



## Narrating Contagion and Conceptualizing Humanity: Differences in Plague Narratives by Defoe and Shelley

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**Abstract**

*Male narrators of the plague in Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* and Shelley's *The Last Man* ruminate about similar concepts, which include aristocratic social systems and politics, as well as stereotypical perspectives of Eastern cultures. Despite similarities in focus, the narrators' views of society differ, reflecting opposing opinions about humanity. To explain why these viewpoints vary so dramatically, processes shaping each narrator's sense of self are evaluated using Social Identity Theory. In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, H.F. clearly aligns with the social system he observes, seeking to maintain his status as a wealthy merchant and craftsman. Concerning Lionel from *The Last Man*, he is never considered a legitimate part of the upper class. His depiction as an outsider makes him feel marginalized, which exposes the injustice of an exclusionary British social elite. When Lionel is left alone due to contagion, he finally realizes that external social relationships cannot define humanity; it is compassion and morality that define what it means to be human. This individualistic view of humanity reveals that the marginalized can empower themselves, thereby transcending injustices driven by socioeconomic, cultural, racial, or gender biases.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

In *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers and the Outbreak Narrative*, Wald (2008) states that “Communicable diseases know no borders, and the global village is the biological scale on which all people and populations are connected” (p. 53). Recently, we have become acutely aware of this interconnected, biological phenomenon that links all of humanity. When Covid emerged in 2019, it spread to nearly every country in the world in just nine months (Higgins-Dunn, 2020). The pandemic led to widespread job losses and economic uncertainty, fueling social and political change on a global scale. Border closures, quarantines, and healthcare restrictions also transformed society by constraining relationships at local, national, and international levels (World Health Organization, 2020).

While modern-day changes caused by COVID seem surprising, they are by no means a new phenomenon. In the novel *A Journal of the Plague Year* by Daniel Defoe, we learn about similar effects of the Great Plague, which ravaged London in 1665 (Brown, 2020). A male

narrator, simply named H.F., reveals concerns with economic security and health, as well as an internal psychological response to massive societal changes. His reaction to the rapidly changing world around him is expressed in the following quote:

I had two important things before me; the one was the carrying on my Business and Shop; which was considerable, and in which was embark'd all my Effects in the World; and the other was the Preservation of my Life in so dismal a Calamity, as I saw apparently was coming upon the whole City; and which however great it was, my Fears perhaps as well as other Peoples, represented to be much greater than it could be. (Defoe, 2010, p. 52)

As in the modern day, the narrator reveals anxiety about both health and economic concerns. H.F.'s first concern involves economic security as a saddler, a prosperous merchant who has several servants. His second concern is about survival, maintaining health amidst a deadly plague. In another 18<sup>th</sup> century novel called *The Last Man*, by Mary Shelley, aspects of the plague are further explored, albeit through a futuristic setting. In the story, a devastating plague obliterates the entire human population, leaving the narrator, Lionel Verney, to deal with the resulting "psychological and literary anxiety" that ensues (Zolciak, 2018, p. 1243).

Through the ruminations of two male narrators on the impact of disease, a common fascination with politics and the aristocracy emerges. We see that H.F. observes society in flux, raising questions about the legitimacy of the privileged aristocracy. This perspective is exemplified as H.F. observes that the "Nobility and Gentry, from the West part of the City throng'd out of Town" (Defoe, 2010, p. 51). Through seeing the privileged quickly abandon the city, H.F. is compelled to wonder whether or not the social and political systems to which he is affiliated can be trusted. At the same time, mistrust of local and national government institutions is increased as rumors begin to circulate that the "Bills of Mortality" do not match the number of dead in the churchyard. Concerning the government, the narrator also writes, "it seems that the Government had a true Account of it [the plague], and several Counsels were held about Ways to prevent its coming over; but all was kept very private" (Defoe, 2010, p. 46). Accounts of political corruption or neglect appear reminiscent of modern-day debates over the validity of government institutions, mask mandates, and policies toward immunization. In *The Last Man*, Lionel reveals the same infatuation with aristocracy. He develops close relationships with characters like Adrian, the son of the last king of England, and Raymond, a nobleman instrumental in leading the Greeks against the Turks. Lokke (2003) suggests that such a focus on aristocratic figures reveals an "incarnate a death drive, a will to power, in its most explicit and destructive form – limitless ambition, untamed pride, and uncontrollable passion" (p. 120).

