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Diplomová práce

Fight Club, Invisible Monsters and American Psycho. Transgressive Fiction of Chuck Palahniuk and B. E. Ellis

Klub rváčů, Neviditelné nestvůry a Americké psycho. Transgresivní fikce Chucka Palahniuka a B. E. Ellise

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Anotace

Diplomová práce se zaměřuje na srovnávací analýzu tří postmoderních románů americké literatury, spojených s termínem transgressive fiction: *American Psycho* B.E. Ellise (1991), *Fight Club* (1996) a *Invisible Monsters* (1999) Chucka Palahniuka. Na základě psychologické charakteristiky hlavních postav a jejich konfliktu se společenskými normami práce popisuje psychologickou motivaci skrytou za transgresivním jednáním protagonistů, s cílem ukázat, jak tyto prvky reflektují i narušují normy a očekávání okolí. Teoretická část poskytuje obecný rámec transgresivní literatury s ohledem na psychologii osobnosti, ale i na širší literárně historický kontext žánru: význam transgresivního chování postav v gotickém románu (Botting). Vlastní komparativní analýza zkoumá konkrétní příklady tlaku společenských norem na způsob vnímání světa a krizi identity, vedoucí k odporu v podobě odchylek od většinového způsobu života. Prostřednictvím tohoto srovnání práce poukazuje na shody i rozdíly v zobrazení vztahu jednotlivce a společnosti i nad významem transgresivní prózy pro literárně kulturní vývoj.

Klíčová slova

Transgresivní fikce, postmodernismus, Palahniuk, Ellis, konzumerismus, identita, tělo, komodifikace, násilí

Abstract

This thesis focuses on a comparative analysis of three postmodern novels of American literature associated with the term transgressive fiction: *American Psycho* by B. E. Ellis (1991), *Fight Club* (1996) and *Invisible Monsters* (1999) by Chuck Palahniuk. Based on the psychological characteristics of the main characters and their conflict with social norms, the thesis examines the psychological motivation behind the protagonists' transgressive behaviour, aiming to show how these elements reflect and disrupt the standards and expectations of their surroundings. The theoretical part provides a general framework for transgressive literature with regard to personality psychology, but also to the broader literary-historical context of the genre: the significance of transgressive behaviour of the characters in the Gothic novel (Botting). The comparative analysis itself examines specific examples of the pressure of social norms on the way of perceiving the world and the crisis of identity, leading to resistance in the form of deviations from the majority way of life. Through this comparison, the work points to similarities and differences in the depiction of the relationship between the individual and society, as well as the significance of transgressive prose for literary and cultural development.

Key words

Transgressive fiction, postmodernism, Palahniuk, Ellis, consumerism, identity, body, commodification, violence

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1 Introduction

Late twentieth-century Western fiction repeatedly returns to a crisis of meaning produced by late capitalism, consumer culture, and the erosion of stable identity. In such a culture, the individual no longer appears as a coherent, autonomous subject but rather as a fragmented construct shaped by economic systems, media representations, and performative social roles. The novel *American Psycho* (1991) by Bret Easton Ellis, *Fight Club* (1996), and *Invisible Monsters* (1999) by Chuck Palahniuk emerge from this landscape as incisive explorations of identity under pressure. Rather than offering conventional narratives, these texts expose the instability of the modern subject and address the psychological consequences of living in a world dominated by surface, simulation, and commodification.

This thesis examines how these novels construct characters whose identities collapse, fracture, or dissolve in response to the demands of contemporary capitalist society. Central to this analysis is the claim that identity within these narratives no longer functions as an internal essence but as a performative and consumable product. Characters define themselves through possessions, bodies, routines, and aesthetic codes rather than through stable moral or emotional frameworks. When these structures fail to produce meaning, characters turn to transgressive practices of violence, self-destruction, bodily modification, or ideological extremism as substitutes for authenticity and purpose.

The theoretical part of this paper draws primarily on postmodern cultural theory, particularly the work of Fredric Jameson and Jean Baudrillard. Jameson's analysis of late capitalism, the waning of affect, and the collapse of historicity provides a foundation for understanding the emotional flatness and repetition that dominate these narratives. Baudrillard's concepts of simulacra and hyperreal illustrate the erosion of reality and consequence within the worlds these characters inhabit, where representation overtakes experience and meaning dissolves into surface.

Methodically, the thesis employs close textual analysis combined with comparative interpretation. Each novel is first examined through detailed character studies, focusing on how individual figures embody specific responses to identity crisis, consumerism, and emotional disconnection. These analyses attend not only to protagonists but also to secondary characters, whose role often clarifies or destabilises the trajectories of the central figures. The final chapter synthesises these readings through a comparative framework, highlighting both the shared cultural conditions that shape the characters and the different paths they take in response.

2 Postmodernism

To understand the literary and cultural landscapes inhabited by the characters in the works of Chuck Palahniuk and Bret Easton Ellis, it is first necessary to establish the theoretical framework of postmodernism. As a concept, postmodernism remains difficult to define, often described as a fluid, paradoxical phenomenon that simultaneously establishes and undermines the very concepts it critiques. However, beyond its ambiguities, it serves as a descriptor of the cultural and philosophical transformations regarding the individual's place within late-twentieth-century capitalist societies. This chapter outlines the defining features of this phenomenon. The following subchapters explore the evolution of capitalism into its advanced stage, a transition marked by the commodification of culture and the integration of aesthetic production into market logic. This exploration includes an analysis of the *"crisis of reality,"* where the loss of historical depth and the rise of the *"simulacrum"* – the identical copy without an original – reshape the human experience. By examining Fredric Jameson's theories on the waning of affect alongside Jean Baudrillard's concept of the hyperreal, this chapter provides the necessary context for analysing how the novels in question depict the fractured self in a world saturated by consumerism.

2.1 Defining Postmodernism

Within the contemporary cultural discourse, postmodernism emerges as a particularly challenging and ambiguous concept. Literary theorist Linda Hutcheon characterises postmodernism as a profoundly paradoxical phenomenon that simultaneously uses and abuses, establishes and then immediately undermines the very concepts it critiques.[1] Its very definition remains fluid, constantly adapting to the specific analytical context, which contributes to its status as a highly contested term. Nevertheless, as a broad descriptor, postmodernism points to a significant cultural and philosophical transformation in the understanding of the individual within late twentieth-century capitalist societies. This reorientation of subjectivity is notably characterised by a pervasive self-reflexivity or ironic knowingness that has become a defining feature of contemporary culture.[2]

[1] HUTCHEON, Linda. *Poetika postmodernismu: historie, teorie, beletrie*. Praha: Univerzita Karlova, Nakladatelství Karolinum, Limes, 2023. ISBN 978-80-246-5271-9. pp. 19–20.
[2] NICOL, Bran (ed.). *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Novel: A Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002. ISBN 07-486-1478-8. pp. 1–2.

Postmodernism can be understood through its various manifestations. At its most specific, practical level, it refers to a distinct set of literary and artistic practices that gained momentum from the 1950s through the early 1980s, marked by a radicalised self-reflexivity that intensified modernist inclinations, along with a return to ironic forms of representations. More abstractly, it encompasses a series of philosophical propositions primarily centred on the rejection of realist epistemology. These tenets deny the existence of a Cartesian autonomous subject with a stable identity, challenge the transparency of language, question the accessibility of the "real", and dispute the possibility of universal foundations for knowledge or truth. At its most ambitious level, postmodernism, often termed "the Postmodern" at this level, endeavours to describe a new sociocultural and/or economic formation that has substituted modernism in the Western world.[3]

2.2 Postmodernism, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Reality

Postmodernism, in contrast to modernism, is less concerned with the construction of novel realities; instead, it critically examines ruptures, singular events, and pivotal moments that fundamentally alter existing paradigms. Its emergence arrives with the completion of the modernisation process, a period in which even the last remnants of nature, historically a domain resisting cultural domination, have been entirely absorbed into the cultural realm. Consequently, postmodernism does not signify the dawn of a new social order but rather reflects the evolution of capitalism into its advanced stage, characterised by the complete commodification of culture itself and the thorough integration of aesthetic production into prevailing market logic.[4] This understanding is reinforced by the conviction that everything is, in fact, culturally influenced. Nothing in life, be it nationalism, identity, or even reality itself, is natural or given. Instead, everything is recognised as the product of cultural mediation, strategically framed by ideological, social, or economic interests.[5]

This attitude finds resonance in philosopher Peter Sloterdijk's concept of cynical reason. Unlike a classical Marxist view, in which ideology cunningly deceives individuals into conforming without realising their true motivations, postmodern cynical reason suggests a

[3] BERTENS, Johannes Willem and NATOLI, Joseph P. *Encyklopedie postmodernismu*. (Encyklopedie.) Brno: Barrister & Principal, 2005. ISBN 80-865-9826-8. p. 6.
[4] JAMESON, Fredric. *Postmodernismus, neboli, Kulturní logika pozdního kapitalismu*. SOK. Praha: Rybka Publishers, 2016. ISBN 978-80-87950-27-2. pp. 7–11.
[5] NICOL, Bran (ed.). *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Novel: A Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002. ISBN 07-486-1478-8. pp. 3–4.

conscious awareness of ideological manipulation. Individuals, in this view, may recognise the falsity of their actions yet persist in them.[6] As a result of this, cultural expressions once deemed transgressive, such as obscurity, sexual explicitness, psychological extremity, and overt social and political defiance, no longer offend anyone. Instead, they are assimilated into the official Western cultural landscape, where their provocative nature is normalised and institutionalised.[7]

Consequently, the very notion of reality is no longer taken for granted; instead, it is viewed with suspicion, understood as continually organised and constructed by mass media and the global capitalist economy. The overarching argument within postmodern social theory is that to exist in postmodernity means experiencing a profound estrangement from authenticity, a disconnect from what is perceived as genuine or authentic. Our physical and linguistic environments are increasingly saturated with mass media discourses that endlessly recycle decontextualised images, ultimately stripping them of their original meaning.[8]

Fredric Jameson critiques the aesthetic shifts in postmodernism by contrasting Andy Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* with Vincent van Gogh's *A Pair of Peasant Shoes*. Jameson observes that Warhol's work, rooted in his commercial illustration background, explicitly foregrounds commodity fetishism within late capitalism. He identifies a defining characteristic of postmodernism as a new kind of flatness or absence of depth, a literal superficiality, that prioritises surface over the modernist search for hidden meanings. This aesthetic is profoundly shaped by the pervasive role of photography and the photographic negative, which permeates Warhol's images with a deathly quality. The death of the world of appearance signals a deeper transformation, in which the object world itself becomes a collection of texts or simulacra, leading to a mutation in the subject's disposition.[9]

This mutation in the disposition of the subject gains further clarity when viewed against its modernist predecessor. Jameson argues that the modernist concept of artistic expression relies on a monadic (In Leibniz's philosophy, a monad constitutes a simple substance, entirely devoid

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[6] NICOL, Bran (ed.). *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Novel: A Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002. ISBN 07-486-1478-8., p. 4.

[7] JAMESON, Fredric. *Postmodernismus, neboli, Kulturní logika pozdního kapitalismu*. SOK. Praha: Rybka Publishers, 2016. ISBN 978-80-87950-27-2. p. 28.

[8] NICOL, Bran (ed.). *Postmodernism and the Contemporary Novel: A Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002. ISBN 07-486-1478-8. p. 5.

[9] JAMESON, Fredric. *Postmodernismus, neboli, Kulturní logika pozdního kapitalismu*. SOK. Praha: Rybka Publishers, 2016. ISBN 978-80-87950-27-2. pp. 31–34.

of parts, yet possessing an internal vitality[10]) understanding of the subject, an autonomous, self-contained vessel from which inner feelings project outward to form a unique style.[11] However, as exemplified by Edvard Munch's *The Scream,* this very configuration of individual subjectivity as a self-sufficient, isolated sphere condemns the monad to an empty solitude, a cell from which escape proves impossible. This isolation, the ultimate cost of modernist self-definition, subsequently paves the way for postmodernism's characteristic absence of depth and the waning of affect.[12]

Jameson argues that the erosion of the individual subject and personal style accelerates the rise of pastiche — a parody-like imitation of a unique, idiosyncratic style. Pastiche, however, is a concept distinct from its predecessor; unlike parody, which modernist mimicry used to reaffirm a linguistic norm, pastiche functions without such an anchor. The pervasive nature of pastiche cultivates a consumer's desire for a world transformed into mere images, pseudo-events, and spectacles. These phenomena align with the conception of the "simulacrum", an identical copy for which no original ever existed.[13]

This cultural logic culminates in what Jameson terms the "crisis of historicity," a condition in which the past ceases to function as lived experience. Instead, it reappears as a commodified construct of literary language of simulacra or pastiche. In postmodernism, cultural production no longer seeks accurate representation of historical content, and the past becomes accessible through reproduction and nostalgic aesthetics. This shift, where a history has devolved into a collection of fragmented images and simulacra, aligns with poststructuralist thought, in which the past as a referent is progressively marginalised. The disruption of genuine historicity, however, is paradoxically accompanied by what Jameson calls "nostalgia mode". This phenomenon reflects a collective yearning for a past lost under the dictates of fashion and generational ideologies.[14]

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[10] LEIBNIZ, Gottfried Wilhelm. *The Monadology* [online]. Translated by Robert Latta. [s.l.]: Kerguelen, [no date of publication]. [Accessed 30 June 2025]. Available at: http://home.datacomm.ch/kerguelen/monadology/monadology.html#2.

[11] JAMESON, Fredric. *Postmodernismus, neboli, Kulturní logika pozdního kapitalismu*. SOK. Praha: Rybka Publishers, 2016. ISBN 978-80-87950-27-2. pp. 38–39.

[12] Ibid., p. 39.

[13] Ibid., pp. 40–43.

[14] JAMESON, Fredric. *Postmodernismus, neboli, Kulturní logika pozdního kapitalismu*. SOK. Praha: Rybka Publishers, 2016. ISBN 978-80-87950-27-2. pp. 43–44.

2.3 Baudrillard, Simulacrum and the Hyperreal

Building on the notion of the simulacrum as an identical copy devoid of an original, as seen in pervasive pastiche and the transformation of the world into images and spectacles, Jean Baudrillard's insights fundamentally reshape the understanding of the very nature of reality. Baudrillard argues that the contemporary era marks a transition from a phase where representations mirrored stable reality to a world overwhelmingly dominated by simulacra – copies that have detached themselves from any original referent, effectively becoming their own reality.[15] This theoretical framework offers a lens through which to examine the late-capitalist fictions of Chuck Palahniuk and Bret Easton Ellis, where characters inhabit landscapes saturated with consumerist aesthetics and constructed identities, their realities blurred by the pervasive influence of manufactured experiences and the absence of authentic grounding.

Baudrillard's analysis begins with a reinterpretation of Jorge Luis Borges's renowned fable, in which an Empire's cartographers create a map so detailed that it perfectly coincides with the territory. However, Baudrillard posits an inversion of this relationship for the contemporary condition. He asserts that it is no longer the map or representation that is subject to decay; rather, it is the "real" itself — the territory — that is undergoing a process of disintegration. This decay manifests as fragmented shreds, signalling a rupture. This rupture precipitates what Baudrillard terms "the desert of the real itself", a conceptual space where the direct, unmediated correspondence between signs and their referents has irrevocably ceased to exist.[16]

The "real", in this environment, is no longer discovered but produced, and can be endlessly replicated. Its existence does not rely on rationality or adherence to an ideal; rather, it is defined by its functionality, reducing it to a mere operational device. Consequently, it loses its authentic connection to what was traditionally understood as real, as no encompassing imaginary provides it with grounding. What emerges instead is the hyperreal, generated through the synthesis of numerous models within a "hyperspace without atmosphere," a realm entirely detached from conventional reality.[17]

Postmodernism marks a pivotal shift, making old ways of understanding the world outdated. Jean Baudrillard expands on this, arguing that capitalism has undergone a radical transformation, thrusting us into a hyperreal world of cyberspace and media-driven events. For

[15] BAUDRILLARD, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994. ISBN 04-720-9521-8. p. 1.
[16] Ibid.
[17] BAUDRILLARD, Jean. *Simulacra and Simulation*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994. ISBN 04-720-9521-8. pp. 1–2.

Baudrillard, foundational Marxist ideas, such as the difference between a product's use-value and its exchange-value, become no longer relevant. These concepts hinged on a human view of need, which a new economy of signs and simulacra has eclipsed. Terry Eagleton acknowledges postmodernism's positive role in pushing issues of gender, identity, race, and ethnicity into political discussions. Yet, he simultaneously sees it as deeply flawed. Like Hutcheon, Eagleton argues that postmodernism frequently undermines its own progressive objectives by dismissing the possibility of genuine, meaningful social change.[18] Hutcheon further critically engages with Eagleton's assertion that the creation of an authentically political art in our contemporary age necessitates a synthesis of revolutionary avant-garde and modernist aesthetics. She, conversely, posits that the very artistic paradigm Eagleton seeks already exists.[19]

In summary, postmodernism is not merely a descriptive label for new artistic or cultural trends, but a profoundly transformative logic that shapes how reality, subjectivity, and meaning are understood in late capitalist society. Its characteristic self-reflexivity, scepticism towards grand narratives, and embrace of simulacra challenge the very notions of authenticity and stable identity. This intellectual and cultural context provides a vital framework for analysing the works of Chuck Palahniuk and Brett Easton Ellis, whose fiction explores the landscapes of commodified experience and fractured self.

[18] BERTENS, Johannes Willem and NATOLI, Joseph P. *Encyklopedie postmodernismu*. (Encyklopedie.) Brno: Barrister & Principal, 2005. ISBN 80-865-9826-8. pp. 165–166.

[19] HUTCHEON, Linda. *Poetika postmodernismu: historie, teorie, beletrie*. Praha: Univerzita Karlova, Nakladatelství Karolinum, Limes, 2023. ISBN 978-80-246-5271-9. p. 47.

3 Gothic

This chapter outlines the historical development and defining feature of the Gothic genre, tracing its emergence from a Renaissance term of cultural disdain to a literary mode characterised by excess, transgression, and the sublime. It examines how Gothic fiction challenged Enlightenment ideals through its engagement with fear, ambiguity, and the return of the past, and it highlights the genre's lasting influence on later transgressive literature.

Before its adoption in literary discourse, the term *Gothic* emerged among Italian Renaissance writers as a label for the medieval artistic and architectural forms that had developed from the 12th century onward. They used the term pejoratively, equating it with barbarism, its etymological source, *Gothicus*, referred to the Goths – Germanic people associated with the fall of the Roman Empire.[20]

The Gothic has historically operated as a literature of excess, often foregrounding the irrational, the emotional, and the transgressive as counterpoints to Enlightenment ideals of reason, morality, and social order. Originating in the late eighteenth century, Gothic fiction dramatised cultural anxieties in the wake of social and political transformations.[21]

The Gothic is closely tied to the sublime, a concept that prioritises terror, awe, and disorientation over rational interpretation. This aesthetic of excess serves a critical function as it enables the exploration of taboo subjects (sexuality, violence, madness, etc.) by cloaking them in metaphor, while simultaneously appealing to the reader. Gothic excesses transgressed the social order and morality, and undermined the boundaries between life and fiction.[22]

The exaggerated traits and inherent ambiguity of Gothic figures were widely recognised as expressions of transgression. The transgressive force of Gothic literature resides not only in its thematic provocations but also in its aesthetic form. The Gothic's deflection from the Enlightenment's ideals of clarity and order to fantastical, emotional intensity and the collapse of rational boundaries undermined the Enlightenment's epistemological authority and its reliance on reason as the sole mode of understanding human experience.[23]

The origin of the genre lies in the publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764. In his preface to the second edition (1765), subtitled *A Gothic Story,* Walpole admitted he aimed to blend ancient and modern romance. In the 18th century, this blend was seen as an

[20] CARLICK, Stephen. *What Is Gothic Literature?* [online]. London: Penguin Books, 22 Oct. 2024 [Accessed 26 November 2025]. Available at: https://www.penguin.co.uk/discover/articles/what-is-gothic-literature.
[21] BOTTING, Fred. *Gothic*. New York: Routledge, 1996. ISBN 04-151-3229-0. p.1.
[22] Ibid., pp. 2–3.
[23] Ibid., p. 4.

oxymoron. The "modern" referred to the rising literary form, defined by science and the values of the bourgeoisie. Yet the aspects of *The Castle of Otranto* that drew on older supernatural traditions, those evoking what readers understood as the "ancient romance," ultimately generated the strongest appeal.[24]

Since then, Gothic literature has come to be understood through its preoccupation with the return of the past, its fascination with transgression and decay, its sustained exploration of fear, and its blurring of the boundaries between the real and the fantastic.[25] The genre intentionally aims to provoke fear and apprehension. It frequently engages with narratives in which women confront dangers posed by oppressive, tyrannical male figures, among other recurring motifs.[26]

Gothic is also inextricably linked to the concept of the Sublime. As defined by Edmund Burke, anything that evokes notions of pain or danger, confronts individuals with terror, engages with terrifying objects, or acts in a way comparable to fear generates the sublime. Such experiences produce the most intense emotional response the mind can register.[27]

As Donna Heiland argues, *"Gothic fiction at its core is about transgressions of all sorts: across national boundaries, social boundaries, sexual boundaries, the boundaries of one's own identity."*[28] Additionally, a genealogical study of transgressive literature reveals a clear historical line connecting foundational Gothic authors such as Mary Shelley and Bram Stoker to modern transgressive authors such as Bret Easton Ellis, Chuck Palahniuk, and others.[29]

Given the genre's reputation of darkness and provocation, readers often mistake transgressive fiction for horror, the Gothic, or erotica. While transgressive works borrow from these modes, texts in horror, Gothic, or erotic traditions do not automatically count as transgressive and vice versa.[30]

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[24] HOGLE, Jerrold E. (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to the Modern Gothic*. Cambridge Companions to.. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. ISBN 978-1-107-67838-5. pp. 3–4.
[25] SPOONER, Catherine a MCEVOY, Emma (ed.). *The Routledge Companion to Gothic*. London: Routledge, 2007. ISBN 02-039-3517-9. p. 1.
[26] HARRIS, Robert, *Elements of the Gothic Novel*. VirtualSalt [online]. 19 Oct. 2020 [Accessed. 26 November 2025]. Available at: https://www.virtualsalt.com/elements-of-the-gothic-novel/.
[27] BURKE, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. [online]. London: Printed for J. Dodsley, 1772 [Accessed 26 November 2025]. Available at: https://archive.org/details/enqphilosophical00burkrich/page/n209/mode/2up. p. 13.
[28] HEILAND, Donna. Quoted in BERG, Jessica. *The Terrors of Everyday Life: The Gothic Novel as a Woman's Conduct Guide to Survival, 1791–1817*. Master's thesis. South Dakota State University, 2022, p. 9.
[29] GÖÇ, Murat. *Transgressing Fiction / Fictionalizing Transgression*. In Making Sense of Popular Culture. Cambridge Scholars, 2017. [online]. [Accessed 25 November 2025]. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338356587_Transgressing_FictionFictionalizing_Transgression. p. 158.
[30] CHRISTIANSON, Jena. *Life Sucks: Classifying Transgressive Fiction*. Master's thesis. South Dakota State University, 2018, [online] [Accessed 27 November 2025]. Available at: https://openprairie.sdstate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=3663&context=etd. p. 4.

While the Gothic genre is distinguished by its fascination with the dangers and thrills of social and moral transgression[31], transgressive fiction radicalises this impulse on a formal level, encouraging the reader to participate as a partner in the act of meaning-making, piecing together the narrative through intertextual signals and culturally specific references. In this sense, the reader navigates its layers rather than receiving a fixed interpretation. This dynamic refuses to treat the narrative as a straightforward depiction of individual or social dilemmas.[32] Many scholars identify transgression as a defining and indispensable feature of the Gothic genre.[33]

In sum, the Gothic's enduring fascination with crossing moral, social, and psychological boundaries provides the foundation for modern transgressive literature. While the Gothic uses excess, the sublime, and the supernatural to examine cultural anxieties, transgressive fiction confronts taboo subjects by demanding active reader engagement.

[31] BOTTING, Fred. *Gothic*. New York: Routledge, 1996. ISBN 04-151-3229-0. p. 5.
[32] GÖÇ, Murat. *Transgressing Fiction / Fictionalizing Transgression*. In Making Sense of Popular Culture. Cambridge Scholars, 2017. [online]. [Accessed November 26 2025]. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338356587_Transgressing_FictionFictionalizing_Transgression. pp. 161–162.
[33] KLEIN, Olivia. *Oh, I was a rebel: The Limits of Transgression in Ottessa Moshfegh's Gothic Fiction.* Master's thesis, Harvard University Division of Continuing Education, May 2023, p. 38.

4 Transgression

The concept of transgression as a key feature of literariness has been recognised since the era of the Russian Formalists, who primarily examined how literary works defied the expectations shaped by established literary traditions. However, as transgression has increasingly become an accepted mode of literary discourse, transgressive literature finds itself at risk of losing its disruptive essence and instead becoming part of the very conventions it seeks to challenge.[34]

Transgression refers to an act of breaking or going beyond established boundaries and limits that define what is acceptable or possible. It represents not a singular event, but rather a repetitive process in which the crossed boundary subsequently restores itself, thereby revealing the fluidity of limits. Transgression offers no definitive liberation from constraints; it merely intensifies the engagement with them. Limits and boundaries maintain no perpetual existence; instead, they are constantly in the process of being created, diminished, and recreated.[35]

In one of the foundational myths of the Judeo-Christian tradition, human existence originates from an act of transgression – Adam and Eve's banishment from the Garden of Eden after disobeying God's command by eating the forbidden fruit. It was not the act of eating from the tree, but the trespassing of the boundary, that led to their exile.[36]

The concept of taboo also reveals the contradictory nature of boundaries. Taboos are rooted in emotional and irrational forces that both define and challenge societal norms.

The English word "taboo" is derived from the Polynesian word "tabu" (with the accent on the first syllable). In the languages of Polynesia, the word means simply "to forbid," "forbidden," and can be applied to any sort of prohibition. A rule of etiquette, an order issued by a chief, an injunction to children not to meddle with the possessions of their elders, may all be expressed by the use of the word "tabu".[37]

While reason would lead to a rejection of actions or behaviours viewed as unacceptable, societal pressures and emotions often justify their presence and continuation. The irrational nature of taboos explains why their very existence may, paradoxically, serve as a justification

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[34] BOOKER, M. Keith. *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection, and the Carnivalesque.* University of Florida Press, 1991. ISBN 0-8130-1065-9. p. 2.
[35] FOUCAULT, Michel. *A Preface to Transgression*. In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 2019. ISBN 9781501741913. pp. 33–34.
[36] BOOKER, M. Keith. *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection, and the Carnivalesque.* University of Florida Press, 1991. ISBN 0-8130-1065-9. pp. 2–3.
[37] RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. Reginald. *Taboo: The Frazer Lecture 1939* [excerpt]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. [Accessed 17 February 2025]. Available at: https://assets.cambridge.org/97811076/95795/excerpt/9781107695795_excerpt.pdf. ISBN 9781107695795. p. 5.

for their presence. They exist to be violated because of the strong emotional reactions they create. These responses help enforce the rules about what is considered unacceptable; however, without those emotional reactions, reason alone would not be enough to develop or maintain the boundaries. Transgression merely opens the way beyond the usually observed limitations, but it does not eliminate them. Without interdiction, transgression would be meaningless, reducing to a mere instinctual or standard behaviour.[38]

Transgression should not be understood as an opposition between two concepts, but rather as a challenge to an existing boundary or norm. It transcends and redefines the idea without seeking to overturn or destroy it.[39]

After attending a writing workshop led by Dennis Cooper in Los Angeles, Michael Silverblatt, an American literary critic, learned that the young contemporary writers are interested in a new style of writing. This style of writing is fundamentally centred on violation – disrupting societal norms, rejecting humanistic ideas, or defying bodily boundaries.[40] Transgressive fiction, a term introduced by Silverblatt in 1993 following the publication of Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), is characterised as a literary genre that deliberately engages with taboo subject matter. Sex, violence, and drug use are all examples of controversial content that aim to provoke and unsettle the reader.[41]

Authors who challenge norms through satire present these highly controversial topics as if they were completely normal. Due to this approach, the personal stance or intent of the author remains unclear, leaving the audience to ,,*face the subject matter of the work directly, rather than through the optic of a system or theory."*[42]

In postmodern literature, transgression serves as a means for writers to set themselves apart, particularly in a time when sociological perspectives view culture and literature on a global scale. Unlike the mainstream postmodernist, the alienated postmodern writer (as Mookerjee calls them) engages in transgression through two primary modes of expression. The first one is sexual transgression, a narrative form exploring the body's interaction with societal belief systems, which manifests in two approaches. One, where desire is mediated through irony and

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[38] BATAILLE, Georges. *Erotism: Death and sensuality*. City Lights Books. 1986. ISBN 0872861902. pp. 63-68.
[39] FOUCAULT, Michel. *A Preface to Transgression*. In *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press. 2019. ISBN 9781501741913. p. 35.
[40] SILVERBLATT, Michael. *Shock Appeal / Who Are These Writers, And Why Do They Want To Hurt Us?: The New Fiction Of Transgression*. *Los Angeles Times*, online, Available at: https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-08-01-bk-21466-story.html.
[41] MOOKERJEE, Robin. *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. ISBN 9781137341082. p.1.
[42] Ibid., p. 2.

linguistic play, and second, where desire is presented in a more explicit and confrontational manner. The second mode of expression is the rogue speaker, a transgressive figure who expresses an obsessive worldview through a highly specific language that reinforces the antihero's primal lust for physicality. This anti-hero, often characterised as a fusion of cultured and raw, pursues a closeness with death as a means of reclaiming a lost vitality that thrives in the absence of ideals.[43]

Transgressive fiction frequently highlights the tendency of consumer culture to emphasise surface-level traits such as pornographic stereotypes or traits tied to ideals of beauty and value. It is this focus on specific qualities that overwhelms the identity of the things or people that own them. Authors of transgressive fiction blend different styles of language, thus disrupting the conventional way of expression. The incorporation of explicit imagery serves to remind us of the raw physical reality. Their works often depict perverse or twisted scenarios, highlighting the conflict between primal human instincts and the societal ideals of progress and convention.[44]

Critics often regard transgressive fiction as a genre trivial or destructive. Jonathan Dee highlights a growing trend in modern fiction, in which the most shocking actions become psychologically more believable when a character commits them without obscure motivations. These characters are often depicted using mass-produced cultural symbols to convey their identity. Through this approach, the author presents them as ordinary people reduced to generic figures defined by commonality rather than individuality. By relying on familiar imagery, these characters seem more reflective of collective cultural norms.[45]

Transgressive fiction, despite its complex themes and narrative techniques, can be seen as anti-intellectual in a certain sense. Through the provocative nature of transgressive works, established norms and conventions are being challenged not only in terms of societal values but also in relation to intellectualism. This type of fiction rejects intellect in favour of the raw, often twisted depiction of human experience. The genre, although it disregards moral reasoning or intellect, does not promote a return to old values or a primal way of life. It critiques societal norms, breaks boundaries, but does not seek a return to conservative ideologies. Due to the

[43] MOOKERJEE, Robin. *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. ISBN 9781137341082. p. 3.
[44] Ibid., pp. 5–6.
[45] DEE, Jonathan. *Readymade Rebellion: The Empty Tropes of Transgressive Fiction*. Harper's Magazine, 1 April. 2005.

nature of this genre, it not only provokes deep reflections on human nature, morality, and society, but also forces readers to confront the harsh reality that intellect often overlooks.[46]

The 20th century witnessed profound sociopolitical upheavals, accompanied by a corresponding collapse of longstanding moral and social certainties. Events such as the deployment of nuclear weapons, the fall of the Soviet Union, and the rapid rise of mass media and consumer culture significantly altered the collective psyche of Western society. In response to these events, postwar literature increasingly turned away from serious attempts to works that were deliberately provocative and experimental, challenging readers to reconsider the role and possibilities of literature in a media-saturated world.[47]

Transgressive fiction gained its popularity by dealing with the reality of everyday life and telling stories of the marginalised or disenfranchised figures, such as gangsters, delinquents, drug users, etc. These characters serve not merely as protagonists but as vehicles for social critique. The appeal of such literature lies in its visceral connection to the raw, unfiltered experiences of its heroes.[48]

This fiction, in particular, draws upon the aesthetics of the avant-garde[49], an artistic and literary movement defined by its commitment to innovation, exploration, and invention.[50] Transgressive fiction, in this context, can be understood as an extension of avant-garde principles, utilising shock, taboo, and narrative fragmentation to confront the reader with uncomfortable truths about contemporary existence.[51]

Ultimately, the idea of transgression appears as a dynamic force at the heart of both literary innovation and cultural critique. Instead of merely crossing boundaries for their own sake, transgressive fiction reveals the constructed nature and contingency of social norms, compelling readers to examine how limits are established and constantly challenged.

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[46] MOOKERJEE, Robin. *Transgressive Fiction: The New Satiric Tradition*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. ISBN 9781137341082. p. 10.
[47] GÖÇ, Murat. *Transgressing Fiction / Fictionalizing Transgression*. In Making Sense of Popular Culture. Cambridge Scholars, 2017. [online]. [Accessed November 26 2025]. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338356587_Transgressing_FictionFictionalizing_Transgression. p. 158.
[48] Ibid., pp. 158–159.
[49] Ibid., p. 158.
[50] CUDDON, J. A.; HABIB, Rafey a BIRCHWOOD, Matthew. *A dictionary of literary terms and literary theory.* 5th ed. Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley, 2013. ISBN 978-1-4443-3327-5. pp. 62–63.
[51] GÖÇ, Murat. *Transgressing Fiction / Fictionalizing Transgression*. In Making Sense of Popular Culture. Cambridge Scholars, 2017. [online]. [Accessed November 26 2025]. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/338356587_Transgressing_FictionFictionalizing_Transgression. p. 158.

5 Beauty, Gender, and the Politics of the Body

The classical era recognised the body as both a focus and instrument of power, one that is controlled, moulded, disciplined, and closely observed.[52]

In the eighteenth century, power shifted towards the precise and individual control of the body, focusing on the regulation of movements and their efficiency rather than on symbolic behaviour. This form of control, known as discipline, involves the continuous supervision of processes of activity rather than just outcomes, achieved through the strict division of time, space, and movement. Unlike slavery or servitude, disciplinary power relies on subtle, systematic subjugation that enhances the body's utility while ensuring obedience. This period marked the emergence of an art form that focused on the human body, in which increased obedience was directly linked to increased effectiveness.[53]

During this period, new mechanisms of bodily regulation emerged, reflecting a shift in the management of bodies. The body was reconceptualised as a system that could be dissected into parts, modified in its functioning, and optimised to operate with greater efficiency. This novel form of control functioned to enhance individuals' utility and enforce their obedience.[54]

The demands surrounding the human body have undergone significant changes in recent years. Previous generations, particularly our mothers, primarily regarded the body as a tool for survival, vital for reproduction and self-preservation. In contrast, contemporary women often perceive their bodies as objects subjected to external evaluation, ones they can modify and alter to align with prevailing societal expectations. Today, maintaining a healthy body is no longer sufficient. Cultural narratives have perpetuated the myth of the ideal body, fostering a sense of shame over perceived imperfections and leading individuals to underestimate their own value.[55]

In contemporary culture and society, beauty operates not merely as an aesthetic ideal but as a normative force that shapes subjectivity, determines social status, and controls one's visibility. Especially in relation to femininity, dominant standards of appearance function as tools that regulate and construct social hierarchies. These ideals, reinforced through media and advertising, promote a narrow perception of attractiveness. Females face pressure to conform to these standards to be recognised as legibly feminine. The archetype of the *femme fatale* —

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[52] FOUCAULT, Michel. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Peregrine Books. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1979. ISBN 978-0-679-75255-4. p. 136.
[53] Ibid., pp. 136–138.
[54] Ibid., pp. 138–139.
[55] FIALOVÁ, Ludmila. *Moderní body image: jak se vyrovnat s kultem štíhlého těla*. Psychologie pro každého. Praha: Grada Publishing, 2006. ISBN 80-247-1350-0. p. 88.

a seductive, flawless, and powerful woman —serves both as a symbol of empowerment and as a model that binds femininity to appearance and control. The pursuit of beauty often becomes an attempt to transcend the social and professional limitations imposed by perceived unattractiveness.

The human body functions as a crucial medium through which cultural norms and social values are expressed and sustained. As Mary Douglas argues, the body operates as a symbolic form, a surface upon which societies inscribe and reinforce their hierarchical structures, moral codes, and ideological assumptions. Beyond its symbolic role, the body has frequently operated as a metaphor for broader political and cultural systems. Representations of the body often parallel how cultures imagine and organise themselves.[56]

Women are often engaged in the pursuit of the ever-shifting ideal of femininity. This continuous process demands constant attention to subtle, often arbitrary changes in fashion and beauty standards. As a result, female bodies become disciplined and compliant, and their energies and capacities are conditioned to external control and regulation in the name of improvement. Dieting, makeup, and dressing are activities that structure much of the daily lives of many women, causing a shift from social engagement to a more inward focus on self-modification. These embodied practices perpetuate a sense of deficiency, inadequacy, and insufficiency. In the most extreme forms, the enactment of femininity may result in profound demoralisation, physical exhaustion, and ultimately, death.[57]

Modern ideas of identity, shaped by consumer capitalism and the dominance of Western mass culture, particularly that of the United States, have contributed to the emergence of a new postmodern perspective and reception of the body. Science and technology play a central role in this shift, presenting the body as increasingly liberated from its natural limitations. What began as efforts to replace damaged parts has since evolved into an industry and ideology fixated on transformation, correction, and continuous improvement.[58]

Women frequently become objects of the male gaze and subjects to objectification within the patriarchal cultural framework. Fashion brands play a significant role in defining societal standards of beauty, leading to the continuous scrutiny of their appearance and the pursuit of unattainable beauty standards. This compels women to adhere to the latest fashion trends and

[56] BORDO, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. 1st ed., University of California Press, 2003. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/jj.8441705. [Accessed 20 May 2025]. p. 152.
[57] Ibid., p. 153.
[58] Ibid., p. 218.

to monitor their body weight closely in an effort to conform to normative yet paradoxically unrealistic beauty ideals.

According to the 2023 survey by the American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery (AAFPRS), facial plastic surgeries in the USA have seen a significant increase, especially among women and younger age groups. The normalisation of aesthetic enhancement, driven by social media, influencer culture, and technological advancements, has led to a surge in procedures among Gen Z.[59]

This fixation on appearance reveals not only a social mechanism of control but also the internalisation of external standards, where the boundary between the authentic self and the constructed identity becomes blurred. The pursuit of beauty becomes less about individual desire and more about conforming to an externally imposed ideal. The tyranny of beauty is not merely concerned with aesthetic appeal; it represents a broader system of control artificially constructed by societal norms and often unattainable expectations.

5.1 Gender

Judith Butler questions the very foundation of how we understand gender, not as a stable identity or innate characteristic but as something constituted through repeated social practices. Rather than assuming that individuals have a gender, she postulates that gender is something a person becomes under social pressure. One is, therefore, not born a woman but instead becomes one. Being a woman is thus the result of cultural norms that dictate how bodies should appear and behave. These norms, however, are neither chosen nor innately determined; instead, they emerge from the continuous social expectations and pressures placed upon individuals.[60]

The understanding of gender and sex is fundamentally shaped by prevailing cultural paradigms, which establish boundaries that define what gender can be and how it can be experienced. These paradigms are often grounded in binary oppositions such as male/female, which demarcate the range of socially recognised gender identities. Feminist theory challenges the notion of gender as an inherent individual attribute, instead framing it as a relational construct conditioned by historical and social contexts. Thus, gender can be regarded as fluid and context-dependent rather than a fixed quality.[61]

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[59]THOMAS, Kugler, ISG Solutions. *American Academy Of Facial PlasticAnd Reconstructive Surgery, Inc*. Online. American Academy of Facial Plastic and Reconstructive Surgery. [Accessed May 12 2025]. Available at: https://www.aafprs.org/.

[60] BUTLER, Judith P. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 10th anniversary ed. Thinking Gender. London: Routledge, 1999. ISBN 04-159-2499-5. pp. 11–13.

[61] Ibid., pp. 13–15.

By the 1980s, historians began to employ the term gender to refer to culturally and socially constructed systems of sexual differentiation that impacted both men and women. A central distinction emerged between sex, understood as the biological, anatomical, and physiological characteristics of individuals, and gender, conceived as a historically contingent, culturally shaped, and often unstable category. Some scholars questioned the validity of separating gender from biological sex, proposing the two may be so interrelated that distinguishing between them may be meaningless.[62]

These doubts stemmed from four key principles. First, the recognition of intersex individuals, whose ambiguous genitalia at birth challenged traditional binary classifications and highlighted the complexity of sex indicators beyond the physical. Second, anthropological and ethnographic findings demonstrated that some cultures recognise third and even fourth genders, suggesting that gender identity can be fluid and change throughout a person's lifetime. Third, the existence of transgender and transsexual individuals further complicates the binary framework, as their self-identification contradicts their anatomical, chromosomal, and hormonal patterns. Lastly, the heterogeneity of women's experiences is shaped by factors such as class, race, religion, and nationality, which have varied across history. This prompted reflection on the category of "woman", especially when considering that in the 19th century, womanhood was defined by domestic passivity. Therefore, black women labouring in fields alongside men did not fit this classification, and, by those standards, could not be classified as "women" at all.[63]

Thus, historians have concluded that gender has historically functioned as a performative construct, realised through behaviour rather than being rooted in biology. Individuals across various historical periods did not merely possess a gender but actively performed it, either reinforcing or resisting culturally prescribed norms.[64]

As Kimbrell states: *"Many historians have seen gender definitions as a social mirror as each culture re-creates sexual identities in its own image."*[65] Modern culture appears to be no exception. Over the past several generations, traditional gender prototypes of masculinity and femininity have been destabilised, giving way to reconfigured ideals that align more closely with the demands of the contemporary era.[66]

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[62] WIESNER, Merry E. *Gender in History: Global Perspectives*. 2nd ed. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011. ISBN 978-1-4051-8995-8. pp. 2–3.
[63] Ibid., pp. 3–5.
[64] Ibid., p. 5.
[65] KIMBRELL, Andrew. *The Masculine Mystique: The Politics of Masculinity*. New York: Ballantine Books, c1995. ISBN 03-453-8658-2. p. 15.
[66] Ibid., p. 16.

