PHANTASIES OF A FRACTURED IDENTITY: UNCONSCIOUS RESISTANCE IN COMMITTING TO A PLURALIZED IDENTITY IN NATHANIAL HAWTHORNE’S BLITHEDALE ROMANCE AND CHUCK PALAHNIUK’S FIGHT CLUB

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ........................................................................................................................... iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ....................................................................................................... iv
INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1
DISCUSSION ....................................................................................................................... 10
IMPLICATIONS .................................................................................................................. 39
LITERATURE CITED .......................................................................................................... 41
ABSTRACT

There are anxieties associated with constructing one’s identity within dominant social culture regardless of when such a construction takes place. Both Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Blithedale Romance* explore the intricacies of each respective narrators’ identity crises to reveal startling similarities between Miles Coverdale, a poet working on a New England commune in the mid-nineteenth century, and an unnamed narrator, who is a project recall coordinator for a large corporation in a United States metropolitan area during the twentieth century. This paper will document the patterns that emerge as these narrators recount experiencing the desire for completion and the crisis that manifests as they develop feelings of inadequacy and become increasingly dissatisfied with their current identities. This dissatisfaction results in both narrators: 1) joining a counterculture movement to assume an exaggerated form of their socially prescribed gender role, which results in a feeling of artificial completeness; 2) forming a homoerotic bond with a companion in the counterculture movement; 3) using heterosexual companionship not for romantic attachment but for ulterior motives; and 4) housing at least some of the responsibility for the death of an individual who is perceived having a “unified” and contradictory identity (only one part of which the narrators accept).
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There are anxieties associated with constructing one’s identity within dominant social culture regardless of when such a construction takes place. Both Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club* and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Blithedale Romance* explore the intricacies of each respective narrators’ identity crises to reveal startling similarities between Miles Coverdale, a poet working on a New England commune in the mid-nineteenth century, and an unnamed narrator, who is a project recall coordinator for a large corporation in a United States metropolitan area during the twentieth century. This paper will document the patterns that emerge as these narrators recount experiencing the desire for completion and the crisis that manifests as they develop feelings of inadequacy and become increasingly dissatisfied with their current identities. This dissatisfaction results in both narrators: 1) joining a counterculture movement to assume an exaggerated form of their socially prescribed gender role, which results in a feeling of artificial completeness; 2) forming a homoerotic bond with a companion in the counterculture movement; 3) using heterosexual companionship not for romantic attachment but for ulterior motives; and 4) housing at least some of the responsibility for the death of an individual who is perceived having a “unified” and contradictory identity (only one part of which the narrators accept).

*Blithedale Romance* and *Fight Club*, written over a century apart, reveal that both of their narrators experience a crisis as they come to recognize themselves as flawed—their identities fractured as result of dominant social ideologies privileging one set of binaries over the other. Regardless of which identity the narrators choose to embrace at any given moment—because they both believe they must choose between two, both of which they identify with—they perceive their identities as always fractured. Along with
the recognition of a fractured identity, each narrator attempts to destroy the weaker of the binaries rather than embrace them. Due to their perceived fragmentation, both narrators join counterculture movements in order to begin the process of recreating themselves. Within these counterculture movements, dominant social prescriptions become marginalized, thus giving the narrators an artificial sense of completeness. Involvement in such movements proves to be deceptively cleansing—narrators are given the false hope that they are empowering the weaker of its binaries and thus shed an old identity for a new one. Curiously, the narrators also attempt an intimate companionship with a hyper-masculine character. The inability to embrace duality coupled with the narrators’ preference for a homosexual relationship inhibits the emergence of any romantic heterosexual relationships. Although each narrator dabbles in heterosexual attachment, both the unnamed narrator and Coverdale ultimately detach themselves from these relationships; in rejecting what is prescribed as socially acceptable, the narrators exhibit the ability to dismiss social prescriptions in their identity creation; nevertheless, Coverdale and the anonymous narrator of Fight Club are unable to scrap their predisposition to commit fully to a single side of a binary. Each text also includes the existence of other characters with “unified” and contradictory identities that transcend traditional binary boundaries, which in turn further threatens the narrators. This transcendence itself appears to shatter the narrators’ burgeoning “greater identities.” Adding to their hesitation and anxiety is the fact that others are even capable of achieving such transcendence in the texts. The deaths of these characters—in both texts at least one dies—perform a morbid attempt by the narrators to rid themselves of the anxiety that one’s identity can be both contradictory and complete.
Both the unnamed narrator and Coverdale use similar timelines to reveal their narrative; the novels’ framework functions as a vehicle for further indicating repression. The narratives begin with their present state of existence, to which they then proceed to recall the events that have led to their current selves. In brief final chapters, past recollections rejoin the present narrative and the narrators’ final utterances are meant to repress the overlying meaning of the text as a whole. Trivial elements in the manifest content of the parting selves cause distortion and are a form of mental censorship. The narrators’ closing statements transfer threatening impulses elsewhere, in an act of classic Freudian displacement.

Applying Freud’s concepts in “The Uncanny” to Hawthorne and Palahniuk’s texts, the anxieties the narrators experience become apparent when analyzing the correlation between culturally defined masculinity and the creation of personal identity. Developing from “an infantile wish,” the uncanny causes stress when one concurrently holds elements of conflicting ideologies, or when what was were once known in childhood, is now repressed by an ideology (Freud 141). Freud traces the etymological implications of “heimlich” (“homely”) and “unheimlich” (“unhomely”), concluding that the terms are more synonymous than oppositional, with “unheimlich” being the repressed term. As a child, an individual creates multiple selves in an attempt of assuring his own immortality. The multiple selves beseech a child to accept conflicting ideas. But as the child grows into an adult, repression of the multiple selves occurs, and reminders of the former selves manufacture anxieties and fright.

The terms “heimlich" and “unheimlich” function as binary opposites. Structuring language and perception of the world, binary opposites are theoretical relationships that
achieve definition through negation and opposition. Within each set of binaries, one relational concept is always privileged and the other is repressed. According to Helene Cixous, “Thought has always worked through … dual hierarchal oppositions” (Cixous 583). Exploring the relationship between binary opposites reveals that there is always a privileging of one binary over the other, with dominant social ideology choosing to value one while marginalizing the other. Cixous elucidates a correlation between her assigned Activity/passivity and Man/Woman binaries, finding that the dominant ideology privileges Man and Activity, while Woman and passivity are marginalized. While Man is identified by the presence of a phallus, Woman encompasses what is female and anything else that is not wholly Man: including hermaphrodites, the transgendered, the castrated, etc. The male phallus operates as a semiotic representation of power; thus power makes Man complete. Working within binary oppositions, the absence of the phallus indicates a lack of power and therefore an incompleteness. Of compelling interest for our study, asserting, “Either woman is passive or she does not exist,” Cixous implies the following for the male counterpart: Either Man is Active or he does not exist (Cixous 584).

Published in 1996, Chuck Palahniuk’s novel Fight Club has already been dissected with critics’ attention focusing on the text’s blatant attacks on consumer culture and the anxieties of a lost masculinity, with some critics articulating a correlation between the two. This essay embraces these criticisms and applies them to further

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1 Cixous’ binaries are replicated as they appear in Sorties.
2 Boon attributes the feminization of man as a direct result of capitalism. Both Boon and Ta both agree that American society influenced by feminists, gay and lesbian activists, and other marginal subcultures. Not only do outsiders put masculine identity up for scrutiny, but men are having a hard time preserving the status quo throughout recent history. Mendieta blames the loss of masculinity with lack of father figures. Kennett
support a pattern that emerges as a result of an identity crisis not only in this particular
text, but expands the pattern to other pieces of literature, and in the case of *Blithedale
Romance* one that even precedes the theorists. *Fight Club* opens with the unnamed
narrator critiquing the nature of his existence. He lives in an impersonal high-rise
apartment building with generic, yet endearing possessions. He works as a recall
coordinator for a major insurance company where he reduces human life and calamity to
a mathematical equation. Unable to revolt against a society enamored with consumerism
and impersonality, the narrator acts out his rage by being a “tourist” (albeit one who
suffers from no disease) at numerous support groups, including one dedicated to
testicular cancer survivors.\(^{3}\) Subconsciously dissatisfied with who he has become and
feeling helpless in recreating himself, Tyler Durden appears as if by magic, and “saves”
the narrator. Rounding up “the middle children of history...the strongest and
smartest...[that] are pumping gas and waiting tables,” Tyler and the narrator build an
army consisting of the common man, and fight clubs spring up across the country. Fight
clubs allow men to perform what is perceived as masculinity through acts of violence and
aggression. Fight clubs evolve into Project Mayhem, a subculture movement intended to
save the world from the human race. Eventually, the narrator comes to realize that Tyler
and the unnamed narrator are one in the same person, with Tyler being the deviant

elaborates on Mendieta’s ideas, suggesting his identity crisis stems from the narrator’s
ineffectiveness of reaching out to an absent patriarchal narrative. Similar to Boon’s
assertion, Giroux maintains *Fight Club* launches an attack on the feminization of man,
and the culprit for feminization happens to be capitalism.\(^{3}\) Matthews concludes narrator’s need for support groups is due to “physical shortcomings
reflect his own feelings of spiritual emptiness” (89). Matthews asserts support groups
function as an outlet of emotional frustration, and that fight clubs replace the narrator’s
need of support groups.
personality. *Fight Club* becomes an expose of one man’s plunge into madness in attempting to recreate not only himself, but the entire world.\(^4\) The trauma experienced by the unnamed narrator in creating a new identity influences the narratives.

