Masculinity and the Postmodern in American Psycho and Fight Club

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MASculINITY AND THE POSTMoDERN IN AMERICAN PSYCHO AND

FIGHT CLUB

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By
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MASCULINITY AND THE POSTMODERN IN AMERICAN PSYCHO AND FIGHT CLUB

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Initially, this paper traces masculinity in America from the nineteenth century and up through the mid twentieth century in order to define traditional masculinity and identify some of its characteristics. Traditional masculinity, typically demonstrated though aggressive and violent behavior, is currently undergoing cultural and social revisions due to various contemporary ideas. In analyzing American Psycho and Fight Club, two controversial novels written in the past twenty years, the paper makes clear that the protagonists acutely feel the tension that exists between historical perceptions of masculinity and current ideas of what men should be. They react to that tension by exhibiting behavior that is characterized as protest masculinity or ultramasculinity.

The problems of waning masculinity, however, are symptomatic of the larger problems posed by a postmodern era as a result of high capitalism. Postmodernism is explored, as are its origins and contexts, through the work of Frederic Jameson and Francis Fukuyama, and its ideas are applied to the characters from both novels. Though Patrick Bateman, the protagonist in American Psycho, is unaware that he lives during the postmodern timeframe, he nevertheless manifests his anxiety to it primarily through acts of violence against women and other assertions of what he believes is traditional masculinity. The narrator of Fight Club and his alter ego Tyler Durden are more aware of the stultifying nature of rampant capitalism than Patrick Bateman; their reactions to corporate capitalism and postmodernism are manifested through violence and eventually efforts at revolution aimed at one of the financial centers of America.
The nature of postmodernism as a stultifying and anti-individualistic perception becomes clear through an analysis of each protagonist’s job and daily life. It is clear that the postmodern era is socially and psychically disturbing to men, as evidenced by the dual nature of each protagonist’s personality and their apparent lack of unifying identities. Patrick Bateman and the narrator in Fight Club create, whether consciously or unconsciously, alter egos that allow them to exhibit their respective masculinities in a culture that no longer accepts such behavior. That both characters manifest extreme versions of masculinity is particularly important to note, and indicative of a primal need to be traditionally manly. Contemporary society attempts to repress the behavior that stems from that need, and even attempts to erase the need to be masculine as well. Neither character experiences any catharsis because of his actions. Patrick Bateman learns nothing about himself, nor does he feel any remorse for the murders he committed throughout the novel. Tyler Durden is dead at the end of Fight Club, and though the narrator lives on, he is confined in an insane asylum, which to him is perhaps preferable to the outside world.
Waning Masculinity

Imagine for a moment a large glass building filled with row upon endless row of gray walled cubicles inhabited by similarly dull and colorless people, typing and talking professionally away, and then a factory, the same shade of gray, with machines working while a mentally fatigued man pulls pieces from the maw of the means of production. Imagine the confluence of people in and out of a convenience store, where the products are colorfully displayed under the phasing fluorescent lights; a man stands behind a counter, wearing the same shirt as his co-worker, on it a name tag that simply says “Associate” despite the fact that “Allen” or “Dave” is engraved into the white piece of plastic. Follow one of these men away from his place of work, any one and let the cliché of contemporary existence wash over you as you picture one of these typical people speaking tonelessly to a young man or woman wearing another name tag over a knit polo shirt in a large store anywhere in the United States—he wants to buy the same beige tile, stereo system, or colorful shirt that his neighbor has so that his house, his entertainment, his identity is as pleasantly similar as possible to everyone else’s. Is he really a man? He’s certainly not manly like James Cahn, or even as virile as Mel Gibson can seem to be.

You know this man, this person, who listens to the radio Top 40, drives an indistinctive white or silver vehicle, and lives in a house or apartment that looks like every other. He likes movies with action, supple and scantily clad yet strangely defiant women, and reads the newspaper, if he reads at all. His personal hobbies are playing fantasy football on his computer at work or drinking fresh yet tasteless beer on his couch—whatever it is, it provides a strange and self conscious pleasure made all the more
interesting by the faint aura of despicability that pervades the act, given his company's internet technology policy or the buzz he knows is bad for his liver. But what happened to him? Is this what was promised in film after film, in television dramas, serial novels, and Bud Lite commercials?

The question that arises out of this brief and stereotypical depiction of the contemporary male is one of waning masculinity. It is easy to say of the above example, "No, that's not what a man really is," but it is not so easy to determine why the stereotype evoked is one that seems to reflect contemporary identity so well, especially when we still have very well-kept ideas of what a man is supposed to be. The modern American ideal of manhood can be traced back to the late nineteenth century. Clay Motley finds that the idea of a self-made man as one who was economically independent and emotionally self sufficient was prevalent among the middle class in the early twentieth century because it seemed to allow for manly pursuits such as competition and encouraged manly values like "assertiveness, ambition, and lust for power" (61). The nation of the self made man as an ideal was criticized however, because it seemed to suggest an "over-civilization" and subsequent feminization of the otherwise primal nature of men. Business failed as a repository for male energy because the industrial revolution had helped create a corporate culture that seemed to stifle man's fundamental need to express himself physically and sometimes violently. The resultant backlash against that over-civilization culminated in the notion of "passionate manhood" wherein combativeness and aggression "were exalted as ends in themselves" (Rotundo 5-6). A
greater emphasis came to be placed upon physicality and strenuous labor as emblematic of manhood and embodied in figures like Teddy Roosevelt and his roughriders.¹

For a very long time the image of Roosevelt and his type of manhood was a dominant one. Sports were the particular provenance of these manly men; they served a dual purpose in that men got to play violent games like football and other men got to watch them play. The spectatorship combined with the contests help enforce the idea of manly men as those who were aggressive and even vicious, but also helped solidify a male culture in which men bonded and reinforced those same ideas in groups (62).

During the mid to late nineteen fifties, however, a change began to take place. The conceptualization of masculinity that had defined and influenced male behavior for more than a generation once again proved incapable of surviving cultural and societal changes. The events and perceptions that began to disrupt traditionally held ideas of masculinity are varied and stretch across the decades since World War II with increasing rapidity—the industrial boom, feminism, the emergence of global culturalism, and the takeover of corporate capitalism all had a hand in the destruction of masculinity as we used to know it. From a certain perspective the fall of traditional masculinity can hardly be called detrimental to society. The violence, stoic disregard for feelings, and general macho attitude that characterized manly behavior prior to the fifties is perhaps best left in the past, relegated to film and literature as an anachronism. Yet, to characterize waning masculinity as a problem in and of itself brought about by the environment and changing cultural and societal perceptions is to fail to analyze completely the differences between men then and now. Though it is obvious that men are now different in fundamental ways

¹ A more extensive discussion of masculinity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries can be found in Michael Kimmel’s Manhood in America and Anthony Rotundo’s American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era.
from the men of the past, due in part to different conceptions of what masculinity is, it is nevertheless insufficient to assert that waning masculinity is solely responsible for that difference.

Writers of popular literature and film have attempted to identify the underlying problem regarding declining masculinity with varying success. The lack of understanding that informs our conception of masculinity has been explored recently in film and literature but work in that area has seemed more intent on obscuring the divide between men and women rather than discovering what it is to be a man. Movies like Mr. Mom bend traditional gender expectations and seem to suggest that the difference between men and women is largely a social factor that can be alleviated through gender role reversal. Cross dressing, as explored in such films as The Birdcage and Priscilla: Queen of the Desert, seem particularly popular, especially when the men dressed as women get in touch with their “feminine sides” and come to understand themselves better. Other films and books address the problem of waning masculinity through a reactionary type of hyper-masculinity; they present characters that are either hackneyed, stereotypically violent men—think Rambo, or anything with Arnold Schwarzenegger—or else they parody such works to expose the stupidity of that type of behavior.

Two books published during the nineteen-nineties delve into the question of masculinity with more incisiveness, however. American Psycho, by Brett Easton Ellis, at a cursory glance seems a strange and difficult narrative about pointless violence. However, it becomes clear after some study that the book is deeply concerned with masculine identity as it exists in an increasingly un-masculine time period. Chuck Palahniuk’s Fight Club is ostensibly concerned with the same thing, demonstrating as it
does a reactionary masculinity intent on the destruction of a system that stifles it. Yet each of these books raises questions beyond the sometimes complex problem of masculinity, and each explores more than a protagonist’s reaction to it. Both *Fight Club* and *American Psycho* suggest a larger problem, one that is intertwined with masculinity and men, but that has its genesis in societal and cultural conditions brought about by high capitalism and an increasingly corporate mentality. In both, an exploration of masculinity is manifest, but so as well is a sense of the postmodern and its effects upon the lives of the characters; it is no coincidence that postmodernity and waning masculinity are concurrent problems. In fact, the decline in traditional masculinity as it is explained above and its reassertion in each novel is a result of the postmodern condition.

Both *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* were controversial novels when first published, due mainly to the violence that is a major part in each. Some readers decried *American Psycho*, in particular, because the violence in the book is often committed against women and virtually every male character is a misogynist in some meaningful way. *Vintage*, the company that published Ellis’ novel, angered women’s groups and feminist critics and even engendered a potential boycott of their product line by refusing to censor the text. *Fight Club*, while perhaps not sparking such a lightning rod of criticism, nevertheless faced its own share of inflammatory derision—the novel has been criticized as disgusting and subversive, at once an anti-capitalist rant and “dark and unsettling” satire.² Both books are at once satirically funny and terribly violent, but also posit unique perceptions of modern day American life, particularly as it applies to men.

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² Roger Cohen’s article, “Editorial Adjustments In *American Psycho*” from the New York Times, 18 February 1991, details Ellis’ publishing difficulties. The Seattle Times reviewed *Fight Club* and found it subversive, as well as “dark and unsettling.”
the quintessential eighties man, concerned only with “number one” and the accumulation of wealth—and the occasional, brutal dismemberment and literal consumption of women. The unnamed narrator of *Fight Club* is an emasculated, milquetoast insomniac who works a job he hates and attends support groups for terminally ill men and women in his quest for something authentic. He also moonlights as an ultra-masculine revolutionary who wishes to destroy the world that so stultifies his pathetic alter ego.

