



Societal Collapse and Psychological Resilience: A Social Scientific Reading of Collective Trauma in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*

Granit Zela

Department of Social Sciences, University of New York, Tirana

DOI: 10.26417/emp7m866

Abstract

Mary Shelley's dystopian novel *The Last Man* (1826), while a cornerstone of literary studies, offers a profound and underutilized historical imaginary for understanding contemporary societal crises. This article moves beyond traditional literary criticism to reframe Shelley's work as a sociological and educational case study, particularly relevant in the post-COVID-19 era. Using a theoretical framework grounded in the sociology of collective trauma and social cohesion, this analysis investigates the novel's depiction of a "narrative plague"—the collapse of shared meaning, social bonds, and institutional trust—that runs parallel to the medical pandemic it portrays. The study employs a qualitative textual analysis to examine the social-psychological dimensions of isolation, loss, and anomie as depicted in the novel. Findings reveal how the narrative simulates the disintegration of social capital and the failure of political and scientific institutions to manage catastrophe, offering critical insights into the foundations of community resilience and mental health. This 19th-century text is analyzed as a pre-sociological thought experiment, connecting historical representations of societal collapse with contemporary social science discourse on disaster response and recovery. The article argues that the novel's themes have direct implications for educational policy and pedagogy, highlighting the urgent need for trauma-informed approaches that can rebuild social inclusion, foster critical media literacy, and cultivate psychological resilience in an era of profound informational and social fragmentation.

Keywords: Mary Shelley, *The Last Man*, social cohesion, collective trauma, educational resilience, social capital, narrative plague, post-pandemic studies, social policy, mental health

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic was not merely a public health crisis; it was a profound social and psychological event that exposed the fragility of global systems, eroded institutional trust, and fractured shared societal narratives. In its wake, scholars, policymakers, and educators are grappling with fundamental questions about social cohesion, collective trauma, and the pathways to resilient recovery (Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). While contemporary data provides one avenue for understanding these challenges, historical and cultural artifacts offer another, providing "thought experiments" that simulate societal dynamics under extreme stress. Mary Shelley's novel *The Last Man* (1826), written nearly two centuries ago, stands as one of the most powerful and prescient of these experiments. Though celebrated in literary circles, its potential as a rich case study for the social sciences remains largely untapped.

This article addresses a gap in the social science literature by bridging 19th-century literary imagination with 21st-century sociological and educational challenges. While literary scholars have analyzed the novel's themes of loss and romantic despair (e.g., Spark, 2013; Hunt, 2024), they have not systematically applied social scientific frameworks to understand its depiction of societal disintegration. Conversely, social science research on pandemics often focuses on empirical data from recent events, overlooking the valuable insights embedded in historical narratives that explore the deep cultural and psychological underpinnings of collective response to crisis. This study, therefore, poses the following research question: *How can the narrative architecture of Mary Shelley's The Last Man, when analyzed through the lens of social cohesion and collective trauma theories, illuminate the mechanisms of societal collapse and inform contemporary strategies for fostering educational and community resilience?*

To answer this question, this paper reframes the novel's central conceit—a global plague—through the theoretical lens of Susan Sontag's (1978) "illness as metaphor." It argues that the physical pestilence in the novel serves as a catalyst for a more insidious "narrative plague": the breakdown of communication, the collapse of shared meaning, and the dissolution of the social bonds that constitute a functioning society. By analyzing this narrative plague, the paper investigates the cultural frameworks societies use to comprehend catastrophes, a theme of direct relevance for educators and policymakers navigating a post-pandemic reality where trust in institutions and shared narratives has been profoundly eroded. The analysis aligns with the European Journal of Social Science Education and Research's focus on "Mental Health, Trauma, and Resilience" and "Social Inclusion and Integration" by using the novel to explore the fundamental building blocks of a healthy society and the role of education in its reconstruction after a cataclysmic event.

Literature Review: Theoretical Frameworks for Analyzing Societal Collapse

To move beyond a purely literary reading, this analysis is grounded in three intersecting domains of social science theory: collective trauma, social cohesion and social capital, and the role of narrative in shaping social reality. This framework provides the necessary tools to interpret the events of *The Last Man* not as mere plot devices, but as illustrations of complex social and psychological processes.

