

There's Something About Marla: *Fight Club* and the Engendering of Self-Respect*

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Forthcoming in Thomas Wartenberg, ed. *Fight Club*. New York: Routledge.

*Excess ain't rebellion.
You're drinking what they're selling.
Your self-destruction doesn't hurt them.
Your chaos won't convert them.
They're so happy to rebuild it.
You'll never really kill it.
Yeah, excess ain't rebellion.
You're drinking what they're selling.*

Cake
Motorcade of Generosity (1994)
"Rock'n'Roll Lifestyle"

Fight Club's protagonist is a nameless male narrator (Edward Norton) who works in an unremarkable office building in an anonymous city for an unidentified auto manufacturer. He lives in a bland high-rise condominium, which he has meticulously appointed with Ikea furniture. He is employed as a "recall coordinator", so he spends much of his time flying around the country investigating car accidents involving cars manufactured by his employer. The narrator has become so forlorn over the pointlessness of his existence that he develops chronic insomnia.

Soon he finds himself at a support group for victims of testicular cancer. There he finds solace in "letting go". He becomes addicted to similar support groups and attends them regularly, pretending to be afflicted with the appropriate fatal disease. His insomnia disappears. And then a woman called Marla (Helena Bonham-Carter) begins showing up at

these meetings. It is clear that Marla is also a “tourist” and the narrator finds that he cannot cry in presence of another faker. His insomnia returns.

Fortunately, the narrator encounters a savior in the charismatic persona of Tyler Durden (Brad Pitt). As Durden’s apprentice, the narrator learns how to recover a sense of meaning and self-worth by rebelling against the system responsible for the hollowness of his existence. This rebellion consists, at first, in forming fight clubs where men can reject society’s domesticating norms and regain their masculinity and sense of purpose by beating and being beaten by other men. In the meantime, much to the narrator’s disgust, Tyler and Marla take up a sexual relationship.

Eventually the rebellion develops into Project Mayhem. The fighters become uniformed, tightly controlled, almost worshipful lackeys who mindlessly carry out Durden’s plans for destroying society. As the film unfolds to depict the evolution of the rebellion, we see the narrator become increasingly uneasy with the aims of Project Mayhem. Then we learn that Tyler is in fact the narrator’s alter ego and that, thanks to Tyler (and therefore to the narrator himself), the corporate headquarters of several major credit card companies are about to blow up. The film ends with the narrator destroying Tyler (by shooting himself in the mouth) and with the narrator and Marla holding hands as they watch the bombed buildings crumble to the ground.

Fight Club is both all about Marla and not about Marla at all. The narrator tells us at the beginning of the film, “...all of this—the gun, the bombs, the revolution—has something to do with a girl named Marla Singer”. Marla, we learn, as the film progresses, is the impetus for the arrival of Tyler Durden, and hence for the formation of the fight clubs and the inception of Project Mayhem. She is the impetus, then, for the mission of self-

repudiation, self-reclamation and social change informing the fight clubs and Project Mayhem. Marla is the force behind the narrator's efforts to salvage his self-respect.

At the same time, Marla is, as a woman, excluded—indeed *shielded*—from this mission of self-renewal. She is, therefore, denied public and communal avenues for self-reclamation and she is denied opportunities for initiating the social change necessary for such reclamation. Her self-renewal must be a solitary pursuit performed in the margins of male-initiated social upheaval. Her only option, within the terms of the film's logic, I will argue, is to define her worth derivatively, by association with the narrator. *Fight Club*, then, despite its somewhat self-effacing attitude about the rejuvenation of masculinity that it portrays, reinforces a familiar patriarchal story: men's sense of worth lies in their joint world-making activities. Women's sense of worth lies in their attachment to individual men who undertake these activities.

My main argument builds upon three preliminary discussions. The first is a brief outline of the contours of the concept of self-respect. The second is an analysis of the links between gender, personhood and the grounds of self-respect. The third is an account of my approach to interpreting *Fight Club* given its many layers of irony. Drawing on these preliminary discussions, I examine two interpretations of the film's social commentary—what I call the “gender-neutral” and the “gender-specific” interpretations. I show that on both of these readings the film implies that Marla, as a woman, must regain her self-respect through an intimate relationship with the narrator.

Self-Respect: The Conceptual Landscape

Most of us believe that self-respect is valuable. And we have some idea what it is for a person to have, to lack or to lose self-respect. Furthermore, some prominent philosophers have founded their ethical theories upon the value of self-respect.¹ And more

than a few contemporary philosophers have devoted considerable effort to figuring out what self-respect is.² Their work shows that the notion is highly complex and multifaceted.

In order to gain some clarity about the concept of self-respect, we can consider the following puzzle. On the one hand, we tend to think that it is generally a good thing for someone have and maintain her self-respect. We might be tempted to think, of someone who has acted in an unworthy manner, "Has she no self-respect?" In this case, we see her act as *rooted in a lack of self-respect*, and we may judge this lack to be a character flaw (even though we might not blame her for the flaw). On the other hand, though, we tend to think it is sometimes a bad thing for someone to have self-respect. We might be tempted to think, again, of someone who has acted in an unworthy manner, "How can he respect himself?" In this case, we see his conduct as *warranting a loss of self-respect*, and we may judge his failure to experience a loss of self-respect as a character flaw.

How can we hold simultaneously that all of us should respect ourselves and that some of us should not respect ourselves? How can we hold that persons should always strive to preserve their self-respect and that they should sometimes lose their self-respect? The way out of this puzzle is to recognize that there are two distinct notions of self-respect embedded in our moral discourse. Following Robin Dillon, I will use the terms "recognition self-respect" and "evaluative self-respect" to identify these two notions (Dillon 1992)³.

