The American Dream Unhinged:
Romance and Reality in *The Great Gatsby*
and *Fight Club*

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In 2005, Chuck Palahniuk added an afterword to his 1996 cult novel, *Fight Club*. By that time, the book had become something of a phenomenon in part because in 1999 it had been adapted into a major studio motion picture starring Edward Norton and Brad Pitt. The sexy actors and edgy film-making drew attention to the novel, but its popularity was a mixed blessing from Palahniuk’s perspective. Not only did the film significantly soften the radical ending of the novel, but the Hollywood machine also transformed the *Fight Club* ethic, which is rooted in guerilla-type resistance to commodity culture, into merely a successful marketing ploy. In the afterword, Palahniuk wrestles with the ironies of his situation. He marvels at the “fight club” look on Versace and Gucci fashion runways (imagine clothes with razor blades sewn into them and male models with dark make-up around their eyes to suggest bruising) and at the fact that “young men around the world” took “legal action to change their names to ‘Tyler Durden’” (the hero of the novel) (211). Although amused by the momentum and significance of the book in global public life, Palahniuk’s frustration is evident as he recalls the National Public Radio book reviewer who condemned the book because it “fails” to address the question of race directly and the flight attendant, who on a flight back to Palahniuk’s home base, Portland, conspiratorially shared with the author his theory that the book was “really about” gay men in public steam baths (216).

Although Palahniuk remains playful and good-humored in the afterword, he cannot resist adding a dash of authorial intervention into the interpretive mix. The direction he provides is unexpected to say the least. He complains that people seemed to have missed the point because “no one called [*Fight Club*] a romance” (216). In fact, Palahniuk provocatively claims:

> Really, what I was writing was just *The Great Gatsby*, updated a little. It was “apostolic” fiction—where a surviving apostle tells the story of his hero. There are two men and a woman. And one man, the hero, is shot to death

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It was a classic, ancient romance but updated to compete with espresso machines and ESPN. (215-16)

Although *The Great Gatsby* is one of those novels that is in some way always being retold and updated, for readers familiar with both books, this comparison may feel something like, to use the language of *Fight Club*, a blow to the gut: what could the dingy, brutal, late capitalist world of Tyler Durden's fight clubs have to do with the shining, enchanted, high capitalist world of Gatsby's “blue gardens”? The answer is much more than one might initially expect. Upon examination, the novels are formally similar with surprisingly undisguised parallels in narrative structure, character dynamics, and even style. And perhaps more importantly, why would Palahniuk point to his novel's affinities with *The Great Gatsby* as a way of highlighting its anti-consumerist stance? Palahniuk's comments encourage us to read the books together, and when we do, we discover that there is much more to their relationship than just the formal similarities. Reading the books side by side puts them into focus as novels about the development of commodity culture in America and its devastating impact on individuals in a way that reading them separately does not.

It is worth noting that *The Great Gatsby* and *Fight Club* more or less bookend the twentieth-century. Each book offers a distinct snapshot of the American society of its time, and because both Fitzgerald and Palahniuk are fascinated by the way social and economic conditions affect their characters' lives, when read together the books present a study of the ascendancy of American commodity culture and its cultural, social, and personal ramifications. When Fitzgerald wrote *The Great Gatsby* in 1925, the shift from a culture of production to one of consumption was well underway. As a man who notoriously viewed himself as the “poor boy in a rich boy’s world” and who rocketed to fame and wealth with his first book, Fitzgerald was a keen observer of the social and economic landscape of his day; his personal situation made him particularly alert to the way commodities could be used to suggest status and class. In fact, Mary McAleer Balkun argues that Fitzgerald's observations about the dynamics of commodity culture make *The Great Gatsby* in many ways “the culmination of the consumer mentality in [its] era” (151). By the end of the twentieth century, when Chuck Palahniuk wrote *Fight Club*, America had moved beyond the fledgling stages of commodity culture and into the ironies and challenges of late capitalism.

If *Gatsby* recorded a moment in which Fitzgerald suspected that the “the culture of the commodity [was spinning] out of control” (Balkun 151), *Fight Club* confirms those suspicions and presents a world where the culture
of commodity has spun out of human control to the extent that it appears that commodities control people; as the narrator observes: “the things you used to own, now they own you” (44). Commodities are so ubiquitous that Gatsby's extraordinary gesture of consciously using them to help define and bolster his identity has become the norm as the narrator presents a world in which young professionals of all kinds secure their sense of self and their social identity through condos in certain parts of town, particular cars, and certain types of sofas. At the same time, the narrator of *Fight Club* strongly suspects that something is awry. Although lulled into complacency by his comfortable life and his fondness for his objects, he begins to sense something vaguely sinister and unhealthy in contemporary culture. In short, the world of *Fight Club* is a logical extension of the culture of commodification at the center of *The Great Gatsby*.

In this essay, I will take Chuck Palahniuk up on his invitation and explore the ways in which *Fight Club* can be read as an updated version of *The Great Gatsby* in order to examine what such an update reveals about the sacred myths of American prosperity, individuality, and progress across the twentieth century. I will address the formal similarities between the novels, such as characterization, narrative structure, and genre, and use these observations as a way into a critical analysis of the similarities and differences between the novels' common tropes and themes, including self-invention, use of and attitudes toward objects, and concern with time (especially a preoccupation with history and origins). By reading the two books together, I will demonstrate that *Fight Club* develops the uneasy undercurrent about the potentially dangerous aspects of commodity culture in *The Great Gatsby*. Even more to the point, *Fight Club* works to locate that danger in the transformative power of the American dream itself, which is predicated on what young Jimmy Gatz calls, “the unreality of reality” (105). Although it is not explicit in *Gatsby*, the “unreality of reality” is what leads Fitzgerald to his notoriously ambivalent attitude toward the American Dream despite Nick’s desire to believe in it and in Gatsby, but by the time we reach the late-century context of *Fight Club*, it is clear that the dream is actually a nightmare.

*“The Great Gatsby, Updated A Little”*

Despite the many and often startling differences between the dirty, rough world of *Fight Club* and the incandescent, polished world of *The Great Gatsby*, the novels are remarkably similar, especially in terms of their formal elements including narrative structures, character dynamics, and even narrative style. These similarities help us understand what Palahniuk meant when he said that he was “just” rewriting *The Great Gatsby*, “updated a little.” To establish what
Palahniuk refers to as the “apostolic” narratives of *Gatsby* and *Fight Club*, both he and Fitzgerald use a narrative frame to structure their stories. This allows the apostle narrators to initiate, from a present moment, a story in which they will recall the history of their relationships to their heroes—how they met, became believers in their heroes’ programs and ambitions, and ultimately witnessed their heroes’ deaths. In addition, the structure dictates the basic pattern of character interaction, since one character is figured as the “follower” of the other and both narrators/followers create suspense in their tales as they slowly uncover the true identities of their heroes.

