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**COMMUNITY AND VIOLENCE: THE  
REINVENTION OF MASCULINITIES IN CHUCK  
PALAHNIUK'S NARRATIVE**

**PhD Dissertation**

**Carmen Fuentes Fuentes**

**Supervisor: Dr. Gerardo Rodríguez Salas**

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Meeting Chuck Palahniuk on paper has not been easy, but it has been a pleasure. Sometimes sentimental, sometimes insurgent, and most of the time uncomfortable, each and every protagonist in his books are full of teaching moments that have affected and expanded my vision of the world. When I first watched David Fincher's film *Fight*

*Club*, I was an undergraduate student only beginning to have an interest in academia. I would have never imagined that the author who had written such thought-provoking novel would, at some point in the future, fill five years of my life with the hunger to not only explore the idea of masculinity in community, but also to contest and enrich my own schemes. Thank you, Chuck.

## **SUMMARY**

The critical studies of men and masculinities are having an important and necessary impact on literary criticism, allowing for the opening of new horizons in gender studies. In this context the interaction of hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities in different communal ensembles in literature is a question that has been scarcely studied. North American author Chuck Palahniuk's novels offer a social and argumentative context that focuses on today's America where male characters see themselves immersed in an identity crisis marked by gender. The starting point of this crisis is the masculine psychical pattern available in the individualistic communitarian model that exists nowadays in the United States. Palahniuk takes as a reference this American society's status quo and brings its national symbolism, with an essentially religious weight, to extremes that drive these communities to self-destruction. Death as a communitarian and saturated symbol becomes one of the most important elements of his work. Such communitarian demolition affects the masculine self as well, which is also taken to the extreme, producing the rupture of communitarian, and consequently, gender limits. In order to analyse Palahniuk's selected novels under these lens, the starting point is an interdisciplinary theoretical approach combining community theories and critical studies of masculinities. As regards the first field, the references to authors such as Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Derrida or Roberto Espósito, among many others, will shed light to the debate on traditional communities' lack of value, specially due to their religious power. Since community cannot be understood without the subject, and the subject is intrinsically united to the body, Nancy's theorization of the latter will be vital. This takes us to question (in community, and never in an isolated way) the male body and its symbolic power inside the community, in this case the American one. In order to examine and deconstruct such gendered symbolism, critical figures like Connell, Horrocks, or Hearn, among others, examine the male self as sexualized entities, socially filtered by gendered standards that are different to those of females, but equally harmful and limiting. The combination of these two theoretical fields applied to Palahniuk's selected works of fiction manifests the social crisis in which capitalist America finds itself, which influences negatively the masculine psyche. Nevertheless, the author manages, through his grotesque and extreme plots, to create ruptures in these traditional schemes and promote different and innovative alternatives.

## **Keywords**

Chuck Palahniuk; community theory; (in)operative community; death/finitude; masculinities; body/corporeity; violence; religion.

## RESUMEN

Los estudios de masculinidades están teniendo una importante y necesaria repercusión en el campo de la crítica literaria para la apertura de nuevos horizontes en los estudios de género. En este contexto, la interacción de masculinidades hegemónicas y no hegemónicas en distintos entornos comunitarios dentro de la literatura es una cuestión relativamente poco estudiada. Las obras del autor norteamericano Chuck Palahniuk ofrecen un contexto social y argumentativo centrado en la América actual donde los personajes masculinos se ven asolados por una crisis identitaria marcada por el género. El punto de partida de esta crisis es el patrón de psique masculina disponible en el modelo comunitario individualista que existe a día de hoy en los Estados Unidos. Palahniuk toma como referencia este status quo de la sociedad americana y lleva el simbolismo nacionalista, con una carga esencialmente religiosa, a extremos que conducen a estas comunidades a su autodestrucción, siendo la muerte como símbolo comunitario uno de los elementos más importantes de su obra. Dicha demolición comunitaria afecta también al “yo” masculino, que también es llevado al extremo, dando lugar a la ruptura de límites comunitarios y, en consecuencia, de género. Para analizar las novelas seleccionadas de Palahniuk bajo este prisma, se parte de una aproximación teórica interdisciplinar de estudios comunitarios y de masculinidades. Del primer campo, se han tomado referencias de autores como Jean-Luc Nancy, Jacques Derrida o Roberto Espósito, entre otros, que argumentan la falta de validez de la comunidad tradicional, sobre todo debido a su carga religiosa. Ya que la comunidad no puede entenderse sin el sujeto, y el sujeto está intrínsecamente unido al cuerpo, la teorización de Nancy sobre el mismo también será de vital importancia. Esto nos lleva a la cuestión (en comunidad, y nunca de forma aislada) del cuerpo masculino, y a su simbolismo de poder dentro de la comunidad, en este caso norteamericana. Para analizar y desconstruir dicho simbolismo de género, figuras críticas como Connell, Horrocks, o Hearn, entre muchos otros, examinan la figura del hombre como un ente sexualizado y filtrado socialmente por estándares de género diferentes a las mujeres, pero igual de dañinos y limitadores. La combinación de estos dos campos teóricos aplicados a la obra de Palahniuk pone de manifiesto la crisis social en la que se encuentra la América capitalista, que influye negativamente en la psique masculina. El autor, sin embargo, consigue, a través de sus argumentos grotescos y extremos, crear rupturas en este esquema y promover alternativas diferentes e innovadoras.

### Palabras clave

Chuck Palahniuk; teorías comunitarias; comunidad (in)operativa; muerte/finitud; masculinidades; cuerpo/corporeidad; violencia; religión.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2013 I finished my degree with a final dissertation that focused on the analysis of Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, which was directed by Professor Amaya Fernández Menicucci at the University of Castilla-La Mancha. This literary analysis focused on the novel's main character and its gender performance inside the American social milieu, which provided a picture of a degraded and toxic concept of masculinity. This work would pave the way towards my increasing interest towards Gender Studies, specifically those centred on masculinities. Such drive became more pressing during the Master's Degree in English Language and Literature, which I carried out at the University of Granada. My Master's dissertation, titled "*A copy of a copy of a copy: Community, the Saturated Body and Endangered Masculinities in Chuck Palahniuk's Fight Club*" (2015) can be considered a more mature development of my first literary analysis. Chuck Palahniuk offered a fictional scenario in his first novel which, I argued, allowed me to keep exploring the identity crisis experienced by American men. This time, however, and with the aid of my supervisor, Dr Gerardo Rodríguez Salas, my examination came accompanied by the introduction of community theories in the corpus. The results were innovative, as such an addition proved enriching in the end results of my dissertation. I stated that Palahniuk's narrative in *Fight Club* provided a fictional setting in which hegemonic masculine practices are taken to the extreme inside a deeply individualistic American context. This individualism, I argued, pushed the male protagonist towards a feeling of incompleteness, which he could only solve by creating a community in which the archaic masculine practices in the American community were taken to the limit, in order to find a more satisfactory and accepted identity inside this societal model. The fight club community proved to be a temporary

patch for those males who felt incomplete as men. However, its extreme understanding of masculinity inside this operative community<sup>1</sup> led to the members' self-destruction and, as a result, the annihilation of the community itself. In my conclusions, it was argued that, first, masculinity is based on completely external factors which find their origin in religious figures that represent an empty space. At the same time, I concluded that the main female character, due to her close relationship with death, provided a proper channel for the male protagonist to avoid symbolic saturation and have a more open understanding of his private self. *Fight Club* proved masculinity's self-destructive nature, if taken to the extreme, and how it follows the archaic schemes imposed by the religious figures that project the communal idea representing manhood. The results of the dissertation were so thought-provoking and innovative that both my supervisor and I decided immediately to follow this line of research with the rest of the novels by the same author, expecting to find similar and even more stimulating outcomes.

The introduction to the present thesis aims to present the content of my work, the goals and initial hypotheses, the time framework in which it has been elaborated, the methodology followed and the chapters in which the theoretical background and the analysis of Palahniuk's fiction have been divided.

Regarding the goals of this work, they have changed throughout this long path of five years. First, the aim was to analyse all the novels that Chuck Palahniuk would have written until the moment of closing this study, which made a total of 13 novels. However, once the writing process had started, it was proven that, on the one hand, the analysis of his entire literary corpus was too extensive, and on the other, not all novels lent a fruitful analysis when inspected through this particular research angle. Secondly, this thesis aimed at finding proof that (American) masculinities could become particularly harmful in communities defined by fraternity (all-men communities); however, specially after the analysis of Chapter 2, the exploration of relationships within the family proved to be also key in defining and deconstructing the male psyche in the author's *oeuvre*.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, one of the objectives that changed slightly was the examination of female masculinities or "pariah femininities", in Schipper's wording

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the adjective 'operative' makes reference to the terminology used by Jean-Luc Nancy in his *Inoperative Community* (1991). By 'operative communities', Nancy refers to essentialist and immanent communities. This idea will be properly theorised in Chapter 1.

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, Mendieta makes reference to the fact that the "trope" of the family appears repeatedly in the author's stories, all of them "dysfunctional" (404).

(2007). There are indeed several cases in which masculinity does not match the male body, therefore demonstrating its lack of fixity to a biological carcass. However, it is true that, in the process of writing, it was discovered that female masculinity follows a different direction from that followed by the male characters, notably when discussing openness towards the body.

Ultimately, the goals of this paper can be summarised as follows:

1. To analyse the different types of communities, both operative and inoperative, which can be found in each of the eight novels examined.
2. To discuss the different types of hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities and observe how they worked in each of the community formations.
3. To find evidence that proves that these masculinities were taken to the extreme not to magnify them, but to show their destructive nature and their actual fragility.
4. To expose how violence and death are treated in all these novels with the common goal of breaking with gendered stereotypes related to the male body and how grotesque characters, defined by these two concepts, are useful to break with operative communities.
5. To unveil the way in which Palahniuk uses the body as a catalyst element to avoid religious and organic/operative symbolism.
6. To find a common thread that unites these novels to show a clear process in which the rupture of gender stereotypes inside the community is made more evident with each work.
7. To add to the critical value of Chuck Palahniuk's works the place his novels deserve as disruptive pieces of literature regarding community theories and critical studies of men and masculinities.

The present study takes the following hypotheses as a starting point:

1. The communities shown in the selected novels by Palahniuk are a reflection of American values taken to a grotesque extreme. When

such extremes occur, these provoke the rupture of community limits, giving way to other, more flexible and de-saturated ensembles.

2. The masculinities represented in each work are usually taken to the extreme together with the aforementioned communitarian ensembles, with the intention, as I expose, to break with their traditionalism and find new alternatives of a gendered self inside the community.
3. Violence and death are present in all of Palahniuk's novels and their role is to help those communities and types of masculinities to be taken to the limit and attain with this their breakdown and the birth of other innovative options.
4. Within the context of community theories and the sexual and gender roles that take place in them, the body acts as catalyst, a filter of communitarian symbolism that will help the main characters to find real communication outside the saturation that defines the organic community.

My working planning was divided into two different phases: in the **first**, during the first, second, and third year, I read analytically all novels of the author written until that time in order to provide a later selection and possible aggrupation of these novels for the organization of the chapters of the thesis. After this, I prepared the theoretical framework which would later be applied in the close reading of the selected corpus. This theoretical framework includes an interdisciplinary examination that combines community theories and critical studies of masculinities. Finally, the writing of the final theoretical framework was the natural outcome. During these three years, I attended a total of six conferences (four national and two international ones). During my third year, I also completed an international stay of three months at the University of Leeds, where the part on masculinities was supervised by Professor Hamilton Carroll, from the same university. In the **second phase**, during the fourth and fifth year, I used the theoretical framework to analyse the selected novels. This theoretical framework was kept open to changes, which indeed took place during the process. I also published a related article in the academic journal *Odissea*, from the University of Almería, apart from two other publications. Finally, I wrote the analysis of the selected novels and elaborated my conclusions.

The methodology I have used to elaborate this work is the usual methodology followed in literary critical studies. First, I read extensively about the two fields of study which I have used to analyse the novels: community theories and critical studies on men and masculinities. Next, I selected eight novels that, under my judgement, had the greatest potential in order to apply the chosen theoretical basis. The aforementioned theoretical framework would be open to changes as I progressed in my analysis during the second phase. Once the analysis of the novels was completed, I elaborated my conclusions, which are a summary of the work previously done and which, I hope, will open the path for other possibilities of analysis in other literary works.

When it comes to structural organisation, after two chapters devoted respectively to tracing a theoretical background on community theory (**Chapter 1**) and critical studies on men and masculinities (**Chapter 2**), this thesis analyses eight of Chuck Palahniuk's novels, which are arranged chronologically: *Fight Club* (1996)<sup>3</sup>, *Survivor* (1999), *Invisible Monsters* (1999), *Choke* (2001), *Lullaby* (2002), *Diary* (2003), *Damned* (2011), and *Doomed* (2013). The common theme in the global analysis is the examination of hegemonic and non-hegemonic forms of masculinity and how they are transformed throughout the different stories. However, in order to facilitate the study, the novels are grouped in pairs depending on the structural line that can be perceived through community theories. This grouping takes into account common themes and the relationship between the main characters. The pairs will be formed as follows:

- **Chapter 3** focuses on *Fight Club* and *Survivor*. In both cases the thematic channel involves some sort of religious, organic and saturated formation used as a weapon against the individualising American context. The main characters will approach deadly, female characters that will be catalyst figures in making them confront their own singular identities.
- **Chapter 4** deals with *Choke* and *Invisible Monsters*. These two novels revolve around a protagonist whose need of getting in touch with their own singularity drives them to approach death in a brutal way. In both cases religious imagery and the death drive are recurring themes.

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<sup>3</sup> At the time of the release of this thesis, there exist a second (2015) and third part (2019) of *Fight Club*. However, this thesis will only deal with the first part (1999).

- **Chapter 5** analyses *Diary* and *Lullaby*. Family bonds are posed in contrast to the capitalist American milieu in which these stories are set. In both cases, power and creative veins are driven by deadly forces, which in the end help characters build connections through real exposure.
- Lastly, **Chapter 6** focuses on *Damned* and *Doomed*. These are the first and second part of the same story, in which its main character, a thirteen-year old ghost girl, struggles to find her place in the community of Hell, where she has been sent once dead. Unifying themes include sexual discovery and a satirical view on death, American overproduction and new cosmopolitanism. The family as a pivotal structuring element of the gendered self is also salient.

## **PART I**

### **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: COMMUNITY THEORY AND CRITICAL STUDIES OF MEN AND MASCULINITIES**



# CHAPTER 1

## COMMUNITY, FRATERNITY AND THE BODY

### 1. Why community?

The term “community” has been thought about by numerous theorists during the past decades, particularly from the 1980s onwards and in the dialogue between Jean-Luc Nancy and Maurice Blanchot with Georges Bataille as a third participant in absentia.<sup>4</sup> In his work *Communitas*, Roberto Esposito claims that “[n]othing seems more appropriate today than thinking community; nothing more necessary, demanded, and heralded by a situation that joins in a unique epochal knot the failure of all communisms with the misery of new individualisms” (1). This is why several authors such as Nancy, Blanchot or Esposito, among others, have endeavoured to describe what is understood as community, why it has “failed” and whether it is possible to envision an alternative model. As Zygmunt Bauman claims, the word “community” has a tinge of security and comfort on which society has always relied (2). It seems, however, that the concept of community has entered a crisis which needs to be resolved. Esposito explains that, in the twentieth century, the idea of community used to combine an organicist view coming from German thought, the capacity among its members for proper communication, and America’s new vision towards the term and concept. However, he continues, the aforementioned authors began almost immediately to see the flaws of

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<sup>4</sup> This dialogue was inaugurated by Nancy with his work *The Inoperative Community* (originally published in 1985-6), to which Blanchot replied with *The Unavowable Community* (1984). Nancy made reference to Bataille’s conviction about the fact that community as traditionally understood had finally come to a halt in its very *raison d’être*, while Blanchot added to this discourse his view on the community of lovers and the negative community, which annuls the subject, further adding to Nancy’s commentary.

such a model. They proposed a “modification” where, “instead of community referring to a property or a belonging of its members” it alluded to “a constitutive alterity that also differentiated community from itself, evacuating it of any identity making connotations” (Esposito, *Immunity* 83-4). More than adding to the subject’s self, this communal “being together” “contaminated” that subjectivity (Ibid.). Thus, the subject in this traditional concept of community remains limited and even castrated of its own alterity. Jean-Luc Nancy states that we live now in an era “which can only think itself” (*Loose* 5). It can be argued that this is specially the case in the American context, that which is of utmost interest for this thesis. Before delving further into this point, it must be borne in mind that today’s communities, including the American one, have become much more complex than those that existed before major industrial developments, as explained by Jessica Berman (1). In addition, Berman states that social experience has been replaced by a “community of speech”, headed by social media, and the confrontation between cosmopolitanism and angry fascism is projected through several writers of the twentieth century and onwards (2-3), where Chuck Palahniuk may also be included.

The crisis of the notion of community seems clear. Bauman argues that the turmoil to understand it has been such that it has become “numb” or “dead”; community has lost the ability to reflect upon itself (11). Relying on Ferdinand Tönnies’s and Robert Redfield’s reflections, Bauman asserts that we have killed community due to our obsession with it: “in a true community there is no motivation towards reflection, criticism or experimentation” (11). He concludes that there is no need to think community because it is and always was “already there”; community fails when it becomes “self-conscious” (10). Perhaps we should consider at this point two important questions: first, why reflecting on community is so important that it has been impossible to avoid such pondering; and second, why this idea can be so useful to both analyse masculine identities and help deconstruct them. In order to give an accurate account of both aspects, there needs to be a review of the conclusions that communitarian theorists have reached. In his seminal book, *The Inoperative Community*, Nancy theorises two models of community: the operative or organic model and the inoperative one. The former makes reference to the traditional concept of community that involves total communion as far as the identity of the subjects go, while following essentialist notions such as nationalism, religion or ethnicity, to name just a few. The second model, on the

contrary, involves a more open understanding of community, in which there is no fusion among its members and their alterity is preserved.

## 2. The operative community

The organic or operative community is encouraged by a feeling of *incompleteness* in the individual, who pursues such completion through a process that Georges Bataille calls immanence or fusion; that is, a communion that takes place in its very essence (Blanchot, *Unavowable* 17; Nancy, *Inoperative* 9). As a consequence, the singular “I” becomes a communal “We” (Etzioni 157). Several elements need to be defined to understand this communitarian association. As Nancy himself introduces it, the operative community is governed by total immanence, which “contains no other logic than that of the suicide of the community” itself (*Inoperative* 9). It is the premise followed by Nazi Germany, which consisted in the “extermination of the other, of the subhuman deemed exterior to the communion of blood and soil” (*Inoperative* 12). The concept of death will be central in both communities, but especially so in the operative or traditional model. In *The Unavowable Community*, Blanchot’s analysis concludes that what unites the members of an operative community is *death*, which is why it is taken as its main nucleus: that which is shared the most (9). Nancy conceives in fact the operative community as the “community of death”. This is the case because the reality of the operative State is at its most real when the subject gives his life for the community —and I say *his* because it is an intrinsically fraternal conceptualization, as will be explained later. This was the dynamics followed since the First World War, and keeps operating like this even today. Thus, Nancy continues:

[The] community of human immanence (...) is one such community of death. (...) The fully realized person of individualistic or communistic humanism is the dead person. (...) In other words, death [is] the infinite fulfilment of an immanent life: it is death itself consigned to immanence, it is in the end that resorption of death that the Christian civilization (...) has come to minister to itself in the guise of a supreme work. (...) [It] presupposes, precisely, the death of each and all in the life of the infinite. (*Inoperative* 13)

Secondly, and retaking Nancy’s mentioning of Christianity, religion is also a pivotal component in this type of formation. In the Western world, the first communities

are thought to have their origin in Christianity and the values this religious doctrine entails. Three main religious figures need to be mentioned to continue with this line of thought: the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ, and God at the pinnacle. Only God, the Creator, is entitled to subjectivity (Esposito, *Communitas* 10). Such scheme is reminiscent of Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft*, a community based on a utopian, pastoral union, in which kinship, fellowship, and/or religion bring the association together (xvii).<sup>5</sup> Focusing now on the main (religious) figure around which every other element makes sense, God's power is unreadable by the human mind, so that anything related to these religious figures is surrounded by mystery. And it is here when Derrida's analysis of the *secret* in community enters the scene.

*Secrecy* is another element that needs close attention. It surrounds the very origin of the Christian community as we know it nowadays. In his guide throughout this complex idea in *The Gift of Death* (1992), Derrida takes Jan Patočka's view, who equals secrecy to the individual's *responsibility* in community (17). However, if in the Christian community responsibility must *only* be carried out towards the "absolute other," represented by an invisible entity, members cannot in actuality be responsible towards *anything*, including community itself. As a result, for an operative community to work, the secret must never be resolved, and never must the individual be open to the other individuals who form the community. A crucial aspect related to the secret is its relationship with the concept of death. Secrecy acts as a mystifying filter through *sacrifice*. By this, Derrida means that death can only have meaning if it is turned into a gift, the same way that Jesus Christ sacrificed himself for the Christian community, a sacrificial act which, at the same time, was surrounded by mystery (*Gift* 12, 81). Only when dying for another do we make sure that we are being responsible towards community. However, death cannot be *given*: "No one can die for me if 'for me' means instead of me, in my place" (Patočka qtd. in Derrida, *Gift* 41), and the same happens in reverse. My death can only be mine, and in no way can I spare anyone from dying. Through Patočka, Derrida seems to be pointing out that the members of the operative community can only be responsible towards the other (*not* the absolute other) by opening themselves, letting themselves literally be seen by the other. It could be argued that it is when offering that which is most secret of all, *ourselves*, our essence, that we

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<sup>5</sup> Tönnies establishes the differences between two types of communities: the already mentioned *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, a more mechanical and artificial type, which is closer to the "spatial, rather than the 'historical' sense of mutual awareness" (xviii).

are taking real responsibility. Ultimately, *secrecy means absolute irresponsibility*, towards myself and towards the other, as according to Derrida's work, it involves "the individualization of the relation to oneself, to the ego that separates itself from the community" (*Gift* 20).

The Christian community is then a community whose origins are unavowable, in Blanchot's words. If secrecy is always an issue when it comes to God's actions, it can be discussed that the operative community needs secrecy, and without it, organicism cannot take place (Nancy, "Confronted" 33). If the "absolute other" takes place in secrecy, the only way in which God can control His subjects is through the sharing of a secret between Him and the individual —again, only taking responsibility towards this entity. Derrida claims that a secret that is only shared by the subject "with him or herself" is actually being shared as well with God, who acts as an invisible witness that knows the secret as well, "what I call God in me" (*Gift* 108).<sup>6</sup> In Christianity, this secret takes place first between God and Christ, who knew about his upcoming death, in this case intended as an act of sacrifice: the "dying for the other" (the community) (*Gift* 12). As a result, death is given a certain meaning or interpretation; in other words, it is *signified* —in Christ's case it was the salvation of what will be later called the Christian community (*Gift* 12, 81). Sacrifice is then transformed into a gift for the saved community, the "gift of death." It seems then that secrecy, just like death and its attached symbolism, is always at work, and as a result real exposure never occurs. Moreover, Christ's sacrificial act came from God's command, so that Christ was only obeying God's wishes, and not his apostles' desire for him to be spared from his death. Being this the case, this secret sacrifice leads to the betrayal of ethics towards the rest of the members with whom Christ, in this case, communes under God's power (*Gift* 71). As an example, Derrida takes the sacrifice of Abraham's son, which can only be justified because God commanded it without taking into account, for example, the opinion of Abraham's family. For this reason, Bataille discusses that this community works in *betrayal* (Nancy, *Inoperative* 1), because the subject disregards his or her responsibility for the rest of the members.

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<sup>6</sup> According to Derrida, this is a frightening secret that literally "makes you tremble," which he calls "mysterium tremendum" (*Gift* 54).

## 2.1. An expected plot twist: the downfall of the operative community

Taking into account this paradigm, the operative dimension of the Christian community will face great opposition by scholars. Derrida was one of the authors that expressed his discomfort with this notion: “If by community one implies, as is often the case, a harmonious group, consensus, and fundamental agreement beneath the phenomena of discord or war, then I don’t believe in it very much and I sense in it *as much threat as promise*” (“Community” 107; my italics). He is not alone in this view. Bauman concludes as well that community “stands for the kind of world which is not, regrettably, available to us but (...) which we hope to re-possess,” and it always comes at a price (3-4). First of all, if the ultimate objective of community is total communion under God’s power, this conception leads to the destruction of the self in a sacrificial act. Moreover, if God represents an invisible figure who needs to act in secret, community itself assumes the impossibility of its own immanence precisely because “[n]ihilism and community mutually exclude each other” (Esposito, *Communitas* 135-137). Operative models seem to be obsessed with those who belong to the communal “We” and those who come from a “They” outside (the enemy), as pointed out by Chantal Mouffe (qtd. in Berman 15). However, a community implies the “being with” another entity outside my own self or “an-other”, which implies an inside/outside dichotomy also applicable to the others who are “outside of the outside” (Nancy, *Loose* 33; Nancy in Derrida, *Touching* 14). The solution in the operative community to distinguish between the “acceptable outside” (the outside *inside* community) and the unacceptable one (the outside *outside* community) is simple, though mediocre and redundant: only the “good other” is accepted; namely, God (Badiou 24). But where can the differences be located between “us” and “them” if, in essence, there is no real difference which operative models of community can really explain?

Total immunity then —as theorized by Esposito in “Comunidad y Violencia”— is an obsession for the operative community, and it means the protection against any other external force or entity. According to this author, immunity itself deactivates community. As fear for the “other” arises, so does the feeling of being unprotected, and the higher the protection, the higher the risk of being attacked. This fear comes from the conscious idea of being both a potential victim and/or the victimizer, so that we become suspicious of our neighbour. Thus, claims Esposito, immunity turns into chaos among the members of the community: our “being equal” is the major threat, which is why

total communion can also lead to terror. 9/11 attacks in America pose a clarifying example of the fading line that separates friend from enemy (Esposito, “Comunidad y Violencia” 1-6).

It can be concluded that the operative community is obsessed with those who come from outside —the “foreigners”— against whom the community needs to protect or differentiate from. However, if the foreigner, as explained by Derrida in *Of Hospitality*, gives a name, committing his own family when he is presented to the public in the community, he has the right to hospitality; but there can be two types of foreigners: the previously described, and the “absolute other,” who in this case is a foreigner who does not give his name, and is not presented to the public, almost acting in disguise. Derrida then proposes that as a result, hospitality can face a great danger, because it is an idea which is transcended when executed: when completely granted, the foreigner gains control of something that by definition does not belong to him or her, and would be given access to the community, which immunity is trying to protect. Hospitality, just like the idea of community itself, turns into a paradox: if community is completely welcoming, access is not only being granted to the foreigner, but also to that irresponsible, absolute other that must be repelled. In that case, says Derrida, hospitality needs also certain hostility, which entails violence against the other. This contradicts the very notion of hospitality and it can lead to the previously theorized excessive immunity that results in destruction (Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 19-25).

In sum, the notion of this previously described archaic Christian community is being questioned, because “this emblem is no longer in circulation except in a belated way for a few” (Nancy, *Inoperative* 1), having thus lost its value today. Joseph Hillis Miller contributes to the debate claiming that “[m]odern communities just do not work. They are like an inoperative piece of machinery, in need of repair” (*Conflagration* 5), probably because they still work within the previously explained archaic scheme. Moreover, as clarified by Nancy, the communion on which the operative community is based is an idea or a project, and the resulting community is imposed as a fact (“Confronted” 28).

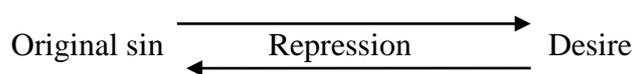
## 2.2. The “unsavable”: community and (men’s) drama

Taking into account the level of controversy and actual senselessness that accompanies the operative community, it seems appropriate to examine the reasons why such a system would be plausible in the first place. Bataille points his thoughts towards one direction: the never-ending need of ecstasy in people’s lives, which could be found in God and religious thought. Bataille goes further and gives his own synonym for this type of ecstasy: *drama*; existence needs to be dramatized (*Inner* 10). Religion is, according to him, a rich source of dramatization, whose climax takes form in the act of sacrifice, such as Jesus Christ’s for His believers. Bataille closes this analysis by saying that the importance given to death as a sacrificial act comes from man’s need of *anguish*, or in other words, drama (*Inner* 10-11, 73). Following the previous statements, there is an interesting view as regards the very source of drama itself. According to authors like Nancy Armstrong and Giorgio Agamben, *desire* constitutes the origin of dramatization. Every single being has “an original relation to desire” (Agamben 1). However, desire does not appear in isolation; it needs to be provoked by an external source. For Armstrong, this force is tied to sexuality and its repression. Quoting Foucault, Armstrong understands that anything that has been previously repressed has the natural impulse of being liberated, and this is always part of something related to sexuality (Agamben 17). In conclusion, repression would be regarded “as a means of producing desire,” and when desire is repressed, drama ensues (Agamben 19-20). In the operative community, this desire that is said to be inherent to man’s existence is restrained, but also encouraged. As Bataille contends, “the passion [or desire] of the self (...) seeks an object” (*Inner* 73), an object which needs to be necessarily outside the self and therefore external to the operative “God in me” mentioned above: the desire that gives meaning to operative dramatization and helps the members to reach ecstasy is actually a source which comes from outside the community itself.

This dilemma is further problematized by René Girard. Basing his theories on literary works, he studies the object of desire through a triangular relationship in which three components are present: the *object*, the *subject* (which seeks the object), and the *mediator* (who establishes the nature of the relationship between subject and object). In this relationship, and according to Girard, it is the mediator’s desire for the object that actually makes the object desirable for the subject. In addition, the mediator is normally taken as a role model for the subject, but also an obstacle to obtain the object of desire.

In addition, Girard makes the distinction between two types of mediation: external mediation, in which there is sufficient distance (in a spiritual sense) between mediator and object so that there is no contact between them, and internal mediation, in which both subject and mediator may be able to connect. In the latter case, the subject finds her/himself “torn” between two different feelings towards the mediator: fascination and resentment. It is this quandary that ultimately makes the subject’s sentiment lead into *hatred* towards the mediator: “only someone who prevents us from satisfying a desire which he himself has inspired in us is truly an object of hatred” (Girard 3-11).<sup>7</sup> It is the internal mediation that is of most importance for this thesis, as it is the one that affects the subject more deeply, and indeed, the one that is more relatable to operative communitarian drives. As Girard concludes, “internal mediation triumphs in a universe where the differences between men are gradually erased” (14). If total communion or fusion eliminates the individual “I”, this includes the erasure of the self’s own particular desire(s) at the mercy of a mediator (God, in this case) who, though invisible, is taken as a figure who watches constantly and even inhabits the subject’s will.

It has been mentioned that repression is a means of provoking desire, a desire that is later re-repressed, thus creating dissatisfaction and drama. However, there needs to be a way of introducing that source of repression from the very origin of the later-fused-self: original sin. Since birth, humans have a bad conscience, a feeling of debt even before they have had a chance of doing anything wrong (Agamen 50-51). This Christian morality governs the members’ lives: God (the mediator) introduces successfully the subject to a desire that is intrinsically seductive but utterly prohibited. A (communal) limit is established, which shall not be crossed but which needs to be always visible. Desire must be kept alive but satisfaction shall never be reached, mirroring the analysis that Bauman provides of Don Giovanni (53). If Girard’s triangle desire is applied to operative models of community, the scheme could go as follows:




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<sup>7</sup> The similarity with Freud’s Oedipus complex seems obvious.

Here, this operative, communal scheme based on Christianity reaches its peak, and its mechanisms can only but reflect upon themselves, taking us back to Bauman's "end of an era" consideration. If God, the Christian community's core, is the source and the repressor of human desire, community is doomed to always be dissatisfied. Of course, as Bataille suggests, faith used to be strong, and only when scientific intelligence came into the scene did the Western milieu have to choose between being faithful, or not (*Inner* 10). Soon, an uncomfortable realization would hit Western philosophy: "God is an atheist"; "[he] finds rest in nothing and is satisfied in nothing. Every existence is threatened, is already in the Nothingness of His instability" (Bataille, *Inner* 103). In other words, it could be said that God only knows his own Non-existence. If this were the case, it is implied that God also lacks memory, and as such, he becomes *impotent* (Agamben 5). God's "death", or rather, his invisibility made visible, marks the beginning of the end. Communal ecstasy leaves with Him. The punisher disappears, together with what used to be punished. Community has been "unmade", and once broken, it cannot be put back together (Bauman 15). Humanity stands alone, lacking the source of drama that gave meaning to existence, and becomes *unsavable*: "The truly unsavable life is the one in which there is nothing to save" (Agamben 13).

### **2.3. Individualism, capitalism and America**

It is easily understandable now how, as a consequence of the failure of the idea of communism, individualism emerges strongly in America.<sup>8</sup> The middle-class or bourgeoisie has made the world to their likeness and attempt, though irresponsibly, to save society from nihilism (Agamben 62). American materialistic neo-cosmopolitans see, however, their efforts towards a seemingly world-conscious, though careless individualism, frustrated: death remains invincible, the ultimate "expropriation" unattainable, impossible to possess (Agamben 70-72). The origin of community is the individual, without whom there can be no social bonds. However, according to Nancy, "the individual is merely the residue of experience of the dissolution of community (...) the abstract result of a decomposition" (*Inoperative*: 3). This modern, individualistic society evolving from failed immanence is similar to what Tönnies describes in his

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<sup>8</sup> In fact, in "Unworked and Unavowable: Community in *The Awkward Age*", Hillis Miller insists that American people "hardly form a community" (87).

notion *Gessellschaft*, which, in contrast to *Gemeinschaft*, describes a mechanical society, where the relationship between “free-standing individuals” is that of self-interest, closer to the “‘spatial’ rather than ‘historical’ sense of mutual awareness” (xviii). This makes sense in connection with the technological era in which our society has evolved, with highly advanced devices that are now essential for our everyday life. In Derrida’s words this individualism of technological civilization relies on a “misunderstanding of the unique self [because] [i]t is the individualism of a *role* and not of a *person*” (*Gift* 37), denoting a fake and superficial understanding of the self: “When everything is reduced to input and output, when representation is replaced by simulation, and when art is reduced to a check, humans and objects become more and more equivalent with a circulation of signs, and we witness the advent of a technocratic society based on efficiency” (Stryck 4).

Agamben understands capitalism as a reality made up of images filtered through the media, images separated from actual human experience (78-79), an idea that once again mirrors the previously outlined scheme. Moreover, the strengthening of security measures in the country (specially after 9/11), far from introducing a feeling of higher protection, heightens population’s unease (Beck 21). This also arises the debate between what would be more suitable: security that reduces people’s freedom, or freedom without security, which may lead into a feeling of abandonment (Bauman 20). Furthermore, capitalism is characterized by its “problematic” overproduction. Now the drama is that there is too much, an abundance that has even become undesirable (Beck 14). This state of affairs can be relatable with Stryck’s opinion on the American context that has evolved to not being able to stand itself: “an ambivalence about community is part of a fundamental American tension” (49). It is easy to understand this ambivalence when there exists the coexistence, in different degrees and including extremes, of the most individualistic forms of new cosmopolitanism and the new fascist trends that America is also going through.

Community, as it used to be understood, is dead, and individualism introduces us to “being” on our own. As interpreted by Nancy, “it is as if being itself (...) surprised us from an unnameable beyond. It is, in fact, the ambivalence of the unnameable that makes us anxious: a beyond for which no alterity can give us the slightest analogy” (*Global* 35). Individualisation’s drama can be said to be, then, that there is no drama, as operative models used to understand it. Now, absolute truths about good and evil have

been transformed into a wider range of options and perspectives that can be perfectly valuable. Or rather, remain non-judged by the old judges. Even though this could be taken as a better alternative in comparison to the saturated symbolism that formed part of the operative community, subjects do not seem to be capable to embrace this ambivalence, which is indeed part of existence. Now that the “I” has discovered itself outside communion, it cannot help but become conscious of the “other” “I”s that surround her/him, who have come to the same discovery. Here, as Badiou explains through psychoanalysis, the ego builds itself while identifying itself with the other, which results in the combination of “narcissism and aggressivity” (73). Desire is, of course, still part of existence and the quest for communal ecstasy has been substituted by egotistic avidity. The individualistic “I” believes that the “other” only desires out of vanity, because “my” desire is more intense than the other’s (Girard 20). Still, Beck insists that the need for sharing grows due to individualization (105).<sup>9</sup> It can be concluded, then, that America is going through an epochal crisis that may make new ways of understanding community plausible. Pessimistically, though, Bauman believes that those who truly wish to find community are condemned to suffer like Tantalus (17). However, can the modern Tantalus be saved?

### **3. The inoperative community: an alternative model**

With all these contradictions that construe the operative community, together with the malaise that accompanies the resulting individualism that community’s rupture has left behind, it is time for the *inoperative community* (in Nancy’s terms) to enter the communitarian landscape. This type of community is one of the possible communities that can take place without falling into the vicious circles examined above. To avoid the radicalism of the operative model, there needs to be a *clinamen*: “an inclination or an inclining from one toward the other” (Nancy, *Inoperative* 3). This clinamen is produced thanks to the subject’s exposure. Nancy observes that exposing oneself is “to be on the limit, where, at the same time, there is both inside and outside, and neither inside nor outside” (*Loose* 7). What he seems to be implying is that the subject should recognise the existence of the limits that separate her/him from other subjects, but at the same

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<sup>9</sup> In fact, he exposes that marriages are now more built upon the “fear of being alone” than actual love (Beck 114).

time be able to not use those limits as a means of separation between entities, blocking actual exposure towards the other. In fact, the author explains that “[e]xposure comes before any identification” (*Loose* 7), thus, before any labels or mystified filters. It can be concluded that real exposure is that which allows the subject to know him/herself and the other, but once an operative articulation takes place, exposure and singularity are lost in communion.

This openness to otherness goes against the “We” as “worked” in the previous community, and does not entail the loss of identity of the participants. They thus acknowledge each other’s *alterity*, and this action enables *communication*, which can only happen between singularities, rather than individualities, posed at the limit of their existence through an unworked confrontation with death (Bataille qtd. in Esposito, *Communitas* 145-146).<sup>10</sup> Two important concepts have been mentioned: *communication* and death. Focusing on the first, Berman quotes Charles Taylor, who makes clear that identity is negotiated through dialogue, not through communal fusion as in the operative model; that is, through the subject’s “dialogical relations with others” (11). Derrida proposes the same idea: “*We must give up trying to know those whom we are linked by something essential*; by this I mean, we must greet them in the relation with the unknown in which they greet us, as well, in our *distance*” (“Friendship” 386, my italics). In the inoperative model, death, in turn, is confronted directly, without mystification, and this can only occur when the subject is posed at the limit of her/his existence. As previously explained, operative models “work” on death by establishing that it is the only element shared by all members of a community. However, Nancy rejects this idea and affirms that “being” is that which is most shared by the members of the community, and that “[n]onexistence is not for sharing” (*Loose* 1). Besides, and going back to the previous point on openness, only in death, or getting close to it in a non-mystified way, as Derrida explains, are members allowed to open themselves (*Gift* 41). Therefore, death should only be used as an element that facilitates communication. The subject’s conscience of his/her own finitude should help, then, build better relations.

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<sup>10</sup> In his *Inoperative Community*, Nancy clarifies the use of “singularity” rather than “individuality,” thus rejecting the self-sufficient and complete Cartesian ego. Singularities are only understood in relational terms, always incomplete, always looking for a connection, which leads to the previously discussed notion of *clinamen*.

Finally, as this community does not take place under God's power, the secret that founded the community is *unworked* as well. The loss of the secret modifies three aspects in the inoperative community. The first would have to do with the concept of *original sin* and its repercussion as regards desire. When discussing subjects' inability for sharing, Girard states that "[o]riginal sin is no longer the truth about all men as in a religious universe but rather each individual's secret, the unique possession of that subjectivity which broadcasts its omnipotence and its dazzling supremacy" (57). If by this it is meant that sin can be in any way something that heightens the subject's individuality and that it may equal real exposure, the operative model was clearly attempting against the subject's essence. Secondly, the secret inscribed in sacrifice has to be mentioned: instead of taking death as an act of sacrifice to be given to God as a gift—as did Christ for the community as a whole—it is a gift for the other whom I really love.<sup>11</sup>

The other aspect would be the re-establishment of the ethics of the community that was betrayed according to Derrida, and also as a consequence, of responsibility: if as mentioned previously there is no communion but communication, the subject does not respond only to an ungraspable, sometimes unjustifiable God—or to oneself, from the individualistic perspective. He or she responds to any member of the community, encouraging a true sense of "being together" among our neighbours. Thus, Bataille considers that community as such belongs to lovers (Nancy, "Confronted" 29),<sup>12</sup> precisely because this community has "as its ultimate goal the destruction of society" (Blanchot 48), probably meaning that it "unworks" the operative model. It is therefore the solution to resolve the nihilism that takes place in the communion that made the previous community fail. The main drawback of the inoperative community is that it is temporary: "the strangeness of what could not be common is what founds that community, eternally temporary and always already deserted" (Blanchot 54). The inoperative community normally takes place under extreme circumstances, in bodily

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<sup>11</sup> Blanchot states that sacrifice is something that can only happen in love relationships (44), in contrast to the sacrifice for the community as a whole in Christianity.

<sup>12</sup> As explained by Blanchot, it can be formed by lovers or friends (*Unavowable* 33), which gives the inoperative community a wide range of possibilities.

encounters (such as sex), which will be further explained through the concept of corporeity.<sup>13</sup>

### 3.1. Corporeity: the body in community

Susan Bordo examines the body as “a metaphor of culture”:

a powerful symbolic force, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body [...] an imagination of body morphology has provided a blueprint for diagnosis and/or vision of social and political life. (2362)

The body is thus presented as always *signified* and *limited* by these significations. This idea is shared by Nancy in his work *Corpus*, which will offer one of the keys to understand communitarian tensions in Palahniuk’s novels. I will first discuss the role of corporeity in the operative community to later problematize it in the inoperative model.

For Nancy, the origin of any community is tied to the body of the individual, which is *signified* as an open space, a place of existence without which nothing can exist (*Corpus* 15). It was already mentioned that Christianity is one of the main pillars of the operative community in the Western world, with God at its core. As a result, the body takes its meaning from the body of God, because as explained in *Corpus*, “the body of God was the body of man himself” (61), thus establishing the relationship between man and God’s body. This may be the reason why the body takes such mystic symbolism, as Bordo claims in the previous quotation. Being so close to God and yet not understanding Him from a human perspective, God’s body becomes an obsession: *Hoc est enim corpus meum* —translated as “God’s body is here”— is taken by some as “a real consecration” and by others as a *symbol*, “thanks to which those who form a *body* with God can commune,” creating anxiety to “touch and eat the body of God, to *be* that body” (*Corpus* 3, 5). Being this the case, there can be no other more important, more meaningful body than His, which is again another reason why He is the only entity allowed subjectivity. The members’ bodies of the Christian community created by Him are nothing but a devious copy of His unearthly perfection.

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<sup>13</sup> In ‘Two Grinning Puppets Jigging Away in Nothingness: Symbolism and the Community of Lovers in Katherine Mansfield’s Short Fiction’, Gerardo Rodríguez-Salas offers an apt example of this inoperative potential of the community of lovers in the fiction of Katherine Mansfield.

However, God's body is something "we cannot see or touch" (*Corpus* 3). His body is surrounded by secrecy, turning him into an invisible entity, which controls His subjects through the "God in me" contrivance (Derrida, *Gift* 108). This same secrecy is also projected to Christ's body, who was sent by God to be sacrificed in benefit of all humanity whom He had created. Christ's sacrifice can be said to be the ultimate act for the signification of the body and its death through a mystifying filter. According to O'Byrne, Christians commune through their participation in Christ's death, offered as a sacrifice (127), which, again as a reference to the secret, contains an element of mystery. As discussed previously, death is given a certain meaning or interpretation: in Christ's case it was the salvation of what will be later called the Christian community (Derrida, *Gift* 12, 81), giving Christ's body, and thus the concept of the Christian body, a particular meaning. Sacrifice is then transformed into a gift for the saved community, the "gift of death." For Nancy, this is "the principle of Western unreason," because the body "never happens (...). For us, the body is always sacrificed: eucharist" (*Corpus* 5). It never gives the chance for the body to be *exposed* and understood as it is without the limitations imposed by this religious imagery.

The aforementioned failure of the operative communities evolves, as explained earlier, into individualism, where a superficial understanding of the self takes place based on the reminiscence of the symbolism explained in the previous paragraph. With this reminiscence of religious and archaic men and women's place in society, people are, as previously commented, entitled to fulfil a *role* in a given social setting. Using the body for such an ordeal, this *role* may come in the form of photoshopped models in magazines, stereotyped paragons of men and women in the film industry and television programs, or advertised objects and products that create what can be considered a social need for self representation, and ultimately, identity. This mirrors as well the previous idea of capitalist practices. As explained by Agamben, capitalism has provoked the massive manipulation of the body throughout "advertising and commodity production" (specially the female body), provoking the subject's utter separation from its actual flesh (48-49). Again, the body is not exposed, but *signified* through now modern cultural meanings that impose different limitations, but limitations nonetheless. As it is a role that the subject is acting upon, the term *performance* enters the scene to describe identity, which will be later developed. For Derrida, the body of the individual is always performing a character, as if he or she was always wearing a *masque* (*Gift* 37).

Having established body limitations in both the operative community and individualism, the aforementioned scholars take the *inoperative community* as the best alternative for dissolving this bodily saturation. This alternative model finds its origins in the body as well, but it is seen under a very different light: The “I” of the subject is restored because the body is understood as “the stranger ‘out there’”, as explained in *Corpus* (19). This means, as Nancy concludes, that the subject per se exists *inside* this body, independently of his or her body’s physicality, as if the body was merely a shell, taken as “the objected matter of the subject” (*Corpus* 29). The body may be taken as a limit of the self, and for the self to be exposed it must do so outside of itself, that is, of the body (Bataille, *Inner* 73). As a result, it could be seen as a mere *reconstruction*, something invented together with the meaning to which it was tied, and this objectification takes place from the outside, “to me or to someone else” (*Corpus* 9). Thus, neither God’s body nor His son’s sacrifice is of actual *significance* in this case, because the body loses its mystified meaning. In sum, contrary to the operative community, the body is not taken as the functional identity of the subject.

This distance taken from the body as something symbolic is achieved in the community of lovers because their bodies “do not give themselves over to *transubstantiation*, they touch one another, they renew one another’s spacing forever, they displace themselves, they address themselves (to) one another” (*Corpus* 19). In the same work, Nancy discusses that this type of *touching* of the bodies has its climax in sexual intercourse, without which *love* cannot take place (37, 39, my italics).<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the new conception of the now *not* symbolic/signified body under God’s power of creation implies an openness to other singularities (and not solely to God), to *alterity*. This avoids the complete, destructive immanence —or self-enclosure— that took place in the operative community, which is why Nancy does not take *non-immanence* as a loss. The body that chained the subjects to community is transformed into the key to set them free. In a way, it can be argued that the inoperative model follows what Nancy calls “[a] logic of the limit” in which the limit itself is not completely defined, in which the sides which it separates “belong to all and to none — not belonging to itself, either” (*Loose* 6).

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<sup>14</sup> In *The Unavowable Community* Blanchot connects with this idea of the body as a stranger in this type of community, because lovers become “estranged from themselves” (43).

### 3.2. Community and fraternity: synonyms

What are the constraints by which bodies are materialized as “sexed,” and how are we to understand the “matter” of sex, and of bodies more generally, as the repeated and violent circumscription of cultural intelligibility? Which bodies come to matter, and why? (Butler, *Bodies* xi-xii)

Last but not least, the question of sex and gender needs to also be explained. In community, power relations are described through *sex* and the bodies attached to them, establishing the difference between those *bodies that matter* inside community and those that do not. In the operative community the answer is clear: “the world of bodies” theorized by Nancy in *Corpus* is ruled by male ones. It is first important to understand that God is sexualized and taken as a male character. In the family institution, one of the main pillars of the community, the father figure needs to embody God’s masculinity — “the body of God was the body of man himself” (Nancy, *Corpus* 61). Taking into account what has been discussed so far, this God, characterized for His maleness, is considered in the Western world to be the one who dictates the limits of what is considered *reality*, what is common, and it is inside these limits set through the *symbolic* that the operative community, and therefore the “authentic” community, is construed, trying to escape from the vast reality that cannot be fully comprehensible.<sup>15</sup> As a result, God’s symbolic sex, the penis, stands as a locus of power that delimits reality and shapes, at the same time, what is “right” in the (Christian) community. For this reason, the family is based on a patriarchal power that “focuses on the father and on the transmission to and by males” (Nancy & Clift 120). As described in the Bible, this father is taken as an authoritative, punishing persona.

Though this will be better explained in the next section, there needs to be consciousness about how, when the body is sexualized, phallic genitalia empower the man and thus turn him into the communal nucleus. It can be argued then that it is through this (religious) culture that biology becomes destiny (Butler, *Trouble* 11), an idea that connects with Tönnies’s *Gemeinschaft*, a community based on *biologism*, defined by Barbara Stiegler as “the assumption that gender is a purely biological fact” (5). In such a case, God pays attention mostly to those that would project His masculinised power on Earth, represented in society “as if all men were brothers under

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<sup>15</sup> Dylan Evans argues that “[the real] is impossible to imagine, impossible to integrate into the symbolic order, and impossible to attain in any way”, and Slavoj Žižek relates the Real to religion and the Christian Trinity (qtd. In Pérez de Luque 50-53).

one universal father, who wills the happiness of all” (Kant, qtd. in Derrida, “Friendship” 381), not mentioning women, who are made invisible in such a statement. It can be then discussed that phallogentrism shapes the idea of a community based on friendship,<sup>16</sup> which has been traditionally defined as “fraternity”, leaving femininity and femaleness aside (“Friendship” 366).<sup>17</sup> However, God is an invisible entity, with an invisible phallic source of power. As a result, the fraternal community is born from the absence of the father figure, the *paternal vacuum*, which has turned the father into a *sign* or *symbol*, a mere sketch or empty outline, offering an empty space (Nancy & Clift 121-122), giving the operative community the aforementioned nihilism that originates it.

According to Lacan, that which “structures all linguistic signification (...) and so becomes a universal organizing principle of culture” is called the *Symbolic*, and in her theory on sexual politics, Julia Kristeva argues that the *Symbolic* is the paternal law, which “shapes a hierarchy immune to challenge”, turning women into “the negative of men, the lack against which masculine identity differentiates itself” (qtd. in Butler, *Trouble* 13, 107-108). If maleness pertains to the symbolic spectrum that delimits reality, femaleness is considered its counterpart, pertaining to, in Kristeva’s words, the *semiotic*. Reinterpreting Lacanian theory and giving prominence to the semiotic connection with a pre-linguistic maternal realm, Kristeva explains the contrast between the symbolic and the semiotic as follows:

What I call “the semiotic” takes us back to the pre-linguistic states of childhood where the child babbles the sounds s/he hears, or where s/he articulates rhythms, alliterations, or stresses, trying to imitate her/his surroundings. In this state the child doesn’t yet possess the necessary linguistic signs and thus there is no meaning in the strict sense of the term. It is only after the mirror phase or the experience of castration in the Oedipus complex that the individual becomes subjectively capable of taking on the signs of language, of articulation as it has been prescribed —and I call that “the symbolic”. (*Reader* 133)

Kristeva then clarifies that the semiotic is “that which ‘precedes’ the symbolic law: ‘The mother’s body [can be considered] what mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations and becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*,”<sup>18</sup> because the

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<sup>16</sup> Derrida describes friendship as “a single soul and two bodies,” which clearly shows its operative dimension (*Friendship* 359).

<sup>17</sup> This involves a concept of friendship that entails virile homosexuality (Derrida, *Friendship* 366-83), therefore contradicting heteronormativity.

<sup>18</sup> The *chora* is “that site where materiality and femininity appear to merge to form a materiality prior to and formative of any notion of the empirical” (Butler, *Bodies* 17).

maternal body represents “meanings that are prior to culture itself” (qtd. in Butler, *Trouble* 15, 109). Thus, if the symbolic is, for instance, the body covered by given meanings, the semiotic is the body taken as *naked*, devoid of those symbols that enable the bodies to be part of the community. The semiotic is, therefore, that which is outside the paternal symbolism that shapes the organic community. It is precisely that “stepping outside” that is needed for breaking with operativeness and for the recognition of alterity needed for the inoperative community to take place, turning the female body into the key for such ordeal: the semiotic body favours exposure. Indeed, the semiotic is also, as discussed by Butler in *Gender Trouble*, something that entails a “libidinal multiplicity” which cannot be maintained, turning the semiotic into something, although valuable for subversion, as *temporary* as the inoperative community described by Blanchot (109). It is safe, therefore, to equate the paternal symbolic to the operative community, and the semiotic to the inoperative one.

However, I emphasise that the female body can only have such potential outside this paternal symbolism that construes the operative community. When inside this paradigm, both male and female bodies are signified once they enter community through gender, which can be considered one of the anchors that unites modern societies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century to the symbolism that takes root in religion. Butler, however, becomes suspicious of this category, indicating that “gender,” the traditional interpretation of sex, is a cultural construct. If this is the case, this author claims, there is a “radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders,” thus concluding that both “gender” and “sex” are equally constructed (*Trouble* 8-10). Anyhow, as mentioned earlier, this is difficult to escape. As stated in the previous section, in this now individualistic setting, subjects are to perform a *role*. This idea is very closely related to Kristeva’s *masquerade*, which entails the performance of a certain identity in relation to gender (qtd. in Rodríguez-Salas, *Diosa Blanca* 77-79). Under these conditions, the subject constructs his or her own identity as a social being, as man or woman, feminine or masculine, through a gendered body, expressed through bodily *performances* (Connell 48), so that identity in community is, not only devoid of subjectivity, but also reduced to this sexual superficiality. In offering what is normative, the symbolic seems to be maintained thanks to the aforementioned heteronormativity, which marginalizes any other possibilities, and inspires a “terror,” in Butler’s words, regarding the possibility of finding oneself in a “limbo” untied to any of these normative

possibilities (*Bodies* 60-61). Lacan agrees arguing that “[t]he breaking of certain taboos brings on the spectre of psychosis” (qtd. in *Bodies* 98), by taboo meaning any other possibilities outside the phallogocentric schema.

Gender boundaries are, however, not as ideally clear as it could be expected. Although gender takes its roots from the body to which it is attached, it is a fact that not all bodies are normatively male or female. The reality, or rather, what the semiotic offers, are bodies that might not belong to such bodily ideals. There might be defective penises and vulvas; females with petite breasts, or males lacking facial hair (Fuentes 5-6). In addition, Connell explains that certain masculine practices can contradict other equally masculine ones. He takes a male athlete as an example. Physical exercise has been described traditionally as a masculine performance, but “much of what was defined in his peer culture as masculine was forbidden for him,” such as drinking, fighting, or a too active sex life (Connell 63).

However, throughout the 20th century, masculine and feminine definitions seem now less inflexible, and men and women’s differences in appearance are more ambiguous (Moya, qtd. in Baron and Byrne 209). An easy example can be found in the film industry, with the popular Sigourney Weaver’s leading role in *Alien*, where she plays a female “macho” character who is “tough and cool, but warm and alluring” (Bordo 2368); or the feminization that seems to have taken place in male characters, such as some of the roles performed by Hugh Grant. Moreover, as it is discussed in the next section, masculinity is no longer available to the male body, as women may also be able to attain this gender identity. This possibility of interchange in the previous examples seems to point out to Freud’s idea that there is no purity in masculinity (and femininity for that matter) together with Jung, who argues that both genders coexist in the same subject. Jung concludes that a gender balance is necessary for a healthy social life, because by rejecting, in the male case, the feminine, the person risks being the victim of a psychotic break (qtd. in Connell 10-13, 19).<sup>19</sup> This demonstrates, once again, that the ideas of the operative community must be deeply challenged, because either following or rejecting it proves to be dangerous.

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<sup>19</sup> This is the basis of Virginia Woolf’s concept of androgyny, which she takes from Coleridge in the last chapter of *A Room of One’s Own* (1929).

This homogenizing untaintedness portrayed in the idea of femininity and masculinity is, then, impossible —this will be further examined in the next chapter. As a consequence, fraternity, which first imposes a normative representation of reality through the symbolic, and takes its basis on such gender purity with God as a masculine model, is turned as well into a fictive construct. It is revealed to be as performative as gender: community is nothing less but a fiction (Bentham, qtd. in Etzioni 155-56). Being this the case, it can be argued that the inoperative community is the answer for the body limitations that construct and at the same time deconstruct the symbolic in the community, avoiding self-destruction, radicalism, or individualistic loneliness. The body is not signified through gender by means of sex, but regarded as simply an ensemble of organs, muscles and flesh, without relating it to any other symbols or images, as Nancy advises (*Corpus* 7-9). This might be considered utopian, as the body is too socially grounded, too culturally shaped for it to be now seen as detached from any meaning. However, these archaic, masculine-based communities can start being deconstructed through the introduction of the feminine sphere, which encourages the coexistence of both femininity and masculinity, and opens venues for a different type of community. As an alternative or breaking point, *sorority* seems for Nancy and Clift a fitting solution, seeing femininity as a necessary complement to avoid the nihilism of the fraternal organic community, which portrays the idea of the semiotic, that is, a naked, non-signified reality:

*Fraternity and sorority intersect, (...) just as much as they constitute, in a more general way, the masculine and the feminine (...): no one is ever simply or completely a "man" or a "woman", and the notion of siblings [or understood in this context as the members of community] does not necessarily signify a manly brotherhood. (Nancy and Clift 121; my italics)*

The cards are on the table. And now, the following appreciation makes room for the next part of this thesis. Community is in crisis, because men are in crisis. The last statement seems only logical. It was explained before that community —as understood in this context— is but a fraternal bond. As Max Scheler explains, “choosing a model for oneself is common to all men” (Girard 14), and men seem to have chosen poorly: a *vacuum*, an idealized entity which is, by its very definition, unattainable. *Resentment* towards such a masculine ideal (towards the mediator), Scheler explains, is what men ought to ultimately feel.

The triangular desire scheme (Girard) which organicism describes is now being dismantled. Feminist thought is one of the main reasons why this is the case. Women, the used-to-be object of desire for heterosexual men, are now, through endless struggle and fight, experimenting their own metamorphosis, and becoming their own subjects, with their own desires. Although as Beck observes women are “still halfway between freedom and enclosure” they form part, or better, play the main role, of the new revolution (111). “The future is female” motto is now familiar to anyone. However, as Beck also perceives, men’s “old role identity” coincides with what is asked now of women. The smashing of the chains of tradition is something that only the used-to-be-oppressed (and still are) can do: “All the factors that dislodge women from their traditional role are missing on the male side” (Beck 112). The need for drama has been mentioned in previous sections. In this sense, women are the ones entitled to drama: the need for equality gives them a very much-needed reason to battle. Indeed, as Stryck contemplates, the disappearance of “traditional links” may lead to the dissolution of all links—including those related to gender—, which would encourage the appearance of new, more flexible communal possibilities. This also helps a renewal as regards the self, because as Jock Young proposes “[j]ust as community collapses, identity is invented” (qtd. in Bauman 15).

But how do men deal with finding that new identity in this ambivalent new reality? Palahniuk’s very liminality in his novels can be seen as a reflection of this ambivalence, because as Mendieta explains “[Palahniuk is] neither a commercial nor an academic writer” (395). The same scholar argues that the author’s protagonists are *survivors* of American culture, their “deviance [being] the health of the individual in a sick society”, in the struggle between “freedom and individuality” (Ibid.). Mendieta also comments on the impact of religion in Palahniuk’s characters, how it has promoted uniqueness (that is, individuality): “[i]n a mass culture of mass consumption, the singular becomes the prophetic, but the prophetic in turn becomes that which is manufactured by the culture industry” (Ibid. 398). Palahniuk’s characters and their disruptive nature reject their “manufacturing” by the capitalist, individualistic American system, which results in the formation of atypical communitarian models, based, as Mendieta concludes, in pathological behaviours which in the end signify “the health of the individual and the illness of society” (Ibid. 408); that is, the collapse of the current, self-absorbent, American community. In fact, the “illness of society” is almost literal, as Casado de Rocha points out about the authors’ characters and the pattern they normally

follow to in the end find true connection: “*from* disease to community” (105, 112). The author is clearly more interested in marginal characters and “sexuality and gender bending”, but not *just* “alternative forms of commune and community. The alienated rather than the radical chic” (MacKendrick 10). Palahniuk himself has made clear statements about his books being intentionally about society and “being together”: “I’m not a nihilist. I’m a romantic. All my books are basically romances; they’re stories about reconnecting with community” (qtd. in Kavadlo 5-6). Another author that agrees with this idea is Devin Harner, who insists that “Palahniuk is encouraging a rebellion of community and connection, made possible through writing from within the Capitalist marketplace” (183). Tatyana Shumsky assures that Palahniuk’s flawed characters converse thanks to being posed at the limit, finding at the same time a way to handle their instability, and that only through “truth, honesty, clarity and a sense of internal calm” are they ready to be openly in community (57). His “romantic desire for connection” has been however widely missed by many readers and literary critics (Kavadlo 6), something that this thesis will attempt to solve.

## CHAPTER 2

### CRITICAL STUDIES OF MEN AND MASCULINITIES

#### 1. Defining the field of study

In his article “Gendering Men: Theorizing Masculinities in American Culture and Literature” (2008), Josep María Armengol argues that explorations on gender focused on women for years. It was soon exposed, however, that men are equally victims of patriarchy, though in a different way. Authors like Armengol argue and demonstrate that patriarchal mechanisms are real and prominent in the formation of the male psyche. This author contemplates that masculinity has not been studied in details as a gender per se, thus one of the reasons for the problems that scholars find when it comes to referring to this field. The author continues explaining that men have been “constantly universalized,” which indeed also neglects different *experiencies* of masculinities (77). The same author, together with Àngels Carabí, goes through the different approaches as regards the studies on masculinity in their introduction to *Alternative Masculinities for a Changing World* (2014). There, the question is raised on how some experts address the issue by focusing on the (negative) existence and effects of hegemonic masculinity, and how others make an effort to find and analyse other forms of alternative, and/or non-hegemonic practices. This even complicates the very labelling of the field of studies, since it is difficult to decide when and how they should be named one thing or another (Men’s Studies, Masculinity Studies, or Studies of Masculinities, to name a few). Carabí and Armengol locate three different categories when it comes to this debate: one that analyses hegemonic masculinity and its negativity (mainly led by Connell), a second one that criticizes the former for being too broad and simplistic, and a third one

that aims at examining the dissensions that may exist inside the first concept and how these can advocate for new alternatives (1-3).

It was during the 60s and 70s in the United States that the notion of masculinity and the existence of “other” masculinities began to be examined by academics in a systematic way. According to Armengol this interest arose in the United States thanks to the feminist movement and the liberation movements of the gay community. Not only did these movements give visibility to women’s fights, but they also helped to shake the basis of the hegemony that existed as regards heterosexual masculinity (*Gendering Men* 38). Men began to see themselves as gendered subjects, and therefore, its fixity and actual performativity, in Butler’s words (1993), are also contested. In fact, John Beynon concurs that masculinity studies are not just a consequence of feminist studies, but also a reaction to what feminism has to say about men and masculine identities (3). Indeed, masculinity has begun to be analyzed under the microscope as such only now that it is being deconstructed. Discussions on contemporary masculinities seem to mirror the image of a sinking ship. Feminists question constantly women’s (generally subjected) role in society, and it is by taking on an offensive pose against the system that supports general male domination (discussed below) that they have encountered the actual breaches that can be found in the reasons behind male supremacy. Robert Horrocks reinforces this idea by claiming that “[masculinity] did not really exist until feminists began to attack the presuppositions of traditional political and social theory” (6).

In 1972, Simone de Beauvoir stated in *The Second Sex* that “[a] man would never set out to write a book on the peculiar situation of the human male” (15); but as claimed by John MacInnes when mentioning this same quotation in *The End of Masculinity* (1998), the picture we find today is strikingly different: now, men themselves, and not just women, seem to be truly preoccupied with their role in society. Lynne Segal contends that now men are also being explored, seen as sexed subjects, and not just the representation of the human race (“Changing Men” 625). Indeed, as asserted by Beynon, the masculine identity used to be regarded as something rigid, fixed and unmovable, detached from any social context, power relations, or historical events; now, as the author concludes, it is perceived as a hybridized, a “bricolage” masculinity (Ibid. 6). In fact, Horrocks stresses the fact that masculine identity changes depending on the person and the context: “My male identity is protean, fluid, adaptable” (5).

Masculinity, that which only belonged to men and justified male superiority, a “force of nature” (Ibid. 5) is no longer regarded as such.

Though the examination of this question has proven to be extremely valid, the very nomenclature used in these studies and the debate that surrounds it are also proof of the actual complexity of this matter. There is great insistence on the part of authors such as Horrocks (1994) and Pease (2000) to talk about masculinities rather than masculinity, as a way to break away from essentialism. In her thesis on masculine studies and literature, Beatriz Domínguez Ruiz also points out at the difficulty of using such a field of knowledge precisely due to this lack of consensus, which may be an indication of how differently this issue can be tackled (14). At the same time, as briefly mentioned above, the field takes on many different disciplines that heighten this complexity. As explained by Segal, we need to “embark in more than one journey” to understand “what has happened to men and masculinity over the last two decades” (*Slow Motion* xvii).

This thesis will explore masculinities within the notion of the community in Chuck Palahniuk’s fiction. Armengol reflects on the fact that there is a “growing interest in literary men” and that such higher attention may be beneficial, “since analysing fictional representations of masculinity may help to better understand its social construction” (“Gendering Men” 78). He also ponders about the fact that it remains a highly uninspected area. Chuck Palahniuk’s works examine the male psyche from different angles, as I will explain later in detail. In 2005, Mendieta wrote that Palahniuk remained highly unexplored, and indeed this seems to be still the case (“Surviving” 394). Concerning the line of research of this thesis, a fair number of articles about violence and masculinity have been written about *Fight Club*; however, the same cannot be said about the rest of his literary creations. Some pieces of literary analysis have been published in recent years, among which one could highlight *You Do not Talk about Fight Club*, edited by Read Mercer Schuchardt (2008), *Sacred and Immoral*, edited by Jeffrey A. Sartain (2009), *Reading Chuck Palahniuk. American Monsters and Literary Mayhem*, edited by Cynthia Kuhn and Lance Rubin (2009), and finally, *Understanding Chuck Palahniuk*, by Douglas Keeseey (2016). The first is a compilation of articles focusing on the author’s first novel, *Fight Club*, exploring American society and capitalism, together with some notes on the masculinity projected by the main characters. *Sacred and Immoral* widens its focus on Palahniuk’s works

written until its year of publication, and further helps locating the author in the academic paradigm. The collection of articles that are gathered in this work reflect on Palahniuk's contributions to contemporary literature and the American political and philosophical paradigm. In *Reading Chuck Palahniuk* he is further described as a literary disruptive icon that explores uncomfortable questions through extremely troubled characters. As explained in the "Introduction", "[t]he ways in which [Palahniuk's] protagonists go about their quests (...) translate into a deliberately disturbing experience for the reader, who is provoked, in the true spirit of transgressive fiction, to confront the lurking monsters" (Kuhn and Rubin 5). *Understanding Chuck Palahniuk* is the most recent of the four. In this work, Keesey explores identity, the body and comedy in the novels published until 2016, and includes an analysis of *Damned* and *Doomed*, which are by far the ones less examined in the literature. Here, Keesey makes a scanning of Palahniuk's biography in his introduction, which he often uses later to analyse his novels. His Chapter 1 concludes with the idea that the author's characters are "the externalized expression of *our* anger and suffering". Palahniuk invites the reader to empathise with his "monstrous" characters and their pain, which though sometimes too extreme and even provoked by absurdity, may mirror the readers'" (13). Palahniuk's male characters are worthy of the attention to which Armengol refers to in Men's studies, precisely because of the rupture that these characters offer in Palahniuk's fiction. Although it is impossible not to mention the question of masculinity in the aforementioned pieces of literary analysis, a detailed focus on men's studies and its influence in the American community seems to be somewhat lacking. Furthermore, Palahniuk seems to have been wrongly marked as an advocate of toxic masculinities; however, as this thesis will also demonstrate, this is far from the truth. As authors like Jesse Kavadlo point out, "[t]hrough Palahniuk's dramatic irony, (...) readers have the opportunity to feel the redemptive powers of feminism, love, cooperation, harmony, and story telling, by inhabiting worlds where they are conspicuously, even absurdly, absent" (7).

For these reasons, in order to have a broader, more complete picture of what masculinity, or indeed, masculinities mean, how this is maintained, and their examination in Chuck Palahniuk's novels, this notion has been tackled through many different perspectives, ranging from historical, political concepts, which regulate power relations between the sexes, to the field of psychoanalysis. In the following sections, the

most salient concepts surrounding the critical studies of men and masculinities will be outlined, examining first why there is such a need to do so.

## **2. From undisputed power to contested identities**

MacInnes argues that masculinity is “an ideology produced by men as a result of the threat posed to the survival of the patriarchal sexual division of labour by the rise of modernity” (45). In other words, masculinity is but a constructed set of beliefs that need to be constantly at work for it to be made plausible. As a result, MacInnes claims, this concept has always been under suspicion for three reasons: its indefinable condition, and therefore, the possibility of it being part of both men and women; secondly, the same arguments that support such concepts (masculinity, femininity, gender) can be used to debunk them; and finally, the changing nature of social institutions and labour systems, which encourage equality between the sexes<sup>20</sup> (Ibid. 45-46). In addition, sociological and historical events would also need to be countered. It should be stressed that such structural revision would not have taken place if it were not for the first wave of feminism in 1850, which as Sylvia Walby claims, is not given the credit it should receive (150). It cannot be denied that women’s situation in society has improved greatly, and it seems that women’s new and noticeable presence has created the need to rethink men. However, authors like Roger Horrocks (1994) point out that equality is still far from being a reality, and men still hold most of the ground as regards power and authority.

Feminism has led to counter discourses that help deconstruct the current oppressive system that favours hegemonic masculinity (discussed below), and brings to light the incongruities of this ideology to help its modification (Hekman 190). Feminism has managed to make these contradictions more readily visible, but other elements do play an important part as well. John Beynon points out that masculinity has changed due to the following factors: the rise of the women’s movement, twentieth-century conflicts, changes in the world of work, the rise of a highly consumerist society, the gay movement, and men themselves, since some of them began to question masculinity in the 70s in North America with the “men’s movement” (15).

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<sup>20</sup> MacInnes mentions technological advances as a primordial reason for making male and female bodies equal (46).

It is also interesting to see how the current analysis of men's identities as gendered is generally accompanied by the word "crisis", but such assumption might be problematic. It is obvious that men's identities and their role in society have experienced a tremendous transformation in the last century. This first male "opposition" towards hegemonic masculinity formed what is known as the first wave of masculinities. It focused on men and how the dominant hetero-patriarchy affected them, and it "was avowedly pro-feminist and dedicated to personal and institutional change" (Adams and Savran 5); the second wave, originated during the 80s, can be considered, however, more problematic. According to Whitehead and Barret, it "sought to highlight, not so much the cost to men of patriarchy, but the centrality of male power to dominant ways of being a man" (15). It can be argued that this obsession to "recuperate [males'] own innate, masculine power" (Adams and Savran 5) may be enough proof of the existence of a crisis in masculine identity. However, one may wonder whether relating this transformations to a crisis in male identity is but another way of attempting to recuperate men's privilege. According to Horrocks (6), in her book *West of Everything* (1992) Jane Tompkins explains reasonably that men have felt imperilled by the new values found in feminine literature, and traditionally masculine ones are now trying to retake their supremacy, that is, the maintenance of the patriarchal system. Hamilton Carroll explains in his work *Affirmative Reaction* that white masculinity (that is, hegemonic masculinity)<sup>21</sup> is taking a vulnerable position to regain its centrality, acting "defensively" in order to recuperate its "cultural authority". The author goes on to conclude that, since non-hegemonic groups seem to be now the focus of attention, normative forms of masculinity are trying to disguise themselves as marginal so that they do not really lose their dominant position: if privilege is made invisible, there is no privilege to dismantle, which is why masculinity should no longer be seen as "unmarked" (1-8). Indeed, it can be argued that if a collective is already considered marginalized by the current status quo, it is difficult to see its real threats.