The act of writing itself becomes a method for working through the traumatic realizations of the uncanny and perceived fragmentation. Narrators from both *Fight Club* and *Blithedale* embark on a literary journey that is meant to function as therapy, although by the end of both novels, resolution cannot be achieved. Both the unnamed narrator and Coverdale write from the perspective of the victim, although it can be argued they are just as much the perpetrator. The unnamed narrator’s inability to accept responsibility for “Tyler’s whole murder-suicide thing,” reiterates his inability to accept duality of his nature (Palahniuk 13). Tyler is the uncanny manifestation of the narrator’s anxiety of incompleteness. Although Tyler is the embodiment of the narrator’s wish fulfillment, the coexistence between the two is impossible. After Tyler becomes known to the narrator, the narrator identifies himself by comparing himself to Tyler, defining his own deficiencies, which further perpetuates a negatively constructed and incomplete identity. Tyler is everything the narrator strives to be. Citing an instance when the narrator threatens his boss, the uncanny surfaces within the text when Tyler’s words seep into the narrator’s consciousness; the narrator represses the unconscious Tyler in himself by saying, “I used to be such a nice person” (Palahniuk 98).

The conflicted narratives parallel with the narrators’ conflicted self’s, and the narrative distortion is directly related to each narrator’s occupation. As a recall campaign

\(^4\) Ng refers to the narrative as a sort of existential crisis, arguing the alter ego, Tyler Durden, was created to as a vehicle to transcend existential boundaries.
coordinator in the Compliance and Liability department, the narrator of *Fight Club* performs the same mundane task of reducing human life to a mathematical equation, which is also a reduction of individual identity. Fighting the grim realism that he too is a statistic, the narrator acts out in creating Tyler Durden, fight clubs, and Project Mayhem. Similarly, as a poet, Coverdale identifies himself as an expressive individual, and therefore feels compelled to suppress many details within the text. Coverdale expects his readers to sift for textual truths among casually mentioned information from his observations, which blatantly contradict his personal asides to the audience.

One of his lesser-known novels, Hawthorne’s *Blithedale Romance* is recounted by a single narrator who is personally invested in the success of a commune that lies outside a New England town’s limits. By completely excluding third person narration from the text, all events and dialogue are filtered through the mind of Miles Coverdale: a poet, dandy, and voyeur. Coverdale becomes invested in the lives of a philanthropist named Hollingsworth, and documents the love triangle that unfolds between Hollingsworth and two contradictory women, Priscilla and Zenobia, who are later revealed to be sisters. Love proves lethal as Coverdale reports that the rejected Zenobia has taken her own life. By allowing Coverdale to be the sole narrator, Hawthorne subjects readers to Coverdale’s biases, exaggerations, omissions, and partial truths, thus rendering the entire text ambiguous and leaving readers to exercise their own discretion in either filling in plot gaps or assigning truth-values to his statements. While some analyses of the text illuminate Coverdale’s narrative ambiguities concerning his romantic attachments, other critics investigate whether the text is meant to document a dystopia or
These examinations of the novel illuminate Coverdale as a conflicted narrator, with the source of his anxieties stemming from his perceived inadequacies.

Because our only eye into Blithedale is through Coverdale, the relative validity of his statements remains inconclusive and cannot be taken at face value. Taking into account that the story is told retrospectively, readers cannot fully know the motives behind the retelling of Blithedale. Coverdale will attest that the profession of being a poet mixed with hard labor may be the result of his shoddy narrative in his statement that, “Intellectual activity is incompatible with any large amount of bodily exercise”; however, exhaustion veils Coverdale’s true intentions (Hawthorne 88). As a poet, Coverdale is licensed to manipulate words and contort any information at his whim, even if consciously unaware of doing so. Much more critical of his fellow Blithedalers than of himself, Coverdale litters his story with disclaimers such as, “I am perfectly aware that the above statement is exaggerated, in the attempt to make it adequate,” and, “There may have been some petty malice in what I said”; and although the admissions are made, they are done so with much carelessness (Hawthorne 93,143). Because Coverdale confesses to embellishing the truth and then lightly dismissing said confessions, he relieves himself of his guilty conscious. These confessions of truth-stretching prove to be doubly moot:

For an early but critically informative survey of approaches to Blithedale Romance, see Gross and Murphy’s edition of The Blithedale Romance: an Authoritative Text; Background and Sources; Criticism

McElroy articulates, “his self-conscious candor includes a suggestion of repressed truth,” indicating that it is never Coverdale’s intention to deceive his audience. Coverdale’s lies are self-induced to protect his fragile psyche. McElroy also argues Coverdale’s manipulation of the text was completely subconscious, claiming that “Coverdale’s ‘confession’ […] is false in comparison to a pattern of details developed during his narrative” (McElroy 2).
first, when considering there is no known degree to how much Coverdale feigns, and a second time when readers realize that those directly involved in the Blithedale fiasco will never be made aware of the lies being told. He masterfully manipulates language to elicit sympathies for himself, while he is the primary instigator in the downfall of Blithedale all along.

Not only has Coverdale’s content been proven problematic, but the suppression of information complicates the text. For example, Coverdale is aware, although never explicitly stated in the text, of Priscilla’s most guarded secret: that she is, in effect, a prostitute.\

Coverdale expects his reader to follow his strategically placed trail of breadcrumbs, leaking just enough information to reach this conclusion. When Zenobia asks, “‘Is she not worth a verse or two?’” Coverdale esoterically responds, “‘Yes […] and from a better poet than myself. She is the very picture of the New England spring’” (Hawthorne 81). Coverdale’s flattery, in saying Priscilla deserved better, is a veiled attempt to pass the task to someone that does not have such a tainted view of her. By referring to Priscilla as “the very picture of the New England spring,” and not spring itself, Coverdale is suggesting Priscilla’s character at Blithedale is two-dimensional, superficial, and a presentation of a distorted reality. She hides among the Blithedalers as a virginal girl; in reality, she engages in less than innocent acts.

This superficial compliment alone is not enough to warrant suspicion regarding Priscilla’s promiscuity. That is when Coverdale uses his craft to weave an observation in which Priscilla played a trick on Silas Foster. Furious with her, Foster “in a very gruff voice, threatened to rivet three horseshoes round Priscilla’s neck and chain her to a post”

\[\text{7 Lefcowitz’s theory supports claim about Priscilla’s sexuality.}\]
Moments later, Coverdale pens, “How she made her peace I never knew; but very soon afterwards I saw old Silas, with his brawny hands round Priscilla’s waist […]” (Hawthorne 96). Coverdale expects his audience to assume he was not wholly invested in social politics, but it seems as though Priscilla utilizes her body as a means of persuasion. One paragraph down, Coverdale reminisces how, “everybody loved her and […] would have given her half of his last crust, or the bigger share of his plum-cake” (Hawthorne 96). While “everybody” encompasses both genders, Coverdale covertly hints at Priscilla’s prostitution by listing hypothetical deeds of goodwill performed for her with the exclusive use of masculine pronouns. A man in any other profession could be excused from this error as a careless use of English grammar. But Coverdale’s mastery of language holds him fully accountable for his words.