For Nick Caraway, the unlikely hero is Jay Gatsby, the likable but gaudy parvenu with mysterious antecedents. For the nameless narrator of *Fight Club*, the hero is Tyler Durden, a charismatic loner who works odd jobs as a movie projectionist and a banquet waiter. On first inspection, Gatsby and Tyler could not appear to be more different. Gatsby is a wealthy man with a large if incoherently decorated house on West Egg, Long Island, angling to be admitted into the most rarified level of the American upper classes. Tyler is an impoverished squatter in a decrepit house in a “chemical waste” part of town, who eschews capitalist accumulation and envisions himself as the leader of “guerilla terrorists of the service industry” (81). But both men capture the imagination and loyalty of their respective narrators/friends, which in turn occasions the retrospective narratives of the novels. There are notable similarities between Gatsby and Tyler, which I will address later, but I want to begin addressing the formal similarities between the texts by discussing the character of the narrators, since their voices and sensibilities most inform the narratives.

Nick Caraway and the narrator of *Fight Club* envision themselves as nice, normal men, who may even be considered a bit prudish given the insistently progressive standards of their particular societies. Both are in their early thirties, engaged in employment that is impersonal, and to varying degrees, dehumanizing; both live lives generally devoid of meaningful relationships and intimacy. As a result, both narrators feel alienated from the world around them and cling to outside forms of validation for their sense of self. Although they live nearly seventy years apart and thus the specifics of their lives differ significantly, both men seem uncomfortable in the mass, urban environments of the twentieth century with their emphasis on impersonal, commercial exchanges. By putting the narrators side by side, it becomes clear that the narrator of *Fight Club* is an intensification of Nick Caraway in at least two important ways. First, they share a sense of personal emasculation, which takes a variety of forms including the inability to act decisively or connect personally with others. One of the advantages of reading *Gatsby* alongside *Fight Club* is that
the latter novel points to the significance of the motif of masculinity for the characters in both novels. *Fight Club* makes it clear that masculinity can be understood as an index of individualism, and that in such a context, hyper-masculinity can be understood as a form of purposeful, self-determining action, a way of rebelling “against a seeming impersonal and feminized dominant culture” (Ta 265). And second, both narrators experience a split or fractured identity based on their encounters with the logic of commodity culture. This fractured sense of identity is represented through an array of psychological symptoms—lost time, forgetfulness, alienation, and most importantly, a split sense of self—that serve as the outward signs of their inability to articulate an integrated, productive, meaningful, and coherent sense of self amid the flux and flow of modern life.

At the beginning of *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway briefly mentions that he is a recently returned soldier from the Great War. This nearly glossed-over fact helps to explain why he is consistently presented in terms of emasculation and psychological crisis. The first indication that Nick is not well comes when he explains, referencing his wartime experiences, that he “enjoyed the counter-raid so thoroughly that [he] came back restless” (7). Although his general agitation (perhaps even shock) stems ostensibly from his involvement in the war, there is also a sense that the war is a convenient catch-all for the shock and jolt of modern life in 1922 in general. At nearly thirty years old, Nick is uncertain and undirected after the war; his plans are vague as he decides to go east to study the bond business for the underwhelming reason that “Everybody I knew was in the bond business” (7). Lacking an independent sense of self or purpose, he anchors his identity in his family, beginning the narrative with words of wisdom from his father (which, incidentally, he seems to have misunderstood [Donaldson, “Trouble” 131]) and a brief accounting of his somewhat shady ancestry (traceable in theory to the Dukes of Buccleuch, but in practice to his grandfather’s brother, who founded a hardware store after sending a substitute to the Civil War) (7). After obtaining familial permission to go east, Nick tells readers that “all my aunts and uncles had to talk it over” (7), a detail which infantilizes him. His identity continues to be fragile and contingent; he notes that it was not until a man asked him for directions in his new town that he was “lonely no longer” (8). On the basis of this slight interaction, he suddenly and with surprising force claims for himself the identity of “a guide, a pathfinder, an original settler” (8). But the fact remains that out east on the outskirts of New York City, Nick finds himself living an anonymous life structured by the impersonal interactions and mechanical rhythms of the modern world, which only exacerbates his “restlessness.”
Nick lives alone in a “weather beaten cardboard bungalow” (8) in a commuting town, making a daily pilgrimage into the city for his work as a bond trader. It is a routine devoid of any intimacy or personal interaction, a routine which heightens his already acute sense of alienation and isolation. This problem is reinforced by the nature of his work, which involves trading abstract commodities—bonds—on a disembodied market. Although Nick claims to have been on “first name” (61) terms with the other young clerks and bond salesmen at the firm, he does not mention their names. This omission is curious because Nick seems to fetishize names, at one point reciting a long litany of the names of those who attend Gatsby’s parties that same summer. This issue of names is significant because it reflects the tension around intimacy and identity in the novel. On the one hand, the use of first names at work implies intimacy and familiarity, but on the other, first names are usually common and widely shared. At Gatsby’s parties, Nick carefully gives the family names of the attendees, thus heightening their individuality and social significance. Nick does not know them personally, yet they seem more real and dimensional with their colorful names than do the nameless first names at work. In any event, Nick’s work life seems to replicate the anonymity that large, urban environments encourage. He describes his lunches with the other young professionals in “dark, crowded restaurants [eating] little pig sausages and mashed potatoes and coffee” (61). The crowds and the regularity of the meal imply a kind of interchangeable quality to these lunches, giving the impression of faceless, mindless repetition to Nick’s work days.

In this environment, Nick claims to long for connection with others. He insists that he enjoys the “racy and adventurous feel of [the city] at night” and reveals that he follows random women on the street, always remaining an observer with a “restless eye” (61). He feels disconnected from the singing voices and laughter that surround him on the night streets and imagines that he, “too, was hurrying toward gayety and sharing their intimate excitement” (62). Here Nick seems to forget that he does run through the city with his own group of friends (Tom, Daisy, Jordan, and Gatsby), but his forgetfulness also suggests that in these situations he does not feel intimately connected to them. In fact, intimacy is always elsewhere for Nick. His disconnected and aimless flânerie through the impersonal city is also mirrored in his most personal affairs.

Throughout the book, Nick has difficulty connecting with people, particularly women, a fact that again highlights his emasculation. In part, this difficulty is the result of the busy modern world where connection to others can be reduced to recognizing faces from one’s commute, as Nick notes at Gatsby’s party: “here and there was a face I had noticed on the commuting
train” (46). Still, over the course of the novel, Nick is involved in three “relationships” with women, but in each of them he feels disconnected and isolated from the woman in question and abruptly severs their contact for minute, often inexplicable, reasons. First, he extricates himself from a “tangle” with a “certain girl” from home, occupied by the netting thought that when that girl played tennis, “a faint mustache of perspiration appeared on her upper lip” (64). He then allows a “short affair with a girl who . . . worked in the accounting department” to “blow quietly away” when she goes on vacation in July (61). The end of this affair is the only time it merits mention in his narrative. Even Nick’s relationship with the dishonest golfer Jordan Baker, which receives the most narrative attention, testifies to his inability to make connections or act with certainty in the world. The liaison notably begins not through his own volition but through his cousin Daisy’s matchmaking and ends in a whirl of confusion and indecision as he recalls: “We talked like that for a while then abruptly we weren’t talking any longer. I don’t know which of us hung up with a sharp click first but I know I didn’t care” (163). Nick seems alienated both from himself and his own desires as well as from other characters throughout the narrative. His unstable identity, paralysis in personal affairs, and inability to maintain meaningful connections suggest his confusion about his place in an impersonal but jarring modern world, which simultaneously inspires restlessness and vague desires as well as the incapacity to act on them.