The Sociology of Collective Trauma

Collective trauma occurs when a catastrophic event fundamentally alters a group's shared identity, memory, and future orientation (Erikson, 1976). It is not simply the sum of individual traumas but a crisis of meaning that damages the "tissue of community" itself. Jeffrey C. Alexander (2012) argues that trauma is not inherent in an event but is a socially constructed attribution. A group must create a "trauma narrative" that identifies the nature of the pain, the victims, the perpetrators (if any), and the moral significance of the suffering. This process is crucial for a community's ability to process and eventually move beyond the event. When this narrative-making process fails—when there is no consensus on the meaning of the event or when communication breaks down entirely—a society can become "stuck" in a state of unresolved trauma, leading to social paralysis and disintegration.

In the context of a pandemic, the trauma is often diffuse and ongoing, lacking a clear endpoint or a single villain, which complicates the creation of a coherent trauma narrative (Garland, 2021). Shelley's novel provides a simulated environment to observe this process in extremis. The plague in *The Last Man* is an unstoppable, seemingly meaningless force, which systematically dismantles every framework—religion, science, politics, art—that characters use to make sense of their world. The novel thus becomes a study in the failure of a society to construct a functional trauma narrative, leading to what this paper terms a "narrative plague."

Social Cohesion and the Erosion of Social Capital

Social cohesion refers to the bonds that hold a society together, encompassing trust, shared values, and a sense of belonging. A key component of cohesion is social capital, defined by Robert Putnam (2000) as the "networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit." Social capital exists in two forms: "bonding" capital (strong ties among homogenous groups, like family) and "bridging" capital (weaker ties among heterogeneous groups, which are crucial for broader societal cooperation). Disasters and crises can severely test, and often deplete, a society's stock of social capital (Aldrich & Meyer, 2015).

During a pandemic, social distancing measures, political polarization, and economic disruption can fray both bonding and bridging ties. Trust in neighbors, institutions, and leaders may decline, leading to a state of anomie—a sense of normlessness and social detachment first described by Émile Durkheim (1897/1951). *The Last Man* offers a stark depiction of this process. As the plague spreads, it dissolves every

form of social organization: families abandon each other, political leaders become impotent or tyrannical, and communities turn to violence and scapegoating. The protagonist, Lionel Verney, witnesses the complete erosion of social capital, leaving him in a world devoid of the trust and reciprocity necessary for human society to function. His ultimate isolation is not just a personal tragedy but the logical endpoint of a total societal collapse rooted in the destruction of social bonds.

The "Narrative Plague": Informational Fragmentation and Meaning-Making

The concept of a "narrative plague" extends Sontag's (1978) work on "illness as metaphor" into the realm of social epistemology. In an era of informational fragmentation, where social media and partisan news create conflicting realities, a society's ability to form a shared understanding of a crisis is severely compromised (Benkler et al., 2018). This breakdown of a common narrative can be as destructive as the crisis itself, fostering distrust, hindering collective action, and exacerbating social divisions. This paper posits that Shelley's novel prophetically illustrates this dynamic.

The fragmented, episodic structure of *The Last Man*, which literary critic Joyce Carol Oates called "a deliberately, at times perversely, anti-narrative," is not a stylistic flaw but a representation of this social breakdown. As society disintegrates, so does the coherence of the story. The narrative becomes a series of "episodemics"—short, tragic episodes of death and failed relationships that mirror the chaotic, unpredictable nature of the plague itself (Cooke, 2009). This narrative fragmentation reflects the characters' inability to construct a meaningful story out of their suffering, a key symptom of unresolved collective trauma. This framework allows us to analyze the novel's form and content as intertwined data points on the relationship between narrative coherence and social resilience.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model: The Interplay of Medical and Narrative Plagues

Layer 1: The Catalyst Event (Medical Plague in <i>The Last Man</i>)	
A global pandemic that overwhelms existing medical, political, and social systems.	
Layer 2: The Sociological Impact (The "Narrative Plague")	
Collapse of Social Cohesion & Capital - Erosion of institutional trust (government, science) - Breakdown of bonding capital (family, community)	Collapse of Shared Meaning - Failure to construct a coherent trauma narrative - Proliferation of misinformation and despair - Devaluation of art, philosophy, and religion

• Disintegration of bridging capital (national, international cooperation) • Rise of anomie and social fragmentation	• Breakdown of communication and language
Layer 3: Individual and Educational Consequences	
Manifests as widespread Collective Trauma , psychological isolation, and existential despair. This highlights the critical need for Educational Resilience : pedagogical approaches focused on rebuilding social-emotional skills, fostering critical thinking to combat narrative fragmentation, and processing collective trauma to restore a sense of community and shared purpose.	

