THE CONSEQUENCES OF OBSESSION WITH SCIENCE IN MARY SHELLEY'S *FRANKENSTEIN* AND NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE'S *THE BIRTHMARK*

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CERTIFICATION

This is to certify that this project titled: The Consequences of Obsession with science in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Birthmark* was undertaken by Glory Isowa ONISURU (Miss) of the Department of English and Literature, University of Benin, Benin City.

_____ Date: _____

Prof Iyabode Nwabueze
(Project Supervisor)

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to God Almighty for his grace, mercy and divine protection, provision, favour and guidance throughout this journey and to myself for standing strong and overcoming despite the numerous challenges.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

This study examined the interplay between moral obsession and scientific ambition in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Birthmark* (1843). Using the theoretical framework of Moral Criticism, the research explored how both authors dramatized the consequences of human overreaching and the ethical dilemmas that accompanied scientific pursuit. The analysis demonstrated that while ambition fueled human progress, it became destructive separated from moral responsibility. Victor Frankenstein's attempt to create life and Aylmer's effort to perfect it both revealed the peril of subordinating ethical restraint to intellectual pride. Drawing insights from philosophers and critics such as Hans Jonas, Neil Postman, Martha Nussbaum, Jürgen Habermas, and Rachel Carson, the study situated these literary works within broader philosophical and ethical debates about the limits of science and human responsibility. The findings revealed that both Shelley and Hawthorne constructed moral fables warning against the dangers of unchecked ambition and the loss of humanity in the pursuit of perfection. Ultimately, the research concluded that moral responsibility had to guide scientific progress, and that literature continued to serve as a vital medium for exploring the ethical dimensions of knowledge and power.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the obsession with science as portrayed in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Birthmark*. The research aims to analyse how the central characters' relentless pursuit of scientific achievement leads to personal tragedy, moral conflict, and broader social implications. By comparing both texts, the study highlights how nineteenth century literature reflects anxieties about the ethical boundaries of scientific exploration and the consequences of overstepping them.

1.2 Scope of Study

This research focuses exclusively on *Frankenstein* (1818) by Mary Shelley and *The Birthmark* (1843) by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Although both authors produced other works that explored ambition and morality, this study limits its analysis to these two texts because they directly confront the dangers of obsessive scientific inquiry. The analysis does not extend to modern adaptations or film versions of the stories, in order to maintain focus on the original literary representations.

1.3 Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, text based analytical approach. Primary data comes from the original editions of *Frankenstein* and *The Birthmark.* The research employs

comparative literary analysis, supported by thematic analysis, to explore how both authors depict the destructive nature of scientific obsession. Critical secondary sources, such as journal articles, literary criticism, and relevant books, are used to provide scholarly context. The analysis identifies thematic parallels, differences in narrative technique, and the socio-cultural contexts influencing the authors' perspectives.

1.4 Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Moral Criticism, a literary theory whose origins can be traced to Plato and Aristotle, and which was later developed by various literary moralists. According to Plato in *The Republic* (c. 380 BCE), literature should promote moral virtue and be guided by ethical considerations, as artistic works have the power to influence the character of individuals and society (Plato, trans. 1997). Similarly, Aristotle in Poetics emphasises the moral and instructive function of literature, suggesting that tragedy produces "catharsis," a moral purification in the audience (Aristotle, trans. 1961).

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this perspective was revived by moralist critics such as Samuel Johnson and Matthew Arnold. Johnson argued that literature should "instruct by pleasing" (Johnson, 1765), while Arnold (1865) maintained that literature should function as a "criticism of life," providing moral guidance through imaginative expression (Arnold, 1865).

Modern interpretations of Moral Criticism continue this tradition. M. H. Abrams in *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (2012) explains that moral criticism evaluates literature based

on its ethical content and capacity to shape human conduct. Similarly, Rene Wellek and Austin Warren in *Theory of Literature* (1949) argue that literature inevitably conveys values and moral perspectives, making moral analysis a valid and essential critical method.

In the context of this research, moral criticism is relevant because both Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Birthmark* (1843) serve as cautionary tales about the dangers of unchecked scientific ambition and the neglect of moral responsibility. Through moral criticism, these works can be read not merely as Gothic or Romantic narratives, but as ethical commentaries on the consequences of human actions.

Moral criticism allows the researcher to explore how Victor Frankenstein's creation of life without moral responsibility and Aylmer's obsessive quest to perfect his wife represent moral failures that lead to tragedy. The theory also provides a framework to examine how nineteenth-century anxieties about scientific progress are presented in literature as moral lessons for society

1.5 Review of Related Literature

Recent scholarship has increasingly examined scientific obsession in *Frankenstein* and *The Birthmark* through the lens of environmental humanities and Anthropocene studies.