For the previously outlined reasons, a brief revision of the facts that are described as determinant in the construction, and indeed, deconstruction of hegemonic masculinities will be provided. In the following section, fundamental concepts such as

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<sup>21</sup> Race is another variable that has a great effect in definitions of masculinity. This thesis focuses on Palahniuk's characters, who are normally white and belong to the working or the middle class. This is why race will not be discussed in length in the analysis of his novels, whereas class seems to be a much more salient issue in this author's works.

patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, the male body and its symbolism, and the intersecting role of violence will be revised, and the reasons why Chuck Palahniuk helps question and debunk such concepts will be explained.

### **3. Patriarchy and gender spheres: two worlds in one**

One of the primary focuses of gender studies has been the concept of *patriarchy*. It is regarded as a system that regulates human relations in civilized cultures, and it has been examined in depth from different perspectives, both socially and economically, and probably as many as the concept itself covers. In *Patriarchy at Work* (1990), for instance, Sylvia Walby explains that the term has evolved and changed throughout history, and some of its definitions have failed to express what is, in her own words, a “system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women” (20). She gives six different structures that are the foundation of this system, which include relations in the household, paid work, capitalism and racism, male violence, sexuality and culture. Many other male academics have contributed to the definition and analysis of this paramount concept, including MacInnes (1998), Jeff Hearn (1992), Horrocks (1994) or Brod (1994), all of them pointing out at its complexity at different levels. It is such an intricate issue that Jeff Hearn encourages academics to begin thinking in terms of *patriarchies* (14).

One of the most important aspects that should be highlighted in connection to the patriarchal system is the relationship between patriarchy and male power. According to Segal, the state operates in such a way that men’s dominance is institutionalized in virtually any economic, social, and political aspect, therefore promoting women’s dependency and lack of autonomy (*Slow Motion* 82). One of the outcomes of men’s domination and women’s submission is the widely discussed division between the public and private spheres,<sup>22</sup> with men’s presence mainly in the first one and control over both (Hearn 1992). This is, however, not as simple as it might appear. Society is a changing concept; it seems logical to believe that throughout history, social needs have changed and been reshaped. However, male domination manages to stay in place. MacInnes (5-7) discusses how, with the arrival of modernity, social transitions occur

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<sup>22</sup> This aspect will be contested and re-examined in future chapters in combination with community theories.

with colliding social forces that present a conflict between patriarchal ideologies and sexual equality. However, the sexual labour divisions remain, and the author explains this is mainly due to the concept of gender; he insists that gender and masculinity, which as largely explained by authors like Butler are socially constructed, were created “to defend patriarchy, not demolish it” (Butler, *Bodies* 3, 85).

Demetrakis Z. Demetriou problematizes Connell’s definition of hegemonic masculinity and its maintenance of patriarchy. The author establishes that hegemonic masculinity fails to see the multiplicity of different masculine and feminine practices that actually exist and that also help sustain patriarchal values. He describes maleness as not a “homogeneous, internally coherent bloc,” since there are certain masculine practices which are also subordinated by hegemonic ones, and which have a different relationship with the overall subordination of men towards women (341). Demetriou goes further and makes the distinction between external hegemony, or “men’s dominance over women,” and internal hegemony, the domination of other masculinities (341). In particular, I would like to emphasize Demetriou’s reference, inside this last type, of “complicit masculinity” (a term coined by Connell). For him, this entails “a number of men who do not act in the way prescribed by the hegemonic model but still (passively) sustain it and thus realize the patriarchal dividend” (342). In addition, “some masculinities are subordinated (...) because the configuration of practice they embody is inconsistent with the currently accepted strategy for the subordination of women” (344). This type of non-hegemonic masculinity will be the one of most interest for this thesis, as many of Palahniuk’s male protagonists can be related to a type of masculinity that does not entail leadership or domination, but that in principle does not help (at the beginning) to break with hegemonic values. Finally, another important contribution by this author is that of the concept of the *masculine bloc*, which “implies a non-reified and non-dualistic understanding of masculine power and practice. Its “hybrid” nature, which makes hegemony “dynamic and flexible,” allows the absorption of other practices that permit hegemony’s reconfiguration and adaptability to new historical contexts (348).

The latter point brings me to commenting on economic and consumerist practices that accompany these historical contexts. Never forgetting from now the actual hybridity that is argued to exist inside masculinities, Horrocks adds that patriarchy, when viewed from an economic perspective, favours men’s dominant positions outside the household, whereas women need to stay inside; however, he also contends that in

those circumstances where such harsh conditions are not found, more collaboration and less stereotyping occurs (57). This only reinforces the idea that this system, from a social perspective (although it does affect other aspects of men's lives, as will be seen below) oppresses both men and women. On examining Weber, David Morgan contemplates the idea that capitalism needs masculinity for its development (qtd. in Brod, *New Men's Studies* 192). For all these reasons, contradictions begin to easily appear, and the actual weaknesses of the social structure begin to unleash inevitably.

It can be argued that one of the main problems is the very concept of masculinity, which, when possessed, grants the access to power and privilege. Of course, it is common knowledge that the masculine gender, as a social construction, indeed a fiction in Segal's words ("Changing Men" 630), has been traditionally attached to the male body. Pease maintains that one important mistake relies on how men's identities are still essentialized into the masculine ideal ("Reconstructing" 18). As a result, as claimed by MacInnes, in order to achieve equality, the connection between masculinity and maleness needs to be denied, and the differences between men and women should also cease to be emphasized (*The End of Masculinity* 78, 86). If this is the case, the importance given to the sex roles theory would also be contested: Stacey and Thorne explain that sex roles should stop being used to talk about gender and socialization, as such concepts fail to explain how power relations really function by favouring social division (qtd. in Brod and Kaufman 89).

For the purpose of this thesis, the division between public and private spheres is of special interest. The traditional connection between the public sphere and masculinity and the private sphere and femininity can be considered to be much more problematic than it could appear to be. Jeff Hearn is particularly poignant in this respect when discussing these concepts, claiming how, traditionally, a problem only becomes visible when taken to the public (*Public Eye* 8). MacInnes states that the reason behind the separation of the public and the private favours the survival of the political in its current form (that is, this favours men's dominant position), because the public needs to be separated from the personal (22). However, Hearn also insists that what is considered private or public is pure ideology, which could be precisely another reason why the patriarchal system can and must be contested. After all, he remarks, patriarchy is just a word (33, 35). The fact that intimacy is so related to the private sphere can be considered to be highly problematic, mainly since the public seems to be now engulfing

the private, because “change in public men and public masculinities occurs in association with and in relation to (the construction of) what men do in private” (Hearn 14, 53). It can be inferred then that the private has a greater potential to contest the system, because as also discussed by Horrocks, “[i]ntimacy is power” (30). This will be explored in more detail in the following sections.

The aforementioned factors are not, however, the only ones to take into account when talking about men’s identity and the problems that come with this idea of the self. To gain a deeper view on the matter, other important concepts coined by different experts will be examined and analyzed under the light of Chuck Palahniuk’s deconstructive potential.

#### **4. Hegemonic masculinities: the pressure on the male psyche**

Raewyn Connell was one of the first authors to theorize the concept of hegemonic masculinity in a systematic way. According to the writer, hegemonic masculinity entails a series of practices that promote and maintain men’s domination (*Masculinities* 832), therefore, sustaining patriarchal values. In *Gender and Power* (1987), Connell describes hegemonic masculinity first, as the general propagation and maintenance of men’s power on women, but also defines it as a simplification of what is otherwise a more complex and contradictory matter: that of (male) identity. It is essentially based on the exercise of violence and the *subordination* of other masculinities rather than their elimination, it is mandatorily heterosexual, it comprises a fantastic image of the “true man”, as according to the author there are no personalities of men that can correspond completely to hegemonic practices, and finally, its patterns of behaviour are essentially public, shown and encouraged through the media and marketing (183-185). Recently, great stress has been posed on the need to note the actual plurality that exists when talking about the masculine gender. Most current experts, including Hearn, Segal, Horrocks, or Kimmel, insist on the usage of the term masculinities in plural, even when talking about its dominant position, as these practices change due to many different variables, including age, social class, or even historical changes, as further discussed below.

On a brief note (since racial issues do not seem to be really at the core of Palahniuk's novels), race has also been posed in a central position when discussing hegemonic masculinity. Authors like Mike Hill, in the context of the United States, claim that this hegemony is white. In his work, he mentions Sally Robinson, who assures that "white masculinity reassures itself through a new identity politics of increased white masculine visibility and victimhood" (239). The author does not fail either to also relate this white supremacy with religious origins (13). Even though, as Connell comments in her works, hegemonic masculinities cannot *not be seen* as a fantasy, some academics seem to agree on the fact that hegemonic masculinities play such an important role in men's lives as to be ignored. Mosher and Sirkin claim that hypermasculinity, that is, the exaggeration of masculine values, is an issue, and it is a normal experience for many boys and male adolescents to feel "shame and self contempt when [failing] to attain (...) masculine ideals" (151). Masculinity does seem to have deep social roots that do not seem to sustain themselves strongly. Mailer claims that men are always struggling to find out when, if this ever happens, they become real men (qtd. in Segal, *Slow Motion* 89). Kimmel reaches the same conclusion when he discusses American manhood, stating that "[m]asculinity must be proved, and no sooner is it proved than it is again questioned and must be proved again" (122). This is also, in part, due to the firm belief on a higher (masculine), transcendental being present in "mass collectivity", which is also, a social fantasy" (Hearn, *Public Eye* 8).

Hegemonic masculinities need necessarily to subordinate other non-hegemonic groups: to maintain its position at the top of the pyramid, there needs to be one. Segal claims that masculinity cannot be displayed "except in relation to what is defined as its opposite," especially femininity ("Changing Men" 635). In North America, where the dominant, privileged masculinity is heterosexual and white, black and gay masculinities are always considered oppressed and subordinated (which again emphasizes the racial issues stated above). It should be reminded, however, that hegemonic masculinity does not reject completely non-hegemonic values; sometimes, they may make some of those non-hegemonic features their own (Connell and Messerschmidt 844). This is corroborated by Pease in his discussion of feminist attempts to undermine hegemonic values: he argues that if female traits were to be more valuable, they could be "incorporated into men's power base" (*Recreating* 15).<sup>23</sup> This demonstrates the actual

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<sup>23</sup> See also Matthew Hall's discussion on metrosexuality (2015).

malleability of hegemonic masculinity, its lack of fixity, and how its fragile nature lacks real contestation through other non-dominant forms; experts need to begin to grasp with the reality that hegemony can be reshaped (Hammarén and Johansson 3, 9). Such instability can be seen in the lack of consistency as regards men's experiences of power (Pease, *Recreating* 9); if power were a fixed value given to all men equally, men's experiences would not be incongruous. In addition, if a hierarchy also exists among men who apparently conform to the norm (Hearn 60), the privilege that comes with masculinity may be shown to be more rooted on external, rather than internal, purely male factors.

For the above stated reasons, Kimmel proposes that black and gay masculinities can successfully contest traditional masculine values (135). "Masculinity becomes legible (...) when it leaves the white male middle-class body" (Halberstam 2), and thus seeing its practices outside its common dominant positions may facilitate its examining. Brod proposes to analyze non-hegemonic values through two different axis: male-female and male-male, also showing how both are interconnected; the tensions suffered by subordinated groups must be brought about, and agency must be granted (Brod and Kaufman 89). For Segal, homosexual masculinities can represent a type of subversion, as it can easily highlight typical masculine contradictions (*Slow Motion* 126-27). At the same time, Pease quotes Haraway (1988) to suggest that "vision is better from below," thanks to the oppressed distanced and more objective perspectives (*Recreating* 4).

As seen previously, masculinity is deeply connected, and is originated in a dominating nature. It is precisely this power and privilege that comes with it that masculinity "becomes an issue," for being "valued and desirable" (Segal, *Slow Motion* 68). Because masculinity is seen as naturally institutionalized and superior (Segal, "Changing Men" 635), men may assume they are entitled to feel more powerful than women, and will only notice their privilege when their power is denied (Pease, "Reconstructing" 21). In addition, it should be taken into account, however, that this difference of power also occurs between men, as pointed out by Hearn (52). However, although men have been raised to feel powerful, this is in actuality very far from the way many of them feel (Kimmel 136), and here is where contradictions and frustrations begin to make their appearance.

According to Kaufman, masculinity is related to power and control, but such privileged position comes at a price: masculinity's self-destructive nature. He declares that masculinity involves the suppression of these emotions that are not consistent with the ideals of manhood; being a man means being powerful and oppressive, but also alienated and oppressed ("Contradictory" 142, 148, 150). As previously explained, ideas of masculinity seem to be deeply rooted in the identity of every man. It should not be forgotten that masculinity per se, those practices that need to be produced to prove one's manhood, only make sense when exercised in public. Indeed, as Hearn explains repeatedly in *Men in the Public Eye*, men's identity is essentially constructed in the public domain, while the private one was historically seen as unimportant, emotions being regarded as something trivial (19; Seidler in Carabí and Armengol 228). Of course, it is common knowledge that this division is not as clear-cut as it used to be socially, and both men and women are participating increasingly in both spheres. This change is perhaps the reason why conflict as regards men's identity and the so-called "masculine crisis" is coming into being.

As a result of what was previously explained, it can be argued that two main problems arise, one at a social level, the other at a personal one. First, the way in which masculinity is defined is seen by many authors as a way to exercise control for the sake of the system, and any changes produced in gender definitions are also part of the adjustment. In relation to this, Segal cites Foucault's conviction that "dominant definitions (...) serve both to regulate and control the behaviour of all men and women" (*Slow Motion* 121). Reinforcing this argument, Brod postulates that post-industrial capitalism brought with it images of masculinity related to aggressiveness and the workforce; however, this is apparently highly contradictory, as men are not really in control of their jobs, and this state of affairs generates an insecurity which can only be relieved through "sources of masculine identity validations *offered by the system*" (*Making of* 13-14). Males' actual subordination through their supposedly gender identity to the demands of capitalism is also pointed out by MacInnes, who after examining Weber's and Marx's analysis of the capitalist system concludes that there is no rise of the rule of men, but that of offices (5). This is an interesting appreciation. It was already mentioned previously that gender, particularly masculinity, are social constructs needed to maintain the division of labour. In this respect, Horrocks explains how men are turned into mere units of production; he quotes Gilmore, who claims that

there is a “strong connection between the social organization of production and the intensity of male image” (58). In this way, the idea of masculinity seems far from its actual principles of domination: as concluded by Jack Halberstam (an author to whom I will come back later), in the end, the power that comes with masculinity does seem a fantasy when relating it to the power of the system: “today’s rebel without a cause is tomorrow’s investment banker” (5)

The second main problem I would like to highlight is related to men’s collective experience of the self, and how they may relate to their environment due to the values they had to internalize to be valuable for the system. Men’s construction of their identity in the public sphere has been described as having a significant weight, but their relationship as regards the private one seems lacking and mishandled. In the United States, the number of men that seek the help of a therapist in order to solve internal, emotional conflicts related to their private lives is overwhelming (Horrocks, 1994; Segal, 2007). Hearn locates such dilemma on the fact that men’s experience in the public and the private are not separated (63), and it could be argued that, as a result, they lack a sense of a private self. This is justified if masculinity is understood as a concept that only makes sense when exercised in public (this will be further explored in the section dealing with *homosocialities*). The explanation of this phenomenon may lead to question how the power that characterizes masculinity is defined. Kaufman explains that “men have come to see power as a capacity to improve control on others and on our own unruly emotions,” which include “nurturing, receptivity, empathy, and compassion” (“Contradictory” 145, 148). Being a man means, for the most part, the capacity to endure suffering by repressing emotion (Horrocks 42). However, men’s superiority vanishes when dealing with the psychological, their inner mental worlds, and family relations (Segal, *Slow Motion* 64).

Following these premises, it seems clear that exercising typical macho ideals entails self-oppression and pain. It is argued that privilege still has its very enticing advantages: “when you rule the roots, call the shots, and are closer to God, there is not a lot of room left for pain, at least for the pain that appears to be linked to the practices of masculinity” (Ibid. 154). In addition, Connell claims that some men may feel compelled to support hegemonic masculinity due to “fantasy gratification,” “displaced aggression” and the “benefit[s] from the subordination of women” (*Power* 185); however, the price to pay, as Kimmel calls it, is still too high. According to Kaufman, there is the

imperious need to stay constantly in control no matter the circumstances, but “the assertion of power is also a response to fear and to the wounds we have experienced in the quest for power. Paradoxically, men are wounded by the very way we have learned to embody and exercise our power” (“Contradictory” 149). Such feelings are not unjustified. After all, as the author continues, “[g]ender is the central organizing category of [men’s] psyches” (Ibid. 144), and since there is not a man that can “live up to these ideals and images,” this pain is also accompanied by intense fear. This fear, further, translates into men’s emotional dependency (Ibid. 148, 149).

These problems can be related to masculinity’s essentializing nature. Through gender determinism, which does not leave room for transformation (Pease, *Recreating* 36), “we think of manhood as eternal, a timeless essence that resides deep in the heart of every man” (Kimmel 119). Manhood turns into something transcendent, while its historical and cultural nature is forgotten; this is not to be seen as a loss, though: this realization gives men agency, the opportunity to act through their own volition, not through self imposed values (Ibid. 119, 120, 136). For this to happen, however, major changes need to occur. The alienation provoked by public patriarchies through the very transcendence of that alienation due to gender essentialism (Hearn 14) can be tackled by encouraging men to explore their personal power: to be “centred, rooted in the self, and being able to speak and act from that centre,” because indeed, “[i]ntimacy is power” (Horrocks 30, 34). This will imply men getting in contact with what is traditionally seen as a more “feminine side” (Segal, “Changing Men” 10), although it can be argued that precisely men accepting feminine values would ultimately provoke the erasure of such limiting labels. In this way, the “hegemonic masculine psyche” could be dislodged (Kaufman “Contradictory” 159), and a more flexible, healthy understanding of the male self could be achieved.

## **5. Female masculinities: resistance against hegemonic masculinity**

Female masculinity is a relatively new concept that has not been as widely explored as male masculinity. It has been demonstrated throughout all previous sections that masculinity is constructed and based on fantasies and symbols, anchored to the male body without any logical reason. Having said that, the next step may be to wonder if masculinity can then be present in other bodies that are not male. In her revision of

Lacan and the phallus, Butler explains that “if one can imagine a lesbian phallus, ‘the phallus’ will become detached from male bodies and hence usable for other subjects” (qtd. In Kegan Gardiner 589). Jack Halberstam begins examining this question in his introduction of *Female Masculinity* (1998), where although he does believe there are female masculinities, these “are framed as the rejected scraps of dominant masculinity in order that male masculinity may appear to be the real thing” (2). He goes on saying how masculinity only becomes apparent and visible when leaving “the white male middle-class body” (Ibid. 2), further stressing how masculinity may be exercised outside its normative periphery.

It is interesting as well to observe how Halberstam makes the effort to separate female masculinity from lesbianism. He concludes that masculinity may be exercised outside sexual preferences, so that “the making of modern masculinity” can take place (Ibid. 46). At the same time, women have not just reproduced male masculinity, but indeed have provided “their own unique contributions,” which are generally unnoticed (Ibid.). It seems then, that female masculinities are worth studying in depth because they may contribute to the deconstruction of hegemonic masculinity (Ibid. 40). At the same time, it may help dismantle the derogative ideology that accompanies the idea of “woman”: by seeing masculinity as something movable and unfixed, this may at the same time help men to accept as their own those qualities of womanhood which they appreciate but are taught not to acquire in “dominant, male-centred discourses and realities” (Segal, *Slow Motion* 173-174). It has proven difficult to find works that delve into the issue of female masculinities, which further reinforces its potential disruptive force against what is considered normative and remains resistant to change. However, the existing literature points towards interesting directions. Laura Doan, for example, wrote an article in 1998 that examined women’s “boyish” dressing during the 1920s. Being this a time of tremendous cultural and social experimentation, some gender borders were crossed with women dressing up the way men did: cross-dressing was perhaps the first step towards the coining of the concept of “female masculinity” and its “multiple interpretative possibilities” (664-67). Doan also concluded that even though dressing and behaving as a man may have slightly dissolved the line that separates femininity and masculinity and demonstrated gender’s performative (and not biological) nature, women acting like men may help them project “less femininity”, but not “more masculinity” (Ibid. 674).

It is, then, not easy to separate masculinity from the male body, and when seemingly doing so, the result does not seem really for females to have a greater sense of equality. To explain this, one can recur to Mimi Schippers (2007) and her accounts on *femininities*. She begins explaining, after mentioning Connell and her definition of gender and sex roles, that femininity remains highly under-theorized, and that femininities are, by definition, subordinated by masculinities (85-86). The sexual and gender dichotomy that arises in this relationship based on power and domination is, according to Schippers, a result of heterosexual desire as a defining, hierarchical feature. It establishes as well women as an erotic object of desire based on sexual difference, where they are deemed to be passively “wanted” by men (Ibid. 90). An “idealized relationship between masculinity and femininity”, Schippers suggests, is what really configures gender difference, and the reason why both masculinity and femininity cannot be regarded as just “the cultural norm” or in an isolated fashion, as they both feed into each other (Ibid. 93-94). To maintain this status of power of men over women, the same author contends, those elements and practices that belong to masculinity must not be available to females. She opts, instead of female masculinities, for the term *pariah femininity*. They cannot be called masculine, but neither can be considered normatively feminine: “pariah femininities are actually the quality content of hegemonic masculinity [which is] constructed as feminine when enacted by women” (Ibid. 94). This entails, then, that hegemonic masculinities are totally bound to context, and as a result, reducing masculinity and femininity to just “the symbolic” proves to be dangerous (Ibid. 93-96).

Judith Kegan Gardiner (2012) continues this line of research arguing that female masculinity is indeed “inherently paradoxical” (597). After revisiting authors like Butler or Halberstam and their theorizations of the term, she considers that, generally, literary critique seems to point out that masculinity promotes in men insecurities and aggressive behaviour, while in women it is regarded under a positive light (Ibid. 610).<sup>24</sup> Kegan Gardiner esteems these differences as “gaps”, and concludes that there are many oppositions and contradictions in the concept of female masculinity in particular and masculinities in general. She also claims that separating masculinity from men is not a step forward, as this reinforces its coherent “entity”, thus overlooking other important

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<sup>24</sup> Specifically, Kegan Gardiner explains that scholars see “these masculinities as gallant and brave”, apart from being different to the masculinity enacted by men (610).

variables involving “gender hierarchy”, and the roles of “privilege and power”, agreeing with Connell and Messerschmidt (Ibid. 616, 619; *Hegemonic Masculinity* 852).

The focus of this thesis is the analysis of masculinities in Chuck Palahniuk’s male characters, and as a result its attention to masculinity in his female protagonists will be more limited. However, the obvious presence of certain masculine performances on many of them in the author’s fiction called for their inspection. At the same time, the survey of female masculinities in this thesis enriches the analysis of hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities. I see the usage of the term “pariah femininities” more fitting to describe these female characters as, indeed, I agree with Doan’s assumptions about how masculinity “per se” is not really accessible to women who enact it. I will argue that these women’s practices show something different than femininity, though one cannot really locate them in the masculine spectrum. It is, I contend, something different that escapes specific definitions, which in essence is in the end what female masculinity does. In Palahniuk’s novels, “pariah femininities” are prolific and represented in different contexts by different types of women. They include Marla Singer (*Fight Club*), Fertility Hollis (*Survivor*), Shannon and Brandy Alexander (*Invisible Monsters*), Ida Mancini (*Choke*), Helen Hoover Boyle (*Lullaby*), Misty Wilmot (*Diary*) and Maddy (*Damned and Doomed*).

## **6. Fatherhood and motherhood**

The presentation of American families will be salient in Palahniuk’s novels. For this reason, an account of the conceptions surrounding the family will be given under the light of power relations and gender studies. The family is believed to represent an appropriate environment where the “gendered psyche” is developed through “love and longing, and support and disappointment”; parents embody the ruling gendered dichotomy, where gender is not an abstract concept but is systematically represented by the members of a family: the process of development of “‘normal’ manhood” [(hegemonic masculinity useful for the state)] begins there (Kaufman, “Contradictory” 146-147). Sylvia Walby agrees by stating that the family represents a “pillar of stability” to the state and society; however, she also claims that the importance given to the family is overemphasized (61). After all, traditional father and mother roles may have been easy to describe when division of labour encouraged so clear-cut divisions of

spheres. However, experts seem to generally have problems when it comes to define, especially, modern fatherhood. This is probably in part due to the changing nature that fatherhood has suffered historically, specifically in the United States (together with the visibly higher participation of women in the job market and positions of power). The first author that could be mentioned to itemise this conception is Hearn, who begins by saying that the father figure has been “historically and culturally highly variable” (80). This is corroborated by Requena-Pelegrí, who claims that fatherhood has evolved hand in hand with social changes together with “the competing discourses on masculinity” (qtd. in Carabí and Armengol 116). Likewise, LaRossa contends that, in fact, in the United States, instead of evolving per se, fatherhood has gone “up and down (...) in response to economic, ideological and other influences” (42).

It can be inferred then that the meanings attached to fatherhood, much like masculinity, adapt and move in sync to the overall system. Focusing on economic factors, Brod explains how American capitalism has expropriated the power from individual patriarchs in the family and held it for capitalist institutions, resulting in alienation and a “gap between institutional and personal power” (*Making of* 13). This meant the introduction of a more *absent* father figure, whose power would not be lessened, but indeed made more symbolic (Hearn 80). The ideology behind such absence may be explained by British psychology, which used to insist on the fact that the father’s absence was fundamental, so that the line between both public and private spheres would be clearly drawn, the father being “a visitor from the outside world” (Segal, *Slow Motion* 9). When discussing the so-called masculine crisis, father absence seems to be one of its strongest pillars. This wound caused by industrialism, which also provokes families’ separation (Bly in Horrocks 78), is according to Requena-Pelegrí, stimulated by “new commercial capitalism,” the assumption that “a man’s talent and energy should determine his wealth and social standing” (“Fathers Who Care” 117). As a result, inside the family, in general terms the patriarch is no longer in control, and familiar patriarchies (or rather, private ones) become social patriarchies (Ursel in Hearn 43). This shift of domination from the father to the state is essential to understand historical transformations: the father of the private family has been dethroned, and patriarchal institutions take his place: “the ‘child’ state seeks to kill the father” (Hearn 92). In his own analysis, Kaufman adds that, more than ever, authority no longer is held by the father in capitalist societies: if patriarchy is acting without the father (as worded

by Jessica Benjamin) the very term “patriarchy” per se can be easily called into question (“The Construction of Masculinity” 4).

Because capitalism is intrinsically contrary to traditional family views, traditional masculinity (as attached to family relations and fatherhood) is being displaced by other forms; men’s power in the family is decreasing, and male authority in the household seems to be more contested than ever (Segal, *Slow Motion* 83-84). Such affirmations make sense when relating them to previously discussed forms of masculinity that conform to hegemonic ideas, those which can be better controlled and favourable to the state. Although more modern views on fatherhood point at an increase in men’s presence and nurturing in family life, Segal continues by claiming that although more men affirm they enjoy childcare, they can actually be very selective as regards the tasks they perform. Fathers’ involvement has been apparently overemphasised, and although several external facts may be behind such neglect (like working conditions), change has not been that significant, and this absence is still an issue (Ibid. 29-30).

The idea behind fathers’ absenteeism to fulfil social and economic demands carries with it several consequences. Firstly, de Beauvoir explains that, in representing the outside, the father figure, at least when discussing capitalist societies, “personifies transience, he is God” (qtd. in Segal, *Slow Motion* 24). Segal responds, however, that the myth of the father as a God-like figure has always been clear, but the same cannot be said about the father as a man (Ibid.). It seems that when entering a non-symbolic realm, the reality of the body in which fatherhood needs to exteriorize itself experiences some sort of ideological dissolution. Although both motherhood and fatherhood fill in to an extent a symbolic position, fatherhood’s symbolic limits are more diffused and unfixed (Barnes 71). For this reason, according to Pateman, fatherhood does not enjoy certainty: “[p]aternity has to be discovered or invented. Unlike maternity, paternity is merely a social fact, a human invention” (35). Once again, it can be observed how this idea, so rooted in masculine conceptions, is actually only loosely based on actual biological realities, as also commented by MacInnes (108).

In order to understand the basis of most of the literature that deals with father absence and its interrelationship with motherhood on children, and specifically, on boyhood and later masculinity, Freud’s approaches on sexual development need to be

mentioned. Freud theorized that, in order for the child to break away from its dependent relationship with the mother and begin to establish connections with the outside world, the father figure is fundamental. Through the so-called *Oedipus complex*, the boy begins to see his mother as an object of desire, thus failing to identify with her as it happens in the *pre-Oedipal* stage. At the same time, he begins to see the father as a rival, but he also begins to identify with him. It is through the *castration anxiety* first mentioned by Freud that the boy fears punishment by his father due to his inappropriate desires for the mother, therefore learning to direct his sexual desires towards other women, also ensuring the boy's heterosexuality and masculine identification through the father figure (Connell, 2005; Butler, 1990, 1993).<sup>25</sup> Without entering for now in the male sexual paradigm, it seems easy to understand that, consequently, any further account of men's identity in most fields would stress the father-son relationship, and/or lack of it, and the obsession behind the father figure. After all, from a Freudian perspective, the father has to be the first to evaluate his son's masculinity, paramount for the development of his identity as a boy, and later as a man (Kimmel 130).

For such reasons, it should not be surprising that authors such as Chodorow highlight that the father absence "create[s] difficulties for the development of a sense of masculinity in boys" (106). For example, Segal explains that North American studies on criminality and young men during those decades stated that due to the absence of the father figure, these delinquents adopted a rigid, hyper-masculine identity to cover their insecurity as men (*Slow Motion* 29). Horrocks mentions as well how men's abusive behaviour has been justified due to the lack of a father figure (80). It may be seen as a difficulty, as Chodorow words it, precisely because the masculinity boys learn is based on a fantasy, on a distant relationship which stays in stark contrast to the relationship with the mother, characterized by "oneness and inseparability" ("Contradictory" 150). Because the state configures it this way, patriarchal power is experienced by boys inside the family through an absence rather than a presence, and always through the present figure: the mother (Hearn 157).

The mother-son relationship has been widely explored, and it has been claimed that the importance of the mother has been over-emphasized. When using Freud's argumentation, Kimmel assures that the mother becomes in the boy's eyes an

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<sup>25</sup> This will be further analyzed in the section dealing with violence and the male body.

“infantilizing creature,” as she represents dependency and nurturance; this way, the author continues, the mother, a woman with the power to emasculate the boy, reminds him of the great controversy: manhood needs to be demonstrated, whereas her womanhood does not need to be proven (Kimmel in Brod and Kaufman 127). Some have gone as far as implying that there has been a “hidden matriarchy” inside the family, as mothers had a clear emotional domination on men (Ibid.). In other words, there seems to be a widespread conception that mothers are widely considered clandestinely oppressive inside the private sphere.

Moreover, experts claim that mothers have also been blamed by many men for their overprotective nature and their emotional power over sons. Pease comments on boys’ fears of becoming “mummy’s boy” in front of their peers due to her overprotection (*Recreating* 74). Mothers’ overprotection has also been seen in relation to their relationship with their husbands. Chodorow states that, due to father absence, psychologists talk about a tendency by wives, which consists of turning their affectionate attention to the son; the mother, as a woman, is a marginalized being in a sexist social milieu, and for this reason the mother-son relationship is made particularly strong in these circumstances (104-105). It can be argued, however, that this can be considered a very archaic, rigid view on family life, as now many different types of families exist. What is important to remember, however, is that the traditional ideology of a family is still imposed by the state, as families play an important role as institutional pillars (Walby, 1987).

Not all authors agree on such importance given to parental roles. Stoltenberg considers how men may use this recent stress on unloving or missing fathers as an excuse to justify their abusive behaviour and not make any effort to change it, and that too much importance is actually placed on the “father wound” (qtd. in Pease 38). For this not to repeat itself, Seidler claims that it is important for men to see themselves as different from men of other generations (228). This could potentially help men to see themselves as different from their absent, uncaring father figures. Pease cites Christian (1994) to explain that, because hegemony also works through the oppression of older men on younger men, when men identify with traditional fatherhood, that is, their oppressive fathers, hegemonic masculinity is also reproduced, together with patriarchy and male domination; as a result, the “wider culture” advertised by the system gets reinforced (*Recreating* 58, 64).

In addition, mother-son relationships have often been unfairly blamed for men's lack of emotional abilities. Segal talks about a "backlash" as regards this attitude: "the growth of a youthful rebellion against the oppressiveness of those dutiful mothers attempting to act out the advice so freely heaped on them" (*Slow Motion* 10). For instance, when studying men's memories, Pease explains how they feel more compelled to exert power over their mothers but not over their fathers; he justifies such attitude by claiming that men did not see the "inaction" of their fathers as the problem, but rather, their mother's involvement (74-75). Moreover, it does seem that many analysts have placed too much emphasis on the pre-Oedipal phase and men's envy and fear towards women, together with the domination that apparently mothers have on their children; nevertheless, this power has been greatly misunderstood: "it is restricted (...) to children (...) constrained by dependency on men, regulated by the state (...) [and] isolated" (Ibid. 61-64). Moreover, because of mothers' embodiment of dependency, boys and young men feel entitled to finally reject them, projecting such attitude to all women (Kimmel 127-128). It might be said that due to this "motherhood power" women's actual powerlessness is widely overlooked (Ibid. 64). This also continues reproducing women's social oppression: because motherhood and womanhood are seen as separated constructs and it is difficult for men to see their mothers outside the realm of motherhood, as people with personal needs and desires, patriarchal power is broadened (Pateman 217; Pease, *Recreating* 75).

Some solutions have been proposed by the experts in order to change men's attitudes towards their fathers and mothers and their ideas of fatherhood. Firstly, in connection to the idea of the father representing patriarchy and its oppression, Hill's account on the inflexibility attributed to identities is interesting: to gain power, the subject needs to be like its oppressor, and thus starts constructing his identity by copying him, and becoming masculine consists of "identifying with [men's] oppressor" (qtd. in Carroll 9; Kimmel 130). However, it might be the case that by stressing the unequal relationship between the mother and the father, new generations of men can begin to change these views. Pease claims that mothers' and sons' experiences with the fathers and husbands may be the same (*Recreating* 65). For this reason, of special importance is for sons to begin thinking of their identity as men "through dis-identification with patriarchal fatherhood and through empathy with the experiences of their mothers" (Ibid. 56). For this to happen, and in relation to what has been previously

discussed on the danger of sex roles, Gutterman insists that an effort needs to be made to disconnect “sexuality, reproduction and motherhood” (226), where women are not merely “objects of men’s policies” (Hearn 53).

Many authors have also considered the necessity of forgiving those traditional fathers’ behaviour and seeking for reconciliation; after all, those fathers need to be seen as wounded men as well, therefore promoting further understanding and compassion (Biddulph in Pease, *Recreating* 65). At the same time, Pease believes that fatherhood should also start being defined by nurturance, by beginning to be more involved in childcare (*Recreating* 58, and Chodorow), as it seems that the view attached to it is still far from it. However, Requena-Pelegri interestingly points out that there might be a big gap between the reality of what fathers actually do and the overall ideology that surrounds fatherhood; she cites the works of Wahlström and Marsiglio and Roy and Fox to explain that in reality fatherhood entails a wide variety of different versions with different practices (118). In addition, LaRossa discusses that there is a great difference between the “*culture of fatherhood*” and fathers’ actual acting in the household (39). Perhaps, the problem with capitalist views on fatherhood relies as well on the fact that other varieties of fatherhood that involve a more caring disposition are made invisible in favour of a normative masculinity.

## **7. The male body**

### **7.1. The male body and sexuality: the phallus**

As mentioned in the first chapter, the body is “a powerful symbolic force, a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of the body” (Bordo 2362). It is through the body that humans enter gender identity with genitalia at its core, and in this case, the penis has been posed by feminist authors such as Kristeva (1982) or Butler, who apart from locating the penis as the representation of the *phallus*, contends that “‘persons’ only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility” (*Trouble* 22). Sex achieves meaning through gender. To understand the relationship between the penis/phallus and the male body, it is perhaps important to revise the reasons given in the literature. As seen earlier,

any patriarchal system needs maleness (through masculinity) to be regarded as powerful; it needs masculinity rooted in sex; it needs the penis to be the only possible physical representation of the phallus (MacInnes 80-83). Once the relationship between the male body, the penis, the phallus and power is made, it becomes easier to understand how, as Gilmore words it, the male image is adapted to society and the state's needs of production (224).

As explained by Walby, Barnes or Hearn, patriarchy means “the rule of the father,” which means that the father figure in the family, his very body, is seen as paramount in the son's view of his own as a projection of masculinity. It was already mentioned earlier how sons and daughters first get in contact with femininity and masculinity inside the family through its members. The sexual difference embodied by fathers and mothers has its origins in the body, and several authors have attempted to explain them via different factors. Resuming Freud's accounts, the main focus will be on the male infant. The pre-Oedipal stage involved the boy's identification with the mother, whereas once the child enters the Oedipal stage, the infant begins to identify with his father and sees him as a rival for his mother's love. It is when the male infant goes from the first stage to the second in his quest for independence from the mother that the penis, the organ that separated him from her physically, gains importance (Chasseguet-Smirgel in Chodorow 122-123). However, not only does the penis achieve the separation from the mother and the development of an individual self, it also situates the boy's body in the gender spectrum: the *phallus* enters the stage. Experts like Lacan have explained how the phallus is not only a “mark of division,” but also the “privileged signifier”; one of the main reasons to justify this can be redeemed as rather simplistic but nonetheless highly plausible: the penis is more readily visible than the vagina: possession of the penis is seen as wholeness, its non possession as lacking (Benvenuto and Kennedy and Lacan in Segal, *Slow Motion* 73). This generates in the female infant what Freud called first “penis envy,” which also translates as the girl's desire to break away from the maternal figure, and clearly situates the penis as a more highly viewed organ (Chodorow 123). According to Lacan, then, there is only one sex *in contrast* to its “Other” (in *Ibid.* 73). The hierarchy between the male and female genitals according to traditional psychoanalysis, becomes obvious, and men's bodies become the access to the privileges granted by the patriarchal state: they become the dominant, patriarchal discourse (Segal, *Slow Motion* 74).

On the view that the phallus is directly related to power, authors have studied the origins of sexism in the early relationship with the mother. Lacan continues by saying that before the boy is conscious of his possession of the phallus, the mother is the one who holds the power (as discussed in the previous section, she is seen as secretly dominating): therefore, by becoming the mother's "object of desire," before he possesses it, he *becomes* the phallus, and in that way, the mother possesses the symbol of desire, in dominating the child. This "duality," Lacan concludes, is broken by the father figure, who does appear as whole in possessing the phallus the mother truly desires: the boy is aware of castration, and in trying to attain his wholeness he identifies with his father. However, Lacan says, "his desire of possession of the phallus is itself the product of a loss, of castration" (Ibid. 73-74). Although Lacan concludes as well that the ideology behind the phallus constitutes an idea of difference between men and women based on a fantasy, the literature is showing the obsession which exists surrounding the penis and its symbolic meaning: "The phallus is not something men possess, but a seemingly timeless symbolic order, representing sexual difference and the law of the father, which holds women and men alike in its thrall" (in Ibid. 74). Indeed, Segal continues explaining that this symbolism is not sustained on its own: it is the power that men generally possess in the social milieu in placing such symbolic power in the phallus that the state regulates the way in which men and women connect to their bodies (*Slow Motion* 182).

These accounts are, however, regarded as misguided, sexist, and ultimately wrong by later experts and feminist authors. Firstly, after her review on Lacan, Segal herself revises this author's limits on his conceptualization of the phallus to justify male domination. She is especially poignant in her view that Lacan fails to give an account of the influence of many other variables, like class, race, or sexual orientation (*Slow Motion* 76). MacInnes also points out how difficult it is to justify the reason why, if the phallus is always symbolic, women cannot possess it: "the phallus presupposes itself" (83). In fact, according to Segal, not only is the phallus a fantasy, and only relatable to maleness, but it is also unavailable for the individual man, because many other variables and structures controlled by the state are at play when exercising power (*Slow Motion* 177). At the same time, some feminists have been blamed for blindly accepting men's dominance as related to the possession of their penis, when in fact, this connection is, again, symbolic and it is perfectly contestable once this connection is not taken for

granted: the power of the phallus is not as real as many have thought it to be (Ibid. 177, 181).

Despite all criticism towards traditional psychoanalysts, Connell states that it is true that most men commonly believe that masculinity is a reality and “almost always thought to proceed from men’s bodies” (*Masculinities* 45). This is also acknowledged by Segal, who also mentions sports as related to “male imagery”, to muscles and activity. As the phallus is not enough to show its presupposed power, the male body needs to do it justice (Dyer 270). For this reason the body becomes the most important source of projection of men’s masculine identity (in modern gender ideology). Connell does conclude, however, that such natural masculinity grounded on the body, is as well a fantasy (*Masculinities* 45, 47-48). Placing this responsibility on body performance can be problematic. Katz provides a very enlightening analysis of white masculinity in advertising. He first mentions Brod, who states that since men are no longer in control of their jobs, they have lost an important source of confidence which belonged traditionally to masculine ideals; because of this, men need to make use of other tools to reinforce their masculine value which is “offered by the system,” as previously mentioned: these tools are their bodies. Many changes may be surrounding men in society, but bodies remain a faithful demonstration of masculinity (262). Besides, when men have no access to other forms of abstract validation such as economic or workplace power, they resort to the body (Ibid. 262). Therefore, not only is the state imposing certain values through hegemonic masculinity: it seems to also push men towards their need to rely on their bodies to have a masculine identity, to feel like men. At the same time, Dyer concludes as well that because the male body needs to show its toughness at all times for the masculine identity to stay in place (again, originated by a constructed symbol), men may become what he calls the “hysterically phallic,” the constant and anxious proving that a man is man enough, that he *is* (275).

Many experts failed to acknowledge the problems that come with the so-called privileges that the male body carries, but now the problems behind the symbolism and ideologies surrounding the male body are being addressed and examined. It may be useful to begin by the sexual difference and consequent sexual hierarchy imposed between the male and the female body. This has created what some authors call the fetishism of sexual difference. As both Marx and Freud already expressed, our realities are fetishized, and so are our bodies (in Horrocks 65). MacInnes claims that members of

modern society attempt to reject this material fetishism connected to the body, but the system keeps pushing people towards it (9). For such fetishism to take place, the symbolism of sex is reinforced when bodies enter socialization and escape their true origins, those related to nature (Ibid. 38, 39). It can be argued that this symbolization process through socialization and separation from nature is even harsher in the male psyche. Therapists such as Ethel Spector Person believe that masculine gender relies specially on sexuality, whereas women can use other methods to assert their gender identity (in Segal, *Slow Motion* 178). If this sexuality is fetishized and subject to changeable symbolism, men's identity is prone to suffer great levels of anxiety.

This anxiety may be explained through Freud's sexually biased accounts on the boy's castration anxiety as related to the penis. Because traditional psychoanalysis in this matter could be reversible, Horrocks questions why the boy's fear may not be about losing his penis, but due to a castration that has already taken place: the loss of the breast, his penis seen as inferior. It would be for this reason that the boy feels the need to overemphasise the power of his organ, to make up for such lack (86-87). There are however, other possible reasons that might explain the insecurity that accompanies the penis. When discussing fetishism and sexual development in the male infant, Chodorow concludes that the mother (because of the social marginalization mentioned earlier and their need to see their son as something that substitutes the absent husband) may "push her son out of his preoedipal relationship to her into an oedipally toned relationship defined by its sexuality and gender distinction" (107). In this way, the importance of sexuality will be present in the boy much earlier in his life than in the girl. At the same time, Greenacre states that the early separation of the boy from the mother may result in his insecurity as regards his genital body identity, which can make him feel threatened, and indeed, castrated; this assumption leads Chodorow to conclude that, for the boy, having an idea of a separate self may be more difficult (in Chodorow 107). Such is the difficulty of men regarding themselves as "someone" only if they see themselves as men, that "not being a man" means just "not being": it means the death of the self (Horrocks 105-106).

On posing the body as the main source of projection of masculinity, Horrocks states that their identity is so grounded in muscles and physical adequacy, that men have been castrated in yet another way: they have been deprived of their emotions, something which comes as a surprise to many men when they discover that part of themselves. He

poses this in contrast to women's bodies: "women have been closer to the earth, closer to feelings, closer to life and death" (Ibid. 105, 122, 158). Because hegemonic masculinities operate in ways in which control is always granted, this also applies to control over nature: control over the body. This implies distancing oneself from that which needs to be controlled, which is why men lack an emotional connection with their bodies (Seidler 222, 224-5).<sup>26</sup> This distance from the body has devastating consequences in relation to men's relations with themselves and with other men and women. It could be argued that the difficulty for men to experience themselves as private selves as mentioned in the "hegemonic masculinity" section may be a consequence of this self imposed distance.

The above-mentioned sexual fetishism has provoked the dehumanization of sexuality, now seen mainly through technology (Horrocks 116). Indeed, one of the most important pillars that sustain modern masculinity is the "sexualisation of everything and specially of (every) woman" (Makinnon and Haug in Hearn 123-124). Sexual relationships are a challenge for many men. The high consumption of pornography is the best example to show this. Segal has situated pornography in the realm of addictions used by men to distract themselves of a great insecurity: that of "performance anxiety," the ultimate proof of virility (*Slow Motion* 184). After all, the "erect penis" has been regarded in different centuries and across different cultures as the pinnacle of masculinity (Leverenz 63). It is in sexuality that men feel the most insecure, in fear of not being able to sexually perform, to satisfy women, and men's terror of women's genitalia; this is what has encouraged many men in America to seek out for the help of a sex therapist (Ibid. 178-179, Segal, *Slow Motion* 184). Horrocks' comment on this is not very different. He claims that men's fear as regards sexual intercourse comes as well from the mother, a figure that can also promote castration anxiety, that can "mock his penis, (...) devour it or take it off him" (165) Pornography, however, provides images of women who are sexually available, which at the same time, according to Segal, covers the need of dependency and need for identification with others (Ibid. 63).

Under these circumstances sexuality does not only operate in relation to women (in heterosexual relationships): it also affects men's own sexual experiences in connection to their own bodies. Segal explains how sexual anxiety for men translates

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<sup>26</sup> Seidler discusses as well the relationship between the body and religion, which will be dealt with in later chapters.

into two problems: it jeopardizes any attempt from men to establish meaningful relationships with women and the opportunity to allow their bodies to feel pleasure through other means (*Slow Motion* 184-185). Pornography has repeatedly been blamed for its diminishing treatment of women, which indeed perpetuates as well certain negative social stigmas and women's submission (Ibid. 185), and it may further promote sexual fetishism through fantasy. Indeed, Horowitz and Kaufman observe that objectification of women does generate feelings of remorse when men themselves are aware of it: most heterosexual men feel guilty when realising that their sexual needs can be regarded as oppressive towards women. At the same time, these authors have analyzed this repression, and state that dominant forms of masculinities (indeed, hegemonic ones) locate pleasure within activity, whereas experiencing pleasure in a passive manner is repressed (qtd. in Pease 84).

From a Freudian point of view this obsession with sex in modern times would lead to alienation from any other relationship, and it is a deeply "patriarchal and hypermasculine" view on sex (Horrocks 119-120). At the same time, it could be argued that such detached view on sexuality encourages the "creepification of male sexuality": choosing to submit women through power rather than trying to treat them at an equal level, mostly because sex and power go hand in hand for many men (Biddulph and Seidler in Pease, *Recreating* 43). In addition, in Horrocks's view, modern sexuality is too preoccupied with finding pleasure, ignoring sex's potential to find contact: to meet someone else devoid of the fantasies and symbolisms that someone may project onto the other (121). In fact, Leverenz claims that intimacy in the sexual realm grows when anxiety as regards sexual performance subsides (74).

All in all, the points made above demonstrate the strong relationship between the male body and sexuality as intertwined with dominance in the exertion of masculinity. However, not only sexuality plays an important role in relation to the male body. Violence is also one of the main issues when discussing masculine bodily experiences and performance.

## 7.2. The male body and violence

It was previously stated how the body and its performance was paramount in the projection of a desired masculine ideal. However, another important asset that cannot go unmentioned is male violence. As Kimmel claims, it is difficult to see manhood as separated from violence (132), and this violence seems to be also deeply connected to the male body. Male violence creates astonishment and preoccupation at a great social scale, and it is one of the topics that has worried feminists the most and, perhaps most worrying of all, it has been taken by many as something essentially inherent to men, something incurable (Horrocks 125). For example, Susan Brownmiller states that violence is part of male psychology and anatomy (in Kaufman, “The Construction of Masculinity” 3). Indeed, biology has been wrongly used as an excuse to justify men’s violence, as authors like MacInnes have also pointed out. Anthony Clare, for instance, highlighted how higher levels of testosterone in men may play an important role in relation to higher rates of male violence (Chapter 2, n.p.n.). However, taking for granted male violence does not seem to provide possibilities for change. Katz suggests that rather than all men being violent, it is violence that is considered part of masculine performance (1). At the same time, other authors like Segal contend that violence cannot simply be related to masculine behaviour, and violent acts should be seen in an autonomous way, as this facilitates tackling the problem (*Slow Motion* 225).

Perhaps, as Kaufman offers, one important question that should be asked is the way in which society makes use of violence, why some forms of it are accepted and others disapproved, and why it is that men are the main perpetrators (“The Construction of Masculinity” 3). Indeed, it could be argued that the (patriarchal) state has much to do with this issue. Horrocks illustrates how the state hypocritically adjudges violence when in fact it practices it (warfare, terrorism, fighting). Some feminists, the author continues, have located the violence perpetuated by the state as a projection of the violence found in the male psyche, but the existence of other communities that do not operate through violence demonstrates how, once more, hegemonic masculinity is particular to its political and social contexts (140-41). In addition, if as Kaufman says human nature is both capable of being violent and aggressive, but also cooperative, the question remains as to why the first is more encouraged than the latter (“The Construction of Masculinity” 3). If the patriarchal state needs gender identities and the masculine one is defined by violence, it would not be too absurd to believe that the state also encourages

men's violent behaviour through different means.<sup>27</sup> Horrocks quotes Marx, who gave two options: male violence is either biological or constructed by the state; Horrocks opts for the second reasoning (142).

According to Gilmore, men are not really prepared to fulfil the expectations of the state, and their aggression is mandatorily *learned* in different ways (120). For instance, Katz analyses how, in a culture driven by consumerism, white male violence is normalized and used to reassert a masculine identity based on strength and aggressiveness (261-63), which would explain men's need to rely on violence in order to demonstrate their virility. In this sense, Katz continues, violence gives men a degree of confidence in the social milieu; violence, just like masculinity, has been turned into a product one can buy, a "purchasable commodity" that makes sense in consumerist society (Ibid. 264).<sup>28</sup> In addition, the usage of hypermasculine tokens in advertising helps "associate the product with manly needs" and leads to believe that men have always been aggressive" (Ibid. 264-65). Horrocks concludes that due to the demands of the state and hegemonic masculine imagery, men have been taught to be the main bearers of violence (135-36). Segal points at the same direction, stating that society tolerates much more men's aggressiveness, whereas women's is suppressed, their passivity idealized (*Slow Motion* 220, 223).

Family relations may also be influential as regards the early boy's acceptance of a violent behaviour. Going back to father absenteeism and always within a patriarchal society, Horrocks mentions that the most important role of the father-son relationship is to save him from a "primitive masculinity" which would lead to the mother's and the son's mutual destruction.<sup>29</sup> However, father's absence encourages the boy's abusive behaviour, because he feels himself abused and hurt (79-80). To illustrate this, Horrocks mentions men with mental problems such as Hemmingway or different criminals such as Gary Gilmore, who felt he had lacked his father's love and attention, men that fulfil the "psychological cliché" of those who feel guilty and hate themselves because they feel they need to be punished (Ibid. 95). These ideas connect with Kimmel's view on the fact that a man feels the pressure to become that which he fears: a dominant,

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<sup>27</sup> Kaufman also argues that civilization itself is designed by structures that use violence to dominate and control ("The Construction of Masculinity" 4).

<sup>28</sup> After all, as Seidler explains, in modern society "masculinity remains linked to consumption" (226).

<sup>29</sup> This could be analyzed in the light of Lacan's accounts as regards the triangle mother-father-son in section 5 of this chapter.

aggressive man like his father; during this process, the infant rejects the mother and begins to see her as inferior, and this implies, in Freud's words, the origin of sexism (126-28). Winnicott supports this when he claims that "when there is an antisocial tendency, there has been a true deprivation" (124). Still in the psychological realm, when dealing with the psychology of rapists, Lisak states that "the worse the subject's relationship with his father, the more did he express hostility towards women" (qtd. in Horrocks 138). Kaufman has his own explanation as regards violence against women. The author claims that in many men's eyes, women may represent "objects of mystification," those to whom men can articulate their feelings, or just objects which are weaker, socially powerless people ("The Construction of Masculinity" 9).

Freud's accounts on the origins of sexist attitudes in the family may not be considered accurate for many as other variables should be taken into account. However, misogyny and violence against women are a reality made prominent not only in academia and the literature being examined but also in social protest made salient in the media, with rape as one of the most significant problems. The penis is seen as a locus for the convergence of male power and dominance. In fact, feminists such as Andrea Dworkin have claimed that the penis is regarded as a terrifying weapon even more dangerous than guns or knives, therefore posing it as a token of male violence (qtd. in Segal, *Slow Motion* 186). Susan Griffin, in turn, relates rape with compulsory heterosexuality in the patriarchal domains and equals rape with male terrorism against women and reinforcement of male power (in Segal, *Ibid.* 198). Segal also points out the endless debate surrounding pornography and sexual violence, concluding that partly due to the proliferation of pornography there has been now more objectification towards the violence they suffer (*Ibid.* 187-190). Perhaps pornography, as a collateral effect, has managed to bring to the public the actual violence and perversion directed towards women.<sup>30</sup>

Still with Segal, the author remarks two myths surrounding rape that prevent this problem from being successfully eradicated: first, the fact that it used to be thought that rape was rare and only caused by mentally ill individuals; second, that men want to protect women from it, when in fact authorities have been reported frequently to show hostility against the victims (*Ibid.* 199). The second myth might be of great interest for

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<sup>30</sup> Earlier in this chapter it was pointed out how Hearn considered the need to take problems to the public eye in order for them to be acknowledged (14).

this dissertation. Segal claims that rape has been seen as trivial by some men who believe that, behind a rape, women secretly desire to be abused (Ibid.). This is a terrible assumption, one which mirrors Mosher and Sirkin's accounts on men's view of women in a patriarchal milieu: sexual objects that need to be dominated for men to feel more "macho" (151).

Male violence, however, is not only directed against women. According to Kaufman, male aggressiveness is also perpetuated against other men. It occurs in different scenarios, including sports, where violence is made part of entertainment, in solving conflicts (wars), and it is also part of competition. The most important thing to learn from this, Kaufman clarifies, is that it clearly shows how male-only relationships are based on power, because other men are seen as "potential humiliators, enemies, competitors" (9-10). Along similar lines, Kaufman agrees by stating that men may behave in a more aggressive way when they feel socially powerless ("The Construction of Masculinity" 1). In part, this may be due to the fact that, since men are violent, they are expected to be able to suffer violence themselves (Horrocks 134). As Kaufman continues explaining, in order to establish a social relationship with anyone, certain levels of passivity need to be given, but this passivity provokes in men the fear of losing power, which is why, Kaufman states, men show their love for one another in an aggressive way; otherwise, being passive means being feminine, which goes against masculine ideals ("The Construction of Masculinity" 10-12). Moser and Sirkin contribute to this matter by saying that when violence is considered manly, it means that aggression becomes a more adequate way to project power among a group of men (151). It is also a way through which patriarchy prevents men from being attracted to each other and a way to promote homophobia (as will be further explained in the next section; Ibid. 12).<sup>31</sup>

Finally, given Palahniuk's writings, it is also essential to mention men's violence against themselves. Kaufman theorizes how this type of violence has its basis on "[t]he formation of an ego on an edifice of surplus repression and surplus aggression" which provides a "precarious structure of internalized violence" ("The Construction of Masculinity" 12). All feelings men have been taught to hide and repress

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<sup>31</sup> Rape by men to other men is also explored by Ken Plummer, who claims that in North America this act involves most of the time black men committing the offence towards white men, as a way to establish dominance (in Segal, *Slow Motion* 208).

(such as fear, passivity, or unhappiness) imply a rejection of what men *also* are, a rejection of the self. As a result, when any un-masculine thought or feeling arises, men need to repress it in a violent way (Ibid.). Men have been taught to hide their unhappiness; if they keep “bottling up” their feelings, however, certain psychological traits appear, such as depression, or addictions such as drug use and alcoholism, which are far more common in men than in women (Horrocks 144). Repressing these feelings also means distancing from the body and how it feels, and men end up looking at themselves as mere objects, bodies with their power converging in their genitals, that need to be disciplined, so that their identity as men survives (Ibid. 12). Leverenz ventures that the Oedipus complex is something imposed by fathers (100); in this view, it could be argued that men have interiorized the fact that they need to be punished by the father figure in their process of identification with him and separation from the mother. If this punishment does not take place due to the father absence, it might be believed that they feel compelled to do the punishment themselves, or recreate it when in need to reinforce their masculine character. In summary, all forms of violence explained above converge finally in men’s own self-destruction.

For all these reasons, it might be right to assume, as Segal does, that “men are the vulnerable sex” (*Slow Motion* 62), at least as the first barrier of marionettes to be hit by the patriarchal system. Stanley Brandes reaches the same conclusion, contending that men feel that way ideologically in comparison to women (in Horrocks 29). Women, it seems, are always the problem when discussing men’s weaknesses. Kaufman explains how men’s fear of expressing their feelings (with other men) creates their strong dependency on women, who are seen as emotional beings that can support and meet men’s emotional expectations (“The Construction of Masculinity” 12). It is important to remember MacInnes’ view as regards men’s inability to find healthy ways of attachment and their inability to be able to “become a subject” on their own (Winnicott in MacInnes 26-29), probably due to the dependency issues mentioned by Kaufman in earlier sections. Taking this into account, Theweleit provides an enlightening explanation: because men have difficulties establishing object relationships with women (which may be expanded to anyone) due to their early detachment from that who provided nurturance and love to become a man (Segal, *Slow Motion* 66), men dread having a meaningful union with a woman because they believe this union will mean their dissolution, an absolute fusion, which is why they feel the need to distance themselves

from her, by turning her into an object, substituting love with violence, the need to kill (Ibid. 99).

The ideas above encourage an interesting fantasy in men's psychology: the idea that only in death are they capable to show their love and caring for others; it is in death that they can show such "weakness" because love is deeply connected with suffering and masochism in male psychology: love is meant to be painful, it is through suffering that men are allowed to love, especially other men. At the same time, this love-death connection seems to reach its peak in criminal minds (Horrocks 112, 150-51).<sup>32</sup> For the sake of hegemonic masculinity, men seem to choose pain over love and caring. The psychology that lies behind patriarchy relies on a twisted conception of sex (Willis in Segal, *Slow Motion* 130). For this oppressive view to end and for men to change their own perspective on their gender identity, there needs to be more acceptance as regards men's sexual fantasies which are not "manly" or compulsory heterosexual: men need to stop feeling guilty about their true sexual nature (Ibid. 181, 194). This might be the reason why men who show fragility appear far more authentic than any flexed muscle (Horrocks 106).

In American cultural manifestations and literary texts, masculinity does not escape its violent treats. Armengol explains how many literary works pose violence as a way for the male characters to test their virility, especially in adventure stories (135). The role of violence perpetuated by men in fiction is also explored by experts such as Brian Baker (2008) or Maggie McKinley (2015). The latter explores exhaustively several works of fiction that show American men struggling with the same tensions posed by Kimmel, Kaufman, Connel, or Segal, which are perfectly outlined in their characters (Ibid. 1). McKinley argues that the authors he explores do see masculinity as something central for the identity formation of their male characters, but at the same time, while also trying to liberate their characters from such a burden, they inevitably fall again into the same "cultural myths and power structures" from which they seek to escape (Ibid. 2).

I will argue later, however, that Chuck Palahniuk manages to give different alternatives not only through the violent behaviour of his male characters, but also that of his female protagonists, in a way in which these structures are contested and

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<sup>32</sup> Horrocks exemplifies it by citing American Westerns (151, 152).

confronted by using precisely violent acts that will nonetheless also affect the above mentioned power structures.

## **8. Homosociality**

Homosociality is defined as implying “nonsexual attractions held by men (or women) for members of their own sex” (Limpman –Blumen in Bird 121). I consider this term of great relevance in this thesis for its own relationship with the concept of community and in the light of the first two stories analysed in this thesis: the representation of male-only and female-only groups which are later contrasted with mixed ones. Although it may refer to both female or male-only groupings, in this case I will solely focus on male homosocialities, the most salient in Palahniuk. Hammarin and Johansson mention two different types of homosociality: vertical or hierarchical homosociality and horizontal homosociality, with the first being more generally present in male homosocialities and the second more spread in female ones (5). Bearing this in mind, many have used this concept to describe how men relate to each other in a way that reinforces patriarchy, and how men’s bonds and privileges are reaffirmed (Ibid. 1). One such view is that proposed by Bird, who claims that homosociality “promotes clear distinctions between hegemonic masculinities and non-hegemonic masculinities by the segregation of social groups” (121). She also mentions three factors that characterize this ensemble, which have already been examined in previous sections as part of hegemonic masculinity: hiding emotions, competitiveness and viewing women as sexual objects (Ibid. 122).

This may be considered true in certain circumstances. Horrocks considers that in Western communities men being kept from the company of women is much more salient than in any other societies, an “extreme version of men without women” (42). This may be explained in the light of the gender gap in the public domain in patriarchal societies: in societies of greatly advanced civilization and powerful institutions which regulate the public sphere, men’s relationships among each other are strengthened (Hearn 14). In these circumstances, homosocialities are settings where men may oppress women and other men (non-hegemonic masculinities) and they may enhance men’s power through certain organizations (fraternities, for example, hegemonic against non-hegemonic) (Ibid. 61, 102).

In general, homosociality, that is, men gathering together with other men, is seen as one more way for men to develop their masculinity. According to Kimmel, “[m]asculinity is a homosocial enactment” (129). It is also in men-only groups that one of men’s greatest fear comes into view. According to Leverenz, men’s real fear is not directed against women, but against other men: they dread being humiliated or subjugated by other men, and this is, according to Kimmel, “the great secret of American manhood,” because, according to William Gaylin, it is in front of other men that a male needs the most to appear as a real man (in Kimmel, *Ibid.* 131, 133). This may be due to the fact that masculinity is more successfully reaffirmed when surrounded by masculine figures. Baily insists that the privileges that an individual may enjoy (in this case a man’s masculinity) can only be accessed by belonging to a group that, as a group, possesses this privilege (in Pease, “Reconstructing” 21). This is supported by Bird’s view on the fact that the ideas that accompany homosociality are part of hegemonic masculinity, but they are not as important for “individual identity” (122).

Experts have seen male homosocialities as patriarchal and sexist in the sense that these groupings also mould the way in which its members shall behave with women, and the way they must relate to them. This is stated by Flood, who also explains that in these circumstances women “become a currency men use to improve their ranking in the masculine social scale” (in Hammarin and Johansson 2). In this way, male homosociality establishes a clear idea of hegemonic masculinity (as suggested by Bird 121) that sees heterosexuality as compulsory (Segal, 2007; Hammarin and Johansson, 2014). This seems to promote segregation as well. As Segal states, for the husband to maintain his social status among his fellow male friends, he needs to establish certain distance from his wife and offspring (*Slow Motion* 6).

Hearn also concludes that men prefer the company of other men, but indeed he words this in a different manner: men *desire* the company of other men (147). He adds that “organizations” also provide something else: not only are men’s relations based on power, as mentioned in the previous section: it is an opportunity for narcissism and self-love (love for men) (148). It is at this point that Hammarin and Johansson claim that it is limited to see homosociality just as a way for hegemonic masculinity, and for that matter, patriarchy to be extended. They quote Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and her work *Between Men* (1985), where this author suggests that homosociality encloses a range of

different desires and exhibitions of intimacy between men (1). In this way, it seems that homosocialities have been generally studied as regards their effects outside the group itself, but the relationships established between its members may have been analyzed in a too simplistic way.

Firstly, Paul Hoch points out that there is a widespread belief in connection with being in men's company and higher homosexual desires, which in turn obliges men to behave in a more violent way, to avoid such temptation (in Segal, *Slow Motion* 133). This is but one indication of how male homosocialities bring with them homophobia. According to Foucault, the appearance of the concept "homosexuality" in society as a category had as a purpose to distance men from each other: consequently, homophobia is used as a tool by patriarchy to avoid intimacy between men (in *Ibid.* 117). Homophobia, however, is said to be connected to a great attraction: it both "reveals and conceals (...) fascination [for homosexuality]" (Horrocks 90). On similar lines, Sedgwick states how homosociality may use heterosexual rivalry between men, where women are posed as the element that filters their relations, to disguise their actual attractions to each other (23). At the same time, competitiveness may be encouraged in male friendships and groupings because, as explained by Messner, cooperation is contrary to hierarchy and promotes a more cooperative relationship of equality (in Bird 122-23).

It is here that male homosocialities may be posed as a very interesting space where masculinity may, not only be enhanced, but also contested and re-invented. Resuming Sedgwick's work, this author observes how male homosocial and homosexual relations are characterized by a discontinuity that does not take place in female homosocialities and homosexual relationships, where in fact relationships are much stronger (5, 25). This form of "male bonding," Sedgwick continues, translates into men's desire for intimacy but also terror towards homosexuality and between-men intimacy (53). This correlates with Kimmel's view, who claims that homophobia is not just the dread towards gay men, but also the fear of being perceived by your male peers as gay: as Leverenz concurs, it is fear against appearing feminine, a "sissy, untough, uncool" (in Kimmel 131).<sup>33</sup> In addition, Pease sees homophobia as a defence mechanism against homoeroticism to avoid at all costs any sexual approach between men.

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<sup>33</sup> Again, this correlates with men's fear of women and repression of their emotions and femininity, and the emotional dependency on women explained above.

He adds that heterosexuality is so intrinsically embedded in masculine identity as the norm that homosexuality needs to be considered unnatural (*Recreating* 76-77).

If men's relationships with other men are conceptualized as competitive, homophobic, and emotionally detached, it is indeed difficult to imagine changes taking place. Hamarin and Johansson question this view, and suggest a more open and flexible perspective: male homosocialities as spaces where masculinity can be treated "in terms of intimacy, gender equality, and non-homophobia" (6). These authors, however, do not call for the destruction of male homosocialities, but their reworking, while at the same time observing the way in which these homosocialities operate, be it in a hierarchical or horizontal way (Ibid. 8, 9). A study of heterosocialities (mentioned by Bird) may also provide more flexible alternatives to understand masculinities.

**PART II**

**COMMUNITY THEORY AND MASCULINITIES IN  
CHUCK PALAHNIUK'S FICTION**



## CHAPTER 3

### “May I never be complete”: Violence and the male body in *Fight Club* (1996) and *Survivor* (1998)

#### 1. Introduction and plot summaries

The first chapter of this thesis will follow a structure later repeated in the other chapters devoted to the analysis of Chuck Palahniuk’s fiction. First, I will offer an outline of the American, individualistic milieu in which the novels are set. Then, I will introduce the concept of *death* as regards the main characters’ attraction to it, and how such attraction will be pivotal in the formation of both operative and inoperative communities. Following precisely this path, I will describe the operative communities observed in both works, in which the role of Derrida’s secret and symbolic *sacrifice* will be especially poignant. In the following section, I will introduce the inoperative encounters that take place between the main characters and the female protagonists in this case. After explaining the female protagonists’ potential for openness, I will follow Girard’s triangular relationship between Subject, Object and Mediator and apply this relationship to the characters of each novel. Finally, I will expose the inoperative climax reached in each story with some final conclusions.

*Fight Club* (1996), Palahniuk’s first novel, focuses on a white, middle-class nameless male protagonist who feels alienated and consumed by loneliness. He suffers insomnia and an attraction towards the death drive. A doctor advises him to go to aid groups of people who suffer a terminal illness in order to experience (from outside) real pain. He suddenly meets Marla Singer, the female protagonist. Their encounter takes place in a group of testicle cancer, which creates tremendous remorse in the protagonist, as in this group Marla mirrors his own deceit, and then his insomnia returns. It is at this

point that the protagonist meets Tyler Durden, a hyper masculine character that convinces him to create an only-men community which they call fight club. The purpose of this club is attending men to enhance their masculinity, and as a result, their identity as men. Soon this fight club radicalizes and turns into Project Mayhem, whose purpose is to destroy altogether the capitalist, American community in order to go back to a more archaic model. It is then that the main male character discovers that Tyler is an alter ego produced by his own imagination, and that he is, indeed, Tyler. He also becomes aware of the fact that Tyler's appearance aimed to approach Marla from what the protagonist believed an appropriate masculine persona. As Marla had become a distraction for the aim of Project Mayhem, and his second personality is now out of control, the protagonist sacrifices himself in order to kill Tyler, thus saving Marla. The story ends with the coma of the main character, who receives visits and letters from the female protagonist.

The narrator in *Survivor* (1999) is Tender Branson, a member of a deeply religious cult called the Creedish. In this cult, the male first-borns are invariably called Adam and are obliged to marry and have as many children as possible with their wives. The remaining male offspring are called Tender and must leave the community to work for the Americans outside the cult, giving their earnings to the Creedish community. All members of the Creedish community are to commit suicide together when 'Deliverance' day comes, which is to be announced by the elders of the cult. However, when that day arrives, many of the Creedish who were outside do not receive the news and they are left behind. The Americans refer to them as the *survivors*, and a social project is created in order to help them feel integrated in their "new" community. The protagonist is one of these survivors, and demonstrates the same feelings of alienation and loneliness as *Fight Club's* protagonist, also sharing the same attraction towards death. Tender shows this attraction by using his phone number to convince people who feel suicidal to kill themselves. Soon after, he meets the sister of one of his victims, Fertility Hollis. Fertility is Marla's equal. She is a grotesque character who claims that she can foresee future disasters. Tender becomes the last survivor, as his other brothers and sisters seem to have managed to "deliver" themselves. The media begins to show an interest in him and convinces him to become America's new celebrity-like messiah. He accepts this role to the last consequences in order to attract Fertility. At the end, during his last event as the new messiah, it is discovered that his brother Abraham is still alive and that he

had been the one killing the other survivors. At the end, Tender ends up killing his brother and running away with Fertility.

