

“WHAT SHALL BEFALL HIM OR HIS CHILDREN”: THE FIGURE AND ANXIETY OF
THE CHILD IN MARY SHELLEY’S *THE LAST MAN*

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ABSTRACT

The scholarship currently surrounding Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* is scarce in comparison to the amount of scholarship with her more well-known text *Frankenstein*. One of the popular trends of *Frankenstein* scholarship centers on analyzing anxieties of motherhood in the text. This paper utilizes this scholarship to examine a set of analogous anxieties present in *The Last Man*, set against an apocalyptic future where there is no next generation. This paper uses a combination of feminist theory, psychoanalysis, and new historicism to examine the anxieties surrounding motherhood and children in *The Last Man*. I begin by analyzing the figures of the mother and the child in the novel before analyzing the different anxieties present both in literal motherhood and then in metaphorical reproduction through technology, literature, and companionship in animals. Mary Shelley's work, and not only *Frankenstein*, deserves acknowledgement and study.

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DEDICATION

To the Illustrious Dead

And to the Mother I will Never Become

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INTRODUCTION

Mary Shelley's novel *The Last Man* begins with a quote from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*: "Let no man seek / Henceforth to be foretold what shall befall/ Him or his children" (Shelley 1). While this epigraph is often read within the context of the novel as a way of understanding the anxiety of the apocalypse, the inclusion and the generational aspect of this quotation leads to a further mostly unanalyzed anxiety present in the novel: the anxiety of and for the future generation. By examining the depictions of children in the novel and the anxieties that surround them, I interpret the novel as an exploration of these anxieties, both for Shelley's personal experiences and on a cultural level.

Shelley's more famous work, *Frankenstein*, has often been read as reflecting Shelley's conflicting ideas of motherhood, most notably in Barbara Johnson's article "My Monster/Myself." Johnson argues that *Frankenstein* serves as an autobiographical exploration of Shelley's anxieties around motherhood – while investigating the dangers of "monstrosities" in childbearing, autobiographical writing, and reproductive technologies. Victor's abandonment of the creature can be read as mirroring Shelley's emotions after carrying an unwanted child from a married man – a child who would later die – along with Shelley's efforts to work through the early loss of her own mother and the emotional and supportive neglect from her stepmother (Johnson, "My Monster/Myself," 6-9). Likewise, in discussing Mary Shelley as a mother, Charlotte Sussman in her article "Daughter of the Revolution: Mary Shelley in our Times" postulates that Virginia Woolf leaves Shelley out of her analysis of female authors because Shelley is a mother (159-160). Sussman says, "Despite its powerful paradigm of literary foremothering ("we think back through our mothers if we are women"), *A Room* tends to violently reject the possible combination of biological and literary maternity" ("Daughter of the

Revolution” 160). By situating Shelley’s importance as both a mother and an author, Sussman presses scholars to analyze the effects of one on the other. Shelley’s fiction therefore appears heavily invested in motherhood, and while many academics have taken up the task of studying *Frankenstein* through the lens of a mother, little scholarship currently exists about the function of the mother and the child in Shelley’s later text *The Last Man*.

Even superficially unrelated philosophical themes like life and death can be read as a variation on themes of motherhood and the tensions surrounding creation and creators. Sandra M. Gilbert notes in her chapter “Horror’s Twin: Mary Shelley’s Monstrous Eve” that in *Frankenstein*, birth and death are inherently connected, taking inspiration from Victor Frankenstein’s own words “To examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death” (qtd. in Gilbert 59). A similar concept is also present in the inner workings of *The Last Man*. While examining the end of the world through the Plague, Shelley is also revealing some of her own anxiety surrounding childbearing and raising. Death and birth are connected and as Shelley examines new birth and children in *The Last Man*, she is also examining the necessity of eventual death, both on the personal level and that of the race.

The depictions of children and the anxieties that surround them present a metaphor for Shelley’s own anxieties around motherhood at the time of her writing. The term “metaphor” here is used with autobiography theorist James Olney’s definition of the term in his introduction to *Metaphors of the Self: The Meaning of the Self*:

[metaphors] are something known and of our making, or at least of our choosing, that we put to stand for, and so to help us understand, something unknown and not of our making; they are that by which the lonely subjective consciousness gives

order not only to itself but too much of objective reality as it is capable of formalizing and of controlling (30).

Olney understands autobiography – rather than simply being a truthful retelling of one’s life – to be about discovering and exploring the self – coming to know the self. This is what arguably Shelley did in *The Last Man*. She explored her own complicated emotions surrounding motherhood. This is a woman whose own mother died in childbirth; who was raised by a stepmother who seemed diametrically opposed to Shelley’s birth mother; a woman who carried an unwanted child conceived by a married man who would later die in infancy; who lost three of her four children; and a woman who at the time of writing *The Last Man* possibly felt entirely alone in the world (Marshall). The complicated emotions that would have arisen from such a life resonate in *The Last Man*, especially evident in the interactions between parents and children.

But it is not only Shelley’s anxieties about children that *The Last Man* appeals to, but also a larger basis of experiences. While certainly not as popular as *Frankenstein* – Shelley’s more well-known text – *The Last Man* may resonate with readers because the fears within – even beyond the fear of the end of the world – are present in a large portion of the community. Specifically, parents. Olney argues that we read autobiographies not just to learn about the author, but also to learn about ourselves and our own experiences (46). Therefore, Shelley tapped into a universal parental fear, which is why readers return to this metaphorical autobiography. *The Last Man* received a resurgence in academic popularity in the 1960s and 1970s,¹ following decades of fraught political warfare, social upheaval, and corresponding with the end of the Baby Boom in America. With many alive remembering the 1950s and living with the remnants of fear

¹ Thanks to scholars like Robert Lance Snyder, Hugh J. Luke, and Lee Sterrenberg.

of a nuclear apocalypse, the reinterest in this text may be connected to anxieties in the culture at the time. Families were not only worried about the state of the world, but also the threat of a future, both in the symbolism of children but also the danger on physical lives and space.

Not only is Shelley reflecting on her own life, but also the lives of many other mothers and parents who have lost children, especially in the 19th century. In his book *Angels and Absences: Child Deaths in the Nineteenth Century*, Laurence Lerner collects and recounts numerous literary and personal writings of parents' grief after their children's deaths.² Many of the examples within the book from diary entries of Mrs. Tait and Margaret Oliphant to the novels of Charles Dickens mirror similar moves to Mary Shelley's. Shelley's authorship was not only a way of her dealing with her own trauma, but also her tapping into cultural anxieties surrounding children at the time.

In her chapter, "The Lost Settler Child," Rebecca Weaver-Hightower argues that in many texts, the act of mourning a dead child mirrors a similar "act of mourning: the cultural guilt over genocide" (160). Colonizing authors in colonized areas write about dead children, sometimes their own, to deal with the guilt of participating in a larger colonizing genocide. In the case of *The Last Man*, these mirroring acts of mourning reverse. The act of mourning over a large-scale death in the population as is present in *The Last Man* may reflect the personal guilt over child loss. Rather than the death of the child standing in for the death of thousands of colonized people – the deaths of millions of people to the plague stand in for the grief of losing one's child. Utilizing Freud's idea of the displacement, I argue that Shelley is positioning her trauma and

² Lerner writes about Mary Shelley only peripherally – only as William Shelley's mother or Percy Shelley's wife. His argument that she "grieved in silence", in comparison to her husband, not only reduces her diary entries and letters to "silence" but also discounts her as an author of numerous novels dealing with child trauma and death.

grief within the conceit of the plague³ to explore these experiences and possibly heal.

Displacement happens when an idea or experience is too dangerous or taboo to represent itself in a dream without censorship, so the subconscious presents a new aim or a new object for this aim (Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, 324). Shelley displaces the death of her children then onto the death of the population.