Bateman and the narrator are, superficially at least, somewhat iconographic. Patrick Bateman embodies the eighties, with his good looks, obvious wealth, and thin veneer of sophistication. He consumes at an exorbitant rate, paying thousands of dollars for jukeboxes, clothing, artwork, and an apartment in the sky. The narrator of *Fight Club* is equally emblematic of his time period, the nineteen-nineties, when the avarice of the preceding decade necessarily evolved into a more corporate world in which individuality and the concerns of men were secondary to the bottom line of the company. He is what we might call successful, but finds that his life is defined by his labor, to the exclusion of almost everything else. He has no social life as all of his time is spent either flying to or from some place and enjoys his wealth only insofar as it makes his home conform to some idea garnered from a magazine. The thing that sets these two apart, however, from people you or I might see going about their typical lives is the madness that pervades their narratives. These men, despite their seeming similarity to common people, are nevertheless irretrievably insane. Each has two personalities, one that he presents to the world at large, typically male and useless, and the other that exists after the lights go down, away from the prying eyes of the “normal people.” These alter egos drive the narratives and tell each character’s self-important story as if he were actively seeking an
audience. Each, in entirely different ways, wants that loving lens of the camera on himself so as to lend context and meaning to his bizarre recounting. Bateman imagines himself as the star of his own American drama, demonstrating both the physical properties and social skills that might make for a cheesier and less endearing version of The Secret of My Success. Conversely, he also enjoys portraying himself as aberrant, and during his recitals of violence, often perceives himself to be the lead in a slasher flick, perusing and subsequently mauling young, good-looking women in an askew assertion of his in-question masculinity. Fight Club’s protagonist, on the other hand, wants to tell his story because he wants to rationalize his actions, his need to destroy that which society and history have built, so we might recognize the problem that prompted his madness and also the complete lack of a viable solution. His alter ego, he seems to say, is everything that most men want to be, but cannot, for there is no longer any place for that person. Yet, both the narrator and Bateman need to be recognized by others for what they think they are and what they want to do, lest they go through their lives unremarked upon and unremarkable. The simple need for recognition as individuals is what impels them to tell us their stories.

Each character’s narrative addresses an increasing problem in American society—the decline of the male persona as it traditionally existed in a world that becomes seemingly more superficial and meaningless as the days go by. Declining masculinity, and a tentative breakdown of traditional gender roles in contemporary American society, are indicative of changing values but also highlight the problem of belatedness, particularly for men, who have no great war to fight, no real ideological enemy to face,
and in many ways no overarching purpose to fulfill. This idea is particularly prevalent in *Fight Club*, but is just as applicable to *American Psycho*. The time of the typical aggressive and physically imposing man seems to have passed by, despite the preponderance of masculine images from the past and our nostalgia for them. While masculinity and the ways in which contemporary males deal with its devaluation and subversion are central themes in both novels, there is an implicit dilemma that influences each text; the questions of maleness and what it means to be a man are symptomatic of the wider problems of a late capitalist society with technological and aesthetic concerns that confound historical referents for understanding and implied meaning. These men are set adrift in a world of celluloid and glossy photographs with little to guide them besides hackneyed impressions of a past that they cannot relive or regain.

Both Bateman and the narrator of *Fight Club* possess alter egos who are capable of actions that are beyond their “real selves” and in some fashion allow them to be the men they think they should be. Of course, “real” as applied to either the narrator or Bateman is a loose term, and not only because they are fictitious characters. The two live lives that seem real but are colored by a perception of themselves and of the world that is mostly fantasy. It is difficult for the characters to think of themselves as “real” in that both conceive of themselves in a peculiarly dramatic way. Bateman thinks of himself as living a movie, and the narrator of *Fight Club* is incapable of finding anything authentic in his environment—thus the world itself, to the narrator, is unreal, a depiction of films

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3 “Belatedness,” as it is used here, is derivative of Harold Bloom’s ideas concerning poetry in *The Anxiety of Influence* and *A Map of Misreading*—that those who came before are so strong in their influence that they leave no room for new poets to produce anything truly original. This assertion holds particular strength in the modern and post modern periods because of the reverence accorded the “Greatest Generation” and the influence it has on subsequent generations of people, like Patrick Bateman and the narrator of *Fight Club*. 
and television programs that, like Plato's perception of the Forms, are artificial while retaining some idea of what reality exists. Bateman is a psychotic killer and cannibal who murders scores of women and minorities without remorse or explanation. The narrator suffers from Multiple Personality Disorder, manifesting an alter ego that takes over when he falls asleep to wreak havoc on himself and the world around him. Their actions notwithstanding, each has experienced a splintering of the psyche, brought about by the world and his perception of it. The failure of the characters, insofar as we might attribute failure or success to the actions and thoughts contained in their narratives, lies in each one's inability to realize that the problem they react against is more than a problem of waning masculinity or the loss of traditional male identity.

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4 There is an ongoing debate on whether or not Patrick Bateman actually commits the crimes he details in the novel. It seems unlikely that he might have committed so many grisly murders without getting caught. The novel indicates that many people either do not see Bateman while he is murdering people, or else mistake what he is doing for something else.
Much of the initial criticism of *American Psycho* found it lacking in artistic value or social importance because Patrick Bateman experiences no growth, evinces no remorse, and at the end of the novel, remains at large, ready and even eager to kill again. Furthermore, the novel is at times tedious, with the continual inventories of clothing that people are wearing, run downs of menu items, inane conversations between characters, and interludes on quasi-meaningful pop music that lend the book a certain boredom and stifle the readers’ ability to pay attention or want to. Indeed, even the gruesome killings become rote after a time, no longer as shocking or as terrifying as they are in the beginning of the novel. The presentation of violence becomes just as boring as the descriptions of what various characters are wearing and how much money they spend on dinner. One can witness rape and subsequent dismemberments and cannibalism only so many times before even those vile practices lose their potential to shock or sicken.

*American Psycho*, despite its technical deficiencies, is nevertheless very evocative of the postmodern man and posits, through its protagonist, the symptoms of a man struggling both with his role in the world as it is defined by the times and a need to adhere to some idealized version of man as he is presented through historical precedent. The images and the ideas that help conceptualize masculinity are, in the case of this novel, false in that they are built upon films, commercials, and television. Patrick Bateman, as a singular inherent identity, does not exist.

Superficially, Patrick Bateman is the sort of person a man might admire. He is rich, successful, and has his pick of gorgeous women who, if they don’t exactly find him charming, find in his economic and physical packaging something to be desired. Yet the
trappings with which we might define Bateman actually create Bateman. His well-kept physical appearance is derivative of fashion models and billboards, and his job is the same executive level job that everyone on Wall Street has. For Bateman, appearance is literally everything. Those other things with which men usually define themselves--job, home, possession, skills, love--are as devoid of meaning as is his material wealth and card board cut-out appearance. His relationships are empty in terms of love or understanding—his fiancé and girlfriend are essentially the same person, both in appearance and demeanor. The man’s home, his castle, is a mockery of high style and expensive vapidity, where one side of the room has the same high end appliances as the other, the walls are uniformly white and uninteresting, and his one piece of art is hung upside down because Bateman can’t even tell what it is.

It is clear that Bateman keeps himself in peak physical condition, modeling his own appearance after the billboards of Calvin Klein models that he must see as he commutes about town in his everyday life. In the chapter titled “Health Club” Bateman gives the reader a rundown of his remarkably difficult and lengthy workout sessions. By the number of sets and repetitions he describes, we must assume that the man is extraordinarily fit and possessed of great physical strength. He does “five sets of ten repetitions” on a Nautilus leg machine and then several sets of fifteen repetitions on a free weight machine for the same leg group. He sculpts his arms and chest with equal ardency, again using different types of machines that essentially produce the same workout (69). While his musculature must impart some sense of a masculine identity, what with muscles bulging and amount of weight lifted denoting a virile manness, Bateman’s skin care regimen conversely demonstrates his preoccupation with what one might
consider a particularly feminine concern. "Morning" details Bateman’s daily routine, from eating sissified foods like Japanese pears and bran cereal to his overwhelmingly feminine application of various creams and ungents that make his skin look better. He pays special attention to his face, using an "exfoliating gel scrub" in the shower and then "Mouse a Raiser, a shaving cream by Pour Homme," followed by a moisturizer, "an after shave lotion with little or no alcohol," more moisturizer, eye balm, and a final "protective" lotion that precludes the appearance of aging (27-28). While some of his posturing might correctly be ascribed to the fashion sense of the eighties, in which androgyny was somewhat chic and well put together men were the norm, the feminine qualities that underlie Bateman’s obsessive routines are striking, particularly for a man who considers himself the pinnacle of male evolution and detests the “fags” whose mannerisms he co-opts. In addition, the repetition that marks his daily routine is predicated upon various promises made by the machines and products that he uses. It is as if, to Bateman, if one protective lotion will do him good, or free weights will better shape his arms, then the addition of Nautilus for the muscles or a moisturizer for the skin will simply impart more benefit, though that is almost certainly not true. The truth, however, is less important than the promise.

The clothes that make Patrick Bateman and the rest of the men in this novel are all very expensive, very chic, and very similar in design. Like the skin care odyssey delineated above, the attention that Bateman pays to his clothing is to emphasize his masculinity, but instead serves only to emphasize a facet of femininity. His idea of how he looks and the effort he puts into looking good are uniquely unmasculine, if not in intent, then in effect. Bateman harps on brand name and cost more than anything else.
when it comes to the clothes, as the endless and numerous lists of outfits described in the
book suggest. Bateman and his friends wear Susan Bennis Warren Edwards, Polo, Jill
Sander, Gucci, Armani, Krizia, d’Orsay, etc. Bateman and his cohorts also wear Oliver
Peoples glasses, no prescription, and all are eager to flash their platinum credit cards,
which are just as much a part of the outfit as are the shoes or tie.

