveness.

As emigration increased in England during the early 19th century, a loss of communal feeling seemed inevitable. Simultaneously, however, the homeland of England cannot necessarily be lost without an established nation to begin with, as proposed by Anderson. As the plague spreads, Verney's fear of losing his nation grows, and he comes to the realization that survival requires leaving their homeland. This also leads to questions of belonging and having a connection with one's community by exploring the discrepancy between emigrants and exiles, between those still connected to their original homeland and those banned from it. Sussman notes a particular question of concern: "How far could someone travel from his or her native environment…and still

retain a connection to it?" (Sussman 287). This question is explored as Verney, the lone survivor, travels away from his homeland on a journey without a clear destiny.

Although emigration offered the potential to alleviate the stress of overpopulation, Shelley also contrastingly questions if society can sustain itself with few numbers. She demonstrates a stark opposition to the encouragement of emigration, using the plague "as a way to trigger and consider the movement of vast numbers of people" (Sussman 287). The attempt to safeguard communal identity and the accompanying fear of contagion from neighboring nations not only mirror the mechanisms of colonial control but also expose an underlying hypochondriac mentality. Grinnel notes that "[b]ecause well-being is a metaphor for something that cannot be totaled and brought into visible sight or confirmed absolutely, it is readily remapped as a potent figure for so many social, cultural, and political concepts, and that volatile availability to new inscriptions is only heightened amid representations of epidemic disease" (Grinnel 115). This concern is eminent in Shelley's novel, and it demonstrates an exaggerated future that forces a nation to remove itself from and take action towards the current state of colonial order in the hopes of returning to "the promise, well not of "England as a well-defended sanctuary" (Wright 129), but at least of "a nation whose future destruction is less certain" (Grinnel 90). Both Shelley's characters and the worldwide devastation of the plague reflect contemporary debates and expose the fragility of sovereignty. As fear of disease escalates, talk of emigration spreads among the remaining survivors. Imagining England as a corpse, Verney asks, "Shall we, in these desert halls, under wintry sky, sit with closed eyes and folded hands, expecting death?" (Shelley 260).

In the text the nostalgia of staying in the motherland is in conflict with the need to survive. The nostalgia towards Verney's homeland demonstrates that the plague not only threatens the

security of environment and territory, but it also threatens the sense of community and the sanctity of its inhabitants. Essentially, as individuals either perished or fled, England could not sustain itself and became a gravesite. This is evident as Verney bemoans, "England, late birth place of excellence and school of the wise, thy children are gone, thy glory faded!" (Shelley 258). With the relentless plague, death is inevitable, and these children "are gone, and thou goest with them the oft trodden path that leads to oblivion" (258). This focus on nostalgia is characteristic of the Romantics, whose work often sought to reclaim their nation's past. In *The Last Man*, Shelley reinforces this impulse, placing particular stress on community and relationships as crucial to shaping an individual's bond with the nation.

The Last Man and recent experiences

Michael Platiensis provides an early historical record of the plague's arrival in Sicily in 1347, while Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) offers a quintessential English portrayal of solitary suffering under quarantine. Similarly, Verney, like Defoe's character H.F., anxiously observes the plague's advance into England. Though written centuries apart, these European accounts helped shape Shelley's post-apocalyptic vision. Like the writers who preceded her, Shelley depicts the contagion of fear, the onset of a mysterious disease, the mounting death toll, the frantic quest for refuge, and, ultimately, the catastrophic effect of the plague on a shattered population. Even in the novel's late-twenty-first-century setting, her characters "called to mind the plague of 1348, when it was calculated that a third of mankind had been destroyed" (Shelley 233). However, unlike her predecessors Shelley's *The Last Man* is not a documentary record of a disease pandemic, rather a speculative projection of how a catastrophic plague could alter social and

political norms. The reaction to the coronavirus pandemic anticipates the social and political fallout of a pandemic in ways that echo the global experience of coronavirus reaction over the recent years, specifically the ideological polarization created by anti-pandemic measures.

In the context of COVID-19, *The Last Man* has been re-evaluated as a prescient modern post-apocalyptic pandemic novel, anticipating not only the spread of disease but also the political dynamics surrounding it. Shelley exposes a feature of pandemic politics still familiar today: the strategic deployment of denial. In the novel, the plague initially enters English consciousness only as rumor, "This enemy of the human race had begun early in June to raise its serpent-head on the shores of the Nile" (Shelley 175), mirroring how contemporary publics first encountered news of COVID-19 as distant and vague reports. Within months, desertion yields to mass death; Shelley's image of "the banqueting hall of death… spread only in London" (Shelley 281) evokes the abrupt escalation from complacency to catastrophe. As the contagion crosses Europe, multiple theories of its origin circulate. Many characters blame "effluvia" or "pestilential air" (Shelley 192), recalling what Wills calls "the now-outdated miasma theory of disease" (Wills 20). "It was called an epidemic. But the grand question was still unsettled of how this epidemic was generated and increased" (Shelley 231). This epistemic uncertainty produces both hesitation and a false sense of security; an assumption that distance or geography confers immunity: "there was no immediate necessity for an earnest caution… [Being an island, it was felt,] England was still secure" (Shelley 231). Shelley thus dramatizes how rumor, misinformation, and misplaced confidence can become politically weaponized during a health crisis—an insight that resonates sharply with the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Olivia Murphy argues that the denial and minimization of the plague in *The Last Man* echo Britain's historical pattern of dismissing early signs of disease in its colonies, "ventriloquizing" the nation's complacent response (Murphy). Shelley dramatizes this dynamic when she notes that "some leaders are skeptical of the danger and ridicule any attempt to plan for the arrival of the contagion in Britain" (Shelley 221), a stance uncannily similar to contemporary leaders' public downplaying of COVID-19. As in the early stages of the recent pandemic, government attention initially focuses more on safeguarding trade and economic stability than on preserving human life. The belief that "in a year or two pestilences would cease" (237) anticipates modern-day claims that the virus would "disappear on its own". The novel thus foreshadows 21st century conditions: uncertainty over a disease's origin, the privileging of commerce over public health, and the politically driven denialism of those in power. While Shelley imagines a far more catastrophic mortality, near the extinction of humankind, Verney's survival highlights an enduring narrative of resilience. At the same time, her future society lacks the medical knowledge necessary to develop vaccines, leaving its population without prevention or cure, a striking counterpoint to today's biomedical breakthroughs and vaccine rollouts.

