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Masculine and feminine: Interdependent gender roles in ‘fight club’

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Abstract

The notion of men and women being reliant on one another is present in modern culture, as evidenced in the film adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk’s novel *Fight Club*—a film which is, ironically, loosely associated with male independence. I argue in this essay that Marla Singer and the narrator’s (Jack’s) respective femininity and masculinity are dependent on that of the other. Jack cannot be masculine while Marla exhibits overly masculine traits; Marla cannot be feminine while Jack exhibits overly feminine traits. Thereby, this film exerts the necessity for long-established gender constructs, suggesting that two people of the opposite sex cannot peacefully coexist while both display the same stereotypical gender traits, and that neither can achieve proper ethos until they are together and exhibiting their assigned traits.

Keywords: films, fight club, david fincher, chuck palahniuk, gender, identity, modern cinema

Introductions

Throughout history has existed a prevalent theme of men and women being reliant on one another, despite the significant—though changing, and usually artificial—inequalities in areas such as education, career power, and political influence. Marc Antony of Rome stabbed himself to death after hearing rumors that his lover, Queen Cleopatra of Egypt, had committed suicide; she, after receiving news of his death, induced a poisonous snake to bite and kill her. Queen Victoria’s reign over England was highly influenced by her husband Prince Albert, and she went into mourning for 40 years after his death. Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, famous criminals during the American Depression, repeatedly faced a threat of violent death during their spree of robberies and eventually were killed together as a result of their crimes. John Lennon and Yoko Ono collaborated on many musical and artistic projects until his death, after which she founded three major memorials for him (Biography.com).

These couples all display a similar trait: a certain degree of dependence on one another, suggesting that a combination of masculine and feminine qualities are needed in order for each person involved to achieve their full potential.

This notion is still present in modern culture, as evidenced in the film adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk’s novel *Fight Club*—a film which is, ironically, loosely associated with male independence. I argue in this essay that Marla Singer and the narrator’s (Jack’s) respective femininity and masculinity are dependent on that of the other. Jack cannot be masculine while Marla exhibits overly masculine traits; Marla cannot be feminine while Jack exhibits overly feminine traits. Thereby, this film exerts the necessity for long-established gender constructs, suggesting that two people of the opposite sex cannot peacefully coexist while both display the same stereotypical gender traits, and that neither can achieve proper ethos until they are together and exhibiting their assigned traits.

This argument is presented in three points. First, I describe the film adaptation, its background, and my feminist methodology of representational critique. Second, I focus on three elements in the film: Jack’s feminine traits of borderline-obsession with furniture and the need to cry; Marla’s masculine traits of fearlessness and brazen obscenity; and their transformation together throughout the film. Third, I conclude with the implications of this argument on rhetorical theory, particularly in terms of traditional gender constructs.

The film adaptation of Chuck Palahniuk’s novel *Fight Club* features a protagonist narrator whose name we assume to be Jack: an average American white-collar male worker bored and disappointed with his life. On his doctor’s recommendation as a cure for his insomnia,

he starts attending a support group for men with testicular cancer; he finds he can suddenly sleep again. He becomes addicted to support groups until he discovers a woman Marla, perennially high-heeled, foul-mouthed, and cigarette-smoking is attending the same meetings. He is upset that someone else is doing the same thing he is; he confronts her and they agree to attend separate meetings.

Shortly after this, Jack encounters Tyler Durden—a man who is everything Jack is not: wholly unfettered, delinquent, and self-assured—on a return flight from a business trip. Jack comes home to find his apartment burned down, and himself without a place to sleep. He calls Tyler, who takes him in and proceeds to wholly alter Jack's worldview. They begin an underground "Fight Club" for men to come and brawl as a means of releasing their anger and embracing their innate violent tendencies as males.

Fight Club grows, as does Jack's rebelliousness and disregard for the impressions of others. Marla calls to inquire why Jack has not been attending support groups and to inform him that she has overdosed on Xanax. Jack leaves the phone off the hook and walks away while she is talking. Tyler picks up the receiver and "helps" Marla through her overdose by bringing her home and sleeping with her. Fight Club continues to grow and eventually morphs into Project Mayhem, a terrorist organization that spreads to most major cities.

