

BECOMING THE NEW MAN IN POST-POSTMODERNIST FICTION: PORTRAYALS OF  
MASCULINITIES IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S *INFINITE JEST* AND CHUCK  
PALAHNIUK'S *FIGHT CLUB*

by

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Under the Direction of Christopher Kocela

ABSTRACT

While scholars have analyzed the masculinity crisis portrayed in American fiction, few have focused on postmodernist fiction, few have examined masculinity without using feminist theory, and no articles propose an adequate solution for ending normative masculinity's dominance. I examine the masculinity crisis as it is portrayed in two postmodernist novels, David Foster Wallace's novel *Infinite Jest* and Chuck Palahniuk's novel *Fight Club*. Both novels have male characters that ran the gamut of masculinities, but those that are the most successful at avoiding gender stereotypes (Donald Gately in *Infinite Jest*, and the narrator in *Fight Club*) develop a masculinity which incorporates strong, phallic masculinity and nurturing, testicular masculinity, creating a balanced gender. At the same time, both novels examine postmodernist fiction's future. Post-postmodernist fiction, similar to well-rounded masculinity, seeks to be more emotionally open with the reader while still using irony and innovation for meaningful effects, not just to be clever.

INDEX WORDS: David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, masculinity, postmodernist fiction, post-postmodernist fiction

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## CHAPTER 1: POSTMODERNIST MASCULINITIES IN A TIME OF FEMINISM

Folklorist Jay Mechling opens *On My Honor*, his ethnography of the Boy Scouts in America, with a list of complaints that describe the masculinity crisis at the turn of the Twenty-first Century. Two of the complaints particularly interested me: first, “male peer groups . . . engage too often in aggressive and violent behavior”, second, some people “blame mothers and female teachers for ‘feminizing’ boys (xv). Mechling, though, quotes accounts of the masculinity crisis from the 1890s in order to point out the similarities between that crisis and the masculinity crisis concerning boys at the turn of the Twentieth Century (xv). Such an argument spoke deeply to me as I became interested in masculinity and what defines American manhood. This crisis does not apply only to boys. Movies like *Fight Club*, *Misery*, and books like Robert Bly’s *Iron John* (as well as the mythopoetic men’s movement that produced Bly’s book) all signal that a crisis exists for men today, especially white heterosexual men. When I began studying postmodern American literature, I started to see a crisis for men reflected in American postmodernist fiction in the 1990s. Some aspects of this crisis (as well as any solutions to the crisis) have not been addressed critically.

Much of the masculinity crisis results from the contradictory definitions of masculinity that exist, according to psychologist Joseph Pleck. In *The Myth of Masculinity*, Pleck analyzes how the contradictory definitions of masculinity in American society and the results of those conflicting messages. For example, a man must, paradoxically, be tough and competitive at work, though caring and nurturing at home; a man should have numerous sexual experiences until he settles down and is faithful to only one woman; a man must be strong and emotionally closed, yet must be emotionally available to his close friends and family members (in Rosen 6). Pleck also argues that boys often form their gender identity without any male role model because many children (both boys and

girls) are raised by single mothers with no men in their lives. Because of this, most boys form their masculine identity by emulating male stereotypes. By modeling themselves on those stereotypes of the mythic “manly man”, boys often act in a hyper-masculine way: by acting violent, horny, emotionally cold, etc., they overcompensate for their lack of male role models by attempting to be something they can never achieve. Like Simone de Beauvoir’s “Eternal Feminine”, the myth of masculinity is filled with contradictions.

Psychiatrist Anthony Clare takes Pleck’s ideas even further. Clare believes that hyper-masculine men act out a losing battle between the potentially fulfilling lives they could lead—lives not based on stereotypes of masculinity—and the unfulfilling lives narrowly defined by the mythic (to borrow a phrase from Beauvoir) Eternal Masculine.<sup>1</sup> Gender is a social construction<sup>2</sup> that, Clare argues, causes men to act out in hyper-masculine ways as they unknowingly overcompensate for their inability to achieve what is mythic and, therefore, impossible. But as postmodernist literature and critical theory reminds us, multiple truths often exist, so there must be more than just one way to define men. Most books that focus on masculinity in literature, however, problematically use only one way to define men.

Most critical essays about masculinity and its portrayal in literature point out the same facts, while often focusing on white, heterosexual men. Critical articles talk about how men are violent, especially towards women. Out of fear, these men often marginalize homosexuals. The rise in

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<sup>1</sup> Trained as a doctor, Clare hints at such a term without ever referring to Beauvoir.

<sup>2</sup> Gender as a social construction makes one think of Judith Butler. Judith Butler sees performance as the key to seeing both problems and potential solutions for male and female genders in her book *Gender Trouble*. Gender does not exist so deeply rooted in our individual psyches that it causes us to act/perform as we do, but are constructed within the social domain. Butler analyzes the sexual performance of characters in drag that appears confused but really is less confused than straight people in terms of their gender: the drag performers are self-conscious enough to recognize that they are performing an act of gender while straight people are often unaware that they are. But one need not analyze such extreme examples to see how this concept of the performative applies to the masculinity crisis at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Men act out their confusion, their psychological rootlessness, by acting in stereotypical excess as hyper-masculine men.



power of minority groups like women and homosexuals makes white men anxious, producing emotional and physical blockages in their lives. Sally Robinson sees the anxiety and blockage as a disturbing sign of a masculine backlash against the feminist movement of the 1960s (26). After witnessing the political liberation that gave minority groups more power than before, white, heterosexual, male authors began portraying themselves as victims too because they feel wounded physically and emotionally. To Robinson, however, the white, male authors' strategy attempted to regain the power they lost, a way to reinforce the masculine hegemony that has ruled since the beginning of civilization (xii). Other scholars believe that this backlash against feminism appears acutely in postmodernist fiction. Marilyn Maxwell does not believe postmodernist literature breaks down previously inviolable barriers between genders as one would expect from an artistic movement that challenges the idea of one truth; instead postmodernist literature reinforces these barriers, especially the violence towards women ingrained in contemporary American society (xvii).

I believe all these points are valid. Robinson's argument applies to the texts she uses, helping one analyze how emotionally blocked and physically wounded men appear in these texts. In researching the portrayal of masculinity in postmodernist literature, though, I found a glaring gap in many of the critics' analyses and arguments. Rarely did I find a discussion of masculinity that did not primarily use feminist theory to explain the masculinity crisis. While feminist discussions about masculinity and its hegemony serve an excellent purpose, discussing men primarily by discussing women seems a little antithetical. What about fictional portrayals of masculinity that do not deal with women or respond to feminism in any prominent way? What can be learned about the masculinity crisis from portrayals of men among men? In this study, I set my sights on this gap in literary scholarship concerning men in relation to other men. I have chosen two postmodernist novels from the mid 1990s in order to analyze the masculinity crisis in a way that does not make women the focus of the discussion—something rarely done before in scholarship.

Both David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* were published in 1996. Despite arising at the same cultural moment, they show two different versions of the masculinity crisis portrayed in postmodernist fiction. While *Infinite Jest* deals partly with masculinity and *Fight Club* deals with it almost exclusively, both novels focus primarily on male characters. I am not suggesting that these two novels completely encapsulate the masculinity crisis in America at the end of the Twentieth Century, nor am I suggesting that they do so by marginalizing female characters: each does have one or two strong female characters that cannot help but influence the male protagonists in the novels. Both Wallace and Palahniuk portray their male characters almost exclusively in the company of men. As mentioned above, much of the literary scholarship on masculinity comes from feminist critics like Sally Robinson and Marilyn Maxwell. Little of this scholarship focuses on contemporary fiction in a systematic manner. Moreover, much of masculine literary analysis centers on modernist fiction from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century or earlier, with very little attention to postmodernist fiction. One of the few book-length examinations of masculine fiction, David Rosen's *The Changing Fictions of Masculinity*, stops at the literary modernist period. Similarly, Thomas Straychacz focuses on the ultimate "man's man", Ernest Hemingway, yet another modernist fiction writer. Rosen's book, although limited in scope, has much to say about masculinity as portrayed in literature prior to modernist fiction.

David Rosen's book examines men among men from *Beowulf* through *Paradise Lost* and up to *Sons and Lovers*. Rosen argues that ideas of masculinity change over time through a dialectical process whereby a dominant, "stable" masculinity is passed on to the next generation only to have it dramatically opposed before the two masculine ideals become synthesized into a new, stable masculinity; the masculinities are either stereotypical masculinity or a more feminine masculinity (xiii). Rosen believes, for example, that the feminized masculinity of Victorian England gave rise to the "primal masculinity" of the modernists (181). In his conclusion, Rosen uses scholarly criticism

of *Sons and Lovers* to illustrate how the criticism itself develops along a journey similar to that of the literature: critics seem to alternate between reading the novel in terms of tough masculinity or feminized, nurturing masculinity. Rosen contends that these critical changes occur quickly, with very little time spent between the two sides of the dialectic. While useful, Rosen's argument still does not adequately portray the full range of possibilities available to masculine characters in literature. I modify Rosen's idea, arguing in this thesis that much time is spent blending the two sides of the spectrum within portrayals of postmodern masculinity in novels such as Wallace's and Palahniuk's.

Berthold Schoene-Harwood, in his book *Writing Men*, also looks at the emotional and nurturing elements of fictional men. Unlike most other scholars, Schoene-Harwood addresses late Twentieth Century novels. Schoene-Harwood argues that, because of the hegemonic power they have had throughout history, men actually appear invisible to society at large (xi). But Schoene-Harwood does not focus just on men among men. His argument begins to sound a lot like Marilyn Maxwell's when he claims that masculine hegemony maintains its power through violence towards non-heterosexual, white males: "Traditionally thriving on an endless proliferation of oppressive violence, [traditional masculinity] consolidates its hegemony both discursively and by actual physical force in a systemic display of omnipotent power", from sexism on one side to rape and violence on the other (xii). According to Schoene-Harwood, men need to find a way to break out of this stereotyped straight-jacket if they wish to cease being invisible and end the violence. This argument, like Maxwell's, ignores the effects of certain aspects of male behavior such as violence between white, heterosexual males as well as the portrayal of men in the company of other men—especially where violence does not exist—and falls into the trap of looking at men primarily in relation to women.

Throughout his book, Schoene-Harwood argues that many authors portray men and women as completely separate sexes distinguished by the violent behavior intrinsic to many male characters. Many authors, Schoene-Harwood argues, are becoming more aware of their male-gendered position and are beginning to portray men and women not as completely different sexes, but as individual, multi-gendered selves, “gynandric” sexual hybrids of genders (181). This trend inspires Schoene-Harwood’s solution for ending the misogynistic, violent masculinity that dominates literature. He hypothesizes a future where male and female characters will see each other not as opposites but as human individuals that seek to explore their own complex gendered-ness (184). But this solution for making male characters both visible and free of masculinity’s constrictions does away with different genders altogether! In a sense, this seems like he kills the patient in order to cure him! Surely there must be a way for men to be men, yet break free of the sexism and violence that has accompanied many masculine characters throughout literary history. I believe that while such criticism as Schoene-Harwood’s and Rosen’s and Strachayz’s each looks at masculinity in helpful ways, gaps remain in their coverage, either chronologically or in terms of their solutions to the violence inherent to fictional portrayals of masculinity.

My thesis seeks to fill those gaps in terms of both chronology and tenable solutions. I examine contemporary portrayals of masculinity in a way that allows us to focus on men amongst men, not just in relation to women. I also propose a way for male characters to remain men while also ending the binary thinking of men as either violent or weak, either caring or cold. None of the other scholars I have discussed have really done this. Pleck sees no solution to the masculinity crisis because he sees the myth of masculinity as being impossible to destroy. Schoene-Harwood sees the binaries as being so entrenched that the only solution is to do away with them so that men become genderless hybrids. I seek to explode the binary, creating a spectrum that exists forever, not just in the few moments when one element of the binary becomes the new dominant according to Rosen.

Instead, I examine the masculinities portrayed in Wallace and Palahniuk's novels by placing the male characters on a spectrum between nurturing, emotionally-involved masculinity and sexually exploitive, emotionally closed masculinity. This allows me to examine them without these characters losing their individuality or their gender. Ending this crisis requires us to change our thinking about traditional masculinity. Extending the bodily metaphors normally used to describe men allows us to rethink masculinity for the Twenty-first Century.

In his essay "The Male Body and Literary Metaphors for Masculinity", Arthur Flannigan-Saint-Aubin examines how the two distinct parts of male genitalia can serve as metaphors for two different masculinities. Flannigan-Saint-Aubin sees phallic power as just one half of the male genitals. The penis symbolizes the phallus—certainly the most common metaphor for masculinity throughout literature—and has "aggressive, violent, penetrating, goal-directed, linear" (239) attributes. Male genitals, however, consist of not only the penis: the testicles are also included and have "passive, receptive, enclosing, stable, cyclic" attributes, which men lose when masculinity only consists of the penis (239). These testicular adjectives could certainly describe feminine attributes. By embracing this "weaker," feminized masculinity, men develop a more complete gender. This masculinity is hopefully one more caring and less violent. Such a "blended," balanced gender model will hopefully allow men to define themselves individually, without using the stereotypes of normative masculinity.

This tension between the two masculinities, Calvin Thomas argues, allows one to examine normative masculinity and its intrinsic problems. Using Julie Kristeva's ideas about abjection, Thomas argues that normative masculinity causes men to make both women and weaker men abject in order for hyperbolically masculine men to protect themselves psychologically. These men must protect themselves from weakness and vulnerability in order to avoid losing control of one's self. They do this by making some weaker individual the receptacle of abjection, be it semen or some

other bodily fluid inherently associated with abjection and filth. By examining these strategies for protecting one's manhood from vulnerability, Thomas examines what being male means in postmodern society. I argue that the dialectic Thomas establishes of strength/weakness, power/abjection can also be applied to the dialectic of phallic and testicular masculinities. The ontological play of postmodernism and postmodernist literature allows multiple interpretations to develop, according to Thomas. Thomas argues that rigid modernist literature sought to control the outside world much as hyperbolic, hegemonic masculinity seeks to control the self. If postmodernist fiction responds to (or reshapes) modernist fiction's artistic goals, then perhaps postmodernist fiction also responds or reshapes sexuality as well, as Calvin Thomas points out (26). Therefore, to Thomas, postmodernist literature potentially shows how to move past hegemonic masculinity. Despite Thomas' ideas, little has yet been said critically about postmodern masculinities in fiction.

The study of masculinity in postmodernist fiction abounds with potential solutions to the masculinity crisis, solutions rooted in the artistic aims of postmodernist art. To varying degrees, each of the novels I study here embraces postmodern masculinities and the play between potential masculinities on the testicular and nurturing/phallic, normative continuum of masculinity. Each of the novels contains several male characters that allow us to examine the conflict between the two definitions of masculinity. In each novel, normative, phallic masculinity is tied—as Pleck points out—to troubled, confused men. Adopting purely testicular masculinity does not solve the problem since it signals the confusion of gender roles and perceived weakness. I believe the solution to the masculinity crisis portrayed in postmodernist fiction derives from a more complex, well-rounded balance between the two ends of the masculinity spectrum. This blending of the two masculinities is appropriate considering postmodernist literature often uses multiple narrators and ambiguous plots to produce different, subjective versions of reality and truth.

While primarily about tennis and drug addiction, David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest* focuses on several male characters that embody the different views of masculinity described above. The first part of Wallace's *magnum opus* focuses on Hal Incandenza, a tennis and academic prodigy at an elite tennis academy who faces an identity crisis. Hal's family of eccentric and gifted characters contributes to his inability to cope with the stresses of a strong maternal figure and competitive tennis. His oldest brother Orin, a punter in the NFL, is an important character in terms of Wallace's portrayal of masculinity. In addition to physical talent, Orin embodies a hyperbolic male sexuality which explains his pathological need to seduce women. Their father James is an emotionally distant alcoholic who eventually commits suicide after a second, successful career as an avant-garde film maker.

All of these male characters invert the normal relations between the sexes discussed in most studies of masculinity. Instead of a female character defining herself by the man in her life, these three men define themselves in relation to Avril Incandenza—Hal and Orin's mother and James' wife. Avril is a prominent grammar scholar and an active member of the Quebecois separatist movement, and she is sexually promiscuous as well. Such a strong woman affects the masculinity of the men around her, especially her cuckolded husband, James. James' emotional absence because of his unmaning by his wife causes disturbed senses of masculinity in Orin and Hal, just as Pleck argues about boys who lack strong father figures. Each of these men responds to Avril's strong womanhood in different ways, though all show masculinities in crisis. Orin becomes solipsistic and hyperbolically promiscuous, James becomes emotionally dead and commits suicide, while Hal finds himself paralyzed with a fear of living: he ends up lying on the floor after giving up the drugs that help him cope with his dysfunctional family and the pressures of competitive tennis.

The second half of the novel, though, focuses not on the Incandenzas but on Donald Gately, a recovering diawlude addict who has become a master cat burglar to pay for his addiction.

Accidentally killing someone during a job scares Gately straight, causing him to enter Ennet House, a half-way house for drug addicts. Gately thrives there and eventually becomes a resident staffer at the house after graduating from the program. In many ways, the novel focuses on Gately, especially in terms of masculinity. While the Incandenza men all struggle with their masculine identities (whether consciously or not), Gately seems to have the most well-rounded sense of gender identity, integrating phallic and testicular masculinity nearly seamlessly. The owner of a large, physically imposing and weapon-like body, Gately does not fear kicking ass when he needs to; at the same time, he nurtures the Ennet House residents, counseling them and cooking their food. The only time that we see him acting out violently occurs when he is forced to protect the residents of Ennet House; in a revealing paradox, Wallace describes the fight in terms that feminize Gately. As a result, Gately models a new postmodern masculinity by representing multiple, fused masculinities that make him comfortable as both ass-kicker and nurturer.

Yet Wallace does not merely blend vulnerable, emotional openness with tough, emotional closure at the level of his fictional narrative. Wallace also seeks to create a new style of postmodernist fiction that, like the new masculinity, blends the usual, expected postmodern with a new emotional openness. The latter allows Wallace to form a connection with the reader which is absent in much postmodernist fiction. In his book *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, Marshall Boswell claims that the hallmark of Wallace's oeuvre is a dialectic of cynicism and naïveté that seeks to “explode” (11) the ironic, narratorial posturing that saturates postmodernist fiction.