CRISIS, CASTRATION, AND CONSUMERISM

Despite the gap in publishing years, *Blithedale Romance* and *Fight Club* reveal that both of their narrators experience an existential crisis as they come to recognize themselves as passive members of society. Separating himself from his former life, Coverdale relocates to the Blithedale commune in search of “the better life!”; his utterance relays a sense of unhappiness with his current self (Hawthorne 38). Identifying himself within “a generation of men raised by women,” the narrator of *Fight Club* assigns blame to his maternal upbringing and projects a feminized, thus passive, identity onto himself (Palahniuk 50). The narrator is quick to administer responsibility for his anxieties, blaming maternal influence and consumer culture. He believes that individuals become complacent in daily routine and informs his audience, “You do the job you’re trained to do […] You don’t understand any of it, and then you just die” (Palahniuk 12).
In terms of ideological binaries, those who are trained are fulfilling the role of the feminized and passive, as knowledge of the task is passed down to the individual, allowing a minimal role in the creation process. The passivity of the narrator and his generational cohorts elicits feelings of inadequacy and eventually results in acting out against trained routine: an attempt of wish fulfillment.

Mimicking the unnamed narrator’s creation of Tyler, Coverdale finds himself craving a similar identity completion. The lamentation, “I am only a poet, and, so the critics tell me, no great affair at that,” functions as an articulation of perceived inadequacy (Hawthorne 33). Coverdale believes that the public devalues his writing, which is his contribution to society. Wanting desperately to identify himself as something other than a failed poet, Coverdale joins the microcosmic Blithedale commune. It is within this community that Coverdale attempts to reincarnate himself from poet to an earth-worker, whose labors will bring about radical change to his world. The slide from insufficiency of self to projection onto the world is also exploited in Fight Club, with the narrator divulging his plans “to blast the world free of history” (Palahniuk 124). These feelings of insignificance and incompleteness are inseparable in that identity is a projection of one’s self onto the world, and with no feeling of accomplishment or worth to the progression of society, there is nothing to project but incompleteness. Recreating the world would place the narrators as forefathers and appease anxieties of unaccomplishment.

Coverdale exhibits his own symptoms of inadequacy through the use of others’ dialogue in the text. Unable to acknowledge his anxieties as internal, Coverdale uses Hollingsworth as a mouthpiece for his feelings of inadequacy. During an instance of
Zenobia hailing Coverdale’s poetry, Hollingsworth hastily conjectures, “Miles Coverdale is not in earnest, either as a poet or a laborer,” and simultaneously devalues Coverdale’s previous occupation as well as his current one (Hawthorne 90). Further affirming his anxieties, Coverdale recalls a conversation concerning the transformation of Blithedale into a prison reform with Hollingsworth. Hollingsworth promises Coverdale “from this moment you shall never feel the langor and the vague wretchedness of an indolent or half-occupied man,” which indicates even Hollingsworth recognizes that communal life does not rid Coverdale of his anxieties (Hawthorne 149). Towards the close of the novel, Coverdale reiterates Hollingsworth’s critique: “As Hollingsworth once told me, I lack a purpose,” which indicates his identity created at Blithedale did not satiate the feeling of inadequacy (Hawthorne 249). These anxieties coincide with the alignment of the passive side of a binary, where neither narrator feels as though he has the ability to be an Active participant in the world.

One contributing factor to this feeling of incompleteness is an identity that is created within consumer culture. Although they identify themselves through their professions, the narrators also identify themselves through their possessions. The narrative begins as Coverdale recalls the unusually snowy April night he journeyed to Blithedale, and how he had to leave his “comfortable quarters—” an early affirmation that Coverdale could provide well for himself (38). Falling ill almost immediately after arriving at Blithedale, Coverdale compares his meager accommodations with what he had left behind: “My pleasant bachelor-parlor, sunny and shadowy, curtained and carpeted, with the bedchamber adjoining; my centre-table, strewn with books and periodicals” (Hawthorne 64-5). In this passage, Coverdale identifies himself as moderately wealthy
with the mentioning of luxuries such as curtains and carpets, and also as a bourgeois intellectual, as he calls attention to the abundance of literature. Further articulating a moderate income, upon leaving Blithedale, Coverdale again flaunts his ability to indulge himself in the finer things in life when he is quick to assert that he has taken residence “in a certain respectable hotel” (Hawthorne 159). Even with the ability to indulge himself with material wealth, Coverdale’s boredom resumes (until he discovers his room has a view of Zenobia’s city apartment).

In concordance with Coverdale’s inventory of his material goods, the narrator from Fight Club also defines himself by his possessions: “Home was a condominium on the fifteenth floor of a high rise, a sort of filing cabinet for widows and young professionals,” (Palahniuk 41). But unlike Coverdale, the description of this abode is much more impersonal. When we meet the narrator, he is obsessed with his possessions: his dwelling, his car, his IKEA furniture. He is the perfect complacent consumer. But the narrator becomes increasingly unhappy, and he begins to view his possessions with an inverted perspective, “Then you’re trapped in your lovely nest, and the things you used to own, now own you” (Palahniuk 44). Just as the narrator identifies himself as a statistic, he inverts the process and projects his own internalized manifestations on to all of humanity: “The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue” (Palahniuk 43).

Because pornography can satisfy the basic biological urge for sex, the replacement of pornography with consumer catalogues demonstrates a shift in values from a desire to

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8 This too is a 19th century concept; Emerson’s “Ode to W.H. Channing” addresses the irony of possessions becoming possessors: “Things are in the saddle./And ride mankind” (50-1)
satisfy a biological need to a compulsion to need unnecessary items. When consumerism dictates need, it obliges passivity and results in the feminization of a culture. Individuals now identify themselves through possessions, and if these possessions are predetermined, then so too is one’s identity. The narrator laments identities are like, “[…] a house full of condiments and no real food”; the monumental anxieties of insignificance are contained within the metaphor that there is no real substance to narrator’s life (Palahniuk 45). Tyler becomes the savior to the trapped narrator.9

Fight Club’s narrator works as a recall coordinator for a major insurance company that impersonally calculates human life into a dollar amount:

You take the population of vehicles in the field (A) and multiply it by the probable rate of failure (B), then multiply the result by the average out-of-court settlement (C). A times B times C equals X. This is what it will cost if we don't initiate a recall. If X is greater than the cost of a recall, we recall all the cars and no one gets hurt. If X is less than the cost of a recall, then we don't recall. (Palahniuk 30)

The title “recall coordinator” represses the gruesome nature of the job, veiling the death and destruction associated with the narrator’s auto assessments (his contributions to society). The equation also signifies the monotony of the job he is trained to do. The calculating logic of consumerism dehumanizes and reduces human life (including the narrator’s) to a statistic. The solidarity of regular travel manifests an emotional restlessness that begins to overtake the narrator, “when the plane banked enough to one side, I prayed for a crash. That moment cures my insomnia with narcolepsy when we might die helpless and packed human tobacco in the fuselage—” a clear indication of a

9 Tyler, in contrast, poses as the poster-child for an anti-consumer society. Several critics, such as Giroux, Matthews, and Pettus have noticed Tyler’s invocation of fascist ideologies. Only Kavadlo concludes Tyler sees fascism as an end to postmodern consumerism.
desire for something to jolt him out of his mundane routine (Palahniuk 25). The narrator’s juxtaposition of insomnia and narcolepsy calls forth a binary of sleeplessness and sleep. Privileging sleep, the narrator seeks refuge from insomnia in narcolepsy. However, the narrator’s assigned value in the binary is imperfect as he fails to consider the amount of control one has with either of these afflictions. Both insomnia and narcolepsy are conditions over which the sufferer has little control. By inaccurately assessing the binaries, the narrator applies irrational logic, which will continue to inhibit in his attempt to appease his anxieties. The narrator’s plane crash manifesto is followed by the statement, “This is how I met Tyler Durden,” even though the narrator has not divulged the story of how he met Tyler on the beach (Palahniuk 25). The crash is the prayer for change, an internalized catastrophe that instigates the creation of Tyler.

Despite attempts to ignore the limitations of binary opposites, there is an exhibited compulsion to continue to operate within these limitations because there is no template for an alternative.¹⁰ Suggesting the inability to achieve a consistent identity, the unnamed narrator manifests this anxiety in identifying himself through synecdoche. In stating, “I am Joe’s grinding teeth,” or “I am Joe’s Smirking Revenge,” the narrator demonstrates he is unable to commit to a singular self and instead chooses to identify fragmentally with his present state of consciousness (Palahniuk 59 & 114).

