



From Man's World to Gaia's: An Ecocritical Reading of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826)

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Abstract

Set in a plague-ravaged twenty-first-century world, Mary Shelley's three-volume novel *The Last Man* (1826) narrates the tragic tale of the protagonist, Lionel Verney, and his network of friends and family as they battle a deadly pathogen that engulfs the planet. The novel's shifting interactions between human beings and Mother Earth, in which the apparently powerless natural world eventually becomes the planet's domineering force, will be analysed in depth in this ecocritical reading of Shelley's text, with aid from the scholarly works of Barbara Johnson, Morton Paley, and Simon Estok. The idea that a pandemic can cause armageddon – a very palpable reality in this post-COVID-19 world – makes a novel like *The Last Man* quite prescient. Further, this article will explore how Shelley writes her life into the formulation of the plot of *The Last Man* through a biographical reading of the text. Finally, this study will employ the theories propounded by noted critics like Val Plumwood, Karren Warren, and Vandana Shiva to present an ecofeminist reading of the text, through close analysis of the diverse cast of male and female characters, particularly Lionel Verney and the earth mother herself, who emerges as an ecofeminist all-powerful creation in Mary Shelley's nonpareil dystopian novel.



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Thy hand, great Anarch! lets the curtain fall;
And universal Darkness buries All.

– Alexander Pope, *The Dunciad*.

Introduction

Alongside the renowned 1818 novel *Frankenstein* (1818), Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797-1851) is the author of the dystopian three-volume novel *The Last Man*, published in 1826. *The Last Man* is set in a plague-ravaged twenty-first-century England caught in the throes of a political upheaval precipitated by a shift from authoritarian monarchy to a republican form of government. The narrative pivots around five principal characters connected through fraternal and marital bonds. Lionel Verney is the narrator and the eponymous “last man” who emerges as the sole survivor of the pandemic. Lionel’s dear friend Adrian is the son of the last ruler of England and is imbued with republican principles, and Lord Raymond, who aspired to become England’s King. The two primary female personae of the novel are Perdita – Lionel’s sister and the wife of Raymond – and Idris, sister to Adrian and Lionel’s betrothed.

The first volume of the novel narrates the lives of the principal characters and records the personal and political machinations fuelling Britain’s political transformation. Lionel and Perdita, who had once been very close to the inner circle at the royal court, now lived on the outskirts of England due to disagreements with the royalty and their father. Both of them, however, had been friends with Adrian and were gradually reintroduced into the social life of urban England.

The second segment opens with Lord Raymond setting out for Greece to fight the incoming Turkish forces. It is during this war that the deadly pathogen emerges in the open and begins its dance of destruction. To add to her woes, along with the ravages of the disease, England was severely weakened by waves of invasions by the Irish and the Americans, and a terrible climate. This compels a mass exodus of the British population into mainland Europe. However, with a frightening pace, the plague scythed through humanity, and spared none save Lionel.

Now based in a post-apocalyptic world, the final division of Shelley’s work is a record of Lionel’s wanderings through the world with “a shaggy fellow, half water and half shepherd’s dog” who became his “only company” (Shelley, 2011, p. 680). The novel concludes in the year 2100 with the titular character wandering the wilderness of a planet devoid of people, yet pregnant again with the sublime beauty of the natural world, following the fall of *Homosapiens*.

In the Introduction to the landmark *The Ecocriticism Reader*, Cheryll Glotfelty defines Ecocriticism as the “study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty, 1996, p. xviii). Employing Glotfelty’s ecocritical lens, the first section of this article will look at the changing role of the interactions between the natural and the social world in *The Last Man*, through the varied points of view of the primary characters in the novel. After a brief reading of the biographical imprints of Shelley’s life in the novel, the article will turn to analysing Shelley’s text through an ecofeminist optic, with the life-giving mother nature as the primary ecofeminist force of the novel.