Postmodernist authors create a literature not of exhaustion but aloofness, where actual human connection and emotion disappear between the author and an audience of passive consumers. According to Boswell, cynicism allows Wallace to be ironic about the irony and yet still create real human emotion in the resulting naïveté (13-14). *Infinite Jest* explores the future of postmodernist literature through that dialectic of cynicism and naïveté; but at the same time, Wallace cannot break



completely free of postmodernism. He still integrates standard elements of postmodernist fiction (metafiction, irony, etc.) within this dialectic of cynicism and naïveté.

In his attempting to establish a new wave of postmodernist fiction, Wallace uses a strategy homologous to the blending of emotional strength and emotional vulnerability revealed in his male characters. His fiction also blends the emotional aloofness of irony that characterizes so much postmodernist fiction with the emotional openness he wishes to capture in the poetics of a new wave of postmodernist fiction that Boswell describes as post-postmodernist. We can map Wallace's strategy in terms of the masculinity continuum that mirrors the discussion of masculinity above: on the stereotypically masculine end lies the emotionally closed, ironic and distant "traditional" postmodernist author, while on the testicular, caring and vulnerable end lies the emotionally open post-postmodernist author who uses irony for a purpose, not just to be clever and emotionally distant. As Wallace told McCaffery in his interview, postmodernist fiction seems to take the coolly ironic pose without any sense of purpose or meaning, merely producing tricks to impress the audience (18). Most criticism of postmodernist fiction supports Wallace's claim that postmodernist authors often distance their reader through extreme innovation and cleverness. As Larry McCaffrey points out in the introduction to *Postmodern Fiction: A Bio-Bibliographical Guide*, even language, like everything else in postmodernist fiction, "becomes 'thickened,' played with and shown off, and frequently becomes just another element to be manipulated by a self-conscious author" (xxi). Steven Connor, in his essay "Postmodernism and Literature", claims that postmodernist fiction operates in artistic conditions where "the novel no longer [keeps] its reader in step with it" (77). As an author, Wallace seeks to move past this emotional separation of author and reader inherent in postmodernist fiction. While he does not fully achieve this goal, he valiantly attempts to make an emotional connection with his reader in a manner similar to the way in which he depicts masculinity.

Wallace conflates this project of post-postmodernist storytelling with postmodern masculinity through his depiction of James Incandenza's film career, a career that serves as an allegory of postmodernist authorship. If Orin serves as the epitome of normative, hyperbolically male sexuality, James serves as the epitome of the postmodern storyteller who cannot convey emotion. Instead he creates films empty of any non-hostile, meaningful connection with his audience. In James' film *The Joke*, unsuspecting moviegoers enter a theater and begin watching a film which consists only of different shots of that audience watching the screen, waiting for a real film to begin; the entire movie consists of the audience "watching itself watch itself get the obvious 'joke' and become increasingly self-conscious and uncomfortable and hostile" (989). James makes the audience the butt of a joke that they do not enjoy at all. Such a "film" does not create any meaningful emotional connection with the audience other than provoking hostility, which causes the audience to ignore any artistic message the director might wish to make. In this allegory of authorship, James' all-too-clever tricks remind us of the tricks of postmodernist authors that Wallace derides in his interview with McCaffery, tricks that keep the reader from understanding or enjoying a novel. Once again, Gately serves as the ideal man, though it is as an author in Wallace's post-postmodernism project.

In *Infinite Jest*, I shall argue, Don Gately's A.A. experiences serve as the antithesis of James Incandenza's films, perfectly synthesizing emotional openness and irony in a way that, according to Boswell, signals Wallace's move into post-postmodernism<sup>3</sup>. Instead of the distancing, solipsistic, abjectifying tricks of James Incandenza's postmodern storytelling, A.A. embraces real emotional connection because the more vulnerable you are, the more power you have in the group, and the

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<sup>3</sup> Much of my thinking about A.A.'s methods as anti-postmodern was inspired by Brooks Daverman's unpublished thesis available at the David Foster Wallace fan site, *The Howling Fantods* ([www.thehowlingfantods.com/brooksdaverman.htm](http://www.thehowlingfantods.com/brooksdaverman.htm).) While my understanding behind the post-postmodernist aspect of *Infinite Jest* differs from Braverman (who focuses on postmodern devices and meta-fictional moments), I am indebted to him.

more they respect you. Unlike the love affair postmodernist authors have with irony, members of A.A. view irony negatively as a device that closes off the user emotionally. For example, irony and false humor make one new speaker “desperate to amuse and impress [the audience]. The guy’s got the sort of professional background where he’s used to trying to impress gatherings of persons. He’s dying to be liked up there. He’s performing.” The speaker goes on to make a joke that is “so clearly unspontaneous, rehearsed” (367). In fact, using self-deprecating irony seems false and makes you appear too desperate for people to like you. And this is true, according to Wallace, not just in A.A. but in postmodernist fiction as well. Wallace believes that the work of young writers (like the Brat Pack of Bret Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney) embodies the trick of creating emotional distance through irony in an attempt to make the audience like them. This desire to be liked destroys the potential for emotional connection, since using irony to be liked ironically makes it harder for the audience to like the speaker. What does work in A.A. (and perhaps post-postmodernism), however, is honesty and emotional connection. Gately eventually realizes that A.A. is “maximally unironic. An ironist in a Boston AA meeting is a witch in a church. Irony-free zone. Same with manipulative pseudo-sincerity” (369). Gately represents not just well-developed, mixed masculinity, but the new direction of post-postmodernist fiction as well. This direction uses irony (purposefully) as a means for emotional connection, much as Gately uses physical violence to protect those he cares for physically and emotionally.

Like Wallace, Chuck Palahniuk explores the need for a new, postmodern masculinity, one that combines both testicular and phallic aspects; Palahniuk’s novel, though, ends without depicting much hope for that goal to be achieved. In *Fight Club*, there is no Gately to serve as an example. Instead, Palahniuk’s novel focuses on the nameless narrator of *Fight Club* who discovers that his white collar, yuppie life is not as perfect as he thought. But his real sickness appears not to be his insomnia, but rather his conflicted gender identity. His feminized lifestyle, his “feminine” work, his

womanly nesting instinct all show a man out of touch with himself not only physically but also psychologically, as manifested in the numerous ways outlined by Joseph Pleck. The narrator further reveals his confusion when he initially finds solace with the therapy group for testicular cancer survivors, Remaining Men Together. In this group of eunuchs, the narrator can open up emotionally, which finally allows him to sleep. Though similar to A.A., Remaining Men Together fails to help the narrator. When the insomnia returns, the only cure is active masculine ass-kicking as he and his alter ego Tyler Durden form Fight Club, a new kind of masculine therapy.

In the Fight Clubs, the generation of men described by Pleck gets the chance to discover their gender roles in contact with other men, rather than women. Palahniuk's novel contains only two female characters: a minor character in a support group, and Marla Singer. This novel proves Marilyn Maxwell's theory false, in that the violence in the novel is not directed at any female character. In fact, the violence protects the one significant female character from the violence the male characters inflict on each other. The novel shows how Tyler takes these men without fathers and creates a hyper-masculine form of Remaining Men Together that might better be called "Becoming Men Together." By fighting other men in hand-to-hand combat—in unstated, but assumed, sweaty, bloody, abject-fluid-filled battles—the men are "saved" from their previous lives. While the narrator and Tyler Durden believe this homosocial activity helps them prove their masculinity, however, it ultimately does not help them achieve happiness or contentment. As Pleck argues, the lack of early male role models condemns these men to overcompensation through hyper-masculine behavior (i.e., hyperbolic sexuality and violence) that cuts off any ability to lead fulfilling lives. Eventually the narrator realizes this problem. He discovers that becoming hyper-masculine like Tyler has made him more confused about not only his gender identity, but his overall identity too when he discovers that Tyler is really an illusion of the split personality disorder emerging in him. Tyler serves as the ego ideal of masculinity for the narrator.

In analyzing *Fight Club*, I take Pleck's ideas further using the psychoanalytic ideas proposed by Mike Hill in *After Whiteness* and by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Between Men*. In both of their books, Hill and Sedgwick argue that the lack of a strong father figure, the "father-shaped void" (Hill 98), also causes a distorted sense of self-identity because without that male role model, the formation of the ego is disrupted in the Oedipal stage. For Sedgwick, the boy must fill this lack of a male role model using homosocial relationships with other men. Male horseplay allows men to deflect any fears about their heterosexuality (be it fear of homosexuality and/or feminization) and prove their masculinity. Through these relationships, the boy forms a normative heterosexuality that allows him to have "normal" relationships with women; often a love-triangle between two men and a woman helps facilitate this substitute for the father (Sedgwick 23). Fight Clubs in Palahniuk's novel function as distinctly homosocial experiences while the love triangle between Marla, Tyler, and the narrator eventually helps the narrator briefly form a more blended masculinity and a "normal" sexual relationship before ultimately returning to his previous behavior.

The Oedipal stage figures strongly in Hill's argument as well. Hill uses the psychoanalytic works of both Theodor Adorno and Judith Butler to analyze the "father-shaped void" in economically troubled white males \ (men like Palahniuk's fictional Fight Club members). Though Hill concentrates on how some ultra-right wing masculine groups fill the father-shaped void with ambivalent—yet totalitarian—ideas about race, I believe Fight Clubs in Palahniuk's novel fill the void in a non-explicitly racial way that leads to the same totalitarian politics Hill discusses. Ironically, Fight Club does not help the male characters develop their gender identities, but only further retards their development on the phallic/testicular continuum. Eventually the narrator realizes that his ultra-masculine behavior while acting as Tyler, his split personality, has not helped him lead a more fulfilling life or solve his problems. It only makes those problems worse when Fight Clubs evolve into a pseudo-fascist militia.

In the novel, Fight Clubs quickly father Project Mayhem, essentially a masculine terrorist group that claims it wants attention from the consumer culture surrounding it. According to Joanne Tuss, despite their claims that the movement tries to help them gain the social and political power society long denied them, the members of Project Mayhem actually aim to deal further with the absent fathers these men never knew by castrating the powerful men that represent the “void” and trying to take their power from them. Sally Robinson’s argument (that white, heterosexual men claim victim-hood in order to maintain their hegemonic power) applies well to Fight Club since the previous “wounding” and feminization that Fight Club members suffered from society’s leaders really serves not to make them victims of oppression but rather serves to justify their attempts to gain power. The masculine therapy of Fight Clubs leads to a militia devoted to gaining power, not to developing a sense of masculinity like that towards which Donald Gately works in *Infinite Jest*. The narrator, though, is not completely lost. When he tries to protect Marla from harm, he admits to himself that he possesses a nascent testicular side and that he does not just identify with the phallic-only side that Tyler represents. The narrator struggles from that point forward to develop a new blended masculinity. But the novel ends without as much hope as does *Infinite Jest*. The reader discovers that while the narrator has the symbolic ability to kill Tyler’s hyper-masculine influence on his identity, he still cannot fully commit himself to a more testicular masculinity by literally killing Tyler’s influence on him. The novel closes with the narrator choosing to remain closely connected to his ego ideal Tyler Durden, awaiting his chance to return to Project Mayhem. Such an ambivalent ending signals that Palahniuk does not appear as hopeful as Wallace about the future of masculinity in America.

In *Fight Club*, Palahniuk’s nameless protagonist rarely opens himself emotionally to others, remaining distant even from his love interest Marla Sanger. Eventually, in trying to protect Marla, he admits to her “I think I like you” (197) and then he symbolically kills Tyler in order to protect

her. Here the narrator actually makes a rare emotional connection with a woman and opens his nurturing side by trying to stop the violence of Fight Club and Project Mayhem, no matter how temporary such a commitment is. The narrator even reveals his real name to Marla: “I take out my wallet and show Marla my driver’s license with my real name. Not Tyler Durden” (172). While he honors her with his real name, Palahniuk withholds it from the reader, maintaining the distance between the narrator and the reader. As a result, while we get to witness this event, we only do so second-hand: we know the narrator opens up, we see it happening, but we don’t get the complete openness that Marla gets. Such instances put Palahniuk somewhere between Wallace on one side and the other clever, ironic authors of postmodernist fiction on the other.

Regardless of their differences, both novels show that gender theory applies to women as well as men. As Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble*, if gender does not exist, but is rather performed, it is up to individuals to perform individual gender roles that fit their lives more appropriately. While much of masculinity studies keeps an eye on men in relation to women, my project’s focus on men in relation to other men in contemporary fiction is needed, especially during a masculinity crisis like that present in society today. A good example of this desire for men to be studied on their own is Robert Bly’s Iron John movement of the 1980s which signaled the desire for men to explore masculinity on their own, away from women. The blockbuster popularity of the movie version of Palahniuk’s novel also signals that something about these men in crisis speaks deeply to American society today.

Men find themselves bound by masculine stereotypes: a man should be strong, but not too strong otherwise he appears emotionally closed; a man should be sensitive, but not too sensitive otherwise he appears too weak, a pansy. David Foster Wallace and Chuck Palahniuk show that men can develop both their phallic strength and their testicular empathy instead of emulating the confused gender role of the hyper-masculine male. This development could serve as a partial

solution to the masculinity crisis in American society at the end of the twentieth century. While the Boy Scouts helped “solve” the masculinity crisis at the end of the nineteenth century, such a solution would not adequately help in today’s America where stereotypes of masculinity are no longer the solution. Instead of an organization that teaches boys how to act like the stereotypical men, the current masculinity crisis needs to redefine what makes a man. While a man does not need to be strong at all times, he cannot be completely weak and emotional either. The solution, perhaps, lies somewhere in between.



CHAPTER 2:  
NEW MEN, NEW FICTIONS IN DAVID FOSTER WALLACE'S *INFINITE JEST*

When David Foster Wallace published *Infinite Jest* in 1996, critics primarily focused on its encyclopedic breadth of subject matter, its polyphonic storylines, and its extreme heft. Much was also made about the lack of a satisfying conclusion, one that would tie together the disparate storylines whose connections exist only in narrative hints. Some critics quickly saw the novel as Wallace's master work, one where he abandoned the overly Pynchon-esque influence that marked his first novel, *The Broom of the System* (McInerney). Few critics saw the novel as the watershed moment for postmodernist fiction that it really is. In a well-known interview with Larry McCaffery in *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Wallace lists many of the problems he has with the forefathers of postmodernist fiction as well as the 1980s Brat Pack of Bret Easton Ellis and Jay McInerney; Wallace especially dislikes these authors' use of irony for no purpose other than to create vapid comments on contemporary culture rather than seeking an emotional connection with their readers. As Marshall Boswell points out, in *Infinite Jest* Wallace seeks to create a new post-postmodernist fiction that is ironical yet emotionally significant as well.

The topic of emotional vulnerability not only appears in Wallace's concern for connecting with his readers but also in the theme of masculinity that pervades the novel. Despite the novel's multitude of characters, almost all its major characters are male. By closely reading Wallace's depiction of masculinity in two protagonists (Hal Incandenza and Don Gately) as well as one of the most significant secondary characters (Hal's brother Orin), I argue that Wallace portrays emotional vulnerability as a major sticking point of masculinity but also the key to a new postmodern masculinity. The development of a post-postmodernist fiction and a new postmodern masculinity

come together in the novel's male characters and their authorial abilities. Wallace's project to blend irony and sincerity in post-postmodernist fiction is similar to his attempt at blending strength and emotional openness in post-postmodern masculinity, a masculinity—like post-postmodernist fiction—that aims for emotional openness, not just normative masculinity's emotional emptiness and phallic violence.

All three primary male characters show different masculine aspects through their behavior: whether it is Orin Incandanza's libertine jock, Hal's sexually repressed intellectual, or Donald Gately's nurturing tough guy, all three perform similar, yet different masculinities. All three display similar aspects of normative masculinity slightly differently. Orin possesses a hyperbolic male sexuality, Hal competes in the acceptable domain of athletics, and Don Gately skillfully uses his body as a weapon. All three, though, begin the novel in the standard position of male sexuality as described in Calvin Thomas' *Male Matters*, where the male body remains invisible unless it is used in sports or warfare (12). Despite each of the male characters having physical bodies with significant problems or traits, none of the male characters explicitly acknowledges his body, possibly in an attempt to avoid being seen as prone to the weakness inherent in physical bodies: Hal never describes his ankle as being injured (other than to get pity from his mother), mentioning it only obtusely; Orin never mentions his body other than to protect his leg while hang-gliding into one of his games; and Gately never acknowledges how large and impressive a physical specimen he is. Catherine Nichols goes further, pointing out that, in *Infinite Jest*, male bodies are both invisible *and* deformed. She points out how many of the male characters have "exterior physical deformities" (5), such as Hal's overly large right arm or Orin's similarly large right leg with its wounded knee. While Nichols sees the deformed bodies as a sign of the grotesque carnival that Wallace uses to comment upon American society, I believe that these invisible, deformed bodies signal a disturbed sense of each man's masculinity. Though the male characters rarely mention their deformities, the narrator's

description of their bodies signals a breakdown between the invisible/visible dialectic: their once invisible bodies (and vulnerabilities) become visible and weak, reflecting the characters' emotional weakness at the moment. The additional male fear of sexual abjectness serves particularly well as a way to explain the characteristics of normative masculinity, giving us a useful tool for examining the male characters in *Infinite Jest*.

In *Male Matters*, Calvin Thomas discusses how the “money shot” in heterosexual porn films summarizes normative male sexuality. Ejaculation in normative, male heterosexuality usually occurs inside the vagina, invisibly making the woman a receptacle of the semen. When a male porn star pulls his penis out of a woman in order to show his orgasm, his now-visible ejaculation makes him abject, since people can now gaze upon the filth and realness of what was once hidden. Orgasm also causes a loss of self-control, making a man emotionally vulnerable. The solution to the threat of abjection represented by the money shot is to objectify the woman, making her the receptacle again: instead of the vagina, though, the money shot uses the woman's back or breasts as receptacles of abject fluid (19-20). Similarly, all forms of bodily fluids symbolize abjectness, especially feces and urine. Therefore, Wallace's decision to set most of *Infinite Jest* during the “Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment” appropriately signals the abject nature of a society where the lower half of the body is emphasized (Nichols 5). Thomas' ideas allow us to analyze fictional portrayals of normative male sexuality in *Infinite Jest*.

