

Remaining Men Together:
Chuck Palahniuk's Ethic of Masculinity in Fight Club and Survivor

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Abstract:

Chuck Palahniuk has managed to startle his readers since the 1996 release of *Fight Club*, continuously depicting the grotesque reality of contemporary American society. The film adaptation of *Fight Club* in 1999 garnered him a cult-like following. Palahniuk's fame may be the result of his challenging current thought about what it means to be a "man." His postmodern gothic style in the novels *Fight Club* and *Survivor* challenges the reader to redefine stereotypical definitions of masculinity. Set in a post-generation X world, *Fight Club* depicts the internal rage men know as a direct result of societal repression and *Survivor* represents the ultimate social effects that choosing to not deal with such emasculation and repression can cause. Through these works, Palahniuk exposes the problem of gender essentialist thought and showcases the need for a society that recognizes the fluidity of gender identity.

Introduction: Contextualizing Chuck Palahniuk's Work

Since his inception as such a prominent writer about and commentator on American culture, Chuck Palahniuk has transgressed the typical boundaries of genre. From his first published work *Fight Club* (1996) to his most recent *Doomed* (2013), Palahniuk's work demands the attention of the critical eye to discern the genre of each individual piece. With his work being so contemporary, the criticism of Palahniuk's work is quite limited. The critiques that are available require extensive outside reading for a fuller and more contextualized reading. Three main critical lenses come about in reading criticism of Palahniuk's works including: the genre of new gothic, the literary movement of post-postmodernism, and the sociological approach of gender studies. The new gothic refers to a revitalization of grotesque entities in the contemporary world. Post-postmodernism interpretations read Palahniuk's work as an ironic commentary on contemporary American society. Lastly, a gender studies reading of his texts highlight Palahniuk's themes and use of language that lean towards a feminist interpretation of contemporary American society. When critics try to identify the genre that best fits his works, multiple authors place Palahniuk's works in-between a number of categories, which supports Palahniuk's description of his own work as "transgressional fiction." Transgressional fiction can be defined as the crossing of multiple genres in one work that creates a seemingly new genre, or one that has not yet been explored. While each reading of Palahniuk's work offers a vastly different interpretation of the text, each agrees that his work offers a haunting insight into 21st century American life, the demands on the individual, the grotesque nature of the present, and the absurdity of American society's expectations.

The conjunction of these three critical lenses creates an overarching theme in Palahniuk's work: the ethics of masculinity. For such a contemporary author like Palahniuk, it is important to

examine his text alongside the criticism. One of the most prominent readings of Palahniuk's work interrogates them through the sociological lens of gender studies. While I understand the importance of contextualizing his works through genre categories and literary movements, I ultimately believe his work to comment more on the resulting gender identity his characters create. I contend that there are two main elements which highlight the issues of gender in contemporary American society that Palahniuk addresses. The first is how gender identity is portrayed by the individual (much like Judith Butler's ideas of performative acts), and the second manifests in portrayals of the body. As Butler writes:

Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that "performance" is not a singular "act" or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance. (Butler 95)

This section from *Bodies That Matter: on the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* gives insight into what I believe is the root of how humans are able to identify themselves; through performative acts on a regular basis, humans establish their gender as a means of which society will allow them to perform. Humans can choose to act from a set of predetermined choices established by society. While other performances are more challenging, these acts that are more progressive are still mappable and question the normative set of acts that society typically allows. Olivia Burgess and Jesse Kavadlo both write on the experience of the characters in Palahniuk's works that perform

specific acts which the reader must analyze in order to determine the socially traditional gender identity of each character. Kavadlo writes on *Fight Club* and *Survivor*, putting the two in conversation with each other and opening the door for an understanding of how a majority of Palahniuk's works function. Kavadlo writes that:

[Palahniuk's male characters] set destruction in motion, and then they strive to correct it. And part of the correction, we discover, requires the potential return of the traditional heteronormative male, no longer emasculated like the victims of testicular cancer, or homosocial and homoerotic like the members of fight club, or subservient and domesticated as the Creedish "tenders" have been trained. . . Yet the return of the Husband/Father Figure seems potentially satirical as well – it's hard to imagine an unironic happily-ever-after in these books. (Kavadlo 106)