Like Nick, the narrator of Fight Club is a thirty-year-old business professional who feels alienated from the ways of his world and the people around him. This narrator’s disconnection is also the result of a trauma, but his trauma is no longer anchored in a war as a way of representing the shock of modern life. Rather, his alienation is portrayed directly as a symptom of a consumer-driven, late-capitalist culture that is so impersonal (despite artful marketing to make it appear otherwise) that the narrator is not even given a proper name as a personal form of identification. The narrator lives in a sophisticated, global economy marked by convenience and nearly unimaginable plenty (he has seven kinds of capers in his refrigerator [45]). Such an environment encourages people to believe that they lead exciting, unique, fulfilled (or at least full) lives; but this narrator’s discontent, typified by his persistent insomnia (akin to Nick’s restlessness), is a form of recognition that this system, despite all appearances to the contrary, is a dehumanizing prison.

The narrator seems to sense, without being able to articulate it fully, the impersonality and silent coercion of late-twentieth-century commodity-dominated culture. As he describes the conditions of his life, evidence of his incarceration begins to build. He lives in an unnamed, generic, big city, and
unlike Nick, who can safely and confidently fasten his identity to his family name, this nameless narrator must look to consumer brands to fill the void and help him establish his sense of self. His home, “a condominium on the fifteenth floor of a high-rise, a sort of filing cabinet for widows and young professionals” (41), suggests not only the impersonality and compartmentalization of contemporary urban life but also the vague sense of being managed or filed away. The notion of being managed and the association with “widows” suggests that this lifestyle is emasculating. These feelings are further confirmed as he contemplates the IKEA products that he has used to furnish his apartment. Here as elsewhere he senses that his desires have been shaped for him (he notes that most of his acquaintances have IKEA furniture as well), but this social engineering has been done while artfully maintaining the illusion of personal choice (he has, after all, selected the objects and their colors from a huge selection). Nonetheless, purposeful action and choice are carefully limited to a circumscribed consumer space. His life and identity are problematically reduced to the objects he buys, and he knows it: “It took my whole life to buy this stuff” (44). He explains the cycle through which commodities become cathected as part of his identity: “You buy furniture. You tell yourself, this is the last sofa I will ever need in my life. Buy the sofa, then for a couple of years you’re satisfied that no matter what goes wrong, at least you’ve got your sofa issue handled. Then the right set of dishes. Then the perfect bed. The drapes. The rug” (44). The perfection of one’s home and clothing through a series of commercial exchanges has become integral to a contemporary sense of self. Brand names have replaced ancestral names as the markers of one’s identity.

Reading through Fight Club with Palahniuk’s injunction in mind, it is clear that the narrator represents an intensification of Nick both in terms of the environment that he finds himself in and his response to it. The nature of the narrator’s work is as troublingly abstract as Nick’s bond trading, but it has a more sinister implication. In his capacity as a recall campaign coordinator for a major automotive firm, the narrator of Fight Club spends his days running equations in which he weighs human lives against the cost of out-of-court settlements, deciding to “recall” only if it is financially expedient. His work directly implicates him in the process of dehumanization that also precipitates his malaise. He is not simply a victim of the system; he is complicit with it. For the narrator of Fight Club, the logic of the contemporary world has infiltrated his sense of self to a degree not seen in Nick because he is completely interpolated into the logic of the system. Filed away in his condo, running numbers that weigh corporate profit against human life, he is denied the outsider status Nick is able to maintain.
Like Nick, the narrator’s efforts to reach out to others are complicated by his non-committal, restless personality, but unlike Nick, this narrator’s life is largely devoid of any personal relationships (even those to a “second cousin once removed” (10), which Nick so carefully explains is Daisy’s relationship to him). At one point, the narrator of *Fight Club* even christens the people who sit next to him on his many flights for work “single-serving friends” (31) and compares them to the “tiny soaps, tiny shampoos, single-serving butter, tiny mouthwash” (21) he encounters in the hotels and restaurants during his travels. The endless stream of business travel—“You wake up at O’Hare. You wake up at LaGuardia. You wake up at Logan” (25)—reveals how much work life has come to dominate personal life, leading to an entire “single-serving” culture of discrete, business-mediated exchanges. Convenience and mobility have paradoxically enslaved the narrator; he is kept as discrete and separate as the tiny mouthwash from one hotel to the next, culturally denied opportunities to make meaningful connections while the “single-serving” state of mind has come to dominate his life.

In fact, the process of reaching out to others is linked to the notion of pathology in the text. The only way the narrator is able to make connections is by attending various disease support groups. The implication is that intimacy and illness occupy similar quarters in this society. But even this support and camaraderie are spurious because he is attending the various support groups under false pretences; he may be ill, as all members of late capitalist culture are psychically and spiritually ill, but he does not have the particular diseases (brain parasites, testicular cancer, etc.) these groups are designed to address. Still, the support groups satisfy some deep-seated need for intimacy that is otherwise unfilled in his life, because with a heightened sense of mortality, “Everyone [is] clinging, risking to share their worst fear” (22). Significantly, in the early stages of the novel, these are the only places where he is touched and feels that he is a part of something vital and significant.

The narrator is so alienated from a meaningful, non-pathological sense of intimacy that when he meets Marla Singer, a woman who, like him, attends support groups under false pretences in an effort to feel alive, he is unable to make a healthy connection with another healthy person; he feels only threatened and annoyed without noticing their similarities or his attraction to her. Even when Marla asks the narrator to examine her breast and underarm area for a possible lymph node lump (her idea of foreplay), his contact with her remains sterile and clinical. Until the narrator finds fight club, intimacy is always associated with pathology; after he finds fight club, it will become associated with violence. But throughout the text, it is clear that intimacy and the deeply personal have no natural place in contemporary culture; they are
known by their lack, which breeds aimless, circular, ever-renewing desires that drive the consumption of things.

Both Nick and the narrator of *Fight Club*, then, are alienated from their modern, busy, urban societies, but even more alarmingly, both seem alienated from themselves and their own desires to an almost pathological degree presented in terms of compromised masculinity. It is in this susceptible, lonely, and aimless state that Nick and the narrator meet their heroes—Gatsby and Tyler—and their “romances” (as Palahniuk insists they are) begin. Despite the many important differences in the way they live their lives and in their ambitions, Gatsby and Tyler are both flamboyant, attractive, charismatic figures; young “rough-neck[s]” (*Gatsby* 53), who act, even if it means breaking the law in order to get what they want. Although Gatsby’s appearance is never quite made clear (significantly the details of his physical appearance are almost always obscured by his sartorial choices), readers are made to understand that he is an attractive man. The fact that Gatsby was played by Robert Redford in the 1974 film version of the book further helps Gatsby resonate with the description of Tyler (who was played by Brad Pitt in the 1999 film version of *Fight Club*) as “perfectly handsome and an angel in his everything-blond way” (202). More important than their good looks, however, is the fact that both men are seen as “godlike” by their “apostles.” This description of the heroes as “godlike” begins with the narrators’ first encounters with them, which are strikingly similar in numerous ways, and thus merit some attention.

