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**A POSTHUMANIST READING OF STEPHEN KING'S *FIRESTARTER*:
SURVEILLANCE, EXPERIMENTS AND THE ETHICS OF ALTERITY**

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Introduction

When people first encountered Stephen King's 1980 novel, they might have expected a dynamic science fiction thriller. Instead, they found a work that raised profound questions about government control, military exploitation of individuals, and whether humans should be subjected to any enhancements. Engagement with these themes makes *Firestarter* particularly relevant to contemporary posthumanist thought, which questions the very nature of being a human and asks if, in the times of technological advancements and biological intervention, the current definition of human is still applicable. In light of these concerns, this article's primary aim is to explore *Firestarter* from a posthumanist perspective based fundamentally on the approaches of N. Katherine Hayles and Cary Wolfe.

Although *Firestarter* appears to be a fast-paced science fiction novel about a young girl with pyrokinetic abilities, its deeper significance demonstrates when interpreted through the lens of posthumanist theory. Drawing on N. Katherine Hayles's argument that the posthuman view tends to value information and patterns over the physical body itself, or, as she puts it, "privileges informational pattern over material instantiation" (Hayles 199: 2), the novel reveals anxieties about reducing human identity to data and control systems.

Similarly, Cary Wolfe's critique of Enlightenment humanism helps illuminate how King's depiction of governmental experiments exposes the marginalisation of those who deviate from normative definitions of the human. In this way, *Firestarter* not only dramatises biopolitical practices that instrumentalise human subjects, reducing them to data or tools, but also confronts the reader with the need to redefine what the human really is.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that the science fiction genre employed here by King provides a favourable space for examining issues related to posthumanism. As indicated by Sherryl Vint in *Bodies of Tomorrow* (2007), science fiction "is particularly suited to exploring the question of the posthuman because it is a discourse that allows us to concretely imagine bodies and selves otherwise, a discourse defined by its ability to estrange our commonplace perceptions of reality" (2007: 19). This is because science fiction does not reflect the world through the author's mere depiction but through their speculative reworking. It is the author's responsibility to present the world, its ethical intricacies, and the laws governing it to the readers. The author introduces characters who operate according to rules different from those in the real world, allowing readers to explore alternative subjectivities, as well as the relationship between the body and technology or identity.

Moreover, Vint insists that science fiction should function as "a space in which models of possible future selves are put forward as possible sites for identification" (2007: 20). In this context, *Firestarter* can be seen not as a story illustrating posthumanist thought but as a text that enacts it or brings it to life by encouraging readers to empathise with the main character, Charlie, a child whose body was altered even before her birth due to technologically-engineered mutations of her parents, and who was later subjected to further violations by a governmental system of control. At the same time, Vint underlines that technology is "neither emancipatory nor repressive in and of itself and can be used to signify new forms of exclusion as well as new spaces of freedom" (2007: 21). Consequently, the moral and ethical implications of

technological involvement are shaped by the social context of the imagined reality.

According to Vint, technological changes are inevitable, but they do not have to be associated with the end of the human era. It is therefore imperative that we develop an ethically responsible model of embodied posthuman subjectivity which enlarges rather than decreases the range of bodies and subjects that matter (2007: 190), and that is precisely what King tries to achieve with *Firestarter*. By connecting it with governmental control and oppression, the novel illustrates how technological intervention diminishes personhood, yet simultaneously advocates for a more inclusive approach to who or what constitutes a human.

Hayles and Disembodied Posthuman

According to Hayles, the defining feature of humans is not the physical form or body but the unique informational patterns each human being carries. In *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), she argues that “the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life” (2). In her framework, a person’s identity is composed of patterns of thought, behaviour and memories rather than their bond with the biological form. This notion could be clearly illustrated by the concept of teleportation, according to which the human body may be scanned, converted into pure data, sent somewhere else and reconstructed exactly as it was, indicating that what truly matters is not the material body but the encoded information. In that sense, Hayles suggests that the body becomes “the original prosthesis we all learn to manipulate, so that extending or replacing the body with other prostheses becomes a continuation of a process that began before we were born” (3). This reconfiguration of embodiment challenges conventional humanist ideas of identity, posing a fundamental question regarding the boundaries of the human.

