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ROMANCE AND IDENTITY IN *FIGHT CLUB*

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## ROMANCE AND IDENTITY IN *FIGHT CLUB*

JACOB WIKER

### ABSTRACT

Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club* has been the subject of much critical contention over the years. Typical analyses of the novel revolve around its existential or nihilist comedy, homoerotic elements, or commentary on consumer culture. However, no critics to date have studied *Fight Club*'s romantic elements, despite indications by the author that the novel is, in fact, intended to be a romance. This study reimagines and interprets *Fight Club*, the novel, as a work with romantic elements essential to the structure of the narrative itself. Additionally, it studies the complex interplay of Palahniuk's romantic elements with questions of gender identity and masculinity. It is concluded that, in *Fight Club*, romance drives the narrator's quest for identity.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	page
ABSTRACT.....	iii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION.....	1
II. NARRATIVE OVERVIEW.....	3
III. BACKGROUND, CRITICAL RECEPTION, CULTURAL IMPACT..	5
IV. IDENTITY.....	13
V. ROMANCE.....	22
VI. CONCLUSION.....	31
WORKS CITED.....	34

CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

“I am the biggest romantic you are ever going to meet,” states Chuck Palahniuk, author of *Fight Club* (Straus 1). In the afterword to the 2005 Norton edition of the novel, he notes that “[*Fight Club*] was a classic, ancient romance but updated to compete with the espresso machine and ESPN” (216). Later, in the same text, he laments, “One reviewer called the book science fiction. Another called it a satire on the *Iron John* men’s movement. Another called it a satire of corporate white-collar culture. Some called it horror. No one called it a romance” (216). In a 1999 CNN.com interview, he stated, “the whole story is about a man reaching the point where he can commit to a woman.”

Palahniuk’s assertions as to the nature of his work represent a view of *Fight Club* that has not yet been critically undertaken; a view that the text, in light of its place in a larger Romantic literary context as well as its treatment of the interactions between its characters, seems to uphold. Critics have focused on a number of *Fight Club*’s more distinct, easily-unpacked themes, including its commentary on capitalism, its questions of

gender and identity, and its treatment of women. None, however, have chosen to interpret the text as a romance, or even to, in any real depth, discuss the novel's romantic ideals.

In this thesis, I argue that Palahniuk's *Fight Club* is, in fact, romance – or, more accurately, that it is driven *by* romance and that it is very much part of a distinct romantic tradition. Whether or not *Fight Club* can itself be considered to be a “romance” is a larger question: however, it incorporates romantic ideals and traditions deeply in the text as a way in which to affect change in its narrator. To develop a more complete critical understanding of the novel, it is important to examine the romance in the text and how it drives the narrative forward as well as discuss how it modifies critical perceptions of the work. The lack of any meaningful commentary on the romantic aspects of the novel is a visible hole in the fabric of current criticism, and it is all the more crucial to consider it, given the variability in critical and popular interpretation, the cultural impact of the work, and the degree to which romance drives the narrative forward.

*Fight Club*'s romance is an engine of the fluctuation of the narrator's identity – in fact, it actually instigates his masculine crisis. In the beginning of the novel, the narrator (who, in the critical convention, is usually called “Jack”) is essentially emasculated and without any form of identity. When Jack meets Marla Singer, it is her presence that instigates the disassociation of his two identities (Jack and Tyler). The narrator is then caught between the influence of Marla and of Tyler: he moves away from demasculinization and lack of identity towards Tyler's ultra-violent, “macho” hypermasculinity and then diverges, “killing” Tyler by shooting through his own face, and, thus, reaching an equilibrium – in Freudian terms, a “maturity” that allows him to the opportunity to “commit,” to set aside his own self-obsession in favor of another.

## CHAPTER II

### NARRATIVE OVERVIEW

Like many other contemporary, experimental, or transgressive works of fiction, *Fight Club* does not follow a typical narrative path. It concerns a nameless narrator, who, again, is generally referred to as “Jack” for convenience’s sake. This is a reference to the novel, and, subsequently, the film’s discussion of a number of *Reader’s Digest* articles on different body parts, each titled “I am Jack’s heart” or “I am Jack’s colon,” and so on.<sup>1</sup> For the sake of clarity, *Fight Club*’s narrator will be referred to as “Jack” for the remainder of this paper.<sup>2</sup>

Jack is caught up in a fit of postmodern ennui and is subsequently afflicted with insomnia. He treats this by attending support groups for ailments that he does not actually suffer from. It is in one of these support groups that he meets Marla Singer, a parasitic

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<sup>1</sup> In David Fincher’s film, “Jack” is used – in Palahniuk’s novel, it is actually “Joe.” However, in the interest of conforming with critical convention insofar as discussion of *Fight Club* is concerned, “Jack” is used here.

<sup>2</sup> Palahniuk’s unnamed narrator is unnamed for a specific reason: because he is constructed as a “vessel” for the reader. The partial target of *Fight Club* is precisely the audience among which it has found its greatest popularity – the disenfranchised 20<sup>th</sup> century male. Hence, the narrator is very much the same sort of “character” as many of the novel’s readers might be: young, isolated, and surrounded by consumer products, with a boring, meaningless job that requires significant and continual ethical compromises.

woman who attends the same support groups because they make her “[feel] every moment of her life” due to the “dying and death and loss and grief” of the other attendees (38). Later, Jack meets Tyler Durden on an airplane. After his apartment is destroyed, Jack moves into a run-down home with Tyler, and they begin “Fight Club,” a clandestine organization where men gather in basements and alleys to fight each other by a strict set of rules. Fight Club evolves into a second organization – Project Mayhem – which seeks to tear down civilization through increasingly destructive acts of highly-publicized violence. Jack realizes that, in fact, Tyler Durden is not real: he is simply another “personality” that exists in Jack. Jack confronts Tyler as the latter is about to blow up a number of large, multi-story buildings belonging to credit-card companies. After the ensuing scuffle, Jack shoots himself through the face, killing Tyler. In the final chapter of the novel, finally haven fallen victim to his inability to satisfactorily rectify his own masculinity and the culture that surrounds him, he has gone insane and is living in a mental ward where he believes that he has died and gone to heaven.

