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The Legacy of *Invisible Man*: Ralph Ellison's Influence on *Fight Club*

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

Vedoucí bakalářské práce (supervisor):

Prof. David L. Robbins, PhD

Zpracoval (author):

Michal Otáhal

Studijní obor (subject):

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Abstract

This thesis explores the themes of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) in comparison with Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) through the views of the intradiegetic unnamed first-person narrators of both novels. Although they are of a different race, socio-economical standing, and era, they have a similar mindset which, on the one hand, criticizes the US capitalism and the work-oriented, materialistic American Dream, and on the other one, reflects Emersonian combination of nihilism and anarchy. *Fight Club* follows the ideas voiced in *Invisible Man* and adjusts them to the contemporary globalized society. The thesis is divided into three main chapters, each focusing on one major topic pursued by the narrators. The first chapter deals with the idea of dispossession, both as a material and spiritual separation from the world, which is the core of the narrators' process of self-liberation from the norms of society. Only when they lose all possessions, social bonds, and almost erase their identities, they can find their true (Emersonian) selves and freedom. The self is more analysed in the following chapter focused on the theme of social invisibility. The narrators are taken at face value by society, i.e. people concentrate only on their outward social markers and disregard their individual selves. Thus, they lack their own identity and feel like no ones—they are invisible in the hive of identical individuals. This is strengthened by their everyman features, omission of their real names, and loss of their original identities, which are overshadowed by those they assume (or receive). The final chapter analyses the manipulation of the organizations which the narrators join. The narrators have no actual power over the organizations—they become mere symbols of their ideologies. When the narrators realize the manipulation, they try to stop them but are considered as traitors and figuratively castrated, which leads to their final dispossession in their quest of finding their true Emersonian self and freedom.

Key Words

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club*, dispossession, possession, identity, manipulation, social invisibility, society, freedom, everyman, American dream

Abstrakt

Tato bakalářská práce zkoumá motivy románu Ralpha Ellisona *Neviditelný* (1952) v porovnání s románem Chucka Palahniuka *Klub rváčů* (1996) prostřednictvím názorů bezejmenných intradiegetických vypravěčů obou knih v první osobě. I když je každý jiné rasy, jsou z jiné doby a mají rozdílné socioekonomické postavení, zastávají podobné názory, které na jedné straně kritizují americký kapitalismus a pracovně orientovaný, materialistický americký sen a na druhé straně odráží Emersonovo propojení nihilismu a anarchie. *Klub rváčů* navazuje na myšlenky vyjádřené v *Neviditelném* a přizpůsobuje je současné globalizované společnosti. Bakalářská práce je rozdělena do tří hlavních kapitol a každá se zabývá jedním z hlavních témat, kterým se vypravěči věnují. První kapitola rozebírá myšlenku „vyvlastnění“, jako materiální i duševní separaci od světa, což je klíčový proces vypravěčů umožňující jim osvobození sebe sama od norem společnosti. Teprve když se zbaví veškerého vlastnictví, společenských vazeb a téměř i identit, naleznou své pravé (Emersonské) já a svobodu. Pojetím „já“ se více zabývá druhá kapitola, která sleduje téma společenské neviditelnosti. Vypravěči jsou společností souzeni dle svého zevnějšku, tj. lidé se zaměřují pouze na jejich vnější společenské ukazatele a ignorují jejich individuální já. Postrádají tak vlastní identitu a cítí se nebýt nikým – v davu totožných jednotlivců jsou neviditelní. Tento pocit je upevněn tím, že mají podobné vlastnosti jako Everyman (Kdožkolivěk), jejich jména jsou vynechána a ztratí své originální identity. Tyto identity jsou zastíněny těmi, které získají nebo na sebe převzou. Závěrečná kapitola se zabývá manipulací organizací, ke kterým se vypravěči přidají. Vypravěči nemají nad organizacemi žádnou faktickou moc – stanou se z nich pouhé symboly jejich ideologií. Když si vypravěči uvědomí jejich manipulaci, pokusí se je zastavit, čímž ze sebe udělají zrádce a jsou metaforicky vykastrováni, což vede k jejich definitivnímu „vyvlastnění“ na jejich výpravě za hledáním pravého Emersonského já a svobody.

Klíčová slova

Ralph Ellison, *Neviditelný*, Chuck Palahniuk, *Klub rváčů*, vyvlastnění, vlastnictví, identita, manipulace, společenská neviditelnost, společnost, svoboda, everyman, kdokolivěk, kdožkolivěk, americký sen

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The critics offer many interpretations and inspirations for Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club*. In many cases, it is compared with Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, where the protagonist deals with his second violent personality trying to overpower him. In one essay, the novel is even compared to the comic series *Calvin and Hobbes*, in which, some argue, Hobbes is an imaginary friend of Calvin, who believes Hobbes is real.¹ Palahniuk himself says:

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

It was a classic, ancient romance but updated to compete with the espresso machine and ESPN.²

Although, like *Fight Club*, *The Great Gatsby* criticizes the concept of the American dream and explores ideas of multiple identities (including social invisibility), it lacks the endeavour to free oneself from the tight grasp of society and reach for the Emersonian liberated Self.

While most critics pursue in *Fight Club* more popular themes such as anarchy, personality disorder, or the comparison to its movie adaptation, the novel also offers detailed representations and ideas of the contemporary American mindset. Some of these thoughts strikingly resemble those examined in Ellison's older novel. Like *Invisible Man*, *Fight Club* also explores the issues of dispossession, the failed American dream, and the social invisibility of people living on the edge of society without any possibility to move upwards. The narrative "Bildungsroman" structures of the novels are quite similar: they both feature an unnamed "intradiegetic first-person narrator,"³ who has to destroy his identity and forsake his possessions on his paths of self-discovery, and whose development is highly influenced by leaders of the organization he joins.

This BA thesis explores the perception of these themes present in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952) and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) through the

¹ Galvin P. Chow, "The Return of Hobbes," in *You do not talk about Fight Club*, ed. Read Mercer Schuchardt (Dallas, TX: Bendella Books, Inc., 1998), 133.

² Chuck Palahniuk, "Afterword," in *Fight Club* (London: Vintage, 2010), 216.

³ Michel Fabre, "The Narrator/Narratee Relationship in *Invisible Man*," *Recent Essays from Europe: A Special Issue*, no. 25 (Autumn 1985): 535, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2930824>.

views of the unnamed first-person narrators of both novels. Although they are of a different race, socio-economic standing, and era, they have a similar mindset which, on the one hand, criticizes US capitalism and the work-oriented, materialistic American Dream; and, on the other one, reflects a (post-)Emersonian combination of nihilism and anarchy. The thesis argues that the main concept of *Fight Club*'s Emersonian search for one's true Self—combined with social invisibility and the unattainable American dream—follows the interpretations in Ellison's *Invisible Man* but adjusts them to the contemporary globalized society.

The thesis is divided into three main chapters, each focusing on one of the major themes pursued by the narrators. Since the themes are highly interlinked, the chapters often refer to each other. The second chapter deals with the idea of dispossession, both as a material and spiritual separation from the world, which is the core of the narrators' process of self-liberation from the norms of society. Only when they sink to the very bottom of their lives—lose all possessions, social bonds, and almost erase their identities—can they find their true (Emersonian) selves and freedom. Dispossession as such is named only in *Invisible Man* where it takes on a unique philosophical meaning rather than being a mere “act of taking somebody's property or land away from them.”⁴ Apart from material possession, it involves spiritual: similar to the possession Emerson explains at the end of his essay “The Poet:”

Thou shalt have the whole land for thy park and manor, the sea for thy bath and navigation, without tax and without envy; the woods and the rivers thou shalt own; and thou shalt possess that wherein others are only tenants and boarders.⁵

What Emerson describes in this excerpt is the ultimate state the narrators reach at their end: they become one with what Emerson designates as “external” and “internal” nature⁶, free of their social bindings and meaningless possessions produced by the process and conditions of “civilization.” To integrate with (and thus fully “possess”) “nature” and to become Emersonian American Poets (as described in the third chapter), they need to dispossess themselves of the “possession” derived from “useless” (indeed, pathological) civilization. Dispossession has, of course, also a racial Afro-American

⁴ “Dispossession,” *Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, accessed August 4, 2021,

<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/dispossession?q=dispossession>.

⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The Poet,” in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, 7th edition, Vol. B, ed. Nina Baym (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc, 2007), 1195.

⁶ Martin Procházka and David Robbins, “Ralph Waldo Emerson,” in *Lectures on American Literature*, ed. Justin Quinn (Prague: Karolinum, 2011), 88.

meaning in *Invisible Man*, concerning the eviction of poor people in great debt. Because *Fight Club* does not deal with racial struggles and because race is not indispensable for the core signification of dispossession, this meaning is omitted from the current thesis.

There is, however, an interesting quote by Chuck Palahniuk that connects the two different eras and the social standing of the narrators:

In the late 1950s, individuals suffering under racial segregation went to church for comfort; there they found each other and the power to take action. Perhaps that was the transition from finding community in religion to finding it in politics and therapy. Now, to vent and exhaust their worst fears, people go to addiction recovery groups, political protests, fight clubs.⁷

Of course, Palahniuk alludes to the various civil rights movements that were forming around churches in that period (M. L. King, Rosa Parks, and others). The Brotherhood, the organization in *Invisible Man*, does anticipate some characteristics of an activist religious community; but, being based, as it is, on the virulently anti-religious Communist Party,⁸ it is more oriented toward politics and secular “salvation.” People gather at a specified time to hear a speech by somebody they believe to be a reliable authority and guide, who preaches, in this case, about their *social* deliverance. The process is different in fight clubs, but the dynamic is not.

The self of the respective narrators, which needs to be dispossessed (redeemed), is analysed more fully in the third chapter, which is focused on the theme of social invisibility. The narrators are, and allow themselves to be, taken at face value by society and its members, most of whom focus only on their outward social markers and disregard their individual selves (or “internal natures” as Emerson would put it). Thus, both narrators lack their own identity—their inner, authentic “selves” are invisible (even to the narrators) in a hive of externally, other-determined androids—as Waggoner described T. S. Eliot’s “hollow men:” “We are hollow men, futile men, made more futile by the knowledge of our own futility.”⁹ These “hollow men” can also be described as David Riesman’s “lonely crowd”: “a teeming throng whose individual members nevertheless feel themselves to be achingly alone, empty, devoid of purpose or

⁷ Chuck Palahniuk, “The Fringe is the Future,” in *You do not talk about Fight Club*, ed. Read Mercer Schuchardt (Dallas, TX: Bendella Books, Inc., 1998), 10.