Source: Developed by the author based on the theoretical framework.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative textual analysis, treating Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* as a narrative case study. This methodological approach is appropriate for exploring complex social phenomena through the rich, detailed data provided by a cultural text (Given, 2008). The novel is not treated as a direct representation of reality but as a "sociological imaginary"—a simulated world that allows for the examination of social processes in their most extreme forms. The justification for using a fictional text rests on the premise that literature often captures the deep cultural anxieties, social assumptions, and psychological dynamics of its time, providing insights that may not be accessible through purely empirical methods (Lowenthal, 1989).

The analytical process involved three stages. First, a close reading of the novel was conducted to identify key themes, events, and character arcs related to the research question. Passages depicting the breakdown of family, community, government, and international relations were systematically cataloged. Second, these textual data were coded according to the core concepts of the theoretical framework: manifestations of collective trauma, erosion of social capital (bonding and bridging), and instances of narrative fragmentation or the failure of meaning-making. For example, scenes of families abandoning sick members were coded under "erosion of bonding capital," while the protagonist's inability to articulate his grief in a coherent story was coded under "narrative plague."

Finally, in the analysis and discussion stages, these coded data are interpreted through the theoretical lenses of Alexander (2012), Putnam (2000), and Sontag (1978). The analysis moves beyond summarizing the plot to explain *how* the novel's narrative illustrates these social scientific concepts. The goal is to demonstrate what the fictional case of *The Last Man* reveals about the real-world dynamics of societal

response to existential crises, thereby generating transferable insights for contemporary social science and education.

Analysis: Deconstructing Societal Collapse in *The Last Man*

The novel's narrative unfolds as a systematic deconstruction of the pillars of human society. By applying our social scientific framework, we can analyze this process not just as a literary tragedy, but as a simulated case study in the mechanics of social disintegration.

The Disintegration of Social Bonds: From Family to Nation

The first casualty of the plague in *The Last Man* is social capital. Shelley meticulously depicts the erosion of both bonding and bridging ties. Initially, familial and friendship bonds (bonding capital) provide a bulwark against the encroaching chaos. The central characters—Lionel Verney, his sister Perdita, the noble Adrian, and the ambitious Lord Raymond—form a tight-knit community. However, as the crisis intensifies, these bonds prove fragile. Perdita, consumed by personal grief, abandons her child and commits suicide. Lord Raymond's political ambitions lead him to a reckless death in a plague-ridden Constantinople. Shelley demonstrates that even the strongest interpersonal ties can be severed by the overwhelming force of a collective crisis combined with individual psychological stressors.

This erosion is even more pronounced at the societal level. As the plague reaches England, bridging capital evaporates. Communities turn on each other, scapegoating outsiders and rejecting refugees. The political system collapses into factionalism, with one charismatic but fraudulent leader promising false salvation, mirroring the rise of demagoguery in times of crisis. Shelley writes, "Every man, as he met his fellow, looked on him as a murderer" (Shelley, 1826/2004, p. 250). This sentence perfectly captures the complete annihilation of social trust, the bedrock of social capital. The society regresses to a Hobbesian state of "war of all against all," not out of inherent evil, but because the structures of trust and reciprocity have been systematically destroyed. This illustrates a key sociological insight: social order is not a natural state but a fragile construction that requires constant maintenance through shared norms and trust, all of which are obliterated by the plague.

The Psychology of Existential Trauma and Failed Resilience

The protagonist, Lionel Verney, serves as a focal point for analyzing the psychological impact of collective trauma. His journey is not one of heroic resilience but of progressive psychological disintegration. He is not just lonely; he is the sole survivor of every conceivable social unit—family, community, nation, and finally, species. His trauma is absolute and existential. At the novel's end, he wanders the ruins of Rome, a "miserable atom" in a dead world, writing his story for a non-existent audience. This act of writing, which might typically be seen as a form of therapeutic narrative construction, is rendered futile. It is a testament to a trauma so profound that it cannot be integrated or overcome; it can only be recorded.

