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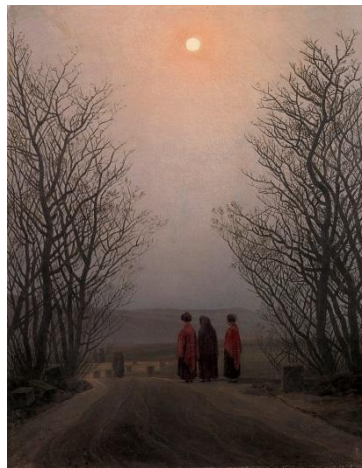
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**Women Doubly Affected by the Abusive Power of  
Patriarchy: An Ecofeminist Analysis of Nature's  
Response in Mary Shelley's The Last Man**



*Easter Morning.* Caspar David Friedrich (1835)

MA dissertation

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MA in Advanced English Studies

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“But for him this dialogue is over. He says he is not part of this world, that he was set on this world as a stranger. He sets himself apart from woman and nature ... We are woman and nature. And he says he cannot hear us speak. But we hear”. (Griffin 17)

## **Statement of Intellectual Honesty**

Name: Esther Jiménez Rodríguez

Title of TFM: Women Doubly Affected by the Abusive Power of Patriarchy: An Ecofeminist Analysis of Nature's Response in Mary Shelley's The Last Man

I hereby declare that this is a completely original piece of work; all secondary sources have been correctly cited. I also understand that plagiarism is an unacceptable practice that will lead to the automatic failing of this TFM.

Place and date: Barcelona, 10 July 2023

Signature: *EJR*

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Last, I want to specially dedicate this dissertation to my grandmother who humbly taught me the language of nature and whose memory will always remain with me.

To the memory of Mary Shelley, whose endless grief consumed her throughout her life and whose marvelous ability to portray it has persisted through the decades.

## Abstract

The apocalyptic novel *The Last Man* (1826) by Mary Shelley, depicts a plague that quickly and effectively eradicates almost all human beings excluding the protagonist of the novel. Written in a context when the industrial revolution was rapidly developing and therefore exploiting the environment, the pandemic destroys and prevents the continuity of humanity. I contend that the novel expands on the notion of the plague by exploring nature as an entity who can rebel against patriarchy and renew itself. Besides, the nineteenth century was a period when societal discrimination against women persisted. In fact, the pandemic in *The Last Man* indiscriminately kills men and women alike. It leaves no female characters alive at its conclusion and represents women as victims of this catastrophe. Hence, the aim of this dissertation is to examine how women in the novel are doubly affected by the abusive power of patriarchy, first, through social submission and, second, as innocent victims of nature's avenging response to an eco-catastrophe that was essentially male-induced (through men's centrality in the exploitation of the environment during the Industrial Revolution).

**Keywords:** Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, women, nature, patriarchy, plague, eco-catastrophe, anthro-catastrophe, ecocriticism, ecofeminism





## 0. Introduction

“Her whole existence was one sacrifice to him” (Shelley 91)

Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) resonates with contemporary society through its depiction of a pandemic that not only destroys humanity but also prevents procreation and continuity.<sup>1</sup> The originality of this plague<sup>2</sup> is caused by the story's departure from the archetypal depiction of the biblical plague in which it is God who punishes humankind. Here, it is nature who,<sup>3</sup> by taking an active role, punishes human beings. Mary Shelley's ideas of atheism are probably reflected in the representation and description of this plague, as her emphasis on natural causes and the absence of any divine intervention or providence in the unfolding events suggest a worldview that rejects the notion of divine intervention. Further, the pandemic is anthropomorphised in order to make the understanding of nature and of its forces easier to comprehend. In fact, it works as a metaphor since Shelley does not describe its symptoms but the story itself. Tragically, women bear the brunt of this calamity, as the novel concludes with the stark absence of any surviving female characters. In other words, nature punishes

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<sup>1</sup> In terms of the plot, Shelley's novel depicts the story of Lionel Verney, narrated by him, as he becomes the only survivor and consequently the last man on earth after a plague exterminates the entire human species at the turn of the twenty-first century. He witnesses the demise of his family and all of humanity. About his family, Lionel and Perdita become friends with the earl of Windsor, Adrian. Perdita, Lionel's sister, marries Lord Raymond while Lionel marries Adrian's sister, Idris. Later on, the male characters battle Turkey on behalf of Greece. This is followed by the deaths of Raymond and Perdita. After these incidents, the pandemic spreads across the world, leaving only Lionel as the sole survivor.

<sup>2</sup> *Pandemic* and *plague* are, of course, distinct terms. The online Cambridge Dictionary defines *pandemic* as “a disease that exists in almost all of an area or in almost all of a group of people, animals or plants” (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org>, s.v., “pandemic”). *Plague* is “a serious disease that kills many people, and it is often used to refer to bubonic plague, a very infectious disease caused by bacteria spread mainly by fleas on rats or other animals, that causes swelling, fever, and usually death in humans” (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>, s.v., “plague”). Though I recognise this difference, I use the terms here in a less technical sense, to refer indistinctly to a mortal viral disease of massive spread and incidence.

<sup>3</sup> In the novel, I read nature as a personified entity rather than a material entity. As a result, “who” will be used throughout instead of “which” or “that” to refer to the environment.

indiscriminately, leaving no innocents behind in this story. At the end, there is only one single man standing, the last man. The idea that both women and nature are innocent victims of the patriarchy seems plausible to me.<sup>4</sup> Though the point that nature is both an innocent victim of patriarchy and an agent of punishment might seem contradictory to the reader, one is the consequence of the other. In other words, nature becomes an agent of punishment as a response to the abuse and degradation that it has suffered. As regards women in this novel, they not only face exclusion from political life but also find their lives confined within the narrow boundaries of domesticity, centered around the family. In fact, women were not only victims of the endless violence carried out on nature during the 19<sup>th</sup> century;<sup>5</sup> they also suffered, of course, from social inequality, being deprived of a fuller education, excluded from equality by law and by religion, and being restricted to an enforced domesticity. Furthermore, the industrial revolution is crucial to the claims that have been previously mentioned. During the late eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth Century (1760-1830), Europe, especially England, faced a profound transformation characterised by a series of significant changes. That is, following Thomas Southcliffe Ashton's text *The Industrial Revolution*,

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<sup>4</sup> Patriarchy is "a system of social organization with a pyramidal, hierarchical, power-based structure [that] has so far given mostly men access to its higher echelons" (Martín 9); however, in strict coherence with this definition, my dissertation recognises that men are also victims and sufferers of patriarchy. Nonetheless, however much the title of the novel may remark the solitude of the last-surviving male representative of humanity, my focus in this study is on women as victims of this system.

<sup>5</sup> Glazebrook calls attention to the intricate connection between nature and the rural and household economies, predominantly overseen by women: "Trees and forests are inextricably connected to rural and household economies governed by women, that women are more dependent on forest products than men for food, fuel, fodder, and products for the home including building materials, household utensils, gardens, dyes, medicines, and income, that women suffer more than men as a consequence of environmental degradation and destruction of forests, that women's lives are affected when it comes to these issues more than men's because of customs, taboos, and legal and time restraints that men do not face, and that the key assumptions in orthodox forestry are male-biased" (Glazebrook 6). Drawing from this, it is evident that nineteenth-century women, whose lives' depended on domesticity, directly suffered from the ecological cost that the industrial revolution provoked. The consequences of environmental degradation were obviously not gender-neutral; they affected women in exacerbated ways due to their vital role within the household economy.

there were many environmental, social and economic changes. For instance, Ashton sheds light on the extensive environmental, social, and economic shifts that occurred during this period:

Areas that for centuries had been cultivated as open fields, or had lain untended as common pasture, were hedged or fenced; hamlets grew into populous towns; and chimney stacks rose to dwarf the ancient spires. Highroads were made-straighter, stronger, and wider than those evil communications that had corrupted the good manners of travellers in the days of Defoe. The North and Irish Seas, and the navigable reaches of the Mersey, Ouse, Tren, Severn, Thames, Forth, and Clyde were joined together by threads of still water. In the North the first iron rails were laid down for the new locomotives, and steam packets began to ply on the estuaries and the narrow seas (Ashton 13).