⁸ Barbara Foley, “The Rhetoric of Anticommunism in *Invisible Man*,” *College English* 59, no. 5 (September 1997): 535, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/378665>.

⁹ Hyatt Howe Waggoner, “T. S. Eliot and *The Hollow Men*,” *American Literature* 15, no. 2 (May 1943): 116, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2920415>.

independent meaning”¹⁰ Once they join the organizations, they believe they have regained purpose and a sense of belonging, even though it may be only illusory. Narratively, this condition is emphasized by the protagonists’ everyman features and the omission of their real names.

By assuming other identities, they gain access to others of their social sphere and even the power to control them; but only when they stay in their role. While they wield this externally-assigned identity, they experience the delusion of power, of becoming the Emersonian Poet—the “voice of their generation.” Once they stumble out of this identity, they suddenly become feeble and ostracized from the group to which they had deceived themselves, or been deceived, as belonging. Nonetheless, the struggle to understand their identity, or serial identities is one of the keys to the discovery and liberation of their “true” Selves, because their identity-confusion enhances their spiritual dispossession.

The fourth chapter analyses the manipulation of the narrators (and other members) by the organizations to which they have joined themselves. Whatever the two protagonists might allow themselves to imagine, they never have any actual power over the organizations and are maneuvered, instead, into becoming mere symbols and tools, if not personifications, of the organizations’ respective ideologies. Their own “true” identities (those which are legitimately “owned” by the narrators) are appropriated, possessed, defaced, and rendered invisible by the exploitative, oppressive organizations. The erasure of members’ names subdues their individuality and renders them an everyman (no man) without any remaining distinguishing characteristics. When the organizations deteriorate, the narrators try to “save” their members but are trapped in a Kafkaesque limbo, into which they have allowed their “mentoring” leaders to carry them, and where they have to undertake (through “dispossession”) a process of self-discovery whose outcome is anything but assured.

This BA thesis employs the thoughts of Ralph Waldo Emerson, whose transcendental philosophy protrudes in both examined novels. The novels’ interpretations of Emerson’s philosophies in his essays (for example, “The Poet,” and “Self-Reliance”) constitute the basis for my argumentation on the main concepts in the

¹⁰ Wilfred M. McClay, “Fifty years of *The Lonely Crowd*,” *The Wilson Quarterly* 22, no. 3 (1998), <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?authtype=shib&custid=s1240919&direct=true&db=edsblr&AN=edsblr.A20998496&site=eds-live&scope=site&lang=cs>.

novels that are compared in this thesis: dispossession, invisibility, the American Poet. Dispossession and those who are dispossessed—as conceptualized in *Invisible Man* and later in *Fight Club* (although the expression does not appear there in this form)—are problematic concepts to interpret, but crucial to understanding nuanced aspects of previously-induced commentary. Corrigan in his essay suggests that the poetry of (the self-embodied American poet) Walt Whitman is presented through the eyes of the dispossessed:

those who will not enjoy the ideal democratic pact to come and are subsumed as raw materials for the ascent into this new America.¹¹

Most critical studies, however, approach “dispossession” in the material sense springing from the colonial time of oppression and its various projections into the post-colonial U.S.¹² Therefore, I have found support for my arguments in this thesis in various essays regarding these concepts and their persistence as described above.

As far as I have been able to discover, these two novels have previously been critically juxtaposed only in one short article by Michael Mason, “Father of Fight Club,”¹³ and in a discussion on a forum;¹⁴ but neither represents a deep analysis on the topic as they only scratch the surface of the issues. Therefore, this thesis employs and compares the suggestions provided by available essays on the individual novels. The essays for *Fight Club* are cautiously chosen because not every work exploring “*Fight Club*” deals specifically with the novel. Although it is a relatively recent book (published in 1996), there is an extensive body of criticism surrounding the narrative. Unfortunately, the film adaptation in many cases overshadows the novel, and therefore its criticism as well. Some critics even seem to be oblivious to the fact that it is an adaptation and examine the film as the work of its director David Fincher. Nonetheless, I have also employed in this thesis some of the better essays on the film, although only those that are focused on ideological issues shared with the book, which I believe are accurately captured in the adaptation.

¹¹ John Michael Corrigan, “Visions of Power and Dispossession: Emerson, Whitman, and the “robust soul,” *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review* 28, no. 3 (Winter 2011), <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A249959058/GLS?u=karlova&sid=bookmark-GLS&xid=00bed7a3>.

¹² Siraj Ahmed, “Dispossession and Civil Society: The Ambivalence of Enlightenment Political Philosophy,” *The Eighteenth Century* 55, no. 2 (2014): 154, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/549291>.

¹³ Michael Mason, “Father of Fight Club,” *This Land*, accessed January 3, 2021, <http://thislandpress.com/2014/04/07/father-of-fight-club/>.

¹⁴ Giddy, “fight club based on ellison's invisible man?,” *antsmarching*, accessed January 3, 2021, <https://www.antsmarching.org/forum/showthread.php?t=58047>.

Since the protagonists of both books are nameless, this thesis refers to the protagonist of *Invisible Man* simply as Invisible Man and to the one in *Fight Club* as The Narrator. Even though the character Tyler Durden in *Fight Club* is the alter ego of The Narrator, they are generally described in the thesis as two separate characters to avoid confusion. Although they influence one another, their thoughts are different. Because of the film adaptation's popularity, the critical consensus is to call the Narrator "Jack."¹⁵ The Narrator uses Jack's (in the novel, Joe's) organs as a conveyor of his emotions, the Narrator's choice, in either case, of one of the most common English names enhancing Joe/Jack's (and the Narrator's) dis-identification as a self-effacing everyman.¹⁶ Taking all this into consideration, I have chosen to call him simply "the Narrator."

¹⁵ Douglass Keeseey, "The Struggle for Identity: *Fight Club*, *Invisible Monsters*, *Survivor*, *Choke*," in *Understanding Chuck Palahniuk* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2016), 16.

¹⁶ Chow, "The Return of Hobbes," 133.

Chapter 2: “Dispossession! *Dis*-possession is the word!”

On their journey of self-discovery, the narrators discuss the value of possession, not only in the material sense but also spiritual, and how it affects one’s social position. With various help, they discover that the disposal of both types of possession allows them to liberate themselves from the norms of society. Their idea of dispossession criticizes the work-oriented, materialistic American Dream which, according to them, does not fulfil its promise. Through the process of dispossession, they sink to the very bottom of their lives—they lose everything they own, sever their social bonds, and nearly erase their identities. When they do that, they find their true selves and freedom in the Emersonian sense. It is the discovery of their new voices that changes the way they see the world. From then on, they slowly start to critically re-evaluate their previous lives and possession in general.

Chapter 2.1: A New Voice

Although the backgrounds of *Invisible Man* and *The Narrator* are different, they both trusted in the American dream which, ultimately, failed them. After seeing the eviction of an old Afro-American couple, *Invisible Man* realizes he cannot achieve anything more with hard work because the system does not allow it. *The Narrator*, on the other hand, is trapped by his possession in an endless cycle of furnishing his home with mass-produced products. The only solution for them is to accept their roles and come into agreement with their new voices that preach about dispossession.

The narrators of both novels live as best as they can within the rules of the society but there is no reciprocity from the system. During *Invisible Man*'s studies at college, he "and his fellow students virtually worship the administrators and trustees, embodiments of the material success that supposedly ensues from hard work and clean living."¹⁷ Even after several gruesome setbacks, he still pursues the notion of the American dream: "the ideal that every citizen of the United States should have an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination, and initiative."¹⁸ His awakening from the futile pursuit of this life is marked with the birth of his new powerful voice, which commences his process of self-realization and sets the grounds for the idea of dispossession.

A similar change occurs in *The Narrator*'s life in *Fight Club* due to his new voice, his alter ego, Tyler Durden. Tyler's ideology also criticizes the concept of the American dream based on *The Narrator*'s failure to reach it. Unlike *Invisible Man*, his life was always full of possessions. *The Narrator* feels close to reaching the American dream, though it is only a phantom feeling of the unreachable:

I was tired and bored with my job and my furniture, and I couldn't see
any way to change things.
Only end them.
I felt trapped.
I was too complete.
I was too perfect.¹⁹

¹⁷ Valerie Smith, "The Meaning of Narration in *Invisible Man*," in *New Essays on Invisible Man*, ed. Robert O'Meally (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 30.

¹⁸ "American Dream," *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed January 4, 2021, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/6342?redirectedFrom=american+dream#eid5337887>.

¹⁹ Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* (London: Vintage, 2010), 172-173. (All subsequent quotations from this edition will be indicated in the text by parentheses.)

The fruits of the American dream—the material possessions—bring him only emptiness and severe insomnia. He is a “corporate slave, [who] defines himself by his material possession, and by what he does from nine to five to attain those things.”²⁰ His turning point is the emergence of Tyler, the new voice, who liberates him from all material possessions by blowing up his precious condominium.

Invisible Man responds to the eviction of the old Afro-American couple and delivers a speech which “marks his transition from a phase of egocentric leadership ‘for’ society to a phase of self-effacing leadership ‘against’ the social order;”²¹ in other words, he turns himself and the eviction’s audience against the American dream. After being unfairly expelled from a college (similar to Booker T. Washington’s Tuskegee Institute) by its Afro-American president (who, in addition, betrays him by giving him a false prospect of a job in New York), after stumbling into a political power-struggle in a paint company (where he is again tricked by his Afro-American co-worker into destroying boilers and, in the process, severely injures himself), and after a subsequent hospitalization where he undertakes torturous medical treatment, he ends up at the eviction scene and meditates on this previous experience. Having all these instances of betrayal (and there were even more) in mind, he finds a new voice that goes against his previous beliefs and the norms of society. The new voice represents the first manifestation of the term dispossession.

When Invisible Man audibly laments the old couple’s pitiful life, which is spread out on the cold winter streets of New York, a furious man from the angered mob surrounding the scene retorts: “Hell, they have been dispossessed!”²² The focus of Invisible Man’s speech immediately turns to the man’s last word. He begins to use it for his further argumentation and expands its meaning onto a philosophical level:

That’s a good word, ‘Dispossessed’! ‘Dispossessed,’ eighty-seven years and dispossessed of what? They ain’t *got* nothing, they caint *get* nothing, they never *had* nothing. [...] So who’s being dispossessed? Can it be us? (Ellison, 279)

The answer reflects his personal experience with the impenetrable system. He realizes that he is in the same position as the couple: “And it was as though I myself was being

²⁰ Christopher N. Chandler and Philip Tallon, “Poverty and Anarchy in *Fight Club*,” *You do not talk about Fight Club*, ed. Read Mercer Schuchardt (Dallas, TX: Bendella Books, Inc., 1998), 36.