Both narrators first observe their hero near an ocean, caught in a gesture that seems to capture ambition and idealism. Nick first sees Jay Gatsby on his lawn, which overlooks Long Island Sound, as he regards the “silver pepper of the stars” and suddenly stretches his “trembling” arms “toward the dark water” (25). The narrator of *Fight Club* first sees Tyler Durden sitting in the “shadow of a giant hand” he has created by arranging logs on a beach. For both narrators, these initial meetings are deeply moving as both heroes seem contained in an idea of perfection that they have created for themselves, which speaks to a lack of self-sufficiency and self-determination in the narrators. For Gatsby, this “curious gesture” is one longing for the green light, Daisy, and all they have come to represent for him as he stands in the shadow of his efforts, represented by his big house. For Tyler, the hand, which he has labored to create by arranging logs so that they will cast a shadow of a perfectly proportioned hand for only a minute, is his form of self-created perfection.

It is this capacity for self-making and for self-definition that encourages the narrators to see their heroes as godlike. Nick notes, when he muses...
on Gatsby’s act of self-invention on the shores of Lake Superior, that “The truth was that Jay Gatsby of West Egg, Long Island sprang from his Platonic conception of himself. He was the son of God” (104). Similarly, when the narrator meets Tyler sitting in the hand (of God?) on the beach, it suggests that Tyler also sprang from some idea of his own making, since he crafted the hand that cradles him. The association is made still more explicit after the narrator’s condominium mysteriously explodes, and he attempts to call Tyler with words that echo the Lord’s Prayer running through his head as the phone rings: “Oh, Tyler, please rescue me. . . . Deliver me from Swedish furniture. Deliver me from clever art” (46). Despite their notable differences, then, Gatsby and Tyler share an important set of traits in common: they are both idealists, who have a sincere desire to convert that idealism into action at any price. This is the quality that most impresses the narrators; these godlike heroes will enact the concept of making words/ideas flesh as they invent themselves in these texts.

Ultimately, however, there is one insurmountable distinction between Nick’s fascination with Gatsby and the narrator’s with Tyler in Fight Club: Nick and Gatsby are two distinct characters with separate bodies and identities, while Tyler is, readers learn as the novel progresses, an alter-ego of the narrator, another personality that “use[s] the same body, but at different times” (164). Although the split between Fight Club’s narrator and Tyler is (once it is revealed) literal and clinical, arguably, Palahniuk is echoing and intensifying Nick’s split sense of self in Gatsby. As many critics of Gatsby have noted, Nick experiences a kind of metaphorical split in his narrative; he is, as the well-known critical description of his split explains, both “inside and outside” the events of the novel, uncomfortably straddling the role of participant and observer.² Nick describes this split sense of self as the alcohol takes effect at the impromptu party at Tom and Myrtle’s love nest: “Yet high over the city our line of yellow windows must have contributed their share of human secrecy to the casual watcher in the darkening streets, and I was him too, looking up and wondering” (40). In many ways, this statement is merely the most concise and clear of Nick’s sense of alienation and anonymity in the modern world, but it also introduces the idea of a schizoid sensibility that is present in The Great Gatsby and that will be more fully explored in Fight Club.

Indeed, upon closer inspection, splits and aporias abound in The Great Gatsby. Gatsby is a kind of split personality, having transformed himself from the unwashed Jimmy Gatz into the spectacular Jay Gatsby. Even Nick’s narration of Gatsby suggests a gap or split between the man and Nick’s image of him, a tension that is half-registered by Nick through his conflicting emotions toward Gatsby as at once “everything for which I have unaffected scorn” and
the only one “who turned out all right in the end” (6). Some critics, such as David L. Minter, have even remarked on the way that Nick can be understood to have created Gatsby in the sense that Nick has very little of substance to go on as he sketches the character that he and readers come to think of as Gatsby. Despite the fact that Fitzgerald seems to play with the concept of self-division and splitting on a variety of levels throughout the novel, Gatsby and Nick are nonetheless distinct characters, a distinction that is not sustained between the narrator and his hero, Tyler, in *Fight Club*.

Although the narrator of *Fight Club* is initially presented to readers as a separate character from Tyler Durden, it becomes clear that the narrator's disorientation and insomnia are more than symptoms of his cultural malaise; they are symptoms of his multiple personality disorder. At the same time, the creation of Tyler, the perfect, strong, blond alter-ego who sits in the hand of his own godly making, can still be understood as the most prominent symptom of that malaise. Tyler, after all, is everything the narrator is not—purposeful, powerful, and scornful of commodity culture—and in this way, the split mirrors the participant/observer split of Nick in *The Great Gatsby*. Insofar as the narrator is technically both himself and Tyler, he too is both participant and observer of his own and Tyler's actions. Nonetheless, by making Tyler another personality that shares the narrator's body, Palahniuk makes literal the schizoid sensibility Fitzgerald began to detect and represent in *The Great Gatsby*. In fact, Palahniuk's development of a schizoid character relationship as a symptom of late capitalism and commodity culture echoes the work of theorists such as Fredric Jameson and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who have explored (albeit in very different ways) the psychoanalytic category of schizophrenia and identity formation in late capitalism. Most importantly, by presenting this schizoid sensibility as a literal multiple personality disorder, Palahniuk pathologizes one of the most cherished tenets around which both books and the American Dream pivot—self-invention.

Acts of self-invention are at the center of both novels and are integral to the apostles' relationships with their heroes, not only because they connect the heroes to the American Dream—the Franklinian promise that a man can overcome the conditions of his birth through energy and industry and build his own identity in the world and thus his own happiness—but also (and arguably more importantly) because they typify the heroes’ ability to act purposefully and vitally, something the narrators seem unable to do. But the attempts at “self-making” in *Gatsby* and *Fight Club* question this promise insofar as the acts of self-invention at the heart of both novels are fraught with difficulties, not to mention violence. Gatsby's ambitions, after all, lead him into a life of crime and unsavory “gonnegtions” that end with his dream
denied and his death. Nonetheless, it is still possible to see the value of the
dream and the magic of Gatsby’s self-creation because of Nick’s position in the
text. As an outsider, Nick evaluates that process of self-creation and arrives
at a sympathetic, romantic portrayal of Gatsby. This ability to sympathize
with Gatsby is why Nick’s distinct and separate existence is so important—
it creates an outside perspective from which to view the story of Gatsby.
His narrative perspective thus allows readers (at his prompting) to downplay
Gatsby’s flaws—his relentless, single-minded ambition, his illegal activities,
his attempt to “steal” another man’s wife—in favor of a sympathetic, even
glamorous view of Gatsby. Part of the magic of Gatsby relies on Nick’s inability
or unwillingness to recognize fully the realities behind him. But more impor-
tantly, Nick’s romanticization of Gatsby allows him to believe in purposeful,
redemptive action that staves off the existential emptiness and fundamental
incoherence of modern life.

In Fight Club, however, such an outside perspective is denied because
the narrator becomes the same physical person as Tyler. As a result, the
narrator’s relationship to Tyler is a closed loop, one that denies a mediating
final valuation (such as Nick’s) that redeems the difficult qualities of the hero.
In fact, on the contrary, at some point it becomes clear to the narrator that
Tyler’s ambitions require nothing less than the narrator’s destruction, which
makes the narrator’s relationship to Tyler not only unsympathetic but directly
adversarial. In the narrative frame of the novel, Tyler is holding a gun in the
narrator’s mouth. In the opening pages, this scene appears to readers as two
distinct men, one threatening the life of the other, but by the end of the novel,
readers understand that it is the narrator who is holding the gun in his own
mouth as he wrestles with his alter-ego, Tyler, for control of the body they
share. In this moment, it becomes clear that all acts of self-invention are in
some fundamental way acts of self-destruction; to invent a self requires the
destruction of the self that was there before, just as Jimmy Gatz is in a sense
killed by Jay Gatsby.