The Binary between Nature and Human

The very genesis of the novel contains an ecological element. The Prologue to *The Last Man* begins with an unnamed third-person narrator exploring the ancient caves in Naples and quite unexpectedly discovering the “last man” Lionel Verney’s manuscript, etched on a natural sheet of “Sibylline leaves” (Shelley, 2011, p. 46), of pre- and post-plague life as recorded by Lionel. This is how Verney begins his tale,

I AM the native of a sea-surrounded nook, a cloud-enshadowed land which, when the surface of the globe, with its shoreless ocean and trackless continents, presents itself to my mind, appears only as an inconsiderable speck in the immense whole; and yet, when balanced in the scale of mental power, far outweighed. So true it is that man’s mind alone was the creator of all that was good or great to man, and that Nature herself was only his first minister. (Shelley, 2011, p. 50)

In the very beginning of the narration, a binary is being constructed between human beings being the “superior” creator of “all that was good” with the world, and the relegation of the realm of “Nature” into a mere subservient “minister” of her human overlords. It is quite astonishing that such a form of binary could still be conceived by someone who was the final survivor of a powerful pathogen that had devastated humanity. This dichotomous way of thinking is crucial to the ecocritical perusal of canonical literature to interrogate how man has used his ‘superior’ cranial abilities to justify domination over the ‘dumb’ world of nature.

It may be noted here that the narrator, while providing a retrospective account of living in a post-plague world, does not begin by identifying himself as the narrator, thereby moving away from following the conventional openings of most of the canonical eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels. Being well aware of nature’s immense power, he calls himself a “native of a sea-

surrounded nook”, thereby locating himself within the environmental realm and identifying with the same, thereby implicating that despite his haughty outlook on the natural place of natural world vis-à-vis humanity, he ultimately betrays his awareness that, along with the rest of his species, had no choice but to survive under the domain of the all-powerful natural world. The uses of words like “shoreless” and “trackless” further buttress the sublime and expansive grandeur of nature. This is quite unlike the opening words of a homo-centric novel like *Robinson Crusoe*, which begins with the narrator identifying himself within a social milieu saying “I Was born in the Year 1632, in the City of York of a good Family, tho’ not of that Country, my Father being a Foreigner of Bremen, who settled first at Hull.” (Defoe, 2007, p. 84) *Crusoe* is a tale of the conquest of nature by man, while Shelley’s novel inverts this anthropocentric paradigm on its head.

However, quite inexplicably, in the subsequent lines the narrator again rehashes the binary between the anthropocentric ideas about the physical world of nature and the mental realm of man and labels the environment as being man’s mere “minister” since man’s “mental power”, i.e. the power of reasoning as opposed to mute nature’s brute force was far superior to anything that nature could ever hope to create, including the plague.

The fact that the story contained in the “Sibylline leaves” outlives the natural Armageddon may also be seen as a testament to the power of the human faculty and the uniquely human art of writing and narrating stories. But at the same time, the material fact ‘on the ground’ fact of Verney’s world was that of an abject apocalypse, where nature triumphed over the human beings and the sibylline leaves could only find their way into the author’s hands by virtue of their spotless preservation in a natural, geological space. Thus, in a way, it was indeed nature’s will to transmit this message as a statement of her prowess to posterity, necessitating the all-powerful ‘homo humanus’ to recognise their dependence on the order of nature.

The ecological world plays an essential role in the life of Verney, too. In the introductory phase of the novel, Lionel and his sister Perdita are found to be leading an isolated existence in “mountain abodes” amidst nature, far from the “busy haunts of men” (Shelley, 2011, p. 65). This, however, did not satisfy Lionel as it “did not accord [him] with the love of action and desire of human sympathy.” (Shelley, 2011, p. 56)