²¹ John S. Wright, “The Conscious Hero and the Rise of Man: Ellison’s War,” in *New Essays on Invisible Man*, ed. Robert O’Meally (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 166.

²² Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin Essentials, 2014), 278. (All subsequent quotations from this edition will be indicated in the text by parentheses.)

dispossessed of some painful yet precious thing which I could not bear to lose” (Ellison, 273). He argues that the old couple did not have anything to begin with. Society was dispossessing them of everything throughout their entire lives and, now, virtually nothing remains in their possession. Evicted and homeless, they hit the rock bottom of society without any means to climb up.

Bearing in mind the last citation, The Narrator in *Fight Club* feels similarly towards his condo where he tries to satisfy his “nesting instinct” (Palahniuk, 43) of acquiring “material symbols of wealth and success.”²³ He cannot by himself acknowledge nor erase what makes him miserable. His new voice, Tyler, steps in and blows up his apartment to free him of all material possessions and the pursuit of the American dream. The Narrator says to an investigating detective at the scene, “I loved my life. I loved that condo. I loved every stick of furniture. That was my whole life. [...] It was me that blew up” (Palahniuk, 110-111) and so begins his journey of the dispossession of one’s Self.

As *Invisible Man* stands in front of the few belongings of the old couple on the street and feels the power of their dispossession, so does The Narrator with his destroyed furnishings and condo. Although *Invisible Man* wishes to calm the tense situation surrounding the eviction, he does the exact opposite and aggravates the mob into violence when he emphasizes the failure of the materially oriented American dream. Subsequently, he is contacted by Jack, the leader of the Brotherhood, who invites him in and gives him more room to meditate on dispossession by giving him a paid position in the organization. Likewise, without material possession, The Narrator agrees to meet up with Tyler, him as yet-unexplored alter ego (but he does not know that yet), who explains to him his own philosophy of dispossession and anti-consumerism.²⁴ Their meeting leads up to the foundation of the first fight club when Tyler tells him: “I want you to hit me as hard as you can” (Palahniuk, 46). Therefore, violence is also present, though, not against the system (like the police supervising the eviction in *Invisible Man*) but rather aimed at himself.

Both narrators begin to trust in the power of their new voices and gradually develop their philosophy of dispossession. They scrutinize their lives and realize that

²³ Christian McKinney, “The Salvation Myth,” in *You do not talk about Fight Club*, ed. Read Mercer Schuchardt (Dallas, TX: Bendella Books, Inc., 1998), 68.

²⁴ McKinney, “The Salvation Myth,” 69.

the hard-working pursuit of material belongings is meaningless and futile: it gives them nothing back and even takes from them (eviction in *Invisible Man* and insomnia in *Fight Club*). The American dream has, thus, failed to reward them for their endeavour. Due to that, they were dispossessed even before the discovery of their new inner voices. Up to this point, being dispossessed was a certain state in which both narrators lived, but their further actions turn dispossession into a process of decomposition of their Selves, not only by the disposal of material possession but also spiritual.

Chapter 2.2: The Process of Dispossession

This chapter follows the major aspects of the narrators' views on dispossession. Dispossession is a central topic of both novels, that immensely influenced the lives of the narrators. The meaning of this term, as presented in the novels, is a complex socio-psychological idea that is extensively explored by the narrators based on their experience and the people they meet. Through dispossession, which corresponds with Emerson's "Self-Reliance"— "The only way to freedom for an individual is a radical change in his or her relationship to things and social institutions,"²⁵—they aim to achieve freedom as individuals. Before the narrators discover their new voices (described in the previous chapter), they live in an almost catatonic state. They dream of a perfect high-society life promised by the American dream, but it is never fulfilled. Then, their new voices emerge and become the catalyst of the narrators' development. It is not a development per se but rather dispossession and dissolution of their Selves. They need to dispose of all possessions—both material and spiritual—to sink to the very bottom of their lives. When they are at the bottom, they discover their true Emersonian Self, which requires approaching the Over-Soul (the fundamental equal validity of each human consciousness) and the consequent unity of the world,²⁶ and then rising anew and reaching for their ultimate antinomian freedom from the grasp of society.

A first (though feeble) instance of the dispossession process in *Fight Club* is even before the Narrator finds his new voice. He attends several cancer support groups where he releases his frustration and overcomes insomnia: "This is the only place I ever really relax and give up. This is my vacation" (Palahniuk, 18). At each session, he spiritually dispossesses himself: "Every evening, I died, and every evening, I was born. Resurrected" (Palahniuk, 22). Like all vacations, the effect is only temporary. The cycle of resurrection at these sessions is, therefore, easily disrupted by the arrival of a new person, Marla. The Narrator falls in love with her but does not admit it at first,²⁷ they are "drawn by each other's nihilistic sense of self-destruction."²⁸ She becomes the trigger that starts the splitting of the Narrator's personality and, thus, she is one of the creators of his new voice:

²⁵ Procházka and Robbins, "Ralph Waldo Emerson," 87.

²⁶ Procházka and Robbins, "Ralph Waldo Emerson," 87.

²⁷ Keesey, "Struggle for Identity," 25.

²⁸ McKinney, "The Salvation Myth," 70.

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. (Palahniuk, 198)

She knows he is not there as a cancer victim: “To Marla, I’m a fake.” (Palahniuk, 23), and because of this exposure he cannot be born again: “Because I can’t hit the bottom, I can’t be saved” (Palahniuk, 22). Finally, he finds new and more profound salvation: he establishes a fight club with Tyler, to whom he looks up and who provides spiritual mentoring of dispossession. In the end, it is he who does these changes to himself since Tyler and the Narrator are the same person.

As in *Fight Club*, *Invisible Man* also experiences resurrection when he gives his first public speech at an event organized by the Brotherhood. He wishes to confess, as one does at support groups, to the people in the audience that “seemed to have become one” (Ellison, 340). During the speech in the arena when he reflects on his previous experience, he wishes to leave everything behind him by confessing:

Times are hard, I’ve known despair. I’m from the South, and since coming here I’ve known eviction. I’d come to distrust the world... (Ellison, 345)

He has experienced many downfalls in the past and, as Harold Bloom suggests, the dispossession theme reflects Faulkner’s vision of Mississippi but in a Northern city: “The narrator captures in his speech the sense of transience and indeterminacy that residents, recast as travellers, experience in city life.”²⁹ He rises as a new person in front of the people: “I feel that here tonight, in this old arena, the new is being born and the vital old revived” (Ellison, 346). After his speech, he begins to cry because of the warm applause he received, “My face was sprayed with the saliva of enthusiasm” (Ellison, 347). But the Brotherhood immediately shuns him for being “wild, hysterical, politically irresponsible and dangerous” (Ellison, 349). Because of that, the organization prohibits him from the liberation of his Self as he is still under the control of a higher social power, as the transcendentalists would suggest.

Crying as a sort of relief is also present in *Fight Club* at a testicular cancer support group where the men embrace each other, “most of them crying” (Palahniuk, 17). The Narrator feels closer to hitting the bottom of his life there:

²⁹ Valerie Sweeney Prince, “*Keep on Moving Don’t Stop: Invisible Man,*” in *Ralph Ellison Bloom’s Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010), 165.

Crying is right at hand in the smothering dark, closed inside someone else, when you see how everything you can ever accomplish will end up as trash.

Anything you're ever proud of will be thrown away. (Palahniuk, 17)

This feeling is practically the same as the one Invisible Man experiences during the eviction scene. When one sees that the American dream is unattainable also for others, it enables him/her to see through its falseness. At this point in the narration, both narrators can experience the moment of truth only for a short time because they still have the social ties that remind them of the success promised by the dream. They have to sever every attachment they have to the outside world.

Invisible Man does not have a mentor like Tyler, but the ideas of dispossession are conveyed through his speeches, experience, and internal remarks. He is being gradually dispossessed by others of “his sense of coherent, unified, integrated Self”³⁰ and, simultaneously, disillusioned about the intentions of the Brotherhood, which, he initially believed, provided the only remaining pathway to (his and others’) eventual fulfilment of the American Dream:

I saw no limits, it was the one organization in the whole country in which I could reach the very top and I meant to get there. Even if it meant climbing a mountain of words. (Ellison, 380-381)

He believes his eloquence can make the dream possible. But with time he realizes: “I had been used as a tool” (Ellison, 564) – the Brotherhood never wished him to be successful in his own way. Furthermore, they have stripped him of his identity and also, for good or ill, of his social and family bonds. He is being gradually more dispossessed:

Throughout the body of the narrative, he had been searching for visibility, individualism, as well as communal identification – all of which turn out to be illusory, producing what he calls, “soul-sickness” The closet approximation to “individualism” comes from the state of disappearance, of pain and emptiness – a shattered rather than integral individual...³¹

Before Invisible Man disappears in the basement away from the eyes of the world, he experiences many downfalls and becomes nihilistic towards everything in his life.

Tyler’s, and therefore the Narrator’s, approach to life becomes also extremely nihilistic when Project Mayhem, the successor of the Fight Club, is founded, and he again begins to attack the principles of the American dream:

³⁰ Jim Neighbors, “Plunging (Outside of) History: Naming and Self-Possession in ‘Invisible Man,’” *African American Review* 11, no. 1 (Summer 2002): 237, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1512257>.

³¹ Anne Anlin Cheng, “Ellison and the Politics of Melancholia,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison*, ed. Ross Posnock (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005), 134.

We are not special.
We are not crap or trash, either.
We just are.
We just are, and what happens just happens. (Palahniuk, 207)

He wishes to dissolve himself, which he believes is the only mean of liberating his Self: “Maybe self-improvement isn’t the answer. [...] Maybe self-destruction is the answer.” (Palahniuk, 49) By self-destructing dispossession and reaching the bottom of his life, the narrator achieves emptiness that becomes a synonym of existential bottom and liberation.³² In *Invisible Man*, the emptiness of the narrator is described in his epilogue as “invisibility,” where everything that matters in life merges, and collapses at the same time, together:

When one is invisible he finds such problems as good and evil, honesty and dishonesty, of such shifting shapes that he confuses one with the other, depending who happens to be looking through him at time. (Ellison, 572)

At this point, Invisible Man has severed all his bonds and lost all his possessions: he has only himself—his Self. The moment before he explains this liberation in the epilogue is the only occasion when Invisible Man voluntarily dispossesses himself of everything he owns.