By the end of the twentieth century, then, the American Dream appears
to have turned into a schizoid nightmare. Structurally, the confrontation of
the narrator and Tyler denies that outside perspective that Nick gives to
Gatsby. Thematically, this decision changes the valence of the act of self-
invention in Fight Club and consequently highlights the violence and self-
vioence that is inherent in all acts of self-invention or self-making. By present-
ing the Franklinian project of self-invention as a fundamentally destructive
phenomenon, Palahniuk develops the dark, haunting, undercurrent in Gatsby
that Nick’s narration tends to obscure. It also begins to suggest why violence
is an unwavering side-effect of the American dream.
“A Classic, Ancient Romance”

In order to explore the intersections between violence and the American dream, which I am tracing through the intersection of commodities and identity, I must begin obliquely by addressing Chuck Palahniuk’s claim that both The Great Gatsby and Fight Club are “romances.” In his 2005 afterword, Palahniuk argues that both books are about “two men and a woman” (215) before calling the books “romances.” This may lead the incautious reader to believe that some kind of love triangle motivates the characterization of the books as “romances.” Although this conventional thought is tempting, it does not accurately describe the male/female relationships in either novel. For quite some time, critics have understood that the romance in Gatsby is not about the “love” affair between Gatsby and Daisy. Although much debate surrounds Daisy’s character, I think it is safe to say that she is, for Gatsby, less a person than an idealized object that will complete and validate his crafted identity. In Fight Club, Marla is used for sex by Tyler, and while the narrator develops a camaraderie with her based on their relationships to Tyler, it is hardly a love affair or a “classic, ancient romance” (216). Sensing these problems with the male/female relationships, some critics have explored the homosocial and homoerotic undercurrents of the texts. Such critics identify the “romance” in Gatsby in Nick’s relationship to Gatsby, either through Nick’s idealization of his hero or by suggesting that Nick harbors latent desire for Gatsby (Fraser). Although less obviously a romance on any level, a handful of critics (see Peele and Thompson) have noted a similar desire (part idealization, part eroticization) in the narrator of Fight Club for Tyler, helpfully augmented of course by the intimacy of the fight scenes.

Although the concept of desire and even erotic desire seem important components of both novels that illuminate rich ways of reading them, for my purposes, I want to propose the usefulness of an older notion of romance, one that is frequently evoked in Gatsby criticism—that of the medieval quest narrative. Fitzgerald invites readers to consider Gatsby in this light with his references to Gatsby’s house as “feudal” with its “high Gothic” library (49); he even explicitly presents Gatsby’s devotion to Daisy as “following the grail” (156). This medieval sense of romance, which is of course closely linked to courtship tales and thus to the modern notion of romance as an erotic genre, also has other notable conventions, one of which is an emphasis on the transformative power of objects. This focus on objects may explain why Palahniuk chooses to identify his novel as “a classic, ancient romance” that is updated to “compete” with popular objects of contemporary culture such as “espresso machines and ESPN.”
Although both *The Great Gatsby* and *Fight Club* can be read as quest romances—Daisy is presented as a “grail” (156) and the narrator of *Fight Club* is clearly on a quest for self-knowledge—their use of objects also qualifies them for inclusion in the genre. In both novels, objects often seem to have special properties that make them magical, promising, and potentially dangerous. Often, objects are associated with transformation, either by appearing to be something they are not, or by promising to give their owner particular qualities. Although in *Gatsby* and *Fight Club*, it is the wizards of Madison Avenue advertising agencies and not Merlin or Morgana who enchant and glamorize commodities, the objects in these novels are nonetheless endowed with similar transformative properties as those in romances (including the aptly named Daisy “Fay” or fairy).

In addition, both novels’ preoccupation with time, particularly its fluidity and malleability, resonate with the romance genre not only because it suggests a supernatural relationship to the usual rules of time and space but also because it emphasizes the subjectivity and perceptions of the narrators, which is a convention of later nineteenth-century Romanticism. Gatsby’s desire to recapture the past is only the most obvious example of the novel’s troubled relationship to time. Throughout the novel, Nick seems to have trouble tracking time, and, as many critics have noted, the overall chronology of events, as Nick presents it, does not quite work (see especially Pendleton). Although in general critics have attributed these discrepancies in the narrative’s chronology to Fitzgerald’s supposedly careless editing habits, it is possible that they are meant to reinforce Nick’s problematic relationship to time, a problem which is suggested by at least two other instances in the novel. The first incident occurs after the suspicious encounter with Chester McKee following the disintegration of the party at Tom and Myrtle’s apartment. The scene reads as a series of odd flashes punctuated by lost moments, represented by the use of ellipses in the text. Nick again loses time, albeit in a different way, when he forgets his thirtieth birthday during the showdown between Tom and Gatsby at the Plaza. Similarly, the narrator of *Fight Club* loses time as he wakes up in different time zones, losing and gaining hours until he has trouble distinguishing his dreams from reality: “A telephone was ringing in my dream, and it’s not clear if reality slipped into my dream or if my dream is slopping over into reality” (139). In both books, lost time highlights the fact that the narrators experience altered states and difficulties of perception—for Nick this condition is precipitated by more frequent use of alcohol than he takes credit for, and for the narrator of *Fight Club*, it is a by-product of what he perceives to be his persistent insomnia.
These altered states allow the authors to mark the extreme disorientation and related alienation of their narrators, but they also enable the authors to create texts with distinctive surrealist, dreamlike styles that evoke an aura of enchantment. This hallucinatory style, represented in *Gatsby* by phrases such as the “floating...cocktails” (44) or the “yellow...music” (44) and in *Fight Club* by phrases such as “I am Joe’s Raging Bile Duct” (59) or “Everything is vertical blinds” (137), in turn helps reinforce both texts’ connection to the “romance” genre and by extension to the promises and dangers of commodity culture because they capture the fluidity and instability of objects in these worlds. In *The Great Gatsby*, commodities seem to enable the quest because they are responsible for creating the glamorous (in its purest sense) world in which anything seems possible. In *Fight Club*, the glamorous objects of butcher-block countertops, track lighting, and maple flooring turn out to be dangerous, distracting ploys in the quest for self. But in both cases, objects are given magical properties that are perceived to intersect with and impact individual identity. The difference is that Gatsby yokes together the disparate objects and their meanings through the force of his grail dream, whereas the narrator of *Fight Club* has no overarching significance to hold them together. As Kim Moreland observes, the “medievalist impulse” in American literature is often an attempt to imbue efforts at self-perfection (which are usually associated with material acquisition) with an overarching purpose; it stems from the need to create a sense of “authentic and intense experience” in the otherwise weightless and insubstantial interactions in modern life (6-8).