## 2. “[T]he things you used to own, now they own you”: Capitalism and individualism

As can be observed in the summaries provided, these two novels are perhaps the best example in Palahniuk’s novelistic trajectory of two novels following a similar path. In them, the main characters show important common points. Both stories are narrated through two male characters who, at the time of the events, live already or enter the American social milieu earlier outlined in the theoretical framework. Materialism defines the quality of life as understood by the main character in *Fight Club*, a white, middle aged professional who lives alone in a condo, which introduces the reader to the state of alienating individualism in which the character lives: “*Single-serving* butter”, “*single-use* toothbrush”, “a miniature *do-it-yourself* Chicken Cordon Bleu hobby kit” (28, my italics); “*single-serving* friend”, “*single-use* friend” (31; my italics).<sup>34</sup> However, in the first pages of the book, there is a hint at the attempts of connection that ought to make of the American people a community: “We all have the same Johannesov armchair in the Strinne green stripe pattern (...). We all have the same Rislampa/Har paper lamps made from wire and environmentally friendly unbleached paper” (43). Although the character does make use of a seemingly communal “We”, it seems clear that no actual union can be perceived. Possessions unite American subjects without creating meaningful bonds. Etzioni’s communal “We” does make its presence, although in this case it is justified through the capitalist setting that clearly describes the context in which the main character lives. As he comments later: “the things you used to own, now they own you” (44). The main character echoes the temporary gratification given by high consumerism, but it is not enough for him to feel complete as a true American man (Mendieta 396).

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<sup>34</sup> The main character’s name is never known. This can be interesting for two reasons: first, it could entail that the protagonist can be anyone who matches the features of the essentialized American individual mentioned above (in Nancy’s view), but it can also have a more interesting meaning: his namelessness expresses his loss of identity under the “American” label. In addition, from a religious perspective, names have great importance through baptism in the Catholic Church (Deluzain, “Names”), helping the subject enter the Christian community. Nevertheless, it can be discussed that in this case religion has lost its value in favour of individualism, making of name-giving a mere formality. It will be argued later, however, that escaping the symbolism that names contain in this sense, the main character is attempting to escape operativeness and find true connections.

In *Survivor*, the approach is different: the protagonist is part of a cult called the Creedish, whose members are completely alienated from the outside, modern world. When he comes of age, he is obliged to access the American community in order to work for the members of society as a butler. In this way, he follows the strict rules of a sect who has clear tinges of Christian morality,<sup>35</sup> as one of its main premises is that members need to make themselves useful by serving others. In this case, the main character is located inside the American community not as a subject who was always part of this environment, but as the “foreigner” earlier discussed using Derrida’s wording. This is clearly projected through the main character’s brother description of the outside world: “In the outside world (...) women had the power to change the color of their hair. And their eyes. And their lips (...) [P]eople were visited in their houses by spirits they called television. (...) People used what they called a telephone because they hated being close together and they were too scared of being alone” (14-15).

Some early conclusions can be drawn from these quotes. Firstly, the opinion of an outsider matches that of the description given by the main character in *Fight Club* as regards alienation, lack of communal union and the poor attempts of society at having a false feeling of being accompanied. Likewise, it gives the reader a glimpse of the image of women projected in the American context. Leaving males aside, it hints that women rely heavily on their image, which they change without restrictions, just like changing pieces of machinery. Moreover, the narrator also states that two “blessings” need to be given up when entering the “outside world”: silence and darkness (15). This takes us again to the same idea of fake togetherness, or rather, poignant loneliness, as fake reminiscences of communal elements surround the “disconnected” individual. This mirrors clearly Ferdinand Tönnies’s *Gesellschaft*, that idea of a mechanical society based on production and consumption, in which no real communal sentiment is stimulated: “the United States is not and never was a ‘homeland’, in the sense the word implies” (Miller, *Conflagration* 11).

Importantly, masculine identities, or masculinities in deference to Connell, play important roles in both novels from the beginning. *Fight Club* provides two different types of masculinities that, as I will argue later, are different sides of the same coin: that projected by the American social milieu and the one created by the “fight club”.

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<sup>35</sup> The connection of these two novels to religion will be further discussed.

Leaving the second for now, the following extract poses a good example of the first. It takes place in a conversation that the protagonist has with an airport employee when he loses his luggage in one of his business trips: “Then, maybe because I’m a guy and he’s a guy and it’s one o’clock in the morning, maybe to make me laugh, the guy said industry slang for flight attendant was Space Waitress. Or Air Mattress. (...) [T]hen he asked me what was the difference between a condom and a cockpit” (43). Such an apparently simple exchange is meaningful. Firstly, it shows the tip of the iceberg, connecting masculinity to sexuality. Secondly, and more interestingly, the protagonist’s appreciation towards sex can be considered vapid. This attitude is repeated as well in the character’s reflection on the consumption of pornography: “And I wasn’t the only slave to my nesting instinct. The people I know who used to sit in the bathroom with pornography, now they sit in the bathroom with their IKEA furniture catalogue” (43), pointing out again towards the alienating effect of consumerism. In *Survivor*, it is interesting to mention for now that the Creedish community follows strictly the rules dictated by biologism. It takes men and women as completely separate entities, whose only differentiating criteria is the subjects’ sexual identity, which is later signified through gendered behaviour –the cult will be further analysed in a later section.

The contexts in which both characters originate are of crucial importance in order to understand the disruptive value that they will acquire later. It also locates them from the beginning in the position of a “complicit masculinity” (Demetriou 342): they are not portrayed as alpha males or iconic masculine personas in their social setting, but they do not show any resistance or fight against that system of beliefs. In addition, these stories are interestingly connected because, although the results of the reinvention of masculinity and the male psyche will be similar, the processes will be reversed: in *Fight Club*, the male protagonist will escape individualism to enter operative models of community. *Survivor*’s main character exchanges his distinctively organic community to become surrounded by a completely individualistic environment. Both of them, however, will succeed in creating an inoperative encounter through the same source of drama: the death drive.

### 3. “The feeling is you have no control”: The main characters’ death drive

#### 3.1. *Fight Club* and self-help groups

The characters in both novels share a staggering state of loneliness. When it comes to *Fight Club*, the nameless protagonist does not mention a single meaningful relationship, be it friendship or romance, until Marla Singer and Tyler Durden’s appearance. His solitude gives him anxiety, which makes him suffer from insomnia. His problems are connected with an identity crisis and his need to *feel*, which make him suffer several episodes marked by brutal death drives: “Every takeoff and landing, when the plane banked too much to one side, I prayed for a crash. That moment cures my insomnia with narcolepsy when we might die helpless and packed human tobacco in the fuselage” (25). He craves for attention, an attention that he can only attain by being close to death. The protagonist hints at this need when remembering that once a doctor had believed he had cancer due to a mark on his foot to which the staff of the hospital had taken a picture: “I still have the picture in my room stuck in the corner of a mirror in the frame. I comb my hair in the mirror before work every morning and think how I once had cancer for ten minutes, worse than cancer” (105).

In order to cure his insomnia, he is advised to attend the meetings of self-help groups. Most of these are groups of cancer, in which the attendants aim to approach death in a direct way in order to get beyond their approaching destiny. These meetings constitute communities that could perhaps be taken as inoperative encounters. However, although they do have death as the main nucleus being apparently confronted in a direct way, this is actually untrue, since such an approach is in the end signified and mystified throughout meditation. In these meetings, the members hug as “therapeutical physical contact” (20), but it seems clear that the consolation they grasp both originates and affects only their own selves.

The main character makes himself a timetable in order to be able to attend as many of these meetings as possible, such is his need of human contact. However, the most important of these groups for the purpose of this thesis due to its direct connection to masculine identity is the one called “Remaining Men Together”. This is an ensemble formed by men who suffer testicle cancer, which means it is an only-men community, in which the common factor is an illness that affects the source of their virility. It could be labelled as a brotherhood, though in this case it would be an inverted *fraternity* in

Nancy's and Derrida's sense: a fraternity without manhood, men who have been casted away: "[a] community for those who have no community" (Blanchot, *Unavowable* 24). When attending these meetings, the main character is able to cure his insomnia and find peace while he lets himself cry in hugging: "Crying is right at hand in the smothering dark, closed inside someone else, when you see how everything you can ever accomplish will end up as trash (...) because right now, your life comes down to nothing, and not even nothing, oblivion" (17). It is in these lines in which one of the first big existentialist façades is presented, as Mercer Schuchardt repeatedly reminds about the author (*Do Not Talk* 3). The protagonist finds a fake source of drama, a cancer that does not exist, but which helps him to be in contact with death (oblivion) in an artificial way.

An interesting character who makes his appearance in this ensemble is Bob, a body builder whose abusive consumption of steroids in order to become a hyper-masculine persona backfires, and leads him to lose his testicles: "Big Bob was a juicer, he said. All those salad days on Dianabol and then the racehorse steroid, Wistrol (...) A lot of body builders shooting too much testosterone would get what they called bitch tits" (21). Bob represents the delusional connection that culture has built between a successful masculine identity and the body, and how dangerous this can actually become, as explained earlier by Clare. In the union (in hugging) between Big Bob and the main character there are two types of non-hegemonic masculinities: the extreme masculinity turned into physical emasculation, and a subjugated type who, though with a normatively masculine body, is not capable of projecting an hegemonic type of masculinity, one that transmits a sense of belonging: "Bob loves me because he thinks my testicles were removed, too" (17), but too rooted in bodily assumptions and distanced from the actual real ones to form their own identity as men.

The protagonist's solace is interrupted when the main female protagonist, Marla Singer, makes her first appearance, significantly, in one of the meetings of this group of testicle cancer. The protagonist's annoyance seems obvious: "With [Marla] watching, I'm a liar. She's a fake. She's the liar. (...) Marla's lie reflects my lie, and all I can see are lies. In the middle of all their truth" (23). Here, the nameless protagonist finds a female body surrounded by masculine ones who fail to be "manly enough", and his displeasure can only indicate once again that his identity as a man is weak and highly

insecure.<sup>36</sup> She is referred to by the narrator as a “tourist” (24), what in Derrida’s analysis could be equated to the *foreigner*. However, there is a clear distinction between Marla and the protagonist. They are both strangers in these communities because none of them share the illness that unites the rest of the members. However, while Marla is a foreigner who has granted her name and does not really hide her true purpose of connecting with death (as explained later), the main character always writes fake names in the name tags that are used in the meetings. This means that the main character is actually acting as the “absolute other” in disguise to use Nancy’s wording. Marla is granted hospitality because she does not hide her true self, which jeopardizes the protagonist’s attempt at successfully feeling part of the group. For this reason the main character begins suffering insomnia again and this will lead him to find a different alternative in which Marla cannot intrude and an accomplished masculinity can be attained. Marla becomes fight club’s trigger, as pointed out early in the story: “I know all of this: the gun, the anarchy, the explosion is really about Marla Singer” (14).

### **3.2. *Survivor*: a God’s sheep in a deathly hotline**

In order to introduce *Survivor*’s main character and explain his attraction towards the death drive, there needs to be a description of the community from where he comes, the Creedish cult. Its very name, stemming from “creed”, is an important clue to realize that this is an organic, deeply religious community. Its members live isolated from modernity and church doctrine rules their lives: where they live, how to dress, their jobs, and even their names – a very interesting aspect. Family names come from the husbands and they are “the way to claim property” (48). The first male born is always named Adam, while all the rest of the sons need to be named Tender. All the girls are called Biddies and when a Bidy is married, her name is exchanged by Author, which points out to women’s main function in the community: procreation. In the main character’s case, he is called Tender Branson. However, as he clarifies, it is not so much of a name as a rank, “the lowest rank” (48). This is something that this character has in common with the one in *Fight Club*: the latter does not reveal his name, because it does not really matter, and the first, although he does have a name, it is only a label which

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<sup>36</sup> Marla’s appearance in the group of testicular cancer is also analysed by Kennett, whose presence “produced the Narrator’s pre-existence doubts of the manliness of group therapy”, highlighting its “feminized space” (58).

only makes sense inside his community. In church, the heart of the community, most elders are men and women's purpose is to always be pregnant and give birth to as many children as they can, many of them dying while fulfilling this purpose. Finally, Adams would stay in the community to marry and form families, whereas Tenders like the protagonist ought to work in the outside world and send the money they earn to their community.

Many of the aspects mentioned are clear examples of operative elements. Tönnies's *Gemeinschaft* is visibly represented here, where blood relations and kinship act as an organizational tool. The lack of modern devices like phones or televisions gives it that pastoral view that also characterizes the old archaic religious communities. All men and women are completely equal in a practical sense: one could even say that they are completely interchangeable, which indicates a saturated communion in which sex is signified through different filters to end up symbolizing a rank inside the community. I do not mean that this equality makes men equal to women, as the latter are basically abused to death. When it comes to masculinity, this entails the need to embody two different, utterly simplistic types of identities: that of the Adams, who are empowered by their right to marry and procreate and inherit land, and Tenders, who as indicated by the name itself, are linked to a more fragile position in the masculine scope of that ensemble, a life dedicated to serving others. Here, Demetriou's labelling of the different types of hegemonic masculinities is clearly established: an external type, which entails the domination of women's body, as if they were cattle; and an internal one, which subordinates second rank men according to the order of their birth. Both gendered positions imply the seclusion of their own singularities, which at the same time are never inquired by the self because of the lack of "insecurity", their guaranteed source of drama as regards their ultimate, unchangeable destiny: the cult's self-destruction. As it could not be different, death acts as a unifying element, as all members live awaiting the moment of the Deliverance: "If the members of the church district colony felt summoned by God, rejoice. When the apocalypse was imminent, celebrate, and all Creedish must deliver themselves unto God, amen. And you had to follow" (61).

The problems and contradictions that accompany operative communities are also present here, as the individual as a singular entity can never be developed, staying in a basic state of the self. At the same time, even though death does act as a unifying

nucleus and gives every member a certain purpose (though it should not be forgotten that this leads to nihilism and the self-destruction of the community), the system is completely inflexible and toxic. This is because there is no real consensus among all members of the community as regards when “the Deliverance” needs to take place, because only a few (the elders) are to decide when this needs to happen. At the same time, although the Creedish community does have a striking resemblance to the archaic Christian community, an important element, perhaps the most important of all, is missing: drama. Jesus Christ’s passion, his sacrifice, his wounded body and even more interestingly, the idea of sin and punishment, is nowhere to be found. This is because feelings are completely out of the picture. They are not needed because everything is justified through God’s doing, and thus subjects do not need to reflect upon themselves: “Whatever happened in the world was a decree from God. A task to be completed. (...) Any emotion was decadent. Anticipation or regret was a silly extra” (16). *Survivor*’s male protagonist has what many American people lack: a purpose, a direction to follow, which bothered those who asked him about the cult: “People are always disappointed if I tell them the truth, that none of us lived in oppressed turmoil. None of us resented the church. We just lived. None of us were tortured by feelings very much. That was the complete depth of our faith. Call it shallow or deep. There was nothing that could scare us” (16).<sup>37</sup>

A turning point takes place when the day of the Deliverance comes but he does not find out until all members remaining in the Creedish land have already committed suicide. He learns this fact when a policeman visits him to deliver the news and prevents him from trying to do it himself. The news is not well received: “The policeman said, ‘This isn’t going to be easy for you to hear’, and I knew I’d been left behind. (...) despite all my work and all the money I’d earned toward our plan, Heaven on Earth just wasn’t going to happen” (61). The protagonist feels betrayed by his community, but unable whatsoever to follow his people. Like him, others were unable to “deliver themselves”, but although they might have been able to come together and keep sharing that which still unites them, they repel each other and feel ashamed: “there’s nothing left between us except embarrassment and disgust” (62). As explained in the theoretical framework, once the community is dismantled, it cannot go back to what it was.

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<sup>37</sup> It is true, however, that Tender’s religious cult makes as well a critique towards American industrialisation, which encourages passivity and obedience (Simmons and Allen 118).

A caseworker is then assigned to each “survivor”, who makes sure they do not kill themselves. In the American society where they cannot help but coexist, they are treated as “the innocent victim[s] of a terrible oppressive cult” (62), who need to be introduced to the American community. He is promised by the caretakers that now that his miserable life (according to them) is over, the change will be for the best. However, ten years pass since the Deliverance, and he finds himself still waiting. As a result, none of the communitarian possibilities that until now have been available to him is satisfactory. It is by accident, however, that he finds his much needed source of drama, a way of approaching death that will grant him the access to a new view of his (masculine) self: A telephone number.

The fact that the main character’s potential to enter inoperative exploration arrives through telephonic conversations seems oddly appropriate. This is not to say this will be how this encounter takes place, but it involves an important element that characterizes inoperative connections: *communication*, in which a visual image of the person is not granted and therefore bodily symbolism does not exist. Not only that, but also communication that revolves and witnesses the death of the one at the other end of the line. This occurs because a crisis hotline in the newspaper makes a typo and writes Tender’s number. Every night, people who feel depressed and suicidal start calling him in need of advice. Instead of talking them out of ending their lives, he encourages them to commit suicide. He becomes the last person to whom these “sufferers” talk to, and he becomes addicted to having such power:

It’s a different kind of entertainment. It’s a rush, having that kind of control. The guy with the shotgun was named Trevor Hollis in his obituary, and finding out he was a real person feels wonderful. It’s murder, but it’s not, depending on how much credit you take. (...) The truth is this is a terrible world, and I ended his suffering. (9)

This represents another point in common between Tender and *Fight Club*’s main character: their need to get close to death from a comfortable position, like swimming with water wings. It indicates as well Tender’s need for human connection, now that he has lost the purpose he used to have in the Creedish community. In addition, it is relevant to mention that Tender is obsessed with meeting and talking to women. It seems obvious that the gratification he feels when talking to suicidal girls comes from his own community’s view towards women: Tender is reproducing, consciously or not, the same degrading domination by feeling the power to end these women’s lives. At this

point in the novel he combines two types of hegemonic masculinity: one which accomplishes female subjugation, and a complicit type, to use Demetriou's wording, since such domination is perpetuated by a more secondary type of masculinity. This is true both in his own community and the American one, because being a survivor means for Americans, as explained before, embodying the identity of a miserable man. Thus, when young girls use that number, he feels a special satisfaction. It is obvious that under these circumstances he is not prepared to reach *clinamen* just yet, as he does not really seem to understand what a true connection would be like: "It's so perfect some nights to hear them in the dark. The girl will just trust me. The phone in my one hand, I can imagine my other hand is her. It's not that I want to get married. I admire guys who can commit to a tattoo" (11).<sup>38</sup> Instead, he seems to get closer to a communal union, the one he misses from his cult, because, as the title of the next section dealing with operative communities, "We are all miserable together" (12).

#### **4. "We are all miserable together": Operative communities**

Until this point it is important to remember that both protagonists start off at different positions (American individualism on the one hand and religious operativeness on the other), but they both have the same lack of a meaningful, private self and crave for connection. It can be argued that this lack of a self, of a truly owned singularity in both protagonists is caused by lack of exposure, as they have not been able to explore their own singularity. Importantly, both characters belong to non-hegemonic masculinities, and will attempt to find their own valuable identity as men by taking masculinity to the extreme: in *Fight Club*, the search of a masculinising persona will take the main character to form an only-men group, which will take archaic ideas of brutal, violent masculinity to the extreme; in *Survivor*, the main character will deliver himself but in a completely different way to that intended by the elders of his old community: he will become a mass leader to the image and likeness of the male deity that the new individualistic America has lost but still exists as a fantasy in the members' minds. Their paths now cross and divert: to achieve this, the individualist will embrace an

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<sup>38</sup> This can be seen as well as Tender's own view of marriage in both the Creedish and the American context, thus indicating that one community is not too different from the other in some aspects.

operative community, and the recently released member of his old symbolically saturated social milieu will experience the effects of American egotism.

#### **4.1. The hysterical male psyche: the key to operative communities**

Starting with the first novel, “fight club” is born from nothingness with the aim of filling a gap. As previously advanced, Marla Singer’s annoying appearance is the main reason why fight club and Tyler Durden are created. However, and although Marla Singer will have an even more salient role to play in the community of fight club, this character will be set aside for now. Fight club needs to be understood from its very roots, from the frustration of the American men that join it. This frustration is what unites these subjects, and it is directly connected to an essential part of them, their identity as men. As one of the members claims, once fight club has grown and expanded throughout the country:

If you’re male and you’re Christian and living in America, your father is your model for God. And if you never know your father, if your father bails out or dies or is never at home, what do you believe about God? (...) What you end up doing (...) is you spend your life searching for a father and God. (141)

This statement reflects Connell’s view as regards the importance of masculinity in men’s lives. In this case, the obsession that exists about the need of having a father figure is also directly related to religious imagery, a connection repeatedly mentioned in the theoretical framework. These men are looking back nostalgically, acknowledging the current state of American society and the need to go back to old masculine values. In Nancy’s wording, “the true consciousness of the loss community is Christian”, and there needs to be “a resurrection that restores both man and God to a common immanence” (*Inoperative* 10). As a result, these men’s crisis as regards their masculine persona is not difficult to understand: it reflects these men’s distress and insecurity in order to cope with the volatile nature of the American father figure. Two conclusions can be reached so far: first, these men are obsessed with the paternal figure embodied traditionally by God, therefore showing a desire to go back to archaic Christian values (Tönnies’s *Gemeinschaft*); second, it shows this figure’s failure in fulfilling this

purpose, as God is as absent as their fathers: the *paternal vacuum* previously theorized. All members are, thus, united by a lack<sup>39</sup>:

Me, I knew my dad for about six years, but I don't remember anything. My dad, he starts a new family in a new town about every six years. This isn't so much like a family as it's like he sets up a franchise. *What you see at fight club is a generation of men raised by women.* (50, my italics)

The source of the protagonist and the rest of the club's members' crisis is thus presented: the paternal figure which supposedly is necessary for males to develop an acceptable masculine identity. Fight club is a community whose nexus roots from these men's incomplete, non-hegemonic masculine psyches: "May I never be complete. May I never be content. May I never be perfect" (46). With the cancer groups fight club has in common the sharing of the subjects' feeling of marginalization.

Tyler Durden is taken, from the beginning, as fight club's creator and the community's guide for the members to perform a masculine persona. He is highly admired and taken as the ultimate model of masculinity for these men, including the main character: "I love everything about Tyler Durden, his courage and his smarts. His nerve. Tyler is funny and charming and forceful and independent, and men look up to him and expect him to change their world. Tyler is capable and free, and I am not" (174). Tyler's figure is signified through a mystifying filter that makes him look like a god-like persona, the paternal figure that can be looked up and that will never fail them, unlike their actual biological fathers: a new messiah for the emasculated. Tyler's doctrine will help this men begin a process of re-masculinisation outside the masculinity made available by the American individualistic system and closer to the main source which is supposed to bring a truer, more natural masculinity: the (male) body.

As regards *Survivor*, while *Fight Club*'s protagonist substitutes individualism with saturated organicism translated into organized crime, in this novel the main character will exchange Creedish organicism with the American individualism of his new environment. This will include a new masculine performance for Tender. After ten years of denial, Tender finds himself completely alone as every known survivor from the Creedish community has finally followed their church doctrine. When informed

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<sup>39</sup> Kuhn relates this lack as well with fight club's men trying to attain their lost masculinity through cultural depictions of masculinity, rather than a connection with their fathers (who are absent) born out of intimacy (38).

about this, he is offered to become a “Celebrity Superstar” (122). The agent that visits him once the news is known tries to persuade him to become a mass leader, “the last survivor”. Here the reader can clearly appreciate Palahniuk’s satire of American religiosity. Tender will epitomize the idea of a religious approach which can be purchased: “[t]he masses might have been used by religion, but now the masses use religion” (Mendieta 397-98). Even though Tender could have followed the Creedish faith or become one more American citizen, he decides to accept what he is being offered. Fertility Hollis will also take part in the main character’s decision, but for now, Tender’s willingness to accept becoming “the last survivor” has much to do with the following realisation:

Ten years ago, he was the hardworking salt of the earth. All he wanted was to go to Heaven. Sitting here today, everything that he worked for in the world is lost. All his external rules and controls are gone. There is no Hell. There is no Heaven. Still, just dawning on him is the idea that now anything is possible. Now he wants everything.  
(123)

The limits imposed of his old operative community are lost with the rest of the survivors. Here, Tender is entering that state described by Nancy in which the subject’s realisation of “being on its own” (*Global* 35) appears as a shock. Absolute truths disappear and, as Tender claims, “anything is possible”.

The source of “drama” imposed by the Creedish, salvation through death, is now obsolete for Tender. For this reason, a new source of drama needs to be found, and the oppressive Creedish beliefs need now to be replaced by others: “The truth is there’s always been someone to tell me what to do. The church. The people who I work for. The caseworker. And I can’t stand the idea of being alone. I can’t bear the thought of being free” (130). There is however a source of drama for Tender which he does not want to be found out. When everyone that knew him, including his caseworker, dies, he claims that “[t]here’s a terrible dark joy when the only person who knows all your secrets is finally dead” (129). Indeed, it would seem that the disappearance of those who knew him as a Creedish would give him the chance to explore his self and build his own identity. However, there is something interesting about his perceptions in connection to those “secrets”: “None of the little secrets inside me wanted to be found and explained away. By myths. By my childhood. By chemistry. My fear was, what would be left?” (83). Tender has then a conception of the self as something related to fears and other

feelings that, he knows, define him today. His sharing of these secrets is dreadful for him, because as he states, sharing them means emptying himself, stripping his remaining self from any communitarian meaning. Now, he epitomizes males' fear of dissolution explained by Segal. His only way of "being" is described by "feeling containment".

Tender is clearly afraid of taking control of his own life, exemplifying in one single character Nancy's analysis on the fear attached to the ambivalence that accompanies singularities. His masculine persona was attached to a rank based on birth, which was completely disempowering in his community. However, now that his rank does not make any sense, he "wants everything", and his masculinity will also experiment great changes, closer to the masculinity that can be dangerous to men's health. His masculinity in this case will conform the "masculinity as product" perpetuated by the capitalist system, fed by the media (Katz, 2010). He becomes an epitome of how the system can easily grant and deny men their masculine identity, and the lack of control that men have of their own masculine identity in this sense. However, his fear of freedom and at the same time predisposition to see himself transformed in a reversed communal setting (though intrinsically similar as regards the self) is also related to his actual fear of delivering himself. Death is an issue that, much like *Fight Club's* main character, triggers both terror and a tremendous attraction. In Tender's case, his death drive will be attached completely to his body, the central stage for this character's extreme demonstration of male American exhibitionism.

In sum, the main characters in these two novels demonstrate that, once the community of origin is broken, going back is not a possibility, which is what obliges them to look for other alternatives (Bauman 15).

#### **4.2. A raw masculinity versus a "magazine man": masculine performance**

In *Fight Club*, violence and heterosexuality set the basis for hegemonic masculinity, and fight club will display both through the figure of Tyler Durden. This club will unite non-hegemonic men to help them evolve into a new hegemonic masculinity outside that established in American society. I would like to introduce this part of the analysis by

referring again to the Oedipus complex examined in the theoretical framework<sup>40</sup>. Tyler represents a paternal figure and a source of masculinity for the men of fight club. The protagonist's jealousy present in the previous quote can help introduce Freud's essentialist predicament regarding the father-son relationship as he viewed it. This Freudian understanding of the relationship of fathers and sons will be projected to fight club. According to Connell, adult sexuality in men is developed successfully throughout the son's admiration/rejection towards the father (*Masculinities* 9). In an individualistic community such as the one offered in this novel, in which these blood connections have lost their strength, Tyler seems to put a solution to these men's lack. They are men who, in their own disconnected social milieu, are now trying to fight their feeling of loneliness, which they seem to ascribe to a problem of marginalization due to their non-hegemonic identity as men (Demetriou). Thus, Tyler gives fight club's men the figure of hegemonic masculinity "standard bearer" that these men are craving. Fight club seems to be the end result of men's desperate attempt to "preserve identity without exercising or excising masculinity" as it used to be (Alexander Boon 270).

In this case, it is Tyler's body, or rather, what it does when fighting, what represents a good example for the men of fight club of what it means to be masculine, in this case equated to being violent and aggressive. Although violence is pervasive in patriarchal society, fight club makes use of a violence that is not approved by the system: it is clandestine, primal and completely rooted on the body, but not on a visual level as sported by the media and advertisement. As the main character explains: "I just don't want to die without a few scars (...). It's nothing anymore to have a beautiful stock body" (48). The (male) body is then transformed into the main locus for these men's masculine power to be developed, and fight club's rules further reinforce this fact: they cannot talk about this club, only two men fight at a time, shoes or shirts cannot be worn, there is no time limit in fight, and newcomers need to fight (50). The first of these rules will be examined later, but the others demonstrate the primordial role of the male body. They represent raw male violence gone dirty, unshielded flesh bruised and bloody. Pain is shared by all members, who attain fusion through the body, a communion which can be argued to have two objectives: first, in fighting each other, men feel the physical punishment needed through Freud's castration anxiety for them to become fully

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<sup>40</sup> Paul Kennett makes his own analysis connecting the Oedipus complex and the community of fight club. He claims that it is the pressure of the identity of the "transcendent Father" and the fantasy to fight him what impedes the main characters' self-freedom ("Oedipal Obsession" 48).

heterosexual men, a stage set aside due to their fathers' absence and finally surpassed thanks to Tyler. In any case, it is important to remember that although Tyler is acting as a masculine guru, they are still being the ones punishing themselves. In this way another organic element appears, as the body is seen through a *mystifying filter* that assist men to become masculine by being signified through violence.<sup>41</sup>

Second, the body also helps these men to feel closer to that punishing paternal persona. As one of the members says, “[o]nly if we are caught and punished can we be saved” (141), connecting with a saturated religious view. As a result, fight club experiences the gap felt by these members left by their paternal figures: “Maybe we didn’t need a father to complete ourselves” (54), though they do need Tyler. As Mendieta comments in his own analysis of *Fight Club*, “[p]hysical violence is always a substitute for immediacy and experience, but also a reaction to frustrated expectation” (396). It is also worth mentioning that fight club’s approach towards physical pain is completely contrary to that of the groups of cancer, who distanced themselves from the body. As a result, the process of re-masculinisation makes these men reach completeness through self-destruction. Pain is not avoided, but encouraged and applauded. It is in fact also provoked through “Tyler’s kiss”<sup>42</sup> on the back of their hand, which marks them as members of the community and parodies the act of baptism characteristic of the outside American milieu. These symbols that characterize fight club are used as a counter-culture to set the difference and mark an inside and outside from the American society:

As long as you are at fight club, you are 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 (...) You’re not your name (...) You’re not your problems (...) You’re not your age (...) You’re not your hopes. (143)

The body is filtered symbolically through different means but invented as well nonetheless (Nancy, *Corpus* 9, 29). In sum, though fight club attempts to destroy the symbols inscribed by the American social setting through violence against the body itself, what this club really provides is, in Blanchot’s words: “the mere parody of a

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<sup>41</sup> This self-punishment rooted in the development of masculinity is also repeated in other characters discussed in this thesis, such as Victor Mancini (*Choke*) and, especially, Carl Streator (*Lullaby*).

<sup>42</sup> In chapters 8 and 9, Tyler invents a symbol in the form of his kiss that he uses to mark the members of fight club on the back of their hands. This is made through a chemical reaction together with his saliva.

sacrifice [of the signified body] set up not to destroy a certain oppressive order but to carry destruction into another set of oppression” (14).

Finally, heterosexuality is another element that is projected in fight club through the figure of Tyler, and here Marla Singer enters the scene. Though Marla’s role is much more complex and will be problematized later in the chapter, in this case she will be prominent for the following reasons. The sexual relationship she maintains with Tyler throughout the novel entails a double effect: Marla is never considered a member of fight club, as she is a woman. However, she is occasionally granted access to the Paper Street House, which is fight club’s and later Project Mayhem’s headquarters. This happens when she maintains relationships with Durden. As a result, first she marks an inside and outside of this community. And secondly, as a woman, she helps Tyler demonstrate his heterosexual identity, because only when having relationships with him is she granted access. When not fulfilling this purpose, she is rejected by him. Thus, Marla becomes an important element in the community of fight club, as she delimits the community and helps Tyler enhance his heteronormative masculinity. As the protagonist confesses at the beginning, “[w]ithout Marla, Tyler would have nothing” (14), and though this is true for the aforementioned reasons, it is also true for the inoperative encounter that will be explained later between the main character and Marla. To finalize this part of the analysis, fight club can be described then as the perfect example of male homosociality, in which the relationship between men is based on aggressiveness and homoeroticism, though arguably present taking into account the presence of nudity and the later discussed encounter between Tyler and the protagonist, a homoeroticism that is eventually suppressed thanks to Tyler’s demonstration of heterosexuality.

Turning now to *Survivor*, Tender becomes a tool in the production-consumption American system. He shows the substitution of sainthood by stardom (Mendieta 398), and his imposed identity as a product reaches a peak that shows the reader how “the distinctions between family and faction, and between consumerism and cult, are eroded entirely” (Kavadlo 14). Now that he is the last survivor, he will be turned into an example of endurance for the American people, always chiselled by the media. Just like hegemonic masculinity engulfs certain non-hegemonic masculinities to maintain its position of power, Tender’s denial to die is used by American society as a chance to

stay content in this milieu. The need of the American citizens of such a character results in showing its own crisis:

People are looking for that, a hand to hold. Reassurance. The promise that everything will be alright. That's all they wanted from me. Stressed, desperate, celebrated me. Under pressure me. None of these people know the first thing about being a big, glamorous, big, charismatic, big role model. (152)

As can be noticed, the word “big” is purposely repeated to indicate America’s obsession with size and its expansive nature. In fact, when Tender discusses his contact with his agent, the latter claims: “Nobody wants a little skinny God (...) They want more than human. They want larger than life size” (154). Tender, a used-to-be low-rank nobody in his own community destined to serve will be transformed into a new “absolute other”. In secret, this was something that Tender desired, though perhaps not precisely in this way: “Still just one time, I’d like to prove I know something better. I can do more than just cover up” (28). In this sense, it is important to understand that Tender’s origins and his actual disruptive thoughts after his community disappears is what helps this new community to feed off his potential: “Every last minute of my life has been preordained, and I’m sick and tired of it. How it feels is I’m just another task in God’s daily planner” (127).

However, in this case the parasite is America itself. First, once the Creedish community is over, the American media further vilifies the cult by accusing it of child labour and sexual abuse. The collision between both ensembles is made prominent here. In both systems the members are capable of survival, but obviously the American perspective is the one that finally succeeds. In fact, once Tender is turned into a celebrity for being the last survivor, he is obliged to state as true all the negative rumours that had been spread about the Creedish community. In addition, later in the story, the agent hints that the Creedish, like many other cults in history, had in the end self-destructed its followers through sacrifice due to their inability to confront the ruling government. A conclusion can be easily reached: there exists a hierarchy of organic communities and, in this case, the Creedish community’s self destruction roots from its weakness in contrast to the American one. It is then demonstrated that none of these communities is self-sufficient in the long term: the Creedish for depending on the outside, which dictates its finitude; the American one for its own inability to be a community, and its never ending search of new reasons to try to reinvent itself. In this

case, a chance to believe again is found in this new mass leader, but its persona is created from the vision that America itself has created for him. Through Tender, the country self reflects on its own re-washed view on life and death, as explained below.

Focusing further now on Tender's body as a male messiah, his appearance in the American media and the immediate attention that he attracts originate from his denial to commit suicide: his denial of death. As Badiou assures, "[t]he fact that in the end we all die, (...) in no way alters man's identity as immortal", because man's choice to become a subject makes this so (64). Americans want to escape death and avoid its direct confrontation as much as any other organic ensemble, and Tender presents himself as a perfect example. As the agent also says: "Reality means you live until you die (...) The real truth is nobody wants reality" (148). Indeed, this connects with America's revolving around simulation, as simulation can fulfil people's fantasies and veil reality. Tender's body will become the point of convergence of American values, a body that as a consequence will become the hysterical body in Nancy's sense, "a body saturated with significations" (*Corpus* 23): "[y]ou are the American Dream. You are the constant-growth of economy" (*Survivor* 154). This implies a strong connection between success and religious imagery, and its dominion is made even more plausible in Tender's body transformation.

Here it is interesting to notice the protagonist's bodily abuse. In *Fight Club* the body becomes a filter used by the main characters to re-masculinize themselves. Tender's usage of his own body demonstrates as well masculinity's tendency to depend on corporeity. Firstly, once the main character learns of his colony's suicide, he starts smoking and drinking profusely (118), an indication, I argue, of his inability to reinvent himself outside his old community. Here, Tender chooses a slow self-destruction, because of his self inside the Creedish community as always signified through communal death. Now that he is on his own and his body is of no use to his old community, he has no other option but to destroy it, as he has lost his purpose. However his male body suffers yet another changeover when he becomes America's new messiah (further commented below). In order to become a God-like figure acceptable for American standards, he starts taking different substances and drugs, and even wearing a wig and other surgeries, to become what people expect of him, visually: "Your metabolism ramps up. Your heart pounds. You sweat. You're nervous all the time, but you look terrific" (153). During his transformation, his agent states: "Your whole body

(...) is just how you model your designer line of sportswear!” (153). Tender embodies Katz’ assumptions of the male body as a product, and how the body is paramount in showing true maleness. Also, it demonstrates Connell’s view on the male sex role being “dangerous to your health” (*Masculinities* 51), and the type of violence that hegemonic masculinity also implies to the self (Kaufman, “The Construction of Masculinity” 12). In fact, in his examination of *Survivor*, Kavadlo argues that Tender makes use of products which aid conceal the damage that has already been done to him, and which if “exposed, it must be concealed”, that is: “suppression in the name of [masculine] perfection” (18). The fact that his new appearance is supposed to match people’s idea of a God-like figure to follow demonstrates the threatening fantasy that surrounds the American male ideal.

To conclude this part, there is one quote that could precisely summarize this last thought: “Amphetamines are the most American drug. You get so much done. You look terrific, and your middle name is Accomplishment” (153). Though it may seem that Tender is here being radically accepted by the American community as an “uberman”<sup>43</sup>, by trying to adapt to hegemony to the last consequences, he is ultimately the most marginalized: “You have to be everything regular people aren’t” (154). This casts him away as well from reaching communion with other Americans, and will have consequences in the development of his psyche.

Both attitudes in *Fight Club* and *Survivor* towards the body (the fighting, the smoking and drinking and the excessive exercise and bodily polishing) are different sides to the same coin: the clear lack of a private self that provides them an alternative, healthier identity.

### **4.3. Radicalism of the community and the body**

As indeed occurs with most operative formations, fight club displays radicalism when it morphs into “Project Mayhem”. Its rules imitate those of fight club, but it adds the following ones: no questions are allowed and members must trust Tyler blindly. This can be related to Patočka’s concept of responsibility: in the organic community one can only be responsible towards the absolute, Tyler in this case. While fight club established simply the limits that separated the “true masculine community” from the individualistic

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<sup>43</sup> Even though he is actually the opposite, as Kavadlo contemplates (15).

America, Project Mayhem seeks the complete destruction of the *Gesellschaft* represented by the outside American community. This is, obviously, a clear attempt to return to the nostalgic old community in which real communion was produced and alienating “uniqueness” did not have an effect. Tyler would act as a God-like persona under whom the rest of the subjects would unite, much like the archaic Christian community. Project Mayhem counts with an army of men who used to belong to fight club plus the new members that little by little join the project.<sup>44</sup> These men are called “space monkeys”, and they shave their heads and wear the same clothes, entering an even stronger communion. They also lose their names as soon as they access the project. Tyler becomes the absolute other, the only one who is allowed to have his own subjectivity (again, another god-like trait).

By rejecting the names given to them through baptism, the members of this project reject the Western idea of a God in order to get the credit they need from a paternal figure: “getting God’s attention for being bad was better than getting no attention at all” (141). Durden commands the space monkeys to do certain tasks involving vandalism to terrorize the American society. In some occasions, these tasks involve “human sacrifices”, as he calls them. Sometimes these sacrifices entail the mutilation of the man’s testicles, which once more points out the importance given to biology when it comes to maleness in both communities. Taking Esposito’s theory, this is connected to his analysis of immunity, as in the end fight club needs the destruction of the outside community in order to strengthen its pillars, showing its self-enclosure. Such obsession with what does and does not belong to the community encourages a chaotic and corrosive hysteria, the operative community taken to the extreme, in which subjects have become “a copy of a copy of a copy” (21). The peak of the confrontation between individualism and operative traits in *Fight Club* arrives at this point of the novel:

You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You are the same decaying organic matter as everyone else, and we are all part of the same compost pile (...) Our culture has made us all the same. No one is truly black or white, anymore. We all want the same. Individually, we are nothing. (134)

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<sup>44</sup> Big Bob, from “Remaining Men Together”, joins as well, further reinforcing the fact that fight club, and now Project Mayhem, was a community for men that did not feel like men.

In *Survivor*, the protagonist's hysteria of "bigger and stronger" comes from a different direction. The goal of Tender's agent is to transform him into the new messiah, and for that, the transformation needs to affect, specially, his physical body. I referred to this transformation from the masculine psyche's perspective in the previous section, but now I will focus specifically on Tender's body as an operative element: "The same way every generation reinvents Christ, the agent's giving me the same makeover. The agent says nobody is going to worship anybody with my role of flab around his middle. These days, people aren't going to fill stadiums to get preached at by somebody who isn't beautiful" (137). If Tender embodies the "American Dream", this reinforces Nancy's analysis as regards the obsession surrounding the body of Christ, which represents the "principle of Western unreason" (*Corpus* 5). As stated before, because Tender is unable to "deliver himself" by committing suicide, he begins smoking and drinking heavily: "It's church doctrine that says I have to kill myself. They don't say it has to be a hurry-hurry instant quick death" (119). This openness to destroy his body for the sake of becoming this mass leader is what allows his agent to, besides making him exercise and going through certain body implants, convince him to take different types of pills depending on his mood and the demands of the tasks that he needs to fulfil as the new "Jesus Christ". According to the agent, it is easier to appear as a good person when one is beautiful. After all, as he also says, they are not "targeting the smartest people in the world, only the most" (155), mirroring the practices that marketing would follow in order to sell more.

Soon his body projects a God-like persona in the "image and likeness" of what Americans would want to be, but are too afraid to become: "Nobody wants to worship you if you have the same problems (...) as a regular person. You have to be everything regular people aren't. Where they fail, you have to go all the way. Be what people are too afraid to be. Become whom they admire" (155). In the end, this demonstrates the same conclusion as regards the American community in *Fight Club*: material possessions do not ultimately provide the wholeness that consumerism promises. At the same time, he becomes a model of hyper-masculinity, attempting to fulfil every single role that makes "the man": he becomes what every person is afraid to be precisely because of the impossibility of becoming so and the failure that would ensue if they tried. As he says, his body is a "fixer-upper", but he "looks terrific" (136, 154). For this reason, although there seems to be a need in the American context to go back to

religious communion in order to gain a real sense of community, this is taking place strictly through the new messiah's body, thus limiting their knowledge of him to his objectified matter, only the image that his advertisers let him show, and one which is not even controlled by him (Nancy, *Corpus* 29).

What can be concluded is that Tender becomes American people's source of "fake" drama. While in *Fight Club* you had to be punished by rejecting the outside American community in order to be saved and hiding your entity from the American public's eye, here we find the same process in a reverted fashion: "The key to salvation is how much attention you get. How high a profile you get. Your audience share. Your exposure. Your name recognition.<sup>45</sup> Your press following" (138). Metaphorically, his body is being sacrificed through a different type of penance: that of taking the ideal American "uberman" discussed earlier to the last consequences. Much like a billboard, his body becomes the point of convergence of all the elements that make up an American purchasable saviour: "if Christ had died from a barbiturate overdose, alone on the bathroom floor, would He be in Heaven? (...) This, this effort, this money and time, the writing team, the drugs, the diet, the agent, (...) all this was so I could off myself with everyone's full attention" (157).

#### **4.4. Secrecy and sacrifice**

After *Fight Club*'s transformation into Project Mayhem, the community enters its critical point. To have a complete analysis of the operative dimension of *Fight Club* there needs to be an examination of its *secrecy*. Firstly, as explained before, the first rule of *Fight Club* (actually repeated twice) is "you don't talk about *Fight Club*". This helps setting that mysterious halo that especially at first surrounds the community. However, the secret in *Fight Club* is originally linked to Tyler: he always appears as a person who is never known completely, as someone who seems to know more than the others, and asks for unquestioned trust. He therefore shares with the idea of God another feature, that of working "in secret". It is at the end of the story that Tyler's secret is revealed. He was all along the product of the protagonist's imagination, the result of the main character's multiple personality disorder, possibly triggered by his obsession to find a valuable masculine model to follow. In this way, Derrida's "God in me" is represented by

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<sup>45</sup> It should be noticed here how in this case the significance given to a name is heightened.

Durden. In addition, the main character starts telling the story he already knows about this fact, which means that it is a secret shared by only the main character and Tyler, similar to the secret shared between God and Christ. Moreover, Tyler's invention mirrors that of the paternal vacuum: in the end, fight club men have chosen another empty space to develop their masculinity, making this relation no different from archaic Christian communities and the present American one.

The main character and Tyler's pair will also be discussed when describing inoperative communities. However, we can elaborate here on the relationship between Tyler and the protagonist, which can be described as homoerotic<sup>46</sup>: the main character's exercise of a "better self" with whom he is first infatuated and later disgusted. It can be described as an operative "community of lovers", that is, a reversed case of such an ensemble. The level of fusion in both characters is astonishing: "I know this because Tyler knows this" (12), a sentence that appears repeatedly throughout the novel. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that both personalities exist inside the same body, further maximising the fusion. This demonstrates that operative models can only take place in sacrifice (through a loss) and that it is utterly paranoid.

Turning now to the concept of death, this is of course taken in a signified way though sacrifice. One only needs to remember the "human sacrifices" asked by the Project Mayhem, sacrifices for the community in which the subject has no value as an entity in itself. The best example is Bob's death while undertaking one of the project's tasks. When he dies, a ritual is made in which he is given back his name, because "[o]nly in death do we have our own names since only in death are we no longer part of the effort. In death we become heroes" (178). This can be related to Derrida's concept of economy of sacrifice, in which the subject receives as much as s/he gives; according to the author, this can only lead to the total loss provided by the death of the subject (*Gift* 100-101). It seems then that death is the only element that can give back the subject's self according to fight club's rules, something which connects with another component typical of hegemonic masculinity, also highly toxic: only in pain, or close to death, do men feel like they can share or acknowledge their own subjectivity. At the same time, death is regarded as a gift (in the form or sacrifice) for the community of fight club, again connecting with deep religious thought.

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<sup>46</sup> The presence of homoerotic tones in Palahniuk's *Fight Club* has also been mentioned by Kavadlo ("Self-Destruction" 6).

In sum, *Fight Club* and *Project Mayhem* represent clear examples of operative communities that originate as a response towards the American community's inability to create a real sense of community among "American people". However, it can be discussed as well that this community would not make sense if, at the same time, there is the absolute certainty that a crisis which only belongs to men at a great scale is also taking place. *Fight Club* arises as an extreme mimicry of the idea surrounding manhood, which in actuality is only visualized in the cultural outcomes that the system produces, but unavailable to men, as experts like Connell, Katz, or Carabí and Armengol explain. Its falsity shows the operative community's self-destructive nature and how indeed it can only be fictional (Etzioni: 155-156), Tyler representing a fake God-like persona with the protagonist acting as a Jesus Christ figure who later ought to be sacrificed. As Kevin Alexander Boon claims in his own analysis of this novel and violence, "the tragedy of *Fight Club* is that in the cultural milieu of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century manhood can only be found in death" (271). Nevertheless, this will not be the only interpretation that this analysis will consider, as inoperativeness will also be present in this complex scheme.

As can be sensed from the last quote, the people that surround Tender in *Survivor* aim to make of his life a spectacle, including his fake marriage and wedding ceremony, streaming on live TV. Tender is embodying the new Christ (they even share the same age when He died) and at one point he ponders at the interest that death attains: "Since change is constant, you wonder if people crave death because it's the only way they can get anything really finished" (140). Modernity brings about constant turmoil, an ambiguity attached to the future that, as explained before, can be terrifying. The symptoms of a communal crisis include the self-reflection and repetition of past patterns, a nostalgic come-back, and this is what Tender is providing. It is not Tender's singularity that has attracted the masses, it is what his character represents: "the individualism of a *role* and not of a *person*" (Derrida, *Gift* 37). It is the saturated symbolism that used to characterize the Christian community and that is now sought due to the failure of American individualism: "[o]ur whole campaign is based on the fact that you're the last survivor' [the agent] says. 'If there's another Creedish alive in the world, you're wasting my time'" (150).

It can be argued that Tender's denial to commit to his duty as a member of the Creedish community is being used so that America and its capitalist system keep

growing. Tender may feel alone and now devoid of the communal fusion that granted him a purpose and a sense of belonging, but he is like any other American man now. As he claims in one of his pre-organized gatherings, “the precious gift of life must be preserved no matter how painful and pointless it seemed. Peace, I told them, is a gift so perfect that only God should grant it (...) His only gift greater than life. The gift of death” (161). In this context, they are making profit of religious beliefs to keep American community as it is: no matter how hollow life may seem, one needs to keep working and consuming. At the same time, death is benefited over life through the act of making a work out of death. Like in many other occasions in both novels, this is one point in which the American community is strikingly similar to operative ones. Tender is as well the sacrifice needed by the American community in this moment of crisis, just like Tyler and the nameless protagonist in *Fight Club* offer themselves to fulfil this role for their community. However, as explained before, Tender reaches such a role by taking the individualistic American values to an extreme, turning himself into an extreme product: “Because the only difference between a suicide and a martyrdom really is the amount of press coverage. (...) This, this effort, this money and time, (...) all this was so I could off-myself with everyone’s full attention” (156). In both works, it is an attempt of openness on the part of both protagonists in a poorly interpreted way of what *exposure* means.

One can link this last thought with the issue of secrecy at this point of the analysis. For that, I would like to go back to this quote: “There’s a terrible dark joy when the only person who knows all your secrets is finally dead. Your parents. Your doctor. Your therapist. Your caseworker” (128). It is right after Tender finds his caseworker dead that he calls the agent and begins his transformation into a messiah. The agent’s makeover could have been taken by Tender as a chance to rebuild his own identity. However, apart from the fact that this makeover is orchestrated by someone else, his “secrets” seem to be still coveted by the main character. His secrets become “unshared” again, which allows him to have a certain part of himself hidden from this new persona. This state of not sharing will be useful as regards his potential to openness with the main female character.

Finally, Tender is asked to marry a woman chosen by the agent and his team, and obliged to issue the greatest miracle of his career.<sup>47</sup> The ceremony takes place during the half-time of the super bowl, which is when Tender predicts the final result of the game. Angry hooligans wreak havoc and Tender is helped to run away, as he also finds out that the police was there to arrest him for being a suspect of his agent's death on that day. This event marks the climax of Tender's role as the new messiah. He has transgressed all the tenets that conform the American community by taking them to the absurd, transforming American values into a hysterical, over-the-top TV show.

## **5. Inoperative communities**

### **5.1. The protagonists' potential for openness**

Both protagonists have been shown to share several traits that, in my opinion, justify the comparative study of these two novels. Now that their contact with operative communities and individualism has been described, their potential to have an inoperative encounter will be analyzed. In both cases the protagonists suffer a spiritual crisis caused by a feeling of incompleteness, triggered by two different backgrounds. This points out to a certain *absence* or *lack*, “[a] lack of feeling, of love, [which] signifies death” (Blanchot, *Unavowable* 36). The main characters have tried to fill or avoid this feeling by taking different equally unhealthy ontological approaches to the extreme, and this is precisely what gives them this potential to explore inoperativeness. As Bataille claims, communication “requires individuals whose separate existence in themselves is *risked*, placed at the limit of death and nothingness” (qtd. in Esposito, *Communitas* 145-146). This predisposition in both characters will help them evolve and reach exposure, and in both stories, this is possible through the protagonists' attraction towards death.

In *Fight Club*, the main character's namelessness can also have a different interpretation. By not giving his name, he is rejecting his total acceptance of the Christian American ensemble. As such, he is demonstrating his own potential to step outside operative and individualistic settings and his openness for new communitarian possibilities. Name-giving is in Western ideology a religious tradition in which God

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<sup>47</sup> In order to maintain his fame, he needs to do miracles. To do so, he asks Fertility to help him, as she says to be able to predict the future (discussed later).

introduces the subject in the community and Kristeva's notion of the *symbolic*. This implies the subject's rejection of the *semiotic*, which revolves around the subject as an open singularity symbolically unfiltered. As a result, by not giving his name, the protagonist cannot commune with Christianity. The name is, according to Kristeva, what transforms the subject into an object, but without a name, the same entity is considered "the abject", a state previous to the symbolic, what "disturbs identity, system, order" and does not respect "borders, positions, rules" (4). A similar interpretation can be given as regards Tender Branson's name. As explained before, more than a name, this was a rank inside the Creedish community; however, once this community disappears this rank makes no sense. At the same time, when Tender is approached to become a messiah for the Americans his name also becomes a brand: a symbol whose power is given by American consumerism. The name Tender Branson, then, stops having any value in both communities as regards a label that can identify the subject and its true singularity.

When it comes to both characters' interest in death, similarities can also be found. In *Fight Club*, the main character's captivation and need to be close to death-like experiences show a self-destructive nature, but also his ability to have an inoperative encounter accepting an-other's alterity. The ecstasy he feels when having a near death experience can be seen in this quote: "The amazing miracle of death, when one second you're walking and talking, and the next second, you're an object" (146). Though only temporarily (until Marla makes her appearance) he succeeds in having these experiences in the groups of cancer, as is the case when he is hugging Bob: "The big wet face settles down on top of my head, and *I am lost inside*. This is when I'd cry" (17, my italics). In *Survivor's* case, the connection with death is even more obvious, as that is what he has been trained to do. He has never had control over his life or his death: "Everything we can do is wrong as long as we're still alive. The feeling is you have no control" (105). Evidently, such a purpose represents a direct attack against the subject, and annuls any possibilities of having a more enriching existence. However, precisely because he has been taught when he needs to end his own life and the moment has come, his impulse to get close to it is still active, although he is not prepared to do it and tries to find excuses every time he has the chance to proceed. As he tells himself, "[t]hey don't say it has to be a hurry-hurry instant quick death" (119). Like the main character in *Fight Club* when visiting the groups of cancer and when talking about his deadly fantasies, Tender enjoys

visiting the cemetery to check the obituaries of the people who called to his hotline and whom he convinced to kill themselves. His dream is “that some night around the next corner will be an open crypt in the wall and near it will be a desiccated cadaver (...). I’ll come across this carcass in some dim gallery (...) before it will leave me in the dark, forever, with this dead monster” (34). This also indicates Tender’s desire to embrace the abject, a state of nothingness in contrast to that of the signified self. It also shows how terrified he is of death and of committing suicide, and how the only way to feel some sort of satisfaction is experiencing death by triggering in others the desire to die. By substituting his Creedish duty for the slow death of American media pressure he is, inadvertently, calling for a different kind of attention, trying to find a different kind of purpose, though in this case his communal We-ness is exchanged by a fake absoluteness of the self.

This closeness to death in both stories indicates that the nameless character and Tender want their identity, their otherness, to be recognized by others. However, as their identity as men has never allowed them to have a sense of a private self (Hearn), they can only try to pursue this in close-to-death experiences. “[I]f people thought you were dying, they gave you their full attention. If this might be the last time they saw you, they really saw you. (...) You had their full attention” (*Fight Club* 107); “‘But they may kill you’. Good enough. I just need to be the center of a lot of attention” (*Survivor* 236). Their willingness to experience this death drive from such positions demonstrates as well Kaufman’s examination of masculinity and feelings: control is of utter importance (“Contradictory” 145, 148), and experiencing death in a “controlled way” is still something about which these characters still seem to obsess. Thus, before any of them can be prepared for true communication, they first accept the erasure of their individuality in one case, and the ill praise on another for two reasons: first, because of the actual fear that stepping outside their known or traditional communal settings can entail and second, because as I will theorize later, the protagonists need to first enter their reversal communitarian settings to use their destruction as an impulse to embrace openness through the main female characters: Marla Singer and Fertility Hollis. Their masculinities will be experienced in two different ways, both in the extreme, helping their deconstruction.

## 5.2. Marla and Fertility: the eye of the symbolic hurricane

As explained by Levinson, “close friendship with a man or woman is rarely experienced by American men” (qtd. in Clare: ch. 4, n.p.n.). In both novels, this “repulsion” is taken to the extreme, which undoubtedly helps see its senselessness. The main female characters share the same deadly imagery that will help the other protagonists to reach alterity. To begin with, these two characters’ presentations share death-like, grotesque descriptions that immediately attract the protagonists’ interest: “Her eyes are brown. Her earlobes pucker around earring holes, no earrings. Her chapped lips are frosted with dead skin” (Marla in *Fight Club* 37-38); “There’s something waxy about how her arms and legs come out of her dress looking raw and white” (...) “Her mouth with its too-thin red-red lips looks cut open with a knife” (Fertility in *Survivor* 37-39). Not only are their appearances grotesque and deadly; the characters also explain that they have a connection with the world of the dead. Marla claims that she had “no sense of life because she had nothing to contrast it with” (38), and in the novel she assures that she receives telephone calls from dead people who also want her dead (62). Fertility’s drama is that she can predict future disasters, but no one believes her. Her job consists of acting as a surrogate mother for couples who cannot conceive children. However, she confesses later that she is actually barren, which implies that her job only involves sex labour. It can be argued that both of them represent death itself in the novel, in the first case because only near deadly people she can feel alive herself, and in the second case because she promises the “gift of life” while, in principle, she can only express a deathly self. This is something that Fertility has in common with Marla, because in *Fight Club*, after she has had sex with Tyler on one occasion, Marla says that “she wanted to have Tyler’s abortion” (59). One way to analyse these two characters entails their subversive nature as regards traditional gendered significations related to women. Here, they are rejecting the symbolism attached to women in the religious paradigm, that of fertility and motherhood.<sup>48</sup> As a result, Marla and Fertility can be said to be valid examples of *pariah femininities*. Their performance makes use of certain feminine traits (motherhood and fertility here) in an inverted fashion, which may be seen as a rejection of the feminine. If following gender dichotomies, this would show an attempt on their part to be closer to masculinity, but the end result cannot be regarded as “masculine”.

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<sup>48</sup> In addition, Fertility is only the character’s “artistic name” (her real name is Gwen) further showing her fake function as a child bearer.

According to Nancy, as community is revealed through death and community cannot operate on it, these two characters represent the opportunity of it being unveiled. The male protagonists see in these characters a chance to find real communication with a subject that does not commune with the community from which both originate, which has turned them into subjects saturated from the symbolism of those two community models. This is reinforced by Marla when she claims that “our culture has made death something wrong” (103) and also Fertility affirms that she called Tender’s hotline because, since she already knew when so many disasters and people were going to die, she was so bored that she wanted to kill herself (53). Marla shares this aspect as well, as “she can die at any moment [but] the tragedy of her life is that she doesn’t” (108). In Hillis Miller’s words, “[d]eath tends to be covered over, suppressed, almost forgotten” (*Conflagration* 14), but these characters have demonstrated that they know death cannot be hidden. In the two stories, the main female and male characters become a perfect combo to form an inorganic encounter: the nameless character and Tender driven towards death, Marla and Fertility representing death itself.

Apart from their connection with death, these characters are of special importance because of their lack of “immanence material”: their ability to avoid being absorbed by any of the communities that do engulf the protagonists. To illustrate this, I would like to mention again the circumstances under which the protagonists have their first encounter with them. Marla meets *Fight Club*’s protagonist in a group of self-help regarding testicle cancer. In this respect, although Marla is granted access to this ensemble in spite of being a woman, she would never be able to be absorbed by the community for the same reason. Besides, although later in the novel she discovers lumps in her breasts, she never participates in the pain-sharing activities that take place there. She only grants her presence, as a mere observer, as one would watch a TV program.

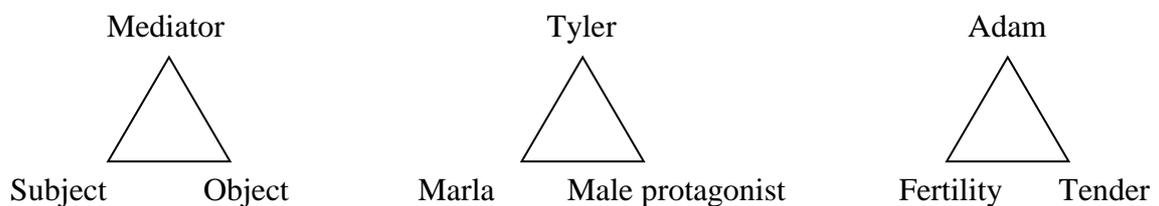
In *Survivor*, Tender sees Fertility for the first time in a cemetery in front of her brother’s grave, one of his hotline’s victims. She is taken as an entity that makes her presence in community but is untouched by its self-erasing effects, a subject that cannot be signified: “[s]he’s the blasé eye of the hurricane that’s the world around her (...) as some jaded survivor, some immortal, an Egyptian vampire after watching the million years of television repeats we call history (...)” (170). It can be discussed that in his visits to the people he has convinced to commit suicide, he forms a community of the

dead whose point of union is Tender himself. If regarded as such, when Fertility arrives, she is surpassing the limits that separate that community from the outside as well. Her access is however granted due to Tender's unexpected willingness of having a love connection, although of course she stands out and does not experience fusion because she is alive: "what I hope is she's dead. My secret wish is right now to be romancing this dead girl. (...) Any dead girl. I'm not what you'd call a choosy" (32). Indeed, Marla and Fertility can be said to escape Kristeva's Symbolic; they are subjects un-worked by any of the communities available and, since they are not symbolically saturated through traditional gendered practices, they can be considered two semiotic elements that confront death in a direct way. They represent the best chance for the narrators to find a meaningful connection with another being together with the opportunity to explore their private self.

### 5.3. Love triangles. A quest for mediators

Each novel has a triad of characters whose connection will enable the inoperative encounters between the protagonists and the main female characters to have a temporary connection. In *Fight Club*, this triangle will be formed by the nameless protagonist, Marla and Tyler; in *Survivor*, these characters will be Tender, Fertility and Tender's brother, Adam, the first born of his Creedish family who was thought dead.

Before analyzing each novel in this sense, I would like to go back to the triangular relationship explained in the theoretical framework as regards the connection Subject – Object – Mediator. In this view, the triangles in this novel would be represented as such:



The reasons why I have located each character in these positions will now be outlined. As explained previously, the main female characters represent death, in a way that they own it, because they are not afraid of discussing it and confronting it directly. In sum, they are not afraid of integrating it in their own existing reality. They are located in the

position of the Subject because thanks to their better understanding of death, they also own the feelings that accompany such drama: fear, anguish, sadness. These feelings define the self and give them agency and the chance to know their own alterity: what scares them, what takes them to the edge, what delimits their own true existence. It is that, and not the body, or other symbolic elements what ought to define them. It is not a drama shared by other members of the community either: it is a personal one that only they can owe and that only they can decide to share through openness. Their potential to share this drama gives them that position in the triangle, and locates the male protagonist in the position of the Object of desire: the one with whom I want to share my drama, my death (as explained below in each novel).

The men of the stories are then located in the position of the Object. As explained in the theoretical framework, men have problems establishing subject-object relationships due to their fear of dissolution in case they connect with a different self (Segal, *Slow Motion* 66). In the nameless character and Tender's case, their attraction but fear of connecting with their own drama through death implies that they do not have a well defined subjectivity: their agency is not completely consolidated for themselves. This further reinforces men's obsession and total reliance on the body and their sexual attributes to project their masculine psyche. As they are what they project on their body, which is also seen by them as an object of masculine projection, they never stop being the object themselves, their inner drama repressed together with their own agency. This is perhaps more clearly represented by Tender when he becomes, quite literally, a product or an object to be purchased. For these reasons, the figure of the mediator will be of great importance to help the female characters' sharing of their selves and to assist the narrators to evolve from objects to subjects rooted on true exposure. These figures, Tyler in *Fight Club* and Adam in *Survivor*, are "hysterically phallic" figures that represent the main protagonists' obsession with the "am I male enough?" obsession (Dyer in Segal, *Slow Motion* 89). This grotesque view on masculinity will channel and filter the main characters' unpolished idea of their self precisely because they take their yearned masculine persona to the extreme, forcing their very apprehension.

### 5.3.1. *Fight Club's triangle*

Tyler's role in this respect will be of even greater importance than in the operative, traditional model of community. In fight club, Tyler is seen as "the Great and Powerful. God and Father" (199). I theorized before that Marla's function in the fight club community was to help reinforce Tyler's masculinity by extolling his heterosexuality, apart from setting an outside to the male-only group. However, this relationship also has an inoperative purpose, in which the main character will also be involved. When Marla is granted access to the Paper Street House, fight club's and Project Mayhem's headquarters, she is a guest who has been granted access by the master. As Derrida explains, the law of hospitality is infringed when the outsider is given an unconditional welcome (*of Hospitality* 75-77). Nevertheless, Marla is never absorbed by this community as it happens with the men that enter it: first, for being a woman, and second, because she is only met sexually by Tyler. Her presence outside the sexual paradigm is only acknowledged by the nameless protagonist, who from the beginning treats her as well with certain hostility. As she is not neutralized by any of the two personalities, her alterity and potential for inoperativeness are not lost.

At the end of the story, the main character finally confesses the real reason why Tyler was created: "I know why Tyler has occurred. Tyler loved Marla. From the first night I met her, Tyler or some part of me had needed a way to be with Marla" (198). Tyler prevents the fusion between Marla and the protagonist because, thanks to him, none of them lose their potential of being exposed and this actually encourages such exposure. Firstly, as explained above, Marla maintains her otherness. Secondly, it can be argued that the main character's multiple personality disorder helps create a clear division between the body and the self, two personalities living in the same body: "Tyler Durden is a separate personality I've created, and now he's threatening to take over my real life" (173). As such, the body cannot be said to be owned completely by any of these two personalities, and taking that into account, when Marla has sexual relationships with Tyler, she is only having intercourse with a body in Nancy's sense, only flesh and skin (*Corpus* 9). Moreover, as explained by Nancy as well, one can "touch the untouchable" in sex, gaining an intimacy that only sexual intercourse can attain because "there's no love without sex" (*Ibid.* 37-39). In addition she does not know the existence of this split personality until the end of the novel, which means that

the body gathers an unusual quality: the possibility of meeting Marla inside and outside the sexual paradigm.

Following these lines, the body turns into a liminal space, much related to Nancy's idea of "the body out there", experiencing the body by distancing from it (Ibid. 29), especially when he is finally conscious that they both "use the same body, but at different times" (164). As the body is being shared, it never belongs to any of the two personalities that make use of it, which means that the body can finally escape the saturated symbolism that would not allow the protagonist to find exposure. Besides, by being conscious that his body does not only belong to him, he can separate his alterity from it, so that he can finally get in touch with his private self. This is made even clearer when, after he learns the truth, Tyler makes him realise that they were not fighting each other: "'You weren't really fighting me,' Tyler says. 'You said so yourself. You were fighting everything you hate in your life'" (167). This realisation helps the protagonist "to speak about the body *ex corpore*", thus exposing it completely: the body "consists in being exposed", it needs to be experienced "in relation to exteriority"; otherwise, the body that grants the subject a place in community is annihilated in favour of a symbolisation of the subject through something that cannot really define the self. (Nancy, *Corpus* 124, 148).

When the main character discovers that Durden was a welcomed guest in his body, he immediately rejects him, and Tyler becomes a parasite in this body, in accordance to Derrida's analysis as regards the laws of hospitality (*Of Hospitality* 59-61). Here, if the once desired father figure has been turned into a parasite and deemed unwelcome, his actions are "in the name of [that] father", a figure he loved but who also monopolized and smothered him, the "God in me" with whom he was talking (*Fight Club* 138-139). However, it needs to be commented that precisely when the main character discovers Tyler's existence as a second personality, he is also capable of recognizing Tyler's alterity, and par contre, he is capable of separating Tyler's from his, spotting his otherness much more clearly. This also allows him to discover that fight club's origins were always a farce and that it is no different from the old Christian communities that it wanted to imitate or the individualistic American composite that drove him to feel such emptiness in the first place. At the beginning of the story, the narrator claims: "I want Tyler. Tyler wants Marla. Marla wants me" (14). This confirms

Esposito's ideas as regards the fact that community is always about wanting others: community needs otherness and communication between subjects.

Tyler's function does not end in helping the narrator better understand himself. When the protagonist comes to the conclusion that "Tyler is a projection. He's a dissociative personality disorder. A psychogenetic fugue state. Tyler Durden is my hallucination" (168), Tyler is used by the main character as a filter of distillation in which he can concentrate all the elements that conform hegemonic masculinity taken to the extreme and embodied in Tyler: all the masculine traits that the men of fight club thought formed the ideal man. In this way the protagonist is devoid of all those gendered symbolisms. Following this line of thought, Tyler's usage as a catalyst figure is for the main character to be able to communicate with Marla. As earlier explained, Marla embodies death in the story, which means that she subverts the image of the Virgin Mary. As a result, between Tyler and the main character, the first is the only one capable of approaching her, embodying himself a God-like persona taken to the extreme. Also, when Marla tries to commit suicide through an overdose of Xanax (88) and calls the narrator for him to watch her die, it is Tyler the one that goes to see her. When he arrives though, she confesses that it was actually a "cry-for-help" (59), and he takes her home to have sex with her, thus being used for Tyler to demonstrate his heterosexuality, as explained above. In addition, Tyler's function as the mediator is also justified by the arguable resentment that the protagonist feels towards him. As presented in an earlier quote, "Tyler is capable and free, and I am not" (174). Admiration *and* resentment towards the mediator is typical (Girard 3-11), and this love-hate relationship is clearly visible between these two personas as the story advances.

It needs to be reminded that the men of fight club are men raised by women. This means that women are regarded by these men through a motherly filter, like that of the Virgin Mary. A traditional gendered dichotomy can be observed, in which women are either seen as mothers or as sexual objects (Irigaray qtd. in Morris, *Literature*: 139). Marla is never seen as a motherly figure, but when Tyler maintains with her sexual relationships she falls into the sexual spectrum. Still on the same path, it can be argued that the main character's lack of a father figure when being raised may have provoked an over-identification with his mother figure (Kimmel). According to Caroline Magennis the over-identification with the mother may also lead to "an oedipal revulsion" (25), which would explain the protagonist's inability to connect with Marla

when he first meets her, and his need to find shelter in a community like fight club. This over-identification may also drive the (heterosexual) male psyche to sense that feared feeling of dissolution when uniting with another woman. Through Tyler then, the protagonist enters a pre-oedipal or pre-symbolic stage, while Tyler keeps all masculine symbolism and takes it to a grotesque extreme, allowing him to step into the semiotic, where Marla belongs. Thus, Tyler's actual function is finally revealed: for the protagonist to approach Marla, he had to create a fictive, grotesquely hyper-masculine figure that would help him connect with her outside the Symbolic, without her being worked through any of the gendered significations that accompany women in an organic composite (motherhood and sexuality). This is even further problematized below.

### 5.3.2. *Survivor's triad*

The mediator that will prepare the inoperative encounter between Fertility and Tender is the protagonist's brother and first-born of his family, Adam. This character has not been analysed before in this thesis due to his arguably short presence in the story and how, from this thesis' perspective, his most valuable contribution has to be accounted in this section. It is finally discovered that the survivors that had been dying until Tender is the last of them had in fact been murdered by a member of the Creedish community who was thought to be dead: an Adam. Though he says that this never bothered him, the narrator says repeatedly that his brother was born before him for "three minutes and thirty seconds" (17). A more empowering form of masculinity in which sex was available together with land inheritance was denied to Tender by that small amount of time, a fact that seems to trigger Tender's obsession and *resentment* against his brother, a typical feeling towards the mediator that poses in us a desire that we cannot have (as also discussed above regarding Tyler and the main male character). This may be clearly seen in this quote: "[wishing to have been born first is] the same as wishing that your parents had been taller, thinner, stronger, happy" (50).

