

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

# Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*: Existentialism and IR meet the post-apocalyptic pandemic novel

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## Abstract

Mary Shelley mined the ideas of international thought to help develop three new subgenres of modern political science fiction ('poliscifi'): post-apocalyptic, existential, and dystopian. Her two great works of poliscifi, *Frankenstein* (1818), and *The Last Man* (1826) – confront the social problems that arise from humanity's technological and cultural interventions in the wider environment. This article recovers *The Last Man* not only as the first modern post-apocalyptic pandemic novel, but also as an important source for the existentialist tradition, dystopian literature, and their intersections with what I call 'Literary IR'. Comparing *The Last Man* with its probable sources and influences – from Thucydides and Vattel to Orwell and Camus – reveals Shelley's ethical and political concerns with the overlapping problems of interpersonal and international conflict. *The Last Man* dramatises how interpersonal conflict, if left unchecked, can spiral into the wider sociopolitical injustices of violence, war, and other human-made disasters such as species extinction, pandemics, and more metaphorical 'existential' plagues like loneliness and despair. Despite these dark themes and legacies, Shelley's authorship of the great plague novel of the nineteenth century also inspired a truly hopeful post-apocalyptic existential response to crisis and conflict in feminist poliscifi by Margaret Atwood, Octavia Butler, and Emily St. John Mandel.

**Keywords:** Mary Shelley; *The Last Man*; Science Fiction; International Relations; Existentialism; Pandemic; Post-Apocalyptic; Dystopian; Feminism

## Introduction

All too forgotten in the history of International Relations (IR) and political theory, Mary Shelley (1797–1851) ought to be foregrounded in the future, especially as these fields of political science grow to recognise their intersections with literature, existential philosophy, and women's intellectual work.<sup>1</sup> In this Special Issue on existentialism and IR, a number of scholars engage literature,

<sup>1</sup>Patricia Owens and Katharina Rietzler, *Women's International Thought: A New History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Samuel Moyn, *Humane: How the United States Abandoned Peace and Reinvented War* (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021); Duncan Bell, 'J. G. Ballard's surrealist liberalism', *Political Theory*, 49:6 (2021), pp. 934–67; Duncan Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race: Empire and the Utopian Destiny of Anglo-America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020); Liane Hartnett, 'Love as a practice of peace: The political theologies of Tolstoy, Gandhi and King', in Vassilios Paipais (ed.), *Theology and World Politics: International Political Theory* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Eileen Hunt Botting, *Artificial Life After Frankenstein* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), esp. ch. 2 and Coda; Duncan Bell, 'Pragmatism and prophecy: H. G. Wells and the metaphysics of socialism', *American Political Science Review*, 112:2 (2018), pp. 409–22; Duncan Bell, 'Founding the world state: H. G. Wells on empire and the English-speaking peoples', *International Studies Quarterly*, 62:4 (2018), pp. 867–79; Eileen Hunt Botting, *Mary Shelley and the Rights of the Child: Political Philosophy in 'Frankenstein'* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania

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both 'liminal' and canonical, as a source or 'site' of political thought.<sup>2</sup> This extends a trend in mainstream IR scholarship, which has widened to consider literature and its relation to political thought.<sup>3</sup> This literary trend in mainstream IR arguably began in the aftermath of the First World War, when the Belgian playwright Émile Cammaerts argued in a 1922 article titled 'Literature and International Relations' that 'the artists and the writers who have been able, through their genius, to make their national temperament better known and better appreciated all over the world, are perhaps the first pioneers of a League of Nations.'<sup>4</sup>

By folding Mary Shelley's futuristic war and pandemic novel *The Last Man* (1826) into the history of IR, this article contributes to a renewed literary movement at the forefront of contemporary IR. While this school of thought – which I label 'Literary IR' – is just coming to be recognised as a distinct hermeneutical approach in political science and political theory, it has deep yet unsung historical roots, as this study of Shelley's novel *The Last Man* and its IR sources and existential legacies demonstrates. This insight into the long-range evolution of Literary IR – from Thucydides to COVID-19 – is one of the realisations that follows from examining the philosophical relationship between IR and existentialism in the political thought and plague literature of Mary Shelley.

### Mary Shelley, Literary IR, and political science fiction

For her part in this process of developing Literary IR, Shelley creatively mined the ideas of international political thought as well as the themes of plague literature, the epic, the romance, and the gothic novel to help develop three new subgenres of modern science fiction (SF): post-apocalyptic, existential, and dystopian literature. From this *mélange* of literary forms arose her two SF masterpieces – *Frankenstein* (1818) and *The Last Man* (1826). These works prove to be more 'political science fictions' than 'hard science fictions', for they are broadly concerned with tracing the often-harmful impact of human artifice on the whole world across families, societies, species, and nations.<sup>5</sup> Unlike later 'hard science fiction' by Isaac Asimov and others

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Press, 2017), esp. chs 2–4; Emma Planinc, 'Catching up with Wells: The political theory of H. G. Wells's science fiction', *Political Theory*, 45:5 (2017), pp. 637–58; Kate McLoughlin, *Authoring War: The Literary Representation of War from the Iliad to Iraq* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011); James Dawes, *The Language of War: Literature and Culture in the U.S. from the Civil War Through World War II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Paul Sheeran, *Literature and International Relations: Stories in the Art of Diplomacy* (London, UK: Routledge, 2007); Paul Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Traveling between the Wars* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1982).

<sup>2</sup>Liane Hartnett argued in her 2018 international relations dissertation that 'liminal' literature (written by now-canonised thinkers such as Tolstoy, Tagore, and Camus) has been a productive site for fresh and rebellious, pacific and anti-imperial ideas on the role of love in international relations. See Liane Hartnett, 'Love in a Time of Empire: An Engagement with the Political Thought of Tolstoy, Tagore, and Camus' (PhD, London School of Economics, 2018). See also Hartnett, 'Love as a practice of peace: The political theologies of Tolstoy, Gandhi and King'; Liane Hartnett and Or Rosenboim, 'Historical international relations and international political thought', in Benjamin de Carvalho, Julia Costa Lopez, and Halvard Leira (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Historical International Relations* (London, UK: Routledge, 2021); Maša Mrovlje, 'Beyond Nussbaum's ethics of reading: Camus, Arendt and the political significance of narrative imagination', *The European Legacy*, 24:2 (2019), pp. 162–80; Maša Mrovlje, *Rethinking Political Judgement: Arendt and Existentialism* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

<sup>3</sup>Bell, *Dreamworlds of Race*; Sungju Park-Kang, *Fictional International Relations: Gender, Pain, and Truth* (London, UK: Routledge, 2019); Julia Welland, 'Joy and war: Reading pleasure in wartime experience', *Review of International Studies*, 44:3 (2018), pp. 438–455; Elizabeth Dauphinee, *The Politics of Exile: Interventions* (London, UK: Routledge, 2013); Maja Zehfuss, *Wounds of Memory: The Politics of War in Germany* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Annick T. R. Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach* (London, UK: Routledge, 2011); Emma Hutchison, 'Unsettling stories: Jeanette Winterson and the cultivation of political contingency', *Global Society*, 24:3 (2010), pp. 351–68; Roland Bleiker, *Aesthetics and World Politics* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

<sup>4</sup>Émile Cammaerts, 'Literature and International Relations', *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 70:3608 (1922), pp. 161–7 (pp. 166–7).

<sup>5</sup>Hunt Botting, *Artificial Life After Frankenstein*, pp. 2–5; Gary Westfahl, *Cosmic Engineers: A Study of Hard Science Fiction* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996).

that uses consistent scientific or mathematical reasoning to predict the consequences of making mechanised weapons, robots, spaceships, imperial galactic societies, and other forms of human artifice, Shelley's political SF is neither solely nor primarily concerned with rigorously extrapolating the future of technology and human society from present-day engineering inventions and scientific theories.<sup>6</sup>

*Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* are rather concerned with delineating the tragic emotions and unjust social consequences associated with the repeated human failure to make peace, share love, and care for others and the world at large. The gothic and domestic horror of *Frankenstein* arises from the destructive passion of a chemist who uses science and technology to create a 'human being' without caring for it.<sup>7</sup> The existential and global terror of *The Last Man* derives from its slow and devastating exploration of the personal and political betrayals that exacerbate war, corruption, and a plague that appears to leave one lone human survivor, who lives to write the 'history' of the near extinction of his species.<sup>8</sup>

Interpersonal and international conflicts, much more than science and technology, serve as plot devices for advancing the existential and post-apocalyptic themes of Shelley's classics of 'polisifi'.<sup>9</sup> By existential, I mean the contemplation of the meaning of life and death and their relation to the formation of personal and communal identities. By post-apocalyptic, I mean speculation on the aftermath of a devastating catastrophe that poses an existential (life-endangering) threat to a person, community, or species.

Shelley's polisifi novels thematically represent the existential threat of death, abuse, war, and other catastrophes as surfacing in fraught familial and romantic relationships and spreading swiftly through and across cultures, states, and empires, like a 'scourge', 'pest', or 'PLAGUE'.<sup>10</sup> The escalating parent-child conflict between Victor Frankenstein and his abandoned creature leads to the death of virtually everyone in his clan. The pestilential battlefields of a centuries-long war between Greece and Turkey spawn a lethal 'epidemic' that leaves Verney, the titular 'LAST MAN', alone amid the ruins of Rome to contemplate the future of humanity and the possibility of its extinction.<sup>11</sup> With her relentless focus on the deeper emotional conflicts that cause tragedy, injustice, and the annihilation of life itself, Shelley foregrounded the social and political problems associated with humanity's selfish, careless, and violent interventions in their wider environment.

Both *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man* are modern post-apocalyptic myths, in the sense that they use widely resonant allegories to envision the aftermath of human-made catastrophes.<sup>12</sup> Frankenstein's gigantic creature is a hulking metaphor for humanity's monstrous potential for self-and-other destruction. The war-driven epidemic of *The Last Man* is likewise a metaphor, writ even larger, for humanity's failure to contain its self-destructive behaviour even unto its own extinction. In Shelley's first novel, a man-made creature turns murderous in his quest for vengeance against his neglectful father-scientist. In her third published novel, a seasonal plague in Constantinople grows into a pandemic as domestic and international conflict circulates the airborne pathogen across borders and oceans through trade, travel, and war.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Westfahl, *Cosmic Engineers*, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup>Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: The 1818 Text, Contexts, Criticism*, ed. J. Paul Hunter (W. W. Norton & Company, 2012), p. 33.

<sup>8</sup>Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, ed. Jane Blumberg with Nora Crook, in vol. 4, *The Novels and Selected Works of Mary Shelley*, general editor Nora Crook with Pamela Clemit, consulting editor Betty T. Bennett (London, UK: Pickering & Chatto, 2001 [orig. pub. 1996]), p. 362.

<sup>9</sup>Hunt Botting, *Artificial Life After Frankenstein*, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup>Shelley, *Frankenstein*, pp. 69, 119; Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 176.

