I Am Jack’s Total Display of Masculinity

By Clyde Jamison

Writer Mike Sharett made this comment about David Fincher’s 1999 film adaptation of the novel by Chuck Palahniuk: “…like the culture that produced it, Fight Club is a mixed bag” (63). The film has multiple layers and deals with two of the forms of masculinity in contemporary popular culture. The modern male receives mixed signals about what is manly and Fight Club deals with this crisis. The film portrays the hyper-masculine male, which is represented by multiple characters, including Bob and Tyler. The film also demonstrates how males are being emasculated by consumer culture, which is represented by Jack and, in some sense, Bob. There is a fear in the film of man being emasculated by the consumerism of their society. At the closing, those two metaphorical representations of masculinity are destroyed. Viewers are given the final message of the film: the idea of creating a new self, outside of cultural constrictions.

The story is told through the eyes of Jack, a twenty or thirty-something male who has been emasculated by consumer culture. The audience finds out that Jack is suffering from insomnia. He begins filling his life with consumer goods from the IKEA catalogue. Author Terry Lee notes, “The male protagonist, Jack, substitutes a desire for consumer objects—IKEA—for sexual desire and for emotional connection to human beings” (418). “We used to watch pornography,” Jack explains. Now he fills his time by ogling the pages of catalogues. Instead of finding a friend or sexual partner, he turns to the IKEA catalogue to fill the void in his life. Jack has lost his sense of male sexuality.

There is significance in the choice of the name Jack for the main character of this film. Jack is a common name. It is a name that is not meant to be remembered. Jack’s character represents the everyman of the film. According to Dramma Giocosa, “…[T]he central character is a modern version of the ‘organization man,’ a thin, gray, terminally bored insomniac and man who spends his life shuffling papers, sitting on planes and buying IKEA furniture for his apartment” (131). Dr. Lynn M. Ta describes Jack as “a nameless insomniac and unfulfilled cog in the wheel of bureaucratized America who cannot seem to escape the [feminized] trappings of corporate oppression and Swedish home furnishings” (265). Jack feels this and in order to try to express himself better, he purchases material goods. He tries to define himself by his apartment, not by his actions. The film implies that the modern man has been castrated by the feminization of consumer culture. Instead of defining oneself by his actions, the modern man defines himself by his items.

When filling his life with consumer goods does not cure Jack’s insomnia, he goes to the doctor. The doctor informs him that he will not die of insomnia, but Jack claims he is in pain. The doctor says that if he wants to see pain, he should go to “Remaining Men Together Meeting.” The significance of the “Remaining Men Together Meeting” is that they are men who have suffered from testicular cancer. Most of the men in this group have lost their testicles. The member who gravitates towards Jack at his first meeting is Bob.

Bob represents multiple ideas in this film. One author suggests “the film attacks both hegemonic Rambo-fed muscle pumping masculinity and complacency of ‘new-man’ feminist-friendly,
IKEA-draped manhood” (Giocosa, 134). Bob represents both a criticism of the muscle-clad hyper-masculinity and consumerism. He was the creator of a muscle mass building program for men and a “juicer.” Bob is a castrated man: he has not only lost his manhood through his testicles, but has also started growing breasts, the female characteristic that is the most obvious part of the female identity. Bob fully represents the castration, but is also being punished for his involvement with the creation of commercial goods to make average men macho men with bulging muscles. Bob’s transformation in the film also runs parallel to Jack’s. Bob is a hyper-masculine male in his life outside of the narrative because of his past career as a body builder. He is known for his muscle mass and his pectoral muscles program. Bob is effeminized by losing his testicles because of his hyper-masculine lifestyle. Like Jack, he is looking for someone to comfort him and help him regain his lost masculinity.

Bob is very much a minor character in this film. Little is known about him except for what Jack chooses to tell the audience. Like Jack, he goes through a transformation. Bob represents the two forms of masculinity this film addresses. He starts out effeminized with no testicles, crying in a support group meeting. Then he is transformed into a warrior in Tyler’s army of vandals. Bob’s death in the film also foreshadows that Jack will have to stop Tyler’s plans, forcing Jack to complete his final transformation. Jack is compelled to leave behind his life of recklessness, and embrace a new identity and partner.