Jack becomes uncomfortable with the group's undertakings, attempts to stop them, and eventually learns (with the unwitting aid of Marla) that Tyler is actually his alter-ego who takes over when Jack is sleeping. The members of Project Mayhem come to view Marla as a threat, and Jack tries to send her to safety and stop everything that Tyler has set in motion. In the end, Jack accepts responsibility for his and Tyler's actions and gets rid of Tyler by shooting himself in the mouth. The movie ends with Jack and Marla holding hands at the top of a skyscraper, watching the buildings around them explode.

The feminist methodology that I will employ in this argument is representational critique. This methodology looks at the portrayal of females throughout the culture, and especially in T.V. and film, and their reflection of or on societal norms. This methodology aids in my analysis by allowing me to examine the two primary male and female roles and to contrast their respective characteristics. Using representational critique, I will show how Fight Club reflects gender constructs in modern society.

When we first encounter Jack by himself, he is sitting on the toilet in his home, holding a cordless telephone between his ear and his shoulder, ordering "the Erika Pekkari dust ruffles" while staring at a furniture magazine. The camera spans to show the rest of his home, with assorted furniture and dish items popping into place on the screen (accompanied by their prices and descriptions) while he speaks about his fixation with them:

"Like so many others, I had become a slave to the IKEA nesting instinct. If I saw something clever, like a little coffee table in the shape of a yin-yang, I had to have it. The Klipsch personal office unit. The Hovetrekke home exercise. Or the Ohamshab sofa with the Strinne green stripe pattern. Even the Ryslampa wire lamps of environmentally-friendly unbleached paper. I'd flip through catalogs and wonder, 'What kind of dining set defines me as a person?' I had it all. Even the glass dishes with tiny bubbles and imperfections, proof that they were crafted by

the honest, hard-working, indigenous peoples of...wherever. We used to read pornography. Now it was the Horchow collection" (Fight Club).

Traditionally speaking, the home, including furniture and dishes, are considered to be within the woman's sphere.

Our next initial encounter with Jack includes him asking his doctor to prescribe some kind of sleeping pills for his insomnia (which the doctor refuses to prescribe), describing them in his narration as "red and blue Tuinals, lipstick-red Sectionals" (Fight Club). Here, lipstick is another association with the feminine.

In the following scene, Jack is at a support group for men with testicular cancer (which he does not have). The group leader calls time for one-on-one conversations, and Jack meets Bob—a large male with what Jack calls "bitch tits". He and Bob have a brief conversation, after which Bob cries, and encourages Jack to cry.

Jack does so, and that night he finds his insomnia to be cured. He begins attending other support groups for illnesses he does not have so that he can cry and be comforted, and thus sleep. Here, Jack is blatantly disregarding the adage that "boys don't cry", and embracing what is often considered to be a stereotypically feminine indulgence in tears.

Enter Marla Singer, sporting wild, Medusa-like hair, bug-eye sunglasses, and loudly clacking high-heels. She walks boldly into the room, smoking a cigarette, and asks in a deep, raspy voice, "This is cancer, right?" without so much as a smile or greeting. Jack is immediately unnerved by her, as she obviously does not have testicular cancer. He sees her in his other support groups and knows that she is, like himself, a tourist. This knowledge throws Jack off-kilter: "Her lie reflected my lie. And suddenly, I felt nothing. I couldn't cry. So once again, I couldn't sleep" (Fight Club).

Jack confronts Marla and tells her he wants her to leave; Marla is completely unfazed and walks away. Jack runs after her and follows her out the door and down the street to a Laundromat, attempting to negotiate some kind of compromise. Marla still appears unaffected but agrees to split up the support groups. She leaves the Laundromat and walks across the street without looking, either way, bringing traffic to a halt; Jack, after stopping to make sure he won't be hit, follows her. They come to a final agreement on who will attend which support groups; Marla calls it a deal and sticks out her hand to be shaken, and walks out the door without a goodbye. Throughout this entire scene, Marla is the one who exhibits recklessness and confidence—traditionally male qualities—leaving Jack trailing fretfully in her wake.

