Voluntary and Involuntary Isolation Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*

When one picks up Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* for the first time, it is safe to assume that at the very end of the novel only one man will remain alive to tell his story. This observation about the isolation of the main character Lionel Verney may seem obvious to most, but looking at the lengths that Shelley used the deadly plague to in order to make Verney into the “last” man is enough reason to pause and wonder about why such devastation and heartache was necessary. Shelley’s novel explores two types of isolation over the course of the story: voluntary isolation and involuntary isolation. Voluntary isolation occurs when a person chooses to sever their ties to society, for example, when many of the rich families seceded themselves when the plague first entered England, and involuntary isolation occurs with forced solitude, as when Verney became the sole survivor at the end of the novel. Most people tend to focus on Verney’s involuntary isolation, but I believe that the voluntary isolation may play a larger role than his final state. The people who chose that path quickly learned that isolation does not assure immunity. Fuson Wang explains, “death wins out against . . . constructed human agency” (241), as exemplified by these families failed attempts to prevent the disease from advancing. The plague therefore represents a universal crisis that could be dealt with in two ways: universal cooperation or complete isolation. I believe Mary Shelley is advocating for people to reach out and unite for a greater cause because it promotes cooperation and hope in the face of a crisis, and also condemns isolation on the
grounds that human beings are all connected and are not immune to universal dangers. Thus, those that isolate themselves become lost as they cut themselves off from all contact from others, fatally restricting any help they might have received.

When the novel was published in 1826, a fierce debate about the nature of “plague” as a contagion or anti-contagion had risen up, causing doubt about current quarantine laws, or, in other words, voluntary isolation. According to the leading scientists in Shelley’s day, plague was transmitted through the air, and therefore there was no identifiable reason why some were infected while others remained healthy. Peter Melville explained, “the novel’s plague with its miasmatic etiology would have been considered the result of poor environmental conditions (such as poor sanitation and ventilation), and its modes of transmission would have been thought to resemble those of malaria, a disease whose name quite literally means ‘bad air’” (832). Therefore, as various characters attempt to find refuge by isolating themselves from a contagion in their homes, the disease was undeterred by walls and passed easily through the the home looking for its next victim. Anne McWhir has pointed out that at times the health of the body plays a role in resisting disease, that is, a healthy body has greater strength to reject infection while a weak body is more susceptible, but “the novel soon demonstrates the futility of all such measures against fatal atmospheric influences that merge contemporary science with ideological critique.” Indeed, all of the efforts of the people proved useless against the death blow of the plague, especially those who sought to evade it through voluntary isolation. A healthy social body, therefore, might offer more resistance to corruption through interaction and involvement in everyday affairs, as evidenced by the lengthened lifespan of the followers of Adrian, second Earl of Windsor, after the plague had consumed most of England. These followers did not ultimately
escape their fate, but their limited existence became much more bearable because they were among kindred spirits and maintained a spirit of hope as they worked together.

It is important to note that at least at the onset of the plague, England seemed isolated socially and geographically because the inhabitants believed the plague was a contagion and they were located on an island. “England was still secure,” Verney explained. “France, Germany, Italy, and Spain, were interposed, walls yet without a breach, between us and the plague. . . we on our stable abode could not be hurt in life or limb by these eruptions of nature” (183). As there were many barriers between the plague and England, many of its inhabitants were unconcerned and believed that as long as they stayed in England and did not come in contact with plague victims, no harm would come to them. While this may seem to be a reasonable idea, it was undeterminable who would or would not contract the disease based on contact. Melville argues that “there is ostensibly no possibility in the novel for direct infection” because the nature of the plague did not allow for it (831). Shelley’s plague needed to be deadly enough to wipe out the human race and a contagion, or disease passed by direct or indirect contact, would not be powerful enough to wipe out the human race, at least, not according to the leading scientists of Shelley’s time who insisted that plague was transmitted through the air. Shelley asserted this belief through Verney as he explained, “That the plague was not what is commonly called contagious, like the scarlet fever, or extinct small-pox, was proved. . . . If infection depended upon the air, the air was subject to infection” (182). Shelley seems to have constructed her plague into an anti-contagion that destroyed any possibility of isolation, unbeknownst to the local inhabitants.
As the plague ravaged Europe, accounts of such isolation proved to be grievous mistakes as death swept over various households, leaving very few survivors to remember or help them. For example, a high-born Duke attempted to save his household from disease by quarantining them all inside his home. He “derided the idea that there could be danger while he pursued his plans of cautious seclusion; and he so far succeeded, that it was not until this second summer, that the destroyer, at one stroke, overthrew his precautions, his security, and his life. Poor Juliet [his daughter] saw one by one, father, mother, brothers, and sisters, sicken and die” (Shelley 223). The sorrow of this scene goes much deeper than the fact that almost all of them sicken and die because they were isolated when it happened. In an effort to save himself and his family, the Duke cut himself and his family off from all other contact with society, rendering them completely helpless when disease finally struck. No one outside of the household could have been aware of their plight until it was too late, and Juliet alone was able to escape and tell their story. Juliet, unlike her Shakespearean counterpart, might have been the sole survivor because she remained emotionally tied to her lover who rescued her from isolation and brought her into the comforting arms of others who were able to help her and whom she could help in return.

