



UNIVERSITETET I AGDER

Wild At Heart

The Connection between Masculinity and Violence in Postmodern Literature: A Study of Masculine Identity Crisis, Violence, and Agency in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*

JON ANDREAS VONEN ROBSTAD

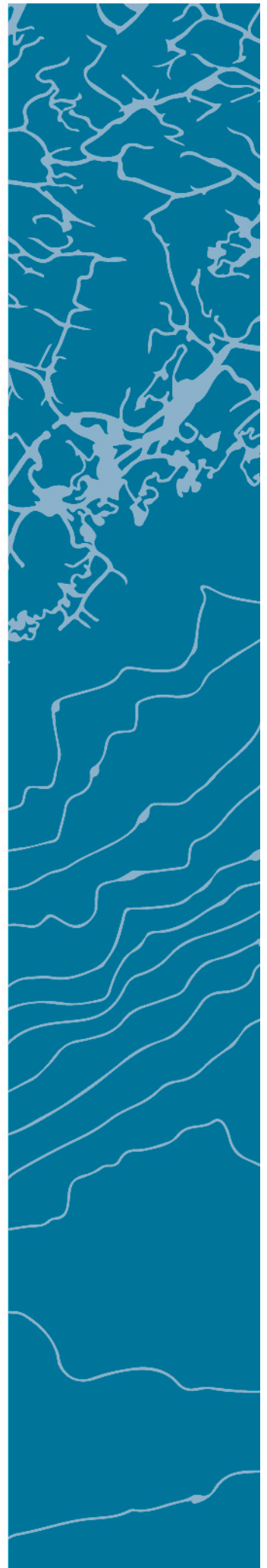
SUPERVISOR

Michael J. Prince

University of Agder, 2017

Faculty of Humanities and Education

Department of Foreign Languages and Translation



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*"He who makes a beast of himself relieves
himself the pain of being a man"*

Hunter S. Thompson

Chapter 1

1.1 Introduction and Thesis Statement

It is not a bold statement to say that contemporary society has shunned everything that is connected to violence. Granted, violence in itself certainly is not a positive or wanted component of any modern and enlightened society. However, the fear of violence has led to an overdramatized response to anything resembling violent behaviour. As a former schoolteacher I have personally witnessed a fixation on screening young people from violence; a paranoia that in my opinion creates more victims than any schoolyard violence will ever do. This fixation obviously goes far beyond the educational system, which is a small part of a larger societal structure. Nevertheless, as a result, it seems as if a culture of victimization and pacification has emerged as the strongest endorsed behaviour in our current society. Violence does not necessarily mean force inflicted by one person to another with the intent to cause physical damage, although it often does, but it can also entail strong emotional feelings and passion.¹ Strong emotional feelings and passion are not reserved for one particular gender, but interpersonal violence almost seems to be; it is

¹ See 'Violence' *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 2017

almost exclusively an issue concerning men. By nature, or environment, men are much more likely to use violence or participate in other violent behaviour. If violence, for the sake of the argument, for a moment is treated as a neutral concept, it leads me to recognise that the society's shunning of violence in principal is demonizing a very large group of people. If we trust the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, violent behaviour is much more than two men sparring, it is also connected to the emotional apparatus. Thus, a systemic repression of a behaviour that arguably is intrinsic to a whole gender can cause that group a feeling of emotional imprisonment. Instinctively we know that things that are bottled up eventually must come out. My hypothesis is that literature, film, and other imitations of life, function as a release, or possibly a safety valve, for these repressed urges and behaviour. Moreover, I suggest that the ultimate release must have some agency. A society that does not allow one to behave in a certain manner, thus serve as the target for the release. Furthermore, the thesis treats violence in connection with gender, and points to issues that can be explained both genetically and environmentally.

Research on violence and gender is probably among the most controversial topics in academia. The common denominator within these two inflammatory topics is the question that inevitably will be raised; is *it*, whatever *it* may be, genetically determined? It appears that there is some deep-rooted societal angst concerning notions that question if certain traits are genetically determined, because if they are, we cannot do anything about it. However, if they are not, but rather environmentally determined, it is perceived as good, because then we *can* do something about it. This dichotomy has for a long time barred any fruitful writing on the topic, thus gender theory has recently only been a topic for the brave or the foolish, whilst violence intrinsic connection with gender has gone under the radar for some time. Death by silence, death of the VCR, or too much death in general, might be some of the reasons.

Gender theory and violence is, as stated, a minefield, and thus intrinsically difficult to navigate. Authors Bret Easton Ellis and Chuck Palahniuk decided not to sidestep the mines, but rather walk straight onto the minefield, detonating as many mines as possible. For much of the same motives, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* are the works that in this thesis are the subjects to close analysis. Ellis's *American Psycho* and Palahniuk's *Fight Club* in similar fashion connect the dots between an

identity crisis in the postmodern male and practice of violence, with both novels portraying a protagonist who clearly perceive violence as the optimum recourse to tackle matters which are identified as aversive or threatening. One of the aims in this thesis is to question universal truths that govern our current understanding of the concept of masculinity; categories that we use as yardsticks to measure the attributes and qualities of a certain human nature, and deconstruct and problematize the naturalization of these concepts.

The thesis is organized in three main chapters. Chapter 1 is the introduction and the presentation of theoretical literature, research, and other relevant findings. The main body of the literature in chapter 1 is concentrated on gender theory, mainly masculinity, and violence. Chapter 1 first attempts to establish a connection between masculinity and the use of violence. Secondly, there is a discussion on a supposed masculine identity crisis, due to the fluctuating masculine gender ideologies established in the same chapter. Furthermore, chapter 1 also includes a discussion on what emotions are, and how emotions can be expressed in different manners. This discussion is imperative in order to establish another crucial link in my hypothesis, namely the correlation between the supposed masculine identity crisis, and agency in the violence portrayed in the target literature analysed in chapter 2 and 3. Due to resurgence of interest in the field of gender studies, particular that of masculinity, there has been a lot of research on that topic previously. However, I found that there appeared to be a gap in some of the research. The gap that I attempt to fill is that which connects the concepts of masculinity and violence, which itself is arguably psychological concepts, with that of emotions. Therefore, chapter 1 attempts to establish a template for understanding how the postmodern man continues to live under a strong influence of times past. In chapter 2 and 3 this template will be utilized when analysing the connection between masculinity and violence in *American Psycho* and *Fight Club*.

1.1.2 Naturalization of Masculine Concepts, and the Reproduction of a Violent Masculinity

Over time connotations and associations connected to the word 'masculine' have changed more than once. The descriptiveness of the word 'masculine' in it self has numerous implicated overtones that give room for a discussion in regards to what the word can be said to imply in any given context. The most basic meaning of 'masculine' is simply something with a 'male trait', or 'manlike'. Nevertheless, the use of the term 'masculine' as a qualifier more often implies someone being 'virile', 'macho', 'powerful', 'vigorous' and things of that nature.² The question is how a word that entails a meaning that merely separates one gender from another also has these additional qualities connected to it? In order to answer that, one has to look at how the word has been used and applied over the last centuries. Therefore, the introductory part will trace how masculinity was perceived from the last fin-de-siècle, to this one, and how the rather elusive terms 'manliness' and 'manly', together with other related expressions, evolved into synonyms of masculinity, and antonyms of femininity through the 20th century, and how the traditional idea of manliness has influenced contemporary understandings of masculinity

One of the most prominent writer on the subject of masculinity and the naturalized behaviour of men has been Pierre Bourdieu, with his particular attention to the dynamics between the two genders. Pierre Bourdieu's book *Masculine Domination* questions the accepted truth about gender issues, and the proliferation of a clear distinction between the two sexes, and subsequently the promotion of male status and domination. Bourdieu asserts that there is an artificial established division between the two sexes, and this division "appears to be 'in the order of things'." The 'order of things' that he describes permeates the social world in which the two sexes operate, perceive things around us, and consequently how we think and act upon the things we perceive.³ The naturalized division

² 'Masculine', 2016, *Oxford English Dictionary*

³ Bourdieu, 2001: 8

between the sexes operates in our sub-consciousness and governs how we assess our surroundings. More notably, it effortlessly makes us accept the truisms about gender, and how we identify the behaviour of the two different sexes. The identification and acceptance of gender differences lends itself to how we speak about gender too. This is what Michael Kimmel and Michael Messner have labelled 'gendered speech', which is "a language in which gender terms are used to make its case."⁴ Gendered speech functions as a means of reifying the naturalized models of gender behaviour through language. Thus, tropes such as "take it like a man," "be a man," "a real man is not a coward," and maxims of that nature ratify commonly accepted truisms that promote gender differences, and perpetuates a homogenous male identity rooted in classical masculine virtues.

More than pointing to arbitrary gender differences, gendered speech's derogatory nature promotes a domineering masculine culture. In this aspect masculinity is concerned with being an ideology that promotes hierarchy. Thus, one has to separate between the terms masculinity and masculinism. The former are the qualities that are given to what is deemed manly in a society, and Arthur Brittan defines the latter as "the ideology that justifies and naturalizes male domination, as such it is the ideology of patriarchy."⁵ Hence, there seems to be much more of an incentive when it comes to masculinism, than with regular masculinity or macho-culture. However, this is a classic 'chicken-and-egg-situation': are the historical and contemporary examples of masculinity a consequence of masculinism, or is it the other way around? Bourdieu is perhaps close to answering this when he addresses the justification behind a masculine society: "The particular strength of the masculine sociodicy comes from the fact that it combines and condenses two operations: *it legitimates a relationship of domination by embedding it in a biological nature that is itself a naturalized social construction.*"⁶ Bourdieu suggests that the naturalized hierarchy is more than mere gender one-upmanship; it is about dominating the opposite sex. Moreover, domination, in the true sense of the word, is about utilizing power over someone you are superior to. This notion of gender hierarchy leads to an injurious balance in the society. However, this is exactly what the aim of masculinism is. According to Michael Kimmel, the core of masculinism is a resistance to femininity, and "to the forces

⁴ Kimmel and Messner, 1998: xiv

⁵ Brittan, 1989: 4; cited in Whitehead, 2002: 97

⁶ Bourdieu, 2001: 23 (emphasis in original)

that turn hard men into soft, enervated nerds,” and, it is through “resistance to femininity that masculinists hope to retrieve their manhood.”⁷ The word ‘retrieve’, that Kimmel uses, implies that manhood is a quality that men used to have, but for some reason do not anymore. Or, at least, men are under the impression that they once had a ubiquitous man-like quality, which is now taken away by an effeminate society. Either way, the history of the masculine ideal, and subsequently masculine ideology, has changed several times. Thus, inquiring a boy, or a young man about what “being a man” entails, is, alas, likely to produce an answer that is in line with the socially constructed masculinism, and the classical attributes of manhood; namely a domineering and violent figure. However, that is, it could be suggested, largely because those ideals have been the ones with the longest longevity, and also the more recurring ones. The question is why values and ideas, which in this particular case, in effect encourage violence and domination, are so persistent.

Another noticeable, and to some scholars controversial, writer on the topics of gender, art, and literature, is Camille Paglia. Her book *Sexual Personae* traces the Western culture’s perception of art and literature, and demonstrates how it to a large extent has been viewed through a masculine lens. Her perception of gender is very much an ontological one, and this lends itself to a rather forgiving view on the connection between masculinity and violence. Moreover, Paglia normalizes violence in the sense that it, according to her, is an intrinsic part of the masculine sex, but conversely postmodern society has a skewed perception of violence, namely demonizing all connected to it. Paglia states that her theory of nature is of a Sadean character, rather than Rousseauan. According to her that entails that she believes that aggression and violence primarily is not learned, but instinctual; “nature’s promptings, bursts of primitive energy from the animal realm that man has never left.”⁸ Without going into depth about her epistemological dichotomy on Sade and Rousseau, her thesis in short proposes that our “[u]nderstanding of literature and art is woefully muddled by philanthropic good intentions.”⁹ I tend to agree. I also believe that this expresses why it is so important to read and view art and literature, within the paradigm that Paglia highlights, in order to peek behind the curtain of muddled good intentions; sometimes man is just nature, and oftentimes nature is violent.

⁷ Kimmel, 2005: 21

⁸ Paglia, 1992: 105

⁹ *ibid.*: 106

Both Paglia and Bourdieu agree that there are intrinsic differences to the two genders, but where Bourdieu tends to give more validity to nurture, Paglia is mostly on the side of nature. Paglia states that “[n]othing so astounds me as the delusion of rationalists that human life is free of biophysical influences.”¹⁰ With that in mind, the apparent societal fixation on defining human natures and allocating them in categories, with properties intrinsically based on gender differences appears to be a paradox, especially taking into account that we tend to give so little validity to natural differences. That said, there is nothing in those gender categories that block the application of a typical gender trait to be used *across* genders, in order to mark a person’s behaviour or demarcation. Thus, one can say that a female has masculine traits and vice versa. However, due to unquestionable differences in how much masculine hormone a man has been dealt from nature, and proportionately how much feminine hormone a woman has been dealt, there are irrefutable distinctions¹¹ in how the two genders instinctively rest. The rest of the behavioural algorithm is up to the inevitable question concerning nature vs. nurture. Paglia concurs with this proposition, and she concludes that the male nature is one of restless brutishness, whilst the female nature is one of waiting and stasis. This gender dichotomy, according to Paglia, is in part due to the gender hormones, in which Androgen agitates and Oestrogen tranquilizes. Thus, she posits, “Man is contoured for invasion.”¹² However, in contrast to Bourdieu, and in accordance with a later discussion on male identity crisis in this thesis, she points out that intrinsic to the gender mystery, is the fact that “[w]oman is born of woman. But man is born of woman and never recovers from that fact.”¹³ In that sense, it can be suggested that every act of misogyny is an act of violence against one’s own genesis, hence, rendering Bourdieu’s take on Masculine Domination a case of rebellion against an inherent matriarchy. This suggestion does not entail that there are any natural properties to misogyny; rather that it is a prerequisite to a masculine identity crisis that will be discussed later.

The ideas and theories of Pierre Bourdieu and Camille Paglia together, by and large, constitute the template on which the literary analyses have been conducted. However, the

¹⁰ Paglia, 1992: 107

¹¹ See Collaer, Marcia L.; Hines, Melissa. Human behavioral sex differences: A role for gonadal hormones during early development? *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol. 118 (1), Jul 1995, 55-107.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.118.1.55>

¹² Paglia, 1992: 108

¹³ *ibid.*: 108; comment made by Paglia’s dissertation advisor, Harold Bloom.

discourse also provides a suggested connection between the naturalized constituents of male behaviour and its virtues, to a current identity crisis in men, and moreover proposes a link between this crisis, and an expression of emotions through violence. Thus, a look at historical anecdotes, descriptions and theory has been done, in order to frame the applied theory in a historical and societal context.

1.1.3 Masculine Pastiche

In the book *Image of Man*, George L. Mosse argues that the classical attributes of manliness and masculinity are prevalent, still govern how a man behaves, and how he is perceived. Thus, “virtues such as will power, honour, and courage are still concepts of a post-modern man.”¹⁴ The term postmodern used here, and above, applies to the historical aspects that indicate change, development and tendencies in the cultural environment since the Second World War, and which still are a characteristic of our time.¹⁵ As with most historic transitions, it is challenging to pinpoint an exact moment in time when the masculine stereotype that we would recognize today started to form. However, according to Mosse, the construction of a masculine stereotype was closely linked to the new bourgeois society that emerged in the latter part of the 18th century.¹⁶ Bourgeois, now a slightly pejorative term, refers to the new middle-class that burgeoned during the last fin-de-siècle, and more importantly the conservatism that was embedded in its culture, specifically an aversion to change and an upholding of traditional values. Mosse’s suggestion about the creation of the masculine stereotype concurs with Angus McLaren’s book *The Trials of Masculinity*, where McLaren explains that the qualification ‘manly’ initially meant the opposite of boyish or childish, but throughout the Victorian age made a transition to an antonym of feminine or effeminate. This notion of separation between the two literal meanings was in many ways tied into the bourgeoisie’s concern with what was seen as a natural difference between the two genders, consequently divorcing the male

¹⁴ Mosse, G. L., 1996: 3-4

¹⁵ See ‘Post-modernism’: J.A. Cudden (1999) *Dictionary of Literary terms & Literary Theory*. England: Penguin Books

¹⁶ Mosse, G. L., 1996: 17

and female world.¹⁷ This semantic signification was largely due to a systemic endorsement of the type of society that the bourgeoisie aspired to, namely a conservative one. Thus their values tended to gaze backwards rather than forwards, however the older ideas of the aristocracy consisting of honour and chivalry were being toned down due to modernization. Nevertheless, the underlying code of behaviour that these ideas signalled was something that the bourgeoisie wanted to carry with them. Mosse points out that these conservative ideas involved a “code of behaviour that could be transmitted into a time when proper comportment had become an important component of masculinity.”¹⁸ Hence, the established characteristics of masculinity, such as courage and sangfroid, were carried on from the yesteryears into the modern world as moral imperatives. However, much of the violent connotations were now almost completely removed.¹⁹ Thus, the modernization of the masculine stereotype had gone through a filter of the new middle class’s values. That filter stripped much of the associated violence away from the words that had now taken on a different meaning. However, the ambiguity of the words, given the historical subtext, such as courage, vigorous, powerful, and macho; the very definition of manliness, were still hinting to a violent history. The traces of history embedded in the meaning of the words render an ambiguous understanding of the connotations. Consequently, someone telling a young man of current time, to “be a man” offers a multitude of manners in which the young man is to interpret that phrase.

