

Flannery O'Connor's Redemptive Violence in Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* and *Invisible  
Monsters*

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Underground fight clubs, transsexuals, shotguns: these are the images that come to mind when one thinks of Chuck Palahniuk's fiction—for many critics and readers, merely the stuff of pulp fiction. However, many of Palahniuk's novels use violence to critique American culture while offering hope for the redemption of his characters and society as a whole. Thus, the violence in his works serves a purpose beyond mere shock value. The function of Palahniuk's violence, I argue, reflects the poetics of Flannery O'Connor. Her works contain culturally-driven narratives with strange and grotesque circumstances that lead her characters to moments of redemption, and she explains these elements of her poetics in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose* (1961). O'Connor's essays and speeches describe how she views literature and good writing, and my thesis explores to what lengths Palahniuk's literary methodology follows her framework, specifically in regards to the element of violent redemption present in his first two novels, *Fight Club* (1996) and *Invisible Monsters* (1999).<sup>1</sup>

### **Palahniuk's Misunderstood Violence**

Palahniuk's critics have not always understood or accepted the violent content in his works. The first novel he wrote was *Invisible Monsters*, publishers rejected multiple times for its dark content; however, Palahniuk responded by writing *Fight Club* to be even darker, and, ironically, it was published first (Widmyer, "The 'Invisible Monsters Remix'"). Though Palahniuk achieved cult status when David Fincher adapted *Fight Club* to film in 1999 (Widmyer, "Strange but True"), he still receives mixed reviews regarding the violent nature of his literature. Jonathan Dee refers to Palahniuk's fiction as "cheap, high school nihilism"

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this project, I will be consulting *Invisible Monsters: Remix* (2012), as it complies with Palahniuk's original vision for the novel (*Invisible Monsters: Remix* vi) ; however, for the sake of brevity, I will be referring to the novel simply as *Invisible Monsters* because most of the current scholarship on this work uses the title and (apart from the order of the chapters and a few additional scenes that do not depart from the overall themes of the original work) the content of the work is consistent with the first edition published in 1999.

(“Ready-Made Rebellion”), and Tom Shone’s derisive *New York Times* review comments, “Palahniuk’s work feels raw but insular, angry but self-coddling, like a teenager’s moods. . . . The stories all follow much the same course. Palahniuk digs up some disgusting factoid; he devises a narrator to deliver the disgusting factoid; and then sits back to watch him or her deliver it. End of story” (“‘Haunted’: Gore Values”). Though Shone is specifically reviewing Palahniuk’s *Haunted* (2005), he contextualizes his review in regards to Palahniuk’s entire body of work. Shone concludes, “There aren’t many requirements for the job of novelist -- but a certain base level of curiosity about the world and empathy for the people in it don’t hurt” (*Ibid*). Both Dee and Shone, among other negative critics of Palahniuk’s work, focus on the violent elements in his fiction on a surface level and assume that this content exists purely to disturb his readers.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> These two book reviews are representative of the negative popular opinion regarding the violence in Palahniuk’s works since the beginning of his writing career. I have consulted multiple journal articles that view his works in a more positive light; however, these articles do not exist in opposition to the claims of my thesis because they do not necessarily place a value judgment on Palahniuk’s violent content.

For example, many of the articles written about *Fight Club* focus on Marxist critiques of the novel, but their views have been represented in my thesis by articles from the essay collections I have consulted, such as James Dolph’s “Behind the Queens’ Veils: Power Versus Powerlessness in C.S. Lewis’s *Till We Have Faces* and Palahniuk’s *Invisible Monsters*” and Ron Riecki’s “Brandy, Shannon, Tender, and the Middle Finger: Althusser and Foucault in Palahniuk’s Early Novels,” among others. Many of the other journal articles available on *Fight Club* take different focal points, arguing that Palahniuk either does or does not present a masculine ideal in the novel (“‘A Generation of Men without History’: *Fight Club*, Masculinity, and the Historical Symptom” by Kirster Friday or “‘Mr. Xerox,’ the Domestic Terrorist, and the Victim-Citizen: Masculine and National Anxiety in *Fight Club* and Anti-Terror Law by Ruth Quiney) or focus on a psychoanalytic reading of the text that discusses the continued references to absentee fathers (“*Fight Club* and the Dangers of Oedipal Obsession” by Paul Kennet). Finally, many of the other articles primarily discuss the 1999 film version of the novel, such as Kyle Bishop’s “Artistic Schizophrenia: How *Fight Club*’s Message is Subverted by Its Own Nature,” which argues that the film’s Hollywood blockbuster status precludes a valid critique of capitalism. However, articles in the same vein as Bishop’s primarily discuss the film as its own text, and Fincher’s version of *Fight Club* has enough different plot points that it would not be appropriate for me to use most of the articles that analyze the film in isolation, particularly those that focus on cinema as a storytelling form.

In regards to *Invisible Monsters*, Palahniuk’s third published novel is a lesser known work. His cult status, which I mentioned briefly in this chapter, leads to many fans and readers of his other novels, but, because *Fight Club* is his most famous work (almost exclusively due to the film adaptation’s success), it is also the novel that has been most discussed in a scholarly context. The articles I have used in this thesis concerning *Invisible Monsters* are from three essay collections about Palahniuk’s works (*Sacred and Immoral: On the Writings of Chuck Palahniuk*, *Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem*, and *Chuck Palahniuk: Fight Club, Invisible Monsters, Choke*) and are representative of some of the only critical analysis of *Invisible Monsters*. These articles primarily discuss gender identity, Shannon’s agency, and nihilism. There have been a few other scholarly articles published about *Invisible Monsters* that diverge from these themes, but, as I mentioned with *Fight Club*’s critical representation, these articles do not make a value judgment concerning the violence in the text, and, thus, would not be appropriate to consult for the scope of my argument.

Cynthia Kuhn and Lance Rubin, in the introduction to their collection *Reading Chuck Palahniuk: American Monsters and Literary Mayhem*, discuss the reasoning behind the negative critiques of Palahniuk's works: "This manner of complaint stems from the perception that Palahniuk horrifies without displaying the supposed literary seriousness of authors like Flannery O'Connor or J.G. Ballard, who also conspicuously employ the violent or gruesome. Generally speaking, opponents seem to interpret his popularity as a lurid testimony to the dumbing-down of American readers" (3). The negative critical voices that Kuhn and Rubin describe result from a misreading of Palahniuk's work and a misunderstanding of his focus. Rather than advocating nihilism, Palahniuk uses the violence in his works as a device that brings his characters into connection with other human beings. In his collection of personal essays, *Stranger than Fiction*, Palahniuk explains that all his novels are about "lonely people looking for ways to connect with one another" (xv). For example, *Invisible Monsters'* protagonist, Shannon McFarland, is a model who decides to shoot herself in the face in order to rid herself of her beauty and escape her modeling career, and Palahniuk uses this action as a catalyst for her personal growth by reuniting her with her presumed-dead brother, Shane. Shannon's former profession makes her feel isolated from others, and—until she and Shane come together at the end of the novel—she only cares about herself as a result of this isolation. Though Shannon's decision to shoot herself in the face does not appear to be objectively good, it creates a path for her to reunite with Shane that she would not have experienced otherwise; thus, the violence in this novel is not meaningless because it serves a redemptive purpose in the narrative.

Additionally, Palahniuk envisions himself as more of a romantic than a nihilist. In an interview with *AlterNet*, he states, "My novels are all romantic comedies. But they're just romantic comedies that are done with very dysfunctional, dark characters" (Straus). Though self-professed romantic he may be, Palahniuk's works are still saturated with violent circumstances

and strange characters who shoot themselves in the face, drug their friends, and undergo gender reassignment surgery—and that is just in one novel. Palahniuk’s critics may not praise the strange content of his novels, but the graphic and violent nature of his writing has a purpose: to bring his characters into community in a society that begets isolation.

*The Impetus of Palahniuk’s Violence*

Palahniuk’s violent content owes something to his creative writing training as a student of Tom Spanbauer, the founder of the Dangerous Writing method. Spanbauer desires writers “to reach into the painful, slimy cognitive chasm, pull out the most frightening morsels, and express them in [a] clear, minimalistic style” (“Chuck Palahniuk in Conversation”). One of Spanbauer’s students, Rachel Smith, comments that Spanbauer encourages his students “[t]o write with honesty. To write your truth,” but that his unique style is often met with opposition: “I’ve encountered many people who don’t enjoy this style: the minimalistic, raw, tell-it-how-it-is, on the body, repetitional [sic] writing. The fragmented and graphic writing. The kind that doesn’t use adverbs and brings forth uncomfortable issues we have a hard time in our culture discussing in the flesh let alone on the page” (“I Was Pond Scum”). This raw, uncomfortable writing produces the kinds of works that Palahniuk has published, where violent content is an exercise in honest portrayal of the human condition.

In effort to honestly portray his characters’ flaws, Palahniuk sees his fiction as a way to write his truth in an almost cathartic fashion, both for himself and his characters. He echoes sentiments similar to Smith when he states, “Stories are how human beings digest their lives: by making events into something we can repeat and control, telling them until they’re exhausted. Until they no longer get a laugh or a gasp or a teary eye” (“A Church of Stories”). In this manner, Palahniuk’s fiction draws on the violence and suffering of real human life (and often, his life), presented in a straightforward fashion. His fiction is not written for the purposes of

shock-and-awe, but to redeem the characters and, potentially, the society he sees as broken. For example, Palahniuk situates the redemptive vision in his works as “the opposite of the American Dream” (*STF xv*), and the redemption present in Palahniuk’s fiction is not only for his characters, but society as a whole. This anti-American Dream vision is most clearly expressed in *Fight Club*, where the narrator is a victim of commodity fetishism and soon realizes that the mass accumulation of home décor cannot bring personal satisfaction (43). The true purpose of his life, the narrator realizes, is to learn to love another person, specifically Marla Singer (198). Palahniuk seeks to deliver his characters from their unfulfilled lives by affording them opportunities to have meaningful relationships with one another, and he also provides a social commentary on the parts of the world his readers need to be delivered from.

### **Defining Redemption**

In order to understand the importance of redemption in Palahniuk’s works, the word must be defined. Though O’Connor provides a useful framework for redemptive violence in *Mystery and Manners* (which will be discussed in Chapter Two), it is essential to understand how a definition of redemption as a whole impacts both O’Connor’s and Palahniuk’s writing. For the purposes of this project, I will discuss redemption in terms its salvific, costly, and transformative power. By exploring these three facets of the word, it will be clear that the narratives of *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters* both have protagonists who are offered salvation and the ability to be transformed by violent means, and a definition of redemption will aid in the discovery of to what lengths the violence in their narratives is connected to the idea of redemption in accordance with O’Connor’s poetics.

#### *Salvation*

The first definition of redemption in *The Oxford English Dictionary* reads: “The action of saving or being saved from sin, error, or evil” (n. pag.). Etymologically, the word “redemption”

originates from the Old French *redemcion*, which means “deliverance from sin” and the Latin *redemptio*, which translates to “a buying back, releasing, or ransoming” (“redemption”). In a Christian context,<sup>3</sup> which is the perspective of O’Connor, this term most often connotes Christ’s death redeeming humankind from a life of damnation.

In O’Connor’s poetics, Christ functions as the salvific figure for her characters because her stories focus on man’s recognition of God’s divinity. The redemption O’Connor’s characters receive provides them a pathway toward spiritual fulfillment, a union of the physical and metaphysical realms. In this way, her characters are redeemed for their lives on earth and have the added security of entering into God’s perfect kingdom after death, corresponding with the Christian biblical narrative. Palahniuk’s works, however, situate the salvific power of redemption on the worldly level alone. His characters are often saved from their isolation through human relationships, and are delivered into fuller lives, both for themselves and those around them, because of these connections. In an interview with Matt Kavanagh, Palahniuk states, “Really the relationship[s] that [form are] the first step toward the character[s] uniting with a larger community. My first four books take individuals who are isolated in a way that society says should make us happy—isolated by their beauty or career or lovely home—and the plots reintroduce those people back to humanity” (184). His characters’ redemption is not simply for their own benefit, but for their reintroduction into their social contexts to affect change in a positive manner.

Though some critics may view the redemption in Palahniuk’s works as a lesser form of O’Connor’s union between the earthly and divine, the spiritual economy in Palahniuk’s novels is

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<sup>3</sup> Narratives that illustrate stories of redemption date farther back in history and exist in other faith-frameworks aside from Christianity, but the analysis herein will focus largely on a Christian perspective of the term because of O’Connor’s Catholic faith and my argument’s situating Palahniuk’s works in the context of her poetics.

consistent in its own way.<sup>4</sup> The characters in his works frequently deny the goodness of God and exist outside of a religious moral code, but Palahniuk provides a pathway to fulfillment for his characters and readers outside of this religious context. This spiritual ambiguity may be largely due to Palahniuk's own lapsed Catholic faith. He states, "Well, I believe there's a divine something, but I believe we're not supposed to know it. There are too many things unexplained in the world for me to be a non-believer" (qtd. in O'Hagan). Palahniuk's own admission that he does not have a specifically grounded faith framework explains the lack of spiritual redemption in his works, but his belief in a "divine something" may affect the way he uses violence to bring about change in the lives of his characters. In this way, Palahniuk's redemption connects more strongly with the *OED*'s definition of being saved from "error" or "evil," rather than "sin." Though his characters undoubtedly would be called sinful in a Christian context, in the morality of Palahniuk's literature, their relationships with others save them from themselves and the damaging social contexts in which they reside.

### *Cost and Violence*

The second *OED* definition of redemption is as follows: "The action of regaining or gaining possession of something in exchange for payment, or clearing a debt" (n. pag.), which more clearly connects redemption to the idea of compensation in exchange for the redeeming act. In a general sense of the term, when a person "redeems" a coupon or a gift card, for example, the products purchased do not suddenly become free. Someone must compensate for the exchange. In the Christian tradition, this compensation for debt occurs through a violent process—animal sacrifices in the Old Testament, and Jesus's crucifixion in the Gospels, among other examples.

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<sup>4</sup> This internal consistence relates to O'Connor's definition of grotesque literature, where characters have an "inner coherence" to their "social framework" (40), despite the strange circumstances around them. These ideas will be more developed in Chapter Two.

The cost of redemption does not always require violence, but, historically, violent circumstances are often the “payment” in exchange for redemption because of the weighty debt of those in need of it.<sup>5</sup>

The violence of redemption is epitomized in the Christian tradition. Christianity is based on violent sacrifice, as seen first in the Old Testament. In the book of Genesis, God told Adam and Eve not to eat from Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden or they “shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17); however, Adam and Eve disobeyed, which Christians believe cast humanity out of perfect relationship with God and into damnation. In compensation for this sin, the Old Testament Jews utilized animal sacrifices as payment for their transgressions because the blood of the animals was spilled instead of their own (Leviticus 17:11). However, the New Testament of the Bible redeems this practice through an equally violent measure. The writer of Hebrews states that “by a single offering [Christ] has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” (Hebrews 10:14). Because Christians believe that Christ was fully God and fully man, his crucifixion provided the ultimate sacrifice for humankind and precluded the need for additional bloodshed. In the biblical narrative, followers of Christ have been redeemed by Jesus’s final sacrifice and, should they follow him, no longer have to suffer death. The Catholic branch of Christianity, however, emphasizes the violence of the sacrifice more than Protestant

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<sup>5</sup> There are several theories regarding the nature of substitutionary atonement, all of which raise important questions about the debt that Christians believe Christ pays for the sins of mankind. For instance, if Jesus paid the debt of sinners, to whom did he pay it? God or Satan? If Jesus paid the debt to God, and Christians understand that Jesus and God are two parts of the trinity, then how can God owe himself something? If Jesus paid the debt to Satan, why would He have a debt to him? Though these arguments are interesting and seek to solve important philosophical dilemmas in the Christian faith, the implications thereof create more complications for the nature of redemption I seek to define in this chapter. Regarding O’Connor’s poetics, her Catholic understanding of sacrifice bringing believers closer to God is sufficient in understanding the redemptive nature of the violence of her works (I will discuss her poetics in more detail in Chapter Two). For Palahniuk, redemption does come from outside the self, but the sacrifice or cost his characters undergo most often is self-inflicted or brought on by environmental influence. Palahniuk does not attribute the redemption in his works to a “higher power,” per se, so sorting through these complicated questions regarding the nature of the cost of redemption is not necessary for the scope of my project (for further information about the satisfaction theory of atonement, see Anselm of Canterbury’s *Cur Deus Homo?*).

denominations. Catholic author Richard P. McBrien argues, “The Christian must pattern her or his life on that of Christ, who did not flee suffering and death but who became obedient even unto death. Christian asceticism is an asceticism of the cross, of the readiness to face death in the service of others and ultimately in the service of the Kingdom of God” (950). These ideas are central tenets of the Catholic faith. Instead of shying away from the violent nature of the crucifixion, Catholics revere the violence of the event as a reminder of their salvation from eternal suffering and distance from God.<sup>6</sup>

In Palahniuk’s works, his characters’ violent actions work within the framework of costly redemption. Both *Fight Club*’s narrator and *Invisible Monsters*’ protagonist, Shannon, shoot themselves in the face, but these acts of self-mutilation are not suicidal. Rather, the two characters take violent measures to remove damaging aspects of their lives. The narrator in *Fight Club* feels isolated by and imprisoned in his social context, which focuses on corporate jobs and purchasing products. The narrator realizes his current situation dehumanizes him, and takes drastic measures to remove himself from this environment. Similarly, Shannon feels imprisoned by her modeling career and needs a way to get out of her narcissistic life as quickly as possible. In order to accomplish this goal, she mutilates her appearance. The two characters’ social settings are so all-consuming that it seems impossible for them to remove themselves by simpler means. Shannon mentions that she is “addicted to being beautiful” (135), and the narrator refers to himself as a “slave” (43) to his consumerist impulses. Because the two characters display their problems in such extreme terms, they must take equally extreme measures in order to remove themselves from these contexts. The violence in Palahniuk’s works, though permeating his novels, exists for a specific purpose—to illustrate the weighty cost of redemption for his

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<sup>6</sup> This belief, in more historically extreme sects of Catholicism, represents itself in the practice of penance for one’s sins, where believers would often self-flagellate or harm themselves in other ways in order to prove their sorrow over their wrongdoings. For a history of penance and reconciliation, see McBrien 836-42.

characters.

*Transformation*

That the redeemed person is saved from sin or error is not enough to constitute true redemption, however. From an etymological perspective, the root words of “redemption” are “re” and “deem,” which mean “again” and “to judge,” respectively (*Online Etymology Dictionary*). According to the Christian framework, this “judging again” occurs at the hands of God. In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis argues, “For mere improvement is not redemption, though redemption always improves people even here and now and will, in the end, improve them to a degree we cannot yet imagine. God became man to turn creatures into sons: not simply to produce better men of the old kind but to produce a new kind of man” (216). The emphasis on re-judgment in the Christian tradition is reinforced by several passages in the New Testament, such as Paul referring to Christians as “new creation[s]” (2 Corinthians 5:17) and Jesus telling the woman caught in adultery to “go forth and sin no more” (John 8:11). These examples, among others in the biblical narrative, connote a change in the hearts of the redeemed persons, where they no longer pursue pleasure solely on an earthly level, but follow God’s teachings instead and He judges them differently as a result of this obedience.

The transformative powers of redemption are also present in Palahniuk’s novels. Shannon’s relationship with Brandy at the end of *Invisible Monsters* shows her ability to turn away from her old lifestyle and toward her “first real beginning” (128), and the extra chapters in the *Remix* version reinforce this idea. Shannon adopts the name Daisy St. Patience, the first new name Brandy gives her in the hospital, and embraces a life of honesty and altruism. Shannon’s new name and identity illustrate how she has fully departed from her old ways and become a transformed person. However, the narrator of *Fight Club* does not complete this transformational process. He acknowledges his feelings for Marla and “kills” the Tyler half of his personality, but

he still entertains the possibility of Tyler returning while lying alone in his hospital bed. Though *Fight Club*'s narrator goes through a portion of the redemptive process, he does not end the narrative as a completely transformed character, and is not fully saved as a result.