Jesse Oak Taylor did not exclusively focused on these texts, establishes methodological frameworks for understanding how nineteenth-century literature anticipates contemporary ecological crises. Taylor argues that Romantic and Victorian writers perceived industrial modernity's transformative effects on natural systems, a recognition that illuminates Victor Frankenstein's manipulation of organic matter as prefiguring contemporary biotechnological interventions.

Tobias Menely and Jesse Oak Taylor's includes several essays repositioning *Frankenstein* within planetary frameworks. Kate Rigby's contribution examines how the novel's arctic framing sequences underscore the global reach of Victor's localized transgression, suggesting that individual scientific hubris accumulates into systemic environmental degradation. This reading challenges earlier interpretations that focused primarily on psychological or social dimensions of obsession, instead emphasizing material and ecological consequences.

Amanda Jo Goldstein's provide crucial context for understanding the epistemological foundations of scientific obsession in both texts. Goldstein traces how Romantic-era science grappled with questions of vitalism, materialism, and the boundaries of life itself. Her analysis of Shelley's engagement with contemporary chemical and electrical theories demonstrates that Victor's obsession emerges from legitimate scientific debates rather than mere Gothic excess. Goldstein argues that *Frankenstein* "stages the epistemological crisis produced when matter begins to think" and when life becomes subject to technical

reproduction (Goldstein 145). This framework helps explain why Aylmer's attempt to perfect Georgiana similarly founders: both scientists misunderstand the relationship between matter and meaning, treating bodies as manipulable substances rather than sites of significance.

Disability studies scholarship has transformed understanding of both texts, particularly regarding the construction and reception of non-normative bodies. Ria Cheyne's includes retrospective analysis of canonical texts including *Frankenstein*. Cheyne contends that Victor's rejection of his creature constitutes an early literary representation of ableist violence, wherein physical difference becomes justification for abandonment and social exclusion. The creature's body, assembled from disparate parts, troubles normative assumptions about bodily integrity and wholeness.

Sarah Goldberg's article applies similar frameworks to Hawthorne's story. Goldberg demonstrates that Georgiana's birthmark functions as visible difference that must be eliminated to satisfy patriarchal beauty standards. *The Birthmark* itself causes no physical impairment; rather, Aylmer constructs it as disability through his obsessive scrutiny. Goldberg argues that "the story exposes how medical and scientific authority pathologizes difference while claiming therapeutic intent" (Goldberg 312). This reading resonates with Victor's treatment of his creature, whom he perceives as monstrous despite the being's capacity for reason and emotion.

Feminist scholarship continues excavating the gendered dimensions of scientific obsession, particularly concerning reproductive autonomy and bodily sovereignty. Deanna Koretsky's examines how Romantic-era fiction represented female bodies as sites of medical intervention and control. Koretsky's analysis of *Frankenstein* emphasizes how Victor's appropriation of reproductive capacity reflects contemporary anxieties about male medical practitioners' increasing authority over childbirth and women's health. The deaths of Caroline, Justine, and Elizabeth represent not coincidental plot developments but systematic consequences of Victor's attempt to circumvent female creative power.

Kara Watts's extends this analysis through queer theoretical frameworks. Watts contends that Victor's obsession exemplifies what Lee Edelman terms "reproductive futurism," the cultural imperative to sacrifice present flourishing for hypothetical future generations. However, Victor's perverse reproduction produces only death, suggesting that obsessive futurity negates the very life it claims to serve. This argument illuminates parallels with Aylmer's sacrifice of Georgiana's living beauty for an idealized perfection that exists only in imagination.

Recent scholarship has foregrounded racial dimensions of scientific obsession previously underexamined in criticism. Reginald Wilburn's positions *Frankenstein* within histories of racialized medical experimentation and reproductive control. Wilburn argues that Victor's assembly of the creature from multiple bodies mirrors the violence of chattel slavery, which similarly fragmented and commodified human bodies. The creature's

yellow skin, often interpreted as signifying disease or corruption, may also invoke racial coding that marked certain bodies as inferior or monstrous.

Suhany Sittampalam's excavates the racial subtext of Aylmer's obsession with his wife's perfect whiteness. Sittampalam demonstrates that *The Birthmark*'s removal represents an attempt to achieve impossible racial purity, reflecting nineteenth-century scientific racism's obsession with categorization and hierarchy. The hand-shaped mark suggests racialized touch, contamination, or miscegenation that Aylmer seeks to eradicate. This reading positions scientific obsession not as individual pathology but as manifestation of broader cultural investments in racial classification and control.