Of all the characters, Orin models himself on the most normative, hyperbolic model of male sexuality which he uses to hide his overwhelming fear of abject weakness. Even when he appears the most emotionally vulnerable, he cannot escape his intense solipsism no matter how hard he tries. Orin starts college as a burnt-out tennis player not talented enough to make it to the “Show” of professional tennis. To compound such an indignity, Orin does not even go to a major college program, rather a “fourth-rate tennis program” at Boston University (Wallace 289). As an elite

tennis reject when he arrives at college, Orin begins the sexual promiscuity that dominates his life in *Infinite Jest*. As Messner notes, the failure in the masculine proving ground of sports causes a sense of inadequacy and weakness in most men (Messner 75), and Orin is a good example. Wallace describes Orin's sex life as a response to his weakness in the fall of his freshman year, his first year of tennis failure: "Orin Incandenza, who like many children of raging alcoholics and OCD-sufferers had internal addictive-sexuality issues, had already drawn idle little sideways 8's on the postcoital flanks of a dozen B.U. coeds" (289). Noticeably, Orin uses the sexual fluids to mark his conquest's thighs, making her a receptacle in a manly attempt to deal with his own vulnerability during intimacy. But such hyperbolic sexuality results not just from his failure as an athlete.

The cause of Orin's hyperbolic sexuality can be traced back to his parents. Orin's strong mother, Avril Incandenza (nee Mondragon<sup>4</sup>) overshadows his weaker father, James Incandenza. Hal, Orin's brother, characterizes Avril as a very powerful, forceful woman: she's a near celebrity among militant grammarians, and she probably participated in the Quebecois separatist's terrorism movement years earlier. On top of this, she is also very sexually active, having intimate experiences with forty Mid-eastern medical attachés, her adopted brother Charles Tavis, as well as John Wayne, a Quebecois tennis star—and separatist-movement terrorist—at Enfield Tennis Academy, the tennis academy founded by her late husband. As Calvin Thomas notes, men associate strong maternal authority with production (like ejaculation) and, therefore, abjectness (98). Speaking as all men, Thomas writes that "If various forms of reification come to my rescue, if they present themselves as means of repudiating maternal authority, beating back the mother and thus protecting myself from the abjection with which she threatens me, then perhaps I will be more than happy" to return to production (99). Orin's sexual conquests are his form of compensation and protection in the face of

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<sup>4</sup> Avril's maiden name also compounds her sexuality which threatens the men around her. If we read Mon- as a reference to the *mons venus*, and -Dragon as, well...Dragon, we see that Avril possess a aggressive, "toothed vagina."

his strained relationship with his mother<sup>5</sup>, allowing him to continue his production as a punter both in college and the pros.

The strong maternal force does not just threaten a man with abjection, but also produces confused gender roles like Orin's hyper-masculinity. As Pleck and Clare point out, an absent father damages a boy's developing sense of masculinity, often resulting in gender confusion that produces hyper-masculinity. Even if Orin's father were not compared to the strong Avril, James' emotional absence from the family due to alcoholism certainly qualifies him as a nearly non-existent father. (In fact, both Hal and Orin rarely talk about James aside from his suicide.) Because of the abject nature of being dominated by a dominating female figure and the gender confusion it causes in his life, Orin avoids his mother, even responding to her personal letters with the form letter with which his professional football team responds to fans. Orin's resulting hyper-sexuality allows him to respond to his gender confusion and inadequacy with a hyper-masculinity that hides the fear he feels.

Ironically, soon after arriving at college as a sexually promiscuous tennis failure, Orin becomes a monogamous football star. After a few weeks of being part of a tennis program that constantly reminds him of his athletic inadequacy, Orin quits tennis in order to try and impress a cheerleader he nicknames the Prettiest Girl of All Time (the PGOAT). Orin's hyper-masculinity extends from the bedroom to the sports field when he switches to one of the most stereotypical masculine sports of all: football. However, instead of redeeming his athletic manhood, his initial experiences with football confirm his inadequacy. The narrator describes Orin's terrible first experiences using the emasculating, pejorative terms of hegemonic masculinity: "Then it turned out that the idea of actually making direct physical contact with an opponent was so deeply ingrained as alien and horrific that Orin's tryouts, even at reserve positions, were too pathetic to describe. He

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<sup>5</sup> In her memories of a Thanksgiving where she first meets Avril Joelle hints that Orin has an unnatural obsession with his mother's approval (747). We can only speculate about the Oedipal nature of that obsession.

was called a *dragass* and then a *molly gag* and then a *bona fried pussy*. He was finally told that he seemed to have some kind of empty swinging sack where his balls ought to be” (291). While the coaches figuratively castrate and feminize Orin for his inability to be violent like a man should be, they change their tune once Orin discovers his true calling. When the team’s normal punter breaks his leg during practice, Orin becomes a punting prodigy, producing legendary kicks that bar patrons recall fondly. Now that he has the potential to be a professional (a “Show-type career”), the coaches treat Orin much better than they did before. Punting redeems Orin and his manhood. This renewed masculinity is paradoxical, however, since being the punter actually makes him more vulnerable as a man.

Regardless of whether or not football is merely ritualized, homosexual behavior translated into an acceptable masculine form,<sup>6</sup> punting remains the least masculine position in the sport. Unlike other football players, the punter is most vulnerable and most susceptible to injury while playing his position, his leg high above his head while kicking the ball. Because of this, special rules protect the punter alone, rules that were explained very clearly in order to reassure Orin that he would be safe (292). Avoiding physical contact, a character trait worthy of castration earlier, becomes a selling point for the coaches who now want what Orin can produce. In addition, after kicking in that vulnerable position, the punter can usually avoid further involvement in the play, avoiding the redemptive violence, the “brutal” (294) action that confirms one’s manhood. This avoidance of physicality suits Orin perfectly as we will later see that the outlet for his normative masculinity is sex, not violence. Still, the narrator fills his description of Orin’s punting with abject imagery, showing that Orin remains less a man than other football players.

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<sup>6</sup>One of the most persuasive essays about the homoerotic undertone of American football is Alan Dundes’ essay “Into the Endzone for a Touchdown: A Psychoanalytic Consideration of American Football.” In it, Dundes persuasively analyzes how football is an acceptable, symbolic form of homosexuality with the sport’s emphasis on tight pants, anal imagery (e.g., butt patting, hiking, etc.), and cradling and caring for a symbolic egg that one team refuses to give up before depositing in the other team’s end zone.

Despite the potential abjectness of the position, punting symbolizes sex to Orin, complete with orgasm and approval. Here the narrator describes the action of punting in words that emphasize the abjectness of the action: “He punted the football better and better as his motion . . . got more instinctive. . . . Rockette-kicking in the midst of crowd-noise so rabid and entire it seemed to remove the stadium’s air, the one huge wordless orgasmic voice rising and creating a vacuum that sucked the ball after it into the sky, the leather egg receding as it climbed in a perfect spiral. . . .”

(293). Not only does the narrator feminize Orin’s punting motion by likening him to female dancers famous for their sexy legs, Orin arouses the “orgasmic” noise of the crowd by expelling not semen, not a ball, but an egg! Orin becomes a vulnerable dancer who, in front of the whole stadium, ejaculates not manly sperm, but an ovular football. Even Orin himself describes punting to his eventual girlfriend Joelle van Dyne, the PGOAT, in feminized sexual terms: he describes the roar of the crowd as “a sort of single coital moan, one big vowel, the sound of the womb” (295). Thus even Orin recognizes the feminine aspect of punting. In his confused concept of masculinity, Orin makes everything abjectly sexual, even a violent sport, making him just as feminized as when he was a “bona fried pussy.” The only difference is that now the coaches don’t give him a hard time.

The sexual significance of Orin’s punting description to Joelle van Dyne lies not only in its content but in the way in which he opens up to her. Not only does he describe himself in feminized terms to a girl he (at first) only wants to fuck, he opens up emotionally and honestly while describing his vulnerability. Paradoxically, Orin’s initial attempt to seduce a girl using manipulation becomes a moment of emotional honesty and vulnerability. What was a stab at having a one night stand becomes a monogamous, long-term relationship. His openness with Joelle is something he never had before. Orin thinks, “It never even occurred to him to ask her what sort of demeanor she preferred. He didn’t have to strategize or even scheme. Later he knew what the dread had been dread of. He hadn’t had to promise her anything, it turned out. It was all for free” (296). While we

later learn the dread had been the dread of emotional vulnerability within a monogamous relationship (whose failure could deeply wound him), Orin opens himself to Joelle, even letting her make him into the subject of her short films under the tutelage of Orin's father, James.

As the subject of Joelle's films, though, Orin becomes even more vulnerable than before now that he is the focus of the camera's gaze. Laura Mulvey points out that being the subject of the camera's (and audience's) focus turns a person into an object. However, Orin opens himself up further to this experience, even becoming a private connoisseur of the films, especially the ones in which he's most vulnerable:

Her technique is superb on the Delaware debacle Orin can just barely take reviewing, the one time all year the big chuffing center oversnaps and arcs the ball over Orin's upraised hands so by the time he's run back and grabbed the crazy-bouncing thing ten yards farther back the Delaware defense has breached the line, are through the line, the fullback supine and trampled, all ten rushers rushing, wanting nothing more than personal physical contact with Orin and his leather egg. . . . [When he is] just about to get personally contacted and knocked out of his cleats by the Delaware strong safety . . . when the tiny .5-sector of digital space each punt's programmed to require runs out and the crowd-sound moos and dies . . . and Orin's chin-strapped plastic-barred face is there on the giant viewer, frozen and High-Def in his helmet right before impact, zoomed in on with a quality lens. Of particular interest are the eyes. 299

Orin can barely stand to watch this tableau of *raping interruptus* by violent defenders who have already knocked the fullback onto his back (a position symbolizing sexual assault), and are coming for Orin next. The moment before the defenders violate him, the tape ends, interrupting the orgasmic moan of the crowd and leaving Orin staring into his own eyes. His intense concentration on his eyes symbolizes his intense solipsism as he gazes at himself repeatedly on screen.

Laura Mulvey's work on film theory can help us further understand Orin's intense solipsism and hyperbolic sexuality. Orin complicates Mulvey's theories about the sexual pleasure a viewer gets from watching an object on screen. Viewing serves two purposes: "The first, scopophilic, arises from the pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight" (2185). By watching himself, Orin gets narcissistic pleasure, but he also seems to enjoy his vulnerability both



as an object to be gazed at and as a punter about to be physically violated. In this obsession with his weakness, we see Orin's intense solipsism, which connects with Mulvey's second reason people watch films. Rooted in the mirror stage of development, the second purpose for watching "[develops] through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, [and] comes from identification with the image seen. [. . . This demands] identification of the ego with the object on the screen through the spectator's fascination with and recognition of his like" (2185). This reason helps us understand Orin's focus best: Orin watches himself in order to recognize his own existence. By constantly watching himself watching himself, though, Orin reveals an infinite loop of solipsism. This solipsism gets worse after he and Joelle break up. The break-up wounds Orin because of the vulnerability he has always dreaded; this break-up makes him reluctant to be vulnerable again, and increases his hyperbolic sexuality. As Catherine Nichols astutely points out in her essay "Dialogizing Postmodern Carnival: David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*", Orin's sexual addiction partly has its roots in the emotional vulnerability he fears (10). His sexual addiction allows him to continue "his solipsistic denial of emotional openness" (10). Such "denial of emotional openness" remains a standard aspect of hyper-masculine behavior where emotions are considered weak and fought against. Interestingly, Orin uses such hyper-masculine, emotional absence as a tool for scoring with women, feeding his hyperbolic sexuality. The same solipsistic strategies apply to Orin's sexual practices.

Orin's self-containment during sex reflects not just emotionally-closed, normative masculinity. Nichols quotes Orin's explanation for his nearly infinite sexual conquests:

why, maybe one Subject is never enough, why hand after hand must descend to pull him back from the endless fall. For were there for him just one, now special and only the One would be not he or she but what was between them, the obliterating trinity of You and I into We. Orin felt that once and has never recovered, and will never again. (Wallace 566-7)

As Nichols points out, Orin also thinks this while alone, looking into the mirror, possibly while masturbating (10). By focusing on himself as the object of his own gaze again, Orin makes himself

abject through both the gaze and masturbation. But he also feeds his solipsism here. Similar to Joelle's film clips, here we see Orin literally "performing" (to use Judith Butler's term) his hyperbolic masculinity in front of the mirror with himself as audience, emphasizing the narcissistic nature of his gender confusion. If he has no woman with which to prove his virile sexuality, he can always use himself.

Two aspects of Orin's language, as Nichols points out, make him the epitome of normative masculinity. Orin, like many stereotypically masculine men, sees the loss of self-containment during sex as a failure to avoid. He uses the metaphor of a fall to describe this loss abjectly as a fall into filth and weakness. Here Orin, like others, sees the fall as occurring when one loses control during sex. Furthermore, normative masculinity seeks to retain strong self control by remaining in constant control of one's hyperbolic sexuality. To avoid losing oneself and becoming abject, normative masculinity seeks to avoid the exact "self-shattering" (Thomas 20-21) which Orin describes as "obliterating" him with another woman who could potentially hurt him. Therefore his attempts to hide his weak physical body are fitting behavior for a man defined by such hyperbolic sexuality. He keeps his body hidden even though during most of the novel he suffers from knee problems as a result of his punting career—the abject football position makes him more (physically) vulnerable. This injury first occurs (and requires his first surgery) during the disintegration of his relationship with Joelle, a relationship where his emotions were open and vulnerable. But as he collapses emotionally, his body does as well, symbolizing just how weak he has become both physically and psychologically.

Much as Orin does, Hal faces gender issues because of his parents, though he deals with them using coping mechanisms of his own. Unlike Orin's sexuality, drugs and tennis allow Hal to avoid feeling the fear of abjection. While he does use tennis to assert his strong masculinity, Hal is not defined by hyperbolically masculine sexuality like his brother Orin is. Actually, Hal and Orin

have a strained relationship because of Orin's hyperbolic sexuality: despite Orin's constant attempts over the phone to befriend Hal by telling Hal seduction stories or giving help with information for seducing women, Hal remains distant. Though he isn't as hyperbolically sexual as Orin is, Hal is not as emotionally weak as the men in the Inner Infants class he mistakenly attends. Yet he does not blend phallic and testicular attributes like Donald Gately does. During the course of the novel, Hal comes closer to achieving a better developed sense of manhood, in part because of Gately's influence. Through his intellectual and athletic talents, Hal finds himself on the top of the Enfield Tennis Academy food chain: being a strong student and a strong tennis player puts him in a strong position not just socially and academically, but in terms of masculinity as well. Hal, though, longs to break free of his own solipsistic tendencies, tendencies that mirror his brother's; unlike his brother, he longs to find the emotional connection that Orin so strenuously avoids. While this desire for emotional connection ties into Wallace's aesthetic allegory for postmodernist fiction, it also indicates a desire to be more testicular in his masculinity. At one point Hal says that he desires to feel something like an emotion, which he has not felt for a long time: real emotions have become nothing more than variables in rarified equations for him (694). Hal makes serious attempts to establish that emotional connection with others, which is part of the reason he gives up drugs. Eventually, though, we see that Hal (possibly with Gately's help) does get in touch with his emotions, even if the narrator does not fully reveal the depth of those emotions.

We see in one particularly noticeable instance how Hal dislikes the hyperbolic male sexuality that Orin forces on him. The longest of the novel's infamous ninety-six pages of endnotes recounts a phone conversation between Hal and Orin that begins with Orin discussing two of his strategies for seducing Subjects. But before Orin can go into the details of "Seduction Strategy Number 7", Hal tells him "You know I hate these Strategy calls" (1007). Unlike Orin, who retreats into a hyper-masculinity of career and sexuality (as problem-ridden as both are), Hal responds to the same

athletic pressures and gender issues by becoming staunchly non-sexual, to the point that he doesn't want to even hear about Orin's conquests. Orin's constant bragging about his sexual conquests perhaps influences Hal's anti-sexuality. Speaking about Hal's sexuality and those of his two brothers, Orin and Mario, the narrator says that "Hal is maybe the one male E.T.A. for whom lifetime virginity is a conscious goal. He sort of feels like O.'s having enough acrobatic coitus for all three of them" (634). Hal clearly wants to be different from Orin, but he goes too far, becoming hyper-nonsexual. Hal's non-sexuality ties into the same athletic gender identity that Orin faces when he starts college.

During most of the book's present (November, Year of the Depend Adult Undergarment), Hal's near loss to Ortho Stice, the "Darkness," is one of the most significant stories circulating around Enfield Tennis Academy. Hal is ranked second in singles at ETA and is also a year older than Stice, two facts that make the near loss shocking and emasculating to Hal. Hal's age and his ranking indicate he should beat Stice easily. Scholars like Michael Messner clearly make the connection between manhood and athletic ability, such that losing makes you less of a man. In a sport like tennis, which explicitly ranks the players' manhood through their athletic skills (while other sports do so less explicitly), to lose to someone ranked below you is doubly emasculating. Anthony Clare goes so far as to claim that sports help boys prove their manhood because sports serve as a symbolic fight against the control of society's rules which seek to weaken men's power, and feminize them<sup>7</sup> (205-6). Losing that fight, then, feminizes the man.

Therefore, we can look at tennis as a means for Hal to assert his masculinity in the face of the strong maternal power in his life, Avril. While Orin uses sex as a coping mechanism to fight

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<sup>7</sup> The abundant phallic imagery in much of organized sports could prove the validity of Clare's argument as they become tools to fight feminization. And tennis is a great example, with its "sticks" that each player values so highly. In fact, this phallic symbolism has more credence when the narrator hints that "the sticks" actually become "dicks" as some female players probably use them for sexual purposes (636).

against the fear of abjection and death, Hal uses tennis and drugs. And while Hal does not avoid Avril like Orin does, Hal certainly does not seek her out. Therefore, Hal's withdrawal from drugs adds to the psychological pain of living he experiences later in the novel when this coping technique disappears and he lies on the floor of an ETA viewing room, unable to move. His near loss to Stice<sup>8</sup> signals that his athletic coping mechanism similarly fails to help him keep the maternal force at bay. No wonder, then, that he cannot produce on the tennis court and can hardly speak at the novel's ending: he is paralyzed by the pain of living, a pain grounded in his physical body. As he lies on the floor at the end of the novel, he can only think about his body, such as how his bones feel and how his "throat's equipment" moves when he swallows (956). His mother's strong sexuality and cuckolding of his very non-sexual father (who discusses sex only once but in impersonal terms) figure strongly in his emotional pain, as revealed when his thoughts move from his body to his mother having sex with various partners: "Sex between the Moms and C.T. I imagined as both frenetic and weary [. . .]. My coccyx had gone numb from the pressure of the floor [. . .]. Bain, graduate students, grammatical colleagues, Japanese fight-choreographers [. . .] –these encounters were imaginable but somehow generic" (957). His emotional pain combines with his physical pain as he imagines his mother having sex with numerous men. In response to this pain, he finds himself paralyzed. Such pain, though, inspires Hal to attempt to make himself a better man by giving up drugs.