<sup>11</sup>Shelley, *The Last Man*, pp. 183, 362.

<sup>12</sup>Hunt Botting, *Artificial Life After Frankenstein*, pp. 4, 43; Philip Ball, *The Modern Myths: Adventures in the Machinery of the Popular Imagination* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2021), p. 70.

<sup>13</sup>Peter Melville, *Romantic Hospitality and the Resistance to Accommodation* (Waterloo, Ontario, Can.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007), pp. 155–6.

Although *Frankenstein* is far better known and studied, it was *The Last Man* that contributed to the philosophical traditions we now associate with post-apocalyptic, existential, and dystopian literature. By dystopian, I mean the opposite of utopian. Utopian literature depicts an ethical, social, or political ideal that is not yet realised. Utopia is Saint Thomas More's neologism, combining the Greek words 'οὐ' (not) and 'τόπος' (place), meaning 'nowhere'.<sup>14</sup> Dystopian literature pictures the reverse image of utopia. As Margaret Atwood has argued from a liberal perspective, dystopias 'warn' readers of what to avoid if they want to preserve freedom, peace, rights, happiness, and justice from attempts at tyranny, conquest, and oppression.<sup>15</sup> *The Last Man* hybridises existential and post-apocalyptic themes in its dystopian vision of a late twenty-first-century Earth where even the world's leading republics of England and the 'Northern States of America' crumble under the pressure of a war-spurred pandemic.<sup>16</sup>

Though most strongly associated with George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), dystopian literature has roots in Shelley's polisifi.<sup>17</sup> Orwell originally titled *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, 'The Last Man in Europe', and represented its hero, Winston Smith, as 'the last man' in London to resist the contagion of totalitarian ideology disseminated by the all-seeing imperial regime of Big Brother.<sup>18</sup> A fan of gothic and SF literature since childhood, Orwell praised Mary Shelley in his 1944 review of *English Diaries of the Nineteenth Century*, and then, as we shall see, used strikingly similar language as this 1944 book's reprinting of her journal's May 1824 entry on 'the last man' in the torture scene of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.<sup>19</sup>

Atwood grew up reading Orwell and Shelley, and titled one of her first collections of poetry, 'Speeches for Doctor Frankenstein' (1966).<sup>20</sup> She set *The Handmaid's Tale* (and its 2019 sequel, *The Testaments*) in a post-apocalyptic North America of the early twenty-first century. An epidemic of infertility – caused by sexually-transmitted disease, the seeping of toxic waste into the environment, and the spread of political and sexual corruption in Western capitalist society – leads to a *coup d'état* of the United States by a fundamentalist Christian terrorist organisation that seeks to restore female fertility by forcing a sector of women to serve as sexual slaves and surrogates for the military commanders and their wives.

Like any myth, ancient or modern, one recognises the story of *The Last Man* before even reading it. This is due to the symbolic resonance and vast cultural influence of its central figure: the 'last known survivor' of a massive existential threat like a postwar plague.<sup>21</sup> The cultural canonisation of Shelley's story has been accomplished largely through its adaptation into two important post-apocalyptic plague novels, M. P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901) and Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954).<sup>22</sup> Shiel's novel is notable for introducing a recurring comic and romantic twist to the tragedy, wherein the seeming last man meets and falls in love with the apparent last woman.

Shelley's and Shiel's novels were also successfully translated for the screen and stage, beginning with a comic silent movie and Broadway musical *The Last Man on Earth* (1924) and extending to the Hollywood doomsday film *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil* (1959) starring Harry

<sup>14</sup>Thomas More, *Utopia*, eds George Logan and Robert Adams (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>15</sup>Margaret Atwood, 'Margaret Atwood: Covid-19 lockdown is not a dystopia', *The Guardian* (16 April 2020).

<sup>16</sup>Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 190.

<sup>17</sup>George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, ed. John Bowen (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021); Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale and the Testaments Box Set* (Toronto, Ontario, Can.: McClelland & Stewart, 2020).

<sup>18</sup>Dennis Glover, *The Last Man in Europe* (Melbourne, Aus., Black Inc., 2017); Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 212.

<sup>19</sup>George Orwell, 'Review of English diaries of the nineteenth century', *Manchester Evening News* (28 July 1944).

<sup>20</sup>Margaret Atwood, *Speeches for Doctor Frankenstein* (1966).

<sup>21</sup>'Survivor – Eye Of The Tiger Lyrics | Lyrics.Com', available at: {<https://www.lyrics.com/lyric/958332/Survivor/Eye+of+the+Tiger>} accessed 27 October 2021.

<sup>22</sup>M. P. Shiel, *The Purple Cloud* (Lulu.com, 2014); Richard Matheson, *I Am Legend* (New York, NY: Rosetta Books, 2011).

Belafonte.<sup>23</sup> But it was Matheson's novel about the 'last man in the world' to survive a vampire plague that has secured the ongoing reception of the last man trope in contemporary SF and horror literature, cinema, and television.<sup>24</sup> After its initial filmic adaptation as *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), starring Vincent Price, Matheson's version of the last man narrative begot *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *28 Days Later* (2002), *I Am Legend* (2007), and countless post-nuclear, pandemic, and zombie apocalypse movies and television series after them.<sup>25</sup>

### The Last Man theme in post-apocalyptic, dystopian, and existential political thought

While the literary legacy of *The Last Man* has been woven into popular culture, the novel's significance for philosophy and political thought has only begun to be charted. In the era of COVID-19, *The Last Man* has been recovered as the first major modern post-apocalyptic pandemic novel.<sup>26</sup> Here I foreground it as a vital literary and philosophical source for existentialism and its intersections with international political thought and dystopian literature. Comparing *The Last Man* with its probable sources and influences – from Thucydides, Hobbes, Vattel, and Voltaire to Stoker, Wells, Orwell, Camus, and Atwood – reveals Shelley's ethical and political concerns with the overlapping problems of interpersonal and international conflict. *The Last Man* dramatises how interpersonal conflict, if left unchecked, will spiral into the wider social and political injustices of violence, war, and other human-made disasters such as species extinction, pandemics, and a range of metaphorical existential plagues upon humanity such as loneliness and despair.

Despite these dark themes, Mary Shelley's authorship of *The Last Man* led to the development of a hopeful, post-apocalyptic existential response to the interlocking problems of interpersonal and international conflict. This future-oriented tradition of international political thought has aimed to rise above a pair of fatalistic fallacies: first, the metaphysical or existential belief that there is nothing after (or *post*) apocalypse, since extreme catastrophes may seem to bring to those who suffer them a final stop or absolute end to a state of human affairs; and secondly, following from this bleak premise, the nihilistic view that there is nothing to be done in the face of total war and other human-made apocalyptic disasters. Apocalypse, from this pessimistic perspective, is death without end.

By contrast, the post-apocalyptic tradition after Shelley returns apocalypse to its original meaning in ancient Greek (ἀποκάλυψις): a 'revelation' or 'uncovering'.<sup>27</sup> In this Shelleyan tradition of post-apocalyptic political thought, it suggests the unveiling of a new way of life *after* personal or collective disaster. Shelley's dark yet ultimately hopeful vision of the future has shaped the aesthetic behind modern existential, post-apocalyptic, and dystopian fiction and philosophy, from Dostoevsky and Nietzsche, to Orwell and Camus, to Octavia Butler and Emily St. John Mandel. She and her followers in feminist SF – especially Atwood, Butler, and Mandel – have created a vital imaginative space for thinking about how personal change in response to conflict and disaster can lead to global change towards diplomacy, justice, peace, and a new cosmopolitan world order.

<sup>23</sup>Aram Goudsouzian, *Sidney Poitier: Man, Actor, Icon* (Chapel, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); American Film Institute, *The American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of California Press, 1997); Amy J. Ransom, *I Am Legend as American Myth: Race and Masculinity in the Novel and Its Film Adaptations* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018).

<sup>24</sup>Matheson, *I Am Legend*, kindle edn, loc. 988.

<sup>25</sup>Ransom, *I Am Legend as American Myth*.

<sup>26</sup>Hunt Botting, *Artificial Life After Frankenstein*; Eileen Hunt Botting, 'Opinion | Mary Shelley created *Frankenstein*, and then a pandemic', *The New York Times*, Opinion section (13 March 2020).

<sup>27</sup>Alison McQueen, *Political Realism in Apocalyptic Times* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 23; Hunt Botting, *Artificial Life After Frankenstein*, p. 54.

Post-apocalyptic political thought in this feminist vein offers a more hopeful and futuristic alternative to the pessimistic, absurdist, and nihilistic elements of canonical (and men-dominant) existentialisms, typically associated with Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus. We need more feminist and literary approaches to addressing existential questions in poliscifi to save the concept of apocalypse from its reduction to mere annihilation and catastrophe. By adding the aporetic prefix ‘post-’ to ‘apocalypse’, we join Shelley, Atwood, Butler, and Mandel in making room in Literary IR for the theorisation – or imaginative revelation – of new political futures *after* man-made disasters. On this Shelleyan and feminist reading of the original Greek, apocalypse is never the end, but rather is always the beginning.

### ***The Last Man*: A novel in ideas of international political thought**

The daughter of two political philosophers, the anarchist William Godwin and the women’s rights and abolition advocate Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley was raised by her father to debate over the dinner table the epistemological and educational ideas of Locke, Rousseau, and her late mother, who had tragically died from sepsis after giving birth to her.<sup>28</sup> Immersed from the very onset of life in the ideas of the Western tradition and particularly the European Enlightenment, Shelley saturated the story of her pandemic novel with the themes of international and global political thought from Thucydides and the Bible to Hobbes, Voltaire, Vattel, and Burke.

As a *roman à clef* – or allegorical study of the author’s life story – *The Last Man* is best understood as a novel ‘in ideas’ instead of a novel ‘of ideas’.<sup>29</sup> The plot of Shelley’s global plague novel is driven by the political philosophies that she debated first with her father and later with her lover and husband the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley. But the novel, like *Frankenstein*, is not a mere ideological vehicle for the transmission of other writers’ ideas.<sup>30</sup> It is rather that her dystopian novel questions and dissects these received ideas from the Western tradition to reveal a new, utopian, cosmopolitan understanding of what world politics could and should be in the future.

Soon after the sixteen-year-old Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin eloped to Europe in the summer of 1814 with the unhappily married poet Percy Shelley, she noted in her journal that he read Thucydides.<sup>31</sup> Perhaps his interest in the *History of the Peloponnesian War* arose from the couple’s recent trek through war-torn France, where whole towns had been razed by the invading forces of Russia during the last year of the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>32</sup> Since Mary kept an annual notation of her and Percy’s reading in her journals, it is possible that they discussed Thucydides together or that she read the Greek historian but forgot to record it on the day or at year’s end. What is certain is that *The Last Man* alluded to Thucydides’ famous account of the Plague of Athens: Verney notes with worry the arrival of the ‘plague at Athens’ after it leaves the battlefields near Constantinople via trade, travel, and military routes.<sup>33</sup>

In 430 BCE, after the Athenian general Pericles ordered the masses to hide behind the city walls from the invading Spartans, he unwittingly sealed them up with the plague brought into the city-state through its busy trading and naval port. About 100,000 people – a quarter of the population – suffered reddening fever, stertorous breathing, and maddeningly painful deaths

<sup>28</sup>Charlotte Gordon, *Romantic Outlaws: The Extraordinary Lives of Mary Wollstonecraft & Mary Shelley* (New York, NY: Random House, 2016), p. 33.