We must first acknowledge the difference between dynastic grief and paternal/maternal grief. We can understand the difference here as between a grief concerning a furtherance of the parent and a grief concerning children as loved family members. Lerner states that “dynastic grief is less human than paternal grief” (85). He defends this argument by demonstrating the difference in word choice between how Josiah Conder mourned his son (with dynastic grief) versus how he mourned his daughter (with paternal grief) (Lerner 85). Lerner places the difference strictly within the confines of gender; a parent mourns their daughter with more emotional and sentimental grief rather than the prideful emotions of dynastic grief with their son. This binary is essentializing and limiting, as all binaries are, but the idea behind the binary is worth acknowledging. Parents would be more concerned with their dynasty in relation to their sons who would carry on their names.

A majority of the names in *The Last Man* have a name associated with royalty aristocracy, or power either in meaning (Raymond – “counsel” with a pun on “rey monde” or king of the world) or in association (Lionel with Richard the Lionhearted or Lionel of Arthurian tales). This might be because most of the people Shelley had taken inspiration from were of at

³ The determination of if this is a conscious or unconscious choice on Shelley’s part is not certain, without clear indication at the time from Shelley’s personal writings.

least higher classed births, but one might also consider the importance of children and lineage to people of higher classes, who have something to pass on to the next generation.

Reading *The Last Man* – or any of Shelley’s novels – as an autobiography is not innovative. Scholars like Richard Peck⁴ have long argued the (auto)biographical elements in Shelley’s novels. Barbara Johnson specifically reads *Frankenstein* as autobiographical. Yet, all current work on *The Last Man* focuses on Shelley as a Romantic or Shelley after the death of her husband. While both remain in play throughout my reading, this essay places focus rather on Shelley as a mother, eliciting fears of and for the child.

This paper will use a combination of feminist theory, psychoanalysis, and new historicism to examine the anxieties surrounding motherhood and children in *The Last Man*. We start by analyzing the figures of the mother and the child in the novel before analyzing the different anxieties present both in literal motherhood and then in metaphorical reproduction through technology, literature, and companionship in animals.

⁴ See Richard Peck’s “The Biographical Element in the Novels of Mary Shelley” for a dissection of the characters’ real life parallels, including the triple role of Clara as Clara (the daughter), Claire (the stepsister), and Allegra (198-210).

FIGURES OF THE MOTHER IN *THE LAST MAN*

An example of anxieties surrounding children can be seen in the character of Idris. Idris, the main character Lionel's wife, becomes a personification of maternal grief and worry. While relatively carefree at the beginning of the novel, the tragic loss of her and Lionel's second son causes a drastic change in Idris' personality. The circumstances of this son's death – specifically the fact that the mother was present for the death, but the father was away in Italy – mirror the circumstances of Clara Shelley's illness that led to her death, although Shelley was able to reunite with Percy before the actual death, unlike Idris and Lionel (Marshall, "Volume I," 221-227). Noting the change in his wife, Lionel states that every threat of illness created anxiety for her and that Idris could not stomach the remaining children being too far from her, "lest the insidious thief should as before steal these valued gems" (Shelley 226). Nearly every scene that Idris is part of after the death of the unnamed son focuses on her grief and anxieties as a mother. So much so that Idris' happiness and mental state are directly connected to the well-being of her children. Lionel notes "while [the children] in health sported about her, she could cherish contentment and hope" (Shelley 249). But as the plague continues and glimpses of its effects can be seen in her children's lives – even when not ill themselves – Idris grows worse, more anxious, and weaker. This connection between Idris and the health of her children reaches its climax when Evelyn, her youngest son, first falls mysteriously ill. Even though he's not sick with the fatal plague, "apprehension deprived her of judgment and reflection; every slight convulsion of her child's features shook her frame – if he moved, she dreaded the instant crisis; if he remained still, she saw death in his torpor and the cloud on her brow darkened" (Shelley 291). Despite the threat of the plague outside her door, it is the fear of losing her child that ultimately weakens Idris and lands her in her deathbed. After Evelyn's illness – even though he regains his health this time –

Idris can never return to her state from before (Shelley 292). From herein, Idris is burdened with the thought of her children's mortalities, but more specifically the fear that they may die before her. She grows increasingly weaker, until she's unable to continue living. Lionel and others posit it might be of the stress of motherhood and her sorrow (Shelley 292).

There is clearly something unnatural to Idris about her children's death, specifically, as Lionel notes she doesn't appear to worry about his death – rather focusing her concerns on her children (292). While Idris does not go far enough to say it herself, the reader can infer this double standard has something to do with the fact that it is at least not uncommon for the husband to die before the wife if she lived past menopause, but the same cannot be said for children dying before the parent.

To argue that a parent mourned their child in the 19th century with much emotion is controversial. In 1962, Philippe Aries proposed a theory called “Parental Indifference Hypothesis” – parents from centuries where the probability of a child's death was much higher than in society today didn't mourn their children as much as they would in modern society (40). This is contradicted by numerous sensationalized stories of child deaths and readers' responses to these deaths (Weaver-Hightower 170). Not only were poets, authors, and everyday people within their diaries and journals writing about the traumatic experience of child deaths – but readers of these texts responded with extensive empathy and distraught upon reading of these experiences.⁵

Lerner notes “An infant death rate of 154 per thousand seems to us appalling ... but in 1840 it was not new” (159). He further states “if child death can no longer be seen as inevitable,

⁵ For more extensive coverage of the history of child deaths in 19th century writing and literature, along with the readers' reactions, see Lerner's *Angels and Absences: Child Death in the Nineteenth Century*.

or at any rate normal, it will seem a worse blow when it happens” (Lerner 159). Yet, the entirety of Lerner’s book recounts numerous examples of parents emotionally mourning their children’s deaths – even if the infant death rate of children was far higher than it is now, the emotions and grief within the texts remain poignant to a modern audience. Parents mourned their lost child, at the very least on an emotionally comparable level to today.

Idris is, of course, not the only mother who suffers in the name of her children. When the survivors of the plague escape to France, they come upon a dangerous cult. While not evident at first, much of the cult’s functioning (and its inevitable downfall) surrounds the concept of generations and children. The cult’s leader gains power from the ability to hold people’s devotion through fear – specifically the fear of loss of the future (Shelley 387). When we look at Lionel’s description of the cult’s population, this becomes even clearer. He says, “This man had between two and three hundred persons enlisted under his banners. More than half of them were women; there were about fifty children of all ages; and not more than eighty men” (Shelley 387). The population is specifically the vulnerable persons of the community, but Lionel’s focus here on the women and the children show that he has a fair idea of the importance of children and the future in the cult. While it’s not said, there’s a likelihood that some of the cult are related to each other, especially as it’s not likely for a child to join a cult of their own volition. The reader can suppose then that with the specifically high population of women and children, some of the women are the mothers of the children, binding both to the cult. The children cannot leave without their mothers and the mothers will not leave without their children. That mothers are present and important is confirmed when the reader meets Juliet for the second time.

The first time the reader encounters Juliet, she is identified primarily as her role as a daughter and relative to older family members. Once the plague hits, it is Juliet who cares for

them until one by one they die off, leaving Juliet alone. When the reader discovers Juliet again, she is a mother, and it is this role that determines her position in the story from herein.

Juliet's involvement in the cult revolves entirely around the protection of her child. After the death of the rest of her family, Juliet's child becomes "the object of her being" (Shelley 388). Even though Juliet is on numerous occasions shown to not truly adhere to the cult's beliefs, she appears to have joined because "her love for her child made her eager to cling to the merest straw held out to save him" (Shelley 388). Compared to the others in the cult, she isn't as passive in her following as the other members of the cult who obey without question. When Lionel is taken prisoner by the cult, it is Juliet who rescues him. Yet, when Lionel urges her to come with and find freedom that way, Juliet refuses, crying out, "My child, my child! He has my child; my darling girl⁶ is my hostage" (393).