Upon any meeting between characters, an inventory is made of their clothing, listing
what suit, tie, and shoes are worn, but also, at times, how well the outfit works. The men
and women similarly make snarky remarks to each other about the relative fashionability
of each other’s clothes, from Van Patten criticizing McDermott’s tie by declaring it
would only get a bum “appetizers at Jams” to Evelyn declaring Carruthers’ suit “tacky”
at a U2 concert (51, 143). Yet, while Bateman is completely serious about his look and
comparing it to that of others, his friends Van Patten and McDermott seem at times to be
-teasing him about his pre-occupation with appearance. Though equally narcissistic, they
nonetheless find Bateman humorous: their desire to get a fashion question answered in
GQ is clearly something they are doing for fun, whereas Bateman takes their questions
about tasseled loafers and rounded collars deadly serious. To Bateman, the question is
concomitant to his identity, at least as he hopes others perceive it as such.

Interestingly, because all the men wear the same clothes, style their hair the same
way, and inevitably work out until they are “ripped,” as Bateman says, it is
extraordinarily difficult for even the characters in the novel to recognize each other.
There are numerous instances of mistaken identity—Paul Allen calls Bateman “Marcus”
until his death, a “logical faux pas since Marcus works at P and P also, in fact does the
same exact thing” that Bateman does, and “has a penchant for Valentino suits and clear
prescription glasses" (89). In public, it is difficult for Bateman and his friends to recognize anybody, and arguments typically ensue over who is sitting at the bar, Frederick Connell or Roger Daley, for instance. The women in the novel are equally similar, in their choices of clothing, their physical characteristics, and their attitudes. Both Evelyn, Bateman’s fiancé, and Courtney, his girlfriend, wear the same sorts of clothes, do the same sort of job, and look very much alike, though, “Courtney has a slightly better body, Evelyn nicer tits” (143). The difference between the two, it is clear, is almost non-existent, even on a superficial level. Differentiation between the characters is difficult for the reader, but even more so for the characters among themselves. Most of the characters are the same, homogenized by popular perception and by their affluence, and few seem to care at all that their lives are efforts in verisimilitude.

Patrick Bateman’s job, while difficult to describe, is nevertheless indicative of his propensity to value appearance over substance. He performs “Mergers and Acquisitions” that create nothing, demonstrate no particular prowess, and in fact, accomplish very little at all. Every day, Bateman arrives at his immaculately stylish and well-furnished office, greets his secretary, whose duties are mainly getting lunch and dinner reservations for her boss and pouring Pelegrino, and generally does nothing. All that the reader might gather about his job is that it pays well, requires little if any responsibility, and means remarkably little to Bateman except for its value to his appearance. Everyone else has a job exactly like his, and despite the fact that Bateman doesn’t need to work, he keeps the job because it allows him to fit in, and also helps to disguise his aberrant nature behind a cloak of normalcy. What Bateman fails to realize, and inevitably cannot fathom, is that his job is very large part of his problem. He is
denied the satisfaction of creation, the pride a man might take in that, and a sense of
differentiation from others due to the overwhelming similarity of his work to the work of
those around him.

Bateman's reality, the ultra masculine image he thinks he puts forth, is a role he
plays—yet the insanity that marks his night life, as it were, is itself a part of the image he
wishes to convey—if not in public, then to the reader. The normal (or traditionally
normal) ways in which men define themselves are denied Bateman because of the stark
similarity of those around him and the lives they all lead. Bateman cannot define himself
through his job because he doesn't do anything or need to do anything. He produces
nothing and seems to have no skill that might provide satisfaction were he to practice it.
He has no hobbies—he works out, but does so because that is what the other characters
do. He watches movies, but confines himself to those with pornographic or violent
content. These films are generally collections of scenes rather than narratives and as such
are very similar to the smash cut chapter breaks that Ellis uses in the novel. Fashion, that
outlet of the self that is usually an indicator of some sort of overarching identity, is
subsumed by a culture that is intent on production—an idea that is not limited to industry
and that in fact governs most of a person's everyday life. In the days of high capitalism,
production extends to people, their educations, their worldviews, and their self-
perception. There is little that is Patrick Bateman that isn't a brand name or a reference
to some sort of high fashion magazine—in fact, the reality that is Patrick Bateman's life
is undefined and ambiguous at times. We wonder if some of the things he describes
actually happened, or if he imagined that they happened. The violence that pervades his
consciousness, however, is very real to Bateman, a way to define himself in a
traditionally male, physically assertive way—by taking control of and killing women and minorities, primarily—that has little to do with those around him. It is something uniquely his, this violence, the memory of killing and eating women. As such, and because of its necessarily secret nature, Bateman is able to create his own private reality, divorced from the typical and dull existence that marks his otherwise everyday life. And, lest his actions lose their importance, he finds he must tell someone, anyone—you, me, the reader, and eventually his lawyer.

It is difficult to reconcile Bateman’s crimes with the reality of forensic evidence, eyewitnesses and the problems of body disposal. It seems certain that such a murderer must inevitably be caught given his propensity for spur of the moment crime, leisurely torture sessions, and the amazing number of people he has supposedly killed. One must ask, during and after reading the novel, “How did this man not get caught?” However, the question, often asked and never answered satisfactorily, of the reality of Bateman’s narrative and his telling of it, is less important than the fact that he tells it and what it says about him as a character and culture in general. Mark Storey, in his paper on American Psycho, tells us that “the narrative is life through the prism of Patrick Bateman’s psyche, but closer inspection reveals his psyche is nonexistent. Instead, Ellis gives us a central identity created by external forces” and the fictional world that is created is not important so much for its believability, but for what it implies (58). While it may be difficult to conceive of a psyche that is nonexistent, Storey’s claim is important because it underscores how a person’s identity is not so much granted him at birth as it is formed by those things around him. In claiming that Bateman’s psyche does not exist, Storey is

5 Mark Storey implies that it does not matter if Bateman relates actual events to his audience. The importance is in the telling, whether factual or not, and in what it says about Bateman’s condition.
making the claim that there exists no actual, innately individualistic idea of Bateman because he cannot create one for himself. Subsequently, it becomes apparent that Bateman is an unreliable narrator and that to place any trust in what he says as representing verifiable facts is ludicrous—he is, after all, irretrievably insane. Furthermore, the way in which Bateman structures and retells his story is almost comic in its cinematic quality. Many of the scenes of violence play like scenes from action or horror films, with him using power equipment—in a respectable and wealthy apartment high rise, no less—to cut up and otherwise eviscerate his victims. He re-enacts, many times, scenes from the films he is constantly renting, from killing Bethany with a nail gun, to using a drill to kill some other woman as he saw it played out in Inside Leda’s Ass. After his first date with Jean, the secretary who is in love with him, Bateman says of her parting hug,

I am so used to imagining everything happening the way it occurs in movies, visualizing things falling somehow into the shape of events on a screen, that I almost hear the swelling of an orchestra, can almost hallucinate the camera panning low around us, fireworks bursting in slow motion over head, the seventy millimeter image of her lips parting and the subsequent murmur of “I want you” in Dolby sound. (265)

It is obvious that this man is in no way in touch with reality as it is, but instead frames his life as if he were the central character in a film—or book. He is a child of the advertising age, a man whose perceptions and his very idea of himself and his actions are based upon a collage of magazine photo spreads and pornographic movies. Like the men in Susan Faludi’s Stiffed, Bateman thinks of himself as “under a new kind of inspection, a scrutiny that [emanates] from the lens of a camera” and where the most important thing in the world is “mastering the art of self-presentation, fathering your own image,
reproducing a self that could be launched into mediated existence” (Faludi 530). Though Faludi’s work is primarily concerned with working class men and the effects of capitalism and corporate culture on them, it is no great stretch to assume that Patrick Bateman, though definitely not working class, nevertheless suffers from some of the same problems that other men do. In fact, the insistence on appearance that pervades the corporate world—on looking good, wearing a power suit, having an expensive watch—engenders that feeling of inspection to a greater degree that it might in a working class vocation. No one is, after all, making sure that a pipe fitter or engine mechanic is meticulously put together or stylishly impressive.

That Patrick Bateman is violent is apparent. However, the cause of the violent behavior is less clear, as it seems that Bateman does not have problems that would merit such outbursts—besides his insanity. Gender conflict plays a part in Bateman’s behavior. He struggles to embody a masculine ideal, but nevertheless demonstrates certain effeminate tendencies in some very important ways. Bateman’s appearance is of the utmost importance to him and he goes to great lengths to make sure that he always looks his best. His use of various potions and cosmetic unguents serve to undermine his idea of himself as masculine, if only subconsciously. Also, and perhaps more importantly, Patrick Bateman is a traditionalist in many ways, and his behavior can be seen to derive from that fact. As a male, he is drawn to physical violence because that is what is expected of him. Bateman capitulates to the culturally normative image of a man as one who does things to other people rather than letting things happen to him. The image of a man as dominant, controlling, and violent is prevalent in contemporary culture—movies, television, and music are partly responsible for violent masculine conceptions, and to
deny that those images have power to influence men and boys would be to underestimate their power.

Popular culture and its products inundate Patrick Bateman’s life. He is a man who not only follows the fads, but also becomes the fads. He is, in short, a person whose whole identity is a product of puerile and meaningless drivel. Bateman’s choice of music and the attention he pays to the lyrics is indicative of his complete lack of an intrinsic identity. In several chapters interspersed throughout the novel, Bateman regales us with his poor taste in music and exceptionally banal analyses of the lyrics and artists who sing them. Through his hermeneutic discourses on such heralded artists as Whitney Houston, Genesis, and Huey Lewis and the News, Bateman exposes the vacuum of his selfhood and posits an inner self that is created by listening to such music and pouring over it as if it were a Shakespearean sonnet. The irony of his selections is twofold: he at once chooses sentimental, trite, and self-consciously profound music to talk about, but then misunderstands the author’s intentions. In his discussion of Genesis, he claims that the album “Invisible Touch” is “the group’s undisputed masterpiece... an epic meditation on intangibility” that at the same time “deepens and enriches the meaning of the preceding three albums” (135). He declares that the song “Tonight, Tonight, Tonight” makes a connection with the unknown by meaningless repetition—I am not certain exactly what that is supposed to mean, but I remember the song as being a normal pop ode to relationships; it is typical pap, in other words. It is funny as well that Bateman feels Phil Collins’ solo career, while “more satisfying in a narrower way” than his work with Genesis, is nevertheless very good, particularly the song, “Against All Odds,” “though it was overshadowed by the excellent movie from which it came” (136). The
irony here is apparent to anyone who has actually seen the movie Against All Odds, which is itself a nostalgic reference to the noir films of the nineteen forties—a time when men were still men, like Humphrey Bogart, and the women were exceptionally beautiful and usually tractable.