The deliberate process of dispossession of both narrators is set off by the loss of their accessories—Invisible Man’s briefcase and the Narrator’s suitcase—which represent their most “essential” possessions. Invisible Man carries in his briefcase items that “symbolize his delusions and his tendency to conform to the roles assigned him by others”³³—his identity and experience. He has received the briefcase, with a high-school diploma in it, at his graduation and, along with its accumulated contents, it “confirm[s] his assumption that if he does what the world expects of him, he will be rewarded with respect and acceptance.”³⁴ Near the end of the novel, he falls into a dark manhole while being chased by an angry mob, and he sets all items inside the briefcase on fire to see in the darkness. First, he lights his high-school diploma as a torch “applying one precious match with a feeling of remote irony, even smiling as I saw the swift but feeble light push the gloom,” (Ellison, 567) leaving pride in his education behind him (as the Narrator’s high-school diploma was also destroyed in the

³² Olga Pavlova, “Utopie o násilí, vražích a renegátech,” in *Proroci postutopického radikalismu: Alexandr Dugin a Hakim Bey* (Prague: Vyšehrad, 2018), 184.

³³ Alžběta Piňosová, “The Concept of Self-Definition: Emersonian Principles in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Richard Wright’s *Native Son*” (MA thesis, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, 2011), 62.

³⁴ Smith, “The Meaning of Narration in *Invisible Man*,” 30.

condominium explosion). Then, Invisible Man chooses Clifton's doll, which symbolizes the manipulation of the Brotherhood and his defiance against it: "Isn't the shooting of an unarmed man of more importance politically than the fact that he sold obscene dolls?" (Ellison, 466). With an ironic comment that the doll "burned so stubbornly" (Ellison, 568), he searches for another of his possessions in the briefcase. The final two items are two slips of paper—one with a warning from a member of the Brotherhood "*Do not go too fast*" (Ellison, 383) and the other with his fake identity, which was forced onto him by Jack from the Brotherhood with the command that he must "answer to no other" (Ellison, 309). When he sees these two slips together, he notices, for the first time, that the handwritings on both papers are identical and realizes Jack's treachery:

That he, or anyone at that late date, could have named me and set me running with one and the same stroke of the pen was too much.
(Ellison, 568)

He burns the whole content of this briefcase along with his past. It was his final and only voluntary self-dispossession.

In *Fight Club*, the loss happens much earlier in the narrative. The Narrator's suitcase is seized by Security at an airport because of a vibrating "electric razor" (Palahniuk, 42). The loss pulls him out of his stereotypical way of life, but primarily out of his comfort zone because he always carries a specific complement of clothes and traveling equipment: "The bare minimum you need to survive" (Palahniuk, 40). As Emerson says in his poem "Sacrifice:" "T is man's perdition to be safe,"³⁵ explaining that the feeling of being safe hinders the man's progress which correlates with the Narrator's simple and uneventful life. The final blow to this safety is caused by the explosion of his apartment and he is compelled to call Tyler, his only acquaintance, for help: "Oh, Tyler, please deliver me. [...] Oh, Tyler, please rescue me." Tyler answers his prayer, and accepts that he can live with him under one condition: "I want you to hit me as hard as you can" (Palahniuk, 46). At this moment, the first fight club is born, and the Narrator willingly begins his journey towards complete spiritual dispossession with Tyler as his mentor: "The liberator who destroys my property," Tyler said, "is fighting to save my spirit. The teacher who clears all possessions from my path will set me free." (Palahniuk, 110)

³⁵ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Sacrifice," *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson – RWE*, accessed August 3, 2021, <https://www.rwe.org/poems/>.

In the more ambivalent case of *Invisible Man*, his “teachers” consist of everyone he meets, the great majority counselling, at least explicitly, conformity to the mythology of the American dream; but the most important “teacher” for him turned out to be his late grandfather. He is haunted throughout the novel by his last words that Joseph F. Trimmer calls “a riddle that is both a delightfully ambiguous joke, and a cruel and cryptic curse:³⁶

I want you to overcome ‘em with yeses, undermine ‘em with grins,
agree ‘em to death and destruction, let ‘em swoller till they vomit or
burst wide open. (Ellison, 16)

Trimmer suggests that the answer to the riddle is that “self-creation begins with the affirmation of self and the complex heritage of that self,”³⁷ in other words, one has to acknowledge who he truly is and how one arrived at that point. He had the answer to everything from his grandfather but realized that only after a long purgation and only in the salutary solitude of the dark manhole where he was left alone with *his own* thoughts. In *Fight Club* there is a similar realization of the Narrator’s self when he discovers that Tyler is his second personality and he has, in fact, done everything Tyler did by himself. He decides to permanently terminate Tyler (and himself) by shooting himself, but is discouraged by Marla and other people from the support groups, who arrived offering their aid: “We can help you” (Palahniuk, 204). Nevertheless, he pulls the trigger, “I have to do this,” (Palahniuk, 205) he says; but the shot is not lethal. He ends up confined in a mental institution, swarmed with loyal people from the Fight Club and Project Mayhem who still see him as Tyler Durden although Tyler has been incorporated into the Narrator: “We miss you Mr. Durden” (Palahniuk, 208). Before he pulls the trigger, the Narrator calls the moment “a total epiphany” (Palahniuk, 204).

After *Invisible Man* dreams in the manhole, where *Invisible Man* relives his previous experience, he is “through and, in spite of the dream, I was whole” (Ellison, 571). Likewise, the Narrator becomes whole when he assimilates with Tyler. *Invisible Man* decides to live in a cellar separated from the world, completely invisible, and if he went out, the people would recognise him by his false Brotherhood name and not his. Even though the Narrator is surrounded by many people in the asylum, they consider him to be Tyler Durden and not him as his original self; they appraise him based on what he did as Tyler and his previous identity is dead: “Of course, when I pulled the

³⁶ Joseph F. Trimmer, “The Grandfather’s Riddle in Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*,” *Black American Literature Forum* 12, no. 2 (Summer 1978): 46, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3041594>.

³⁷ Trimmer, “The Grandfather’s Riddle,” 50.

trigger, I died” (Palahniuk 206). Although publicly invisible, the narrators feel free and finally at peace in their private heavens. In *Fight Club*’s epilogue, the Narrator describes the asylum as his “father’s house [and] heaven” (Palahniuk, 206), and Invisible Man lights up his cellar and “the power of the heavens [as a] a comic Prometheus who has stolen the fire with which the gods had burned him on the electric carpet of the battle royal.”³⁸ Both are still confined by society, but they have—through the absolute dissolution of their former selves—resurfaced, found their inner peace, and became independent Selves that have absolute freedom of mind. As Emerson puts it: “It is awful to look into the mind of man and see how free we are [...] Outside, among your fellows, among strangers, you must preserve appearances, — a hundred things you cannot do; but inside, — the terrible freedom!”³⁹

³⁸ Thomas Schaub, “Ellison’s Masks and the Novel of Reality,” in *New Essays on Invisible Man*, ed. Robert O’Meally (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 131.

³⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, “2 October 1832,” in *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks*, ed. Alfred R. Ferguson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), 46.

Chapter 3: “Behold the Invisible, Behold the Unseen”

Identity is an important issue of both books, which follows the characters from the beginning to the end. The question of who and what they are is the leading force that pushes them forward. Even though identity holds such a great claim on the development of the characters, most of the time they remain nameless, virtually invisible, and unable to comprehend their role in the bigger scheme concocted by others. The narrators suffer several identity crises as they roam the world using fake names under which people start to recognise them while they slowly begin to forget their original selves. They get lost in a whirlpool of different roles, names, and personalities that others use to serve their needs. Identity is one of the keys to the freedom of their Selves because their identity-confusion enhances their spiritual dispossession.

Chapter 3.1: Invisible Everyman – the new American poet

Ellison's namesake Ralph Waldo Emerson shared in his essay "The Poet" the idea of a new American voice which "turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their right series and procession."⁴⁰ The narrators of both novels represent the Everymen of their generation, "an ordinary or typical human being"⁴¹ of their gender, age, and social status. Unlike Emerson's Poet, they turn their original Selves "to glass" along with the world and, therefore, become invisible. Their invisibility is underlined by the lack of their real names. Their original identities become obscured by those they are required to assume, which later eventually become the only identities that society sees.

After the narrators discover their new voices, which besides dispossession commences the change of their identities, they acknowledge the everyman role they play in society and become speakers voicing the problems of their social strata. Their initial selves do not deviate from the norms of the society which connect them to other people of the same social status who have been through the same challenges as the narrators. Because they are of the same origin, the people listen to the narrators' preaching about dispossession and tend to be submissive to their words. Their original identities, which get lost in the process of dispossession, again become important to them. At the end of the novels, the originals serve as means of vicarious juxtaposition of every identity they had up to this moment.

The novel *Invisible Man* ends with an often-quoted question⁴² that leaves the novel open for many interpretations: "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?" (Ellison, 581). Timothy Brennan suggests that the "you" is aimed at the Afro-American identity,⁴³ but the addressee (and the defended person) can be anyone, who has been dispossessed in the past (or lived through similar ordeals) and is, therefore, of lower social standing. These people can understand the hidden meanings and allusions that *Invisible Man* uses in his speeches. He becomes the speaker for the Afro-American community when he delivers a speech at the eviction scene when he learns he must, as Callahan comments, speak *to* an audience in order to speak *for*

⁴⁰ Emerson, "The Poet," 1187.

⁴¹ "Everyman," *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed July 3, 2021, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/65346?redirectedFrom=everyman#eid>.

⁴² Fabre, "The Narrator/Naratee Relationship in *Invisible Man*," 535.

⁴³ Timothy Brennan, "Ellison and Ellison: The Solipsism of 'Invisible Man,'" *CLA Journal* 25, no. 2 (December 1981): 179, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44328608>.

them.⁴⁴ At the end of Invisible Man's journey, he assumes the role (final identity) of the ultimate speaker for his social class and becomes a modernized version of the Emersonian poet:

his suggestion that he speaks for [many of] us is a contemporary (and thus hesitant) echo of Emerson's faith in the poet, who, by looking deeply within himself, finds what is true for all men.⁴⁵

Although the meanings are potentially obscured for some amongst the general public, those who comprehend Invisible Man's invisibility can understand what he intended by his oration.

