

## POSTHUMAN PREDILECTIONS AND PROTEAN VISIONS IN STEPHEN KING'S *BILLY SUMMERS* AND *LATER*

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**Abstract:** *This paper analyzes Stephen King's Later (2021a) and Billy Summers (2021b) in the context of posthumanism and protean identity to reveal the incorporation of controversies about human nature, ethical norms, and AI in modern literature. Employing textual analysis, it scrutinizes the protagonists' moral complexities and evolving identities, highlighting their posthuman tendencies. In Billy Summers, the protagonist's shifting identity, molded by environmental demands and personal ethics, reflects the adaptability found in AI discourses. Later explores Jamie Conklin's protean abilities, blurring the boundaries between life, death, and the supernatural, offering new perspectives on identity and ethics. This research elucidates the evolving nature of humanity in the context of technological and existential challenges.*

**Keywords:** *adaptive identities, AI centrism, existential framework, posthumanism, protean identity*

### 1. Introduction

Stephen King is an internationally acclaimed author, famous for his horror and suspense novels, and he still delves deeper into the themes in modern works such as *Later* (2021a) and *Billy Summers* (2021b). Despite the considerable differences in the plots of these novels, they both bear possession of serious philosophical concerns of the present epoch with regard to posthumanism and protean self. In *Later*, the main character Jamie Conklin is a young boy who can see the dead and speak with them and is drawn into the world of crime and spirits, and personal ethical questions. Reflecting on his unique power, Jamie observes, "Dead doesn't mean gone. That's the trouble with the dead, they're like phones that never stop ringing; you want to ignore them, but you can't" (King 2021a: 12). In this ability, the life and death questions and concerns become the focus in which Jamie feels exposed to the experience. Similarly, *Billy Summers* tells the experiences of a soon-to-be retired contract killer facing moral dilemmas regarding his profession's changes, as he completes his last job. Billy perceives himself as a "good bad man", struggles with the moral implications of his past and future actions (King 2021b: 45). Both novels center around posthumanism, and respond to the aspects that question human nature by framing human experiences in ecological and technological frameworks. As Mark

Browning's (2009: 74) analysis further illuminates, King's work often "subverts the conventional boundaries of humanity, forcing readers to reconsider the limitations and possibilities of the human condition".

Our study seeks to fill a gap in existing scholarship by exploring the intersection of posthumanism and protean identity in *Later* and *Billy Summers*. While much of the academic discourse on King's work has traditionally centered on themes of horror and American cultural anxieties, there has been relatively little exploration of how these themes intersect with contemporary discussions on human nature and ethics within a posthuman framework. Through a close textual analysis, this study investigates the language, themes, and character development in both the novels, focusing on how the protagonists navigate ethical dilemmas and redefine the human experience. In *Later*, the analysis centers on Jamie Conklin's unique abilities and how they influence his identity, creating a tension between the human and the supernatural. Billy Summers is different again: whereas the protagonist bootlegger Stillman is an embodiment of evil and virtue depending on the context. In this way, using a comparative analysis, this research paper aims to reveal the common narrative and theme in the two novels as to contribute to the discussion on posthumanism and new dynamics of identity in postmodern fiction. Finally, this paper presents new avenues of reading for further understanding the notion of the human being as depicted by King through his characters in the twenty-first century.

### 1.1. Overview of *Later* and *Billy Summers*

In *Later*, Jamie Conklin emerges as a young character whose supernatural power enables him to observe and communicate with dead entities. His mother first protects him from understanding the consequences of his supernatural gift, before outside entities, including law officials and criminal interests, discover his powers. Through his dead encounters, Jamie faces the total breakdown of his reality base, which leads him to travel within a deathless reality. Through the plot development, Jamie finds himself in perilous situations which pressure him to face the burden of his power. The novel shows Jamie's path through moral ambiguity, because he faces choices that make it difficult for him to distinguish self-determination from societal obligations.

The novel *Billy Summers* showcases the chronicles of a contract killing professional, who plans his future after retiring. Billy operates distinct from traditional assassins, because he develops multiple roles to keep himself unidentifiable. The reveal of betrayal in his last job forces him to reevaluate everything about his career as an assassin. Through Billy's narrative, King examines the relationship between deception techniques and personal development and ethical conduct in dangerous situations. Billy's mastery of self-transformation has led to persona shifts, which create ethical and psychological consequences for his identity, while questioning his authentic nature.