Posthumanism contests the traditional definition of the human as one unified identity, centring its focus on individuality and autonomy of the subject. It also emphasises the profound impact of technological advancements and informational networks on human identity, noting that the understanding of what counts as a human is currently being reshaped. Moreover, the definition of a human is not fixed but, rather, fluid and unstable, as the boundaries between human and machine become blurred. Hayles further states that “[t]he posthuman view configures human being so that it can be seamlessly articulated with intelligent machines” (3). In this context, the human mind can be integrated into a broader network of information and computation. Since human identity is primarily defined as informational patterns, a computer operating complex software may not be fundamentally different from it. In Hayles’s view, the human subject is no longer perceived as a purely biological, autonomous subject but rather as a complex system made of technological and informational components. She explains that “[t]he posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components” and should be treated as a “material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction” (3). According to posthumanist thought, the human is a hybrid or assemblage of parts with fluid boundaries rather than a unified flesh-and-blood individual.

In contrast to Hayles, who highlights the posthuman shift from material embodiment to informational pattern, Sherryl Vint urges that any posthuman discussion should remain focused on the body. As she explains, “my concern is less with tracing how the history of cybernetics leads to a disembodied view of the subject... and more with attempting to think through how we might develop another concept of the posthuman that is attentive to embodiment” (218). Her standpoint is also relevant in the context of *Firestarter*, as the physical body of the main character, Charlie, serves as a site of posthuman changes and is being prepared to be used as a military asset beyond Charlie’s control. In the novel,

posthuman reality does not present itself as an abstract idea but as a tangible, embodied experience for the protagonist.

At the core of *Firestarter* lies the need to redefine the boundaries used to frame the human subject, exemplified by the novel's protagonist, Charlie McGee, whose identity is perceived as a data system measured in terms of utility rather than subjectivity. Charlie's situation results from external factors she had no control over. She "is purely a victim of circumstance and greed by ruthless adults" (Wiater et al. : 267). While at college, her parents, Andy McGee and Vicky Tomlinson, had voluntarily participated in a governmental experiment involving a drug called Lot Six, which caused them to develop mild psychic abilities. Although their powers are weak, their daughter is born with a terrifying gift: pyrokinesis, the ability to start fires with her mind, making her an unintended and possibly dangerous outcome of the experiment. The agency responsible for the experiments (the Shop) identifies Charlie as both a threat and a potential military asset. Their desire to investigate the girl's abilities leads to a pursuit of her and her father (with the girl's mother, Vicky, being killed in the process). Eventually captured, Charlie and Andy are taken to a secret facility where scientists aim to study and weaponise the little girl, while simultaneously keeping her father sedated to suppress his abilities. The Shop's approach in treating Charlie and Andy clearly shows that in their eyes, the girl and her father are not people with their own subjectivities, fears and emotions, but objects that can be used.

Firestarter is "about a father and daughter on the run, alone and vulnerable, while all around them a powerful government machine works to find them" (Brown 92). Since rescuing Charlie from the hands of the Shop's agents for the first time, Andy and his daughter have been constantly hunted. Amid their escape, they find themselves defenceless and vulnerable, unable to face the upcoming danger. Their oppressors are influential and relentless; they possess vast resources, including governmental authority, which can make the life of the McGees significantly harder and their escape unlikely.

From the very beginning, the Shop's goals and objectives regarding Charlie and her father are clear and straightforward. As described, the Shop is "a top-secret government agency doing whatever it takes—including parascientific research—to create fantastic new weapons for America's arsenal" (Wiater et al.: 267). They want to militarise the girl's psychic abilities for strategic advancements, identifying her not as a person but as a possible prototype of future biotechnological warfare. Their need to dehumanise Charlie stems from the deep-rooted fear of the unknown. The scientists are deeply concerned about the potential consequences of Charlie's abilities which are far beyond typical and still an uncharted territory; accordingly, "[t]hose still working for the Shop remain deeply concerned that a girl with Charlie's power might one day, as she matures, gain the awesome power to split the world itself in two with merely a concentrated thought" (Wiater et al.: 267). For the Shop, this hypothetical vision in which Charlie might one day lose control of her powers and cause widespread destruction is enough to justify the drastic measures undertaken to capture her and later ruthlessly experiment with her pyrokinesis. In their actions, they reduce Charlie and Andy from actual humans with their thoughts and feelings to possible weapons of destruction, viewing them through the lens of their abilities.

Since the Shop operates as a top-secret government agency devoted to weaponising human abilities, Charlie's body becomes for them a site of experimental curiosity and technological exploitation. This attitude aligns with the posthuman tendency to understand the human in terms of data, function and utility. In the novel, it is exemplified by the repeated measurements of her pyrokinetic output (recorded in degrees Fahrenheit) and by the assumption that once sufficient data is collected, Charlie will be eliminated and replaced with other subjects. Although Charlie appears to be physically ordinary, her body is reduced to the role of a mere instrument generating heat and fire, and precisely that reduction denies her recognition as a human. She is not seen as a frightened, grieving and confused little girl but as a system to be optimised. The

Shop aims to analyse and control the pyrokinetic pattern within Charlie, using her as a prototype whose abilities can be replicated, viewing her less as a person and more as a material, military asset to be used. Indeed, Charlie is both dehumanised and technologised, treated not as a subject but as an object of experimentation and control.