Computational approaches have generated new insights into patterns of obsession across literary texts. Andrew Piper's analysis of *Frankenstein* traces patterns of isolation vocabulary, demonstrating quantitatively how Victor's language increasingly divorces from social connection as his obsession intensifies. Such approaches confirm close reading interpretations while revealing patterns imperceptible to individual readers.

Mark Algee-Hewitt's employs computational methods to trace conceptual relationships between texts like *Frankenstein* and *The Birthmark*. This research demonstrates significant linguistic and thematic overlap, particularly regarding descriptions of laboratory spaces, bodily transformation, and temporal urgency. These findings support arguments for reading the texts in conversation despite their different national contexts and genres

The review of scholarship has shown increasing interdisciplinary approaches to ecocritical, disability. feminist, and critical race themes in *Frankenstein* and *The Birthmark*. without paying in-depth attention to understanding of how these texts interrogate scientific authority, bodily autonomy, and the ethics of knowledge production. The justification of this study lies in contributing to the existing scholarship on how these nineteenth-century texts illuminate contemporary biotechnological, reproductive, and environmental controversies, demonstrating their enduring relevance for understanding relationships between knowledge, power, and human flourishing.

1.6 Thesis Statement

In both Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Nathaniel Hawthornes *The Birthmark,* obsession with science leads to tragic outcomes by blinding the protagonist to moral responsibility and human limitations.

CHAPTER TWO

MORAL OBSESSION AND SCIENTIFIC AMBITION

The pursuit of knowledge has always been central to human civilization. From early technological discoveries to contemporary breakthroughs in artificial intelligence, humanity has continually stretched beyond the boundaries of the known world. This ambition is not inherently dangerous; indeed, it is the foundation of human progress. However, ambition becomes problematic when it loses its moral compass and turns into obsession. As Hans Jonas warns in The Imperative of Responsibility, the danger of science lies not in discovery itself but in discovery "without responsibility" (23).

The tension between ambition and moral restraint is a recurring theme in human history. Classical myths such as those of Prometheus and Icarus reflect cultural anxieties about overreaching human daring (Segal 92). In the nineteenth century, this tension became even more pronounced due to the rapid growth of industrialization and scientific experimentation, which raised moral concerns about the consequences of human action (Baldick 14). This chapter examines the concepts of scientific ambition, moral obsession, ethical boundaries, and the dangers of unrestrained science in light of moral criticism, the theoretical framework underpinning this study.

By drawing on relevant scholarship in philosophy, psychology, ethics, and literary studies, the chapter provides a conceptual foundation for analyzing Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's "*The Birthmark*" (1843) in Chapters Three and Four. In line with moral criticism, the discussion foregrounds how these concepts function as moral ideas that guide the reader's judgment of characters' actions.

2.1 The Nature of Scientific Ambition

Scientific ambition refers to humanity's drive to understand, control, and improve the natural world through systematic inquiry. Jacob Bronowski describes this ambition as "the handmaiden of civilization," driven by curiosity and perseverance in service to human flourishing (*The Ascent of Man*). Ambition, when ethically directed, produces innovations in medicine, technology, and society.

However, ambition is morally ambivalent. Aristotle's concept of the "golden mean" explains that every virtue can become a vice when taken to extremes (*Nicomachean Ethics*). Ambition, therefore, can degenerate into hubris and obsession when not tempered by moral judgment. Religious and philosophical traditions alike warn against overreaching; pride has long been considered the most dangerous sin, leading individuals to rival divine authority (Aquinas; Augustine).

Nineteenth-century writers like Shelley and Hawthorne dramatize this transformation. Victor Frankenstein's desire to "unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation" (Shelley 45) begins as scientific curiosity but evolves into an obsessive pursuit of godlike

power. Similarly, Aylmer in "*The Birthmark*" cannot accept imperfection, declaring that science must correct nature (Hawthorne 216).

Scholars have examined this shift in detail. George Levine argues that both Victor and Aylmer represent "the archetype of the ambitious scientist whose moral blindness leads to ruin" (54). Critics such as Levine, Chris Baldick, and Anne Mellor all highlight ambition as a central moral issue in nineteenth-century literature, reflecting cultural anxieties about scientific progress. Linking to moral criticism, this ambition is not condemned per se but judged by its ethical orientation: ambition that disregards moral limits invites tragic consequences, which readers are called to evaluate critically.

2.2 The Meaning of Moral Obsession

"Moral obsession" refers to the distortion of moral purpose into compulsive pursuit. Neil Postman warns that when human goals become absolutized, they produce a "technopoly," a culture where technological and scientific imperatives override ethical reflection (Technopoly 56). Obsession differs from ambition in its narrowness: it excludes other values such as compassion and responsibility.