It makes sense, then, that as a modern day romance, *The Great Gatsby* is a novel steeped in the language and logic of advertising and marketing as a way of emphasizing the potentially transformative properties of commodities. Gatsby relies on commodities—car, house, clothes—to buttress his self-made identity. He believes that the right mix of objects (with Daisy as the crowning piece in the collection) will magically open the gates to the highest level of the American upper class for him. This is one reason why *Gatsby* is a book so full of symbols or, as Nick calls them, “enchanted objects” (98)—the green light on the dock, the shirts, Daisy. But such an operation of “enchantment” pivots on two important qualities of commodities: first, the understanding that the value of an object inheres not in its use, or even in its exchange (what it costs monetarily) value, but in its symbolic and even more importantly its status value (in other words, what signals it sends about the owner’s identity and status); and second, part of the magic of a commodity is in part attributable to the striving for it and to its distance from everyday life.

Jay Gatsby lives in a world where nothing is simply what it is. Objects are infused with a meaning over and above themselves. Scott Donaldson explores
this aspect of objects in *The Great Gatsby* using Georg Lukacs’s notion of reification, a process through which “commodities take on a mystical life of their own as they are converted from mere ‘products of men’s hands’ into ‘independent beings endowed with life’” (“Possessions” 200). Put another way and using the language of semiotics, the transformative properties of objects in Gatsby’s world rely on the ability to un hinge signifiers and signifieds in ways that do not necessarily respect the culturally and socially accepted pairings, arbitrary though those might be. This surplus of meaning is, of course, the logic of the commodity. Objects accrue meaning and significance beyond their use- and exchange-values through the artful semiotic pairings of marketing—perfume becomes associated with femininity or a particular ring guarantees love. This kind of thinking is essential to *Gatsby*; it allows bootleg liquor to become the “milk of wonder” (117) and Daisy Fay to become the “golden girl” (127). Even the act of self-invention (Jimmy Gatz into Jay Gatsby) adheres to this logic insofar as it rests on Gatsby’s ability to un hinge who he longs to be from the person he is. The implication is that the prevalence of commodity culture suggested to him that gestures such as this are possible; as Donaldson observes via Karl Marx, “under capitalism not only the worker but everything—and everybody—was transformed into a commercial commodity” (“Possessions” 200). Moreover, since it is only once young Gatz suspects the “unreality of reality” (105) that he conceives of his life as Jay Gatsby, Fitzgerald makes the point that such thinking is antagonistic to a stable sense of reality.

In addition, *Gatsby* captures how distance and impersonality are essential to such thinking. Once an object is possessed, its magical qualities begin to diminish. Nick speculates about this dynamic in the famous scene where Gatsby takes Daisy and Nick on a tour of his home. Nick imagines that “There must have been times that afternoon when Daisy tumbled short of his dreams—not through her own fault but because of the colossal vitality of his illusion” (101). Still more importantly, Nick believes it is Daisy’s proximity that begins to break the spell, divesting other distant objects of their supernatural significance: “Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one” (98). Like the “hint” of rooms “ripe with mystery” upstairs in Daisy’s childhood home (155), the green light across the sound, or even those laughing voices Nick longs to join on the New York City streets, distance is required for sustaining the illusion. It is for this reason that after Daisy sides with Tom in the fight at the Plaza, Gatsby enigmatically says “In any case... it [Tom and Daisy’s love] was just personal” (160). Although Nick struggles to make sense of this “curious remark” (160), it suggests that the “personal” is somehow less romantic and enticing than the “impersonal,” that observing is more thrilling and satisfying than actually participating, that
longing is infinitely more fine than possessing. Intimacy destroys the meaning of Gatsby’s objects because it reveals their reality. Arguably, true intimacy with Gatsby would have destroyed Nick’s vigorous illusion of him as well. The loss of illusion is perhaps most famously presented in the scene where Nick imagines Gatsby’s last afternoon by the pool. Suspecting that his dream might be dead, Nick speculates that Gatsby must have “shivered as he found out what a grotesque thing a rose is” (169), without the dream to soften its thorns; as Moreland notes, “Gatsby cannot be ‘Gatsby’ without his dream” (142); without the dream, his identity cannot hold and its incoherence becomes brutally clear.

In *Fight Club*, the language and logic of advertising, marketing, and commodities also dominate the text, but the enchantment with this entire process of longing, desiring, and observing has disappeared. With the ascendency of commodity culture and the logic of the commodity firmly in place, the narrator seems to have caught on to the bait-and-switch semiotics of advertising and marketing. He even suspects that he is on the hamster wheel of perpetual consumption, constantly compelled to shore up his sense of identity and status in society through an “insidious cycle of work-and-spend” (Schor 107), which ultimately benefits companies while imprisoning him. He also senses the hollowness of the promises; the perfect sofa does not help the purchaser define himself in any significant way. It is a never-ending process, built on an institutionalized sense of self-perfection chained to the mechanics of commodity culture in which objects are presented as integral to the process of identity construction. He longs to be released from what he sees as the trap of desiring perfection found on magazine pages: “May I never be complete. May I never be content. May I never be perfect” (46). The process of disenchantment begins when he suspects that the promises are illusory. Moreover, he connects the focus on constant consumerism in contemporary culture to an underdeveloped sense of self. His relationship to commodities has become a substitute for knowing himself and for forging relationships to people. In short, he recognizes Jameson’s point that isolated and disconnected signifiers cannot serve as the foundation of a coherent identity.

Not surprisingly, this suspicion is also accompanied by a longing for the personal, the intimate, and the real. The support groups and eventually the bloody fights of fight club suggest the escalating desire for intimacy. At the support groups, the intimacy is emotional as personal stories about illness are shared, but the physical intimacy is limited to long hugs. At the fight clubs, the emotions are left unarticulated (significantly moving beyond the potential pitfalls of worn out words) in favor of brutal physical intimacy as men wrestle one another in various states of undress, often swapping bodily fluids in the process. If *Gatsby* suggests that mystification of objects is achieved by distance
and impersonality, *Fight Club* responds to a world filled with mystified objects with a primal, almost invasive, intimacy. Despite the fact that they share a surrealistic style, the language of *Fight Club* is preoccupied not with metaphors and symbols as in *The Great Gatsby* but with descriptions of bodily functions, organic matter, and “Do-It-Yourself” guides that detail how to make soap or build bombs. Similarly, if the hero of *Gatsby* attempts to cleanse himself symbolically by anglicizing his ethnically tinged name, James Gatz, the hero of *Fight Club* proudly pronounces his guttural, clearly ethnic name, Tyler Durden. He also rebuffs any compulsion to “cleanse” himself for the upper classes, choosing instead to make expensive soap out of their own liposuctioned fat, which he sells back to them so they can clean themselves. In short, *Fight Club* responds to the high polish and upward mobility of *Gatsby* with a celebration of muck and a determined, purposeful disenfranchisement and embrace of otherness.

