MARY SHELLEY’S *THE LAST MAN*: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ANXIETY AND AUTHORSHIP

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A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate College of Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

May 2017

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ABSTRACT

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Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826) has been dismissed by scholars since it first became a subject of literary critique in the 1960s. *The Last Man* comments on a biographical sketch of Percy Bysshe Shelley, a conflicted lineage and Romantic inheritance, a millennial conflict about the need to look forward and backward simultaneously, and a single author’s desire to locate her writing in a long classical literary history. Shelley’s text is at once a categorical failure of the Gothic genre, and it exemplifies post-apocalyptic, or dystopian, literature. Scholars often criticize Shelley’s book through the lens of feminist theory and on the basis of historical—both political and personal—contexts.

In my thesis, “Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*: A Critical Analysis Of Anxiety And Authorship,” I recuperate the literary importance of *The Last Man* in the context of feminist theory, psychoanalysis, and the Gothic genre by showing how Shelley’s novel foregrounds various forms of personal and culturally embedded anxiety. Although readers often see Shelley’s anxiety as a psychological or social weakness, it is central to my thesis to show how anxiety is at the core of her work. Shelley’s anxieties as demonstrated in her texts exemplify an innovative approach to not only comment on her personal and political struggles, but they also distance her from her contemporaries, therefore allowing her to create a new literary genre. By critically analyzing the anxiety of illness, national isolation, and authorship through psychoanalytic theory and juxtaposing them with an underdeveloped feminist approach, I suggest that Mary Shelley’s
The Last Man is influential in the continuously growing genre of post-apocalyptic literature in the 20th and 21st century.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I’d first like to thank my family and friends for their undying love and support, especially my parents. Mom and dad, thank you for reading to me as a child and expressing the importance of literature throughout my childhood. Also, thank you for being genuinely interested in my research and for letting me vent when I was overwhelmed. I found refuge in your weekly visits. I’d also like to thank my best friend since first grade, Elizabeth. No matter our distance, you were always there to provide words of encouragement.

Next, I want to extend a very special thank you to my goof, “chickhan,” and best friend—my husband, Mikey. I am so thankful for your love and support throughout this process. Writing this thesis was a challenge, and your ability to make me laugh during the difficult times was exactly what I needed. Thank you for your humor, compassion, and for knowing when I just needed a hug or pizza (or both).

Finally, thank you to my committee, Dr. Erin Labbie and Dr. Allan Emery. As an undergraduate student, I was always positively impacted by Dr. Emery’s classes. His courses were certainly a challenge, but I left each class feeling more knowledgeable and empowered. Thank you for your support and thorough feedback on my writing and research. I have also had the pleasure of working with Dr. Labbie since I was a young undergraduate student. Her passion for literature, research, and scholarship inspired me from the moment I walked in the classroom. I appreciate how she recognized my talents and worked closely with me to further develop my writing and analytical skills. While working on my thesis, she dedicated much of her time and was willing to assist me in any stage of the research and writing process. I will be forever impacted by her genius and constant support throughout my undergraduate and graduate career. Thank you.
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INTRODUCTION

Harold Bloom’s landmark book *The Anxiety of Influence* continues to prove its relevance among contemporary literary scholarship. First published in 1973, Bloom’s theory provides an insightful study of 19th-century Romantic writers’ tendency to reproduce the work of strong poets of the past. Bloom diagnoses the anxiety that accompanies awareness revealed in Romantic literature that for writers’ individual voices to be heard, they must exercise a successful misreading of their precursors. In Bloom’s view, awareness of this process may allow readers to explore the precursor in terms of the latter poet, rather than merely compare the present to a conception of a revolutionary past. However, for Bloom, only “strong poets” can overcome their anxiety. The six revisionary ratios he explores in his book suggest that “strong poets” tend to employ Askesis or Apophrades.¹ There appears to be a constant battle to differentiate tradition and the individual artist, and this is particularly relevant to critics of 19th-century literature, who sometimes fail to see beyond the precursor’s pen.

Drawing on Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*, and criticizing the patriarchal slant in it that focuses on male strength in writing, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar theorize in their revolutionary book, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination* (1979), that female authors have to overcome a unique form of anxiety.² Because Bloom’s theory emphasized masculine precursors, Gilbert and Gubar point out that female authors experience “a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a ‘precursor’ the act of writing will isolate or destroy her” (93). Though the anxiety of

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¹ Bloom defines this as a “movement of self-purgation which intends the attainment of a state of solitude” (15). Here, the author diminishes his own achievements and the achievements of the precursor, removing any remnants of influence. The last revisionary ratio, Apophrades, is defined as “return of the dead” (15). Here, the author experiences his previous state of solitude and opens his work for inspection. As a result, the predecessor’s work is read in terms of the successor’s work.

² Although it can be argued that Gilbert and Gubar’s work is seemingly outdated, this 700 page text is an early contributor to feminist literary criticism and is foundational to feminist studies.
authorship made history in Gilbert and Gubar’s eloquent piece of feminist literary theory, female authorial anxiety of influence is undeniably under-scrutinize. The work of Gilbert and Gubar serves as one of our only tools in analyzing the works of many female authors, demonstrating that feminist theory is desperately underdeveloped. Despite being outdated, the primary weakness of Gilbert and Gubar’s approach is that it encourages us to feel pity for influential female writers rather than respect their achievements.

This is relevant to my thesis as I explore anxiety, psychoanalysis, and authorship in Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* (1826), whose work manifests to me far more strength than anxiety. *The Last Man* has been a subject of critique since the 1960s. As the first novel published after the death of her husband, *The Last Man* is criticized by scholars, and primarily by feminist literary scholars. Scholarly readings of the novel tend to marginalize Shelley as an innovative, influential author by focusing on her anxieties of memory, inheritance, and familial lines rather than her themes and technical achievements.3 The text attempts to comment on a biographical sketch of Percy Bysshe Shelley, a conflicted lineage and Romantic inheritance, a millennial conflict about the need to look forward and backward simultaneously, and a single author’s desire to locate her writing in a long classical history. Shelley’s text is at once perceived to be a categorical failure of the Gothic genre, and it also exemplifies post-apocalyptic, or dystopian, literature.4 Scholars often criticize Shelley’s book through the lens of feminist theory and on the basis of historical—both political and personal—contexts. This leads most scholarship on the text to take what I see to be an underdeveloped feminist approach to her writing, being rooted in the overly “sympathetic” and insufficiently respectful feminist approach of Gilbert and Gubar.

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3 *The Last Man* received vast criticisms when it was first published, and it would not be republished until 1965. One of the first criticisms of the novel at this time was Jean dr Palacio’s “Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*: A Minor Romantic Theme” in 1968.

4 Dystopian literature is a genre that explores personal, social, and political structures that precede the cataclysmic events of the apocalypse.
Published in 1826, *The Last Man* is set in the years 2090-2100. It begins with a frame narrative that establishes the temporal displacement in the novel. The last man and the main character, Lionel Verney, represents a story within a story, beginning with the discovery of the sibylline leaves prophesizing the future and the ultimate end of the world at the end of the 21st century. In the “Author’s Introduction,” two companions explore the Sibyl’s cave, and discover “piles of leaves, fragments of bark, and a white filmy substance, resembling the inner part of the green hood which shelters the grain of the unripe Indian corn” (Shelley 3). On these leaves, they discover a fragmented prophecy of an impending plague in England that will bring the world to an end. The female discoverer of these leaves takes on the role of both editor and author and transforms these writings into the current narrative of the main character, Lionel Verney. This narrative explores the devastation of the plague, and it follows Verney living at the end of the 21st century as the plague destroys what he loves most, including his family and his nation.

As his family and friends perish, Verney journeys alone, and begins to experience an anxiety—both psychological and literary. He finds solace in the art of writing, but he realizes that since he is the last man on earth, leaving any mark would be rendered useless when there are no inhabitants to read or remember him. Yet this moment of anxiety and sadness ensues when Verney says that he “will write and leave in this most ancient city, this ‘world’s sole monument,’ a record of these things. I will leave a monument of the existence of Verney, the Last Man…I lift my eyes from my paper…again I feel that I am alone” (Shelley 372). Reflecting on the loved ones he lost along the way, he feels utterly alone and decides to write solely of desolation and death.

The anxiety expressed in Shelley’s novel produces a new genre for future authors to reproduce, which is none other than the apocalyptic genre. Deriving from the Old Testament,
apocalyptic literature is a literary genre that exaggerates cataclysmic events that will transpire at the end of the world. Apocalyptic literature uses destruction and death as a symbol for societal problems, but it also emphasizes the personal anxieties that are projected and transcribed through an intensified, exaggerated reality.

Contemporary horror fiction is best defined by one of its leading writers, Stephen King. With a vast imagination to create monstrous plots and an exceptional understanding of his readership, Stephen King is highly regarded as one of the best (and certainly most popular) authors of contemporary horror. He admits, however, that much of his inspiration derives from classic authors of horror fiction. He found particular motivation in *Frankenstein* while writing *Pet Sematary*; indeed, the parallels of plot in these novels as well as their personal anxieties when writing them are uncannily similar. Paying homage to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, King writes in *Danse Macabre*, “How did it happen that this modest gothic tale…became caught in a kind of cultural echo chamber, amplifying through the years until, a hundred and sixty-four years later, we have a cereal called Frankenberry…an old TV series called *The Munsters*…Aurora Frankenstein model kits…and a saying such as ‘He looked like Franken-stein’ as a kind of apotheosis of ugly?” (King 57). Realizing the power of television and popular culture, King demonstrates that Shelley’s *Frankenstein* remains relevant throughout different historical moments. As the Romantics engaged their past, the contemporary Gothic and horror genres appropriate and respond to past literature to render their own representation of what Bloom called the anxiety of influence. In the case of King, one can see how popular renderings of *Frankenstein* produce basic changes to the novel’s elements and discourses not only to meet the demands of contemporary audiences, but also to create new expectations and perceptions. In the

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5 See also Justin Brooks *Stephen King: A Primary Bibliography of the World's Most Popular Author* and George Beahm’s *Steven King: America's Best-loved Boogeyman*. 
present thesis I will show how we can also see this method being employed when comparing *The Stand* with *The Last Man*.

*Frankenstein* becomes synonymous with the expression of unconscious fear in the Gothic genre. Yet, its centrality overshadows other expressions of anxiety and fear that are evident in Shelley’s work, and the nuances that it inspires in later fiction. In “Mary Shelley, Author of *Frankenstein*,” Nora Cook states that Shelley’s idea of fear derives from the “unconscious and inexplicable sources of psychic disturbance” (*A New Companion to the Gothic* 111). These psychic disturbances are both personal and political. In his work, King expertly utilizes the personal and political elements of the precisely inexplicable sources of psychic disturbances to meet the demands of his contemporary readers. In an era defined by a ubiquitous fear of war, poverty, and contagion, King exaggerates the perverse anxieties of the 1970s—and again in the 1990s—in *The Stand*, one of the most famous horror novels in contemporary literature. One of the main points of my thesis is invested in articulating the apparent disparity between views of Shelley’s *The Last Man* and the work of Stephen King. While Shelley, who arguably initiates a particular genre of apocalyptic literature with *The Last Man*, is marginalized, King’s ability to transform the horror genre is lauded. One answer to this disparity urges a turn toward feminist theory and the exposure of the pattern to dismiss 19th-century female authors, as in George Elliot’s terms, ‘silly woman novelists.’ Another answer that I propose in this thesis is that the anxiety of influence pervades across and erodes both gender and temporal barriers. Shelley’s work in *The Last Man* is evidence of an assertion of crucial political and historical points that can also be found in German Romantic literature such as Heinrich von Kleist’s *Earthquake in Chilé* (1807), and Freud’s reading of Jensen’s *Gradiva* (1907).
Bloom’s work was deeply steeped in his reading of Freud and psychoanalysis. It is important to continue to explore the ways that Shelley’s *The Last Man* investigates anxiety in a way that stages a reading of it to contribute to new scholarship on Shelley today. My thesis works within this framework to show how, in conjunction with the anxiety of authorship, Jacques Lacan’s seminar on anxiety, *Le Seminaire livre X – L’angoisse*, explores how anxiety is manifested in both males and females. Despite eventually turning to issues of sexual difference, Lacan’s investigation begins with traditional gender categories distinguishing the having from the being of the phallus and power. In this seminar he states, “Men’s anxiety is linked to the possibility of not being able,” while “[f]or the woman, it is what initially she doesn’t have that constitutes the object of her desire at the start” (Lacan 189). For Lacan, men have the phallus and women are the phallus. The difference between having and being correlates to the process of writing in the context of the debate about anxiety of influence between Bloom and Gilbert and Gubar. The idea of “not being able,” the fear of impotence and the ultimate fear of castration, strongly correlates to the literary traditions of a man and his use of writing utensils.