The first public speech in which Invisible Man uncovers his new voice is a fine example of "outsiders," those responsive primarily to on "higher frequencies," (Ellison, 581) being oblivious to what he says. He tries to calm down the aggravated crowd and when he asks the policemen if the old couple can have "fifteen minutes worth of Jesus?" (Ellison, 279), the policemen overseeing the eviction are unaware of what he is trying to accomplish by his words and reply:

"I got my orders, Mac," the man called, waving the pistol with a sneer. "You're doing all right, tell 'em to keep out of this. This is legal and I'll shoot if I have to..." (Ellison, 279)

The officers believe that Invisible Man stood up to subdue the crowd and fail to see the irony in his words, which is most apparent in the following reply:

Look at him [...] With his blue steel pistol and his blue serge suit. You heard him, he's the law, He says he'll shoot us down because we're a law-abiding people. (Ellison, 279)

There is an ironic collaboration between him and his audience;⁴⁶ he says what the policemen want to hear, but simultaneously undermines their position by attributing to them a willingness to rely on the brute power of their guns. Furthermore, he reminds the crowd of their social position, where they have no say in the eviction although everyone disagrees with it.

A few moments later, the riot begins, and Invisible Man says to other officers that rush to the scene "We've been clearing the sidewalk of a lot of junk. [...] It's a clean-up campaign" (Ellison, 283). The crowd stands with Invisible Man when he is

⁴⁴ John F. Callahan, "Frequencies and Eloquence: The Performance and Composition of *Invisible Man*," in *New Essays on Invisible Man*, ed. Robert O'Meally (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 87.

⁴⁵ Shaub, "Ellison's Masks and the Novel of Reality," 153.

⁴⁶ Callahan, "Frequencies and Eloquence," 66-67.

confronted by the new officer: “He ain’t doing nothing” because “We’re all together” (Ellison, 283). The crowd understands why Invisible Man kept repeating “We’re law-abiding” (Ellison, 275, 276, 277, 278, 279) and uses the same ironic wording as Invisible Man when they confront officers, proving the narrator’s power over the people:

“Clear the streets,” the officer ordered.
“That’s what we were doing,” someone called from the back of the crowd. (Ellison, 283)

In the ambiguousness of being “law-abiding” echoes the last words of his grandfather: “Overcome ‘em with yesses” (Ellison, 16). Invisible Man became the spokesperson for people who understand the meaning of dispossession.

Similarly, as Ellison portrayed the Afro-American minority in the USA, Palahniuk focuses on a specific minority which the Narrator calls “a generation of men raised by women” (Palahniuk, 50). Like Invisible Man, he becomes the speaker for this sub-group of society that gathers in fight clubs and, later, in the split-off organization Project Mayhem. In the afterword of *Fight Club*, Chuck Palahniuk says that the core ideas of the novel are based on the people he met;⁴⁷ therefore, it represents a real sample of ordinary men. Keeseey suggests that the novel gained public attention for being so close to a specific sample of the society because it,

connects with working-class people, many of them young, who do not usually read fiction—and who may not regularly read anything at all [and] a number of these fans are blue-collar workers living hardscrabble lives, or others, like young people, who struggle to make sense of and find solace in a world where they feel relatively powerless.⁴⁸

The target audience has the same properties as the generation described in the novel; thus, it arguably may be considered as a minority unified by elective affinities similar to those in *Invisible Man*. Therefore, the Narrator also represents a specific group of society as an everyman; and after finding his new voice (Tyler), he too gains the power to affect and motivate them. These “fatherless men” discover their affiliation with each other in fight clubs founded and inspired by Tyler/the Narrator. Later, when Tyler creates Project Mayhem, these men begin to dispossess themselves by his (and, of course, the Narrator’s) example.

⁴⁷ Chuck Palahniuk, “Afterword,” in *Fight Club* (London: Vintage Books, 2010), 215.

⁴⁸ Douglass Keeseey, “Understanding Chuck Palahniuk,” in *Understanding Chuck Palahniuk* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 2016), 3-5.

The connection between the members of this society—which is, in fact, a kind of secret brotherhood—is most apparent in their interaction outside of the club and organization. Whenever the Narrator meets another beaten-up man from Fight Club in public, they “nod to each other” (Palahniuk, 54) in recognition. Their true identities are concealed behind their broken façade, “Who I am in fight club is not someone my boss knows” (Palahniuk, 49). This minority is invisible to the rest of society, similarly to Thomas Pynchon’s concept of “Preterite” people, “the unfavoured who have been dismissed and relegated to the dark margins of history,”⁴⁹ and the “Elite” looks down upon them as to people who do not belong: “According to my boss, there are fewer and fewer gentlemen in business and more thugs.” (Palahniuk, 54) The popularity of the club quickly spreads and so does its membership, despite the first two rules of the club telling its members: “you don’t talk about fight club” (Palahniuk, 48). But at the club, they feel they belong somewhere. The Fight Club connects all of them and brings sense to their miserable (working-class) lives. Because the narrators of both novels are everymen of their respective generations, they appeal to many members of their own class and condition—as the novels themselves do in the real life.

The main difference between the two novels on the topic of invisibility is the speed of dispossession of the individual members and the feeling of belonging somewhere. In *Invisible Man*, the narrator recognizes other people he represents but because of the Brotherhood’s (and others’) manipulation, he feels alienated from them and in general feels even more disempowered from helping others as he frequently does from helping himself. On the other hand, the narrator of *Fight Club* managed through his voice, Tyler, to create a true Brotherhood of individuals who share the same ideals, provide mutual support, and bolster each other’s strength. Nevertheless, the Narrator is later also alienated from the organization as its members close its doors before him.

⁴⁹ Paul Jahshan, “Dark Margins: Invisibility and Obscenity in Thomas Pynchon’s *V.*, *The Crying of Lot 49*, and *Gravity’s Rainbow*,” *American Studies Journal*, no. (2010): 3, <http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/4860>.

Chapter 3.2: Shadow Identities

The narrators are nameless everymen of their generation who never reveal their true names. They express themselves only through other identities that follow them throughout their narratives and aid them both in their self-deception and self-realisation. When they begin to assume other identities, it amplifies their process of dispossession. Whereas Invisible Man embodies other identities that are externally assigned to him by society, the Narrator's personality unintentionally splits in two which eventually compete with each other.

Invisible Man receives a new identity from Jack of the Brotherhood on a piece of paper. He must use it immediately and reject all ties with his former self: "You must put aside your past" (Ellison, 309). Without a moment to reconsider the Brotherhood's proposition, which offers him a great amount of money in exchange for his identity, Invisible Man "was swept into the large room and introduced by [his] new name" (Ellison, 310-311). He does sever all communication with people who know his real name. Therefore, all his newly formed acquaintances recognize him under the received identity, which utterly overshadows and thus dispossesses Invisible Man's original Self.

The Narrator, on the other hand, was not forced into using fake names. He conceals his true identity from the beginning and deliberately pursues his anonymity: "I never give my real name at support groups" (Palahniuk, 19). Keesey suggests that his namelessness is an outcome of being an everyman who is "suffering an identity crisis, unsure of who he really is."⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the fake name – Tyler Durden – that he uses at the support groups also overshadows his original identity. His alter ego develops into a highly individual identity which takes over control of the Narrator's body and life. Ned Vizzini glorifies Tyler as "a legend" and the Narrator as "everyman [who] is as useless as Hamlet, slinking through his years, waiting for death."⁵¹ Without Tyler, the Narrator would never start to dispossess himself: to free himself from the bindings of the society and his ultimately mundane life; but later he battles "Tyler's influence,

⁵⁰ Keesey, "Struggle for Identity," 16.

⁵¹ Ned Vizzini, "Tyler Durden, Boss Playa," in *You do not talk about Fight Club*, ed. Read Mercer Schuchardt (Dallas, TX: Bendella Books, Inc., 1998), 63.

seeking to retain his own identity and ideology in the presence of the overwhelming personality.”⁵²

Although the critical consensus calls the narrator of *Fight Club* “Jack” (which is the name used in the 1999 movie),⁵³ the novel’s narrative suggests that his real name might be Joe. After the Narrator moves in with Tyler, he finds a house filled with “stacks and stacks of *Reader’s Digest*” (Palahniuk, 57) where is “a series of articles where organs in the human body talk about themselves in the first person: “I am Jane’s Uterus. I am Joe’s Prostate.” (Palahniuk, 58). From then on, he begins to use this dissected identity of Joe to express his otherwise subdued feelings, “often replacing organs with feelings and things involved in his life.”⁵⁴ When he learns that Tyler spent a night with Marla, he suppresses his anger by assigning it to Joe’s organs:

I am totally Joe’s Gallbladder, [...] Raging Bile Duct [...] Grinding Teeth [...] Inflamed Flaring Nostrils [...] White Knuckles. [...] How could I compete for Tyler’s attention. I am Joe’s Enraged, Inflamed Sense of Rejection. (Palahniuk 58-60)

The Narrator is in love with Marla and hopes to suppress his jealousy over Tyler by conveying his anger through Joe’s body parts. This is more apparent in the following section when Tyler asks the Narrator whether there is a problem that he is with Marla:

I am Joe’s Clenching Bowels. No, I say, it’s fine. Put a gun to my head and paint the wall with my brains. Just great, I say. Really. (Palahniuk, 62).

Nonetheless, the Narrator is unable to keep his emotions indefinitely at bay by this technique indefinitely.

There is an echo of Stevenson’s novel *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, where the lines between the personalities of the narrator begin to be blurred when the Narrator’s process of dispossession progresses. Tyler commences new projects—the foundation of Project Mayhem—for which he needs funds. He starts to make money by the fabrication of pure soaps from human fat. But he needs to be awake longer to work on the ghoulish project, and therefore starts to abuse the sleep time of the Narrator, who naively believes his “insomnia is back” (Palahniuk, 96). He begins to be unable to hold

⁵² Jeffrey A. Sartain, “‘Even the Mona Lisa’s Falling Apart’: The Cultural Assimilation of Scientific Epistemologies in Palahniuk’s Fiction,” *The International Journal of Existential Literature* 2, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2005): 28, https://www.academia.edu/3059060/The_Fiction_of_Self-destruction_Chuck_Palahniuk_Closet_Moralist

⁵³ Keesey, “Struggle for Identity,” 16.