In addition to these new ways of exploitation, what distinguished this period from others was the rapid growth of population. This increase was due to the significant reduction of mortality rates due to health improvements such as the introduction of root crops that expanded the supply of more fresh meat, the substitution of wheat for inferior cereals, the higher standards of personal cleanliness, the use of brick instead of timber in the walls, the pavement of larger towns that were supplied with running water, the development in the knowledge of medicine and surgery, the increase of hospitals, etc. Moreover, international trade had a considerable impact on the new society, allowing the population to bring supplies from other countries. In this way, “the conjuncture of growing supplies of land, labour, and capital made possible the expansion of industry” (21). This narrative that celebrates the economic and social impact of the Industrial Revolution and the beginning of Modern Economic Growth has been dominant in Europe. Nevertheless, while this dissertation acknowledges the economic and health improvements achieved during that time, it is essential to acknowledge that the massive migration from rural villages to urban centres brought about an enormous social and psychological upheaval among the people of that era. To further expand this, it is worth noting that in pre-industrial times, people would live in the villages and would have a strong bond with nature. As most people lived off the land, mostly depending on

agriculture of sorts, their lives and activities were regulated by the seasons. They had a symbiotic and responsible relationship with nature in which the environment was not a source of limitless exploitation but a source to be taken care of in order to gain food and, hence, survive. The rapid move to the cities, consequently, brought massive social disorientation since it broke this strong relationship and co-dependence with nature that people had. Their lives no longer depended on natural patterns such as the seasons or the weather; the work they were doing—unlike traditional rural work—was often incomprehensible to them, and they had little or no knowledge of what exactly they were producing. And, of course, their surroundings were emphatically disconnected from the natural environment of the country. Perdita, one of the female protagonists of this novel, is the embodiment of the psychological disturbance that the industrial revolution caused. This is brought on when she abandons her cottage to live in London with her husband Raymond, mirroring the broader social movements of the time. This idea will be further explored within my analysis. In addition to this, some scholars have assessed the socio-ecological costs associated with the increase of energy consumption that this era exploited. Estefania Barca's *Energy, property, and the industrial revolution narrative* criticises the celebration of the industrial revolution as “the final victory of humanity (represented by the male hero who stole fire from the gods) from the constraints of ‘natural’ conditions, thanks to new technologies and social values” (Barca 1). Though acknowledging the social and economic advantages of the industrial revolution, its exploitation of the environment brought vast consequences such as air and water pollution, deforestation, animal extinction, resource exhaustion, entropy, climate change, etc. In fact, this new understanding of the world drastically changed human being's relationship to nature: “The [industrial revolution] had reworked the earth's landscape, altering the foundations of a society based on agriculture and placing

it on the road to modern economic development (...). New sources of energy and technology were developed, different ways of farming and feeding the population emerged” (4). Additionally, as human life shifted towards the cities during this period, women were gradually offered a limited space for intellectual participation. A debate on this issue then began. However, it was not a discussion of how women should be educated, but—instead—for *whom* they should be educated: “The ideal propounded in Rousseau’s *Émilie* (and implicitly assumed by most male – and some female – pedagogical writers) that ‘all women’s education must be related to men’, that is, directed to meeting the material and sentimental needs of children and husbands” (Bolufer 9). It is evident, therefore, that even those women who had the *privilege* to access an education were ultimately restricted to domestic life. Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* provides an instance of this with the characters of Perdita, Idris and Clara who devote their lives to the care of their male relatives and children. This dissertation acknowledges the fact that, during the nineteenth century, women of the so-called lower social classes were also forced to lead a dual life, balancing both work responsibilities and the care of their families. Nevertheless, since Shelley’s novel mainly centres around women of what might be termed the financially “consolidated” classes, my text will primarily concentrate on this specific group of women who lacked access to work (or did not feel the obligation to work). Hence, their lives revolved around fulfilling the expectations of being devoted wives and mothers.

My study hopes to contribute to literature studies by approaching an important literary work from two contemporary critical perspectives, Ecocriticism and Ecofeminism, as I aim to study both women and nature as victims of patriarchy. To date, Ecofeminists have not treated Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* in great detail. Indeed, most studies in the field of Ecofeminism have focused largely on *Frankenstein*

(1818). I will consider Karen J. Warren's *Ecofeminist Philosophy* (2000), which discusses how the unjustified domination of women is connected to the unjustified domination of animals and nonhuman nature. In addition to this, Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature* (2015) discusses the way in which women are identified with the Earth, as they are often perceived as both providers of nourishment for humanity (through their roles in domestic life), while also being subjected to male aggression and violence. This aspect of Griffin's analysis holds particular relevance to my study, as it provides a framework for exploring the way in which women and nature have historically been victimised under patriarchal systems of abuse. Furthermore, this dissertation will assess arguments presented in Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm's *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996) in order to gain an overview of the field of study known as ecocriticism. By drawing insights from this source, I aim to delve into certain issues such as the project of modernity, the industrial revolution and the "anthropocentric arrogance and dominating attitude toward nature". (Glotfelty 13). As has previously been stated, this analysis is crucial to Shelley's novel as it was written during a period in which the industrial revolution was expanding rapidly into many distinct ambits of life. While the social and, above all, economic advantages of this revolution are usually highlighted, it is crucial to recognise, as contemporary studies of the Anthropocene now acknowledge, the enormous environmental degradation and, in many cases, ecological disaster that accompanied it.

Ecocriticism has been defined as a literary and cultural research field that examines "the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty 9). This field relates to ecofeminism, which combines elements of both ecocriticism and feminism. Ecofeminism argues that both the domination of women and the degradation of the environment are caused by patriarchy and capitalism. In line with this

perspective, anthropocentrism outlines the belief that human beings are the centre of all existence, often at the expense of other entities, including nature. This issue does not mean that nature is a detached entity separate from human beings. Rather, anthropocentrism propagates the notion that nature is limitless and that we have the right to exploit it limitlessly.

The concept of Nature has been subject to diverse interpretations throughout time. I view it as an autonomous entity that we must take care of and co-exist with in a symbiotic relationship. This view, of course, has not been exempt from criticism. Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature* (2007), argues that nature is a man-made construction that we have created in order to make an artificial distinction between ourselves and the environment. On the other hand, this relationship between human beings and nature is also analysed in *The Last Man*: "Philosophers have called man a microcosm of nature, and find a reflection in the internal mind for all this machinery visibly at work around us" (Shelley 51). This particular view of nature highlights our dependency on and relative insignificance in the face of nature. However, the environmental philosophy termed *Deep Ecology* challenges this belief to argue that human beings must radically change their relationship with nature, recognising it not only as a source of dependency but also as something that necessitates our utmost care and consideration.

Finally, two other concepts relevant to my study—both relating to the notion of disaster—are "eco-catastrophe" and "anthro-catastrophe". The former is a disaster caused by the abusive behaviour of humans that has a huge cost on the environment; the latter is a disaster caused by nature that has a huge impact on the life of human beings. Some examples of eco-catastrophes would be climate change, floods, deforestation or species extinction. Instances of anthro-catastrophes are devastating plagues, viruses,

earthquakes, volcano eruptions or tsunamis.<sup>6</sup> Both types of disaster are depicted in *The Last Man*. The first sees the environment degraded after the war in Constantinople; the second is the plague.

Pandemics have been a part of human history since ancient times, leaving their traces in the earliest of literary representations that have survived to this day (as the story of the Flood reveals). In the Middle Ages, there was an understandably significant presence of the pestilence in works such as Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (c1380), or Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron* (c1353) in which ten citizens from Florence escape from the Black Death and tell 100 stories. Somewhat later, Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) may even have influenced both Shelley's work and John Wilson's *The City of the Plague* (1816), which is a collection of poems on the topic. Again, it should be noted that the pandemic portrayed by Mary Shelley is far from being related to God's punishment and the biblical apocalypse. Rather, as the central focus of art in Romanticism was nature, the divine power of destruction is given to nature<sup>7</sup>. This idea, as previously stated, reflects Shelley's own ideas about atheism: "Mary no longer measured her beliefs nor based her desires on the potential perfectibility of mankind. She subscribed to no specific religious doctrine" (Spark 120).

Focusing on the critical review of *The Last Man*, Anne McWhir's editorial introduction to the 1996 Broadview Press edition offers an analysis of the text as well as an overview of the context. It provides some works on the Last Man archetype, a section with versions of the Plague that have been previously mentioned, an annotated

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<sup>6</sup> I recognise that this distinction between "eco-catastrophe" and "anthro-catastrophe" is not absolute, since however the disaster has been provoked it is still often a natural phenomenon (as in the case, for example, of climate change). Nevertheless, the entity that causes the event is essential to my analysis and therefore, this distinction helps understand this question more clearly.

<sup>7</sup> This dissertation acknowledges that it is possible in "Romantic" terms to see the plague as a sublime force since it is powerful and exhilarating, irrespective of how destructive it may also be (so, too, is the ocean, or a storm). However, this attribute does not mean that it is something invigorating that elevates the soul; its essential characteristic is that it is mortally terrifying.



text that acknowledges crucial references to *Paradise Lost*, and a postscript by Mary Shelley that emphasises her endless pain and grief after losing her family: “My husband and my children, whose loss changed my whole existence, substituting, for happy peace and the interchange of deep-rooted affections, years of desolate solitude, and a hard struggle with the world” (Shelley 415). Muriel Spark’s biography (1993) of Mary Shelley argues that *The Last Man* is highly autobiographical in the sense that almost all of Shelley’s relatives had died<sup>8</sup> when she wrote this story of human extinction.<sup>9</sup> Further to this, Kari E. Lokke’s *The Last Man* (2003) offers insights into Shelley’s writing, highlighting the context in which she composed her works. During Shelley’s time, her contemporaries were actively producing artistic works that centred on the theme of the last men. Among these works are Thomas Campbell’s poem *The Last Man* (1823) and John Martin’s apocalyptic painting *The Last Man* (1849). Nevertheless, Shelley’s text has been described as an “uncannily prescient novel” and as a “prophetic challenge to Western humanism” (Lokke 1). That is, Shelley seems to provide a more extended criticism of the anthropocentric domination of nature.

