

MUSIC: [BBC Sounds intro music plays]

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MUSIC: [organ music plays, then Gothic music]

HOLLIE McNISH: Hi and welcome to our Bitesize English Literature podcast, where we talk through the important themes in the texts for your English Literature GCSE. In this series we're diving into "Frankenstein" by Mary Shelley.

I'm Hollie McNish, I'm a writer and a poet, and I used Bitesize to help me when I was studying for my GCSEs, so it's great to be here. And it's even better to be joined by the marvellous Steven Camden, AKA Polarbear. Steven, have you got any good revision advice to kick us off?

STEVEN CAMDEN: What helped me a lot was at night time listening to things like this podcast. You can almost like double up on what you've learnt in the day and let it kind of like seep into you rather than it being actively scribbling-, scribbling notes. You can listen to them and take notes but then maybe even listen again, like re-listening when you're in a more kind of calm state and the stuff will just – I find that information goes in just before I'm going to sleep, actually.

HOLLIE McNISH: Oh, nice.

STEVEN CAMDEN: So I'll have a listen, like, just before. So you've got-, you've got your active revision version and you've got the more kind of like gentle, aah, just checking. And it can feel quite good 'cause you can feel like you already know certain things and then a refresh before you drift off and, I guess, dream about Frankenstein.

HOLLIE McNISH: [laughs] Oh! What a lovely thing to dream about!

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah, sorry! Yeah, forget that! Yeah, you don't have to dream about Frankenstein! But it helps!

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: "Frankenstein" is the story of a creature who is given life by scientist Victor Frankenstein. Remember, the scientist is called Victor Frankenstein and the creature does not have a name. That's important.

The creature is shunned by society and he takes revenge: first murdering a child, William, and framing a young woman, Justine, for the crime. Is any of this fair? Well, let's find out, because in this episode we're talking about justice. This theme is really closely related to the theme of prejudice, which we talked about in the last episode. So go back and listen to that again if you need a recap.

Before we get into it, here is a section from the text. The child the creature kills is William, Frankenstein's little brother. On hearing the news, Victor Frankenstein rushes home. He knows the creature must have done it. But when he gets there he hears some upsetting news. Their servant, and to him close family friend Justine has been accused of the murder.

Here's Victor Frankenstein talking to his father and adopted sister Elizabeth.

CLIP

ELIZABETH: Your arrival fills me with hope. You perhaps will-, will find some means to justify my poor guiltless Justine. Well, who is safe if she be convicted of crime?

00:02:41.02S VICTOR FRANKENSTEIN: She is innocent and that shall be proved.

ELIZABETH: <sobbing> Everyone else believes in her guilt, but I know it is impossible.

VICTOR'S FATHER: Dry your eyes, Elizabeth. If Justine is innocent, rely on the justice of our courts.

END OF CLIP

HOLLIE McNISH: So let's focus on the quote in that clip. Elizabeth, who is the adopted sister, also Victor Frankenstein's wife...

STEVEN CAMDEN: Future wife.

HOLLIE McNISH: ...says, "Justify my poor guiltless Justine." So that's important. I would write that one down. It's also one of the few times in this text that a woman is talking about a woman. There's two female characters. Elizabeth is this sort of perfect, idealised, er, female character, and she says, "Justify my poor guiltless Justine." And this is quite a strongly worded quote from Elizabeth.

Frankenstein's father, what does he say?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Well, he says they can rely on the justice of-, justice of the courts, right? Because he believes in the justice system because he's allowed to because they're rich. Their version of the law is a different version of the law of-, of the common folk.

HOLLIE McNISH: This rich family believes that society is fair and that the justice system, the justice of the courts, it can be relied on. So what do you think Mary Shelley is trying to say about this? Because it's really important in your exams to-, to write down what you think the author is trying to tell us about a theme. So Mary Shelley–

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah, yeah, It's a comment, right? It's like there are-, there are versions of justice. There's a version for the people and the wealthy and there's a version for the people who have little. And one is distinctly fairer than the other. We were talking in the other podcast about prejudice, about the house she grew up in and how aware she would have been of these kind of political and social factors. So it's definitely on purpose. So it's good to mention, like you say, Mary Shelley's doing this on purpose to tell you that there are versions of justice which also applies to Victor and the creature.