⁵⁴ William E. Rocha, “Fight Club,” *Palahniuk Page by Page*, Pedia Press, 18, <https://pediapress.com/books/show/palahniuk-page-by-page-an-oral-biography/>.

his anger back through the fiction of Joe's body parts. When the Narrator is confronted by his boss at work because he printed the rules of the fight club in the office, the Narrator loses his temper "I am Joe's Blood Boiling Rage" (Palahniuk, 96); but he no longer can express his anger only through Joe and offends his boss. The Narrator remarks that Tyler's words were "coming out of my mouth. I used to be such a nice person" (Palahniuk, 98). With worsening insomnia, he begins to lose control over his identities and starts to shift between both: "If I could wake up in a different place, at different time, could I wake up as a different person?" (Palahniuk, 33).

The dissected identity of Joe serves as a certain medium between the Narrator and Tyler, and the Narrator gradually starts acting more like the latter identity. In order to gain a steady income, the Narrator blackmails the manager of a restaurant where he (or rather Tyler) deliberately contaminated the food served to customers by his body fluids. The emotions conveyed through Joe become more sinister, "I am Joe's Smirking Revenge" (Palahniuk, 114) and the blurred line between him and Tyler is again underlined by the repetition of the acknowledgement: "Tyler's words coming out of my mouth. I used to be such a nice person" (Palahniuk, 114). The Narrator even realizes the rising similarity between them: "Tyler and I were looking more and more like identical twins" (Palahniuk, 114). In the moment of his final dispossession when he shoots himself: "I'm not killing myself, I yell. I'm killing Tyler. I am Joe's Hard Drive" (Palahniuk, 205). At a certain point Joe, and therefore the Narrator, is objectified and used by Tyler: "I am Tyler's mouth. I am Tyler's hands. Everybody in Project Mayhem is part of Tyler Durden, and vice versa" (Palahniuk, 155) which symbolizes the overwhelming power of the shadow identity and the creation of a new everyman who embodies all.

Invisible Man does not dissect his identity into organs like the Narrator, nor does he have a shadow identity like Tyler; but there is a character which identity he assumes:

as the two major representatives of possible identities [... who] are the opposite poles of a continuum in which Rinehart represents complete acceptance and Ras represents complete rejection of life under the dominant white culture.⁵⁵

Rinehart is a mysterious and influential man. He has an enormous impact on the Invisible Man's process of dispossession and realization of his invisibility, even though

⁵⁵ Daniel Nyikos, "'Hey, Ras... Is it You, Destroyer? Rinehart?': The Ideological Choice between Rinehart and Ras in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*," *AMERICANA - E-Journal of American Studies in Hungary* XII, no. 2 (Fall 2016), accessed July 20, 2021, <http://americanajournal.hu/vol12no2/nyikos>.

they never meet in person. When Invisible Man tries to escape the vigilantes of Ras, he buys “the darkest lenses” (Ellison, 482) to hide in public. It works, but people—and, for a brief moment, even his lovers—begin to mistake Invisible Man for Rinehart, who is, apparently, his doppelgänger. Rinehart seems to play many roles in society and appears to be a well-known man. Like Tyler, Rinehart is gravely respected by those who know him.

Immediately, when Invisible Man assumes the identity of Rinehart, his behaviour starts to change, and he begins unintentionally to speak words that he believes are expected by the people who address him. Even people close to him cease to recognize him and see only Rinehart. Invisible Man wishes to put this “disguise once more to a test” (Ellison, 487) and chats with Brother Maceo, who knew him well from the Brotherhood. Nonetheless, Maceo recognizes only Rinehart and confronts him in a fight when Invisible Man loses control over his assumed identity: “‘You take it easy old man,’ I said. ‘Don’t let your mouth get your head in trouble,’ thinking, Why am I talking like this?” (Ellison, 488) and “Why am I acting from pride when this is not really me?” (Ellison, 489). In *Fight Club*, there is an echo of this overwhelming power of the second identity: “Tyler’s words coming out of my mouth” (Palahniuk, 98). It becomes disconcertingly easy for both narrators to embody the personality of their shadow identities.

Moreover, it is Rinehart who uses the term invisibility on a leaflet and the narrator adopts it:

Behold the Invisible
Thy will be done O Lord!
I See all, Know all, Tell all, Cure all
You shall see the unknown wonders. (Ellison, 495)

After reading these lines, Invisible Man contemplates his own invisibility and believes that Rinehartism is an answer to the Brotherhood’s issue. It is to become an ultimate everyman who everybody recognizes even under different circumstances:

I caught a brief glimpse of the possibilities posed by Rinehart’s multiple personalities and turned away. It was too vast and confusing to contemplate. (Ellison, 498)

Tyler Durden also represents a similar interpretation of everyman since he shares many qualities with Rinehart. In the words of Invisible Man, to be Rinehart means to have a smooth tongue (which he, as the American Poet, accepts) but also to be heartless and

ready to do anything (which he rejects).⁵⁶ Tyler is also extremely eloquent and is capable of many violent and callous deeds, a combination that causes the Narrator's (again to use Pynchon's phrase) "fierce ambivalence"⁵⁷—torn between two opposing forces.

The major difference between the novels is that Invisible Man can regain his original identity in the blink of an eye by taking off his glasses, which formed his Rinehart's visage and through which, symbolically, his view of the world is adjusted. On the other hand, Tyler is a pervasive identity that gradually usurps more and more of the Narrator's life. Rinehart helps Invisible Man to recognize his invisibility— "I had been as invisible to Mary as I had been to the Brotherhood" (Ellison, 571)—but Tyler makes the Narrator invisible by making his original Self disappear without his approval or knowledge:

"But everyone knows you're Tyler Durden," Marla says.
Everyone but me.
Nobody at work calls me Tyler Durden. My boss calls me by my real name.
My parents know who I really am.
"So why," Marla asks, "are you Tyler Durden to some people but not to everybody?" (Palahniuk, 172)

It is a question of one's invisibility, to others as to self: Invisible Man's parents also knew who he was before he gave up on them in pursuit of the new Brotherhood's identity. In invisibility, the narrators again become everymen, though, not of a specific group of people as described in Chapter 3.1 but rather of all people, as the narrators' consciousness becomes more inclusive due to dispossession.

⁵⁶ A. Yemisi Jimoh, "These (Blackness of Blackness) Blues," in *Spiritual, Blues, and Jazz: People in African-American Fiction* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 149, <https://bit.ly/SpiritualBluesandJazz>.

⁵⁷ Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (London: Vintage, 2000), 8.

Chapter 4: “Let’s Follow a Leader, Let’s Organize.”

Like many oppressive organizations, the Brotherhood and Fight Club (along with Project Mayhem) exploit the weaknesses of their members. Through their speakers, the organizations convey solutions for these weakened people and become their saviours. They exploit the vulnerability of the dispossessed and preach that they will deliver them from the bindings of society. Their speakers represent their social group as everymen, which enables them to come closer, as brothers, to their victims. The true intentions of the leaders of the organizations are hidden behind their redemptive teachings, which are supposed to free their followers, but instead, they indoctrinate and exploit them. Near the end of the novels, the narrators finally see through the schemes of the leaders they respected but are unable to remedy what the organizations have done through them. The power of the organizations proves to be, dishearteningly, far stronger than themselves.

Chapter 4.1 – The Pawns on Strings

The turning point of both narrators in the perception of their organizations is the funeral of a man with whom they sympathized, even became friends. Although the circumstances of their respective deaths are slightly different—Clifton defends himself against the harassment of a policeman and Big Bob flees a crime scene—they are both shot down by the police. The organizations, where these friends had a prominent status, acknowledge them in death only as mere empty pawns of the greater cause. The cold reaction of the organizations is the last straw for the narrators, and they decide to stand up to the leaders in defence of their fallen friends.

Invisible Man witnessed the death of Tod Clifton; he saw him selling racist Sambo dolls. At first, he is repulsed by that act but later, at Clifton's funeral, he realizes that the puppets are "metaphors for the black members of the Brotherhood who are manipulated, unknowingly, by the white leadership."⁵⁸ Invisible Man organizes Clifton's funeral where he delivers a powerful speech about him. In the eulogy with the ironic wit of his previous speeches, he simultaneously emphasizes Clifton's "puppethood" and his "everyman" qualities to remind the audience that he was one of them, "Clifton was same as any other person" (Ellison, 456), and attacks the authorities that are at fault of his death:

The cop? What about him? He was a cop. A good citizen. But this cop had an itching finger and an eager ear for a word that rhymed with 'trigger,' and when Clifton fell he had found it. (Ellison, 457)

Invisible Man makes Clifton a martyr of the system, but one that induces violent riots in Harlem⁵⁹—which makes him something between a Christ and an anti-Christ figure.⁶⁰

This Clifton's status of being between good and evil is further examined at a hearing of the Brotherhood summoned to inquire Invisible Man about the organization of the funeral. They condemn his speech as an "oration over the body of Brutus, [...] a traitorous merchant of vile instruments of anti-Negro, anti-minority racist bigotry has received the funeral of the hero" (Ellison, 465-466). Invisible Man responds that he defended Clifton's name at the funeral even though he was "as disgusted as you. But hell, isn't the shooting of an unarmed man of more importance politically that the fact

⁵⁸ Smith, "The Meaning of Narration in *Invisible Man*," 39.

⁵⁹ Alan Nadel, "Tod Clifton: Spiritual and Carnal," in *Ralph Ellison Bloom's Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2010), 6.

⁶⁰ Nadel, "Tod Clifton: Spiritual and Carnal," 16.

that he sold obscene dolls?” (Ellison, 467). Invisible Man attacks the sudden aloofness of the Brotherhood’s committee and reminds them of what they promised to the people that trust the organization—to stand by them in such injustice.

