FLOUNDERING: *FIGHT CLUB*

AND THE POSTMODERN

MASCULINE IDENTITY

CRISIS

THESIS

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CHAPTER ONE:

The American Crisis

It is the 3rd millennium, and the American man is suffering from an identity crisis. Wavering gender conceptions and the conforming effects of late capitalism have left many men floundering for a source of identity. The rigid gender roles of the past were challenged during the cultural upheaval of the 1960s and 70s, and new possibilities for behavior were created for both men and women; however, for some, this increase in variability brings disorientation. Male subjects seem to feel most threatened by this instability. While the emerging diversity has brought greater freedom for women, men have lost their privileged status. The assumption of male superiority has weakened, and many formerly respected markers of the "typical" male have been dismantled and demonized.

Prior to the sexual revolution, there were clearer standards for masculinity. Entertainment from the late 50s and early 60s provides a glimpse of the gender ideals that were in place at that time. Cultural icons like John Wayne, Ward Cleaver, and James Bond helped to set standards of masculinity that today are considered antiquated. A strong image of manhood, John Wayne portrayed the same stock character in many of his films. In the films, *The Sands of Iwo Jima, The Green Berets,*

Rooster Cogburn, and *True Grit,* Wayne was a tough-talking, beer-drinking fighter. On television, the long-running series *Leave it to Beaver* gave American men another suitable traditional model for manhood; Ward Cleaver was a model patriarch, a kind and stable provider for his family. Ian Fleming's fictional super-spy James Bond was a dashing hero who never let a beautiful woman or an evil villain slip through his fingers. Although James Bond films continue to be made and continue to make money, the character has been slightly modernized; however, the films are still criticized for the continuation of sexist stereotypes.

In today's world, these traditional gender types are often regarded as rigid and negative. Tough-talking, beer-drinking fighters now go to anger-management classes and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, and the stable provider can no longer support his family alone. If he does attempt to be the sole breadwinner, he might be considered an oppressive dictator denying his wife a fulfilling career. And the charming ladies' man might be accused of being a misogynist and, possibly, a repressed homosexual.

Some cite feminism as a source for the devaluation of the traditional male role: "Perhaps nothing has had a larger cultural impact in this crisis of masculinity than the recent rise of the women's movement" (Kimmel, "Weekend" 262). In the workplace, women compete for jobs with men, and in the home, the husband is no longer the

undisputed leader as was cited in the 1980 census: "The 1980 census no longer automatically assumed that the male member of the household was its head" (Bernard 160). Women are now less economically reliant on men, and therefore, men have a more difficult time deriving strength from feminine weakness and dependency. In 1966, M. Brenton warned in his book, *The American Male,* of the dangers of this sort of identity formation:

> By depending so heavily on his breadwinning role to validate his sense of himself as a man, instead of letting his roles as husband, father, and citizen of the community count as validating sources, the American male treads on psychically dangerous ground. It's always dangerous to put all of one's psychic eggs into one basket. (qtd. Bernard 153)

The traditional man needs a female from whom he can derive his power: "In traditional masculinity, to experience oneself as masculine requires that women play their prescribed role of doing the things that make men feel masculine" (Pleck 5). In addition to feminism, other changes in civil rights have helped to loosen the stranglehold that white men had on opportunity: "By the late 1960s, the civil rights movement had already challenged the dominant view that the public arenas and the workplace were virtual preserves for whites" (Kimmel, "Weekend" 262). The rise of

neo-Nazi organizations and anti-government militias seem to give violent voice to the frightened, whimpering white male.

Destabilized by the feminist and civil rights movements, the white American man struggles to find ways to prove his manhood. Without a noble war to fight, the common man finds few opportunities to gain recognition and identity. Most military actions after W.W.II have not had the full support of the general populace, and veterans of these actions have not received the heroic accolades given to veterans of the past. The horror of the Vietnam War did little to help the collective masculine psyche; the hypocrisy of the Gulf War was keenly portrayed in the film *Three Kings*, and the military intervention in Bosnia was barely noticed. Violence, organized or not, is no longer a respected marker for men.

The rise of global capitalism has also served to dilute the importance of the American man; millions of blue-collar jobs have moved to Third World countries, and many men have lost the ability to successfully feed their families: "The contemporary crisis of masculinity has structural origins in changing global geopolitical and economic relation and in the changing dynamics and the complexion of the workplace" (Kimmel, "Weekend" 261). The increase in technology jobs did little to help the unemployed factory worker who was ill educated and ill prepared to make the transition from manual to mental labor. In the face of the supposedly booming American economy, many traditional men

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were left behind. Because they grew up believing that they had the right to rule, white men have been particularly disturbed by societal changes: "Perhaps the hardest hit psychologically were the middle-class, straight white men from their late 20s through their 40s...they believed themselves entitled to the power that attended on the successful demonstration of masculinity" (Kimmel, "Weekend" 262).

However, some men have adapted to the changing job market. These might be the sons of the laid-off factory workers, sons of alcoholic, abusive, and angry fathers. These disillusioned young men fill cubicles and offices in company after company. Perhaps they are well paid, but they are often denied the satisfaction of seeing the direct result of their labor. In 1844, Karl Marx warned that capitalism would bring worker alienation: "The worker is related to the product of his labor as to an alien object" (109). The typical office worker provides only a tiny piece of a larger product. Workers often interact only with their computers as they shift and sort data for eight hours a day. For the average worker, the only observable outcome of his/her labor is the production of a paycheck at the end of the week and maybe an occasional "good job" from the boss. Labor is "not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it" (Marx 110). As workers struggle to amass the bits of green paper that feed the capitalist economy, they are denied the satisfaction of directly filling a need: "I need a chair. I will

make one." This immediacy of experience is gone; now I must work in front of a computer screen for two weeks, and then I can buy a chair. Even twenty years ago, a man's job was vital. My father worked for a local electric company. When there was a thunderstorm and the electricity failed, my father would have to go out and work to reconnect the power. Today, computers simply reroute the power; therefore, the company has greatly decreased its human workforce.

Capitalism has also increased the significance of the production of wealth, and workers have become less and less important; they are a means to an end for the capitalist:

> With the *increasing value* of the world of things proceeds in direct proportion the *devaluation* of the world of men. Labor produces not only commodities: it produces itself and the worker as a *commodity*—and this in the same general proportion which it produces commodities. This fact expresses merely that the object which labor produces— labour's product—confronts it as *something alien* as a *power independent* of the producer. (Marx 107-108)

Since a man is merely a commodity for the capitalist, vital portions of his identity are destroyed: "Traditional definitions of masculinity had rested on economic autonomy: control over one's labor, control over the product of that labor, and manly self-reliance in the workplace" (Kimmel,

"Weekend" 261). If a man is unnecessary to both the public and private sphere, it is natural that he will feel he has no identity at all. Ralph Ellison once proclaimed, "I am an invisible man." Although he was speaking of the condition of African-Americans in the 1950's, his words could come from any man locked in the postmodern struggle for identity.

In her book, *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Male*, Susan Faludi describes the current masculine position in great detail. Her hypothesis is that today's men have no use—no importance— in society and have nowhere to turn for assurance of their worth and confirmation of their masculinity. A traditional male response to societal pressure would be to attack and repel the source, but the new enemies are elusive:

> The faceless authority of corporate bureaucracy, the remote-control method of military-industrial economy, the feminization of an onrushing celebrity culture, the malevolence of image-management governance, all these eluded direct confrontation. (Faludi 306)

Faludi found that these societal problems were often compounded by an absent or distant father: "Over and over, the breakdown of loyalty in the public domain brought my male guides face-to-face with the collapses of some personal patrimony. Behind all the public double crosses, they sensed, lay their fathers' desertion" (Faludi 596). Faludi

concedes that fathers have been deserting sons for centuries; the difference lay in the culture in which they were dumped, a culture in "which personal worth was judged in ornamental terms" (598). What consumer culture had been doing to women for years is now being inflicted on men. Advertising and entertainers provide impossible goals for all to fall short of.

In a culture of appearance with distant fathers and age-old conventions shaken, where can men turn for role models? In the 1960s, boys could look up to men like John F. Kennedy or Martin Luther King Jr., but in the 1990s, most potential heroes are eventually exposed as louts by the media. President Clinton has provided one of the biggest sex scandals of the 20th century, and numerous religious figures have been caught in less-than-heavenly positions. Sports figures are also mired in scandals ranging from sexual assault to murder, and the entertainment industry mirrors the rest of the nation as Hollywood couples cram the Los Angeles divorce courts.

In response to this lack of role models, Robert Bly wrote *Iron John,* a book that sparked what became known as the men's movement. In the book, Bly attempts to provide a means for getting in touch with the disappearing traditional masculinity. Bly recounts a fable of a son and his relationship with a Wild Man. The fable serves a number of purposes:

> [T]o suggest manhood as a quest, to heal the split between
> the dutiful son and the Wild Man, to imply that the son's
> healing of his own wound will simultaneously heal the
> father's own wounds, to suggest the possibilities of manly
> nurture and initiation of men by other men, and, most
> central, to launch his critique of contemporary culture.
> (Kimmel, "Weekend" 264)

In response to the book, hordes of confused men left their homes for weekends of getting "in touch" with their inner warrior at "for men only" retreats:

> Dozens of therapists and 'mythopoetic' journeymen currently
> offer workshops, retreats, and seminars to facilitate their
> 'gender journey,' to 'heal their father wounds,' so that they
> may retrieve the 'inner king,' the 'warrior within,' or the
> 'wildman.' (Kimmel, "Weekend" 259)

These manly archetypes were derived from the work of psychoanalyst Carl Jung and his theories on the collective unconscious. Jung believed that everyone held universal traits within his/her unconscious; therefore, all men have the same basic characteristics locked deep inside their psyches: "The idea was that all men possessed the same set of masculine archetypes that predisposed them to think, feel, and act in similar ways" (Schwalbe 510).

