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Voluntary and Involuntary Isolation in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*

Jessica Pope Mudrow

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. The ultimate isolation of Lionel Verney may seem obvious to most, but the way Shelley uses the deadly plague to transform Verney into the last man causes the reader to wonder why such devastation and heartache is necessary. Shelley's novel explores two types of isolation over the course of the story: voluntary isolation and involuntary isolation. Most readers tend to focus on Verney's involuntary isolation as he becomes the last man alive, but I believe that voluntary isolation may play a larger role in his final state. The people who choose the path of isolation quickly learn that isolation does not assure them immunity from the plague. Fuson Wang explains that death "wins out" against "constructed human agency," as exemplified by those that choose to isolate themselves in order to prevent the disease from advancing (241). The plague therefore represents a universal crisis that could be dealt with in two ways: complete quarantine or universal cooperation. The initial response for many may be to close off and avoid getting involved in the crisis, but Shelley's novel refutes this

by exposing the damaging effects of inaction. Choosing to withdraw from society in the face of hardship is more harmful in the long run because it leads to silent suffering without the hope of aid. Shelley effectively shows how voluntary isolation cuts people off from any comfort and help they may have received in their suffering, while those that cooperate with others permeate a hope for survival and a greater call for humanity to find success as they come together. If the voluntary isolation status is not changed, involuntary isolation and the consequent suffering becomes the intolerable consequence of ignoring the basic human needs of society as a whole.

Using the plague to expose the futility and danger of voluntary isolation, Shelley challenges the immediate reaction of many citizens to seclude themselves in the face of crisis, ultimately resulting in their tragic demise. In *The Last Man*, many rich families assume that seclusion will protect their families from deadly disease, and thus seclude themselves when the plague first enters England. However, they soon find that walls, physical or otherwise, cannot stop the unpredictable plague. According to the leading scientists in Shelley's day, plague was transmitted through the air, and there was therefore no identifiable reason why some people were infected, while other people remained healthy. Shelley, who followed the plague debate closely, includes this belief in her novel as the plague ravages through the cracks in the defenses of the naive citizens. This theory is supported by Peter Melville as he explains that the plague "with its miasmatic etiology" may have been "considered the result of poor environmental conditions," such as poor sanitation and ventilation (832). This widely held belief might have been rational if the plague had followed these rules. However, the plague works according to its own chaotic whims and no one is excluded in the fallout. As various characters attempt to find refuge from the contagion by isolating themselves in their homes, the disease passes undeterred through the walls of each home. Indeed, all of the efforts of the people to prevent contagion prove useless against the deathblow of the plague. Those who seek to evade it behind closed doors are especially exposed to the futility of voluntary isolation.

Even though England initially seems isolated both socially and geographically, the inhabitants soon find that they cannot escape the crisis, which further exposes the naivety of solitude as a way to avoid disaster and encourage the administration of relief as soon as possible. Verney articulates this belief as he discusses the solidarity of England, explaining that "we on

our stable abode could not be hurt in life or limb by these eruptions of nature” (Shelley 183). As there are multiple barriers between the plague and England, including the English Channel, many of the British people are unconcerned with the danger, and believe that as long as they stay in England and do not come in contact with plague victims, no harm will come to them. While this is a reasonable belief, it is undeterminable who would or would not contract the disease. 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 the plague was transmitted through the air. Shelley asserts this belief through Verney when Verney explains that the plague was not “commonly called contagious,” further elaborating that if “infection depended upon the air, the air was subject to infection” (182). Shelley constructs the plague into an anti-contagion that destroys any possibility of isolation, geographic or otherwise. This means that it is no longer an issue to stay away from infected areas because the dangers are the same in any part of the world. What, then, is left to stop the people from banding together to stave off as much suffering as possible? If there is no further danger in providing aid, then providing that aid should become a priority as society is engulfed in crisis. As the people of the novel work together to provide much needed comfort and gratitude, those involved draw closer together and ease some of the pain of the situation, while those that stubbornly remain in solitude are forced to suffer in silence.