The mass media filled the void left by the absence of strong role models in many families, becoming a powerful force in shaping gender ideals. In the absence of a direct and relatable male family figure, mediated portrayals of masculinity and femininity began to shape how individuals understood, perceived, and performed gender. Over time, these portrayals grew increasingly stereotypical, relying on simplified and often exaggerated traits that solidified conventional notions of masculinity and femininity. Despite their nature, such representations have been widely accepted and normalised, contributing to the internalisation of narrow gender expectations across contemporary culture.[67]

Masculine ideals traditionally associated with generosity, husbandry, and honour have significantly diminished in contemporary culture. These qualities have been replaced mainly by traits such as self-interest, greed, pursuit of power, manipulation, and sexual promiscuity. Masculine sexuality, once linked to responsibility and protection, is now often associated with aggression and violence.[68]

As masculinity is increasingly filtered through mass media and market-driven narratives, it becomes more about dominance, sexual abundance, and emotional inaccessibility. The rise of social media has opened a gateway for a new paradigm of masculinity to emerge, one referred to as toxic masculinity.

These characteristics are not incidental but are deeply embedded within patriarchal structures that have historically shaped societal conceptions of masculinity. By the term patriarchy, we understand *"a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominant, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence."*[69]

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[67] KIMBRELL, Andrew. *The Masculine Mystique: The Politics of Masculinity*. New York: Ballantine Books, c1995. ISBN 03-453-8658-2. pp. 16–18.
[68] Ibid., pp. 18–19.
[69] HOOKS, Bell. *The will to change: men, masculinity, and love*. New York: Washington Square Press, (c)2004. ISBN 978-0-7434-5608-1. p. 38.

6 Existential thought

The presence of existential thought within transgressive fiction reveals the philosophical depth of its provocative and often violent nature. While this type of fiction is primarily known for its challenge of societal norms and its vivid depiction of taboo content and behaviours, it also engages deeply with questions central to existential philosophy. Characters search for meaning in an indifferent world, where their identities are fragmented, and their sense of individuality is alienated by modern society. In the works of both Chuck Palahniuk and Bret Easton Ellis, these existential concerns are embodied in characters who resist, collapse under, or attempt to reconstruct the emptiness that surrounds them. Both authors use dark humour and satire to examine the contradictions of American society and to explore the collapse of authenticity in the postmodern world. Humour thus serves as a device that reveals the hollowness of contemporary cultural and societal values. These literary techniques function as a means of exposing the dissonance between societal ideals and the existential crises faced by individuals who, despite (to varying degrees) embodying these ideals, experience disillusionment and identity fragmentation.

Existential fiction is the result of two humanistic pursuits: existential philosophy and the literary creation of fictional narratives, both of which have long addressed fundamental questions of human existence. While existential thought is essentially a modern development, its core concerns have been present throughout history in various forms. As a framework for confronting the human condition, existential thought shapes the way literature explores themes of alienation, identity, and moral ambiguity.[70]

To discuss existentialism, one must acknowledge its foremost representative, the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. In his essay *"Existentialism is a Humanism" (1946)*, Sartre distinguishes between two forms of existentialism: Christian existentialism and atheistic existentialism, the latter of which encompasses his own philosophy. Sartre posits that human beings differ from objects in that their existence precedes their essence. He illustrates this claim with a straightforward example. Any object crafted by a human being is created with a predefined purpose, its appearance and function known to the creator beforehand. In such instances, the object's essence precedes its existence.[71]

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[70] BROSMAN, C. Savage. *Literary Topics: Existential Fiction*. Detroit: Gale Group, 2000. ISBN 978-0787651312. p. 1.
[71] PETŘÍČEK, Miroslav. *Úvod do současné filosofie*. Praha: Herrmann, 1997. ISBN 978-80-8003-305-7. pp. 100–102.

The process of object creation meticulously mirrors the traditional concept of Creation, where the human being is the object brought into existence by God. Therefore, the relationship between essence and existence remains identical for everything within the Christian worldview – essence precedes existence. Sartre, however, believes our world operates without God, building upon Nietzsche's famous declaration, "God is dead." Based on this atheistic hypothesis, there must be at least one being in a godless universe whose existence can be established before its essence, human, or, as Heidegger says, "Dasein".[72]

Human beings, therefore, exist prior to their essence, and they forge this very essence over the course of their own existence. They are, in other words, firstly nothing and become something only later. Their becoming is entirely dependent on themselves. This inherent lack of a predetermined human essence is a direct consequence of the claim that "God is dead," which eliminates any possibility of a being capable of conceiving such an essence a priori. Consequently, as the conceiver of its own being, humanity becomes precisely what it will itself to be, thereby assuming full responsibility for its becoming.[73]

While Heidegger's introduction of Dasein (human existence characterised by its inherent "being-in-the-world" and defined by its active engagement within practical and social contexts) provided a starting point for existential thought by focusing directly on specific human experiences, Sartre saw a crucial limitation in his approach.[74] Sartre criticised Heidegger's philosophy, as he believed that the human subject does not restrict itself to mere "being-in-the-world", which projects possibilities; rather, it is a conscious "being-for-itself".[75]

This extends to the notion of identity. The principle of identity can be considered synthetic, not merely because its range is limited to a defined realm of being, but primarily because it condenses an infinite density. In this view, identity functions as an ideal of one and comes into being solely through human reality.[76]

6.1 Identity Crisis

In *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters*, Chuck Palahniuk deconstructs identity as a fragile, fluid construct shaped by societal expectations, personal trauma, and pressure. The narrator of *Fight Club* struggles with a fragmented sense of identity, perceiving himself as only a shell of the

[72] PETŘÍČEK, Miroslav. *Úvod do současné filosofie*. Praha: Herrmann, 1997. ISBN 978-80-8003-305-7. p. 102
[73] Ibid, pp. 102–103.
[74] SARTRE, Jean-Paul. *Bytí a nicota: pokus o fenomenologickou ontologii*. Knihovna novověké tradice a současnosti. Praha: Oikoymenh, 2006. ISBN 80-729-8097-1. p. 117.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid., p. 118.

person he aspires to be. This internal struggle ultimately results in him creating his alter ego, Tyler Durden, who embodies everything the narrator believes he lacks – masculinity, freedom, sexual confidence, etc. Becoming Tyler Durden allows the narrator to reject the constraints of consumer culture and manifest the formerly suppressed desires and ideologies. Similarly, *Invisible Monsters* follows a protagonist who struggles with her past identity and the construction of a new one. Characters in Palahniuk's work often attempt to find meaning in a world that seems devoid of meaning and identity, where individuality is constantly eroded by conformity and consumerism, revealing that in such a world, identity may not even be attainable.

Identity is primarily constructed through social processes, whereby society plays a prominent role in ascribing identity to individuals. This process begins at birth and continues throughout childhood and into adulthood. While society assigns a particular identity to individuals, it is the individuals themselves who engage in the process of modifying, accepting, and internalising that identity. However, when the identity is not internalised, a conflict between the objective and subjective identities arises. The certainty and stability of one's identity are derived from constant definition and recognition of the identity made by society. External social conditions and constraints are therefore significant factors in shaping and maintaining this stability.[77]

Human identity is not solely shaped by society, as it is also constrained by inherent physiological limitations, such as mortality and basic human needs, which are universal and unchangeable. Additionally, identity is constructed within specific contexts and environments, influenced by factors like available resources and social conditions.[78]

"It is probably no mere historical accident that the word person, in its first meaning, is a mask. It is rather a recognition of the fact that everyone is always and everywhere, more or less consciously, playing a role. […] It is in these roles that we know each other; it is in these roles that we know ourselves."[79] According to this view, the mask we wear is not merely a façade, but a constructed role — the idealised self we strive to embody. Over time, this performed identity becomes deeply ingrained in our personality, making it our "truer" self in the way

[77] BERGER, Peter, L. *Modern Identity: Crisis and Continuity* in: Wilton S. Dillon (ed.) *The Cultural Drama: Modern Identities and Social Ferment*, Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1974, pp. 162–164.
[78] Ibid. pp. 165–167
[79] PARK, Robert, Ezra, *Race and Culture* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1950), p. 249. in: GOFFMAN, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Penguin. London: Penguin Books, 1990. ISBN 01-401-3571-5. p. 30.

others recognise us. In effect, the mask is both a personal aspiration and a social script that informs our every interaction.[80]

The mask represents the standards, whether related to beauty, behaviour, or social status, that society values and imposes upon its members. Goffman elaborates on this by describing the "front", which is the visible structure of our performance.[81] This "front" includes "setting" and "personal front", sometimes conveniently divided into "appearance and "manner", where "appearance" *"may be taken to refer to those stimuli which function at the time to tell us of the performer's social statuses."*[82] And "manner" *"may be taken to refer to those stimuli which function at the time to warn us of the interaction role the performer will expect to play in the oncoming situation."*[83] By consciously or unconsciously managing these elements, we signal to others that we meet, or are striving to meet, the norms set for us.[84]

7 Destruction of Self

The disintegration of the individual is not merely a thematic outcome in transgressive fiction, but a process driven by specific psychological and sociological factors. This chapter investigates the *"Destruction of Self"* by dissecting three interrelated components that disrupt the boundaries of identity: aggression, narcissism, and consumer culture.

The chapter begins by exploring aggression and violence, viewing them through both instinctivist and environmentalist lenses to understand how suppressed tensions in modern society manifest as destructive impulses.

Following this, the chapter addresses narcissism as a pathological condition arising from the decay of stable authority and the rise of a visual. Media-driven culture. It explores how the modern subject, driven by a fragile internal balance, seeks external validation to confront feelings of emptiness and inferiority.

Finally, the chapter turns to consumer culture, analysing it as an ideological framework that conditions worldview and identity. By utilising the concepts of *"conspicuous consumption"* and *"commodity fetishism",* the section demonstrates that the pursuit of material goods fails to

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[80] PARK, Robert, Ezra, *Race and Culture* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1950), p. 250. in: GOFFMAN, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Penguin. London: Penguin Books, 1990. ISBN 01-401-3571-5. p. 30.
[81] GOFFMAN, Erving. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Penguin. London: Penguin Books, 1990. ISBN 01-401-3571-5. p. 32.
[82] Ibid., p. 34.
[83] Ibid., p. 35.
[84] Ibid.

satisfy internal psychological needs, leading to a commodified existence in which the self is reduced to an object within the market.

7.1 Aggression and Violence

Aggression is most commonly defined as a psychological force, emotional and motivational by nature, directed toward harming the environment, objects, other individuals, or oneself. From a psychological perspective, aggression is typically understood as an innate trait or a reactive readiness within human nature. As such, it is an ethically natural and functional mechanism that contributes to self-preservation, adaptation, assertiveness, and defence.[85]

Aggressive behaviour is often accompanied by intense emotional states such as anger or rage, as well as imagery related to revenge, harm, humiliation, or lethal violence. Ethologist Konrad Lorenz conceptualised aggression as an instinctual drive, a form of internally accumulating tension that continually seeks release. In modern societies, natural opportunities for releasing such tension are often limited or suppressed. Consequently, individuals generate artificial conflict to satisfy these built-up impulses. Paradoxically, the more a society suppresses outward expressions of violence, the more likely these expressions are to emerge. When a culture imposes overly idealistic norms regarding peace and violence, it may inadvertently encourage covert transgressions, undermining the very ethical framework it seeks to promote.[86]

Instinctivism posits that human aggression, whether displayed in warfare, criminal activities, personal conflicts, or other manifestations of violent and cruel behaviour, stems from an instinctive impulse that is biologically rooted in people and awaits the right time to be expressed.[87] Aggression is not solely learned, nor are societal factors the sole determinants of it; it is an inherent part of human nature. Although societal norms may influence the expression of aggression, the instinct itself exists independently of any external factors. On the other hand, behaviourism explores how a person behaves and the social conditioning responsible for that behaviour, while disregarding subjective forces.[88]

The instinctivist concept was overshadowed by Freud's theory, which redefined the understanding of human instincts by dividing them into two primary categories: sexual instincts and the instinct for self-preservation. This change in perspective provided a more structured

[85] PONĚŠICKÝ, Jan. *Agrese, násilí a psychologie moci*. Praha: Triton, 2005. ISBN 80-725-4593-0. p. 22.
[86] Ibid. pp. 22–23.
[87] FROMM, Erich. *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973. ISBN 0-03-007596-3. p. 2.
[88] Ibid., p. 3.

approach to human motivation and significantly contributed to the development of the psychoanalytic theory.[89]

Sigmund Freud sought the biological roots of aggression within the framework of his psychoanalytic theory. He posited that, as there exists a fundamental drive toward growth and preservation, there must also exist a counterbalancing force aimed at decay and decline, termed Eros and Thanatos, life instinct and death instinct. Thanatos, the opposing force to Eros, reflects a tendency toward self-destruction. Freud interpreted the persistent and often irresolvable nature of human conflict as evidence of this innate duality. This led him to the hypothesis that aggression is not merely a reactive or situational phenomenon, but rather a biologically grounded impulse.[90]

Freud conceptualised the death drive as a latent yet fundamental force, operating silently within living beings with the ultimate aim of their destruction. In his later development of the theory, he posited that a portion of this drive is redirected outward, manifesting as aggression and destruction towards others or external objects. In this view, the death drive paradoxically serves Eros by preserving the self through the destruction of something else.[91]

The opposing perspective to Instinctivism is Environmentalism, which asserts that human behaviour is shaped exclusively by external influences, particularly social and cultural factors, rather than innate predispositions. According to this theory, aggression and violent tendencies arise from Environmental conditions. The roots of this theory can be traced back to the Enlightenment, where philosophers proposed that humans are inherently good but are corrupted by a flawed environment. According to this perspective, a good society creates good men, while a corrupt society produces morally flawed individuals.[92]

The behaviourist approach holds great importance in the examination of aggression, as it is the predominant approach favoured by many American researchers in this field. Behaviourism says that aggression, like all behaviours, is learned through experiences that aim to maximise personal benefit. However, it fails to consider that behaviour cannot be fully understood in isolation from the individual who performs it. The behaviourist explanation of deviant

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[89] FROMM, Erich. *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973. ISBN 0-03-007596-3. p. 14.
[90] PONĚŠICKÝ, Jan. *Agrese, násilí a psychologie moci*. Praha: Triton, 2005. ISBN 80-725-4593-0. pp. 24–25.
[91] FREUD, Sigmund. *Nespokojenost v kultuře*. Spektrum. Praha: Hynek, 1998. ISBN 80-862-0213-5. pp. 114–117.
[92] FROMM, Erich. *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973. ISBN 0-03-007596-3. p. 33.

behaviour fails to consider the deeper motivations of the person, completely disregarding the interplay of conscious and unconscious factors that manifest in the violent act.[93]

Human aggression can be categorised into two types. The first, shared with animals, is a phylogenetically programmed impulse to attack (or to flee) when survival is endangered. Hence, it serves a purpose within humans, ensuring their survival. The second type is unique to humans as it is largely absent in most mammals. It lacks the survival function and is driven merely by a desire for pleasure, manifesting itself as cruelty or unnecessary violence. Both psychological and social factors influence these manifestations. The destructive aggression makes humankind distinct from other mammals in their capacity to kill and harm members of their own species and derive satisfaction from it. This highlights the psychological needs and harmful passions of human character.[94]

As German neurobiologist Joachim Bauer states: *"If aggression keeps its communicative function of attracting attention, it is constructive. Once it has lost this function, it becomes destructive and the trigger for violent cycles."*[95]

Psychoanalysis blends Instinctivism and Environmentalism, attributing aggression to both innate impulses and early childhood influences. The importance of psychoanalysis lies in its approach to uncovering underlying motives rather than the particular theories it proposes.[96] Freud suggested that it is crucial to explore the fundamental forces that provoke homicidal urges in individuals who are otherwise peaceful and morally conscientious, therefore emphasising the role of the unconscious mind and of the forces that suppress these undesirable urges.[97]

The concept of character significantly influences the shaping of behaviour, as traits such as love or aggression drive actions and provide a sense of satisfaction. This behaviour is, however, not solely determined by character, but is also constrained by the "reality principle", introduced by Freud, which demands modification of behaviour for self-preservation. Men balance their character-driven impulses with the need to avoid harmful consequences. The extent to which

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[93] FROMM, Erich. *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973. ISBN 0-03-007596-3. pp. 42–45.
[94] Ibid., pp. 4–5.
[95] BAUER, Joachim. (2011). *Schmerzgrenze Vom Ursprung alltäglicher und globaler Gewalt*. München: Karl Blessing Verlag in: KİERDORF, Sabine. (2020). *"Show me your horse and I will tell you who you are" of natural reflexes and culturally controlled communication*. Journal for the Interdisciplinary Art and Education, 1(1), 37–54. https://doi.org/10.29228/jiae.4. p. 43.
[96] FROMM, Erich. *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973. ISBN 0-03-007596-3. pp. 77–79.
[97] Ibid., p. 79.

self-preservation guides the action varies. Individuals such as murderers disregard the interest of self-preservation, while, on the other hand, opportunists prioritise personal gain.[98]

Changes also influence the manifestation of repressed desires in a situational context. When the situation changes, previously repressed desire may be expressed through behaviour. The desire is repressed due to its perceived social or moral inappropriateness; however, it does not disappear when denied. It remains unconscious, often influencing behaviour in subtle or indirect ways.[99]

One of the defining characteristics of the human being is the capacity for self-awareness, reason, and imagination. These abilities create the need for a coherent understanding of the world and of one's place within it. To function purposefully, individuals rely on a mental framework that structures both their natural and social environments. Without such a framework, a person becomes psychologically disoriented and unable to act with consistency. Significantly, this framework does not necessarily depend on the empirical accuracy of its content. Its core function is to provide a sense of meaning and stability. Even when it is flawed or incomplete, it continues to fulfil its essential psychological role.[100]

The deep, overwhelming need for such a framework helps explain why individuals often embrace irrational or extreme systems that seem absurd to those who are not under the influence of those systems. Such systems offer a sense of order and certainty in a chaotic world. The more an ideology promises clarity and meaning, the more attractive it becomes. The framework alone, however, is not sufficient. Humans also require a goal, an object of devotion.[101]

Violence is often linked to male temperament. This association appears well-founded when viewed through the lens of crime statistics, which show that men are more likely to engage in violent behaviour. In Western societies, especially, this pattern has shaped the broader perception of men as inherently more aggressive. Gender thus appears to be a critical factor, illustrated by the fact that, in the United States, men are nearly eight times more likely than women to commit violent crimes.[102]

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[98] FROMM, Erich. *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973. ISBN 0-03-007596-3. pp. 81–82.
[99] Ibid., p. 82.
[100] Ibid., p. 230.
[101] FROMM, Erich. *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973. ISBN 0-03-007596-3. p. 231
[102] WRANGHAM, Richard W. and PETERSON, Dale. *Demonic males: apes and the origins of human violence*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, c1996. ISBN 03-956-9001-3. Available at: https://www.gbv.de/dms/hbz/toc/ht008809585.pdf. pp. 108–113.

7.2 Narcissism

Selfishness has been a persistent characteristic throughout history, with people prioritising their own interests over those of others. The emergence of character disorders as a dominant category of psychiatric pathology, alongside shifts in personality structures, is a result of specific societal and cultural transformations.[103]

Society shapes individuals by transferring its values, beliefs, and ways of understanding and interpreting the world. According to Durkheim, personality develops through socialisation, which can occur within the family, through education, or in other social institutions. In clinical literature, narcissism is not merely a term for self-absorption but a condition where rejected love turns inward as self-hatred.[104]

The most common psychological disorders in any era often reflect the dominant social and cultural conditions of that period. The increasing prevalence of narcissistic traits corresponds with broader structural shifts in late capitalist society, including the decay of stable authority, the rise of visual and media-driven culture, consumerism, and the prioritisation of self-presentation within corporate and bureaucratic spheres. In such environments, personal advancement is frequently determined by one's capacity to project a desirable public image. This cultural shift has profound implications in inducing narcissistic tendencies and emotional alienation.[105]

The concept of narcissism, initially introduced by Paul Näcke in 1899, described a self-directed sexual investment where an individual treats their own body as an object of desire. Although initially seen as a perversion, psychoanalytic theory later recognised narcissistic traits in a wide range of psychological conditions, suggesting that narcissism plays a broader role in human sexual and emotional development.[106]

Winfrid Trimborn distinguishes three relational functions of narcissism: firstly, violence as an expression of the need for contact, secondly, the pursuit of control within a relationship, and thirdly, the desire to possess the other person. Narcissistic frustration is experienced as an unbearable sense of inferiority, accompanied by shame stemming from the perceived loss of status and pride. In narcissistic individuals, self-esteem is maintained by a fragile internal balance.

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[103] LASCH, Christopher. The culture of narcissism: American life in an age of diminishing expectations. Reissued with a new Introduction 2018. New York, [2018]. ISBN 978-0-393-35617-5. pp. 61–62.
[104] Ibid. pp. 63–64.
[105] Ibid. pp. 69–76.
[106] FREUD, Sigmund. (1914). *On Narcissism. The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud,* Volume XIV (1914–1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works, 67–102. p. 73.

The regulation of this narcissistic equilibrium does not always succeed, especially when considering the socially prescribed paths toward self-worth, such as wealth, appearance, power, influence, and social prestige.[107]

Aggression, when employed as a means of restoring narcissistic balance, becomes pathologically charged when anxiety over threatened self-worth narrows the individual's focus solely to themselves, aiming only at the elimination of feelings of inferiority. This mobilises power directed at removing the source of destabilisation, or regaining control over it, at any cost. Importantly, narcissism and aggression are not inherently unethical; it is only when the frustrated need for self-validation arises that they transform into aggression and a destructive desire for dominance.[108]

Individuals diagnosed with narcissistic personality disorder often exhibit a grandiose sense of self-importance; however, this inflated self-image is typically built on a deep understanding of vulnerability. They are susceptible to any stimuli that may threaten their self-esteem and tend to respond with intense emotional reactions. When faced with failure, they struggle to respond constructively. The underlying motives of such individuals are closely linked to psychological difficulties, such as chronic feelings of emptiness, profound loneliness, and a marked lack of empathy. This emotional deficit manifests as an inability to form close relationships and a fundamental inability to experience love.[109]

Contemporary mass media, through their glorification of celebrity culture and the manufactured allure surrounding it, have transformed American society into one that is primarily composed of admirers. By offering an illusion of proximity to fame and prestige, the media reinforce and amplify narcissistic aspirations. In consumer-driven societies, individuals are increasingly encouraged to externalise their self-worth through recognition. To be recognised is to matter and to be admired. Through this pursuit of admiration, individuals attempt to fill the void within, escape the fear of insignificance, and ultimately achieve a sense of validation.

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[107] PONĚŠICKÝ, Jan. *Agrese, násilí a psychologie moci*. Praha: Triton, 2005. ISBN 80-725-4593-0, p. 71.
[108] Ibid. pp. 71–72.
[109] PRAŠKO, Ján a kol. *Poruchy osobnosti*. Praha: Portál, 2009. ISBN 9788073675585. p. 321.

7.3 Consumer Culture

Consumption represents a fundamental and transhistorical human activity involving the utilisation of goods and services to fulfil needs. However, modern consumerism is understood as a sociological concept. Historically, insufficient attention has been directed towards the motivations behind consumption. Our consumption behaviours communicate signals to ourselves and others regarding our identity and our relationship with, or distinction from, other individuals.[110]

Consumerism is best understood as a powerful ideology.[111] The term carries a dual meaning. In economics, this term refers to policies that prioritise consumption and assert that consumer choice should be the primary determinant of manufacturing and economic organisation.[112] Sociologically, consumerism operates as an ideological framework that conditions our worldview, values, relationships, and identities. This idea further proposes that human happiness, identity, and fulfilment are best achieved through the acquisition and consumption of goods and services.[113]

Consumer society denotes the social arrangement or structural configuration that arises from this ideology.[114] In its most basic formulation, Baudrillard understands consumer society as a formation in which the organisation of social life centres on the consumption and exhibition of commodities, through which individuals attain prestige, construct identity, and negotiate their social status.[115] In such a structure, as sociologist Zygmunt Bauman articulated, consumption becomes the *"principle propelling force that coordinates systematic reproduction, social integration, social stratification, and the very formation of individual identity.*[116]

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[110] ROACH, B.; GOODWIN, N.; NELSON, J. *Consumption and the Consumer Society*. Global Development and Environment Institute, Tufts University [online]. 2019 [Accessed 12 November 2025]. Available at: https://www.bu.edu/eci/files/2019/10/Consumption_and_Consumer_Society.pdf. p. 5.
[111] COLE, N. L. *What Does Consumerism Mean?* ThoughtCo [online]. 12 May 2025 [Accessed 13 November 2025]. Available at: https://www.thoughtco.com/consumerism-definition-3026119.
[112] WIKIPEDIA. *Consumerism*. Wikipedia [online]. [Accessed 13 November 2025]. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consumerism.
[113] COLE, N. L. *What Does Consumerism Mean?* ThoughtCo [online]. 12 May 2025 [Accessed 12 November 2025]. Available at: https://www.thoughtco.com/consumerism-definition-3026119.
[114] ROACH, B.; GOODWIN, N.; NELSON, J. *Consumption and the Consumer Society*. Global Development and Environment Institute, Tufts University [online]. 2019 [Accessed 12 November 2025]. Available at: https://www.bu.edu/eci/files/2019/10/Consumption_and_Consumer_Society.pdf. p. 13.
[115] FIRAT, Aytekin; KUTUCUOĞLU, Kemal Y.; ARIKAN SALTIK, Işıl; TUNÇEL, Özgür. *Consumption, Consumer Culture and Consumer Society*. Journal of Community Positive Practices [online]. XIII(1), 2013. ISSN 1582-8344. [Accessed 13 November 2025]. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320929948. p. 194.
[116] BAUMAN, Zygmunt. *Consuming Life.* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008, in: COLE, N. L. *What Does Consumerism Mean?* ThoughtCo [online]. 12 May 2025 [Accessed 13 November 2025]. Available at: https://www.thoughtco.com/consumerism-definition-3026119.

While consumption as a basic necessity has always existed, the origins of a recognisably modern consumer culture can be traced to 18th-century England. Historians Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb documented this *consumer revolution*, which they termed *"The commercialization of 18th-century England"*. This era witnessed a gradual release of acquisitive impulses, stimulated by the promotion of new fashions and the power of envy. For the first time, the quest for opulence and display began to extend beyond the confines of the wealthiest.[117]

The Industrial Revolution dramatically accelerated this trend by solving the problem of supply.[118] Mass production made a wider variety of goods available, while new factors such as urbanisation and the expansion of the railroad changed the perception and acquisition of consumer goods.[119] This era also introduced a crucial cultural alteration – the mass display of goods. This innovation brought tempting products into daily public view, fostering fashion and envy.[120] This period marked the shift to mass-produced, advertised brands, laying the groundwork for a new American consumer culture.[121]

While the 19th century focused on solving supply issues, the 1920s in America developed an ideology to manage demand. This change did not mark a spontaneous cultural shift. Instead, it was a direct response to concerns about overproduction.[122] Former president of the United Fruit Company, Victor Cutter, articulated this concern in the late 1920s, stating that the greatest economic problem of the era was the lack of *"consuming power"* in relation to the power of production.[123] As Edward Bernays stated in his classic 1928 book *Propaganda*: *"Mass production is profitable only if its rhythm can be maintained."*[124]

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[117] HIGGS, Kerryn. *A Brief History of Consumer Culture*. The MIT Press Reader [online]. 11 Jan. 2021 [Accessed 12 November 2025]. Available at: https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/a-brief-history-of-consumer-culture/.
[118] WIKIPEDIA. *Consumerism*. Wikipedia [online]. [Accessed 13 November 2025]. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consumerism.
[119] CORBETT, P. Scott; JANSSEN, Volker; LUND, John M.; PFANNESTIEL, Todd; VICKERY, Paul; WASKIEWICZ, Sylvie. *A New American Consumer Culture*. US History II (OS Collection) [online]. [Accessed 12 November 2025]. Available at: https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-ushistory2os2xmaster/chapter/a-new-american-consumer-culture/.
[120] HIGGS, Kerryn. *A Brief History of Consumer Culture*. The MIT Press Reader [online]. 11 Jan. 2021 [Accessed 12 November 2025]. Available at: https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/a-brief-history-of-consumer-culture/.
[121] CORBETT, P. Scott; JANSSEN, Volker; LUND, John M.; PFANNESTIEL, Todd; VICKERY, Paul; WASKIEWICZ, Sylvie. *A New American Consumer Culture*. US History II (OS Collection) [online]. [Accessed 12 November 2025]. Available at: https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-ushistory2os2xmaster/chapter/a-new-american-consumer-culture/.
[122] HIGGS, Kerryn. *A Brief History of Consumer Culture*. The MIT Press Reader [online]. 11 Jan. 2021 [Accessed 12 November 2025]. Available at: https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/a-brief-history-of-consumer-culture/.
[123] Ibid.
[124] Ibid.

The solution to overproduction became the creation of new needs. This approach came to be known as *"the new economic gospel of consumption."* It depended on continually rising expectations, and as President Hoover's committee proclaimed in 1929, on cultivating an *"almost insatiable appetite for goods and services."*[125] This novel expansion of consumerism collapsed with the Great Depression, and it was only after almost 20 years that mass consumption resumed any role in economic life.[126]

Mass consumption renewed in the post-Second World War decades and continued into the 1970s, a period often referred to as the *Golden Age of Capitalism.*[127] This era was driven by a combination of factors, including rising middle-class incomes, new production technologies such as automation, and, crucially, the widespread adoption of consumer credit.[128] Postwar economic growth enabled nearly everyone to buy goods previously unaffordable.[129] Throughout the 20th century, capitalism sustained its momentum by transforming individuals into consumers, encouraged to crave its ever-expanding array of enticing products.[130]

7.3.1 Critical Theories of Consumption

In his 1899 work *The Theory of the Leisure Class,* Thorstein Veblen introduced the concept of *conspicuous consumption.*[131] Veblen defined this as the practice of acquiring and displaying one's wealth to demonstrate *"pecuniary strength"*[132] and thereby gain social status and honour.

The key mechanism of this practice is what Veblen called *"conspicuous waste".*[133] He claimed that the goods consumed derive their value precisely from their wasteful nature and their lack of any practical function.[134] This logic demonstrates the *"Veblen Effect"*, a market anomaly, where a higher price, when associated with status, generates greater demand among

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[125] HIGGS, Kerryn. *A Brief History of Consumer Culture*. The MIT Press Reader [online]. 11 Jan. 2021 [Accessed 12 November 2025]. Available at: https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/a-brief-history-of-consumer-culture/.
[126] Ibid.
[127] COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS. *How Did Mass Production and Mass Consumption Take Off After World War II?* [online]. 14 Feb. 2023 [Accessed 11 November 2025]. Available at: https://education.cfr.org/learn/reading/how-did-mass-production-and-mass-consumption-take-after-world-war-ii.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Ibid.
[130] HIGGS, Kerryn. *A Brief History of Consumer Culture*. The MIT Press Reader [online]. 11 Jan. 2021 [Accessed 12 November 2025]. Available at: https://thereader.mitpress.mit.edu/a-brief-history-of-consumer-culture/.
[131] BRITANNICA, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. *Conspicuous consumption*. Encyclopaedia Britannica [online]. [Accessed 14 November 2025]. Available from: https://www.britannica.com/money/conspicuous-consumption.
[132] CORPORATE FINANCE INSTITUTE (CFI). *Conspicuous Consumption* – Definition, Reason, Influence. [online]. [Accessed 13 November 2025]. Available at: https://corporatefinanceinstitute.com/resources/economics/conspicuous-consumption/.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Ibid.

consumers, contradicting conventional economic expectations.[135] Veblen thus established modern consumption as a deeply social and irrational activity, driven by the pursuit of status.

Karl Marx's concept of *"commodity fetishism"* provides a critique of the production side. The buyer forms a relationship not with the producer, but with the product itself. Marx argued that in a capitalist society, the product's exchange-value (which relates to the worth of a product in comparison to other similar goods)[136] overshadows its use-value. This cultivates a relationship where marketing and advertising strongly influence how consumers perceive products. Consequently, the imagined advantages and cultural significance attached to goods often detach from their real attributes and the labour that created them.[137]

Several misconceptions surround the idea of *commodity fetishism*, the most common being the belief that it represents a kind of *false consciousness* that overtakes individuals whenever they participate in the marketplace: an illusion in which they idealise the goods they consume, or the products they hope to acquire. In this interpretation, *commodity fetishism* is treated as an emotional or even libidinal attachment to products.[138]

Marx, however, rejects the idea of *commodity fetishism* as a purely subjective illusion or form of *false consciousness*. Instead, he locates the fetish in the external world itself, treating it as an objective feature embedded in the social relations that underpin capitalist commodity production.[139] In this framework, *"the process of production has the mastery over man, instead of being controlled by him."*[140]

In the mid-20th century, Frankfurt School theorists Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno developed the concept of the *"culture industry"*.[141] They argued that culture itself had become industrialised and commercialised, and that *"culture today is inflecting everything with*

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[135] EBSCO. *Veblen's Theory of Conspicuous Consumption*. Research Starters – Political Science [online]. 2021 [Accessed 13 November 2025]. Available at: https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/political-science/veblens-theory-conspicuous-consumption.
[136] EBSCO. *Commodity Fetishism*. Research Starters – Economics [online]. 2024 [Accessed 13 November 2025]. Available at: https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/economics/commodity-fetishism.
[137] Ibid.
[138] GARRIDO, Carlos. *What Is the Fetishism of Commodities?* [online]. 31 May 2022 [Accessed 13 November 2025]. Available at: https://www.hamptonthink.org/read/what-is-the-fetishism-of-commodities.
[139] Ibid.
[140] MARX, Karl. *Some Aspects of the Notion of Commodity Fetishism*. In: *Capital*, Volume I [online]. Chapter 5. Transcribed in Pilling, Geoff. Marx's Capital, Philosophy and Political Economy. 1980 [Accessed 14 November 2025]. Available at: https://www.marxists.org/archive/pilling/works/capital/ch05.htm.
[141] KELLNER, Douglas. *The Frankfurt School*. [online]. [Accessed 14 November]. Available at: https://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/papers/fs.htm.

sameness".[142] Some tend to present the *"culture industry"* as the inevitable outcome of modern technology.

They argue that millions of consumers supposedly require mass-reproduction systems that naturally produce standardised cultural goods designed to satisfy the same set of needs across countless locations. As production funnels into a few dominant centres while reception remains scattered, the system needs tight organisation and planning. These standardised forms supposedly reflect what consumers already wanted, which explains the minimal resistance. In practice, however, the system is unified by a cycle of manipulation. The power that technology gains over society lies in the hands of those with the strongest economic status.[143]

Capitalist societies thus sustain a perpetual cycle of labour and consumption, offering surface-level solutions to more complex emotional and social demands created by the system itself. In doing so, they narrow the possibilities for genuine freedom and meaningful forms of communal life.[144]

The French sociologist Jean Baudrillard argued that in the postmodern, post-industrial era, consumption has evolved beyond even Marx's critique. The organising principle is no longer use-value or exchange-value, but *"sign-value".*[145] For Baudrillard, contemporary society revolves around the consumption and display of commodities, which function as markers of identity, prestige, and social position. In this logic, the status attached to one's possessions directly correlates to their rank within the system of sign value. A commodity's significance emerges from its position within a hierarchy of status and distinction.[146]

Consumer culture operates through a value system broadly labelled as *"materialism",* which psychological research typically defines through three subcomponents: acquisition centrality (where acquisition of possession is seen as an essential life goal), possession-defined success

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[142] HORKHEIMER, Max and Theodor W. Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. [online]. Edited by Gunzelin Schmid Noerr; translated by Edmund Jephcott. Stanford University Press, 2002 [Accessed 14 November 2025]. Available at: https://www.maroskop.org/images/2/27/Horkheimer_Max_Adorno_Theodor_W_Dialectic_of_Enlightenment_Philosophical_Fragments.pdf.
[143] Ibid.
[144] PHILOSOPHIZE THIS! Podcast. Episode #110 – "*The Frankfurt School Pt. 3 – The Culture Industry*" [podcast]. 7 Sept. 2017 [Accessed 16 November 2025]. Available at: https://www.philosophizethis.org/podcast/the-culture-industry.
[145] STEVENS, Alex. *Jean Baudrillard. Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* [online]. First published 22 April 2005; substantive revision 18 December 2019 [Accessed 19 November 2025]. Available at: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/baudrillard/.
[146] Ibid.

(using ownership to judge one's own and others' success), and acquisition as the pursuit of happiness (believing possessions lead to well-being).[147]

An extensive body of research demonstrates a consistent, negative correlation between materialism and personal well-being. Higher materialistic values correspond with reduced happiness and life satisfaction, a decline in pro-social behaviour, greater engagement in environmentally harmful practices, and an increased experience of negative emotions, depression and anxiety.[148]

According to Tim Kasser, PhD, materialism fails to satisfy individuals' intrinsic psychological needs. It encourages them to focus on external validation at the expense of their innate needs for autonomy, competence, and relationships. When these needs remain unfulfilled, individuals commonly report reduced levels of well-being alongside increased psychological distress.[149]

[147] ISHAM, A., et al. *The Problematic Role of Materialistic Values in the Pursuit of Sustainable Well-Being*. PMC [online], 2022 [Accessed 26 November 2025]. Available at: https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8951562/.
[148] AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION. *What Psychology Says About Materialism and the Holidays* [online]. 16 Dec. 2014 [Accessed 20 November 2025]. Available at: https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2014/12/materialism-holidays.
[149] Ibid.

8 Chuck Palahniuk

Chuck Palahniuk has established himself as one of the most distinctive and provocative voices in contemporary American literature, known for his minimalist style and raw exploration of the dark themes and motifs that govern the human condition. Shaped by a life marked by personal tragedy and a diverse range of experiences, Palahniuk developed a narrative voice that confronts the themes of alienation, consumerism, and the search for authenticity through transgression. This chapter provides an overview of his biography and literary development, examining his unique approach to storytelling.

8.1 The Life of Chuck Palahniuk

Chuck Palahniuk, born in 1962 in Burbank, Washington, has become one of the most prominent contemporary authors, best known for his first novel, *Fight Club*. His writing explores themes of alienation, disillusionment, and the effects of consumerism on modern life. Known for a minimalist style, his works often bear a dark, satirical tone. Drawing heavily from his life experiences, Palahniuk developed a distinctive narrative voice. His time working in hospice care and his involvement with the Cacophony Society shaped his approach to storytelling, providing insight into societal norms and human behaviour.[150]

Palahniuk's early life was marked by the separation of his parents. He was only fourteen when his parents, Carol and Fred, divorced. This led to Chuck and his siblings spending a significant part of their childhood at their maternal grandparents' cattle ranch.[151]

After graduating with a BA in journalism from the University of Oregon in 1986, Palahniuk started his career as a journalist for a local Portland paper, but this career was short-lived. He then began working as a mechanic, and it was during this time that he encountered experiences that would later influence his early work. His involvement with the Cacophony Society inspired the Project Mayhem in *Fight Club*.[152]

Palahniuk's literary development was significantly shaped by the various groups with which he was involved. Notably, Landmark Education, which he joined in 1988, spurred his decision to write. He further refined his skills through Tom Spanbauer's Dangerous Writing workshop, where he learned the principles of minimalism and received his first critical feedback.

[150] CHAPLINSKY, Joshua. Chuck Palahniuk – Bio. *The Cult: The Official Fan Site of Chuck Palahniuk* [online]. 2014 [Accessed 13 November 2024]. Available at: https://www.chuckpalahniuk.net/chuck.
[151] Ibid.
[152] Ibid.

Additionally, Palahniuk was a member of the Cacophony Society, a collective of pranksters, and found ongoing support and humility through his involvement with Alcoholics Anonymous.[153]

On Andrea Carlisle's recommendation, Palahniuk joined Tom Spanbauer's workshop after initially attending hers. However, the intense nature of his fiction unsettled other participants, making them uneasy in his presence. After spending several years with Carlisle's group, he eventually moved on to Spanbauer's.[154]

Spanbauer taught Palahniuk about the horizontal and vertical of a story. The horizontal is the sequence of essential points within the plot of the story, while the vertical refers to the increase in psychological and physical tension. These should go hand in hand; one cannot progress without the other. An effective vertical is created through a limitation of elements. The essence of minimalist writing is reinforcing a central idea through repetition rather than distraction. Introducing unrelated aspects leads to boring storytelling.[155]

During this workshop, Palahniuk attempted to write his first novel, *If You Lived Here, You'd be Home Already*, which got rejected since it was too dark and too extensive. Palahniuk only succeeded with his third novel, *Fight Club*, published in 1996 by W. W. Norton. When it was released, it was a debut novel written by an unknown author, with only 10,000 copies printed.[156] However, it was Fincher's movie adaptation of the story from 1999, starring Brad Pitt and Edward Norton, that drove sales of the novel.[157]

The movie quickly became a top-selling disc and gained cult status on DVD[158], evident by its enduring popularity, particularly among young men, even more than twenty years after its release. This continued admiration is reflected in its cultural relevance, as the film remains omnipresent in the lives of new generations of viewers. This demographic, primarily as a result of the crisis of masculinity, identifies with the ideology evident in *Fight Club*. The novel embodies a rejection of the political, economic, and social systems that position young men in

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[153] LITERARY HUB. *Chuck Palahniuk on His Childhood Love of Ellery Queen and Writing in a Good Mood*. Literary Hub [online]. 2020 [Accessed 13 November 2024]. Available at: https://lithub.com/chuck-palahniuk-on- his-childhood-love-of-ellery-queen-and-writing-in-a-good-mood/.
[154] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Consider this: moments in my writing life after which everything was different*. London: Corsair, 2021. ISBN 978-1-4721-5553-5. p. 11.
[155] Ibid., p. 89.
[156] JORDISON, Sam. *First rule of Fight Club: no one talks about the quality of the writing*. Online. The Guardian. [Accessed 13 November 2024]. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/dec/20/first-rule-about-fight-club-no-one-talks-about-the-quality-of-the-writing.
[157] CHAPLINSKY, Joshua. Chuck Palahniuk – Bio. *The Cult: The Official Fan Site of Chuck Palahniuk* [online]. 2014 [Accessed 13 November 2024]. Available at: https://www.chuckpalahniuk.net/chuck.
[158] Ibid.

roles where they struggle to establish a sense of identity, often denied to them due to the effects of modernity. The pursuit of self-discovery, of one's true essence, is manifested in this narrative through violence. This traditionally masculine domain has historically been employed as a means of asserting dominance, status, and, to some extent, identity.