In his participant-observation study of what has also been called the mythopoetic movement, Michael Schwalbe reported that most of the men who attended the weekend retreats were "between the ages of 35 and 60. Nearly all were white, self-identified as heterosexual, and college educated" (Schwalbe 508). On the surface, this is precisely the group that appears to have the most privileged position, yet they felt the need to search for identity and support. The groups generally avoided political discussions and kept conversations on a personal, emotional level to avoid dissention; however, it is precisely this fact that prevented any opportunity for lasting social change. The veneration of the assumed inherent masculine traits not only supports controversial biological determiners for gender, but it also upholds the subordination of women: "the celebration of manhood and of masculinity—even if it is supposedly 'deep' or 'authentic' and thus a more fully human version of masculinity —reaffirms the lesser value of women, whether this is intended or not" (Schwalbe 518). These aspects of the men's movement, as well as the groups' usurping of choice bits of random native traditions caused it to be highly criticized.

Many social scientists have wondered why this privileged group of men experience their lives as powerless. Some believe it is the methods by which men prove their manhood:

"Why, then, do American men feel so powerless? Part of the answer is because we've constructed the rules of manhood so that only the tiniest fractions of men come to believe that they are [really men]. We have managed to disempower the overwhelming majority of American men by other means—such as discriminating on the basis of race, class, ethnicity, age, or sexual preference" " (Kimmel, "Masculinity" 138).

Even if a man does achieve some semblance of masculinity, he must constantly be on guard against its destruction: "the reigning definition of masculinity is a defensive effort to prevent being emasculated" (Kimmel, "Masculinity" 127) American psychologist Robert Brannon identified what he considers to be the unwritten rules of traditional masculinity. These are rules that few could ever completely fulfill, and, therefore, many men feel that they do not measure up:

1. "No Sissy Stuff!" One may never do anything that even remotely suggests femininity. Masculinity is the relentless repudiation of anything female.

2. "Be a Big Wheel." Masculinity is measured by power, success, wealth and status. As the current saying goes, "He who has the most toys when he dies wins."

3. "Be a Sturdy Oak." Masculinity depends on remaining calm and reliable in a crisis, holding emotions in check.

In fact, proving you're a man depends on never showing your emotions at all. Boys don't cry.

4. "Give 'em Hell." Exude an aura of manly daring and aggression. Go for it. Take risks. (Kimmel, "Masculinity" 125-126)

A look at today's popular American culture provides evidence of the continued struggle to reach these unattainable goals. The late 90's have seen a rise in the glorification of the most negative aspects of the traditional male. Reacting to what he might call the PC (political correctness) movement, the new "traditional" man is an unashamed über-male. Weekly television shows feature this man in all his glory; he drinks, farts, smokes cigars, watches football, and objectifies women with pride. "The only half hour where men can be men without apologizing for it," boasts the narrator from MTV's show, *Dudes*. On Comedy Central's, *The Man Show*, men can tune in to ogle the female mascots—aptly named, The Juggies. While wearing tiny cheerleader costumes, The Juggies enthusiastically cheer the moronic antics of the show's hosts. A special segment of the program features women jumping up and down on a trampoline in their underwear. Not to be left out of a burgeoning market, another cable channel, FX, has its own version of *The Man Show*, cleverly titled, *The X-show*. In addition to highlighting scantily clad women on *The X-Show*, FX proudly brings its viewers *The*

Toughman Contest. This is a show for regular "guys." The viewer can see common men get into a ring and try to beat each other to a pulp. The channel TNT also periodically pays homage to the old-style man; for weeklong periods, TNT ads promise to show "Movies for guys who like movies." These films usually contain a large number of explosions and inevitably feature testosterone-heavy stars such as Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzeneggner, who draw on traditional masculine models. And for those viewers who are tired of the rules protecting sissy NFL football players, they can now tune in to watch the mega-masculine XFL, the Extreme Football League. The new teams have appropriately manly names— NY/NJ Hitmen, Las Vegas Outlaws, Chicago Enforcers, San Francisco Demons, and Orlando Rage. This league has also decreased the size of the uniform that its cheerleaders wear.

This dedication to archaic gender roles extends from the television screen to the silver screen. Films such as *Gladiator, Braveheart,* and *The Patriot* honor the more heroic aspects of men. Other films such as *American Pie* and *Whipped* are reminiscent of the early 80s classic *Porky's.* Each of these films chronicles the struggle of a group of young men trying to find women to have sex with. However, there are a few films that attempt to address seriously the confusion of the postmodern man, films such as *American Beauty, Being John Malkovich, American*

Psycho, and, the focus of this paper, *Fight Club.* Each film has as its protagonist a defeated man lost in the world of late capitalism.

In the Oscar-winning film, *American Beauty,* Kevin Spacey plays the deceased narrator, Lester Burnam. Lester wakes one day to discover the desolation of his life. His well-paying but soulless advertising job mirrors the loveless marriage to his perfect wife. In postmodern America, appearance is everything, and both Lester's job and his family are masks he wears to "prove how normal" he is. His previous response to the crisis of masculinity had been depression, but inspired by a pot-selling neighbor boy, Lester quits his job and blackmails his boss, a representative of evil corporate America. He also defies his controlling, materialistic wife, and he begins to take back the pieces of his life that he loved, with little worry for conventions. He returns to the joys of his youth— cars, drugs, and girls—but as he begins to build something new from his life, another crisis-ridden man guns him down.

In Spike Jonze's surrealist film, *Being John Malkovich,* the protagonist, Craig Schwartz, is forced to find a new outlet for masculine identity. As a puppeteer, Craig is unable to survive financially from his work. This belittles his masculinity, and his posture shows his utterly defeated attitude. He is convinced by his wife to find a paying job, and, like many other men, he becomes an anonymous paper-pusher in a corporation. Craig finds a tunnel in his office building which leads to the

mind of the actor John Malkovich. Finally, Craig can have an identity. Even though the experience lasts only 15 minutes, there are large numbers of unhappy men who gladly pay for the opportunity to be someone else. With the help of his stunning co-worker Maxine, Craig begins a successful business in providing an alternative identity for other suffering men. The only character in the film that does not go into Malkovich's head is Maxine. She is confident and pleased with her own identity, and this is why both Craig and his wife, Lotte, fall in love with her. Craig attempts to stay in the Malkovich body in order to win Maxine's love, but his plan is ultimately unsuccessful. Like Lester Burnam in *American Beauty*, he is unable to build a new type of masculine identity.

American Psycho presents a less subtle protagonist than the previously mentioned characters; Patrick Bateman simply murders people to relieve his deep dissatisfaction. Or at least he imagines that he murders people. With a fabulous Wall Street job and an equally fabulous girlfriend, Bateman is angry that the promised bliss from the accumulation of wealth has not materialized. He is undistinguishable from every other Wall Street worker in his office; they all share hairstyles and expensive wardrobes. Bateman's life is an amalgamation of products; facial cleanser, mud masks, aftershave, Valentino suits, and Jean Paul Gautier hanging bags. He rails against the futility and anonymity of his

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life: "I simply am not there," he says of his daily life. Bateman attempts

to assuage his anxiety by committing horrific murders of women and

male co-workers, although the film does not make it clear whether the

murders are real or only a figment of his imagination. At the end of the

film, Bateman confesses his crimes to his lawyer, and to his horror, the

lawyer does not believe him. Ultimately, even violent crime cannot

provide an individualized identity.

All of these films present men reacting to the conditions imposed

on them by the postmodern world. Because they have been unable to

distinguish themselves as powerful masculine subjects, they strike out in

desperate ways to establish subjectivity for themselves. As the films

reveal, a return to adolescence, the assumption of another's identity, or

the perpetration of hideous violence are all unsuccessful means of

creating new and beneficial alternatives for men in our society. In *Fight

Club*, the protagonist makes an attempt at each of the aforementioned

alternatives; however, he continues through these to find another

solution.

A Theoretical Interpretation

French theorist Jacques Lacan reinterpreted the work of Sigmund

Freud.The resulting body of work is extensive and complex. For this

thesis, I will concentrate on those aspects of Lacanian theory that directly apply to the postmodern masculine identity crisis.

As previously mentioned, it is the masculine subject who has reacted most negatively to the new liberality of gender roles because the masculine subject is mostly characterized by the world around him. For Lacan, a subject was not masculine or feminine because of biological makeup; rather, he saw the two possibilities as positions a subject took up at her/his entrance into language: "Every speaking being situates itself on one side or the other" (Lacan 79). Before the development of language, the subject is only a group of instincts. Once the subject learns to speak, she/he becomes a split subject. When I learn to speak, I can talk about myself—"I went to the store." Now, I have become the subject of my sentence, yet I am also the one who is speaking—I am a split subject: "every human being who learns to speak is thereby alienated from her or himself" (Fink 7). With the institution of language comes the subject's entrance into society and all that entrance entails: "*Alienation represents the instituting of the symbolic order*—which must be realized anew for each subject—*and the subject's assignation of a place therein*" (Fink 52). The symbolic order is the language and society that the subject is born into. One important part of this order is the illusion of what Lacan calls the big Other. The big Other is the audience for all of the subject's actions. The "they" people are always talking

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about—"they say that it will rain today." The assumption is that there is a kind of meta-subject, a societal mind watching and controlling. The ultimate question for the subject is "what does the big Other desire from me?" By trying to be what the Other wants, a subject derives identity. For the child, the big Other is the parents, and as the child grows, other institutions and other people take the parent's place. For many men and women, this watchful eye of the big Other shapes everything that they do; however, in Lacan's view, it is the masculine subject who is most driven by this need for outside validation.

