*AI In Literature*, Volume 1, Issue 7

A review of: ‘*How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics’* by N. Katherine Hayles (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1999)

Book Review

Arianna Parris

Nottingham Trent University

English (BA) Hons

N1079102@my.ntu.ac.uk

Postmodern literary critic, N. Katherine Hayles, delves into the world of technology and its relationship with humans in her book, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*. Throughout the book, contemplative questions regarding the ethical factors of society as a whole, due to the increase in technology use, arise, making Hayles’ text one that will always offer a complex but significant perspective, whilst subtly provoking thought into her readers through her unique concepts, but just how relevant can a book written in 1999 be in today’s advanced world of technology?

Hayles begins her array of ideas by introducing cybernetics, and the way in which this has led to the beginning of the growing relationship between humans and technology, as well as the blending of both. Despite being published in 1999, the book continues to remain relevant in the world of technology, as she manages to combine ideas of philosophy, science and literature, in order to explore a potential posthuman future and its effects on society. Hayles focuses on the relationship between technology and identity, zooming in on the way in which technology impares, manipulates and modifies our sense of self. Both her structure and style of writing allow the reader to self-reflect, and the book constantly portrays futuristic ideas through its pioneering thoughts on the blurring between humans and AI, making this text one that successfully stands out from its counterparts. With the introduction of wifi and bluetooth occurring in 1997 and 1999, the critic’s complex ideas most definitely reflect its time of publication, and the book builds on its contextual surge in technological advancements of the 90s and 2000s whilst looking towards the future of AI from a careful viewpoint, similarly to authors she mentions such as Mary Shelley who indirectly warns readers of the progression of science and technology through a dramatic narrative following an artificial intelligence.

The book continues to provoke thought as Hayles demonstrates the way in which the progression of technology becomes apparent in the world of literature. Her referrals to the 1818 gothic novel, Frankenstein, perfectly capture the early signs of technology appearing in literature, through the book’s themes of unrestricted science and transgressed boundaries, and Hayles continues to make direct links between novels and society, addressing the way in which literature is able to mould the perspectives of readers. The critic continues to use Mary Shelleys, *Frankenstein*, and William Gibson’s, *Neuromancer* (books that reflect societal outlooks on technology advancement), to indicate the changes in social and cultural beliefs due to portrayals seen in literature, further emphasising its influence.

Despite introducing numerous, complex ideas, Hayles manages to convey her points in a way that is easily understood, making the book accessible to people with varying educational backgrounds. Being a critical book surrounding a niche subject, one may assume that the books target audience would be rather minute, however the critic effectively widens her crowd through the engaging central topic of a posthuman society, which presents itself as a debate of a world beyond humans, but unravels to be a detailed and enthralling investigation into the what it means to be human and the way in which humanity and technology are no longer separate, but are now becoming intertwined.

Hayles continues to expand the multiple thoughts conveyed in her book by addressing the ethical factors as the power and influence of technology over cultural values and beliefs continues to grow. She successfully sparks rumination about a potential future where AI has a lot more involvement and power over decision making, our sense of individuality, and how this will impact society as a whole through her extensive research.

Overall, *‘How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*’ by N. Katherine Hayles proves itself to be a very informative book with an insightful analysis on the current world of AI and its future. The book introduces a large amount of broad topics, delving quite deeply into the complex relationship between society, literature and technology: three contrasting elements that Hayles illustrates a variety of unconventional similarities between. Her portrayal of the impending blend between AI and humanity, as well as her links to existing novels and representations of technology that might’ve been overlooked by readers, definitely make her ideas far different from the rest.

Bibliography:

Hayeles, N. Katherine, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics,* (Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press, 1999)