<sup>29</sup>David Armitage, *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

<sup>30</sup>Hunt Botting, *Mary Shelley and the Rights of the Child*.

<sup>31</sup>Mary Shelley, *The Journals of Mary Shelley, 1814–1844*, eds Paula R. Feldman and Diana Scott-Kilvert (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1987), vol. 1, 93.

<sup>32</sup>Mary Shelley, *History of a Six Weeks’ Tour* (London, UK: T. Hookham, 1817).

<sup>33</sup>Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, ed. P. J. Rhodes, trans. Martin Hammond (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2009); Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 176.

because of this military strategy.<sup>34</sup> Mary Shelley, it seems, derived a political lesson from Thucydides' account of the Plague of Athens, which she dramatised in *The Last Man*: bad political ideas and poor leadership decisions based on them make for fatal public policies in times of war and other crisis. Like H. D. in Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), Verney watches with anxiety as the plague sweeps into England from southern France, due to the failure of leaders in either country to prepare to stop it through suspension of trade, travel, military campaigns, and other politically institutionalised modes of disease transmission.<sup>35</sup> Set in the 2090s, her futuristic pandemic ultimately levels France, England, and all the world's other nations, enacting the war-driven political tragedy of the plague of Athens on a global scale.

Foreshadowing the insights of Derrida and his deconstructive philosophy, Shelley used the idea of 'plague' more as a loose, figurative concept than as a fixed, literal disease.<sup>36</sup> Tellingly, the plague does not even appear until about halfway through the novel. When Verney recalls that it arose in the war between Greece and Turkey, he renders 'PLAGUE' in all capital letters.<sup>37</sup> As Verney leads readers to comprehend his extraordinary existential predicament as the ostensible last man on Earth, 'PLAGUE' functions more as a capacious symbol of varieties of human-made destruction than as an actual pathogen. By keeping it mysterious whether its mode of infection was airborne, 'contagious' by physical contact, or both, Shelley refrained from defining 'PLAGUE' as a specific disease.<sup>38</sup> This omission is significant, given that she had a series of tragic experiences with the scourge of infectious disease. Three children she bore or cared for had died of dysentery, malaria, and typhus, while she and Percy lived in Italy between 1818 and 1822.<sup>39</sup> Then tragedy struck again when Percy died at the age of 29 in a sailing accident off the coast of Tuscany.

Perhaps because of the immensity of these losses, Shelley conceptualised 'PLAGUE' as an existential abyss: a bottomless sign for catastrophes. The introduction of the word midway through the novel marks its transition from a romantic epic, set at the exotic locations of Windsor Castle and Constantinople, into a speculative dystopian fiction about the failure of the world's governments to contain a novel and lethal epidemic. This abrupt change in genre provokes in the mind of the reader a deconstructive philosophical process of unmaking, or breaking down, the prevailing meanings of a cascade of synonyms for disaster: war, conflict, contagion, corruption, hardship, disease, deprivation, and death. As the godlike author of the first novel to chronicle the global spread of a species-decimating pandemic, Shelley leads readers to see how the plague *unmakes* world leaders' bad political ideas and policies, revealing their tragic flaws as people and governments. This unmaking of a severely defective (or dystopian) world order uncovers the need to find new (or utopian) ways of making connections and communities on Earth. Shelley's political science fiction paradoxically reveals how critical analysis of the concept of disaster points the way towards overcoming it.

A studious reader of the Bible, Shelley revised the sacred story of Noah's ark in the final scene of *The Last Man*, while giving the ancient Hebrew myth a distinctively modern existential and post-apocalyptic twist.<sup>40</sup> In her fictional version of life after a flood of pestilence, the last man Verney sets out to sea – with his dog and the works of Homer and Shakespeare as his only

<sup>34</sup>Chris Mackie, 'Thucydides and the Plague of Athens: What it can teach us now', *The Conversation* (19 March 2020); Eileen Hunt Botting, 'The politics of epidemics, from Thucydides to Mary Shelley to COVID-19', *Current History*, 120:822 (1 January 2021), pp. 35–7.

<sup>35</sup>Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (London, UK: E. Nutt, 1722).

<sup>36</sup>Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (London, UK: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>37</sup>Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 139.

<sup>38</sup>Peter Melville, *Romantic Hospitality and the Resistance to Accommodation* (Waterloo, Ontario, Can.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2007); Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 183.

<sup>39</sup>Hunt Botting, 'The politics of epidemics, from Thucydides to Mary Shelley to COVID-19'.

<sup>40</sup>Hunt Botting, *Artificial Life After Frankenstein*, p. 51.

companions – in search of other survivors.<sup>41</sup> He surmises that people, perhaps a ‘saved pair of lovers’ like Adam and Eve, must be safe in some remote location on Earth.<sup>42</sup> Once he finds them, he thinks, there might be the start of a new Edenic society that preserves the best of human culture (compassion, companionship, literature) and discards the worst (the plagues of war and other man-made conflicts). The plague’s unmaking of the global impact of war and imperialism leads, paradoxically, to Verney’s remaking of the imaginative conditions for love, hope, renewal, and even the prospect of a cosmopolitan peace.

Beginning with their joint devotion to Wollstonecraft and Godwin’s progressive political ideas, the Shelleys became experts on the history of Enlightenment political thought from Hobbes to Kant.<sup>43</sup> They bought a copy of the 1816 French translation of Johann Gottlieb Buhle’s *Histoire de la philosophie moderne* while they lived in Geneva that same year.<sup>44</sup> Buhle provided a lengthy summary of the international political thought of the Swiss political theorist and diplomat Emer de Vattel and its relationship to the earlier work on the law of nations by Wolff, Hobbes, Pufendorf, and Grotius. His 1758 treatise *Le Droit des Gens* (*The Law of Nations*) was quickly translated into English.<sup>45</sup> It was well known on both sides of the Atlantic for its contributions to just war theory and the idea of a diplomatic peace achieved through the cross-cultural and international leadership of ‘ambassadors’.<sup>46</sup>

Vattel gained fame for defending the right of small nations to exist independently from more powerful states and empires. While he advanced a diplomatic and pacific view of the realisation of international cooperation across sovereign nations, Vattel justified the intervention of more powerful states on behalf of less powerful ones vulnerable to conquest. When they read *Le Droit des Gens* during the 1775 Continental Congress, American revolutionaries led by Benjamin Franklin found a two-fold model for a modern international practice of independent statehood: first, political leaders must show respect for the equal sovereignty of nations; and secondly, they must develop diplomatic alliances against imperial conquest and for international cooperation.<sup>47</sup>

Vattel’s *Le Droit des Gens*, with its final five chapters devoted to the theory and practice of ambassadorship, is the most proximate source in international political thought for Shelley’s depiction of Verney as an ‘ambassador’.<sup>48</sup> Born a shepherd boy in the north of the republic of England, Verney befriends the dethroned royal family near their country estate in the 2070s. Adrian, the former prince turned republican political leader, sends him to Vienna to train as a diplomat, as ‘private secretary to the Ambassador’.<sup>49</sup> After two years of diplomatic service abroad,

<sup>41</sup>Hilary Strang, ‘Common life, animal life, equality: *The Last Man*’, *English Literary History*, 78:2 (2011), pp. 409–31.

<sup>42</sup>Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 362.

<sup>43</sup>Hunt Botting, *Mary Shelley and the Rights of the Child*.

<sup>44</sup>Johann Gottlieb Buhle, *Histoire De La Philosophie Moderne, Depuis La Renaissance Des Lettres Jusqu’à Kant* (Paris: F. I. Fournier, 1816); ‘Archives.Nypl.Org: Manuscript Lists of Books from the Library of Percy Bysshe Shelley’, available at: <https://archives.nypl.org/cps/22404> accessed 1 December 2021.

<sup>45</sup>Emer de Vattel, *The Law of Nations: Or, Principles of the Law of Nature, Applied to the Conduct and Affairs of Nations and Sovereigns* (Philadelphia, PA: T. & J. W. Johnson, 1844).

<sup>46</sup>Vattel, *The Law of Nations*, pp. 452–500; Simone Zurbuchen, ‘Vattel’s law of nations and just war theory’, *History of European Ideas*, 35:4 (1 December 2009), pp. 408–17; David Armitage, ‘The contagion of sovereignty: Declarations of independence since 1776’, *South African Historical Journal*, 52:1 (1 January 2005), pp. 1–18; David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

<sup>47</sup>Richard H. Helmholz, ‘Use of the civil law in post-Revolutionary American jurisprudence’, *Tulane Law Review*, 66 (1992), pp. 1649–84; Ben Holland, ‘The moral person of the state: Emer de Vattel and the foundations of international legal order’, *History of European Ideas*, 37:4 (2011), pp. 438–45; F. S. Ruddy, ‘International law and the Enlightenment: Vattel and the 18th century’, *International Lawyer*, 3:4 (1 January 1969), pp. 839–58; Isaac Nakhimovsky, ‘Vattel’s theory of the international order: Commerce and the balance of power in the law of nations’, *History of European Ideas*, 33:2 (1 June 2007), pp. 157–73.

<sup>48</sup>Vattel, *The Law of Nations*, pp. 452–500; Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 31.

<sup>49</sup>Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 31.

