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**An Autobiographical Analysis
of
Mary Shelley's The Last Man**

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, Mary Shelley's fame rests on the probation of her iconic novel *Frankenstein*. If one walked throughout streets of any city in the world and asked people, I'm sure it would be almost impossible to find somebody who never heard about the story of doctor Frankenstein and the creature he brought to life. In addition, many movies are helping to increase the popularity of this novel and its author. Not only there are faithful adaptations, but also parodies. There are so many adaptations inspired to this book that it would be too long to mention them all here, and the interesting fact is that day by day they are growing in number. Form the hilarious *Frankenstein* by Mel Brooks to the more recent *Frankenweenie* by Tim Burton. Furthermore, we shouldn't forget the British television period crime drama named *The Frankenstein Chronicles*, released by BBC for the first time in 2015 and the biographical movie *Mary Shelley*, dedicated to the period she spent with her beloved Percy Byshee Shelley.

On one hand, one can see how the British novelist Mary Shelley is mainly known by our contemporaries for her masterpiece *Frankenstein*, about which scholars from different countries have written many books and essays and thanks to which she was able to enter and somehow manipulate the imaginary and the mentality of the future generations. On the other hand, the other novels she wrote are still relegated to a less important position in the history of British and international literature even though they actually had a strong impact on many future authors' works.

For what I am concerned, Mary Shelley is a great novelist who deserves to be recognized by the public for her merits and the innovation she brought about in literature. Consequently, she deserves to be known also for the other amazing stories that she was able to write during her career.

For this reason, I have decided to focus on *The Last Man*. This novel will be analysed in the following chapters mainly because, among the others, it boasts the merit of being the first science-fictional novel ever written in history.

The Last Man is the fourth novel of Mary Shelley. Although the novel has been underestimated for a very long time and misunderstood by many critics and scholars, especially during the author's time, nowadays it is becoming more and more popular and is catching the interest of the public and of scholars. It was published in 1826 and it is today considered to be the second most famous novel of Mary Shelley by scholars and readers all over the world, after *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*.

The negative reactions toward the novel during Mary Shelley's time were generally due to its deeply dark and discouraging features, typical of modern science-fiction and apocalyptic stories. In addition, the story is accompanied by an often too exaggerated and also lavish language. This futuristic novel, or better to say, the apocalyptic story, has lately started to be reconsidered by critics, especially thanks to the psychological and biographical traits that clearly emerge from the plot. Not only the novel is well known as the product of a meaningful and devastating period in Mary Shelley's life, but also as an analysis of many different interesting characteristics and features that will be investigated later on in this thesis. It is a tale which talks about future and, furthermore, which is animated by

the interest of the author in the impact that scientific knowledge has on human life and human institutions. Probably, Mary Shelley's own sad experiences caused her brain to develop such ideas but some scholars believe that the author's interest in future and science might have been absorbed during her few but intense years spent with her life companion Percy Byshee Shelley.

The main aim of this thesis is thus not only to analyse the novel from the literal point of view, but especially from the personal and autobiographical one. This thesis aims to explain and demonstrate that when Mary Shelley started to write *The Last Man*, she actually tried to build her own personal intangible monument to the best past period of her life which she had spent with her circle of friends during the summer 1816 in Ginevra. After the loss of the most important people in her life, namely, her husband Percy Byshee Shelley, her close friend Lord Byron and her sons, those cheerful and blessed moments of happiness seemed very far and, consequently, she fell in a state of deep depression. The memory she kept of those moments was like a dream and she was aware that she would have never been able to bring those beautiful moments back again. During that period of gloom and depression she also started a period of huge and attentive self-examination. That is mainly the reason why this novel not only is considered a grief work but also a *roman à clef* in which readers can easily explore Mary Shelley's personal beliefs, feelings and thoughts including the rejection of Shelleyan Romanticism¹ and, at the same time Percy Shelley's intellectual passion for cosmic and celestial that left its indelible mark on Mary Shelley's imagination for the rest

1

B. T. Bennet. "Radical Imagings: Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*", *The Wordsworth Circle*, Vol. 26, No. 3, Summer 1995, p. 147.

of her life.

To conclude, it's possible to state that *The Last Man* not only evokes several significant moments in the author's life, but actually reflects the mental state of Mary Shelley. Also the apocalyptic theme that pervades the novel fulfils the role of representation of the perception of life that the author herself had during the last years of her life. To show and explain those different aspects mentioned above and to understand the influence that the life of Mary Shelley had on the development of her second most important novel, I am going to explore the plot under different points of view.

This thesis is divided into different chapters which are dedicated to more specific parts regarding Mary Shelley's life and career, the novel, the characters in the story, and the analysis of the reflections of the author's life in the novel. In the first place, the author's life is discussed pointing to the influence that especially her family and environment undoubtedly had on her personal development and all her works. Secondly, the thesis analyses *The Last Man* in detail, discussing not only the plot but also the genre – or better the genres - attributed to it and the critics made both by contemporary and modern scholars. Another chapter is devoted to the study and the description of the tale's characters: both main and secondary characters are analysed and also linked to Mary Shelley's own life and to the future devastation that she foresees for herself and the other human beings on Earth. Last but not least, a part is dedicated to the analysis of the concerns that the author had about the thematics of her time and the reflection of her opinions in the novel.

Chapter 1. THE LIFE OF MARY SHELLEY

Mary Shelley is recognized as one of the most famous women writers of the early 19th century. She owes her fame to her mesmerizing science-fictional novel named *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus*. Even though this novel is not the main topic of this thesis, it deserves to be mentioned here as it plays a fundamental role in the author's life because it fulfils a meaningful moment in Mary Shelley's career.

Frankenstein is the story of a scientist who manages to bring to life a creature which soon, without companions and feeling misunderstood by humans, is obliged to live alone in a world to which it doesn't belong. The story of doctor Frankenstein and its creature inspired more modern writers and nowadays it is still one of the most widely read books all over the world.

Mary Shelley based *Frankenstein* and also the majority of her writings on her own personal life experiences, both positive and negative. In fact, she was not a simple woman with a plain life: on the contrary, she always lived her life like that of a great romantic heroine. Her soul was full of passion, pain and faith, and like most of the great artists² she was never able to live an easy and comfortable life. Not only she lived an extremely modern life but she should be considered an author of the future. Mary Shelley was a woman and an author ahead in time, too visionary and modern to be understood by her contemporaries. Undoubtedly, it would have been easier for her to fit in in the modern society we live in.

On one hand, not being completely understood by her contemporaries must

² B. Johnson, *A Life with Mary Shelley*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2014, p. 4.

have been sad and frustrating for her, but on the other hand, this is also the reason why nowadays she is still remembered as the symbol and precursor of many of the emancipated women who followed her steps in the following centuries. It is also thanks to the increasing in a general interest in women's studies and a redefining of English Romanticism that an increment in Mary Shelley's readership took place during the last century. Mary Shelley is a special author because she never gave up experimenting and she avoided to remain stuck on the development of novels with the same repetitive style. Mary Shelley tried hard to develop new ideas and she should be considered and remembered by the future generations as one of the most productive and active authors of her time.

During her exciting and uncommon life she wrote novels – including *Frankenstein* (1818), *Valperga* (1823), *The Last Man* (1826), *The Fortunes of Perkin Warbeck* (1830), *Lodore* (1835), *Falkner* (1837) -, and novellas – *Mathilda* (1820) -which boast very different features. In addition, she wrote several dramas, a number of short stories, various travel books – such as *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* (1817) and *Rambles in Italy and Germany* (1844) - and biographical studies dedicated to her deceased husband's life and works.

Not only Mary Shelley was a very strong woman but she was also an extremely sensible one. She was too romantic and too idealist to live a happy and disinterested life. Consequently, she lived a life full of suffering. Writing was her therapy, healing her depression. It was her best way to free her mind and to express her discomfort. Her sensibility sometimes didn't let Mary write explicitly about the people who played an important role in her life, but it is clear that many of them are given a new life under the form of fictional characters in the majority

of her novels. Often they have different names but the same characteristics of those people who surrounded Mary Shelley during her life. These characters are either main or secondary but even when they are just secondary they play a fundamental role in her novels. For instance, she managed to portray Percy Shelley's and her friends' portraits in her novels for at least five times even though her father-in-law didn't give her the permission to openly mention and write about her husband after his death. This fact stopped her from writing and concluding the poet's first official biography, even though she desperately wanted it, both for personal and economical reasons. Consequently, the creation of new personalities for her husband in her novels was the only possible way to help her satisfy her needs.

Throughout her life Mary Shelley was surrounded by very strong male personalities. Firstly her father, and then her husband and friends and these strong personalities were all men who were able to influence the epoch she lived in. It was frustrating to live in the shadow of these men without the support of a mother. This frustration made her feel like she wasn't a simple woman but something in the middle, like she was part of a kind of "third sex" to which also the narrator of *The Last Man* and the creature of *Frankenstein* belong as well.

What is the difference between the two novels? Well, it is the different role played by the protagonists and the type of personification which represent Mary Shelley's different experiences in time. More specifically, if in the first period of her life – as mentioned before - she lived under the power of strong men and wanted to be accepted by them, in the second part she felt she had no need to stay alive anymore since all the people she had loved were already gone. This evolution is clearly expressed in the two novels' different plots. While *Frankenstein* is the story

of a creature who is superfluous in the world of men, *The Last Man* tells the story of a creature who is superfluous in a world without men.³

In this chapter an analysis of the author's life is presented and particular attention is given to the most important events that influenced Mary Shelley's thoughts which later emerged in *The Last Man*.

1.1 Early Life

Mary Shelley grew up in an extremely educated environment full of books and knowledge. Her parents' knowledge and their outside the box personal experiences had a terrific impact on her life and her future decisions.

Daughter of William Godwin, a distinguished man of letters and philosopher – whose ideals and actual practice were in conflict - and Mary Wollstonecraft, a pioneering and influential feminist famous for writing the essay named *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Mary Shelley was born on August, 30th 1797 in Somerstown, London in the middle of the historical period named the French Revolution. Being born in such an important, violent and bloody period certainly influenced Mary Shelley's perception of the world. In fact, the so called and nowadays remembered *Révolution française* was a period of extremely difficult and far-reaching change, both in the social and the political fields, not only in France, but also in its colonies which began in 1789. The Revolution overthrew the monarchy and established a republic. Even though the hope was to establish a

³ F. Sampson, *In Search of Mary Shelley: The Girl Who wrote Frankenstein*, Pegasus Books, London, 2018, pp. 261 – 262.

republic and thus bring happiness and equality to the population, France suffered violent periods of political turmoil which in the end caused the establishment of a dictatorship under Napoleon. Consequently, many of the dictator's ideals and principles spread in the areas he conquered in Western Europe and also beyond. England and many other countries in Europe got inspired and at the same time scared by the ideals of this revolutionary change. The liberal and radical ideas on which the Revolution was based on, profoundly altered the course of history, bringing about the global decline and failure of absolute monarchies, and replacing them with republics and liberal democracies.

1.1.1 An Uncommon Background

Both her father and her mother were extreme supporters of the French Revolution and this caused Mary Shelley to become profoundly interested in the latest news. Even though she never got the chance to meet her mother in person since she died of puerperal fever just a few days after her birth, she started to admire her, both for her passionate spirit and for her temper. She heard a lot of stories about her mother's experiences and ideals thanks to her father and the books her mother wrote.

After Mary Shelley's mother's death, William Godwin decided to marry Mary Jane Clairmont, a rich and well educated woman, not simply for love, but more probably in order to restore his financial and social problems. In fact, he got married to a woman with a totally different personality from that of her deceased first wife. This choice caused Mary Shelley to grow up in a complex and badly

organized family composed by her, her father and her step-mother. We shouldn't forget to mention the existence of the other few members of the family that surely influenced Mary Shelley's future. First of all, her half-sister Fanny Imlay - daughter of her mother Wallstonecraft and Gilbert Imlay, Mary Wollstonecraft's first husband. He was a fascinating American businessman, but also an author and a diplomat who committed suicide in 1816. Fanny Imlay covered the role of "peacemaker in the family" probably because she was the oldest child of the house and she felt responsible toward her siblings and Godwin⁴. Finally, we shouldn't forget to mention her step-siblings: the daughter and the son of Godwin's second wife: Mary Jane (soon to be Claire) - who played a very important role in Mary Shelley's future life - and Charles Clairmont.

Mary Shelley's family was very uncommon and extremely modern if one thinks about the context of the 19th century society. Surely, it wasn't easy to handle the rumours about her parents but in spite of this unusual situation, Mary Shelley soon proved to be an extremely curious and really talented girl. She was so talented that when she was just 11 years old, she got her first story, "Mounseer Nongtonpaw", published by her father.

As Mary Shelley grew older and became an adolescent, her temperament changed as well. She turned out to become more impatient, unhappy and bold and she developed a great desire for insatiable knowledge. She was an agreeable, sparkling and vivacious girl who was educated at home. Contrary to what one might believe, Mr. Godwin was incompetent for the education of his daughters. It was instead the second Mrs. Godwin who took care of the education of the children

⁴ A. K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, Routledge, Chapman and Hall, New York, 1988, p. 14.

of the house. Besides, she was very jealous of Mary Shelley and wasn't that good at hiding this sentiment. In return, the little girl also didn't like her step-mother since she was always trying to favour her own children. Undoubtedly, the girl would have preferred her father to take care of her education and the fact that he didn't, surely influenced her future life. A clear evidence of the continuous bitterness between these two women can be found in a letter that Mary Shelley wrote to her lover in 1814, in which she affirms "I detest Mrs. G[odwin] she plagues my father out of his life & then well no matter".⁵ The person who she felt to be closer to the figure of a mother was not Mrs. Godwin indeed but her father's close friend, Mrs. Maria Gisborne⁶. She was the only woman with whom Mary Shelley could ever share her opinions and more importantly she was the only one who was really able to understand her. In a letter written in the city of Lucca in Italy Mary Shelley tells Mrs. Gisborne that "It is strange after having been in the habit of visiting you daily, now for so many days to have no communication with you"⁷

1.1.2 Some fundamental moments in Mary Shelley's life

Along with her childhood, the first influencing period before she met Percy Shelley that deserves to be mentioned here is the so-called Baxter period. This period started when Mary Shelley was a teenager and was sent by her father to the countryside to spend five months at Dundee, in Scotland, in the hope to overwhelm

⁵ M. Shelley, *The Letters of Mary W. Shelley*, ed. F.L. Jones, University of Oklahoma Press, Norman, 1944, p. 4.

⁶ F. Sampson, *In Search of Mary Shelley: The Girl who wrote Frankenstein*, cit., p. 211.

⁷ M. Shelley, *The Letters of Mary W. Shelley*, cit., p. 52.

her behavioural problems. During those months she lived with the Baxter family, whose components, close friends of Mary Shelley's father, were people of education and culture. For the first time the teenage girl was far from home and she got the chance to stay with an ordered and cheerful family. It was a totally different environment from the Godwin family to which Mary Shelley had always been used to. During that time she also got the chance to get acquainted with authors, poets and novelists such as Coleridge, Harzlitt, Lamb and Constable, hitherto known by the girl only by name or thanks to their works. She spent most of the time writing about her origin, especially favouring the maternal one. She was always looking back at the memory of a mother she never had the luck to meet.

The Baxter period was very satisfying, carefree and special to her since she got in contact with the traditional lifestyle she had always craved for. Because of this reason, after this period, she didn't settle back easily into her old place since her personality had deeply changed.

The second fundamental moment in her existence is the meeting between Mary Shelley and the only love of her life: Percy Byshee Shelley. They had already met at the Baxters' residence but the second and most significant meeting took place after she returned to her ordinary life. The Godwin family had previously heard a good deal about the rich and good-mannered poet Percy Shelley who, in addition, happened to be a true admirer of William Godwin. Percy Shelley went to the Goldwin residence in order to discuss with Mr. Godwin about his writings. Mary Shelley's father, who was facing a very hard economical crisis, initially saw him as a possible source of income that he had been struggling to get for a very long time. Unexpectedly, things changed soon because Shelley's father, Sir. Thomas – a very

aristocratic and educated man who had a reputation to protect - got mad at his son's unconventional ideals and consequently decided to stop sending monetary support to his son. In 1814 when Percy Shelley went up to see Godwin on business, the two young fellows, Mary and Percy Shelley, fell in love at first sight: her presence illuminated him and his presence was flattering her in return. After that moment, Percy Shelley started to meet her every single day⁸. They soon became intimate friends and Percy Shelley became the one and only man who was ever to remain the sun and centre of Mary Shelley's existence. Unfortunately, their deep and intense love, wasn't meant to be easy.

1.2 The First Years with Percy Shelley

Mary and Percy Shelley immediately felt like they were meant to be together. Their emotional and sexual bond was incredibly overwhelming. They wanted to be together badly and would have never given up their relationship. At the same time they were aware of the fact that theirs was an unconventional love. On October, 25th 1814, Mary Shelley wrote a very intense letter to her lover containing these lines:

For what a minute did I see you yesterday — is this the way my beloved
that we are to live till the sixth in the morning I look for you and when I
awake I turn to look on you⁹.

⁸ They would usually meet at Old Pancras Churchyard where Mary Shelley's mother's grave was situated and where she used to go alone in order to find the peace needed to write and read.

⁹ M. Shelley *The Letters of Mary W. Shelley*, cit., p.3.

He was her true love but they were meant to face many difficulties. It was the kind of relationship that parents would have never supported in the 19th century, not only because of their very young age but also because Percy Shelley was already married to a girl named Harriet Westbrook. Since Mary Shelley was very young and thus influenced by the ideas of romantic love and love marriages that were becoming common during those years – in spite of planned marriages –, she was eager and determined to get the life she wanted. She wanted to do just like her mother did in the past, and she wasn't willing to listen to the suggestions and opinions of her relatives. She didn't want to be kept in a cage for the rest of her life just to respect the desires and hopes of her relatives. In addition, Percy Shelley, got quickly bored with her wife Harriet Westbrook because after a short period of marriage he understood that his ideals weren't compatible with the “traditional life” she wanted. Besides, Percy Shelley and Harriet Westbrook got married when they were extremely young – at that time, in fact, Percy Shelley was nineteen and the girl had just turned sixteen. Fights started to happen more and more frequently and the continuous frictions between the two, mainly due to the divergence in dreams and desires, became deleterious for the young couple which soon wasn't able to share anything anymore. Harriet Westbrook soon got pregnant and she started to believe that her pregnancy would have helped them to rebuild their bond. On the contrary, it made their union even more precarious than before. Percy started to become more interested in Mary Shelley, probably encouraged by the respect he had for her father and his ideals, and by the fact that she was an educated and open minded girl. Even though they were young and in love, they were aware that in their union was unethical within the opinions and the traditions

of the nineteenth century society since it was impossible for them to get married. Their relationship would have never been accepted not only by Percy Shelley's father, second Baronet of Castle Goring, but also by Mary Shelley's family, open-minded in theory but more traditional in practice.