In seeking a Narcotics Anonymous meeting to help with his marijuana withdrawals, Hal accidentally finds himself in a men's support group, reminiscent of those in Robert Bly's *Iron John* man movement of the 1980s and 1990s. While Hal accidentally stumbles upon this meeting of men

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<sup>8</sup> Hal's discussion of the loss, though, comes in the same paragraph that discussed Hal's anti-male sexuality. It seems more than coincidental that the person who precipitates this crisis of masculinity is named Ortho, a name similar to Orin. Whereas Hal dislikes Orin's hyperbolic male sexuality, perhaps Hal dislikes the athletic masculinity that Stice represents: Stice, like John Wayne, is one of the few players at ETA who has a legitimate shot at "the Show." The near loss, though, creates an identity crisis for Hal, partly due to his giving up drugs, but partly because he knows he is in trouble in a masculine world based on rankings. Hal deals with the loss stoically, but inside he is emotionally torn up.

getting in touch with their feelings, it is a meeting he recognizes might offer him a way to get in touch with his neglected testicular side. In a scene that anticipates the Remaining Men Together therapy group (which I analyze in the next chapter on *Fight Club*), a man sits in front of everyone holding a teddy bear and crying for his Inner Infants needs to be met (801). While sitting there during the meeting, Hal watches a rope of mucus hang from the man's nose, inspiring a sympathetic rush of his own bodily fluid, saliva, in Hal's mouth (805). Such sympathy implies that Hal wants to get in touch with his emotions. The emotions, though, end up being too weak and abject, "too testicular," in the same way that Orin's sexuality is too strong, "too phallic," for Hal. The narrator equates such touchy-feely therapy (which stands in stark contrast to the unemotional, but very sincere, AA meetings of Don Gately) with baby-ish behavior: the man cries like a baby as he seeks to get in touch with his inner infant rather than his inner child. Such abjectness is considered weak not only in terms of phallic masculinity, but from those critics concerned with developing men's testicular masculinity too. Even Robert Bly, the founder of the men's movement, sees excessive emotions as weak and feminine (3). For Bly, a real man has emotions but also must remain strong and masculine (4); looking at *Infinite Jest* through Bly's ideas, we see the dangers of being either too emotionally closed like Orin, or too open like Mr. Inner Infant.

In the end, though, Hal finds a method for embracing a more testicular masculinity, one that allows for emotions. After Hal's lack of emotion in the novel's chronological beginning, the temporal end shows a Hal who has overcome his prior emotional and physical paralysis. Hal describes himself as "not a machine. I feel and believe" (12). Ironically, though, the admissions committee at the University of Arizona cannot connect with him because the worried committee misunderstands his utterances (which the narrator describes as "sub-animalistic"). As they send him to the hospital, he says "Please don't think I don't care" (12). The new Hal that cares also does not seem too worried that he will be playing tennis in college (like Orin did) even though elite tennis

looks down upon the college game as certain death for a professional career. However, despite his improvements in embracing a new masculinity, Hal remains far from embodying a well-blended masculinity. While he opens himself up more and cares as he never did before, he cannot communicate those feelings to others, rendering those feelings meaningless, despite his desire for the other characters to know he cares.

Wallace does give us a clue that Hal's new testicular tendencies are due in part to meeting Gately. We never see, though, what exactly transpires in the days between Hal lying on the floor of the ETA viewing room (at the end of the novel) and his meeting with the admissions officers (at the beginning of the novel). While sitting in the admissions meeting in Arizona, Hal thinks about how former Enfield student John Wayne probably would have won the What-a-Burger Invitational: Hal remembers Wayne "standing watch in a mask as Donald Gately and I dig up my father's head" (17). Later in the novel, this memory becomes the vision of the future Gately sees while he lies in his hospital bed after being shot. Gately and Hal must have met since Hal knows Gately's name at the chronological end of a novel in which he never meets him, even though Gately doesn't know Hal's name earlier in the hospital. While Wallace does not give us any information about their meeting, I believe that their meeting influences Hal's perception of manhood since Gately serves as the male role model Hal needs.

Donald Gately's masculinity serves as a stark contrast to the emotionally closed, solipsistic Orin and the struggling, uncertain Hal. By joining Alcoholics Anonymous and becoming sober, Don Gately begins the process of becoming a more complete man who gets away from the violence that dominates his life. Don eventually embraces his nurturing, testicular masculinity as a counselor at Ennet House (a half-way house and drug rehab center) while he still remains able to unleash his violent, phallic masculinity when it's needed. Ironically, his most phallic moment comes in the service of his testicular, nurturing side as he protects one of his residents from violence and gains a

more complete masculine sexuality in the process. Similar to the way that Hal seeks to find a fuller example of normative masculinity than Orin's, Don seeks to discover a less violent masculinity than the example he had growing up. That example was his mother's boyfriend, the MP, a violent, drunk abuser of both women and animal alike. Don grows up violently hyper-masculine, despite the nurturing side he later develops when he joins AA. A.A. helps Gately develop his masculinity when he understands the importance of real emotional vulnerability to the program.

While manifesting both testicular and phallic sides, Gately does not embody normative male sexuality. Gately serves as a stark contrast to Orin's emotional closure behind an insincere façade. Late in the novel, when Don seeks to remain substance free while recovering in the hospital from a gunshot wound, he comes to the realization that he has never had a relationship with a non-addict, much less a healthy sexual relationship with anyone (919). Throughout Don's recollections of his life, he sees himself as almost non-sexual, much like Hal. Lying in his hospital bed, Gately remembers his long-time girlfriend and fellow addict. Don says "The most sexual thing [he] ever did with Pamela Hoffman-Jeep was he liked to unwrap her cocoon of blankets and climb in with her and spoon in real tight, fitting his bulk up close against all her soft concave places, and then go to sleep with his face in her nape" (932). He would only spoon with Pamela Jeep-Hoffman for a few minutes before he would get up and seek a Dilaudid fix. Although a talented ex-football player, Gately does not possess a (hyperbolic) masculine sexuality like Orin's. Instead he possesses the non-sexuality of addiction because he'd rather get a fix from a "moist and smeary-mouthed" drug-dealing friend than have sex with his girlfriend. Throughout the novel, whenever the narrator depicts addiction in association with Gately, he describes the inherent filth associated with it. Vomit, piss, shit, drool all coat the addict's world. And this world of abjectness has "blotted out" Gately's masculine sexuality, leaving him with violence as the only outlet for his phallic masculinity.



Immediately following this remembrance of his weak, sexual past, Don remembers the MP, his model of violent masculinity.

Because Gately was too young to recognize the sexual component of his mother's abusive relationship with the MP, the masculinity of his mother's boyfriend consists not of hyperbolic sexuality, but of hyperbolic violence. The MP's behavior explains why Don usually performs his masculinity in violent ways. The M.P. is a violent drunk, prone to abuse Gately's mother repeatedly. Wallace conflates this violence with sex, though, when, late in the novel, Gately remembers that the sound of his mother and the MP having sex were almost the same as the sounds of the MP beating her, a memory that disturbs Gately enough to try and repress it (842). In another sickening memory, Gately finely realizes that his pet kitten didn't just disappear, but was put down the garbage disposal by the M.P. (933)

Growing up, Gately uses football as the primary outlet for the rage and violence within him. On the field Gately uses his strength and speed to punish the opposing players, gain yards, and score for his team<sup>9</sup>, unlike Orin, who seeks to avoid any physical contact while playing football. He focuses his violence through an acceptable, masculine form, becoming the stereotypical football stud, becoming "truly dedicated" to it (903). Football and its inherent popularity, though, eventually expose Gately to drugs, which become his personal downfall and his exit from the sport. Without football into which to channel his rage, Gately becomes a violent drug addict. At the beginning of a paragraph describing Gately's violence, the narrator explains how Gately beat a North Reading kid nearly to death, then portrays Gately as "kind of a boys' boy. He had a jolly ferocity about him that scared girls. And he had no idea how to deal with girls except to try and impress them by letting

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<sup>9</sup> Gately has so much talent, in fact, it is rumored that his coaches get sexually excited watching him play: his seventh grade coach supposedly masturbated to Gately's 40-yard dash time. Such a rumor suggests that Gately is good enough that grown men are willing to make themselves abject because of his skills, suggesting Gately's position as the alpha male in terms of athletics.

them watch somebody do something to his head. He was never what you'd call a ladies' man" (903). Even as a popular, social teenager, Gately appears clueless about the opposite sex to the point of being un-sexual, not knowing how to interact with women unless it involved violence directed towards himself. He demonstrates his violent nature when he drops out of school and becomes a full-time thief and addict. He does time in prison once for "assaulting two bouncers in a nightclub—it was more like he'd beaten the second bouncer bloody with the unconscious body of the first" (463). The sheer strength and awesome power of Gately's body makes him a tremendous weapon. The event that scares Gately straight, though, is his act of manslaughter during a robbery: Gately gags a man with a cold who slowly suffocates on his mucus. Paradoxically, this accident gives Gately the opportunity to move away from this violent, phallic masculinity toward a more nurturing, testicular masculinity.

After accidentally murdering his robbery victim, Gately joins the Ennet House, a rehabilitation program. As he remains sober, Gately becomes more and more testicular in his masculinity as he opens up emotionally by speaking in A.A. meetings. Eventually he becomes a staff member at Ennet House, helping other addicts get clean and sober. Wallace shows Gately's role as a nurturer at Ennet through the fact that Gately becomes a cook. He even worries about whether the residents will like the meals he cooks, causing him to worry like "nervous bride" (469). At Ennet House, Gately experiences many anti-masculine moments that do not break him down but help him develop a nurturing side, the side he had previously hidden. One part of his life that develops his nurturing side involves his humility-breeding job (having a menial job is a requirement of the Ennet House program) as a janitor. Even after he becomes a live-in counselor at Ennet House, Gately continues working as a janitor at Shattuck House, a homeless shelter where many residents are also addicts. After spending a night nurturing the addicts in Ennet's rehab program,

Gately goes to clean-up after others, including addicts that aren't even trying to become sober.

Wallace describes the filth Gately cleans up on a daily basis as the epitome of abjectness:

The inmates at the Shattuck suffer from every kind of physical and psychological and addictive and spiritual difficulty you could ever think of, specializing in ones that are repulsive. There are colostomy bags and projectile vomiting and cirrhotic discharges and missing limbs and misshapen heads and incontinence and Kaposi's Sarcoma and suppurating sores and all different levels of enfeeblement and impulse-control-deficit and damage. . . . There's one sort of blocked off and more hidden corner... that's always got sperm moving slowly down the walls. And way too much sperm for just one or two guys, either. The whole place smells like death no matter what the fuck you do. 434-5

This list of every sort of filth and abject bodily fluid seems a pretty standard list of abjectness, though certain parts of it stand out more than others. The sperm that is "way too much for just one or two guys" suggests a homosocial, sexual bonding of sorts that lacks a female receptacle to redeem its masturbatory ejaculate. The whole reek of filth doesn't come from dirt, but rather from "death," suggesting that normative masculinity equates abjectness with death. While commenting upon the filth associated with abjectness, Thomas quotes Bersani's statement that the anus equals death (56). The presence of Kaposi's Sarcoma (a lesion associated with AIDS, often accompanied by bleeding) in the Shattuck Shelter further literalizes this assertion that abjectness represents death.<sup>10</sup>

Experiences at the Shattuck Shelter show that Gately's nurturing side continues to develop since he both cleans up after other addicts, and seeks to bring some of them to the A.A. program.

For Gately,

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<sup>10</sup> Kaposi's Sarcoma also appears in one of James Incandenza's films where the sarcoma appears in the anus of a homosexual with AIDS. Throughout the novel, subtle connections between abject addiction and homosexuality appear, such as when Gately sits through a Celtics game as "two resident pillow-biters . . . were having this involved conversation about some third fag having to go in and get the skeleton of some kind of fucking rodent removed from inside their butthole" (274). The anus is quite literally death for the sex-toy "fucking rodent" and the homosexual who must remove its carcass from his anus. The homosexuals are "fags" or "pillow-biters", derogatory terms, though a footnote makes clear that these terms did not come from Gately. However, both the den of abjectness that is Shattuck shelter and the conversation witnessed about deceased vermin come in the service of Gately trying to become a cleaner, more whole person: the janitor job makes Gately more humble in order to accept the A.A. program, while his counselor at Ennet House suggest Gately stop filtering his experiences and open up to the world around him, even such uncomfortable conversations as the one he witnesses; that way, Gately can be sure he, not his addiction, actually controls his mind.

Maybe the worst is that there's almost always one or two guys in the Shattuck who Gately knows personally, from his days of addiction and B&E, from before he got to the no-choice point and surrendered his will to staying straight at any cost...Gately'll slip them a finski or a pack of Kools and maybe sometimes try and talk a little AA to them, if they seem like maybe they're ready to give up. With everybody else in the Shattuck Gately adopts this expression where he lets them know he's ignoring them completely as long as they keep their distance, but it's a look that says...not to fuck with him. (435-6)

Gately tries to help the people he knows get help for their addiction while ignoring the people he does not know. This mental distancing (through thoughts and attitude) protects him from the threat of death all around him. Yet at the same time, the physical exposure to abjection and death allows him to return to Ennet House and his job as a counselor "with his Gratitude-battery totally recharged" (435). With that recharge, he can be a better counselor, more patient and willing to deal with the more difficult house members. Still, a subtle blade of violence appears in Gately's attitude that tells people not to "fuck with him." This attitude, with its hint of violence, protects him from the residents' abjectness, and serves as a warning for the residents to stay away from him for their own good.

Eventually Gately must act violently while protecting his charges at Ennet House. When the spectacularly shitty Randy Lenz pisses-off a group of Quebecois thugs by slitting their dog's throat, Gately steps in to protect Lenz. As the Quebecois thugs pull up outside Ennet House, Gately goes outside to meet them, instantly appraising the situation for violence. As he does, he remembers how he used to have "little fantasies of saving somebody from harm, some innocent party, and getting killed in the process and getting eulogized at great length in bold-faced *Globe* print" (611). Even though he cannot admit it, even though he struggles against enjoying the testicular side of himself (since he describes the above fantasies as "sick"), Gately really wants to help and nurture those around him. Because of both his job and his nurturing personality, Gately gets the chance to help when he joins the increasingly violent situation outside. This is the first time that the reader sees Gately become overtly violent, although he is violent only as a protector, blending his violent

masculinity with the nurturing, testicular one. And when the fight begins, Gately becomes an artist, gracefully producing pain.

Ironically, the language the narrator uses to describe Gately's violent protection contains some of the same language used to describe Orin's feminized athletics. Gately produces something masculine in feminized terms, suggesting that all production (as Thomas argues), even that which is violent, creates anxiety for the producer. As soon as Gately takes the first punch, he stops worrying in any sort of philosophical terms at all and enters the flow of fighting. Gately creates art as he

takes the man's broken hand's arm he's holding out and with his eyes on the ground's other Nuck breaks the arm over his knee, and as the guy goes down on one knee Gately takes the arm and pirouettes around twisting the broken arm behind the guy's back and plants his sneaker on the guy's floral back and forces him forward so there's a sick crack and he feels the arm come out of the socket, and there's a high foreign scream. The Nuck with the blade who was down slashes Gately's calf through his jeans as the guy rolls gracefully left and starts to rise, up on one knee, knife out front, a guy that knows his knives and can't be closed with while he's got the blade up. Gately feints and takes one giant step and gets all his weight into a Rockette kick that lands high up under the Nuck's beard's chin and audibly breaks Gately's big toe in the sneaker and sends the man curving out back into the dazzle of the highbeams....It's impossible, outside choreographed entertainment, to fight two guys together at once. 613

In this portion of the fight right before the Quebecois thugs shoot Gately, the narrator reminds us that this fight is not "choreographed entertainment," a false, artistic product. No, this fight is real, seriously masculine business. But despite the truly fierce nature of the fight, the narrator describes Gately as an artist who uses the medium of violence for his anxious production. This becomes especially true since the artistic terms are taken from dance: the pirouettes of ballet and those famous Rockette kicks. The narrator uses the last term in his description of Orin's feminized sport, thereby making Gately's art, though masculine and violent, similarly abject. Unlike Orin, though, Gately does not avoid the redemptive violence. While Gately dishes out more than he takes (even killing one of the Quebecois), Gately's wounds are at the hands of phallic weapons: a blade penetrates him, and he becomes the receptacle of the bullet, a symbolic sperm if you will. The feminized nature of his violence seems fitting after the change Gately has undergone in A.A. and at

Ennet House. In fact, after he is shot, his fantasized, heroic headline goes through his mind once more. Gately uses the shooting as a means for accepting some of his abject nature; Wallace even hints to the reader that a future, normalized sexual relationship with the beautiful resident Joelle van Dyne might be possible for Gately.

Despite being shot, Gately continues to be the nurturing leader of his charges, ordering them to take him inside and giving them advice on how to deal with the police. All this occurs while he is bleeding, producing an abject bodily fluid in such quantities that some people almost vomit (616). But as he goes further into shock, he gives up control of the situation to Joelle. Not threatened by a woman, Gately even feels safe enough to throw up on her, which she ignores. When he says how much he hates his current weakness, “Joelle v.D. runs a hand down Gately’s wet arm that leaves a warm wake, the hand, and then gently squeezes as much of the wrist as she can get her hand around. ‘And Lo,’ she says softly” (619). In her tender gesture, cutting through his blood, covered in his vomit, Joelle seems to have accepted him, softly stating what seems to be approval of his vulnerability. In contrast to Orin, her last boyfriend, Gately gives up complete self-control and accepts his weakness earned in the defense of his charges. Such a difference between himself and Orin comes from the testicular, caring masculinity that Gately embodies. Gately’s helpfulness even continues while he recovers in the hospital.