The so-called protagonists of *Fight Club* and *Survivor* experience a personal paradigm shift in their own behaviors from a state of emasculation to a false sense of masculinity. This shift occurs because the reader experiences the main characters changing the way they behave from traditionally feminine behaviors of subservience and sensitivity to the more traditionally masculine behaviors displaying dominance and role of the provider. Kavadlo is ambivalent about the return to tradition by Palahniuk's characters. The perception of these characters as feminine would detract from their viability as societal role models. Eduardo Mendieta writes:

There was a time when being a man meant having learned how to be a man from fathers, or uncles, or grandfathers, who all had their own war stories to tell. Being a man meant going through certain rites of passage which were overseen and officiated by other men. But that time was long along. How do men become men in a culture that only projects

violent male role models, or commercialized and glossy versions of males? (Mendieta 396)

The contemporary American citizen must fashion their own idea of what a man ought to be. The world in a post-generation X time has left the sons of the era in solitude with no role model to tell them what they ought to be like, so society tells them what is expected from them. Mendieta argues that as a result of “de-industrialization and ... un-heroic and patently Machiavellian and self-serving wars.” American men are left yearning for “worthy” male role models (Mendieta 395). And when these male role models fall from grace it is because they no longer fit into the neat identities created for them by society at large. *Fight Club* depicts the internal rage men know as a direct result of societal repression and *Survivor* represents the ultimate social effects that choosing to not deal with such emasculation can cause. Through these works, Palahniuk exposes the problem of gender essentialist thought and showcases the need for a society that recognizes the fluidity of gender identity. I submit that Chuck Palahniuk utilizes his novels *Fight Club* and *Survivor* to create a code of conduct that men ought to follow for the sanctity of the individual and enlightenment of society as a whole.

The Vicious Virtuous: The Appropriation of Masculine Values in *Fight Club*

Fight Club is told through the narration of an unnamed, young professional in any stereotypical American city. He holds a boring job, has no real direction, and is fed up with his current situation. He meets a man named Tyler Durden and fights him, some bystanders witness this and ask if they can join. The first fight club is formed; men get together to fight one another, escaping the confines of their offices, obligations, and expectations. The popularity of the fight club quickly escalates and the club transforms into a domestic terrorist group called Project

Mayhem. The members of this organization aim to destroy the financial system and allow for Americans to free themselves from the tyranny of overbearing capitalism. I hold that *Fight Club*'s success comes from the reader's realization of the hyper-masculinization of Tyler Durden and the other characters of the novel, identification of the prophetic wisdom dispensed by Durden, and determination to fulfill their lives in some manner that was inspired because of the novel or a perceived message from Palahniuk. The reader holds empathy with the narrator, and can feel empowered by Durden. In *Fight Club*, the reader is able to witness Tyler Durden perform such acts that would place him in the extreme category of masculinity. He is violent, aggressive, demands respect, fosters vengeance, and is described as being attractive in the muscular, stylish way that men are "supposed" to be by the normative standards of society. The acts that Tyler chooses to perform are vulgar and brutal, they embody the normative vices established by contemporary American society; however, he chooses to act in such a manner for virtuous ambitions. Durden hopes to help free the contemporary man from the confines of society by providing a venue for recuperation and reestablishing the expectations of society to compensate for the lack of paternal figures and the shifting paradigm of gender roles. The paradigm shift is that of who provides for the family; no longer is it the sole requirement of the 'man of the house' to be the breadwinner, but it is now a cooperative venture of the man and woman of the home to be the caretakers of the next generation.