Verney returns to the court circle at Windsor Castle, with ‘a reputation already founded’, to serve his lifelong friend Adrian in his political career guiding the fledgling republic of England from a monarchical past into a democratic future.<sup>50</sup>

Also in Adrian’s court is Evadne, a Greek princess and daughter of the Greek ambassador to England. In imagining an international diplomatic circle at Windsor Castle, Shelley likely took inspiration from her friendship with Alexandros Mavrokordatos, the Greek prince, diplomat, and leader of the 1821 Greek War of Independence from Ottoman rule. During the 1810s, Mavrokordatos lived in exile from his homeland in the court of his uncle, the prince of Wallachia, then was educated at Padua in the Austrian Empire before he befriended and resided with the Shelleys at Pisa in 1820–1, when he tutored Mary in ancient Greek.<sup>51</sup>

Beyond the example of Mavrokordatos’s diplomatic career, Vattel’s philosophy of ambassadorship as the art of forging ‘friendship’ between nations likely shaped her characterisation of Verney as a peacemaker.<sup>52</sup> Verney’s life as a diplomat and citizen of the world begins with his friendship with Adrian and extends to shaping ‘friendship’ in all domains of life: from the romantic relationships of their court circle, to the battlefields of Constantinople, to the English government’s pandemic response in London, to aiding the remnant of plague survivors in France and Italy.<sup>53</sup>

The Shelleys likely encountered Vattel through Buhle, even though they probably bought his six-volume history of modern philosophy in Switzerland to learn more about Kant. Buhl provided a lengthy summary of his late eighteenth-century German contemporary Kant’s three *Critiques*, which elaborate his epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics.<sup>54</sup> Buhle did not summarise Kant’s political writings, however, including his utopian theory of a cosmopolitan peace achieved through a world federation of free republics. According to Kant’s theory of ‘perpetual peace’, these republics would be united not as a world state, but through mutual regard of their sovereign independence from one another.<sup>55</sup> In this and other political essays from the French revolutionary era, Kant argued that an essential feature of a free modern constitutional republic was to respect the ‘universal right of humanity’ or ‘cosmopolitan right’ of citizens, whether they were from one’s own country or another nation.<sup>56</sup> In his 1795 essay on perpetual peace, Kant favourably placed Vattel among the ‘sorry comforters’ of modern theories of international law: for he was a harbinger of an optimistic (though perhaps impractical) cosmopolitan philosophy of ‘universal hospitality’ towards fellow citizens of sovereign republics and the world itself.<sup>57</sup>

Because Mary did not record in her journals her or Percy’s reading of Kant’s political writings, it is more likely that the cosmopolitan and diplomatic themes of *The Last Man* are rooted in her exposure to Vattel and other French-Swiss cosmopolitan writers than Kant. Another Francophone writer with ties to Geneva and Switzerland who may have inspired the character of Verney is Voltaire. Mary noted in her journals that she read Voltaire’s *Memoires*, his ‘romans’, and his ‘Essay on Nations’ between 1815 and 1816.<sup>58</sup> From the 1769 *Memoires* and her own extensive travels around Geneva, she would have known that Voltaire left the city-state for Ferney in 1759, just across the border in France, to protest the Swiss republic’s ban on theatre.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Gordon, *Romantic Outlaws*, p. 376; Roderick Beaton, *Byron’s War: Romantic Rebellion, Greek Revolution* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 70.

<sup>52</sup>Vattel, *The Law of Nations*, p. 139.

<sup>53</sup>Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 26.

<sup>54</sup>Buhle, *Histoire De La Philosophie Moderne, Depuis La Renaissance Des Lettres Jusqu’à Kant*, tome sixieme, pp. 216–19.

<sup>55</sup>Immanuel Kant, *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 106.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., pp. 106, 126.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., pp. 103, 105.

<sup>58</sup>Shelley, *Journals*, vol. I, pp. 37, 76, 94.

Voltaire's fame in Ferney, and his liberal support of the theatre, arts, and industry there, led the town to rename itself Ferney-Voltaire in 1791.<sup>59</sup>

The close match between the unusual surname Verney and Ferney-Voltaire suggests that Shelley may have wanted to associate the Voltairean town's avant-garde culture with the character of the 'LAST MAN'. Voltaire's riotously funny novel *Candide* (1759) – a satire of Rousseau's optimistic belief in providence even after the massive, human-exacerbated disaster of the 1755 Lisbon Earthquake – may have inspired the dark humor of Verney, who says he will 'sit amidst the ruins and smile' despite the very real possibility of human extinction.<sup>60</sup> Voltaire's anti-imperial, anti-slavery, and anti-church writings share *The Last Man's* concern with the realisation of true personal and political independence in opposition to past forms of religious and secular oppression. When he bravely strikes out to sea in search of other survivors, with Shakespeare, Homer, and his dog in tow, Verney evokes Voltaire's quixotic quest for a cosmopolitan conception of citizenship and independence, unlimited by national or religious roots, yet supported by love of the arts and compassion for others.<sup>61</sup>

In the biographical allegory of *The Last Man*, Adrian stands for Percy and Verney for Mary.<sup>62</sup> Following the political ideas of Percy's 'Declaration of Rights' (1812), 'The Mask of Anarchy' (1819), and 'A Philosophical View of Reform' (1819–20), Adrian is the radical visionary of peace made through non-violent protest of oppression, modern representative republican government, and enfranchisement of the poor.<sup>63</sup> Mary/Verney take this radical vision of peace and justice and go global and existential with it. Despite being the last (wo)man left alone after losing everyone s/he loves, s/he finds a way to make peace with the world in all its darkness, by summoning hope for the preservation of a new way of life on Earth, even if the human species faces almost certain extinction.

Like Vattel, Verney/Mary deduces that there are universal 'offices of humanity' that extend beyond particular duties to care for and preserve one's own family, culture, and nation.<sup>64</sup> Vattel went so far as to argue that 'every nation is obliged to cultivate the friendship of other nations.'<sup>65</sup> He defined 'real friendship' – whether between individuals or nations – as a 'happy state' that 'consists in mutual affection'.<sup>66</sup> Verney/Mary takes this argument about the duty to cultivate friendships one step further. Once they existentially identify as 'THE LAST MAN' while writing down their strange life history, they extend Vattel's cosmopolitan ethic of friendship to other species. As he prepares for his journey towards the coast of Africa to seek other survivors, Verney keeps a mutt as his sole living animal companion and gives up hunting in favour of eating dried corn from granaries.

After the apocalyptic flood of plague, Mary's avatar Verney is the modern existential Noah, setting sail towards an uncharted horizon of humanity with his dog and his books. What is left for him is the possibility of bridging a Voltairean cosmopolitan citizenship with a Vattelian friendship with the whole creation in an 'international society' yet to be built.<sup>67</sup> This

<sup>59</sup>George Keate, *Ferney: An Epistle to Monsr. de Voltaire* (London, UK: J. Dodsley, 1768); 'History of Voltaire's Château', Centre des monuments nationaux, available at: {<https://www.chateau-ferney-voltaire.fr/en/Explore/Chateau-de-Voltaire/History-of-Voltaire-s-Chateau>} accessed 28 October 2021.

<sup>60</sup>Voltaire, *Candide, ou, L'optimisme* (Paris: Delarue, 1877); Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 310.

<sup>61</sup>Ruddy, 'International law and the Enlightenment'.

<sup>62</sup>Catherine Redford, "'The till now unseen object of my mad idolatry': The presence of Jane Williams in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*", *Romanticism (Edinburgh)*, 19:1 (2013), pp. 89–99; Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, ed. Morton D. Paley, World's Classics (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. xxi.

<sup>63</sup>Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Shelley's Declaration of Rights* (London, UK: Whittingham and Wilkins, 1868); Percy Bysshe Shelley, *The Masque of Anarchy: A Poem* (London, UK: Shelley Society, 1892); Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Philosophical View of Reform ... with an Introduction and Appendix by T. W. Rolleston* (London, UK: H. Milford, 1920).

<sup>64</sup>Vattel, *The Law of Nations*, p. 134.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., p. 132.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>67</sup>Ruddy, 'International law and the Enlightenment', pp. 845, 858.

post-apocalyptic hybridisation of Voltaire and Vattel would entail a cosmic solidarity with and compassion for the world itself – what it was, what it is, and what it will be. In a reflection on the meaning of life and death near the end of his ‘HISTORY OF THE LAST MAN’, Verney articulates this epiphany: human beings inevitably die, and may even become ‘extinct’, but ‘humanity’ understood as humaneness need not, and must not, be extinguished, if his life as a human is to ultimately have ethical meaning.<sup>68</sup> By reconceiving the meaning of humanity after apocalypse, Verney paves the way for understanding humaneness or genuine compassion as *post-human*: for it arrives after the Anthropocene, yet in time to save the world from human-made destruction.

Mary, like her father Godwin, was a devoted reader of Burke, who was influenced by Vattel’s philosophy of international law. A Member of Parliament who prosecuted Warren Hastings for his crimes against the indigenous peoples of British India, Burke took seriously the Vattelian idea that the law of nations justified states’ intervention on behalf of oppressed peoples against their tyrants.<sup>69</sup> In *The Last Man*, Shelley has the diplomat Verney quote or adapt the words of Burke on several occasions, reaffirming the wisdom of his pacific and optimistic views on being a good leader through following others, and on the persistence of the best of human culture even after war and other attempts to destroy it.<sup>70</sup>

Godwin’s *Political Justice* (1793) alluded to Burke’s traditionalist view of social life as people’s membership in ‘little platoons’, or small class-based communities, but took it in a radically anarchistic political direction.<sup>71</sup> In Godwin’s theory of the ideal, or ultra-minimal, state, people would live most freely and ethically in families and other small social units. Citizens would only come together occasionally to work out essential matters of over-arching government in localised representative bodies before returning to daily life in their little platoons.<sup>72</sup>

Godwin represented this anarchist vision of peaceful social life with minimal government as a critical retort to Hobbes’s pessimistic vision of a violent state of nature without government. Based on his experience of the English civil wars, Hobbes famously theorised in *Leviathan* (1651) that the lack of a sovereign with sufficient power to enforce the law would inevitably entail the dissolution of society and government into a state of war of each against all.<sup>73</sup> A good pupil of Locke, Godwin thought (contra Hobbes) that people were social by nature and could live peacefully in groups even without the oversight of government. Godwin took Locke’s argument in the *Second Treatise of Government* (1690) about the state of nature in a more radical political direction.<sup>74</sup> True justice and happiness, Godwin argued, would be achieved by individuals in small communes without much government. *Political Justice* went so far as to theorise an inverse relationship between the amount of government and the capacity of people to deduce and perform the moral duties prescribed to them by the laws of reason. In other words, Godwin thought that the minimisation of government intervention was the political key to making people realise their ethical potential as duty-bearers towards others.

In *The Last Man*, Shelley represented this philosophical debate between Godwin, Burke, and Hobbes as a political allegory. When the plague enters England, the government is unprepared, and society begins to crumble. In the initial fearful stages of self-quarantine, people retreat into their homes, living in relatively peaceful isolation. Meanwhile, the government – abandoned by its

<sup>68</sup>Shelley, *The Last Man*, p. 362.

<sup>69</sup>David Armitage, *Foundations of Modern International Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 165–6.

<sup>70</sup>Shelley, *The Last Man*, pp. 176, 278–9, 319.

<sup>71</sup>Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (7th edn, London, UK: Printed for J. Dodsley, 1790), p. 68; William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (London, UK: G. G. and J. Robinson, 1798).

<sup>72</sup>Mark Philp (ed.), *Godwin’s Political Justice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 2, 23, 48.

<sup>73</sup>Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>74</sup>John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*.

elected populist leader Ryland, then saved by Adrian and Verney – attempts to help the poor, provide medical care, and prevent the spread of the plague by imposing trade and travel restrictions. This peacefully anarchistic stage of England's pandemic response reflects some of the communal ideals of Burke as refracted through Godwin's progressive theory of political justice.

But as the epidemic worsens in England, a more dangerous form of anarchy plagues the very basis of its society. Unburied bodies, panic, violence, invading forces, and apocalyptic cultists haunt the edges of Windsor Castle and weaken Adrian's republican government to the point that it finally collapses. This descent into levelling death and chaos is the final, Hobbesian, worst case scenario of England's failure to adequately respond to the existential threat of the pandemic.