After having reviewed previous studies on *The Last Man* that have been mentioned earlier and following my discussion of the critical framework, I have identified a number of gaps that this dissertation will attempt to address. Following Estefania Barca’s approach in “Energy, Property and the Industrial Revolution Narrative” (2011) in which she discusses the ecological cost that the industrial

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<sup>8</sup> Only ten days after Mary Shelley was born, her mother (Mary Wollstonecraft) died. In Mary’s adolescence, she was sent to Scotland, far from home, by her stepmother, Jane. After having married and escaped with Percy Shelley, she gave birth to their first daughter, who died after two weeks. Following the publication of her most famous work of fiction, *Frankenstein*, two of her children died. She had five children with Percy, of whom only one survived. As a final tragic note, in 1822, Percy Shelley drowned in a storm off the north-western coast of Italy. Stricken by grief, Mary began to write *The Last Man*.

<sup>9</sup> Though recognizing this issue, this study will not focus on the autobiographical facets of the novel.

revolution occasioned on nature, I will argue that a feminist point of view needs to be taken more fully into account. As I have suggested, this is because women were not only socially excluded and restricted to domestic life, but were also victims of the various eco-disasters caused by the industrial revolution. Further to this idea, Garance Abdat's "“We call ourselves lords of the creation”" explores the idea that the pandemic is a metaphor for nature bringing back balance to the environment.

My text sees nature as an avenger that reacts against the patriarchy by punishing human beings through disease. Abdat's article also outlines the binary opposition between the feminine and the masculine, by observing that Shelley's plague is described as feminine. My dissertation will attempt to criticise this essentialist differentiation between masculine-technology and feminine-nature. Following this line, Susan Griffin's *Woman and Nature* (1978), argues that patriarchy sees women as "inferior to [men] and closer to nature" (Griffin 14). This closeness to nature and identification with women and nature relates to the plague being feminised in Shelley's text. As mentioned previously, this dissertation will not examine the association of women with nature but will, instead, focus on women as double victims of nature's response to patriarchal structures. However, whilst I agree that *The Last Man* is clearly influenced by Milton's *Paradise Lost*, since it can be understood as "the tale of 'what misery th'inabstinence of Eve shall bring on men'", I depart from Sandra M. Gilbert's interpretation in "Horror's Twin: Mary Shelley's Monstruous Eve". Instead, my argument departs from Gilbert's viewpoint by asserting that the absence of women caused by the plague (which is seen as a response to the patriarchal exploitation of nature), serves as a way of indiscriminately punishing women as well.

By focusing on the study of the relationship between human beings and nature in literature, this analysis not only draws inspiration from existing discussions but also

contributes to the ongoing conversation about how the natural world is represented in literary texts. In the specific context of my project, which revolves around the theme of the plague, the exploration of this relationship sheds light on how the natural world is imagined and represented within the narrative. In fact, as I have seen in my research, there has been very little discussion of how nature takes on an active role as an avenger,<sup>10</sup> reacting against the exploitation of the environment, and aiming to restore what might be called a “natural balance”. In this novel, the plague is both nature itself and nature’s army that serves to punish humankind.

Having reviewed a number of secondary sources pertaining to my topic, text and critical framework and in light of what I see as the insufficiently explored areas that this dissertation will attempt to assess, I would like to pose the following question: Does *The Last Man* suggest that women are doubly affected by the abusive power of patriarchy in nature? And if so, how? Given this thesis question, I therefore propose the following thesis statement: Although it has been claimed that in Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* nature takes on an active role as a leveller that brings balance back, this dissertation will argue that women in the novel are doubly affected by the abusive power of patriarchy, first, through social submission and, second, as innocent victims of nature’s avenging response to an eco-catastrophe that was essentially male-induced (through men’s centrality in the exploitation of the environment during the Industrial Revolution).

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<sup>10</sup> Nature has often been identified directly with the feminine, as it can be a life giver and nurturer. However, there is a complex difficulty of etymology involved. The word ‘nature’ comes from Latin ‘natura’, which is grammatically feminine, and this grammatical fact greatly assists in consolidating the conceptual view of nature as inherently feminine at the level of sociological gender. Following this idea, it might be argued that over time, this underlines its notion as a *maternal* life giver, a provider, a protector (and, also, as something to be exploited). My dissertation, however, sees the attribution of feminine to both nature and plague as essentially arbitrary (as is all grammatical gender), and consequently does not make a sociologically gendered reading of either concept.

Nature answers with an anthro-catastrophe (the plague) that swiftly and effectively eradicates almost all of humanity, men and women alike.

My text will be divided into three different sections for this purpose. The first section will centre on the initial impact of patriarchy's oppressive power on women. To investigate this matter, I will analyse the two female protagonists that are excluded from the social and political world and are forced to live a domestic life. These are Idris and Perdita. Following the chronology of the novel, the second section will concentrate on nature as the avenger who responds back with the plague. Furthermore, as Shelley's novel uses feminine pronouns to describe the plague, this representation will be examined. Through the characters of Idris, Perdita and Clara and their respective catastrophic deaths, the third part of the dissertation looks at how women suffer the consequences of the pandemic.

## 1. Women Excluded from the Social and Political World: An Enforced Domesticity

“Her task of soothing him; her cares for the beauteous Clara, her rides in his company, her dedication of herself to his consolation” (Shelley 80).

From the beginning of the novel, we notice that the role of the female characters is to take care of and to be gentle and kind to men. An instance of this is when Lionel, the narrator, gives an account of how his parents came to know each other. In the story, his father was extremely ill and was taken care of by a cottage-girl who would become mother to Lionel and Perdita: “A nervous fever was the consequence; during which he was nursed by the daughter of a poor cottager, under whose roof he lodged. She was lovely, gentle, and, above all, kind to him ... The attachment between them led to the ill-fated marriage, of which I was the offspring” (Shelley 9).

This section will analyse how in different ways, both Idris and Perdita suffer from social inequality within the society they live in. Although *The Last Man* is chronologically set far from Mary Shelley’s own period,<sup>11</sup> it is still plausible to see these two characters as the embodiment of comfortably situated women in the early nineteenth century. That is, Princess Idris is forced to marry a wealthy man but is somehow able to change her destiny, whereas Perdita, coming from a lower-class family, is totally unable to change her fate and ends up subservient to men by marrying Raymond. She constructs her life following Raymond’s wishes to become the Protector of England. Following this line, neither of them is able to escape from the role of an angelic and dedicated housewife and, therefore, they are excluded from contributing to political and philosophical discussions even if their relatives are fully immersed in this matter. The following two fragments from the novel provide identical examples of this

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<sup>11</sup> *The Last Man* is narrated in the year 2100: “On that day I ascended St. Peter's, and carved on its topmost stone the era 2100, last year of the world!” (Shelley 365)

issue: “When any separation took place between us, it generally so happened, that Idris and Perdita would ramble away together, and we remained to discuss the affairs of nations, and the philosophy of life”. (Shelley 71); “Idris and Perdita only remained with the children” (106). We can see here how every time that there are discussions about politics and philosophy; women have no say in these matters.

Given this, my text will consider Susan Griffin’s analysis of the expectations and the social norms that have been expected of women throughout history. Griffin discovered that there is somehow a universal pattern among women that has led them to a domestic life. That is, the life of women was about accomplishing the role and function of housewife (Griffin 56). In this way, though both Idris and Perdita have their own individual experiences and personalities, they end up being restricted to a passive and private life. Indeed, one can notice that Adrian, Lionel and Raymond, the male characters, “move into the outside world to shape reality” whereas Idris and Perdita “direct their energies inward” clinging to “the home, to sameness, to tradition” (52). In the novel, there is therefore a binary opposition between activity and passivity, between the outside world and the private world.

### **1.1. Idris: The Provident Creature**

“To watch her children hour by hour, to sit by me, drinking deep the dear persuasion that I remained to her, was all her pastime” (Shelley 264).

Idris is the Countess of Windsor’s daughter and eventually becomes Lionel’s wife. Since she is a princess, Idris is tied to and suffers from the expectations that society has of a woman of such high status. Her name itself already foreshadows her personality and identity. That is, as McWhir’s edition of *The Last Man* observes “the Greek word Idris means ‘provident creature’” (Shelley 39 n43). Moreover, this name has also been interpreted in other languages: “Her rather masculine name can mean ‘prophet’ in

Arabic, or ‘ardent prince’ in Welsh” (Antal 5). Though this name has been given many translations, they all refer to comparable qualities such as intelligence and power. Indeed, Idris foreshadows what the plague will bring, which is the horrible death that follows her children. Furthermore, in Shelley’s times, these attributes would have been considered masculine and a way of challenging the role of a woman.

