

Moving Beyond the Man: Women, Weather and the World in Mary Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826)

1. Aim

This research will demonstrate how the female characters: Perdita, Idris, the gendered Earth and the Plague in Mary Shelley's apocalyptic novel, *The Last Man* (1826) not only biographically define her solitude; but illustrate how Shelley began to engage with ecological concerns of the period.



2. Analysis:

'Nature, our mother, and our friend, had turned on us a brow on menace. [...] She could take our globe, fringed with mountains, girded by the atmosphere, containing the condition of our being, and all that man's mind could invent or his force achieve; she could take the ball in her hand and cast it into space, where life would be drink up and man and all his efforts forever annihilated.'

(Shelley, 1985: p.168)

- Research is concentrated on 'Mother' Earth as an inhospitable sphere. I analyse her hostility towards the human species, and by seeking their annihilation she may enact true 'Paradise' for nature, animals, and the Other.
- The construction of Paradise is important when understanding Nature Vs. Man's efforts to achieve it. Through this, a gender divide is created by the Female protecting nature and the natural, and the male representing the Anthropocene and the manmade.
- The emergence of the Anthropocene is demonstrated as the male characters, Adrian, Merrival, and Lionel imagine a future in which man's "restless aspirations will [...] bring fourth good instead of evil" (p.159).

3. Findings:

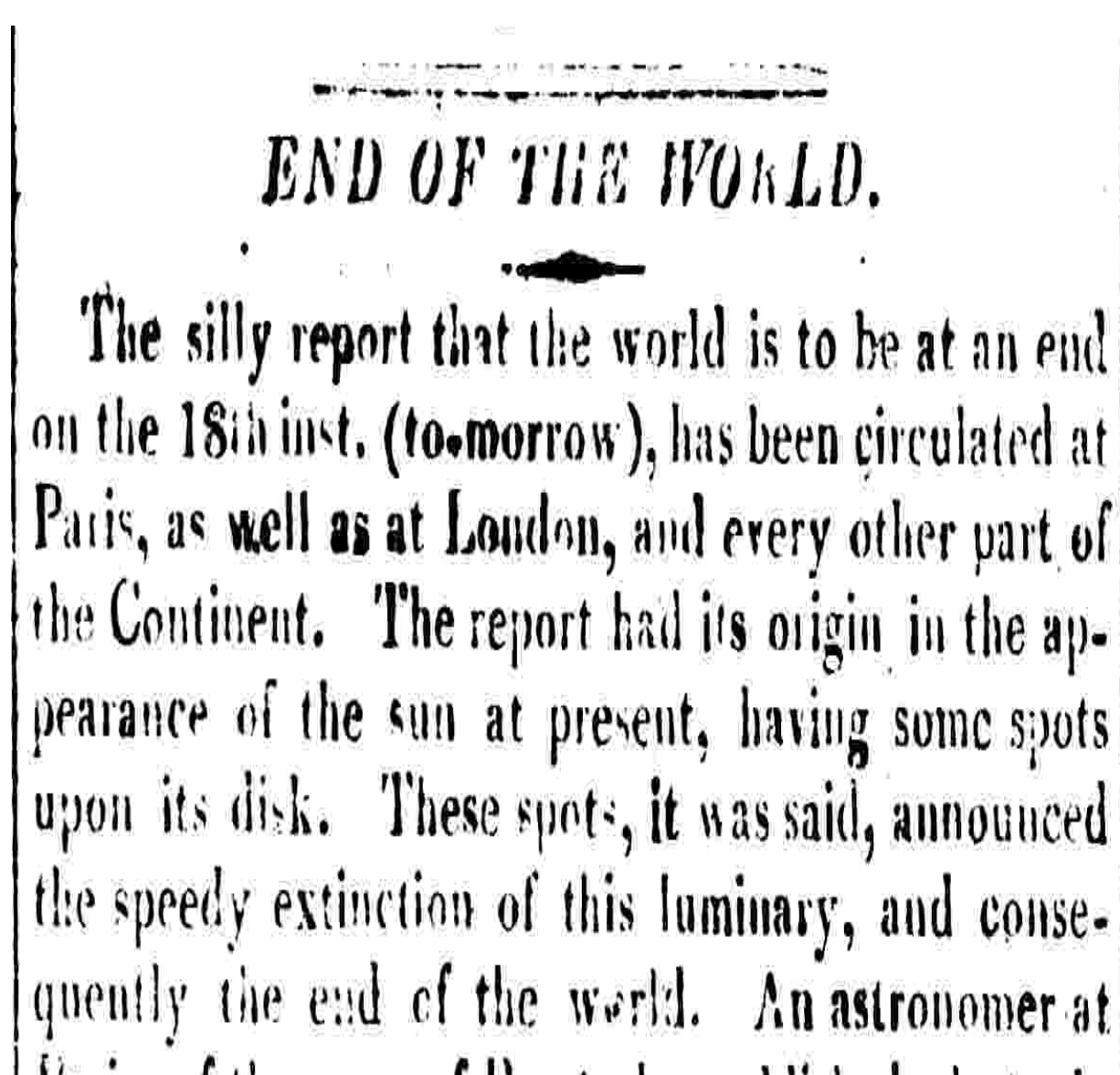
The Last Man shares Mary Shelley's concerns and anxieties towards the potential reality of an ecological apocalypse.

Her portrayal of the Earth, and the Plague as female characters demonstrate the emergence of the Anthropocene in the text as man's failure to construct true Paradise on Earth.

Mary Shelley's 'Last Man' narrative demonstrates her own thoughts on the potential existence of life without man, and how fears of an ecological apocalypse were still prevalent even ten years after the 1816 disaster.



"The Last Man" By John Martin (1849)



The Morning Post, (1816)



"Weymouth Bay" By John Constable (1816)

References:

- Constable, J. (1816). "Weymouth Bay" 13 February <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/john-constable-weymouth-bay-bowleaze-cove-and-jordon-hill>
- Martin, J. (1849). "The Last Man" 13 February <https://romantic-circles.org/editions/mws/lastman/jmartin.htm>
- Shelley, M. (1985). *The Last Man*. Eds B. Aldiss. London: The Hogarth Press LTD
- Unknown. (1816). 'End of the World'. *Morning Post*.


Gale Primary Sources. 13 February. <https://go-gale-com.libaccess.hud.ac.uk/ps/retrieve.do>

Acknowledgements:

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Further Information:

Grainville's *Le Dernier Homme* (1805)
Byron's "Darkness" (1816)
Thomas Campbell's *The Last Man Poem* (1823)

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