As William Godwin discovered their relationship, he forbade them to meet again but, of course, Mary Shelley found this reaction in contradiction with both her parents' personal histories. She understood that the only way for them to stay together was to elope and so they did. They eloped together to the continent in the early morning of 28th July 1814. Mary Shelley accepted immediately the proposal to leave the country with her lover, believing that it would have been a romantic escape. However, her expectation was too high and soon this romantic escape turned into something much more complicated and less pleasant, especially because of the presence of her step-sister Jane Clairmont¹⁰. She was also quite jealous of her step-sister, probably because of what was happening to her and the love story she was living. Blinded by her jealousy and willing to try new experiences, Claire seized the moment and strongly insisted in accompanying the young couple to the Continent. Mary and Percy Shelley accepted the fact, thinking that it would have been a temporary situation. Certainly, that situation must have been undoubtedly more disturbing to Mary Shelley than to her lover. In fact, Percy Shelley was a Romantic poet and his ideal of free love was parallel to a so called "harem psychology"¹¹ according to which being a man surrounded by more than one woman was something extremely pleasing and acceptable. Unfortunately they soon discovered that situation was to be less temporary than they expected. Their

10 From now on simply referred to as Claire.

11 A. K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, cit., p. 21.

predictions were wrong and Clare stayed longer in the company of the couple filling the role of the “perpetual third” member. This fact had not only psychological but also economical effects on the elopement since the couple was already plagued by financial troubles. The presence of Claire must have been an incubus to Mary Shelley who during her first years with her life-mate couldn't enjoy her coupledness. As a matter of fact, Claire and Percy were the only ones who actually contributed to the sustenance of the trio.

Mellor claims that Percy Shelley noted in his journal that during that period Mary Shelley seemed “insensible to all future evil. She feels as if her own love would be alone to suffice to resist the invasion of calamity”.¹² That experience surely affected forever Mary Shelley's personality and self-confidence. Her psychology was affected also by the fact that her father got offended by his daughter's deliberate decision to disobey him. Furthermore, William Godwin blamed his daughter of the destruction of Percy Shelley and Harriet Westbrook's marriage. For these reasons they didn't keep in touch for a long period as he decided to write her no letters for almost three and a half years.

1.2.1 Journals and Letters

Mary and Percy Shelley kept a joint journal during their years together and after some time spent collaborating, Mary Shelley became the principal diarist. They purchased a green book while they were in Paris in 1814. Nowadays, these

¹² Ibid., p. 23.

written documents are incredibly precious because they are the main sources of information for those who study the life and works of Mary Shelley. An important information that one gets from Mary Shelley's annotations, is that during the first months of their journey, the coupledom changed shape. In fact, the young Mary Shelley and her lover started to build up a hierarchical relationship in which the woman played the role of young mistress-student while the poet played the part of the educated mentor-teacher. This situation led them to undergo a patriarchal system that, thanks to her mother's beliefs, wasn't supported at all by Mary Shelley's ideals.

In *The Last Man*, the relationship between Lionel Verney and Adrian has many points in common with the one between the Shelleys. As Mary Shelley became the principal diarist, the green book itself became a reflection of her development: her nature was that of a reserved woman, often accused of coldness by those who met her during the years. For this reason, she always paid attention to her journals entries. She wrote each word carefully in order to avoid the revelation of embarrassing secrets. At the same time, an intense emotionalism – in addition to the need to keep record of events - clearly emerge from her journal's pages, especially from 1814-1815 entries¹³. After Percy Shelley's death, Mary used the journal as a form of emotional release and it ceased to be just a record of events.

Another aspect that deserves to be analysed here – because it is directly linked to the fictional introduction and development of the novel - is the importance that letters had for the Godwin family. In Mary Shelley's variegated

13 P.R. Feldman, D. Scott-Kilvert, Introduction in M.S., *The Journals of Mary Shelley 1814-1844*, ed. P. R. Feldman, D. Scott-Kilvert, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987. pp. xv-xxiii

family, the second Mrs. Godwin was the one who took care of children's education. However, also Mr. Godwin had some desires. He used to give enormous importance to letter writing and expected his pupils to learn to write perfectly by writing letters. According to his belief, if someone aspired to authorship, he or she was supposed to write much and publish little. This theory and the importance given to epistolary correspondence by her father deeply influenced Mary Shelley who, especially in *The Last Man*, complicated this idea by using a so called chiasmic structure¹⁴. In other words, the Sybil's scattered leaves contain two parallel meanings. On the one hand, they represent prophetic messages written in several languages from the past to the present and the future. On the other hand, they contain a kind of testament that Lionel Verney leaves to posterity and relates his difficult experience.

The letters in *The Last Man* acquire importance also because they reveal the characters' biographies: letters about love and politics in the novel show the reader the similarity and connection between public and private spheres of life.

1.2.2 A Novel's Life

On the continent Mary Shelley was finally free to live the kind of adventure that until that moment she had only read on books. Percy Shelley, and the two women started their long and enlightening journey around Europe. They visited different countries such as France, Germany, Switzerland and Holland and got the

¹⁴ B.T. Bennet, "Mary Shelley's Letters" in E. Shor, *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003. p. 218.

chance to learn about different cultures. During this journey the young lady often felt alone but, as Esther Shor notices, “Mary knew that books can make a good companion”.¹⁵ Probably because of this reason, during this nomadic period she became more literarily productive than Percy Shelley.

This was a reaction needed by the author in order to pour out her frustration caused also by the annoying presence of Claire, in order to supply a lack of affection that influenced her romantic relationship with Percy Shelley. Soon, other events and tragedies influenced Shelleys' life causing their relationship to become even more challenging and complicated. A series of apparently endless tragedies fell on Mary Shelley and the people she loved. To begin with, after their tour of Europe, Mary and Percy Shelley decided to return to England where their first daughter Clara Everina was born premature in February 1815 and died only a month later. Again, in 1816 Mary Shelley gave birth to another child, her firstborn son William, who also died after a while because of malaria. In a letter to her husband written in October 1817, she informs him about their son and daughter's health condition:

Your babes are very well — But Willy suffers from the cold — I want sadly some flannell for petticoats both for him and myself — indeed the poor little fellow is very susceptible of cold and suffers a good deal — [...]. Clara is rather disordered — cows milk evidently does not agree with her — If you have not written to Fur nival do by the next post and ask his opinion of milk and bread.¹⁶

Mary Shelley, already mad at her man because of the scarce amount of attentions

15 E. Shor “Introduction” in E. Shor, *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, cit., p. 1.

16 M. Shelley. *The Letters of Mary W. Shelley*, cit. p.39.

he was giving to her, determined that it was his fault if they were in that situation and blamed him also for the death of her children. Among these tragedies though, the couple lived also quite cheerful moments and in particular one period of happiness: the one they spent in Ginevra in company of Claire, Lord Byron and Polidori.

1.3 A Wet Summer in Ginevra

In 1814-15 Mary and Percy Shelley were free of her step-sister's unbearable company. They settled in Bishopgate and finally Mary Shelley thought she would have lived the life she had always wanted with the love of her life but this conviction didn't last long. It didn't last because in 1816 the poet suggested her companion to take Claire to the Continent, and precisely to Geneva in Switzerland in pursuit of Lord Byron, with whom Claire had just started a relationship. He was famous for his unethical and out of the box behaviours, but of course Claire, who had always dreamt of love adventures like the one her sister had, decided to follow her heart and her desires. Mary Shelley accepted the offer without hesitation because of several reasons: first of all, she was interested in meeting Lord Byron, a writer she had always admired, and secondly, she wanted to re-experience the nice adventurous time spent on the continent with Percy and Claire the year before.

Many essays have been written about the summer of the year 1816, also remembered as the year without summer because of the incredibly wet weather it brought. The young couple and Claire, who couldn't wait to stay close to her lover

Lord Byron, moved to a residence which was situated close to the mansion where at that time Byron and Polidori – Byron's personal physician - were living. Since the weather was rainy and cloudy, the circle of intellectuals didn't get the opportunity to spend much time outside of the residence so Mary Shelley and her company spent time chatting, chilling and discussing in Byron's residence located in the countryside. The discussion was always vivid and captivating and was about the most various topics: from science, to philosophy, from literature to politics. These moments spent together with her fellows and the influence this period had on her future life inspired the first volume of the novel *The Last Man* in which she mentions and describes the happy and carefree time in which Verney and his companions were living in the Castle of Windsor, moments which resemble those they spent in Ginevra.

“Happy, thrice happy, were the months, and weeks, and hours of that year.
Friendship, hand in hand with admiration, tenderness and respect, built a
bower of delight in my heart”¹⁷

In the lines above one can see the key of the idea of relationship in Mary Shelley's mind. In her opinion, admiration, tenderness and respect were the basis and the most important characteristics to build a solid and strong relationship. For the first time after a long period, in Ginevra she was able to experience this type of bond: the one she had always craved for.

¹⁷ M. Shelley, *The Last Man*, Wordsworth Editions Limited, Hertfordshire 2004, p. 27. Henceforth all quotations are from this edition and they will be given in parenthesis.

1.3.1 "We will each write a ghost story"

On a stormy night in June, the poets got particularly bored. Staying home and waiting for the rain to stop wasn't a great pastime. So hoping to find a diversion, they started to discuss about *Fantasmagoriana*, a French anthology of German ghost-stories which was particularly popular at that time. That night Lord Byron proposed the famous ghost-writing contest to which also Polidori, and the young couple were invited to participate. Mary Shelley was the only one in the circle who took the contest seriously probably because she didn't want to miss the opportunity to write something meaningful and revolutionary. It wasn't easy to find ideas but after a few nights spent thinking hopelessly, she finally began to write *Frankenstein*, a Gothic novel which is still considered one of the most powerful horror stories of western civilization. To write this novel Mary Shelley took inspiration from her own anxiety. In addition, she was able to explore the mysterious fears of human nature and awaken thrilling horror mocking the stupendous mechanism of the Creator of the world. She didn't finish the work immediately but completed it in May 1817.

Another important point in the novel which was inspired by an episode that took place during that summer can be found again in the first volume of *The Last Man*. More precisely the episode is the first encounter between Percy Shelley and Lord Byron. It was the first time they got personally acquainted. In temperament, as will be discussed in the following chapters, the two poets were opposed to each other. It's believed that probably this difference is the factor that contributed the most to the creation of a very strong bond and an intellectual comradeship

between the poets that lasted until their death.

In September Mary, Percy Shelley and Claire, pregnant with Lord Byron but finally abandoned by him, went back to London. Just a few months after this carefree period which surely offered them bread for thought, the Shelleys had to face another tragedy that actually turned out to be an opportunity for them: Harriet Westbrook, Shelley's first wife, pregnant with his baby, was unable to go on with her life without her husband, She was feeling that the scandal of his life with Mary Shelley was too heavy to carry and so she decided to commit suicide. However, Percy Shelley didn't grieve over her death because he was aware that her suicide would have given him possibility to finally legalize the relationship with Mary. They got married immediately but even though they had legalized their relationship, their coupledom was still seen as a scandal by society.

1.3.2. Mary Shelley's Journeys in *The Last Man*

In 1818 *Frankenstein or the Modern Prometheus* was published, also thanks to the poet's effort, and at the end of the year Percy and Mary Shelley started their journey in Italy. The journeys that they made together throughout their life, often emerge in the novel *The Last Man*. For instance, from the summer of 1815 to the following May the Shelleys stayed at Bishopgate Heath, near Windsor, and undoubtedly Mary Shelley had in mind those moment as she wrote many scenes in *The Last Man*¹⁸. To make an example taken from the first volume of this novel

18 W. E., Peck, "The Biographical Element in the Novels of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley" *PMLA*, Vol 38, No. 1, March 1923, p. 203.

Adrian, says that Lionel:

often left us, and wandered by himself in the woods, or sailed in his little skiff, his books his only companions. He was often the gayest of our parties, at the same time that he was the only one visited by fits of despondency; his slender frame seemed overcharged with the weight of life, and his soul appeared rather to inhabit his body than unite with it.

[LM 72]

Surely she remembered the moments when Percy Shelley used to walk in the countryside alone probably in the hope of finding inspiration to write. By the woods described in the novel she recalled in her mind the beautiful British countryside that she missed during the period spent in Italy. In fact, after that period spent near Windsor, The Shelleys were again on the Continent in May 1816, and their journey across the Channel finds its way into *The Last Man* as well. Again as Lionel Verney looks from France toward England, melancholy emerges from the lines she writes and it is probably the feeling that must have welled up in the souls of the couple as they stared in the reverse direction in the spring of 1818. In a passage Lionel Verney pronounces these words:

It were no mighty leap from Calais to Dover. The eye easily discerns the sister land; they were united once; and the little path that runs between looks in a map but as a trodden footway through high grass. Yet this small interval was to save us; the sea was to rise a wall of adamant-without, disease and misery-within a shelter from evil, a nook of the

garden of para- dise-a particle of celestial soil, which no evil could invade. Their faces turned hopefully To the south . . . to the sun!-where nature is kind, where Jove has showered forth the contents of Amalthea's horn, and earth is a garden. How tranquil and sweet seemed the wide-spread waters; how welcome these arks of refuge, sailing placidly over them, . . . "Farewell England," said the royal exile

[LM 198]

1.4 Percy Shelley's Death and the Last Years of Grief

In Florence Mary Shelley gave birth to Percy Florence. However, her sufferance wasn't to be over since she soon had to face another very hard time when in July 1822 her husband drowned in the Gulf of La Spezia because of a storm that caused a shipwreck. After this tragedy Mary Shelley would have never been the same as she had lost the guide and companion of her life. She and her son moved to the Italian city of Genoa and during their stay in Italy her novel *Castuccio, Prince of Lucca*, soon renamed *Valperga* by William Godwin, was published.

In August 1823 she returned to London with Percy Florence and soon undertook a very successful writing career as a novelist, biographer and travel writer but her tragedies weren't over and she soon suffered another important loss, the one of her close friend Lord Byron, who had been one of the most supportive people in her life, especially during her hardest times. Hoping to help the Greeks to get Istanbul, still known as Costantionople at that time, Lord Byron

decided to leave for a war expedition. Unfortunately, he couldn't succeed and died on the battlefield at Missolonghi in Greece in April 1824. When Mary Shelley learnt this tragic news she had already begun to write *The Last Man* – then published in 1826 - and had already started to publish the collection *Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* aiming firstly to keep alive the memory of her husband and secondly to make a living out of writing. After the publication of this collection, Sir Timothy Shelley, threatened her. He warned her that he would have withdrawn Percy Florence Shelley's allowance if she had tried again to bring his son's name before the public. The reason why he didn't want her daughter-in-law to write about his son was that Percy Shelley had already dishonoured his noble name and family and Sir Timothy was embarrassed by the popularization of his atheist and revolutionary ideas.

1.4.1 A Never-ending Sufferance

After Mary Shelley returned to London in 1823 with her son Percy Florence, she still strongly believed in the value of family. She couldn't get rid of the idea that the family was the only source of satisfaction that a woman could ever experience in her life. Because of this misleading idea, after the death of her husband she was never able to imagine herself as the central and independent protagonist of her own life but just as an appendix related to someone else. Mary Shelley could live only in function of others, either as a mother, a daughter, a wife or a devoted widow. Certainly this mental state turned into a form of profound anxiety toward

the health of the people that surrounded her and in particular toward the ones of her only surviving child and her father.

A.K. Mellor explains that she had developed a kind of dependence on the male gender in spite of the quite few positive moments that her relations with the other sex had given her. She claims that: “Mary Shelley conceived herself as a follower, as a worshipper at the altar of another”¹⁹. For this reason, especially after Percy Shelley's death “having lost confidence in male companionship”²⁰, she expanded her relations with women but also those turned to be empty and disappointing sources of sadness. She soon started to believe that both men and women were of the same nature. After her friends abandoned her, blaming her for the sufferance that her husband experienced during the last period of his life, Mary Shelley decided to go back to her original home. Her father welcomed her like only a father could do. Since then, she got several offers of marriage but, “in spite of the attention of several male admirers”²¹, she decided to refuse them all. After the proposal she got from her friend Edward John Trelaway, she answered him with a letter including the passage below, reported by Mellor in her monography of Mary Shelley:

“You tell me not to marry – but I will – anyone who will take me from my present desolate and uncomfortable position anyone – and with all this do you think that I should marry? – Never – neither you, nor anybody else – Mary Shelly should be written on my tomb – and why? I cannot tell – except that it is so pretty a name that tho' I were to preach myself for

19 A. K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, cit., p. 181.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

yours, I never should have the heart to get rid of it".²²

It is a very meaningful quotation from which her attachment and especially the unquestionable admiration she had for her deceased husband emerge. Although she was a cheerful person who enjoyed the company of others, even during the moments in which she wasn't alone, she couldn't get rid of the despairing mood that finally emerges in second and third volumes of *The Last Man*. This depressing mood made her incapable of moving on with her life, made her unable to build up meaningful relations with others and transforming her in "a person who lived in the past"²³.

In 1827 Mary Shelley decided to accept Thomas Moore request to help him write the biography of Lord Byron. During the following years she published several volumes trying to complete a biographical memoir of Percy Shelley, but in the end, she was never able to achieve her goal. In 1840 she travelled through Europe and returned to London in January 1841 when her son graduated from the University of Cambridge. Then, together, they began a second tour of the continent with other friends. When in 1844 Sir Timothy Shelley died, Percy Florence inherited baronetcy and estate but a few years later, precisely in 1850, Mary Shelley was diagnosed with brain tumour and died in London at the age of 53.

22 Ibid., p. 183.

23 Ibid., p. 184.

1.4.2 The Controversial Relationship between Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont

Not much has been written about the relationship between the two step sisters Mary Shelley and Claire Clairmont, daughter of the second Mrs. Godwin by a previous marriage. She is remembered as the step-sister who fulfilled the unwanted role of companion and eternal third of Percy and Mary Shelley on their elopement. After that moment she made herself a member of the Shelley household for a long time.

In order to protect the ideal of the couple performed by the poet and Mary Shelley, the Victorians tended to deny that Claire had ever been of any real importance for Shelley in this unusual triangular relationship. Anyway, thanks to the diaries, letters and journals they kept during that period together, scholars are now aware of the fact that Claire was of much greater importance for the poet than the orthodox writers have been willing to admit²⁴. To be more specific, the main sources from which the importance of Claire emerges are the biography of Mary Shelley by Mrs. Julian Marshall, the Shelleys' diaries and Percy Shelley's works. As Harrington writes, when we read private letters and link them to the poems of the poet it seems that "Claire appears in a good many places, some in which her presence has not hitherto been suspected".²⁵

24 J. H. Smith, "Shelley and Claire Clairmont", *PMLA*, Vol. 54, No. 3, p. 785.

25 *Ibid.*, p 787.

1.4.3. Percy Shelley and Claire Clairmont

During the years they spent together, the bond between Percy and Claire grew stronger and stronger. Even though it isn't possible to claim that Percy Shelley was a responsible man, it is sure that he cared not only for the wellness of his life companion but also for that of her step-sister.

Claire lived with the Shelleys during the season 1814-15 and even though the extent of Percy Shelley's attachment for Claire has always been minimized, it is clear that Mary Shelley was not satisfied with that strange situation. In fact, during that period Claire had begun to spend time alone with the poet, especially at night, while Mary Shelley was being left to her own readings. Obviously one can't exactly know the dynamics of the events but Claire, using highly unethical tactics, actually succeeded in getting Percy Shelley's attention who didn't even try to avoid her pleasant and tempting charm. In their journals it's stated that the two had frequently to stay up late and talk long after Mary Shelley had gone to bed. Sources show also that, after she had made up her mind that Claire must go and stay away from them, Percy Shelley didn't hurry too much in order to make Claire leave and, in addition, he persisted in his usual behaviour which was so disturbing and irritating to Mary Shelley. He was always finding excuses in order to be out with Claire alone while her step-sister was left alone with Hogg, Percy Shelley's close friend. Even though Hogg and Percy Shelley had probably thought in a possible "couple exchange", scholars suggest that Mary Shelley probably would have never considered Hogg's attentions to be an acceptable substitute for Shelley's²⁶.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 796.