The gunshot wound lands Gately in the hospital where he experiences a vision of meeting Hal in the future that connects to Hal’s memory at the beginning of the novel. In this memory, Gately sees himself digging up a head with this “really sad kid”, a description of Hal that suggests neither the future muteness, the tennis talent, nor the academic prodigy he is. Even in his feverish visions Gately identifies a person in need of help. Such a connection surely hints that Gately is partly responsible for Hal’s discovery of his new feelings. In terms of caring, Hal resembles Gately, the most developed man in the novel, rather than Orin, one of the most confused. But by being

violent and abject, phallic and testicular, Gately further embodies the new man—one not afraid of being testicular, or phallic, when he needs to be. In a sense, his synthesis of the two sides of the dialectical masculinity represents a new postmodern masculinity, one that breaks free of normative, emotionally-closed stereotypes.

The blending of strength and emotion describes Wallace's post-postmodern aesthetic as well. While the new postmodern masculinity blends the normatively phallic with the nurturing testicular, Wallace's post-postmodernist fiction similarly synthesizes the dialectic of ironic posing and naïve-but-real emotions. If we use the same continuum from the discussion of masculinity above, on one end lies the emotionally closed, ironically distant postmodern author, while on the other lies the melodramatic, romantic author; the emotionally open post-postmodern author lies somewhere in between. Within this encyclopedic novel, the two narrative projects of redefining masculinity and postmodern storytelling connect more closely than one might think. Throughout the novel, many postmodern, overly-ironic characters (especially James Incandenza) consider real emotion to be weak. These characters consider truly ironic esotericism the more masculine manner of storytelling because it is not emotional. Within both of these projects, though, Gately is not just the new masculine man, but he is also a new post-postmodernist storyteller. That is, he appears unafraid of being both ironic and emotionally honest, especially at the A.A. meetings. The exact opposite of him, however, is James, which is why he is the postmodernist storyteller I focus on instead.<sup>11</sup>

James Incandenza embodies ironic, emotionally distanced postmodernist storytelling. He is the father of multiple postmodernist films that most audiences cannot understand, and he is also the emotionally absent father of Orin and Hal who cannot connect with him. James' emotional

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<sup>11</sup> Orin, however, does not serve as the example of postmodern author in addition to that of normative masculinity, despite Iannis Goerlandt convincing argument that Orin uses empty irony to seduce his Subjects much like many postmodernist authors seduce their readers (310). However, seduction techniques do not really make Orin a storyteller.

solipsism appears through both his films and his attempts at communicating with Hal. As an allegorical description of authorship, James' oeuvre reveals how postmodernism often leaves the audience abject and powerless. One example could serve as an exemplar for all his films:

*Cage III—Free Show.* The figure of Death presides over the front entrance of a carnival sideshow whose spectators watch performers undergo unspeakable degradations so grotesquely compelling that the spectator's eyes become larger and larger until the spectators themselves are transformed into gigantic eyeballs in chairs, while on the other side of the sideshow tent the figure of Life uses a megaphone to invite fairgoers to an exhibition in which, if the fairgoers consent to undergo unspeakable degradations, they can witness ordinary persons gradually turn into gigantic eyeballs. (988)

This film is wonderfully postmodern, full of ironic concepts and meta-fictional moments. But through this film (and all his films), James fails to connect with his audience. Instead, the audience portrayed in this film represents all of James' audiences: James tricks the audience, making them the butt of the joke by transforming them into something physically grotesque, while also participating in self-reflexive games that make them both gazed at and gazer. One of Laura Mulvey's idea about the power of the spectator applies well here. Mulvey argues that scopophilic power privileges the gazer who makes the object of the gaze into an abject receptacle. We see James assume the privileged position of the gazer behind the camera, a gazer who ultimately considers the audience worthy only of self-degradation since they gaze at themselves; unlike Orin, who enjoys such solipsistic gazing, the audience does not, and becomes hostile. Nichols points out that all James' films are self-reflexive and make James "at the very least a chimerical blend of a latter-day John Barth-Thomas Pynchon disciple" (Nichols 12), much as LeClair sees James' films as outtakes from *Gravity's Rainbow* (17). The postmodern nature of these films also calls to mind the tricks of postmodernist literature that Wallace rails against in his interview with McCaffery. Instead of connecting with the audience, the authors just confuse them by filling their work with innovative, but meaningless, tricks.



Even James' attempts at personal connection with his son fail because he is too much of a postmodernist, too emotionally distant to actually listen to anyone else since he is too wrapped up in himself. Early in the novel, we witness a flashback to a young Hal being called to the office of a "professional conversationalist" who turns out to be James, and who attempts to converse with Hal before launching into a long self-centered speech. Throughout his father's speech, Hal attempts to respond, but James does not listen. Hal finally gives up, telling his father "I can't just sit here watching you think I'm mute while your fake nose points at the floor. And are you hearing me talking, Dad? It speaks. It accepts soda and defines implore and converses with you" (31). Worse yet, after ignoring his son's attempts at communicating, James turns the moment into a movie told not from Hal's point of view but from his own, called *It Was a Great Marvel that He Was in the Father without Knowing Him*. James turns Hal's sincere attempts at communication into something to be used for emotionally cold art. James, like many postmodern artists, cannot actually connect with his audience, even a captive one.

James continues to be a solipsistic story teller even after his death. He appears to Gately as a wraith who struggles to communicate even when he gets inside his audience's head.<sup>12</sup> Using his ability to command Gately's mind—much as an author might control the mind of his readers—the ghostly James abuses Gately with language that makes Gately's head hurt: "with roaring and unwilling force, comes the term Pirouette, in caps, which term Gately knows for a fact he doesn't have any idea what it means and no reason to be thinking it with roaring force, so the sensation is not only creepy but somehow violating, a sort of lexical rape" (832). In his attempt to communicate with Gately, James uses phallic power to force Gately into a position of abjection from which to

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<sup>12</sup> Tom LeClair believes that the wraith might be Wallace injecting his voice into the novel (32), using James as a comment about the tricks of "postmodern talent without passion or position" (33). While I agree that James is a passionless postmodernist, I find the former statement of LeClair's difficult to agree with. I don't believe James symbolizes Wallace because James is the emotionally cold, solipsistic postmodernist that Wallace states he dislikes so much in his interview with McCaffery. Also, though one might claim that Wallace's withholding of certain scenes makes this novel passionless postmodern fiction, there are moments of extreme emotion and pathos in this novel that make me believe that LeClair is too hard on Wallace.

abuse him. James feminizes Gately as audience by raping his mind with the word “pirouette”, one of the same words used by the narrator to feminize Gately earlier during his violent—yet testicular—moment. In this moment of being made abject, Gately’s experiences with Alcoholics Anonymous signal the group’s potential power to be both abject and powerful. At the moment when Gately has become an abject audience for James’s postmodern narrative technique, Gately employs a powerful narrative strategy from A.A. By “identifying” with James, by listening and understanding, Gately does what many postmodernist authors cannot, which is to make an emotional connection with another person.

Instead of just blowing off the wraith (or becoming hostile like many of James’ audiences do) Gately tries to “maybe Identify, to an extent” (833) with him, thereby establishing a connection. The difference between Identify and Compare is essential to Gately’s A.A. experience. That difference allows him to synthesize the phallic power of storytelling (forcing the audience to become the receptacle of the story) with the abject, emotional nature of listening to create a new form of post-postmodernist storytelling. Gately describes how most of the new members of A.A. are terrible listeners, who sit listening passively to the speaker without making a personal connection. Instead, they just Compare their experience with the Disease to the speaker’s, thereby justifying how much better off they are since they never became as abject an addict as the speaker (365). But by devaluing the speaker as merely more abject than themselves, the new members do not connect to or Identify with the speaker’s story. A person who Compares avoids becoming emotionally vulnerable, and, instead, judges the other person (Daverman). However, a person who Identifies becomes a receptacle for that story. Paradoxically, instead of becoming abject, the Identifier becomes stronger, not weaker. Therein lies the power of A.A. as a solution to the postmodernist distancing that Wallace disavows in his interview with McCaffery. By refusing to Compare with the James the wraith, Gately Identifies with him and thereby avoids losing his self-containment or

identity when he becomes emotionally connected, something hyperbolic men (like Orin) and postmodernist authors avoid.

However, similar to his ability to move beyond violence and develop his inherent nurturing side, Gately develops his previously impoverished storytelling skills as a member of A.A. In A.A. he develops his linguistic abilities not just to be able to communicate, but to enable him to command an audience and connect with them. Even when he tries to speak about the A.A. program pejoratively at the meetings in order to get kicked out, he unintentionally shows the newfound power of language he has within the program:

[He] perked up considerably at 30 days clean when he found he could raise his big mitt in Beginner Meetings and say publicly just how much he hates this limp AA drivel about gratitude and humility and miracles and how he hates it and thinks it's horseshit and hates the AAs and how they all seem like limp smug moronic self-satisfied shit-eating pricks with their lobotomized smiles and goopy sentiment and how he wishes them all violent Technicolor harm in the worst way, new Gately sitting there spraying vitriol, wet-lipped and red-eared trying to get kicked out... (352-3).

Here, Gately finds that instead of getting upset at him for his diatribe, the audience rewards him for his emotional honesty. Ironically, Gately's phallic production of hate turns him into an excellent member of A.A.—his wet lips perhaps unconsciously connect him in his emotional openness with the abject terms through which he describes the other members. When he begins to actively listen, getting as close to the other speakers as possible, Gately truly begins to change. Tom LeClair points out that Gately fits into this system well because of his ability to sympathize with the speakers he hears (34). Gately continues to show his nurturing side through his listening abilities, regardless of whether that makes him a feminized recipient.

The irony of A.A. lies not just in the power of the abject listeners, but throughout the program's structure and philosophy as well. At the very core, there are no dogmas to the program that you must follow, yet it works. Addicts, not educated, highly-paid doctors are the ones that actually cure you. No one controls the program, yet it still works. The leaders of A.A. do not care

how “official” the program is, or what authority enables them to successfully treat other addicts because they care only about the actions that make the program work for each person. Louis Althusser’s theories on political ideologies apply perfectly to this A.A. ideology. To Althusser, ideologies exist in peoples’ actions alone: “these [ideological] practices are governed by the rituals in which these practices are inscribed with in the material existence of an ideological apparatus, be it only a small part of that apparatus” (1501). As Gately eventually discovers, A.A. only works if you do the work, even if you don’t believe in what you are doing or understand it. The meetings and meeting halls are the “material existence” of the A.A. ideology and are also important primarily as the setting in which to do the “work.” The founder or “author” of A.A. is as non-existent in its daily action as the legendary founder of the Ennet House program: they created the ideas, but the members make it work through their actions.

This formula opposes the postmodernist authors who each view their creation, imaginary as it is, as the most important part of the reading process at the expense of the reader’s ability to Identify with the novel’s emotional content. As Wallace says in his interview with McCaffery, postmodernist authors just want to be loved for their cold cleverness regardless of whether they connect with their audience sincerely. Like Gately, a reader must work to Identify with the characters in the novel in order to get anything meaningful out of it, not just sit and admire the dexterity of the distant author. In a similar manner, this novel, according to Tom LeClair, behaves much like A.A. in that it has many voices that force the reader to work and to Identify with the characters. Wallace’s novel still contains ironic moments, but these do not distance Wallace’s novel from the audience because those moments contain emotional content, possibly “rescuing” in their power (LeClair 34). Gately epitomizes success in this program. Having seen emotional openness in abject terms, he submits to the ironic, “unironic” program and becomes a more powerful speaker. At the same time, though, he does not see listening as a weakness, but rather as strength. When

compared to Hal, Gately appears to be the more developed individual, blending emotion and strength in a manner wholly new.

Hal desires an emotional connection with other people, but especially with his father who was so psychologically and emotionally absent before his death. Just as his father does, Hal desires an openness and emotional connection in their relationship, even if Hal could not express that desire before James' death. Late in the novel, Hal admits to being jealous of Orin since it is Orin whom their father talked to about the emotional power of sex.<sup>13</sup> Hal says "It was the most open I'd ever heard of Himself being with anybody, and it seemed terribly sad to me, somehow, that he'd wasted it on Orin" (956). Hal's desire for emotional connection illustrates that the phallic and postmodernist, testicular and post-postmodernist projects align with each other through Hal as well as through Gately. Throughout the novel, Hal's desire for an emotional connection to his father (and others) is very much like Wallace's post-postmodernist project. At the temporal end of the novel, Hal finally feels after the emotional paralysis he experienced when he gave up drugs. In summarizing Hal's change over the course of the novel, Nichols points out that "Hal moves from experiencing life through the 'hip, empty mask, anhedonia,' which 'cloaks his hideous internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need' [Wallace 659], to trying to address emotional issues in his own voice" (13). Despite this change, Hal cannot connect with others, addressing "emotional issues in his own voice" because he has trouble communicating. Hal remains stuck between the two as he was stuck on the spectrum between the phallic and testicular masculinities.

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<sup>13</sup> In this moment, we see that the way stories are told among the Incandenza men, the way they allow emotions to be revealed, are misinterpreted and sexualized, turning real communication into the abject feminine. Hal recalls Orin telling the story: "What poor old O. claimed to have found so moving was Himself's assumption that O. was still cherry" (956). In this scene, the one moment that James is emotionally open and connecting with one of his children, sex dominates the moment. Such a moment is wasted on Orin; naturally, solipsistic, hyperbolically sexual Orin turns what is emotionally significant into an emotionally sterile message about sex alone. James' trouble communicating with Orin further emphasizes his difficulty opening up: the one time he does open up, he chooses the wrong recipient and topic, and is left appearing weak, emotional, and feminized.

In some ways Hal remains more stuck than before because he can never connect emotionally with his father after his father's death, and now people cannot understand him when he tries to express those emotions. Also, in many ways, Hal connects more to the postmodernist author than the post-postmodernist author: Hal has memorized the OED, and he knows giant words that few other people do. He knows philosophy as well as more esoteric subjects like Byzantine pornographic mosaics. Yet he cannot connect with anyone, instead making noises that are below that of an animal's (14). Again, Hal's connection to Gately and AA could be his solution, his way of overcoming his lack of communication because after meeting with Gately, Hal suddenly cares. However, at the temporal end of the novel, Hal cannot communicate normally despite his emotional evolution and linguistic talents. He ends the novel not only torn between his masculinities, but also torn between prodigious linguistic talent/esoteric knowledge (the realm of the postmodernist) and real emotional vulnerability (the realm of the post-postmodernist). This realm also lies within the realm of postmodern masculinity according to Calvin Thomas, for modernism's rigid rules equal the rigid rules of hyperbolic and contained masculine sexuality, while the shattering of rules in postmodernism would be equal to the self-shattering of a more fluid, dialectical masculinity (20-21). Hal, despite his desire to do so, cannot overcome that emotional fear as Gately does.

Perhaps Wallace sees no reconciliation between postmodernist language games that dazzle and real connection with the audience. Perhaps in this novel Wallace is ironically indicting himself at the same time that he indicts other postmodernists. Tom LeClair points out that despite the wraith's similarities to Wallace, Hal, with his philosophical bent and large vocabulary and tennis skills, appears to be the character most like Wallace. Perhaps Wallace, like Hal, sees himself as being unable really to create an emotional connection with his audience no matter how much he wants to do so; perhaps Wallace finds it difficult to move past the postmodern tricks he uses so easily himself

in order to create a new post-postmodernist fiction. But Nichols sees this paradox as part of the plan, a way of de-centering postmodernist fiction without duplicating realism (14). I agree with Nichols, because this paradox illustrates that Wallace is not just being contradictory in an attempt to pay lip-service to some meaningless goal for a new post-postmodernist fiction. This paradox forces us to rethink literature instead. After all, Wallace never said that postmodern tricks were all bad, rather that they were bad only when they were used too frequently and for no purpose other than to be clever and to get the audience to like you as an author. Wallace uses these tricks for different reasons.

Yet Wallace himself seems to find this emotional openness difficult to carry through completely. While he does create scenes of great emotional power, Wallace holds back some things from the reader. The lack of resolution at the novel's end serves as the most significant example of this common withholding in postmodernist fiction. Wallace leaves the reader with Gately lying on a beach after being forced to go on a binge by dealers who kill Gately's partner in crime. This ending forces the reader to connect the dots between this binge (along with Gately's act of manslaughter) and Gately's time at Ennet House and his sobriety. In terms of narrative, Wallace holds back more, though, by not showing us the scene that connects the Hal and Gately storylines. He only hints that the two characters meet while digging up James' grave. One could argue that this scene would have been the most significant of the entire novel in terms of its emotional impact.

In his essay "Put the Book Down and Slowly Walk Away": Irony and David Foster Wallace's *Infinite Jest*, Iannis Goerlandt uses this absent scene as the crux of his exploration of whether or not Wallace is guilty of being overly ironic. According to Goerlandt, depending on whether or not the reader realizes that there is a missing scene between Gately and Hal (325), Wallace both fails and succeeds at trying not to be too ironic. Goerlandt argues that Wallace does not withhold the scene at all since the scene does exist within the novel's narrative (324) in Gately's foreshadowing (Wallace

934) and Hal's recollection (Wallace 17). However, because this scene does not appear explicitly, and is easy to miss, Goerlandt believes Wallace is guilty of hypocritically being both postmodernist and pretentious (325). Wallace is guilty of being too much of a postmodernist since readers who do not realize the connection between the two memories are doomed to a lack of closure. I believe Goerlandt's argument is valid. Wallace seems to admit, through this omission, that it might be harder than one thinks to make the transition to an emotionally honest wave of postmodernist fiction, or that such emotional honesty really is impossible to achieve.