The chapter on Whitney Houston is equally ridiculous—he understands that the unifying theme of the song "The Greatest Love of All" is that it is impossible to empathize with anyone in the world but ourselves. Bateman's projection in this instance is that Whitney Houston has something to say to him, and in his own twisted way he actually takes something meaningful from the song. Unfortunately, he once again completely misinterprets the message, and in applying it to himself, creates one more in a long list of insanities that divorces his psyche from anything resembling reality. A further illustration, and perhaps the most important, is Bateman's strange, hallucinatory meeting with Bono, the lead singer of the band U2. While one might easily argue that U2's music is far beyond Genesis and Huey Lewis and the News in terms of artistic value and social import, this episode serves as yet another instance in which Bateman's reality is bizarrely influenced, even created, by pop culture. He imagines that Bono is imparting a message to him, fraught with meaning, as the stage and the lights fade away into nothing—"I am . . . the . . . devil . . . and I am . . . just . . . like . . . you . . ." (146). The message, though somewhat troubling, is secondary to the person that conveys it to Bateman—a pop singer. It is clear that Bateman believes in the importance of his communion with Bono, a communion, that despite its psychedelic underpinnings, is nevertheless very similar to someone deciding to worship the devil because he heard the Beatles' Abbey Road in reverse over a water bong and some mushrooms.
The character that is Bateman then, is less an effort by Ellis in creating a reality and letting other characters move in it, than it is, as Storey says, “about the dilemma of Patrick Bateman’s identity.” In fact, there are no “real” characters in the novel at all, with the possible exception of the secretary, Jean. All of Bateman’s friends live in the same unreality that he does—they invariably speak as if they were reading off scripts. Take for instance, the conversation that Bateman has with Christopher Armstrong, another Vice President at P and P. Bateman asks, “So, how were the Bahamas?” and receives in a reply a dissertation on the quality of his vacation, as if he were reading out of a travel brochure: “Travelers looking for that perfect vacation this summer may do well to look south, as far south as the Bahamas and the Caribbean Islands. There are at least five smart reasons for visiting the Caribbean including the weather and the festivals and events, the less crowded hotels and attractions, the price, and the unique cultures” (137). Of course, Bateman is as bored by the recitation as we are, but the conversation is important in that it further illustrates the complete vacancy of original thought in both the people and the culture that produced them. Armstrong, like Patrick Bateman, is a created persona, an amalgamation of fantasy male figures from film and from the depths of the American psyche, but thinks of himself as normal. What Bateman does not seem to realize is that the very “normalcy” to which he and others like him cling so tenaciously, and the other characters evince so uniformly, is in fact the greatest detriment to his and their sanity. Bateman’s willing capitulation to popular fads and culture correlates with the extent of his violent behavior and attitude. This is due, in part to the uniformity of the characters that posits a uniformity of identity that is inextricably intertwined with money, fashion, and looks without substance. Bateman is divorced from the reality of a historic
man, given the times, an absentee father, and the nature of the men around him, who suffer from the same lack. He has no choice but to model himself after fictional men because no real alternative exists. The protagonist’s problem is one of identity, yes, but one of masculine identity first and foremost. The idea of what a man is is terribly askew in this novel and the protagonist, whether he is really acting out or just harboring fantasies, is in some way trying to define himself as a man. Bateman, says Storey, is the “ultimate cliché of the 1980’s male” and he “conceives of the world in a purely clichéd and masculine way,” but he makes no distinction between the Patrick that goes to work every day and comes home somewhat like a normal man and the one that makes meat loaf out of women’s fingers (60). There is an idea of Patrick Bateman, he says, but there are actually two ideas of Bateman. There is the Bateman that the other characters in the work see and there is the one that Bateman thinks of himself as. The narrative is an illustration of the “bad” Bateman, a self conscious recital of facts that is trying to tell the reader, “This is who I really am” though all evidence points to the contrary. While both are pure construction, and there exists no real Bateman in any meaningful sense, there does exist a disparity between the two personae that offers a meaningful differentiation. The Bateman that others perceive is perhaps the one that can be said to be the most real, but the second is more real to Bateman, and that, as they say, makes all the difference. As if to make up for the masculine deficiency of his “real” self, the other Bateman acts and thinks as an uber-male, replete with misogynistic attitudes, bloodlust, and a filmic tendency toward ultra-violence.

While Bateman’s temporal identity is created by the environment, by social forces and ideas of manhood that prize a brash, educated, and urbane character, the “dufus,” in
other words, that Price calls Bateman near the beginning of the novel, the other persona is created for him as well by those same forces. His other personality is the hidden one that kills women and minorities and suffers continually under the edicts of a society that doesn’t permit derivation from a particular mold. It is supposed to be his “true” identity that we, the reader, are privy to. This other is the man that Bateman in an altogether conscious way wants to be—a created identity that makes up for the inadequacies, whether real or imagined, that he is confronted with in his daily life. The alter-Bateman is unfettered, violent, a man of action, who is limitless in his hungers and denies himself nothing. This personality, the bad one, we might say, exists because Bateman does not have the tools to create a meaningful existence within the confines of custom, nor does he possess the ability to distinguish his reality from that fictional realm of movies and television. He cannot be a man because he is denied any actual referent of masculinity and therefore is forced to rely on cultural perception and the resultant fantasy that it depicts to understand what a man is supposed to be.
Fight Club's Narrator

Though only a few years, perhaps ten at the most, separate the settings of Patrick Bateman and the narrator/Tyler Durden, the world of Fight Club is remarkably dissimilar from the world that Bateman inhabits. The flash, verve, and sheer greedy shininess of the eighties have been replaced by the efficient and technologically advanced, yet somehow more sterile nineties. The excess that marked the eighties is strangely absent, as is most of the fun that imprinted that time as well. As the times change, so do the characters that inhabit them. The narrator is a very different character than Patrick Bateman, but mostly in a psychological sense. Each exhibits many of the same tendencies, at least where material possessions and self-perception are concerned. The narrator is rather boring, just a guy with a few problems who goes to and from work and lives a rather uneventful existence—or so we might initially think. We know this because he tells us this. Yet, unlike Bateman, he makes no great list of friends, accomplishments, interests, or desires. The little that we know of the narrator, however, is more important perhaps for its brevity and its introspection than the exhaustive meanderings of Patrick Bateman. Whereas one must pick apart the long diatribes of Bateman for the importance that Ellis is trying to conceal in the categorical logs of his daily life, Palahniuk, through the narrator, tells us very little, as if there is really nothing worthy to report. We know the man is an insomniac and that he suffers from all the myriad trappings associated with that ailment. He is physically unwell, so much so that “the bruised, old fruit way” his face has collapsed may cause you to think that he is dead (19). His only hobbies, it seems, are decorating his apartment and going to support groups for terminally ill people.
The narrator’s apartment is peculiarly funny and somewhat revealing of his character. Like Bateman, who clutters his apartment with chic things because he thinks other people have them, the narrator furnishes his apartment to define himself. The items in the various rooms, even in the refrigerator, are reflections of his personality, material manifestations of an identity that is only partly formed, and made mostly from impressions of other people and advertisements. The people he used to know, who used to sit in their bathrooms with pornography, “now they sit in their bathroom with their Ikea furniture catalog” (43). The narrator is no different. He has a Johannesov Armchair, Rislampa/Har Paper lamps, Alle Cutlery Service, a Vild hall Clock in galvanized steel, and a Klipsk shelving unit. And, oh yes, one must not forget the Hemlig hatboxes or the Momalla quilt cover set (43-44). Like Bateman, the narrator has been over-civilized and thus emasculated by a culture that encourages consumption and complacency. His interests barely extend beyond a catalog of furniture and the man actually claims that he possesses a “nesting instinct” as if he were a pregnant woman (43). Suffice it to say that he is just as much a product of his time as Bateman is—a man with nothing better to do than decorate and shop. The narrator, though, is the more interesting of the two, given his unique awareness of his situation as it relates to a dull, postmodern existence. Bateman moves through his life regardless of the forces that act upon and against him—even his violent behavior is, given his surreal existence, somewhat removed from his temporal life. The narrator is fully cognizant, however, that the world is a stifling, in-authentic place that has made him its prisoner.

An important example of the narrator’s plight is in what he tells us of his job. He works as a recall campaign coordinator for what he terms “a major” car manufacturer.
Unlike Bateman, whose job plays almost no role in his life, the narrator’s life is consumed completely by his job. He travels constantly, and his life seems to be a collection of airport names, broken only by brief periods of sleep. “You wake up at Air Harbor International,” “You wake up at Ohare,” and “You wake up at La Guardia,” he says, as if his life were simply a progression of destinations without stops (25-28). He makes “single serving” friends on his trips while he samples the “single serving” shampoos, soaps, toothpastes, and meals. His life is a single serving life—a collection of moments without context or meaning that is ending one minute at a time. The Narrator travels to and from these places to apply the “formula” whereby his company determines the financial viability of initiating a recall. The formula, though seemingly unimportant to the overarching thematic implications of the work, is nevertheless indicative of the corporate takeover of American Life—it reduces people to a series of numbers, valuable only for their place in the formula and what that means to the bottom line. As the narrator explains it, the formula is like a story problem you might have been forced to complete in a third grade mathematics text:

If a new car built by my company leaves Chicago traveling west at 60 miles per hour, and the rear differential locks up, and the car crashes and burns with everyone trapped inside, does my company initiate a recall?
You take the population of vehicles in the field (A) and multiply it by the probable rate of failure (B), then multiply the result by the average cost of an out of court settlement (C). A times B times C equals X. This is what it will cost if we don’t initiate a recall. If X is greater than the cost of a recall, we recall the cars and no one gets hurt. If X is less than the cost of a recall, then we don’t recall. (30)

If the cost in human lives is too great for his company to bear financially, then they will capitulate, no to an interest in saving the lives of the people who make the company wealthy, but rather to the mercenary notion that each life has its price.
In addition to a soulless and life sucking job, the narrator’s life is marked by his relentless insomnia that in turn dissociates him from the world at large. He sees life through a lens of mental and physical exhaustion. His job, while taxing, is nevertheless of secondary importance to his need simply to sleep. There exists, however, no remedy for this malady. His doctor refuses to prescribe sleep medication, advising the narrator simply to exercise and eat some Valerian root. As his insomnia deepens, his only recourse, as it occurs to him, is annihilation. The narrator wants to erase his existence, to die, or at the very least, experience some sort of authentic emotion through death. He says, on one of his many business trips, “when the plane banked too much to one side, I prayed for a crash” and also for “pelicans sucked into turbines, and loose bolts, and ice on the wings” (26). It is in this unhealthy state of mind that the narrator first attends the disease support groups and surrounds himself with the death it seems he is so intent on realizing.

