

# The Last (Fertile) Man on Earth: Comedy or Fantasy?

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## Abstract

The trope of infertility in science fiction may be explored through the theme of a single fertile man remaining on earth, with the fate of the entire species devolving on this one single individual. The article will review narratives that deal with this premise, and will outline the obvious, the not so obvious, and the even potentially comic outcomes that arise from the overturning of the usual male-chasing-female paradigm.

## Keywords

science fiction, population, society, values, infertility

## Introduction

Infertility in science fiction (SF) is not an uncommon theme and may be used in a wide variety of ways to depict numerous additional tropes within the genre (Grech 2011). One specific way that has been used to explore a variety of possibilities has been to posit a scenario wherein only a single fertile man is left, a last hope and potential savior for the entire species.

This essay will provide a brief reading of a number of narratives with this premise and will discuss commonalities that arise from such matters that include the almost universal trend for males of most species to compete for mates, and how overturning this tendency leads to excesses in power and the emphasis and contrast with feminism. The inherently comical potential that this may lead to will also be underscored, as will the current trends in infertility.

## Narratives

The novum of having just one fertile man in the entire world, in the first instance, as a result of a nuclear disaster, is expounded in

Frank's (1946) *Mr. Adam*. The narrative describes the explosion of a nuclear power plant, which releases radiation that sterilizes all males, including unborn fetuses. The only fertile man is Mr. Adam (Adam is the protagonist's true surname) who was located in an iron mine several miles underground at the time of the accident and hence protected from the radiation spike. This particular novel was influenced by Shelley's (1826) *The Last Man*, wherein a plague decimates humanity. Shelley was herself inspired by Cousin de Grainville's (1805) *Le Dernier Homme*, in which the entire future earth becomes sterile and the last man resists manipulation to father a new breed of monstrous cannibals by choosing death instead. This dystopic novel was published posthumously and has had its trope recycled repeatedly in the past two centuries, as will be

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shown in this article (Cousin de Grainville 1805).

*Mr. Adam* inspired the silent comedy *The Last Man on Earth* (1924), which in turn led to the semi-musical comedy *It's Great to Be Alive* (1933). The former explains how a plague of "male-itis" kills all fertile men over the age of twelve years, and all males under this age vaccinated against the disease are rendered sterile. Only one fertile man is found, a reclusive individual who lives in the countryside.

Barr's (1955) *The Man with Only One Head* depicted almost universal male sterility due to the explosion of a cobalt-salted bomb. This is portrayed as initially resulting in a frenzy of covert extramarital sexual relationships, and adultery is therefore made a capital crime. Initially, only one man remains fertile, but fertility is eventually restored to all men by the discovery of a new medical treatment (Barr 1955). Men are also rendered almost universally sterile in the aftermath of a world war in Borodin's (1948) *Spurious Sun*, and the few men who remain fertile are blacks and are all red headed, blue eyed, and black bearded. Similarly, but without warfare, in Weston's (1934) *Comet Z*, sterility afflicts all but one man after the earth passes through a comet, and the protagonist uses his crucial status to force universal disarmament, until the comet's effects dissipate.

The retainment of fertility with the bestowment of a mantle of power is a trope that is repeated in the single fertile man theme. Power may fall to a matriarchy if even the last few men die, as shown in Wyndham's (1979) *Consider Her Ways*, where babies are influenced by specialized feeding, hormone manipulation, and training. The lack of males is explained as an accident by a male scientist who attempted to develop a virus that would exterminate the common male rat, a virus originally derived from one that specifically attacked rabbits, but which mutated and killed all human males despite elaborate precautions to protect a few early noninfected individuals.

The warfare/radioactivity trope is not an uncommon cause of almost total male infertility (Ellison 1969) and portrays a few feral

adolescents who survive a postwar world. An adolescent human male and his telepathic dog encounter an attractive young girl who seduces the boy and lures him to ultraconservative and rather bourgeois "downunder shelters" where he learns that he is to be used as a stud to impregnate women who are losing their fertility. He escapes with both girl and dog, and eventually kills and cooks the girl to stave off hunger for himself and his canine companion (Ellison 1969).

In Cowper's (1973) *Kuldesak*, an overpopulated earth surrenders government to an artificial intelligence (AI) whose solution is to cull huge swathes of humanity and imposes itself as a god over the remainder, the majority of which are "budded" with the cortical implantation of electrodes that allow direct individual stimulation of pleasure centers. Both sexes are thus rendered docile and malleable to the AI's purposes, and males are somehow sterilized by this process. This is inexplicable as the deliberate damage to the areas controlling sex hormone and sperm production—the hypothalamic-pituitary axis located in the base of the skull—may be caused by electrode implantation, but the novel only mentions cortical implantation, a reference to the forebrain. Some humans, referred to as "roamers," are not budded and allowed to run free, and their function is to be milked of sperm during physical punishment for transgressions in an almost sadomasochistic ritual (Cowper 1973).

More recently, Fulsang's (2000) *A Destiny of Fools* depicts the moral issues inherent in a situation where total global human infertility can only be potentially alleviated by the sperm of just one man who is a convicted psychopathic murderer, and who is sentenced to death. Infertility in this narrative occurs through the agency of *Wolbachia* parasites engineered to infect humans. *Wolbachia* are one of the world's commonest and most successful parasitic (gram-negative) bacteria, and live inside cells (endosymbionts), specifically, in the testis and ovaries. These bacteria are ubiquitous in the invertebrate world and affect 70 percent of all insect species, as well as many species of nematodes (parasitic worms).