As a result of *Fight Club's* success, Palahniuk gained complete creative autonomy. In 1999, two new novels were published – *Survivor*, a religious satire, and an updated version of *Invisible Monsters*. Since then, he has continued to publish nearly every year. The year 2001 marked great success for *Choke, as it* appeared on the New York Times bestseller list.[159]

Palahniuk's work has always been influenced by his personal experience. Working on *Lullaby* helped him deal with the tragic death of his father. As Palahniuk mentions in an interview with Joe Rogan, his father was brutally murdered in May of 1999, after answering a personal ad of a woman looking for a partner. Rita, a lawyer working within the prison system, initially encountered her future husband while he was incarcerated. After assisting in his release, they married, but the relationship soon turned abusive when he sexually assaulted her daughter. In response to this abuse, Rita divorced him and began legal proceedings to have him reincarcerated. During this period, she met Palahniuk's father. Her ex-husband reportedly threatened that if he ever discovered Rita involved with another man, he would kill them both.[160]

As the trial approached, Palahniuk's father planned to pick Rita up so they could remain together until the legal proceedings were completed. However, Rita's ex-husband appeared and shot him. Following this incident, Rita and Palahniuk's father sought refuge in his home, which was then set on fire by her ex-husband. They were both dead before the fire got to them.[161]

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[159] VOLLE, A. *Chuck Palahniuk*. Online. Encyclopaedia Britannica. [Accessed 10 October 2024]. Available at: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Chuck-Palahniuk.
[160] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Chuck Palahniuk Shares the Strange Story of His Father's Murder*. YouTube, uploaded by [PowerfulJRE], 2021 Oct. 27 2021. Available at:https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cMB46z1Xmuc.
[161] Ibid.

8.2 Palahniuk's Writing Style, Themes, and Motifs

As Jesse Kavadlo says, reading Palahniuk is like *"rubbing your eyes with raw broken glass*".[162] That is a fitting comparison, given that people have been known to faint during his public readings, with ambulances sometimes waiting outside the venues.[163] This proves that reading Palahniuk's work is an intense, visceral experience. His narratives, characterised by raw imagery, unsettling violence, and transgressive themes, feature physical brutality, sexuality, and vivid descriptions of the repulsive, creating a discomforting yet compelling reading experience.

His protagonists are frequently marginalised figures, struggling with identity, trauma, or self-destruction, who ultimately transform into unlikely agents of salvation. Palahniuk's storytelling is defined by fragmentation, disjointed structures, and provocative themes that challenge conventional narratives. Despite the chaos and disorder his works portray, they evoke a paradoxical sense of clarity and cohesion, leaving the reader with the unsettling yet profound realisation that, despite its brokenness, the world remains strangely intact.[164]

His ability to elicit such intense physical and emotional responses has earned him recognition as one of the most distinctive voices in postmodern literature. Palahniuk assaults, unsettles, and forces readers into a confrontation with the cultural taboos. He transgresses the conventional, shocks the reader, yet explores the themes of alienation, resilience, and the search for meaning in a world that feels meaningless in a strikingly original way.

In *Consider This,* Palahniuk explores two concepts that propel the novel's story forward. The momentum is formed with a "clock" and a "gun". The clock serves as a narrative device that constrains time, driving the story toward its conclusion. When the time expires, the story comes to an end. It does not always signal the end of the entire story; it can also mark a significant turning point in the narrative, or it can be confined to a singular scene. By limiting available time, the clock heightens tension and sets clear expectations for the reader, increasing their emotional engagement. In contrast to the clock, the gun introduces a potential for sudden resolution. Typically introduced early and then concealed, the gun remains in the background,

[162] KAVADLO, J. (2005). The fiction of self-destruction: Chuck Palahniuk, closet moralist. Stirrings Still: The International Journal of Existential Literature, 2(2), p. 3.
[163] AKBAR, Arifa. Chuck Palahniuk: 'I shy away from non-consensual violence'. *The Independent* [online]. 2012 [Accessed 10 October 2024]. Available at: https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/chuck-palahniuk-i-shy-away-non-consensual-violence-7851425.html.
[164] KAVADLO, J. (2005). The fiction of self-destruction: Chuck Palahniuk, closet moralist. Stirrings Still: The International Journal of Existential Literature, 2(2), p. 3.

creating an anticipation that the reader may temporarily forget, only to reappear and drive the narrative toward its climax.[165]

[165] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Consider this: moments in my writing life after which everything was different*. London: Corsair, 2021, p.90–93. ISBN 978-1-4721-5553-5.

9 Bret Easton Ellis

Born into the very culture of status and surface he would come to critique, Ellis's literary voice was shaped by the emotional fractures of his upbringing and the consumerist values embodied by his father. This chapter situates Ellis within the *"Blank Generation",* exploring how his preoccupation with media saturation, brand consciousness, and personal experience led to the creation of *American Psycho*.

Bret Easton Ellis was born in the suburb of Los Angeles as the oldest of three siblings. During his early childhood, his parents divorced, leaving his mother to raise him, while his father remained a negative influence in his life.[166]

From an early age, this troubled relationship shaped not only his personal development but also his literary imagination. Ellis portrays his father as the epitome of consumerism, a person completely fixated on status, prioritising the finest clothes, owning a particular car, regardless of whether these possessions brought him any real satisfaction.[167] It is evident that Ellis's father served as the primary inspiration for the protagonist in *American Psycho*.

Ellis started writing at a young age, creating children's books as Christmas gifts for his parents. However, they grew concerned about the themes in his stories. One Christmas tale, *The Angel's Trip*, featured an angel falling from the top of a tree, incorporating violent and sexually suggestive elements, including ornaments being slaughtered and others engaging in prostitution to gather information about the angel's whereabouts.[168]

He made his first attempt at writing a full-length novel in 1978, drawing from his experiences working at his grandfather's casino in Nevada. He had been sent there after his family discovered marijuana in his room. Inspired by *The Sun Also Rises*, he aimed to write a serious novel. His first attempt was completed during his junior year of high school, followed by a second version a year later. The latter closely resembled what would eventually become *Less Than Zero.*[169]

The unexpected commercial success of *Less Than Zero* marked a pivotal moment in Ellis's career. The novel gained widespread recognition through word of mouth and ultimately positioned Ellis as a representative voice of his generation. Ellis was forced to face the challenges

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[166] MURPHET, Julian. *Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho: a reader's guide*. New York: Continuum, 2002. ISBN 08-264-5245-0. p. 11.
[167] CLARKE, Jaime, and Bret Easton Ellis. "Interview with Bret Easton Ellis." *Mississippi Review*, vol. 27, no. 3, 1999, pp. 61–102. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20134803. Accessed 10 Mar. 2025. p. 82.
[168] Ibid. pp .61–62.
[169] Ibid. pp. 62–63.

of sudden literary fame, navigating the pressures of public attention as well as meeting the expectations to serve as a spokesperson at an age when most writers have yet to find recognition in the literary world. The sudden wealth, comparable to that of stockbrokers and bankers, would be an influence on his writing of *American Psycho*.[170]

"I made an enormous amount of money and I moved to Manhattan […], working on American Psycho was my way of fighting against myself slipping into a certain kind of lifestyle."[171] Ellis identified with Patrick Bateman, the protagonist of *American Psycho*, because they shared many similarities. However, the novel ultimately served as a criticism of his father's values.[172]

The novel's publication process further illustrates how deeply its themes disturbed the contemporary audience. The novel was initially scheduled for publication in the United States by Simon & Schuster. However, following widespread negative media criticism for its perceived sadistic content, the publisher withdrew its support just three months before the intended release, calling the story "questionable taste".[173] Ellis later stated that he had not initially realised how violent the novel would become. However, according to him, the vivid descriptions of violence were justified, as they reflected the protagonist's experience in a society where *"everything was surface – food, clothes – that is what defined people."*[174]

Ellis's writing habits and working philosophy also explain how his fiction emerges from within rather than from literary ambition. He plans each narrative meticulously, dedicating up to a year to outlining every story. He often works backwards, starting with the ending, making the writing process much easier.[175] Ellis emphasises the importance of a clean environment for his writing, ensuring the kitchen is organised and that his bed is made.[176] Ellis notes that he has always felt comfortable living within the very society he depicts, despite confronting certain elements that unsettled him and found their way into his fiction. The tension of moving through

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[170] MURPHET, Julian. *Bret Easton Ellis's American Psycho: a reader's guide*. New York: Continuum, 2002. ISBN 08-264-5245-0. p. 13.
[171] Clarke, Jaime, and Bret Easton Ellis. "Interview with Bret Easton Ellis." *Mississippi Review*, vol. 27, no. 3, 1999, pp. 61–102. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/20134803. Accessed 10 Mar. 2025. p. 82.
[172] Ibid.
[173] PAN MACMILLAN. "*American Psycho: a history of controversy*." Pan Macmillan Blogs [online], 13 Feb. 2025 [Accessed 13 March 2025]. Available at: https://www.panmacmillan.com/blogs/literary/american-psycho-controversy-banned-book-censorship.
[174] Ibid.
[175] Interview Magazine. "*Bret Easton Ellis Has All the Answers.*" [online]. 16 Apr. 2018 [Acessed 27 November-2025]. Available at: https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/bret-easton-ellis-has-all-the-answers.
[176] BRANWEN, Gwern. *What Is The Morning Writing Effect?* Gwern.net [online]. 11 May 2011 [Accessed 25 November 2025]. Available at: https://gwern.net/morning-writing.

that world while feeling fundamentally out of place, an outsider who didn't fit in, was the primary motivation for his writing.[177]

He explains that he writes from emotion rather than ambition. He does not see himself as a professional, career-driven author; he finds genuine enjoyment in the writing process. This process unfolds based on what he feels at any given moment. The act of writing itself is a response to emotional pressure. There is no message to convey or political stance to promote; instead, each book reflects his personal preoccupations with those feelings.[178]

Understanding Ellis's literary background also requires situating him within the broader movement of Blank fiction. The term refers to a distinct strand of American literature that developed during the 1980s, marked by its preoccupation with consumerism, media saturation, sexual excess, urban decay, and fashion-driven nightlife.[179] According to Annesley, blank fiction *speaks in the commodified language of its own period.*[180] The extensive reliance on mass-culture references not only characterises blank fiction's style but also precisely situates it within a particular cultural era. Importantly, this contextual awareness does not originate from meticulous scene construction or rigorous reconstruction; rather, it arises through the text's incorporation of contemporary commercial products and brands.[181]

His novels embody these characteristics, offering some of the most incisive portrayals of late-capitalist surface culture in contemporary American fiction. In Ellis's novel, consumer goods consistently take precedence over human beings. Emotions and authentic feelings rarely enter the characters' conversations; instead, their focus shifts almost entirely to the surface details of designer labels, high-priced bottled water, and other symbols of status and wealth. This creates a world in which material objects hold more value than genuine human connection.

In summary, Ellis's life and work frame him as a writer profoundly shaped by the emotional fractures of his upbringing, the pressures of early success, and the cultural excesses of late-twentieth-century America. His fiction emerges from a deeply personal conflict with the consumerist values embodied by his father and amplified by the environments in which he lived.

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[177] Interview Magazine. "*Bret Easton Ellis Has All the Answers.*" [online]. 16 Apr. 2018 [Acessed 27 November-2025]. Available at: https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/bret-easton-ellis-has-all-the-answers.
[178] LOUISIANA CHANNEL. *Writer Bret Easton Ellis: I Write From a Place of Feeling*. Produced by Marc-Christoph Wagner. Louisiana Channel, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 13 Aug. 2025 [online]. [Accessed 4 November 2025]. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j62CdDg8LhE.
[179] YOUNG, Elizabeth and CAVENEY, Graham. *Shopping in Space: Essays on America's Blank-Generation Fiction.* New York: Grove Press, 1992, ISBN 9780871135421. p. xii (2nd page of Introduction)
[180] ANNESLEY, James. *Blank fictions: Consumerism, Culture, and the Contemporary American Novel*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998. ISBN 03-122-1534-7. p. 7.
[181] Ibid.

Through his characteristic straightforward prose, reliance on mass-cultural references, and depictions of emotional detachment, Ellis aligns with Blank Generation fiction. His novels centre upon the struggle with identity and a critique of a culture in which superficiality, status, and consumption replace genuine feeling.

10 Invisible Monsters

Like *Fight Club*, Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters* explores themes of self-destruction, postmodern consumerist culture, and identity crisis. However, *Invisible Monsters* shifts its primary focus to the motif of beauty, which Palahniuk positions in an unconventional way, transforming it from an asset to a burden.

The protagonist, Shannon McFarland, is a former model once renowned for her physical appearance. Her beauty defined her, shaped her social status, and served as her gateway to success. However, it ultimately became the source of her identity crisis. In a traumatic accident, McFarland deliberately disfigures her face with a firearm, thereby relinquishing the beauty that once defined her. This act of self-destruction represents a response to the external pressure imposed by a society obsessed with appearance and superficiality, where beauty is often equated with value and power.

In postmodern culture, beauty functions as a commodity, an asset she purposefully gives up to avoid becoming a commodity herself. Shannon, confronted with the conflict between objective and subjective identity, attempts to liberate herself from the constraining framework of the oppressive sense of self that society has constructed for her. Through this extreme measure, she transitions from being the object of societal gaze to a figure of marginalisation, thereby encountering a new form of oppression.

The act of disfigurement represents both a downfall and a form of liberation. By becoming what society rejects, Shannon forces a confrontation with identity stripped of pretence. The attributes that were used to secure her rank in the societal hierarchy are erased; however, she forces herself to reckon with who she is beneath the surface.

Liberated women of the postmodern age, who should, in theory, feel free from the constraints of traditional gender roles, often paradoxically find themselves trapped by the pressure to conform to beauty standards that remain ingrained in society.[182] Palahniuk's portrayal of Shannon McFarland demonstrates that the struggle with beauty can be an essential issue imposed by the societal system. The fixation on beauty is an aspect of the relationship between female liberation and societal expectations. Through this relationship, Palahniuk mirrors the paradoxical tension between the performance of beauty and the pursuit of autonomy.

[182] WOLF, Naomi. *The beauty myth: how images of beauty are used against women*. New York: Perennial, 2002. ISBN 00-605-1218-0. Available at: http://www.loc.gov/catdir/description/hc041/2002072516.html. p. 9.

For McFarland, beauty serves both as a currency and a cage —a construct that defines, restricts, and ultimately destroys her identity. The protagonist embodies the ideal woman as dictated by societal standards – attractive, admired, and desired. Palahniuk thus critiques how society co-opts feminism through beauty culture by setting and reinforcing unattainable standards. Her self-inflicted disfigurement is an act of rebellion, a violent rejection of the system society used to define her.

Living in a consumer-driven culture where *"folks are staring at themselves in the monitor staring at themselves in the monitor staring at themselves in the monitor, on and on, completely trapped in a reality loop that never ends."*[183] Individuals become caught in a repetitive cycle of self-image management. In this cycle, the self is fragmented and commodified, reduced to a visual product for later consumption. Personal worth is measured by adherence to social standards rather than authentic expression.

The opening chapter of Chuck Palahniuk's 1999 novel, *Invisible Monsters,* serves as a violent entry point into a narrative obsessed with identity, consumerism, violence, and disintegration. By employing an *in medias res* structure, Palahniuk thrusts the reader directly into the chaotic aftermath of an unexplained catastrophe, offering no clear context and thereby immediately disrupting expectations of linear storytelling. As the narrator herself indicates: *"Don't expect this to be the kind of story that goes: and then, and then, and then. What happens here will have more of that fashion magazine feel, a Vogue or a Glamour magazine chaos with page numbers on every second or fifth or third page. […] There isn't a real pattern to anything, either. Stories will start and then, three paragraphs later:*

Jump to page whatever. Then, jump back."[184]

By employing the "Jump to …" device, Palahniuk deliberately disrupts conventional linear storytelling. This fragmented and non-linear approach creates a sense of disorientation that reflects both the psychological turmoil of the characters and the novel's overarching themes of fractured identity and disorder. The "Jump to …" instructions serve not only as literal leaps between scenes but also force the reader to actively piece together the story from fragments. This technique amplifies the sense of unreliability, instability, and uncertainty, aligning with the novel's emphasis on fluid identities and the rejection of fixed categories.

"Just remember, the same as a spectacular Vogue magazine, remember that no matter how close you follow the jumps: Continued on page whatever. No matter how careful you are,

[183] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 118.
[184] Ibid. p. 20.

there's going to be the sense you missed something, the collapsed feeling under your skin that you didn't experience it all. […] Well, get used to that feeling. That's how your whole life will feel some day."[185] This is a metanarrative moment in which the narrator comments on the novel's structure. Palahniuk deliberately employs a non-linear, fragmented narrative structure, jumping between timelines and seemingly disconnected events. The comparison to a Vogue magazine extends beyond the narrative structure in an attempt to encapsulate the disjointed nature of contemporary life, where individuals, like the novel's characters, experience their lives as fragmented and incomplete.

In the abrupt and deliberately chaotic opening chapter, Palahniuk announces the central themes and concerns of the novel: the instability of self, the artificiality of consumer-driven identity and culture, violence, and the hyperfixation on fashion, image, and beauty. Through this fractured narrative, the author illustrates the blurred nature of self-perception and identity formation in a society obsessed with materialism and superficial image, where the constant pressure to meet external standards becomes a battle of continual reinvention rather than an authentic expression of self.

The first chapter serves as a literary manifesto for the rest of the novel. Palahniuk immediately declares that everyone (not only) in the novel is just a mere product manufactured by society with no sense of self, autonomy, or identity.

[185] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 22.

10.1 Cosmetic Capitalism: The Power of Beauty, and the Commodification of Identity

Everyone in *Invisible Monsters* is merely an archetype, a projection of a fabricated persona, socially constructed by the capitalist tendencies: *"Me, I'm standing at the bottom of the stairs but only in a physical way. My mind is, I don't know where. Nobody's all-the-way dead yet, but let's just say the clock is ticking. Not that anybody in this big drama is a real alive person, either."*[186]

Palahniuk continues to critique this hollow existence by using the character of Evie Cottrell as a symbol of society's commodification of identity. Evie is reduced to nothing but an image, a standard shaped by the forces of advertising and consumerism. She is a product devoid of identity, constructed solely to embody the beauty and perfection that the media dictates. Her character is not an authentic individual, but a commodity, reduced to the sum of her looks and marketable traits with no real substance or personal essence: *"You can trace everything about Evie Cottrell's look back to some television commercial for an organic shampoo, […]"*[187].

The author further consolidates these ideas in the passage: *"What I tell myself is the gush of red pumping out of Brandy's bullet hole is less like blood than it's some sociopolitical tool. The thing about being cloned from all those shampoo commercials, well, that goes for me and Brandy Alexander, too."*[188] Here, Shannon admits that she and Brandy are no different from Evie. This passage highlights the notion that their identities are, in fact, not authentic but rather manufactured products of advertising and consumer culture, where their originality has been stripped away.

Palahniuk then continues with this dehumanisation in the following passage: *"Shotgunning anybody in this room would be the moral equivalent of killing a car, a vacuum cleaner, a Barbie doll. Erasing a computer disk. Burning a book. Probably that goes for killing anybody in the world. We're all such products."*[189] The author moves beyond the immediate narrative of the novel by proposing a provocative idea that the act of killing any person is no different from destroying an inanimate, lifeless object. This radical comparison serves to challenge the reader's moral framework and perception of human value. It can be inferred that by referring

[186] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. pp. 11–12.
[187] Ibid. p. 12.
[188] Ibid. p. 12.
[189] Ibid. p. 12.

to *"anybody in the world,"* Palahniuk is not limiting his claim to the fictional universe of the novel, but is deliberately extending it to the real world, the one of the reader.

In the opening chapter, Palahniuk reinforces his critique of a surface-obsessed culture, where: *"Brandy Alexander, […], is gushing her insides out through a bullet hole in her amazing suit jacket."*[190], yet the narrator remains preoccupied with the aesthetics of her outfit. The focus shifts from the violence and Brandy's suffering to the *"[…] white Bob Mackie knock-off Brandy bought in Seattle with a tight hobble skirt that squeezes her ass into the perfect big heart shape."*[191] The obsession with clothing extends beyond the narrator to the victim, Brandy Alexander, who, despite the severity of her injuries, later remarks: *"Shit. There's no way the Bon Marché will take this suit back."*[192] This moment of pervasive fixation of appearance underscores how her identity and self-worth are inextricably tied to material possessions, and so *"[…] human fulfillment was no longer equated with what one was, but with what one possessed. The present stage, in which social life has become completely occupied by the accumulated productions of economy, is bringing about a general shift from having to appearing."*[193]

The story continues with a description of the suit's design, its high cost, and its beauty, despite being soaked in blood. The dissonance between the violent reality and the narrator's obsessive focus on fashion (even in times of imminent death) reveals the extent to which she is trapped in a mindset forged by years of being the epitome of beauty. In this moment of life-threatening violence, rather than confronting the raw humanity of the situation, the narrator remains fixated on the superficial details. For Shannon, aesthetic presentation seems to hold more value than human life.

This idea is further explored when Shannon says: *"It's not that I'm some detached lab animal just conditioned to ignore violence, but my first instinct is maybe it's not too late to dab club soda on the bloodstain."*[194] She acknowledges the abnormality of her reaction, where, instead of trying to save Brandy, she thinks about salvaging the clothes. Shannon is socially conditioned and trained to prioritise beauty above all else. *"Most of my adult life so far has been me standing on seamless paper for a raft of bucks per hour, wearing clothes and shoes, my hair done and some famous fashion photographer telling me how to feel."*[195]

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[190] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 12.
[191] Ibid.
[192] Ibid., p. 15.
[193] DEBORD, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Translated by KNABB, Ken. Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014. ISBN 978-0-939682-06-5. p.5
[194] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 13.
[195] Ibid.

In the novel, self-destruction is both hidden and glamorised. Trauma is either aestheticised or avoided. This dynamic is evident when the narrator states: *"Another thing is no matter how much you think you love somebody, you'll step back when the pool of their blood edges up too close."*[196] Here, the author captures the instinctive tendency to distance oneself from suffering, even when it affects a loved one. In the case of Brandy Alexander, the image of blood spilling from her body ruptures the visual and aesthetic perfection that otherwise define her persona. The artificially created beauty is disrupted by something raw and uncontrollable.

Just like in *Fight Club*, Palahniuk emphasises the theme of loss of authenticity in Invisible Monsters. This idea is clearly present in the passage: *"What's burning down is a re-creation of a period revival house patterned after a copy of a copy of a copy of a mock-Tudor big manor house. It's a hundred generations removed from anything original, but the truth is aren't we all?"*[197] The house, however, is a metaphor for the self. It is artificially constructed by imitation and stripped of any original essence. Its destruction is not a tragedy but rather a symbolic collapse of identities built entirely on tailored foundations. Palahniuk suggests that in a culture oversaturated with consumerism and media, the self is merely reproduced and recycled, with no trace of an authentic origin.

This idea is further explored in the narrator's pyromaniacal act just moments later: *"Just before Evie comes screaming down the stairs and shoots Brandy Alexander, what I did was pour out about a gallon of Chanel Number Five and put a burning wedding invitation to it, and boom, I'm recycling."*[198] The act of setting fire to what one might call symbols of femininity, designer perfume, and a wedding invitation, becomes a rejection of femininity as it has been stylised and commodified. Rather than embracing traditional markers of womanhood, the narrator incinerates them, framing the act not as destruction but as a form of recycling. This echoes the earlier assertion that everything and everyone is *"a copy of a copy of a copy"*[199], suggesting that identity is a disposable, endlessly consumed, and rebranded commodity.

The disposal of identity is explored through Brandy Alexander's radically critical monologue when she states: *"'It helps to know you're not any more responsible for how you look than a car is," […]. "You're a product just as much. A product of a product of a product. The people who design cars, they're products. Your parents are products. Their parents were products. Your teachers, products. The minister in your church, another product,' Brandy says.*

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[196] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 15.
[197] Ibid., p. 14.
[198] Ibid., p. 15.
[199] Ibid., p. 14.

Sometimes your best way to deal with shit, she says, is to not hold yourself as such a precious little prize."[200] Letting go of the need to see oneself as a prize becomes a survival mechanism in a world where self-worth is measured by attention, appearance, and consumption.

"Evie, Brandy and me, all this is just a power struggle for the spotlight. Just each of us being me, me, me first. The murderer, the victim, the witness, each of us thinks our role is the lead. Probably that goes for anybody in the world. It's all mirror, mirror on the wall because beauty is power the same way money is power the same way a gun is power."[201] This passage functions as a crystallisation of the novel's central preoccupation with identity and the commodification of appearance. The narrator reveals a direct equivalence between aesthetics and dominance, showcasing that beauty is not a passive trait but an active force of social currency. By aligning beauty with money and a gun, Palahniuk strips it of its romantic connotations, instead presenting it as an instrument of power. He then satirises the cultural obsession with self-image while also suggesting that characters, much like society at large, pursue beauty not to express themselves, but to dominate the competitive social hierarchy.

Having succeeded in the social hierarchy grants power and control over uncertainty. Especially in a world where identity feels fragmented and continuously challenged, asserting dominance and status becomes a way to stabilise the self. The pursuit of ranking high within the hierarchy is not about beating others, but rather about winning the internal battle for meaning and recognition in a world that feels indifferent.

[200] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 217.
[201] Ibid., p. 16.

10.2 Shannon McFarland: The Beautiful Model No One Dares to Look At

Once the embodiment of commodified beauty, Shannon McFarland, the narrator and central figure of the novel, undergoes a radical transformation into a disfigured outcast, segregated from the very society that once idolised her flawless exterior. Her prior existence, defined by an obsession with superficial perfection and idealised aesthetics, becomes violently dismantled as she relinquishes the constructs of her former self.

Shannon's decision to disfigure herself represents a deliberate rejection of her former commodified beauty, embraced with full awareness as she looks at herself in the mirror and declares: *"This is exactly what I wanted."*[202] This passage captures a crucial moment of self-confrontation as the narrator faces her disfigured reflection. The opening line: *"Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest one of all?"*[203] directly refers to the cultural legacy that equates female worth to physical appearance. However, Shannon immediately annihilates this narrative by declaring: *"The evil queen was stupid to play Snow White's game. There's an age where a woman has to move on to another kind of power. Money, for example. Or a gun."*[204] Not only does she reject the superficial value of beauty, but she also acknowledges the departure from her commodified role as the flawless, beautiful model —a role that once reduced her to a mere object of aesthetic value.

Her affirmations: *"I'm living the life I love, I tell myself, and loving the life I live. I tell myself: I deserved this. This is exactly what I wanted."*[205] function both as acts of self-empowerment and as a means to assert control over the trauma of social alienation. The mirror serves as a symbol of self-reflection and absolute honesty. Instead of reinforcing shallow ideals, it captures her raw confrontation with the loss of her former self and the emergence of a new transgressive identity.

However, Shannon remains haunted by the newly gained invisibility and her former identity. She admits: *"I didn't want to pick up any pieces. Lower my expectations. Get on with my less-than life. I didn't want to feel better about being still alive. Start compensating. I just wanted my face fixed, if that was possible, which it wasn't."*[206] This passage exposes a profound internal

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[202] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 31.
[203] Ibid.
[204] Ibid.
[205] Ibid.
[206] Ibid., p. 48.

conflict. Although Shannon initially disfigured herself as a radical act of rejection against the commodification and expectations, she simultaneously yearns for restoration, for a return to "normal". This contradiction reveals the complexity of her transgression as an ambivalent struggle with identity. Mutilating herself was a rebellious, transgressive act that allowed her to escape the pressure of being objectified and controlled. But humans crave recognition, and physical appearance is a vital source of social validation.

"The truth is I was addicted to being beautiful, and that's not something you just walk away from. Being addicted to all that attention, I had to quit cold turkey. I could have my head, but hair grows back. Even bald, I might still look too good. Bald, I might get even more attention. […] I had to deal with my looks in a fast, permanent way or I'd always be tempted to go back."[207] Shannon frames beauty as both a drug and a trap, something so toxic and addictive that only a violent, irreversible break could free her from its control.

This inner paradox is underscored in one of Shannon's most striking confessions: *"If I can't be beautiful, I want to be invisible."*[208] In this declaration, beauty and visibility are inextricably linked as Shannon, stripped of beauty, sees no place for herself. *"Fuck me. I'm so tired of being me. Me beautiful. Me ugly. Blonde. Brunette. A million fucking fashion makeovers that only leave me trapped being me."*[209] This quote serves as an existential outcry against the endless cycle of performed identity. Any trace of an original or authentic self is destroyed. She swung from one extreme to the other, shifting from the centre of attention to absolute invisibility. While being in the epicentre of the gaze had been her norm, invisibility introduced an unfamiliar void. This contrast sparked her yearning to reclaim her former beauty, to return to the state where she felt seen and validated, to return to her comfort zone.

Despite her deliberate attempt to escape the superficial world of modelling through self-disfigurement, which nearly killed her, Shannon remains trapped in the expectations of those around her who continue to reduce her worth to surface-level traits. Her former coworker and best friend, Evie, offers her no rest from the industry that helped destroy her. *"I talked to the agency and they said that if we re-do your portfolio they'll reconsider taking you back for hand work."*[210] Evie says, while flipping the pages of Vogue and Glamour, to force Shannon back into the same system she so desperately tried to escape.

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[207] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. pp. 285–286.
[208] Ibid., p. 214.
[209] Ibid., p. 224.
[210] Ibid., p. 44.

The narrator expresses her desire to escape the system when she enviously admires women whose physical appearance exempts them from society's relentless expectations to conform to beauty standards. She reflects: *"You know how you look at ugly hunchback girls, and they are so lucky. Nobody drags them out at night so they can't finish their doctorate thesis papers,"*[211] admiring the way disfigurement seems to offer liberation from objectification. *"I wanted the everyday reassurance of being mutilated,"*[212] Shannon admits, framing physical damage not as loss but as freedom. She envies how *"a crippled deformed birth-defected disfigured girl can drive her car with the windows open and not care how the wind makes her hair look,"*[213] an effortless freedom that is denied to her. Her perfect exterior becomes her cage: *"Trapped in a beauty ghetto is how I felt. Stereotyped. Robbed of my motivation."*[214]

Her hopeless attempt to avoid the constricting labels imposed by others becomes evident in the passage where she admits that*: "before the accident, I told people I was a college student. If you tell folks you're a model, they shut down. Your being a model will mean they're networking with some lower life form. They start using baby talk. They dumb down. But if you tell folks you're a college student, folks are so impressed. You can be a student in anything and not have to know anything."*[215] This confession reveals the limitations of Shannon's existence as a model. As Shannon reveals: *"I was tired of staying a lower life form just because of my looks. Trading on them. Cheating. Never getting anything real accomplished, but getting the attention and recognition anyway."*[216] Shannon's beauty overshadowed and suppressed her inner value. Her beauty simultaneously objectifies and infantilises her in the eyes of society. To be a model is not merely to be reduced to a product for visual consumption, but also to be perceived as intellectually void. Shannon's intentional concealment of her profession underscores her awareness of the dehumanising social stigma associated with modelling.

The dehumanisation continues even after her accident, when she is forced to only eat what she calls baby food. Her post-accident diet of *"everything mashed or pulverized or crushed."*[217] functions as a metaphor for identity erasure and regression. When she remarks: *"You are what you eat."*[218]*,* the consumption of baby food implies a forced return to a pre-identity state.

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[211] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 286.
[212] Ibid.
[213] Ibid.
[214] Ibid.
[215] Ibid., p. 42.
[216] Ibid., p. 286.
[217] Ibid., p. 48.
[218] Ibid

Babies, unlike adults, lack autonomy and a fully developed sense of self. Their identity is yet to be written, a philosophical concept known as tabula rasa. By consuming the food of infants, Shannon symbolically regresses into a state of passivity and dependency.

Her dependency extends beyond the physical to emotional experience. As a model, Shannon was conditioned to perform emotions on command, responding not to inner feelings but to external instructions: *"The photographer in my head says: Give me patience. Flash. Give me control. Flash."*[219] or as mentioned earlier *"Most of my adult life so far has been me standing on seamless paper for a raft of bucks per hour, wearing clothes and shoes, my hair done and some famous fashion photographer telling me how to feel. Him yelling, Give me lust, baby. Flash. Give me malice. Flash. Give me detached existentialist ennui. Flash. Give me rampant intellectualism as a coping mechanism."*[220] This experience left Shannon increasingly more detached from genuine emotion. This habitual production of feelings on command distorted her ability to portray her authentic self. In the absence of a camera, she only knows how to imitate and pretend. That is why her later declaration becomes so crucial: *"I'm giving you my life to prove to myself I can, I really can love somebody. You see, I can handle the baby food and the not talking and being homeless and invisible, but I have to know that I can love somebody."*[221] Here, love becomes her ultimate salvation, an emotion not merely performed, but sought after as proof of her humanity and vulnerability. Instead of performing for external purposes, Shannon seeks to internalise authentic feelings, so she no longer remains an *"invisible monster incapable of loving anybody."*[222]

Her relationship with Shane underwent a dramatic transformation throughout the novel. While the protagonist's self-inflicted disfigurement can be interpreted as a rejection of commodified beauty, a close examination also reveals a more intimate psychological motive rooted in her dysfunctional family dynamics. Her brother's mutilation transformed him into the centre of attention of the household, leaving Shannon virtually invisible. She recalls bitterly: *"You'd think my folks totally forgot they even had a second child,"*[223] and confesses, *"They just liked my brother more because he was mutilated."*[224] *"Whether he's good or bad, alive or dead, Shane still gets all the attention. All I ever get is angry. "I'm the last child you people have left*

[219] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 49.
[220] Ibid., p. 13.
[221] Ibid., p. 296.
[222] Ibid., p. 198.
[223] Ibid., p. 73.
[224] Ibid., p. 72.

alive so you'd better start paying me some attention." Silence."[225] The parental attention Shane receives after his death becomes evident when their parents turn into obsessive supporters of gay rights. This dynamic becomes particularly relevant when considering that Shannon occupied the centre of societal attention as a model; however, she remained neglected and invisible to her own parents. Her brother's accident reoriented their affections entirely towards him. Shannon's self-disfigurement, then, emerges not solely as a rejection of societal beauty standards but as a deeply internal conflict, as she never actually tells her parents. *"Don't look for me to ever tell my folks about the accident. […] I told my folks, as soon as I could write them a letter that I was going on a catalogue shoot in Cancún, Mexico, for Espre."*[226]

[225] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 93.
[226] Ibid., p. 95.

10.3 Brandy Alexander: The Transgressive Queen of Reinvention

The narrator meets Brandy for the first time outside the hospital speech therapist's office after her accident: *"Brandy Alexander was just so there, glamorous in a seated Princess Alexander pose, in an iridescent Vivienne Westwood cat suit changing colors with her every move."*[227] Her catsuit, which shifts colour with every movement, serves as a metaphor for her fluid and variable identity. It reflects her own transformation as well as rejection of fixed categories, most notably the subversion of traditional gender norms. *"[...] The way she looked turned the rest of the world into virtual reality. She changed color from every new angle."*[228] emphasises how her presence disrupts the standard, blurs the lines between real and artificial, and implies her multifaceted identity.

Brandy Alexander, the "Queen Supreme" of Chuck Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters*, exemplifies a radically transgressive figure whose psychological motivations are rooted in identity annihilation, self-reinvention, and the rejection of normative gender constructs. Her vision of the world where *"[...] the universe is run by a fairly elaborate system of gods and she-gods. Some evil. Some are ultimate goodness. Marilyn Monroe, [...], Nancy Reagan and Wallis Warfield Simpson [...] Gods and she-gods come and go and leapfrog each other for a change of status."*[229] , reveals her investment in constructed identities and celebrity culture.

The inclusion of feminine icons such as Marilyn Monroe, a former American actress, pop culture icon and a major sex symbol[230], or Nancy Reagan, the wife of the 40th president of the United States – Ronald Reagan, American first lady in the years 1981 – 1989, and actress, often criticised for her circle of glamorous friends and expensive clothing[231], reflects Brandy's belief that femininity is a performance shaped by power, visibility, and social significance. These traits are bestowed upon those who actively compete for attention in the public eye and continually adapt to meet shifting societal expectations.

Brandy emerges in the novel as the living embodiment of beauty turned into power, a self-fashioned goddess in a world governed by appearances and reinvention. *"Seth writes and Brandy reads. You have to keep recycling yourself."*[232]

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[227] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 43.
[228] Ibid., p. 44.
[229] Ibid., p. 76.
[230] "*Marilyn Monroe*" Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. [Accessed 1 June 2025]. Available at: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Marilyn-Monroe.
[231] *"Nancy Reagan*" Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc. [Accessed 1 June 2025]. Available at: https://www.britannica.com/biography/Nancy-Reagan.
[232] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 104.

Described hyperbolically as so desirable that *"you could chop her head off and put it on blue velvet in the window at Tiffany's and somebody would buy it for a million dollars."*[233], Brandy becomes less a human being and more a fetishised object of worship. She constructs herself according to the logic of consumer culture, where beauty is capital and bodies are endlessly modifiable commodities. Her obsession with plastic surgery, *"reading some plastic surgeon's glossy hard-sell brochure about vaginas complete with color pictures showing the picture-perfect way a urethra should be aligned to ensure a downward stream of urine."*[234], and *"some of the gods and she-gods are dead. Some are alive. A lot are plastic surgeons."*[235] serves as both a literal and symbolic act of self-erasure and reconstruction. By willingly subjecting her body to endless surgical revision, she turns herself into a postmodern goddess of beauty. In Brandy's world, appearance exceeds identity, and power lies in the ability to manipulate perception.

For the narrator, Brandy is her *"instant royal family,*[236]*"* her *"only everything to live for."*[237], her saviour figure. Yet beneath this worship lies a deep psychological need. The narrator, herself trapped in a cycle of trauma, jealousy, and disfigurement, is drawn to Brandy not only for her beauty but for her ability to reframe trauma as performance. She offers a model of identity formation that does not repress suffering but repurposes it as a tool for reinvention. After all, as Sister Katherine states, she *"is someone different every week."*[238]

Brandy's physical appearance operates as a deliberate subversion of conventional beauty standards. The description of her extending *"one of those hairy pig-knuckled hands with the veins of her arm crowded and squeezed to the elbow with bangle bracelets of every color."*[239] and *"[…] Brandy's hands are enormous. Beaded with rings, as if they could be any more obvious, hands are the one part about Brandy Alexander the surgeons couldn't change."*[240] captures the clash between a raw, masculine physicality and the feminine bangle bracelets. Her body thus becomes a living critique of the binary categories of male and female, beautiful and grotesque, authentic and fake, that define traditional modes of gender identity. Her presence challenges the norms of beauty; she does not conform to existing standards but redefines them through excess and contradiction.

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[233] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 57.
[234] Ibid., p. 78.
[235] Ibid., p. 76.
[236] Ibid., p. 57.
[237] Ibid.
[238] Ibid., p. 47.
[239] Ibid., p. 58.
[240] Ibid., p. 23.

Her gender identity, much like her appearance, resists categorisation within binary frameworks. She is a composite figure who blurs the traditional gender constraints. Brandy performs femininity with deliberate extravagance and designer clothes, yet her masculine features remain visible. The ambiguity of her presence portrays gender as constructed, unstable, and changeable. She becomes both the postmodern beauty ideal and its caricature, an exaggerated construct that simultaneously fulfils and mocks the very standards it reproduces.

"Until I met Brandy, all I wanted was for somebody to ask me what happened to my face. […] But nobody wanted to know. Then nobody doesn't include Brandy Alexander. […] We had to meet, Brandy and me. We had so many things in common. […] Most women know this feeling of being more and more invisible everyday."[241] Brandy's importance extends beyond her visual oddness and defiance of gender binaries, as she becomes a figure of affinity, one the narrator can relate to. Brandy understands Shannon's psychological deprivation of not being seen, as they are both similarly marginal. The shared experience of feminine invisibility becomes not only a bond between the two characters but also a critique of how society renders women who deviate from idealised norms as irrelevant. Brandy does not merely reflect Shannon's pain; instead, she embodies a transgressive mode of mediation that turns invisibility into power by embracing it.

Her radical declaration: *"I'm not straight, and I'm not gay," […] "I'm not bisexual. I want out of the labels. I don't want my whole life crammed into a single word. A story. I want to find something else, unknowable, some place to be that's not on the map."*[242] reveals her conscious revolt against the persistent societal endeavours to categorise, define, and label. In her attempt to escape binary logics, she articulates a more profound desire for autonomy, a pursuit of a self liberated from imposed identities. She is escaping the labels attached to her assigned gender, as it is later revealed that she is, in fact, Shannon's gay brother Shane, until now presumed dead, as revealed in the following passage.

"Brandy's first family, her birth family, didn't want her, so we adopted her," […] "Her birth family thinks she's dead." It's not everybody who gets a second chance to be born again and raised a second time, but this time by a family that loves her. […] and Die Rhea says, 'This, this is how Brandy wanted to look, like her bitch sister. That was two years ago, before she had

[241] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 32.
[242] Ibid., p. 261.

laser surgery to thin her vocal cords and then her trachea shave. […] We paid for her jaw contouring and her forehead feminization.'"[243]

Given Chuck Palahniuk's purposeful use of names throughout the novel, it is probable that the evident similarity between the names Shane and Shannon is a deliberate choice rather than a coincidence. The nearly identical spelling of the names underscores the connection between the two characters, hinting at their identities and life trajectories as closely intertwined. The names likely signal the parallel of their experience, as both siblings endure forms of marginalisation, invisibility, and social exclusion. Most importantly, however, it shows their struggle and their desire to escape: *"And I Did Not Make That Hairspray Can Explode. Brandy says, 'I know. I did it. I was so miserable being a normal average child. I wanted something to save me. I wanted the opposite of a miracle." […] And on the baseboard, I write: The Truth Is I Shot Myself In The Face.'"*[244]

Importantly, Brandy's radical bodily transformation functions not as a mere pursuit of femininity, but as an intentional, performative rupture —a deliberate act of self-mutilation that enables her to escape the scripted roles of identity and reach for something authentic beyond them. As stated: *"A sexual reassignment surgery is a miracle for some people, but if you don't want one, it's the ultimate form of self-mutilation."*[245] In her own words*, "being a woman is the last thing I want."*[246] Brandy frames her physical transformation not as destruction but as an opening that carves *"the path to the greatest discovery."*[247]

Both Shane (Brandy) and Shannon transgress the boundaries of the human body in deliberate, extreme ways. Shannon's self-inflicted facial massacre and Shane's gender transition, as well as his self-inflicted hairspray "accident", do not serve merely as physical transformations, but more importantly as acts of existential redefinition. They rewrite the identities they were unable to adhere to. He undergoes surgery to escape the anguish of living in a homophobic society, and Shannon destroys her prettiness to free herself from the societal constraints imposed by her beauty. However, they each become what the other sought to escape. Shane tries to emulate his sister's femininity and beauty, while Shannon seeks to break free from being reduced to it.