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Okay, we're gonna look at what some of the characters tell us about justice. I think Justine is one of the most interesting characters when it comes to this theme. Even her name is important.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Massively.

HOLLIE McNISH: Massively important. Because there's alliteration. [laughs] No, I'm only joking!

STEVEN CAMDEN: That's part of it! No, but yeah, it's-, it is not a big leap, is it? It's not a big leap to realise, you know, Justine, Justice.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah. And it's–

STEVEN CAMDEN: It's deliberate, it's deliberate.

HOLLIE McNISH: It's deliberate. So again this is such a good example of an author's intent. Mary Shelley has called this character Justine, and this character is one of the main characters when we look at justice. And obviously the word "Justine" and the word "justice"...

STEVEN CAMDEN: She wants you to think about justice when you say or hear the name.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah. And Justine is innocent. So remember, Justine is-, is innocent. The only thing that ties her to the crime of the murder of William Frankenstein is the locket found in her pocket.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah.

HOLLIE McNISH: So this is the necklace the creature has stolen from William and planted on Justine. She can't explain it. But even if she could, it doesn't make much sense. She lives with the Frankenstein family and could have taken it at any time if she wanted it. So this is-, this is not really great evidence to pin a murder on someone, but, but, she confesses–

STEVEN CAMDEN: –She confesses. She confesses because she's terrified about going to hell. So even though she knows she didn't do it, such is the power of the-, the-, the-, the injustice of what's been set up that she is executed for something she did not do.

HOLLIE McNISH: And it's so complicated, isn't it, this idea inside her mind. I can't quite get my head around it, this idea of confessing because she's scared of going to hell. And some people say – it could be said – that's quite a good phrase, "it could be said that", for your exam! – it could be said that Mary Shelley is being critical of the Church here.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah.

HOLLIE McNISH: She's writing at a time where there was this massive tension between science and religion. And Victor Frankenstein is a scientist playing God trying to create life. And she says she can die at peace.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah.

HOLLIE McNISH: She's being executed for a crime she did not commit. She says she can die in peace because Victor Frankenstein and Elizabeth believe her to be innocent! [laughs] I'm not sure I'd be!

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: What about Victor Frankenstein? So he obstructs justice, doesn't he, as you've said. He gets in the way of justice.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah.

HOLLIE McNISH: He has evidence that Justine is innocent, he knows that he's created this creature who committed the murder, but he doesn't want to admit to what he's done. And he lets her die, and she feels at peace because he tells her he believed her because he knows she's innocent because he knows it was the creature! Erm, it's quite hard to be on... on Victor Frankenstein's side here, no?

STEVEN CAMDEN: –It is very hard to be on his side. And I think what makes it worse to me as well is the quote, "During the whole of this wretched mockery of justice, I suffered living torture."

HOLLIE McNISH: Ah! This one gets me too.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Completely. Just the idea of here is this woman who has been executed but it's "me" who's in the pain. No. No, Victor.

HOLLIE McNISH: [laughs] No! No, Victor!

STEVEN CAMDEN: Well, it's interesting because we're talking about justice, right, he calls it a mockery of justice, but he does nothing to help. What about his own sense of justice? What about personal justice? What about, like, you know, between people as opposed to just a system?

There's a comment there, right? So he says one thing but-, but he-, he-, he has-, he has no sense of personal justice.

HOLLIE McNISH: No. And what does "mockery" mean? So he calls it "a mockery of justice". What-, what does he mean by "mockery"?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Well, it means it's a joke, right? It means it's not something you can-, you can trust or that-, that is believable or just or right.

HOLLIE McNISH: Okay, so it makes a joke of justice.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah, exactly.

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: So justice doesn't just take place in the courtroom in this Gothic novel "Frankenstein", does it? There's also personal justice. There's a lot to be said for the theme of justice when we look at the relationship between Victor Frankenstein the scientist and the creature.

STEVEN CAMDEN: He didn't ask to be born, this creature. So there's this idea of what is right and wrong, right? He's so painfully lonely he begs Frankenstein for a companion. That will be the just thing to do. Like, "You made me. Give me a companion."

