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an Exploration of Modern Masculinity Through Chuck Palahniuk's Secondary Characters in *Fight Club*

Research Question: How does the role of secondary characters in *Fight Club* contribute to Chuck Palahniuk's exploration of the fragility of modern masculinity?

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Introduction

"The first rule about fight club is you don't talk about fight club. [...] The second rule about fight club is you don't talk about fight club" (Palahniuk 49). For a novel titled after the very thing that should not be discussed, *Fight Club* by Chuck Palahniuk explores topics that many men and society often avoid discussing, particularly the difficult conversations surrounding masculinity. These issues are treated with silence as if bound by an unspoken rule against discussing them. Therefore, in this essay, we will confront these conversations and examine how Palahniuk uses his novel to address one of these unspoken topics: the fragility of modern masculinity.

Fight Club, published in 1996, quickly became a cultural phenomenon, attracting readers with its raw portrayal of modern masculinity in society (Baker). The novel follows an unnamed narrator who suffers from insomnia and dissatisfaction with his white-collar job and consumer-driven lifestyle. He soon meets Tyler Durden, a charismatic extremist who represents a satirical exaggeration of hyper-masculinity. Together, they start fight club which is an underground society where men unleash their suppressed emotions through brutal, raw fights. As the club evolves, it soon becomes known as Project Mayhem and shifts its objective toward dismantling social norms and enhancing chaos as a means of liberation. As the novel unfolds, the iconic twist is finally revealed: Tyler Durden, the face of fight club and the narrator's closest friend, does not exist. Instead, he exists only in the narrator's fractured mind, due to his insomnia-induced dissociation.

Masculinity is the novel's central theme, exploring how rigid expectations can distort identity, fuel internal conflict, and ultimately lead to self-destruction. While the primary characters, the narrator and Tyler Durden, are essential to the novel, the secondary characters

throughout *Fight Club* are also necessary in deepening the story's exploration of this central theme. Through secondary characters like Robert "Bob" Paulson, Angel Face, and Marla Singer, Chuck Palahniuk exposes a fragility within masculinity and explores it through the eyes of diverse individuals within society. Therefore, this raises the question: **How does the role of these secondary characters in *Fight Club* contribute to Chuck Palahniuk's exploration of the fragility of modern masculinity?**

Exploring the central theme of masculinity in *Fight Club* is vital, especially given today's concerns and discussions surrounding gender roles and society's expectations. As Christine Emba states in *The Washington Post*, men are struggling and are experiencing "a widespread identity crisis — as if they didn't know how to be." Emba attributes this crisis to the decline of traditional male roles in today's society and the growing pressure for men to conform to our ever-evolving social norms. Today, many men may feel emasculated and isolated without clearly defined roles since there are no fixed roles that define what men and women should do or be anymore.

In her article, Emba discusses the workforce and occupations that are perceived as more masculine. She notes, "Deindustrialization, automation, free trade and peacetime have shifted the labor market dramatically, and not in men's favor — the need for physical labor has declined, while soft skills and academic credentials are increasingly rewarded." Emba explains that, in contrast, women have been advancing in the workforce, "putting a further dent in the "provider" model that has long been ingrained in our conception of masculinity." *Fight Club* explores these concerns, with its primary characters physically rebelling against the modern world that seems to be undermining their sense of masculinity, diminishing their identities and pushing them aside.

Today's discussions and debates around gender norms and roles highlight the urgent need to reevaluate literature that addresses these concerns. Specifically, *Fight Club* is a work that stands out as Palahniuk's secondary, seemingly less significant, characters effectively illuminate these themes. Through their representation and the metaphors embedded in their stories, the secondary characters are able to reveal the fragile nature of modern masculinity that society often overlooks.