The cult makes the mistake of cutting Juliet's tie to them though. She is in the cult primarily to protect her child, but when the child becomes ill with the plague, the cult secretly murders the infant. It is this moment of death that awakens Juliet:

At last a female, whose maternal vigilance subdued even the effects of the narcotics administered to her, became a witness of their murderous designs on her only child. Mad with horror, she would have burst among her deluded fellow – victims, and wildly shrieking, have awaked the dull ear of night with the history of the fiend-like crime, when the Imposter, in his last act of rage and desperation, plunged a poignard in her bosom. Thus wounded to death, her garments dripping

⁶ Juliet's child changes gender from male to female. For simplification, I use the neutral "child" out of quotation marks. This child likely serves as an archetypal child and does not represent a real child, hence their unnamed status and their uncertain gender.

with her own life-blood, bearing her strangled infant in her arms, beautiful and young as she was, Juliet, (for it was she) denounced to the host of deceived believers, for the wickedness of their leader. (Shelley 407)

Juliet is not even named until the last sentence of this passage. Until that moment, she is identified solely as being a mother. Her identity focuses on her ability as a mother and how her motherhood and attachment to her child serve as the instigators of the cult's demise. It is seeing her child dead that causes Juliet to awaken from the passive trance the cult puts over its victims. Likewise, the other members of the cult awaken when they see the visceral image of Juliet, her dress stained with blood and her carrying her strangled child in her arms. The sight of this violence against children and against mothers causes the people of the cult to question the truth of the matter around them (Shelley 407).

Unlike in the cases of Idris and Juliet, motherhood is not always presented as selfless and self-sacrificial, such as in the case of the Duchess. Throughout much of *The Last Man*, the former queen continuously ignores her relationship with her son-in-law Lionel. Despite that he is legally in her family – married to her daughter, Idris – the queen refuses to acknowledge Lionel as a son. It is not until Idris' death – hence the realization of losing her child – that the queen even uses the word “son” to refer to Lionel (Shelley 359). With Idris' death, the queen is forced to realize that Lionel's connection to Idris through their children is her last chance at future generations. Since Adrian, the Countess' son, hasn't shown interest in romance after Evadne, the Duchess' remaining grandson Evelyn – and to some extent Clara, who dotes upon her – are her last chance at her legacy being carried on in the future. Despite her name not being able to be passed on in the same way the Verney name is, the former queen may be concerned with the idea of her family disappearing now that the link back to her – Idris – is dead.

One might wonder if this figure of the overbearing strict mother-in-law has any reflection on Shelley's feelings towards Percy's family. Warren, in his partial biography and partial collection of Shelley's letters and diaries, notes the increasing coldness of Sir Timothy Shelley towards Mary Shelley ("Volume 2" 140-153). Sir Timothy refused to give her monetary assistance and only began to show interest in her and her family, when her son Percy Florence Shelley became his heir (Warren "Volume 2" 150).⁷ Even so, the help was focused almost entirely on her son, leaving Shelley destitute ("Volume 2" Warren 151).

How then do these fictional mothers reflect on Shelley's experiences? We, as readers, must remember that at this point in her life, Shelley had not only lost her husband and many friends, but most of her children. The only surviving child at this time was Percy Florence. This fear that Idris, and the other mother figures, display about the loss of her children is not only one that Shelley would recognize but one that she had lived through herself. Shelley had seen the feared conclusion. Whereas Idris dies from the heartbreak after losing Alfred to his illness, Shelley must continue living and grieving (Shelley 334). This leaves the reader with the question of which ending is worse. Should mothers hope to be like Mary or Idris, living beyond the unspeakable deaths of their child or dying from grief? Or perhaps Juliet, whose child's death – along with her own – echoes loudly? Are there good "endings" for mothers who have lost children? In "My Monster/Myself", Barbara Johnson argues that *Frankenstein* is "among other things, a study of the impossibility of finding an adequate model for what a parent should be" (3). Both the creature and Victor, raised in entirely different situations, end up both

⁷ The death of Charles Shelley, Sir Timothy's eldest son, making Percy Florence Shelley the heir happened after the publication of *The Last Man*. But, Mary Shelley might have been imagining a similar situation where her father-in-law would accept her as the Duchess does with respect to Lionel.

mentally scarred and traumatized. Both good and bad childhoods result in trauma (Johnson “My Monster/Myself” 3). Similarly, there is no adequate model for what a grieving mother should be in *The Last Man*. The end result is the same: a tragic death.

Lerner states that “the central figure of any child death must surely be the mother” (211). Excepting the case of Lionel – who even sometimes distances himself from the death at hand – the mothers are the ones who suffer the most when a child dies. If the central figure is the mother, we must then wonder why Shelley positioned herself as a father in this novel, not the mother. Perhaps it was a way of working through the grief from a spot of emotional privilege. Lerner addresses two reasons mothers might be thought to mourn their children with greater emotion than the fathers: the physical – that the bodily experiences of childbirth and suckling would connect mother and child – and the social – that the mother would likely see more of the child than the father did (47). Furthermore, in “The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America,” Carroll Smith-Rosenberg notes examples where mothers and female friends dealt with mourning and funeral arrangements, while the father might not have even attended the funeral (23). This is reflected in the characters in *The Last Man*. It is the mothers of the novel whose deaths are necessitated by the deaths of their children, whereas fathers like Lionel survive past their grief. In fact, after Alfred’s death, Lionel is more concerned with his own illness rather than the passing of his eldest son (Shelley 338-339). Of course, this is not to say that Shelley purposely wrote herself into a role so as not to mourn her child, only that the father’s grief might have been easier to handle than the mother’s, in Shelley’s eyes. Writing herself as a father might function as a way of working through the pain.

Shelley, herself, writes in a similar comment about the difference between fathers and mothers in facing mourning and grief – especially grief surrounding a lost child. She says, “happy are women who can weep, and in a passionate caress disburden the oppression of their feelings; shame and habitual restraint hold back a man” (Shelley 172). Ironically, this reverses the postulation of Lerner that it is women and mothers who are silent in the face of grief (74). Rather, it is the men who are silent in Shelley’s cultural vision and women are the ones who express themselves.

FIGURES OF THE CHILD IN *THE LAST MAN*

Of the children characters in *The Last Man*, most are included generally as victims for their parental characters to mourn over. Their personalities are not explained in detail, often greatly overshadowed by the amount of detail instead given to their dead bodies or their parents' reactions to the deaths. The one exception to this is the character of Clara – Perdita's and Raymond's daughter. Clara is given page after page to grow as a character. Yet, this attention isn't entirely positive for Clara as she is forced to exist in the liminal role as a child who must be cared for and as a growing mother figure for nearly every other major character in the book, including adults. Clara is given such thorough attention in the book possibly because her childhood is ripped from her and responsibility is forced upon her, even though she is still quite young by the time of her death at the end of the novel.

The catalyst for Clara's true switch from child to forced parental figure appears to be the abandonment by her parents, Raymond and Perdita. Both choose other duties, Raymond to Greece and Perdita to her love of Raymond, over caring and raising their daughter. In fact, both appear extremely callous about the fact that they are leaving a young child behind. In entrusting what functions as essentially his last will and testament, Raymond says, "To you Lionel, I entrust your sister and her child" (Shelley 188). Through his language here, Raymond distances himself not only from his wife by referring to Perdita solely as Lionel's sister, but more specifically distances himself from his child. In his request, he refers to Clara as only being Perdita's child, not his. While one might argue that he's trying to appeal to Lionel's attachments to these people, he does not call Clara "your niece." Instead, her only attachment is to her mother – an attachment she will soon lose. Not only does Raymond not recognize his daughter with his words, but he doesn't immediately recognize her presence nearby. Despite her proximity, he willingly talks

about his death, “thoughtless of her presence, and she, poor child, heard with terror and faith the prophecy of his death” (Shelley 188). While he does attempt to fix this mistake after realizing her presence, Raymond has already cut off his parental tie sufficiently to the point that he needs to be reminded of what his loss will mean to Clara. He assures her that his death is beneficial to her, because this way he can never desert or forget her, but he’s already done both. Not only are his platitudes to his daughter empty, but he immediately follows it up with a request with responsibility far too substantial for an eight-year-old child. He says,

One thing you must promise, – not to speak to any one but your uncle, of the conversation you have just overheard. When I am gone, you will console your mother, and tell her that death was only bitter because it divided me from her; that my last thoughts will be spent on her. But while I live, promise not to betray me; promise, my child (Shelley 188).