Recognition Self-Respect

Recognition self-respect is the kind of self-respect that we tend to think all persons ought to possess and strive to preserve. Unworthy behavior, such as allowing one's rights to be trampled, is viewed as evidence of, or as constitutive of, an absence of this type of self-respect. The label "recognition self-respect" derives from the fact that the view of oneself to which it refers consists primarily in recognizing that one is a person and taking into account

this fact in deliberation and action. Such recognition is not to be understood as mere acknowledgment of the fact that one is a person. It also includes recognition of the implications of this fact, namely that the status of being a person requires certain kinds of conduct toward oneself and it includes an appreciation of the moral standing one has as a person.

In the case of recognition self-respect, one's being a person relates not only to the object of one's self-respect, but also to its normative grounds. Where the object of recognition self-respect is oneself considered as a person, the normative ground of recognition self-respect is one's being a person. One's status as a person requires or entitles one to respect oneself. This notion of the proper ground of recognition self-respect allows us to make sense of the commonly held view that persons ought always to respect themselves. If it is simply in virtue of *being* persons that individuals ought to respect themselves, it follows that persons ought always to respect themselves.

In order to have a sense of what would count as respectful or disrespectful conduct toward persons considered as such, we must have some idea of what a person is. Most accounts of recognition self-respect rely upon a Kantian ideal of the person: persons are understood as autonomous, rational agents who possess a special worth grounded in their capacity for moral agency and who enjoy a status of moral equality with other persons on the basis of this special worth. Recognition respect for oneself, then, involves the proper appreciation of these features of oneself and the status they confer.

Evaluative Self-Respect

Evaluative self-respect is the kind of self-respect that we are sometimes supposed to lose. Where the presence of recognition self-respect *prompts* us to engage in worthy conduct or refrain from engaging in unworthy conduct, the presence (or absence) of evaluative self-

respect depends upon conduct already undertaken. Moreover, evaluative self-respect, unlike recognition self-respect, is merited. It is something that people must earn by conforming their actions, attitudes, and so on to certain standards of worthiness. Consequently, we are not always entitled to have evaluative self-respect, and some instances of evaluative self-respect are unwarranted. Likewise, some instances of *diminished* evaluative self-respect are also unwarranted. One may persist in viewing oneself in a negative light as a consequence of expecting too much of oneself.

Like recognition self-respect, evaluative self-respect is typically directed toward oneself as a person. When we appraise ourselves as persons, the object of our evaluations is generally our character. For example, one who believes racism to be a defect of character might lose respect for herself upon discovering that some of her attitudes are racist. So, both recognition self-respect and evaluative self-respect may take persons, considered as such, as objects. However, the object of evaluative self-respect can be more specifically identified as one's character or even particular traits of character.

Where recognition self-respect is grounded in one's being a person, evaluative self-respect is grounded in being a *good* person; it is gained and lost, preserved and reclaimed on the basis of one's actions, attitudes, and so on that bear upon or express one's character. This understanding of the appropriate grounds of evaluative self-respects helps us make sense of the idea that evaluative self-respect is something that individuals should sometimes lose. If one acts in a way that is unworthy, he ought to disapprove of himself. He would be unjustified, in other words, in feeling completely satisfied with himself.

Relations Between Recognition and Evaluative Self-Respect

Although recognition self-respect and evaluative self-respect are conceptually distinct attitudes, they are related to one another in several ways. I will discuss only one of

these ways, which is important for my “diagnosis” below of the characters in *Fight Club*. A person’s evaluative self-respect frequently depends upon and fluctuates with one’s recognition self-respect (Dillon 1992). One has and expresses recognition self-respect, recall, by committing oneself to certain standards that are required of persons as such. Were one to realize that she had failed to meet these standards, her evaluative respect for herself might decrease; she might negatively appraise herself in light of her failure to fulfill the requirements imposed by her moral personhood. In short, it is not uncommon for one to lose her self-respect because she’s failed to maintain her self-respect.

There are two kinds of cases where this connection between evaluative and recognition self-respect does not obtain. One arises from the definition of recognition self-respect and one arises from the pliability of human psychology. Consider the first type of case. If having recognition self-respect is fully to acknowledge one’s standing as a person, then one can fail to respect oneself in the recognition sense merely by being ignorant. (I will discuss such a case below.) However, if one is ignorant of what’s involved in comporting oneself as a person, then, if he fails to so comport himself, it follows that he will not be aware of his failure. Hence, he will not be aware that he has reason to negatively evaluate himself, and so will not impose upon himself such an evaluation.

A second reason that a decrease in evaluative self-respect may not result from a failure of recognition self-respect is because one may engage in various sorts of denial. For instance, one might deceive oneself about the nature of one’s own conduct or attitudes to spare oneself the pain of seeing oneself in an unfavorable light.

As much as we might be able to lay out the conceptual and psychological relations between recognition and evaluative self-respect, an epistemological obstacle remains. When we observe in a person the self-deprecating, self-loathing or self-destructive behavior

typically associated with the absence of self-respect, we cannot always know what kind of self-respect a person is lacking. A person who lacks recognition self-respect, for example, might, in Kant's words, "make himself a worm" because he fails to understand his moral equality with others (Kant 1996). Or, he might contrive to do so to benefit himself. The conduct associated with this self-attitude might include, say, publicly belittling or deprecating himself.