The support groups function on multiple levels for the narrator. He is able to cry at them, to experience some authentic emotion and thereafter return home to sleep. Without the groups, the insomnia will keep him awake for days at time, distorting the world into “a copy of a copy of a copy” that creates a distance where “you can’t touch anything, and nothing can touch you” (21). With Bob, a true cancer survivor from the support meetings, he is allowed to make contact with someone, a long embrace with another person in which he and Bob both cry until some sort of cathartic release occurs. However, human contact is secondary to the narrator’s exposure to death and to the dying. The group members’ dying is more authentic than his life, and for a few brief moments each night, the narrator surrounds himself with real people who have real
problems. His doctor suggests the group to him: “My doctor said, if I wanted to see real pain, I should swing by First Eucharist on a Tuesday night. See the brain parasites. See the degenerative bone diseases” (19). Of course, the operative word here is “real,” something with which the narrator is only vaguely acquainted. In the tragic Chloe, the Cheesebread Bob, and a myriad of other dying or severely distressed characters, the narrator has his only contact with a reality different from his “copy of a copy” life. The membership in these groups is loose at best, what with many people dying and not returning and newcomers arriving at almost every meeting. It is because of this that the narrator, “little warm center that the life of the world crowded around,” remains undiscovered for over two years (22). He gets to experience the miracle of death at least twice a week—and he doesn’t have to die to do it.

Whereas Bateman is unaware of the cause of his psychotic episodes, it is clear that the narrator understands better the influences in his life and is similarly aware of how meaningless most of his existence is. That he doesn’t react beyond going to therapy groups is de rigueur for the sort of person that he is—those meetings are a temporary fix, a way to feel some manner of authentic emotion without really having to suffer the consequences of the events that would spawn such emotion. And, if you’re dying says the narrator, people pay attention to you (107). Like reading a book, or watching a movie, so the narrator hovers around the edge of other people’s lives, feeding on their tears and crying along with them, aware all the time that he only wants the trappings of a terminal existence. Of course, such a temporary and voyeuristic remedy cannot last. Marla Singer, another cancer groupie, or “tourist” as the narrator calls her, ruins the groups for the narrator. Like him, Marla had “no real sense of life because she had
nothing to contrast it with” as nothing of note or importance has ever happened to her (38). She attends the meetings for the same reason that the narrator does but actually seems to get more from them. Her skin clears up, she feels alive and experiences every moment of her life—he merely gets to go home and go to sleep (38). Marla’s successful use of the meetings only serves to exacerbate the narrator’s problems.

Enter Tyler Durden, the charismatic, masculine, and strangely thoughtful— in a crazy sort of way—alter ego of the narrator. Tyler is the man that the narrator thinks he wants to be but cannot be. He is tough, smart, virile, and in possession of an identity created not from the life that the narrator leads but because of that life. He is the reactionary incarnation of a “generation of men raised by women” who don’t want to be their job, or their apartment, or any of the other paltry things that govern their lives (50). The first time we see Tyler Durden is on the beach, creating for one moment a bit of artistic perfection (12). He makes a giant sculpture from driftwood that for one brilliant minute will cradle him in its shadow as if it were the hand of God. In this small bit of creativity and labor, it easy to find an artist, a person who is imaginative and productive and exists in stark contrast to the narrator, whose life is mathematical and moribund. Yet, while Tyler is creative and imaginative, it quickly becomes clear that he is not intent on creation so much as he is on destruction. The narrator says of the sculpture, “The giant shadow hand was perfect for one minute” but subsequently Tyler says, “A moment was the most you could expect from perfection” in a presage to the destruction that is to come (32).

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6 Tyler and the narrator are the same person—however, given the need to differentiate between the thoughts of the two, Tyler and the narrator will be presented as distinct entities. It can reasonably be asserted that the two exist separately until the conclusion of the book anyway.
Destroying the narrator's apartment is the first in a series of symbolic acts that come to define Tyler's anti-capitalist manifesto. In a violent explosion, all of the things that owned the narrator—his clever coffee table, glass dishes, and expensive mustards—are blown out the window of his "filing cabinet for widows and young Professionals" (41). The same night, the narrator calls Tyler Durden—or calls himself; the mechanics of communication with an alter ego are difficult to understand—ostensibly looking for a few drinks and some conversation. What he really wants, however, is deliverance, from the things he used to own, but now own him, deliverance from Swedish furniture, clever art, from the hope for contentment, the desire for perfection, and the need to feel complete (46). He wants to be rescued from his life, and Tyler is happy to oblige him, asking only in return a simple favor. Tyler says, "I want you to hit me as hard as you can" (46). And so begins Fight Club—the product of a hallucinatory battle between a man and his other self. It is a release of pent up aggression, disappointment, anger, and ineffectuality—in combination with the destruction of the narrator's apartment, the fight becomes a sort of masculine bath, in which the emasculate, purposeless, and meaningless existence of a consumer is washed away until only the man remains.

The purposes of Fight Club are not obscure or complex. It is simply an after hours boxing group that meets to negate the listlessness that pervades the daily lives of its members. A man can be a god in Fight Club, if only for a few minutes, and is in control of his life in a way he cannot be in the real world. Passionate masculinity is much in evidence and is reveled in like it was at sporting events at the beginning of the 20th century. Fight Club is a place outside the real world, and functions as a negation of reality for its participants, at least on Saturday night. Who a man is at Fight Club has nothing to
do with his job, or his house, or his economic status, though those facets of his existence may become in Fight Club the things he is fighting. The combatants face each other free from all the societal and cultural concerns that they typically deal with—no shirt, no shoes, just two men, a dimly lit cellar, and a crowd of onlookers. The fights themselves are brutal, almost silent contests in which a man might find himself facing the mail boy from his office, a policeman going through a divorce, or a dishwasher from Denny’s. The thing that brings them together is the fight, the tangible evidence that whomever you might be and whatever your problems are, it doesn’t matter in Fight Club. Someone is ready to beat on you until either you give up or get knocked out, and he knows you’re trying to do the same thing to him. The fight is a therapeutic hobby and after Fight Club, says the narrator, “the real world gets the volume turned down. Nothing can piss you off. Your word is law, and even if other people break that law or question you, even that doesn’t piss you off” (49).

Fight Club, however, is just as ineffective in the long run as the therapy groups were. Though many people break the first rule—“You do not talk about Fight Club”—and membership in Fight Club grows until new venues are required, the need that it addresses is much too pervasively insistent to be contained for long. A few hours a week of release from the tensions of modern life aren’t enough to satisfy either Tyler or the narrator. After the apartment explosion and the first Fight Club, the two decide to share Tyler’s house in the middle of an industrial park, complete with bad wiring, no television, and constant leaks. The house serves as a sort of proving ground for the narrator, a place of Spartan deprivation where there is little to do but read out of the mound of old and molding magazines or to exercise. It is there that the narrator and Tyler really begin
fleshing out the idea that is Fight Club. He participates in the organization of Fight Club, helps Tyler write the rules, and even uses some of his corporate resources to make copies of them to hand out to members. The narrator still goes to work most days, but is marked by his nights of brawling—a hole opens up on the side of his face, stitches line his eyes, and he is constantly swallowing blood from un-healed wounds in his mouth. His nights are spent as a banquet waiter, where he terrorizes rich people by farting on their meringues or peeing into their soup. Kid’s stuff really, and not worthy of a man who thinks as much of himself—though he posits that he is infectious human waste more than once—as Tyler does. The escalation of Fight Club and its eventual transformation into a proving ground for Project Mayhem seems inevitable.

It is important to stop here, for a moment, to discuss Fight Club itself before I delineate the rise and fall of Tyler Durden and the details of Project Mayhem. Fight Club, even if nothing had come after it, is a fascinating idea. The need for it, at least insofar as the characters in the book see a need, is a correlative for a need to have some control over one’s environment. The men who participate are not the rich, successful, or outwardly happy people that populate American Psycho. Instead, Fight Club is a sort of union of hourly wageworkers, a kind of guild in which a collective strength can be attained through self-annihilation. The purpose is not self-improvement, so the narrator says, but it is, in a way. Fight Club is an excellent example of what Gwen Broude calls “protest masculinity,” a sex-typed behavior characterized by violence, high levels of physical aggression, and eventual lawlessness (103). The causes of such protest masculinity are generally the absence of a father figure and subsequent identity insecurity. It is clear that the narrator is a fatherless sort—he says, “Tyler never knew his
father” and Tyler himself says that in their first fight, he was fighting the father he never knew (48). In a broader sense, none of the characters in *Fight Club* have ever had a proper father figure—they are a generation of men raised by women and as such are forced at an early age to identify women as the “controllers of valued resources” (104). This in turn can engender an identity crisis, where the young man is forced to decide, even if subconsciously, if he wants to be a male or a female. The tension inherent in such choosing can and does lead to a reactionary behavior in many cases, in which hyper-masculinity becomes a defensive mechanism as well as a dominant portion of a man’s identity and behavior.

Also, the fights themselves are a form of aberrant sado-masochism, in which the ability to endure pain and accept suffering as the means of achieving a regenerate state are seen as admirable. Though Tyler fights and is beaten, the pain purifies him in a way, and is something real and authentic that he can identify with. He makes this clear when he confronts the manager of the screen projectors guild and gets pummeled until he is nearly unrecognizable. He says, “Go ahead” while the man is beating him, “you can’t kill me” . . . you have too much to lose. I have nothing” (114). And all the while he is laughing, enjoying the beating, because it is one more event that will help him hit rock bottom—Tyler’s paradoxically ultimate state of degradation and personal power.