What became increasingly important for the bourgeoisie from the fin-de-siècle toward the start of the 20th century was a focus on the natural order of things, thus establishing a society that represented that order. Mosse asserts in his book that physicians correlated disease and practice of vice during this era, and subsequently health and virtue was equated. Physicians also linked masculinity to these qualities, and it became a symbol of the moral universe of the bourgeoisie. ‘Degenerative’ and ‘decadent’ were labels given by physicians to those who did not fit the mould of the normative society. In order to sustain the values of this society a need for a countertype emerged, a part that normally would be given to the ‘Jews’, ‘Gypsies’, or ‘asocials’. However, this group of outcasts was now being expanded to include those on the fringes of the masculine ideal. A

¹⁷ McLaren, A., 2008: 33

¹⁸ Mosse, G. L., 1996: 18

¹⁹ *ibid.*: 19

group that before was considered a respected member of middle-class normative society was now cast out of the respected sphere because they did not adhere to the manly ideal. Those outside this ideal were therefore considered, in addition to degenerative and decadent, “sickly or unmanly”.²⁰ Along similar lines, McLaren proclaims that “masculinity was at the turn of the [20th] century [...] going through a period of deconstruction and reconstruction”, and he asserts that the bourgeoisie was very occupied with distinguishing themselves from those on the margins: the assemblage of men that in their eyes were not masculine, and hence did not contribute to the growing middle classes. The bourgeoisie assumed that the outsiders were lacking in manliness, and intuitively supposed that rationality, productiveness, and order were aspects of the opposite. So, according to McLaren, the declining birth rate in France, Britain’s loss of industrial supremacy and the labour unrest in Germany were all attributed to waning virility.²¹ These rather extreme views on the significance of adhering to the masculine ideal exemplify the dominance of myth in the concept of masculinity, and the naturalized truths and beliefs of a society. According to Roland Barthes “myth is neither a lie, nor a confession: it is an inflexion.”²² In this case it is an inflexion of the masculine properties, bending them to fit into a language that suits the society. The principle of myth is that it transforms history into nature, thus naturalizing the masculine concepts.²³ In the same manner as Bourdieu describes the strength of the sociodicy, Barthes describes the strength of the myth: “myth essentially aims at causing an immediate impression – it does not matter if one is later allowed to see through the myth, its actions is assumed to be stronger than the rational explanations which may later belie it.”²⁴ Hence, the naturalized masculinity, which Bourdieu addresses, and deconstructs, is likely to be a prevailing subconscious standard even today.

²⁰ Mosse, G. L., 1996: 79-83

²¹ McLaren, A., 2008: 35

²² Barthes, R., 2009: 153

²³ *ibid.*: 154

²⁴ *ibid.*: 155

1.1.4 Justified Violence

Accordingly, an important aspect in the naturalized male behaviour is violence. The historical subtext of violence within the concept of masculinity is thoroughly documented by Angus McLaren in his book *The Trials of Masculinity*. His work features extensive research on how violence has been attributed to masculinity, and also how the justification of violent behaviour within the masculine ideal has naturalized the connection between manliness and violence. His research is in the fields of general concepts of masculinity, legal discourses, and medical discourses. The most poignant examples on the connection between masculinity, manliness and violence are found in his research concerning legal discourses. What makes this particularly interesting is that many of the legal cases provide the juridical aspect of the violence, but also the reasoning behind the verdict, and simultaneously the deconstruction of the violence by contextualizing the manliness of both the offender and the victim. This tri-connexion provides for an interesting insight in the sanctioned violence found in the courtrooms and the streets of Europe, from the last fin-de-siècle through the first parts of the 20th century. Logic based on a naturalized manly behaviour fed into a democratic credo when it came to physical confrontation. Thus, “a man, no matter how humble his rank or status, had the opportunity of proving his masculinity,” with the sanctioned use of violence. Furthermore, the legal discourses tell us that a man who in a physical confrontation had “fought fairly when he had no other recourse,” and he in this confrontation killed another man, was likely to be acquitted “if it could be successfully argued that his adversary’s actions had threatened the accused’s very manhood.”²⁵ According to the anecdotes supplied by McLaren, the press and the courts continuously endorsed violent behaviour during this era, and consequently violence was viewed as a reasonable instrument to protect one’s reputation, i.e. one’s manhood. Perhaps even more significant is that choosing not to resort to violence would be considered a sign of deviancy. Similarly, as pointed out by Mosse, men who lacked courage were considered effeminate, i.e. weakly or sickly; qualities that equated with being a

²⁵ McLaren, 2008: 123-124

deviant, someone who did not live up to the manly ideal. So to be known as someone who avoided use of violence was the same as being revealed as not being a real man. Thus, in the late 19th century “confrontational homicide was located not beyond, but within the boundaries of normal masculinity.”²⁶ An anecdote acquired from a court record and provided by McLaren illustrates this: Murdock Campbell, who beat to death a fellow Scots miner, had tried his best to avoid a confrontation with a bully. However, “[t]he [verbal] abuse was enough to make some men get up and fight. [Campbell] in getting up and going out was subjecting himself to *the taunt of being a coward*.”²⁷ Hence, a reasonable man could only take so much. Campbell was subsequently found not guilty.²⁸

1.1.5 Changing Masculinities

Towards the beginning of the 20th century one saw a reaction against the sanctioned violent behaviour among men. This was mostly a shift taking place in the urban areas, but the ideological tendency was that there was a move away from the so-called ‘rugged masculinity’, towards ‘masculine domesticity’.²⁹ The term masculine domesticity was introduced by Margaret Marsh to describe a shift in ideal behaviour for men in the beginning of the 20th century. In her article *Suburban Men and Masculine Domesticity*, she describes how men, predominantly those moving into the suburbs, would take significantly greater interest in his wife and children, and the general household than his father and the generation before him would.³⁰ According to Marsh, as masculine domesticity evolved, it soon came to be incorporated into the concept of manliness. Moreover, men who now were hands-on in their children’s upbringing saw their involvement as essential in order to bring their sons up to be real men. The manly ideal was during this period a man who was involved in the details of the household, going on camping trips with his children, and generally taking greater delight in the family.³¹ The shift in tendency from what would have

²⁶ McLaren, 2008: 131

²⁷ BC GR 419, Vol. 1 0 1, file 1904/54; cited in McLaren, 2008: 122, *my emphasis*

²⁸ McLaren, 2008: 122

²⁹ McLaren, 2008: 235-236

³⁰ Marsh, 1988: 166

³¹ *ibid.*:166, 169, 176

been considered manly only a few decades before, is considerable. Interestingly, Marsh hypothesises that this shift in masculine ideology may be a trigger for developing aggressive thoughts and feelings:

“One might hypothesize that men, as their behavior within the family became less aloof (or patriarchal), and more nurturing and companionable, would develop a fantasy life that was more aggressive. The rage for football and boxing, and the reading of adventure novels, might have provided that vigorous fantasy life [...].”³²

Marsh’s hypothesis is a reminder that it is likely that the classical attributes of masculinity continued to govern men, and how they perceived themselves, even though the manly ideal was undergoing changes. It is also a reminder that the concept of masculinity at the turn of the 20th century was being both deconstructed and reconstructed. The question is whether that last reconstruction of the manly ideal, from aggressor to domesticity, was more of an idyllic representation than a representation of reality. On the one hand, one might think that there is some biological or inherent natural reason to why men are violent and, and females allegedly less so. On the other hand, there is strong evidence that the violent behaviour observed in men is a social construct, and this behaviour is unremittingly endorsed by the urge to prolong the patriarchal hegemony.³³

This claim has been explored in recent research on men and violent behaviour. The softening of the manly ideal in the last fin-de-siècle does not seem to be reflected in how current men perceive themselves, nor how they behave. Is this an indicator that the pendulum has swung the masculine ideal in a different direction yet again, or that the ideal of men as aggressors proved to be more persistent than was assumed in the first place? A research paper from 2015³⁴ presents a comparative analysis on men, masculinities, and physical violence in contemporary Europe. The paper analyses data from research collected from most of the Western European countries, and presents an analysis in regard to

³² Marsh, 1988: 178

³³ See Wojnicka, K., (2015). *Men, Masculinities and Physical Violence in Contemporary Europe*. Centre for European Research at the University of Gothenburg.

³⁴ Ibid.

connections between perpetration of violence, and the character of traditional hegemonic masculinity. In the analytical discourse the paper states that men conduct the majority of physical violence in Europe. However, since the inclination to violence does not lie in human nature, the use of violence among men must be connected to the model of masculinity that dominates the society. Hence, as the research illuminates, “men’s violence is a product as well as a means of gender-specific socialisation and other societal practices that contribute to the reproduction of ‘masculinity as violence’.” This conclusion to why men have an inclination to violence is ratifying the hypothesis that classical attributes of masculinity, and the idea of manliness still governs men, and how they perceive themselves.

A further trace of the history and naturalization of the masculine concepts, and the apparent violence imbedded in those concepts, may unravel some reasons to why men have come to a certain, and damaging, conclusion about their own nature. According to some researcher in search of biological markers of gender in brain function, there is nothing that suggests that there is any claim to a distinction in gender differences.³⁵ However, some studies claim otherwise.³⁶ That said, as this is not a a thesis on biology, but rather on how biological terms are being applied as a natural law on human behaviour, I do not see any particular reason to examine this much closer. The interesting aspect is how we tend to use biological differences as ontological markers for gender differences is much more interesting, and thus the naturalization of such, is the focus of my thesis. Nevertheless, on the natural differences between men and women, I say as Camille Paglia: “I leave open the question of brain differences.”³⁷ That said, biological differences are not a prerequisite for socially constructed ideologies. Hence, talk of ‘nature’ is perhaps superfluous. Still, there seems to be an accepted truth that there is a biological difference between male and female nature. Whitehead points out that the idea that masculinity, and femininity for that matter, are found either in our genes or in our prehistory is more or less the same fallacy, “the fundamental premise is the same: our gender is fixed, universal and,

³⁵ Moir and Jessell, 1989; cited in Whitehead, 2002: 11

³⁶ See Luders E., Toga A.W. (2010) Sex Differences in the Human Brain, their Underpinnings and Implications, pp. 2-12.

³⁷ Paglia, 1991: 20

thus, beyond our control,”³⁸ and, “at the level of [...] biology, the brain or genetics, masculinity does not exist; it is a mere illusion. Masculinity is not a product or an entity that can be grasped by hand or discovered under the most powerful microscope.”³⁹ Accordingly, it is a rational assessment that masculinity is not inherent, and nor is it an ideology, or concept, that one necessarily adheres to automatically when being born as a particular sex. Kimmel and Messner puts it eloquently when they say that “Men are not born; they are made.” They explain this statement in terms of how men do not have a predetermined biological imperative. What ‘makes a man’ in their view, are the men’s participation in social life, and how they are actively creating their own masculine identity “within a social and historical context.”⁴⁰ Conversely, Paglia states, “A woman simply is, but a man must become. Masculinity is risky and elusive. It is achieved by a revolt from woman, and it is confirmed only by other men. Feminist fantasies about the ideal ‘sensitive’ male have failed. Manhood coerced into sensitivity is no manhood at all.”⁴¹ Paglia illuminates an important facet of masculinity. It appears to a large extent to be defined in the vacuum of femininity. That is why masculinity is so oblique, it is not a specific thing, it is merely what femininity is not. Is that why masculinity as a concept is so susceptible to change?

1.1.6 Masculine Confusion

A sociocultural shift towards the beginning of the 20th century saw a milder and more effeminate side to manhood. Margaret Marsh describes this in *Suburban Men and Masculine Domesticity*, and Martin Francis in his article *The Domestication of the Male?*, which are both reporting on a more domesticated versions of the masculine ideal. Marsh points out the possibility of developing an aggressive fantasy life as a consequent of a more nurturing and companionable male role, because the new role in effect breaks with the naturalized male behaviour. Francis ratifies that hypothesis in his article: “[m]en constantly

³⁸ Whitehead, 2002: 11

³⁹ *ibid.*: 34

⁴⁰ Kimmel and Messner, 1998: xx

⁴¹ Paglia, 1992: 82

travelled back and forward across the frontier of domesticity, if only in the realm of imagination, attracted by the responsibilities of marriage or fatherhood, but also enchanted by fantasies of the energetic life and homosocial camaraderie of the adventure hero."⁴² It is only natural to assume that the current scope of gender ideology is thus involving two facets of contradictory elements: masculinism, which propagates male domination, and the idea of the domesticated male culture, which oppose male domination. The inherent conflict between the two ideologies makes it impossible to amalgamate the two belief systems. This logical break between the two main masculine ideas ascertains that there is not any unifying masculine consensus, and that there are multiple masculinities. According to Whitehead, "it is no longer tenable, given recognition of the multiplicity, historicity and dynamism of gender representations, to talk of masculinity in the singular."⁴³

As a consequence to the arbitrary and fluctuating gender identities there is "[...] no such thing as [a] 'modern masculinity' [...], certainly not in a fixed or predetermined form and as a definite standard for all males to follow," according to Whitehead.⁴⁴ The shift from a time when men were shepherded into a naturalized dominant behaviour, to a time when the male identity was deconstructed and juxtaposed with its gender counterpart has led the male community into something that resembles an identity crisis. Thomas B. Byers proposes that a lack of a master narrative has led the male population into disarray, and that this is contributing to the crisis.⁴⁵ As the traditional breadwinner men have outplayed their role. Wars are no longer fought on the battlefield. Industry is no longer the foundation of the economy. The narrative of the masculine ideology that has been told for generations are deconstructed, but this time a reassemble is not attempted, yet the classical manly ideal of men as aggressors, seem to persist. If the deconstruction has resulted in that 'modern masculinity' does not exist, how does that bode for the 'modern man'; a man that supposedly have evolved away from the use of violence? Still, contemporary data and research suggest otherwise: Violence is very much a part of the intrinsic behaviour of the modern male. The disunion of ideal and reality is a red flag.

⁴² See Francis, M. (2002). The Domestication of the Male? Recent Research on Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century British Masculinity. *The Historical Journal*, 45(3), 637-652

⁴³ Whitehead, 2002: 34

⁴⁴ *ibid.*: 16

⁴⁵ Byers, 1995: 6

Moreover, it indicates that there is an unbalanced perception of the male ideal that perhaps fosters violent behaviour. Byers suggest, “that anti-feminism and homophobia are reactions against progressive attempts to destabilize patriarchal heterosexual hegemony.”⁴⁶ This assertion implies that there is a contemporary perpetuation of the bourgeoisie’s concern with the so-called deviants in the last fin-de-siècle. The established masculine stereotype once more feels threatened by people on the margins of masculine and heterosexual normalcy, hence those who were marginalized a century ago, and have since fought their way back, seems yet again to be sacrificed in hope of prolonging masculinism. The question is whether this is a reaction in form of post-domesticity, or if it is a parallel tendency to the alternative male ideology of masculine domesticity. The answer probably lies in the future; however, some experts are already “urging males to find their authentic selves, outside the stereotypical machismo that damages and imprisons them”, and “that the major male identity crisis requires males to re-assess their masculinity by adopting roles that are relevant to modern times.”⁴⁷

Recognition of an existing identity crisis is opening up for a re-evaluation of gender roles, but the underlying factor of the socially constructed masculinity, or gender in general, is not openly addressed. Thus, men being told to find their ‘authentic selves’ are still liable to search within the already existing gender roles, sustaining the identity crisis put forth by a socially constructed masculinity; a society that seemingly promote an effeminate male ideal, but conversely is founded on classical masculine virtues, render the confusion complete.