He entrusts his last wish to his daughter, a wish fraught with lies, deceit, and secrecy. Raymond shoves responsibility onto Clara and forces her to become an adult; forces her to parent herself and take on a caretaker role for her mother.

While there is always the risk in applying modern concepts of psychology to texts where such ideas would be anachronistic, it is worth noting that Clara shares similarities with victims of emotional incest,⁸ also known as covert incest, where the child is forced to play the emotional role of a partner to their parents. Maxine Jacobson, in her article “Child Sexual Abuse and the Multidisciplinary Team Approach: Contradictions in Practice,” defines covert incest as “a 'hands-off derivative' defined by a boundary violation between parent and child. One example

⁸ The lines between emotional/covert incest, parentification, and Atlas Personality are blurred in this case (Vogel). For simplification, I use “covert/emotional incest” with the understanding that there are shades of all three present.

would be a father who shares intimate details of his marital relationship with his daughter” (233). This example bears a significant parallel to the case of Raymond and Clara. While Raymond doesn't place a sexual expectation on his daughter, the boundary violation still occurs as he forces Clara to take on a role as emotional partner to both himself and Perdita. She must take on the role of a confidante, shouldering the burden of secrecy, for Raymond, but she must also act as an emotional stabilizer and sounding board for her mother. Both roles are beyond what should be expected of a young child.⁹

Jacobson notes that incest, including covert/emotional incest “contaminates innocence and signifies the loss of sentimental childhood. However, these children are also not yet adult, and therefore, banished to a purgatory of sorts, trapped between two worlds” (233). We see this purgatory of ages in multiple descriptions of Clara throughout the novel, where she is both child and adult, yet neither at the same time.

Clara is described by Lionel as, “no ordinary child; her sensibility and intelligence seemed to have already endowed her with the rights of womanhood” (Shelley 205). Later, he states, “Yet, when she stood in unassuming simplicity before us, playing with our children, or with girlish assiduity performing little kind offices for Idris, one wondered what fair lineament of her pure loveliness, in what soft tone of her thrilling voice, so much of heroism, sagacity, and active goodness resided” (Shelley 277). In both cases, Clara is being recognized as both a child, but something more than a child: an adult or a parent. Clara is already being forced into adult roles despite not reaching maturity at this time. Even Lionel, her uncle who should be aware of

⁹ The concept of a dependent child would, of course, be different in the 19th century. Therefore, the argument that Clara suffers under emotional incest is not accurate, but rather that the anxieties surrounding this concept and Clara's anxieties are analogous. I use covert/emotional incest to understand Clara's struggles, not as an informal diagnosis.

her youth, cannot fully see her as a child. After the tragedies of her parents' deaths and the growing threat of the plague, Clara is forced to end her childhood in order to function and survive. In her chapter "The Long Afterlife of Loss," Eva Hoffman says of children burdened with trauma from the generation before,

there is the need – indeed, the imperative – to perform impossible psychic tasks: to replace dead relatives or children who have perished; to heal and repair the parents; above all, to rescue the parents. To rescue the parents and keep rescuing them, from their grief and mourning, from death which had so nearly engulfed them and which had undone so many. To keep undoing the past, again and again.
(409)

We see this same tradition with Clara, who is burdened with the requirement to help her parents in their grief and trauma, to rescue them from their own emotions. It becomes Clara's job to sort through and heal from these experiences.

This is what Lerner might call the Wise Child. In his book, he addresses this archetype. Specifically, he traces the figure of the "old-fashioned" child in Charles Dickens' various novels – a child who seems older mentally than they truly are while still holding the younger innocence (Lerner 86). This child often ends up caring for the adults in their life, even if only spiritually. Clara fulfills a similar role to this archetype in *The Last Man*. Clara mentally takes on adult responsibility without being burdened by an "adult personality" – Shelley's children are near perfect in obedience and manners, completely innocent, and sources of pure truth, whereas the adults in Shelley's novel are capable of cruelty and betrayal. Clara fits the former rather than the latter.

One reason Clara suffers a troubled childhood is the lack of acknowledgement by her mother as a child. Perdita's last will doesn't address the fact that she's leaving a child behind after her death. While Raymond recognizes what his loss will mean to Clara – as limited and biased as his scope is – Perdita's last action, last words, only tie her back to Raymond. In her hand, she clenches a slip of paper that only reads “To Athens” (Shelley 214). Perdita succeeds in her mission, to lie beside her husband in death, with these words. Yet, these words also silence Clara's childhood. Perdita does not name a caretaker, and, in that way, Clara must step up to the role as her own caretaker. In fact, after Perdita's death, Clara serves primarily as a caretaker for other characters, especially other children. Clara can no longer see herself as a child who needs help, because her own mother's last words refused her this identity.

In “Glutting the Maw of Death: Suicide and Procreation in “Frankenstein,”” Richard K. Sanderson recounts the end of *The Wrongs of Woman: or Maria*, written by Shelley's mother Mary Wollstonecraft – a book we know Shelley read in 1814, more than ten years before publication of *The Last Man* (51). In the unfinished novel, upon spotting her long-lost daughter, Maria vomits up the laudanum meant for her suicide – a tactic that Wollstonecraft attempted in 1795 – and proclaims, “The conflict is over! – I will live for my child” (qtd. in Sanderson 51). Sanderson argues that “such knowledge of her mother's life and work must have given Mary Godwin occasion to ponder, if only abstractly, the meaning of suicide and its possible relations to motherhood. Offspring could be a kind of counterweight to suicide, providing meaning, stability, and human connection” (51). This connection of mothers and suicide should draw attention then to Perdita and Clara. Clara, unfortunately, does not serve as this counterweight, not giving her mother enough “meaning, stability, and human connection.” Even Sanderson who argues the importance of children in staving off suicide, ignores Clara when describing Perdita's

death: “who chooses to die rather than be torn from the place where her husband has been buried” (58). While Clara does not speak on this matter, one must wonder how this tragedy, especially with Clara’s proximity to the suicide, may alter her personality and thought processes.

Ironically, according to Freud in his essay “The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman,” Perdita’s choice of suicide by drowning may indicate a desire for childbirth due to the connection of water and womb (162). Yet, she is abandoning her child by drowning. By returning to the womb, symbolized in the water, she is abandoning and orphaning another child, forcing Clara to mature.

Even before the deaths of her parents, who both choose death over raising their daughter, Clara was forced to grow up far sooner than she should have at her age. After Raymond and Perdita’s first separation, Clara is forced to become a mother to her own mother metaphorically, guarding her words carefully so as not to upset Perdita. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg notes that a certain level of codependency was expected between mother and daughter at this time, but the example of Clara and Perdita goes beyond even Smith-Rosenberg’s theory (15). At the young age of eight, Lionel notices the way Clara’s altered, saying, “Formerly, she had been a light-hearted infant, fanciful, but gay and childish. After the departure of her father, thought became impressed on her young brow” (Shelley 160). Further down the page, he remarks, “There is no more painful sight than that of untimely care in children, and it was particularly observable in one whose disposition had heretofore been mirthful” (Shelley 160). Here, Lionel addresses one of the toxic fears that sink into a parent’s heart – of failing the child in a way that causes them to have to grow up sooner. In that sense, the parent is limiting the childhood, ending it prematurely just as death would. While Clara does not die of the plague as a young child, her existence as a child does die earlier than it should.

Clara becomes a mother figure to numerous characters through the novel, not just to her own parents. As the plague evolves, so does Clara's mothering ability. Meanwhile, she is still just a young child, at least by age. But she cannot allow herself to be a child in the world, because Alfred and Evelyn, her younger cousins, need a mother, especially when Idris steps out of the household to assist in caring for the sick. She becomes the "sole minister to the wants of her little cousins" (Shelley 310). She steps in as a pseudo-mother to her cousins both before the death of Idris and then fully becomes a mother to Evelyn after. When the three children play or interact, they're rarely described as equal, but rather akin to a description of a mother or adult playing in the mindset of a child. When the boys are cheerful and loud, Clara is quiet and withdrawn (Shelley 243). When Evelyn wants to go play, Clara is focused on a tale of horror, seemingly more aware of the current situation than her cousins (Shelley 243). Clara is separate from the culture of childhood around her, although not able to fully cross over into adulthood either.