An interpretation of Palahniuk's work through the lens of genre would point the reader to the post-postmodernist readings of his texts. Instead of looking at works for their grotesque qualities, critics such as Lars Bernaerts and Andrew Delfino examine the novels and short stories by Palahniuk through the lens of post-postmodernism. The definition of post-postmodernism is still being constructed and is hazy at best, as critics attempt to define it while in the midst of the

movement. A working definition of the critics I have read agree on focuses on informed naivety, pragmatic idealism and moderate fanaticism of the various cultural responses to, among others, climate change, the financial crisis, and political instability. Lars Bernaerts points out to the reader that the use of structural elements of post-postmodernism that in reading Palahniuk's texts also place it in this genre, in this case, the use of delirium in the narrative. According to Bernaerts essay, "elements that enable us to identify the delirium as an important manifestation of madness, that is anchored in the narrative: an alternative relation to reality, an alternative coherence, a strong belief, a psychological motivation, and a pathological background" (Bernaerts 376). These elements of delirium create an alternative experience of the text for the reader, once he has become fully aware of the delirious situation thought shifts from one understanding of the text to another in a single, swift action. We see the delirious revelation in *Fight Club*, as the narrator becomes instantaneously aware that he is, in fact, Tyler Durden; we see this in *Survivor*, as we realize that Tender Branson will become the terrorist and successfully escape the plane. I submit, that the use of delirium characterizes the contemporary person; the conflicting times must conflict the mind. These climatic, yet fundamental, revelations in the novels represent more than just the apex of the narrative; they demonstrate the prowess of Palahniuk as a writer and his insight into the psychological state of mind which these early 21st century, post-postmodern characters experience.

As most of the critics do, Andrew Delfino bridges the gap between two genres in his thesis work, *Becoming the New Man in Post-Postmodernist Fiction: Portrayals of Masculinities in David Foster Wallace's Infinite Jest and Chuck Palahniuk's Fight Club*. Delfino admits the difficulty in calling a work post-postmodernist while critics still work to define its tenets. His definition centers around the idea of the author creating an emotional connection with the reader;

more specifically though, the author must create an emotional connection with the reader through the use of a male protagonist, the character whose emotion is often limited or omitted. Again, the lines of the gender studies and post-postmodernist readings of the text become blurred, but in order to understand what makes the latter a viable genre, Delfino defines a “spectrum of masculinity” that can be used to place the traits of the postmodern man so that gender identity is not a binary that will limit what men are and are not capable of (Delfino 10). Along with the gender studies readings of Palahniuk’s work, Delfino illustrates the problem with the narrator of *Fight Club*. Delfino writes, “He discovers that becoming hyper-masculine like Tyler has made him more confused about not only his gender identity, but his overall identity too when he discovers that Tyler is really an illusion of the split personality disorder emerging in him. Tyler serves as the ego ideal of masculinity for the narrator” (Delfino 14). This confusion comes as a direct result of the post-generation X American culture. At this time the taboos of the familial structure were lifted and divorce became more acceptable. The men in *Fight Club* have grown up without fathers, and as a result have a difficult time not only expressing emotion, but also their gender. Because of the male role model being absent in the home, these men only have the hyper-masculine men of mainstream media to look up to and emulate. The manners in which these men are able to act are simply a means of overcompensation.

Through the character of Tyler Durden, we see a man who is vicious and acts in a manner that is outside of what would be acceptable normative male behavior. I submit that Tyler Durden uses primal methods in order to obtain enlightened conclusions. His vicious language is an equalizing force; Durden claims that, “You are not special. You're not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You're the same decaying organic matter as everything else. We're all part of the same compost heap. We're all singing, all dancing crap of the world” (Palahniuk *Fight Club*

134). This blanket statement Tyler makes is his great equalizing claim, this is his enlightened goal: he hopes for a world where all people are equal in the perception of society, no longer defined by the consumerist notion of property ownership and capitalist status. Palahniuk makes clear what it is that Tyler Durden does and does not believe the contemporary man is:

According to the mechanic, another new fight club rule is that fight club will always be free. It will never cost to get in. The mechanic yells out the driver's window into the oncoming traffic and the night wind pouring down the side of the car: "We want you, not your money."