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[243] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 176–177.
[244] Ibid., p. 282.
[245] Ibid., p. 259.
[246] Ibid.
[247] Ibid.

Shannon's and Brandy's relationship undergoes a profound transformation, revealing not only the fluidity of identity but also the potential of abandoning it. Initially, Shannon's feelings are hateful, as she recalls: *"His face was all exploded in a hairspray accident, […] my folks totally forgot they even had a second child,"*[248] and bitterly adds:, *"Still there's a happy ending. He's dead now."*[249] This radical emotional detachment is later completely turned as Shannon states: *"Completely and totally, permanently and without hope, forever and ever I love Brandy Alexander."*[250] In this moment, Shannon surrenders not only her resentment but her sense of self as she decides to give her brother her name, her identity, her everything: *"I leave my purse and any idea of who I am tucked under Shane's hand. And I leave behind the story that I was ever this beautiful, that I could walk into a room deep fried in a tight dress and everybody would take my picture. […] What I need is a new story. […] What I need to learn to do for myself. To write my own story. Let my brother be Shannon McFarland. I don't need that kind of attention. Not anymore."*[251]

[248] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 73.
[249] Ibid., p. 73.
[250] Ibid., p. 297.
[251] Ibid., p. 296.

10.4 Evie Cottrell and Manus Kelley: The Post-Masculine Bodies

10.4.1 Evie Cottrell: Performance, Pain, and Perfection

Evie Cottrell, Shannon's best friend, co-worker, and model from Texas, emerges as a constructed figure shaped by the demands of the fashion industry and her own unresolved past. Fashion imposes a punishing regime of aesthetic perfection on Evie, a regime she internalises and exaggerates. Her femininity, with lips painted in *"shades of lipstick you'd expect to see around the base of a penis."*[252] and her eyes buried beneath *"so much eye shadow you'd think she was a product testing animal."*[253] as well as using so much hair spray that *"there's a hole in the ozone over the Taylor Robberts Modeling Academy."*[254] almost turn her into a grotesque parody. However, a harsh reality unfolds behind this precision.

Evie, born male, and raised in a homophobic household: *"Evie's mother looks hard at Brandy, 'Have you ever done any modelling?' she says. 'You look so much like a friend of my son's.' 'Your daughter,' Brandy growls."*[255] filled with parental disappointment, clings to beauty as a means of validation. *"Evie's house was what a Texas girl would buy if her parents kept giving her about ten million dollars all the time. It's like the Cottrells know Evie will never make the big-time runways."*[256] Her need for constant attention and validation exposes her fragile, insecure self: *"I hate how I don't feel real enough unless people are watching. She says, 'I don't hang around Brumbach's for privacy.'"*[257] Evie never trusts her own worth without the gaze of others.

Palahniuk delays the revelation of Evie's gender history, strategically disrupting the reader's assumptions. The reader only finds out that she was assigned male at birth towards the end of the story. Unlike Brandy, whose transformation carries undertones of escape, Evie's gender transition stems from a deeply internal, conscious desire to redefine herself. Shannon does not realise Evie's past until Evie's mother exposes it: *"Why, it plum broke our hearts the day Evan came to us. Sixteen years old, and he says 'Mommy, Daddy, I want to be a girl'," says Mrs. Cottrell."*[258] as well as: *"'Evan wanted to be a world-famous fashion model,' he told us. 'He*

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[252] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 68.
[253] Ibid.
[254] Ibid.
[255] Ibid., p. 269.
[256] Ibid., p. 123.
[257] Ibid., p. 69.
[258] Ibid., p. 268.

started calling himself Evie, and I cancelled my subscription to Vogue the next day. I felt it had done enough damage to my family.'"[259]

Evie fully embraces the attention that beauty brings and deliberately positions herself as a consumable product, so adored in a consumer-driven society: *"Evie really is Evelyn Cottrell, Inc."*[260] For her, *"a sexual reassignment surgery is a miracle"*[261], as she actually wanted to become a woman. This surgery thus operates as a tool of self-creation rather than mutilation. Yet beneath the glamour and attention lies an everlasting loneliness, as Evie admits to hating the silence of her empty home and feeling worthless and unreal without external appreciation.

The commodification of (not only) Evie's body is evident as both Shannon and Evie are reduced to passive objects, a *"hired walking sex furniture"*[262], designed to manipulate desire and drive consumption. The absurdity of promoting products of the *Num Num Factory* through hypersexualised femininity highlights how their bodies are marked and traded for profit. *"Me and Evie, we're hired to be walking sex furniture to wear tight evening dresses all afternoon and entice the television audience into buying the Num Num Snack Factory."*[263]

Evie's identity, meticulously constructed through surgery, styling, and artificial perfection, remains inherently fragile, as illustrated by her subtle desire to equal Shannon. This can be observed when Shannon confronts Evie for wearing her sweater: *"is that my sweater you're wearing?"*[264] to which Evie replies, *"Yeah, but I knew you wouldn't mind."*[265] and *"on my pad I wrote: is that my halter top? You know you're stretching it."*[266] As revealed, Evie's closet is full of *"what's left of my (Shannon's) clothes, stretched and tortured to death and hanging there on wire hangers, dead."*[267]

Though seemingly trivial, this encapsulates Evie's attempt to perfect her performance as a living product in a world obsessed with beauty and performativity. The act of wearing Shannon's sweater transcends a mere borrowing of clothing; it metaphorically gestures toward the fluid and performative nature of identity within the postmodern society Palahniuk constructs. The sweater serves as a symbol of interchangeable identity, where personas, like clothing, can be worn, borrowed, and repurposed to adapt to the shifting demands of society. In this moment,

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[259] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 269.
[260] Ibid., p. 123.
[261] Ibid., p. 259.
[262] Ibid., p. 39.
[263] Ibid., p. 123.
[264] Ibid., p. 45.
[265] Ibid.
[266] Ibid., p. 125.
[267] Ibid., p. 126.

Evie momentarily inhabits the success and presence Shannon once held in the modelling world. The ease with which Evie adapts this attribute of Shannon's former self underscores the novel's central idea, that identity is neither fixed nor intimate, but mutable, consumable, and constantly changing.

Shannon's superior modelling success is underscored by the revelation that her *"passing grade in modelling school was just because Evie'd dragged down the curve."*[268] And that *"all the Cottrell relatives with their Texas land and oil money are heavily invested in Evie's being a model failure."*[269] The remark regarding Shannon's sweater that *"it's a size six [...] and you're a size nine"*[270] highlights more than just a difference in clothing size, as it also reveals the unforgiving and harsh standards of the modelling world that Evie is subjected to. Evie's repeated failures at auditions unveil her fragile position within the industry. Hence, her endeavour to attain equality with her more successful friend. *"Most times it was an embarrassment going to modelling look-see auditions with Evie. Sure, I'd get work, but then the art director or the stylist would start screaming at Evie that, no, in his expert opinion she was not a perfect size six."*[271]

The narrator's memory of a *"fashion shoot in a junk yard, in a slaughterhouse, in a mortuary"*[272] exemplifies the preoccupation with constructing beauty through proximity to decay. Identity is created through contrast as the characters would *"go anywhere to look good by comparison."*[273] Although they might not be of the same appearance, the narrator's admission: *"What I realize is mostly what I hate about Evie is the fact that she's so vain and stupid and needy. But what I hate most is how she's just like me."*[274] reveals their entanglement. Evie's perceived flaws become unbearable as they reflect the narrator's own repressed insecurities. Shannon's hatred for Evie transpires as explicit and deeply personal. Her declaration: *"Evie slept with my fiancé, so now I can do anything to her,"*[275] unveils the unstable foundation their relationship was built on. When Shannon declares, *"I could kill Evie"*[276] and *"I hate Evie,"*[277] she exposes the reality of her relationship with her best friend.

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[268] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 68.
[269] Ibid., p. 124.
[270] Ibid., p. 45.
[271] Ibid., p. 124.
[272] Ibid., p. 266.
[273] Ibid.
[274] Ibid.
[275] Ibid., p. 154.
[276] Ibid., p. 155.
[277] Ibid.

Working in an industry where appearance serves as currency, Evie's identity is manufactured, stripped of any interpersonal complexity. Cottrell thus remains trapped between who she is, who she wants to be, and who the industry demands her to become. The pursuit of modelling, once her teenage dream, gradually turns into an existential tension, where repeated rejection disrupts her confidence and blurs the line between genuineness, autonomy, and performance. *"More and more, being beautiful took so much effort."*[278] Evie briefly reclaims a voice that feels unfiltered and autonomous when, after being rejected, she shouts: *"You people can all suck the crap out of my sweet Texas ass."*[279] As the narrator notes, these were the moments when *"Evie was fun and quirky, almost like she had a life of her own."*[280] Evie momentarily represses the polished, constructed persona demanded by the modelling industry and society and reveals her authentic, raw, unperformed self. For a moment, she is no longer "Evelyn Cottrell, Inc.", but Evie, the real, authentic person, who asserts her presence beyond commodification.

After a collagen lip injection, Evie declares that *"she no longer had any fear of hell."*[281] This hyperbolic statement highlights the grotesque extremity of bodily transgression within cosmetic capitalism. The remark satirises the violence embedded within beauty culture, where pain and self-modification become normalised in the pursuit of aesthetic perfection. Palahniuk exposes the masochistic tendency of cosmetic perfectionism, where bodily suffering is required to achieve an aesthetic ideal. Hell, the archetypal realm of pain, punishment, and sin, loses its terror when reframed as a path to idealised femininity. Through relentless violation of her body, Evie transgresses the constraints of her body in the most brutal, excessive way.

Evie's statement: *"The whole time, growing up, I just thought being a woman would be ... not such a disappointment."*[282] functions as a crucial moment of disillusionment that undermines the motivations behind her transgressive self-reconstruction. In the novel, Evie's transition is presented as a deliberate and deeply internalised attempt to construct a new, socially legible identity aligned with standards of femininity. However, this confession reveals a contrast between the idealised image of womanhood Evie has internalised and the reality of her lived experience post transition. Rather than offering fulfilment or a sense of authenticity, her

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[278] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 164.
[279] Ibid.
[280] Ibid.
[281] Ibid.
[282] Ibid., p. 166.

new identity exposes her to a different set of pressures and disappointments, particularly within the modelling industry, where femininity is relentlessly commodified.

"Evie will self-mutilate. All this navel gazing. Evie had nobody except she had a ton of family money."[283] Ultimately, Evie illustrates the paradox of transgressive self-creation and reinvention within capitalist frameworks. Her transformation is radical in intention, yet constantly challenged by beauty standards, industry demands, and internalised insecurity. Her identity, while constructed with the utmost precision, remains unstable, always conditioned by external validation. Unlike Brandy, who invents an entirely new persona as a radical act of erasure, Evie does not create; she conforms. Her transformation, though radical in execution, ultimately strives to fit into rather than resist pre-existing beauty paradigms. Whereas Brandy becomes something ungraspable and deliberately transgressive, Evie aspires to become recognisable and desirable within the framework of conventional beauty.

10.4.2 Manus Kelley: The Failed Masculinity

Manus Kelley, the narrator's former fiancé who abandoned her when *"he saw what was left"*[284], initially enters the narrative as an epitome of heteronormative masculinity. A police detective in Vice, seven years older than Shannon, physically attractive with *"square-jawed, cheekboned good looks"*[285], and fearless as he was *"afraid for the first time in his life because I'm holding Evie's rifle."*[286], Manus radiates the superficial traits of traditional male authority. This initial portrayal immediately positions him as a critique of conventional masculinity, suggesting that what appears strong, authoritative, and dominant is often merely a superficial illusion. Even in moments of vulnerability, as even *"at the end of a rifle, Manus's skin feels tight and sexy"*[287], his desirability is framed in aesthetic rather than emotional terms, emphasising the importance of appearance. Although seemingly assigned the role of the protector or alpha male, Manus in fact serves as a shallow performance of masculinity.

This shallow performance of masculinity is further complicated by early textual clues regarding his sexuality and professional façade. Shannon's recollection that *"he wore a Speedo, and any smart woman should know that means bisexual at least"*[288] foreshadows the ambiguity and instability of his sexuality. His professional identity too becomes subject to ridicule and

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[283] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 70.
[284] Ibid., p. 38.
[285] Ibid., p. 229.
[286] Ibid., p. 137.
[287] Ibid., p. 160.
[288] Ibid., p. 39.

parody: *"Sure, Manus used to be a police vice detective, if you consider wagging your butt around the bushes in Washington Park wearing a Speedo bikini a size too small and hoping some lonely sex hound will whip his dick out, if that's detective work, then, sure, Manus was a detective."*[289] This critique not only undermines his professional credibility but also subverts the very notion of his job as a humiliating performance. This depiction of his position within the police department, far from affirming his authority, instead renders Manus a shell of masculinity, a figure desperately clinging to relevance and willing to resort to any means to succeed, driven by the perceived threat that: *"The pressure was on to replace him with a new model."*[290]

Manus's desperate clinging to an idealised, albeit shallow, masculinity is further illuminated by his obsession with physical appearance, exemplified in the line: *"What I need is for my basket to look big, but my ass to look adolescent."*[291] This grotesque scene culminates in the moment where he *"takes the slice of bread and stuffs it inside between himself and the crotch of the Speedo,"*[292] casually justifying the act by claiming *"this is how underwear models get a better look."*[293]

This moment functions as an example of anxious masculinity, exaggerated to absurdity. It simultaneously critiques the societal pressures on men to conform to idealised, often unrealistic, body images, turning a symbol of potency into an object of ridicule. However, his assertion of knowledge regarding modelling practices, especially in such a niche and bodily specific context, raises questions about its origin. Given that such information lies far outside the expected expertise of a vice detective, two interpretative possibilities emerge: either the claim is a fabricated rationalisation masking sexual deviance or fetish, or it reflects his identification with the objectified male body that disrupts the heteronormative persona he projects.

These two interpretative possibilities highlight Manus's profound internal conflict, presenting him as either an active deceiver or a product of the very objectification he seemingly embodies, thus deepening the novel's critique of fixed gender roles. Manus is hence revealed as intentionally performing desirability, which further underscores the ambiguity of his identity and sexuality. Like the novel's other protagonists, who are all women or identify as such, Manus commodifies his body, signalling that the pressures to be validated, desired, and visible transcend gender boundaries. These demands are not exclusive to women; instead, they operate

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[289] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 228.
[290] Ibid., p. 232.
[291] Ibid., p. 229.
[292] Ibid.
[293] Ibid.

across the spectrum of identity, revealing that the male body, too, is subject to the exact mechanisms of objectification, performance, and aesthetic modification.

Throughout *Invisible Monsters,* Manus Kelley operates under various aliases, all part of the *Brandy Alexander Witness Reincarnation Project*[294], Seth Thomas, Denver, Alfa, among others, underscoring the fragmentation and fluidity of identity within the novel. The character remains entangled with all the novel's central female characters. He is Shannon's former fiancé, Evie's secret lover, and later becomes obsessed with Brandy Alexander. *"Manus being all the time looking at Brandy, listening to her, in love with her so obvious I only wanted to kill them in worse and more painful ways."*[295] *"I could have just watched the stupid infomercial and known Manus and Evie had some tortured sick relationship they wanted to think was true love."*[296] His obsession with Brandy, who bears a striking resemblance to Shannon, suggests his attraction is rooted not in genuine connection but in superficial beauty. This is further underscored by his disturbing actions toward Brandy when she was still Shane, a sixteen-year-old boy.

"'This guy,' Brandy says, 'he asks me to get in his car, to talk, just to talk, and he asks if I have anything I'd like to say that maybe I was too afraid to tell any of the child service people.' […] 'This guy, this detective, I tell him, 'No,' and he says, 'Good.' He says he likes a kid who can keep a secret.'"[297] The passage exposes the deceptive nature of Manus's authority. He is initially presented as an authoritative, influential, and trustworthy figure, yet he abuses this position to fulfil his deviant desires.

It twists trust into a mechanism of control, revealing the inauthenticity of his professional persona. *"'The police guy,' Brandy says, […] 'he puts his hand on me, right up the leg of my shorts, and he says we don't have to re-open the case. We don't have to cause my family any more problems.' Brandy says, 'This detective says the police want to arrest my father for suspicion. He can stop them, he says. He says, it's all up to me.'"*[298] This further exposes the controlling nature of Manus's character, where he abuses his power to satisfy his own sexual lust. *"'The police guy,' Brandy says, 'he was young, twenty-one or twenty-two. He wasn't some dirty old man. It wasn't horrible,' she says, 'but it wasn't love.' […] 'Mostly,' Brandy says, 'it made me confused for a long time.'"*[299]

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[294] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 225.
[295] Ibid.
[296] Ibid., p. 120.
[297] Ibid., pp. 250–251.
[298] Ibid., p. 251.
[299] Ibid., p. 252.

The incident happened during Shane's formative years and may have contributed to his later extensive bodily modifications and gender transition, as an attempt to reclaim control over his body. *"I do the homework: Manus is thirty years old. Brandy's twenty-four. When Brandy was sixteen I was fifteen. When Brandy was sixteen, maybe Manus was already part of our lives."*[300] His forceful sexual encounter with Shane highlights the violent, controlling nature of his masculine façade and reveals his deviant sexual behaviour. His sexually compulsive and controlling nature becomes a direct observation by another character, the Queen Supreme herself: *"Brandy says, 'Why is it you have to seduce every living thing you come across?' […] Seth giggles. Seth blushes and twists some of his hair around a finger. He says, 'You make me sound so sexually compulsive.'"*[301]

"And maybe when he kisses Brandy Alexander's royal butt he's not just pretending. Maybe it's the two of them in love when I'm not around. This wouldn't be the first time I've lost him."[302] Throughout the novel, the narrator remains obsessed with Manus, yet she frequently questions whether her feelings stem from love or from something self-destructive. In a moment of self-awareness, Shannon reflects: *"Jump to Manus watching me do that infomercial. […] I thought we were a real love relationship. I did. I was very invested in love, but it was just this long, long sex thing that could end at any moment because, after all, it's just about getting off."*[303]

Her words destroy the romantic connection linked to intimacy and reduce it to a purely physical encounter, devoid of its emotional depth, also evident in the line: *"Almost all the time, you tell yourself you're loving somebody when you're just using them. This only looks like love."*[304] This confession exposes the relationship's performative core and suggests that love itself has become an imitation designed to mimic affection. Love becomes a construct manufactured to satisfy personal desires rather than shared emotional connection. Relationships thus turn into transactions, where individuals are not truly loved but used, reflecting the commodification of emotion that parallels the omnipresent commodification of the body.

This emotional detachment also becomes apparent in a life-or-death situation. *"Let's not anybody get killed, here." And it's so déjà vu. This was the exact way Manus Kelley would ask if I'd gotten my orgasm. Not the words, but the voice."*[305] This parallel reveals that for Manus, sex was fundamentally transactional. The resemblance of the same voice across two such

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[300] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 253.
[301] Ibid., p. 87.
[302] Ibid., p. 114.
[303] Ibid., p. 195.
[304] Ibid.
[305] Ibid., p. 138.

different contexts suggests that he takes no interest in the emotional fulfilment of the act, but rather its completion. This shared vocal pattern exposes Manus as controlling even in the most intimate situations.

When referring to Manus being with Evie, the narrator claims that: *"The word love tastes like earwax when I think it about Manus and Evie."*[306] The obsession persists, as the narrator admits: *"[...], how can I keep thinking I love Manus? Manus is just the last man who thought I was beautiful. Who kissed me on the lips. Who touched me. Manus is just the last man who ever told me he loved me."*[307] This confession escalates into a desired vengeance: *"Manus cheated on me with Evie, but I still love him so much I'll hide any amount of conjugated estrogen in his food. So much I'll do anything to destroy him."*[308] *"I love Seth Thomas so much I have to destroy him. I over-compensate by worshiping the queen supreme. Seth will never love me. No one will ever love me ever again."*[309] The emotional needs fuel violence, and the narrator no longer seeks intimacy and love but revenge.

The destructive impulse finds its most profound expression in Shannon's subsequent assault on Manus's very foundation and essence of masculinity. Moving beyond emotional damage, Shannon deliberately sabotages his body. By secretly administering estrogen and other hormones to Manus, she enacts a profound and involuntary gender and physiological transgression, forcing him into a physical transformation that directly challenges the foundations of his constructed identity and the societal norms he once embodied. Paradoxically, it is Manus who taught Shannon and Brandy how to get drugs.[310]

As the narrator admits: *"It was in San Francisco I started Denver on his own secret hormone therapy to destroy him."*[311] Shannon's inability to possess Manus fuels a destructive desire for control, leading her to seek his destruction not through death, but through a systematic dismantling of his desirability. This vengeful impulse is explicitly articulated when she confesses: *"And I want Seth dead. Worse than dead, I want him bloated with water and insecure and emotional. If Seth doesn't want me, I want to not want him."*[312] Her longing for him to be emotional directly targets the emotional detachment that defined his character, a quality previously highlighted by his transactional approach to intimacy.

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[306] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 160.
[307] Ibid., p. 198.
[308] Ibid., p. 140.
[309] Ibid., p. 104.
[310] Ibid., p. 225.
[311] Ibid., p. 232.
[312] Ibid., p. 115.

Furthermore, her desire to see him fat and bloated aims to destroy the pitch-perfect body and face, the superficial masculine traits that initially draw her to him. Shannon observes the success of her endeavour as she notices his forced physical decline: *"Inside his clothes, instead of the plates of hard muscle that used to drive me crazy, now the fat pushes his shirt out over the top of his belt. It's the Premarin. His sexy five o'clock shadow is fading from the Provera. Even his fingers swell around his old letterman's ring."*[313] This physical deterioration confirms her successful attempt at destroying his masculinity, transforming him into a distorted, undesirable version of his former self, and her reclamation of power through bodily transgression.

The detail when *"the fat pushes his shirt out over the top of his belt"*[314] undergoes a symbolic transformation when juxtaposed with Shannon's later sexual fantasy: *"I want Seth's belt around my neck. I want Seth's fingers in my mouth and his hands pulling my knees apart and then his wet fingers prying me open."*[315] Initially, the belt serves as a literal marker of Manus's physical deterioration, signifying his failure to retain the masculine body, literally transgressing beyond its former boundaries, and symbolising Shannon's successful attempt at destroying it. Yet, in Shannon's fantasy, the belt transforms from a mere garment into an instrument of domination, desire, and intimacy. This eroticism, centred on a body she deliberately destroyed, exposes the complex and often contradictory nature of Shannon's actions.

The contradiction of her actions can be seen when she states: *"Sure, it's all just for fun. Watching for his breasts to develop. Seeing his macho babe-magnet swagger go to fat and him taking naps in the afternoon. All that's great, but his being dead would let me move on to explore other interests."*[316]

While other characters in *Invisible Monsters* undergo radical bodily changes, theirs are often presented as voluntary or driven by a desire for reinvention or escape. Manus's transition is forcible, insidious, and entirely non-consensual. Unlike characters who actively seek to transcend societal norms, Manus becomes unwillingly stripped of his masculine signifiers. This forced feminisation punishes him not just by rendering him undesirable, but by erasing the very self he constructed and so desperately tried to retain.

Manus Kelley's frequent, almost obsessive, reference to God functions not as a testament to religious faith, but as a commentary on the nature of authority. His question: *"When did the*

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[313] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4., p. 101.
[314] Ibid.
[315] Ibid., p. 115.
[316] Ibid., p. 78.

future switch from being a promise to being a threat?"[317] encapsulates his personal life experience as a series of disappointments, as well as portraying him as a man terrified by time, ageing, irrelevance, and ultimately being replaced. He explicitly equates parents with God, stating that: *"your folks are like God because you want to know they're out there and you want them to approve of your life, still you only call them when you're in crisis and need something."*[318] This analogy, later reinforced by *"Seth says how your being born makes your parents God. You owe them your life, and they can control you,"*[319] shows that for him, love is rooted in obligation and control.

For Manus, parenthood is less about nurture and more about oppression. His direct criticism: *"'First,' Manus says, 'your parents, they give you your life, but then they try to give you their life'"*[320] reveals a deeper psychological conflict linked to his childhood. The disinterest and self-centeredness of his parents can be seen when he remembers being given a *"box all wrapped up. It's the size of a high-end stereo system or a wide-screen television. This is what I'm hoping for. I mean, it could've been anything else, and I would've liked it more."*[321] *"'No,' Manus says. 'they give me this shit.' […] 'The whole box,' Manus says, 'is full of all this shit and heirlooms that nobody else wants.'"*[322]

Manus's profound resentment, stemming from his parents' perceived divine-like control, manifests in a radical act of self-erasure, as he retrieves his birth certificate and *"chucks it out of existence."*[323] This act of destroying his birth certificate represents his desperate attempt to liberate himself from the constraints of the past and his God-like parents. By destroying it, Manus rejects the inherited identity and strives for authentic autonomy. While other characters try to reinvent and recreate, Manus erases.

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[317] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 103.
[318] Ibid., p. 116.
[319] Ibid., p. 175.
[320] Ibid., p. 210.
[321] Ibid., pp. 211–212.
[322] Ibid., p. 212.
[323] Ibid., p. 215.

10.5 Comparative Analysis of the Characters

In Chuck Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters*, the central figures collectively undergo radical and violent transformations, both physically and psychologically, that serve not only as acts of rebellion against societal norms but also as desperate attempts to reclaim agency in a world obsessed with superficiality. This comparative analysis systematically explores the complex psychological struggles and physical transformations these characters undergo, examining how their stories reflect the novel's profound thematic concerns.

Through a detailed examination of their shared struggles with self-definition, varied engagements with the body, consistent reliance on constructed roles, and their profound disillusionment with the norms of contemporary consumer culture, this chapter aims to show how Palahniuk dissects the human condition in an era marked by widespread superficiality and constant aesthetic reinvention. The analysis will also highlight not only the similarities in their experience of commodification and control, but also the crucial differences in their ability to act, whether their transformations appear as voluntary acts of liberation, tragic surrenders to societal demands, or insidious manifestation of vengeance, ultimately demonstrating how these characters both embody and challenge the very boundaries of gender, desire, and selfhood.

10.5.1 The Body: Transformations and the Aesthetic Control

Invisible Monsters centres upon the theme of the body as a mutable canvas, suitable for both radical self-creation and destruction. The narrative explores this theme through the literal and symbolic transformations undergone by all four central characters, although with critical distinctions in their mediation.

Brandy Alexander stands as the "Queen of Reinvention", embodying semi-voluntary pursuit of bodily modification as an ultimate act of self-reconstruction. Her journey from Shane to Brandy, facilitated by extensive plastic surgery, hormonal treatments, and vocal training, is a deliberate rejection of assigned identity and an embrace of fluidity. She constructs herself into a postmodern goddess of beauty, turning her body into capital within the consumerist logic she simultaneously critiques and exploits. Her transformation cannot be understood as a mere pursuit of femininity, but rather as an intentional change, where beauty becomes a chosen weapon and identity a deliberately crafted construct.

Crucially, this radical shift was not driven by a genuine desire to become a woman, but rather by the perverse idea that undergoing such a change represented the most irreversible

transgression she could conceive. For Brandy, the body serves as a vehicle for escaping the confines of labels, achieving a radical form of freedom through cosmetic and aesthetic alterations.

In contrast, Shannon McFarland's bodily transformation, while initially a result of trauma, evolves into a complex act of self-disfigurement that paradoxically seeks liberation through exclusion. Her pursuit of invisibility challenges the oppressive gaze of consumer culture that had previously defined her. Her almost grotesque appearance operates as a violent rejection of her former commodified self. Yet, her disfigurement, though initially portrayed as involuntary, is revealed to be a chosen means to control perception and escape the addiction of beauty. Her body becomes a site of protest, transforming itself into a sanctuary from the pressures of perfection.

Evie Cottrell represents a more ambiguous form of bodily transformation, one driven by a desperate need for validation and conformity within existing beauty paradigms. Her sexual reassignment surgery, while a significant physical change, was primarily motivated by a desire to fit into a constructed feminine ideal, distinct from Brandy's radical pursuit of identity annihilation. Brandy's radical transformation neither rejects visibility nor wholly conforms to it; instead, she manipulates visibility on her own terms, constantly shifting, performing, and rewriting the narrative. Brandy's fluidity exposes the failure of Shannon's attempt to fully escape the self and simultaneously undermines Evie's belief that conformity to beauty standards guarantees fulfilment.

Evie, who fully embraces the attention that comes with being beautiful, positions herself as a consumable product, embodying the masochistic tendencies of aesthetic perfectionism. Her body serves as a testament to the pain and sacrifice involved in maintaining a façade of perfection demanded by the fashion industry, ultimately becoming a site of both achievement and enduring suffering. Her transformations are less about radical reinvention and more about achieving an idealised, albeit painful, version of a conventional female body.

While Shannon seeks to escape the relentless gaze, to withdraw from the prison of aesthetic scrutiny, Evie craves attention, desperately performing a femininity she believes will grant her recognition and value. Shannon mutilates herself to escape the very gaze that Evie seeks, and their opposing trajectories underscore the inescapable reach of societal beauty norms; whether one resists them or embraces them, the body remains under supervision and control.

Manus Kelley's bodily transformation is presented as entirely involuntary, an act of bodily sabotage inflicted by Shannon. The unconscious consumption of estrogen and other hormones

forces Manus into an involuntary gender and physiological transgression, dismantling his former perfect masculine body, once at the centre of his identity. Manus becomes unwillingly stripped of his masculine traits and turned into a grotesque parody of a man. Unlike the other characters who embrace or choose their fluidity, Manus is on the opposite side, emphasising the cruelty of one's desire for absolute control over another's existence. His physical decline is not merely an aesthetic shift but a manifestation of his eroding autonomy and the profound loss of self that accompanies such involuntary bodily modifications.

The bodily modifications throughout the novel, whether self-inflicted, surgically induced, or forced upon others, operate in a dual manner. They act as both rebellions against oppressive norms and as new forms of subjection to internalised pressures. Brandy transcends the former fixed self, but without fully wanting to. Shannon's mutilation initially functions as an act of freedom from the gaze, yet she soon finds herself trapped in the paradox of invisible visibility. Evie's surgical transformation, motivated by the desire to conform to idealised femininity, situates her as the most tragic figure in this dynamic. She strives to perfect the feminine image, but in doing so, she further entangles herself within the oppressive structures that devalue her. Manus's forced bodily transformation, inflicted by Shannon's hormonal sabotage, stands as the ultimate violation. His loss of control strips away the masculine bravado he carefully constructed, revealing that gendered identity functions as a fragile performance.

Together, these characters embody the inescapable tension between the desire to transgress and to adhere to societal norms. Their transformations signal not pure rebellion nor simple conformity, but the impossibility of fully escaping the social expectations that shape the body and the self.

10.5.2 Performance and the Breakdown of Authenticity

In the novel, identity functions not as a stable essence but as a manipulated, fragmented performance. This fragmentation is not merely a psychological state, but a direct critique of postmodern consumer culture, which reduces selfhood to a commodity to be consumed. Each central character engages in a unique, often violent process of self-reinvention in response to trauma, alienation, and societal expectation. Through their varied relationships to image and recognition, Palahniuk demonstrates that authenticity emerges not from stability but from transgression and collapse. The novel portrays identity as unstable, sustained through repetition, visibility, and external validation.

Brandy Alexander constructs an identity that defies categorisation. Her transformation into a glamorous, hyper-feminine icon is not a pursuit of authenticity in the traditional sense but

a radical refusal to submit to assigned identity. She seeks to destroy the self that society imposed on her. For Brandy, authenticity lies in autonomy, in the process of construction. She is the most successful, most dominant architect of her own identity. Her Witness Reincarnation Project embodies her ideology. *"Some days, I hate it when Brandy changes our lives without warning. Sometimes, twice in one day, you have to live up to a new identity. A new name. New relationships. Handicaps- It's hard to remember who I started this road trip being."*[324] Brandy's approach to identity demonstrates her radical fluidity, and more critically, her ability to impose this fluidity onto others. She has control not only over her own persona but also over the identities and realities of those around her. Brandy, having mastered her own reinvention, now asserts a dominant power over the selfhood of her companions, compelling them into uncomfortable and disorienting transformations. For her, identity is a series of roles to be adopted and discarded at will. While her refusal of a stable identity can certainly liberate her from the labels society imposes, this refusal also traps her into an eternal performance of transgression.

Shannon McFarland, by contrast, initially pursues authenticity through destruction. Her facial disfigurement symbolises an attempt to escape from the roles projected onto her. She wants to vanish from the gaze that commodifies her. Yet, her self-erasure quickly reveals another trap, as even outside beauty, she remains defined by its absence. She never entirely sheds her internalised desire for visibility and validation. Her obsession with beauty, even as she claims to reject it, continues to structure her sense of self. Ultimately, Shannon's struggle suggests that the search for an authentic self is defined by societal definitions of visibility, worth, and, in her case, womanhood. Her final gesture of relinquishing her name and life to Brandy signals not a reclaiming of self but a surrender of identity altogether, as if authenticity can only be reached through annihilation. This suggests that true authenticity can only be achieved by disappearing entirely from the commodified world, perhaps implying that in a consumer society, a truly authentic self cannot exist within its confines.

Evie Cottrell performs identity with obsessive precision. Unlike Brandy, who deconstructs gender, or Shannon, who obliterates beauty, Evie clings to femininity as salvation. Her transition into femininity, shaped by desire for recognition and familial rejection, reflects a desperate attempt to be loved, seen, and admired. Her identity becomes inseparable from the gaze as she does not feel real unless people are watching. Evie represents the commodified self in its purest form, crafted, marketed, but hollow. Her moments of angry outbursts and vulnerability are

[324] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Invisible Monsters*. London: Vintage Books, 2003. ISBN 00-992-8544-4. p. 64.

moments of sincerity, revealing that beneath her constructed identity lies a void. These times of honesty are the breakdowns of her meticulously constructed façade. This suggests that, in her case, authenticity can only surface in the raw, unscripted moments when the performance weakens. Her tragedy lies in her inability to sustain these authentic glimpses, constantly returning to the illusion of the validated, crafted self, thereby demonstrating that when identity depends on validation, authenticity dissolves into performance.

Manus Kelley's identity presents a tragic exploration of constructed masculinity, inauthenticity, and the devastating impact of external forces upon the self. Through this character, Palahniuk reveals that performativity is not exclusive to femininity. Initially, his portrayal as the epitome of masculinity, with his perfect physique and a career as a detective, positions him in the role of a typical alpha male. Yet, Manus's selfhood soon reveals itself to be a meticulously orchestrated performance, rather than an authentic internal state. The desperate act of stuffing his underwear reveals the insecurity otherwise hidden beneath the façade, exposing the fragility of an identity solely based on external validation and societal ideals. Authenticity for Manus thus proves impossible, as his core being functions as a reaction to, and a performance for, others, rather than a genuine expression of self.

Through the distinct trajectories of Brandy Alexander, Shannon McFarland, Evie Cottrell, and Manus Kelley, Palahniuk demonstrates how authenticity emerges less from stability and more often from acts of transgression and collapse. Brandy's radical self-construction, Shannon's paradoxical pursuit of authenticity through annihilation, Evie's desperate reliance on external validation, and Manus's tragic adherence to a false masculine façade collectively underscore the novel's central argument that identity and genuine selfhood are relentlessly shaped by societal pressures and the demanding gaze of others.

11 Fight Club

Fight Club offers a narrative occupied with psychological fracture, cultural exhaustion, and the search for authenticity within the structures of late capitalist society. At its centre stands an unnamed narrator whose life, consumed by corporate monotony, insomnia, and consumerism, collapses under the pressures of performativity and psychological deprivation. Through its narrative and the emergence of the alter ego Tyler Durden, the novel discusses the conditions that shape identity and the destructive methods individuals adopt to reclaim a sense of meaning. The Narrator, Tyler Durden, Marla Singer, and the Space Monkeys all embody distinct responses to the existential crisis that modern society imposes.

The novel centres upon the emptiness of the Narrator's existence. His condominium, decorated with obsessive attention to perfection, illustrates how consumer culture promises identity through accumulation while providing only emptiness. His participation in support groups, initially taken as a therapy for his insomnia, exposes the novel's preoccupation with the collapse of authenticity. The Narrator takes on the vulnerability of the terminally ill, adopting their pain as a temporary identity that allows him to feel something within a life devoid of meaning. The support groups, which should offer sincerity, function instead as places for rehearsed suffering, emphasising the destabilising effect of a culture in which authenticity has become indistinguishable from performance.

Into this artificially manufactured existence enters Marla Singer, whose presence ruptures the fragile catharsis the Narrator has constructed. She mirrors his behaviour so precisely that she becomes a reflection of his own fraudulent existence. Marla's disregard for social status, material possessions, and stability positions her as the opposite of the consumerist life the Narrator embraces. Her chaotic presence shatters the Narrator's performance. The psychological tension initiated by her creates the prerequisite for the emergence of Tyler Durden, the embodiment of everything the Narrator suppresses.

Tyler enters the narrative as a charismatic, liberated, and masculine figure, yet he is fundamentally a mere psychological construction born from the Narrator's repressed impulses. His identity, built in opposition to consumerism, modern masculinity, and corporate obedience, functions as both an ideal and a threat. He articulates the desire for destruction as a pathway to freedom and authenticity, positioning violence as the only method of reclaiming control from the forces that have drained men of purpose. His philosophy attracts men who are equally disillusioned, revealing a generational crisis in which men feel directionless and deprived of meaning.

The formation of fight club becomes the embodiment of Tyler's vision. In dark basements across the world, men reject the passivity of modern life, returning to their primal urges, reintroducing meaning and authenticity through violence. The club quickly evolves into a collective identity that exceeds individual intention. Its popularity reflects a widespread cultural striving for authenticity.

The escalation from fight club to Project Mayhem marks the transformation of Tyler's philosophy into totalitarian action. This movement operates through strict hierarchy, anonymity, and utter devotion. The Space Monkeys, Tyler's obedient followers, relinquish their identities in exchange for purpose, discipline, and a sense of belonging. This dissolution reflects the central paradox of Durden's ideology: the attempt to escape societal conformity, replacing it with another, more extreme form of it.

The Space Monkeys reveal the novel's broader commentary on consumerism. Project Mayhem thrives on the emptiness produced by capitalism and the loneliness of modern life. Through violent tasks, property destruction, and embraced chaos, the group attempts to destroy the society that shaped them. The extreme nature of the movement can be most notably seen in their treatment of death as a form of martyrdom, a sign that the individual has finally gained meaning.

The climax of the novel occurs when the Narrator realises that Tyler's decisions and limitations are grounded in his own mind. Tyler cannot operate beyond what the Narrator unconsciously allows. This revelation dissolves Tyler's authority and forces the Narrator to confront the truth that the rebellion he has built has turned into a prison. In attempting to destroy the consumer culture and reject the constraints of modern life, he has reproduced the same oppressive structures through both fight club and Project Mayhem. His final confrontation with Tyler symbolises a desperate attempt to reclaim his autonomy, identity, and control from the part of himself that has overtaken his life.

The Narrator's psychological reconstruction remains incomplete, and the threats of Project Mayhem continue across the country. Across its narrative, *Fight Club* positions identity as unstable and vulnerable to external forces. The characters embody the consequences of consumerism, alienation, and capitalist monotony. In this way, the novel serves not only as a narrative about violence and rebellion but as a deep critique of contemporary existence, revealing how identity fractures under the pressures of consumer culture and how desperate the human desire for authenticity becomes in a world that offers only replication. The following chapters of this thesis examine these dynamics in detail, showcasing how the novel's characters expose the destructive paths individuals follow in their struggle to feel authentic.

11.1 Marla Singer: The Authentic Faker

Marla Singer, with her short, matte black hair and large eyes, reminiscent of those in Japanese animation[325], enters the novel as a disruptive force that dismantles the Narrator's illusion of order and authenticity. Her arrival fractures the controlled environment of the consumer-driven existence. She introduces chaos into a world obsessed with stability, exposing the psychological fragility of capitalist life.

This chapter examines Marla as an embodiment of decay, revealing the Narrator's inauthenticity and the culture's broader crisis of selfhood. Through her transgressive rejection of beauty, conformity, and material worth, she disrupts the capitalist logic that equates value with appearance.

The narrator's initial encounter with Marla Singer at a support group meeting immediately shatters his carefully constructed psychological and social facade. Her sudden emergence constitutes not a mere situational inconvenience, but rather an unwanted intrusive element that actively appropriates the emotional catharsis the narrator had recently established.

"The only woman here at Remaining Men Together, the testicular cancer support group, this woman smokes her cigarette under the burden of a stranger, and her eyes come together with mine.

Faker.

Faker.

Faker."[326]

The narrator's meticulously constructed identity as an ill person is immediately revealed to be a defensive performance, rendering his behaviour fundamentally inauthentic. When he observes Marla mirroring his behaviour, she becomes a reflection of his own fraudulent existence. This construction of the self through borrowed social roles exemplifies what Martin Heidegger terms the mode of inauthenticity. One exists in the mode of inauthenticity if they have either lost or only seemingly achieved themselves.[327]

The shared gaze does not mean recognition, but rather mutual exposure —an acknowledgement of their shared deceit. Marla threatens his borrowed identity, the one that allows him to feel and, more importantly, to sleep. A support group is intended as a space of genuine

[325] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 18.
[326] Ibid.
[327] WRATHAL, Mark. *Martin Heidegger*. Online. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2025 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.). [Accessed October 03 2025]. Available at: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger/.

vulnerability; however, Palahniuk's versions of those groups expose his vision of a culture where authenticity dissolves into performance. Rather than preserving a sanctuary of sincerity that the narrator and Marla later corrupt, these gatherings already function with theatrical confessions and empathy. Authentic emotions and feelings are treated as goods of consumption. Through the suffering of others, both the Narrator and Marla attempt to verify their own existence within a culture that offers only simulation and repetition. This reveals how late-capitalist subjects can pursue truth merely through imitation and borrowed feeling.