Soon after this, Jack encounters Tyler Durden (Jack's alter-ego), who he moves in with after coming home to find his apartment complex on fire. Tyler's attitude towards life is the epitome of stereotypical masculinity—he is careless, destructive, violent, cocky, and slightly grimy-looking. He rubs off very noticeably on Jack, who begins to exhibit similar traits. By the time we see Marla again eight weeks have passed, during which time Jack morphs into somewhat of a replica of Tyler.

She calls to ask why Jack hasn't been attending his support groups and to calmly inform him that she has probably overdosed on Xanax. The camera shows her with her head resting on a dirty, case-less pillow: not a very "feminine" thing to do, and in direct contrast with Jack's spotless apartment at the beginning of the film. However, whereas

throughout their first conversation when Jack was chasing after her trying to get her to listen, in this scene, Marla continues talking to Jack after he simply leaves the phone off the hook and walks away. This shows markedly how much Jack has changed since meeting Tyler.

The next morning, Jack finds Marla in his kitchen and asks what she's doing there. She cusses at him and leaves (because Jack is Tyler), after which Tyler walks into the kitchen and tells Jack that he slept with her the night before, and Jack is immediately upset by her again. The screen flashes back to Tyler picking up the phone Jack left, going to get Marla from her apartment, and bringing her home. Throughout this scene, Marla is her standard obscene self—cussing, generally being a mess and lacking completely anything that might be described as lady-like. Tyler and Marla continue sleeping together, which bothers Jack. A few scenes later, Marla calls Jack because she thinks she's found a lump in her breast. Jack is not sure how to deal with this, but he goes to her apartment anyway.

When he shows up, she offers him a stolen boxed lunch, saying she got it for him, and she asks concernedly about a burn on his hand—both motherly, feminine actions. This marks Marla's shift away from the more masculine traits in her character, which occurs only after she is forced to face the distinctly feminine threat of a lump in her breast. She continues on this very feminine cant by kissing Jack a thank-you after he examines her breast and fails to find a lump, and then by appearing frustrated and disappointed when Jack asks if they are done (because she and Jack have been sleeping together for some time, even though Jack is unaware of it).

By the time Jack realizes that he and Tyler are actually the same person, Marla has grown visibly fond of him, as well as visibly frustrated with the huge inconsistencies of his character. As Project Mayhem is about to set off a major act of terrorism, Jack is attempting to undo what he has done while being Tyler. He apologizes to a furious Marla and jumps in front of a bus to stop it and try and make Marla board and get to safety. This particular act marks another huge change in Jack—who at the beginning of the film, looked both ways before crossing the street after Marla.

Additionally, Jack, previously a non-violent person, resorts to violence in order to try and prevent Project Mayhem's plan from succeeding, eventually shooting himself in the mouth in order to rid himself of Tyler. He takes responsibility for what he has done as Tyler, and takes charge of the situation, ordering the members of Project Mayhem to leave. In the final scene, Marla starts to berate Jack for everything he's caused her to go through, but she stops when she sees that he's been shot. She is genuinely upset by this and immediately starts "playing nurse" and trying to help him. When the buildings around them start exploding, Jack tells Marla that he is fine and that everything is going to be all right.

Both Marla and Jack go through tremendous changes in character throughout the movie. The violence they both experiences transforms Jack into a stronger person—making him more self-aware and assertive—and Marla into a more sensitive person—making her softer and less callous. Whereas Jack displays the more feminine traits at the beginning of the film, and Marla the more masculine, now each has given up some of those opposing gender qualities and absorbed more of that of their own gender.

The impression we are left with at the end of *Fight Club* is that the rearrangement of Marla and Jack's masculine and feminine traits leads them to become better people. Marla, as a more feminine woman, is tenderer towards Jack, and thus more appealing to him. Jack, as a more masculine man, is more confident towards Marla, and thus more appealing to her. This suggests that only through the proper alignment of masculine and feminine traits can one truly achieve the good character and proper ethos. While feminists and supporters have worked vigorously in an attempt to blur the lines of gender constructs, this shows that despite the progress made, they are still very apparent in modern culture and modern society.

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