The mechanic yells out the window, "As long as you're at fight club, you're not how much money you've got in the bank. You're not your job. You're not your family, and you're not who you tell yourself." (Palahniuk *Fight Club* 142-143)

Here the reader can understand how it is that Tyler Durden (and thus Palahniuk) believe that the individual cannot and should not be defined by what society says they are or are not. His language and personal values manifest in the best way he knows: Tyler fights, he destroys, and he empowers the men that surround him. The question remains however, what rules or code of conduct does Durden adhere to his existence, and how does the reader experience them?

In conjunction with Tyler Durden, Marla Singer is a woman who also acts outside the typical realm of female normative behaviors. In the theories surrounding gender essentialism and social constructivism, Robert Parker explains that, "*Female* and *male* refer to essences, whereas poststructuralist feminists think in terms of constructed gender rather than of essence" (Parker 158). Parker's explanation clarifies Butler's theory; gender is determined by what we do with our bodies, not what bodies we have. We can look to Cynthia Kuhn's essay on Marla Singer's character and examine how she plays a liminal role in *Fight Club* because of her transcendence

of gender norms. “Moreover, while “othered” as female, Marla refuses to fit neatly into conceptions of “the feminine”; she continually perplexes such scripts” (Kuhn 44). Marla’s refusal to adjust to a predetermined idea of gender amplifies the use of liminal characters that Palahniuk enlists. As Sidney Sondergard points out, “[Palahniuk] fosters an adversarial relationship with his readers as well, throwing out controversial ideas, obscenities, sexual excesses, and sardonic humor with equal abandon, as though compelled to violate every conceivable taboo” (Sondergard 19). The characters of *Fight Club* embody all that Sondergard suggests and use their grotesque natures to explicitly express Palahniuk’s contentions with stereotypical gender expectations. Marla plays a hugely liminal role, one that transgresses the typical boundaries of gender. The Narrator can be seen as more feminine when he spends his time assembling his home, he acts in subordination to capitalism, and he is subservient to Tyler Durden. Marla on the other hand spends her time outmaneuvering the capitalist requirements of society: she steals jeans from the Laundromat and sells them at local stores for cash, she lives in a hotel disregarding the typical feminine role to establish a home, and she can be read as an equal to Tyler Durden. This conflation of gender roles between Marla and the Narrator/Tyler Durden creates a tension with the reader, the typical, normative roles each person is expected to take on have been altered and it creates confusion in the novel.

Palahniuk’s work addresses the ethics of masculinity in a world where masculinity is in crisis, there is a majority of criticism focused on canonical genres like the gothic but place Palahniuk’s work in the setting of the new gothic by critics such as Sherry Truffin or Cynthia Kuhn. In her article “‘I Am Marla’s Monstrous Wound’: *Fight Club* and the Gothic,” Kuhn explores the gothic and grotesque nature of Palahniuk’s writing. Kuhn’s writing does a number of things: it examines Marla Singer’s role in *Fight Club*, discusses the genre of the new gothic,

and interprets *Fight Club* with the ideas of the new gothic genre. Kuhn writes that, “Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* (1996) offers a veritable catalog of gothic conventions: decrepit mansion, mysterious stranger, ancestral curse, clandestine behavior, raging madness, eerie doubling, astonishing grotesqueries, and unavoidable monsters” (Kuhn 36). These canonical elements of Palahniuk’s writing in *Fight Club* immediately call to attention the details that make the classic gothic works such as *Dracula* or *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* immortal; but also the more subtle notions in the novel bring to mind memories of the southern gothic genre in works such as Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, from the ideas of the mental state (as we see with Benjy) to the problems of the individual, their outward manifestation, and ultimate effects on others (characteristics of Quentin). These examples of the classic definition of the gothic genre show the external monsters, the ones we can see; while southern gothic highlights the internal monsters that we all face. This continuum of external to internal conflicts of monsters hints at the development of the new gothic, creating a lineage of the gothic enterprise. Kuhn continues on to write that, “The gothic architecture of *Fight Club* invites us to hold society at least partly responsible for producing such monstrous behavior” (Kuhn 39).