Adam is the first person that talks to Tender about the outside world, as he has the chance to visit it so that he could register his marriage with his wife for the union to be legal.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, Adam can be said to be luckier: he is allowed to belong to his first

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<sup>49</sup> This points out again the Creedish community's lack of agency in comparison to the American community.

community and to access, though temporarily, the outside community as Derrida's *foreigner*. In comparison to Tender, his rank allowed him to know both worlds, and to return to the place in which he could be completely part of the community. Indeed, due to his non-hegemonic masculinity, he has a wider view on such reality: "vision is better from below" (Haraway qtd. in *Recreating* 4). Due to his lower rank, Tender is obliged to feel as a foreigner until his death, denying all Tenders the right to commune ever again. Much later in the story, the reader learns that Adam is still alive and Tender suspects that he has been murdering the remaining survivors so that their deaths would pass as suicide. At first, Tender believes that he is doing this in order to prove something to the world: "to take us all to Heaven, or to show the world Creedish unity, or to seek revenge on whoever blew the whistle on the labor missionary movement, I don't know" (204-205). He thinks this way because Adam stopped hiding when Tender signs certain papers to turn the old Creedish lands into "the repository for [American] outdated pornography" (190). Such area is called "Pornfill", and it is used to discard all pornography in order to show its corrupting nature. As a consequence, taxes on pornography rise, which causes outrage in the nation. This reaction proves as well, in this particular fictive scenario, the importance of a purchasable, already-designed sexuality, highlighting America's consumerist nature. Even more importantly, it squares with Segal's view on pornography and people's dependency on it, showing a tremendous lack of agency and control over (in this case) Americans' sexual drive and desire. Supposedly, thanks to this repository, Tender "will stem the sex craving that has taken control of the world" (254), as the new mass leader. Interestingly, Tender believes that this would not be a problem, but a solution: "I thought that might solve the problem for America" (193).

This is an important point in the novel and it has great salience in this analysis. As explained in the theoretical framework, sexual relationships are knowingly difficult for American men, and a tremendous source of anxiety. Pornography establishes an image of sex which encourages violence and objectification of women, but it is also a fiction which on the one hand may make men comfortable, but it can also detach men from the actual intimacy that accompanies sex on the other, which as discussed earlier is what many men secretly desire. When Adam finally manages to kidnap both Tender and Fertility after the super bowl and embark on a journey towards Canada, he tells Tender something that the latter says he did not remember: "I know what happened to

you was terrible. I understand why you're terrified of having sex” (209). It is revealed that, when they were still children, Tenders in the Creedish community were obliged to watch women in labour. Adam's wife was one of the women they saw, who died with her baby on the night she was giving birth. For that reason, “sex to [Tender] is just pain and sin and [his] mother stretched out there screaming” (256). This could be analysed as the reason for Tender's detachment from the mother figure and from any feelings whatsoever. It is Adam who encourages Tender to break with both the Creedish doctrine and America's new archaic view on sex: “The only way you'll ever find your own identity is to do the one thing the Creedish elders trained you most not to do (...) Commit the one biggest transgression (...) You'll be a slave the rest of your life unless you bite the apple” (249).

According to Adam, all cultures are castrating, either physically or psychologically (252), because sex equals power:

“if you never have sex (...) you never gain a sense of power. You never gain a voice or an identity of your own. Sex is the act that separates us from our parents. Children from adults” (...) ““And if you don't crave sex (...) will you crave power?” No, he says. (253)

Adam can be said to be the one to cut the last thread that prevented Tender from being ready to find intimacy through sex by reminding him how the Creedish had achieved to erase all Tenders' (and all the members') alterity. In the Creedish subjects' mind, the elders had connected sex with death, presumably represented in the mothers in labour's bodies. Women's bodies had then been psychologically corrupted for the Tenders: the sexual objectification that takes place through channels like pornography in the outside world did not occur for the men in the community, but in turn their (masculine) identity was completely aseptic. As a result, Tender's masculinity has never been symbolized through any of the communities mentioned, which means that, like the main character in *Fight Club*, though via different means, he is devoid of the symbolic saturations attached to the male body (this will be further problematized when discussing the concept of sacrifice).

### 5.3.3. Communities of lovers

All the efforts and transgressive moments that have occurred until now lead up to this: the inoperative, though temporary encounter, between the main female and male characters. Kristeva explains that the maternal belongs to the semiotic, for the maternal body has not gone through the symbolic associations that define the paternal law (qtd. in Butler, *Trouble* 109). As explained before, Marla and Fertility can be considered subversive versions of a motherly figure connected with death, which is why they also can be considered symbolically unfiltered by the communities that do make a work out of death. Both characters reach this state with the protagonists in different scenarios. In Marla's case, her body acquires this property when she calls the main character to explore her breasts in search of lumps. While exploring her, he tells her that "maybe the point is not to forget the rest of yourself if one little part might go bad" (105). As Nancy states, the body, be it healthy or sick, is only a shell. Marla's body is not the same as God's body, mystical and unavowable. Moreover, her breasts are not sexually objectified: they are observed aseptically, as the origin of Marla's fateful pain. Marla could touch the main character's body through sex, and he has been able to do the same with an unfiltered intimacy that is not sexually signified. This should also be noticed in contrast to the great attention given to male genitalia. Nancy describes the breast as a "mass that localizes many an ectopia", related both to "nourishment", and "visibility of sex" (*Corpus* 85), the first in connection with the motherly figure of women and the second to female sexual objectification. Marla's, however, are not taken as any of those: they are connected with death. As such, not only does Marla reject the motherly figure attached to women, but also that related to sexuality. When stepping out of that dichotomy, she rejects completely the operative symbolism that limits women's role in community. She also enters the abject, and now finds herself on the same page as the main character, now ready for the inorganic encounter.

Now that it has been established that neither Marla nor the protagonist belong to the normative gendered conceptions that make up the operative community, the main character and Marla can be said to "intersect" in the same way that subjects do in *sorority*, fighting back the concept of *communal fraternity* theorized by Derrida, where sorority is presented as establishing an inorganic communication that challenges the symbolic saturation represented by Tyler (Nancy & Clift 121-122). Thanks to Marla's escaping of the gender dichotomy enclosed by the feminine and the main character's

usage of Durden as a filter of hyper-masculine saturation, they both can meet and communicate outside the traditional model, as they have managed to separate their true selves from the body and its significations. They become, for a short period of time, a community of lovers, becoming “estranged from themselves, into an intimacy which also estranges them from each other” (Blanchot, *Unavowable* 43), having a direct approach towards death as its basis. With this inclining from one towards the other, or *clinamen*, they open themselves to one another, since communication only happens “at the limit of death and nothingness” (Esposito, *Communitas* 146). Their real connection can be said to reach a peak when the protagonist confesses that he wants to save her from Tyler (discussed below) because he thinks that he likes her, though it is not “love” (197), at least not yet, because Tyler is still part of him.

When it comes to Fertility in *Survivor*, this character also manages to escape the aforementioned dichotomy. She is indeed a subversive representation of maternity as she is supposedly barren and both the husbands and herself know that her job as a surrogate mother is actually prostitution. This in turn situates her in the sexual realm, although she cannot be met in this way either by the main character. When they first meet in the cemetery and she talks to Tender later through the hotline, she asks him to help her have an orgasm right after she tells him that she wants to commit suicide, supposedly without knowing that he was at the other end of the line. There are, at that point, two Tenders: the Creedish “geeky, ugly” version which Fertility has seen in person, and the one that answers the phone and makes people kill themselves without thinking it twice. It should be remembered that Fertility is attracted to death as much as Marla is, which means that the man at the other end of the phone is attractive to her as well. Tender is, however, incapable of fulfilling her desires because he is terrified of sex, which means that he cannot filter Fertility through the sexual filter either. However, even though he cannot meet her sexually, he does want to connect with her: “The living, breathing creepy geeky ugly me can’t stand up to her fantasy, so I have a plan, a terrible plan, to make her hate me and at the same time fall in love with me. The plan is to unsex her. Unattract her” (65).

Things go according to plan. As he later says, “God forbid I should try and look good for Fertility. The worst strategy I could pursue is self-improvement. (...) My plan is to look like untapped material. The look I’m going for is natural. Real. (...) Clean but not polished” (70). Here, Tender shows his willingness to expose himself to her in a

way in which she can appreciate that exposure, and through his phone conversations as a stranger, he convinces her to go on dates with him, always with the promise that they (she and his unknown identity) will get together later. His plan goes, one may say, too far, as his way of attracting her by unattracting her makes him turn himself into a grotesque religious male product, a Tyler Durden for sale. By making himself attracted by the masses, he achieves Fertility's disgust: "The last time Fertility saw the buffed, bulked, tanned, and shaved me in person, she said I was improved beyond recognition. She said, 'You need a disaster?' She said, 'Look in a mirror'" (194). Tender has used his own body to concentrate masculine saturated symbolism, which demonstrates masculinity's fragility as Tender's health is completely jeopardized. At the same time, this attracts Fertility because she is capable of foreseeing disasters, and Tender represents a very dangerous one:

"You're turning out just like every guy I've ever trusted" (...)

"You are just a dog doing a trick"

This is only so I can kill myself.

"I don't want you dead"

Why? (...) Is it because she likes me?

"No (...) I don't hate you, but I need you" (179)

There are two important criticisms that Fertility points out in this passage. First, as seen at the beginning of the quote, Fertility criticises the homogenizing effect that capitalism and globalization has had on the American man, but also on society in general: "It's like we have the same artificial memory implants" (...) "[We'll be] United. Equal. Exact" (179). Tender is, as a result, Fertility's chance to break with those boundaries. Fertility has the power to know everything, which is why she tells him: "if anybody is going to surprise me, it's going to be you" (180), because he was raised outside this milieu he is not part of the "mass culture, not yet" (180). In this sense, first, community is again exposed in the subjects' need for each other; second, like the protagonist in *Fight Club*, Tender is occupying now a liminal position between both worlds. He is both part Creedish, while his brother is hunting for him and he is still connected to that culture due to his fear of sexual intercourse, but he has also been transformed and symbolically signified by the mass culture. However, belonging to both

communitarian ensembles means as well not belonging completely to any of them, which has enabled him to find an inorganic rupture. Being only a Creedish member in the American society would not be enough for Fertility to fight saturation, because as a Creedish, he is unable to approach women outside the “death equals pain” contrivance: “Sperm makes me think of sex makes me think of punishment makes me think of death makes me think of Fertility Hollis” (82). By transforming himself into an extreme version of the “just another guy”, which Fertility despises, she exposes herself in order to expose him, because even though he has been partly absorbed by the American community, she knows of his potential to surprise her.

## **6. Sacrifices and the consolidation of the psyche**

### **6.1. Sacrifice and psyche’s finales in *Fight Club***

As it could not be any different, *Fight Club* ends with the sacrifice of the nameless character and Tyler Durden. However, in both cases the objective behind the act of sacrifice has different purposes. Tyler wants the main character to sacrifice himself for the community of fight club/Project Mayhem mirroring Jesus Christ’s sacrifice, a gift for humanity as Derrida would describe it (*Gift* 12, 81). Tyler has prepared Project Mayhem’s ultimate terrorist attack by elaborating explosives to blow up the tallest building in the city: “your martyrdom thing. Your big death thing (...). A real opera of a death” (203), thus another sign of a symbolizing act towards death. Of course, being this a sacrifice in which death is mystified the religious imagery cannot be missed: “This isn’t really death (...). We’ll be legend. We won’t grow old”, because “the first step to eternal life is you have to die” (11).<sup>50</sup> It seems to be an act of sacrifice whose purpose is to save the American people from its own decadent, ultra-consumerist culture, like Christ did with the Christian community. The main character, who has confessed that he likes Marla, knows that if he does not cooperate they will go after her. Consequently, he is willing to die for her, a type of sacrifice which “only those who love consent to do” (Plato cf. Blanchot, *Unavowable* 44). The impossibly extreme sharing of body and death of the main character and Tyler is then turned into an inorganic understanding of

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<sup>50</sup> In an interview with the author, Palahniuk explains how *Fight Club* and its explosive essence was encouraged by the rage and disappointment he felt towards his own generation: “despite all of the things we’d been raised with (...) what had our lives amounted to? Pumping gas? Filing? Watching a computer screen? (...) I just felt this enormous frustration around that” (qtd. in Alex Boon 275).

the act of dying. In addition, Tyler's ambitioned immortality resonates as well with the eternal shadow that manhood is supposed to cast (Badiou 64).

When Durden is about to pull the trigger to kill both personalities, Marla interrupts accompanied by a few members of the groups of cancer, begging him not to do it. When her presence is acknowledged, Tyler disappears, because "Tyler is [the protagonist's] hallucination, not hers" (204). She assures that she knows the difference between both personalities and that she likes the protagonist as well. Here, the climax of the inorganic encounter between them takes place: by stating that she knows the difference between both personalities, she is manifesting that she has been able to recognize the main character's self, differentiating it from Tyler's, the body acquiring a marginal role together with all its significations. The symbolic power of the phallus disappears as well as a result, and both characters meet at an equal level.

This encounter is, however, temporary. Now Marla knows of Tyler's existence, which means that his catalyst power has been lost. The protagonist decides to finally shoot himself. This is the case because first, that is the only way in which he can save Marla. At the same time, by putting Tyler to sleep, this sacrifice allows him to consolidate his own understanding of his newly discovered private self. And also, it gives Marla's life a meaning, which she lacked: "If I want my life to have meaning for myself it must have meaning *for someone else*" (Bataille cf. Blanchot, *Unavowable* 21-22). This death also helps restore the "I" of the main character: "I want to be dead. Because only in death do we have names. Only in death are we no longer part of Project Mayhem" (201). It can be concluded that the main character and Marla exchange highly valued gifts: the gift of life and the gift of death.

This interpretation can be taken even further. According to Nancy, when the body is sacrificed it "never happens" (*Corpus* 5). But in the story, the main character does not die; he falls into a coma. Both personalities remain inoperative, while the body is still "alive". It becomes, however, a passive body, an *unworkable* body that returns to the object because in this state it cannot be signified by any filters, masculine gendered significations included. In his comatose state, while dreaming, he comments that Marla visits and writes to him from Earth. The fusion between the characters remains incomplete and open, because "writing isn't signifying" and "touching happens in

writing all the time” (Nancy, *Corpus* 11). This communication in inorganicism will last as long as his coma does too, which establishes its temporary nature.

In the “Heaven” in which the main character finds himself, he can finally rest. There, he has conversations with God:

I’ve met God across his walnut desk with his diplomas hanging on the wall behind him, and God asks me, ‘Why?’ (...)

Didn’t I realize that each of us is a sacred, unique snowflake of special unique specialness? (...)

I look at God behind his desk, taking notes on a pad, but God’s got this all wrong.

We are not special.

We are not crap or trash, either.

*We just are.*

*We just are, and what happens just happens.*

And God says, ‘No, that’s not right.’

Yeah. Well. Whatever. You can’t teach God anything. (207, my italics)

This Heaven is clearly a parody of the Biblical version and with clear taints of American capitalism. Despite this IKEA God’s obstinacy, the protagonist reaches his own conclusions, which can only but come from the total exposure he has achieved: “we just are”, free from any attached symbolism, coming from whichever source. His concept of the body, be it male, female, decadent or not, defies the *hoc est enim corpus meum* described by Nancy, because “corpus is never properly me” (Nancy, *Corpus* 3, 29).

## **6.2. Sacrifice and psyche’s finale in *Survivor***

Three sacrifices are the focus in *Survivor*, all of them necessary for the inoperative encounter between Fertility and Tender. Before continuing, it is important to remember that Fertility can predict the future and claims at all times that “she knows everything”. This means that all deaths that will be discussed from now on were known to her before they happened. The first to be discussed is Trevor’s death, Fertility’s brother. Trevor was one of the victims from Tender’s self-help hotline. When Tender visits his crypt, he wishes that the dead comes back to find him and takes revenge (39), showing *Fight Club*’s nameless protagonist’s same death drive. It is thanks to Trevor, or Trevor’s

crypt, that Tender and Fertility can meet for the first time. As already explained elsewhere, Tender begins having a romantic interest for Fertility in that moment, and they arrange to have a date. However, shortly after, Fertility calls Tender's hotline, presumably not knowing that Tender was at the other end of the line. She tells him that she has met a "pretty weird guy" (54). Apart from describing him as a guy who "doesn't have any good features to work with" (54), she believes that he is a homosexual and that he could have been dating her brother. This might be the first time in which Tender feels hurt as regards his masculine sense, taking into account that he seems sexually interested in her. As a result, Trevor can be said to be the one to trigger the main character's later transformation.

Adam's death can be also considered a sacrifice. His death takes place, symbolically, while Tender and Adam are driving through Pornfill, where magazines, films and other pornographic materials are being burned. The smoke provokes an accident and Adam's eye gets perforated with a "Tender Branson dashboard statuette", and tricks Tender to kill him by asking him to smash his face with a rock in order to make him unrecognizable. The scene is clearly a parody of Cain's assassination of Abel, as Fertility appreciates: "It's so totally Cain and Abel I can't stand it" (264). However, it seems clear that Adam's intention was for Tender to kill him, maybe to both help Tender to feel empowered, and also to eliminate the last reminiscence of the Creedish community. Although the protagonist does feel like he has been the one who has killed Trevor and Adam, Fertility explains that both of them could only be destined to die: Trevor could only end with the boredom that consumed him by encountering death, the ultimate surprise, and Adam "knew that an old culture of slaves couldn't found a new culture of free men", and wanted Tender to survive, but not his "slave mind-set" (265). Once more, an exchange of gifts is produced: the gift of life to Tender, in exchange of the gift of death for Trevor and Adam.

Tender's sacrifice is the last one to be discussed. Tender and Fertility decide to have sex so that they can follow Adam's last request: Tender's supposedly capacity to attain agency and feel empowered by having sex. The intercourse does not last long: he had built up this moment so much that it ends quickly, to which Fertility says: "I hope that was really empowering for you" (275), and does not let him try it again. In this moment, Fertility manages to escape as well the second gendered option left for her in the dichotomy: that of a sexual target. Moreover, the final conclusion as regards sex

seems clear: sexual intimacy is wrongly interpreted in American society, the Creedish community and Adam's own interpretation after leaving his saturated ensemble. First, sex cannot be taken as a source of power in that sense because it implies the establishment of a hierarchy that encourages a view of the self grounded on sex. Secondly, it cannot be taken as taboo, or a reference of pain and suffering. Thus, a different interpretation is left for both of them to be found outside operative meanings. The sexual act between the characters is connected to sacrifice because Fertility finally finds out why she needed Tender in the first place. "I got my surprise (...) and damn it, I don't want it. I don't want this!' (...) 'I'm pregnant'" (276). Her plan is to board a plane to Australia that she knows will be hijacked, so that she can lose the baby, but it is later discovered this is not her true intention. She prepares the ground so that, without realising it, it is Tender the one who ends up hijacking the plane. Hollis tells him that the only way to escape his identity as Tender Branson and "be dead to the world" is to tell his story so that he can "walk away from it": "after that we'll start a new life together and live happily ever after" (284).

And this is what he does. He has told his whole life story from the end and left it recorded in the plane's black box, and supposedly after this, the plane crashes with him. However, it is hinted that he never dies, and that in the end he manages to survive and meet Fertility again, as she knew he would. The temporary inoperative encounter between them takes place then: when he realizes that his identity as Tender will be washed away and a new self will have the chance to grow: "If I survived, she said, we could work on having better sex. We could work on making a new life together" (287). The "organic baggage" he used to carry will disappear, and only Fertility will know about it. They become a couple who completely "see" each other. His own body becomes only a shell that will now be inhabited for a new version of a self that he will be capable to build: "Here's the life and death of Tender Branson, and I can just walk away from it" (289).



## CHAPTER 4

### **“Assaulting the world by assaulting [your]self”: Family bonds and hysterical identities in *Invisible Monsters* (1999) and *Choke* (2001)**

#### **1. Introduction and summary of the novels**

Following the structure of the first chapter, Chuck Palahniuk’s novels *Invisible Monsters* (1999) and *Choke* (2001) will be examined together. Both works describe a toxic relationship between the protagonist and one family member; namely, a mother and a brother. This means that family bonds will be more salient in this part of the analysis. First, I will introduce the main characters and their contexts as regards their life inside the American community; then, I will explain how parenthood (particularly motherhood) and family ties have an effect on the protagonists and their ontological view in an operative understanding of community; finally, I will outline the steps taken by both protagonists to break with those boundaries. In both cases, as was the case in the first chapter, a triangle will be the answer to envision inoperative encounters and death will take a dominant role. It entices the main protagonists as a way to leave aside a (gendered) identity, which feels imposed or limiting. In this context, death entails a type of rebirth for the characters, in which father, mother and family figures in general will be taken to a deathly extreme. Representing strong ties to the characters’ true self, their families’ grotesque representation leaves room for a destructive, but rescued from the ashes, new persona.

In *Invisible Monsters*, Shannon McFarland<sup>51</sup> is a middle-aged woman who used to be beautiful and worked as a super model. At the beginning, she reveals that someone shot her with a rifle in the face. This resulted in her losing her jaw and half her face. She is fired as a model and is convinced to accompany a transsexual woman, Brandy Alexander, who she just met in the hospital. Together with a third party, Seth, they drive the country living in motels and visiting rich people's houses to steal, sell and consume the drugs they can find there. The story is told in a non-orderly fashion, so that many of the elements introduced throughout the story are only clarified towards the end. This fragmentation helps the characters' very de-construction process as provided by Palahniuk. As the story slowly untangles, it is discovered that Brandy Alexander is in fact the female protagonist's disappeared brother, Shane, who left the family's house after revealing his homosexuality. Previous to his disappearance, Shane had an accident with a hairspray which exploded in his face, causing his disfigurement. Shannon was always suspected to have provoked such accident, but Brandy confesses at the end that he had provoked the disaster himself. Once Brandy confesses her true identity, Shannon tells her own truth: that she had been the one who shot herself in the face. It is also revealed that Seth is in fact Manus, Shannon's ex-boyfriend, who turns out to be a homosexual who had sexually abused Brandy when she was still a young man. The story ends with Shannon giving her (bureaucratic) identity to Brandy Alexander, given their similar looks, providing her now sister and herself with a new beginning.

*Choke's* main character is Victor, a middle-aged man who works in the Colonial Dunsboro, a museum that recreates colonial times. He used to go to medical school but leaves it so that he can take care of his delusional mother, who is an intern in an expensive "constant care hospital" (81), which Victor has to pay. Throughout the story Victor keeps remembering his childhood with her, Ida Mancini, who had a very peculiar way of raising him. He also earns money by going to restaurants and choking on food on purpose. After a client has saved him, they feel responsible for him, and send him money and other gifts. Victor is also addicted to sex, and tries without much success to get over his addiction by going to a group for sex addicts. His best friend, Denny, used to be an alcoholic, but he is trying to overcome his addiction. In his mother's hospital, Victor meets Dr Marshal, a woman who works in the facility, and he feels immediately

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<sup>51</sup> The main female character does not reveal her name until the end of the story. She hides her true identity for reasons explained later in the chapter.

attracted to her. At one point in the story, Victor finds his mother's diary, which is written in Italian, thus being unveiled for the reader that she was an immigrant from that country. Dr Marshal assures that she can read Italian and tells Victor that the journal explains how he was conceived with the DNA of Jesus Christ, and that he is the new messiah. In the main time, to feel purposeful, Denny has been collecting rocks from the street to build a cathedral. At the end of the story, Victor chokes his mother while feeding her and Dr Marshal is revealed to be another lunatic at the asylum. The novel ends with the main characters watching the ruins of Denny's attempt at building the cathedral.

The most important point in common between these two protagonists and the reason why these works are examined together is the toxic relationship that they maintain with one of the members of their family: Victor is deeply united to his smothering mother, and Shannon is obsessed with the figure of her supposedly dead brother, Shane. This toxic relationship, I will argue, will determine the main characters' view on their gendered selves and it will explain certain aspects of their self-destructive nature. However, at the same time, and as is often the case in Palahniuk's works, these toxic characters will also be the mediators for the protagonists to establish innovative relationships with other entities in the story.

## **2. "Bigger, better, stronger": Nationalism and religion**

Before delving deeper into the characters and how they cope with their particular life crisis, it is important to locate both in the American context. *Choke* is perhaps more direct in its criticism of American culture. For example, Victor comments that "immigrants tend to be more American than people born [there]" (76). The protagonist seems to believe that the image projected by the United States is much more powerful outside its borders. Derrida's *foreigners* coming to the country would indeed attempt to be part of the culture by accepting the image it sends to the rest of the world, but which does not work for Americans themselves. This mirrors Stryck's view on how simulation substitutes real representation (4). The communal fantasy portrayed by Americans seems to have stopped working as a unionist tool for American people themselves, as Hillis Miller comments when claiming that the word "homeland" never truly described the American nation (*Conflagration* 11). This critique is especially

poignant when the main character is working in the museum: “The only funny part about Colonial Dunsboro is maybe it’s too authentic, but for all the wrong reasons” (31). He describes the people working there (including himself) as “losers” who could not hold a real job “in the real world” (31). He compares this behaviour with what pilgrims did when they arrived to the new land: “isn’t this why we left England in the first place? To find our own reality (...). [I]nstead of just wanting to believe something different about God’s love, [they] want to find salvation through compulsive behaviors” (31). If Victor is implying that Americans are only imitating the old costumes that pilgrims left behind in Europe, the message seems clear: despite its efforts to state its own identity, America is only another copy of old cultures made bigger and more extreme: “My point is, this is America. You start out with hand jobs and progress to orgies. You smoke some dope and then, the big H. This is our culture of bigger, better, stronger. The key word is progress” (203). Here, Stryck’s communal ambivalence as regards American identity is again made visible by Palahniuk.

Metaphorically, this shows the obsession with the size of the American man<sup>52</sup> and its projection in the media, as explained by Katz in the theoretical framework. As seen later, this image will be once more connected with a God-like understanding of the male psyche. *Invisible Monsters* provides its own social critique early in the novel, though in this case it roots purely from American industry and the body in modelling. Evie, one of Shannon’s friends who is also a model, states: “beautiful people should never date each other. (...) When both of you are beautiful, neither of you is beautiful. (...) [Y]ou’re less than the sum of your parts” (39) This idea mirrors the “bigger and stronger” American mindset. There is always something that is better or can be better. In this sense, it can be argued that the American community is becoming hysterical, in Nancy’s sense (*Corpus* 23): its symbols of greatness and strength can only evolve by becoming hyperbolic, including the subjects that inhabit it, which leads inevitably to the community’s own implosion. Indeed, as also stated by Nancy, these two Palahniuk’s works show an America that can only “think itself” (*Loose* 5).

In the two novels the country is once more portrayed as an alienating environment dominated by the media, where religion is still the organizing axis of the wheel. However, the clash between an operative “being together” and new

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<sup>52</sup> There is an obvious connection here with *Survivor*’s main character and its transformation into a mass leader.

individualisms can be easily spotted: “if you believe that we really have free will, then you know that God can’t really control us (...) All God does is watch and change channels when He gets bored” (*Invisible Monsters* 80). God seems to have lost its power as a punishing figure, but in the American subject’s mind He is still there, watching. The symbols that characterize the archaic and traditional operative communities are still at work, but they do not create the communal effect they used to have (Etzioni’s communal *We*). Throughout the story, Shannon keeps apologizing to this figure after what happened to her: “Sorry Mom. Sorry God” (42, 95). In this sense, and for these characters, Derrida’s “God in me” (*Gift* 108) has become an uncomfortable entity that is hardly ever overlooked. He is not a paternal figure under whom all subjects attain fusion, as Nancy comments in operative models. In American culture, He has passed to represent a *parasite* in Derrida’s sense (*Of Hospitality* 59-61), an unwelcome thought, or perhaps, an uncomfortable *gap* in their minds which should be filled. Once again He represents an unavowable entity, in Blanchot’s wording, who unsettles the subject. His function as a communal element is now useless.

Still, God is an important referent in both novels. In *Choke*, His relationship with America is made evident, but His absence is also revised. As Denny, the main character’s best friend, says: “It’s okay if there isn’t a God anymore, but I still want to respect something. I don’t want to be the centre of my own universe” (74). There exists the consciousness in both works that the idea of community as understood under God’s power is now obsolete, but individualism is not a valid solution either. The presence of a God that may or may not be watching implies as well the lack of a purpose, and the drama that accompanied religion, as theorized by Bataille, needs to be part of people’s lives.

### **3. “Give me attention”: The protagonists’ bodies and their *game* with death**

Now that the context and characters’ view on their respective settings has been introduced, Shannon and Victor share another important feature, which connects these two stories with the ones analysed in the first chapter: the role that deadly experiences plays in their lives. At the same time, their connection with death is two-folded: both characters are repulsed and attracted by it, and this union is closely related with a member of their family.

From the start, both stories make clear that death will be a central theme in the novel. *Invisible Monsters* begins with the protagonist witnessing a character's death, that of Brandy Alexander. They find themselves in a manor that is holding a wedding reception. The manor is on fire, and Brandy has been shot. Here, in the last moments Brandy Alexander has to spare, life becomes more powerful than ever: "A girl can't die without her life flashing before her eyes", which the narrator herself translates into "[g]ive me attention" (19). *Choke*'s opening pages describe the main character's first choking experience by accident as a child. His mother saves him while "the entire restaurant crowded around. At that moment, it seemed the whole world cared what happened to him", and he realises then that "[y]ou had to risk your life to get love. You had to get right to the edge of death to ever be saved" (3). Both works show that only in death does the subject find true openness (Derrida, *Gift* 41).

Though both novels show from the beginning this close relationship with death, the approach in each story is different. It is at the end of *Invisible Monsters* that Shannon confesses that she was the one who shot herself in the face. However, before analysing the reasons why she did it in the section dealing with inoperative communities, it seems appropriate to examine this character's interest in death before her true intentions are cleared up. Right after the "accident" takes place, she confesses that she never panicked, because "hysteria is impossible without an audience. Panicking by yourself is the same as laughing alone in an empty room. You feel really silly" (50). She has made this act of self-destruction, verging on the edge of death, only to get people's attention: "All I want is somebody to ask me what happened. Then, I'll get on with my life" (45).

As explained before, *Choke* also shows this facet early in the novel. However, Victor's obsession with death is even more remarkable. He used to go to medical school, and every time he sees someone he cannot help but analyse them in a pathological way: "Ignorance was bliss" (103); "After you find out all the things that can go wrong, your life becomes less about living and more about waiting. For cancer. For dementia" (104). His constant state of alert drives him to find solace in sexual

intercourse, to which he is addicted.<sup>53</sup> While having sex with one of his partners, he thinks the following:

For the next I don't know how long, I've got no problems in the world. No mother. No medical bills. No shitty museum job. No jerk-off best friend. Nothing. I feel nothing. To make it last (...) I tell Nico (...) how beautiful she is, (...) how much I need her. (...) Because this is the only time I can say it. Because the moment this is over, we'll hate each other. (...) The only person we'll hate more than each other is ourselves. These are the only few minutes I can be human. (19)

During sex, Victor manages to forget about the finitude of everything that surrounds him by the limited time scope that characterizes sexual intercourse. In this sense, it can be argued that Victor manages to separate his suffering self from his body. Nancy's thesis in *Corpus* is clear here when explaining that one must see the body as an outside of oneself, which would in turn help the subject's real self be seen and understood by her/him (29). However, in this body/self split, there is only nothingness ("I feel nothing"), meaning that he does not attempt to explore his own self or that of his sexual partners. This nothingness is also, nevertheless, connected by the character himself to the type of chemistry that the body produces when having sex constantly: "Sex addicts really crave the peptide phenylethylamine that might be triggered by danger, by infatuation, by risk and fear" (18).<sup>54</sup> It is pure physical exercise that poorly attempts to give Victor a working masculine projection. This is reinforced in the following reflection: "It's not that I don't love these women. I love them just as much as you'd love a magazine centrefold, a fuck video, an adult website" (17). Women and pornography come up as if part of the same category, one of the main features that characterizes hegemonic masculinity. This would explain Victor's inability to be with women without treating them as sexual objects. It shows as well the anxiety that accompanies the male psyche and its relationship with sexual performance (Segal, *Slow Motion* 184). In addition, his inability to see women as individualities reflects his own lack of understanding of his own self: the body is only understood if sexed for men and women in the male paradigm. This understanding ought to be repeatedly in action for it

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<sup>53</sup> This behaviour reminds us of *Fight Club*'s main character usage of the cancer group meetings to find peace.

<sup>54</sup> Mendieta analyses *Choke* as a simile between American culture and an amphetamine, something that over-excites the subject and keeps it craving for more: "Our culture is perpetually turning us into junkies" (402).

to be maintained, as Kimmel explains (122), which also justifies the main characters' compulsive sexual behaviour.

Although inoperative communities do happen in these types of relationships, this is not the case. Victor equates "being human" to feeling nothing, which could mean that his male psyche is understood in an essentialist way, or better yet: not understood at all from his own individuality. He relates masculinity to impassivity and lack of feelings, as Segal comments. For Victor, the only way of being a man is the one projected by American hegemonic masculinity, but his self-perception as a "loser" (168) and his consciousness as regards his inability to attain such state locate him in the non-hegemonic spectrum. At this point, it seems logical to equate Victor to an instigator of Demetriou's external hegemonic masculinity, but who also makes use of victimhood (to be a loser) inside the hegemonic masculinity spectrum (341). Having sex repeatedly helps Victor reach a state of nothingness, one that can be relatable to Kristeva's abject: the need to go back to a state of the self that had not been symbolised in any way. If the self is examined, the subject has the natural need to define it, but the state of the abject gives the self the chance of not entering any of the labels available in community. It can escape symbolism, but at the same time it avoids a further understanding of its own complexity. As Victor says more than once, "sponges never have a bad day" (150). The climax of his approach to death comes at the end of the story. In what becomes his last relationship connected to his sexual addiction, a sexual toy gets stuck in the protagonist's rectum, blocking his bowels, and preventing him from defecating. He lies about this, and pretends that nothing is wrong. He compares this feeling with his own existential crisis: "I don't feel anything left inside" (216). I will come back to this event in section 5. What is most interesting in this sense is that Victor tries to take the concept of the abject to the extreme. "Not being", that is, eliminating completely the self from the body and acting purely as animals is not a healthy possibility. His attempt to escape from Nancy's concept of symbolic saturation is distorted and is self-destructive.

One could conclude that this state of nothingness can be similar to that of invisibility, the covering of a psyche that does not exist for him because he does not understand it through the symbols available in the organic community. In fact, this behaviour, which is constantly repeated as well in *Invisible Monsters*, can be said to mirror the state of the American community. It is worth mentioning at this point how deeply individualism as understood in a capitalist setting has taken root in the main

character's view: "Shotgunning anybody in this room would be the moral equivalent of killing a car, a vacuum cleaner, a Barbie doll (...) Probably that goes for anybody in the world. We're all such products" (12). Again, this is another feature that proves how the self has been pushed to the margins in favour of the subject's bodily representation. It is an ensemble engulfed by Esposito's nihilism, the body encapsulating nothing inside, its shell the only proof of these characters' humanity. In this sense, as happened in *Choke*, Nancy's concept of the body is rejected and ignored: here, the body is completely fused with an unexplored self.

It is also an individualism that excludes the other and centres the subject's attention on an essential understanding of the self, always strongly delimited: "each of us being me, me, me first. The murderer, the victim, the witness, each of us thinks our role is the lead" (16). Instead of maintaining a relationship with the other to expose the self and communicate, the other is used egotistically to artificially heighten that self's value. As one of Shannon's friends, who is also a model, claims: "I hate how I don't feel real enough unless people are watching" (69). It is here that the similar craving for attention that both Victor and *Invisible Monster's* main character have is made explicit. After the shot, Shannon stays in the hospital for some time, and there she meets Brandy Alexander, the most important character after Shannon in this thesis. As the latter says at the beginning of the novel: "[u]ntil I met Brandy, all I wanted was for somebody to ask me what happened to my face. (...) But nobody wanted to know. Then nobody doesn't include Brandy Alexander" (32).

Before exploring in detail the relationship between Shannon and Brandy, it should be mentioned that the protagonist's feeling of invisibility was already an issue even before her accident: "we all end up mutilated. Most women know this feeling of being more and more invisible everyday" (32). This also entails an essentialist conception of women and femininity in the public sphere, and provides an example of Demetriou's both external and internal hegemonic masculinity: women are taken as "invisible" not only in men's reality, but in the female protagonist's perception as well. Shannon is not fighting the alienating effect in community that has an impact on women, thus reinforcing the "fraternal union" that characterizes operative communities, which leaves women aside. She sees herself through the gendered filters that pose masculinity above femininity and she has literally mutilated herself, making herself invisible through this close-to-death experience: "Nobody will look at me. I'm

invisible” (45).<sup>55</sup> Shannon is also a grotesque character, much like Victor and the other female characters analysed earlier (Marla and Fertility) in the sense that she understands her own mutilation as “an advantage. All those people now with piercings and tattoos and brandings and scarification... What I mean is, attention is attention” (53). Basically, her body is still taken as the main focus of the projection of who she is. If understood as such, becoming hideous and a super model are two different sides of the same coin, as in both extremes Shannon follows the beauty standards (what is beautiful, what is hideous) that rule American society and its production-consumption scheme. She is therefore a victim of internal hegemonic masculinity, being (sexually) objectified from the outside, but still not fighting this drive. This is similar to Victor’s reflection on America’s idea of progress: evolving successfully means *more*, bigger and always forward, even if that puts the subject in danger.

Still on *Invisible Monsters* and Shannon’s distorted manner of trying to be noticed, Brandy Alexander’s arrival will change her approach:

“Your perception is all fucked up,” Brandy says. “All you can talk about is trash that’s already happened” (...) “You can’t base your life on the past or the present” (...) “When you realize the story you’re telling is just words (...) and [you can] throw your past in the trashcan (...) then we’ll figure out who you’re going to be.” (60-61)

When they meet, Brandy convinces Shannon to wear a veil, instead of going under surgery to reconstruct her face. The veil covers whatever there is underneath, a secret: “There’s nothing about me to look at so most people don’t. It’s a look that says: *Thank you for not sharing*” (24). According to Mendieta, the protagonist’s beauty is now “presenced” but not seen. It is “the beauty of the grotesque and terrifying”, and it is even more owned by her for its very performative nature (the shot in the face) (400). In this way, invisibility is understood in a different way. No one can tell if the veil enters the scene to *cover* something out of shame, or if it is about *hiding* it because of its value. Indeed, this gives Shannon a mysterious halo: “The look is elegant and sacrilegious and makes me feel sacred and immoral” (14). It is also the assumption of the role of a woman who refuses to be seen and objectified, a small but still a first step towards the rejection of the “sexual object” role.

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<sup>55</sup> This mutilation will have a different reading in other sections.

In sum, Victor and Shannon share a connection with death that makes them develop a disruptive potential similar to the protagonists of the first two novels analysed in Chapter 1. Moreover, both of them have an essentialist understanding of gender roles, which encloses each of them in their own part of the social spectrum. At this moment, their identities verge on a state of liminality that cannot make them part of society but that cannot offer them the chance to expose themselves, as they do not have anything to expose but their bodies. Shannon's big secret (explained below) is covered, and just like when she was a model, the body continues to be her only channel to access her self. Victor uses sexual intercourse to erase any feelings that may enter his mind, his body being only a machine of masculine projection. However, the relationships that these protagonists will develop with other characters in the story will help them evolve from their nihilistic existence to a curious inoperative incursion (explained in section 5).

#### **4. “Even your physical body will get replaced”: The body and family bonds**

From an essentialist and operative perspective, it is necessary to clarify first that the main characters of these two novels are signified through the gender dichotomy that rules traditional communities: masculinity (Victor) and femininity (Shannon). In both cases the body becomes essential for them to have their own identity performance, and family bonds are the ones that help trigger such understanding of the self in both protagonists. As explained before, family bonds are paramount in these two novels, which is why they are being analysed together. In both cases, there is one particular member of the family that conditions their development as individualities.

*Invisible Monster's* Shannon suffers an identity dissolution influenced by her brother, Shane. From the beginning of the story the protagonist talks constantly about her brother. Shannon and Shane were only one year apart and looked alike. When Shane catches a sexual illness, their parents assume that he is a homosexual, and they throw him out of the house. However, before that, a hairspray explodes on his face, which mutilates him partly. Instead of making Shannon feel pity for his brother, this makes her *resent* him: “[My parents] just liked my brother more because he was mutilated” (72). In the previous section of this chapter, it was explained how both protagonists' show great need for attention. In Shannon's case, the need is so excessive that it becomes destructive: “I really, really, really want my brother to be dead. Because my folks want

him dead. Because life is just *easier* if he's dead. Because this way, I'm an only child. Because it's my turn, damn it. My turn" (75). It needs to be mentioned as well that due to Shannon's jealousy, there is a certain suspicion that she provokes the accident, although she maintains this is untrue (92-93). Some time later, after Shane disappears, someone informs the family that AIDS has killed him, and their parents become strong supporters of gay rights, apparently out of guilt. Here, from the moment his parents reject him for his sexual identity and he suffers the accident, the focus is always on him. In the type of social milieu in *Choke* and *Invisible Monsters*, "attention is attention", as Shannon says. In America, as also commented above, progress is always forward. Working with this logic, and taking matters to the extreme as Palahniuk has readers used to, Shannon's self-provoked accident with the rifle would make sense. An interesting observation here is that, being brother and sister, Freud's "penis envy" or Horrock's revision of "breast envy" are not an issue. Sex difference is not what organizes the siblings' hierarchy, but body mutilation or disease, yet another symbolizing filter for the body. A body that is *noticed* when in sickness, in Nancy's sense. This will be of help later for the characters to really understand their bodies "ex corpora" in the section dealing with inoperative models.<sup>56</sup>

In this novel, bodily essentialism filters as well the view on parenthood and gender stereotypes in both men and women. I would like to begin by analysing how homosexuality is regarded in the story. When Shane dies, his parents decide to join P.F.L.A.G. (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). As happens regularly in Palahniuk's novels, there seems to be a satirical look in the way the parents are handling the issue: "With gay stuff you have to be so careful since everything means something in secret code" (90). They want to create a tablecloth to support the gay community, but they cannot decide which colours to use because most combinations already mean something. The excessive symbolism that surrounds the whole idea seems to make its actual purpose vanish. It can also be argued that flags and symbols do not really do much as a means for real acceptance of the LGTBI community. An image before an actual fact, something expected in a society in which you are what you look like. At the same time, every time Shannon and Shane's parents talk about homosexuality they do

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<sup>56</sup> In his article on 'sibling intimacy', Gerardo Rodríguez-Salas offers interesting keys that can be applicable to the special bond of the two siblings in Palahniuk's novel under analysis.

so in sexual terms or about sexual diseases, which does not really help breaking with the social stigma that surrounds homosexuality, in America and elsewhere.<sup>57</sup>

On a different note, womanhood is widely discussed and deconstructed in *Invisible Monsters*. The main female character is enough proof, having half her face missing. She was a super model but decided to blow her face off, giving up her beauty. Her identity as a woman as understood in the American context was clearly compromised from that moment, and indeed, since then, she stays in a limbo in which there is no room for gender significations (Shannon's identity and the reasons behind her mutilation will be analysed below). However, there are two other female characters in the novel that challenge normative forms of femininity. To begin with Brandy Alexander. It is finally revealed at the end of the story that she is actually Shane, Shannon's brother. Shane, now Brandy, has gone under surgery several times and his look is now completely womanly. Shannon comments that her hands were the only part that could not be changed in surgery: "Brandy's hands are enormous. Beaded with rings, as if they could be more obvious (...) so Brandy doesn't even try to hide her hands" (23). Everything about her is large-scale and sumptuous, a body that takes the feminine cliché to the extreme, much like Tender's transformation in *Survivor*. Not long after Brandy confesses that she used to be Shane, it is also discovered that Evie used to be a boy too, who decided to become a woman at the age of sixteen. This all boils down to the fact that the two characters that represent acceptable standards of femininity in this context turn out to have been born biologically male. In fact, Brandy still preserves her penis, but projects herself as a woman nonetheless. This can be argued to devalue completely the symbolic power that accompanies the penis when attached to a body which is not read as male. The phallus is demonstrated here to be completely dependent on a male body that is also inevitably chained to contextual elements.

This represents a breach in masculine identity as understood by the American community that cannot be ignored. It presents masculinity as fluid and fixed only as much as the body, though not necessarily male-like, performs in a masculine way. Halberstam proposed that masculinity stands out specially when outside the "white male middle-class body". Here, however, the main locus of masculine projection, the penis

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<sup>57</sup> Apart from Shane, there is another male character in the novel who also feels attracted towards other men. Manus, also known as Seth and Ellis during the novel, used to be Shannon's boyfriend, but during the relationship he starts insinuating that he wants other men's attention. He will be analysed in section 6.

signified as the phallus, is found attached to a female body. One may wonder, then, which gender identity dominates Shane's psyche. She cannot be completely signified through any of the gendered filters available in the operative community, the American community to be more specific. This means that she (he?) is the one to decide, regardless her (his?) body. Still, *Invisible Monsters* recreates a social milieu in which appearances are everything, the body being its main projector of identity. Proof of this is that Brandy suggests that Shannon covers her mutilated face, because her mutilation would undoubtedly create social rejection<sup>58</sup>: "You can live a (...) regular life (...) You just can't let anybody get close enough to you to learn the truth. In a word (...) veils" (107). In a way, Brandy does the same. Her body, extravagant and excessively feminine, is a coverage. She hides by showing too much. Another important remark is that this understanding of the subject's self is still limited to the body and in denial of its real exposure, without which an inoperative encounter could not take place. This is because in none of the cases mentioned above is the body completely exposed, as Nancy recommends in *Corpus*.<sup>59</sup> Finally, it can be argued that it is the (mutilated) body what makes of Shannon and Brandy two more examples of "pariah femininity". The first by having lost half her face, and the second by having gone through a sex change operation, represent two different samples of marginalized femininities. At the same time, their "hiding" through their rejection of femininity (beauty, in Shannon's case, and overemphasis as regards Brandy) is deliberate, which is a similar approach to Marla's and Fertility's gender performance in Chapter 3. To complicate matters, Brandy will confess later (see section 7) that he (Shane) never wanted to be a woman. Keeseey sees this not only as a rebellion against sexual stigmatizations. It also poses Brandy/Shane (before completing her/his transformation) in a transsexual process that is closer to "being between the sexes than in definitely changing from male to female" (33). It cannot be countered as a means of attaining power through masculinity, but these characters non-normative feminine performance will grant them a greater sense of agency and power.

In *Choke*, Victor suffers that same type of dissolution inside the family institution discussed earlier, due to his relationship with his mother. Ida is early

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<sup>58</sup> It cannot be forgotten that although the American community does provide its members with a meaningful connection for "being together", the intention is still that of creating a communal identity. All characters in the novel have the need to belong.

<sup>59</sup> Scott Ash also refers to the usage of the body in *Invisible Monsters* and *Choke*, as a means to "escape the hegemonic control of what society deems are appropriate behaviours and choices" (75).

presented as a smothering figure that *asphyxiates* the main character.<sup>60</sup> “The truth is, every son raised by a single mom is pretty much born married. I don’t know, but until your mom dies it seems like all the other women in your life can never be more than just your mistress” (16). His obsession is a reflection of another of his addictions: dependency (Mendieta 401). The absolute fusion commented by Kimmel in mother-son relationships is clearly exemplified in Victor’s opinion of his mother, and it is extended to all women (127). At the same time, this takes us back to Chodorow’s vision of the pathologically strong bonds between mothers and sons, when the husband is absent (104-105). In addition, Victor’s *resentment* is also clearly visible every time he talks about her. As the story continues and Victor keeps remembering his childhood, he tells how his mother loses him again and again to social services, and how she kidnaps him time after time from his new foster families. She becomes his only valuable referent: “You are mine. Mine. Now and forever, and don’t you ever forget it” (67). Her attitude<sup>61</sup> and Victor’s mirror perfectly Freud’s Oedipus complex examined in the theoretical framework: Victor’s lack of a father figure would explain his difficulty at attaining a proper masculine identity, which turns him into an abusive person (as examined by Segal and Horrocks). Here, the main character imitates *Fight Club*’s protagonist and the rest of the members who had been “raised by women”. Their lack of a father figure was translated into a defective and weak (masculine) identity, and so is Victor’s.

Still in *Choke*, Victor’s negative fixation towards women is more and more poignant as the story advances. The following extract, found at the equator of the novel, is the best example of Victor’s essentialist view when it comes to women and motherhood. First, I will analyse the first of the two:

All my life, I’ve been less my mother’s child than her hostage. The subject of her social and political experiments (...) Now she’s mine, and she’s not going to escape by dying or getting better. I just want one person that I can rescue. I want one person who needs me (...) I want to be a hero, but not just one time. Even if it means keeping her crippled, I want to be someone’s constant saviour (...) I’m just tired of being wrong all the time just because I’m a guy. I mean, how many times can

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<sup>60</sup> In fact, one may infer that “choke” is a reference to Victor’s performance in restaurants to get money and also to describe his relationship with his mother.

<sup>61</sup> Though the author does not give any clues about this being the case, Victor’s memories are completely filtered by his childhood, so the reader can never be sure if everything that he remembers about his mother is true.

everybody tell you that you're the oppressive, prejudiced enemy before you give up and become the enemy. I mean, a male chauvinist pig isn't born, he's made, and more and more of them are being made by women. After long enough, you just roll over and accept the fact that you're a sexist, bigoted, insensitive, crude, cretinist cretin. Women are right. You're wrong. You get used to the idea. (118)

To begin with, in these last two quotes I observe Ida's appearance as a true "pariah". She is another example of "pariah femininity", closer to the masculine than the feminine, without having been granted the access of masculinity's power and in the end being stigmatized by her own son, who paradoxically feels powerless in front of her. Her rebellious, aggressive nature posed in contrast to her current vulnerable state mirrors Kegan Gardiner's theorized confusion as regards the effects of "female masculinity": powerful in some ways, powerless in others (610). In addition, Victor's essentialist conception of women can be analysed from several angles. First, Victor's mother is an example of Kimmel's analysis of the maternal figure culturally over-emphasised and taken as an "infantilising creature". Victor finds Ida as a powerful emasculating model that has always symbolised oppression together with emotional dependency. However, now that she is at his mercy, he wants to do with her exactly what she did with him: he wants her power. This reminds us of Segal's backlash as regards the son's rebellion against his mother, and the son's tendency to never blame the "inaction" of the father (*Slow Motion* 10). Examining the extract further, Victor keeps following the aforementioned experts' conclusions when, right after commenting on his necessity to be needed by his mother, he connects his discourse with his opinion on women. Following Pateman (217) and Pease's comments (*Recreating* 75), Victor is incapable of seeing his mother outside the motherhood paradigm, and his view is extended towards all females. For him, every woman is exactly like his mother: oppressive and emasculating, and getting too close would mean trouble. This is viewed during an argument that Victor has with a stripper, after he tells her about a common illness among women:

"You have one sick issue with women"

After her I yell, "Every woman is just a different kind of problem." (100)

His inability to see women outside this realm would explain his use of sex as a way of escaping, instead of finding healthy sexual relationships with women. For him, sex is incestuous, in the sense that his mother represents all women for him; such is her

power.<sup>62</sup> In this sense, Victor finds himself trapped into two different worlds: the American community, which limits men's identity through specific symbols of masculinity; and his mother, who embodies the only thread that may help him step outside those saturations, but who still is too powerful for him. Next to his mother, his main referent, Victor's psyche, is still too weak to stand on its own. He always sees himself as Ida's son.<sup>63</sup> But his self needs desperately to have its own independence. For that reason, Victor confesses: "I'm terrified of losing her, but if I don't, I may lose myself" (118).

Back to his reflection on women, his negative view is also interesting. In his opinion, it is like the Pygmalion effect: men becoming what women think of them. If women are to decide what men can become, it gives women further emotional power and makes men more dependent on them. Here, Victor embodies the ideology that accompanies men of the second wave of masculinities, as explained by Whitehead and Barret (15). From this perspective, the protagonist is clearly epitomising the American masculine crisis that is so central for this thesis. Always used to being at the top of the pyramid, now comes the realization that too much power has been taken away from them, and women, seen as equally oppressive, their identities homogenised, have to be the ones to blame.

The extract analysed above continues as follows, this time commenting directly on motherhood:

I mean, in a world without God, aren't mothers the new god? The last unassailable position. Isn't motherhood the last perfect magical miracle? But a miracle that's impossible for men. And maybe men say they're glad not to give birth, all the pain and blood, but really that's just so much sour grapes. For sure, men can't do anything near as incredible. Upper body strength, abstract thought, phalluses – any advantages men appear to have are pretty token (...) Women are already born so far ahead ability wise. The day men can give birth, that's when we can start talking about equal rights. (118)

Firstly, motherhood is posed at the same level as God. This time, it is not the paternal figure that embodies the "absolute other", but a maternal one. The father has been de-

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<sup>62</sup> Victor's inability to connect intimately with women because of his relationship with his mother is also revised by Keeseey, what he calls the protagonist's "Madonna/whore complex" (44).

<sup>63</sup> One proof of this is the reference to his constant flashbacks with his mother, showing a childhood overwhelmed by his mother's presence.

throned as the ultimate powerful communal entity, in Victor's mind. Contrary to Freud's views, Victor poses men as the ones who have a lack, a lack that prompts envy. Not only does motherhood appear as the strong one, it is also described with traits that are normally part of hegemonic masculinity: the ability to bear "pain and blood". Any other feature that describes men<sup>64</sup> cannot make it justice. At the same time, though the phallus maintains its symbolic power, this cannot face women's biological ability of giving birth,<sup>65</sup> which in a way helps though superficially deconstruct hegemonic masculinity. This type of masculinity is never contested, but Victor is clearly discrediting it. In a nutshell, Victor sees men as the "weaker sex", and this only reinforces the symbolism attached to the two sexes under consideration in this mindset.

The protagonist continues saying that "[w]omen don't want equal rights. They have more power being *oppressed*. They *need* men to be the vast enemy conspiracy. Their whole identity is based on it" (204). This perfectly exemplifies Robinson's ideas as regards hegemonic masculinity and its usage of victimhood to stay in the dominant position, and Carroll's conclusions when he explains that white masculinity tries to maintain its supremacy by holding a vulnerable stance (1-8): "It's not about looking good, (...) – but you still win. Just let yourself be broken and humiliated. Just your whole life, keep telling people, I'm sorry. I'm sorry" (53). By trying to locate men as the weaker sex, Victor reinforces the system's dominion on men's psyches. It can be argued that in that way, by seeing women strive to equality, men are forced to feel disempowered. As a result, men's agency keeps being compromised, and stays limited by the notion of "man". The same goes as well, of course, for men's (Victor's) view of women. In addition, it is interesting to see Victor talking about women's identity and how this is based on men's oppression, when in fact experts always talk about masculinity as a term originated in opposition to the surge of the concept of femininity. It is masculinities that completely depend on what femininity is, what "not to be". As such, Victor only demonstrates his own denial, his inability to understand himself outside his relationships with women (specially his mother). In this sense, and adding to the previous argument, Victor is becoming part of Demetriou's historical bloc: his statement about women having more power by being oppressed not only reinforces

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<sup>64</sup> It should not be forgotten that though Victor's hierarchy poses women at the pinnacle, his description of men and women is still purely essentialist and homogenizing, echoing again Demetriou's external hegemony.

<sup>65</sup> Of course, once again, Victor is projecting a view of women that only includes those that are able and desire to have babies.

external hegemony, but also makes women's stand "homogeneous and consistent with the project of domination" needed by hegemonic masculinity to keep leading both men and women (345).

After this analysis of the body in both works and how parenthood and family bonds have an effect on the characters' psyche, I would like to focus now on how religious imagery affects Victor and Shannon through parenthood. Similarly to the process analysed in the first chapter, the protagonists' use of operative symbolism will take their selves to an extreme organic understanding which will later be used in their benefit to engage in an inoperative encounter.

## **5. "Parenthood is the opiate of the masses!": Parents, selfhood and religious symbolism**

In the previous section, parenthood was analysed in relation to the main characters' perception as regards their gender identities and their perception towards womanhood and manhood. Here, parenthood will be examined from the religious symbolism to which it is attached in both novels. As can be concluded even from a superficial glance, parenthood is given a central role, so it is not surprising to find it described in terms of religious symbolism: parenthood a sacred state.

In *Invisible Monsters*, parenthood is taken by the main characters as a projection of the omnipotent power of a god-like figure, one that helplessly manipulates them without consideration. This novel is even more direct establishing this connection when one of the characters, Seth, comments that "your being born makes your parents God. You owe them your life, and they can control you. 'Then puberty makes you Satan,' he says, 'just because you want something better'" (175). The same character also states that "your folks are like God because you want to know they're out there and you want them to approve of your life, still you only call them when you're in crisis and need something" (116), and also "your folks are God. You love them and want to make them happy, but you still want to make up your own rules" (203).

In *Choke*, Victor's rejection of God was analysed in the previous section as his way of rejecting his mother's power. However, this also means that he is giving this power the credit that he does not want her to have. In *Invisible Monsters* that power is

recognized, but also craved and wanted. As the main character writes on a note: “You spend your entire life becoming God and then you die” (264). Indeed, as Ida Mancini claims: “Parenthood is the opiate of the masses!” (*Choke* 112). In society, becoming a father or a mother is the promise of an agency that does not depend on anyone but yourself. Parenthood provides the subject with a dominant position on another(s), which helps the self of the one that gives life greater value: a stronger sense of the self. This indicates a reproduction of Derrida’s examination on irresponsibility in community, because the subject feels compelled to feel responsible only towards an absolute other whose agency depends on the existence of someone else, leaving aside the self that does form part of community (*Gift* 17). In this view, sons and daughters are always dependent on a parental figure, establishing a hierarchy only surpassed by God (indeed, the family is one of the main pillars that sustain traditional communities, including America). The self can only thrive when having an-other subject under its protection. In that sense, the (patriarchal) system has power because it forces a hierarchy as well, in which it assumes the role of “protector”. This imitates the relationship between God and His subjects. It is a patriarchal system founded in a hierarchy where men provide and women guard the home; a family structure where mothers and fathers rule over sons and daughters until the latter become the procreators. In a nutshell: traditional communities make the self incapable of developing on its own, and hierarchies are forced and needed. As a result, difference always fosters inequality, instead of educating the self to evolve embracing its own difference and the others’, from equality. Instead, the subject cannot be “on its own”, and creates co-dependent relationships. In such a mindset, Freud’s analysis about the relationship between mothers, father, sons and daughters makes perfect sense.

In *Choke* this quote, already discussed in the previous section, will serve to examine this same question: “I mean, in a world without God, aren’t mothers the new god?” (118). Previously, Victor’s obsession with finally embodying his mother’s power position has been appreciated. Victor wants to imitate his mother, who at the same time embodies a God-like figure, always in Victor’s view (“now I want to be the hero”). As the story advances, once Victor’s mother is presented and their relationship is clarified, Palahniuk implies that, in her delusional mind, Ida Mancini believes that Victor was

conceived with Jesus Christ's genetic material.<sup>66</sup> All this information is supposedly found in Ida's diary, which is written in Italian. Dr Paige (an important character that will be examined in detail later) says that she knows the language, and tells Victor that this is what is written in his mother's diary: "if you believe in the Holy Trinity, you're your own father" (...) 'Your poor mother (...) she's so delusional she truly believes you're the second coming of Christ'" (145-146). This discovery turns Victor's self-perception outside down. He cannot stand the fact that he has been conceived to be a good person: "You people are not going to make me feel anything. (...) Nobody's going to trick me into feeling Christlike" (155). From that moment, Victor becomes obsessed about this new identity imposed on him by his mother. He keeps asking Deny, his best friend, to tell him that he is nothing like Jesus Christ: "Tell me again I'm an insensitive asshole" (168). From then on, he also acts by always wondering, "what would Jesus NOT do?" (169, 177, 182, 186, etc.). Victor cannot stand the fact that a new imposition on his identity by his mother has appeared, and he wants to reject it at all costs:

"I'll prove her I'm no Jesus Christ. Anybody's true nature is bullshit. There is no human soul. Emotion is bullshit. Love is bullshit (...). We live and we die and anything else is just delusion. It's just passive chick bullshit about feelings and sensitivity. Just made-up subjective emotional crap. There is no soul. There is no God. There's just decisions and disease and death" (156).

As Victor equates his mother with God, by denying God and becoming some sort of antichrist, he may believe he is escaping his mother and his smothering shadow. This is *Choke's* bond between motherhood and religion.

This examination of parenthood and the God figure can be added further complexity. In both novels, the main characters try to embrace the new identities that their new companions, intentionally or not, are giving them. In *Choke*, Victor's relationship with Dr Paige will be decisive. Although this bond will be further discussed in the section dealing with inorganic communities, it is important to mention it here because it also influences the protagonist's willingness to explore his own self, though unsuccessfully here, as I will theorize. Due to his interest in her, Victor decides to believe what his mother's diary says. Since he believes he is the new Jesus Christ, Dr Paige is convinced that if both of them have sex and they succeed at conceiving a

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<sup>66</sup> During one of his visits to the hospital, Victor tells his mother that he is Victor's father. To which she answers: "Oh, you're him, and you've come back" (...) 'Oh blessed Father. Holy Father' (...) 'Oh, please forgive me'" (70).

foetus, they can use its cells to save his mother, who is slowly dying of dementia. However, now his identity feels even weaker than before: “Anymore, I won’t even pretend to know what I’m like” (231). Even though now he finds himself in some sort of limbo, he does reach the following conclusion: “It’s pathetic how we can’t live with the things we can’t understand. How we need everything labelled and explained and deconstructed. Even if it’s for sure unexplainable. Even God.” (232). He decides to follow, in an act of faith, his new identity as Christ, and he wants to “try and be a better person” (239). However, for the first time, he feels insecure, perhaps because now he understands the real responsibility of finding his own agency: ““What if Jesus spent all his growing up getting things wrong (...) before he ever got a single miracle right?”” (237). *Invisible Monsters* follows a tremendously similar path. When Brandy convinces Shannon to wear a veil, she explains all the advantages:

In the way our world is, (...) people knowing everything about you at first glance, a good veil is your tinted limousine window. Behind a good veil, you could be anyone” (...) In our world where nobody can keep a secret anymore, a good veil says: Thank You for NOT Sharing (...) “Other people will fill the blanks” The same as how they do with God, she says. (108)

In both works, God represents an obsession for the main characters, precisely because he cannot be explained: “It’s pathetic how we can’t live with the things we can’t understand”; ““Other people will fill the blanks’ The same as how they do with God”. Both protagonists are obsessed over such figure because it represents their chance to become a self on their own. In both novels they are trying to embody the figure of an “absolute other”. As explained in the theoretical framework, God’s actions are unavowable and cannot be understood by the human mind; however, at the same time He is also the only one entitled to subjectivity. The One whose identity is only His, and that can remain always open to interpretations because it can never be limited: all answers may or may not be correct. Victor and Shannon make use of this trait, the first by adopting an identity whose birth may provoke obsession but cannot be understood, and the other by making herself invisible, and therefore unreadable. It can be argued that this entails a step forward for both characters to be able to find an open exposure of their selves that does end up limited by the gendered symbolism that rules society, leaving their past identities behind. However, there is still one issue that prevents them from reaching a full understanding of their individualities. In both cases, their identities are imposed by an external party: Brandy Alexander and Dr Paige and Victor’s mother.

In any case, both characters have reached a liminal state as regards their identities that has prepared them for real exposure, as explained in the following section.

## **6. Inoperative encounters: The main characters' potential for openness**

The first part of this chapter dealt with the main characters' interest in death and the reasons behind this attraction. In this section, I will analyse the protagonists' approach to death as a means to reject the symbolism that characterizes the operative community and the American context in which they live in order to reach a better understanding of their selves. I will theorize Victor's and Shannon's attempts to go back to the abject, or a pre-symbolic stage, in order to block the symbolism mentioned above and *communicate* with the other.

In *Invisible Monsters*, the narrator, Shannon, keeps telling the story in a non-linear manner, taking the reader constantly back to her memories with her brother. At those times she reflects on her past's volatility: "No matter how careful you are, there's going to be the sense you missed something, the collapsed feeling under your skin that you didn't experience it all. There's that fallen heart feeling that you rushed right through the moments where you should've been paying attention" (22). The same anguish towards finitude is expressed in the last extract. Although *Choke*'s anxiety towards fugacity is more salient as explained below, Shannon's constant reminiscences of moments shared with her brother point out as well her willingness to go back to the abject. The liminality that Victor reached through his choking scenes and sexual experiences is also attained by Shannon when she shoots herself. The reasons why she does so will be explained later, but for now, one thing is clear: the lack of a face is per se a step towards social enclosure, and therefore communal rejection. As Shannon confesses early in the novel, she just wants someone to ask her what happened, so that she can move on (45). When she meets Brandy in the hospital, she is the only one who truly takes an interest on her: "'Posing girl, you are so God-awful ugly. Did you let an elephant sit on your face or what?'" (57). There is clearly that initial inclining that characterizes Nancy's *clinamen*. However, here only Brandy is an active party in it. As exposed above, Brandy convinces Shannon to take her past life just like a story, so that when she realises that her past is only words, they can "figure out who [she is] going to be" (61). The main character becomes an "empty canvas" on whom her new companion

can imprint new fake identities, so that they cannot be caught by the police. Shannon becomes one of Brandy's "Witness Reincarnation Project", just like Manus, the man that accompanies them in their journey visiting manors and selling drugs. Whenever they are asked for their names and nationalities, they both go through different names and backgrounds: Shannon McFarland, also Miss Arden Scotia or Bubba-Joan; Manus Kelley, or Alfa Romeo, Ellis Island and Seth Thomas. The constant change of names and stories with which Brandy comes up, including herself, can be analysed in the following way. First, they become Derrida's concept of the *foreigner* in a reversed manner. Indeed, the foreigner has the right to hospitality when he enters a new community and gives her or his name. These characters are, however, already part of the American community, but give fake names and nationalities. In that sense, these characters, who are already engulfed in that communal union, can step away from it and observe themselves from a different angle. This is as well a step towards liminality, since when this happens, they belong to a communal limbo.

It should be remembered, however, that this is always orchestrated by Brandy Alexander, so the other two characters never own these fake identities for them to be inoperative attempts at understanding the self. At the same time, the relationship between Shannon and Brandy is, and always was, a toxic one. Shannon is highly dependent on Brandy because the latter is the only character that shows an interest on her. There is, however, another reason behind Shannon's fixation on Brandy. The protagonist confesses the following: "I love Seth Thomas [(Manus)] so much I have to destroy him. I overcompensate by worshiping the queen supreme. Seth will never love me. No one will ever love me ever again" (104). In the story, Shannon explains that Manus used to be her boyfriend, but he shows clear signs that he is attracted to men. Though living in denial, she is perfectly conscious of her dramatic panorama: "Even if I overcompensate, nobody will ever want me (...) You can't kiss someone who has no lips. Oh, love me, love me, love me (...). I'll be anybody you want me to be" (105). This only shows the fact that Shannon's identity used to be widely defined by her relationship with Seth, and that her desire to escape the past mirrors her willingness to escape away from his treason. Her desire of breaking from her past identity is not motivated by an exposure to otherness, but escaping an identity that did not work for her anymore and she saw impossible to change. Though the motivations are not the best, the consecution is fruitful, as the same liminal state attained by Victor is achieved

by Shannon through Brandy's new identities and her insistence on making her invisible: "Not a word: you're still too connected to your past. Your saying anything is pointless" (110). Not showing is not exposing, but also leaving open an endless range of possibilities for the *other*.

An important element as regards Brandy's (Shane's) and Shannon's identity is the character of Manus himself. Manus was a police detective who would go undercover to catch male sexual offenders. While going out with Shannon, he begins showing clear signs that he likes other men. As their relationship advances, he keeps asking questions that reveal such fact: "[H]e asks, if I were a gay guy would I want to bang him up the butt?" (229). As he becomes older and his role as a bait does not work anymore, he becomes even more obsessed with becoming attractive for other men: "Me being a gay guy, would I think he looked too desperate? Too aloof? (...) 'I'd hate for guys to think I'm just a big dumb cow is all'" (234) To add to this scheme, Brandy reveals later that Manus sexually abused him when he was Shane at the age of fifteen, giving him the sexual disease that would later provoke his eviction from the family house. In addition, Manus met Shannon at the age of eighteen, not long after Shane's disappearance, when he goes to the house to ask about him. At meeting Shannon at the door, he claims: "You know, you look a lot like your brother, (...)" (253), leading to their ensuing relationship. Manus' character can be examined as a projector of both external and internal hegemonic masculinity. The first because even though his sexual preferences are made perfectly clear by the character, he lies about it and hides from it,<sup>67</sup> which demonstrates his rejection towards the gay community. His performance is also referential to internal hegemony because precisely due to the same reasons as stated above, he is marginalizing himself as a homosexual man, disguising his sexuality with Shannon's relationship. Importantly, he becomes as well a point in common between Shane and Shannon, them becoming a collateral damage to his twisted male psyche. Their identities are strongly forged by their relationship with this man, a clear example of toxic masculinity, who acts in secret due to his lack of acceptance of a self that does not in reality belong to this spectrum.

Taking the same route as *Choke's* analysis in this section (seen below), consuming drugs is also relevant to understand the characters' potential to reach

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<sup>67</sup> In fact he makes Shane promise that he will not reveal their relationship to anyone: "He says he likes a kid who can keep a secret (251)"

inoperative connections. When they visit a manor and consume the drugs they can find there, the aforementioned state of liminality acquires higher potential to find exposure. In a conversation between the protagonist and Brandy, this occurs: “‘I’m on drugs so it’s all right if I tell you this’. Brandy looks at me bent over her, offering a hand up. ‘I have to tell you’ (...) ‘but I do love you’ (...) ‘I can’t tell how this is for you, but I want us to be a family’. My brother wants to marry me” (257). Brandy’s approach to drugs is the same as Ida Mancini’s, the most comfortable way of these characters to expose their true feelings. At the same time, the fact that they can find so many drugs inside rich people’s bathroom cabinets is also indicative of American people’s pandemic of existential anguish, how its asphyxiating limits traps them all.