In the context of feminist theory, this literal embodiment of power is all too obvious at times. As Gilbert and Gubar claim, “If a woman lacks generative literary power, then a man who loses or abuses such a power becomes a eunuch—or like a woman…When the imprisoned Marquis de Sade was denied ‘any use of pencil, ink, pen, and paper,’… he was figuratively emasculated” (Gilbert and Gubar 55). Since the apparent object of a female’s desire is what she does not have, Shelley’s anxiety can derive from her desire to both protect her family from illness and surpass her contemporaries, as will be discussed in chapter 1 and 3. Overcoming this anxiety is possible, as Freud and Lacan suggest, through sublimation; however, Gilbert and Gubar seem to suggest otherwise. Lacan sets the framework for the core of anxiety, but Gilbert
and Gubar combine it with literary tradition, focusing deeply on female and timely circumstances, ascribing to outside sources to her inability to produce. This once again requires us to pity female authors, rather than recognize them for their innovations and authority. For example, Gilbert and Gubar acknowledge that female authors of the 19th century were skilled writers; however, this fact is attributed primarily to their circumstances:

Women from Jane Austen and Mary Shelley to Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson produced literary works that are in some sense palimpsestic, works whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning. Thus these authors managed the difficult task of achieving true female literary authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards. (117)

Gilbert and Gubar do recognize that 19th-century female authors produced work that had more than surface level meaning, but it is deemed as their only choice due to their circumstances, ultimately undermining their ability to utilize literary devices such as metaphors on their own accord. This is because “there is just such a tradition, a tradition especially encompassing the works of nineteenth-century women writers who found viable ways of circumventing the problematic strategies we have just outlined” (Gilbert and Gubar 116). Thus, Gilbert and Gubar ascribe the illusion of society’s expected roles to Shelley’s literary genius, and claim that women of the 19th century were dependent on their relationships with others. As we shall see, Mary Shelley’s utilization of the plague as a metaphor surpasses her contemporaries as it is innovative for her time, and she takes her authority a step further by restoring the Sibyl, a prophetic female figure of ancient Greece.
These issues are crucial for an investigation of Mary Shelley and her work. Mary Shelley’s membership among a community full of literary geniuses places her at the crux of a study of Romanticism, its heritage, and its lineage. Shelley’s parents, Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin, her husband, their circle, and association with Lord Byron places Shelley in a long line a literary history, and it is important to study her contributions. However, by focusing on Shelley’s apparent anxiety of authorship, critics fail to recognize how *The Last Man* exemplifies Shelley’s accomplishments as a female author. Also, if we are to follow the “genius” of Gilbert and Gubar, we are at once limiting Shelley. Gilbert and Gubar thoroughly examine how female authority is threatened because “for the female artist the essential process of self-definition is complicated by all those patriarchal definitions that intervene between herself and herself” (61). Some critics such as Anne K. Mellor develop Gilbert and Gubar’s crucial points and claim that Shelley merely depended on others to form her own identity; however, I argue that her relationships with others did not define her. Instead, she used her relationships as inspiration for her works. The criticisms that Shelley depended on others and that her work reflects her identity grounded in her relationships with others not only belittles Shelley’s grief towards her family, but also her writing. Grieving is not solely a female activity; it is the experience of everyone, and to demonstrate the fear of illness, national and personal solitude, and mobility through an exaggerated apocalypse represents the struggles she had to overcome in her personal life. As we see in even contemporary apocalyptic texts, the topics that Shelley writes about are representative of a pervasive fear throughout time. In fact, Suparna Banerjee, author of "Beyond Biography: Re-Reading Gender In Mary Shelley's The Last Man," sees Shelley’s work as more than just a representation of her relationships. He argues that Shelley may actually be challenging or questioning relationships, particularly maternal and romantic
ones as dooming women to live lives full of frustration, suffering and “(self-)destruction” (Banerjee 526). Shelley ascribes this fate to “women’s proclivity toward excessive dependence on emotional interaction with men and their inordinate absorption into motherhood. She also indicates that this intensively relational self-definition is the result of their forced exclusion from participating independently in the public world” (Banerjee 526). Shelley thus sees the fate of women as problematic and decides to involve herself politically through her writing, alluding to various political issues as well as her mother’s work, *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). Her involvement and opinions regarding current political discussions, as discussed in chapter 2 of this thesis, challenges the idea of subservient wife, lover, and mother. Though a devoted wife and mother herself, Shelley “undermines her own ideology of the family by acknowledging that it confines and eventually even destroys the women who enact it” (Banerjee 526). *The Last Man* demonstrates the very act of undermining the family, particularly as Shelley characterizes Verney as an author who has an increased sense of authority, especially as he is the last man able to record history; much like Shelley is the last of her family to embark on this responsibility.

In fact, Verney’s account in the novel depicts an increased sense of authority in regards to authorship, and he expresses the importance of literature. He says:

> I had been wedded to literature. I felt convinced that however it might have been in former times, in the present stage of the world, no man’s faculties could be developed, no man’s moral principle be enlarged and liberal, without an extensive acquaintance of books… The collation of philosophical opinions, the study of historical facts, the acquirement of languages, were at once my recreation, and the serious aim of my life. I turned author myself…As my authorship increased, I acquired new sympathies and pleasures. I found another and a valuable link to enchain me to my fellow-creatures; my
point of sight was extended, and the inclinations and capacities of all human beings
became deeply interesting in me. Kings have been called the fathers of their people.

Suddenly I became as it were the father of all mankind. (Shelley 124)

This passage is especially significant before the disruption of the plague because it emphasizes a
need to record history, and perhaps it is a foreshadowing of the events to be recorded. Verney
demonstrates this by claiming that these histories, languages, and other criteria that create the
connections between human beings and their histories are at his control. In other words, Verney
as the father of mankind is symbolic of his (and Shelley’s) authorship; his survival exemplifies
the need to create literature for his own sanity, and it represents the desire to leave behind a
legacy. As men’s anxiety is linked to a fear of ‘not being able,’ Verney feels a need to record
history as the sole survivor of the plague. As a representation of Shelley, however, he also
remains consistent with Lacan’s view of female anxiety as it is linked to desire. His authorship is
the only thing he has left in his life; and, without an audience, he has the power to control what is
recorded. Her family’s demise similarly allowed Shelley to embark on her own literary voice,
demonstrating that she did not depend on her relationships.

For Lacan, the anxiety of a “last” juxtaposed with the need to record the past functions as
a fear of castration that takes on a temporal quality. Lacan’s concept of castration anxiety refines
the more traditional form expressed by Freud by foregrounding the traces of history (both past
and future) that affect fear and desire. For Lacan, a male subject “shrinks back from turning his
castration into something positive, namely, the guarantee of the function of the Other, this Other
that steals away in the indeterminate echo of significations, this Other in which the subject no
longer sees himself except as fate, but fate that has no end, fate that gets lost in the ocean of
histories” (46). Here, the Other functions as the subject’s reminder of the relationship between
him and his surrounding significations. The fate of Verney is indeed the fact that there is an end to not only human existence, but an end to literary history. Thus, the end of the Shelley family and Lord Byron perhaps gave Mary Shelley anxiety as the sole survivor; however, it is possible to conclude that the death that surrounded her inspired her to acquire her own sense of authorship. While the success of her predecessors remained, their death allowed Shelley to find her own voice and develop the confidence to be the literary mother of humankind.

Through the discussion of anxiety of authorship, the anxiety of memory in a long line of literary history is also examined in Shelley’s own life and in *The Last Man*. Charlotte Sussman also discusses this in her article about anxiety in *The Last Man*, claiming that “[o]nce people remove themselves permanently from a place, writing on monuments becomes a useless form of cultural memory” (296). Sussman suggests that by Verney leaving his homeland, leaving any mark would be useless because if it is the end of the world, no one will place their eyes on these monuments again. Sussman also suggests that “the hypermobility provoked by the plague destroys not only the future of a community but also its past, that it undermines cultural memory” (296). With the fear of emigration at the time, people moving from place to place posed a threat to cultural memory in regards to a nation as a whole, and an overall dissolution of culture through the journey of survival contributed to the fears of 19th-century proponents of emigration (Sussman 297). In regards to Shelley’s representative character, “Without an audience, the last man has no voice; an audience can only hear him as long as his travels remain in the context of European cultural history” (Sussman 299). In relation to Shelley as an author, it appears that Sussman suggests that the only way for her voice to be heard is by remaining in the context of Romanticism. By diverging from the norm, Shelley is dismissed as an influential
Thus the loneliness of the female artist, her feelings of alienation from male predecessors and successors, her urgent sense of her need for a female audience together with her fear of the antagonism of male readers…her anxiety about the impropriety of female invention—all these phenomena of ‘inferioritzation’ mark the woman writer’s struggle for artistic self-definition and differentiate her efforts at self-creation from those of her male counterpart. (94)

At the same time, Sussman, as well as Gilbert and Gubar contradict one another, and they leave Shelley in a paradox. More specifically, Sussman claims that by diverging from historical and cultural norms, Shelley is limited as an author, while Gilbert and Gubar claim that female writers prior to the 20th century struggle to even find artistic abilities and personal voices in their writing. In these views Shelley indeed loses both ways: by creating a new literary genre, Shelley will be undermined as an author by both her female and male contemporaries. However, if Shelley does not innovate, she will struggle to find her voice through her overall anxiety of authorship and feelings of alienation from her male predecessors. Sussman, and Gilbert and Gubar all suggest that Shelley feared her voice would not be heard to be as significant as those who preceded her (such as her mother, father, and husband). Compounding Shelley’s “burden,” Mellor contributes to her apparent anxiety by discussing the deprivation of female role-model and a lack of familial unity. Mellor says that, “Mary Shelley herself was deprived of a feminist role-model and a supportive family when her mother dies and was subsequently denounced in the popular British press as a harlot, atheist, and anarchist…Like Frankenstein’s creature, she has no positive prototype she can imitate, no place in history (Mellor 118). Mellor suggests
The fear of not being remembered or not having a voice is a potential universal fear. It is clear that Shelley felt the need to make her voice heard within a long line of literary history because of the influential writers in her own life. Instead of repressing these desires, Shelley creates the worst-case scenario in *The Last Man*, where the wiping out of humanity has double implications because humanity is demolished and there is also the potential for those who once lived to never be remembered again. Looking at Mellor’s suggestion that we compare Shelley to Frankenstein, it is imperative to recognize the strengths of Mary Shelley that were adapted without her mother’s guidance. If Shelley followed or imitated stylistic aspects of her family’s literature, she never would have found her voice or obtained authority. Although her authority is often questioned, and sometimes explained away by reference to her relationships with her family members, it is also present in this, her least revered text, *The Last Man*. This apparent lack of guidance leads to a particular aspect of Shelley’s novel that sets her aside from her contemporaries and allows Shelley the use of prophetic knowledge. This will be further discussed in chapter 3 of this thesis.

In addition to her personal life, her societal and political context threatened her originality and legacy. More specifically, Timothy Rupert states that “*The Last Man* reflects the fact that Shelley, by the age of twenty-nine, witnessed not only wartime violence and postwar authoritarianism but also the moment of British Romanticism’s greatness flicker” (153). I suggest that Shelley is one of the bravest authors of the 19th century due to her personal and
social struggles and how they are clearly represented in *The Last Man*. It is not only the fact that her works were published; it is the sheer quality and overall emotion demonstrated in her novels, especially *The Last Man*, that represents the truth in human nature. She is clearly not afraid to hide her struggles, although critics claim that this makes her weak as an author. However, I argue that her openness makes her stronger as an author because we can conclude that Shelley used the one man left standing in the novel as a metaphor for her own life—Shelley is indeed the last “man” standing in regards to her family, friends, and literary contemporaries. She is the sole survivor of the long line of literary genius; by recognizing her own status through her writing, Shelley could grieve and contribute to the growing genre of apocalyptic literature.

Not only is the mere suggestion of anxiety of authorship’s existence limiting to authors such as Shelley, but the way in which Gilbert and Gubar describe the effects of this anxiety further restrict female authority. Gilbert and Gubar discuss how “debilitating” the anxiety of authorship can be for women, and compare it to a disease:

In comparison to the ‘male’ tradition of strong, father-son combat, however, this female anxiety of authorship is profoundly debilitating. Handed down not from one woman to another but from the stern literary ‘fathers’ of patriarchy to all their ‘inferiorized’ female descendants, it is in many ways the germ of a dis-ease or, at any rate, a disaffection, a disturbance, a distrust, that spreads like a stain throughout the style and structure of much literature by women, especially—as we shall see in this study—throughout literature by women before the twentieth century. (95)

By comparing the authority of authorship to a disease, Gilbert and Gubar make it inevitable for women to “suffer” from this contagious phenomenon of lack of authority due to patriarchal
definitions of authorship, and the way in which they present this argument has a sense of finality. In other words, it is as if all women prior to the 20th century will suffer from an anxiety, but by making this claim, Gilbert and Gubar suggest that authors of this century and prior have nowhere to be placed on the influential literary scale in history. Interestingly, the “disease” can be constituted as a metaphor for the contagion and ultimate demise of the human race in *The Last Man*, as well as the debilitating environment in which women had to write. Through the death of her inspirational line of literary genius, Shelley exaggerates the fear of trying to find her voice. However, by using the plague as a metaphor, Shelley indeed gives an authoritative voice to the apparent “struggles,” or what society made her feel like, of finding her place in a long classical history of literature.

Shelley’s anxiety functions as a prophecy, and the temporality of anxiety is clearly perceived in Shelley’s desire for community. However, the contrary fear of solitude is a patriarchal mask. Therefore, this thesis aims to suggest that Shelley’s novel foregrounds various forms of anxiety. Although readers often see her anxiety as a psychological or social weakness, it is central to my thesis to show how her anxiety enhances the quality of her work. Shelley’s anxieties as demonstrated in her texts inspire an innovative approach to not only comment on her personal and political struggles, but they also distance her from her contemporaries, therefore allowing her to create a new literary genre. By critically analyzing the anxiety of illness, national isolation, and authorship through psychoanalytic theory and juxtaposing them with an underdeveloped feminist approach, I suggest that Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* is influential in the continuous growth of post-apocalyptic literature in the 20th and 21st century.
CHAPTER I. - ANXIETY OF ILLNESS

Anxiety about the end of the world has been culturally pervasive since its narration in the fear-inspiring Biblical book of *Revelations*; yet, literature about an escalating illness or plague that wipes out all of humanity and which also places particular focus on historical and political discussions was not necessarily popular in the Romantic era when Mary Shelley wrote *The Last Man*. During the British Romantic era, authors often used fear of the apocalypse and a contagious plague as a way for individuals to reflect on their own lives and their overall morals in a religious context. More specifically, 19th-century writers often used the end of civilization as a didactic metaphor for human beings’ ethical and religious faults.

Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man* is the first novel that she wrote after the death of her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley. Her personal loss and mourning are expressed in the novel’s themes and decision to produce an allegory of apocalypse. Many critics, however, consider her connections between the public and private worlds she embeds in her text to be a weakness. For instance, Mary Poovey suggests that the novel is “a simplified indulgence of self-pity” (qtd. in Banerjee 519). Other critics also dismiss *The Last Man* as a subpar tale, such as Mellor who suggests that Shelley was excessively dependent on others. Michael Eberle-Sinatra similarly claims that “both Shelley’s first and her third novel evidence a struggle, in paratext and text, over whether she is to be present as a (pseudo-) male author, a female author, a usurped author or an author of indeterminate gender, a struggle in which the ‘fear’ and ‘ambition’…are key operatives” (95). Generally, criticisms focus on autobiographical elements, including the memorialization of her husband and the alleged Anglo-centrism within the novel. However, there are other contributions that discuss the novel’s historiographical, prophetic, and temporal commentaries.
I suggest that the novel is highly relevant to an understanding of personal and political issues at stake in both Shelley’s life and the British *fin-de-siècle*. *The Last Man* is worthy of careful reading as it presents a serious commentary on the grief that Shelley feels, as well as the hypochondria that the British Empire experienced during the late Romantic Era. Although Britain did not suffer from pestilential summers like those the United States experienced during the yellow fever outbreak of the 1790s, “[S]cenes as this one dramatized how Britons now perceived flows of disease that crossed geographical and national borders with ease, channels of transmission that had long been open but which went largely unacknowledged because they tended only carry diseases from the old world to the new” (Grinnell 85). The views expressed by many scholars concerning Shelley’s “self-indulgence” and grief echo the sentiments asserted in Gilbert and Gubar’s landmark work, specifically with the notion that patriarchal traditions complicate female authors’ ability to define themselves (61). Some critics such as Mellor concur with Gilbert and Gubar in regards to Shelley’s dependence on others to form her own identity; however, this claim limits her authority and ingenuity as an author, and insists that Bloom’s anxiety of influence is the prevailing force behind Shelley’s writing. Inspiration cannot be misinterpreted as anxiety, and I challenge the criticism that declares that Shelley’s work reflects only an identity grounded in her relationships with others. Rather, she develops her own voice that is unique and continues to be unrecognized and unacknowledged even by the best of feminist critics. By continuing to utilize the work of Gilbert and Gubar, however, many critics continue to focus on Shelley’s romantic and maternal positions, claiming that she “had been taught to conceive of her self only in relational terms, as a daughter/wife/mother” (Mellor 169). These presumably feminist approaches actually limit authors like Shelley who created innovative literature. Therefore, I suggest a revision of the history of “feminist” scholarship that has
dismissed Shelley. More precisely, I argue that Shelley boldly utilizes the plague as a way to both heal herself from events that transpired in her personal life and to distance her writing from that of her contemporaries. Through sublimation, characterization, and the meaning of solitude that is created through illness, Shelley distances herself from her contemporaries and ultimately contributes to the now popular genre of dystopian literature. In fact, her work is ahead of its time, setting the stage for a new genre of apocalyptic literature that remains popular in our contemporary moment. Rather than being dismissed or behind her time or as others have stated, “self-indulgent,” Shelley’s work stands the test of time and informs current writing in a significant manner that accounts for the way that the personal and the political work in tandem.

Genre, the Populous, and Time

Although the use of an escalating illness that demolishes humanity was not common in the Romantic era, references to the end of the world are profuse in contemporary apocalyptic literature. Stephen King’s *The Stand* employs a narrative form that follows, even if it does not quite imitate, Shelley’s *The Last Man*. Like Shelley, King expertly plays on the debilitating fears of society through current events, and he escalates these situations into a cataclysmic phenomenon. What is particularly unfortunate about this is that while authors like King are lauded for this use of societal anxiety, Shelley is dismissed and simply criticized for writing literature that is merely cathartic and memorializing to her successful counterpart, P.B. Shelley. While Shelley’s expression of grief should not question her authority as an author, Shelley still “speculates upon what it means to fashion a medicalized understanding of the nation in an age of hypochondria” (Grinnell 86), demonstrating that her work is clearly dismissed as this component of her work is unrecognized by male patriarchal scholars.
In order to understand this temporal relationship between the apparent failure of the female authored apocalyptic text in the Romantic Era and the success of the male authored apocalyptic text in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, it is helpful to consider the psychoanalytical connections between the personal and the political as they illustrate anxiety and struggles between the subject as a singular being and a cultural group. Sigmund Freud’s and Jacques Lacan’s theories on anxiety and psychoanalysis in conjunction with Shelley’s novel help to demonstrate where Shelley’s anxiety derives and how it is used to create an innovative piece of literature for future authors, like Stephen King, to follow. Freud and Lacan argue that the most basic form of anxiety that is based on fears and the possibility of real and terrifying events to occur is the anxiety of reality. Here, reality means the world outside of the literary imagination, and it connects personal drives to cultural phenomenon that are perceptible in the material world. Although in the 19th century the plague exaggerates the idea of anxiety of illness, it does have a real grounding throughout earlier historical epochs when it demolished many cultural groups and nations. Shelley’s novel expresses the anxiety that still derives from something that is completely real; it also functions as a macrocosm for Shelley’s personal anxieties and the adversities that Shelley had to overcome in her life. Fear of the plague is one element in the expression of anxiety, but the actual contagion is quite real and possible. The anxiety between the fear and the real contagion are in conflict, and they also multiply and inform each other.

Shelley thus overcomes her personal anxiety by practicing what Freud refers to as sublimation. Simply put, sublimation is the transformation of a negative drive into a positive one in the shape of work or labor. Here, Shelley writes a novel that expresses anxiety in an historical setting, and transforms her fears into work. Instead of limiting her, like many of her critics claim, this approach that demonstrates Shelley’s vulnerability proves her to be valiant as she is able to
transform her personal struggles into an influential and innovative piece of literature that was not
deemed popular until the 20th century.

Lacan’s seminars on anxiety also explore how anxiety functions through desire: “The
existence of anxiety is linked to the fact that any demand, even the most archaic, always has
something illusory about it with respect to what preserves the place of desire. This is also what
explains the anguishing side of anything that gives a response to this false demand in such a way
as to fill it in” (Lacan 64). At a time of intense political discussions on emigration, England’s
borders were loose. And Lacan demonstrates how Shelley expresses her anxiety, specifically
regarding her desire to protect her homeland as it includes the people she adored most. As
England was already vulnerable because emigration as well as the maintenance of an imperial
economy, Shelley’s novel explores how in comparison to the vastness of the world, England was
relatively small and susceptible to disease and contagion. In Julia Wright’s “‘Little England’:
Anxieties of Space in Mary Shelley’s The Last Man,” she notes the anxiety that Verney
demonstrates throughout the novel regarding the populous and his spatial awareness:
“Geographical anxiety is intimately connected with the rising sense of powerlessness in the
novel. As the plague progresses, space becomes less manageable. Maps are inadequate,
characters self-consciously turn from wide-ranging maps…and even the sanctity of the English
country estate proves fictional as the plague invades and all falls into ruin” (138). Shelley
expresses her archaic desire for human survival through Verney as she realizes that boundaries
are “mere lines on a map” (Wright 138). These boundless lines act as a source of anxiety
because protection from illness is a priority, especially when it pertains to protecting the family.
The anxiety of illness coincides with the anxiety of solitude, and these proliferate throughout the
novel as the illness wipes out all of humanity, and one man, Lionel Verney, remains to tell a story that will not be heard.

**Shelley’s Personal Anxiety**

The anxiety of illness pierces the heart of Shelley’s personal life, and it can be argued that her anxiety derives from her desire to hold on to her only son, and only person, left in her life. Since the summer of 1819, illness and death was an unruly occurrence in her life that left her suffering from bodily and psychic ailments. And her neurotic depression, or what she preferred to call “bad spirits,” influenced her writing (Mellor 146). Shelley succumbed to eternal grief after the loss of both of her children, William and Clara Everina, and found no solace in her husband Percy, who became estranged from Mary due to her “bad spirits” which he thought would negatively affect his writing. Whereas her depression may have affected Percy’s career, Mary Shelley’s career flourished through her grief and even her anger towards Percy due to his, from what some might say, emotional abandonment. In particular, Shelley’s novels reflect sublimation; through her adversities, she redirects her suffering to her writing, creating innovative and influential literary works. Sublimation is further explored by Lacan in his seminar on *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*: “The sublimation that provides the *Trieb* with a satisfaction different from its aim—an aim that is still defined as its natural aim—is precisely that which reveals the true nature of the *Trieb* insofar as it is not simply instinct, but has a relationship to *das Ding* as such, to the Thing insofar as it is distinct from the object” (110). The *Trieb*, or urge, for Shelley is to protect the only person left in her life, her son, from illness. As she did grieve over the personal events that transpired in her life, the *Trieb* allowed her to produce a piece of literature that was outside the realm of traditional Romantic texts during the 19th century. However, not all critics agree with this notion of sublimation. For example, Poovey “sees the
‘defining characteristics’ of the novel as ‘pain, loss and grief’ and reads in it ‘a simplified indulgence of self-pity’. Fiona Stafford too locates its origin in bereavement and sees it as ‘an expression and study of grief’” (qtd. in Banerjee). Unlike Poovey, however, Stafford perceives the novel’s expression of grief to have for Shelley “a cathartic effect of purifying, reducing, and eventually ending previously uncontrollable emotions” (qtd in Banerjee 519). While recognizing the cathartic effect that sublimation may produce for Shelley, Stafford’s critique at once limits her novelty by merely reducing the novel to a grieving process to help her to control her “neurotic” behavior. Banerjee recognizes Shelley’s re-direction of grief as a “creative transcendence,” where her suffering engages meaningfully “with the world outside itself” (Banerjee 520). “Just as Shelley rejected the conventional elegiac modes of mourning so too her act of mourning transcends the boundaries of the self. As a rich cultural text her grief-work comments on major socio-cultural themes that both informed the world she lived in and preoccupied her personally” (Banerjee 520). Not merely a grieving process, Shelley’s writing transcends her personal life. She does not merely focus on the bereavement of her loved ones—she utilizes these emotions and personal triumphs in conjunction with major political and cultural themes throughout the novel.

Shelley’s act of sublimation can be connected to Lacan’s seminar on anxiety as her anxiety derives from the desire to protect her only son from disease and death. Lacan emphasizes that anxiety occurs with something that was “already there, at much closer quarters, at home, Heim…[it is] this unknown occupant that appears in an unexpected way is absolutely related to what’s encountered in the Unheimliche, but it’s too little to designate like that because, as the term indicates very well for you in French, this hôte, in its ordinary meaning is already something well-wrought through with expectation” (Lacan 75). The Uncanny, or Unmeimliche,
is particularly at work in Shelley’s novel as the familiarity of her home life and family becomes unfamiliar, desolate, and frightening. Thus, Shelley writes the novel in a way that expertly depicts the phenomenon of the uncanny. The anxiety that occurred in her real life has influenced the reality of her isolation in written form, and “[t]hat is why anxiety is the direct antithesis of the wish, why antitheses are so closely allied in association and why they occur together in the unconscious, as we have heard” (Freud 192-93). Shelley’s anxiety of illness in her personal life, deriving from her desire to protect her only son and person left in her life, is seen clearly in the novel when Verney realizes that the last two people in his life, and ultimately in the world, are dead: “I would have wound myself like ivy inextricably round them, so that the blow might destroy us. I would have entered and been a part of them—so that if the dull substance of my flesh were thought, even now I had accompanied them to their new and incommunicable abode” (Shelley 360). The desire to protect his friends is evident, but there is also a clear anxiety of isolation that coincides with the anxiety of illness and death since Verney expresses his willingness to accompany his friends to their demise. As he contemplates their death, Verney echoes Shelley’s feelings at the time, and sublimation is particularly seen as she writes in this powerful moment of grief: “Oh! Grief is fantastic; it weaves a web on which to trace the history of its woe from ever form and change around; it incorporates itself with all living nature; it finds sustenance in every object; as light, it fills all things, and, like light, it gives its ow colours to all” (356). This sentiment is highly reflective of Shelley’s personal anxiety of illness and isolation, but the use of sublimation is strong, and it allows Shelley to write an honest and powerful piece of literature. With this particular form of anxiety, an anxiety that Freud refers to as a general condition of anxiety, Shelley experienced “expectant fear” or “anxious expectation” (347). Freud states that “[p]ersons who suffer from this sort of fear always prophesy the most terrible of all
possibilities…and ascribe a dreadful meaning to all uncertainty. Many persons who cannot be termed ill show this tendency to anticipate disaster. We blame them for being over-anxious or pessimistic” (347). This sentiment is clearly expressed by Shelley’s critics, and The Last Man is seen as poorly written on account of her anxieties being openly expressed. The novel is wrongly viewed as a self-indulgence of self-pity and merely as memorializing to her husband, and with the desolation of the plague and the emphasis on lastness, it appears that Shelley does not leave much room for optimism, referring back to the way in which people categorize the general condition of anxiety as “over-anxious or pessimistic.” Her emotions are reduced to neurotic behavior that could only be cured through writing, and this undeniably limits her authority and agency as an author.