Without a government to lead, Adrian and Verney round up the last survivors – a frail thousand – and flee to France. There anarchy is no better. With the rise of this plague-driven state of war within and across states, Shelley signals her agreement with Hobbes's view that the state of nature is ultimately a state of war. When there is a vacuum of power on a national or international scale, the abyss of anarchy opens to swallow society whole.

Hobbes gleaned this dour lesson from the English civil wars, a political tragedy the Shelleys knew well from Percy's reading aloud Hume's *History of England* in 1818.<sup>75</sup> Hume's *History* told the story of Sir Edmund Verney, an English aristocrat loyal to Charles I who died carrying the king's standard in the Battle of Edgehill in 1642.<sup>76</sup> His eldest son, Sir Ralph Verney, wrote an account of the Long Parliament and remained strategically neutral and diplomatic in his negotiations between the Royalists and the Cromwellians.<sup>77</sup> The Verney family held several estates, including one in Buckinghamshire, not far from where the Shelleys lived in Windsor in 1815–16 and in Marlow in 1817–18.<sup>78</sup> One wonders if Ralph Verney, a famous survivor of the English civil wars and the great plague of London of 1665–6, may have been an inspiration for Lionel Verney, the last survivor of a series of disasters caused by a cycle of war and plague.

Like Thomas Hobbes, Ralph Verney, and Emer de Vattel, Shelley's Lionel Verney is wary of the danger of a state of war on the national or international scale. But Mary uses the story of 'THE LAST MAN' to make a Vattelian point about peacefully closing the vacuum of power. As a post-pandemic ambassador of 'the offices of humanity', Verney models to himself and his readers how the international political void can and should be filled with a culture of friendly and hopeful diplomacy, which aspires to make peace over time with the whole world. This Vattelian diplomatic peace is governed by a 'universalistic' law (or obligation) of a 'moral person' (whether an individual or a state) to care for and protect the life and independence of oneself and others, especially the weak and vulnerable, across artificial borders of nation, culture, and species.<sup>79</sup> Verney acts on this diplomatic sense of obligation to care for the whole world when he refuses to succumb to despair and loneliness, and sets out with his dog and his books in search of a new community with whom to remake a planetary dystopia into a cosmopolitan utopia.

### Shelley's post-apocalyptic legacies for existentialism, dystopian literature, and international thought

There is a trail of intellectual influences from Shelley to Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Stoker, Camus, Orwell, Butler, Atwood, Mandel and the modern existential, post-apocalyptic, and

<sup>75</sup>Shelley, *Journals*, vol. I, p. 215.

<sup>76</sup>David Hume, 'The History of England, Vol. 5 | Online Library of Liberty', available at: {<https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/hume-the-history-of-england-vol-5>} accessed 28 October 2021.

<sup>77</sup>Sir Ralph Verney, *Verney Papers: Notes of Proceedings in the Long Parliament* (London, UK: Camden Society, 1845).

<sup>78</sup>Verney Estate: East & Botolph Claydon Village', available at: {<https://www.theclaydons.org/verney-estate>} accessed 28 October 2021.

<sup>79</sup>Holland, 'The moral person of the state'; Jennifer Pitts, *Boundaries of the International: Law and Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), pp. 79–84.

dystopian novel. *The Last Man* and the Russian poet Aleksandr Pushkin's influential play *A Feast in Time of Plague* (1830) borrowed decadent elements from the Scottish playwright John Wilson's *City of the Plague* (1818) by depicting people dancing or hosting dinner parties amid pestilence.<sup>80</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky adored Pushkin. In *Notes from Underground* (1864), he alluded to the poet-playwright's famously paradoxical image of raising a toast to the plague.<sup>81</sup> Dostoevsky pictured a man living alone in a basement, revelling in the darkness of human existence instead of seeking an escape from it through the delusions of post-Enlightenment liberal-utopian politics. This 'underground man', like Friedrich Nietzsche's 'Last Man' after him, are riffs on the post-apocalyptic literature of the era of the Napoleonic wars, popularised by Shelley's SF novels and Lord Byron's poem 'Darkness' (1816), which pictured the extinction of life after the death of the sun.<sup>82</sup>

A classicist by training, Nietzsche turned towards the writing of a new form of existential literature and philosophy in a similar vein as Dostoevsky, whom he first read in 1886.<sup>83</sup> Although we do not know for certain whether he read Shelley, Nietzsche suggested his cultural grasp of *Frankenstein's* reworking of the ancient Greek myth of Prometheus. In *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), he wrote, 'He who fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster.'<sup>84</sup> This aphorism might be read as a philosophical abstract of the conflict at the heart of Shelley's first novel. Victor Frankenstein becomes a monster by fighting with his own monsters, internal and external – first, his perfectionistic psychological drive to create and dominate life, and then, his material creature made from this hubristic urge to become a tyrannical god.

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–5), Nietzsche used the figure of the 'last man' as the allegorical antithesis of his 'superman' or 'overman'.<sup>85</sup> Unlike the hopeful Verney who dares to believe that other people have survived the global plague, Nietzsche's despairing last man brings about the destruction of himself and humanity by sinking into the depths of a corrupt and pointless nihilism. Nietzsche bewails the descent of most of modern mankind into a 'monstrous', beast-like state, and calls for the best of the rest of them to rise to the noble task of the 'first man' or 'overman': to take charge of reforming humanity as a whole by ascending to a higher level of individual virtue.<sup>86</sup> This superman/overman shares with Verney a future-oriented and poetic, empowered yet solitary posture, figured in Romantic painting of the nineteenth century as the lone woman or man looking over a sublime cliff or across a moonlit or sunlit horizon, made famous by the German artist Caspar David Friedrich.<sup>87</sup>

### The reception of Shelley and the representation of 'The Last Man' in art

The most famous of the nineteenth-century artworks to directly represent the idea of the last man was a study and painting series (c. 1826, 1832, 1849) by the British Romantic artist John Martin (Figure 1).<sup>88</sup> Martin began the series during the year Shelley published *The Last Man*. He took

<sup>80</sup>John Wilson, *The City of the Plague: And Other Poems* (London, UK: G. Ramsay, 1816); Svetlana Evdokimova, *Alexander Pushkin's Little Tragedies: The Poetics of Brevity* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003).

<sup>81</sup>Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* (New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday, 2011).

<sup>82</sup>Dostoevsky; Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (London, UK: Penguin, 1974); Lord Byron, 'Darkness by Lord Byron (George Gordon)', Poetry Foundation, available at: {<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43825/darkness-56d222aeeee1b>} accessed 25 November 2020.

<sup>83</sup>Jeff Love and Jeffrey Metzger (eds), *Nietzsche and Dostoevsky: Philosophy, Morality, Tragedy* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016).

<sup>84</sup>Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good & Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future* (New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday, 2010), p. 89.

<sup>85</sup>Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid. For exact passage, see: {[https://www.google.com/books/edition/Thus\\_Spoke\\_Zarathustra/a9VxKgui0mEC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=thus%20spoke%20zarathustra%20penguin&pg=PT312&printsec=frontcover&bsq=monstrous](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Thus_Spoke_Zarathustra/a9VxKgui0mEC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=thus%20spoke%20zarathustra%20penguin&pg=PT312&printsec=frontcover&bsq=monstrous)}.

<sup>87</sup>Nina Amstutz, *Caspar David Friedrich: Nature and the Self* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2020).

<sup>88</sup>Catherine Redford, 'Friendship and Community in Last Man Literature, 1806–1833' (PhD, Bristol University, 2013).



**Figure 1.** John Martin, *The Last Man* (1849), Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.

inspiration from the public debates about the possibility of the end of humanity, reinvigorated by the publication of Thomas Campbell's short poem 'The Last Man' (1823, 1825) and Shelley's novel (January 1826).<sup>89</sup> Martin became famous for painting scenes of apocalyptic disaster, which, according to art historian Barbara Morden, influenced the Brontës and the Pre-Raphaelites.<sup>90</sup> Well connected in English society, Martin was friends with the gothic novelist, poet, and Member of Parliament Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who was in the social circles of Shelley and Godwin and corresponded with them extensively in the late 1820s and 1830s.<sup>91</sup>

Martin wrote to Bulwer-Lytton in 1849 to thank him for sending his recently published poem, 'King Arthur'. The poem drew explicitly from the language of both Campbell and Shelley's depictions of the last man as a seer overlooking a ruinous landscape, only to find hope on the horizon:

... a dead great city's grave,  
Where, when the moon is at her full, behold  
Pillar and palace shine up from the wave!  
And o'er the lake, seen but by gifted seers,  
In phantom bark a silent phantom steers.<sup>92</sup>

Bulwer-Lytton's verse nicely captures the post-apocalyptic ending of Shelley's *The Last Man*, with Verney steering his 'phantom bark' into an unknown future like a new-age version of Coleridge's ancient mariner. These lines inspired Martin as he completed his painting of 'The Last Man' for exhibition at the Royal Academy and Liverpool that year, in the midst of a cholera epidemic.<sup>93</sup> The canvas depicts a white-robed sage, raising an arm to greet a red sun, not a dead sun, over a stormy and desiccated landscape.

Bulwer-Lytton also corresponded with Thomas Campbell in the 1840s.<sup>94</sup> In London in 1823, Campbell had issued his hopeful Christian 'evangelical' poetic response to the bleak vision of the death of the sun and the extinguishing of life in Byron's 'Darkness', but it met little attention.<sup>95</sup> Republished in London to great acclaim in 1825, Campbell's poem 'The Last Man' sparked a

<sup>89</sup>Ibid.

<sup>90</sup>Barbara C. Morden, *John Martin: Apocalypse Now!* (Newcastle, UK: Northumbria University Press, 2010).

<sup>91</sup>William Feaver, *The Art of John Martin* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 184–7.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid. I confirmed Feaver's finding by visiting Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies to read two letters from John Martin to Edward Bulwer-Lytton in 1849 (ref. DE/K/C11/33-4).

<sup>93</sup>Feaver, *The Art of John Martin*, pp. 185–6, 234, note 124.

<sup>94</sup>Letter from Thomas Campbell to Edward Bulwer-Lytton, 24 October 1842, in the Bulwer-Lytton letter book at Hertfordshire Archives and Local Studies.

<sup>95</sup>Redford, 'Friendship and Community in Last Man Literature, 1806–1833'.

public debate on apocalypse and human extinction that only gained steam with the publication of Shelley's novel in January 1826.