Escaping the culture, escaping community, escaping social stereotypes and any other type of symbolic signification is then a recurrent theme in Palahniuk’s novels, perhaps even more evident in these two works. In *Choke*, Victor’s mother was adamant in her attitude towards teaching her son how everything is symbolically filtered. In the following quote, Brandy mirrors clearly Ida’s thinking:

“It helps to know you’re not any more responsible for how you look than a car is (...) You’re a product just as much. A product of a product of a product. Your parents are products. Their parents were products. Your teachers, products (...) Sometimes your best way to deal with shit, she says, is to not hold yourself as such a precious little price. (...) [Y]ou can’t escape the world, and you’re not responsible for how you look, if you look beautiful or butt ugly. You’re not responsible for how you feel or what you say or how you act or anything you do. It’s all out of your hands (...) You’re about as free to act as a programmed computer. (...) “There isn’t any real you in you” (...) even your physical body, all your cells will be replaced within eight years.” Skin, bones, blood, and organs transplant from person to person. Nothing of you is all-the-way yours. All of you is inherited” (...) “Whatever you’re thinking, a million other folks are thinking. Whatever you do, they’re doing, and none of you is responsible.” (...) “You’re a product of our language” (...) “and how our laws are and how we believe our God wants us. (...) “Anything you can do is boring and old and perfectly okay. You’re safe because you’re so trapped inside your culture (...) You can’t imagine any way to escape. There’s no way you can get out.” (...) “The world (...) is your cradle and your trap” (...) “And if you can find any way out of our culture, then that’s a trap, too. Just wanting to get out of the trap reinforces the trap.” (217-220)

There are a few readings to this extract. First, the concept of responsibility in community, as theorized by Patočka (qtd. in Derrida, *Gift* 17), needs to be mentioned here. Brandy takes away the American members' responsibility and locates it on the system, much like any other organic community and its relationship with the absolute other. It may be seen as liberating, but it also deprives the individual of its own self. If individuality needs to be born from feelings and personal desires, this philosophy does not contemplate the possibility of an identity evolving on its own. At the same time, I would like to establish a relationship between Brandy's "all of you is inherited" reflection with Victor's pondering on how pilgrims decided to just imitate the cultural beliefs they left behind in Europe, mentioned at the beginning of this analysis. In this sense, America is seen as a community completely unoriginal, and its obsession with comparisons backfires on its people. It also explains Palahniuk's reiterative ideas with quotes like "a copy of a copy of a copy" (*Fight Club*), "a reference to a reference to a reference" (*Survivor*), or "a product of a product of a product" (*Invisible Monsters*). As much as America may desire to be bigger, stronger, and better, its basis will always be dependent on something external to itself. Brandy's opinion on how "[a]nything you can do is boring and old and perfectly okay" mirrors as well Ida's rationalisation about laws and their limit on freedom and creativity. At the same time, she also shares Ida's view on America and its encapsulating symbolisms. It can be concluded that both of them understand that trying to fight them gives them further power and agency: expressing the desire to step *outside* implies the recognition of an *inside*. Shannon's decision to be invisible behind the veil she always wears is not something she does out of her own volition, but Brandy's idea. However, this invisibility also locates her in that liminality that will allow Shannon to expose her own self.

Following with *Choke*, the main character uses near death experiences in restaurants provoked by choking on food to attract people's attention, in a similar process as that of *Invisible Monsters*. It can be argued that during those moments in which Victor is self-provoking his asphyxiation, his body enters a liminal space in which both life and death fight each other. He also achieves the same liminality when having sexual intercourse ("I feel nothing", 19). Almost at the end of the story, his approach as regards sexual relationships is further clarified when he remembers his first time: "It's the last frontier to conquer, other people, strangers, the jungle of their arms and legs, hair and skin, the smells and moans that is everybody you haven't done. The

great unknowns. The last forest to devastate. Here's everything you've only imagined" (251). The first sexual experience of the subject is always symbolically saturated in any civilized culture, including America. A body, seen naked for the first time, can be said to attain a greater impact when it comes to exposure. Going back to his first time, it happens in a flight with a woman he does not know who proposes him to have sex there. Her own view towards reality seems to affect deeply the main character:

"Anything you can acquire" (...) "is only another thing you'll lose" The answer is there is no answer (...) "Why do I do anything?" (...) "I'm educated enough to talk myself out of any plan. To deconstruct any fantasy. Explain away any goal. I'm so smart I can negate any dream" (...) "I do this, *this*, because it feels good" (...) "Maybe I don't really know why I do it. In a way, this is why they execute killers. Because once you've crossed some lines, you just keep crossing them" (...) "the minute you give yourself a good reason, you'll start chipping away from it." (257)

This is the same existential nihilism that characterizes Victor throughout most part of the novel. Sexual intercourse is used as a means of escaping reality, a gate to enter the abject, seen by him as a protection against his own self and his feelings. However, his greatest attempt at entering Kristeva's abject comes with his constant flashbacks towards his childhood, dominated by his mother's shadow. Victor's past is full of moments in which his mother participated in several acts of vandalism and made him accompany her. The first memory that Victor remembers with his mother is particularly significant. She asks Victor to stay still, so that she can outline his shadow on the ground with a canspray. While she does so, she tells him the story of a Greek goddess who did the same with her lovers, "so she would always have a record of how he looked, a document of this exact moment, the last moment they would be together", to what she adds: "Art never comes from happiness" (4). Here, one can establish the relationship between Ida's obsession with capturing that exact moment and Victor's fixation with finitude. It also provides an explanation in relation to his view on sex: "The truth is, sex isn't sex unless you have a new partner every time. The first time is the only session when your head and body are both there" (185-186). It can be argued that she relates artistic creation with drama, the main cultural source of identity, as explained in the theoretical framework by Bataille (*Inner* 10). Art's tragedy is that it can never be repeated, and its repetition creates a symbolic friction that washes its power away. Only what's new, in Victor's mind, and in the American mindset, has value.

In all Victor's retrospections, his mother is always sending the same message: the need to break people's pre-conceived ideas: "What we have to do is mess with people's little identity paradigms'. What the Mommy used to call 'Beauty Industry Terrorism'" (66). Here, Victor's mother shows a facet that, though perhaps extreme, is culturally disruptive: "I want you to know more than just what people think is safe to tell you' (...) 'Like, when you're thinking about the rest of your life' (...) 'you're never really thinking more than a couple of years down the road' (...) 'By the time you're thirty, your worst enemy is yourself'" (97). Here, it can be said that Ida wants Victor to appreciate each moment, the value of what is finite. Organic symbols are what give community its identity, what makes community last and be sustained. The *symbolic* always has fixed meanings, which turns that which is not eternal into a *semiotic* weapon, that is, something that challenges operative patterns (it needs to be remembered that according to Nancy inorganic ones are characterized by their temporary nature). This may be Ida's message: using finitude to fight an essentialist identity that negates the uniqueness of the self.

In connection to the previous idea, Ida tells her son several times about how drugs and other addictive substances had to be used in order to treat the "dangerous excess of human knowledge", the "big goal" (148-149). She also makes a reference to the Biblical apple, how since then, humanity had been "too smart for its own good" and something had to be done to give people their innocence back (149). She adds that "[e]very addiction (...) was just a way to treat this same problem. Drugs or overeating or alcohol or sex, it was all just another way to find peace. To escape what we know. Our education. Our bite of the apple." Ida's inorganic potential cannot be denied. Her goal, as she concludes, is "to uncomplicate *myself*" (150). In communitarian theory, to "uncomplicate oneself" would mean to devoid oneself of the symbolic saturations that accompany the body, the main projector of the self's identity, and the one that suffers the most saturation. Ida adds at the end of the chapter that "We don't live in the real world anymore' (...) 'We live in a world of symbols'" (150), a statement that rounds off this character's ability to help the protagonist to reach Nancy's *clinamen*.

Ida Mancini was clearly an epitome of rebellion and cultural disobedience, and when Victor goes back to his mother's actions and its consequences (her being in jail more than out of it), he remembers how, as a child, he was afraid of doing anything rebellious, anything against the law: "Anything new or different or original was

probably against the law. Anything risky or exciting would land you in jail” (157). The world, Victor muses, had become a boring place, due to the obsession with security and organization: “The laws that keep us safe, these same laws condemn us to boredom” (159). This can be directly related to Bauman’s connection between a heightened security and lack of freedom (20). In his struggle to break through, Victor claims: “Without access to true chaos, we’ll never have true peace. Unless anything can get worse, it won’t get any better” (159). Here we find one of those peaks in Palahniuk’s stories that exemplify the author’s essence, his way of cornering his characters in order to make them react with extreme measures. Without knowing it, Victor’s mother had been preparing the grounds for her son to reach towards the edge in order for him to break the lines that delimit community: “‘The only frontier you have left is the world of intangibles’ (...) The unreal is more powerful than the real. Because nothing is as perfect as you can imagine it” (159-160). Ida is yet another of Palahniuk’s characters who craves and at times manages to create new meanings through “random chaotic acts” (Sartain, “Mona Lisa” 33), showing her tremendously disruptive potential for the destruction of the old and the hope for something new. It is one extract in which Palahniuk’s existential romanticism is clearly envisioned. She is another example of “pariah femininity”, closer to the masculine than the feminine, without having been granted the access of masculinity’s power and in the end being stigmatized by her own son, who paradoxically feels powerless in front of her. Ida’s gender performance mirrors Kegan Gardiner’s theorized confusion as regards the effects of “female masculinity”: powerful in some ways, powerless in others (610).

Taking the last part of the aforementioned quote as a reference now, I want to examine a specific chapter of the novel in which Victor’s mother exemplifies well this idea. In chapter 20, Victor remembers how his mother used to earn money by putting men into a trance and guiding them through a sexual fantasy of their choice:

What she did was (...) hypnotic induction, and guide the experience. He wasn’t going back in time. None of it was real. What was most important is he wanted this to happen (...) Imagine Salome. Imagine Marilyn Monroe. If you could go back to any period in history and get with any woman, women who would do everything you could imagine. Incredible women. Famous women (...) All she really did was set the stage. She just introduced them to their ideal. She set them up on a date with their subconscious because nothing is as good as you can imagine it. No one is as beautiful as she is in your head. Nothing is as exciting as your fantasy. (130)

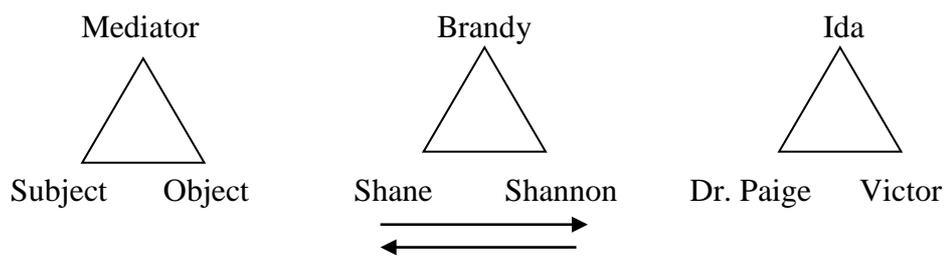
However, after a while, the men that visit her begin to also ask for advice on investment, clothing, or appearance. Insecurity in their minds leaves room for a feeling of safety that only the privacy of their minds can provide. This passage offers an understanding of these men's private self that coincides with the theoretical framework: Ida offers the therapeutic help that Hearn mentions has become so vital for a great majority of men in the United States, and Hearn's conclusion about men's private self is also made salient (63). They need an external channel, Ida, in order to guide them in their own inner worlds, because they are incapable of doing it on their own. The fact that it is a woman that provides that kind of help is also significant: it further locates masculinity as a completely fused concept inside the *symbolic*, and makes Ida (a woman) appear as an entity that can take them out of that organic symbolism and introduce them into a space unlimited by these symbols. As a result, Ida demonstrates her belonging to a scope characterized by Kristeva's semiotic, open and unrestricted, where men in this case can explore their true desires.

However, even though these men could be using Ida's channelling to step outside the oppressiveness of having to follow hegemonic masculinity's guidelines, even their inner desires are completely manipulated by patriarchal thought. Not all men could afford paying for her services, so "she'd get the same type again and again" (135), which demonstrates the capitalist basis behind this business and Ida's making a profit out of it. At the same time, these types of men who can pay for the appointments are always after sexual experiences with women where they can do whatever they want. They are also men who need to express their uncertainty about banal aspects that are always related to the communal living offered by the capitalist system. Even more disheartening, as Ida reflects, the women that these men want in their fantasy are for them nothing but "[p]rojections. Sex symbols" (136), again, one more element of Demetriou's external hegemonic masculinity. The fact that this is all part of Victor's childhood memories helps these facts take on a nuance that prepares the protagonist to understand the symbolic limitations of the community in which he lives. It is true that although Ida's intentions are to give his son the ability to question the system, her extreme and at times grotesque means attain the contrary effect: infusing fear in Victor. His mother's fixation on making him comprehend the value of his own imagination and the importance of understanding the value of finitude has backfired until Victor meets Dr. Paige, the character that will help him have an inorganic encounter.

Victor and Shannon have now reached a liminal space that will allow them to have their respective inorganic encounters. Though this connection will be produced between the protagonists and another alterity, this will happen thanks to the triangular relationship produced through the presence of a third party, as it occurred in the first chapter. It can be concluded that, what these two characters do, is “[to assault] the world by assaulting [them]selves” (*Choke*, 37). It is the violence that they exert against themselves what gives them entrance to the liminality exposed before and the “relationship triangles” of the next section, also examined in the following paragraphs.

## 7. Love triangles

Once again, I will use the Subject – Object – Mediator scheme to explain the two triads that make their appearance in each novel. In *Invisible Monsters*, the triangle will be formed by Shane, Shannon, and Brandy Alexander, and in *Choke*, it will be composed by Victor’s mother, Ida Mancini, Dr. Paige and Victor.

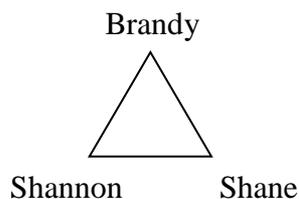


When comparing *Invisible Monsters* and *Choke* in this respect, the process is more complex in the first. To understand this scheme, it needs to be pointed out that although Brandy and Shane are the same person, it is Shane introducing himself as Brandy that provides him with this mediating power. Presenting himself as this new character who shows such an interest towards her will allow him to connect with his sister. At the same time, I would like to draw the attention towards the positions of subject and object. As I indicate above, they are interchangeable. This is the case because, as I will theorize later, Shannon *inclines* herself towards Shane as an object, and Shane inclines himself towards Shannon in the same way, both from their own position as subjects. Brandy is also well located as a mediating figure because as explained below this identity is not really recognized as a valuable self by Shane, his creator.

*Choke*’s process is more similar to the one given in *Fight Club* and *Survivor*. The mediating figure is Ida, the one who prepares Victor to learn how to doubt the

world that surrounds him. Victor covers the position of the object due to the same problems that the protagonists in the aforementioned works presented in relation to their masculine identities. Victor's fear of dissolution as represented in his relationship with his mother is salient. At the same time, his view of women's bodies as a way of escaping reality through sex objectifies his own body as well. This all indicates, as a result, the lack of a private self that consequently positions Victor as the object. Dr Paige, mirroring Marla Singer and Fertility Hollis in their respective stories, has a story of her own, a clear view of her own self that will entice the main character so that he learns to "see" himself by seeing his intended.

Focusing solely now on *Invisible Monsters*, in this thesis, I theorize that for Shannon and Shane to understand their subjectivity, they need the *other* to occupy the position of the subject, while they enter the abject and assume the position of the object in order to separate the self from the body. I will begin by locating Shane in the position of the object.



In the third section, it was explained how Shannon made use of the features of the absolute other in a way that allows them to step outside gendered symbolism and be able to find exposure. This can also be applied to Brandy Alexander. To understand this point, Derrida's concept of the *secret* needs to enter the scene again. Both Brandy and Shannon have a secret that only at the end of the novel is shared between the two. As Derrida analyses when talking about the secret shared between Abraham and God, the secret has no real value because it is only shared by him and his idea of "God in himself". This means that the secret is never actually shared, because only God, or the absolute other, knows the subject's secret. If the secret has only value when shared, its value is lost because this sharing is never taking place. However, in *Invisible Monsters*, this problem is solved. Brandy covers the position of the absolute other because she is making conscious efforts to make herself unreadable. Under that hyper-feminine, voluptuous body, there exists a secret that is revealed little by little in the story. Brandy tells Shannon about her past life as a boy, and that when he was fifteen he was asked by

his parents to leave for being a homosexual. She also confesses that she has a sister and that she is trying to find her. To this, the main character finds herself torn: “Brandy knows about me, or she doesn’t know. She’s confessing her heart, or she’s teasing me” (254). This limbo is yet another liminal state which further helps locate Brandy in the position of the mediator. It also helps seeing Brandy’s identity as weaker and faker. This is reinforced when Brandy confesses that she still has not gone through a vaginoplasty: “‘It was supposed to come off after a year, but then I met you’ (...) ‘I had my bags packed in the Congress Hotel for weeks just hoping you would come rescue me’ (...) ‘I just loved you so much, I thought maybe it’s not too late?’” (257).

Finally, during the wedding reception where the story begins, in the manor which is about to be devoured by flames, the truth about Shane’s sex change is uncovered:

“It’s not that I really want to be a woman.” (...) “I’m only doing this because it’s just the biggest mistake I can think to make. It’s stupid and destructive, and nobody you ask will tell you I’m wrong. That’s why I have to get through with it.” (...) “Don’t you see? Because we’re so trained to do life the right way. *To not make mistakes.*” (...) “I figure, the bigger the mistake looks, the better chance I’ll have to break out and live a real life.” (...) “Our real discoveries come from chaos” (...) “I’m making the same mistake only so much worse, the pain, the money, the time and being dumped by my old friends, and in the end my whole body is my story.” A sexual reassignment surgery is a miracle for some people, but if you don’t want one, it’s the ultimate form of self-mutilation. (...) ‘Not that it’s bad being a woman. This might be wonderful, *if I wanted to be a woman.* The point is,’ (...) ‘being a woman is the last thing I want. It’s just the biggest mistake I could think to make.’” (258-259)

In a society where the body remains as the only valuable projector of the subject’s identity, Shane’s transformation into a woman entails making a work out of his body with gendered significations that contradict his own perception of the self. As a result, Shane follows a process similar to the one observed in Tyler and the main character in *Fight Club*. Shane can be said to have used Brandy, a character completely rooted on the body, as an identity whose gendered symbolism is taken to the extreme, and which does not represent Shane at all. As a result, Shane has managed to really be able to separate his self from that body which becomes alien to his own, true identity. In that way, he is able to talk about his body *ex corpore*, in Nancy’s terms (*Corpus* 124), a mere shell, leaving his own identity in the open for Shannon to be able to really “see” it.

At the same time, he is able to recognize his own identity and reject any signification that does not belong to an idea of the self that he has been able to build on his own. By “trapping” himself in a female body that embraces gendered symbolism in an exaggerated way, he rejects the fusion that limits the self encapsulated in the body in the operative community:

“I’m not straight, and I’m not gay,” (...) “I’m not bisexual. I want out of the labels. I don’t want my whole life crammed into a single word. A story. I want to find something else, unknowable, some place to be that’s not on the map. A real adventure”. A sphinx. A mystery. A blank. Unknown. Undefined. Unknowable. Indefinable. Those were all the words Brandy used to describe me in my veils. Not just a story that goes and then, and then, and then, and then until you die.” (261)

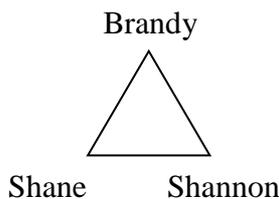
I would like to stress the value of the words that the narrator mentions, which were used by Brandy to describe her when covered by the veil. Brandy is the first “absolute other” that appears in the story, when her secret identity had not been revealed. A mysterious character that provides the protagonist with a coverage, a hiding place. Brandy is the one that gives Shannon the chance to also have the possibility of leaving behind his identity as Shannon McFarland and become anyone else. They both become the “absolute other”, an entity with an open identity, thanks to each other, an identity that cannot be signified, in Blanchot’s and Nancy’s wording: ““When I met you,” (...) ‘I envied you. I coveted your face. I thought that face of yours will take more guts than any sex change operation. It will take more guts than any sex change operation. It will give you bigger discoveries. It will make you stronger than I could ever be’” (261).

The inorganic encounter between Shane/Brandy and Shannon is about to take place. This temporary moment of *clinamen* occurs during Evie’s wedding reception. Because Brandy takes after the looks of her sister, Evie shoots her thinking she is shooting Shannon. Once more, Blanchot’s “work out of death” appears. This becomes a moment for sharing, because its temporariness and the futility of this instant invites to openness. Among other confessions, Shannon swears that she was not the one who provoked the hairspray accident, regardless of the jealousy she felt towards him. To this, he answers: ““I know. I did it. I was so miserable being a normal average child. I wanted something to save me. I wanted the opposite of a miracle’” (282). To this openness, Shannon reveals her own secret, which as I will explain now takes her away from the position of the object and gives her back her subjectivity. Using Brandy’s

blood loss, on the floor Shannon writes: “*The Truth Is I Shot Myself In The Face*”. A shocked Brandy responds: “That, (...) I didn’t know” (282-283).

In this situation, with Brandy mortally wounded, Nancy’s *clinamen* takes place in an extreme situation, where both subjects are exposing and sharing their truths with each other, in a situation surrounded by death and the body is literally being cut open. Shane began occupying the position of the object, and used his character Brandy as a mediator in order to communicate with his sister, whom he loves. In the triangle proposed at the beginning, Shane was the object because for him Shannon represented a whole self he could love and to whom he could expose himself, when the time came. Now that Shane has revealed his truth, he can occupy his position as a subject.

It is now Shannon’s turn. In this case, although the mediating figure is still covered by Brandy, the positions of subject and object are exchanged:



Nearly at the end, the main female character confesses:

Jump to the truth. I shot myself. (...) The truth is I was addicted to being beautiful, and that’s not something you just walk away from. Being addicted to all that attention, I had to quit cold turkey. I could shave my head, but hair grows back. Even bald, I might still look good. Bald, I might get even more attention. (...) I had to deal with my looks in a fast, permanent way or I’d always be tempted to go back. You know how you look at ugly hunchback girls, and they are so lucky. Nobody drags them out at night so they can’t finish their doctorate thesis papers. (285-286)

Shannon understands the saturated symbolism that accompanies the body in the context where she lives, and can only see it as a cage. At the same time, the more your body fits the ideal of beauty, the more trapped the subject is by its cultural implications: “Trapped in a beauty ghetto is how I felt. Stereotyped. Robbed of my motivation. (...) I wanted to give up the idea I had any control. (...) To be saved by chaos (...) What I thought was, at last I’ll be growing again, (...) evolving” (286-287). If she wants to escape the *symbolic*, to which the subject enters through her/his body, the body needs to be destroyed. Indeed, Palahniuk’s solution is a drastic one, but it helps seeing the

problematic relationship between the body and the self in community. In this sense, by attacking herself, Shannon could be said to be making use of a facet that belongs to hegemonic masculinity, although this is not used to fit in society, as the stereotypical American man would: she is using it for her own benefit. Exerting violence against oneself is indeed one of the elements that define hegemonic masculinity (Kaufman, "The Construction of Masculinity" 12), and having both Shannon and Shane use it demonstrates the unfixity of the masculine gender, as understood through Demetriou's internal hegemony. However, since Shannon defines herself as a woman, it can be argued that she is exerting a type of masculinity which, though toxic, is still part of that spectrum, and therefore shows its weak nature. Thanks to her exposure with her brother, she has discovered something about her "self" that otherwise she would not have been able to grasp: "I don't want to be me anymore. I want to be happy, and I want Brandy Alexander back. Here's my first real dead end in my life. There's nowhere to go, not the way I am right now, the person I am. Here's my first real beginning." (291). This love triangle has given each of these individualities their own agency thanks to the mediating figure of Brandy Alexander.

As already explained above, in *Choke* the relationship between Victor, Dr Paige and Ida Mancini is very similar to the triangles found in *Fight Club* and *Survivor*. Ida Mancini acts as a mediating figure, who represents a hysterical rejection of the cultural values of the setting where she lives. Like Marla and Fertility, Dr Paige, who will be further analysed in this part of the chapter, is a bizarre character whose peculiar but strong personality locates her in the position of the subject. Victor will be occupying the position of the object, due to his view of the self as fused with the masculine body. I will first examine Dr Paige's role in the story and her relationship with the protagonist. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator explains that Paige Marshal is a doctor in the mental hospital where his mother, Ida, is an intern. There, there are many other women who suffer dementia like his mother, and when they see him, they believe Victor is someone who hurt them in the past: "Here I get to be all things to all women". Instead of denying it, he ends up assuming that role and asking for forgiveness. In that way, these women feel relieved, being able to close that chapter from their past. Here, Victor is embodying the figure of Jesus Christ, offering himself as a sacrifice for these women to find spiritual solace. When observing his attitude, Dr Paige claims: "'It's sweet,' (...) 'what you're doing, I mean. You're giving these people completion on the biggest

issues in their lives” (115). When these encounters happen, Victor gets completely captivated:

The way she looks right now, you have to think about multiple car pile-ups. Imagine two bloodmobiles colliding head on. The way she looks, you'd have to think of mass graves to even log thirty seconds in the saddle. Think of spoiled cat food and ulcerated cankers and expired donor organs. That's how beautiful she looks. (115)

When he looks at her, he approaches her as he would approach one of his sexual partners. He is repeating the same pattern, because as explained above he feels unable to see women as subjects, and not mere sexual objects, due to his fear of dissolution and the strong influence that his mother has on him. However, Dr Marshall seems to be a different case: “I didn't want her to become just another piece of ass. Because nothing is as perfect as you can imagine it. Because nothing is as exciting as your fantasy” (164), making allusion again to his mother's ideas, reinforcing again the fact that the origins of his treatment of women is rooted in them (although I will explain this view in more detail). Dr Marshall expresses her desire of having sex with Victor. However, Victor uses sex as a way to find a liminal space where he can set his feelings aside and enter nothingness. After he has had sex with a woman for the first time, he loses interest, because the excitement he achieves from it is gone. The fact that he does not want to meet Dr Paige sexually implies different facts. First, it means that he does not want to locate Dr Marshall as a (sexual) object and maintain her agency; second, because he is unable to have a sexual relationship in an inoperative sense, he strengthens his position as object. He demonstrates that he cannot expose himself to Dr Marshall because he has no self to expose, and as Bataille claims when explaining the “community of lovers”: only lovers are able to expose themselves in an unworked way (qtd. in Nancy, “Confronted”: 29. To exemplify this idea, the following quote will be of use. When Victor rejects her, he tells her “‘Maybe the truth is I really want to like you instead’ (...) Paige said, ‘Maybe sex and affection aren't mutually exclusive’. And I laughed. (...) I told her, yes. Yes, they are” (165).

In connection to Victor's need to have his mother's power when conscious of his submission to her (see section 2), he expresses his need to connect with somebody. However, his view on relationships is as toxic as the one he had with his mother (“You are mine. Mine. Now and forever, and don't you ever forget it”, 67). He manifests his desire towards Paige in these terms: “What I need is to be indispensable to somebody.

Who I need is somebody that will eat up all my free time, my ego, my attention. Somebody addicted to me. A mutual addiction. See also: Paige Marshall” (213). His fear of dissolution is contradicted completely in this thought. However, it is perhaps this limited conception that does not allow him to commune with Paige in this way. Not until both characters fill the position of the Subject can they be able to expose themselves as equals.

Of special interest is the role of Ida as a mediator, since actually without her Victor would not be able to find such connection. As it can be sensed from the moment Ida Mancini is introduced in the story, she is a person who is perfectly conscious of how cultural beliefs limit the human mind, how these go against human nature, against the self. Going back to the concept of the absolute other, Ida makes use of such features by always going against what is by default given, and she acts in consequence: ““When you’re crazy (...) how you look or act is not your fault”” (198). She thinks that crazy people “have all the power” (198), because they are not limited by the symbols that are followed by those who want to belong. Such is the need of American people to feel they have a community. It is in such state of dementia when her mediating power between Marshall and Victor reaches its peak. The three of them are in Ida’s room in the hospital. She does not recognize Victor, so she believes he is someone else. When she sees them together, she asks Dr Paige and Victor if they love each other. In her insistence, they both say yes. At that, she states that ““what [she is] most afraid of is, after [she is] gone, there will be no one left in the entire world who’ll love Victor”” (227). After the conversation, Victor asks Paige why she lied. ““Who says I was lying?’ Does that mean she loves me? That’s impossible. ‘Okay’ (...) Maybe I fibbed a little. I like you. Some”” (227).

The real inoperative encounter between Dr Paige and the protagonist will occur, as also happened in *Fight Club* and *Survivor*, with the death of the mediator, Ida. It needs to be remembered that after reading Ida’s diary in Italian, Dr Paige had told Victor that he had been conceived with the genetic material of Jesus Christ, which turned him into the new messiah. At the beginning he wanted to reject such role, but when he meets Dr Paige, he begins to grow into the role of Jesus Christ, or at least he is willing to become a better person. The last time he visits his mother, he is feeding her pudding. For the first time in years, she recognises Victor, her son. When Victor tells her he has read the diary and he knows about how he is the new messiah, and that he is

there to save her. However, the diary does not enclose that secret, but a different one that Ida shares right before her death with her son: “I stole you out of a stroller in Waterloo, Iowa. I wanted to save you from the kind of life you’d get” (268). The truth about Victor’s origins is finally revealed, but Victor does not believe her and keeps feeding her pudding. She chokes on one spoonful, and dies. Paige gets to the scene and tries unsuccessfully to revive her. Then, Paige’s own secret is also uncovered: “My mom’s dead, and Paige Marshall is a lunatic. Everything she told me she made up. Including the idea that I’m (...): Him. Including that she loves me. (...) Including that I’m a natural-born nice person. I’m not. And if motherhood is the new God, the only thing sacred we have left, then I’ve killed God” (271). First on Dr Paige, she tells the main character that she is a specialist in genetics from the future (year 2556), who had “travelled back in time to become impregnated by a typical male of this period in history. So she could preserve and document a genetic sampling” (276). She was an intern in the hospital because she had told the truth “about [her]self” (277), and that same night she was going to be taken back to the year she belonged. Because this is the last time they are supposedly going to see each other, she assures that she is “grateful” and that she loves him (277). Victor asks her to stay still, so that he can trace her shadow with a pen, like his mother did when he was little. To make the moment last, to take a hold of its temporariness: “Just in case. It’s just in case you’re not crazy” (277).

With his mother’s death and his newly discovered insanity, Victor enters a state of identity crisis even more pronounced than the one he suffered before: “I’m not loved. I’m not a beautiful soul. I’m not a good natured, giving person. I’m not anybody’s saviour. All of that’s bogus now that she’s insane” (272). However, it needs to be reminded that, in spite of his efforts to cover that self with his own version of “the new saviour”, his new identity was still dictated by his mother’s ideas and Dr Paige. His self was still not his own. In this state, he walks around the Colonial Dunsboro, where he works, and his reflection about his past life, his identity, and America’s past converge: “There’s no way you can get the past right. You can pretend. You can delude yourself, but you can’t re-create what’s over” (273). This line of thought imitates Bauman’s idea as regards the fact that when torn apart, community cannot be put back together again (15). This can also be applied to Victor’s identity. However, this can be taken as chance for him to finally expose himself. He abandoned his identity as an addict, and an uncaring person, to try to mirror Jesus Christ. However, the mediating figure that

sustained in a fake manner this identity is gone. It can be said that, with Ida gone, Victor's past becomes obsolete, much like it happened in *Survivor* when the last person that knew Tender, his brother (and also the mediating figure in the analysis of that novel) dies. This exemplifies as well the fact that the mother-son relationship is overemphasized when discussing the male psyche (Kimmel 27). He has reached a dead end, and the relationship between parenthood and agency (or power) explained in the second section becomes salient again:

Because I can't save anybody, not as a doctor, not as a son. And because I can't save anybody, I can't save myself. Because now I'm an orphan. I'm unemployed and unloved. Because my guts hurt, and I'm dying anyway, from the inside out.(...) For the first time in longer than I can remember, I feel peaceful. Not happy. Not sad. Not anxious. Not horny. Just all the higher parts of my brain closing up shop (...) I'm simplifying myself. Somewhere balanced in the perfect middle between happiness and sadness. Because sponges never have a bad day. (281)

Right now, with his bowel blockage problem, Victor is exemplifying Horrocks's analysis in relation to men's inability to accept love if not in connection to suffering (112). His violence against himself is, at the same time, the same type of abuse examined by Kimmel and also experienced by Shane and Shannon. Victor's only way of approaching his self is by feeling his body through pain. He used to be completely worried all the time about finitude, death's arrival. Not knowing when his fatal ending could come is what had pushed him towards addiction in the first place: "I admire addicts. In a world where everybody is waiting for some blind, random disaster (...) the addict has the comfort of knowing what will most likely wait for him down the road. He's taken some control over his ultimate fate, and his addiction keeps the cause of his death from being a total surprise" (185). With the conviction that he is going to die, he feels free. He is confronting death directly, and he is ready to find exposure, because he has simplified himself, also meaning: he has become devoid of the symbolisms that limited him. He is now ready to reach the climax of the inorganic encounter that is about to happen between himself and Dr Paige.

As a conclusion for this section, I would like to bring it to a close with the most salient point of convergence that both mediating figures have. Brandy agitates the reader's conscience, in a world in which appearances substitute the real self, where as Stryck contemplates representation is substituted by simulation (4): "It's because

we're so trapped in our culture, in the being of being human on this planet with the brains we have, and the same two arms and legs everybody has. We're so trapped that any way we could imagine to escape would be just another part of the trap. Anything we want, we are trained to want" (*Invisible Monsters* 259). Almost as an extension of this same idea, Victor's mother wants her son to have an open self which can escape the limiting effects of the symbolism that affects the American community: "I don't want you to just accept the world as it's given (...) I want you to invent it. I want you to have that skill. To create your own reality. Your own set of laws"; she wants him to "create his own symbols" (285).

### **8. "Just the way I look. The truth": The inoperative climax**

Both novels reach their inorganic climax at similar points when reaching the end of the story. In *Invisible Monsters*, I left Shannon and Brandy in a burning mansion, the protagonist's brother, Shane (because he does not really accept Brandy's identity as his own) shot in the chest and about to die. The story returns at the end where it began, although now the reason behind Shannon's inability to accept Brandy's death becomes clearer: "I know Brandy is maybe probably going to die, but I just can't get into it" (17). Now that Shane has exposed himself to Shannon by telling her the truth, and Shannon has done the same, the protagonist can answer the question that Shane/Brandy has been asking the main character since the beginning of the story: "Do you love me?" (18). It is this extreme situation when exposure is finally complete. In blood, Shannon writes: "*I Am Your Sister, Shannon McFarland. (...) You loved me because Even If You Didn't Recognise Me, You Knew I Was Your Sister. On Some Level, You Knew Right Away So You Loved Me*" (281). Shannon's real love for her brother is demonstrated right after, once they are moved to the hospital: "This is my third chance, and I don't want to blow it. (...) I could've stopped Evie from shooting you. The truth is I didn't so I'm giving you my life because I don't want it anymore" (293). Shannon decides to give her identity documents to Shane, so that Brandy Alexander can become Shannon McFarland. They are using the symbols made available by the American community to escape the significations that come attached to those symbols:

Be famous. Be a big social experiment in getting what you don't want. Find value in what we've been taught is worthless. Find good in what the world says is evil. I'm

giving you my life because I want the whole world to know you. I wish the whole world would embrace what it hates. (...) I'm giving you my life to prove to myself I can, I really can love somebody (...) Completely and totally, permanently and without hope of reward, just as an act of will, I will love somebody (294-295).

In *Choke*, Palahniuk plays with a similar idea. Denny, Victor's best friend, had decided that he needed a purpose, to believe in something (see section 1). He begins collecting rocks from the street, one for each day he is sober. Little by little, he begins putting the rocks together on a terrace. When people passing by see it, they begin wondering what it is that he is trying to build. Soon, reporters and television channels show, and curiosity increases due to their inability to answer: "[I]s it a house?" And I say we don't know. 'Is it a church of some kind?' We don't know (...) We won't know until the last rock is set (...) [H]ere's just a foundation we may none of us see completed in our lifetime" (263) Denny has found a purpose whose ending is not certain and which allows the main character to feel useful. They do not know what they are building, and this is interesting in the sense that it has no cultural symbols attached. It is a construction unlimited by any symbolism, open to interpretation. This has, in this thesis' view, two readings. First, it goes along the same lines as Bauman's reflections on community, and how this is destroyed when it becomes self-conscious. As long as what they are building is not labelled, it preserves its open identity. Second, it also mirrors Victor's character. It can be argued that Ida Mancini wanted to do with Victor what Denny is doing with these rocks, to maintain his identity as an open space.

The "building" is, however, finally destroyed. Victor had been confessing all the crimes that the old women in the hospital had accused him of, and word goes around. He is chased and confronted in Denny's terrace, where he is attacked with the rocks that they had been using for the "building". What he calls, "the martyrdom of Saint Me" (290). The building did not mean anything from the very first rock that made it. And now, among its scattered structure, Victor reunites with Paige again, because nobody has come to pick her up: "I guess that means I'm insane", to what Victor answers: "Well' (...) 'I guess I'm not saving anybody'" (291). In this moment, the characters are surrounded by nothingness. However, Palahniuk is offering a powerful metaphor. Surrounded by scattered rocks, these maintain the meaning they used to have when they had been put together. Though forming part of the same structure, they preserved individuality, their non-symbolized state. They have managed to establish a connection

outside the symbolisms that surround both sexual and gendered identities which describe the American community, because they have been able to expose each other. Through each other's eyes, they see reflected their own self, one which does not apply to any of the significations culturally pre-ordained:

We can spend our lives letting the world tell us who we are. Sane or insane. Saints or sex addicts. Heroes or victims. Letting history tell us how good or bad we are. Letting our past decide our future. Or we can decide ourselves. And maybe it's our job to invent something better. (...). It's creepy, but here we are, the Pilgrims, the crackpots of our time, trying to establish our own alternate reality. To build a world out of rocks and chaos. What's going to be, I don't know. (...) And maybe knowing isn't the point. Where we're standing right now, in the ruins in the dark, what we build could be anything. (292)

The main character, thanks to his inoperative connection with Paige, escapes cultural dichotomies, and the narrator closes the story with an open understanding of the self which is also applied to his own vision of the rest of the characters.

*Invisible Monsters'* ending reaches similar conclusions. Shannon gives away her identity in bureaucratic terms, which as a side effect demonstrates how valueless the identity of a person is in in that respect. How the self can be so easily lost in appearance, in an ID picture. Once she has made this decision, she takes control of her own identity:

What I need is a new story. (...) What Brandy's been doing for me. What I need to learn to do for myself. To write my own story. Let my brother be Shannon McFarland. I don't need that kind of attention. Not anymore. [They] bring me what I asked for, please, and it's the pictures, the eight-by-ten glossies of me in my white sheet. They aren't good or bad, ugly or beautiful. They're just the way I look. The truth. (296)

Mirroring Victor's perception, Brandy's self is extracted from the body that used to enclose it and, thanks to the extreme situation to which she has been exposed, she can recognize her own self: "The truth is, being ugly isn't the thrill you'd think, but it can be an opportunity for something better than I ever imagined" (288). "Imagined", one may say, outside Kristeva's *Symbolic*. As concluded by Andy Johnson, *Invisible Monsters* gives that "ambiguity" which is tremendously feared by American traditions (71). One may argue that *Choke's* inconclusive ending provokes the same effect, as the only certainty is that the wheel keeps moving.

## CHAPTER 5

### “Constructive Destruction”. Failed and destructive paternal figures in *Lullaby* (2002) and *Diary* (2003)

#### 1. Introduction and novels’ plot summary

This chapter analyses *Lullaby* (2002) and *Diary* (2003), Palahniuk’s fifth and sixth novels respectively. The family plays, once again, an important role. However, instead of taking the perspective of the offspring, this chapter takes that of the parents. This time, it is not the sons or daughters projecting their rage against their progenitors, but the father or the mother expressing grief and guilt about their parenting. The creator observes her/his own shadow extended through their children, including a twisted gendered identity deeply obsessed with wounds that can only be cured with a more open understanding of the self. The paternal figures in these works, also taken as the *absolute other* in the institution of the family about to be explored, experience their own location inside this American space through pain and a self-destructive drive. This *pain* is also the root of a dramatization that takes these characters to the extreme and helps them break with American traditional values. Palahniuk has familiarized us with this process. In these stories, however, paranormal events are also at stake, as explained below.<sup>68</sup>

Firstly, a summary of both stories will be provided followed by the introduction of the main characters as well as their position inside the American social milieu proposed by Palahniuk in the novels. Secondly, the role of fatherhood and motherhood will be exposed. Finally, attention will fall on the relationship between *death* and *pain* as a

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<sup>68</sup> Keeseey explains that *Lullaby* and *Diary* are, together with *Haunted* (2005), Palahniuk’s “Horror Trilogy”. Indeed, in the two works analysed in this part of the thesis, the characters feel trapped inside a “cycle of horror” that will repeat itself, with the “same miserable fate” (61). Horror as a genre is not directly addressed in this thesis, but it is important to notice its presence to understand the disruptive nature of both novels.

source of creativity and communicative exposure, and how this takes us to the construction of operative, and finally, inoperative models. It cannot be forgotten that masculinities have a strong influence on both the concepts of *parenthood* and the source of drama and *pain*, as will be explained later.

*Lullaby* is narrated by Carl Streater, a journalist who covers news involving Infant Death Syndrome. His own child, and his wife, died years ago in their sleep. He discovers that these deaths are provoked by an African culling song called “Poems and Rhymes Around the World.” He read this poem to his child and wife the night they died. Carl meets Helen Hoover Boyle, a real estate agent, who also knows about the culling song and its power. Helen’s hippie secretary, Mona Sabbat, has got a boyfriend, Oyster, who is a nihilistic rebel that wants to destroy the human race in favour of the planet. The four of them join in a road trip around the States, visiting different libraries around the country, to find all the copies where the poem can be read to destroy them, together with the Grimoire – the original source of the culling song that contains other powerful spells. They manage to destroy all the remaining copies and eventually find the Grimoire. However, Oyster’s intentions of using the spells to destroy humanity to save the planet have him evicted from the road trip. After being able to translate the Grimoire and having access to the spells, Mona and Oyster manage to steal all spells from Carl and Helen, all of them but the culling song. The story ends with Carl and Helen chasing Mona and Oyster around the country, following strange events and miracles that they leave in their trace. It is important to notice that the story begins at the end, interrupted with facts happening “after the fact”, with Streater telling the reader that he and another subject, whose identity is not revealed at the beginning but turns out to be Helen inside another man’s body, are going after two people who are terrorising the American community with magical spells.

*Diary*, in turn, has a female character as a protagonist. The story is told through a second person narrator that mimics Misty Wilmot’s perspective. This second person narrator is directed towards Peter Wilmot, Misty’s husband, who is currently in a coma. It narrates how Misty fell in love with Peter in Art school. He comes from Waytansea Island, a place that used to be prosperous for its native people but now has fallen prey to gentrification and is filled with wealthy tourists. Because of this, the islanders have been relegated to jobs that are dedicated to giving service to these newcomers. In her thirties, Peter is discovered inside the family car in a seeming suicide attempt, which leaves him

in a coma. In order to pay for the expensive equipment to maintain him alive, Misty works as a waitress in the island's main hotel. As the story continues, and with the aid of Angel de la Porte, Peter's friend, Misty discovers that, every four generations, a man from the Waytansa community lures a young female artist to the island, gets her pregnant and makes her stay, marrying her. Both the husband and their offspring must die some years later, as this pain is supposed to provoke in her a wave of tremendous artistic creativity. Her pictures are to be shown to the wealthy tourists, who will be completely mesmerized by such beauty, the effect of the Stendhal Syndrome. During such bedazzlement, they will be set on fire, which allows the islanders to retrieve an enormous insurance claim that will let them have a comfortable, luxurious life again for another four generations. However, Peter, who works after their marriage remodelling houses, adds secret rooms to the rich people's houses with hidden messages written on the walls, warning about the conspiracy and confessing that he never loved Misty and is actually in love with another man, de la Porte. In the end, however, Misty cannot do anything to stop the cycle, as she falls again in the same trap as her female past versions.

## **2. "Armoires are the cockroaches of our culture:" Capitalist America**

In both *Lullaby* and *Diary* American capitalism is pivotal. The reader understands quickly that Palahniuk condemns American capitalism as "anti-human". As in the other stories analysed so far, America takes the role of an insatiable beast that self-consumes itself due to its obsession with its own growth. Its essence is based on becoming "bigger, better, stronger", as already discussed in chapter 2. There is never a point of inflection, there is always room for improvement, and if an end is met, one also encounters failure. This is clearly shown in both stories. In *Lullaby*, when reaching the end of the novel, Realtor makes the following reflection: "Are these things really better than the things I already have? Or am I just trained to be dissatisfied with what I have now? Am I just under a spell that says nothing is ever good enough?" (*Lullaby* 230). This may make reference to Beck's ideas as regards how now overproduction has become problematic (14), and "spell" may be taken as a metaphor of the effects of capitalism. In *Diary*, also near the end, Misty considers the following:

[Y]ou can't cap growth. It's anti-American. Selfish. It's tyrannical. Evil. Every child has the right to a life. Every person has the right to live where they can afford. We're entitled to pursue happiness wherever we can drive to, fly to, sail to, to hunt it down (...) – but that's the system of checks and balances, the way the market adjusts itself. (235)

In chapters 3 and 4, it has been established that all novels are marked by the effect of capitalist America. Here, in the novels considered for this chapter, this reasoning is made at the end, though its influence is equally palpable. In both *Lullaby* and *Diary*, Palahniuk shows a society immersed completely in this landscape. In *Lullaby*, Oyster is an anarchist who strives to create chaos among consumers. He pretends to be representing a law firm, and writes adverts on newspapers implying that the business in question is not reliable:

Attention Patrons of the Treeline Dining Club

Have you contracted a treatment – resistant form of chronic fatigue syndrome after eating in this establishment? Has this food-borne virus left you unable to work and live a normal life? If so, please call the following number to be part of a class-action lawsuit. (24)

Throughout the story, the narrator keeps reading these adverts while trying to catch Oyster and stop him from inflicting more harm and confusion with the spells that he and Mona have stolen from Carl and Helen. After acquiring the spells and while being chased by the latter at the end of the story, Mona and Oyster use pseudo-religious references to call society's attention:

This week, it's the Holy Virgin of Welburn, New Mexico. She came flying down Main Street last week. Her long red and black dreadlocks whipping behind her, her bare feet dirty, she wore an Indian cotton skirt printed in two shades of brown and a denim halter top [The Virgin's description coincides with Mona's appearance]. It's all in this week's World Miracles Report, next to the cashier in every supermarket in America. (7)

The latter example is clearly referential from Christianity. But some other times Hindu references are also used by the two rebels:

The Judas Cow. This is really what this cow is called. It's a cow that lives at the slaughterhouse. It mingles with the doomed cows, then leads them up the chute to the killing floor. (...) Until [it] stopped. (...) [It] sat there in the doorway and looked

at everyone with its brown cow eyes and talked. (...) It said: 'Reject your meat-eating ways.'

In this sense, religion is being used to terrorise the community, and at the same time, it is in itself being dismantled. The end result is that the miracles and mystical events that are collected in the Bible and other sacred sources can be realised by spells and enchantments gathered in a pagan book related to old African incantations. One could also point out that capitalism is also in part guilty of the power that these religious references have on people. After all, as Agamben states, the capitalist reality digested by the members of the community is always filtered by pre-established symbolism that does not belong to human experience (48-49). This makes anything believable and taken as "the truth", as long as it is filtered by the system. Everything gets mixed, and limits among religions and other beliefs are mocked. At the same time, it could be argued that the African continent, historically abused by America and Europe, is taking its revenge. Derrida's *foreigner* is here, in this sense, much more powerful than ever. It is invisible and lethal. Palahniuk seems to take to paper a non-worded fear, the vendetta from many outside communities that have suffered the consequences of American imperialistic capitalism.

Coming back to the novels, it seems clear that capitalism is an important element in *Lullaby*. As Helen, the main female character, contends when she meets Carl for the first time: "People die (...) But furniture, fine beautiful furniture, it just goes on and on, surviving everything' (...) 'Armoires are the cockroaches of our culture'" (51). Whatever can be produced for its consumption, Helen seems to hint, will survive human relations, any community of people. Indeed, as Palahniuk claims through Tyler in his first book, "the things you used to own, now they [own] you" (*Fight Club*, 44). Immortality, one could say, a term invented by humankind, can belong to anything but the subject: "Think of all the generations of women who looked in that mirror' (...) 'They aged in that mirror. They died, all those beautiful young women, but here's the wardrobe, worth more now than ever. A parasite surviving the host. A big fat predator looking for its next meal'" (*Lullaby* 51).<sup>69</sup> As Agamben stated and was outlined in the theoretical framework, death remains still that which cannot be owned and managed; but the objects that can be pursued gather that sense of immortality (70-72).

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<sup>69</sup> Here, in this "Big Brother" environment, it is the commodities that watch us, but not the government (Mendieta 403), pointing out to an even more nihilistic understanding of community.

The same occurs in *Diary*. The Waytansa Island, a place that used to be “owned” by its people, by its original community, is, as Misty reflects many times through the book, being “[eaten] alive” (76-77). In this sense, the island’s system is one that gives wealth and freedom to one generation, but dooms the future ones in a cycle that never ends. As one of the islanders, Peter’s father, tells her once: ““One generation makes the money (...) The next generation protects the money. The third runs out of it. People always forget what it takes to build a family fortune”” (150). When such point arrives, the legend of the island, that which says that a young female painter will give back the community its wealth again, is restarted. The concept of “rich, American people” is several times analysed and mocked: ““What’s the point of being rich if there’s nothing to buy?”” (76), says one of the opulent members of the community of tourists that arrive at the island. Wealth is also constantly considered the only means of “escape”. As a young girl, right before meeting Peter, Misty lived with her hippy mother in a trailer, in almost indigent conditions. Her hippy mother used to tell her that:

[It]’s the American dream to be so rich you can escape from everyone (...) Scratch any fortune (...) and you’ll find blood only a generation or two back.’ Saying this was supposed to make their trailer lifestyle better”. Child labor in mines or mills (...). Slavery. Drugs. Stockswindles. Wasting nature with clearcuts, pollution, harvesting to extinction. Monopolies. Disease. War. Every fortune comes out of something unpleasant. (152)

Angel de la Porte, one of the characters that helps Misty unravel the mystery accompanying the Island, concludes the following:

[R]ich people don’t like to tolerate much. Money gives you permission to just walk away from everything that isn’t pretty and perfect. You can’t put up with anything less than lovely. You spend your life running, avoiding, escaping. The trouble is (...) we’re running out of places to hide. It’s why Will Rogers used to tell people to buy land: Nobody’s making it anymore. This is why every rich person has discovered Waytansa Island this summer. (102-103)

According to Mendieta, *Diary* is one of the darkest novels in Palahniuk’s literary path, as it addresses more directly the issue of class and race and American “hyper-gentrification” (although the focus of this thesis is directed elsewhere) (405, 407). The latter quote resonates, again, with Agamben’s words: indeed, the middle-class has the capital to shape the place where they live (62). Nature, the land, is completely irrelevant. In *Lullaby*, this idea is also clearly displayed: ““Those old Westerns’, Oyster says (...), ‘with the tumbleweeds and cheatgrass and shit?’ (...) ‘None of this is native,

but it's all we have left.'(...). 'Almost nothing in nature is natural anymore'" (110). In this novel, Oyster sees what is known as the American land being abused and constantly corrupted by the caprice of the new communities in power that come one after another. According to Oyster, a new population comes to kill the other that used to be in charge:

"The way yellow fever and smallpox killed off your Native Americans (...) we brought Dutch elm disease to America in a shipment of logs for a veneer mill in 1930 and brought chestnut blight in 1904. Another pathogenic fungus is killing off the eastern beeches". (...) In 1890, Oyster says, another man decided to play God. Eugene Schieffelin released sixty *Sturnus vulgaris*, the European starling, in New York's Central Park. Fifty years later, the birds had spread to San Francisco. Today, there are more than 200 million starlings in America. All this because Schieffelin wanted the New World to include every bird mentioned by Shakespeare" (114, 141).

The capitalist system is, then, fundamental to understand the foundations on which these two novels unravel their plots towards the ultimate criticism that comes with it. At the same time, the family as an institution, the most relevant aspect in the analysis of these two works, can be said to also be clearly influenced by capital thought, and how it represents a clash between the traditional community that America wants to hold in Palahniuk's novels, and the individualism that a culture based on consumerism provides instead. As commented by authors like Chodrow or Agamben, capitalism and patriarchy are co-dependent, and understanding this as the basis for Palahniuk's representation of American society will pave the way to understand masculinities in these two works as well. In the next section, the resulting individualism that stems from capitalism, and its effect on the male psyche (in Carl, Oyster and Peter Wilmot) and extended in the female one (Misty) will be analysed, together with the need for communal connection that arises from this state of affairs.

### **3. "Whatever the story, this isn't about *you*": Individualism**

As explained in the section above, the country's identity seems to be relegated in favour of economic growth, as was also explained in previous chapters of this thesis. The obsession with growth can only be related to this drive, motivated by the individualism raised by the capital, to always escape death. As previously explained in the theoretical framework, death is the only frontier that money and its power cannot conquer (Agamben 66). The American communities that we find in *Lullaby* and *Diary – fake as*

regards the actual connection among its people – make sense, according to Nancy, when one understands that the old idea of community has been dissolved: “decomposed” (*Inoperative* 3). In both stories, Tönnies’ *Gesellschaft* is clearly established in everybody’s understanding of what human relations in the country ought to be like.

In *Lullaby*, at the beginning, when finding himself alone at home, Streator can listen to the muffled laughter coming from his neighbours’ TVs. To this, he makes the following reflection: “Most of the laugh tracks on television were recorded in the early 1950s. These days most people you hear laughing are dead” (15). This realisation mirrors, once again, Agamben’s explicit relationship between capitalism and a filtered reality through the media. This TV laughter, literally, passes as life what now are dead people. Capitalism attempts to reuse in order to produce, including dead people’s laughter. At the same time, it makes reference to Bauman’s critique of the (American) community, which has become repetitive, “numb” and “dead” (11). This also points out towards Derrida’s idea about individualism and technological advancement, which encourages “the individualism of a role, and not of a person” (*Gift* 37). As Streator explains when describing his work as a journalist covering a story, “[t]hey want you to believe that the news and you are always two separate things. Killers and reporters are mutually exclusive. Whatever the story, this isn’t about *you*” (*Lullaby* 25). Once again, it is made clear that the person’s function is made more salient than the person’s self. America favours the image of a community made of the pieces of a puzzle that ought to fit, but from a “corporative” perspective. The piece can always be substituted by another that can commit to the same function.

This idea as regards individualism and lack of perspective when it comes to opening the person’s own self is also made explicit in *Diary*, almost at the end of the story:

Maybe the only thing each of us can see is our own shadow. Carl Jung called this his shadow work. He said we never see others. Instead we see only aspects of ourselves that fall over them. Shadows. Projections. Our associations. (...) Not the exact image, but everything reversed or upside down. Distorted by the mirror or the lens it comes through. Our limited personal perception. Our tiny body of experience. Our half-assed education. How the viewer controls the view. How the artist is dead. We see what we want (...) All the artist can do is give us something to look at. (252-253)

Nancy's impressions as regards the anguish of the subject's "being" on its own also reflect something intrinsic to the American self: America's obsession with itself and its own development is also projected in and by American citizens. The fact that subjects are only being able to see themselves through the wrong lenses is ignored. The fake understanding of community to which Palahniuk has us used to is also reflected here. The "American way to be" is regarded as a parasite-like life, deeply rooted in the subject's mind:

Imagine a plague that you catch through your ears. (...) Imagine an idea that occupies your mind the way an army occupies a city. Outside the car now is America.

*Oh beautiful starling-filled skies,*

*Over amber waves of tansy ragwort.*

*Oh, purple mountains of loosestrife,*

*Above the bubonic-plagued pain.*

America. (*Lullaby* 157)

The same idea characterises *Diary*. Misty has become a single mother after her husband's coma. Her daughter is not close to her, and neither the tourists nor the islanders bond with her in any way. She has an addiction to alcohol, and her alcoholism is especially poignant when she obsesses over the idea that she has reached a point in which she can only go in circles, and stepping forward is not a possibility anymore:

If you realise you're forty-one years old and you've reached the end of your God-given potential, well, cheers. (...) Here's as smart as you're ever going to get. If you realize there's no way you can give your child a better standard of living (...) and this means no college for her, no art school, no dreams, nothing except for waiting tables like her mum... Well, it's down the hatch. (75)

Misty's idea of motherhood is filled with anxiousness, which accompanies the individualism motivated by capitalist thought: "the manipulations of modern capitalism (...) [encourage] the decline of the oedipal father (...) [and] (...) [e]xclusive maternal involvement", together with the need to "please" and "succeed", fostering dependency (Chodorow 189).

In any case, the anxiety felt by both protagonists is clearly visible. There is no room to accept the ambivalence that *being* itself implies, as Nancy concludes: accepting one's alterity is not a solution, because one's potential is only understood in terms of what the community expects of the subject. It is the realisation of this fake model of existence that finally provokes in these two protagonists the anxiousness that will prepare their paths towards their openness and the acknowledgement of *otherness*. Once again, Palahniuk presents through his characters the distress produced when the archaic community of the past has been dismantled in favour of new individualisms (as named by Esposito), supporting an economic growth based on a competitive pyramid. In *Lullaby* and *Diary*, the egos are constantly competing: in the first, the old conservative and paternalist America as embodied by Carl and Helen fights the aggressive and at times guileless eagerness represented by Oyster and Mona to go back to a meaningful understanding of being together. In the second, the reader finds Misty, who yearns to give her daughter a better life, playing by the rules of the game that the Waytansa Island has meticulously prepared, inevitably following the prophecy once again. Girard's battle of the ego's desires takes place. Finally, when the individual's imposed solitude inspired by an individualistic understanding of communal sharing is uncovered, the need for connection and the self's openness makes its appearance.

#### **4. "As if some dead body just spoke": Grotesque characters marked by death**

Before delving into the role of *parenthood* and *guilt*, the main issues in the analysis of these two novels, I will explain the main characters' connection with death and how this connection will pave the way to create among them a meaningful, open, inoperative encounter. In both novels, death or near death experiences accompany the main characters from the beginning, and their gender identity will have a strong connection with the outcome. To start with *Lullaby*, Carl Streater, the narrator, works as a reporter covering Infant Death Syndrome. He is a lonely man, very much comparable to the main character in *Fight Club*, friendless and with a low self-esteem: "I'm not the pioneer brain of anything" (42). Before talking about his job, it should be said that he feels strongly about the "addictive" society in which he lives, and inside such context, he feels completely alienated. He describes his block as always being full of *noise*: "These people who need their television or stereo or radio playing all the time. These

people so scared of silence (...) These soundoholics. These quiet-ophobics (...) This is what passes for home sweet home” (15). Streator makes a reflection about the individualistic American society described in all Palahniuk’s works presented so far. No real communication takes place among people, only meaningless “‘white noise’ of media”, to which the American milieu has become addicted (Mendieta 402), mirroring the addictive society presented as well in *Choke*. At the same time, Carl’s desire to find silence may be related to the type of solace that one finds in death. Streator wants for everybody to stay quiet to find a halt in the world’s existence. The reason behind this may be, perhaps, for him to find himself as part of a community, as he feels his life has been frozen in time. In this way, he shows certain potential to open his-self, as it can be argued that silence may allow a more fluid distillation of any type of saturated symbolism. The spoken word, as main channel of communication, is regarded by Streator as poisoned and useless, and he feels clearly bothered by the members of the community in which he finds himself.

It is here that I can begin to introduce the issue of how traditional masculinity acts as a defining feature of the main character in *Lullaby*. Streator’s antisocial tendency is reminiscent of Winnicott’s theory about “deprivation” (124). The type of deprivation that outlines Carl’s character is yet to be discovered, but it is a common element to all Palahniuk’s main male characters examined so far. He seems to have chosen loneliness over a real attempt to connect with others, a sign of his difficulty for finding healthy attachments (Winnicott in MacInnes 26). With the culling song, however, his stance will be shaken towards change. When Streator discovers the deadly power of the culling song, he tries to convince himself that if he ever used it again, he would do so for good (57). Soon, however, he starts using its power uncontrollably, and kills anyone who irritates him. When thinking about this, he compares his actions with those of Waltraud Wagner, a nurse who began murdering patients who were suffering irredeemably, but later started doing so with those who simply annoyed her. She soon began to be known as “the angel of death”, and Streator mirrors himself in such label. It is interesting to notice this line of thought: “It’s not that you want everybody dead, but it would be nice to unleash the culling spell on the world. Just to enjoy the fear (...) [A]fter that the world would be silent. Dangerous and frightened, but silent. (...) It would be nice to see

words come back into power” (59)<sup>70</sup>. This may be taken as an extreme view of Berman’s “community of speech” (2-3), where words have even the power to kill. It can also be regarded as an attempt on Streator’s part of regaining a sense control over his own self, and also finding some sort of immanence. It could be argued that he is posing fear that would arise in the community as a unifying element if indeed words had that kind of power. At the same time, it gives him an agency only attainable by Patočka’s *absolute other*: Streator’s mind is impenetrable, *unavowable*, but tremendously powerful. It can be argued that any human being has the capacity to kill another, but with the spell, Carl is more capable than anyone. His *responsibility*, also in Patočka’s sense, towards community also increases, such is now his power to change it. Carl’s *desired* silence, retaking Lacan, takes the main character rapidly to the same author’s *guilt*: “The more people die, the more things stay the same” (90).

Carl’s power to take death away will grant him, however, the opportunity to connect with *Lullaby*’s female protagonist, Helen. When it comes to his female companion in the story, Helen Hoover Boyle is introduced and described in a grotesque way, as is also the case with other female characters in other novels: “This *was* Helen Hoover Boyle. Our hero. Now dead but not dead” (6). It is already hinted at the beginning that Helen has been murdered, although the reader cannot know yet how. And yet, it is assumed, she is not dead. As the story goes on, Palahniuk gives the reader some decisive traces, which help locate Helen in the grotesque spectrum of Palahniuk’s female protagonists. When Streator has his first encounter with her, in his eyes she is ornamented like a “Christmas tree”, with “[p]earls big enough to choke a horse” (29). The following extract may well summarize Streator’s impression of Helen:

Judging from her hand, this close-up, she must be in her late thirties or early forties. Still this taxidermied look that passes for beauty above a certain age and income, it’s too old for her. Her skin already looks exfoliated, plucked, scruffed, moisturized, and made up until she could be a piece of refinished furniture. Reupholstered in pink. A restoration. Renovated. (29)

Helen is an authoritarian character, a leader. When talking about a piece of furniture with Streator, she claims: “I love it, but I’ll only have it in my own terms” (52). If, as explained above, furniture is equated with immortality in this respect, Helen is trying to

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<sup>70</sup> Palahniuk’s usage of words as a mortal weapon may be referring to the fact that information itself has become a virus and a channel of fear (Mendieta 403).

occupy the place of the *absolute other* not only by using the power of the culling song, but also by trying to acquire immortality in her own way, much like a God like figure. She can be said to represent the islanders' obsession with their transmission of wealth from generation to generation in *Diary* (see section 2). Another important aspect of Helen's life is the fact that her son, Patrick, is being kept cryogenically frozen, so that Helen is capable of bringing him back thanks to the Grimoire: "Having the power of life and death isn't enough. You must wonder what other poems are in that book" (86). In this sense, Helen would be embodying a reversed figure of the Virgin Mary. This would be the case because she was the one who sacrificed her son accidentally, and wants to live his resurrection in her own terms (this will be further examined in section 6). In sum, Streator and Helen can be said to have a *shared irresponsibility* towards the American community, as they are keeping their power a *secret*, and intend later, accompanied by Mona and Oyster, to find the other copies of the poem so that only they know about its existence. Helen and Carl's union will be further problematized later when discussing the roles of fatherhood and motherhood (see section 5).

Helen epitomizes capitalist thought in her very skin and bones, including her feminine role. Her appearance (see the quote above) takes a normative feminine performance focused on her looks to an extreme that would be surpassed with difficulty. Her gender performance in this case seems to mirror the same passivity of the furniture she tries to buy and sell, although it will be seen later that her femininity takes an interesting twist. It can be seen as well as an attempt towards the same immortality discussed above. Delving deeper into this character, when she and Carl acknowledge that they need each other's help to destroy the book of spells, they ally with Mona and Oyster, and accompany them to a witches' cult, together with other people that share the same beliefs. In this context, Helen has a very clear view on human afterlife: "'Doesn't reincarnation strike you as just another form of procrastination?'" (98). In this sense, as happens with many other of Palahniuk's female characters, Helen confronts death directly, in a completely de-filtered way, acknowledging her own finitude as a human being. Helen's view of death as a business woman contradicts, however, her approach as a mother, something I will mention again in section 5. As a real estate agent, she is undistracted, focused on the goal of growth, which is as well a patriarchal understanding of development, though in this case epitomized by the figure of a female character. This is perhaps something which helps seeing Helen outside the traditional role of the

American woman merged with the mother figure, thus giving her greater potential to break with conventional symbols.

Streator and Helen, then, seem to be two faces of the same coin: he walks towards physical self-destruction, whereas Helen tries to hide her own aging, erasing her own human self. Both attitudes, as I will explain later, have however the same goal: atonement. From the beginning of the story, Streator and Helen's connection is defined by death: they both killed accidentally their partners and son and daughter by reading them the culling song, and this connection is the one that poses them together in the story. When Streator finds her and tells her about the culling song and its power, and how he knows they share that knowledge, Helen tells him that it is best if he lets her work alone: "'It really is no concern of yours'. Because I'm just a reporter, is what she means. Because I'm a reporter tracking down a story he can't ever risk telling the world. Because at best, this makes me a voyeur. At worst, a vulture. (...) 'That's exactly what I mean', she says" (83). But then, Streator re-establishes their connection through death by giving the following confession:

And behind her, I say, what if I'm not just my job? Maybe I'm not just some two-dimensional predator taking advantage of an interesting situation. (...) I say, maybe I noticed the book in the first place because I used to have a copy. Maybe I used to have a wife and a daughter. What if I read the damn poem to my own family one night with the intention of putting them to sleep? Hypothetically speaking, of course, what if I killed them? I say. Is that the kind of credentials she's looking for? (...) [D]oes that make me wounded enough in her book? (...) And I say, maybe I've lost every bit as much as her. (83)

*Diary* takes a similar turn with its main characters. Misty Wilmot is the narrator who tells the story through a *diary* written in second person and directed towards her husband, Peter, who is now in a coma. It is inevitable to find connections between these characters and *Fight Club*'s protagonists, when at the end, the nameless male character falls into a coma to save Marla from the space monkeys, offering himself as a sacrifice. Misty has been told that Peter tried to commit suicide inside the family car, implying that he was trying to escape from the precarious lifestyle that his family has. As was explained before, further in the novel it is explained that the young men of the Waytansa Island are used as bait every four generations to attract a young female artist that will bring them out of poverty. Peter, then, can be considered as a sacrifice as well in Derrida's sense. By the end of the novel, it is discovered that Peter was secretly in

love with Angel de la Porte, and that his intention was to reveal the islanders' intentions in the messages that he left on the walls of the houses he had to rebuild: "'I've done my part. I found her...' (...) 'it's not my job to kill anybody. She's the executioner'" (57). Peter's fate, like his father's, was to fake his death so that Misty's grief could be used to boost her creative vibe and follow the island's prophecy. But he rebels against this mission he has been given, and tries to escape. His intentions are discovered by the islanders and they try to murder him inside his car, which he was going to use to run away with Angel. Thus, though the only real sacrifice was Misty, Peter pays with his body his imprudence, though not entirely with his life. It is after Peter enters a comatose state that Misty begins to communicate with him through the diary, and it implies an openness towards communication on Misty's part which otherwise would not have taken place. Before knowing the truth about the community's intentions with her and still believing that his husband had tried to commit suicide, Misty's resentment towards him is clearly palpable: "You have endless ways you can commit suicide without dying dying" (18). Indeed, in Misty's thought, death is not only the body's demise. In this sense, she is looking at death in a symbolic way. Someone can be "dead" while their organs are still functioning, dead being, as a result, a body closed to any communication, to being an active participant of community. This mirrors the type of individualistic society described as well in *Lullaby*.

In addition, Misty has a similar conception towards the notion of immortality, though she focuses on art: "[f]rom famous artists to building contractors, we all want to leave our signature. Our lasting effect. Your life after death. We all want to explain ourselves. Nobody wants to be forgotten" (24). Misty shares many traits that have already been mentioned in other female characters from Palahniuk's other works. She is described physically as a woman who has neglected her appearance and only worries about her job at the Island's hotel. This is her main source of income, both to care for her daughter and to maintain her husband alive in the hospital. Misty is perfectly conscious of her precariousness and thinks of herself as a lousy artist, and this has taken her to become an alcoholic. She drinks every time she wonders about her situation: "Another longest day of the year. It's a game anybody can play. This is just Misty's own personal coma. A couple drinks. A couple aspirin. Repeat." (18). Here, Misty mirrors her own existence as that of Peter's, establishing a connection between both which can only be described in grotesque terms: a dead marriage. Taking these ideas

into account, it is not difficult to equate Misty's and Helen's stance in the novels' context. In both cases their gendered performance is filtered through their physical appearance, and while one is hyper-feminine and the other is completely unpolished and unkempt, they represent two extremes that may touch at the edges. It is their full commitment to their jobs what morphs their gender roles into the grotesque image they provide. They both adopt a toxic approach to their lifestyle in community, which is very similar to hegemonic masculinity. One could say that these women have been "infected" by patriarchy, and their gendered roles have been influenced accordingly. They can be said to be part of Demetriou's internal hegemonic masculinity, as they self-impose community's domination of themselves and giving too much importance to their roles as mothers. However, there is as well an important point in common between the two that at the same time helps them reinvent that masculinity which also affects them, and it has death as its main nucleus. Both of them reject masculinity's "timeless essence", as described by Kimmel (119). Masculinity's immortality is not pursued by these female characters, nor represents a defining factor for their identities. As Helen comments in the witches' cult meeting, she perceives reincarnation as "just another form of procrastination" (98). On her part, Misty also views death as something actually hard to achieve, something that she only learns in the very last lines of her story: "Plato was right. We're all of us immortal. We couldn't die if we wanted to" (260). Misty's bodily mutilation is seen by Andrew Slade (especially by Doctor Touchet, who administers her pills) as a way for the Islanders to make of Misty an immortal being against her will: "We can become immortal only by surviving death" (67). Thus, both characters are *marked by death* in a transcendental way, but struggle constantly to eject such vision of finitude.

Continuing with gendered stereotypes, both Carl Streator and Peter Wilmot represent two marginalized, non-hegemoninc versions of American masculinity: the first has alienated himself voluntarily and the second is not heterosexual, and has tried to escape his community because of his sexual preferences and rejection of the island's prophecy (which has resulted into him being directly pushed aside by its members). They are examples of Demetriou's "complicit masculinity" (342), although Peter tries to break with this when he attempts to escape. At the same time, they epitomize a dangerous version of masculinity that pushes them to self-harm. Streator builds miniature houses, representing his own house with his family inside, and stomps his

naked foot on it, to always remind himself that his family is dead because of him (*Lullaby* 22). Peter self-harms himself with a pin on his nipple, to explain Misty that art can only come from pain (*Diary* 48); at the same time, he hides his affair with de la Porte (*Diary* 227). These situations will be analysed in more detail in the following section, as they are strongly connected with the concept of the family. In any case, it is important to remember for now that masculinity in this analysis is closely related to fatherhood, and that not fulfilling the traditional American father figure that they should have adopted, their guilt drives them closer and closer to death, specially Peter.

Real communication, as Derrida explains, must assume the distance that exists between one being and another. This distance is already present between both couples, but it has still not been filtered through an inoperative experience. What can be assumed for now is that the four of them share, like many other Palahniuk's characters, a drive towards death that helps them break with the boundaries of Kristeva's Symbolic, and prepares them for that which cannot be labelled. At the same time, Bataille's demise of community due to its need of drama (*Inner* 10) is also present in these four characters: Streator and Helen lament having provoked their family's death; Peter hides his sexuality and his real lover, together with his unwillingness to follow his community's task; Misty has lost her husband to a coma and palliates her pain with alcohol. Bataille's dramatization of existence is, therefore, key in these four characters, and the four of them embody a form of deadly sacrifice. The four characters are showing their own opening towards their understanding of death, but they are still filtering it through communitarian symbolism, by giving too much weight to its failed role in community. Something represses these two couples, a desire or a loss, in Foucault's sense, which induces in them a source of desire that they need to repress one way or another: alcoholism and self-inflicted pain.