Focusing on how Idris challenges the norm and represents an empowered woman, we may claim that she breaks free from her fate of having to marry a man that she does not love. From the beginning of the novel, this persona is utilised as a mere prop or object to restore the monarchy in England and thereby preserve the royal dynasty. This is mainly conducted by her mother, the Countess of Windsor, who obliges her to marry Raymond. Of course, this fate was not experienced by men and, as the novel might be a reflection of nineteenth century society, we see this issue through Adrian. Adrian, despite being fully supportive and protective of his sister, is not destined to meet this expectation.

As Idris is a very powerful and wily character, she escapes from this arranged marriage and marries the love of her life (Lionel). This is not just rebellious and contrary to patriarchal ideals of the time, since Idris feels free to marry anyone she wants, but also because Lionel is a lower-class man who will impede the family from restoring the monarchy. In the following passage of the novel, the Countess of Windsor reproaches her own daughter for failing to fulfil her obligations as a princess:

Were your sister indeed the insignificant person she deserves to be, I would willingly leave her to the fate, the wretched fate, of the wife of a man, whose very person, resembling as it does his wretched father, ought to remind you of the folly and vice it typifies—but remember, Lady Idris, it is not alone the once royal blood of England that colours your veins, you are a Princess of Austria, and every life-drop is akin to emperors and kings. Are you then a fit mate for an uneducated shepherd-boy, whose only inheritance is his father's tarnished name? (Shelley 65).

Furthermore, her own mother poisons Idris in order to bring her to Austria and, hence, force her to marry a good fit for the family: “The Countess again came to her daughter's bed-side: ‘In Austria at least,’ she said, ‘you will obey. In Austria, where obedience can be enforced, and no choice left but between an honourable prison and a fitting marriage.’” (Shelley 69). These excerpts show how the Countess of Windsor continually punishes her own daughter for refusing to embrace and adapt to the role of a princess. Nevertheless, during the passage in which Adrian was extremely ill due to heartbreak, the Countess saw his son as a victim and suffered painfully: “Her passions had subdued her appetites, even her natural wants; she slept little, and hardly ate at all; her body was evidently considered by her as a mere machine” (Shelley 57). As a result, they are perceived differently by their mother: Idris is treated as a disobedient meaningless creature while Adrian is treated as a victim to be cared for. Nonetheless, Idris reacts to this mistreatment and is regarded by the other characters as “the only being who could resist her mother (Shelley 57). That is not to suggest that she treats her mother with hostility in return. Actually, Idris could be said to be a representation of a female character that defies the patriarchal stereotype that all girls despise their mothers: “And it is said that girls are born castrated ... This wound to herself is said to develop like a scar. And it said that she will pass from self-hatred to hatred of her mother and then hatred of all women” (Griffin 57). After reading this work, it is clear that Idris is far from hating her mother or other women in her life. Rather, in the absence of her mother, she protects and cares for her female relatives.

Idris is thus an example of a strong woman who is able to speak for herself and marry a man of her own choice. Nonetheless, even if able to fight for her wishes, she remains limited to the confines of her own home. Idris devotes her life to the care of her husband and children. Indeed, she is excluded from the outside world, from the political



and philosophical world: “Being Lionel’s spouse, Idris stands for the traditional roles of a wife and mother, rearing their two sons (Alfred and Evelyn), but she collapses mentally when she cannot save her children” (Antal 5). Her mental breakdown will be further assessed when I consider women who suffer the consequences of the plague.

## **1.2. Perdita: The Lost Creature**

“Her whole existence was one sacrifice to him, and if in the humility of her heart she felt self-complacency, it arose from the reflection that she had won the distinguished hero of the age, and had for years preserved him” (Shelley 91).

Perdita, Lionel’s sister, is a crucial character in Shelley’s text. She represents the anxiety and sorrow that a woman experiences when she devotes her entire life to her family. At the beginning of the novel, Perdita is an independent and autonomous person. She lives her life in her own cottage where she has a strong bond with nature. Nevertheless, when Perdita meets Raymond, she loses her individuality and dedicates her entire life to him and the child she bears, Clara. Furthermore, this loss of individuality that is caused by patriarchal beliefs is already hinted by the etymological meaning of her name: “Perdita loses herself in her pathological love for her husband Lord Raymond, a metaphorical annihilation of self that eventually leads to a literal annihilation of self, one signalled by Perdita’s name, meaning ‘lost’ in Italian” (Jones Square 3). The name also echoes Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s Tale* in which the female sheep herder with this same name is “restored to her rightful rank at the end of the play” (Shelley 12 n16). Therefore, not only does the reader realise that Perdita is fated to self-sacrifice and lose herself due to her romantic relationship with Raymond, but also perhaps that, despite having been raised in poverty she finally enters the upper class.

Considering the attributes that Perdita was given before meeting Raymond; growing up an orphan, she was distrustful of people, individual and coexisted with

nature. In fact, Lionel makes reference to Ullswater when describing the home of his sister. In the passage “She dwelt in a cottage whose trim grass-plat sloped down to the waters of the lake of Ulswater; a beech wood stretched up the hill behind, and a purling brook gently falling from the acclivity ran through poplar-shaded banks into the lake” (Shelley 13), we notice remnants of Mary Shelley’s romanticism as well as how Perdita is associated with a life in symbiosis and harmony with nature.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Perdita did reject people, but never the environment. Being an orphan and lacking parental love, essential for shaping one’s identity, may have contributed to this problem:

Her manners were cold and repulsive. If she had been nurtured by those who had regarded her with affection, she might have been different; but unloved and neglected, she repaid the want of kindness with distrust and silence. She was submissive to those who held authority over her, but a perpetual cloud dwelt on her brow; she looked as if she expected enmity from everyone who approached her, and her actions were instigated by the same feeling. All the time she could command she spent in solitude. She would ramble to the most unfrequented places, and scale dangerous heights, that in those unvisited spots she might wrap herself in loneliness. Often she passed whole hours walking up and down the paths of the woods (Shelley 12).

This serves as yet another illustration of Perdita’s closeness to nature and isolation from society. Her brother also referred to her as “the mountain girl” (33). However, as was previously stated, Perdita abandons this individuality and way of life to be with Raymond. She becomes entirely submissive to him to the point that she asks him: “Take me—mould me to your will, possess my heart and soul to all eternity” (53). Instead of encouraging her independence and uniqueness, Raymond gradually implants “into her his own hopes and desires” (81). In this way, she agrees to move to London where Raymond is Lord Protector of England. As a result, she suffers psychologically when she moves to the city. In a sense, Perdita represents the multitudes who moved to urban areas throughout the early industrial revolution, as well as all the disorientation that this

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<sup>12</sup> This passage is particularly reminiscent of William Wordsworth’s “She dwelt among the untrodden ways” (1798/1800), from the early phase of the poet’s writing, which focuses intensely on the power and majesty of nature, and the deep happiness of those who live in harmony with it.

relocation brought about. We can observe this idea when the family returns home and Clara notices and celebrates her mother's gaiety: "'This is better, Mamma,' said Clara, 'than being in that dismal London, where you often cry, and never laugh as you do now' ... with increased anxiety she departed for London, the scene and cause of all her misery" (105, 113). Another illustration of this is when Lionel admits that, whereas Perdita is scared of leaving her life for the sake of romantic love, his sister would do everything for her spouse: "Perdita acceded to his wishes; for his contentment was the chief object of her life, the crown of her enjoyment; but to leave us all, her companions, the beloved partners of her happiest years ... was a task that almost conquered her strength of mind" (78). As a result, Perdita experiences a great deal of grief while attempting to perform the strenuous obligations of a wife and mother that patriarchy systematically imposed on women.

In addition to suffering, she is also unable to express her anguish to her loved ones. Perdita is made to act the part of a contented wife even if she has experienced the psychological distress of moving to the city, and her husband has been unfaithful to her (with Evadne). In the following two fragments, Perdita is silenced and her melancholy is repressed: "It required all her self-command, to suppress the gush of tears self-pity caused at this idea. After many struggles, she succeeded, and turned to join the company ... She had to play the part of a courteous hostess" (103). "I had imposed a law of silence on myself; and for months I have kept it. I do wrong in weeping now, and greater wrong in giving words to my grief. I will not speak! Be [it] enough for you to know that I am miserable" (107). We can see how loving too much has made Perdita wretched. To aggravate matters, she sacrifices herself by publicly taking full responsibility for Raymond leaving her: "If you wish to break the chains that bind us, say the word, and it shall be done—I will take all the blame on myself, of harshness or

unkindness, in the world's eye". (110). As well as having lost her entire world, she is willing to assume the blame and consequences for the fact that Raymond has stopped loving her. We can see, consequently, how this character is humiliated and reduced to misery. This is due to the fact that Perdita's world had become completely domestic and dependent on her husband. Thus, "with the destruction of her domestic world, Perdita experiences private suffering as global catastrophe" (Bailes 20). In this way, after Raymond goes to Constantinople and is slain in a battle, Perdita takes her own life full of culpability and anguish. Hence, as Webb contends, "the collapse of the domestic world prefigures the collapse of the entire human world, and the rest of the novel is taken up with describing the plague" (Webb 3).

