In her novel *The Last Man*, Mary Shelley follows in the footsteps of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant by representing the beautiful and the sublime as female and male aesthetic categories, respectively. However, even though most of the characters in *The Last Man* embody Burke and Kant’s traditional aesthetics of the beautiful and the sublime, the novel’s protagonist, Lionel Verney, falls into a different aesthetic category — the Gothic idea of the uncanny. Freud’s definitive 1919 essay on the qualities of “uncanniness” serves as the basis for analyzing Lionel. Throughout the text, Lionel evolves into an uncanny figure. At the same time, he loses his gender characteristics, becoming ambiguously gendered and almost hermaphroditic. His loss of gender identification, combined with Freud’s conception of the aesthetic, renders the uncanny as a genderless aesthetic.

Nearly all of the females in *The Last Man* are “beautiful” characters. First and foremost, Kant points out that the “beautiful” is always physically attractive (Kant 91), and the women in Shelley’s novel are indeed physically attractive. However, Shelley only pays nominal attention to physical beauty and places more emphasis on the beauty inherent in the women’s virtues and personalities. For Burke, this focus particularly genders the beautiful; he argues that only the feminine is beautiful. He states, “But...perfection [is so far] from being the cause of beauty, that this quality, where it is highest, in the female sex, almost always carries with it an idea of weakness and imperfection” (Burke 137). He further distinguishes beauty from the sublime by calling beauty weak and imperfect. Moreover, these traits make women beautiful. In the novel, Idris and Perdita are always subservient to their husbands and brothers. Presented as a frail persona, Idris ultimately dies as a result of this fragility because she cannot endure the plague raging around her and the threat of death hovering over all of her loved ones. Meanwhile, Perdita is also weak; she kills herself when Raymond dies,
feeling useless without her male half. This extreme codependence is the largest weakness in Shelley’s female characters, and yet, it does not diminish them aesthetically. The gentler feminine sex serves the stronger male gender within the novel, paralleling the relationship between beauty and the sublime.

In contrast, Shelley’s Lord Raymond is a prime example of masculinity, possessing all the qualities of the sublime. As Burke states, the sublime “excites ideas of pain and danger...it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (51). Raymond is a Byronic figure; he is a dashing soldier who goes off to fight for Greece, whose “reckless courage and comprehensive genius brought him into notice...[h]e became a darling of this rising people” (Shelley 31). Raymond also encompasses other sublime virtues such as wisdom, justice, and fortitude, as he is a good leader and a successful general. Yet, in contrast to beauty, sublimity inspires both positive and negative reactions. Raymond also incites more unpleasant emotions, like terror. His passions are described as “violent,” and his focus is entirely selfish (Shelley 35). For example, he terrifies his wife with his irrational fear of her infidelity and her vehement reactions to her accusations of infidelity and her anger. Raymond is then left to Adrian to lead him into civilization. “I was admitted within that sacred boundary which divides the intellectual…and animals. My best feelings were called into play in response to [Adrian]” (Shelley 22). He is rescued from an animalistic existence by the education that Adrian provides. His first evolution does not grow out of his own volition; rather, it is left to Adrian to lead him into civilization. The air of weakness that surrounds Lionel is one of the main forces rendering him incapable of being a sublime figure.

This transformation from a savage to a civilized gentleman also sets up Lionel’s lack of roots. The concept of the unknown being uncanny is expressed in the German concepts of the heimliche and the unheimliche (Freud 21). The word heimlich denotes “home,” “native,” and “known.” Its antonym, unheimlich, conveys the uncanny and means literally, “not home.” Conversationally, however, it means “uneasy,” “eerie,” “ghostly,” and “creepy.” The term unheimlich is easily applied to Lionel. Despite being adopted by Adrian, Lionel never really has a place of his own to call “home.” He only is able to join the nobility by marrying Idris, Adrian’s sister. While Lionel is welcomed in the aristocracy and acts as the governing Lord at Windsor, it is never technically “his” house and he is never the real Lord of Windsor as this title belongs to Adrian. This sense of alienation, fueled by his childhood abandonment and enforced by the circumstances of his life, drives him to travel at the end of the novel. As the last man, there is little need for Lionel to continue traveling. Yet he is not comfortable leading a settled life. He cannot establish a new home and certainly will not do so without external influences.