Although their main themes differ in supernatural elements and criminal schemes, the novels unite through their analysis of human flexibility under extreme

situations. King uses Jamie and Billy to create characters whose identities change under duress, therefore questioning the standard beliefs about the personal sense of self, as well as human choice and the extent of personal evolution.

## 1.2. Theoretical and conceptual framework

Exploring the situations of the characters in *Later* and *Billy Summers* requires an understanding of posthumanism and protean identity theories. Analyzing these novels requires posthumanist analysis because it challenges traditional humanist perspectives. Cary Wolfe (2010: 47) asserts that “Posthumanism forces us to rethink what we mean by ‘human’ and to consider the broader ecological and technological contexts in which we exist”. The idea directly explains how to understand the character Jamie Conklin from *Later*. Jamie exists outside usual states because his ability to talk to dead people places him between life and death. King captures this tension in the line: “We all exist in the space between the real and the unreal, a place where the boundaries of what is possible and impossible are constantly being tested” (King 2021a: 14). Throughout the novel this character demonstrates his ability to traverse human and posthuman domains, while advancing the narrative’s exploration of posthuman theory. The central character in *Billy Summers* portrays a person with protean identity through his flexible and changeable nature as a hitman, whose moral code keeps shifting. Billy himself acknowledges this transformation, stating, “I am who I need to be, not who I was. My past is a tool, not a burden” (King 2021b: 78). The protean self describes this personality trait because an individual adapts their identity in response to different situations. In Rosi Braidotti’s (2018: 92) perspective that “the posthuman condition urges us to acknowledge the fluid and transformative nature of our subjectivities”, the author solidifies this thought by discussing both ethical and existential aspects that arise during the process of self-reinvention. A. J. Palko further expands on this idea, noting that

“King’s protagonists often find themselves in existential crises that force them to confront the fluidity of their identities and the impermanence of their moral compasses. These crises are not merely personal but are reflective of larger societal shifts, where traditional notions of good and evil, right and wrong, are no longer sufficient to navigate the complexities of modern life.” (Palko 2009: 89)

King’s portrayal of Billy shows that identity exists as an ongoing process of transformation. The main characters in the analysed novels struggle between humanist principles and emerging technology and supernatural elements, which are posthuman experiences that challenge their self-identity and moral values during a time of dramatic change. Andrews (2007) explores changes in culture which demand constant adjustments to prove the ever-changing nature of the self. In addition to posthumanism and identity fluidity, the role of artificial intelligence (AI) and technological intervention must be considered in these narratives. Posthumanist discussions often examine the tension between human autonomy and technological determinism, raising essential questions about moral responsibility. In *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle (2011) explores the effects of AI on human relationships

and self-conception. She showcases the moral challenges technology creates, as it continues to dominate day-to-day activities. Through Billy Summers, the reader sees how Billy utilizes intelligence gathering, together with digital surveillance and deception techniques, which demonstrate the effective precision of AI-driven systems. Through third person limited narration, King captures Billy's meticulous approach: King (2021b: 52) describes his meticulous planning: "Weeks, sometimes months, of research went into a job". This level of calculated precision parallels the notion of continuous self-optimization in an age of algorithmic intelligence. As Zygmunt Bauman (2000: 12) argues in *Liquid Modernity*, contemporary identity is marked by "constant self-renewal, self-reinvention, and self-transformation", a principle that underscores both Billy's adaptability and Jamie's evolving self-awareness.

Scholarly investigations of posthumanism and protean identity together with AI in literature show minimal interest in studying King's later works, while devoting more attention to his earlier works, centring around horror fiction. Few critics have studied how King handles the evolution of identity through human-machine integration and conceptual changes in his *Later* and *Billy Summers* novels. This research fills this gap by investigating how these novels improve discourse about identity together with ethical matters as well as technological effects in posthuman realms.