Some critics see other reasons behind Wallace's failure to achieve the break from overly ironic postmodernist fiction. Mary K. Holland argues that Wallace fails to break out of postmodernist fiction's overly ironic world because none of his characters really ever break free of their solipsistic narcissism and actually connect with each other (239). Also, according to Holland, Wallace does not truly comment on postmodernism's overuse of irony within the novel since:

Wallace [never seems] to consider the difficulty of positioning himself outside the society that he consciously critiques or the impossibility of successfully critiquing a society whose sinister and powerful underpinnings remain unacknowledged: not just destructive irony but the pathological narcissism that makes us feel, when we try to reach out to others through earnest communication, like fish out of water. (221)

Such an argument, though, seems to confuse Wallace's fiction with his philosophical essays on fiction and pop culture. Couldn't a critic also make the claim that while Hal and Gately struggle against the postmodern world they find themselves in (Holland 220), their failure is Wallace's comment on that world? Though his characters fail (according to Holland) to escape the narcissistic world around them, Wallace's attempts certainly have their emotional moments (e.g., Gately in cook's apron fretting over whether the residents of Ennet House will like his spaghetti, Hal struggling to make his emotions known while lying on the floor of a University of Arizona bathroom). These moments, I believe, show Wallace trying to break with the dominant trends in postmodern fiction.



Despite this failure, in many ways, Wallace has been successful in his lofty project of being newly postmodern and emotionally sincere at the same time. As Michiko Kukatani writes in her *New York Times* review of *Infinite Jest*, the novel “also shows off the 33-year-old Mr. Wallace as [. . .] a writer of virtuosic talents who can seemingly do anything, someone who can write funny, write sad, write serious, write satiric, a writer who's equally adept at the Pynchonesque epic and the Nicolson Bakeresque minute, a pushing-the-envelope postmodernist who's also able to create flesh-and-blood characters and genuinely moving scenes.” If others can see that Wallace really does “write sad” and “genuinely moving scenes” while still pushing the envelope of fiction, then maybe he has reached his goal. Perhaps Wallace needs to realize that if he has committed patricide against his postmodern fathers, he needs to become the new father of post-postmodernism, as he mentions to Larry McCaffrey (150). In such a wonderful metaphor for fiction and masculinity, Wallace can be the nurturer that he portrays Gately as becoming: a man comfortable with his testicular side, unafraid of also being tough and physical in the name of protecting those he cares for: the audience.

CHAPTER 3:  
BECOMING MEN, REMAINING MEN, AND BITCH TITS:  
TROUBLED MASCULINITY IN CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S *FIGHT CLUB*

Like *Infinite Jest*, *Fight Club* examines the formation of different masculinities along the spectrum of testicular and phallic masculinity. Chuck Palahniuk, though, portrays a more severe masculinity crisis than does David Foster Wallace. The nameless protagonist, the narrator of *Fight Club*, suffers from the nesting instinct of a too-testicular masculinity at the novel's beginning. Eventually, he creates the hyper-masculine phallic ass-kicking Fight Clubs<sup>14</sup> to make him more stereotypically masculine. This resolution to the protagonist's masculinity crisis, however, is more troubled and ambivalent than Donald Gately's blended masculinity in Wallace's novel. Still, the nameless protagonist must struggle to balance normative, phallic masculinity and nurturing, testicular masculinity. Similar to Hal in *Infinite Jest*, the narrator faces a masculinity crisis partly because of the lack of a strong father figure.

The narrator's absent father, though, has more significance to his male identity than James Incandenza's emotional absence. The lack of a strong father leads to the narrator's psychotic break with reality and the formation of his split personality, Tyler Durden. Within that father-shaped void, the narrator and Tyler form Fight Club which becomes a place for the members to develop their gender roles. Because of the father-shaped void, however, the gender roles they develop do not just conform to normative masculinity, but become overly extreme forms of masculinity. Those extreme forms lead to the totalitarian politics that transform Fight Club into Project Mayhem, an anarchic project to destroy modern society. Obviously these men are in crisis. Eventually, though, the

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<sup>14</sup> Although Palahniuk does not capitalize Fight Club, I capitalize it here since, like Remaining Men Together, it is the proper name for self-help movement; instead of being for survivors of testicular cancer, Fight Club is for men suffering from a masculinity crisis (symptoms include: a dependence on IKEA catalogue pornography, or inability to get or sustain an erection when propositioned by a terminally ill woman).

homosocial bonds the narrator forms in *Fight Clubs* and through his relationship with Tyler allow the narrator to develop a healthier sense of self. In that development, the narrator of *Fight Club*, like Donald Gately, eventually discovers his nurturing masculinity by protecting someone weaker than himself at the novel's end. But the ambivalent ending of the novel reveals the narrator's inability to completely develop a blended masculinity, showing that solving the crisis of masculinity is not done easily.

Most of *Fight Club* does not describe the development of the narrator's testicular masculinity but rather describes the development of his phallic, normative masculinity. That normative masculinity develops through violence, a trend that characterizes most fictional portrayals of masculinity according to Sally Robinson. According to Robinson, the masculine "crisis" at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century merely represents a backlash against the liberation movements that empowered women and minorities in the 1960s and 70s. Under the threat of losing their hegemonic power in American society, straight white males manufactured a liberation movement of their own in order to preserve their power. In her book *Marked Men*, Sally Robinson argues that many straight, white, male authors depict straight, white male characters of all social classes as wounded and emotionally blocked as a result of their victimization at the hands of other liberationist movements (ix). The nameless protagonist suffers from similar emotional blockage and physical pain as Robinson describes. Wounded characters like the narrator are really not as wounded or powerless as they imagine, however; they just seek to use liberationist rhetoric to preserve their own hegemonic influence on American society. *Fight Club* recreates Robinson's argument almost exactly.

Therapeutic *Fight Clubs* start as places for men to work on their gender issues but eventually the clubs develop into the training grounds for an anarchic army which plans to conduct Project Mayhem's pursuit of political power, like Robinson's argument predicts they would. While Project Mayhem appears to be focused on destroying a corrupt, capitalistic society and liberating the victims

of the system, the members focus not on changing the ideology (despite what Tyler says) but focus merely on changing who is in charge: they seek to gain the power that eluded them from the beginning (Jordan 375). Though it fails to actually put them in charge, Project Mayhem's survival at the end of the novel (unlike in the film version) signals that the crisis of masculinity has not ended. Even if the narrator has discovered a more nurturing side to himself, he has not yet completely freed himself from the masculinity crisis he experiences at the temporal beginning of the novel.

While the novel begins at the chronological end, the opening emphasizes the masculinity and identity crises faced by the narrator, crises similar to those Robinson describes. Because of his insomnia, the narrator begins going to support groups for victims and survivors of terminal illnesses. In doing so, he discovers that his problem sleeping lies in the fact that he cannot express himself emotionally. When he does finally cry, he finally falls asleep. As Robinson points out, many male characters' wounding manifests itself physically through emotional blockage (129). When this blockage finally breaks down, the man often expresses emotions uncontrollable and dangerous to himself and those around him. Robinson's observation applies to *Fight Club's* narrator and his blockage since his future support group experiences lead to the establishment of Fight Clubs, where the violence is directed onto the narrator's body before eventually being directed outward.

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator's struggle with insomnia occurs at the same time he struggles to be a man. From the looks of it, the narrator has a perfect life: he has a good white-collar job, a nice car, and a nice condo. But lurking underneath it all is a sense of abject emptiness. Describing his condo in a high-rise, he says "you couldn't open the windows so even with maple flooring and dimmer switches, all seventeen hundred airtight feet would smell like the last meal you cooked or your last trip to the bathroom" (41). Despite all he owns, he cannot escape the subtle smell of shit that pervades his airtight condo, an unavoidable result of and symbol for his abject life. The narrator is not alone in a society where masculinity has disappeared, replaced by a consumer

society that the narrator (and by extension, the members of fight clubs) believes feminizes men, turning them away from their normal (read: hyperbolically male) behavior (read: fighting), especially in terms of their sexuality. Much as women occasionally serve as the receptacle for abject fluids, according to Thomas, the narrator and his friends have become passive receptacles for feminized goods. He says that “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” (43). The men have given up on masculine sexuality. The men that once gazed at naked women in porno mags have become feminized by looking at their new porno mags: catalogues that give them the “nesting instinct” common among female birds and pregnant women. And they read this pornography while they are in the bathroom, the one room completely devoted to abjectness. Since the narrator is already dead as a man, no wonder he works as a recall coordinator, dealing constantly with death. Despite this “perfect” life, he cannot sleep, and his insomnia prompts him to go to support groups, where overly emotional people display their weakness.

Palahniuk further paints the narrator as a feminized, blocked-up man while he attends these groups. In one of the first groups he goes to, the sexually aggressive Chloe disturbs the sex-ambivalent narrator’s sense of masculinity. Chloe, a woman about to die from brain parasites, wants “to get laid for the last time. Not intimacy, sex” (19). Facing this open invitation (“Climb on top. Pony up...”, Chloe offers [20]) for phallic sex without emotional intimacy, the narrator does not even get an erection, signaling his lack of stereotypical, masculine sexuality. The narrator acknowledges his impotence when he turns down Chloe, asking the reader, “What does a guy say? What can you say, I mean” (19). In that slip of the narrative tongue, the narrator acknowledges any other guy would have accepted Chloe’s offer. Instead, the narrator indicts himself by restating that same question using the second person point of view, which distances himself from it; his rephrasing also seems to imply that his impotence makes him not quite a guy. Furthermore,

Palahniuk portrays the narrator as feminized, even in his own mind during guided meditation. When asked to envision his power animal, the narrator says “Mine was a penguin” (20) further illustrating his emasculated nature. The penguin is hardly a powerful animal, nor is it a stereotypically masculine one: male penguins take an equal role in performing the traditionally female role of raising the young. A fitting avatar for someone who realizes how strong the nesting instinct is in him! The penguin also foreshadows the narrator’s eventual development of a nurturing instinct, though much hyper-masculine activity must occur before he is able to develop that side of himself. The first support group that helps the narrator reveals how the narrator’s emotional blockage comes from his masculinity crisis.

Though he goes to many other support groups beforehand, the first group that actually helps the narrator is Remaining Men Together, a group for survivors of testicular cancer. There he realizes that he can only cry—which allows him finally to sleep—when confronted with another person’s emotional openness and honesty. Only the vulnerability and honesty of others can get him to cry, to “go a big rubbery one” (23). In using the term a “big, rubbery one”, the narrator says that to be emotionally open, holding nothing back, is to be soft, vulnerable, and impotent, rather than hard and phallic. The narrator, though, cannot be honest and emotionally vulnerable at the same time: at all the support groups he goes to, the narrator never gives his real name (19). Instead, he must always hold some part of himself back, never risking any emotional connection with another person by opening up. To do so would make him vulnerable to the other person who could see the weakness behind the narrator’s façade; it would also make him vulnerable to actually identifying with the other person’s pain. Like Orin Incandenza in *Infinite Jest*, the narrator keeps himself emotionally distant while appearing emotionally open. “If I didn’t say anything, people in a group assumed the worst. They cried harder” (22). Ironically, by being more emotionally closed and by saying nothing, the narrator actually appears more open, one of Orin’s successful seduction

techniques. This façade, when coupled with the lack of a real name, shows that the narrator has become an emotional vampire, a “big tourist” (24) (his name for someone who does the same emotional faking he does), in order to satisfy his need for emotional release.

Remaining Men Together becomes the group the narrator identifies with the most since it is the only one that allows him to relieve his emotional constipation by crying, allowing him to finally sleep. Such a group perfectly fits the narrator and his masculinity crisis: the group members have lost their testicles to cancer and must work together to figure out how to remain men after a loss that threatens their gender identity. Ironically, though, they have lost the part of their body that makes them nurturers while the phallus, the symbol of power, remained intact. The narrator constantly uses feminized images and images of abjection to describe the group. He introduces the group through his bonding with Bob: “Bob’s big arms were closed around to hold me inside, and I was squeezed in the dark between Bob’s new sweating tits that hang enormous, the way we think of God’s as big” (16). Bob is utterly feminized as a result of his cancer: after losing his testicles, he has grown “bitch tits” (17) as a result of hormone support therapy.

On a deeper level, the narrator also feminizes Bob’s overly emotional manner in his first description of him. When he first meets the narrator, Bob has already begun crying, his “big moosie chin on his chest, his eyes already shrink-wrapped in tears. Shuffling his feet, knees-together invisible steps, Bob slid across the basement floor to heave himself on me” (21). The narrator describes Bob in terms of abject fluids (tears, sweat), making them an intrinsic part of Bob’s identity. Both Thomas and Robinson make the connection between emotions and sexuality where an unrestrained, emotional outburst equals the unrestrained release of semen during intercourse. To lose those fluids without a proper (female) receptacle makes oneself abject. The narrator further describes Bob as feminized by the way Bob walks with his knees together, the physical indication that he has lost his balls, essentially making him no longer male. It is easy to see that Bob can serve

as the mascot for this all-male support group with its constant crying and other feminine actions compared to the future actions of Fight Club. If we look a little more deeply, we see that Bob becomes feminized as a result of losing his testicles is an ironic result of his attempts to be overly masculine.

Bob gets testicular cancer because he used steroids as a professional bodybuilder, an activity which the narrator equates with feminized men. Bob describes professional bodybuilding as “a stupid way to live, . . . but when you’re pumped and shaved on stage, totally shredded with body fat down to around two percent and the diuretics leave you cold and hard as concrete to touch” (21-2) you feel otherwise, according to Bob. Again, a description of Bob connects him to the abject fluids of urine filled diuretics, but more importantly, he does not really look like a “real” man as defined by Fight Club because of the bodybuilding and the steroids. Later, while describing Fight Club, the narrator says that Fight Club was the real reason for “going to the gym. . . . The gyms you go to are crowded with guys trying to look like men, as if being a man means looking the way a sculptor or an art director says” (50). To the narrator, the contrast between hyperbolic, “real” men of Fight Clubs and poseur gym rats throws pragmatic masculinity versus artificial masculinity into sharp relief. Bob’s bodybuilding creates an artificial, meaningless portrayal of the masculine body, one that becomes the pretty, abject object of people’s gaze. Unlike the bodies of “real” men—like those in fight clubs—who must use their bodies for the hyper-masculine activity of fighting, bodybuilders’ bodies serve no pragmatic purpose. The narrator, though, does not see the irony in his statement since his stereotyped notions of masculinity appear just as ridiculous and arbitrary as the bodybuilders’ concept of manhood. The significance of bodybuilding must be examined further since it serves as the aesthetic counterpoint to pragmatic fight clubs, though both remain paradoxical examples of the masculine.



Critic and bodybuilder Marcia Ian writes extensively on the gender bending nature of professional bodybuilding, despite male bodybuilding appearing completely “dedicated to wiping out ‘femininity’” (“Abject”, paragraph 1). Ian primarily focuses on the gender bending nature of female bodybuilding, but that does not stop her from pointing out the dynamics of male bodybuilding as well. In fact, Ian argues that bodybuilding paradoxically makes men less manly and ends up destroying the sense of self that men strive to achieve through such masculine behavior as getting big muscles. Ian writes that male bodybuilders feminize themselves to some extent: “Consider the curvaceous pectoral mounds of the well-developed male chest; the round ‘muscle bellies’ of powerful male biceps; the firm meaty thighs and spherical buttocks of the man who can squat heavy. And how about the hairless, well-lubricated flesh some of the men sport year-round, but with which all male competitors must emerge on contest day?” (“Abject” paragraph 13). In looking “ferociously” masculine, the male bodybuilder actually ends up looking much more like a female bodybuilder with hairless legs and armpits, as well as rounded (though muscular) breasts. Fittingly, the steroids that create Bob’s hard pecs also create his eventual “bitch tits.” Such a connection between *Fight Club* and Ian’s work illuminates the paradox that seeking merely to look manly comes without the ability to be a man.

Ian continues her analysis of gender roles in both men and women’s bodybuilding in her essay “The Primitive Subject of Female Bodybuilding.” In this wonderful essay, Ian analyzes how bodybuilding competitions further deconstruct the bodybuilders’ senses of self through both a disturbed “mirror stage” and the sports dependence on both the audience’s and judges’ gazes. Ian argues that a bodybuilder’s mirror stage in competition does not proceed like an infant’s. An infant feels like they are made up of bits and pieces before they are held up to a mirror and see their ego ideal in that reflection, which provides them with a sense of a complete body. But the process goes in reverse for bodybuilders, who experience the tearing apart of their senses of self (Ian “Primitive”

79). For Ian, a bodybuilding competition literalizes the mirror stage, “as the ‘ideal I’ of the physique perceived for months in gym mirrors gives way to the ‘ego ideal,’ represented now by the judges, as onstage nearly naked, the bodybuilder is mirrored by a crowd of hooting fans before whom she performs her ‘image’[. . .] observed and evaluated by the judges who bring their gaze to bear upon her”(“Primitive” 79). The judges essentially take the “ideal I” of the bodybuilder and break it up into the separate pieces of that body in order to judge him or her, destroying the sense of self that the mirror stage establishes for the competitor. The judges and audience then make the bodybuilder whole again by putting that body back together with their gaze and helping the contestant “survive” as an individual (“Primitive” 84). For Ian, this moment cannot help but make the bodybuilder abject as the object of the judges’ gaze. Ian astutely makes the connection to Mulvey’s scopophilia when she points out that this occurs not just for female bodybuilders, but males as well; in fact, “Bodybuilding is the one relatively mainstream venue dominated by men in which the central activity is exposing to view the passive and objectified male physique” (“Primitive” 84). So, bodybuilding is a paradoxical sport, normally considered masculine but that is also feminized: bodybuilding has all eyes focused on a man trying to live up to the arbitrary ideals of a manly physique.

Palahniuk takes Ian’s ideas a step further in his novel, since the bodybuilders end up appearing literally feminized, castrated because of their attempts to look like men instead of acting like men—like the members of Fight Club look. Bob (who has sculpted hair which indicates an artificial masculine self-image) gets his castrating cancer from using steroids as a bodybuilder. Bob tells the narrator that “A lot of bodybuilders shooting too much testosterone would get what they called bitch tits” before telling the narrator that “In Mexico, where you buy your steroids, they call [testicles] ‘eggs’” (21). Bob, like Orin Incandenza in *Infinite Jest*, participates in a sport that appears masculine, but is subtly abject: to the ‘roid users, testicles become feminized “eggs”, just as Wallace

describes Orin's football not as manly sperm but as an egg. So the final result of such a paradoxical sport leaves Bob utterly feminized in not just his emotions but in his appearance as well, his enormous bitch tits hanging down almost to his castrated crotch. But the embrace of that overly emotional man is just the safe haven for relieving his emotional constipation the narrator needs.