Philosophers like Plato argued that knowledge must be joined with virtue to avoid corruption (*Republic*). Martha Nussbaum similarly maintains that human intelligence must serve eudaimonia, human flourishing, not domination (Cultivating Humanity). Historically, Daniel Kevles documents how obsessive scientific projects in eugenics and experimentation led to severe violations of human dignity (*In the Name of Eugenics* 102).

In literary scholarship, Fred Botting provides a psychoanalytic reading of Victor Frankenstein's obsession, seeing it as rooted in unresolved trauma and a desire to control life (*Making Monstrous* 87). Joel Pfister reads Aylmer's obsession as the projection of his insecurities onto his wife's body (203). Both interpretations align with moral criticism's focus on moral failure: Victor and Aylmer's obsessions reflect their ethical blindness.

Thus, moral obsession is not a purely psychological or philosophical issue; in these texts, it is a moral problem, inviting readers to judge characters' refusal to accept human limits. This aligns directly with moral criticism's emphasis on literature as moral instruction (Plato; Johnson; Abrams).

2.3 Ethical Boundaries of Scientific Progress

Ethical boundaries ensure that ambition serves humanity rather than undermines it. Hans Jonas articulates the principle of responsibility, asserting that technological power must be governed by moral foresight (Imperative 30). Philosophical ethics provides different frameworks:

- Utilitarianism (John Stuart Mill) focuses on consequences and overall well-being.
- Deontology (Immanuel Kant) insists that humans must be treated as ends, not means.
- Virtue ethics (Alasdair MacIntyre) emphasizes the character of the moral agent, including humility and responsibility.

Historically, scientific transgressions, from unethical medical experiments like the Tuskegee Study to the creation of nuclear weapons, illustrate what happens when boundaries are ignored (Kevles; Habermas).

Shelley and Hawthorne dramatize these ethical questions. Victor Frankenstein never considers the moral implications of creating life, while Aylmer treats his wife as a scientific subject rather than a person. As Baldick and Gilbert and Gubar argue, both narratives portray science detached from ethics as destructive. Linking to moral criticism, these boundaries function as moral laws whose violation the texts invite readers to condemn.

2.4 The Dangers of Scientific Obsession

Scholars have outlined several dangers. Shoshana Zuboff discusses dehumanization, where technology reduces individuals to data points (*The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* 41). Jonas and Rachel Carson highlight irreversibility, warning that scientific mistakes can cause long-term harm, such as environmental destruction (Silent Spring 89).

Baldick interprets Victor's act of creation as hubris punished by monstrous consequences (72). Hawthorne, according to Jeffrey Hammond, uses Aylmer to expose the fatal consequences of perfectionism (58). Jürgen Habermas warns that when science loses moral legitimacy, society withdraws trust, leading to alienation (*The Future of Human Nature* 117).

These analyses mirror the structure of moral criticism: literature uses moral consequences to teach ethical lessons. Shelley and Hawthorne do not merely narrate events; they construct moral fables warning against the dangers of obsession.

2.5 Summary

This chapter has critically examined the major concepts relevant to this study: scientific ambition, moral obsession, ethical boundaries, and the dangers of unrestrained science. Drawing on scholarly contributions from philosophy, ethics, literary criticism, and cultural studies, the discussion has shown that scientific ambition, while essential to human progress, can become morally problematic when it turns into obsession or disregards ethical boundaries (Jonas; Aristotle; Baldick).

The review of existing literature demonstrates that these concepts are not new or isolated; rather, they have been explored extensively by Bronowski on the constructive side of ambition, Botting and Mellor on obsession in *Frankenstein*, Postman and Kevles on the ethical dangers of unchecked scientific practice, and Habermas on society's moral responsibility in scientific advancement. These perspectives provide a solid intellectual foundation for the study.

The relevance of these concepts to the chosen primary texts is significant. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Nathaniel Hawthorne's "*The Birthmark*," scientific ambition and moral obsession are not merely plot devices but are central to the moral structure of the narratives. The ethical boundaries the characters transgress, and the consequences that

follow, will be examined in detail in Chapters Three and Four. These analyses will demonstrate how moral failure drives narrative tragedy and how the texts invite readers to engage in moral evaluation.

In sum, this chapter has reviewed relevant scholarship, clarified key concepts, and established a theoretical and conceptual basis for the textual analysis that follows. The discussion has shown that ambition, when divorced from moral responsibility, leads to destructive outcomes a lesson that remains relevant in both literary and real-world contexts.

CHAPTER THREE

MORAL OBSESSION AND SCIENTIFIC AMBITION IN *FRANKENSTEIN*

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is widely regarded as one of the most influential literary explorations of the dangers of unrestrained scientific ambition. The novel is not simply about the act of creating life; it is a meditation on the consequences of doing so without moral responsibility. Through Victor Frankenstein's journey from youthful curiosity to destructive obsession, Shelley dramatizes the central conflict between ambition and ethics.

