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Masculinity and gender expression in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*

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Abstract

The main focus of this project is the examination of the representation of the masculine gender in Chuck Palahniuk's 1996 novel *Fight Club*. Throughout this analysis I aim to explore the novel's depiction of the state of masculinity at the turn of the 20th century, from the origin and cause of the perceived "crisis of masculinity" experienced by the narrator of the book, to the social and material remedies that emerged as a direct result of this critical situation, concluding with an exploration of the consequences of the main character's retaliation against the larger cultural context.

The first section of this paper is devoted to providing historical context for the fluid nature of the definition of masculinity, as well as the discontent it can generate in men. The western idea of maleness has always been susceptible to change, fluctuating according to a myriad of other social, historical and economic factors. In the late 20th century, one such shift had taken place. In *Fight Club*, the essence of manhood, which is variable, as mentioned, but also unattainable, is proven to be frustrating and harmful for men. As the most perfect ideal of masculinity is placed always in the past, it is impossible for men to ever achieve a totally satisfactory form of gender expression, which results in a constant fear of social rejection and general unease. Thus, men's psychological state and position in society become, consciously or subconsciously, linked to their performance of masculinity.

Following this initial segment, I analyze the consequences of men's detrimental relationship to their own gender, as depicted in the novel. Once the narrator's despondency reaches a boiling point, his first instinct is to lash out against femininity. Perceived as the complete opposite of masculinity, it is selected by the narrator as the leading cause of male dissatisfaction. The conclusion he reaches is that society, and therefore the men raised by that same society, have become over-feminized. He then seeks to return to a previous idolized

version of maleness. The narrator aims to abandon post-industrial consumerist masculinity for post-war masculinity. In doing so, he creates a schizoid alternate personality, Tyler Durden, to represent this seemingly more meaningful version of masculinity. Tyler, then, creates fight club, as a space devoid of any femininity, where men can forge bonds and reclaim aspects of masculinity now disdained by mainstream society, mainly, the enactment of violence.

The third and final section deals with the escalation and consequences of the narrator's pursuit of post-war masculinity. Unconsciously, he ends up recreating and perpetuating the same systems that had led to his initial ennui. He realizes too late into the novel that he cannot find a remedy for his troubles in another version of manhood, as dominant standards of male gender expressions are unsatisfying by design. Instead, I posit that the novel offers gender hybridity as a solution to the oppressive principles of the gender binary.

In conclusion, *Fight Club*'s author recognizes the dysfunctional state of masculinity and the pain it can inflict on men. At the same time, he condemns acts of violence as ultimately useless in providing an alternative to a significant gender expression. As mentioned above, the novel seems to shine a positive light on individuals who embody both feminine and masculine qualities, existing outside the confines of traditional gender norms. Rather than a return to the past and more rigid separation between the genders, the path forward would be an evolution, an incorporation of the best qualities of both masculinity and femininity.

1. The crisis of masculinity

In 2020, author and journalist Candace Owens tweeted: "There is no society that can survive without strong men. The East knows this. In the west, the steady feminization of our men at the same time that Marxism is being taught to our children is not a coincidence. It is an outright attack. Bring back manly men".

According to this statement, something about the previous generation's notion of masculinity is being lost. Men used to be more masculine, and men have forgotten how to be men and men before were more masculine than men now. These and other similar sentiments plague particular corners of the internet, eliciting uncountable think pieces, video essays and podcast episodes. This is what they have taken from you, this is what they want to take from you. And the way some of these indignant defenders of masculinity speak, one could think that this is a recent issue. But the truth is that this is all old news. Masculinity has been dying for a long time, or else has existed in a constant state of dying throughout all of human history. This is part of its design, an intrinsic aspect ingrained in the concept's very core.

In 1984 a woman wrote to an advice column in the *Arizona Daily Sun*: "I'm an older woman, and I believe in equal rights and all that, but, Langdon, don't you think all this women's lib stuff has contributed to the "wimping" of American men? Am I just imagining it, or is today's man less manly than those I grew up with?". Fifty years earlier, in 1934, *The Brownsville Herald* reported in the article "Mothers honored at Lions Program": "Just as in Rome before it fell, women are becoming more masculine and men more feminine, said Rev. Flynn V. Long in a talk to the Lions club at the Madison Hotel this week when they honored their mothers. He said women imitating men have caused men to become less chivalrous and declared that too much feminine influence early in life was having its effect on men."

Even during the XIXth century similar concerns about the blurring of the line between male and female could be found in local newspapers throughout the USA. One such case from 1886, printed in *The York Dispatcher* read: “ARE THE SEXES CHANGING PLACES? / Men Becoming Feminine in Their Bearing & Women Grow More Dashing. / It is rather amusing to note just now that the fashionable world displays a tendency decidedly the reverse of that which obtained a few years ago. Once it was proper for men to cultivate a martial bearing. They held their heads in the air, took manly strides, held their shoulders back & were brisk & talkative. [...] All this is very bad form now. Men should droop a little, carry themselves carelessly & bend their head a trifle forward if the 500 specimens on view at the horse show are to be taken as examples.” All these complaints about the state of masculinity harken back to a previous time period where things were, theoretically, as they should be. They evoke the fantasy of a past masculine order that was perfect, manifesting a nostalgic desire for it. But this masculinity is every bit as elusive as it is illusory. This particular way of conceiving masculinity hinges on the fact that it is never achievable, only ever aspirational. This is so because the ideal is always set in the past.

Eventually, at the turn of the twentieth century, masculinity found itself changing in obedience to the emergence of a new economic model, post-industrial capitalism, as well as the rise of other significant societal changes that reorganized culture at large, such as the incorporation of women into the workforce. The concept of the masculine ideal shifted alongside the broader zeitgeist. As society and culture evolved, men suddenly found themselves with a new definition of masculinity to grapple with. This confrontation is at the crux of Chuck Palahniuk’s 1996 novel, *Fight Club*. In its pages, the unnamed narrator is forced to reckon with the rise of a post-industrial masculinity, forged in the wake of late-stage capitalist consumer culture (Skinner, 2011). The struggle that the main character of *Fight Club* undergoes is born of this period of social transition he finds himself living through. Gender expectations are

shifting, with society redefining what characteristics are desirable for men to embody. The narrator of the novel is aware of this and finds himself a victim of the treachery of nostalgia. Dissatisfied with the redefinition of masculinity taking place, he instead looks back to the past. He turns towards an untainted, but ultimately unattainable version of maleness.

Like many others before him, and many others after him, the narrator of Palahniuk's novel searches the past for an archetype of manliness that he feels his present society cannot provide. This truer, more substantial form of masculinity is a perfect illusion, paradoxically also created by society, a testimony to the fluid definition of gender. Through various means, with media having an essential role, society forges different ideals of masculinity for every moment in history, but always placing the most impeccable and perfect version in the past, forever gone, forever out of reach. Men are never as manly as the men of the previous era, and so, exactly after their moment has passed, and only then, can men be considered to have been the most flawless embodiment of masculinity.

Gender roles are used as a means to exercise social control, to maintain a specific *status quo*. Failure to conform to these standards results in negative consequences on a social level. Thus, fear and shame become the tools employed to keep men in line, as failure to conform to the predetermined standard of masculinity would result in rejection by the collective. Furthermore, by placing the ideal, perfect form of masculinity perpetually in the past and making it effectively unreachable, men are never freed from the threat of repudiation. They can never fully embody the paradigm of manhood, so they can never become secure, as far as their self-image is concerned. The threat of failure is ever present, so they must continuously put in effort and energy into conforming to what is expected of them. All for fear of becoming outcasts from their community.