### CHAPTER III

#### BACKGROUND, CRITICAL RECEPTION, AND CULTURAL IMPACT

*Fight Club* is considered to be a work of transgressive fiction, a genre which also includes Bret Easton Ellis' seminal work *American Psycho*, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, and virtually Palahniuk's entire catalog (certain works, such as *Invisible Monsters* or *Haunted*, are even more blatantly transgressive than *Fight Club*). According to critic Michael Silverblatt, who initially coined the term "transgressive" in reference to modern authors such as Palahniuk and Ellis, "The underlying idea of transgressive thinking (as derived from Foucault) is that knowledge is no longer to be found through the oppositions of dialectical reasoning. Instead, knowledge is found at the limits of experience. The body becomes the locus for the possibility of knowledge" (2). Transgressive fiction is very much concerned with the body, and it utilizes themes of bodily mutilation to make further points about societal constructs, sexual norms, or any of a variety of other entrenched, "traditional" targets.

*Fight Club* is this idea taken to its logical conclusion – at least on the surface. In the novel, Jack’s quest for identity explicitly revolves around mutilation, which is reflected by the numerous passages in which he and other men are beaten, bloodied, and maimed, as well as the novel’s continual fixation on both physical and mental self-destruction. By the end of the novel, Jack is transformed: his bones broken and body battered and his face torn into “an angry Halloween pumpkin” giving him “a jagged smile from ear to ear” (207). In the final chapter, Jack’s bloody smile has become one of insanity: faced with the innate bipolarity of his own existence, he has lost his mind. In a way, the end of the novel mirrors *American Psycho*’s: the mental ward copies Ellis’ existential sign, “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT” (399).

The violent, often objectively shocking modes of cultural critique identified by Silverblatt are in and of themselves quintessentially “romantic.” The transgressive exists partially as a reaction to that which is established, to the ideals that form the culture in which Jack is a part. Though, in a modern context, the notion of transgressive fiction is very “new,” it is still deeply informed by the ideals of post-enlightenment romanticism to the degree that it exists as a reaction to entrenched societal, “rational” constructs. Works like *Fight Club* or *American Psycho* deal with abstract, “primitive” ideals – questions like the nature of masculine identity, of love, and of emotion. *Fight Club* itself explores what it considers to be cultural issues with societal and familial structures on a number of different levels.

To sufficiently understand Palahniuk’s place in a romantic tradition, it is therefore necessary to understand the ways in which transgressive fiction operates in the same romantic tradition and as a reaction to cultural structures. James Gardner describes the

transgressive as “liberal or leftist...it seeks the distinction of radical ‘otherness’ and...aspires to threaten the status quo” (54). He goes on to discuss the violence (both sexual and otherwise) that is implicit in the various works he considers in his essay. However, in a genre that is already by definition nebulous (as a matter of fact, if it wasn’t difficult to define, that would defeat its own point – the definition of the transgressive fiction restricts it to preconceived formulas, which are its antithesis; thus, it cannot be concretely defined.) Gardner finds that he is unable to clearly place his discussion and, rather, devolves into a discussion of violence isolated from transgressive fiction’s larger set of themes. He intimates that transgressive fiction like *American Psycho* and other such works is violent simply for violence’s sake: “One senses that [the author’s] gaze is always steadily fixed on the reader, as though asking, ‘Are you revolted yet? Are you shocked?’” (55). Later, he suggests that

One crucial difference between these authors and the authors of ordinary novels...is that, whereas the latter are content to preserve the traditional protocols of fiction, these newcomers would have us believe, as they themselves believe, that they have penetrated to an all-important and long-hidden truth about human society...There is an element of bad faith, if not downright hypocrisy, in these novels...It comes in the form of the seemingly irresistible need of the authors to attribute to their private preoccupations a larger social message, which is really only window dressing” (56).

Gardner’s critique is partially a product of his own revulsion: ironic, as he himself has become the “victim” to precisely what he has accused the authors of doing – shocking readers for shock’s sake – without actually proving in any satisfactory manner

that they are doing that at all. Moreover, in doing so, he ignores the larger literary history that informs novels like *Fight Club*. It is his accusation, by inference, that transgressive fiction seeks to tear down “the traditional protocols of fiction,” that should be a call to modern criticism to more accurately and carefully evaluate such works: not because Gardner’s evaluation is accurate, but because it is common (Gardner 56). Gardner’s essay, however, is valuable, because it does give the reader some knowledge into what transgressive fiction actually seeks; to destabilize, shock, and offend *in order* to reveal some other truth or make some other commentary. In other words, transgressive violence is a means, but not (one hopes) an end.

*Fight Club* operates in two modes: the transgressive, wherein the body is abused, tortured, and torn to pieces, and the romantic, wherein human attraction at its most basic level is examined. Both of these modes point toward the novel’s cultural commentary and its problems with the bipolarity of modern masculine identity. While *Fight Club* is reactionary, and while it encounters modern American culture specifically, it also represents a narrative largely driven by romance despite its more typically transgressive discussions of narcissism, gender identity, and the social effects of capitalism. While social critique and the problem of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century masculinity is *Fight Club*’s end, the romance in the novel is its engine – and the dearth of critical attention devoted to *Fight Club*’s romantic aspects and structure does the novel a great disservice, especially as it is in and by the action of romance in the novel that the narrator’s identity – and the identity of the reader, if one is, like most modern critics, to accept an *Everyman* interpretation of the narrator – fluctuates and is defined.

