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The Common Good Frankenstein Textual Analysis and Argument Essay

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Writing Process

My writing process for this particular essay was fairly simple and straightforward. I began by reading the prompt and writing notes on my teacher's specific directions. I then went to the library, where I reviewed my notes and the directions. Next, I began to write a brief rough draft which I later printed and gave to my teacher for review. Finally, I took all of her suggestions for improvement into consideration and completed my essay.

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The Common Good Frankenstein Textual Analysis and Argument Essay

The female characters in the novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley exemplify individuals that reflect the values and virtues of the common good. These women serve as examples and vessels of the burden the common good can impose and the consequences that come of putting others before yourself. The sometimes passive nature of these women further show the role they are compelled to complete by society. Although they strive to adhere to the common good, these women are repeatedly hindered by their male counterparts and societal norms.

The ideology known as the Common Good was conceived by Pope John Paul II and explains the role that individuals play in communities in order to maintain peace and prosperity. Pope John Paul II defines the Common Good as, “The social and community dimension of the moral good” (347). The Common Good is a principle that puts the needs of others in the hands of the individual. Every member of society is tasked with the responsibility of making sure their actions represent high morals and take into account the lives of others. Pope John Paul II relays this profound aspect of the Common Good when he states, “The sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily” (346). The words of Pope John Paul II highlight the possible negative or positive consequences the actions of others can have on an individual and a community as a whole. Whether or not one chooses to follow the path of righteousness that the Common Good presents,

affects not only the individual but those around them. This phenomenon is abundantly present in the novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley.

As aforementioned, *Frankenstein* by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley echoes many of the same sentiments found in the Common Good. Characters in the novel either reject the common good or embrace it. The women are the majority when it comes to adhering to the principles of the Common Good. However, the effectiveness or consequences of these individual efforts are continually impacted by outside sources. For instance, the valiant efforts of Justine and Elizabeth are diminished and in vain. Both of these women are subject to an untimely and brutal demise. The unfortunate position in which they find themselves results from the expectations of society and the actions of the males who reside above them. Death does not find these women as a result of evil or dangerous actions of their own. On the contrary, the selfish and cowardly actions of male characters surmount the goodness that the women are compelled to epitomize. The women are confined to a role that limits their power and halts their ambition.

The understated and impressive abilities of Shelley's women far outshine the characteristics of Victor. Victor shows his weakness again and again as he runs in fear from the monster he created and the terror he has wreaked upon society. Victor refuses to take responsibility for his actions and consequently endangers and harms the lives of others. The selfish and irresponsible actions of Victor are especially detrimental to the well-being of the women around him. Victor's blatant rejection of the common good has disastrous repercussions. This atrocity is allowed as a result of the pressures and expectations put upon communities by society. Women are seen as meek and inferior, despite the immense strength that they hold within. While men are more than capable of feats of selflessness and goodness, they are left with options and excuses that women are not afforded. As a direct result of this phenomenon, the

women in the novel *Frankenstein* are plagued by bouts of massive misfortune despite following the virtues outlined in *The Common Good* by Pope John Paul II.

The first character to feel the wrath of Victor's unjust and patriarchal actions is his housekeeper named Justine Moritz. Justine is wrongfully accused of murdering Victor's younger brother William. This traumatic event was actually caused by Victor's monster in an act of frustration and revenge against Victor. However, Justine is unable to provide evidence to support her innocence and is condemned to death. Justine demonstrates her good intentions when she proclaims, "God knows how entirely I am innocent. But I do not pretend that my protestation should acquit me; I rest my innocence on a plain and simple explanation of the facts" (65). The pure aspirations towards justice that Justine commits are ultimately futile. She is powerless against the stronger and privileged authority that presides. "Yet she appeared confident in innocence and did not tremble, although gazed on and execrated by thousands, for all the kindness which her beauty might otherwise have excited was obliterated in the minds of the spectators by the imagination of the enormity she was supposed to have committed" (61). The death of Justine, despite her pure and saintly actions, marks the symbolic defeat of righteousness and virtue.

