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William Veeder's Analysis of *Frankenstein*

"The Women of *Frankenstein*" is an excerpt from William Veeder's book *Mary Shelley and Frankenstein: The Fate of Androgyny* and is found in the first edition of the Norton Critical Edition of *Frankenstein*. Essentially, Veeder argues that the common interpretation of the female characters in the novel as weak needs to be reconsidered in order to avoid what he refers to as "melodramatic simplifications" (Veeder 271). In developing this discussion, Veeder primarily engages in and with feminist literary criticism, but he also employs close textual analysis to distance parts of the argument from that politically-oriented perspective.

The excerpted selection from the book focuses on the character of Justine to develop its argument. Veeder claims that Justine is more of a victim than a weak character and that her downfall is the result of forces beyond her control: "Arrayed against her are five formidable forces...[, including] the plot of the novel, the power of the church, and the machinery of the law" (272). The consideration of the plot of the novel is a particular example of close textual analysis, as it focuses exclusively on the novel itself, without consideration of the larger historical context. He later suggests, "Justine has been victimized by the very plot itself. How could she imagine that an eight-foot-tall, man-made monster had sneaked up and slipped the miniature into her pocket?"

(272). Clearly, Veeder suggests, anyone, regardless of gender, would have been unable to overcome such an obstacle.

In further discussing this part of the novel, Veeder further engages with feminist criticism to make a claim that sets Shelley's purpose against the feminist perspective. In discussing Justine's confession, which occurs after she has been convicted, Veeder explains, "Had she wanted to indict true woman for passive weakness, Mary would have made Justine's fate dependent upon her giving in" (272). Thus, at least in this scene, Veeder demonstrates that Shelley is not making a commentary on the status of women at the time, at least not directly. Although he sees in Justine characteristics associated with the nineteenth-century concept of true womanhood—which upholds a virtually unattainable standard for proper female behavior—Veeder does not see that status as a determining factor in Justine's ultimate fate.

In the end, Veeder reinforces his original claims by exclaiming that Justine is not self-effacing in the mold of the typical "true woman," but rather simply "understandably human" (273). In that way, he counters the arguments found in the feminist criticism of the later twentieth century to which he is responding.

Veeder, William. "The Women of *Frankenstein*." *Frankenstein: Contexts, Nineteenth-Century Responses, Criticism*. Edited by J. Paul Hunter, Norton, 1996, pp. 271-73.