Before attempting a more thorough analysis of the narrative's romance, it is necessary to examine how the novel stands insofar as its place in contemporary and popular criticism – in other words, why it has been critically treated the way that it has. Reactions to *Fight Club* – and to Palahniuk's catalog in general – have varied widely. Kenneth MacKendrick notes that,

A lot of people hate Chuck Palahniuk's writing...He's been identified as misogynist, a nihilist, and an American pornographer, not always in that order...Palahniuk [is]...often identified by reviewers [as a geek]. Let us remember that... a geek is the one with the sharp choppers biting the head off a live chicken, a carnival performer, a charlatan, a para-journalist, a shock-jock writer with an audience of teenage pot-heads (4, 5).

Though MacKendrick hesitates to clearly evaluate these statements, his assertions are not entirely without merit. Palahniuk's infamous story "Guts" is known to cause episodes of fainting, vomiting, and even, in one case, a seizure during live readings. Palahniuk himself notes that, while talking about *Haunted* in his writer's group, "...my story called 'Exodus' sent a friend into my bathroom where she cried for the rest of the evening. Later, her therapist would ask for a copy of the story to help with her psychoanalysis" ("Guts Effect" 1). These examples of the impact that Palahniuk's writing can have inform the criticism to some degree, "steering" critical interpretations of *Fight Club*.

Steffan Hantke studies this phenomenon in more detail, noting that "Given Palahniuk's endearing desire for notoriety, the story of the fainting reader speaks to his public image as a literary provocateur, a writer who, like his musical equivalent Marilyn Manson, pushes the envelope and is loved by his fans for frightening and assaulting

them” (197). It is readily apparent that the author is delighted and amused by violent reactions to his work, and, furthermore, that these reactions are deliberately and carefully incited. Palahniuk *is* violent – not in the stereotypically brutish, masculine way that one might associate with a work like *Fight Club*, but violent nonetheless. However, like other transgressive authors, his violence is not purposeless. Read Mercer Schuchardt, in the introduction to *You Do Not Talk About Fight Club: I Am Jack’s Completely Unauthorized Essay Collection*, labels Palahniuk an “existentialist paramedic” (1). The simile he is drawing is obvious: contemporary society is the patient, the victim of its own excesses and missteps, and Palahniuk is its EMT, his brutal fiction the defibrillator trying to restart the cultural heart – and, like a defibrillator, it is deliberately shocking.

It is worth noting that Palahniuk is hardly the first person to have used violence *specifically* in order to more clearly make a point, even outside of the confines of transgressive fiction: the inimitable Flannery O’Connor, in *Mystery and Manners*, famously said, “for the hard of hearing you shout and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures” (34). Like Palahniuk, her fiction is characterized by perverse, twisted figures and gruesome killings, and, like Palahniuk, she uses violence as a means rather than as an end. This is a crucial point, because, as we can see through an examination of Gardner’s argument, it is easy to interpret *Fight Club* and other fiction like it as being violent simply for violence’s sake. The violence of *Fight Club* – and of transgressive fiction in general, however – is hardly as “new” as critics like Gardner might presume it to be: the transgressive is, by its own revolutionary and anti-rationalist nature, another incarnation of romanticism: its primal yearning for destabilization of that

which is established represents a larger set of literary themes that inform the genre as it exists today.

Apart from his themes, the occurrences in his work, the violence of Palahniuk's prose has also been critically discussed *ad nauseum*. Perhaps most notably, Jesse Kavadlo describes the experience of reading Palahniuk as,

Like having your eyes rubbed raw with broken glass... You feel the shards in your eyes, yes, and then you're being punched, hard, your nose broken. Like the world is broken. Livid because there's violence, but there's sex, there's the bodily fluids that accompany violence and sex. Eyes rubbed in broken glass, first, then in blood and lymph, and you want more. That's just the plot. Don't even get me started on the characters. You should stop listening right now (3).

According to Kavadlo, Palahniuk does violence not just to his characters, but, through proxy, his readers. This assertion falls very much into line with the *Everyman* interpretation of the character of the narrator (something which is, at this point, largely a given in the body of contemporary criticism on *Fight Club*) as well as with Hantke's description of Palahniuk as a "literary Marilyn Manson." One assumes that the namelessness of the narrator is meant to indicate that he shares the reader's cultural identity, and, therefore, the reader's problems. This is echoed in the novel: multiple times throughout, the narrator addresses the reader directly as "you," most notably in Chapter 9, where Tyler burns the narrator's hand with lye and lectures him on the virtues of self-destruction (74-78). The first chapter also makes use of this technique (13).

One of the most notable aspects of the novel, and one that demands further critical attention, is its extraordinary cultural impact. Palahniuk himself notes that a number of

“Fight Clubs” in the vein of those in the novel have been established “in real life,” which seems to at least partially validate the novel’s discussion of masculinity, or the lack thereof, as something which ought to be both critically and realistically addressed. It is impossible to say whether these are instigated by the same postmodern ennui that Jack suffers from, by Brad Pitt’s “manic” performance as Tyler Durden in David Fincher’s 1999 film, or any combination of those or other factors (Hornady).

## CHAPTER IV

### IDENTITY

My thesis rests on *Fight Club's* nature as a novel that is essentially romantic and that subsequently deals with intertwined questions of identity – a question that is further reflected on and to its discussion of masculinity and gender in general. The two ideas are intertwined, and inextricably so: as such, they must be studied in light of one another.