As if he could not come up with an answer to the implicated criticism of their ways, Jack accuses Invisible Man of “riding ‘race’ again” (Ellison, 469), even though he had written to Invisible Man at the beginning of his career an anonymous warning stating:

you are from the South and you know this is a *white man’s world*. So take a friendly advice and go easy so that you can keep on helping the colored people (Ellison, 383)

The Brotherhood proved to be hypocritical about their own aims; and although they claimed to act for the brotherhood of all men, they remain racist while denouncing racism in public. Clifton, who was once (like Invisible Man) regarded as their finest speaker, is now dead, and the important deeds he did for the community are forgotten by the Brotherhood sworn to help. His death is, however, most important for Invisible Man, as he finally can see the Brotherhood’s complicity in the Harlem riot(s) and understand just how false the face of the Brotherhood (and the world) presents.⁶¹

In *Fight Club*, the death of Big Bob is also an eye-opening moment for the Narrator, when he realises that members of Project Mayhem are entrapped in “a fascist paramilitary group that is more dangerous than the social order it has set out to destroy.”⁶² Robert Paulson, alias Big Bob, is shot by the police while conducting a “homework assignment” (Palahniuk, 177) for Project Mayhem. He fled from the police because “It was better to be hurt than getting arrested, because if you were arrested, you were off Project Mayhem, no more homework assignments” (Palahniuk, 177). The people involved in the Project are “men with nothing to lose” (Palahniuk, 167), except for the organization itself (Fight Club/Project Mayhem) that gives members a purpose in life. Unfortunately, that “purpose” resembles the feeling of Invisible Man towards the Brotherhood: “Outside the Brotherhood we were outside history; but inside of it they didn’t see us” (Ellison, 499). Invisible Man comments that Clifton “knew that only in the Brotherhood could we make ourselves known, could we avoid being empty Sambo dolls” (Ellison, 434).

⁶¹ Smith, 28.

⁶² Henry A. Giroux, “Private Satisfactions and Public Disorders: *Fight Club*, Patriarchy, and the Politics of Masculine Violence,” *JAC* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2001): 11, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20866386>.

In *Fight Club*, there is a similar symbol of manipulation like the one concerning the Sambo doll. Near the end of the Narrator's journey, he realizes that he was also used by Tyler's organization:

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. (Palahniuk, 12)

Along with all other members, the Narrator is a pawn, a Space Monkey (as the members of Project Mayhem were called), who were not intended to be conscious of what they were doing. The notion of being a Space Monkey corresponds with Jack's remark towards Invisible Man, "you were not hired to think" (Ellison, 469). The Space Monkeys do everything without any prospect of money and do so blindly, like the Three Wise Monkeys: "See no evil. Hear no evil. Speak no evil" (Palahniuk, 138). They are kept oblivious to what they are doing by rules similar to those of the Fight Club: the first two rules "about Project Mayhem is you don't ask questions about Project Mayhem" (Palahniuk, 119). Like the Brotherhood, Fight Club and Project Mayhem offer support and stability to people with empty lives. Since the leaders of these organizations know that most members refuse to go back to their old ways, they exploit these social flaws of their members for their own sinister means.

After Big Bob's death, the Narrator unsuccessfully attempts to bring down Fight Club in the name of his shadow identity, Tyler Durden:

I think the club served its purpose, don't you? [...] A man is dead, I say. This game is over. It's not for fun anymore (Palahniuk, 178)

But everyone completely overlooks him and becomes invisible to other members, who do not acknowledge him as the supreme power of Fight Club and banish him. He becomes once again nameless because "There are no more names in fight club. You aren't your name. You aren't your family" (Palahniuk, 200)—which makes each member an everyman. This is similar to when Jack tells Invisible Man "You must put aside your past" (Ellison, 309) and so forget about his family (see Chapter 3.2).

Nevertheless, there is a difference in the perception of the members' names in both novels. Unlike Clifton's in *Invisible Man*, Fight Club recognizes Bob's name and his deeds:

Only in death will we have our names since only in death are we no longer part of the effort. In death we become heroes. (Palahniuk, 178)

Although Bob's name and age are chanted in all fight clubs around the country, that superficial, mechanical, doll-like recognition is the end of the line of his acknowledgement:

One minute, Robert Paulson was the warm center that the life of the world crowded around, and the next moment, Robert Paulson was an object. After the police shot, the amazing miracle of death. (Palahniuk, 177-178)

To regain some dignity for his dead friend, the Narrator decides to fight Tyler (he is not yet aware they are the same person) and to bring the organization down. Clifton was Invisible Man's friend as well, and after his funeral and the dispute with the Brotherhood, Invisible Man also undergoes a serious change of his mind:

After tonight I wouldn't ever look the same, or feel the same. Just what I'd be, I didn't know; I couldn't go back to what I was—which wasn't much—but I've lost too much to be what I was. Some of me, too, had died with Tod Clifton. (Ellison, 478)

The deaths of their fallen friends uncovered for the narrators the morbidities at the heart of their organizations and opened them to personal and institutional resistance. They began to embrace their invisibility as they reached the limit of their dispossession (severance) from the world.

Chapter 4.2: Freedom for Freedom

Since the narrators, at least initially, represent their respective social groups, they all aim for the same thing: they wish to regain their purpose in life, be free and independent of the determinative powers of society. In both novels, the organizations promise to break the social chains that enslaved their members, but eventually, they become the very thing they criticise. The organizations entangle their members in snares of their own creation, cloaked behind “divine” purpose—rebuilding of the society. Only the narrators manage to break free, though not immediately, despite being used by the organizations like anyone else. In the process, when they unsuccessfully try to change the ways of these brotherhoods, the narrators are ostracized and again rendered as invisible as they were before they joined. But at this point, they have already set on their path towards total dispossession of their self and, therefore, towards their freedom; and they have nowhere to come back to. In their final moments, the narrators realize that it is they who must take the final step towards freedom, and nobody can do it for them.

According to the statutes of the organizations, although individuality and freedom are two separate ideas, they should be attainable together. But due to the character of both groups, it is not (and never was) possible. The snares of both organizations are tight, and to some extent radiate the Nietzschean will to power: “the drive of the superman in the philosophy of Nietzsche to perfect and transcend the self through the possession and exercise of creative power”⁶³ as a sort of twisted unattainable American Dream. The teachings of Project Mayhem in *Fight Club* are immensely nihilistic, depriving the members of their selves and individuality:

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

This corresponds with the Brotherhood’s notion of world unity—the brotherhood of man. The last sentence in the excerpt is a rallying call for all the people of the same status who feel the world should offer more for them. These teachings were, of course, written by Tyler, the Narrator’s newfound voice. In the first speech of Invisible Man, when he discovers his own new voice, he also calls for an establishment of the like-

⁶³ “Will to Power,” *Merriam-Webster*, accessed 6 August, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/will%20to%20power>.

minded people: “Let’s follow a leader, let’s organize. Organize” (Ellison, 275-6). The call is answered, and the organizations gradually gain power by promising freedom and simultaneously subduing individuality.

First, let us look at what the organizations offer for their followers. In *Invisible Man*, the main goal of the Brotherhood is “working for a better world for all people,” as Jack explains to Invisible Man, “Too many have been dispossessed of their heritage, and we have banded together in brotherhoods as to do something about it” (Ellison, 304). The Brotherhood, which many critics associate with the Communist Party,⁶⁴ aims to economically uplift those exploited and subdued by capitalism, among whom is a high percentage of American and non-American Blacks.

Although it is the racial uplift of Afro-Americans that represents the core of their ideology, they do not wish to call it a racial thing. Invisible Man, like other Afro-American members of the Brotherhood and people (not necessarily all African-Americans) to whom he delivers his speeches, “is an eternal existential man, trapped in uncertainties and meaningless absurdities, who can no longer hope for moral, religious, or social salvation—his only certainties are birth and death.”⁶⁵ The Brotherhood, at least in theory, offers salvation, a new purpose, on which such people can linger and develop—a new version of the American dream.

Fight Club and Project Mayhem have a similar stance as the Dream’s towards the betterment of the world, with the difference that they wish to destroy it first and create the new Eden.⁶⁶

We wanted to blast the world free of history. [...] Project Mayhem will break up civilization so we can make something better out of the world. (Palahniuk, 125)

The teachings of Tyler are highly against consumerism, which he believes entraps the modern man. Tyler describes his contemporary modern “lost generation” as:

We are the middle children of history, raised by television to believe that someday we’ll be millionaires and movie stars and rock stars, but we won’t. And we’re just learning this fact. (Palahniuk, 166)

This passage refers to the failed American dream, which Tyler tries to recreate. These words rapidly spread (like a virus) amongst the whole generation, and the Fight Club

⁶⁴ Foley, “The Rhetoric of Anticommunism in *Invisible Man*,” 535.

⁶⁵ Justin Quinn et al., “African-American Prose,” in *Lectures on American Literature*, ed. Justin Quinn (Prague: Karolinum, 2011), 257.

⁶⁶ Peter Mathews, “Diagnosing Chuck Palahniuk’s *Fight Club*,” *The International Journal of Existential Literature* 2, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2005): 96, https://www.academia.edu/3059060/The_Fiction_of_Self-destruction_Chuck_Palahniuk_Closet_Moralist.

and Project Mayhem accept a great multitude of new members every day from all over the country. The members are enthralled by the new purpose in their lives—the recreation of the world, which is, in essence, an adapted (almost religious) new version of the American dream, as in *Invisible Man*.

The structure, rules, and subtly forced allegiance, which are the fundamental power elements of both organizations, transform the brotherhoods into sectarian covenants that must be obeyed. To enter this covenant, the members have to dispossess themselves of their previous social, material, but also intellectual possessions (including their previous selves), and solely follow the preaching of their respective brotherhoods without inquiries, and therefore without doubts.

When Invisible Man joins the Brotherhood, Jack asks him about his background and his education, concluding the inquiry with: “Well, let me advise you to forget it. You’ll be given books to read along with some material that explains our program in detail” (Ellison, 305). The leaders of the Brotherhood do not wish Invisible Man (or anyone else) to question their ideology. He is not supposed to express his identity or his own ideas, but rather parrot to the masses those assigned to him by the Brotherhood: “For all of us, the committee does the thinking. For *all* of us. And you were hired to talk” (Ellison, 470). Although it is professedly a brotherhood, where everyone should have their say and be equal, there is still integrated a strong invincible power structure that represents the exact thing it preaches against. The members have, therefore, blindly pursued freedom in order to get entrapped in another society where they are again invisible since their individuality and identity are shattered.

This revived American dream is also reflected in Palahniuk’s novel, where the “brothers” seeking purpose in life are embraced by the secret organization, Fight Club, that forbids its members to speak about its very existence. Its affiliated organization, Project Mayhem, goes even further (following similar steps as the Brotherhood in *Invisible Man*) and prohibits its members to doubt any order they are given: “The first [and second] rule about Project Mayhem is you don’t ask questions about Project Mayhem.” (Palahniuk, 119). The members strictly obey all rules imposed on them by Tyler, even if it goes against their personal opinions or interests: “The fifth rule about Project Mayhem is you have to trust Tyler” (Palahniuk, 125). All members have no choice but to listen and do what the leader, Tyler, commands, like the space monkeys described in the previous chapter.

