



Università degli Studi di Udine

Prova di Ammissione alla Scuola Superiore a.a. 2020-2021 – LINGUA INGLESE

PART 1. READING COMPREHENSION

For obvious reasons, when it comes to literature born of epidemics, people think of Boccaccio and Daniel Defoe. Mary Shelley, one of the most important authors of a plague journal of a later age, is usually overlooked. Her journal is a remarkable piece of life-writing – and death-writing – on its own terms. But Mary's personal response to plagues – both real and metaphorical – also became the basis for her second great work of political science fiction after *Frankenstein*, entitled *The Last Man*.

The science fiction novelist and literary critic Joanna Russ has argued that this remarkable novel has shaped almost every subsequent science fiction and horror story of pandemic, total war, zombie apocalypse and other man-made disasters. First published in 1826, it tells the harrowing tale of a global plague that originates in a war in Constantinople, towards the end of the twenty-first century. This plague appears to wipe out all but one human on the planet.

But Mary Shelley was writing as much about the past as the future. For *The Last Man* seems to have taken its bearings from the riveting diary of plague and other seeming afflictions of fate that she kept as a twenty-five-year-old widow. She had already filled three volumes of journals, but, after her husband, the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, drowned off the shore of Tuscany in July 1822, she stopped for three months. This pivotal volume – begun on October 2, 1822, and plaintively titled “The Journal of Sorrow” – contains a meticulous private record of how, since publishing *Frankenstein* at the age of twenty, she had lost almost everyone she loved to contagion, fever, or fatal accident. Here she developed a kind of spiritual medicine, or a philosophical means of coping with plagues of all kinds, obtained through the act of writing itself. By turning inward, to face the darkness of her thoughts, she used her journal to write her way out of a dangerous fiction: that nothing can be done in the face of disaster.

She opened the new volume with an inscription that teeters between despair and hope: “The Journal of Sorrow — / Begun 1822 / But for my Child it could not / End too soon”. She doubted her resolve to live, despite her deep tie to her one living son. Why, she wondered, should “I begin again?” Now that she was alone – “Oh, how alone!” – she had “no friend” to whom she could communicate her “soul” in the way she did to her husband. After his death, she reflected, “my thoughts are a sealed treasure which I can confide to none”. Yet her blank journal beckoned her to write. “White paper”, she asked, “will you be my confidant?” After reaching for the theological language of the soul, then scratching it out, she persisted in speaking from the vantage of “I” while introducing a new “you” into her inner conversation.

For nearly two years she struggled to find peace with the past by filling the pages of her “Journal of Sorrow”. Then tragedy set her back again. Writing after the death of her friend Lord Byron from sepsis, in 1824, she described Italy as “murderess of those I love and of all my happiness”. Her former Mediterranean heaven had robbed her of Percy, stolen two of their infants through malaria and fever, and spontaneously terminated her last pregnancy while nearly killing her. “Attacks” of a mysterious illness had beset her son Percy Florence twice since his father's drowning. In January of 1824, as the

child recovered, she likened herself to a pestilential reaper, moving inexorably through a field of hay with a scythe: “Those I would seek, fly me – I have no power”.

Returning to her homeland had brought little relief. In a sort of self-quarantine, she avoided society because of malicious gossip about her tumultuous marriage to Percy. “Confined in my prison-room – friendless”, she confided to her journal, “my mind is as gloomy as this odious sky.” If Italy was a murderess of all she loved, then her “English life” was a premature burial.

Fate at once made Mary Shelley the plague and the last person to survive it. Yet this dark paradox gave her a new literary calling. As she worked on her second great work of speculative fiction, she confided a kinship with the novel to her journal in May 1824: “The last man! Yes I may well describe that solitary being’s feelings, feeling myself as the last relic of a beloved race”. In the novel, she gendered the plague as feminine: if Mary Shelley was the last woman, then the plague would also be a she. By identifying thus with the plague in her private journal and in *The Last Man*, she confronted the stark fact that humanity is the author of its own disasters, even those that seem purely natural or beyond our control. As scientists now remind us daily, collective human behaviour will either drive up or flatten the curve of Covid-19’s rate of infection. Mary Shelley saw clearly that we are both the problem behind and the potential solution to such a pandemic.

Mary Shelley kept a plague journal in order to fight despair. And despite the tragedies that befell her, she persevered to write a post-apocalyptic novel about a man who manages to survive a pandemic with his humanity intact. The hero of the novel Lionel Verney preserves his sense of solidarity with humanity by writing a plague journal of his own, a “History of the Last Man” that he hopes someone else, another survivor, might one day find and learn from. At the end of his narrative, Verney departs Italy on a ship – accompanied only by his dog and the works of Shakespeare and Homer – in search of other survivors. We are those survivors: people who now live in an age of pandemics, whose time has come to write stories of hope amid profound and incalculable sorrow.

Exercise 1. General Comprehension. Circle the correct answer.

1. What point does the writer highlight in the first paragraph?
 - A. Boccaccio and Daniel Defoe are the most important writers on epidemics
 - B. Mary Shelley’s journal became the basis for her second novel of political science fiction, *The Last Man*.
 - C. Although usually overlooked, Mary Shelley is one of the most significant writers on plagues and epidemics
 - D. *The Last Man* is Mary Shelley’s second great work of political science fiction after *Frankenstein*.