Later in the text, they make their way back into the social world and are warmly made to feel at home by Adrian, who wishes to put past familial disagreements behind them and not let the bygone family feuds hurt his friendship with Lionel. Lionel, however, after long years in the

wilderness, could never quite fit into this cultural world and got caught in the crossfire between the tussle of pro-democratic and monarchical ideas of Adrian and Raymond, summed up in the words “Adrian despised the narrow views of the politician, and Raymond held in supreme contempt the benevolent visions of the philanthropist” (Shelley, 2011, p. 100). Nature was, therefore, a nurturer for Lionel and provided his beloved sister and himself a happy and safe life after their father, who had once been a close friend of the king, had squandered most of his wealth in the city and needlessly feuded with the royals. Interestingly, nature continues to remain a safe haven for Lionel even after the plague had murdered the rest of his species. After recovering from the ailment, he roamed the continents of Europe, Asia, and Africa in desperate search for human life and company, accompanied by a dog (he also had a dog in his shepherding days of the past), another creature of the environment. Perhaps it is not a matter of mere coincidence that the novel begins and ends with the “last man” searching for human company in a world devoid of their existence, but rather speaks to the omnipotence of the natural world, and humanity’s circular, never-ending desire to break free from the hands of Mother Earth – a nurturer and destroyer in equal measure.

What changes in the mind of “the last man” throughout the novel are his feelings pertaining to the natural realm. Towards the beginning of the text, when he lived in the wilds voluntarily, his experiences in nature were pleasant and joyous as expressed in these jubilant lines,

A beech wood stretched up the hill behind, and a purling brook gently falling from the acclivity ran through poplar-shaded banks into the lake. I lived with a farmer whose house was built higher up among the hills: a dark crag rose behind it, and, exposed to the north, the snow lay in its crevices the summer through. Before dawn, I led my flock to the sheep-walks and guarded them through the day. It was a life of toil; for rain and cold were more frequent than sunshine; but it was my pride to contain the elements. My trusty dog watched the sheep... (Shelley, 2011, p. 61)

This view of nature changes sharply towards the conclusion of the narrative, and a starkly different view of the natural world develops in Lionel’s psyche.

The lone wanderer will still unfurl his sail, and clasp the tiller—and, still obeying the breezes of heaven, for ever round another and another promontory, anchoring in another and another bay, still ploughing seedless ocean, leaving behind the verdant land of native Europe, a down the tawny shore of Africa, having weathered the fierce seas of

the Cape, I may moor my worn skiff in a creek, shaded by spicy groves of the odorous islands of the far Indian ocean. (Shelley, 2011, p. 683)

From roaming without a care in the lush, pastoral dells of the British Isles, Lionel finds himself in a very different natural landscape through the course of the narrative. However, in both of these markedly different stages of his life, Lionel and his dog are alone in the world of nature. The former is a pastoral scene, while the latter could be read in “ecoGothic” terms, following the coinage of this term by Andrew Smith and William Hughes in the introductory chapter to the volume *EcoGothic*. Smith and Hughes define the “ecoGothic” as the “Gothic’s representation of ‘evil’ and fear emanating from the ecological world” (Smith & Hughes, 2013, p. 1). Shelley’s novel invokes these ecoGothic ideas through the depiction of the elemental forces of nature and the raging battle between humans and a fearsome natural world. Here, nature becomes the principal source of a foreboding, Gothic doom that Verney had to grapple with, which engenders the transformation of his perception of the world around him. Lionel and the human world hence undergo a journey from being able to “contain the elements” to having to obey “the breezes” of the environment. Thereby, flipping the script, it is the human beings who turn into nature’s hapless “minister[s]”. Verney thus displays what Simon Estok calls “ecophobia” in “Theorizing in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia”. In this article, Estok defines “ecophobia” as possessing a recognisable “contempt for the natural world” (Estok, 2009, p. 204). The ecoGothic power of the plague, however, shuts this ecophobic “contempt” forcefully. Shelley’s ecoGothic nature, in turn, echoes Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland’s idea that “Nature in the Gothic is so effectively uncanny because it is known and unknown all at once – strangely made visible in these stories in a way that often challenges our foolish sense of human self-enclosure” (Parker & Poland, 2019, p. 5) in “*Gothic Nature: An Introduction*”.