Now, a person who suffers from diminished *evaluative* self-respect (justifiably or not) might engage in similar behaviors. For instance, the person in the example above might be so disgusted with himself, in the end, for making himself a worm as a means to personal gain, that he exhibits self-loathing, which conduct is not externally distinguishable from his worm-like behavior. Or consider a person who is disappointed in herself for some failure of character unrelated to her recognition self-respect. She might also display self-contempt, although her recognition self-respect is fully intact. I offer these observations as a confession that the "diagnoses" of the characters in *Fight Club* I offer below are necessarily speculative. I can only hope that they are plausible.

Gender and Self-Respect

The account of self-respect I have presented is very much complicated by the existence of gender hierarchy.⁴ And it would be incomplete without a discussion of the philosophical relations between gender and personhood. A useful way to sort through the complications introduced by gender is by discussing the case, due to Thomas Hill, of the Deferential Wife. Hill asks us to imagine her as follows:

This is a woman who is utterly devoted to serving her husband. She buys the clothes *he* prefers, invites the guests *he* wants to entertain and makes love whenever *he* is in the mood. She willingly moves to a new city in order

for him to have a more attractive job, counting her own friendships and geographical preferences insignificant by comparison. She loves her husband, but her conduct is not simply an expression of love. She is happy, but she does not subordinate herself as a means to happiness. She does not simply defer to her husband in certain spheres as a trade-off for his deference in other spheres. On the contrary, she tends not to form her own interests, values and ideals; and when she does, she counts them as less important than her husband's. She readily responds to appeals from Women's Liberation that she agrees that women are mentally and physically equal, if not superior, to men. She just believes that the proper role for a woman is to serve her family. As a matter of fact, much of her happiness derives from her belief that she fulfills this role very well. No one is trampling on her rights, she says; for she is quite glad and proud to serve her husband as she does (Hill 1991a: 5-6).

Hill claims that the deferential wife is *servile*, which is a trait incompatible with self-respect. Her servility, he says, rests in her failure to understand and properly value her moral rights—in particular, those rights, such as the right to have a say in where they live or whom they entertain—that bear upon her status of moral equality with her spouse. Many people are resistant to the idea that the Deferential Wife is lacking in self-respect.⁵ An examination of one of the reasons for this resistance will reveal some important insights about the gendered nature of self-respect.⁶

The Deferential Wife is clearly doing what she thinks is right. Her commitment to living her life in accordance with her values arguably shows integrity. Moreover, many of the values she has committed to—caring for her family, for example—are hardly morally

questionable. It seems odd to attribute such a damning character flaw as servility to a person with these admirable qualities. However, all that is commendable about the Deferential Wife is compatible with her uncritically subordinating herself, *qua* woman, to a man, *qua* man. And we do not have to look far to find out why she willingly and happily does this. The Deferential Wife accepts a common patriarchal ideal of femininity and her pride derives from her fulfilling this ideal. To resist attributing to the Deferential Wife a lack of self-respect, on account of her worthy qualities is, I suggest, to resist recognizing the way in which ideological support for gender hierarchy is wrought, in part, by idealizing the traits of those on the bottom who are compliant. Few people, I submit, would resist attributing a lack of self-worth to an exactly similar case involving a Deferential Husband.

The specific combination of commendable and regrettable qualities exhibited by the Deferential Wife exposes the nature of the links between gender, personhood and the grounds of self-respect. Though the Deferential Wife disregards, in some ways, her status as a person, she obviously does not experience a loss of evaluative self-respect on this basis. Her evaluative self-respect is intact because she has *staked* her self-worth on her status, not as a person, but as a woman. Her positive self-appraisal rests upon a long-standing male-dominant conception of woman according to which women lack the status of full personhood.

On this view, although men and women both *partake* of personhood, they partake of it differently, and this difference is, *for women*, the decisive mark of inferiority. This (supposed) natural inferiority justifies women's lower moral and social standing and their role as "helpmeet" for man (Tuana 1993)⁷. Men's natural superiority, on this view, justifies their role as leaders and world-makers and their exclusion of women from these activities. Both Kant and Freud, for example, assert that women are less capable than men of morality

(Freud 1964:125-129, Kant 1960: 81). Aristotle claims that women's deliberative capacity is "without authority" and that she therefore exhibits virtue in obeying men (Aristotle 1982: 1259b32, 1260a14). And Rousseau maintains that, due to her difference from man, woman "is specially made for man's delight" (Rousseau 1979: 358).

If women are not regarded as persons to the full extent—if their "womanness" makes them lesser or defective persons—and if women uncritically accept this picture (one would assume under a more romantic description), then it follows that they would be disinclined to respect themselves as persons. Moreover, if we consider the ubiquity, reach and power of gender norms, then we would expect that women would stake their self-respect on their status as women.⁸ And that is what the Deferential Wife does. Her "recognition self-respect"⁹ consists in her living up to the expectations placed upon her as a woman. Her evaluative self-respect is secured by her awareness that she does this well.

Two differences between men's and women's self-respect follow from this assimilation of persons with men. First, under a system of male dominance, a woman who genuinely respects herself as a person will fail, in some regards, to live up to the norms of her gender. One cannot simultaneously act as an equal and as a subordinate. For a man, respecting oneself, in the recognition sense, as a person is compatible with living up to the norms of his gender. There is a convenient overlap between ideals of personhood and ideals of masculinity. Both persons and men should e.g., stand up for their rights, demand their due, exercise their autonomy, and so on. A man who subordinated himself to another (unnecessarily) would fail to respect himself both as a person and as a man. And, he would have grounds to lose his evaluative self-respect for both types of failure.