That *Fight Club* is a type of protest masculinity is also apparent from the need that its members have for recognition from others. The fighters wear their wounds, scars, and stitches as if they were badges, letting the whole world know that they have been beaten up. The narrator is particularly insistent in this respect, and becomes angry when people fail to comment on his pummeled face.
Me, with my punched out eyes and dried blood in big black crusty stains on my pants, I’m saying HELLO to everybody at work. HELLO! Look at me. HELLO! I am so ZEN. This is BLOOD. This is NOTHING. Hello. Everything is nothing, and it’s so cool to be ENLIGHTENED. Like me.

Yet the narrator harps on the nothingness of his existence too much for his problem to be simply the absence of his father and a lack of identity presupposed by being raised exclusively by a woman. As in American Psycho, the problem of masculinity is more a symptom than it is the disease. As Project Mayhem and its goals make clear, Tyler and the narrator, and a lot of other men, are pissed off—and it has less to do with Mommy than it does with the corporate world and capitalism in particular.
Project Mayhem

It is unclear up to and through the middle of the novel as to how much Tyler actually does while the narrator is asleep, but it is apparent that he is gradually taking more control of both their lives. There are hints, small foreshadowings, of the unity of their identity, but they are few and far between before Project Mayhem really starts to take off. The narrator says, “you never see me and Zsa Zsa Gabor together, and this doesn’t mean we’re the same person. Tyler just doesn’t come out when Marla’s around (64). Tyler speaks for the narrator at times, telling him to tell a doctor that he fell down the stairs, did not get beat up. Tyler’s absence around Marla, at least when the narrator is present, also hints artfully around the question of his identity, but does so in a way that the narrator, perhaps despite himself, finds easy to defend. Marla will enter a room and just that quick Tyler will be gone—the narrator, however, says that his parents did the same disappearing act for years before his father left (66). That Marla and Tyler are never around each other is written off as just another in a long line of miscommunications between men and women.

Regardless of the narrator’s relationship with Marla, we find that his relationship with Tyler grows and expands. They spend nearly all their time together, and it is clear that the narrator is becoming increasingly similar to Tyler in demeanor and behavior. Project Mayhem really begins with Tyler/the narrator working at the Pressman Hotel as banquet waiters, both for money and to “stoke . . . class hatred” (65). He calls the people he works for the “giants,” because of their obvious wealth, their success, and the fact that they look down on their waiters as little people. Tyler plays numerous pranks on the giants, even going so far as to write a note to one of the hostesses informing her that one
of the waiters had urinated into a perfume bottle found in the bathroom. Yet the class
hatred blooms into an operation that extends to all Fight Club members and beyond the
juvenile tricks perpetrated against the rich people.

After a time, employment itself becomes a problem for Tyler/the narrator.
Neither really wants to work for someone else, nor do the care to make money for people
who already have more than enough. Tyler says, “Getting fired is the best thing that
could happen to any of us. That way, we’d quit treading water and do something with
our lives” (83). What Tyler intends to do with his life, and thereby the narrator’s life, is
to “blast the world free of history” as we know it (124). His ostensible goal in destroying
history is at once a goal to destroy society as we know it and thereafter to induce a
premature dark age while it will also serve to “liberate” men in a certain sense from the
slavery of their daily lives, to teach each of them that “he had the power to control
history” (122). Tyler believes that the world itself is suffering for our sins of
complacency and continued consumption—his solution is to send humanity into a state of
either “hibernation” or “remission” so that the earth can recover. Humanity, Tyler
thinks, can then, after a suitable amount of time has passed and the tools of our society
are safely forgotten, re-emerge as a better and more harmonious people (124-125). Tyler
want the world to revert to a primitive stage, when men hunted for their food, and lived in
huts made from animal hides, wore clothes of the same material, and generally existed as
a slightly more intelligent form of apes. He envisions hunting elk near the hulked out
ruins of skyscrapers and drying meat on abandoned super highways, even then crumbling
with disuse.
Yet, there is another goal of Project Mayhem, one that seems odd given Tyler’s
devout wish to see society destroyed. It seems that he wants to create new icons that seem
to serve a higher capacity than those of the past, like John Wayne or The Marlboro man.
Tyler idolizes the small people, those who people who lived little lives but served as the
foundation for other people trying to do great things. The way that Tyler idolizes
relatively inconsequential people of the past, for instance the sacrificed South American
people whose fat eventually became the soap of a civilization, is a case in point. Tyler
doesn’t focus on the mathematicians, or architects, or lawgivers from past societies, nor
does he venerate them in the same way that we are taught to in History class. Instead, in
a sort of Harold Zinn gone wild episode, Tyler pursues a lengthy discourse on how those
people sacrificed were the real heroes. Similarly, the space monkeys that were sent up
into low orbit and died so that man could reach the moon are more heroic in their
servitude than the engineers are in their brilliance (78). Paradoxically, the icons Tyler
hopes to create are not even what we might call anti-heroes, but are in fact less than even
that. Heroic to Tyler Durden is suffering brought about by one’s own stupidity,
uselessness, and general inability to make any sort of remarkable contribution to the
world. In a radical reversal of typical values and cultural heroic symbols, Tyler seeks
instead to venerate the people who are the lowest—and not in the Biblical sense of the
meek inheriting the earth. He sets himself up to be the first new icon, and though he
admits that he is not even worthy of respect or recognition he nevertheless demands it.
He declares quietly to the Narrator, “I’m breaking my attachment to physical power and
possessions because only though destroying myself can I discover the greater power of
my spirit” (110).
Tyler begins recruiting others to follow his cause—he seeks out those who wish to be degraded, like Marla, and then reaches out to others who are disenfranchised in some profound way. Bob, the cancer patient from the support group, joins Project Mayhem in the hopes of metaphorically growing back the testicles he had removed because of steroid use. Angel Face, another Fight Club graduate, participates in Project Mayhem because he, like Tyler, wants to hit rock bottom. In his attempt to gain some recognition as a revolutionary, Tyler begins handing out assignments to the members of the project that encourage unlawful behavior. The soldiers, for that is what they become, deface financial buildings, stop up pay phones with grease or pudding, threaten to castrate government officials, and generally make nuisances of themselves. Underlying all of their juvenile behavior, however, is Tyler’s grand scheme of forcing the rest of the world to recognize what he is trying to do. Increasingly subversive and antithetical to the old order, Tyler prints bumper stickers that say things like “Drunk Drivers Against Mothers,” or “Make Mine Veal,” in attempt to communicate not only his disdain for a politically correct and emasculated culture, but also to get people to think subversively themselves. Like Neo of The Matrix fame, Tyler thinks of himself as a liberator and a light bringer in his fight against an establishment that has all of us in its thrall.

Project Mayhem, for all it’s being an anarchical sort of army, is very tightly organized, and almost fascist in its strict order and the members’ adherence to its precepts. Oddly, though Tyler claims he wishes to hit rock bottom and take the men with him, he nevertheless establishes a very strict set of rules and regiments the lives of the Project Mayhem soldiers to a remarkable degree. All wear a uniform of sorts: all black clothing, with a pair of serviceable shoes and burial money kept in their socks. When not
reeking havoc on the world at large, the various members, including Bob, the Cheesbread, stay at the Paper Street House and eventually turn it into a factory. They primarily produce soap, which is then sold to high-end boutique shops and department stores. The soldiers begin tilling the soil around the house, producing various herbs and scented plants that will become part of the soap that is their source of income. The soap’s byproduct, nitroglycerine, is assiduously skimmed from the top of the rendered fat and allowed to cool in order to make explosives for an as yet underdetermined purpose.

Surprisingly, for a group that seeks to destroy any sort of order is surprisingly like the old world in many ways. The Project Mayhem members are subject to, and believe wholeheartedly in, an ideological system created by Tyler Durden. Its tenets, while different from those of the “real world,” are nevertheless as strict and as binding as a religious sect’s or the Constitution. The rhetoric that characterizes Tyler’s cult of personality is also almost like what one might hear from either political party in the United States, albeit with a certain flavoring of the postmodern. One space monkey chants, “Our culture has made us all the same. No one is truly black or white or rich anymore. We all want the same. Individually we are nothing” (134). In an even stranger twist, Tyler uses many of the concepts that define a production oriented, capitalist workforce to get his followers to create soap. Each member is trained to do one thing perfectly within Project Mayhem, and when the narrator begins questioning Tyler about the army living in their house, Tyler says to him, “Don’t bother them. They all know what to do. It’s part of Project Mayhem. No one guy understands the whole plan, but each guy is trained to do one simple task perfectly” (130). Concerned for perhaps the first time, the narrator further describes what he sees as an ironic situation—“Pull a lever.
Push a button. A team of space monkeys cooks meals all day, and all day, teams of space monkeys are eating out of the plastic bowls they brought with them” (130). The space monkeys are behaving exactly as they did before, despite their newfound ideology and supposed faith in their own power to “change history.” They have simply jumped from one tight knit and unforgiving organization into another into another.

Project Mayhem is supposed to culminate in the destruction of the Parker Morris Building, a center of financial records that Tyler suggests contains the whole of American credit history. The explosion does not happen. Tyler, exposed at last as the narrator’s alter ego, is foiled by his other self—the narrator shoots himself through the head, effectively silencing Tyler for good. The narrator survives in a mental institution where he can finally sleep, his life effectively excised of all responsibility and any need for effort. Yet Tyler does live on as the icon he was hoping to become, the martyr for a group of deranged people bent on the destruction of civilization itself and awaiting his return. The narrator doesn’t want to leave the asylum, because, occasionally, someone with a black eye, or a beat up face will bring him his lunch and whisper, “We miss you Mr. Durden. Everything is going to plan” (208). The work, it is clear, is continuing without the leader; the new ideology that Tyler created has found its followers.
The Postmodern

It is easy to give examples of "things," events, or attitudes that are postmodern, but it remains strangely difficult to describe what "postmodernity" actually is. In a theoretical sense, it is impossible to actually define the postmodern because we remain a part of it and therefore are incapable of establishing either a proper historical distance from it, or an intellectual perspective that can encompass its totality. It is more useful, implies Frederic Jameson, to think of postmodernity as a concept "whose function is to correlate the emergence of new formal features in culture with the emergence of a new type of social life and a new economic order—what is often euphemistically called modernization, post industrial or consumer society, the society of the media or the spectacle, or multinational capitalism" (3). Put simply, postmodern thought is a lens that allows us to perceive the present. The interesting thing, however, about postmodernism, and that which sets it apart from most other modes of perception, is the fact that it denies the reality of history, and the concept of reality itself, because neither is empirically verifiable, and therefore can have no real implications for a study of contemporary literature, art, culture, or life.