Thus, Lionel – as a representative of his species – goes from being inside the world of nature to going against the natural world. It becomes quite clear to him that while he believed during his days of tending to this flock that he was heroically standing atop nature, he was, in fact, a component of Mother Earth. Once Gaia decided to up the ante and invaded the delusional sense of self-enclosure that Verney and other men had thought they had erected, it became quite clear that being within the natural world was far more favourable to humanity’s survival than being up in arms against her.

In “*The Last Man: Apocalypse Without Millennium*”, Morton Paley notes that while narrating and recording the events, Lionel “imagines a live reader for his narrative” (Paley, 1993, p. 11)

inhabiting the planet in the future. The very idea of envisioning a future readership of his writings contradicts the idea of the ‘last-ness’ of humanity. Lionel’s motivation for keeping a record of his solo experiences was certainly wrought in a hope that humanity would again regain standing sometime in the future, and he would be able to ‘live’ through his words to transmit his tale of conquering the ravages of nature and time to posterity.

Beyond Lionel, the other major characters in the novel also have complex interactions with the natural world. Adrian, for instance, was instrumental in reintroducing the ‘wild’ Lionel into polite society away from the natural world. Besides, in the city, Adrian punctiliously maintained “a park and preserves” where he would spend “delightful hours in watching the tribes of lovely and almost tame animals with which it was stocked, and ordered that greater care should be taken of them.” (Shelley, 2011, p. 70) Both of these actions colour Adrian as a patriarchal re-educative force who attempts to tame and control the natural world and its impulses by introducing and constraining them into social spaces. The idea that nature could be in any way governed by man, as Adrian had aspired to, is proved wrong by the plague.

Lord Raymond was a pompous aristocrat who wished to capture Constantinople in the hopes that his martial might would lead to his rise in power and prestige in the court of England. It is here – i.e., just at the opportune moment of some mortal’s ambition becoming disproportionate – that the plague emerges into view during Raymond’s campaign in Greece against the Turkish army. At the very outset of the plague’s spread, the disease is described in antagonist terms as an “enemy to the human race”, as noted by Barbara Johnson in the chapter “The Last Man”. Johnson argues that it was while fighting the ‘others’, i.e. the Turkish, the Europeans discover the “absolute Other” in the form of the plague (Johnson, 1993, p. 264). While the Greeks were on the path to victory, the emergence of the pathogen led to a wild scramble on the battlefield from both the warring contingents. Both victor and vanquished alike ran helter-skelter to shield themselves from the disease unsuccessfully. However, the plague’s victory brings an end to the Western hold over the world, and following Johnson’s article, seemingly “replaces” (Johnson, 1993, p. 264) the victory of the West over the East with its own conquest of the entire globe.

In the narrative context of the novel, this was the first time human beings encountered what it meant to be pitted against the powerful forces of nature. The chaos caused by the pestilence wiped out the false perceptions that led Adrian and Lionel to mistakenly assume that they could dominate nature. Alongside the millions of deaths, and social and political instability caused by the plague, the contagion’s spread also led to invasion by the peoples living from the “uncultivated wilds” of America and Ireland (Shelley, 2011, p. 361), who had arrived to find safer

places to live in the United Kingdom, effectively colonising England only for the affliction to end their lives as well in short notice. Additionally, deadly storms wreaked havoc on the coastal towns of England. These multipronged assaults on the social world of the novel – by both natural and human forces – foment a complete devastation of British, and later global, social, political, and cultural order.

Here, the metaphor of Mary Shelley’s seminal creation – Frankenstein – can be used to elaborate on the ideas of the Other found in *The Last Man*. Frankenstein was artificially created by a scientist, but not adequately nurtured. As a result of this, the so-called monster turned rogue and ultimately turned on its creator. Extending this logic, human beings may be read as a creation of nature, but again, who ultimately turned rogue with the help of technology and became an “absolute Other” to nature, while also regarding the natural world in a similar vein.