In the following section, I will explain how these characters' drama or pain is rooted in the family institution, one of the main pillars of the operative community. Parenthood will become again an important issue; however, this time, this analysis will focus on the parents, instead of the perspective of the son or daughter, as happened in chapters 1 and 2. Parenthood represents a fundamental part of the operative community, and in these novels it is always connected with a feeling of *guilt* towards the subject and the *other*. It will be precisely this guilt that will enable the protagonists to break with operative boundaries and find an inoperative *clinamen*.

## 5. “This is how we must look to God”: Guilty and *tainted* parenthood

### 5.1. Guilt and parenthood

The latter section has analysed the subjects’ immersion in an individualistic society that does not favour a true connection between the members of the community, and in both novels, this is laid out in very different contexts. However, there is one common thread that unites both works: the protagonists are paternal figures who are conflicted with the same type of guilt. I will argue that this guilt limits the main characters’ understanding of themselves, and that it is rooted in an operative understanding of a paternal figure, and consequently, the institution of the family. It fosters the *paternal vacuum* discussed in the theoretical framework and developed in previous chapters, together with a narrow understanding of the gender identity of the characters. However, it will also be discussed how Palahniuk’s extreme versions of these paternal figures will allow the protagonists to find an inoperative encounter through the self-destructive nature that such an understanding of parenthood carries (see section 7). Moreover, though masculinity is indeed an important issue as regards the male protagonists, I will also mention the female masculinity that the female leading characters produce in their own gender performance.

It has already been explained that American capitalism favours the development of an extremely individualistic society. At the same time, it obsesses over production, creation, the progress of the community through individual competitiveness, and it highlights the role of the family, where motherhood and fatherhood are treated differently (see section 3). This obsession is epitomized in the main characters, but especially when it comes to their paternal identities. Both couples, Carl and Helen in *Lullaby* and Peter and Misty in *Diary*, identify as parents and locate themselves inside community as *failed* mothers and fathers. In Chapter 4, when analysing *Invisible Monsters* and *Choke*, the protagonists were sons and daughters who regarded their parental figures in disbelief and disappointment. At the same time, the paternal figure was compared to God, in the sense that only by becoming a parent does the subject gain its own true self, much like God and its subjects in the Christian community (see Chapter 4, section 2). Now, in *Lullaby* and *Diary*, it is the offspring that either disappears or dies, and the paternal figures are left alone to suffer this loss. Chapter 3 seems to corroborate the main characters’ toxic relationship with their parents as

analysed in the chapter 4 of this thesis, and although the perspectives are different, they can be argued to be the two sides of the same coin. The four protagonists have tried to fulfil the role of fathers and mothers inside the American society, in an attempt to attain the agency that only the *absolute other* can achieve. It is now necessary to go back to Bataille's analysis of *drama* and its root in the subject's *desire*. In these two works, the main characters' drama is based on their desire of being good parents and providers, and their failure when trying to do so.

In the case of *Lullaby*, as explained at the beginning of this chapter, both Streator and Helen killed accidentally their family, their daughter and son, after reading to them the culling song. As such, the role of the family as an institution inside the community used to protect and raise new generations has been completely reversed. A culling song, which is supposed to soothe and put a baby to sleep in the protective arms of a parent, is turned into a deadly weapon. The symbolism behind the term *lullaby* is turned upside down, making it even more powerful. Streator's desire for words to "come back into power" takes the characters of the novel to the type of archaic, operative community left behind by the individualistic, consumerist America. From the beginning of the story, Streator can be argued to show an obsession with a baby's fragility: "All we know about sudden infant death is there is no pattern. Most babies die alone between midnight and morning, but a baby will also die while sleeping beside its parents. It can die in a car seat or in a stroller. A baby can die in its mother's arms" (13). At the same time, a feeling of unease and clear *anguish* accompanies this line of thought: "All we know is, we don't know" (33). This anguish takes us back again to Bataille's ideas and will be essential to explain the characters' *guilt*. Streator's attempt at being an acceptable father figure, which in Christianity mirrors that of a God figure, has backfired. Whereas a God figure, and indeed a paternal one, should "know everything" in order to offer protection, Streator embodies a *dethroned* father figure. This is further confirmed in the following extract:

There are so many people with infants, my editor said. It's the type of story that every parent and grandparent is too afraid to read and too afraid not to read. There's really no new information, but the idea was to profile five families that had lost a child. Show how people cope. How people move forward with their lives (13).

Streator shows a clear feeling of incompleteness, which points him out towards a death drive to which Palahniuk has us already accustomed. Streator's death drive, as I

have already advanced in previous sections, implies physical self-abuse. At the beginning of the story Streator is described by his limping, and in the first pages an explanation of his condition is given. He buys scale model houses which he builds and arranges himself, only to step on them with his bare foot:

The trick to forgetting the big picture is to look at everything close-up. The shortcut to closing a door is to bury yourself in the details. This is how we must look to God. As if everything's just fine. Now take off your shoe, and with your bare foot, stomp. Stomp and keep stomping. No matter how much it hurts, the brittle broken plastic and wood and glass, keep stomping until the downstairs neighbour pounds the ceiling with his fist. (21)

This corroborates the fact that Streator is trying to picture himself as a deity who looks down at what he himself has created. Instead of taking care of it, however, he destroys it and hurts himself at the same time. It can be argued that, if God commits a mistake, only He can be the one to punish Himself, as He is *unavowable* and only He understands His intentions. The male protagonist can be said to be trying to imitate God as a paternal figure to the last consequences. Just like God cannot be understood nor touched, so does Streator see himself.

*Diary's* main character is a mother. Although there will be differences as regards gender performance and the way in which both protagonists will finally break their own symbolism, they are both influenced by the effect of the type of parenthood inspired by patriarchal, capitalist America. Misty's role as a mother is pivotal in the story: "What they don't teach you in art school is how your whole life can end when you get pregnant" (40). Misty's anguish at not being able to set an acceptable role model for her daughter Tabbi is similar to Streator's: "I don't want you filling my kid with expectations that I can't fulfil" (96)<sup>71</sup>. It needs to be mentioned that in *Diary* Peter obliges his later wife to become a mother by manipulating her contraceptive pills and birth control tests (91-92), in order to follow the island's prophecy. Another point in common between Streator and Misty is the fact that they both resent their own parents in a way that reminds us of Shannon and Victor's relationship with their parents in *Invisible Monsters* and *Choke*. In a discussion between Mona and Streator while they are travelling around the country to find and destroy the other copies of the culling

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<sup>71</sup> Peter's mother, Grace, insists constantly that Misty will become a great painter. This sentence is Misty's answer to those comments.

song, he tells her that he “[doesn’t] want her to make the same mistakes [he] made” and that “when [he] was about her age, [he] stopped talking to [his] parents” (209). In Misty’s case, her resentment towards her mother is even more poignant and similar to Victor’s bonding with Ida Mancini. In her diary, Misty writes: “Just for the record, a big part of this mess is Misty’s fault. Poor little Misty Claire Kleinman. The little latchkey product of divorce with no parent at home most days” (43). Of course, although she begins blaming herself, she is clearly placing such responsibility on her mother and the absence of her father, though especially her mother, who is mentioned many more times. This attitude reminds us of Pease’s analysis as regards the unfair importance given to the mother’s involvement and the unawareness of the fathers’ absence (74-75). Often coming back to her own past as a daughter, Misty obsesses over the idea that she does not want Tabbi, her own daughter, to be miserable just like she is. Her alcoholism helps her get through the days while she realises all her efforts to have a better life by escaping the American community and becoming part of the Island go to waste. It can be noticed here, however, that Misty is acting the same way her own mother did: taking too much responsibility on her daughter’s future, thus her own, almost hysterical, involvement. Making use of a quote shown above, “If you realise there’s no way you can give your child a better standard of living – hell, you can’t even give your child the quality of life that your trailer park mom gave you – and this means no college for her, no art school, no dreams, nothing except for waiting tables like her mom...” (75). Misty’s absent father figure corroborates Barnes idea as regards the diffused nature of fatherhood (71). The excessive blame and resentment towards the mother figure is also present in Peter Wilmot’s character, though this is not as present in the story. This can be noticed through the messages that he leaves in the hidden rooms. When analysing his handwriting, de la Porte comments: “the way capital *I*’s are thin and pointed proves that Peter’s got a keen sharp mind but he’s scared to death of his mother” (28).

There is, however, one fundamental difference between Carl and Misty. Both parenthoods are imposed, but in different ways. Misty’s motherhood was directly imposed by Peter and the community of Waytansea Island, a community which is clearly operative, symbolically saturated, and which takes death as its main core of existence. In fact, it needs to be mentioned that there is one type of motherhood in *Diary* that is much more powerful and toxic: Grace Wilmot’s (Peter’s mother). Grace “knows everybody’s secrets” (84) and her motherhood is tremendously powerful,

because according to de la Porte's analysis on Peter's graphology, Peter is, not only scared of his mother, he is also very attached to her (51). She represents the supposedly "hidden matriarchy" that exists in the American community due to the mother's emotional control over her (male) offspring (Kimmel 27). However, she also shows how this hidden matriarchy is an illusion, as it is the public sphere, where community's mechanisms are at work, what presents a real danger in the Waytansea island, being Grace only a channel for this mechanism to work. Grace's character will be of importance as well when dealing with inoperative communities.

Alternatively, Streator's sense of a *failed* fatherhood is imposed in a symbolic way as well, but from an individualistic, fake communal union that is the American social milieu. This takes us back to Brod, Hearn and Horrocks' analysis of modern fatherhood: Streator's fatherhood has failed because he, as a man, has not been able to be a father and maintain his family alive inside the system. It is therefore shown that both Waytansea Island's community and the American community are equally toxic for the individual, who is obliged to become a procreator under the system's interests. In that sense, both characters' guilt comes from the failed performance of a role that is both imposed and dramatised by the system itself, because the expectations behind the role of fatherhood are too high to be met, which means that it will always be a role that will be resented by the subject. In this sense, the characters always feel in debt (in Lacan's thinking) towards the community, as only the community provides them with an identity that they cannot construct themselves, and that by definition never belongs to the subject.

I would like to end this section by retaking the concepts of public and private spheres explained in the theoretical framework (see Chapter 2, section 3). The effect of the public and the private brings special importance in these two works. Indeed, the limit that separates the public and the private is essentially, in the capitalist realm marked by private property, the household. As has been already probably noticed, both novels have the concept of "the house" as something quite emblematic. In *Lullaby*, Carl stomps miniature houses as an act of self-punishment, and in *Diary Peter* conceals several rooms inside the rich people's households of the island where he leaves secret messages. The household can be here examined as a metaphor of not only the private sphere, but also these men's private self, and it is tremendously descriptive as regards their approach towards it. Carl feels the need to abuse and destroy it, because this is

how he experiences at the beginning his own agency: broken, due to his failure as a father figure, having killed the components of his own private sphere: his family.<sup>72</sup> Peter, on the other hand, has a more developed subjectivity. He does not destroy these private rooms; he hides them, leaving secrets behind, in a seemingly attempt to define his own intimacy. In a world in which the private and the public are more and more blended (Hearn 14, 53), Peter's covering of these rooms with the secret messages can be regarded as an almost political attempt: an effort to hold on to his own privacy and therefore defining his true self. Also in *Diary*, Kathy Farquharson makes a compelling point in relation to Misty's connection to the outside and the inside: "[She] deals with exterior space simply, by converting it to interior space", both painting and her approach to motherhood (122). That is, Misty's comfort zone is found in the private space, much like Peter's real self was encased in that hidden comfort. In this way, the gendered performance shared by the couple converges interestingly, as their real act or performance happens equally in the private.

## **5.2. Bodily gendered identities in parenthood**

In this subsection I will discuss the gendered identities of the four main characters of these two novels with a focus on their bodies. In my view, there are clear similarities between the understanding of the gendered self in Carl Streater and Misty Wilmot and between Helen Hoover Boyle and Peter Wilmot. Carl Streater represents an example of a man whose masculine identity can be said to be clearly marginal and non-hegemonic at the time the story is being told (see section 4). He has failed as a husband and a father by losing his family, and lives an alienated life. His only link with reality is his job as a journalist who covers sudden infants' deaths, a constant reminder of his dramatised reality and the source of his guilt: "in crib deaths, it's standard procedure to assure the parents that they've done nothing wrong" (*Lullaby* 33), while he is fully aware that he was the one who read the culling song to his family. Misty, in turn, has been left alone by her husband, now in a coma. Her life revolves around her job as a waitress in the

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<sup>72</sup> *Lullaby's* metaphor of the household is also examined by Christina Angel. She compares the "infrastructure" of the miniature houses with symbolic institutions that form community, like the Church or factories. She claims that his destruction of the ones he builds himself represents his own tragedy of family loss, hurting his body as a redeeming act. Symbolically, Helen works selling houses as well, which for Angel represents, in public and unhidden, what Carl "practices inside his home in the dark hours of the night" (55-56).

main hotel of the island, a life that she endures through her addiction with alcohol. The most important common thread that unites Carl and Misty is their expression of a toxic *and* arguably masculine gender performance through the abuse they provoke towards their own bodies. Of course, this masculinity on Misty's part will be of utmost interest, since it will be observed how the effects of hegemonic masculinity can be present in a non-male body and how its dangerous nature is made more salient when it leaves white, male corporeity (Halberstam 2).

Carl's self-abuse has already been mentioned in earlier sections when discussing his guilt towards his performance as a father. The pain that he inflicts on himself by stomping on miniature houses with his foot shows his obsession with being a masculine persona that projects himself as a good father. Alcoholism is Misty's own way of escape and body abuse. It can be noticed that although both strategies involve hurting the body, there is one difference that needs to be acknowledged: Carl's abuse involves over-noticing his body, making it hurt, while Misty's involves alienating herself from it. This difference may be justified by their gender roles inside the American community. While men understand their body and their emotions as something they must control (Kaufman, "Contradictory" 145, 148) and being also expected to endure violence (Horrocks 134), Carl's behaviour may be understood. Misty, however, chooses to detach herself from it. The literature establishes that women's bodies are seen as not being as distant from the private sphere, connected to feelings (Horrocks 122). If this were the case, by trying not to be so present in the moment with the aid of alcohol, she is negating her own intimacy by deluding it.

On a different note, both protagonists experience their bodies through other characters, which is also an important feature of these two novels. When it comes to Carl, there is an interesting passage where Mona is taking care of his damaged foot. An intriguing connection with Carl's body at the core takes place:

With a folded towel under it, Mona pours the rubbing alcohol. The pain's so instant you can't tell if the alcohol is burning hot or ice cold. Sitting on the motel bed, (...) with Mona kneeling on the carpet at my feet, I grab two handfuls of bedspread and grit my teeth. My back arched, my every muscle bunches tight for a few long seconds. The bedspread's cold and soaked with my sweat. Pockets of something soft and yellow, these blisters almost cover the bottom of my foot. Under the layer of dead skin, you can see a dark, solid shape inside each blister. (*Lullaby* 151)

There seems to be here an honest attempt on Carl's part at connecting with Mona through his pain. Behind this pain, there is a secret, as he never tells her the reason why his foot is in that state. The scene may be regarded as the illusion of being cured without showing the real wound, which of course does not grant its cicatrisation. Blood is being cleaned, but cuts remain open, out of cowardice. The irony is clear: one needs to be open in order to find closure. Going back to an extract analysed before, it should be reminded that Streater's job demands his focus on the details: "The shortcut to closing a door is to bury yourself in the details" (21), thus ignoring the whole picture and the main problems. When Mona is curing him, they are both focusing on the pain on his foot, while remaining silent about the reasons behind such pain. It is the perfect metaphor for the body as a mere shell. At the same time, though indirectly, seeing the body in such a way, de-constructed, helps the characters experience their bodies in a defiltered way.

Oyster's character, which will be examined with more detail in the sections dealing with the operative and inoperative communities, presents himself naked the first time he is introduced, during the meeting of the coven, where they do what Mona calls "ritual nudity": "Clothing is dishonesty in its purest form" (96). It needs to be mentioned that the coven is a type of community that does attempt to break with American capitalist thinking, thus the attitude towards clothing and the naked body. However, in a similar way as happened with the groups of cancer in *Fight Club*, although the intention is to confront the body in a way which rejects the symbolism attached to it by the American system, in the end the coven is not different from the type of operative communities which characterise a religious cult: the mystic halo that does not allow for an open and truthful understanding of the body. Back to Oyster's connection with the body, while the four of them are travelling inside the car, Oyster gets his shirt off and shows his chest. Helen begins watching him and when he notices her gaze, "he winks at her and tweaks his nipple", which makes the main character think about the Oedipus Complex (112). Oyster's disregard of decorum seems indeed a proper means to rebel against the symbolism attached to the (male) body (although its potential will be a more salient feature in the exploration carried out in the next section).

Perhaps, the climax as regards the body's dismissal of the mystic halo that accompanies it which originates in Christian thought in this work is epitomized in Helen Hoover Boyle. In *Lullaby*, the moments in which the body is clearly seen as a mere

cover are especially poignant in the female protagonist. As stated before, Helen's appearance resembles that of a restored piece of furniture. In such a way, the body is being compared to an object, that is, something that does not entirely belong to the human side of the subject. In a sense, this could also be interpreted as Helen using her own body in the same way as masculine bodies are used to express their gendered identity. However, Helen's understating of the body will evolve tremendously when they discover in the Grimoire, together with other spells, the "occupation spell", which allows the person who conjures it to literally occupy the body of someone else. Helen uses it at the end of the novel to occupy the body of a sergeant who had arrested Carl for being suspect of the death of the many people that he has killed with the culling song. She does so because her own body has been killed by Oyster, which means that her psyche is still alive. When Streator realises that the sergeant is in fact Helen, an interesting exchange takes place:

‘This is amazing. Being with you like this, you’re giving me an erection’ (...) ‘This sounds sexist, but I’ve always wanted a penis’ (...) I think as soon as I put you into a taxi maybe I’ll hang around in this guy and beat off. Just for the experience’ And I say, if you think this will make me love you, think again. A tear runs down the cop’s cheek. Standing here naked, I say, I don’t want you. I can’t trust you’ ‘You can’t love me,’ the cop says, Helen says in the cop’s grizzled voice, ‘because I’m a woman and I have more power than you.’ (241)

In this last extract, it can be discussed that Helen is effectively treating the body as if it were just a mere shell, since the male body she is occupying does not alter her own psyche as a woman. As far as the body goes, Helen is a character with a special potential if adding the layer of her projection of motherhood. Carl feels dethroned as a father figure. However, Helen never seems to feel defeated as a mother (thus her untiring quest to save her son). The fact that Carl feels this way as a father, but not Helen as a mother, points out to Pateman's ideas regarding fatherhood as always uncertain, contrary to motherhood, which remains always uncontested (35). For this reason, Helen does not feel defeated as a mother, nor therefore, as a subject with her own, clearly defined identity. In fact, far from feeling dethroned, Helen might be feeling more powerful. It has been explained before that thanks to the culling song both Carl and Helen are able to attain the features of the *absolute other*. This power, the power of a God-like figure, is culturally closer to that of the father figure. As such, it could be argued that, having failed as a mother, Helen is now trying to fulfil the role of a mother

with traits of a father figure. This is the case because the spells of the Grimoire, the most absolute power in the fictional setting of this novel, may equate that of the mysterious power of a God like persona, defined in religion by his possession of the symbolic phallus, the locus of male power (Butler, *Trouble* 22). Thus, the important issue in this outcome is the fact that the magical and fictional power of the spells is put at the same level as that of the phallus, showing its dependence on external factors and its unfixity to the male body. Taking Helen's view of the body and motherhood into account, and her arguably masculine stance, she represents yet another example of "pariah femininity". Though self-destructive, Helen can be seen as present both in the feminine spectrum (her hyper-feminine appearance) and the masculine one (her aggressiveness and need of control). As a result, paternity is seen in Carl as self-destructive, while maternity as projected by Helen not dangerous to her self, but is seen as externally destructive. Both attitudes are not appropriate for a healthier "being together", but their pairing will demonstrate to be very interesting to break with organic boundaries.

I will now examine *Diary* and its projection of the body. As explained before, Misty's focus on her body involves as well self-abuse, but this type of abuse (alcoholism) facilitates an evasion of the conscience of the body and the mind. Contrary to Carl, Misty can be said to not want to feel *anything*. It also needs to be mentioned that Misty's self concept as regards her physical appearance is deeply influenced by her husband's gaze. In one of the houses that Peter vandalizes with his red paint messages about the Island's prophecy, it reads:

'... now I see my wife working at the Waytansea Hotel, cleaning rooms and turning into a fat fucking slob in a pink plastic uniform' (...) '...She comes home and her hands smell like the latex gloves she has to wear to pick up your used rubbers... her blonde hair's gone gray and smells like the shit she uses to scrub out your toilets when she crawls into bed next to me...' (...) '...her tits hang down the front of her like a couple dead carp. We haven't had sex in three years...' (25)

To Misty's own consciousness as regards her lack of professional success as an artist, she needs to add her husband's disgust when it comes to her body. It can be argued that, through Misty's body and the effects that the type of slave-like work has had on it, Peter is comparing the islanders and the type of (economic) growth they have applied for generations. After discovering this message, Misty visits her husband in the hospital,

where she responds to his offensive words through the “diary”: “Just so you know how bad you look, any person in a coma longer than two weeks (...) [y]our face swells and turns red. Your teeth start to drop out. If you’re not turned every few hours, you get bedsores’ (...) ‘As for Misty’s breasts looking like a couple dead carp, you should talk” (40). Here, both Misty and Peter are sharing a comparable physical decay, for very different reasons. And one important issue to take into account at this point is the fact that one of them is in this state for trying to rebel against the islanders; the other is for now submissive before its living conditions.

Peter’s own conception of the body when the couple were still young and attending art school is also significant, as he and his view on the body are highly influential on Misty’s later open understanding of the self. While observing a painting made by Misty at an exhibition, Peter tells her the following: ““You’ll need to suffer to make any real art” (47). He makes her a list of different famous artists who suffered accidents, severe depression or other illnesses, and explains how great art can only come from suffering. To show her what he means, he uses a rusted pin to pierce one of his nipples violently, in a way that blood smears his clothes: ““I make a different hole every day” (...) ““It’s so every day I feel new pain” (48). In sum, what Peter teaches Misty in relation to creative inspiration is that only pain can provide it. Here, Palahniuk is referencing Ida Mancini in *Choke*: “Art never comes from happiness” (4), which reminds us of her disruptive potential. Later in the story, Angel de la Porte shares with Misty a similar line of thought when he is discussing handwriting analysis: “Everybody was trying to link the physical and the emotional. The body and the mind. The world and the imagination. This world and the next” (...) ‘If emotion can create a physical action, then duplicating the physical action can re-create the emotion” (54). When Misty visits Peter in the hospital, she takes the brooch with which he injured himself and pokes his flesh with it several times during the story. Every time, Misty asks him “[c]an you feel this?” (42). Misty is supposed to be the next great painter that will save the island, but the prophecy establishes that she ought to have always the same psyche, who comes back every four generations in a different body and with a different name. The pain on her body, as can be guessed from the previous quotes, should help her remember the pain she went through in her past forms so that she can become a great painter again. Here, a reminder of Bataille’s idea of the role of *drama* is clearly at stake in this part of Palahniuk’s work. In this view, Misty borrows Peter’s own understanding of his gendered identity,

and makes hers his own vision, in this case, of a masculine persona. As made clear in the theoretical framework by Horrocks, traditional forms of masculinity can only understand love when relating it to pain (112). This is perhaps the most important connection between Misty and Peter: creativity can only come from pain, and it is through this pain (the scene when Peter bleeds) that Misty begins to be attracted to Peter. Later, her own self abuse with alcohol can be said to be her only way to live and accept herself, which implies a toxic masculine treat. In her own way, and taking into account Misty's bodily performance and her condition as a foreigner (as the *absolute other* of the island's prophecy, to say the least), Misty is also a pariah for femininity. Her closeness to death can be seen as an approach to nature (a trait more accessible to women, according to Horrocks 158), but it is also an act of control over her body that mimics masculine control (Seidler 222). The result is some sort of gendered hybrid, unlabelled due to her marginalization.

It is throughout the middle of the story when Misty is finally convinced by Grace and Tabbi to paint. She is taken to a distant forest inside the island, where Misty can see scattered statues that represent different Greek gods and goddesses. Misty is told into eating some sandwiches and drinking a bottle of wine, together with some pills that the doctor of the island has provided for her headaches. It is later discovered that she is being poisoned, although at first she believes she has had food poisoning. When taking these, the pain and sickness she suffers in her body is unbearable. However, during this state, she is capable of drawing astounding paintings. In this way, it is by putting Misty's body to the limit, or rather, putting this body in great danger, that she can create pieces of work that verge on something unique, and therefore, she breaks with the symbolic limits imposed by that which is conventional. It steps away from the *Symbolic* and comes closer to Kristeva's *Semiotic*.

As explained by Bordo in the theoretical framework, the body is an empty canvas on which our culturally shaped ideas are put into work. This is clearly epitomised by the main characters in *Lullaby* and *Diary*. Both Carl and Misty are victims of the limits that the Symbolic sets in community. In Carl's case, his obsession with a father figure reflects as well his need to imitate and be closer to the body of God, by interpreting God's role when building the miniature houses. He becomes his own source of punishment in an attempt to redeem his failure as a father, and therefore, as a man. It could also be argued that by attempting to become his own tormentor, he is

trying to commune with Derrida's "God in me", and represents clearly the anxiety and obsession that accompanies the God-like origins of masculinity in the American setting that Palahniuk proposes. Misty, in turn, has become obsessed with her husband's body, and his lack of response towards his own source of punishment through pain, the origin of their toxic attraction. Indeed, as explained by Brod, when in absence of other forms to validate masculinity, men make use intensively of their bodily performance (in Katz 14). In addition, Peter can be argued to be embodying the body of Christ, since he was supposed to be the male sacrifice to attract the female artist to the island (this will be further examined in the following section). There is indeed *secrecy* surrounding his current state when it comes to his body, and his current inability to feel any pain makes such body useless symbolically speaking, especially if the Waytansea Island understands creativity, only attainable through *drama*, as the most important projection of the self. On her part, Misty can be argued to have taken Peter's bodily role on her own. She self-harms her body in order to sustain a self that made sense when both of them were together.

In both cases, it seems obvious that as Greengrace contends (in Chodorow 107), the main protagonists do not have a clear sense of a self that is separable from their gender performance. At the same time, their gendered view of their self is so harmed by their own and others' expectations (the community) that only by corrupting their bodies can they get a hold of what they feel is the reality of their true identity. This also seems to give them a sense of control over their self which they believe they do not have, as explained by Seidler (224-225). Carl's lack of an emotional self to cope with his loss implies going back to the body, and punishing it; Misty distances herself from it, in order to escape those emotions. The only way of having contact with their selves is by taking their bodies to the limit. However, in doing so, they are also preparing their inner selves to openness.

These characters have been examined individually through their body performance and it has been explained how this performance is highly filtered by a symbolism that comes attached to hegemonic masculinities. In the next section, these characters will be examined in community, both in operative and inoperative models. Although they are always trying to conform to traditional forms of masculinity, it will be precisely their inability to do so that will give them the potential to break with organicism and have an inoperative encounter.

## 6. “Everything is nothing by itself”: Operative communities

In this section, I will explore the operative models that appear in each of the novels that are being examined in this chapter. I will argue that the process in each of them consists in the main characters leaving behind the individualistic American setting to enter an operative network. In this way, they will attempt to fill the void that individualism and their own limited gendered self-concept have created in them. In *Lullaby*, the four main characters will form an artificial, operative community based on the assumption of traditional family roles, being also united by the concept of death. In *Diary*, Misty Kleinman will abandon the American social milieu to enter the organic community of the Waytansea Island, a cult-like composite based on a prophecy in which death will also play a fundamental role.

### 6.1. The coven in *Lullaby* and the trailer park in *Diary*

*Lullaby* and *Diary* follow a similar pattern to that of other Palahniuk’s works like *Fight Club* or *Choke*. In them, the main protagonists live in clearly individualistic settings. These settings do not really escape from old forms of symbolic organicism, and at some point, they find themselves attempting to go back to more archaic forms of “being together”. They do so in order to solve that feeling of incompleteness that individualism creates in them. Beginning with *Lullaby*, there are two operative communities which need to be analysed: the community of the coven, where the main character and Helen meet Mona and Oyster, and the family that these four characters form during their trip to destroy the remaining copies of the culling song.

The community of the coven, which is essentially the origin of the main operative model of this novel, makes its appearance soon after Carl and Helen meet. Mona invites them once they have discovered the existence of the spells and the Grimoire. The people that gather in the coven identify as Wiccan, and they all use different names when these reunions take place.<sup>73</sup> When Mona is introducing the main characters to the other members, Helen interrupts her right before giving her real name and calls herself “Chinchilla” (95). Two things are important in this exchange. First, this community is comparable to that of fight club in the sense that the members lose their

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<sup>73</sup> Mona goes by the name of Mulberry, for example.

names when participating in these meetings. The individual “I” is substituted by a name of their preference that is supposed to help them acquire an identity that rejects the outside American community and find a different one. In addition, when Helen is giving that particular name, she is, first, epitomizing Derrida’s *foreigner in disguise*: she does not really belong to the community, but is trying to make the other members believe she communes with their ideas (Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 19). At the same time, her particular choice helps see the coven in a humorous, non-important way, which immediately dismantles the community’s purpose. Since this community is completely based on symbols, the fact that Helen can pass as a regular member of the community by just giving that kind of name shows the symbolic precariousness of this composite, how weak its basis actually is.

There are other interesting symbols that characterise this community, which also have a resemblance to other religious gatherings. In the meeting of the coven (which takes place in Mona’s apartment),<sup>74</sup> there is an altar where sacrifices to a deity are offered. This sacrifice takes the form of wine, which presumably imitates blood. When they arrive, Helen believes that the “sacrifice” is actually wine to be drunk by the people attending. When Mona realises Helen’s mistake, she reprimands her: ““That’s the altar (...) You just drank my sacrifice to *The Goddess*””, to what Helen answers: ““Well, how about you get *The Goddess* another sacrifice, but make it a double this time”” (93). This exchange shows again Helen’s mockery and the coven’s lack of a solid symbolic basis. Lastly, another trait that makes this community clearly operative is the “ritual nudity” that they practice, which was already commented on earlier sections. Here, the body is not filtered through the symbolic weight that clothing has, but it is not regarded unfiltered in Nancy’s sense either. In sum, the coven presents an alternative community to the American social setting of the outside, but which does not manage to give the self value to its own core identity.

The community of the coven is, in addition, important for two facts. First, it is there where Oyster is introduced. As soon as he arrives in the apartment, he undresses and stands completely naked, showing no sign of modesty. From the first time Streater

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<sup>74</sup> This is yet another sign to discredit the community of the coven. Instead of having these meetings in symbolically saturated places, they take place at an apartment, which can only be owned if it is being paid. Again, the symbols of this community keep being influenced by that of the outside community.

sees him, he regards him as some sort of menace as far as his very bodily and *masculine* presence goes, not missing any details:

[H]e's standing here, hands on his hips, dick-and-balls naked (...). His dick tapers to a dribbling pink stalactite of wrinkled foreskin. A silver ring pierces the tip. (...) The details about Oyster are (...) [h]e's got one of those young bodies. The arms and legs look segmented, big with muscles, then narrow at the joints, the knees and elbows and waist. (95)

A clash between a new and a more archaic masculine identity occurs when Carl confronts Oyster for the first time. This is even more visible when Oyster interacts with Helen: "Standing there naked and young, he lifts Helen's hand all the way to his face. Standing there all tan and muscled, he looks from her ring (...) to her eyes and says, 'A stone this passionate would overpower most people.' And kisses it." (96). It seems obvious that Helen and Carl and Mona and Oyster form two combos which embody very different interpretations of the American community: The first two are two adults that feel the weight of Patočka's *responsibility* in a traditional way, meaning that they feel the need to save the rest of the members of the community by destroying the book of spells. Oyster and Mona, though mainly Oyster, also feel the responsibility of saving the community; however their plan to save it only contemplates the disappearance of the human race, by using the Grimoire. The clash between these two couples keeps becoming more intense, making it obvious that, especially Oyster and Streator represent two versions of masculinity which are equally toxic: "To me [Carl], Oyster says, 'The only power of life and death you have is every time you order a hamburger at McDonald's'" (99). Oyster brings a rebellious type of masculinity that makes Carl's look *passé* and passive. In their encounter in the coven, however, an interesting bond between the four characters takes place. In the reunion, at Streator's comments, Mona says to Carl: "Jeez, you sound just like my father" (98). At the same time, when Oyster reprimands Streator for not undressing in the coven reunion, he also adds: "Nice tie, Dad" (96). Here, the "organic family" is shaped and meets for the first time. Such meeting is, in terms of the analysis of communit(ies) in this thesis, as significant as the first encounter between Marla Singer and the male protagonist in the groups of cancer (*Fight Club*), or Tender Branson and Fertility Hollis in the graveyard (*Survivor*). Oyster's masculinity is attractive because it is closer to a normative masculinity that is not controlled by the capitalist system and actually fights against it. It is one that mirrors

Tyler's freer conception of the masculine ideal, young and restless, but also phantasmatic and hysterical (Butler, *Bodies* 93).<sup>75</sup>

A trailer park is the origin of Misty's incompleteness in *Diary*. She used to live with her mother there before meeting Peter Wilmot. It has already been mentioned how Misty's mother, a hippie as described by her daughter, believes that the American community is not a real community because everybody in it wants to escape from each other, being this the reason why wealth gains such importance (see section 2). In a way, their life in the trailer park seems to be their own way of escaping the individualism that prevails in the community outside the park, which "is supposed to make their trailer lifestyle better" (...) "[Because] [e]very fortune comes out of something unpleasant (...)" (152). However, going to the margins of a community that already encourages alienation shows not to be a valid solution for this main character. When she was a little girl, Misty would imagine her own ideal community by drawing it: "Picture the kind of castle houses that a little girl living in a trailer park would draw. (...) The bourgeois daydreams of some poor white trash kid. The whole island was exactly what a kid growing up in some trailer park (...) would dream about" (8). As it turns out, the island she draws is exactly like the Waytansa Island, the same concept as Benedict Anderson's *imagined community* (6). The social difference created by capitalist America has located Misty and her mother on the lower steps of the spectrum, and the Waytansa Island is the result of the naïve dreams of a little girl. Such childish concept of the island gives the first organic strokes of what I will define later. It embodies the eagerness of this character to find a real community again, as the American one does not fulfil her wishes of "being together": "The point is, when you're a kid (...) you don't know anything about the real world. You want to believe somebody when he says he loves you. He only wants to marry you and take you home to live in some perfect island paradise (...). He says he only wants to make you happy" (13). This may be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, it shows a step backwards on Misty's part (and the islanders', as will be shown in later sections) as regards the understanding of community. Instead of real openness, Misty is choosing to "be saved" by someone else, a man that will marry her and form a family. Indeed, this is a very traditional and patriarchal approach towards "being together"; same as in *Lullaby*, the family and parenthood become valid options

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<sup>75</sup> The analogy between Tyler and Oyster is also observed by Mendieta, although he claims that the latter shows greater solidarity with nature, regardless of his own self-destructive psyche at a global scale (405).

to find a truer self, acquiring the power of the creator, or absolute other. It is also the prevalence of the private sphere over the public one, the construction of a private community that will further alienate Misty inside the organic community of the Waytansa Island.

## 6.2. “Protected. Quiet and alone:” Derrida’s *foreigner*

Before studying this “family” in greater detail (see next subsection), I would like to examine this artificial family bond from the concept of Patočka’s *foreigner*. During their first encounter, it is the couple formed by Helen and Carl that is invited (by Mona) to the coven, a seemingly closed, operative group. The “key” that gives them access is their possession of the culling song and their knowledge about the Book of Spells. The four characters can be said to share a magical *secret*, surrounded by mystery. In other words, they share one common, symbolic belief. As explained in the theoretical framework, the organic community is obsessed with those who come from outside, so that they can protect their group and be hostile against those who represent a threat (Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 19-25). However, in this case, Mona (though not Oyster) is the one who grants them the necessary hospitality that allows them to, temporarily, be part of this reunion. From this moment, Mona will have an important role: that of being the hinge that unites the four of them together, and also the only one in this composite that has no intention of hurting anybody. In this respect, Mona resembles previously discussed characters, such as Marla Singer (*Fight Club*), Brandy Alexander (*Invisible Monsters*), or Dr. Marshall (*Choke*): “Mona Sabbat has got to come with us. Someone without blood on her hands. Mona and Helen and me, and Oyster, the four of us will hit the road together. Just another dysfunctional family. A family vacation. The quest for an unholy grail.” (102)

Oyster brings the type of hostility that does not allow them to completely fuse these four characters (as further explained in the section dealing with the inorganic communities). Oyster is clearly a copy of *Fight Club*’s Tyler Durden, something that will be examined later. For now, and as a summary for this subsection, it is important to notice how two couples, coming from very different communitarian settings, represent two types of *foreigners* that will temporarily fuse in an organic way because of how they see themselves when inside this fake, family unit. This responds to Stryck’s

theory about the importance given to the *role*, and not to the subject's essence. The community of the Waytansea Island is a realm whose foundation is based on the acceptance of a prophecy. This prophecy can take place thanks to the appearance of a *foreigner*, that is, the appearance of somebody who comes from outside the island. This foreigner must be, according to the prophecy, a talented female artist. In this sense, the community is only welcoming because it needs this outsider for its economic survival. However, Misty is not only embodying Derrida's foreigner, she is also "upgraded" to what could be called the *absolute foreigner*. This is because Misty is never truly accepted as one more islander: she is not part of the secrecy that surrounds the prophecy itself (explained in subsection 6.5.). At the same time, she acquires, without knowing it, the traits of Patočka's *absolute other* because she becomes a *mother* to all islanders (further explained in subsection 6.4.).

Nevertheless, Misty is not the only foreigner who is worth examining. Peter Wilmot represents as well Derrida's *foreigner* in the American setting where he and Misty meet each other. In art school, he is taken as an outcast: "Don't. No, her friends said. Not Peter Wilmot. Not 'the walking peter'". (...) Creepy Peter Wilmot" (43-44). Peter is imposed, from the island, the role of foreigner because, according to the prophecy, he needs to never *commune* with anyone else who is not the painter of the prophecy. He needs to stand out to attract, with his jewellery, the *absolute foreigner*: "The only difference between Peter and a homeless mental outpatient with limited access to soap was his jewellery. (...) Junk jewellery" (44). In addition, there is another type of foreigner which is of absolute importance to the community of the Waytansea island, and which also adds to its operative dimension: wealthy tourists. The island's source of wealth is exclusively based on its attraction of outsiders with money. This also demonstrates the weak basis of the Waytansea Island as a composite, as it needs those who come from outside to survive, therefore contradicting its over-protective nature (the aim of the prophecy is to finally kill those tourists in Misty's art exhibition in order to claim a multimillion insurance). In fact, as read in one of the messages that Peter leaves as a warning before he falls into a coma: "... save our world by killing this army of invaders..." (53). Another important fact to take into account when examining the tourists as foreigners is the creation of the OAF (Ocean Alliance of Freedom), a terrorist group that kills those coming from outside, as a counter attack to the massive tourism

that conglomerates, but also gives the island its wealth. This demonstrates the hostility that invariably accompanies the island's system of survival.

### 6.3. The self through symbolism

To help draw the map of how the artificial, operative communities of both novels work, it needs to be remembered that their union is firstly, artificial, and also, and perhaps more importantly, it represents a "being together" which is based on family roles that are purely symbolic and filtered by gendered significations. In *Lullaby*, this dynamic will follow the four characters until the end of the novel. There are several examples where it can be observed. "'You know, you and Helen are so much like my parents.' Mona. Mulberry. My daughter" (156); "'Mom, Dad? What's a really posh restaurant in Reno, Nevada'" (113)<sup>76</sup>. Etzioni's ideas can be reflected here, though this time we find an artificial "We" that labels an artificial family, where the individual "I" exists ("I", the "father", "I", the "daughter") and revolves around a role that is tailor-made by the traditional family institution.

The *incompleteness* felt by the characters, which is typically what leads the subjects to the need to *commune* is present in Helen and Carl's failure at being good parents. When it comes to Mona and Oyster, it seems clear that their willingness to be part of this family does not come from incompleteness, but from their vision of death (examined in further sections). However, Mona and Oyster are clearly rebelling against the pre-established schemes given by the American community. Their rebellious youth has been given a target towards which they can rebel: two subjects that can easily fulfil their parents' role, and against whom they can rebel without actually breaking the existing bond between themselves and their actual parents. It is a fake, simulated rebellion, one that does not endanger the real relationship that ought to exist between them and their parents.

In turn, Helen and Carl may also be able to access a simulated redemption for the death of their former family. This is another trait that makes this composite clearly organic. Its simulating nature makes the relationship among its members completely artificial. At the same time, as hinted in the title of this subsection, this is possible

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<sup>76</sup> Oyster asking about a fancy restaurant he can endanger with one of his misleading adverts.

precisely because the four of them are playing roles which are clearly saturated with symbolisms: but there is no blood relationship between them. All these organic traits are explained through Carl's observations:

[Mona]'s the age my daughter would be, if I still had a daughter. (101); [Oyster]'s the age her son, Patrick, would be. Helen's the age my wife would be, if I had a wife. (...) This might be the life I had, if I had a life. My wife distant and drunk. My daughter exploring some crackpot cult. Embarrassed by us, her parents. Her boyfriend would be this hippie asshole, trying to pick a fight with me, her dad. And maybe you can go back in time. Maybe you can raise the dead, past and present. Maybe this is my second chance. This is exactly the way my life might have turned out. (102)

Another operative attribute that can be taken from this extract is how, indeed, these artificial family roles are also deeply influenced by gendered significations. Each character is just assuming the role they would assume in a "natural" family, taking into account their symbolically filtered genitalia:

According to Oyster, the 'dads' have all the power so they don't want anything to change. He means me [(Carl)]. (...) Oyster says all the "moms" have a little power, but they're hungry for more. He means Helen. (...) And young people, he says, have little or no power so they're desperate for any. Oyster and Mona. (142)

This can be said to epitomize clearly how the younger representatives of the state (Oyster) want to murder the father in the familial institution, and become independent from that smaller community which provides the family (Hearn 92). However, Oyster's projection of domination and leading entail the destruction of any other type of subjectivities, including his own.

Interestingly, in *Diary* the symbolic role that limits the characters' self is also related to the institution of the family. And, similarly to *Lullaby*, Peter's and Misty's roles are imposed by the operative community of the island. For the prophecy to work, a young man needs to convince the female painter to marry him and take her to the island. It is perfectly noticeable from the moment they meet that Peter does not really accept his role pleasantly. When they get together, Peter's way of asking Misty out is blunt and completely passionless: "If you'd never consider marrying me, there's no point in me taking you to dinner, is there? (...) I find this approach saves everybody a shitload of time" (46-47). In addition, when they become a couple, there is one occasion in which

they come across another young boy from the island who knows Peter. When he realises she is the chosen one,<sup>77</sup> the friend shows his condolences to Peter. To this, Peter answers: “‘Yeah, (...) fucking lucky me’” (83). It is clear that Peter sees his role as Misty’s future husband and later, father of Tabbi, as a curse.

Thus, Peter manages to attract Misty with his fake jewellery,<sup>78</sup> although this is not his only way of assuring that Misty leaves her mother and goes to the island. He also manipulates her contraceptive pills and lies to her about her period in order to get her pregnant. In any case, it can be argued that it is Misty’s willingness to leave her life in the trailer park and find a more desirable community what really lures her. Her role as Peter’s wife, and later a mother, is imposed by Peter (and the community) but it is also a role that she accepts with eagerness at the beginning: “‘Having Tabbi made Misty part of something, of the Wilmot clan, of the island. Misty felt complete and more peaceful than she’d ever thought possible” (212). It is here where Etzioni’s “We” is operated, and Misty’s “I” is substituted by the self needed by the community to fulfil the prophecy and survive. It is demonstrated then that their relationship, and the family that they will form later with Tabbi, is as artificial as the fake family that is created by the protagonists in *Lullaby*. On a different note, the imposed motherhood on Misty is a clearly gendered role saturated with symbolism. Not only will Misty be the creator of a human life, a purely biological fact; she will also be the creator (the *absolute other*, transformed into the *absolute foreigner*).

Having analysed both novels in relation to these symbolic roles, it is important in this subsection to highlight the fact that these roles do not escape the main religious figures that shape the American traditional institution. When it comes to *Lullaby*, I would like to argue that Carl is embodying a God-father figure, since as explained before he is using such imagery to be able to punish and redeem himself. Helen’s character is a grotesque one like Marla or Fertility, a reversed Virgin Mary, whose real son (Patrick) is kept frozen for her to be able to save him once.

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<sup>77</sup> This friend shows Misty one of his own pieces of junk jewellery from the island, and her attraction towards it confirms the prophecy.

<sup>78</sup> The fact that the jewells that ought to attract the artist are fake is but another parodic component of the actual artificiality of the community of the island.

#### 6.4. The artificial family and religion

The origin of the operative family in *Lullaby* takes place in a religious cult, linked to the fact that this group sees itself as a family where the roles of mother, father, son and daughter that has obvious religious connotations. However, it is interesting to see the different perspectives that each of these characters have when it comes to religious thought and God since, though different, they all manage to form part of the same puzzle. One thing that does bring their religious references in common is the fact that they always relate it to death (further analysed in subsection 6.6.). In this sense, taking back the religiously symbolic roles that this fake family union portrays, while Streater would be the equivalent to a God-father figure and Helen would be a reversed Virgin Mary, Mona and Oyster represent the never-sacrificed sons, as the artificial paternal figures that embody their creators have failed in their religious mission. Oyster would be representing a Jesus Christ that has not been able to sacrifice himself yet, which is why he becomes obsessed with this task. In turn, Mona would be the most interesting character in this respect. She does not commit to any of the available roles, precisely because in the religious pyramid, there is only room for one prominent female character, the Virgin Mary. This will leave her apart in this analysis for now, but will be of tremendous importance in the section dealing with inoperative communities.

The role of God in Carl Streater's life has already been mentioned, with his attempts of punishing himself by stepping on miniature houses. With this "new family" he sees the chance of redeeming himself: "There's so much we need to get fixed. To get back to God, as Mona would say. Just to break even" (181). As also illustrated above, Carl's masculinity finds its source in the figure of God. It was discussed how his initial way of alleviating his pain for losing his family consists of embodying a god-like figure that destroys something he has created, a superior being, a father-like figure that punishes himself for his mistakes, his own "God in me". Streater's view on religion is however, totally different to the other three. A good example is the car trip, when they discuss how killing animals can be justified but not human beings. To this, Carls says that humans are above animals, and that God provides animals to humans so that they can survive (149). Helen adds: "Of course you'd say that (...) you're on the winning team" (149). Helen herself has her own way of looking at God's doings, showing a more pragmatic side to it: "Maybe you go to hell for the things you don't do. The things you don't finish" (86). Helen's position can be read as well as a critique to men's

superior position in community in relation to religious imagery, since, after all, men are closer to the figure of God than women are (Segal, *Slow Motion* 154).

When it comes to Oyster, and perhaps to a lesser extent, to Mona, God is the enemy that must be taught a lesson. It is especially in respect to God that Oyster becomes *Fight Club's* Tyler Durden. His discourse about how he plans on saving the Earth from human beings irritates Streater endlessly. Oyster compares Adam and Eve with the herds of goats and pigs left by the sailors on the islands so that, when coming back, they would have animals to eat: ““You ever wonder when God’s coming back with a lot of barbecue sauce?”” (139); ““You ever wonder if Adam and Eve were just the puppies God dumped because they wouldn’t house train?”” (142). Lastly, I would like to focus here on how Carl and Oyster’s view on religion is also a sign as regards their own (gendered identity): Carl represents a submissive masculinity, a fallen soldier that knows about loss, a harmed masculine psyche that still sees punishment as the only way towards redemption. Oyster, on the contrary, acts like Tyler Durden would, and takes punishment to the next level: the only solution is self-destruction. It is an unevolved masculine view of the self, the violence against oneself taken to the extreme (Horrocks 134). This will be further explained in the subsection dealing with death. What is important to point out is that the four of them take religion as a symbolic basis on which they all need to operate. In this sense, saturated and operative symbolism stays in place.

In *Diary*, the Waytansea Island adopts religious mechanisms that are parallel to those found in the Christian community. Firstly, it aims to present itself to the outsider as an earthly paradise: ““And the first time you see the island, coming from anyplace else in the entire world, you think you’re dead. You’re dead and gone to heaven, safe forever”” (11). As a result, the island manages to provide the type of archaic and pastoral community that can only be imagined: ““Those fine old family trees where everybody was everybody’s cousin once removed. (...) They ate something meat with every meal, and all the sons seemed to wear the same shabby old jewellery, Their kind-of regional fashion statement”” (46). As explained previously, the Waytansea Island provides wealth to four generations, but this wealth comes always from the outside and from outsiders. It is a community that depends on the system (capitalist America) that it despises. It seems logical that the islanders would use a mystical prophecy to justify the massacre with which it culminates (explained in subsection 6.6).

Art and creative vibes are also filtered through a mysterious halo that provides a connection to a religiosity similar to Christianity and its stoic obsession with suffering in order to find solace and forgiveness. They advocate for a religion of pain centred on artistic production (Bataille's *ecstasy*), being this the reason why Peter introduces Misty to art by showing her the advantages of creating through pain. As examined before, Misty manages to paint tremendously well after she is poisoned with the pills that the doctor of the island gives her. However, it is precisely Misty's suffering towards her family that will trigger her artistic vibe. Taking Misty away from her own creation (her family, one could say), is what truly awakens her artistic value: "Inspiration needs disease, injury, madness" (65). Such statement can be related to a religious type of suffering, where the one who suffers will be relegated as an *outcast*, but an adored one. In this sense, the Wilmot family (meaning here Misty, Peter, and Tabbi) acquire several of the religious traits that define the Christian family. In this sense, and coming back to the family roles that these characters fulfil, Peter would be a resigned Jesus Christ, sacrificed in secrecy by the community. However, it should be noticed that, contrary to Oyster, Peter is unwilling to accept this gender-like filtered sacrifice, which means that he is rebelling against the toxic masculinity proposed by the island. Also, this sacrifice has the objective of transforming Misty into a Virgin Mary for the community: the mother that grieves, making her more authentic in a traditional gender-like understanding of the self. When the truth about the prophecy is revealed, Peter's father and mother assure her: "Under one name or another, you're the mother of us all. (...) 'You've *loved* us all'" (245). This statement has the effect of first unifying the members of the Waytansea community under the same banner (Misty) and pushes Misty towards the fulfilling of a role given externally by others and one which marginalises her further. Her marginalisation however, manages as well to avoid communion, as I explain in the section dealing with inoperative communities.

Similarly to what happens in *Lullaby*, *Diary* provides characters whose familiar bonds are also relatable to religious figures. However, its positions may be seen in a more complex way. Peter is the unwilling sacrifice to the community. He embodies a Jesus Christ who does not want to really fulfil that purpose. Misty can be interpreted in two ways taking into account these lenses. On the one hand, she could embody the Virgin Mary figure, who in this case suffers the loss of her lover, and who also experiments the (fake) sacrifice of her daughter Tabbi. However, one may wonder who

the absolute other is in this triad (that is, the God-father figure). Peter is sacrificed, but he also represents a paternal vacuum if regarded in the triangle formed by Misty, Tabbi, and himself. However, when he adopts unwillingly the role of the sacrificed, it is his mother, Grace Wilmot, the one that occupies the role of the absolute other: she knows the secret behind the prophecy and she also embodies the creator of the sacrificed. This represents a symbolically filtered manner of interpreting this family union, but it is innovative in its own way, as I will explain in section 7.

To sum this subsection up, even though the operative models form themselves among the main characters in each story, they cannot help but use the same saturated symbolism that accompanies traditional gender significations.

## 6.5. Secrecy

From the beginning of this chapter, it has been clarified that the concept of the family is pivotal to understand the relationship among the protagonists of both novels. In this sense, the concept of the secret is important to consolidate the hierarchical difference that exists in *Lullaby* between Carl and Helen (the parents) and Oyster and Mona (the son and the daughter) in this operative formation. This difference can be seen from the beginning during the meeting of the coven: the parents do not renounce to their clothes, while the son and daughter undress and show their bodies, young and naked, with nothing to hide. Age, in this sense, promotes the accumulation of secrets, of a past that the characters do not want to share nor remember. When it comes to the parents, it becomes obvious that their secret is surrounded by guilt. It can be argued that the parents not only have a shared guilt, but also a shared shame, arguably shown through their lack of nudity. I would like to go back to how Carl and Helen, as people that used to play the role of parents, make use of the traits of the *absolute other* in order to gain agency, an identity of their own, by becoming responsible for the well being of another human.

This agency, however, has turned into a tainted one, an identity that has failed, but an identity nonetheless. With this agency comes the responsibility that both Carl and Helen feel towards trying to redeem their sins by destroying the culling song with which they killed their own family. In this respect, the hierarchy between these artificial

parents and the artificial offspring is shaped thanks to their painful secrets. It is the secret, in its purest organic and symbolic sense, a secret that is defined by drama (and ecstasy), what has given Carl and Helen an agency. However, this agency is, of course, tainted and castrating, as they feel only defined by the suffering caused by their losses (always as parents or creators). Oyster and Mona, the artificial son and daughter, do not have the agency of the absolute other in the sense that they are not creators and parents; however, at the same time, they do not have the responsibility that comes from Carl and Helen's guilt: "'Me,' Oyster says, 'I'm all for wiping the slate clean, of books and people, and starting over. I'm for nobody being in charge'" (160). In sum, Oyster's intentions, together with Mona's are radical and in the open, while Helen and Streater never clarify completely with them the reason why they do what they do. Secrecy and mystery, their unshared truth, is the only thing at this point in the story that holds Helen and Carl's identity together, as they can only see themselves through the "God in me" contrivance. Finally, it is also worth mentioning that Carl does represent a more archaic view of masculinity when relating his masculinity to the secret. Going back to MacInnes and Hearn's ideas, his true self becomes stronger in his own private sphere, his intimacy, in those moments when he is building the miniature houses and destroying them. It is also reminiscent of a type of "complicit masculinity", in Demetriou's wording, as he suffers the effects of such masculine identity in silence, and his private self only brings him pain because he has not been able to tackle his masculine psyche in a healthy way. Oyster, on the contrary, would seem to represent a different understanding of masculinity, completely open, naked, and taken to the public. It will not, however, be a healthier understating of masculinity either, as I will theorize in section 7.

*Diary's* main secret is that which is shared by all the members of the community, and is only hidden for Misty, the *absolute foreigner*, and the tourists that come to the island to invest their money. In this sense, the islanders are being completely irresponsible towards themselves, as the community's self destructive nature is its only alternative to keep its existence. Here, it is demonstrated that this shared prophecy is in fact what gives the islanders their identity, and as a result, it points out towards yet another organic element that needs to be taken into account in this novel. The shared prophecy, which works in secret, is shared by those that were born in the island. This means that it is the sharing of this prophecy that allows the members of this

community to keep their territory, the *land* of the island per se. In a nutshell, this entails a communal identity based exclusively on a place, and not the true self of the person that lives in it.

In the same work, there are other symbolic elements related to secrecy that need to be mentioned. Firstly, it is several times remarked by Misty that Peter used to love watching Spanish soap operas when they were a couple. These soap operas, with their super-artificial characters and plots, spoke in Spanish, and neither Peter nor Misty could really understand what they said. During sexual intercourse, Peter would tell Misty “te amo” (161), therefore imitating the fake type of romance that these types of TV shows provide. In relation to this, Misty reflects several times in the story: “What you don’t understand you can make mean anything” (37, 67, 92). Symbolically speaking, that which belongs to Kristeva’s Symbolic but whose meaning cannot be understood loses that which limits it, and deceives those who interpret it freely through their own desire. Misty’s need for ecstasy is represented by the community of the island which she drew. However, it can be argued that the toxicity of the secret that surrounds the basis of the community shows Misty’s own lack of understanding of “being together” and interpretation of her own self.

I would also like to mention Peter’s secret messages. When Misty and Angel de la Porte visit these hidden rooms with messages in red ink written by her husband, de la Porte tries to interpret these messages with his knowledge of graphology. As referenced before, “[e]verybody was trying to link the physical and the emotional” (54). It seems clear that Peter wanted to maintain these messages in secret, only to be revealed in due time. Although this particular secret can also be interpreted in an inoperative way (see section 7), the fact that Peter was unable to open himself and tell the truths that graphology provides (like his fear and attachment to his mother) is enough proof that the community of the Waytansea island does not work for its members to evolve in their own way. To end this subsection, the most important organic secret of all when it comes to diary, and which opens the door of the next section is the ultimate purpose of Misty’s artistic production: the sacrifice of the tourists in a fire while they are mesmerized with Misty’s work.

## 6.6. “I want to be what killed the dinosaurs”: Death as an operative *symbol*

I would like to argue in this last subsection dealing with operativeness that the main characters experience what could be called the “saviour’s syndrome”, a concept that comes directly related to sacrifice or “dying for the other”. This “dying for the other” will be precisely the door that will lead us to the section dealing with the inorganic or inoperative communities that will be discussed in section 7. In *Lullaby*, there is a striking difference between the two female and the two male characters in this respect. Both Carl and Oyster have a tremendous need to sacrifice their lives in order to find themselves useful, in order to “be”. This idea of “being” only in suffering takes us back to Hearn and Horrocks’ ideas as regards hegemonic masculinities. However, as explained before, Streator does so to redeem himself because of his mistakes as a subject with a self-imposed agency (fatherhood), while Oyster wants to present himself as a new version of Jesus Christ, willing to give his life to stop humanity’s destruction.<sup>79</sup> In this case, the role of Mona will be important, both with Streator’s and Oyster’s inclination towards sacrifice.

As I explained before, Streator does indeed get corrupted by the killing power of the culling song. It is at this point that Mona tries to warn him, explaining that killing drives you away from humanity, alienating the subject. She goes further, and says: “The only way out (...), will be to surrender and let the world kill Helen and [Carl] for [their] crimes. Or [they] can kill [themselves]. (...) ‘After killing someone, those are the only ways back to connect with humanity.’ (...) ‘That’s the only way you can get back to a place where the world isn’t your nemesis. Where you’re not totally alone’” (133-134). It is here that Mona’s potential to bring up an inoperative connection with the rest of the characters starts to fluctuate. She offers him the salvation he needs: telling the truth and unveiling the *secret*, opening his self. However, the main male character is not ready yet to take such thread. Indeed, his only way to be saved and sacrifice himself in an inoperative way (the Gift of Death *for someone else*, as Esposito words it in *Communitas* 11) would be to turn himself to the police and confess his crime. He has the chance to do so after receiving a call from a detective who is investigating him for being suspect of the deaths of his neighbours. However, he ends up killing him with the culling song: “I’ve killed my savior (...). I’m that much further from the rest of

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<sup>79</sup> It is difficult to ignore Oyster’s similarities in this respect with Tender in *Survivor*.

humanity” (183). In any case, this point represents the male protagonist’s organic climax. It is several times during the novel that he reminds himself that “[t]he more people die, the more things stay the same” (90, 135, 183, 196). It seems obvious that here death acquires the unifying and symbolic filter that characterizes the operative community.

While Carl seems to become more and more conscious of his deathly cycle, Oyster evolves into what Nancy calls *hysteria*: “a body saturated with significations” (*Corpus*, 23), as he is becoming an implosion of his own extremist ideas:<sup>80</sup> “It’s just my generation trying to destroy the existing culture by spreading our own contagion” (116), because “[e]very generation wants to be the last” (144). This mirrors Blanchot’s ideas as regards the occasional attempt to substitute one organic composite for another equally oppressive system (*Unavowable* 14). In Oyster’s view, in the new world, he would have to disappear too:

“I’m for nobody being in charge” (...) “I just love everything the same. Plants, animals, humans. I just don’t believe the big lie about how we can continue to be fruitful and multiply without destroying ourselves” (...). “I’m a fucking patriot (...) This culling poem is a blessing. (...) It will save millions of people from the slow terrible death we’re headed for from disease, from famine, drought” (...). So he’s willing to kill himself and Mona? I ask, so what about his parents? (...) Aren’t they innocent in his mind? “This isn’t about guilt or innocence” (...) The dinosaurs weren’t morally good or bad, but they’re all dead.” (...) “I want to be what killed the dinosaurs” (...) “In order to save the world, Jesus Christ suffered for about thirty-six hours on the cross” (...) “I’m willing to suffer an eternity in hell for the same cause” (...) “You figure out who’s the best saviour.” (160-62)

Oyster’s idea of saving humanity with his own sacrifice represents the organic extreme discussed in *Fight Club* and *Survivor* in Chapter 1. It is here that the fake family’s organicism reaches its peak. Oyster intends to turn his life into the Gift of Death, killing everybody else in this giving. In this sense, Oyster is being completely irresponsible towards the community he wants to save, as he would be making it disappear and in the end there would be no gift, because no one would remain there to receive it. He represents Esposito’s concept of total immunity of the community, which indeed takes his view to total destruction. In addition, Oyster is always open as regards his intentions, which means that the secret does not operate on him in this case. If one takes religious

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<sup>80</sup> This is another proof that this character is also a copy of Tyler Durden.

imagery to analyse this group of four, Oyster could be said to be sharing this secret with Carl, who embodies a father-like figure (God, in the religious triangle). However, not even in this case do they experiment real exposure. Oyster is filtering his death with saturated symbolism that is not even his own, as he always takes Christian religion as a reference, which means that he never leaves the Symbolic to enter the Semiotic. Ultimately, it is the aforementioned toxicity that accompanies their view as American men, based on religious figures, what defines their destructive nature.

Taking these ideas now and applying them to *Diary*, the aforementioned saviour's syndrome is imposed on Peter and is only voluntary for Misty. As explained above, for the prophecy to take place, Misty needs to experience the death of both her husband and her daughter to feel the necessary pain to create the paintings that will provoke the Stendhal Syndrome to all the tourists that go to the exhibition. With the collaboration of all members of the community, the death of the husband and the daughter was to be simulated, and Peter would have had the chance to only fake it and simply hide from her. However, Peter's intentions were very different.<sup>81</sup> When the islanders find out the truth about this, they try to kill him and make it look like a suicide attempt. This demonstrates the fragility of the island's secret, as it is clear that total communion does not exist (as demonstrated by Peter). Plus, the hysterical reaction that this total immunity provokes is completely dangerous. Death is, as a result, the most important operative element in Waytansea Island, as it is the source of the "saviour's" inspiration. It is from this communal ecstasy that the whole island is fed, and its toxicity is clearly stated by Peter in his messages: "... set foot on the island and you will die...' (...)' run as fast as you can from this place. They will kill all of God's children if it means saving their own'" (16).<sup>82</sup> In any case, even that feeling of fusion through death among the members is completely artificial, therefore showing how the ultimate nucleus of this composite is tremendously fictitious. Misty is in fact the real sacrifice, although they need her alive just enough in order to keep her paintings. After being fed with the medicines that make her weak and obliged to just sit and paint, she feels the weight of her condition: "Between the cast and the necklace, Misty feels pinned to the bed. Staked out. A sacrifice. An anchoress" (166).

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<sup>81</sup> Peter was bisexual and was having an affair with Angel de la Porte. His intentions were to leave the messages hidden in the houses for Misty to find them and run away with his lover.

<sup>82</sup> This can be taken as a reference to Derrida's economy of sacrifice.

The role of the saviour was imposed generations ago by other female painters like Misty, and all of them attempt to warn her: “You’ll die when they’re done with you” (89). It can be argued that the Waytansea Island is in itself a parasite community, as it feeds its own wealth from the outside capitalist America: ““Most fortunes (...) are founded on the suffering and death of thousands of people or animals. Harvesting something. (...) ‘We’ve just found a way to harvest rich people’” (245). When Misty finds out that Peter’s warnings are actually true, she tries to warn the police and the tourists that come to see the exhibition, but the Stendhal Syndrome does take place when the tourists see her paintings. The older generation of the island lock themselves with them, and they all die in a fire provoked by the islanders.

All in all, both communities – the artificial family and the Waytansea Island – are operative representations in which Badiou’s “good other” is always sacrificed, which means that that nucleus around which the community builds itself disappears. As a result, Esposito’s nihilism is operated, and the community absorbs its members into nothingness, its purpose a failure. The hospitality around which both communities grow turns quickly into a toxic hostility that puts the members in danger. The effects of religious symbolism are also clearly visible when they operate in the roles that all characters assume, eroding their own understanding of the self and perpetuating the same gendered significations that Christianity has traditionally promulgated, specially Christ’s “dying for the other”. In the next section, however, I will analyse how, once again, Palahniuk takes these symbolic saturations to the extreme in order to break radically with these symbols and find a more open and suitable understanding of the characters’ (gendered) self.

## **7. “Constructive destruction”: Inoperative communities**

### **7.1. Death and the body: The characters’ potential to openness**

In chapters 1 and 2 death was analysed first from the perspective of operative communities and then from the perspective of inoperative ones. This chapter will follow the same path. It is precisely this obsession with death and the characters’ inclination towards a death drive what takes them to the margins of the symbolic and paves the way towards an understanding of the self that manages to break those limits. *Lullaby* and

*Diary* experience an approach to death that helps the protagonists access *clinamen* in analogous ways. In both novels, Carl and Misty approach death similarly through their bodies. Their self-abuse can be said to help them feel the body from outside, especially Misty when she is being poisoned by the islanders to help her touch rock-bottom: when she addresses the islanders in her state, she is described “[a]s if some dead body just spoke” (143). By treating the body in such abusive way, by making it hurt, these characters achieve what Nancy calls “the body out there”, thus seeing it as just a cover, and not the main source of the subject’s self, giving them the potential to become open subjects.

It was explained before how Carl, in *Lullaby*, achieves to further alienate himself because of his murders with the culling song. However, it can also be argued that it is precisely this alienation that can help him see his own self outside the symbolic limitations of the gendered self that he has built as a failed father. According to Mona, it is precisely his own self-destruction what can save him, in a chance to find true openness. Mona is sure that he “is (...) a powder keg of something. Rage. Sorrow. Something. (...) Until you deal with your real personal issues, you’ll never be able to control yourself” (78). Mona’s analysis of Carl’s issues mirrors Hearn’s view in the theoretical framework: men’s lack of a private self, where they can find a place to explore their emotions. Streator’s real issues are revealed half-way through the story. It was known that he had killed his family by accident with the lullaby. However, there is an eerie piece of information that had remained hidden: he had sex with his wife the next morning, and kissed his daughter good-bye, not realising they were both lifeless: “I kissed Katrin on the side of her head. (...) The sun came through her yellow curtains. Her toys and books. She looked so perfect. I felt so blessed. (...) It wasn’t until I came home that I knew what I’d done” (178-179). When Carl remembers this scene, he is also watching his “new family” (Helen, Mona and Oyster) asleep: “This is the life I have now. For better or for worse. For richer, for poorer” (178). As a result, Carl found perfection in death, much in the same symbolic way in which operative models find their communal climax, without forgetting the clear connection with Christianity and marriage towards which Streator makes a reference. However, it is precisely this value of perfection and the realisation of its impossibility, taken from religious belief, what makes Streator see death not only through a symbolic filter, but also something tangible, which can be confronted directly.

Helen's view towards death is also pivotal. It has already been mentioned that her character has grotesque strokes that remind the reader of other female characters in Palahniuk's works, like Marla Singer, Fertility Hollis or Ida Mancini. One of the most important quotes in this respect is the following: "This isn't about love and hate, (...) It's about control. People don't just sit down and read a poem to kill their child. They just want the child to sleep. They just want to dominate. No matter how much you love someone, you still want to have your own way" (148). Helen's view on parenthood is one of utter control, an idea that mirrors perfectly the infantilizing figure that accompanies the mother figure according to Kimmel, but also the need for control that defines hegemonic masculinity (Kaufman, "Contradictory" 125). Once again, the author is taking one of the many folds that define masculinity to project it through a female character, overexposing it and exaggerating its unfixity in the male body. Helen represents a smothering attitude that takes the character to death. Interestingly, Oyster's view on humanity's domination is practically the same, pointing out to analogous gendered views of the self: "This isn't about guilt or innocence,' (...) the dinosaurs weren't morally good or bad, but they're all dead," to what he proceeds, "I want to be what killed the dinosaurs" (161). He is also conscious of this power struggle to which Streater does not enter, as he claims: "Helen wants the same world, but with her in charge" (160). Helen and Oyster's idea of control is comparable to the limited hegemonic masculine identity that is given in the United States. It does not matter if the person is morally good or bad; still, punishment is always the way to evolve, and only in death does the (masculine, control obsessed) psyche allow itself to progress one way or another. Precisely because Carl is inside the spectrum of the non-hegemonic masculine spectrum (because he feels now as a dethroned father) can he, together with Mona, enter a more open understanding of the self with Helen.<sup>83</sup>

Oyster also provides the antithesis to Carl's view, in the same way Tyler Durden provided a super-masculine persona to the main nameless character, a reflection of an overwhelming and ultimately destructive understanding of existence. Oyster's "plague of information" infuriates the main character and makes him wish for as much noise as

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<sup>83</sup> It needs to be remembered that Helen and Carl unite at the beginning because she also knew about the culling song, and she provides her murdering services to great institutions like the U.S. government. The reasons behind this are not merely economic: Helen's view on death is neither romantic nor symbolically filtered by religious paradigms. It is entirely pragmatic. It can be argued that in this sense Helen provides a gendered identity which, setting aside if it is feminine or masculine, does not really obey any of those etiquettes.

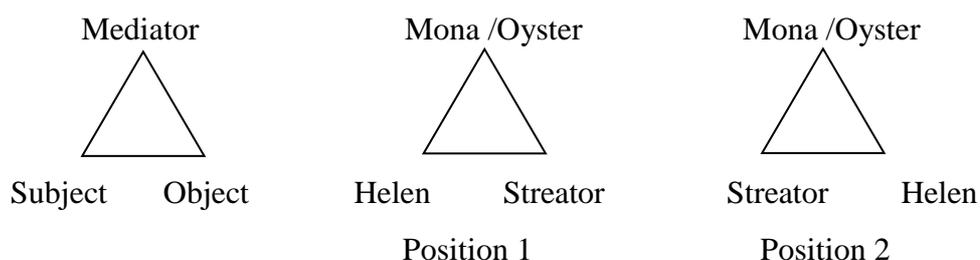
his neighbours: “[a]nything, so long as it’s loud and constant and lets me pretend my breakfast sandwich is just a breakfast sandwich. That an animal is just that. (...) Here’s Big Brother singing and dancing so I don’t start thinking too much for my own good” (158). Oyster’s most important role in this analysis is, similarly to Tyler Durden, to disturb Streator’s own schemes. Oyster’s conception of death is pure destruction, that is, the power of the father figure taken to the extreme. Helen mirrors the same idea, but here the power of the phallus leaves the male body, which makes it more salient and visibly dangerous (Halberstam 2). At this point of the novel, none of these will be of use to Streator, but Mona will provide the hinge effect between Carl and Helen that will help establish an inoperative, though temporary encounter between these two characters.

