CLASSICS LIBRARY · STORY MAP

The Last Man

Mary Shelley · *1826 · original English text*

Mary Shelley, the author of Frankenstein, wrote this long novel about the end of the human race. A frame story says that she and a friend found Sibylline leaves in a cave near Naples in 1818 and that the book is her arrangement of them. The narrator, Lionel Verney, writes in the year 2100 as the last man alive.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What is left of human society, friendship, and hope when a plague takes every person, and what does the last survivor have to say?

Shelley does not offer a plot of rescue. She follows a circle of friends, their politics, and their loves until the plague arrives, and she lets them die one by one. The loss of the circle is the loss of a world. The ending, with Lionel alone in Rome, asks the reader to feel what is lost and what, if anything, remains when the last person writes for no one.

KEY CHARACTERS

Lionel Verney
The narrator, the last man.

Adrian, Earl of Windsor
An idealist and friend.

Lord Raymond
A statesman and soldier.

Perdita
Lionel's sister, Raymond's wife.

Idris
Adrian's sister, Lionel's wife.

Evadne Zaimi
A Greek princess who draws Raymond away.

Clara
Perdita's daughter.

Ryland
A republican leader.

Grades 11–12
Read the full text free at classicslaunch.org.

01
The Sibyl's Cave
INTRODUCTION

Two travelers visit the cave of the Sibyl near Naples in 1818 and find leaves covered with writing. The author says the novel is her arrangement of those leaves.

- The frame makes the book a found manuscript.
- The cave is a place of prophecy.
- The author claims to translate.

02
Lionel, Adrian, and Raymond
VOLUME I

Lionel grows up wild, befriends Adrian and Idris, and meets Lord Raymond, who marries Perdita and becomes Lord Protector of England. Raymond's affair with Evadne breaks the circle.

- Lionel is a rough boy who is educated by friendship.
- Adrian is an idealist.
- Raymond is a statesman of great charm.

03
War in Greece
VOLUME II, CHAPTERS I–III

Raymond leads English volunteers in the war between Greece and Turkey and is killed in the ruins of Constantinople.

- The war is a glory and a waste.
- Raymond's death ends a great life.
- Perdita's grief is the book's first great sorrow.

04
Return and Plague
VOLUME II, CHAPTERS IV–IX

Lionel returns to Windsor in 2092. The plague, which began in the East, crosses Europe and reaches England, and the government gives way.

- The plague is first a rumor.
- The government cannot stop it.
- The circle of friends is drawn together.

05
The Long Flight
VOLUME III

In 2096 the survivors leave England under Adrian, cross France and Switzerland, and lose one friend after another.

- The flight is a pilgrimage with no goal.
- The group dwindles.
- Adrian's hope is steady.

06
The Last Man
VOLUME III, CHAPTERS IX–X

Adrian and Clara are lost at sea. Lionel reaches Rome alone and resolves to sail the shores of the world.

- Adrian and Clara die at sea.
- Lionel is alone in Rome.
- He decides to look for another living person.

Loss · Friendship · Plague · The Future

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 11–12

1. The book is set in the future. Notice what has changed and what has not.
2. The frame tells you the story is a found manuscript. Ask why Shelley uses it.
3. Watch the characters' political views.
4. The ending is a lone voice. Think about what Lionel can do.

Summaries are original to Classics Library. Read the original English text (Project Gutenberg #18247), the public-domain text hosted at classicslaunch.org/works/shelley-the-last-man/.