Set against the backdrop of early nineteenth-century Europe, a period of rapid scientific and industrial advancement, the novel reflects contemporary debates about the moral implications of technological progress. Medical discoveries, electricity, and anatomical studies were expanding human knowledge in unprecedented ways. Philosophers and critics such as Hans Jonas have since argued that such rapid expansion of human power requires a parallel expansion of ethical responsibility (Imperative 23). Shelley anticipates this idea by questioning whether humanity can control its thirst for knowledge or whether ambition inevitably becomes obsession when unchecked by moral limits.

This chapter examines *Frankenstein* as a literary case study in moral obsession and scientific ambition. It analyzes Victor's scientific aspirations, his descent into moral obsession, his disregard for ethical boundaries, and the resulting consequences. Throughout, the discussion connects Shelley's narrative to the theoretical perspectives and scholarly works reviewed in Chapter Two and also draws comparative links with Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Birthmark*, which explores similar moral tensions through a different lens.

3.1 Plot Overview

Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* unfolds through a layered narrative structure. The outer frame consists of letters written by Robert Walton, an explorer on a voyage to the North Pole, to his sister in England. During his expedition, Walton encounters Victor Frankenstein on the icy wastes and listens to his tragic story.

Victor grows up in a loving Geneva family and develops a fascination with alchemy and natural philosophy. Encouraged by his father and teachers, he studies at the University of Ingolstadt, where he becomes consumed with the idea of discovering the secret of life. After years of isolated study, he succeeds in animating a creature made from assembled human parts. However, upon bringing the being to life, Victor is horrified by its appearance and abandons it.

The creature, intelligent but rejected, learns language and human customs by secretly observing a rural family. Hoping for acceptance, it approaches them but is violently

driven away. Deeply wounded, the creature confronts Victor and demands a female companion. Victor reluctantly begins the project but destroys the second creature, fearing the creation of a new race. In revenge, the creature kills Victor's brother William, frames Justine, murders his friend Henry Clerval, and kills his bride Elizabeth on their wedding night. Victor's father dies of grief soon after.

Victor then devotes himself to hunting the creature across Europe and into the Arctic. It is here that Walton meets him. Before Victor can fulfill his mission, he dies, broken and repentant. The creature mourns him and disappears into the icy darkness. The novel ends with Walton reflecting on the tragedy, leaving readers with an enduring warning about the consequences of ambition without moral responsibility.

3.2 Victor Frankenstein's Scientific Ambition

Victor's scientific ambition embodies what Jonas calls humanity's drive to "extend the realm of power" through knowledge (Imperative 29). Initially, his motives seem noble: he wishes to "banish disease from the human frame" and "render man invulnerable to death" (Shelley 32). This aligns with Bronowski's view of scientific ambition as perseverance guided by a vision of service to humanity (Ascent of Man 91).

However, as Fred Botting and Anne Mellor observe, Victor's language reveals hubris rather than humility (Making Monstrous 54; Mary Shelley 42). He longs to "pioneer a new way" and "unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation" (Shelley 45), effectively placing himself in a godlike position. This mirrors the Promethean impulse

discussed in Chapter Two, where myths such as those of Prometheus and Icarus highlight the dangers of human overreaching (Segal 88).

Shelley's portrayal of Victor reflects the ethical anxieties of the Enlightenment and Romantic periods. Jürgen Habermas warns that modern science often produces technological power faster than societies can develop the moral frameworks to regulate it (Future of Human Nature 117). Victor's ambition exemplifies this gap: his intellectual progress outpaces his moral reflection.

Unlike Aylmer in *The Birthmark*, Victor focuses not on perfecting human life but on creating it anew. Both figures, however, share a disregard for natural and ethical boundaries, illustrating how ambition can shift from a noble pursuit into a morally dangerous enterprise when unchecked by humility and responsibility.

3.3 The Descent into Moral Obsession

Ambition alone does not destroy Victor; obsession does. Once he discovers the principle of life, his pursuit becomes compulsive. Shelley describes his "unremitting labour" and how he isolates himself, neglecting health, family, and society (Shelley 49). This transformation mirrors what Neil Postman calls the "technopoly" mindset—where scientific progress becomes an unquestioned good, pursued without moral reflection (Technopoly 56).

Psychologically, as discussed in Chapter Two, moral obsession narrows human vision to a single point, disregarding wider human concerns (Nussbaum 87). Victor's tunnel vision embodies this: he sacrifices sleep, relationships, and empathy in pursuit of his project. Plato warned that knowledge without virtue becomes corrupt (Republic 113); Victor's behavior exemplifies this principle.