### 1.3. The structure of the paper

Our paper adopts a structured analysis to study *Later* and *Billy Summers*; it makes use of posthumanist theory alongside protean identity examination and technological-cum-ethical evaluation. The discussion begins by exploring Jamie Conklin and Billy Summers as posthuman figures, emphasizing how their experiences challenge conventional understandings of selfhood. The natural boundaries Jamie defies with his abilities push Billy into an endless cycle of adapting his identities alongside dealing with morally ambiguous situations. The subsequent analysis discusses the ethical challenges pertaining to existential issues that emerge from these posthuman states, through Jamie's responsibility battle with his supernatural ability and Billy's ethical considerations in his line of work. The following analysis examines Billy's development process, as Jamie experiences a suspended state of life and death. External forces shape their identities, until they are confronted with identity changes because of self-evolution. The paper examines artificial intelligence by connecting Billy's operational tactics with modern AI-based decision systems during his planning process and deception operations. It analyses how surveillance and data-based control procedures erode human freedom and explores his works against the recent debates on technology and self-organization. King presents Jamie and Billy in the concluding segment as characters whose identity shapes through both supernatural forces and technological elements. Our research establishes the relevance of *Later* and *Billy Summers* to current discussions about morality, along with adaptability and human transformation, through a posthumanist lens. Further the research establishes how posthumanism is akin to protean identity and AI ethics, before presenting an expansive understanding of selfhood change in King's works.

## 2. Posthumanism and protean identity

*Later* and *Billy Summers* explore the intersection of posthumanism and protean identity through their protagonists, whose extraordinary abilities and shifting moral perspectives challenge traditional understandings of selfhood. Breaking the posthuman elements with the help of technology, parapsychology, and improved human abilities the paper deconstructs the posthumanism of conventional human nature. The supernatural power in *Later* turns the normal course upside down, and poses the dilemmas of death and post- mortality, consent, and rights to a soul's peace to Jamie thus: "I didn't want to use my ability to help her do something bad. Still, did I have an option? Could I just ignore what I saw, knowing it could stop something terrible? But where does it end? How do I draw the line?" (King 2021a: 143). This dilemma demonstrates how *posthumanist* undermines the standard ethical paradigms, since they entail scenarios where boundaries of ethical normativity are vague.

As Lunceford (2012: 15) observes, "Posthumanism opens up new ways of thinking about identity and ethics by questioning the very boundaries that define humanity. In a posthuman world, the lines between human and non-human, natural and artificial, become increasingly fluid". This aspect is best seen in Jamie's case and having to question his humanness with the existence of such abilities. Similarly, in *Billy Summers*, the protagonist is rooted in a posthuman milieu conceptualized with the help of skills and morality. Billy is experienced in his profession, which combined with his self-observational ability, alienates him from everyday human life. His last assignment, which he takes with the purpose of it being his last one acts as the trigger for his awakening on the existential and moral plane. Throughout the novel, Billy questions the value of life and the justifications for taking it, pondering: "Does killing people have to be my job just because I'm good at it? Is that all there is to me? I want to believe I can be more than the sum of my worst deeds. But what if that's all I am?" (King 2021b: 215) This introspection aligns with posthumanist concepts, which challenge the boundaries of human morality and emphasize the potential for transcendence through personal growth. Rodríguez (2014: 629) argues that "In navigating traumatic experiences and moral ambiguities, characters are forced to confront their fractured identities, often leading to a reevaluation of their ethical frameworks".

King (2021b: 38) portrays Billy as a man capable of assuming various personas, each tailored to the demands of his profession: "He could wear a hundred faces, each one more convincing than the last. But behind every mask was the same man, wrestling with the same questions. Could he ever be more than what he pretended to be? Was there any part of him that was real?" This flexibility is not without its consequences, resulting in an existential kind of frustration: "Part of him, a big and important part, longed for a life where he wasn't constantly looking over his shoulder, waiting for the next job, the next kill. He wanted something real, something that wouldn't slip away when the mask came off" (idem: 112). This reflection shows the difficulty of defining a protagonist and his/her subjectivity as the result of protean living, especially when it comes to finding consistency in such a fluid context

concerning an identity. Lunceford (2012: 20) observes that “The posthuman condition is characterized by a constant tension between fluidity and stability, as individuals navigate a world where identity is increasingly fragmented and contingent”. Billy is also very consistent in his character fluctuations as how he goes about accomplishing tasks. Thus, one can consider his detailed research of targets as a way to maintain control in a highly unethical occupation. Billy’s progression towards adopting a more ethical way of thinking is discernibly observable, especially when it comes to his behaviour concerning “Buffalo Bill” in Harris’s *The Silence of the Lambs*.