According to rumours, in which Byron believed, Claire had a child by Percy Shelley: Elena Adelaide Shelley. She was born in Naples in 1818 as the daughter of Percy Shelley and Marina Paduin, a woman who doesn't seem to have ever existed. However, according to other rumours this little girl who died in 1820, was the daughter who Percy Shelley had with a nursemaid working for the Shelleys, whose name was Elise Foggi²⁷.

However, the relationship between Claire and Percy Shelley remains still quite undefined and controversial, but generally it can be defined as a strongly fraternal love.

1. 5. Mary and Percy Shelley: the Edge between Love and Hate

Mary Shelley had certainly been a devoted wife and after her husband's death she didn't feel like making a real change in her lifestyle. She felt like she had to live exactly where she was, in that mental state that, between grief and despair, was giving her the strength to revive her husband, collecting his manuscript and writing his memoirs. Again, she was living to be the shadow of her man even though he had passed away.

As implied in the previous chapters, the relationship between Mary and Percy Shelley has never been all sunshine and rainbows especially after she started to blame her husband for the death of her children: Clara Evelina in 1818 and William who died of malaria a year after. She blamed him because at that time he wasn't with her but with her step-sister Claire. He had left his wife alone in order

²⁷ F. Sampson, *In Search of Mary Shelley: The Girl who wrote Frankenstein*, cit, p. 220.

to help her sister-in-law to see her daughter Allegra who was under Lord Byron's protection in a convent near Venice.²⁸ Allegra had a very short and difficult life – she died in the convent after having spent short period in custody of several different families²⁹ - also because Lord Byron didn't want Claire to take care of her since he considered her not to be responsible enough. Percy Shelley who was very attached to the child, didn't miss the chance to visit her, probably in a moment in which also his wife would have needed his support and presence. This lack of attention and this act was something Mary Shelley was never able to forgive for the rest of her life and in the *The Last Man* one can see hints of this unforgivable act throughout the story. For instance, in the final part of the story Adrian-Percy drowns together with Clara – who is a representation of Mary Shelley's children - suggesting that the death of Mary Shelley's children is indissolubly linked to her husband's guilt.

Another important hint is the character Evelyn herself, who is – again - a representation of Mary Shelley's dead children. In spite of the terrible moment of depression she was facing, even her father, didn't seem to understand the importance of the impact that the death of these children had on her. For instance, in a letter writtten on 19 September 1819, after William's death, Godwin wrote a letter to his daughter inciting her to hide her feelings and her sorrow, otherwise he said that she would have risked to lose all the other important people of her life, since they would have got bored with seeing her down all the time.³⁰

Surely the early period of their coupledom spent together with Claire Clairmont

28 A. K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, cit, p. 141.

29 F. Sampson, *In Search of Mary Shelley: The Girl who wrote Frankenstein*, cit., p. 266.

30 Ibid., p. 233.

didn't help them to build a solid basis for their life together; on the contrary the unexpected bond that soon grew between the poet and the girl affected Mary Shelley negatively. This and the tragedy of the loss of her children caused in the woman a devastating feeling of loneliness as nobody would understand her sufferance. Since summer 1819 her bad spirits, namely a form of neurotic depression, grew stronger and literally started to dominate her life. This state of mind consequently caused sadness not only to Mary Shelley herself but also to those around her. Percy was the one who suffered this depression the most and, refused by her wife, "had sought solace elsewhere"³¹. This surely is not the best reaction an husband could have if he really wanted to help his wife to get out of depression. As Mellor explains, in 1821 Percy Shelley in his work *Epypsychidon* even celebrated his erotic love dedicating it to Emilia Viviani, unconcerned about a possible reaction of Mary. Emilia was a "nineteen-year-old Florentine Contessina who had been confined by her father, the governor of Pisa, to the conservatory of St Anna, where she was obliged, under great duress, to await an eventual marriage to a favourable suitor"³². In the same poem he describes his wife under the shape a cold chaste moon. The reference to his wife is quite explicit since by that time she wasn't able to give him any good emotions anymore. He soon found psychological support and sympathy also in the fun-loving and cheerful Jane Williams,. There are no proofs of an actually real romantic relationship between the two but Percy got deeply infatuated during the last period of his life. She was a family friend and after her husband and Shelley drowned together she still kept in touch with Mary Shelley and she then became her best friend until her death.

31 Ibid., p. 145.

32 See https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-1-349-21649-9_6 (09/01/19).

1.5.1 Percy Shelley and the Other Women of his Life

Even though, as already mentioned, there has never been any proved sexual intercourse between Percy and the women to whom he dedicated his work. Sources show that neither the birth nor the death of Mary Shelley's first child stopped Percy from giving his attentions not only to Claire but also to other women whose fun-loving, cheerful and pleasant love were to him a great psychological support during Mary Shelley's hard times. For example, there are poems that proof his infatuation for Jane and Sophia Stacey³³. In fact, after the loss of her children Mary Shelley built a wall that not even her husband could penetrate.

It is obvious that being aware of the fact she wasn't the centre of Percy Shelley's life was extremely debilitating for the woman. This constant threat on her relationship with Percy Shelley, caused by her step-sister and other women, deeply influenced her personality and thoughts. The consequences of these insecurities can be explored in the autobiographical elements present in the majority of her novels. Mary Shelley felt like her husband's careless, egocentric and egoistic behaviour had betrayed the idea of family to which she was so devoted and which she desperately wanted to make hers. This form of disappointment soon mutated in unspoken anger. Since she couldn't find the way to confront him openly and, at the same time, couldn't find anyone to talk about these unexpressed feelings, the only relief she was able to find was writing. For instance, in the novella *Mathilda* she "projected much of the hostility she felt toward her husband"³⁴ and at the same time from the story emerge some of Mary Shelley's most murderous impulses

33 F. Sampson, *In Search of Mary Shelley: The Girl who wrote Frankenstein*, cit., p. 248.

34 A. K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, Routledge, cit., p. 143.

toward her lover.

After the birth of her son Percy Forence, her most acute depression was finally a little bit alleviated and this feeling gave her the chance to partially reconcile with her husband but because of his death she couldn't enjoy this happy moment long. As Percy Shelley died she felt in fact profoundly guilty about it. This sense of guilt was mainly given by the fact that she had desired her husband's decease many times when he was still alive. Writing *The Last Man* she tried somehow to redeem herself and started to play the role of the devoted widow of an irreplaceable genius. In writing the novel she attempted to exorcise her resentment toward Percy and his political ideology and at the same time she attempted a social analysis. So, one can say that the novel pits the ideology of the bourgeois egalitarian family egoism. She highlighted the female masochism typical of women in the nineteenth century and through death and sorrow she showed that cultural ideologies are nothing but meaningless fictions. Again, in Adrian, who is oddly detached from his responsibility for the living, she reflected the spirit of her husband Percy. He, who never married, never fulfilled the desire of building a family and at the same time lingered incapable to achieve his political ideals as well. Just as the plague destroyed everything, also the homogeneous and egalitarian society he dreamt of crushed. Adrian was never able to assume leadership just like Percy never took responsibility for his actions.

This concept of responsibility comes in the novel mingling with the idea of temporal mutability of human beings. This idea is fundamental and it is a message to humanity. Mary Shelley wanted to emphasize the fact that life is something that people often underestimate and that they don't live it as it is supposed to be lived.

This happens because one thinks of how he would like things to be instead of enjoying them for what they are.

1.5.2. Mary Shelley's Remorse

In the novel everyone is so concentrated on the desire of perfect life that they cannot taste the life they have and don't enjoy enough spending time with those they love. Mary Shelley blamed herself and her husband because of the same reason. During her life with Percy Shelley, she wished she had spent more time with her husband accepting him for what he was instead of thinking of the perfect life she wanted and that in the end she never got.

As mentioned in the previous chapters, after Shelley's death, Mary Shelley pledged to herself and to the others that she was born to justify the poet's points of view and that the goal in her life was to make him beloved to all the future generations. She decided to live for him also after his death during the last period of her life, publishing, among the others, *Posthumorous Poems* in 1824 and *Poetical Works* in 1839 – a collection remembered by future generations as the first stone of a poetical monument due to Percy Byshee Shelley - , and organizing his literary remains in the collection named *Keepsake*. She got the merit to produce and be the first editor of many of her husband's masterpieces, such as *Julian and Maddalo*, *Triumph of Life* and *The Witch of Atlas*. In addition, she was the first to give her husband's *Queen Mob* a reputable imprint and to gather essays in order to publish *A Defence*, *On Life* and *On Love*. Mary Shelley admired her husband's spirit and in

her dreams she wanted to shape the unrealized poet that he was. Anyway, in 1823, the intervention and the threat of her father-in-law Sir Timothy Shelley, distanced her from her goal. After Percy Shelley's death, Byron and Thomas Love Peacock became Shelley's testamentary executors. In 1823 they gave his wife a letter from her father-in-law in which he declared that he wouldn't have provided to Percy Florence unless she had renounced to his custody. Naturally she didn't accept this threat and didn't give up. On the contrary, she kept on collecting her husband's works in order to make a living for herself and above all her children.

Her Journal entries record her sadness:

January 18, 1824 – Have I now been nearly four months in England and if I am to judge of the future by the past and the present, I have small delight in looking forward... I am imprisoned in a dreary town – I see neither fields, nor trees, nor sky – the exhilaration of enrapt contemplation is no more felt by me... Writing has become a task, my studies inksome, my life dreary... My immagination is dead, my genius lost, my energies sleep.³⁵

The lines below, are taken from a note of *Queen Mab* and they contain the memory Mary had of her deceased man. This work of his was written in 1813 and “his lengthy prose notes remain one of the natal texts in the history of English socialism”³⁶:

[H]e loved truth with a martyr's love: he was ready to sacrifice station and fortune, and his dearest affections . . . he was too enthusiastic, and too full

35 Quoted in A. K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, cit., p. 183.

36 A. K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, cit., p. 18.

of hatred of all the ills he witnessed, not to scorn danger . . . He did not in his youth look forward to gradual improvement: nay, in those days of intolerance, now almost forgotten, it seemed as easy to look forward to the sort of millennium of freedom and brotherhood, which he thought the proper state of mankind, as to the present reign of moderation and improvement . . . In this spirit he composed *Queen Mab*.³⁷

Readers can easily perceive his ideals and ideas and if one compares them with the protagonist Adrian in Shelley's *The Last Man*, one can understand how Adrian is the spokesperson for Percy Shelley and his generosity to friends and family.

In the following chapters we will dig more in depth to analyse those aspects contained in the novel in order to understand better the link between Mary Shelley's life and the novel itself.

³⁷ Quoted in S. J. Wolfson "Mary Shelley, editor" in E. Schor, *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, cit., p. 203.

Chapter 2: **THE NOVEL: *THE LAST MAN***

Mary Shelley began to write *The Last Man* in a period that was extremely depressing for her. It was a time in which she felt more lonely than ever and she knew that she couldn't find comfort in anything else but in writing. She couldn't share her fears with anyone of those who were close to her because no one would have been able to understand her sorrow. In this difficult situation, she decided to start writing the apocalyptic novel named *The Last Man* in the year 1824 then published in 1826. This is a masterpiece because it is a totally revolutionary novel that changed forever the future of literature and built the way to science fiction. The story, whose protagonist is a man named Lionel Verney, touches in fact several different topics and can be analysed under many different aspects. Mainly for this reason, this is why nowadays it can't be given an interpretative closure or categorization yet. It's considered by many scholars to be a transition work in Mary Shelley's career who in this literary experiment tried to work out new ways of achieving self-identity as an author but at the same time tried to express her deepest thoughts and reflections about life.

The novel is so multifaciated. Among the other topics and situations, it includes multiple love-triangles, political debates and also psychological struggles. Last but not least, it includes the psychological state of the author into the narrative. The novel, that boasts a complex textual indeterminacy, is told through the voice of a lone British man narrator who becomes a spokesman for Mary Shelley's incisive moral vision and ambivalent reaction to the 19th century British society, to the liberal ideologies of her parents and to the romantic ideologies of her

husband.

After the success of *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley had a reputation in the contemporary literary field and it was very hard for her to keep up with the expectations of the public. The first mention of the idea she had of her soon-to-be third novel can be found in a letter addressed to Leigh Hunt dated October, 25th 1823 to whom she announced her return to a freer and more imaginary theme closer to her style. She probably hesitated a lot while writing the novel but the news of Lord Byron's death in Missoughi seems to have shaken her apathy off and removed her creative paralysis.

The story is presented as indirect narrative: the person who found the pages on which the tale was written just adjusted the it in order to make it easier to read because the information on the leaves on which the it was written were scattered and unconnected. Even though it involves an apocalyptic topic the strategical choice to present the story under the form of an indirect narrative actually relieves the readers from the anxiety of imagining a world in which there are no readers at all because they are told the story long time before Lionel Verney exists. In other words the author by writing this story showed her ability in placing a distance between the readers and the narrator but at the same time she was able to make the readers reflect about the future. Unfortunately, the novel wasn't acknowledged all its merits during the author's time because of different reasons that soon will be here analysed.

In the first part of the novel the human world is a representation of the archetype of human development propounded by Romantic writers such as Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley in their works.

To conclude it's possible to state that this novel's formal hybridity calls into question thematic and boundaries typical of the narrative of the 19th century. The premise of a futuristic apocalypse is brought about by the decomposing figure of the plague which can be seen as an act of God or as something Satanic and demoniac. Interestingly, the author herself never mentions anything supernatural or divine. Reality and fantasy, history and vision come together to raise in the reader the awareness of humanity's common bond. Death leads the survivors to shift their firmly held values and prejudices that become pointless and false.³⁸

This part of the thesis is devoted to the analysis of the novel and its fictional aspects. First of all the fictional introduction and its meaning will be analysed and a short plot of the novel will be provided. After that we will talk about the reaction of the public during the time of the author and how the novel was then reconsidered in the 20th century. We'll also talk about the concept of apocalypse and the aspects that are beyond the *roman à cléf*. To conclude there will be a discussion about imagination and personification and the role they play in the author's mind.

2.1 The Novel and its Fictional Introduction

The novel takes place in the year 2029 and the setting had been deeply negatively criticized by Mary Shelley's contemporaries. The main cause of this negative feedback is that the novel's setting is in a time akin to but, at the same

38 A. Young-Ok.. "Read Your Fall: The Signs of Plague in The Last Man", *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol. 44, No. 4, Winter 2005, p. 588.

time, remote from the author examination³⁹. By doing so, Mary Shelley ended up creating a kind of non-futuristic future in which life in the 21st century seems too similar to the life during the time the author lived in. The author doesn't create any fictional elements and it makes the novel more futuristic. Additionally, she tries to emphasise and instill in the novel a vast sense of hopeless despair.

The novel is composed by three volumes which are deeply different from each other. In these volumes the process of destruction (or auto-destruction?) of humanity is described gradually. In addition, each of the volumes actually retraces different periods of Mary Shelley's life and her mental state. The first volume is pervaded with a sense of positivity. It is a portrayal of the youth, friendships and betrothals which gives life to an idealized community, the so called "happy circle". This idealized community, which recalls Mary Shelley's own youth, is destroyed when the protagonists leave the protected environment in order to meet the external world. As soon as they get in touch with others, they cause the happy circle to be poisoned. The second and third volumes are thus pervaded with a sense of loss, pressure and psychological threat felt by the characters and sensations which reflect the last years of the author's life.

2.1.1 The Plot of *The Last Man*

In the first volume of the story, which is set in the year 2092, readers get to know Lionel Verney. He is the son of a nobleman who loses everything. This

³⁹ H. S. Spatt, "Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*: The Truth of Dreams", *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 7, No. 4, Winter 1975, p. 534.

nobleman before his death wants to make sure that his son and his daughter will get a respectable future. He soon decides to send a letter to his friend the King in order to ask him the favour of taking care of his children: his son Verney and his daughter Perdita. For some reasons, the king never gets the letter and those children are obliged to live in poor and wild conditions for a long period, thus developing hate toward the kingdom and royalty. When the children are grown up they get to know Adrian, the son of the king who has republican ideals. Adrian decides to help and educate Lionel and soon the two develop a strong bond. After a while they meet Lord Raymond who aspires to become the leader of England. Lionel falls in love and marries Adrian's sister Idris and Perdita marries Lord Raymond, who soon starts a relationship with Evadne, a Greek princess. When Perdita learns about her husband's affair, she leaves him and Raymond moves to Constantinople to fight against the Turks.

The second volume starts in a totally different atmosphere. The setting is now fantastic and people are getting sick because of the spread of a virus. Perdita and Clara, her daughter, decide to go look for Raymond in Constantinople and Lionel goes with them. Evadne dies while fighting for Raymond's ideals and Raymond dies too on the battlefield. Perdita is devastated and commits suicide. Clara, Lionel and Adrian are back in England and Adrian takes the lead of the country. Adrian wants to protect the population from the plague but soon he understands there's no solution.

The third volume is also pervaded with a dark and hopeless atmosphere. The setting is in year 2100 and England has been devastated by the plague like the rest of the world. Humanity has been decimated and the only survivors are Clara, Lionel

and Adrian who sail to the Continent to find salvation. Clara and Adrian die in a shipwreck. Lionel is now alone:

around the shores of a deserted earth, while the sun is high and the moon waxes or wanes, angels, the spirits of the dead, and the ever open eye of the Supreme, will behold the tiny bark, freighted (LM 375)

With the lines above the author shows that Lionel has finally the last man, the last in a world of desolation.

2.1.2 The Origins of the Novel

When Mary Shelley wrote *The Last Man* there was already a significant number of essays and novels published under the same name. This mode was started by Cousin de Grandville's prose epic written in 1805 and translated in English under the name of *Omegarus and Syderia: a Romance of Futurity*. These were apocalyptic responses to the horror of the bloodiest periods of the French Revolution, to the Napoleonic wars and to the uncertainties brought by the dreams of the Romantic era. In Mary Shelley's novel a unique contrast is presented: the sickness of humanity and of the religious and political authority is compared to the health of nature and natural life.

In the first volume, youth, friendships and betrothals followed by love marriages symbolize the idealized community of a happy circle that lives far from the community and the plague is not the first cause that brings this Windsor idyll

to an end: this negative force is incarnate in the characters themselves. For instance, the happiness of the circle had already been threatened before the plague by Lord Raymond's imperialist campaign in Istanbul and by his adulterous affair with Evadne. Also Adrian's ideals are not helpful but just useless to the wellness of the community.

In the volume that follows the critique to the beliefs and aspirations of the post-revolutionary Romantic Era imply a rejection of the biblical claim that human beings are superior beings inheritors of the earth. It goes against the Christian notion of man as the lord of creation, measure of all things. This critique becomes a declaration of inevitable universal extinction in the opening of the third volume. Mary Shelley's rethinking of time reflects a deep interest in questions regarding the temporality of human life⁴⁰. It is the fictional introduction of the novel that gives readers an idea of time which actually ends up in interweaving past, present and future into simultaneous moments.

