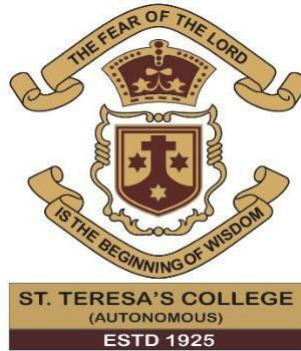


**A Comparative Analysis of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* and the COVID-19
Pandemic: Exploring the Parallels in Themes and Insights into the Human
Experience During Pandemics**



*Project submitted to St. Teresa's College (Autonomous) in partial fulfilment of the
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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this project entitled “A Comparative Analysis of Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* and the COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring the Parallels in Themes and Insights into the Human Experience During Pandemics” is the record of bona fide work done by me under the guidance and supervision of Dr. Maria Theresa Chakkunny, Assistant Professor, Department of English.

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Introduction

Pandemics have been a recurring theme throughout human history, from the bubonic plague in the 14th century to the current COVID-19 pandemic. These global health crises have had far-reaching social, economic, and political implications, disrupting daily life and causing significant suffering for individuals and communities. As the world continues to grapple with the COVID-19 pandemic, it is critical to examine the human experience during pandemics to better understand the challenges and opportunities that arise during these crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on the world, affecting individuals and societies in ways that were unimaginable just a few years ago. As we struggle to come to terms with this crisis, we can turn to literature to gain insights into the human experience during pandemics. *The Last Man*, a novel by Mary Shelley, tells the story of the last surviving human after a pandemic wipes out the world's population. Despite being written almost two centuries ago, the novel provides powerful insights into the human experience during pandemics, including themes of isolation, grief, and the fragility of civilization.

Studying pandemics is not only important for understanding the human experience during crises, but also has practical implications for public health policy and disaster management. By examining the lessons learned from past pandemics, we can inform current efforts to combat COVID-19 and prepare for future outbreaks. The study of pandemics can also provide insights into the ways

in which society and civilization respond to crises, illuminating both the strengths and weaknesses of human communities.

Mary Shelley, the author of *The Last Man*, is a notable figure in literary history, best known for her seminal work, *Frankenstein*. Her contributions to the Gothic literary tradition and her exploration of themes such as isolation, mortality, and the nature of humanity have made her a revered figure in literary circles. Her life and work have continued to inspire generations of readers and scholars, making her a fitting subject for a comparison with the current pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in late 2019, has had a profound impact on the world. With millions of cases and deaths worldwide, it has disrupted daily life, strained healthcare systems, and challenged the global economy. The pandemic has also highlighted pre-existing social and economic inequalities, and exposed weaknesses in political systems and institutions.

This project aims to deepen our understanding of the human experience during pandemics by comparing and contrasting Mary Shelley's novel, *The Last Man*, with the COVID-19 pandemic. The goal is to identify the similarities and differences between the two pandemics and to draw insights from this comparison into the human experience of pandemics. The approach will involve a detailed analysis of *The Last Man*, focusing on its themes, characters, and literary techniques, as well as a broader examination of COVID-19 and its impact. By exploring these topics, we hope to gain a deeper appreciation of the challenges and opportunities that arise during pandemics, and to identify lessons that can be learned from past and present crises.

This project will begin by providing a detailed analysis of *The Last Man*, including its themes, characters, and literary techniques. The analysis will focus on how the novel portrays themes such as isolation, grief, and the fragility of civilization, and identify any other themes that are relevant to the comparison with the COVID-19 pandemic. The next chapter focuses on COVID 19 and its analysis.

The project will compare and contrast the themes and parallels between *The Last Man* and the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting key similarities and differences between the two pandemics and explaining how these impact the human experience of pandemics. The project will also examine how the novel provides insights into the human experience during pandemics and identify any lessons that can be learned from the comparison.

Chapter 1

The Novel *The Last Man*

The novel *The Last Man* explores a number of themes, many of which are relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic. Some of the key themes include isolation, grief, and the fragility of civilization. The novel portrays the experience of being the last surviving human, and the profound sense of isolation that comes with it. The protagonist, Lionel Verney, struggles to find meaning and purpose in a world where everyone he knew and loved is gone. It also explores the theme of grief, as the characters mourn the loss of their loved ones and the world as they knew. Shelley portrays the depth of human emotion in the face of loss, and the struggle to come to terms with a new reality. The novel also highlights the fragility of civilization, as society collapses in the wake of the pandemic. Shelley portrays the breakdown of social order, the rise of tribalism and violence, and the challenges of rebuilding a new society from the ashes of the old.