"Until tonight, two years of success until tonight, because I can't cry with this woman watching me. Because I can't hit rock bottom, I can't be saved."[328] Marla's gaze threatens the narrator's orchestrated performance, as her presence exposes the truth behind his attendance at the meetings, forcing him into an emotional void. By attending the same gatherings, Marla essentially steals his method of emotional release, thus leaving him with hatred towards her that he cannot properly process or express.

Marla's search for meaning begins with the intensely personal crisis of a potential illness: *"Marla had started going to the support group after she found the first lump."*[329] This immediate confrontation with her own finitude shatters her existing reality, exposing her to the raw, brutal experience of vulnerability. Her core tragic philosophy that *"she can die at any moment"*[330] and the *"tragedy that she doesn't"*[331] highlights her deep sense of alienation and the inability to live up to her fears. Her escape from the medical system after seeing the clinic's waiting room[332] is a rejection of the social degradation that society imposes on the uninsured and the unwell.

Her decision to attend the support groups, a desperate act of psychological self-treatment, was fuelled by the desire to belong. By surrounding herself with the suffering of others, she sought to neutralise her own fear, finding a twisted comfort in shared pain. Her observation that *"Everyone has something wrong"*[333] is a bleak acceptance of universal failure, suggesting that genuine connection can only be found under the circumstances of shared tragedy. Marla's transition from passive avoidance to active participation reveals her path toward transgressive authenticity. Her first goal was merely the psychological relief; however, this immersion

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[328] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 22.
[329] Ibid., p. 107.
[330] Ibid., p. 108.
[331] Ibid.
[332] Ibid.
[333] Ibid., p. 109.

eventually led to the radical realisation that she could only feel truly alive when directly confronting death.[334]

The Narrator's performative experience of suffering and his incapacity for genuine emotional release stand in stark contrast to Marla's unmediated and affectively authentic presence – embodied most strikingly in her casual act of smoking a cigarette amid a room of individuals terminally ill with cancer.[335] The narrator then projects his own duplicity onto her as he states: *"With her watching, I'm a liar. She's a fake. She's the liar."*[336] He desperately attempts to invalidate her and restore his own sense of control. Rather than confronting his own fraud, he externalises the lie and blames the other person. By constantly repeating that Marla is a fake and a liar, the Narrator attempts to convince both himself and the reader that the problem lies with her, not him.

Marla's character also highlights the psychological conflict rooted in the novel's central theme of anti-consumerism. She challenges the narrator's consumerist identity by serving as its complete opposite. Marla Singer embodies everything the narrator's consumerist life rejects: chaos, imperfection, and disregard for possessions. She lives in room 8G in the Regent Hotel[337] and possesses virtually nothing of value.

While the Narrator's existence previously revolved around the ownership of the newest furniture and meticulous aesthetic perfection, Marla Singer represents the complete opposite. This opposition finds its manifestation through her fashion choices, as well as her living situation. Her choice of a devalued, unwanted bridesmaid's dress and a cheap hotel room highlight her anti-materialist philosophy that the Narrator, prior to his psychological breakdown, could never tolerate.

"'I wanted to show you my new dress,' Marla says. 'It's a bridesmaid dress and it's all hand sewn. Do you like it? The Goodwill thrift sold it for one dollar. Somebody did all these tiny stitches just to make this ugly, ugly dress,' Marla says."[338] Her commentary on the hand-sewn, inexpensive dress crystallises the novel's criticism of modern consumerism and the devaluation of labour. By focusing on the tiny stitches used to create an ugly dress that was then sold for a negligible price, Marla highlights the disconnect between human effort and material worth. Her conscious choice to embrace the aesthetically flawed and rejected serves as a gesture

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[334] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 38.
[335] Ibid., p. 36.
[336] Ibid., p. 23.
[337] Ibid., pp. 60–61.
[338] Ibid., p. 67.

against the culture where things become easily disposable. *"What Marla loves, she says, is all the things that people love intensely and then dump an hour or a day after."*[339]

"'The Animal Control place is the best place to go,' Marla says. 'Where all the animals, the little doggies and kitties that people loved and then dumped, even the old animals, dance and jump around for your attention because after three days, they get an overdose shot of sodium phenobarbital and then into the big pet oven.'"[340] This statement serves as a grim allegory that underscores the disposable nature of life and emotional commitment within the culture of late capitalism. By highlighting the fate of pets who were "loved and then dumped" before their euthanasia, Marla draws a direct parallel between the discard of consumerist goods and the devaluation of life. The short three-day window before execution underscores the efficiency and finality with which modern society disposes of everything that ceases to provide immediate gratification.

Marla, *"who goes to Laundromats to steal jeans out of the dryers and sell them at twelve dollars a pair to those places that buy used jeans,"*[341] deliberately denies the capitalist fashion industry its power to assign value based on brand or novelty. The act of stealing and reselling jeans operates as a form of transgression that is both materially criminal and ideologically subversive, constituting an anti-consumerist praxis that destabilises the capitalist logic of commodity fetishism, where *the value of products is shaped more by the perceptions and meanings ascribed to them by consumers than by their practical uses.*[342] By selling the stolen items at a low, fixed price, Marla strips the commodities of their value and reduces them to mere utility. This transaction challenges the entire ideology of consumption. Her reliance on theft for income and her refusal to accumulate personal possessions solidify her role as an anti-materialist.

Singer's anti-materialist endeavours extend beyond her wardrobe choices of discarded clothing, manifesting crucially in her living space, which again functions as a counterpart to the Narrator's perfectly constructed consumerist "nest". Where the Narrator's condominium embodies a fraudulent identity achieved through meticulous accumulation of property, Marla's cheap hotel room provides a raw, chaotic shelter, reflecting her detachment from societal standards, expectations, and aspirations. Her unapologetic personality and willingness to accept

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339 PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 67.
340 Ibid.
341 Ibid, p. 89.
342 LASKY, Jack. *Commodity Fetishism*. Online. EBSCO. [Accessed: 5 October 2025]. Available at: https://www.ebsco.com/research-starters/economics/commodity-fetishism.

ugliness and devaluation force the Narrator to confront the profound emptiness beneath his own manufactured perfection.

Her dramatic self-proclamations of worthlessness further emphasise the chaotic truth of Marla's existence: *"Marla shouts to the police that the girl who lives in 8G used to be a lovely charming girl, but the girl is a monster bitch monster. The girl is infectious human waste, and she's confused and afraid to commit to the wrong thing so she won't commit to anything."*[343] By projecting her intense self-loathing, reducing her identity and value to an infectious human waste, Marla mirrors the Narrator's own dissociation from his true self. She acknowledges the profound self-confusion stemming from the inability to commit.

"'The girl in 8G has no faith in herself,' Marla shouts, 'and she's worried that as she grows older, she'll have fewer and fewer options.'"[344] This confession links her personal crisis directly to the anxieties of modern life. Her fear of a limited range of options disrupts the ideological promise of the American Dream, which is that of limitless opportunities. She exposes the reality where the promise of boundless choice leads merely to existential crisis, where, out of fear of making the wrong commitment, the individual commits to nothing.

Marla's psychological state is captured in the following statement: *"She never dreamed she could feel so 'smarvelous. She actually felt alive. Her skin was clearing up. All her life, she never saw a dead person. There was no real sense of life because she had nothing to contrast it with. Oh, but now there was dying and death and loss and grief. Weeping and shuddering, terror and remorse. Now that she knows where we're all going, Marla feels every moment of her life."*[345]

Marla's psyche embodies the Heideggerian concept of Being-towards-death by defining vitality solely through proximity to suffering and death. This need to derive vitality from death constitutes the fundamental psychological motivation behind her transgressive behaviour. Her chaotic lifestyle and presence at support groups are driven by an existential desire to confront death. This fixation on mortality disrupts her formerly inauthentic existence, characterised by a lack of exposure to it, as she endeavours to achieve authenticity in a society established on a manufactured sense of comfort.

Singer's confession regarding her former employment reveals the depth of her existential crisis and her radical solution: *"I used to work in a funeral home to feel good about myself, just*

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[343] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 61.
[344] Ibid.
[345] Ibid., p. 38.

the fact I was breathing."[346] Her need to define self-worth through negative contrast, finding value in being alive only by being surrounded by the dead, underscores the psychological poverty of her life before her confrontation with mortality.

Through the job, Marla attempted to create the contrast necessary to experience the raw reality. Furthermore, her statement that: *"Funerals are nothing compared to this. Funerals are all abstract ceremony. Here, you have a real experience of death."*[347] Marla's dismissal of funerals as abstract suggests that the traditional form of grieving has become an empty, symbolic gesture, a mere performance designed to defuse the terrifying reality of mortality.

This critique culminates in her observation that *"our culture has made death something wrong."*[348] By arguing that *"old animals should be an unnatural exception,"*[349] Marla positions the wild as a superior, honest system. She effectively labels the natural termination of life as authentic, while assuming that human effort to sustain life artificially is fundamentally inauthentic. Singer rejects the inauthentic existence that requires continuous, mediated avoidance of decay and death. By favouring the finality of the natural world, Marla exposes the truth that contemporary society, in its fear of annihilation, has rendered life itself sterile.

Marla's continued pursuit of self-destruction, noted by Tyler Durden: *"At least Marla's trying to hit bottom."*[350] is a critical statement that underscores the novel's critique of inauthenticity. Tyler's observation elevates Marla's self-destructive chaos from mere dysfunction to a logically motivated existential choice. In a society where consumer comfort relentlessly undermines genuine vulnerability and self-validation, the deliberate descent into existential despair is often framed as the only possible route to authenticity. Marla's willingness to embrace it is a transgressive act that acknowledges the inevitability of annihilation, whereas the Narrator must be forced into the same collapse. Tyler, as the Narrator's destructive alter ego, validates Marla's chaos, providing the necessary existential contrast that enables the Narrator's own destructive re-evaluation of his life.

Singer's chaos stems from her refusal of the feminine archetypes prescribed by capitalist culture. Society assigns women specific roles, identities, and functions. Within the prevailing capitalist order, women are typically positioned as the aesthetically pleasing, assigned to the domestic sphere of homemaking, and encouraged to pursue the ideals of beauty, stability, and

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[346] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 38.
[347] Ibid.
[348] Ibid., p. 103.
[349] Ibid.
[350] Ibid., p. 69.

motherhood. Marla consciously rejects all the roles. Her failure to embody the feminine ideal thus functions not as a personal insufficiency, but as an active, transgressive act that exposes the inauthenticity of the roles themselves.

Her philosophy manifests most clearly through her deliberate subversion of femininity in relation to beauty and social value. In a culture that equates womanhood with aesthetic appeal, composure, and emotional stability, she refuses to participate in the performance of attraction or self-assuredness. Rather than aspiring toward the polished ideal of feminine desirability, she consciously dismantles it through self-degradation and self-loathing. Calling herself a bitch and a human butt wipe exposes the absurdity of the aesthetic requirements that govern female identity.

By rejecting the imperative to appear put together, she embodies the psychological collapse that results from a society equating visibility with worth. The articulation of her personal physical and emotional descent becomes a form of resistance against the commodified ideal of females. By embracing the chaos, Marla performs a transgression that exposes the fabricated nature of gender roles. Her attempt to hit bottom should not be seen as a passive breakdown but as an act of authenticity, a refusal to maintain the façade assigned by patriarchal and consumerist ideologies.

11.2 The Narrator: Joe's Disintegrated Self

A sterile corporate routine, a life dictated by IKEA catalogues, and living in a world where *"One minute, you're a person, the next minute, you're an object"*[351] trap the nameless protagonist of *Fight Club* in emotional stasis. His chronic insomnia becomes the subconscious spark of rebellion, a force that drives him towards transgression. This impulse first manifests itself in his endeavours to regain control by infiltrating support groups for the terminally ill. By pretending to share their pain, he steals fragments of genuine emotional experience that consumer life denies him. When this performance of suffering loses its power, his psyche ruptures completely.

This chapter examines the unreliable narrator's consciousness that must transgress its own boundaries to escape a culture built on simulation, consumption, and control. Through this breakdown, transgression becomes the only path toward an authentic encounter with the self in a world ruled by superficiality.

The protagonist is introduced as a deeply disaffected individual, trapped in the monotony of his late-capitalist existence. His corporate job as well as his life in a condominium on the fifteenth floor of a high-rise leave him emotionally depleted and numb. This dissatisfaction with the absence of authentic meaning in his life manifests as chronic insomnia. This condition not only denies him sleep but also gradually dismantles his understanding of reality: *"I haven't slept in three days unless I'm sleeping now."*[352]. His perception of the world becomes increasingly distant, turning his day-to-day existence into an *"out-of-body experience"*[353] where *"everything is so far away, a copy of a copy of a copy."*[354] His sense of self, like the products that surround him, feels endlessly replicated and hollow; his identity is mediated through objects, leaving him in a cycle of imitation stripped of originality.

The Narrator's emotional release within the setting of support groups illustrates the central paradox of his character, where the longing for authenticity becomes substituted by simulated performance. His statement: *"I've been coming here every week for two years, and every week Bob wraps his arms around me, and I cry,"*[355] exposes the ritualised nature of his emotional expression. His apparent vulnerability is ultimately exposed as a meticulously staged act designed to fill the emptiness and monotony of his existence: *"This is why I loved the support*

[351] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 153.
[352] Ibid., p. 97.
[353] Ibid., p. 19.
[354] Ibid., p. 21.
[355] Ibid., p. 17.

groups so much, if people thought you were dying, they gave you their full attention. If this might be the last time they saw you, they really saw you." [356] The routine of attending meetings each week transforms any possibility of sincerity and authenticity into a ritualised, commodified performance.

His claim that *"crying is right at hand in the smothering dark, closed inside someone else"*[357] suggests both the physical intimacy and the existential suffocation that define his day-to-day experience. The comfort he derives from Big Bob's vicinity originates in the temporary dissolution of self – *"And I'm lost inside."*[358] Enclosed *inside someone else*, the Narrator abandons individuality and responsibility, entering a womb-like state where all the burdens of life disappear. His desire for regression to child-like dependency exposes the psychological and physiological exhaustion of a person constantly pressured by endless demands and performance. The Narrator's recognition that *"everything you can ever accomplish will end up as trash"*[359] highlights the realisation that everything leads only to waste.

Tears become the only available mode of authenticity. When the Narrator admits that *"it's easy to cry when you realize that everyone you love will reject you or die,"*[360] and *"your life comes down to nothing, and not even nothing, oblivion,"*[361] he articulates his acceptance of finitude. This catharsis, however, depends on Marla's presence. With her watching, the Narrator cannot bring himself to tears[362]; thus, the illusion that his suffering is genuine collapses, forcing him to confront the performative foundation of his hopelessness. In her presence, he cannot sustain the baby-like state, disrupting his meticulously orchestrated catharsis.

Finally, when he declares, *"This should be my favorite part, being held and crying with Big Bob without hope. We all work so hard all the time. This is the only place I ever really relax and give up. This is my vacation."*[363], he reveals the reality behind his attending the meetings. His holiday from work consists of participating in a staged experience of suffering. In this sense, the Narrator's transgression manifests through emotional consumption. The support group functions as a commodity of feeling, a place where even raw emotions, such as grief, are transformed into a performance. His reliance on these groups thus exposes the profound

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[356] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 107.
[357] Ibid., p. 17.
[358] Ibid.
[359] Ibid.
[360] Ibid.
[361] Ibid.
[362] Ibid., p. 18.
[363] Ibid.

inauthenticity of his existence, defined by seeking truth in lies, comfort in surrender, and deriving meaning from the performance of ultimate meaninglessness.

If the support groups expose the commodification of the Narrator's emotional life, his obsession with consumer goods reveals the same principle in the construction of his identity. The so-called IKEA *"nesting instinct"*[364] dramatises the extent to which the Narrator has internalised the logic of consumer capitalism, where he defines himself through perfection of possessions rather than through authentic experience or relationships. His apartment serves as a carefully curated showroom, where every object promises to reflect his status and prestige. When he confesses, *"I loved my life. I loved that condo. I loved every stick of furniture. That was my whole life. Everything, the lamps, the chairs, the rugs were me. The dishes in the cabinets were me. The plants were me. The plants were me. The television was me,"*[365] he exposes his identity as inseparable from his possessions. Each piece of furniture substitutes for a fragment of his identity, reducing his self to yet another commodity.

The Narrator recognises that consumerism is not his unique praxis, as he admits, *"And I wasn't the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue. We all have the same Johanneshov armchair in the Strinne green stripe pattern."*[366] Here, he acknowledges the false promise of individuality, as every purchase claims to express personal taste; however, it replicates the same pattern across millions of households worldwide. His observation links directly to his earlier complaint that everything appears *"a copy of a copy of a copy."* Just as his condominium replicates countless others, so does his subjectivity.

His description of consumerist entrapment is further highlighted when he states: *"It took my whole life to buy this stuff. You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. Buy the sofa, then for a couple years you're satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you've got your sofa issue handled. Then the right set of dishes. Then the perfect bed. The drapes. The rug. Then you're trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now they own you."*[367] What began as the pursuit of comfort inverts the power dynamic between the consumer and his possessions. The consumer finds himself trapped in an endless cycle of demanding new purchases as every object inevitably heads towards discard or replacement.

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[364] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 43.
[365] Ibid., p. 111.
[366] Ibid., p. 43.
[367] Ibid., p. 44.

The absurdity of the Narrator's consumerism reaches a moment of self-awareness when he admits, *"I'd collected shelves full of different mustards, some stone-ground, some English pub style. There were fourteen different flavors of fat-free salad dressing, and seven kinds of capers. I know, I know, a house full of condiments and no real food."*[368] The condiments do not merely symbolise excessive consumption and accumulation; they reflect the Narrator's own state of being. His identity depends entirely on external validation until he becomes, metaphorically, a condiment himself, something that adds flavour to the world around him but possesses no substance of its own. The absurdity of this situation is transformed into an existential metaphor, exposing how consumerism hollows out the individual, leaving nothing authentic behind.

This deepens Palahniuk's critique of contemporary identity. In a culture governed by surface-level traits and presentation, the individual ceases to exist as "*real food"* and instead becomes disposable garnish. The self transforms into a product, valued not for its own substance but for its convenience and utility.

The explosion that destroys his apartment serves as a metaphor for the collapse of this consumerist identity. The detonation eradicates his carefully constructed, yet superficial world, and at the same time erases the version of himself that believed identity could be purchased and arranged. When he admits *"It was me that blew up"*[369] he signals the symbolic birth of a new identity. His consumerist self no longer lives; instead, out of the ruins emerges Tyler Durden, the projection of suppressed desires and rebellion against the existence that had defined him.

The doorman's remark, *"All that's left is the concrete shell,"*[370] further reinforces this symbolic transformation. Just as the explosion leaves behind the empty frame of the building, stripped of its constituent parts, so too the Narrator now exists as a hollow shell of his former self. The interior, the consumerist persona that once gave shape to his identity, had disappeared. The apartment's ruin thus mirrors the Narrator's psychological rebirth.

His haiku also encapsulates this transformation:

"Without just one nest
A bird can call the world home
Life is your career."[371]

The metaphor of the nest clearly evokes his apartment, the consumerist sanctuary in which he sought comfort, stability, and control. The loss of his home forces him into a liberated

[368] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 45.
[369] Ibid., p. 111.
[370] Ibid., p. 45.
[371] Ibid., p. 64.

existence by destroying the illusion of safety provided by material possessions. The final line, *Life is your career*, can be read as a moment of realisation. Life, like a career, represents something one actively chooses and shapes rather than passively receives. The haiku, therefore, suggests that freedom lies not in consumerist ownership but in the conscious authorship of life.

The destruction of the apartment operates simultaneously as a literal and metaphorical rupture. Palahniuk illustrates the paradoxical liberation that arises from destruction – *"Maybe self-destruction is the answer"*[372]. Only through the annihilation of his consumerist self can the Narrator construct an alternative form of subjectivity. At this point, the possessions that once defined him dissolve, and a transgressive reinvention begins.

The collapse of the consumerist self not only frees the Narrator from the illusion of material completeness but also ignites a deeper rebellion against the structures that once governed his life. His haiku captures this moment of ideological transformation:

"Worker bees can leave
Even drones can fly away
The queen is their slave"[373]

On the surface, the poem inverts the natural hierarchy of the hive. In reality, the queen dominates the collective, her subordinates existing solely to serve her. Yet the haiku imagines the opposite, an idea of breaking free from biological or social programming. The worker bees represent the corporate workforce, the men trapped within routines of production and consumption. The assertion that they can leave and fly away expresses a desire for escape, the same impulse that forges the creation of the underground boxing clubs.

The final line completes the inversion. Once the workers renounce obedience, the supposed centre of power collapses. The queen becomes the servant of those who refuse to serve. Within the novel's framework, the queen can represent the corporation that depends on its workers, or even the larger social system that requires compliance to sustain itself.

The novel's treatment of fatherhood reveals another dimension of the Narrator's collapse: the crisis of masculinity in the absence of a father figure in a household. When he reflects: *"Me, I knew my dad for about six years, but I don't remember anything. My dad, he starts a new family in a new town about every six years. This isn't so much like a family as it's like he sets up a franchise,"*[374] Palahniuk frames the father's repetition of the same pattern as a reflection

[372] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 49.
[373] Ibid., p. 63.
[374] Ibid., p. 50.

of consumer culture itself. The franchise metaphor transforms paternal care into a consumerist practice, where even intimate human relationships are treated as commodities, discarded once they lose their novelty. Fatherhood reproduces itself mechanically, leaving behind traumatised offspring and unfulfilled ideals.

The Narrator's later reflection reinforces this parental vacuum: *"My father never went to college so it was really important I go to college. After college, I called him 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."*[375] The repetition of long distance captures both the physical and emotional disconnection between father and son. The father offers a script for success through education, employment, and ultimately, marriage; however, the script no longer provides a path to genuine fulfilment.

The father's advice only underscores his indifference and the futility of the established pattern of adulthood. The Narrator exposes the failure of paternal guidance and the broader crisis of masculinity that defines his generation when he claims: *"I'm a thirty-year-old boy, and I'm wondering if another woman is really the answer I need."*[376] By referring to himself as a boy rather than a man, he reveals the conflict between his dependency on his father as a role model and his own masculine autonomy.

The Narrator extends his personal crisis of masculinity into a collective problem when he observes that, *"What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women."*[377] The men live in a world absent of fathers, a world where masculine identity no longer derives from authority, competence, or tradition. The men are forced to create their own tradition, their own rituals of discipline and violence to fill the vacuum. The fight clubs thus operate as surrogate families, and Tyler Durden emerges as the symbolic father, a commanding, masculine, God-like role model: *"To everybody there, I am Tyler Durden the Great and Powerful. God and father."*[378]

Tyler's confession that he had been fighting his father[379] conveys meaning on multiple levels. First, it frames the violence of fight club as a substitute for paternal confrontation. Second, since Tyler and the Narrator represent two aspects of the same consciousness, the line suggests

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[375] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. pp. 50–51.
[376] Ibid., p. 51.
[377] Ibid., p. 50.
[378] Ibid., p. 199.
[379] Ibid., p. 53.

that the Narrator rebels against his own internalised identity. In fighting his father, he fights the obedient corporate son who sought approval through labour, consumption, and conformity.

The Narrator's remark: *"Maybe we didn't need a father to complete ourselves,"*[380] signals a moment of realisation. The men of *Fight Club* begin to understand that the paternal model has nothing left to offer. Their fathers neither comprehend the world they live in nor care enough to guide their sons through it. The traditional figure of authority has been replaced by indifference and a sense of distance. Recognising this drives them towards rejecting the idea that a masculine identity depends on paternal validation.

The novel's critique deepens when the Project Mayhem mechanic proclaims: *"What you have to understand is your father was your model for God."*[381] This extension of paternal absence into a theological crisis captures Palahniuk's social commentary. The man further claims that *"If you're male and you're Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And if you never know your father, if your father bails out or dies or is never at home, what do you believe about God?"*[382] The absent father, along with the failure of paternal authority, thus reflects a cultural loss of faith.

The mechanic's conclusion: *"What you end up doing is you spend your life searching for a father and God*[383]*"* represents the displaced form of their worship. When we learn that there *"is the possibility that God doesn't like you,"*[384] and *"How Tyler saw it was that getting God's attention for being bad was better than getting no attention at all. Maybe because God's hate is better than His indifference,"*[385] we realise that the men of *Fight Club* need proof that some form of authority still exists. The violence thus becomes a cry for attention, mirroring Tyler's belief that divine wrath at least confirms this existence.

The longing for recognition parallels the Narrator's earlier remark: *"May I never be complete. May I never be content. May I never be perfect."*[386] It transforms the absence of the father, or of God, into a form of liberty. Completion, whether through parental approval or divine appreciation, implies submission to an external authority. Incompleteness, by contrast, allows autonomy, self-reinvention, and rebellion: *"[…] my life just seemed too complete, and maybe*

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[380] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 54.
[381] Ibid., p. 140.
[382] Ibid., p. 141.
[383] Ibid.
[384] Ibid.
[385] Ibid.
[386] Ibid., p. 46.

we have to break everything to make something better out of ourselves."[387]. The narrator no longer prays for redemption, he seeks attention, because *"Unless we get God's attention, we have no hope for damnation or redemption."*[388]

When the Narrator reflects: *"The first time I met Tyler, I was asleep. I was tired and crazy and rushed, and every time I boarded a plane, I wanted the plane to crash. I envied people dying of cancer. I hated my life. I was tired and bored with my job and my furniture, and I couldn't see any way to change things. Only end them. I felt trapped. I was too complete. I was too perfect. I wanted a way out of my tiny life,"*[389] he reveals the existential exhaustion that arose from his supposed completeness. However, the more his life conformed to social expectations, the more claustrophobic it became.

To remain incomplete means to remain alive, to reject the paralysis imposed by consumerist fulfilment. By renouncing perfection, he abandons the systems that once defined him, the father's expectations, the corporate hierarchy, and the culture of consumerism that equates accumulation with identity. The combined pressures of this existential confrontation and the physiological stress of insomnia serve as the primary triggers for the narrator's dissociation. This allows for the full manifestation of the Narrator's truly destructive, anti-consumerist, anti-materialist, and aggressive masculine alter-ego: Tyler Durden.

[387] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 52.
[388] Ibid., p. 141.
[389] Ibid., pp. 172–173.

11.3 Tyler Durden: The Pawn of The World

Tyler Durden represents the ideological and psychological core of *Fight Club*. Emerging from the Narrator's unconscious, Tyler embodies characteristics that contemporary society frequently suppresses, such as strength, confidence, desire, courage, and independence. *"I am nothing in the world compared to Tyler."*[390] His appeal is rooted in unwavering certainty, rejection of consumerist values, and the promise of liberation through destruction: *"I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his smarts. His nerve. Tyler is funny and charming and forceful and independent, and men look up to him and expect him to change their world. Tyler is capable and free."*[391] Tyler functions simultaneously as a saviour and an authoritarian figure, ultimately converting rebellion into submission.

Tyler Durden materialises as the embodiment of the Narrator's suppressed desires and unattainable ideal of selfhood. Everything the Narrator cannot express finds release through Tyler. The Narrator's passive existence, defined by consumerism, generates the conditions for the alter-ego's emergence. Tyler represents the Narrator's own potential; his fearlessness, charisma, and control represent the ideal masculinity that the culture denies. In creating Tyler, the Narrator gives form to the perfection he cannot achieve within the limits of his own identity. This psychological groundwork sets the stage for their first meeting, which reveals the moment when the unconscious finally surfaces.

The Narrator describes their first encounter with deceptive simplicity: *"And somehow, by accident, Tyler and I meet."*[392] The meeting is anything but accidental. Tyler's existence had been forming long before that moment, hidden within the Narrator's suppressed desires: *"Tyler had been around a long time before we met."*[393] The setting of their first encounter suggests a more profound significance. Palahniuk situates this moment in a landscape stripped of all artifice, ensuring that nothing can disguise the truth about identity.

"How I met Tyler Durden was I went to a nude beach."[394] The Narrator meets Tyler on a nude beach, stripped of clothes, symbolically representing being stripped of the identity that society demands he wear. Nakedness here becomes a symbol of purity, a state of being before corruption, before culture imposes its demands. In the biblical sense, it recalls creation itself, the moment when Adam and Eve existed unburdened. Tyler emerges as the Narrator's own

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[390] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 146.
[391] Ibid., p. 174.
[392] Ibid., p. 32.
[393] Ibid.
[394] Ibid.

creation, the ideal he wishes to become. When Tyler constructs the giant shadow hand from driftwood logs and sunlight: *"The giant shadow hand was perfect for one minute, and for one perfect minute Tyler had sat in the palm of a perfection he'd created himself,"*[395] he showcases the essence of his nature. For him, perfection never lasts; it exists only in the moment of creation itself: *"Tyler Durden the great, who was perfect for one moment, and who said that a moment is the most you could ever expect from perfection:"*[396] This belief, that a single, fleeting moment can hold ultimate meaning, becomes the foundation of his later ideology and his presence itself. Project Mayhem carries this logic to its extreme, transforming the pursuit of a perfect moment into a moment of total annihilation. Yet Tyler's philosophy does not remain abstract. It immediately starts to manifest at the moment he offers the Narrator a place to stay.

When Tyler offers the Narrator a sanctuary, it comes with a condition: *"Tyler said, yes, I could move in with him, but I would have to do him a favor."*[397] This moment marks the transition from idea to reality. Violence becomes the means through which the two halves of the same self finally confront each other. By striking Tyler, the Narrator attacks the part of himself that has long remained buried beneath comfort and obedience. Through pain, the Narrator reconnects with his own body and with the version of himself that society has forced him to repress. The favour Tyler asks for forces the Narrator to confront his passive self.

Later, Tyler exposes the truth: *"'You weren't really fighting me,' Tyler says. 'You said so yourself. You were fighting everything you hate in your life.'"*[398] This line uncovers the purpose behind their violence. The fight grants the Narrator a method for confronting all that he despises – the job that drains him and the possessions that dictate his identity. Through Tyler, his frustration gains direction. This new direction materialises in the hierarchy of fight club itself, where Tyler steps naturally into the role the Narrator has unconsciously built for him.

Tyler's leadership is immediately evident when he steps under the single bulb in the centre of the fight club's basement. While the surrounding space fades into darkness, he remains illuminated, framed by the only light source. The men gather at the edges, obscured in shadow, watching him. This arrangement establishes Tyler as a figure of authority and, potentially, salvation. *"Tyler gets under the one light in the middle of the black concrete basement and he can see that light flickering back out of the dark in a hundred pairs of eyes."*[399] This image suggests

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[395] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 33.
[396] Ibid., p. 201.
[397] Ibid., p. 46.
[398] Ibid., p. 167.
[399] Ibid., p. 50.

not only leadership but also evokes worship. The men reflect this light, their eyes mirroring the bulb, symbolising how his voice and ideology fill their emptiness. Having secured his position as the figure at the centre of their world, Tyler must demonstrate invulnerability, and the basement becomes the stage for performing masculinity stripped of hesitation.

Durden's reaction of a single, unfazed *"Cool."*[400] delivered after the Narrator's cheek splits open after a fight, reveals the essence of Tyler's constructed masculinity and the authority he claims over the men of fight club. Injury, pain, and damage do not provoke concern; they signal progress. He refuses to acknowledge the wound as an issue, and in doing so, he trains the others to view any injury as triumph. Tyler's treatment of injuries lays the foundation for the emotional numbing that later defines Project Mayhem, as he rewrites the men's relationship to pain and consequence. This logic explains the cold approach to Robert Paulson's dying. The Space Monkeys carry Robert's body as though they handle an object: *"One minute, Robert Paulson was the warm center that the life of the world crowded around, and the next moment, Robert Paulson was an object."*[401] Big Bob's death does not disturb them because injury has long ceased to mean vulnerability; it functions as evidence of commitment and devotion. This hardened emotional logic extends into Tyler's influence over the Narrator's personal life, and nowhere is the fracture more evident than in his relationship with Marla Singer.

As Tyler's relationship with Marla reveals the deepest fracture with the Narrator's identity: *"We have sort of a triangle thing going here. I want Tyler. Tyler wants Marla. Marla wants me. I don't want Marla, and Tyler doesn't want me around, not anymore. This isn't about love as in caring. This is about property as in ownership. Without Marla, Tyler would have nothing."*[402]

Every interaction Tyler has with her exposes a truth the Narrator refuses to acknowledge. When *Tyler comes to the kitchen table with his hickies and no shirt and says, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, he met Marla Singer last night and they had sex,"*[403] The Narrator reacts with disgust not because of the act itself, but because Durden does what the Narrator cannot admit he wants: *"After Melanoma last night, I came home and went to bed and slept. And dreamed I was humping, humping, humping Marla Singer."*[404] Tyler performs the desire that the Narrator

[400] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 51.
[401] Ibid., p. 178.
[402] Ibid., p. 14.
[403] Ibid., p. 58.
[404] Ibid., p. 59.

suppresses; the dreams are a proof of the Narrator's repressed attraction, manifested through the alter ego who holds the confidence and sexual desirability the Narrator lacks.

Tyler's protectiveness complicates this relationship further. He reacts to Marla's overdose, calls the police, and races to her hotel. The Narrator describes this situation as though Tyler interferes in something that does not concern him: *"This is none of Tyler's business,"*[405] yet he acts with urgency. When viewed through the lens of split identity, the moment reveals what the Narrator's rational self resists – the instinct to save Marla originates in him, and Tyler merely gives shape to the impulse the Narrator refuses to admit.

When the Narrator says: *"Marla Singer doesn't need a lover, she needs a case worker,"*[406] he reduces her to a responsibility and a complication. He frames her as someone who needs care rather than affection. By calling her a case, he distances himself emotionally, pretending avoidance and indifference. Tyler's response: *"Don't call this love."*[407] cuts through the Narrator's avoidance because Tyler's relationship with Marla operates only on a physical level. Tyler handles the intimate aspect – sex, stripped of emotional depth- the Narrator refuses to handle the emotional one. Every interaction pushes the Narrator closer to acknowledging that Tyler expresses what he suppresses, turning Marla into the battleground between the two halves of the same mind.

The alter ego performs the role of protector because the Narrator cannot yet admit his desire for Marla Singer. Their entire relationship becomes a language between two halves of the same mind. Everything Tyler does with Marla reveals something the Narrator does not want to confront: *"From the first night I met her, Tyler or some part of me had needed a way to be with Marla."*[408] Tyler carries the desires that the Narrator refuses to acknowledge and act upon.

The relationship between Tyler and Marla reveals the Narrator's inability to reconcile emotional intimacy with physical desire. By stating that: *"Tyler and Marla are never in the same room,"*[409] and *"I never see them together,"*[410] he unravels that Marla triggers the part of his psyche that longs for connection, while Tyler represents the part that refuses it. When Marla appears, the emotional intimacy surfaces, pushing the purely physical alter ego of Tyler Durden into disappearance. Conversely, when Tyler dominates, emotion remains shut out. As the Narrator cannot choose between vulnerability and detachment, he keeps them strictly separated.

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[405] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 60.
[406] Ibid., p. 62.
[407] Ibid.
[408] Ibid., p. 198.
[409] Ibid., p. 65.
[410] Ibid.

His assumed hostility towards Marla emerges as a defence mechanism meant to preserve this psychological clash.

This hostility towards her: *"I'm not talking to Marla. She can horn in on the support groups and Tyler, but there's no way she can be my friend,"*[411] stems from this internal conflict. Marla threatens to expose the desire for genuine connection, which he rejects by hiding behind Tyler's casual sexuality. Tyler's commands: *"Don't ever talk to her about me. Don't talk about me behind my back,"*[412] as well as: *"If you ever mention me to her, you'll never see me again,"*[413] maintain the boundary that the Narrator refuses to cross. Tyler's command assures him dominance, which he continues to materialise through his craftsmanship of soap and explosives.

Tyler's way of making soap reveals a troubling side of consumer culture, where people themselves become commodities. He uses stolen human fat from liposuction clinics to make luxury soap, showing how consumption and the consumed are intertwined. Wealthy customers end up buying products made from their own discarded tissue, highlighting the dark irony that chasing beauty and self-improvement has consequences. *"Our goal is the big red bags of liposuctioned fat we'll haul back to Paper Street and render and mix with lye and rosemary and sell back to the very people who paid to have it sucked out."*[414] The Paper Street Soap Company's soap serves as a clear reminder that in a profit-driven society, the human body can be treated as another source of income. *"Tyler calls himself the Paper Street Soap Company. People are saying it's the best soap ever."*[415] *"Tyler was making real bucks."*[416] *"Without money to worry about, maybe I could quit my job."*[417]

His competence transfers directly into his capacity to make explosives: *"You can mix the nitroglycerin with sodium nitrate and sawdust to make dynamite."*[418] His detailed knowledge reflects the ideology built on the principle that destruction enables transformation: *"'I'm breaking my attachment to physical power and possessions,' Tyler whispered, 'because only through destroying myself can I discover the greater power of my spirit.'"*[419] *"'The liberator who*

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[411] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 66.
[412] Ibid., p. 72.
[413] Ibid.
[414] Ibid., p. 150.
[415] Ibid., p. 87.
[416] Ibid.
[417] Ibid.
[418] Ibid., p. 73.
[419] Ibid., p. 110.

destroys my property,' Tyler said, 'is fighting to save my spirit. The teacher who clears all possessions from my path will set me free.'"[420]

This idea can be further seen in Durden's monologue: *"Only after disaster can we be resurrected. It's only after you've lost everything, that you're free to do anything."*[421] Tyler's technical mastery of explosives functions as a symbolic extension of the ideological role he occupies within the Narrator's divided psyche. When Tyler declares: *"You can blow up bridges, You can mix the nitroglycerin with more nitric acid and paraffin and make gelatin explosives, you could blow up a building easy, with enough soap, you could blow up the whole world,"*[422] he does not merely describe the process of bomb-making; instead, he articulates his philosophy of radical transgression.

Explosives serve as the material embodiment of the destructive impulse that the Narrator's unconscious has turned into a principle of liberation. Tyler's expertise with explosives literalises the extremity of the Narrator's repressed potential. Durden's detailed monologues mark the point at which the Narrator's yearning for control over his life transforms into an idea of control over the physical and social structures that have constrained him.

The repeated use of *"you can"* turns the words into guidance. The conversation about explosives is similar to the one that occurs when Tyler first appears on the nude beach, serving as a symbol of creation and perfection. The shadow hand he creates, perfect for just a moment, hints at the idea behind explosive destruction: perfection only lasts briefly, and only through destruction can a new moment of possibility begin.

This destructive capability also reinforces Tyler's position as both saviour and authoritarian leader. While he promises liberation through the destruction of consumerist structures, his expertise in such an area gives him absolute power. The men in Project Mayhem are drawn to Tyler's charisma but ultimately fall under his control. His detailed knowledge becomes a secret authority that only he owns – others can follow his commands, but cannot match his skill. The men do not understand the process, only Tyler's orders.

The demolition of buildings and bridges reflects the demolition of the Narrator's consumer identity. Each explosive recipe Tyler describes allegorically functions as a method of dismantling the psychological structures that sustain the Narrator's dissatisfaction. His bomb-making is closely linked to his ideological role. Explosives put his philosophy into action and show the

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[420] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 110.
[421] Ibid., p. 70.
[422] Ibid., p. 73.

psychological rupture at the centre of the novel. Far from being merely violent, his expertise deepens the thematic exploration of identity, consumer culture, and the seductiveness of destructive liberation.

The revelation that *"Tyler Durden is a separate personality I've created, and now he's threatening to take over my real life"*[423] marks the moment when the Narrator can no longer sustain the illusion of control. This loss becomes immediately apparent in Project Mayhem itself, which has grown beyond his reach. Each time he confronts a space monkey, they merely repeat the rules, treating him like an outsider to the very movement he unknowingly built. His attempts to intervene collapse under the obedience the alter ego had constructed. Tyler stops functioning as an external companion and emerges as a force that actively rewrites the Narrator's reality. Each task the Space Monkeys complete strengthens Tyler's authority, making it increasingly difficult for the Narrator to intervene.

Tyler's explanation: *"We're not two separate men. Long story short, when you're awake, you have the control, and you can call yourself anything you want, but the second you fall asleep, I take over, and you become Tyler Durden."*[424] Exposes the extent of this takeover. What the Narrator interpreted as insomnia turns out to be a double existence he never consented to: *"And the jobs, well, why do you think you're so tired. Geez, it's not insomnia. As soon as you fall asleep, I take over and go to work or fight club or whatever."*[425] Sleep becomes the opening through which Tyler Durden claims dominance and control over the body. The rebellion the Narrator created now functions as its own authority, capable of crossing every boundary he believed existed between them.

This collapse of identity intensifies when Tyler instructs the Narrator to look at the cancelled checks: *"I rented the house in your name. I think you'll find the handwriting on the rent checks matches the notes you've been typing for me."*[426] The handwriting, a symbol of personal identity and originality, becomes evidence of the fragmentation of self. When Tyler states: *"why do you think you're so tired,"*[427] he reveals that the Narrator lives two lives at once. By day, he works the job he despises, by night, the alter ego takes over and carries out the destruction he never admits he craves. The exhaustion that defines his life was never a symptom of stress and lack of sleep but the physical cost of a fractured identity that never rests.

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[423] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 173.
[424] Ibid., p. 167.
[425] Ibid.
[426] Ibid.
[427] Ibid.