### 3. Posthuman context and moral implications

The ethical dilemmas faced by the characters possessing powers or traits beyond typical human standards situate these narratives in the posthuman realms, where distinctions between the human and the non-human, natural and artificial, become increasingly blurred. For similar reasons, Jamie Conklin finds himself in a complicated and rather eerie middle-ground between the realm of the living and the realm of the dead. Jamie reflects:

“He was not dead yet, but he was not exactly alive either. Someone caught him in the middle. He existed in that narrow space between life and death, where the rules of the living didn’t quite apply, and the whispers of the dead were the loudest sounds. It was as if he was a shadow, neither here nor there, moving in a world that no one else could see or touch.” (King 2021a: 14)

This quote reiterates the fact Jamie finds himself in a middle ground between the living and the dead, whereas the book presents readers with new forms of dying that do not fit in with the human experiences. This aligns with Katherine Hayles’s (1999: 2) concept of the “posthuman,” where “the distinction between human and machine is no longer self-evident”. Jamie relives the shades’ world and is thus placed in a state where boundaries of the human world are challenged. The ethical aspect of employing power is very significant when it comes to Jamie’s case. This gift makes him face unresolved issues of the dead, thereby creating a moral dilemma that is continuous. In a conversation with his mother, Jamie reveals: “They never left. Not really. In my mind, the dead piled up like a graveyard in chaos” (King 2021a: 11). This illustrates that the decision for a way of living with the undead is put on Jamie’s shoulders; he has to be the one to determine it.

Jamie’s spiritual and emotional growth is most evident through how he sees life and death. To some extent, he becomes compassionate to death in that he starts identifying the ghosts as people with their own stories and unresolved issues. King captures this shift with: “He was not just seeing dead people anymore” (idem: 128). This change is important when it comes to the growth of Jamie’s moral compass as he deals with the dead and comes to embrace more complexities in life.

The versatility and systematic approach to one’s work as a hitman is the best illustration of how AI affects human individuality. Billy, patterned after the nature of his work, was able to become somebody else each time he needed, which is like learning and updating like the new artificial intelligence systems of the world



today. King (2021b: 52) portrays Billy's preparation for assignments with: "Weeks, sometimes months, of research went into a job". His logical and strategic approach to each task mirrors that of a chess player, meticulously analyzing every move and adjusting his tactics to meet specific objectives-much like the programmed logic and adaptability of AI systems. Billy's ability to reinvent himself for each job is a form of self-preservation in a morally ambiguous profession. In this respect, King's portrayal of semiotic uncertainties between man and the machine, life and death in both novels contributes to the current literary discourses on posthumanism and AI centrism. Thus, King makes the readers think about the evolving nature of life in the twenty-first century.

#### **4. The chameleon assassin and the ethical quandaries of the supernatural**

Billy represents a complex character who embodies various persona, changing them in accordance with the requirements of his activity as a hired killer. King (2021b: 42) depicts Billy as a fluid character in the novel through the use of the following lines: "He was a cipher, a ghost who could inhabit any life for a brief, deadly performance". Such representation draws attention to Billy's self-uncertainty; however, he is good at playing different parts. His skills are not limited to his career, but they also reflect his need for normalcy inside of him. This internal conflict is poignantly expressed when he reflects that "He ached for a life where the world was not in a constant state of hypervigilance, a life where looking over his shoulder was not a reflex" (idem: 87). This craving for a normal life evidently proves that he is a man, who is even, to some extent, torn between his corporate self and the simpleton who wants a life without upsetting encounters. Initially, Billy is reluctant to interact with the target, because the latter is too young to show the ethical values of the hero. This internal struggle exemplifies the muddiness of the ethical dilemma that Billy possesses and the constant battle between his personal code of ethics and situations expected from him for different tasks.