The Shop's approach to Charlie and Andy exemplifies the shift in the treatment of humans seen not as individuals but as an informational systems that can be interpreted, controlled and used in the service of institutional power. From the beginning, Andy is deeply concerned with the Shop's willingness to conduct further experiments on him and his daughter. He quickly realises that the men from the Shop were the ones "who wanted to pick them apart and see what made them work—and to see if they could be used, made to do things" (King 28). This cold and analytical approach of the Shop's scientists reflects what Hayles described as a defining feature of the posthuman condition. Her concept of the "material-informational entity" accurately describes the logic according to which Andy and Charlie are regarded as carriers of strategic potential rather than as individuals with moral worth or personal agency.

Firestarter serves as a powerful counterpoint to the posthumanist idea of reducing individuals to data-producing systems. Charlie goes through various tests, but at the same time, she manages to gain a deeper understanding of her abilities. She rejects the idea of her powers being a destructive military asset and rather accepts them as a meaningful part of her identity, not a resource but a personal capacity. This shift is evident in a moment of internal reflection: "Why shouldn't I want to do it? If people are good at things, they always want to do them" (King 1980: 296). Here, Charlie indicates a point of injustice at being denied the right to express natural and integral parts of her selfhood. In doing so, she takes agency and reclaims a form of embodiment which was stolen from her by the Shop. Charlie does not want to be framed as an instrument; she wants to establish a more complex definition for her humanity, grounded in

feeling, choice and autonomy. As Wiater, Golden, and Wagner observe: “Charlie is tempered by it [her power], like steel in the forge. She emerges only more powerful—and wiser—after the tragedy of her tale” (267). Through her transformation, the novel reaffirms the importance of subjectivity and resistance to the system that seeks to instrumentalise the self.

Other scholars, K. T. Tamilmani and V. S. Sridheepika, argue that “Charlie’s arduous struggle to harness and control her formidable powers emerges as a poignant allegory, shedding light on the complex psychological consequences of transcending the confines of conventional human capabilities” (313). Their perspective supplements Vint’s argument, which underlines the fact that a truly ethical posthumanist approach must remain attentive to the body. Charlie’s initial fear of her own abilities and potential illustrates the price she had to pay for her parents’ involvement with a governmental experimental programme. Her body is portrayed as both a frightening source of danger and a locus of her agency, which she must accept and learn to live with (King 296: 465).

The dynamic and the need for experimentation and exploitation exemplify features that Hayles described as characteristics of the posthuman subject. As previously mentioned, Hayles sees the human condition as no longer grounded in the notion of a coherent, autonomous self but rather in patterns of information. In *Firestarter*, this logic is present in the actions of the Shop, which deploys advanced surveillance and unethical methods to study Charlie and her potential with a methodological and dehumanising approach. As a consequence, Charlie’s identity becomes increasingly fragmented and unstable. The Shop sees her as a subject to observe, a weapon to control, an anomaly to contain with “scientist at both their best and worst, blue-skying a hundred new ideas on one hand and worrying tiresomely—and considerably after the fact—about how to control on the other hand” (King 350). Those categories, of threat and weapon, are imposed on Charlie by the systems of biotechnological governance and technological discourse. Her value is not measured in terms of who she is, but by what she can do and what can be achieved if the Shop gains

control over her power, and that is a possible reactivation of the Lot Six programme (King 137).

Cary Wolfe's Critique of Liberal Humanism's Approach

Charlie struggles not only with the surveillance imposed by the Shop, but also with the system that devalues subjectivity in favour of utility. The way in which she is treated illustrates how, in the posthuman world, identity is no longer grounded in physical presence or inner life. The narrative of *Firestarter* leaves the reader with an urgent demand to redefine and reconsider what it means to be human. After all, Charlie, as a character, evokes sympathy and compassion rather than fear and concern in the reader. Along with the need to redefine what the human is comes Cary Wolfe's posthumanist critique, which offers a framework for exploring the philosophical foundations of Enlightenment humanism and its persistent effect on contemporary ethics and understanding of what counts as human. While Hayles focuses on the transformation of the human into an informational entity, Wolfe examines the foundation of what qualifies as human in the first place. For him, the exclusion is not merely a side effect of humanist thought but a problem deeply grounded in its foundation. He blames liberal humanism for employing a very narrow set of criteria, favouring exclusion, marginalisation, and denying anyone who does not fit into its model the right to be considered human (136–137).