### **Conclusion: O'Connor as a Critical Lens**

In order for people to be redeemed, they are saved from their current context, the debt of their error has been repaid, and they leave the experience transformed by the process. Palahniuk utilizes violence to bring his characters to redemption, but the redeeming moments he offers them are achieved through a connection with another person (often romantic, but not always), rather than a reconciliation with God. Though Palahniuk is not a professing Christian (as O'Connor was), he was raised Catholic.<sup>7</sup> Because of this similarity, O'Connor's poetics is an appropriate lens through which to view Palahniuk's works. O'Connor undoubtedly included more of her religious convictions in her stories, but I believe that Palahniuk's redemptive violence is a reflection of his internalization of the Catholicism of his youth. Secondly, O'Connor's poetics is an appropriate framework to use in an analysis of Palahniuk's novels because both authors focus on the incarnational importance of damage to physical bodies. In O'Connor's poetics, for example, it is only when the grandmother's entire family is murdered that she recognizes her kinship with *The Misfit*, and, in Palahniuk's works, Shannon's self-mutilation allows her to break free of her narcissism and to love her brother, whom she used to despise. In both authors' works, the damaged body is a representation of the broken soul, where physical pain provides a pathway to spiritual healing (in O'Connor) and relational reconciliation (in Palahniuk). Though Palahniuk's novels are vastly different from O'Connor's short stories in

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<sup>7</sup> As mentioned earlier, Palahniuk has stated that he currently believes in a "divine something" (O'Hagan). In several interviews, Palahniuk has commented on his Catholic beliefs, ranging from mentioning that he has not "been a practicing Catholic since the late 1970s" (Potter) to joking about how he and his siblings only went to church "so [his] parents could have sex in other rooms apart from the bedroom" (O'Hagan).

both form and content, the redemptive elements in Palahniuk's fiction are reminiscent of the Catholic beliefs concerning the importance of violence to understand redemption. These ideas are more clearly represented in O'Connor's poetics, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Her works employ a regional focus, grotesque circumstances, and violent events in order to bring her characters into recognition of God's divine power. The violence in Palahniuk's novels reflects the themes in this chapter as well as the methodology O'Connor uses to convey them.

## CHAPTER TWO: REDEMPTIVE VIOLENCE IN O'CONNOR'S POETICS

As discussed in Chapter One, the definition of redemption encompasses salvific, costly, and transformative connotations, where people are delivered from their current sins or errors, debt is repaid, and the individuals are changed as a result of these encounters. In O'Connor's short stories and novels,<sup>8</sup> redemption takes a similar form, and her characters are delivered from their damaged lives almost exclusively through violent means. However, the violence O'Connor presents is not an end itself; the redemption that comes after the violent moments in her fiction is the purpose of her works. Without Parker's revelation in which his acknowledgement of God's divinity interrupts his daily life, or Hulga's recognition that her devotion to atheism may not be sustainable, all that would be left at the end of O'Connor's stories are broken people without hope. But the redemption that O'Connor offers her characters is intrinsically linked to the violent actions that precede such moments, and these characters could not be redeemed without the intense narrative they go through.

The redemption in O'Connor's stories is not accomplished solely through forcing fierce circumstances on the lives of her characters, however. The violence that O'Connor creates is unique because of the dark and disturbing realities she portrays through an intense focus on the regional context of her fiction. By describing the real world in as strange and grotesque terms as it appears, O'Connor's redemptive violence shakes the lives not only of her characters, but also of her readers. She desires to pull her readers out of cultural religion and into God's grace, and uses the graphic nature of her works to shock her readers out of their complacency. In order for O'Connor's redemption to be accomplished, her fiction utilizes the raw elements of her cultural surroundings, employs elements of grotesque subject matter, and enacts violence on her

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<sup>8</sup> Though O'Connor's two novels also employ redemptive violence, I will be using her short stories as the basis of comparison for Palahniuk's works because she is most well-known for this form and these stories provide a wider range of material through which an execution of her poetics can be observed.

characters.

### **O'Connor and Her Country**

O'Connor's poetics is marked, first and foremost, by regionalism, and this intense occupation with the Southern heritage that surrounds her contributes largely to the violence of the redemption in her stories. She desires fiction that focuses on "concrete realities" rather than the cultural abstractions or social problems. For O'Connor, it is impossible to separate the concrete reality from the theme of a story because the former embodies the latter (*MM* 90, 96). Additionally, she dislikes fiction that does not make use of the "local idiom" because "when you ignore the idiom, you are very likely ignoring the whole social fabric that could make a meaningful character" (*MM* 103-104). Good literature, in O'Connor's poetics, does not rely on types of people or stock characters to communicate a spiritual lesson; rather, she writes stories that have a strong sense of the characters' surroundings in order to reveal deep spiritual truths as they occur in real life.

Far more than making sure that a fiction writer "speak[s] for his country" (*MM* 25), the local focus of O'Connor's fiction serves to contribute to the moments of redemptive violence that her works are most known for. The physical settings in O'Connor's fiction provide a real place for grace to occur, which more effectively reveals her redemptive moments. If her fiction were detached from a concrete surrounding, it would be more difficult for her audience to recognize how grace affects her characters in a real, specific context. For example, in "Good Country People," the eponymous adage repeated throughout the story shows how, through Hulga's experiences, O'Connor points out the flaws of people in her immediate Southern culture that place a higher value on goodness as opposed to holiness. The regionalism of her fiction is also utilized in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," where the grandmother attributes the descriptor "good man" to people who do not deserve it. Both Hulga and the grandmother recognize at the

end of their respective stories that what they had formerly held up as goodness is no longer valid in the face of God's grace, and thus experience redemption.

This regional focus connects to the salvific definition of redemption discussed in Chapter One, where O'Connor seeks to redeem her characters and her society by saving them both from broken ways of life. Thus, the regionalism of O'Connor's fiction proves most effective to reveal redemption's salvific properties because her critical lens is aimed at the society around her that enables the character flaws she desires to correct. If O'Connor's fiction were not situated in her specific cultural context, she would not be able to draw on these culturally resonant examples that illustrate her redemptive moments with a stronger power. Without the manners of the location surrounding her, O'Connor's fiction would not as effectively reveal the mystery of God's grace she seeks to expose.

For O'Connor, this mystery of God's grace is His incarnational presence in the world: "[F]or me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that" (*MM* 32). Sarah Gordon comments that O'Connor's "grace is possible to human beings only *through* and *within* nature" (76, emphasis original), and O'Connor argues that "[a]rt requires a delicate adjustment of the outer and inner worlds in such a way that, without changing their nature, they can be seen through each other" (*MM* 34). In fact, Inger Thörnqvist recognizes O'Connor's use of the natural world to reveal divine truth through an examination of the representations of blood in her works. Thörnqvist utilizes examples from O'Connor's "The River" and describes the connection between a physical river and "the rich red river of Jesus's blood" (*CS* 165), showing how these instances of the physical and spiritual worlds interacting agree "with the early church's Latin liturgy," which presents "natural phenomena as embodiments of Christ" (90). In O'Connor's fiction, the physical world is not simply a metaphor for God's presence, but an embodiment of it, and writing that connects to

nature by revealing divine truth is exactly the kind of literature she desires. The concrete reality that surrounds O'Connor is a physical embodiment of the grace that Christ offers His people. Her fiction, though, is not only meaningful for the South. In *Mystery and Manners*, O'Connor argues that "the serious fiction writer always writes about the whole world, no matter how limited his particular scene" (77). Paradoxically, the more limited and local a writer's focus is, for O'Connor, the more a writer will be conscious of how the local sphere he or she is surrounded by communicates to the entire world. Thus, O'Connor's fiction has a strong regional focus, and this focus serves to make the violence of the redemption in her stories more communicative to a larger context because she provides a physical place for it to occur.

### **Grotesque Subject Matter**

The harsh realities O'Connor presents are often communicated in a fashion that seems out of character for a devout Southern woman. "She who lived a comfortable, conventional, pious middle-class existence on a dairy farm in Milledgeville, Georgia, wrote stories that are like literary thunderstorms, turning on sudden violence and flashes of revelation that crash down from the heavens, destroying even as they illuminate" (Rogers xi). The violence in O'Connor's works is shocking, but that is exactly what she found to be the most appropriate form for her as a Catholic writer. The shocking and grotesque content in her fiction serves to contribute to the elements of redemptive violence in her writing because the grotesque content she does employ is a violence to the reader as well as the characters, calling for a redemption of them both.

In defining grotesque works, O'Connor writes that "the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life. . . . Yet the characters have an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework. Their fictional qualities lean away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected" (*MM* 40). Additionally, O'Connor mentions

that writers of grotesque fiction will “[look] for one image that will connect or combine or embody two points; one is a point in the concrete, and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye, but believed by him firmly, just as real to him, really, as the one that everybody sees” (*MM* 42). The grotesque elements in O’Connor’s fiction serve to illuminate the incarnational presence of God in the world.

The incarnational elements in O’Connor’s fiction are represented through her use of physical objects that have a strong spiritual resonance, which not only “combine or embody two points,” but point toward the spiritual conditions of her characters. For example, Hulga’s wooden leg or Manley’s hollowed out Bible represent the spiritual holes in their respective lives, but these objects also function on the physical level of the story. Just as the blood symbolism in “The River” is an embodiment of Christ’s sacrifice, so Hulga and Manley’s hollow objects signify their brokenness. However, O’Connor asserts that this incarnation will be “violent and comic, because of the discrepancies that it seeks to combine” (*MM* 43). A wooden leg and hollowed out Bible would not be objects O’Connor’s audience would readily ascribe to God’s grace or power, but O’Connor uses these objects in her story to communicate on both the physical and spiritual level. Furthermore, O’Connor describes these connections she makes in harmony with her religious beliefs:

My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have, in these times, the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, the perverse, and the unacceptable. In some cases, these writers may be unconsciously infected with the Manichean spirit of the times and suffer the much-discussed disjunction between sensibility and belief, but I think that more often the reason for this attention to the perverse is the difference between their beliefs and the beliefs of their audience. Redemption is meaningless unless there is a cause for it in the actual

life we live, and for the last few centuries there has been operating in our culture a secular belief that there is no such cause. (*MM* 33)

In “Good Country People,” Hulga’s wooden leg serves as a representation of her spiritual handicap. Her mother describes her as an “atheist” (*CS* 278) and Hulga tells Manley Pointer that “We are all damned, . . . but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there’s nothing to see” (*CS* 287). Ironically, it is only when Hulga’s leg is removed and stolen that she confronts the impracticality of her belief in nothing. According to Henry T. Edmonson III, Hulga asking Manley “aren’t you just good country people?” (*CS* 290) “indicates just how hypocritical has been Hulga’s contempt for common, everyday life. It only takes the distress of her predicament to expose her need for that which formerly only disgusted her” (66). At the end of the story, Hulga is left in the barn without her leg and with the realization that her way of life may not be viable. The grotesque elements in this story, though, are not simply allegorical comparison. O’Connor states that “[i]f you want to say that the wooden leg is a symbol, you can say that. But it is a wooden leg first, and as a wooden leg it is absolutely necessary to the story. It has its place on the literal level of the story, but it operates in depth as well as on the surface” (*MM* 99). In this manner, O’Connor distances herself from the “sorry religious novel[s]” (*MM* 163) of her day which focuses on the literal level of a narrative *only* as it serves to reveal the spiritual. However, O’Connor’s grotesque fiction is redemptive because of the incarnational focus. This story aligns with the costly and violent nature of redemption explained in Chapter One. Hulga—because of her hard-headedness—could not have come to the realization that her life is missing something if her leg were not stolen, and O’Connor uses this physical violence enacted against her as a pathway to spiritual healing. The destruction of the physical world, as stated in Chapter One, reflects a spiritual brokenness that O’Connor desires to heal, and she presents grotesque content in her stories to accurately reflect the world’s brokenness. For O’Connor, the physical world is

not merely a gateway to the spiritual realm, but an embodiment of it.

In O'Connor's poetics, the presence of incarnational elements in her fiction is essential in order for her stories to be redemptive. O'Connor writes extensively on grotesque and violent content in literature, with a particular emphasis on the challenges she faces in communicating to an audience who does not understand that the "distortions" she sees in the world are not problematic. The problem she faces is "to make these [situations] appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural," and she argues that a good writer "may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience" (*MM* 33-34). The violence in O'Connor's works serves not only to bring to light the redemption that she offers her characters, but to communicate most strongly with her readers by manifesting her symbolic connections in the real world. O'Connor was deeply skeptical of the cultural religion that permeated the South in her day, and her writing seeks to force her contemporaries out of their complacency and into true faith. She explains that, when a writer assumes that his or her audience does not share his or her beliefs, he or she must make these beliefs "apparent by shock" (*MM* 34). Karl-Heinz Westarp writes that O'Connor "is aware that she writes for an audience who thinks God is dead and who does not believe in the Incarnation" but that O'Connor, as a Catholic, had a strong belief in "sacraments [as] the most prominent incarnational signs of the power of God's sanctifying grace" (113).

For example, in "Good Country People," Hulga's wooden leg masks her physical and spiritual handicap, which points to the redemption her character needs. It is only when her leg is stolen that her physical handicap is fully exposed and her lack of religious belief is put to the test. The shocking nature of the events that unfold in the story also serves to shock O'Connor's readers out of their cultural religion and into a recognition of how even the most repugnant individuals can be redeemed. Thus, O'Connor's redemptive violence employs a transformative

power, both for her characters and her readers. In addition to writing for an audience of nonbelievers, O'Connor was aware of her audience of people whose faith was largely cultural rather than personal. In this manner, O'Connor's fiction not only presents a redemptive narrative, but values the grotesque and shocking nature of violence both for her characters and readers that is unconventional for many of her contemporaries.

### **Purposeful Violence**

In addressing the violence in her fiction, O'Connor writes that "[w]e hear many complaints about the prevalence of violence in modern fiction, and it is always assumed that violence is a bad thing and meant to be an end in itself. With the serious writer, violence is never an end in itself. It is the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially" (*MM* 113). This passage connects strongly with O'Connor's regional focus and use of grotesque elements in her works. In O'Connor's stories, violence does not exist for its own sake, but to honestly portray a character's need for redemption in the physical world. In *Mystery and Manners*, O'Connor disparages two common types of writing: the sentimental and the obscene. She argues that, while many readers and critics can recognize obscene literature and their distaste for it, sentimentality is just as bad: "Sentimentality is a skipping of [the process of redemption] in its concrete reality and an early arrival at a mock state of innocence, which strongly suggests the opposite" (148). Commenting on these two themes that O'Connor censures, Gordon writes that "[t]he sentimental and the pornographic are failures on either side of this mystery: sentimentality errs because of its refusal to enter the natural world, and pornography errs because it never leaves the natural behind" (76). In order to distance herself from these two extremes, O'Connor utilizes violent circumstances not as indulgent ends, but as a means to illustrate the redemption that she believes Christ offers.

For O'Connor, faith was a serious matter which should not be dealt with lightly, and this

belief overflows into her poetics. Her works center on the violence in the world, but with a belief that a person with true faith can overcome such violences: “To insure our sense of mystery, we need a sense of evil which sees the devil as a real spirit who must be made to name himself, and not simply to name himself as vague evil, but to name himself with his specific personality for every occasion” (*MM* 117). For O’Connor, evil in the world does not exist in a nebulous and passive sphere; rather, she believes the devil is an active force in the world. According to Lila N. Meeks, “O’Connor believed that even the most alienated of men, through free will, could accept the undeserved, immeasurable love of God, his fellow man, and himself. She also believed that the devil would do all he could to prevent such a reunion” (19). However, O’Connor states that what makes a story work “is always an action which indicates that grace has been offered. And frequently it is an action in which the devil has been an unwilling instrument of grace” (*MM* 118). Though O’Connor does not specifically attribute the violence in her stories to the devil, she acknowledges the active nature of evil in the world and situates offers of redemption in opposition to this evil. Ironically, she places the devil as the most effective instrument of grace in her fiction, which connects strongly to her ideas about the necessity of violence for her characters: “[I]n my own stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moments of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work” (*MM* 112). Just as Catholics emphasize the necessity of Christ’s suffering as the cost of mankind’s redemption, so O’Connor believes that violence, and specifically violence brought forth by the forces of evil, serves to bring her characters to redemption.

For example, in her story “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” the main character is a child who decides she could be a martyr, but only “if they killed her quick” (*CS* 243) because she does not want to endure a life of pain. However, the girl is violently confronted with grace when a nun

accidentally smashes “the side of her face into the crucifix hitched onto her belt” (CS 248).

O’Connor describes this moment as “the ultimate all-inclusive symbol of love” and mentions how “the martyrdom that [the protagonist] had thought about in a childish way . . . is shown in the final way that it has to be for us all—an acceptance of the Crucifixion, Christ’s and our own” (HB 124). The pain that the child experiences in the story is salvific because it literally forces her to collide with a recognition of Christ’s sacrifice. In this story, the child cannot recognize her misguided ways without her life being interrupted in a violent manner, and, when she looks at the sun after the encounter, it is described as “a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood” (CS 248). This recognition of Christ’s sacrifice in the physical world illustrates how the child was redeemed by her interaction with the nun and her violent collision with grace.

### *Irony in O’Connor’s Violence*

Whether or not O’Connor presents violence under an ironic framework is essential to discover because if the violence and grotesque circumstances in her works are not ironic, then the end result is a perversion of grace instead an offer of redemption. In O’Connor’s fiction, what her characters believe about themselves juxtaposed with the situations that occur to negate those beliefs is what makes the violence in her works ironic. In “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” the grandmother dresses herself in her finer clothes, thinking that “[i]n case of an accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady” (CS 118). The grandmother’s high opinion of herself serves to highlight just how dysfunctional and un-ladylike she really is, but the ironic content in O’Connor’s story does not stop at such a surface level. When The Misfit discovers the family after the car accident, he mentions that it would have been better for their collective fate if the grandmother had not recognized him, as if O’Connor is intimating that the blame for the family’s eventual deaths rests on the grandmother’s shoulders. O’Connor is not legitimizing the family’s murder, however. Instead, she uses the family’s

murder to provide a redemptive moment for both the grandmother and The Misfit himself. The grandmother must confront her own pride that caused the car accident in the first place, and, in a revelatory moment, she looks at The Misfit and cries out, “Why you’re one of my babies! You’re one of my own children!” (CS 132). Of course, she is not saying that The Misfit is *actually* one of her children, but that she regards him with the same love and acceptance that she would one of her own kin. The grandmother’s recognition that she and The Misfit are both human beings with value serves to redeem her in the last moments of her life. After The Misfit shoots her, the grandmother’s “legs [are] crossed under her like a child’s and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky” (CS 132), which shows how, in her final moments, she has embraced humility and been transformed by the redemption offered to her.

At the end of the story, The Misfit remarks that the grandmother “would’ve been a good woman . . . if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life” (CS 133). Though broken and freakish the grandmother may be, O’Connor is not using The Misfit to advocate for the murder of prideful individuals; rather, the grandmother’s murder serves a specific function in the narrative to move The Misfit from “no pleasure but meanness” (CS 132) to recognizing that his life as a criminal is no longer fulfilling. In a letter she wrote to John Hawkes, O’Connor explains that each of her characters has a choice “either throw away everything and follow Him or enjoy yourself by doing some meanness to somebody, and in the end there’s no real pleasure in life, not even in meanness. I can fancy a character like the Misfit being redeemable” (HB 350). In this assertion, O’Connor cements the idea that the violence in her works is not operating on a literal level; rather, she uses the violence she enacts on her characters to highlight their need for grace.