1.2 Violence as a Form of Expression

The reproduction of the masculine myth appears to have fostered generations of men that believe violence is an inherent part of male behaviour. Assimilation of such ideas is likely to lend themselves to other facets of men’s lives as well. One might ask, if the behaviour is inherent, is it not likely that violence is an intrinsic part of the psyche as well? Men thus see violence as a part of their past and present, and likely the future too.

⁴⁶ Byers, 1995: 6

⁴⁷ Whitehead, 2002: 55

Violence has become a defining characteristic for men, closely linked to the emotional apparatus.

Emotions are among those descriptive qualities that define who we are, both in our own eyes and in the eyes of others, Joseph LeDoux asserts in his book *The Emotional Brain*.⁴⁸ The indication that externally expressed emotions are a key concept in how individuals are perceived by others, suggests that expression of emotion is a socially relational mechanism. LeDoux points out that emotions happen to us, it is not something that we can will to occur. Thus, it must be a reaction to something, or someone, which has triggered a feeling, or a memory of a prior experience has surfaced due to a certain chain of events.⁴⁹ All are occurrences that we have little, or no, control over. The view that emotions are a natural, and not a social occurrence are also challenged by Lisa Barret in her article *Emotions are real*, where she states that “emotions are ontologically subjective”, as other socially constructed mechanisms are, because they “rely on human perceivers for their existence.” Hence it is the agreed upon perception and interpretation of a particular display of emotion that creates the meaning, and the potential for emotional agreement between two humans. Logically it all comes down to the collective agreement of identification and representation. As Barret points out, “if a set of instances is collectively recognized as having a status as emotions, that will give those instances their functions.”⁵⁰ So, in short, if no labels for emotions existed, and no agreement on what they represented had been made, there would be a priori no emotions. That is however not the case. The essence of human emotions is found in what is called ‘mirroring’. Mirroring is an important social process in humans. Individuals mirror emotions, actions, speech, etc. in other perceived individuals, then mirror the reaction of an emotion, action, speech and so on, and applies it to similar perceived situations, and then compute the outcome of those reactions to be either friendly or hostile.⁵¹ Hence, as LeDoux posits, “emotions, in short, result from the cognitive interpretation of situations.”⁵² This means that emotions are not completely natural, but rather a naturalized social construct. Thus, humans cannot express

⁴⁸ LeDoux, 1999: 11

⁴⁹ *ibid.*: 19

⁵⁰ Barret, 2012: 420

⁵¹ See Barsalou, L. W. (2013). Mirroring as pattern completion inferences within situated conceptualizations. *Cortex*, 49(10), 2951-2953.

⁵² LeDoux, 1999: 48

emotions and feelings completely freely, but do so within a recognisable register of other humans.

In light of what LeDoux and Barret describes, the key to understand human behaviour seems to be through emotions triggered by external influences, and interpretation of human emotions displayed in others. Hence, an assumption can be made that it is possible to control, regulate, or at least affect human emotions, and consequently human behaviour, through external factors. Catharsis Theory is one example of such a concept. The Catharsis Theory suggests that venting anger, through purging exercises such as ‘hammering nails’, ‘walloping pillows’, and other similar exercises whilst ruminating the cause of anger, should release the anger built up, and as a result leave the participant anger-free. Contrary to popular belief the Catharsis Theory is not supported by empirical evidence. According to Bushman,⁵³ participants that partook in purging exercises were angrier after the exercise. The reasoning behind Bushman’s stand on Catharsis Theory is that venting while ruminating about the source of aggravation is sustaining the aggressive thoughts and feelings that the catharsis is supposed to purge out of the system, as a result making people angrier and more aggressive. Moreover, the purging exercise’s activation of aggressive thoughts has the possibility to produce associations consisting of aggressive ideas and emotions related to violence, which can lead to aggressive actions. Bushman further states, “venting is practicing how to behave aggressively.” Nevertheless, on one account Bushman actually approves of the purging; “venting anger can reduce physiological arousal, but [the] anger must be directed directly at the provocateur, people must also believe that the provocateur will not retaliate,” and in contrast to the Catharsis Theory that proposes that confronting any target will relieve anger, Bushman states that “venting anger against substitute targets does not reduce arousal.”⁵⁴ So, concurring with this, aversive events produce negative results, even if it is a method of choice in order to vent something out of the emotional system. In *The Emotional Brain* LeDoux refers to a study that asserts that emotions in humans can be produced by a combination of artificial arousal and social cues. That means that it is not necessarily an internal process that sets off the emotional system, emotions are just as prone to be affected by external influence.

⁵³ See Bushman B. J. (2002). *Does Venting Anger Feed or Extinguish the Flame? Catharsis, Rumination, Distraction, Anger, and, Aggressive Responding*. PSPB, Vol. 28. 6, June 2002, pp. 724-731

⁵⁴ Bushman, 2002: 725

In short the study showed that it is not certain that it is the feeling of sadness that makes you pout, or that it is the pout that makes you sad. The same can be said for other emotional and physiological responses.⁵⁵ Humans mirror the expression of emotion they perceive, but also express the emotion that they believe are the naturalized response to communicate their emotions. So, drawing on these findings it can be hypothesized whether this is transferable to other human behaviour as well, since it has been established that our behaviour is so closely linked to our emotions.

The idea that behaviour is closely linked to emotions is an ancient idea, however, psychologists and philosophers still to this day struggle to define what an emotion is. In an excellent discussion on this subject, *Toward a Working Definition of Emotion*⁵⁶, Mulligan and Scherer try to establish a functional description of emotion that clarifies the phenomenon, but without reducing its definition to “different types of primitive feelings.” Out of what Mulligan and Scherer call their ‘proposed working partial definition’, the important elements to highlight is that, according to them: x is an emotion only if, x is an affective episode, x has the property of intentionality (being directed), x contains bodily changes (e.g. arousal), x contains a perceptual or intellectual episode.⁵⁷ The duo also cite the Merriam-Webster definition of emotion: “a conscious mental reaction (as anger or fear) subjectively experienced as strong feeling usually directed toward a specific object and typically accompanied by physiological and behavioural changes in the body.”⁵⁸ When it comes to the essential components of an emotion, as outlined above, intentionality is at the apex of the apparatus. Hence, what is essential to an emotion is that they have or appear to have an object. The object can be a thing, or the behaviour of other people, but it excludes sensations, say a painful tooth or things of that nature. Accordingly, emotions are responses, a response to a perceived object; an emotion is an attitude or position taking toward, or as a result of a perceived object.

⁵⁵ LeDoux, 1999: 48

⁵⁶ See Mulligan & Scherer (2012). *Toward a Working Definition of Emotion*. *Emotion Review*. Vol.4, No.4 (October 12) 345-357

⁵⁷ In Mulligan and Scherer’s proposed partial working definition of emotion there are three more demarcations to emotion succeeding the ones mentioned here. Since the focus here is the *product* of emotions they will not help clarify that subject, rather the opposite, however this reduction does not obfuscate their original proposed working definition.

⁵⁸ ‘Emotion’, Merriam-Webster, 2012; Cited in Mulligan and Scherer, 2012: 346

Via these views on how humans are governed by emotions, and how emotions are a trigger to behaviour, I propose that violence is an expression of emotion. Thus, violence is a form of expression. If the empirical evidence concerning the correlation between masculinity, masculinism, manliness and violent behaviour is considered, it can be suggested that: violence is an emotional reaction, in which the intentionality that is a result of a learned fear of demasculinization⁵⁹ is at the centre of a perceptually naturalized behaviour. The fear of not being a real man, in a sense that is harmonious with masculine ideology, is the intentionality, or object, behind the arousal. An awareness of this fear is conscious, however the source to this fear lies in the naturalized manliness that is a product of the sub-consciousness. Arousal caused by these emotions can be invoked by anything that is perceived as a threat to masculinity. Since masculine ideology endorses violent behaviour, an emotional reaction within the scope of violent behaviour is *likely to fall natural to men*. Men have been 'educated' in violence through a masculine ideology, which reproduce violent rhetoric, historical anecdotes, and sports. As a consequence, violence as an expression is the manifestation of naturalized masculine behaviour.

Violent behaviour does not necessarily demand physical inter-personal violence; it can also be exercised through domination, or through strength of emotions. Hence, phrases and tropes such as "be a man," or "take your medicine like a man," does not automatically entail a violent and aggressive image, but also a stoic and sangfroid figure that is capable of, if not controlling, but suppressing feelings and emotions. A key constituent in masculine ideology and masculinism is domination, even if it synchronically undermines the goal of establishing privilege over the other sex. Bourdieu addresses what he calls 'a trap' in the 'male privilege', a sub-conscious coercion that "has its negative side in the permanent tension and contention, sometimes verging on the absurd, imposed on every man by the duty to assert his manliness in all circumstances."⁶⁰ This assertion epitomizes the fallacy in the naturalized masculine ideology; it dominates men more than it subjugates women.

⁵⁹ Demasculinization in biology means the removal of testicles, or to repress male hormones in order to suppress male functions. I have adopted that term, and thus am applying it to my theory. It describes in essence the man's two greatest fears, both biological and psychological.

⁶⁰ Bourdieu, 2001: 50

1.3 On Target

Few works of literature have caused more controversy and antipathy than Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, but at the same time fostered such a fervent following. Even now, more than two decades since they were first published, both novels still seem to be able to provoke readers, and oddly enough, people who have not read them. In my view, what set them apart from other depictions of fictional violence is the clear agency in the violence, and the liberating affect that the violence has, first of all for the respective protagonists, but perhaps for the readers as well. Other fictional descriptions of violence tend to utilize violence as a signifier or a symbol, but Ellis and Palahniuk's use of violence is portrayed as a naturalized part of the male constituent, rather than symbolizing a dark part of human nature.

Other critics have made a connection between an identity crisis in postmodern masculinity, and the exercise of fictional violence, most notably by Mark Storey. His article "*And as things fell apart*": *The Crisis of Postmodern Masculinity in Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho and Dennis Cooper's Frisk*, illuminates the crisis in postmodern masculinity, and demonstrates how it has had an impact on contemporary literature. However, I do not concur with Storey's analysis of *American Psycho*, and his claim that the protagonist is nothing more than a hollow representation of the "culture that surrounds him."⁶¹ Nevertheless, to my knowledge, there have not been any attempts to see the crisis in masculinity in connection with how violence is a form of expression, and how the exercise of violence can have a clear agency in that regard. This is what I hope to achieve with this thesis, and a close reading of *American Psycho* and *Fight Club* will further demonstrate this.

⁶¹ Storey, 2005: 59

Chapter 2

An Analysis on the Connection between Masculinity and Violence in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho*

“That vice has often proved an emancipator of the mind, is one of the most humiliating, but at the same time, one of the most unquestionable, facts in history”

W.E.H. Lecky

2.1 Boy Next Door

“He’s the boy next door. That’s Patrick.”⁶² This statement is a recurring description of the protagonist, Patrick Bateman. First found in the novel’s first chapter, The Dinner Party, this description is one of many where he is depicted as polite and sensitive by different characters in the novel. If this is really how the people that surround him perceive him, how is it then, that an apparently shy, sympathetic ‘boy next door’ really is a social

⁶² Ellis, 2000: 11

deviant, a psychopath, and secretly is a mass murderer? I suggest that only two thirds of this claim is true, namely he is not a mass murderer at all. Through an analysis of how the novel presents the protagonist, and how the protagonist perceives himself and his milieu, I will demonstrate how the protagonist's fraying mental health, dissociative personality, and his escapist occupation is fostered by a masculine identity crisis, and what the reader experiences as extreme violence and murder to a large extent is a result of Patrick's imagination.

The Dinner Party, where the first 'boy next door'-description appears, is divided between two locales. The first part of the chapter is a cab ride to a dinner party, and the latter part is at the actual dinner party. Patrick and Timothy Price share the car to the party, and this is naturally the first acquaintance the reader makes with the protagonist. In the taxi Patrick appears fairly withdrawn. During the first 8 pages Patrick only speaks 5 times, whilst Price is talking continuously. The things that Patrick says out loud are of no, or little importance, this is not taking into account his internal monologue and narration, which I will return to later. When Patrick is engaging in conversation with Price he is merely commenting on the issues that Price is talking about, or asking him questions, mostly to keep the conversation going it seems. However, there are a few interesting things about Patrick's sparse participation to comment on, mostly to do with when he does actually speak up, and his apparent motive for doing so. Price is ranting on about the things that he observes on the streets they are passing by in the car; bums, graffiti, and fast food restaurants. He also rages about what he reads in a newspaper; strangled models, murdered babies, and Nazis. Patrick sits quietly and listens to Price's monologue, and does not interrupt him until Patrick hypothesises that perhaps dyslexia is a virus, and is something one 'can get from pussy', as one can with the HIV-virus. First when Price makes this ludicrous claim Patrick comments that this seems very unlikely to be true. Other matters that Patrick shares his thoughts on are whether they should bring flowers to the dinner party, or that he is concerned when Price admits to not having stopped using steroids. It seems like the best way to describe Patrick in the first few pages of the novel is: concerned. While Price is ranting and bragging on the way to the party, Patrick acts as the voice of reason. This tendency in Patrick's behaviour continues when they reach the party as well.

At the dinner party Patrick acts flirtatious and polite, and he is in many ways the perfect guest. He compliments the hostess, and displays good manners. Price on the other hand keeps up his boisterous act and his satirical comments. Thus already in the first 10-12 pages of the novel there seems to be a clear distinction in overt behaviour between Patrick and his friend. The question is what this difference in behaviour entails. It seems as if Patrick is very concerned about how he is perceived by other people. More importantly the manner in which he presents himself appears to be very contrived, but also restrained. A good example of his measured presentation of himself is during a conversation around the dinner table, where Patrick expresses his thoughts on what he feels are the major concerns in today's society. The matters that he addresses are the importance of having a strong national defence, preventing the spread of communism, and ensuring that America is a respected world power. However, he also tackles issues such as care for the elderly, finding a cure for AIDS, environmental damage from pollution, education, social security, and care for wilderness areas. He goes on to mention the economy, civil rights, "women's freedom" (as he calls it), before he finishes off by saying "Most importantly we have to promote gender social concern and less materialism in young people."⁶³ Notably there is a nice spread of social concerns over a fairly broad political platform in Patrick's solicitousness. These matters juxtaposed with the issues that Price talks about in the car reiterates the two character's anxiety about how they are perceived, or in Price's respect the lack of thereof. Already in the first chapter Patrick gives of the impression that it is imperative for him to be viewed as conscious and sympathetic, and that manifests itself in an assemblage of trepidations. The issues he addresses are not discussed, just listed by him; they are merely a nomenclatural display of topics that Patrick feels that he should be concerned with, and more importantly: the other guests realizes that he is a considerate and sympathetic member of society.

After most of the guests have left the party, Patrick, Price and Evelyn remain. At this point Price is fairly drunk, and is openly flirting with Evelyn, which is Patrick's girlfriend. Patrick is very gentlemanly about the situation, and he escorts Price out of the house. After this Patrick tries to have sex with Evelyn, and after being unsuccessful at this feat he quietly leaves. This brief recount of the narrative in the first chapter demonstrates two things:

⁶³ Ellis, 1991: 15-16

overtly Patrick is a very nice guy, a boy next door, but intrinsically the trope 'boy next door' entails an element of mystery. The boy next door is someone you know, but do not have a close relationship to – you do not know this person intimately. It also entails that there is a layer of innocence connected to him, and also perhaps a suggestion that he even might be a virgin. Furthermore, from a dramatic point of view it also indicates that Patrick is the arbitrary representation of 'anyone' – he could be anyone you think you know. Hence, the conspicuous narrative in the first chapter consists of the surface elements of Patrick's character, the things that are observable to others. In other words, these are the things that Patrick *wants* others to see. Thus, in the nature of that argument there are other elements of Patrick's personality that are found beneath the surface, namely the things that he does not share with other people. A closer look at the protagonist's internal monologues and thoughts, and the descriptive language used in this chapter reveals more about the 'boy next door.'