2.1.3. The Sibyl Cumaen Cave

The novel starts with a fictional introduction that tells the reader about a marvellous discovery made by a nameless and genderless narrator.

Mary got inspired by a trip she made on December 8, 1818 with Percy and Claire Clairmont which actually was other than exciting. They visited the Sibyl Cumaen Cave on the Lake of Agnano, close to the Italian city of Naples.

40 T. Ruppert, "The Sibyl in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*", *Studies in the Novel*, Vol. 41, No. 2, summer 2009, p. 152.

On February, 19th 1819 Mary wrote a letter to her dear friend Mrs. Gisborne saying :

We leave Naples Sunday next with the regret every one must feel at leaving so lovely a place [...] —We have one consolation that we have visited most of the places to be seen — Paestum — Pompeii — Herculaneum — Vesuvius — Baiae — Lago d'Agnano — Caccia d'Astroni — Caverto — We have had generally favourable weather for our excursions except that to Paestum & then it was not so bad as it might have been.⁴¹

Their guide led them underground and as they moved on the way became narrower and narrower. There was almost no illumination so they could barely see where they were thanks to the fragile light of a torch. After a while, the three and the guide found themselves in front of a splendid arch and the guide informed them that it was the way to the Sibyl. Percy, excited, asked Mary Shelley to follow him and, even though the guide strongly warned them about the danger, the two kept on going. Soon they had passed the arch and passed a narrow path that led to a breath-taking rocky landscape. On the ground not only there was grass but there were some special leaves. On those leaves there were written sentences in different languages, modern and old ones, containing information about the future. Is it reality or fiction? Probably readers will never be sure about it but what is known is that Mary and Percy Shelley, during their stay in Naples visited the cave more than once.

41 M. Shelley. *The Letters of Mary W. Shelley*, cit., p. 62.

In other words she found an image of the future in a place of the past and presents it to the eyes of the present. Mary Shelley believed that through imagination one could re-see the world so she attributed to it transformative quality and considered fiction as an agent of positive change.

According to the scholar Bennet, the author's works involve a commitment to socio-political critique. Her faith in the imagination's ability to better the world can be set within the tradition of British Romantic visionary poetics famous between 1789 and 1832 and rehearses longstanding concerns about the corruption on politicians in Britain coming from the East. It belongs to the European literature that includes Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Camus's *The Plague* and Boccaccio's *Decameron* that criticize the empire revealing something about Pre-Victorian England and something about the timeless promise of human renewal. So it's possible to claim that the traveller to the Sibyl 's cave resets Verney's thoughts within the shape of her own vision of life.

At length my friend, who had taken up some leaves strewed about, exclaimed, "This is the Sibyl's cave; these are Sibylline leaves". On examination, we found that all leaves bark, and other substances, were traced with written characters. [...] some unknown to my companion, ancient Chaldee, and Egyptian hieroglyphicsm old as Pyramids. Stanger still, some were in modern dialects, English and Italian. (LM 3)

The exclamation "This is the Sibyl's cave; these are Sibylline leaves" is associated to VI book of the *Aeneid* where the Cumaen Sibyl leads Aeneas to his

vision after life.⁴² There are two reasons why Mary Shelley decided to use this as prophetic symbol. First of all, in 1817 Coleridge published a collection of poems under the name of *Sibylline Leaves*. Secondly, the Sibyls are women who have the power of prophecy and write their prediction on leaves. By that, Mary Shelley tried to celebrate the female gender and lead these creatures from an ancient embodiment of female being to the modern imagination.

Verney's narrative succeeds in blending history in an extraordinary continuum including the Cumaen Sibyl. The Cumaean Sibyl was the priestess presiding over the Apollonian oracle at Cumae, a Greek colony located near Naples, Italy. The word sibyl comes (via Latin) from the ancient Greek word *sibylla*, meaning prophetess⁴³. The Sibylline Books were collections of oracles in Greek verses believed to contain the destiny of the Romans. The choice of adding this meaningful element is important because it brings into question the patriarchal system against the old matriarchal one.

Verney's narration is both tale and frame in one and at the beginning of the second volume he has already a hint of his destiny:

I was overcome by weariness; the solitude depressed my spirit. The sultry air impregnated with dust, the heat and smoke of burning palaces, palsied my limbs. Hunger suddenly came acutely upon me. The excitement which had hitherto sustained me was lost; as a building, whose props are loosened, and whose foundation rock, totters and falls, so when hope deserted me, did my strength fail. [...] I strode to rise, but

42 M. D. Paley "Apocalypse without Millennium" in A. Fisch, A. K. Mellor, E. A. Schor, *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, Oxford University Press, New York 1993. p. 110 .

43 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cumaean_Sibyl (13/12/18).

my heavy lids closed, my limbs over-wearied, claimed repose – I rested my head on the stone, I yielded to the greatful sensation of utter forgetfulness; and in that scene of desolation, on that night of despair – I slept. (L M 160)

Verney, the to-be humanity sole record keeper, has witnessed the death of numerous close relations and he questions the point of fixing an identity when there's no humanity left. He writes his autobiography and leaves the manuscript in Rome as a monument.

2.2 The Critics

The story of a world-wide, 21st century plague and its solitary survivor has a common point with *Frankenstein*, namely that both novels emerge from the interest of the author in the importance of new scientific discoveries and their potential impact on social order and human life. However, the difference between the two plots is the reaction of the critics during Mary Shelley's time. If *Frankenstein* had a triumphal and also surprisingly immediate success and was praised both by the readers and by the critics, one can't say the same for *The Last Man*. It was in fact not appreciated by the population, especially by the critics who wrote very strong and hard comments about it. Also according to Hugh Luke, a estimated and well-known biographer of Mary Shelley, readers can't defend it as a "flawless piece of writing"⁴⁴. Because of the often redundant language that the

44 H. J. Luke, Jr., "The Last Man: Mary Shelley's Mith of Solitary", *Praire Shooner*, Vol. 39, No. 4

novelist used when she developed its plot.

Of course the vocabulary used when writing a novel is fundamental if a novelist wants his story to be a success and sentences can be made boring through repetition causing the public not to appreciate a work. Nevertheless, one can try to justify this abundance of exalted language by saying that during her writing activity Mary Shelley was probably experimenting with the language and the main source from which she took inspiration was from the work of her deceased husband Percy Shelley. Therefore, contemporary critics damned this novel during Shelley's times which in fact had little popular success.

2. 2.1. The Public's Reaction during Mary Shelley's time

It's extremely interesting to mention here the most important reviewers who criticized *The Last Man*. To begin with, *The London Magazine and Review*, in its "Monthly Advice to Purchasers of Books" defined *The Last Man* "an elaborated piece of gloomy folly -bad enough to read- horrible to write" while *The Monthly Review* looked upon the novel as "the product of a diseased imagination and a polluted taste, which describes the ravages of the plague in such minute detail that the result was not a picture but a lecture in anatomy".

Other critics considered it to be "a sickening repetition of horrors... sheer nonsense" (*The Literary Gazette, and the Journal of Belles Letters*) or even "the perpetration of her [Mary Shelley's] stupid cruelties... most pitiful, and

Winter 1965/66, cit., p. 317.

unimaginative,” and lacking “anything really sublime, or striking, or terrible” (*Blackwood's*). Mary Shelley had become an esteemed and respected novelist thanks to *Frankenstein* but even compliments to the author finally turned out to be negative feedbacks to the novel. For instance, *The Literary Gazette, and Journal of Belles Lettres* deserves to be mentioned as they judged the novel “an instance of strange misapplication of considerable talent” and even the *Monthly Review* perceived the plot as “the impress of genius, though perverted and spoiled by morbid affection”.⁴⁵

However, these negative feedbacks weren't due simply to the overblown language used but also to the fact that it was a completely new type of story, never seen before on the literary market of the 18th century. *The Last Man* is to be considered the forefather of a new kind of romance or even a prophetic tale which was published at the wrong time, probably too early in time, during a period in which the apocalyptic topic wasn't taken as seriously as then it will be during the 20th century. As a matter of fact, although also at that time there was a preoccupation about *The Last Man* thematic, this subject was seen by the public more as a ridiculous than an apocalyptic one. Indeed, it shouldn't be forgotten that the general sentiment of the population during that time was that of feeling indestructible and the possibility of the devastation of humanity was totally ludicrous. It's interesting that as a consequence to the reaction of the public toward *The Last Man*, Mary Shelley avoided the supernatural and she did that intentionally in order to avoid other negative feedbacks.⁴⁶

45 K. J. Darling, “Renegotiating the Apocalypse: Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*”, 2016, p. 9.

46 M. D. Paley “Apocalypse without Millenium” in A.A. Fisch, A. K. Mellor, E. A. Schor, *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, cit. p. 107.

2.2.2 The Modern Critics to the Novel

Nowadays critics literally rediscovered Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* considering it an extraordinary modern and complex masterpiece created from the perception that the novelist had of the political and cultural contradictions that dominated England in the 18th century. Mary Shelley deeply contributed to the foundation of that woman science-fi literature that represents the end of civilization leading to Angela Carter – whose literary style includes comedy and macabre horror-fantasy - and Ursula Le Guin, considered some of the principal science-fiction novelists. The work of Mary Shelley could be thus defined an advanced and developed Gothic narrative in which ghosts and fears are given real features that cause tangible consequences even though metaphorical events.

Another interesting point on which one should focus our attention and which probably contributed to the cold reception of the novel is the setting. To be more specific, the story is supposed to take place during the 21st century until the year 2100 but even if it is thought to be set in a very far future time, Mary Shelley doesn't distance herself too much from the present and from her contemporary lifestyle and traditions, on the contrary she represents them highlighting its most negative features, as if she wanted to criticize the society she lived in. According to these features *The Last Man* can once again be seen under a different light, namely, as Mary Shelley's personal rebellion to the 19th century British society.

The Last Man is nowadays a copious source for modern scholars who study the life and career of Mary Shelley as it is enriched by interwoven topics, themes and symbols which allow scholars to analyse the novel under different aspects:

biopolitics and the contagionism/anticontagionism debate, constructions of gender, conceptions of time, theatre and art and politics.

Mary Shelley in the first volume of *The Last Man* introduces the revolutionary vision of the protagonist because Adrian refuses his right to become the monarch in order to follow and pursue his republican ideals. In the three volumes she wrote, the author criticizes and then destroys the three fundamental basis of nineteenth century British society. To be more specific, in the first volume she destroys the monarchy, in the second she criticizes the patriarchal model of society and to conclude in the third volume she destroys religion. This destruction what led the critics to be severe toward *The Last Man* and give a negative feedback during the 19th century.⁴⁷

The novel can be thus considered a speculative fiction pervaded with discourses of life in the intellectual exchanges of the 19th century but also a *Bildungsroman* of the future filled in with scepticism about a non-political life⁴⁸ which foregrounds the dynamic exchange between writers and readers. It's a narrative of future devastation that presents an author without readers.

47 A. Angelini Sut, *Mary Shelley e la maledizione del lago*, Giulio Perrone Editore, Roma 2018, p. 185.

48 H. Strang, Common Life, Animal Life, Equality: The Last Man, *ELH*, Vol. 78, No. 2, Summer 2011, p. 411.

2.3 The Plague and its Meaning

Mary Shelley with *the Last Man* created the doorway to the apocalyptic and science fictional novels that became so popular starting from the 20th century. When Mary Shelley wrote her novel she was a widow of 27 living in London. It was quite hard for her since the main important men of her life were dead by that time. She was lost and melancholic and from this melancholia the idea of plague took form. The black plague of the 14th 15th century was seen with fear because of the desolation that it was able to create in no time. It's a sickness, an epidemy that kills quickly and painfully. In addition, some events that took place in the 19th century build a catastrophic idea in the author's mind.

In 1815 the volcano Tabora on the island of Sumbawa, nowadays Indonesia, erupted. This volcanic explosion was recorded as one of the most powerful in history. The ash provoked by the explosion dispersed around the world and lowered global temperatures, in an event now remembered as the "Year Without a Summer" in 1816. Undoubtedly this event touched the fantasy of Mary Shelley: she must have looked at it with fear and excitement at the same time.

Another source of inspiration must have been the so called first cholera pandemic which began near Calcutta, in India, and spread all over the world. This sickness reportedly began in India, after that it spread to Russia and eventually Europe. It is known that by 1831 was killing as many as 30,000 people each day, was a "plague" not because of its origin in India but "because the nineteenth-century medical and sociopolitical communities could not control the spread of the

disease”⁴⁹. Hundreds of thousands of people died as a result of this pandemic, including many British soldiers, which attracted European attention. This event reminded the author of the black plague because it killed people very fast and painfully as well.

2.3.1 A Modern Vision of the Plague

Audrey A. Fish in the essay contained in *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein* compares the Plague in *The Last Man* to the modern plague of the 20th century, namely AIDS. This disease has become so common that nowadays people don't even talk about it, but it is still very dangerous and it spreads more and more as time passes. She explain that even though Mary Shelley's novel has been considered an apolitical work the consideration of AIDS, that for a long time was thought to be a disease coming from foreigners, underlines the political lesson contained in the novel. Fisch explains that: “what has been trivialized in the case of AIDS are the various social and political factors that raise a disease to the state of plague”⁵⁰. The plague is considered to be something that comes from outside the safe ship of Britain just like AIDS is something that comes from outside the safe ship of America. But there is a change in the foreignness of this plague. If in *The Last Man* the emphasis is on foreignness in terms of different nationality, AIDS foreignness is due to, so called, “unnatural” sexuality or different race. It is not

49 A.A. Fisch “Plagiung Politics: AIDS, Deconstruction and The Last Man” in A.A. Fisch, A. K. Mellor, E. A. Schor, *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, cit., p. 270.

50 Ibid.

anymore something that comes from the contact with different societies but it is settled already within society. In the end, the United States of America are no longer a tight ship but it would be it if there were no drugs and if its population were heterosexual.

If the plague in *The Last Man* and the Cholera epidemic from which Mary Shelley got inspired when she wrote her second masterpiece spread everywhere, the cause is not due to some exotic or mysterious reasons but because humanity didn't completely understand how these disease worked just like in the 20th century the world didn't understand the working of the HIV virus.

Another comparison can be done with the 21st century migration process.. Europe in fact has been facing an important immigration problem for the last few years and the number of immigrants that reach our coasts from Africa and other countries in war. Europeans are becoming upset and try separate themselves from “the other” in order to protect their countries and their traditions.

2.3.2 Between Fiction and Reality

The terrible plague that manages destroy humanity is both a science-fictional and a very antique real element. Because of its characteristics, this element cannot be constructed easily and logically since it is an irreducible phenomenon that not only defines but also challenges the limits of rational understanding⁵¹. In the novel, the plague spreads everywhere starting from the

51 P. Melville, “The problem of immunity in *The Last Man*”, *Studies in English Literature, 1500 – 1900*, Vol. 47, No. 4, The Nineteenth Century, Autumn 2007, p. 842

year 2093. The author didn't choose this date by coincidence: it is exactly 300 years after the terror caused by the French Revolution.

Several scholars believe that the meaning attributed to this fundamental element in the novel is of political nature. According to this analysis it is possible to claim that the plague in *The Last Man* is an allegory used by the author to demonstrate how powerless human beings are against the violation of humanity that in the future will ultimately take the form of pestilence. Through this allegory Mary Shelley clearly attacks the Enlightenment faith in the inevitability of progress that can be reached by human beings through collective effort. In addition, the devastation caused by the plague is also a profound critique of Romantic ideology. A hint that leads toward this interpretation is given by Lionel's encounter with the black man. Hutchingson underlines that "Shelley has herself succumbed to the racism so common in her era by representing the novel's only African as an object of physical horror"⁵². According to Lokke, the discomfort that Lionel feels in the arms of the dying black man is symptomatic of the power struggles between Europeans and the Others (non-European). Furthermore, there are other power struggles that emerge, for instance the struggle between man and woman and between the self and the other. These examples of power-struggles show an inseparable and mutually destructive master/slave, persecutor/victim pair that ultimately dooms the entire human race. Also the fact that the plague spreads first of all in the Eastern part of the world and after that it reaches the West - arriving in England only at the end of the novel - needs to be taken into consideration since it undoubtedly underlines the sense of cultural superiority that England has always

52 Ibid.

had when compared to the other parts of the world.

However, the plague is more than just a sign of the author's dissatisfaction over political and national ideologies. It is an invention of despair encoded in both the effects and the cause of the infection in *The Last Man* which shows Mary Shelley's literal ability. Here it's worth to mention an entrance taken from her journals. It is dated May, 14 1824: "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." In the second chapter contained in the second volume of *The Last Man* we find words that resemble those written in her journal:

Adrian welcomed us on our arrival. He was all animation; you could no longer trace in his look of health, the suffering valetudianarian; from his smile and sprightly tones you could not guess that he was about to lead forth from their native country, the numbered remnant of the English nation, into the tenantless realms of the south, there to die, one by one, till the LAST MAN should remain in a voiceless, empty world. (LM 263)

As they compare the two sentences above, readers cannot deny that, this passages underline the shape of roman à clef given to the novel. Writing this novel had a deep therapeutic value for Mary Shelley and it helped her to work through her own despair, to understand the feeling of loss and abandonment that she suffered in the years immediately preceding the composition of the novel.

2.4 Beyond the *roman à cléf*

As mentioned in the previous chapters, Mary Shelley became famous thanks to *Frankenstein*, a novel which has some points in common with *The Last Man*. In addition, if one carefully analyses the two novels would understand the literal and personal evolution of the author.

Anna Maria Crispino in her essay⁵³ “Creature post-umane: da Frankenstein Cyborg” explains that the change in Mary Shelley's personal reflection had a deep influence on the development of the subjects of two different novels. If in *Frankenstein* Mary Shelley expressed her doubts about the destiny of humanity, in *The Last Man* she conveys the certainty that in the future humanity will lead itself to the disaster. Apocalypse is an influencing and fascinating element which when Mary Shelley wrote *The Last Man*, apocalypse was getting a common topic to talk about. At that time, even when essays or novels were not specifically dedicated to that subject, most of the authors mentions some apocalyptic tones in their novels or poems.

Although the main interest here is that of finding common elements between Mary Shelley's own experience and the protagonists in the novel, *The Last Man* cannot be simply considered a *roman à cléf*. Primarily because it is a very complex novel filled with many elements which can be studied under different aspects. For instance the story of Lionel Verney can be observed from the political, biographical, social and sexual points of view offering always new aspects of incredible modernity and interest which have soon started to inspire more modern writers and film directors. First of all this novel repudiates the revolutionary

53 A. Crispino “Creature post-umane: da Frankenstein ai Cyborg” in AAVV, *Lady Frankenstein e l'orrenda progenie*, Iacobelli Editore, Roma 2018, pp. 127 - 148.

hopes of Percy Shelley and William Godwin. Because of this, one can claim that it represents Mary Shelley's political reaction to Europe and the European feelings after the failure of the French Revolution that brought Europe back to monarchy.

A second aspect that is interesting nowadays is that even though it is occasionally considered the first apocalyptic story in history, *The Last Man* "denies the linkage of apocalypse and millennium" which means that, contrary to the beliefs and tendency of today and of the Romantic epoch to link the beginning of a new millennium with the end of the world creating a so called "non-millennial apocalypse". In the novel the end of the human kind is presented without any rational explanation, as well as the protagonist immunity to the sickness and interestingly the author, even though she wrote the novel in the 18th century, doesn't mention neither a supernatural intervention nor the presence of an omnipotent God.

