

# The Formation of Separatism in Shelley's *The Last Man*: A Struggle to Overcome the "Primitive" and Live in a World of the Abject

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## ABSTRACT

*In an analysis of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, this essay focuses on the impact of the plague on society's mentality and function. The plague, explained as a manifestation of the "primitive" and the abject—based on the concepts of Douglas and Kristeva—leads to social separatism, dystopia, and moral regression. Paired with analysis of language and the character Adrian, the essay concludes that Shelley's greatest warning is against the objectifying of humanity as potential abjections.*

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The Romantics were a group intent on pouring forth their emotions, all the while falling victim to the idealizing of the world. One of the great sources of their fancies was nature and all its reverential beauty and abundance of life. Yet, Romantic author Mary Shelley blurs this assumed dichotomy—in which beautiful life and nature are united as one in opposition to death and destruction—in her novel *The Last Man*. *The Last Man* is an apocalyptic plague novel that chronicles the life of Lionel Verney and his extended family as they attempt to survive in dwindling numbers. Although fantastical, *The Last Man* portrays a more honest sense of the world than other Romantics texts by portraying all the ways in which the good and bad, life and death, are two sides of the same coin. Expanding on this image, Shelley's novel displays the consequences of paying attention to only death, or the bad side of the coin. Shelley depicts this by creating the plague—a picture of nature and death as a united pair—and focusing on society's ability to treat the clean versus the unclean. With the theories of Mary Douglas and Julia Kristeva as a foundation, readers can see how the plague, which succinctly provides Shelley's characters and their community with a clear example of "death infecting life," represents the ultimate form of the primitive and the abject (Kristeva 4). By using the ultimate form of the primitive and abject, Shelley reveals the human tendency to fear the reality of death in life so much so as to regress in societal values and morality. This regression manifests through a separatist mentality. Shelley ultimately provides hope and a way out of this regression into separatism by creating a character who models how to live compassionately toward humanity, despite the constant shadow of death and disease that are the great abjections of our lives. In this context, we can see that Shelley marks separatism as leading to dystopia. Similarly, the intensity of such a dystopia is increased by the failure to accept that the abject is a part of life.

The plague in *The Last Man*, more than threatening society with disease, threatens society's system of values and its desire to ignore life's abjections. The spreading of the plague in Shelley's novel is not wholly physical—that is, not clearly defined as contagious via bodily contact—but its consequences are. No matter how the plague is caught, the disease shows itself in a physical taint of the body. This physical taint draws forth images of what Douglas calls "the primitive." The idea of the primitive is characterized by an emphasis on the state of material items. Physical uncleanliness, such as "contact with corpses, blood or spittle" trumps any spiritual concept of uncleanliness within society

(Douglas 13). The state of the soul and spirituality is acknowledged less, in terms of cleanliness, than contact with a physical object that is unclean. Note that Douglas uses the word “primitive” in order to describe the secularist understanding of the past’s treatment of the unclean. Douglas does not mean “primitive” to be a description of the reality of the past, but as a description of how secular culture frames the past’s customs in comparison to its own. That is, secular culture views itself and its understanding of the unclean as advanced and logical by contrast to the past. I will use “primitive” not for its negative connotations, but in the sense that it is the belief that the material and the physical constitute the distinction between what is clean and unclean.

Douglas next asserts that all understandings of dirt are merely a product of categorization. This claim is an important one for understanding Shelley’s argument regarding a regression of values within *The Last Man*. Douglas explains the relativity of the unclean through the idea that “shoes are not dirty in themselves, but it is dirty to place them on the dining-table; food is not dirty in itself, but it is dirty to leave cooking utensils in the bedroom”(45). Thus, any society’s perspective of the physically unclean thing is actually a matter of categorization and context. From here, any behavior against an unclean thing is revealed to just be “the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications” (Douglas 45). This last statement is essential to Shelley’s novel because of its characterization of the unclean as a threat to “cherished classifications.”

The plague is the ultimate destroyer of classification within *The Last Man*; it blurs all lines and thoughts of borders or rank. Shelley’s narrator at one point acknowledges that “all the world has the plague” (193) and that “one beggar had become of more worth than a national peerage of dead lords” (234). The narrator recognizes that no one category of social class or worldly identification prevents disease from affecting a person. In many ways, this makes the plague the abject writ large. The abject, more than just an “other,” is that which “disturbs identity, system, order” and that which “does not respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva 4). The plague certainly has no respect for borders within Shelley’s novel, nor does it fail to disturb the identity of individuals and nations. Shelley’s plague is the fullest form of abjection, because it not only disturbs identity and systems of order but accomplishes this through the spreading of corpses and death. As Kristeva points out, “the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. . . . It is something rejected