I have assessed how Idris and Perdita see how their own identities are obscured by the imposed duty of wife and mother and how they suffer from social inequality. Their domestic worlds disintegrate with the onset of the plague. Following this collapse, I will now further explore how the plague represents an avenging response to patriarchy.

## 2. Nature's Avenging Response to Patriarchy: The Plague "the enemy of human race"

"That same invincible monster, which hovered over and devoured Constantinople—that fiend more cruel than tempest, less tame than fire, is, alas, unchained in that beautiful country"  
(Shelley 173).

The characters in the novel learn about the existence of the plague in June 2092. Curiously, Perdita is the one to acknowledge and mention it first. The pandemic seems to be more powerful than human wars, than human exploitation. It arbitrarily and effectively kills every person on the planet. That is, it has the power to put an end to human civilisation:

One word, in truth, had alarmed her more than battles or sieges, during which she trusted Raymond's high command would exempt him from danger. That word, as yet it was no more to her, was PLAGUE. This enemy to the human race had begun early in June to raise its serpent-head on the shores of the Nile (Shelley 137).

Indeed, this "enemy to the human race" (137) is impossible to fight against. Throughout the whole novel, we notice how Shelley challenges the anthropocentric view that human beings have the right to exploit their environment due to the belief that we are superior to everything that surrounds us. We see this critique through Lionel's words when he questions this assumption:

We call ourselves lords of the creation, wielders of the elements, masters of life and death, and we allege in excuse of this arrogance, that though the individual is destroyed, man continues for ever ... [W]e glory in the continuity of our species, and learn to regard death without terror. (Shelley 181)

By creating a fictionalised plague that calls into question human existence and superiority, Shelley allows nature to take protagonism and to respond to having been exploited. Since patriarchy had been entirely involved in the degradation of the environment that was occurring, the disease is nature's retaliatory response to this structure of power. Garance Abdat argues that "La peste apparaît comme l'outil de la vengeance de la nature, par le biais de l'extinction de l'espèce humaine". ("The plague appears as a tool of vengeance for nature, as it provokes the extinction of human

species”) (Abdat 3). Furthermore, the plague brings utter chaos. As a result of its outbreak, the social, economic, and political institutions start to crumble: “International trade stops, class distinctions collapse, social organisation breaks down, and colonized peoples ‘invade’ England. Adrian eventually becomes Lord Protector, but it is only to lead the few surviving English to Europe, ultimately to die” (Webb 3). All of the social and economic structures that the human intellect has built in this way start to crumble.

This section will first explore how the extinction of humanity follows a process of nature coming back to balance, of renewing itself. Second, as this text acknowledges that the identification of women with nature is merely a social construct, my text will examine this issue. The aim of this analysis is to critique this social construct that has persisted throughout human history.

## **2.1. Nature comes back to life: From destruction to growth**

“It was one of those lovely winter-days which assert the capacity of nature to bestow beauty on barrenness” (Shelley 243).

Throughout Lionel’s narration, the reader witnesses a process of decay and growth that nature suffers from. That is, when the wars take place, we see how the environment is damaged, but when nature answers back with plague, we observe a renovation of nature reclaiming the cities. Regarding the destruction of nature, the novel’s depiction of the war in Constantinople offers some instances of this environmental decadence:

Weary nature awoke to suffer yet another day of heat and thirsty decay. No flowers lifted up their dew-laden cups to meet the dawn; the dry grass had withered on the plains; the burning fields of air were vacant of birds; the cicale alone, children of the sun, began their shrill and deafening song among the cypresses and olives (Shelley 154).

These words capture the decadent consequences that wars have on the environment. Nature is portrayed as lifeless and extinct. The following example describes how the cities that had been constructed by human hands are also destroyed by the war in

Constantinople: “While over them hovered a murky cloud; fragments of buildings whirled above, half seen in smoke, while flames burst out beneath, and continued explosions filled the air with terrific thunders” (156). Of course, the health of the ecosystem is impacted by this brutal destruction of the cities. Additionally, the images of fire and decadence reinforce this perception of a degraded environment:

All I could discern within the precincts of the massive walls was a city of fire: the open way through which Raymond had ridden was enveloped in smoke and flame ... Strange to say (the result perhaps of the concussion of air occasioned by the blowing up of the city) huge, white thunder clouds lifted themselves up from the southern horizon ... The glare of flames attested the progress of destruction, while, during mingled light and obscurity, the piles around me took gigantic proportions and weird shapes” (Shelley 157).

Perhaps the war is an example of how patriarchy has been abusive to and exploitive of nature. In other words, the depiction of the conflict in Constantinople serves as a critique of a particular form of toxic masculinity. In fact, Raymond despite being referred to as “the ambitious” (71) and “the conqueror” (113) does not die in a manner befitting of his lofty position. That is, he does not die in battle. Rather, the Lord Protector is killed in a fire and has his face disfigured: “And my friend's shape, altered by a thousand distortions, expanded into a gigantic phantom, bearing on its brow the sign of pestilence” (Shelley 158). By not giving him a triumphant demise, Shelley in a sense criticises the anthropocentric arrogance that wars represent, and which Raymond personified.

Raymond’s death follows the massive outburst of the plague that threatens the future of the human species. Nature undergoes a transition from death to restoration. Hence, the depictions of the environment begin to be lively and the reader witnesses how nature prospers and regains “its accustomed health[!]” (Shelley 185). In this way, as Abdat claims, the annihilation of humankind is followed by the renewal of nature (6). Further to this idea, as was mentioned in the introduction, this plague is not the result of God’s anger. Instead, it is produced by nature. The passage that follows depicts how

nature is serene and in bloom throughout the epidemic rather than being accompanied by the customary apocalyptic visions of God's wrath through thunderclouds and storms:

HEAR YOU not the rushing sound of the coming tempest? Do you not behold the clouds open, and destruction lurid and dire pour down on the blasted earth? See you not the thunderbolt fall, and are deafened by the shout of heaven that follows its descent? Feel you not the earth quake and open with agonizing groans, while the air is pregnant with shrieks and wailings,— all announcing the last days of man? No! none of these things accompanied our fall! The balmy air of spring, breathed from nature's ambrosial home, invested the lovely earth, which wakened as a young mother about to lead forth in pride her beauteous offspring to meet their sire who had been long absent. The buds decked the trees, the flowers adorned the land: the dark branches, swollen with seasonable juices, expanded into leaves [...] Where was pain and evil? Not in the calm air or weltering ocean; not in the woods or fertile fields, nor among the birds that made the woods resonant with song, nor the animals that in the midst of plenty basked in the sunshine (Shelley 249).

Hence, as stated before, nature returns to a state of balance and beauty thanks to the absence of human beings.<sup>13</sup> Further to this idea, following a passage in which Lionel returns to London when the plague has already arrived in England, he notices that the city has been altered. Indeed, the images of the plants and the trees returning to the city symbolise nature's re-colonisation of the city: "London appeared sufficiently changed. There were no carriages, and grass had sprung high in the streets; the houses had a desolate look; most of the shutters were closed" (Shelley 197). However, nature also reclaims the land through water. That is, once the disease quickly passed through England, the island was metaphorically devoured by the sea's majestic power: "Before Christmas half England was under water" (210). Thus, the absence of people and the absence of technological developments (since people were wholly occupied in simply surviving the plague), allows nature to come back and take what belonged to it.

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<sup>13</sup> The renewal of nature resonates with our contemporary post Covid-19 society. That is, during the outbreak of the 2020 pandemic, nature began to reestablish itself and take back the cities. Indeed, as Mondello asserts, because of this text's emphasis on disease and colonisation, as well as its obvious connections to the Covid-19 pandemic, it has attracted more critical attention (423). What makes Shelley's text relevant is that it "allow[s] us to re-evaluate our relationship with nature from a paradigm before evolutionary theory" (Keeling 7). That is, by reproducing a plague that echoes with Covid-19, we are forced into thinking about our anthropocentric view of the environment.



Moreover, this anthro-catastrophe that comes to earth to punish human beings for mistreating nature is eventually victorious. That is, the plague is not defeated at the end of the novel. Therefore, we learn that nature is so much more powerful than humanity and that it has the inner ability to renew itself and overcome the patriarchal system that had been instrumental in degrading it. As Mondello claims, this universal pandemic “establish[es] a powerful ecofeminist critique that no patriarchal ‘fantasy of complete mastery’ over nature is possible” (Mondello 422). Further to this idea, as Elmer contends, the plague is not depicted as “other” or an antagonist of human beings. Rather, it serves as nature’s vehicle or nature itself to end world history. Namely, to end the existence of humanity (3).

