

Conference Abstract

On Responsibility and Response-ability in Contemporary Literature on Science

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In the 2011 London production of Nick Dear's play *Frankenstein* the two actors playing the Creature and the allegedly mad scientist exchanged their roles every other night, thus emphasising how tightly bound the Creator is to his Creature, how close subject and object are and how inescapably dependent on each other they are regarding the affirmation of their respective subjectivities. When considering Victor Frankenstein to be mad, it is vital to remember that, with madness, we also associate a limited culpability, a limited responsibility, response-ability. By allowing Frankenstein to step away into madness, we free him from an ethical responsibility for his actions, because we assume he is not capable of basing his decisions on ethical principles. The focus of this paper is the question of ethics in the context of responsibility and choice, the acknowledgement and denial of humanity, the recognition of the object of scientific inquiry, and how literature interrogates these matters. Drawing from texts such as Dear's play, Simon Mawer's novel *Mendel's Dwarf* (1997) and Emily Ballou's *Darwin Poems* (2009), as well as from Kelly Oliver's theory of an ethics based on witnessing, I will show how contemporary literature explores the possibility of giving voice to and hearing the object of scientific enquiry and how questions of ethical responsibility towards society and humanity are addressed.