Using examples that stem from voluntary isolation, Shelley redefines isolation as tragedy for those that choose to remain in seclusion, despite the warnings. This situation becomes far worse for the isolated as they contract the disease. Isolation puts them out of the reach of help and they are left to suffer alone. As the plague ravages through Europe, this isolation proves to be a grievous mistake, causing death to sweep over various households, and leaving very few survivors to help with the disaster. In *The Last Man* a highborn Duke ridicules the idea of danger being found in seclusion, and he hides himself and his family inside their home in order to save his household from disease. The Duke realizes his mistake too late, and “the destroyer” overthrows “his precautions, his security, and his life” (Shelley 223). The sorrow of this scene goes much deeper than the fact that

almost all of them sicken and die due to their isolation. In an effort to save himself and his family, the Duke cuts himself and his family off from all other contact with society, rendering them all completely helpless when disease finally strikes. No one outside of the household is aware of their plight until disaster is upon them, and the Duke's daughter Juliet is the only one able to escape and tell their story. Juliet, unlike her Shakespearean counterpart, may possibly be the sole survivor of the family because she remains emotionally tied to her lover, who rescues her from isolation, and brings her into the comforting arms of other people who are able to help her and whom she is able to help in return. Voluntary isolation turns an already dreadful tale into a complete tragedy as the deaths of the family go unnoticed, meaning that no relief is provided in their dying moments.

Shelley further uses these sorrowful instances to extend the futility of quarantined isolation to include the various untold stories of those that suffer in silence, heightening the tragedy of isolation and why isolation is not a logical solution for those people who are facing danger. The tragedy of isolation is intensified by the sparse encounters of those that do manage to come out of seclusion with the traveling party. One encounter that is brought to light in this desperate moment illustrates the long and individual plight of an old grandmother. Removing herself from all contact with society, the old grandmother ventures out at night to scavenge for food, but it eventually becomes more difficult for her to scavenge as food becomes harder to find. Even though she is "threatened by famine" the old woman fears the plague so much that her "greatest care" is to "avoid her fellow creatures" (224). Here, a very old woman suffers alone both physically and emotionally because of her fear of catching the plague. Her solitude makes it harder to find food and other necessities until the danger of starvation becomes greater than that of disease. It is not until she encounters someone who is infected that she seeks help. In other words, when she fears it is too late and subsequently contracts the disease. As the old woman realizes the futility of continuing to hide, she is able to come out and receive the benefits of cooperating with others in her last moments of life. Now, instead of being alone and slowly dying of starvation and cold, the old woman is able to die in some comfort at the very least, and surrounded by people who care. Whether alone or in company, she is dying and unable to prevent it. Her only consolation is that in the end she chooses to die where people can provide what help they can and record her story when she is gone. She is lucky because she remains so close to

society and is therefore able to change her mind about her decision to isolate herself. However, many others are too far removed, suffering unnecessarily. These stories are only two of many instances where people may have suffered because of their choice to isolate themselves. They would have had no comfort or support in their deaths, which may have been terrifying and heartbreaking as they pass on without notice. Quarantine could not save these people from plague, and if there is no justifiable logic behind who will contract the disease next, then isolation is not a safe or logical solution.