### **Conclusion: O’Connor’s Redemptive Violence in Palahniuk’s Early Novels**

The violence present in O’Connor’s stories works to move her characters to moments of

grace. The circumstances she places her characters in, however, are not just violent for their own sake. O'Connor utilizes the local color of her Southern heritage and grotesque circumstances or characters to highlight the depravity of all men and the incarnational presence of grace in the world. In effect, the violence of O'Connor's works provides redemption for both the characters in her stories and her readers. She utilizes many realistic, yet strange elements in her fiction so that the redemptive violence in her works is grounded in concrete reality and shocks her readers out of the complacency of cultural faith. The violent means of redemption in O'Connor's fiction effectively moves her characters from brokenness to possibilities for wholeness in a way that mirrors the messy and violent necessity of Christ's crucifixion. Her redemption embodies the world and transports its recipients into recognition of the divine.

In O'Connor's poetics, violence especially provides a possibility for redemption because of the incarnational focus of her stories: her characters lead fuller lives because their physical bodies undergo a transformation that is representative of their spiritual journeys. Examining Palahniuk's works through the lens of O'Connor's poetics reveals the role that violence plays in the metamorphoses of his protagonists as well. Though Palahniuk's redemption works toward worldly rather than transcendent ends, the focus of his fiction still aligns with O'Connor's methods of redemptive violence, expressed through his own worldview. The redemption Palahniuk offers his characters delivers them from capitalist America and the preoccupation with appearances and possessions therein.

O'Connor and Palahniuk have a similar redemptive focus in their writing, but Palahniuk's redemption has a few key differences from O'Connor's that must be addressed. First, O'Connor's redemption occurs most often through one violent moment in her stories, but violence pervades Palahniuk's texts. His characters have a single climactic and violent experience, but the text as a whole is wrought with other scenarios of similar caliber. This

distinction is potentially a departure from O'Connor's framework, but Palahniuk's fiction is written over thirty years after hers and, with the increased access to violent and objectionable content in television, movies, and literature of his day, his violence is more pervasive as a result. This intense saturation of violent content in his novels is necessary in order to shock his readers that have been inundated with violent media out of complacency. Additionally, O'Connor's stories exclusively end with redemption for her characters, but Palahniuk's endings are slightly more varied. In most of his novels, his characters have a moment of realization where they understand that the lifestyles they have been living are faulty, but sometimes his characters are not strong enough to leave their pasts behind and accept the redemption that has been afforded to them. In these instances, a space for redemption has been made available for his readers, where a better way to live is displayed that his characters have not taken advantage of. In *Fight Club*, for example, the narrator does not accept the relationship he could have with Marla, but Palahniuk's readers are invited to understand how one might escape similar struggles in the wake of an overpowering capitalist environment. Palahniuk's fiction is critical of the society that surrounds him, and his novels follow the O'Connerian framework to provide redemption for this social context.

Palahniuk seeks to redeem his characters and readers from the damaging aspects of contemporary American life, and the violence in his works offers redemption for his characters in a similar framework as O'Connor. His works are also focused on a cultural problem, in that he uses his novels to speak out against the trappings of the American dream. Though Palahniuk's regionalism is not as narrowly focused as O'Connor's, he recognizes the unifying struggle of late-capitalist America where advertising companies and consumer-driven markets have moved past selling goods and services and onto an fetishized ideal lifestyle fostered by those products. Palahniuk recognizes the faults in this societal structure and his works fight against "the impulse

to rush out and buy a lot of stuff so [you] feel like a grownup” (qtd. in Robinson). Palahniuk sees consumer-driven American culture as problematic, where once people come to a point of established adulthood and form their identity based on the things they purchase, like the narrator in *Fight Club*, they often end up more alone than when they started.

In order to shock his audience and characters out of their collective complacency, Palahniuk employs O’Connor-esque grotesque characters and violent circumstances in order to bring his characters what he feels they need: genuine human connection. In an interview with Matt Kavanagh, Palahniuk comments that his characters often do away with the systems of cultural adulthood that they have created in order to find something better: “[M]y characters realize that isolation will destroy them. So, they destroy their own ‘success’ and force themselves back into community with other people. Maybe this is my Catholic upbringing, but my characters know that God is only present when two or more people are together. Their salvation relies on being forced to interact with others” (187). Palahniuk’s fiction focuses not only on redeeming his characters from a life of isolation, but also on redeeming the consumer-driven culture that has enabled their seclusion. In this way, Palahniuk’s writing aligns with O’Connor’s poetics of redemptive violence. Both authors seek to redeem their characters and shock their societies, and these themes are evident in Palahniuk’s novels *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters*.

## CHAPTER THREE: WE WON'T REALLY DIE

O'Connor's characters are brought to redemption through violent means, and the redemptions her characters experience call for a change in her social context as well as in the lives of her characters. In O'Connor's fiction, redemption is delivered in spiritual terms, and her readers are implicitly called to recognize their own depravity when they read of how her characters' lives are changed by God's grace. Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, then, offers a similar structure, albeit from a non-spiritual perspective. The novel centers on the unnamed narrator's struggle to remove himself from the problematic aspects of corporate America, and Palahniuk desires for his readers to take similar steps toward redemption. The narrator feels isolated and dehumanized by his corporate job and consumer-driven lifestyle, and, in order to remove himself from this damaging social role, he creates an alter-ego named Tyler Durden. The two men start a fight club that encourages its members to come together once a week and escape their normal routines, and it seems as though Palahniuk is advocating a violent removal from society in order for a person to become whole, a belief potentially reinforced by Tyler and the narrator's creation of Project Mayhem, fight club's militaristic offshoot.

However, Palahniuk does not use this novel to campaign for an anarchist break from corporate America. The narrator makes the reader aware at the beginning of the novel that "all of this . . . is really about Marla Singer" (14), his love interest. As discussed in Chapter One, Palahniuk desires his characters to be redeemed from their respective isolations by engaging in human connection with one another. The focus of *Fight Club*, then, is the narrator's ability to come to a place, not where he can overthrow society, but where he can love another person. The narrator's assertion that Marla is the focus of the novel seems counterintuitive at first. Throughout the narrative, fight clubs have run rampant, and Project Mayhem has sought to destroy the controlling systems of corporate America, which suggests that the novel's mission

might be more closely linked a quasi-Marxist revolt against capitalism. However, Palahniuk confirms that the true purpose of the narrator's life is to reach a point where he can love another human being.<sup>9</sup> The endgame is not the destruction of the narrator's external oppression as a component of corporate America, but ridding himself of his internal obstacles—manifested as Tyler—that keep him from achieving a loving relationship. In this way, Palahniuk illustrates a stark contrast between the redemption that the narrator is offered and the violence that precedes it. In fact, the violence the narrator goes through is necessary for him reach a point where he can be redeemed, a redemption that can only be achieved through loving Marla. Though their connection begins in the unlikeliest of circumstances, and their relationship throughout most of the novel is tumultuous at best, Marla's presence has a salvific purpose for the narrator, whether or not he recognizes this reality.

In fact, at the end of the novel, the narrator does not enter into a relationship with Marla; instead, he “kills” the Tyler half of his personality and is almost completely cut off from the outside world after doing so. Though *Fight Club*'s narrator goes through the process of O'Connor's redemptive violence, he is unable to be fully redeemed because he has not internalized the costly aspect of redemption. As illustrated in Chapter One, redemption encompasses a costly action, where something must be given up in exchange for the redeeming act. Though the narrator does “kill” Tyler, he is still contemplates his other half's return at the end of the novel, and Palahniuk's choice to end *Fight Club* with an emphasis on Tyler instead of Marla shows the narrator's unredeemed state at the end of the story arc. Instead of focusing on his relationship with Marla, the narrator's last moments in the novel point toward his connection

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<sup>9</sup> In an interview with *CNN*, Palahniuk comments on the 1999 film adaptation of *Fight Club* directed by David Fincher. On the film's more hopeful ending, he states, “I approved of it because I wanted to see the romance emphasized more. . . . And the whole story is about a man reaching the point where he can commit to a woman, so the ending is appropriate” (qtd. in “Chuck: Palahniuk: A Chat about the Novel *Fight Club*”).

with Tyler as a means of freedom, indicating his inability to let go of his former self.

The ending of *Fight Club* has received divergent critical responses, complicated by the film adaptation's more hopeful rendition. In the movie, Marla and the narrator acknowledge their affection for one another and watch multiple buildings explode together (Fincher), as if to intimate that redemption has been achieved, but only through the allowance of societal destruction. However, the novel's ending provides less interpersonal connection. In the last chapter, the narrator is in his hospital bed, thinking, "Marla's still on Earth, and she writes to me. Someday, she says, they'll bring me back" (207). Marla's love for the narrator breaks through the walls of his disillusion, desiring to bring him back into a relationship with her. His personal demons still remain, however, and he wonders when Tyler will return. David McNutt recognizes the redemptive ending of the film version, but submits that the novel does not offer the same hope for the narrator or Marla:

The eucatastrophic element to the conclusion of this version of the story is quite different from that in Fincher's film. For although he has unexpectedly survived his self-inflicted gunshot, and although the building doesn't blow up as he intended, the narrator is not free from his delusions about Tyler. In the closing chapter, as people—with broken noses or black eyes—occasionally pass by, they whisper to him, 'We miss you, Mr. Durden' or 'We look forward to getting you back.' Moreover, reproached by society and confined by his own mind, the narrator is still not capable of an authentic relationship, with Marla or anyone else. (McNutt)

Interestingly, though McNutt asserts that the narrator and Marla's relationship is not possible in the novel's ending, he also notes an important difference between the novel and the film: at the end of the book, the buildings do not explode. Where Fincher's film version provides a romantic

ending and societal destruction, Palahniuk's novel hints at the possibility of a future romance,<sup>10</sup> but leaves the representations of society intact. Most importantly, it would seem, Project Mayhem does not win. *Fight Club*, then, offers redemption with a more societal than character-driven focus by providing a functional space for readers to imagine what a successful redemptive journey would look like in the same context.

Palahniuk does leave redemption open for his readers, but the prognosis for his narrator is much less hopeful. Mary W. McCampbell notes that “[i]n the end, *Fight Club*'s narrator finds no answers—only a feeble deity taking notes on the lives of others” (156). Indeed, the narrator meets God in his dream-like state while at the hospital, and God asks him, “Why did I cause so much pain? Didn't I realize that each of us is a sacred, unique snowflake of special unique specialness? Can't I see how we're all manifestations of love?” (207). The questions that God asks the narrator reflect language that Tyler uses throughout the novel when referring to fight club and Project Mayhem. The narrator rejects God's advice and asserts that “[w]e just are, and what happens just happens” (*Ibid*), which shows some positive distance between himself and Tyler. However, the narrator's rejection of a faith framework and subsequent stalling in his relationship with Marla show how the narrator, though offered and tentatively acquiescing to redemption, does not fully accept it. The narrator's spiritual healing depends on his establishment of relationships with others—something he is not capable of achieving by the novel's end.

Though the narrator's redemptive journey in *Fight Club* is important, there is an abundance of violence in the text that seems to point toward a more destructive objective. In a novel centered on a club encouraging consensual violence and anti-capitalist sentiment, love

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<sup>10</sup> This possibility is reinforced by Palahniuk's *Fight Club 2*, which releases at the end of May 2015. In the information Palahniuk has released about the second installment, Marla and the narrator are married, which indicates an eventual acceptance of the redemptive offer at the end of the first *Fight Club*.

seems hardly a central theme. However, as I have suggested, Palahniuk's first novel is more redemptive in mission than it would initially appear. He does not desire his readers to start their own fight clubs or to engage in random acts of violence, though some have desired to do so.<sup>11</sup> The violence in his works does not exist for shock value, but as a means of destroying obstacles in the way of meaningful relationships, and this purposeful violence is the feature that most closely connects Palahniuk to O'Connor's framework. O'Connor's work contains an abundance of violent content, but the violence she presents is a tool, not her total focus. In *Mystery and Manners*, she writes, "Our age not only does not have a very sharp eye for the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace, it no longer has much feeling for the nature of the violences which precede and follow them" (*MM* 112). In this passage, O'Connor comments on her readers' failure not only to see grace when it is offered, but also their "inability to stomach"<sup>12</sup> the violences that often accompany such moments. In both O'Connor and Palahniuk's fiction, violent content is a means, not an end. O'Connor, as stated in Chapter Two, models a complete cycle of redemption that is not necessarily present in *Fight Club*. At the end of the novel, the narrator has not accepted the offer afforded to him. The redemption Palahniuk seeks then moves outward into the realm of his readers, where they are propelled back into the text to discover how the violence in the novel works toward the narrator's potential for salvation, though it remains out of his reach.

### **A Copy of a Copy of a Copy: The Narrator's Brokenness**

The first phase in the narrator's journey toward potential redemption in *Fight Club* is a

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<sup>11</sup> Many Palahniuk fans have asked him where they can find fight clubs and have even sent him pictures of their bruised up faces as a sort of homage to his work, but Cammie Sublette argues (and I agree) that these actions constitute a gross misreading of the novel's purpose (36).

<sup>12</sup> A phrase borrowed from O'Connor's own personal correspondence, "The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it emotionally. A higher paradox confounds emotion as well as reason and there are long periods in the lives of all of us, and of the saints, when the truth as revealed by faith is hideous, emotionally disturbing, and downright repulsive." (*HB* 100).

recognition of his brokenness. This recognition comes earlier for the readers than for the narrator, as Palahniuk opens his novel near the end of the story, with Tyler about to enact Project Mayhem's final mission: the demolition of the Parker-Morris Building, which will topple onto the Museum of Natural History, "destroying every scrap of history" (12). In the view of Project Mayhem's members, this scheme will destroy comfortable, American life by "erasing" the historical context of America up to this point. With his gun in the narrator's mouth, Tyler says, "[T]he first step to eternal life is you have to die" (11), implying that the narrator's death is the only way he can be truly actualized. This statement is partly true, in that the only way the narrator can be redeemed is by ridding himself of Tyler, an embodiment of his obstacles standing in the way of loving someone. Though the novel opens at the end of the story, this framing is an effective device to show how broken the narrator is and to provide context for the violent events—and possible redemption—that will follow.

The role of violence in revealing the narrator's brokenness in *Fight Club* follows O'Connor's model set forth in her poetics, most notably in how violence serves to reveal the essential qualities of a person. In discussing her own story, "A Good Man is Hard to Find," O'Connor mentions the effect that violence has to reveal a character's fragmentation: "[t]he man in the violent situation reveals those qualities least dispensable in his personality, those qualities which are all he will have to take into eternity with him; and since the characters in this story are all on the verge of eternity, it is appropriate to think of what they will take with them" (MM 114). Though O'Connor's statement about "the verge of eternity" refers more strongly to a Christian understanding of what her characters will take with them into the afterlife—to Heaven or Hell, based on their decisions—Palahniuk's fiction offers a similar vantage point from his own worldview. As a lapsed Catholic who currently does not hold specific religious beliefs, Palahniuk's "verge of eternity" threatens the narrator with impending death rather providing a

possibility for eternal life afterwards, as O'Connor's poetics does. However, his framing calls for his reader to adopt a viewpoint of his protagonist similar to that evoked by O'Connor. When the narrator's death is imminent at the start of the readers' experiences with the novel, they will be made more aware of the character's brokenness than if the novel had started at the chronological beginning. In this way, Palahniuk's "verge of eternity" has much less to do with how his characters will enter the afterlife, and more to do with who his characters could be in their deaths and how his readers will understand the characters' needs for redemption.

In the next chapter of the novel, the story continues at its chronological beginning, and Palahniuk creates a narrative space for readers to trace the narrator's journey from his mundane life to his more dire circumstances. Initially, the narrator believes he has a medical problem that explains his interpersonal difficulties. He suffers from insomnia, stating that his condition makes his world seem "so far away, a copy of a copy of a copy. The insomnia distance of everything, you can't touch anything and nothing can touch you" (21). Yet his insomnia is merely indicative of a larger problem: the narrator seems to be fundamentally out of touch with the people around him. He mentions that his doctor told him that "[i]nsomnia is just the symptom of something larger. Find out what's actually wrong. Listen to your body" (19). Though his doctor is undoubtedly seeking a medical solution, the narrator alludes to the true problem he is facing—his inability to have real relationships with those around him. His "insomnia distance" creates a gap between himself and other people, which repeats in a cyclical fashion, causing his lack of sleep to continue. The problem, as well as its eventual solution, is his relationships with others.

Additionally, the narrator's job places a strain on his ability to achieve human connection. The narrator works at a recall facility where he decides which cars his company will recall in the case of a lawsuit. This corporate environment causes him to dehumanize people, in the same way that he is also dehumanized by functioning as a cog in the corporate machine: "If a

new car built by my company leaves Chicago traveling west at 60 miles per hour, and the rear differential locks up, and the car crashes and burns with everyone trapped inside, does my company initiate a recall?" (30). The nature of his corporate job causes the narrator to view people in terms of equations and recall statistics rather than as real people who, like him, desire meaningful relationships. This distance the narrator's job creates between himself and other people reflects Palahniuk's own feelings about the costs of the American Dream. He describes this dream as a threshold people cross, which is "[a]n environment you can control, free from conflict and pain. Where you rule," but "[w]hether it's a ranch in Montana or a basement apartment with ten thousand DVDs and high-speed Internet access, it never fails. We get there, and we're alone. And we're lonely" (*STF* xv). The cost of this pursuit of happiness along these materialistic lines is a weighty one: the loss of genuine relationships.

This moment of social critique in *Fight Club* functions by the same logic as O'Connor's regionally-focused redemptive violence. Though Palahniuk's critical scope is broader, the aims of his critique follow her pattern. Where O'Connor disparages the culturally religious South in which she was writing,<sup>13</sup> Palahniuk critiques the consumerism that pervades America in the late 1990's and its inability to provide fulfillment for its devotees. Just as O'Connor's social context exerts power over its inhabitants by perpetuating a cultural *appearance* of religion rather than true faith, so Palahniuk's characters are caught in a corporate machine that focuses on consumerism that begets isolation over community. In order to escape both power structures, characters use violent means, and the escape is rewarded with a greater sense of fulfillment. In Palahniuk's words, the American Dream—with its corporate jobs, affectations, and success stories—cannot provide a meaningful existence because it creates distance between individuals.

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<sup>13</sup> See section in Chapter Two entitled "O'Connor and Her Country."

Thus, *Fight Club*'s narrator feels the effects of his pursuits toward the above goals when he discusses his apartment, but he displaces his self-criticism by focusing it on others like him: "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). Though the narrator includes himself in this moment of social critique, his focus is on how others around him participate in similar behaviors, thereby legitimizing his practices. As Palahniuk states in *Stranger than Fiction*, the narrator is "alone" and "lonely" in his comfortable job and consumer-driven lifestyle. He is aware of his isolation, but, at this point in the novel, the narrator is not ready to undergo the violent acts necessary to provide him freedom from the consumerist ideology surrounding him. He seeks community, but can only find kinship in those who share his flaws, which perpetuates his isolation from beneficial relationships.

### **False Identities as a Tentative Solution**

The second stage of the narrator's journey toward redemption illustrates his flawed attempts to seek community with others. In order to find a connection with other people, the narrator attends support groups for diseases he does not have, but his own attempts at redeeming himself prove ineffective because of his lack of honesty—a fundamental necessity for true community. In *Remaining Men Together*, a group for men with testicular cancer, the narrator meets, among others, Big Bob. Bob is a healing agent for the narrator that could redeem his disconnection from others; the narrator's experience at the support group opens with him snug between "Bob's new sweating tits<sup>14</sup> that hang enormous, the way we think of God's as big" (16). Initially, it seems as though this intense physical contact may bring the narrator fulfillment. His embrace with Bob provides a possibility for redemption through connection with another person

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<sup>14</sup> The narrator explains that Bob has breasts "because his testosterone ration is too high. Raise the testosterone level too much, your body ups the estrogen to seek a balance" (17).

because he is forced to interact with others and to experience another person's pain. The narrator seems as though he has found a cure for his insomnia and states that his experiences at Remaining Men Together are "as close as [he's] been to sleeping in almost a week" (17). At the same time, although his need for human connection is momentarily fulfilled by his involvement in these support groups, his relationships with the others in attendance are not completely genuine and therefore cannot provide a lasting solution. In addition to leading the other members of the group to believe he has testicular cancer, he "never give[s] his real name" (52), and his disingenuous participation in the group cannot allow him to have the human connection that he needs. By inauthentically presenting himself to the other members of Remaining Men Together, the narrator creates a safe distance between himself and others. He is able to experience "real pain" (19) and have "therapeutic physical contact" (20) without actually having to go through any pain himself, and without pain, in O'Connor's terms, there is no true redemption.