After attending the meetings, Jack starts feeling like a man again. In turn, he starts sleeping again. Jack is in the land of men with no testicles; he is the alpha male simply because he has his testicles. Jack’s meetings are invaded by Marla Singer. Marla is the major female character in this film. She is the love interest of both Jack and Tyler. She is the prize at the end the tunnel for Jack, once he has completed his transformation for emasculated to hyper-masculine. Jack is forced to realize that he should not close off the opposite of sex. In order to do that, he has to learn his lesson the hard way. The presence of Marla causes Jack to spiral back into his cycle of not sleeping. Marla could potentially feminize Jack’s new escape. After that, Jack returns to his life of corporate castration. He begins to travel the country again for the nameless car insurance company he works for. He meets people on the planes that he calls his “Single Serving Friends.” On one of his trips he meets Tyler Durden. Tyler is Jack’s mentor for his next transformation in the into hyper-masculine man.

Tyler represents hyper-masculinity. Tyler is, as described in one article, “a flamboyant character with a taste for vandalism and violence, who lives in an abandoned house in an urban wasteland, with no consumer comforts of any sort” (Giocosa 131). Tyler is Jack’s polar opposite. He dresses in flashy clothing, like blood-red leather jackets. He has messy hair and an ideal physique. Jack is a corporate drone in a white dress shirt, black tie, and average hair cut. Unlike Jack, Tyler does not live by consumer ties. He does everything in his power not to. Tyler lives his life by complete id impulses. As soon as Jack and Tyler get off their plane, one of the first things Tyler does is steal a car. Throughout the movie, Tyler is shown living a hyper-masculine lifestyle, living by his id.

Another aspect of Tyler that sets him apart from Jack is his employment. Jack works for a nameless insurance company, where as Tyler owns his own, probably illegal, soap business. In order to make soap he steals fat from liposuction clinics. As Tyler explains to Jack, “[he sells]
rich women their own fat asses.” Tyler, in a sense, is kind of Robin Hood—only he is stealing from the rich and selling to the rich. Tyler lives life by his own laws and becomes Jack’s new model for masculinity.

Other interesting aspects of the two characters are their homes. Jack considers his apartment a “filing cabinet for young professionals.” Jack again refers to how insignificant he feels. At one point in the film Jack’s apartment is destroyed. This is the point in the film where he begins his transformation into a new man. All that remains of Jack’s consumer life is smoldering remains in the street. At this point in the film, Jack takes a moment to comment on his refrigerator: “It is shame, a refrigerator filled with condiments but no food.” This quote really explains Jack’s existence before meeting and eventually moving in with Tyler. Jack, like his refrigerator, had just condiments. He filled his life with consumer goods rather than the company of others in the form of friends or sexual partners. Jack was the one who set the bomb in his apartment, destroying all of his material goods. That act begins his transformation into the hunter-gatherer male, a rebirth into a new man. Lee considers Tyler and Jack’s relationship this way: “Tyler can help Jack, but he has to want the help” (421). By blowing up his apartment and eventually moving in with Tyler, Jack signals that he is willing to be stripped down and learn the ways of Tyler.

From this point on in the film, Jack begins to transform into a new form of masculinity. One author states: “Jack equates masculinity with the hyper-masculine world of Tyler” (Ta 270). Jack used the IKEA catalogue as method to find out what a man should be. Now his new archetype is the hyper-masculine world of Tyler Durden and the Paper Street Soap Company. Tyler will show Jack what it means to be at rock bottom—how to live his life as a stripped-down male who survives on the basics. In Tyler’s vision, a man does not need coffee tables or fancy towels. He just needs himself. Once Jack is willing to give up that life, he can join with Tyler and destroy all that is feminizing.