As mentioned before, Wolfe's main argument is the claim that liberal humanism constructed its model of the human based on a highly specific set of features, which in turn led to the exclusion of anyone who, to some extent, does not fit. By setting such a rigid standard for inclusion, the humanist model has had far-reaching consequences for people with disabilities, racialised groups, and women, marking them peripheral to ethical reflection. As he states, even well-intentioned humanist promises "reproduce the very kind of normative subjectivity—a specific concept of the human—that grounds discrimination against nonhuman animals and the disabled in the first place" (Wolfe xvii).

To illustrate this notion, Wolfe describes the humanist model as a conceptual house, building broadly called the human. The doors to that house are open for the ideal or model individual (able-bodied, mentally stable, economically independent white male) while also allowing entry, through reforms or exceptions, to the rest, like people with disabilities, racialised individuals, or nonhuman animals. At first glance, this model may seem to acknowledge or validate other forms of existence; however, its underlying principles remain unchanged. Wolfe stresses that disability and nonhuman interests are treated “as merely the next room added onto the (increasingly opulent and globalising) house of what Richard Rorty has called ‘the rich North Atlantic bourgeois democracies’” (Wolfe 137). As he explains, liberal humanism allows small surface-level reforms while, at the same time, preventing more profound changes to the foundation.

Given the reluctance to change present in liberal humanism, Wolfe’s posthumanism calls for a radical approach; instead of adding more rooms to the house, he proposes a complete redefinition of the human. By challenging the very foundation of the humanist framework, Wolfe’s posthumanism opens the possibility for a system that is more inclusive, able to adapt and respond to the needs of contemporary existence, like, for example, in Stephen King’s *Firestarter*. The novel provides a powerful image of institutional response to abilities falling outside the normative categories, while, at the same time, urging for a much broader understanding of the human. As soon as Charlie’s pyrokinetic abilities begin to manifest, she ceases to be seen as a child but, rather, is perceived as a potential threat or weapon. She is repeatedly referred to as a monster or a witch by both the Shop’s scientists and ordinary people (King 133: 468). Those labels do not stem from her actions but from what she is, as she is different from what liberal humanists used to perceive as normal. Her pyrokinetic abilities mark her as fundamentally different, not only in degree but also in kind, resulting in positioning her outside the criteria established by liberal humanism.

Wolfe writes that “posthumanism means not the triumphal surpassing or unmasking of something but an increase in the vigilance, responsibility, and humility that accompany living in a world so newly, and differently, inhabited” (47). In his view, human exceptionalism should not be idealised but approached with awareness and accountability regarding humans’ position in the world. Although the character of Charlie McGee in the novel is presented as surpassing human limitations and ordinary abilities, Wolfe’s posthumanist perspective helps to reveal that her transcendence should not be seen as superior but as coexisting with other life forms. The government’s treatment of Charlie’s abilities, viewing them as a resource to be exploited, is the exact opposite of Wolfe’s approach. Instead of considering her as a part of a “newly and differently inhabited” world, the state desires to weaponise her difference.

The novel vividly depicts people’s failure to face the real posthuman difference. Charlie, although looking and behaving like a normal little girl, is approached with apprehension and distance because of her extraordinary abilities. She evokes fear even in people who were sent to capture her and who later experiment with her powers, because even though the Shop’s agents are all properly trained men who understand the dangers of their job, a close encounter with Charlie and her destructive powers frightens them. Faced with a manifestation of power beyond their understanding, they instinctively seek escape: “The three men he [Al Steinowitz, the best agent in the Shop’s employ] had sent running down toward Andy and Charlie from the front end of the porch had forgotten their duty to God, country, and the Shop” (King 130). Their abandonment of their commitments only amplifies their failure to acknowledge what is different. The novel exposes the fact that the deep-rooted impulse to fear and reject difference is not limited to institutional structures. As mentioned before, the Shop’s scientists and agents are not the only ones who approach Charlie with fear and distrust.