To explore how Palahniuk's secondary characters contribute to our understanding of modern masculinity, I will closely examine the secondary characters, Robert "Bob" Paulson, Angel Face, and Marla Singer, beginning with a detailed textual analysis of key passages involving these characters. This will involve how these secondary characters contrast with the narrator and Tyler Durden, each embodying diverse aspects of masculinity and vulnerability. Additionally, I have studied existing secondary sources exploring *Fight Club* to provide a greater context for my analysis. This will allow me to combine various perspectives exploring *Fight Club* which will allow me to strengthen my understanding of Palahniuk's narrative choices and their impact. I have also closely examined modern discussions and articles examining the topic of modern masculinity to fully understand the modern male experience. Through this multifaceted approach, I hope to highlight how Palahniuk's use of his secondary characters challenges and deconstructs traditional notions of masculinity within his narrative.

Robert "Bob" Paulson

At the beginning of the novel, the narrator has not slept in three weeks. Desperate for relief, he visits his doctor, only to be dismissively advised to chew valerian root and exercise, with the promise that sleep would eventually follow. The doctor downplays his condition, telling

the narrator that if he wanted to see “real pain,” he should visit support groups for those with terminal illnesses. Taking this advice, the narrator attends a testicular cancer support group called "Remaining Men Together," where he meets Robert "Bob" Paulson. During a soothing exercise, the narrator finds himself cradled in Bob's arms, describing Bob with phrases like "too much estrogen" and "bitch tits" (Palahniuk 17).

Once a powerful bodybuilder, Bob's reliance on steroids led to his testicular cancer and resulted in the removal of his testicles and the development of "bitch tits" due to excessive estrogen (17). This transformation stripped him of the physical traits that once defined his sense of manhood, resulting in a sense of emasculation and insecurity. Bob's appearance, once “totally shredded” and a symbol of male strength, now symbolizes his vulnerability (21). His physical changes forced him to seek solace in support groups, where he clung to others like him. Bob's character reveals how closely masculinity is tied to physicality, and how quickly it can be disrupted simply by changes in the body, exposing its inherent fragility.

Bob's struggle is poignantly captured when the narrator describes their embrace: "Bob's big arms were closed around to hold me inside, and I was squeezed in the dark between Bob's new sweating tits that hang enormous, the way we think of God's as big" (16). Bob was once the embodiment of physical strength and masculine ideals through his successful bodybuilding career and social status. He ironically faces emasculation due to the very steroids he used to enhance his sense of masculinity through his physical appearance. His steroid use results in his cancer diagnosis, which ultimately robs him of the physical dominance he once prided himself on: "His own gym, Big Bob owned a gym. He'd been married three times. He'd done product endorsements [...] The whole how-to-program about expanding your chest was practically his invention" (21).

Following this, Bob faces bankruptcy, divorce, and estrangement from his two grown children, who no longer return his calls, leaving him unable to fulfill the traditional male roles he once embodied as he is no longer able to provide for his family or maintain his image of strength. His story exposes how even a seemingly small disruption to a man's physicality, such as the loss of one's testicles, can unravel one's entire sense of masculine identity. Despite Bob's efforts to conform to social ideals such as building a career around physical strength and starting a family, he loses everything due to circumstances beyond his control, exposing the inherent instability of masculine identity, which seems to be based on unstable and unrealistic expectations.

Additionally, Bob's perceived loss of masculinity forces him into a perceived maternal role. Stereotypically, females are portrayed as nurturing and empathetic, while males are seen as more rational and less emotionally expressive (Christov-Moore et al.). However, Bob defies this stereotype by providing deep comfort and emotional support to the narrator during their embrace. In this moment of emotional vulnerability, the narrator finds solace in Bob's arms, where he is comforted in a way typically associated with maternal care: "I was lost inside oblivion, dark and silent and complete, and when I finally stepped away from his soft chest, the front of Bob's shirt was a wet mask of how I looked crying" (Palahniuk 22). The narrator can let go and embrace his vulnerability in Bob's arms, something he has been unable to do elsewhere. In Bob's maternal embrace, the narrator finds a rare space where he can release his pent-up emotions through crying.