Jack's identity and the way said identity shifts across a spectrum of masculinity is primarily instigated by his romance with Marla and the subsequent occurrences that stem from his encounters with her. To understand how Marla influences the fluctuation of Jack's identity from his emasculated state at the beginning of the novel to the masculine "id" of Tyler, First, let us consider fluctuating identity – what I call "spectrums of identity" – in *Fight Club*.

The symbolism in the "Remaining Men Together" scene(s) in Chapter 2 indicates to the reader that Jack is (figuratively, temporarily) "castrated" at the beginning of the novel. Despite Jack's anxiety, *Fight Club* seems to indicate that the act of castration –

though it is touched on several times in the novel – may not drastically affect what it views as more internal masculine qualities so much as it affects the castrated person’s self-perception of those qualities: Big Bob, a monstrous ex-bodybuilder who attends “Remaining Men Together,” continues to self-identity as masculine despite having explicitly feminine external characteristics (breasts). His function as a literalization of Jack’s own anxiety over his masculine identity (or lack thereof) is important to the narrative.

The discussion of the narrator’s form of identity has to by its own nature be tied in with the idea of the romance, as it is the romance and the romantic journey which affect his change. It is worth noting that Jack’s figurative castration does not equal feminization so much as simply disinterested sloth: the loss of the narrator’s metaphorical testicles causes not feminization (which would be an active change of identity) but, rather, a lack of any clear identity at all.

I intend to postulate here that, in the beginning of the novel (at least, after the first chapter), Jack exists at one end of a spectrum that describes a line of progression between demasculinization and hypermasculinization. Jack’s inability to self-identify in any meaningful way effectively robs him of a “natural” identity, and he substitutes consumer goods; we see this through his fixation on IKEA furniture, his condo, his car, and the rest of his material possessions as value-objects with which he defines himself.<sup>3</sup> As his existence is tied up in furniture and other “valueless” objects, he himself is valueless: he is aware of his own lack of any identity deeper than that which is reflected in his “Johanneshov armchair” or “Rislampa/Har paper lamps” (43). This is reflected even in

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that a number of critics have already discussed *Fight Club*’s commentary on capitalism: this is not the focus of this paper, but it is worth the reader’s investigation in order to gain a broader understanding of how the novel functions in contemporary society.

the smallest details of the foodstuffs he keeps in his refrigerator: "...different mustards, some stone-ground, some English pub style. There were fourteen different kinds of fat-free salad dressing, and seven kinds of capers" (*Fight Club* 45). Even Jack's food has the veneer of flavor, of identity, but without actual substance.

Tyler represents the opposite extreme in the masculine gender spectrum. He is captivatingly macho, loud, brash, confident, and violent – the epitome of the sort of attitudes that, culturally, are considered "masculine." The nature of Tyler's existence is in and of itself a conflict: he exists as a reaction to Jack's demasculinization, born out of a cultural quest for identity. Kevin Alexander Boon notes,

In *Fight Club*, Palahniuk examines American men...who face a web of idealized rhetoric that publicly condemns qualities associated with typical manhood...yet still expects men to perform the same tasks they have been asked to perform for millennia: protection of the home and family, expansion and growth of the community, and defense of the nation, all of which demand an ability to act with aggression. Contemporary men have reacted in numerous ways to this cultural dissonance...All of these are attempts to preserve identity without exercising or excising masculinity (270).

Boon's "cultural dissonance" reflects the very problem that *Fight Club* is most directly encountering: the bipolar identity of the 20<sup>th</sup> century male. Jack's inability to self-identify, combined with his encounter with Marla, causes a "bipolar" split between himself and Tyler Durden, a split that can only be rectified by Marla herself.

One of the most interesting facets of Palahniuk's work is that it is both to a degree traditionalist but also explicitly binary, if not entirely heterosexual. In *Fight Club*, men

are obsessed with what they consider to be fundamentally masculine characteristics, but *Fight Club* suggests a mode of identity that goes beyond mere performance. This is an interesting detail because it stands in sharp contrast to more contemporary interpretations of gender *a la* Judith Butler and others, which maintain that gender is *entirely* performative. In fact, if gender is indeed entirely performative for Palahniuk, it turns the entirety of *Fight Club* into an existential farce – an interpretation that has, admittedly, been done before. In fact, the novel seems to assume that the masculine and feminine genders possess innate characteristics, a more archaic view of gender, though one that is also reminiscent of the older, knights-and-ladies romances. Whether the novel’s gender-constructions have any basis in reality is a topic for further argument; however, the vast popularity of *Fight Club*, especially among the young, restless American males who are its target audience, seems to suggest that it has touched a cultural nerve.

*Fight Club*’s emphasis on Jack’s “nesting instinct” is another way that it connects with the romantic tradition. Jack contrasts the more primal, emotional, “romantic” urges indicated by “pornography” against the social structures implied by the “Johanneshov armchair” and “Rislampa/Har” paper lamps.

I wasn't the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue. We all have the same Johanneshov armchair in the Strinne green stripe pattern...We all have the same Rislampa/Har paper lamps made from wire and environmentally friendly unbleached paper. (*Fight Club* 43).

The indication that the specifically-named items are shared among multiple people, i.e., that each of them possesses the same set of furniture, indicates both Jack’s “conformity”

to the structuralized society he lives in and implies an inability to self-identify so profound that he fills it – not only with furniture – but with the same furniture as other “identity-less” men. Critic Terry Lee notes that,

In the IKEA generation represented by the protagonist...sexual energy is also restrained. The male protagonist...substitutes a desire for consumer objects – IKEA home furnishings – for sexual desire and for emotional connection to human beings. Like Jack, men (and women) *want* things because the free enterprise, consumer-materialist culture they live in benefits from their desiring things. In *Fight Club*, Jack unconsciously substitutes the near-perfect IKEA sofa for human relationships (418).