In The Dinner Party chapter Patrick is called 'boy next door' three times by his girlfriend Evelyn. If we extrapolate from what Angus McLaren said, that 'boy' means the opposite of 'manly', and that the qualification 'manly' is an antonym of feminine, Evelyn is in effect categorizing Patrick as someone who is not a man, or at least that he is leaning towards the more effeminate of the two gender binaries. The first 'boy next door' incident appears right after Patrick and Price have arrived. Patrick is commenting on the appearance of two other dinner guests, Vanden and Stash, two people of lower social status than the rest of the dinner guests. Patrick observes their attire; their hair, their smoking habits, and that they are "probably drugged to the eyeballs". Price is equally unimpressed, seething "she's doped up watching MTV and I want to watch the goddamn MacNeil/Lehrer report."⁶⁴ These are comments made to distance themselves from from Vanden and Stash, likely to communicate that proper comportment is an important component of masculinity, which is most clearly expressed when Patrick offers his hand and presents himself to Vanden and Stash. Vanden takes his hand, but does not say anything, Stash does neither, and he rather smells his own fingers. Thus, Vanden and Stash are by Patrick and Price's gestures presented as being outside the sphere of establishment, since they do not adhere

⁶⁴ Ellis, 1991: 11

to the same social values as the rest. Interestingly, as Patrick is leaning in to offer his hand to Vanden, he catches a glimpse of himself in a mirror, and has to smile at how good he looks. This small incident is offering a view into the microcosm of modern social dichotomy, rooted in the equation between health and virtue. Patrick views his own good looks as the embodiment of good health and virtue, and conversely Vanden and Stash's lack of physical attraction and manners, together with their apparent bad habits such as drugs and smoking are equated with disease and vice. Ostensibly satisfied with his himself and his own masculinity, Patrick comments on Vanden and Stash to Evelyn and Price. Price responds by calling Patrick a 'dufus', and probably as token of their relationship Evelyn defends Patrick by saying: "Oh leave Patrick alone," "He's the boy next door. That's Patrick. You're not a dufus, are you honey?"⁶⁵ Suddenly Patrick's own masculinity is questioned by Evelyn's comment. By calling him a boy she is effectively diminishing his masculinity, and reducing the social distance between him, and Vanden and Stash; who to Patrick represent 'degenerative' and 'decadent' people who do not fit the mould of normative society.

The second time Evelyn calls Patrick a 'boy' is after dinner, when only him and Price are remaining at Evelyn's house. In a similar fashion to last time, Price is bantering and Evelyn misunderstands and thinks that Price is calling Patrick an extra-terrestrial, and she feels yet again as if she has to defend Patrick by saying "Leave Patrick alone. He's the boy next door," and follows with "You're not an extra-terrestrial, are you honey?" Patrick responds by saying "Should I even dignify that question with an answer?"⁶⁶ The conversation between Price and Evelyn continues while Patrick is occupied in his own mind, starting to visualize his Absolut and cranberry as "a glassful of thin, watery blood with ice and a lemon wedge in it"⁶⁷ This is the first time we catch a glimpse of Patrick's violent fantasy. Shortly after this, Evelyn is using the same trope to denote Patrick, after Price wants Patrick to agree with a statement he made, and Evelyn interrupts saying "Patrick is *not* a cynic, Timothy. He's the boy next door, aren't you honey?" This time Patrick responds by whispering to himself "No I'm not, I'm a fucking evil psychopath."⁶⁸ This reaction by Patrick goes unnoticed by Evelyn and Price, who continue their conversation.

⁶⁵ Ellis, 1991: 11

⁶⁶ *ibid.*: 18

⁶⁷ *ibid.*: 19

⁶⁸ *ibid.*: 20

Noticeable it seems as if Evelyn feels that she has to defend Patrick against Price. The three times he is called 'boy next door' by Evelyn, it is to validate Patrick's innocence, and if we take the virgin suggestion at face value, it is also a tongue-in-cheek comment that likely at the same time functions as a trigger for his violent fantasy. Nevertheless, why is it that Patrick cannot stand up for himself against Price's banter and comments? Or to reverse the question: would Price's reaction to similar banter from Patrick render equivalent reactions? Had the roles been reversed, the reaction from Price would most likely be on the complete opposite end of the aggression-scale. The reason behind this suggestion is that Patrick is a typical product of Masculine Domesticity - a branch of modern masculinity that has moved away from typical Rugged Masculinity, and now do not retort with violence, aggression, and confrontation, while Price is of a more aggressive and dominant mould. The juxtaposing of Patrick and Price is not coincidental. To Patrick Price represents everything that he is not: confident, macho, and vigorous. Before the night ends Patrick is more or less admitting this fundamental difference between them when he allows the continuation of a fairly lewd conversation between Price and his girlfriend. Whilst he is watching the interaction between them he thinks to himself that: "I am fairly sure that Timothy and Evelyn are having an affair," and more importantly "Timothy is the only interesting person I know."⁶⁹ Why it is of such importance that Patrick finds Timothy to be the only interesting person he knows will be addressed, but first it is equally important to establish why Patrick can be seen as a product of masculine domesticity, and how this is affecting him.

The information that the reader has about Patrick at this moment in the narrative is perhaps not enough to paint a complete picture of the protagonist. However, there is some reasonably solid evidence to support a claim that he is not a very macho man, in the classical masculine sense, that is. As described he is very withdrawn in the taxi, and at the dinner party, and he is letting himself be dominated by both his girlfriend and his apparent male friend. Patrick is also very occupied with domestic consumer objects, his own and other's appearance, and paradoxically not to be perceived as someone who is not masculine. Hence, he is in many ways what can be called a masculine simulacrum, or a masculine pastiche; a person who has bought into the myth of the post-modern masculine

⁶⁹ Ellis, 1991: 22

ideology. This second layer of naturalized constructed masculinity is very likely a strong influence on his identity crisis. Patrick's fascination for Price is likely for a similar reason, he is perhaps someone that Patrick feels has managed to preserve his masculinity in a society of fragmented ideologies. Hence, it is within reason to believe that Patrick idolizes Price, and wants to model his own persona, or the lack of one, on his.

With these preliminary assessments of the protagonist established, I claim that how the reader experiences Patrick in the first chapter is his 'real' self, and that the narrative presents a fairly accurate depiction of him and his milieu. However, it is important to point out that the protagonist narrates the novel. Thus, one has to be cognizant of The Unreliable Narrator, and there is always a layer of capricious and ambiguous information clouding the narrative. Still, I believe that it is less so in the first chapter than it is in the later stages of the narrative. The reason behind this assertion is my proposition that domestication and demasculinization of Patrick has triggered a development of a violent fantasy life, and that Patrick's mental health is rapidly deteriorating as the narrative develops. Thus, the infamous murders and extreme violence portrayed in the subsequent chapters are merely reflections of Patrick's fantasy, and moreover he is *dependent* on his fantasies in order to experience release for his subjugated feelings due to the naturalized connection between violence and masculinity. The rest of the novel, that is everything after the first chapter, is distributed between the protagonist's psychological breakdown and his monotonous job and life – in which the lack of a coherent and cohesive post-modern masculine ideology triggers his mind to dissociate and create an alternative reality, which functions as an escape from his boring, domesticated, but alas real life.

To a large extent The Dinner Party chapter offers a condensed presentation of the master narrative in the novel. Namely, Patrick's struggle to locate his own manliness in society, and subsequently his reactions to this; Patrick's overt feeling of subjugation; Patrick's skewed perception of society; and lastly Patrick's deteriorating mental health, which in my view is a result of the above factors and his masculine identity crisis. Thus, through further analysis of the narrative and the protagonist I hope to demonstrate that there is a correlation between Patrick's psyche, his violent fantasies, and his emotional reactions to the fear of demasculinization.

2.2 On the fringes

The following morning, after the dinner party, Patrick wakes up and commences his morning routine. A three-page description of a very time consuming process that involves no less than 39 different items,⁷⁰ among them four different facial moisturizers on top of each other. Albeit they, according to Patrick, serve different purposes; it seems excessive. He uses two different combs, two types of mouse, and a blow-dryer to style his hair. He changes his clothes three times before he has had any breakfast, and that does not include when he changes into what he is actually wearing to the office. This is just a selection from a morning routine that would have been inconceivable even for Victorian age royalty. This episode is telling of a man who is overly concerned with his own appearance. The novel is littered with similar incidents, and the question is why Patrick is so occupied with his own appearance. Firstly, the link between health and virtue, and subsequently those qualities' alleged link to masculinity undoubtedly plays a considerable role in Patrick's universe. Secondly, it is not only a signifier for masculinity, it also signifies that Patrick belongs to the upper middle-classes, or more significantly he is demonstrating that he is a part of the healthy normative society, as opposed to the outcasts in society, as described by George L. Mosse. These binary oppositions are a recurring theme in this novel, and will be addressed thoroughly later. However, there is an obvious ironic aspect to Patrick's obsession with his appearance. That aspect is his meticulous grooming of himself, when it overtly seems like he is equally concerned with his manliness. These are two things that intuitively oppose each other, at least if one thinks of the classical rugged masculinity. However, that is a concrete example of how the postmodern masculine domesticity, that I have described, is practiced. As Marsh pointed out, masculine domesticity had much to do with men taking greater delight in household, and a century down the road the interest in household has expanded to include other aspects of indoor activities that before were seen as a female proclivity. That inclination together with the shift from industry as the foundation of the economy to finance and consumerism, has opened up to, or rather embraced post-modern

⁷⁰ Ellis, 1991: 25-28, *counted items include different soaps and creams, but also grooming equipment and garments. Items not accounted for is eg. sink, shower, towels etc.*

men in a sphere that before was reserved for women. Thus Patrick's morning routine can be seen as epitomizing the domesticated male consumer.

The difficulty Patrick has with acting in accordance with, or submitting to, one particular ideology is embedded in the two different, and incongruent spheres that Patrick's universe consists of. The capitalistic world that Patrick works in endorses rugged masculinity, but conversely the era and milieu of middle-class values he inhabits, endorse masculine domesticity. The intersection between these two spheres is where the source of Patrick's identity crisis lies. A crisis is very evident when these two worlds collide, as they do quite often in Patrick's life. The Dinner Party chapter describes this, and the series of episodes that constitute the whole narrative demonstrate it. Furthermore, the crises increase as the narrative develops. As chapter 1 shows, he is functioning, and has likely for some time been able to juggle the two worlds he inhabits, but from the novel starts until it finishes, which takes around three years, he has experienced a complete collapse.

2.3 Violent fantasies

The violence that the novel is so infamous for is not prevalent until a fair bit into the narrative, although, it is alluded to quite early. Patrick's first violent thoughts that are directed towards any particular individual appears in a nightclub called The Tunnel, not long after the endeavours at the dinner party in the first chapter. Patrick and Price are standing outside the club, and Patrick, who is both narrating this, and thinking it, describes how he suddenly gets the impulse to kill his other friend McDermott: "I have a knife with a serrated blade in the pocket of my Valentino jacket and I'm tempted to gut McDermott with it right here in the entranceway, maybe slice his face open, sever his spine [...]"⁷¹ Patrick's violent impulses are in this instance not acted on, and the temptation passes in this case. Whether or not Patrick actually has a knife in the pocket of his Valentino jacket is of little interest, the interesting aspect is that he could have had a knife, and that he could have killed McDermott. It is the potential for violence that is Patrick's escape. The storyline is progressively built up with reduced violent actions and allusions like this, before Patrick is

⁷¹ Ellis, 1991: 52

portrayed as actually acting upon his violent impulses. This seems to be analogous to how the protagonist's mind is gradually becoming more disconnected from reality. As the reader becomes more acquainted with the protagonist, it becomes very clear that he does not do anything at work. A regular day at the office for Patrick is reading the newspaper and watching TV, and having his secretary reserve him tables at different restaurants, before he goes out for drinks with friends, or go to the gym. In other words, he is not very productive, the effort he puts into his daily work probably does not contribute much to the general economy. Even though his lack of productivity is not a matter that Patrick communicates directly, it is reasonable to expect this to be a contributing factor to why he feels demasculinized. Patrick's role in the economy is only as a consumer, a position in the economy that can be deemed effeminate. It is by all standards effeminate in regards to how traditional masculine ideology sees men as the provider, the breadwinner, and the producer. Hence, Patrick's anxiety can be traced to a fear of lacking in the quality of manliness. Which means that his fear of lacking in manliness is tied in to the fear of being a societal outcast – being someone that is cast out of the group for not contributing; someone who does not earn his place in society. Patrick's anxiety fosters revulsion for other people that have crossed that invisible boundary and become an outcast, either by choice or force, because of their apparent lack in productivity, masculinity, and conformity. The aversion Patrick has for people that fit this description is first observed in the Dinner Party chapter, with regards to Vanden and Stash, but later it is seen in his first act of extreme violence when he stabs a bum on the street.

In the chapter called Tuesday, Patrick encounters a bum lying in a doorway. Here it is again imperative to be reminded of the narrator's unreliable nature, and subsequently his *point of view*. Mieke Bal writes that focalization "is an aspect of the story that [the] narrator tells. It is the represented 'colouring' of the [story] by a specific agent of perception, the holder of the 'point of view.'"⁷² With this in mind it is also clear that more than an agency in Patrick's violence, there is also an agency in his perception. Hence, there is a fair chance that Patrick is only reporting on the facts that he wants the perceiver of *him* to see, in order to elevate his own status. According to Bal, "perception depends on so many factors that striving for objectivity is pointless. [Factors such as] previous knowledge

⁷² Bal, 2002: 19

[and] psychological attitude towards the object; all this and more affects the picture one forms and passes on to others.”⁷³ Thence, taking into account Patrick’s focalization and the *perception* of the bum, he is appalled by the stench: “some kind of cheap alcohol mixed with excrement hangs here like a heavy, invisible cloud”; and the mere appearance of the bum repels him too: “He’s dressed in some kind of tacky looking lime green polyester pantsuit with washed-out Sergio Valente jeans worn *over* it (this season’s homeless person’s fashion statement) along with a ripped orange and brown V-neck sweater stained with what looks like burgundy wine.”⁷⁴ Hence, how Patrick perceives and describes the bum is in stark contrast to how he perceives and describes his own morning routine, and is likely to confirm his views on the natural hierarchy on society. Patrick mockingly engages in conversation with the bum, asking him if he homeless because he is unemployed, and sarcastically wondering if he lost his job due to insider trading. Patrick rapidly becomes more aggressive towards the homeless man: “Listen. Do you think it’s fair to take money from people who *do* have jobs? Who *do* work?” To entice the bum, and to keep the conversation going Patrick says that he would like to help him, “It is just that... I don’t know. I don’t have anything in common with you.” But before the man has time to answer, he “[...] reach[es] out and touch[es] his face gently once more with compassion and whisper, ‘Do you know what a fucking loser you are?’ [the bum] starts nodding and [Patrick] pull[s] out a long, thin knife with a serrated edge and, being very careful not to kill him, push maybe half an inch of the blade into his right eye, flicking the handle up, instantly popping the retina.”⁷⁵ A page of descriptive violence later, which includes multiple stabbings and popping of the second eye, Patrick throws the mutilated bum a quarter, saying: “There’s a quarter. Go buy some *gum*, you crazy fucking *nigger*.” When Patrick walks away from the scene he describes how he feels “ravenous, pumped up, as if [he’d] just worked out and endorphins are flooding [the] nervous system, or just embraced that first line of cocaine, inhaled the first puff of a fine cigar, sipped that first glass of Cristal”⁷⁶ After this Patrick notes that he feels the urge to *do* something that the bum would do, and decides to go to McDonald’s. This is the first time Patrick narrates an act of violence in

⁷³ Ellis, 1991: 142

⁷⁴ *ibid.*:129 *Emphasis and parenthesis in original*

⁷⁵ *ibid.*: 131

⁷⁶ *ibid.*: 132

present tense, before he has only referred to violence that he claims to have done, or he has fantasized about carrying out violent acts.