Postmodernism does not simply reject the past, however, nor does it preclude influence, per se. Rather, in postmodernism, we find that past is a false referent despite our use of it in that fashion. The postmodern concept asserts that the past cannot really be known or understood because everything we have of it is memory, and therefore subject to interpretation and misunderstanding. The past we think we had, that many of us are nostalgic for, and that seems to influence our lives, should we have any knowledge
of it, in fact never actually existed. What we are left with then is a world of simulacra, according to Baudrillard—a collection of constructs based not on reality, if there is such a thing, but instead based on faulty interpretations of and a desire for those things that came before us (Wolfreys 368-69). The world we live in now is representative of a steadily regressive rehashing of thoughts, concepts, and rationalizations that attempt to create a present that would seem the logical product of a past that is mostly fantasy. Of course, such a revelation must inevitably cause tension within people, particularly those of the modernist bent, with their insistence on order, progression, and unity.

In 1989 Francis Fukuyama declared that history was at an end, perhaps in an effort to deny the apparent problems associated with the triumph of capitalism. Jesus had smiled upon Western democracy and deemed it the pre-eminent form of liberal government—thereafter it would spread like a plague, inundating the world and bringing with it visions of prosperity, engendering a global democratic theme park in which all people would forget about conflict, whether armed or intellectual, and simply spend money after they left their jobs in the service industry. History, “as a single, coherent, evolutionary process” had culminated in a world in which government and subsequently daily life was finally free from the fundamental questions of human happiness—the systems and institutions that had triumphed in the West had proven perfect for everyone, despite the insistence of some naysayers from backward, repressive societies that just didn’t get it (i). In fact, other, prior beliefs were proven wrong, systems of government exposed as irretrievably flawed, and the values, insofar as they were different from Western counterparts, were shown to be antiquated and rude. The continued progress of

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7 See Frederic Jameson’s “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” for a more detailed account of a postmodern perception of history and the ‘nostalgia mode.’
technology, an ancillary benefit of a capitalistic, democratic government, that "makes possible the limitless accumulation of wealth," would provide for everyone. Technology has advanced to such a degree that even those people who are merely cogs in the great system of elitist enrichment that is the Western style of government are relatively happy.

A man in the west can provide for himself, with credit of course, a home, food, a television, and a means of getting from one place to another. So long as he keep working, he might even afford medicine when he is sick, the occasional vacation to a place with a beach, or even something really artistic, like a play in New York city, or a home theatre system.

Fukuyama's modernist interpretation is a fallacy—it relies on the faulty assumption that there must be an inevitable termination of movement, if not progress, that allows for something like "the death of history" to take place. It also implies that such a harmonious stasis, once achieved, will be satisfying and fulfilling enough, and inclusive enough, to forestall either regression or progression. What Fukuyama and other neo-conservative modernists cannot admit, or perhaps realize, is that history is not a single, cohesive line of progression, nor does the history through which they find justification for capitalism actually reflect what they imply it does. The grand illusion that the past was movement toward a sort of perfection, and that the present, because of the past, is better, fails to take into account not only the falseness of what we know as history, but the rather apparent effects of capitalism on society, culture, and existence.

Postmoderism is decried by much of the old guard because it does not fit into their idea of what the end of history entails. Postmodern thought is relativistic, and obscures distinctions between good and bad, high and popular culture, while it
simultaneously dissolves traditional authority constructs like the nuclear family, class distinctions, and religious belief. Strong beliefs are questioned, even ridiculed, and first hand experience is relieved of its power because postmodernists recognize that empiricism is little more than perception compounded by repetition and further clouded by inherent bias. Strangely, the post-postmodernists (really just modernists who don’t like postmodernism--neo-conservatives are one fine example) do not see that this condition that spoils their idea of a capitalist utopia is in fact the socio-political product of capitalism itself.

The desire for wealth, the means for getting it, and the ways in which we respond to it are inextricably intertwined with our entire existence. Questions of philosophy, morality, value, and aesthetic worth have become commodified—or, to phrase it perhaps more currently, “If it don’t make money, then it don’t make sense.” The relativism of postmodernity that some people hate is merely a symptom of the inherent net goal of capitalism, namely the cessation of competition and progress by way of total economic victory over the conscience and intellect. In this case, democracy was the impetus for competition, with the ostensibly ultimate goal of creating the best possible society. While I would argue quite strenuously that we haven’t created for ourselves “the best possible society” the fact nevertheless remains that we have created a society that many are willing to settle for. We have been systematized to believe that the products we want and need are the keys to our “fundamental happiness” and have complacently decided that being comfortable is enough.

This is the world that we live in and are plunged into with startling clarity when we read American Psycho and Fight Club. Removed by some years from “the end of
history,” and enmeshed in the postmodern age, it seems fairly clear that things didn’t work out exactly as Fukuyama predicted, either for the protagonists, or for the rest of us. The unlimited accumulation of wealth, as Fukuyama envisioned it, is much in evidence, though its benefits to humanity at large have yet to be realized. In typically historical fashion, the wealth of the world is held by its smallest portion of people, while the rest work to produce more for those that already have more than enough. In many ways, we are still, and will remain, the space monkeys that Tyler Durden thought he and his followers had been. We pull a lever, push a button, and go home to our cardboard apartments to live in relative quietude. I have no wish, however, to imply that the wealthy and successful, like Bateman and Durden, aren’t affected just as much as everyone else. Their discontent is certainly manifest, and it stems from the same stultifying, anti-individualistic efforts of capitalism to assimilate the entirety of our existences.

The decline of masculinity is symptomatic of the postmodern malaise that contemporary culture is suffering from and just as much a result of capitalism as postmodernity itself. Tradition has given way to constant change, individuality to homogeneity in intent and production, and masculinity to consumerism, just as it did in the time of the “self-made” man in the middle and toward the end of the nineteenth century. Restraint has taken precedence over expression, and violence and aggressive behavior are again acceptable as long as they are channeled into business. However, the technological differences between eras exacerbate the waning masculinity of our contemporary era. There is little need any more for a man to make the things he needs, nor is there any reason for him to want to try. The products of our time are better than
what a man might make in his garage or shop; both simple and complex products are made in factories for a low cost and are of a uniform and generally high quality. The jobs that men have these days do not prize either their strength or ingenuity—instead they call for a prostration of character and will, combined with a subservience to the bottom line that stifles imagination and limits the moral and spiritual restlessness that characterized the men that came before. Today a worker is just another commodity, a man just another cog in the wheel of production. He pushes a button. He pulls a lever.

American Psycho and Fight Club embody the postmodern as a result of capitalism and the subsequent stasis of unlimited progress. The tensions that exist in the books, particularly where identity and masculinity are concerned, suggest that the end of history has not happened, and that in fact a regression of sorts will and perhaps must take place. In each novel there is a hearkening back in the protagonists, subconscious in American Psycho and very much conscious in Fight Club, that screams for a recognized place in history. Temporality, as relativistic and ill defined as it is, fails to serve as an anchor for either of the characters, and each feels divorced from a sense of history because of the continual change inherent in that temporality. Their efforts at becoming men through violence, protest masculinity, and historical regression help the characters create identities for themselves. The narratives that each relate to us beg for recognition of that identity, and also serve as simple evidence of existence amidst a contemporary culture that tends to overlook everyone but models, actors, and other social deviants.

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8 Jameson's "The Antimonies of Postmodernity" suggests that technological progress, which seems at this time almost limitless, creates a paradox in which continuous and rapid advancement actually precludes change because change itself becomes standard.
Patrick Bateman, though unaware really of his postmodern predicament, nevertheless demonstrates a reaction against its tendencies. His "real" life is not what anyone would call remarkable, particularly during the eighties, when it seemed everyone on the coasts was rich, successful, and marginally sophisticated. The only thing that sets him apart from his cadre of peers—Bateman doesn't have what a normal person might call friends—is his imagined capacity for violence on a large and very brutal scale. It is apparent from the way in which he lovingly describes most of the scenes of murder that he feels like the reader should know and perhaps even wants to know about cutting a woman up with a chainsaw.

In his subconscious rampage to be perceived as 'other' than what he actually is, Bateman incorporates nontraditional and, in many cases, meaningless references, in order to formulate a sense of identity. Perhaps because of the conspicuous absence of his father, Bateman turns to pornography, films, magazines, and various icons of popular culture that give him a completely fallacious idea of what a man, or a person, is supposed to be. He emulates Donald Trump, a man possessed of such dimness of character that the only thing anyone really associates with him is a dollar sign. The list is long and remarkably undistinguished, but it makes clear nevertheless that Bateman is an amalgamation of pop culture figures with no real sense of self.

There is also about Patrick Bateman a juvenile fascination with being seen that is certainly derived from the mass consumption of entertainment. Patrick talks, acts, and dresses as if he were a movie star and in fact chooses to perceive the world around him as if it were one long film with him at its center. The violence that he perpetrates is simply one of those cinematic qualities that Bateman wants to exude. He is exciting. He is
shocking. He is what you want to see. This need for recognition is due mainly to the ignorance that constitutes our modern lives. Like most everyone else, Bateman is simply a nine digit number to the government, a couple of dollars in a nice suit to a cabbie, and a Ken doll to dress and take places for his girlfriend. Is it any wonder that he feels he needs to do something extraordinary to be treated as an individual?

While one cannot really sympathize with a mass murderer, one can in fact sympathize with the factors that help to create one. To characterize Bateman as insane and then forget about him is to fail to recognize to what extent he is a product of his environment. Patrick Bateman is the perfect consumer—a man that believes in the promises that a capitalist society makes and believes in the products themselves. He wants to look good, so he believes that moisturizer and sea salt shampoo will make him handsome. He wants to be muscular, so he works out on every type of machine that his gym contains. He wants to be tan, because the world tells him that to be tan is good, and thereafter contemplates buying a tanning bed for his home. There is no outside, or any stepping back from consumerism for Patrick Bateman because that is all that there really is to his life. His existence is defined by purchasing, and in a broader sense by advertisement and the promise of better and different everythings.