In *Fight Club*, the reader bears witness to this eternal struggle, this Sisyphean relationship between men and masculinity. The main character is trapped in a constant, never-ending struggle to become a man. Key to this endeavor is the redefinition of the relationship between men and violence that was taking place in the late 20th century. At this point in history, there was an incipient attempt to establish a “more congenial masculinity” (Boon, 2003, p. 267). In the wake of social liberation movements that championed the rights of women and minorities, like people of color and the LGBTQ community, the traditional structures of power were placed under siege. Suddenly men (heterosexual white men specially) found themselves being held accountable, with their authority being put into question and their acts of violence being critiqued. In *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* (1999), Susan Faludi argues that the result of this backlash was a sudden sensation of lack of control. For the longest time, authority was inherently linked to masculinity. And suddenly that relationship, that *status quo* had been put at risk. This idea is reiterated in Michael Kimmel’s *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (1996), where it is posited that, as women and minorities reclaimed their right to have a place in traditionally male-exclusive spaces, American white men were left with the sense that: “If ‘they’ gain, ‘we’ lose” (p. 218).

Understanding *Fight Club* in this way, as a representation of the concerns of white men, immediately makes the entire premise seem futile. After all, “it is difficult for white men to rage against the machine when they themselves are the creators of that very machine” (Ta, 2006, p. 275). This is why, unavoidably, the anger the narrator feels towards the system is sublimated into a violence against the self: “Maybe self-improvement isn’t the answer. [...] Maybe self-destruction is the answer” (p. 49). The traditional structures of power are still very much in place, with white men in a clear position of social hegemony. And yet, they find themselves unsatisfied. Their position may be at the top, but it is still heavily constricted, clearly delineated. White men have the power, but they may keep it as long as they continue to perform

adequately the expectations society has placed upon them. It is the realization of the existence of these bonds that causes the narrator to become malcontent. There is in him a desire for power free of these limitations, to be a man not according to the post-industrial consumerist ideal of manhood, but on his own terms, regardless of greater social expectations, and to exercise his power without having to be beholden to the demands of women, people of color and all other collectives that had historically been subordinated to white men and in the 20th century had started to demand accountability from them.

Suddenly having to deal with centuries worth of grievances from feminists, black activists and other marginalized groups, coupled with the subsequent rewriting of the masculine ideal, men were left with a feeling of dissatisfaction (Giroux, 2001). The rules under which society operated were being rewritten, and men found themselves struggling to catch up. As Kimmel puts it in *Guyland: The Perilous World Where Boys Become Men* (2008): “So they’re [guys] left alone, confused, trying to come to terms with a world they themselves barely understand. All the while, many do suspect that something’s rotten in the state of manhood” (p. 71).

Of course, none of this is to say that societal order was upended and turned completely on its head. Men were, and indeed still are in a clear position of power within western culture. But there is an evident demand for them to let go of their traditionally dominant position. Boon (2003) argues that: “The most effective strategy has been to engender in them a penetrating sense of guilt, or, to borrow Yúdice’s term, shame. But shame is also associated with not engaging in traditional male behaviors” (p. 268). Men, and a large part of what it has meant to be a man, are no longer considered desirable and, in some cases, even acceptable. On the other hand, if men are perceived to be underperforming masculinity, they suffer social retaliation as well. They are, in essence, trapped between a rock and a hard place. They are forced to walk a tight rope, where if they are not careful and lean towards either side too much, they will

plummet to the ground. Moreover, the shifting nature and constant redefinition of masculinity makes it so that half the time they cannot even see the rope they are meant to be walking on.

The feeling men are left with is, according to Skinner (2011): “No one –bosses, friends, enemies, women– cares about how men live, feel, or take care of themselves” (p. 38). This sentiment is explicitly echoed in *Fight Club* when Tyler is getting fired from his job as a movie projectionist. While the union leader is beating him up Tyler says to him: “I am trash and shit and crazy to you and this whole fucking world, [...] you don’t care where I live or how I feel, or what I eat or how I feed my kids or how I pay the doctor if I get sick, and yes I am stupid and bored and weak, but I am still your responsibility” (p. 115). Crucially, Tyler expresses his resentment towards a post-industrial capitalist society that he feels has failed him, demanding accountability from it.

It is clear then that the upsetting of traditional social structures has left men less than content. Society is not meeting their expectations, which results in a feeling of frustration and inner turmoil. In *Fight Club* we see this male malaise clearly reflected: “Tyler was the pawn of this world, everybody’s trash” (p. 113). When considering the bigger picture of the turn of the century, masculinity is relegated to a lesser role, an expendable piece in the chessboard of history. This creates an interesting paradox, where men are concurrently in a position of power, but at the same time under harsh scrutiny and constant criticism. They hold a privileged position within society and, simultaneously, are antagonized by it. They are both at the center of it all and left in the margins.

2. The substitutes for masculinity

The narrator of *Fight Club* remains nameless throughout the story. After all it is not important who he is; he could be anyone. He is meant to represent a sort of everyman, a prototype of the average American male of his time period. In accordance with this premise, he lives in an impersonal apartment, and he has a mundane, tedious job as a “recall campaign coordinator” (p. 31) for a car manufacturer. He has no notable hobbies or close relationships with others. If we are to take the standards of his life as a representation of the average man of the late 20th century, we would be forced to paint a dire picture. He is a man with a relatively successful but unfulfilling professional life and no significant interpersonal connections. The narrator himself seems to be aware of how this lifestyle has undermined some part of him, and similar conditions have affected others (other men, in particular) as well: “The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue (p. 43)”. He feels there is something wrong, not with him as a person, but with him as a man specifically. When picturing his “power animal”, he conjures up the image of a penguin (p. 20), that is, a flightless bird, an animal preyed upon by others.

To combat this unease the narrator has developed a habit of attending a series of support groups for people suffering from different ailments. In contrast with his inauthentic life, proximity to death and despair bring him some semblance of comfort. He finds the extremes of human suffering he bears witness to in the groups more real than anything else in his world. One of the gatherings he attends is called “Remaining Men Together”, a support group for men who have suffered from testicular cancer and have lost their testicles as a result. As Kjersti Jacobsen puts it in *Chuck Palahniuk: Beyond the Body: A Representation of Gender in Fight Club, Invisible Monsters and Diary* (2013): “Physically, their locus of manhood is gone, meaning the gap between man and woman has been closed, biologically speaking” (p. 20). The

narrator feels something missing from his life, especially as a man. So, he finds a sort of solace by surrounding himself with men that are also missing an essential aspect of their manhood. The main difference is that the narrator experiences a psychological loss, while the men of the support group have experienced a physical loss. This dichotomy seems to somewhat assuage the narrator's fears. The emasculation he experiences seems more bearable in the presence of men who have experienced a physical, irreversible loss of masculinity.