Jack’s description of men “sit[ting] in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalog” instead of “pornography” represents not only the death of his sexual drive but a substitution of natural, “romantic” ideals for consumer goods that, instead of benefiting him, benefit the “consumer-materialist culture.” Jack’s postmodern ennui is something that he “fills” with consumer goods, and those consumer goods replace all desire, sexual or romantic.

In order to provide an agent of change, *Fight Club* spends a considerable amount of time playing with the idea of self-destruction, or “hitting bottom.” In the novel, Jack notes, “Maybe self-destruction is the answer” (49). Almost directly before this assertion, he muses,

It used to be enough that when I came home angry and knowing that my life wasn't toeing my five-year plan, I could clean my condominium or detail my car. Someday I'd be dead without a scar and there would be a really nice condo and

car...Nothing is static. Even the Mona Lisa is falling apart. Since Fight Club, I can wiggle half the teeth in my jaw” (49).

Though references to self-destruction and how it relates to the problem with identity are frequent throughout the course of the novel, possibly the best-known (and most critically discussed) illustration of this idea occurs at the end of Chapter 8 and the beginning of Chapter 9. Tyler moistens Jack’s hand with a kiss and pours lye on it. As Jack writhes in pain, Tyler subjects him to a lecture on the virtues of self-destruction.

“In ancient history,” Tyler says, “human sacrifices were made on a hill above a river.

After hundreds of people were sacrificed and burned, Tyler says, a thick white discharge crept from the altar, downhill to the river.

“Rain,” Tyler says, “fell on the burnt pyre year after year, and year after year, people were burned, and the rain seeped through the wood ashes to become a solution of lye, and the lye combined with the melted fat of the sacrifices, and a thick white discharge of soap crept out from the base of the altar and crept downhill toward the river.”

Where the soap fell into the river, Tyler says, after a thousand years of killing people and rain, the ancient people found their clothes got cleaner if they washed at that spot.

“It was right to kill all those people,” Tyler says.

The back of your hand is swollen red and glossy as a pair of lips in the exact shape of Tyler's kiss. Scattered around the kiss are the cigarette burn spots of somebody crying. “Open your eyes,” Tyler says, and his face is shining with tears.

"Congratulations," Tyler says. "You're a step closer to hitting bottom.

"You have to see," Tyler says, "how the first soap was made of heroes.'" (76-78)

The ironic thing, of course, is that, in a novel at least partially about counter-cultural anarchism, Palahniuk chooses to frame the virtue of self-destruction within the ideals of progress. However, the idea of self-destruction in *Fight Club* comes down very much to the question of identity and nature of self. In the novel, it is only the destruction of self that can become a catalyst for change. Tyler indicates that the only possible method of "progress" is *through* destruction, "human sacrifice." Later in the novel, members of Project Mayhem are assigned to carry out other "human sacrifices," advancing Tyler's "primal" agenda. Through the analogy of the soap as the result of human sacrifice, *Fight Club* indicates that even society's most tightly-constructed mores, ideals, or objects are informed by or constructed of more primal, even violent, urges, and that these urges cannot be suppressed even by the more elaborate constructs that they inform.

In this way, Jack's IKEA identity must also be sacrificed. The destruction of his possessions *is also* the destruction of self – as his possessions, in the beginning of the narrative, *are* self. After the demolition of his apartment, and, therefore, his "Rislampa/Har" identity, Jack turns immediately to Tyler, his hypermasculine identity, to fill the void.

*Fight Club* is a novel of transformation, and the destruction of Jack's possessions, the tearing-down of both his identity and of the social constructs that his identity is made of. However, Palahniuk's novel is not only a novel of personal transformation; it describes a *cultural* and *social* transformation on the part of the narrator that is expressed through extremes. The IKEA generation stands as the polar opposite of Tyler Durden's

intoxicating, “sexy” anarchism, which resembles what is sometimes referred to as “anarcho-primitivism” or “green anarchism” (Zerzan, *Primitivist Primer*). His extreme represents the opposite of Jack’s more “static” existence:

Imagine...stalking elk past department store windows and stinking racks of beautiful rotting dresses and tuxedos...you'll climb up through the dripping forest canopy and the air will be so clean you'll see tiny figures pounding corn and laying strips of venison to dry in the empty car pool lane of an abandoned superhighway stretching eight-lanes-wide and August-hot for a thousand miles. This was the goal of Project Mayhem, Tyler said, the complete and rightaway destruction of civilization” (125).

Tyler expands the question of the self-destruction of identity in order to substitute his own primitivistic, hypermasculine identity as something that can be applied to all society through the actions of Project Mayhem. The self, then, is, thematically speaking, expanded universally: Jack experiences this desire for the destruction of self on a larger level, particularly as he fights “Angel Face” in Chapter 16 of the novel:

I held the face of mister angel like a baby or a football in the crook of my arm and bashed him with my knuckles, bashed him until his teeth broke through his lips... I wanted to breathe smoke.  
Birds and deer are a silly luxury, and all the fish should be floating.  
I wanted to burn the Louvre. I'd do the Elgin Marbles with a sledge-hammer and wipe my ass with the *Mona Lisa*. This is my world, now (124).

This quote ties into the narcissism that is inherent in the masculine id: it displays Jack’s desire to destroy not only himself, but the world around him. The destruction of self is

paralleled with the destruction of culturally-significant objects or places, each of which pale in significance to Jack's own masculine crisis, expressed through his desire to eradicate that which is, in a way, culturally significant.

The point at which *Fight Club* turns into Project Mayhem is crucial, because it also marks the point where the narrator's own desire to self-identify becomes explicitly destructive: instead of searching for identity, he is, instead, now seeking to exercise his destructive id. Jack's desire to self-identify *through* self-destruction has moved outward from himself to become a desire to destroy everything around him. It is only towards the end of the novel that he begins to break away from the influence of Tyler, a transformation that culminates with Tyler's "death" in the tower.