Not long before the encounter with the bum he has a dinner appointment with a girl named Patricia, a named that is strikingly similar to Patrick, and one almost get the impression that he is speaking about himself in this chapter. If he is talking about himself, it is probably why Patrick rationalizes why he should *not* kill her. He “come[s] to the conclusion that Patricia *is* safe tonight, that [he is] not going to unexpectedly pull a knife out and use it on her just for the sake of doing so, that [he is] not going to get any pleasure watching her bleed from slits [he’s] made by cutting her throat or slicing her neck open or gouging her eyes out.”⁷⁷ The things Patrick says that he is *not* going to do to Patricia resemble the things that he does, or at least says he did, to the bum not long after this. Through his rationalization over why he is not going to assault Patricia he gives the reader a valuable insight into his mind when he says that “Whatever happens, the useless fact remains: Patricia will stay alive, and this victory requires no skill, no leaps of the imagination, no ingenuity on anyone’s part. This is simply how the world, *my* world, moves.”⁷⁸ The testimony, which is not useless facts at all, gives a clear indication that there certainly are some level of inventiveness and fantasy involved, likely superimposed on real events that Patrick extrapolates on, in order to give *his* world, as he says, some exhilaration that he cannot experience in his real life. If we let us self be reminded yet again of Patrick’s focalization, it is clear that there is a particular agency in his ‘colouring’ of the story that he recounts, in order to skew the perception, the reader has of him. Make no mistake about it; this is Patrick’s story. However, do to his apparent psychological issues, hints of a different focalization seeps in. So, if Patricia actually were Patrick, it would make sense due to some strange occurrences that evening. When she arrives at his apartment he says that “she arrives thirty minutes late and I tell the doorman to let her up even though I meet her outside my door while I’m locking it.”⁷⁹ This would have been a too odd thing to do, not to be noted by her when he eventually lets her in. Later that evening at Patrick notes that “[w]e are, except for the occasional hardbody, literally the *only two people in Tunnel*.” This, in addition to that the doorman at the nightclub does not seem to notice that Patrick is

⁷⁷ Ellis, 1991: 76

⁷⁸ *ibid.*: 77, *emphasis in original*

⁷⁹ *ibid.*: 77

with anyone, he even makes a point out of only welcoming him (although he calls him McCullough), suggests that Patrick actually is alone that night, and that he and Patricia are the same person. Subsequently, this also suggests that Patrick was not rationalizing not assaulting Patricia, but rationalizing not assaulting Patrick, namely a suicide. The chapter with Patricia is one of the first solid indicators that Patrick's mind is starting to slip.

Prior to these events, Patrick, who often stops by the video store to browse the horror-film selection, re-rents a film called *Body Double*, a film that he refers to several times, and he admits at one point to have rented 37 times,⁸⁰ among other horror-films (which is also referred to several times). The title of his favourite film is strongly suggesting that there is a case of 'double personae', which is seen in the discussion about Patricia and the bum above. When he comes home from the video store he is annoyed because he is in a hurry, and he "won't have enough time to masturbate over the scene where the woman is getting drilled to death by a power drill [...]"⁸¹ Accordingly, a behavioural pattern seems to surface: Patrick watches *Body Double*, and he is excited by the images, and it inspires him, or his imagination rather. His date with Patricia is fairly mundane, as is everything in his life, and he starts merging reality with fantasy, but has still enough control over his dissociative mind to rationalize himself out of it. However, when he leaves a party, equally unexciting as his date with Patricia, prior to seeing the bum, the images from before are still lingering in his mind, and they surface due to lack of excitement. The difference now is that this is the first time when he completely gives in to the fantasy, and consequently has difficulties with separating fantasy and reality. Hence, Patrick's mutilation of the bum is likely to be an ingenuity of his mind, and in reality Patrick just kept walking after he spotted the bum, and did not circle the block as he claims. However, since his fantasy seems to function as a second layer of reality, it is likely that he did go to the McDonald's afterwards, and this might be where he fantasized about the violence, because the narrative suggests that he stayed there for quite a while.

The apparent mutilation of the homeless person is not the first act of violence or murder that Patrick claims to have done, but it is the first violent act that he narrates in full. Prior to this it has been more ambiguous whether or not he was just brutally honest

⁸⁰ Ellis, 1991: 112

⁸¹ *ibid.*: 69

about his misdeeds, but after this episode it is reasonable to assume that he had imagined all the violence, or that he reported what he had watched in films. Most likely a combination of the two. While the narrative is chronological throughout the novel, the first half of the novel also reports from every single day in Patrick's life. Hence, the reader gets a thorough recount of Patrick's experiences, although one must keep in mind that Patrick himself narrates these experiences. On the other hand, Patrick is very honest in his narration and does report from happenings that clearly throw a veil of ambiguity over the rest of the narrative. An example of this is after he has been at the dry cleaners to drop off some bloody sheets: "I walk away, hailing a taxi, and heading toward Hubert's in it I hallucinate the buildings into mountains, into volcanoes, the streets become jungles, the sky freezes into a backdrop, and before stepping out of the cab I have to cross my eyes in order to clear my vision. Lunch at Hubert's becomes a permanent hallucination in which I find myself dreaming while still awake."⁸² This passage asserts that Patrick's perception of reality is a product of his mind, but that at this point in the narrative he is aware of his hallucinations. This awareness is not present shortly after this incident, and the Patrick/Patricia-incident marks this change in the narrative. Consequently, he might be an honest narrator, but not a reliable one, as he has trouble with telling truth from fiction. This has probably been a gradual ordeal, and the narrative cuts into and investigates a period in the protagonist's life when there are pivotal shifts in his psyche and behaviour.

Patrick's crisis forces his mind to seek refuge in creations that traditionally have given him release for his domesticated and effeminate life. Since he has an inclination towards violence and sex, which can be argued, has a naturalized relevance for men, Patrick has used violent films and pornography as an escape mechanism. Now however, pornography and fictional violence no longer suffice as a substitute for the lack of excitement and adventure in his life, so his mind is creating an alternative reality, and this other reality gradually seizes complete control over his consciousness. It is not a coincidence that it is excessive violence that is the outlet for Patrick's frustration. For him, the violence is an outlet for his emotions; hence, it is through violence that Patrick subconsciously is expressing his emotions.

⁸² Ellis, 1991: 86

2.4 Imitating reality

Emotions are the hallmark of an individual's personality. It is one of the defining characteristics of a human being; it is how we characterize others, and our self - emotions define who we are, both in our own eyes and in the eyes of others. Emotions are however not something humans have control over. Human's feelings are a reaction to something, either internal or external. Normally one perceives emotions expressed through laughter, tears, or perhaps anger. Patrick however, seems to express his emotions through use of excessive violence, or more precisely he seems to be processing his emotions through vivid fantasies about violence. There is little doubt about Patrick's fascination for violence. All his favourite movies are violent ones, and in conversations he is casually referring to famous serial killers such as Ted Bundy, Charles Manson, and Ed Gein.⁸³ His real passion lies in movies and pop-culture, and there are numbers of movie tropes in the narrative. When Patrick is narrating, he often applies similes such as "like in a movie," "moves in slow motion, as in a movie," "scene two,"⁸⁴ and so on. Moreover, he is also filming a lot of the murders, and one gets the impression that he is directing the girls, as cast, from position to position, from scene to scene, as a director would. One can only speculate, but it could be that this is a liberating action for Patrick, since these are matters that he can control, in contrast to his real life. Hence, a lot of Patrick's formative influences come from movies, and thus movies are an important factor in creating Patrick's emotional apparatus. He does not appear to have the ability to express emotions outside of what he has been exposed to through movies. An indicative example of this is when he has started developing feelings for his assistant Jean, and she embraces him outside a café: "I am so used to imagining everything happening the way it occurs in movies, visualizing things falling somehow into the shape of events on a screen, that I almost hear the swelling of an orchestra, can almost hallucinate the camera panning low around us, fireworks bursting in slow motion overhead, the seventy-millimeter image of her lips parting and the subsequent murmur of 'I *want* you' in Dolby sound."⁸⁵ Thus, the movie similes and tropes serve as substitutions

⁸³ Ellis, 1991: 92

⁸⁴ *ibid.*: e.g. 245, 288, 367, 236, 375

⁸⁵ *ibid.*: 265, *Italics in original*

for authentic emotional experiences within himself and exchanges with others. He adopts feelings from movies, and the movies in their part also functions as an outlet for his emotions. In a hyperreality the adopted feelings appear *more* real to Patrick than his real feelings, not unlike Alex DeLarge in Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*, when he proclaims that "it's funny how the colours of the real world only seem really real when you viddy them on the screen"⁸⁶ Patrick is to some extent aware of his shortcomings on the spectrum of human emotions, in which the passage above also suggests ("I am so *used to* imagining everything happening the way it occurs in movies [...]") He subsequently addresses this later in the novel, following a psychological breakdown: "There wasn't a clear, identifiable emotion within me [...]. I had all the characteristics of a human being – flesh, blood, skin, hair – but my *depersonalization* was so intense, had gone so deep, that the normal ability to feel compassion had been eradicated, the victim of a slow, purposeful erasure. I was simply imitating reality [...]"⁸⁷ Patrick's awareness of his disability in expressing his emotions through normal human faculties are a contributing factor to why he utilizes movies as an adoptive sensory mechanism. It is the only manner in which he is able to express his emotions. The essence of human emotions are expressed through mirroring other's emotional expressions, however, Patrick is mirroring what he sees in movies. He is only imitating reality. A clear indication of that is the Chase, Manhattan chapter.⁸⁸ This is an extremely over the top chase scene through the streets of Manhattan. A page and a half into the chapter the narrative changes from first person point of view to third person, mid-sentence, making the dissociating, or *depersonalization*, complete. Other than reiterate the fact that Patrick is completely mad, it very clearly demonstrates how obsessed Patrick is with cinema. This chapter is like it is taken from a screenplay of a Hollywood action movie. As Mark Storey asserts, "Life for Bateman, it seems, is one long film."⁸⁹

Even though Patrick's emotional apparatus is a spectre adopted from fictional, or pop-cultural exploits, it is governing his behaviour in similar manners as if they were his own. Hence, when Patrick is experiencing feelings of anger and resentment, he searches the catalogue of reactions that corresponds to those emotions in his cognitive library of fiction. And since his intellectual library mostly consists of violent imagery, the natural

⁸⁶ Kubrick, 1971; *A Clockwork Orange*

⁸⁷ Ellis, 1991: 282, *My italics*

⁸⁸ *ibid.*: 347

⁸⁹ Storey, 2005: 61

response to thoughts of anger is to process that through violence. To Patrick, violence is the only recourse to release, as he opens up about to his girlfriend Evelyn: “My... my *need* to engage in... homicidal behaviour on a massive scale cannot be, um, corrected’, I tell her, measuring each word carefully. ‘But I... have no other way to express my blocked... needs.’”⁹⁰ Six-Hohenbalken points out in her book *Violence Expressed*, that in realms of human experiences verbal language is only one of numerous means of expression. And focusing solely on narratives of violence and the context, in which they emerge, is not sufficient to understand the meaning and the effects of violence.⁹¹ Hence, one cannot only look at Patrick’s violence in itself, and its immediate context, to understand why he expresses his emotions through violence. His ontological conditioning, through the naturalized connection between masculinity and violence, plays a large role in his choice of violence as his language of expression. By and large, Patrick’s violence is his emotional reaction to the fear of demasculinization, which is not an immediate context, but rather a systemic and sociological context. This notion brings to attention Pierre Bourdieu’s perception on the naturalized agency in Manliness, “[which] can be seen, [as] an eminently *relational* notion, constructed in front of and for other men and against femininity, in a kind of *fear* of the female [...]”⁹² Looking closer at some of Patrick’s fantastical murders there is a clear agency in the violence; it is not merely pragmatic cold-blooded release of emotions. He targets objects that to him characterize masculine domesticity. At the Zoo he observes a mother breast-feeding her baby, to which he says that it “[...] awakens something awful in me.”⁹³ This observation triggers an emotional reaction in Patrick, in which the emotional reaction to this is expressed through violence, and it is the presence of domesticity that threatens him. Patrick’s sudden need for emotional release results in a murder, or most likely a fantasy about a murder, of a child. To Patrick the child naturally represents the epitome of domesticity: conjugal bond. After he has murdered the child he states that “I’m suddenly jolted with a mournful despair at how useless, how extraordinarily painless, it is to take a child’s life. This thing before me, small and twisted and bloody, has no real history, no worthwhile past, nothing is really lost.”⁹⁴ Patrick’s

⁹⁰ Ellis, 1991: 338, *italics in original*

⁹¹ Six-Hohenbalken, 2011: 1

⁹² Bourdieu, 2001: 53

⁹³ Ellis, 1991: 297

⁹⁴ *ibid.*: 299

reaction to his own murder indicates that he did not find the emotional satisfaction that he sought. The child's temporal constituent did not make it a part of the domestic ideology that Patrick wanted to eradicate, but rather a consequent of it; just as him. Hence, the satisfaction would have been greater killing the mother, who actually (or probably) endorse the ideology that he oppose. However, his 'need to engage in homicidal behaviour' is usually directed towards women, so this is merely one, of a few, exemptions to that pattern.

Bourdieu suggests that there is a naturalized hierarchy in the relationship between men and women. Traditionally males have, at least overtly, dominated females, but there is a constant battle about domination over the opposite sex. Consequently, each gender's ultimate fear is to be dominated by the other, and Patrick perceives his girlfriend's wish of forming a conjugal bond between them as an attack on his hegemonic status. Allowing a formal bond to form would accordingly mean subjugation of his masculinity due to the bond's intrinsic adherence to masculine domesticity, which would concretize his biggest fear; namely to be dominated by a woman. During a conversation with his girlfriend, where it is clear that she wants to take her relationship with 'the boy next door' further, Patrick can only see the dangers to such an arrangement. He feels that he has to some extent exposed her, and the rest of the female population for that matter, covert objective, which is to dominate him, and his subsequent thoughts reveal his fears: "For the first time I notice that she has been eyeing me for the two last years not with adoration but with something closer to greed"⁹⁵ Patrick perceives his girlfriend's proclamation as a proclamation of ownership, hence his judgements of it as 'greed'. If Patrick's fear of being dominated and 'owned' by a woman is not clearly communicated via his thoughts in this quote, his fears are certainly expressed when he ponders what kind of books his assistant Jean likes to read after he momentarily lets himself be lured enough into domesticity to actually consider admitting his feelings for her: "What kind of books does Jean read? Titles race through my mind: *How to Make a Man Fall in Love with you. How to Keep a Man in Love with You Forever. How to Close a deal: Get Married. How to Be Married One Year from Today. Supplicant.*"⁹⁶ The book titles personify Patrick's fears, and not long after this he murders two women, and a child at the Zoo, re-establishing his role as hegemonic male, and

⁹⁵ Ellis, 1991: 338

⁹⁶ *ibid.*: 265

expressing his anger and fear through violence within the boundaries of classical masculinity. As Mark Storey puts it, although in a slightly different context, “The murderous insanity of Bateman is merely the ultimate realization of normative masculinity’s internal logic.”⁹⁷ However, it is not solely masculinity’s logic, the agency in Patrick’s violence also has a psychological logic to it. As Bushman posits, the venting of anger must be focused directly at the objects that are the direct source of the anger, only then can the psychological arousal be reduced. Hence, Patrick’s violence is by and large directed at women, not because he is a misogynist, but because women are representing a threatening ideology. Furthermore, Bushman also states that venting anger against substitute targets does not reduce arousal. Hence, why Patrick feels unsatisfied after killing the child.

2.4 Battling ideologies

Even though domestication, in all senses of the word, is Patrick’s principal fear, he is at times literally flirting with the possibility of allowing himself to be subjugated. Being drawn towards women (and perhaps men too), he is seemingly considering settling down occasionally. This is observable in his thoughts about his on-off girlfriend Evelyn, his assistant Jean, and his ex-girlfriend Bethany, the only female characters in the novel with some kind of depth. He is contemplating this whilst he is going on a fantastical murder spree to release anger directed towards an ideology he feels is a direct threat to his manliness. Thus, Patrick is juggling the two ideologies; rugged masculinity and masculine. The ideological climate in the milieu he inhabits, the end of the 1980’s, is experiencing resurgence in the interest in gender studies, and gender awareness.⁹⁸ It is not an issue that is addressed directly, but it is the driving force behind Patrick’s identity crisis that in affect drives him to madness. However, it does seem to be an overt recognition on Patrick’s part that his masculine hegemony is on the brink of extinction, or rather a recognition that it perhaps never existed in the first place. Topics of this nature has been explored in books such as Michael Kimmel’s *Manhood in America: A Cultural History*, and Warren Farrell’s *The*

⁹⁷ Storey, 2005: 63

⁹⁸ Francis & Skelton, 2001: 12-13, and Connell, 2002: 68-70

Myth of Male Power. The latter demystifies the myth of male power in an era where the tides in gender equalities have shifted so dramatically that it is de facto suppressing men. The novel captures the zeitgeist of this ideological shift and its, although extremely exaggerated, damaging effect on males caught in between the two ideologies. In the beginning of the novel Patrick is seemingly not aware of the shift. He appears to only feel the psychological affect that it has on him, since he has problems navigating within the domesticity. Nevertheless, people around him sense that he has trouble with conforming to the 'new masculinity', and how they perceive him is illustrating that: "She says nothing, just looks at me like I'm the opposite of civilization or something."⁹⁹ Others perceive Patrick as the 'opposite of civilization' because he has yet ostensibly conformed to the new masculine ideal at this point. However, as the narrative progresses he is becoming increasingly aware that he is on the outside of the normalcy that he so desperately has tried to establish himself within. Warren Farrell is in his book *The Myth of Male Power* deconstructing an article that appeared in *Psychology Today*, called *Women as Nigger*, where the term 'nigger' implies a one-sided oppressiveness, in which women are equated with slaves, and men with slave-owners. Farrell is pointing out the misjudgement of such a comparison with real Afro-American slaves. Nevertheless, in the discourse Farrell is suggesting that even though historically women have been suppressed, the current man (as of the 90's) is equally suppressed as the women were before them. Thence, he suggests that the nigger of the modern day is the man.¹⁰⁰ Patrick echoes this notion in a poem he writes to impress (she is not impressed) his ex-girlfriend Bethany, before he allegedly murders her later that day:

The poor nigger on the wall. Look at him

Look at the poor nigger.