In fact, it is a revolution in the field of literature as it differs from previous apocalyptic novels which mentioned "last man". For instance, if one takes into consideration *Omegarus and Syderia, a Romance in Futurity*, the English translation of the novel by Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville named *Le Dernier Homme*, he would see that the will and the intervention of God is fundamental in the separation of Omegarus and Sydena that will eventually lead humanity to its end. Again, Byron – from whose writings Mary Shelley got inspired - in the poem "Darkness" makes large use of biblical language related to the apocalypse. A point in common which Mary Shelley's novel is that the three of them are presented under the form of an indirect narrative but even though Mary Shelley got undoubtedly inspired by these two poems mentioned above, she made her own

specific choice to leave aside any mention of God or his will in *The Last Man*.

The story of Lionel Verney and his circle, can be analysed also as a description and critique of the conditions of women during the writer's time as it compares the behaviours and the feelings of female and male genders. Each character is analysed in depth also from a psychological prospective that offers today's scholars a great opportunity to understand the 18th century's society.

To conclude, *The Last Man* is a *roman à clef* but also the first science fiction apocalyptic novel ever written and an essay about society which inspired many young generations of readers and dreamers..

2.4.1 Ahead of Time

Since this thesis has already focused on Mary Shelley's personal experiences that influenced her career as a writer, it is now important writing skills.

Nowadays, many people love science-fiction, a very popular genre that has inspired many generations of readers. Surely thanks to the development of the movie business and the growth of technology and special effects it got even more popular and common. Not only younger but also older people are fascinated by the surrealistic situations and futuristic landscapes presented in science-fictional stories. But when was science-fiction born? Well, it's Mary Shelley the one we should thank for the birth of this genre because she is the one who, thanks to her novel, opened the way to other science-fictional authors. In fact, *The Last Man* foresees a post-apocalyptic genre that developed during the 18th and the 19th

century but which actually became even more popular thanks to a literary movement named Cyberpunk, in which apocalypse is enriched with technological and environmental thematics. The story of Lionel Verney can be placed among those that focus on the risk and not anymore on the possible benefits of scientific discoveries. The dystopian dimension⁵⁴ is here animated by the preoccupation for environmental disaster that causes and is caused also by the relation between man and woman.

This literary genre has a very long tradition which started in 1726 with *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World, in Four Parts. By Lemuel Gulliver, First a Surgeon, and then a Captain of Several Ships*, later simply remembered as *Gulliver's Travels* by Jonathan Swift. This tradition continued with *The Last Man*, *The Time Machine* (1895) by H. G. Wells, *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, *Metropolis* by Thea Von Harbou and many others.

An interesting point that Crispino takes into consideration is that starting from the 20th century this genre is getting more and more addressed to Young Adults, often in the shape of trilogies. Among others, *The Hunger Games* (2008) by Suzanne Collins or the series by Veronica Roth: *Divergent* (2011), *Insurgent* (2013) and *Allegiant* (2014). In addition, generally very young women - such as the sixteen years old Beatrice in the *Divergent* trilogy and the sixteen years old Katniss in *Hunger Games* - save the oppressed population in these polluted future worlds, where dictatorship gains the upper hand.

54 Dystopia is the characterization of a fictional world which include revelation and revolt. What utopia brings to science fiction is its "ability to reflect or express our hopes and fears" (Claeys, p. 138 in "The origins of dystopia: Wells, Huxley, and Orwell." *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*. Ed. Gregory Claeys. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 107-131).

2.4.2 A Specific Kind of Apocalypse

In *The Last Man*, apocalypse is one of the main elements and scholars named it a non-millennial apocalypse. But what is a non-millennial apocalypse? Apocalypse is conventionally divided by experts in three different groups according to the link they have with time. The groups are millenarian, millennial and non-millennial.

To begin with, the millenarian group is the apocalypse generally linked to the Bible and to Christ's second coming on earth. Secondly, a millennial apocalypse comes with associated millennium and the apocalypse can precede or induce this given period of time. Lastly, a non-millennial apocalypse, as the name suggests, is linked to no accompanying millennium. In Mary Shelley's novel it is translated into a so called Romantic apocalypse concentrating on the gradual decline of mankind's politics leading to the extinction of the human beings. Basically the author used this event to assess the correctness of the long-considered traditional romantic themes. Mary Shelley was a visionary artist and in this novel she tried to discredit the idea that history is unidirectional and linear. In fact when the Plague spreads around and no human being but Verney are left on earth, time itself collapses. Actually time collapses for humanity but nature keeps on going following its natural path. Just human history is a closed chapter, but the natural world's deep time stays unaffected. The landscape presented at the end of the novel is not in ruin and it's free of decay: everything stays and it's stopped like stuck in time creating the image of a land frozen in the 19th century. This leaves possibility to start again in the future.

Furthermore, the discourse of apocalypse can't be properly understood without taking in consideration the historical context of the French Revolution. After the Napoleonic Wars Europe was not the same. The Battle of Waterloo in 1815 had brought an end to a period of bloodshed that last twenty years. The Continent suffered a dramatic break from the past and the British government started to get stricter fearing riots also in England. Bennet suggested that Mary Shelley was committed to sociopolitical critique and this commitment was guided by the faith that with the imagination human beings are able to make the world a better place. Mary Shelley's apocalypse can be thus seen as a critique of the global interconnectivity and as a prophetic vision of the destiny of the imperialist expansion that would finally collapse and that, if it endured, would lead humanity to a nightmarish future.

It is true that even though Mary Shelley offers a tragic vision of the future she doesn't leave readers without hope. The frame narrator like the Archangel Michael tries to move the audience. The narrator wants the readers to rethink the society they live in. This hopeful vision of history contrasts with Verney's vision of history but they come together across time. It is a story interwoven within a story linking present, past and future. The frame narrator intervenes in the course of history and in the plague-chronicle by recasting the sibylline leaves with the aim to warn humanity more than damn it and to caution it rather than condemn.

Crespino also notes that for those readers who come across the novel in our age, it is impossible to read it without thinking about the ignominious failure of the ideal of an almighty and unique subject. It is a catastrophic part of the male mentality which sometimes forgets to be born thanks to a woman. Apocalypse is

here due to the male figures of the story who challenge death and seek absolute domination on nature and other human beings.

2. 5. Imagination, Power and Personification

Apocalypse is a fundamental element in the novel that includes a strong link between imagination and power, a bond that readers can perceive while reading every single chapter of the novel starting from the second volume. The meaning and concept of power itself is subjected to a mutation in the text. In the first chapter the narrator talks about power of mutability and one sees power presented as mere brute force. The transformation into intellectual power will be reached with the intervention of Adrian but only at the end of the novel the narrator will become truly powerful thanks to the union of power and knowledge. Adrian himself unfortunately is never able to achieve it because of his misleading imaginative qualities, qualities actually possessed by Percy Shelley. In fact, Adrian's conception offers only a way to escape from a grim reality and also the other characters in the novel use imagination as a way to keep themselves far away from reality. In other words it's a critique that underlines some of the blindspots of masculine Romanticism.

...Farewell to the arts,--to eloquence, which is to the human mind as the winds to the sea, stirring, and then allaying it;--farewell to poetry and deep philosophy, for man's imagination is cold, and his enquiring mind

can no longer expatiate on the wonders of life,...

(L M 256)

The author puts the reader in front of the idea of failure of the paradise of imagination: in the end the admirable ideals of Adrian are proved to be wrong and unfeasible and the coward Ryland is instead proved to be right⁵⁵. The failure of imagination brings about the failure of art but in the end Lionel Verney becomes a literary artist, the possessor of the most important story that has ever been told even those the story is important for are all necessarily dead: he believes in readers to be a guarantee of the survival of the human race and wants them to be a testimony to it's own existence but at the same time he promises them a future in which they will not be able to read the novel.⁵⁶

The reader is invited to approach his own elimination retrospectively.

The plague was in London! Fools that we were not long ago to have foreseen this. We wept over the ruin of the boundless continents of the east, and the desolation of the western world; while we fancied that the little channel between our island and the rest of the earth was to preserve us alive among the dead. It were no mighty leap methinks from Calais to Dover. The eye easily discerns the sister land; they were united once; and the little path that runs between looks in a map but as a trodden footway through high grass. Yet this small interval was to save us: the sea was to rise a wall of adamant – without, disease and misery – within, a shelter

55 M. D. Paley "Apocalypse without Millenium" in A.A. Fisch, A. K. Mellor, E. A. Schor, *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, cit., p. 116.

56 B. Johnson "The Last Man" in A.A. Fisch, A. K. Mellor, E. A. Schor, *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, cit., p. 266.

from evil, a nook of garden of paradise – a particle celestial soil, which no evil could invade – truly we were wise in our generation, to imagine all these things! (LM 198)

In these lines the arrival of the plague in England is told: the plague reaches the safest place on earth but the hope of a millennium persists even when it should be abandoned. No sacred order seem to exist.

The Plague in the narrative is always female. Adrian and Lionel personalize them in different ways. For the former, she is identified with Kali, the Hindu goddess of death, time and doomsday, a strong mother-figure often associated with violence and sexuality. Like an overwhelming force “she succeeds in crushing out the beings of all who stew the high road of life”.⁵⁷ To the latter, instead the plague is a snow queen who abdicated her throne and remorsefully “despoiled herself of her imperial sceptre among ice rocks that surrounded us”⁵⁸. These descriptions create a borderline between personification and myth. The Plague is much more powerful and stronger than personal will or national leadership. Constantinople is blown up but instead of either army it's the Plague that takes it.

2.5.1 The Function of Windsor

Windsor is a nest, a place of happiness and joy for the protagonists in the first volume of the novel. It is the house where Verney becomes a man and becomes

57 Ferguson Ellis, “Subversive Surfaces: The Limits of Domestic Affection in Mary Shelley's Later Fiction” in A.A. Fisch, A. K. Mellor, E. A. Schor, *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, cit., p. 220.

58 Ibid.

educated thanks to Adrian and where he meets the love of his life, Idris. There, the happy circle can discuss about politics. In short, one can say that it is a zone of confrontation which seems to be detached from the rest of the world and it is exactly this condition of separation from society that gives Windsor the possibility to be the source of happiness to Verney's circle.

Mary Shelley must have felt the same in Villa Diodati in Ginevra during the summer 1816 but she must have felt the same also during the time spent in Scotland with the Baxter family, which offered her a great cultural growth. However, as the novel proceeds toward the third volume, the atmosphere in Windsor changes completely. Verney describes this mutation as follows:

Our little town of Windsor, in which the survivors from the neighbouring counties were chiefly assembled, wore a melancholy aspect. Its streets were blocked up with snow – the few passengers seemed palsier, and frozen by the ungenial visitation of winter. To escape these evils was the aim and scope of all our exertions. (LM 213)

It is clear that what once was a safe and cosy nest, later on in the novel, becomes an uncomfortable place of despair and sadness. But why does it happen? Because of the contact with the rest of the population and its problematic. Not being isolated and caring for the others brings devastation also to Windsor and so the only way to survive is that of leaving what once was a source of happiness to the circle. This again is similar to what Mary Shelley experienced in person when as the people she loved started to get involved toward others and consequently

died. For example, Lord Byron started to get involved in politics and died fighting for the independence of Greece while Percy Byshee Shelley died after having met his friend in another Italian city. Of course Mary Shelley doesn't clarify the cause of despair in this way but she creates an hypothetical plague that soon infects and kills the population on heart. The Plague refuses to respect any of the distinctions between England and the other populations of the world. If in the first place the struggle was that of keeping the Plague out of England, then the protagonist fight to keep it out of "their Paradise" Windsor and finally they can't do anything but keeping it out of their own bodies. If in the first place Windsor is Paradise and happiest place on earth, in the end it becomes "a colony of the unhappy"⁵⁹.

59 Ibid., p. 227.

Chapter 3: THE MAIN CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL AND MARY SHELLEY'S

CIRCLE

One aim of this thesis is to show how the protagonists and the secondary characters presented in *The Last Man* resemble the people who surrounded Mary Shelley in her life. The novel represents not only the first real example of science-fiction story, but also a deep self-analysis that the author carried out in a moment of despair and loneliness. Mary Shelley wrote this novel to feel better and she tried to give a new life to her beloved ones in the story. Thus, *The Last Man* not only is a novel about death and destruction but also about life and hope.

The biographical elements are easy to grasp throughout the three volumes of the book, even though the author sometimes changed the gender of the prototypes in order to give each character the capacity to represent more than one person in Mary Shelley's circle - or even the author herself - . The ones who emerge the most are Lord Byron and Percy Bysshe Shelley who create two extremes and opposite ways to think and see the world.

Many scholars agree on the fact that even though Mary Shelley never succeeded in writing a complete biography of her husband, she still felt the urge to honour him after his death. To do so, she published the *Posthumous Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* in 1824 that nowadays is one of the main sources for those who study Percy Shelley's life and works. Mary Shelley felt that publishing that collection wasn't enough to honour her husband and for that reason she drew full-length portraits of him in several other occasions.

The novelist clarified her intention in writing her novel *The Last Man* as follows:

I have endeavoured, but how inadequately, to give some idea of him in my last published book – the sketch has pleased some of those who best loved him – I might have made some more of it but there are feelings which one recoils from unveiling to the public eye.⁶⁰

It is true that she could have written more explicitly about the men of her life but she probably didn't want to express her feelings and thoughts too openly, even though in the end she was able to point out more characteristics and feelings than she expected.

The Last Man mainly deals with the time the Shelleys spent in England. From August 1815 to May 1816 the Shelleys stayed at Bishopgate Heath, near Windsor, and many scenes in the novel clearly owe their origin to that carefree period. In a scene in which Lionel, the protagonist of the novel, looks from France towards England, one is reminded of what Mary and Percy Shelley must have felt as they gazed in the reverse direction in the spring 1818. Melancholy and despair emerge from the following lines:

It were no mighty leap from Calais to Dover. The eye easily discerns the sister land; they were united once; and the little path that runs between looks in a map but as a trodden footway through high grass. Yet this small interval was to save us; the sea was to rise a wall of adamant – without disease and misery – within a shelter from evil, a nook of the garden of

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W. E. Peck, "The Biographical Element in the Novels of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley", cit., p. 197.

paradise – a particle of celestial soil, which no evil could invade [...]

The forest was dressed in green; the young calves frisked on the new-sprung grass; the wind-winged shadows of light clouds sped over the green cornfields; the hermit cuckoo repeated his monotonous all-hail to the season; the nightingale, bird of love and minion of the evening star, filled the wood with song; while Venus lingered in the warm sunset, and the young green of the trees lay in gentle relief along the clear horizon.

(LM 127)

Mary Shelley idealized that time and compared Windsor to the Garden of Eden where, far from the community and big city life, she was finally able to spend one of the best periods of her life. In the lines reported above, some characteristics typical of the British landscape are easily recognizable and England is said to be “a celestial soil, which no evil could invade”. Clearly, Mary Shelley wanted to protect and keep in her mind the idealized image of her *Heimat*. Again in the following lines she didn't miss the chance to describe her beloved country and she offered readers a detailed description of those places that had been of extreme importance during her childhood and youth. England was the land that always had a special place in her heart and mind, and that she, once she was abroad, always craved for:

For the last time we looked on the wide extent of country visible from the terrace, and saw the last rays of the sun tingle the dark masses of wood variegated by autumnal tints; the uncultivated fields and smokeless cottages lay in the shadow below; the Thames wound through the wild plain, and the venerable pile of Eton college, stood in the dark relief, a prominent object;

the cawing of the myriad rooks which inhabited the trees of the little park, as in column of thick wedge they speeded to their nests, disturbed the silence of evening.

Let's focus the attention on the characters themselves and their resemblance with Mary Shelley's circle. At the beginning of chapter six, in the first volume, Verney/Shelley begins with a general introduction of the "happy circle" and then he continues with a description of his friends which gives the idea of dream life. In the lines below one sees how much Mary Shelley was actually thinking about Villa Diodati's period when she decided to describe Verney's circle. Perdita's cottage is probably the representation of the house that the Shelleys rented once they moved to Ginevra:

And now let the reader, passing over some short period of time be introduced to our happy circle. Adrian, Idris and I, were established in Windsor Castle. Lord Raymond and my sister, inhabited a house which the former had built on the border of the Great Park, near Perdita's cottage, as was still named the low-roofed abode, where the two, poor even in hope, had each received the hope to our felicity. We had our separate occupations and our common amusements. (LM 70)

Here I offer a summary of the main disguised under which we meet biographical hints. As we mentioned before it is important not to forget that the author sometimes confers to one character certain traits or acts that another character had already personated in the story.

- Lionel Verney represents Mary Shelley herself, who with his sister Perdita (a mixture of the author and her step-sister Claire) are the orphans of the former king's disgraced friend ;
- Adrian (representing Percy Shelley) and his sister Idris (representing the ideal partner covering the role of mother and wife in the bourgeois family) are the children of the king who abdicated in favour of a republican government;
- Lord Raymond, namely Lord Byron in disguise, is a successful military leader and heir to a large fortune;
- Evadne is a Greek princess but it is the symbol of all Percy Shelley's mistresses who Mary had to deal with throughout her life.
- The Countess of Windsor is often a representation of William Goldwin and sometimes a representation of Sir Timothy Shelley;
- In the children, Clara and Alfred one can get information about the woman's feelings toward her children.
- The majority of the secondary characters represent Mary Shelley's own concerns and are analysed in the following chapter.

3.1 Lionel Verney

Lionel Verney is the main character of the novel and the only survivor of the human race after the plague destroyed everything on earth. He is the representation of the main feelings that Mary Shelley herself felt after the loss of

the majority of her friends and last but not least her children. She felt the need to write down her feelings as “the solitude became intolerable”(LM 211). Many of the literary reviewers that got the chance to know Mary Shelley in person demanded the author why she had decided to write a novel called *The Last Man* instead of calling it the Last Woman. It is not easy to answer this question since *The Last Man's* protagonist doesn't totally embody the traditional characteristics attributed to the male gender. In fact, Lionel Verney falls into a different aesthetic category. He represents a kind of third sex.

Great God! Would it one day be thus? One day all extinct, save myself,
should I walk the earth alone? Were these warning voices, whose
inarticulate and oracular sense forced belief upon me. (LM 212)

According to Luke, in *The Last Man* “the condition of the individual being is essentially isolated and therefore ultimately tragic”⁶¹, just like the real condition of the author. This myth of loneliness has been related to the Wordsworthian idea of the three ages of man. This ideas explains that men develop following three steps in the following order:

- childhood, the age of innocence, when human beings don't have self confidence yet;
- adolescence when human beings become aware of the self and distance themselves temporarily from the others;
- maturity which is seen as the age of the achievement and understanding of

61 H. J. Luke, Jr., “The Last Man: Mary Shelley's Myth of the Solitary”, *Praire Schooner*, Vol. 39, No. 4, Winter 1965/66, p. 325.

unity of all living things.

The life of Lionel Verney in the novel also consists of three phases but in a different order. According to Wordsworth, if one moves from a temporary state of loneliness toward a permanent state of unity, but in the novel Lionel leaves a temporary state of unity for a permanent state of loneliness.

To sum up, Mary Shelley offers the vision of a life in which unity is something that human beings can enjoy for a very short time because in the end they are condemned to loneliness.