The second difference is this: because women are expected to take as their own aim, the support of men *in their aims*, and because women's opportunities for cultural production and

world-making have therefore been limited, women's worth and self-worth is derivative. In the first place, a woman must be in a heterosexual union with a man in order to fulfill the expectation that she support, or at least defer to, the man with whom she is in such a union. So she must be part of such a union in order to have the proper grounds, by patriarchal standards, for "recognition self-respect". It follows that she must be part of such a union in order for her "recognition self-respect" to be intact. Secondly, her evaluative self-respect, since it depends, in part, on her preserving her "recognition self-respect", will be grounded, to some extent, in her success in attaching herself, in the requisite way, to a man. Under male dominance, women's self-respect cannot be adequate in the absence of relationships with men.

Interpretive Framework

Some reviewers have interpreted *Fight Club* as a straightforward satire of the consumerist mindset that has (ostensibly) gripped Americans of the late twentieth century.¹⁰ And there are indeed moments of up-front satire in the film, for instance the send-up of support groups and of white-collar office culture. Interpretations that emphasize the satirical aspects of the film, and the social criticism embedded therein, arguably underemphasize the self-referential aspects of the film, which have been foregrounded in some scholarly treatments.¹¹ These self-referential moments complicate the film in two ways. First they reveal the film's awareness of its own status as a consumer item. Second, they reveal the film's awareness of the difficulty, for a critique of consumer capitalism, of positioning itself outside of the system it criticizes.¹²

The difficulty might be described as follows: the system of consumer capitalism is nearly absolute in its control over what ideas are disseminated. Moreover, it is extremely resistant to disseminating ideas that would undermine it. So, to the extent that a critique is

genuinely located outside of the system, it will receive little or no uptake. To the extent that the critique is located within the system, it will receive uptake, but only if either sanitized or insincere. If the critique is sanitized—if it is drained of its radical content or tone—then it is essentially devoid of critical force; if it is insincere, then, to avoid being *simply* hypocritical, it must be ironic. The film must offer its critique with a wink. Here, too, though, the critique loses force. But in *this* case the mere taking up of the distancing stance garners the film a kind of outsider status. The way to the outside, if one is inextricably ensconced on the inside, is to *acknowledge* one's location through gestures of self-mockery.

Fight Club was produced by Twentieth Century Fox, one of the six major Hollywood studios. It is a highly stylized movie featuring well-known actors Edward Norton and Helena Bonham Carter and mega-star Brad Pitt. Furthermore, it is rife with product placements, most notably Starbucks and Pepsi. It is quite apparent to the viewer then, that the film is implicated in the system it sets out to criticize. It is, itself, not only an object for consumption, but one that has various *accoutrements* designed to promote its own *mass* consumption, such as extremely popular actors and slick production. Moreover, the willingness of such mega-corporations as Starbucks and Pepsi to allow the placement of their products is a clear indication that the film's message hardly poses a threat to the future consumer capitalism.

Fight Club conveys its awareness of its own status as consumer item in a variety of ways. For instance, in one scene the narrator and Tyler are riding a bus the inside of which is plastered with advertisements. One of the ads features a beautifully sculpted, bare-chested male model advertising Gucci clothing. The narrator says to Tyler in a derisive tone, "Is that what a man looks like?" Tyler laughs in agreement with the narrator's criticism of the ideal of male beauty perpetuated by visual media, especially advertising. Early on in the next

scene of a fight club meeting, we see a shot of Brad Pitt's beautifully sculpted, bare-chested body (Ansen 1999)¹³. Indeed the film contains many similar shots offering such "eye-candy". So we are given the social critique and then we are given a confession: we are shown that the film knows that it is indeed an instance of what it condemns.

Another example concerns Tyler's practice of splicing pornography—in particular, male organs—into family films. The narrator is pictured, *as a narrator*—not as part of the narrative—in the frame in which he explains to us the requirements of Tyler's job as a projectionist. Meanwhile, Tyler demonstrates his job to us by pointing to the upper corner of the frame in which he is pictured to show us the "cigarette burns" in the film—the film we are watching—that are designed to tell the projectionist when it is time to change the reel. At the very end of the film, we see a penis spliced into the film—again, the film that we are watching. These formal features show us that *Fight Club* is quite conscious of its being a film. Indeed, we see that it is conscious of being the sort of film into which Tyler might be tempted to splice pornography. Hence, this splicing represents the film's admission that it is nothing more than a big studio movie whose aim is entertainment, not genuine social critique, satirical or not.

Fight Club, then, is, in a certain respect, unstable. It offers moments of satire designed to denounce consumerism. At the same time, it frequently pulls back from its social critique in its moments of self-awareness. I think these two dimensions of the film can be treated individually. That is, I believe that the coherence of the narrative's social critique can be assessed separately from the film's position regarding its own status as critique. I will focus on the social critique—the straightforward narrative—because I believe that we can uncover in the *interstices* of that narrative a corroboration of certain widely accepted social norms. The extent to which the film, through its self-referential gestures,

pulls back from the narrative's content turns out to be irrelevant, on my approach, to what the narrative *fails* to say. It is irrelevant to what is implied by the *gaps* in the narrative because the film can insert ironic commentary only upon what it (satirically) says, not upon what it does not say.

What I will argue is that however much of an “outsider” status *Fight Club* is able to achieve through its various layers of irony, it is in the end, along a particular dimension, utterly conventional. It reinforces, I contend, a certain patriarchal ideal of femininity through its portrayal of Marla. Just to forestall a certain misinterpretation of my view: I am not standing my argument on the open misogyny expressed by Tyler (though I will discuss his misogyny below.) *This* dimension of the film is clearly implicated in the film's calculated distance from its own (purportedly subversive) content. In a vernacular familiar to analytic philosophers, Tyler's misogynistic remarks are mentioned but not used. What I am interested in is the film's failure—arguably colossal, given its overt engagement with issues of self worth—to offer a coherent account of Marla's self-contempt and need for self-renewal.