From a psychological perspective, Verney's state exemplifies a failure of post-traumatic growth. He finds no new meaning, no new community, and no sense of purpose beyond mere biological survival. His "resilience" is a hollow one. Shelley subverts the romantic ideal of the heroic, self-sufficient individual. Verney's intellect, strength, and love for humanity are ultimately useless in the face of total social collapse. This serves as a powerful critique of individualistic models of resilience, suggesting that true, sustainable resilience is not an individual trait but a collective property, dependent on the social support systems that the plague destroys. His final state is a study in anomie—a complete detachment from a world that no longer offers any social or moral anchor.

The "Narrative Plague" and the Collapse of Meaning-Making

The most sophisticated element of Shelley's social analysis is her depiction of the "narrative plague." As the physical plague spreads, it infects the very language and systems of meaning that allow humans to understand their world. Science is powerless, offering no cure or explanation. Religion becomes a source of violent fanaticism rather than solace. Art and philosophy are rendered meaningless in the face of mass death. Shelley explicitly shows this breakdown when Verney tries to read classic accounts of plagues by Boccaccio and Defoe, only to find them inadequate: "The pictures drawn in these books were so vivid, that we seemed to have experienced the... results depicted by them," yet they offer no real comfort or guide to action (Shelley, 1826/2004, p. 259).

The novel's structure mirrors this collapse. The narrative is fragmented, jumping between personal tragedies and large-scale societal events with a disorienting lack of cohesion. Cooke's (2009) concept of "episodemics" is apt here; the story is a collection of broken narratives, reflecting a world where coherent storytelling is no longer possible. This is the essence of the narrative plague: the destruction of the shared stories that bind a culture. Without a common framework to understand their suffering, the characters are left with only "harrowing shrieks and silence dire" (p. 608). This literary device has profound sociological resonance in the 21st century. It serves as a metaphor for the informational chaos of the digital age, where competing narratives about crises like pandemics or climate change prevent the formation of the social consensus necessary for effective collective action.

Discussion

Analyzing *The Last Man* through a social scientific lens allows us to answer our research question by revealing the novel as a powerful simulation of the mechanisms of societal collapse and a source of crucial lessons for contemporary challenges. The narrative demonstrates that a society's vulnerability to a crisis lies not only in its material or technical capacities but in the resilience of its social fabric and its collective systems of meaning-making. The "narrative plague" is ultimately more destructive than the medical one because it destroys the very possibility of a coordinated, compassionate, and rational response.

The findings from this analysis hold direct relevance for the post-COVID-19 world. The erosion of institutional trust, the rise of political polarization fueled by misinformation, and the widespread mental health challenges observed during the recent pandemic are real-world manifestations of the dynamics Shelley explored nearly 200 years ago. Her depiction of the failure of leadership, the turn to scapegoating, and the ultimate descent into anomie serves as a stark cautionary tale. It suggests that societal resilience cannot be taken for granted; it requires active investment in social capital, the promotion of institutional trustworthiness, and the cultivation of a shared civic narrative.

Furthermore, the novel's focus on the failure of meaning-making has profound implications for education. In an era of informational fragmentation, the ability to critically evaluate sources, distinguish evidence from falsehood, and participate in constructive dialogue is not just an academic skill but a prerequisite for democratic citizenship and societal survival. The "narrative plague" Shelley describes is analogous to the "infodemic" that accompanied COVID-19. This underscores the urgent need for educational systems to prioritize media literacy, critical thinking, and civic education.

The novel's bleak conclusion also forces a critical re-evaluation of the concept of resilience. Lionel Verney's survival is not a triumph. It is a portrait of trauma without recovery. This challenges simplistic notions of "bouncing back" and points toward the necessity of trauma-informed pedagogy and public mental health policies. True resilience is not merely enduring hardship but requires the collective processing of trauma and the active rebuilding of community. Education has a central role to play in this process, by creating safe spaces for students to process their experiences, fostering social-emotional learning, and rebuilding the sense of community and belonging that was fractured by the pandemic.