In both novels, the existing aristocratic and political systems serve as a negative force that ultimately results in a great deal of death and destruction. In addition to the political elite, H.F. observes the actions of the lower and middle classes who remain in the city after the diaspora, revealing his concern about the social changes around him. He explains how people of the lower and middle classes behave when the plague first emerges, recounting that “People would stop as they went along, and call to the Neighbours to come out” if a body was found on the street. Later, there is a clear change in behavior. The narrator explains that “if at any Time we found a Corps lying, [we would] go cross the Way, and not come near it” (Defoe, 2010, p. 121). The use of “we” is telling. It suggests that the narrator's high-minded religious and social values are also beginning to deteriorate. As in *A Journal of the Plague Year*, social decay is a prevalent theme of *The Last Man*. Refugees from America, as well as religious factions in the heart of France, begin to violate laws and disregard traditional values, leading to widespread death and lawlessness.

Social decay is also very prevalent among the aristocracy, who comprise the circle of friends for Lionel. Most of the narrative's main characters avoid contracting disease, yet they succumb to the despair imposed by decadence and moral decay. Raymond's love affair destroys Lionel's sister, Perdita, leading to a depression that results in the neglect of her daughter, Clara. Furthermore, Raymond's quest to defeat the Turks ultimately leads to his own death and destruction while fighting. Concerning Adrian, a love affair with Evadne leads to “a descent into despair and madness akin to that of the maniac in Percy Bysshe Shelley's Julian and Maddalo” (Lokke, 2003, p. 118). Rather than being merely a social class, the aristocratic elite in *The Last Man* appears to be a force driving social breakdown and decay. It may represent a “will-to-power” (Lokke, 2003, p. 126), which ultimately results in death and destruction.

In addition to an obsession with the privileged class and political systems, a common ideal about other racial and cultural groups is expressed. Accounts of H.F., for example, reveal a bias towards Turks and Mahometans in Asia, who “would go unconcern'd into infected Places” (Defoe, 2010, p. 55). H.F. perceives a need to understand the threat of disease through applying a bias to groups that are categorized as “other.” The narrator of *The Last Man* also reveals a clear cultural and political bias. We first see discrimination against Eastern cultures as the narrator travels from Greece to Constantinople, a Muslim city. Initially, the environment is beautiful. The narrator watches “the shadows as they retreated from hill and valley, and the golden splendour of the sun's approach,” marveling at the beautiful and “splendid landscape” of Greece (Shelley, 2008b, p. 177). From Macedonia onward, “fewer beauties” are observed as the pathway to Constantinople becomes more barren and desolate (Shelley, 2008b, p. 177).

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As Lokke (2003) points out, bias embedded within the narrative reflects Shelley's understanding of the plague, "now proven to be historically accurate, of epidemics as a product of imperial and colonial contact with the East" (p. 124).

Prejudicial depictions of "other" in the novels reflect a common bias, which labels groups outside our own social or geopolitical spheres of influence as primitive. Such a phenomenon may be illustrated by examining Michael Crichton's 1969 novel, *The Andromeda Strain*. This novel depicts mysterious microbes that are brought back to earth via a space probe (Wald, 2008, p. 31). The microbes appear symbolic, representing anxiety about the unknown and a fear of "other." The novel uses this fear to "dramatize the threat of rapid and careless development and the failure to consider the consequences of human encroachment on 'primordial' ecosystems that harbor unfamiliar and deadly microbes" (Wald, 2008, p. 32). Just as with the *Andromeda Strain*, narrators H.F. and Lionel explain disease through the consequences of human encroachment. They blame the plague on contact with unfamiliar Eastern cultures, using a prejudicial view of "other" to ascribe distant cultures with primitive qualities.

Both *A Journal of the Plague Year* and *The Last Man* explore similar concepts. Each narrator reveals a common obsession with the external world, thereby exposing cultural, political, and geographic factors that shape society. Despite having a similar focus, narrators' interpretations of the world are radically different, as are the final outcomes in each story. The present study uses Social Identity Theory as a framework to interpret and explain why common quests to understand society lead to very different conclusions about humanity. Social Identity Theory is a critical framework that examines how identity is shaped by social experiences that promote either inclusion or exclusion (Hogg, 2016). By examining external social factors that shape each narrator's identity, differences between the novels may be better understood.