In *Diary*, the main character is being deceived into painting by being administered poisonous medicines and the fake death of her immediate family. She is literally a sacrifice, fulfilling the imposed roles of past female painters that gave back the wealth to the island. Misty can be said to be a passive character until the second half of the story, just accepting the low quality life she has and avoiding thinking too much about it with her alcoholism. However, during her visits to her husband in the hospital, her approach towards Peter’s comatose body can be said to have certain inorganic potential. Misty, like Carl in *Lullaby*, uses her body to punish herself by detaching herself from it with alcohol. However, she is also using Peter’s body: “Some visits, she sticks the needle in you, stabbing again and again. And she whispers, ‘Can you feel this?’” (41). Her approach to death is similar to *Fight Club*’s protagonist in the groups of cancer, or Tender in the graveyard in *Survivor*. She attempts to punish herself through her husband’s body. As discussed before, Peter taught Misty how pain is the only valid source of inspiration to create art. According to the doctor of the Island, “‘pain [can be] a spiritual tool.’ (...) It’s only when someone is in extreme pain, that their subconscious can slip into their conscious [,] (...) and give them access to divine inspiration” (188). The “raison d’être” of the island is therefore based on the constant sacrifice of the body, as explained in the section dealing with the operative communities, but it is precisely this dissolution of the body what will also give Misty the access to see her body as “the stranger out there” (Nancy, *Corpus* 19).

Perhaps, the most important inoperative sign that occurs in this novel from the very beginning is the diary through which the story is being told. According to Nancy, the best way to touch and communicate without the signification of the body being in

the way is writing (Ibid. 11). The diary is also written in third person towards Peter. This stands for two things: the first is that, of course, the most important connection will occur between Misty and Peter. The second is that, because Misty is writing about herself in third person, it may have got two interpretations. The first would be operative, as the diary is supposed to be a recurrent testimony of the female painters of the prophecy. The diary collects the life of all these women, which is always the same, a circle that Misty will not be able to break. However, at the same time, by writing in third person, Misty is being able to talk about her body outside itself as well through this channel, following the same process as the main character in *Fight Club* and Tyler Durden. Speaking about those other artists allows talking about herself in a detached way, thus avoiding saturated symbolism. According to the prophecy, Misty has been the same person with different names, but always living the same life. For this reason, according to Peter, for Misty “death will be transitory, temporary, confusing” (183), and it is precisely this temporariness that provides Misty the chance to have a proper inoperative encounter.

## 7.2. Love triangles



The triangular division that can be observed in *Lullaby* obeys a similar scheme to that examined in chapters 3 and 4. In this analysis, as was also the case in other chapters in this thesis, the Subject and Object positions are interchangeable and have different but equally fruitful effects, in which the first position has to be given before the second one can take place (see position 1 and position 2). When Carl occupies the location of the Subject, Helen fills that of the Object, and vice versa.

In position 1, Helen occupies the Subject because Streator's true self is only minimally unlocked when trying (unsuccessfully) to open his own private self. As explained at the beginning, Helen and Streator were already connected by a shared guilt. Their source of drama was the same: failed parenthood. Consequently, Mona and Oyster could represent that which Carl and Helen resent equally, a son and a daughter that end up producing a rupture in the family. Helen represents a character with a well shaped identity, a self that knows her own source of desire (saving Patrick). In one of the scenes when she meets Streator, she refers in this way to one of the pieces of furniture: "I love it, but I'll only have it on my own terms" (52). Such statement indicates how well she connects with her own private self, that is, her own desires, which is what locates her without a doubt first in the Subject position. On another occasion, during the car trip in their quest to find the Book of Spells, Helen herself comments that she wants the same type of world Oyster is looking for, but being her the one who commands it (160). It can be argued that, in Helen, Streator sees a failed parenthood that has not given up on saving her son (Patrick).

Both Mona and Oyster represent different mediating figures which in their own way will help establish the inoperative connection between Carl and Helen outside saturated (religious and gendered) symbolism. In position number 1, in which Streator is still the Object, Mona and Oyster represent for Helen her lost son, especially Oyster. She considers him to be "lovable" (197), even though his rebellious solution would entail Helen's own demise. At the same time, Mona represents Helen's willpower. They are the antithesis of each other: while Helen is pragmatic and cold, Mona is a spiritual being. While Mona believes in an immortality in which all beings commune in a pastoral way, Helen believes that "there is no afterlife". It is here that Streator fills an important part in Helen's desire. At one point in the novel, Helen confesses to Carl: "I'm glad you found me out. I think I always hoped someone would' (...) 'I'm glad it was you.' Her life isn't so bad, I say. She has her jewels. She has Patrick. 'Still,' she says, 'it's nice to have one person who knows all your secrets'" (199). Here, secrecy finds an inoperative breach. Finally in the story and the analysis, the secret entails a "touching" of one another, real openness and communication. This is the main reason why Carl must be the first of the two to fill the position of the Object for Helen to completely open herself. Now that she has reached such openness, she can be of value in the Object position for Streator in the Subject position, that is, position number 2.

Although position number 1 is interesting and necessary, it is the second position that is of greatest interest for this thesis, especially as regards a gender-based analysis. Streator feels powerless from the beginning of the story. Such are his feelings as regards lack of power that he is not capable of punishing himself successfully. He needs to keep stomping miniature houses because his masculine self (his father self) is not strong enough, and must be recreated again and again, as any gendered practice to be maintained. Helen represents a much more well-rounded character in this respect. Her strength is therefore desired by Streator. However, when it comes to this position the mediators, I argue, are even more interesting than the position of the Object. As occurred in other love triangles in other chapters, the Subject finds her/himself resenting the mediator, for arising in her/him the desire towards the Object. It has been demonstrated in earlier quotes how Oyster and Helen maintain sometimes a relationship which Streator describes in terms of the Oedipus Rex (see section 5.2.). He resents his youth and his “nothing to lose” attitude. He resents, in sum, that fresh, aggressive masculinity that Streator seems to feel unable to produce because he has failed as a father, the ultimate step of manhood. However, although Oyster presents that incentive for the main character to evolve in a toxic way as regards his gender identity, Mona deludes this effect. Mona gives the spells a different perspective. When Streator and Helen reveal that they know about the Grimoire and its power, Mona claims that a spell only “focus[es] an intention. (...) The more emotion a person has bottled up, (...) the more powerful the spell” (201). In this view, Mona is aiming directly at Carl’s inner self, therefore giving the spells a meaning which could be helping the characters to explore their own emotions, that is, their own private selves. This attitude locates the (male) body and its performance in the margins, allowing the trigger to de-filter that body symbolically. In addition, Mona pushes Streator towards his authentic path towards redemption: ““We want the criminal to confess during the trial. We want him to be exposed (...). The detective is a shepherd, and we want the criminal back in the fold, returned to us. We love him. We miss him. We want to hug him” (156). From the beginning, Mona gives Carl the key to “being together” in an authentic way. As a result, she uncovers Streator’s most human part of himself, therefore giving him and Helen an opportunity to have a temporary but inoperative encounter. It should also be remembered that normally, in the position of the Mediator, one would find a self with the characteristics of the absolute other, whose self is strong enough to mediate. In this sense, I argue that ultimately Oyster and Mona are the ones who better fulfil this



the position of the Object in position number 2. It could be argued that Peter was unable to fill a position of the subject of his own because he was obliged to be a mediator for the prophecy. However, once he confesses his bisexuality and his love for Angel de la Porte, and after falling into a coma after trying to escape, it can be argued that he fills a position that could entail a liminal space between Subject and Object, with Misty accompanying him in the Subject position (seen above). Once Peter enters his coma, the same as occurred in *Fight Club* with the main character takes place. Peter's body enters a liminal space in which the body becomes literally the "stranger out there", where the self cannot manifest itself through the body, which is inevitably always symbolically filtered. The only way in which Peter's truth is finally in the open are the messages that he left in the hidden rooms. His openness arrives when the truth in these messages is revealed, the secret losing its organic power. At the same time, Peter's resentment is, according to the messages, directed to the islanders, and not Misty. It is thanks to Misty, and the family that he unwillingly formed, that Peter has the need to confess, which means that he sees Misty in an unfiltered way: he does not take her as one more painter of the prophecy: "I don't love Misty Marie,' (...) but she doesn't deserve to be tortured. I love our island, but we have to find a new way to save our way of life. We can't keep harvesting people.' (...) 'This is ritual mass murder, and I won't condone it'" (228-229).

### **7.3. The *foreigner* as the last trigger**

Having established how the main characters are preparing the way to finally open themselves, in this section I will argue that it is the characters' condition of Derrida's *foreigner* that finally provides the necessary breach to break operative models and find finally an inoperative climax. In both works, there is a tipping point in which total communion is dissipated at a moment I will call the *inoperative rupture*. In *Lullaby* the rupture arrives when the two couples of foreigners become foreigners again in a transformed way that I will describe later. In *Diary*, this rupture arrives when Peter's messages are revealed and therefore he uncovers himself as Derrida's *foreigner in disguise*, given his hidden sexuality and rejection of his community.

The rupture in *Lullaby* occurs when, once the foursome has found the Grimoire, Oyster tries to steal it. In this sense, the family bond has been compromised. The "son"

has attempted to make his the power of life and death. In the scene, Helen is the one that confronts him:

Oyster, the evil, resentful, violent son Helen might have, if she still had a son. (...) And then it happens. Helen slaps him hard across the face, dragging her fistful of keys through each cheek. Another scarred parasite. Another mutilated cockroach armoire. (...) His face and hands are smeared with blood. The devil's face. (...) And Mona with the ruins of Western civilization braided into her hair, the bits of dream catcher and I Ching, she looks at her black fingernails in her lap and says, "Oyster, what you did is wrong." (186-87)

The scene reminds the reader of a traditional family quarrel, but here Oyster is completely evicted from the "family": "'You can forget me,' (...) 'But that doesn't mean I don't still exist'" (190). Soon after Oyster is rejected by the "parents", Mona also tries to gain her "parents'" power by stealing the Grimoire herself: "'You see,' (...) When there's the possibility of a little power, you already want more'" (203). Like Oyster, she "betrays" the artificial familial hierarchy: "This is the daughter I knew I'd lose someday. Over a boyfriend. Over bad grades. Drugs. Somehow this break always happens. This power struggle. No matter how great a father you think you'll make, at some time you'll find yourself here. (...) Now she's someone I may never understand. A stranger" (204-205). Once again, after this operative union takes place, both sons and parents see themselves again as strangers. An evolution has taken place in their relationship, in which power friction has been the protagonist. What is most important here is the fact that Streater has failed again as a father in this artificial model. However, it can be argued that this is the case precisely because he has seen this group under the same lenses as a traditional, organic family. He has understood that once the offspring wants to attain their own agency and find an independent self, the father-son/daughter fusion needs to be broken, and each self needs to be exposed under its own light. If Streater has reached this conclusion, it means that he is ready to let go of the traditional masculinity that encapsulated him.

The same can be said about *Diary*. The inoperative rupture in this case happens when Peter's true feelings are finally revealed: "'I'm in love with Angel de la Porte, and I'm sorry but I will not die for our cause.' (...) I won't let you kill me the way you've killed all the painters' husbands'" (228). Peter is rejecting the family role of father and husband imposed by the community. He rebels against this imposition, and moreover,

he reveals that he is attracted by someone of the same sex, another boy destined to attract a female painter. As defined by Mendieta, he is a “lone anarchist” (406). Of course, in this sense Peter is not only rejecting the hegemonic masculinity imposed by the island, but opening his willingness to enter a different type of sexual identity, which of course contradicts traditional forms of masculinity in general. Peter was, from the beginning, as much a foreigner as Misty was, and it is demonstrated that his masculinity is a disruptive one because, like Misty, his gender role is a prison that he tries to escape, thus avoiding Demetriou’s complicit masculinity, thanks to his messages.

However, it needs to be noted that Peter is not the only one who produces the family rupture. In this case, Tabbi also plays an important role. In order to enhance Misty’s anguish and drama to make her paint, Peter’s parents fake Tabbi’s death by making Misty believe she drowns in the sea. It is later discovered that this death was indeed fake. Tabbi turns out to be completely part of the islanders’ plans, to what Misty makes the following reflection: “Maybe it’s just a daughter’s job to piss off her mother” (201), comparing Tabbi with her younger self and her own mother. At the same time, Tabbi starts showing a more rebellious nature by smoking in front of her mother after she has finished all her pictures and discovers the prophecy and the Island’s plans. After Misty reprimands her, her daughter answers: ““You might be more careful, Mother. We don’t need you anymore,”” to that what Misty replies: ““I loved you a lot more when you were dead”” (224-225). This statement points out at the connection that Carl makes as well in *Lullaby* between perfection and death. Only when lifeless, can perfection arise, which of course demonstrates its contradictive nature. Perfect families, like perfect communities, can only be *imagined*. Now, both the father, the mother and the daughter stand on their own, which means that the family communion has been broken. This leaves the characters on an identity limbo, bringing them the chance to open their own selves in an inoperative way.

#### **7.4. The inoperative climax**

In both novels, the inoperative and temporary climax is produced between the couples analysed above in similar ways: by being able to see themselves reflected and *seen* by the other, avoiding gendered symbolism. I will begin by describing how clinamen, and real communication, takes place between Helen and Carl. Oyster has been evicted from

the “family”, and his mediating power has been successful. His extreme masculinity has located Carl in a more rounded subject position, by being able to compare his own masculine self to that of Oyster. Once it was established that they were indeed forming a fake familial union, Carl locates himself as the husband, but he also observes Helen from this position from a perspective which he acknowledges as innovative and even grotesque, but still operative and symbolic: “I look at Helen. My wife. In this new creepy way. Till death do us part” (104). Although as explained in section 6 when dealing with operative communities Carl is here giving Helen the role of the wife, such “pin” helps him focus his attention on her, leaving aside the reporter-like persona he had adopted to avoid connecting with other human beings. Mona here is important because she is the one who reveals one secret to each other which unites them further: “I say, Mona said you planned to kill me. And Helen says, ‘She told me that you wanted to kill me.’ We both look at each other. I say, thank God for Mona” (198). With this shared secret, which is also a shared desire, their true communication commences, with Mona as a channel. At the same time, Helen awakens in Carl the necessary willingness to open himself in order to deal with his emotions: “On the guard bar locked across us, Helen puts her hand on mine and says, ‘Mr. Streator, do you even *have* a first name?’ Carl. I say, Carl. It’s Carl Streator. I ask, why did she call me middle-aged? And Helen laughs and says, ‘Because you are. We both are.’ (...) And I say, her eyes. I say, they’re blue” (199). This process of clinamen continues on a particularly important scene which takes place while the police is looking for Streator as suspect of murder. He seeks Helen to find a place to stay, and she shows him a new spell which can make the person float. There, a romantic moment ensues:

Holding out her hand, Helen says, “Here.” And I take it. And she doesn’t let go. And we kiss. And it’s nice. (...) “From now on, we can do anything.” (...) My swollen infected foot, Helen’s crusted scabby knees from Oyster’s attack, there’s no way to hide these from each other. It’s been twenty years, but here I am, somewhere I never dreamed I’d ever be again, and I say, I’m falling in love. And Helen, (...) she smiles and rolls her head back, saying, ‘That’s the idea.’ I’m in love with her. In love. With Helen Hoover Boyle.” (221-22)

Their physical contact, their injured bodies in the open, and most importantly Carl’s confession, provide this moment of inclining of one another, in which there are not more secrets to be revealed. The body here locates its power to project the subject’s

identity in injuries and blood, from a fight they have experienced together in a fake familial context (with Oyster; see section 7.3.). Here, however, they are not a father or a mother. In fact, not even sexual organs are taken as important in this moment of real communication. They are both being completely honest with each other, as Carl confesses his love, while Helen never hides her intentions of being able to attract him for her own purposes. Soon after, Carl suspects that he is not truly in love with Helen, and that he is being a victim of a love spell. Helen's ambition to control the world begins to awaken in Streater the type of feeling of emptiness and destruction which can allow for a new vision to grow: "Inside the shifting mess of the future, I can't recognize anything. I can't see anything except just more of the past" (229). He begins to see Helen as someone occupying him, which can be argued to help see his own agency by noticing it being manipulated. A new consciousness. To this thoughts, Helen tells him: "If you have no free will. You don't really *know* what you *know*. You don't really love who you only think you love. What do you have left to live for?' Nothing" (232). Carl's self-destructive train of thought, his spiritual emptiness, clashes against Helen's ambition to own everything. This new emptiness can be said to be rejecting the communal symbolisms and approaching the Semiotic, from which new roots can be found: "What I have left, maybe the only way to find freedom, is by doing the things I don't want to. (...) Confess to the police. Accept my punishment. I need to rebel against myself. It's the opposite of following your bliss. I need to do what I most fear" (232). Carl's identity rupture, his own fight against his nature, mirrors that of Tender's transformation in *Survivor*, and Shannon in *Invisible Monsters*. Streater, however, fails this time to forge further his identity when trying to hand himself to the police, because Helen "saves him" by occupying one of the agents with a spell.

Carl's first step towards a shift in his depressed masculinity as a dethroned father (described as "complicit masculinity" in section 4) has to do with a marginal male character whose few interventions are actually very significant in Carl's transformation. There is one paramedic, called Nash, who is often present in the crime scenes that Streater needs to cover. His appearance is unkempt, filthy and messy, which contrasts absurdly with his duty of "cleaning the scene". He is the perfect example of Biddulph and Seidler's "creepification of male sexuality (qtd .in Pease, *Recreating* 43): "If you could have any woman you wanted (...) if you could have her in any way you wanted, wouldn't you do it?" (47). In context, he is making reference to the recently deceased

female present in the room, “still warm” (47). Nash finds out about the culling song and obliges Carl to give it to him, blackmailing him to telling the truth about Carl’s own family’s death. He soon starts using it to kill women and abuse them sexually after they die. His abominable way of being with a woman mirrors his own view about love relationships. For him, being with a woman entails fugacity, as things soon start to “fall apart”; “Anyone and everyone could become your next sex zombie” (57). Nash takes to the extreme men’s difficulty of being intimate with a woman, with death being the only way to connect freely (Horrocks 112). He may be also related to an extreme version of “complicit masculinity”, as he exerts his life and death power for sexual domination. It highlights Butler’s dangers of “heterosexual desire”, which poses women exclusively as the object of desire, with deathly consequences (*Trouble* 24-25). Carl ends up killing Nash. By doing so, Streator is precisely doing “what he most fear[s]”, as he is eliminating that part of himself that held him prisoner: “[Nash:] ‘You killing me would be the same as killing yourself’” (235). It is the type of redemption that Mona mentions in section 7.2. of this Chapter. Streator thus truly “rebels” against that hidden part of himself embodied by Nash, although when he does he still feels anchored to his own sin: “[Nash] is saved, but I’m not” (237). His struggle as a failed man/father is not completely resolved, but there has been a movement of friction that has effectively shattered his ill conception of his past self.

There is one final inoperative moment, also extremely temporary, once Helen and Carl recover Patrick’s frozen body. To Carl’s ignorance, Helen’s body is being occupied by Oyster. She (Oyster) has unplugged the machine that maintained the body refrigerated, and holds him while assuring that she wants to put an end to her lust of power. In this state, Carl sees Helen for the first time as a whole, avoiding details, which entails a true inclining towards the *other*: “The details of her suit are, it’s some color. It’s a suit. It’s ruined.” Not only are details unimportant, but the big picture is that of destruction, undefined. In addition, the scene provides a grotesque image in which their bodies mix in a performance which reverses any symbolisms attached to the “loving family”: “My hands bleeding, I lift out Patrick, cold and pale. My blood on Patrick, I put him in Helen’s arms. I put my arms around Helen. My blood and hers, mixed now.” (251) Of course, the moment is broken once Oyster reveals himself. However, the scene has been truly transformative for Carl: the body, both male and

female, has lost its meaning inside the symbolism of the family, and literally stays open and torn, uncovered.

By the end of the novel, while it is hinted by Palahniuk that Helen (inside the body of a sergeant) and Carl are still chasing Oyster and Mona around the United States, Carl's transformation is demonstrated to stay in place: "*You are the possessed. We're all of us haunting and haunted.*" (258) His consciousness as regards lack of control contradicts the masculinity that prevails in America, together with capitalist thought: owning per capital does not make the self really own anything. Finally, Helen confesses that there is not a love spell in the Grimoire, which means that Streater's feelings towards her were true. Only in love can true openness occur, and only accepting the ambiguity that accompanies the self's identity can a real "being together" stay in place, as indeed happens between these two protagonists.

Finally, *Diary* reaches similar conclusions as regards the final openness of the self, manifested specially in the main protagonist, Misty. To begin this part of the section, it is convenient to remember the Waytansea Island's obsession with its prophecy, and the fixity of its *raison d'être*: the immortality and preservation of, not the subject that forms the community, but the community itself, giving it its clear organic nature. As Grace Wilmot explains once Misty knows about the prophecy, "'We all die.' (...) 'The goal isn't to live forever, the goal is to create something that will'" (198). The operative model here is taken to the extreme, as the subject is completely un-regarded in favour of the survival of the wealth and the identity of the land itself, but not the people that live in it. It is the maintenance of a label. Here, Misty accompanies this extreme operative view, as she is the one who needs to orchestrate it through the paintings that are born from her pain. It is these extreme circumstances what will allow her to finally abandon the identity she has been imposed. Misty has been taken to the limit between life and death by being poisoned, which echoes how America itself reaches unhealthy limits by excessive consumption: "[W]recking a place is the only way to save it. You have to make it look horrible to the outside world." (235) Misty epitomizes this idea through her body. This body, a female one, which is diminished throughout the novel, is taken away from gendered stereotypes, helping its symbolic de-filtering. Her dreamer girl identity from her life in the trailer park has been demolished, and she stands, much like Carl in *Lullaby*, in a liminal position in which her loneliness (after the loss of her family) and self destruction cater for a new understanding of her self.

Indeed, it is Misty's identity as a mother, which began as something imposed, what establishes the foundations of her openness. Her role of motherhood is also taken to the extreme. As stated above, she has been the mother of all islanders at some point in the history of the island. At the same time, the overprotective nature given to this role is also made acute, as her paintings are the ones that provoke the Stendhal syndrome which attracts those who are not her "sons and daughters". This extreme role, also symbolically saturated, will be her launch pad towards an inoperative moment. As seen before, Tabbi demonstrates that she has been completely abducted by the community, as she sees her mother as just one necessary element for the legend to continue: the fulfilment of a role, and not of a person. Nevertheless, Misty is determined to save her daughter from her brain-wash, and for that, even though she knows about what will happen in the exhibition of her art, she is willing to let the legend continue its course: "To save Tabbi, Misty could let happen what always happens, Misty could just let it happen again. The art show. Whatever it is, she could let the island myth run its course. And maybe Waytansea would be saved. (...) Or maybe they can give Tabbi something better than a future of no challenges, a calm secure life of peace" (235). Here, Misty is breaking with the island's tradition and also the capitalist thought of consumption and commodity which intrinsically American. At the same time, she is choosing herself this time to become a mother, but not a mother for all: only for Tabbi, in a way rejecting the engulfing effect that motherhood per se has on women's role. She is a mother, but she chooses when and with whom, helping see womanhood and motherhood as two different spectrums that can conflagrate (Pateman 217). Once she makes this realisation, she finally states the following, addressing her husband: "It's okay that you never loved her, Peter. Misty loved you. At least for believing she could be a great artist, a savior. Something more than a technical illustrator or commercial artist. More than human, even" (235-236). In this sense, Misty has been able to open herself by seeing her own identity through the eyes of Peter. Although she will reject in the end the identity which the island wanted to give her for its own benefit, she appreciates such view. At the same time, the fact that she is capable of loving her family despite her not receiving the same love, demonstrates a solid view of her own perception. She can love without being loved in return because she feels whole as a subject, and does not need community to *complete* her. By the end of the novel, the *diary*, Misty writes: "What Misty's learned is the pain and panic and horror only lasts a minute or two. What Misty's learned is she's bored to death of dying. (...) Misty's not writing this for you, Peter, not anymore"

(259). What can be interpreted in this passage is that the main character has been truly able to see her own self outside the limits of her body through the extreme pain that she has been obliged to endure, without making of it a mark that defines her. Pain, here taken as a source of creativity, *ecstasy*, is taken as fleeting, just like inorganicism and its power to de-filter symbolically the body. At the same time, Peter ceases to be that which sustains Misty's identity, and finally, though accepting her past and the symbols that accompany it, she takes them as something movable, unfixated: "We're betrayed by everything we do. Our art, our children. But we were here. We are still here" (259).

"Constructive destruction" is thus the title of this chapter, precisely because it is the best quote to summarize this analysis. The main characters, failed creators, need to go back to nothingness, always in a grotesque, destructive way, so that their change inside community and as for themselves is made truly noticeable.



## CHAPTER 6

### **“There will be no separation between perdition and paradise”: Reinventing the Gendered Self Through Death in *Damned* (2011) and *Doomed* (2013)**

#### **1. Introduction and summary of the novels**

The last chapter of the present study on Chuck Palahniuk’s fiction will be devoted to the analysis of one story covered in two different novels: *Damned* (2011) and *Doomed* (2013). In my view, these two novels represent Palahniuk’s ultimate revision of the American community’s obsession with the Christian creed and how it affects the subjects’ identity through the repression of sexuality. Death will be once again the main nucleus around which everything else revolves, especially because this time the first person narrator is the ghost of a thirteen-year-old girl sent to Hell. I compare both novels despite the second being a continuation of the former because, as I will argue, both parts address different matters that make the main character evolve differently in each volume. In *Damned*, Palahniuk focuses on the self at a more communitarian level, in which America as a social milieu is analysed in terms of the Bible’s description of Hell. *Doomed*, in turn, takes *Damned*’s previously outlined schemes and examines them differently, taking them to the extreme: the main character’s self evolution within that community and the influence of the family expressing differing types of climax. Perhaps the most important aspect to take into account in this last chapter is the fact that, as I will argue, the concept of masculinity is seen under a completely different light. There is a noticeable shift from previous novels and these two works with this

issue. So far, the main characters' different representations of masculinities have been rooted in or have been deeply related to a wound in the self's identity. This identity belonged to an adult persona whose self had evolved while being influenced by the symbolism of community, and presented an idea of their gendered psyche that appears shattered and in need to be re-defined through self-destruction. *Damned* and *Doomed*, however, offer the story of a female child who only learns about her own wounded self once she passes away. Due to her young age, she remains unpolished as far as operative traits and gendered significations. Regardless, the effect of hegemonic masculinity in her nature will show how masculinity is in fact like a virus: it has become something that spreads itself and ends up affecting all subjects equally. These two novels culminate with the idea that masculinity is the tool that any member of the American community, be it male, female, or any other, must use in order to gain any sense of agency, the only way to "play by the rules" of the system. This analysis will show that masculinity is indeed not a gendered label attached to the male body, but a state of mind difficult to escape by anybody.

*Damned* introduces Madison (Maddy) Spencer. She is a thirteen-year-old girl who claims to have died recently. She is sent to Hell in a limousine driven by a demon, who at the end will be revealed to be Satan himself. In Hell, which is described in detail and is frequently compared to Earth, she makes acquaintance with a group of four teenagers. The five of them together are depicted mimicking the main characters of the American film *The Breakfast Club*. In this book, Maddy never quite reveals how she died, but she describes several episodes in which she provokes near death experiences to herself when she was alive. Though she loves them, she resents her parents for the type of education she received from them. They are movie stars described as rich snobs who do not believe in God or any religious doctrine, and are obsessed with political correctness, environmental issues, and depict a "free spirit" mind-set. While in Hell, Maddy starts to work as a telemarketer, one of the main posts that can be taken there. The telemarketers call the "predead" and ask them mundane, obnoxious questions. On the phone, Maddy starts convincing the people she calls to die and go to Hell, which increases little by little the population that arrives there, and begins creating a leader-like identity for herself, which contradicts her pre-dead identity as an insecure, lonely child. In one of those phone calls, Maddy contacts her parents and tells them that she is in Heaven, and that everything they told her about God was true. She entices them to

swear and offend as much as they can so that she can see them again when they die (though in Hell, not in Heaven). Finally, at the end of the novel and at Halloween, the dead are allowed to go to Earth until midnight, but Maddy violates the curfew and is obliged to stay as a ghost. Satan, the limousine's driver, reveals that she is but a character created by himself, and that she has no freewill. The novel ends with Maddy's post-alive crisis regarding her own identity.

*Doomed* starts with a prophecy, which is completed throughout the story in a non-linear fashion. It foresees that the nation will be destroyed by an island made of plastic garbage, a paradise made of plastic presumably led by Madison. It retakes Maddy's crisis of her ghost self and shares episodes of the main character's life, her loneliness and her need to feel exposed in a sexual way. The circumstances of her death are also revealed: her orphan brother, Goran, chokes her to death in a hotel room after having a marihuana overdose. However, the most important secret that Maddy uncovers is how she dismembered her grandfather's penis accidentally in a public toilet. Still on Earth, Maddy manages to contact her parents through a ghost hunter that can see the dead by taking Ketamine. Because of the phone call that they had in *Damned*, her parents have created a new religion based on doing everything they are not supposed to do to go to Heaven. This new cult is called "Boorism," and is based on the subjects constantly offending each other, without really taking such offense. It says to have united the global population, and partly this is true: unknowingly, they are all condemned to Hell. At the end of the novel, it is revealed that Maddy had not hurt her grandfather, since it was Satan who had occupied his body to molest her. In this way, her "creator" is rendered powerless. Finally, Maddy decides to run away from her family, Hell and Heaven, and find her own destiny, convinced that it will be her job to unite both worlds, Satan's and God's.

## **2. "Consumption in absentia": America and Hell**

*Damned*'s milieu mirrors the social setting of the novels analysed in previous chapters: a reflection of the highly consumerist America. This time, the main character is the daughter of Antonio and Camille Spencer, two renowned movie stars and producers who are extremely rich. They own dozens of mansions around the world, but never truly occupy any of them to live. They are rich nomads, incapable of settling in one single

place. Furthermore, they are capable of controlling these houses online. What Maddy describes as “[c]onsumption in absentia” (2). Now, not even bodily presence is needed to consume and spend. However, in Maddy’s opinion, the power of the capital loses, in this sense, its supposedly powerful thrall: “It’s power, but a kind of pointless, impotent power” (2). Once again, Palahniuk exemplifies the country’s shaping through the economically potent, who expand their private property like a virus. It represents the same *Gesellschaft* described by Tönnies and visible as well in novels like *Diary*. At the same time, the ability of Maddy’s parents to control their many mansions without actually being there traces the perfect analogy with being ghosts in those houses. The author compares the possibilities of capitalism with death itself, and this exemplifies Agamben’s description of the system as a set of images that do not really match that which is tangible and real, away from real human experience (78-79). This never-ending hunger for more, America’s obsession with overproduction and its own idea of progress, was also observed by Maddy while she was still alive:

I remember how, when I was really young, I thought the United States would just keep adding states, sewing more and more stars to our flag until we owned the entire world. (...) It seemed natural that Japan and Africa would eventually be absorbed into the starry part of our national flag. (...) When you’re a little kid, you really do think that getting bigger (...) will be the answer to all your problems. (106)

Palahniuk seems to be comparing America’s obsession with growth with that of a child craving for attention, pointing out at the nation’s juvenile idea as regards its own identity. It may be connected to Beck’s analysis on American problematic overproduction (14), which seems to lead to the whole world becoming one under the grasp of capitalism. Camille, Maddy’s mother, shows this naïveté too when she explains that if people from other countries come to the United States to work in service-directed jobs, this is a right they should be allowed to have (113-14). The country is, once more, seen as a conglomerate of the elite, where true Americans are the ones that ought to be served. Stryck’s tension in the American community (49) is also manifested in Maddy’s impressions of the “predead” people with whom she talks as a telemarketer: “the people to whom I talk are so endlessly attached to their wealth and achievements, their homes and loved ones and physical bodies. So attached to their *fear*” (207). The fear Maddy refers to is, undoubtedly, death. This fear pushes the subjects towards an individualism based on material possessions. As also in Agamben’s words, death remains that which cannot be conquered by any means by the wealthy (62). Girard’s

“egotistic avidity” (20) is clearly epitomized here by the American higher class, which again engulfs all other American identities in one, still artificial. What is perhaps of most interest when discussing *Damned*’s view on the United States is Madison’s constant comparison between America and Hell: “For you [people alive] Hell will feel like one long, nostalgic hit of déjà vu” (8); “In Hell you’d be foolish to count on people displaying high standards of honesty. The same goes for earth” (12); “Hell amounts to nothing more than a marginal neighbourhood allowed to deteriorate to the extreme” (215). Madison describes Hell in the same terms as one would describe the living conditions of most of the American population. Here, the symbolism attached to Hell is applied to earth, the American land specifically.

*Doomed* takes this Americanism of the wealthy to the extreme. According to the prophecy, “one day a single mighty nation would rule all others. This nation will occupy an island in the center of a great ocean. It will rapidly collect all the wealth of the whole world, and all the kings of the world shall come to reside here. (...) [T]his future nation [would be] a beautiful mirage. (...) [I]t will float on the horizon” (232). This whole “paradise” is also described as being entirely made of plastic, a floating surface made of garbage. These “kings of the world” are led by Maddy’s parents, who follow blindly their daughter’s words when she spoke to them about Heaven and salvation from her telemarketer booth from Hell. Taking Maddy’s advice fanatically, they create Boorism, a new religion that guarantees anyone their entrance in Heaven only by offending others. They manage to lobby the American population of the richest to create this new continent, which they call *Madlantis*, in honour to their daughter. This new land is described as “the opposite of tabula rasa,” because the prophecy says that it existed before any preconceived ideas of other nations and countries, of other *communities*, how it was already planned and predestined to exist in such a way (239). In addition, Maddy explains: “It’s no coincidence that these patriotic zealots – known as Madlantians, and seeking freedom from colonialist oppressors – they are also the wealthiest people in the world, and that under the freshly inked constitution of Madlantis none of them will be subject to taxes upon their lofty incomes” (240).

These novels show America under the same light as the other works previously analysed. This time, the lens is that of a thirteen-year-old girl, whose vital experience is limited. However, as I will argue in later sections, this limitation also helps her to see reality without the limits imposed by adulthood. Her vision of America as a black hole

trying to absorb everything is, however, a powerful one, and it also shows a process similar to the transformation of the communities observed in previous chapters. The *Gesellschaft* observed in *Damned*, deeply individualistic, evolves finally into a *Gemeinschaft* of the wealthy, where a fake religion attempts to unite the whole world together, with the same premise, however, as America's idea of a swallowing growth. Individualism and consumerism appear again as the crack that prevents the United States from forming a meaningful and truly diverse community, and this favours their fall into a type of fusion that blurs the subject's real self. In sum, America becomes here an allegory of the hegemonic idea of "man", which is today at risk as authors like MacInnes argue (45). Palahniuk shows an America which seems to force-feed itself, perhaps because of fear of becoming "less" if it does not keep growing, a behaviour which may be seen as parallel to the obsession that follows men and their need to project in a certain masculine way. It also reflects Morgan's view as regards the relationship between masculinity and capitalism (qtd. in Brod, *The New Men's Studies* 192). In the following section, I will connect this individualism with parenthood and its effects on the main protagonist.

### **3. "Me, the bane of [their] existence": Family and anguish**

In the theoretical framework, Nancy proposes that our "being on our own," our own individuality and actual, physical separation from one another terrifies the subject; this is the main source of the individual's *anguish*. *Damned*, in a similar way to *Choke*, *Lullaby* and *Diary*, projects this anguish through the parental figures: Antonio and Camille Spencer. Contrary to *Lullaby* and *Diary*, and comparable to the main character in *Choke*, the parental figures' anguish is received and filtered through Maddy, the daughter. Douglas Keeseey makes the following reflection: "Madison is a spoiled little rich girl whose opinions can be viewed as childish ignorance of the true severity of adult torment. But her words can also be read as calling attention to the fact that adults (...) do not have a monopoly in pain. The lives of teens can involve real suffering" (102). She can be compared to a mirror on which her parents' anguish is reflected, hence the title of this section. The following is a reflection on Madison's beliefs as regards parenthood's foundations:

[I]f you ask me, most people have children just as their own enthusiasm about life begins to wane. A child allows us to revisit the excitement we once felt about, well... everything. A generation later, our grandkids bump up our enthusiasm yet again. Reproducing is a kind of booster shot to keep us loving life. (...) My dad would tell you: "Every audience gets the performance it expects." Meaning: If I'd been a more appreciative child, maybe they'd seemed like better parents. (101-102)<sup>85</sup>

The weight given to the family in this extract mirrors Sylvia Walby's impression about the fact that the family is given too much importance for the stability of the community (61). It is also first through the family that masculinity makes its appearance in the analysis of these two works, although the family represented in *Damned* and also in *Doomed* does not focus so much on fatherhood as a pillar for the proper development of manhood. It is true, however, that *absence*, just like the type of consumerism described above, is also salient in both Antonio and Camille as parents, adding to the aforementioned allegory between America and hegemonic masculine performance. They frequently send Madison to prestigious boarding schools, or expensive camps in summer, so that they do not spend much time with each other. In this sense, the "patriarch" is not in control of the child, but this type of absence engulfs both parental figures. It can be argued that here economic opulence has much to do with this shift in power, as no hierarchy is ever mentioned between Maddy's father and mother. Both father and mother are absent parental figures, a *paternal vacuum*.

*Damned* focuses on Camille and Antonio as parents who have taken their rejection of traditional parenthood and family bonds to the extreme:

[T]hey'd done their time, wasted their teen years lolling in the muddy fields of Vermont and the salt flats of Nevada, naked except for rainbow face paints and a thick coating of sweaty filth, their heads festooned with fifty pounds of fetid dreadlocks, teeming with crab lice and pretending to find enlightenment... that does NOT mean I have to make the same mistake. (...) [B]ecause they had ingested drugs and flirted with brain damage, they insisted I should do likewise. (49, 50)

It is worth noticing that, thanks to their economic comfort, Maddy's parents could pursue this life in the America that Palahniuk presents the reader with: "both my mother and father had been free of social status and therefore had nothing to lose by cavorting

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<sup>85</sup> This extract reminds clearly of Ida Mancini's statement in *Choke*: "Parenthood is the opiate of the masses!" (112).

nude, their swollen genitals smeared with muck” (49-50). It seems safe to argue that both Antonio and Camille’s subjectivity in *Damned* is defined by their attempts to reflect their own idea of a self in their daughter. They acquire the status of creators, of the *absolute other*, as in Chapter 3, in order to have a sense of a self. In this respect, the attention, or rather, *adoration* of the infant seems paramount, as they are supposed to represent valid examples of gendered identities. In fact, both Camille and Antonio have very clear, closed ideas about what men and women ought to be:

My mother would tell you that men (...) are too stupid, too easily found out, and too lazy to ever succeed as truly gifted liars. (...) In his own unhelpful way, my father would tell you, “A woman eats to feed her pussy.” Meaning: Anything we do to excess is in compensation for not getting a minimum amount of sexual gratification. My mother would say that men overimbibe alcohol because their penises are thirsty. (72-73)

For them, gendered identity revolves around (sexual) fixed performances, genitalia becoming a valid key to open the “real” self. As the reader can sense through the extracts above, Madison never truly approved of their parenting skills while being alive, and resents them clearly for having acquired an extreme view as regards an open-minded parenting. Madison’s parents fail miserably to gain this reflection of perfect parenting through their daughter.

In case you have yet to notice, my parents do nothing in moderation. (...) When my baby teeth began to fall out, they went so far as to suggest I wear a set of the painful primary-teeth dentures that Twentieth Century Fox forced into little Shirley Temple’s adolescent mouth. In times like these, being kneaded, probed, and polished by a team of beauty experts, I wished I had (...) been raised, untouched, in an Iron Curtain orphanage. (...) [M]y folks thought my childhood should be the childhood they’d wanted to have, resplendent with meaningless sex, recreational drugs, and rock music. (118-120)

Maddy’s parents need of attention, the need to be *exposed* (which will be later reproduced by Maddy herself), results in their adopting different orphans coming from depressed countries. Maddy explains that, when she was alive, she had several brothers and sisters for very little time, only to gather that devotion that only a son or a daughter can express towards their creators or carers. The most resonated of the orphans that they adopt is called Goran. This character will be of utter importance in this analysis for other reason. For now, Goran represents the contrast between those who need the *others*

to exist and those who understand the finitude of their own existence, and therefore are capable of seeing and exposing themselves: “To them, if Goran doesn’t love them, that clearly indicates that Goran is damaged and incapable of loving anyone. (...) To both my parents, the world is a battle for attention, a war to be heard. Perhaps that’s what I admire about Goran. His distinct lack of hustle” (120).

In *Doomed*, this failure reaches an interesting peak, and becomes tangible in Maddy’s impression of her parents, in the middle of her own conflict as regards her own self: “It doesn’t escape me that this is the central conflict of my life: I love and adore all of my family, except when I’m with them” (29). This is the same principle that characterizes her parents’ relationship with the mansions they own, and can control from the distance: it is a pointless type of power. It is not the love relationship that would be reached in an inoperative type of family ensemble, as real exposure cannot happen in the distance. When it comes to the revision of family bonds, *Doomed* offers an examination of fatherhood and motherhood, focusing especially on the latter. Both sides are differentiated as regards their symbolic limits, in which those delimiting fatherhood are, mirroring Barne’s words (71), much more diffused than the symbolic space filled by Camille. Although this will be revised in more detail when discussing the influence of religion in both works, it needs to be mentioned that Camille’s emotional investment in Madison is much greater than Antonio’s. On the one hand, this attitude represented in motherhood is the same as the one portrayed by Ida in *Choke* and Misty in *Diary*, where the role of motherhood is overemphasized, showing Chodorow’s “oneness and inseparability” (“Contradictory” 150) and the strong emotional dominance that these women seem to have on their children. Moreover, it further locates the masculinity projected by traditional fatherhood in a position of ambivalence and ambiguity that affects Maddy’s father. For now, however, it suffices to say that “being a mother” seems to bear the greatest weight in this story. This is the case because during the novel, Maddy becomes obsessed with becoming a good mother to a kitten her parents tell her to adopt. The circumstances under which this kitten arrives to Maddy’s life will be discussed in later sections, but Maddy’s self-imposed role as a mother to the pet is worth commenting. I will first focus on how Maddy sees motherhood at the beginning:

I never imagined it would be too awfully difficult to be a good mother. That’s why my own mother seemed like such a disappointment. Really, what onerous efforts did

successful motherhood require? One had only to accumulate a sufficient deposit of fresh spermatozoa within one's womb, and then await the release of a viable egg. From what I could suss out, the whole process seemed more or less automated. The actual birthing involved staffing a sterile, tiled toom with an entire documentary film crew, all the grips and gaffers and sound engineers, the cameramen and assistant directors and makeup artists. I've seen the result: My mother blissed out on an intravenous Demerol drip (...). A stylist is powdering down the shine on her meticulously axed pubis, and voilà (...): I am born. (213)

For Madison, motherhood is rendered to the physical act of giving birth, an act which is also turned into a TV show with stylists and cameramen recording the scene. Emphasis is given to how Maddy's birth was filtered through the camera, resonating with Stryck's and Agamben's ideas (4; 78-79): human experience is substituted by simulation (as Camille never ceases to be an actress in her own labour) and filtered through the lenses of a camera. In this way, it could be argued that the essentialist traits attached to motherhood mentioned in the theoretical framework (nurturing, emotional predisposition) are unknown to Maddy, which could be helpful to see the body as a mere shell, as Nancy states in *Corpus*. However, apart from the fact that seeing the male and female body as mere creators of other bodies is completely limited for the living subject, it does not encourage an inoperative *clinamen* where the body is exposed beyond its physical conditions. It actually mirrors the way in which hegemonic masculinity treats the body: something that needs to be dominated (Brod 262). Moreover, as observed in the paragraph above, Maddy's reality is always filtered through the camera. Her parents are always making of their lives a reality show to be watched by everybody. Such is their over-exposure that the family has become a product in itself, in Agamben's wording (48-49).

Maddy's idea of motherhood makes her expect to become one as easily with her new pet, Tigerstripe:

Once I was born, I could see for myself that motherhood required no special skills. My general impression was that various glands come to the fore, and you're rendered essentially a puppet or a slave to the timing of bodily secretions. (...) You're always consuming or voiding some vital gunk. It's this full comprehension of motherhood that prompted me to give my kitten, Tigerstripe, a better upbringing than I had endured. (213-14)

Firstly, Maddy's opinion about motherhood not requiring any special skills mirrors Pateman's connection of motherhood and biological certainty easily shown through labour as opposed to fatherhood and its conception as a "social fact" which needs to be demonstrated in non-biological ways (35). Moving on, for Maddy, this "better upbringing" implies having the opposite, open-minded behaviour that her parents did not have with her. She attempts to show her cat decorum and introduces him to Christianity, with which Maddy was obsessed at some point during the novel, partly to rebel against her parents' anti-religious stance. In addition, Tigerstripe becomes Maddy's weapon to project the remorse she feels towards her parents: "perhaps we could ship my kitty off to some expensive school in Switzerland, where she could live, socially isolated, among hateful rich pussycats!" (219). An interesting dynamic arises once Tigerstripe is introduced in the family. Maddy begins to refer to herself and her cat as "We": "*We* don't like nonfat, fair-trade tofu sausage, and *we* request that you no longer serve it to *us*" (214), arguably attempting at forming a "community for those who have no community" (Blanchot, *Unavowable* 24). This shows Maddy's feeling of marginalization inside her own family, which does not go unnoticed by her parents. While this happens, Antonio and Camille begin to feel more neglected: "The more I distanced myself in the exclusive company of my new kitten, the more my dad perused the photographs and the files of destitute orphans available for adoption. The more I isolated myself, the more my mom surfed real estate listings on her notebook computer" (215). This also demonstrates that this family is completely operative, as Maddy's parents can be said to be completely united as far as identity goes, a communion reinforced by their daughter's rejection of both of them. Maddy's constant attempts to feel and behave differently make this operativeness even more extreme. Finally, Maddy's attempts to become a better mother than her own end in a grotesque way, which will also help explain better the main character's self crisis and ultimate exposure. Tigerstripe turns out to be sick soon after he was adopted, and he dies. However, to hide her shame for not having been able to take care of her own "child", Maddy carries the dead cat inside her clothes to hide it: "Under my sweater, lumped against my belly like a pregnancy, like a miscarriage, I felt the jumble of his collapsing bones" (221).

As far as community theories go, it seems important to mention here the two patterns that form inside the family at this point. Camille and Antonio have acquired the

characteristics of the *absolute other* inside the family, as mother and father, having only an identity of their own in relation to the hierarchy formed with Maddy, whose attention and adoration towards her parents is paramount for the recognition of their own self. However, when Maddy turns her attention and affection to something else (her pet in this case) and forms this small “we” type of community, her parents’ identity goes into crisis. It is a co-dependent type of family, whose exposure depends on the “eyes” of the other, but always lacking eyes to see themselves as whole identities, or singularities in Nancy’s terms. These “eyes” can also be applied to the audience that feeds constantly their hunger for attention.

*Damned* and *Doomed* differentiate themselves at this stage mainly in the sense that *Damned* centres completely on Maddy’s parents’ selves, while in *Doomed* Maddy is the one that while alive has attempted to rebel against her carers and tries to find an identity of her own by rejecting her parents’ and going in opposite directions. The end result is just equal to having turned the coin upside down. The family is, then, a central issue when it comes to exploring the self of the main character. In the next section, I will examine the central topic of these novels, death, in relation to religion and the body, which will also take as an important item the nature of Maddy’s family bonds.

#### **4. “You’re dead; now just calm down”: Religion, community and the body**

Until now, the novels analysed in this thesis have focused on characters who were attracted to death or had near death experiences, which facilitated their exposure to alterity by filtering the symbolism attached to the operative community, always dictated by religious thought. *Damned* and *Doomed*, however, propose an interesting angle: that of the main character, Madison, who is already dead. In addition, the setting proposed by the author provides an afterlife that is exactly how the Bible describes it: there is a Heaven, and there is a Hell. Those who follow the righteous path of Christianity are allowed entrance in Heaven, whereas those not following this traditional religious doctrine go to Hell. This procures an interesting experiment when it comes to examining the ontological boundaries of the self. Once the body is abandoned and the subject’s essence is set free under these circumstances, the traditional schemes on which community is based (taking the United States as its foundation) are much more easily contested, let alone the connection with the body, especially with sexuality. In the next

section, I will examine the notions of religion and the body (specifically under the light of sexuality) always taking as a nucleus the demise of the subject. Palahniuk offers us the chance to observe what could happen once the self abandons the body after death, if indeed religious symbolism played its presumed operative role.

#### **4.1. Religion and the afterlife**

At the time Maddy begins telling her story in *Damned*, she is already dead and in Hell. Hell, her new home, is described as containing everything anyone familiar with Christian religion would expect from such a place: fire, cells, screaming creatures and giant demons, and rivers of any type of bodily, unpleasant fluids.<sup>86</sup> Maddy gives her descriptions of Hell in detail, although she is often apologetic: “If my version of Hell fails to impress you, please consider that to be my own shortcoming” (7). Such an attitude connects with the aforementioned resentment towards her parents: “They told me that nothing was a sin, just a poor life choice. (...) They said that if anything should force us to modify our personal behavior it should be our allegiance to a social contract, not some vague, externally imposed threat of flaming punishment” (16). In Palahniuk’s story, those modern families who inhabit the Earth, trying to forget religious thought and its limiting and punishing nature, are actually doomed to go to hell, an eternity of painful existence: “As it turns out, the way-fundamentalists Christian creationists were correct. How I wish I could tell my parents” (81). Maddy is now conscious of her parents’ faux pas, and explains the reader how wrong those who do not believe in God are, in case they want to go to Heaven. Palahniuk proposes here taking a few steps back as regards the evolution of social thought, and by taking Christianity to the very last consequences the book shows how castrating this religion is for the self.

In addition, Palahniuk highlights the actual instability and fluctuating nature of something as fixed as religion. In *Damned*, one of Maddy’s friends in Hell, Leonard, explains that in the early times of Catholicism, “[c]elebrants were too used to petitioning individual deities, so the Church created the various saints, each a counterpart to an earlier deity. (...) He adds that if civilization lasts long enough into the future, one day even Jesus will be sulking around Hades, banished and ticked off” (30-31). Not only is Christian thought called into question, but also the characters that

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<sup>86</sup> Hell’s composing of dismembered and broken human bodies is an aspect also analysed by Keesey, who wonders if the author is making a point as regards our flesh and bones being also a type of hell. Should it be discarded, or is the body something to be coupled with the spirit? (106).

sustain its basis. Jesus as the ultimate saviour is questioned in the sense that his symbolic power will be as temporary as the other deities that were adored before him. Though following a different path, Palahniuk is once again pushing his characters to accept a communal union that ought to tackle the existential crisis that individualism provokes. As occurred in the other chapters analysed previously, religion represents a source of ecstasy that these characters need in order to find meaning in their lives. As discussed in the theoretical framework, ecstasy stems from drama, and this drama reaches its climax through symbolically filtering death as a sacrifice (Bataille, *Inner* 10). Heaven and Hell represent the division established by good and evil, which stems from Jesus Christ's sacrifice. In this way, (sexual) desire is one that must be repressed. Its presence is taken for granted in any human being. The body is to be sacrificed, not abused nor touched for pleasure (Armstrong 19-20). Repression walks hand in hand with desire, and its successful constraint, that is, the subject's sacrifice of her/his own bodily urges and passions while alive, results in a passage to Heaven. Nevertheless, Heaven is never described to the reader, nor does God ever make any appearance in any of the novels. Only Hell and Satan are made tangible, whose figure will be examined later in more detail. In fact, as Leonard explains early in the novel: "John Scotus Eriugena wrote during the ninth century that Hell is where your own desires take you, stealing you away from God and the original plans God had for fulfilling your soul's perfection" (46).

Though it is, supposedly, this repression of desire what could be said unites the people on Earth and constitutes the division between those who are blessed and those who are doomed, there is one thing that Madison teaches the reader in the first part of the story, which I find important in this analysis: "No, it's not fair, but it would seem that the only immortal being allowed to indulge in a dalliance with mortals is God Himself" (80). God, the *absolute other*, must represent the example to follow in the Christian community: that power under which Christians are equally loved, their selves levelled in apparent fairness. However, God needs to create a hierarchy, as he is the absolute other. In this sense, one could venture to say that in order to create such hierarchy, God must be the one to break His own rules ("God is an atheist", in Bataille's words, *Inner* 103). As a result, it would make sense to think that in the end, God cannot be made tangible, nor can it be anything else but unavowable, as He is the one that must represent his own worst nemesis. In sum, God self-destructs Himself in this context.

The aforementioned contradiction is also made visible in the polygraph test that Maddy is obliged to take when she files for an appeal to be sent to Heaven.<sup>87</sup> The questions that she needs to answer show completely obsolete and ultra-conservative religious ideas: “Do you believe the Bible to be the one and only true word of God?” (...) “In your honest opinion, does life begin at conception?” (...) “Do you view sexual acts between individuals of the same gender to be an abomination?” (*Damned* 92-93). The way in which Madison is tested is already proof enough that faith, the main nucleus of religion and the basis around which God can be allowed to exist in the subject (“God in me”) is now founded on “forensic science”. Leonard makes the following reflection: “Do people go to Heaven because they acted good? Or do they go to Heaven because it’s predestined... because they *are good*? That’s ancient history” (93). In Palahniuk’s work, Christianity has suffered the same fate as the pastoral, archaic community of the past. Thinking itself has provoked a hyperbolic religious tension that remains unsustainable in present times (Nancy, *Loose* 5), its inflexibility inapplicable today. The “paradox”, as Palahniuk calls it, is clear: “Is God a racist, homophobic, anti-Semitic ass? Or is God testing to see if I am?” (94). The uncertainty that *Damned* proposes relies on the need to clarify if faith can only be contemplated inside the limits imposed by the type of fixed thought that accompanies the Old Testament, or if indeed religion can be shaped in accordance to current communitarian needs. Maddy’s conclusion is the following: “Yes, I do want to go to Heaven – who doesn’t – but not if it means I have to be a total asshole” (92). In sum, *Damned* locates the main character in what becomes the central theme of the whole story, religion thought taken to the extreme at a greater scale, which is later developed in *Doomed*. This basis has religion and the afterlife as main focus, letting the reader experiment with a reality that is truly managed by the saturated symbolism that conforms the superficially individualistic American community.

*Doomed* starts and revolves around a prophecy that constantly points out at the appearance of a new messiah who will guarantee everyone’s entrance in paradise. Presumably, this prophecy is constantly hinting that this messiah will be Maddy. Boorism is the new religion that Maddy’s parents start since the day that Maddy calls them from Hell. Boorism bases its praying on “Tourette’s syndrome”: everybody insults and annoys each other; instead of showing love for your neighbour, which is what

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<sup>87</sup> The bureaucracy that organizes Heaven and Hell is similar to Earth’s in Palahniuk’s novel.

Christianity demands, Boorism encourages its followers to show disrespect for everyone: “The path to redemption is swearing” (61). Since Maddy called her parents and made them believe she was in Heaven, the religion that they have created preaches that everyone has a place guaranteed in paradise if they follow her teachings. In contrast to the offensive comments that everybody is giving each other, “everyone’s beaming. You’ve never seen so many people so happy. (...) Now that humanity is assured a permanent seat at the right hand of God, they’re grinning with glee. Their eyes are misted with righteousness” (66, 68). The tremendous emotional comfort that is now received thanks to this new current has also resulted in the whole world feeling more united than ever. As the ghost hunter, Crescent City, tells Maddy: ““You have created world peace! Nobody’s a gay anymore, or a Jew or a person from Africa,” he rants, forging ahead. “Look at us! We’re all ‘Boors’”! (69). The feeling of *immanence* and of brotherhood that is created thanks to this new cult is palpable, and its effects as an operative community will be examined in section 5. What is important to notice here is the contrast that *Doomed* brings when comparing it to *Damned* as regards religious thought. *Damned* revisits Christian doctrines and places them at a level which not only cannot be ignored, but very much taken into account, as in the story it constitutes a splitting point between life and what happens after death. *Doomed* represents a turn of the screw of the latter, as it proposes a reversed version of traditional Christianity. Suddenly, Boorism gives instructions that seem tangible and clear, and God seems closer to the human mind, instead of just invisible and not understandable:

This is the death of angst. Forget Nietzsche. Forget Sartre. Existentialism is dead. God has been resurrected, and people have a road map for attaining glorious immortality. In Boorism, everyone who’d abandoned religion now has a path by which to return to God, and that feels... great. (...) In light of this new salvation, mortal life feels like the final day of school. (...) It makes the inevitability of death shine like a final cosmic Friday preceding an infinite party weekend in Mazatlán. (70)

Finally, the prophecy reveals that the aim of Boorism was to make:

[a]ll pre-existing religious doctrines (...) seem ridiculous, outdated, oppressive, or hateful. (...) Everything held to be sacred and holy had to be reduced to a joke (...) and the mention of God or the Devil must be met with universal eye rolling. Most important (...) intelligent people must be made to feel ashamed of their need for a

higher power. They must be starved for a spiritual life until they would greedily accept any that would be offered to them. (251-52)

In this view, Palahniuk suggests an important crisis at a communal level in the United States, though in the novel he seems to take it worldwide. Palahniuk seems to advocate for a complete destruction of the pre-existing religious system, taking it to the extreme, in order to destroy its limiting symbolism and bring, in fiction, a new start: “God [had] to be thoroughly killed before we could resurrect him” (252). The author points at the individualistic society that he portrays in both works, bringing the climax in the second part: “people would hide their need [of a religious system] behind a mask of sarcasm and ironic detachment” (252). When in fact he seems to conclude the need of a way to commune through something beyond our own understanding is natural: “They would want to belong to something larger, to a sort of family who accepted them despite their worst behaviour” (252). What Boorism does not seem to be able to conquer is, however, a true understanding of the individual self without the need to commune with others, as this communion entails a smokescreen for the exposure of the true subject. As Maddy’s mother tells her daughter in *Doomed*, “[r]eligions exist because people would rather have a wrong answer than no answer at all” (16). This means that at this stage Palahniuk’s characters have not reached the conclusion to which each of the novels arrive in this analysis: the need to embrace the self and the ambiguity that its detachment from symbols brings with it. In the next section, I will explore the novel’s approach to the body and sexuality, always from a religious stand and having death as its main axis.

To conclude this part, there is one more way to analyse the last quote. The way in which Palahniuk poses humanity’s need to recuperate religious faith in a hysterical way (“They must be starved for a spiritual life until they would greedily accept any that would be offered to them”; 252) mirrors the fixation towards regaining “male power”, to make up for the presupposed crisis in which male power finds itself (Adams and Savran, 2002: 5). In sum, in *Damned* and *Doomed* one can glimpse the idea, though not expressed directly and in a subtle way, of a patriarchal and religious system which feels the need to be “rebooted” in order to keep its supremacy, to recuperate in Tompkins’ words (qtd. in Horrocks: 6).

## 4.2. The body and sexuality

It is impossible to understand the conception given to the body in these two works without examining it hand in hand with sexuality. This is the case because Maddy's very understanding of her body comes filtered by her parents' teachings, who are open-minded when it comes to the sexual act: "No, it's not fair, but my mom and dad were always happy to tell me the sordid details of every sex act or fetish that existed. Other girls might get a training bra at thirteen, but my mom offered to have me fitted for a training diaphragm. Beyond [that], my parents never taught me a single thing about death" (88). There are several layers that need to be analysed after reading this contemplation in order to understand the commentary that will follow this subsection. Maddy's parents have taught her that the body's limits are tied to its sexual nature, and that the body can only be felt in that way, just Christianity's opposite. Her discovery of the body, though not her own body yet, has been extravagant but completely theoretical, filtered by an adult vision which does not belong to her own experience, being still a child. Knowing this, together with the reality that, as observed in the extract above, sex is much more openly discussed than death, it makes sense that the protagonist would feel enticed to have her own discovery of her body through near death experiences.

In *Damned*, the first of these takes place in Maddy's boarding school. While her peers are on Christmas holidays, and without telling her parents, she stays alone in the school building for two weeks. She dedicates herself to reading and wandering the different rooms of the edifice at night and naked. On one of those nights, while snowing, she ventures outside the premises, and sensing the danger that she might be spotted by the school guard, she experiences her body in a way completely new for her:

Pelted with ice crystals and pretending to be asleep, but more awake than I had ever felt. Every hair and cell of me alert, aching, afraid. Alive. All of me felt the thrill of being touched at that same instant. You see, I wanted to be discovered. I wanted to be seen at the very height of my prepubescent power. (...) Over the past two weeks of solitude, something within me had changed, but I could still fake being shocked and fragile and demure. (67)

This is perhaps one of the most important extracts for Maddy's self-discovery (further tackled in the next section). There has not been *another* who has really seen her; one could even say that this self-discovery has taken place *in secret*. But there is an interesting interpretation: though nobody else, in presence, has seen her, she feels this

discovery as a true one, probably because she has been able to discover her body to her *own self*, which is why it feels like a real exposure. She has been able to see her body as something out there, which of course gives her the potential to real openness. This episode makes even more sense when it is added that she almost freezes to death while in the snow, which is what makes her feel her body at such limits.

The second most important near death experience is what Maddy calls “the French kissing game” (145). The first time results in a satisfactory near death experience, while the second one causes her actual death. It consists of being choked by someone else who, right before doing so to death, gives the receiver the “kiss of life” with oxygen to prevent the person from dying. Maddy experiences her on the hands of her classmates in her boarding school, who bully her for being fat. Leaving her relationship with her peers aside, the main character loves the experience, feeling how she literally abandons her body, thus her capacity to appreciate her own bodily detachment is something to be highlighted.

As I hovered there, observing, as detached as my mother keyboarding to spy on the maids (...), I felt neither pain nor anxiety. I felt nothing. (...) I seemed to fall from the ceiling and land into my body. (...) All of my body felt so electric, as thrumming and vibrant as I'd felt naked in the snow at night. My every cell swelled so full of newfound vitality. (144)

Her death, in the hands of Goran and also because of the French kissing game, attains the same effect, though this time her abandonment of the body is permanent: “Splayed there on the carpet, I'm reduced to the status of the cooling food which surrounds me: my life only partially consumed. Wasted. Soon to be consigned to the garbage” (158). This realisation does not constitute the climax as regards her total exposure as a whole subject, but it does pave Maddy's way to understand her post-alive self as something that does not need to be signified through her physicality. In fact, her conclusion as regards her physical self by the end of *Damned* is the following (to which I will come back later): “[Goran] forever destroyed that physical manifestation of me, but Goran did not kill ... me” (220).

Moving on, the body in both works is also deeply attached to religious symbolism. This issue begins to be poignant once Maddy is dead and in Hell. There, the group of five friends (this composite will be examined in the next section) confront a female demon called Psezpolnica, who wants to devour them. This moment is told in

the story right after Maddy has narrated her experience of self-discovery naked in the snow in her boarding school when she was still alive: “It is no accident that I segue from a scene in which my group is confronted by a towering nude giantess to a flashback in which I, myself, am undressed and exploring both my interior and exterior environs without the usual protective layers of clothing or shame” (71). Maddy is clearly comparing her first meaningful bodily exploration with a demonic creature, naked, hungry and furious. In addition, the strategy that Maddy uses to escape from the demon is to give the female demon pleasure with oral sex, with the help of one of her friends, Archer (75-77). This thesis focuses on masculinity and the male body, but I would like to make a point here paying attention to the female one. Maddy’s knowledge of sexuality (and by that, her own sexuality) is shown to be precarious, just as the demon’s reaction to the ministrations that she receives and which help the group to escape from her. Maddy does recognize that her “knowledge is largely theoretical” (75), which could be mirroring the lack of attention that female sexuality still receives, even though her parents had no taboos when talking about sex with her. This points out to a clear misunderstanding of what sex and pleasure, and body knowledge per se, is really about.

*Doomed* takes this misunderstanding of sexuality (and the body) to an interesting peak, which will have as its main locus the symbolic power of the phallus and the sexuality approaching towards masculine sexuality, from Madison’s point of view. This will bring about intriguing conclusions to be resolved in section 6. When discussing the sexual body in *Doomed*, the most important event to consider this issue is Maddy’s stay at her grandparents’ upstate house. She is sent there during the summer holidays after a confrontation with her parents when Tigerstripe dies. Moved by her boredom and her grandmother’s insistence, Maddy chooses one of the books of her grandparents’ library for her to read.<sup>88</sup> The book, by Charles Darwin, is called *The Voyage of the Beagle*, and absorbs Madison from the first page. Hungry as she is for discovery and independence from her parents, she is determined, inspired by the book, to find her own new species and give it her name. This thirst for yet another discovery of her own will be examined later in the sections dealing with operative and inoperative communities, but this part of the novel is also significant to complete this analysis on sexuality.

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<sup>88</sup> It is explained by the prophecy that the book that Maddy takes was predestined for her to choose, as well as the event that will take place with it.

To find her new species, Maddy goes to a traffic island during the hottest moment of the day, considering that a great amount of different insects will be there for her to observe. Unfortunately, it comes to a point when she needs to use the bathroom, and she feels obliged to use the public toilet nearby. As the woman's restroom is out of order, she ventures to the men's toilets. While in one of the stalls, she observes a hole on the walls that connects to the one next to it. A man enters the stall nearby and inserts his penis through this hole. Lacking completely any knowledge of (female or male) sexuality, she confuses the organ with a "lump of dog poopie" (119), which she believes is yet another bullying act similar to those she experiences by her peers. In her confusion, and believing this to be an act of practical joke and not sexual violence, she becomes infuriated and attacks the penis (unknown to her at that moment) with Darwin's book:

No longer would I tolerate similar forms of demeaning abuse. (...) Steeling myself, I was Theseus about to do battle with the Minotaur in the dank basements of Crete. I was Hercules girding my loins to fight Cerberus (...). Striking a hail of blows upon the struggling caca, I likewise found myself howling great screams of rage. Mine was the vengeful whoop of every child ever tormented by cruel bullies, a combination of fury and weeping and sheer hysterical laughter. (...) So fiercely did I scream that frothy spittle ribboned from my lips. (120-122)

The end result of this "battle" is the dismemberment and demise of the man behind the wall. His identity is not important in this section, although it will be later in the chapter. What matters here is the symbolic value that this encounter has brought with it in terms of the penis as a locus of power and domination. The book is filled with the blood and fluids from this person, which means that she cannot keep reading: "Now I'd never know how evolution ends" (141). Maddy's actual ignorance and lack of experience when it comes to sexuality was already manifested at the beginning of this section. Regardless of her parents' openness with sexuality, they have failed to show their daughter the true weight of sexuality and the body. It points out at a general misunderstanding of sex in communal terms putting individualism on the back. However, this lack of comprehension also means Maddy's closeness to a more semiotic understanding of reality, including sexual organs. For her, the penis is never filtered as the phallus, because she has never understood nor experienced sexuality in any way that may have made her tip the balance one way or another. Thus, far from feeling the fear that such an organ under those circumstances would have created, Maddy feels grown

and decided to attack it. Her reflection as regards the book and revolution is, apart from being ironic, also captivating. Here, quite metaphorically, it can be argued that it is precisely this symbolism attached to the body and that understanding of sexuality which prevent the subject from “evolving” to something beyond that bodily transubstantiation. Moreover, Maddy’s identification with Theseus and Hercules in this “battle” is thought-provoking. She breaks with her own gender boundaries, picturing herself as heroes and not heroines. This is not to say that she is being sexist, as throughout the novel she makes numerous references to other female personalities and also identifies with them (seen in section 6).

I would like to make a comparison here between *Lullaby*’s main female character, Helen, and Madison. As explained in Chapter 3, Helen occupies a man’s body with a spell, and claims that she had always wanted to know what it was like to have a penis. After dead, Madison manages as well to occupy a male body.<sup>89</sup> However, she does not show that excitement at all:

As a girl, I’d always imagined the joy of having a pee-pee: like having a best friend and confidant, only attached. The reality is that I’m no more aware of my newfound wiener than I am of my own appendix. (...) In my pants I can feel something bobbing and jiggling. My pee-pee feels less like a faithful compadre and more like something gross falling out of my pelvic floor. (...) How can men tolerate this vile sensation?” (187-188)

The main difference between Helen and Maddy can be said to come in the form of a debate between adulthood and childhood. As explained before, Maddy’s knowledge about sexuality is theoretical, unattached to any symbolism shared by the same common knowledge that founds a communal experience as far as the body goes. While Helen mentions male masturbation, Maddy does not even fall to think about that due to her non-existent sexual experience. Thus, Maddy’s experience of the body cannot completely enter the Symbolic, and therefore presents herself devoid of such filters. In fact, there are many occasions in which she sees herself observing this symbolically sexual, and potentially traumatic event, with the cold gaze of a scientist (137).

One more perspective from which this question can be observed is the *repression of desires* that has been mentioned when discussing religion. To exemplify this, I will conclude this section with Antonio’s remarks about his and Camille’s

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<sup>89</sup> In *Damned and Doomed*, the dead can occupy the bodies of recently demised people.

understanding of the body and death: “‘Baby girl, we’ve discussed this. Nothing has a soul, and when you die you rot away to create healthy organic compost for subsoil lifeforms to reproduce in. (...) There is no God. There is no soul. Nothing survives beyond death” (225). It can be argued that what feels carnal, earthly, or purely physical has been always, though theoretically, offered to her via her parents’ teachings. It seems clear that her parents believed that limits were precisely the problem, so the limits of the Symbolic do not really exist for Maddy: it is the Symbolic, that is, the restrictive meanings imposed by the Christian-influenced American culture the ones which are banned for her. In that respect, it makes sense that Maddy would crave those restrains, and that her own source of *ecstasy* as far as the body goes would not operate in the same way as what feels common inside community, which does work with those limits that she does not know. The more her parents fight against the body’s symbolic filters, the more Maddy wants to find and apply those symbols to herself. Her desire will come true, as the prophecy will bring those symbols to her.

Finally, though Maddy is incapable to understand her own body through the symbols that define sexuality, she projects her bodily identity with her own size. Maddy is presented in the novel as an overweight girl, but in *Doomed* it is revealed that she used to be thin before the incident in the public toilets upstate. It is later discovered that the male body found in the stall is that of her grandfather. In addition, after her papadaddy’s death, Maddy begins to see her grandmother through a different lens, once they learn about the man’s death:

I studied my nana as intently as I’d study my own reflection in a mirror. For there was my nose, my future nose. Hers were my thighs. How her shoulders stooped forward when she walked was how I’d someday walk. It looked like such an impossible task: growing old. (...) In Toulouse, cooks say the first crepe is always (...) [f]or the cat. The first crepe is always flawed, (...) so they let the cat eat it. Somehow I decided that I could do the same with my nana’s flaws. The more she cooked and baked, the more I ate. I could absolve her sins by eating them. And, if not forgive them, I could carry them around my hips as my own burden. (160)

Maddy makes of her body her own bargain chip to try to absorb her grandmother’s imperfections, offering herself as a symbolic sacrifice. This is perhaps the only way in which Maddy bids herself symbolically. It is also a naïve, childish type of redemption, but also one whose potential resides in the fact that she moves away from the desired body images for which her female peers go (described by her as compulsively

anorexic). It can be seen as another strategy that attains rupture from the common body image that is pursued by both men and women today. In addition, though her self abuse may be compared to other characters like Victor Mancini in *Choke* when he suffers a vowel blockage (Chapter 4) or Carl Streater in *Lullaby* when he steps on miniature houses with his bare foot (Chapter 5), Maddy tries to sacrifice herself for “the other” (in this case her grandmother). The aforementioned male characters use violence as a way to connect with their private selves due to the wound that comes with masculinity and men’s need to repress their feelings (Kaufman 12), while Maddy seems more prepared to really see “the other”, enduring pain in a similar way as Misty in *Diary*.

This section has dealt with how death interacts with religion and the sexual body, also putting it in perspective with the body alive. The next section will problematize these ideas discussing the operative and inoperative communities formed in *Damned* and *Doomed*. I will also argue that the formation of these ensembles revolves around the main character’s identity crisis, which is resolved in an inoperative climax. The point of convergence of all these communities will be Madison.

