



Fear, Will, and Heroic Mastery in Stephen King's *Later*

*Ms. Adrin Sanchia Jason D.¹, Dr. N. Ananthavalli²

¹ PhD, Scholar (Full-Time) in English, Government Arts College, Tiruchirappalli-22 (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli-24).

² Research Supervisor and Associate Professor, PG & Research Department of English, Government Arts College, Tiruchirappalli-22 (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli-24).

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.19625093

Submission Date: 22 Feb. 2026 | Published Date: 17 April 2026

*Corresponding author: **Ms. Adrin Sanchia Jason D.**

PhD, Scholar (Full-Time) in English, Government Arts College, Tiruchirappalli-22 (Affiliated to Bharathidasan University, Tiruchirappalli-24).

Abstract

Heroism acquires meaning through trial. A hero enters danger, endures fear, and proves inner strength in conflict with a hostile force. Stephen King's Later offers such a pattern through Jamie Conklin, a boy with the rare ability to see and question the dead. His gift first serves practical ends, yet it soon draws him into terror when he encounters the ghost of the serial bomber Kenneth Therriault and the sinister supernatural force called Darklight. This paper studies Jamie's struggle with Darklight as a severe test of courage, will, and moral steadiness. Darklight enters the novel as an alien force of dread, one that disturbs Jamie's mind, weakens his peace, and presses him toward crisis. Jamie's growth as a hero reaches its height in the Ritual of Chüd, where he faces evil directly and compels it to submit to his will. His later command over Darklight in the episode with Elizabeth Dutton confirms the depth of that victory. The novel thus presents heroism as an achievement of endurance, self-command, and moral authority. Through Jamie Conklin, King gives fresh force to the ancient conflict between good and evil and locates that conflict within the mind, conscience, and courage of a child.

Keywords: Stephen King, Later, Jamie Conklin, Darklight, heroism, good and evil, Ritual of Chüd, mastery.

1. Introduction

Literature has long given a place of honour to the hero. Across myth, epic, romance, and modern fiction, the hero bears a special burden. He enters danger, meets trial, and proves worth through action under pressure. Heroism therefore belongs to ordeal. Fear, pain, uncertainty, and danger furnish the field in which courage becomes visible. The hero's worth rests in stamina, moral firmness, and the power to act with clarity in a time of crisis. Joseph Campbell describes the hero as one who moves beyond private limits and reaches a source of renewal larger than the self. That formulation offers a useful point of entry into Stephen King's *Later*. The novel grants no epic battlefield, royal quest, or public ceremony of triumph. King places heroism in the life of a child and gives it a supernatural dimension. Jamie Conklin, the protagonist, lives with an uncanny gift: he can see the dead and draw truthful answers from them before their final departure. This power grants access to knowledge, yet it also opens a path toward terror. Through Jamie, King turns the familiar story of good and evil into a psychological and spiritual struggle. Jamie's first use of this power seems manageable. He helps his mother, Tia Conklin, a literary agent, complete the final book of the dead writer Regis Thomas. He later assists Liz Dutton, a police officer, in the search for the last bomb planted by Kenneth Therriault. This second encounter changes the direction of the novel. Therriault's ghost remains near Jamie instead of departing. The abnormal persistence of that ghost reveals the presence of a darker force within him. King gives that force a singular name: Darklight. The term "Darklight" carries immediate weight. Its oxymoronic structure joins two contrary conditions and gives verbal form to a force that exceeds ordinary categories. Darklight carries both luminosity and darkness, sight and blindness, revelation and terror. Jamie confronts a force that belongs to no familiar order of ghostliness. Through this invention, King produces a supernatural evil that lives in the realm of dread, confusion, and psychic assault.

This paper argues that Jamie Conklin proves his heroism through his conflict with Darklight. The novel presents heroism as moral endurance, self-command, and victory in a battle of wills. Jamie begins as a vulnerable child burdened by an extraordinary gift, yet the conflict with Darklight draws from him courage, discipline, and authority. The Ritual of Chüd marks the decisive moment in that transformation. It gives Jamie the means to face evil at close quarters and to compel its submission. His later command over Darklight in the confrontation with Elizabeth Dutton extends that victory and confirms his heroic stature. *Later* thus offers a strong modern version of the contest between good and evil and locates that contest in the interior life of a young protagonist.