Other scholars have instead divided the life of Verney in three phases of a totally different nature, which reflect “the Gothic idea of uncanny”.⁶² According to this theory Lionel undergoes a transformation in three phases throughout the story:

- Lionel the Beast;
- Lionel the Man;
- Lionel the uncanny.

These phases of life clearly evoke Mary Shelley's own life experiences. To explore these three phases and compare them with the author's life, it is necessary to go through the novel chronologically. In the first volume Lionel meets Adrian, he is adopted and educated by him and this process leads him to civilization. Lionel describes this life-changing event comparing himself to a beast that had been caught and starts to evolve into a civilized man:

“as he spoke, I felt subject to him; and all my boasted pride and strenght

62 U. Bauschbacher, “He, She and It: Aesthetics in Mary Shelley”, *URJ*, May 2002. p. 5.

were subdued by the honeyed accents of this blue-eyed boy. The trim and paled demesne of civilization, which I had before regarded from my wild jungle as inaccessible, had its wicket opened by him" (LM 20)

After a while, Lionel marries Adrian's sister, Idris, after she escapes from her mother. It's possible to claim that the author herself felt she met civilization when she got the chance to meet Percy Shelley, - "the blue-eyed boy" - for the first time. Mary Shelley regarded him as the embodiment of her parents' ideas and that is why she felt subjected but also totally devoted to him for the rest of her life. If Lionel-Adrian's relationship represents the respectful and fraternal love between Mary and Percy Shelley, the relationship Lionel-Idris is the representation of their marriage.

When the plague breaks out Lionel goes to Greece with his sister Perdita looking for Raymond. Raymond and Perdita pass away and soon Adrian becomes Lord Protector. Lionel and his family stay at Windsor and Alfred, their son, dies. In this instance Alfred could be a representation of Mary Shelley's son William, named after William Goldwin, and this passage could represent the moment when Mary Shelly "saw death stealing across his features" (LM 276). Both Mary Shelley and her husband were grief-stricken over his sudden illness and death in Rome, probably from a cholera or typhoid infection. The plague spreads and so Adrian decides to move the survivors from England to Paris. The Countess of Windsor reappears and soon Idris dies. The Countess dies too after reconciling with Lionel. Everyone dies one after the other until Lionel becomes the last one left alive. This was true for Mary Shelley as well because she was left alone as her circle's

components died one by one before her.

What are we, the inhabitants of this globe, least among the man that people infinite space? Our minds embrace infinity; the visible mechanism of our being is subject to merest accident. Day by day we are forced to believe this. (LM 184)

To summarize, Lionel the Beast is nothing but Mary Shelley before the beginning of her relationship with Percy Shelley; Lionel the Man is Mary Shelly during the period of her life spent with her husband and her circle and, in the end, Lionel the uncanny is the lonely Mary Shelley, a woman left alone in a world of strangers.

3.2 Adrian and Idris

As mentioned, *The Last Man* contains Mary Shelley's admitted portrayal of Percy Shelley as Adrian but some scholars and readers can see Percy Shelley portrayed as Idris as well. It's possible to claim that Adrian's ideals are those shared by the author's father and husband; these ideas are shown first in *Political Justice* (1793) and in *Prometheus Unbound* (1820). Even though Adrian wants to genuinely represent republican ideals, he actually incarnates the ideal of superiority of the high class. In her novel Mary Shelley criticize these abstracts ideas and Adrian's idealism will be in the end defeated by the plague.

Adrian, on whose life my happiness depended [...] bitter task was it, to behold his spirit waver between death and life; to see his warm cheek, and know that the very fire that burned too fiercely there, was consuming the vital life; to hear his moaning voice, which might never articulate words of life and wisdom. [...] he knew me [...] (LM 56)

If one analyses these words taken from the first volume of Mary Shelley's novel, it's possible to understand that the author is actually reflecting her feeling toward her husband. She in fact was somehow dependent on him and sometimes it was hard for her to keep pace with him. Idris identifies with her children and she doesn't have a life on her own. This female character and its story question the reader, making him reflect about the social roles that are left for a woman once her family is destroyed defining women as the creators and preservers of human's life.

The theory of free love which Percy Shelley supported was not totally shared by the novelist who more than once felt threatened by her husband's interest in other women. At the same time, Mary Shelley felt that the poet was the only man able to understand her feelings and thoughts. For this reason she depicts him as the moral heart of the novel and refuses to sympathized the dreams of massacre and glory of Raymond, calling into question the civilizing mission of his campaign. This anti-war sentiment and Percy Shelley's benevolent humanitarianism is shared by Mary Shelley who also highlights atrocities on the part of the Greeks and European expressing a devastating critique of the Western imperialism.

"The love which would rule me, not that which I rule" (LM 43) is a statement that

encloses the essence of Percy Shelley: a man who made love the goal of his life.

On the other hand, Idris embodies the ideal that the author had of life partner and companion which her husband never succeeded to fulfil. She is identified with the 19th century ideal of woman who needs to stay closed in the family sphere separated from the rest of the world.

3.3 Perdita

Here is another fundamental member of the Shelley circle clearly represented in the story: Claire Clairmont, alias Perdita. To build this character, Mary Shelley got inspired not only by her step-sister but also by herself and probably by the female gender general state in the British society of the 19th century. Perdita expresses intense frustration with her passive feminine role and wishes to be taken more in consideration by men. During the first period of protectorate in fact she seems to be quite satisfied:

During the first months of his protectorate, Raymond and she had been inseparable; each project was discussed with her, each plan approved by her. [...] Her expressive eyes were two stars whose beams were love; hope and light-heartedness sat on her cloudless bow. She fed even to tears of joy on the praise and glory of her Lord. (LM 93)

From these lines emerges a condition of semi-total partnership and equality,

the one Mary Shelley dreamt of, as Raymond asks her wife for approval every time there is an important decision to make. This reflects a situation which is true for most of the couples during the first period of marriage or simply of the relationship. Also Lord Byron and Claire Clairmont had a period of intense love in which they were inseparable and Mary Shelley felt the same during her first period with her husband. But like all good things, also this idyllic feeling is soon over since Lord Raymond starts to crave for power more and more. He wants to move from the private to the public sphere, leaving her wife aside. As he does this, tragedies and unlucky events start to happen. As Perdita finds out that Raymond has a relationship with Evadne, she feels like she has lost her certainties because the betrayal is not simply physical but also mental. This makes it harder for Perdita to accept it and, in the concentrated pride of her nature, even though she can't forgive Raymond, she also feels that can't live without him because she believes that family is the only place for her to be happy and because "the very heart and soul of Raymond and Perdita had mingled" (LM 103). Perdita's nature seems here to show more of Mary Shelley herself than Claire⁶³:

She possessed a capacity of happiness. [...] The same peculiarities of her character rendered her sorrow agonies; her fancy magnified them, her sensibility made her forever open to their renewed impression; love envenomed the heart-piercing sting. (LM 102)

Her cheerful nature and romantic spirit emerge from the lines above. This is the description of the author during her first period with Percy Shelley, when

63 W. E. Peck, "The Biographical Element in the Novels of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley", cit., p. 211.

everything to her was an adventure.

The love of Perdita-Claire for Lord Raymond-Byron is thus described:

No office, no devotion, no watching was irksome to her, as it regarded him. She would sit apart from us and watch him; she would weep for joy to think that he was hers. She erected a temple for him in the depth of her being, and each faculty was a priestess vowed to his service. (LM 72)

Claire loved Lord Byron but her love wasn't returned properly. Her devotion was meaningless to Lord Byron and soon he decided to break up with her, not long after Claire discovered she was pregnant. Even though their relationship was over, both of them tried their best to take care of their daughter. In the novel also Allegra, born to the pair, is represented through the character of Clara, daughter of Perdita and Lord Raymond and she is thus described:

“It was curious to trace in this miniature model the very traits of her father.

[...] How very dear she was to Perdita!” (LM 72)

According to scholars, through the unhappiness exhibited by Perdita over the secret visits of Lord Raymond to the beautiful Greek princess Evadne, the author shows her real attitude Mary Shelley had toward Percy Shelley's philosophy of divided love. Evadne appears to be the prototype of Harriet Shelley and all the other mistresses – suspected and real – Percy Shelley had throughout his life with Mary Shelley.

“Perdita was all kindness and attention to her lord; but she was silent and beyond words sad” (LM 108) as she understood she could never get what she wanted from Raymond. In the same way, Mary Shelley, who was in need of an unconditional love, felt betrayed every time her husband showed his interest in other women or simply found them attractive. Obviously, this is another expression of Mary Shelley's frustration due to the attentions that her husband gave her sister Claire and to Emilia Viviani. In these descriptions she expresses the different idea of love that generally men and women have and shows readers her disappointment toward this different way to approach love.

3.4 Lord Raymond

The figure of Lord Raymond was clearly inspired by Lord Byron, a close friend of Mary Shelley who had always been admired by her since they met at Villa Diodati in 1816 for the first time. A man who loved beauty and who believed in himself, Lord Byron, just like Lord Raymond could be described as a cynical and brilliant man of the world. He was special because of his revolutionary and sometimes unethical way of leading his life and in the novel *Lord Raymond and Adrian*, just like Percy Byshee Shelley and Lord Byron, present two figures in contradictions.

Byron was often described as the most flamboyant and notorious of the major Romantics, He was both celebrated and condemned in his life for his aristocratic excesses such as huge debts, numerous love affairs - with both men and women - as well as rumours of a scandalous *liaison* with his half-sister.

Needless to say that:

Raymond was the theme of every tongue, the hope of each wife, mother or betrothed bride, whose husband, child, or lover, making a part of the Greek army, were to be conducted to victory by him. (LM 40)

To go back to the character, Lord Raymond has a limitless ambition and his desire for power rules his erotic relations as well. He denies his adulterous love affair with Evadne Zaimi and this denial actually draws infection to him. He doesn't simply die because of the plague but he dies because he is a liar. His lies and his dishonesty show that his soul is filthy and it causes the plague to be somehow attracted by him. Clara, daughter of Raymond and Perdita, even though deeply loved by her parents, is victimized, both literally and figuratively, by them. Perdita forbids even the merest mention of Clara's father. In this way Clara becomes the alter ego of Allegra, daughter of Claire and Byron who lived a short and uneasy life because of her parents' relationship: a man and a woman that didn't love each other but almost despised each other.

The episode in which Lord Raymond fights and dies in the twenty-first-century struggle for Greek independence is undoubtedly drawn from Lord Byron's life, whose death at Missolonghi came while Mary Shelley was composing the opening chapter of the novel. It is here extremely important to mention the contrast of physical appearance between Raymond and Adrian because in the novel this unequal physical aspect of the two is merely symbolic of deeper and more significant differences, which often rise to open conflict and become fundamental

to the plot⁶⁴.

If the physical and mental difference between the two characters in the novel becomes fundamental to the plot, Lord Byron and Percy Shelley's differences became fundamental in Mary Shelley's life. These two men had in fact deeply different ideals but whenever they met they were able to keep the conversation going for hours. As Mary Shelley wrote:

No two persons could be more opposite than Adrian and he... A spirit of aversion rose between them. Adrian despised the narrow view of the politician, and Raymond held in supreme contempt the benevolent visions of the philanthropist. (LM 34)

When Lord Byron and Percy met in Switzerland in 1816, the two were incredibly different both in the appearance and in the mentality but it is probably this difference in disposition that gave life to a neverending friendship. Mary Shelley in the first volume of *The Last Man* writes:

The very difference of our dispositions gave zest to these conversations. Adrian had the superiority in learning and eloquence but Raymond possessed a quick penetration, and a practical knowledge of life, which usually displayed itself in opposition to Adrian, and thus kept up the ball of discussion. (LM 71)

It is clear that in those lines Mary Shelley described the relationship

64 E. J. Lovell, Jr., "Byron and the Byronic Hero in the Novels of Mary Shelley", *The University of Texas Studies in English*, Vol. 30, 1951, p. 167.

between Lord Byron and Percy Shelley in disguise. In the following pages of the novel, Raymond is repeatedly pictured as the masterful man of action, irresistible to women, a born soldier and able administrator, mature and thoroughly masculine, as contrasted with Percy Shelley, the unworldly man of thought and immature dreamer, who abhorred strife and was ill at ease and ineffective in the world of actuality.

My first act when I become King of England , will be to unite with the Greeks, take Costantinople, and subdue all Asia. I intend to be a warrior, a conqueror. (LM 44)

The ideals are those of Lord Byron himself who in fact helped Greece during the war against the Turks and it is in that war that he lost his life.

The earth was spread out as an highway for him; heavens built as a canopy for him. Adrian felt that he made a part of a great whole. He owned affinity not only with mankind, but all nature was akin to him; the mountain and sky were his friends; the winds of heaven and the offspring of earth his playmates; while he the focus only of his mighty mirror, felt his life mingle with the universe of existence. (LM 34)

But why does Raymond die? According to the novel Raymond fighting in Costantinople comes into contact with the plague that at that time was devastating the East of the world. It's also true that he had got the news of Evadne's death not longer before he passed away. According to Mellor, these two events are linked to

each other. Raymond doesn't contract plague but an incurable sadness that eventually debilitates him and leads him to death. After the death his lover he becomes more melancholic, unable to overcome his sadness. Probably his death works as "self-fulfilment of Evadne's prophecy – curse"⁶⁵

65 Mellor, Anne K., *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, cit, p. 239.

Chapter 4: **THE SECONDARY CHARACTERS IN THE NOVEL AND THEIR ROLE IN MARY SHELLEY'S LIFE**

The Last Man is a very special book, not only because of the variety of topics that it touches on, but also because there are not actual secondary characters. In fact, I mean that all characters have a specific function and their role is fundamental to the plot, even though it appears for a very short time. Generally the secondary characters in the story are modelled on some people who have been extremely important in the novelist's life, like the Countess of Windsor or Evadne. In other cases they are the representation of something deeper and less immediate to the modern reader. Thanks to the different personalities presented in the book the author vehicles her opinions on specific concerns that were so actual for her time.

This is the main reason why I've felt the need to dedicate a specific chapter to the so called secondary characters. In addition, the concerns that emerge from these characters are – sadly - extremely modern and actual. I believe that they can allow readers to make a kind of introspection. In addition they can help them analyse the modern society and understand it better. As an example one can mention the Negro Half-Clad. Even though he functions as a representation of the idea of imperialism and its consequences in the nineteenth century, nowadays he can be seen as the representation of the European racism toward those immigrants who try to reach the coasts of the Continent and as a representation of the often demonised Islamic religion.

In other words, all the characters in the novel, included the secondary ones

can be seen and studied not only as representation of the world of Mary Shelley and the society she was in, but as the personifications of issues that concern the modern society.

4.1 The Countess of Windsor

The Countess is one of the most controversial characters presented in the novel because she is a woman with typical male characteristics. She is the mother of Idris and she doesn't approve her daughter's relationship with Lionel Verney because according to her he doesn't deserve to marry Idris. The reason is that they come from a higher social class while Verney doesn't. In the first volume of *The Last Man*, she endeavours to put a temporary ban on the lovers, requesting Idris not to see this young man during the interval of one month. Idris, loves her mother and wants to respect her will but her love toward Lionel is so great that soon she can't keep her promise anymore. When Idris refuses to stay away from her beloved, the Countess, aware that nothing will be able to stop their love, still requires a pledge that she will not marry. Idris promises but at last she breaks her promise again and there is an elopement similar to the one that really took place on July 28, 1814 when Mary and Percy Shelley accompanied by Claire escaped from the Godwin residence. After this episode, the Countess declines any communication with the two lovers Idris and Lionel, just like William Godwin did after Mrs. Godwin tried without success to bring her daughter Claire Clairmont back to London.

As I mentioned, William Godwin was an open-minded man but his beliefs

were sometimes distant from his actual behaviours. He is thought to have opposed Percy Shelley's romance with his daughter in 1814. Probably Mary Shelley represented this fact through the episode reported below.

While the brother and sister were still hesitating in what manner they could best attempt to bring their mother [the Countess of Windsor] over to their party, she, suspecting our meetings, taxed her children with them; taxed her daughter with deceit, and an unbecoming attachment for one whose only merit was being the son of her imprudent father; and who was doubtless as worthless as he from whom he boasted his descent. (LM 64)

Another important passage in the first volume of the novel is the following one.

The Countess cast no look of kindness on my worn-out frame though afterwards she thanked me coldly for my attentions. The days that followed were full of pain to me; so that I sometimes regretted that I had not yielded at once to the haughty lady, who watched all my motions, and turned my beloved task of nursing my friend to a work of pain and irritation. The countess had the advantage of position. (LM 56)

In the lines above it is not Mr. Godwin who appears in disguise but Percy Shelley's father Sir Timothy Shelley who despised the couple for their behaviour and for the way they lived. Even after the poet's death, he threatened more than once Mary Shelley to not support her economically anymore.

The Countess of Windsor couldn't be a calm and nice ruler but more probably a tyrannical one due to her avidity and selfishness. She has strong political ambitions and her greatest desire she has is to accomplish the restoration of monarchy and rule over the population of England. In other words, she doesn't want to be just a simple mother or wife and this ambition emphasise the dissimilarity between her and the characters of Idris and Perdita. However, her will is not enough since as a foreigner and a woman, she wouldn't be accepted by the population as a legitimate sovereign. So, because of her gender, she find herself dependent on a man. She finds herself obliged to find a way to fulfil her desires and the only possibility is that of doing so through men such as her son and her husband – the king- or even the future husband of her daughter. Unsurprisingly, the Countess, as all the other women in the novel, is not destined to an happy ending but is condemned to sufferance. This happens when she understand that she has no way to satisfy her desires because of her husband's abdication, of her son's Republicanism and because of her daughter Idris' decision to marry a non suitably highborn man, namely Lionel Verney.

To sum up, not only she can't find happiness but her character also suggests that women can't neither be happy, both in the future and in the past, nor gain access to the corridors of political power. Once again, a rigid division of between sex roles denies women a fully satisfying life, no matter how powerful a woman is.

4.2 Evadne

Evadne, exactly like all the other female characters in the novel, is not an independent character, but a woman that depends by a man, namely the very strong Lord Raymond. She is a character that lives and then dies chained to her passions. However, Evadne is the most independent woman in the novel and covers a very important function in the story. She has a very attractive personality, she is proud, strong and beautiful. She has the ability of making men fall in love with her and in fact in the first volume even prince Adrian, the sole heir, falls in love with her but he's obliged to let her go.

Mary Shelley got inspired by her own experience and by the women she met during her life in order to create this character. According her own diaries, during their period together, Mary and Percy Shelley never stopped in a single place for a long time, and in the places they visited it wasn't rare for people to fall in love with Percy Shelley. He had a habit of Platonically respond – and sometimes not only platonically - so Mary Shelley who could barely tolerate this invasion of her emotional domain by other men and women, made of Evadne the character in the book that collectively represented Sophia Stacey, Emilia Viviani, Jane Williams, Claire Clairmont and the ghost of Harriet Shelley.

Of course the other female characters are also inspired by real acquaintances and friends of hers but for example Perdita offers readers a very different image and idea of woman. Evadne in fact is strong and fearless. She is the female version of the Byronic hero⁶⁶ with oriental magnificence and great energy of

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Historian and critic Lord Macaulay described the character as "a man proud, moody,

her passions. This untamed pride is what attracts Raymond and his affair with Perdita is a symbolic beginning of the spread of the plague. Probably Mary Shelley's own insecurities are reflected in the creation and then behaviour of this character.