HOLLIE McNISH: And that's-, we've got more about that in the podcast on isolation. So have a wee listen to that as well.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Exactly. Go back and check those out. And he agrees to make him a female companion. Do you believe that that is because of Victor's sense of justice or does he just want the creature to leave him alone? It's not a definite answer.

HOLLIE McNISH: No. That's important to say, isn't it? There's not-, there's not a definite answer. This isn't a novel that's telling you exactly what to think. And that's okay to-, to write that in your exams–

STEVEN CAMDEN: –Completely. And also to say that Victor has put himself in a position where there almost is no justice, that the ideas of right and wrong have kind of gone out of the window because he's played God.

MUSIC: [organ music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Now let's talk about the explorer Robert Walton, because he tells us about collective justice. So there's lots of different types of justice: there's the character of Justine; there's the relationship between Victor Frankenstein and the creature; and then there's the explorer Robert Walton talking about collective justice. So collective justice is when we all come together to decide what's fair as a group.

STEVEN CAMDEN: And that's in relation to his crew, right? And-, and this idea that he is-, he is the captain of his ship, and then on this mission, this ambitious mission, that a lot of the crew have doubts, and whether he will listen to them or not.

HOLLIE McNISH: So there's a great quote here about collective justice, about listening [laughs] to other people. [STEVEN: laughs] Erm, and it is Robert Walton, the explorer. So they're off exploring the Arctic. He's in charge. He's wanting to seek knowledge–

STEVEN CAMDEN: And it's treacherous, right? This is uncharted, frozen – we could die here.

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah. It is very dangerous. And his crew, importantly, are like, "We wanna go home!"

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah! "Can we maybe not?!"

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah!

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: Eventually Robert Walton says, "In justice, I could not refuse." So he's writing that in a letter to his sister, talking about the fact that he could not not turn the boat around and go home – even though he wanted to carry on, but he listened to his crew.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Which is interesting. You know, think about it in relation to ambition: justice in this sense serves a purpose because it keeps that ambition in check and possibly saves the lives of the entire crew and himself.

HOLLIE McNISH: Do you think Mary Shelley is saying that justice is more important than glory?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yes, I do. But I think it's important to think about examples of here is somebody who does seem to learn or use justice for the greater good. This is based on Victor Frankenstein telling his story to Walton. They're the mirror of each other but Walton possibly learns from Victor's mistakes.

HOLLIE McNISH: And it's good to compare characters. Like, you can compare them quite succinctly in your exam, can't you?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah, that's a good quote. You know, it literally mentions the word, right, if-, if you're writing, about, "In justice, I could not refuse."

HOLLIE McNISH: Yeah.

STEVEN CAMDEN: So there's somebody thinking about the greater good, considering the world, foregoing their own-, own ambition and their glory.

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]

HOLLIE McNISH: So before we go let's recap this theme of justice. So Justine is found guilty by the court. Mary Shelley called her Justine on purpose so we think about justice when we think about her. These names are chosen for a reason. The character Justine questions in a great way the justice of the legal system at the time when this text was set.

Then we've got Victor Frankenstein.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Mm-hmm.

HOLLIE McNISH: So he feels the system has let Justine down. He calls it a "mockery of justice." He laughs at justice as if – he makes justice into a joke, but what about his sense of personal justice? Victor Frankenstein doesn't tell anyone what he knows to save Justine, he lets her die, and what does he owe the creature? Is it-, is it justice to destroy the companion that he made for the creature? So there's a lot of questions around justice in terms of Victor Frankenstein.

STEVEN CAMDEN: Yeah. And then–

HOLLIE McNISH: Then finally?

STEVEN CAMDEN: Collective justice, like what's fair for the group, for a society. And the example here we have is the explorer Robert Walton bending to collective justice, listening to it, and choosing to allow it to turn a ship around and bring his-, his-, his crew home and saying, "In justice, I could not refuse."

MUSIC: [Gothic music plays]



HOLLIE McNISH: Thanks so much for listening to this Bitesize English Literature podcast. Remember you can check out the Bitesize website for more on the theme of justice. To listen to the other episodes in this series just search "Bitesize" on the BBC Sounds app. In the next episode we're talking about ambition.

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