Shelley's depiction of futuristic England contains clear signs of ethnocentrism, "racist assumptions" (Murphy), and even overt racism in how the plague's origin and transmission are attributed. In both Shelley's narrative and the 2019 pandemic, the disease is imagined to originate in the East, echoing Defoe's description in *A Journal of the Plague Year*: "It [the plague] is of old a native of the East, sister of the tornado, the earthquake, and the simoon" (Shelley 233). Initially, the influx of travelers from the East was regarded as largely harmless to Europe: "If perchance some stricken Asiatic come among us, plague dies with him, uncommunicated and innoxious" (233). This imperialist assumption, however, proves false as the plague ultimately enters Europe.

Verney's own infection, contracted from a dying 'Black' who collapses against him while he is returning to his family, further dismantles the myth of Celtic immunity. By this point, England no longer serves as a refuge from the disease; it has become a destination from which pandemic refugees flee, demonstrating that "this sense of racial superiority and immunity is unfounded" (Murphy). Shelley's portrayal of an advanced Western European society devastated by a plague from the distant East closely parallels the xenophobic rhetoric, racial scapegoating, and conspiracy theories that emerged during the recent global pandemic.

The emergence of disinformation and denial in a pandemic had previously been regarded as a uniquely Twenty-first Century phenomenon, fostered by the online sphere's obscure corners in which odd conspiracies could flourish. But here was Shelley in the 1820s clearly anticipating how fake news, forcefully enunciated, could be harnessed by an amoral leader to impose a false reality in which followers would live or die. Similar patterns of rumor, misinformation, and denial have accompanied pandemics for centuries, shaped by fear, uncertainty, and social networks of their time. For instance, in the novel, the 'Imposter prophet' leading a group of English refugees in Paris keeps control over his followers by promoting unwavering belief and spreading claims that are "false, yet vehemently asserted" (Shelley 85). Whether modern science or traditional religious belief, both could be twisted to uphold the power base of an unscrupulous leadership. Shelley's fictitious pandemic of 2094, then, resembles the recent times with various unreliable conspiracy theories surrounding the origin of the disease; reliance on exclusion and national isolation; racist ideology and actions accompanying its onset; and failures of leadership both before and after the arrival of the epidemic.

Conclusion

The Last Man is not simply a tale of a prophecy nor a personal lament, it rather is an attempt to extend the possibilities of the novel as a vehicle of ideas and to dramatize the inter play between the irrational and the rational, or between dream and reality. In portraying an experience of the supernatural, it takes us on a journey in which the boundaries separating the extraordinary from the ordinary give way, leaving us no choice but to confront the uncertain and the unknown. As such, Mary Shelley's apocalyptic novel is related to that genre which the structuralist critic Tzvetan Todorov characterizes as "the fantastic" one which involves "an experience of limits" (Snyder 452). The most important trait of the fantastic in fiction, according to Todorov, is that it obliges the reader to experience with the narrator a hesitation between natural and supernatural explanations of the events described. Moreover, the duration of uncertainty and the concept of indeterminacy themselves become leading themes of the work. This defines well the dilemma of cognition evoked in *The Last Man*, for the plague "eclipses interpretation of any sort and demands that we reexamine our assumptions about the knowable world" (452).

Shelley's plague narrative still seems relevant in the contemporary world, in its original and artistically adapted forms which suggests that Shelley shared a paradoxical yet hopeful existential outlook. Despite the darkness of the epidemic literature, Shelley leaves open the possibility of delivery from the disasters of the past to a new and unknown, post-apocalyptic blank slate (Hunt 131). Humanity might then have a second chance to realize its potential for what had eluded them before: whether it is freedom or love, happiness, or peace. In the fictional version of life after a flood of pestilence, the last man Verney sets out to sea– with his dog and the works of Homer and Shakespeare as his only companions– in search of other survivors. He surmises that people, perhaps "children of a saved pair of lovers" (Shelley 339), must be safe in some remote

location on Earth. The plague's unmaking of the global impact of war and imperialism leads, paradoxically, to Verney's remaking of the imaginative conditions for love, hope, renewal, and even the prospect of a cosmopolitan peace. In a reflection on the meaning of life and death near the end of his 'HISTORY OF THE LAST MAN', Verney articulates this epiphany: human beings inevitably die, and may even become 'extinct', but 'humanity' understood as humaneness need not, and must not, be extinguished, if his life as a human is to ultimately have ethical meaning (362).

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