To blame and place the burden on society is what adjusts the classification of *Fight Club* from the traditional gothic genre to that of postmodern gothic. As Sherry Truffin agrees in her article “This is What Passes for Free Will’: Chuck Palahniuk’s Postmodern Gothic,” productive human agency for the contemporary person comes only as a reasonable reaction to counter the norms of consumerism and all that makes contemporary, commodity-based, American culture such a dehumanizing force. The resulting aesthetics of a life lived in this manner manifest as postmodern gothic where the grotesque fiend is an external factor. As the reader will experience while reading some of Palahniuk’s works, the characters of *Survivor*, *Fight Club*, *Choke*, and

Invisible Monsters, embody a form of the self-deprecation, grotesque nature, and decrepit living conditions that characterize gothic works, which can acutely shape the perception of the reading. The characters in all of these novels embark on a personal inquiry into the nature of their existence and how it results from society, giving it the postmodern gothic label.

Ironically, the meticulously violent acts that Tyler Durden performs are liberating for the men of Project Mayhem rather than overwhelming. Typically, it can be expected that violence breeds more violence which in turn situations an individual or a society in a state of crisis. However, Tyler uses violence to translate an emotionally charged, enlightening experience to the members that fight and participate in Project Mayhem. The narrator confirms this:

You aren't alive anywhere like you're alive at fight club. when it's you and one other guy under that one light in the middle of all those watching. Fight club isn't about winning or losing fights. Fight club isn't about words. You see a guy come to fight club for the first time, and his ass is a loaf of white bread. You see this same guy here six months later, and he looks carved out of wood. This guy trusts himself to handle anything. There's grunting and noise at fight club like at the gym, but fight club isn't about looking good. There's hysterical shouting in tongues like at church, and when you wake up Sunday afternoon you feel saved. (Palahniuk *Fight Club* 51)

Tyler creates an experience and enriches their lives in a way that these men cannot get anywhere else. The euphoria provided to these men allows for a safe haven of existence. Something that they will look forward to, not dread.

A key piece of information that Tyler passes on to the narrator is how to create explosives, "You take a 98-percent concentration of fuming nitric acid and add the acid to three times that amount of sulfuric acid. Do this in an ice bath. Then add glycerin drop-by-drop with

an eye dropper. You have nitroglycerin” (Palahniuk *Fight Club* 12). The instructions provided will directly counter the instructions given by the narrator of *Survivor*. The instructions given in *Fight Club* are to create something with destructive force, a show of prowess that is typically associated with the male gender role. While the terrorism aspect of Project Mayhem connotes a negative enterprise, Tyler Durden has managed to enlighten (or brainwash) the recruits to the point where they have become existentially aware of their place, and lack of place, within society which will allow them to help better the condition of society so that citizens will be able to live more freely and happily. By freely and happily, it is meant that men and women will be able to perform their lives in a manner which best suits their desires. From the start of the novel, the Narrator lives his life in neatly organized settings that will grant him “happiness.” The Narrator only performs these behaviors because those are what society expects him to do. The Narrator is expected to follow the formula set forth by society and most importantly, his father. He is to go to college, get a job, get married, fit the rules that society says a man ought to do. Very similar expectations to these are set forth by Palahniuk in *Survivor*; however, Palahniuk enlists different means to achieve a similar breaking of expectations on behalf of Tender Branson.

The Virtuous Vicious: The Negative Results of Embodying Societal Expectations in

Survivor

Survivor tells the story of a man in his mid-to-late-twenties, Tender Branson, who grew up in a religious colony but manages to leave and work as a domestic caretaker for a wealthy couple in Oregon. Tender meets a young woman, Fertility Hollis, who has Cassandra-like abilities to foresee the future. He falls in love with her, and does what it takes to have her return the emotion. When it becomes known that Tender is the last remaining member of the Creedish

Colony, he is whisked away to be transformed into a modern day messiah that the American public will adore. The story of Tender Branson in *Survivor* can be interpreted almost in the opposite manner of *Fight Club*: he is shown as an effeminate character who the reader can only feel sympathetic for. The tension created by the emasculated Tender engages the reader awkwardly, Palahniuk forces the reader into an uncomfortable position by placing Tender in the opposite gender stereotype than Tyler Durden. Male readers typically would want to identify with Tyler Durden, who the narrator of *Fight Club* claims is everything he wants to be. These two novels challenge the traditional gender roles and beg to be reexamined in contemporary society. Whereas the Narrator/Tyler Durden proves to be strong, intelligent, loyal, and all the other traits that are typically associated with masculine traits and gender roles; Tender Branson, whose name evokes femininity, is a weak, timid, homemaker of a man who fits the requisites of traditional feminine traits and gender roles.