In particular, I will argue that where the film can account for Marla's lack of self-respect, it cannot account for her exclusion from the revolution and where it can account for her exclusion from the revolution, it cannot account for her lack of self-respect. The result of this incoherence in the narrative is that the film reinscribes the long-standing view, explained above, of women's sense of worth as appropriately derived from their attachment to men.

Portraits of Self-Destructiveness

All of the main characters in *Fight Club* are struggling with issues of self-worth. Consider, first, Marla. She is clearly short on self-respect. She attempts to kill herself. She

refers to herself as “a monster” and as “infectious human waste”. When she learns that a support group member she knew has died, she says, “It was the smart move on her part.” Furthermore, Marla involves herself in a sexual relationship with Tyler, and in a rancorous “friendship” with the narrator, both of whom hold her (and women in general) in contempt. In one scene, for instance, when the narrator attempts to peer in on Tyler and Marla having sex, Tyler suddenly appears at the bedroom door, wearing a yellow rubber glove, and asks the narrator, “You wanna finish her off?” (The narrator declines.) In another scene, when the narrator is talking to Marla in the kitchen of the house that he shares with Tyler, Tyler commands, “Get rid of her.”

Marla, it seems, must be kept at bay. She is, by Tyler’s lights, a danger. Tyler says to the narrator, “She’s a predator posing as a house pet.” And Tyler insists that the narrator never talk about him with Marla, as though this act would weaken the bond existing between himself and the narrator. On the narrator’s view, Marla is not so much a danger as an intruder. When Marla comes downstairs after her first night spent with Tyler, the narrator looks at her in horror and says, “What are you doing here? This is my house. What are you doing in my house?” Later he says to us, “She invaded my support groups, now she’s invaded my home.” That Marla is willing to endure the abuse that is delivered by Tyler and by the narrator (that is to say, by her lover, since, from her point of view, they are one and the same person) suggests that she lacks recognition self-respect. Her disdainful comments about herself suggest that she also suffers from diminished evaluative self-respect, perhaps, in part, because she grasps, at some level, that submitting to abuse from her lover is below her.

The narrator’s lack of self-respect, like Marla’s, is glaringly obvious and vividly portrayed. He has difficulty sleeping, which may indicate that he is deeply troubled by

something that he has done—that he is, perhaps, filled with self-reproach. The fact that his insomnia is manageable only when he attends support groups suggests that the narrator is desperately in need of affirmation from others. He tells us that when he is at a support group meeting he is, momentarily, at the center of the universe. Apparently, being affirmed by others enables him quiet his self-recriminations enough so that he can sleep.

Another indication that the narrator lacks self-respect is the fact that he fantasizes that the plane he is travelling on crashes. His death, presumably, would free him from his misery. We have reason to believe that his misery is caused not only from the deadening monotony of his job, but also from a persistent dissatisfaction with himself perpetrated by his commitment to the consumerist values that keep him chained to his job. Finally, the narrator's destruction of his condominium, which certainly represents a rejection of a consumerist lifestyle, can also be interpreted as a symbolic act of self-destruction. The narrator, we can surmise, wishes to destroy the person whom that condo has come to represent. And, the fact that he has, just before the condo blows up, projected a new self—Tyler—corroborates this idea that the narrator wishes to obliterate himself. The narrator, I would argue, suffers from a painful deficiency of evaluative self-respect, which is founded, at least in part, upon the knowledge (itself unacknowledged) that he lacks recognition self-respect. He knows, but has not yet come to terms with the fact, that he has so far committed himself to values that are somehow unworthy of or below him.

Tyler, of the three main characters, has the most complex set of attitudes toward himself. He is self-confident, self-assured, indeed cocky, and, unlike the narrator, forthright in his resistance to the consumerist milieu that surrounds him. He appears, therefore, to have plenty of self-respect. However, Tyler is obsessed with self-destruction, both physical and psychological, which might suggest an absence of self-respect. He says to the narrator, for

example, “Self-improvement is masturbation; self-*destruction*....” The unspoken thought here is that self-destruction is a far superior method of self-transformation than the mild, superficial and ultimately narcissistic sort of self-transformation marketed in consumerist society.

The importance, for Tyler, of physical self-destruction is shown, of course, through the fight clubs, but also in a scene where Tyler dampens the narrator’s hand with a kiss and then pours lye on his hand. While the narrator is writhing in pain, Tyler launches a psychological assault, telling the narrator that he must come to terms with the fact that his own father may not have liked him and that God (“the father”) may not like him. Tyler also tells the members of Project Mayhem, repeatedly, that they are as worthless as garbage. “You are the all-singing, all-dancing crap of the world,” he says. And, he tells them, “We are all part of the same giant compost heap.”

Clearly, Tyler is not out simply to destroy *himself*; he endorses self-destruction for all (or for all men) as an ideal. He sees self-destruction as the necessary means to cleansing oneself of the toxins accumulated by consumption, or, to switch metaphors, he sees it as the means of ridding oneself of the disease of consumption. Tyler, then, is similar, in a certain respect, to the Deferential Wife. He takes, *as a matter of principle*, what one might judge to be a disrespectful stance toward himself. However, Tyler takes this stance in order to be an exemplar. (He himself bears a kiss-shaped scar on his hand.) He regards such a stance as a necessary means to personal and political transformation—as a means for *reclaiming* one’s self-respect. So, Tyler’s dedication to self-destruction, though arguably misguided, is not plausibly construed as a lack of self-respect.