According to Freud, the uncanny is primarily something that should be repressed or has “undergone repression and then returned from it” (“The Uncanny,” 245). Lionel’s emergence into society can be described by the Freudian concepts of the Ego, Id and Superego. The wilderness in which he revels at first is representative of the Id, the untamed part of a personality craving only instant gratification. Stealing and fighting, Lionel acts on every visceral impulse, and this disregard for social convention leads to his incarceration. He is pure passion, his every move fueled by his hatred for Adrian and the nobility that turned its back on his father. He has not been subjected to the taming influence of society and hence, has not developed a Superego, or conscience, to discipline the wild Id. Only the appearance of Adrian, the embodiment of an Ego — a balance between the wild Id and restrictive moral Superego — leads Lionel out of his wild manners into civilization. Lionel comes into contact almost exclusively with Adrian. As a result, Adrian’s influence curbs
Lionel’s Id, enabling Lionel to develop an Ego that allows him to become a normal and balanced human being. However, Lionel’s primitive roots need to be repressed in order to forge the “new” Lionel. This first transformation plants the seeds of his uncanniness.

Moreover, Freud wrote that the uncanny encompasses elements of precognition and morbid anxiety (Freud 47). The strongest connection between Lionel and the uncanny element of prophecy is in the text’s introduction. At the beginning, the Sybil’s cave is described as the place where a document is “found,” a document that is actually the novel itself. The author narrating the introduction claims only to have put the scraps of prophecy together and translated them. This makes Lionel the embodiment of the prophecy. In addition, Lionel experiences a moment of precognition shortly after the outbreak of the plague in London, before the extent of its destructivity was known. He returns home to find a small festival held in honor of his son Alfred’s birthday. Lionel exclaims, “Ye are all going to die […] already the gay dance vanished, the green sward was strewn with corpses, the blue air above became fetid with deathly exhalations” (Shelley 189). Lionel presciently envisions the deaths of his wife and children, as well as the deaths of the surrounding villagers and other party attendees; he simply misidentifies the causes of the their deaths. Furthermore, his morbid anxiety over his family is mentioned numerous times throughout the novel, demonstrating that Lionel is in the midst of transforming from a man to a fully uncanny figure.

Similar to the sublime aesthetic, the uncanny can invoke negative responses due to being mean and hurtful. “We also call a living person uncanny, usually when we ascribe evil motives to him. But that is not all; we must not only credit him with bad intentions but must attribute to these intentions of capacity to achieve their aim in virtue of certain special powers” (Freud 49). In contrast to Lionel’s positive qualities depicted in the majority of the novel, there are several instances when other characters accuse Lionel of being “unkind.” For example, after Perdita’s husband’s death, Lionel drugs Perdita to put her aboard the ship, despite her express wishes to stay in Greece by his grave. She wakes up from her drugged sleep and, realizing what Lionel has done, exclaims, “Unkind! unkind!...you know not what you have done!” (Shelley 167-8). She blames him for his selfish desire to keep her close to him and for his blatant disregard for her feelings. His unkindness also drives Perdita to commit suicide. Hence, by wielding a “special power,” by using a drug and then forcing an evil end, Lionel commits an uncanny act.

Finally, Lionel’s survival of the plague epidemic completes his transformation from a man to an uncanny figure, for as Freud says, “we are tempted to conclude that what is ‘uncanny’ is frightening precisely because it is not known and familiar” (21). No one, including the reader, knows why Lionel survives the plague. There is no logic and also no supernatural explanation offered in the place of logic. Furthermore, Lionel’s ambivalence towards his own death heights his uncanniness. He is never frightened about his own demise, but he never quite embraces it either. As he nears death, he declares he is happy. The uncanny is closely related to death and man’s attitude towards death, “turning something fearful uncanny” (Freud 49). Lionel’s attitude towards death is foreign and unsympathetic.