Being an intercessor, Jamie Conklin becomes a figure that operates between life and death. King (2021a: 37) vividly describes Jamie's experiences with the supernatural, emphasizing the disruption of natural order: "The silence of the house was shattered by a chorus of voices, a spectral murmur that sent chills down his spine. The dead weren't supposed to talk, were they?". Through the above words, the author emphasizes the spooky aspect of the story as far as the conversations between Jamie and the dead are concerned, since their voices disrupt the contemporary perception of life and death. The supernatural powers that endow Jamie compel him to solve the most unexceptional ethical questions. His power to see and communicate with the dead creates a burden of responsibility, encapsulated in his reflection: "There are times when I simply wish I could block it all out... However, what about the rest of the population? Individuals who require my assistance?" (King 2021a: 42). The internal struggle that systematically embodies Jamie is the conflict between his selfishness and a desire to help the dead cross over. His caring is just another source of ethical dilemma about the legitimacy of his role and relevance of having such capacities. Moreover, Jamie's encounters with the dead provoke existential angst about his own

place in the world. King's (2021a: 8) description of the spectral presence of the dead captures the unsettling nature of Jamie's interactions: "The dead shuffled around him like a ghostly parade, their faces etched with an otherworldly hunger. Were they lost, or waiting for something?" The symbolic vagueness of the dead carries certain existential motifs, on which the nature of the afterlife, the reality of its characters are questioned as well as Jamie's role as a witness of the presence of the specters. This sense of death reflects the change Jamie's powers brought about regarding his ideas of the world, life, and self.

## 5. The technological and ethical dimensions

King explores technology, ethics, and self in order to provide human stories of choice in contrast with mere machinery. Billy's use of advanced surveillance tools and the black web show how technology is slowly and gradually seeping into the lives of people. This dependency is vividly illustrated when King (2021b: 48) describes Billy's meticulous planning: "He had devoted the previous two weeks to meticulously examining the architecture of the apartment building...acquiring blueprints from the unauthorized corners of the internet via a cryptic international network". This proves the traits of the modern AI systems, which are adaptive and improving with time, just like human beings. As Guga (2015: 45) notes, "The reinvention of the human in the Information Age necessitates a reconsideration of identity as increasingly intertwined with technology". Billy's decision-making process and predictable patterns of actions and behaviours are often reminiscent of programmed robots and artificial intelligence throughout the novel, thus posing questions regarding the intersection of human life and AI in the twenty-first century. Conversely, in *Later*, Jamie Conklin struggles with the ethics that can be derived by using his powers, which enable him to communicate with the dead people. In contrast with the technological issues with which Billy struggles, Jamie mostly encounters ethical challenges. His interactions with spirits force him to confront the ethical implications of his powers, especially when tempted to use his abilities for personal gain or altruistic purposes. King (2021a: 92) registers Jamie's internal struggle with the moral dimension of his talents: "There was a moral dilemma associated with accepting payment for this task. It diminished its value in some way, giving it the impression of being a mere spectacle at a carnival". This ethical introspection contrasts sharply with Billy's moral quandaries as a hitman, who must navigate a complex landscape of professional duty and personal beliefs. Billy's reflections on whether to complete his final mission or defy his employers to save innocent lives illustrate the complexity of his moral identity emphatically: "I'm not saying it's right... but it's what I do. It's what I've always done" (King 2021b: 112).

King's creation of Billy as a central character with mechanical movements, yet driven by an internal struggle with his conscience, allows it for a contrast between the mechanical dependency and the humane compass. Even though Billy's behaviour can be described as being driven by an almost mechanical-like efficiency, there exists an undeniable and complex humanity in his dilemmas. Another facet