The novel features several main characters, each of whom play a significant role in the story. Lionel Verney is the novel's protagonist and narrator. Lionel is the last surviving member of his family and ultimately the last man on Earth. He is deeply affected by the loss of his family and friends and struggles to come to terms with his fate as the last man on earth. He longs for human connection and is tormented by the memories of the loved ones he lost.

Lionel's childhood friend, Adrian, is another major character in the novel. Adrian is a talented artist who becomes a political leader alongside Lionel. He is a passionate and idealistic person who is deeply committed to his beliefs.

Evadne is another important character in the novel. She is a Greek princess who becomes Lionel's wife. Evadne is a strong and independent woman who is highly educated and talented. Her presence in the novel highlights the themes of love and loss, as well as the fragility of human relationships.

Percy Shelley, a close friend of Lionel, Percy is a poet and philosopher who shares Lionel's love of nature. He is one of the first to fall victim to the plague, and his death has a profound effect on Lionel.

Ada Lovelace, a mathematician and computer scientist, is a close friend and confidant of Lionel's. She is one of the last people to die of the plague, and her death leaves Lionel deeply affected.

Mary Shelley, a close friend of Lionel and the wife of Percy, is a writer and one of the last people to die of the plague. Her death has a profound effect on Lionel, as he feels a deep sense of loss and isolation after her passing.

King Raymond, the King of England, is a close friend of Lionel's and one of the last people to die of the plague. He is a good-hearted and compassionate leader, who struggles to come to terms with his fate as the last ruler of a dying world. He is in love with Perdita, Lionel's sister.

Perdita, in turn, is a character who is torn between her love for Lord Raymond and her loyalty to her brother. Both Lord Raymond and Perdita play important roles in the novel, and their relationships with Lionel and each other are a significant part of the story.

The Italian Bandit is a minor character in the novel, but his experiences offer a powerful portrayal of the psychological toll of the pandemic on those who

are most marginalized and vulnerable. As a bandit, he has always existed on the margins of society, but the pandemic pushes him even further to the fringes. He is forced to confront the reality of violence and exploitation in a world that has been destroyed by the pandemic, and he struggles to find any sense of hope or purpose in life.

The Abbess is the leader of a convent of nuns, and she is one of the few characters in the novel who initially seems to have a sense of purpose and meaning in life. However, as the pandemic progresses and the world falls apart, even the Abbess is not immune to the psychological toll of the situation. She is forced to confront the reality of death and loss, and she struggles to maintain her faith in the face of such overwhelming devastation.

These are the main characters in the novel, each of them play an important role in the story. Throughout the novel, we encounter various characters who fall victim to the plague and die. These characters are a poignant reminder of the devastation and tragedy that can be wrought by pandemics. Their deaths also underscore the novel's themes of isolation, grief, and the fragility of civilization. Overall, the characters in *The Last Man* are complex and multi-dimensional. They each play important roles in the novel's themes and plot, and they provide insight into the human experience during times of crisis. Their interactions with Lionel gives us a sense of how the plague affected not only him but the society and the people around him.

The novel is also notable for its exploration of the psychological effects of the pandemic on the survivors. *The Last Man* reflects the anxieties and concerns of

its time period. The novel was written during a period of political upheaval and social change, and Shelley was heavily influenced by the events of her time. The protagonist, Lionel Verney, is the last man on earth and his descent into madness as he grapples with his isolation and loss is a powerful illustration of the mental toll that such a disaster can take.

Shelley's novel is one of the earliest works of pandemic fiction and it is considered a classic of the genre. It is considered as a warning about the potential consequences of a global pandemic and as a commentary on the human condition. The novel is a great example of how literature can explore the social, political and psychological impact of pandemics on society.

Shelley employs a number of literary techniques to convey the themes and messages of the novel. Some of these techniques include:

Symbolism: Shelley uses symbolism to convey the themes of the novel. For example, the sea is a recurring symbol throughout the novel, representing both the source of the pandemic and the vastness and indifference of the natural world.

Foreshadowing: Shelley uses foreshadowing to build tension and anticipation throughout the novel. For example, early in the novel, Lionel dreams of a world without humans, foreshadowing the coming pandemic.