Once Lionel completes his transition from a man to an uncanny figure, he also loses his gender, becoming asexual and androgynous. A large part of Lionel’s sexual metamorphosis is not connected to anything he actively does; rather, it is connected to the fact that his gender is rendered useless. Gender consists primarily of three elements: biological, comparative, and social. By the end of the novel, Lionel is the only person to have survived the plague. Biologically, then, he becomes asexual as there is no hope of repopulating the earth; his physical sexuality is irrelevant, and he becomes technically impotent. His sexual physical desires are also rendered useless since there is no one, male or female, to fulfill any sexual craving. He then must fulfill the role of male and female in his own life, a trend that started while he was taking care of Clara, fulfilling both maternal and paternal roles. There is also the comparative aspect of gender, the definition of one’s sex in opposition to the other. If there are two genders, one is distinguished by not being the other; hence, the categories of male and female exist. However, there is no other gender left for Lionel to compare himself to; he cannot define himself through contrast.

Finally, gender is a social construct that carries with it expectations and conventions regarding behavior and self-image. For example, in Lionel’s Western society, men wore pants and took up careers while women wore dresses and stayed home raising children. To an extent, their lives were predetermined.
based on their social gender, rather than a biological necessity. Yet there is no society, Western or Eastern, to establish a gender code that Lionel must follow. The only trace of social gender that still clings to Lionel at the end of the novel is his own memory of these “gender laws”. He thus becomes asexual, possessing male reproductive organs that are useless, and androgynous since he must fulfill his own sexual desires and practice both the male and female spheres of life defined by his memory of gender roles.

Lionel’s final step in his transformation into a full uncanny figure matches the time when his gender changes. In the novel, there is a pattern of women being beautiful, hence gendering the aesthetic to be feminine. Likewise, the cases of sublime males in the novel gender the sublime as male. Lionel, then, is a genderless, sexually irrelevant figure who is uncanny, transferring his sexual identity onto the aesthetic of the uncanny. The uncanny aesthetic’s gender is defined by an irrelevance of sexuality and gender.

Shelley chooses to end the novel with a lone uncanny character. Both the beautiful and the sublime characters perish. There is a wistful autobiographical element to this turn of events, as Shelley struggled to suppress her gender in a world dominated by men who were practicing the same literary craft as she. The uncanny, the survivor trait, can be possessed by either sex. The novel suggests an equality of the sexes, a suggestion supported by the fact that the author’s voice is aligned with Lionel’s and that Lionel is believed to be Shelley’s fictional doppelgänger. Some contemporary critics have asked, “Why not The Last Woman?” Shelley answers with her desire to create a genderless encasement of spirit to stress the irrelevance of gender to her contemporary society.

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**Works Cited**


**Suggested Reading**


Freud S. *The Ego and the Id*. 1923.

Shelley, MW. *Valperga*. 1823.
Figure 1: Character Map

Figure 2: Novel Chronology

Lionel the Beast
- Lionel meets Adrian, is adopted by him
- Lionel is educated
- Marries Idris after she escapes from her mother
- Plague breaks out
- Goes to Greece with Perdita looking for Raymond
- Raymond and Perdita die
- Adrian becomes Lord Protector
- Lionel shuts himself and family in at Windsor
- Alfred dies
- Adrian decides to move rest of England to Paris
- Countess of Windsor reappears
- Idris dies
- Alfred, Lionel, and group of stragglers travel the Continent
- Countess of Windsor dies after reconciling with Lionel
- Everyone in the group dies, including Evelyn, Lionel’s last child
- Adrian and Clara die in shipwreck
- Lionel is the last one left alive