Returning to London from Italy in August of 1823, and supporting herself and her sole surviving child by writing for local publishers and periodicals, Shelley would have been aware of the controversy over Campbell and Byron's competing visions of the end times while she wrote *The Last Man* between the spring of 1824 and the winter of 1825. When the Shelleys were visiting the exiled poet in Geneva during the dark and stormy summer of 1816, Byron composed his great apocalyptic poem around the same time Mary noted in her journal that she had begun to write *Frankenstein*.<sup>96</sup> It was the 'year without a summer' when the climatic impact of the eruption of Mount Tambora caused skies to darken around the world.<sup>97</sup>

In May of 1824, the night before she learned of the death of her friend Byron from sepsis near the field of the war of independence in Greece, Shelley confided to her journal that she knew what it meant to be 'the last man', with everyone she loved 'extinct before me'.<sup>98</sup> Her distinctive use of the word 'extinct' suggests a profoundly personal and psychological link between the shock of the loss of individual life and the mourner's ascent to existential contemplation of abstract and absolute nothingness. In the next entry in her journal, Shelley noted how prescient she was. She was now, in fact, the last (and leading) literary woman in the second generation of British Romanticism. Campbell's poem, reissued in 1825, would have resonated deeply with her in the wake of the death of her closest living friend Byron, author of 'Darkness'.

Indeed, the legacies of Campbell's poem for popular culture run deep throughout nineteenth-century Anglo-American art and music. In London, between 1826 and 1832, a comic play and a number of satirical cartoons and essays spoofed the concept of the 'last man' (and, after the publication of Shelley's thinly-veiled *roman à clef*, the 'last woman').<sup>99</sup> This international cultural hub also saw a serious tribute, the short opera scene 'The Last Man' (1826) with lyrics from Campbell's poem and set to music by William H. Callcott, performed four times in the same period.<sup>100</sup> In 1835, the best-known British Romantic painter J. M. W. Turner – whom Godwin took his daughter Shelley to visit in his studio<sup>101</sup> – illustrated an 1837 edition of Campbell's poems. It featured a watercolour of the last man as an angelic new Adam, guided by a golden cross in his leap of faith towards heaven over an orange-pink sun, which is setting, or perhaps rising, on the horizon (Figure 2).<sup>102</sup>

The religious resonances of Campbell's poem turned the last man into a mainstream nineteenth-century icon of hope. Music publishers in London, New York, and Boston reissued Callcott and Campbell's 1826 opera scene 'The Last Man' from the 1840s through the 1870s.<sup>103</sup> In 1857, in Boston, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, and New York, it was printed as part of a series 'Sweet Songs for Sabbath Evenings' for hymnals and churchgoers.<sup>104</sup> This popular sacred music, like Martin's painting, represented the last man in a prophetic manner, heralding not the nihilistic death of the sun but rather the sign of a brighter way of life to come. In the words of

<sup>96</sup>Shelley, *Journals*, vol. I, p. 118.

<sup>97</sup>Gillen D'Arcy Wood, *Tambora: The Eruption That Changed the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

<sup>98</sup>Shelley, *Journals*, vol. II, p. 477.

<sup>99</sup>Redford, 'Friendship and Community in Last Man Literature, 1806–1833'.

<sup>100</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup>Jonathan Jones, 'Frankenstein and the Gory Gang: How the novel blazed a trail for high art horrors', *The Guardian*, Books section (31 October 2018).

<sup>102</sup>'One of Twenty Vignettes: *The Last Man*', National Galleries of Scotland, available at: {<https://www.nationalgalleries.org/art-and-artists/19265>} accessed 29 October 2021; Thomas Campbell, *The Poetical Works of Thomas Campbell: A New and Improved Edition. With a Portrait, Etc* (London, UK: Oliver & Boyd, 1837).

<sup>103</sup>William Hutchins Callcott and Thomas Campbell, *The Last Man* (London, UK: Addison & Hodson, 1844); William Hutchins Callcott, *The Last Man* (London, UK: Addison & Lucas, 1850); *The Last Man* (New York, NY: Firth, Pond & Co., 1850); William Hutchins Callcott, *The Last Man, Sweet Songs for Sabbath Evenings* (Boston, MA: Oliver Ditson & Co., 1857); William Hutchins Callcott, *The Last Man* (New York, NY: Wm. A. Pond & Co., 1863–77).

<sup>104</sup>Hutchins Callcott, *The Last Man* (1857).



Figure 2. J. M. W. Turner, *The Last Man* (1835), National Galleries Scotland.

Campbell, as sung in the opera scene: 'Yet prophet-like, that lone one stood, Saying, This spirit shall re-turn to Him That gave its heav'nly spark.'<sup>105</sup>

In this Victorian evangelical context, the Irish artist Robert George Kelly exhibited his painting *The Last Man* to critical appreciation in Birkenhead, England in 1886 (Figure 3).<sup>106</sup>

Its dark yet dramatic canvas offers a vista of hope through its vision of an orange sunset (or sunrise) that illuminates a bare man half-dressed in white like Christ after the resurrection. Facing away from the viewer, he raises his hand towards the horizon as though to welcome the light into the darkness engulfing the world. In nineteenth-century European art and literature, Campbell, Shelley, Martin, Turner, and Kelly's iconic images of last men, alongside Nietzsche's superman, gesture towards a new post-apocalyptic future in which humanity resurrects itself in more positive and creative ways than ever seen before, despite the threat of extinction. These artworks depict a literal sunrise after humanity's sunset, as an affirmation that something does and will exist, even if we do not.<sup>107</sup>

### The reception of Shelley in post-apocalyptic and dystopian literature

Beyond her tantalisingly indirect connections to Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, Martin, Campbell and other nineteenth-century creators of last men, Shelley directly influenced countless works of post-apocalyptic and dystopian literature. Among the most philosophically and politically significant are Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* (1897), M. P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* (1901), Alfred Noyes's *The Last Man* (1940), George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Albert Camus's *The Stranger* (1942) and *The Plague* (1947), Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954), Octavia Butler's *Clay's Ark*

<sup>105</sup>Ibid.

<sup>106</sup>Robert George Kelly, Painter: Irish Artists', available at: {<https://www.libraryireland.com/irishartists/robert-george-kelly.php>} accessed 29 October 2021; Walter Strickland, *A Dictionary of Irish Artists* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>107</sup>I thank one of the editors of this Special Issue for this insight.



**Figure 3.** Robert George Kelly, *The Last Man* (1886), Williamson Art Gallery, Birkenhead, UK.

(1984) and *Parable* series (1993–8), Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985) and *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003–13), and Emily St. John Mandel’s *Station Eleven* (2014). All of these novels use metaphors of plague to convey how the social pathologies and psychological contagions of political injustice are transmitted by monsters across boundaries of family and nation. These monsters may be literal bloodsucking, man-eating cannibals, or figurative vampires, who seek to dominate others through manipulative practices of mind control and physical torture. In twentieth-century dystopian literature, figurative vampires proved to be more effective than literal vampires in draining the life and humanity from society by taking the form of totalitarian states and conquering empires.

At the time of his death, Stoker owned a Victorian pocket-sized edition of *Frankenstein*, printed in the 1860s. Its superadded subtitle – ‘the Modern Man-Demon’ – eerily anticipated Stoker’s depiction of Count Dracula as a monstrous hybrid of man and demon.<sup>108</sup> The shape-shifting vampire from Transylvania is less a person than an evasive spectral phenomenon or miasmatic disease that hovers around and possesses its hosts. Like an oppressive wave of plague spread by bats or rats, or even a violent poltergeist, Dracula takes on a variety of material forms and overtakes the most cutting-edge technology of the British empire – electric telegraphs and steam-driven international shipping – to target and prey upon his victims, reigning death and chaos across the thresholds of homes and states. The international and technological bent of Stoker’s novel, in turn, may have influenced the leading dystopian novel of totalitarian political surveillance: *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

On Christmas of 1919, the teenage Eric Blair (later known as George Orwell) gave a copy of *Dracula* – arrayed with garlic and an ornate crucifix – as a love-gift to his sweetheart Jacintha Buddicom.<sup>109</sup> His monumental works of dystopian fiction, *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), are concerned with the two dominant themes of *Dracula* and Shelley’s SF novels before it. First, there is the political problem of *cannibalism*, real or metaphorical, by which people in power cruelly use or prey upon their fellow creatures in order to advance their own craven and even bloodthirsty interests. Secondly, there is the political problem of *mind control*, literal or figurative, by which people’s worldviews are manipulated and tainted by the insidious belief systems of those in power.

<sup>108</sup>Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, ed. Roger Luckhurst (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011); Wilkinson & Hodge Sotheby, *Catalogue of Valuable Printed Books, Autograph Letters, and Illuminated and Other Manuscripts Including the Library of the Late Bram Stoker, Esq., and Other Properties: Monday, the 7th of July, 1913, and Following Day* (London, UK: Dryden Press, 1913).

<sup>109</sup>Eileen M. Hunt, “‘Dracula’s daughter’: The rediscovery of a love poem for George Orwell’, *The Times Literary Supplement* (4 June 2021).

While he was at boarding school in the 1910s, Orwell loved to read plague literature and speculative tales of epidemics and disease, including Edgar Allan Poe's plague allegory, 'The Masque of the Red Death' (1843) and H. G. Wells's novel *The War of the Worlds* (1897) and short story 'The Country of the Blind' (1904).<sup>110</sup> Wells's novel chronicled a cataclysmic alien infestation of Earth, stopped only by a pathogen for which the invaders lacked immunity. In the final chapter, Orwell would have encountered the narrator deliriously singing lines from Thomas Hood's satirical poem, 'The Last Man' (1826), when he discovers that the aliens have been defeated by the Earth's microbes. 'The Last Man Left alive! Hurrah! The Last Man Left Alive!' he chants, not realising that other people around the world have made the same gleeful discovery of their survival.<sup>111</sup> Wells may have encountered Shelley's *Last Man*, too, as part of his research into Hood's ironic response to the 'last man' trope of the 1820s. What we do know for certain is that Wells knew *Frankenstein*, for he directly referenced its title in the opening pages of the manuscript for his novel about making human-animal hybrids through science, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896).<sup>112</sup>

Unlike Wells, we do not have direct evidence that Poe read Shelley, but there is a consensus that he alluded to the final sentence of *Frankenstein* in the last lines of one of his earliest published stories, 'Ms in a Bottle' (1833).<sup>113</sup> That same year, he might have acquired from his publishers their new dual release of the first American edition of *The Last Man* with *Frankenstein*.<sup>114</sup> As with Poe, we also do not know for certain if Orwell read Shelley's novels. But we do know that Orwell praised the 'lost art' of her journals – the basis of her *roman à clef*, *The Last Man* – in 1944, and that the original title for *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was 'The Last Man in Europe'.<sup>115</sup> He may have been directly referencing Mary Shelley's novel when he had the hero Winston Smith described as 'the last man' as he is tortured for his belief in love by O'Brien, the merciless agent of the totalitarian regime.<sup>116</sup>

While reviewing *English Diaries of the Nineteenth Century* in 1944, Orwell had encountered a three-page transcript of Mary Shelley's journals, covering 14–15 May 1824. It was on 14 May that she invoked the concept of the last man: 'The Last Man. Yes, I may well describe that solitary being's feelings: I feel myself as the last relic of a beloved race, my companions extinct before me.'<sup>117</sup> James Aitken, the editor of *English Diaries of the Nineteenth Century*, underscored the term 'The Last Man' with a footnote that identified it as the 'Title of a novel she was writing'.<sup>118</sup> As the research head of the Orwell Society, L. J. Hurst, has pointed out, 'the key words "last man" and "extinct" also appear in O'Brien's one-paragraph address to Winston':

'If you are a man, Winston, you are the last man. Your kind is extinct; we are the inheritors. Do you understand that you are alone? You are outside history, you are non-existent.' His

<sup>110</sup>David Ryan, *George Orwell on Screen: Adaptations, Documentaries and Docudramas on Film and Television* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018), p. 76; Claire Tomalin, *The Young H. G. Wells: Changing the World* (London, UK: Penguin, 2021), p. 1.