Imagery: Shelley uses vivid and evocative imagery to convey the emotional and psychological states of the characters. For example, she describes the landscape of the novel in rich detail, conveying the sense of loss and devastation that pervades the world.

The novel *The Last Man* portrays themes such as isolation, grief, and the fragility of civilization, and identifies other relevant themes in comparison to the COVID-19 pandemic. *The Last Man* portrays the theme of isolation through the experience of being the last surviving human. The protagonist, Lionel Verney, is left alone to navigate a world without anyone he knew and loved. He struggles to find meaning and purpose in a world where no one is left to interact with or provide him with any sense of community or belonging. This sense of isolation is similar to what people may have experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, as many individuals were left alone due to quarantine measures or the loss of loved ones.

The novel also explores the theme of grief as the characters mourn the loss of their loved ones and the world as they knew it. Shelley portrays the depth of human emotion in the face of loss and the struggle to come to terms with a new reality. This theme is relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic as many people have experienced the loss of loved ones or have had to adjust to a new reality with changes in daily life.

The Last Man highlights the fragility of civilization as society collapses in the wake of the pandemic. Shelley portrays the breakdown of social order, the rise of tribalism and violence, and the challenges of rebuilding a new society from the ashes of the old. This theme is also relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic as it has brought to light the vulnerability of society and how quickly it can be disrupted.

In addition to the themes mentioned above, *The Last Man* also explores themes of leadership, power dynamics, and the limitations of science and

medicine in the face of pandemics. These themes are also relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic, as they highlight the complexities of managing a crisis and the importance of effective leadership and decision-making.

Chapter 2

The COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic is an ongoing global health crisis caused by the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The virus was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, and quickly spread to become a worldwide pandemic. The World Health Organization declared the outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on January 30, 2020, and later declared it a global pandemic on March 11, 2020.

The COVID-19 virus is primarily transmitted through respiratory droplets and close contact with infected individuals. Symptoms of the virus include fever, cough, fatigue, and difficulty breathing, and can range from mild to severe, with some cases resulting in death.

The scope of the pandemic has been massive, affecting almost every country in the world. As of February 2023, there have been over 460 million confirmed cases and over 6 million deaths worldwide, with the numbers still increasing. The pandemic has had a profound impact on individuals and societies, causing widespread illness, death, and economic disruption. It has also highlighted inequalities and exposed weaknesses in healthcare systems, social safety nets, and emergency preparedness.

To contain the spread of the virus, governments around the world have implemented various measures, including lockdowns, travel restrictions, and social distancing guidelines. These measures have had significant social and economic consequences, including the loss of jobs and businesses, disruptions to

education and mental health, and an increase in domestic violence and substance abuse.

The pandemic has also sparked a global effort to develop vaccines and treatments to combat the virus. Multiple vaccines have been approved and distributed, providing hope for a way out of the pandemic. However, the emergence of new variants of the virus has raised concerns about the effectiveness of current vaccines and the potential for future waves of the pandemic.

Some of the problems associated with COVID-19 which impact individuals and societies include:

Health Impact: The most immediate and obvious impact of COVID-19 is its impact on health. The virus has caused widespread illness and death, with millions of individuals infected and many requiring hospitalization and intensive care. The virus has also led to long-term health complications for some individuals, including lung damage, neurological problems, and chronic fatigue.

Economic Impact: The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the global economy, causing widespread job losses, business closures, and supply chain disruptions. The pandemic has hit some industries harder than others, with the tourism, hospitality, and retail sectors particularly affected. The economic impact of the pandemic has been felt most acutely by marginalized and vulnerable populations, who are more likely to work in low-wage jobs with limited job security.

Social Impact: The pandemic has also had a significant social impact, disrupting daily life and causing widespread social isolation. Quarantine measures and social

distancing guidelines have prevented individuals from interacting with family and friends, leading to loneliness, depression, and anxiety. The pandemic has also highlighted pre-existing social inequalities and exacerbated them, with marginalized populations suffering disproportionately from the economic and social impact of the pandemic.

Mental Health Impact: The pandemic has had a significant impact on mental health, with many individuals experiencing stress, anxiety, and depression as a result of the pandemic. The pandemic has also led to an increase in substance abuse, domestic violence, and child abuse, further exacerbating mental health issues.