The difference between male and female subjects can be seen in the way that each relate to his/her alienation within language: "Masculinity and femininity are defined as different kinds of relations to the symbolic order, different ways of being split by language" (Fink 106). Again, the two positions are not dependent on biology; men may take the feminine position and vice versa. It is the masculine position that is completely defined by the split brought about by language: "Men are wholly determined by the alienation brought about by language" (Fink 106). The institution of language encloses him completely, yet he maintains a fantasy of the father—one who exists outside the boundary who maintains perfect enjoyment with no split: "But while men are wholly castrated, there is nevertheless a contradiction: that idea of noncastration—of knowing no boundaries, no limitation—lives on

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somewhere, somehow, in each and every man" (Fink 107). This belief in one outside of limitation comes from the father's institution of the incest taboo. He is a barrier to the mother's affection for the child, and, therefore, the child believes that the father has access to something that the child does not. As the masculine child grows, he identifies with the fantasy position and hopes for that total access and enjoyment. In our culture, and many others, the phallus has become the signifier of this enjoyment; it is the signifier of desire. It is also the signifier for the subject's entrance into language; the phallus represents the father's "no," the barrier between the child and the mother.

In the past, men could look at masculine icons and imagine their *jouissance* (enjoyment) as being complete, but as the icons are destroyed and criticized, men are shaken; dreams of total access are fading and avenues for control are dismissing. Without concrete opportunities for recognition within the symbolic order, the weight of their identity crisis becomes crushing; men no longer believe that there is a possibility for existence outside of the order's control. Attempts to revive old models of manhood are in vain. Only by learning to identify with the female position can men derive a new form of identity. Because the feminine position does not harbor a fantasy of a position outside of the symbolic order, she is not completely determined by it: "A woman is not split in the same way as a man: though alienated, she is not altogether subject

to the symbolic order" (Fink 107). With a fantasy of the phallus (free existence outside the order), men must be completely controlled by the order: "Since one man is entirely exempt from the phallic function, all the others are wholly submitted to it; and since no woman is entirely exempt from the phallic function, no woman, similarly, is wholly submitted to it" (Zizek, *Indivisible* 156). Women do not have the fantasy; therefore, they realize their subjectification to the order. They are not completely defined by the entrance to language: "Woman undermines the universality of the phallic function by the very fact that there is no exception in her, nothing that resists it" (Zizek, *Indivisible* 157). While men are only able to experience phallic *jouissance* (symbolic), women have the possibility for what Lacan calls the Other *jouissance*. This is enjoyment not dependent on the symbolic order.

Typically, men have enjoyed the spoils of society and women have not. As the source of his power is called into question, the postmodern man can no longer find a stable identity: "In post-modern society, we have a total disbelief in authority and in the power of the symbolic order, the so-called big Other" (Salecl, *(Per)versions* 150). The power held by most depends on the rest of society's compliance. A judge's power comes from the constituents who elect him/her and relies on the contract made with society; his/her decision will be accepted and abided by. As all of these positions are called into question, the ground for identification is

shaken: "The post-modern subject no longer accepts the power of institutions or society's power to fashion his or her identity...one can also observe the subject's anger and disappointment in regard to the very authority of the big Other" (Salecl, (*Per)versions* 151). Although these institutions have lost some power, the subject can not escape from the function of the symbolic order: "The fact that subjects face a radical rejection of belief in the big Other, or that they know that the big Other actually does not exist, does not mean that the symbolic structure is not operative. Subjects are still strongly marked by the symbolic prohibition although they might no longer identify with the authorities who are supposed to be bearers of this prohibition" (Salecl, (*Per)versions 159*).

In summary, men are suffering from an identity crisis because their previously unquestioned avenues for power are being destroyed. Because they have no other source for identity and enjoyment, they must attempt to derive something new. The new postmodern subject is obsessed with finding such an outlet for identity and that is what *Fight Club* explores. The protagonist desperately desires an identity and recognition. Salecl explains that this is the ultimate fantasy: "the subject... forever lacks a firm hold in the other order of symbolic existence...the object of fantasy is precisely to supplement, fill in, this symbolic lack, to provide a fragile, temporary semblance of being for the subject" (Salecl, *Sexuation* 6).

CHAPTER TWO:

Fight Club **and the Crisis**

In comparison to the aforementioned films, I believe *Fight Club*

provides an excellent example of the postmodern masculine struggle.

This film is a violent and shocking exploration of the deranged mind of

one man frantically searching for an identity in late capitalist America.

The film was adapted for the screen by Jim Uhls from the novel by full-

time mechanic and part-time novelist, Chuck Palahniuk. David Fincher

directed the film, and Edward Norton, Brad Pitt, and Helena Bonham-

Carter take the starring roles. Unlike the other films mentioned, *Fight

Club* has what I believe to be a positive ending. After a long and

harrowing struggle, the main character seems to have found a more

successful answer to his identity crisis; he will no longer fight to

maintain the traditional masculine position wholly dependent on the

symbolic order—he will identify with the feminine position.

Fight Club is the story of an unnamed protagonist; for convenience,

I will call him by his first mentioned alias—Cornelius. Edward Norton

plays Cornelius, and it is his depressed narration that leads the audience

through the maze of the film. Like many men in American society,

Cornelius is unhappy with his station in life. A cog in the corporate

machine, he has no purpose other than to be a collector of material

possessions. Cornelius' ensuing depression leads to chronic insomnia, and only visits to support groups for the dying can relieve his sleeplessness. In the groups, the presence of another faker (a woman) disturbs Cornelius' enjoyment, and once again, he cannot sleep. On one of his many business trips, Cornelius meets Tyler Durden. From his first moment on screen, it is clear that Tyler's desire is to subvert the capitalist system. Tyler and Cornelius form a fighting club that becomes a haven in which the dissatisfied American man can be reborn. During a fight, the subject is reassured of his own existence, if not through glory, then through pain. This state cannot be maintained, and a new order evolves, one that Cornelius cannot control. He then realizes that Tyler is his own creation, another personality in his own mind who is not dependent on the symbolic order for his validity. The movie ends with Cornelius' emancipation from Tyler and explosions that destroy the home offices of many credit card companies, bringing all consumer debt to zero.

As a white-collar worker in the late capitalist era, Cornelius suffers from the worker's alienation that Marx predicted. He receives no satisfaction from seeing the results of his work; for him the observable product of his labor is a paycheck at the end of every week. Cornelius is a recall coordinator for a major car company; he is one of the hundreds of faceless paper pushers that fuel mammoth corporations. Cornelius'

main function within the company is to apply a mathematical formula to the value of human life. He must decide what is most cost effective for his company. Should a manufacturing flaw go ignored in one of the company's cars in order to avoid the cost of a recall? Human lives will likely be lost, and the company will be forced to pay out-of-court settlements. Perhaps an immediate recall would be more fiscally advantageous. The cost to human life never enters into the equation; the financial cost is the only consideration. As Karl Marx warned, late capitalism has brought the complete reification of humanity; human life has been devalued as material possessions have increased in importance. This devaluation is apparent on one of Cornelius' business trips. As he examines one of his company's cars after an accident, the men working with him make crass jokes about the wreckage with no regard for the lives of the people who died in the accident. Far removed from the human element of his job because of the huge bureaucracy, Cornelius struggles to ignore the ethical problems that go along with his work; however, the deception takes a heavy toll. Like Tom Cruise's character in *Jerry Maguire,* Cornelius "hates his place in the world," and as he flies across the country, he prays for a mid-air collision to end his banal existence. Later in the film, threatening his boss, he calls himself a "button down, oxford-cloth psycho," who might come to work with a machine gun and destroy all in his path. The 90s have seen an

enormous number of just such shootings in the workplace. These disgruntled employees attempt to reek havoc on the system that promised more than it could deliver.

In the late capitalist world, many companies demonstrate little in the way of loyalty to their employees, confident that positions can easily be filled by another worker. Faludi cites this destruction of job security as another factor adding to men's feeling betrayed:

> Men throughout America discovered in the eighties and nineties that the contract they thought they had with their employers was a lie...Loyalty was what you got if you were the one bringing cash to the table. Like so much else in the era, loyalty had become a commodity. (154)

Here is another former distinguisher for men that has been destroyed. Today there is little to distinguish one worker from another; all are replaceable; they are the grey drones of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis,* as well as the Gucci-covered yuppies in *American Psycho.* Cornelius' co-workers fare no better: they too are interchangeable. As he makes copies, Cornelius stares at three fellow employees each doing exactly the same thing—making copies and drinking coffee. Although Cornelius is commenting on his insomnia-induced emotional state, his words reflect the status of the individual in conforming, capitalist culture: "Everything is a copy of a copy of a copy." At this point in the film, the

audience gets its first hint of the existence of Tyler. As Cornelius watches

his co-workers, a single frame of Tyler is spliced into the scene. Had the

viewer blinked at this moment,
he/she might have missed this
important clue in the true nature of
the relationship between the two
men. See Fig. 1

Without a meaningful career,
Cornelius has only one true purpose:
he is a consumer. For a masculine
subject, this realization is horrifying;
he is forced to confront his complete
subjugation to the symbolic order.
There is no longer an illusion of

Fig. 1

control for most men, and they line up with women to be objectified in

order to sell products. Faludi quotes Betty Friedan's book, *The Feminine*

Mystique, and explains that the female oppression Friedan had

discovered is now being targeted at men. An advertising executive told

Friedan the following:

> Properly manipulated ("if you are not afraid of that word," he
>
> said), American housewives can be given the sense of

identity, purpose, creativity, the self-realization, even the

sexual joy they lack—by the buying of things." (601)

Since the publication of Freidan's work in 1963, advertisers have realized

that men are also potential customers. As men's roles have been

destabilized, the resulting uneasiness has made them more desperate for

proof of their worth; advertisers are more than delighted to provide a

myriad of products claiming to create a better, happier, and more manly

subject. Tyler addresses this manipulation in a speech to the men of

Fight Club: "Advertising has us chasing cars and clothes working jobs we

hate to buy shit we don't need."