Marla's attendance at the support groups highlights the narrators' own illegitimate life, causing a breakdown of his comforting mechanism. He states, "To Marla I'm a fake. Since the second night I saw her, I can't sleep. Still, I was the first fake, unless, maybe all these people are faking . . . Marla's lie reflects my lie, and all I can see are lies" (23). Marla's intrusion on the narrator's comfortable sphere casts a glaring light on the lie he has been perpetuating and causes him to question those around him, exacerbating his isolation. At Remaining Men Together, Marla is obviously out of place; as a woman, she would not have testicular cancer. The narrator belittles her, thinking that she is a "big tourist" (24) because, he supposes, she does not attend the support groups for any reason, but to observe in her own strange way.<sup>15</sup> In the same way that the

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<sup>15</sup> Later in the novel, the narrator discovers that Marla began attending the support groups after she found a potentially cancerous lump in one of her breasts (108). Rather than seeking medical treatment, however, she decides to attend the support groups for a similar reason as the narrator: "[I]t was easier to be around other human butt wipe. Everyone has something wrong. And for a while, her heart just sort of flatlined" (*Ibid*). Though Marla derogatorily

narrator projects his IKEA fetish on others like him, he calls Marla a tourist in order to legitimize his attendance at these groups because he *needs* them to sleep, to function: “This should be my favorite part, being held and crying with Big Bob without hope. We all work so hard all the time. This is the only place I ever really relax and give up. This is my vacation” (22). However, Marla’s intrusion upon the narrator’s world complicates matters. He states, “I can’t cry with her watching” (18) and “[b]ecause I can’t hit bottom, I can’t be saved. . . . I haven’t slept in four days” (22). With the reappearance of the narrator’s insomnia and his inability to be emotionally involved in the support groups, the narrator realizes that the “vacation” he experiences cannot last forever. Because he is no longer able to mimic the motions of mourning and loss, he can no longer sleep.

However, the unraveling of the narrator’s first failed attempt to save himself is also an opportunity for him to be redeemed, for the pain that results from his attendance at the support groups opens an avenue for growth and change. The narrator’s assertion that he has to “hit bottom” in order to experience salvation connects to O’Connor’s ideas about redemptive violence: “[I]n my own stories I have found that violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moments of grace. Their heads are so hard that almost nothing else will do the work” (*MM* 112). O’Connor recognizes that her characters need to “hit bottom” before they can be saved in a similar way that *Fight Club*’s narrator describes, and she allows them to do so through violent means. The grace that O’Connor offers her characters, however, is a recognition of God’s divine power in their lives. Palahniuk’s grace, instead, begets human connection in a world that perpetuates isolation. The narrator does not realize this at the time, though, and believes that Marla is inhibiting him from taking steps

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refers to the support group members as “human butt wipe,” she understands, on some level, that community with others helps ease suffering, and the violence of her potential-cancer brings her into a potential relationship with the narrator.

toward what he thinks will redeem him. Marla's attendance at the support group causes the narrator to disrupt the healing process he believes he has begun, and serves to further highlight the fact that he is searching for human connection through illegitimate means.

In O'Connor's poetics, her characters often cling to ways of life that are not as beneficial as they believe, and these false redemptions are trumped by the violent means that remove them from such damaging contexts. In "Parker's Back," the title character mentions how his tattoos were inspired by a man he met at the fair, whose colorful arms and legs "filled [him] with emotion, lifted up as some people are when the flag passes" (513). This emotional response Parker has to the man's tattoos is similar to the release the narrator in *Fight Club* finds at the support groups: both characters' senses of self-worth are defined by something artificial that masks their problems rather than healing them. Parker is eventually dissatisfied with his tattoos because "[t]he effect was not of one intricate arabesque of colors but of something haphazard and botched" (514). In the same way that Parker's identity is built around an illegitimate attempt to self-actualize, *Fight Club*'s narrator has a solution to his problem that he believes will work—attending the support groups—only to have Marla's intrusion shatter it. With his ability to control his surroundings and seemingly fix his problems ruined, *Fight Club*'s narrator must search for redemption through other means. Here, Marla's intrusion into the narrator's world is less of an obstacle to healing than a motivating factor that spurs him further on his journey toward redemption.

### **Corporate America and Project Mayhem: Two Identical Broken Systems**

After his hope for fulfillment is tainted by Marla's presence, the narrator searches for another experience like the support groups, where he can move outside of his isolated context and into connection with other human beings. The narrator believes he finds this connection in Tyler Durden. Significantly, the narrator meets Tyler while on vacation at a nude beach, which

recalls the language the narrator uses to describe his time at Remaining Men Together. This continued reference to vacations as a way of healing foreshadows the problematic relationship the narrator and Tyler will have: a vacation, by its very nature, cannot last forever. When the narrator meets Tyler, he is hard at work creating a natural clock out of driftwood by using the light of the setting sun.<sup>16</sup> Tyler explains that “the giant shadow hand was perfect for one minute. . . . One minute was enough, Tyler said, a person had to work hard for it, but a minute of perfection was worth the effort. A moment was the most you could ever expect from perfection” (32). The narrator’s relationship with Tyler seems as though it will bring about his redemption. Tyler stands outside of the world of commodity culture and embodies a masculine ideal that the narrator desires to attain. In effect, Tyler does push the narrator out of his debilitating lifestyle, but this departure alone cannot save him. Because the narrator and Tyler are two halves of the same person, the narrator is not entering into a genuine relationship with another person by becoming more involved with Tyler’s enterprises. However, the narrator’s creation of Tyler and the violence in fight club, like his experience in the support groups, serve to bring him closer to redemption by moving him away from his life of isolation.

### *Self-Destruction, Soap, and Catharsis*

The narrator and Tyler’s fight club acts as a liberating agent because it forces the narrator into contact with other human beings, but fight club and the destruction of bodies is not the ultimate goal. The narrator knows that in order to become a whole person, he must distance himself from his sterile and corporate lifestyle, and Tyler allows him the freedom to do so. The

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<sup>16</sup> The narrator has an interior monologue running through this scene where he continually refers to himself being “asleep” (32-33), even providing a bit of foreshadowing by stating, “I had to know what Tyler was doing while I was asleep. If I could wake up in a different place, at a different time, could I wake up as a different person?” (32) At this point in the narrative, these comments more directly apply the narrator wondering what Tyler was doing with the driftwood; however, these thoughts also indicate the narrator’s dissociative identity disorder. Because Tyler is the other half of the narrator’s split personality, he could be referring to what Tyler was doing before he had become aware of his existence. In the narrator’s words, he states, “Tyler had been around a long time before we met.” (*Ibid*).

narrator seeks solace in Tyler, who tells him that in order to move in with him, he must do him a favor. He says, "I want you to hit me as hard as you can" (46). Thus, fight club is born through the narrator's self-destructive impulses. However, the narrator and Tyler are two halves of the same personality, so the narrator's "first fight" is really just him beating himself up. This kind of physical self-destruction spurs on the narrator's redemptive journey because he recognizes that he must confront the parts of himself that keep him from real relationships with others. After the narrator understands that Tyler is not real, Tyler tells him that during their first fight "[y]ou weren't really fighting me . . . You said so yourself. You were fighting everything you hate in your life" (167). The narrator seeks human connection, but he moves past meaningful relationships and jumps straight into brutal physical contact. The violence is not without a purpose, though. It helps the narrator to confront hidden parts of himself, and also serves to bring him closer to Marla because of her involvement with the events surrounding fight club and Project Mayhem.

The fight club the narrator and Tyler organize brings a sense of freedom akin to the kind of release he used to get at the support groups, and this sense of freedom seems to hold salvific power for him. He explains that "[a]fter a night in fight club, everything in the real world gets the volume turned down. Nothing can piss you off. Your word is law, and if other people break that law or question you, even that doesn't piss you off" (46). In this manner, the narrator seems to have found a healing agent in fight club, which causes him not to worry or care about the things in his life that used to bother him. Olivia Burgess states that "Tyler's creation of fight club allows the Narrator to transition from mimicking pain and otherness to embodying it" ("Revolutionary Bodies"), a step closer to redemption from the dishonest life he was living while attending the support groups. Burgess ties the narrator's engagement with physical mutilation at fight club to the potential for personal change: "[W]hen the body can bleed and break, it offers something

different from the day-in-day-out routine, and this imperfection and ability to transform makes the body an appealing site for staging a revolutionary utopia” (*Ibid*). Additionally, Eric Repphun argues that “[p]hysical pain, transformed into a specific and liberatory form of suffering, is the primary vector for authentic experience and personal transformation throughout the novel” (142). Both Burgess and Repphun argue that Palahniuk’s attention to physical violence provides an understanding of suffering as an incarnational act that has the power to fundamentally change a person. The change that the narrator must experience then, is the transition from isolation to human connection. Palahniuk has commented, however, on how fight club’s mission and rules are not the focus of the novel, “just so long as the [group] allow[s] the members to come together for a short time. A regularly occurring community where the participants could abandon their normal lives and feel connected to their peers” (“Foreword: The Fringe”).<sup>17</sup>

However, the narrator does not meaningfully interact with other members of fight club apart from Tyler. Though he fights the other men who attend the meetings, he does not experience a “community” in the way that Palahniuk desires. In effect, because Tyler and the narrator are one and the same, the narrator remains in a state of isolation, making contact with others only through the brutal collisions of the fights. Because the narrator’s only meaningful contact at fight club is with Tyler, however, his participation in the group is an avenue for the destruction of the aspects of his life he finds repulsive. He reflects, “[m]aybe self-improvement isn’t the answer. . . . Maybe self-destruction is the answer” (49). Though the narrator does not

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<sup>17</sup> Palahniuk has also commented that the creation of fight club was largely inspired by his involvement with Portland’s Cacophony Society: “Cacophony was basically an organization of people who had really boring jobs. They were letter-carriers for the post office, they were people who were bookstore clerks at Powell’s. They were people who had really, very structured hourly-job lives. And they needed a way to have chaos in their lives for a very structured window of time. If we do this kind of a theme party, we can be crazy – we can be insane anarchists—from four o’clock to midnight on Saturday night. . . . People would come up with concepts the way you did when you were kids and you played a game . . . you’d just arbitrarily come up with rules. You know? ‘The first rule of Fight Club is you don’t talk’ – you just come up with a rule and another rule and you invent the game instant. And you have the freedom, the authority, to do that. And Cacophony let us do that every week and give up our boring lives for two or three hours” (“Chuck Palahniuk: Need for Chaos and Legacy of Fight Club”).

use fight club to its fullest, community-building extent, he is able to break away from some of the less desirable aspects of his personality. The narrator speaks of resisting self-improvement, but he is not talking about personal actualization. Instead, he is referring to the stereotypical American Dream version of a complete life: “It used to be enough that when I came home angry and knowing that my life wasn’t toeing my five-year plan, I could clean my condominium or detail my car. Someday I’d be dead without a scar and there would be a really nice condo and car. Really, really nice, until the dust settled or the next owner” (*Ibid*). The narrator’s need for self-destruction is a desire to distance himself from the meaningless hobbies and preoccupations of his comfortable existence. Though the narrator does not have true friendships with anyone else in fight club, distancing himself from the controlling systems of consumerist society is the first step in his redemptive journey, and one that fight club allows him to accomplish.

The narrator’s relationship with Tyler seems promising at first, but a connection with Tyler alone cannot provide redemption because Tyler seeks to be the only salvific figure in his life. In effect, Tyler is a manifestation of everything the narrator needs to be rid of, but removing the most damaging aspects of one’s life is not easily accomplished. As previously stated, since the narrator’s relationship with Tyler is essentially with himself, the narrator cannot be redeemed through associating with Tyler alone. Eduardo Mendieta argues, “Tyler is the alter ego of an impossible masculinity. He is the American male on steroids, precisely what American males must be cured of” (57), and the narrator seems to be at least subconsciously aware of this. Though Tyler breaks the narrator out of his comfortable routine, he also resists some of the narrator’s attempts at change and seeks to keep him from the object of his goal: Marla. Shortly after he and the narrator move in together, Tyler makes him promise three times not to mention

anything about him to Marla (72).<sup>18</sup> The Tyler half of the narrator's personality realizes that Marla is getting too close to the narrator and that, if she knew Tyler existed, the illusion would be shattered and the narrator would realize that he and Tyler are one and the same. In effect, where the narrator grew at first *because* of Tyler, he now continues in spite of him. Tyler's vacillation between a liberating and damaging agent for the narrator mirrors a person's struggle for and resistance to growth and change.

Tyler's changing role in the narrator's life is especially important because Tyler *is* the narrator in some capacity. Thus, his functional shift in the narrative illustrates the narrator's own resistance to the positive progress he is making. In a letter to Cecil Dawkins, O'Connor describes a similar tension in the context of Christianity: "All human nature vigorously resists grace because grace changes us and the change is painful" (*HB* 307). In O'Connor's poetics, a resistance to grace is common because of the difficult nature of the Christian life. It is easier for followers of Christ to understand rules and regulations, and to condemn others for not following them, but it is much harder for them to progress in their own struggles. Palahniuk, too, recognizes the difficulty of change and uses violence to jar his characters and readers out of their insularity and stagnation. Because change is painful, the narrator's road to redemption is not a straight line. Sometimes, Tyler helps him by getting the narrator to recognize how the things he thought were so important no longer matter,<sup>19</sup> and at other times Tyler reflects the human impulse to remain in brokenness and isolation because opening oneself up to others is too difficult. Near the chronological end of the novel, the narrator reflects on this change in Tyler in

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<sup>18</sup> The promise coming in threes loosely connotes Christ's asking Peter if he loved him three times (John 21:15-17), and Peter's subsequent trio of denials upon Christ's crucifixion (Luke 22:54-62). However, Tyler attempts to consume the narrator's life as a means of destruction, not redemption.

<sup>19</sup> Later in the novel, readers learn that Tyler caused the explosion at the narrator's apartment (167) in an attempt to rid him of the products he had found value in. After the fire, the narrator states, "Deliver me, Tyler, from being perfect and complete" (46) and calls on Tyler for redemption from his misguided life.

terms of a love triangle: “I want Tyler, Tyler wants Marla, and Marla wants me. I don’t want Marla, and Tyler doesn’t want me around anymore” (14). The violence of fight club creates a community because it allows its participants to express themselves more fully, but the narrator’s split from Tyler complicates matters by destabilizing the narrator’s psyche.

In an exploration of Tyler’s mutable purpose in the novel, it becomes clear that he, above all else, desires to destroy the material world. Instead of desiring that spiritual healing come through the real world, Tyler promotes destruction of matter as a means of personal fulfillment. In contrast to O’Connor’s poetics, Tyler seems to embody the “Manichean spirit” she disparages in *Mystery and Manners*, where the physical world is ultimately evil and must be destroyed or distanced from in order for a person to achieve spiritual healing (*MM* 33). In *Fight Club*, Tyler embodies the narrator’s desire to move away from consumer-driven culture because of its isolating function, but Tyler’s violence is carried too far—as shown eventually through Project Mayhem—and promotes the destruction of any system in the physical world in favor of spiritual enlightenment.

Tyler displays his distaste for the material world through one of his myriad of part-time jobs: he steals fat from the dumpsters behind liposuction facilities to make soap. However, Tyler’s destructive actions—selling the liposuctioned fat of rich people right back to them—actually reinforce a consumerist society more than Tyler would like to believe. He desires to distance himself from a commodity-based culture, but Tyler’s decision to make a product and sell it shows a participation in, rather than a departure from, capitalism. Tyler sees making soap as an ultimately good, yet destructive act, but Palahniuk utilizes the symbol in a way that both aligns with and departs from O’Connor’s poetics. As stated in Chapter Two, O’Connor explains that a writer who respects mystery will find an image to describe both the physical and spiritual realms, but this combination is often “violent and comic” because of the disparate spheres it

brings together (43). In this manner, Palahniuk uses the soap metaphor to reveal Tyler's desire to break from a commodity-based culture, but also to reveal his—and the narrator's—inability to do so. Tyler describes how soap was discovered as a result of human sacrifices: "After hundreds of people were sacrificed and burned . . . a thick white discharge crept from the altar, downhill to the river. . . . Where the soap fell into the river . . . after a thousand years of killing people and rain, the ancient people found their clothes got cleaner if they washed at that spot" (76-77). This link between soap and sacrifice connects to the definition of redemption presented in Chapter One. Tyler understands that redemption necessitates a cost, and situates the goodness and cleanliness that soap brings as an appropriate justification for the people who were murdered to create it.

James Corbett argues, however, that Tyler's account of soap's origins is a bit farfetched: "Soap got its name, according to an ancient Roman legend, from Mount Sapo, where *animals* were sacrificed. Rain washed a mixture of melted animal fat, or tallow, and wood ashes down into the clay soil along the Tiber River" ("Soap and Anarchy," emphasis added). Corbett continues to state that the legend of Mount Sapo is "the estimation of Wikipedia" and that Tyler's "changing of 'animal sacrifices' into 'human sacrifices'" further sensationalizes the product's origins (*Ibid.*). Tyler proclaims that "it was right to kill all those people" (77) because the human sacrifices created something beneficial. Tyler's comparison, however, is disproportionate because cleanliness does not justify murder. Though soap does not necessitate human sacrifice, Corbett contends that associating soap with these destructive acts allows the symbol to be read both positively and negatively, where soap "[takes] on the role of the wine in the Christian act of communion, the result of a chemical reaction akin to transubstantiation, which turns the blood of a savior into a substance that will cleanse us all of evil" ("Soap and Anarchy"). Tyler's description of soap's cleansing properties being closely linked to violent

means echoes the narrator's desire to cleanse himself through violence from a life he feels is tainted. However, because Tyler disproportionately regards human sacrifice as a necessity for soap's creation, he does not appropriately understand the cost of redemption. Additionally, Tyler's participation in a capitalist enterprise undermines his anti-establishment rhetoric. He desires to distance himself from corporate America and the need for success, but his participation in this environment—albeit for destructive purposes—illustrates how his anarchism is an incomplete philosophy. Therefore, Tyler's creation of soap is a false redemption for the narrator, where the violence Tyler preaches cannot bring fulfillment because the cost he internalizes (human sacrifices or societal destruction) is disproportionate to the good that comes from the act.

Though Tyler's creation of soap is a false attempt at redemption, the narrator trusts that he will find solace in fight club. Indeed after attending fight club, the narrator equates his experience with the catharsis a congregation feels after a powerful church service. The club has rules that are repeated in a chant-like fashion,<sup>20</sup> which become something of a liturgy for the members. And although the narrator (through Tyler's espoused anarchist philosophy) desires to break away from the rules and regulations of traditional American society, fight club has just as many fundamentalist practices. After an evening at fight club, the narrator connects the violence he experiences to religious power: “[F]ight club isn't about looking good. There's hysterical shouting in tongues like at church, and when you wake up Sunday afternoon you feel saved” (51). According to Corbett, “Tyler and the narrator seek to sanctify violence almost as some religious sects glorify self-flagellation. According to this theory, it is only through violence and suffering that we can understand the cleansing fire of salvation” (“Soap and Anarchy”). The

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<sup>20</sup> “The first rule of fight club is you don't talk about fight club. . . . The second rule of fight club is you don't talk about fight club” (96), et cetera. When the narrator tries to shut down a fight club meeting later in the novel, the members encircle him and chant the rules back to him, almost as some would invoke religious power from Scripture, and banish him from the building (176).

seemingly disjointed comparison that the narrator makes between the violence in fight club and salvation suggests that Palahniuk echoes O'Connor's framework, where a writer who is in tune with the "mystery" of the world will "be interested in characters who are forced out to meet evil and grace and who act on a trust beyond themselves—whether they know very clearly what it is they act upon or not" (*MM* 42). In this context, O'Connor is discussing a person's implicit divine call from God into reconciliation, but the same logic applies in Palahniuk's work on a more worldly level. The narrator knows he needs something that he does not have, and he trusts Tyler and fight club to give it to him. The violence in fight club connotes religious power because the narrator is aware that salvation must come from something beyond himself.

