

On *Frankenstein*, Creative Writing, and Creation

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818) shows Victor Frankenstein's hubris in creating. A dedicated scholar, intent on understanding, intent on creating, Frankenstein obsessed over the possibility of imbuing an inanimate object—a self-made corpse—with life. His determination to experiment was incessant, as he “seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit” as he toiled in his workshop at the top of the house in which he lived (Shelley 37). What seemed to surprise Frankenstein most at the end of this ill-fated experiment was not that he succeeded in giving a creature life but that the creature's subsequent awakening horrified him: he had created a monster, a “catastrophe” (39). This “monster” had been sewn together by Frankenstein, the monster's body a sum of the parts from which he was stitched, his mind, at first, a sum of the thoughts of his creator.

Victor Frankenstein is a creator whose creation—however paradoxically—disgusts and horrifies him, and he is a creator whose creation knows this disgust, this horror, and subsequently vows revenge against Frankenstein and all he holds dear. What fascinates me most about Frankenstein's story is this idea of the possibility of creation, that *we too can create and therefore be creators*. We may not be attempting to animate a corpse, but we are attempting to bring together thoughts and ideas, close readings and analyses, scholarship and faith, into some sort of coherent whole, taking steps to determine how best to face the problems, the questions, or the concerns that shape who we are and how we approach ideas.

Stitching and Shaping Creation and Beauty

I think often of the 13th Article of Faith, which reads, “We believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and in doing good to all men; indeed, we may say that we follow the admonition of Paul—We believe all things, we hope all things, we have endured many things, and hope to be able to endure all things. If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things” (*Articles*). The turn of my thoughts to this article is not new, however. In fact, I have thought of it frequently since receiving my patriarchal blessing shortly before my family moved from Missouri to Iowa prior to my junior year of high school. Perhaps it was the timing of this reference in the blessing itself, perhaps it was simply its inclusion in the blessing, or perhaps it was due to the many emotions that came as a result of moving to a new place at that point in life, but this particular Article of Faith has stood out in my memory as I have considered how it might apply to certain situations or circumstances or how it might help me to find the “virtuous,” the “lovely,” the “of good report,” or the “praiseworthy” around me.

The phrasing around this reference within the blessing itself, however, has stood out less in my memory. In referencing the article, my blessing states, “I bless you to be true, honest, and chaste. I bless you to be smitten by the 13th Article of Faith, for I bless you to be a lover of beauty and all that is positive and good in our world.” For a time, I generally thought of the Article of Faith as I read over my blessing and considered briefly how “true,” “honest,” and “chaste” closely mirrored the language of the article itself. Beyond that, however, I didn't give it much thought other than the phrasing making me smile as I think of the seemingly “darker” creations that I admire and am drawn to. (A fact that often makes my friends smile or laugh because my pull towards these creations does not seem to “fit” my personality: the darker, seemingly more morbid fairy tales; my research of the Gothic and its conventions; movies and television shows like *Venom* or *Grimm*.)

But I also know that there is power in words, and to be “smitten” means to be both “deeply affected with or struck by strong feelings of attraction, affection, or infatuation” and to be “suddenly affected by something (such as a strong emotion or a serious illness)” (Merriam-Webster). To be smitten by the 13th Article of Faith, then, means to be drawn deeply and strongly to it, to be affected by it. I grew up learning that the Articles of Faith were written to express some of the differences between the beliefs of members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the beliefs of others (“Articles”). They were statements. Clear, simple declarations of belief to learn in Primary and remember throughout life. For me, however, they have taken on a deeper meaning when I consider the 13th Article of Faith in this context and as something that I can be drawn deeply towards and affected by—literal words to live by, adhere to, and practice.

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I am constantly amazed at the creations that surround me. Nature (and spending time outdoors) is an especially clear example to me of creation. I think of Missouri with its powerful thunderstorms and memories of days spent outside at the pool and at amusement parks. Iowa with its rolling hills and ever-present corn. Utah with its soaring mountains (which felt so much larger than life when I first came to BYU that I was afraid I would run into them) and national parks. England with its beautiful heaths, white cliffs, and pebbled beaches. North Carolina with its forests upon forests of trees, sandy beaches, and smoky mountains. These beautiful creations are often what I think of or first reference when I mention the places where I have lived to others. Each is a creation, and each is beautiful. But creation goes beyond that—beautiful buildings, old and new, stories that evoke sense and emotion and connectivity, advances in technology and medical treatment—the list is endless.

Beyond this is, simply put, the vastness of creation. I know that it is easy to make a blanket statement that illustrates the how and the what of creation. But then I think that we each are given the opportunity to create—be it with families, with hobbies, with scholarship—just as the Creator, who “shall be called Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Father of heaven and earth, the Creator of all things from the beginning” (The Book of Mormon, Mosiah 3:8). This ability of creation that is given to us feels empowering and enables me to more fully appreciate how the lines from my blessing and the 13th Article of Faith seem to coalesce, despite the fact that the words “beauty” and “positive” are not found in the Article of Faith. The word “lovely,” however, is. And it is in the word “lovely” that I feel beauty and positivity represented. “Lovely” hints at an opportunity to create, to contribute, to seek after the good, meaning that we can both look for the good and strive to create the good. This is perhaps easiest to illustrate, for me, in writing creatively.