The feelings of inadequacy are not only felt intrinsically, but manifest themselves in the narrators’ relationships with the world. With these projections, the narrator feels increasingly passive and powerless. In a cancer support group, the narrator reminisces about a relaxation exercise intended to give mental strength to cancer patients. But when

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¹⁰ Lee’s essay explores the repercussions of the contradicting roles society expects men to fulfill; the inability to fulfill these roles leave men feeling inferior and incomplete.
the narrator is invited to envision an animal representation of the Active side of the binary, one that makes his feel in control, he instead chooses an animal that serves as a condensed metaphor: “Chloe talked us into caves where we met our power animal. Mine was a penguin” (Palahniuk 20). On one level, the inability for the bird to fly reflects the narrator’s inadequacies; another meaning of the penguin suggests the narrator’s attempt at embracing hybridity, as the penguin has the appearance of a bird with the uncanny ability to swim like a fish. Exaggerating these feelings of helplessness, the narrators in both texts develop a fixation on an inevitable element of human nature that no one can control—death.

Death becomes a fixation for the narrators because of its duplicitous nature: death is absolute, certain, and inescapable, but at the other end of the binary, death is indeterminable, as there is no indication of the specifics concerning an individual’s death. Death is simultaneously certain and uncertain. The inability to control one’s identity becomes, for our narrators, intertwined with this notion of death, and as they attempt to harness their own identities, they also attempt to control death. And yet the resolution of the ambivalence regarding death is impossible. One can only wait for death’s unannounced arrival, in which case one is at the mercy of an unknown certainty, or one can cause death. But in choosing to commit suicide or murder, the certain end result is only partially achieved. Even though the murderer is Actively creating an identity, say, as “a murderer” or “a suicide,” that Activity is only an illusion as death can be the only result.¹¹

¹¹ While both narrators clearly morbidly narcissistic (the suicide fantasies) they both can also be read as murderers as well, the unknown narrator in killing Tyler and Coverdale—perhaps—in killing Zenobia.
Coverdale displays anxieties of death as he refers, for example, to himself as “frosty bachelor” and then proceeds to document the constantly increasing grey hairs on his aging body (Hawthorne 37). Almost immediately after Coverdale arrives at Blithedale, he also falls ill. Coverdale seizes this opportunity to exaggerate his ailments in order to contemplate death and his affections for Hollingsworth, who attended to him: “I wonder, does one meet with, in a lifetime, whom he would choose for his death-bed companions” (Hawthorne 66). Similarly to Coverdale documenting his aging body, the narrator of Fight Club shifts the burden of his own passivity by using a second person pronoun to create a more personal connection with his audience, “This is your life and it’s ending one minute at a time” (Palahniuk 29). By prompting readers to reconcile themselves with an inevitable end, the narrator is no closer to feeling complete, but he forces readers to identify with him as one who will also meet a similar end. This is an attempt to subject others to his pain. Reiterating that he is inescapably a statistic, the narrator or Fight Club emphasizes human mortality, “On a long enough time line, the survival rate for everyone will drop to zero” (Palahniuk 17). Degeneration places both narrators into a passive role, and in attempting to regain control of the Active, the narrators engage in a series of self-destructive behaviors to assert control of their own deterioration.

Self-destruction is, both texts suggest, a direct result from realizing the passivity of one’s existence. Like death, the degeneration of one’s self, whether physically, emotionally, or mentally, is inevitable. By engaging in self-destructive behavior, one regains some control over how fast one degenerates. In order to eliminate the passive self, the narrators self-destruct to reinsert themselves into society as Active and
masculine. Robert Bennet notices these patterns of self-destruction and argues in his essay that the text exhibits a desire for human flaw. Diverging with Bennet’s analysis, I believe there is not a desire for human flaw, only a fixation with the flaw that serves as a constant reminder of an incomplete identity. The narrator creates Tyler Durden in order to correct his perceived flaws; therefore, the desire is not in being flawed, but the desire to alleviate a flawed and fractured self.

The allusions to Jacqueline Susann’s *Valley of the Dolls* throughout *Fight Club* create an associative link to the subtext of these self-destructive tendencies. Whereas the main characters in Susann’s text are Broadway stars identifying with the Active side of the binary, the metaphor becomes distorted as the narrator of *Fight Club* exists on the passive side of the binary. No matter where any of Susann’s or Palahniuk’s characters perceive themselves in relation to the Active/passive binary, the commonality between the two exists in the need to engage in self-destructive behaviors. The juxtaposition of Susann’s characters to the narrator of *Fight Club* offers commentary that no matter what side of the Active/passive binary one relates to, due to the inability to be both Active and passive, ergo incomplete, there will always exist a tendency for self-destruction.

Although much more implicit, Coverdale too, feels a need to self-destruct. Hollingsworth’s constant criticisms begin to wear on Coverdale, and feeling as though he is of little worth, the narrator states, “I began to long for a catastrophe … The curtain fallen, I would pass on with my poor individual life” (Hawthorne 170-1). Coverdale’s statement bears a staunch resemblance to anonymous narrator of *Fight Club* holding his breath for a plane crash. Coverdale’s servings of self-pity drive the compulsion to self-destruct, opting for nonexistence rather than an existence in passivity.
CULTURAL REVOLUTIONS AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE POWER PARADIGM

In order to establish themselves in the Active, the narrators participate in establishing a counterculture movement, and within these movements, the narrators assume an exaggerated form of their prescribed gender roles. Romanticizing their newfound ideologies, the narrators believe they have awakened a novel sense of self-control. In concordance with their inflated masculinity, the narrators are optimistic that resisting to dominant culture will instigate a revolution that will result in the recreation of the world. When the excitement from the novel experience fades, it becomes increasingly apparent that these counterculture movements recreate the power structure of the society they have revolted against. As time progresses, the narrators realize the futility of their actions, and their passivity is reaffirmed.

The link established between Man and Activity, and Woman and passivity results in both narrators adopting hyper-masculine personas. Equating the implementation of physical strength and Activity, violence becomes the “ultimate language” in Fight Club. Detailing the transition from passivity to Activity, the narrator documents a pattern in recruited members, “Most guys are at fight club because of something they’re too scared to fight. After a few fights, you’re afraid of a lot less” (Palahniuk 54). Thus the narrator has assigned bravery and aggression as performances of a masculine identity. The narrator tells his audience, “What happens in fight club doesn’t happen in words”; he exerts his Activity through fistfights— each bloody lip or swollen eye received at fight

12 Giroux asserts the violence experienced in the Fight Clubs is imperative in forming male bonds. He identifies violence as “crucial element of male bonding” (17) and man’s “ultimate language” (18).
club is a badge of courage (Palahniuk 50). Once the relationship between Activity and the exertion of physical strength has been established, Tyler and the narrator dichotomize the world’s population into two types of people: those who support Project Mayhem and those who hinder Project Mayhem. As the narrator explains, “Who guys are in fight club is not who they are in the real world. Even if you told the kid in the copy center that he had a good fight, you wouldn’t be talking to the same man,” which indicates the separation of two different spheres: fight club and the rest of the world (Palahniuk 49). Just as fight club becomes a safe haven for the narrator, and Coverdale takes refuge at Blithedale, both men dare these establishments to change not only themselves, but something much bigger.

The narrator of Fight Club expects the newly formed counterculture establishments to start a cultural revolution. Noting the dichotomous identity of fight club members, the narrator expounds:

You saw the kid who works in the copy center, a month ago you saw this kid who can’t remember to three-hole punch an order or put colored slip sheets between the copy packets, but this kid was a god for ten minutes when you saw him kick the air out of an account representative twice his size then land on the man and pound him limp until the kid had to stop (Palahniuk 48-9).

Fight club privileges a new performance of masculine identity, one that exists outside dominant social codes. In accordance with the currently privileged social paradigm, the copy center attendant is socially inferior to the account representative. The “kid” is socially suppressed (comparatively to the account representative) as he does not have the academic training, money, or even the physical size, but in an alternative environment, the kid in the copy center has the opportunity to redefine himself, and in this case his
physical dominance ranks him superior to the account representative. Fight club becomes a venue for regenerating lost masculinity.