The epitome of the male body completely devoid of maleness is presented in one of the members of this group, Bob. Bob is an ex-bodybuilder who developed testicular cancer as a consequence of the overconsumption of steroids and testosterone supplements. His excessive intake of artificial hormones eventually resulted in his complete castration. Bob pursued in his body-building a form of masculinity acceptable to his contemporary society. A pursuit for a specific appearance, a particular look, a symbol of masculinity completely detached from any meaningful substance, a body painstakingly molded for no other purpose than vanity. This insistence on such maleness, one that is accepted and even encouraged, but ultimately hollow, revealed itself as a form of self-castration. The result was the loss of any and all virility for Bob. This can be taken to mean that a continued reliance on the substitutes for masculinity provided by post-industrial consumerist society can only lead to a total loss of any significant and tangible manhood. Thus, "Palahniuk's narrator sees in Bob's physical condition what is happening to him psychologically" (Skinner, 2011, p. 30)

As for the support groups, they are presented as an imperfect replacement for what the narrator feels is missing in him. The techniques employed in these gatherings (talking about feelings, hugging each other, openly crying, etc.) rely on more "feminine" qualities, such as support and empathy. They feminize the men that partake in them. This is most clearly expressed when, as part of the therapeutic process in the testicular cancer support group, the narrator and Bob hug (p. 21). The narrator is pressed against Bob's chest, which has developed

a shape akin to a breast due to his medical condition. So not only is the narrator forced to confront a body that blurs the lines between the masculine and the feminine, but Bob was also the first individual that managed to make him cry in any of the support groups. This kind of emotional vulnerability is completely at odds with any traditional sense of masculinity.

One could even argue that “the process of reaching out to others is linked to the notion of pathology in the text” (Gizzo, 2007, p. 77). At the beginning of the novel the support groups are the only context in which the narrator can find some semblance of fulfilment for the absolute lack of intimacy in his life: “This is why I loved the support groups so much, if people thought you were dying, they gave you their full attention. If this may be the last time they saw you, they really saw you” (p. 107). The issue arises from the fact that this particular version of intimacy is intrinsically linked to illness, according to Gizzo. In spite of this, another reading of the support groups is also possible. It is among these individuals that the narrator finds respite from the artificial and meaningless trappings of capitalist society. In the words of Burgess (2012): “Here, among the frail and outcast, the Narrator finds an alternative to the perfection or at least the pressure to maintain the appearance of perfection” (p. 270). The support groups offer a refuge for the narrator from the existence he has come to abhor, presenting an alternative to his monotonous, unfulfilling existence.

To an outsider looking in, the narrator would seem to have a perfectly fine life. He is relatively successfully playing the game of capitalism. And yet he himself is unfulfilled. He has been told to want the things he has but finds no actual satisfaction or comfort in having them. This dissonance between what he is supposed to feel and what he actually feels becomes a source of his unrest. However, when faced with survivors of cancer or the terminally ill, their suffering and insecurity assuage his sense of alienation. By being witness to these groups of outcasts and momentarily sharing in their pain, his own estrangement from his supposedly satisfactory life seems bearable.

Moreover, by infiltrating these sessions he must pretend to be one of these ailing castaways from conventional society. He pretends to be dying or to have survived something awful or to have lost something irreplaceable. Although a pretense, this proximity to suffering and death revitalizes the narrator: “Walking home after a support group, I felt more alive than I’d ever felt. [...] Every evening, I died, and every evening, I was born” (p. 22). By pretending to be dying, the narrator can embrace life with renewed passion, acting out death in order to be able to appreciate his life, even while it remains meaningless.

Through this method the narrator manages to temporarily cure his insomnia, the manifestation of his melancholy. This all changes once Marla enters the scene. The narrator notices a woman has started to frequent the same support groups as he. She is an intruder, an interloper in this small haven the narrator had found for himself. As she attends all the groups, even the one for survivors of testicular cancer, she becomes a glaring impostor, obviously out of place and encroaching on spaces where she doesn’t belong. But instead of appreciating their similarities or his attraction to Marla, the narrator is only infuriated by her presence. She is a phony, and more damning, she is a reminder that he himself is a phony: “In this moment, Marla’s lie reflects my lie, and all I can see are lies” (p. 23). Marla is a witness to his charade and her presence a constant reminder that he is only putting on a show. She makes him aware that his proximity to death is only pretend, it is fake, like everything else in his life he hates: “[...] and all of a sudden even death and dying rank right down there with plastic flowers on video as a non-event” (p. 23). Marla’s presence shatters the illusion, rendering the cure he had found utterly ineffective. Back to a life he hates and cannot fix or escape, the narrator finds himself in need of a new remedy. Thus, Tyler Durden is born.

In contemporary society, the narrator, as a man, finds no environment in which he can experience intimacy. In turning to the support groups, emotional closeness is associated with pathology. The next step is the creation of “fight club”, in which intimacy becomes associated

with violence. He is retaliating against the violence of the dominant culture with aggression and destructive behaviors. However, as the novel progresses, this “fighting fire with fire” proves itself to be counterproductive. No subversion or revolution can take place if he employs post-capitalist consumerist society’s own tools of oppression to escape from its bonds. The issue is that at this point in the story, the narrator is yet unable to imagine any other meaningful solution.

The crux of the narrator’s problem is the following: he is professionally and financially accomplished, the two main metrics by which capitalism measures success, but this same lifestyle has led to complete isolation. Capitalism and consumerism create an environment in which creating and maintaining meaningful interpersonal relationships becomes practically impossible, alienating individuals from others and themselves.

The narrator attempts to remedy this by attending the support groups. There, intimacy can be achieved, but he must do so through a veneer of lies. He cannot become close to others as himself, only as a facsimile of a dying man. Closeness to death, although false, allows him to feel more appreciation for life and to feel embraced by others. But this is fake as well, and thus he is unable to truly sate his deep-seated need to experience a real connection. Furthermore, there exist no other spaces in which he can make use of these more traditionally feminine ways of creating bonds to others. In a way, Marla’s intrusion may have made him feel that these empathetic, congenial forms of intimacy have failed him: “Worse than that, I can’t cry with her watching” (p. 18). Not because he experienced them through inauthentic means, but because they feminize him too much.

The outlet for the narrator’s and Tyler’s discontentment is the fight club. This is relevant for a series of reasons. The post-industrial society of Palahniuk’s novel scorns certain forms of behavior traditionally associated with masculinity, while at the same time it shames men for not performing maleness appropriately. One of the thorniest subjects in this regard is men’s

relationship to violence. This is the way Boon (2003) puts it: “Outside exclusively male discourses, in broader channels of communication, male relationships with violence are most often characterized as a form of cultural malignancy” (p. 269). But, at the same time, he explains, there is an assumed intrinsic relationship between men and aggression. Putting biological determinism aside, it is undeniable that part of the link between men and violence is due to cultural factors. There is an expectation for violence in the cultural and social definition of manhood. Men, as providers and protectors, were expected in the past to be able to exercise the necessary violence to uphold these roles. In a post-industrial capitalist society, where the existence of these archetypes lost its point (due to a different economic model and to the shifting of gender roles), the actions needed to sustain them remained as the only measure to signify masculinity. As Judith Butler writes in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990): “the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a re-enactment and re-experiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (quoted by Skinner, 2011, p. 70).

However, in the milieu of the end of the century, in a restructured society, where what it means to be a man has been redefined, the standards have changed. This new situation results in a paradoxical landscape. The young men of the end of the 20th century had grown up in a cultural environment that condemned violence but punished them if they were found completely devoid of it. Men were expected to tame their aggressive impulses, but movies and other forms of popular media were rife with men of action that achieved their heroic goals through physical, and indeed, often violent means (Skinner, 2011). There was a clear and apparent contradiction between what society explicitly demanded of these men and the archetypes of manhood they were presented with. The implicit ideal version of masculinity, the unachievable perfect manliness, was drastically at odds with present societal demands of accountability for men.