Marginalisation and worry, caused by an encounter with the unknown, accompany the girl in most of the human-to-human interactions. Charlie's stay

at the Shop ends in conflagration, killing many people and animals and destroying the whole facility. On her way out, Charlie encounters a panicked woman with a broken arm who responds with apprehension and aggression. As Ingrid E. Castro notes, the woman “accuses Charlie of being a witch, advising that Charlie should kill herself” (108: see also King 468). This moment highlights how, despite her young age, Charlie is perceived not as a child in distress but as a monstrous figure, an embodiment of anomalous power. The accusation of witchcraft reflects a long-standing cultural pattern: the tendency to demonise those who exceed or defy normative expectations, especially when their difference cannot be rationally explained. The woman’s reaction, urging Charlie to take her own life, reveals how ordinary individuals can become agents of exclusion and violence when confronted with the unfamiliar. Her response underscores the extent to which fear of otherness can override empathy, even when the supposed threat is a vulnerable and mistreated girl.

These reactions, coming from frightened, ordinary people, demonstrate that the fear of difference is not limited to powerful institutions concerned with collective well-being, but is also deeply embedded in societal attitudes. In addition to the previous interaction with the woman at the Shop’s headquarters, mention may also be made of the reaction of Norma Manders, who, despite initially caring for the girl, after witnessing her powers, perhaps guided by self-preservation instinct, refers to Charlie as a monster and orders her father to “[t]ake [his] monster and get away” (King 133). However, Andy McGee, a loving and understanding father, rejects this logic of fear and dehumanisation. Despite confronting the horror his daughter’s powers evoke, he refuses to see her as a threat and instead proposes a more empathetic approach, calling her his Zippo lighter (King 24). He defends his daughter by saying that “She’s no more a monster than a kid in an iron lung or in a home for retarded [sic] children” (King 135). While the language is outdated, this passage shows Andy’s attempt to reframe Charlie’s difference in humanising terms. Like children with disabilities, his daughter should not be defined by her difference,

but, instead, approached with compassion and understanding. In making this analogy, Andy challenges the cultural narrative equating what is abnormal with what is monstrous, offering a vision of humanity that includes vulnerability and difference.

The social and political aspects of *Firestarter* also resonate with what Tamilmani and Sridheepika (2024) describe as “the potential perils associated with unchecked transhuman capabilities and the resultant societal paranoia they may incite” (2024: 313). Charlie and her father are relentlessly pursued by the Shop; the girl is repeatedly being called a threat, a monster or a witch. These attitudes reflect the exclusionary logic of liberal humanism as presented by Wolfe. In the eyes of most characters in the novel, Charlie cannot be accepted within society; moreover, if her difference cannot be understood, it has to be feared and controlled. She is seen as a weapon whose potential can only be obtained by imposing authority and manipulation, denying her the right to be treated as a regular human.

Conclusion

Although at first *Firestarter* may seem like an entertaining novel with a fast-moving and interesting plot, on closer analysis, it reveals an engagement with posthumanist ideas. Following Hayles’s critique, the novel shows us a different approach to people treated as informational systems, while their physical bodies recede into the background. At the same time, it engages with Cary Wolfe’s redefinition of the human in a “newly, and differently inhabited” world through its engagement with societal treatment of Charlie and her father. In the world of *Firestarter*, difference, exemplified by Charlie and, to some extent, by her father, is feared and approached with distance and the need to analyse it, not to understand, but to learn to manipulate it and use it for systemic purposes.

The novel demands that the readers deeply rethink and expand their definition of the human to make it more inclusive. It challenges people to

reconsider their perspectives and what it means to be human in a world shaped by technological and ethical complexities. Although contemporary approaches such as disability studies, feminist theory, and animal studies have begun to challenge traditional notions of humanity by focusing on what has been neglected, the most profound transformation must still occur within human perception itself.

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Abstract

This article applies a posthumanist framework to Stephen King's *Firestarter* (1980), focusing on the systems of surveillance, the ethics of experimentation on humans and the cultural dehumanisation of what is considered unknown. Charlie McGee, a child born with pyrokinetic abilities, resulting from a government experiment conducted on both of her parents, embodies concerns central to posthumanist theory as outlined by N. Katherine Hayles and Cary Wolfe. Hayles argues that posthumanism "privileges informational pattern over material instantiation" and redefines the human as "an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components" embedded in systemic networks. Her ideas fit Charlie, whose identity is deeply shaped by such a network, one of surveillance, experimentation, and exploitation. Meanwhile, Cary Wolfe's critique of liberal humanism reveals how traditional definitions of the human exclude those who differ from normative standards. As he writes, posthumanism "forces us to rethink our

taken-for-granted modes of human experience, including the normal perceptual modes and affective states of *Homo sapiens* itself." Charlie is labelled a "monster" or "witch," revealing the cultural forces behind her exclusion. As she gains agency over her powers, she emerges as a figure of posthuman resistance, reclaiming autonomy from the system that sought to control her.