It is justly expected for an older cousin to help with the younger ones, especially in the case of great tragedy as is present in *The Last Man*. It's unfortunate, but not entirely unheard of. Should Clara's mothering end with Alfred and Evelyn, the depth of Clara's forced parenthood wouldn't be quite as heart-wrenching. Rather, Clara, at various points in the novel, becomes a mother figure or a confidante for nearly every important character in the text, including numerous adult relatives. As already stated, Clara parents her own mother and it is further described that "she would be sole handmaid of Idris ... nothing gave her so much pleasure as our employing her in this way" (Shelley 310). Later, after the former queen tries to regain a relationship with her remaining family members, Clara steps in as a nurse for the ailing elderly woman. When the former queen dies, she addresses Clara, saying, "Be to Adrian, sweet one,

what you have been to me – enliven his sadness with your sprightly sallies; soothe his anguish by your sober and inspired converse, when he is dying; nurse him as you have done me” (415).

Constantly, older generations pressure Clara to take on a role not only of parenting and caring for her younger cousin-siblings, but also of caring for adult relatives whose job it should be instead to care for her. Additionally, Clara succeeds in these roles where others fail. Clara is selfless and loving where others turn their back and abandon. While at best a very young woman and facing her own death, she pushes her uncle and Adrian to save themselves from the sinking boat, rather than rescue her (444). This constant selflessness should not be expected of a young girl and yet Clara must step into this role to help everyone else and to face the threats towards her life and childhood.

ANXIETIES SURROUNDING THE CHILD

The threats around children tend to revolve around three themes: children as a continuation of the parent, children as the future, and children associated with death. Through these themes, we see the evolution of fear around childbearing. The child first acts as a reminder of the parent, then as a figure for the future, and finally as a reminder of mortality. Shelley taps into these complicated anxieties through Lionel's misfortunes during the plague.

The first anxiety is one that's been examined in literature for centuries, if not millennia: the anxiety that if our children die so does our chance at a legacy. Children can often be viewed as one way of achieving immortality. As long as the child lives, so does the story of the father – as in most literature, the focus is on the father's legacy, not the mother's. Arnaud Wisman and Jamie L. Goldenberg note in their study on mortality salience that “Having children can contribute to a sense of immortality, in both a literal and symbolic sense, and can help fortify a sense of meaning and self-worth” (47). They also discovered that people showed an increased desire for children after being reminded of death and mortality (Wisman and Goldenberg 58). Lerner argues a similar idea, saying “[children] carry on our existence after we die” (119). Both sources note a pseudo-immortality, albeit in less selfish language. So, the threat of losing a child is not only fearful for the familial loss, but for the concept of the end of one's legacy.

This focus on legacy enduring through children can be seen when Lionel attempts to comfort his sister after Raymond's death. He says, “You say that you have lost Raymond. O, no! – yet he lives with you and in you there. From him she sprung, flesh of his flesh, bone of his bone ... in her enthusiastic affections, in the sweet qualities of her mind, you may still find him living, the good, the great, the beloved” (Shelley 205). Here, he gestures to Clara, pointing out that as long as Clara lives, in some way so will Raymond. The language used of “flesh of his

flesh, bone of his bone” harkens back to Biblical language, specifically that of Genesis 2:23 where Adam describes Eve saying, “this at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one shall be called Woman, for out of Man this one be taken” (*New Revised Standard Bible*, Genesis 2:23). Of course, the use of Biblical language is both pointed and problematic. God makes Eve in Adam’s image, of the same parts, and so reflects Adam. In the same way, Lionel argues that Clara reflects Raymond. Yet, there is a complication to this reading that hints at the complication of reading your child as a continuation of yourself. Adam tells not only about a reflection of himself here, but also of his lover. Extending this comparison is uncomfortable when referred to a father and daughter duo and recalls the danger of covert/emotional incest. It should not be Clara’s job to fulfill the role of her father, even if one doesn’t consider this role on a sexual or romantic level.

This isn’t the first time this sort of language or an appeal to parental visages is used for Clara. Earlier, when Perdita’s and Raymond’s marriage is suffering, Perdita develops a fascination with studying Clara’s face, as it is said,

Sometimes she hung over her child, tracing her resemblance to the father, and fearful lest in after life she should display the same passions and uncontrollable impulses, that rendered him unhappy. Again, with a gush of pride and delight, she marked in the features of her little girl, the same smile of beauty that often irradiated Raymond’s countenance. (Shelley 103)

Clara’s similarity in appearance to her father specifically is a cause of both distress and joy. Perdita – and other characters – project ideas and expectations onto Clara, ones that she must live up to and ones she must avoid.

The next step in analyzing the anxieties is to extend the concept of the child beyond a continuation of the parent and into a continuation of humanity as a whole. In this way, children function not only as the future generation but as a stand in for the future in general. At Alfred's birthday party, the adults look upon the children, noting "the difference of character among the boys, and endeavored to read the future man in the stripling" (Shelley 227). Lionel and the other adults outright state their endeavor to envision the future of the children present before them. This fortune-telling through children isn't uncommon even today, as children typically function as a symbol for the future. The death of the child then represents something more than just the loss of a family member. It's a metaphorical threat to the future. While watching Evelyn, his last biological child, die, Lionel begins to contemplate not just the death of his son but the death of the future:

His little form and tiny lineaments engaged the embryo of the world-spanning mind of man. Man's nature, brimful of passions and affections, would have had a home in that little heart, whose swift pulsations hurried towards their close. His small hand's fine mechanism, now flaccid and unbent, would in the growth of sinew and muscle, have achieved works of beauty or of strength. His tender rosy feet would have trod in firm manhood the bowers and glades of earth – these reflections were now of little use: he lay, thought and strength suspended, waiting unresisting the final blow. (Shelley 434-435)

Lionel combines both mankind and his son in this mourning contemplation, putting the entirety of the mind of man into Evelyn's "little form." Evelyn represents possibility and evolution, but possibilities and evolution that shall never come. Man's nature, works of beauty or strength, firm manhood – all cease to exist for Lionel when his son does.

Lionel himself is not immune to serving as a figure for humanity through the figure of a child – just as a child of England. The first words of Lionel’s story, excluding the frame story, are “I am a native of a sea-surrounded nook, a cloud-enshadowed land” (Shelley 3). The idealized language situates an idea of home for Lionel. Specifically, Johnson argues, this sets up England as Lionel’s fatherland, both fierce and intimidating, while also being a place of belonging (“The Last Man,” 12). The anxieties surrounding son and father reflect the anxieties Lionel has for England, especially when he is forced to leave. Whereas other countries are known for their spices or their landscapes, Lionel claims that England is known for “thy children, their unwearied industry and lofty inspiration. They are gone and thou goest with them the oft trodden path that leads to oblivion” (Shelley 324). Lionel later states “We left none to represent us, none to repeople the desert island, and the name of England died when we left her” (Shelley 326). Sussman focuses on this line in her analysis of *The Last Man*, noting that “Verney becomes a kind of Anti-Adam: not a powerful namer but a passive witness to a global unnamer” (“Islanded in the World,” 295). If England is known for its children – a stand-in parental figure for the English people – than its recognition and name-importance comes from its children’s attachment to the nation. Once the son steps away from the father’s lineage, the father’s line is gone and so is his name. Similarly, when the last survivors of England leave, including Lionel, the lineage and name of England loses its importance.