Cornelius has been fully duped by consumer culture. He calls

himself a victim of the "Ikea nesting instinct." His home is full of stylish

pieces from the trendy, Swedish furniture company. As he walks through

his apartment, the scene mutates into a virtual catalog complete with the

product descriptions and their prices appearing next to each item.

Cornelius wonders as he flips through the pages of a catalog, "What sort

of dining room set defines me as a person?" Today our things, not our

personalities or accomplishments, define us. In the film, *High Fidelity*,

the main character explains, "it is *what* you like not what you *are* like

that is important." In addition to providing a source of identity for

Cornelius, his shop-at-home catalogs allow him to purchase products

without ever leaving the isolation of his own home. Cornelius has little human contact other than the occasional voice taking his phone order.

We can see the impact of consumerism on both individual subjects, like Cornelius, and on our language. Name brands and product terminology have been added to the vernacular in great numbers, and the film highlights this proliferation. The list of products mentioned in the film is extensive: Rogaine, Olestra, Viagra, Seconal, CK shirts, DKNY shoes, and AX ties. Cornelius foresees this trend as usurping everything in the future: "When deep space exploration rams up, it will be the corporations that name everything; the IBM Stellarsphere, the Microsoft Galaxy, Planet Starbucks." Even the stars will be exploited for their advertising potential. This knowledge serves to drive home for Cornelius the realization that he is not in control; he is the one being controlled. As a masculine subject, Cornelius would have grown up expecting some part in this power. "One giant step for man," said Neal Armstrong, but today the planets belong to someone else; men merely travel to the stars as tools for the corporate machines.

With a life of product dependence and over consumption, Cornelius finds it difficult to develop a meaningful and individual existence. He sees his life as small, measured out in tiny increments, what he calls "a single serving life," reminiscent of the "coffee spoons" used to measure out the life of T. S. Eliot's anti-hero, J. Alfred Prufrock.

There is no evidence of his existence other than the contents of the trashcan next to his desk, the remnants of the products he has dutifully consumed. The camera seems to weave through the name brand refuse as it did the contents of Cornelius' mind at the start of the film. Each night, Cornelius comes home to his apartment in what he calls a "filing cabinet." Ironically, the sign outside of his building says, "Pearson Towers: A Place To Be Somebody." In this type of life, there is no way to be "somebody."

The feminine subject has been fighting against her own objectification in American culture since the 60s. Some inroads have been made, but because her identity was not built completely on the symbolic order, she has handled the rise of consumer culture more gracefully. However, the masculine subject reacts to this sort of anonymity with feelings of helplessness. Constant references to emasculation remind the viewer that his fantasy of phallic enjoyment has been destroyed. Cornelius finds brief respite from his pain in a group for sufferers of testicular cancer. After the destruction of his apartment, Tyler tells Cornelius "It could be worse. A women could cut off your penis while you're sleeping and throw it out the window of a moving car." The reference is of course to John Bobbitt, the man who became a celebrity after his wife took revenge for the abuse she had suffered at his hands. In addition, the threat the Project Mayhem uses against its enemies is

"we'll take your balls." The phallus is evoked again when the audience

sees the splice of pornography that Tyler chooses to inject into a

children's film. While he could show any number of obscene images, the

splice features only a close-up of a penis.

In the face of conformist capitalism and the emasculation that it

brings, Cornelius cannot find any way to be a man. In response, he

attempts to take up the traditional feminine role. As he flips through his

home furnishing catalogs, he thinks, "We used to read pornography;

now, it's the Horchow Collection." The man who had once enjoyed simple

sexual objectification of women is now reduced to her position—

decorating his condo. He longs for the objectifying, porn-loving

traditional male attitude portrayed on *The Man Show*. Cornelius uses the

energy from his anger and dissatisfaction for housecleaning, again, a

stereotypical female response: "When I came home angry or depressed,

I'd just clean my condo or polish my Scandinavian furniture." Fifty years

ago, Cornelius would have already been married, and his wife would have

been the one to decorate and clean his apartment.

American culture's new obsession with men's physical appearance

has also feminized masculine subjects. As Cornelius lies on the couch

flipping channels, he sees an infomercial for a spray-on hair substitute.

Again, like Patrick Bateman, men have begun relying on beauty products

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and obsessing about their appearance. Faludi talks much about the
pervasive new culture of "appearance" in *Stiffed*:

> By century's end, the dictates of a consumer and media
> culture had trapped both men and women in a world in
> which top billing mattered more than building, in which high
> representation trumped production, in which appearances
> were what counted. (451)

With the masculine role disintegrating, Cornelius attempts to find
fulfillment in co-opting presumed feminine traits; of course, this reversal
must ultimately fail because an assumption of the feminine position
cannot replace the lost phallic enjoyment. In fact, it makes him feel the
loss even more. As men see women climbing out of their secondary
status, they are beginning to feel their own oppression: "No wonder men
are in such agony. Not only are they losing the society they were once
essential to, they are 'gaining' the very world women so recently shucked
off as demeaning and dehumanizing" (Faludi 39).

With the failure of the co-opted feminine role, Cornelius must
continue his search for a source of identity. His depression continues,
and he begs a doctor to help him with medication, "Come on! I'm in
pain." The doctor dismisses his suffering and tells him to go see real pain
at a support group for survivors of testicular cancer. Intrigued, Cornelius
attends a meeting of "Remaining Men Together." Here Cornelius' pain is

acknowledged; all are victims of emasculation, both literally and symbolically. Their meetings take place in a gymnasium; a basketball hoop and an American flag hang on the wall. This used to be a place where legends were made, but now high schools heroes are reduced to pathetic figures like Bob: "Bob had bitch tits." Bob had been trying to forge a masculine identity through bodybuilding, but testicular cancer and its treatment had turned him into a pseudo-woman with breasts "that hung enormous." See Fig. 2.

Fig. 2

In the group, Cornelius can finally express his emotions; his pain is acknowledged and allowed. Crying in Bob's arms, he finally finds relief: "I let go. Lost in oblivion. Dark and silent and complete. I found freedom. Losing all hope was freedom." He has given up on the illusion of subjectivity. He has found a return to the womb, a place without the curse of the split subject. Cornelius sees his tears on his partner's shirt, and the wet spots look like a face staring back at him; finally, Cornelius believes he has found an authentic identity.

In addition to commiserating in their misery, the men of the group seem to derive both homosocial and, perhaps, homosexual enjoyment from the other sufferers. In the postmodern world, men have fewer opportunities to bond with other men. Often men are quick to name

others as homosexuals in an attempt to assert their own masculinity: "Being seen as unmanly is a fear that propels American men to deny manhood to others, as a way of proving the unprovable—that one is fully manly" (Kimmel, "Masculinity 136). Homophobia seems to be on the rise as men see their position becoming more and more like women's. This fear of being perceived as gay prevents men from relying on each other in intimate ways: "Loving male relationships are part of the experiences of many men that are rarely thought about or discussed because of homophobia" (Lehne 333). On a recent episode of "Inside the Actor's Studio," Ben Affleck explained that he and Matt Damon had been inspired to write *Good Will Hunting* because of the lack of contemporary films depicting what he called "male love and friendship." The film was a success, and Damon and Affleck won Oscars for the screenplay, perhaps indicating the desire other men felt for this type of film.

On Cornelius' first night at the group, during sharing time, Bob approaches him. The audience sees Cornelius's face as he is sitting in a chair, and Bob's hand (wearing a gold bracelet) comes into the frame to help Cornelius to his feet; it looks as if he is asking him to dance. As the camera pans around the room, the other men clutch each other in semi-erotic poses. One man seems to be moving his head into the lap of the man sitting across from him, and another man hugs and clutches sensuously the shoulder of another. More important than the homoerotic

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subtext, however, is the male support that comes from the group. The

leader says that he sees courage in the men, and he gets strength from

their courage. Like the mythopoetic movement, the groups provide men

time with other men to mourn what has been lost. Unlike the *Iron John*

devotees however, the men in the support groups are not attempting to

reassert their power through the invocation of traditional male models.

The cancer sufferers are honestly relating to each other and recognizing

the pain that they all feel. Without their testicles, the men find that the

confines of traditional manhood are gone; they are now free to be human

beings heroically confronting death and their own symbolic

emasculation.