from which one does not part” (4). The plague is certainly the purveyor of corpses within Shelley’s novel and thus the purveyor of the abject. In one scene, Shelley’s narrator describes that “every day a frightful gap was made in [his] troop—they died by the tens, by fifties, by hundreds” (326). Such an increase in the plague signifies an increase in society’s saturation and confrontation of corpses and the abject. The plague and its great distribution of corpses is therefore a twofold image, reflecting both the “primitive” fear of the physically unclean and the ultimate abjection. Shelley develops this twofold image within *The Last Man* and demonstrates how a society that focuses on the physically unclean as the ultimate threat will regress in its values and ability to cherish human life. Essentially, the focused opposition to that which is physically tainted creates large-scale separatism and morally tainted communities.

There are several instances in the novel in which Shelley argues against a separatist nature, and its role as a response to the endemic abject, by eliminating individual autonomy and developing exclusive collectives. As Mark Canuel provocatively suggests during his analysis of agency within *The Last Man*, Shelley appears to implement the idea that “an argument about . . . agency can be made by eliminating agents” (150). Her examples of the separation of communities into group identities is described through a language of tribalism. That is, Shelley uses descriptions that connote tribal behavior when presenting a people’s division into exclusive groups. Tribal, in this case, reflects Shelley’s sense of the word. As part of the 19th-century British Empire, in which there was imperialism and the subjugation of communities deemed less civilized, Shelley frames tribes as groups that necessarily and inherently participate in pillaging, fighting, and nomadism. Although these are narrow definitions about the constitution of a tribe and carry misconceptions, they serve to overtly portray a divided people within the novel. As such, I will use the idea of tribalism only when demonstrating how Shelley’s language works to emphasize a division between communities. Aside from demonstrating her demarcation of divisions, I will use the term “separatism.” Separatism more accurately portrays Shelley’s underlying argument, which is aimed against the division of a community into exclusive groups. This division, caused particularly by the fear of the abject, is what reflects a communities’ regression in values and morals.

Shelley describes several instances in which, amidst the plague-ridden world where national

boundaries have withered, a group will form and take to regional domination. In one such scene, Shelley writes:

“A number of people from North America...had set sail for the East ...Several hundreds landed in Ireland...and took possession of such vacant habitations as they could find...As they exhausted the produce of one spot, they went on to another. At length they began to interfere with the inhabitants, and strong in their concentrated numbers, ejected the natives from their dwellings, and robbed them of their winter store. A few events of this kind roused the fiery nature of the Irish; and they attacked the invaders” (235).

The separatism in this scene is clearly marked by Shelley’s identification of two groups: one as “invaders” and the other as “natives.” She creates a scene in which people have decided to disregard other communal life, through “interfering” and “ejecting” inhabitants, so as to benefit themselves. With material danger, uncleanliness, and the abject at the forefront of their minds thanks to the plague, which is reflective of the “primitive” mindset, the invading separatists—or tribe—treat the other communities more like objects and less like human lives. Shelley describes this as a case in which “human beings, unwithheld by shame... ventured on deeds of greater wickedness, or gave way more readily to their abject fears” (213). Thus, in order to deal with the plague—that is, their abject fears—the group has decided to see humans as *potential* corpses and the *potential* abject; if humans are potential threats, even when not yet contaminated by the plague, then they are essentially objects to be repressed and rejected. Here, the primitive mindset tackles the issue of uncleanliness preemptively and, under this fear-ridden and regressive belief, the separatists can set aside any moral quandary when pillaging and fighting other communities. Shelley further suggests this is the case when she writes that the tribe from North America actually “took delight in thrusting the possessors from their houses” (237). Their actions are not simply survival based in this moment. By calling the inhabitants “possessors,” the invader’s motivation more clearly becomes driven by a desire to overcome other groups, who they necessarily see as the opposition. This divisive perspective only builds off of itself, as Céline Kermisch’s conceptual exploration of risk and virtue-responsibility will imply. The ethics explored in Kermisch’s article suggest that, by “concentrate[ing] rather on ‘outsiders’ in order to increase the loyalty to the group,” these tribes end up focusing "on the

reinforcement of the social cohesion” (96). This cohesion, though, is exclusive to the “tribe.” Therefore, the reinforcement only promotes more opposition to those on the outside than it does a kind of unity. As one group builds its exclusivity, a sort of ripple effect begins to occur. Shelley demonstrates this with her increasing examples of separatism.