The last step in this evolution of anxieties is the most negative fears of the child: the way that children and birth are connected inherently to death. When one views their child, they also in some ways are viewing a reminder of their own mortality. While Lionel and the other characters of *The Last Man* don’t state this fear as clearly as they do with the loss of future generations or possibilities for humankind, one can see that this threat looms behind the language used,

especially in the use of Lionel's imagery and metaphors. When Lionel speaks on the people's fear of simple and common diseases – in comparison to the larger threat of the plague – he compares the disease to a baby animal, asking, “Could we domesticate a cub of this wild beast, and not fear its growth and maturity” (Shelley 231). While Lionel's point here is more about how trauma affects the scale of fear, his use of the cub metaphor is expressive of another fear – that the possibility children represent is also a threat to society: that the child may grow up to be a clear and present danger to society. This is not the first time Lionel uses cub imagery to talk about danger. When, earlier in the novel, he first contemplates how to save his family from the plague, he considers hiding himself and them away in a “wild beast's den, where a tyger's cubs, which I would slay, had been reared in health” (Shelley 248-249). Lionel speaks here about actively killing *children*. He doesn't speak about killing the parent tiger itself or the danger the cubs might present – as he does later – but simply gives what might be a throwaway line about killing children. Given that otherwise Lionel appears to be a nurturing father, we as readers might ask what this line means about his parenting. Perhaps it is indicative of a deep-seated fear of what children might represent. One might also think of Johnson's argument about children and monstrosity – once again, this reflects Shelley's fear of a monstrous new generation, whether that is with human children, writing, or technology (Johnson, “My Monster/Myself” 10).

When Lionel, Adrian, and Idris take stock of the damage of the plague, their lists of victims typically center on the child or future generations. In one case, Lionel explains, “From such scenes I have sometimes saved a deserted infant – sometimes led a young and grieving mother from the lifeless image of her first born, and drawn the sturdy labourer from childish weeping over his extinct family” (Shelley 278). The presented examples evolve from an orphaned baby to a young mother whose lost her child to the regression of an adult man to a

child with the demise of his family. By the end not only are there orphaned children, but even the adults have become metaphorical orphans after the loss of their family. Later, when Adrian and Lionel are looking over the “wretched sufferers”, the last survivors of the plague, once again a theme of children and generations arise. First, they spot “a mother cradled in her enfeebled arms the child, last of many, whose glazed eye was about to close for ever,” then a war-torn veteran who cannot bring himself to eat after the loss of his wife and children, and a father who is comforted by his daughter named as his “last hope” (Shelley 416). The two survivors in the “wretched sufferers” who are not immediately connected to children – a young woman trying to paint her lover’s face from memory and a dying servant attempting to continue serving his master – still hold the fear of expectations and generations. The woman cannot bring herself to create something in the image of her lover – a pseudochild – and the servant is leaving his dependent master orphaned in a metaphorical sense.

The plague and the possibility of its infection for our main characters often pairs itself with children. This danger often peaks surrounding the children or is juxtaposed with their happiness. Of the main characters’ deaths, none of the adults die by the plague or a sister sickness.¹⁰ They are killed in battle, commit suicide, die in a storm, or of heartbreak, but the plague’s touch is never deadly for them. In fact, in a book where a plague threatens humanity, almost nobody of note dies of illness. The exception to this lies in the children. Two of Idris’ and Lionel’s sons die of the plague or of a similar illness.¹¹ During the 19th century, children died more often to infectious disease – like the Plague of this novel – than any other cause of death

¹⁰ Main characters are those with great attention paid to them who also significantly affect the plot: the main friend group (Lionel, Idris, Raymond, Perdita, and Adrian), the children (Clara, Alfred, and Evelyn), and Evadne.

¹¹ The cause of the middle son’s death is not stated, but we can assume he died of other causes.

(Lerner 35).¹² The fact that there is the distinct possibility that the children did die of the plague grows more poignant when we recognize that “plague differs from meningitis in being an epidemic: each death is one of many, not an isolated event” (Lerner 171). Not only does it pain the reader to see a child die, but this is a child’s death that is part of a larger event at hand. Yet, unlike many of the other victims of the plague, their deaths carry weight. At the same time of Alfred’s death, Lionel becomes infected – and what is later discovered to be immunized – to the plague. As his son is dying, Lionel comes across a man with the plague whose “breath, death-laden, entered my vitals” when Lionel gets too close in trying to help (Shelley 337). When Lionel returns home from this misadventure, Alfred is already dead. Alfred’s death also starts Idris’ downfall into death. So, Alfred’s death becomes a direct threat to both of his parents— one that succeeds in the case of his mother.

The autobiographical text, according to Johnson, requires murdering the parents. She says, “Is autobiography somehow always in the process of symbolically killing the mother off by telling her the lie that we have given birth to ourselves?” (“My Monster/Myself” 4). Later, in discussing Shelley’s anxieties about proving herself “worthy of [her] parentage” written in her introduction to *Frankenstein*, Johnson declares “Mary, paradoxically enough, must thus usurp the parental role and succeed in giving birth to herself on paper. Her declaration of existence as a writer must therefore figuratively repeat the matricide that her physical birth all too literally entailed” (“My Monster/Myself,” 8). Alfred’s death threatens his parents’ lives, but it is Shelley’s birth – both physical and metaphorical on the paper – that necessitates some form of

¹² The ambiguousness of the exact nature of the illness(es) that kills Alfred and Evelyn is typical for the way deaths of children were discussed in terms of level of detail (Lerner 36).

death for her parents. In both cases, though, the younger generation poses a real threat to the preceding one – and one that succeeds on some level.

Evelyn's death, on the other hand, harms Clara – someone of his own generation, but who plays the role of his mother. Whereas before his death, Clara retains some glimmers of her childhood imagination, such as participating in the imaginary religion Lionel and Adrian build for her, after Evelyn dies, Clara enters fully into adulthood. All descriptors and attributes of a child disappear from her narrative entirely. Evelyn's death functions as a gate for Clara that she can only pass through once and not return – killing her childhood.

The choice on Shelley's part to pair these anxieties with an illness is not an unfounded one. Children and illness were and continue to be paired together in literature. Because of this, *The Last Man* exemplifies a larger theme of the time. When Lionel considers the plague, he places an importance on children, naming specifically "I heard of the death of only sons ... young mothers mourning for their firstborn" (Shelley 223). In a list of only four examples, half of them center on children and the next generation. The latter example even specifies the reaction of "young mothers mourning for their firstborn." This is a role Shelley would have understood too well, recalling the birth of her daughter Clara when Shelley was only 18 – a child who died only weeks after (Marshall "Volume 1," 226-227).

Lerner states that the sick child is an important character in the 19th century. He states, "a sick child makes everyone better natured, and as a kind of reward this mollifies, even removes, the pangs of sickness" (Lerner 93). It not only recasts past characters with the ability to help a weak vulnerable child, but the use of this character also warms the text to the reader who is now privy to what otherwise seems a silent secret affair. Readers care about the ill children which means they fall for a trap Lerner recognizes – once children fall ill in a text, they are likely to die

(165). This is especially true when the children go into remission, seemingly for no reason (Lerner 165). This plays with both the readers' fear, but also the mother's fear of never being able to escape fully the dangers of illness, especially for young new mothers.

Even when children in the novel are not dying – even when they are happy – the threat of the plague is paired with the younger characters. It is at Alfred's birthday party, a pinnacle of a celebration of childhood, that news of the plague's spread to England is revealed. Ryland, the leader of England at the time, appears to break the news: "*The Plague* ... Everywhere – we must fly – all fly – but whither? No man can tell – there is no refuge on earth, it comes on us like a thousand packs of wolves – we must all fly – where shall you go? Where can any of us go?" (Shelley 242). While surrounded by children, who remain unaware of the danger, Ryland is in a panicked state where he cannot make sense of his own thoughts. This frenzy and fear soon spread throughout what should be a celebration of Alfred, corrupting the party into chaos. Before Ryland even arrives, Lionel has his vision of death. He sees, "ashy pale, Raymond and Perdita sat apart, look on with sad smiles. Adrian's countenance flitted across, tainted by death – Idris, with eyes languidly closed and livid lips, was about to slide into the wide grave" (240). At this moment, when he should be celebrating his son's life, Lionel can only see death – specifically the death of his generation. It is not the children Lionel prophesies about, but rather his friends and wife. In this way, both the future generation and the threat of the plague work together to represent a danger to the parental generation. This anxiety around the child being the death of the parent's generation has been analyzed by numerous psychoanalysts, starting with Freud (*Interpretation of Dreams*, 280). One might think primarily of the Oedipal complex, that the son, on an unconscious level, desires to kill his father – to usurp him (Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams* 280). Johnson builds off this, saying "The idea that a mother can loathe, fear, and reject her baby

has until recently been one of the most repressed of psychoanalytical insights, although it is of course already implicit in the story of Oedipus, whose parents cast him out as an infant to die” (6). This fear, in this novel, proves to be unfounded since it is the parental generation who lives on – but that creates a different fear of its own.