After his first emotional release, Cornelius becomes addicted to

support groups. Although his original group was exclusively male,

Cornelius later attends inclusive groups. At their weekly meetings, both

genders attempt to deal with the reality of their life-threatening diseases

and the possibility of their imminent demise. Groups like Alcoholic

Anonymous do not hold the same allure for Cornelius; he needs to attend

groups confronting death in order to put less importance on his identity

or lack of one. Some group members, such as Chloe, seem frightfully

close to the grave. Her appearance represents the horrifying reality of

death as she pathetically pleas for what will probably be her last sexual

partner. In an attempt to control their fear and pain, Chloe and the

group practice guided meditation. The leader tells them to imagine their cave; this cave is their protection from pain and suffering, again an image of the womb. Rather than a warm cave in a beautiful green mountain, Cornelius' visualizes a cave of ice. In his cave waits his "power animal," the animal that will help him survive his world. For Cornelius, this is a penguin. At first glance, penguins do not appear to be very powerful, but their endurance is impressive when one considers the environment in which they must survive. Their survival also depends on group cooperation and a sharing across sexes of child-rearing and food-gathering activities. Cornelius hopes that his penguin can teach him to survive in his cold, late-capitalist world. In his cave, his penguin urges him to "slide." Later, Cornelius cites Tyler as teaching him to "let that which does not matter, truly slide." This is what originally the groups do for Cornelius; however, the identity Cornelius creates within the groups is a lie; he is only pretending to be fully confronting his death. Inevitably, Cornelius' peace is disturbed by the appearance of another faker in his groups. Her name is Marla, and Cornelius claims, "She ruined everything."

Although Cornelius blames Marla for destroying his newly found peace of mind, his project was already doomed to failure; she is only the excuse. He can never be satisfied; he will never be complete because he is a split subject; she merely exposes his lack. As a "tourist," she

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represents the inauthentic and forces Cornelius out of his happy delusion. Without her presence, he could pretend that the emotions he was experiencing were authentic. Although he claims not to be attracted to her, it is clear from their first altercation that he desires her. After their decision to split the groups between them to avoid further contact, there is no need for Cornelius to get her phone number, yet he does so using the flimsy excuse that they may need to switch nights. It is his desire for Marla not his insomnia that finally forces Tyler to the surface. If Cornelius and Marla had split up the groups to avoid seeing each other, presumably Cornelius would again be free to enjoy and, therefore, would again be sleeping like a baby. At the start of the film, Cornelius says, "All of this, the guns, the bombs, the revolution, has something to do with a girl named Marla Singer." Had Cornelius been able to confront his desire for Marla, Tyler would not have taken over. When Cornelius tries to call Marla after the destruction of his condo, Tyler surfaces. When Marla calls Cornelius for help during her suicide attempt, Tyler also surfaces. Cornelius needs Tyler as a buffer between him and his desire.

Cornelius' love/hate object, Marla, suffers from her own problems. Her attendance at the groups shows her unhealthy infatuation with death; however, she is not bothered by Cornelius' knowing that she is a faker. With little investment in the symbolic order—no job, no

relationships—she seems to live on the fringes of society, stealing food and clothes as necessity dictates. She exposes (as will Tyler later) Cornelius' attempts to be "cool" when he confronts her at the groups: "I saw you practicing this. Is it going as well as you'd hoped?" As a woman, she does have the possibility for enjoyment outside of the symbolic order: "It's not because she is not-wholly in the phallic function that she is not there at all. She is not not at all there. She is there in full. But there is something more" (Lacan 74).

In spite of her aloofness, Marla also suffers from the effects of late capitalism. Although Marla's distress in never fully examined, her behavior provides insights. One morning after a raucous night with Tyler, Marla says to Cornelius, "The condom is the glass slipper of our generation. You slip one on and you dance all night, and then you throw it away—the condom, not the stranger." But the implication is that you *do* throw away the stranger. She goes on to describe the history of the dress she wears; it is a bridesmaid dress that she paid $1 for: "Someone loved it intensely for one day." She compares it to a Christmas tree, something loved and quickly abandoned. This is the throwaway nature of American society. Everything is disposable—razors, contacts, diapers, and even cameras. Relationships fare no better in this world, and that seems to be the core of her depression. Cornelius says, "Marla's philosophy of life is that she might die at any moment. The tragedy was

that she didn't." She imagines death as her only escape from the "merry-go-round" that she sings about: "Gotta get off, gotta get off this merry-go-round." Her death wish is clear from her constant smoking—even during sex. She is a chain smoker; she takes long, deep drags from her cigarette and French inhales. She walks into traffic without a care, while Cornelius stops and looks for a break in the cars. Her passive suicide attempts are eventually replaced by real ones; she attempts to kill herself with an overdose of Xanax later in the film; however, her phone call to Cornelius and the police after taking the pills indicates that death was not really her goal. Like Cornelius, she wants a release from the confines of the symbolic order, but she is not actually ready to die.

With the intrusion of Marla, Cornelius is forced to find another outlet for identity. He is unable to face his desire and his life, so his mind creates another fully formed personality who is up to the challenge—Tyler Durden.

CHAPTER THREE:

"Do you know Tyler Durden?"

Waking from a dream, Cornelius finds himself sitting on an airplane next to Tyler Durden. A creation of Cornelius' mind, Tyler is everything that Cornelius would like to be. He is attractive and smart; his clothes reflect no current style, yet somehow he appears "cool." It is his disdain for the reigning social order, and his apparent freedom from it, that gives him this aura. Like Maxine from *Being John Malkovich*, Tyler has an abundance of confidence and does not need validation from external sources. With the creation of Tyler, Cornelius receives a brief respite from the pressure of his meaningless life; he now has an identity of his own making and can use this identity to do everything he is afraid to do, such as quitting his soul-destroying job and having a sexual relationship with Marla.

With their first meeting, Tyler immediately begins dismantling illusions imposed by the symbolic order. One of the most important jobs of the symbolic order is to hide the reality of death. A subject constantly confronting his/her own death is unable to put stock in the arbitrary nature of the social order; therefore, many aspects of culture function to divert our attention and make us believe that we are safe from harm. Tyler points to the plane's emergency procedure card; its illustrations depict passengers calmly preparing for a crash, and he scoffs at the

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blatant lie. He concedes that the oxygen masks might make the passengers euphoric and thus calm during a crash, but they would most likely never survive the accident. Tyler calls it an "illusion of safety." Slavoj Zizek, in a 1996 essay, also commented on the lie told by these cards, and he cited their existence as an example of ideology and its covert forwarding: "Suffice it to recall the safety instructions prior to the take-off of an airplane. Aren't they sustained by a fantasmatic scenario of how a plane crash might look? Is not this 'gentrifying' of a catastrophe ...also ideology at its purest?" (*Plague* 6). Tyler also exposes Cornelius' attempts at the friendly chitchat between strangers found acceptable on a plane. When Cornelius asks Tyler about his profession, Tyler exposes his true disinterest: "Why, so you can pretend like you're interested?" In addition to Tyler's renegade social behavior, he possesses an enormous amount of information on the manufacture of explosives from "simple household products," a favorite terrorist strategy of the late 20th century.

In his first attempt to drag Cornelius from the grip of the symbolic order, Tyler blows up Cornelius' apartment while he is away on a business trip. As Cornelius surveys the destruction, he pointedly remarks on the state of his life. The contents of his refrigerator are scattered through the street, and Cornelius thinks, "How embarrassing! A refrigerator full of condiments and no food." This is a direct comment on consumer society. Life is full of extras (designer clothes, sports cars)

piled on top of a void: "Constructed around celebrity and image, glamour, and entertainment, marketing and consumerism, it [ornamental culture] is a ceremonial gateway to nowhere" (Faludi 35). With his apartment destroyed, Cornelius calls Tyler for help. As they drink beer in a pool hall, he laments the loss of his material possessions: "I had it all." Tyler attempts to convince Cornelius of the absurdity of the accumulation of meaningless belongings. Tyler longs for simpler times when men didn't know what a *duvet* was. He wants to be more than a consumer; he wants things to have immediate importance to life "in the hunter/gatherer sense of the word." Tyler warns Cornelius, "The things you own, end up owning you." Later, during one of their Fight Club evenings, Tyler preaches to the men about the dangers of materialism: "TV has us working jobs we hate to buy shit we don't need." Tyler later describes himself as someone who rejects the "basic assumptions of civilization, especially the importance of material possessions." Soon, Cornelius is a convert, and he mocks his previous attitude. Speaking to the detective investigating the explosion at his apartment, he says, "That was not just a bunch of stuff that got destroyed; it was me." The viewer then hears Cornelius think sarcastically, "I would like to thank the Academy." He has just put on the appropriate performance for a capitalist audience. A subject who doesn't love his possessions is suspect.

Tyler takes Cornelius back to his dilapidated home on Paper Street. The house seems on the verge of collapse; few of the amenities work, yet Cornelius stays. The previous occupant left a collection of articles with descriptions of body parts written from the organ's point of view: "I am Jack's medulla oblongata. Without me Jack could not regulate his heart rate, blood pressure, or breathing." This is the best confirmation of existence that a subject can hope, the realization that he is a collection of parts, not a complete subject.

On a bus ride, the pair address Faludi's "ornamental culture." Looking at a Gucci underwear ad featuring a perfectly toned half-naked man, Cornelius asks Tyler, "Is that what a man looks like?" Tyler responds, "Self improvement is masturbation, now self destruction..." Self-improvement only proves and increases one's investment in the symbolic order; attempts at self-destruction prove the subject's lack of attachment to life within the symbolic confines. MTV's new show, *Jackass*, provides momentary fame for male practioners of self-destruction. Each week, young men allow themselves to be used as targets for Jai-Alai balls and baseball bats, while their friends cheer for any resulting blood loss.