2. Discussion

Stephen King gives Jamie Conklin an unusual place in the world of the novel. Jamie bears a gift that separates him from others and gives him access to the dead. This gift grants knowledge and usefulness, yet it also imposes solitude. His life moves between ordinary childhood routines and encounters that belong to another order of existence. King uses this doubleness to create a hero whose trial begins in vulnerability. Jamie's youth, emotional exposure, and limited power intensify the force of his later growth. Jamie's conversations with the dead establish the terms of his gift early in the novel. The dead answer his questions truthfully, and that power allows him to serve others. His help with the manuscript of Regis Thomas offers one example. His encounter with Kenneth Therriault offers another. After Therriault's suicide, Liz Dutton pressures Jamie into questioning the dead bomber about the location of his final explosive device. Jamie secures the answer, the police recover the bomb, and lives are saved. This moment could have stood as a brief episode of supernatural intervention. King chooses a darker course. Therriault's ghost continues to appear before Jamie. The normal pattern of departure gives way to recurrence, and recurrence gives way to dread. The repeated return of Therriault alters Jamie's world. Fear enters his daily routine. The ghost appears across the street, in the elevator, and at school. Terror thus leaves the isolated space of a ghost story and enters familiar urban life. King uses this movement to thicken the emotional pressure upon Jamie. Home, school, and street lose their security. Jamie begins to live under the pressure of expectation, uncertainty, and inward strain. His rest grows thin. His studies suffer. His athletic life weakens. The force within Therriault claims a place in Jamie's consciousness and presses upon his peace from every side.

King's description of Darklight gives this force its distinct horror. Jamie sees within Therriault something far worse than a dead body or an ordinary spirit: "I began to think I could see into Therriault. Maybe it was a hallucination brought on by the vibration and the sense that the world was on the verge of exploding like a delicate wine glass, but I don't think so. It wasn't his guts I was looking at but a light. It was bright and dark at the same time. It was something from outside the world. It was horrible" (King 158). This passage supplies the essence of Darklight. King joins brightness and darkness in a single force and gives Jamie an experience that strains language itself. Darklight carries horror because it exceeds common categories of perception. The eye sees it, yet the mind resists its meaning. The force enters the novel as a presence from outside the human order. Such a conception recalls H. P. Lovecraft's claim that fear draws great power from the unknown. In *Later*, the unknown takes form and presses itself upon a child's mind. The symbolic force of Darklight reaches further. The very word suggests inner disturbance. The source of terror stands before Jamie, yet it also settles within his consciousness as pressure, uncertainty, and dread. In this sense, Darklight operates as both supernatural entity and psychic burden. King thus keeps the conflict in two registers at once. Jamie faces an external evil, and he also faces the inward pressure that evil produces in the mind. This dual force gives the novel much of its power.

Jamie's trial gains further depth through his isolation. He has little room for easy explanation. His mother struggles with financial and emotional strain, and Jamie carries a desire to protect her from further burden. The problem before him belongs to a realm that ordinary social life cannot easily absorb. This solitude matters for the paper's argument. Heroism often grows in an exposed condition where public support gives way to private endurance. Jamie's courage acquires weight because he bears the strain in large measure within himself. Professor Martin Burkett enters at this point as a figure of wisdom and guidance. He offers Jamie an interpretive framework for his experience and directs him toward a mode of action. Burkett sees in Therriault more than ordinary ghostly persistence. He identifies the possibility of infestation by a darker force. This insight shifts the conflict from haunting to possession. Jamie now faces a malignant entity that uses the dead as its vessel. Burkett also introduces Jamie to the Ritual of Chüd, a spiritual and mental discipline that becomes the novel's decisive means of confrontation. In broad cultural and religious traditions, human thought often returns to the clash between opposing forces: good and evil, virtue and vice, order and chaos. Some traditions sustain a clear moral polarity; others seek a state beyond dual division. King's novel belongs to the first pattern in emotional structure, yet it also grants the conflict a deeper psychological texture. Jamie's battle with Darklight unfolds as a contest between good and evil, but the field of combat lies within consciousness, fear, and will. Burkett's explanation of the Ritual of Chüd clarifies the stakes of that conflict: "Once this union has been accomplished, you and the demon have a battle of wills. This would occur telepathically, I assume, since it would be hard to talk while engaged in a...mmm...mutual tongue bite. The first to withdraw loses all power over the winner" (King 147).