2. Which is the main event that caused Mary to stop writing her journal for three months?
 - A. The death of two of her toddlers through malaria and fever
 - B. The death of her friend Lord Byron from sepsis
 - C. The spontaneous termination of her last pregnancy
 - D. The death by drowning of her husband Percy Bysshe Shelley

3. Why is "The Journal of Sorrow" a pivotal volume according to the writer?
 - A. It provides the basis for the story later developed in *The Last Man*
 - B. Through the act of writing the journal, Mary learned how to cope with plagues of all kinds
 - C. It offers a meticulous account of the death of P.B. Shelley and Lord Byron
 - D. It recounts how Italy robbed Mary of all she loved

4. In paragraph 3, it says "Here she developed a kind of spiritual medicine". "Here" refers to:
 - A. "The Journal of Sorrow"
 - B. *Frankenstein*
 - C. *The Last Man*
 - D. The three volumes of journals

5. What result does Mary Shelley obtain by identifying herself with the plague both in her private journal and in *The Last Man*?
 - A. She highlights how humans are both the problem behind and the potential solution to collective disasters
 - B. She teaches how to preserve a sense of solidarity with humanity through an age of pandemics
 - C. She proves how literature can fight despair
 - D. She shows how writing can function as a spiritual medicine in the face of disaster

6. What does Mary Shelley's personal response to plagues teach us according to the writer?
 - A. We should find comfort in works of literature about epidemics
 - B. It might be useful to keep a personal journal to fight fatalism
 - C. It is our time to act and awake our sense of solidarity by writing stories of hope
 - D. We should learn from past narratives of disasters and plagues

Exercise 2. Textual and stylistic analysis

1. Macro text type: is this text expository, argumentative, or instructive?

2. Micro text type: is this text a story, a newspaper article, essay, book introduction, scientific review, interview, manual biography, speech or editorial?

3. Is the overall register formal, informal, neutral, or colloquial?

4. How would you define the general style of the text?

Exercise 3. Linguistic analysis: The following is a list of synonyms for words/expressions which appear in the text in the paragraph indicated in brackets and in the order given on the list. Find the corresponding words/expressions and write them down:

1. (part 1) neglected
2. (part 2) tragic / painful story
3. (part 3) originated / stemmed from
4. (part 3) captivating / intriguing
5. (part 3) crucial
6. (part 4) wavers
7. (part 4) encouraged / stimulated
8. (part 5) relentlessly

PART 2. SYNTAX AND LEXIS

Exercise 4. Complete the second sentence so that it has a similar meaning to the first sentence, using the word given. **Do not change the word given.** You must use between **two** and **five** words, including the word given.

1. We had to leave the lecture early or we would have missed the last bus.
UNTIL
If we..... of the lecture, we would have missed the last bus.
2. The number of students going to university went up last year.
INCREASE
There..... the number of students going to university last year.
3. I'm concerned about whether I'll be able to finish the project on time.
CONCERNS
What..... whether I'll be able to finish the project on time.
4. I am sorry I didn't contact you, but I was very busy.
TOUCH
I apologise for..... you, but I was very busy.
5. He sings in the show and dances in it as well.
ONLY
Not..... in the show, he also dances in it.

6. 'There's been a rise of over ten per cent in the price of the tickets,' said Sue.

GONE

Sue said that the price of the tickets.....than ten per cent this year.

7. Helen finally managed to think of a solution to her problem.

COMING

Helen finally succeeded..... a solution to her problem.

Exercise 5. Read the following extract and choose the most appropriate word to complete the text.

Dr Joseph Bell

Dr Joseph Bell was a distinguished Scottish doctor and professor at Edinburgh University in the (1) nineteenth century. He had remarkable powers of observation and deduction. This (2) him to accumulate useful information about patients in a very (3) space of time.

He was very good at (4) where his patients were from by identifying small differences in their accents. He could also (5) a patient's occupation from marks on their hand. He claimed to be able to (6) a sailor from a soldier just from the way they moved. If he identified a person as a sailor he would look for any tattoos that might assist him in knowing where their travels had (7) them.

Dr Bell's skills for observation and deduction (8) a great impression on his students, particularly on one called Arthur Conan Doyle. Conan Doyle went on to create the famous fictional detective Sherlock Holmes, whose character was (9) on that of Dr Bell.

- | | | | | |
|---|---------------|---------------|----------------|--------------|
| 1 | A late | B previous | C closing | D final |
| 2 | A enabled | B authorised | C guaranteed | D caused |
| 3 | A small | B rapid | C narrow | D short |
| 4 | A showing off | B working out | C setting down | D turning up |
| 5 | A relate | B acknowledge | C solve | D determine |
| 6 | A change | B differ | C distinguish | D contrast |
| 7 | A transported | B brought | C conveyed | D taken |

- 8 A set B made C formed D put
- 9 A applied B established C based D written

Exercise 6. Read the text below and think of the word which best fits each space. Use only **one word** in each gap.

The Importance of Reading

Reading is good (1) us. In fact, there is plenty of evidence that reading for pleasure is more than just another leisure pursuit – it actually improves our mental and physical health. Reading extended texts (2) as novels or biographies, (3) requires intense concentration for a considerable period of time, helps to lengthen attention spans in children and improves their ability to think clearly. However, experts say (4) is essential to acquire the habit of reading extensively (5) a small child, while the brain is still developing.

Reading can undoubtedly (6) beneficial to our mental well-being. Reading not (7) helps combat feelings of loneliness, it also allows people to relax and forget their problems for (8) while. The concentration required during the act of reading seems to ease muscle tension and slow the heart rate. Researchers have found that just six minutes of reading can reduce stress levels by as (9) as two-thirds.

PART 3. WRITING

The act of writing became a sort of “spiritual medicine” for Mary Shelley. Besides giving her a new literary calling, keeping a personal journal helped her to fight her sense of loss, grief, and isolation. In *The Last Man*, she recounts the fictional story of Lionel Verney, who manages to survive a pandemic with his humanity intact by writing a journal of his own. Briefly discuss what you consider to be the role of the humanities (the study of literature, philosophy, and the arts) in promoting our sense of human interconnection and solidarity in an age of pandemics.

(max 600 words)