In addition to Tyler's repudiation of material possessions, he attempts to subvert the symbolic order by using the gaps inherent within it to his own purpose. Tyler works as a film projectionist in order to

splice frames of pornography into children's' films. During a movie, the viewer believes that he/she is seeing a complete image; however, there are gaps that the viewer does not notice. Like the viewers of Tyler's special projects, the *Fight Club* audience thinks all the gaps have been smoothed over until Tyler brings our attention to his methods. The film exposes its own gaps by showing us the "cigarette burns" used to show the time for a changeover of the film reels. The splices of Tyler before his actual entrance as a character foreshadow the duo's relationship. These film techniques replicate the message; the symbolic order that is the film is exposed. Tyler wants to expose gaps so that people can see that there is no "whole;" there is no complete enjoyment—"I say never be complete." And this is what the techniques of the film do. We see the gaps; the tricks are uncovered. As Tyler give a monologue to the camera at one point, the film appears to be shaking and the edges look like they are exposed. Like Bertolt Brecht's 'alienation effect,' Fincher reminds the audience, "You are watching a movie." The audience is also privy to the same spliced in penis that Tyler wants the families to see. Although Tyler claims he uses various pieces of pornography, the only image the *Fight Club* audience sees is a penis.

During their first outing, Tyler asks Cornelius to do him a favor; he wants Cornelius to hit him as hard as he can. When queried as to why, he replies, "How much can you know about yourself if you've never been

in a fight? I don't want to die without any scars." Cornelius obliges him

with a punch to his ear. Tyler returns the favor and punches Cornelius

in the stomach. Cornelius says, "That really hurts. Do it again." And

thus, Fight Club is born. Other men quickly join the pair in their

destructive activities. Why is this particular activity so seductive to the

men involved?

Fight Club helps the men involved in it for a time because, in pain,

the subject is assured of his existence. It is a quick look past the

unimportant trivia of daily life. In the face of severe pain, the subject sees

nothing else: "I am the pain." After a severe beating, Cornelius stares at a

puddle of his own blood on the floor. Cornelius looks at it with the same

amazement and recognition that he had when he saw the face of tears on

Bob's shirt. It's working; Cornelius believes in his own existence, and

questions about his identity are no longer a concern. Pain is completely

real experience; like sexual enjoyment, it resists symbolization. There is

no marketing, no etiquette, no games, and no money, only pain; however,

the group cannot maintain this pure state. Once other men join the

group, Cornelius claims that "It was on the tip of everyone's tongue; Tyler

and I just gave it a name." They have now symbolized it. Although the

first two rules of Fight Club are "You do not talk about Fight Club," the

members obviously talk about the club because the membership quickly

grows. Cornelius eventually writes down the rules at work and

accidentally leaves a copy of them in the copy machine. This symbolization continues, and the group becomes a new system.

As Fight Club grows, Cornelius' job becomes less and less important; he caustically displays his mouthful of blood at a meeting and thinks to himself, "you can swallow a pint of blood before you get sick." He has transferred his identity from work to Fight Club, and he now imagines himself as outside of the realm of consumer culture; he knows something "they" don't: "I got right in everyone's hostile little faces. Yes, these are bruises from fighting. Yes, I'm okay with that. I am enlightened."" This belief in his freedom is what makes him vulnerable to a new type of control: "an ideological identification exerts a true hold on us precisely when we maintain an awareness that we are not fully identical to it" (Zizek, *Plague* 50). Now that he believes society no longer controls him, he is no longer on guard against the control of outside forces.

The nature of Tyler's new community bears a strong likeness to the initiation rituals in tribal societies, as did the mythopoetic movement of the 90s. Men cloister themselves with other men in an attempt to shield themselves from the assumed judgmental eyes of women; although as previously mentioned, proof of masculinity is primarily provided by and for other men. Away from the feminine, men must undergo test and trial after which they are considered a new being; the transition generally was

from boy to man. In her book *(Per)versions of Love and Hate*, Renata

Salecl explains the appeal of initiation rituals in a postmodern world:

> The return to old traditions needs to be understood as a way
>
> contemporary subjects deal with the deadlocks in a highly
>
> individualized society. Thus when people propagate old
>
> initiation rituals they are not simply being nostalgic about
>
> the past... but are trying to find some stability in today's
>
> disintegrating social universe. (Salecl 145)

The above passage is also true of Fight Club. Within their new

society, men turn to the past and try to revive the old roles. Although the

activities of the group do not mimic a specific ritual, Fight Club's violence

reinforces traditional ideas of masculinity: "one of the central images of

masculinity in the Western cultural tradition is the murderous hero, the

supreme specialist in violence" (Connell 126). The idea of accepting pain

is also a mainstay of traditional masculinity: "Boys are taught that to

endure pain is courageous, to survive pain is manly" (Sabo 100). This

group is for men only, and an old-style man settles things with his fist.

The anger latent in these emasculated men needs an outlet, and what

better place to release your bitterness than on your fellow victims. As a

group, Fight Club is amazing in the number of desires that it can

address: traditional masculinity is revived, and, as is necessary,

femininity is purged. The primitive ritual provides missing stability and

comfort, anger is released, and any masochistic desires for punishment are filled. Considering these factors, the group's popularity is understandable.

The underlying anger inherent in Fight Club surfaces as Tyler and Cornelius fantasize about the people they would like to fight. With these fantasies, the two enact revenge on the people who they believe have wronged them. First, they dream of fighting repressive authority figures: Cornelius wants to fight his boss, and Tyler wants to fight his dad, who is, of course, also Cornelius' dad, revealing the anger he harbors against him. Tyler talks about the pathetic instructions for living that his father had given him, and his resentment is obvious. Later, when the duo choose celebrities to fight, Tyler picks Ernest Hemingway, an icon of self-destructive hyper-masculinity. Cornelius wants to fight William Shatner, otherwise known as Captain Kirk of *Star Trek*. The James Bond of space, Captain Kirk seduced every attractive female that the crew of the Starship Enterprise encountered, human or not. These men set unreachable standards of masculinity, and their followers are still angry. Finally, the pair chooses historical figures to battle. Again they choose men who promised too much. Cornelius wants to fight Mahatma Gandhi; Tyler wants to fight Abraham Lincoln. Both were apparently peaceful men who brought liberation to large groups of people; however, the emancipation was limited. For all subjects, masculine or feminine, there

is no true and lasting freedom from the symbolic order. Each of these fantasy combatants has held a place of perceived phallic enjoyment: they seem to have had, at least for a brief time, that masculine control that today's men lack. Tyler and Cornelius have finally recognized the deception, and they want revenge, as Tyler explains: "We've all been raised on television to believe that one day we'd all be millionaires and movie gods and rock stars, but we won't, and we're slowly learning that fact. And we're very, very pissed off." Although white men have been told that they hold most of the power in society, the experience of many does not support this. Sociologist Michael Kimmler describes the resulting anger: "They are the feelings of men who were raised to believe themselves entitled to feel that power, but do not feel it. No wonder many men are frustrated and angry" (Kimmel, "Masculinity" 136).
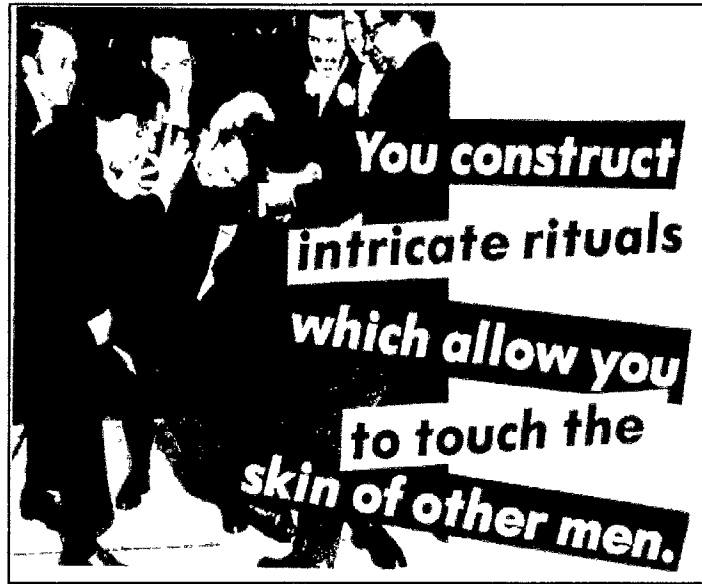
As in the support groups and the mythopoetic movement, Fight Club also provides the homosocial bonds that are missing from postmodern life. Cornelius says "every Saturday night we were finding something out. We were finding out more and more that we were not alone." Traditionally, men need other men to prove their manhood: "Masculinity is a homosocial enactment. We test ourselves, perform heroic feats, take enormous risks, all because we want other men to grant us our manhood" (Kimmel, "Masculinity 129). In Fight Club, men are comfortable being intimate with other men. After one fight, two

combatants hug tightly and one screams out joyously, "yeah." Even Tyler

and Cornelius have a relationship that often borders on the homoerotic.