Look at the poor nigger on the wall.

Fuck him.

Fuck the nigger on the wall.

Black man is debil (sic)¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Ellis, 1991: 208

¹⁰⁰ Farrell, 1993, 38

¹⁰¹ Ellis, 1991: 233, *organized to a stanza by me*.

Having already established the detrimental perception Patrick has on his own ability to adapt to a 'new masculine ideal', he is through the poem expressing this perception of his own dire standing in a changing sociodicy. By identifying with 'the nigger' he acknowledges that he has little or no control over his own life. Thus, he realizes he is enslaved by the rules of a domesticated society, and the only remedy for his identity crisis is to subdue to domesticity, since the rugged masculinity is on a steady decline. He seems to gradually understand that he is caught in the intersection of the two masculine ideologies, and toward the end of the novel he is candidly asking himself: "Man vs. Conformity?"¹⁰² This binary opposition is the connexion to Patrick's identity crisis.

Before Patrick comes to this realization, he is in an emotional battle with the opposing ideologies. After the bodies start racking up, he must find a place to store them. He rents a warehouse, and for a while the logistics to this place is on his mind: "I want to keep the men's bodies separated from the women's"¹⁰³ Since his violence has agency, it is reasonable to expect that the murder victims carry similar meaning to him, although it is likely a subconscious notion. The separation of the bodies strongly suggests that, even in death, he does not want to mix the ideologies, in the same way that he has problem amalgamating them in his real life. His fantastical murders are for the most part focused on women, but ever so often he imagines killing a man. This is probably due to his sporadic leanings towards the masculine domesticity ideology, and therefore directs his imaginative violence towards eliminating threats against that ideology, hence his Patrick/Patricia-incident where he arguably contemplates suicide. Durand and Mandel posits in their book *Novels of the Contemporary Extreme* that "extreme novels enact an aesthetic that does not strive for harmony or unity, but force the confrontation between irreconcilable differences, most notably the differences between reality and art."¹⁰⁴ Patrick tries to avoid this reconciliation by separating the bodies of his imaginative victims, probably an intellectual enterprise, as an analogy to how he tries to separate the two ideologies he intrinsically identifies as irreconcilable. It is exactly in this pocket of disunity that Patrick exercises his violence. However, he does manage to unify art and reality, through his blending of fiction

¹⁰² Ellis, 1991: 395

¹⁰³ *ibid.*: 249

¹⁰⁴ Mandel, 2006: 1

and real life incidents. Nevertheless, in all this violence and madness, the protagonists foremost concern is easily overlooked, to which he confesses to Bethany before he kills her: "I... want... to... fit... in."¹⁰⁵

2.6 Notes from Underground

On the cover page of the novel there is an epigraph from the preface to Dostoyevsky's *Notes from Underground*. This makes the reading of *American Psycho* particularly interesting. As Bran Nicol points out, "The emblematic nature of each protagonist, the Underground Man and the American Psycho, is suggested by the particular passage Ellis uses for the epigraph."¹⁰⁶ The similarities between the two protagonists are found in the epigraph that Ellis provides: "Both the author of these *Notes* and the *Notes* themselves, are, of course, fictional." And, "The subsequent fragment will consist of the actual 'notes,' concerning certain events in his life." The juxtaposition of these two novels is very revealing of the abstruse narration in the *American Psycho*, because they appear to follow certain structural similarities. *Notes from Underground* is a two-part novel. The first part is, as pointed out in the epigraph, notes. Hence, stylistically it is in form of a monologue. Not dissimilar to how Patrick's narration is. The second part of *Notes from Underground* is recounting incidents in The Underground Man's life that are of particular prominence to his life; again, similar to *American Psycho*. Even more telling is the parallel between the two novels if one looks at the layout of *American Psycho*. The infamous last five words of the novel is "THIS IS NOT AN EXIT" found on page 399. Halfway in the narrative, page 199, there is an entry reading "EXIT", in same capitalized letters. After this there is a large gap in time, perhaps indicative of some change in the protagonist. I suggest that it is after this Patrick gradually comprehends the fallacy of the masculine myths. Patrick becomes even gloomier after this, and he has perhaps become aware of the trap in the male privilege that Bourdieu writes of. The fallacy in the naturalized masculine ideology is that it dominates men more than it subjugates women, due to men's duty to assert their

¹⁰⁵ Ellis, 1991: 237

¹⁰⁶ Nicol, 2009: 202-204

manliness in all circumstances. The “EXIT” therefore signals the narrative’s turning point, and the start of the tragedy’s falling action. Robert Louis Jackson writes in the introduction to the Penguin Classics version of *Notes from Underground* that “The ‘tragedy of the underground’ is the tragedy of disfigured souls adrift in what appears to them a meaningless, godless, fate-ruled world. Here is no salvation, only the conviction that things ‘cannot be otherwise.’”¹⁰⁷ This could easily have been written about the ‘tragedy of American Psycho’, and it is in many ways mirrored in Patrick’s apprehensive confession towards the very end of the novel: “My pain is constant and sharp and I do not hope for a better world for anyone. In fact I want my pain to be inflicted on others. [...] there is no catharsis. [...]. This confession has meant *nothing*...”¹⁰⁸ The fact that Patrick explicitly articulates that his so called confession, which he calls his narrative, did not mean anything, strongly suggests that it actually did mean something. Apart from the matters that have been treated in the analysis of the narrative above, there is a strong sensation that Patrick perceives his own narrative as a tragedy. Possibly not a tragedy in the classical Greek sense, but still a tragedy that follows the dramatic structure of rise and fall. Camille Paglia writes that “[t]ragedy is a male paradigm of rise and fall, a graph in which dramatic and sexual climax are in shadowy analogy. Tragedy is a western vehicle for testing and purification of the male will.”¹⁰⁹ Patrick’s perception of what happened to him during the span of the novel was his own psychological rendering of a test of his masculinity, and how that manifests itself in aggressive emotional outlet.

Much of the same that has been discussed with regard to masculinity and violence in *American Psycho* can be found in Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* as well. However, *Fight Club*’s approach to the masculine identity crisis, and the agency in the subsequently expressed violence is slightly different than it is in *American Psycho*. Still, the same fear of demasculinization is present, and the protagonist struggles with much of the same trepidations. If *American Psycho* is a tragedy, *Fight Club* is not, but it still bears semblance of a test. However, the test is of perseverance and endurance, a testing of the protagonist’s masculine virtues on a practical level, rather than on a psychological one. This will be discussed further in chapter 3.

¹⁰⁷ Dostoyevsky, 2009: xxi

¹⁰⁸ Ellis, 1991: 377

¹⁰⁹ Paglia, 1991: 7

Chapter 3

An Analysis on the Connexion between Masculine Ideology and Violence in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*

Every act of creation is first of all an act of destruction

Pablo Picasso

3.1 Domestication and Destruction

Chapter 2 analysed a novel that in many ways presented a tragic figure, and much to the protagonist's own despair his violent outlet did not achieve any cathartic result. However, enduring the psychological breakdown did seem have some therapeutic affect on him, in the sense that he became aware the cause to his distress, but what he did achieve, was all to a personal gain. The second novel that will be analysed within the analytical framework that has been established is Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*. It is published a few

years later than *American Psycho*, but it still operates very much in the same era. Hence, it is more than likely that the same ideologies, societal movements, and occurrences influence both authors. Whilst the protagonist in *American Psycho* only seems to remedy his own predicaments, the protagonist in *Fight Club* approaches the same quandaries with the intent to rectify them for a whole future generation of men. Ultimately the main difference between the two novels is that the protagonist in *Fight Club* attempts to change an ideology that, whether or not he is aware, is suppressing his masculinity, whereas the protagonist in *American Psycho* merely wants to preserve his own stature. More than just having a different approach to the crisis and the violence, the narrative is attempting to resolve the shortcomings of *American Psycho*; shortcomings not by the protagonist, but by the author. There is a strong notion of a 'writing-back' in Palahniuk's novel that, at least to me, seems to overtly comment on Ellis's narrative.

Richard Slotkin posits in his book *Regeneration Through Violence* that "[t]here is a strong antimythological stream in [American] culture [...] which asserts that this New World is to be liberated from the dead hand of the past and become the scene of a new departure in human affairs."¹¹⁰ The New World Slotkin is referring to is the development of North America, established much in opposition to the Old World, Western Europe. However, being such a ubiquitous part of the American mythology, the sense of dismantling to rebuild is a strong and compelling idea in post-modern America still. Destruction, regeneration, and recreation are very much the premise in which the narrative in *Fight Club* operates. The regenerative force of violence is pronounced already in the first pages of the novel by Tyler, who is historicizing and contextualizing the feat he and The Narrator have completed, but yet to be revealed in the narrative: "'This is our world, now, our world,' Tyler says, 'and those ancient people are dead.'"¹¹¹ And how is this going to be achieved? According to Tyler, "You can topple everything."¹¹²

The narrative follows the nameless narrator (The Narrator) and Tyler Durden. Together they create a series of underground fighting clubs, which functions as the nexus between the Old and New World they attempt to create. The narrative is a recounting of events that have led up to a barrel -of -gun -in -mouth -situation on top of a high-rise office

¹¹⁰ Slotkin, 1996: 3

¹¹¹ Palahniuk, 1996: 14

¹¹² *ibid.*: 13

building. “Tyler gets me a job as a waiter, after that Tyler’s pushing a gun in my mouth and saying, the first step to eternal life is you have to die. For a long time though, Tyler and I were best friends. People are always asking, did I know about Tyler Durden.”¹¹³ In the first chapter the Narrator does not know about Tyler, but during the first half of the retrospective narrative neither The Narrator nor the reader knows the true nature of the Narrator and Tyler’s relationship. However, during the unfolding of the narrative that ultimately returns to the locale of the gun-point-situation in the latter part of the novel, it is clear that The Narrator and Tyler are the same person.

The narrative acquaints the reader with a man that feels that his masculinity is on trial. He is not producing anything, not even offspring; he is not part of a great war. The Narrator sees little purpose or direction in his life, and the lack of master narrative leaves him fumbling for determination and ascertainment. “After college, I called [my father] long distance and said, now what? My dad didn’t know. When I got a job and turned twenty-five, long distance, I said, now what? My dad didn’t know, so he said, get married. I’m a thirty-year old boy, and I’m wondering if another woman is the answer I really need.”¹¹⁴ The Narrator’s exasperation is imbedded in his belief that his identity crisis is caused by a demasculinized society: “What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women.”¹¹⁵ External pressure, and problems coping with a demasculinized society, leads The Narrator’s mind to dissociate, and ultimately surrender completely to fantasy, thus Tyler Durden is created.

Tyler is the complete opposite of The Narrator, but he is everything that The Narrator wishes he were. Tyler is vigorous, masculine, and determined, determined to destroy society in order to rebuild it. The creation of an alter ego is a manifested escape mechanism, a prerequisite instrument created subconsciously by The Narrator to tackle head on a society that, in his view, promote an effeminate male ideology, which in effect suppress classical masculine virtues. Tyler is a faculty of The Narrator’s own nature that he cannot live without, but as the narrative reveals, he cannot quite live with him either. This dichotomy is permeating the narrative: “That old saying, about how you always kill the

¹¹³ Palahniuk, 1996: 11

¹¹⁴ *ibid.*: 51

¹¹⁵ *ibid.*: 50

thing you love, well, it works both ways.”¹¹⁶ As Patrick does in *American Psycho*, The Narrator experiences a masculine identity crisis. Similar to Patrick, The Narrator’s crisis fosters a dissociative and split personality, which functions as an escape mechanism for his pedestrian and domesticated set of life. As in *American Psycho*, violence is utilized to literally strike back at society, and is the favoured utility for emotional outlet. Through an analysis of the interconnectedness between the protagonist and his alter ego, and how the narrative portrays destruction as a creative force, I will demonstrate how the protagonist’s identity crisis is a reaction to a battle between ideological forces. I will also describe how I believe *Fight Club* is more successful in its deconstruction of masculine ideologies than *American Psycho* was.

3.2 A Fear of Domination

The Narrator’s fear of being dominated is addressed already early in the first chapter. However, as the retrospective narrative reveals, The Narrator has been the subject of domination throughout much of his adult life. It is not until the manifestation of Tyler, and his assisting in exposing the domination to him that he becomes aware the ramifications of his own subjugation. However, the Tyler/Narrator dichotomy is a facet in all of the Narrator’s relationships after he has surrendered to his imaginary friend and alter ego. This is also the case for his relationship with Marla, a figure as equally forlorn as our protagonist. Tyler’s possibly corrupt guidance is a lingering notion with the Narrator throughout the narrative. This is expressed when he is conscious the toxicity of the triangle relationship between himself, Tyler, and Marla: “This isn’t about *love* as in *caring*. This is about *property* as in *ownership*.”¹¹⁷ The words in the quote are emphasized in the original text, thus highlighting the intentionality of the juxtaposition of the content words Love and Caring on the one side, and Property and Ownership on the other. This indicates that the protagonist has a pertinent trepidation, and awareness for the dynamics of the relationship. As soon as there is talk about Property and Ownership as components of a

¹¹⁶ Palahniuk, 1996: 184

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*: 14, *emphasis in original*

relationship one immediately thinks of the naturalized gender hierarchy, and The Narrator fears where his place in that hierarchy is. More than contrasting Love/Caring and Property/Ownership, this dichotomy introduces an underlying theme of the novel, namely the paradox of any absolute principle with regard to an ideology. This paradox is further embedded in the relationship between The Narrator/Tyler and Marla, which in itself is, I suspect, an intended, imperfection in the narrative. The overt aim of The Narrator and Tyler is to expose and destroy the sociodicy that legitimates domination and represses masculinity, hence a love relationship seems like an odd subplot. However, I think it serves the function as a propagator for the unfolding of an ideology that is not intrinsic to love relations, and the possible fallacy of Tyler's purpose. It is ultimately a question about whether or not the Narrator can subdue to the possibility of conjugal bond, whilst simultaneously striving to be on the *outside* of the ideology that endorses that particular arrangement. The character Marla plays an important role as one of the propagators for male domination, and that is also how she will be treated in this analysis. But moreover, and perhaps more important, the Narrator is also dominated by his own mind, i.e. Tyler, and finally, can The Narrator really obtain freedom by opposing society, and the systemic structures that it relies on? As Camille Paglia suggests, "Freedom is the most overrated modern idea, originating in the Romantic rebellion against bourgeois society. But only *in* society can one *be* an individual."¹¹⁸ The creation of an alter ego whose sole purpose is destruction suddenly seems like a fallacy. The Narrator will later discover that his alter ego after all is not only about destruction, albeit, it will be The Narrator's own ruin.