The confrontation between the two halves of the same mind reaches its peak when Tyler refuses to disappear: *"I wouldn't be here in the first place if you didn't want me. I'll still live my life while you're asleep, but if you fuck with me, if you chain yourself to the bed at night or take big doses of sleeping pills, then we'll be enemies. And I'll get you for it."*[428] Tyler frames his existence as a necessity rather than an accident. The Narrator tries to regain authority and control by diagnosing himself: *"Oh, this is bullshit. This is a dream. Tyler is a projection. He's a disassociative personality disorder. A psychogenic fugue state. Tyler Durden is my hallucination."*[429] Tyler undermines this by claiming: *"Maybe you're my schizophrenic hallucination."*[430]

Tyler's final command pushes the Narrator toward the ultimate act of obedience: his own ritualised death. Tyler frames it as a necessary finale, the last step in completing the philosophy he has imposed: *"The last thing we have to do is your martyrdom thing. Your big death thing.*[431] He imagines the Narrator dying at the top of a skyscraper while Project Mayhem destroys the structure beneath him, transforming suicide into a theatrical performance. The death is meant to crown the Narrator as the movement's perfect disciple, the final product of its ideology. *"A real opera of death,"*[432] Tyler says, reducing the Narrator's life to a performance that serves the cause. The demand for martyrdom exposes the truth beneath Tyler's idea of freedom, where liberation requires absolute submission, and the highest form of devotion lies in sacrificing one's life to the ideology. Pressing a gun into the Narrator's mouth, Tyler demands complete control and devotion.

Marla's appearance marks the turning point: *"Marla's coming toward me, just me because Tyler's gone. Poof. Fast as a magic trick, Tyler's disappeared. And now I'm just one man holding a gun in my mouth."*[433] Her arrival forces the return of emotional intimacy, which Tyler cannot inhabit. In her presence, the Narrator stands alone. Tyler's disappearance and the failure of his plan reveal one final fracture in their shared identity.

When the Narrator says: *"Tyler, you mixed the nitro with paraffin, didn't you."*[434] He exposes the truth that undermines Tyler's supposed dominance. Previously the Narrator had stated the following: *"Mix the nitro with sawdust, and you have a nice plastic explosive. A lot of the*

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[428] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 168.
[429] Ibid.
[430] Ibid.
[431] Ibid., p. 203.
[432] Ibid.
[433] Ibid., p. 204.
[434] Ibid., p. 205.

space monkeys mix their nitro with cotton and add Epsom salts as a sulfate. This works, too. Some monkeys, they use paraffin mixed with nitro. Paraffin has never, ever worked for me."[435] Tyler never possessed complete control. Paraffin never works for the Narrator, which means Tyler, despite all his authority, confidence, and mastery, still operated within the limits of the Narrator's own experience. Tyler cannot exceed the boundaries of the mind that created him. If Tyler truly functioned as an independent, superior self, he would never have made a mistake the Narrator already knew to avoid. The failed mixture becomes proof that the alter ego cannot fully detach from its "host". Tyler's knowledge, his power, and even his destructive potential still depend on what the Narrator unconsciously allows. This moment reframes the struggle of the double self. The fight was never between a destructive alter ego and a helpless victim, but between two impulses of the same mind, neither capable of existing without the other.

[435] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 204.

11.4 The Obedient Space Monkeys: Project Mayhem and The Eight Rules of Fight Club

"A lot of young people try to impress the world and buy too many things."

"A lot of young people don't know what they really want."

"Young people, they think they want the whole world."[436]

These remarks encapsulate the generational crisis from which fight clubs emerge, a generation that is suffocated by abundance yet starved of purpose.

In this chapter, the first rule of fight club will be broken. Fight Club emerges as the physical and ideological extension of the Narrator's psychological collapse, a space where repression, alienation, and masculine crisis become ritualised through violence. Conceived as an underground response to the monotony of modern life, it functions simultaneously as therapy, rebellion, and performance. Within its basements, the men who once measured value through possessions regress to their primal selves, stripped of hierarchy and civility. Violence becomes the new form of communication, a ritual of rebirth through which they attempt to reclaim a sense of control suppressed by modernity.

"Fight club is not football on television. You aren't watching a bunch of men you don't know halfway around the world beating on each other live by satellite with a two-minute delay, commercials pitching beer every ten minutes, and a pause now for station identification. After you've been to fight club, watching football on television is watching pornography when you could be having great sex."[437]

As the club expands, it becomes an ideology. What once served as a personal journey to liberation becomes a collective movement of rebellion against society. The former harmlessness of men fighting in a basement evolves into the militarised discipline of Project Mayhem, where individuality dissolves into ritual and command. The members, reduced to obedient space monkeys, devote themselves to Tyler's cause with religious passion, ready to die for the illusion that gives their lives meaning. In this sense, they embody what Camus describes in *The Myth of Sisyphus: "I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give*

[436] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 45–46.
[437] Ibid., p. 50.

them a reason for living (what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying).[438]

11.4.1 The 1st and 2nd Rules: Silence as Promotion

"The first rule of fight club is you don't talk about fight club."[439] *"The second rule about fight club is you don't talk about fight club."*[440] The repetition of the first rule immediately establishes the paradox at the heart of fight club - silence as promotion. Through repetition, the rules become a sacred law. Once a rule becomes law, it ceases to serve a purpose and exists solely to be obeyed. Tyler's later claim that *"a law is a law. Driving too fast was the same as setting a fire was the same as planting a bomb was the same as shooting a man."*[441] Reveals his logic, where the content of the law no longer matters, only obedience does. Every act of transgression becomes equal.

What begins as a rule to preserve the club's secrecy evolves into a philosophy that erases the distinction between discipline and destruction. The club's existence is secured solely through the first rule being broken. Secrecy makes the club desirable, for the idea to survive, the men of fight club have to talk about it. The rule's violation is not a failure, but rather a mechanism through which fight club spreads and acquires members.

The first two rules, therefore, operate as a paradox. They offer the illusion of discipline and exclusivity while ensuring that disobedience remains built into the system. Every man who breaks the rule becomes a missionary for the cause. By discussing the club, they ensure its survival. *"You're not supposed to talk about fight club, but we talked and for the next couple of weeks, guys met in that parking lot after the bar had closed, and by the time it gold cold, another bar offered the basement where we meet now."*[442]

Even when the members insist on keeping silent, they already spread the rumour, turning silence into a form of advertisement. *"'Most of you,' Tyler yells in the cone of light in the center of the basement full of men, 'you're here because someone broke the rules. Somebody told you about fight club.' Tyler says, 'Well you better stop talking or you'd better start another fight*

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[438] CAMUS, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. TRanslated by O'BRIEN, Justin. New York: Vintage Books, 1991. Translation originally published by KNOPF, A. Alfred, 1955. Originally published in France as: *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* by Librairie Gallimard, 1942. p. 2.
[439] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 48.
[440] Ibid.
[441] Ibid., p. 142.
[442] Ibid., p. 54.

club because next week you put your name on a list when you get here, and only the first fifty names on the list get in.'"[443]

This paradox becomes explicit in Big Bob's line: *"I've got good news. […] The group's disbanded. I only come down here to tell any guys who might show up. […] there's a new group, but the first rule about this new group is you aren't supposed to talk about it."*[444] His attempt to respect the rules inevitably violates it. This also marks the transition between the emotional dependency of the support group and the physical relief of fight clubs. The same men who once cried together in search of healing now meet to hurt one another in search of authenticity. As violence replaces therapy, repression turns into release. What once used to be self-help becomes self-destruction.

11.4.2 The 3rd rule: The Illusion of Choice

The third rule represents a moral boundary within the club: *"when someone says stop, or goes limp, even if he's just faking it, the fight is over."*[445] It creates a sense of ethics engraved into violence. The rule separates confrontation from cruelty and sadism. However, when the Narrator breaks it, the pretence of moral order collapses, and *Project Mayhem* is born.

The inclusion of the phrase *"even if he's faking it"* introduces the possibility of deception, yet also the necessity of trust. It grants both men the power to decide. The rule depends of trust in the opponent. Once the Narrator disregards the rule, the symbol of equity becomes proof of hierarchy.

During the fight with a new member of the club, often referred to as Angel Face, the Narrator ignores every sign of surrender. *"I tagged a first-timer one night at fight club. […] I tagged him because the insomnia was on again, and I was in a mood to destroy something beautiful."*[446] The relapse of sleeplessness signals the return of Tyler Durden, the re-emergence of instinct. His justification, *"I wanted to destroy everything beautiful I'd never have*[447]*"* reveals the long-suppressed envy. By destroying the man's face, the Narrator embraces domination.

Up to this point, the fights offered a form of structure, controlled and maintained through the third rule. In this moment, he abandons control entirely, allowing the body to move without constraints. His declaration: *"I wanted the whole world to hit bottom"*[448] extends the violence

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[443] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 54.
[444] Ibid., p. 100.
[445] Ibid. p. 49.
[446] Ibid., p. 122.
[447] Ibid., p. 123.
[448] Ibid.

from the basement to the entire world, the desire to destroy beauty expands into the desire to destroy everything he lacked.

The destruction of Angel Face marks a turning point. His face, a symbol of beauty, becomes unrecognisable under the assault. In destroying it, the Narrator destroys what still connects him to morale and humanity: *"Pounding that kid, I really wanted to put a bullet between the eyes of every endangered panda that wouldn't screw to save its species and every whale or dolphin that gave up and ran itself aground."*[449]. The moment shifts the nature of violence in the novel; the fights no longer express frustration, they no longer offer a search for meaning, rather, they turn into acts of pure destruction. From a broader perspective, the metaphor signals the crisis of masculinity. In a consumer society that supplies comfort, men find themselves unable to find meaning.

"It was that morning, Tyler invented Project Mayhem."[450] The line completes the transformation of violence. Once the final moral limit disappears, *Project Mayhem* arises as a collective ideology.

11.4.3 The 4th rule: Direct Confrontation

The fourth rule ensures that the act of violence remains personal. Victory or defeat carries no significant weight; what matters lies in the confrontation itself: *"Fight club isn't about winning or losing fights. Fight club isn't about words."*[451] Each opponent represents what the person is fighting: the boss, the missing father, the system, the self: *"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."*[452] The rule transforms the fight into an event where the buried conflicts manifest themselves. When the men exchange blows, they confront everything that destroys them from within, seeking no solution, but release: *"Nothing was solved when the fight was over, but nothing mattered."*[453]

The fight operates as a direct confrontation spoken through the body. For a few minutes, the men inhabit a primal-like world of brutal violence and authenticity. *"You aren't alive anywhere like you're alive at fight club. When it's you and one other guy under that one light in the middle*

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[449] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 123.
[450] Ibid., p. 123.
[451] Ibid., p. 51.
[452] Ibid., p. 53.
[453] Ibid.

of all those watching. […] This guy trusts himself to handle anything."[454] Each wound represents a confrontation, a fleeting release from the passivity of modern existence, a glimpse of something real and undeniable: *"After a night in fight club, everything in the real world gets the volume turned down. Nothing can piss you off. Your word is law, and if other people break that law or question you, even that doesn't piss you off."*[455]

For the Narrator, this confrontation takes a literal turn. His first fight with his alter ego, Tyler, externalises the conflict within. The opponent functions not as an enemy but as a reflection of his fragmented self. The rule's insistence on two participants per fight converts the match into a solely psychological ritual where the men face their own troubles: *"There's nothing personal about who you fight in fight club. You fight to fight."*[456] Violence replaces introspection. As fight club expands, the personal duel, however, evolves into a collective ideology. The one-on-one confrontation that once produced meaning dissolves, creating space for the rise of *Project Mayhem.* Individuality, once promised by the rule, evaporates. What began as a fight between two selves transforms into a coordinated act of obedience. The fourth rule, designed to preserve authenticity, ultimately signals its dissolution.

11.4.4 The 5th Rule: Order Within Chaos

The fifth rule, *"one fight at a time"*[457] introduces the illusion of order within chaos. By allowing only one fight at a time, Tyler imposes a sense of discipline upon what would otherwise turn into a frenzy. The rule grants the fight structure, and each act of violence is restricted by controlled boundaries. The basement does not function as a place of uncontrolled aggression, but as a controlled environment where discipline takes shape through obedience. Each man learns to wait his turn, to respect the order. The rule demands patience and restraint, qualities rarely associated with rebellion.

Through this rule, Tyler begins to turn the fighters into disciples. While two men fight, the remaining members watch. The men joined the club to escape passivity, yet the rule returns them to it. Their eyes consume violence the way they once consumed products. The match provides release without active participation. They participate through observation, the collective gaze forges unity, as the men observe, move, and react together: *"There's grunting and noise at fight club like at the gym […] there's hysterical shouting in tongues like at church, and*

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[454] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 51.
[455] Ibid., p. 49.
[456] Ibid., p. 54.
[457] Ibid., p. 49.

when you wake up Sunday afternoon you feel saved."[458] As one act of violence concludes, another begins, ensuring every movement aligns with authority. This process rehearses the obedience that later defines *Project Mayhem.*

The rule also transforms the fights into a desired act. With only one match allowed at a time, not every member receives the chance to participate in one on a given night. The waiting creates tension. Watching others bleed and swell only deepens the desire to participate, to feel something authentic. Through this process of waiting and longing, Tyler's authority grows. The men depend on him to grant permission, to decide who fights and who watches: *"This week, Tyler says, it's the first fifty guys through the door and that's it. No more."*[459]

The fifth rule exposes yet another paradox at the heart of the novel. In the name of freedom, the men learn submission, they learn to respect hierarchy and order in their search for chaos and rebellion. Through the rule, Tyler shapes them to follow without question, to respect the commands: *"These are the quiet young men who listen until it's time to decide."*[460] The men desire the opportunity to prove their obedience.

11.4.5 The 6th rule: Body as the New Identity

The sixth rule, *"men fight without shirts or shoes"*[461]*,* removes the last traces of civilisation from the basements of fight clubs. By removing clothing, the men erase the identities associated with it. Shirts and shoes once marked a difference; expensive brands were related to status, class, and personal taste. Without them, the fighters stand exposed, reduced to bodies rather than roles. The gesture of near nudity is a regression to the primal existence free of identification based on money, status, or possessions: *"As long as you're at fight club, you're not how much money you've got in the bank. You're not your job. You're not your family, and you're not who you tell youself."*[462]

The act of undressing functions as a metaphor of abandonment. By removing the clothes, each man enters the fight freed of the labels that define him outside of the club: *"Who guys are in fight club is not who they are in the real world. Even if you told the kid in the copy center that he had a good fight, you wouldn't be talking to the same man."*[463] The removal of clothing grants equality, no one wears a better suit, no one is labelled by their newest footwear, and the

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458 PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 51.
459 Ibid.
460 Ibid., p. 54
461 Ibid., p. 49
462 Ibid., p. 143.
463 Ibid., p. 49.

bare torso becomes the new dress code. What once distinguished one man from another disappears, creating sameness within the club.

By forbidding shirts and shoes, Tyler redirects attention to the body as the only source of truth. Skin cannot deceive; bruises and scars portray authenticity. The exposed bodies convey proof of effort, pain, and endurance: *"You see a guy come to fight club for the first time, and his ass is a loaf of white bread. You see this same guy here six months later, and he looks carved out of wood."*[464] Through discipline, the soft bodies shaped by comfort harden.

The changing bodies mirror the progression of belief. As the men devote themselves to the fights, their muscles grow, and so does their trust in Tyler. By following the rule, they internalise the values of the club. The physical change functions as proof of loyalty: *"Every bar I walk into, every fucking bar, I see beat-up guys."*[465] The devotion anticipates the fifth rule of *Project Mayhem* which says, that *"you have to trust Tyler."*[466] While the sixth rule concerns the stripping of clothes, it symbolically prepares them for the stripping of doubt.

The rule also eliminates the logic of consumerism. Outside the basements, clothes construct identity, inside, they mean excess. Instead of purchasing identity through clothes, the man now earns it through bruises. The transformations of the bodies encapsulate the shift from passivity to active production. The toned muscles serve as a symbol of belonging. The body becomes an advertisement for Tyler's ideology, which posits that pain provides purpose.

11.4.6 The 7th Rule: The Discipline of Endurance

The seventh rule denies limits and removes the boundaries that are normally linked to competition. In fight club, there is no referee, no clock, no authority to intervene. *"The fights go on as long as they have to,"*[467] says the seventh rule. The men who spend their days under schedules and supervision suddenly confront an experience that no longer submits to a timetable.

Once the men allow the body to decide what the mind cannot, they go beyond a personal choice. The longer they fight, the less they act out of desire, turning endurance into obedience. The rule teaches them not only to tolerate suffering but to find purpose in it.

The absence of time transforms each fight into a ritual that suspends ordinary life. The men escape the rhythm of society and enter a state of timelessness that offers freedom.

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[464] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 51.
[465] Ibid., p. 156.
[466] Ibid., p. 125.
[467] Ibid., p. 49.

This rule also foreshadows the ideology of *Project Mayhem.* It shapes the men into instruments of endless endurance. Once they learn to fight without limit, they learn to live without it as well. What began as an endurance test inside the basement expands into an ideology of total collapse: *"This was the goal of Project Mayhem, Tyler said, the complete and right-away destruction of civilization."*[468]

The seventh rule, therefore, transgresses its literal meaning and becomes a moral framework for the entire novel. By erasing the concept of limit, Tyler eliminates the possibility of rest or reflection. The men's bodies continue to move long after logic has stopped. This endless endurance mirrors the exhaustion of late capitalist life, where individuals are trapped in cycles of production and consumption that never end.

11.4.7 The Last Rule: The Initial Test

The last rule functions as a test of worth, faith, and belonging. It separates the observers from the devoted; it is about proving one deserves entry. *"If this is your first night at fight club, you have to fight."*[469] Every newcomer faces an immediate test, turning the last rule into a mechanism of selection. The first punch provides the man his membership in the club. Only those who truly desire belonging submit to it.

Tyler understands the need that drives them: *"Most guys are at fight club because of something they're too scared to fight. After a few fights, you're afraid a lot less."*[470] The first fight, therefore, functions as proof of worth, a demonstration that one deserves a place among those who can face what ordinary life forbids. The men do not fight for victory, but for validation and a sense of belonging. In the modern world, that has turned them into mere spectators, the fight club grants the rare chance to prove capability: *"[...] Tyler explained it all, about not wanting to die without any scars, about being tired of watching only professionals fight, and wanting to know more about himself."*[471]

The newcomers fight not only for Tyler's approval but for their own. To fight means to earn recognition from the man who created the rules, and from the self that has long felt lost. The club transforms fear into currency; those who overcome it purchase membership through pain and facing their fear. For men who have never been tested, the rule provides the test they have

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[468] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 125.
[469] Ibid., p. 50.
[470] Ibid., p. 54.
[471] Ibid., p. 52.

always needed: *"If you've never been in a fight, you wonder. About getting hurt, about what you're capable of doing against another man."*[472]

The men fight to prove endurance, loyalty, and devotion. Each fight reassures them that they are more than replaceable workers or passive consumers. The only failure lies in refusing to participate. The logic of the final rule plays a significant role in *Project Mayhem.* Tyler assigns the men a task to pick a fight with a stranger and lose. The initiation becomes the new method of expansion. What once proved an individual's worth now serves as a recruitment tool. The men who fought to earn belonging must now reproduce that experience in others. By losing, they pass on the discovery that gave them purpose: *"'What we have to do, people.' Tyler told the committee, 'is remind these guys what kind of power they still have.'"*[473]

11.4.8 Project Mayhem: The Birth of the Space Monkeys

The transition from *Fight Club* to *Project Mayhem* marks the final stage of Tyler's ideological evolution. The individual pursuit of authenticity through pain turns into collective submission through obedience. What began as an experiment in liberation becomes an experiment in control. The basements now serve as training grounds for organised chaos. A place where the space monkeys are born.

"The first rule about Project Mayhem is you don't ask questions about Project Mayhem."[474] While fight club demanded secrecy to protect its existence, Project Mayhem demands silence to protect its authority. The rule enforces belief and complete trust. Tyler's space monkeys no longer seek freedom from authority; they submit to it, grateful for the certainty and hopes it provides. By forbidding questions, the first rule of Project Mayhem completes what the first rule of fight club began – the conversion of rebellion into obedience.

When Tyler explains that *"the goal of Project Mayhem had nothing to do with other people,"*[475] he removes any trace of morality from his philosophy. It becomes their cause and theirs alone, a self-sufficient mission that requires no justification. The men follow Tyler with absolute devotion. Their loyalty no longer depends on moral reasoning but on shared purpose. Destruction becomes sacred when performed in the name of their cause: *"Project Mayhem will break up civilization so we can make something better out of the world."*[476] *"We wanted to*

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[472] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 52.
[473] Ibid., p. 120.
[474] Ibid., p. 119.
[475] Ibid., p. 122.
[476] Ibid., p. 125.

blast the world free of history."[477] When Tyler claims that: *"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,"*[478] he provides direction to the men who once felt powerless and directionless. The idea of controlling history provides purpose, even if the control results only in ruin.

The admission process into Project Mayhem strips individuality to its bare minimum. Each applicant must arrive with the exact items prescribed: *"Two black shirts. Two black pair of trousers. One pair of heavy black shoes. Two pair of black socks and two pair of plain underwear. One heavy black coat. One white towel. One army surplus cot mattress. One white plastic mixing bowl."*[479] The list contains only the essentials. The plain, unbranded clothing eliminates difference, erasing the marks of status, taste, and personality. The uniformity of black turns each applicant into a blank surface upon which Tyler's ideology can be inscribed.

The inclusion of *"exactly five hundred dollars cash for personal burial money"*[480] reveals the dehumanising logic of the project. The instruction that *"this money must always be carried in the student's shoe so if the student is ever killed, his death will not be a burden on Project Mayhem,"*[481] reduces each man into a disposable part of the system, a subject of operational efficiency, stripped of individuality.

Applicants are further tested before their admission: *"You tell the applicant to go away, and if his resolve is so strong that he waits at the entrance without food or shelter or encouragement for three days, then and only then can he enter and begin his training."*[482] The waiting period outside the Paper Street house functions as selection through humiliation: *"If the applicant is young, we tell him he's too young. If he's fat, he's too fat. If he's old, he's too old. Thin, he's too thin. White, he's too white. Black, he's too black."*[483] As the men move from initiation into action, their obedience deepens. Tyler describes each of their further missions as small steps that draw them further into his ideology: *"'Every time we do these little homework assignments,' Tyler says, 'these fight club men with nothing to lose are a little more invested in Project Mayhem.'"*[484] These assignments function as acts of transgression that bind the men to the larger cause.

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[477] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 124.
[478] Ibid., p. 122.
[479] Ibid. pp. 127–128.
[480] Ibid., p. 127.
[481] Ibid.
[482] Ibid., p. 129
[483] Ibid., pp. 128–129.
[484] Ibid., p. 167

The Paper Street house becomes the physical embodiment of Project Mayhem's ideology. The Narrator describes returning home to find it transformed: *"I come home from work now, and the house is filled with strangers that Tyler has accepted. All of them working. The whole first floor turns into a kitchen and a soap factory. The bathroom is never empty."*[485] The chaos of labour reappears in another form. Each man contributes to production, but none understands it: *"No one guy understands the whole plan, but each guy is trained to do one simple task perfectly,"*[486] mirroring the logic of corporate efficiency.

The Paper Street house, however, exceeds mere metaphor; it becomes a living organism that consumes the men within it. The Narrator observes: *"Tyler's rented house on Paper Street is a living thing wet on the inside from so many people sweating and breathing. So many people are moving inside, the house moves,"*[487] individuals merge into one organism that moves in unity. What began as a rejection of sterile corporate modernity now replicates it perfectly. Each man functions as an interchangeable, productive, and expendable fragment of a larger system.

Project Mayhem is the final irony of the Narrator's revolt, as the attempt to escape replication produces perfect replication instead. Men who entered the basements to reclaim individuality learn instead to perform identical rituals, to accept a given hierarchy, to wear the same marks of belonging. The people who felt interchangeable again become interchangeable parts of a single operation. What they sought to escape, they instead became: *"You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You are the same decaying organic matter as everyone else, and we are all part of the same compost pile."*[488] This admission process tests their endurance and will, and those who remain prove their readiness to submit.

Project Mayhem hence perfects the system that fight club initiated. What began as the physical expression of pain evolves into the psychological submission of self. The plain clothes, the burial money, and the waiting transform the man into a machine. Every trace of identity and individuality disappears into a united purpose. The loss of individuality is further highlighted later when one of the space monkeys recites: *"Our culture has made us all the same. No one is truly white or black or rich, anymore. We all want the same. Individually, we are nothing."*[489]

The generation that never faced external crisis now faces an internal one: *"You have a class of young strong men and women, and they want to give their lives to something. Advertising*

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[485] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 130.
[486] Ibid.
[487] Ibid.
[488] Ibid., p. 134.
[489] Ibid.

has these people chasing cars and clothes they don't need. Generations have been working in jobs they hate, just so they can buy what they don't really need. We don't have a great war in our generation, or a great depression, […] we have a great revolution against the culture. The great depression is our lives."[490] This quote encapsulates all the previously stated ideas. The men and women of this generation possess strength, but they lack direction and purpose. They live in a world saturated with stimulation, where advertising sells purpose through consumption, convincing them that fulfilment can be purchased. With no enemy to fight, they turn inward.

Project Mayhem thus becomes a conflict against culture itself, designed to fill the void left by the absence of real struggle. Through this speech, Palahniuk highlights the crisis of late capitalism. When society no longer demands sacrifice, people seek it. Tyler gives them what consumer culture cannot: a sense of belonging, purpose, and importance.

The night of the Hein Tower assignment reveals the total faith and submission that define Project Mayhem. *"You can picture a team of law clerks and bookkeepers or messengers sneaking into offices where they sat, every day. […] and they used passkeys where they could and used spray canisters of Freon to shatter lock cylinders so they could dangle, rappelling against the tower's brick facade, dropping, trusting each other to hold ropes, swinging, risking quick death in offices where every day they felt their lives end one hour at a time."*[491]

The men who once fought to regain control now hand their lives over to others without hesitation. The trust they refused to grant the system they served now belongs to the brotherhood that had replaced it. The final line captures the essence of their psychological transformation: they prefer the immediacy of death pursued in the service of belief to the slow death of routine and subordination.

The idea that, *"Only in death will we have our own names since only in death are we no longer part of the effort. In death we become heroes,"*[492] exposes the ultimate contradiction within Project Mayhem. The men join the movement to escape anonymity, yet their names regain value only after they have passed away. Individuality, denied in life, returns through death. Death becomes the only moment when a man reclaims ownership of his identity. Project Mayhem replaces the passivity of modern existence with the certainty of martyrdom. To die for the cause means to finally live for something. In Tyler's world, heroism and death become

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[490] PALAHNIUK, Chuck. *Fight Club*. New York, 1996. ISBN 03-930-3976-5. p. 149.
[491] Ibid., p. 121.
[492] Ibid., p. 178.

indistinguishable, and individuality is preserved only through self-destruction. What began as resistance to conformity concludes in its purest form, as the men embody the same obedience they sought to escape.

11.5 Comparative Analysis of the Characters in Fight Club

The characters of *Fight Club* operate as expressions of the novel's thematic core, each addressing the collapse of identity, the failures of consumer culture, and the search for authenticity within a system that suppresses it. While the narrative appears to revolve around distinct figures, the novel reveals their shared coexistence defined by fragmentation. The characters articulate the novel's critique of modern masculinity, the commodification of self, and the seductive dangers of ideological obedience.

11.5.1 Fractured Selves: Identity Formation and Dissolution

Identity in *Fight Club* functions as a shifting, unstable construct shaped by the cultural pressures of late capitalism, emotional deprivation, and the search for meaning in a world emptied of purpose. Each character embodies a different response to this crisis, revealing how identity becomes distorted, adopted, or reconstructed in attempts to cope with contemporary existence. Rather than presenting identity as fixed, Palahniuk stages it as fluid, performative, and constantly at risk of collapse. The novel's central characters illustrate the multiple ways in which individuals attempt to survive the psychological demands of their environment. They expose how identity is tested and often destroyed under the weight of societal expectations.

The Narrator's identity exists in a continuous state of fracture, shaped by consumer fatigue and suppressed dissatisfaction. His sense of self is not a coherent personality but an accumulation of external forces of modern society. Advertising, corporate monotony, and the illusion of belonging all shape his existence, filled with consumerist urges. His identity is unstable, borrowed from IKEA catalogues, the accumulation of possessions, and the performativity of support groups. He attempts to compensate for the emptiness he feels by adopting identities of the terminally ill, adopting their pain as though it might bring authenticity to his life. However, these identities are merely temporary performances that provide a false sense of selfhood. The more he participates in these roles, the more his own identity dissolves.

His encounter with Tyler marks the moment when the Narrator's identity begins to fragment more visibly. Tyler Durden emerges not simply as an alternative personality but as the embodiment of what the Narrator cannot allow himself to become: dominant, confident, sexually free, and liberated from the anxieties of contemporary life. Tyler articulates the impulses the Narrator represses. The duality between them exposes how weak the Narrator's original identity has become. The alter ego does not appear as a distinct other but as the inevitable manifestation of everything the Narrator seeks. Throughout the novel, the Narrator's identity becomes

increasingly more unstable, forbidding him to regain control and differentiate between his original self and the alter ego he created.

The collapse of the Narrator's identity can be seen most prominently when he realises that others cannot distinguish between him and Tyler. People around him reflect the identity he unconsciously created, not the one he attempts to maintain. He finds himself fighting for control over his own personality, mind, and body. Ultimately, his struggle to reclaim himself requires violently confronting the part of his identity that has gained too much autonomy. His sense of self emerges only in opposition to Tyler, revealing that the identity he had long suppressed must be acknowledged but not obeyed. His identity crisis occupies the centre of the novel as the most extreme instance of dissolution. The Narrator embodies the instability of identity, which defines his entire existence.

Tyler Durden represents an identity constructed entirely through opposition. He stands in opposition to consumerism, to the passivity of modern life, failed masculinity, and the generation of men raised by women. His identity becomes artificially manufactured through charisma, violence, and ideological clarity. His character embodies one singular purpose – to fill the emptiness within. Although Tyler's identity is performative, it is, more importantly, convincing, because it fills the void within the Narrator and the other men of *Fight Club.* He becomes the fantasy of who the Narrator wishes he could become.

As the narrative progresses, Tyler's identity gains autonomy, evolving beyond a reflection of the Narrator and becoming a symbol for the men who follow him. The Space Monkeys look up to Tyler as an unshakeable leader, granting him an identity beyond the Narrator's psyche. His identity thus operates on two different levels: internally as the Narrator's psychological projection, and externally as a God-like figure whose presence reshapes the behaviour and beliefs of all the members of fight club.

However, Tyler's identity depends largely on the Narrator's unconscious. His power appears limitless, but his knowledge and competence remain constrained by what the Narrator allows. Despite his assumed dominance, Tyler cannot exceed the boundaries of the mind that created him. His identity, therefore, collapses when confronted with these limitations. Tyler's identity thus reveals itself as a carefully constructed illusion: seemingly powerful and omnipotent, but fundamentally dependent on the very mind that imagined him into existence.

In deliberate contrast to the fragmented identity that defines the Narrator and Tyler, stands Marla Singer. She rejects the performance of stability and embraces her own chaos without apology, giving her a form of authenticity that the men cannot achieve. Her identity never relies

on external validation, but on emotional transparency and internal acceptance. She refuses the comfort of social roles. In a world where the Narrator constructs identities to cope and Tyler constructs his identity to dominate; Marla merely exists as herself with no interest in pretending to be anything else.

She disrupts the fragile balance between the Narrator and Tyler, as she engages the parts of the Narrator's psyche that Tyler suppresses. Her presence forces the Narrator to confront the emotional areas of his identity, while Tyler's avoidance reveals how incompatible she is with the hypermasculine fantasy he represents. Marla becomes the solution that destabilises the Narrator's dissociative self: when she enters, Tyler disappears. As Marla lives without illusion, she does not distinguish between the Narrator and Tyler because she responds to the individual in front of her, not to the false identity they attempt to project. Marla's identity ultimately forces the narrative toward confrontation and resolution. Without her, Tyler would have never emerged, but also could never have been suppressed.

As a collective, the Space Monkeys represent identities willingly surrendered. They enter Project Mayhem seeking the destruction of the selves that society has rendered meaningless. Each man arrives carrying a fractured identity shaped by an unfulfilling job, numbness, and a desire for purpose. Project Mayhem offers them the erasure they crave. Their identities dissolve into a collective mass united through obedience, discipline, and belief. The fragmentation of self that the Narrator experiences unwillingly, they embrace as salvation.

Big Bob and Angel Face illustrate this collective identity in two opposing ways. Robert's transformation reveals how the group consumes the individual entirely. Once the popular member of support groups, he becomes an anonymous agent of Project Mayhem, his distinctiveness erased until even his death is interpreted as a ritualised moment. Angel Face represents the opposite extreme. His beautiful face is destroyed by the Narrator in a moment of utter violence. Yet he becomes so consumed by the movement that he remains a part of it. Both men lose their identities within Project Mayhem.

The Space Monkeys lose their individuality in the name of their faith. Their appearance that renders them all the same signifies the dissolution of the self. They crave this disintegration, believing that anonymity liberates them from the pressures of modern life. However, their new identity is not freedom, but submission, built entirely on Tyler's authority. Their identity becomes an interchangeable part of a machine controlled by their role model, Tyler Durden. They therefore submit themselves to Tyler and his cause.

Across *Fight Club,* characters display different approaches to identity. The Narrator's fragmented identity creates the conditions for Tyler Durden's emergence, while Tyler's hyperconstructed identity reveals itself as both ideal and prison. Marla stands outside their masculine crisis, her identity unfractured, exposing the performativity that defines the men around her. The Space monkeys, in contrast, relinquish identity altogether, treating erasure as salvation. Together, these characters illustrate the novel's central argument that modern identity can dissolve under the pressures of consumerism and cultural sterility, the desire for reinvention, or vanish entirely in pursuit of belonging.

11.5.2 Consumerism and the Crisis of Meaning

Consumerism in *Fight Club* functions as both the symptom and the catalyst of the characters' psychological disintegration. The novel presents a world in which identity, purpose, and emotional fulfilment have been replaced by material accumulation, corporate dependency, and complacency. Possessions become substitutes for meaning, and culture reduces individuals to consumers whose value is measured by their acquisitions. Within this environment, the characters are formed by consumerism. The novel's characters embody different responses to the suffocating logic of capitalism. Their relationship to consumption exposes how deeply the system influences every aspect of their lives, from the spaces they inhabit to their very own psyche.

The Narrator's relationship to consumerism operates as the foundation of his existential collapse. He lives within a system that defines identity through ownership, and he participates fully in this ritual. His apartment, characterised by curated aesthetics, serves as evidence of his internal emptiness induced by the capitalist logic. He does not collect furniture and objects because he desires them but because they offer the illusion of stability and self-definition. His obsession with IKEA catalogues reflects his desire to construct a coherent identity through material. Yet the more he consumes, the deeper his dissatisfaction becomes. His possessions do not reflect individuality but conformity, revealing the fragmentation of personality in a world of mass-produced culture. Consumerism has replaced meaning with comfort, feeling with objects, and authenticity with replication.

The destruction of his apartment marks the narrative turning point, functioning not merely as a practical loss but as the symbolic collapse of the identity he has built. The explosion forces him to confront the reality of consumerism, that everything he has accumulated and relied upon can be destroyed in an instant, leaving nothing behind. With the loss of his possessions, he loses the artificially constructed version of himself. This gives way to an obsession with Tyler, replacing material consumption with ideological consumption. The Narrator does not liberate

himself from consumerism; rather, he transfers his dependency onto Tyler's philosophy, adopting beliefs the same way he once adopted furniture. Consumption remains central to his psychological disorientation, as he cannot escape the logic that defines his life, that identity must be acquired from an external source.

Tyler Durden constructs himself as the nemesis of consumer society, yet his relationship to it remains paradoxical. He positions consumerism as the root of masculine decline and existential despair, the force that strips men of desire, and replaces struggle with convenience. By defining himself against consumerism, Tyler establishes his ideological foundation: to destroy the system, one must reject its comforts, abandon possessions, and surrender individuality. His philosophy, however, depends on consumerism as the enemy. Without the culture he despises, his identity would lose its foundation, making it impossible for him to ever manifest himself into existence.

His ideology functions as its own form of consumption. Instead of purchasing objects, his followers purchase the worldview he offers. Tyler replaces material commodities with ideological ones, offering meaning, belonging and masculinity as the new products. His hyper-masculine philosophy transforms rebellion into a consumable identity, one that promises transformation through destruction. This process mirrors the mechanisms of advertising, which promise fulfilment through acquisition. Tyler merely shifts the object of desire. His anti-consumerism thus reveals itself as a disguised form of consumption, one that demands an even higher price than material goods – the surrender of autonomy.

Tyler's anti-consumer philosophy becomes most explicit in his soap production. He uses human fat taken from bodies, shaped by the beauty industry, to make expensive soap sold back to the rich. The process transforms consumer waste into a luxurious product, highlighting the absurdity of consumption. The soap also becomes the source of his explosives, linking consumer goods to destruction. This dual function shows that Tyler cannot truly escape the system he despises. His rebellion relies on the very products of consumerism, and his ideology, though assumed as liberation, mirrors the logic of the consumer culture.

Marla Singer stands as a direct rejection of consumer culture, not through rebellion but through indifference. Unlike the Narrator, who seeks identity in possessions, or Tyler, who constructs identity in opposition to them, Marla does not validate products. She lives without attachment to objects, possesses nothing, and buys nothing unnecessary. Her thrift-store wardrobe, unstable lifestyle, and disregard for perfection work as anti-consumer gestures, revealing her disinterest in participating in the consumer logic entirely. In a narrative dominated by

performativity and constructed identities, Marla's indifference appears strangely authentic. Her refusal to take part in consumption exposes the emptiness of the consumer rituals that the other characters adhere to.

She also disrupts the consumer dynamic between the Narrator and Tyler. She forces the Narrator to confront the emotional dimensions of his identity that he cannot purchase or escape. She stands as a reminder that emotional intimacy and genuine affection cannot be consumed, purchased, or performed – despite the Narrator's earlier attempts to simulate them through his participation in support group meetings.

The Space Monkeys represent the ultimate collapse of consumer identity. They enter fight club and Project Mayhem, desperate to get rid of the selves they built through meaningless jobs, empty routines, and consumer distractions. Their lives before Tyler revolved around working to afford goods that bring no real fulfilment, leaving them directionless and numb. Consumerism has stripped them of purpose, turning them into interchangeable units. Tyler's arrival offers them escape from consumption and the pressure to maintain an identity shaped by it. They embrace Project Mayhem because it promises erasure, the dissolution of the consumer self that has failed them. For the Space Monkeys, the destruction of consumer society becomes synonymous with personal rebirth.

12 American Psycho

Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* serves as an intricate examination of identity, consumerism, and violence in late-twentieth-century literature. Similarly to *Invisible Monsters* and *Fight Club*, the novel centres on a protagonist whose sense of self disintegrates under the pressures of a postmodern, commodified society. American Psycho, however, offers a more radical depiction of this crisis: Patrick Bateman is not merely a victim of consumer culture; he is also a product of it. Through his excessive consumption, bodily regulation, performative masculinity, and escalating brutality, Bateman embodies the collapse of identity in a culture that prioritises surface above all else.

The novel places the protagonist in an environment where individuality is effectively absent. The citizens of Manhattan and the P & P Workers bear such a striking resemblance that the characters frequently confuse one another—a recurring motif that illustrates the failure of personal identity to persist in such a landscape. Ellis constructs a world in which individuality becomes an unattainable luxury, a world in which everyone performs the same roles. The Men of Wall Street obsess over business cards, book the finest restaurants, and discuss aesthetic routines with ritualised precision. Social interactions seem rehearsed, and conversations contain no real substance or value. This repetition is not incidental but structural; through it, Ellis emphasises the dissolution of individuality within a system in which selfhood is measured by branding, wealth, and status rather than by internal qualities.

The protagonist's obsession with consumer culture forms the foundation of his identity. As he lists his designer clothes, grooming essentials, and luxurious dining experiences, he reveals how much consumption dominates his life. These meticulously detailed descriptions operate as a form of self-advertisement, a way of signalling status to a world that recognises only superficiality. Bateman internalises these values so thoroughly that even in solitude, he remains governed by consumer logic, wearing costly clothing to bed and adhering to routines, as if to impress an invisible audience.

This reliance on external signifiers of identity correlates with an increasing sense of emotional detachment. As his days unfold in monotone, his relationships lack genuine grounding. The people in Patrick's vicinity speak past one another, affection is replaced by performance, and perfection. As he states: *"I ... want ... to ... fit ... in."*[493] he reveals that the mask of performance has become his "truer self".

[493] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 228.

As the narrative progresses, Bateman turns increasingly towards brutality as a means of feeling anything real. Violence becomes a temporary escape from the world, which remains governed by simulation. The precision with which he describes acts of torture reflects the precision of his skincare routine, as both follow similar structural logic. By placing these contrasts side by side, Ellis exposes the extent to which consumer culture reduces bodies to objects. People become interchangeable, disposable, and stripped of both originality and morality.

The fragmentation of the narrative reflects Bateman's psychological decline. Early chapters remain clear; however, as Bateman begins to lose his grip on reality, the narrative shifts to a third-person perspective, with Patrick asserting that he is also experiencing hallucinations. The reader is forced into the uncertainty that Bateman himself experiences, unsure which events are real, exaggerated, or imagined. The protagonist is thus revealed to be an unreliable narrator, illustrating how reality disintegrates unless it is anchored in individuality.

Ellis presents Manhattan as a space saturated with repetition, where the difference between authenticity and imitation becomes irrelevant. Corporate life reduces men to their clothing and business cards, conversations become scripts, and office buildings become interchangeable. Within such a setting, Bateman loses moral responsibility. Even his final confession is dismissed as a joke, illustrating how even truth can become indistinguishable from simulation.

American Psycho, therefore, presents a portrait of identity in crisis. The protagonist is reduced to a subject defined by hollow routines, emotional detachment, and the relentless demand to perform perfection. The narrative presents an environment from which there is no escape, as individuals become so similar to one another that no authentic experience can be attained.

12.1 Patrick Bateman

This chapter examines the construction and disintegration of Patrick Bateman's identity in *American Psycho*. It portrays Bateman as a subject based entirely on the logic of late-capitalist consumerism. Through an interpretation of the protagonist's self-presentation, bodily discipline, sexual deviance, and escalating violence, the analysis traces how consumer culture produces an identity grounded solely in surfaces, performances, and commodities. The chapter proceeds by exploring Bateman's obsession with branding and appearance, his narcissistic self-surveillance and body regulation, his reduction of sexuality to a transgressive performance, and the role of violence as the only remaining source of feeling. Finally, it considers Bateman's progressive dissociation, narrative fragmentation, and nihilistic worldview, which reveal the collapse of subjectivity in a culture that privileges surface over interior.

