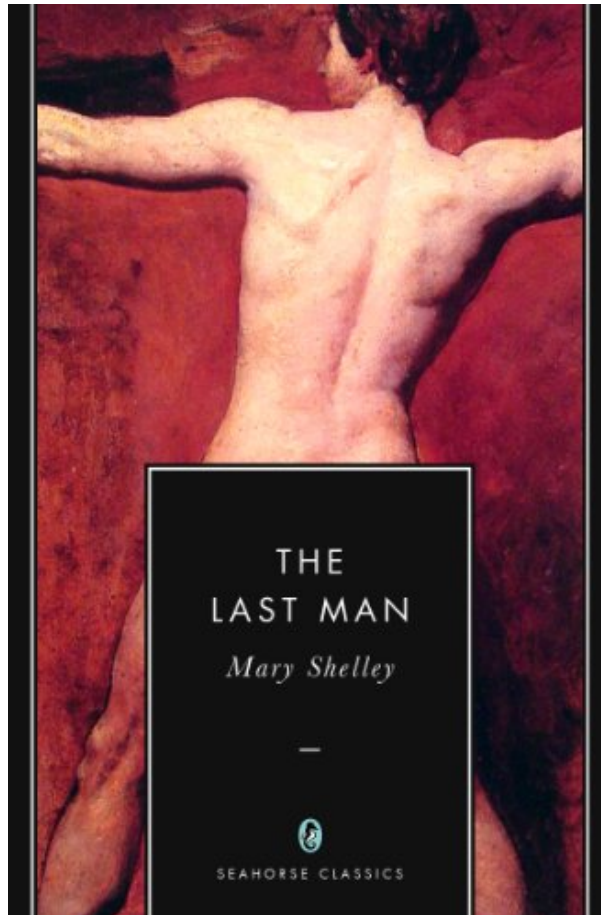
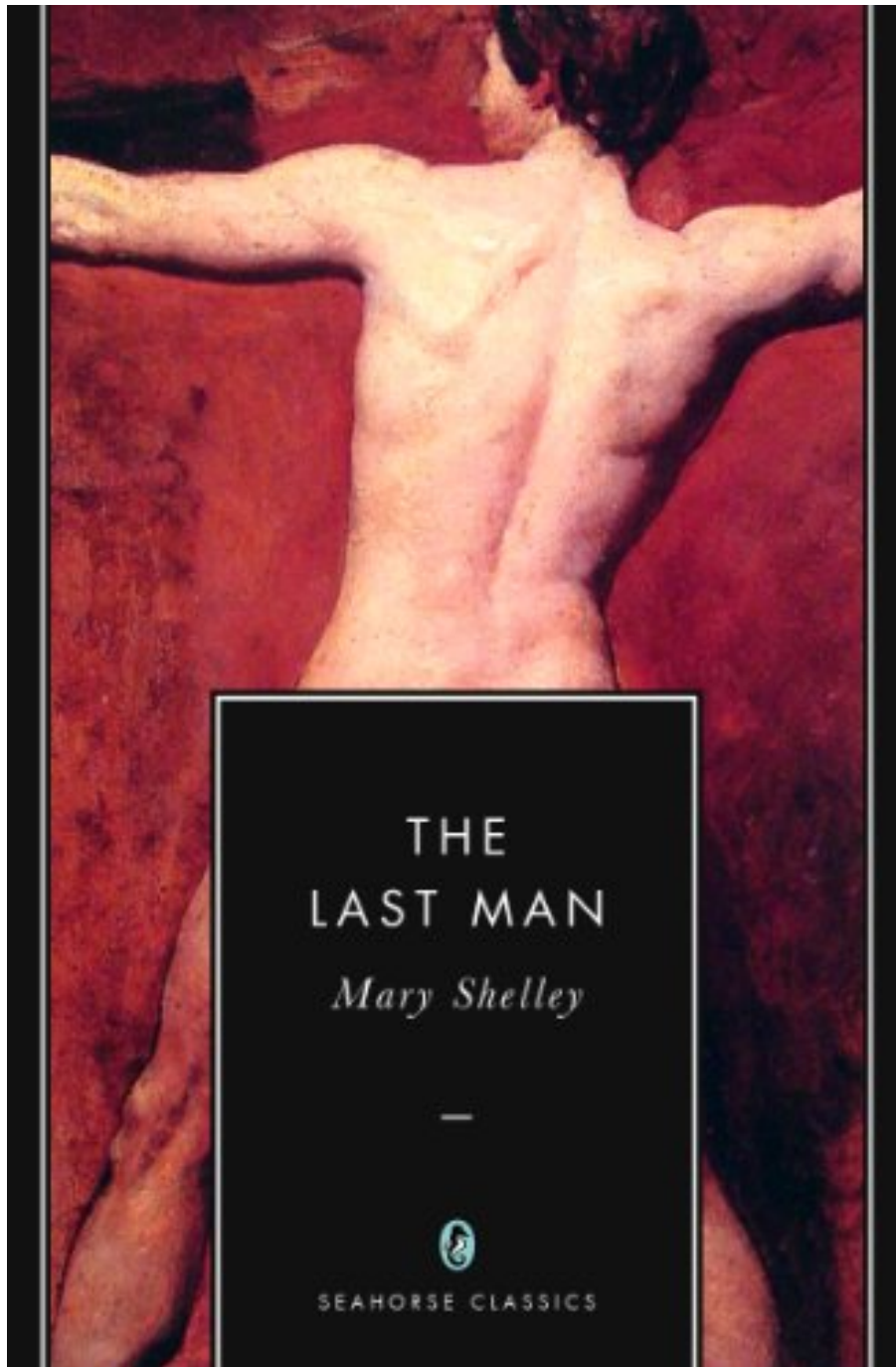