Though Shelley’s anger persisted towards her husband regarding his emotional abandonment, and her feelings towards him are exemplified as she wrote her famous novels Mathilda (1820) and Frankenstein (1823), Shelley’s career takes a new turn after Percy’s careless death of from drowning. A chapter of Mellor’s book, Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters, “Love Guilt and Reparation: The Last Man,” truly represents the inspiration of Shelley’s undermined dystopian novel, and demonstrates potential sources of her own personal anxiety of illness. More specifically, Idris, Adrian’s sister and Verney’s wife in The Last Man, represents the epitome of motherhood, and seeks fulfillment in the love for her family. Banerjee notices Shelley’s use of characterization as Idris “is destroyed by maternal anxieties” (180). Above all else, she is characterized as an affectionate mother: “Idris, the most affectionate wife, sister and friend, was a tender and loving mother. The feeling was not with her as with many a pastime; it was a passion” (Shelley 180).
Consequently, after the plague reaches England, her maternal anxieties deepen and cripple her physically and psychically and “[cause] her ‘triumphant and rapturous emotions of maternity’ to be changed into those of ‘grief and fear’ for the welfare of her two surviving children” (180) (Banerjee 525-26). Idris’s husband, Verney, describes her anxiety in a way that demonstrates an understanding of her condition, yet feels helpless in alleviating her: “If Idris became thin and pale, it was anxiety that occasioned the change; an anxiety I could in no way alleviate. She never complained, but sleep and appetite fled from her, a slow fever preyed on her veins” (Shelley 253). Her torment is so great that “she compare(s) this gnawing of sleepless expectation of evil, to the vulture that fed on the heart of Prometheus” (Shelley 242). The maternal, affectionate, and self-sacrificing qualities that Idris possess are clear as the group plans to leave the only place she has ever known:

   The images of health and hope which I presented to her, made her with a smile of consent. With a smile she agreed to leave her country, from which she had never before seen absent, and the spot she had inhabited from infancy; the forest and its mighty trees, the woodland paths and green recesses, where she had played in childhood, and had lived so happily through youth; she would leave them without regret, for she hoped to purchase thus the lives of her children. They were her life; dearer than a spot consecrated to love, dearer than all else the earth contained. (Shelley 181)

Evidently, Idris is willing to sacrifice everything for her children to live better lives and to survive the epidemic—even if that means leaving behind everything she has ever known. Instead of viewing the departure of the motherland of England as something to bemoan, Idris realizes there could be hope after all, for she knows that staying means the demise of her children.
Unfortunately, the uncontrollable force of illness prevails when her sons succumb to the plague and die. Idris clearly lives for her children as she dies of bereavement soon after their demise.

The connection between Idris and Shelley is their undeniable love for their children, and especially the fear of their well-being. As stated by Mellor, “In Idris Mary Shelley projects both her own obsessive grief for her dead Clara and William…and her enduring and excessive anxiety for the health of her only surviving child, Percy Florence, for whose sake alone she claimed to continue living…Because Idris identifies so closely with her children, she has no life of her own—her sons’ deaths annihilate her as well” (155). Shelley’s personal experience of the death of her children made her susceptible to the production of (or experience of) anxiety of illness for the only son she had left was inevitable. Lacan emphasizes that at the core of experiencing anxiety is a certain desire, and, as he explains, “at the heart of the experience of desire lies what remains when desire has been, let’s say, satisfied, what remains at the end of desire, an end that is always a false end, an end that is always the result of having got it wrong” (Lacan 175). Protection from illness was key; however, Shelley’s novel depicts the relationship between human’s need for control and uncontrollable forces in many aspects of life, including illness and death. Death is an inevitable aspect of life; yet, the diffusion of illness in The Last Man was something that no one expected to escalate as quickly as it did, and individuals either simply gave up or they took action. More specifically, Verney, although seemingly hopeless, tries to save the ones he loves by considering migration: “I spread the whole earth out as a map before me. On no one spot of its surface could I put my finger and say, here is safety” (Shelley 144). The need for control and the need to protect the ones he loves, as well as his nation, is undermined by the appearance of the inevitable force of the plague. Through this imminent demise, it is apparent that taking action, or in this case running away, will not stop the
uncontrollable forces of death and illness, and this is demonstrated through the passing of Idris’s sons. The feeling of anxiety caused by the inevitability of illness, and ultimately death, was most likely felt in Shelley’s own life due to the dichotomy of protecting her only son—and only person—left in her life and the natural forces of the world that surrounded her.

Shelley’s anxiety of illness, which was a large part of her personal life, transformed her novel from something that was natural (death), into something that was unnatural, or extreme (the plague), once again emphasizing the Uncanny. The pain that she felt after the death of her children, her husband, and even the abandonment of Lord Byron not only gave her an anxiety of illness, but an anxiety of solitude; thus, the epidemic pursued in her novel. The pain Shelley employs in her writing deriving from unfortunate events allowed her to not only distance, or heal, herself from the loss, but also create a new genre of literature. Mellor seems to support Mary Shelley by claiming it to be the first apocalyptic novel; however, Mellor’s feminist arguments justifying Shelley’s reasoning for writing the novel paradoxically undermine her authority as an author. According to Mellor, “In psychological terms, the novel enabled Mary Shelley to gain distance from and some control over her profound anger and loss” (144). Through her anxiety of illness and isolation, Shelley finds inspiration for a genre that finally allowed her to heal. Shelley clearly did not choose wallowing stagnation as a result of her grief. Contrastingly, she distances herself from her grief, and potentially overcame her pervasive fears of death and dying through the use of the apocalypse in The Last Man. While Mellor agrees that the novel allowed Shelley to gain distance from her turmoil, she also undermines her authority by focusing on her dependence on others. According to Mellor, “Lacking a firm conviction in her own ego, grounding her identity entirely on her relationships with others, Mary Shelley was acutely aware of the fragility and temporality of those very relationships and acts of engagement
through which ideological meaning can alone be represented and sustained” (169). Mellor suggests that Shelley experienced an anxiety of solitude, deriving from a fear of others leaving her. No matter the circumstances and overall domestic lifestyle of 19th-century women, being dependent on others is very much a ubiquitous phenomenon throughout history, and will continue to be a part of human nature in the future. Banerjee recognizes the way in which Shelley distances herself from her contemporaries in regards to anxiety of isolation when he states that other 19th-century writers utilized conventions of the “Kindertotenlieder” in order to “minimize and mitigate loss through imagining eternal union/reunion with the dead children” (Banerjee 520). Shelley, on the other hand, “painfully recreat(es) and reexperienc(es)” her maternal and other personal losses through a “fantasy of apocalyptic destruction and disintegration that mirrors the chaos of ‘her ruined inner world’, ravaged by feelings of unconscious guilt, rage, anxiety and despair. Through this reliving of negative feelings Shelley comes to terms with them, the final chapter of the novel telling ‘a story . . . of survival, of the art of losing’, whereby, like Verney, Shelley gains the ability to ‘face the ruins and survive’” (Banerjee 520).

In contrast with Mellor’s view, being dependent on human relationships is not solely a female characteristic, nor is it something to scorn as it is seen in The Last Man that men also depend on relationships in order to survive. As the knowledge of the plague permeates Verney’s mind and psyche, he fearfully reflects on the safety of his family:

This feeling of universal misery assumed concentration and shape, when I looked on my wife and children; and the thought of danger to them possessed my whole being with fear...I would seek the mountain eagle’s eirie, and live years suspended in some accessible recess of a sea-bounding cliff—no labour too great, no scheme too wild, if it
promised life to them. O! ye heart-strings of mine, could ye be torn asunder, and my soul not spend itself in tears of blood for sorrow! (Shelley 138)

Verney’s dedication to his family not only represents his stereotypical, patriarchal duty as a husband and father, but his dependability on his relationships with his wife and children. It is evident that Verney will do anything in his power to keep his family alive, yet his sentiments suggest that he does not want to live life in their absence. Verney bemoans "the vast annihilation that has swallowed all things-the voiceless solitude of the once busy earth" (Shelley 267). As the last man, Verney finds that his “voice, unused now to utter sound, comes strangely on [his] ears” (Shelley 372). Sussman states that “[t]he diminishing number of human voices first erases the identity of the nation and finally threatens to render the last individual un-recognizable to himself” (12). The anxiety of illness thus transpires as Shelley identifies with Verney as the last woman of her familial, Romantic inheritance. Like Shelley, Verney’s solitude brings him to the “edge of narrative's capacity to preserve and communicate experience” (Sussman 14). Therefore, with no one left in Shelley’s life, she may have struggled with feelings of isolation, particularly in regards to her voice being heard. Nonetheless, the need for human relationships is not a flaw, some critics to the contrary. If anything, this human “flaw” increases Shelley’s credibility as an author as she uniquely expresses her fears, as well as the fears of everyone, in a mass-destructive, apocalyptic universe.

Dystopian Anxiety from Shelley to King

Other lauded authors of contemporary dystopian literature developed similar techniques as Shelley, where personal and societal anxieties are employed in a highly exaggerated manner. One of the most popular dystopian novels of the 20th century is Stephen King’s The Stand. Grounding his opinions on a multitude of topics through the metaphor of the plague, this novel
expertly embodies how authors use current political and societal issues in a hyperbolic, worst-case-scenario situation in literature. For King, *The Stand* grapples with current economic and political upheavals in the 1970s. More specifically, with individuals seeing the first scare of gas shortages, troubled brewed in the Middle East, and American factories were moving jobs overseas, meaning unemployment rates were on the rise. Also, with the post-Vietnam war, concerns of environmental safety, contagion, and containment were ubiquitous. By creating a world where disease, death, and an overall separation of good versus evil destroys human-kind, King test the limits of current societal and political disturbances. He ultimately makes these issues seem more realistic and goals are more attainable unlike the world portrayed in the novel. It is no wonder why *The Stand* was a major hit—society was collectively experiencing anxiety regarding world issues, particularly illness, and creating a world where those fears were magnified was the perfect way for King to play with those fears. King’s achievements such as having number one hits on *New York Times* bestsellers list would, according to Ross Douthat, author of “Stephen King’s American Apocalypse,” “[P]robably earn King a certain kind of literary immortality, the sort reserved for such genre pioneers as Arthur Conan Doyle and Jules Verne…But King has the rare distinction of being both a pioneer and a perfecter; he has both created the modern horror novel and imbued it with an unexpected literary respectability” (15). In other words, Douthat claims that King has a literary respectability like no other author due to his creative development of the modern horror.

Additionally, Douthat explains that King has a multitude of readers and that his work is extremely significant not only because of the frightening creatures or characters such as ghosts and vampires, or the sex and violence, but because of “King’s ability to imbue his tales of the uncanny with a realism, a cultural relevance, and a theological heft that’s missing in even the
highest of contemporary American fiction” (15). This development of the modern horror, however, had to derive and have inspiration from somewhere. The legitimacy of Shelley’s work may be questioned, especially with her lack of technological or historical advancements. However, the realism of illness and death presented as a result of current fears during Shelley’s time of emigration and the death that occurred in her own life is truly prominent. King is clearly not the first and certainly not the last to create a novel that depicts a cultural relevance. King indeed cleverly asserts certain positions in *The Stand* in regards to current issues in the 1970s, and he undoubtedly takes these current events and transforms them into an exaggerated and even more frightful phenomenon; however, he is not the founder of a new literary genre, or even an author who advanced a literary genre. What seems predominantly undermined in Shelley’s novel is the use of personal anxieties as they are seen as a weakness. However, if it is seen as a clear depiction of societal fear of contagion, like Stephen King writes, it is then considered innovative and lauded for its cultural relevance. Although unnoticed, Shelley utilizes societal fears of contagion in her novel as well, and the novel “explores nervous intuitions of sickness that enable some characters to possess almost fantastic abilities to sense the presence of disease and thus exist in a state of health that is well and ill (Grinnell 91). She also carefully characterizes Adrian, the Earl of Windsor. This is perhaps a “gesture which demonstrates in part the lasting effects of an eighteenth century discourse of hypochondriacal nationalism, as well as the pervasive health-consciousness of the period” (Grinnell 101), which will also be further explored in the next chapter. Thus, it is evident that although Shelley utilized both personal and national anxieties, she still remains unnoticed for being a precursor of the apocalyptic genre creation.

It is imperative to recognize that while King is lauded, Shelley is dismissed. When discussing the topic of apocalypse in literature, Shelley is certainly not represented, or even
mentioned, in this category. According to Gregory O’Dea, author of "Prophetic History and Textuality in Mary Shelley's The Last Man,"

Not least among entries into the field is Mary Shelley’s The Last Man (1826). It is perhaps indicative of our estimation of Mary Shelley, however, that this novel is rarely discussed except as a kind of (auto)biographical monument: The Last Man is usually read as evidence of its author’s loneliness and despair in the years following the death of her husband, Percy Bysshe Shelley, or for its idealized portraits of P.B. Shelley (in the character of Adrian) and Lord Byron (as Lord Rayond)…the readings tend to ignore the novel’s philosophical and thematic content, and implicitly resist the thought that Shelley had ideas to examine independent of her circumstances and acquaintances. (283-84)

To add to O’Dea, Shelley’s grief is no doubt eminent in The Last Man due to the death of her husband, and his estrangement from Shelley up until his death inspired many aspects of the novel as well as the death of all but one of her children. Critics only categorize Shelley’s novel on the basis of her emotional turmoil and admiration for her husband and other fellow contemporaries such as Lord Byron when the novel represents so much more than that, including the ideas discussed by Grinnell that the plague is “part of a textual pandemic of reiterated scenes of infection; it is part of American and British national discourses of self; it is a symptom of contemporary English anxiety regarding the effects of colonial enterprise, though it is also a symptom of contemporary hypochondria” (115). It is also a comment on Shelley’s involvement with politics in a time where people feared losing the motherland of England due to increased emigration debates, which will be further explored in Chapter 2. Nonetheless, the emotional component that Shelley conveys throughout the novel should not be undermined as sublimation
is a significant contributing factor to her ingenuity as an author as this expression of anxiety was not commonly used during the Romantic era.
CHAPTER II. – ANXIETY OF NATIONAL SOLITUDE

To leave the country of our fathers, made holy by their graves! We could not feel even as a voluntary exile of old, who might for pleasure or convenience forsake his native soil; though thousands of miles might divide him, England was still part of him, as he of her. He heard of the passing events of the day; he knew that if he returned, and resumed his place in society, the entrance was still open, and it required but the will, to surround himself once more with the associations and habits of boyhood. Not so with us, the remnant. We left none to represent us, none to repeople the desert land, and the name of England died when we left her...