However, the fact that the narrator is not capable of reaching beyond himself shows how ineffective his redemptive journey has been thus far. Regarding the potential healing effects of fight club, Palahniuk states, "The group's effect on the world doesn't matter. What's important is how the group helps each individual build his sense of ability and confidence. As the individuals gain a sense of their own strength, wisdom, endurance, and courage, the organization dies. The organization is *supposed* to die" ("Forward: The Fringe," emphasis original). In other words, the rules of the club or organization or church do not matter. For Palahniuk, these organizations are only valuable only insofar as they serve to construct what people are really after: genuine human connection. It would be too self-aware and vulnerable for people to come together *just* to come together. In Palahniuk's mind, people (and his characters) need a system to legitimize their interactions, but, ultimately, fight club is not the point. Showing up to work with a black eye as a badge of pride is not the point. The real reason that fight club exists is so that the narrator can attempt to heal his brokenness in a more visceral way because of the intense nature of his entrapment in the corporate American system, and Palahniuk also implicitly calls for his readers to escape from similar obstacles to community. Though fight club is an imperfect organization,

its function, at the outset, is to bring the narrator into close contact with other human beings by consensually beating each other. Because Palahniuk's redemptive violence works toward reconciliation on a more worldly—as opposed to spiritual—level, fight club seems as though it will be a good place for the narrator to reconcile his brokenness. As the narrator finds the ability to connect with others, fight club no longer needs to exist. However, the narrator's redemptive journey becomes complicated when he and Tyler create Project Mayhem, an extension of fight club, which focuses more on destruction than liberation.

### *Project Mayhem's False Promise of Fulfillment*

As fight club continues to expand beyond its usefulness as a redemptive agent, it develops into Project Mayhem, where Tyler's hatred of the material world is most apparent. The organization seeks to "save the world" by creating "[a] cultural ice age. A prematurely induced dark age" that will "force humanity to go dormant or into remission long enough for the earth to recover" (125). This expansion further exacerbates the already intense violence in the text. According to the narrator, Tyler invents the project because, one night during fight club, the narrator told him that he did not feel as affected by a fight as he usually did: "You can build up a tolerance to fighting, and maybe I needed to move on to something bigger" (123). The narrator is starting to realize that the rush of human connection he experiences through the destruction of bodies does not have the power to bring complete fulfillment, and Tyler—instead of letting fight club die and allowing the narrator to meaningfully connect with others outside of its context—instead creates something that could ultimately destroy them both. Though fight club brings the narrator closer into meaningful contact with others, Project Mayhem represents the narrator's resistance to redemption and the consequences of that resistance. At the same time, although Project Mayhem is not redemptive itself, the violence therein provides another opportunity for the narrator to progress in his redemptive journey. The narrator is aware that he needs

something—particularly violence—to save himself; however, Tyler begins to war against him, changing from a salvific to a damning figure.

Project Mayhem, as an extension of fight club, should theoretically bring the narrator more liberation from the suffocating aspects of his job and lifestyle, but the organization is just as stifling as what it tries to break from.<sup>21</sup> Though the group seeks to liberate, “the goal of Project Mayhem had nothing to do with other people. Tyler didn’t care if other people got hurt or not. The goal was to teach each man in the project that he had the power to control history. We, each of us, can take control of the world” (122). Though Tyler promises the members of Project Mayhem that they have the power to control the world, he continually dehumanizes them and sees them as valuable only if they serve a function of the project. He and the narrator refer to the members as “space monkeys,” language that recalls the opening scene of the novel, where the narrator is atop the Parker-Morris building, about to be killed: “It’s so quiet this high up, the feeling you get is that you’re one of those space monkeys. You do the little job you’re trained to do. Pull a lever. Push a button. You don’t understand any of it and, then you just die” (12). If this passage were read in isolation with the idea that Tyler is Palahniuk’s thematic mouthpiece, then criticism that suggests Palahniuk’s nihilism<sup>22</sup> would be accurate; however, Palahniuk is not arguing for an anarchist break from society or a revolution. Rather, the narrator is illustrating how Project Mayhem, as an organization trying to break free of corruption, eventually corrupts

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<sup>21</sup> The rules and constructs that Tyler creates for Project Mayhem mirror the chanting mantras of fight club: “The first rule about Project Mayhem is you don’t ask questions about Project Mayhem” (119). Additionally, Project Mayhem draws from the support groups the narrator has experienced where each subcommittee, ranging from Arson to Misinformation has a scheduled day of the week to meet and assignments each of the members must complete before the next gathering, lest they be expelled from the project. The narrator refers to these meetings as “Organized Chaos” and “The Bureaucracy of Anarchy” and even “Support groups. Sort of” (Ibid).

<sup>22</sup> Many critics of *Fight Club* focus on passages like these as evidence that Palahniuk’s work functions as an anarchist manifesto that seeks to liberate its characters (and readers) from the trappings of Corporate America; however, this surface-level analysis serves to ignore the deeper themes in the text (reinforced by Palahniuk’s own extra-textual commentary in interviews and articles), which point toward the power of love and relationships as the central objective of the narrative.

its members by melding them into a collective whole. In this way, Project Mayhem reproduces the dehumanizing corporate structures that it seeks to dismantle.

Though Project Mayhem is an extension of fight club, the militaristic organization is much more damaging than its original counterpart, which shows Tyler's change in function from the narrator's savior to his obstacle. The rhetoric surrounding fight club seems like a strong contrast to the capitalist culture that imprisons its members: it attempts to disassociate them from the trappings of their perfect American pasts by telling them that "[a]s long as you're at fight club, you're not how much money you've got in the bank. You're not your job. You're not your family, and you're not who you tell yourself" (143). This rhetoric compels its members to create new identities and to become whole individuals through their own power. However, Tyler's philosophical sound bites in Project Mayhem go beyond this, telling the members that "[t]here are no more names in fight club" (200). More than dismantling a person's failures or fears, Project Mayhem's rhetoric completely eradicates individuality. Marla tells the narrator at one point that "now all the space monkeys are shaving their heads" and "using lye to burn off their fingerprints" (157), most likely upon the instruction of Tyler. The community-building unification of fight club has turned into identity desecration in Project Mayhem, which stands in stark contrast to O'Connor's poetics and Palahniuk's professed aims for the novel. The new system seeks to remove its members from any positive associations that do not impact the advancement of the project's goals. When Big Bob dies in an accident on one of Project Mayhem's missions, he becomes an icon of the movement as the crowd at fight club chants his name. "Only in death will we have our own names since only in death are we no longer part of the effort. In death we become heroes" (178). Rather than violence as a pathway to redemption, Tyler advocates violence for guerilla warfare against capitalism. In this moment, Tyler and Palahniuk's missions diverge: if death is the only way out of Project Mayhem, then the initiative

cannot be redemptive in the way Palahniuk desires because the self-destruction that Tyler fights for is abject. The redemption that the narrator needs is not complete removal from society, but a self-destruction of the aspects of his personality that keep him from loving another person, followed by a reintroduction into his community as a changed individual. Redemption involves entering back into society as a whole person, not staying in isolation.

As the narrator realizes that he and Tyler are the same person, he begins to understand how isolated he still is and how Tyler functions as a projection of his masculine ideal. Upon the discovery of his double identity, Tyler tells the narrator, “We’re not two separate men. Long story short, when you’re awake, you have the control, and you can call yourself anything you want, but the second you fall asleep, I take over, and you become Tyler Durden” (166). The film version of Tyler puts it more bluntly: “All the ways you wish you could be, that’s me. I look like you wanna look, I fuck like you wanna fuck, I am smart, capable, and most importantly, I am free in all the ways that you are not” (Fincher). The harsher language film-Tyler uses illustrates how much Tyler is a product of the narrator’s desires: in his search for connection with another person, the narrator has created a manifestation of all that he wants to be in Tyler, even to the point of imagining his and Marla’s rambunctious sex life. McKinney reinforces the narrator’s projecting impulse: “In Durden the narrator immediately discovers the living embodiment of every physical and mental characteristic he has ever lacked. Durden’s maniacal pranks . . . appeal to the narrator’s own hatred of culturally expected safety and convenience. . . . The narrator is drawn to Durden’s athletic build, witty intelligence, and scathing sense of humor” (“The Salvation Myth”). The narrator has not just created a liberating agent in Tyler; he has created a manifestation of ideal masculinity and the man he thinks he should become. His increasing suspicion toward Tyler, then, connotes an increasing awareness that he himself is not to be trusted.

In the wake of his discovery, the narrator comes to understand that he caused all of the grotesque and violent actions Tyler has taken throughout the novel, and the narrator's redemption depends on getting rid of the Tyler-half of his personality. The narrator realizes that he would go to bed earlier and earlier every night because of his struggle with insomnia, but that "[e]very night . . . Tyler will be in charge longer and longer" (174). In this moment, the narrator becomes aware that the very disease he sought to rectify—his insomnia—is still occurring. Its presence is indicative of the fact that Tyler has not been liberating him, but suffocating. In addition to making the narrator promise not to tell Marla about him, Tyler provides further obstacles to the narrator's redemption by creating rules that keep the narrator from canceling fight club (179) and making castrating the narrator a "homework assignment" for Project Mayhem (187). The narrator realizes that he has deluded himself by thinking that Tyler alone could bring him salvation. In reality, Tyler started as a vehicle toward the narrator's redemption—and he does contribute to it by revealing the narrator's need to remove himself from corporate America's control—but the Tyler's resistance to change catalyzes a movement that must be stopped in order for the narrator to be redeemed.

### **It's All Really about Marla Singer: Love as a Means of Redemption**

Apart from her attendance at the support groups, Marla exists primarily in the background of the novel's narrative arc, yet she is the narrator's object of pursuit and his only hope for redemption, which aligns with O'Connor's redemptive violence. Though Marla does not participate in the narrator and Tyler's actions before and during Project Mayhem, she and the narrator could not have been brought together without the violent actions that precede their acknowledgement of affection for one another. While Tyler and the narrator organize fight clubs and wreak general havoc, Marla is around, but uninvolved. This distance between Marla and the narrator is in part due to his initial hatred of her and Tyler's insistence that the narrator not tell

Marla anything about him (72). However, the narrator fictionalizes Marla's relationship with Tyler due to his inability to love her himself.<sup>23</sup> As James R. Giles states, "Despite [the narrator's] mixed feelings about her, Marla remains an anchor to reality and, fake devotee of terminal illness support groups though she is, his hope for ultimate psychological and sexual healing" (43). Giles' assertion that Marla must be the narrator's vehicle for healing coincides not only with the narrator's need to love another, but with O'Connor's focus on redemption in her fiction.

It is especially fitting that, if Marla is the object of the narrator's redemption, Tyler—functioning as the narrator's obstacle—continuously drives a wedge between the two of them. At one point in the novel, the narrator mentions that he and Marla had worked out a system where they would divide up the support groups they each attend, so as to not have to see one another. When the narrator calls Marla one afternoon to see if she is planning on attending Melanoma that evening, she tells him that she accidentally overdosed on her anti-depressants but that "[t]his wasn't a for-real suicide . . . this was probably just one of those cry-for-help things" (58). Instead of rushing to her aid, the narrator assumes that Marla is just trying to get attention and tells her that he will just stay at home that night. However, it is Tyler who goes to the hotel and saves Marla from her overdose, which results in their having sex that evening. Because of the narrator's fragmentation and inability to truly love someone, he cannot recognize that he and Marla had sex and displaces the action on to Tyler. Where the narrator feels inadequate, Tyler compensates, which is at first helpful toward the narrator's redemption, and then destructive. Indeed, *Fight Club* is truly about the narrator's ability to connect with Marla, and he is not capable of doing so for the bulk of the narrative, so he envisions her connecting with Tyler—the stronger half of his personality—instead.

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<sup>23</sup> The narrator repeatedly refers to Tyler and Marla's lovemaking, stating that one night he dreamed he was having sex with Marla, only to wake up see Tyler at the breakfast table, shirtless and covered in hickeys (56).

Instrumental in the narrator and Marla's fledgling relationship, however, is Marla's role in the narrator's discovery of his double identity. Though Tyler eventually admits to the narrator that they are two halves of the same personality, it is Marla who makes him realize his double life to its fullest extent. After Tyler and the narrator have their conversation, the narrator is still somewhat in denial about his double life. He tells Marla, "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. I'm not Tyler Durden" (173) but she keeps reassuring him that he is, in fact, Tyler by reminding him that he does not sleep (172). In fact, when Marla finally realizes that Tyler and the narrator are two separate personalities, she does not recoil in horror, but provides darkly comic support: "'Just like Tony Perkins' mother in Psycho,' Marla says. 'This is so cool. Everybody has their little quirks. One time, I dated a guy who couldn't get enough body piercings'" (*Ibid*). Though Marla's comment could be read as a flippant disregard for the narrator's struggle, she clearly recognizes the severity of the narrator's predicament by agreeing to help him. Marla is not directly involved in the events that have caused the narrator's struggle toward redemption, but her presence throughout the narrative—and especially alongside the narrator in his discovery of his double life—allows her to be a redemptive agent for him by being a person with whom he can connect and love.

However, Marla remains slightly unsure about the narrator's double life and is at first uncertain about how to help him. She becomes concerned when she witnesses him shoot his boss, but the narrator tells her that it was Tyler who did it. She asks, "'Why should I believe any of this?' It happens that fast. I say, because I think I like you. Marla says, 'Not love?' This is a cheesy enough moment, I say. Don't push it" (196). In this defining moment in their relationship, the narrator's participation in fight club and interactions with Tyler have allowed him to enter

into contact with others just enough so that he can admit his feelings for Marla. His removal from his perfect job and safe life has allowed him to realize how much he needs her. The man that attended the support groups at the beginning of the novel could never enter into a relationship, but, after being exposed to visceral human connection in fight club, the narrator is capable of recognizing his feelings. Thus, Tyler's function in the narrative, though he presents an obstacle to the narrator's redemption, is to bring the narrator to a place where he can finally love someone. It is only through the narrator's involvement with fight club and his distancing from his former commodified life that he can come to this point, and the violence that he has gone through has brought him to a place where he can recognize his affection for Marla. With Marla no longer functioning as an oppositional force, the narrator is one step closer to redemption and the ability to truly connect with another person.

The final stages of redemption, however, prove the most challenging. Now that the narrator has realized that Tyler must be stopped before Project Mayhem enacts its most destructive mission to date, he and Marla must work to destroy fight club and stop the members from bringing about more devastation. As the narrator confronts the fact that he has caused all of the destruction in his life, he reflects, "My boss is dead. My home is gone. My job is gone. And I'm responsible for it all. There's nothing left. . . . Step over the edge" (193). The narrator believes that he must kill himself to kill Tyler, and this belief coincides with the sacrificial aspects of redemption discussed in Chapter One. At the top of the Parker-Morris Building, Tyler holds the narrator hostage—literally and figuratively—so that he cannot prevent the building's final destruction. As the narrator is about to pull the trigger, Marla rushes in. "We followed you. . . . You don't have to do this. Put the gun down" (204). The narrator yells back that he has to kill Tyler, but Marla responds, "'It's not love or anything . . . but I think I like you, too.' . . . Marla likes Tyler. 'No, I like you,' Marla shouts. 'I know the difference'" (205). Earlier in the novel,

after the narrator realizes that he and Tyler are the same person, he reflects, “I know why Tyler had 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). The narrator’s admission of affection for Marla proves that he is finally capable of being with another person. However, because he believes that he cannot be whole with Tyler still around, he shoots himself in the face. This final act of self-destruction is a victory for the narrator because he has eliminated Tyler, or “everything [he] hate[s] in [his] life” (167). However, as evidenced by the concluding chapter of the novel, despite having removed his obstacles to redemption and learning that he needs to love another person, the narrator is not yet ready to accept the offer afforded to him. Instead, he ponders the future from his bed in a mental institution, having no contact with Marla beyond an occasional letter and half-worrying, half-hoping that Tyler may return.

**Conclusion: In My Father’s House There are Many Rooms**

This rejection of redemption is problematic for some critics, but the narrator undergoes the process of violent redemption indicative of O’Connor’s poetics, only to be left at the end of the narrative not entirely ready to act upon the grace that he has been offered. When discussing her strange characters, O’Connor writes that “[t]he freak in modern fiction is usually disturbing to us because he keeps us from forgetting that we share in his state. The only time he should be disturbing to us is when he is held up as the whole man” (*MM* 133). *Fight Club*’s narrator is undoubtedly a freakish character, and his journey reflects a familiar heartache to Palahniuk’s readers—the desire, but often inability, to truly love others. However, the narrator is not the whole man he believes himself to be at the end of the novel. He asserts his dominance over the God figure he meets while daydreaming in the hospital by saying, “You can’t teach God anything” (*FC* 207), which indicates his refusal of redemption on a spiritual level. The narrator believes he has reached a state of enlightenment, but he is still broken because he subconsciously

rests in the possibility of Tyler returning. The last few lines of the novel are whispers of the various hospital staff connected with fight club or Project Mayhem stating that they cannot wait for Tyler to return. Palahniuk's decision to close on these lines, instead of Marla's offer of a meaningful relationship, is especially important because it illustrates the magnitude of the narrator's tragedy: an offer of redemption has been extended, and the narrator—in compliance with O'Connor-esque principles—goes through the *process* of redemption though violence, but, at his current state, is unable to fully accept the redemption that could so easily be his.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Palahniuk's announcement at ComicCon 2013 that a *Fight Club* sequel will be released this coming May raises important questions regarding the previous installment, particularly in regard to the redemptive themes. "The sequel will be told from the—at first—submerged perspective of Tyler Durden as he observes the day-to-day tedium of the narrator's life. . . . He's living a compromised life with a failing marriage, unsure about his passion for his wife. The typical midlife bullshit. Likewise, Marla is unsatisfied and dreams of accessing the wild man she'd once fallen in love with. She tampers with the small pharmacy of drugs that her husband needs to suppress Tyler, and—go figure—Tyler reemerges to terrorize their lives" (Widmyer "Fight Club 2"). This announcement from Palahniuk has several implications that impact the interpretations of the first *Fight Club* novel given in this project. The narrator and Marla's marriage indicates that he is capable—at least, for a time—of the human connection that Palahniuk desires for his characters, however, the announcement that Marla is the one who instigates Tyler's resurfacing calls into question her validity as a redemptive agent. If Marla were truly the way for the narrator to finally enter into a functional relationship with another human being, would she betray that function for the desire of the "wild man" she once knew? Or, is this merely momentary slip-up in characterization that Palahniuk is utilizing as a plot device to create narrative tension? Regardless, the analysis in this project focuses on the first installment in the series and the narrator's journey is still in agreement with the redemptive violence in O'Connor's poetics.

## CHAPTER FOUR: IF I CAN'T BE BEAUTIFUL, I WANT TO BE INVISIBLE

In *Fight Club*, the narrator's journey does not end with an acceptance of the redemptive offer before him. He goes through O'Connor's process of redemptive violence, but his final moments in the novel leave him disconnected from Marla and awaiting Tyler's return. In contrast, Palahniuk's *Invisible Monsters*<sup>25</sup> displays a more complete journey through redemptive violence that coincides with O'Connor's poetics. The novel, presented in a non-chronological fashion,<sup>26</sup> describes the story of Shannon McFarland, a model who feels imprisoned by her beauty and her involvement with the fashion industry. In order to rid herself of her former life, Shannon decides to shoot herself in the face, and this violent action serves as the catalyst for her healing: she is reconciled with her presumed-dead brother, whom she meets in the hospital after her accident as Brandy Alexander, a pre-operation transvestite. The reconciliation of the two siblings through strange and violent circumstances brings Shannon redemption, and this redemption is consistent with O'Connor's poetics as set forth in Chapter Two.