## **2.2. The Problem with the Identification of Nature as Feminine**

“Those times when man walked the earth fearless, before Plague had become Queen of the World” (Shelley 273).

This text acknowledges the significant problem with the etymology and the representation of nature as feminine in the formal structure of this novel, as was indicated in the introduction. I will therefore briefly investigate and critique the social construction that links women and nature. Nevertheless, since etymology has already been mentioned, I will concentrate on the social understanding of these terms.

Regarding the social construction that identifies nature with women, I see this as patriarchal. According to Glotfelty, patriarchal men have attempted to strengthen their bond with nature through this archetypal identification: “a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine—that is, nor simply the land as mother, but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification-enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose, and painless and integral satisfaction” (104). Therefore, the creation of this ubiquitous

metaphor of nature as a woman might be one of the origins of the hostile and haughty exploitative practices of patriarchy to nature. Patriarchy also identifies nature as a mother and mistress (14). On another note, Morton criticises how the view of nature has been idealised to claim that “putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman” (Morton 9). As a consequence, this identification is patriarchal as it regards both nature and woman as something to be exploited. Curiously, in Shelley’s text, there is almost no trace of this identification of nature as a mother that nourishes human kind. Rather, she reverses this archetype and turns nature into something powerful and vengeful:

Nature, our mother, and our friend, had turned on us a brow of menace. She shewed us plainly, that, though she permitted us to assign her laws and subdue her apparent powers, yet, if she put forth but a finger, we must quake. She could take our globe, fringed with mountains, girded by the atmosphere, containing the condition of our being, and all that man's mind could invent or his force achieve; she could take the ball in her hand, and cast it into space, where life would be drunk up, and man and all his efforts for ever annihilated (Shelley 183).

In this sense, in line with Shelley’s Romantic interpretation of nature as the sublime, she does not depart from this identification of nature as woman, but gives it the power to end the human race. In keeping with this notion, throughout the novel, we acknowledge that the plague is described as the “Queen of the World” (273) and the earth, though pleasing and flourishing, is depicted as “our grave” (Shelley 206).<sup>14</sup> Once more, Shelley is reversing the meaning of nature from something that is only there for human exploitation to something that can respond with disease.

On the other hand, although this identification is implied by the text’s formal structure, I would argue that it is more appropriate to see nature as something neutral,

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<sup>14</sup> Other interpretations of the plague regard it as a mythological female figure. For instance, as Fisch contends, in this novel Adrian identifies the disease with the Hindu goddess Kali, whereas Lionel identifies it with a snow queen. It therefore “exists somewhere between personification and myth in a borderland where casualty seems nonexistent” (Fisch 120).

since its representation as feminine is merely a social construct. Taking this into account, by punishing men and women alike, nature liberates itself from patriarchal dominance. Nonetheless, women are not saved either from patriarchal domination or from death. As a result, as my thesis statement claimed, women are doubly affected by nature's response in *The Last Man*. The previous section explored their affectedness through social exclusion and the following will examine how the plague affects them. This analysis will be conducted through the investigation of the deaths of Perdita, Idris and Clara.

### 3. Women Affected by Nature's Destructive Response to Patriarchy

“Women died of fear as they listened to their denunciations; men of robust form and seeming strength fell into idiotcy [sic] and madness, racked by the dread of coming eternity”  
(Shelley 206).

It is possible to consider women and nature as victims of patriarchy. That is, patriarchy is as fundamentally oppressive toward nature as it is toward women (Glazebrook 4). Ecofeminists have remarked on the relation between feminism and environmentalism (3) due to their suffering from the abusive power of the patriarchy. Nevertheless, this text argues that though seeing both as victims, this connection is established by acknowledging and realizing how environmental exploitation directly impacts women. In fact, nature's vengeful and destructive reactions to having been abused punish both genders equally.

Shelley's depiction of the plague understands no gender. That is, in *The Last Man* natural disasters such as floods, sea storms or plagues indiscriminately kill men and women alike. The female protagonists endure social inequity as a result of being forced into domesticity, but they also experience nature's retaliatory reaction to patriarchy. However, they do so in different ways when their lives are reduced to domesticity. This section will first analyse how the collapse of the domestic world is related with the appearance of the plague and other anthro-catastrophes through the deaths of Perdita and Idris. It will then consider Clara's drowning in the ocean.

#### 3.1. Perdita: “The Victim of Too Much Loving”<sup>15</sup>

“I am dead. This is another world, from that which late I inhabited, from that which is now your home” (Shelley 165).

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<sup>15</sup> Shelley 169.

Perdita is described as “the victim of too much loving” (Shelley 169). That is, she loved her companion so much that she lost her life and independence. Jones Square argues that *The Last Man* proposes the notion that femininity is connected to a propensity to feel excessively, which results in suicidal thoughts (2). Nevertheless, this issue of experiencing excessive emotion is caused by the fact that Perdita’s entire life is devoted to the domestic home, when that is destroyed, she becomes lost. Therefore, as nineteenth-century women were “forced to define themselves within the traditional classifications of daughter, wife, and mother, their ability to develop autonomous identities independent of their prescribed gender roles was severely limited” (Jones Square 3). This issue had already been explored by Mary Wollstonecraft. Shelley’s mother claimed that if women were permitted “to share the advantages of education and government with man, [they] would grow wiser and become free” (330, 310). Hence, what makes women suicidal or mad is not the female mind, but patriarchy (Jones Square 16).

Regarding Perdita, what her name already foreshadowed is eventually accomplished, she “loses herself in her pathological love for her husband” (Jones Square 3). In other words, Raymond’s death signifies the mental collapse of Perdita since her life was entirely devoted to him. To elaborate on this further, following Raymond’s passing, Perdita’s will is to remain in Greece. The following fragment illustrates how for the first time Perdita took a decision as an autonomous person while telling her brother Lionel:

Go you to England, and leave me where alone I can consent to drag out the miserable days which I must still live ... But do not deceive yourself; this cottage is built by my order; and here I shall remain, until the hour arrives when I may share his happier dwelling ... I can only declare my fixed resolve. I stay here; force only can remove me. Be it so; drag me away—I return; confine me, imprison me, still I escape, and come here (Shelley 165, 166).

Lionel forces her go back to England despite the fact that she made her intentions known to her brother. He accomplishes this by poisoning her in the same manner as Idris was poisoned by the countess of Windsor, by administering a drug to make her unconscious. Lionel, thus, does not respect Perdita's decision to stay and be independent. We can observe how even his kind and beloved brother does not allow her to be individualistic and take her own decisions.

Perdita commits suicide: when she awakes on a boat sailing to England and realises that her brother has not respected her decision, she throws herself overboard. This death anticipates her daughter's drowning, which will be examined later: "The sea was gently agitated, now shewing a white crest, and now resuming an uniform hue; the clouds had disappeared; and dark ether clipt the broad ocean, in which the constellations vainly sought their accustomed mirror ... Suddenly I heard a splash in the sea" (Shelley 168).

Though Perdita willingly commits suicide, her drowning can be understood as an example of how women in this story are collaterally affected by nature's destructive response to patriarchy. It is true that in this case nature does not function as an agent of punishment. Indeed, what needs to be acknowledged here is that the sea in fact becomes more of an agent of *destruction*, by causing her death. That is, nature is the only character within the novel that respects her decision by not being gentle and saving her. Perhaps it does not save her due to its indifference. However, my dissertation argues that nature in this novel is an active, personified force that responds and has an effect on human kind. Hence, in this instance nature becomes two distinct entities: On the one hand it is a place for liberation and autonomy (it respects Perdita's decision and frees her from patriarchy); on the other, it is a place for destruction (she is arbitrarily killed). Consequently, Perdita finds both liberation and death. As a result, the sea is an agent of

freedom and destruction. Perdita's death provides an example of how women in *The Last Man* can also be affected by the destructive power of nature despite obtaining freedom from the patriarchy.

### 3.2. Idris: "The Anxious Mother"<sup>16</sup>

"All was dark, desert, and silent; she lost all self-possession ... Wild fear gave wings to her feet; ... she neither felt, nor feared, nor paused, but ran right on, till her strength suddenly deserted her so suddenly, that she had not thought to save herself" (Shelley 264).

The disease does not kill Idris; in fact, she never even contracts it. Nevertheless, Idris is directly affected by the plague as her fear of her family contracting the plague consumes her until her passing. That is, in line with Spark's argument, after being in poor health due to past years' anxieties and the loss of her son Alfred, exhaustion causes her demise (227). She experiences additional consumption as a result of having to care for the sick, much like Clara eventually does (this will be further explored in the next section). The following passage exemplifies this caring nature that is so frequently associated with mothers: "Maternal affection had not rendered Idris selfish; at the beginning of our calamity she had, with thoughtless enthusiasm, devoted herself to the care of the sick and helpless" (Shelley 216). Hence, we can see how this character devotes her existence to the care of others.