– Shelley, *The Last Man*, 259

Though the fear of illness, and the ultimate inspiration for this dystopian novel, is clear in Mary Shelley’s personal life, the anxiety of solitude coincides personally and nationally. As death will inevitably encroach on each and every individual, the fear of being alone is imminent. However, in the 19th century this fear is not only present in one’s personal life, but in regards to one’s national identity. Shelley not only depended on her own personal relationships in her life, but recognized the societal fears of losing a nation that dominated much of England’s 19th-century political culture. As a pivotal time in England, the loss of an Empire, the longing for the preservation of England as motherland, and the increase in globalization left people xenophobic and uncertain about the future. The theme of preservation directly correlates to the need of belonging, which is also prevalent in *Frankenstein* through Victor Frankenstein, the creature, and Robert Walton. Thus, Shelley’s political involvement is evident throughout her literary career, giving her more authority than she receives credit for. In *The Last Man*, The plague exerts extreme pressure on the idea of national community in particular, by forcing a reevaluation of the number of people needed to continue a nation as a living community. Furthermore, it increases human mobility, severing all local attachments as its survivors seek safety. By considering these issues, *The Last Man* engages with contemporary sociopolitical debates and reflects on the consequences of those debates for literary production and readership (Sussman 287). Thus, this
chapter explores Shelley’s novel in relation to her involvement in current political debates, particularly that of emigration and the ultimate anxiety of national solitude as well as mobility.

Although Shelley exhibits a connectedness to a place of origin, terms like “nation” are extremely elusive, and must be analyzed when reading into Mary Shelley’s personal life and her overall intentions for *The Last Man*. From the perspective of Benedict Anderson, author of *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, one might see that Shelley’s anxiety is justified. Anderson claims that term “community” that reflects a nation in particular is imagined, and “[i]t is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (7). This imagined idea of wholeness is imperative to recognize in analyzing Shelley’s reasoning behind *The Last Man*. Due to the death of her entire family, perhaps Shelley felt that she was abandoned in a homeland that is vacant and so she seeks solace within the political uproar on emigration. With the support of emigration, a lack of community is imaginable. At the same time, however, the homeland of England cannot necessarily be lost without an established nation to begin with, as proposed by Anderson.

These pervasive fears, centered on national solitude, are exaggerated through the plague and the mobility of survivors in *The Last Man*. Although this anxiety represents Shelley’s desire to remain knowledgeable in a time of political uproar, and perhaps seek solace with the loss of her family, this aspect of the novel is read as a personal account of death, rather than societal fears of the death of a nation. Because of the resemblance to her personal life, and because its publication was soon after the death of her husband, the novel is dismissed as merely a personal memoir in a highly exaggerated apocalypse. Therefore, it is necessary to consider and explore the political debates at the time the novel was written, the way in which the characters allude to
these debates within the novel, and to compare Shelley’s metaphor of the plague to other lauded authors, such as Stephen King. By juxtaposing Shelley’s personal life with her knowledge and involvement in politics, the reasoning behind the novel will continue to unfold. Also, because this novel receives little praise by feminist scholars and critics, by exploring the metaphor of the plague and comparing it to other lauded novels with similar motifs, Shelley’s creativity and authority as an author can be further established. In other apocalyptic literature, the use of the apocalypse is symbolic for societal issues that are transferred and transcribed through an intensified, exaggerated reality. This was not deemed popular until the 20th century, and with this analysis, it can be argued that Shelley surpasses her contemporaries and becomes a major influence for future authors such as King to follow.

Emigration and England

During 19th century, debates arose regarding the benefits as well as disadvantages of emigration in England. Although emigration was considered a potential cure for perils of overpopulation, the opposing sides of the debate were in agreement regarding the “strain it would put on cultural and national community, two categories that did not necessarily overlap” (Sussman 287). The debate about emigration provoked other significant questions about the definition of community and the “extent to which communities were constituted by the territory they inhabited and the degree to which they were based on customs and traditions” (Sussman 287). This also led to questions of belonging and having a connection with one’s community by exploring the difference between emigrants and exiles, between those still connected to their original homeland and those banned from it. Sussman notes a particular question of concern: “How far could someone travel from his or her native environment…and still retain a connection
This question is explored in *The Last Man* as Verney, the lone survivor, travels away from his homeland on a journey without a clear destiny.

Although emigration offered the potential to alleviate the stress of overpopulation, Shelley also contrastingly questions if society can sustain itself with few numbers. She demonstrates a stark opposition to the encouragement of emigration, using the plague “as a way to trigger and consider the movement of vast numbers of people” (Sussman 287). As discussed in Chapter 1, protection from illness was key, and the novel explores the Romantic notion of well-being and how it must be understood as a “spatial event in the consciousness of the age, one that draws together distinct nations and geographies into a global web of territorial and rhetorical health” (Grinnel 86). The idea of maintaining a sense of community and the fear of contagion from surrounding countries represents the idea of effective colonial rule, but it is also a symptom of hypochondria. Grinnel notes that “[b]ecause well-being is a metaphor for something that cannot be totaled and brought into visible sight or confirmed absolutely, it is readily remapped as a potent figure for so many social, cultural, and political concepts, and that volatile availability to new inscriptions is only heightened amid representations of epidemic disease” (115). This concern is eminent in Shelley’s novel, and it demonstrates an exaggerated future that forces a nation to remove itself from and take action towards the current state of colonial order in the hopes of returning to “the promise, well not of ‘England as a well-defended sanctuary’ (Wright, 2000, p. 129), but at least of a nation whose future destruction is less certain” (Grinnel 90). Both Shelley’s characters and the global catastrophe of the plague comment on the debates at the time as well as the undermining of sovereignty.

In *The Last Man*, Shelley brilliantly develops her characters to exemplify contemporary political upheavals and discourses that are relevant to her historical context. Sussman also
recognizes Shelley’s particular characterization, which demonstrates her stark opposition to emigration, when she states, “*The Last Man* seems to align itself with opponents to emigration. Much of this imagery, including the poignancy of leaving ancestral graves and nostalgia for the associations of childhood, might have been taken from the rhetoric denouncing government support for emigration” (293). The fear of losing a nation intensifies as Verney realizes that in order to survive the expanding plague, they must leave their homeland.

At this point of the novel, the year is 2096, and the nostalgia of staying in the motherland is in conflict with the need to survive. As the fear of illness intensifies, discussions of emigration grow among the few survivors. Thinking of their overall well-being and potential hope for the future, Verney seems motivated by the idea and informs Adrian. Considering England as a corpse, Verney questions, “Shall we, in these desert halls, under wintry sky, sit with closed eyes and folded hands, expecting death?” (Shelley 260). The son of the last King of England, Adrian is driven by philanthropy and philosophy, rather than ambition. He thus understands that he must consider the needs of the remaining survivors and promptly constructs a plan for departure. Even Idris demonstrates some hope for the future as she yearns for the well-being of her husband and children, and it is at this moment when maternal instincts must outweigh nostalgia. Clearly grieving together for the loss of the home, Verney and Idris “wept together in consolatory tears, and then calm—nay, almost cheerful, we returned to the castle” (Shelley 262).

Nonetheless, despite the way hope and the need to survive drive the survivors to flee, thoughts of the past creep into the minds of the evacuators. The love and respect for the once motherland of England is transformed into a melancholic nostalgia in which founding fathers are memorialized for their contributions to this great nation:
To leave the country of our fathers, made holy by their graves! We could not feel even as a voluntary exile of old, who might for pleasure or convenience forsake his native soil; though thousands of miles might divide him, England was still part of him, as he of her. He heard of the passing events of the day; he knew that if he returned, and resumed his place in society, the entrance was still open, and it required but the will, to surround himself once more with the associations and habits of boyhood. Not so with us, the remnant. We left none to represent us, none to repeople the desert land, and the name of England died when we left her...

(Shelley 259)

The nostalgia towards Verney’s homeland demonstrates that the plague not only threatens the security of environment and territory, but it also threatens the sense of community and the sanctity of its inhabitants. Essentially, as individuals either perished or fled, England could not sustain itself and became a gravesite. This is evident as Verney bemoans, “England, late birthplace of excellence and school of the wise, thy children are gone, thy glory faded!” (Shelley 258). He continues to memorialize England, explaining how it is a place renowned for its inhabitants, rather than resources, especially “thy children, their unwearied industry and lofty inspiration” (Shelley 258). With the relentless plague, death is inevitable, and these children “are gone, and thou goest with them the oft trodden path that leads to oblivion” (Shelley 258). The emphasis on nostalgia is not uncommon to the Romantics because much of their work attempted to recover the history of their nation, and Shelley asserts this idea in The Last Man with a certain emphasis on community and relationships as this highly influences the connection one has with a nation. Because the industrial revolution and changes in government and the economy occurred during the time of Romanticism, many authors emphasized their way of life in the city with
much nostalgia for a time in which nature was accessible. In an age powered by smoke and steam, and a nation characterized by colonial expansion, “‘nervous disease began to shew themselves more eminently’ in England in the nineteenth century than in any early period” (qtd. in Grinnel 92). Ultimately, anxiety emerges since the desire for life away from the city as well as a need for political reform was emphasized, particularly by other Romantics, such as Wordsworth and P.B. Shelley.

Instead of using nature as a metaphor for these changes or explicitly emphasizing a longing for nature, Shelley exemplifies the literal sickness of the nation through the metaphor of the plague in order to comment on societal and governmental issues. This also distances herself from her contemporaries, and the plague serves as a metaphor for emigration and government involvement in this process. Just as the plague brings fleeing and death, emigration encourages expansion and an ultimate loss of a nation. Additionally, emigration signifies lose borders, demonstrating the potential for national “impurities.” With the fear of not being able to sustain a nation, the lack of borders encourages mobility of those who do not belong in England. Shelley uses Verney to reference this controversial issue in the novel, particularly when he comments on the Irish, whose "disorganized multitudes" are "collected in unnatural numbers" (Shelley 298).

Verney also notes that the English were appalled by the Irish’s "disorderly clamour, the barbarian shouts, the untimed step of thousands coming in disarray" (Shelley 300). The plague causes the nation’s barriers to become “hypersensitive and vulnerable,” and with new groups coming in and current inhabitants fleeing out, “societies lose their order, their rhythms, their civilization—their numbers become ‘unnatural’” (Sussman 290). Verney even encounters a plague sufferer, whom he refers to as a “negro half clad,” and he held Verney with a “convulsive grasp. With mixed horror and impatience I strove to disengage myself…his face was close to
mine, and his breath, death-laden, entered my vitals...I sprang up, threw the wretch from me, and [darted] up the staircase” (Shelley 85). With the ongoing debate of emigration, this encounter demonstrates the anxiety of infection, particularly from those that are deemed outsiders. The idea of national health, “an imagined community of health,” forces the nation into communication with the diseased outsiders, and “thus paradoxically imbricates it in a web of possible infection in order to secure its singular well-being” (Grinnel 113). Verney’s horror and disgust exemplifies the need for purity within the confines of England; however, with the debate of emigration and the constant movement of individuals, it is inevitable to encounter those that will plague the nation.

The fear of solitude, both personally and nationally, is yet again a natural human phenomenon, and it is displayed in a powerfully exaggerated way in *The Last Man*. At a time when debates on emigration were staggering, the fear of standing alone in a nation was an argument against emigration, and Shelley demonstrates the fear of lacking national coherence by obliterating human-kind. In Sussman’s article, the topic of national identity and coherence is discussed in the perspective of the current political issues and how they are addressed in *The Last Man*. According to Sussman, “As the epidemic comes to England, *The Last Man* uses the imaginative force of mental power and empirical measurements to convey the state of the nation. Searching for appropriate figures, Verney moves between two kinds of metaphor: personifying England as a human body and comparing it to the inanimate spaces of a tomb or a grave” (288). These combined metaphors can exemplify a multitude of interpretations. First, and most obvious, these metaphors can signify the need for a nation to be personified in a way that individuals can deeply be connected to, and the overall importance of numbers to national coherence and feeling of connectedness. Sussman continues by saying, “Soon he makes even clearer the importance of
numbers not only to national coherence but also to human identity itself…” (288). Clearly, the fear of solitude is represented in *The Last Man*, as Shelley questions the limits of the human psyche within a disappearing coherent society. While a man by himself may be weak, Shelley poses the question of if society can sustain itself with few numbers.

The metaphor of England as both a personification of a human and as a tomb can also be representative of Sigmund Freud’s *The Uncanny*, where something familiar—Verney’s homeland of England which is personified as a human body—becomes something frightful, like the metaphor of England as a tomb, referring to the inevitability of death. According to Freud, “From what I have observed, this phenomenon does undoubtedly, subject to certain conditions and combined with certain circumstance, awaken an uncanny feeling, which recalls that sense of helplessness sometimes experienced in dreams” (10). Shelley provides an obvious connection to her homeland of England, and when the illness is deemed as an inevitable doom, the familiar homeland of England becomes a frightening place that is filled with illness, death, and solidarity.

On their decision to embark a new journey, Verney claims, “Yet let us go! England is in her shroud,—we may not enchain ourselves to a corpse” (Shelley 180). What was once so familiar transforms into something eerie, and it makes this barely surviving group leave their once acclaimed motherland. However, due to the connection of England as the homeland, the uncanny feeling that Mary Shelley endows through the metaphor leaves Verney with a feeling of hopelessness because he does not know where he should go. This leads to the assumption that can be made that the tomb is linked to the womb, and that the human body signifies England as the motherland. Typically, the motherland signifies the origin of colonial power or the home of an ethnic group. Shelley demonstrates her own national origins to exemplify society’s feelings of having nowhere to go. The image of the tomb is thus “categorized by a lack, that is, by the fact
that what is called upon there is unable to appear there. It orients and polarizes desire and it has a
function of inveiglement for this desire. There, desire isn’t simply veiled, but essentially brought
into relation with an absence” (Lacan 45). This is exemplified as Verney and the others start to
embark on their journey:

In the meantime, while we descanted on alien sorrows, and on a solitude which struck our
eyes and not our hearts, while we imagined all of change and suffering that had
intervened in these once thronged streets, before, tenantless and abandoned, they became
mere kennels for dogs, and stables for cattle:—while we read the death of the world upon
the dark fane, and hugged ourselves in remembrance that we possessed that which was all
the world to us…” (Shelley 266)

Verney’s description of his home land divides it into different forms of locations. The location
that Verney inhabits is compared to the entire world, and its worth is exemplified by the people
that originated from that area. Therefore, not only do relationships impact one’s national identity;
a place of origin also significantly impacts the inhabitants’ relationships with those from the
same community and background, and we can see much of this influencing Mary Shelley in her
own life. In the novel, although the inhabitants of England understand that they must leave their
homeland, the event is undoubtedly melancholic and filled with contemplative thoughts and a
fear of ambiguity for the future.