In order to achieve the redemption through human connection that Palahniuk desires for his characters, Shannon must rid herself of her narcissism that is fostered by her upbringing and cultivated by her societal role. In Shannon's pre-disfigured life, she grew up in the shadow of her older brother and tried to gain attention through her career as a model. However, her attempts at actualization prove ineffective, as her endeavors to gain her parents' affection or be noticed on a larger scale only end with her being more isolated, as evidenced by her inability to have a

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<sup>25</sup> As stated in Chapter One, *Invisible Monsters* was initially rejected for its dark content, but was subsequently published in 1999, following Palahniuk's first two novels *Fight Club* and *Survivor*.

<sup>26</sup> The text of *Invisible Monsters* skips around in time. In one of the first chapters of the novel, Shannon lets the readers know what to expect: "Don't expect this to be the kind of story that goes and then, and then, and then. What happens here will have more of that fashion magazine feel, a *Vogue* or a *Glamour* magazine chaos with page numbers on every second or third or fifth page" (1). In keeping with Shannon's claim, Palahniuk's chapters are ordered non-chronologically, and each individual chapters contains multiple timelines in the narrative. However, I will be analyzing the novel from a mostly chronological perspective in order to most effectively trace Shannon's redemptive journey.

genuine relationship with her friend and fellow model, Evie Cottrell. It is only when Shannon takes violent measures to remove herself from her social function that she begins her journey toward redemption. Though Shannon's violent actions forcibly remove herself from her unfulfilling lifestyle, Palahniuk reveals that it is not Shannon's occupation alone precludes her possibility for healing. Just as the narrator in *Fight Club* had to fight "everything [he] hated in [his] life" (167) in order to achieve fulfillment, so Shannon must confront the repugnant aspects of her personality that keep her from connecting with others.

Shannon distances herself from her narcissistic tendencies by reuniting with her brother, Shane. The siblings' ability to come together is the central focus of the novel and aligns with Palahniuk's creative purposes, where a connection between two people has the power to overcome the oppressive nature of contemporary American society. Both Shannon and Shane have taken drastic measures to remove themselves from this damaging social context, and their similarly violent pasts serve to unite them at the end of the novel. Brandy<sup>27</sup> explains, "I wanted something to save me. I wanted the opposite of a miracle" (*Ibid*), but she never actually wanted to be a woman. "It's just the biggest mistake [she] could think to make" (111). Similarly, Shannon mutilates her appearance in order to get out of her modeling career and find a fuller life. About their similar pasts, Shannon reflects, "In this way, Shane, we are very much brother and sister. This is the biggest mistake I could think would save me. I wanted to give up the idea I had any control. . . . I wanted to force myself to grow again" (136). Both Shannon and Shane are aware that their social roles are isolating, and Shannon, specifically, knows that she needs to give up her narcissistic control in order to be redeemed. Though Shane does not really want to be a

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<sup>27</sup> As mentioned earlier, before Brady Alexander started her gender transformation, her name was Shane McFarland and she was Shannon's brother. Throughout this chapter, I will refer to the character by the name that corresponds with the immediate events in the text, so references to Brandy and Shane should be treated as analysis of the same person.

woman and Shannon did not really want to be mutilated, both characters desire to do something drastic to save themselves, and these drastic actions occur through violent means in accordance with O'Connor's poetics.

Shannon also acknowledges her inability to live a fulfilled life behind the veils she uses to hide her grotesque appearance, and accepts responsibility for her manipulative actions on the road trip that has spanned most of the novel: "The future is not a good place to start lying and cheating all over again. None of this is anybody's fault except mine. . . . Now my whole new future is still out there waiting for me. 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. The truth is I'm sorry" (137). Shannon's moment of clarity shows how she recognizes her need for redemption. Some critics, however, have disparaged the novel's ending, stating that it "does not offer a positive prognosis for the future of either character" (Ash 79) or that Shannon's "redemptive fate is unclear" (Dolph 110). This denouncing of Palahniuk's endings seems to be a critical trend. Though critics have rightly found *Fight Club*'s ending unclear and non-redemptive as well, the ending of *Invisible Monsters* presents a stark contrast to the narrator of *Fight Club* alone in his hospital bed. Rather, Shannon's fate is redemptive because of the sacrifice she endures. As stated in Chapter One, sacrifice is an integral component of redemption's costly nature, where something must be given up in exchange for the redemptive act.

For her sacrifice, Shannon chooses to give her brother her identity and to live a life of obscurity: "I just want to be invisible. Maybe I'll become a belly dancer in my veils. Become a nun and work in a leper colony where nobody is complete. I'll be an ice hockey goalie and wear a mask" (131). Shannon's sacrifice begets her redemption because she has moved past the narcissism that controlled her during her time as a model and has chosen to forgo attention seeking in favor of anonymity. However, her redemption is not only in her desire for obscurity.

Shannon embraces honesty and realizes that, in order to truly love somebody, she must not hide her true self. The veils she wore after her accident provided a mask for her to hide behind and could not provide redemption because she was not being completely transparent with those around her. Shannon's decision to leave her veils at Brandy's hospital bed (133) signifies her desire to live a life of honesty and illustrates a drastic change in her character, which Palahniuk elaborates upon in the additions to the 2012 *Remix* version of the novel that will be discussed later in this chapter.

In relinquishing her former identity, Shannon has internalized the cost of redemption and becomes closer to Brandy at the end of the story. According to Johnson, "The siblings' reconciliation is central to the novel, as it reflects a theme that Palahniuk attributes to all his works: human connection" (70). Palahniuk recognizes this trend in his early novels and discusses how his works contribute to this theme: "My characters are—so far—always victims of themselves. They're alone because they sabotage any chance of bonding with another person. They don't want to give up what seems like autonomy in their lives and become dependent on another person" (qtd. in Kavanagh 184), and, as stated previously in Chapter One, Palahniuk desires his characters to move from being "victims of themselves" to whole individuals in the context of a larger community. Shannon and Brandy's redemption is not meant to be an isolated one that affects only the two of them. Rather, Palahniuk's focus is that his characters be redeemed and reunite—as changed individuals—with their larger social context. In this way, Palahniuk's fiction aligns with O'Connor's poetics because he not only desires redemption for his characters but also widens his lens to illustrate how that redemption has the power to change the societal problems that affect his culture. In this way, the redemptive process that Palahniuk's characters go through in *Invisible Monsters* serves as example for his readers to follow. By illustrating the damaging effects of pursuing the American Dream and all its components,

Palahniuk calls for his readers to cease placing value on material objects or possessions and to love each other instead.

### **A Search for the Spotlight**

As in *Fight Club*, Palahniuk opens *Invisible Monsters* with a scene at the near-end of the story arc. This narrative device, again, illustrates the potential fate of his protagonist and calls for the reader to pay closer attention to the events that led up to this climactic point in the novel. In this chapter, Shannon and Brandy are on the “verge of eternity” (MM 114) like the narrator of *Fight Club*. Though Shannon is not about to die, Brandy is, and the threat of her friend’s death has the potential to bring redemption. In the first chapter, Shannon and Brandy are at her best friend Evie’s wedding, where Shannon hopes to enact revenge on the people who have wronged her. Her revenge plot goes awry, however, and Evie, mistaking Brandy for Shannon, shoots Brandy in the chest. In this moment, Shannon reflects on the status quo of their situation, calling to mind Palahniuk’s assertion that corporate America has a dehumanizing function:

“Shotgunning anybody in this room would be the moral equivalent of killing a car, a vacuum cleaner, a Barbie doll. Erasing a computer disk. Burning a book. . . . We’re all such products” (285). The cog-in-the-machine angst that the narrator of *Fight Club* feels is compounded in *Invisible Monsters*: far more than being merely consumers of products, the characters in *Invisible Monsters* have become products themselves. This movement from active consumption to static representation intensifies the depravity of the characters in this novel, and Shannon’s recognition that she, Brandy, and Evie are all products of a consumer-driven, fashion-based culture shows the problem to which the novel is pointing. As in *Fight Club*, Palahniuk is critical of his cultural context and uses *Invisible Monsters* to bring his characters and readers redemption from it.

Palahniuk desires to affect change in his society by presenting characters that are—initially—consumed with the lifestyles he sees as damaging. Shannon acknowledges that the

three women view their lives in terms of a theatrical production, each vying the more powerful position: “Evie, Brandy, and me, all this is just a power struggle for the spotlight. Just each of us being me, me, me first. The murderer, the victim, the witness, each of us thinks our role is the lead. Probably that goes for anybody in the world” (289). The inclusion of “anybody in the world” at the end of Shannon’s declaration provides a social critique for Palahniuk’s readers as well as his characters, and this dual redemptive focus is in alignment with O’Connor’s poetics. She writes, “You have to push as hard as the age that pushes against you” (*HB* 229). In O’Connor’s fiction, redemption for mankind focuses on the individual and holistic level. She calls for a change in culture to be taken by violence because nothing else has worked. In the same way that her characters need redemption by violent means because of their hard-headedness (*MM* 112), the social context in which O’Connor writes requires a violent redemption as well. In a similar fashion, Palahniuk seeks to do for his social context what O’Connor does for hers: he uses violent circumstances to bring not only his characters to redemption, but to call for change in the society he sees as broken.

At the near-end of the plot, Shannon is still stuck in her old ways, relying on her self-centeredness to bring her fulfillment, which illustrates her brokenness at this point in the novel. After Brandy has been shot, Shannon thinks that “maybe it’s not too late to dab club soda on the bloodstain” (286) and that “no matter how much you think you love somebody, you’ll step back when the pool of blood edges up too close” (288). At this point, like *Fight Club*’s narrator, Shannon is on the verge of her redemptive moment, but is unable to change her ways because she still maintains a distance from Brandy and is not yet capable of loving her. However, as illustrated by the end of the narrative, the violence of Brandy’s near-death experience serves to push Shannon through her redemptive moment, bringing the siblings closer to one another. At the beginning of the novel, however, Shannon has not reached such a state, and she defaults to

the theatrics and narcissism that have defined her character thus far. The theatrical language in this chapter continues, where each character has a moment in the spotlight or a “cue” is given (286) when the attention shifts. Additionally, Shannon carefully describes the outfits each of the women is wearing, paying specific attention to her own: “This is everybody’s cue to look at me. My gown is a knockoff print of the Shroud of Turin, most of it brown and white, draped and cut so the shiny red buttons will button right through the stigmata . . . You can’t tell how I look, face-wise, but that’s the whole idea. The look is elegant and sacrilegious and makes me feel sacred and immoral” (287). Shannon believes she has a sort of agency and empowerment through her wardrobe and the attention she would receive for wearing something so irreverent; thus, she feels capable of controlling the world around her. This is evidenced in her starting the fire at Evie’s house prior to the wedding ceremony. She excuses her actions by passing them off as “special effects” and stating that “it’s not as if this is a real house. What’s burning down is a re-creation of a period revival house patterned after a copy of a copy of a copy of a mock-Tudor big manor house. It’s a hundred generations removed from anything original, but the truth is, aren’t we all?” (287). When Shannon widens her critical scope from the present drama, Palahniuk uses her insights to point toward the disconnection of people from each other because of the consumer-based society in which they live.

As he explores in *Fight Club* with the narrator’s insomnia, the “copy of a copy” in this novel also points to a disconnect between human beings and others. The culture that pervades Shannon’s context and Palahniuk’s audience is inundated with advertisements promising their consumers new and better lives. Because of the increasing popularity of television sitcoms and other programs in the late 1990’s, advertising companies had the power to reach people almost twenty-four hours a day. As stated in Chapter Three, Palahniuk argues that this saturation of consumer-driven entertainment produces isolation instead of community because this

overwhelming presence of advertisements forces viewers to inwardly focus their lives, creating a commodity fetishism that cannot bring personal fulfillment. However, Palahniuk argues that his readers and characters should reject this impulse, and he calls for a redemption from these desires. O'Connor recognizes the faults in her social context as well, stating that "it seems more than ever now that the kingdom of heaven has to be taken by violence, or not at all" (*HB* 229). Though O'Connor is discussing the kingdom of heaven in the context of a Christian worldview—where she understands that human nature actively works against this need—Palahniuk's novel has a sort of "kingdom" of its own. Ultimately, he desires human connection for his characters and readers, and he understands that, in the face of the powerful force of advertisements and product placement in late 1990's America, an equally powerful force must overcome this pervasive influence. In *Invisible Monsters*, Shannon goes to violent lengths to remove herself from being a mechanism in a society preoccupied with consumerism, but her status at the beginning of the novel shows her inability to transcend her role at present.

Though Shannon is not fully redeemed in this section of the novel, in the final moments of the first chapter, she is able to recognize her faults: "My point is that, if I'm honest, my life is all about me" (289). This admission brings her closer to redemption because she is aware of her narcissism, but when Brandy asks if Shannon loves her, she reflects, "It's when folks ask questions like this that you lose the spotlight. This is how folks trap you into a best-supporting role" (290). Though Shannon knows she should respond with affirmation, she "just can't get into it" (*Ibid*) and remains silent. Her inability to connect with Brandy at the potential end of her friend's life shows how Shannon is in need of the ability to let go of herself and to truly love someone. In the opening chapter of the novel, Shannon appears on the verge of redemption, but has not yet responded to the grace she is offered. Brandy responds, "Even if you can't love me, then tell me my life . . . Tell me how we got here" (291), and Shannon is left with Brandy,

bleeding out on the floor, to recount their life story together. Though Shannon could be connecting with Brandy and redeeming herself at this moment, she flippantly reflects, “Give me a break” (292), which illustrates her complacency and brokenness at this point in the novel. Shannon is not quite at the same point of desperation that the narrator of *Fight Club* is at the beginning of his novel, but the opening chapter of *Invisible Monsters* provides a frame to the narrative in the same way. In this fashion, Palahniuk presents his protagonist at a decisive moment in her life, where she is on the cusp of redemption. Like the narrator in *Fight Club*, Shannon’s redemption depends on her ability to love another person, but the first chapter of the narrative leaves the reader wondering whether or not Shannon will achieve this end.

### **Happy Together: Palahniuk’s Satire of the American Family**

Though the novel presents its events in a non-chronological fashion, the sections describing Shannon and Shane’s home life are the first scenes that occur sequentially in the characters’ lives and illustrate Shannon’s need for redemption from her self-centered ways. The siblings’ relationships with their parents mirror one another, uniting them in a similar place of oppression. Shane, as the older brother, is held to high standards by his parents, who do not understand the sexual choices he makes and eventually banish him from their house for coming home with a sexually transmitted disease. Shannon, on the other hand, lives in her brother’s shadow even after he has left the family. Their starting points illustrate similar themes in regards to the necessity of their redemption. Shannon, in particular, is consumed by her narcissism which is both cultivated by and a reaction to her upbringing. The broken nature of Shannon’s character fulfills O’Connor’s poetics because Shannon’s brokenness is so all-consuming that it would take a violent measure to remove her from its power.

Shannon’s childhood is pervaded by the feeling that her parents love Shane more than her, which exacerbates her narcissism and need for attention. As is typical of younger siblings,

Shannon cannot help but feel she's living in her brother's shadow where her older brother is "[t]he voted best at everything. The basketball king" (32). However, the McFarland parents have a much different regard for their daughter: "*It's not that we don't love you*, my mom writes in one letter, *it's just that we don't show it*" (*Ibid*, emphasis original). The status quo changes when, one day, Shane tests positive for gonorrhea and is banished from the house (62). Later, Shannon reflects, "With the light on in my room, all I could see was myself reflected in my bedroom window. When I turned out the light, there was Shane, standing just outside the window, looking in at me . . . I turned on the bedroom light so I could only see myself in the window. Then I shut the curtains. I never saw Shane again" (63). Commenting on this scene, Andy Johnson notes that Shannon "literally blocks out [Shane's] image with her own; her narcissism leads her to abandon her ill and ostracized brother" (65). Shannon believes she has dispensed justice in this moment, but her ability to abandon her brother when he needed another person the most illustrates her disregard for him and starkly contrasts with their reconciliation at the end of the novel. Shannon's rejection of Shane shows how in need of redemption she is because her narcissism, even as a younger child, leads her to regard herself as more important than the people around her.

Additionally, Palahniuk points out the flaws he sees in the American nuclear family through a description of how the McFarland parents relate to their children. In describing the imperfections of Shane and Shannon's family unit, Palahniuk communicates the need for redemption for both his characters and his audience. Palahniuk's critical lens focuses not only on one character's inability to humble herself, but on the family unit that fosters her need for attention, which points toward larger, societal ramifications of the problems he addresses in the novel. Palahniuk's critique of the nuclear family's internal hypocrisy calls for a redemption of his society, which aligns with O'Connor's poetics. The regionalism of her fictions stands in

opposition to the cultural religion that was prevalent during the time she was writing, and Palahniuk's censure of the American family unit provides a similar commentary on the social problems he despises. Though the McFarland parents are not necessarily consumed by a "nesting instinct" (43) like the narrator of *Fight Club*, Palahniuk believes that a consumer-driven lifestyle isolates its participants, cultivating a narcissism that keeps them from connecting with one another. For Mr. and Mrs. McFarland, this narcissism manifests itself in how the parents care more about their own appearances than loving their children.

Shannon visits her parents three times after Shane has left the family, but each time she is at home, she encounters her parents' hypocrisy regarding him. Although her mother and father rejected Shane as a teenager, they now appear remorseful and have taken up gay-rights activism in order to compensate for their inability to love Shane while he was still alive.<sup>28</sup> The McFarland parents' activism, though, stems from self-preservation rather than love for their son. At Thanksgiving one year, her mother and father describe how they could not decide how to design Shane's remembrance quilt because each color represents a different facet of the gay community,<sup>29</sup> so they instead decide to make "a nice tablecloth out of the material" (244). The inclusion of Shane's would-be memorial quilt into a stereotypical nuclear family setting shows the disingenuous mourning of the McFarland parents. Instead of honoring the memory of their son for who he is, their concern rests with how their family will be perceived. Mr. McFarland comments, "Strangers are going to see us and see Shane's name . . . We didn't want them thinking things" (243). Mrs. McFarland continues, "Really these panels are to help the people left behind" (*Ibid*), which reinforces the parents' inward focus. Though Shane's reputation lives

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<sup>28</sup> The McFarland family receives an anonymous call (which came from the Rhea sisters) telling them that Shane is dead and that "Miss Shane hated their hateful guts and her last words were: *This isn't over yet, not by a long shot*" (65).

<sup>29</sup> Her parents describe how the different colors they could have included in Shane's memorial quilt could have represented anything from regular oral sex to fascination with Nazi homosexuals (243-44).

on after his death and the McFarland parents could be worried about how he would be perceived, their other actions indicate that their fear stems from a concern that their friends and neighbors will get the wrong idea about Shane, and, by extension, themselves, which exemplifies the hypocritical nature of their family unit.

The McFarland parents' fear of anti-gay hate crimes further reveals their self-absorption. Though they outwardly express fear of the crimes they could be subjected to, there is an overarching tone of excitement in the chapter, as if being the target of anti-gay oppression will provide legitimacy to their struggle with Shane's homosexuality. Shannon's father almost jubilantly explains, "You'll have to cut your mother some slack. We're expecting to get hate-crimes any day soon" (60). Shannon's mother and father approach defending Shane's honor with zeal, but their defense, like with Shane's memory quilt, is situated more strongly in reference to how *they* will be regarded instead of Shane. "That the McFarland parents remain ignorant of the true events swirling around their family while overreacting to perceived threats reveals the conservative, reactionary nature of the nuclear family" (Johnson 69-70). Shannon recalls the moments, at the same dinner table where Shane's abandoned remembrance quilt resides, when her parents banished Shane from the house, calling their decision an exercise in "tough love" (62). The fact that these moments of tension in the McFarland household frequently occur at or in reference to the dinner table shows the breakdown of the familial ideology that Palahniuk critiques because a place of family unity has instead fostered selfishness. As Ron Rieckki argues, "Palahniuk's early novels . . . undermine property-family ideology, viewing the 'house' as a symbol to be overturned, the prison-like protective edifice that maintains ideological order. The 'house' and all of its capitalistic manifestations are treated with disdain, something to be destroyed, set fire to, looted, and even exploded" (90). Though the McFarland's house is not physically destroyed, their family unit is strained and continues to break throughout the novel,

reinforcing Palahniuk's critique of American domestic life.