This statement gives the confrontation its central logic. The issue concerns power, authority, and submission. Victory grants mastery. Withdrawal grants defeat. Jamie's heroic stature therefore depends upon firmness under intense psychic

pressure. Physical strength alone holds little value here. A battle of wills requires endurance, concentration, and the courage to remain present in the face of terror.

King prepares this moment with care. Jamie has already lived under the pressure of hauntings. Darklight has invaded his sleep, his daily routine, and his emotional life. He has known fear in recurring form. The Ritual of Chüd brings all of that diffuse terror into a single confrontation. The scattered pressure of previous scenes gathers into an event of direct combat. The hero and the malevolent force stand before each other in a concentrated form of trial. Jamie's victory begins with a sudden and vital shift in disposition. On the day of the confrontation, he sees Therriault in the hallway and moves toward him. This action carries great importance. Fear often seeks distance. Jamie closes that distance. He seizes the moment and enters the struggle on active terms. In that movement, he crosses from troubled victim to combatant. King grants the hero a decisive act of will before the ritual reaches its highest intensity. A further revelation follows: Darklight fears Jamie. This reversal changes the moral geometry of the novel. Up to this point, Jamie has carried the position of prey. With this discovery, evil itself acquires vulnerability. That recognition deepens Jamie's courage. He holds Therriault fast, presses the struggle, and refuses release. He seeks complete submission rather than temporary relief. Burkett's instruction has already prepared him for this demand. Evil yields only under firm mastery.

The verbal exchange during this scene confirms the shift in power:
 "Yes. You're not like the others. You see."

"Yes what?"

"Yes I'm afraid of you!"

Sweet!

I let him go. 'Get out of here, whatever you are, and go to wherever you go. Just remember if I call you, you come'"
 (King 161).

This scene stands at the heart of Jamie's heroic development. He compels fear from the source of fear. He extracts submission from the force that has pressed upon his life with dread and disorder. In formal terms, King stages a battle between good and evil. In psychological terms, he stages the victory of courage over terror. Jamie's command carries moral significance because it arises from self-mastery. He neither collapses before Darklight nor surrenders himself to it. He secures authority and sends the force away under his own terms.

This victory gives the novel one of its strongest dimensions. Horror fiction often places the human subject under the power of the monstrous. *Later* allows a reversal. Jamie gains mastery over the evil that sought mastery over him. Such a structure lifts the novel beyond simple fear and moves it toward a study of heroic discipline. Jamie's triumph rests in courage under pressure and in moral steadiness at the moment of highest danger.

Those large-scale conflicts present the clash of opposing forces in apocalyptic form. *Later* offers a smaller stage, yet the inner structure remains similar. A young boy faces a force of evil that seeks dominion. The struggle produces a crisis in which endurance, courage, and mastery determine the outcome. King condenses the epic pattern into the scale of personal experience. This compression gives the novel intensity.

Professor Burkett later warns Jamie against another summons of Darklight. The warning has value because it preserves the dangerous dignity of the force. Jamie's victory does not empty Darklight of threat. It secures authority over that threat. This distinction matters. Heroism in *Later* does not produce a world free from danger. It produces a protagonist strong enough to confront danger with command.

The later conflict with Elizabeth Dutton develops this point with greater clarity. Dutton, once a figure of institutional order, descends into corruption and violence. She kidnaps Jamie and forces him into another ordeal. Here King places human evil beside supernatural evil. Dutton's greed, desperation, and brutality give the novel a second axis of moral conflict. Jamie thus faces a world in which danger comes from both human vice and supernatural force.