12.1.1 Consumerism and the construction of identity

Patrick Bateman appears as the archetype of late-capitalist achievement. The young Wall Street yuppie[494], with wealth, status, and a carefully sculpted physique, moves through Manhattan in his designer suits and with apparent ease. His branded clothing, strict diet, and two-hour workouts leave nothing to chance, and those around him regard him as the epitome of perfection that others aspire to imitate. On paper, Bateman possesses all that modern culture defines as success: desirability, an enviable lifestyle, attractive women, and status. Nevertheless, none of this provides meaning; on the contrary, although on the surface Bateman appears fulfilled, his interior remains hollow.

His daily routines are characterised by mechanical precision, his relationships collapse into empty performances, and conversations are reduced to rehearsed lines: *"The conversation follows its own rolling accord – no real structure or topic or internal logic or feeling […] just words, and like in a movie, but one that has been transcribed improperly, most of it overlaps."*[495]

This leaves the protagonist with profound emptiness. As this void expands, Bateman begins searching for something that might provide meaning amid the emotional numbness and hollow existence in a meaningless world. The emptiness is compensated for with violence, which

[494] a young person who lives in a city, earns a lot of money, and spends it doing fashionable things and buying expensive possessions – definition from: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/yuppie#google_vignette

[495] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 380.

grants him an escape from consumerist life. Violence provides a sensation that consumer luxury cannot replicate. In a society that celebrates surface above all else, Patrick turns deviance into a distorted form of self-recognition.

Bateman constructs his identity entirely through consumption. He describes himself and others merely through designer labels and fashion. His precise and detailed self-description operates as an advertisement for luxurious brands: *"I'm wearing a lightweight linen suit with pleated trousers, a cotton shirt, a dotted silk tie, all by Valentino Couture, and perforated cap-toe leather shoes by Allen-Edmonds."*[496] When he later discusses another outfit – *"a four-button double-breasted wool and silk suit, a cotton shirt with a button-down collar by Valentino Couture, a patterned silk tie by Armani, and cap-toed leather slip-ons by Allen-Edmonds"*[497], he again characterises himself through branding, offering no insight into his personality.

This constant listing of clothing produces an identity without substance. Bateman's suits function not as expressions of taste, but as indicators of wealth and status. Designer labels control his life, as even in bed, he remains burdened by consumerism: *"In bed I'm wearing Ralph Lauren silk pajamas."*[498] Bateman internalises the logic of consumer capitalism to such an extent that even in the absence of observation, he remains influenced by the necessity to display luxury.

The obsession is not solely centred on Bateman, as it characterises the entire environment surrounding him. When he observes McDermott walking in wearing a perfectly coordinated designer combination from John Reyle, the description again sounds like an advertisement, rather than an authentic human encounter: *"McDermott walks in […], wearing new nonprescription Oliver Peoples redwood-framed glasses, black and white wool houndstooth-check single-breasted suit with notch lapels, a striped cotton dress shirt with spread collar and a silk paisley tie, all of it designed and tailored by John Reyle."*[499]

Ellis himself noted that the outfits described throughout *American Psycho* are, if visualised, fundamentally wrong. Although Bateman obsessively lists prestigious designer clothes, the combinations he assembles are stylistically incoherent, turning the people into almost clownish figures.[500] The characters wear the right brands but in the wrong ways, revealing their complete dependence on labels rather than a genuine sense of style or selfhood. Ellis's comment exposes

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[496] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 28.
[497] Ibid., p. 173.
[498] Ibid., p. 24.
[499] Ibid., p. 105.
[500] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *This Is How I Created Patrick Bateman*. YouTube, uploaded by [WWU Klipp], 25 Oct. 2022. Available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=q1InLnAvQ2I.

the satire underlying these descriptions. The novel portrays fashion as a shallow discourse of status, where the mere accumulation of expensive garments substitutes for individuality. This absurdity underscores the hollowness of the consumerist approach, as Bateman and his peers dress not to express personality or individual preference but to perform a demanded role.

As said, Bateman and all the other men of Wall Street adopt fabric as their chosen mode of communication. Status replaces individuality, and brands replace identity. They mirror one another so thoroughly that no one truly sees anyone else: *"everyone looks familiar, everyone looks the same."*[501] This idea remains omnipresent throughout the entire novel as men mistake themselves constantly: *" […] some Wall Street guy who looks like Boris Cunnigham"*[502] or: *"I trip out onto the street, bumping into Charles Murphy from Kidder Peabody or it could be Bruce Barker from Morgan Stanley, whoever, […]"*[503] Patrick further emphasises this when he admits his resemblance to others: *"Even though I'm more handsome than Craig, we both look pretty much the same."*[504]

Patrick experiences this collapse when Owen confuses him with someone else: *"Owen has mistaken me for Marcus Halberstam (even though Marcus is dating Cecelia Wagner) but for some reason it really doesn't matter and it seems a logical faux pas since Marcus works at P & P also, in fact does the same thing I do, and he also has penchant for Valentino suits and clear prescription glasses and we share the same barber at the same place, the Pierre Hotel, so it seems understandable."*[505]

This exemplifies arguably the most significant illustration of how external appearance suppresses personal individuality and how an individual's identity becomes solely associated with external characteristics. The men integrate themselves into a corporate hive where personality and authenticity become irrelevant. Clothing and appearance define the boundaries of selfhood, with the label's name bearing greater significance than the individual's name.

Bateman finds himself unable to escape this system, contributing to it with the same intensity as others. His preoccupation with branding and labels indicates a profound desire to maintain a sense of identity, even if it is entirely derived from external markers. Consumerism promises coherence, yet he never achieves it. He lists brands to construct an identity and thus compensate for internal emptiness.

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[501] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 59.
[502] Ibid., p. 55.
[503] Ibid., p. 145.
[504] Ibid., p. 240.
[505] Ibid., p. 86.

Bateman contributes to this superficiality by judging people based on their fashion: *"I keep swallowing, thinking I have to see her shoes, and so as inconspicuously as possible I try to peer over the counter to check out what kind of shoes she's wearing, but maddeningly they're only sneakers – not K-Swiss, not Tretorn, not Adidas, not Reebok, just cheap ones."*[506]

The obsession with consumerism governs not only Bateman's self-presentation but also the way he perceives others. Even the most ordinary encounter becomes a reflection of his fixation on branding. The footwear decides the cashier's value, and the absence of a recognisable, prestigious logo produces disgust. For Bateman, if the brand fails to signify status, the person fails as well.

This scene also reveals Bateman's inability to recognise authenticity, as it no longer exists within the world he established. The woman's inexpensive shoes signal reality outside his world, as the absence of branding disrupts the logic that sustains his identity. Without a label to interpret, she cannot be positioned within the hierarchy of the constructed consumerist order. His worldview depends entirely on surfaces, and anything that escapes this system provokes unease and anxiety.

This moment further reinforces Patrick's perception of social class. He believes that all individuals partake in the same ritualised consumer behaviour, as he examines people with the same approach he applies to clothing – by categorising and evaluating them. This obsession dehumanises everyone around him, as well as limiting his worldview, which cannot express individuality. His consumerism narrows reality until it becomes nothing more than a list of labels.

12.1.2 Narcissism, and the Body

Bateman's relationship to fashion becomes a demonstration of his mechanical devotion to rules. His profound knowledge does not stem from a genuine interest in aesthetics but from an obsession with rules, categories, and perfection. He recites clothing facts with the flat precision of a manual or advertisement: *"'Well, they should fit trimly around the body and cover the waistline,' I say. 'It should peek just above the waist button of the suit jacket. Now if too much of the vest appears, it'll give the suit a tight, constricted look that you don't want,'"*[507] also seen in: *"Once a line of clothing has been purchased from its manufacturer, it's perfectly legal for the retailer to replace the original label with his own. However, it's not legal to replace it with*

[506] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 109.
[507] Ibid., p. 84.

another retailer's label […] because details regarding fiber content and country of origin of the manufacturer's registration number must remain intact."[508]

This mechanical recitation highlights a profound crisis of individuality. Bateman no longer separates self-expression from fashion rules. What ought to serve as self-expression becomes a system of classification, exposing how consumerism has overtaken not only his preferences but also his speech. These monologues read like instructional manuals designed to approve behaviour rather than to foster individuality. The tone of his speech is important because it shows how deeply consumerism has shaped his mindset. By turning fashion into a strict set of rules, he indicates that his sense of self relies entirely on external approval and following those guidelines: *"I'm beginning to feel bad that I'm not wearing the new Versace pullover I bought last week at Bergdorf's. It would look good with the suit I'm wearing."*[509] When the attire of he and others does not meet the criterion of perfection, they are frequently discarded without further consideration: *"I head toward the bar humming "Silent Night," vaguely depressed by what most of the women are wearing."*[510]

Patrick's obsession with perfection extends beyond clothing and influences other aspects of his daily life. Even the most mundane objects, such as a plate of food, become an aesthetic arrangement so immaculate that he refuses to disturb its perfection: *" […] looking up from my plate, a fork poised over it, but my hand will not move; it's as if it appreciated the plate's setup too much, as if my hand had a mind of its own and refused to break up its design."*[511] This experience demonstrates how even the most fundamental rituals evolve into performances of control. To maintain the illusion of perfection, the object must stay untouched.

Bateman directs his pursuit of perfection even regarding his own body, treating it as a project that demands maintenance, discipline, and control. His elaborate morning routine, executed with mechanical precision, reflects the attempt to construct an idealised self through one's body: *"I pour some Plax anti-plaque formula into a stainless-steel tumbler and swish it around my mouth for thirty seconds. Then I squeeze Rembrandt onto a faux-tortoiseshell toothbrush and start brushing my teeth and rinse with Listerine. Then I inspect my hands and use a nail-brush. I take the ice-pack mask off and use a deep-pore cleanser lotion, then an herb-mint facial masque which I leave on for ten minutes while I check my toenails."*[512]

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[508] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 178.
[509] Ibid., p. 39.
[510] Ibid., p. 177.
[511] Ibid., p. 48.
[512] Ibid., p. 25.

The morning routine, followed by a two-hour workout, demonstrates how meticulously he develops a physique that counterbalances internal instability. By transforming his body into an idealised surface, Bateman temporarily suppresses the underlying fractures. The regimen provides him with a sense of coherence within an identity that persistently risks collapse.

Patrick's narcissism clearly extends the logic of consumer culture directly onto his own body, as it becomes another luxurious object, another commodity to sculpt into perfection. Bateman's self-observation restricts his daily experiences, as he is unable to perform the most routine tasks without continually monitoring his reflection: *"I urinate while trying to make out the puffiness of my reflection in the glass that encases a baseball poster hung over the toilet."*[513]

Bateman's obsessive self-surveillance is most vividly expressed through his compulsive engagement with reflective surfaces, a recurring motif that reveals the profound instability of his self-image. When he introduces himself: *"'Hi. Pat Bateman,' I say, offering my hand, noticing my reflection in a mirror hung on the wall – and smiling at how good I look,"*[514] the moment of greeting becomes secondary to the confirmation of his visual perfection. This tendency reappears when he remarks: *"I catch a glimpse of my reflection on the surface of the table. My skin seems darker because of the candlelight and I notice how good the haircut I got at Gio's last Wednesday looks."*[515] Patrick thus turns every moment into an opportunity for self-assessment, demonstrating how his reliance on superficial self-presentation conceals an emptiness within.

He treats his appearance as if it might expose the inner collapse. Even mundane moments turn into self-observation: *"I'm at a phone booth checking my messages, staring at my reflection in an antique store's window."*[516] Only after adjusting the surface can he proceed with the ongoing tasks: *"I check myself in the mirror before entering the gym and, dissatisfied, go back to my briefcase for some mousse to slick my hair back and then I use a moisturizer and, for a small blemish I notice under my lower lip, a dab of Clinique Touch-Stick. Satisfied, I turn the Walkman on, the volume up, and leave the locker room."*[517] These constant corrections trap him in a performance of perfection to such a profound extent that they permeate every aspect of his life.

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[513] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 25.
[514] Ibid., p. 10.
[515] Ibid., p. 11.
[516] Ibid., p. 123.
[517] Ibid., p. 65.

His narcissism even dictates his reactions to others. When an individual observes him, his instinctive response is not curiosity but self-observation: *"He keeps looking at me. Tentatively I touch my hair to see if it's messed up or out of place."*[518] This line exposes the fragility behind the false façade, revealing that beneath the meticulous exterior lies constant fear of imperfection.

His physique must be precisely maintained to uphold the façade. It serves as his final defence against the disintegration of self from within: *"All it comes down to is: I feel like shit but look great*."[519] When he claims: *"I've been drinking close to twenty liters of Evian water a day and going to the tanning salon regularly and one night of binging hasn't affected my skin's smoothness or color tone,"*[520] he underlines this deep preoccupation with appearance.

Patrick's demonstration of physical excellence deteriorates upon the disclosure of his steroid usage. *"Now I'm lunging up Lafayette, […] stomach contracting with horrendous abdominal cramps – they might be caused by the steroids."*[521] Anabolics reveal the extent to which he sacrifices his own body to perfect it. The performance-enhancing drugs represent the ultimate contradiction of his narcissism – to maintain the perfect exterior, he must destroy the interior. The use of such substances confirms that his physique does not express genuine confidence but rather a fabricated identity. It demonstrates that even his musculature is a constructed commodity that he exhibits.

This fixation extends into his sexual encounters as well. Even when there is no real attraction toward a woman, he still longs for her gaze and validation: *"I want Helga to check my body out, notice my chest, see how fuckin buff my abdominals have gotten since the last time I was here, even though she's much older than I am – maybe thirty or thirty-five – and there's no way I'd ever fuck her."*[522] Bateman does not seek pleasure, but confirmation of his sex appeal. His body becomes a product meant to be admired and approved.

12.1.3 Sexuality, objectification, and the collapse of intimacy

In his world, women function as instruments that reflect his sexual worth: *"Is the fact that she dates me behind his back what excites her, my body or the size of my dick?"*[523] Bateman does not recognise his personality as a possible factor in attracting women; instead, he immediately

[518] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 181.
[519] Ibid., p. 103.
[520] Ibid., pp. 102–103.
[521] Ibid., p. 145.
[522] Ibid., p. 110.
[523] Ibid., p. 151.

attributes it to external factors, wondering which aspect of himself captivates them. Attraction becomes a measurement of his desirability, not an expression of intimacy. Sexuality, like fashion, becomes a performance through which he evaluates his own worth.

Women reinforce his narcissism, as early in the novel, Courtney acknowledges his charm: *"You really know how to charm the ladies, Bateman."*[524] Yet it immediately reveals that this charm serves a singular purpose – to validate the exterior he has constructed. Attraction becomes confirmation of his value, turning his body into a commodity.

This dynamic appears most prominently in his bedroom encounters. Patrick centres his body more than the intercourse itself: *"I pull my Armani shirt up and place her hand on my torso, wanting her to feel how rock-hard, how halved my stomach is, and I flex the muscles, grateful it's light in the room so she can see how bronzed and defined my abdomen has become."*[525] The emphasis is placed not on pleasure but on ensuring that the woman observes the outcome of his workouts, thereby positioning the performance of perfection as more significant than the sexual experience.

It later becomes apparent that the intercourse is inevitably doomed when Patrick states: *"After attempting to have sex with her for around fifteen minutes, I decide not to continue trying."*[526] It offers no satisfaction as it refuses to engage with anything beneath the surface. Sexuality, stripped of intimacy, produces frustration, so he then turns to masturbation, exposing the depth of his disconnection. *"I masturbate, thinking about first Evelyn, then Courtney, then Vanden and then Evelyn again, but right before I come – a weak orgasm – about a near-naked model in a halter top I saw today in a Calvin Klein advertisement."*[527] The following passage: *"Last Night I had dreams that were lit like pornography and in them I fucked girls made of cardboard,"*[528] further illustrates this disconnection. Bateman diminishes all women, whether partners, acquaintances, or strangers, to interchangeable images, illustrating how they are reduced to recycled objects of consumption.

As the narrative progresses, Bateman resorts to violence to achieve satisfaction and a climax. In one scene, he describes sex in the most objectifying form possible: *"We have sex and lying beneath me she is only a shape."*[529] The reduction to a shape reveals the logic with which he treats women. They are not partners but mere surfaces. Pleasure arises not from connection but

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[524] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 8.
[525] Ibid., p. 22.
[526] Ibid., p. 23.
[527] Ibid.
[528] Ibid., p. 192.
[529] Ibid., p. 205.

from domination, and violence becomes the tool for overcoming the emotional numbness and achieving absolute control.

Women are categorised based on appearance criteria. *"If she likes me only for my muscles, the heft of my cock, then she's a shallow bitch. But a physically superior, near-perfect-looking shallow bitch, and that can override anything, except maybe bad breath or yellow teeth, either of which is a real deal-breaker."*[530] In Bateman's perspective, women are regarded similarly to commodities. They are accepted if deemed aesthetically pleasing; otherwise, they are rejected. Physical appeal and sexual attraction serve as a form of quality assessment, undermining any sense of worth based on individuality.

His objectification extends further when a bartender with a poor attitude is rewarded solely based on Bateman's bodily features standards: *"She's got a rad body and is so hot-looking that I will leave her a big tip because of this."*[531] This illustrates how behaviour, personality, and all other attributes fall short of appearance.

Even when Bateman acknowledges a woman's physical attractiveness, he rejects the emotional aspects that accompany genuine intimacy: *"Though physically Patricia is appealing and I wouldn't mind having sex with her body, the idea of treating her gently, […] rubs me the wrong way."*[532] The dehumanisation of an individual, referring to them merely as a body, reflects Patrick's detachment from humanity. Authenticity plays no role, as in his own words: *"it's possible to act differently from how one actually feels to get sex."*[533]

Bateman's sexual life reveals the extent of his narcissism. He engages in sexual intercourse not for pleasure or intimacy, but as an opportunity to showcase his body, masculinity, and dominance. When the performance fails to deliver satisfaction, he resorts to violence or integrates it into the coitus itself.

12.1.4 Violence as the only source of authentic feeling

His aggression surfaces long before the first explicit murder, as the narrative provides hints that gradually expose Bateman's psychological decay. Indications of aggression make their way into otherwise ordinary scenes, revealing how violence saturates his psyche. When he casually says*: "You are a fucking ugly bitch I want to stab to death and play around with your body, but*

[530] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 151.
[531] Ibid., p. 54.
[532] Ibid., p. 75.
[533] Ibid., p. 51.

I'm smiling,"[534] the contrast between the brutality of the thought and his pretence of calm exposes his psychological fragmentation.

Similarly, the lingering gaze on a kitchen knife: *"For what seems like a long time I stare at the Black & Decker Handy Knife that lies on the counter next to the sink,"*[535] is immediately followed by: *"The suit I wear today is from Alan Flusser."*[536] The juxtaposition between the deviant contemplation and fashion observation encapsulates Bateman's dual existence. The monstrous interior coexists with the perfected exterior demanded by society. The coexistence of brutality and consumer performance foreshadows the collapse of boundaries that subsequently define his violent sexual behaviour.

Violence first infiltrates the protagonist's sexuality indirectly, then progressively takes over his desire entirely. His shift from self-gratification to sexualised images of different women to masturbating over the murder scene in *Body Double: "I rerent Body Double because I want to watch it again tonight even though I know I won't have enough time to masturbate over the scene where the woman is getting drilled to death,"*[537] marks the moment violence becomes an erotic stimulus.

What begins as a fantasy quickly transforms into the prerequisite for arousal. By the time he states: *"I would like to tit-fuck her and then maybe cut her arms off"*[538], sexual desire and violence become unified. Violence no longer appears merely as an intrusive thought; it becomes inseparably linked to all sexual interaction.

In Bateman's universe, consumerism persists as an omnipresent force, whereby the valuation he places on a suit exceeds the importance he assigns to a human life. Patrick reassures himself that he will not indulge in murder, not out of empathy but because the cost of the clothing restrains him:

"I come to the conclusion that Patricia is safe tonight, that I am not going to unexpectedly pull a knife out and use it on her just for the sake of doing so, that I am not going to get any pleasure watching her bleed from slits I've made by cutting her throat or slicing her neck open or gouging her eyes out. […] maybe it's simply that I don't want to ruin this particular Alexander Julian suit by having the bitch spray her blood all over it."[539]

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[534] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 57.
[535] Ibid., p. 28.
[536] Ibid.
[537] Ibid., p. 67.
[538] Ibid., p. 77.
[539] Ibid., p. 74.

The chapter "Girls", which vividly describes a threesome, signifies the moment when the boundary between harmful thoughts and taking action disappears. Sexual pleasure becomes conditioned by physical harm. The aftermath: *"Tomorrow Sabrina will have a limp. Christie will probably have a terrible black eye and deep scratches across her buttocks caused by the coat hanger. Bloodstained Kleenex will lie crumpled by the side of the bed,"*[540] frames the excessive violence as the outcome of Bateman's desires.

The coat hanger recurs again when Bateman tells another woman, after an escalated conflict in the restroom of a club, *"The things I could do to you with a coat hanger."*[541] When examined in the context of his previous experience, it could be argued that the statement indicates both sexual interest and a sadistic threat. Lust and aggression merge to such a degree that Bateman can no longer distinguish between attraction and the urge to harm.

His recollection of a girl named Alison, with whom he had an affair, accentuates this inability. *"I suddenly remember, painfully, that I would have liked to see Alison bleed to death that afternoon last spring but something stopped me."*[542] He recalls wanting to observe her dying, as he derives fulfilment from witnessing fear, struggle, and vulnerability. However, he admits that her drug-induced indifference disrupted the fulfilment: *"She was so high – 'oh my god,' she kept moaning during those hours, blood bubbling out of her nose – she never wept. Maybe that was the problem; maybe that was what saved her."*[543] Alison's indifference and pleasure prevent Patrick from experiencing the erotic satisfaction, suggesting that Bateman's violence depends as much on psychological dominance as on physical one.

As the narrative progresses, the pattern of sex followed by homicide fails to satisfy him, and so the order must be reversed. Bateman murders first and subsequently uses the body as an object for sexual release. His fantasies revolve entirely around gore: *"I'm thinking about pools of blood, geysers of the stuff."*[544] His former fantasies of women engaging in sexual acts with each other are discarded: *"Again I make the two of them eat each other out but it start failing to turn me on – all I can think about is blood and what their blood will look like."*[545]

On numerous occasions, Bateman asserts dominance by coercing women into various sexual positions; however, as he does not find satisfaction in such acts, his exertion of control and dominance must originate from absolute authority by taking advantage of women who are

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[540] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 169.
[541] Ibid., p. 189.
[542] Ibid., p. 199.
[543] Ibid.
[544] Ibid., p. 291.
[545] Ibid.

helpless and wounded: *"I take advantage of her helpless state and, removing my gloves, force her mouth open and with the scissors cut out her tongue."*[546]

The scene in which Patrick saws off a woman's head and uses it as an object for masturbation exposes how sexual gratification arises only through complete possession, objectification, and destruction: *"While Tiffany watches, finally I saw the entire head off – and holding the head up like a prize, I take my cock, purple with stiffness, and lowering Torri's head to my lap I push it onto her bloodied mouth and start fucking it, until I come, exploding into it."*[547]

Beyond sexual brutality, violence influences other aspects of Bateman's life. It serves as the sole means by which he temporarily breaks through the apathy that characterises his everyday existence. The incident of stabbing a homeless man marks one of the moments where Bateman encounters violence not merely as fantasy but as an actual lived experience. The acts of severe brutality provide a feeling of authenticity: *"I start stabbing him in the stomach, lightly, above the dense matted patch of pubic hair."*[548] *"Afterwards, two blocks west, I feel heady, ravenous, pumped up, as if I'd just worked out and endorphins are flooding my nervous system, or just embraced that first line of cocaine, inhaled the first puff of a fine cigar, sipped that first glass of Cristal."*[549] At these instances, Bateman transcends the limitations of his meticulously crafted persona, thereby permitting his distorted self to be liberated. His reaction confirms it: *"I can't help but start laughing."*[550] The laughter arrives involuntarily, signalling how violence offers Bateman an emotional response he otherwise cannot access.

Violence produces the emotional intensity he fails to retrieve from sex, performance, consumption, or from the narcissistic rituals that structure his days. It gives him the hormonal reaction that his superficial life never offers. In this sense, homicide functions not merely as transgression but as a moment where the sensation of violence compensates for the emptiness that saturates his life. The pleasure derived from the act offers something not even his perfect routine, meticulous appearance, or sex can provide.

12.1.5 Dissociation, and the Oblivious Society

The emotional numbness that shapes the atmosphere of *American Psycho* operates even before Bateman directly addresses it. He moves through a world where no genuine contact occurs, a world where *"people pass, oblivious, no one pays attention, they don't even pretend to not*

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[546] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 236.
[547] Ibid., p. 292.
[548] Ibid., p. 126.
[549] Ibid., p. 127.
[550] Ibid.

pay attention."[551] Manhattan and its people directly reflect Patrick's internal state: disengaged, indifferent, and hollow. This shallow environment enables his disintegration, as he himself recognises it early in the novel when he whispers to himself: *"I'm a fucking evil psychopath."*[552]

When Bateman's fiancée Evelyn describes him as the boy next door[553], it suggests that Patrick successfully embodies the ideal of the harmless, approachable young man. He fits the image of the trustworthy, charming man. He is perceived through this ideological filter, not for what he truly is, but for what he appears to be. This underscores the novel's paradox: in reality, Bateman is reduced solely to his surface appearance, lacking an interior with real substance. This exposes the broader theme that nobody really sees anyone else.

The sense of invisibility intensifies his encounters. *"I'm greeted by the expressionless mask of the doorman's heavy, stupid face. I am a ghost to this man, I'm thinking. I am something unreal, something not quite tangible, yet still an obstacle of sorts."*[554] When referring to himself as a ghost, he articulates a profound social alienation. His understanding of perception collapses alongside his identity. When Bateman questions other engagement with their surroundings: *"I mean, does anyone really see anyone? Does anyone really see anyone else?"*[555], he reveals a crisis at the centre of the novel. Patrick's identity has been so extensively associated with external features that recognition becomes impossible.

He internalises this dissociation by applying cinematic logic to his lived experience: *"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."*[556] This approach erases the boundary between reality and imagination, transforming life into an experience constructed merely to be consumed from a third-person perspective.

This dissolution culminates in the line that captures the entire psychological trajectory of the novel: *"This is my reality. Everything outside of this is like some movie I once saw."*[557] His reality is not the world around him but the closed space of his own disintegration. Everything outside Bateman's mind feels like fiction because he no longer participates in reality.

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[551] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 144.
[552] Ibid., p. 19.
[553] Ibid.
[554] Ibid., p. 68.
[555] Ibid., p. 229.
[556] Ibid., p. 254.
[557] Ibid., p. 332.

The shift into third-person narration during the chapter *"Chase, Manhattan"* formalises this fragmentation. The narrative transforms to: *"Patrick tries…"*[558], *"Patrick keeps thinking…"*[559], *"Patrick's mind is out of sync."*[560] The shift underscores his unreliability as the narrator. He is no longer able to participate in the lived reality fully, portrayed by the loss of the narrative voice.

The blurring between reality and representation widens when he admits: *"I cannot be positive that I'm not hallucinating."*[561] His perception fractures so thoroughly that he begins to doubt the stability of the world itself. The dissociation he feels is recognised by Alison when she looks at him. The gaze recognises Patrick as *the opposite of civilization.*[562] Bateman attempts to locate himself within the real space, but his consciousness remains unstable.

He envisions ceasing to exist and dissolving from the world that barely registers him. In the bathroom, he imagines disappearing into a crack in the wall: *"I stare into a thin, weblike crack above the urinal's handle and think to myself that if I were to disappear into that crack, […], the odds are good that no one would notice I was gone. No … one … would … care. In fact some, if they noticed my absence, might feel an odd, indefinable sense of relief. This is true: the world is better off with some people gone."*[563]

He reveals not only his personal detachment but also a more extensive detachment that encompasses everyone around him: *"Our lives are not all interconnected. That theory is a crock."*[564] Patrick rejects the possibility of genuine connection, reducing human existence to isolated units, yet, paradoxically, genuine connection is the one thing he truly craves: *"I just want to be loved,"*[565] and *"I just want peace, love, friendship, understanding."*[566]

His monologue: *"there is an idea of a Patrick Bateman, some kind of abstraction, but there is no real me…"*[567] operates as the most explicit statement of the collapse of his identity and individuality. In this confession, Bateman articulates the core of his identity crisis: he functions not as a stable subject but as a surface constructed from society's expectations, designer labels, and behavioural performance. The "idea" perceived by others is sustained by wealth, status,

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[558] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 335.
[559] Ibid., p. 336.
[560] Ibid., p. 337.
[561] Ibid., p. 174.
[562] Ibid., p. 199.
[563] Ibid., p. 217.
[564] Ibid.
[565] Ibid., p. 332.
[566] Ibid., p. 308.
[567] Ibid., p. 362.

and attractiveness, yet the man beneath this abstraction recognises nothing substantial within himself, turning him into an empty vessel.

He becomes *"an entity, something illusory,"*[568] a product of late-capitalist formation where identity is constructed from a consumable façade rather than an authentic interior. His description: *"Myself is fabricated, an aberration. I am a noncontingent human being. My personality is sketchy and unformed, my heartlessness goes deep and is persistent,"*[569] reveals that the personality he inhabits does not emerge organically but exists as a culmination of performative gestures meant to simulate humanity (elsewhere in the novel, Bateman asserts that he is indeed not human but in touch with humanity[570]) in an environment where authenticity no longer conveys any meaning.

The subsequent analysis underscores this deterioration as Bateman identifies the loss of his humane qualities: *"My conscience, my pity, my hopes disappeared a long time ago (probably at Harvard) if they ever did exist."*[571] Patrick attributes this decline to the elite institution that supposedly fosters character, and instead portrays himself as a product of privilege deprived of humanity.

When he declares: *"I simply am not there,"*[572] and *"there are no more barriers to cross,"*[573] he exposes both a moral and existential exhaustion. Bateman situates himself beyond the conventional categories, insisting he has surpassed even the most destructive and deviant versions of human behaviour: *"All I have in common with the uncontrollable and the insane, the vicious and the evil, all the mayhem I have caused and my utter indifference toward it, I have now surpassed."*[574]

His question: *"Is evil something you are? Or is it something you do?"*[575] holds no value, as there is no stable "you" to begin with. And as he states: *"This confession has meant nothing,"*[576] even trying to acknowledge the self fails to serve as a form of revelation or redemption. The lack of catharsis underscores his detachment from the world, and the emotional numbness remains.

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[568] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 362.
[569] Ibid.
[570] Ibid., p. 328.
[571] Ibid., p. 362.
[572] Ibid.
[573] Ibid.
[574] Ibid.
[575] Ibid.
[576] Ibid.

Bateman's vision of the world as an *"unending desert landscape devoid of reason and light and spirit"*[577] crystallises the nihilistic core of his psyche. The protagonist's worldview, once again, reveals itself to be constructed entirely out of absence. He admits that: *"This was what I could understand, this was how I lived my life, what I constructed my movement around, how I dealt with the tangible."*[578] The world, as Bateman sees it, contains no moral interiority, no spiritual depth, no emotional resonance.

"Intellect is not a cure. Justice is dead. Fear, recrimination, innocence, sympathy, guilt, waste, failure, grief, were things, emotions, that no one really felt anymore. Reflection is useless, the world is senseless. Evil is its only permanence. God is not alive. Love cannot be trusted. Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in … this was civilization as I saw it, colossal and jagged …"[579]

This passage encapsulates Bateman's fully realised nihilism, echoing Nietzsche's declaration that "*God is dead"*. Patrick's vision portrays civilisation as constructed solely upon superficiality, as all human qualities lose their foundation in faith. He rationalises his violence by asserting that only evil appears to be enduring, as it is the sole aspect that suppresses numbness.

[577] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 360.
[578] Ibid.
[579] Ibid.

12.2 Timothy Price: The Patrick Bateman Prototype

This chapter analyses Timothy Price as a crucial precursor to the novel's protagonist, positing him as the prototype of Patrick Bateman's eventual disintegration. Price articulates the foundational values: consumerist obsession, surface-level identity, and violence. By examining Price's commodified self-definition, his narcissism, and eventual disappearance, this section explores how he prefigures Bateman's trajectory, establishing the interchangeable nature of identity within the novel's late-capitalist environment.

Timothy Price appears in the narrative prior to the introduction of the main protagonist. This positioning should not be perceived as coincidental but rather as deliberate. Price serves as an initial introduction to the world that later consumes Bateman. Although he exhibits behaviour similar to his Wall Street colleagues, his role holds significantly greater importance. Price's introduction articulates the values that shape the entire narrative: consumerism, surface identity, emotional flatness, and latent brutality. In many ways, Timothy becomes the prototype that Bateman later imitates and exceeds.

From the opening page, Price defines himself not in human terms but marketable ones: *"I'm resourceful, […] I'm creative, I'm young, unscrupulous, highly motivated, highly skilled. In essence what I'm saying is that society cannot afford to lose me. I'm an asset."*[580] In this scene, Timothy reduces himself to a commodity, to a list of marketable traits. His insistence on being irreplaceable is ironically undermined by the fact that he inhabits an environment in which everyone is interchangeable. His self-valuation reveals the underlying societal logic: individuals perceive themselves as distinctive yet ultimately conform to the same societal norms and expectations. This belief is ultimately diminished following Price's disappearance, as he is scarcely mentioned in subsequent conversations throughout the remainder of the novel.

Price constructs his identity through products just as everybody else within the story: *"He takes off the expensive-looking Walkman, […] he continues talking as he opens his new Tumi calfskin attaché case he bought at D. F. Sanders."*[581] He also dresses similarly to others: *"Price is wearing a six-button wool and silk suit by Ermenegildo Zegna, a cotton shirt with French cuffs by Ike Behar, a Ralph Lauren silk tie and leather wing tips by Fratelli Rossetti."*[582] Timothy contributes to the surface-obsessed system, where identity is merely a matter of display.

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[580] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 3.
[581] Ibid., p. 4.
[582] Ibid.

Timothy is also revealed to perform the same narcissistic rituals as Bateman: *"Tim blurts out. He walks over to Evelyn and bows next to her, checking out his reflection in the mirror."*[583] Observing his reflection during an interaction with another individual demonstrates his self-observation and highlights the tendency of individuals to concentrate primarily on themselves, rather than actively participating in those interactions.

His fixation on beggars exposes the emptiness that governs his meticulously polished exterior: *"his eyes fixed on a beggar at the corner of Second and Fifth, "That's the twenty-fourth one I've seen today. I've kept count,"*[584] His counting reflects the boredom he experiences and the need for stimulation in a life devoid of meaning. There is no indication of empathy; he simply observes them, and by enumerating them, he diminishes them to mere units, thereby devaluing the human beings, as they hold no value for him.

Initially, Price expresses violent thoughts the same way Bateman does, before he descends into his aggressive frenzy: *"and we have a mayor who won't listen to her, a mayor who won't let the bitch have her way – Holy Christ – let the fucking bitch freeze to death."*[585] He expresses his hatred toward gay people in a similar assertive manner: *"Did you read about the host from that game show on TV? He killed two teenage boys? Depraved faggot. Droll, really droll,"*[586] and: *"'They're all faggots.' Price shrugs. 'The British.'"*[587]

Perhaps the most significant scene concerning Price occurs in the chapter titled "*Tunnel*" as it radically reframes Price and reveals a significant rupture in his psyche. Up to this point, he perfectly executes the role of the Wall Street archetype; however, the existential crisis underlying this performance is now revealed. When *"Price gazes longingly at the tracks as if they suggest some kind of freedom, embody an escape that Price has been searching for,"*[588] the narrative exposes him as a figure aware of his entrapment. The tracks offer the possibility of escaping the suffocating system that defines his existence. He gazes into the darkness because it provides a chance of exit.

When Timothy *"keeps staring past the railings, trying to find the point where the tracks come to and end, find what lies behind the blackness,"*[589] the chapter's central metaphor reveals itself. The end of the tracks signifies the termination of the curated role that Price performs. It

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[583] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 20.
[584] Ibid., p. 4.
[585] Ibid., p. 5.
[586] Ibid., p. 6.
[587] Ibid., p. 34.
[588] Ibid., p. 53.
[589] Ibid., p. 58.

signifies the end of the commodified self. The darkness he fixates on reflects the internal void that he both embodies and briefly confronts. His aim is not to exit the tunnel, but to abandon his former existence.

This intensifies when he shouts: *"Listen. We need drugs."*[590] The narcotics, however, do not provide the escape Price seeks: *"It's a fucking milligram of ... Sweet'n Low, […] Price is furious, red-faced and sweating; as if this was my fault, as if buying the gram from Madison was my idea,"*[591] hence Timothy has no alternative but to disappear into the darkness beyond the rails: *"'Listen to me, Patrick,' he screams. 'I'm leaving. […] No, Bateman. I'm serious you dumb son-of-a-bitch. Leaving. Disappearing,'"*[592] and finally, as he shouts and all eyes are on him *"he regains his composure before disappearing into blackness."*[593]

Price's disappearance marks a pivotal moment in the narrative, as from that point forward Bateman shifts more violently into the descent that defines the rest of the novel. Timothy vanishes, and Patrick subsequently fills the void, experiencing the same collapse his colleague had encountered. Once Price is gone, nothing can stop Patrick from losing his sanity.

When Price reappears briefly near the novel's end, the previously impeccable figure appears somewhat disjointed and altered. His remark: *"I just don't get how someone, anyone, can appear that way yet be involved in such total shit,"*[594] functions as a hidden self-reflection. Although he reacts to the president's speech, the line also mirrors Price's own duplicity. He cannot comprehend how someone can present perfection while engaging in moral or existential decay, yet this contradiction defines his own existence. He, too, used to wear the mask of flawlessness while participating in the same system.

Price thus represents the initial trajectory that Bateman follows: consumerist, narcissistic, emotionally numb, and violent. Patrick, however, surpasses him by acting upon his impulses. Patrick thus becomes the manifestation of the ideas that concerned them both. Bateman also claims that: *"Timothy is the only interesting person [he] knows,"*[595] which correlates with the conversation Patrick has about serial killers, saying that Ed Gein *"was an interesting guy."*[596] By employing the same adjective to characterise both men, he effectively equates them and discloses that they are both regarded as idols by him.

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[590] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 53.
[591] Ibid., p. 56.
[592] Ibid., p. 58.
[593] Ibid., p. 60.
[594] Ibid., p. 382.
[595] Ibid., p. 21.
[596] Ibid., p. 88.

12.3 Paul Owen: The Unidentifiable Identity

Paul Owen occupies an ambiguous position in *American Psycho.* He represents a figure whose identity never realises itself. He is a co-worker present throughout the narrative, yet he remains misidentified and misplaced. Through his character, Ellis exposes the consequences of functioning in a culture which has entirely dissolved individuality. Owen represents how identity ceases to matter at all and how people overlook one another in a society saturated with selfishness and superficiality.

His character is introduced indirectly, through his professional status. He enters the narrative during Price's monologue, regarding the Fisher account: *"Price began his spiel today over lunch […]and continued ranting over drinks at Harry's where he had gone on […] about the Fisher account that Paul Owen is handling."*[597] This immediately situates him within the same system that defines the others, where worth is measured exclusively through professional success.

The Fisher account becomes Owen's sole distinguishing feature. Bateman repeatedly returns to it, asking obsessively: *"Is Paul Owen still handling the Fisher account?"*[598] and listing it as one of his primary goals: *"to find out as much as humanly possible about Paul Owen's mysterious Fisher account."*[599] Owen's management of the account represents a notable professional achievement; however, this success is subsequently undermined following his disappearance, particularly when Detective Kimball raises the issue of the money owed by Paul to Meredith: *"All I know is that Paul Owen owes her supposedly a lot of money."*[600] This reveals how the account operates as a false indicator of status and wealth, unveiling the underlying reality. While Owen appears rich and successful, the truth is that he is tormented by significant financial debt.

Like every other man in the novel, Owen is described almost exclusively through clothing and grooming: *"Paul Owen walks in wearing a cashmere one-button sports jacket, tropical wool flannel slacks, a button-down tab-collared shirt by Ronaldus Shamask,"*[601] and: *"'Hello, Owen,' I say, admiring the way he's styled and slicked back his hair, with a part so even and sharp."*[602] These descriptions demonstrate how effectively Owen reinforces uniformity within

[597] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 5.
[598] Ibid., p. 140.
[599] Ibid., p. 170.
[600] Ibid., p. 264.
[601] Ibid., p. 106.
[602] Ibid., p. 107.

consumer culture. He strictly conforms to the aesthetic norms and conventions associated with Wall Street masculinity, rendering himself indistinguishable within this framework. His appearance does not serve to individualise; on the contrary, it effectively erases his distinctiveness.

The collapse of individuality becomes explicit through repeated cases of mistaken identity. Owen mistakes Bateman for Marcus Halberstam: *"Owen has mistaken me for Marcus Halberstam"*[603], Evelyn for Cecelia: *"Paul Owen has called me Marcus four times and Evelyn, much to my relief, Cecilia twice,"*[604] and Bateman himself notes that: *"no one has corrected Owen and it's unlikely that anyone will."*[605] The profound indifference towards misnaming exposes how recognition has diminished in importance. Names no longer serve as reliable indicators of identity; the environment does not necessitate them because it does not prioritise originality and specificity. Individuals are regarded as entities characterised by superficial traits rather than by personal distinctions.

Owen becomes a victim of this system, as he both struggles to recognise others and remains unrecognised himself. The identity confusion confirms that the characters move through social encounters performing roles rather than engaging in genuine interactions. In such an environment, individuality cannot be maintained as it is neither required nor recognised.

This logic reaches its most significant expression after Owen's *supposed* murder. Bateman kills Owen in his apartment and later leaves a message on an answering machine implying that Paul has moved to London. He remarks: *"My voice sounds similar to Owen's and to someone hearing it over the phone probably identical,"*[606] showcasing how even regular indicators of individuality fail to distinguish one from another, rendering identity replaceable.