Biographical Imprints in *The Last Man*

Being a woman herself, Mary Shelley locates the complex dynamics of a patriarchal society from an intellectual, as well as aesthetic and ethical angle. Morton Paley observes in the Introduction to the 2011 Oxford edition of *The Last Man* that the text is replete with biographical details from Mary Shelley’s life and her decorated contemporaries. In 1822, Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) – the husband of Mary, and the inspiration behind the freethinking Adrian – drowned in Italy. A couple of years later, Lord Byron (1788-1824), a close friend and colleague of the Shelley couple, succumbed to injuries while fighting for the Greeks against the Turkish troops, closely mirroring Lord Raymond’s ventures.

By 1826, Paley highlights, Mary Shelley was in dire need of financial support and had to publish her husband’s *Posthumous Poems*, something made considerably more difficult by the archconservative Timothy Shelley being adamantly opposed to the publication of his son’s radical, pro-republican works. To add to her hardships, Shelley was also looking for publishers for her writings to sustain her kids and herself. These struggles led Mary to lament in her diary, “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, May, 1824), lines which conspicuously resemble Lionel Verney’s laments in *The Last Man* (Paley, 2011, p. 1). This leads to the conclusion that Shelley herself saw nature as an adversary, as her husband had drowned in a natural setting, which had robbed her of her beloved Percy and led her to face considerable hardships alone. Thus, Shelley’s adversarial approach vis-à-vis nature is enunciated by her

labelling the natural calamity in the form of the plague as an “enemy to the human race”, and her own self.

Another notable influence behind the creation of *The Last Man* is a famous geological phenomenon of 1816. Often designated as the Year Without the Summer, the year 1816 saw a geologically intriguing phenomenon caused by the eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia a year before, something which had triggered a considerable change in the global climate. A host of apocalyptic works were penned responding to the aftermath of Tambora’s eruption. Curiously, the concept of a solitary survivor’s narration of events post-cataclysm found much vogue amongst Romantic authors of this day. Lord Byron wrote his famous “Darkness” and portrayed a world bereft of light where “darkness” became “the universe” and laid waste on human population, his narrator being the last surviving individual of the human race (Byron, 1817). The comparatively less canonical poem “The Last Man” by Thomas Campbell is also a verse narrative of the last “lonely” surviving individual in a world where “The Sun himself must die” (Campbell, 1832).

The Last Man, therefore, is not a novel written in isolation but was rather a product of its time, drew inspiration from a network of similar fictional proceedings, and also grew out of a range of Mary Shelley’s autobiographical reflections.

The Politics of Gender and Ecofeminism in *The Last Man*

Except the Countess of Windsor, the rigidly pro-monarchy mother of Adrian and Idris, who strongly opposed her daughter marrying Lionel, and Perdita, the cast of women characters in *The Last Man*, like Idris and Evadne Zaimi – Adrian’s beau – are ideal nineteenth-century epitomes of devoted wives to their outgoing, politically-active husbands. Care for and devotion to their partners and the running of the household are the primary markers of their identities. They are excluded from the realm of politics, formulation of policies to stem the spread of the disease, and reduce fatalities. The absence of women in these fields is ironic, as a prime tenet for limiting epidemic or pandemic deaths is adequate care and nourishment, which were seen as ‘feminine’ and ‘womanly’ qualities. The absence of women from the realm of care, and the consequent failure of the masculine networks of care, can be read as Shelley’s oblique critique regarding the exclusion of ‘feminine’ qualities in social and political decision-making.

The Countess of Windsor unsuccessfully schemed to orchestrate a return of the monarchy using her children, Adrian and Idris, as political pawns. This ultimately proved futile due to Adrian’s

stringent commitment to republicanism. This episode depicts the futility of a lone woman going against what had been predestined by society as her role.