The inverse of the threat of children is the threat of the mother to the child. Just as the child represents the possibility of a threat to the older generation, the mother represents a threat to the younger generation. She has the possibility to attack when the child is at the most vulnerable and the child holds so much trust in the mother that it opens the possibility of a betrayal. Our narrator and pseudo-author Lionel taps into this fear of the double-edged sword of a mother when talking about the doubled nature of nature (or Mother Nature), saying, “Surely, if, in those countries where earth was wont, like a tender mother, to nourish her children, we had found her a destroyer, we need not seek it here, where stricken by keen penury she seems to shudder through her stony veins” (Shelley 424). Just as the mother is in a position of power and trust over the child, Lionel determines a similar trust in nature. A common theme of the Romantic period was a fascination with nature which often ventured into the sublime – Shelley’s sublime not only reminds the reader of their small position in the world but reminds them of a certain faith against harm that they hold every time they venture into nature.

Weaver-Hightower traces a similar pattern of Nature as both killer and caretaker of children, especially in Lost Children narratives. In these narratives, children may thrive when thrust into nature, but it is not uncommon for children to die, posed with nature “cradling the child, accepting her” (Weaver-Hightower 172). In this case, even when nature is the murderer, as is the case with the Plague’s death count, there is still something nurturing and motherly about nature’s deadly embrace – especially with children.

On the human level, the ex-queen refuses to play the role of the nurturing mother. Rather than facing her responsibilities as a caretaker and looking out for her children, she prioritizes instead money, legacy, and nobility – all aspects of life that are lost when the plague hits. It is only after the plague has raged across the world and the ex-queen loses Idris as a daughter that she reacts with any sort of motherly kindness.

ANXIETIES AROUND TECHNOLOGY AND REPRODUCTION

Similar to Shelley's more famous novel *Frankenstein*, *The Last Man* shows a comparable anxiety around technology. Johnson notes the connection between technology and childbearing in *Frankenstein* as "ambivalence toward technology can thus be viewed as a displaced version of the love-hate relation we have towards our own children" ("My Monster/Myself," 6). But the whereas in *Frankenstein*, technology moves too fast, and its threat lies in doing too much, in *The Last Man*, technology has not moved fast enough and does too little. Despite a majority of the action taking place in the latter end of the 21st century, the world present in *The Last Man* differs very little from Shelley's contemporary scientific society. Unlike most stories meant to take place in a somewhat distant future, Shelley has not guessed at future technology. Other than Lionel's occasional mention of dates, it would be easy to entirely forget that the text is meant to take place in the future.

It is this lack of technological advancement that Shelley focuses on in *The Last Man*, focusing by rarely mentioning it. The one exception – the one scientist of note – is the astrologer Merrival described as "this visionary who had not seen starvation in the wasted forms of his wife and children, or plague in the horrible sights and sounds that surrounded him" (Shelley 305). After the death of his entire family, "the old man felt the system of universal nature which he had so long studied and adored, slide from under him, and he stood among the dead, and lifted his voice in curses" (Shelley 305). Science not only remains stagnant in *The Last Man*'s world, but it is entirely useless and only a distraction in the face of the plague. When Merrival realizes the death that surrounds him, he loses faith in his science and finds that it rings empty in comparison to the chaos around him. Hugh J. Luke Jr sees Merrival as a figure for Percy Bysshe Shelley, hinting that Mary Shelley might have felt bitter towards Percy for a concern with lofty art,

politics, and science while their children died (321). Just as Merrival fails to see his children dying of the plague because of his focus on the stars, Shelley worries here about Romantic idealism and technology outweighing the lives of children.

When put in relation to the anxieties around children, this absence of technological advancement begins to make sense. Our anxieties surrounding technology reflect our anxieties surrounding children, specifically that they both stand in for the future. We are responsible for creating both, but both may eventually rise above our creation – posing a threat. This threat is evident in *Frankenstein*, but it is the other side of the coin that resonates in Shelley’s later text: what if our creations do not survive? In both cases, technology’s and the children’s potential is not realized; the children die before their parents and technology hasn’t advanced.

While technology in the way we, as readers, typically think of it is strangely absent, reproductive technology in the form of the book does exist. At the end of the novel, Lionel attempts to make his suffering worthwhile. From the nothing surrounding him, from his loneliness, Lionel creates. Specifically, he writes a book – but a book with no future readership. As he ponders his desire to write a book, he says,

I also will write a book, I cried – for whom to read? – to whom dedicated? And then with silly flourish (what so capricious and childish as despair?) I wrote,

DEDICATION

TO THE ILLUSTRIOUS DEAD.

SHADOWS, ARISE, AND READ YOUR FALL!

BEHOLD THE HISTORY OF THE

LAST MAN (466)

In writing this book and creating this dedication to the dead, Lionel fully realizes the culmination of his fear. He creates a book that *should* be his continuation, but like his children, it only results in nothingness from death. There are no future generations to read his book. This dedication is echoed in Charlotte Sussman's question for readers of *The Last Man*: "Can books exist without readers?" ("Islanded in the World," 287). One could posit the other side of this question is then the following: can mothers exist without children? Lionel leaves us with both questions possibly unanswered.

The Last Man begins with a strange frame narrative, where the unnamed narrator – theoretically Shelley herself – stumbles upon the cave of Sibyl. There in the cave, she comes across Lionel's story. The rest of the story, excepting the end, is her retelling of the narrative she found. This would initially birth the argument that this is not autobiographical at all, as she is clearly telling the story that belongs to someone else – the futuristic Lionel Verney. Yet, Shelley acknowledges herself that the story has become distorted: "Doubtless the leaves of Cumaean Sibyl have suffered distortion and diminution of interest and excellence in my hands. My only excuse for thus transforming them, is that they were intelligible in their pristine condition" (Shelley 7). Shelley transforms the writing by restructuring it by "add[ing] links, and model[ling] the work into a consistent form" (Shelley 6). The act of recreating the Sibylline leaves and restructuring the story parallels Shelley's writing of an autobiography through fiction. In "My Monster/Myself," Johnson deals with the absurdity of naming *Frankenstein* as an autobiographical text when it is in fact the autobiographies of three male characters (3). She does this by examining the monstrosity of reproduction, both in writing and childbearing ("My Monster/Myself," 4). The autobiography of *Frankenstein* is just as monstrous and awkward as Victor's child – the Creature, both reflecting back on the anxiety around bringing new life into

the world. Part of Shelley's monstrous autobiography shows itself again in this text. Like the contemporary image of the Creature, this story is sewn together from different tragedies, deaths, and traumas. Just as Shelley picks up and rearranges the pieces of Lionel's story, she is also picking up and rearranging the pieces of her own life and story, trying to form them into a comprehensible tale.

One of Lerner's examinations – Margaret Oliphant – writes in her diary after the death of her children “And now here I am all alone. / I cannot write any more” (Lerner 27). Here, we see Oliphant also connecting writing and parenting, just as Mary Shelley does numerous times. Once she loses her ability to parent through the deaths of her offspring, she also loses the ability to write – no longer able to reproduce physically or creatively. Lerner, in discussing Dorothy Wordsworth's writing after the death of her child, notes of her tear, “The blot, like words, is writing: moving as it is, it requires the same act of faith in the reality of the signified on our part” (72). Lerner recognizes here that it's possible for something “hidden” to be just as valuable and important as what is clearly stated – going so far as to say that the tear drop might have purposely been included. Wordsworth's tear is writing of her grief. Similarly, we might say that Shelley's writing of the plague is her version of the tearstain, writing of her grief without writing of it in the expected outward manner that might be expected of her. It is as Lerner says, “Real and vicarious grief do not exist independently of one another” (188). The real grief that Shelley experienced at the loss of her children is represented symbolically through the depiction of the next generations coming to an end, guaranteeing that the future does not come.