## **5. “Set yourself a goal so difficult that death will seem like a welcome reprieve”: Operative communities**

Before dealing with the most important operative communities that can be found in *Damned* and *Doomed*, I would like to introduce this section by mentioning Maddy’s family as an operative community. As explained in section 3, Maddy cannot be said to have ever felt, when she was alive, as part of her own family. Her resentment and rejection were already an issue in this analysis, but there is something else that needs to be shared to understand why Maddy’s family is an operative one: “[My parents] create a tableau of elegant good looks. So meticulously outfitted in their tuxedo and gown. Every hair assigned its perfect place. The pair of them, so beautifully blocked for a two-shot, I can’t resist messing with their Zen” (128). Through this extract, it can be argued that Maddy never felt part of this family unit. She always felt like an outsider, as her parents did make of her life and her death much more than their core relationship with her daughter. Maddy was constantly made viral by them, even in her funeral (166). Madison’s funeral service is perhaps what constitutes the breach between the last thread of individualism and the operative models that I am about to develop. While attending

her own funeral service as a ghost before being sent to Hell, Maddy realises that people are as fake in her funeral as they were when she was alive (168-169). In addition, apart from it being described as something with great economic profit for those who attended, most importantly Maddy confesses here that “[n]obody grieves more at funerals than does the newly deceased” (169). This still visible attachment on Maddy’s part to her body corroborates the later great transformation that her individualistic nature will experience in the different operative (and inoperative) communities that are to be exposed below.

Both novels display very clear operative configurations. *Damned* pays attention to the community formed by *the dead* in juxtaposition to the community of the living or *the predead*, as Maddy calls them. Those who are dead are also divided into the souls that go to Heaven and those who are sent to Hell. Significantly, the novel focuses mainly on the description of Hell, while Heaven is only mentioned. At the same time, *Doomed* will focus more specifically on the figure of Satan, giving him a voice and a presence, while God’s words never come from His own mouth. His existence is only taken for granted by those who say that come from Heaven. This means that, although the community of Hell exists in contrast to another ensemble, the analysis will be only focusing on the first, while the second remains, as it could be expected, *unavowable*.

Firstly, it is important to notice that death unites and separates the communities of *the predead* and the dead. Of course, this constitutes the main nucleus of the community of the dead as being operative. I will start this analysis with the contrast established from the beginning between the living and the dead in *Damned*. Maddy begins her story by telling the reader:

Probably I shouldn’t even tell you I’m dead, because no doubt now you feel awfully superior. (...) Yes, we all look a little mysterious and absurd to each other, but no one looks as foreign as a dead person does. We can forgive some stranger her choice to practice Catholicism or engage in homosexual acts, but not her submission to death. (...) [D]ying seems like the greatest weakness. (2-3)

Maddy’s mention of the *foreigner* in this case is revealing. According to the main character, there is nothing stranger than a dead body, and she applies such vision to any living person. Moreover, when the protagonist says that “we all look a little mysterious and absurd to each other,” she could be manifesting the contrast between the American individualism where she comes from and the unifying effect that death has

automatically once the body stands lifeless. Here, Derrida's foreigner is interestingly met with hostility, demonstrating the great opposition that really exists between the communities of the living and the dead, and the symbolic force that death contains, and the members' denial towards their own finitude.

The body is precisely another element that is very much taken into account to establish the great difference between the predead and the dead: "Trust me, the being dead part is much easier than the dying part" (1), as Maddy says, because she sees herself in the need to abandon her original self, that attached to the symbolism of the people alive. One could say that what transforms the individualistic and alive "I" into the dead and unified "We" would be, to recuperate Etzioni's words (157), apart from being dead which is already different enough, the connotation that the people alive have as regards death and which also affects them once they are deceased: "Death is the One Big Mistake that none of us EVER plans to make" (4). As death is seen through a mystic halo filtered by religious symbolism, individualistic America does not see death in a direct way, which of course implies that the same "souls" that end up dying keep on seeing this death in the same symbolic way. In fact, since here Palahniuk is following ultra-Catholic thought, this symbolism must exist and will determine the space marked by Heaven and that marked by Hell.

Once the difference between the alive and the dead is established through the eyes of the thirteen-year-old protagonist, the community of Hell comes to be described, the most important operative community of this section. As commented before, *Damned* focuses especially on Hell and the people that Maddy meets there, which is what is going to be now analysed. An interesting fact when discussing Hell for the first time in the book is that Maddy keeps comparing Hell with life on Earth: "[W]atching television and surfing the Internet are really excellent practice for being dead" (1). Once there, Maddy's self attempts to adopt a detached perspective: "You're dead; now just calm down" (5). The issue seems to be that death is not something here to be feared anymore. It is the ultimate detachment of the corporeal self. What actually impersonates the fusion of the community of the dead is their abandonment of the body. As the main characters also explains: "[w]hen you're dead, you pretty much have to give up your demands about boundaries and personal space" (5); "[o]n the plus side, in Hell you're no longer slave to a corporeal self" (18). However, at the same time, though experiencing the body from the outside as Nancy recommends is a step towards

symbolic dissolution, here symbolism does not really cease to exist. The body keeps epitomizing that which made the person's self while alive, and is still after dead. Maddy makes it clear in her own musings: "Maybe I'm in Hell because I'm fat – a Real Porker. If you can go to Hell for having low self-esteem, that's why I'm here" (1). This reinforces Bordo's ideas as regards the body being "a metaphor" of the person's self (165), and the symbolic importance that the body still has even after death.<sup>90</sup>

Another point in common that Maddy establishes between herself and the rest of the people that inhabit Hell is their worry that they may have disappointed their loved ones by dying (44). She also explains that "[i]f the living are haunted by the dead, then the dead are haunted by their own mistakes" (102). This connects with the fact that Christian beliefs take death as something that needs to be related to sacrifice, a gift to be given (Derrida's *gift of death*). Life needs to be signified, and if taking religious thought, only by signifying death does the subject acquire a unique identity. Palahniuk seems to point out here that giving death a certain symbolic value does not really enhance the subject's self-development. Once dead, this symbolism still follows the self, here named a "soul" with no fixed body. The contrast between the importance given to the body and the inevitability of its final breakdown is made clear by her (alive) parents: "[My parents] seemed heavily invested in the belief that if one could constantly maintain one's personal appearance and mitigate the signs of aging, then death would never be a pressing issue" (88), an idea that once again connects with Agamben's conclusions: death remains that which cannot be conquered by the capitalist middle-class (62). This obsession with immortality connects as well with the conviction that, for every man, manhood is eternal (Kimmel 119). As a result, America's identity connects again with the traits that define hegemonic masculinity. In this sense, Maddy learns an important lesson almost at the end of the novel, and which gives her an even greater potential to find real exposure: "[i]n Hell, it's our attachments to a fixed identity that torture us" (179).

An important peak reached by the community of Hell with Madison's aid has to do with the telemarketing job that she had to execute while there.<sup>91</sup> Once she has been

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<sup>90</sup> Rodríguez Salas explores this aspect in the post-mortem narration of events by Penelope and the maids in Atwood's parodic revision of Homer's *Odyssey*. See "'Close as a Kiss': The Challenge of The Maids' Gyn/Affection in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*" (2015).

<sup>91</sup> The tongue-in-cheek commentary that clearly relates telemarketers with demons working from Hell cannot be missed.

there for some time, and after having had the chance to meet some people there and make new friends (in the shape of *The Breakfast Club* cast, as explained below) Maddy makes the following reflection: “I’ve seen beyond the veil. I’m dead, and in my own admittedly limited life experiences, I’d wager that the best people are. Dead, I mean” (79). Since she has only known Hell, it is implied that she is talking about the dead people staying there. Before really delving into what Madison attains with the community of Hell, the following represents an important glimpse to understand what Hell becomes next:

In the prejudiced, bigoted modern world, alive is alive. Dead is dead. And the two factions must not interact. This attitude is entirely understandable when you consider what the dead would do to property values and stock prices. Once the dead informed the living that material possessions were a big joke – ARE a big joke – well, the De Beers people could never sell another diamond. Pension funds would truly wither. (165)<sup>92</sup>

Even under these circumstances when death and life are discussed, the main problem is wealth and what people do with it. Death is not inconvenient for the abandonment of life on Earth and those with whom the subject forms a community; it is because it opens the self in a way in which the modern world would collapse, due to its fixation on the body, and everything that feels tangible always from a symbolic perspective shaped by the media and other similar currents, as Katz explains. Thus, what Madison does, as I will explain shortly, is to transform the dead, specifically the community of the dead in Hell as the new non-hegemonic, post-alive avant-garde. This becomes the disruptive current that individualistic alive people need.

Coming back to Maddy’s telemarketing work, she begins to come across people who are terminally ill (which is why, she muses, they keep answering her questions): “Over the next few hours I run across an elderly man dying of kidney failure. A middle-aged woman apparently losing her battle against lupus. (...) I meet another man who is alone, trapped in a cheap apartment, dying of congestive heart failure. I meet a girl about my age, thirteen, who’s dying from AIDS” (125). There are two important remarks to make here. The first is that this is completely relatable to *Survivor*’s main character, Tender, and his approach to death by telling people that they should commit suicide and die. In both cases, the ones who answer the phone from Earth can be said to

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<sup>92</sup> Here, there is a reference to *Fight Club*’s philosophy.

be forming a community of sick people who are marginalized from the healthy ones: “a community for those who have no community” (Blanchot, *Unavowable* 24). It is also, in addition, comparable to the groups of cancer present in *Fight Club*. When Maddy is talking to these ill subjects, she thinks: “Listening to [them], I yearn to encourage [them] to just give up and die. (...) It won’t hurt, I swear. In fact, death will make her feel way better. Look at me, I want to say, I’m only thirteen and being deceased constitutes about the best thing that’s ever happened to me” (111). Thanks to Maddy’s encouragement, more and more people begin to die and enter Hell, since, as she comments: “[e]ven if the Bible is correct, and it’s easier to push caramels through the eye of a needle than get to Heaven, well, Hell doesn’t totally suck. (...) [You]’ll meet new people. [You] might not even notice the difference. Not at first” (110). The community of Hell increases, and Maddy becomes an *absolute other* who, as opposed to Jesus Christ, she attracts followers to Hell:

These souls have been arriving in droves, transforming Hell into a veritable Ellis Island of new arrivals, shocked but not devastated by their demise, more curious than frightened, in fact eager to shed their former failing lives and embark upon some new enterprise. It would seem that I’ve recruited them. All of them, every one of these faces lauds me from their far-flung windows in the walls of Hell. They demand the gates be thrown open so that they might embrace me... their new hero.  
(205)

The attention that Maddy never attained from her parents and would help her own exposure (by being seen by her immediate others, her mother and father) is substituted by this public outcry, the new messiah that they needed (the effect on Maddy’s identity in this respect will be examined in the next section). At the same time, Hell maintains a familiarity with Earth that may diminish the pre-conception that the living have about it, meaning that death loses its importance, and promises a second chance.

One of the most revealing operative communities that I will examine in this section and which proves to be decisive for Maddy’s identity’s transformation is the one formed inside Hell among Maddy and four more characters. These are described physically, and as far as their behaviour goes, as the main protagonists of the film *The Breakfast Club*, Maddy’s personal favourite. For the main character, the five of them represent a group of adolescents that may help her at the beginning to feel more in tune with the *in group* identity she had always wanted for herself. From the beginning of the

novel Maddy presents herself as a fat, but smart girl. Young as she is, she seems to always justify her own identity by being a well-read and cultured person, and warns repeatedly that she is not being smart in order to overcompensate, “in the same manner as insecure homosexuals who constantly trot out Michelangelo and Noël Coward and Abraham Lincoln in order to bolster their own fragile self-esteem. (...) [A]t least I find myself mingling in very, capital-V, Very good company” (83) – here she refers to her *Breakfast Club* friends. With Babette acting as the popular cheerleader, Patterson, the football player, Leonard, the geek, and Archer, the rebellious punk, there is only one role for her to play: the insecure, shy girl of the group. Here, Derrida’s “individualism of a role, and not of a person,” (*Gift* 37) is clearly put into the scene.

Since Maddy died before her first period and having any sexual experience, she spends great time of her narration saying that she does not share the needs and “hormones and gender expectations” (12) of adolescence, which represents for her the “Ice Age of Dumbness” (13). More into the point, she says: “need I remind you that I am dead, deceased, and rendered eternally prepubescent and therefore immune to the mindless reproductive biological imperatives that, no doubt, shape every living, breathing moment of your crummy living, breathing life” (22-23). It can be argued that for Maddy, forming part of this group of teenagers helps her feel part of a community in which, though she has not been able to “bloom” sexually, she can lie about it, and commune with the rest of the group. As already mentioned in section 2, “[i]n Hell you’d be foolish to count on people displaying high standards of honesty.” The *Breakfast Club* may represent a community of lies, with made up identities, but it does not seem to matter. It is also a place where sexuality is highly remarked, especially in Babette’s body, highly desired by the other three male members of the group. The three young male characters’ behaviour towards the sexualisation of Babette is proof of the “creepification of male sexuality” (Biddulph and Seidler in Pease, *Recreating* 43) that characterizes a patriarchal system, also projected in Hell. To this, Maddy has very clear ideas: “It’s my experience that girls tend to be terrifically smart until they grow breasts. (...) Both boys and girls” (12). Her actual experience is very limited, but even so, the ideas that accompany hegemonic masculinity have influenced Maddy’s schemes when it comes to sex roles, demonstrating the viral effect of toxic masculinity. All in all, this group, I argue, helps Madison to see herself inside a community that, aside from death,

is informed by some sort of incompleteness, precisely because of their arrival in Hell at that young age.

Finally, all these operative communities that come to take shape in *Damned* will have their climax in *Doomed*, in the new religious cult that Maddy's parents form after their conversation through the phone: 'Boorism'. I will not expand too much on this new cult because it was already explained in the section dealing with religion, but it needs to be reminded that 'Boorism' manages to form a global community in which everybody reaches fusion through swearing and making offense. Religion loses completely its symbolic potential of restrictions and limitations, as everyone believes that they are guaranteed a place in Heaven. The most important trait in the community formed by 'Boorism' is that death is not something that people *fear*, but something to be celebrated:

It's difficult to accept the idea that everyone's about to die (...), because everyone seems so happy. Smiling. Their manic eyes flashing. (...) There's no fear of disease. No social pretense or status indicators or power hierarchies separate them. The crowd is singing my name, grateful for the salvation they believe is imminent. They're happy in the way people are happy while burning books or beheading kings; they're righteous. (293)

Here, Boorism can be said to bring along the other side of the same coin. While death was something to be feared in order to appreciate life on Earth, now that death is not the end, life loses its value. Allowing myself to go back to the first sections where America was posed at the focus of attention, the title of this section seems like a valid metaphor to end it: such is the need to go forward, that one prophecy promising Paradise seems much more welcoming than America's obsession with progress. The happiness and salvation promised by 'Boorism' is based on an approach towards death, described as "burning books" or "beheading kings". It is the destruction of old orders, apparently, for the founding of something better and new. However, similarly to the operative community of fight club, boorists represent in reality a "parody" of an equally oppressive system which is destroyed in order to be occupied by a different but equally suffocating ensemble (Blanchot, *Unavowable* 14). The elimination of the old practices (decorum, political correctness) exemplify a very similar move to the one taken by Ida Mancini and also Victor in *Choke*: "to uncomplicate *myself*" (150). This is another form of nihilism, as it erases the subject's essence with a unifying effect: "No social

pretense or status indicators or power hierarchies separate them” (293), and only death unites them all. At the same time, ‘Boors’ consideration of death as the path towards happiness, towards paradise, can be connected to the idea that masculinity projects a love which can only be shown when closer to death. Thus, ‘Boorism’ seems to be taking hegemonic masculinity to the most toxic level, as it is driving the whole global community to their own self-destruction. The world is supposed to find happiness in death, much like men ought to find an excuse to open themselves to their feelings when about to meet their own finitude. It is later discovered that ‘Boorism’ was actually Satan’s trap to gather as many people as possible in Hell, to take revenge towards God. The self-destructive nature of this new global cult shows its true colours and demonstrates that Hell and Heaven are chained together by a succession of beliefs that always come back to a patriarchal understanding of being together. The “rise of modernity” mentioned by MacInnes which explains the sexual division of labour is rejected (45), but the cycle that moves masculinity and its obsession with control and repression of the inner part of the self keeps at work: the wheel remains unbroken. Satan as a phallic figure now imposes his own law through Maddy, which turns out to be a more aggressive, though present as opposed to absent (God), version of hegemonic masculinity. I will come back to the figure of Satan in the next section.

I will finish this section by commenting on the element of secrecy in all these communities, but particularly in connection to the truth behind the prophecy that shapes Boorism and its new continent, Madlantis. Secrecy is a defining feature of the operative communities that formed in both novels, although it only makes its appearance in *Doomed*, thus warning these communities’ final rupture. The prophecy represents that great secret: it is not Heaven that awaits the ‘Boorists,’ but Hell (see section 3). The secret also involves Maddy, who is the sacrifice that ought to be “made viral” while she was alive and attracts people towards Hell: a modern Persephone (258). Although Maddy here would be fulfilling the sacrificial figure, it will be precisely this imposed role that will give Madison, in the following section, the potential to form with her family and Satan himself, temporary but powerful inoperative associations.

## 6. “[A]n escaped slave in a blazing world”: Inoperative communities

This section will follow the same scheme outlined in previous chapters, in which I will explain the different inoperative communities with the figures of the Mediator, the Subject and the Object, placing desire and guilt as the source of the characters’ ecstasy and their openness towards each other. However, first I will explain Maddy’s potential to be at the core of the two inoperative communities that I will expose in this part of the analysis. Maddy is the nucleus of the operative and the inoperative communities in these works, and both associations will be different, because each novel reaches different types of models, both in relation to the characters with whom they take place, and the evolution of Maddy’s own identity. This is the reason why, before talking about the love triangles that take place in these two works, I need to display the steps taken so far and revise the events that shape Maddy’s final exposure. All these events are related to death and sexual curiosity, and most of them take place in *Doomed*, when Maddy’s identity is truly developed. First, the French kissing game can be said to have awakened in Madison the need to find the limits of her own body, with a sexual connotation that rather than focusing on one specific organ, expands to the whole body and takes the “petite morte” to a higher level. After this, Maddy is confronted with the man in the public bathrooms, whom she believes to be Papadaddy, but later turns out to be Satan (further examined below). Here, death accomplishes what somehow cleanses her (not) grandfather’s darings: “Just by being a dead body with no wallet or blood, his wiener half torn off, that made my grandpa the innocent injured party. It didn’t seem fair” (145). It is in this situation that Maddy also experiences one of the biggest changes of her still alive self: “What a summer this had been. I’d gotten plump... chunky... just awful, in fact. And I’d begun to love reading. And I’d killed a man. I’d killed my grandfather. And I’d learned discretion” (160). Both her body and her mind experience a change during this summer, the change that most teenagers go through when they experiment the average hormonal alterations and begin their to-be-expected path towards adulthood. Maddy does this by knowing what it is to give death “in battle”, as she described it. This locates the character further and further in the same position as every other main character in Palahniuk’s stories: closer to death than life itself, a special thirst towards a dramatic ecstasy.

The most important event of this list is Maddy’s death, which is co-starred by Goran, one of the orphans adopted by her parents and the one who constitutes Maddy’s

most meaningful love interest. Firstly, Goran represents the most salient representative of the toxic masculinity that Palahniuk deconstructs in his works. He is introduced in *Damned* as the most grotesque character of the story. Though until now this role had been performed by a female character, this time the author chooses a male persona:

Although he was only one year older than me, Goran's forehead was already etched with wrinkles. His cheeks, hollowed. His eyebrows grew as wild and tangled as the forested slopes of the Carpathian Mountains, so matted and bristling that if you looked too closely among the hairs you'd expect to see marauding packs of wolves, ruined castles, and stooped Gypsy women gathering firework. Even at the age of fourteen, Goran's eyes, his voice pitched deep as a foghorn, it all gave the impression that he'd witnessed his entire extended family tortured to death (...). He seemed to exist in his own permanent isolation, insulated by some terrible history of hardship and deprivation, and I envied him that. I did so, so long to be tortured. Next to Goran, even adult men sounded silly and chatty and insignificant. Even my father. Especially my father. (61)

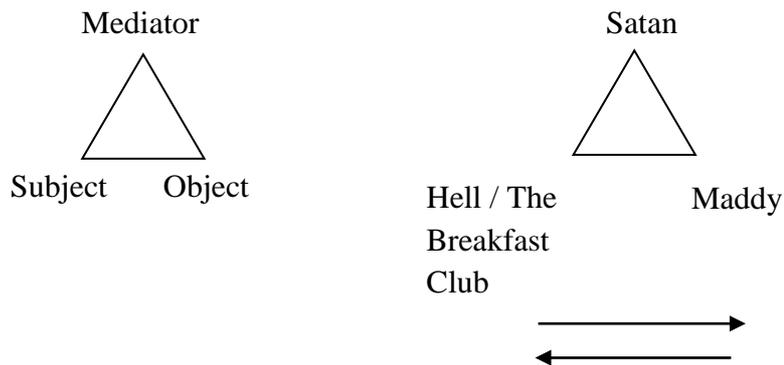
Goran represents the type of masculinity that seems to take shape when closer to death and violence. The fact that Goran, a teenage boy, appears as more manly than any men, points out at the toxicity linked with hegemonic masculinity, and is a reminiscence of the dehumanization of the body experienced by (hyper)masculine men.

It is also interesting to see Maddy comparing Goran with her father in a negative way. Her father Antonio, as commented before, tries to stay away completely from the canon, including gendered stereotypes. Maddy finds her supposedly authoritative figure so un-authoritative that she, as she comments, yearns to be punished, and she does not attain such punishment from her father. Here, Maddy is asking for the Oedipal punishment that is normally ascribed to the male psyche, necessary for men to have a sense of their manhood (Leverenz 100), thus showing once more that masculinity is detached from maleness and its toxicity and it may take roots in any subject. Maddy has the idea that agency must be attained through some sort of rite of passage that combines sexual and death experiences with violence, which goes hand in hand with manhood's supposed transcendence (Kimmel 120, 136). Moreover, Antonio's role as a (non-) punishing father makes reference to American society's deeply rooted nature when it comes to the roles that ought to take place inside the family, showing how its importance is overemphasized (Walby 61). Although Goran represents what masculinity can become when taken to the extreme (like Tyler Durden in *Fight Club*), it is precisely

this extreme that makes the connection between these characters so important for this analysis: “How come I click so well with Goran is that he’s never been allowed to be a child, and I’m strictly forbidden to grow any older” (113). This is the case for Maddy both during her lifetime due to her parents infantilising her, and the fact that she is dead. As already explained, for Maddy adulthood and a blooming sexuality ought to give her a whole identity, and her frustration comes, in many ways, from this realisation. However, there is something else that Goran brings Maddy in the form of a life lesson: “Goran simply is. (...) Wherever Goran is at this moment – sitting or standing, laughing or crying – he’s doing it with the clarity of an infant who knows that no one will ever come to his rescue” (120). Maddy sees Goran as free, and this is perhaps the most important masculine trait that one can observe in this character, and one which better manages to separate gendered and sexual meanings from the body itself, because that freedom is precisely what Maddy wants to find for herself as well. A connection between Maddy and the main male character in *Fight Club* can be also observed: “Tyler is capable and free, and I am not” (174) (see Chapter 3, section 4.1.). *Fight Club*’s protagonist feels the same envy and admiration towards Tyler as Maddy does for Goran. In Palahniuk’s fictional American context, masculinity grants freedom and agency, and Maddy craves for both. Her final transformation will be seen in the inoperative associations to be analysed subsequently.

The two inoperative communities to be developed now compound two different levels that Madison reaches in the two stories, although the most climatic one will be that taking place in *Doomed*. I will argue that the first love triangle in *Damned* will involve the figure of Satan, the community of Hell, and specifically The Breakfast Club, and Madison. The love triangle in *Doomed* will be formed by Satan and Madison as well, but instead of the community of Hell, it is the family bonds with her parents, and Goran, that will establish an inoperative, though temporary, ensemble where a process of clinamen will enable the characters’ openness to each other.

I will begin by the love triangle formed in *Damned*:



Here, I argue that the figure of Satan will embody the role of the Mediator; the community of Hell and The Breakfast Club, here the same concept, occupy the role of the Subject, while Maddy will fit in the role of the Object. As observed, and as was also the case in other chapters, these positions will be reversed, as Maddy will finally find her own position as a Subject once she has occupied that of the Object.

Maddy begins the story identifying herself as a fat, not popular girl, but relies on considering herself very smart. She feels that she has not developed sexually, and that for this reason, her identity is not complete. In both books, Madison is always communicating with Satan one-sidedly, a figure that remains silent until the end of *Damned*. It can be argued that Palahniuk places Satan as the only character belonging to the story that acquires the traits of the *absolute other* without being a vacuum, or an absent figure, at least from the ending of the first part. Being Satan a character that speaks to Madison, that really *sees* her, he becomes a more fitting paternal figure in Maddy's current situation: "I've transferred all my immature needs for attention and affection to the only parental adult available: Satan" (37). I will tackle Maddy's need for attention again in the next love triangle. For now, it is important to see the relationship of trust that is established between both characters, at least on Madison's part. Maddy tells Satan all her secrets, which means that what Derrida calls "God in me", in Madison's case would be "Satan in me."

When Maddy arrives in Hell, she feels bad with herself because she still has hope, a bad habit that one should not have in Hell: "My biggest gripe is still hope" (20). However, it is this hope that pushes Madison towards her own self-discovery, even after death. The first detail to be noted is that, be it shared or not, everybody in Hell knows why they are there. They lie openly, knowing that the other knows that what they say is

not true (see section 2). In this sense, the secret is deluded, because in the end the members of Hell know that everyone has their own secret that makes them different. In a way, the manner in which Palahniuk has presented Hell is a way in which truths are not completely in the open, but their members know that there is one truth to be discovered, or one lie to be uncovered. It can be discussed that in this sense there is a type of honesty, or rather, an open non-clear environment. This is further developed at the beginning of *Doomed*, even though here I will only focus on *Damned*: “One of the chief torments of Hell is that we all know, secretly, why we deserve to be here” (10)

Maddy confesses many of her secrets, which she believes are shameful, and which have to do with her attempts at sexual discovery and near death experiences. It is in Hell, however, where she seems comfortable to share this information with Satan, a first step that allows her to be free and prepares her for the next. Her mother admits at the beginning of the story that “[y]ou can trust Maddy to tell you anything about herself – except the truth” (79). This implies a crisis of identity on Maddy’s part, as she is unable to talk truthfully about herself. This becomes an issue half through *Damned*, after she narrates her own demise: “Floating here, I want nothing more than to go back and to fix this hideous error. In this moment, I’ve lost both my parents. I’ve lost Goran. Worst of all, I’ve lost... myself (159). She will see later that this was not the case (“Goran did not kill ... me”, 220), but at first death does inflict a change on her own view as a subject. After telling this event, she begs Satan to not ask her “how she feels” (161), because she does not seem to be ready to confront this change in her own self:

I’ve made my entire identity about being smart. (...) [D]espite so many options, I chose to be smart – the intelligent fat girl who possessed the shining brain, the straight-A student (...). However, in light of the truth: that I did not die of a marijuana overdose ... nor did Goran reveal himself as my romantic ideal... my schemes have brought nothing except heartache to my family ... Thus, it would follow that I am not so smart. And with that, my entire concept of self is undermined. (...) [H]aving failed at my initial strategy, I’ll never again have faith in a single identity. (...) [T]hat new persona will always feel as phony and put-on plastic fingernails or a rub-on tattoo. (175-177)

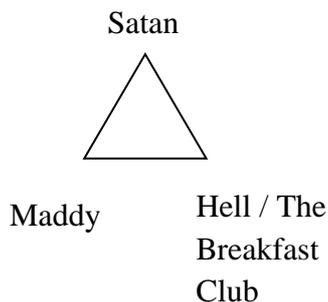
What is positive in this confession, as far as the self goes, is that despite the main character’s distrust in any identity, she is no longer closing herself to one fixed self, which entails the subject’s greater flexibility. Still, the “many options” to which she refers and which I have not added to the extract are always centred on the female,

sexualized body, making a closed dichotomy between the body and the mind. This is as well a very narrow understanding of the self, which means that even though the journey has already started, it is not yet completed.

For this reason, at the moment of her death, Madison is occupying the position of the Object, as she still does not have a clear idea of the self into which she can turn. The community of Hell would make here its entrance in the position of the Subject, and more specifically, the Breakfast Club. It is true that I have commented before that the Breakfast Club does not represent a free understanding of an original self, but the reused roles of adolescence, that time in life in which everything is cliché. In any case, they do have a fixed and accepted role, and it will be this mirror that will help Maddy find an identity in which she finds herself comfortable. After all, they are in Hell, and being death the “ultimate mistake” implies the breaking of general boundaries. Hell itself is located, ideologically, inside the Symbolic. However its very nature is that of chaos and lack of limits. It presents, therefore, a good landscape for Maddy to explore her own, not so fixed after death limits. What Hell knows, as an identity, is that it has no limits. In a way, Hell represents a menace towards hegemonic ideals. It is the place to go when the Christian subject has not followed God’s path, and are doomed to His rejection. Therefore, Hell negates the structure of limits that forms Heaven, and though it is symbolically defined by suffering and a wretched landscape, the absence of transcendence with God resolves the subjects’ obsession with the body of God (*Hoc est enim corpus meum*; Nancy, *Corpus* 3, 5). If God’s body is now unreachable for certain, self-acceptance seems to be the only answer. In relation to this, the transcendental, higher masculinity to which one could aspire is also negated (Hearn, *Public Eye* 8). Hell could represent as well a community of non-accomplished masculinities, masculinities that have failed to hold onto the ideal marked by the (again, absent) father figure. Thus, Maddy’s thoughts about how in Hell “it’s our attachments to a fixed identity that torture us” (179) can be better understood. Hell’s suffering is the subjects’ remorse at not having been able to achieve a proper (gendered) self in accordance to operative symbolisms. However, at the same time, precisely because in Hell these limits become deluded, subjects’ loss may be seen as an opportunity to explore other possibilities, as happens with Maddy in the next extract analysed.

In *Damned*, Maddy’s trust on her self will reappear in a notable moment in which, in Hell, she is encouraged by one of The Breakfast Club, Archer, to challenge

Hitler in a fight, because she needs to “abandon being likeable” (185). After being victorious in battle, Maddy realises that now, she wants power, “[n]ot affection. I don’t want that kind of pointless, impotent power (...). Mark my words: Being dead isn’t all sitting around in remorseful reflection and bitter self-recrimination. Death, like life, is what you make of it” (195). Maddy’s newly discovered thirst for power mirrors Demetriou’s definition of hegemonic masculinity, based on submission of others with aggressiveness (341), once again demonstrating that masculinity is becoming less and less an issue about sex or gender, but the exertion of domination. Masculinity is an attitude one needs to adopt if they desire a powerful stand. The phallus can indeed be possessed by others who do not own a white male body (Halberstam 2). Although it is still encouraged by an external party, Maddy does seem to have the illusion of having found her own place in Hell, which is why now those roles can be reversed, and now Maddy can occupy the position of the Subject, being Hell her new home, what she desires to conquer, having Satan as that mediating figure that channels her thoughts and turns them into action:



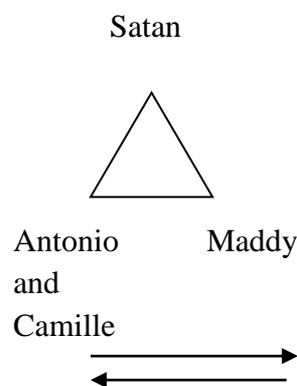
Maddy’s conclusion as a Subject in *Damned* goes as follows:

Who I am is no longer the plump girl who’d smile willingly (...). My hips bristle with totems and talismans, proof that I am not simply a character in a fixed book or film. I am no single narrative. As neither Rebecca de Winter nor Jane Eyre, I am free to revise my story, to reinvent myself, my world, at any given moment. (...) For now do I embody all the traits I had so hoped to find in Goran. Meaning: No longer am I limited. (200-201)

This moment of complete openness, this *clinamen* towards Maddy herself, is however truncated by Satan’s final appearance at the end of this first part. Satan appears to be the driver that took Maddy to Hell at the beginning, and the script he offered her to read was, in fact, her own life: “[Y]ou’ve lived it. (...) ‘But, technically speaking, there is no

“you” (...) Madison Spencer does not exist, Satan claims. I am nothing but a fictional character he invented aeons ago”(232, 233). With this confession comes Maddy’s own realisation: “Instead of a fat, smart thirteen-year-old girl... I might be a figment of Satan’s imagination,” a character he has created for “luring souls into perdition” (234, 235). Being this the case, the positions of the Subject and the Object reverse again, as the Mediator has snatched from Maddy her own agency. The main character, however, does not falter in her believe that she can indeed fight Satan. The conclusion of *Damned* goes as follows: “Now, to prove that I exist I must kill you ([Satan]). As the child outlives the father, so must the character bury the author” (242). With this statement, she presents her strength as a non-fixed, fearless identity, and she concludes by saying: “I am thirteen and dead and a girl. I might be a touch of a sadist and a little bit jejune... but at least I am not a victim, not any longer. I hope. I hope, therefore I am. Thank God for hope” (246).

While *Damned* provided a love triangle between Hell, Maddy and Satan, *Doomed*’s triangle will have Maddy’s family in the position of the Subject to help the main character finally leave the position of the Object and find her own, original self as a Subject.



The second part starts introducing Maddy’s crisis of the self at a new level where she needs to find out who she wants to be and rebuild her self from the ashes. Echoing in her head, she listens to Satan reading his script exactly the way she is feeling: “[Maddy] realized that she didn’t exist. She’s never existed save as a puppet created to serve the supremely sexy, insanely handsome Devil...” (14). This second part goes back to the concept of the death of the body: “Death isn’t the end of peril. There are deaths beyond death. Like it or not, death isn’t the end of everything” (23). Maddy has experienced her own blooming, her own self-development through her own death. She

has managed to take a hold of a new, more powerful persona once she has given up the symbolically saturated filters that accompanied her living body. Now, however, he who says to be her author has killed her again by negating her agency: her “death beyond death”.

*Doomed* begins after Halloween, when the dead can walk the Earth again until midnight. Maddy, however, has violated her curfew, and is now wondering Earth as a ghost. This new dilemma makes her feel even more insecure about her *no*-identity:

[A] ghost can get lonesome. (...) I feel a smidgen sad and discarded, forgotten by the entire world. My heart would swell like a water balloon filled with hot tears, swell and explode if I saw my folks, saw them and had them *not* see me. Isolated, alone with only my thoughts and feelings, as a ghost with no means to communicate, I've become the ultimate outsider. (21)

Maddy's family represents the main character's reference as regards her construction of a self. If they did not see her, those who in the triangle are now located in the position of the Subject, she would not be able to abandon the position of the Object and embody that of the Subject. The importance given by Maddy to her parents as a vital anchor is striking:

On the not-infrequent occasions when sleep eluded me (...), I took great pleasure in eavesdropping on my parents' carnal panting. Their coital groaning acted upon me as the sweetest lullaby. (...) [It was] assurance of continued familial bliss. [It] guaranteed that my home wouldn't crack up as had all those of my wealthy playmates. Not that I had playmates. (31)

The main character's childish dependence on her parents shows her lack of a defined self when she was still alive. At the same time, and taking back the public versus private sphere scheme explained in the theoretical framework (Hearn, MacInnes), for Maddy the private sphere grants an idea of her own identity. This may be the case due to her parents' constant public exposure of their lives. It can be argued that being seen by everyone, Maddy felt even lonelier, as her public identity, filtered by her parents and the media, was not the one she would have wanted for herself. This could be a reminder of other previously analysed characters like Tender in *Survivor*, or Shannon and Shane in *Invisible Monsters*. However, it will be this ambiguity originated in the main character that will give her the potential to find a flexible and open identity of her own. For this to

occur, however, she needs to be seen by her parents first, creating with them an inoperative and temporary community, as explained below.

Firstly, it needs to be mentioned that though Maddy confesses in *Damned* that she loves her family, she feels she is not paid enough attention, and therefore does not feel *seen* by them. This is something that she takes as an infantilizing factor, but even more infantilizing for her is the fact that she believes that she is too loved and taken cared of: “I wanted my parents to strike me. A punch with a closed fist or a slap with an open hand, I dreamed of it. Whether the blow came from my mom or dad, those pacifist, idealist, non-violent do-gooders, it didn’t matter. (...) I yearned for the impact because I knew that nothing else would shift the parent/child balance of power as effectively” (204). The Oedipus complex resonates here again and is reminiscent as well of all the other novels analysed in this thesis. Punishment itself, however, does not appear as a satisfactory source of self-validation: “Yes, my father slapped me. And yes, I might be an uppity preteen romantic with aspirations to become a long-suffering Helen Burns, but I do know that getting walloped across my (...) mouth was a lot less fun than I’d always imagined it would be” (230). The punishment originating from the father figure craved by the main male characters in *Fight Club* or *Lullaby* results unsatisfactory for Maddy, which indicates a step forward in broadening the character’s concept of agency’s validation.

The reason why punishment takes place is also interesting and will take me to the last part of the analysis of Maddy’s family in the love triangle: the prophecy. Maddy’s pet, Tigerstripe, died not long after it was adopted. This is depressing for Maddy, since “[she] wanted something that would live to love [her] back” (208). This is strikingly contrary to her parents’ philosophy of love: “Topmost among the criteria my parents sought in any dependent relationship was impermanence. (...) Nothing offers better public relations fodder than something you can rescue and love intensively for a month and then be filmed burying at a lavish funeral” (208). Thus, when her parents let her adopt Tigerstripe, it is because they knew it was sick and its life would be short. Once again, the concept of love is related to a toxic understanding of masculinity: love is intrinsic to suffering (Horrocks 112). Devastated, Maddy rallies against her parents, for letting her love something that was going to pass away so soon (228). At this, his father answers: “No one wants to know when their child is doomed to die” (228). Maddy’s reaction is to strike his father on the cheek, receiving that slap in return. After

this scene, her father stops paying her any attention: “I’d become invisible to him. For my part, as he could no longer see me, I could no longer speak to him. Thus we ceased to exist for one another” (231). As both characters are now invisible to each other, this represents still that lack of acceptance of their own identity: Antonio’s agency is denied by his own offspring, as he is unable to expose himself to his daughter; the daughter’s source of attention and model of love now becomes sealed for her.

In *Doomed*, after Maddy’s death and her phone call to her parents from Hell, the prophecy begins to unleash. They follow the lie that has originated ‘Boorism’, thus the lie that has been following Satan’s desires, having him as the clear mediator of their future encounter. When the protagonist speaks with her parents as a ghost via the ghost hunter, her mother believes that Maddy is only a “projection of [her] guilty conscience,” provoked by Ketamine (246). Nevertheless, she reveals the secret of her birth:

“He whispered merely the idea of you’. And in doing so [Maddy] was conceived. (...) I knew I was destined to be the mother of a murdered child. All of my film roles had been a rehearsal for that night.” (...) We knew the agonies you’d suffer, so we kept you at arms length. I couldn’t bear to witness the pain you’d be forced to endure, so we used criticism to prevent ourselves from loving you too much. By fixating on your flaws we tried to save ourselves from the full brunt of your eventual murder.” (249)

What the reader finds here is an operative community taken to the extreme, where the roles of the main religious figures are played perfectly. Camille is the representation of a Virgin Mary that has been rehearsing her role as a suffering mother. The same would be applied to Antonio, in the shape of the putative father, unwilling to embrace a punishing persona, and making himself invisible (a vacuum) once that role was fulfilled. He is Demetriou’s “complicit masculinity” similar to Carl in *Lullaby*. He does not engage in hegemonic masculinity’s practices directly, but does not fight actively against them. This makes Maddy the sacrificed child, the baby Jesus Christ that needs to be loved and murdered (by her brother, Judas, Goran in this case) for the new religion to work. This is all narrated and orchestrated by Satan: “Soon Maddy would have to embrace the fact that she personified chaos, and that her reason for being was to bring misery and conflict to everyone whose life she touched!” (264). At the same time, she is contacted by God, through someone else, who wants her to be her double agent. Here, Maddy reaches the great peak of her crisis: “You can appreciate my frustration (...).

The Devil claims me as his invention. So does God. If Babette's to be believed, I'm part of some grand conspiracy launched by my so-called friends in Hell. Now my mother dismisses me as nothing but her own drug-induced vision. At what point do I become my own creation?" (247).

Right before Maddy is finally seen, literally and metaphorically by her parents, Babette makes her appearance from the dead and personates herself as Maddy, thin, beautiful and sacred, coming from Heaven to save all Madlantians (300-301). Antonio and Camille believe this mirage at first: "It's clear: My parents don't love me. My parents don't even recognize me. They love *this*, this skinny, Barbie-dolled version of me" (302). In the meantime, Maddy has occupied the body of the ghost hunter to warn her parents about the prophecy, but her attempt is met with disgust and she is hit by her own father, who cannot recognize her. In true rendition, through the voice of another, she claims: "I'm sorry I was such a self-righteous coward..." (306). This confession, the unveiling of Maddy's secret, the fragility that she actually had comes forward. This is the moment in which real communication happens with her parents, and a moment of *clinamen* ensues:

It happens, on rare occasions, that supernatural phenomena occur for which we've no explanation. Two hands come forward to cup the sides of my misshapen head. My mother's soft, perfumed palms and much-bejewelled fingers lift my ravaged face until I'm looking up, into her eyes. Her arms cradle my shattered body, creating a not-unsentimental pietà, and she asks, 'Maddy? Dewdrop, is that really you'? My father stoops to embrace the two of us. I am seen. Finally, I am recognized. My parents and I, our little family, is, in that moment, reunited. (306)

True recognition is achieved because, despite occupying a body that is not familiar to her parents, Maddy's true self has been able to make room for her own true subjectivity to be truly *seen*. Maddy has been able to reject the symbolisms attached to her own body by using a different cover, thus leaving her essence in a liminal space that cannot be worked in any way by the Symbolic. At that moment, like Goran, Maddy "simply is" (120). Here, Maddy is finally able to occupy the position of the Subject. Unfortunately, the Mediator, Satan, does not give up at that moment of familiar reunion. Then, when his efforts seem useless and feels dethroned in the reign of chaos that he has created for himself, he insists that he is Maddy's true father (328).

I would like to take a moment here to pay attention, once more, to the religious figures that form Palahniuk's scheme at this point of the novel. It can be argued that these roles are being played by faux impersonators and, in addition, the figure of the father is being substituted by Satan. God remains invisible, and the same occurs with the figure of Jesus Christ, whose role is disruptively reversed by being played by a thirteen-year-old girl.<sup>93</sup> This only reinforces the weak foundations of such a way of understanding religion, and its need for it to be revised. In this moment of turmoil, when Satan seems to be about to triumph, the ghosts of Maddy's grandparents make their appearance. It is then revealed that Pappadady was in body, but not in soul, the one inside the public toilets; he was occupied by Satan, who had tried to molest Madison. She reveals, in front of all, her ultimate secret:

"Mighty Satan", (...) "were you not jerked off by Darwin's gore-slickened observations about the Cape of Good Hope?" (...) "Were you not" (...) "in fact *castrated* by your only intimate encounter with the diminutive Maddy Spencer?" (...) "[D]oes your wiener not ache at this proof that little Madison gelded you? Did she not reject your evil advances in the not-sterile environs of a public upstate potty?" (317)

Maddy has not killed her author, but she has castrated him. The castration of the symbolic phallus of this equally symbolic figure can be argued to be its best destruction: "Here is proof that I exist as someone beyond Beelzebub's sweaty paedophile fantasy. What mere fictive character could so cripple her author?" (317). Enraged by Maddy's confession, Satan orders to kill her parents. As a result, the three of them are reunited, and Madison feels finally happy. Keeseey concludes his chapter about *Damned* and *Doomed* talking about Maddy's "salvation" after all her confessions, perhaps in the sense that the body (Maddy's body in this case) is not "antithetical to spirit. Instead, compassion for the body is proof that one has a soul" (114). As a result, the body is not seen as a cage for the true self, but a companion whose meaning can fluctuate as much as the soul, something unlimited as far as space goes, can.

Maddy comes to be the triumphing figure in the struggle of two different representations of masculinities with the defeat of both. Satan and God can be analysed as the embodiment of these two types of toxic masculinities: the one represented by

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<sup>93</sup> In fact, to call her parents' attention, there is one point in the novel when Maddy pretends that she is in a relationship with Jesus Christ.

God is the archaic model of hegemonic masculinity, the ideal to which none of the male characters in the works analysed here are capable to personify. It is the type of masculinity defined by the paternal vacuum (Nancy & Clift: 121-122), the origins of the wound provoked by father absence, which prevents men from feeling like men (Bly in Horrocks 78). Satan can be said to represent the angry type of masculinity which demands constantly his father's attention and punishment, to sense his very much wanted manhood. He is the "hysterically phallic", male anxiousness to be a man personified (Dyer 275). He is the radical type of masculinity also represented by Tyler in *Fight Club*, or Oyster in *Lullaby*, in which phallic power projected in the male body remains as nucleus of the self's psyche. Maddy denies both of them, the first by rejecting His offered attention in absence, the second by literally castrating him. The main character's manner of defeating both of these types of masculinities shows their essential core. God's representation of masculinity is ideal, invisible, unattainable; Satan's is hyperbolic and violent, and highly dependent on his male body (thus the importance given to his castration, felt as loss of power).

After the protagonist's victory in the battle against Satan, she decides to take one more step forward to prove herself independent and unafraid: "I don't fancy returning to Hell and being humiliated. Nor do I hanker to enforce God's pronouncements banning birth control and gay marriage. Henceforth I will prove my own existence. I will prove that I steer my own destiny" (327). With such a resolution, Maddy takes with her the ghost of Tigerstripe and leaves everyone behind. While running away, she states in her mind:

I'm Persephone reinvented, determined to be more than a daughter or a wife. Nor will I settle for some celestial joint-custody agreement, shuttling back and forth between residences in Heaven and Hell the way I continually jetted between Manila and Milan and Milwaukee. My new goal is the reunion of all opposites. I will strive to reconcile Satan and God. In doing so, by resolving this core conflict, I will resolve all conflict. There will be no separation between perdition and paradise. As all of creation founders around me, only my purring kitty, gathered snug in my arms, only Tigerstripe trusts that I know where I'm bound. (329)

Maddy stands in a symbolic ambiguity that in the end breaks all kinds of symbolism. Among all the paths that she is offered, she decides to take her own, in spite of all the uncertainty. As a ghost, bodily symbolism has also lost meaning, and religious figures that dominated her reality have ceased to have any impact on her path, including her

own parents. She also rejects the meaning of her sexuality as a girl, not-yet a woman, opting for not naming that which may await her in the future, wondering around Earth on her own. Perhaps in this manner, existing but intangible, she truly represents not only both worlds, Heaven and Hell, but also any shade in the middle. By not deciding on any of the options available, she remains free and open to any new opportunity she may find. She is indeed “an escaped slave in a blazing world” (328). Madison began being a pariah, and Palahniuk ends her story reinforcing this role. She was a marginal character inside her own family and the community that surrounded her, and the prophecy further expands her position as a loner. The last quote analysed, however, makes of her a proud pariah, in between femininity and masculinity, in a state that refuses to hold onto a name, the same gap that both separates and unites “perdition and paradise”.

To conclude this last chapter, it seems safe to claim that *Damned* and *Doomed* culminate these revision of Palahniuk’s works as they achieve to disconnect masculinity and maleness, something encouraged by MacInnes (*The End of Masculinity* 78, 86). Masculinity does not constantly appear epitomised by male characters who feel neglected by absent father figures or wounded by their inability to become men on their own. Masculinity is felt as a virus that has abandoned the male body and expands together with capitalist ideas. It presents itself as the assertion of power and imposition on others, and does not in reality cater for sexual or gender representations.



## CONCLUSIONS

After this journey through Chuck Palahniuk's fiction with a special focus on community theory (**Chapter 1**) and critical studies of men and masculinities (**Chapter 2**), we can argue that the writer follows a progress that begins with *Fight Club* and finishes in *Doomed*, where the characters' relationship with death becomes stronger to break with non-valid communal practices and with gender stereotypes (mainly present in family figures). In his first novels, especially those analysed in Chapters 3 and 4, masculine identities are explored at a more individual level, in which the characters that find themselves at the core do not feel part of their respective communities. However, in Chapters 5 and 6, the novels analysed show an examination of gendered identities at a greater scale, with toxic masculinities leaving the male protagonists' bodies and affecting other characters and their environment, inside the communities proposed. Thus, in the eight novels by this author that have been analysed, I expound a progress in which the same elements have progressively given a gripping viewpoint that proved both innovative and ground-breaking as regards gendered identities and the male body inside the American community proposed by Palahniuk in his fiction.

In **Chapter 3**, *Fight Club* and *Survivor* are two novels in Palahniuk's corpus that, by following reversed processes, reach the same concluding remarks. The United States is presented as a community in which human relationships are based on consumption and the possession of goods, which help the country look powerful but makes its inhabitants miserable. By posing both narrators in opposite communal ensembles, Palahniuk demonstrates the inability in both cases of providing the subject with an enriching identity inside the American community, and how they attempt to go back to old communitarian schemes, which proves ineffective altogether. In both cases, masculinity governs the identity of the protagonists, who represent extreme versions of

non-hegemonic masculinities inside their own ensembles. By locating both characters on the other end of the line and making them adopt extreme versions of the hegemonic masculine identities available by the system, masculinity proves its changing and erratic nature. It is also interesting to see how the focus of the protagonists' trauma as regards their insecurity as men changes from the "father wound" in *Fight Club* to the suffering mother figure in *Survivor*, an ill view of the parental figure which is perpetuated but at the same time interrupted by the union that later occurs between the protagonists.

In addition, both Tyler Durden's (and therefore, the nameless protagonist) and Tender Branson's transformations into communal leaders, though in different contexts, show an understanding of their masculinities by those who follow them as toxic. In addition, the concept of the "American man" is unnatural and makes the men who fall in its thrall completely vulnerable. The connection between a successful masculine identity with violence and sex is also made clear in both stories, in a way in which, in the end, only those two elements are actually of importance when building their psyche in this community. It is shown, however, that their attachment to these traits is secretly a way of approaching a self-destructive nature that will allow them to escape symbolism. It is also seen that Durden's and Tender's new identities as mass leaders are as fictional as the basis on which the American community is built, thus proving how this type of masculinity and this type of communal understanding of "being together" feed off each other.

By contrast, the female protagonists demonstrate a strong sense of identity and self-knowledge, posing Marla and Fertility as strong characters who, precisely due to the system not providing them with a complete sense of belonging, avoid communal immanence and remain *un-signified*. As fraternal unions do not affect them and the gendered dichotomy explained above that affects women does not alter their subjectivity, they help find ruptures to escape operative essentialism. Their bodies, connected to death as completely distanced from the ideal female body, meet in the opposite position the "super masculine bodily representation" taken to an extreme, showing the same decadence in those men who try to get closer to this ideal. Because their decaying bodies are not signified, death is also unworked, and this shows the true meaning of community: wanting and needing one another in total exposure between the two couples. In both cases exposure is produced with the help of a third party, the

mediator, who represents a sacrifice that cannot avoid its deadly destiny due to its self-destructive nature.

**Chapter 4** has provided an analysis of *Invisible Monsters* and *Choke* as regards the toxic relationship that exists between the American (operative) community and family bonds. In both cases, the main characters' stories (Shannon and Victor) are told in a non-orderly fashion, which helps the very process of deconstruction that has allowed to explain both characters' discovery of their own self. This chapter has focused on the toxic relationship which exists between parenthood and the American state. The father figure, with its absolute otherness, mirrors a God-like figure that is also projected by America as a state. The American community lives up to a scheme in which agency, and a wholesome understanding of the self, is only attained when becoming a progenitor, reproducing the religious symbolism projected by God, a father figure, and His subjects.

In these circumstances, it is precisely the belonging to non-normative and non-hegemonic conceptualizations of the self in community that allows Shannon and Victor to start cracking community's limits. The characters' interest in death is what gives them such disruptive potential. Both understand it as something that has only symbolic value when witnessed by the other(s), when with it one acquires other(s)' attention, in the same way God's subjects are obsessed with the figure of God. However, at the same time, since their bodies are also partly mutilated in the process, they also enter a liminal space that allows them to surpass the limit of the *symbolic* and the *semiotic* (using Kristeva's terminology), without belonging completely to either of those. Shannon's and Victor's bodies gain an even stronger symbolic saturation (one for hiding it beneath a mysterious veil, the other for relying exclusively on it in sexual encounters).

This chapter has also explored the relationship that exists in these two novels between the gendered understanding of the self and family bonds. The relationship between the protagonists and their parents is characterized by extreme fusion. In *Invisible Monsters*, Shannon wanted her brother dead so that she could have her parents' undivided attention, which denotes a desire to commune with them completely. In *Choke*, Victor's extreme union with his mother, based on a smothering and infantilising relationship, makes him regard women through the same lenses. In both cases, such relationships with their parents make them filter their own self exclusively

through their bodies, which they abuse and mistreat in order to make themselves noticed, and loved. On the other side of the coin, however, such asphyxiating bonding makes them inadvertently desire their own freedom.

At the same time, parenthood has also been analysed in connection to religious significations. The God figure is present throughout both stories as a communal reminder. God is related to parenthood several times in both stories, once again reinforcing the aforementioned fact that in order to enjoy “God’s subjectivity” one needs to become a parent. In an attempt to do so, both main characters try to take hold of the traits belonging to the “absolute other”, in an attempt to explore their own selves. Though at the beginning this step forward is encouraged by an external factor (Brandy Alexander and Ida Mancini respectively as mediators), it will mark the beginning of their approach to an inoperative encounter.

Once all these cards are on the table, inoperative possibilities start to materialise. Death’s power to create liminal spaces for the characters and their drive towards Kristeva’s abject allow mediators to act as semiotic channels for the characters that occupy the object and subject positions to build their *clinamen*. Once again, it is a triangular relationship between the characters that allows such encounter. In the end, and as was also the case in Chapter 1, *clinamen* reaches its climax when the mediator’s death (Brandy and Ida) arrives. After such exposure, which of course can only be temporary, a new beginning out of nothingness is built: Victor stands with Dr. Paige watching a mountain of rocks that never shaped into anything known; Shannon gives away her identity documents and enters now an invisibility only provided by American bureaucracy, giving her own identity to Brandy, who disappears on paper. It could be concluded that their abuse of (bodily and gendered) symbols has achieved symbolic *nothingness*: as if these symbols had been worn out. Indeed, it is such conclusion what gives this chapter its name.

Palahniuk seems to keep building up this quest towards nothingness through his characters’ self destruction, and the process continues in **Chapter 5**. *Lullaby* and *Diary* present a failed father, Carl Streater, and a failed mother, Misty, who self-abuse their bodies. As a failed father, Carl punishes himself, as no other hierarchically higher figure, that of God, can do it for himself. His redeeming practice, which consists of destroying miniature houses that he has built in the intimacy of his home, points at a

toxic understanding of masculinity and fatherhood, as only violence seems to allow some sort of revision of his unknown self. *Diary's* mother, Misty, represents a female character who hurts herself through alcoholism which, further from getting her closer to her decaying body in order to properly understand it, helps distance herself from it. Apart from indicating a poor understanding of her gendered self, her dependence on her comatose husband is also indicative of the effect that her husband Peter's gendered persona has on her. In addition, the "house" as a metaphor of the "private self" has been examined, the limit of the private and public spheres, where secrets can be discovered and intimacy can bloom into the characters' truer self. While Chapter 2 gave the reader the outcry of the forsaken Jesus Christ, here sons and daughters have actually been sacrificed, and God himself, represented by the paternal figures of these stories, has been abandoned by His own subjects. It mirrors America's loss of faith, of fear, of Bataille's ecstasy. Thus, Palahniuk shows here once again the tremendous influence that these religious figures have on the male psyche, and of course, in community.

The main male characters of *Lullaby* and *Diary*, Carl and Peter, are part of a non-hegemonic type of masculinity and they are both victims of their own community's imposition of these gendered roles. However, there is one fundamental difference between Carl and Peter: the latter accepts much earlier his non-normative sexual orientation and tries to escape, although in the end his braveness has a price to pay. This is one of the reasons why Peter does occupy the position of the mediator, while Carl can only hope to gain a sense of a private self and become a subject on his own. It can be argued that precisely because Peter was perfectly familiar with his non-hegemonic sexual desires he is granted a much more open and clearer view of his private self. Streater will only achieve such understanding of his self with the inoperative relationship that he will finally form with Helen, a strong leader who knows her inner desires well and, as a result, has a clear understanding of her private persona. This union happens with the aid of Oyster and Mona, the fake son and daughter who channel his and Helen's relationship by providing, like Tyler Durden, a hyper masculine persona, thus showing Carl's self-destructive nature in an extreme way.

Mona, like Marla or Fertility, escapes consciously from American stereotypes. Though she and Oyster end up becoming their own symbolically saturated cliché, it is their playing the role of "what could have been" with the main characters' sons and daughters what paves their path towards redemption. When it comes to Misty, the way

in which she discovers her husband's secret with the messages on the walls and her diary leads her to communicate her own message (her self), once Peter's was also in the open. At the same time, Misty and Peter's relationship was never operative, as their union meant Misty's introduction into the Waytansea Island's community but her husband, the channel, was never an active advocate of the island's legend.

Death is again the main axis around which the development of the characters is produced. In this case, death becomes power, be it a spell or the creative force of some paintings. The characters' relationship through death, once again, helps them come closer to that liminality that only deadly experiences can provide. Their bodies become so extremely abused, especially in Misty's case, that they are *unworkable*, totally misunderstood by the symbolism available in their respective communities. Thus, their inoperative encounter occurs once this liminality, which comes from the nothingness that accompanies the abject, obliges the characters to open themselves completely to their own private truth, which may remain secret, but not for themselves. Again, the figure of a strong hyper symbolic mediator (Mona and Oyster and Peter and the islanders) is paramount for this process to reach completion.

Finally, **Chapter 6** closes this analysis with *Damned* and *Doomed*. The main character is a thirteen-year-old girl, Maddy, who dies before becoming an adult according to the changes which the body is supposed to experiment in order to become a grown-up in community. In this sense, Maddy gathers all communitarian significations of the American community by being its antithesis. While alive, she paints a picture of American society community through her parents' obsessive consumption in the distance, "consumption in absentia". Not only is there excessive consumerism, but this consumerism is produced in the distance, which means that the body is not a participant of that consumption anymore. It shows, therefore, a community that annuls itself. If the American communal experience is based on consumerism, but this consumerism is not placed on the body of that who consumes, it suppresses its very basis. In addition, the American obsession with growth mirrors that of a hysterical hegemonic masculinity, demonstrating in these novels that masculinity has stopped being only a matter of male bodies and masculine gendered identities.

In *Damned*, there is a focus on Maddy's self once her body has been abandoned and, as such, cannot be a source to define that identity. Once dead, Maddy's dead-self

represents a liminal state that does not allow her to commune completely with the American community which she has left behind to enter Hell, due to the fact that her self remains un-gendered, her body unfiltered. The community of Hell imitates that of Earth, further placing the American setting as a “zombieland”. The difference between Earth and Hell is that its inhabitants’ dark desires are unknown but presupposed, understood as a truth. In this sense, there is an almost obliged openness towards the true self.

*Doomed* keeps focusing on Maddy’s identity, but this time such persona is projected in the American community and its understanding of death. The story goes from the individual to the communal, having death always as a governing force. Such is the case because of the media-like persona that the protagonist has embodied, imposed by her parents while alive. When dead, she is also later dominated by Satan, similarly to Tender’s transformation into a messiah. Here, the main character’s identity goes back to that given by the sacrificial type of persona represented by the religious figure of Jesus Christ, thus becoming hyperbolic and symbolically saturated by the community of the alive and the dead.

In this chapter, Palahniuk takes a step further, because death is no longer a tool to help the character approach the abject. Death is a rite of passage that has already taken place, and the post-reality he offers is filtered by the religious symbolism that is mysteriously hidden for those alive, but made tangible for those who are dead. By making them so, they are easily deconstructed and placed in the open. At the same time, death is unworked by Maddy when she convinces terminally ill people to end their suffering, and makes them confront it in a direct way. In addition, masculinity is deformed and distorted through three different channels: Maddy’s father, who attempts to represent a non-hegemonic type of masculinity with his hippie, pro-earth, open minded discourse, but falls victim of his own symbolic bodily identity as a man; Goran, who embodies a ruthless, violent man in the body of an abused child; and Satan, whose power is taken to its minimum expression when castrated by the protagonist, even if that castration takes place in a body that does not belong to him. Moreover, Madison’s character demonstrates how the quest towards agency in the American social milieu proposed by Palahniuk forces the self to crave for a masculine performance, as hegemonic masculinity and its controlling, competitive nature is the only tool available by the system to gain power. At the same time, Maddy’s very ignorance of sexuality in

practical terms gives her as well the potential to break with the symbolic weight that the body and its organs have, which means that her female, underdeveloped body does not condition her own identity formation. In addition, God, the other male character who represents love and perfection, remains once more invisible. While there was a brief contact between the main character in *Fight Club* with God in which He projects an individualistic entity, this last work only mentions His existence, and His words never leave His own mouth. It points out again at the unavowable figure that rules Americans' understanding of being together and of masculinity, an understanding which remains, again, inconclusive, and impossible to actually follow. It makes sense then that the angry masculinity offered by the figure of Satan, which mirrors that projected by Tyler and Oyster, would make an appearance to fight the old masculine values embodied by the God father figure. In the end, however, both gendered identities are rejected by the main character.

Taking a more holistic view at the analysis provided in all chapters of this thesis, the unworking of *death* is undoubtedly the engine that provides all characters' rupture into an inoperative understanding of the self. Indeed, death represents the limit of the subject; when death is surpassed the individual disappears, and with them, community. Palahniuk offers reinventing community by destroying it, by using his characters' death drive as a tool. It is interesting to observe in this sense, for example, the different approaches in male and female characters. It has been demonstrated that while the female protagonists approached death in an attempt to expand their own creativity (Misty and Marla), their ambition (Fertility, Helen, or Dr. Paige) or just a change in their already rounded identities (Shannon), the male characters studied in these novels had the need to approach death to make contact with their unknown subjectivities. Of course, being the aforementioned women the ones that approached death from the position of the Subject, the inoperative connection that arises is completely justified. When it comes to the usage of death itself as a defining tool for the subject, the climax comes with Maddy in the last two novels examined. It can be argued that Palahniuk deconstructs its limiting power by taking it as a given, something that has to happen and *has* happened. The body is no longer abused, but it is left behind completely, this time not temporarily, but eternally, in the fictional space created for the author's protagonist. It provides reassurance, the final deconstruction of the symbolic body, with its gendered symbolism, and a scenario filled with the remains of what used to be there and has been

recently destroyed and deformed. Furthermore, most of the female characters have shown signs of Schipper's "pariah femininity" in their fluctuation between masculine and feminine performance, in a final result that epitomizes the very concept's paradoxical reality, and which helps problematize the question of masculinities in the other characters.

The family is also revised and dismantled, in a process in which it gathers a building importance. The process begins with *Fight Club*, where the absent father figure is given great salience, together with *Survivor*, where the father in the Creedish community is a mere "title", and not so much a guiding identity for the subject's development. In *Choke* the missing father figure is also highlighted, but the toxic strength of motherhood eclipses such lack. *Invisible Monsters* operates on the family as well, posing it as the only source available to construct the subject's agency, the right of the creator as a progenitor. The family's definite power of definition when it comes to the subject arrives with *Lullaby* and *Diary*, where these roles show their strength from a defeated position. *Damned* and *Doomed* show this failure's climax as epitomized by its main adolescent protagonist. Palahniuk shows the great debate of parenthood from a toxic masculine perspective: either completely absent, or too aggressively present. Such understanding of family union inside the private sphere may show a paternal (and therefore masculine) understanding of the institution of the family in which fear of dissolution pushes the characters to be too involved or completely disappeared. In any case, both positions are still clearly defined by the two positions available in the spectrum: the engulfing nature of motherhood, and the nothingness expressed by fatherhood. Palahniuk's extreme version of these two positions is what ultimately helps breaking the spectrum itself, with the characters ending up rejecting these roles as a given.

In relation to this, it is also interesting to notice how this scenario related to the family provides an intriguing examination of the figures of the mediator and those who perform the role of the messiah, the sacrificed, the unwilling Jesus Christ. In all Palahniuk's novels examined, the mediators are well-rounded characters with clear identities, which in most cases verge on hyperbolic and symbolic over-saturation. They represent the extreme that needs to be built up to the limit and then destroyed. Normally, this extreme comes with gendered practices that become violent against the subject and end up killing or completely mutilating the body. However, these characters

become necessary for the “scapegoats” to feel the extreme experiences they needed to open their own self through simulation. The mediator helps simulating the characters’ implosion. At the same time it has been demonstrated that, one way or another, the mediator must die for the protagonist to experience an inoperative encounter. This may entail yet another sign that expresses the fact that, in the American community, the role of the religious mediator (God) is out of proportion for it to have a constructive effect to form community.

Finally, American masculinity has been deconstructed in several ways. First, its relationship with religious figures which cannot really operate in the subject show their actual fragility. At the same time, the nature of these figures (mainly God and Jesus Christ) is not understandable today as they advocate for an understanding of life, and specially death, which is self-destructive for the individual. The fact that masculinity needs to also be found and demonstrated through external practices, not to mention the tremendous importance given to the paternal vacuum, shows that the masculine psyche is always searching for its own identity outside itself, rejecting its own private exploration. In addition, it disregards the male body, as it is obsessed with its control and the execution of violence against it, in Palahniuk’s works. This also indicates that possessing the phallus is not enough to execute masculinity satisfactorily. Thus, by making his characters “do what they most fear”, “rebellling against themselves” or seeking for “the opposite of a miracle”, they manage to move away from this toxic masculinity, as first, they let themselves lose control of their own bodies. This is normally channelled through the mediators, who help them de-filter their psyches in near death experiences, where the control over the body is minimally lost (or death itself).

Masculinity is also demonstrated to be a toxic role that limits the male psyche inside the community, but also other non-male characters in the stories analysed. Firstly, the crisis at the core of American masculinity can be found in the figures of the willing or unwilling messiahs that appear in most of the works examined. Tyler, Tender, Victor, Oyster, Misty, and Maddy<sup>94</sup> show the “makeover” that religious and gendered significations need so that old values can maintain their hegemonic position. These new

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<sup>94</sup> As explained in Chapter 2, in *Invisible Monsters* Shannon would represent a good example of a sacrifice for the other (her brother) but not at a communitarian level in the same way the other “scapegoats” do.

messiahs are extreme and self-destructive, and appear in an individualistic social context where both a communitarian and a patriarchal crisis go hand in hand. It has been mentioned that these figures present an alternative towards re-masculinization through self-destruction, assuming a vulnerable position (in Harrold's words, which could help them maintain the supremacy of operative values. Thus, these messiahs show community's crisis at these different levels, and its struggle reassure the old basis that still sustains it. As the analysis advances and works like *Fight Club*, *Survivor* and *Choke* are left behind, the same toxicity present in extreme versions of masculinity can be observed in the communitarian obsession with growth and progress which encapsulates America, culminating specially in *Doomed* and *Damned*. The country itself is the hyper masculine ticking bomb which has come to a halt in its progressive nature and is only capable of reflecting upon itself, unable to move forward. Instead of finding different approaches, the same symbols are being used, only becoming overwhelming and hysterical for the subject. Men's obsession with their masculinity, in sum, mirrors America's obsession with itself. This means, inevitably, that masculinity does not belong to the masculine body, nor the penis as a symbolic locus of power, and is extrapolated to the figure of the father-state. As Brod explains, capitalism needs masculinity for the system to work, and the change must commence in men themselves rebelling against this scheme. Masculinity, as already mentioned elsewhere, has become a virus which rapidly spreads in a context in which subjects, setting aside sexual or gender significations, feel obliged to find their agency through over-performance in front of the others. Attention is essential and very much wanted by all Palahniuk's characters, meaning that their public persona (that seen by the others) is over-emphasized and their private self is always underdeveloped. It is only when the characters understand that "intimacy is power," in Horrock's words (30).

The results obtained have proved, I argue, very close to the initial hypotheses that I had when I first started this process. Indeed, all eight Palahniuk's novels analysed include male protagonists who experience their masculine self in a toxic way due to the communitarian setting in which they are placed, where individualism governs the American milieu, fed by capitalism. However, as was argued in the last chapter, an understanding of masculinity is experienced externally by a female character, who also makes use of practices traditionally taken as masculine for her own identity. This distances slightly from my initial conjectures, but it reinforces further one of the main

goals of the thesis, which was to demonstrate the actual unfixity of masculinity. Death proves to be the main axis of all the communities described in each work. As death is the main annulling element of the traditional American community due to its religious symbolism, this helps seeing the limits of these communities and their rupture. At the same time, violence and the body are closely related to this review of death, which also questions the gendered self of the characters at the same time as these operative communities are contested and finally destroyed. In this sense, violence is found to happen mainly against the very self of the protagonists, which points out at self-destruction as a way to find real openness. I also have found the figure of the mediator in each novel to be extremely useful, together with the grotesque female characters that demonstrate to have a better understanding of their own gendered self, as they are not signified in the same way in the American community. Finally, it is also shown how America's communal demise is deeply connected to a toxic understanding of the masculine self, the main representative of traditional social formations based on fraternal union, further highlighting the fact that traditional masculinities affect negatively the American community and that they should be discarded in favour of other types of more open gender identities. At the same time, the women in the novels and non-hegemonic masculinities have a greater potential of giving communities a fresh start due to the marginal positions which they have been obliged to take.

The results obtained in this literary analysis leave room for future research on several academic paths. Firstly, the concept of female masculinity has been useful to problematize masculinities, but the concept escapes the scope of this thesis. A more detailed and profound analysis of this concept would prove useful to expand the field of gender studies. At the same time, the theoretical framework of this thesis could be applied as well to the rest of the novels by Chuck Palahniuk that have not been examined in this work. All of Palahniuk's novels are complex and contain a wide variety of elements that can be inspected extensively. It would be interesting, for example, to analyse marginalized masculinities in *Rant* (2007) or *Pygmy* (2009), or the extreme effects of radical American capitalism on sexual identity in novels like *Snuff* (2008) or *Beautiful You* (2014). Finally, Palahniuk's novels could also shed more light on the issue of femininity as performed by both male and female characters. Since the author has been capable of showing masculinity's waving nature, one could expect that the sexual/gender spectrum fluctuates equally from the other side.

In sum, Chuck Palahniuk shows that community must be destructed to be rebuilt again. But for this to happen, masculinity must be demolished first. He shows this destruction by simulating the symbolic saturation of his male characters, and its effect on the female ones as well. It is when taking these characters to the extreme with deadly experiences that their dominating sense of control alleviates their psyche and they can find openness with other characters whose connection with death is not a need to lose control, but a natural connection which makes them confront it in a direct way. The main characters in each novel are involved in inoperative encounters that help them renew “one another’s spacing for ever” (Nancy, *Corpus* 19). Importantly, the theoretical framework of this thesis mentions three types of male violence, but all three converge in one single type, which is the one most readily shown in these works: men’s violence against themselves as a desperate way to get in touch with their identities. Self-destruction is, of course, not the answer, but the author provides the perfect fictional scenarios to understand how gendered stereotypes asphyxiate the subject and how, when having a strong connection with their inner psyche, a healthier relationship can be given between two or more people, without letting their selves being dissolved by the other.



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