In comparison to *Fight Club*, *Survivor* presents a character that appears virtuous but has vicious motives. Tender Branson holds primal motives which he attempts to achieve through enlightened means. Originally, his ultimate desire is to consummate his new affair with Fertility, but he quickly realizes that in order to appeal to her, he must alter his appearance so that he better fits the stereotype of masculinity. After his ascension to the status of religious celebrity, Tender transforms his appearance in order to become famous with the masses and attractive for Fertility. Tender comments on the process of his transformation:

The agent's yelling that no matter how great you look, your body is just something you wear to accept your Academy Award.

Your hand is just so you can hold your Nobel Prize.

Your lips are only there for you to air-kiss a talk show host.

And you might as well look great.

It's around the one hundred and twentieth floor you have to laugh. You're going to lose it anyway. Your body. You're already losing it. It's time you bet everything.

This is why when the agent comes to you with anabolic steroids, you say yes. You say yes to the back-to-back tanning sessions. Electrolysis? Yes. Teeth capping? Yes.

Dermabrasion? Yes. Chemical peels? According to the agent, the secret to getting famous is you just keep saying yes. (Palahniuk *Survivor* 150-149)

Palahniuk manages to list all the procedures, at length, that Tender must go through in order to become what society believes he ought to be to represent their spiritual belief, to embody masculinity, and to win the girl in the end. Palahniuk scrutinizes the normative expectations of contemporary American society here, explicitly stating the impossibility of achieving the perfection that is expected of men. Just as there are hefty expectations put on women in today's society, the overwhelming nature of these expectations can weigh heavy on the person, causing mental deterioration. This is what I believe leads to Tender's internal collapse at the end of the novel, the alterations forced on him by his agent, the expectations of his followers and the obligations that carry with those prove to be too great for him to successfully function.

Scott Ash writes in "Going to the Body: The Tension of Freedom/Restraint in Palahniuk's Novels," the use of the body by Palahniuk is what demands the immediate attention of the reader:

The excessiveness, explicitness and messiness of bodily business in Palahniuk's novels have certainly gotten the attention of reviewers of his work. Episodes like the bathroom sex scene between Victor Mancini and Nico in *Choke* or the habit of young men from Waytansea Island of piercing their skin with junk jewelry to try NOT to attract a woman

in *Diary* must be what is on the minds of reviewers when they talk about Palahniuk's novels. (Ash 73)

The grotesque use of the body calls to mind an ironic use of language and situation that creates a post-postmodern series of work by Palahniuk, amplified here in *Survivor*. As Tender ferociously attempts to alter his body to fit an expectation that is hardly attainable the reader is able to witness the deterioration of his mind, Bernaerts idea of the delirium is present here as well.

Tender Branson quickly rises to stardom, creating a nationwide following. His agreement with the demands of his agent stems from his desire of wanting an enormous audience to witness his suicide. From the start of the novel, the reader understands that Tender has no real desire to live. He hosts a local suicide hotline, reveling in the divine power he is able to hold over those that call. Tender was raised under the impression that when the time came, he must commit suicide for his church. When the other members of the Creedish Family commits mass suicide and the remaining members of the Creedish in the outside world begin to die, this weighs heavy on him; should he kill himself like he was taught to do, or should he take this opportunity to live and grow? There are no ties to keep him alive, save for Fertility Hollis. Fertility challenges Tender as she is the one person who holds a greater level of divine wisdom than him; she can actually foresee the future while Tender can only nudge those already close to the edge. There is a level of bewilderment as he becomes aware of the influence and power he is capable of after his agent transforms him. The epiphany comes while on his Stairmaster: the tool of which sculpts and strengthens his body while wearing away at his sanity, Tender narrates:

As if people know anything about being a celebrated famous celebrity spiritual leader. As if any one of those people isn't already looking around for a new guru to make sense out of their risk-free boredom of a lifestyle while they watch the news on television and pass

judgment on me. People are all looking for that, a hand to hold. Reassurance. The promise that everything will be all right. That's all they wanted from me. Stressed, desperate, celebrated me. Under-pressure me. None of these people know the first thing about being a big, glamorous, big, charismatic, big role model.