In one scene, Tyler hugs Cornelius and slaps him on the butt like a

football teammate. While Tyler takes a bath, Cornelius sits with him in

the bathroom chatting about their lives. Cornelius describes their

relationship as being like Ozzie and Harriet's, a famous fictional married

couple. Tyler asks Cornelius is there "something wrong dear?" Faludi

mentions this desire for homosocial bonding in her book. In an

investigation of The Citadel, Faludi concluded that the men opposed the

entrance of women into the school because it would disturb the intimacy

the men could enjoy behind the walls of the institution:

> The rules imposed on them, rules enforced not just by the
>
> Citadel but by the rest of society required that being men
>
> they could not enjoy intimacy without denouncing it at the
>
> same time. Private tenderness was allowed only to those who
>
> publicly promoted their contempt for homosexual love and
>
> who were shielded from the assumedly disappointing gaze of
>
> women. (Faludi 127)

Perhaps this was another reason for excluding women from Fight Club;

without the eyes of women, men feel freer to express their love for each

other. The following art piece seems to express the repressed desire that

men have for the affection of other men. Fig. 3

Fight Club also serves to give the men in the group what Faludi calls "a use." Today, most men have no specific purpose: "Where we once lived in a society in which men in particular

participated by being useful in public life, we now are surrounded by a culture that encourages people to play almost no functional public roles, only decorative or consumer ones" (Faludi 35). Cornelius says that fighting became "the reason to cut your hair and trim your nails." Tyler's dream of a society free from *duvet* discussions seems to be coming true.

As the club begins to gain members, Tyler is forced to offer himself as a sacrifice. A mobster beats him severely when he discovers that the group is using his bar without permission. After letting himself be viscously brutalized, Tyler convinces the mobster to allow them to continue to use the facilities. After the beating, he sits on a toilet (throne?) in the basement and gives out the first of the group's homework assignments; he is now the undisputed leader/king. The need for a sacrifice is mentioned again when Tyler begins making soap: "the 1st soap was made from the ashes of heroes." Without the sacrifice, without

giving up *jouissance,* and becoming alienated in language, there can be

no civilization. It is also a guarantee that someone is watching: "a

sacrifice is a guarantee that the Other exists" (Zizek, *Enjoy* 56). Without a

big Other to serve, choices become horrifyingly meaningless. The

postmodern skepticism in regards to the big Other is assuaged with

Tyler's sacrifice. After Tyler's sacrifice, the group's alliance is cemented,

and its eventual failure is assured. Tyler has become the "hero" to create

the new civilization, but as in other literary works like *Animal Farm, Lord

of the Flies,* and, more recently, *The Beach,* the new society is doomed to

follow the example of the old.

Like the delusions of the previous generation, these men believe

that because they have invented this new society, they can control it

rather than allowing it to control them. The first and second rules of

Fight Club try to maintain its position as outside the symbolic order:

"You do not talk about Fight Club." To talk about it is to destroy it; it

then becomes distorted and another part of the system that they were

trying to escape from. Later Cornelius mentions again the difference

between Fight Club and the rest of the world; "Fight Club wasn't about

winning or losing. It wasn't about words." Words are the domain of the

big Other: "The belief in the big Other is the belief in words...What we

have today is therefore precisely a mistrust in mere words" (Salecl,

(Per)versions 151). During a fight, Cornelius says that the shouts

sounded like speaking in tongues, a type of pre-language communication; it was a mystical experience: "Afterwards, we all felt saved." This was something beyond the bounds of society, and it gave them a new identity: "Who you were in Fight Club is not who you were in the rest of the world." Cornelius says that after fighting "everything else had the volume turned down. Nothing was solved but nothing mattered." The belief that they have escaped the symbolic order is what will lead to their downfall. In *The Usual Suspects,* Kevin Spacey's character says, "The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist." With the illusion of freedom, the members of Fight Club close their eyes to the new conformity that is evolving.

Of course, the attempt to return to traditional masculinity in a position from outside of society cannot resolve Cornelius' identity crisis. He has not reached completion, and he never will. Tyler attempts to convince Cornelius of the truth of his existence by forcing him to confront the reality of his own death. While making soap one night, he gives Cornelius a horrible chemical burn. This is an important moment in the film. As Cornelius' hand burns, Tyler explains, "You have to know, not fear, know that someday you're gonna die... It's only after we've lost everything that we're free to do anything." While he was completely dependent on the symbolic order, Cornelius could ignore the fact that someday he will die. Once he truly accepts this fact, the assumption is

that he will no longer be ruled by purely materialistic concerns. Later, Tyler forces him to confront his death even more drastically; Tyler lets go of the wheel of the car they are riding in, and it careens off the road and turns over. He tells him that he must "let go" and think about how he would feel about his life if he died at that moment. After the crash, the occupants climb out of the wreckage, and Tyler tells them that they just had "a near-life experience." Tyler's confrontational and twisted life-affirming tactics are not reserved for Cornelius. He threatens a liquor store clerk with death if he does not pursue his dream of becoming a veterinarian. He keeps the clerk's drivers license, and judging by the number of other licenses at the Paper Street house by the end of the film, Tyler has "liberated" many others as well.

As a creation of his own mind, Tyler also provides opportunities for Cornelius to work through his personal problems. Tyler seems to often represent the "inner child" which holds a god-like position in many self-help books of the 20th century. Tyler rides a bike through their house (something no mother would ever allow). Like two children on a schoolyard, Tyler forces Cornelius to promise three times not to talk about him to Marla or anyone else, three being the "magic number," of course. Cornelius and Tyler also look like children as they gleefully destroy luxury cars with baseball bats. This return to childhood has been seen as part of the appeal of the men's mythopoetic movement: "It is an

effort to turn back the clock to that time before work and family responsibilities yanked men away from their buddies, from a world of fun" (Kimmel, "Weekend" 281). Cornelius attests to the fact that he remains a child emotionally: "I'm a thirty year old boy." With an absent father, there was no one to teach him how to be a man. Faludi also cited the lack of a father as a major issue for many of the men she interviewed: "the breakdown of loyalty in the public domain brought my guides face-to-face with the collapse of some personal patrimony" (596).

As their relationship progresses, Tyler comes to represent Cornelius' lost father. Tyler chastises Cornelius and Marla for their arguing saying, "You kids." Cornelius also mentions that Tyler and Marla were never in the same room together, and his "parents pulled this same act for years." It is odd that he would remember much of their relationship; he said that his parents divorced when he was six years old. Later in the film, Tyler tousles the hair of one of the members of Project Mayhem like a father, and Cornelius jealously thinks, "I am Jack's inflamed sense of rejection." Cornelius then takes his anger out on the perceived rival for Tyler's affection and beats him viciously. The pair's relationship becomes estranged, but before Tyler disappears, he whispers to a sleeping Cornelius, "feel better champ." Perhaps these are the words that Cornelius' father said before he deserted his family. Tyler's absence resurrects Cornelius' feelings of abandonment: "I am all alone. My father

dumped me. Tyler dumped me. I am Jack's broken heart." As Cornelius searches the country for Tyler, he thinks that he has been "setting up franchises." In addition to the obvious capitalist critique, these are the same words Tyler used to describe the many families that Cornelius' father had established. Tyler also mentions Cornelius' father during the hand-burning incident; he says,

> Our fathers were our models for God. If our fathers bailed, what does that tell you about God? Consider the possibility that God does not like you. He never wanted you. In all probability, he hates you. It's not the worst thing that could happen. We don't need him.

Tyler seems to give Cornelius the strength he needed to confront both his fears and his deep-seated feelings of abandonment.

Thus far, all of Cornelius' methods for resolving his identity crisis have been only temporarily successful. The supports groups provided a socially acceptable outlet for his emotions, but Marla's arrival reminded him that his persona was only a fiction. Tyler and Fight Club gave Cornelius a bit of the traditional masculinity that he felt he had been missing, but soon he will be forced to confront the fact that it all has been an illusion manufactured in his own diseased mind.

CHAPTER FOUR:

Project Mayhem

Ultimately, Cornelius must halt the destructive evolution of his creation. With Tyler as their undisputed leader, the members of Fight Club begin to take their project into the real world. Cornelius procures "corporate sponsorship" for Fight Club by blackmailing his boss, similar to Lester Burnam's extortion scam in *American Beauty*. By connecting Fight Club to the evil corporate world, rather than continuing to avoid its symbolization, he quickens its ruin. With the newly acquired funds, Tyler turns their house into an army-like training base. Before being allowed to train, "applicants" must pass a test of physical and emotional endurance. Tyler's army is called Project Mayhem. Project Mayhem has replaced the military as traditional man-maker. The first rules of Fight Club existed as a way to avoid symbolization, yet Project Mayhem gives its member a completely symbolized identity; the trainees must shave their heads and wear a uniform that erases all traces of authentic individuality. Although they have repudiated capitalist culture, they are still slaves to the symbolic order; their entire identity is contingent on something arbitrary. Tyler tells them what to wear, how to think, and who they are: "You are the all singing, all dancing crap of the world." The recruits have no power in the group: the first rule of Project Mayhem is "Ask no questions." Each recruit must be loyal and fully dedicated to Tyler's goal—the

undermining of consumer society. What began in Cornelius' mind as a way to escape conforming capitalism has morphed into only a new brand of uniformity. The group begins committing carefully planned acts of vandalism; erasing videotapes, destroying luxury cars, and blowing up computer stores. They replace the deceiving aircraft emergency cards with a more realistic version that depicts the true horror of a crash. See Fig. 4 below.

Before Fight Club, Cornelius lamented the power that corporations would likely have in the future—"Planet Starbucks." As he watches Project Mayhem spiral out of control, he realizes the extent of Tyler's

power and thinks—"Planet Tyler." In the microcosm of Project Mayhem, Tyler has become the undisputed dictator. Like many Germans under Hitler, Project Mayhem's soldiers are happy to have a strong leader to follow: "In Tyler we trusted." He is the new god to lead men away from the burden of their freedom. Cornelius and Tyler's relationship begins to fall apart as Project Mayhem's antics become more extreme.