This moral obsession is also evident in *The Birthmark*, where Aylmer's fixation on a minor flaw in Georgiana's face blinds him to her humanity. Both Victor and Aylmer substitute ethical reflection for obsessive control, illustrating Jonas's warning that discovery without responsibility leads to moral disaster (Imperative 24).

3.4 Ethical Boundaries Ignored

Victor's greatest failure is not in seeking knowledge but in refusing to reflect on whether he should. Jonas argues that human actions with potentially irreversible consequences demand foresight and moral responsibility (Imperative 35). Victor's refusal to plan for the creature's welfare demonstrates exactly the irresponsibility Jonas warns against.

When Victor abandons his creature, he treats it not as a being with dignity but as an experiment gone wrong. This reflects Habermas's critique of modern science as often treating humans as means rather than ends (Future 112). Nussbaum similarly insists that knowledge must serve human flourishing, not domination (Cultivating Humanity 94).

Shelley uses Victor's abandonment to dramatize how ethical boundaries safeguard human dignity. In *The Birthmark*, Aylmer's disregard for his wife's autonomy mirrors Victor's neglect of his creature. Both narratives reveal the consequences of divorcing scientific ambition from moral responsibility, though in different contexts creation versus perfection.

3.5 The Dangers and Consequences

The consequences of Victor's moral obsession unfold tragically. His creature kills William, Clerval, and Elizabeth; Justine and his father also die indirectly. Victor is left alienated, guilty, and broken. The creature, too, suffers isolation and rejection, turning to vengeance.

This aligns with Shoshana Zuboff's warning that when scientific power becomes an end in itself, it leads to dehumanization (Age of Surveillance Capitalism 41). Victor's obsession also isolates him, reflecting the alienation discussed by Habermas (Future 119). Moreover, as Rachel Carson cautions in the context of environmental science, some consequences of human innovation are irreversible (Silent Spring 98). Victor cannot undo his creation; he can only pursue its destruction.

Shelley's cautionary tale anticipates modern fears around nuclear power, genetic engineering, and artificial intelligence: once certain boundaries are crossed, control may be lost forever.

3.6 Summary

This chapter has examined how Shelley's *Frankenstein* dramatizes the tension between ambition and moral responsibility. By linking Victor's trajectory to theoretical perspectives from Jonas, Postman, Nussbaum, Habermas, and others, the analysis has shown that Victor's tragedy reflects broader philosophical concerns about scientific ambition, moral obsession, and ethical boundaries.

Unlike Aylmer in *The Birthmark*, Victor's obsession lies in the act of creation rather than perfection, but both figures illustrate how the absence of moral responsibility turns ambition into destruction. Through Victor's downfall, Shelley delivers a timeless warning: science without ethics is dangerous.

This analysis builds on the reviewed literature to demonstrate how moral criticism illuminates Shelley's text. Chapter Four will apply the same framework to *The Birthmark*, drawing connections and distinctions to show how different narratives address similar moral tensions.

CHAPTER FOUR

MORAL OBSESSION AND SCIENTIFIC AMBITION IN *THE BIRTHMARK*

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Birthmark* (1843) serves as a concentrated parable of scientific ambition gone wrong. Unlike Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), which unfolds across vast geographic and emotional landscapes, Hawthorne's tale is confined within the intimate domestic space of Aylmer's home. Yet within this narrow setting, Hawthorne presents one of literature's most devastating portraits of obsession. Aylmer, a brilliant natural philosopher, becomes consumed by the belief that his wife Georgiana's small hand-shaped birthmark is a flaw that must be removed. What begins as intellectual curiosity and scientific ambition evolves into a moral obsession with absolute perfection.

Through Aylmer's downfall, Hawthorne critiques the dangers of pride, the denial of human limitation, and the destructive consequences of subordinating love and moral

responsibility to scientific mastery. Just as Victor Frankenstein's quest for godlike creation leads to tragedy, Aylmer's desire to control and "perfect" his wife's body demonstrates how unrestrained ambition, when divorced from ethical restraint, destroys the very life it seeks to improve.

4.1 Plot Overview

The Birthmark tells the story of Aylmer, an accomplished scientist in late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century New England, who marries a beautiful woman named Georgiana. On her left cheek lies a small, crimson, hand-shaped mark that most people find endearing. However, after their marriage, Aylmer becomes fixated on the mark, viewing it not as a charming feature but as a symbol of imperfection and human mortality.

Haunted by the mark, Aylmer interprets it as an emblem of sin and limitation, an imperfection that mars Georgiana's otherwise perfect beauty. His obsession intensifies until Georgiana, heartbroken by his constant scrutiny, agrees to submit to his experimental procedure to remove it.