Analysis is conducted in two steps. First, scholarly literature is examined to illustrate differences between the narrators and how they define the world around them. Next, these differences are explained through the lens of Social Identity Theory, which illustrates how very dissimilar social experiences lead to opposing perspectives on humanity. Ultimately, analysis of the two novels reveals that common quests to understand the external world yield different outcomes depending on socioeconomic disparities and the social processes that shape feelings of inclusivity or exclusivity.

## **2. SIMILAR NARRATORS, DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ON HUMANITY**

Despite a similar focus, narrators from *A Journal of the Plague Year* and *The Last Man* describe society and the external world in very different ways. H.F., from *A Journal of the Plague Year*, focuses primarily on describing, in a logical manner, political and social behaviors intended to control the illness. His descriptions often reveal the subjectivity of the behaviors. For example, he describes the “Bills of Mortality” as being contrived, casting doubt upon the number of dead being reported. Such narration reveals propaganda’s role in constructing reality. Essentially, H.F.’s sense of reality, which may ultimately reflect the experiences of Defoe’s Uncle Henry (Withington, 2020, p. 1754), is a systematic deconstruction of absolute truth. Concerning this issue, Seager (2008) also writes that Defoe’s journal “endorses fiction, validating a version of honesty that admits the unattainability of absolute truth, dismantling texts that aspire to such certainty” (p. 652).

H.F. also explains the ability of social systems to adapt to the turbulent times of the plague. This ability to survive and adapt is exemplified by a story of three men who flee from London. A Sail-maker, his brother John, and a Joyner (named Richard) all decide to escape the city and move to a more rural location for safety. As they plan to leave, they agree to invest all their money in “one publick Stock” (Defoe, 2010, p. 166). In contrast to the strict British hierarchical system based upon birth and nobility, a more communist and egalitarian society is established (Defoe, 2010, p. 166). Social relationships now become egalitarian and fluid, as the virus strips the social system of its ability to function properly. Nixon (2014) explains these dynamic social systems, writing that they are designed to exemplify “permeable interpersonal and national borders that reinforce the vitalizing power of community interaction even in response to the hugely threatening potential of fatal, communicable disease” (p. 62). It is true that the novel contains an intense focus on society and human behavior. There seems to be an obsession with describing existing and emerging social orders, which McDowell (2006) contends was written to “rewrite the past of a culture still plagued by unruly orality in the new, idealized image of a print-oriented civic order” (p. 104).

Unlike H.F., Lionel Verney in *The Last Man* offers more emotionally charged accounts of the plague. At the very beginning of the story, he expresses anger toward the royal family, blaming them for his poverty and lowered social status. Later in the novel, there is a clear change in this emotion. He states that “Social feeling and sympathy constituted a marked feature in my disposition. In early youth, the living drama acted around me drew me, heart and soul, into its vortex. I was now conscious of a change. I loved, I hoped, I enjoyed, but there was something besides this. I was inquisitive as to the internal principles of action of those around me: anxious to read their mind” (Shelley, 2008b, p. 174). Due to the passionate narration included in *The Last Man*, scholars largely focus on emotional explanations for the

novel's purpose. Deren (2017), for example, argues that coverage of the plague is used to express revulsion, as well as sympathy, which is termed "revolting sympathies" (138). Through cultivation of revolting sympathies, the author prompts the reader to "rethink the possibilities and the consequences of human relationships and invites us to reimagine a communal future that makes room for those realities" (Deren, 2017, p. 160).

Lionel Verney's emotional narration has also led scholars to conclude that *The Last Man* serves as a testimonial to Romanticism. According to Haslanger (2016), the novel is used to exemplify two forms of Romantic cosmopolitanism. It reveals progressivist cosmopolitanism, which denotes historical perfectibility and a federated Europe, as well as cynic cosmopolitanism, which is associated with animal life and radical freedom (659). By revealing the animalistic nature of the narrator at the beginning of the story, along with the reclaiming force of nature at the end of the novel, a cosmopolitan desire for freedom is expressed. In this case, "the nonhuman animal becomes an icon of the freedom the cosmopolitan seeks" (Haslanger, 2016, p. 674). As in other scholarly conclusions, the power of emotional and inner faculties of humanity explains why the novel was written.