Unfortunately, soon after the narrator becomes comfortable releasing his emotions in the comforting embrace of support groups, the appearance of Marla Singer, another "tourist" (38), interrupts his ability to release those emotions. As a result, he becomes emotionally blocked up again, and the insomnia returns. Without emotional release, the support groups are pointless, eventually causing the narrator to stop going. In this therapeutic vacuum, the narrator forms Fight Club after he meets Tyler Durden. In violent, bare-knuckle fighting with other men, the narrator finds a new form of release that helps him more than the therapy groups ever did. By fighting in the clubs, members like the narrator get in touch with their masculinity through homosocial, hyper-masculine contests. Such violent outbursts directed at themselves and each other (by joining the club and fighting each other) signals the violent outbursts that Sally Robinson predicts from emotional constipation. And the narrator sees Fight Club and its violence as the place to form a sense of idealized masculinity like that portrayed by Tyler Durden.

In the midst of the narrator's crisis, Tyler appears as the ideal manifestation of the narrator's masculine self. Tyler serves as the idealized projection of everything the narrator wishes to be as a man (Mendiata 397). We find out that he is a good fighter, a sexual stud with Marla (in direct contrast to the narrator's impotence with Chloe), and a natural, popular leader of Fight Club. He also supplies the real voice of Fight Club, the one that announces all the rules and has the narrator do the feminized, secretarial work of typing them up. Tyler articulates the narrator's desire when he discusses the truth that they are the same person: "I wouldn't be here in the first place if you didn't want me" (168). The narrator goes on to say, "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, and I am not” (174).

While Pleck does not state that gender confusion results in split personalities, Tyler represents the perfect result of Pleck’s belief that hyper-masculinity results in confusion: the narrator is so confused about his gender that he creates Tyler, projecting ideal manliness onto himself by using a split personality! It is also symbolically significant that Tyler works as a projectionist at movie theaters in his spare time. Tyler gives the narrator the license to become the normatively masculine, hyperbolically sexual man.

Soon after Tyler appears, the narrator, acting as Tyler, unknowingly blows up his own apartment, a symbolic destruction of his nest and all it entails. He then meets Tyler at a bar where they give birth to Fight Club by fighting each other. He begins to fight his body and its inherent weakness when he fights Tyler. Later he revels in the wounds that afflict him, proud of them and their effect on the people shocked by them. Unlike the truly ill members of previous support groups, the narrator’s illness is not a physical one (the body’s betrayal), but a mental one which shows how confused he is about himself as a man. His split personality allows the narrator to behave like a man, albeit a violent one, as Robinson predicts would happen. Such behavior also signals the narrator’s disturbed sense of masculinity, which Pleck believes happens to any man raised without an adequate male role model.

Ultimately, we discover the creation of Fight Clubs and Project Mayhem both result from an absent father and the resulting, overly powerful maternal force in his life—nesting instinct included. This absent father causes serious consequences for the narrator’s sense of self in terms of ego formation. As both Eve Sedgwick and Mike Hill point out, the presence of a strong father is essential in the Oedipal stage in order for a boy to define his sense of self and his sense of masculine heterosexuality in relation to his mother. Sedgwick’s idea of homosocial relationships explains how

the homoerotic aspect of Fight Clubs allows the men to compensate for their confused gender roles; the love triangle with Tyler over Marla also helps him form his masculine identity by allowing the narrator to develop a deeper relationship with Marla. Hill, though, cites Theodor Adorno who sees the lack of a strong father figure during the Oedipal stage as the seed from which eventual totalitarian politics and rage spring. The first descriptions of Fight Club shows how closely linked the rage and absent fathers are in the narrator's thinking.

Palahniuk intersperses the narrator's description of his "father-shaped void" with the initial descriptions and rules of Fight Club. After stating that the first and second rules of Fight Club are not to talk about Fight Club, the narrator introduces this memory of his father: "Me, I knew my dad for about six years, but I don't remember anything" (50). The narrator goes on to reveal the root cause of why many men identify so deeply with the Fight Clubs' homosocial project to develop real men. The narrator states immediately after his memory of his father's absence, "What you see at [Fight Club] is a generation of men raised by women" (50). Without any male role models, an entire male generation has confused gender roles in the face of society's conflicting messages about what defines a stereotypical man. Being so close to women also causes the greatest gender conflicts for men, according to Pleck (129). Without enough men in their lives and with too many women, the members of Fight Club are extremely confused about what it means to be a man, like the narrator and his nesting instinct. With the lack of a role model, it is no wonder that the narrator forms Fight Club, a hyper-masculine, homosocial group. As the name indicates, it is a club that gives the members a sense of belonging through violent sport. Violent sports, according to Clare, allow boys to learn how to release aggression and other feelings in ways they cannot do anywhere else (65). Regardless of the rules, club members talk to other men, resulting in increasing attendance at the fights because so many men feel the same way as the narrator. This support group saves them from the IKEA pornography, the fake sports and fake sex that distracts them from the real world (50).

The narrator revels in this physicality as he fights his body's weakness, the sign of his prior, feminized life. He shows off the wounds that show he has now been "saved": a hole in the cheek, stitches in his mouth, bruises, black eyes that mirror what he has also given to his fight partner. But the violence of Fight Club does not just fill the "father-shaped void", but also helps the men develop their sexuality as well.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's concept of homosocial activity further explains how this generation of gender-confused men use Fight Clubs to help establish their heterosexuality as well as fill the holes left by their missing fathers. Rooted in the Oedipal conflict, Sedgwick's theories state that homosocial activities fall on a continuum: homosexuality lies on one end and close same-sex friendships lie on the other. These same-sex relationships do not promote homosexuality, but rather help establish a man's heterosexuality: Sedgwick writes, "homo- and heterosexual outcomes in adults [are] the result of a complicated play of desire for and identification with the parent of each gender: the child routes its desire/identification through the mother to arrive at a role like the father's, or vice versa" (Sedgwick 22). Sedgwick also quotes Richard Kleinmann who further describes this Oedipal stage in the formation of sexuality:

In the normal development the little boy's progress towards heterosexuality, he must pass, as Freud says [. . .], through the stage of the "positive" Oedipus, a homoerotic identification with his father, a position of effeminized subordination to the father, as a condition of finding a model for his own heterosexual role. [. . .] There results from this scheme a surprising neutralization of polarities: heterosexuality in the male...presupposes a homosexual phase as the condition of its normal possibility. (quoted in Sedgwick 23)

For most men (especially those that do not have strong male role models to help create a normative heterosexuality), homosocial relationships with other men reinforce this missing "homosexual phase." Homosocial behavior, then, allows men to strengthen their heterosexuality by participating in activities that might seem homoerotic, like rolling around half-naked, locked with another man in a sweaty embrace during a fight. By participating without becoming homosexual, the men of Fight Club strengthen the gender roles that had remained incomplete for so long. But, as Pleck and Clare

would point out, without the original father figure, this homosocial behavior merely serves as a substitute and still leads to confused gender roles and hyper-masculinity, all symptoms the members of Fight Club display in their powerless lives.

Through the birth of Fight Club, the narrator describes how the fighters are all the powerless members of society. They are office boys and waiters, the lowest of the service industry and are often not even very good at their jobs. Fight Club becomes their support group, helping them remain men together through their battle with the symbolic cancer affecting their gender roles rather than the physical, testicular cancer. In fact, when the narrator returns to Remaining Men Together, he finds that it has disbanded and the members of that support group have joined fight clubs. The narrator outlines the true purpose of Fight Club as follows: “Fight club isn’t about winning or losing fights. . . . You see a guy come to Fight Club for the first time, and his ass is a loaf of white bread. You see this same guy here six months later, and he looks carved out of wood. This guy trusts himself to handle anything. . . . There’s hysterical shouting in tongues like at church, and when you wake up Sunday afternoon you feel saved” (51). Clearly Fight Club helps transform these men from weak, effeminate nesters struggling to hold onto their manhood into “real”, hyperbolic men who can fight another man and “handle anything” (52). But even such wonderful therapy is not perfect.

Within the praises the narrator heaps upon Fight Club lies hints that this hyperbolic masculinity is just as false as the overly feminized masculinity of body building. The narrator describes Fight Club members as being “carved out of wood” which has a double-meaning in light of what he said earlier about men who go to gyms only to end up looking like sculptures. Certainly it could mean that the men are now hard and beautifully pragmatic—in the sense that they can use these muscles for a purpose, not just to be stared at. It could, however, also indicate a false sense of masculinity since the narrator previously described the men who went to the gym in a similarly aesthetic, but useless, manner while deriding body builders like Bob. But is being carved out of

wood somehow different? While the narrator's description certainly indicates these muscles are more useful in Fight Clubs than the sculpted look of bodybuilding might be, that description still seem to have a whiff of falsehood to it. The narrator seems to be splitting hairs since he clearly admires the masculine aesthetic of wooden muscles for Fight Club members. Such signs indicate that the narrator is confused about even his idealized gender roles, just creating a description which better fits a violent masculine stereotype rather than an aesthetic one. Perhaps he admires being wooden rather than carved because wooden muscles also symbolize the emotionally closed demeanor of stereotypical masculinity. We also clearly see that creating a new, more hyperbolic masculinity is not the only goal of Fight Club either, no matter if the narrator doth protest too much.

Early in his description of Fight Clubs, the narrator says that "Maybe we didn't need a father to complete ourselves. There's nothing personal about who you fight in [Fight Club]. You fight to fight" (54). As Clare says, fighting amongst men and boys symbolizes a fight against being controlled and becoming feminized (204-5). So clearly, the fight is not the result of a personal disagreement with your opponent, but rather functions as therapy: with the help of their fight partners, the members of Fight Club use homosocial behavior to become "new" men by destroying the weak selves produced by their fathers' void. But developing a new gender role that fits society's stereotypes better does not fill that void completely; instead Tyler and the narrator create a political movement within Fight Club, a movement which mirrors the movements that usually occur among powerless and fatherless men, according to Mike Hill.

Using Adorno and Butler's psychoanalytic arguments, Hill discusses the politics of some underprivileged white men with weak senses of self in American society. Hill uses Adorno's essay (written with Max Horkheimer) "Authoritarianism and the Family Today" as a lens through which to examine the psychodynamics of the right-wing politics popular among heterosexual men in what



Hill calls the “post-white” world after the Civil Rights Movement. Hill argues that powerless white men (the same kind Sally Robinson writes about) fill their “father-shaped void” by sexualizing race in an idealized—but non-existent—colorblind society. While Hill focuses on race in America, his arguments apply to masculinity as well, especially when he focuses on Adorno’s discussion of the Oedipal conflict. Hill explains this conflict in Adorno’s essay:

Drawing from Freud’s castration complex, Adorno maintains, in classical Freudian terms, that a healthy negotiation with the power of the father means that ‘a considerable amount of aggressiveness must be developed in the child against the authority which prevents him from having his first, but nonetheless his most important satisfactions. . . . By means of identification he takes the unattackable authority into himself. The authority now turns into his super-ego’. (113)

But problems occur in forming one’s self-identity when the father is weak or nonexistent, which challenges the child’s ability to identify with the father or to become conditioned to be a proper member of society. In those cases, the confused boy instead looks “for a stronger, more powerful father . . . as it is furnished by fascist imagery” (Adorno quoted in Hill 114). For Hill, Adorno’s argument adequately explains totalitarian politics’ strong pull among powerless men. Hill sees Judith Butler, though, as taking this idea further, explaining the sexualized aspect of those totalitarian politics. For Butler, gender roles form for men through the repudiation of two things: 1) the feminine, which men can desire but never be, and 2) homosexuality, which men cannot desire in heterosexist societies (Hill 116). This leads to problems because it causes either melancholy for or rage against the homosexuality a boy cannot express (Butler quoted in Hill 116).

Those two ideas about rage which Hill applies to race apply just as well to the politics behind fight clubs’ hyperbolically masculine Project Mayhem. Butler’s ideas explain not just the rage the members of Fight Club and Project Mayhem express throughout the novel, but also the narrator’s homoerotic melancholy when Tyler disappears momentarily. The narrator says “I am Joe’s Broken Heart because Tyler dumped me” (134), thereby expressing time spent apart in a homosocial friendship in terms reminiscent of a homosexual relationship’s end. Butler’s ideas also explain the

narrator's initial hatred of the heterosexual Marla Singer. Together, Butler ideas about homosocial behavior and Adorno's ideas on totalitarian politics explain how fight club's cries of hyper-masculine rage births the fascist political movement of Project Mayhem. This movement paradoxically seeks to change history by "enslaving them" (Palahniuk 149) in order to set them free within a hyper-masculine, totalitarian system of hunting and gathering. Eventually, Fight Club is not enough for its members, which is not surprising in light of Hill's argument about the natural connection between violence and politics.

Although the members gain their stereotypical, hyperbolic masculinity, Project Mayhem begins because they still lack recognition from the powers that be. As Tuss points out, the hyper-masculine experience of Fight Club is not enough because it still does not give the men what they want: the attention of the powerless men in society (100), the father figures missing from their lives. In one significant scene, both Tyler and the narrator extort money from their respective employers in order to fund Project Mayhem. But Tyler's rant seems to be directed not just at the authority figure in the room with him, but at absent fathers everywhere: "I am trash and shit and crazy to you and this whole fucking world," Tyler said to the union president. "You don't care where I live or how I feel, or what I eat or how I feed my kids or how I pay the doctor if I get sick, and yes I am stupid and bored and weak, but I am still your responsibility" (115). When the narrator confronts his own boss, he tells us "Basically, I said the same stuff Tyler said" (115). Now that the members of Fight Club have used the violent, homosocial club to break with their feminized former lives, they create hyper-masculine gender roles for themselves after having grown up without traditional role models. Now they seek to fight back against their absent fathers and gain political power.

After having recaptured their masculine power through hyperbolic displays of manhood, the members of Fight Club begin the next step of proving their masculinity. Project Mayhem allows them to try gaining the power that would really serve as proof of their masculinity. In doing so, they

seek to gain the attention of their absent fathers by taking their fathers' power. In Jordan's words, the members of Project Mayhem become the "castrating fathers" (376) themselves, complete with the power to fight any danger by threatening to cut off the testicles of anyone who challenges them. Eventually, Project Mayhem has members in enough places to control two traditionally masculine areas of power: both the law (project members in the courts and police departments) and the ability to provide food (by waiters and chefs who contaminate the food). In the end, they have become the very fathers they hate, since, like the narrator's father, they travel around the country setting up "franchises" of Fight Club. But while defining itself as a political movement geared toward freeing people from the slavery of capitalism and giving them control, it really does nothing to help its members' immediate lives; Project Mayhem's rhetoric of advancement is really empty, and merely attempts to recruit members. Fight Club is no longer a support group for weakly masculine men, but a political movement concerned with power alone, not with changing the world. It has become the same fascist political movement Adorno predicts will happen among Oedipally arrested men.

As Matt Jordan argues in his essay "Marxism, Not Manhood," Project Mayhem signals the totalitarian, power-hungry aspect of hyper-masculinity that seeks to "take control of the world" while not really changing anything in it (375). By making the project appear to be about destroying a corrupt society, Tyler hides the fact that the destruction will just put the members of the Project in power without really changing the quality of life for anyone but the previously powerless members of Mayhem. Jordan quotes Tyler's vision of the world post-Project Mayhem:

You'll hunt elk through the damp canyon forests around the ruins of Rockefeller Center, and dig clams next to the skeleton of the Space Needle leaning at a forty-five degree angle. ...and every evening what's left of mankind will retreat to empty zoos and lock itself in cages as protection against bears and big cats and wolves that pace and watch us from outside the cage bars at night. (124)

As Jordan points out, in Tyler's plan people will still have to battle for survival, climbing back into cages that seem very similar to the condo in the high-rise the narrator destroyed (375). The only

difference is the type of survival, one based on mythic conceptions of masculinity (372), similar to the hyper-masculinity of societal stereotypes. And this revolution occurs not because the current society is too feminine (Jordan points out that there is still an abundance of phallic buildings and symbols), but because society has kept the members of Fight Club powerless. The “victims” of Fight Club are victims only in the sense that they do not have as much power as they wish to have.

We can further see that their political goals serve as a façade behind which they attempt not to change the world, but only the leaders. According to Louis Althusser, the ideology of an economic system lies in the “state ideological apparatuses” which indoctrinate the members of society. In order for a true Marxist state to exist, Althusser points out, “the proletariat must seize the State in order to destroy the existing bourgeois State apparatus and, in a first phase, replace it with a quite different, proletarian, State apparatus” before eventually destroying the State altogether (1488). Therefore, to filter Jordan’s point through Althusser, Project Mayhem concerns itself not with changing the state ideological apparatuses, but with putting themselves in control of the very same ideological system. After the coup, everyone will suffer from the same poverty and battle for survival the members of Fight Club suffered from earlier. Now their missing fathers will have no choice but to listen to the sons they abandoned long ago.

Despite the movement’s potential power, the narrator never completely joins Project Mayhem. When he finds out that he himself is Tyler Durden, however, and that Tyler is using Project Mayhem as a domestic terrorist group, the narrator tries to shut down Fight Club and Project Mayhem. Ultimately, though, he uses his power to try saving Marla from Project Mayhem. Marla becomes the real key to the narrator’s move beyond normative masculinity, especially as he moves from the hyper-masculinity of Fight Club to the more vulnerable, testicular masculinity he shows in his attempts to protect Marla.

What had been an antagonistic relationship with Marla (when she first crashes the support groups) changes when the narrator checks her breasts for cancerous lumps later in the novel. This scene signals the narrator's development of a more vulnerable, less-emotionally closed masculinity. While performing this physically and emotionally intimate task, the two share stories full of fear and death. The narrator tells an intimate story of his own near-death experience with cancer. While the narrator was having a wart removed from the tip of his penis, the doctors thought he may have a rare form of skin cancer. When they discover that it was just a birthmark, the doctors are disappointed (103-4). The narrator begins his story by making it about a threat to his phallus, his manhood, before he actually opens himself emotionally by describing a moment of fear and vulnerability. Such a story indicates that participating in Fight Club does not make the narrator as nearly hyper-masculine as Tyler: the narrator opens himself emotionally with a woman, something Tyler cannot do, which is why he disappears from Marla's presence unless he is fucking her. But the narrator does not open up entirely, nor is he as comfortable with his vulnerability as *Infinite Jest's* Donald Gately: the narrator does not complete the story by revealing to Marla that he still fears people will see his foot and he will be dead to them (106). Even though he withholds complete honesty, the narrator shows he cares about Marla when he tries to make her laugh by sharing a story of sexual deviancy from Dear Abby where a husband can only have sex with his wife if she pretends to be dead. The story he chooses foreshadows his eventual revelation that he has a relationship with her since their relationship is also sexually deviant: instead of having Marla play dead, the narrator can only have sex with her as Tyler, his split personality.