of his personality is revealed in his interactions with Alice, a young woman that he helps; this demonstrates his ability to care, as well as the ability to protect. These are the aspects that AI systems have not been able to mimic. As Sollora-Romero et al. (2020: 159) argue, “The menacing digitalization of subjectivity complicates our understanding of identity, as characters navigate the tension between their human emotions and machine-like roles”. This dynamic nature indicates the ever-active human traits like compassion, remorse, and ethical self-consciousness, which cannot be simulated by machines. Interestingly, King’s novels explore how technology and the supernatural abilities influence human identity, morality, and agency. Billy’s technological adeptness and Jamie’s ethical dilemmas reflect broader themes of posthumanism, where the boundaries between human and machine, or human and supernatural, are increasingly blurred. Through these characters, King explores the idea of what it is to be a person in the modern, technologically focused world, to be human when technology and morality intermingle in ways that are rather disquieting. As Azcárate (2017: 23) suggests, “The fusion of ghosts and machines in modern narratives complicates our understanding of humanity, forcing a reevaluation of the self in relation to technology”. The blurring of the spectral and the mechanical in King’s works thus speaks to the shifting definition of humanity in the contemporary milieu.

## 6. Redefining human experience: protean abilities in *Later* and *Billy Summers*

Jamie Conklin is in the middle ground between the living and the dead, which makes the two states more relative than comparable. King (2021a: 11) vividly captures Jamie’s experience with haunting imagery: “The dead built up in my head like a disorganized cemetery”. This image shows that the dead people have not left Jamie’s mind; rather they force him to come face-to-face with the spirits. Unlike the other mediators, or even mediums, Jamie assimilates the preoccupation of the dead — altering his perception of human life. This resonates with N. Katherine Hayles’ (1999) posthumanism where the posthuman is not a sign of the complete annihilation of human beings, but their evolution. Many of these conflicts involve interactions with the dead, something which takes them beyond the human realm mentally and physically, causing Jamie to question his own identity and sanity. The “deadscape” in *Later* - a “shifting landscape” filled with “the echoes of a million lives” (King 2021a: 152) - symbolizes the ongoing presence of the deceased, suggesting that death is more of a transition than a terminal end.

On the other hand, *Billy Summers* presents another aspect of posthuman subjectivity in the one-man-technology tool that is Billy Summers. As a hitman, Billy is a quintessential shapeshifter, who creates and assumes several personalities, pertinent to a given task at hand. His usage of technology in the form of surveillance, shielded communication, and thorough research over the internet portrays Hayden’s version of posthumanism, in which human beings become hybrids of both biological and technological elements. But this flexibility does take its toll, and what one sees in Billy is not only the cracks in his professionalism, but also the conflict in his ethical reasoning. Meese et al. (2015) argue that digital media affordances contribute to the

evolution of identity, blurring the lines between life and death, which is mirrored in Billy's complex relationship with technology. The characters in the novels reflect broader themes of posthumanism and the complexities of identity in a technologically advanced world. King's portrayal invites reflection on the philosophical implications of these evolving identities, particularly in the context of AI and digital media's influence on human experience (Palko 2009).

## 7. Conclusion

In this paper, Stephen King's novels *Later* and *Billy Summers* are analyzed with the help of posthumanism, protean identity, and an AI-focused approach, which supports the conclusion that the author looks at the development of the human being in a world enriched with technology. In *Later*, Jamie Conklin, an apparently superhuman young man who has an ability to speak to the dead, turns into a posthuman character, who exists beyond the human experience of existence and non-existence. His unique ability shows that there are no clear lines between the phases of human life and the afterlife, and that there is always a place in existence for a human being. Similarly, Billy Summers' dependence on technological means and his use of various personas in *Billy Summers* explore the sphere of human and AI interactions. His exactness and his ability to improvise demonstrate that a future society in which technology becomes intertwined with human life is possible, thus posing the question of what it means to be the best self with the coexistence of AI. Both characters embody the posthuman potential for transformation, as theorized by scholars like N. Katherine Hayles (1999) and Donna Haraway (1991). Jamie's experiences with the dead and Billy's use of technology challenge the stability of human identity, highlighting the fluid and dynamic nature of selfhood in a posthuman era. At the same time, the narratives of both novels also focus on the subjective effects of such transformations and seem to imply that superhuman capabilities are not without their consequences. King's works therefore serve as a rich commentary on the moral questions and metaphysical questions that arise from the coming together of people, technology, and the supernatural. Through constructing intricate and paradoxical narratives and plot lines about Jamie and Billy, King enters the protracted conversation about the future of humanity's identity; and challenges us to think about how humanity would exist in the context of the current technological progression.

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