Like H.F., Lionel describes the thoughts and behaviors of those around him, but he does not present this narration as a testimonial to the continuity of social order. In *The Last Man*, no man in the novel could escape the plague, except for Lionel Verney himself. By explaining the spread of disease to various characters in the novel, the narrator appears to express the idea that "Western societies cannot isolate themselves from the world they have helped create" (Bewell, 2000, p. 311). The narrator understands that the world is interconnected, making attempts to exclude some groups from humanity an impossibility.

Lionel's descriptions in *The Last Man* paint civic order as a concept doomed for extinction. They disparage the legitimacy and viability of existing social systems, suggesting that the role of mankind must be redefined. Concerning this perspective, Sargent (2020) explains that *The Last Man* "rewrites the past as an always already-extinct anteriority that wastes the present that summons it" (p. 313). Such narration forces the reader to address preconceived notions of humanity. Furthermore, the inevitable interconnectedness of humanity, as exemplified by the effects of disease, reveals an undeniable connection among all human beings.

### **3. WHY PERSPECTIVES DIFFER: LIONEL'S QUEST FOR IDENTITY**

Both H.F. and Lionel examine social order, political policies, and human behavior that influence the people around them, yet conclusions about their observations differ considerably.

The novel *A Journal of the Plague Year* appears to be a rational explanation of human behavior, which reveals adaptable and resilient qualities embedded within human social systems that promote survival. In contrast, *The Last Man* paints mankind with a more romantic or humanistic lens. It is civic order and aristocratic relationships that will face extinction.

Seemingly similar fixations by male narrators, who reach very different conclusions about mankind, appears enigmatic and difficult to interpret, which explains why scholars have extensively debated the purpose of each novel. Problems with interpretation may lie primarily in a scholarly obsession with the external. Theories examining the novel look at external social and political systems, while neglecting the internal cognitive processes of the two narrators. Some scholars do recognize the importance of inward interpretation of external events in the novels. Zimmerman (1972), for example, recognizes that historical events have a spiritual meaning, reflecting the Puritan traditions of the period, which make the descriptions of H.F. turn “inward” (p. 417). Recognition of this spiritual reality ultimately reflects the idea that meaning from the novel has a more metaphysical purpose. While insightful, the analysis does not adequately clarify H.F.’s personal biases and motivations, preventing identification of the novel’s true purpose. While Zimmerman (1972) correctly identifies the “psychological turmoil” that H.F. goes through, he fails to identify the main point made by the narrator, leading to a vague conclusion that the narrator’s “lesson is sometimes poorly taught” (p. 422).

Differences in conclusions about the nature of humanity cannot be fully understood without examining each narrator's identity and the external processes that shape it. The origins of each narrator differ considerably. As a prosperous saddler with many servants, H.F. is an accepted member of a prosperous merchant class. Thus, he shows appreciation for his social station in life and a keen desire to maintain it. As he mulls over his decision to stay or flee, he reveals a need to preserve his economic status and financial security, thereby reflecting his position. Lionel, in contrast, is a tabula rasa. He is reminiscent of the creature in Shelley’s (2008a) *Frankenstein*. Like the creature, who begins life in the natural world, Lionel Verney is born as “an orphan among the valleys and the fells of Cumberland” (Shelley, 2008b, p. 13). From a primordial state, we see a character who finds a “freedom” and “companionship with nature” as he tends a flock of sheep. Like *Frankenstein*’s creature, Lionel also reveals contentment with the natural world, tempered with an unfilled need for companionship. At the same time, Lionel’s surroundings are not “sufficient to tame” his eager spirit early in the story. He begins to break the law, leading other shepherds to scheme and execute “many a mischievous prank.” Although Lionel attributes this behavior to a lack of “capacity for self control” inherited from his father, we also see that he harbors a resentment due to “a restless feeling of degradation from my true station in society” (Shelley, 2008b, p. 14). He harbors

resentment toward the prior King, who did not honor an oath to help his father, leading to debt and loss of social stature. Like Frankenstein's creature, Lionel's anger radiates from a failure to gain acceptance from a society that rejects him.