The narrator later reflects, "[a]nd I slept. Babies don't sleep this well", comparing his interaction with Bob to that of a mother soothing a child to sleep (22). This comparison demonstrates how Bob's empathetic qualities, traditionally considered feminine, shift him into a

maternal role. His embrace, which finally cures the narrator's insomnia, demonstrates the way emotional traits often labeled as "feminine" can push a man further away from social ideals of manhood. Bob's nurturing presence, though comforting to the narrator, serves as yet another sign of his emasculation, with the narrator comparing him not to a man but to a mother and woman instead. This comparison demonstrates how social expectations of masculinity, which view emotions and caregiving as weaknesses, reveal the fragile state of modern masculinity. This view pushes men who do not conform to traditional norms, like Bob, into roles that completely undermine their masculinity.

Chuck Palahniuk's use of Robert "Bob" Paulson as a secondary character exposes the true fragility of modern masculinity. Bob's story demonstrates how easily modern masculinity can be dismantled by circumstances outside of one's control. By portraying Bob as a traditionally masculine character who is reduced to a feminized, maternal figure, Palahniuk exposes the true weaknesses of social expectations around gender. Palahniuk's use of this secondary character explores how modern masculinity, built on physical strength and gender roles and expectations, is vulnerable to collapse.

Angel Face

"That Saturday night, a young guy with an angel's face came to his first fight club, and I tagged him for a fight. That's the rule. If it's your first night in fight club, you have to fight" (122). The narrator's description of this secondary character as "a young guy with an angel's face," who must fight as part of his initiation into fight club, explores the central theme of fragile masculinity throughout the novel (122). The act of the narrator singling out Angel Face because he is perceived as beautiful and weak, demonstrates a key aspect of Palahniuk's exploration of

modern masculinity: the social perception that men who are physically attractive or exhibit vulnerability are inherently weaker or less masculine.

This secondary character is referred to only as "Angel Face," never given a proper name, and described as simply "beautiful" (122). The compliment "beautiful" is typically associated with femininity, with adjectives like "pretty," "gorgeous," and "lovely," and is often used to describe and compliment women. This choice of adjective, rather than traditionally masculine terms like "handsome" or "good-looking," indicates that the narrator perceives Angel Face as embodying qualities associated with femininity. The use of "beautiful" instead of a masculine compliment reveals the narrator's first impression of Angel Face as fragile, weak, and unthreatening which are all traits he views as flaws within the extreme-masculine world of *Fight Club*.

Angel Face's beauty becomes a symbol of everything the narrator despises as he represents feminized masculinity he believes is a product of modern society's softening of men. The narrator explains that "because the insomnia was on again, [he] was in a mood to destroy something beautiful" (122). The narrator's desire to destroy "something beautiful" with his brutal attack is not merely about violent relief, but a symbolic attempt to physically strip away the softness within Angel Face that he associates with femininity and vulnerability (122). By attacking Angel Face, the narrator hopes to shape him into the mold of the hyper-masculine, violent ideal that fight club promotes, where aggression and dominance are valued above all else.

The narrator's description of the fight reinforces this idea: "That night at fight club I hit our first-timer and hammered that beautiful mister angel face, first with the bony knuckles of my fist like a pounding molar, and then the knotted tight butt of my fist [...] Then the kid fell through my arms in a heap" (123). The brutality of the narrator's actions against Angel Face serves as an

act of emasculation. Through this violence, Angel Face's physical beauty is destroyed, and with it, his perceived feminized traits.

Angel Face's transformation after the fight further explores the novel's criticism of masculinity being tied to physical strength. Once admired for his beauty, he is left with two black eyes and skin "pounded thin across his cheekbones and turned black" after the brutal attack (124). The narrator's comment, "[p]ut him in a dress and make him smile, and he'd be a woman," perfectly demonstrates how, in the narrator's eyes, Angel Face's loss stripped him of his masculine traits, reducing him to a woman (128).

Palahniuk utilizes Angel Face's character to reveal how today's world associates male vulnerability and weakness with emasculation. Therefore, by losing the fight, Angel Face not only experiences physical damage but also experiences a symbolic reduction in status, where his weakness is viewed as unmanly. Therefore, Palahniuk examines how the mere act of losing a fight becomes not just a personal failure but also a broader emasculation in today's society.