The Mystery of Marla

Amidst all of this self-destructiveness, how are we to understand Marla's position within the terms of the film's social commentary? How do we make sense of the fact that Marla, like the narrator, lacks self-respect, but unlike the narrator, is denied (Tyler's version of) the means to self-redemption? Consider the gender-neutral interpretation of *Fight Club*. On this view, all of us—men and women—are subject to the travails experienced by the narrator. "Like so many others," the narrator says, "I had become a slave to the Ikea nesting instinct." He continues, "I'd flip through catalogues and wonder, 'What kind of dining set defines me as a person?'" Meaningless consumption, on this interpretation, has rendered all our lives spiritually empty; if we are at all "in the know", we feel dislocated and alienated. We do not like who we have become. Yet we are puzzled by our dissatisfaction with ourselves because we have followed the formula for fulfillment that has been prescribed to us. We sense that we have somehow failed, so we cast about for some means of relief, such as support groups or large doses of Xanax.

The system of consumer capitalism, on this reading of *Fight Club*, has deformed us as persons by intimating that what really matters about us is our ability to consume material goods. It has therefore damaged our recognition self-respect by causing us to look away from our intrinsic worth as autonomous, creative and self-creative beings and to instead stake our worth strictly on our status as consumers in a marketplace. Consumer capitalist ideology has also diminished our evaluative self-respect, on this reading, because we sense (inchoately) that we have failed to live up to some important ideal. The self-disappointment or self-contempt that accompanies this realization is compounded by the fact that we cannot quite see that our displeasure has been culturally imposed. We are lead to believe that our discontentment is our own fault.

The film suggests two solutions to this problem, one personal and one political. The personal solution is self-punishment. One should get beaten up; hence the formation of fight clubs.¹⁴ The goal, we are told, is to “hit bottom” which is a necessary precursor to individual redemption. The political solution that the film *initially* suggests is to dismantle the system of consumer capitalism, through guerilla tactics, and then resurrect society. (The film eventually recants this suggestion as it shows the rebellion recapitulating the very crimes of the system being rebelled against.)¹⁵ Both the personal and the political solutions, the film implies, offer an avenue for restored self-worth. Not only will the resurrected society ensure all of us a more meaningful existence, but also the very process of identifying and addressing the problem is itself restorative.

The gender-neutral interpretation of *Fight Club* makes sense of Marla’s feelings of alienation and self-contempt and her inclination toward self-destruction—she, like the narrator and the fight club members, has been psychically damaged by a consumer-oriented culture. What might be otherwise regarded as her personal problems are given a political explanation. This interpretation also makes sense of Tyler’s praise for Marla as someone who is trying to hit bottom. Marla, like all of us—according to Tyler’s philosophy—needs to hit bottom before she can rise above.

So, why is Marla not allowed in on the revolution? The gender-neutral interpretation cannot explain why the narrative so clearly positions Marla as an interloper. It cannot explain why the revolution must, with such determination, exclude Marla, and indeed all women. (When Marla asks the narrator why he has not been to any support groups lately, he says smugly, “I found a new one. It’s for men only.”) If Marla is just as much a victim of the system as the narrator, then to deny Marla the opportunity for self-reclamation that is offered to the narrator and his cohort is to imply that it is not fitting that she experience this

reclamation. *This* idea entails either that it is not fitting for her to respect herself or that she, as a woman, is required to find some other avenue of self-respect. And indeed Marla *does* find another avenue. In the closing scene she commits herself to the narrator. She forgives him his past transgressions. She accepts his explanation that his recent conduct is attributable to its being “a very strange time” in his life and she accepts his assurances that everything will be okay. Safely ensconced in a heterosexual union, Marla can begin the process of regaining her self-respect.

Consider, now, the interpretation of *Fight Club* that identifies the narrator’s predicament as a specifically masculine one.¹⁶ On this reading, the main harm of consumer capitalism is that it emasculates and domesticates men. White-collar men, such as the narrator, are impelled take on the *narcissistic* trappings of femininity, such as an abiding interest in decor. “We used to read pornography,” the narrator laments, “now it was the Horchow Collection.” Blue-collar men, such as Tyler, are forced to take on the *support-oriented* trappings of femininity through mundane service jobs such as waiter or bartender. Tyler warns the police commissioner, who has vowed to crack down on the fight clubs (and whom Tyler is at the same time threatening to castrate), “Look, the people you are after are the people you depend on. We cook your meals. We haul your trash. We connect your calls. We drive your ambulances. We guard you while you sleep. Do not fuck with us.”

On the gender specific reading, consumer society has driven *men* to feel empty, dislocated, alienated. It has deformed men by depriving them of contact with or experience of their masculine natures. Consumer culture, then, has damaged men’s “recognition self-respect” by forcing them to embrace the feminine values of consumption and service. By lowering themselves in this way, men have diminished themselves both as men and as persons. No self-respecting man would willingly embrace the feminine; no self-respecting

person would willingly ignore his status as a person in the way the embracing of the feminine requires. Consumer capitalist ideology is also an obstacle to men's evaluative self-respect, on this reading, because men sense, but do not fully grasp, that they have failed in some way to live up to some important ideals. Their feelings of worthlessness are compounded by the fact that they cannot quite see that their dissatisfaction has been imposed by a feminizing culture. They are led to believe that the source of their discontentment resides in *them*.