Regarding Idris' mental breakdown, the outburst of the plague is what causes the decline and disintegration of her life. That is, her domestic world, her home, her family. As the narrative progresses, we learn that Idris starts obsessing with the fear of her family contracting the disease. This is due to the fact that, as was mentioned with Perdita, she devotes her entire life to domesticity and when Idris learns that this life can be eradicated by the plague, her entire existence crumbles. As Banerjee claims, "there is no interest to the soul beyond the emotion of love, either romantic or maternal, and so

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<sup>16</sup> Shelly 224.

[she is] stifled by the torturous intensity of that emotion (7). Under these limitations of domestic life, Idris craves love and family to fulfil herself and thus, maternal fears eventually wreck her (8). In support of this idea, “the anxious mother” (Shelley 224) observes how this compulsive worry affects her physical wellbeing. The following instances from the text provide examples of how her health begins to deteriorate while the plague is expanding through England:

If Idris became thin and pale, it was anxiety that occasioned the change ... She never complained, but sleep and appetite fled from her, a slow fever preyed on her veins, her colour was hectic, and she often wept in secret; gloomy prognostications, care, and agonizing dread, ate up the principle of life within her. I could not fail to perceive this change ... she was too weak ... Day by day, during that time, the health of my Idris declined: her heart was broken; neither sleep nor appetite, the chosen servants of health, waited on her wasted form” (Shelley 251, 264).

We notice, therefore, how the pandemic affects her physically due to her fears of her world becoming extinct. Furthermore, through Lionel’s narration of her, we learn that he fully understands and cares about her: “I saw the eye of Idris wander from me to her children, with an anxious appeal to my judgment ... the anxious mother, my own beloved and drooping Idris, claimed my earnest care ... I could not reproach the anxiety that never for a moment slept in her heart” (Shelley 191, 224). Indeed, in order to try to calm his wife, Lionel assures her that they will protect their children: “With summer and mortality grew our fears. My poor love and I looked at each other, and our babes.— ‘We will save them, Idris,’ I said” (Shelley 216). But Idris persists in being lost in fear of losing her children: “The very soul of fear had taken its seat in her heart. She had grown thin and pale, her eyes filled with involuntary tears, her voice was broken and low” (Shelley 237).

These worries ultimately become true when her son Alfred contracts the plague: “She looked on her son. She saw death stealing across his features; she laid him on a bed, she held drink to his parched lips” (Shelley 264). During this passage, we observe the depiction of a dejected woman who practically collapses upon learning that her son



is dying: “She again fell; she could not rise; she hardly strove ... She breathed an earnest prayer to die speedily, for there was no relief but death” (Shelley 265). Here, we can notice how the loss of her child equates to her internal demise<sup>17</sup>. Indeed, the only circumstance that will make her anguish disappear is death. This fact is also noticed by her husband who understands her grief and suffering: “Idris must die, for her heart was broken” (Shelley 266). Furthermore, following their son’s death, Lionel learns that he has contracted the plague. During Lionel’s illness, Idris reaches the lowest stage of her physical degradation. Not only does she have to mourn her dead son, but also she has to care for and worry about the health of her dying husband:

When I had been attacked by illness, her cheeks were sunk, her form emaciated; but now, the vessel, which had broken from the effects of extreme agitation, did not entirely heal, but was as a channel that drop by drop drew from her the ruddy stream that vivified her heart. Her hollow eyes and worn countenance had a ghastly appearance; her cheek-bones, her open fair brow, the projection of the mouth, stood fearfully prominent; you might tell each bone in the thin anatomy of her frame. Her hand hung powerless; each joint lay bare, so that the light penetrated through and through. (Shelley 271).

Through this passage, Idris is shown as having a lifeless soul. She is in a state of death. The plague has an impact on her in a way that destroys her life as a mother and a wife (even if Lionel does not perish). In fact, Idris is more worried about her relatives contracting the plague than she is about catching it. Consequently, her fixation with her family getting the disease, her caring for others and witnessing her son die from the plague all contribute to her final death: “Verney’s wife Idris ... dies from a slow weakening of her physical body brought on by her plague-induced fears for the lives of her sons” (Chatterjee 16). This occurs when Idris and Lionel are on their way to rescue their servant Lucy and her mother when a snowstorm catches them both, which Idris'

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<sup>17</sup> Perhaps, Mary Shelley implanted her own grief into her fictional character. As Zolziak argues, Idris and Shelley are connected by their unquestionable love for their children, particularly by their concern for their welfare (32). Indeed, Idris is obsessed with the health of her daughter Evelyne, her son Alfred and her husband Lionel: “[i]n Idris Mary Shelley projects both her own obsessive grief for her dead Clara Everina and William . . . and her enduring anxiety for the health of her only surviving child, Percy Florence” (Banerjee 1-2). However, Idris is not given the fate of witnessing her husband and her daughter Evelyne die.

health can no longer withstand: “For two long hours I sought to restore departed life; and, when hope was as dead as my beloved, I closed with trembling hands her glazed eyes” (Shelley 279). Her death reinforces Idris’ commitment to care for others and self-sacrifice.

Perdita and Idris both offer instances of how having their life reduced to domesticity “confines and eventually even destroys the women who enact it” (Banerjee 8). As previously noted, this restriction is originated by patriarchy and the result of “their forced exclusion from participating independently in the public world” (8). Idris is thus doubly affected by the plague: she suffers from social inequality through her obsession with the family which has become her sole world while experiencing the anxiety of seeing her family contract the disease and die. Hence, nature, though also being a victim from patriarchy, collaterally contributes in the process of Idris’ destruction and death.

### **3.3. Clara: The Little Queen of the World<sup>18</sup> and the Last Woman**

“My lovely Clara also was lost to me—she who last of the daughters of man, exhibited all those feminine and maiden virtues, which poets, painters, and sculptors, have in their various languages strove to express. ... But her heart was the throne of love, and the sensibility her lovely countenance expressed, was the prophet of many woes, not the less deep and drear, because she would have forever concealed them” (Shelley 351- 352).

Clara, Raymond and Perdita’s orphan child, could be seen as the true heroine of this novel. Indeed, if we consider the etymology of her name, we might think of attributes such as “‘bright’, ‘shining,’ or even ‘illustrious’” (Shelley 80, n81). In addition to this, Clara was the name of Shelley’s daughter who died in 1818. On these qualities, throughout the novel, Clara demonstrates an extreme empathy and capacity to care for and heal others. This is acknowledged by her uncle Lionel: “Clara was not an ordinary child; her sensibility and intelligence seemed already to have endowed her with the

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<sup>18</sup> Shelly 335.

rights of womanhood” (Shelley 161). In addition to sensibility and intelligence, she illuminates the survivors’ lives with her gaiety:

Clara, our lovely gentle Clara, was our stay, our solace, our delight. She made it her task to attend the sick, comfort the sorrowing, assist the aged, and partake the sports and awaken the gaiety of the young. She flitted through the rooms, like a good spirit, dispatched from the celestial kingdom, to illumine our dark hour with alien splendor ... so much of heroism, sagacity and active goodness resided (Shelley 217).

Clara is, then, assigned the role of illuminating the way for the remaining survivors with her joy and brightness. Focusing on her caring for others, Clara has the responsibility to take care of her cousins Evelyn and Alfred when she is only twelve years old. Nevertheless, though given this duty, she is not given the opportunity to acquire knowledge and access to an education just like Alfred does. Clara remains in the house, having her life reduced to domesticity. In fact, there is a fragment in the novel in which Clara and Lionel conceal Evelyn’s illness to Idris while leaving Clara with the responsibility of taking care for his daughter: “Clara, though only twelve years old, was rendered, through extreme sensibility, so prudent and careful, that I felt secure in entrusting the charge of him to her, and it was my task to prevent Idris from observing their absence” (Shelley 226). Moreover, from volume 3 onwards, she continues to be cheerful even after witnessing the deaths of her relatives in order to uplift others. The novel remarks the burden that Clara is given at such a young age.

By the end of the novel, only Adrian, Lionel, Evelyn and Clara are among the survivors “to represent the human race on earth” (Spark 231). Nonetheless, with the passing of Evelyn, Clara becomes “the last girl/woman” (Chatterjee 12). As Spark argues, Shelley does not abandon the personal catastrophe in Clara’s life (232). That is, not only had she grown up in the absence of her parents, but Clara has also witnessed how the entire human species is now on the very brink of extinction. This passage describes her transition from a cheerful to a melancholy state: “Before we quitted Milan,

a change had taken place in her habits and manners. She lost her gaiety, she laid aside her sports, and assumed an almost vestal plainness of attire” (Shelley 338). We see thus that it is impossible for her to maintain both her duty as a caretaker and her positive attitude. Remarking this notion of the last woman, Clara is termed “the little queen of the world” (335) by Lionel and Adrian who become her “humblest servitors” (335).