The second character who suffers at the cruel hands of a society driven by inequality and unfair expectations is Elizabeth Lavenza. Elizabeth was the orphaned offspring of noblemen who lived in Italy. She was eventually brought into Victor's life at a young age after she was discovered and adopted by his wealthy parents. From the first time they met, Victor idealizes Elizabeth and eventually falls in love with her. The source of Victor's love stems from an admiration of the combination of idyllic qualities that Elizabeth possesses. Elizabeth is attractive and strives towards charity and humble obedience. She portrays an image of womanhood that is

cultivated and admired in the time period of the novel. Victor mentions his approving and patronizing attitude towards Elizabeth's disposition when he proclaims, "While I admired her understanding and fancy, I loved to tend on her, as I should on a favourite animal; and I never saw so much grace both of person and mind united to so little pretension" (21). These traits serve her well as she is taken from her unfortunate childhood circumstances and placed in a position of comfort and protection. However, despite her status as a figure of class and admiration, she too falls victim to the vehement actions of Victor and his monster. "She left me, and I continued sometime...when suddenly I heard a shrill and dreadful scream" (173). Victor arrives only to witness the final moments of Elizabeth's life. Even in the end, Elizabeth is abandoned by the man in her life and left to suffer at the hands of his creation. Victor expresses remorse, however, it is too late to undo the monstrosities that he and his forced accomplice have committed.

Victor has multiple opportunities to save the innocent lives of Justine and Elizabeth. However, he is frozen by cowardice and entitlement. His immaturity and overall sense of superiority are reinforced by the culture of his time-period. This accepting attitude allows him to commit this most heinous crime. Victor is himself a hypocrite as he constantly criticizes the monster he created in the beginning of the book for his deadly behavior. However, Victor is not free of sin as he himself is responsible for the loss of numerous innocent lives. Victor finally shows some recognition of his guilt when he says, "I had been the author of unalterable evils; and I lived in daily fear, lest the monster whom I had created should perpetrate some new wickedness" (60). The introspection that Victor eventually shows is shallow as he continues to keep his involvement to himself and relinquish his monster.

In the novel *Frankenstein* by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, the female characters strictly adhere to the guidelines found in the work the Common Good. Although it costs them the

ultimate price of their young lives, the women that Shelley creates continue to put others before themselves and remain moral. Despite their high ethical and passive expectations, the women in *Frankenstein* do not lack passion. They continually demonstrate their impressive inner strength through repeated acts of courage and sacrifice. However, these acts are misplaced. Instead of laying down for slaughter in the name of peace and fortitude, these women should have fought for their lives. For instance, the powerful statement made by Justine proved her strength and courage, however, these words only allowed her to die with a clear conscience. Death still captured her despite her innocence and goodness. While death does not discriminate, the judgement of officials and peers does. Justine and Elizabeth were doomed from the beginning as their status and gender placed them in a cage of susceptibility. This sentiment is shared by Shelley's own mother, Mary Wollstonecraft. She writes, "Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison" (45). The thoughts and actions of the men and the patriarchal society around them should not have decided their fate. Wollstonecraft again laments about the hindrance of women during this time period when she says, "It is vain to expect virtue from women till they are in some degree independent of men" (25). This profound statement shows the ability women possess and the expectations they are wrongfully confined to. These characters in particular show immense strength and intelligence when faced with dangerous and fatal situations.

The choice Shelley makes to portray her characters in this manner is completely deliberate. Shelley wishes to highlight the injustice and inequality prevalent in the times before her and the current time in which she resides. The feminist views that Shelley inherited from her mother are strewn throughout *Frankenstein*. Shelley expertly and coyly portrays her female characters as

hidden sources of intelligence and power. The true injustice that women in this time period face is repeatedly shown through scenes of harsh and nonsensical punishment. Shelley calls the attention of her audience to the atrocities that reside over women. The complete horror of these events are hard to ignore as she paints vivid scenes of cruelty and unfairness. Elizabeth herself forces the reader to contemplate the grave situations that prevail. She emphatically states, “When I reflect my dear cousin, on the miserable death of Justine Moritz, I no longer see the world and its works as they before appeared to me” (60). Elizabeth goes on further to say, “Before, I looked upon the accounts of vice and injustice, that I read in books or heard from others, as tales of ancient days, or imaginary evils; at least they were remote, and more familiar to reason than to the imagination; but now misery has come home, and men appear to me as monsters thirsting for each other’s blood” (60). In this way Elizabeth completes the ultimate task of forcing realization that these atrocities are not far away but are present and active. Shelley proves through her work that evil runs rampant through the lives of humanity with abandon, unless we as individuals of awareness ignite change.

In *Frankenstein*, women are used as tools of insight as they provide a glimpse into the unjust and patriarchal world in which we preside. The way that they exhibit the principles of the Common Good only further prove the untapped power and goodness that women possess. The misfortune they experience despite their morality directly proves the fundamental wrongness that society continually perpetrates.

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