The solution to this problem, according to the gender specific reading of *Fight Club*, is for men to reclaim their masculinity, and hence their status as full persons, first, by being beaten up, and second, by renovating society. Physical suffering, at the hands of other men, is the means by which men are reunited with their masculinity. They must have the femininity literally beaten out of them. Once this transformation has taken place on a large enough scale, society itself can be transformed. The new society will ensure that men *remain* men.¹⁷ "In the world I see," Tyler says, "you're stalking elk through the damp canyon forest around the ruins of Rockefeller Center. You'll wear leather clothes that will last you the rest of your life.¹⁸ You'll climb the wrist-thick kudzu vines that wrap the Sears Tower. And when you look down, you will see tiny figures¹⁹ pounding corn and laying strips of venison in the empty carpool lane of some abandoned super-highway."

The gender specific interpretation of *Fight Club* easily makes sense of Marla's exclusion from the revolution. As the literal and figurative embodiment of toxic femininity (hence Tyler's rubber glove), Marla is part of the problem. Though useful to Tyler as a "sport fuck", she poses a threat to men and to the success of the political transformation envisioned by Tyler. Tyler says to the narrator, "We're a generation of men raised by women; I'm wondering if another woman is really the answer we need."

The gender specific interpretation, however, cannot make sense of Marla's self-contempt. *Marla* has not been emasculated by consumer society, or perhaps, she has, but she has not been harmed by the process; she's instead been appropriately shaped by it. So why is *Marla* joining support groups for diseases she does not have? And why is Marla trying to hit bottom? Why should she hit bottom? What purpose would that serve? Because the political explanation given for the narrator's self-contempt is not available in the case of Marla, and because we are given no explicit alternative explanation, we are lead to believe that *her* self-hatred is idiosyncratic and inexplicable. She's just some crazy girl.²⁰

Moreover if the political explanation in terms of emasculation does not account for Marla's lack of self-respect, then the political solution of reinstitutionalizing masculinity will not enable her recovery. How, then, can Marla be redeemed? Again, the narrative's ending supplies an answer. Marla must commit herself to the (now rehabilitated) narrator so together they can serve as the Adam and Eve of the new society. Marla, *qua* feminine, must be excluded from the revolt against femininity, but is, *qua* heterosexual female, instrumental to the success of a resurrected masculinist society. Alongside the narrator, she has found her "place"—the proper site of her redemption.

Marla, Bob and Essentialism About Gender

At the first support group meeting he attends (for men with testicular cancer), the narrator meets Bob, who turns out to be pivotal character in the film. Bob has had his testicles removed and has developed breasts ("bitch tits") that are, in the narrator's words, "as big as gods are big." It is in the arms of Bob, with his face nestled against Bob's enormous breasts, that the narrator first experiences the acceptance, comfort and emotional release that allow him *finally* to sleep. Later in the film, the narrator encounters Bob on the street. He greets him with genuine affection and learns in the course of their brief

conversation, that Bob, too, has abandoned support groups in favor of fight club. When Tyler initiates Project Mayhem, Bob is one of his first recruits.

Tyler and the narrator's acceptance of Bob may seem in tension with my interpretation of *Fight Club*, which stresses the rejection of the feminine. First, it seems as though, through his relationship with Bob, the narrator *embraces*, rather than *rejects* the feminine—or, at any rate, he embraces (indeed literally) the *maternal* feminine. Second, Bob is permitted to join fight club and Project Mayhem. Does not Bob's inclusion undermine my claim that the revolution must exclude women since its aim is to counter the forces of feminization? And does not Bob's inclusion, therefore, undermine my claim that the film sees women's self-respect as appropriately achieved through association with a man, and not through revolution?

Given Tyler's (and derivatively, the narrator's) commitment to gender essentialism and to a strict nature/culture dichotomy, Bob's role in the film, I maintain, supports, rather than challenges, the interpretation I have given. By "gender essentialism" I mean the view that one's gender is part of or is determined by one's biological sex. Males, on this view, are, "by nature," masculine; women are, "by nature," feminine. The (purported) feminization of men perpetrated by consumer capitalism, is, on such an essentialist view, an attempt to make men into something they are not; it is an assault on their natures. It is in this respect (according to Tyler, anyway) misguided, if not immoral. And, it should be countered by strategies that will allow men to recover their masculinity.

This picture of gender is evinced primarily through expressions of Tyler's philosophy. Consider first, the fight club policy that requires members to strip down to nothing but their pants when they fight. This policy probably symbolizes a number of things,²¹ but surely it symbolizes, in part, the shedding of the influence of culture on the

biological male. Insofar as acculturation is a feminizing force, it also symbolizes the shedding of the feminine. When the external trappings of culture are discarded, what can be uncovered (through self-destruction) is the genuine or authentic man.

Consider second, Tyler's utopic vision of a world where men hunt, wearing durable leather clothes, while women pound corn and dry venison. While this vision harkens back to an earlier (perhaps mythical) *time* before modernity; it also endorses the normative primacy of the "natural" over the cultural. It is a vision where the presence and influence of culture is minimal and therefore people act in accordance with their "true" natures.

So, though the narrator may have found solace initially by embracing, in Bob, the maternal feminine, it is significant that Bob is biologically male. If the maternal feminine is the real source of healing for the contemporary man, why does the narrator find comfort in the arms of a feminized *male*? And why does Tyler tell the narrator that one of their problems is that they are part of "a generation of men raised by women"? Rather than seeing Bob as woman, I contend, we should see Bob as a male whose subjection to feminization has had the most acute manifestation. Bob has been transformed not merely psychologically, but physically. The narrator's initial relief comes to him in the form of affirmation from a fellow victim, who can serve also as a male mother figure.