From an analysis of Lionel Verney, and his parallel development with Frankenstein's monster, we can see a fundamental difference with H.F. In *The Last Man*, Lionel begins as a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*. He is born pure and enjoys the environment, but this view changes as he learns about the way in which society has suppressed his family. He begins to hate himself, declaring that "I continued my war against civilization, and yet entertained a wish to belong to it" (Shelley, 2008b, p. 19). It is clear that the narrator feels like an outsider. His tremendous desire to become a part of society is further expressed when he meets the son of the former King and declares, "Doubt me not, Adrian, I also will become wise and good!" (Shelley, 2008b, p. 29). Considering this intense desire to become accepted by society, Lionel differs significantly from his counterpart. Rather than having an established social role, he is an outsider, a symbol of the marginalized. It is this symbolic representation that explains the true purpose of *The Last Man*. Humanity is redefined by revealing not just external social, political, and biological phenomena, but the effects of these factors on Lionel's identity. Being a symbol of the marginalized, Lionel systematically deconstructs aspects of privilege and racism to redefine what it means to be human. The true nature of mankind is ultimately illustrated through the protagonist's struggles with social exclusion, geopolitical bias, and preconceived gender roles.

### **3.1. Social Exclusion and the Failure of Assimilation**

Through Lionel's desperate attempt to gain acceptance from the British elite, the negative impact of social discrimination and oppression is made evident. One of Lionel's first attempts to gain status is through marriage to Adrian's sister Idris, a former princess of England. Lionel desires status and aspires to become a better person. Concerning this union, he states, "To be worthy of her, to raise myself to her height through the exertion of talents and virtue, to repay her love with devoted, unwearied tenderness, were the only thanks I could offer the matchless gift" (Shelley, 2008b, p. 89). From this excerpt, we see an inferiority complex, reflected in a lack of self-worth. The narrator desires status and respect, which is clearly exemplified by his desire to rise to the station of his wife. Although he eventually marries Idris, her death strips Lionel of the only legal connection to the social elite. In addition to marriage, Lionel attempts to accrue status through warfare. Concerning an impending battle, Lionel pledges his allegiance to Raymond, a commander of the Greek army fighting against

Constantinople. Lionel states that “I will stand at your side, draw my sword in the Greek cause, and be hailed as a victor along with you!” (Shelley, 2008b, p. 178). The narrator’s ambition is evident in this phrase. He desires glory and acceptance in the hierarchical English social system, going to extremes to prove his loyalty. At the same time, he is not able to gain distinction as a war hero. Raymond continues to point out Lionel’s status as other. As an example, Raymond asks, “Yet how can I expect you [Lionel] to sympathize with me? You are of this world; I am not. You hold forth your hand; it is even as a part of yourself, and you do not yet divide the feeling of identity from the mortal form that shapes forth Lionel” (Shelley, 2008b, p. 187). Like the effort to seek glory in battle, Lionel’s bid for the role of Lord Protector is an attempt to amass status that fails. He tries to usurp the role in Adrian’s absence. Under the pretense of easing the burden of his friend Adrian, he speaks to the assembly, his “friends,” only to be refused soon after (Shelley, 2008b, p. 246). Following this attempt, Adrian calls Lionel “a shepherd-boy that tends a silly flock,” further asserting that the job of Lord Protector is not a “fitting scope” for him (Shelley, 2008b, p. 247). From Adrian’s comment, we can see that Lionel is still regarded to be a lowly shepherd by his companions. Unlike H.F., Lionel seeks to obtain status rather than maintain it. Inevitably, his attempts are in vain. Lionel’s wife soon dies, cutting his filial link to high society, just as Raymond and Adrian exclude Lionel from participating in either battle or affairs of state. Inevitably, all attempts to become a recognized member of dominant society fails. Through this form of narration, it becomes clear that Lionel’s low social status is ultimately maintained by a prejudicial social system, which excludes him from obtaining the prosperity that he truly desires.

### 3.2. Geopolitical Bias and the Deconstruction of Superiority

In addition to social oppression by an exclusionary elite, the narrator of *The Last Man* ruminates about cultural and geopolitical borders, which helps him to recognize an implicit bias that questions the legitimacy of English social institutions. As he realizes that the disease spreads ubiquitously, the universality of mankind on a physical level is revealed, thereby delegitimizing assertions of social or cultural superiority. The preeminence of British social systems is also deconstructed through narration of warfare. Despite explaining that, “Moslems should be rescued from slavery and barbarism, and restored to a people illustrious for genius, civilization, and a spirit of liberty” (Shelley, 2008b, p. 177), Adrian observes Christian soldiers raping a girl, effectively negating the legitimacy of his personal bias. Lionel reveals an implicit bias, as well as a mental conflict about the validity of a Eurocentric cultural prejudice. As in youth, the narrator comprehends the cruelty of British society and questions whether to include the English social circle within his identity. His critical view differs significantly from that of

H.F., who rationally explains the behaviors of others, so as to understand and justify the social system to which he firmly belongs.