Angel Face's transformation displays *Fight Club's* exploration of how social pressures link a man's worth to physical strength and aggression. Once confident in his appearance, Angel Face is reduced to an unrecognizable state, showing how easily traditional markers of manhood, like beauty and dominance, can be suddenly taken away. The fact that his emasculation is so tightly linked to his appearance and ability to fight deepens *Fight Club's* exploration of modern masculinity, where strength and toughness are valued, and any sign of weakness is punished.

Near the end of the fight, the narrator describes that "[he] held the face of mister angel like a baby or a football in the crook of [his] arm and bashed him with [his] knuckles, bashed him until his teeth broke through his lips" (124). This description demonstrates the infantilization of Angel Face during the fight, symbolizing the emasculation the narrator imposes on him. The

comparison of Angel Face to both a "baby" and a "football" exposes the narrator's perception of Angel Face as being both helpless and an object to be controlled. The "baby" description evokes a sense of vulnerability, weakness, and femininity, qualities the narrator associates with a loss of masculinity. The "football," on the other hand, suggests something to be tossed around and exposes the narrator's feeling of dominance over him.

The description of Angel Face found in the "crook of [his] arm" greatly strengthens this imagery (124). The "crook" refers to the bend in the arm, which, when associated with holding something, suggests cradling or holding something close, like an infant. This further infantilizes Angel Face, as he is positioned as something fragile, small, and in need of protection, yet he is simultaneously being beaten. Holding Angel Face in this position makes him incredibly vulnerable and powerless, and the narrator can assert dominance over him in the same way one might control something weaker or less valuable.

This comparison reinforces the idea that, in modern masculinity, vulnerability and weakness are deeply tied to femininity and infantilism. Therefore, accompanying these traits equate to being feminine. The narrator's violent actions and his treatment of Angel Face as both a helpless infant and an object to be handled reveal the toxic expectations surrounding modern masculinity, where the suppression of vulnerability and weakness is vital in preserving one's sense of masculinity.

Therefore, through Angel Face's character, Chuck Palahniuk reveals the fragile nature of modern masculinity, as it is formed by social expectations of strength and dominance. The narrator's rapid decision to punish Angel Face for his beauty and perceived weakness exposes the true instability of modern masculine ideals, where aggression, control, and power are the only traits that matter. Angel Face's character reveals how easily one's masculinity can be

deconstructed in today's society and how tightly modern masculinity relies on physical strength and the suppression of weakness.

Marla Singer

Within Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, the secondary character, Marla Singer, becomes a powerful tool through which the fragility of modern masculinity is explored from a female perspective. Throughout the novel, simply Marla's existence seems to disrupt the narrator's sense of masculinity since her apathetic personality and disregard for gender roles force him to confront his internal insecurities. Through Palahniuk's use of this secondary character, he is able to explore the frail state of modern masculinity specifically, demonstrating how easily it can be destabilized by external influences, including both comparisons to women and the need for validation from other men.

The narrator and Marla Singer first meet at a Remaining Men Together meeting, where, like the narrator, she is not attending out of genuine illness but for pleasure instead. During another soothing exercise, the narrator observes Marla's emotional detachment: "The man still crying against her neck, Marla takes another drag on her cigarette. I watch her from Bob's shuddering tits" (23). This moment demonstrates Marla's emotional distance and nonchalant qualities often associated with masculinity, which leaves the narrator feeling weak and emasculated by comparison. While the narrator seeks emotional validation in the support groups, demonstrated by Bob's weekly comforting embraces, Marla's character challenges his expectations of traditional gender roles. Her apparent nonchalance and behavior, more "masculine" than his own, seem to undermine his sense of self-worth. This reveals the fragility of modern masculinity, demonstrating how easily it can be threatened by simply a woman's

rejection of traditional expectations and her refusal to adhere to the emotional roles often assigned to her gender.

As the novel progresses, Marla Singer's relationship with Tyler Durden serves as a direct attack on the narrator's masculinity, exposing its fragility. Tyler and Marla's first encounter occurs when Marla overdoses on Xanax and calls the narrator, saying she's "doing the big death thing," referring to her attempting suicide (59). The narrator, seeing her as a rival, refuses to help, but Tyler, his other personality, intervenes and stops her. Tyler takes Marla from her hotel room and brings her back to his house. Later, Marla demands that Tyler keep her awake all night, stating she'll die if she falls asleep. This marks the start of their casual sexual relationship, something the narrator deeply resents.