As an early twentieth century novel, however, *The Great Gatsby* does register tension and suspicion around the new, transformative, and magical properties of objects in a commodity culture and reality. Gatsby realizes that he occupies a transitional moment in which objects still maintain some authority as evidence and proof, and he exploits this evidential power of objects to staunch the flow of sawdust on that first ride into Manhattan with Nick. As Gatsby regales Nick with (false) stories of his extraordinary youth, Nick explains that “With an effort I managed to restrain my incredulous laughter. The very phrases were worn so threadbare that they evoked no image except that of a turbaned ‘character’ leaking sawdust at every pore” (70). As if sensing Nick’s disbelief, Gatsby produces two forms of hard evidence to support or perhaps even materialize his words—a medal he was supposedly awarded by Montenegro during the war (which Nick notes “had an authentic look” and a photograph of Gatsby at Oxford, “cricket bat in hand.” After these items are produced and inspected, Nick abruptly suspends his disbelief remarking, “Then it was all true” (71). In this scene, Fitzgerald captures the transition to the logic of a commodity-based culture, the move from a moment in which the objective, material world is clearly real to one in which objects are manipulated for effect to create an illusion. A similar moment occurs when Owl Eyes assesses Gatsby’s library: “It’s a bona fide piece of printed matter. . . . What thoroughness! What realism!” (50). Despite his tendency to live in dreams, Gatsby demonstrates that he understands the power of objects and uses their supposedly unimpeachable nature to underwrite his claims. In other words, he uses “realism” as a strategy for illusion, the sleight of hand of the magician.
It is this manipulation of reality that ultimately brings about Gatsby’s demise in the form of his encounter with Tom Buchanan. The real reason that Gatsby is killed is because he has, through his act of self-making and pursuit of Daisy, violated the social boundaries and sensibilities of Tom’s world in which individuals must be authenticated by ancestry. Tom does not deny Gatsby the right to become successful, but he does deny him the right to enter his particular pocket of American society. As Donaldson points out in “Possessions in *The Great Gatsby*,” what Gatsby (and Myrtle) fail to comprehend is “that it is not money alone that matters, but money combined with secure social position” (194). He goes on to observe that they “fall victim to what Ronald Berman (borrowing from Pierre Bourdieu) calls ‘the iron laws of social distinction’” (194). In fact, Tom is obsessed by a fear of infiltration throughout the novel because he (rightly) believes his exclusive world is under assault. From his “scientific” (17) readings about the threat to the Nordic race and his interest in horses (and therefore likely their bloodlines) to his anecdotal story about Biloxi, a man who conned his way into Tom and Daisy’s wedding (135), and his disdainful reference to Gatsby as “Mr. Nobody from Nowhere” (137), Tom makes it clear that he and his kind must value family lineages that can be authenticated as proof of a person’s worth and right to consort with them. Tom’s worldview aligns reality or a person’s “real” identity with ancestry. This position represents a kind of consensus on the part of the wealthy and powerful who want to protect their society; they define the idea of the “real” by linking it to history and origins, which is exactly what Gatsby’s romanticism with its desire for “a release from history” works against (qtd. in Berman 22). With this idea of reality in place, Tom and his set can easily and comfortably identify Gatsby as a “fraud” or a “counterfeit.” In a world with these values, it is not surprising that the “advertisement man” (125), Jay Gatsby, shatters like “glass against Tom” (155).

Although Nick leaves open the possibility that Gatsby, through dint of effort and his “heightened sensitivity to the promises of life” (6), is more real (even if he is not authentic) than any of the other scheming, dishonorable, and careless characters, ultimately *The Great Gatsby* records a moment when the promise of the American dream runs up against the reality of American life as those in power at that time defined it. As a result, it raises a series of questions about the arbitrariness of what we call “real” (Nick’s own shady family past illustrates the tenuosity on which Tom’s claims are built) and the tension between dreams and reality that seems to be inherent in the notion of American progress. Gatsby’s belief in the “unreality of reality” ultimately runs aground on the very real and perhaps more important, the very powerful Tom Buchanan.
In *Fight Club*, Chuck Palahniuk reverses the problem. Rather than bask-ing in the “unreality of reality,” the narrator seems unable to experience his life as real at all. His insomnia is so disorienting that he claims everything feels like an “out-of-body experience” (19). With an apartment designed to “look like” a page of an IKEA catalog and clothes that make him “look like” the perfect young professional, he has difficulty—both because of his insomnia and because of the logic of advanced commodity culture—distinguishing between his life and some idea of “life” sold to him in targeted marketing campaigns. Rather than commodities enabling his identity, they seem to dictate and imprison it. His life feels hyper-mediated, so much so that he does not have a clear sense of where his desire begins and what he has been told to desire ends. His reality is based on the unreality of magazine ads and catalogs. In this sense, he lives in what Jean Baudrillard termed “hyper-reality,” a cultural condition that accompanies late capitalism in which the real begins to imitate the unreal (12) (one example of this hyper-reality would be new “towns” that strive to look like Main Street at Disney World, a place designed around a notion of an ideal American past that never actually existed). In such a world, Baudrillard contends there is no longer an outside referent through which the real can be ascertained (1).

This is the problem that prompts the narrator to attend the disease support groups; he wants to break through the otherwise flat, shiny surfaces of postmodern culture by proximity to undeniable and irrevocable death, which gives him a glimpse of the real: “Walking home after the support group, I felt more alive than I’d ever felt” (22). Pathology—or dis-ease—becomes a way of breaking out of the world of hollow gestures that Gatsby introduces. This fleeting experience of the real, however, is destroyed by Marla Singer’s presence: “Well, Marla is smoking and rolling her eyes, ... all of a sudden even death and dying rank right down there with plastic flowers on video as a non-event” (23). The idea of “plastic flowers” recorded on video again captures the narrator’s sense that all his experiences are hyper-mediated and denatured. Unlike Gatsby, who built his identity based on the “unreality of reality” (105), the narrator of *Fight Club* feels his identity has been denied him by a culture premised on the “reality of unreality.” Moreover, the nightmarish, schizoid world of *Fight Club* seems to suggest that the move is one from observing a talented magician to being lost in the funhouse.

It is after Marla sullies the efficacy of the support groups that the narrator meets Tyler and together they found fight club—secret, underground meetings of men from various backgrounds who fight, shoeless, shirtless, and bare-knuckled until one of them “says stop or goes limp” (49). These bloody fights finally satisfy the narrator’s longing for reality. When Tyler begins fight club
by asking the narrator to “hit me as hard as you can” (46), he initiates a process of physical intimacy designed to give a clear sense of self in a hyper-mediated, unreal society. In fact, Tyler puts a premium not just on fighting but on scarring; he even initiates new inductees with a ritualistic kiss on the hand that he then sprinkles with lye to create a burn mark: “Tyler explained it all, about not wanting to die without any scars... and wanting to know more about himself” (52). The idea of physical extremity puts the men of fight club in touch with the real and allows the distinctions of a commodity-based culture to evaporate: “As long as you are at fight club, you’re not how much money you’ve got in the bank. You’re not your job. You’re not your family, and you’re not who you tell yourself” (143). The physicality and violence of fight club are attempts to insist upon reality over performance and typical markers of status. This desire to move beyond performance is, of course, opposed to Gatsby, who is created entirely by such performances and markers of status. It is also why in those first glimpses of the heroes, Gatsby looks out at the green light for his sense of self, while Tyler sits in a hand of his own making for his.