It's stair climbing around floor number one hundred and thirty you start raving, ranting, speaking in tongues. (Palahniuk *Survivor* 138)

Tender is a religious celebrity and hopes to use this devout, momentary congregation for his own good. It is his selfish actions that Palahniuk scrutinizes. Tender has the ability to influence a large number of people yet he chooses to be passive about this opportunity, yet he has failed to speak to those who may need true guidance, not just another short prayer book or a television spot that reminds them to be a somewhat decent being. Tender's ambivalent form of existence directly contrasts the method by which men are typically thought to behave, men are expected to normatively be decisive and action-oriented. The reader's experience with Tender is one of frustration. Where Tender is presented with an amazing opportunity to reach the masses, he only passively engages with them; instead, Tender focuses on Fertility and selfish hopes of creating a relationship with her. Tender and his Agent take advantage of those that have flocked towards him, looking only for a profit. This affirms the stereotypical notion that men only look out for their own interest. What we see in *Survivor* is the embodiment of normative male behavior creates a self-sustaining cyclical rotation of celebrity that is artificial in every sense of the word, and can only assume to be egocentric and narcissistic. The religious experience that Tender provides for the nation is faux at best, and pales in comparison of the chapel of the fight club like Tyler Durden creates.

These shifts of performative acts the individual can act upon are constrained by what society will allow. Because of society's determination of what a man "ought" to look like, Tender is transformed to fit that ideal and the acts he can perform in order to escape the demands of his Agent are limited to extreme acts of violence. Towards the end of *Survivor* there is an exchange between Tender and his brother Adam:

Adam says, "You can't let them arrest me for mass murder."

I say I'm not the one who delivered anybody to heaven.

Breathing heavy and fast, Adam says, "You have to deliver me."

...

And I ask, How?

...

With his other hand, Adam grabs at the ground beside him and drags an open magazine across his mutilated face. The magazine shows a man and a woman copulating, and from under it Adam says, "When you find a rock. Bring it down on my face when I tell you." (Palahniuk *Survivor* 31-30)

We read an experience of extreme violence because the performative act of violence is typically associated with the masculine identity and that is how Tender has performed, aligning with the stereotypical behaviors of the masculine. Neither cast of male characters from these books is able to act in such a manner that seems feminine as the parameters of normative behavior restrict and limits what they are able to choose to do.

Surviving Fight Club: Palahniuk's American Nicomachus

Taking a cue from Aristotle, who dedicated his work in ethics to his son, Nicomachus, so too do I believe that Palahniuk has dedicated his works on contemporary America to the fatherless sons within our society. Through these complementary texts, Palahniuk mirrors masculine characters in contemporary existence that informs his readers of the virtues to scrutinize, and the vices to argue for. The transgression between virtuous and vicious behavior of the characters in the novels parallel the genre Palahniuk utilizes. Through the reading of these works, it becomes clear that *Fight Club* and *Survivor* are inversions of each other. Whereas *Survivor* demonstrates the destructive effects of embodying and utilizing the normative behaviors that society demands of men, *Fight Club* shows the reappropriation of masculine values and traits for a more enlightened endeavor. These opposing explorations of masculinity lead to the creation of a code of conduct that I believe Palahniuk challenges his readers to follow including, but not limited to: recognizing the fluidity of gender identity; establishing a positive image of the masculine; the possible detrimental effects of conforming to normative masculine behavior, the vices of masculinity; and raising the question of how can gender normative behaviors be appropriated for the betterment of the individual or society, the virtues of masculinity. As Aristotle aimed to inform the next generation of men how to behave to reach the ultimate goal of happiness, Palahniuk's work does something similar: it establishes an easily accessible criticism of culture and guidebook for living a fulfilled life as a performative male.