The narrator expresses his anger and jealousy through a recurring motif of bodily metaphors, referencing a *Reader's Digest* series where human organs speak in the first person. To describe his frustration, he expresses, "I am Joe's Grinding Teeth. I am Joe's Inflamed Flaring Nostrils. [...] I am Joe's White Knuckles" (59). Palahniuk's use of imagery, describing the narrator's grinding teeth, flaring nostrils, and white knuckles, reveals the narrator's intense emotional response to Tyler's sexual relationship with Marla. These physical symptoms of rage suggest that his jealousy does not stem from mere sexual desire or rivalry, but from deeper insecurities regarding power and control. Tyler Durden seems to embody everything the narrator aspires to be: confident, dominant, and assertive. Therefore, Marla's attraction to Tyler, the "perfect man", intensifies the narrator's feelings of inferiority, constantly reminding him of his perceived failure to live up to these ideals.

The narrator reveals deeper emotions as he reflects, "How could I compete for Tyler's attention. I am Joe's Enraged, Inflamed Sense of Rejection" (60). Therefore, it is clear that his

initial rivalry with Marla does not stem from romantic or sexual jealousy but from a need to compete for Tyler's approval. The narrator feels threatened by Marla's presence, even in gaining validation from his own alter ego, revealing this deep insecurity. Even the approval of Tyler, a figure created in his mind, becomes vital to his self-worth and sense of manhood, revealing how modern masculinity often relies heavily on unrealistic external validation, exposing its fragility.

The secondary character, Marla Singer, allows Chuck Palahniuk to expose the fragility and insecurity within modern masculinity, exploring how easily it can be disrupted and destabilized. Through Marla, Palahniuk comments on rigid gender norms and reveals how such narrow definitions fuel feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt within men. By portraying the narrator's internal feelings in response to Marla and Tyler's relationship, Palahniuk further exposes modern masculinity's vulnerability as it is tightly tied to external validation from men and can be very easily disrupted when this external validation is not achieved or mere confrontation from women who defy traditional gender expectations.

Conclusion

Throughout Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*, the roles of the secondary characters like Robert "Bob" Paulson, Angel Face, and Marla Singer, contributed significantly to Palahniuk's exploration of the fragility of modern masculinity. Bob Paulson's character revealed how masculinity, tied to physical appearance and strength, collapses when those traits disappear, revealing its fragility. Angel Face's fight with the narrator exposed how modern masculinity is linked to aggression and dominance and once his beauty and strength were lost, he became a symbol of emasculation, exposing its fragility. Finally, Marla's interactions with the narrator revealed how men often rely on minimal competition and validation from others to feel

masculine, revealing the fragile state of modern masculinity. These secondary characters were able to deeply explore the frail nature of modern masculinity, which is built on fragile ideals of power, physicality, and external validation.

As a man, Chuck Palahniuk likely encountered many obstacles in expressing these ideas, which makes *Fight Club* such a powerful and unique vehicle for bringing these issues to light. As Palahniuk notes in his afterword, “The *fighting* wasn’t the important part of the story” (213). Therefore, through his writing, Palahniuk not only created a satirical, masculinity-centered narrative revolving around the fights in fight club, but also exposed the flaws within modern masculinity, demonstrating how today’s society pressures men to conform to unrealistic ideals of strength, dominance, and emotional suppression.

While our world has evolved greatly since the book’s publication in 1996, the same narrow definitions of masculinity remain today, as seen in the continuous emphasis on physicality, career success, and control. Luckily, progress has been made through many movements supporting men’s struggles and the growing conversations around men’s mental health have begun to reveal the toxic effects of such rigid ideals. With these issues being evident since at least the novel’s publication, it’s time we encourage men to embrace vulnerability and redefine what it means to be masculine. Therefore, by the end of this analysis, readers are encouraged to adopt a more flexible, compassionate view of masculine identity that hopefully values emotional expression, resilience, and true strength above all else.

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