The investigation of Owen's disappearance further destabilises any sense of reality. Detective Kimball reports that someone mistook Paul for Ainsworth: *"I checked it out and what happened is, he mistook a Hubert Ainsworth for Paul."*[607] Later, Bateman hears conflicting remarks that Owen has been seen in London multiple times: *"Someone I talk to through my lawyer tells me that Donald Kimball, the private investigator, has heard that Owen really is in London, that someone spotted him twice."*[608] These observations reveal perhaps the most horrifying realisation: whether Owen is alive or dead becomes irrelevant.

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[603] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 86.
[604] Ibid., p. 137.
[605] Ibid., p. 137.
[606] Ibid., p. 209.
[607] Ibid., p. 262.
[608] Ibid., p. 289.

When Bateman confesses to the murder of Owen, it is dismissed as a joke. Harold Carnes, the lawyer, laughs and responds with amusement, as if it were a piece of dark humour or an image of Bateman's twisted fantasy. Disturbingly, Carnes insists that Bateman could not have committed the murder: *"I had ... dinner ... with Paul Owen ... twice ... in London ... just ten days ago."*[609] At the same time, he repeatedly misnames Bateman, calling him Davids and Donaldson.

Owen's death generates mere confusion. It cannot be recognised because Owen never existed as a distinct subject. In this context, the character exemplifies the novel's critique of individuality at its most advanced stage. He embodies a subject so profoundly absorbed by consumerism that even his death is inconsequential, as his existence never exceeded the confines of the capitalist system. His character illustrates how seamlessly identity disintegrates within this hollow environment.

[609] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 373.

12.4 Evelyn and Jean: The Artificial and The Real

This chapter explores how the female characters in *American Psycho* articulate two distinct feminine positions within the same late-capitalist environment. Evelyn and Jean stand on opposing sides of the same system because they respond to its demands in fundamentally different ways. Through them, the novel explores how identity becomes shaped and hollowed out by consumer culture and emotional disconnection, and how one can stay aloof from it.

Evelyn Richards embodies full integration into the Manhattan ecosystem. She mirrors the men surrounding Bateman in her obsession with status, aesthetic perfection, and meaningless conversations. Her identity depends on external validation, luxury, and performance, turning her into another interchangeable figure within society. Her presence reinforces the logic of surface over substance.

Jean, by contrast, occupies a distinct position within the same environment. She does not conform to the system; instead, she actively disrupts it through her emotional transparency, attentiveness, and refusal to depend on external markers and validation. The following chapter focuses on how Evelyn reinforces the exact mechanism of the system that Jean disturbs. It explores how Jean introduces the possibility of authenticity, vulnerability, and genuine connection.

12.4.1 Evelyn Richards: The Woman of Wall Street

Evelyn appears in *American Psycho* as Patrick Bateman's fiancée, a female counterpart to the Manhattan men. On the surface, she suggests security, social status, and genuine affection. Within the narrative of the novel, however, Evelyn is disclosed to be another factor that compels Bateman towards his disintegration. Rather than grounding him through authentic emotional affection, love, and support, she reflects an identical cultural mechanism that produces Patrick's decay. Evelyn participates fully in the same construction of surface identity, consumer performance, and emotional detachment that governs the novel's environment. Her presence gradually reinforces the conditions that lead to Bateman's collapse.

Like the men surrounding the protagonist, Evelyn belongs to the same corporate structure: *"Evelyn is an executive at a financial services company."*[610] Her occupation, therefore, incorporates her into the same culture of performance, consumerism, and superficial appearance. She fully internalises and embodies this system, ultimately transforming into another hollow figure

[610] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 13.

within the protagonist's environment. Her resemblance to other characters, both male and female, is evident in various instances.

Her reliance on antidepressants: *"Evelyn is addicted to Parnate, an antidepressant,"*[611] functions as a parallel to the men's habitual use of cocaine and alcohol. Where Bateman and his peers find relief in narcotics, Evelyn suppresses her emotional disturbance through antidepressants, mirroring Bateman's own use of Valium and Xanax. This reveals the same existential crisis, signalling a problem which requires a solution; however, this solution remains suppressed rather than being actively addressed. Evelyn's dependency thereby reveals a broader emotional numbness, culturally solved with medication.

Evelyn's identity depends heavily on social visibility, perception, and status. Her criteria for friendship reveal this superficiality: *"I mean I doubt Stash makes the society pages of W, which I thought was your criterion for choosing friends."*[612] In Evelyn's view, social worth is unmistakably linked to status, suggesting that personality holds no significance compared to high social rank. As already demonstrated, throughout *American Psycho,* the most appropriate method to convey such status is through one's attire and aesthetic perfection.

Her fixation on it emerges almost immediately during the sushi scene, where the disorder of food presentation provokes genuine distress: *"We have to save Evelyn. She's been rearranging the sushi for the past hour."*[613] Her reaction: *"Oh, god. It's a mess. I swear I'm going to cry,"*[614] reveals that imperfection triggers anxiety. The meticulous arrangement of ginger slices, *"placing strips of pale orange ginger delicately in a pile next to a small porcelain dish filled with soy sauce,"*[615] reflects Bateman's fixation on control. However, in his case, this obsession is more significantly associated with sexual encounters rather than food.

This pathological obsession extends to Evelyn's own appearance. Bateman notes that *"Evelyn's face seems chalky"*[616] and that *"her mouth [is] lined with a purple lipstick that gives off an almost startling effect."*[617] This leads him to the realisation that *"she's taken Tim Price's advice to stop using her tanning lotion."*[618] Evelyn's body, hence, becomes another surface ready to display perfection. She adjusts herself according to external signals rather than her own

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[611] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 23.
[612] Ibid., p. 18.
[613] Ibid., p. 8.
[614] Ibid, p. 9.
[615] Ibid., p. 10.
[616] Ibid., p. 114.
[617] Ibid.
[618] Ibid.

preference. Clothing functions in the same way. *"Evelyn's wearing an Anne Klein rayon jacket, a wool-crepe skirt, a silk blouse from Bonwit's , antique gold and agate earrings from James Robinson that cost, roughly, four thousand dollars."*[619] Her outfit operates as an indicator of financial prosperity rather than a reflection of internal conviction. The explicit focus on cost underscores the ideology that wealth should remain visibly displayed.

Evelyn's response to violence exposes yet another curiosity. When her neighbour is found decapitated, she responds by treating herself: *"She couldn't deal with the office today so she spent the afternoon calming herself with facials at Elizabeth Arden."*[620] Such a horrible incident becomes a mere inconvenience, which, however, is resolved through luxury. Even more disturbing is the revelation that she appears cheerful soon after: *"She seems in a much better mood, boisterous almost, more than you'd expect of someone whose neighbor's head was sliced off."*[621] While brutality does disturb her, she refuses to acknowledge it fully, as after Bateman's confession, she no longer participates in the conversation.

In fact, all conversations she partakes in consistently collapse into emptiness.

"'Is any of this registering with you or would I get more of a response from, oh, an ice bucket?' […] she opens her mouth and I finally expect her to acknowledge my character. And for the first time since I've known her she is straining to say something interesting and I pay very close attention and she asks, […] 'Is that… Ivana Trump?'"[622]

Bateman's declaration that it is for the first time she may say something interesting exposes how blank her monologues are. Patrick repeatedly notes that Evelyn speaks without listening and listens without hearing: *"Her dialogue overlaps her own dialogue,"*[623] he observes, while later admitting: *"I nod, pretending to listen, but I've already phased out."*[624] This indicates that she contributes no genuine value to human interactions, as her conversations closely mirror those Patrick engages in with the men of Wall Street, which also lack substance.

As the narrative progresses, Evelyn's shallowness gradually provokes more irritation. Bateman finds himself imagining violence against her: *"We had to leave the Hamptons because I would find myself standing over our bed in the house before dawn, with an ice pick gripped in my fist, waiting for Evelyn to open her eyes."*[625] He even goes as far as to admit that: *"if it*

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[619] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 114.
[620] Ibid., p. 113.
[621] Ibid., p. 115.
[622] Ibid., pp. 116–117.
[623] Ibid., p. 118.
[624] Ibid., p. 322.
[625] Ibid., p. 271.

weren't for the people in the restaurant I would take the jade chopsticks sitting on the table and push them deep into Evelyn's eyes and snap them in two."[626] He particularly emphasises the eyes, describing them as *"pallid gray."*[627] Eyes are often regarded as the window to the soul; however, beneath her eyes, there appears to be no soul.

Furthermore, Evelyn has nothing to offer to Bateman anymore: *"I notice her lack of carnality and for the first time it taunts me. Before, it was what attracted me to Evelyn. Now its absence upsets me, seems sinister, fills me with a nameless dread."*[628] The lack of carnality and the lack of any emotional depth reveal how perfectly she functions within society. Her superficiality reveals that nothing in her environment requires depth. In this sense, Evelyn operates as the feminine counterpart to Bateman's colleagues: polished, aesthetically controlled, and profoundly detached.

Evelyn, therefore, embodies the ideal partner produced by the logic of late capitalist culture. She is fully integrated into systems of consumption and performance. She offers no substantial value and therefore fails to distinguish herself from the other characters.

12.4.2 Jean: The Authentic Secretary

Jean occupies a distinctive position within the novel. Unlike most characters, who serve as interchangeable figures within Bateman's environment, Jean resists the integration into the mechanisms of consumerism, performativity, and emotional detachment that predominate the novel. This separation from the other characters becomes her defining characteristic, as she stands out as the only one capable of authentic affect, as shown by her emotional presence and sincere interest.

Jean's introduction immediately separates her from the other women in the novel. Batemans describes her as *"my secretary, Jean, who is in love with me and who I will probably end up marrying."*[629] This subtly foreshadows that Jean's affection will significantly influence Bateman's worldview. She stands out by wearing *"something improbably expensive and completely inappropriate"*[630] which showcases how she differentiates herself from others. In Bateman's eyes, her outfit fails to conform to the precisely given rules of clothing. This perceived inappropriateness reveals how Jean displays sincerity and personal preference rather than adhering to prescribed expectations.

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[626] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 322.
[627] Ibid., p. 115.
[628] Ibid., p. 321.
[629] Ibid., p. 61.
[630] Ibid.

Her emotional vulnerability appears through subtle jealousy, as when Bateman asks her to make dinner reservations, she hesitantly responds: *"Oh, something ... romantic?"*[631] This establishes Jean as emotionally invested in Patrick from the beginning, underlining the genuine emotional aspect of her character. Whereas other women pursue Bateman for the prestige and access to fancy restaurants he offers, Jean's jealousy is focused on Patrick himself rather than on the luxury of the restaurant.

Jean's behaviour repeatedly produces reassurance and reliability. When Bateman seeks validation about purchasing a tanning bed, she responds carefully, acknowledging its unusual nature while still complimenting him. *"'Well, it is a little unusual,' she admits, and I can tell she is choosing her words very carefully. 'But no, of course not. I mean how else are you going to keep up that devilishly handsome skin tone?'"*[632] Bateman describes himself as *"vaguely touched by her almost total devotion."*[633] This response is significant, given that Bateman rarely registers any positive emotional reactions towards others, and when such responses do occur, they are typically accompanied by sexist remarks. When he tells her: *"You're prettier than that,"*[634] the statement lacks the sexualised subtext. Jean is never involved in his violent or sexual fantasies.

This is because, despite her devotion, Patrick initially finds Jean's affection unsettling rather than erotic. He repeatedly refers to her as *"my secretary who is in love with me,"*[635] exposing her emotional availability. Patrick describes this devotion as *"crush that renders her powerless,"*[636] and admits that he finds this *"lack of defense oddly unerotic."*[637]

The dinner at *Dorsia* marks a turning point. Bateman's elaborate deception to secure a reservation suggests a subconscious desire to impress Jean, even if he never acknowledges this motivation. When they get kicked out of the restaurant, Jean's reaction sharply contrasts with that of the other women in *American Psycho.* Instead of anger or humiliation, she laughs and defuses the tension governing Bateman: *"Jean skips down the street laughing, pulling me along, and when I finally notice her unexpected mirth, between giggles she lets out 'That was*

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631 ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 62.
632 Ibid., p. 64.
633 Ibid.
634 Ibid.
635 Ibid., p. 101, p. 114.
636 Ibid., p. 253.
637 Ibid.

so funny' and then, squeezing my clenched fist, she lets me know 'Your sense of humor is so spontaneous.'"[638]

The contrast becomes explicit when compared to Patricia's reaction in an earlier scene, where a failure to get to the same restaurant results in anger: *"She gives a little gasp when I drop the news, ignores the apologies and turns away from me to glare out the window."*[639] Jean appreciates her time with Patrick regardless of the restaurant or other markers of status. It is this distinction from others that disrupts Bateman's expectations.

When Jean invites Patrick to her apartment, he admits that he wants to accept, yet something intervenes: *"Even though I'm critical of her approach it doesn't necessarily mean that I don't want to go up – but something stops me, something quells the bloodlust."*[640] Bateman is unable to cause her harm, even if he does not explicitly recognise the underlying reason for it.

When Jean embraces him: *"And though it has been in no way a romantic evening, she embraces me and this time emanates a warmth I'm not familiar with,"*[641] Patrick experiences a feeling so unknown, yet so authentic, it alters something inside him: *"I realize, at first distantly and then with greater clarity, that the havoc raging inside me is gradually subsiding and she is kissing me on the mouth."*[642] This experience, followed by a subsequent fantasy: *"I imagine running around Central Park on a cool spring afternoon with Jean, laughing, holding hands. We buy balloons, we let them go,"*[643] introduces a purity and joy otherwise absent in the novel. The vision lacks violence, consumerism, social hierarchy, and all other superficial markers; it is an authentic desire for something humane, something real.

Jean continues to distinguish herself through her discourse. She asks Bateman meaningful questions about him, rather than about clothing, expensive water, or fancy restaurants. When she asks him: *"Haven't you ever wanted to make someone happy?"*[644] Jean introduces depth and genuine interest into conversations. Jean also articulates her feelings directly: *"I think I'm in love with you,"*[645] and refuses denial: *"I can't pretend these feelings don't exist, can I?"*[646] In a world governed by performance, simulation, and superficiality, Jean interrupts the mechanically precise system with her authenticity.

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[638] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 251.
[639] Ibid., p. 74.
[640] Ibid., p. 254.
[641] Ibid.
[642] Ibid., p. 255.
[643] Ibid.
[644] Ibid., p. 359.
[645] Ibid., p. 361.
[646] Ibid., p. 362.

Bateman's response reveals the depth of her impact on him. He experiences what he recognises as a crucial moment in his life: *"I get an odd feeling that this is a crucial moment in my life and I'm startled by the suddenness of what I guess passes for an epiphany. There is nothing of value I can offer her."*[647] For the first time, he self-reflects and recognises another person for who they truly are: *"For the first time I see Jean as uninhibited; she seems stronger, less controllable, wanting to take me into a new and unfamiliar land – the dreaded uncertainty of a totally different world."*[648] Authenticity, which Jean represents, marks a potential risk.

The contrast between Jean and other female characters, especially Evelyn, becomes explicit when Patrick describes her eyes as if there was *"truth in them"*[649] contrasting the dull eyes of Evelyn. The truth reflected in Jean's eyes operates as another indicator of her authenticity and purity. Bateman truly realises his affection as he claims: *"she weakens me, […] I can admit to feeling a pang, something tightening inside, and before I can stop it I find myself almost dazzled and moved that I might have the capacity to accept, though not return, her love."*[650]

Patrick's final admission of feeling *"touched by her ignorance for evil,"*[651] and his question: *"Why not end up with her?"*[652] represent a possibility that previously seemed impossible. Jean symbolises an alternative to his current life, offering a way out of the superficial surroundings. She provides a space free of surface, one grounded in attention, vulnerability, and authenticity. Even if Bateman cannot enter this unfamiliar realm, he acknowledges it and recognises it as real: *"Imagine for an instant a world where someone is grateful for something. […] there is one who pays attention, who notices the boy's agony and smiles, as if holding a secret."*[653]

Jean stands apart because she does not perform identity as a commodity. She expresses authenticity and embodies hope in an otherwise meaningless world. In a narrative dominated by surface, Jean introduces depth and reveals that authenticity remains present even if it seems completely lost.

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[647] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 364.
[648] Ibid.
[649] Ibid.
[650] Ibid.
[651] Ibid., p. 365.
[652] Ibid., p. 364
[653] Ibid., p. 365.

12.5 Comparative Analysis of the Characters in *American Psycho*

The characters of *American Psycho* function as figures shaped by the cultural logic of late capitalism. Each character embodies a different response to a world governed by consumerism, aesthetic performance, and the collapse of individuality. The following chapters examine how the characters navigate, or fail to navigate, this fractured environment. Through analysis of their approach to society, these chapters demonstrate how Ellis constructs a social environment in which individuality becomes interchangeable, authenticity increasingly inaccessible, and the sense of self dismantled.

12.5.1 The Erosion of Identity

Identity in *American Psycho* is depicted as an unstable, externally constructed construct rather than an authentic expression of the inner self. Each character exhibits a distinct response to this deconstruction of identity.

Patrick Bateman occupies the centre of the novel's identity crisis. Unlike the other characters, he repeatedly acknowledges the absence of a stable self, describing himself as an idea, or an abstraction, rather than a human being. His identity is assembled through routines, surfaces, acquisitions, and rehearsed behavioural scripts. While Bateman appears aware of his instability, such awareness produces no catharsis. Violence emerges as an attempt to regain control and to achieve distinction in a world of sameness. Through gruesome homicides, Bateman seeks to anchor himself in an unstable environment that offers no authenticity. Patrick's confessions articulate the core of his crisis: he exists only as a collection of performative gestures designed to simulate humanity.

He attempts to compensate for his internal void by obsessively controlling his exterior. His identity relies heavily on brand names and commodities, as he lists designer clothing with mechanical precision to signal status to a world which recognises only superficiality. This reliance on external signifiers traps him in a cycle of narcissistic self-surveillance. He cannot engage in ordinary activities without monitoring his reflection, checking his appearance, and ensuring that the mask he wears remains intact.

Timothy Price functions as the precursor to Bateman. He establishes the values of consumerist obsession, emotional detachment, and violent urges that define their shared world. Like Bateman, Price identifies himself through marketable traits, viewing himself not as a human being but as a valuable asset. He participates in the same rituals of surface-level identity,

constructing his selfhood through expensive accessories and luxurious suits, mirroring Bateman's dependency on labels to signify worth.

As mentioned, Timothy also prefigures Bateman's brutality and nihilism. He reduces human suffering to statistics and expresses violent misogyny and homophobia with the same ordinariness as Patrick. However, Price diverges from Bateman in his moment of existential awareness. While Bateman remains imprisoned by his compulsion to fit in, Price chooses to vanish from the suffocating system.

While Bateman represents the disintegration of identity and Price its disappearance, Owen represents its total erasure. Owen is another figure so thoroughly absorbed by consumerism that he ceases to exist as a distinct subject. Owen thus reinforces the novel's critique of uniformity. Described exclusively through his appearance, age, and well-balanced diet, he adheres perfectly to the norms of Wall Street, rendering himself indistinguishable from his peers.

This uniformity leads to the novel's recurring motif of misidentification, as Owen persistently mistakes his colleagues with someone else. Through his character, Ellis displays how individual identities become irrelevant in a culture that focuses merely on status and surface.

Evelyn Richards functions as the female counterpart to the Wall Street men, embodying complete integration into the culture of status and performance. Her identity is entirely contingent upon social visibility; she attributes worth to status, power, and wealth. Consequently, she becomes interchangeable with other female characters, lacking distinctive traits in her personality. Like her counterparts, Evelyn offers no genuine connection. Her role exemplifies a beautiful female figure generated by late capitalism.

Jean, the secretary, occupies a unique position in the novel as the only character who resists the mechanisms of commodification and offers the possibility of genuine identity. She distinguishes herself immediately through her refusal to conform to the rules of Bateman's world.

Unlike the characters who perform demanded roles, Jean exhibits emotional transparency and authenticity. Her devotion and genuine interest unsettle Bateman, as they provide something unfamiliar. She portrays the only individual who truly pays attention in a world defined by indifference. Jean thus represents the possibility of a world grounded in authentic identities. She remains as the proof that humanity exists, even if other characters are too far gone to reach it.

12.5.2 The Aesthetics and Bodily Control

This chapter examines the regulation of the body and the preoccupation with aesthetics in *American Psycho*, demonstrating how the characters reduce physicality to a commodity. In Ellis's

narrative, the body functions as a surface to be sculpted, maintained, and displayed. For the characters, physical perfection acts as a defence mechanism against internal emptiness, yet it simultaneously entraps them in a cycle of narcissistic self-observation.

Patrick Bateman exemplifies the most extreme manifestation of this aesthetic control. He regards his body as a project requiring control and discipline. His morning routines, executed with utmost precision, reveal his endeavour to construct a flawless exterior to conceal his fractured self. This obsession extends to his physique, as he participates in exhausting workouts and enhances his form through the use of steroids, even when such practices cause evident harm. The willingness to destroy his internal health for external appearance and admiration highlights how surface presentation becomes more significant than inner well-being.

Although Timothy Price prefigures Bateman's obsession, he does so in a less pathological form. While he engages in the rituals of self-observation which interrupt his day-to-day experience, his eventual escape suggests an arguable realisation that the curation of aesthetic perfection is ultimately unsustainable.

Evelyn Richards extends this logic to the female body, treating it as an object to be managed and controlled. Her appearance reflects her adherence to external trends and advice rather than personal expression. Beauty routines become her reaction to trauma, highlighting how the characters use bodily regulation to suppress emotional reality. Evelyn's body exists only to display wealth and social status.

Jean serves as the opposite for the remaining characters. By actively disregarding the rules to conform to the constricted look Bateman idolises, Jean retains a sense of self-expression. In an environment populated by *"hard bodies",* Jean's refusal to strictly regulate her appearance allows her to remain the only character capable of genuine connection.

12.5.3 Consumerism and the Value of Acquisition

In *American Psycho*, consumerism functions as the primary system of value, replacing morality, emotion, and identity with the logic of acquisition. The characters do not merely consume products, they define their existence through them. This chapter analyses how the accumulation of luxurious commodities creates a hollow society where individuals are judged solely by their market value.

Patrick Bateman constructs identities by listing the goods the people own. He introduces himself and others by their labels, instead of by their traits. This compulsive listing reveals the preoccupation with acquisition. His consumerism is also his primary mode of judgment. He evaluates people depending solely on their outfits. For him, consumption provides an illusion

of coherence, yet paradoxically, it ultimately fails, driving him toward violence as it remains the only sensation luxury cannot bring.

Timothy Price embodies the commodification of the human subject itself. As he views his own life as a resource to be used in the market, he demonstrates that, in this environment, individuals are indistinguishable from the products they consume.

Paul Owen illustrates the deceptive nature of consumer status. He is defined by the Fisher account, a professional commodity that Bateman craves. Owen appears to be the pinnacle of cultural success, yet this image masks a reality of significant debt. His character reveals that consumerism produces a fragile illusion, as the appearance of wealth is more important than reality.

Evelyn represents consumerism as a substitute for emotional connection. By wearing ridiculously expensive earrings and clothes, she displays how deeply she becomes integrated within the consumer culture. She chooses her acquaintances based on social ranking, reducing social bonds to status transactions. Through her character, Ellis criticises the culture that knows the price of everything but values nothing real.

While other characters embrace the consumerist logic, Jean, once again, disrupts it entirely. She does not participate in the status seeking that defines others. Jean proves that a possibility to exists within the material world without being consumed by it, has not been fully erased. Her ability to find joy outside the social hierarchy stands as the novel’s only hope for catharsis.

13 Characters Across the Novels

The following chapter provides a comparative analysis of the primary characters examined throughout this thesis, synthesising the thematic concerns discussed in the preceding chapters. By concentrating on identity formation, consumerism, bodily aesthetics, and the pursuit of authenticity, the chapter investigates how each character exemplifies a unique approach to the pressures of postmodern culture. Through comparative analysis, the chapter clarifies how similar cultural pressures generate different outcomes. This final part thus reveals how Palahniuk's and Ellis's characters and unreliable narrators articulate the psychological consequences of contemporary existence.

13.1 The Fractured Self in Late Capitalism

Across *Fight Club, Invisible Monsters,* and *American Psycho,* identity no longer functions as a stable, inner essence but as a fragile construct shaped almost entirely by the cultural logic of late capitalism. In each novel, subjectivity is mediated through surfaces, consumer goods, bodies, aesthetic performance, and demanded roles. These novels collectively expose the exhaustion of the individual in the postmodern world. Palahniuk and Ellis saturate their narratives with characters who attempt to survive this exhaustion in radically different ways – through fragmentation, reinvention, violence, or total submission to superficiality.

The most striking common denominator across the three novels is the absence of a coherent self. Identity no longer represents something one is, but rather something one performs, borrows, or invents under pressure.

Patrick Bateman, the protagonist of *American Psycho,* represents the most extreme version of this condition. He does not experience identity as fractured but as fundamentally absent. His reference to himself as an *"idea"* renders him a postmodern subject entirely composed of surfaces. Bateman does not repress an authentic self, as there exists none beneath the performance. His identity exists only as an abstraction maintained through repetition: the same routines, the same restaurants, the same brands, the same conversations.

Timothy Price and Paul Owen illustrate earlier stages of this same condition. Price recognises the emptiness of the system and attempts to escape. His disappearance, however, does not dismantle the system, it merely removes him from view. Owen, by contrast, represent the complete erasure of individuality. His identity exists only as a function and even his death cannot be confirmed. Owen's potential murder is absorbed by the world of simulacra, where even death loses its finality.

In contrast, the Narrator of *Fight Club* experiences identity as something that actively fractures under pressure. Unlike Bateman, he initially believes that a coherent self exists and can be maintained through obsessive consumption. His obsession with furniture, catalogues, and domestic perfection reflects a desperate attempt to anchor his identity. When this fails, the psyche splits. Tyler Durden, therefore, emerges as the embodiment of everything the Narrator has been trained to suppress: aggression, dominance, sexual confidence, and freedom. Where Bateman attempts to perform a single identity relentlessly, the Narrator balances between two incompatible selves, each attempting to claim control.

Marla Singer and Jean function as ethical interruptions within their respective narratives. Neither performs identity as commodity, nor do they seek transcendence through violence. Marla's authenticity and Jean's sincerity provide unfamiliar ground. Their presence exposes the artificiality of the systems governing the male protagonists. While the Narrator ultimately moves toward Marla, Bateman recoils from Jean, underscoring a crucial difference: *Fight Club* allows for a solution, while *American Psycho* discards it completely.

Invisible Monsters introduces a third model of identity: a deliberate reinvention. Shannon McFarland's and Brandy Alexander's trajectories involve complete alternation of identity in pursuit of authenticity. As a fashion model, Shannon's identity was entirely dependent on visibility and desirability. Her face and body became currency, and once the surface was destroyed, she became invisible and worthless to the system that once produced her. Rather than attempting to restore a lost self, Shannon abandons it entirely. Brandy, on the other hand, radicalises this approach. Identity becomes a narrative that can be altered or discarded at will. Unlike Bateman, who holds on to the mask, or the Narrator, who loses control of his self, the Queen Supreme attempts to escape the system through complete renovation.

Evie Cottrell and Evelyn Richards represent conformity taken to its extreme. Both women internalise the system without resistance. Evie pursues perfection through surgical excess, Evelyn relies on luxurious attire.

What unites these characters is their recognition that in the logic of late capitalism, identity cannot remain intact. The difference, however, lies in their responses to this knowledge, through Bateman's denial, the Narrator's internal conflict, and the reinvention of both Shannon and Brandy.

13.2 Consumerism as Identity Maker

Consumerism in all chosen novels does not simply influence identity; instead, it actively structures it. Characters understand themselves and others primarily through commodities, brands, and market value. Consumption becomes a signifier through which social hierarchy, desirability, and value are articulated.

Patrick Bateman and the Narrator both experience consumerism as suffocating. While Bateman reduces human beings and himself to objects through his obsessive listing of clothing, skincare routines, business cards, etc., the Narrator does the same through his obsessive acquisition of furniture. They both (alongside other Manhattan men) become the objects they accumulate. People are reduced to their commodities, be it furniture or attire, revealing how deeply ingrained the logic of acquisition truly is. Although Bateman completely internalises this logic without attempting to address it, the Narrator subconsciously assumes control by destroying the very furniture that confines him.

In *Invisible Monsters*, consumerism operates most brutally on the body itself. Shannon and Evie cannot be understood as consumers, as they themselves become commodities. Their value depends on visibility, youth, and most importantly, the conformity to aesthetic standards. Shannon's realisation that she is a product exposes the regress of identity. No original self exists beneath the surface, and self-destruction becomes the only available escape. By disfiguring herself, Shannon sabotages her market value, ultimately rendering herself unmarketable.

Thus, while Bateman consumes endlessly, the Narrator oscillates between consumption and destruction, and Shannon destroys herself to escape being consumed.

13.3 The Body as Surface, Discipline, and Resistance

In all the novels, the body functions as the primary site of identity enforcement. It serves as a surface to be perfected, punished, or reinvented. Although all narratives emphasise bodily regulations, they do so through diverse approaches, revealing how each character perceives the body as a different instrument.

Bateman's body operates merely as an indicator of sexual attractiveness. His exercise routines, grooming rituals, and obsessive self-observations display the precision with which he treats it. By maintaining physical perfection, Bateman attempts to radiate desirability, turning his body into a commodity. As he constantly checks himself in all reflective surfaces, he articulates the most profound insecurity governing his character, a fear of imperfection, and an inability to fit in with the rest.

Fight Club offers a direct rejection of this aesthetic regimen. Unlike Patrick, the men of the novel strip away the visual signifiers of status and subject their bodies to pain. Although the members initially lack sculpted physiques, they attain them through their participation in the clubs. Their physiques are a consequence of discipline and endured hardship rather than intensive training at exclusive fitness facilities. While Bateman's workouts are driven by the desire to enhance his appearance, for participants in fight clubs, their physiques are simply a natural byproduct of their rigorous discipline. *Fight Club* and *American Psycho* each feature a single character who does not partake in such rituals. Marla, whose chaos and indifference prevent her from conforming to beauty ideals, and Jean, who likewise never genuinely attempts to adhere to them.

In *Invisible Monsters*, bodily modification holds significant importance. Brandy and Evie undergo surgical procedures to attain their desired appearances. Manus Kelley's forced feminisation through unconscious hormonal treatment contrasts with Bateman's masculinity, cultivated through the consumption of anabolic-androgenic steroids. Consequently, Kelley's physique becomes unrecognisable and unstable, reflecting Shannon's invisibility and social exclusion.

Across all three texts, the body always serves a purpose. Whether the characters perfect it, alter it, or destroy it, the body remains the primary medium through which they articulate status, power, and identity.

13.4 Violence as a Substitute for Meaning

Violence emerges in all the novels as a response to the emotional numbness imposed by societal pressures and demands. In narratives where affect and meaning have evaporated, aggression becomes the sole remaining sensation capable of eliciting a sense of authenticity.

For Bateman, violence functions as a form of stimulation. Homicide elicits physiological and psychological responses unmatched by any other experience. However, his violence fails to effect any change. It cannot provide catharsis, as it receives no acknowledgement. Nonetheless, it offers Patrick a release from the pressures imposed upon him. He seeks to escape his pain by inflicting it upon others: *"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."*[654]

[654] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 362.

Bateman fully recognises that violence offers no true escape and that there is no chance to escape the system.

In *Fight Club*, violence functions as a means of confronting repressed hatred. Physical confrontation provides a temporary escape from feelings of alienation. Unlike Patrick, the men do not aim to cause harm to one another; instead, they seek raw confrontation and the masculine response it evokes. However, as Project Mayhem expands, violence begins to serve a different purpose, reminiscent of Bateman's approach. The very actions intended to restore individuality ultimately eradicate it and cause harm to others. As in *Invisible Monsters*, the only way to escape is by redirecting violence inward. To become liberated means to kill the part of the individual that causes the havoc.

Invisible Monsters addresses violence differently, as self-harm and bodily transformation replace outward aggression. Although the violence remains directed inward, representing an internal confrontation, the characters do not intend to cause harm to others. The narrative refrains from providing detailed descriptions of violence to the extent observed in the scenes in *Fight Club* or *American Psycho.*

14 Conclusion

This thesis provides a comparative analysis of the transgressive fiction of Chuck Palahniuk and Bret Easton Ellis, specifically examining the novels *Fight Club* (1996), *Invisible Monsters* (1999), and *American Psycho* (1991). Through the lens of postmodern theory, Gothic literary traditions, and sociological perspectives on the body and consumerism, this thesis explored how these narratives articulate the disintegration of the self in late-capitalist society. The findings demonstrated that these novels do not merely portray individual psychological breakdowns but articulate a shared cultural condition in which meaning, authenticity, and a stable self have become increasingly unattainable.

What unites the characters across these novels is the awareness of their alienation. In line with Sloterdijk's concept of cynical reason, these individuals often recognise the emptiness of their environment; however, they persist in engaging with it, nonetheless. Bateman comprehends and accepts the superficiality of his existence, while the Narrator of *Fight Club* recognises the falseness upon infiltrating support groups, additionally being a slave to his consumerist impulses. Shannon McFarland and Brandy Alexander explicitly acknowledge themselves as inauthentic individuals, being products artificially constructed by society. Despite their understanding that identity is inherently a fabricated construct, they continue to manipulate it.

The analysis reveals that characters in late-capitalist society suffer from a profound waning of affect, where superficiality and consumerist obsession replace genuine emotion. In *American Psycho*, Patrick Bateman embodies the hollow subject, explicitly recognising himself as an "idea" rather than a human, who relies on extreme violence to overcome the numbness of his commodified existence. Similarly, *Fight Club* illustrates how the suppression of masculine identity by consumer culture fractures the Narrator's psyche, giving rise to Tyler Durden as a violent projection of repressed desires, a rebellion that paradoxically replicates the very structures of control it seeks to destroy through Project Mayhem. In *Invisible Monsters*, the characters exemplify the waning of affect as commodified subjects who struggle to distinguish between authentic feeling and performative gestures. Trapped in a reality where everything is processed through aesthetics, they resort to radical self-disfigurement and constant reinvention as a desperate attempt to escape the emotional numbness and reclaim a sense of authenticity.

Across all three novels, violence and bodily transgression function as substitutes for meaning. When traditional structures of value collapse, characters turn to the body as the last mode of control and sensation. Bateman's murders, the ritualised violence of *Fight Club*, and the self-inflicted mutilations in *Invisible Monsters* each represent attempts to feel real in a world that

has rendered experience hollow. However, it is revealed that while violence produces intensity and sensation, this transgression offers only momentary solution, but no sustainable alternative.

Secondary characters further reinforce the thesis' findings. Figures such as Timothy Price, Paul Owen, Evelyn Richards, Evie Cottrell, Jean, and Manus Kelley illustrate different modes of adaptation to the same system – conformity, disappearance, emotional detachment, or commodified transformation. Their interchangeability, misidentification, and emotional flatness underscore the erosion of individuality in late capitalism. Even characters who appear authentic, such as Jean or Marla, function more as disruptions than solutions. While they remind that authenticity and affect may still exist, it remains hardly accessible to the protagonists themselves.

Ultimately, this thesis argues that *Fight Club, Invisible Monsters,* and *American Psycho* represent different solutions to the same postmodern crisis. Transgression becomes a response to this crisis, an attempt to escape the system. In *American Psycho*, transgression ultimately collapses into repetition. The novel concludes by stating: *"THIS IS NOT AN EXIT,"*[655] showcasing how Ellis constructs a world from which there is no escape.

By contrast, *Fight Club* presents a transformation that is later proved unstable. While the Narrator succeeds in dismantling his consumerist identity, this destruction does not produce liberation. Tyler Durden's idea of liberation requires the erasure of individuality, a demand embodied by the Space Monkeys. Palahniuk thus demonstrates how the search for authenticity can turn into authoritarian discipline. Once the radicalised ideology sustains itself, there is also no escape.

Invisible Monsters offers a different approach to the other two novels. Shannon and Brandy engage in a form of self-reconstruction. They accept that identity itself functions as a construct; their transgression lies in self-reinvention, rather than seeking external solutions.

In conclusion, the analysis of chosen thematic areas across these novels reveals that *American Psycho* stands as a warning of total absorption, where the subject collapses entirely into simulation. *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters* expose the violent and often tragic cost of attempting to reclaim meaning within a system that is devoid of it. Taken together, these works insist that the fractured self is not an anomaly but the inevitable outcome of a civilisation that privileges surface above all.

[655] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 384.

Resumé

Tato diplomová práce předkládá komparativní analýzu transgresivní fikce Chucka Palahniuka a Breta Eastona Ellise se specifickým zaměřením na romány *Klub rváčů* (1996), *Neviditelné nestvůry* (1999) a *Americké psycho* (1991). Optikou postmoderní teorie, gotické literární tradice a sociologických perspektiv těla a konzumerismu tato práce zkoumala, jakým způsobem uvedená díla artikulují rozpad identity v pozdně kapitalistické společnosti. Zjištění prokázala, že tyto romány nezobrazují pouze individuální psychologická zhroucení, nýbrž artikulují sdílený kulturní stav, v němž se smysl, autenticita a stabilní já stávají stále hůře dosažitelnými.

To, co spojuje postavy napříč těmito romány, je vědomí vlastního odcizení. V souladu se Sloterdijkovým konceptem *„cynického rozumu“* tito jedinci často rozpoznávají prázdnotu svého prostředí, přesto nadále zůstávají jeho součástí. Bateman chápe a přijímá povrchnost své existence, zatímco Vypravěč *Klubu rváčů* rozpoznává vlastní faleš při infiltraci podpůrných skupin, přičemž zůstává otrokem svých konzumních impulsů. Shannon McFarland a Brandy Alexander explicitně uznávají svou neautentičnost coby umělé produkty konstruované společností. Navzdory pochopení, že identita je ze své podstaty vykonstruovaným fabrikátem, pokračují v její manipulaci.

Analýza odhaluje, že postavy v pozdně kapitalistické společnosti trpí hlubokým *„vyhasínáním afektu“* (waning of affect), kdy povrchnost a konzumní obsese nahrazují skutečné emoce. V *Americkém psychu* ztělesňuje Patrick Bateman prázdný subjekt, který se explicitně identifikuje spíše jako „idea“ než jako lidská bytost a který se spoléhá na extrémní násilí, aby překonal otupělost své komodifikované existence. Podobně *Klub rváčů* ilustruje, jak potlačení maskulinní identity konzumní kulturou vede k fragmentaci Vypravěčovy psychiky, což dává vzniknout Tyleru Durdenovi jako násilné projekci potlačených tužeb – vzpouře, která prostřednictvím Projektu Mayhem paradoxně replikuje tytéž struktury kontroly, jež se snaží zničit. V *Neviditelných nestvůrách* postavy exemplifikují *vyhasínání afektu* jako komodifikované subjekty, které obtížně rozlišují mezi autentickým citem a performativními gesty. Uvězněny v realitě, kde je vše zpracováváno skrze estetiku, se uchylují k radikálnímu znetvoření a neustálému přetváření sebe sama jakožto zoufalému pokusu uniknout emocionální otupělosti a znovu nabýt pocitu autenticity.

Ve všech třech románech fungují násilí a tělesná transgrese jako náhražky smyslu. Když se tradiční hodnotové struktury hroutí, postavy se obracejí k tělu jako k poslednímu prostředku kontroly a prožitku. Batemanovy vraždy, ritualizované násilí v *Klubu rváčů* a sebepoškozování v *Neviditelných nestvůrách* představují pokusy cítit skutečnost ve světě, v němž je

vyprázdněna. Ukazuje se však, že ačkoli násilí produkuje intenzitu a senzaci, tato transgrese nabízí pouze chvilkové řešení, nikoli udržitelnou alternativu.

Vedlejší postavy dále posilují závěry práce. Postavy jako Timothy Price, Paul Owen, Evelyn Richards, Evie Cottrell, Jean a Manus Kelley, ilustrují různé způsoby adaptace na tentýž systém – konformitu, útěk, emocionální odtažitost či komodifikaci sebe sama. Jejich zaměnitelnost, mylná identifikace a plochá emocionálnost podtrhují erozi individuality v pozdním kapitalismu. I postavy, které se jeví jako autentické, například Jean nebo Marla, fungují spíše jako narušení než jako řešení. Ačkoli připomínají, že autenticita a afekt mohou stále existovat, pro samotné protagonisty zůstávají stěží přístupné.

Tato práce v konečném důsledku argumentuje, že *Klub rváčů*, *Neviditelné nestvůry* a *Americké psycho* představují odlišná řešení téže postmoderní krize. Transgrese se stává reakcí na tuto krizi, pokusem o únik ze systému. V *Americkém psychu* se transgrese nakonec hroutí do repetice. Román končí konstatováním: „TOTO NENÍ VÝCHOD“ (THIS IS NOT AN EXIT[656]), čímž demonstruje, jak Ellis konstruuje svět, z něhož není úniku.

Naproti tomu *Klub rváčů* představuje transformaci, která se později ukazuje jako nestabilní. Ačkoli Vypravěč uspěje v dekonstrukci své konzumní identity, tato destrukce neprodukuje osvobození. Osvobození, jak si jej představuje Tyler Durden, vyžaduje vymazání individuality, což je požadavek ztělesněný skrze Space Monkeys. Palahniuk tak ukazuje, jak se hledání autenticity může zvrhnout v autoritářskou disciplínu. Jakmile se radikalizovaná ideologie stane soběstačnou, ani zde neexistuje únik.

Neviditelné nestvůry nabízejí odlišný přístup než zbylé dva romány. Shannon a Brandy se angažují ve formě rekonstrukce sebe sama. Přijímají fakt, že identita sama o sobě funguje jako konstrukt; jejich transgrese spočívá v sebe-reinvenci namísto hledání externích řešení.

Závěrem lze říci, že analýza vybraných tematických okruhů napříč těmito romány odhaluje, že *Americké psycho* slouží jako varování před totální absorpcí, kdy se subjekt zcela hroutí do simulace. *Klub rváčů* a *Neviditelné nestvůry* odhalují násilnou a často tragickou cenu pokusu o znovuzískání smyslu v systému, který je ho zbaven. V souhrnu tato díla prosazují tezi, že roztříštěné já není anomálií, nýbrž nevyhnutelným výsledkem civilizace, která upřednostňuje povrch nade vše ostatní.

[656] ELLIS, Bret Easton. *American Psycho*. London: Picador, 2022. ISBN 978-1-5290-7715-5. p. 384.

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