The effect of bacterial infection may include the death of infected males, the feminization of males to females, male conversion to infertile pseudo-females, the stimulation of parthenogenesis (reproduction without sexual contact with a male of the species), and cytoplasmic incompatibility resulting in the inability of Wolbachia-infected males to successfully reproduce with uninfected females or females infected with a different Wolbachia strain. Some researchers have claimed that Wolbachia might even be important in speciation (the creation of new species) in affected species (Zimmer 2001).

Fertility is regarded as an instrument of power and remains in the hands of a small group of men in Helen Mary Hoover's (1973) *Children of Morrow*, where a postnuclear warfare, patriarchal and fundamentalist dystopia, with mostly infertile men, is run by a few remaining fertile men.

A slightly different approach is taken in Farmer's (1960) *Flesh*, which follows an astronaut on an 800-year space trip through the use of suspended animation. He returns to find the earth populated entirely by women, an apt fate for a man called Space Commander Stagg (Farmer 1960). Tiptree's (1976) most famous award-winning and reprinted story *Houston, Houston, Do You Read* conversely depicts a feminist utopia, since a plague wipes out most human life, with only 11,000 people survivors, all female, and who continued the species by repeatedly cloning these original 11,000 genotypes. Three male astronauts from the past are displaced to their future, to this utopia, and the men have sperm extracted so as to allow the creation of new genotypes before being disposed of.

Comic book SF has also dealt with infertility in the mad scientist trope, and since comics typically excel in goshwow heroes and stories, it comes as no surprise that *The Avengers* (Marvel Comic heroes) thwart the evil plans of the "Yellow Claw" who intended to eliminate humanity as we know it by rendering all of humanity sterile through the release of a gas, while keeping a fertile set of women within his gas-proof base. The Yellow Claw planned to

repopulate humanity by fathering children from women chosen for their purportedly superior genetic traits (Lee and Kirby 1981). Total male destruction by an unexplained plague has also been depicted in the comic series *Y: The Last Man* (Vaughan and Guerra 2003–2008) where every mammal possessing a Y chromosome, including embryos, fertilized eggs, and sperm are destroyed, with the exception of a young man and his pet Capuchin monkey.

A man may falsely assume that he is the last fertile man on earth, a belief displayed by the leader of a tribe of Neanderthal-like hominids, *Anthropophagus, The Grim Reaper* (1980).

An interesting variation on the warfare theme that predominates these dystopian scenarios is the survival of just one single couple after a war that is provoked by Satan himself, in Knight's short story *Not with a Bang* (1950). Humanity's lot is shown to be redeemable as the couple are scientists who have a time machine and who intend to return to the past to regenerate the race.

A reworking of this theme is the trope of a few remaining fertile women after a disaster of some kind. For example, chemical warfare in Jones's (1967) *Implosion* leads the USSR to deliberately contaminate Great Britain's drinking water, leading to almost universal and irreversible female sterility. Since the nation risks dying out, legislation is passed to force the few remaining fertile women into breeding camps, a trope that prefigures *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood 1986). The problem spreads worldwide as various countries also discover the chemical agent and sterilize perceived rival countries (Jones 1967).

## Discussion

In the real world, in the majority of species, it is usually the male who postures in perpetual competition with other males to attract females of the species, thereby allowing the individual to breed.

The situations depicted in this reading are rarer but an analogous situation exists with regard to males of the African Topi antelopes

where male antelopes are so forcefully pursued by pushy females that they refuse the advances of previous partners and even attack them to drive them off, thereby ensuring that energy and resources are conserved so as to allow the male to breed with as many different females as possible, hence maximizing his chances of fathering offspring (Bro-Jørgensen 2008).

These stories also extrapolate current trends in declining fertility into the future. Epidemiologists estimate that the number of Western couples who struggle to conceive will double within the next decade, to one in three couples, as opposed to the current figure of one in seven couples. This is believed to be due to the rising age of first attempt at pregnancy (as fertility declines with age); an increase in sexually transmitted diseases, which damage the reproductive organs; an escalation in obesity, which is known to adversely affect fertility; and a declining level of male sperm count and overall sperm quality (Ledger 2009). Ironically, infertility treatment in males with low fertility may result in male offspring who inherit their father's problem. It has been estimated that if even half of infertile men were to use intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI) to father children, then the incidence of significant male infertility could double in developed countries within seven generations (Faddy et al. 2001).

In SF, removing males completely is the extreme, and allows authors and readers to delve into the possibilities of the ensuing feminist utopias, as in Wyndham's (1979) *Consider Her Ways* and Tiptree's (1976) *Houston Houston*. It is almost as if the single remaining male trope posits an opposite scenario, with the remainder of the race, including all women, rendered totally dependent for fertility and offspring on a single male. This strengthens Michie and Cahn's contention that women are policed through a series of interventions in both infertility treatment and pregnancy in the name of domesticity, supporting Paul Morrison's (1991) notion of the "domestic carceral," which was foreshadowed by Foucault's (1979, 24) *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the*

*Prison*, almost as a form of punishment for infertility, where we are asked to "analyse rather the 'concrete systems of punishment,' study them as social phenomena." This aspect is even more relevant when infertility treatments are entangled in explicit or implicit male dominance games, particularly when framed in feminist discourses and idioms.

The comical possibilities of such situations, with all remaining males—and by extension, male readers—regarding one remaining fertile male with envy, have also been investigated. The stories that depicted these humorous outcomes, particularly after warfare, also reveal that such authors "were not really reacting to the bomb at all: they were glibly assimilating it to SF's long-established conventions. Nearly every aspect of nuclear doom was trivialized in some form or other" (Brians 1984, 258).

However, this reading reveals only one commonality: the almost universal outcome is that of a solution being found, one that restores the situation back to the norm, once again underscoring the genre's penchant for happy endings.

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