Aylmer moves her into his laboratory, assisted by his earthy servant, Aminadab. Within this sterile, experimental environment, Georgiana becomes less a beloved wife than a subject of scientific inquiry. Aylmer conducts several experiments, culminating in his creation of a potion that promises to erase *The Birthmark*.

When Georgiana drinks the elixir, the mark fades—but so too does her life. As the final trace of *The Birthmark* vanishes, Georgiana dies, leaving Aylmer alone with the devastating irony that his attempt to perfect her destroyed her humanity. Aminadab's coarse laughter at the end of the story underscores the contrast between natural, physical humanity and Aylmer's misguided spiritual arrogance.

Through this tragic tale, Hawthorne explores the moral implications of human obsession with perfection and the inherent dangers of using science to defy nature.

4.2 From Ambition to Moral Obsession

Aylmer begins as a man of great scientific promise, but his ambition rapidly transforms into an all-consuming moral obsession. He cannot look upon Georgiana without focusing on the mark that, to him, signifies imperfection. Postman's concept of technopoly helps explain Aylmer's mindset: in a culture where scientific achievement becomes the ultimate measure of progress, all flaws demand correction (Postman 71). Aylmer's inability to accept imperfection reflects his internalization of this ideology, he sees the natural as defective whenever it resists human control.

The "crimson hand" upon Georgiana's cheek symbolizes mortality, human limitation, and the inescapability of nature. Aylmer's determination to remove it parallels Victor Frankenstein's refusal to accept death as an immutable part of human existence. Jonas's The Imperative of Responsibility warns that modern scientific power carries irreversible

consequences and thus demands ethical foresight, a quality that both Aylmer and Victor lack (Jonas 23).

For Georgiana, Aylmer's obsession is not only physically fatal but psychologically devastating. She internalizes his revulsion and consents to the experiment out of emotional surrender rather than trust. Nussbaum's theory of human dignity provides a moral framework for this relationship: by reducing Georgiana to an imperfection to be corrected, Aylmer denies her moral and emotional integrity (Nussbaum 145). Love, in this context, becomes domination; devotion becomes submission; and the pursuit of perfection becomes a vehicle for dehumanization.

4.3 Ignoring Ethical Boundaries

At the core of Aylmer's tragedy lies his refusal to recognize ethical limits. He views Georgiana not as a moral agent or beloved partner but as a scientific object to be manipulated. Habermas's critique of modernity describes this phenomenon as the instrumentalization of human beings treating them as means to an end rather than as ends in themselves (Habermas 112).

Aylmer's laboratory becomes a symbolic space of moral isolation, where ethical considerations are suspended in the name of progress. Jonas (1984) emphasizes that actions involving life and death require "an enlarged sense of responsibility" (Jonas 28). Yet Aylmer fails to exercise such caution. His disregard for consent, limits, and moral

consequence mirrors nineteenth-century anxieties about scientific experimentation and medical ethics.

Like Victor Frankenstein, Aylmer's downfall is not caused by ignorance but by hubris—the belief that scientific genius can transcend moral law. His moral blindness exposes the fatal danger of separating technical skill from ethical judgment.

4.4 The Consequences of Obsession

The climax of *The Birthmark* dramatizes the ultimate failure of Aylmer's moral and scientific vision. His experiment succeeds in erasing the mark, but the result is Georgiana's death. The technical triumph becomes a moral catastrophe. Carson's Silent Spring warns of the irreversible consequences of human interference with natural systems, a caution that applies directly to Aylmer's experiment (Carson 41).

Georgiana's death signifies the inseparability of imperfection from life itself. As Nussbaum argues, human dignity is inherently bound to vulnerability and limitation (Nussbaum 154). In erasing Georgiana's flaw, Aylmer attempts to erase her humanity. His pursuit of perfection eliminates the very essence of being human.

Postman's critique of technological hubris resurfaces here: when science becomes an end in itself, it ceases to serve human flourishing and instead destroys it (Postman 83). Aylmer's failure thus reinforces Jonas's moral imperative that scientific power must always be tempered by ethical self-restraint.

4.5 Summary

Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Birthmark* offers a profound moral critique of scientific ambition and the human desire for perfection. Through Aylmer's transformation from visionary scientist to moral obsessive, Hawthorne exposes the destructive consequences of divorcing science from ethics.

By drawing on theoretical perspectives from Jonas, Nussbaum, Habermas, Postman, and Carson, this analysis demonstrates that Aylmer's tragedy is both personal and philosophical. His ambition to transcend human limitation mirrors Victor Frankenstein's drive to create life, but where Victor seeks to create, Aylmer seeks to perfect. Both, however, fall victim to the same ethical blindness.