Shelley cleverly makes the connection between a societal fear of losing its homeland and
national identity through emigration, and the plague intensifies this fear into the worst case
scenario. Here, Shelley is giving her own negative opinion about emigration; however, she also
conveys how man can overcome the death of a nation. Like Freud’s interpretation in “The
Theme of the Three Caskets,” Verney (and Shelley) “overcomes death, which he has recognized
intellectually. No greater triumph of wish-fulfilment is conceivable. A choice is made where in reality there is obedience to a compulsion; and what is chosen is not a figure of terror, but the fairest and most desirable of women” (298). Verney overcomes death intellectually, and although England will always be the motherland, mobility is inevitable. Similar to Georg Wilhelm Hegel’s view of self-consciousness, Verney’s confrontation with death is essential because “the life of mind is not one that shuns death, and keeps clear of destruction; it endures death and in death maintains its being. It only wins to its truth when it finds itself utterly torn asunder… [the] mind is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and dwelling with it (Hegel 13). Similar to Verney, as the last man, he has no audience, and his idea of the self is realized in relation to the absence that surrounds him. By essentially facing the abyss, Verney is able to write his own history. Although Verney is alone, Rupert looks at this situation as a positive moment where Shelley explores the possibilities of humans and their roles in history, asserting the idea that “history realizes possibilities rather than circumscribes them” (Rupert 145).

The death of a nation through anxiety of illness and solitude also correlates to anxiety of mobility. Through Shelley’s questioning of human and national sustainability, anxieties of mobility, both physical and geographical, are clear in The Last Man as well as modern dystopian literature and in popular culture. Sussman also extensively discusses mobility being represented in the novel, and she says that “[a]s the plague makes the barriers between nations hypersensitive and vulnerable, societies lose their order, their rhythms, their civilization—their numbers become ‘unnatural’” (290). As fierce debates over emigration flourished in the 1860s, Shelley innovatively uses the plague as a metaphor for the political debates. The style of using mass destruction of the world and/or mass obliteration of human-kind to exemplify current local and
global issues was not popular in literature until the 1900s. This is where many critics such as Mellor and Poovey question the integrity of Shelley’s work as a Romantic novel. However, these critics must move beyond the style of writing, her forced disposition as a wife and mother, as well as her overall “burden” of being a female author during the 1860s, and start recognizing *The Last Man* as one of the first dystopian—or post-apocalyptic—novels. Instead of focusing on current literary trends of Shelley’s time, scholars and critics should look at Shelley as an innovator, and an author beyond her literary genre.

**Anxiety of National Solitude throughout Time**

When looking at other authors of contemporary apocalyptic literature, such as Stephen King, it is clear that a similar motif is employed, and it is a highly lauded aspect of *The Stand* and in King’s writing in general. *The Stand* grapples with current economic and political upheavals in the 1970s and wrestles with the ugly truths of America that were exposed during Vietnam as well as the tension in Iraq as the novel was republished in 1999. More specifically, with individuals seeing the first scare of gas shortages, troubled brewed in the Middle East, and American factories were moving jobs overseas, meaning unemployment rates were on the rise. Also, with the post-Vietnam war, concerns of environmental safety, contagion, and containment were ubiquitous. With these anxieties spreading across the nation, the inhabitants needed a strong and trustworthy government. However, King questions the government’s true motives. More specifically, King utilizes American anxiety of losing the freedoms of a nation, a nation built upon this very principle. Jenifer Paquette, a strong proponent of King’s work, explores how “[t]he question of government is central to the novel’s theme” (121). Because of the government’s strong hold of every aspect of society, citizens are forced to remain uninformed:
The news that the characters receive as the super flu ravages the country is completely controlled. Nick Andros notices that the newscasters behave as though someone else is in the room with them, someone perhaps threatening them to make sure nothing untoward is said on the air. This possibility is confirmed…[when] several newscasters and technicians stage a coup against the armed men and spend the next few hours broadcasting the real news. They are summarily executed for treason when the military blows up the building they are broadcasting from. (Paquette 69)

With this lack of control, the plague and the government is used as a metaphor for the average American’s lack of control over larger social and political issues. Further, by writing of a disease that was “accidentally” released by the military, King comments on the corrupt nature of the government and the military, and he plays on society’s fears of losing a beloved nation built on the principle of freedom and opportunity. Through this anxiety, there emerges a dichotomy of urgency and stagnation in regards to dealing with the corrupt military and government. King thus explores where Americans stand in regards to these current political issues: there are those who try to stand against the lies from the government and military, and there are those who are determined to live a life consumed by ignorance and bliss.

Instead of confronting the issue directly, like Verney does with death and the abyss in *The Last Man*, King suggests that citizens under government control will risk madness and should focus attention elsewhere. However, King offers a more positive message through this dichotomy and the exaggerated world of the apocalypse. By creating a world where disease, death, and an overall separation of good versus evil destroys human-kind, King tests the limits of
current societal and political disturbances, and ultimately makes them seem more realistic and goals are more attainable unlike the world portrayed in the novel.

When Shelley wrote *The Last Man*, the debate of emigration brought immense anxiety to society; therefore, the use of a dystopia in her novel exemplifies the circumstance that terror in real life is no longer hypothetical. Her opposition to emigration, perhaps due to the loss of her own family, also echoes society’s fears of losing a nation. The novel's persistent interest not simply in voice but in community and audience underlines the way that most narratives about human extinction concern cultural memory in the peculiar sense that they are written in the face of the extinction of memory. As many readers of the novel have noted, a story by the last man by definition has no audience: the events of Verney's solitude will never become a fireside tale (e.g., Johnson). When he writes that story, he can only address it to a community that has already disappeared, "the illustrious dead" (Sussman 466).

While both authors comment on societal and global issues, King is lauded for his ability to powerfully demonstrate these issues through the plague. On the other hand, Shelley is dismissed, perhaps due to her status as a widow and nearly childless mother. When Shelley addresses political issues, it is merely connected to her personal life, and the novel is criticized as a melancholic and memorializing account towards her husband, Lord Byron, and her children. One critic, Jonathan Elmer, claims that *The Last Man* “is not a novel of mourning, then, but of melancholia, with Shelley sealing off her terrible losses by rendering them commensurate with global history itself” (356). Elmer notes that Shelley’s novel is “Forthrightly political” and adopts a “different approach to the problems of empire, race, and historical melancholy,” (356) yet the novel is persistently seen as a method of memorializing her husband by comparing his death to a massive loss in history.
However, what scholars and critics fail to realize is that King’s novel also heavily relates to his personal life and career. *The Stand* was a turning point in King’s literary career, making him an even more successful author. King even discloses his personal struggles in an interview a few years after *The Stand* was published:

> I was suffering from a really good case of career jet lag…Four years before, I had been running sheets in an industrial laundry for $1.60 an hour and writing *Carrie* in the furnace-room of a trailer…Suddenly, all of my friends thought I was rich. That was bad enough, scary enough; what was worse was the fact that maybe I was. People began to talk to me about investments, about tax shelters, about moving to California. These were changes enough to try and cope with, but on top of them, the America I had grown up in seemed to be crumbling beneath my feet.… (King, *Danse Macabre*, 426-27)

Both Shelley and King experienced personal struggles, and the use of the plague can be seen as an attempt to wipe these struggles away and/or to come to terms with them, yet King’s novel is praised while Shelley is dismissed. King indeed cleverly asserts certain positions in *The Stand* in regards to current issues in the 1970s, and he undoubtedly takes these current events and transforms them into an exaggerated and even more frightful phenomenon; however, he is not the founder of a new literary genre, or even the founder of advancement to a literary genre. Mary Shelley used her authoritative voice as an author to place her readers into another world that is, in essence, the worst-case scenario to test human and societal limits, and is ultimately an inspiration for future authors such as King.
CHAPTER III. – ANXIETY OF AUTHORSHIP ACROSS TIME

In order to further prove Shelley’s authority and disprove the disease of anxiety of authorship and anxiety of memory, we must look at her use of the Sibyl, which is a prophetic female figure of ancient Greece. By utilizing the Sibyl and her prophecy of the plague, Shelley makes a comment on authoritative voices in female literary history as well as the Romantic representation of the past. However, because of her perceived anxieties from her critics, her authoritative voice gets lost just as it does for Verney in the novel as the last man. Thus, Shelley’s application of the Sibyl and the temporal disconnection she creates in the novel should be further analyzed as a rhetorical approach to comment on the romantic representation of the past. Instead of focusing on just one aspect of time, Shelley uses the reconsideration of the past, the impending future, and the “urgent re-envision” of the present in what Mellor refers to as “simultaneous time scrapes.” As the reader recognizes the connection with the future—which is also the present—with ancient past of the Sibyl, it is imperative to analyze this utilization of time as a significant comment on temporality and historical tradition. Mary Shelley’s use of the plague and its discovery through the Sibyl in *The Last Man* is a comment on the Romantic representation of the past. Romantic prophecy is heavily influence by male authority, and Shelley questions and reinvents the idea of female authority in romantic history. Ultimately, by applying these elements, Shelley not only recognizes the limitations of Romanticism, but subverts it by representing it as a dystopia.

The temporal disconnection in the novel also reveals how anxiety is sublimated and revealed throughout time, and it demonstrates a universal trait in apocalyptic literature—the desire to create meaning for unexplainable events. Wish fulfilment is thus very prevalent in apocalyptic and dream narratives, and Freud’s reading of Jensen’s *Gradiva* as well as Kleist’s
Earthquake in Chile are relevant to explore in the context of Shelley’s approach to the apocalyptic genre. Common motifs in apocalyptic literature include destruction and death as a symbol for societal problems, but it also emphasizes the personal anxieties that are projected and transcribed through an intensified, exaggerated reality. In this way, it is essential to discuss the historical relevance of these texts in relation to Shelley’s The Last Man. Though Gradiva is a fictional narrative, the main character, Norbert Hanold, represents anxiety of love similar to the way Shelley does through the plague. By utilizing Lacanian and Freudian Psychoanalysis—particularly Freud’s The Uncanny, Delusions and Dreams in Jensen’s Gradiva, and The Interpretation of Dreams, as well as portions of Lacan’s Écrits and his Seminar on anxiety—it can be argued as a multifaceted being, Gradiva exemplifies the process of psychoanalysis through the use of the apocalypse, the uncanny, and the dream manifestation of language. As anxiety influences other realities, both in written and dream form, it is apparent that Shelley uniquely expresses her desire to contribute to this now popular literary genre.

It is first important to discuss Shelley’s use of temporal displacement in the novel as it sets the framework for how anxiety is revealed. Shelley’s novel begins with an “Author’s Introduction,” where two companions explore the Sibyl’s cave, and they discover “piles of leaves, fragments of bark, and a white filmy substance, resembling the inner part of the green hood which shelters the grain of the unripe Indian corn” (Shelley 3). On these leaves, they discover a fragmented prophecy of an impending plague in England. Upon discovery, the Englishwoman became “employed in deciphering these sacred remains” (Shelley 3). From the start of the novel, Shelley innovatively utilizes the Sibyl to produce a frame narrative. By framing the novel in the future through the discovery of an ancient prophecy in the present, Shelley not only comments on the exchange between readers and writers, she “questions the
rhetoric that claims an ultimate authority for authors, and develops new models for authorship, for composition, and for authority that go beyond notions of power (Bennet and Curran 120). Essentially, there is a double meaning behind the exchange between the discoverer and the prophetic Sibyl. The first meaning regards the power given to the Englishwoman; because she felt compelled to decipher and reproduce the prophecy, authorship is questioned in a way where editors share in authority. This would be particularly authoritative of Shelley as she was compiling unpublished works of her husband during this time. According to Audrey Fisch, Anne Mellor, and Esther Schor, authors of *The Other Mary Shelley: Beyond Frankenstein*, “The ability to combine these roles—of editor, transcriber, critic, and biographer—belongs uniquely to herself, Mary Shelley argues [to her publisher]” (17). If we consider the Englishwoman to be a sketch of Shelley herself, we can assume that she claims full authority as an editor and transcriber towards her husband. In regards to Percy’s work, they are “dependent upon Mary’s: we cannot connect with him unless we connect with her first, and her attachments have the advantage of appearing more solid. At stake here is the power to define and transmit literary genres. Mary Shelley’s notes ultimately insist upon a profound reevaluation of gender and genre” (Fisch, Mellor, and Schor 19). Similarly to *The Last Man*, we cannot connect to the story prophesized by the Sibyl if the editor does not transcribe, edit, and publish it herself. Therefore, we can conclude that female editors such as Shelley can have as much, if not more, authority than the original author.