Chapter two starts a recounting of events that has led up to the top-floor of the Parker-Morrison building. The Narrator finds himself in a support group for cancer patients, or more precisely testicular cancer patients. The reason behind his visit to this support group is that he has discovered that observing people in 'real' pain helps cure his insomnia. When considering that the psychological reasons for his insomnia is a dormant fear of demasculinization, a visit to a locale where the biological emasculation and the borders between the genders are blurred, makes the 'real' pain ever more ironic. The Narrator's support group partner is a former body builder named Bob. Bob confesses to having used every available steroid during his bodybuilding career in order to achieve the perfect

¹¹⁸ Paglia, 1991: 39

physique. Attaining masculine traits to signify manliness through body manipulation and attire is a recurring motif throughout the novel. This theme is linked to the equation of health and virtue, and manifests itself in the aesthetics of the male body as a signifier for virility and power. However, in Bob's case the search for the perfect physique has given him testicular cancer, subsequently no testicles, and female breasts. There is little that can be viewed as a more literal demasculinization than the removing of a man's testicles. "Bob cries because six months ago, his testicles were removed. Then hormone support therapy. Bob has tits because his testosterone ration is too high. Raise the testosterone level too much, your body ups the estrogen to seek a balance. [...] Too much estrogen, and you get bitch tits. [...] Bob loves me because he thinks my testicles were removed, too."¹¹⁹ It is the ultimate masculine domestication – the removal of the masculine hormone producing apparatus. Bob with his tits, and no testicles, can no longer be perceived as a complete man, or a man at all. The question is if he is gender neutral, or if he is to be perceived as a woman. The Narrator makes a comparison between Bob and God, and that is perhaps how *his* perception of Bob is: "Bob's new sweating tits that hang enormous, the way we think of God's as big."¹²⁰ That the support meeting is taking place on holy ground, in a Church, does not make this simile any less assertive. Next, as a form of maternal therapy, The Narrator leans in between Bob's God-like tits, and feels safe enough to unload his emotions, as a child would seek comfort between a mother's bosom: "This is when I'd cry. Crying is right at hand in the smothering dark, closed inside someone else, when you see how everything you can ever accomplish will end up as thrash."¹²¹ This part of the encounter between The Narrator and Bob is more reminiscent of a mother figure comforting a lost son. Taking onto account Bob's physique and physical presence, the encounter is evocative of Paglia's study of the 'Porch of the Maidens' in Athenian Acropolis, in her book *Glittering Images*. Caryatids, columns shaped like women, are gazing at the Parthenon "[c]asual and relaxed, the women are balancing a heavy stone roof on their heads. It is a remarkable display of female power: voluptuous curves combined with massive, muscular strength."¹²² The Narrator seeks psychological redemption from a former champion bodybuilder, in the form of a model modern mother, a caryatid in flesh and blood. With The Narrator's life in

¹¹⁹ Palahniuk, 1996: 17

¹²⁰ *ibid.*: 16

¹²¹ Palahniuk, 1996: 17

¹²² Paglia, 2012: 21

tatters, he seeks comfort where he feels most at ease: in the strong arms of a God-like hermaphrodite. To The Narrator there is nothing threatening about Bob, even in his hermaphroditic appearance, because his 'voluptuous curves combined with massive, muscular strength,' is the best of two worlds for him. Man is born of woman, and he never recovered from that, Paglia said, but gender hierarchy is born of religion, and neither man nor woman, has yet recovered from that. To solidify the religious aspects of The Narrator's encounter with Bob and his God-like tits, The Narrator states that: "Every evening, I died, and every evening, I was born. Resurrected."¹²³

The support group for testicular cancer, where The Narrator and Bob meet, is poignantly named Remaining Men Together. Its name paradoxically entails that the last place where they can actually remain men, among men – is a place where the men are completely stripped of their manhood epitome, their testicles. In order to collectively remain men, they have to reject one of the most important markers of masculinity. This is not unlike the idea behind Masculine Domesticity; in order to attain the *current* masculine signifier, which arguably is a family, one has to renounce the classical masculine virtues.

The Narrator continue to attend meetings at Remaining Men Together, and other similar therapy groups, for two years, and meanwhile is able to sleep since the meetings provide an emotional outlet for him. But when Marla starts showing up to therapy groups, he is again emotionally blocked; he cannot cry, hence he cannot sleep. The Narrator does not explicitly say why he cannot cry when Marla is there, only that he cannot. Nevertheless, it is very likely that the masculine sanctuary has been disrupted by the presence of a *real* female. Displaying emotions of that nature, such as crying, is not a naturalized behaviour for men. Victor Jeleniewski points out in his book, *Man Enough*, that "[w]e do not like being considered 'weak' for this is a threat to our very masculinity. A weak man is not a man at all, or so we learn. This fear is played out differently within different masculinities, but often men respond harshly to an accusation of weakness, experiencing this is an attempt to humiliate them. Somehow emotions have been identified with *weakness* so that we learn that to be 'strong' means 'being in control' of our emotions."¹²⁴ This means that when Marla trespasses into the sanctuary of the masculine sphere she not only blocks The Narrator's emotional outlet with her very presence, she

¹²³ Palahniuk, 1996: 22

¹²⁴ Seidler, 1997: 190

also inflicts a second layer of frustration on to him by threatening to expose the illusion of the masculinity that The Remaining Men Together is conserving. Marla, by being an agent for the masculine domesticator, is threatening The Narrator with demasculinization merely by her presence. However, the Narrator's most prominent fear seems to be the exposure of the fact that he actually is in possession of both his testicles, "To Marla I'm a fake,"¹²⁵ and that he really has no somatic reason for attending these meetings.

This fear and frustration leads to The Narrator's first violent reaction. Albeit a fantasy, but still, he seeks violence in order to express his emotions. He imagines grabbing her and telling her off: [...] I'll grab the little bitch. Her arms squeezed tight against her sides, and my lips pressed against her ear, I'll say, Marla, you big fake, you get out. This is the one *real* thing in my life, and you're wrecking it. You big tourist. [...] Marla, I can't sleep with you here. I need this. Get out."¹²⁶ Apart from the overt fear of infiltration by a conflicting ideology, The Narrator is adamant that this is the one *real* thing in his life. The 'realness' that he seeks is to be in a masculine-only environment. The world outside of this paradigm consists of a forced amalgamation of opposing ideologies and myths, which he finds threatening to his naturalized manliness. This is, ironically, a support group for men that lack, or have serious illnesses, connected to an essential masculine totem. As the narrative unravels there are more men seeking refuge in man-only milieus to escape the same confusing reality as The Narrator does, which ultimately lays the ground for the establishing of the fight clubs.

3.3 The Savage

Since Marla's intrusion on the Remaining Men Together group, The Narrator is again plagued with insomnia. The lack of sleep causes his mind to dissociate, and this subsequently leads to the first manifestation of Tyler as a completely separate individual. The recounting of the meeting with Tyler at a beach presents Tyler as a representation of an ideology opposing the one that is subjugating The Narrator, but it also appears to be a romantic fondness for Tyler. The Narrator is clearly searching for something that can

¹²⁵ Palahniuk, 1996: 23

¹²⁶ *ibid.*: 24, *my emphasis*

liberate him from modern materialism, and he finds that in a character whose resemblance is that of a romanticized image of a savage. Richard Slotkin explains that “[...] the Indian had been associated with precisely those traits of character that now composed the virtues of the frontier hero: skill in woodcraft, independence of social restraint, crudeness of manner and origin, materialism, hostility to social order, and rebelliousness.”¹²⁷ Hence, the Narrator’s first perception of Tyler, is one of a modern day Indian; a self-reliant savage, a non-civilized masculinity, a man capable of basic skills: “Tyler was naked and sweating, gritty with sand, his hair wet and stringy, hanging in his face.”¹²⁸ More than looking the part, Tyler is a man that is capable of creating something with his bare hands, cultivating nature, and being satisfied by the value of manual labour in itself. At the beach Tyler is building a structure out of driftwood logs. The logs are placed in the sand so that their shadow, just for one fleeting minute, forms a hand. As The Narrator recounts, it “was perfect for one minute, and for one perfect minute Tyler sat in the palm of a perfection he’d created himself.” The Narrator is here making a conscious choice to be more like Tyler, or rather *be* Tyler. As Slotkin states: “Given a choice between the effeminacy and the incompetence of eastern dudes and the masculine prowess of the Indian, the westerners had chosen the latter.”¹²⁹ The Narrator realizes that the effeminacy of the life that he has lived has provided him no favours. Tyler’s physical labour is described as a virtue, and its own reward, hence his focus on the effort rather than the product of his labour: “One minute was enough, Tyler said, a person had to work hard for it, but a minute of perfection was worth the effort. A moment was the most you could ever expect from perfection.”¹³⁰ Another facet to the first meeting between the two is the image that the logs create; a hand that Tyler sits in. This chair might signify a few things; also, one must be cognizant that this incident is a figment of The Narrator’s troubled mind. One possibility is that it could resemble a visual demonstration of the hand of God. The traditional meaning of the hand of God is to illustrate divine intervention, and in this case it is possibly an illustration of the necessity of The Narrator’s need for assisted change, hence his mind’s creation of Tyler in the first place. This reading of the episode ties in with an already established religious or metaphysical aspect to how The Narrator’s mind interprets the world around

¹²⁷ Slotkin, 1996: 418

¹²⁸ Palahniuk, 1996: 32

¹²⁹ Slotkin, 1996: 418

¹³⁰ Palahniuk, 1996: 33

him. Another possibility is that it is a parody of mass-produced furniture, or other consumer articles that occupies The Narrator and his equals. The last reading of the incident makes sense with regards to what happens next.

“I wasn’t the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue.”¹³¹ The recognition that The Narrator feels like a slave to nesting instincts, a quality that to him is an effeminate trait and a threat to his masculinity, leads him to his first violent reaction, when his apartment is destroyed in an explosion. At the time The Narrator does not know that did this himself, but he will eventually remember it. The agency in the violence is directed not only at the apartment, which is a symbol of his old life and literally the domestic locale, but also at the objects in the apartment, which are signifiers for domestication and an effeminizing culture. Later in the narrative The Narrator is reiterating this: “Everything, the lamps, the chairs, the rugs were me. The dishes in the cabinets were me. The plants were me. The television was me. It was me that blew up.”¹³² The Narrator rationalizes the agency in a three-step chain reaction. 1. “It took my whole life to buy this stuff.” 2. “Then you’re trapped in your lovely nest, and the things that you used to own, now they own you.” 3. “Detonation.”¹³³ The Narrator knows that in order to recreate his life he must start with a completely blank slate. The destruction of his apartment is merely one step towards ‘hitting rock bottom’, a destructive mantra running throughout the novel. When The Narrator comes to inspect the scene of the explosion, the doorman of his building comments “All that’s left is the concrete shell.”¹³⁴ The notion of an empty shell expresses and assumes a concept of a new beginning, a tabula rasa where new ideologies can be cultivated. Thus, the ultimate goal for The Narrator, and later when his movement evolves into the more political Project Mayhem, is to create a clean slate where myth can be reinvented. So, what he really wants is a systemic purge, not just a personal erasure of preconceived ideas. The ideological purge must be systemic in order to achieve a complete societal catharsis since everyone is an instrument in endorsing the dominant ideology. This is one of the key elements in how Pierre Bourdieu explains how naturalized social constructions legitimate themselves through ontological prescriptions. To

¹³¹ Palahniuk, 1996: 43

¹³² *ibid.*: 111

¹³³ *ibid.*: 44, my numerals

¹³⁴ *ibid.*: 45

draw on the endeavours of *American Psycho*, this is where the two novels differ substantially. Whilst *American Psycho's* protagonist simply wants to tackle a personal identity crisis on the level of psychology, *Fight Club's* protagonist attempts to correct the underlying ideology that has provided the milieu for such a crisis, on the level of history. I will return to this towards the end of the analysis.

The demolition of the apartment facilitates The Narrator's complete surrender to fantasy life, which means moving in with his imaginary friend Tyler. Spending increasingly more time with Tyler lets him experience his first 'interpersonal' violence, which is an important benchmark in the narrative. It is the first of many acts of violence, but this is particularly interesting because it is the first time he fights himself. The preface to the violence is that in exchange for accommodation, The Narrator must in return hit Tyler. "Tyler said, 'I want you to hit me as hard as you can.'"¹³⁵ However, it might as well have read: "I said, 'I want me to hit me as hard as I can.'" The violence against his own ego denotes an awareness the protagonist has for his own role in ratifying the ideology that he opposes, and that he perceives himself as both a victim and as an agent. "Instead of Tyler, I felt finally I could get my hands on everything in the world that didn't work, my cleaning that came back with the collar buttons broken, the bank that says I'm hundreds of dollars overdrawn. My job where my boss got on my computer and fiddled with my DOS execute commands. And Marla Singer, who stole the support group from me. [...] I asked Tyler what he'd been fighting. Tyler said, his father."¹³⁶ The emotional release he seeks through the violence is directed at himself, thus his ego is both the provocateur and the target. The episode with Tyler is intertwined with a soliloquy which is delivered in form of a mock prayer to his imaginary friend: "Oh, Tyler, please deliver me." [...] "Deliver me from Swedish furniture. Deliver me from clever art [...] May I never be complete. May I never be content. May I never be perfect."¹³⁷ The Narrator is returning to religious tropes and allusions, and one can assume that his God no longer is domestic effigies, but rather the destructive forces of Tyler Durden; The Regenerator who will liberate him from the dead hand of the past and create the scene for a new departure in The Narrator's life.

¹³⁵ Palahniuk, 1996: 46

¹³⁶ *ibid.*: 53

¹³⁷ *ibid.*: 46

3.4 Violence and Regeneration

Under the dubious guidance of Tyler, The Narrator is on a steady course to hitting rock bottom, or redemption, whatever may come first. The Narrator is now living together with his imaginary friend, and together they are attempting to deconstruct the dominant masculine ideology. They establish fight club, a gathering place for men from all layers of society where they come to confront others as well as themselves in pugilistic combat. In first it is just a place where men come to be men among other men, liberated from domesticated life. "Most guys are at fight club because of something they're too scared to fight. After a few fights, you're afraid of a lot less."¹³⁸ The attraction fight club has on the men that attend them is the release of built up emotion, excess aggression, that the domestic life they normally lead provide no outlet for. "'Get it out,' Tyler said. 'Trust me. You'll feel a lot better. You'll feel great.'"¹³⁹ The fight clubs deliver an arena where violence can be a form of expression. Through this arena, The Narrator and the other participants realize that it is not only an emotional release, but moreover, the momentary regressive behaviour that the violence is, provides a moment of utter freedom. It is liberation from the material world, the conformity of the modern society, and an escape from the masculine identity crisis. Tyler's words sum up the regenerative forces of surrendering to something other than mind-numbing consumerism: "'I'm breaking my attachment to physical power and possessions,' [...] 'because only through destroying myself can I discover the greater power of my spirit.'"¹⁴⁰ It is as if the organized underground fighting actually does provide a healthy psychological outlet: "Even a week after fight club, you've got no problem driving inside the speed limit. Maybe you've been passing black shit, internal injuries, for two days, but you are so cool. [...] After fight club you're so relaxed, you just cannot care."¹⁴¹ After the success, fight club gradually becomes more of a political and philosophical endeavour, where Tyler speaks about self-destruction rather than self-improvement as a means to hitting rock bottom, which in his philosophical conviction is equated with enlightenment: "Maybe self-improvement isn't the answer. [...] Maybe self-

¹³⁸ Palahniuk, 1996: 54

¹³⁹ *ibid.*: 115

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*: 110

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*: 139

destruction is the answer.”¹⁴² Hence, the members of fight club have left their comfort zones in order to pursue enlightenment and liberation through destruction, violence and vandalism.