As *Fight Club*’s narrator catapults his status from corporate cog to legendary liberator, Coverdale too engages in hyper-masculine behavior in his transition from poet to earth worker.\(^{13}\) Shortly after arriving at Blithedale, Coverdale notices a change in his disposition, “I began to be clothed anew, and much more satisfactorily than in my previous suit. In literal and physical truth, I was quite another man” — and cites his change in lifestyle as a contributing factor to his self-satisfaction (Hawthorne 83). This self-satisfaction is derived from his musing as to how he will be painted and represented for future generations, Coverdale avows, “I will be painted in my shirt-sleeves, and with my sleeves rolled up, to show my muscular development” (Hawthorne 145). Coverdale’s focus on muscular detail relays a connection between physical labor and the Active in masculine determined binaries. Making sure to credit Silas Foster, a masculine force among the Blithedalers, with the compliment, “[My] shoulders have broadened a matter of six inches, since [I] came among [them],” Coverdale is again crediting his sense of Activity with his labors at Blithedale (Hawthorne 153).

Whereas members of fight club assimilate themselves back into the dominant social structure after fight club, the core members of Project Mayhem adopt a similar ideology to Blithedalers, as they are much more committed to withdrawing from the world. Weighting the shoulders of all the commune members with the fate of the world, Coverdale offers a retort about a skeptic’s reception of Blithedale, “This lack of faith in our cordial sympathy, on the traveler’s part, was one among the innumerable tokens how

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\(^{13}\) Tuss presents the idea that fight club elevates narrator to iconic figure.
difficult a task we had in hand, for the reformation of the world” (Hawthorne 40).

Corresponding with Coverdale’s finding fault with the current system, the narrator of Fight Club places his hopes in Project Mayhem, believing, “It’s Project Mayhem that’s going to save the world. A cultural ice age. A prematurely induced dark age. Project Mayhem will force humanity to go dormant or into remission long enough for the Earth to recover” (Palahniuk 125). In referring to their respective reformations to revolutionize “the world” and “the earth,” both Coverdale and Fight Club’s narrator employs rhetoric that anticipates a transformation that would benefit the entire planet, not just humanity.

Unfortunately, neither fight club/Project Mayhem nor Blithedale deliver a new, unique identity because they recreate both the same power structure that incited the initial rebellion. In explaining the hierarchy of Project Mayhem, the narrator exclaims, “What comes next in Project Mayhem, nobody but Tyler knows (Palahniuk 125). By submitting to Tyler, his followers, referred to as “space monkeys,” are not set free as promised; there is only transference of submission from the original power structure to Tyler. The narrator reduces each space monkey’s job to “Pull a lever. Push a button,” a phrase used for both Project Mayhem and in the beginning of the text to describe the passivity and insignificance the narrator feels (Palahniuk 130). Applying this statement to Project Mayhem reveals the inadequacies of the organization in that its structure mimics what it sets out to destroy. Once settled into the routine of the counterculture movements, anxieties of incompleteness return to the narrators. Finding that, “You can build up a tolerance to fighting, and maybe I needed to move on to something bigger,” the passivity

Clark and Kennett notes the following paradox: even with the anarchic Fight Club and Project Mayhem, there are still rules and guidelines; Tyler promises that those who participate in Project Mayhem will ultimately be their own masters, but in order to be the master, they must submit themselves wholly to Tyler first.
the narrator feels needs to be satiated (Palahniuk 123). In uttering this statement, Tyler promptly forms Project Mayhem in an attempt to regain Activity. But the narrator/Tyler soon discovers that any system that employs the same social hierarchy will never aid them in ridding their anxieties.

Similarly, Coverdale cannot generate another type of social paradigm, although Zenobia suggests, “it may be some of us who wear the petticoat will go afield, and leave the weaker brethren to take our places in the kitchen” (Hawthorne 44). Horrified with the suggestion, Coverdale opts to separate the sexes. However, it is Zenobia’s use of “weaker” that demonstrates operation within the same sets of binaries, inadvertently assigning the value of passive to any man who does not participate in physical labor.

The narrator of Fight Club never consciously considers embracing both sides of the binary, as existence is exclusively limited to the narrator or Tyler. Coverdale, however, consciously realizes the benefits of embracing the binaries, although he cannot simultaneously commit to both: “No sagacious man will long retain his sagacity, if he lives exclusively among reformers and progressive people … It was now time for me, therefore, to go and hold a little talk with the conservatives” (Hawthorne 56). The inability to dually embrace binary opposites proves Coverdale is not “the sagacious man” he describes. Coverdale articulates his belief that it is impossible to identify oneself outside opposition, as he cannot entertain the notion that a fellow Blitherdaler could be “no poet while a farmer, and no farmer while a poet” (Hawthorne 88). In the recognition of a fractured identity, each narrator attempts to identify with one of the binaries rather than embrace both.

ABSENT FATHERS AND OEDIPAL OBSESSIONS
The formation of a homoerotic bond within the counterculture movement becomes inevitable for each narrator. Their identity crisis stems from the narrators’ ineffectiveness of reaching out to an absent patriarchal figure. With no father figure around to suggest the template for performing masculinity, the narrators develop a preoccupation with a hyper-masculine character. Assigning the role of the father onto Tyler and Hollingsworth, the respective narrators foster a homoerotic attachment with an individual in their new social settings. Eventually each narrator is rejected by the object of his affection, which contributes even more to the anxieties already experienced.

Each of the bonds is nurtured by the lack of relationship with a father figure. Although there is no specific mentioning of Coverdale’s youth, he constantly reiterates how Hollingsworth is much older, indicating his attraction is fueled by the difference in their ages. *Fight Club*’s narrator deifies Tyler, making him deliverer of not only himself, but others as well. Feeling trapped in his current identity, the anonymous narrator meditates, “Deliver me Tyler, from being perfect and complete” (Palahniuk 46). But the narrator also projects images of his father onto Tyler: “My dad, he starts a new family in a new town about every six years. This isn’t so much like a family as it’s like he sets up a franchise” (Palahniuk 50). The associative link created by the religious undertones of the previous statement combined with the narrator's projection of his father's family franchising onto the franchising of fight clubs and Project Mayhem catapults Tyler to father status with condensed meanings; Tyler becomes father and Father.

Unlike Coverdale, the narrator of *Fight Club* is much more forward about his romantic attraction to Tyler as he discloses his situation to the audience, “We have sort of a triangle thing going on here. I want Tyler. Tyler wants Marla. Marla wants me”
His preoccupation with Tyler develops into an obsession as the narrator takes momentous leaps from acquaintance to drinking buddy to roommate to co-creator of fight club to business partner in a very short amount of time.\textsuperscript{15} Because of scheduling conflicts, Tyler and the narrator rarely see each other, leading the narrator to conjecture, “I had to know what Tyler was doing while I was asleep” (Palahniuk 32). Like Coverdale, the narrator condenses multiple meaning into a single sentence. The duality of the aforementioned statement can be read as either a statement of truth or inquiry. As a statement of inquiry, it reflects the narrator’s natural curiosity of his love interest. Layered, it is an assertion that of course he knows what Tyler was doing because Tyler is in his unconscious.

Eventually each of the narrators must cope with rejection by the paternal figure. After breaking a promise to Tyler, the narrator grieves to his audience, “I am Joe’s Broken Heart because Tyler’s dumped me” (Palahniuk 134). Before the love triangle breaks apart, Marla reminds the narrator, “Even if someone loves you enough to save your life, they still castrate you” (Palahniuk 68). In applying this theory, Tyler’s appearance saves the narrator, yet the space monkeys strict adherence to Tyler’s rules nearly results in the narrator’s castration. Interfering with Project Mayhem results in castration, which would not only transition the castrated being into the passive but would also prevent him from ever regaining Active status again. Even though Tyler’s existence catapults the narrator into a temporary status of Activity, because the narrator attempts to

\textsuperscript{15} Clark and Quincey only touch on the homoerotism between Tyler and narrator; Kennett explains this attachment is a result of no masculine role models in the narrator’s life. Matthews claims lack of father figure leads to homoerotic attachment to Tyler. Peele argues the reinforcement of heteronormativity is fulfilled by not censoring in homosexual tendencies.
dissolve Project Mayhem, Tyler’s rules of interference nearly places the narrator into a state of permanent passivity.