Family for Shelley was tied to reading and literature, being born to two literary greats and living with that expectation upon her. Gilbert writes of Shelley's connection of family and literature as follows: “Especially because she never knew her mother, and because her father

seemed so definitively to reject her after her youthful elopement, her principal mode of self-definition – certainly in the early years of her life with Shelley, when she was writing *Frankenstein* – was through reading, and to a lesser extent writing” (50). According to Gilbert, Shelley creates an identity for herself through the act of reading – especially the reading of her mother’s works, tying these two forms of reproductions together (50). If reading is then looking back at what existed before her – her mother – than writing is looking forward to what exists after her – the next generation.

Gilbert ends her chapter on *Frankenstein* with the following quote: “For the annihilation of history may well be the final revenge of the unmothered monster who has been denied a true place in history” (Gilbert 72). Once again Gilbert’s focus lies on what lies behind Shelley, not beyond. The concern with *The Last Man* isn’t the annihilation of history, but rather the annihilation of the future. This may be one reason why Lionel’s readers within the text must exist in the past. The connection to his past is strong now – he understands his father, he is well-read, all of what appears good in his life remains behind him. But Lionel worries that there is nothing to connect him to the future, something that Shelley herself might have been concerned about with the loss of three children and a loosening grip on her remaining son’s lifestyle. Rather than the unmothered monster, it is the mother – perhaps monstrous – who worries for her place in the future.

There is also a way of reading this book as Lionel’s final child, a cyborg creation of human and (written) technology. Like Donna Haraway’s cyborg, this book cannot be correctly said to have a mother and a father (2192). Those that it is dedicated to are already long dead and even its “parent” of Lionel can be said to be nobody. After all, Lionel has consistently defined himself by his relations to others throughout the novel – and now with no one left in the world,

he has no connection to name himself with. In fact, “Unlike the hopes of Frankenstein’s monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through a restoration of the garden: i.e., through the fabrication of a heterosexual mate, through its completion in a finished whole” (Haraway 2192). Rather, it is Lionel who asks to be saved by his creation. It is through the book he reaches for companionship: a feat that inevitably fails. Haraway notes that, about cyborgs, “Survival is the stakes” (2217). Similarly, it is Lionel’s survival that is at stake in his creation of the book. Not only his survival as the last living man, but also his survival as a person in the more metaphorical sense. This book allows him to survive as Lionel Verney, because there are the hopes of *someone else* to read it and to recognize his identity as the author.

One should make the connection here back to Shelley’s books, especially later ones like *The Last Man* where she would’ve been struggling with the numerous losses to her family and friends. Just as Johnson traces parallels between Shelley’s authorship of *Frankenstein* and Victor’s creation of the creature, there are connections to be made between Shelley’s authorship of *The Last Man* and Lionel’s authorship of his book (“My Monster/Myself,” 7). In the 1831 Introduction to *Frankenstein*, Shelley bids her “hideous progeny go forth and prosper,” echoing a parallel between children and writing in her mind. After the deaths of loved ones, children, and friends, our authors – both Lionel and Shelley – contemplate the usefulness of writing their respective stories. Truly, Lionel Verney’s life is always defined in terms of loneliness, isolation, and not belonging, similar to how one might imagine Shelley’s ideas of her own life, outside of the societal norm (Luke 326). Luke notes of Lionel, “Not only is he the solitary living human being, but, unlike the Lionel of the novel’s first section, he is now fully conscious, aware of having lost what he once had, the joy of human companionship” (326-327). Lionel’s loneliness is fully-formed because he can recognize how alone he truly is after all he has loved are gone.

As Lionel is facing the precipice of extinction for humanity, there is a singular companion left for him: a dog. The Apocalyptic dog has become common enough in the genre to warrant its own TV Tropes page, including examples like Dogmeat from the *Fallout* series, Kojak from Stephen King's *The Stand*, and Sam from *I am Legend*. Dogs in the apocalypse are either returns to the wild wolves and a threat against the human protagonists or loyal companions. Shelley may be the predecessor of this latter trope with the inclusion of the dog in the conclusion to *The Last Man*. Yet, this dog is not a real dog. It is an archetype, the concept of a dog without being a fleshed-out character. In fact, nearly every dog in the novel fulfills the archetype of a dog, especially the apocalyptic dog, without forming a realistic version of any individual animal.

Tracing the figure of the dog through the novel, we see that the main function of these dogs is to act as companions where humans cannot serve as company. At the beginning of the novel, while describing his childhood, Lionel names a dog as his singular companion other than his sister (Shelley 14). By beginning with the sole companion of Lionel being a dog and ending with a dog as companion, this creates a circular nature of loneliness for Lionel. As a child, Lionel was alone and forced to be independent – whereas in the end, he's alone with no dependent outside of the dog.

Other dogs in the novel serve similar purposes as companions to humans in their times of loneliness or abandonment. When the survivors of the plague happen upon a little girl whose only human connections have long died to the illness, it is only a Newfoundland dog named Lion who keeps her company until her inclusion into the group of survivors (Shelley 333). Raymond's dog Florio is the last creature to follow Raymond when he goes into the depths of war – although Raymond does turn Florio away in the end, completely isolating himself (Shelley 198). When

Raymond and Florio reunite, it is after the death of Raymond, where Florio dies beside the body of his former owner (Shelley 206). The dog cannot be a continuation of his master. Rather the master's death necessitates the death of the dog. This, of course, does not bode well for Lionel's dog.

It would appear, then, that the dogs in this text act as companions, a logical conclusion. The apocalyptic dog typically is the sole companion of the human protagonist, acting as a sort of heart of the story. But even in this introduction to the trope, we already begin to explore the problems hiding beneath the surface. In stories concerned with "what comes next," the dog is unfortunately a weak answer. The documentary *Life After People*, while imagining the effects that an entirely human apocalypse would have on the world, posits that most dogs would not survive more than a few weeks after the deaths of humans due to their dependence upon humanity and their long separation from their wild instincts. Of course, one should not disrespect the power and importance of companionship with nonhuman animals – rather, a dog cannot serve as a continuance of legacy nor can the dog interact with Lionel in the same way his human children would. Even as the dog is a dependent upon the human, they cannot continue the culture of humanity. While he holds one last companion, Lionel remains functionally alone.

Mary Shelley's concerns with reproduction can therefore be seen in the function of science, literature, and animal companionship present in the novel. These three do not do enough, neither replacing or offering up home for their human child counterparts.

CONCLUSION

With *The Last Man* published towards the end of the Romantic period at 1826, Shelley stands at the precipice of the end of an era, looking back and fearing the future that might not welcome her or the ideals she holds. Many of the “great names” of the Romantic Era are long gone, just as Lionel’s friends are long gone and Shelley views herself as one of the last survivors. And in thinking of Shelley as a survivor, we switch here at the completion of the essay from reading her as a mother to reading her as a daughter. Sussman states “As a daughter, Shelley imagines herself to be the end of the line. Her son may inherit his grandfather’s estate; her husband’s poetry may be preserved for a new generation; but the legacy of Wollstonecraft and Godwin dies with her, even before her own death” (“Daughter of the Revolution,” 168). In this way, Shelley is a last Wollstonecraft and Godwin, the last chance for her family names and ideals to live on. In fact, it is Shelley who writes of herself “The last man! Yes, I may well describe that solitary being’s feelings, feeling myself as the last relic of a beloved race, my companions extinct before me” (Shelley vii). The “race” here can refer to her Romantic circle, but Jonathan Elmer proposes in “Vaulted Over the Present’: Melancholy and Sovereignty in Mary’s Shelley’s *The Last Man*” that “race” is a way of speaking of her family (355). By doing this, she equates being the last of her family with the last of mankind, equalizing herself with Lionel Verney.

In creating her apocalyptic vision, Shelley taps into experiences of motherhood and its anxieties, of children and their anxieties, of authors and their anxieties – combining these and casting them into a futuristic world of illness and death. Despite the clear horror surrounding the plague, it is the horror surrounding the children that often captures readers, perhaps without their realization.

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