Similarly, the tale of an old grandmother who was seeking life through seclusion is another instance that Shelley uses to expose the futility of contagionism’s quarantine. Removing herself from all contact with society, the old grandmother “would wander out at night to get food, and returned home, pleased that she had met no one, that she was in no danger from the plague. As the earth became more desolate, her difficulty in acquiring sustenance increased. . . But, even though threatened by famine, her fear of the plague was paramount; and her greatest
care was to avoid her fellow creatures” (224). Here, a very old woman suffered alone because of her fear of catching the plague. Her solitude made it harder to find food and other necessities until the danger of starvation was greater than that of disease, and it was not until she encountered someone who was infected that she sought the help of others. These two stories are only two instances where isolation was recorded, but in Verney’s world there would have been countless households that would have isolated themselves from the universal crisis and suffered without anyone knowing what happened to them. Shelley uses these sorrowful instances of isolation to advocate anticontagionism and expose the futility of quarantined isolation.

Quarantine could not save these people from plague, and if there was no justifiable logic behind who would contract the disease next, then isolation was not a safe or logical solution. But if isolation is not a solution when the world is in universal crisis, what would be the solution?

This question is further complicated with Verney’s involuntary isolation when he finally becomes the last man on earth. Verney becomes the pathetic example of what life would be like for the people who sought isolation if had been spared from the plague. Alone and emotionally weak, Verney had to face the prospects of traveling the world without any excitement or hope for the future because there was no other voice to continue humanity’s reign on the earth. Charlotte Sussman explains, “the nation makes a claim on human voices to name it—without those voices it reverts to being a piece of barren ground. The diminishing power of any single human voice as humanity disappears haunts the novel and emphasizes the importance of communication to human identity” (295). As Verney continued in isolation, he too lost his human voice and became more and more animal-like as he scavenged for food and slept outdoors because he did not have another human to interact with. He became “a kind of anti-Adam” (Sussman 295) as he
saw only shadows of humanity in books or in his dog, which he found faithfully guarding its master’s sheep even though its master was certainly no longer coming back (365). Without the comfort of human companionship, Verney had no hope for the future and even contemplates suicide because his world was so bleak and hopeless. “Neither hope nor joy are my pilots,” Verney explained, “restless despair and fierce desire of change lead me on. I long to grapple with danger, to be excited by fear, to have some task, however slight or voluntary, for each day’s fulfillment” (367). In this passage, Verney is expressing that even though he survived the plague, losing the rest of humanity was too great to endure and left him purposeless with nothing to lose. He sought tasks to occupy his days because to try and restore the shadow of the life he had was too sorrowful to endure.

Shelley uses these images to illustrate the dangers of isolation, both voluntary and involuntary. Shelley’s technique of taking a single, simple idea and enlarging it to the point of disbelief gives readers a chance to reexamine the idea. Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor reflects that “Shelley suggests the invigorating pleasures of sublime horror . . . encourage the pleasures of solitude, not society, and the Last Man by definition draws these pleasures to an extreme” (769). Isolation can be considered beneficial for a time, but when pushed to the extreme can be emotionally harmful. The extremity that Shelley is expressing is the absence of hope, which is stifling to anyone who is alone for too long. Isolation, therefore, is not only illustrated as an undesirable choice, but as an intolerable consequence if ever a destruction of humanity were to take place.