The prevailing critical opinion is, in essence, that *Fight Club* is in and of itself a sort of "cry for help" on the part of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century male – an unfortunately simplistic interpretation. Though Boon is not necessarily incorrect (indeed, far from it) in his description of the issues that *Fight Club* is wrestling with, his analysis is also far from complete. *Fight Club* is undeniably concerned with the problem of masculinity – hence the novel's catch-phrase, "you do not talk about Fight Club," implicitly connected to public discussion of the problem of masculine identity. Ironically, in the context of Boon's "web of idealized rhetoric," Palahniuk renders, through the novel, all discourse *about* the novel – and, thereby, about the problem with masculinity – taboo. The heart of *Fight Club*, however, is the redemptive power of the romance which is the real center of the novel, and it is with this that we ought to be concerned: further consideration of *Fight Club*'s notions of identity will be discussed in the following section, as they are, again, inextricably tied up in the narrative's romantic construction.

## CHAPTER V

### ROMANCE

Insofar as *Fight Club* fits into a tradition of romantic literature, we have already considered its primal ideals, rejection of cultural structures, and the ways in which the body of transgressive literature as a whole encounters both of those ideas. However, the narrative of *Fight Club* is driven by a *specific* romance – that between Jack and Marla – or, rather, Jack/Tyler and Marla. Boiled down to its essence, *Fight Club*'s romance takes the form of heteronormative “pursuit,” the archetypal fictional and cultural ideal of the woman “pursued” by the man. However, the novel's heterosexual romance is complicated by the quasi-homosexual romance between Jack and Tyler. In fact, numerous critics have remarked on the visible, or, perhaps, rather ill-disguised homoeroticism in *Fight Club*. Indeed, *Fight Club*'s homoeroticism indicates a more complex “love triangle” than traditional interpretations of romance might initially suggest: however, surprisingly, it is by that heteronormative romance that Jack is finally redeemed, or, at least, saved from Tyler.

The idea of romantic attraction between a man and a woman driving a narrative seems contrary to the destructive, violent, and relentlessly brutal nature of Palahniuk's fiction, though it is quintessentially romantic. However, the manipulation of literary tropes is something that is characteristic of transgressive fiction.

*Fight Club* is undeniably gender-centric, and, though it appears to be more explicitly concerned with the male gender, it is more implicitly concerned with the female one. It is against the work's lone female character, Marla Singer, that the narrator must define himself, and it is she who is the constant objective of his attention, and, finally, his savior – an interesting reversion of what one might usually expect from something which is purportedly a romance. But, in fact, Marla-as-ideal and as the narrator's savior, makes sense: romance generally focuses on the female character's instigation of transformation on the part of the male (this is a theme common in everything from Chretien de Troyes' romance *Eric and Enide* to Zach Braff's romantic comedy *Garden State* – not that the two are comparable). In the same way, Marla affects Jack's transformation. It can be safely assumed that most romances, which generally center around a male character if not several, are transformative.

Palahniuk establishes the narrator as a masculine person without identity and without, further, a clear way out of the issues that arise from that lack of identity. To try to identify himself, he attends support groups for people who are chronically ill. Palahniuk depicts the support groups as absurd, grotesque, dark, and ridiculous: indeed, thematically, it is only Marla who stands out from the background of absurdity. She is someone the narrator "recognizes," because she is like him – and he, in his head, labels her "faker," despite the irony that he himself is "faking" the illnesses that each of the

support groups are purportedly supposed to treat (*Fight Club* 18). It is here that a connection is established between the two, and where the burgeoning of the romance which the pattern of the novel follows is established – though the narrator, of course, does not realize it, in his own hypocrisy accusing Marla of doing precisely what he himself has already done. As noted previously, the backdrop of the testicular cancer support group should not escape the reader insofar as its metaphorical import rests; it is, further, interesting to note the absurdity of Marla, a woman, being there in the first place.

What is crucially important to note at this stage is that it is Marla, and Marla alone, who “instigates” Jack’s transformative journey, and who continues to influence or cause all of his movements towards a meaningful identity throughout the course of the novel. It is through Marla that Tyler is “born” – or at least becomes visible to Jack – and it is because of Marla that the narrator is forced to face his own masculine crisis. It is because of Marla that fight club and, then, Project Mayhem exist. As he sits with Tyler’s gun in his mouth at the top of the Parker-Morris building, Jack tells us,

While desks and filing cabinets and computers meteor down on the crowd around the building and smoke funnels up from the broken windows and three blocks down the street the demolition team watches the clock, I know all of this: the gun, the anarchy, the explosion is really about Marla Singer (*Fight Club* 14).

By Jack’s own admission, Marla is necessary because she is, again, the instigator of his transformative journey: it is by her presence that Tyler Durden is created. “Without Marla, Tyler would have nothing,” says Jack, several lines later. The crucial realization here, in the context of the novel, is tied up in Palahniuk’s statement that *Fight Club* is about the “man reaching a point where he can commit to a woman.” Indeed,

Jack's lack of identity – especially specifically *masculine* identity – makes him “unworthy” of Marla. When Jack initially meets Marla, it is in the context of his support groups, which he was using to avoid confronting his own “bipolar masculine crisis.” Upon their meeting, Jack is again inflicted with insomnia and is now forced to confront the problem of his own identity instead of hiding in support groups and IKEA furniture. Unable to find release, he turns, instead, to Tyler and to fight club. His encounter with Tyler and with fight club are crucially important to his own character: the repressed, masculine id must be dealt with. It is, finally, Marla who “rescues” him from Tyler – she who comes to him on the top floor of the Parker-Morris building, Tyler holding a gun in his mouth, and by her presence banishes Tyler.