<sup>111</sup>H. G. Wells, *The War of the Worlds* (First Avenue Editions, 2017); Thomas Hood, "'The Last Man' by Thomas Hood', *Romantic Circles* (1 October 1997), available at: <https://romantic-circles.org/editions/mws/lastman/hood.htm>; Lee Sterrenburg, 'The Last Man: Anatomy of failed revolutions', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 33:3 (1978), pp. 324–47.

<sup>112</sup>Hunt Botting, *Artificial Life After Frankenstein*, pp. 125–6.

<sup>113</sup>Don G. Smith, 'Shelley's *Frankenstein*: A possible source for Poe's *MS. Found in a Bottle*', *Poe Studies/Dark Romanticism*, 25:1/2 (1992), pp. 37–8.

<sup>114</sup>Mary Shelley, *The Last Man* (Philadelphia, PA: Carey, Lea and Blanchard, 1833); Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus* (Philadelphia, PA: Carey, Lea and Blanchard, 1833); Hunt Botting, *Artificial Life After Frankenstein*, pp. 39–40.

<sup>115</sup>Orwell, 'Review of English diaries of the nineteenth century'; Dennis Glover, *The Last Man in Europe* (Melbourne, Aus., Black Inc., 2017).

<sup>116</sup>Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 212.

<sup>117</sup>Shelley, *Journals*, vol. II, p. 477; James Aitken (ed.), *English Diaries of the Nineteenth Century* (London, UK: Penguin, 1944), pp. 31–3.

<sup>118</sup>Aitken (ed.), *English Diaries of the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 31–3.

manner changed and he said more harshly: ‘And you consider yourself morally superior to us, with our lies and our cruelty?’<sup>119</sup>

These neat parallels make one wonder if Orwell paid homage not only to Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s existential meditation on the bleak sense of extinction that comes after the absolute loss of love, but also to the last two initials of her pen name, by calling the tragic hero of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – who is tortured by the state for having a love affair – ‘Winston Smith’.

Malcolm Pittock made the case that Orwell may have changed the title from *The Last Man in Europe* to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, just before it went to press in late 1948, due to the fact that Alfred Noyes, a well-known Catholic conservative writer, had recently published a popular novel titled *The Last Man*. Pittock did not explore whether Noyes appropriated the title from Shelley’s novel or other representations of ‘the last man’, but rather focused on unearthing parallels between the plot of this 1940 post-apocalyptic novel and Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.<sup>120</sup> Its parallels with Shelley’s plague novel and its closest adaptation, Shiel’s *The Purple Cloud*, are far more obvious.

Noyes’s *The Last Man* is about a global war that seemingly leaves one man alive only to find a female survivor with whom he falls in love, much like Shiel’s romantic twist on Shelley’s existential thought experiment. Before the catastrophic war, Noyes depicts the world’s nations split into two rival leagues or factions. They use bioweapons that spread lethal diseases across borders, harming both their enemies and themselves. Then the ‘two sides’ mutually deploy a more effective and supposedly ‘secret’ and ‘last resort’ doomsday weapon that sends ‘all-pervasive’ and ‘ethereal waves’ to stop the ‘beating of the human heart’.<sup>121</sup>

Noyes began his post-apocalyptic novel *in medias res*. The narrator compares his incredible story of survival with nineteenth-century ‘Poems and works of fiction’ about the ‘last man’.<sup>122</sup> The narrator alludes to the plotlines of two of the best-known plague novels in this tradition, Wells’s *The War of the Worlds* and Shiel’s *The Purple Cloud*, as well as the ‘dying sun’ imagery of Byron’s ‘Darkness’, before he recounts how he *in fact* endured a war-driven near-extinction event and found love despite it all.<sup>123</sup>

In 1944, Orwell described Noyes’s poetry as ‘completely spurious bombast’ and reviewed his 1942 novel *The Edge of the Abyss*.<sup>124</sup> He judged the story so ‘silly’ and ‘incoherent’ as to not merit rehearsal, even as it raised a serious question: will rising amorality lead to the ‘destruction’ of ‘Western civilization’?<sup>125</sup> If Orwell also deigned to read Noyes’s *The Last Man*, he was yet again exposed to the tradition of post-apocalyptic literature rooted in the 1820s debates on ‘the last man’ to which Shelley contributed the major plague novel.

*Nineteen Eighty-Four*, like Shelley’s and Noyes’s extended riffs on the ‘last man’ theme, is as much a war novel as it is a novel of dystopian international politics. Writing in the wake of the bombings of London during the Second World War, Orwell knew first-hand the terror of living under the constant threat of destruction. Indeed, his wife Eileen O’Shaughnessy Blair died in 1945 after a surgery intended to resolve her poor health, which had been exacerbated by the grief and tension of wartime. In 1950, Orwell also died young from the contagion of tuberculosis that he contracted as a child and had crippled him for months on end as an adult. Perhaps inspired by his wife’s 1934 poem ‘End of the Century, 1984’, which imagined what her high school would be like fifty years in the future, Orwell’s greatest novel is set in a dystopian Britain of the late twentieth century.<sup>126</sup> No longer a

<sup>119</sup>Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 212; Author’s correspondence (via email) with L. J. Hurst, 5 December 2021.

<sup>120</sup>Malcolm Pittock, ‘*The Last Man and Nineteen Eighty-Four*’, *English Language Notes*, 35:3 (1998), pp. 67–73.

<sup>121</sup>Alfred Noyes, *The Last Man* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn, London, UK: Catholic Book Club, 1941), pp. 5–6, 8–9.

<sup>122</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

<sup>123</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup>George Orwell, *As I Please, 1943–1946* (Boston, MA: David R. Godine Publisher, 2000), p. 144.

<sup>125</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>126</sup>Sylvia Topp, *Eileen: The Making of George Orwell* (Kindle edn, London, UK: Unbound Publishing, 2020), locs 1472, 1828.

sovereign nation-state governed by an elected parliament through the consent of its citizenry, Britain has been subsumed under the empire of Oceania. Constantly at war with other superstates, Oceania treats Britain – known as ‘Airstrip One’ – as a mere landing strip for its airborne weapons.<sup>127</sup>

### The reception of Shelley and the rise of the existential novel

While in Paris in 1945, Orwell tried to meet Camus, a fellow journalist and critic of fascism. He later sent Camus a copy of the French edition of *Animal Farm*, a fable about how authoritarian and totalitarian regimes cannibalise their own.<sup>128</sup> Camus’s two great existential novels from the 1940s, *The Stranger* and *The Plague*, share uncanny thematic resemblances to both *Frankenstein* and *The Last Man*.<sup>129</sup> The suicidal protagonist of *The Stranger*, Meursault, has often been compared to the Creature.<sup>130</sup> The characters share angst-ridden social isolation, the utter failure to thrive in emotional and familial relationships, and sudden descents into murderous crime because of the tragic sense of the absurdity of existence.

Although *The Plague* does not concern a pandemic but rather a localised epidemic of the bubonic plague, it follows both *Animal Farm* and *The Last Man* in treating contagion as a metaphor for how political ideologies (fascism, imperialistic war) manifest as social diseases that drain a society of its capacity for humaneness. And like Shelley’s SF novels, Camus’s existential narratives explore the psychological state of a lonely survivor of personal or political disaster. Dr Rieux, the narrator of *The Plague*, is a survivor like Verney who lives to chronicle the implosion of a human community. Both existential survivors write journals that warn future readers of the danger of the resurgence of the social diseases of conflict, domination, and despair.

The fact that we still read their plague narratives, in their original and artistically adapted forms, suggests that Shelley and Camus shared a paradoxically yet contagiously hopeful existential outlook. Despite the darkness of their epidemic literature, both existential writers leave open the possibility of delivery from the disasters of the past to a new and unknown, post-apocalyptic blank slate. Humanity might then have a second chance to realise its potential for what had eluded them before: whether it is freedom or love, happiness, or peace.<sup>131</sup> Before he died in a car accident in 1960, Camus titled his last unfinished novel – published by his daughter in 1994 – *The First Man*.<sup>132</sup> One wonders if this conceptual reversal of the title of Shelley’s pandemic novel signals his awareness of *The Last Man* and its many legacies in twentieth-century cinema and literature.

A reader of both Nietzsche and Dostoevsky, Camus was familiar with their existentialist ideas of ‘the last man’ and ‘the underground man’. In Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* (1864), the narrator’s unforgiving sense of the meaninglessness of existence drives away the one woman in his life, leaving him alone in a dark basement. This ‘underground man’ prefigured both Nietzsche’s ‘last man’ as well as Camus’s Meursault.<sup>133</sup> All three archetypes of the modern existential protagonist tie back to Shelley’s SF novels and their sources in eighteenth-century English and German literature. Camus and Shelley explicitly based their plague novels on Daniel Defoe’s tale of solitary woe under quarantine lockdown in *A Journal of the Plague Year*.<sup>134</sup> Frankenstein’s Creature reads and identifies

<sup>127</sup>Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 27.

<sup>128</sup>Matthew Lamb, ‘The meeting that never was’, *Los Angeles Review of Books* (13 March 2015), available at: {<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/meeting-never/>}.

<sup>129</sup>Albert Camus, *The Plague* (New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday, 2012); Albert Camus, *The Stranger* (New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday, 2012).

<sup>130</sup>Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: Annotated for Scientists, Engineers, and Creators of All Kinds*, eds David H. Guston, Ed Finn, and Jason Scott Robert (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017), p. 80.

<sup>131</sup>Hartnett, ‘Love in a Time of Empire’.

<sup>132</sup>Albert Camus, *The First Man* (New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday, 2012).

<sup>133</sup>Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*; Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*; Camus, *The Stranger*.

<sup>134</sup>Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (London, UK: E. Nutt, 1722).

with Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). And in his 1942 essay on his philosophy of the absurd, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus revealed his deep reading in the works of Goethe, Dostoevsky, and Nietzsche.<sup>135</sup> Through this intertextual overlay of influences, the idea of the last known survivor of a wider catastrophe – living alone in a hovel, basement, or bunker – has become a predominant existential trope of modern literature.