Furthermore, this dissection and restructuring of gender roles meant that, not only did men's relationship to masculinity become more complicated, their relationship to femininity was also altered. Giroux (2001) contends that: "[...] as white, heterosexual, working-class and middle-class men face a life of increasing uncertainty and insecurity, they no longer have easy access to those communities in which they can inhabit a form of masculinity that defines itself in opposition to femininity" (p. 8). In this way the incompatibility of the relationship between the traditional ideal notion of masculinity and the new notion of late-capitalism's post-industrial version of masculinity is laid bare. The two versions of manhood are almost entirely incompatible. We must ask then, where does that leave men? Caught in a liminal state where conforming to the idealized version of a past masculinity is demonized and censured, but being unable to perform manliness in a satisfactory manner is also perceived as a failure on their part. In a society that still so heavily relies on a binary perception of gender, there seems to be no alternative. The men in *Fight Club* have no choice but to be men, or at least, attempt to do so.

The crux of this conundrum is, then, the very definition of masculinity. The way gender is socially conceived is, generally, quite narrow. Manhood exists as a monolithic concept, for which there are no widely accepted alternatives that, in essence, constricts men and their expressions of gender identity (Pfeil, 1995, p.8). What is more, within these restrictive constraints, other aspects of maleness are grouped together with violent impulses, domination instincts and a plethora of other negative stereotypes. This conception of masculinity is the result of millennia of cultural conventions. It is ultimately society which casts men in these roles, and, in the last century, has begun to fault them for fulfilling them. It is understandable, then, that frustrations and resentment would arise in men: "[...] we have no control, no choice, no direction, and no escape" (p. 146). It is understandable, then, that the main character in *Fight Club* would feel betrayed in a sense, and eventually reach a boiling point.

The nameless narrator of Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* is an average, normal man. By any definition, at the beginning of the novel he is one of the many faces that make up the masses of the turn of the century society. Far from the domineering, aggressive type of man that had begun to be scorned, he can even be considered remarkably strait-laced and demure. He is in his thirties, a young professional involved in an impersonal job that lives on his own and lacks any significant or deep relationships in his life. There is no intimacy in his day-to-day life, which makes him feel alienated from the rest of the world. He appears to the reader as decidedly out of place in his modern, urban environment. He is clearly troubled, ill at ease in the impersonal way of life of post-industrial consumerist society. He lacks the capacity or tools to form connections with other people. He is someone that has conformed, almost to an extreme, to the new model for masculinity constructed after the disavowal of violence, and yet has seen himself turned into an outcast within said society all the same.

The narrator is unsatisfied with his life. By attending the support groups and experiencing connections to others he manages to find contentment. But when this source of comfort is taken from him, his reaction belies a lack of understanding of the real source of the problem. Tyler creates fight club to reclaim a past version of masculinity, that can satisfy the modern man's inability to express a meaningful version of maleness. But what fight club is, at its core, is a social space for men to be able to find connection with each other. Fight club is a recreation of the support groups, with the crucial difference that fight club is an exclusively male space, where relations to intimacy are mediated through violence. Even then, the narrator is not searching for a new version of masculinity, not deep down. He is searching for a new way to forge bonds with others. When he attended the sessions for "Remaining Men Together" what reassured him wasn't necessarily the physical lack of evidence of manhood in the other men, a fact that made him feel better about his own deficient masculinity. What reassured him

was the existence of a space where he was free to express his emotions and connect with other people.

But the narrator does not realize this. So, his mind conjures up Tyler Durden, the embodiment of an idealized version of masculinity. After Marla renders the effect of the support groups null, the narrator finds himself purposeless, isolated, and vulnerable. The solution Tyler delivers is fight club, clandestine meetings of all sorts of men where they can, as the name suggests, gather regularly to fight each other. About the creation of fight club, Aitken and Craine (2004) say: “Although Marla is equally as alienated [...], we argue that [the narrator] creates the fight club to exclude her completely after she infiltrates his testicular cancer support group” (p. 293). As the feminine has failed him, he spurns it, expelling it from his life completely.

Fight club becomes a collective where hyper-masculinity is worshipped, and violence becomes the only channel of connection. In fight club “[...] masculinity gains its force through a celebration of both brutality and the denigration of the feminine. [...] Fight Club's vision of liberation and politics relies on gendered and sexist hierarchies [...]” (Giroux, 2001, p.16). Violence becomes, then, the medium through which men can bond with each other in an absolute absence of any feminine elements. In contrast with the support groups: “Talking, crying and ‘hug time’ have been replaced by wordless ‘grunting and noise’ and ‘hysterical shouting,’ drawing a clear contrast to the effeminate group therapy sessions” (Jacobsen, 2003, p. 23).

From his frustration with an unfulfilling, watered-down notion of manhood his desire for change arises. Disillusioned with the softer, mellowed down masculinity he has adopted until now, the narrator instead turns his gaze backwards. Unhappy with the present, he places his hopes in a past distorted by nostalgia, believing the masculinity of the previous era to be a

more worthwhile and better alternative. Faludi (1999) speaks of a “post-war masculinity”, that appeared to the men of Generation X as more “meaningful, significant, and authentic”. She argues that in the years following the second World War, the contributions men made to society were for its betterment, for the general good. More specifically, their contributions were material. Not only did they have an evident, effective use, but the results of their labor were also tangible: “Using tools, operating machines, building houses and harvesting food are examples of contributions made by the labor of post-war men” (Faludi, 1999, p. 34). In association with these types of efforts also came some of the more positive traits traditionally associated with masculinity: responsibility, discipline, diligence, etc.

In this way, we can infer that *Fight Club*, in contrasting these two models of manhood, also does the same with the two economic models within which these archetypes were developed and existed. At its core, this novel also encapsulates a critique of late capitalism, and the way society has been transformed to revolve around profit and consumption: “I am stupid, and all I do is want and need things” (p. 146). The narrator starts off with a dehumanizing job and no significant emotional connections to other people. Without a partner or close friends, the only relevant relationships in his life are all based on materialist and commercial exchange. Men built the corporations and worked to erect capitalism and a post-industrial society. In turn, these institutions created an environment where the ideal of maleness was deconstructed and redefined. This new ideal was insufficient for men, who found themselves alienated from their roles as producers and their relationships with other people:

We don't have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, but we do, we have a great war of the spirit. We have a great revolution against the culture. The great depression is our lives. We have a spiritual depression. (p. 149)

By design, capitalism alienates people, destroying all sense of community. White, upper-class men built the capitalist system, and profit from it in a material sense. They receive

tangible benefits and are the social group that this economic model benefits the most. However, they have also been affected by its social downsides. The only logical conclusion to this chain of events is, then, that the very consumerist and capitalist systems built by men have become the new enemies they must face in their struggle to achieve a meaningful masculinity (Ta, 2006, p. 276).

The narrator revels in the brutality of fight club, pleased by the bruises and injuries that mar his body. About the night where it all begins, when the first punch was thrown, the narrator says: "I didn't want to, but Tyler explained it all, about not wanting to die without any scars, about being tired of watching only professionals fight, and wanting to know more about himself" (p. 52). Similarly to the support groups, fight club implies an escape from conventional society. A retreat into a smaller group governed by its own set of rules. It is a space where the narrator can come into contact with pain and suffering, where he can experience a misery that is more real than anything post-industrial capitalism can offer or even tolerate.