In stark contrast to the courtly upbringing of the women mentioned above, Perdita grew up in an entirely different way with Lionel in the pristine woods and hills. She is described as spending “the time she could command she spent in solitude. She would ramble to the most unfrequented places, and scale dangerous heights, that in those unvisited spots she might wrap herself in loneliness” (Shelley, 2011, p. 59) and that she often “lost herself delightedly in these self-created wanderings, and returned with unwilling spirit to the dull detail of common life.” (Shelley, 2011, p. 60). In these lines, readers can spot a happy girl living in the lap of her mother earth. It was because of being wrenched from this natural world to fit into a world of social obligations that she lost her carefree disposition and became another typical lady, devotedly looking after the menfolk. Henceforth, a female character like Perdita in *The Last Man* is the happiest when away from the patriarchal social order, and becomes oppressed under the burden of a masculine social order, which opens up an ecofeminist reading of the novel. This strain of ecofeminist thought finds powerful expression in the sweeping wave of destruction that wipes out the masculine world order, root and branch, as explored in the next section of this exposition.

The all-powerful earth mother is certainly the most prominent presence in the novel. The plague represents an ecofeminist nature taking on a heteropatriarchal social world. While Lionel might have survived because of his closeness with the natural world, it may be argued that someone like Perdita could have emerged as an ecofeminist heroine and become a much more suitable survivor of the plague because of her gender identity and deeper engagement with Mother Nature. Writing in the nineteenth century, Shelley might have indeed struggled to imagine a woman being the last surviving member of the human species, given the patriarchal social order of her time.

It might also be useful to read the novels using Val Plumwood and Karen Warren’s theories of ecofeminism. In *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, Plumwood formulates a reason-nature dualism as a cudgel to expose how literature created a “master model” (Plumwood, 2005, p. 23) that seeks to employ reason as a “conceptual weapon” (Plumwood, 2005, p. 54) to exclude anything or anyone who was not seen as possessing “reason”. Traditionally, males have been seen as having the copyright on “reason”. Hence, women and nature were relegated to being dependent on men as their saviour. As a remedy, Plumwood uses the idea of an “anti-dualist” (Plumwood, 2005, p. 33) approach to combat the phallogentric nature of literature. This formulation finds further support in *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective on What it is and Why It Matters* by

Karen Warren, where Warren calls this system an “oppressive framework” created and enforced by this artificial, patriarchal social “value system” to justify hierarchal power relations between the members of society using binary expressions like “ups and downs” (Warren, 2005, p. 45). This further provides “logic of domination” (Warren, 2000, p. 46) as the existing privileges belonging to the “ups” (masculine) and desirable to be continued, and as an extension creates a logical, inviolable, hierarchical framework to perpetuate the oppression of the feminine forces, namely women and nature.

Also, within an ecofeminist framework, by virtue of the fact that nature does not remain a passive agent here as it was expected to be by Lionel and the patriarchal social framework, she rather emerges and exhibits what Vandana Shiva calls the *adishakti* of “Prakriti” (Sanskrit for ‘nature’) – “a powerful and effective primordial source of power” (Shiva, 1998, p. 38). This “primordial” power can be located in the havoc wreaked by the plague. There is also something essentially “primordial” about Perdita’s ability to be free and at home in nature, and not in the haunts of men in the social order. This *adishakti* (Sanskrit for ‘ancient power/force’) violates Warren’s “logic of domination” used by a masculine culture to oppress women and Gaia. Perdita and the Countess also emerge as “anti-dualist” heroines, while the rest conform to the code of dualism. The latter by virtue of her trying to pave a way for her will to continue and thereby fight back against a masculine culture, and the former because of the freedom and ease that she felt in the “anti-dualist” world of Gaia, something that she lacked in the “dualist” social world.