Matheson's horror-SF novel *I Am Legend* was pivotal for the development of the mid-century, postwar iteration of post-apocalyptic literature.<sup>136</sup> It effectively combined the gothic plot lines of *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, and *The Last Man* with the existentialist ideas of Camus, Nietzsche, and Dostoevsky. Matheson's proximate source for adapting the plot of *The Last Man* was M. P. Shiel's novel *The Purple Cloud* (1901) about a toxic gas that instigates humanity's self-destruction through war and other conflict.<sup>137</sup> In a romantic version of the aporetic ending of *The Last Man*, Shiel had the last man abandon his misanthropy when he stumbles upon a female survivor and seer, buried in the ruins of Constantinople, with whom he falls in love.

Blending elements of Stoker, Shiel, and Shelley as refracted through filmic versions of their novels, Matheson imagined a post-apocalyptic America in which all but one human has been turned into a vampire by a bioengineered plague. This lone man, Robert Neville, quarantines himself in a bunker to fight off the invaders. Yet he ultimately realises that he is the aberration or monster, not the vampires, for he is the 'last of the old race' of humans.<sup>138</sup> Matheson's novel was adapted for the screen as *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), and later as *I Am Legend* (2007), starring Will Smith. The 1964 film almost single-handedly spurred the zombie apocalypse genre in film and television, led by the directorial work of George Romero.<sup>139</sup>

In the interwar period, feminist SF gained traction, especially in the post-apocalyptic mode. The art critic Helen Sunderland likely authored the anonymous short story, 'The End of the World' (1930), which imagined a 'plague' after the 'third World War' that takes 'the males of every nation', leaving women to mourn the death of 'the Last Man' and the eventual demise of the human species.<sup>140</sup> While a young poet in the 1950s and 1960s, Margaret Atwood was a devoted reader of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Shelley's *Frankenstein*.<sup>141</sup> Atwood's feminist dystopian fictions from the *Handmaid's Tale* and *MaddAddam* series are replete with monstrous imagery of blood, betrayal, cannibalism, and the ripple effects of toxic romantic and familial relationships.<sup>142</sup> Atwood's handmaid is Creature-like in her diaristic recording of her social isolation and deprivation as a sexual slave forced to work for a Puritanical theocracy in the early twenty-first century.

The biracial SF writer and critic Samuel R. Delany called Octavia Butler the leading black SF writer after Shiel.<sup>143</sup> A distinctive element of Butler's style was to draw upon the monster and vampire imagery of post-apocalyptic fiction in the literary vein of Matheson, Stoker, and Shelley. Set in 2021, her novel *Clay's Ark* chronicles the dangerous outbreak of a highly infectious

<sup>135</sup> Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus And Other Essays* (New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday, 2012).

<sup>136</sup> Matheson, *I Am Legend*.

<sup>137</sup> Shiel, *The Purple Cloud*.

<sup>138</sup> Matheson, *I Am Legend*, Kindle edn, loc. 2343.

<sup>139</sup> Bruce Peabody and Gloria Pastorino, *Beyond the Living Dead: Essays on the Romero Legacy* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2021); Amy J. Ransom, *I Am Legend as American Myth: Race and Masculinity in the Novel and Its Film Adaptations* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018).

<sup>140</sup> Michael Ashley (ed.), *The End of the World and Other Catastrophes* (London, UK: British Library, 2019), pp. 30–5, 330.

<sup>141</sup> Margaret Atwood, 'My hero: George Orwell', *The Guardian* (18 January 2013); Atwood, *Speeches for Doctor Frankenstein*.

<sup>142</sup> Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale and the Testaments Box Set*; Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday, 2004); 'Margaret Atwood on *The Year of the Flood*, August 19, 2010', available at: {[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npamsWwWu\\_0&list=PLMPkmRDc0CwMp3BowPTWPGyYy2XS2\\_8hR&index=2&t=0s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=npamsWwWu_0&list=PLMPkmRDc0CwMp3BowPTWPGyYy2XS2_8hR&index=2&t=0s)}; Margaret Atwood, *MaddAddam: Book 3 of The MaddAddam Trilogy* (New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday, 2013).

<sup>143</sup> Samuel R. Delany, 'Racism and science fiction', *The New York Review of Science Fiction* (1998), available at: {<https://www.nyrsf.com/racism-and-science-fiction-.html>}.

alien microorganism after a spaceship crashed in the desert with one contagious survivor.<sup>144</sup> This last man deliberately infects other humans who mutate into blood-drinking, cat-human hybrids.

Also set in the twenty-first century, Atwood's prescient *MaddAddam* series envisions the invention of a CRISPR-like technology that would allow for the making of pig-human hybrids (such as scientists in fact began to make in petri dishes in 2017).<sup>145</sup> In this dystopian triptych, a nihilistic leader in the corporatised pharmaceutical industry cynically unleashes a bioengineered plague in the form of a sexual enhancement pill.<sup>146</sup> While his express purpose is to destroy humankind, two women survive him who bring humanity back from the brink of extinction.<sup>147</sup>

Atwood's work inspired Butler's *Parable* series and Mandel's *Station Eleven*: especially their now-iconic stories of 'last women' who, like Mary/Verney, find the strength to survive a devastating series of personal and political disasters to sustain hope of a better future. In *The Parable of the Sower*, Butler presents the diaristic story of a young African-American woman, Lauren Oya Olamina.<sup>148</sup> In the year 2024, she escapes the breakdown of her impoverished and violent Los Angeles community by disguising herself as a man and hitting the road into the anarchistic world beyond the city walls. In the sequel, *The Parable of the Talents*, Olamina – a bit like Mina, the female lead of *Dracula* – uses her superhuman capacity for identifying with other people's thoughts and feelings to fight the social diseases of her time and work towards a new, post-apocalyptic world of peace and justice to be realised on another planet.<sup>149</sup>

Mandel's *Station Eleven* is poignant to read during the time of COVID-19, as it foresaw that a lethal flu-like pandemic could be unwittingly and swiftly transmitted via international air travel. Mandel directly referenced the existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre throughout her post-apocalyptic plague novel set in the near future of the twenty-first century. While Sartre pessimistically argued in his play *No Exit* (1944) that 'hell is other people', Mandel has her young heroine Kirsten survive the state of war left in the wake of the Georgia Flu to realise that true hell is both 'a world with almost no people in it' and 'the absence of people you long for'.<sup>150</sup>

Like a 'final girl' survivor in a late twentieth-century slasher horror film, Kirsten narrowly escapes a brutal execution by a false prophet of doom when one of his abused followers turns on him to save her before committing suicide with the same gun.<sup>151</sup> Akin to Verney equipped on his ship with the works of Shakespeare and Homer, Kirsten's love of literature and its power to imagine a more hopeful future is what sparks this act of supererogation by a stranger. As she recites lines from her favourite comic book, *Station Eleven*, to the mad cult leader who also happens to own one of the few surviving copies, Kirsten distracts him long enough for his rebel sentry to finally revolt against the tyrannical ideologue. In the final scene of the novel, Kirsten gives her copy of the comic book to an airport museum established to preserve the vestiges of humanity's pre-pandemic past. Then she sets out to discover the mysterious source of the electric lights that have just been lit over the southern shore of Lake Michigan.

Mandel, like Atwood, writes dystopian fiction in the more hopeful and cosmopolitan mode of Shelley and Butler than in the dark and cynical mode of Orwell and Camus. This may be due to these women writers' concerted bridging of a variety of gendered and international perspectives in their novels. A lifelong environmentalist, the Canadian Atwood has used her fiction to explore social justice issues raised by the melting Arctic, the uncontained AIDS epidemic, legal attempts

<sup>144</sup>Octavia E. Butler, *Clay's Ark* (New York, NY: Open Road Media, 2012).

<sup>145</sup>Erin Blakemore, 'Human-pig hybrid created in the lab: Here are the facts', *Science* (26 January 2017); Atwood, *MaddAddam*.

<sup>146</sup>Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*.

<sup>147</sup>Atwood, 'Margaret Atwood on *The Year of the Flood*'.

<sup>148</sup>Octavia E. Butler, *Earthseed: The Complete Series* (New York, NY: Open Road Media, 2017).

<sup>149</sup>Ibid.

<sup>150</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday, 2015); Emily St. John Mandel, *Station Eleven* (New York, NY: Knopf Doubleday, 2014), pp. 48, 144, 148.

<sup>151</sup>Daphne Gottlieb, *Final Girl* (New York, NY: Soft Skull Press, 2003).

to strip women of reproductive rights, and the corporatisation of bioengineering worldwide.<sup>152</sup> Now a New Yorker, Mandel came of age in Canada during the early twenty-first-century wave of SARS that hit Toronto due to traffic through its major international airport.<sup>153</sup>

### Conclusion: Literary IR from the last man to the final girl

Almost two centuries before Atwood, Butler, and Mandel shaped the contemporary field of feminist poliscifi, Shelley's seeming powers of augury likewise arose for deeply personal reasons with universal resonance. As a young English woman, travelling through Italy with her husband and children, she experienced an epidemic of tragedies on a depth and scale that most people could not bear. The original 'last Woman', or final girl who outlasts them all, Shelley's emotional and intellectual resilience in the face of the many plagues upon her family is what made her a visionary and generative SF novelist, existential writer, and political philosopher of pandemic and other artificially-made disasters.<sup>154</sup>

It is to Shelley that we owe the diverse evolution of the modern existential, dystopian, and post-apocalyptic literary traditions – especially the hopeful feminist outlooks of Atwood, Butler, and Mandel – and their philosophical roots in Western international thought from Thucydides to Vattel. By reclaiming her within this feminist 'counter-archive' of poliscifi, we reveal how post-apocalyptic and dystopian literature can build pragmatic, creative, optimistic, and emotionally compelling bridges between existentialism and IR.<sup>155</sup> This interdisciplinary, bridge-building exercise in Literary IR is crucial for rectifying two long-standing biases of these critical areas of philosophy and political science: (1) gender prejudice against the value of women's contributions to and perspectives on existential questions and international politics, and (2) a pessimistic orientation towards politics and the human condition that obstructs the hope and love necessary to move forward through globally impactful disasters of our own making.

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<sup>152</sup>Margaret Atwood, 'The Powells.Com Interview with Margaret Atwood', Powell's Books, available at: {<https://www.powells.com/post/interviews/the-powellscom-interview-with-margaret-atwood>} accessed 29 October 2021.

<sup>153</sup>Jordan Williams, 'Station Eleven by Emily St. John Mandel', *American Microreviews & Interviews*, available at: {<http://www.americanmicroreviews.com/station-eleven-by-emily-st-john-mandel>} accessed 8 February 2021.

<sup>154</sup>The Literary Gazette and Journal of Belles Lettres, Arts, Sciences, &c' (February 1826), *Romantic Circles* (1 March 1998), available at: {<https://romantic-circles.org/reference/chronologies/mschronology/reviews/lgrev.html>}.

<sup>155</sup>Jeanne Morefield, 'Women's international thought: Toward a counter-archival transformation of global power: Knowledge', *International Politics Reviews* (26 October 2021).