

An unjust characterization assignment

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Justine: An Unjust Characterization The women in Mary Shelley's

Frankenstein do not seem to hold a very significant place in the novel. They are not given meaningful lines and we do not get to a lot of their back story. In fact, we not seem to know some of them at all, for example, Mrs. Saville, Walton's sister (who happens to be the first female in the novel). She is basically a non-entity, only serving as a recipient of her brother's letters. Generally speaking, Shelley's female characters seem to be weak or live a short life.

Victor's mother is not long in the picture and she is described as an "indulgent" parent. The main female character, Elizabeth is very passive, and seems to bend to Victor's will and timeline. Indeed, Victor does not put his trust in her because, in my opinion, he sees her as weak. However, there is a female character who do not fit into the "weak woman" category: Justine Moritz. The literary element I will discuss is character, specifically how Justine is probably the strongest female character; she shouldn't be characterized as weak, but as a victim of her own individual circumstance and the world she lived in.

We get some background information about Justine Moritz through a letter from Elizabeth to Victor, which establishes Justine's unfair circumstance in life and explains how the people around her feel about her. She was her father's favorite and when he died her mother, for some reason, did not treat her very well. Victor's mother saw this and decided to take Justine in as a servant when she was twelve years old. Right away we see that Justine is mistreated by her own mother and then forced to be a servant to the Frankensteins at a young age.

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Clearly, the world she lived in was not fair, but this does not necessarily make her a weak character. Elizabeth describes Justine as “ the most grateful little creature in the world...she thought her [Mrs. Frankenstein] the model of all excellence, and endeavored to imitate her phraseology and manners” (Shelley, 1818/2008, p. 46). Justine was grateful to live with the Frankensteins and apparently adored Mrs. Frankenstein. When Justine is accused of murdering William, Mr.

Frankenstein (Alphonse) says “...I had rather have been for ever ignorant than have discovered so much depravity and ingratitude in one I valued so highly” (Shelley, 1818/2008, p. 59). Even though at this point, Alphonse believes she might be guilty, we can see that he did once think highly of Justine, another testament to her kind character and good will to the family. Alphonse goes on to tell Elizabeth, “ If she [Justine] is, as you believe, innocent, rely on the justice of our judges, and the activity with which I shall prevent the slightest shadow of partiality”(Shelley, 1818/2008, p. 0-61). Alphonse is convinced that justice will prevail if Justine is innocent; he even thinks that he can influence the judge somehow. But this is not how the real world works. There is no such thing as justice for Justine, a poor woman in the nineteenth century who is accused of such a heinous crime. Because of her circumstance in life, Justine gives in and confesses to the murder even though she did not do it. One might say this certainly is a weak moment for Justine; however, let us consider her position.

She was under considerable pressure and is up against some pretty threatening forces, the angry community and her doubtful friends. Justine doesn't stand a chance against these forces, particularly the church, which

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seems to be the breaking point for the confession. Justine says to Elizabeth and Victor, I confessed, that I might obtain absolution.... my confessor has besieged me; he threatened and menaced, until I almost began to think that I was tthe monster that he said I was.

He threatened excommunication and hell fire in my last moments.... Dear lady, I had none to support me; all looked on me as a wretch doomed to ignominy and perdition. What could I do (Shelley, 1818/2008, p. 66)? During this time period, the church had a very strong influence on both individuals and the justice system. Justine seems to have no other alternative but to confess. Justine is not necessarily a weak female character, but vulnerable to the world and its inevitable control over her.

Enduring time in prison, facing the rejection, first from her mother, and then from the people who took her in, grieving for William, being forced to confess to a crime she did not commit and dying for it, I would say that Justine is the strongest female character in the novel so far. Although she is a victim, she handles her situation with bravery and grace and evokes sympathy from the reader in a way Elizabeth does not. Reference Shelley, M. (2008).

Frankenstein, or the Modern Prometheus. Oxford: Oxford World Classics.
Originally published in 1818.