Moreover, for the narrator, fight club seems an improvement in this regard: "Tyler's creation of fight club allows the Narrator to transition from mimicking pain and otherness to embodying it" (Burgess, 2012, p. 271). In the support groups he had to pretend, to lie, to be allowed even a momentary proximity to death. In fight club, he can have the experience of suffering for himself. To him this would be one of the ways in which fight club is better, more fulfilling than the support groups because all traces of falsehood have been eliminated. The irony lies, of course, in that fight club is also governed by a lie. After the fiasco with Marla the narrator's exhausted and disillusioned mind had to lie to itself in a manner so complete, so absolute, that it created a schizoid personality, a seemingly separate consciousness sharing a body with the narrator. Tyler, the narrator's apparent savior, is just another lie.

This is a lie but, nonetheless, a lie that can satisfy the narrator's yearning for reality, one that "initiates a process of physical intimacy designed to give a clear sense of self in a hyper-mediated, unreal society" (Gizzo, 2007, p. 90). The insistence on repeatedly experiencing pain and repeatedly sustaining physical markers of these experiences is a form of self-determination, a way to regain a sense of control by forcefully prying it away from the predominant order of the contemporary capitalist society. It is a way for the narrator to present resistance to the prevalent values of physical perfection and conformity he is confronted with on a daily basis: "Fight club gets to be your reason for going to the gym and keeping your hair cut short and cutting your nails. The gyms you go to are crowded with guys trying to look like men, as if being a man means looking the way a sculptor or an art director say" (p. 50).

The damaged, flawed body created through fight club is simultaneously a critique and an alternative to the chiseled bodies promoted and worshipped in the mainstream. They are a way to reject and escape an ideal of the male body that places men in "ornamental" roles, where their bodies exist to be put on display as objects, much like women have been in the past (Faludi, 2000, p. 506). This was the position Bob occupied as a bodybuilder, existing in a body made to be looked at, not a body that served a constructive purpose. The version of physical prowess fostered by Tyler is one that enacts violence and action (coded masculine) instead of channeling vanity and consumption (coded feminine). Therefore, it is seen as a more meaningful way to embody masculinity according to the patriarchal, hyperaggressive ideals of fight club.

On top of this, while the body sculpted in the gym is just a "copy of a copy of a copy" (p. 21), like everything else under capitalism, the bodies shaped by fight club are different. They are bodies that serve as proof of the individual's ability to affect reality, to change and transform their environment and themselves. It is this physical change that facilitates a psychological renewal, similar to the death/rebirth of the support groups: "There's grunting and noise at fight club like at the gym, but fight club isn't about looking good. There's hysterical shouting in

tongues like at church, and when you wake up Sunday afternoon you feel saved” (p. 51). As Pettus (2000) puts it: “Pain and its signs remain consistently and immediately real, both in and out of fight club, both in the mind and on the body” (p. 120).

Furthermore, the body of men also has had its role changed, from being a means of production to becoming a means of consumption. This alienates men from their bodies, further reinforcing their uneasiness. Resorting to violence has a particular significance in that, unlike in the workplace, fight club allows men to produce visible, tangible results. They can alter reality with their hands in a way that is immediately and unmistakably noticeable. When moving from an industrial economy to one based on information, where rather than dealing with goods the market deals with knowledge, there is a certain feeling of accomplishment that is lost.

It is vital to note that although fight club exists outside of predominant society, its consequences and traces on the body are brought back into conventional environments. The body marked by the brutality of fight club is a reminder of fight club’s existence that persists in everyday life and disrupts social order. As a rebellion against the new post-industrial version of maleness, the narrator bears, defiantly, on his body the signs of the violence of fight club. There is no mellowness, no tamed manhood in his wounds. There is, instead, the allusion to violence, to aggression, to a less socially acceptable version of masculinity that he is employing to fill the void in his life.

We have, then, the main character replicating the same pattern that countless others have throughout history. As previously discussed, this state of masculinity, constantly under threat, constantly inferior to its previous versions, is part of its very design. Consequently, the narrator endeavors to return to a perceived superior notion of manhood, which he finds in post-war masculinity. This requires a reclamation of the traits associated with the previous version of

maleness, supposedly attacked, and practically erased, by post-industrial capitalism. Alongside positive traits like discipline and a sense of duty, there is also a return to attributes such as aggression, resoluteness, and fierceness.

By reclaiming these characteristics there is a hope of overcoming the emasculating and isolating effects of capitalist society. From the point of view of the main character, modern men are potential heroes trapped by obligations and societal conventions that stifle their manliness, akin to “Odysseus adjusting the garnish on a Waldorf salad or Agamemnon hunting for drapes to match his bedsheets” (Boon, 2003, p. 272). Thus, the fight club endeavors to save the men chained to offices and cubicles where there is no honor to be found, rescuing them from the demeaning position within society to which they have been relegated. The fact that the fight clubs in the novel get as popular as they do is a testament to this longing by the men of the book for an alternative to their current acceptable version of manhood, or else a desire for meaningful interpersonal connection. Although the post-war notion of masculinity is as narrow and constricting as the version they are currently performing, they ironically find it liberating. In part this is because it allows them to create a sense of belonging and intimacy.

What the fight clubs offer these men is an opportunity to “explore the possibilities for creating a sense of community in which men can reclaim their virility and power” (Giroux, 2001, p. 8). They are, ultimately, social gatherings where men can be part of a larger system, providing for them a context where their actions have a material impact on reality and they can be recognized as men, in accordance with a more traditional notion of masculinity. They are desperate for this kind of validation, as post-industrial society is completely devoid of viable alternatives.

In the post-war period, mastering a trade and carrying out a role as providers became staples of the role of men. However, by the time *Fight Club* was written, times had changed

significantly. As a result of the feminist movement women had entered the workforce in droves, fundamentally altering the structure of society. What it entailed to be a woman had changed, which resulted in an inevitable blurring of the lines between the gender roles. With the definition of womanhood changing, the conception of manhood was left in an unclear situation. The rules had been altered, but there didn't seem to be a clear answer as to how that change affected men. Kimmel (1996) postulates that:

[...] the traditional markers of manhood—being the head of a household, having a steady job, and providing for the material needs of a family—are obsolete. What once marked manhood today marks adulthood – for both sexes. So, what does it mean to be a man? That's something most guys are still trying to figure out. (p. 42)

In short, the direction society is following made it increasingly harder to define masculinity in opposition to femininity. What had served to delimit masculinity during the post-war era was no longer applicable. In other words, post-industrial society left no room at all for post-war masculinity. What men were essentially left with was an unprecedented standard of masculinity with ill-defined guidelines and boundaries, that nevertheless categorically denied the possibility of performing some of the key markers of post-war masculinity. But instead of embracing femininity, the same way women had embraced aspects of masculinity, most men resisted a further dismantling of the gender binary. Their reluctance can be explained when taking into consideration that a lot of men would see the loss of a clear distinction between the social roles of men and women as a loss of the power that the gender binary traditionally conferred on men. There was an unequivocal impediment in ever fully re-enacting the idealized past of maleness and, at the same time, a dissatisfaction with the contemporary archetype.

The nameless narrator finds himself at a dead end. No exits in sight, no solution to his predicament. He can find no adequate way to perform a substantial masculinity. It is in the throes of this despair that Tyler Durden appears, and the fight club is created. Although capitalist society denies men fulfilling jobs and has eliminated the exclusivity of their roles as

providers, these are not the only markers of post-war masculinity. In the context of fight club, men are allowed to reclaim the aggression of traditional masculinity, rejecting the post-industrial idea of a non-violent manhood.