The romantic “journey” that is instigated through the loss of Jack's possessions – a journey that involves both the pursuit of Marla Singer, the work's “womanly ideal,” as it were, and, as a condition of the pursuit of Marla, a quest for identity on the part of the narrator.

Jack's quest for identity, however, does not manifest itself completely in his heterosexual pursuit of Marla as something by which he can define his own identity – in fact, the relationship between Jack, Tyler, and Marla is depicted as “a sort of triangle thing...I want Tyler. Tyler wants Marla. Marla wants me” (14). Critics have picked up on a considerable number of homosexual elements, specifically, a great deal of sexual tension between Tyler and Jack. Of course, this is complicated by the fact that Tyler *is* actually Jack, which makes his homosexual attraction to Tyler narcissistic, as well as love for a hypermasculinized vision of himself. Both the movie and the film are filled with explicitly homosexual behavior on the part of Jack and Tyler. Passages in the novel – two

examples might be where the narrator first meets Tyler Durden on a nude beach and the previously-discussed scene where his hand is burnt with lye (this is especially blatant: the kiss, the white, flowing soap, and the theme of the entirety of said painful, homoerotic encounter as “hitting bottom” all make this relatively clear). It is obvious that this is a theme that pervades both the novel and the film; the question is, of course, how it fits into the idea of a “traditional” or male-female romance.

Tyler, of course, “is” Jack, so any homoerotic attraction between the two must, again, be narcissistic. He is also the literal embodiment of Jack’s own distorted yearning for a hypermasculine identity – a yearning so strong that it manifests itself in an entirely different personality, which must, again, be dealt with before he is “worthy” of Marla. Bearing this in mind, it seems clear that – despite the symbolic homoeroticism throughout the novel – that homoeroticism in *Fight Club* is largely metaphorical, and represents the narrator’s desire for hypermasculinity (the socio-sexual values of ancient Greece come to mind here, though reviewing those influences on Palahniuk’s work is a task far too large for this essay).

Further homoerotic imagery can be drawn from the beginning and end of the book, in the Parker-Morris building, as Jack sits, restrained, with Tyler’s gun in his mouth. Indeed, it has been a relatively long-running tradition in criticism to associate firearms with phalluses. The phallus, as indicative of masculinity, becomes the “weapon” by which Tyler is actually killed: however, Jack uses it on himself, “firing” the symbol of his own masculinity through his head in order to destroy Tyler. Thomas Peele picks up on these themes: “The phallic symbolism is obvious... The first, short chapter is filled with references to the gun in his mouth, the tonguing of it, the adjusting it in his mouth to be

more comfortable” (863). This partly indicates *Fight Club*’s homosexual themeology, which has been considered before. With the “phallus” in this scene that of both Jack *and* Tyler, the narrator becomes essentially self-fellating, and it is only with, ironically, the “discharge” of the phallic weapon that he rids himself of Tyler, albeit also destroying himself in the process – indicative of, again, the “bipolar” cultural crisis. This is crucial, as the discharge of the firearm represents a specifically and innately masculine action: in other words, it seems to indicate that Jack has, indeed, found a “balance” of a sort – has, in essence, a masculine identity now *stronger*, and in the view of the novel more properly oriented, than Tyler’s.

Let us return to and review the concept of a “spectrum of identity.” Jack begins with an identity that is, essentially, “null,” or nonexistent. His lack of and desire for identity, brought to the fore by Marla, gives birth to Tyler Durden, who is his masculine ideal: something he “loves,” an image of what he would like to be. Tyler represents the hypermasculine identity, the upper-end, so to speak, of Jack’s identity spectrum. Since Jack fails to define his own identity, retreating instead to into the comfort of IKEA furniture and support groups, his identity is thereby defined by those other than himself: on one hand, the violent, “macho” Tyler, and, on the other, Marla, the feminine. In fact, it is only at the crux of the novel, during the final scene in the Parker-Morris building, that Jack comes close to finding a balance – and this balance is instigated by Marla. During the final scene, the differentiation between Jack and Tyler is yet more heavily emphasized. However, it is clear that Tyler is an extreme that, in this scene, stands in direct opposition to Jack’s moderation.

Jack does not actually clearly self-identify, or gain any sort of ability to clearly direct his own decisions, until Marla “rescues” him from Tyler:

Tyler and me at the edge of the roof, the gun in my mouth, I’m wondering how clean this gun is.

Three minutes.

Then somebody yells.

“Wait,” and it’s Marla coming toward us across the roof.

Marla’s coming toward me, just because Tyler’s gone. Poof. Tyler’s my hallucination, not hers. Fast as a magic trick, Tyler’s disappeared. And now I’m just one man holding a gun in my mouth (204).

Jack cannot rescue himself: it is, in fact, Marla, in the company of the members of his support groups, who rescues him and who allows him to “kill” Tyler, freeing himself from the clutches of his own violent, masculine id. Indeed, though she denies it, Marla’s love for Jack is so great that she is willing to sacrifice her own life for him:

I yell, go. Get out of here. This building is going to explode.

Marla yells, “We know” (204).

The narrator denies Marla’s affection, claiming that she “likes Tyler.” ““No, I like you,” Marla shouts. ‘I know the difference’” (205). Marla’s self-sacrificial love for Jack, however, fails to save him: he fires the gun into his own head and subsequently loses his mind. In the final chapter of the novel, Jack is in an asylum, though he thinks he has died and gone to heaven: he continues communicating with Marla through letters. “If there were a telephone in Heaven,” Jack says, “I would call Marla from heaven and the moment she says, ‘Hello,’ I wouldn’t hang up. I’d say, ‘Hi. What’s happening? Tell me

every little thing” (207). It is clear that, despite his final self-destruction (even destruction of his psyche) to rid himself of Tyler, Marla is really the only tangible thing in Jack’s world: the asylum is “heaven,” the nurses a “heavenly host,” and the psychiatrist “God,” but Marla still retains her identity.