Creation as Process

After graduating from my undergrad at BYU, I joined a writing group and began the process of attempting to write creatively. As an avid reader, the idea of writing my own story was always in the back of my mind. My first, earliest attempts at creative writing were heavily accented by academic language and more rigid structures that prevented the flow of the story I aimed to tell. I quickly realized that if I was serious about creative writing, I needed to pause, take stock, and find a way to allow myself to write in a way that worked with the genre more naturally than the strict, regimented prose I had grown accustomed to in school.

Eventually, the more I wrote creatively, the less rigid the structures became, the less academic the prose. In no way does this mean that I feel like I am a great creative writer. Far from it, in fact. But writing in this way has allowed me to open my mind to new ways of

thinking, exploring ideas, and putting words down on a page. Creative writing helps me clear my head when I try to write yet struggle to put words to paper. Creative writing helps me be a bit better at “word vomiting,” at rough drafting, at writing more freely. For me, creative writing, instead of solely focusing on an end *product*, has been a *process* of figuring out how to write, how to process ideas, how to approach topics.

The product, of course, is often the goal. It is easier in any field to account for the time spent working on something by showing a finished product versus the hours spent trying to write a couple of sentences in a still un-finished product. Victor Frankenstein spent hours upon hours with an end product in mind: bringing life to an inanimate object. Had he slowed and worked less feverishly, perhaps the process, and therefore the end product, might have been different. What if he had embraced his creation instead of shunning it? What if the process of creation was two-fold, first the initial creation and then the subsequent creation of shaping of thoughts, habits, ideas, actions? We learn time and again in the scriptures that we are “free to choose” how we live (2 Nephi 2:27). Our ability to actively and repeatedly choose signals that life itself is a process through which we aim to learn and grow, and that creation is also a process, a reason to become something more.

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Perhaps this is why I was drawn to learn how to embroider as I completed and defended my MA thesis at BYU. After spending months stitching together thoughts and ideas from readings, research, and scholarship into one cohesive whole, I needed an outlet that allowed me to do similarly but in a different medium. Stitch by stitch, thread by thread, color by color, winding and rewinding, evaluating and reevaluating, these projects came to life as I stitched flowers and decorations and gifts for friends and family. The process of embroidery became an outlet for me as, bit by bit, stitch by stitch, I created pieces of art.

Similarly, growing up in the Church I learned the core, basic principles and doctrines of the Gospel. I remember the moment when I knew that I needed to go through the process of gaining my own testimony. This testimony would be one that *I* built, and it would be built upon the basic truths I understood and strengthened by my own knowledge and experiences. Gaining and strengthening my testimony has been a similar, continual, stitch by stitch process, as “just as the tomb’s emptiness provided meaning to others regarding the risen Lord, so Church doctrines, ritual practices, and covenants lend shape, meaning, and purpose to our pulsations of spiritual experience. They move belief in the direction of understanding” (Wickman 204). Here, the things I know or believe are stitched together as in my present I recall past experiences, buoying myself up as I receive answers, each new experience adding to an aspect of my testimony and my faith and providing me with more than one way to support what I know to be true. I still have questions, of course. But it takes more than one loose thread to unravel a tapestry of experiences.

Creation as Faith

My experiences in life, thread by thread, build upon each other. I have had several experiences that have shaped my interests as a person and as a scholar, including studying abroad in London as an undergraduate student and pursuing multiple graduate degrees. I have often thought of my seemingly circuitous route to my PhD program, a route that often feels as if it needs justification. It has taken several years for me to see that while my route has been, in a way, circuitous, it has not been without purpose. For me, these degrees have been part of a larger process of understanding who I am as an individual, as a person of faith, and as a scholar.

Through each of these experiences I have learned how to draw closer to and rely on my Savior. I have learned how to seek and listen to revelation. I have learned how to humble myself

as I heed the promptings I have received. All of this has been a continual process as I keep trying, striving, believing, and (even) remembering Elder Jeffrey R. Holland's words: "Don't you quit. You keep walking. You keep trying. There is help and happiness ahead . . . It will be all right in the end. Trust God and believe in good things to come" (Holland). This has brought me comfort over the years as I strive to put my trust in God in all parts of my life, trusting that I am on the right path for me at this time as I work through my PhD. What I am learning and understanding more and more each day is that as an individual, as a person of faith, as a scholar of faith, I have the opportunity to create each day. My creations may be as simple as adding another stitch to my current embroidery project or as complex as starting my next research topic in the hopes of contributing to the field. In all of them, being a scholar of faith, to me, means not only having the opportunity to create but being able to find joy in all of my creations, large or small (and unlike Victor Frankenstein), for "Adam fell that men might be; and men are, that they might have joy" (2 Nephi 2:25).

I am still piecing together these ideas just as Victor Frankenstein pieced together his monster, but I take comfort in knowing that this process, like any other, is ongoing. And it is in this process that each new experience adds another stitch, another opportunity, another way for me to be a scholar of faith.

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