3. The solution for masculinity

The success of fight club and its rapid growth become testaments to the frustration of 20th century men with post-industrial consumerist culture. There is clearly something that, not only the narrator, but also many other men are lacking. The clandestine gatherings started by Tyler Durden and his efforts to reclaim post-war masculinity seem, initially, to be a form of salvation. A remedy to what the narrator feels is missing from his life. Eventually, however, this changes.

One night the narrator participates in a fight against a boy that had just joined the club:

That Saturday night, a young guy with an angel's face came to his first fight club, and I tagged him for a fight. That's the rule. If it's your first night in fight club, you have to fight. I knew that so I tagged him because the insomnia was on again, and I was in a mood to destroy something beautiful. (p. 122)

The narrator brutally beats him, becoming so aggressive that Tyler feels the need to comment on it. The fact of the matter is that the narrator no longer finds fight club a suitable antidote to his malaise. His insomnia has come back, the most prominent symptom of his uneasiness. When he chooses to participate in the fight, it is no longer a matter of feeling something real or leaving tangible traces on the physical world. He just wants to “destroy something beautiful”. To break something just for the sake of breaking it, with no sense of catharsis being obtained. It is after this incident that Tyler decides he has to “[...] take fight club up a notch or shut it down” (p. 123).

The next level Tyler devises is Project Mayhem. In fight club, men defy the standards imposed on them by capitalist society without incurring any serious repercussions. They can let out some steam, but nothing about the source of their problems actually changes: “[...] since they only fight amongst themselves, the narrator's creation of Fight Club is as empty of meaning

as the consumerist culture he rebels against” (Skinner, 2011, p. 57). Once he realizes this, fight club is revealed to be simply another of the dismal substitutes for a meaningful gender expression that the narrator has come to abhor. As it exists, fight club is no longer the viable deliverance from an unfulfilling existence he so desperately yearns for. The failure of fight club is that gender roles and stereotypes have been wholly ingrained in the minds of men by post-industrial society. They can only replace one limiting version of masculinity with another, placing their faith in a different, albeit similarly constricting, form of gender expression. Of course, the illusion eventually breaks down and even this past notion of manhood, seemingly better, becomes another disappointment. Hence, Tyler’s decision: dissolve fight club or make it evolve.

Project Mayhem is the medium Tyler intends to use to bring about a sort of cultural reset. In fight club the violence was exclusively internal. Project Mayhem redirects that destructive force outwards, towards non-consenting parties, ranging from random acts of public violence to full blown domestic terrorism. Tyler Durden has decided that the current world is beyond fixing, so it must be destroyed in order to build the future he has dreamt up. The problem arises in that he is unable to completely unshackle himself from the structures that constrain people in post-industrial capitalism. Tyler has an ideal he wishes to attain but no clear sense of how to make it a reality. Amid this uncertainty about how to bridge his current goals with a future realization, Project Mayhem cannot help but replicate existing systems of power (Burgess, 2012, p. 267). Tyler ends up forming a militia that demands absolute obedience and enforces existing stereotypes. He aspires to destroy contemporary societal expectations, but ironically ends up reproducing them.

Very intentionally, the members of Project Mayhem resemble in appearance fascist paramilitary groups, with their shaved heads (p. 157) and black shirts (p. 127). But these are not the only preexisting organizations that Tyler’s army ends up imitating. Established around

an absolute, centralized power that admits no opposition or questioning, the “space monkeys” that make up Project Mayhem become nameless drones, similarly to the men that abide by the capitalist post-industrial notion of masculinity, trapped in their service jobs. They are all cogs in machines, tirelessly working at menial tasks to produce results they cannot perceive or comprehend: “You just do your little job. Pull a lever. Push a button. You don’t really understand any of it” (p. 193).

The narrator himself becomes conscious that he is repeating the patterns that have failed him in the past. Each of the “committees” that make up Project Mayhem meet at a regularly scheduled time, on a different day of the week. Like a work timetable or like support group meetings, as he muses. Even while his attempts to break free from the oppressiveness of post-industrial consumerist society, he finds himself unable to come up with significantly different alternatives. This inability to construct viable replacement power structures parallels his failure to find a satisfying expression of maleness. As Aitken and Craine (2004) put it: “The ironic culmination of Project Mayhem is that it ultimately portrays masculinity as an objectified, essentialized generality that men submit to in a mind-numbing way. It is no coincidence that in their search for identity, the Fight Club men become a collective that eerily approaches fascism” (p. 295). Here lies the ultimate failure of both fight club and Project Mayhem: their rebellion against mainstream society is doomed because they cannot break free from its conventions, ultimately becoming reproductions of its values and patterns.

Tyler’s very conception of gender is rooted in the model promoted and enforced by consumerist society. Masculinity can only exist in opposition to something. Femininity, queerness, anything that is other, has to exist outside of the definition of manhood in order for it to exist at all. The transition from the support groups to fight club is an initial attempt to guarantee a more authentic masculinity by purging anything feminine from the narrator’s life.

However, this hard division of the genders is just a regurgitation of preexisting societal notions that proves insufficient to satisfy the narrator.

Another way in which Tyler Durden unintentionally reproduces the principles of post-industrial capitalist society is best exemplified through the incident with the Indian cashier. With the narrator holding him at gunpoint, he confesses to having wanted to be a veterinarian. He had been forced to abandon this dream due to economic difficulties, hence his current occupation. What the narrator does is threaten to kill him if he isn't working his way back into vet school the next morning (p. 154). He walks away believing he has done this man a favor, as if he has given him some sort of wake-up call and set him on course to fix his life. The narrator can think this because, to him, choice "appears to be an exclusively individual act, a simple matter of personal will that functions outside of existing relations of power, resources, and social formations" (Giroux, 2001, p. 13). He believes that an individual's agency is dependent solely on oneself. lwd

This egalitarian, individualistic perception of choice comes from the fact that he is a cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, Caucasian male. The system was built for him, by others like him. So, to him, doing most things is just a matter of determination, as systemic obstacles are practically non-existing. This is why he applies this logic to everyone else, unable to conceive the impediments other minorities have to deal with. This privileged concept of agency, that anyone can become anything as long as they set their minds to it, is one of the capitalistic values that Tyler reproduces in his own ideology. He perpetuates the rhetoric that "anyone can achieve anything they work hard for", without taking into account that, oftentimes, the circumstances of individuals stack the odds against them, regardless of their own strength of will or determination. Tyler Durden believes that sheer tenacity is enough to break free from the system, unaware that many institutional limitations that heavily constrict others never were an obstacle for him to begin with.

The moment the narrator realizes that Project Mayhem is not the salvation Tyler had promised is when Bob dies. Bob, who had changed the support groups for fight club, and fight club for Project Mayhem, loses his life for Tyler's ideology. Only after he has passed away is he deemed free from post-industrial masculinity and can become an embodiment of the post-war manhood Tyler is trying to recreate. This is signified by the revelation of his name. Members of Project Mayhem are just "space monkeys", mindless drones without an identity of their own, whose individuality is of no importance. They have chosen to stop being cogs in the machine of capitalism to instead become cogs in the machine of Tyler's rebellion. It is only in death that they are allowed to be recognized as people. It is only in death that Bob's identity is revealed: "His name is Robert Paulson and he is forty-eight years old" (p. 176). The shock of this first death makes the narrator realize that Project Mayhem is more dangerous, more harmful to men, than the consumerist society he intended to topple. Project Mayhem, fight club's new iteration, is no longer a safe space where men can consensually release their frustrations or create material traces of their existence and their effort. It is now a paramilitary organization with violent tendencies that border on fascism. It has become a group that can and does do irreparable damage to people. Burgess (2012) marks this moment in the narrative as the turning point where the narrator "[...] understands that Project Mayhem [...] has taken on the dominant culture's rhetoric of repression that it meant to subvert" (p. 277).