Fantasizing about being portrayed as eternally masculine, Coverdale expresses a preoccupation with Hollingsworth as a paternal figure, referring to the duo as “Father Hollingsworth and Uncle Coverdale” (Hawthorne 145). Peculiarly, Coverdale allows Hollingsworth to assume the role of the father and Coverdale as uncle. The duality of statement indicates that in Coverdale’s fantasy, the two could be either lovers or brothers. No matter which, the role of father implies Activity; Hollingsworth will achieve immortality in his progeny, while uncle implies no progeny—Coverdale’s legacy will cease to exist. But if Hollingsworth is father, then Coverdale’s acceptance of the binary will never allow him to achieve Activity as long he aligns himself with Hollingsworth.

Coverdale’s attempts at misleading his readers become an evolving pattern within the text. Just as he tries at the end to swindle the audience into believing Priscilla was his object of desire all along, we also find Coverdale manipulating the text to portray Hollingsworth as a dear friend, a nemesis, and a love interest. Acknowledging Coverdale’s implications that he is romantically attracted to Hollingsworth, John Miller comments how, “Hawthorne threatens the socially acceptable, utopian ideal of brotherhood with an erotic bond not considered proper between one man and another” (Miller 7). Early in the text Coverdale maintains, “There was a tenderness in his voice…which few men could resist and no woman,” an admittance that he is not one of those “few men” (Hawthorne 55). During a bedside confession, Coverdale reveals to Hollingsworth he wants them to be lifelong partners: “I heartily wish that I could make your schemes my schemes, because it would be so great a happiness to find myself
treading the same path as you” (Hawthorne 80). Hollingsworth tries to convince Coverdale of the modifications he wants to make to Blithedale; Coverdale recollects, “Had I but touched his extended hand, Hollingsworth's magnetism would perhaps have penetrated me with his own conception of all these matters,” and homoeroticly charges the verbal exchange between he and Hollingsworth (Hawthorne 150).

When Hollingsworth becomes involved with Zenobia and Priscilla, the passive rejection Coverdale experiences is only vocalized in his concerns for Priscilla’s heart. And while there is concern for a heart’s well being, Coverdale is only concerned with his; he uses Priscilla’s heart as a mask for his own broken heart. Even though Miller notes, “Coverdale displays obvious jealousy of Hollingsworth’s appeal to Priscilla fearing that his male rival/object of fraternal love will ‘crush the tender rosebud [Priscilla’s heart] in his grasp,’” Coverdale continues to reiterate all his concerns in this matter are for Priscilla’s feelings (Miller 6). Although Priscilla functions as his artificial object of distress, Coverdale articulates a similar concern for Zenobia’s love loss. After Hollingsworth renounces his romantic ties with Zenobia and leaves her in the woods, Coverdale declares, “Hollingsworth has a heart of ice! He is a wretch!” (Hawthorne 230). Coverdale’s infatuation with Hollingsworth illuminates these utterances as mourning of Coverdale’s own rejection by Hollingsworth.

Alleging Hollingsworth is a conflicted individual caught between a “genuine, charismatic loving kindness vs. his egotistical obsession with philanthropy,” Coverdale denigrates Hollingsworth in an attempt to taint the audience’s perception of him (Miller 2). In order to protect his fragile state of consciousness, Coverdale distorts his affections towards Hollingsworth into disdain with over exaggerations of his character. Twelve
pages after his bedside manifesto, Coverdale pens, “He was not altogether human. There was something else in Hollingsworth besides flesh and blood, and sympathies and affections, and celestial spirit,” concluding men like Hollingsworth “have no heart, no sympathy, no reason, no conscience” (Hawthorne 92). Further advancing this subhuman disposition, Coverdale snidely comments that if Hollingsworth was a better philanthropist, one gaze from Zenobia “should melt him back into a man” (Hawthorne 101). Yet, when Hollingsworth rescues Pricilla as the Veiled Lady, this act of kindness hardly goes noticed, as such a heroic act does not fit within the paradigm Coverdale has prescribed.

**FAUX-MANCE: THE FAÇADE OF HETEROSEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS**

Preoccupied with maintaining their homosocial bonds in order to regain Activity, and compelled to identify with either Activity or passivity, romantic heterosexual relationships are prevented from blossoming within both texts. 16 For the narrators, who we must remember are submissive in relation to socially prescribed masculinity, seeking companionship from a woman translates into emasculation and passivity. Because Activity what is desired in pursuing an improved identity, the rejection of a woman becomes the rejection of passivity. The unnamed narrator admits that he does not love Marla by the close of *Fight Club*. And Coverdale uses Priscilla to project his own anxieties concerning Hollingsworth’s affections onto her. Ultimately, both the unnamed narrator and Coverdale detach themselves from their heterosexual relationships, using them as an ulterior means to achieve Active status.

16 Eve Sedgwick recontextualizes the term “homosocial,” concluding that although homosocial relationships do not imply homosexuality, it cannot be completed detached from the definition
In *Fight Club*, Marla Singer becomes intertwined with the narrator’s identity crisis from the moment the narrator laid eyes on her; the narrator even credits her appearance with the creation of Tyler, “I know why Tyler had occurred. Tyler loved Marla. From the first night I met her, Tyler or some part of me had needed a way to be with Marla” (Palahniuk 198). Marla’s presence in the support groups and in the novel serves to illuminate the passivity of the narrator. Her subscription to nihilism leaves her void of any real emotional capacity—her life ambition is “to have Tyler’s abortion” (Palahniuk 59). Marla’s absence of moral values allows her perpetuate an abusive cycle: not only can she withstand the narrator’s consistent berating, she also has the ability to inflict damage of an equal magnitude onto the narrator without hesitation. Tormented because he is unable to sleep, but nevertheless infatuated, the narrator is conflicted as to how he should go about speaking to Marla, “The next time we meet, I’ll say, Marla, I can’t sleep with you here” (Palahniuk 24). This is another one of narrator’s statements with condensed meanings. One interpretation directly refers to the narrator’s insomnia; literally, the narrator cannot fall asleep at night with Marla in the same support groups. Operating at an unconscious level, the narrator’s statement indicates he cannot pursue any sexual encounter with Marla at that precise time and location.

Despite the overwhelming amount of insults hurled at Marla, there are several occurrences within the text where the narrator exhibits feelings of romantic attachment. Even a single instance of compassion towards Marla indicates the narrator’s conflicted opinion of her. Although ignoring her suicide attempt, when the narrator checks Marla’s

17 Jordan limns the paradox between the narrator’s want of companionship, but rejects the idea of marriage. Quincey posits the sexual relationship with Marla through Tyler is proof the narrator is unable to harbor emotional connections.
breasts for lumps at her request, the narrator recalls his own cancer scare and feels compelled to improve Marla’s disposition, “Marla isn’t laughing. I want to make her laugh, to warm her up” (Palahniuk 106). Even Marla’s theorem, “you always kill the one you love,” can be proven within the Tyler-Marla-narrator love triangle (Palahniuk 13). Having already admitted his love for Tyler, the narrator eventually attempts to murder Tyler, and before that, Tyler is assumed to attempt to murder Marla. In Tyler’s attempted murder, so too is the narrator attempting to murder Marla. Once the narrator realizes that Tyler is his means of wish fulfillment, and “if Tyler loves Marla’s, I love Marla” he accepts he has developed some attachment to Marla (Palahniuk 199).

But more prominent than his tenderness is the blatant disrespect and loathing of Marla. The narrator attempts to poison his audience against her, citing Marla as insane: “Marla Singer doesn’t need a lover, she needs a case worker” (Palahniuk 62). Because she is another tourist in support groups, her presence exposes the narrator as passive; recognition of this passivity generates his brutal verbal tirades against Marla. In light of this study, the appearance of more insults towards the feminine is not directed towards Marla specifically, but a rejection of the narrator’s own passivity and femininity. Feeling already feminized within dominant culture, the narrator rejects Marla in the exclamation, “I’m a thirty-year old boy, and I’m wondering if another woman is really the answer I need” (Palahniuk 51). When the narrator feels he is identifying with Marla, he is compelled to insult her to detach himself from what she represents. As long as he keeps her at arm’s length, he cannot evoke his own need for passivity. Her presence disrupts the narrator’s rise to Activity, which eventually provides an excuse as to why Tyler is so driven to kill her. Evoking her own philosophies, Marla believes the worst job in the
world would have to be recycling toilet paper. Coupling that statement with she and Tyler’s affinity for calling each other “human butt wipe[s]” during copulation, the narrator/Tyler is calling Marla what she considers the lowest of the low, an ultimate utterance of hatred (Palahniuk 64).