However, this comes to an end when Clara suffers the same fate as her mother Perdita. That is, Clara eventually drowns<sup>19</sup> along with Adrian while “Lionel Verney survives to be the Last man” (Paley 17). Her death occurs when Clara strives to assist her uncle during a sea storm and does everything in her power to help them survive; she is not successful:

We had cut away our mast, and lightened the boat of all she contained—Clara attempted to assist me in heaving the water from the hold, and, as she turned her eyes to look on the lightning, I could discern by that momentary gleam, that resignation had conquered every fear ... ‘We are lost’ cried Clara ... The lightning shewed me the poor girl half buried in the water at the bottom of the boat; as she was sinking in it Adrian caught her up, and sustained her in his arms ... I did not yet feel in every pulsation, in every nerve, in every thought, that I remained alone of my race,—that I was the LAST MAN. (Shelley 346, 348).

It is already clear in the novel that Clara is affected by nature’s vengeful response to the patriarchy through the storm. Despite dedicating her life to helping others, she is ultimately overcome by the over-bearing power of the sea, which, along with the pandemic, acts—as an extension of nature itself—as an army, carrying out its mission to destroy both men and women alike. In this way, nature ensures that there is no last woman standing, and therefore no chance for human procreation. Clara’s task would have been to have children with Adrian and attempt to ensure the survival of the species. As Banerjee claims, Clara becomes “the only possible female propagator of

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<sup>19</sup> Understandably, Shelley has an obsession with drowning. Three protagonists in the novel (Idris, Adrian and Clara) lose their life at sea. In her life, not only did Shelley experience the loss of her children, but also the loss of her husband who drowned off the coast of La Spezia. Hence, as Bailes contends, there are two *meanings* for the deaths of Adrian and Clara: one is the fate of humanity that is sealed and puts an end to any prospect of repopulation, and the other is the depiction of Adrian's real-life counterpart, Percy Shelley (15).

humanity” (10). Nonetheless, by drowning, she experiences death with Adrian instead of a “life as his wife” (Banerjee 10). In this way, the protagonist of the novel is destroyed by nature’s vindictive reaction to patriarchy, in addition to having been exposed at a very young age to the terrible pressure of being the last female propagator. Even as a heroine, Clara’s fate is to lose her liberty and to be destroyed.

#### **4. Conclusions and Further Research**

Through the analysis of Idris and Perdita, the plague as a metaphor for nature's vengeful response to patriarchy and the effect on women of this response, this dissertation has assessed women who were socially excluded from society and enforced into domesticity, and has considered how both their social condition and fate as victims of the plague is, in effect, a double punishment. In light of my analysis, I have arrived at the following conclusions:

Idris and Perdita, who represent the economically consolidated class women in the nineteenth century, have their existences reduced to their home. Their role is to take care of and be supportive to their relatives. Perdita and Idris are unable to elude this social expectation of the angelic and dedicated housewife (a circumstance that would be further fixed in British social ideology later in the century, through the concept of the Angel in the House). They are excluded from participating in debates on politics and philosophy. Although each of these two characters has a unique history, they are both doomed to the same fate: to live a life of passivity and exclusion from the outer world. Idris, despite being an empowered woman who challenges the expectations placed on a princess, such as having to marry a wealthy man, and fights strongly for her own wishes, nevertheless eventually remains limited to the confines of her own home. As for Perdita, she loses her individuality and connection to nature through her obsessive love for Raymond. She is also expected to portray a happy life, even if she has experienced the trauma of relocating from her beloved country to the city and having to support her husband's infidelity. In this way, Perdita's and Idris' true identities are veiled by the socially patriarchal obligations of being a wife and mother.

Following this, Shelley depicts a plague that is unstoppable. Thus, she challenges the anthropocentric notion that humans are more powerful than the environment. Nature

becomes a powerful character who responds to having been exploited. This also calls into question the social construction of nature as feminine. In *The Last Man*, nature is not seen as something to be mistreated, nor as a mother who nourishes humanity. Instead, it responds to patriarchal exploitation by bringing about a disease that causes human extinction. As patriarchy had been wholly complicit in the degradation of the environment—a fact illustrated by the novel’s portrayal of the war in Constantinople, which damages and degrades the environment—the plague is therefore nature’s retaliatory response to this system of dominance and abuse. The emergence of the pandemic coincides with a process of renewal in nature that, as I have previously argued, resonates with our twenty-first century experience of the pandemic, in which nature returned (if only briefly) to a healthier state. In Shelley’s novel, the towns and the land are reclaimed by nature as it comes back to vigorous life. As a result, this brings the history of humanity to an end and liberates nature from patriarchal exploitation.

Finally, the destructive reaction of nature to patriarchy has an impact on women. In my dissertation, I have proposed that women are doubly victims. The female protagonists endure social inequity as a result of being forced into domesticity as well as experiencing nature’s retaliatory reaction to patriarchy. Despite Perdita willingly taking her own life after a mental breakdown brought on by her pathological love for Raymond, she dies at sea, which acts as an agent of nature’s destruction and causes her death. Idris’ life was totally reduced to a domesticity caused by patriarchy; she is directly affected by the plague as her fear of her family contracting the disease consumes her until her death. Clara, though being the heroine in *The Last Man*, dies at sea even though she dedicated her whole existence to caring for others and in spite of her illuminating the way for the remaining survivors when she was only a girl of twelve.

Hence, Perdita, Idris and Clara lose their lives to nature's destructive response while also losing their personal liberty in their own lives.

Therefore, in closing, I now return to my thesis statement, which was "although it has been claimed that in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* nature takes on an active role as a leveller that brings balance back, this dissertation will argue that women in the novel are doubly affected by the abusive power of patriarchy, first, through social submission and, second, as innocent victims of nature's avenging response to an eco-catastrophe that was essentially male-induced (through men's centrality in the exploitation of the environment during the Industrial Revolution)". Social submission is represented by the enforced domesticity that Perdita, Idris and Clara undergo. On women suffering nature's response, Perdita dies at sea, Clara is drowned at sea and Idris dies of exhaustion after having witnessed her loved ones contracting and dying from the plague. In this way, nature answers with various anthro-catastrophes (the plague, sea storms, snowstorms...) that swiftly and effectively eradicate almost all of humanity, making sure that procreation will be impossible. I believe that my thesis statement appears to be supported by the analysis that I have carried out. The female protagonists' lives are limited to an enforced domesticity, which is followed by the outbreak of the plague and the subsequent deaths of these women. As there is no woman left standing, there is no chance for procreation. Lionel is therefore left as the last man, which is the greatest of punishments since there is nothing he can do in the absence of women: "Alas! to enumerate the adornments of humanity, shews, by what we have lost, how supremely great man was. It is all over now. He is solitary; like our first parents expelled from Paradise, he looks back towards the scene he has quitted" (Shelley 254). Nature ensures the extinction of humanity. As a consequence, the pandemic in *The Last Man* gives a happy ending to nature by allowing it to save itself from degradation and to



regenerate itself across the world. But it is a sad ending for women, who are the innocent victims of both patriarchy and this natural catastrophe.

### **Further Research**

While this dissertation has not been able to delve into the portrayal of toxic masculinity, which might be approached particularly through the character of Raymond, it is worth acknowledging that this notion could be assessed jointly with the patriarchal exploitation of nature and with the consequences of the industrial revolution, which—in such an approach—could be argued to be further instances of toxic masculinity, understood ecologically.

I would also be interested in exploring certain contemporary depictions of plagues such as *The Last of Us* (2023). This television show is based on the video game developed by Naughty Dog (2013). *The Last of Us* is set in 2033 and depicts a pandemic that was caused twenty years earlier by a widespread fungal infection that brings about the breakdown of society by turning humans into zombie-like creatures. This pandemic could also be seen as nature taking revenge on patriarchy. In the series, we observe how nature is taking back the cities and re-emerging in full bloom. Additionally, a 14-year-old girl named Ellie who is among the survivors becomes humanity's last hope. The Greek etymology of Ellie is "light" whereas the Latin meaning of Clara is "bright". Both girls therefore illuminate the way for the remaining survivors. Ellie and Clara share the responsibility of preserving humanity, and this is an interesting echo of Shelly that might be followed more closely.

On another note, I am aware of the extreme feminist notion that argues that death is preferable to patriarchy. That is, from this perspective, the only choice women have within a patriarchal society is death. Harrington's article "Suicide, Feminism, and

‘the Miserable Dependence of Girls’” discusses the figure of nineteenth-century female suicide in full detail through the women characters in Joseph Conrad’s *The Idiots*, *The Secret Agent*, and *Chance*. Another way of approaching Shelley’s novel might therefore be through the position that nature serves as, in effect, a mortal alliance for women to liberate themselves from patriarchy by being destroyed.

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