The contrast between those that isolate themselves and those that desire human collaboration ultimately shows that voluntary isolation can lead to involuntary isolation, eventually resulting in hopelessness for the future. Verney faces involuntary isolation when he finally becomes the last man on earth; he has no knowledge of anyone else alive in the world, and believes they have all died. Shelley shows the degradation of Verney's spirit as he yearns for companionship and aid. Because he becomes immune to the plague, Verney is uniquely spared when others are not. He becomes the pathetic example of what life would be like for those who had sought isolation—if they had been spared from the plague. Alone and emotionally weak, Verney must face the prospect of traveling the world alone, without any excitement or hope for the future. What makes life worth living when there is no one to share it with? This is the question that Verney faces as he descends into misery, frantically but hopelessly beginning his search for any other human life. He is alone in a deceased and rotting world that contains only memories of a civilization. Verney has no one to speak to, to give him comfort, or to confide in. All communication with humanity is lost. Communication and its importance for men and women is emphasized by Charlotte Sussman as being vital to "human identity," explaining that a "nation" without human voices is "barren ground" (295). Scavenging for food and sleeping outdoors, Verney also loses his human voice as he becomes more and more animal-like. He becomes "a kind of anti-Adam" as he sees only shadows of humanity through books or in his dog, which he finds faithfully guarding its master's sheep even though its master is no longer coming back (295). Without the comfort of human companionship, Verney has no hope for the future. He even contemplates suicide because his world becomes so bleak and hopeless. Verney explains, "I long to grapple with danger, to be excited by fear, to have some task, however slight or voluntary, for each day's fulfillment" (Shelley 367). Verney is expressing that even though he survived the plague, losing

the rest of humanity is too great to endure, leaving him purposeless and with nothing to lose. He seeks out menial tasks to occupy his days in order to try and restore the shadow of the life he had. Through Verney's seclusion, Shelley again shows the damning nature of isolation as it removes help and, in Verney's case, hope for the future.

Shelley uses the image of Verney's bleak seclusion to illustrate isolation as a terrible consequence of excess human solitude, because while some seclusion and privacy can be beneficial, humans are still meant to interact with one another. Shelley's technique of taking a simple idea and enlarging it to the point of disbelief gives readers the chance to re-examine the idea. Jennifer A. Wagner-Lawlor writes that Shelley "suggests the invigorating pleasures of sublime horror," while encouraging "the pleasures of solitude, not society" (769). The extremity to which Shelley extends solitude in the novel makes solitude terrifying and undesirable. Isolation can be considered beneficial for a time, but when pushed to the extreme it becomes emotionally harmful. The extremity that Shelley expresses 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.

Shelley further portrays voluntary isolation in any form as dangerous, with emotional damage being a deadly consequence of that isolation. The emotional damage that voluntary isolation causes is exemplified through Verney's sister Perdita; Perdita experiences emotional upheaval as she quietly deals with the personal crisis of her husband's betrayal. It is important to note that crisis is not limited to grand worldwide disasters, but can also happen on the individual scale. Perdita goes through personal turmoil and suffering when her husband, the Lord Protector Raymond, becomes distant from her due to his numerous encounters with another woman. Distressed, she keeps her sorrows to herself until they completely consume her. She declares, "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" (Shelley 153). Many people have found themselves in similar situations and are forced to deal with the emotional upheaval and struggle that comes with overcoming the hardship. Depression and other mental health problems are a crippling individual crisis that can be extremely difficult to overcome without help. In fact, many continue to suffer in silence because they don't want to be a

burden to anyone. Perdita feels this way and continues to suffer alone until it consumes her so much that she becomes emotionally unstable. In the end, Perdita's grief and loneliness are too much to bear and she intentionally gives up her daughter into Verney's care, committing suicide a short while later. Had Perdita been forthcoming with her personal trials, she may have been spared some of the heartache and pain she was facing and be able to take care of her daughter, using service to work through her grief. Instead, she allows her grief to take over her emotions, resulting in more tragedy.