Conclusion and Implications

Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, when read as a social scientific text, transcends its literary origins to become a vital commentary on the foundations of human society. This study has demonstrated that the novel's depiction of a global plague serves as a powerful analytical tool for understanding the interconnected processes of collective trauma, the erosion of social cohesion, and the collapse of shared meaning. The concept of the "narrative plague"—a breakdown in the stories a society tells itself—is a particularly potent insight, offering a historical lens through which to view contemporary challenges of misinformation and social fragmentation.

The contribution of this research is twofold. First, it introduces a valuable but overlooked cultural artifact into the social scientific discourse on disaster, resilience, and public health. It shows how historical narratives can be used as rich case studies to explore complex social dynamics. Second, it generates actionable insights for contemporary policy and practice, particularly in the field of education.

Implications for Education and Social Policy

For educators, this analysis highlights the need for a curriculum that goes beyond content delivery to actively cultivate the skills of social and emotional resilience. This includes:

- **Trauma-Informed Pedagogy:** Recognizing that students and educators are processing the collective trauma of the pandemic and creating learning environments that prioritize psychological safety, connection, and community.
- **Critical Media Literacy:** Equipping students with the tools to navigate a complex and often toxic information environment, fostering skepticism toward misinformation and an appreciation for evidence-based reasoning.
- **Project-Based Civics:** Engaging students in projects that rebuild a sense of community and shared purpose, thereby actively generating social capital within the classroom and beyond.

For policymakers, Shelley's work is a reminder that public trust is a society's most valuable resource during a crisis. Policies related to public health, economic recovery, and social welfare must be designed and communicated in ways that build, rather than erode, this trust. Investing in public mental health infrastructure is not an auxiliary concern but is central to fostering a resilient populace capable of navigating future crises.

Limitations and Future Research

The primary limitation of this study is its reliance on a single, fictional text. While *The Last Man* is a uniquely powerful case, the insights derived from it are interpretive and not generalizable in a statistical sense. Future research could mitigate this by conducting comparative textual analyses of other apocalyptic narratives from different historical periods and cultural contexts to explore variations in imagined societal responses to crisis. Furthermore, future empirical research could test the hypotheses generated by this analysis, for example, by examining the correlation between levels of social capital and community resilience in regions affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, or by assessing the impact of media literacy interventions on institutional trust.

In conclusion, Mary Shelley's two-century-old novel remains hauntingly relevant. It serves as a powerful intellectual and ethical resource for confronting the challenges of our time. By studying its depiction of societal collapse, we can better understand the social and narrative foundations of a resilient, inclusive, and compassionate world, and the crucial role of education in building and sustaining it.

References

- [1] Aldrich, D. P., & Meyer, M. A. (2015). Social capital and community resilience. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 59(2), 254–269.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764214550299>
- [2] Alexander, J. C. (2012). *Trauma: A social theory*. Polity Press.
- [3] Benkler, Y., Faris, R., & Roberts, H. (2018). *Network propaganda: Manipulation, disinformation, and radicalization in American politics*. Oxford University Press.
- [4] Cooke, J. (2009). *Legacies of plague in literature, theory and film*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- [5] Durkheim, É. (1951). *Suicide: A study in sociology* (J. A. Spaulding & G. Simpson, Trans.). The Free Press. (Original work published 1897)
- [6] Erikson, K. T. (1976). *Everything in its path: Destruction of community in the Buffalo Creek flood*. Simon & Schuster.
- [7] Garland, E. (2021). The social life of pandemics. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 50, 355-373. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-101819-110037>
- [8] Given, L. M. (Ed.). (2008). *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods*. SAGE Publications.
- [9] Hunt, E. M. (2024). *The first last man: Mary Shelley and the postapocalyptic imagination*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
- [10] Lowenthal, L. (1989). *Literature and the image of man: Sociological studies of the European drama and novel, 1600-1900*. Transaction Publishers.
- [11] Pfefferbaum, B., & North, C. S. (2020). Mental health and the Covid-19 pandemic. *New England Journal of Medicine*, 383(6), 510–512.
<https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMp2008017>
- [12] Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. Simon & Schuster.
- [13] Shelley, M. (2004). *The last man*. Wordsworth Editions. (Original work published 1826)
- [14] Sontag, S. (1978). *Illness as metaphor*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- [15] Spark, M. (2013). *Mary Shelley*. Carcanet Press.