Fight club had emerged as a substitute for the catharsis experienced by the narrator in the support groups. The main difference was the exclusion of all feminine aspects. It replaced the methodology of the groups with violence, constrained through a set of rules. The next evolution, Project Mayhem, also had its own rules. But this set of directives failed to contain its violence, which is directed outwards towards parties that may not share Tyler's beliefs, becoming an imposition on others. Project Mayhem reveals itself as a movement with the potential to establish the same type of oppressive system it was supposedly born to destroy.

Tyler's end goal for Project Mayhem is the destruction of the national museum, an act that is meant to result in the obliteration of the symbols of the origins of the current system: "We wanted to blast the world free of history" (p. 124). This is also intended to be an end to Tyler himself, a simultaneous destruction of the genesis of post-industrial capitalism and Project Mayhem. However, the charges do not go off: "Nothing explodes" (p. 205). The origin of dominant culture remains, and so social order remains unchanged. It is, however, hard to argue that the destruction of the point of origin would have been enough to upend post-industrial society. After all, the novel implies that Project Mayhem goes on even after the "death" of Tyler Durden. When the narrator shoots himself in the head, he banishes the schizoid personality from his brain, but even this is not enough to halt the organization. This can be taken as proof that groups of people can and will continue to perpetuate a certain ideology or system, regardless of whether its point of birth is preserved.

Ultimately, both the museum and Project Mayhem remain. The narrator has failed to break free from the oppression of both post-industrial capitalism and post-war masculinity. He fails to find any meaningful catharsis or to achieve any significant change for the larger milieu of the 20th century. As Pettus (2000) puts it: "By the end of the novel, fight club and Project Mayhem only slightly transcend the system they parody and substantially reinforce it" (p. 125). The one thing clear by the end is that the tension between masculinity and contemporary culture will inevitably lead to the destruction of one or the other: "This was the goal of Project Mayhem, Tyler said, the complete and right-away destruction of civilization" (p.125). The novel, however, seems to suggest that annihilation is not the right path, as it does not guarantee the end of the problem. Rather, a transformation, a metamorphosis, of both society and the notion of manhood is the best alternative.

The narrator fails to find a substantial gender expression through Tyler because he associates the ideal maleness to violent acts and pursues a version of masculinity that

categorically excludes femininity. Jacobsen (2013) says: “Femininity is represented in many ways in this story; as consumerism, lack of authenticity, dependency, emotion and lack of will to stand against mass psychology” (p. 30). This perception of the feminine is a clear depiction of how the narrator relates to and understands femininity. As the vehicle through which the story is relayed, his own notion of femininity permeates the entire plot, resulting in a mostly negative representation of it. This animosity can be explained as a defense mechanism, born from a fear that exists within the narrator. He is afraid of becoming too feminine and, simultaneously, he is afraid of the relief he finds in femininity.

The narrator’s apprehension towards the feminine is connected to his revulsion towards consumerism. Production is associated with masculinity, while consumption is linked to femininity. The prevalence, then, of consumerism in his capitalist society equates to a feminization of the population as a whole: “Consumerism in *Fight Club* is criticized primarily as an ideological force and existential experience that weakens and domesticates men, robbing them of their primary role as producers whose bodies affirm and legitimize their sense of agency and control” (Giroux, 2001, p. 14). If his inauthentic, consumerist, post-industrial society is feminine in nature, then femininity becomes the threat that is directly damaging men’s position in said society: “What you see in *fight club* is a generation of men raised by women” (p. 50).

This attitude towards womanhood is reflected in the treatment received by Marla, one of the very few women that appear in the novel, and decidedly the central female character. She is an entity whose existence makes men miserable but must be tolerated to an extent as she provides relief for sexual needs. The narrator comments: “Except for their humping Marla and Tyler are never in the same room” (p. 65). While the fact that the narrator cannot see both people at the same time is a result of him sharing a body with Tyler, there is also another interpretation of his relationship to Marla at this point in the story. In his pursuit of post-war masculinity, Tyler is perpetuating the separation of the spheres that each gender occupied until

the women's liberation movement (Jacobsen, 2013). Tyler, as an agent of post-war masculinity, has no need for Marla except in these specific instances, so he has no relationship to her outside of them.

This is how Marla satisfies the male narrator's sexual needs. The way in which she makes him miserable is revealed in their very first meeting. Marla intrudes on the support groups, and even more damningly infiltrates the group for testicular cancer survivors: "This is the only real thing in my life, and you're wrecking it" (p. 24). This infuriates the narrator, who perceives this invasion as a further degradation of masculinity. Manhood, which at the beginning of the novel is already in a precarious state for him, loses any remaining authenticity when Marla starts intruding on the supposedly exclusively male space. Her presence there is a symptom of a larger issue that plagues post-industrial capitalist society. Since women had started encroaching on traditionally all-male spheres, the separation of the two genders had weakened. The lines that separated men from women were becoming blurrier, which the narrator felt as a threat to masculinity.

The way in which he interacts with Marla is an attempt on Tyler's part to consciously perpetuate the hard division the two genders used to have. His insistence on recreating these rituals is a consequence of the fear the narrator has of witnessing and being part of the disappearance of manhood as a concept that exists in opposition to femininity. This is the perceived source of his ennui. He feels like he is not being permitted to express his maleness in a satisfactory way. There is an essential part of him, of his nature, that is being denied. In the inauthentic world he has been forced to inhabit, gender no longer seems to matter in the same way it used to, which results in malcontent men. The change in women's place in society has taken place at the expense of men relinquishing privileges they have, until the 20th century, exclusively held and enjoyed. This change in what many men perceived to be their natural right is implied to be the source of an underlying scorn for femininity.

However, if the gender dichotomy were truly based on deterministic biological facts, if it were truly ingrained in people's nature, gender roles would be preserved no matter how the rest of society changed. *Fight Club* functions as an excellent example of gender being subject to social conventions. This means that gender is something that exists to construct and maintain the structure of society. It reveals itself not as factual truth or a biological instinct but instead as a fluid concept, that changes according to society's needs and is perpetuated by cultural means.

Marla is the clearest representation in the novel of this conception of gender. She exists as an entity that embodies feminine and masculine characteristics and she "[...] acts as a challenge to traditional gender norms, which would explain both the narrator's and Tyler's feeling of threat towards her" (Jacobsen, 2013, p. 33). Marla's existence goes against the gender binary and its norms. She is attractive, independent and unapproachable; she also rejects motherhood and domesticity. It is precisely these traits of hers that cause the narrator's crisis. When she starts attending the support group for testicular cancer, Marla asserts her presence in a supposedly male-only space. In doing so she clearly breaks the separation of the genders, revealing it to be just a flimsy social construct. It is this instance that forces the narrator to face his own inauthenticity. Of course, the possibilities that Marla represents make the narrator extremely uncomfortable initially. The result is that he lashes out against femininity and the blend of genders by idolizing a past, supposedly purer version of masculinity.

Of course, Tyler and the way in which he embodies gender is eventually revealed to be equally disappointing and equally as artificial as consumerist masculinity. The narrator starts embodying the Tyler Durden persona, founds fight club and develops Project Mayhem as a way to find a meaningful version of maleness. He feels that post-industrial society is denying him a satisfactory gender expression, so he rebels against it and attempts to find salvation by asserting a different version of manhood. He focuses his anger against femininity and a society he feels

has become feminized, unable to correctly identify the isolating and impersonal structures of capitalism as the source of his discomfort.