She had always been devoted, even after death, to her husband, expected Percy to be devoted to her as well but he never did. According to Silvia Neonato, it seems that the supporter of free love Percy Shelley, had once even proposed to her wife Harriet a *menage à trois* with his friend Thomas Hogg before getting acquainted with Mary Shelley.⁶⁷ On the other hand, she always felt that the other women who had some relationships with Percy were to give him a superficial love and that nobody else ever loved him the way she did. Through Lionel Verney, her alter-ego, she claims that:

I didn't accuse Evadne of hypocrisy or a wish to deceive a lover; but the first letter that I saw of her convinced me that she didn't love him; it was written with elegance and foreigner as she was, with great command of language. The hand-writing itself was exquisitely beautiful [...] there was kindness, gratitude and sweetness in her expression, but no love. (LM 25)

I find that this short passage contained in the first volume of the novel is very meaningful because it gives a concrete idea of the attitude of the woman toward Percy Shelley's lovers and girlfriends.

“In wild delirium she called upon the name of Raymond (LM 144)” This significant

cynical, with defiance on his brow, and misery in his heart, a scorner of his kind, implacable in revenge, yet capable of deep and strong affection" https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Byronic_hero (19/01/19).

⁶⁷ S. Neonato. “La donna che anticipò le nostre paure” in AAVV. *Lady Frankenstein e l'orrenda progenie*, cit, p.9.

sentence shows the devotion that women have for men and for everything they do. The devotion they have in what they believe.

4.3 The Negro Half-Clad

In the last part of the novel a very special character appears. He is the only black man who Mary Shelley mentions in *The Last Man*. Scholars still find his appearance quite controversial since it is not clear the meaning that she wanted to attribute to this man. In order to explain better the different attributions given to this character by biographers and literary critics during the 19th and 20th centuries, one can analyse the passage in which the appearance of this character is described.

It was quite dark; but as I stepped within, a pernicious scent assailed my senses, producing sickening qualms, which made their way to my very heart, while I felt my leg clasped, and a groan repeated by the person that held me. I lowered my lamp, and I saw a negro half-clad, writhing under the agony of disease, while he held me with a convulsive grasp. With mixed horror and impatience I strove to disengage myself, and fell on the sufferer; he would his naked festering arms round me, his face was close to mine, and his breath, death-laden, entered my vitals. For a moment I was overcome, my head was bowed by aching nausea; till, reflection returning, I sprung up, threw the wretch from me, and darting up the staircase, entered the chamber usually inhabited by my family. (LM 268-269)

Scholars such as Mellor, Snyder and Plug, tried to understand the meaning of this encounter which seems to be the only case of direct infection in the novel. An infection from which Lionel not only recovers but even gets stronger. In fact, after the encounter he “hovers near death for three full days but later, as Snyder says, Lionel acquires “new faculty of vision” and “an heightened spiritual awareness”.⁶⁸ But what is this archetypal rebirth due to? Is it really the only case of direct infection in the novel?

As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, throughout the centuries different meanings have been attributed to this episode and this character.

First of all, Plug claims that it is a complex critique to the Romantic ideology and it represents Mary Shelley's dissatisfaction with the ideologies, both political and national, of that time. According to the scholar there is no specific reason for the singular capacity of the protagonist to withstand the plague but his acquired immunity must have something to do with the plague-devastated black man⁶⁹. Secondly, it might be a specific critique to the Imperialist policy of the 19th century British Empire , representing “the colonies collective revenge on the metropolitan centre”⁷⁰. Thirdly, it might be the involuntary confession of the English disgust toward the colonial others who were dominated by them. According to Bewell, the “embrace functions as inoculation rather than contagion”⁷¹. By this, the scholar suggests that the loving hospitality of the other and a “more genuine reception of the other”⁷² might be the key to our survival. Anyway Lionel, can't show

68 P. Melville, “The Problem of Immunity in The Last Man”, cit., p. 892.

69 J. Plug, *Borders of a Lip: Romanticism, Language, History, Politics*, New York, State Univ. of New York Press, 2003, p. 160.

70 Ibid.

71 A. Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1999, p 333.

72 Ibid.

compassion to the man because he feels he's a stranger. He has in mind his familiar drama and rejects the embrace given by the black man in order to look for Alfred, his oldest darling. In this sense, the negro half-clad is a threat to the family and the unity of its members. There is no space for compassion to others since the priority is given to relatives since blood relation is the real important thing in life.⁷³

4. 4 The Other Characters in *The Last Man*

There are other few character that deserve mention because even though they appear in the story for a short time they provide important information about the author's point of view, and if one reads the novel, one can also complete the story with philosophical reflection about the nature of human life and they contribute to the overall meaning of the plot. I've decided to group them under one chapter because they are different from the other characters. If the main characters described before are a mixture of characteristics which were part of different people in Mary Shelley's life, also the secondary ones possess special features. Merrival, is the one who worries more about the future than the present; Ryland is the politician who doesn't take responsibility when it's needed the most. Clara and Lucy are two women who cannot live their own life but live in function of a man. Finally Alfred and Evelyn are the symbols of loss and grief. These characteristics not only were part of the author's time but are still part the our modern society.

⁷³ P. Melville, "The Problem of Immunity in *The Last Man*", cit., p. 836.

4.4.1 Merrival

The first character that deserves to be mentioned is Merrival, a scientist and more precisely an astronomer who seeks to convince the population of how perfect the future will be. He appears at the beginning of the Volume Two. Merrival, when the plague hasn't left the East yet, claims that earth is not so far from being a paradise since "the poles proceed slowly, but securely; in a thousand years the pole of the earth will coincide with the pole of the ecliptic" and so "an universal spring will be produced, and earth become a paradise" (LM 175). Ryland, pragmatic as he is, mocks the visionary astronomer and his millenarian expectations. Even when Adrian reads on the newspaper that the plague is moving toward the Western part of the world, the scientist doesn't join the conversation but instead keeps on assuring that "the joyful prospect of an earthly paradise after an hundred thousand years, was clouded to him by the knowledge that in a certain period of time after, an earthly hell or purgatory would occur when the ecliptic and equator would be at the right angles." (LM 176) Merrival doesn't pay attention to the spreading of the plague but, instead, cares and speculates about the condition of Earth six thousand years later. This character is thus a clear metaphor, a grotesque parody of those who ignore the present issues in order to follow a distant future that no one knows how actually would be. Probably Mary Shelley had in mind her father's ideas and her husband and through this character she tried to make a caricature of their ideas, a caricature of all those who mistakenly foresee the future. Godwin believed in man's future perfectibility and that reason was able to determine the right choice. The astronomer reappears later on in the novel and is brought back to

reality only when all his family is dead to the plague and eventually he goes mad.

4.4.2 Ryland

Ryland is another character that deserves mention. He is the leader of the popular democratic party, a man with huge plans and hopes for England beginning with the removal of the aristocracy. Before the plague he is a strong and self-confident man who believes in his ideals in a moment of need, as the plague spreads through England he has to leave his plans aside in order to face immediate problems linked to it, such as hunger and poverty. In this problematic situation Ryland, who is now Lord Protector, is unwilling to govern his beloved country since “there is no help!” and he “neither pretends to protect nor govern an hospital – such will England quickly become”. (LM 195) This coward behaviour of course disappoints the good-hearted Adrian who warns the Lord Protector:

“But come Ryland, recollect yourself! Men have hitherto thought you magnanimous and wise, will you cast aside these titles? Consider the panic your departure will occasion. Return to London. I will go with you. Encourage the people by your presence. I will incur all the danger. Shame! Shame! If the first magistrate of England be foremost to renounce his duties.” (LM 195)

Somehow Ryland becomes the incarnation of the utopian ideas shared by

Godwin and Percy Shelley. According to their vision of society and life, humanity could reach perfection not following the ideals of nationalism and traditional government, namely monarchy, but thanks to small self-governed democratic communities leaving aside traditional forms of government. These ideas seem to be a “dream of anarchy” that can only be reached when the population is responsible enough to understand how to live respecting the needs of each other. These ideas cannot be applied in society, In other words, through Ryland, Mary Shelley represents the failure of the revolutionary democratic ideas so beautiful but at the same time Utopistic toward which Mary Shelley was quite doubtful.

4.4.3 Clara

The third character that deserves a characterization in detail is Clara, daughter of Raymond and Perdita who is one of the four survivors who finally dies in shipwreck. According to Adrian's plan of rebirth of humanity she fulfils the role of human vessel that will be able to propagate humanity again. Adrian and Lionel called her “the little queen of the world” (LM 343). She is joyful, tender and cheerful at the beginning:

Clara entered our scheme with childish gaiety. Her chief business was to attend on Evelyn; but it was her sport to array herself in splendid robes, adorn herself with sunny gems, and ape a princely state. Her religion, deep and pure, didn't teach her to refuse to blunt thus the keen sting of

regret; her youthful vivacity made her enter, heart and soul, into these strange masquerades. (LM 343)

As she understand the plan that Adrian has for her future she understand she has not freedom and she is condemned to a role that she doesn't want for herself. Consequently, she changes dramatically in behaviour and spirit:

“She lost her gaiety [...]. She approached us timidly, avoided our caresses, nor shook off her embarrassment till some serious discussion or lofty theme called her for awhile out of herself.” (LM 345)

As the survivors sail she doesn't fear shipwreck as much as she fears her planned future. She would prefer to die, as death is undividing rather than become the mother of the idealized perfect future humanity of Adrian's dreams. By doing so, she reveals the failure of Adrian's ideals and idealization of himself as the perfect representative for a glorious new generation. Adrian's dream is not feasible without a woman and in this way the author shows the failure male-leadership.

4.4.4 Lucy

Another character that deserves to be mentioned is “the unhappy and dutiful servant” (LM 281) named Lucy Martin whose story is explained in the third chapter of the second volume of the novel. Her character and her story deserve to be highlighted because “poor Lucy's sad story was but a common one” (LM 277).

She is the best representation of those women who can't succeed in finding their independence and sacrifice their entire life to others. To be more specific, Lucy is a kind and sweet woman who is completely devoted to her mother. She decides to get married after the destitution of her father in order to protect her mother from poverty. Her first husband soon dies and when facing hard economical difficulties she decides to marry again, not for love but for gaining home security especially for her poor and sick mother to whom she was so devoted. As the plague spreads around England, Idris and Verney make a plan to save Lucy and her mother as well but Lucy is aware that trying to move her mother in those bad and dangerous conditions would mean to kill her. For this reason she refuses to escape since her mother, too weak for the effort would immediately pass away. She doesn't live her life but in the end she spends it "sacrificing herself for the welfare and comfort of her parent" (LM 278).

4.4.5 Alfred and Evelyn

Finally, the other two characters that deserve attention are Alfred and Evelyn, sons of Verney and Idris since they reveal aspects of the author's profound grief. The loss of her children influenced Mary Shelley in the deepest part of her soul and her novels, as Mary Jacobus highlights, are "suffused with maternal mourning as well as survivor guilt"⁷⁴. The stories of abandonment and mourning are mainly *Frankenstein*, *Matilda* and undoubtedly *The Last Man* in which she

⁷⁴ B. T. Bennet, S. Curran, *Mary Shelley in Her Times*, The John Hopkins University Press, Maryland 2000, p. 135.

hauntingly and obsessively returns to the theme of loss reproducing the circumstances of her own children's death. The trauma of watching helplessly the death of a child is proposed in the novel through the characters of Evelyn and Alfred. Details about the feelings of a mother who finds her own child dead and stays at the bedside of this creature are provided in the novel, leaving the reader with a sense of despair. In this way the author underlines how powerless and vulnerable is a human being in front of disease.

This revival of her inner world has been considered a way for author to recover from depression. This deep grief that negatively influenced not only her mental state but also her relationship with her husband was at that time perceived as excessive by all those around her⁷⁵ and only more modern studies were able to identify this as one of the most distressing and long lasting grief for a woman.

75 Ibid., p. 136

Chapter 5: MODERN THEMATICS IN THE NOVEL

When Mary Shelley started to write *The Last Man* there was already a significant number of essays and novels published with the same name. It started with Cousin de Grandville's prose epic written in 1805 and later translated in English under the name of *The Last Man Omegarus and Syderia: a Romance of Futurity*. These novels and essays were apocalyptic responses to the horror brought about by the bloodiest periods of the French Revolution. They were an answer to the Napoleonic wars and to the inscurities of the Romantic era. In Mary Shelley's novel a unique contrast is presented. The sickness of humanity and of religious and political authority is compared to the health of nature and natural life.

In the first volume, youth, friendship and betrothals - later followed by love marriages - symbolize the idealized community of an happy circle that lives far away from the community. Thus, the plague is not the first cause that brings the Windsor idyll to an end. On the contrary, the negative force is incarnated in the characters themselves. For instance, the happiness of the circle presented in the novel has already been threatened before the plague spreads around. The threat is comes from Lord Raymond's imperialist campaign in Istanbul and to his adulterous affair with Evadne. Also Adrian's ideals are useless and they don't bring any kind of help to maintain the wellness of the community.

In the second volume, instead, the critique is directed toward the beliefs and aspirations of the post-revolutionary Romantic Era. This critique implies a rejection of the Biblical claim that human beings are superior and consequently

they are the real inheritors of the earth. Mary Shelley goes against the Christian notion of man as the lord of creation who is thought to be measure of all things. This critique soon becomes the announcement of inevitable universal extinction in the opening of the third volume.

As Morton D. Paley suggests Mary Shelley was thoughtful about how life which most of the people used to lead in England and her “masterpieces appear not as bringers of solace but as self born mockers of men's enterprise”⁷⁶. In the following paragraph, the author's opinions about the society she lived in will be analysed by focusing the attention on the role she attributed to politics, to family and to nature in particular.

5.1. Politics and Eurocentrism

As I mentioned, the novel of Mary Shelley ends up to be a kind of social leveller among the different social classes presented in the story. This situation brings out the connection between the poor and the rich and shows the flaws of the East – West division of the world. According to Johnson, the plague is nothing but a “nightmarish version of the desire to spread equality and fraternity throughout the world”⁷⁷. Mary Shelley doesn't simply offer a feminist critique to the Romantic and political egotism, but she shows how the ideals of British politics are flawed by the idealization of the male figure as a leader able to glorify the imperial England. By

76 M. D. Paley “Apocalypse without Millenium” in A.A. Fisch, A. K. Mellor, E. A. Schor, *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, cit., p. 115.

77 A.A. Fisch “Plagiung Politics: AIDS, Deconstruction and The Last Man” in A.A. Fisch, A. K. Mellor, E. A. Schor, *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, cit., p. 270.

levelling society, the Plague shows Mary Shelley's conviction that the only way to deconstruct social and national differences is by universal destruction. According to A.A. Fisch in fact, "Shelley's novel is on the deepest anti-political level"⁷⁸. In other words, instead of offering an alternative, a formula of rebirth or a roadmap for political change the author treats all political programs as hopeless and useless.

Since a very early age, Mary Shelley was able to read in five languages including Greek and Latin. She grew up admiring her dead mother and contemplating her ideals of freedom and equality. Her mother, a radical supporter of equality values in society and her father, a symbol of the defence of human rights became her mentors. In addition, she was informed about the contemporary issues of the century, beginning with the ideals of the French and the scientific discoveries of the 18th century. She used to greedily read books and discuss them with her life companion Percy Shelley. She was extremely sensitive toward social injustice especially when they involved members of weaker categories. As Silvia Neonato says, it's thanks to her letters and diaries that nowadays one is able to understand how incredibly involved she was in politics. From her writings emerge comments on the Napoleonic defeat and the luddite riots which were strongly supported by William Godwin and were soon repressed in 1816 with hangings and deportation of the rebels.⁷⁹

In the novel, any political system is criticized and presented by a single leader. Interestingly, all of those learders are men. Republicanism is represented by Raymond, hereditary monarchy by Adrian and democracy by Ryland. Raymond is

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 273.

⁷⁹ S. Neonato. "La donna che anticipò le nostre paure" in *Lady Frankenstein e l'orrenda progenie*, cit., p.9.

the superman who runs for the election as Lord Protector and he is the representation of the perfect male leader who gets the unanimous support of the citizens. Perdita is the first voice out of the chorus which would find happiness in her husband's defeat during the election: she brings about the first fracture of the myth of male unity.

Ryland, instead, is a politician who combines “political radicalism of democracy with conservative chauvinism” thus dismisses the problems outside the borders of his country. He resigns at the last minute when the illusion of a separated and protected island is destroyed since the spread of the Plague in England makes the idea of superiority of his country fade in his mind. Ryland is the representation of the flaws and limits of democracy. For him the problems lived in Greece are “as remote as the future”⁸⁰ and the other communities are simply invisible. It is important to notice that even though the liberals see the wrong side of this vision, they don't do anything to stop the conservatives but they only complain and produce pity. It is a sort of incomplete and incoherent democracy that refuses to face and thwart the disaster when it is experienced by others and in addition it doesn't intend to work in an England corrupted by external entities. Adrian, on the contrary, is able to see humanity also in the foreigners (for instance, the Turks in Constantinople). He accepts leadership as the plague depresses the world acquiring the status of perfect leader. This is somehow controversial because it sounds like illness and death are requirements needed in order to reach perfection.

80 A.A. Fisch “Plagiung Politics: AIDS, Deconstruction and The Last Man” in A.A. Fisch, A. K. Mellor, E. A. Schor, *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, cit. p. 272.

5.1.1 The Utopistic Vision of William Godwin and Percy Shelley

William Godwin and Percy Shelley shared the conviction that “the improved powers of the rational mind could conquer disease and even death”⁸¹. Godwin explains these concepts in *Political Justice* and later Percy Shelley describes them in *Prometheus Unbound*. Mary Shelley calls into questions these visionary ideas and makes Adrian repeat them within the novel.

Look into the mind of man, where wisdom reigns enthroned; [...] Love, and her child, Hope that can bestow wealth, on poverty, strength on the weak, and happiness on the sorrowing. Oh, that death and sickness were banished from our earthly home! That hatred, tyranny, and fear could no longer make their lair in the human heart! ... The choice is with us [...].⁸²

Mary Shelley shows how “utopian hopes prove futile in *The Last Man* because nature is impervious to human will and human rationality”⁸³. So, in the end all controlling nature is proved to be much stronger than the so called powers of human mind. Through Raymond instead, Mary Shelley invokes the arguments of a traditional class system and proposes the idea of a constitutional monarchy that was provided by Burke in his essay *Reflections on the French Revolution*.

According to Burke, society is an organism itself and consequently it is subject to disease. The metaphor that Burke uses to explain the disease of society is the “plague” or revolution, inspired Mary Shelley. In fact, after the destruction of

81 A. K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, cit, p. 162.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid.

France the British constitution risks infection. The institution of gradual reforms in a pragmatic way proposed by Burke is clearly preferred by Mary Shelley in spite of the visionary utopianism of her husband and father.

Mellor claims that since the democratic ideology advocates the process of social levelling completed by the plague, implicitly, it also demands that every person on earth must die equally in a classless society. Ryland's reaction is that of abdicating the Lord Protectorship and leave his fellow countrymen in order to preserve his own life. Ryland's reaction and abdication of political responsibility shows Mary Shelley's opinion about the "excessive optimism inherent in a democratic ideology: a socialist government perhaps succeeds only if there is enough for every individual"⁸⁴.