I believe that Mary Shelley was advocating collaboration and alliance with others in the face of a crisis like the plague. As more and more people contract the disease in other countries,
most of England’s inhabitants understood what Jonathan Elmer calls “their common humanity” (356) and reach out to those in need. Verney acknowledges their charity as he observes “It was impossible to see these crowds of wretched, perishing creatures, late nurseries of luxury, and not stretch out a hand to save them” (186). In the wake of plague, the English opened their stores to the refugees that were fleeing from other countries, and as the people in England banded together to relieve some of the suffering of others they set a precedent based on common humanity, and by invoking that standard Verney’s friend and leader, Adrian, had the authority to prevent bloodshed of desperate peoples on two occasions: First, by ending both the revolution of the North Americans through appealing to their humanity and then by negotiating peace between the English groups who had broke off as they met in France. Therefore, the crisis of the plague reminds the world that every life is precious and should be treated as such.

Banding together also means that there is a support system when individuals begin to suffer. While isolation cuts people off from society’s aid, cooperation strengthens and supports in times of trouble. The addition of the family’s friend, Lucy to Verney’s family party exemplifies this principle. Lucy had been left behind to care for her ailing mother, but when her mother was found dead she became a part of Verney’s household and took over some of the duties that Verney’s late wife Idris had fulfilled. “I communicated my recent loss,” he said, “and gave her the idea that she must come with me to take charge of the orphan children, whom the death of Idris had deprived of a mother’s care. Lucy never resisted the call of a duty, so she yielded, and closing the casements and doors with care, she accompanied me back to Windsor” (286). By giving her a chance to provide aid to someone in need, Verney enabled Lucy to find
the will to survive in spite of her previous hardship. In this way, both Lucy and Verney found support in cooperation and service.

Cooperation and lending support through service are not just fantastical ideas that Shelley was trying to portray in the novel; she was trying to persuade the English people to avoid isolation in times of universal crisis. Shelley was aware that nations can suffer from more than just disease: financial recessions, government oppression, and war are only a few catastrophes that can uproot civilizations and cause major destruction. When this occurs, members of society have two options: isolate themselves and try to solve the problem on their own, or work together with others to try and find a solution for everyone, and it is up to the individual to decide what course of action to take in the face of the new crisis. For example, currently there are many refugees pouring out of Syria and looking for a new place of residence while their homeland is a warzone. Zika infection numbers are rising and in some areas of the world, poverty is chronic. Many want to close borders and isolate themselves from the problems while others are trying to work together to find a solution that will benefit everyone. These decisions about the solutions are ultimately left up to the individual nations and people. However, they have become issues that will affect the whole world, and isolation might very well soon become obsolete because a universal crisis will not stop at closed doors or borders.

However, such crisis is not limited to grand worldwide disasters, but can also happen on the individual scale. Verney’s own sister went through individual crisis when her husband, the Lord Protector Raymond, became distant through his encounters with another woman. Distressed, she kept her sorrows to herself until they consumed her. She declared, “I must weave a veil of dazzling falsehood to hide my grief from vulgar eyes, smooth my brow, and paint my
lips in deceitful smiles—even in solitude I dare not think how lost I am, lest I become insane and rave” (loc 7265). In the end, Perdita was consumed with her grief and loneliness and intentionally gave up her daughter to Verney’s care and died shortly after her husband. Shelley used Perdita to expose another danger of voluntary isolation: it is emotionally damaging while crisis is raging quietly. When someone is in a dangerous or abusive situation, it is better to seek help and reach out towards others than to remain quiet in the face of emotional destruction.

Mary Shelley’s novel reflects a society in turmoil banding together to survive, and while the people are grouped and cooperating with one another there is hope in a chance for survival. In isolation, not only is there no chance of support from others when one is in need but it becomes maddening as the isolation becomes permanent. The plague represents more than just disease: it can take the form of any world or individual emergency and will present the option to isolate oneself or assist others before spreading onward. As the novel and recent history suggest, voluntary isolation cannot stop a universal catastrophe from striking anywhere and everywhere, regardless of how prepared one is. Hope for the future remained until there was no other human left on earth except for Verney, who was trapped due to involuntary isolation. Without human interaction, Verney was reduced to more animal-like tendencies and the only relief was found when he read books, connecting him in a way to the shadow of human society. For him, hopelessness arose from complete isolation and his experience and the experience of the people who voluntarily chose seclusion serve as a warning to those who would choose isolation over cooperation now in the face of universal crisis.