Additionally, the use of the Sibyl herself comments on authority and the masculine bias in prophetic history. Rupert deeply focuses on this vatic female voice and shows how Shelley’s use of this figure allows her to go beyond her contemporaries. According to Rupert:
Shelley surpasses her contemporaries by restoring the Sibyl, a prophetic female voice from Western antiquity, as a principle vatic authority. Through this reconfiguration, she suggests that visionary poetics originates not in patriarchal scriptural history (particularly as Milton interpreted it) but in a distinctly matriarchal pagan past. As *The Last Man’s* fictional ‘Introduction’ explains, Verney’s text has been recovered, collated, and published by an Englishwoman whose tour of Naples in 1818 occasions a visit to the Sibyl’s desolate coastal cave, where she discovers the fragmented chronicle inscribed on scattered and long unread leaves. Shelley’s Romantic traveler thus finds an image of the future in a place of the past and presents it to the eyes of the present. (144)

By restoring the Sibyl, Shelley uses a double metaphor. By using an ancient prophetic female at the beginning of her novel, it can be assumed that Shelley is using it as a metaphor for her own authority in a few ways. First, it can be said that by employing this ancient, powerful figure, Shelley is making a statement about her personal ingenuity in her literature by creating a paradox. The reader must look at the story through its inception: it is a story within a story and entwines the past, present, and future into what Mellor calls “simultaneous time scrapes,” in which the reader recognizes the connection with the future—which is also the present—with ancient past of the Sibyl (qtd. in Rupert 144). In other words, the future is placed into the past which is also recovered by the present by a woman “unlike the seer-poet who intervenes in past visions to create new ways of seeing and being” (Rupert 145). The second metaphor represents another feminist assessment from Shelley. By employing the Sibyl in the era of Romanticism, Shelley questions the masculine bias in Romantic prophecy, and thus “places ‘the whole prophetic tradition, previously withheld from women,’ into contact with ‘a newly emerging
female literature”” (Rupert 146). Although it is recognized that Shelley is attempting to make history by questioning the masculine bias in Romantic prophecy, she is still not recognized for creating an original and thoughtful literary genre of dystopian literature. In addition, by remaining focused on “female literature,” Shelley is still undermined as an authoritative author, and she is criticized on the basis of Romantic literature since Sussman, also claims that “The Last Man investigates the limits of the existing genres of the Romantic novel” (298). Indeed, the limits of the standard romantic novel are tested, and The Last Man is ultimately a failure of a Romantic novel; however, through Shelley’s clever use of the plague, a new genre is formed, and her voice can truly be heard as she is still an influencing author to this day.

The Sibyl can also demonstrate how the representation of history relegates authority to the past and continues as a literary inheritance. In this sense, Shelley makes a strong comment that the Romantic representation of the past is limiting. Therefore, not only does the Sibyl reflect female authority in prophecy in authorship, she also reflects the need to look forward and backwards simultaneously in order to see this consistent pattern in authorship given primarily to males. As a Romantic visionary artist, Shelley reflects an acute interest not only in the Sibyl and her legend, but it also questions the temporality of human life and the limitations of reflecting on history as linear. These provocative questions are considered by scholars to have received serious consideration in the literature of the Romantic period (Rupert 152). Therefore, while Shelley creates a failed gothic tale, she utilizes the probing questions asked by many romanticists at the time. Unfortunately, as she addresses these questions through the temporal displacement, she is overlooked as an authoritative author due to the institutionalized forms of power that history creates. Essentially, Shelley questions how history is structured by arguing that it should not be represented in a way that continues this authority in the past because it will continue linearly in
the present and future, especially the “repression of women and their erasure from the record” (Eberle-Sinatra 102). Rupert also focuses on this idea of history as he states, “[H]istory must not be organized by the same logic that cites the past as an authority for dynastic succession, primogeniture, imperialist aggression, and whole traditions of oppression (150). He also cites Ina Ferris, who discusses the Romantic-era Irish writers. She argues that the past becomes unclosed continues to the present, and they “prompt an understanding of history writing as neither memorializing remembrance (as in nationalist historiography) nor as impartial knowledge (as in the emerging Rankean model) but precisely–and romantically–as active recollection” (141-42). Therefore, these authors create “a model of history as a pointed intersection of the horizons of past and present directed to shaping of the horizon of the future” (qtd. in Rupert 150-51).

Because of the novel’s sibylline timescrape, therefore, Shelley achieves what Anne McWhir calls a “visionary synchronicity” that argues how history is a resource for institutional forms of power (Rupert 150-51). The Sibyl’s prediction of the impending plague is therefore a comment on these institutionalized forms of power where the future continues to be dictated by a patriarchal literary history. As history reinforces power, the anxiety of authorship comes into question as the Sibyl and her prophecy focus on memory, which is highly prevalent in *The Last Man* and in other apocalyptic narratives.

In other apocalyptic narratives such as Jensen’s *Gradiva*, repressed memories are prominent, and the ancient past creates a skewed temporality in the revealing of repressed desires and the function of anxiety. In Wilhelm Jensen’s *Gradiva: a Pompeian Fancy*, the main character Norbert Hanold is trapped in a cycle of consistent dreams regarding the bas-relief, which he calls “Gradiva,” and with which he became obsessed while visiting a museum in Rome. These dreams prove to be haunting as he finds himself in the ancient city of Pompeii in
the moment where the erupting Vesuvius is about to destroy the city. In the dreams, Norbert believes that he and Gradiva lived together in Pompeii contemporaneously, and since he has knowledge from the present that he brings to the past of ancient Pompeii, he tries to warn Gradiva about the Vesuvius; however, he is too late, and she is consumed by the eruption. This dream is repeated, and it is up to Gradiva to be the psychoanalyst in exposing where Norbert’s dreams originate. However, Gradiva becomes a psychoanalytical paradox: although she brings Norbert’s repressed desires to the surface, she is also the one who caused this repression as Norbert has sublimated the desire for his childhood friend through his archeological interests. The anxiety of love is clearly demonstrated as Norbert replaces love in the present reality with his love for archeology. Gradiva, however, symbolizes not only this ancient, apocalyptic past, but she is also representative of the language and symbols that are produced within Norbert’s unconscious. Through her multifaceted role in Norbert’s dream, Gradiva is both the cause and the solution to his repressed desires, creating a “roundabout” path to Norbert’s anxiety realization. Therefore, Gradiva is the signifying chain in exposing Norbert’s repressed desires in his persistent dreams. She exemplifies how being and language coalesce through the unconscious mind, and this is seen as Gradiva’s becomes increasingly real to Norbert throughout his dreams. Ultimately, this anxiety and transference of his childhood love to the ancient past represents temporality as a way of unveiling repressed desires.

Gradiva is first a signifier to Norbert’s subconscious as a figure of the ancient past, which reveals Norbert’s interest in archeology. Although Gradiva exemplifies many aspects of Norbert’s unconscious through her archaic identification, all of these signifiers can be connected to anxiety. The most obvious reason as to why he dreams of such an ancient figure is his love for archeology. According to Freud in his famous text, *Delusions and Dreams in Jensen’s*
“Gradiva,” “The first was a wish, understandable in any archaeologist, to have been present as an eye-witness at the catastrophe in the year 79 AD… The other wish, the other constructor of the dream, was of an erotic nature: it might be crudely and also incompletely stated as a wish to be there when the girl he loved lay down to sleep.” It is clear that through his love for archeology, Norbert is likely to dream of events of the past, and she serves as a wish-fulfillment for his desire to live contemporaneously with an ancient figure. Freud also states in *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

> When considering the relation of dreams to waking life, and the provenance of the material of dreams, we learned that the earliest as well as the most recent investigators are agreed that men dream of what they do during the day, and of the things that interest them in the waking state. This interest, continued from waking life into sleep, is not only a psychic bond, joining the dream to life, but it is also a source of dreams whose importance must not be underestimated, and which, taken together with those stimuli which become active and of interest during sleep, suffices to explain the origin of all dream-images.” (15)

Freud demonstrates that because Norbert has a passion for archeology, it is understandable that his wish to be present in the time of the eruption to experience and further unveil the catastrophe is fulfilled in his dream. Furthermore, because Norbert becomes obsessed with this figure, it is only natural to want closure of her death by being able to witness it firsthand in the dream. The bond that occurs when one dreams of interests in the waking life, however, should not be underestimated as these images have further significance. This is proven when it becomes clearer in his dreams that Gradiva represents, through her ancient figure, other signifiers of Norbert’s past that have been repressed.
The interest in Gradiva signifies more than just his daily interests, and this is indicated by Norbert’s extreme obsession when he first laid eyes on her, particularly her foot, and for his desire for them to live contemporaneously within his dreams. Once seeing her, he becomes enthralled by her ability to walk in a way that he does not see in contemporary women. Because this obsession becomes a reality to him, it is clear that Gradiva represents more than just her ancient prototype, and instead is a figure that Norbert longs for in his reality. However, this thought is repressed as he transfers this feeling onto archeological matter. According to Ika Willis, author of “‘She Who Steps Along’: Gradiva, Telecommunications, History,” Gradiva’s gait is familiar because of its contemporary quality in “association with Pompeii, the long-gone past…Again, Hanold’s desire participates in the complex mediation/immediacy relation of repression or reception” (223). In other words, through this immediate closeness to Gradiva, Norbert is in the process of psychoanalysis with the help of this ancient figure, which clearly represents more than just the ancient past. Through his searching for the perfect gait in contemporary women, he is truly searching for the source of his dreams, making Gradiva the psychologist in exposing those repressed desires. This is particularly interesting here as Gradiva demonstrates her function as an apparatus of the juxtaposition of past and present. Willis also states that Norbert “can only desire Gradiva’s gait in its disappeared pastness because of its preservation in the present,” which makes Gradiva a mediator between Norbert’s past love as well as his transferred love (233). Willis’ statement epitomizes Gradiva’s sense of temporality as well as the idea that Gradiva is a being that represents more than archaeological interests.

As the figure in the dream becomes increasingly real, so do Norbert’s repressed desires. This is especially revealed as the reader and Norbert discover the true name of Gradiva, which is Zoe. Shocked at such a beautiful name, Norbert is pained to think of the true meaning behind it.
Norbert states, “The name suits you beautifully, but it sounds to me like bitter mockery, for ‘Zoe’ means ‘life’” (Jensen 71). The pain experienced from this realization signifies that he desires something about her, and she represents a void in his real life. Moreover, the word “life” is extremely significant in this passage. He is bringing something that has been perished thousands of years ago back to life to a point where he feels he has an emotional connection. The desires to bring the past back to the present in his dreams reveals his unconscious feelings that have been repressed in reality, which is soon revealed to be his childhood love, Zoe Bertgang. This repressed memory and desire continues to unravel because with each dream, the bas-relief becomes increasingly human. An example of this clarity is when Zoe is eating bread with Norbert. Her increasingly human characteristics are shown through the narration: “[B]ut in biting the crust caused also a crunching sound so that they gave the impression of being not unreal phantoms, but of actual, substantial reality” (Jensen 92). With something as insignificant as a piece of bread, Norbert’s real, repressed past is being revealed towards his conscious memory. Through the biting of the crust, Gradiva is yet another signifier of Norbert’s repression, which is life. She is the physical manifestation of Norbert’s former childhood love. This is finally revealed when Zoe discloses her last name, which is Bertgang. Once it is revealed, “Norbert Hanold’s eyes opened to a width never before attained by them, and then he said, ‘…Miss Zoe Bertgang? But she looked quite different—’” (106). Once a childhood playmate, Zoe Bertgang is the object of Norbert’s affection, a fact that has been repressed throughout adulthood. Willis also comments on this repressed desire and says:

Gradiva is both the site of the difference between Gradiva and Zoe, and the site of their identity. The name Zoe Bertgang, in its translatability, marks both the identity and the opposition between Zoe and Gradiva: she is Zoe, “life,” a real
woman rather than a frieze, a phantom, or a delusion, yet she is also named by the very word—Gradiva, Bertgang—that identified Hanold’s invented woman in her specificity. Gradiva and Zoe Bertgang coincide in the gait, the stepping-along, which constitutes [their] identity as the object of Hanold’s desire; they are differentiated in their relation to “life.” (229)

These differences in the meaning of life are constituted by their “stepping along,” and for Gradiva, this stepping along represents the process of psychoanalysis for Norbert. Therefore, his dreams revealed for him, through the process of psychoanalysis, that the woman of stone is truly a human being that he has repressed, which ultimately breaks this vicious dream cycle. However, it can be noted that Gradiva is also the figure that took Norbert away from his present reality. His passions for his former love were so strong, and this transformed into an anxiety that caused repression of his desires into his unconscious mind, allowing him to transfer these passions onto his work as an archeologist.

The anxiety of love is particularly revealed through the use of the apocalypse and Gradiva’s representation of an apocalyptic past. Therefore, as a signifier of an apocalyptic past, Gradiva is also the physical manifestation of his anxiety of love for Zoe that has been repressed in the present. In Norbert’s dream, Gradiva’s features “quickly became more indistinct as the wind drove to the place the rain of ashes, which spread over them, first like a gray gauze veil, then extinguished the last glimpse of her face, and soon, like a Northern winter snowfall, buried the whole figure under a smooth cover” (Jensen 13). Both the eruption of the Vesuvius and the burying of Gradiva under the eruption serve as a double meaning. The eruption can first represent the catastrophe of Norbert’s life in the present. Specifically, Norbert is subjected to a life dedicated to the past as a result of the loss of Zoe. Though repressed, anxiety emerges and is
sublimated. On the other hand, the eruption can also signify emergence that has not fully been conceived by Norbert yet. As the Vesuvius erupts, soon will his repressed desires, thanks to the process of psychoanalysis. Similarly, it can be said that the burial of Gradiva is the burial of Norbert’s anxiety of love in the present—the anxiety, buried deep within the ash, is a wish fulfilment. The burial thus signifies the discovery and overcoming of his anxiety. This is supported in *The Interpretation of Dreams* as Freud states that dreams tend to present the solution first. He states, “Besides the inversion of content, the temporal inversion must not be overlooked. A frequent device of dream-distortion consists in presenting the final issue of the event or the conclusion of the train of thought at the beginning of the dream, and appending at the end of the dream the premises of the conclusion, or the causes of the event” (Freud 107). Therefore, the apocalyptic event is presented first as the solution, yet also the cause, of Norbert’s repressed emotions. Gradiva’s burial signifies that through transference love, Norbert represses the anxiety he once had about love in the present. Also, the burial symbolizes his coming “eruption” of knowledge of his repressed desires, making Gradiva the cause and solution. As Gradiva represents the past and present simultaneously through the apocalypse, a skewed temporality is revealed through Norbert’s transference love.