While one may initially desire to withdraw when facing trouble, it is more beneficial to band together with others facing the same crisis, even if the crisis is not immediately present in the individual situation. While isolation cuts people off from society's aid, cooperation strengthens and supports them in times of trouble. The addition of the family's friend Lucy to Verney's family party exemplifies this principle. Lucy's mother is found dead and Lucy is adamant about staying with her mother, choosing voluntary isolation in order to grieve. However, Verney is aware of the danger that will face Lucy if she remains behind. It becomes vital that Lucy go with the family, and since Verney had become a single father with children to care for it makes sense that that Lucy should join Verney's household. Verney explains that she "never resisted the call of duty" and so closes "the casements and doors with care" and accompanies Verney back to Windsor (Shelley 286). By giving her a chance to provide aid to someone in need, Verney enables Lucy to find the will to survive, in spite of her previous hardship. This gives her purpose and meaning to continue on despite her grief. In this way, both Lucy and Verney find support in cooperation and service. Service then provides a purpose for those that are suffering, and gives them a chance to do something besides grieve because of their troubles. People who have lost much in the wake of environmental disaster and even emotional hardship are able to find solace and new purpose in life as they lose themselves in service toward their fellow beings. Some travel far to help those in need in foreign countries like Africa or South America, while others stay closer to home to aid those who may have gone through similar situations and feelings. Many people find that individual grief is easier to deal with when they keep themselves busy by helping others. Instead of focusing on their individual suffering, individuals are able to put their grief into perspective as they look outward to help and support others. The more people work together

the more likely they are to survive and the greater the chance they have to succeed, despite the sorrow that surrounds them. Thus, banding together gives strength and meaning to continued existence.

Shelley's promotion of collaboration with others in the face of a crisis such as the plague presents the redeeming qualities of compassion and kindness that represent what it means to be human. As more and more people contract the disease in other countries, most of England's inhabitants understand what Jonathan Elmer calls "their common humanity" and they choose to reach out to those in need (356). Verney acknowledges their charity as he observes that it is impossible to see crowds of "wretched, perishing creatures" and not want to "stretch out a hand to save them" (186). In the wake of the plague, many English natives open their stores to the refugees that are fleeing from other countries, and as they band together to relieve some of the suffering of others, they set a precedent based on this common humanity. Aid is distributed on the basis of being human and is freely given to any who come to receive it. Shelley contrasts the cruel and heartless nature of the plague with the compassion of the English citizens in order to show that every life is precious and should be treated well, regardless of origin or circumstance. We are drawn to the stories of Verney and his friends as they work to save what they can of humanity because as humans we want to see humanity succeed, and those that cooperate and work together in the face of crisis often find the greatest success in their efforts. With humanity at stake, it becomes important to try to save every life because each life can then become a new contributor to humanity's continued existence.

Mary Shelley's novel exposes the damaging consequences of isolation as the plague ravages through the world, spreading the message that individuals cannot hope to avoid crisis because it will befall each of us eventually. Every person will have hardships and trials, some on an individual scale and some on a global scale, but Shelley helps us to understand that trouble is unavoidable, and accepting that knowledge is one of the first steps to looking for a solution. 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, whether intentional or not. The plague represents more than just disease. The plague can take the form of any world or individual emergency and will present the option to either isolate oneself or assist others. As both the novel and recent history suggest, voluntary isolation cannot stop a universal catastrophe from striking anywhere and everywhere, regardless

of how prepared one is. In *The Last Man*, hope for the future remains until there is no other human left on earth except for Verney, who becomes trapped because of involuntary isolation. Without human interaction, Verney's only relief is found in books, which connect him to the shadow of human society. For Verney, hopelessness arises from complete isolation. His experience, as well as the experience of the people who voluntarily choose seclusion, serves as a warning to those who would choose isolation over cooperation. Shelley's novel presents isolation as a self-destructive entity that creates helplessness as people suddenly rely upon themselves alone to get out of crisis. Isolation makes people feel forgotten because they have no one to tell their story to or to remember them, they feel hopeless as they battle alone. However, hope comes as people put aside their fears, come out of isolation, and work together for a common goal. Thinking outward towards others fosters hope. As more people work together in the wake of crisis there is more likelihood of success and they draw strength from each other. People find new purpose as they work with others to work beyond their grief and see a bright future. Shelley invites us to look to that future, and to turn to each other in the wake of crisis rather than suffer in the silence of isolation. Though it seems easier to withdraw in the face of a crisis, we are able to draw hope from the helping hands around us. As humanity chooses to extend a hand and open doors to those in need, the likelihood of positive growth for all can be achieved, even in the wake of potential disaster.

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