Jack moving in with Tyler is a big change from the safe secure world of the “filing cabinet for young professional” that has all the modern comforts of modern life. One author says Tyler’s house “reflects the regressive masculinity embodied in its owner” (Ta 274). Tyler’s house is bare and has no signs of emasculating feminine paraphernalia. Before going to the house on Paper Street, Tyler delivers one of the most famous lines of the film to Jack: “Hit me as hard as you can.” Jack hitting Tyler shows he is willing to spiral down into a life of vandalism and hyper-masculine activity, under the direction of his mentor.

The fight club that Tyler and Jack start serves an arena for man to restore their manhood. It gets rid of all that is feminine and helps the average male get back to basics. The target of Fight Club is the average Joe. It is not meant for athletic males or the corporate executives. It is meant for men in the service sector. As Fight Club progresses, it evolves into Project Mayhem. The goal of Project Mayhem is to destroy all that is feminine. The members of Project Mayhem are given homework assignments after each meeting of Fight Club, which usually involve some sort of vandalism related to the consumer culture that emasculated the men of Fight Club. This helps to accomplish the goal Tyler has been preaching since the beginning of the film. One of Tyler’s main philosophies is: “It's only after we've lost everything that we're free to do anything.” Tyler wants to destroy the consumer culture that replaced the simple hunter-gather nature that Tyler
believes should be necessary. Tyler can live his life with his fellow man by the rules that he wants, where basically anything goes.

At the climax of the film, it is revealed that Jack and Tyler are embodied in the same person. Tyler is the creation of Jack’s bored imagination. One author responds to this twist by saying, “Tyler, then, embodies Jack’s own repressed strengths, qualities, that are useful, when contacted for short periods in the service of making transformative change, but which cannot be or shouldn’t be acted out in everyday life” (Lee 420). As Tyler tells Jack in their final fight, “All the ways you wish you could, be that’s me.” Tyler is Jack’s idea of what a male should be in modern society, as opposed to what Jack was before his transformation into the hyper-masculine male. Since Jack represents the everyman, the film shows audiences that every man can get bored. Once a man becomes bored like Jack, he can begin to lash out violently toward the culture that oppresses him.

Jack must stop Tyler and Project Mayhem. Essentially all Project Mayhem is doing is senseless vandalism. Tyler’s master plan involves blowing up all the credit card buildings. By destroying the credit card companies, one of the figure heads of the consumer culture that emasculated the men of Fight Club, he is destroying the feminizing element. Jack does actually outsmart his imaginary friend and manages to kill him by shooting himself in the mouth. Jack has destroyed his new ideal of manliness as well. Jack has left behind the all-male world of Fight Club and Project Mayhem. Now he is able to embrace a female and begin a new transformation.

At the end of the film, the two portrayals of masculinity that the film promotes are destroyed metaphorically. Jack murders Tyler and the hyper-masculinity embodied in him is destroyed. The credit card buildings blow up, representing the destruction of consumer culture. As all of this occurs, Jack and Marla join hands. Ta describes the events this way:

It will be more than just Marla who joins hands with Jack to renegotiate the terms of masculinity and map out new alternatives that will impact the collective good. Perhaps members of defunct Fight Club can now also join hands with Jack in the mission to reignite and reconstitute a sense of social utility as a redemptive quality of neither masculinity nor femininity, but humanity (277).

It is suggested in the final scene that it should not be male against female, but male and female together as humans. If we take away those constructions, we can live a better life. As the credits roll, Jack says to Marla, “You’ve helped me at a very strange time in my life.” Jack’s remark implies that he needed another women in his life to guide him, not Tyler, his hyper-masculine alter ego.

Fight Club is more than what Sharrett calls “the angry white male narrative” (63). It is a portrayal of two ideas of masculinity and how they can limit the ability of the modern male. Sometimes they are too limiting and nameless, as with the consumer culture emasculated male. Other times they are overly self and socially destructive, as with the hyper-masculine male. The closing of this film tells the audience that neither one of these ideas of manliness are correct. Chuck Palahniuk explains that “[his] hope was that the film… would offer more people the idea that they could create their own lives outside the existing blueprint offered by society” (Lee 421).
Palahniuk’s hope for the film can be applies to be both male and female viewers. One does not need to allow culture to define one’s identity.

Works Cited