Shelley’s next example of a separatism in response to the abject comes when a group, once united as one, now finds itself separated into three: “the more numerous division of emigrants... assumed a superiority of rank and power; the second party asserted their independence. A third was formed by a sectarian” (300). The three groups, once united by the commonality of being humans all threatened by the abject plague, now cling to selfish divisions. During one tense moment between the three factions, a “contest arose concerning the distribution of the pillage; the chiefs of the first division demanded that the whole should be placed at their disposal” (Shelley 301). The way that the groups designate “chiefs,” call themselves “divisions,” and begin to fight over “pillage” is a clear example of Shelley’s tribalism and a separatist nature. Once again, such separatism is made all the more justified by the tribes in light of their “primitive” perspective, when each groups’ people simply represent the potential abject meant to be overcome. The natural consequence of such division, though, is strife: “the three divisions, armed, met in the Place Vendome, each resolved to subdue by force the resistance of its adversaries” (Shelley 301). Just as the first example of separatist behavior ended in fighting between the tribe from North America and the Irish, so too does this example culminate on the battlefield with the intent to “subdue” one’s “adversaries.” By repeating the acts of separatism, Shelley shows how the objectification of humans as *potential* abjections can only lead to more division and strife. To rebuke this regressed behavior into a focus on the physical taint, Shelley develops in contrast a character of spiritual and moral purity: Adrian.

Adrian confronts each of the previous divided groups and acts as a model for how to live a life of love despite having the knowledge that humans are the *potential* abject and physically tainted. When the opposing groups face each other on the battlefield, Adrian rises up to quell the impending fight using specifically Christian, spiritual language: “as you worship God, in whose image those also are created...shed not a drop of precious human blood” (Shelley 240). He calls upon the tribes to recognize the human body as precious because of its spiritual significance and not to see their fellow

humans as reminders of death or objects with which to defeat. He continues, sermon-like, shouting that “pardon, succor, and brotherly love await your repentance. You are dear to us, because you wear the frail shape of humanity” (Shelley 240). Adrian recalls not only the values of spiritual cleanliness, but the worth of human life and “precious... humanity.” He does not deny the reality of death but focuses on life and its value above all the physical risks surrounding him. In another instance, when the three tribes are about to strike one another, Adrian rises as a model of “love, unmingled with fear” (Shelley 304). He is described as someone who “never flinched from danger, nor was actuated by other motives than care for the general welfare” (Shelley 304). He is a purveyor of moral purity. He is also an advocate for human worth and compassion because he is motivated by “love” and “care for the general welfare.” Although afflicted by the knowledge of the plague and the pervasive abject around him, just as his comrades are, Adrian does not let the “primitive” mentality direct his actions or lead him into separatism. As such, Adrian demonstrates what humanity can be in spite of a world engulfed by the plague—indeed, the abject.

Shelley ends her argument with the idea that separatism will retreat through the demonstration of unity. She argues this during one scene in which Adrian arrives and “the late adversaries” are said to have “warmed to affection at the sight of him” (Shelley 303). They pause their objectifying of the other groups and recall a sense of affection for the individual when he walks in the space between their three divisions. As Adrian draws attention away from separatism, he reminds the tribes how morally pure “agency” is both an individual and communal responsibility (Canuel 150). A few sentences later, Shelley writes how “no distinction was now visible between the two parties, late ready to shed each other’s blood” (304). Adrian’s character changes the discourse between the separate groups and inspires unity under the name of love for humanity. His cherishment of human life, rather than treatment of humans as objects, leads the people groups out of their regression—characterized by the “primitive” perspective, by their tainted morals, and by a separatist behavior—back towards valuing humans as individuals.

The juxtaposition of separatist language with that of Adrian’s language regarding moral purity, reveals Shelley’s argument that society and humanity need to cherish life, demonstrate compassion, and live in unity. Since humans live with two sides of the same coin, life and death, the novel teaches

that to reject one side of life out of fear is to reject the other. Shelley may use the most extreme, pervasive example of the abject and its most extreme, divisive consequences, but in doing so she effectively reveals society's deeper struggle to act compassionately as it copes with life in death. Just as Shelley exposes her characters to this reality, so too does she assert that all of humanity ought to be "suddenly seized with the conviction, that love [is] the only good in life" (308). Shelley's greatest warning, then, is that to just focus on potential threats and let oneself objectify humanity is to reject the coin of life itself. Essentially, "to avoid" encountering death and abjection, Shelley acknowledges that we would have to "quit the world" (193). Yet, in doing so, we achieve neither a life of true community and compassion nor peace until death has come. It is only by accepting the coin as it is and knowing that in "human nature...beauty and deformity are often closely linked" that society can begin to act with compassion and spiritual reverence for humanity, no matter the physical threat or "abject fears" they may face (Shelley 213).

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