Education Impact: The pandemic has had a significant impact on education, with schools and universities closing or moving to online learning. This has disrupted the education of millions of students worldwide and widened educational disparities. The pandemic has also highlighted the digital divide, with many students lacking access to technology and internet connectivity needed for online learning.

Political Impact: The pandemic has had a significant impact on politics, with governments around the world facing criticism for their response to the pandemic. The pandemic has also raised questions about the role of government in addressing public health crises and the importance of international cooperation in responding to global crises.

Overall, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on individuals and societies, disrupting daily life and highlighting pre-existing social,

economic, and political inequalities. The pandemic has also highlighted the importance of public health preparedness and international cooperation in responding to global health crises.

There are some main similarities and differences between the pandemic portrayed in *The Last Man* and the COVID-19. Some of the similarities are that both pandemics originated from a virus that emerged unexpectedly and spread rapidly. Both pandemics have had a significant impact on human health, causing widespread illness and death. Both pandemics have had a profound impact on society, disrupting daily life and causing significant economic, social, and political upheaval. It had a significant impact on mental health, with many individuals experiencing stress, anxiety, and depression as a result of the pandemic. The pandemics have required a coordinated response from governments, healthcare systems, and communities to mitigate the spread of the virus and address its impact.

Just as there are similarities, some differences also exist between both the pandemics. The pandemic in *The Last Man* is transmitted through the air and is highly contagious, while the COVID-19 pandemic is primarily transmitted through respiratory droplets and contact. The pandemic in *The Last Man* is almost universally fatal, while the mortality rate of COVID-19 is lower, but still significant. The pandemic in *The Last Man* takes place in a pre-technological era, while the COVID-19 pandemic is taking place in an era of advanced medical technology, which has allowed for more effective treatment and vaccine development. The pandemic in *The Last Man* leads to the collapse of society and

a return to primitive forms of living, while the COVID-19 pandemic has led to societal disruptions, but not the collapse of civilization. The response to the pandemic in *The Last Man* is primarily focused on individual survival and self-preservation, while the response to COVID-19 has emphasized collective action, such as social distancing measures and vaccine distribution.

These similarities and differences impact the human experience of pandemics in a variety of ways. On one hand, the similarities highlight the universality of the human experience of pandemics and the need for coordinated responses to address their impact. On the other hand, the differences demonstrate how societal organization, technology, and response strategies can significantly impact the severity and impact of pandemics on individuals and societies. By comparing the two pandemics, we can gain insights into the challenges and opportunities that arise when dealing with pandemics in different historical and technological contexts, and use this knowledge to better prepare for future pandemics.

Chapter 3

Parallels and Insights

Many themes and parallels can be compared and contrasted between *The Last Man* and the COVID-19 pandemic. Both *The Last Man* and the COVID-19 pandemic depict a sense of isolation and loneliness experienced by individuals as a result of the pandemic. In *The Last Man*, the pandemic leads to the near extinction of the human race, leaving the protagonist as the only survivor. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to social distancing measures and quarantine, resulting in widespread isolation and loneliness for almost the whole human race.

Both of them portray the theme of grief and loss. In *The Last Man*, the protagonist experiences intense grief as he witnesses the death of his friends and loved ones, and struggles to cope with the overwhelming sense of loss. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused widespread grief and mourning, as individuals have lost family members, friends, and colleagues to the virus.

Both *The Last Man* and the COVID-19 pandemic reveal the fragility of civilization and the potential for societal collapse in the face of a pandemic. In *The Last Man*, the pandemic leads to the collapse of society and a return to primitive forms of living, while the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the vulnerabilities of modern civilization, including our healthcare systems, economic structures, and political institutions.

Human Resilience: Both *The Last Man* and the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity. In *The Last Man*, the

protagonist demonstrates his strength and resilience as he struggles to survive in a world decimated by the pandemic. Similarly, individuals and communities have shown remarkable resilience in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, coming together to support one another and adapt to the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Collective Action: Both *The Last Man* and the COVID-19 pandemic highlight the importance of collective action in addressing the impact of a pandemic. In *The Last Man*, the protagonist eventually realizes that his survival is linked to the survival of others, and he must work together with other survivors to rebuild society. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasized the importance of collective action, such as social distancing measures, mask-wearing, and vaccine distribution, to mitigate the spread of the virus and address its impact.

These themes and parallels demonstrate how literature can provide insights into the human experience of pandemics, and how the COVID-19 pandemic can be understood in relation to other historical and fictional pandemics.