In *Fight Club*, the members of Project Mayhem lose their possessions, names, and free will; they are even required to shave their heads and wear the same clothes in the (newly created) tradition of the Narrator when he first came to Tyler after his apartment blew up: “Six white shirts. Two black trousers. The bare minimum you need to survive” (Palahniuk, 40). These rules remove all distinguishing elements from every member, which destroys their individuality—rendering them “all part of the same compost pile” (Palahniuk, 134), as one of Project Mayhem’s teachings says. The membership becomes one enormous ant colony, where every member has his assignments to complete but lacks any individuality. The reach of the organization is enormous, almost omniscient and omnipresent:

We’re the people who you laundry and cook your food and serve your dinner. We make your bed. We guard you while you’re asleep. We drive the ambulances. We direct your call. We are the cooks and taxi drivers and we know everything about you. We process your insurance claims and credit card charges. We control every part of your life. (Palahniuk, 166)

This speech of Tyler’s resembles the biblical multiplicity of the devil: “My name is Legion; for we are many” (Mark 5:9, NASB 1995), which emphasizes the immense power he wields in his hands, and simultaneously the lack of individual selves, the invisibility, and the impotence of this (follower) social caste.

This notion is not as strongly voiced in the earlier novel *Invisible Man*, but even there individuality is suppressed. The members of the Brotherhood are not considered as individuals nor permitted any role beyond simply listening to its propaganda and following the orders of its creators. Smith offers a quite perceptive observation related to the entry of Invisible Man into the organization:

The Brotherhood similarly considers the interests of the individual insignificant in relation to those of the organization, although unlike Bledsoe it admits this bias overtly. As Brother Jack tells the invisible man at their first meeting, “you mustn’t waste your emotions on individuals, they don’t count” (284). Tempted by the promise of material and intellectual comfort, the protagonist affiliates himself with the group, even though, for him, individuals (himself in particular) do count.⁶⁷

Invisible Man proves that he does not overlook other individuals, especially when he organizes the funeral for Clifton (described in Chapter 4.1). The manipulation of the people is specifically expressed by Brother Hambro, who is Invisible Man’s “teacher

⁶⁷ Smith, 37.

during [his] period of indoctrination” (Ellison, 500): “It’s impossible *not* to take advantage of the people [...] the trick is to take advantage of them in their own best interest” (Ellison, 504). This Nietzschean egoism is the true ethos (at least Ellison contends) behind the foundation of the Brotherhood that uses the recreated American dream for their own needs in their hunger for power.

A fitting example of taking advantage of their followers is when the Brotherhood does not want directly to interfere with the ongoing riots in Harlem because it would go against their tactical interests of making “temporary alliances with other political groups and the interests of one group of brothers must be sacrificed to that of the whole” (Ellison, 502). This is conveyed also to Invisible Man by Brother Hambro, to whom Invisible Man comes with a new strategy involving the use of “possibilities posed by Rinehart’s multiple personalities” (Ellison, 499), which is examined more in-depth in Chapter 3.2. However, the die is cast, and the distancing of the Brotherhood proves inevitable. To Invisible Man’s indignation, no one has discussed it with him beforehand, and, as a result, realises he that has always been objectified in the eyes of Norton, Emerson, Jack, and the others:⁶⁸ “I was simply a material, a natural resource to be used” (Ellison, 497); and the organization is willing to sacrifice its brothers if necessary for their success.

Near the end of the novels, both narrators go through specific bodily dispossession because they broke the rules—castration, which both embodies and symbolizes their impotence. The castration (itself a kind of retributive betrayal) is ordered by the leaders of the organizations they have allegedly betrayed. In *Invisible Man*, it is only a dream in which appears a parade of all the people whom he believes have manipulated (and paradoxically betrayed) him:

I lay the prisoner of a group consisting of Jack and old Emerson and Bledsoe and Norton and Ras and the school superintendent and a number of other whom I failed to recognize. (Ellison 569)

Jack, however, is the leading figure of the group, because he disappointed and abused the good intentions of Invisible Man most of all. Jack demands that he returns to them; but if Invisible Man refuses, “we’ll free you of your illusions” (Ellison, 569). Invisible Man does refuse and retorts that “I’ll free myself” (Ellison, 569). Nonetheless, they

⁶⁸ Robert O’Meally, “Introduction,” in *New Essays on Invisible Man*, ed. Robert O’Meally (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 17.

proceed with the castration, implying that the Brotherhood does not even allow him to free himself of his own accord, confirming his impotence:

“Now you’re free of illusions,” Jack said, pointing to my seed wasting upon the air. “How does it feel to be free of one’s illusions?” [...] I answered, “Painful and empty.” (Ellison, 569)

At this moment, Invisible Man reaches the state of absolute dispossession of everything, finds his free self, and retires to a basement filled with bright lights, where he decides to write this story as part of his perdition.

In the case of *Fight Club*, it is not a dream but a real-life threat to the Narrator. The situation is, however, similar to Invisible Man’s since the leading voice that orders his castration is the leader of the organization, Tyler Durden. Of course, this means that he ordered a self-castration, as they are the same person. There is one unofficial rule of Fight Club and Project Mayhem to which even Tyler/the Narrator is not invulnerable. The castration is conducted through his minions—Space Monkeys, the members of Project Mayhem—who repeat to him his (or rather Tyler’s) words:

“You know the drill, Mr. Durden. You said it yourself. You said, if anyone ever tries to shut down the club, even you, then we have to get him by the nuts.” (Palahniuk, 187)

This is an extreme sadomasochistic act, but Tyler believes that this threat will calm the Narrator down in his pursuit of bringing down the organization. Instead, it strengthens the Narrator’s hatred towards Tyler, and he actively begins his hunt to bring Tyler down. Since he knows at this point that Tyler is his second personality, the Narrator tries to order the members to stop the castration; but he is as unsuccessful as when he tried to shut down Fight Club after Big Bob’s death, which eventually got him into this messy situation in the first place. But Tyler thought about that too:

I say, you all are making a big mistake.
The mechanic says, “You told us you’d probably say that.”
I’m not Tyler Durden.
“You told us you’d say that, too.” (Palahniuk, 188-189)

This is another instance of the Narrator’s ostracization and proof that the organization has become practically autonomous, self-governing according to rules independent of any person or personality; the Narrator’s (or rather Tyler’s) leadership is no longer needed.

Cheng’s description of “freedom,” as used in *Invisible Man*, can also be related to the one that is examined in *Fight Club*:

Freedom comes not from the historical or social liberation, but specifically from identificatory renouncement (“to be free of illusions”). Because the vocabulary of freedom itself can be deployed in the rhetoric of enslavement (as illustrated by the rhetorics of the Brotherhood), freedom in the light of this wisdom must paradoxically and crucially mean the freedom from ideologies of authenticity and selfhood.⁶⁹

“Freedom” as presented by both organizations is, indeed, paradoxical, because they force their ideologies on members who cannot appeal to (or beyond) them. The narrators need to dispossess themselves of everything, including the organizations, which they abandon and subsequently arm against. They rise above their entrapping ideologies and even the manipulative “identities,” which were assigned to them by the organizations instead of their “own” “identities,” of which the protagonists were dispossessed for another’s exploitative purposes, leaving the protagonists impotent and figuratively castrated. Whether “rising above” that situation can restore their agency and potency remains, in the case both of the Invisible Man and the Narrator, an open question at the end of their narratives.

⁶⁹ Cheng, “Ellison and the Politics of Melancholia,” 134.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

In the three main chapters of this BA thesis, there are described the similarities of the two unnamed first-person narrators of *Invisible Man* and *Fight Club*, who offer us the stories of their lives, the experience they have gathered, and the lies and truths they have encountered on their journeys. The second chapter, dealing with dispossession, has demonstrated the importance of the narrators' discovery of their new voices, which, like Emersonian American Poet, speak for their generation. These new voices reveal to the narrators the truth about the American dream—the promised reward for hard work is unattainable and it is only a misleading concept of the American society. These preaching voices guide them through the process of self-discovery, through the dispossession of their social and material ties, including their selves. The process proves to be partially successful—they have reached internal freedom of their minds, but at the price of their external freedom since they stay, although deliberately, secluded from the rest of society in a kind of sanctuaries.

The third chapter disentangles the multiple identities assumed by the narrators and their importance for finding their true Self. It also further discusses their roles as Emersonian Poets, which, besides other things, bestow on them everyman qualities that ultimately render them invisible in a society consisting of people who are similarly oppressed and dispossessed. In this process, their original identities (Selves) are overshadowed by those assigned to them by their respective and successive organizations. This dissolves them even more in a society of similarly soluble people, because no one recognizes the narrators' original selves. The dispossession of their identities is one of the keys to reaching their ultimate inner freedom.

The fourth chapter sheds some light on the organizations, their practices, and ideologies. The organizations exploit the backgrounds of their (potential) members—they are a modern “lost generation” or “lonely crowd:” a homogenous social group without purpose, stability in life, nor even in the future. The brotherhoods “of all men,” almost without effort, spread widely and successfully indoctrinate their members, who then blindly follow their ideologies and “unselfing” commands, by recreating the American dream for the needs of the modern man (specified above). Their procedures and rules prohibit the members to doubt the organizations, from which prohibitions even the narrators are not initially immune. But later, when their friends (fellow

members) die and the organizations dismiss them as mere objects, the narrators finally recognize that the redemption the brotherhoods offer is twisted and serves only the organizations' own needs, not those of the individual selves of which they are constituted. The narrators then break the "sacred" rules and are denounced as "traitors"—although they have, paradoxically, already been betrayed by the organizations—and are punished by being figuratively castrated (amplifying their impotency) by the leaders, which leads them, along with the other things mentioned in previous chapters, to the discovery of their true Emersonian free Selves.

This thesis's critical juxtaposition of these novels offers two possible conclusions to their strikingly similar narrative and ideas: either Chuck Palahniuk has deliberately transposed the themes of *Invisible Man* to the modern fast-paced globalized era, or Ellison's issues, as presented in his novel, have not been resolved yet (or cannot be satisfactorily resolved) by the society, they still "timelessly" linger on, and therefore are reflected in contemporary literature. Based on the research done for this thesis, neither possibility can be dismissed with certainty; and, hopefully, this work may open new possibilities for further research on either the themes discussed in the body of the thesis or the connection between these two authors.

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