Soon after this moment, Marla tells the narrator that he and Tyler are the same person. After this epiphany about his split personality, the narrator finally begins to express his feelings of love for Marla and brace his nurturing side (of sorts) by trying to end Project Mayhem before more people get hurt. And while the narrator tries to stop Project Mayhem, the project members, under

Tyler's orders, threaten him with castration. To use Flannigan-Saint-Aubin's metaphors of the penis again, the members of Project Mayhem are not just trying to threaten the narrator with the ultimate insult to another male (the ultimate sign of power over another), but they are also trying to cut away the narrator's testicles, the seat of his vulnerable, caring masculinity. They don't, though, which signals how the narrator is (pardon the pun) attached to his testicular masculinity. Still, stopping Project Mayhem becomes ultimately about protecting Marla.

After this threat of castration, the narrator wakes up in the ruins of his condo, and he realizes how important Marla is to him: when facing suicide, he steps back from the high ledge of his condo because "There's Marla, and she's in the middle of everything and doesn't know it. And she loves you. She loves Tyler. She doesn't know the difference. Someone has to tell her" (193). And when he tells her and tries to protect her, she asks why she should believe him. The narrator opens up, becoming vulnerable when he tells Marla that he wants to protect her:

...because I think I like you.  
 Marla says, 'Not love?'  
 This is a cheesy enough moment, I say. Don't push it. (197)

While he clearly does have feelings for Marla, he still is not used to being a vulnerable man (even after all he has done to save her) that can open up to her emotionally and admit his feelings publicly; while not emotionally constipated like he was at the beginning of the novel, he has not attained emotional flow either. His response shows how emotionally stunted he remains, how he is a "thirty-year-old boy" (51) still, since this response fits a junior high student rather than an adult. Such reticence symbolizes his reluctance to let go of his hyper-masculine gender role.

His reluctance becomes self-destructive, showing how extremely reticent he is. Right after admitting his feelings to Marla, he realizes that if Tyler loves Marla, "I love Marla" (199). This realization traumatizes him so much he tries to fight every person at Fight Club that night. He says that part of his attempt at suicide by Fight Club serves as retribution for all he has done in Project

Mayhem, including murdering someone trying to stop Fight Club (199). Before he blacks out from the numerous fights that have beaten him bloody, he admits that his suicide-through-fight-club attempt came from his belief that “Only in death are we no longer part of Project Mayhem” (201). I don’t entirely believe this statement, however. His suicide attempt occurs immediately after he admits his feelings to Marla. Even after admitting those feelings to himself, he cannot accept them and seeks to immerse himself in the hyper-masculinity of Fight Club completely and utterly. After creating Fight Club as therapy for men raised by women, after believing that another woman is the last thing he needs, the narrator realizes that a woman truly *is* what he needs. But he still cannot let go of the hyper-masculine element of himself; as Tyler said, if the narrator really didn’t want him, Tyler wouldn’t exist. Similarly, Palahniuk cannot let go of the emotionally closed, Tyler side of the narrator.

In terms of narrative strategy, Palahniuk never opens up to the reader, just like Tyler cannot open up to Marla. Palahniuk withholds full, direct emotional connection or emotional honesty throughout the novel. The nameless protagonist opens up to Marla much more than he ever does the reader. The narrator even reveals his real name to Marla: “I take out my wallet and show Marla my driver’s license with my real name. Not Tyler Durden” (172). While he honors her with his real name, Palahniuk withholds it from us, maintaining some distance between the narrator and the reader. The nameless protagonist remains nameless. Even in the narrator’s asides to the reader, he remains distant from complete emotional honesty and openness. For example, when expressing his grief at the feelings of abandonment when Tyler disappears for a while, the narrator says, “I am Joe’s Broken Heart because Tyler dumped me” (134). In using the clever device of body parts speaking in the first person (from a series the narrator finds in Tyler’s house), Palahniuk keeps the narrator distant from the reader. Such devices put Palahniuk in line with other authors of postmodernist fiction whom critics praise for their cleverness. But, as with the other postmodernist authors, this

cleverness comes at the expense of emotional connection with the reader. Similar to Wallace's withholding full emotional openness in *Infinite Jest* with Gately and Hal's meeting, Palahniuk does not give the reader the full emotional openness of the narrator and Marla truly being honest with each other. Despite all this, we do see Marla and the narrator have an intimate moment which reveals that the protagonist has matured a little emotionally because of his love triangle with Marla and Tyler.

Early in the novel, the narrator freely admits that the entire plot of *Fight Club* revolves not around the fights and Project Mayhem as much as it revolves around Marla, a fact easily lost amid the abundant fights and cultural commentary from Palahniuk. In the opening chapter, when Tyler is trying to kill the narrator in the explosion that will symbolically destroy history (through the destruction of the natural history museum), the narrator reveals that all of Project Mayhem does not focus on history:

I know all of this: the gun, the anarchy, the explosion is really about Marla Singer.... We sort of have a triangle 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. (14)

Sedgwick's ideas about love triangles become particularly relevant here.

Sedgwick argues that a love triangle in which one man fights another man for a woman serves as a way for a man lacking an adequate father figure to form a more normal sexual identity. Such a love triangle reenacts the Oedipal triangle of father, son, and mother from childhood. However, instead of killing his father this time, a man in the love triangle must kill the symbolic father which the other man represents, and thereby gain true heterosexual identity. Sedgwick makes this point when she writes that even heterosexual relationships are "deeply and inescapably inscribed in the structure even of relationships that seem to exclude women—even in male homosocial/homosexual relationships" (25). Sedgwick also points out, "the power relationships between men and women appear to be dependent on the power relationships between men and



men" (25). Therefore, the narrator's relationship with Marla also connects to the narrator's relationship with Tyler and how he must break with his homosocial friend if he wants to truly be heterosexual. But the narrator cannot bring himself to kill the symbolic father that Tyler represents to him and destroy the triangle. To fully admit his feelings requires him killing Tyler, for which he needs Marla's help.

Ultimately, to kill Tyler, his symbolic father, the narrator gets help and support from both Marla and members of his pre-fight club support groups. At the end of the novel, Tyler holds a gun in the narrator's mouth as the narrator struggles to figure out who he really is. No further realization comes, though, even with time ticking down to the demolition of the building on which they are standing, a moment of destruction which Tyler intends to be Project Mayhem's triumphant fruition. Only the appearance of Marla and members of other support groups helps the narrator realize what he really wants. When he sees Marla, who will take him as he is—even willing to risk death in the explosion to help him—the narrator says "This is like a total epiphany moment for me. I'm not killing myself, I yell. I'm killing Tyler" (204-5). He finally understands that he does not need Tyler, the hyper-masculine part of himself, anymore. What he needs is the emotional intimacy that he can have with Marla. With Marla's support and the unconditional support of people really facing death, the narrator can confront his own cancer of hyper-masculinity and excise it by shooting himself.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, his shooting himself symbolically kills Tyler, his split personality, as well as the symbolic father Tyler represents in the narrator's love triangle with Marla; now the narrator can move forward in a heterosexual relationship after killing his homosocial desire for Tyler. But while his killing of Tyler effectively exorcises his own total dependence on phallic, hyperbolic masculinity,

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<sup>15</sup> The presence of the support group members symbolizes his willingness to connect with others in authentic emotional openness just as with Marla during the breast exam. While before Marla threatened his "tourism" of the groups that he never was honest in, now Marla does not threaten him, and he opens himself up to the support of a group that takes him as he is, regardless of his behavior. Just as Donald Gately in *Infinite Jest* discovered the transformative power of emotional vulnerability in Alcoholics Anonymous—even while trying to push people away, the narrator also does on this rooftop.

the end of the novel appears much less hopeful than *Infinite Jest* does for the prospects of remaining free from normative masculinity.

Palahniuk concludes the novel with an ultimately troubled ending since Project Mayhem and Fight Club continue without the narrator, and he has trouble completely giving up being Tyler Durden. The continuance of Project Mayhem, even after its failure to destroy history, signals that fight club's hyper-masculinists continue to try getting the power refused them for so long. Palahniuk seems to be suggesting that the problems the narrator faces are not entirely gone. Even though the narrator has become more testicular (though far from as well-developed as Donald Gately), he remains unwilling or unable to give up the power that he had as Tyler Durden and/or risk vulnerability by lowering his façade and starting a real relationship with Marla. The narrator doesn't want to leave the mental institution after killing Tyler Durden because occasionally a member of Fight Club will whisper to him "We miss you, Mr. Durden" or "We look forward to getting you back" (208). Such encouragement (and the whiff of power that comes with it) makes completely abandoning that role difficult for someone who needs power and attention from other men.

As Pleck suggests, without strong male figures, these abandoned men and Fight Club members remain boys doomed to resort to hyperbolic masculinity in order to survive psychologically. Even if they do become more testicular, they have never had men in their lives to model for them how to sustain a relationship or the vulnerability needed for a relationship. The narrator still wants to have a relationship with Marla, saying he would call her if there were a phone in the institution, but (conveniently) there is not (207). Such an ambivalent ending seems to reverse some of the progress the narrator made on developing a blended masculinity. The ending also shows us that in postmodern society, even if men can develop well-rounded masculinities, there is much more work to be done as fathers and as men. The narrator, as incompletely transformed as he

is, never moves beyond his desire to be part of the generation of confused men who keep Project Mayhem and Fight Club going, supporting each other in their quest to get the attention of the fathers who abandoned them so long ago.

CHAPTER 4:  
WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?:  
THE FUTURE OF POSTMODERNIST MASCULINITY

The masculinity crisis of the late Nineteenth Century, was “solved” in part by the creation of the Boy Scouts. So far, the masculinity crisis at the beginning of the Twenty-first has no such solution. Men remain confined by the myth of masculinity that Joseph Pleck discusses: they must be strong, but not too strong lest they be violent; they must be emotionally open, but not too emotional lest they appear weak. By reducing the crisis to such binary oppositions, commentators like Berthold Schoene-Harwood seem guilty of over-simplifying the crisis as an all-or-nothing situation that can be solved only with all-or-nothing solutions. In a sense, it seems that the terms of this crisis cause the very crisis itself: if men are strong, surely they must be violent; if they are emotionally open, surely they must be weak pansies. In a world where little is black and white, thinking in such reductive terms makes all tenable solutions impossible. Pleck sees no solutions, while the only solution Schoene-Harwood proposes is the de-genderization of both males and females which would result in the absence of restrictive gender roles for men and women. But such a solution denies that there are aspects of men that are distinctly masculine while men also have some feminine aspects (and vice versa for women). Schoene-Harwood’s gender hybrids are cop-outs, not solutions.

As different as *Infinite Jest* and *Fight Club* are in many ways, they both have men who react to crises of masculinity in similar ways. . The Incandenza men in *Infinite Jest* react to the crisis by becoming hyperbolically sexual, or an emotionally dead alcoholic, or becoming both overly athletic and depressed. The main character of *Fight Club* faces the same crisis. Meeting Tyler Durden, his split personality, causes the narrator to change and actively react as a man to his identity crisis through fight clubs: the beatings the protagonist and other displaced men hand out to each other

serve as homosocial therapy, making the men feel as though they have regained their lost masculinity. But the men's responses in both novels are far from perfect.

All these men's responses lack any real sense of solving the crisis, and in fact, only make it worse. In *Infinite Jest*, Orin's hyperbolic sexuality causes him to be seduced and kidnapped by a sexy French Canadian terrorist; James escapes his alcoholism and cuckolding by putting his head in a microwave oven and pressing the start button; and Hal starts to lose hold of reality by lying on the floor of the tennis academy, paralyzed by the weight of life. Similarly, the narrator of *Fight Club* watches as Fight Club becomes something much more sinister as the men without father figures seek to replace those absent fathers with strong-armed politics. Fight Clubs eventually become Project Mayhem, a terrorist quest to take over the world. Into these extreme situations in both novels, however, comes the real solution to the masculinity crisis: a developed sense of nurturing masculinity in addition to the hard, violent masculinity used only to protect others, not harm them.

Much of my ideas on blended masculinities come from Arthur Flannigan-Saint-Aubin's essay "The Male Body and Literary Metaphors for Masculinity." But, Flannigan-Saint-Aubin's argument forges a solution to not just portrayals of masculinity in literature by combining the nurturing aspects of the testicles with the forceful strength of the phallus, but forges a solution to the crisis of masculinity itself. Since both the phallus and the testicles make men truly male, what they symbolize together could be one of the few adequate metaphors for masculinity possible. This destroys the old binary thinking about masculinity and creates a spectrum along which each man can establish himself as a man on his own terms. In world with many shades of grey, men can pick how much white or black they have in their masculine identities, without giving up biological and cultural influences and becoming genderless hybrids like Schoene-Harwood proposes.

Donald Gately in *Infinite Jest* and (eventually) the protagonist of *Fight Club* serve as examples of this new spectrum of masculinity. Gately's sheer size and strength—Stephen Burn in his guide to

the novel suggests that Wallace hints that Gately is 6'10" and 280 lbs.—make him naturally talented as a violent, hyperbolically masculine man. While he does have an astonishing talent and weapon for violence, Gately rarely becomes violent. Gately has a very strong testicular side as well. He serves as the nurturing mother of the Ennet House drug treatment program, cooking and cleaning. After developing this blended masculinity of nurturing and strength, Gately becomes violent only once, while protecting a resident of Ennet House. Like Gately, the narrator of *Fight Club* similarly finds himself leaving the phallic side of the masculinity spectrum and moving towards the middle. When he realizes the danger to Marla Singer, he nameless protagonist finds himself fighting to end the violent, totalitarian Project Mayhem in order to protect the woman he loves. In doing so, he manages to develop his testicular side by opening up and admitting his feelings for her to Marla. Such a spectrum explodes the binary thinking of Pleck and Schoene-Harwood.

But the binary between testicular and phallic masculinity is not the only binary exploded in these two novels. The binary of ironic cleverness of postmodernist fiction and overly emotional romantic literature honesty also comes under attack, especially in *Infinite Jest*. David Foster Wallace makes very clear in his interview with Larry McCaffery that one area where postmodernist authors fail is their abilities to connect with an audience in any meaningful, emotional sense since they are too busy trying to impress everyone with their innovative use of narrative structure or language. Robert L. McLaughlin describes the response of writers like Wallace to postmodernist fiction in terms reminiscent of Wallace:

Put simply, many of the fiction writers who have come on the scene since the late 1980s seem to be responding to the perceived dead end of postmodernism, a dead end that has been reached because of postmodernism's detachment from the social world and immersion in a world of non-referential language, its tendency, as one writer once put it to me, to disappear up its own asshole. (55)

Wallace, likewise, seeks to find a new way out of postmodernist fiction's dead end by avoiding clever irony and opening up to the reader instead; the detachment of postmodernist fiction gives way to the connection of post-postmodernist fiction.

But Wallace, like the characters he portrays, lies somewhere between both ends of the spectrum. While in *Infinite Jest* Wallace breaks free of the postmodernist tendencies that marked his early fiction (McInerney) by writing some very beautiful, sad scenes, he does hold back from the reader, especially in the crucial narrative and emotional scene of the novel: the meeting of Gately and Hal, which would provide the reader with some narratorial illumination and a sense of closure to the novel's seemingly disparate and divergent plots. Instead, we get a large gap. This seems to be the same crime Wallace indicts the authors of postmodernist fiction for in the McCaffrey interview. At the same time, though, while Wallace fails in one aim of his ambitious literary project, he has not necessarily failed entirely. There are many instances where he connects with the reader emotionally, such as his portrayal of Gately's horrific childhood and subsequent addiction. Perhaps Wallace shows with his failure that he too must find a place on the spectrum between distance from the reader and overly emotional honesty.

Similarly, we could place Chuck Palahniuk on the same spectrum as Wallace. Palahniuk, like Wallace, has his postmodernist moments. He keeps an emotional distance between the reader and the characters. For example, the nameless protagonist never tells the reader his real name, while privileging other characters with it. In *Fight Club*, a wall always exists to keep the reader from getting too close, though close enough to sympathize with the characters. So Palahniuk, in many ways, writes fiction that has elements of emotionally cold postmodernism in it. But that does not mean he fails to be a post-postmodernist author either. The cult popularity of his novels testify that his novels speak deeply to people, especially after *Fight Club* was turned into a film and became a blockbuster hit. In fact, Eduardo Mendiata sees Palahniuk's books not as novels, but as

philosophical treatises on contemporary American culture (394). Such accessibility also ties into the post-postmodernism project of authors like Wallace that McLaughlin describes:

We can think of this aesthetic sea change, then, as being inspired by a desire to reconnect language to the social sphere or, to put it another way, to reenergize literature's social mission, its ability to intervene in the social world, to have an impact on actual people and the actual social institutions in which they live their lives. (55)

Both Palahniuk and Wallace are part of this sea change to reconnect the novel to the social world in artistic and innovative ways. And such a change in postmodernist fiction can also connect back to the idea of masculine genders existing on a spectrum.

Postmodernist fiction and post-postmodernist fiction, as described above, exist on spectrums, not just binary terms of either emotionally-cold literary innovation or emotionally open accessibility. Using such a binary, like the binary thinking of the masculinity crisis, causes the conflict between postmodernism and post-postmodernism, preventing any tenable integration between the two. Without the ability to articulate any solution, no solution can exist. Instead, Gately and the protagonist of *Fight Club* show us that by individuals changing the way they behave, refusing to be classified by binaries, society can be free of such narrow stereotypes as genders. Instead, these characters show us we can think of genders as spectrums along which we can exist in whatever blended ratio we desire. The same possible solution exists for the binary thinking of postmodernist fiction since Wallace and Palahniuk show that blending the two sides and creating meaningful literature is possible. Only through each individual's actions—whether man or author—can the binaries be shattered by showing that one truth does not define them. For the sea changes that McLaughlin discusses do not occur when the entire ocean actually rises up as one, but when the individual molecules of water do.



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