Notably, the character of Lionel can also be read from an “anti-dualist” angle. Lionel – an ecofeminist being – possesses the ability to gel with nature effortlessly and had to undergo considerable training in the hands of Adrian to fit into the public sphere, away from his natural training. However, his experience in the field of nature superseded his social training, owing to which he became the first and only man to recover from the plague, and the last man to survive the cataclysm. Portraying Lionel as the sole survivor is Shelley’s way of asserting that the feminine-ecofeminist ethos of a character like Lionel had enabled him to survive the natural hazard, something that no other masculine figure in the novel, or women operating within the patriarchal social matrix, was able to effectuate.

Conclusion: The Idea of ‘Last-ness’ and Survival

Closer to our times, films like *Armageddon* and *Don’t Look Up* address the issues of apocalypse and survival. While in the former, human beings successfully unite to destroy an asteroid headed towards the planet, the Leonardo Di Caprio-starring production *Don’t Look Up* depicts a hapless

twenty-first century world roiled by misinformation a world where humanity is sleepwalking towards disaster by apparently ignoring an incoming meteorite – standing as a metaphor for the current attitude exhibited by large sections of the global population and governments appertaining to the impending ecological crises. However, even in this movie, a small group of individuals did escape the planet in time and thereby became the ‘last’ people intent on continuing the human lineage. The in-progress HBO-produced television show *The Last of Us* documents the harsh lives of the survivors of the ‘last’ communities on earth after a human-made fungal microbe turns billions of people into zombies.

Moving into the world of print, Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road* presents a southward journey of a father and son in a scorched and hostile post-apocalyptic landscape in search of water. But on the way, the son is adopted by a kind woman while the father walks on. Thus, even in a wasteland, a communitarian spirit and hope seep in.

If this logic of survival is applied to diseases, epidemics, and pandemics, they have featured in literature for quite a long time. Giovanni Boccaccio’s *The Decameron* features a cohort of people who escaped plague-stricken Florence to spend time storytelling in a delightful country villa. Thus, in the time era of Boccaccio (1313-1375), escaping the city and being together with people was the coping mechanism employed. Fast forward three centuries, and the narrator of *The Journal of a Plague Year*, by Daniel Defoe (1660-1731), can be found trying to protect himself in the heart of the metropolis of London itself, since the countryside had been decimated by the titular ailment because of the mobility between the city and its outskirts. He also does not have the merry company that Boccaccio had envisaged, but has to stay safe by himself. It is the tale of an individual survivor, but here, the adage of ‘every man for himself’ can be seen as literally functioning since most individuals were trying to stay safe. *The Plague* by Albert Camus (1913-1960) presents a similar case in the town of plague-infested Oran, but replete with modern prevention techniques and the ultimate creation of a serum that successfully stemmed the flow of the disease, something consciously absent in the texts mentioned previously. Camus’s novel, however, ends with a chilling prediction of plague coming back in Oran. The epidemic becomes a pandemic in Emily St John Mandel’s (1979-) 2014 novel *Station Eleven* in the form of a “Georgian Flu”, which devastates the human world. However, not an insignificant number of people do survive the contagion, and they live almost like the *Homosapiens* of yore – in small, nomadic tribal bands. Therefore, in these books and films over the years, the idea of a spirit of survival against all odds emerges. This is something that Shelley envisages that kept Lionel

Verney going in *The Last Man* – trudging on in a barren world, in the hope of meeting a fellow human.

To conclude, this ecocritical reading of *The Last Man* thereby presents how Mother Nature morphs into a powerful force post-plague, effectively conquering the human world in the novel. Writing from the standpoint of an intellectually brilliant women having to weather the patriarchal nineteenth-century social mores, Mary Shelley presents her proto-feminist ideas through an ecofeminist angle in this text where the mother earth, and the ‘feminine’ Lionel to a much lesser extent, emerge as the most powerful forces in the novel after the overthrow of the patriarchal social order and the creation of an ecofeminist world, where nature reigns supreme and the Gaia becomes the ultimate source of power and authority.

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