Eventually he is able to come to the conclusion that both post-war and post-industrial expressions of maleness are equally constricting and damaging. One symptom of his disillusionment with Tyler and Project Mayhem is the narrator's new perception of Marla's gender hybridity. He begins to consider it differently, disgust and outrage receding. The initial attraction he had denied surfaces again, except this time he can actually process it. The ultimate proof of his acceptance of Marla embodying both genders is the fact that Tyler gives her the same lye kiss that marks the "space monkeys" of Project Mayhem: "The scar on her hand, I ask Marla, how did she get it? 'You,' Marla says. 'You kissed my hand'" (p. 160). Despite being a woman, she is given the same identifying badge as all the other male members of the effort. Through Tyler, the narrator is recognizing and even enforcing Marla's disposition as someone who embodies both the masculine and the feminine.

Throughout the story Marla exists as another possible escape for the narrator from the restrictions of consumerist masculinity. She is Tyler's foil, existing not as the savior the narrator imagined for himself, but nevertheless representing a possible cure for his dissatisfaction. Tyler Durden attempts to rescue the narrator from his inauthentic existence by saving his masculinity through the complete erasure of femininity and the enactment of violent, self-destructive acts. Meanwhile, Marla offers a different possibility, a release from a suffocating performance of maleness achieved by transcending the boundaries of the gender binary.

As the novel progresses, the narrator's disillusionment with Tyler and all he represents keeps growing. At the same time, his attraction to Marla develops further, going beyond the physical and revealing just how similar they are to each other. Beneath their cynical *façade* they are both simply hungry for human connection. In Marla's attitude towards relationships a

contrast between the old ideas of romantic love and the current societal attitude about interpersonal relationships is apparent: “You know, the condom is the glass slipper of our generation. You slip it on when you meet a stranger. You dance all night, then you throw it away” (p. 66).

Within a consumerist capitalist society, affective ties become extremely difficult to forge and even harder to maintain, creating a generalized sense of isolation: “Ever since college, I make friends. They get married. I lose friends” (p. 62). The life of everyone (not just men, as Marla proves) living under these conditions is all the worse for it, resulting in the unease and apathy that plagued the narrator at the beginning of the novel. Jacobsen (2013) posits that in the late 20th century: “Love, sentiments of affection and human connection are completely empty terms, and it is these terms that the narrator is really seeking, not a new masculine identity [...]” (p. 36). This is precisely why the Tyler Durden persona fails the narrator. because what he represents is no substitute for the affective deficiencies the narrator is suffering from.

The ending of the novel is unclear in the sense that the narrator receives no salvation at all. When he is having his final confrontation with Tyler, holding a gun against his own head, Marla shows up with the members of all the support groups from the beginning in tow (p. 204). In this scene the two transformative forces seeking to reorder the narrator’s world collide. In this climatic moment, however, no definitive choice is made: the narrator just shoots himself to be rid of the schizoid personality he has been sharing a body with. Afterwards he finds himself in a mental health facility, recuperating. It is implied at this point that Project Mayhem has survived and is still ongoing, despite the fact that the bomb intended to destroy the museum did not go off.

No revolution ever comes to pass. The point of origin of project mayhem, Tyler Durden, is destroyed, yet the organization remains. The point of origin of post-industrial consumerist

society is unperturbed, implying a failure to alter traditionally gendered society. Marla attempts to rescue the narrator at the last minute, appearing with the support group attendees, representative of alternate gender expression that emerge on the fringes of mainstream society. Nevertheless, they fail to stop the narrator from shooting himself.

In the final chapter the narrator finds himself alone and isolated, in a similar state to the one which tormented him at the beginning of the novel. Neither society nor manhood have toppled, the status quo remains unchanged. No reordering has taken place, and the narrator himself has failed to embrace any profound change. Despite the narrator's inability to enact or embody any significant transformation, the solution the novel seems to be hinting at is the dissolution of the gender binary. Tyler seeks to reinforce the division of genders, going back to a previous time where the separation between the male and female spheres was even more absolute. He aims to create a better world for men by eliminating all the elements he identifies as detrimental to the masculine spirit. Since he identifies all these issues as the proliferation of feminine traits, he seeks to save masculinity by purging it of femininity completely. However, this path is proven unviable, as the ideals promoted by Tyler prove themselves to be unsustainably destructive. The ending seems to suggest that, not an erasure of any of them, but rather a blend of the genders would be a possible solution to the general unrest caused by living under the restrictions of capitalist society.

4. Conclusion

Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* is a testament to the oppressive nature of strict gender expectations. An impossibility to ever attain the current ideal expression of masculinity leads men to frustration and anger. This negative energy can very easily be directed at femininity, as Tyler Durden proves. The restrictive state of maleness becomes, then, a catalyst for misogynistic violence, when men linked the problems that plagued 20th century post-industrial consumerist society with women's invasion of previously exclusive male spaces. The narrator "can, through Tyler Durden, claim women contribute to the post-industrial marginalizing of post-war masculinity" (Skinner, 2011, p. 43). In this way, anything that threatens the inner well-being of men is perceived as an emasculating force that can be met with violent reactions.

Thus, the source of men's malaise is identified as an increasing feminization of society, as a direct result of a misogynistic, reactionary way of thinking. Instead of identifying post-industrial consumerist systems as the forces that isolate and undermine men, the feminine is deemed the threat that besets the state of manhood. To eradicate it, fight club is created as a space where men can reclaim certain aspects of a previous notion of masculinity deemed undesirable within consumerist culture. Tyler aims to give men the ability to express themselves through violence. Danger arises, then, if these stereotypes of male aggression are erroneously perceived as existing within a vacuum. The exercise of violent force has historically served to enforce male dominance, functioning as a tool for men to exercise control over women and other minorities. Failing to consider this fact when regarding Tyler's ideas can lead to the perpetuation of the societal models that produce and legitimize this controlling form of violence:

[...] it is crucial to understand how representations of male violence, scorn for everything that is feminine, and proto-fascist politics [...] resonate with a broader

assemblage of historical and contemporary forces to reproduce rather than challenge some of the more oppressive forces in American society. (Giroux, 2001, p. 19)

Tyler holds contempt and resentment for everything that is feminine, and thus attempts to purge it completely, exercising male aggression to assert his dominance. He has determined that society as a whole needs to be razed to the ground to make room for a significant masculinity. By the end of the novel, however, Tyler's show of violent retaliation is thwarted. The building that represents capitalist society is not destroyed, signifying the failure of post-war masculinity to transform the end of the century milieu into a more fulfilling environment for men.

Fight club and Project Mayhem fail to reorder post-industrial capitalist society. Tyler Durden strove to fix the culture by enforcing a strict gender binary and enacting acts of outward violence. The novel proves this method as ultimately ineffective, with the narrator ending up in a limbo where no definitive solution is achieved. In spite of this, in his final moments before he shoots himself, a glimpse of an alternative transformative future is revealed. Marla and the support group attendees, representatives of a different possibility for change come for him. They are proof that freedom from stifling gender conventions is possible by dissolving the binary altogether and societal change can be achieved through collective social bonds. It is not more strict limits of gender expression that are needed, but the freedom to embrace the positive aspects of both masculinity and femininity. It is also, not violence then, but rather collaborative effort that is the tool we must employ to build a better future.

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