Shelley’s highly exaggerated depiction of the anxiety of illness juxtaposed with Norbert Hanold’s dreams represents how both the conscious and the unconscious mind locate meaning behind events. Although the plague exaggerates the anxiety of illness, the anxiety derives from something completely real, and that is the adversaries that Shelley had to overcome in her personal life. Shelley’s work asserts crucial political and historical points that also locate in in a broader context like Kleist’s *Earthquake in Chilé* and Jensen’s *Gradiva*. However, Jensen and Kleist’s texts seek to locate meaning behind events as well as comment on moral faults, while
Shelley asserts a unique voice through the Sibyl, negating conceived traditional feminists criticisms. Readers often see her anxiety as a psychological or social weakness, but her anxiety is used in a way that allows her voice to be heard. In a sense, Shelley’s use of the Sibyl allows her to be the mediator between past and present texts, much like Gradiva mediates the past and present through language. She establishes that the future is predetermined by a patriarchal past, and cautions readers that this traditional mode will continue to limit female authors because of history’s ability to reinforce power. Her use of the Sibyl, however, not only distances herself from her contemporaries, but it argues that this continuation of power is arguable if literary and romantic history is determined by female authority.

Similarly, Kleist’s *Earthquake in Chile* grapples with the desire to locate meaning behind events and focuses on “disaster vulnerability,” as discussed by Isak Holm, to comment on individual and societal faults, alluding to religion and morality. The two lovers in the story, Josefa and Jeronimo, defied Josefa’s father and conceived a child. As the Earthquake causes the ground to tremble, Josefa is arranged to be beheaded, while Jeronimo is trying to hang himself in his prison cell. Their deaths are soon interrupted as the houses of Santiago are crashing down, rivers are overflowing, and parts of the city burst into flames. This moment of destruction provides an opportunity for the two lovers to escape, and they are reunited with their child outside Santiago. Along the way, they meet another young family, Don Fernando, Donna Elvira and their newborn son. Although part one of the story focuses on nature’s destructive habits and how it impacts humans, the rest of the story demonstrates the destructive habits of humans toward one another (Holm 53). The third part of the story takes place a day after the earthquake, and the citizens gather in the only church still remaining in the city. Preaching that the Earthquake symbolizes moral faults, a priest points to Josefa and Jeronimo, whose sins “have
called down the wrath of God” (Holm 53). The crowd’s growing anxiety and agitation overcome them as they attack the two lovers as well as Don Fernando and Donna Elvira. After a series of misunderstandings, Josefa and Jeronimo are killed, and their newborn son survives while Don Fernando and Donna Elvira’s son is bashed against a pillar.

The transition from natural disaster to human-influenced chaos allows Kleist to comment on humans’ desire to establish social order. The preacher and society see the Earthquake as a sign of moral degradation, yet the anxiety that ensues produces another disaster, and “In both cases, disaster vulnerability and resilience are discussed on a deeper level” (Holm 54). The way in which the fictional characters handle social vulnerability exposes their deepest anxieties, demonstrating that “[t]he violence of the lynch mob is not the product of a wild social disorder; on the contrary, it stems from a wild desire to reestablish social order” (Holm 62). Undoubtedly, Kleist makes an intriguing comment on the factors that influence humans’ perception of disaster, such as theodicy, the sublime, and the state of emergency (Holm), which create an important space in the history of apocalyptic literature. When placing Mary Shelley in dialogue with Kleist and Jensen, however, one sees that her work both holds a place and creates important new spaces, especially her own feminism, in apocalyptic genre.

Because the British Romantics were influenced by and entrenched in dialogue with the German Romantics, Shelley’s achievement is anticipated in the achievement of Kleist and Jensen. In comparing Shelley’s plague to a broader historical framework, we see that Shelley indeed goes beyond disaster vulnerability and argues not for moral reform, but for a political and cultural reform through the way we view illness, nationalism, mobility, and female authority and authorship. Although Shelley follows in the tradition that explores how society perceives disaster, Shelley makes an even bolder comment on the way in which history reinforces power,
both politically and personally. Thus, through a literal and metaphorical temporality through her use of the Sibyl, Shelley’s novel contributes to a genre of the past, present, and future. Beginning with a skewed temporality, the female characters, the Sibyl of the past and the editor of the present, make an important comment on literary history in addition to the future of literature. If literary history is determined by a matriarchal past, the current constructions of gender that render female authors voiceless become disputable. Shelley furthers this feminist critique by creating a female editor who finishes the Sibyl’s prediction, demonstrating the authority she has in her personal life by becoming the editor who supervised the publication of her late husband’s final works.

Shelley’s anxieties as demonstrated in her texts represent an innovative approach to not only comment on her personal and political struggles, but they also distance her from her contemporaries, therefore allowing her to create a new literary genre. Though she utilizes many symbols throughout The Last Man that have been identified and questioned by scholars for their significance, the Sibyl tends to be overlooked and simply viewed as a comment on the anxiety of authorship and anonymous readership. The relationship between authors and editors is certainly demonstrated by the use of the Sibyl, ascribing intentionality towards Shelley’s personal life as an editor and transcriber to her late husband’s work. A deeper analysis demonstrates that the Sibyl also reflects a vatic authority that was previously held from women. Although the discovery of the Sibyl is only a mere few pages in the novel, it sets the entire framework and provides a strong message through its prophecy. She first creates a temporal distortion, which comments on multiple authorities within the process of writing. Within that distortion, we can see how Shelley is commenting on history’s consistency in maintaining power. Lastly, through her prophecy, Shelley is making a direct comment on the Romantic representation of the past and
its limitations on her. Shelley’s innovative use of the Sibyl and her prophecy are ultimately undervalued. Unfortunately, through the lens of feminist theory, particularly theory focused on anxiety of authorship, Shelley is unfairly criticized on the basis of the invalid assumption that she produced nothing more than a poor Romantic tale. Although it certainly is not a standard Romantic novel for her time period, *The Last Man* sets the framework for current dystopian novels and can ultimately give Shelley an important place in literary history that is beyond her time.
CONCLUSION

In contemporary society where we have an abundance of apocalyptic rhetoric, it is easy to overlook the origins of dystopic literature and praise those who employ it to meet modern anxieties. Apocalyptic literature’s continual growth as a genre may in part be due to an endless craving and visceral fear of the unknown and unexplainable. More significantly, narratives that demonstrate the collapse of civilization and order often reflect readers’ personal and political anxieties. The end of the world has been a topic that has horrified, yet intrigued, individuals since “The Book of Revelation” in *The Bible*. Despite this long and entrenched history, literature focusing on the end of the world or life after the apocalypse was not popular until the 1900s. The Romantics were one of the first modern groups of writers to name themselves, and their self-awareness led to their confidence that they could create new genres and promote new ways of thinking. Because of this, it is necessary to explore Shelley’s new way of thinking, which led to her creation of the modern apocalyptic genre. Although contemporary authors like Stephen King with dystopic visions of the future utilize existing fears from their readership, literary exploitation of anxiety has been employed for centuries. Mary Shelley’s *The Last Man*, for example, makes crucial political and historical points that are also made in works such as Kleist’s *The Earthquake in Chile* and Jensen’s *Gradiva*. In this way, she is a precursor to contemporary authors like Stephen King.

As Stephen King has expressed his admiration for Mary Shelley, I examined the parallels of *The Stand* with Shelley’s *The Last Man*, where the two share strikingly similar themes in both personal and political anxiety. Critics of Shelley’s work disagree, however, and revert to the claim that due to her positions as a wife and mother, Shelley experienced an anxiety that she could never be lauded for her innovative authorship. Instead, the area of focus is what Shelley
indeed did not do, rather than what she created, which is a lack of Romantic era motifs that her precursors employed. Instead of looking at Shelley as an innovator, a writer beyond her time, critics marginalize Shelley and continue to be influenced by Bloom’s concept of the anxiety of influence as well as Gilbert and Gubar’s interpretation of the anxiety of authorship.

Transcending the feminist lens of anxiety, this thesis utilized psychoanalytic theories by Freud and Lacan, and feminist theory encouraged by Gilbert and Gubar in order to disprove Shelley’s anxiety of authorship and to reclaim her power as a writer. Rather than viewing anxiety as a weakness, I argued that her expression and depiction of anxiety significantly enhances Shelley’s work. Her anxieties as demonstrated in her texts exemplify an innovative approach to not only comment on her personal and political struggles, but they also distance her from her contemporaries, allowing her to create a new literary genre. The notion that Shelley experienced such an anxiety is simply a patriarchal misconception that has been promoted by certain critics, including feminist ones. This, however, limits authors like Shelley and leaves them in a paradox: if Shelley diverged from historical and cultural norms, she was, according to critics, limited as an author by the anxieties that caused her to rebel. However, the anxiety of authorship suggests that female writers prior to the 20th century struggle to produce artistic writing and fail to find a unique literary voice. Because of these struggles of authorship, Shelley cannot succeed. By creating a new literary genre, she will be undermined as an author by both her female and male contemporaries, and, if Shelley does not, she will struggle in finding her voice through her overall anxiety of authorship and feelings of alienation from her male predecessors.

In order to understand this temporal relationship between the apparent failure of the female authored apocalyptic text in the Romantic Era and the success of the male authored apocalyptic text in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, I explored the psychoanalytical
connections between the personal and the political as they illustrate anxiety between the subject as a singular being and a cultural group. By exploring Freud and Lacan’s theories on anxiety and psychoanalysis in conjunction with Shelley’s novel, I demonstrated the centrality of her anxieties and how they are sublimated through her writing. These anxieties, as demonstrated throughout *The Last Man*, primarily surround the personal and societal fear of illness as well as solitude.

Many factors influence the anxiety of illness and solitude in *The Last Man*. Not only was Shelley plagued by the losses in her own life, but she expressed personal and societal concerns regarding the contagion and loss of a nation, including the fear of “outsiders” while England’s borders were lose. Shelley’s political themes throughout the novel demonstrate her involvement and opinions regarding current political discussions, and she challenges the idea of subservient wife, lover, and mother. This is not to say, however, that her personal anxiety of illness should go unwarranted or be considered self-indulgent. As I argued in this thesis, anxiety is at the core of Shelley’s work and other apocalyptic work throughout time. I considered the psychoanalytical connections between the personal and the political as they illustrate anxiety and struggles between the subject as a singular being and a cultural group. By exploring Freud’s and Lacan’s theories on anxiety and psychoanalysis in conjunction with Shelley’s novel, I hope I demonstrated and supported the reasons behind her anxiety, but more importantly, how she sublimated this anxiety to create a new genre for future authors, like Stephen King, to follow.

Though Shelley utilizes many symbols throughout *The Last Man* that were identified and continue to be questioned by scholars for their significance, the Sibyl tends to be overlooked and simply viewed as a comment on the anxiety of authorship and anonymous readership. While the Sibyl certainly reflects the relationship between authors and editors, ascribing intentionality towards Shelley’s personal life as an editor and transcriber to her late husband’s work, the Sibyl
also reflects a vatic authority that was previously held from women. What’s significant about the
Sibyl is that it is a mere few pages in the novel. By setting up the novel in this way, however,
Shelley creates a temporal distortion that allows her to comment on multiple authorities within
the process of writing. Within that distortion, we can see how Shelley is commenting on
history’s consistency in maintaining a patriarchal power. Lastly, through her prophecy, Shelley is
making a direct comment on the Romantic representation of the past and its limitations on her.

Scholars conclusively fail to recognize Shelley as an influential author due to the only
framework for feminist theory being grounded in limiting subjects such as anxiety of authorship
from Gilbert and Gubar. The juxtaposition of Shelley and King has not been made before, and I
hope I contributed to this growing conversation of dystopian literature, authorship, and the
sublimation of anxiety across time. The comparative analysis of Shelley’s *The Last Man* with
Stephen King’s *The Stand* is important in understanding Shelley within the context of feminism,
psychoanalysis, and gothic/apocalyptic literature. Like her mother, Shelley was a progressive
thinker, yet her work falls outside the Romantic literary traditions. Her feminist voice is
prominent through sublimation, which is seen as a weakness from many critics, and merely
reduced to Shelley’s romantic and maternal positions. Shelley also exceeds literary traditions by
restoring the Sibyl, making an important argument about female voices in literary history.
However, as demonstrated in this thesis, King is praised as the master of modern horror,
although his work is largely influenced by Shelley. In *The Stand* we can see his use of
sublimation as he writes about personal and national anxieties during the 1970s and again in the
1990s. Psychoanalysis thus functions for both authors as a way to reveal repressed desires by
transferring their anxieties onto their writing. This act is therefore not original to Stephen King
or any other contemporary author of apocalyptic fiction, making Shelley a pioneer in this genre.
It is necessary to move forward from feminism’s perspective. Instead of focusing on the lack of female privilege, it is imperative to instead focus on particular literary strengths of female authors that set them apart from their contemporaries. By focusing on stylistic representation of particular literary genres, critics continue to prevent female authors from finding their voices due to the stifling of ingenuity. Additionally, by remaining focused on female hardships including the anxiety of authorship, scholars are indeed limiting Shelley and other female authors by restricting them to a category of failure, and the overall assumption is made that authors such as Shelley did not feel as though their writing was worthy of praise, when indeed this is unknown. Ultimately, it is an assumption waiting to be made that the literary work is of inferior quality. In other words, feminist theory creates a paradox—by sympathetically discussing the adversity faced by female authors, critics indirectly marginalize and demote these authors, overlooking their literary achievements and innovations. This failure to recognize ingenuity due to the blurring foundations of literature such as history and anxiety of authorship, which are also grounded in poor adaptations of feminist theory, is precisely how authors such as Stephen King are lauded, while authors such as Shelley are unfairly dismissed. By taking this underdeveloped feminist approach, scholars marginalize Shelley as an innovative and authoritative author by focusing on her anxieties. Although it certainly does not qualify as a Romantic novel for her time period, nor is it considered science fiction for current apocalyptic literature, *The Last Man* sets the framework for current dystopian novels and can ultimately give Shelley a place in literary history.
WORKS CITED