In the end, Georgiana's death stands as a haunting reminder that moral responsibility must guide scientific endeavor. Hawthorne's tale, like Shelley's, remains an enduring warning that ambition, when unchecked by humility and conscience, leads not to enlightenment but to loss and destruction.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, FINDINGS, AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary of Findings

The principal aim of this study was to examine the effects of obsession with science as represented in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Birthmark* (1843), using Moral Criticism as the theoretical frame. The research objectives were to

1. identify how scientific ambition produces moral conflict.
2. show how ambition can become moral obsession.
3. determine which ethical boundaries the protagonists violate.
4. evaluate how each text dramatizes consequences for readers' moral judgment. Each objective has been met through close textual reading and critical engagement with ethical theory.

The central finding is that both Shelley and Hawthorne represent scientific ambition as morally ambivalent: it can aim at human betterment but easily becomes destructive when divorced from responsibility. Victor Frankenstein's drive to "unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation" (Shelley 45) and Aylmer's compulsion to erase Georgiana's birthmark both begin with ostensibly positive motives but devolve into obsessions that dehumanize others and destroy the protagonists themselves. The pattern common to both texts is that ethical collapse accompanies increasing intellectual pride; as the protagonists' technical power grows, their moral imagination and empathy shrink (Jonas 23; Postman 56).

Stylistically and rhetorically, the novels deploy different narrative strategies to instruct readers morally. Shelley uses expansive landscapes and an epistolary frame to universalize Victor's failure and to show the social consequences of scientific hubris across families and nations. Hawthorne, by contrast, compresses the moral lesson into an intimate domestic tragedy; the laboratory's invasion of the marital home makes Aylmer's ethical failure appear more immediate and personal. Both approaches culminate in the same didactic effect: they invite readers to condemn discovery pursued "without responsibility" (Jonas 23).

5.2 Contribution to Knowledge

This study contributes to scholarship in three principal ways. First, it foregrounds Moral Criticism as a productive critical method for reading nineteenth-century scientific fiction,

complementing psychoanalytic, feminist, and historicist readings by emphasizing ethical evaluation and moral instruction (Plato; Aristotle). Second, the comparative method reveals a conceptual continuity: *Frankenstein* and *The Birthmark* form a thematic continuum in which creating (Shelley) and perfecting (Hawthorne) are two faces of the same ethical problem science pursued beyond moral limits produces similar tragic outcomes. Third, by integrating philosophical sources (Jonas; Nussbaum; Habermas; Postman), the research demonstrates how literary narratives anticipate and model contemporary debates over biotechnology, AI, and irreversible technological harms. In these ways, the project extends interdisciplinary conversation between literary studies and ethical theory.

5.3 Recommendations and Implications of Study

The findings have implications for literary pedagogy, scholarship, and public discourse about science and ethics. For academics and teachers, I recommend incorporating moral and ethical frameworks into literature curricula that address scientific texts this will help students to analyze not only form and theme but also normative consequences and moral reasoning. For scholars, the comparative ethical approach used here can be fruitfully applied to other texts that stage scientific ambition (for instance, H. G. Wells or modern cinematic narratives such as Ex Machina).

For scientists, policymakers, and the public, the moral of these narratives is clear: technological capability must be matched by ethical foresight and institutional

responsibility (Jonas). Ethics education and accountable governance structures are necessary to prevent the kinds of harms Shelley and Hawthorne dramatize. Finally, for creative writers, these stories model how fiction can function as an early warning system fictive cases that sharpen moral imagination and public debate.

5.4 Suggestions for Further Research

Two promising directions could extend this work. First, a focused gendered ethical analysis would deepen understanding of how male scientific ego and control over women's bodies function in these texts linking the symbolic deaths of Elizabeth and Georgiana to broader patriarchal practices and bioethical questions (Gilbert and Gubar). Second, comparative work across media literature, film, and television would clarify how moral warnings about science are reimagined in contemporary culture; for example, comparing *Frankenstein* to recent filmic treatments of AI and genetic engineering could reveal continuities and shifts in moral emphasis. Limitations of this project include its restricted primary corpus (two texts) and its concentration on canonical Western texts; future studies might incorporate non-Western or postcolonial perspectives on scientific ambition.

5.5 Conclusion

By tracing how ambition becomes moral obsession in *Frankenstein* and *The Birthmark*, this study reiterates a persistent ethical lesson: scientific power demands moral responsibility. Shelley and Hawthorne, writing in different contexts, converge on the

same didactic warning unbridled desire to master life or eliminate limitation results not in perfection but in destruction. As contemporary society faces accelerating technological change, these nineteenth-century cautionary tales remain urgently relevant: the exercise of human ingenuity must always be governed by humility, empathy, and ethical foresight.

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