Still, the emphasis in Fight Club on breaking away from the magical spell of commodities and forcing a return to reality does seem to align Tyler Durden and his pumped-up followers uncomfortably with the bulky, “cruel body” (13) of Tom Buchanan, who destroys the more ethereal Gatsby, the representative of commodity culture, by making him confront the real. But whereas Tom is motivated by a desire to preserve a fragile (and arbitrary) economic and social order based on the careful tracking of ancestries, the members of fight club are, as the club evolves into the paradoxical Project Mayhem, trying not to preserve but to annihilate history. In fact, when the narrator and Tyler are on top of the Parker-Morris building, which is supposedly wired to explode, it is not the building but the national museum next to it (where artifacts that catalog and thus institutionalize national history are housed) that is the target of the explosion. Project Mayhem’s goal is to “blast the world free of history” (124), not, as is the case for Tom, to protect and preserve it as a site of authenticity and thus reality.

The desire to destroy history is a complicated point in Fight Club, but Tyler explains that his generation feels abandoned by history: “We don’t have a great war in our generation or a great depression” (140). In other words, there is no formative outside force of irrevocable reality to shape them. Rather they live in the American Dream, a world of plenty and choice, that ironically makes them feel like coddled “thirty-year-old boy[s]” (51). This sentiment echoes Baudrillard’s point that in a postmodern, hyper-mediated world, there is a loss of history and a sense of living outside of history; he argues: “History is our lost
The great event of this period, the great trauma, is this decline of strong referentials, these death pangs of the real and of the rational that open onto an age of simulation” (43). This loss of living in history, in the midst of events that are unmistakably urgent and real, leaves history to ossify in museums and become subject to representations such as Tom’s. The goal of the fight clubs/Project Mayhem to destroy history and society in order to begin again is a more ambitious version of Gatsby’s desire to rewrite his personal history and escape the rigid order of Tom’s world. It is a desire for regeneration through violence, which Richard Slotkin has argued is at the very heart of the American Dream, a creative destruction that fuels the American commitment to progress.

Nonetheless, it is worth noting that in both Gatsby and Fight Club, violence is associated with losing touch with reality. For Gatsby, the dream of self-making is an attempt to overcome the limitations of his birth. He fashions an identity premised on the belief that his real identity can be transformed, that he can make words into flesh. This effort “to be free from the constraints of proof or evidence, to alter one’s identity, to be multiple rather than single, to overcome the flaws of time and space and background” are exactly the “virtues of the American dream” (Weinstein 27). Put another way, the American dream of self-making requires, to use the language of semiotics again, “the limitless freedom of the sign” (Weinstein 28), or the ability to un hinge signifiers and signifieds in ways that challenge the culturally and socially accepted match-ups. This process echoes the logic of commodity culture, which also rives signifieds and signifiers. As the “limitless freedom of the sign,” the dream is, in a sense, premised on a kind of semiotic violence. Ronald Berman recognizes the role of violence in Gatsby when he notes that Fitzgerald’s romanticism is based on a need for “renewal” (20) and “restructuring the familiar” (23). In Fight Club, in a world where the logic of the commodity is ubiquitous, violence offers a way to realign signifiers and signifieds—pain is pain, a scar definitively commemorates a particular event, which is through the mark undeniably real.

This emphasis on destruction is perhaps the most disturbing aspect of Fight Club. When Tyler suggests that “Maybe self-improvement isn’t the answer. . . . Maybe self-destruction is the answer” (49), he seems to question the very foundation of the Franklinian program on which the American Dream is based. Moreover, the desire to destroy things does not stop with individuals’ bodies or even with American society; the members of Project Mayhem even fantasize about destroying the ecology of the earth: “burn the Amazon rain forests. Pump chlorofluorocarbons straight up to gobble the ozone. Open the dump valves on supertankers and uncap offshore oil wells. I wanted to kill
all the fish I couldn’t afford to eat, and smother the French beaches I’d never see” (123). Although the economic resentment is clear, the desire to destroy the earth echoes uncomfortably with Nick’s recollection of the first Dutch sailors sighting “the fresh, green breast of the new world” (189) because his recollection of this moment also invokes the “vanished trees, trees that had made way for Gatsby’s house” (189). There is a celebration of the originary moment when the wonder of the new world presented itself to those sailors, but it is mixed with sadness because Nick knows that the wonder ultimately generates those “inessential houses” (189). From this perspective, *The Great Gatsby* marks the beginning of the American Dream, not with Gatsby’s self-making through commodities but with those Dutch sailors’ wondrous, hungry gaze that desires to transform what it sees, that signals the beginning of an artificial and denatured world. The men in *Fight Club*, who have inherited this artificial, denatured world, cluttered with inessential houses, are rushing to destroy it; they want to see the project through to its logical end, so that the earth and society can recover and begin to reestablish the real. But what both efforts have in common is dissatisfaction with the present, the looking upon one thing and desiring it to be another.

From this perspective, then, *Fight Club* not only “updates” *The Great Gatsby*, it offers a fuller understanding of one of the most hotly debated issues in the book—the American Dream—and provides insight into the relationship between the American Dream and commodity culture across the twentieth century. The temptation in discussions of *The Great Gatsby* and the American Dream is to argue that commodity culture in some way destroyed the purity and nobility of the dream. Many critics have suggested as much. Scott Donaldson refers to the “coda about the Dutch sailors and the corruption of the American dream” (138), and Ross Posnock makes a similar claim when he argues that “What separates the sailors’ discovery and the building of Gatsby’s house is the advent and triumph of capitalism” (211). Here capitalism is to blame for the missteps taken from the “sailors’ discovery” to the time of “Gatsby’s house.” Claims such as these pepper scholarship on *Gatsby* and represent the accepted wisdom on the American Dream as something that in some way went wrong. Initially, *Fight Club* only seems to bolster these claims since it represents a world in which the dream has gone so horribly wrong that it is now a nightmare, but closer scrutiny of the two novels suggests another possibility: that the problem is with the dream itself. The dream may be inherently destructive, a notion that hinges on an understanding of the American Dream as not an end but a process of constant transformation, renewal, and re-visioning—it is regenerative violence.
Notes
1. The narrator in *Fight Club*, the novel, is nameless, although for convenience many critics refer to him as “Jack.” This name comes from the film in which the narrator begins to refer to himself as “Jack” after reading a series of *Reader’s Digest* articles that personify bodily organs and have them explain their function in this first person (I am Jack’s Prostate, for example). In the book, the narrator reads a similar set of *Reader’s Digest* articles, but the organs take the name of “Joe” (58). The narrator does not resort to calling himself “Joe” regularly after that.

2. Many critics have offered assessments of Nick’s character and his reliability as the narrator of *The Great Gatsby* including Hanzo, Thale, and, more recently, Donaldson (“The Trouble with Nick”) and Cousineau.

3. Although it is not my intention to launch into a full discussion of Jameson’s or Deluze and Guattari’s works on capitalism and schizophrenia, I do want to note that Palahniuk’s sense of a schizoid sensibility as a pathology of late capitalism is in sympathy with Jameson’s work on the topic. Jameson associates the schizophrenic’s lack of personal sense of self as similar to the identity formation encouraged by a postmodern, late capitalist culture in which isolated and disconnected signifiers fail to create a coherent sequence.

4. This observation hearkens back to the fact that because the narrator and Tyler are the same person—their relationship exists in a closed loop; there is no definitive outside referent for which one of them is real. Since reality is a matter of representation, whoever wins their battle for their body, wins the right to be “real.”

Works cited