### **3.3 Gender, Emotion, and the Critique of Rationality**

Following the identification of implicit biases which characterize 18th century England of the period, Lionel uses his own emotions to identify common problems with gender-based stereotypes and behaviors. During the period in which the novel was written, emotion is considered a largely female trait. Concerning the mind, Rousseau suggests that women are not by nature able to establish abstract and speculative truths. They are inferior in reason, yet emotional and deceptively charming (Wokler, 2001, p. 128). In contrast, males of the period are thought to be governed by science and rationalism (Nowka, 2007). Although H.F. displays traditional male traits, emphasizing reason and avoiding emotion, Lionel reveals an effusion of sentiment throughout the novel as he struggles to apply rational thought and behavior. Through this emotion, problems with pure emphasis on reason are eventually revealed. Lionel's actions towards his sister Clara ultimately end in disaster, as he blindly applies reason to do what is "best" for her. Despite expressing a heartfelt desire to stay with her recently fallen husband in Greece, Clara is drugged and placed on a boat headed back to England. Lionel effectively uses a "rational" mind, which prioritizes matters of physical and spatial safety over emotional security. The result is tragic. After she drowns herself to rejoin her husband, Lionel states, "And thus the ill-starred girl died a victim to my senseless rashness" (Shelley, 2008b, p. 214). Contemplating the consequences of his actions, Lionel begins to realize the fault of applying rational thought without considering the importance of empathy and emotion. Unlike H.F., the narrator of *The Last Man* realizes that overreliance on rationality, as well as other male stereotypes, can ruin the lives of others.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

Significant differences between the narrators reveal how social processes have shaped identity and perspectives about humanity. As a wealthy merchant and craftsman, H.F. clearly connects with the social system he observes. It becomes a part of his identity. Rather than becoming emotional, he rationally dissects human behaviors and governmental policies, revealing a beauty and continuity of existing British social systems. In the case of Lionel, he never feels like a legitimate part of the upper class. Though he struggles for acceptance, he continues to receive criticism from those he wishes to become accepted by. Through depicting the narrator

as an outsider, he becomes a symbol of the marginalized, serving to expose the injustice of an exclusionary social elite.

Although we see a shared sense of membership linking H.F. to the social, political, and economic systems of the time, Lionel appears to reject society, opting to redefine himself. This suggests that identity and humanity cannot be defined by external social relationships; it is compassion and morality that define what it means to be human. From the rejection of existing social norms, we can see a potential for the marginalized to actively resist unjust aspects of humanity. We can also see how one individual can become empowered through an internal sense of freedom that fosters transcendence. Lionel reveals that it is a liberated mindset that can rise above social injustices driven by inherent cultural, racial, and gender biases. Effectively, Lionel becomes a symbol for empowerment.

While not often recognized within *The Last Man*, there is also a unique feminist message embedded within the story (Zolciak, 2018, p. 1243). Characteristics of the narrator's background may support this perspective. As a member of an "inferior" class, the narrator may signify the negative treatment of women during the 18th century. During this period, male and female roles were "more sharply defined than at any time in history" (Hughes, 2014, para. 1). Because of a patriarchal system of primogeniture, which placed wealth and power in the hands of males, there were few options for social mobility among women, leading to a sense of isolation. It is this British patriarchy, aimed "at the submission and mental enslavement of individuals — especially women," that explains the reaction of the narrator, who feels economically, politically, and socially inferior to his counterparts (Stampone, 2018, p. 198).

Perhaps the main purpose of *The Last Man* is best summarized through analysis of the final book, in which Lionel writes "TO THE ILLUSTRIOUS DEAD" (Shelley, 2008b, p. 466). As the last human being on the planet, Lionel is free from any other social influence, making humanity an internal conception. Through creating his own definition of humanity, he develops an individual identity and self-worth, thereby empowering himself. In this way, the novel becomes more than just a means to redefine humanity. It becomes a guide for empowerment.

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