Shannon attempts to transcend her parents' misplaced activism, but her response is just as self-centered as theirs, which illustrates her inability to be redeemed at this point in the novel. Shannon expresses disdain at her parents' hypocritical ways, but instead of moving past their flaws herself and choosing to love Shane, she defaults to criticism: "They'd like me to sit here in the dark and pretend it's the outside world we're hiding from. . . . They'd like to think it's some bigoted homophobe they're terrified of. It's not any of it their fault. They'd like me to think I have something to make up for" (64). Shannon's parents are unable to confront their own rejection of their son, and instead exchange their overwhelming guilt for overwhelming fear of the outside world. As O'Connor was critical of the cultural religion of her time that focuses more on rules and regulations than grace, Palahniuk attacks the complacency of the upper-middle class, white, cissexual<sup>30</sup> population in contemporary America. Though Shannon recognizes that she does not want to be the center of her parents' attention, she abhors the fact that, not only does she still live in Shane's shadow, but that his memory has been co-opted into a pseudo-activism that destroys her relationship with her family even more. In this manner, Shannon's past cultivates her personality in such a way that she desires attention whenever possible and uses any means to get it; however, this need for attention and love starts her journey toward redemption.

### **Hysteria is Only Possible with an Audience**

In order to achieve the love and recognition Shannon needs, she becomes a model, but her attempts at self-actualization prove ineffective because she is unable to step outside of her own narcissism and truly connect with another person. This attempt at redemption through her own power calls to mind the narrator's attendance at the support groups in *Fight Club*. Just as the

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<sup>30</sup> "Non-transsexual" or "A description of a person whose mental gender and physical sex are and always have been aligned (a female woman, a male man)" ("Cissexual").

narrator's disingenuous participation in Remaining Men Together allows him to mimic the pain of others, never actually experiencing it himself, so also does Shannon's occupation allows her to receive attention, but this attention does not have the capacity to heal her because she is not in a legitimate relationship with her perceived audience. Through a description of her career, Palahniuk illustrates not only Shannon's need for redemption, but also the need for redemption of American beauty-obsessed culture. His pointed critique of the fashion industry echoes the narrator in *Fight Club*'s realization that "the things you used to own, now they own you" (44). Just as the narrator is "a slave to [his] nesting instinct" (43), so Shannon is a slave to her physical beauty and the perceived agency it gives her. However, the novel shows her agency is limited because Shannon is a product and perpetuation of a beauty-driven society. Her career as a model is a false attempt at redemption; her desire for love cannot be accomplished herein because her career will always be focused on herself instead of others.

Shannon, along with her best friend Evie, has such a pervasive need for attention she and her friend create "scenes" in a department store where they can be observed. Shannon describes the model rooms in the department store, equating their openness on one side to an "invisible fourth wall" (248). The theatrical language in this section, carried over from the opening chapter of the novel, reinforces Shannon's need to be noticed. Evie comments that the store is "just like a sound stage . . . The studio audience watching you from the dark" (*Ibid*). This welcoming of voyeurism shows how the two women have been corrupted by the fashion industry and how in need of connection with other people Shannon and Evie are. At this point in the narrative, Shannon and Evie exist only (in their minds) for the entertainment of others and the "rush" (251) they feel when people watch them. Their preoccupation with this observation illustrates their self-centeredness. The distance the two women have from other people is similar to how the narrator in *Fight Club* attends support groups in order to feel human connection, but he cannot

achieve it because he is not presenting his authentic self. Similarly, Shannon and Evie have an “audience,” but their audience objectifies them.

Though they cannot connect to people in a larger social context, the two women cannot have a meaningful relationship with each other either. Throughout this section, Shannon and Evie discuss their pasts and each try to one-up the other with darker stories. The theatrical language continues in these instances as Shannon describes the story of her perceived child abuse as “play[ing] to the crowd” (252). This kind of competition precludes unity and affection for the two women, specifically Shannon. When Evie catches her in a lie about Shane’s past, Shannon does not lament her dishonesty, but their observers’ retreat: “And the crowd of shoppers has bailed, leaving just us and the security cameras” (254). After Evie and Shannon are left alone in the department store, Evie reaches out to her, asking why Shane’s story is so important, but Shannon responds and tells her that “[i]t’s nothing” and to “[f]orget it” (255). Though Palahniuk does critique how the fashion industry has cultivated a need to be observed in this section, he also highlights how Shannon’s self-obsession keeps her from being able to communicate with and connect to another person. Though Evie has caught her in an exaggeration of the truth, Shannon does not have the means at this point in the story to tell her friend what exactly is bothering her and why she needs to be noticed, thus reinforcing her isolation.

Shannon has not yet realized that her way of life is faulty, but she understands that something is missing. Johnson notes that “[a]s a model, Shannon helps promote physical homogeneity by representing an idealized beauty. She seems aware of the artificiality of her role” (62). Here, Johnson brings out the novel’s critique of fashion culture. Because every “action that [Shannon] might take or choice that she might make” is “corrupted and co-opted” by the society that surrounds her (Ash 80), she feels incapable of fully communicating with others. Reflecting this theme, Shannon mentions that “hysteria is only possible with an audience” (32),

in that she cannot feel emotions unless someone is observing her. She feels fake and tends to default to theatrical forms of expression because the flash of the cameras is the best way to get attention. In fact, throughout the novel, Palahniuk provides a narrative device to reflect Shannon's feelings and thoughts: "Give me attention. Flash. Give me adoration. Flash. Give me a break. Flash" (292). The inclusion of a fashion photographer's mantra in Shannon's brain shows how, even if she is not on-location or shooting for a magazine, the world in which she has been developed still owns her. Shannon's every move and action are commented on through her internal photographer's lens, as if she anticipates an audience everywhere she goes. Laura Mulvey and other feminist critics have tied a need for observation to a woman's "to-be-looked-at-ness," relating this concept to women's representations in films for the explicit pleasure of male characters and viewers ("Visual Pleasure"). Mulvey contends, though, that the "gaze" is not specifically a male trait. It is a masculine attribute enacted on the female in question. In *Invisible Monsters*, Shannon has internalized this gaze and is preoccupied with the fact that she has an audience everywhere she goes, whether or not people are actually looking at her. Though Shannon seems aware of the artificiality of her attention-seeking impulses, she does not yet have the means to step outside of these behaviors and be redeemed.

In one particular example of Shannon's modeling career, Palahniuk describes the Num-Num Snack Factory infomercial, which reinforces his critique of the societal structure that enables not only Shannon's narcissism, but the collective self-centeredness of those around her. The Snack Factory machine "takes meat-by-products, whatever you have—your tongues or hearts or lips or genitals—chews them up, seasons them, and poops them out in the shape of a spade or a diamond or a club on to your choice of cracker for you to eat yourself" (48). According to Johnson, "The machine represents the fashion industry which pulls in individuals and refigures them into homogenized products, somehow investing them with an allegedly

increased value” (63). In effect, Shannon’s part of the fashion industry fragments her and reconstructs her person into a collected whole that represents the Ideal Woman, and, by being a model, Shannon participates in this reconstruction of the self into a unified beauty standard. On this theme, Johnson comments that Palahniuk’s use of the phrase “for you to eat yourself” (48) at the end of the Num-Num Snack Factory’s description is especially important: “He could have ended the sentence with the word *cracker*, but the additional and unnecessary phrase ‘for you to eat yourself’ encourages a cannibalistic reading of the scene. The beauty industry feeds on the unrealistic body images of the consumers, only to reproduce those fears through the fashion, diet, and plastic surgery industries to sell to the consumers” (63, emphasis original).

This cannibalistic reproduction illustrates the brokenness of Shannon’s character and the people around her. When she watches the infomercial, Shannon notices that “what’s happening is the folks are staring at themselves in the monitor staring at themselves in the monitor . . . completely trapped in a reality loop that never ends” (46). Johnson connects the audience’s response to the cannibalism of the machine: “From Shannon watching herself on TV to the audience watching itself on the monitors, the scene is filled with narcissism—a kind of visual cannibalism. Instead of mouths devouring substance, though, the eyes become the organs of consumption, constantly returning to the videoscreens for another visual helping” (64). In the same way that Shannon and Evie create a faux life with the need for an audience at the department store, the audience in the infomercial cannot help but gaze at themselves, and this scene serves to further critique how consumerism isolates its participants, inviting them to stare at themselves and buy products instead of connecting with others.

In the descriptions of Shannon’s modeling career, Palahniuk highlights narcissism as not only Shannon’s problem, but a cultural issue, where the fashion industry dehumanizes its participants by creating products of them. This idea is reinforced when Shannon refers to herself

and Evie as “walking sex furniture” (263) during her observation of the infomercial. In effect, Shannon and Evie have become a part of the machine that not only includes the Snack Factory, but the entire focus of the fashion industry. Ash comments that “[t]his transition from body to machine corresponds with a shift away from seeing value in the individual herself and towards seeing value in the product the individual has become a part of” (79). In this way, Shannon has the appearance of individuality, but she lacks true agency because her entire personhood is only as valuable as the products she is hired to sell. In order for her to come to a place where she can truly love another person and be redeemed, she must learn to love others and break from the socially-constructed life she experiences.

### **A Moment of Violence: Shannon’s Self-Mutilation as Redemption**

After she has been a model for a while, Shannon realizes that her life is no longer fulfilling, and she decides she needs to do something drastic to get out of her damaging environment. Though Shannon recognizes that she could alter her appearance to make herself less attractive through more docile means, she believes she must make a more permanent change:

I could shave my head, but hair grows back. Even bald, I might still look too good. Bald, I might get even more attention. There was the option of getting fat or drinking out of control to ruin my looks, but I wanted to be ugly, and I wanted my health. Wrinkles and aging looked too far off. There had to be some way to get ugly in a flash. I had to deal with my looks in a fast, permanent way or I’d always be tempted to go back. (135)

Shannon realizes that she needs to do something drastic, to “fuck up so bad I can’t save myself” (100) in order to break out of the life that imprisons her. Therefore, Shannon decides to shoot herself in the face so that she can rid herself of the constraints her beauty places on her. Shannon

“speaks of mutilation in terms of rebirth” (Johnson 68) and her “self-directed violence provides the path to transcendence. Regeneration through violence has a long history, in mythology as well as enacted in historical events. Christianity, for example, has the myth of Jesus sacrificing himself for humanity and his subsequent resurrection” (Johnson 66-67). Johnson’s connection of Shannon’s self-mutilation to Christianity is especially important, as Shannon’s violent actions align with O’Connor’s poetics. As stated in Chapter Two, though violence pervades Palahniuk’s novels, his characters have a decisive moment where they enact violence on themselves in order to achieve a new, fuller life. O’Connor’s characters go through violent circumstances in order to achieve redemption and to be reunited with God’s grace, and Palahniuk’s characters are also subjected to violence in order to be redeemed through the human connection he desires for them.

For Shannon and the narrator of *Fight Club*, these moments come for both of them through shooting themselves in the face, the locus of their respective identities. Some critics believe that, in Palahniuk’s fiction, the “face is more valuable than the soul” (Riecki 91), arguing that the face—as the ultimate manifestation of identity—being destroyed so frequently in Palahniuk’s works shows his belief in body as commodity. However, Palahniuk sees the face as the *evidence* of the soul, where a destruction of bodies—in accordance with O’Connor’s poetics—provides a pathway to a more meaningful form of existence. In the same way that *Fight Club*’s narrator realizes that “self-destruction is the answer” (49), Shannon realizes that she has to take drastic measures to pull herself out of a life she finds repugnant. In an interview with Matt Kavanagh, Palahniuk explains this self-destructive impulse for his characters: “[They] use their physical bodies as vehicles or means for living a full life, not trying to preserve their youth and prevent death. They’re willing to destroy their appearance and current identity for a chance at real enlightenment and insight” (191).

Shannon’s decision to self-mutilate moves her further along in her journey towards

redemption because she is attempting to distance herself from her former life, and this action brings her closer to Brandy, the true object of her need to connect with others; however, some critics believe Shannon's violent actions bring her freedom in a different way, underscored by a quasi-Marxist desire for power. Johnson comments that "[b]y destroying her beauty, [Shannon] takes control of her body's social capital" (67-68). Following this logic, Shannon would be the most redeemed in the events immediately following her self-inflicted disfigurement because she is finally in control of how people see her. Though she is no longer beautiful by societal standards, she maintains a position of power because is not being told how to look, but telling others how to look at her. However, Shannon is not fully redeemed right after her gunshot wound because, in Palahniuk's novels, violence alone does not bring salvation. In O'Connor's poetics, violence is intrinsically bound up in the redemptive moments for her characters, but Palahniuk's protagonists experience a more delayed realization of how their violent actions bring them healing.<sup>31</sup> Like the narrator in *Fight Club*, Shannon's gunshot wound has the potential to usher her into redemption, but only because of the events following it. She does gain some measure of agency through her disfigurement, but she is still incapable of loving another person, which is the true redemptive focus of Palahniuk's novels—a mission that the narrator of *Fight Club* is unable to accomplish.

Shannon's non-redemptive state immediately after her accident is illustrated by her preoccupation with her appearance while in the hospital. She continuously asks to see the pictures of her disfigured face (263) and muses about returning to modeling for hand or foot work (182). Though Shannon desires to make a big mistake and drastically change her life, the violence of her self-mutilation alone cannot bring her this freedom. In accordance with

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<sup>31</sup> Though this distinction could be seen as a departure from O'Connor's poetics, I argue that it is more likely due to the longer form of a novel versus O'Connor's short stories. For further information, see the conclusion of Chapter Two.

O'Connor's poetics, the redemption that comes because of violence in the text is what brings about this change. For Shannon, her self-mutilation catalyzes her connection with Brandy, and this relationship is the true objective of her journey.

After Shannon mutilates herself, she befriends Brandy Alexander, and is one step closer to achieving redemption through human connection. Initially, Shannon values Brandy for the attention she gives her. When everyone "stopped looking" (262) at her after her accident, Brandy pays attention. Though Shannon first attaches herself to Brandy for superficial reasons, Brandy is instrumental in Shannon's progress toward redemption. After they have met, Shannon grabs a notepad from the speech therapist's desk and writes, "*save me . . . please*" (280, emphasis original). In the same way that the narrator in *Fight Club* appeals to Tyler to save him from his consumer-driven lifestyle, so Shannon appeals to Brandy. When Shannon tells her about the accident, omitting the detail that the gunshot is self-inflicted, Brandy responds, "You can't base your life on the past or the present. . . . You have to tell me about your future . . . when you can just crumble it up and throw your past in the trash can . . . then we'll figure out who you're going to be" (282-83). Brandy's attempt to liberate Shannon from her past self brings Shannon closer to redemption because she is finally moving away from the societal structures that cause her narcissism. However, Shannon can only be fully redeemed through loving another person, a feat which she has not yet accomplished.

After Brandy has told Shannon to let go of her past, she creates Shannon's future, which is a potentially positive step in her redemptive process. Shannon says, "She named me Daisy St. Patience and never wanted to know what name I walked in the door with . . . she named me out of my future" (200). Shannon's renaming connects strongly with her redemption, specifically with regards to the transformational power of the term. Shannon becomes, in effect, a "new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17), both nominally and physically. Her new name symbolizes a new

phase in her life, which will hopefully transform and redeem her. The ability for Brandy to rename Shannon connects strongly to the biblical stories of Paul and Jacob, men who were both renamed by God after a defining, yet violent moment in their lives. Paul's encounter with God on the road to Damascus left him blinded for a time, and Jacob's renaming occurred only after he physically wrestled with an angel, leaving him with a deformed hip (Acts 9, Genesis 35). Palahniuk utilizes Christian symbolism in a large portion of his novels, commenting that "[t]hey're stories that stay with you, and they're stories that connect you to everyone else" (qtd. in Staub). In effect, the biblical symbolism provides a moment of connection for Palahniuk's characters and his audience, which gives the appearance of religious significance to his violent moments, albeit from a non-Christian worldview. The inclusion of Brandy "naming" Shannon is especially important in light of the biblical connection because of Palahniuk's focus on his characters exchanging damaging ways of life for more fulfilling endeavors. "'Who you are moment to moment,' Brandy said, 'is just a story.' What I needed was a new story. 'Let me do for you,' Brandy said, 'what the Rhea sisters<sup>32</sup> did for me'" (201). Brandy's renaming of Shannon is a catalyst for rebirth and redemption, which pushes her closer to genuine connection with another person.

The way that Brandy goes about reinventing Shannon's life, however, initially moves her farther away from real human connection. Though Brandy and Shannon are beginning to care for one another, Brandy covers Shannon's face with expensive veils to hide her grotesque appearance. These veils create a literal and metaphorical wall between Shannon and the outside world, but Brandy asserts that this disconnection will give Shannon power: "'You can go anywhere in the world,' Brandy goes on and on. You just can't let people know who you really

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<sup>32</sup> The Rhea sisters are three drag queens that became Brandy's new family after the McFarland parents kicked her out of their house as a teenager. The three sisters paid for Brandy's reconstructive surgeries and helped her in her transformational process to become a woman (196).

are. ‘You can live a completely normal, regular life,’ she says. You just can’t let anybody get close enough to you to learn the truth” (235-236). James Dolph explains that “the veils exist not so much to hide repulsive faces, but to empower . . . by camouflaging emotions and intentions” (105). In fact, Brandy relates Shannon’s veils to divine power: “‘Don’t worry,’ Brandy says. ‘Other people will fill in the blanks.’ The same as how they do with God, she says” (237). Though Brandy asserts that Shannon’s veils will give her agency, the veils alone cannot provide redemption. Brandy “names” Shannon and gives her a new past and hope for a future, but Shannon still feels a disconnect between herself and the rest of the world. “Bulldozer alpha bitch she can be, we meet again and again in the speech therapist office and Brandy tells me everything I need to know about myself” (241). Though Shannon seems to enjoy the new identity Brandy has created for her, her agency is limited because the identity is being constructed by Brandy and not Shannon. Shannon is going through the process of redemption, but she has not been redeemed yet. Just like the narrator in *Fight Club*, Shannon is trying to redeem herself, but the veils Brandy gives her hide her face and keep her from being honest with others, thus delaying her fulfillment.

### **Behind the Veil: The False Power of Dishonesty**

When Shannon dons her veils and assumes her new name, she begins a journey toward redemption and away from her old life; however, as mentioned earlier, the veils create a wall between Shannon and the outside world. Thus, like the narrator in *Fight Club* with his support groups, Shannon pursues a false redemption that brings her momentary power, but cannot provide lasting fulfillment. During the road trip, Brandy, Shannon, and Manus take to find Brandy’s sister,<sup>33</sup> the trio steal drugs from house shows and sell them at clubs to make money.

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<sup>33</sup> Ironically, the reader is aware at this point in the novel that Shannon and Brandy are related, but Shannon does not know Brandy knows who she is.

The general activities that occur when they go from city to city are not as important as the flashbacks and background information that provide a contextual basis for Shannon and Brandy's relationship. Before the road trip begins Shannon discovers that Brandy is her brother Shane and that Brandy's process to become a woman was an effort to look more like her (204). This realization makes Shannon hate her brother even more, and she feels a sense of powerlessness culminated by the events in the novel thus far: "I can only eat baby food. My best friend screwed my fiancé. My fiancé almost stabbed me to death. . . . My brother has come back from the dead to upstage me. I'm an invisible monster, and I'm incapable of loving anybody" (192). Shannon's state at the beginning of the road trip is still focused on her inability to love others and her desire to be noticed, proving that a departure from her occupation as a model cannot fully save her.