Tyler has one more trick up his sleeve when he moves the fight club out of the basement, and transforms it into a Para-military group. The political aspect of fight club is actualized when Tyler evolves it into the so-called Project Mayhem. Through Project Mayhem Tyler moves the focus from a personal battle with demasculinization, to a systemic battle with demasculinization. The members of Project Mayhem cease to have names, and they start to resemble a guerrilla group more than an underground boxing club. Tyler explains what Project Mayhem is about: “The goal was to teach each man in the project that he had the power to control history. We, each of us, can take control of the world.”¹⁴³ The most interesting aspect with this is the fact that it appears to be happening without the knowledge of The Narrator. This is a project run completely by Tyler. Project Mayhem is what eventually leads to where the novel started, on top of a high-rise office building waiting to watch other nearby buildings topple over, with a gun in The Narrator’s mouth. The Project’s ethos gradually changes from resembling what Tyler and The Narrator did together, namely liberating themselves from the dead hand of domesticated society, only on a larger scale, to terrorism. An early example of what the project was about in the beginning is a ‘homework assignment’ where each one should try to pick a fight with a stranger on the street, and lose. The goal was to empower and emancipate the ‘victim’: “A man on the street will do anything not to fight. [...] Let him experiencing winning for the first time in his life. Get him to explode. Give him permission to beat the crap out of you. [...] ‘What we have to do, people,’ Tyler told the committee, ‘is remind these guys what kind of power they still have.’”¹⁴⁴ After this the project progressively became about larger targets, the structures and axioms of the sociodicy. It is during the transitioning from fight club to Project Mayhem that The Narrator realizes that he and Tyler are the same person, and that he feels that the project is taking it too far. He tries to confront Tyler, i.e. himself, with this, and explains that he never wanted anything like this. ““You weren’t really fighting

¹⁴² Palahniuk, 1996: 49

¹⁴³ *ibid.*: 122

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*: 120

me,' Tyler says. 'You said so yourself. You were fighting everything you hate in your life'"¹⁴⁵ Tyler is under the impression that they are doing this for everyone, and it is no longer a personal battle with masculine domesticity, but a communal battle. It has surpassed The Narrator, and developed into an ideology of its own. This is where the fallacy of ideology comes into play again. For a long time the relationship between Tyler and The Narrator has been a unification of similar goals, but Project Mayhem reinstates the dichotomy that was present before. Tyler and The Narrator now oppose each other, much in the same sense as The Narrator and Tyler together opposed masculine domesticity before. When The Narrator comes home and finds out his apartment has been blown to pieces, the first item he mentions being destroyed is his "[...] clever Njurunda coffee tables in the shape of a lime green yin and an orange yang that fit together to make a circle. Well they were splinters, now."¹⁴⁶ Much like the coffee tables that once fitted perfectly together, the yin and yang that Tyler and The Narrator constituted, well they are splinters, now.

3.5 And as Things Fell Apart

After The Narrator has realized that it is through destruction his spirit will be set free, a phrase that is suspiciously similar to one found in the epigraph of *American Psycho* appears: "Everything is falling apart."¹⁴⁷ I believe this is a nod towards Ellis's novel, and recognition of what it attempted, but perhaps did not achieve. The citation in the epigraph is taken from Talking Heads' song (*Nothing but*) *Flowers*, and reads: "And as things fell apart // Nobody paid much attention." There are a few lines in the song text that I find interesting with regards to the narrative in *Fight Club*. "This used to be real estate // Now it's only fields and trees." "The highways and cars // Were sacrificed for agriculture // I thought that we'd start over." "This was a Pizza Hut // Now it's all covered with daisies."¹⁴⁸ The theme of the song is modernity with all its infrastructure and societal structures regressing to a more natural state, which is also the aim of The Narrator and Tyler's project. The parallels to Tyler's outspoken goals, and the prose he uses when he describes

¹⁴⁵ Palahniuk, 1996: 167

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*: 43

¹⁴⁷ *ibid.*: 112

¹⁴⁸ Talking Heads, 1987

the ambitions of Project Mayhem, is strikingly similar to what is found in the Talking Heads' lyrics: "[...] picture yourself planting radishes and seed potatoes on the fifteenth green of a forgotten golf course. You'll hunt elk through the damp canyon forest around the ruins of Rockefeller Center. And dig clams next to the skeleton of the Space Needle leaning at a forty-five-degree angle." "'Imagine,' Tyler said, 'stalking elk past department store windows and stinking racks of beautiful rotting dresses and tuxedos on hangers; you'll wear leather clothes that will last you for the rest of your life [...].'" And to reiterate what is already stated: "This was the goal of Project Mayhem, Tyler said, the complete and right-away destruction of civilization."¹⁴⁹ The classical American mythology of regeneration through violence could not be expressed any clearer. The outspoken goal of Project Mayhem shed an illuminating light on the whole narrative, and it echoes what Richard Slotkin says in his book *Gunfighter Nation*, about the significance American myth has had on the collective understanding of how fluctuations in society functions: "[it] represented the redemption of American spirit or fortune as something to be achieved by playing through a scenario of separation, temporary regression to a more primitive or 'natural' state, and *regeneration through violence*."¹⁵⁰ More than confirming Tyler's mythological adherence, the passage reiterates The Narrator's realization of discovering the great power of the spirit through destruction. However, this destruction is not without purpose. Tyler's determination to destroy the pillars of a civilization that has fostered men that feel that their spirit has been trampled by the destructive forces of an ideology that does not facilitate their expressive needs, is counterweighed by his determination to rebuild a new society. In that sense Tyler's ideology is a progressive ideology as well as a destructive one.

The last half of the novel is a tour de force of violence, where the goal of destruction literally is pounded in, and the narrative segues into a part of the novel where the agency in the violence is much more resolute. Before this, the violence certainly had agency, only it was a much more general agency, and perhaps misplaced, in the sense that it was aimed at objects and tangibles that embodied the repressive ideology, rather than the systemic culture that endorses it. Yet, even though the movement, i.e. Tyler, is adamant in destroying the pillars of the suppressive ideology, The Narrator is still more tête-à-tête in his violent expressions. The beating of Angel face is an amalgamation of the

¹⁴⁹ Palahniuk, 1996: 124-125

¹⁵⁰ Slotkin, 1998: 12

two points of view. The character Angel face, through his name, represents both religion and effeminacy: religion with its deep-rooted connection to society, and the similarities in how they both repress unwanted elements that do not subdue to their conformity, and effeminacy with its ratification of masculine domesticity. The Narrator tags Angel face for a fight, and beats him to a pulp, saying, "I was in the mood to destroy something beautiful."¹⁵¹ The 'destruction of something beautiful' is the key in understanding how The Narrator rationalizes his actions. On the one side he loathes what Angel face represents to him, effeminacy and repressive ideology, but on the other hand, he is cognizant that he is beating something ubiquitously beautiful, namely a human being; the same spirit that he is so determined to set free. The description of The Narrator's emotions while he is beating Angel face is the only time in the narrative that the use and purpose of violence is questioned. And at the same time hinting that their vocation is perhaps a futile one:

"What Tyler says about being the crap and the slaves of history, that's how I felt. I wanted to destroy everything beautiful I'd never have. Burn the Amazon rain forests. Pump chlorofluorocarbons straight up to gobble the ozone. Open the dump valves on supertankers and uncap offshore oil wells. I wanted to kill all the fish I couldn't afford to eat, and smother the French beaches I'd never see. I wanted the whole world to hit bottom. [...] I wanted to breath smoke. [...] This is my world, now. This is my world, my world, and those ancient people are dead."¹⁵²

There is extreme anger and frustration expressed in this quote, and the violence that goes with it. It is noticeable how much of what The Narrator says here echoes that of Tyler from the first chapter, only the possessive determiners are altered from 'our' to 'my'. That said, what happens in the first chapter has not yet happened when this episode occurs, and it is a strong signal that the two start to merge into one. Nevertheless, there is

¹⁵¹ Palahniuk, 1996: 122

¹⁵² *ibid.*: 123-123

a firm sense of personal agency in The Narrator's emotions and violence. It is *him* that is doing this, and it is for personal gain rather than something larger. I find this very similar, and reminiscent of how Patrick Bateman expresses his agency. To him the violence is an emotional outlet too; it is to make the world feel *his* pain. For both The Narrator and Patrick, their violence is literal expressions of their pain, as Patrick explains it towards the end of *American Psycho*: "My pain is constant and sharp and I do not hope for a better world for anyone. In fact I want my pain to be inflicted on others. I want no one to escape [...] there is no catharsis."¹⁵³ This illuminates the imperative role that Tyler plays in this narrative. Had it not been for him, the violence would not have had any purpose. Whilst Patrick and The Narrator constantly battle substitute targets, Tyler gives the violence cathartic agency. I believe this is a conscious choice by Palahniuk, and that he to a large extent is correcting the errors that Ellis made, or perhaps he did not dare to confront. I suggest that Palahniuk is taking it so far that he toward the end of *Fight Club* is symbolically killing Ellis's protagonist Patrick because *American Psycho* did not take the crisis in masculinity and its naturalized inclination to violence far enough. In *American Psycho* everything did not fall apart as the epigraph promised, however Palahniuk did manage to topple everything, as Tyler, in the beginning of *Fight Club* said was possible. The symbolic killing of Patrick takes place at a murder mystery party that Project Mayhem has infiltrated in order to murder an enemy of the project, "His name was Patrick Madden, and he was an enemy of Project Mayhem."¹⁵⁴ Together with the other nods to *American Psycho*, the name 'Patrick' can hardly be a coincidence. The surname 'Madden' just strengthen the perception that Palahniuk feels that there is something annoying with Ellis's protagonist. I presume Palahniuk's exasperation with *American Psycho* and Patrick Bateman, lies in the unfulfilling end to Ellis's novel. Ellis took it far, but not quite far enough when it came to confronting the underlying issues with masculine domesticity. The Narrator stabs Patrick with a knife, Patrick's own murder weapon of choice, and he dies under the veil of a murder mystery party, with his wife not quite understanding that he is not faking it: "'Patrick, that's enough, stop being dead."¹⁵⁵ The wife is perhaps a symbol of the effeminate masses that took *American Psycho* to their heart, not

¹⁵³ Ellis, 1991: 377

¹⁵⁴ Palahniuk, 1996: 198

¹⁵⁵ *ibid.*: 201

understanding what the novel was supposed to be about, and the murder mystery party might suggest that Palahniuk feels that *American Psycho* was more murder mystery than an opposing counterweight to domesticity. By and large Palahniuk's dual protagonist sets out to achieve what Patrick Bateman did not manage, namely to topple everything, and one might say that they succeeded. The final solidification of their success, and a last pun on *American Psycho's* behalf, is expressed right after the murder of Patrick Madden: "Everything has fallen apart."¹⁵⁶

3.6 Imaginary Friend, or Imaginary Everything?

Another, likely intended, similarity with *American Psycho* is naturally the dissociative mind that both protagonists share, and the subsequent blurring between reality and fantasy. This is something that also is addressed by Palahniuk in the postscript to the paperback of *Fight Club*: "Before my refrigerator was covered with photographs sent to me by strangers: grinning, bruised faces and people grappling in backyard boxing rings..."¹⁵⁷ And: "There have always been fight clubs, they say. There will always be fight clubs. [...] Now, seven books later, men still ask where to find the fight club in their area."¹⁵⁸ Palahniuk's gritty narrative managed to blur the borders between reality and fantasy more than Ellis did. However, that was probably not the intention on either author's part. When it comes to what definitely is fiction, I believe that the murders in *American Psycho* are nothing more than the fantasy of a schizophrenic mind, but is that an argument that can be made for the violence *Fight Club* as well? I think it is, however a main difference between the two narratives is that it is fairly clear early on, and throughout the narrative of *American Psycho* that the protagonist is imagining everything, while in *Fight Club* the suspicion that the protagonist is imagining it all is more present towards the very end of the narrative. "If you can wake up in a different place. If you can wake up in a different time. Why can't you wake up as a different person?"¹⁵⁹ The Narrator asks himself this when he is searching for Tyler at bars across the United States, only to discover for the

¹⁵⁶ Palahniuk, 1996: 202

¹⁵⁷ *ibid.*: 212

¹⁵⁸ *ibid.*: 217

¹⁵⁹ *ibid.*: 157

first time that they are the same person. This could just be deconstruction of the ego, but it might also indicate that The Narrator is imagining everything in the same manner as Patrick did; the ultimate escape fantasy for an unexciting and demasculinized life. The most convincing bit of evidence is an episode after The Narrator has discovered that he and Tyler is the same person, and he in effect is to blame for the violence caused by Project Mayhem. In desperation he tries to stop Project Mayhem for further destruction, in which he does not succeed. As a consequence of this, and his guilt, he tries in affect to commit suicide. "Because I'm Tyler Durden, and you can kiss my ass, I register to fight every guy in the club that night. Fifty fights. One fight at a time."¹⁶⁰ The most interesting fight is the third and last guy he fights:

"Number three seems to know what I need and holds my head in the dark and the smother. There's a sleeper hold that gives you just enough air to stay awake. Number three holds my head in the crook of his arm, the way he'd hold a baby or a football, in the crook of his arm, and hammers my face with pounding molars of his clenched fist."¹⁶¹

This description is eerily similar to when he recounts fighting Angel face:

"There's a sleeper hold that gives somebody just enough air to stay awake, and that night at fight club I hit our first-timer and hammered that beautiful mister angel face, first with the bony knuckles of my fist like a pounding molar. [...] I held the face of mister angel like a baby or a football in the crook of my arm and bashed him with my knuckles [...]."¹⁶²

The question is whether The Narrator is imagining the fights, and thus drawing from the same source to create a fantasy, or if he is still only fighting himself, as he eventually realized was the case the first time he and Tyler fought? A clue to this can perhaps be

¹⁶⁰ Palahniuk, 1996: 199

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*: 200

¹⁶² *ibid.*: 123-124

found earlier when The Narrator explains how his insomnia is affecting his perception on things around him: “This is how it is with insomnia. Everything is so far away, a copy of a copy of a copy.”¹⁶³ If we take the case of insomnia at face value, it is perhaps a simple case of reduced cognitive abilities. This is confusing, and ultimately destabilizing for The Narrator’s psyche. Descriptions of similar nature, to how Patrick Bateman described his dissociating mind indicate that this might be the case: “[...] it’s not clear if reality slipped into my dream or if my dream is slopping over into reality.”¹⁶⁴

Ultimately, the bombs in the buildings they are waiting for to explode eventually do not go off. However, The Narrator does pull the trigger of the gun that is in his mouth, which is the final act of violence in the narrative. It is perhaps the most important act of violence too, because in this instance the violence does have real agency: “I’m not killing myself, I yell. I’m killing Tyler.”¹⁶⁵ The last chapter is the description of a confused narrator, strongly suggesting that he too might be a psychotic and unreliable narrator: “In my father’s house are many mansions. Of course, when I pulled the trigger, I died.”¹⁶⁶ Only he did not die, at least if we take into account that the narrative is retrospective. Is he rather in a psychiatric hospital, and since he thinks he has committed suicide, he believes he is in heaven? “The angels here are Old Testament kind, legions and lieutenants, a heavenly host who works in shifts, days, swing. Graveyard. They bring you your meals on a tray with a paper cup of meds.”¹⁶⁷ There are a lot of ambiguities in the ending. One might even speculate that Palahniuk left it as open and mockingly ambiguous as he did to reiterate the fallacy of Ellis’s ending of *American Psycho*. If so, the question whether or not The Narrator and Tyler actually did do the things that the narrative recounts is of lesser importance. However, at least Palahniuk’s narrative did manage to destroy the pillars of his own domestication. Where *American Psycho* failed, *Fight Club* to a large extent succeeded. Whilst Patrick’s narrative was not an exit, THIS IS AN EXIT.

¹⁶³ Palahniuk, 1996: 21

¹⁶⁴ *ibid.*: 137

¹⁶⁵ *ibid.*: 205

¹⁶⁶ *ibid.*: 206

¹⁶⁷ *ibid.*: 207

Conclusion

The two notions I had at the start of the thesis, and I still have, is firstly that even though there have been shifts in the masculine ideology, the postmodern man continues to be governed by classical masculine virtues. The second notion I had, told me that if that is true in sociological terms, there should certainly be evidence for something conveying similar ideas in literature.

The thesis is grappling with some controversial topics. Even though the main body of arguments are findings from fictional literature, they are still rooted in reality. As was the purpose of the authors of both works too, I imagine. There has undeniably, for some time, been an ideological trend that has endorsed an effeminized society. The protagonists in both novels appear to be fighting against what I have defined as demasculinization. However, the dreaded demasculinization is the product of larger societal mechanisms. In short, the narrative that has been told is that physical strength and aggression no longer is a valuable resource in the current market.

Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* portray two similar protagonists struggling with similar apprehensions to their milieu. Their attempts to conform to the postmodern idea of how a man should be, proves detrimental to them both. However, as with the opposing ideologies, in which is the cause to the protagonist's problems, not even the authors seem to be able to reconcile.

The thesis has pointed to several underlying reasons to why there is a masculine identity crisis, and has demonstrated how fictional literature attempts to come to terms with it. However, as it often is with postmodern problems, they are if not difficult to resolve, perhaps not meant to be solved. Nevertheless, what the novels are successful in illuminating, and what I think the thesis has been particular successful in establishing, is a link between masculinity, identity, emotions, and agency in violence. This is something, at least to my knowledge, which has not been demonstrated before.

These findings can possibly provide a template for future research on similar topics in literature, for other Master students, or perhaps even more seasoned critics. Future research could focus on demasculinization as a concept of its own, rather than the link

between masculinity and violence, although it is an important aspect of the naturalized masculine behaviour that still governs the postmodern man.

Luckily for the postmodern man, reality is rarely as dire as it is presented in fiction.

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