This new ethic that I believe Palahniuk argues for begins with the recognition of the fluidity of gender identity. Tender Branson goes from being an effeminate house keeper to the stereotypical definition of a man. We also see this with the characters in *Fight Club*, the narrator slides within the realm of the masculine and Marla Singer shifts between the feminine and the

masculine. The narrator spends the early part of the novel shopping from IKEA catalogues and collecting condiments, the role of the keeper of the home is typically assigned as a feminine trait. Upon the realization that he is Tyler Durden, the qualities he represents are hyper-masculinized. Marla Singer's character is very similar. She can be read as a liminal masculine character when she arrives at the testicular cancer support group, she is bitter and hard towards the narrator; or later on as feminine when she fills the role of sexual object for Tyler Durden. Through reading *Survivor* we are able to experience a male embodying what society has prescribed for him. What is seen are the negative repercussions of embracing those normative values. The self-destruction of Tender's character is a warning sign for those males who wish to passively accept what society says the male ought to be. The question then asked is, if the male is not supposed to fall in rhythm with the expectations of society because of the negative consequences; how ought the male act to enable the greatest good? I contend that *Fight Club* holds the answer that *Survivor* raises. Within *Survivor* we are able to witness the ultimate result that adhering to normative behaviors can have on a man and how those expectations can alter a man's will. *Fight Club* displays how men can choose to reappropriate the connotations of being a male and benefit the individual and society on a greater scale.

The second tenet that I believe Palahniuk is arguing for is the creation of a positive image of the masculine. Too often the masculine is associated with destructive forces from wars to the breaking of a family, not often enough are there positive images of being a male. As Mendieta claims, we currently live in a society that places no responsibility on the conspirators. The will of the many can too freely be wielded as a tool for malevolent forces. As I have discussed, I believe that the story of Tender Branson provides a more synthetic experience of being a man, there is no revelation or liberation of the man like is there is in *Fight Club*, where the experience is brutal

and honestly authentic. Although Palahniuk presents *Fight Club* where the “good” guys are doing “bad” things, their intentions are meant to enrich the lives of the members of Project Mayhem and the fight clubs. These groups act as a modified support group for those that choose to attend. Before, there were passive speakers in the meetings the Narrator attended for a whole host of diseases, they commented on what was wrong with their lives and how they felt so hopeless; it read eerily similar to *Survivor* and the problems that Tender Branson faced. Now that these men are actively participating in a therapeutic outlet, they have become more comfortable with their existence. As the narrator says, “This is why I loved the support groups so much, if people thought you were dying, they gave you their full attention” (Palahniuk *Fight Club* 107). This I believe gets to the heart of Palahniuk’s ethic: for too long and too consistently, humans have managed to distance themselves from one another and the only relationships that are left are ones that are forced, fake, and otherwise farce. Part of the new masculine ethic revolves around genuine relationships that can foster general wellbeing between those involved and those affected by the members. Tender Branson selfishly aimed to have the whole world watching him as he died. Tyler Durden selflessly motivates the fight club to create a habitat for men who need to find themselves.

I believe that there is more to explore in this realm of the new masculine ethic. Chuck Palahniuk’s work is only a gateway into something I feel is greater. We must look at all authors that address this idea of the contemporary man and how the author critically displays their performative behaviors and their responses to the demands of society. This code of conduct that can be interpreted from *Fight Club* and *Survivor* lives, breathes, and changes as each notion of masculinity is challenged. I hope to see the revitalization in the pride of masculinity so that it may be performed in the most enriching possible way in tandem with the current feminist

movement. Further research must be done to see how other authors approach this subject and can contribute to the code of conduct. I expect to see the works of David Foster Wallace, David Sedaris, Fred Chappell, and many others examined to add to or alternate the ethic presented by Chuck Palahniuk.

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