THE LAST MAN (ANNOTATED) BY MARY SHELLEY



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Thanks to yet another film incarnation, 1818's *Frankenstein* is again a hot property and may even make the best sellers lists. These two editions mark both ends of the publishing spectrum, with Signet offering the inexpensive movie tie-in version complete with photos from the film and an afterword by Howard Bloom. The California version is the Pennroyal edition, featuring gorgeous illustrations by Barry Moser and an afterword by Joyce Carol Oates. Published in 1826 after the death of her husband and three children, *The Last Man* is Shelley's dark look at an apocalyptic future.

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"Anne McWhir's edition of *The Last Man* is first rate! Mary Shelley's novel is well served by a careful editor who provides an informed introduction, comprehensive annotations, and well-chosen appendices that contextualize this richly complex novel. Shelley herself would have been pleased!" ? Charles E. Robinson, University of Delaware

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It is the twenty-first century, and England is a republic governed by a ruling elite, one of whom, Adrian, Earl of Windsor, has introduced a Cumbrian boy to the circle. This outsider, Lionel Verney, narrates the story, a tale of complicated, tragic love, and of the gradual extermination of the human race by plague.

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110 of 117 people found the following review helpful.

'All The World Has The Plague!'

By mp

Mary Shelley's novel, 'The Last Man' is a work which is slowly gaining the critical attention it richly deserves. Fans of 'Frankenstein' will be astounded at how much deeper Mary Shelley's indictment of 'masculine' visionary Romanticism, technology, and the faults of humanity go in 'The Last Man'. At the same time, the novel is fraught with problems and contradictions which give an already paranoid work a whirling sense of internal dementia.

The action of 'The Last Man' takes place between 2073 and 2100 AD. England is ripe for change as the last King of England abdicates his throne in response to public outcry for a more democratic form of government. Lionel Verney, a shepherd, is drawn out of a life of wildness and crime by Adrian, the former crown prince of England. The charismatic Lord Raymond enters the story as the lover of Lionel's sister, Perdita, and the newly-elected Lord Protector of England. Torn between his love of power and his affections for his wife and a persistent attachment to Evadne, a Greek woman, Raymond renounces his political position and flees to Greece. There, he leads a military campaign to establish Greek independence and bring about the end of the Turkish empire.

Then, the Plague takes over. The nondescript malady has wiped out the population of Constantinople just as Raymond conquers it, making his victory meaningless. Word of the plague's virulence comes in from Asia and America, and from the southern, eastern, and western corners of the world, the plague begins to encroach inward towards Europe and England. The remainder of the novel tracks Lionel and Adrian's attempts to save the human race from utter annihilation.

In 'The Last Man', Mary Shelley gives us a horrifying, desolate prophecy of the future, when religion, technology, and human effort are all exposed as meaningless. Although many might say that she also abandons the redemptive possibilities of art, I think that art provides the novel's only hope. Mary Shelley's dependence on art of every format is clear in the novel's influences - She has Lionel refer to literature, including the works of Daniel Defoe, Charles Brockden Brown, Ann Radcliffe, Homer, Shakespeare, and Jonathan Swift among others.

The novel is fraught with problems of gender and power relations. At any moment of emotional weakness, Lionel calls himself 'girlish' or 'womanly,' and the novel seems to privilege women who are selfless and submissive. On the other hand, as Morton Paley's introduction points out, the plague itself is consistently described as female, at one place referred to as 'The Queen of the World'. With regard to power relations, Lionel continually mentions that in the dying world of humanity, social distinctions have all been abandoned - and yet there are still references to his 'servant' or those of other people. The most problematic scene in the novel revolves around racial distinctions when Lionel encounters a dying black man in London.

There are a million things to talk about in 'The Last Man,' and a novel so rich for discussion deserves to be read by as many people as possible. This is a book I warmly recommend, so pick it up and discover that there is more to Mary Shelley than 'Frankenstein'.

59 of 61 people found the following review helpful.

The Beginning of the End

By Greg Hughes

In "The Last Man" (1826) Mary Shelley conceived a plot device that would eventually be used by a string of writers: an apocalyptic plague that virtually wipes out the human race. From "The Last Man" would come books like "The Scarlet Plague" (1912), "Earth Abides" (1949) and "The Stand" (1978), each work taking something from its predecessor, each work written in a separate, distinctive era. The passage of time would allow writers to be more graphic in terms of aftermath, as readers became more sophisticated and less disturbed by what earlier generations would consider "horrifying".