The pair's major break comes after the group attacks a city official who had vowed to crack down on Project Mayhem's terrorist activities. It is at this point that Cornelius begins to feel his paternal rejection anew. He feels rejected because he believes that he had no knowledge of the attack beforehand. As Tyler becomes more radical, the Cornelius side of their personality becomes less involved. He was not prepared for the level of violence that Tyler seems to be comfortable with. The death of Cornelius' friend, Bob, from "Remaining Men Together," ultimately convinces him that the group is dangerous. Bob is killed during a Project Mayhem assignment. With his friend dead, Cornelius orders the group to stop all activities, pointing out that this is no longer a game. Rather than addressing the reality of Bob's death, the group immediately begins to cover up the horror with a chant: "His name is Robert Palsam." This symbolizes away the reality of the loss and covers it with a ritual for the men to hide behind rather than dealing with their own pain and emotion.

Disgusted with the mindless group, Cornelius goes to search for Tyler who is making his way across the country setting up new Fight Club chapters. When a bartender identifies Cornelius as Tyler Durden, he begins to realize the true nature of their relationship. Back in his hotel room, Tyler confronts Cornelius with the reality of his own mental illness. Cornelius' mind wanders back to their first meeting on the airplane; his voiceover at that moment says, "Please return your seats to the upright position. We have just lost cabin pressure." The plane crash he had hoped for has finally arrived: his fantasy world is exposed and destroyed.

Once Cornelius realizes that he and Tyler are the same person, he orders Tyler to stop Project Mayhem. Tyler refuses and says that Marla has to be taken care of, "She knows too much." Cornelius objects, but Tyler takes over his body. When Cornelius regains consciousness, he rushes home to save Marla. Finally, Cornelius is strong enough to face his feelings for Marla, and he admits to her, "I really like you Marla." He begs her to get out of town, believing her life is in danger. Cornelius' concern for Marla and his desire to stop Project Mayhem has given him a new purpose. Previously, Cornelius had been careful and looked both ways before he tried to cross the street, but now, with Marla's life at stake, he runs in front of a bus forcing it to stop. He puts her on the bus and tells her to get out of town.

Back at home on Paper Street, Cornelius realizes Project Mayhem's main objective was the destruction of the buildings that housed major credit card companies. Tyler wanted to destroy the financial record and start everyone over at zero. After a run-in with Project Mayhem police who want to take Cornelius' testicles (more emasculation), he sprints to a building containing one of the bombs. Tyler appears, and as the two fight in a parking garage, the *Fight Club* audience watches bits of the battle on a security monitor, which reveals that Cornelius is fighting with himself. Tyler wins the fight and takes Cornelius upstairs to watch the collapse of financial history: "One step closer to economic equilibrium." Cornelius begs him to stop but Tyler refuses; he will not go back "to the shit job." Cornelius realizes that since Tyler is his own creation, he can take control. He tells him, "I want you to listen to me carefully. My eyes are open." Cornelius puts a gun in his mouth and pulls the trigger. Tyler is killed, while Cornelius only blows a hole through his cheek. With this act, Cornelius has taken responsibility for his own life. He no longer needs Fight Club, Project Mayhem, or Tyler to ensure him of an identity. The film ends with the destruction of the surrounding buildings and The Pixies' song "Where is My Mind?"

With both the destruction of Tyler and the destruction of the debt record, the audience is shown what Lacan considered the act *par excellance.* Although Slavoj Zizek was writing of Roberto Rosselini's film

Stromboli, he could have been speaking of the strange finale of *Fight Club* in his discussion of the act and its importance:

> By this very irresolution of its ending, *Stromboli* [*Fight Club*] marks the proper dimension of the *act*: it ends at the precise point at which the *act* is already accomplished, although no *action* is yet performed. The act done...is that of *symbolic suicide*: an act of "losing all," of withdrawing from symbolic reality, that enables us to begin anew from the "zero point," from that point of absolute freedom called by Hegel "abstract negativity." (*Enjoy* 43)

The *act* is the moment of revolution, the deconstruction of what has been. This is the great moment, but something unknown must follow. The erasure of the debt record is this sort of act: "With an act, *stricto sensu,* we can therefore never fully foresee its consequences, i.e. the way it will transform the existing symbolic space: the act is a rupture after which 'nothing remains the same'" (Zizek, *Enjoy* 45). This is what Tyler hoped for; he had no idea what would come from the ensuing chaos—the act was what was important.

For Cornelius, the *act* was his suicide attempt. He had no idea if he would survive the gunshot wound; he only knew that he could not go on as he had been, with Tyler controlling him. Finally, he has "hit bottom," the position that Tyler had been leading him to all along. His anger and

confusion disappear when he realizes that he has nothing left to lose. He now has a chance at freedom from the rules of the symbolic order: "What a moment ago appeared as the whirlpool of rage sweeping away all determinate existence changes miraculously into supreme bliss—*as soon as we renounce all symbolic ties*" (Zizek, *Enjoy* 43). For Lacan, he has reached the "ultimate ethical achievement...the full acceptance of our 'being-towards-death,' which suspends the social dimension." This suicidal gesture "an act, is at the very foundation of a new social link" (Zizek, *Enjoy* 45). He has given up the fantasy of phallic enjoyment; there is no identity beyond the symbolic.

In Cornelius' renunciation of symbolic ties is also his acceptance of Marla. In his discussion of *Stromboli,* Zizek also claims that the *act* is a feminine function: "we shouldn't forget that the paradigmatic case of such an act is feminine: Antigone's 'No!' to Creon, to state power, her act is literally suicidal" (Zizek, *Enjoy* 46). The *activity,* however, is a masculine function; it is "nothing but a desperate attempt to repair the traumatic incision of this rupture" (Zizek, *Enjoy* 46). The masculine activity will come when world leaders attempt to repair the damage done by the erasure of the debt record. However, the viewer can assume that Cornelius has healed himself through his act. In his radical act, his suicide, he has identified himself with the feminine position and with Marla; their clasped hands indicate their love. Lacan considers "the

ultimate moment of psychoanalysis is identification with the sinthome(symptom)" and "woman is the sinthome of man' (Zizek, *Reader* 31). Therefore, Cornelius is cured. Although destruction fills the background, the two clasp hands and appear equals in statue; although Marla was much shorter than Cornelius previously in the film. Their silhouettes also mirror each other—Cornelius wears a coat with no pants and Marla wears a dress. See Figure 5 below.

As an attempt to resolve the masculine identity crisis, Fight Club and its progeny, Project Mayhem, are unsuccessful. Although the men in the group may believe that they have found a new and more meaningful life, how will their daily lives be improved? Most likely, nothing learned from Project Mayhem will contribute to their relationships with women or their families. As a group built on exclusion and traditional ideas of masculinity, the recruits will have to continue proving their manhood, and as American society has shown, this does not lead to happiness or stability.

For Cornelius, however, the revolution was successful in that it did awaken his true feelings for Marla and allow him to see the best opportunity for existence was taking up the feminine position. With Cornelius' attempted suicide, he has given up all symbolic investment. He no longer cares about the revolution, Tyler, or his masculinity. The dream of phallic enjoyment is gone; he knows that there is no perfect enjoyment, no subject without a lack. It is ironic that Cornelius' attempt to release himself from the symbolic order only strengthens his power in the eyes of the group; after his men see that he has shot himself, they are amazed at his courage and strength. For Cornelius, however, the act does free him; he can now be whatever he chooses.

Although *Fight Club* skillfully portrays the crisis and the failings of returning to traditional masculinity, the response of the public is somewhat disheartening. Financially, the film was not considered a success, but the critical discussions on it have continued. On the Internet there are over 30 web sites in a number of languages devoted to the film; unfortunately, many offer "homework assignments" for "space monkeys" or instructions on starting "your own Fight Club." It seems that many men have ignored the message that these methods failed for the protagonist. Instead, the fans seem content to stay in roles in which they feel comfortable—traditional masculine roles.

The conclusion of *Fight Club* supports the suggestions of other writers who argue that the best opportunity for resolution of the current crisis in masculinity would be an engagement of feminist principles. At the conclusion of her book, Susan Faludi suggests that men turn to women for help dealing with ornamental culture. As in *Fight Club*, men must stop obsessing about proving their masculinity—they have a more important task: "Because as men struggle to free themselves from their crisis, their task is not, in the end, to figure out how to be masculine— rather, their masculinity lies in figuring out how to be human" (Faludi 607). Sociologist Michael Kimmel agrees: "only by fighting for equality, side by side, as equals, can men realize the best of what it means to be a man" (Kimmel, "Weekend" 286).

Faludi also cautions men that the search for an enemy will be fruitless. There is no clear-cut opponent in this war, although some have attempted to create one:

> Men have invented antagonists to make their problems visible, but with the passage of time, these culprits— scheming feminists, affirmative-action proponents, job-grabbing illegal aliens, the wife of a president—have come to be increasingly unconvincing as explanations for their situation." (Faludi 604)

In attempts to assuage their feeling of powerlessness, men have mistakenly thought that the answer lay in grabbing more power: "our imperfect analysis of our own situation leads us to believe that we men need *more* power, rather than leading us to support feminists' efforts to rearrange power relationship along more equitable lines" (Kimmel, "Masculinity" 137). Instead, men must join with feminists in resisting the forces of rampant consumerism. With men's support, feminism would also be revitalized: "Their common ground lay precisely in the concept over which they'd so often fought: feminism. For men seeking to struggle against their betrayals, feminism offers an essential key; in turn, men's success in their struggle may offer the key to feminism's revival" (Faludi 600).

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