Not only does the narrator find a male mother figure, he finds, in Tyler, a male intimate partner. Tyler is, for all intents and purposes, the narrator's lover, but, since they do not actually have sex, their relationship avoids the taint of femininity culturally associated with male homosexuality. In all respects except the sexual, Tyler and the narrator are intimate. They set up a household together. (The narrator compares them, in a scene depicting him straightening Tyler's tie, to Ozzie and Harriet.) They are emotionally committed to one another. Indeed, the narrator is consumed with jealousy when Tyler

begins a sexual relationship with Marla. And, by insisting that the narrator never talk to Marla about him or about what goes on in their house, Tyler isolates his sexual relationship with Marla from his, obviously more valued, relationship with the narrator.

So, the narrator has managed to find male substitutes to fill the roles in his life that would conventionally be filled by women. We can see this as an attempt to insulate himself from any genuinely feminine influence. It follows that Bob's inclusion in fight club and in Project Mayhem does *not* undermine my claim that eschewing the feminine is paramount to Tyler and the narrator's social program. In fact, it supports my view if we look at Bob, as I suggest Tyler would, as a feminized (and therefore damaged) male rather than as a personification of womanhood. We should see Bob as the literal embodiment of male victimization at the hands of an emasculating culture. On this view, to exclude Bob would be to exclude the man who perhaps most deserves to participate in the revolt against the forces of emasculation.

Summary

I have argued that *Fight Club's* narrative contains a revealing incoherence. It portrays both Marla and the narrator as burdened by self-contempt and driven to self-destruction. However, it implies that only the narrator is entitled to deliverance through the grueling therapy of personal transformation provided by fight club and by the protocol of social transformation undertaken through Project Mayhem. Hence it implies that either Marla is not entitled to redemption or that, if she is, she must find some alternative means. By positioning Marla, at the end, hand in hand with the narrator, who has been himself rehabilitated through the ordeal of fight club and Project Mayhem, the film suggests a fitting alternative means of redemption for Marla. In order for *her* to regain self-respect, she must join forces with a man. More specifically, she must attach herself to a man who has proven

himself worthy of her love and support through his world-making activities. In relationship with such a man, Marla has finally acquired the “proper” grounds for self-worth and can begin the project of reclaiming her self-respect.

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* I am grateful to Eric Hutton, Elijah Millgram, Keisha Ray, Kathryn Stockton and Thomas Wartenberg their helpful feedback on this paper. I am also indebted to the undergraduates in my Philosophy and Film class taught in the Spring of 2010 for their inspiring and insightful discussions of *Fight Club*.

¹ For example, Kant 1964 and Rawls 1971 may be interpreted in this way. See also, Williams, B. 1973.

² For example, Dillon 1992, 1997, and 2001, Hill 1991a and 1991b, Massey 1995, Middleton 2006, Sachs 1981, Telfer 1995 and Thomas 1978a and 1995.

³ See also, Darwall 1995 and Hudson 1980.

⁴ And other social hierarchies such as race, class and sexual orientation. For discussions of the connection between self-respect and oppression of various sorts, see Bartky 1990a and 1990b, Boxill 1976 and 1984, Doppelt 1981, Held 1973, Hill 1991a, Mohr 1992, Thomas 1978b and Moody-Adams 1995.

⁵ By “people” here I refer primarily to my students. For a philosophical rejoinder to Hill’s assessment of the Deferential Wife see Friedman 1985. For a response to Friedman see Baron 1985.

⁶ One reason my students give for thinking that the Deferential Wife is does not lack self-respect is that she is proud to serve her husband. This reason is founded upon a confusion between recognition and evaluative self-respect. Another reason my students give is that to claim that the Deferential Wife is servile is to engage in victim blaming. This reason overlooks Hill’s assertion that the issue of praise and blame is distinct from the issue of the presence or absence of the character flaw. Yet another reason my students give is that to the extent that the Deferential Wife herself *believes* that her attitude toward herself is

appropriate, it is appropriate. This reason has to do with the issue of whether or not self-respect is an objective or subjective notion. See Massey 1995.

⁷ See also Antony 1988, De Beauvoir 1989 and Holmstrom 1982, Mill 1989 and Wollstonecraft 2001.

⁸ We would likewise expect that men would stake their self-respect on their status as men.

⁹ The scare quotes indicate that if one's sense of worth is based upon her meeting the standards of femininity, rather than the standards of personhood, then she does not really have recognition self-respect.

¹⁰ See, for example, Turan 1999 and Nechak 1999.

¹¹ See, for example, Dussere 2006. See also, Smith 1999 and Wilson 2006.

¹² See Thompson 2004.

¹³ Ansen connects this scene with the film's (not fully acknowledged) homoerotic themes. He says, "All these guys masochistically lining up to be beaten up by Brad Pitt... The homoeroticism is off the charts, but *Fight Club* can't bring itself to account for it." See also, Denby 1999 and Lau 2002.

¹⁴ Norton says in an interview that the film does not stress the significance of *committing* violence but rather of *being subject to it*. See McLean 1999.

¹⁵ Or perhaps perpetuating worse crimes. For a discussion of the fascistic elements of the film, see Hewitt 2006.

¹⁶ This is perhaps too general. It may be a predicament facing only white men. The absence of men of color in the film has been noted. See Lau, unpublished, Locke, unpublished and O'Hehir 1999. See also Stockton 2006.

¹⁷ The testicular cancer support group was called "Remaining Men Together".

¹⁸ This will no doubt go a long way in precluding the development of fashion, which will go a long way in precluding the development of a consumption-oriented society.

¹⁹ No doubt, women.

²⁰ After the narrator meets (and sleeps with) Marla, he says to the narrator, “Man, you have got some *fucked up* friends!”

²¹ At one point, Tyler tells a new fight club member who is eager to fight, to “lose the tie.” This suggests that stripping down has a leveling effect—it removes outward signs of social hierarchy among men.