"The Last Man" takes place in the late 21st century: a future without telephones, cars, television or computers. In fact life in the 2090s is not that different to the 1820s, apart from a few political changes (Britain is now a republic). Readers who criticized "Earth Abides" for being dated would have even more to

complain about here. Shelley could not possibly have guessed the advances, social and technological, that would take place since 1824. Therefore it's helpful for the modern reader to pretend the story is happening in an alternate 21st century, along the lines of "Pavane".

The narrator Lionel Verney spends the first third of the book describing his early life, telling us how an altruistic young man of noble stock (Adrian) took him under his wing, effectively saving him from a life of penury. Lionel and his younger sister now mix in the highest circles, the cultured world of art, literature and music (things which the working class had nothing to do with in the 1820s).

Mary Shelley's prose is formal to say the least. Containing echoes of Byron and Wordsworth, it is rich, stylish and philosophical. It is not until Part two of the novel that the plague makes its appearance. When Shelley describes the plague there is mention of bodies lying in the open and the breakdown of order, but she doesn't treat it with the kind of brutal frankness that Stephen King does in "The Stand". It does look as if King was influenced by Shelley however. Here is a quote from "The Last Man":

"The ward was filled with an effuvia that caused my heart to heave with painful qualms. The dead were carried out, and the sick brought in, with like indifference; some were screaming with pain, others laughing from the influence of more terrible delerium; some were attended by weeping, despairing relations, others called aloud with thrilling tenderness or reproach on the friends who had deserted them while the nurses went from bed to bed incarnate images of despair, neglect and death."

Here is a quote from "The Stand" one and a half centuries later:

"Wards were crammed. Patients lay on the floors. The halls were full; nurses, many of them obviously sick themselves, wove in and out, some of them weeping hysterically. Others looked shocked to the point of coma." King also adds little details like the smell of waste and the cries of the damned. While Shelley is poetic, King is direct and to the point. He was writing for an audience whose attention span has been diminished by things like television and films laden with special effects. The impatient 21st century reader may therefore find "The Last Man" more of a challenge.

Although Shelley's plague is more gradual than those of other writers, society is still crumbling. Even though extinction is in the air, the main characters still perform acts of heroism. The character Adrian has all the makings of a saint. It's just unfortunate that there will be no one left alive to canonize him. Although "The Last Man" is dated, it did pave the way for a genre that still fascinates and terrifies readers today. Mary Shelley is owed a great debt in terms of apocalyptic literature.

30 of 33 people found the following review helpful.

"The Last Man," the best of Mary Shelley's "other" works

By Lawrance Bernabo

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin Shelley published "The Last Man" in 1826, eight years after her classic "Frankenstein" and four years after her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley died. Of all of her other novels, "The Last Man" is clearly the one that is of more than passing interest. In her Journal in May of 1824 Shelley wrote: "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." The result was one of the first novels to tell a story in which the human race is destroyed by pestilence, which we have seen in novels from Richard Matheson's "I Am Legend" and Stephen King's "The Stand," and films such as the recent "28 Days Later..." However, "The Last Man" is also an early example of a dystopian novel set in the 21st century when England is a republic being governed by a ruling elite. Adrian, Earl of Windsor (and a representation of Shelley's late husband) introduces the narrator of the tale, Lionel Verney, who is the required outsider to describe and comment upon the world of the future.

Shelley's vision of the future is essentially a reaction against Romanticism and the failure of the movement to solve the problems of the world with art and imagination. This would stand in contrast to earlier English utopian works such as Francis Bacon's "The New Atlantis," which reflected the Age of Reason's belief that science would solve any and all problems. Shelley begins the story as a romance, with Lord Raymond (presumed to be modeled on Lord Byron) winning the hand of the lovely Perdita and being elected Protector.

In contrast to the dire predictions of Thomas Malthus regarding unchecked population growth resulting in mass starvation, an ideal world seems to have been created. But then the plague breaks out in Constantinople and starts spreading. This plague is grounded more in fantasy than science, with Shelley clearly relying more on Boccaccio and Defoe, for her pandemic, which is not contagious (an interesting plot choice to be sure).

The point of the plague is that it allows Shelley to show the best and the worst of human nature. When the demagogue Ryland abdicates being Lord Protector, the altruistic Adrian takes his place and makes an appeal for brotherhood, even as anarchy runs rampant in the streets and eventually the main characters are forced to flee England, which has strong parallels to the expulsion from Eden. This sets up the idea at the end of the novel that the last survivors might be able to establish an earthly paradise and rebuild the human race after the plague has disappeared. I was rather surprised that Shelley kills off her female characters because I had expectations that this would be more of a feminist work. Of course, this is because I remember who her mother was, but "The Last Man" is clearly concerned more with her late husband.

"The Last Man" was probably Mary Shelley's least successful work during her lifetime, but today, which the interest in science fiction, as well as the real world threats of biological warfare and other weapons of mass destruction, this idea of how the world ends is quite pertinent. This is clearly her most important work after "Frankenstein," although obviously we are talking about a significant gap.

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