The road trip also illustrates how Shannon seems to gain a measure of agency by being behind her veil, but this pursuit of power creates a distance between herself and others, opposing Palahniuk's goals for his characters. Shannon repeatedly drugs Manus with enough female hormones to make him a woman and Brandy with enough muscle relaxers to kill her. In her own, passive way, Shannon is attempting to exact revenge on those who hurt her. Some critics see her transition in a positive light, though. Dolph comments that "Shannon begins to move from passive, budding supermodel, to active agency as an assassin and arsonist" (104). According to Dolph, because Shannon was previously hiding behind her career and beautiful face and is now making powerful decisions at the expense of others, she has agency. However, Shannon's agency is limited—as symbolized by her veils—because she is not being fully honest with anyone. Shannon knows that Brandy is her brother Shane, but her pride and narcissism inhibit her ability to enter into a loving relationship with him. Similar to the narrator's disingenuous involvement in the support groups in *Fight Club*, Shannon's lack of honesty creates a distance between herself

and Brandy that serves as an obstacle to her redemption.

As their trip comes to a close, Shannon, Brandy, and Manus attend Evie's wedding, where Shannon believes her pursuits for revenge will be finally actualized. At this point in the novel, she has reached the height of her depravity. When she sets fire to Evie's bedroom at the wedding, she reflects, "Oh, and this is gone way beyond sorry, Mom. Sorry, God. At this point, I'm not sorry for anything. Or anybody" (121). Shannon describes this action as an ultimate exercise of her power: "The feeling is of supreme and ultimate control over all" (122). By diverting her rage to the fire, Shannon is giving herself a free pass at revenge. Because the fire, once started, is an independent destructive force, Shannon feels absolved of her guilt and can enact her revenge without consequence.

While her house is burning down, Evie mistakes Brandy for Shannon and shoots Brandy in the chest. Moments before Brandy is shot, Shannon is confronted with the option to finally let go of her self-centeredness and to act altruistically:

And I'm about to become an only child. And I could stop everything at this moment. I could throw off my veil, tell the truth, save lives. I'm me. Brandy's innocent. Here's my second chance. I could've opened my bedroom window years ago and let Shane inside. . . . And if I throw off my veil now, I'll just be a monster, a less than perfect, mutilated victim. I'll be only how I look. Just the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. (141)

Shannon, still consumed by her narcissism and her desire for revenge, does not stop Evie from shooting Brandy because, like her parents with Shane, she is only concerned with how the decision will affect *her*. In this moment, the text circles back to where first chapter of the novel opens, with Shannon on the cusp of redemption. However, as evidenced by the events that will follow, Brandy's imminent death begets redemptive power for Shannon, and she is finally

capable of connecting with another person. For Shannon, her transition from narcissism to human connection comes through violent means. Before Evie fires the gunshot, Shannon dismisses the need to let go of her self-centeredness. However, after Brandy is shot and her death becomes a potential reality, Shannon experiences a change of heart—almost instantly—and responds in love, thus cementing her redemption as a result of violent circumstances.

### **Completely, Totally, Permanently: Shannon’s Declaration of Love**

After Brandy has been shot, the story picks up where the first chapter left off, but this time, readers notice a shift in Shannon’s behavior. Instead of being concerned about the “pool of blood [edging] up too close” (288) Shannon reacts with humility and is finally honest with Brandy, telling her that she knows she is her brother. Shannon’s photographer mantra illustrates her change of heart: when Brandy asks to hear the story of her life as she dies, Shannon reflects, “Nobody’s dying here. Give me denial” (123), which sharply contrasts her thinking, “Give me a break” (292) in the first chapter of the novel. After Shannon and Brandy reveal their secrets to one another, Shannon has a moment of realization that reinforces her redemption: “The truth is nobody here is as stupid or evil as I let on. Except me” (135-36). Shannon’s admission of fault contrasts her parents’ misplaced activism and her own former self-centeredness. In the wake of Brandy’s impending death, Shannon finally has the capacity to self-assess, recognize her faults, and love another person.

In the last chapter of the novel, Shannon has accepted Brandy’s offer of redemption and has been reconciled with her brother. At the end of the narrative when Brandy is in the hospital, Shannon and the Rhea sisters discover that the bullet that hit Brandy in the chest was stopped by the copy of *Miss Rona* in Brandy’s jacket pocket and one of her silicone breasts (129); therefore, Brandy will survive. After Shannon and Brandy are reunited as brother and sister, Shannon’s redemptive fate becomes more certain. In this chapter, she stops calling her brother Brandy and

refers to him as Shane, and this nominal change highlights their redeemed relationship. Shannon states, “Me, I just want Shane to be happy. I’m tired of being me, hateful me. Give me release. I’m tired of this world of appearances. . . . Give me deliverance” (128). In this passage, Shannon’s photographer mantra of her modeling days continues, but its commentary changes as her focus does. She has been fully redeemed from her life of self-obsession and theatrics. She desires a life of fulfillment and, unlike her parents, recognizes her own faults for her actions.

Though Shannon still does not want to be herself, she does so for better reasons than the start of the novel. In this moment, Palahniuk provides Shannon a deliverance from the broken society that is obsessed with fashion, possessions, and always being beautiful. Shannon has realized that her worth does not reside in her beautiful face or her occupation, but in her ability to love someone. She states, “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” (*Ibid*). Though Shannon thought that shooting herself in the face would be a “real beginning” and a way to start over, she recognizes that it is only when she gives up control and narcissism that she can truly love her brother and become a whole person. In this way, Shannon’s act of self-mutilation is redemptive because it forces her out of her social context and into a meaningful relationship with her brother.

At the end of the novel, though, Shannon realizes that just because she wants to be with her brother does not mean she should. As stated in Chapter One, sacrifice must occur in order for the redemptive act to be complete, and Shannon relinquishes her identity to accomplish this end. She desires to be invisible and fade into the background because she has spent her whole life in the spotlight. However, instead of just leaving, she gives Shane her name: “This is my third chance, and I don’t want to blow it. . . . I’m giving you *my* life because I don’t want it anymore . . . You can be Shannon McFarland from now on. My career. The ninety-degree attention. It’s

yours. All of it. Everyone. I hope it's enough for you. It's everything I have left" (129-30, emphasis original). Because Shannon recognizes her complicity in her brother's situation, she knows that she must, finally, do something for someone else in order to make up for her self-centered ways, and this action illustrates how redeemed she has become.

In giving Shane her identity, Shannon provides an opportunity for her own redemption as well as a redemption of the society Palahniuk critiques. Though one could see Shane's entrance into the supermodel world as a step backward for his character, Palahniuk's use of a transgender figure in Shannon's former context confronts contemporary America's comfortable notions regarding sexuality. Transgender men and women were not as socially accepted in Palahniuk's time as they are beginning to be today, especially in the entertainment industry, and Shannon wants her society to be confronted with something unexpected and jarring in order to shock people out of their complacency. In O'Connor's poetics, unusual displays of sexuality have redemptive power as well. Her story, "A Temple of the Holy Ghost" describes a hermaphrodite at a county fair that does not "dispute" (CS 248) God creating him or her with male and female genitalia. This character's open display of non-traditional sexuality causes the protagonist, who was initially disgusted and confused by the hermaphrodite's openness, to confront God's grace.

In *Invisible Monsters*, Shannon desires her culture to be challenged by Shane's choice. What is especially significant, however, is that Shane does not want to be a woman. Though it would be difficult for American culture in the late 1990's to accept a transgender supermodel, it is much more difficult for this society to accept a woman who has not transitioned genders because she actually wanted to. Shannon tells her brother to "[b]e 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" (130-31). Shannon's

assertion that Shane should go on to be famous produces a violence on the readers of the novel. According to Ash, “Shannon has placed her brother in a position to become such a beauty icon, and the result will allow them to challenge American society’s assumptions and fears, thereby forcing Middle America to think beyond binary oppositions and its limited language of experience” (71). In this way, Palahniuk redeems his characters and confronts the preconceived notions of the society in which is writing. Shannon is redeemed because of her sacrifice, and Shane will beget redemption in their social context by forcing the people around him to accept him for who he is.

In the final pages of the narrative, Shannon’s purpose for giving Brandy her life becomes clear: she is finally capable of loving someone and letting go of her self-centeredness. “I’m giving you my life to prove to myself I can, really can love somebody. Even when I’m not getting paid. . . . Completely and totally, permanently and without hope of reward, just as an act of will, I will love somebody” (132). Shannon’s admission coincides with Palahniuk’s redemptive vision for the novel, where her decision to give Shane her identity is motivated out of love for her brother rather than her own selfish desires. Though this decision could be read as a radical application of capitalism rather than a departure from it—where identity is a publicly traded commodity—Shannon’s actions in fact display a departure from capitalism because her goals at this point in the novel are not for her own social advancement, but to love her brother and occupy a position of obscurity. Though Shannon has been born and raised in a self-obsessed family and culture, she finally realizes that, in order to be whole, she needs to love someone. The last lines of the novel state, “Completely and totally, permanently and without hope, forever and ever I love Brandy Alexander. And that’s enough” (133). What is significant in these last lines is that Shannon does not use Shane’s birth-name. She calls him Brandy. In effect, Shannon is not distancing herself from her brother, but expressing love for how he, as Brandy, brought her to the

point of being capable of loving another human being. Though some critics have regarded the ending of the novel as unhopeful, Shannon's declaration of love and removal of her veils (131) show how she has moved from feeling "sacred and immoral" (287) to being able to truly love someone and go forth with the new life she desired at the beginning of the narrative.

### **Conclusion: Daisy St. Patience and Honesty as Un-Boring**

In the main text of *Invisible Monsters*, Brandy tells Shannon that "[t]he most boring thing in the entire world . . . is nudity." The second most boring thing, she says, is honesty" (241). As the novel illustrates, however, honesty is exactly what Shannon needs. Through breaking away from the all-consuming fashion industry and being reunited with her brother, Shannon has been redeemed and is capable of moving past her narcissism. The 1999 text of *Invisible Monsters* leaves the ending open, with Shannon giving Brandy her identity and going on to be invisible. Redemption has occurred, but the reader is not privy to what lengths Shannon's life will continue on this path. In the 2012 *Remix* edition, Palahniuk provides a few new chapters of epilogue<sup>34</sup> that explore Shannon's post-Brandy life. In these extra chapters, Shannon proves once again that honesty is exactly what people need, even if that means throwing it in their faces.

These additional chapters refer to a character named Daisy St. Patience, but this new character is actually Shannon taking on the first name that Brandy gave her when she

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<sup>34</sup> Shannon's epilogue section loops back on itself, so it is impossible to tell where her story starts and ends. These chapters exist outside of the narrative instruction to "jump" to non-consecutive points in the book. Shannon narrates, "No matter how careful you are, there's going to be the sense that you missed something. . . . Well, get used to that feeling. That's how your whole life will feel someday" (3). Additionally, some of the chapters are printed backwards so that the reader has to hold them up to a mirror and look at him or herself while reading. About these strange narrative tactics, Palahniuk states, "You, the put-upon reader, you just want to get through the story, only the author keeps putting plot obstacles in your way. . . . All of those hindrances, like the bones in a trout, they make you take time and actually taste something. It's why heat-and-serve fish sticks are so immensely popular. And Danielle Steel. For people with so little free time that they're forced to wolf down their leisure activities" (231). This narrative structure produces a violence on the reader of the novel, who "just want[s] to get through the story." In these passages, Palahniuk fights against the consumption impulse he critiques in the main text of the novel by inviting his readers to slow down and experience change as a result of his narrative.

“reinvented” her life in the hospital (200). In taking her brother’s name for her as her new identity, Shannon honors him and chooses to embrace a life of good deeds and blatant honesty instead of hiding in obscurity. In one of the chapters, Shannon opens Spitefield Park, an honest cemetery that allows its mourners to put anything on the headstones, from benign puns such as “She sleeps with the angles” to the more scathing “I was a shitty husband and father. I couldn’t die fast enough” (66). This devotion to honesty, even to the lengths of caustic truth-telling, illustrates Shannon’s internalization of the harsh reality of her redemption. Because her former life as a model was so all-consuming and damaging, Shannon completely distances herself from socially acceptable niceties and embraces a radical form of honesty that allows her to fully express herself and connect strongly with the people around her.

Had Shannon faded into obscurity like she intended at the end of the main text, only a portion of the redemption Palahniuk desires for his characters would be accomplished. As stated in Chapter One, Palahniuk desires his characters not only to be saved from damaging ways of life, but to re-enter their larger social contexts after this salvation has been accomplished. After the reader is instructed to jump to the next chapter, there is a scene describing how Shannon mentors young women who, like her, are disfigured: “The Elephant *Women*. . . . The Born-That-Way girls. The In-a-Terrible-Accident girls, and the There-But-for-the-Grace-of-God girls. . . . For them Lady Daisy lifted the hem of her own veil like a stage curtain” (67-68). When these women seek her out, she asks them, “‘How would you like to see the world?’ Adding, ‘And vice versa’” (69). Shannon’s decision to help others like her instead of passively fading into obscurity shows how redeemed she truly is. She is finally capable of loving others completely and fully, and affects positive change in the lives of those around her. For Shannon, brutal honesty is a pathway to redemption because she is finally being honest and living without her mask—literally and figuratively. Shannon embraces the honesty of her new face, using her disfigured appearance

to help others like her, thus illustrating the completeness of her redemption.

The next chapter of Shannon's post-Brandy life describes her imagined "sin-sational" (114) revamp of David Lynch's *The Elephant Man* (1980). In Shannon's version of the movie, according to the narrator, Joseph Merrick, upon being presented to the Pathological Society of London in 1884 "didn't just stand there like an object for physicians to stare at" (117). Instead, he "made his entrance in a burst of blue smoke bomb. . . . His every seam was cleverly held together with Velcro; he'd wear nothing you couldn't get off with a firm yank. He'd wear a banana hammock engineered for maximum flop. And boots. Sexy black leather boots" (115). Shannon's version is more of akin to *Rocky Horror Picture Show* than the true events Lynch's film is based on. Her imagined version of Merrick flaunts his deformities on stage in a drag-show-meets-burlesque-dance fashion, causing his audience to "whistl[e] and stom[p]," to "swoon," and "chant" (117) his name like a crowd cheering for their favorite football team. In these sections, Shannon embraces a life outside of her veils and desires to be completely and totally honest, thus reinforcing the redemption of her character and complying with Palahniuk's desire for his characters to be reintroduced to a larger community in order for their redemptions to be complete (Kavanagh 184).

#### *Palahniuk's Intra-Textual Commentary*

In some of the other extra chapters of *Invisible Monsters Remix*, Palahniuk includes personal essays that span from his time as a writing student to more recent events, and these essays provide additional thematic insight on the novel. In one particular chapter, he writes about how his mother's impending death impacted him during filming the adaptation of his novel *Choke* in 2007. Though this passage exists outside of the *Invisible Monsters* narrative, Palahniuk's decision to include it in the text—especially as the last chapter of the novel—elucidates important information about the redemptive themes he explores:

Where I'm at is a big Episcopal church in downtown Newark, New Jersey, sitting in the dark while I try to write down everything. But isn't that always the impossible impulse? Don't we always try to rescue the doomed bits and pieces of life, in the hope that a mere story can become Noah's Ark and deliver all the living things of the past to a bright and glorious immortality? (301)

As mentioned previously, Palahniuk utilizes Biblical allusions in his novels in order to provide a narrative that "connect[s] you to everyone else" (qtd. in Staub), and the closing lines of the 2012 version of *Invisible Monsters* bring forth redemptive themes similar to O'Connor's poetics.

Though Palahniuk is not a Christian, he recognizes the importance of attempting to "rescue the doomed bits and pieces of life" in order that redemption may occur, and, for Palahniuk, this attempt is the best possible form of redemption his characters and readers can achieve from a non-spiritual perspective. In order to illustrate this idea, Shannon recognizes that sacrifice is an integral part of redemption, and that it is often the most violent of circumstances that beget these redemptive moments. Because the weight of damnation is so great, the cost of redemption must be just as weighty to compensate. In this manner, Palahniuk's commentary and the text of *Invisible Monsters* align with O'Connor's poetics because both Palahniuk and his characters recognize the necessity of violence for redemption.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

As evidenced by Palahniuk's resonance with O'Connor's poetics, the violence in his novels has redemptive ends. Though Palahniuk's redemption does not work on a spiritual level, he uses methods similar to O'Connor's to make his audience aware of their need for salvation. In *Mystery and Manners*, O'Connor argues that it is difficult for a writer to make his or her audience cognizant of such a need: "Redemption is meaningless unless there is a cause for it in the actual life we live, and for the last few centuries there has been operating in our culture the belief that there is no such cause" (*MM* 33). Palahniuk believes that the need for redemption in his society is evidenced by the controlling aspects of capitalist America, yet his audience may not understand that such a societal structure is as damaging as he believes it to be. Palahniuk recognizes the all-consuming depravity of his cultural surroundings, and his novels display how such and overwhelming negative force must be combatted with equally astounding means, demonstrating that he understands the cost of redemption.

Both O'Connor and Palahniuk use violence and grotesque circumstances to beget redemption in their respective contexts. For Palahniuk, redemption occurs through human connection, where he desires his characters to reject the isolating tendencies of corporate American society in favor of loving relationships with one another. Because Palahniuk's works do not redeem on a spiritual level, he does not offer eternal salvation, as O'Connor does; rather, he provides his characters and readers the best possible form of redemption he can: a more meaningful form of earthly existence. According to Palahniuk's worldview, the first step toward this end is a recognition of the depravity of the world. In an interview with *The Agony Column*, Palahniuk comments on how the violent nature of his fiction will impact his readers, with the hope that his characters and readers will have a more fulfilled life in response to his works:

I don't even think of it as shock value. I just do not want to waste my time and I

do not want to waste the reader's time by discussing something that is not really, really confronting and really challenging. You know, if you're going to go into one of my stories, you're gonna' come out the other end a slightly different person and not entirely comfortable with the world anymore. And, so, I just find it impossible to sit down and write a story that does not go to some extreme place because that's the entire purpose of a story for me. (qtd. in Repphun 135).

Palahniuk's assertion that his stories employ graphic content in order to challenge his audience reflects O'Connor's regionalism because Palahniuk desires to redeem his readers from lifestyles he views as broken, and he believes that violent and grotesque content is the best way to accomplish this goal. O'Connor argues that a good writer must "make your vision apparent by shock" (MM 34) to his or her audience, and Palahniuk conforms to this standard in *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters*. He wants his readers' views of the world to change as a result of their experiences with his novels, which fits with his statements about redemption forcing his characters back into community.

In *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters*, the characters undergo similar processes of redemption, only to be met with different ends to their respective journeys. In *Fight Club*, the narrator, after navigating a series of violent circumstances, is finally capable of reaching a point where he can declare his affection for Marla; however, the end of the novel leaves him disconnected from his loved ones and awaiting Tyler's potential return. Though the narrator does not achieve complete redemption in *Fight Club*, his failure does not negate the redemptive journey he experiences. In *Fight Club*, Palahniuk more deliberately situates redemption in the realm of his readers, calling for them to let go of what the narrator could not: an attachment to capitalism and a destruction of society as a means of freedom. In contrast, *Invisible Monsters'* Shannon goes through a complete redemptive process, where she is saved from her involvement

with the dehumanizing fashion industry and, through relinquishing her former identity, returns to her social surroundings as a transformed individual. The two Palahniuk novels analyzed in this thesis do not account for the entire scope of his literary canon, but the redemptive trend present in *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters* provides a potential for further analysis of similar themes in his later works.

Palahniuk's novels have gained cult status and popular acclaim since the publication of *Fight Club* in 1996, and the critical analysis of his works has been diverse, but limited: some authors argue that the violence in his texts is gratuitous, undermining any potential benefits of his narratives, while others champion his novels' perceived anarchist and nihilistic messages without fully evaluating the violent content therein.<sup>35</sup> However, understanding Palahniuk's violence through the lens of O'Connor's poetics provides a new viewpoint of his fiction: both *Fight Club* and *Invisible Monsters* utilize the violent moments in their texts to redeem the characters in the novels from unfulfilled lives and also provide a space for readers to be transformed as a result of their interactions with Palahniuk's works.

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<sup>35</sup> For references to specific articles on these topics, consult page 6 of Chapter One.

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