Subconsciously, Bateman recognizes that he has a problem. Murdering for him is initially a way to define himself as an individual—it fails in the long run because even his horrific and often sickening behavior becomes rote. It loses its power to shock and to horrify not only because he repeats it over and over again but also because there are no consequences attached to those acts. If he really committed them, he probably would have been caught, but that is immaterial—whether Bateman commits the murders or not
is secondary to the idea that the acts themselves don’t mean anything. At the end of the novel, Bateman confesses all of his crimes, the ones that he can remember anyway, to his lawyer. It is supposed to be the final step, the final act that will garner recognition for Bateman as an individual precisely because other people will then know what he has done and thereby create an idea of who Patrick Bateman is that exists separately from his perceptions. It is the ultimate act of a consumer gone mad in which Bateman will commodify himself and thereby ensure his creation by others.

Yet, it doesn’t work. Carnes, the lawyer, believes that Bateman’s confession was a joke; he does not even believe that Bateman left the message on his answering machine. He thinks that another associate at P and P made the confession to ridicule Bateman. At the end of the novel, Bateman sits, much like he did in the beginning, at a swank restaurant with a group of buddies doing the same thing and feeling the same way he did at the start of his narrative, but with the knowledge that:

> Nothing was affirmative, the term “generosity of spirit” applied to nothing, was a cliché, was some kind of bad joke. Sex is mathematics. Individuality no longer an issue . . . Justice is dead. Fear, recrimination, innocence, sympathy, guilt, waste, failure, grief, were things, emotions, that no one really felt anymore. Reflection is useless, the world is senseless. (375)

Because of his confession, and the lack of response it nets, Bateman finally comes to realize who and what he is, though this does not mean that he retains an identity or even comes to any sort of self-actualization. Rather, he discovers that there can be no real identity separate from the world, or inherent to ourselves, and that the values, tenets, and

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9 To find a success story of self-commodification and the subsequent self-creation by proxy that Patrick Bateman must have wished for, one need only look to Paris Hilton and her recent climb to fame and celebrity.
traditions that we typically use to define who we are have no more meaning behind them than the films, books, magazines, and TV shows that try to foist them off on us. He concludes, in the only really self-analytical passage in the text:

... there is an idea of Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me, only an entity, something illusory, and though I can hide my cold gaze and you can shake my hand and feel flesh gripping yours and maybe you can even sense our lifestyles are probably compatible: *I simply am not there* (376-77).

*Fight Club* is different from *American Psycho* in its concerns with the postmodern because the narrator and Tyler Durden are painfully aware, from the beginning of the novel, that their bland consumer existence is the very reason for their identity problems. The narrator claims quite early in the novel that “the things you used to own, now they own you” (45). With that awareness of the situation comes a desire to do something about it—Fight Club is merely the first in a series of acts by which the narrator tries to change himself into someone he wants to be. His identity crisis is much more acute than Patrick Bateman’s and also more complicated.

Unlike Bateman, who remains largely unconscious of his problems throughout the novel, the narrator makes us believe early on that he is dissatisfied with the world, and his life in particular. His life isn’t what he expected it would be despite his apparent success and moderate wealth. He finds it boring, unfulfilling, and generally meaningless, much as it actually is, in all likelihood. The narrator is also a hopeless insomniac whose only way to achieve the oblivion of sleep is to cry at support groups for terminally ill cancer patients—that is, until his mind psycho-somatically manifests a liberator, the iconographic anti-hero. The narrator, just as nonexistent as Patrick Bateman in terms of
identity and sense of self, cannot help but create an alter ego, one who is capable of revolutionary acts and possesses an agenda with complex and mysterious aims.

Tyler wants to destroy history and create a new order, or lack thereof, where people exist much as they did in the prehistoric period. He wants to wear animal hides for clothes, hunt for food, and make soap of the fat of sacrificial victims. The fighting and the initial project Mayhem hijinks are a sort of a warm up for the big bang—the explosion of the Parker Morris Building, a repository of financial records from people all over the country. Of course, there is much that is postmodern about Fight Club throughout, but the concept that organizes Project Mayhem and its ultimate goals are very anti-capitalist and postmodern in nature. Though it isn’t stated explicitly by any of the characters, it is clear that they hold capitalism itself in low esteem. Tyler and the narrator both suggest that consumer culture is in a large part the reason for their crisis of identity. Interestingly, Fight Club poses this postmodern consumer dilemma as a generational problem—the older doorman at the narrator’s apartment says, “People with financial difficulties do this stuff [blow up their apartments]. People who want from out under . . . A lot of young people try to impress the world and buy too many things” (45). He is incapable, for whatever reason, of recognizing that the problem is not a lack of money on the narrator’s part, but the fact that the narrator has too much money. The doorman, perhaps concerned more about living from paycheck to paycheck, cannot understand how someone with the narrator’s obvious wealth would feel constrained by buying whatever he wants. Irving Howe explains that in a high capitalist society such as ours, “The pressure of material need visibly decreases, yet there follows neither a sense of social
release nor a feeling of personal joy; instead, people become increasingly aware of their social dependence and powerlessness” (25).

The generational gap that separates the doorman and the narrator emphasizes the fact that people living under the postmodern era have problems of identity—for the narrator, this problem initially manifests itself as a fight against waning masculinity. In trying to be more masculine, the narrator ascribes the symptom as the problem—he feels as if his identity is in flux because society prescribes an image of a man that he no longer wants to be. In this way, masculinity serves as a sort of metonymy for the postmodern, a part that comes to represent the whole. Yet, Tyler Durden is much more aware that neither masculinity, nor redefined definitions of what it is, are actually what is plaguing him. He blows up the narrator’s apartment, destroying all his personal effects, in an effort to sever the narrator from the ideological underpinnings of their capitalistic forms. He blows the brand names out the window and liberates the narrator from that portion of his created identity. The house on Paper Street, by contrast, is sparse and just a place rather than a collection of societal references.

The protest masculinity within Fight Club is subtle but helps to define the trajectory of the story from the beginning. Masculinity is the first and only easily manageable portion of a man’s identity that can be actively changed in this novel. In response to what is perceived as the emasculation of the common man by popular culture and consumerism, the Fight Club members live humbly, violently, and together, while they simultaneously exclude women and “stoke their class hatred.” Yet, as the men begin wearing all black and subsuming individuality to the organization, the means of self-identification through violence and hyper-masculinity begin to fall short of their goals.
The narrator realizes this, though Tyler does not seem to, and eventually tries to stop Project Mayhem and Fight Club altogether.

The paradox inherent in Project Mayhem, and in Tyler Durden’s aim to destroy modern referents, and thereafter history itself, is apparent. The problem of identity that Tyler and the narrator suffer through is due in main part to their inability to identify with the present because it is so different from the past. The film and billboard representations of the iconic man aren’t sufficient for Tyler and the narrator, but they aren’t entirely able to divorce themselves from those images either. Although some of the problem can be attributed to the fact that the postmodern era has not yet seen its termination, the fact remains that identifying with a period, even one from the past, is an important part of conceiving of a personal identity. Krister Friday explains in “A Generation of Men Without History: Fight Club, Masculinity, and the Historical Symptom,” that “to belong to an era, a history, or a tradition, in other words, it to partake of an essential condition that in many ways marks and shapes us as distinctive, as belonging to this time and not another” (19). That the postmodern era is anathema to self-identification, and is in fact not distinctive for what it seems to be, but for how it reacts to the modern period, makes it seem only logical for Tyler to wish to regress and to identify himself with a different time period, even though he doesn’t recognize that is what he is doing.

Indeed, Tyler’s aims are strangely contradictory. He wants to destroy history, while at the same time he wishes to create a new period in which things are more to his liking. He wants to tear down the images and icons of the old order, but he also wants to replace them with new icons, like the space monkeys and Bob, who after his death is accounted a hero. Ironically, Tyler himself begins to become an icon, an image and a
referent for other men, who admire his masculinity, his style, strength, and revolutionary attitude. In fact, just about every action that Tyler takes in the novel is about recognition and being remembered. Suffering under the same strain as Bateman of not being recognized for anything, Tyler in some way wants to leave a lasting image of himself behind. The narrator’s recounting of events serves in this capacity, but there is an image from the beginning of the books that sticks with the reader throughout. It is of turgid, red penis, thirty feet high, inserted into the middle of the movie Bambi.

In his time as a projectionist, Tyler spliced hundreds of single frames into movies, which, when processed at thirty frames per second leaves only an afterimage, never recognized, but nevertheless subconsciously perceived and remembered by the audience. The penis is an emblem of masculine prowess on one hand, and on the other it is an impressing of Tyler’s will into the memory of others. Though they will never know they saw a giant penis on the screen, they nevertheless feel the effects of witnessing it—children begin to cry, adults feel strangely and inexplicably uncomfortable, and the event that was supposed to be an entertainment instead turns into subliminal pornography. Project Mayhem culminates in another phallic image, with Marla and the narrator poised atop a skyscraper that is about to explode, and carry with it into oblivion postmodernism and by extension capitalism. As with American Psycho, however, the protagonist fails—Tyler’s vision of a new world is saved by paraffin, which has never, ever worked for either the narrator or his alter ego as a binder for home-made explosives.

Like Bateman, Tyler needs recognition—some sort of reaction from the ‘other’ is required for Tyler to form an identity of his own. Both Bateman and Tyler are denied an identity, however, because each is a construct of referents, images, really, of what men
are supposed to be and what society wants them to be. Their ability to create identities is limited to what they can perceive, and as what they can and do perceive is fallacious of necessity, they cannot create anything real for themselves. Tyler, as the alter ego of the narrator, was supposed to liberate the world—in the end he resolves back into the narrator, a figment of the imagination, that like anyone’s supposed identity, never existed at all. For both characters, there is no exit, no catharsis, no better sense of self or of that self’s place in the world—the struggles meted out to us in their narratives have meant nothing.
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