When Dutton shoots Jamie during his attempt to escape, he reaches toward the dark force he had once subdued. He calls upon Therriault for help. Darklight returns with terrifying force and destroys Dutton. The scene gives Jamie a fresh trial. He has gained command over Darklight, yet the return of such a force carries renewed peril. King therefore gives the protagonist another chance to prove mastery under crisis. That second proof soon arrives. Darklight, radiant within Therriault, seeks another confrontation and raises the possibility of renewed struggle. Jamie reads the danger with full clarity. He points toward the door and commands the force to leave. Darklight obeys. This second obedience confirms the depth of Jamie's earlier victory. His mastery endures across time and survives a renewed test. Heroism here acquires consistency. Jamie's courage belongs to character rather than accident.

This episode also enriches the moral design of the novel. Jamie uses Darklight against Dutton, yet he preserves his moral authority because he retains command. He acts as master of the force rather than servant to it. The distinction proves crucial. A hero may enter dark territory and yet preserve integrity through self-command and ethical clarity. Jamie thus emerges as a figure whose strength lies in judgment as much as in courage. King's treatment of Jamie also revises the

idea of heroic masculinity. Jamie has youth, fear, uncertainty, and emotional exposure. These traits give the novel force because they place heroism in a figure far removed from the traditional warrior. King grants great value to inward steadiness. Jamie rises through endurance, conscience, and will. His courage acquires depth because it grows within a child who has every reason to feel terror and every reason to seek escape. Such a design gives *Later* a distinct moral intensity. The hero of this novel therefore stands as more than a survivor of supernatural events. Jamie emerges as a figure who disciplines fear, confronts evil, and claims moral authority over it. Darklight serves as the force that draws forth that authority. Through repeated trial, King turns Jamie's psychic gift into the ground of heroic formation. The conflict with Darklight becomes the means by which the protagonist comes into his own strength.

3. Conclusion

Stephen King's *Later* presents heroism as a quality proved through ordeal. Jamie Conklin begins as a child burdened by a strange gift, yet the pressure of that gift leads him into a profound conflict with evil. Through Kenneth Therriault and the force called Darklight, King gives Jamie an antagonist of great psychological and supernatural force. Darklight disturbs his peace, enters his daily life, and presses him toward fear and crisis. Out of this pressure, Jamie develops courage, self-command, and moral authority. The Ritual of Chüd stands as the decisive point in this transformation. In that confrontation, Jamie faces evil at close range and secures mastery through endurance and force of will. His victory over Darklight alters the structure of power in the novel. Fear gives way to command. Submission gives way to authority. Jamie's later use of Darklight in the episode with Elizabeth Dutton extends this achievement and confirms the permanence of his hard-won strength. The novel gives fresh life to the conflict between good and evil. King locates that conflict within the life of a child and grants it a form at once supernatural, psychological, and moral. Jamie's heroism rests in courage under pressure, discipline of mind, and the power to act with moral clarity in the presence of terror. Through him, *Later* affirms that heroism belongs to endurance, self-mastery, and command over the darkness that seeks dominion over human life.

References

- Campbell, J. (2021). *The hero with a thousand faces*. Yogi Impressions LLP.
- Chöd. (2020, February 27). In *New World Encyclopedia*.
- Eigengrau is the dark gray colour that most people see in the absence of light. (n.d.). *STSTW*.
- Harding, S. (2003). Preface. In *Machik's complete explanation: Clarifying the meaning of Chöd*. Snow Lion Publications.
- Henley, W. E. (n.d.). *Invictus*. Poetry Foundation.
- Ingram, P. O., & Streng, F. J. (1986). *Buddhist-Christian dialogue: Mutual renewal and transformation* (pp. 148–149). University of Hawai'i Press.
- King, S. (2021). *Later*. Hard Case Crime.
- Lotha, G. (n.d.). Sunyata. In *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.
- Ratcliffe, S. (Ed.). (2022). *Oxford essential quotations* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.

CITATION

Adrin, S. J. D., & Ananthavalli, N. (2026). Fear, Will, and Heroic Mastery in Stephen King's *Later*. In *Global Journal of Research in Education & Literature* (Vol. 6, Number 2, pp. 75–78). <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19625093>