The Last Man provides valuable insights into the human experience during pandemics by exploring the themes of isolation, grief, the fragility of civilization, human resilience, and collective action, as discussed earlier. By portraying the devastating impact of a pandemic on individuals and societies, the novel highlights the physical, emotional, and psychological toll of a pandemic on human beings. It also reveals the potential for societal collapse, and the importance of collective action in addressing the impact of a pandemic.

Through this exploration of the human experience during pandemics, *The Last Man* offers several lessons that can be learned from the comparison with the COVID-19 pandemic. These include:

The importance of preparedness: *The Last Man* demonstrates the importance of preparedness in the face of a pandemic, as the protagonist struggles to survive in a world decimated by the disease. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for effective planning, resources, and coordination to mitigate the impact of a pandemic.

The value of human connection: *The Last Man* portrays the devastating impact of isolation and loneliness on individuals, highlighting the value of human connection in times of crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of social connections and community support in coping with the challenges of the pandemic.

The need for collective action: *The Last Man* emphasizes the importance of collective action in addressing the impact of a pandemic, as the protagonist eventually realizes that his survival is linked to the survival of others. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of collective action, such as social distancing measures and vaccine distribution, in mitigating the spread of the virus and addressing its impact.

The resilience of the human spirit: *The Last Man* demonstrates the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity, as the protagonist overcomes numerous challenges and hardships to survive. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the resilience of individuals and communities, as they

have adapted to the challenges of the pandemic and come together to support one another.

By comparing and contrasting the themes and parallels between *The Last Man* with the COVID-19 pandemic, we can gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented by pandemics.

Conclusion

The Last Man by Mary Shelley and the COVID-19 pandemic offers valuable insights into the human experience during pandemics. The novel explores themes such as isolation, grief, the fragility of civilization, human resilience, and collective action, which resonate with the experiences of individuals and societies affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. While the two pandemics are separated by centuries and technological advancements, there are striking similarities in the challenges they pose to human health, social structures, and economies.

Through this comparison, we can see the importance of preparedness, the value of human connection, the need for collective action, and the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the need for global coordination and effective planning to mitigate the impact of pandemics, and the importance of social connections and community support in times of crisis. It has also shown us the power of collective action, such as vaccination campaigns and social distancing measures, in slowing the spread of the virus and reducing its impact.

The Last Man offers us a glimpse into a future world ravaged by a pandemic, and the profound impact it can have on individuals and societies. By exploring the themes and parallels between the novel and the COVID-19 pandemic, we can gain a deeper understanding of the human experience during pandemics, and draw valuable lessons to help us better prepare for and respond to future pandemics.

The comparison between *The Last Man* and the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the value of literature in understanding the human experience during pandemics. While scientific research and statistical data are essential in informing policy and medical interventions, literature offers a unique perspective on the emotional and psychological impact of pandemics on individuals and societies.

Literature can provide insights into the ways in which people cope with isolation, grief, and uncertainty during pandemics. It can also explore the impact of pandemics on social structures, economies, and the natural world. Through literature, we can gain a deeper understanding of the complexity and diversity of human experiences during pandemics, which can inform our responses to future pandemics.

Moreover, literature can offer a way to process and make meaning of the challenges of pandemics. By depicting characters who face similar challenges to those we are experiencing, literature can help us to feel less alone and to understand that our experiences are part of a larger human story. It can also offer hope and inspiration through stories of human resilience, creativity, and kindness.

Literature has an important role to play in understanding the human experience during pandemics. Through literature, we can gain insights into the emotional, psychological, and social impact of pandemics, and find ways to make meaning and cope with the challenges they pose. As we continue to navigate the COVID-19 pandemic and prepare for future pandemics, literature can offer us valuable perspectives and tools to help us through these difficult times.

There are some additional implications for future research related to the findings of this project. This project focused on the comparison between *The Last Man* and the COVID-19 pandemic from a Western perspective. However, pandemics have affected different cultures and societies in unique ways, and future research can explore the cross-cultural aspects of pandemics. By comparing and contrasting the experiences of different cultures and societies, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of the global impact of pandemics.

This project drew upon insights from literature, history, and public health to examine the human experience during pandemics. However, pandemics have far-reaching implications across a wide range of fields, including economics, politics, sociology, and psychology. Interdisciplinary research that brings together scholars from different fields can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of pandemics on individuals and societies.

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