Marla’s expected exit from the text and the narrator’s final rejection of heterosexual companionship comes when the narrator places Marla on a bus to an unknown destination. Prodding the reason as to why he is helping her, “I say, because I think I like you. Marla says, ‘Not love?’ This is a cheesy enough moment, I say. Don’t push it”; the exchange between the narrator and Marla reveals the narrator’s inability to simultaneously seek Activity and pursue a relationship with what he deems passive (Palahniuk 197). Despite the resurfacing of Marla, the narrator’s attempt to rid himself of Tyler is also an attempt to rid himself of his need for Marla and passivity.

Coverdale too rejects heterosexual companionship for similar reasons to the unnamed narrator— to rid himself of passivity. Ending the novel with the declaration— “I-I myself-was in love-with-PRISCILLA!”— Coverdale includes enough details in the text for superficial support of his claim (Hawthorne 251). When Coverdale is pondering the Zenobia-Hollingsworth-Priscilla love triangle, Coverdale is always most concerned with Priscilla’s well-being, and in one instance he declares, “I would really have gone far to save Priscilla, at least, from the catastrophe in which such a drama would be apt to terminate” (Hawthorne 94). Laying the groundwork for his confession to be considered truthful, Coverdale litters the same page with admiration of Priscilla’s smile, deeming it

18 McElroy argues Coverdale’s manipulation of the text was completely subconscious and claims, “Coverdale’s ‘confession’ […] is false in comparison to a pattern of details developed during his narrative” (2).
“a wondrous novelty” (Hawthorne 94). Even when Priscilla first arrives at Blithedale, Coverdale recalls how he was initially mesmerized with her, as he “repeated her name […] three or four times […] as if no other name could have adhered to her for a moment” (Hawthorne 55). Kenneth Kupsch acknowledges Coverdale’s budding interest in Priscilla by citing several passages where a sickly Coverdale is equivalent to Priscilla, “thus bringing him, symbolically, at least, in temporary union with her” (Kupsch 7). However, this “temporary union” Kupsch alludes to is not one of romantic attachment, but one that allows Coverdale to mediate his own anxieties, using Priscilla as his medium.

It is clear from the interaction and the disdain with which he receives Priscilla’s present in his sick chamber that Coverdale is unable to engage in a heterosexual relationship. Noting she was not intimated, Coverdale concluded, “My weakly condition, I suppose, supplied a medium in which she could approach me” (Hawthorne 74). Although not completely aware of his attempts at regaining Active status, Coverdale labels Priscilla as passive, supposing his temporary sickness is the vehicle for their relation and failing to take into consideration his overall demeanor. In aligning Priscilla with passivity, Coverdale is quick to realize the connection, to which he immediately rejects the nightcap; thus Coverdale’s rejection becomes apparent for he is unwilling to align himself with any passive relic. Because he is unable to concurrently accept conflicting ideologies, Coverdale believes that if he can sympathize with Priscilla, his attempt at Activity will be foiled.

Whereas the unnamed narrator of Fight Club incessantly pushes Marla Singer further away, thus indicating a negative fixation, Coverdale exhibits an endearing preoccupation with Priscilla at Blithedale. It is later understood that Coverdale’s
obsession is due to the projection of his feelings onto Priscilla, her heart serving as a
guise for Coverdale’s own heart. 19 What seems to be a musing to himself— “It often
amazed me, however, that Hollingsworth should show himself so recklessly tender
towards Priscilla, and never once seem to think of the effect to which it might have upon
her heart—” Coverdale substitutes Priscilla’s heart for his own, concerned with how
Hollingsworth’s carelessness could impact him (Hawthorne 100). Using his dreams as a
means for expressing wish fulfillment, Coverdale recalls one in particular:

Dreams had tormented me, throughout the night [...] In those of last night,
Hollingsworth and Zenobia, standing on either side of my bed, had bent across it
to exchange a kiss of passion. Priscilla, beholding this, —had melted gradually
away, and left only the sadness of her expression in my heart. (Hawthorne 167)

Calling attention to the anxieties this particular dream evokes, Coverdale returns to his
sickbed where originally felt connected to Priscilla, which was followed by his
instantaneous rejection of her gift. In returning to the site, he forges an uninhibited
connection with Priscilla, and allows her actions to reflect the anxieties Coverdale feels.

In this dream, Zenobia becomes a nemesis twice over to Coverdale in that she rivals him
for Hollingsworth’s affections, as well as simultaneously existing in the Active and
passive sides of the binaries, further fueling Coverdale’s anxieties.

DEATH IN DUALITY: CONSEQUENCES OF ACHIEVING A PERCEIVED
IMPOSSIBILITY

19 Miller notes, “Coverdale displays obvious jealousy of Hollingsworth’s appeal to
Priscilla fearing that his male rival/object of fraternal love will ‘crush the tender rosebud
[Priscilla’s heart] in his grasp.’ Coverdale continues to reiterate all his concerns in this
matter are for Priscilla’s feelings (6).
The existence of a character with a “unified” identity that transcends traditional binary boundaries is a threat to the narrators. This transcendence itself shatters the narrators’ burgeoning greater identities. Adding to their hesitation and anxiety is that others achieve such transcendence in the texts. As Coverdale struggles to articulate his own identity, Zenobia, who is both masculine and feminine, can exist in contradiction—the woman with a big head and mannish hands is also that “hothouse flower.” And Robert Paulson’s cancer induced castration and acquisition of feminine features places him in a similar state of contradiction within Fight Club: he physically achieves an androgynous state in the gender binary. The ability of these secondary characters to transcend the need to identify with one given identity or another inadvertently trivializes the narrators’ own struggles for an identity. The narrators’ arguable responsibility for their deaths reflects their own resolution to choose to privilege binaries over an existence in a state of contradiction. The deaths of these characters perform the morbid attempt by the narrators to rid themselves of the anxiety that one’s identity can be both contradictory and therefore complete.

The suppression of the narrator’s need for Marla allows Bob to assume the text’s comforting maternal persona. Once a week in a church basement, Bob and the narrator bond by attending “Men Remaining Together,” a support group for men battling or surviving testicular cancer. They console each other as they cope with the removal of their testicles and themselves from the Active side of the binary. The members of the support group embrace their castrated selves in performing socially dictated feminine behavior: they release their frustrations through sobs and hugs. Although he cannot cry in

20 Kavadlo notes Big Bob is the only maternal figure in the novel.
the presence of Marla, the narrator admonishes his anxieties by crying into Bob’s mammoth chest, and recalls how “the front of Bob’s shirt was a wet mask of how I looked crying” (Palahniuk 22). While Bob and the rest of the members of “Men Remaining Together” are physically castrated, the narrator suffers from his own feelings of castration and therefore earns his place within the group.

Bob’s existence provides several layers of condensation, each contributing to the narrator’s anxieties. The first layer is Bob’s androgyny, as he becomes the physical embodiment of castration anxiety. Bob’s former hyper-masculine body-building self, the representation of the quintessential man, has been replaced with “bitch tits” (Palahniuk 17). The narrator relays Bob’s former hyper-masculinity to his audience:

Big Bob was a juicer, he said. All those salad days on Diannabol and then the racehorse steroid, Wistrol. His own gym, Big Bob owned a gym. He’d been married three times. He’d done product endorsement, and had I seen him on television, ever? The whole how-to-program about expanding your chest was practically his invention. (Palahniuk 21)

Bob’s castration reflects the narrator’s own passive anxieties and the ultimate punishment for defying Project Mayhem. In the eyes of the narrator, Bob can never regain Active status.

Despite physical castration, the narrator recounts how Bob penetrates the Active side of Cixous’ binary, “One morning I’m leaving for work and Big Bob’s on the front porch wearing black shoes and a black shirt and pants,” and seeks the social refuge of Project Mayhem (Palahniuk 131). But as Bob accepts the life of a performing a single tedious task, he now becomes assimilated with the space monkeys and therefore becomes passive once again. Seemingly content with whom he has become, the only identification found on Bob when he is shot is a picture from his body-building days, a time he attested
was better than real life—’ one where he felt he was wholly masculine (Palahniuk 177). Nevertheless, while he is alive, not only is Bob’s androgyny proof that one can exist in contradiction, but also Bob embellishes conflicting ideologies in his lackey status and the idealization of egocentricity. Even though neither narrator nor Tyler pulled the trigger, it is significant that their negligence resulted in the death of Bob.