Part of the nature of Jack and Tyler’s relationship insofar as it reflects a question of identity is reflected in Freud’s essay on “the Uncanny” and his exploration of doppelgangers, a literary tradition of which *Fight Club* is a part. Reading *Fight Club* in Freudian terms, one might say that Jack suffers from a lack of or retarded maturation; like the children of Freud’s “Uncanny,” he creates a doppelganger to cope with his desire for immortality (a desire that Tyler expresses in the very first chapter) as well as a result of his own obsession with self. In *Fight Club*, Tyler says “This isn’t really death... We’ll be legend. We won’t grow old” (11). Jack, who by now “sees through” Tyler, says “Tyler, you’re thinking of vampires” (12). He also offers, “You want to be a legend, Tyler, man, I’ll make you a legend. I’ve been here from the beginning. I remember everything” (15).

*Fight Club*’s exploration of the narrator’s bipolar masculine identity precludes the “end” of the romance – Jack does not, in fact, “get the girl,” but ends up going insane and being committed to an asylum instead. *Fight Club*, in its effort to seek balance between Jack’s “rationalist” society and Tyler’s “romantic” idealism, has come to a contradiction between the two, and one that cannot be easily rectified – indeed, Jack finds it *impossible* to rectify it. The only response to a contradiction that cannot be resolved is insanity, and, therefore, Jack goes insane.

It is worth noting that my interpretation of the novel largely rests on the assumption that the narrator accurately reports his interactions with Marla: in other

words, the narrator's unreliability or psychosis extends only to his perception of Tyler. If one is to assume that Jack is an unreliable narrator, a host of new questions arise: however, it would not necessarily preclude the interpretation of *Fight Club* as a romance (because, even if the narrator is still imagining the romance, he must desire it), and nor would it negate its discussion of romanticism and rationalism.

The larger questions that *Fight Club* explores through its final chapter and the fate of Jack parallel cultural discussions of romanticism and rationalism. The rational, societal ideals that control Jack at the beginning of the novel are destroying him, but it seems, on the whole, like romance has largely failed to rectify the situation by the end of the novel. The final chapter is deliberately vague: Jack remains in contact with Marla, and seems to have some tangible idea of a connection with "earth" (despite that fact that he believes he has died and gone to heaven.) He expresses his intention to one day talk to Marla again.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

The fundamental problem with viewing *Fight Club* as nothing more than primal-scream therapy for the modern-day male or typical transgressive violence – or even by its homosexual elements, or its historical-social viewpoint, or its commentary on capitalism – is that these parts are all united by a single, romantic narrative, without which they are nonsensical and render the novel easily misinterpreted to say the least. The novel has been constructed around the idea of the tripartite romance between Jack/Tyler and Marla as well as the changes that the romance itself, and that Marla, the object of his affections, instill in him. To ignore *Fight Club*'s nature as a romance is to ignore the very essence of the work. Jack's own inability to define his own identity in a meaningful way, especially as it regards his own masculinity, drives the narrative as a quest for identity *through* the quest for, and directed by, Marla.

The really interesting thing about *Fight Club* is that, despite its more aggressive critics, it is anything but male-centric, since it is only through a woman that the narrator

manages to reach the point where he has encountered, recognized, and dealt with his own identity crisis.

Structurally, *Fight Club* also transcends transgressive ideals, as it utilizes an older ideas – the ideals of the primal, the romantic, as well the form of a romance driving the narrative – in the pursuit of a contemporary message. There is an entire meta-narrative on the value and meaning of history layered on top of the novel, one that is implicit in Tyler’s rejection of society and desire to “wipe clean” the slate of time and rebuild from a “blank.” Further evidence of this is seen in Tyler’s explicit desire to “[destroy] every scrap of history” (12). Additionally, it is revealed (in the first chapter, no less) that Tyler’s “real target” is a “national museum” (14).

Presuming that *Fight Club* is a romance means that, in light of the popular perception of the novel, it gains, like its narrator, a kind of cultural and literary duality – half dirt-and-fluid-filled pukefest, half homage to the age-old knights-and-ladies romance. The bipolarity of *Fight Club*, in this respect, to some degree echoes the cultural contradictions that Boon draws attention to as well as the bipolar nature of the novel itself in its treatment of Tyler’s more “romantic” ideals versus society’s more “rational” ideals.

Ultimately, *Fight Club* lacks a clear ending, and, as such, doesn’t really resolve itself in the same way that one might expect a romantic story to. However, the novel’s lack of resolution is itself meta-commentary on the nature of the problem it encounters, and the question of Jack and Marla’s future is left open-ended. It may be that the novel simply describes the failure of romantic idealism to supplant rationalism, but, presuming that Jack’s identity is the “end” of his romantic quest (at least, partially) this renders the

more rational, structured ideals in the beginning of the novel equally invalid. Again, Ellis' "NO EXIT" comes to mind.

Studying *Fight Club*'s romance is important, because it informs the entirety of the novel and because it is, again, the "engine" of the narrator's movement within the novel. As such, to comment critically on *Fight Club*, it is important to gain a clear understanding of the way romance moves the narrative forward and how larger romantic ideals inform the novel in general. *Fight Club*, despite being a part of the transgressive genre, despite being "new," is, in fact, not new at all: it describes an ideal-conflict that has been, culturally speaking, present for some considerable period of time – a conflict that has no satisfactory resolution other than either complete apathy or unfettered surrender to a more primal state of being.

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