Eventually all these political opinions are the same because they are all flawed in the idealization, therefore they cannot bring any positive change unless they change the criteria and condition of politics.

As population decreases, readership acquires importance. Verney firstly seeks for a companion. He rethinks the vision of England as centre of the universe only after everybody has died.⁸⁵ He understands that England is neither omnipotent nor flawless. He gets rid of the myth of imperial England to accept the idea of England as a lone ship, unable to master everything and "unable to see itself as a part of the rest of the world"⁸⁶. But some details in the novel show that Lionel doesn't totally get rid of those beliefs. As he finds himself alone he is aware that the world hasn't come to an end but he is mad seeking a companion who eventually he

84 Ibid., p. 161.

85 Ibid., p. 268.

86 Ibid., p. 269.

can not find. While he travels to the shores of Africa and India he brings just a dog and some books with him. An interesting element is the selection of books he decides to take with him: he chooses to bring with him novels written by authors such as Shakespeare and Homer, which are the fundamental basis of the British traditional literature.

It seems quite obvious that Lionel is still convicted of a minimal superiority of England on other populations or, at least, he isn't convinced that he would be able to find new texts of interest in the regions he is heading to. It' is another proof that Eurocentrism actually contributes to the Plague's devastation of England since the myth of England "as a great and unconquerable ship of state" is always present in the mind of the Englishman. Lionel with his narrative wants to warn the new race that is going to rule in the future. Not only he wants to show the greatness of the imagination and of the ideals of British politicians but he wants to show the flaws that eventually led to their destruction. To conclude, one can say that Lionel Verney is a quite ambiguous character also from the political point view. He somehow wants to protect the vision he has of his own country as a perfect and flawless one and, consequently, respects British superiority over other cultures. Anyway, it's also true that even though Lionel isn't willing to admit his country's civilization's flaws, he's ready to narrate the destruction of his motherland to the future generation. The Plague is just partly a cause of destruction and he wants to show the 19th century society's faults, maintaining in his mind the vision of an England which is both omnipotent and flawless.

5.1.2 The Impostor-prophet

Religion is never explicitly mentioned in the novel. Its presence, however, can be felt indirectly. In fact, there is another political character, the last one presented in the novel, which is an hyperbole of the three other previous mentioned political characters in the novel but at the same time it looks like a religious character which tries to advertise his own faith over the others.

A third was formed by a sectarian, a self-erected prophet, who, while he attributed all power and rule to God, strove to get the real command of his comrades into his own hands. [...] He was an impostor in the most determined sense of the term. A man who had in early life lost, through the indulgence of vicious propensities, all sense of rectitude or self-esteem; and who, when ambition was awakened in him, gave himself up to its influence unbridled by any scruple. (LM 300)

This “impostor-prophet” after the plague enters England and starts to destroy humanity, forms a group of followers called “brotherhood”. The fact that the group is given such a name is not casual because this terminology recalls the old British ideals of a perfect patriarchal political system, an ideal that is not shared by the author. In addition, the followers call themselves “the elect” ones and undoubtedly this name recalls the idea of perfect leadership, superiority of the Englishman and England as a ship of the state. The impostor's egocentricity doesn't allow him to care about the others. He wants to glorify himself and he claims he is God's chosen

voice. As members of the “brotherhood” get sick, he just kicks people out of the group in the “cord and the midnight-grave disposed of them forever; while some plausible excuse was given for their absence”.⁸⁷

Once again, the plague doesn't merely comes from germs and viruses: it is due to society's lack of ability to handle the sickness not only because of the lack of medical resources and knowledge in the field, but more importantly because of the lack of socio-political capability.

5.2 The Role of Nature

Mary Shelley's vision of nature is in contrast and opposed to the role that the Romantic poets attributed to it and thus it is important to specify the characteristic of both visions. During the Romantic period nature was conferred extreme importance by the Romantic poets. In their poetry in fact, the self and the imagination are the primary elements linked to mother Nature. Poets such as Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth are considered to be priests of nature, they believed nature is the only thing that could bring happiness and joy to humanity. For instance, a corrupted person willing to renovate has nothing else to do but going back to nature, as the mind of men works as a mirror of nature.

These poets were suffering because of the gap between urbanization and nature believing it was the main cause of the problems in human condition. All creatures are made to live, be loved and love, together with community. This is

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 277.

what unites human mind and nature itself. In other words, Romantic poets used to celebrate nature in various dimensions since it is superior to humanity and, according to Percy Shelley, it will remain forever. On the contrary, even the most powerful of the empires is destined to disappear. Wordsworth for instance treats nature as a friend, as a guardian ready to protect people on earth. In his *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on Revisiting the Banks of the Wye during a Tour*, July 13, 1798 he states that Nature is:

"The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse
The guide, the guardian of my heart, soul "

These lines inspired the vision of nature that Mary Shelley had during her youth, which soon changed after the first period she lived with her companion Shelley. Nature can be tranquil, helpful and relaxing to those who can appreciate it and also respect it, but at the same time it can be wild and exciting. Men can find relief in it and they can find happiness. In other words, nature provides a relief that humanity is not able to find in society.

The role that Mary Shelley attributes to nature is quite different though, and it is pointed out in her novels, beginning with *Frankenstein* and then in *The Last Man*. If in Wordsworth nature is conceived the function of guardian and nurse, the only hope for human beings to live in peace, in Mary Shelley's novels nature is something more powerful than anything else, a superior entity that can inflict pain, overwhelming feelings of horror and terror. At first it's something in which human beings (and also Frankenstein's creature) try to find calmness and tranquillity but

nature's power soon becomes too strong. It is something so dark and obscure that can't be completely understood. She anticipates the vision of dark and unbearable nature in Gothic literature.

In *The Last Man* it is personified as and exemplified by the Plague which in the end is able to kill all but three human beings who are the representation of the Shelley family. It's something nobody can fight against and it turns out to be, not the reason for salvation but the cause of destruction of society. Nature rebels and finally shows humanity that she is the ultimate ruler on earth.

Men in the novels believe in the superiority of England and think nothing can stop its greatness: they put human beings in the centre, thinking about the possibility of continuous improvement that one day will lead to the perfection of society, but in the end all of them are proven to be wrong and their ideals are proved to be utopic. In fact, England has sunk because Englishmen couldn't defeat the omnipotence of Nature.

I spread the whole earth as a map before me. On no one spot of its surface could I put my finger and say, here is safety. In the south, the disease, virulent and immedicable, had nearly annihilated the race of man; storm and inundation, poisonous winds and blights, filled up the measure of suffering. In the north it was worse – the lesser population gradually declined, and the famine and plague kept watch on the survivors, who, helpless and feeble, were ready to fall an easy prey into their hands. (LM 207-208)

At first also in this novel Nature is seen as a careful mother which brings

happiness and joy to humanity. It's beautiful and majestic and men are part of it. Soon it turns into something negative and mean that can't bring no consolation. It defeats politics, arts and society conventions so in brief, it defeats humanity. The plague is not contagious but the infection depends upon air contamination and its deadly power gets rid of the world's population.

During the first period spent with Percy Shelley in the continent, the author generally depicted nature "as Dame Kind, a sacred life-force that sustains those human beings who treat her with respect"⁸⁸. This is a deeply romantic vision that probably was inspired by Wordsworth's celebration of a maternal Nature. Soon this vision changes and in the novel Nature is not anymore a positive element.

Nature has the power of destroying everything making the earth an hostile place to live in. No place can offer salvation or safety to people as they become a simple prey to famine and disease. "Weak-spirited women died of fear" while "men of robust form and seeming strength fell into idiocy and madness"(LM 209). Men supposed to be the strongest animals on earth finally surrender to mother Nature but when Verney remains alone on earth nature flourish again and Verney asks himself worried "will day follow day endlessly thus?"(LM 358) . So what is man without Nature? This is a very current thematic because human beings sometimes forget that if one continues to misuse the resources on earth without respecting the needs of Nature, one day nature will rebel and we won't be able to do anything about it. Humanity will finally have to surrender Nature which will continue to go on without men.

88 Ibid., p. 27.

Nature was the same, as when she was the kind of mother of the human race; now childless and forlorn, her fertility was a mockery; her loveliness a mask for deformity. Why should the breeze gently stir the trees, man felt not its refreshment? Why did dark night adorn herself with stars – man saw them not? Why are the fruits or flowers, or streams, man is not here to enjoy them? (LM 262)

But why did Mary Shelley represent Nature as a cruel and merciless feature in the novel? Well, probably because of her depression and the terrible events that influenced her which somehow the power of nature was directly involved. The death of her daughter Clara died on March, 6th 1815 because of the heat and the dry climate of the Italian summer turn out to be fatal to the weak and sick creature. A second episode that surely influenced the author's imagination happened after the death of her son William because of malaria caused by the too warm Italian climate. At that time she was depressed and Percy Shelley, could do nothing but observing her, hoping in her recovery and dedicate her poems.

My dearest Mary, wherefore hast thou gone,
And left me in this dreary world alone?
Thy form is here indeed—a lovely one—
But thou art fled, gone down a dreary road
That leads to Sorrow's most obscure abode.
For thine own sake I cannot follow thee.⁸⁹

⁸⁹ Published by Mrs. Shelley, "Poetical Works", 1839, 2nd edition in
<http://www.bookrags.com/ebooks/4798/60.html#gsc.tab=0> (15/01/18).

Feeling that the presence of Mary Gilborne could bring positivity in his lover's life, Percy Shelley decided to move in Livorno in Villa Sansovano, with a breath-taking panoramic view on the sea. One day he saw her terrified as two huge waterspout approach toward a ship. It's needless to say that in her state of mind this event must have been incredible to Mary Shelley.⁹⁰

Her husband death, caused again by an invincible storm and waterspout as he was coming back from Livorno, where he met his friend Hogg, with Edward and Charles Vivian. He went there sailing the boat Don Juan, later named Ariel because he wanted to reach his friend in Pisa to discuss about *The Liberal*, their political and literal common dream.⁹¹ However, on the way back, sailors and workers in the harbour warned them of the danger of sailing in such weather conditions. It's interesting to mention that those places were soon named *Golfo dei Poeti* by Sem Benelli in memory of Mary and Percy Shelley but also of all the poets who followed, such as Keats and Virginia Wolf .

5.3. Women in the 19th Century British Society

The Last Man is a story that emerges from the author's concern with boundaries between sexes. During the Romantic period society started to debate about the proper role that should be given to women. Also women were directly involved in the discussion and many women writers, such as Mary Shelley's mother

90 C. Sanguineti, "Mary Shelley in Italia. In fuga oltre il dolore" in *Lady Frankenstein e l'orrenda progenie*, cit., p. 39.

91 Ibid., p. 59.

- Mary Wallstonecraft - in her essay *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* advocated a more egalitarian treatment, in particular in the field of education. At that time only a few women were allowed to study and specialize on subjects that were considered "for men". Most women were allowed to consider a career in subjects more appropriate to women such as art, music or needlework. This treatment led women to ask for more rights and autonomy claiming that the educational system was improper and that there were social dysfunction (women used to lose all rights on their properties after marriage) and offered new emerging viewpoints on the state of women. The young Mary Shelley was influenced by these ideas even though she couldn't grow up with her mother and this influence emerges from her novels and the way she depicts women in her stories.

Mary Shelley depicts women in their powerlessness to perform the tasks they are assigned, and shows how they can turn this situation into emotional victimization. Even if women realize their dreams they are obliged to suffer and be subjected to the will of man in any situation.

Perdita achieves Mary Shelley's step-sister's dream of marrying Raymond (Lord Byron) but she must suffer after she marries him. When she finds out that Raymond hides a secret and understands what it is about, Raymond's reaction is that of rushing off into the battlefield in order to experience different feelings. At the same time, Mary Shelley offers an implicit critique of female authorship in the 19th century.⁹²

Mary Shelley struggled all her life to suppress her gender in a world

92 A.A. Fisch "Plagiung Politics: AIDS, Deconstruction and The Last Man" in A.A. Fisch, A. K. Mellor, E. A. Schor, *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, cit. p. 267.

dominated by men both in the professional and in the personal sphere and this is reflected in the main characters of her novels. She was undoubtedly also a cosmopolitan, an open-minded and feminist author so probably the public felt kind of upset in not seeing a title like *The Last Woman* but there is also another explanation: at the end of her novel, as there's no society left, no one can establish a gender code so Lionel is finally free and he doesn't have to follow any, therefore he becomes asexual and androgynous since no conventions and expectations regarding behaviour and self-image exist anymore. This is how she wanted to feel, she was fed up with being judged because of her sex.

To conclude, Mary Shelley's greatest mistake was that of being born as a woman and not a simple one. She tried and succeeded in going beyond a limit no other woman had crossed before. She challenged the boundaries between sex and the fundamentals of patriarchal society. She ventured herself into a field dominated by men and she found her way not only becoming important and well-known as a writer but creating a completely different and new genre: science-fiction. Surely, being the daughter of a woman philosopher, helped her in her mission.

5.4 Mary Shelley's Concept of Family and its Reflection in the Novel

Mary Shelley craved for a “perhaps never-satisfiable desire of unconditional

love"⁹³. I say never-satisfiable because it was the one that she would have got from her mother if she hadn't died in childbirth. In addition, also the relationships she had in her life most of the time turned out to be a source of sadness and pain. First of all, the unhappy relation with her step-mother. Secondly, the troubled relation with her husband and last but not least the death of her children. This love she craved for was also due to the idealized image of the bourgeois family that she made up in her mind. In the nineteenth century even if people wanted to think that men and women were regarded as equals in the family, the state of equality was very far from reality where husbands and wives performed different roles. This unequal condition, strengthened by the doctrine of the separated spheres, namely public man versus private woman, didn't reflect Mary Shelley's dream of family. In addition, a rigid division of sex roles denied women the possibility to have a fully satisfying life because even in the private sphere they were dependent on their children and their husbands.

She wanted in fact a more affectionate family fulfilled with reciprocal support and respect, an idea that emerged from the growth in number of non-arranged and love marriages. This vision, opposite to the hierarchical and double-standard relationships she was used to, probably originated from her maternal roots. Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin was born in a lower-class culture in which both men and wives were supposed to contribute equally to the wellness of the descendants. Mary Shelley soon extended these ideals and expectations to the middle and the upper class. As Mellor claims:

93 A. K. Mellor, *Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters*, cit., p. 213.

Mary Shelley believed the egalitarian family to be the only social context in which both men and women could achieve emotional satisfaction, through powerful husband-wife and parent-child bonding. [...] Like Jane Austen and George Eliot, she believed that the progressive reform of civilization can happen only when individuals willingly give up their egotistical desires and ambitions in order to serve the greater good of the community.⁹⁴

Here readers clearly understand how Mary Shelley's concept of family includes the ideal lady playing the role of the proper wife and daughter: the ideal woman is that member of the family made to fulfil the role of the modest and self-sacrificing creature willing to give up her needs and desires for the good of the family.

In both the public and the private spheres depicted in *The Last Man*, women in society have only a relational identity, as wife or mother [...] and while this relational identity can contribute to the welfare and survival of the family, it is also extremely precarious. It is easily destroyed by human infidelity (the betrayal of Raymond) or the greater power that rules over all human experience, that of Chance, Accident and Death.⁹⁵

The bourgeois family is an institution that also aims to the regulation of the opposite sex and to “contributing daily and hourly to the comfort of husbands” and of the other family members. It's an ideal that can be obtained only by keeping the world at distance, like at Windsor in the first volume of the novel.

94 Ibid., cit., p. 215.

95 Ibid., cit., p. 156.

Mary Shelley has always been considered a controversial person and her novels, like those of her mother Mary Wallstonecraft, have been read as autobiographical, confessional novels⁹⁶. In *The Last Man*, one can find very meaningful aspects of Mary Shelley's character and personality. For instance, she remained convinced that the greatest happiness for a woman was that to be married to a distinguished man, just like her husband Percy Byshee Shelley, and that to be mother. These aspects are represented especially by Perdita who in the novel always remained devoted to her Raymond.

Throughout her life the author remained prisoner of this traditional role of wife and mother attributed to women by the society she lived in and, on the one hand, in her letters and in her journals she seems to feel the need to justify herself for her "guilty desire" of self-fulfilment while, on the other hand, her novels and literary activity deny this subordinate and limited role.

96 D. Lynch "Historical Novelist" in E. Shor, *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, cit., p. 147.

CONCLUSION

This thesis discusses Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, a less known work than *Frankenstein* which however thoroughly expresses her genius. I made this decision because it contains many links with Mary Shelley's life and consequently it helps readers to understand better her personality. My thesis is a biographical and thematic study of Shelley's most profound, and until only recently, least studied novels.

Mary Shelley was "an inventive and often experimental writer" who in her novels offered "a provocative and disturbing vision of a society's response to extreme circumstances"⁹⁷.

In my analysis I have compared *The Last Man* to *Frankenstein* in order to show how the author's personal experiences profoundly influenced her career as writer. I have also focused on the critical reception of the novel, from the early harsh reviews to its re-evaluation during the last decades.

Thanks to this novel one can analyse in depth Mary Shelley's life experiences and thoughts through the elements contained in the plot of *The Last Man*. Firstly, the reader can perceive how the author's life and the people that surrounded her deeply influenced her career as writer. Several similarities between the events described in the plot and those she really lived are a questionless evidence of this profound influence. Particular importance has been given to the numerous tragic occurrences in the novelist's life such as the death of

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P. Bickley, Introduction to *The Last Man* in M. Shelley, in M. Shelley, *The Last Man*, cit. p. vii

her husband and her children and that of her best friend Lord Byron which in fact have been described -even though not explicitly – in *The Last Man*.

After the analysis of the plot and the comparison of Mary Shelley's acquaintances to the characters presented in the novel, one easily understands that the majority of the characteristics that Mary Shelley attributed to her characters actually belonged to Mary Shelley herself, and to her acquaintances, family and friends. Among the others, one can detect some similarities between Mary Shelley and Lionel Verney, Percy Shelley and Adrian, and between Lord Byron and Lord Raymond. The thesis focuses also on the important role played by nature, society and politics in the 19th century and its reflections in the plot of *The Last Man*. I have also tried to account for the role of women in the 19th century and the extent to which the France Revolution shaped the novel.

Numerous essays about Mary Shelley and her circle, the diaries that Mary and Percy Shelley kept during their years together and the works and biographies about Mary Shelley written by scholars, such as A. K. Mellor, E. Shor and A. Angelini Sut, were extremely important in the process of research, creation and writing of this thesis as my aim was that of collecting and organizing elements relevant to *The Last Man's* plot.

Finally, this thesis takes into consideration the ability that Mary Shelley had to hasten those that, in the centuries that followed, actually became extremely modern and popular literary topics, and her ability to create a completely new literary genre which nowadays is one of the most appreciated in literature.

The Last Man is the first apocalyptic science fiction novel written in English and undoubtedly without this masterpiece, many modern science fiction novels and

movies wouldn't exist. Above all, Mary Shelley's depression and the feeble powers of the human mind are important topics especially in the second and third parts of the novel. Nature is the real final judge of human destiny and the plague, by which the entire human population is exterminated, assumes both literal and metaphorical meaning.

To conclude, this thesis not only is an analysis of *The Last Man* and Mary Shelley's life, but also a tribute to the mother of a new literary genre. In fact, *The Last Man* is an extremely meaningful and original masterpiece which deserves to become more popular and known, not only by scholars, but also by all those readers who share a common passion: science fiction.

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