Coverdale’s hand in Zenobia’s murder is much more direct although only implied within the text. In order to exhibit Zenobia’s duplicitous nature, Coverdale pictures Zenobia “in Eve’s earliest garment” (Hawthorne 44). He exposes her in contradiction: the nearly naked vision is pure because Coverdale pictures Zenobia as no ordinary almost-naked woman, but the world’s first woman. Coverdale hopes to draw his readers into the erotic implications of his mental picture, although his words relay the religious implications of Eve’s impurity; she is clothed because she has sinned. Coverdale thus projects Eve’s sins onto Zenobia; her sinister nature is juxtaposed to place Zenobia in a paradox. Furthering her paradoxical nature, Zenobia can reconcile leading both the communal life and maintaining a public life, to which Coverdale then admits that Zenobia’s defense of a duplicitous lifestyle, “irritated me, this self-complacent, condescending, qualified approval and criticism” (Hawthorne 178). Zenobia’s response becomes bothersome in that she embraces the duality of her nature, while Coverdale is still committed to singularity. But despite the need to identify as either Blithedaler or poet, Coverdale is compelled to agree with her; he even cites her authority. Thus

21 McElroy and McDonald’s argue that Coverdale had always been in love with Zenobia, and had actually murdered her in a state of subconscious rage. Due to a stress-induced amnesia, “His mind refuses to remember what he did, though he half suspects himself” (9).
Coverdale’s irritation with Zenobia is not in with the statement itself, but the ability to suspend one’s self in a state of contradiction.

If McElroy and McDonald are right and Coverdale murders Zenobia in an unconscious, dreamlike state, I believe he does so in an attempt at ridding himself of his anxieties, because she has completed herself in a way he cannot. Hoping dialogue will mask his unconscious wish, Coverdale implicates himself when his observations contradict his utterances. The sequence of events leading up to Zenobia’s death appears coincidental. But coincidence proves superficial as an analysis of his observations reveal Coverdale’s involvement to be uncanny. Guising as coincidences, Coverdale presents his commentary in half-truths and contradiction. While taking leave from the commune, Coverdale feigns being thrilled to learn that the room he rents has a direct view into Zenobia’s apartment. The next time he is duplicitous is when both Hollingsworth and Coverdale end up at the same viewing of the Veiled Lady, where Coverdale contributes to Hollingsworth’s recognition and rescue of Priscilla. It is also by some marvelous coincidence that Coverdale makes his first visit back to Blithedale the day of Zenobia’s death. Walking along the riverbank in search of the trio, Coverdale fixates on an area distinguished, “with a barkless stump of a tree” (Hawthorne 215). Coverdale then reverts to a state of creative indulgence, entertaining the possibility of a “skeleton of [a] drowned wretch [that] still lay beneath—” his alleged poetic genius functioning as a vehicle for unconscious wish fulfillment (Hawthorne 215).

The climactic fight between Zenobia, Priscilla, and Hollingsworth exhausts Coverdale, and he retires for a nap. Upon waking, Coverdale describes his state of consciousness:
I must have fallen asleep, and had a dream, all the circumstances of which utterly vanished at the moment when they converged to some tragical catastrophe, and thus grew too powerful for the thin sphere of slumber that enveloped them. Starting from the ground […] I found myself all in a tremble. (Hawthorne 233)

The “dream” Coverdale experiences functions identically to the emergence of Tyler Durden. Like the narrator of Fight Club, Coverdale resorts to a state of unconsciousness, repressing a need to rid himself of the reminder that his failure to create a complete sense of self lies in the inability to embrace contradiction. Zenobia’s death thus comes with great relief.

The knowledge of Zenobia’s death is immediately known as soon as Coverdale wakes. But instead of implicating his “unconscious” self in her murder, he consciously maintains she drowned herself. The barkless stump marks the place of death. A further contradiction emerges between Coverdale’s pre-nap contemplation of the depth of the water, and his post-nap expert advice of the underwater terrain to the search party, when he claims, “I know the bottom, having sounded it in fishing […] there is a pool, just by the stump, twelve or fifteen feet deep” (Hawthorne 237). Unfortunately Coverdale fails to document his fishing expedition in between the quarrel and the nap. His description of Zenobia’s rigid corpse provides enigmatic commentary and indicates foul play:

Her arms had grown rigid in the act of struggling, and were bent before her with clenched hands, her knees too, were bent, and- thank God for it! […] One hope I had; and that, too, was mingled half with fear. She knelt, as in prayer. With the last, choking consciousness, her soul, bubbling out through her lips. (Hawthorne 240)

Coverdale’s statement concerning Zenobia’s struggle is somewhere in between a state of dramatic interpretation and a veiled admission of unconscious guilt.

Even Zenobia’s rhetoric indicates that she had intended on living. Though she laments, “Tell him he has murdered me! Tell him that I’ll haunt him!” Zenobia is sure
Coverdale understands her statements are exaggerations when she precedes these statements with, “tell him something pretty and pathetic” (Hawthorne 231). When Coverdale inquires of her future destination, Zenobia first replies, “No matter where,” followed quickly with the assertion that she, “intend[s] to be come a Catholic, for the sake of going into a nunnery” (Hawthorne 232). Regardless of where she wanted to go, it seems that Zenobia had no intention of taking a permanent dip next to the barkless stump. In killing Zenobia, Coverdale also reduces Hollingsworth’s masculinity as he is forced to abandon his project, and Hollingsworth blames himself for Zeonbia’s death. Thus Coverdale assumes an Active position of power over Hollingsworth’s anxieties.

Similarly, at the close of the novel, when the narrator of Fight Club pulls the trigger, he rebels against Tyler as father, proving that all those castration threats Tyler made against the narrator, and all the violence the narrator endured were empty; the narrator now understands that by denying Tyler, the narrator is engaging in Active behavior. The narrator has broken the template, indicating that it is better to attempt Activity, than to be suppressed by Tyler and doomed to passivity. Although unclear of which (if not both) identity emerges in the end, the audience is assured that the narrator has challenged Tyler’s authority in shooting himself.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The identity crisis that both narrators experience results from socially proscribed ideologies. The anxieties become so burdensome to the narrators that they both engage in a series of self-destructive behaviors in order to recreate themselves: 1) the narrators partake in establishing a counterculture movement, and within these novel social structures each narrator assumes a hyper-masculine identity (and enjoy temporary
power); 2) they develop a homoerotic attachment with an even more masculine presence within counterculture movement; 3) they exploit a heterosexual relationship with no intentions of romance; and 4) have at least some of the responsibility for the death of the complete and contradictory identity posed by the text. Neither Coverdale nor the anonymous narrator achieve permanent resolution to their perceived fractured identities; however, the novels end with both narrators achieving a false sense empowerment: Coverdale’s final proclamation is an Active attempt to steer his audience away from his implications in Zenobia’s murder, and the anonymous narrator engages in Active behavior as he attempts to end both his and Tyler’s lives.

With more than 150 years between these texts, the articulation of similar anxieties and the perpetuation of a similar cycle suggests that as long as Western culture pushes for an identity that singularly identifies with only one side of a foundational gender binary, the manifestation of anxieties and similar patterns of psychological behavior will continue to emerge. The identification with material possessions (serving as an index to a cultural identity) is evident within both texts, and each narrator exhibits the need to create an identity that relies on what is culturally proscribed. Freud and Cixous’ theories prove particularly relevant as they articulate the dangers of privileging only one term in a binary and overemphasizing culturally constructed gender roles. My study of two distinctly different texts produced so far apart from one another demonstrates that both the crises and a series of similar behaviors explicated in this essay result from an interaction between the perception of one’s fragmented identity and Western ideologies. This analysis suggests counter intuitively that Paulson and Zenobia should not be perceived as abominations, but should be celebrated, as they entertain the possibility of
achieving a balanced, even unified self. Despite Coverdale and the anonymous narrator’s briefly toying with a hybrid identity, for the readers who identify with them, assuming an identity that embraces duality can never be achieved because as good products of firmly entrenched ideologies, they are anxious and retreat whenever hierarchies are threatened; thus the belief of privileging only one term of the binaries that construct our notions of self, will similarly, forever precludes transcendence into a hybridized unity. These two novels, produced over 100 years apart, by two very different authors in very different times nevertheless reveal that beneath the surface the— associated with identifying too strongly with ideological gender extremes— along with the actions taken to alleviate, have not indeed changed so much.
LITERATURE CITED


